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## ANALYSIS OF THE “ASSOCIATED TRIO” AS A BACKFIRE EFFECT OF RUSSIA’S FOREIGN POLICY OF NEAR ABROAD

The attempts of the European Union (EU) to engage its eastern neighbors into the European integration after the last eastward expansion in 2007 were found to be largely unsuccessful. The sensitivity of the issue for Russia and the failure of the EU’s eastern neighbors to carry out necessary reforms were among the main reasons that impeded the progress in the European integration of these states. However, on May 17, 2021, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine have come up with a new initiative aimed at revitalizing the European agenda through enhancing mutual cooperation and coordination in issues of common interest related to European integration. The study argues that by counterposing itself to the West and attempting to retain its old paradigm of its area of geopolitical influence in the “near abroad” Russia has greatly contributed to the cooperation between Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine and the establishment of the “Associated Trio” format. As a result of similar interventions to these states jeopardizing their security, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine have developed a strong common anti-Russian agenda, which served as one of the driving forces in their European aspirations. At the same time, the mobilization of the three members of the new initiative was made possible thanks to democratization and reforms imposed from the outside and pushed from inside.

**Key words:** Associated Trio, Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine, Russia, European integration.

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### “Ассоциативтік трионың” Ресейдің жақын шетелдегі сыртқы саясатына кері әсерін талдау

Еуропалық Одақтың (ЕО) 2007 жылы шығысқа қарай соңғы кеңеюінен кейін шығыстағы көршілерін белсенді еуропалық интеграцияға тарту әрекеттері негізінен сәтсіз аяқталған болатын. Бұл мәселенің Ресей үшін сезімталдығы және ЕО-ның шығыстағы көршілерінің қажетті реформаларды жүргізе алмауы осы мемлекеттердің еуропалық интеграциясындағы ілгерілеуді тежейтін негізгі себептердің бірі болды. Алайда 2021 жылдың 17 мамырында Грузия, Молдова және Украина еуропалық интеграцияға қатысты ортақ мүдделі мәселелер бойынша өзара ынтымақтастық пен үйлестіруді күшейту арқылы еуропалық бастаманы жандандыруға бағытталған жаңа бастама көтерді. Бұл мақалада Батысқа қарсы тұру және өзінің “жақын шетелдегі” геосаяси ықпалының ескі парадигмасын сақтауға тырысу арқылы Ресей елі Грузия, Молдова және Украина арасындағы ынтымақтастыққа және “Ассоциативтік трионы” құруға үлкен үлес қосқаны зерттеледі. Осы мемлекеттердің ісіне өрескел араласу мен олардың қауіпсіздігіне қатер төндіруі нәтижесінде Грузия, Молдова және Украинаның еуропалық ұмтылыстарында қозғаушы күштердің бірі болатын ортақ ресеймен текетірестің бастамасын әзірледі. Бұл ретте жаңа бастамаға үш елдің қатысуы сырттан және іштен итермелеген демократияландыру мен реформалардың жүзеге асыру факторлары арқасында мүмкін болды.

**Түйін сөздер:** Ассоциативтік трио, Грузия, Молдова, Украина, Ресей, еуропалық интеграция.

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### **Анализ “Ассоциированной тройки” как обратного эффекта внешней политики России в отношении ближнего зарубежья**

Попытки Европейского Союза (ЕС) привлечь своих восточных соседей в активную Европейскую интеграцию после последнего расширения Евросоюза на восток в 2007 году оказались в значительной степени безуспешными. Чувствительность этого вопроса для России и неспособность восточных соседей ЕС провести необходимые реформы были одними из основных причин, препятствующих прогрессу в европейской интеграции этих государств. Однако 17 мая 2021 года Грузия, Молдова и Украина выступили с новой инициативой, направленной на оживление европейской повестки за счет усиления взаимного сотрудничества и координации в вопросах, представляющих общий интерес, связанных с европейской интеграцией. В статье утверждается, что, противопоставляя себя Западу и пытаясь сохранить свою старую парадигму своего геополитического влияния в своем “ближнем зарубежье”, Россия внесла большой вклад в сотрудничество между Грузией, Молдовой и Украиной и создание “Ассоциативного трио”. В результате грубого вмешательства в дела этих государств, ставящего под угрозу их безопасность, Грузия, Молдова и Украина разработали общую антироссийскую повестку дня, которая послужила одной из движущих сил в их европейских устремлениях. В то же время мобилизация трех участников новой инициативы стала возможной благодаря демократизации и реформам, мотивированным извне и проталкиваемым изнутри.

**Ключевые слова:** Ассоциативное трио, Грузия, Молдова, Украина, Россия, европейская интеграция.

#### **Introduction**

Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine are known to be members of the «Associated Trio», which is a special cooperation format within the framework of the Eastern Partnership leading to a full membership in the EU. The initiative was officially launched on May 17, 2021 in Kiev when the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine signed a joint memorandum committing to the prospect of accession to the EU (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, 2021) The new format is designed to function in accordance with the general Eastern Partnership framework and is aimed at enhancing European integration.

Without any doubt, the initiation of the «Associated Trio» format was viewed by the majority in all three countries as a great achievement because among all members of the Eastern Partnership, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine were the most successful ones in many ways when it comes to the fulfillment of their commitments regarding the European integration. Therefore, the official approval of the Trio format by the EU was also understood by the three countries as a recognition of their efforts. At the same time, perhaps there was another factor that probably helped Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine

consolidate their efforts encouraging them to take further steps on their path of European integration, which is Russia. Among other things, security is one of the top priorities that Trio members seek to ensure within the European integration project. In light of the events of the past several years, Russia is obviously viewed in this context as the main source of threat and regional instability. It is interesting to note however that by intending to protect its area of influence Russia has also greatly contributed to the formation of the Trio format as it is.

#### **Background Information and Literature Review**

The “Associated Trio” is a fairly new topic and it is understudied in the academic field. However, the initiative could be viewed within the conceptual framework of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) launched in 2004, Eastern Partnership initiative of 2009 and a larger process of the EU’s eastward enlargement.

Since recent EU enlargement waves, the question whether the borders of the EU and NATO should be extending further remains open. Little by little it is becoming a common consensus that arrangements short of membership is a good

option for incorporation of these states into the EuroAtlantic integration process (Dangerfield 2011: 2) The development of the EU's ENP has certainly intensified the management or resolution of the unresolved and frozen conflicts in the Post-Soviet space, although it was not intended neither capable to properly manage the process (Sasse, 2009) After EU's failures to reload the ENP in 2011 and 2015, in response to challenges in the neighbourhood, the expectation of Europe's eastern partners from the ENP declined (Dekanozishvili, 2020) Hence, the limited capacity of European initiatives in resolving conflicts in the Former Soviet Union has caused a serious reputational crisis of the European institutions in the eyes of partners. This was especially true for Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine, who had conflicts with Russia and were critical points in terms of regional security, which also became a major obstacle in their European integration.

Failure of the European initiatives and little progress in democratization and reforms as well impediments of Russia to European aspiration of its neighbors prompted Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine to come up with a new initiative of the "Associated Trio". Unlike previous attempts of the EU to encourage its eastern partners, the "Associated Trio" was largely a self-generated initiative approved and hailed by the European administrations. The new format emphasizes the aspirations of the Associated Trio countries to become members of the European Union and serves as a platform for enhanced cooperation and dialogue between the Ministries of Foreign Affairs of the three EU Associate Partners (Ministry of Foreign affairs of Ukraine, 2021)

A number of studies emphasize the leading role of internal development processes in a successful accomplishment of European integration. Strong political competition is the primary factor for creating internal pressures for reform (Sasse, 2012) The top-down Europeanization was found to be dependent on whether parties in question are in power or in opposition and whether they are more pro-European or more pro-Russian (Cianciara, 2015) It was also found that when choosing between West (European integration) and East (Eurasian integration), more successful individuals are more likely to be Westernizers and losers more likely to be Easternizers or Isolationists (Torres-Adán, 2021)

The deteriorating security threats by Russia directly affecting Transnistria in Moldova, Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Georgia, and Crimea, Donetsk, and Luhansk in Ukraine have also shown the

weakness of the EU's security approach through democracy (Nilsson & Silander, 2016: 44) As a matter of fact, the initiatives proposed by the EU before 2015 did not contribute to the improvement of security to its eastern partners nor improved the EU-Russia relations. Eventually, internal political mechanisms, stability of newly created democratic institutions and orientations in foreign relations have determined further actions of the EU's eastern partners. Although the EU welcomed the European Aspirations of its eastern partners, it was not interested in the deterioration of its relations with Russia. In fact, in certain issues, like for instance supply of natural gas, the EU was in a vulnerable situation and confrontations between Ukraine and Russia had certain negative effects on the EU members (Sonmez, 2021) Direct threats posed by Russia, relatively strong democratic institutions and a strongly anti-Russian agenda in Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine were the key factors that stimulated these countries to come up with a new self-generated format of cooperation aimed at accelerating the process of European integration. This paper analyses the underlying factors and mechanism in Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine that determined their choice of the "Associated Trio" as well as the role of Russia in molding this format.

## Methodology

This article is based on qualitative analysis of different data from official sources mainly about the relations between the Trio members, the EU and Russia. The logic behind the analysis is to show how indicators of real economic cooperation between the countries evolve over the last several years. We presuppose that *de facto* integration priorities between countries are well reflected through the change in cooperation schemes between them regardless of formal commitments. However, the study is also based on assessment of formal documents and statements by the officials. The paper makes use of information on internal political changes in the countries of the "Associated Trio" and shows how legal mechanisms and recently created and relatively weak democratic institutions in these countries prompted their governments to set the pro-European agenda as one of the top priorities.

### *The Choice between East and West*

Russia has turned towards resuscitating many elements of the Soviet and Tsarist imperial paradigm of foreign and domestic policy since Vladimir Putin took the presidential office in

2000. It quickly renounced its commitments to democratization and incorporation into the western world and decided to keep the Post-Soviet republics within its sphere of influence to safeguard its geopolitical interests (Rezvani, 2020) Initially this was accomplished mainly through creating regional cooperation organizations (e.g. Eurasian Economic Community, SCO), diplomacy, economic ties etc. However, as soon as Russia felt that it could not withhold pro-European ambitions, it switched to a more interventionist and aggressive approach. Russia especially painfully reacted to the NATO and European Union (EU) enlargements at the expense of what it considered as its (former) sphere of influence. Ethnic cleavages and frozen territorial conflicts were the most preferred pretexts for intervention like in case of the five day Russo-Georgian War of August 2008, which was largely a reaction to Georgia’s clear and ambitious pro-western political stance.

The motivations of Russia to keep its the Post-Soviet space under its control have become evident during after the invasion to the Donetsk and Luhansk regions of Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea. Such desperate actions followed after the Maidan revolution in Ukraine when protests erupted in response to president Yanukovich’s refusal to sign an agreement on political association and free trade with the EU. The harsh reaction of Ukrainians to halt the formal procedures of European integration made it clear that the European choice was indeed essentially important for the Ukrainian people. President Viktor Yanukovich barely escaped from protesters and had to flee quickly to Russia while the occupied eastern territories of Ukraine and Crimea remain under illegal *de facto* control of Russia. 2014 thus became a major turning point in the Russo-Ukrainian relations when Ukraine’s European choice became irreversible while Russia firmly anchored in antagonism to the West.

Unlike Georgia and Ukraine, Moldova has applied a more delicate approach in following the European integration. Moreover, Moldova has long been a swing country when it comes to the choice between East and West. Due to the significant number of supporters of both options, it was no earlier than 2020 when Moldova clearly opted for pursuing European integration. The victory of the current president Maia Sandu in November 2020 became a clear sign of the public approval of the European choice. However, there are a number of factors that make Russia not react as harshly as it

did in the cases of Georgia and Ukraine. Firstly, Moldova does not share borders with Russia and is not strategically important to Russia as Ukraine. Secondly, although Moldova openly declares the European future as one of the top priorities for itself, it does not insist on membership in NATO. In fact neutrality is stipulated in its constitution. Thirdly, Moldova does not defiantly renounce its ties with Russia and takes part in regional cooperation schemes like for instance the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) At the same time, being perhaps the most successful country among the Eastern Partnership members in terms of democratization, Moldova actively promotes the Trio format since recently. However, it is true that Moldova’s ties with Russia are getting more declarative and nominal.

Georgia, on the other hand, has *de facto* renounced its membership in the CIS quickly after the military conflict with Russia. On August 18, 2009 it officially abandoned the CIS (Cisstat.com, 2009) On November 9, 2016, a bill on Ukraine’s withdrawal from the CIS was submitted to the Ukrainian Parliament. On August 8, 2018 Ukraine closed a representative office under the statutory bodies of the CIS (Glavcom.ua, 2018) However, the organization is being very reluctant to recognize the non-membership of Ukraine.

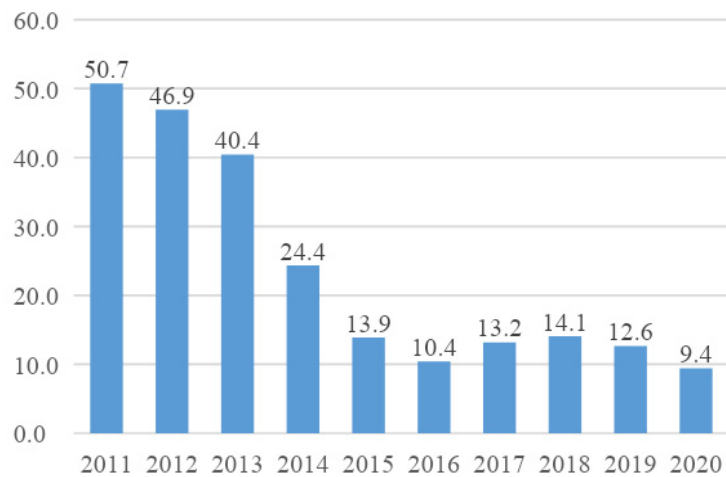
#### *The Russian Factor*

There are a number of common features that helped Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine form a common framework to address their European aspirations. Firstly, in spite of little success achieved in democratic reforms and building good governance by the recommendations of the EU, the three countries have made much more progress in this regard compared to other members of the Eastern Partnership. For instance, Ukraine and Moldova have become the two most democratic countries among the Former Soviet states according to a report by the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU, 2020) In 2021, Georgia became the leading country among Post-Soviet countries in terms of the freedom of press (Reporters Without Borders, 2021) Active civil societies and democratic institutions prevented the establishment of dictatorships. Secondly, all three countries have currently active or frozen territorial conflicts with Russia, which are also the critical points of regional security. These are Transnistria in Moldova, Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Georgia, and Crimea, Donetsk, and Luhansk in Ukraine. Thirdly, several years of

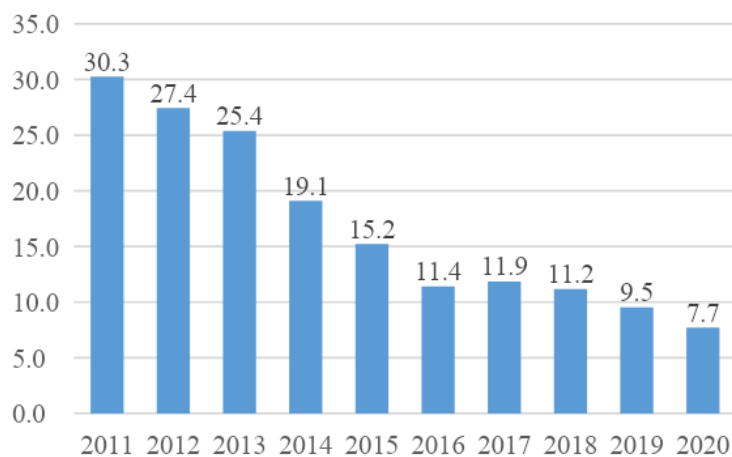
hybrid pressure of Russia on Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine expressed in many ways has greatly helped these countries develop antagonism to ideas and values imposed by Russia and form a common vision of the future that resonated well with the scope of European integration.

Unlike other members of the Eastern partnership, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine have mainly reduced their cooperation with Russia. For

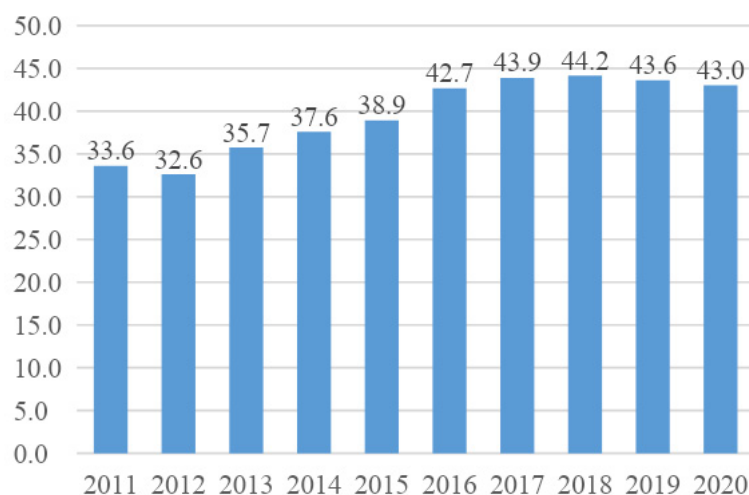
instance, throughout 2011-2020 the combined trade of the Trio countries has dropped from \$50.7 billion to \$9.4 billion. As a result, the share of Russia in the combined foreign trade of Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine decreased fourfold from 30.3 to 7.7 billion (Comtrade, 2020) At the same time, the three countries have favoured trade cooperation with Europe, which happened to a large extent at the expense of trade with Russia.



**Figure 1** – Trade between Trio countries and Russia  
Source: UN Comtrade, 2020



**Figure 2** – Share of Russia in external trade of Trio countries  
Source: UN Comtrade, 2020



**Figure 3** – Share of EU in external trade of Trio countries  
Source: UN Comtrade

Pro-European sentiments are also quite widespread in societies of other Eastern Partners. For example, a recent survey conducted within the framework of the Eastern Partnership EU has revealed that more than a half (53%) of Armenians were positive about the EU, compared to 44% in 2016. The number of people with a negative perception of the EU was only 9%. 60% of Armenians trusted the EU, while the share of those who trusted the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) was at 51%. 84% of Belarusians were either positive or neutral about the EU, and only 12% had a negative opinion about it. 45% of Belarusians trusted the EU, which is more than those who trusted EAEU (39%) In Azerbaijan, 46% of people had a positive attitude towards the EU and only 8% of the population had a negative attitude towards the EU. More importantly, 75% of Azerbaijanis associate their personal values with the EU, such as: “peace, security and stability”, “honesty and transparency”, “economic prosperity”, “freedom of speech”, “human rights”; “rule of law” and others (EU Neighbors, 2020) Generally, public opinion towards the EU is positive in all countries of the Eastern Partnership and the share of people supporting European values is increasing. However, due to the lack democratic institutions in Belarus and Azerbaijan, pro-European views are underrepresented in the governments of these countries. The case of Armenia could be considered as an exception. Due to its complicated geopolitical

situation and reliance on Russia in vitally important issues of security, Armenia has much less space for political maneuvering to address pro-European ambitions.

Practically in all nationwide electoral campaigns after 2014 the topic of Russia and European integration was the main one. Foreign policy issues were way more important than internal issues. For example, the presidential campaign of 2020 in Moldova could be viewed as an illustrative case showing the critical importance of Moldova’s choice between Russia and the EU in the public opinion. Maia Sandu, who represented pro-European political forces, received 57.72% of the vote, defeating her principal opponent Igor Dodon, who advocated closer ties with Russia and the EAEU. It is also worth mentioning that external voting played an important role in determining the outcome of the elections in Moldova. As it is known, a very significant share of Moldovan citizens work abroad and they mostly voted for the candidate representing the European choice for Moldova (Central Electoral Committee of Moldova, 2020) Similarly, a clear pro-European agenda greatly contributed to the victory of the current president of Georgia Salome Zurbishvili in 2018 securing her 59.52% of the votes (Election Administration of Georgia, 2018) The same trends are present in the legislative bodies of the three Trio countries. Generally, it could be stated that any political agendas advocating stronger alliances

with Russia are becoming extremely unpopular in Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine.

In many ways the “Associated Trio” is a unique format for cooperation. Firstly, it has come to be as a consequence of negative events and failures, which is rather peculiar. The members of the format came short of fulfilling the recommendations and requirements of the European institutions regarding the democratization, institutional, economic and administrative reforms, establishment of good governance etc. Secondly, the formation of the Trio framework was accomplished under extremely tough circumstances that Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine could not control and overcome. Despite being formally recognized by all as independent states, Russia turned to extreme and non-conventional methods in safeguarding its sphere of influence. The members of the format were very limited in their actions due to tremendous forces applied from outside. Thirdly, the three countries manage to pursue their goals despite tough challenges. All three members have current or frozen conflicts and territorial disputes with Russia, which could be used as an instrument of pressure by Moscow. Hence, the security and success of the Trio project is constantly jeopardized. Fourthly, “Associated Trio” is the first cooperation scheme in the Post-Soviet space that is not initiated and approved by the Kremlin. Russia played the central role in all other regional organizations and cooperation frameworks and it was difficult to carry out regional initiatives for Former Soviet states without the benevolence of Moscow. In this light, it could be said that further development of the “Associated Trio” initiative between Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine will entail further confrontation between the Trio members with Russia. Moreover, the EU will have more reasons to stay reluctant towards endorsing the future accession of Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine to the EU. Hence, it could be said that the three countries have burnt their bridges by launching the Trio initiative and have no better option than to continue their European integration with consistency and perseverance.

## Conclusion

Regardless of its final result, the “Associated Trio” initiative between Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine is certainly a positive sign that shows the capacity of its members to formulate common policy priorities and determination in pursuing their goals. In spite of limited progress made in conducting reforms, some hesitant position of the EU and enormous pressure from Russia, the members of the Trio seem to be fully committed to succeed in European integration. Moreover, Our analysis shows that the actions of Russia countering the European aspirations of the Trio, including the military conflicts, have led to an opposite result adding solidarity and determination in their quest for European future. Similar aggressive methods applied by Russia to safeguard its area political influence have motivated the three countries to withstand a shared tragedy by uniting their efforts under a common framework. Our findings confirm previous studies that emphasize Russia’s role as a promoter of pro-Western orientation and democratization of Georgia, Ukraine (Delcour and Wolchuk, 2014) and Moldova rather than a counteracting force.

The choice of the “Associated Trio” and determination towards European integration became possible thanks to democratic mechanisms that these three countries managed to develop under conditions of coercive threat from Russia. Over the last decade, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine underwent a process of gradual realignment towards European integration by intensifying cooperation in a comprehensive manner. At the same time, the three countries have been weakening their ties with Russia. Pro-European sentiments are also strong in other members of the Eastern Partnership (Belarus, Azerbaijan and Armenia) However, due to lack of democratic institutions and strong reliance on Russia, the desires of the people in these countries currently cannot be addressed politically. In this light, the success of the unique experience of Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine can potentially become an inspiring factor and produce a strong spillover effect among the rest of the eastern neighbors of the EU.

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