



President Maia Sandu and European Commissioner for Enlargement Marta Kos during a press conference in Chişinău on 5 June. Photo: Presidency of the Republic of Moldova.

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Moldova Enters the EU Accession Negotiations Phase: Reforms, EU Funding and the Test of Domestic Consensus

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The Republic of Moldova is entering a decisive stage of its European path following the opening of the “Fundamentals” Cluster and the EU–Moldova Summit, which reaffirmed Brussels’ political, financial and security support. The challenge is no longer simply to maintain the country’s geopolitical course, but to translate it into measurable reforms, effective institutions and tangible benefits for citizens. As Madalin Necsutu argues in his editorial, “Chişinău can no longer move forward on geopolitical enthusiasm alone. It will move forward on the basis of evidence.”

The interview with Ambassador Daniela Morari outlines the immediate roadmap: the Republic of Moldova aims to open several negotiating clusters in July and, as soon as possible thereafter, the remaining ones. However, progress will depend on delivering results against the agreed conditionalities, effectively absorbing EU funding,

and securing the unanimity of the EU Member States. The accession process is a process of transformation, the Ambassador stresses, underlining that it requires the engagement of society as a whole.

Denis Cenusă’s analysis focuses on the expanding scope of EU–Moldova cooperation and on security, arguing that the European Union is becoming increasingly engaged with Moldova and its domestic policy agenda, and therefore increasingly exposed to the success or failure of the reform process in Chisinau.

At the same time, Angela Gramada warns against the politicisation of the European agenda, arguing that the country’s European future must not become the monopoly of any single political party. Without broad domestic consensus, reforms may continue to advance technically, but risk losing the public support that the accession process ultimately depends on.

News in brief:

The Ambassador of the Republic of Moldova to the Russian Federation, Lilian Darii, was summoned to the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, where he was handed a diplomatic note of protest concerning the alleged detention of Russian diplomatic couriers at Chişinău International Airport “Eugen Doga”. Earlier, Moldova’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs rejected the allegations, stating that the Russian representatives had not been detained at Chişinău on 25 June.

The so-called Ministry of State Security (MGB) of the Transnistrian region has published a list of information resources it has labelled as “destructive”. The list includes more than 20 Telegram channels and media outlets, among them *Zona de Securitate*. The MGB claims that the activities of these resources are coordinated by the Republic of Moldova’s special services and alleges that their administrators “cooperate with Moldovan law enforcement agencies.”

European Commissioner for Environment, Water Resilience and a Competitive Circular Economy, Jessika Roswall, held bilateral meetings with President Maia Sandu, Prime Minister Alexandru Munteanu and Deputy Prime Minister for European Integration Cristina Gherasimov. Her discussions with President Maia Sandu focused on environmental protection, the sustainable management of water resources, resilience to climate change, and the reforms bringing the Republic of Moldova closer to European Union standards.

„We aim to open the remaining negotiating clusters as soon as possible.”



Daniela Morari, Ambassador of the Republic of Moldova to the European Union
Photo: Facebook

The Republic of Moldova is entering a decisive stage of its EU accession negotiations following the opening of Cluster 1 – “Fundamentals” on 15 June in Luxembourg. In an interview for the FES/APE Foreign Policy Bulletin, the Ambassador of the Republic of Moldova to the European Union, Ms Daniela Morari, discusses the significance of the upcoming negotiating clusters, the interim benchmarks, the merit-based approach to accession, the ambitious accession timeline, the disbursements under the EU Growth Plan for Moldova, attracting private investment, and the need for broad domestic consensus in the face of disinformation and external pressure. We also discussed how every step on Moldova’s path towards EU membership will depend both on the country’s ability to deliver reforms and on the unanimity of the EU Member States. We invite you to read the full interview:

Madam Ambassador, following the opening of the “Fundamentals” Cluster, what is the realistic timeline for opening the remaining five negotiating clusters? What key objectives does the Republic of Moldova need to achieve by the end of this year, and to what extent will this timeline depend on Moldova’s own performance as opposed to the political consensus among the EU’s 27 Member States?

The Republic of Moldova has opened accession negotiations under the “Fundamentals” Cluster. Both the European Commission and the Council of the European Union have also confirmed that our country is ready to open negotiations on the remaining clusters.

At present, the Moldovan authorities are engaged in discussions with the rotating Presidencies of the Council of the European Union – Cyprus and Ireland, which will assume the Presidency on 1 July – with a view to opening several additional clusters during July and, subsequently, all of the remaining ones.

In parallel, in line with the accession methodology, the Republic of Moldova must fulfil the interim benchmarks set out in the European Union’s Common Position for Chapters 23 and 24 of the “Fundamentals” Cluster.

Once the European Commission and the Council of the European Union confirm that these interim benchmarks have been met, the accession process will be able to move forward towards the provisional closure of the relevant negotiating chapters. These are the Republic of Moldova's key priorities for the period ahead and until the end of this year.

“Fundamentals”: The Toughest Test for the State

The “Fundamentals” Cluster is the first to be opened and the last to be closed in the accession process. In your view, which are the three most vulnerable areas that could slow down the negotiations: judicial reform, the fight against corruption, or the capacity of the public administration? When assessing progress, will Brussels place greater emphasis on the adoption of legislation or on tangible results and the irreversible nature of the reforms?

It is no coincidence that the “Fundamentals” Cluster is the first to be opened and the last to be closed in the accession process. Nor is it a coincidence that it is the only cluster that includes interim benchmarks. The objective is to demonstrate the functionality and operational capacity of the institutions, ensuring that the Republic of Moldova is fully prepared for integration into the European Union by the time it becomes a Member State.

Progress is assessed on the basis of a broad set of indicators, including the so-called track record, which reflects the effective implementation of reforms. The assessment looks, for example, at how decisions are taken, the number of cases brought before the courts, and the procedural actions undertaken, with the emphasis placed on tangible results rather than solely on the adoption of legislation.

These criteria cover judicial reform and the fight against corruption, but from a much broader perspective than the institutional dimension alone. The focus is not only on the work of the specialised institutions or on the investigation of high-level corruption cases, but also on the state's capacity to combat corruption across all sectors, including within the justice system, and to strengthen the transparency, efficiency and professionalism of public institutions.

Merit-Based Accession, Synchronisation with Ukraine and the Risk of Vetoes

European leaders have consistently stressed that the accession process will be based on the merits of each candidate country. Does this mean that the Republic of

Moldova can, in practice, move forward independently of Ukraine once it fulfils the required conditions? How significant is the risk that Moldova's technical progress could still be delayed by national vetoes, enlargement fatigue or other political considerations within the European Union?

Given that the Republic of Moldova submitted its application for EU membership following a similar step taken by Ukraine, many of the European Union's decisions concerning the two countries were adopted during the same Council meetings. This explains the synchronisation of certain decision-making processes at the EU level. At the same time, the accession process and the current enlargement methodology are based on assessing the merits of each candidate country, while the closing benchmarks for each negotiating chapter are tailored to the specific realities of every country.

The accession process is not a competition in itself. Rather, it is a process of progressing from one stage to the next, towards full functionality, enabling each candidate country to demonstrate, through the reforms and transformations it delivers, that it is ready to become a fully-fledged Member State, fully aligned with the values and policies of the European Union.

Accordingly, when it comes to the implementation of reforms and the pace at which the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine will advance, what will matter most is the delivery of results against the agreed conditionalities. This will be the key indicator determining progress in the accession process.

The Republic of Moldova will be assessed on the basis of the results it delivers. Beyond the “homework” we have to complete as part of the accession process and the efforts devoted to implementing reforms, it is also important to highlight the recommendations contained in the European Commission's Enlargement Package. These, too, serve as important indicators for measuring where we stand in the accession process.

There are therefore clear indicators that allow us to demonstrate that we have earned the right to move forward in the accession negotiations.

EU Accession in 2028 or After 2030?

Do you believe that the Republic of Moldova could realistically join the European Union by 2028, or is an accession timeline after 2030 more likely? Could Moldova become part of this round of enlargement by 2028, alongside Montenegro, for example?

This has also been confirmed by the European Commission, which has described it as an ambitious

yet realistic timeline. Everything will depend on how successfully we are able to move forward through the procedural steps at the European Union level. For this reason, in all our discussions – at the political, technical and institutional levels – with the European Commission, the Council and the Member States, we are making every effort to advance these procedural steps. As I mentioned earlier, our immediate objective is to open negotiations on all the remaining clusters and to make progress on the interim benchmarks under the “Fundamentals” Cluster, which will allow us to begin the provisional closure of individual negotiating chapters.

The Republic of Moldova is already making good progress in several areas. We believe that, as soon as we receive the green light confirming the fulfilment of the interim benchmarks, we will be able to begin provisionally closing a number of negotiating chapters. We have achieved good results in the digital sector, as well as in education and research. Overall, we have identified around ten chapters where, against the closing benchmarks, we have already made solid progress.

Over the coming period, we intend to present a substantial report on these achievements, and we hope that the European Commission will share this assessment, allowing us to seek the approval of the Member States for the provisional closure of those negotiating chapters.

The accession process involves numerous procedural steps, each with its own level of complexity. However, as you rightly pointed out, the most important element remains the need for unanimity among all Member States.

It is difficult to predict how long it will take to achieve such unanimity. Nevertheless, we are operating in a political environment that is favourable to enlargement. The European Commission considers enlargement to be one of the priorities of its current mandate, and the European Parliament shares this commitment. Likewise, the conclusions of the latest European Council reaffirm that enlargement remains a strategic priority, even as the European Union faces other challenges and priorities. We are counting on maintaining this political support, without which the accession process cannot move forward.

The Growth Plan: Reform Delivery as the Key to EU Funding

The EU Growth Plan for the Republic of Moldova makes available up to Euro 1.9 billion, of which approximately Euro 504 million has already been

disbursed. Which specific reforms are linked to the disbursement of the upcoming tranches, and what happens if some of the required conditions are met with a delay? How can the authorities ensure that these funds translate into tangible benefits for the economy and for citizens, rather than simply being disbursed and reported?

The EU Growth Plan for the Republic of Moldova is closely linked to the Reform Agenda, and the Republic of Moldova has committed to a clearly defined set of reforms in order to qualify for the disbursement of EU funding.

The Republic of Moldova has one of the highest implementation, disbursement and absorption rates under the Growth Plan. For the second tranche, we achieved a 93 percent implementation rate of the requirements set by the European Union. Even when compared with the Western Balkan countries, which are implementing similar Growth Plans, or with Ukraine under its Ukraine Facility, the Republic of Moldova stands out for its high level of implementation.

30 June is the deadline for fulfilling the conditions related to the third tranche of the Growth Plan. We expect to maintain this high implementation rate and to submit, by mid-July, our report on the fulfilment of the agreed conditions. The report will then be assessed by the European Commission, which will determine whether the relevant requirements have been met.

For the Republic of Moldova, delivering the agreed reforms is a priority in order to secure the disbursement and absorption of these funds. At the same time, beyond its reform component, the Growth Plan also includes an investment component, which is equally important for the country's development.

European Investment: From Announcements to Capital on the Ground

At the EU-Moldova Investment Conference, held in Chişinău in early June and attended by the European Commissioner for Enlargement, Marta Kos, projects worth up to Euro 641 million were announced. How much of this represents firm private investment, and how much is, for the time being, financing, guarantees or expressions of interest? When is capital expected to effectively enter the economy, how many jobs could be created, and what reforms are investors calling for in the areas of justice, taxation, public procurement and energy security?

The conference was important because it introduced a new dimension to the EU Growth Plan. Alongside the traditional investments in infrastructure and development projects, particular emphasis was placed on the involvement of the private sector.

Last autumn, the European Commission launched a call for proposals targeting the private sector. The call was implemented through three rounds and attracted applications from companies operating in a range of sectors, particularly in the energy sector.

During the recent conference, the companies selected under that call for proposals were announced. They are now ready to invest in the Republic of Moldova, benefiting from additional support provided by the European Commission to help develop strategic sectors.

Beyond investments in the energy sector, foreign companies have also expressed interest in investing in water infrastructure, logistics, agriculture and digitalisation.

These are priority sectors where there is both a clear need for further development and growing interest from companies in the European Union Member States and the Republic of Moldova to expand their investments and operational activities.

What Matters Most to Investors: Justice, Bureaucracy, Energy and Security

We are sure that, in Brussels, you have frequent discussions with potential foreign investors interested in the Republic of Moldova. We know that you are often asked about judicial reform, taxation and energy security. When potential investors ask you about the Republic of Moldova and consider entering the Moldovan market, how important are these issues in their investment decisions?

Yes, these aspects matter a great deal. Investors pay close attention to developments in the justice sector, as well as to indicators related to the business environment. They are interested in the level of bureaucracy and the efficiency of administrative procedures, including how long it takes to obtain permits, licences and other approvals required to carry out business activities.

Another important consideration is the situation in the energy sector and developments in this area. For example, the growing share of renewable energy is viewed positively by private investors, both as an opportunity to develop businesses in this sector and to implement projects based on green energy.

Potential investors are also interested in the country's resilience and security. They ask how the Republic of Moldova has managed to cope with the challenges of recent years and seek to gain a better understanding of the realities and the broader context in which the country operates.

Domestic Consensus and Resilience in the Face of Foreign Interference

EU accession cannot remain solely the project of one government or of a parliamentary majority. How can Chişinău build a broad national consensus that includes the opposition, civil society, local authorities and the business community, so that the reforms can withstand political change? And to what extent could Russian disinformation and interference undermine public support for EU accession and slow down the pace of European integration?

We have all seen how these challenges can distort reality, the harm they can cause, and how deeply they can take root in people's hearts and minds.

We have also seen how much effort it takes to explain, to inform, and to restore an objective, fact-based understanding of reality. I believe these challenges are still very much present. We have learned important lessons about the need to remain resilient and vigilant, and about the importance of understanding the new ways in which we are being challenged and targeted by information attacks.

At the same time, it is essential that all segments of society are engaged in this process. Accession to the European Union is a complex undertaking that cannot be delivered by a single institution or a single actor. It is a transformative process that requires the involvement of society as a whole.

From my discussions in Brussels with delegations and teams from the Republic of Moldova – whether representatives of civil society, members of Parliament, local public authorities or the business community – I see the same aspiration: better living standards, a higher quality of life, greater opportunities for private sector development and, ultimately, stronger economic growth.

These objectives are shared by everyone. The key is to find ways for each of us to contribute to this common effort and to make the most of the opportunities that the European Union accession process offers.

Thank you!

Editorial

Europe's Door Has Opened. Why Chisinau Can No Longer Afford to Lose Momentum

Editorial by de Madalin Necsutu, journalist at TVR Moldova

On 15 June, the Republic of Moldova did not yet receive its ticket into the European Union. It received something more important for this stage of the process: access to the room where the real negotiations take place.

The opening of the first cluster, *Fundamentals*, shifts Moldova's European dossier from solemn declarations to rigorous scrutiny, from applause to conditionality, from saying "we want to join the EU" to demonstrating "we are capable of functioning as a European state."

This is not just another negotiating cluster. It is the backbone of the entire accession process. It covers the judiciary, fundamental rights, freedom and security, public procurement, statistics, financial control, democratic institutions, public administration, and a functioning market economy.

The Council of the European Union is explicit: this cluster is opened first and closed last, and the progress achieved here will determine the pace of the entire accession negotiation. In other words, Chişinău can no longer move forward on the strength of geopolitical enthusiasm alone. From now on, it will advance on the basis of evidence.

Brussels' Promise: Funding, Market Access, and Security

The EU–Moldova Summit on 22 June came at exactly the right moment—just one week after the political decision to open the first negotiation cluster. Brussels' message was carefully calibrated: Moldova belongs in Europe, but that place must be earned every day through reforms.

The European Union pledged political, economic, financial, technical, and strategic support, while also reaffirming its commitment to Moldova's gradual integration into the EU Single Market wherever legislative alignment and administrative capacity make this possible.

Beyond the diplomatic language, the commitments were remarkably concrete. The Growth Plan worth up to Euro1.9 billion for the period 2025–2027 remains the EU's main financial instrument for supporting Moldova. But the funding will not be disbursed out of goodwill—it is conditional on reforms.

The European Commission has made it clear that financial assistance depends on the implementation of the reforms set out in the Reform Agenda, and that this package represents the largest financial support ever granted by the European Union to the Republic of Moldova.



Madalin Necsutu, journalist at TVR Moldova
Photo: Facebook

At the summit, European leaders also highlighted tangible progress already achieved: Euro 504 million mobilized under the Growth Plan; a new Euro 232.7 million investment for the rehabilitation of the Porumbrei – Comrat road; the possibility of unlocking an additional Euro 523 million if the reforms due by the end of the year are completed; as well as Euro 120 million for security needs in 2026, Euro 11 million to strengthen resilience against hybrid threats, and Euro 17 million for border infrastructure.

To these commitments are added initiatives that directly affect citizens' daily lives: Moldova's integration into SEPA, the prospect of "roam like at home," closer participation in Erasmus+, the expansion of DiscoverEU opportunities, enhanced cooperation in research, and investments in infrastructure, energy, digitalisation, education, and connectivity.

In other words, Brussels is seeking to demonstrate that EU accession is not merely a future treaty to be signed, but a process that can deliver tangible benefits well before membership. This is the political logic behind the current approach: European integration must become something citizens can experience before it is formally completed.

Reforms Are Not Won in PowerPoint Presentations

Chişinău has a strong hand to play. It has a reform agenda, European funding, political support, a favourable geopolitical context, and a population that has confirmed its European choice. The Growth Plan Reform Agenda sets out 56 reforms and 153 concrete measures, covering economic competitiveness, connectivity, economic governance, education and healthcare, the green transition, energy security, and the fundamentals of democratic governance.

But this is where the comfortable part ends.

Real reform begins where press releases are no longer enough. The judiciary remains the centre of gravity. Vetting can clean up the system, but it can also leave it depleted if there are not enough qualified professionals ready to replace those who leave. Anti-corruption efforts remain indispensable, but they cannot be reduced to statistics reported to Brussels. Local public administration must be reformed as well, but not through top-down explanations filled with technical language that citizens in local communities struggle to understand.

Moldova is delivering results, but it still has substantial work ahead in the areas of justice, fiscal reform, anti-corruption, environmental policy, local public administration, and institutional implementation capacity. Above all, it must demonstrate that it is not only aligning its legislation with the EU *acquis*, but also implementing it effectively in practice.

That is the difference between a candidate country moving quickly and one that is genuinely prepared for membership.

Moldova and Ukraine: Politically Together, but Advancing on Their Own Merit

The Republic of Moldova and Ukraine entered this new phase of the accession process together. All EU Member States agreed to open the first negotiation cluster for both countries, sending a clear political message of strategic unity in the face of Russia's war and ongoing hybrid threats.

From this point forward, however, the key principle is merit. The European Union has made it explicit that accession is a merit-based process, and that progress under the *Fundamentals* cluster will determine the overall pace of negotiations. This gives the Republic of Moldova a genuine opportunity to distinguish itself from Ukraine – not through political decoupling, not by abandoning Kyiv, and not through a cynical competition between two countries facing Russian pressure, but through stronger administrative performance and verifiable reform.

Moldova has certain advantages. As a smaller state, it can move institutions more quickly, adapt legislation faster, and demonstrate measurable results within a shorter timeframe. At the same time, it faces significant vulnerabilities: limited human resources, fragile institutions, domestic political polarisation, persistent Russian influence, weak local administrations, and continued dependence on the political support of all 27 EU Member States.

However technical the accession process may appear, every negotiating cluster is opened and closed within a political framework in which Member States retain decisive influence. Ultimately, the Accession Treaty will require unanimous approval by the Council of the European Union, the consent of the European Parliament, and ratification by every contracting Member State.

PAS's Trap: Fast Reforms, Slow Consensus

This is where the domestic political challenge begins. PAS deserves credit for advancing Moldova's European agenda at a

pace that few thought possible. It has delivered on the technical side, pushed long-stagnant institutions into action, and kept the country firmly on its European course despite war in the region, disinformation, energy crises, and hybrid threats.

But speed comes at a price: the risk of turning EU accession into a partisan project.

Accession cannot become the property of PAS. Nor can it belong exclusively to the current pro-European government. It is the project of an entire society, and societies are not mobilised through government decisions alone. They are mobilised through public debate, clear communication, compromise, and inclusion. Reforms are undertaken for the people of the Republic of Moldova—not for European institutions—and the European integration agenda should never become the captive of a single political party.

The lesson is a simple one: Brussels can open doors, but ratification is also won through political relationships. At some point, Chisinau may need the support of a national parliament in an EU Member State where the key interlocutor is not a political ally of PAS, but rather a partner of an opposition party from Moldova. If all other domestic political actors are treated as mere spectators, Moldova risks undermining its own external political networks at a stage when they may prove decisive.

Realistic, but Not Inevitable

Is what the Republic of Moldova is aiming for realistic? Yes, if we are talking about rapid progress, gradual integration into the European Union, the opening of additional negotiating clusters, and the possibility of concluding accession negotiations within an ambitious timeframe. No, if we imagine that membership will come simply because Moldova is a victim of Russian pressure or because Brussels needs a success story in Eastern Europe.

Realism means something different. It means recognising that the European Union has made a major political investment in Moldova, but it will not overlook shortcomings in the areas of justice, corruption, public administration, or implementation capacity. It means understanding that a merit-based accession process may allow Moldova to distinguish itself from Ukraine, but it does not exempt the country from securing the political support of all 27 EU Member States. It also means recognising that European funding provides resources, not guarantees, and that the speed of PAS's reforms must be matched by a much broader national conversation.

Moldova has entered the right corridor. It has political momentum from Brussels. It has substantial financial support on the table. It has a rare window of opportunity.

But that window will not remain open indefinitely.

From this point onward, accession will not be decided only in European capitals. It will also be determined in courtrooms, municipalities, ministries, villages, newsrooms, political parties, parliamentary committees, and above all, by the government's ability to transform a race for rapid reforms into a genuine national project.

That is the real European test.

The European Agenda Must Not Be Monopolised by a Single Political Party

Angela Gramadă, Director of the Experts for Security and Global Affairs (ESGA) think tank, spoke with us about the strong political signals that Brussels has sent to the Republic of Moldova and the challenges that will shape the next stage of the country's European integration process. Beyond the recognition that Chişinău currently enjoys at the European level, the real test of accession lies in the consistent implementation of reforms in key areas such as the judiciary, local public administration, anti-corruption, public communication, and the government's ability to build broad political and societal consensus.

In the interview, the expert explains why the messages of appreciation from European leaders should be understood, first and foremost, as a signal of political support in a complex regional environment, where actors continue to seek to undermine Moldova's European path. We invite you to read the full interview.

How do you interpret the messages from European leaders, who have praised the reforms implemented in Chişinău, the political will demonstrated by the authorities, and the fact that the Republic of Moldova has already fulfilled 93% of the measures set out in the Growth Plan? Beyond these encouraging signals and the financial support announced by the European Union, what do you see as the main areas in which Moldova still needs to make further progress in order to consolidate its European path?

As expected, first and foremost, it was a political message and a message of support. In the current regional context, this signal is extremely important because, despite the referendum and the outcome of the parliamentary elections, there are still actors who seek to cast doubt on the achievements that the Republic of Moldova has attained through considerable effort. After all, the formal opening of accession negotiations with the European Union is not something that comes easily. That is why the first thing we should appreciate is this political signal.



Angela Gramadă, Director of the Experts for Security and Global Affairs (ESGA). Photo: Facebook

Secondly, it is important that the European Union has chosen not to make Moldova's European path conditional on its relationship with the Russian Federation. In other words, Brussels is not waiting for a signal from Moscow before deciding whether to continue its dialogue with Chişinău on European integration. Does the Republic of Moldova have the political will to join the European Union? Yes. Do the European institutions have the political will to respond positively to that choice? They do.

We should therefore recognize the efforts made by both Chişinău and Brussels and continue moving forward, regardless of attempts by various actors to divert Moldova from its objective of joining the European Union.

As for the work that still lies ahead, it is enough to look at the platform that monitors Moldova's progress across the six negotiating clusters. It clearly shows that significant work remains in several key areas.

Judicial reform remains one of the most challenging chapters. Fiscal reform also requires considerable effort, while anti-corruption measures will continue to be among the country's main

challenges in the coming years. In addition, numerous technical chapters still need to be adapted to Moldova's specific realities and needs. The EU acquis has already been adopted by the European Union; Moldova's task is to negotiate implementation arrangements and timelines that best reflect its national interests. In some areas, transitional periods will be necessary to ensure that European legislation is properly understood and effectively implemented.

Some of these chapters will not pose challenges only domestically; they will also require complex dialogue with neighbouring countries. Environmental policy is one such example. Moldova still faces a significant gap compared with EU Member States, while at the same time it must address a number of environmental issues together with Ukraine. As a result, this chapter will require sustained political and diplomatic efforts to identify mutually acceptable solutions and to prevent sensitive bilateral issues from slowing down the accession process.

At present, foreign policy is the most advanced chapter. There is relatively little EU legislation left to transpose and implement, suggesting that this cluster is likely to progress more rapidly than others.

That said, challenges will remain. Some Member States may argue that Moldova benefits from Romania's consistent support and from having a strong advocate for its interests within the European Union, giving it access to opportunities that previous candidate countries did not enjoy. Such perceptions may fuel arguments about an uneven playing field. Nevertheless, the Republic of Moldova should not allow itself to be discouraged by such narratives and must continue to pursue its European path with consistency and determination.

The Lack of Genuine Debate and Broad Consensus

The signals coming from Brussels are undoubtedly encouraging and reflect the European Union's recognition of the reform efforts undertaken by the authorities in Chişinău. At the same time, however, voices from both civil society and the opposition have expressed concern about what they see as a decline in dialogue and consultation between the government and other relevant stakeholders. Given that the European integration process requires the broadest possible political and societal consensus around key

reforms, how do you assess PAS's strategy of advancing this agenda without a more inclusive process of consultation and consensus-building?

I believe this is one of the main challenges PAS will face in the coming period. Not necessarily with regard to the accession process itself, because from a technical standpoint Moldova is making good progress. The real challenge is that PAS must understand one essential point: these reforms are not being carried out for European institutions, they are being carried out for the people of the Republic of Moldova.

At the same time, citizens also need to understand that EU accession is not a project for Brussels; it is a project for Chişinău and for every community across the country. From this perspective, I believe the criticism voiced by civil society regarding PAS's tendency to treat the European agenda as an exclusive political domain is justified.

The European integration process must not become the monopoly of a single political party. It requires more dialogue, more public debate, and a genuine process of consultation. Even if some opposition parties initially refuse to engage, it is important for the government to keep the door permanently open and demonstrate, through an authentic public dialogue, that all political forces and civil society actors are welcome at the table. In doing so, even the opposition may come to recognize the importance of participating in discussions about Moldova's European future.

At present, the opposition accuses PAS of trying to monopolize the European integration agenda and claim exclusive ownership of it. Beyond this political dispute, however, there is a strategic consideration that should not be overlooked. At some point, the Republic of Moldova will need to secure the ratification of its Accession Treaty in every EU Member State. If the European agenda becomes identified exclusively with one political party, Moldova risks unnecessarily limiting its own room for manoeuvre.

In some Member States, access to key political actors may well be facilitated through Moldova's opposition parties rather than through the governing party. If these channels of communication have not been developed in advance, Moldova could face unnecessary difficulties at a decisive stage of the accession process.

For this reason, the Republic of Moldova needs a broad national consensus around the European

objective. Only by acting together, as domestic partners, will the country be able to successfully navigate the negotiations and the final stages of accession.

Communication with Brussels and the European institutions must, of course, continue. At the same time, there needs to be a different approach at home: a more inclusive communication and consultation strategy that does not exclude potential political partners or representatives of civil society from the debate and from the process of building consensus around Moldova's European integration.

Justice Reform: Between the Indicators Reported to Brussels and the Reality on the Ground

In their statements following the EU–Moldova Summit, European leaders highlighted the tangible benefits of cooperation with the European Union, while President Maia Sandu presented a series of results, indicators, and achievements, particularly in the area of judicial reform. Against the backdrop of the ongoing debates and controversies surrounding the vetting process, do you believe there is a gap between the picture presented to Moldova's international partners and the reality of how judicial reform is being implemented in the country?

At first glance, such an impression could indeed arise. On the one hand, the European institutions assess the indicators and results that the Republic of Moldova reports through official monitoring mechanisms, as well as the information they receive through their dialogue with the authorities and experts involved in the reform process. On the other hand, there are alternative monitoring reports produced by civil society, which sometimes present a different perspective but do not always reach all relevant European stakeholders in a way that allows for a comprehensive comparative assessment.

From this perspective, European institutions also have a responsibility to maintain an open dialogue with a broad range of actors who can provide independent assessments of Moldova's progress. At the same time, they should pay close attention to the domestic debate and verify whether the issues raised in the public sphere are reflected in the information they receive through official channels. Some indicators point to clear progress,

while others highlight persistent shortcomings. It is precisely this comparative analysis that is essential.

The European Union should rely on its own monitoring and evaluation mechanisms rather than limiting itself to information provided by state institutions. Independent verification of results is a natural and necessary component of the accession process.

There is also another important mechanism: cross-institutional verification. I am referring to the assessments carried out by international organizations that monitor different policy areas relevant to the Republic of Moldova. The Council of Europe, for example, issues recommendations on human rights and the functioning of the judiciary, while the Venice Commission evaluates whether legislation complies with European standards. Taken together, these independent assessments make it possible to conduct a much more objective comparative evaluation.

This does not mean that the Republic of Moldova is failing to deliver results. It simply means that the evaluation process must be rigorous and based on multiple sources of information. The European Union assesses not only a candidate country's ability to align its legislation with the EU *acquis*, but also its capacity to implement those reforms effectively and deliver tangible results in practice.

Local Public Administration Reform: A Major Challenge That Has Not Been Adequately Explained to Citizens

It is often said that two of the most important reforms monitored by the European Union in the accession process are judicial reform and local public administration reform. While judicial reform is already well underway, local public administration reform still appears to lack, at least for now, a clearly defined model. How do you assess the way the authorities are managing this reform, and how important is it to accelerate it for the Republic of Moldova's European integration process?

Judicial reform is undoubtedly one of the Republic of Moldova's greatest challenges. However, local public administration reform is equally important and, arguably, even more complex in terms of its impact on the way the state functions.

We know very well that this reform is part of Cluster 1 – *Fundamentals* – and represents one of the key requirements of the EU accession process. It entails not only administrative reorganization, but also a fundamental restructuring of the mechanisms of cooperation between central and local authorities, public institutions, citizens, and the business community. At the same time, a more effective local administration means a greater capacity to absorb and make use of European funding opportunities.

In reality, this reform goes far beyond a possible territorial-administrative reorganization. If implemented properly, it can strengthen the resilience of local communities and enable citizens to feel more engaged in governance and better equipped to cope with future challenges, including those originating outside the country.

Ukraine offers a very clear example of this. When Russia launched its full-scale invasion, the decentralization reforms that had already been implemented enabled local authorities to respond quickly without constantly waiting for instructions from the central government. Citizens knew where the nearest shelters were, what resources were available, and who was responsible for crisis management at the local level. Today, Ukraine continues this process by decentralizing parts of its energy infrastructure in order to reduce dependence on central authorities when critical infrastructure comes under attack.

This is precisely the kind of resilience that the Republic of Moldova should be aiming to build, even though these aspects have not yet received sufficient attention in the domestic public debate.

The problem is that the reform of local public administration has not been communicated effectively. The messages coming from the authorities are often highly technical and delivered in a rather self-contained manner, without explaining to citizens, in practical terms, what the reform actually means. What is voluntary amalgamation? How will the process work? What benefits will it bring to local communities? These are questions to which many people still do not have clear answers.

The same communication gap exists with regard to local public officials. It is not enough to communicate through press releases or statements from the State Chancellery. Public servants need to fully understand the responsibilities assigned to

them under the law and the role they are expected to play in implementing the reform.

It is equally important for the authorities to explain the benefits of cooperation between neighbouring municipalities. Joint projects make it possible to access larger financial resources and deliver public services more efficiently than if each community acts on its own.

Unless the authorities move away from this predominantly technical approach and begin communicating the reform in a simpler, clearer, and more transparent manner, there is a real risk of facing strong resistance—not only from local authorities but also from ordinary citizens, who may struggle to understand why their community is expected to merge or cooperate with another and what tangible benefits such a change would bring.

The Autumn Report: Cautious Optimism, but Serious Human Resource Challenges

Are you optimistic that the European Commission's progress report to be published this autumn will be favourable to the Republic of Moldova? What are the main reasons behind your assessment?

I believe the Republic of Moldova will receive a more favourable progress report than Ukraine, including in the area of judicial reform. I say this with a great sense of responsibility because Ukraine has encountered a number of significant obstacles in reforming its state institutions, including controversies and scandals affecting the justice sector.

Fortunately, the Republic of Moldova has been able to manage the challenges and controversies surrounding the vetting process and its efforts to reform the judicial system. The country's greatest challenge now is the shortage of qualified human resources to replace those leaving the system, whether voluntarily or because they did not pass the integrity evaluation process.

Building a new generation of highly qualified justice professionals takes time. At the same time, the state must provide the necessary resources, incentives, and working conditions to encourage talented professionals to enter the judiciary and, above all, to ensure that they are able to perform their duties independently.

Thank you!

Moldova's Growing Integration with the EU: Expanding Cooperation and a Stronger Focus on Security

Analysis by Denis Cenusă, associate expert with Expert-Grup

After nearly two years of waiting, on 15 June the European Union announced that the first accession negotiation cluster – the *Fundamentals* cluster – would be opened during the summer. As is customary in the EU enlargement process, this cluster is opened before all others and remains open until the very end of the negotiations, serving as the principal benchmark for monitoring a candidate country's progress.

From this point onward, the EU's assessment will focus primarily on two critical areas: the functioning of the judiciary and the protection of fundamental rights. Only after the remaining five negotiation clusters have been successfully completed –and provided there are no setbacks, reversals, or instances of backsliding –will the *Fundamentals* cluster be reassessed to determine Moldova's overall readiness for EU membership.

Alongside the deepening accession process, Moldova and the European Union continue to attach high priority to political dialogue at the highest level through their annual bilateral summit. Although there was no technical necessity to do so, Brussels and Chisinau chose to hold this year's summit in Brussels just one week after the political decision to launch negotiations under the first cluster. Politically, the summit reinforced the perception that this latest breakthrough in EU–Moldova relations was closely associated with President Maia Sandu and the pro-European government in Chisinau. Symbolically, it marked the removal of the final political obstacles preventing the formal advancement of the accession negotiations.

The summit also carried important domestic political significance. It reinforced the



Denis Cenusă, associate expert with Expert-Grup
Photo: Facebook

government's strategic agenda and its political narrative of achieving EU membership by 2030, while strengthening the credibility of the country's European course ahead of the local elections scheduled for 2027. Much as the EU–Moldova Summit of July 2025 had electoral implications by strengthening the governing party ahead of the parliamentary elections that October –widely regarded as decisive for preserving Moldova's European trajectory – the June 2026 summit likewise served to reaffirm the political legitimacy of the country's European integration agenda.

Accession Negotiations: The EU's Official Entry into Moldova's Political Landscape

The official announcement on the launch of accession negotiations had been expected following the political change in Hungary after the parliamentary elections in April. The removal of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's veto on Ukraine also opened the door for Moldova, which remains linked to Ukraine's accession trajectory.

Five key policy areas are covered by the first negotiation cluster: the judiciary and fundamental rights (Chapter 23), justice, freedom and security (Chapter 24), public procurement (Chapter 5), statistics (Chapter 18), and financial control (Chapter 32). Most of these areas have already undergone an intensive process of *Europeanisation* during the twelve years of implementation of the EU–Moldova Association Agreement.

Nevertheless, the accession negotiations have not yet entered a fully operational phase, as Hungary continues to raise objections, requesting the removal of the wording “as soon as possible” in relation to Ukraine’s negotiations. In practical terms, Moldova’s door to accession still has a lock that can only be opened with a Ukrainian key.

For this reason, although the European Union has already established the benchmarks that will guide future assessments, they will only be fully applied once the remaining political obstacles are overcome. Progress in these areas will be evaluated against a set of horizontal criteria, including institutional capacity, implementation mechanisms, and policy coordination.

Beyond these technical aspects—which are relatively easy to measure—other dimensions, such as judicial independence or the quality of anti-corruption policies, are inherently political. They are therefore more susceptible to politicisation and may be interpreted subjectively, both in Chisinau and in Brussels.

The accession negotiation phase places the European Union in a more delicate position than the Moldovan authorities. While Chisinau may be tempted to overstate the results of certain reforms, the EU is expected to assess progress strictly on the basis of merit. If it is perceived as favouring the government by issuing overly positive evaluations, its own credibility will be called into question. As a result, the EU’s reputation will increasingly become linked to the actual performance of Moldova’s reform process.

At the same time, the Moldovan authorities are likely to invoke the EU more frequently when justifying major reforms—from the external evaluation of judges and prosecutors to fiscal and public administration reforms. Greater transparency and clarity in the accession dialogue may therefore create a temptation to shift all or part of the political responsibility for the quality

of these reforms onto Brussels. As the European Union consolidates its role as the external authority validating Moldova’s reform efforts, the accession process will inevitably generate reputational costs—and political accountability—for both sides.

The Second EU–Moldova Summit: Pro-Reform Optimism and Financial Support

Launched in July 2025, the bilateral EU–Moldova Summit has become the highest-level platform for political engagement between the two sides. Its establishment reflects the high degree of trust that continues to characterize relations between Chisinau and Brussels. The second summit, held in Brussels in June 2026, built on the agenda and political momentum established one year earlier.

First and foremost, the European Union reaffirmed its commitment to supporting Moldova through the Euro 1.9 billion EU Growth Plan. At the same time, the allocation of financial assistance is becoming increasingly strategic, with funding directed toward infrastructure projects capable of delivering tangible social benefits. The construction of a regional hospital in Balti and the modernization of Chisinau’s district heating system are two concrete examples of investments with a direct impact on citizens’ quality of life.

The EU also recognizes that expanding the number of beneficiaries of European grants and loans contributes to strengthening public support for Moldova’s pro-European course and helps consolidate the country’s reform trajectory.

Another key dimension highlighted during the summit was security cooperation, with particular emphasis on countering hybrid threats.

The Joint Declaration contains 21 references to security, underscoring the growing prominence of this area within the bilateral relationship—even surpassing direct references to economic cooperation. In this context, the EU reaffirmed its support for the European Union Partnership Mission in Moldova (EUPM Moldova), for which Euro 197 million has already been allocated.

The Mission has become a strategic instrument for assisting the Moldovan authorities in countering hybrid threats, safeguarding the integrity of

electoral processes, and strengthening the resilience of the country's digital infrastructure. The security dimension of EU–Moldova cooperation is also expanding through Moldova's gradual participation in the European Union Defence Innovation Scheme (EUDIS), as well as in the EU's space programmes, including Copernicus for Earth observation and Galileo for satellite navigation.

The summit also reviewed opportunities for deeper sectoral cooperation in transport, energy, innovation, and the business environment. At the same time, there is a clear trend toward broadening the institutional architecture of EU–Moldova relations through the establishment of new sectoral dialogue platforms, including in areas such as labour and agriculture.

One area that the European Union could not overlook is the rule of law, which lies at the heart of the Fundamentals cluster that will frame the accession negotiations. Although Brussels continues to acknowledge progress in this politically sensitive field, some problematic aspects receive comparatively less attention. Existing shortcomings are reflected, among other sources, in the latest opinions of the Venice Commission, which has recommended that the evaluation of judges include a balanced assessment of their professional performance, alongside appropriate remedial mechanisms for those who do not pass the financial integrity assessment.

In lieu of conclusion

The launch of the accession negotiations, together with the outcomes of the EU–Moldova Summit, demonstrates that bilateral relations are entering a new phase, one characterized by a clearer and deeper political and public policy dimension.

The European Union is prepared to deepen Moldova's European integration on the path toward membership by expanding the range of policy areas in which technical dialogue with Chisinau becomes just as important as political engagement. At the same time, as the accession process advances, the EU is becoming increasingly involved in Moldova's domestic political and reform agenda. This closer engagement also makes Brussels more vulnerable to attempts to shift responsibility for shortcomings or failures in Moldova's reform process onto the European Union itself.

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Moldova Office
111 Bucuresti St., Chisinau, MD-2012,
Republic of Moldova
Web: <http://moldova.fes.de>
E-mail: fes.moldova@fes.de
Tel. +373 855830

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