

Mircea Brie
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THE EUROPEAN ORIENTATION OF THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA

ROMANIA'S SUPPORT FOR THIS PROCESS

Bilingual edition



Editura Universităţii din Oradea



Debrecen University Press

Mircea Brie ◦ Ana-Maria Costea ◦ Nicolae Toderas

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ORIENTAREA EUROPEANĂ A REPUBLICII MODOLVA.

Demersuri de sprijinire din partea României

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AA	Association Agreement
ACIS	Authority for the Coordination of Structural Instruments
AMCSC	Managing Authority for the Community Support Framework
BIE	Bureau for European Integration
CEF	Connecting Europe Facility
CNIE	National Committee for European Integration
COSME	EU programme for the Competitiveness of Enterprises and Small and Medium-sized Enterprises from 2014 - 2020
DCFTA	Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area
DG INTPA	Directorate-General for International Partnerships
DG NEAR	Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations
EDIS	Extended Decentralisation Implementation System
EDMO	European Digital Media Observatory
eID	Digital identity card
ENTSO-E	European Network of Transmission System Operators for Electricity
ERIM	Equal Rights and Independent Media (IREX Europe)
ESPON	European Observation Network for Territorial Development and Cohesion
IPA	Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance
IPCEI	Important Projects of Common European Interests
ISPA	Instrument for Structural Policies for Pre-Accession
ITU	International Telecommunication Union
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
EaP	Eastern Partnership
ENP	European Neighbourhood Policy
UfM	Union for the Mediterranean
PPRM	Partnership Platform for the Republic of Moldova
ATUG	Autonomous Territorial Unit of Gagauzia
DCFTA	Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area
ENI	European Neighbourhood Instrument
PHARE	The Community Assistance Programme for the Countries of Central and Eastern Europe
RoAID	Romanian International Development Cooperation Agency
SMEs	Small and Medium-sized Enterprises
SWIFT	Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication
EU	European Union
IER	European Institute of Romania
JRC	Joint Research Centre
TAIEX	Technical Assistance and Information Exchange
TEN-T	Trans-European Transport Network
RIS3	Research and Innovation Strategies for Smart Specialisation

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vant level. In 2021, he coordinated the technical team responsible for drafting and negotiating the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP). Throughout his career, he has contributed to the policy transfer from Romania to the Republic of Moldova.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Nowadays, the European continent is crossed by and marked by direct or indirect confrontations, which are a threat to the security of the entire continent. On the one hand, from a military point of view, one must remember the war in Ukraine and its effects, the confrontations between Republic of Armenia and Republic of Azerbaijan in 2020 - in addition, in September 2023, Republic of Azerbaijan launched an operation in Nagorno Karabakh, which led to the mass exodus of ethnic Armenians from the enclave (over 100,000 people) and the self-dissolution of the institutions of the “Artsakh Republic”, as of 1 January 2024, Russia’s revisionism, the waves of populism - events that changed the dynamics of the European security architecture. On the other hand, Europe also faces frozen conflicts such as those in: the Transnistrian region, South Ossetia and Abkhazia and until 2020 Nagorno-Karabagh. On the other hand, asymmetric risks and threats, coming from the cyber- sphere, are increasingly present, especially after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. At a macro-level, from a geopolitical point of view, the European continent is the meeting point of competing interests of the great powers such as the USA, the Russian Federation, China and Türkiye. Thus, more and more pressure is put on the EU’s foreign policy, whether it is about the defense policy and the strategic autonomy of the EU, or about its enlargement. In 2023 the European decision-makers have announced the opening of gates to the EU precisely to one of the most dynamic areas from the point of view of the security at the level of Europe, accepting that the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine to become candidate countries to the EU despite the protests and belligerent actions from Moscow.

Thus, the future of any regional foreign policy initiative, such as the EU enlargement, is a very dynamic one, which includes a series of continuities, discontinuities, unforeseen events (such as the beginning of the war in Ukraine in February 2022 was) and a high level of incertitude. In order to explore such a topic, we believe that the comparative method and the method of constructing scenarios are very useful in forecasting in the field of foreign policy, being basically used in the military field, because it allows the articulation of possible future developments based on the identification of patterns, the estimation of uncertainties and probabilities, as well as the introduction of unexpected elements. In addition to starting the accession negotiations of Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova, the EU has initiated a series of internal steps for effective preparation for enlargement. For example, the final report of the high-level expert group on EU Cohesion Policy (presented in January 2024), Ninth Report on Economic, Social and Territorial Cohesion (presented in March 2024), as well as the report on the Future of the Single Market (the Letta report – presented in April 2024) underlines the fact that in the coming years the priorities must not only

aim at the normative preparation for accession, especially in terms of compliance with the Copenhagen criteria, but also at the rapid integration into the EU single market from the pre-accession stage. This means the allocation of funds from the cohesion policy for major investments in the transport infrastructure (rail, energy, road and data), the energy efficiency of public infrastructure and housing, strengthening the competitiveness of large enterprises and SMEs as well as in the efficient management of waste and water resources, etc. An essential role in this respect will be played by the member states and the border regions with Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova. From this point of view, Romania's role is a significant one, especially in the case of the Republic of Moldova, both from the perspective of transferring its expertise and experience from the pre-accession period, as well as from the preparation of major and strategic public investment projects from European funds what will be available in the forthcoming period of time.

The aim of this study was to analyse the relations between the Republic of Moldova and the European Union and to identify the main areas in which Romania can offer expertise and transfer of best practices in the field of European integration.

In this respect, we set out to substantiate the contribution that Romania can have to the European path that the Republic of Moldova is engaged on in the short and medium term. Therefore, the purposefulness of the analysis is policy-oriented, being directly addressed to decision-makers in the field of foreign policy of Romania and the Republic of Moldova, consisting of a set of positioning recommendations and concrete actions that the Bucharest authorities can adopt in the endeavours to support the Republic of Moldova in its European course of action, with an emphasis on risks and opportunities, together with a broad overall analysis of developments in the strategic neighbourhood in the latest decades.

In view of attaining this goal, we had in mind the following **specific objectives**:

1. *The analysis of the dynamics of the European integration process of the Republic of Moldova in the current geopolitical context*, whereby there was analysed the relationship with the European Union, the evolution of Chişinău in the Eastern Partnership in accordance with the European standards, the Association Agreement and the acceptance of Republic of Moldova's accession as a candidate country to the EU.

2. *Drawing up a SWOT analysis on the evolution and dynamics of the European integration process of the Republic of Moldova*. This enabled the identification, synthesis, description and analysis of potential vulnerabilities and uncertainties that may affect the negotiation framework between the Republic of Moldova and the European Union. By using the SWOT method, we considered endogenous factors (such as: political stability at the internal level, the implementation of reforms, the support of the elites and of the population, the managing of territorial conflicts,

etc.), as well as exogenous factors (the war in Ukraine, the merging of the accession negotiations with Ukraine; the support coalitions of the member states, a.o.).

3. Identifying, analysing and evaluating the ways in which Romania can contribute to the consolidation and expansion of the progress made by the Republic of Moldova in the integration process. By this analysis, we presented the actions that were taken in the last decade by the Romanian authorities with regard to its contribution to the consolidation and expansion of the progress made by the Republic of Moldova.

4. The ‘construction’ of alternative scenarios on the political and geopolitical evolution. We made five scenarios for the future starting from the best-case scenario (1. The Republic of Moldova in the EU until 2030; 2. The Republic of Moldova-Ukraine join together; 3. Maintaining the status quo; 4. The Republic of Moldova-buffer zone between the east and west) and the worst-case scenario (5. Non-EU Republic of Moldova for an unlimited period of time). The internal political evolution of the Republic of Moldova and the complicated geopolitical context in Eastern Europe (EU, Russia, USA, Ukraine, etc.) were taken into account.

5. Formulating recommendations to support the acceleration of implementing the necessary reforms in order to bring the Republic of Moldova closer to the European Union. The formulation of recommendations (at the tactical, operational and strategic level) to support the acceleration of the implementation of the reforms needed in order to bring the Republic of Moldova closer to the European Union resulted from the analysis.

6. Formulating public communication recommendations to support the authorities of the Republic of Moldova in promoting the European integration process. Following and analysing Romania’s European path, the expertise accumulated and the examples of good practices, we drew up a set of recommendations that could be used by the authorities of the Republic of Moldova in the process of promoting European integration.

Methodologically, we aimed at the fact that the carrying out of these objectives be achieved through a complex documentation and a set of elaborated methods and tools that imply the use of official documents as primary sources, specialized literature, the expertise of the authors and stakeholders interviewed.

The content analysis method included the analysis of the dimensions and stages of the European integration of the Republic of Moldova (internally and externally - multilateral and bilateral). From the multilateral perspective, in order to analyse the regional and national development framework of the EaP, but also the policies of Chişinău, the following programmatic documents will be analysed: 2009 – the EaP launch; 2013 – Vilnius Summit; 2015 - Riga Summit; 2017 - Brussels Summit: the „20 results for 2020”; 2019 - The conference celebrating the 10 years of EaP, the

annual reports of the European Commission related to the level of integration of the Republic of Moldova and the scores recorded by it, etc. The comparative method was used in view of highlighting the road that the Republic of Moldova has to go by comparing it with the reforms and changes that Romania had to implement as part of the negotiations with the EU.

The SWOT analysis was used according to the classical approach of identifying strengths and opportunities as well as weaknesses and threats.

The scenario method thus makes the unpredictable predictable, at least partially, at an imaginative level. We aimed at using a scientific analytical model, agreed upon and used in the foreign policy and security analyst community, in the following format (Lambert 2007, p. 112): identifying the most important aspects of the problem analysed; identification of the main factors that can influence the analysed problem (differentiated based on the degree of uncertainty – from very likely (close to *status quo*) to very unlikely ('*black swan*' scenario) and the type of impact (very positive, neutral, very negative); creating alternative scenarios.

From the point of view of the structure, the research work is organized in **seven chapters**, in addition to the conclusions.

In the first chapter, *Introduction and methodology*, a short introductory presentation is made under thematic report and the methodological framework is developed.

In the second chapter, *The European integration process of the Republic of Moldova in the current geopolitical context*, we analysed the European integration process of the Republic of Moldova in the current geopolitical context, the challenges for European integration related to the management of the frozen Transnistrian conflict and the developments in the Autonomous Territorial Unit of Gagauzia (UTAG), but also the relationship between the EU and the Republic of Moldova, from partner to candidate state: the Eastern Partnership, the Association Agreement, candidate state, negotiation chapters.

In chapter three, *The relationship between the Republic of Moldova and Romania, as the main element of Romania's foreign policy*, we focused on the analysis of the relationship between the Republic of Moldova and Romania, as the main element of Romania's foreign policy, carrying out a longitudinal analysis of the bilateral relationship between the two, on Romania's role in moving forward on the European agenda of discussions vis-à-vis the integration of the Republic Moldova in European structures.

In chapter four, *Romania's European path: good practice lessons and their transfer towards the Republic of Moldova*, we analysed Romania's European course, emphasizing the lessons of good practice and their transfer to the Republic of Moldova. Thus, we would like to highlight the way in which the Romanian state can assist the partners from Chişinău in the accession process, taking into account the know-how and skills

acquired during the negotiations for their own accession. Thus, the following themes of analysis were taken into account: ensuring the internal political consensus and a prescriptive strategic planning; substantiation of the negotiation strategy; finalization and continuous strengthening of the institutional system and internal governance.

In chapter five, *Future scenarios on the Republic of Moldova's EU integration process and Romania's view in regarding them*, the research team developed the 5 scenarios for the future in the process of integration of the Republic of Moldova into the EU and the positioning of Romania in relation to them after identifying the influencing factors. Thus, the 5 scenarios are: Scenario 1: The *best-case* scenario: Republic of Moldova until 2030; Scenario 2: Republic of Moldova-Ukraine together (jointly); Scenario 3: Maintaining the *status quo*; Scenario 4: Republic of Moldova-buffer zone between east and west and Scenario 5: *Worst case* scenario: Republic of Moldova non-EU for an indefinite period of time.

After the longitudinal analysis, the comparative analysis and the five scenarios, the research team carried out in chapter six, Dynamics of the European integration process of the Republic of Moldova, two sections: 6.1. Stakeholders' perspectives (comprising a synthesis resulting from the semi-structured interviews) and 6.2. The SWOT analysis regarding the dynamics of the European integration process of the Republic of Moldova. The latter represents a SWOT analysis of the dynamics of the European integration process of the Republic of Moldova, outlining the most important strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and also threats.

Thus, in chapter seven, *Supporting recommendations regarding the Republic of Moldova's European integration*, we drafted recommendations to support the enhancing of the implementation of the necessary reforms in order to bring the Republic of Moldova closer to the European Union, as well as recommendations for public communication to support the authorities of the Republic of Moldova in promoting the European integration process.

In conclusion, the Republic of Moldova is seriously affected by the war in Ukraine economically, socially, but also at the level of national and societal security. The hybrid war waged by Russia against this vulnerable state is contributing to a process of eroding democracy and threatens the strengthening of the rule of law and political balance. The Transnistrian conflict and the Autonomous Territorial Unit of Gagauzia (UTAG) are used by Russia to generate instability and to block the initiatives of the Chişinău authorities related to the European integration process. The Transnistrian conflict in the context of the events in Ukraine has repeatedly shown signs that it can be reactivated. The political leaders from the Autonomous Territorial Unit of Gagauzia (UTAG) publicly support Putin's regime and its policies towards the Republic of Moldova and its European integration by visits to Moscow inclusively.

The war in Ukraine, although being an event that affected international security, created an unprecedented opportunity for the Republic of Moldova, namely the chance to apply to the EU accession. The aggressive behaviour of the Russian Federation was felt at the EU level as an unprecedented threat to the stability and security of the entire European continent, fact that led the leaders from Brussels to go beyond the minimum common denominator and unanimously accept the candidate status of the Republic of Moldova to the EU, alongside that of Ukraine. At the other decision-making pole, having in mind the reforms already implemented within the Eastern Partnership, the signing and ratification of the Association Agreement, but also the political agenda, the authorities from Chişinău demonstrated a relatively constant behaviour at the head of the group of six states within the Eastern Partnership. Once with the acquiring of the candidate status, the efforts of the Chişinău authorities intensified in terms of adopting the necessary reforms in order to fulfil the criteria (an element identified as a strong point in the SWOT analysis). This fact is also attested in the monitoring report of the European Commission, but we cannot overlook the fact that the path will not be an easy one, given the weak points identified following the SWOT analysis: the necessary reforms in the judicial system, the still high level of corruption, the prevailing inequality between the sexes, the digitization process that must be continued, the problem of the Transnistrian conflict that can delay the accession to the EU.

The relations between Romania and the Republic of Moldova have been defined by a constant support towards the European integration of the Republic of Moldova. This aspect turned this collaboration into an essential element of Romania's foreign policy. During the last three decades, Romania had a determined role in the democratization and Europeanization of the Republic of Moldova, contributing significantly to its development through bilateral projects and substantial financial assistance, becoming the first bilateral economic partner. The major role played by Romania was noted in aspects such as: the process of liberalizing the visa regime, supporting the breaking of energy dependence on the Russian Federation, obtaining by the Republic of Moldova the status of a candidate country for EU accession and access to the negotiation stage, etc. In the following period of time, Romania must continue this support, facilitating the progress of accession negotiations by the authorities of the Republic of Moldova and contributing to the implementation of the reforms necessary to complete this stage. Romania's experience in the process of EU accession offers a series of valuable lessons for the Republic of Moldova and can be used to guide the Republic of Moldova in a more efficient way, avoiding the blockages and strategic errors registered. Thus, the creation of a clear governance framework, the adoption of a well-defined inter-institutional strategy and the development of a solid partnership with the EU institutions, as well as with the member states that will hold the rotating

presidency of the EU Council in the next three years are key aspects for the successful development of the process negotiation and subsequently of accession to the EU. Also, the implementation of a robust institutional mechanism to coordinate negotiations and the creation of a national program to prepare for integration are necessary steps to ensure a predictable and coherent process for the EU membership

As it can be seen from the scenarios developed, in order for the Republic of Moldova to be able to fulfil the objective it set forth, i.e. to become a member state by 2030, at the internal level, the issue of the Transnistrian conflict will have to be resolved in a relatively short term, namely a possible economic integration of this region into the European market, which is feasible, considering the commercial exchanges already registered. On the other hand, the integration of the Republic of Moldova into the EU will also require a border crossing, probably adopting a model similar to the Cypriot or Irish one. At an external level, it should be disconnected from Ukraine in the negotiation process, which is less likely. Thus, an identified threat was the dependence of the accession to the EU of this state on the end of the war in Ukraine and its accession to European structures. Having in mind these things, as well as the accession process of the Balkans and the aggressive behaviour of the Russian Federation, the Republic of Moldova has relatively small chances of becoming a member state of the EU in the short term. Moreover, this negotiation that the EU has chosen to make in two/jointly can represent a major threat to the Republic of Moldova, considering that the war in Ukraine can continue on an indefinite period of time, which will generate a feeling of frustration on the part of the authorities from Chişinău, fact that can lead to the development of a feeling of frustration and finally to the possible lack of interest in the EU.

The recommendations resulting from the analysis are structured on three levels: strategic, tactical and operational, having in view the national specifics. At a strategic level, the recommendation referring to the support of the acceleration of the implementation of the necessary reforms by the Republic of Moldova in order to get closer to the EU, emphasizes the need to provide coherent and united support to achieve institutional convergence between Romania and the Republic of Moldova, with a view to European integration. From a tactical perspective, the governmental strategies in Romania must include clear objectives related to supporting the authorities of the Republic of Moldova in preparing the negotiations for accession, as well as supporting the implementation of the specific requirements of the negotiation chapters, supported by adequate resources. At operational level, the creation of a national focal point to manage the coordination of technical and financial support is recommended, thus ensuring a unified and efficient approach. At the same time, providing incentives for officials involved in the integration process and the medium and long-term secondment in the Republic of Moldova is also recommended.

In what concerns supporting the authorities of the Republic of Moldova in promoting the European integration process, from a strategic point of view, it is recommended that Romania should make efforts to include the Republic of Moldova in the European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO), as well as creating of a joint hub coordinated by Romania to counteract disinformation. From a tactical point of view, enhancing communication by exemplifying the benefits of European integration, based on Romania's progress within the EU is recommended. In addition to all this, from an operational point of view, the exchange of experience between specialists in the field of public communication from the Republic of Moldova and Romania would contribute to the improvement of communication skills on European topics, supporting correct and effective information of the citizens in the Republic of Moldova on the impact of European integration.

INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY

On June 25, 2024, the European Union organized in Luxembourg the first Intergovernmental Conference at ministerial level to open accession negotiations with the Republic of Moldova. Thus, the EU accession negotiations with the Republic of Moldova officially began. This marks an important stage in achieving the goal of EU accession and the integration of the Republic of Moldova into the European structures. The first Accession Conference at ministerial level with the Republic of Moldova was held following a decision by the European Council on December 14, 2023, to open accession negotiations with the Republic of Moldova and the Council's approval, on June 21, 2024, of the Negotiating Framework for the negotiations with the Republic of Moldova (European Council, 2024). "The opening of accession negotiations only two years after the granting of candidate status is a testament to Moldova's resoluteness in fulfilling the EU reform agenda.... The future of Moldova and its citizens lies within the European Union," stated Hadja Lahbib, the Minister of Foreign and European Affairs of Belgium, on that occasion (European Council, 2024).

During this meeting, the representatives of the European Union underlined that the Republic of Moldova and the EU have a close partnership, which has been constantly developed and deepened in the last decade. The Association Agreement (AA) of the Republic of Moldova with the EU, including also the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area, entered into force in 2016 and has been provisionally applied since 2014. The extensive and comprehensive cooperation between the EU and the Republic of Moldova materializes in a wide range of areas. As a pioneering move in its relationship with a partner country, the EU signed a security and defense partnership with the Republic of Moldova on May 21, 2024. In this context, the European Union "reiterated its resolute condemnation of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine and stated its readiness to continue to provide all the relevant support to Moldova and its people in addressing the challenges relating to the war, and to strengthen the country's resilience, security and stability in the face of Russia's hybrid actions" (European Council, 2024).

Challenges and expectations are particularly high for the Republic of Moldova, especially as the population was called to validate this European path through the election and the referendum of October 20, 2024¹. The European Union continues to expect the democratic process to be consolidated and the rule of law to be a functional reality in the Republic of Moldova, which is called upon to continue adhering to the

¹ Given the dynamic nature of the events related to the subject under analysis, we clarify for the sake of accuracy that our analysis chronologically stops on November 3, 2024.

values mentioned in Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union, namely respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality and the rule of law, as well as respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities. Additionally, the National Action Plan for the Accession of the Republic of Moldova to the European Union for the years 2024-2027 indicates the approval of the policy document in the field of human rights for the years 2024-2027 (2024, 9).

In accordance with the strategy announced by the government in Chisinau, the mission of the Moldovan authorities is to ensure the preparation of the Republic of Moldova for accession to the European Union by 2030. Per the strategy set forth by the government in Chisinau, the mission of the Moldovan authorities is to ensure the preparation of the Republic of Moldova for accession to the European Union by 2030. According to Prime-Minister Dorin Recean, who led the delegation of the Republic of Moldova at the official meeting in Luxembourg, “the European integration plan of the Republic of Moldova is an ambitious, yet realistic one, with very clear indicators for each negotiation chapter, which should bring direct benefits to every person in our country” (Moldpres, 2024).

Romania, as an EU member state located in the immediate neighbourhood of the Republic of Moldova, has an amplified role in the European enlargement in this direction, given the importance and significance of the linguistic and ethnic community, the common historical heritage and the common national and spiritual values of the communities on both banks of the Prut River.

Romania's contribution to the Republic of Moldova's rapprochement with the EU was determined by its position as a member state. From within the EU, Romania was able to play an important role in expanding the area of security and prosperity in the Union's Eastern neighborhood.

At the regional level, a series of geopolitical events that took place in the EU's neighborhood influenced the cooperation dynamics of the main actors in the area. For the Black Sea region, the most notable of them was the illegal annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation in March 2014 and the Russian invasion of Ukraine after February 2022.

Currently, the European continent is being torn apart by direct or indirect confrontations, which threaten the security of the entire continent.

Contextually, on one hand, from a military point of view, we must recall the aggression of the Russian Federation against Ukraine and its effects, the confrontations between the Republic of Armenia and the Republic of Azerbaijan in 2020 – to which is added, in September 2023, the launching of the operation in Nagorno-Karabakh by the Republic of Azerbaijan, which resulted in the massive exodus of ethnic Armenians from the enclave (over 100,000 people) and the subsequent self-dissolution of the institutions of the “Republic of Artsakh” as of January 1, 2024, the revisionism of

the Russian Federation, the waves of populism. These are developments that have changed the dynamics of the European security architecture. On the other hand, Europe is also facing frozen conflicts such as those in the Transnistrian region, South Ossetia, Abkhazia, and, until 2020, Nagorno-Karabakh. Thirdly, asymmetric risks and threats, originating in the cyber sphere, are increasingly prominent, especially after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. At a macro level, from a geopolitical standpoint, the European continent is the meeting point for the competing interests of great powers such as the USA, the Russian Federation, China, and, at a regional level, Türkiye. As a result, increasingly more pressure is placed on the EU's foreign policy, whether in regard to the defense policy and the EU's strategic autonomy, or in relation to its enlargement. In 2023, European decision-makers announced the opening of the EU's doors precisely towards one of the most dynamic areas in terms of security in Europe, by accepting that the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine would become EU candidate states despite protests and belligerent actions from Moscow.

The future of any foreign policy regional initiative, as the EU enlargement, is a particularly dynamic one, including a series of continuities, discontinuities, unforeseen events (as was the case with the start of the Russian Federation's aggression against Ukraine in February 2020), and a high degree of uncertainty. In order to explore such a topic, we consider that the comparative method and the scenario-building method are particularly useful in forecasting within the field of foreign policy. Primarily used in the military field, they allow for the articulation of possible future developments based on pattern identification, the estimation of uncertainties and probabilities, as well as the introduction of unforeseen elements.

In addition to starting accession negotiations with Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova, the EU initiated a series of internal arrangements for the effective preparation of enlargement. For example, the final report of the High-Level Group on the Future of Cohesion Policy (presented in January 2024), the Ninth Report on Economic, Social and Territorial Cohesion (presented in March 2024), as well as the report on the future of the Single Market, *Much More Than a Market* - the Letta report (presented in April 2024), underline that, in the coming years, priorities should not only be focused on normative preparation of accession, in particular as regards compliance with the Copenhagen criteria, but also on the rapid integration into the EU single market from the pre-accession phase. This means allocations from the Cohesion Policy funds for major investments in: transport infrastructure (rail, energy, road, and data), the energy efficiency of public infrastructure and housing, strengthening the competitiveness of large enterprises and SMEs, as well as in the efficient management of waste and water resources, etc. An essential role in this process will be played by the Member States and border regions neighboring Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova. In this regard, Romania's role is a decisive one, especially in the Republic

of Moldova's case, both in terms of transferring its expertise and experience from the pre-accession period and in terms of preparing major and strategic public investment projects using European funds to be made available in the coming period.

The **goal** of this study is to *analyze the relations between the Republic of Moldova and the European Union and identify the main areas in which Romania can offer expertise and transfer of best practices in the field of European integration.*

In this regard, we aim to lay the groundwork for Romania's potential contribution to the European path that the Republic of Moldova is expected to follow in the short- and medium-term. Therefore, the purpose of the analysis is policy-oriented, being directly addressed to foreign policy decision makers from Romanian and the Republic of Moldova, consisting of a set of positioning recommendations and concrete actions that authorities in Bucharest can adopt in their effort to support the Republic of Moldova in its European path, with an emphasis on risks and opportunities, complemented by a comprehensive overview of developments in the strategic neighborhood over the last decades.

To achieve this goal, we aim to achieve some **specific objectives**:

1. The analysis of the dynamics of the European integration process of the Republic of Moldova in the current geopolitical context. The relationship with the European Union, the evolution of Chisinau in the Eastern Partnership per European standards, the AA, and the acceptance of Moldova's candidacy for EU accession will be analyzed. The main negotiation chapters will be presented, alongside the *status quo* of the reforms implemented by the Chisinau authorities in their EU path, as well as the reforms to be implemented for European integration. All this will be corroborated by the implications stemming from the Russian Federation's aggression against Ukraine and its impact on the Republic of Moldova. Additionally, the twin transition agenda will be taken into account, especially concerning streamlining activities in sectors such as digitalization and ensuring energy security, that is the analysis of the political dimension (e.g., democratization, the consolidation of democratic institutions) and the economic dimension (e.g., reforms in economic sectors, alignment with Single Market standards) of Moldova's European integration. Finally, the relationship with the Russian Federation, the Russian Federation's aggression against Ukraine, and the developments arising from the conflict in the Transnistrian region and the Autonomous Territorial Unit of Gagauzia will be analyzed in terms of their impact on the Republic of Moldova's European path.

2. Drawing up a SWOT analysis on the evolution and dynamics of the European integration process of the Republic of Moldova. This will enable the identification, synthesis, description, and analysis of potential vulnerabilities and uncertainties that may affect the negotiation framework between the Republic of Moldova and the European Union. By using the SWOT method both endogenous factors (such as:

political stability at the internal level, the implementation of reforms, support from the elites and the population, the managing of territorial conflicts, etc.) and exogenous factors (such as: the war in Ukraine, the merging of the accession negotiations with Ukraine; the support coalitions of the member states, a.o.) are considered. The analysis will highlight alternatives to addressing the identified vulnerabilities and uncertainties, using examples of relevant practices from previous EU enlargement waves (2004, 2007, and 2013). Furthermore, the analysis of vulnerabilities will reveal their impact on fulfilling the conditions derived from the negotiation chapters, both from the perspective of the social impact of the reforms (the affordability criterion) and from that of ensuring the predictability and continuity of the processes (the irreversibility criterion).

3. Identifying, analyzing, and evaluating how Romania can contribute to the consolidation and expansion of the progress made by the Republic of Moldova in the integration process. The analysis will present the actions undertaken in the last decade by the Romanian authorities with regard to the contribution to the consolidation and expansion of the progress made by the Republic of Moldova. Thus, the analysis will start from the provisions of the Declaration to Establish a Strategic Partnership between Romania and the Republic of Moldova for the European Integration of the Republic of Moldova (signed in Bucharest, on April 27, 2010). The degree of fulfillment of the measures in the Action Plan between the Government of Romania and the Government of the Republic of Moldova for the implementation of the Declaration (signed in Iasi, on March 3, 2012) will be thus assessed. The results of the 12 sessions of the Joint Intergovernmental Commission for Economic Cooperation Romania - Republic of Moldova will be presented and analyzed. In order to extract some lessons learned regarding the efficiency and effectiveness of the support provided by Romania to the Republic of Moldova in order to accelerate its European path, the analysis will present several cases of successful practices. Additionally, some practices that, at first glance, seemed irrelevant but which, over time, had a positive impact on bringing the Republic of Moldova closer to the EU and to the EU single market, will also be presented.

The bilateral relationship between Romania and the Republic of Moldova since Moldova's declaration of independence, the key foreign policy concepts of the two states, the Declaration to Establish a Strategic Partnership between Romania and the Republic of Moldova for the European Integration of the Republic of Moldova, the Support Platform for the Republic of Moldova, as well as joint projects such as the Iasi-Ungheni gas pipeline, among others, will be analyzed. Additionally, Romania's foreign policy concepts towards Chisinau will be analyzed, along with concrete projects implemented by the Romanian state in the Republic of Moldova, European-

level initiatives primarily promoted by the Romanian state, the foreign policy agenda proposed during Romania's EU presidency, etc.

4. *The construction of alternative scenarios on the political and geopolitical evolution.* Consideration will be given to the internal political evolution of the Republic of Moldova and the complicated geopolitical context in Eastern Europe. Our goal is to test these scenarios in order to estimate their specific impact on the dynamics of the integration process of the Republic of Moldova, with a focus on opportunities and threats. The purpose is to adapt the public policies of the Romanian authorities to maximize support for the European integration and development of the Republic of Moldova.

5. *Formulating recommendations to support the acceleration of implementing the necessary reforms to bring the Republic of Moldova closer to the European Union.* Our focus is on formulating recommendations that will support the acceleration of the implementation of the reforms needed in order to bring the Republic of Moldova closer to the European Union. These will also result from conducting semi-structured interviews with representatives of the central public authorities of the Republic of Moldova. Variables such as: defining concrete needs; previous experiences of transfer processes (especially in the case of negotiating the Association Agreement); availabilities of knowledge and experience transfer; types of support instruments and mechanisms will be taken into account.

This will allow us to determine the opportunity of deepening Romania's support for the Republic of Moldova, going much beyond the preparation for cluster negotiations. For example, from this very stage, Romania can play a decisive role in preparing the authorities of the Republic of Moldova in regards to intergovernmental negotiations specific to a Member State (participation of representatives of the Republic of Moldova as observers at thematic meetings organized by the European Commission or in Council configurations, with respect for the conditions of comitology). For the future post-2027 Cohesion Policy, Romania must formulate, together with the Republic of Moldova, convergent positions on certain thematic priorities of bilateral and national interest. Thus, support will not be limited only to peer-to-peer guidance in the effective programming and formulation of national preferences in negotiating the Partnership Agreement and programs with the European Commission services, but will also represent a mutual advantage in strengthening a support coalition, similar to the association of the Visegrád Group.

The recommendations will also explore the option of financing the support methods provided by Romania to the authorities of the Republic of Moldova in preparing and conducting EU accession negotiations. This takes into account the opportunities offered by the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA) or those specific to interregional cooperation for which the Republic of Moldova would be

eligible, aligned with the European Added Value (ViC) objective of the ERDF (such as Interreg EUROPE, INTERACT, URBACT, and ESPON).

6. Formulating public communication recommendations to support the authorities of the Republic of Moldova in promoting the European integration process.

Following and analyzing Romania's European path, the expertise accumulated, and the examples of good practices, we propose that in the field of public communication, a set of recommendations can be developed that can be used by the authorities of the Republic of Moldova in the process of promoting European integration. The main directions and categories of this set of recommendations will result from the analysis of official documents and specialized literature and the expertise of the authors, as well as from the implementation of qualitative research based on semi-structured interviews with representatives of the central public authorities of the Republic of Moldova.

At the level of this objective, we aim to develop several directions that will lead to a **public communication strategy** to support the authorities in the Republic of Moldova in promoting the European integration process.

The directions pursued throughout this analysis are:

- developing targeted communication messages based on the particularities of the public/groups specific to the Republic of Moldova, including structural characteristics of age, gender, types of localities, religious affiliation, etc.
- directly connecting the communication strategy with the accession negotiations on chapters and providing up-to-date information in a way that is accessible to the general public;
- constructing a mechanism to combat hybrid warfare aimed at dismantling the myths propagated in the public space regarding the effects of accession on people's lives;
- developing unified and convincing messages;
- presenting the positive impact of the changes recorded and the opportunities associated with the European path of the Republic of Moldova.

Methodologically, we aim to achieve these objectives through a complex documentation and a set of elaborate methods and tools involving the use of official documents as primary sources, specialized literature, and the expertise of the authors.

This paper includes an analysis of the events and of the context up to October 2024, to cover the results of the referendum on the introduction of the objective of accession to the European Union into the Constitution of the Republic of Moldova and the 2024 Report on the Republic of Moldova accompanying the 2024 Communication from the Commission on EU Enlargement Policy, published on October 30, 2024.

The content analysis method will include the analysis of the dimensions and stages of the European integration trajectory of the Republic of Moldova (internal and

external - multilateral and bilateral). From the multilateral perspective, to analyze the regional, national development framework of the EaP, but also Chisinau's policies, the following programmatic documents will be analyzed: 2009 - Launch of the EaP; 2013 - Vilnius Summit; 2015 - Riga Summit; 2017 - Brussels Summit: the "20 results for 2020"; 2019 - Conference celebrating the 10th anniversary of the EaP, the annual reports of the European Commission related to the level of integration of the Republic of Moldova and the scores recorded by it. The reports of the European Commission regarding the stage of implementation of the *acquis communautaire* (2023) and the steps that the Chisinau authorities must follow in order to complete the European path (2022) will be analyzed as well. Last but not least, the analysis will also cover summaries of the most important studies of specialists in the field regarding the transformations that have occurred in the Republic of Moldova since 1991 and the reforms that are still necessary. Also, the main bilateral agreements, with a European character, signed between Romania and the Republic of Moldova in various fields such as health, energy, education, etc., will be analyzed. Regarding Romania's foreign policy, the analysis will cover the programmatic documents in support of the integration of the Moldovan state into European structures (Defense Strategy of 2015 and 2020, Security Strategy of 2007, etc.) as well as the European agenda of discussions during the period when Romania held the EU presidency and the support for the Republic of Moldova, the ODA that Romania grants, etc.

The *comparative method* will be used to bring to the fore the path that the Republic of Moldova has to follow by comparing it with the reforms and changes that Romania had to implement as part of its negotiations with the EU. Thus, Romania's European path and the negotiations conducted with the EU in the accession process will be analyzed in order to highlight the lessons learned and the good practices that Romania can export to the Republic of Moldova in its European path. The emphasis will be on the elements that Romania can use in consolidating and expanding the progress made by the Republic of Moldova in the integration process, considering its European path.

The *SWOT analysis* will be used per the classical approach by identifying strengths and opportunities, as well as weaknesses and threats. On one hand, in order to capture the specific nature of EU policy implementation, particularly in the context of EU enlargement, the scientific grounding of the method will be ensured through the review of up-to-date and relevant academic sources in the initial phase of identification and analysis of scholarly literature. On the other hand, to better align with the specifics of interventions supported by EU funds (i.e., the justification of the intervention logic) the approach of DG INTPA and DG NEAR will also be drawn upon, including those related to the EU's cooperation with third countries and candidate countries (see, for example, the Capacity4dev resource platform or the European Commission's EXACT

External Wiki portal). The SWOT analysis will facilitate the development of scenarios as well as the design of policy recommendations.

The *scenario method* thus makes the unpredictable, at least partially, imaginatively predictable. We aim to use a scientific analytical model endorsed by the community of foreign policy and security analysts, as per the following format (Lembert 2007, p. 112): identification of the most important aspects of the issue under analysis; identification of the main factors that may influence the issue (differentiated based on the degree of uncertainty — from very likely (close to the status quo) to very unlikely (the “black swan” scenario) — and the type of impact (very positive, neutral, very negative)); and the creation of alternative scenarios. The scenario method will help us bridge the certainties of the present (the acceptance of the Republic of Moldova’s candidacy for EU membership) with the uncertainties of the future (when the Republic of Moldova might become an EU member state, the evolution of the Russian Federation’s aggression against Ukraine, and the repercussions on the European trajectories of both countries). Lembert’s (2007) model aims to first rank the most significant factors, according to their level of uncertainty and their impact on the trends relevant to the studied phenomenon and, in the second phase, to create a series of very different scenarios exploring various manifestations of these crucial factors (of varying intensities and with either positive or negative impacts). The purpose of using such analytical methodology is to identify the crucial factors influencing the relationship between the EU and the Republic of Moldova, as well as the relationship between Romania and the Republic of Moldova, and to outline their impact on Romania’s interests in its relations with the Republic of Moldova. Separating known elements (certainties) from unknown elements (uncertainties) serves to clarify the possible impact of factors on the phenomenon, and this classification of elements forms the basis of the scenario method. The method thus helps avoid the risk of overlooking certain possibilities and assumptions that are not commonly considered by stakeholders, being a tool for anticipating and reducing improbability.

In order to validate the scenarios and to substantiate public policy recommendations (both at the level of those supporting the acceleration of the implementation of reforms and at the level of the public communication strategy), we propose conducting qualitative research based on semi-structured interviews.

In terms of structure, the work is organized into **seven chapters**, in addition to the Introduction and Conclusion sections.

The first chapter, *Introduction and Methodology*, provides a brief thematic overview and develops the methodological framework.

In the second chapter, *The European Integration Process of the Republic of Moldova in the Current Geopolitical Context*, we analyzed the challenges to European integration related to the management of the frozen conflict in the Transnistrian

region and developments in the Autonomous Territorial Unit of Gagauzia, as well as the EU–Republic of Moldova relationship, from partner to candidate status: the Eastern Partnership, the Association Agreement, candidate status, and negotiation chapters.

In chapter three, *The Relationship between the Republic of Moldova and Romania as a Key Element of Romania's Foreign Policy*, we focused on analyzing the the relationship between the Republic of Moldova and Romania as a key element of Romania's foreign policy, by conducting a longitudinal analysis of the bilateral relationship between the two states and on Romania's role in advancing on the European agenda of discussions regarding the integration of the Republic of Moldova into European structures.

In chapter four, *Romania's European Path: Lessons of Best Practices and Their Transfer to the Republic of Moldova*, we analyzed Romania's European path, emphasizing the lessons of best practices and their transfer to the Republic of Moldova. Thus, we highlighted how the Romanian state can assist its partners in Chisinau during the accession process, taking into account the know-how and skills acquired throughout Romania's accession negotiations. Thus, the following analysis topics were considered: ensuring internal political consensus and prescriptive strategic planning; substantiating the negotiation strategy; finalizing and continuously strengthening the institutional system and internal governance

In chapter five, *Future Scenarios on the Republic of Moldova's EU Integration Process and Romania's View Regarding Them*, the research team developed the 5 scenarios for the future of the Republic of Moldova's European integration and the positioning of Romania concerning them, after the influencing factors were identified. Thus, the five scenarios are: Scenario 1: The *best-case* scenario: The Republic of Moldova in the EU by 2030; Scenario 2: Republic of Moldova-Ukraine together (jointly); Scenario 3: Maintaining the *status quo*; Scenario 4: Republic of Moldova-buffer zone between East and West and Scenario 5: *Worst case* scenario: Republic of Moldova non-EU indefinitely.

After the longitudinal analysis, the comparative analysis, and the five scenarios, chapter six, *Dynamics of the European Integration Process of the Republic of Moldova*, includes two sections: 6.1. Stakeholders' Perspectives (comprising a synthesis resulting from the semi-structured interviews) and 6.2. The SWOT analysis regarding the dynamics of the European integration process of the Republic of Moldova. The latter represents a SWOT analysis of the dynamics of the European integration process of the Republic of Moldova, outlining the most important strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats.

Thus, in chapter seven, *Recommendations for Supporting the Republic of Moldova in the Context of European Integration*, we drafted recommendations which might serve the enhancing of the implementation of the necessary reforms to bring the Republic

of Moldova closer to the European Union, as well as recommendations for public communication to support the authorities of the Republic of Moldova in promoting the European integration process.

THE EUROPEAN INTEGRATION PROCESS OF THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA IN THE CURRENT GEOPOLITICAL CONTEXT

2.1. The Evolution of the Geopolitical Context

At the beginning of the third millennium, the Central and Eastern European space was geopolitically marked by the Eastern expansion of both the European Union and NATO, as well as by Russian Federation's tendency to reposition itself as a relevant actor, to reclaim the influence once held by Moscow during the USSR era, including through the use of force against its neighbours. The international system is increasingly moving towards a multipolar world, with a more prominent role for China. All of these developments were complemented by multiple crises that particularly affected the European space: from the economic and financial crisis, through the intense pressure of migration generated by multiple factors, including instability in the Middle East and North Africa, to the COVID-19 crisis and the Russian Federation's aggression against Ukraine.

Notably, the evolution of the relationship between the Republic of Moldova and the European Union was greatly influenced by several high-impact geopolitical events and processes:

- NATO's expansion through the inclusion of formerly communist Central and Eastern European states, up to the borders of the former Soviet Union, including the Baltic countries
- EU's 2004 and 2007 enlargements
- The 2008 armed conflict in Georgia
- The launch of the Eastern Partnership (EaP) in 2009
- The Russian Federation's aggression against Ukraine after the annexation of Crimea in 2014
- The illegal and unprovoked Russian aggression against Ukraine, after February 2022.

The *European Neighbourhood Policy* (ENP), launched in 2003, served as a foundation and a starting point, and its results have been praised by the European Commission since the first years (European Commission 2004). Thus, "the ENP has strengthened relations with partner countries and brought tangible benefits to both the Union and its partners, including the launch of regional initiatives and support to democratisation in the European Neighbourhood" (OJEU 2014). Considered within the regional context, the ENP emerges against the backdrop of the EU's Eastern

enlargement, corroborated by the change in the Russian Federation's strategy towards Eastern Europe.

Shortly after the accession of formerly communist East and Central European countries (the 2004 and 2007 enlargements), the EU had to *reform its European Neighbourhood Policy*. This decision was not triggered by the fact that the new neighbours from the East were too big a challenge for the EU, but rather because this period brought numerous changes to its external border. Its newer neighbouring states were less stable. In the East, the European partners faced major challenges, stemming from both internal issues and, more importantly, from external pressures exerted by the Russian Federation, including pressures of a military nature. The European Union found itself in the position of protecting its partners in the face of an increasingly expansionist Russian state. The 2008 armed conflict in Georgia or the Russian Federation's aggression against Ukraine after 2014 are illustrative of this reality that the EU had to adapt to (For more details, see Brie 2017, p. 55-71).

In retrospect, we can affirm that the eastward Euro-Atlantic enlargement was marked by oscillating developments in relations with the Russian Federation. Through a diachronic examination of the events following the fall of the Iron Curtain, we find that the timid initiatives of the Russian Federation to open up to cooperation with the West in the first decade after the collapse of the USSR were abandoned along the way. The Russian Federation started to increasingly view rapprochement of the former communist states with NATO and, later, with the EU as a threat to its security - a process that harms its regional and geopolitical interests.

The context, starting from the year 2000, when Vladimir Putin became the president of the Russian Federation, and this state's outlook toward the West is shifting. Whereas in the case of the Yeltsin government, we could observe a policy directed towards cooperation, Putin emphasizes the right and necessity of the "independence" of Russian politics. The concept of independence does not refer to the internal independence of this state's policies, but rather must be understood as an antithetical relationship to the EU, and especially to NATO, thus in an external context. In light of this thesis, the Russian Federation perceives itself in a continuous state of external threat generated by its geographical position (lack of maritime borders, expansion of the EU and NATO to the East, and the growth of China's influence in the West) (Tsygankov 2012, p. 31). Such a perception can generate two types of strategies: on one hand, we can speak of a foreign policy whose purpose is rather to defend one's own interests, without clear expressions of expansionist rhetoric and policies (characteristic of the period 2000-2008, until the outbreak of the armed conflict in Georgia). On the other hand, we can observe/ speak of an offensive policy (Bărbulescu et al. 2016, p. 63), representing a shift in Russia Federation's strategy direction after 2008. This shift generated a pattern with aggressive overtones, illustrated

by the Russian Federation's aggression against Ukraine (after 2014), thus an *offensive policy* (Bărbulescu et al. 2016, p. 63). The Russian Federation often used concepts such as the "Russian-Soviet identity" (Perepelytsia 2010, p. 105) when considering the identity of the ex-Soviet European space (especially concerning Ukraine). Under this paradigm, Ukrainians were considered to be "Russian people that speak one of the dialects of the Russian language" (Perepelytsia 2010, p. 105). The Russian Federation perceives Eastern Europe as being part of its immediate vicinity, a historical legacy of the Tsarist imperial *hinterland*. This space, including Ukraine, Belarus, the Republic of Moldova, and the Caucasian countries, is perceived, at most, as a region separating it from the EU and NATO, but in no way a part of the Western system. The Russian Federation often appeals to the use of symbolic, cultural, or religious values - the so-called "*Ruskiy Mir*" (the Russian world/ the Russian cultural sphere). Last but not least, the "*Eurasianism*" ideology (widely discussed in scholarly literature) is used to justify the right of the Russian Federation to intervene in the post-Soviet states. In this way, the Russian Federation perceives any rapprochement of the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine with the EU/NATO as a loss of its influence in the area.

This is the context in which the ENP evolved and underwent reform. In 2009, the Eastern Partnership (EaP) was launched, after the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) took a clearer shape in Paris in 2008, thus strengthening the regional dimension of the ENP. The reform of the European Neighbourhood Policy conferred a distinct character to the Eastern part of Europe. Through the launching of the Eastern Partnership, the EU aimed to strengthen and deepen the ENP in the former Soviet Eastern European space. Thus, the Eastern Partnership represents the specific Eastern dimension of the European Neighbourhood Policy. The partnership was founded on shared values such as democracy, the rule of law, respect for human rights, adherence to the principles of a market economy, sustainable development, and good governance. The EaP is founded on "mutual interests and commitments as well as on shared ownership and responsibility", being "governed by the principles of differentiation and conditionality" (European Commission 2009, p. 5). The EU leaders welcomed and endorsed the Polish-Swedish initiative, delegating the European Commission to conceptualize the new program and come up with proposals and concrete ways for implementing the project by spring 2009. At the same time, at the European Council in Brussels, on 19-20 June 2008, the need to promote the Eastern dimension of the European Neighbourhood Policy and to deepen regional cooperation between the EU's eastern neighbours was reiterated (EU Council 2008, p. 19). The European Commission was mandated and invited by the European Council to "prepare a proposal on the Eastern Partnership" (EU Council 2019). The Russian military intervention in Georgia prompted the European Council, convened in an extraordinary session on 1 September 2008, to examine the regional effects of the new geopolitical context and to ask the Commission

to expedite the process of the EaP initiative (EU Council 2019). The need for a single and cohesive political sphere regarding the Eastern neighbours was evident. The steps taken towards the development of a coherent policy, accompanied by specific European programmes and instruments, gained substance with the organisation of the first *Eastern Partnership Summit in Prague* (May 7, 2009). The Eastern Partnership was designed to complement the European Neighbourhood Policy and aimed to intensify political and economic integration, with none of the six former Soviet states receiving promises regarding eventual accession to the European Union (Rinnert 2013, p. 2). As part of the European Neighborhood Policy, the Eastern Partnership created direct links between the ENP and the European integration and enlargement policy (Bocková & Lenč 2014, p. 161; Kochenov 2009, p. 29).

From the early years of the Eastern Partnership's existence, a clear differentiation in the future relations of the six states with the EU can be observed. The *more-for-more* principle is increasingly targeted by European officials in response to the different aspirations of the partners (especially after the EaP Summit in Warsaw in September 2011). In the period after *the Vilnius Summit* (November 2013), this paradigmatic shift in which the ENP was seen was also required by the fact that the EaP had somewhat reached its limits in the context of the annexation of Crimea and the aggression of the Russian Federation against Ukraine. The European Union proved constrained in managing the Russian Federation's aggression against Ukraine in the period between the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the Russian invasion in February 2022. On a symbolic level, in the immediate context of 2014, the process of the Republic of Moldova, Georgia, and Ukraine's rapprochement with the European Union was deliberately accelerated by the EU. Thus, despite an obvious lack of concrete steps of a reformist-integrating nature, these states receive certain benefits with a high impact on the media and public perception of integration. The Republic of Moldova, because it was almost the only one to remain within the parameters established in the Vilnius context, but also because the EU wanted to send clear messages to the others, became the first country in the Eastern Partnership to benefit from a visa-free travel regime (April 2014). Subsequently, these three states signed bilateral Association Agreements with the EU. The other three states (Belarus, the Republic of Armenia, and the Republic of Azerbaijan) repositioned themselves in the context of geopolitical changes, taking a step back in their relationship with the EU (Brie, 2022).

The EaP Summit in Riga (May 21-22, 2015) was marked by mutual assurances that the EaP would continue and that the ENP represented a viable solution for Eastern Europe. European leaders reaffirmed the particular importance that the EU attaches to the Eastern Partnership as a "specific dimension of the European Neighbourhood Policy". The summit's joint declaration reaffirms the shared vision on "this strategic and ambitious Partnership as one based on mutual interests and commitments and

supporting sustained reform” promoted in the EaP partner states (EU Council 2015a, p. 1).

We cannot fail to notice the shift in perspective through which these matters are presented: each state can decide its level of European integration, namely the areas of cooperation or the objectives it aspires to in its relationship with the EU. The partner states’ “sovereignty” is reaffirmed (EU Council 2015a, p. 1), not only in relation to potential aggressors (such as the Russians!), but also in relation to the rapprochement with the European Union. In the text of the joint declaration, the tone and message are much more cautious regarding the horizon of European enlargement to the east (Matache-Zaharia 2015, p. 254). The shift from the *multilateral*, common dimension of the EaP implementation framework to the *bilateral dimension*, specific and applied differently to each partner, is evident. Thus, the “differentiated relation between the EU and its six sovereign, independent partners” (EU Council 2015a, p. 3) is a priority for multilateral cooperation platforms that are addressed only at a general-declarative level (Brie 2022). The EaP reform through shifting focus from the multilateral dimension to the bilateral one and on the *more-for-more* principle highlights the flexibilization of EU’s policies regarding the EaP in direct accordance with the constraints imposed by these national interests, correlated with the specific geopolitical context.

The Sixth EaP Summit in Brussels (December 15, 2021) gathered only five of the partners: **the Republic of Armenia, the Republic of Azerbaijan, Georgia, the Republic of Moldova, and Ukraine**. Belarus suspended its participation in the Eastern Partnership; however, the EU decided to continue cooperating with the Belarusian people (EaP Summit, 2021a).

The text of the joint declaration (EaP Summit 2021b) contains the reaffirmation of the EU’s commitment towards the EaP countries, welcoming the agreements that the Eastern partners have concluded or were under negotiation:

- the full entry into force of the association agreements and of the deep and comprehensive free trade areas with Georgia, the Republic of Moldova, and Ukraine
- the entry into force of the EU-Armenia Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement in March 2021
- the progress made in the negotiations between the EU and the Republic of Azerbaijan regarding a new comprehensive agreement

The EU recognized the initiative of the trio of associated partners (Georgia, the Republic of Moldova, and Ukraine) to strengthen their cooperation with the EU (EaP Summit 2021b).

The Ukrainian issue, however, highlighted, once again, the limits of the EaP (for more details, see Brie 2022). Moreover, the period from 2015 to 2024 witnessed major

stalemates and geopolitical repositionings. Consequently, the EaP format reached its limits². The initial project had to be adapted towards a bilateral dimension and sectoral deepening based on the *more-for-more* principle. Even though some states, including the Republic of Moldova, Ukraine, Georgia,³ or lately Armenia, have proven obvious progress in the bilateral relationship with the EU compared to 2009, when the EaP was launched, in our opinion, these closer relations have gone beyond the EaP format.

The European agenda adapted to the new reality. We note that the regional challenges are significant. At the bilateral level, relations are marked by the new geopolitical context. Belarus has suspended itself from the partnership. Ukraine must face an aggressive Russian invasion. The Republic of Armenia and the Republic of Azerbaijan have not managed to overcome in a constructive manner, under the EU umbrella, the tense episodes of the tortuous path of conflictual bilateral relations generated by the problems in Nagorno-Karabakh. Georgia and the Republic of Moldova live under direct threat in the context of the Russian Federation's aggression against Ukraine and are forced to pay closer attention to the separatist regions on their territories that are supported by the Russian Federation.

In this new context, the European Union is forced to adapt its Eastern neighbourhood policies on an ongoing basis. The limits of expansion to the East are obvious. At the same time, the EU cannot afford to abandon its partners to whom it can offer limited concrete solutions in the current geopolitical context.

Through an analysis of policies, context, and outcomes, we identify **the current limits of the EaP** in three main directions (without excluding other perspectives) (this section is a synthesis of the analysis found in Brie, 2022):

- the limits of the EU's diminished commitment to the integration of the EaP states
- the general geopolitical context and particularly the Russian Federation's opposition to this project
- the specific national interests of the EaP states

A. The EU's diminished commitment regarding the integration of the EaP states was evident from the very beginning of this partnership project. Until the end of 2023, the EU had always avoided offering a clear perspective on accession to the six EaP states. Despite numerous political statements of support from European

² The sixth EaP Summit in Brussels (15 December 2021) brought together only five of the partners: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine. Belarus suspended its participation in the Eastern Partnership, but the EU decided to continue to cooperate with the Belarusian people. "The EU regrets the decision of the Belarusian authorities to suspend their participation in the EaP and looks forward to resuming cooperation as soon as the necessary conditions for a peaceful democratic transition are in place to build on a joint agenda based on common values and shared interests." (EaP Summit 2021a).

³ In recent years, the position of this state has fluctuated in relation to the process of rapprochement with the EU and in relation to the trend of the first decade within the EaP.

leaders, no firm guarantees and commitments with precise deadlines were offered to any of the six partners.

As early as 2011, the limits of the EU's commitment were apparent. Despite progress made, especially by the Republic of Moldova, Georgia, and Ukraine, the EU left the impression of the existence of political and geopolitical limits during the Warsaw Summit.

Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk, a politician who would come to shape the subsequent period of European politics, stated:

"We know that Georgia, the Republic of Moldova, and Ukraine had higher expectations from this summit: they wanted a clear perspective of joining the Union. But we do not have enough conditions in place to provide a clear perspective. We are waiting for all the conditions to be met, and then we can move on" (EaP Summit 2011)

In the new post-2014 context is obvious that the mere reformation of states, together with the implementation of EU policies and *acquis*, no longer suffice to achieve European enlargement. The ENP, as it was conceived, no longer corresponds to geopolitical realities. It is enough to recall that the ENP had long been seen as a kind of "antechamber" for the enlargement of the European Union. Forced to take into account a complex set of factors, the EU neither ventures hastily nor can it afford to promise accession to the EaP states. This reality is given by both the EU's external context (including the geopolitical one) and the internal one. The latter is also related to the erosion of the enlargement momentum after the accession waves of 2004, 2007, and 2013. Many states have become reluctant to consider further enlargement. The financial and economic crisis, which has shifted the focus much more towards internal political issues, has undoubtedly contributed to this situation. The need for institutional reform, but also the increasingly complicated geopolitical context (the Russian Federation's aggression against Ukraine; the situation in the Middle East and North Africa; the refugee/immigrant crisis; trade tensions and the paradigmatic shift in the US' foreign and security policy that have marked the presidency of Donald Trump, etc.) are likely to further complicate this picture. Last but not least, another vulnerability of the EU's common policies in regard to its neighbourhood, evident also in the period following the Riga Summit, is given by the security dimension in the ENP approach. This proves to be insufficiently clear and is uncorrelated with the current geopolitical situation. Thus, security proves to be a "weakness" (Gogolashvili, 2015, p. 18) on the European Neighbourhood agenda (Bărbulescu et al., 2016, pp. 110-111). The Russian invasion of Ukraine, which began in February 2022, confirmed the blockages and shortcomings of the EaP, but also the limits of the guarantees that the EU could have given to the EaP states (Brie, 2017, pp. 63-66).

B. The general geopolitical context and particularly the Russian Federation's opposition to this project marked the policies of the EaP states. The brutal Russian interventions in Georgia (2008) and Ukraine (after 2014, with the annexation of Crimea, with the support of separatists in the east, and primarily through the military invasion that began on February 24, 2022) were associated with the total subjugation of the regime of Aleksandr Lukashenko to Putin, but also with the maintenance of a constantly tense atmosphere in the Transnistrian region and especially in Nagorno-Karabakh.

The conclusion emerging from a simple analysis is that the states that rejected the political and geopolitical orientation outlined by the Russian Federation were forced to face internal and external challenges supported by the Russians, often of a military nature. The invasion and aggression of the Russian Federation against Ukraine are telling for its response regarding Ukraine's Euro-Atlantic orientation.

Putin's public discourse and political actions reveal a rhetoric that often refers to the glorious imperialist past of his history that he would like to revive, if only in the minds of his citizens, whom he mobilizes in support of such projects concerning internal and external enemies (Brie, 2018, p. 239). The glorification of the past of the Tsarist empire, but also that of the Soviet Union, highlights Russian ambitions that undermine the stability and balance of the international system. In fact, the entire foundation of the current world order was shaken with the invasion of Ukraine due to the principles of international law being flagrantly violated. For this reason, the UN General Assembly adopted a series of resolutions related to the Russian Federation's aggression against Ukraine, including the resolution "Territorial Integrity of Ukraine: Defending the Principles of the Charter of the United Nations", adopted in October 2022 with the votes of 143 UN member states (Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2022) However, the Russian Federation was not condemned by all relevant actors, benefiting from economic and military support, especially from China and India. Last but not least, previously isolated and hostile regimes to the West have gained importance through developing relations with the Russian Federation (including North Korea and Iran).

For the Russian Federation, the entire international ostracism, accompanied by drastic sanctions and corroborated by the immense cost generated by its aggression against Ukraine, weighed less than blocking Ukraine's free path to the West. This once again highlights the stakes set by Putin and his regime in redrawing their sphere of influence in Eastern Europe.

The Russian aggressiveness at all levels thus put pressure on the fragile European integration initiatives that had begun to develop in the EaP states, and the EU was not able to respond effectively through the mechanisms at its disposal.

C. **The specific national interests of the EaP states**, often divergent concerning European integration, also led to the failure to achieve the initial objectives of the EaP. The level of ambition in relation to European integration proved to vary across the six states. Moreover, some of the states have never articulated such a position. For those states, the EaP was seen as an instrument of pragmatic facilitation of economic gains, without political integration implications.

The national interests of the EaP states were not divergent only regarding the objective of European integration, but, in many cases, they also diverged with regard to neighboring partners under the partnership framework.

Without aiming, at this point, to offer a concise overview of the specific interests of each of the six EaP states (this can be found in Brie, 2022), we note that the analysis of specific interests reveals limited ambition levels displayed by each of the EaP states. In fact, the EaP reform, by shifting the emphasis from the multilateral to the bilateral dimension as well as on the *more-for-more* principle, highlights the increased flexibility of the EU's policies towards EaP in direct relation to the limits set by the aforementioned national interests correlated with the specific geopolitical context.

The pro-European orientation of the **Republic of Moldova** is clearly expressed through the formulation of the request to open accession negotiations, the granting of candidate status, and, on June 25, 2024, the official opening of the first intergovernmental conference within the accession negotiation process alongside Ukraine (European Council, 2024). The process is, however, a tortuous one. Chisinau must also take into account the regional context, the current aggression of the Russian Federation against Ukraine, but also the Russian support given to the Transnistrian region and the Autonomous Territorial Unit of Gagauzia.

The unprovoked military invasion of the Russian Federation against Ukraine, representing a flagrant violation of international law, complicated the geopolitical context, introducing significant repositioning and mutations on the international stage. The EU re-evaluated its policies on the Eastern neighbourhood, including in relation to the EaP states. A clear openness is manifested through the initiation of accession negotiations with the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine. The two states remain procedurally connected, being placed together in this process. While waiting for a diplomatic solution to resolve the Russian Federation's aggression against Ukraine, the latter will need to consider, in the post-war period, the future provisions and the joint commitment to end the aggression. This reality, lacking a short- or medium-term solution, is not advantageous for the Republic of Moldova, which could face delays in its accession due to geopolitical reasons that are understandable.

The geopolitical reality generated by the Russian invasion of Ukraine highlights an existing divide between East and West, which must be addressed even by those states that have previously pursued a policy of neutrality. The recent NATO enlargement

through the inclusion of Finland in 2023 and Sweden in 2024 (NATO, 2024) can be understood in the same note. The Russian Federation, through the abusive intervention in Ukraine and its blatant contempt for international law, acquired the image of an aggressor with no limits to violence exerted against its neighbours. The status of neutrality and international treaties no longer represent the guarantor of national security in the classical sense, or concerning the new threats posed by hybrid warfare. This was the context that determined the states neighbouring Russia to seek security guarantees through closer ties with NATO (this rapprochement can be observed at various levels, ranging from sectoral cooperation and partnerships to full accession to the military bloc). The Republic of Moldova finds itself in a similar position. Its neutral status has not carried much weight in the face of numerous Russian leaders who have issued direct threats of military action against this state (often taking advantage of the complicated context of managing the frozen conflict in the Transnistrian region, the evolution of relations with the Autonomous Territorial Unit of Gagauzia, or the situation of the Russian-speaking minority in the Republic of Moldova).

In a broader context, the EU is also repositioning itself in relation to the acceleration of the integration process of the Western Balkans. The new geopolitical reality requires adequate responses and leads to a different ranking for the internal and external affairs of the European Union.

Additionally, the internal consensus in the EU decision-making process is suffering in the context of the prolongation of the Ukrainian crisis. Some states see their economic interests threatened by international sanctions against the Russian Federation, especially in the field of energy supply (see the positions of Hungary, Austria, and Slovakia, among others).

The Republic of Moldova is severely affected on economic and social levels, as well as in terms of national and societal security, by the Russian Federation's aggression against Ukraine. Furthermore, the hybrid war supported by the Russian Federation against this vulnerable state contributes to a process of democratic erosion, threatening the consolidation of the rule of law and political balance. The Transnistrian region and the Autonomous Territorial Unit of Gagauzia are used by the Russian Federation to generate instability and to block the initiatives for EU integration of the authorities in Chisinau. In the context of the events in Ukraine, the frozen conflict in the Transnistrian region has shown, on several occasions, reactivation signs. Political leaders from the Autonomous Territorial Unit of Gagauzia publicly support, including through visits to Moscow, the Putin regime and its policies towards the Republic of Moldova and its European integration.

In order to support the Republic of Moldova and mitigate the major effects of the Russian Federation's aggression against Ukraine, the **Partnership Platform for the Republic of Moldova** (PPRM) was established. This project was launched at the

initiative of France, Germany, and Romania in 2022. “The Partnership Platform for the Republic of Moldova has proven to be a useful tool for coordinating efforts and resources from various parties involved in addressing the significant internal and external challenges faced by the Republic of Moldova” (Government of the Republic of Moldova, 2024). The first editions of the Partnership Platform for Moldova took place in Berlin (April 5, 2022), Bucharest (July 15, 2022), Paris (November 21, 2022), and Chisinau (October 17, 2023, and September 17, 2024). Over 65 partner countries and international organizations came together, reaffirming their strong support for the Republic of Moldova, especially in light of the effects of the Russian Federation’s aggression against Ukraine⁴.

The Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Republic of Moldova has announced that numerous actions will be implemented in preparation for the PPRM Conferences. These initiatives will follow six main dimensions and will involve working group meetings on topics such as *humanitarian aid*, including refugee support, *energy*, *anti-corruption efforts*, *border control*, *financial assistance*, and *public administration reform* (Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Republic of Moldova 2023).

The fifth PPRM conference took place on September 17, 2024, in Chisinau and brought together over 65 international delegations with the aim of mobilizing and concentrating aid from developed countries for the Republic of Moldova. The aim was to generate political, financial, and material assistance, as well as in-depth expertise for the democratic reform process of the Republic of Moldova. On the occasion of this event, several financing agreements worth 380 million euros were signed, in the form of grants and loans (RRA, 2024).

“About 25 million euros will be allocated for assistance from the World Bank and the European Union, which will allow the Republic of Moldova to develop the energy system to prevent energy blackmail, which can still occur,”

said the head of French diplomacy in Chisinau (RRA, 2024). In turn, the German Foreign Minister, Anallena Baerbock, declared that

“support will continue for the Republic of Moldova in the face of the Russian Federation’s aggression and interference in the democratic processes of the Republic of Moldova” (RRA, 2024).

⁴ For more information about the initiative, please visit the website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Moldova. Moldova will host the 5th edition of the Ministerial Conference of the Partnership Platform: A Common Commitment for a European, Modern, and Secure Moldova (September 11, 2024) — <https://mfa.gov.md/ro/content/republica-moldova-va-gazdui-cea-de-5-editie-conferintei-ministeriale-platforme-de> , accessed on October 10, 2024. Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Joint Statement by the Foreign Ministers of France, Germany, Romania, and the Republic of Moldova, co-chairs of the fifth Ministerial Conference of the Partnership Platform for the Republic of Moldova (September 17, 2024) — <https://www.mae.ro/node/65435>, accessed on 10.10.2024.

“The Republic of Moldova is not alone, and the meeting is proof of this,”

said former head of diplomacy in Bucharest, Luminița Odobescu. She also emphasized on this occasion that

“Romania has been and will always be by the side of the Republic of Moldova,”

drawing attention to the aggressive information war that the Russian Federation is waging in the Republic of Moldova (RRA, 2024). The former Romanian Minister of Foreign Affairs “also highlighted the bilateral cooperation agenda with the Republic of Moldova, which includes interconnection projects in the fields of energy and transport, as well as a comprehensive support programme for the benefit of the Republic of Moldova through the deployment of Romanian government experts to assist in the EU accession negotiation process” (Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2024a). On the other hand, according to the press release from the Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MAE), “Romania continues to provide financial support for projects proposed by the authorities in Chisinau based on the *Agreement between the Government of Romania and the Government of the Republic of Moldova regarding the implementation of the technical and financial assistance program, through a non-reimbursable financial aid amounting to 100 million euros granted by Romania to the Republic of Moldova*” (Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2024a).

These diplomatic efforts have been complemented by the support of joint projects or projects in the Republic of Moldova that have benefited from significant financial assistance from the Romanian state and the EU over the past decade. On the occasion of the final conference of the Romania-Republic of Moldova 2014-2020 cross-border cooperation program, held in Chisinau on March 7, 2024, a comprehensive assessment of these projects was conducted. The event brought together the managing bodies of the program from both countries, project beneficiaries, diplomatic missions in Chisinau, and representatives of the European Commission.

„Romania and the Republic of Moldova share an experience of over 20 years of cross-border cooperation, supported by the European Union. We have invested almost 100 million euros in modernizing medical units, in rehabilitating and equipping schools and universities on both sides of the border, in restoring roads and streamlining border crossing points. We are preparing to invest a similar amount during 2021-2027 and we hope to have projects at least as good, for the benefit of local communities”,

“said Aurel-Dragoș Drăghescu, Undersecretary of State within the Ministry of Development, Public Works and Administration of Romania, present at the event” (Romania-Republic of Moldova. *ENI-Cross Border Cooperation*, 2024).

„The results with impact achieved within the Romania-Republic of Moldova cross-border cooperation programme, supported by European Union funds, reconfirm this strong partnership that generates growth opportunities, concrete benefits for people and a better life on both banks of the Prut River”,

“added Artur Mija, Secretary General of the Government of the Republic of Moldova” (*Romania-Republic of Moldova. ENI-Cross Border Cooperation, 2024*). Through the *Romania-Republic of Moldova Cooperation Programme 2014-2020*, 81 projects were financed, totaling 99 million euros. These funds were invested in road rehabilitation, modernization of schools, universities, and hospitals, preparation of institutions and the population for emergency situations, as well as in the restoration and promotion of tourist attractions located on both banks of the Prut River (*Fonduri Structurale, 2024*).

2.2. Internal Contextualization: Challenges to European Integration Related to Managing the Frozen Conflict in the Transnistrian Region and Developments in the Gagauzia Autonomous Territorial Unit

The discussions and developments in relations between the EU and the Republic of Moldova are influenced and marked, both in terms of constraints and determinisms, by the management of the situation in the Transnistrian and Gagauz regions. The EU is obliged to take into account the special situation of these regions. Furthermore, the government of the Republic of Moldova is encouraged to resolve these identity disputes peacefully and in an integrative manner.

The origin of the Transnistrian conflict can be traced back to the last years of the existence of the USSR, when the political class of the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic was divided on two fundamental issues: the nature of relations between Chisinau and Moscow and the place of the Russian or Romanian languages in the public space. While the political forces, which pursued the dual goal of separating from the Soviet Union and increasing the role and status of the Romanian language, took control in Chisinau, some of the Soviet officials who wanted to preserve the Soviet Union established, with the support of influential political circles in Moscow, an alternative center of political power in Tiraspol (Victor, 2024). Beyond this somewhat simplistic and idealistic perspective, it is absolutely obvious that the conflict outbreak on the territory of the Republic of Moldova was inspired, stimulated, and used by the power in Moscow to support its interests. This pattern was also used in the case of other former Soviet republics with the aim of maintaining effective control over all the republics in order to counteract their natural aspirations for sovereignty, freedom and national revival (Stăvilă & Bălan, 2010, p. 4). The proclamation of independence by the Republic of Moldova on 27 August 1991 led to a deterioration in relations between Chisinau and Tiraspol (Rusnac, 2022). Although the first fighting between

forces controlled by the Chisinau authorities and separatist troops occurred on 13 December 1991, the *de facto* Transnistrian conflict erupted on the night of 1 to 2 March 1992, when separatists attacked the police station in Dubasari (Rusnac, 2022).

The military conflict phase lasted until July 21, 1992. However, political tensions remained relevant and can still be found in the region today. The next phase of the conflict took place on July 21, 1992, when, in Moscow, the President of the Russian Federation, Boris Yeltsin and the President of the Republic of Moldova, Mircea Snegur, together with the separatist leader Igor Smirnov, signed a Convention identifying the principles of a peaceful resolution of the armed conflict (Balan 2024). The settlement was in fact a freeze on the conflict that perpetuated and ensured the continuation of Russian interests and control in the region. Russian soldiers were kept in the region with the stated purpose of “maintaining peace”.

The numerous and complex negotiations to resolve this frozen conflict have not resulted in a lasting peace, regardless of the negotiation format so far.

The territorial reintegration of the country has benefited from special attention from the government in Chisinau throughout this period. Within its structures, there exists a Deputy Prime Minister’s portfolio for Reintegration, tasked with coordinating activities related to this endeavor. Under the coordination of this body, between 2011 and 2023, thirteen governmental reintegration programs were implemented, which included funding allocations for 544 projects totaling over 170 million Moldovan lei (MDL). These programs aimed to address urgent issues in the Security Zone, promote sustainable community development, and advance the goal of national reintegration (Government of the Republic of Moldova, 2024). On May 15, 2024, members of the Government approved the Program of Activities for the Reintegration of the Country for 2024, which provides for the financing of 26 projects for sustainable development, infrastructural modernization, institutional support and community interest to be implemented in the localities of the Security Zone (Government of the Republic of Moldova, 2024).

„Despite the efforts and various public policies coordinated from Chisinau, reintegration remains a difficult goal to manage and achieve. The Transnistrian conflict cannot be resolved without the demilitarization of the Transnistrian region, and the right moment might arise when the situation related to the Russian Federation’s aggression against Ukraine is clarified”,

said Deputy Prime Minister for Reintegration, Oleg Serebrian, in an interview for the public television station Moldova 1 (Radio Europa Liberă Moldova, 2024).

Since the beginning of the Russian Federation’s aggression against Ukraine in 2022, Moscow can no longer rotate its military from the Transnistrian region, so it has resorted to recruiting men from the region, where about 200,000 people with Russian passports reportedly live.

“There are numerous military entities or militarized entities with which we must determine an appropriate course of action, as the mere removal of the Russian flag from a military unit in the Transnistrian region will not signify the resolution of the issue. The right moment for addressing this matter, a prerequisite for any progress in the political settlement of the Transnistrian conflict, will undoubtedly emerge once the situation in the war in Ukraine becomes clearer, in a manner aligned with our expectations.”

“added the Deputy Prime Minister for Reintegration” (*Radio Europa Liberă Moldova*, 2024).

In the process of the Republic of Moldova's rapprochement with the European Union, the Transnistrian conflict has proven to be a particularly difficult issue to manage. It is hard to envision European integration without the full exercise of national sovereignty and government control over the entire territory by the authorities in Chisinau. Moreover, both the Republic of Moldova and the EU appear willing to make certain concessions to Tiraspol in order to prompt a proactive response and to facilitate deeper economic integration - an approach intended to encourage at least the Transnistrian elites to engage more openly in dialogue with Chisinau. The separatist regime in Tiraspol still possesses leverage through its control over energy resources, which it can use to extract commercial concessions from Chisinau, sometimes with the tacit approval of EU institutions. These concessions may be perceived by both the Republic of Moldova and the EU as a temporary price to be paid in order to contain the zone of instability created by the Russian Federation's aggression against Ukraine (Cenușa, 2023). Ukraine is also committed to supporting the Republic of Moldova in its reintegration process. This was signaled by Volodymyr Zelensky during the European Political Community summit in June 2023, when he expressed confidence that the Transnistrian issue would be resolved once the war in Ukraine comes to an end (Radio Chișinău, June 2023).

The failure to resolve the Transnistrian conflict is a threat to the national security of Moldova and Ukraine. Therefore, both sides are interested in eliminating the Russian political and military presence in the Transnistrian region, most likely immediately after the end of the war (Cenușa, 2023). In the event of a diplomatic or military arrangement favorable to the Russian Federation, the latter could demand concessions related to the restoration of the transit of Russian military units through Ukraine, previously possible under the 1998 agreement, annulled in 2015, in order to remove the Transnistrian region from isolation (Cenușa, 2023).

In the negotiation equation between Chisinau and Tiraspol, the position of the separatist regime has lost its previous advantages. The Russian Federation, weakened by its aggression against Ukraine and by the international sanctions, is progressively reducing support for the Tiraspol regime. Moreover, against the backdrop of the Ukrainian blockade, there is an obvious logistical barrier. In the same vein, Tiraspol's

energy advantage in negotiations with Chisinau is significantly diminishing as a result of the deepening energy interconnection between the Republic of Moldova and Romania. Planned to be operational no earlier than 2025, the high-voltage line that will connect Chisinau to the Isaccea-Vulcanesti interconnection will supply electricity directly to Chisinau, thereby bypassing transmission networks going through the Transnistrian region. Also, this interconnection will allow reducing the risks related to the attacks of the Russian Federation on the Ukrainian energy infrastructure. Also, the electricity received from the EU will be able to reach the territory controlled by the Chisinau authorities without risking disconnections from Tiraspol (Cenușa, 2023).

On the other hand, in view of the foreseeable cessation of Russian gas transit through Ukraine after January 1, 2025, the leadership of the Transnistrian region could be forced to make certain concessions. The lack of Russian gas would generate a humanitarian disaster in the Transnistrian region. The supply of Russian gas to Tiraspol could be abruptly and prematurely interrupted if the gas compression station at Sudzha (located on Russian territory currently under Ukrainian control) were to be impacted by ongoing bombings in the area. The pressure now is therefore even greater on Tiraspol. This is all the more so since, anticipating the situation and benefiting from the direct support of the EU and, implicitly, of Romania, the Republic of Moldova has taken decisive steps in the process of finding alternative sources of supply. What is certain is that the government in Chisinau can no longer be blackmailed through energy by Moscow via Tiraspol. In the context of the possible deterioration of the situation in the Transnistrian region, Chisinau has a scenario of keeping the region afloat through a dialogue of reconciliation and reintegration.

“At the same time, the consequences for the Transnistrian region will need to be addressed. It is understood that the payment capacity on the left bank of the Dniester is severely limited, and a humanitarian crisis in the region cannot be allowed to unfold,”

says Victor Parlicov, the Moldovan Minister of Energy (Călugăreanu, 2024).

The path to territorial reintegration is a difficult one and must first be deepened at the economic level. Closer alignment with the European Union and the resulting socio-economic benefits has the potential of generating positive effects in the relationship with the Transnistrian region.

“The Transnistrian region will be at least economically integrated into the Republic of Moldova by 2030.”

Thus,

“...at least economically, the region should be practically integrated into a common custom, fiscal, and monetary space with the right bank,”

stated Moldova’s Deputy Prime Minister for Reintegration, Oleg Serebrian. This economic integration is expected to constitute more than half of the overall process

of reintegrating the Transnistrian region into the Republic of Moldova (Pricop, 2024). Initial steps were taken last year. From January 1, 2024, the new Customs Code of the Republic of Moldova came into force, requiring companies from the Transnistrian region to pay customs duties to the budget of the Republic of Moldova.

Until then, the challenge remains significant for the region. In an effort to overcome the deadlock, the Moldovan authorities are prepared to accept the reality of a two-stage European integration process, in which the first stage would involve the accession of the territory west of the Dniester, thus excluding the Transnistrian region. In this regard, President Maia Sandu of the Republic of Moldova stated:

“We want to integrate into the EU as a reunified country, with the Transnistrian conflict resolved, but if that is not possible, then we are ready to integrate in two stages.” (g4media.ro, 2024).

On October 20, 2024, during the referendum on amending the constitution in order to join the European Union, the citizens of the Republic of Moldova were asked to answer the question: *“Do you support amending the Constitution in order to join the European Union?”*. Only 31.02% of the citizens of the Transnistrian region answered “YES”. Thus, 68.98% of the inhabitants of the Transnistrian region present at the polls voted against the accession of the Republic of Moldova to the European Union (Central Electoral Commission of the Republic of Moldova, 2024).

The evolution of the situation in the **Autonomous Territorial Unit of Gagauzia** is also complex, particularly in political and identity-related terms. The Gagauz community has consistently functioned as a borderland community. This reality stems largely from its often-contested positioning between Bulgarian, Turkish, and, more recently, Russian identities claimed by members of the community. Beyond the debates surrounding their origins, the identity of the Gagauz people has undergone significant shifts across various historical stages that have shaped their existence. Over time, this community has increasingly transformed into a Russophile one, systematically supported by Moscow.

Although not very numerous (according to the 2004 census, it had 147,500 members, of whom 127,835 lived in the Autonomous Territorial Unit of Gagauzia), this community stands out for the importance it had in the history of Bessarabia (National Bureau of Statistics of the Republic of Moldova, 2024a). According to the 2014 census, 134,535 inhabitants lived in the ATUG, of which 112,387 were Gagauz (National Bureau of Statistics of the Republic of Moldova, 2024b).

The most widely accepted theory regarding their origin is that they are descendants of Turkic tribes, possibly the Oghuz or even the Seljuks. Other historians suggest a Cuman, Pecheneg, or Bulgarian origin for this population⁵. What remains certain,

⁵ Bulgarian historians consider them to be simply Turkified Bulgarians who have preserved their Christian Orthodox religious identity. According to *** „Cine sunt de fapt găgăuzii, cei folosiți

however, is the Turkic origin of their language and the fact that they converted to Christianity, abandoning Islam under Byzantine influence (Pârlog, 2012). Their presence in the Bessarabian region is linked to a migration from the Bulgarian territories toward Dobrogea and Bessarabia at the end of the eighteenth century. The annexation of Bessarabia by the Tsarist Empire transformed them into a contested group, often involved in disputes with the Turks, but also regarded as Christian Orthodox allies increasingly willing to accept cultural and political rapprochement for control over the new province. In return, the Russians granted them privileges, tax exemptions, military service exemptions, and other benefits (Pârlog, 2012).

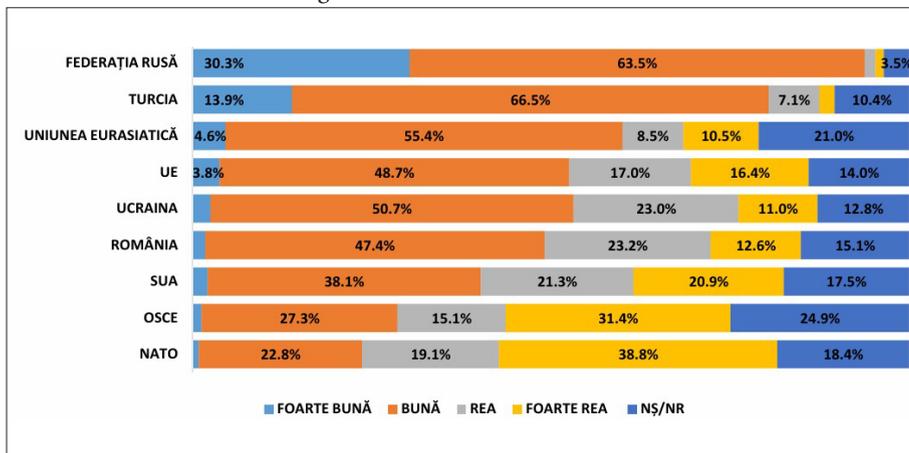
The Soviet period brought them even closer to the Russians in terms of identity, so that now the Russian language is assumed at a collective level. After the Republic of Moldova gained state independence, they, along with other minorities, campaigned for the creation of an autonomous region - the Autonomous Territorial Unit of Gagauzia, receiving cultural support from Ankara, which opened a Turkish Cultural Center and a Turkish Library there. All this transforms this community from a borderland identity into one characterized by cultural and identity contact.

The Autonomous Territorial Unit of Gagauzia is, probably, the most Russophile region of the Republic of Moldova. Initially a separatist entity in the early 1990s, the Autonomous Territorial Unit of Gagauzia ultimately accepted the sovereignty of Chisinau; however, it asserts the right to secession in the event of unification with Romania or even in the event of European integration. Moreover, the rapprochement with the Russian Federation, visits to Moscow, and the pro-Russian policies of the Governor (*Bashkan*) Evghenia Guțul have led to her inclusion on Western sanctions lists. “The United States has imposed sanctions on Evghenia Guțul for her involvement in hybrid actions against the state of the Republic of Moldova and its citizens, actions financed with funds from criminal sources. This decision follows effective cooperation with our external partners, and we will continue to take decisive measures to counter corruption and threats to national security,” wrote Dorin Recean, Prime Minister of the Republic of Moldova, in June 2024. Subsequently, on October 9, 2024, the European Union also added five individuals to its sanctions list for attempts to destabilize the Republic of Moldova, including Evghenia Guțul, the current Governor of the Autonomous Territorial Unit of Gagauzia, who is affiliated with the fugitive Ilan Șor (HotNews.ro, 2024).

azi de Rusia pe post de unealtă geostrategică și amenințare permanentă la adresa suveranității și integrității teritoriale a Republicii Moldova” [“Who Are the Gagauz, Really—Today Used by Russia as a Geostrategic Tool and a Constant Threat to the Sovereignty and Territorial Integrity of the Republic of Moldova”] (20.01.2014), România Breaking News, <https://romaniabreakingnewsro/cine-sunt-de-fapt-gagauzi-cei-folositi-azi-de-rusia-pe-post-de-unealta-geostrategica-si-amenintare-permanenta-la-adresa-suveranitati-integritatii-teritoriale-a-r-moldova/>, accessed on 16.09.2024

Public opinion in the Autonomous Territorial Unit of Gagauzia regarding the European Union and the European integration of the Republic of Moldova has been documented by the Institute for Public Policy. Since 2011, the Institute has conducted opinion surveys focused specifically on the residents of the Gagauz autonomy and the Taraclia district. The most recent such survey was published in 2022 and includes analyses of data collected in September-October 2021 (i.e., before the Russian Federation's invasion of Ukraine and during the period when Irina Vlah was still the governor of the Autonomous Territorial Unit of Gagauzia). It should be noted that, effective July 19, 2023, the new governor is Evghenia Guțul, whose positions have proven to be even more radical regarding rapprochement with the Russian Federation and opposition to the Republic of Moldova's rapprochement with the EU. However, public perception of rapprochement with the EU has improved in the post-2015 period in this region as well. In 2021, 17.6% of respondents indicated they would vote in favor of accession to the European Union (compared to only 3.6% in 2015), while 58% opposed accession (down from 80% in 2015). When given the choice between accession to the European Union and accession to the Eurasian Economic Union, 44.1% stated they would vote for joining the Eurasian Economic Union (compared to 86.9% in 2015), and 19% favored accession to the European Union (up from 2.6% in 2015) (Institute for Public Policy, 2021, p. 31).

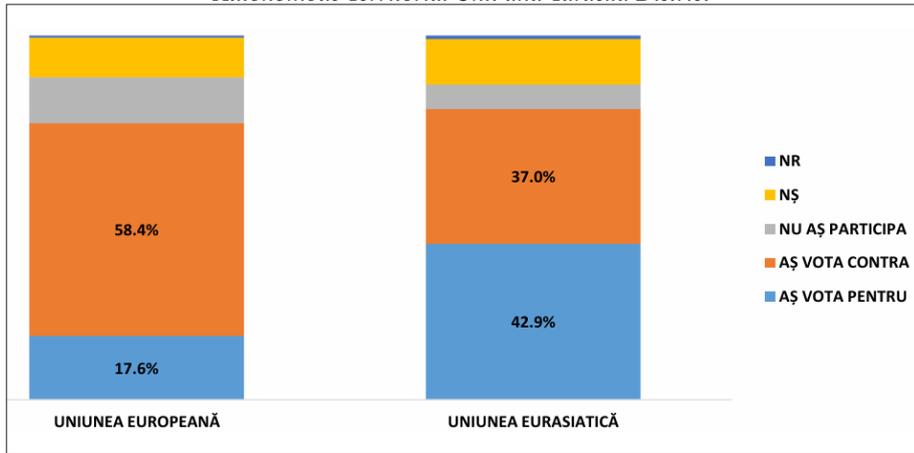
Figure 1 Attitude towards the external partners in the Autonomous Territorial Unit of Gagauzia and the Taraclia District



Source: Institute for Public Policy, 2021, p. 34

The preference of the population in the *Gagauzia Autonomous Territorial Unit (UTA) and Taraclia District* for integration into the Eurasian Economic Union is therefore evident, in comparison to the Republic of Moldova's accession to the European Union. At the same time, the opposing vote is also significant for analysis, with 58.4% indicating they would vote against accession to the European Union.

Figure 2 Preferences for the External Integration of the Republic of Moldova in the Gagauzia Autonomous Territorial Unit and Taraclia District



Source: Institute for Public Policy, 2021, p. 34.

Political messages have become significantly more radicalized in favor of a pro-Russian stance in the context of the Russian Federation's aggression against Ukraine, particularly following the election of the new Bashkan, Evgenia Guțul, in July 2023. The political developments and rhetoric of the leaders in the Gagauzia Autonomous Territorial Unit in 2024 appear to be moving toward a scenario reminiscent of the Transnistrian situation of the early 1990s. There is a visible effort to economically and politically align the region with the Russian Federation. The agreement signed between Bashkan Guțul and Promsvyazbank, along with the region's accession to the Russian financial infrastructure alternative to SWIFT, known as "Mir", signals an even deeper entrenchment within the Russian sphere of influence. "These actions not only reinforce financial and economic ties but also create a structural dependency that could be difficult to reverse in the medium to long term, assuming, of course, that they are fully implemented. The 'Mir' cards would more likely be used to pay protesters and Șor supporters to vote against the EU accession referendum", organized on October 20, 2024 (Pleșca, 2024).

On October 20, 2024, during the referendum on accession to the European Union, only 5.16% of the citizens of the ATUG answered yes. Thus, almost 95% of the Gagauzians present at the polls voted against the accession of the Republic of Moldova to the European Union (Central Electoral Commission of the Republic of Moldova, 2024).

2.3. EU–Republic of Moldova Relations: From Partner to Candidate State - The Eastern Partnership, Association Agreement, Candidate Status, and Negotiation Chapters

The Republic of Moldova was initially the “flagship” of the Eastern Partnership (EaP), demonstrating the fastest pro-European trajectory and being promoted as a “success story” of EU influence in the region, but, between 2016 and 2020, it lost this initial momentum. Russian influence has remained relatively strong in Moldova, manifesting through direct interference in domestic politics, media manipulation, economic control, energy blackmail, and, not least, through support for the separatist movements in the Transnistrian region and the Gagauzia Autonomous Territorial Unit. Nevertheless, in 2014, the EU and the Republic of Moldova signed the Association Agreement, including the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA), which came into effect in July 2016. This milestone confirmed the strengthening of Moldova’s political and economic ties with the EU, ultimately culminating in the granting of EU candidate status in June 2022.

At the same time, it should also be noted that the situation in the Transnistrian region (the territory where Russian military troops are located) has become increasingly tense after the Russian Federation’s aggression against Ukraine, with fears of escalating tensions (Mediafax 2015). Even after the launch of the 5+2 format, the issue of the Transnistrian region remains a major challenge for the Republic of Moldova, the former having unilaterally declared its independence from the Republic of Moldova. In this process, the EU supports the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Republic of Moldova with a special status for the Transnistrian region, which will be part of the accession negotiations. In addition, political tensions periodically resurface between Chisinau and Comrat, the capital of the Autonomous Territorial Unit of Gagauzia, due to the special status of this region, with the Russian Federation providing support to these entities (Deutsche Welle, 2015).

Moreover, relations between Chisinau and Brussels have had several periods of crisis in the recent past. In 2014, after the entry into force of the Association Agreement, the Russian Federation imposed an embargo on Moldovan wines, hitting the largest branch of Moldovan industry, which was dependent on the Russian market (Deutsche Welle 2014). This vulnerability was transformed into an opportunity by redirecting wine exports toward the European market, thereby reducing dependence on Moscow. Two other embargoes followed – on fruit and canned vegetables, as well as on meat imports. After the 2014 parliamentary elections, the Republic of Moldova became the scene of an international scandal that affected the entire society, known as the “Heist of the Century” (Deutsche Welle, 2019a). Through a fraudulent scheme, approximately one billion dollars was removed from the Moldovan banking system. Even ten years later, the perpetrators have not been legally punished, and the lack

of progress in the investigation and recovery of the embezzled money has also led to a cooling of relations with external partners. Following this incident, the pro-Russian Socialist candidate Igor Dodon was elected president in 2016, leading to a further distancing of Moldova from the EU. However, in 2020, Maia Sandu, one of the most vocal proponents of closer ties with the EU, was elected President of the Republic of Moldova. These changes demonstrated an increasing social fragmentation between pro-Western and pro-Eastern orientations among the population. This lack of persistence was somehow resolved after 2022, when the aggression of the Russian Federation against Ukraine began, and the EU was seen as the only viable option due to the fear that the Russian Federation would invade Moldova as well.

Thus, within certain priority sectors corresponding to one or more specific interests, Moldova sought to obtain from the EU:

- financial assistance for economic development, infrastructure, and economic competitiveness;
- the opening of the EU market for agricultural products, particularly for fruits (especially apples, plums, and grapes). This was especially important given that the Russian Federation has frequently used embargoes on these products as a tool of political coercion.;
- the diversification of export markets for wine and derived alcoholic products, which in the past were predominantly directed almost exclusively to the Russian market;
- increasing European foreign investments;
- ensuring state security, including through the management of the status of the Transnistrian region and the Gagauzia Autonomous Territorial Unit (UTA Gagauzia);
- increasing the standard of living and income of the population through economic and social development;
- the diversification of alternative sources for gas and electricity imports through financing connectivity with Romania;
- support for investments in the industrial and energy sectors to reduce the negotiating leverage of the Tiraspol regime, which is financed by Moscow;
- the opening of the European market to Moldovan companies and making Moldovan companies more attractive for businesses from across the Dniester River;
- visa-free access for citizens to the Schengen Area;
- access to educational programs supported by the EU for Moldovan youth;
- negotiating a much more favorable regulation regarding roaming services (TeleRadio Moldova 2019);
- development of regional security programs within the framework of the EaP;

- development of a special relationship with Romania, including through the EaP.

However, from an economic point of view, it should be emphasized that the Republic of Moldova is the largest recipient of EU funds per capita in the entire European Neighbourhood Policy program (see also EU4Moldova.md). The financial assistance provided to Moldova through the European Neighbourhood Instrument (ENI) has been considerable: between 335 and 410 million euros in the period 2014-2017 and between 284 million euros and 348 million euros in the period 2017-2020 (European Parliament 2019b). Within the ENI, joint projects between the Republic of Moldova and Romania were also specifically financed in terms of cross-border cooperation through the Joint Operational Programme Romania – Republic of Moldova. From a financial point of view, the program had a budget of 81 million euros to finance 81 joint projects between the two states in areas such as: safety and security, technological development and innovation, development of transport and communication networks, education, research, cultural promotion, etc. (Government of the Republic of Moldova, Ministry of Infrastructure and Regional Development 2024).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the European Commission approved financial aid of 100 million euros to help the Republic of Moldova fight the effects of the virus, and in January 2022, a macro-financial assistance program worth up to 150 million euros was approved (European Commission 2024). Despite internal political problems, Moldova's benefits from the EU are nevertheless noteworthy: it was the first country to receive visa-free travel to the Schengen states; it became a member of the Energy Community; it participates in the EU's Horizon 2020 Erasmus+ and COSME (programme for the Competitiveness of Enterprises and Small and Medium-sized Enterprises) programmes. As for the "20 Deliverables for 2020" format, a 2019 NGO report notes that it is not widely used in the Republic of Moldova, especially because the country has a much more complete monitoring and reporting format related to the implementation of its Association Agreement with the EU (Evaluation of the implementation of 20 Deliverables for 2020 Republic of Moldova, 2019, p 37). At the economic level, according to EU4Business Moldova (2024), between 2009 and 2017, the EU invested a total of 47 million euros in the country, supporting 4,600 companies, creating 2,600 new jobs, and generating 194 million euros in business loans. In 2022, EU support amounted to 132 million euros, generating 22,427 new jobs, 6,328 small and medium-sized enterprises supported, etc. (EU4Business 2023), which helped the gradual integration of the Republic of Moldova into the EU market and increased the positive impact of the latter, reducing Chisinau's economic dependence on the Russian Federation.

In order to identify and analyze the progress made by the Republic of Moldova in areas such as economy, security, rule of law, interconnectivity, mobility, etc., we used the Eastern Partnership Index, thus conducting a longitudinal analysis, on each area of cooperation, so that we can identify the main progress made, alongside stagnation and even setbacks.

The index was announced two years after the launch of the Eastern Partnership and includes aggregated statistical data on the level of integration of the six countries mentioned above. European integration for the EaP states is understood as a sum of elements encompassing the political, economic, civil, and security dimensions. It is measured by: the level of convergence with European norms, the level of economic exchanges and the growth of these exchanges, the building and deepening of cross-border networks and people-to-people contacts (EaP-CSF 2017).

The EaP Index was created to monitor the reform process in the six partner states and, above all, to signal progress or setbacks in the reform policies committed to by the states within the framework of the association agreements. Regardless of the aspirations of the six regarding European integration, the Index signals respect for the values specific to democracy and respect for human rights, alignment with EU standards aimed at good governance and the rule of law. Thus, both public decision-makers, researchers, and members of civil society can have a clear picture for a better substantiation of public policies.

The EaP Index is based on information collected from local experts through the network established by the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum, using a questionnaire designed according to the methodology introduced by the World Bank with its Doing Business surveys. This methodology requires the use of yes/no answers to avoid unclear positions and minimize errors. In addition, all questions required reasoning for the answer, and nuances led to possible intermediate coding⁶.

The data provided by all three initial dimensions on which the European Integration Index was built represent the arithmetic mean of the scores obtained by the six partner states for each category (a subdivision representative of the measured dimension). The data describing the initial situation, an inter-state and inter-sectoral snapshot of the Eastern Partnership, were published in a pilot project in November 2011, which was subject to discussions and revisions aimed at strengthening the structure and

⁶ The “yes” response was coded as 1, and the “no” answer with 0; however, if expert observations suggested intermediate scores, these were coded as 0.5. For questions requiring numerical data (quantitative indicators), figures were coded through a linear transformation using information about the distances between country scores according to the formula $y = (x - x_{min}) / (x_{max} - x_{min})$, where y is the score on a 0-1 scale, x refers to the raw data value, and x_{max} and x_{min} are benchmarks set for better positioning, namely Lithuania (upper benchmark) and the lowest-performing EaP country (lower benchmark). All benchmark values and standardization procedures are available at: https://eap-csf.eu/content/uploads/2024/07/EaP-Index_Methodology_Jan2024_FINAL.pdf, accessed on 16.09.2024.

methodology of an annual analytical tool. Thus, although the defined categories and subcategories have undergone minor changes, redefinitions or dimensional reframing, they remain representative for measuring the dimensions of the connection between each partner country and the European Union, harmonization between the institutions, legislation and practices of the six partner states and the European Union, but also of the management of the structures for the European integration of the partners (a dimension later integrated into the other two).

However, the EaP Index has often been criticized by the partner states and/or civil society for failing to provide a clear and comprehensible picture to citizens regarding the tangible outcomes achieved by the partner states and the direct consequences impacting individuals' daily lives. It was also not clear to citizens what each country had to do to achieve the best possible score. Last but not least, although the *more-for-more* principle and the adaptability of the program to the needs of the partner countries were pursued, the index did not reflect this, as it failed to highlight the concrete measures that each of the six countries was expected to implement. Given that the emphasis was placed on the goal of achieving the maximum score of 1 point, it created a sense of competitiveness among the EaP states. Moreover, this maximum score of 1 point did not prove to be sufficiently meaningful for the population, especially since, once again, the actions required to reach that score were not clearly explained, nor what would happen once the countries reached it, beyond the AA and the DCFTA, which some states had already signed without achieving the maximum score (this was possible because the index covered more areas than those required for the signing of the two agreements).

The present analysis includes aggregated data from 2011 to 2023. It should be noted that from 2011 to 2014, the index was officially named the *European Integration Index for Eastern Partnership Countries*. The index was renamed as the Eastern Partnership Index in 2015. The change was not accidental, as we will see in the subsequent analysis. While in the case of the former, the emphasis was on integration, starting from the premise that all six partner states want a deeper relationship with the EU, if not accession, in the case of the latter, the tone is more nuanced/adapted, also taking into account the interests of the partner countries.

As can be seen in the graphs below, national preferences for developing and/or strengthening relations with the EU beyond the EaP have been highlighted since its inception.

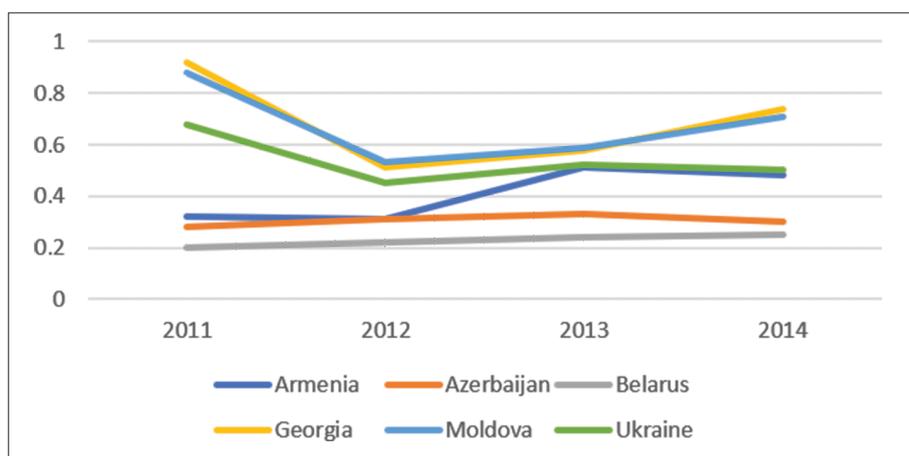
The timing of the name change is not accidental either, given that, in November 2013, at the Vilnius Summit, a turning point was marked for the security of Eastern Europe through the events that began to unfold that year in Ukraine and that continued to unfold throughout 2014 (the annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation) and which culminated in 2022 with the aggression of the Russian

Federation against Ukraine. This event, which generated insecurity and instability at the international level, was transformed into an opportunity in the same year by the leaders in Chisinau (against the backdrop of their pro-European stance, in contrast to the previous government), who subsequently applied for EU membership. Likewise, against the backdrop of this aggression by the Russian Federation against Ukraine, the EU demonstrated unity in the face of an immediate threat from the Russian Federation and accepted this candidacy.

Returning to the EaP, an important element is that the Index is composed of three macro-dimensions, each with its sub-dimensions, as can be seen below:

- **Management.** It includes variables such as: coordination mechanism; legislative harmonisation mechanism; civil society participation and management of EU assistance. An extremely important element in this analysis is that the management dimension has been integrated into the other dimensions since 2015, when the official name of the index was also changed (EaP-CSF 2017). This change of vision was also confirmed at the Eastern Partnership Summit in Riga, where emphasis was placed on differentiating partner states according to their interests (EU Council 2015b), thus changing the generalized vertical vision from top to bottom (from the EU to the EaP) to one that is horizontally adaptable between partners.

Figure 3 The management dimension

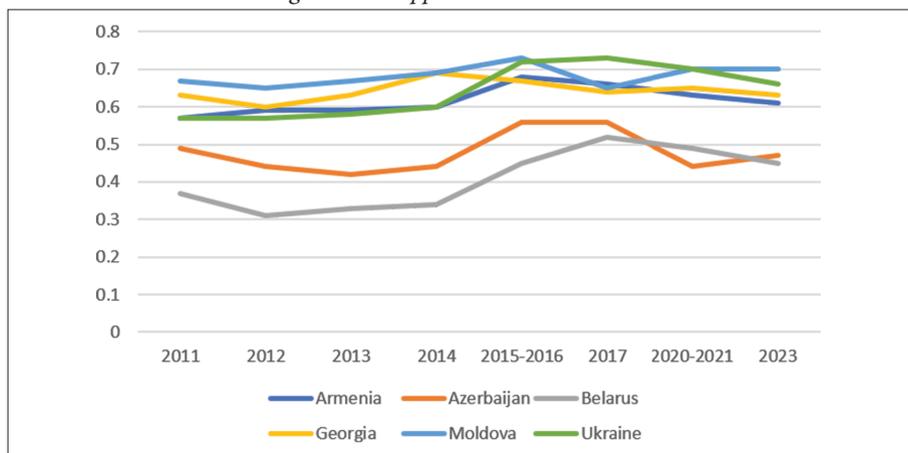


Source: compiled by the authors based on data collected from reports published by the International Renaissance Foundation in collaboration with the Open Society Foundations, available online <https://eap-csf.eu/>, accessed August 4, 2024.

As can be observed in the graph above, the 2011 launch positioned the Republic of Moldova second after Georgia, with a score of 0.88 out of a maximum of 1. However, a sharp decline occurred in 2012, when the score dropped to 0.53, followed by a partial recovery in 2013 and 2014.

- **Approximation.** It includes variables such as: democracy; rule of law; quality of governance; market economy; freedom, security, and justice; energy and transport; environment; education and mobility (people to people). By looking at the chronological chart below (period 2011-2023) for this dimension of the behavior of the six partner states, we can identify a demarcation point at the level of 2014, when all partner states, except for Georgia, registered an upward trend. This trend was stopped in 2015, when the Republic of Armenia and Georgia registered a visible regression until 2017; the Republic of Azerbaijan and Ukraine had an upward trend from 2014 to 2015 when they stagnated, and Belarus registered an upward trend. These scores must also be correlated with the interests of the partner states and with the dynamics of security at the regional level, as we have been able to observe in the other chapters. Analyzing the progress made by the Republic of Moldova, it can be observed that the country is among the leaders of the group of six, exhibiting minor fluctuations over the 12-year period analyzed (with a minimum score of 0.65 in 2012 and 2017, attributed to pro-Russian governments, and a maximum score of 0.73 in 2015–2016, demonstrating a certain level of consistency). It is worth noting the consistent pro-European behavior recorded since 2020 (0.7 which is maintained in 2023). This high score is largely due to the implementation of reforms related to elections, political pluralism, the fight against corruption and measures taken for equal opportunities (EaP Index 2023). Examples of measures could include: the amendment of legislation concerning the assurance of equal opportunities between women and men, as well as legislation related to equality more broadly, alongside the establishment of the National Coordinating Council for the Prevention and Combating of Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (Government of the Republic of Moldova, 2024). However, it should be noted that the fight against corruption in the Republic of Moldova is far from over, as it still largely affects the quality of public services, as well as the respect for fundamental rights such as the right to life, defense and fair trial, education, health, social protection, etc. (Centre for Civil and Political Rights 2021). The same can be said about equal opportunities, given that this state still faces systemic discrimination, especially in the field of health. Also, “Moldova has the highest prevalence of inactivity among women in the region” (Center Partnership for Development 2021, p. 5).

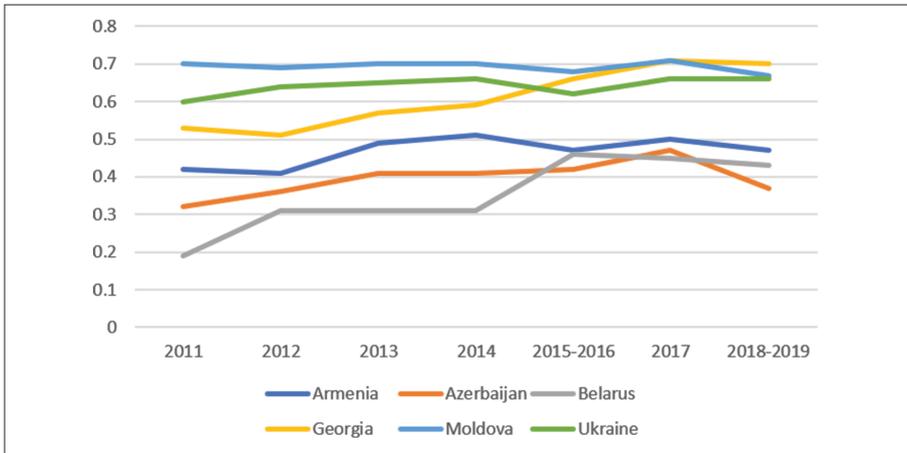
Figure 4 The approximation dimension



Source: compiled by the authors based on data collected from reports published by the International Renaissance Foundation in collaboration with the Open Society Foundations, available online <https://eap-csf.eu/>, accessed August 4, 2024.

- **Linkage.** It includes variables such as: political dialogue; trade and economic integration; transport and energy; freedom, security, and justice; education and mobility (people to people); and assistance for international security, political dialogue, and cooperation. An extremely important element in this analysis is that the linkage dimension has been integrated into the approximation dimension since 2020. Analyzing it from a longitudinal point of view, we observe that, as in the case of the approximation dimension, in 2014, there was a change in behavior in which the Republic of Moldova registered a regression until 2015-2016, when it resumed its upward trend. However, this increase was not particularly noticeable. Nevertheless, at the macro level, the scores recorded by the country remain relatively stable, with only a slight variation ranging from a minimum of 0.68 to a maximum of 0.71. Therefore, we cannot say that significant progress has been made, especially concerning the Republic of Moldova's energy dependence on the Russian Federation.

Figure 5 The linkage dimension



Source: compiled by the authors based on data collected from reports published by the International Renaissance Foundation in collaboration with the Open Society Foundations, available online <https://eap-csf.eu/>, accessed August 4, 2024.

By analyzing these three dimensions, we can observe a fluctuation in the Republic of Moldova's behavior toward the EU, which can be explained by the rise to power of pro-Russian governments. Nevertheless, even in those cases, Chisinau remained among the group of three countries with the highest scores.

With regard to the aforementioned **Association Agreement**, according to the European Commission report published in 2023, relations between the EU and the Republic of Moldova intensified following the outbreak of the Russian Federation's aggression against Ukraine and the submission of Moldova's application for EU membership. The Commission's Opinion sets up nine key steps that the Republic of Moldova must take to advance on its path toward EU accession. In June 2022, the European Council asked the Commission to monitor the progress of the Republic of Moldova in these stages, as well as the level of implementation of the *acquis communautaire* as part of the enlargement process, starting in the autumn of 2023. Moldova responded quickly by putting together an action plan to meet the EU Commission's requirements⁷.

A new mechanism for coordinating Moldova's actions and positions in the integration process was also introduced, and efforts were made to improve institutional capacities. The EU-Moldova Association Agreement remained a key element in

⁷ Ministry of Foreign Affairs and European Integration of the Republic of Moldova, Plan de acțiuni pentru implementarea măsurilor propuse de către Comisia Europeană în Avizul său privind cererea de aderare a Republicii Moldova la Uniunea Europeană [Action Plan for the implementation of the measures proposed by the European Commission in its Opinion on the application for the accession of the Republic of Moldova to the European Union], https://mfa.gov.md/sites/default/files/plan_cnie_04.08.2022.pdf, accessed on September 16, 2024.

achieving the necessary reforms and legal alignment with the EU. On 22 August 2022, the updated EU-Republic of Moldova Association Agenda for 2021-2027 was adopted, outlining the commonly agreed priorities for implementing the Association Agreement and setting out an ambitious reform agenda. The authorities in Chisinau have taken decisive steps to improve the judiciary, including adopting constitutional amendments and initiating a pre-screening process, although more work is needed to ensure transparency, integrity, and accountability in the justice sector. Initial steps have been taken to combat corruption, but it remains a significant challenge. Overall progress in implementing the necessary reforms has, however, been hindered by multiple overlapping crises, revealing relatively weak institutional capacity as well as a lack of human resources in the public administration (EU Council, 2023, p.1)

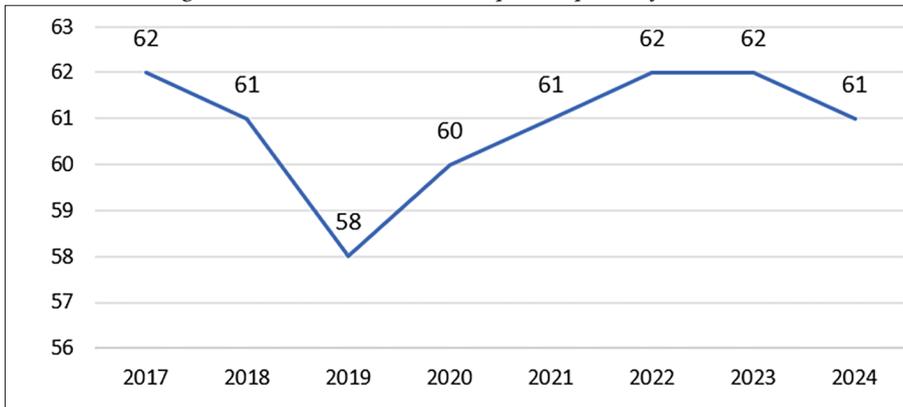
Among the most important topics of discussion between the authorities in Chisinau and those in Brussels are: the democratization of the Republic of Moldova, energy security, and digitalization, aspects that we will discuss below.

Regarding **democratization**, at the macro level and from a longitudinal perspective, the Republic of Moldova exhibits an upward trend, albeit without major systemic reforms. In order to analyze this aspect, we will use the Freedom in the World report. This is an annual report on political rights and civil liberties, composed of numerical assessments and descriptive texts for each country (Freedom in the World Research Methodology). Thus, each country receives a score of a maximum of 100. This score is composed of two dimensions: political rights (for which it can receive a maximum of 40 points) and civil liberties (for which it can receive a maximum of 60 points) (*Freedom in the World Research Methodology*).

According to the Freedom House, the Republic of Moldova is a nation in transit, partly free, and has the potential to develop into a democratic state, with relatively few fluctuations in its score, ranging from 58 out of 100 to 62 for the period 2017–2024. More specifically, in 2017, the overall score was 62/100, with a score of 35/60 for civil liberties and 27/40 for political rights (Freedom House 2017), in 2018, the overall score was 61/100, with a score of 35/60 specifically for civil liberties and 26/40 for political rights (Freedom House 2018), in 2019, the overall score was 58/100, with a score of 34/60 for civil liberties and 24/40 for political rights (Freedom House 2019), in 2020, the overall score was 60/100, with a score of 34/60 for civil liberties and 26/40 for political rights (Freedom House 2020), in 2021 the overall score was 61/100, with a score of 35/60 for civil liberties and 26/40 for political rights (Freedom House 2021). In 2022, the Republic of Moldova recorded a slightly better overall score, with 62/100, with 35/60 for civil rights and 27/40 for political rights (Freedom House 2022). In 2023 all scores remained the same, respectively, 62/100, 35/60 for civil rights and the same 26/40 for political rights (Freedom House 2023), and finally in 2024, the overall

score faced a slight decrease to 61/100, with a score of 35/60 for civil rights and the same 26/40 for political rights (Freedom House 2024).

Figure 6 Freedom in the World Report: Republic of Moldova



Source: Freedom House 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022, 2023, 2024, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/moldova/freedom-world/2024>, accessed on August 13, 2024.

Supplementing this data with information collected by the European Commission is useful. Thus, according to the European Commission Report of November 2023, the Republic of Moldova has made significant progress in improving the Electoral Code, amended in October 2023 to allow for the disqualification of candidates affiliated with unconstitutional parties. However, the European Commission emphasizes the need to strengthen the role of the Central Electoral Commission and to increase the level of transparency on the financing of political parties and third-party interference in electoral campaigns. Last but not least, the Parliament, one of the central bodies in the democratization process, but also in the EU accession process, should become more transparent and should also ensure the involvement of civil society in the decision-making process. Regarding the public sector, the Republic of Moldova adopted the Reform Strategy for 2023–2030 along with its corresponding plan in March 2023, but the progress achieved so far remains limited. The same can be said for the fight against corruption and the reform of the judicial system (European Commission, 2023a; European Commission, 2023b). Thus, the Republic of Moldova proves its capacity and willingness to implement the necessary reforms for accession, but progress is quite far from what is considered desirable for European leaders in terms of democratization.

Regarding **energy security** and **energy integration**, the Republic of Moldova faced a gas crisis at the end of 2021, and although significant progress has since been made in diversifying energy supply and strengthening the resilience of its energy system, the sector remains vulnerable. This highlights one of Moldova's weaknesses in relation to Moscow, considering that over time, the country has relied almost entirely on gas imports from Gazprom. With the support of the EU, the Republic of Moldova is trying

to reduce this dependence. On November 2, 2022, the Republic of Moldova took an important step in this direction by importing natural gas from the Slovak-Ukrainian border. In terms of electricity, since March 2022, the Republic of Moldova's electricity network is synchronized with the ENTSO-E Continental Europe network, allowing it to purchase electricity from Romania and other countries in Europe. In addition, the Republic of Moldova has implemented energy saving measures, fuel switching. Last but not least, this state is part of the EU Energy Platform and actively participates in regional meetings, demonstrating once again the chosen European path. Despite these efforts, the Republic of Moldova continues to struggle with high inflation, recording one of the highest rates in Europe. Gas prices have increased more than fivefold compared to the previous year, with ongoing risks of significant reductions or even complete cuts in gas supply. The EU has further consolidated its role as Moldova's main trading partner, with trade with it accounting for 51% of Moldova's total trade in the first half of 2022 (61.6% of exports and 45.9% of imports) (EU Council, 2023, pp.1-2). At the bilateral level, it is important to note the Iasi-Ungheni project, a gas pipeline that transports gas from Romania to the Republic of Moldova with the aim of reducing the latter's dependence on Russian gas (Radio Free Europe, 2022). However, the process of reducing energy dependence on Moscow must continue through the implementation of as many energy-diversification projects as possible, such as:

- the operationalization of the Iasi-Ungheni-Chisinau Interconnection, completed in 2021;
- the use of natural gas storage facilities in Romania and Ukraine to ensure the energy security of the Republic of Moldova, starting with 2022;
- strengthening the reverse flow of natural gas transmission capacities of the Trans-Balkan Corridor, starting with 2022;
- expansion of the Iasi - Ungheni - Chisinau gas pipeline through the construction of a gas transport pipeline - the Chisinau Ring, by 2031;
- extension of the Iasi-Ungheni natural gas transmission network toward Balti/Drochia by the year 2031.

From the perspective of digitalization, according to data provided by ITU Europe, in 2017, 76.21% of the population of the Republic of Moldova used the internet, and this percentage increased following the outbreak of the pandemic. As can be seen below, there are no significant differences between this country and the rest of Europe, with the Republic of Moldova even exceeding the European average in terms of internet speed.

Figure 7 Key Telecommunications and Internet Indicators in the Republic of Moldova Compared to European and Global Averages

Key indicators (2020)	Republic of Moldova	Europe	World
Fixed-line telephone subscriptions per 100 inhabitants	25.5	32.5	11.6
Mobile cellular subscriptions per 100 inhabitants	84.8	118.3	107
Active mobile-broadband subscriptions per 100 inhabitants	58.8	101.5	77.3
3G coverage (% of population)	99.9	98.4	93.6
LTE/WiMAX coverage (% of population)	99	98.5	85
Persoane care folosesc internetul (%) – cele mai recente date din 2017	76.12	84.9	59.1
Households with Internet access (%)	64.6	87.6	65.7
Fixed internet subscriptions per 100 inhabitants	17.8	33.8	15.8
Distribution of fixed internet subscriptions by speed (%)			
256 kbit/s to 2 Mbit/s	1.6	0.3	1.8
2 to 10 Mbit/s	1	6.4	6.7
10 Mbit/s	97.4	92.3	89.9

Source: ITU, *World Telecommunication/ICT Indicators Database*, august 2021.

Regarding cooperation with the EU and the integration of the Republic of Moldova into European digitalization programs, in February 2024, the Minister of Economic Development and Digitalization signed Moldova's accession to the Digital Europe Programme. This will enable businesses, local governments, NGOs, and central authorities in Moldova to access EU funding for digitalization projects, with a budget of 7.5 billion euros for 2021–2027 (EU4Digital, 2024). To ensure a coordinated approach to the digitalization process, given that this field is a priority for the Union, Moldovan policymakers adopted the Digital Transformation Strategy of the Republic of Moldova for 2023-2030, aiming to achieve 100% digitalization of society. In 2023, the Ministry estimated that 44% of public services online were available to entrepreneurs and 34% to citizens (Government of the Republic of Moldova, Ministry of Economic Development and Digitalization, 2023).

Regarding cooperation with Romania, in 2022, the decision-makers of the two states signed the Memorandum for the creation of a Common Digital Space that would allow: the development of platforms, digital infrastructures and electronic public services; the exchange of data; the mutual recognition of electronic signatures; the

facilitation of investments and innovative entrepreneurship in the field of information technology; ensuring cybersecurity (E-Governance Agency, 2022).

Institutionally, the E-Governance Agency is one of the most active public bodies in the Republic of Moldova regarding digital literacy among citizens through numerous dedicated programs: e-Governance tools for everyone, e-Moldova anywhere with you, Digitized Public Services - Abolished Burdens, Rethink your age! Social and digital connection of young people and the elderly in Moldova, and a Campaign promoting electronic services through the perspective of women leading key projects at the Agency - Female-Driven Innovation/March 2023, among others (E-Governance Agency, Digital Literacy Campaigns).

Beyond these macro-level measures, at the empirical level, independent media institutions and journalists can access small grants of up to 2,500 euros to purchase essential equipment, participate in digital security training courses, and implement secure online campaigns. These grants are provided within the framework of the joint project “Supporting Independent Media and Reliable Information in Moldova”, implemented between 2024 and 2026 by ERIM in partnership with the media initiative Cu Sens, and funded by the European Union (EU4Moldova, 2024).

Digitalization is also a key objective included in the National Action Plan for the Accession of the Republic of Moldova to the European Union for the years 2024-2027, through which the Moldovan state aims to digitalize public services—particularly social security services, the registration and management of legal entities, civil status services, vehicle registration services, and the digital identity card (eID) by 2025 (Government Decision no. 829/2023 on the Approval of the National Action Plan for the Accession of the Republic of Moldova to the European Union for the years 2024-2027, 2023).

All these actions culminated in the desire for the Republic of Moldova to become a de facto and de jure member state of the EU by 2030, according to the statement of President Maia Sandu. She considers short-term accession possible if Moldova proceeds in two stages, referring here to the later integration of the Transnistrian region, as previously mentioned (Radio Chişinău, 2023). On the other hand, European leaders agreed to open accession negotiations with the Republic of Moldova in June 2024 (European Council, 2024), but no significant progress has been recorded so far, making accession by 2030 rather difficult. Nevertheless, as observed in the case of other states, the opening of negotiations does not automatically imply accession (see the case of Türkiye). One of the fundamental principles is that no negotiation chapter is considered definitively closed until all are closed.

Institutional framework for negotiations. After obtaining candidate country status, the Government of the Republic of Moldova strengthened the administrative mechanisms necessary for the European integration process. In December 2022, a

first arrangement of the national mechanism for coordinating European integration was defined and the composition of the 33 working groups related to the negotiation chapters was established (Government Decision No. 868/2022). Thus, a distinct mechanism was established for the preparation and conduct of accession negotiations by gradually shifting it away from the domain of foreign affairs and placing it at the center of government, under the direct coordination of a cabinet member holding the position of Deputy Prime Minister for European Integration. This change in approach provides a stronger framework of authority for interinstitutional coordination processes specific to domestic policy areas.

The mechanism was revised in March 2024, at which point the coordination of the European integration process was fully transferred from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and European Integration to the government center (Government Decision no. 180/2024). Currently, the negotiation process for the Republic of Moldova's accession to the EU involves shared coordination arrangements between institutions responsible for external representation and those involved in domestic policy decision-making. The process is structured across four institutional levels. The first and highest political level is represented by the National Committee for European Integration (CNIE), chaired by the President of the Republic of Moldova. This body ensures strategic coordination, including the involvement of decision-makers and civil society actors in strategic and political discussions related to EU integration. The CNIE meets periodically and adopts decisions of strategic importance aimed at ensuring compliance with the EU accession criteria and respect for the fundamental values of the EU.

The second level is represented by the governmental political level, within the cabinet of ministers under the auspices of the Prime Minister. Within this level, the processes of approving strategic documents regarding the preparation of the actual accession are organized and coordinated. Thus, at this level, the monitoring of planning documents for accession is ensured, decisions necessary for the implementation of the Association Agreement and other agreements with the EU are adopted, negotiation positions are approved, and conflicts of competence between institutions are resolved. National positions and decisions are discussed during the government's weekly meetings, where the Deputy Prime Minister for European Integration provides updates on the progress of the negotiations.

The third institutional level of negotiation is represented by the Interinstitutional Coordination Council formed by the chairmen of the Interinstitutional Committees of the six clusters and other persons with management positions, through which the coherence and consistency of the activities of the Working Groups is ensured. The Council has the role of planning and coordinating the activity of the Working Groups on EU accession, but also of assessing the progress of the implementation of the Association Agreement by developing, monitoring, and reviewing the National

Action Plan. The Council also monitors the implementation of the commitments from the negotiation process and proposes solutions to overcome potential conflicts of competence between the authorities.

Finally, the operational level is represented by the Working Groups that deal with the implementation of the commitments in the Association Agreement and the effective preparation of the negotiations. Formed largely by experts, this level has the role of ensuring the coherence, efficiency, and effectiveness of the preparations for the negotiation process, but also for the preparation of the effective accession to the EU. The working groups within the operational level collaborate closely with other authorities and institutions to overcome potential conflicts of competence and propose strategic solutions that accelerate the negotiation and pre-accession process. The efficiency of the operational level in defining national positions and in obtaining derogations or more favorable transitional clauses depends very much on inter-institutional collaboration, but also on the involvement of experts from various fields, including academia and civil society. Composed of chairs, secretaries, and members appointed from relevant public authorities, these groups have clearly defined responsibilities. For example, the chairs of the working groups are responsible for coordinating activities related to the preparation, monitoring, and reporting on the harmonization of national legislation with the EU *acquis*. They participate in periodic negotiations and oversee the process, ensuring the quality of the documents produced. The secretaries provide logistical and organizational support by preparing meetings and drafting the necessary documents to advance the negotiations. Selected based on relevant skills and experience, the working group members are involved in reviewing the *acquis* and its transposition into national legislation. They play a key role in defining negotiation positions as well as in drafting reports that assess the progress made.

The *de facto* coordination of the Republic of Moldova's accession process to the European Union is carried out by the Bureau for European Integration (BIE), as a structure within the State Chancellery of the Republic of Moldova. Established by Government Decision no. 888/2023, the Bureau is led by the Deputy Prime Minister for European Integration. The BIE manages the implementation of commitments assumed by the Republic of Moldova under the Association Agreement and the Association Agenda 2021–2027, and it is responsible for monitoring progress and periodic reporting. In this regard, the BIE has the role of monitoring the implementation of actions according to the performance indicators and terms specified in the National Action Plan for the Accession of the Republic of Moldova to the European Union, for the years 2024–2027. From an operational point of view, the BIE supports the working groups for the accession negotiation, ensuring the development and verification of the necessary documents, and coordinates the implementation of the EU *acquis* in

collaboration with the Centre for Harmonization of Legislation. The Bureau is also responsible for coordinating strategic communication and translations related to the negotiation process. In order to exercise its powers, the BIE collaborates with other structures within the State Chancellery of the Republic of Moldova to ensure the implementation of the commitments undertaken by the Republic of Moldova in accordance with EU approaches and strategies, as well as to make efficient use of external assistance and European funds.

In order to harmonize domestic legislation with the *acquis communautaire*, in October 2023, the Government of the Republic of Moldova adopted the National Action Plan for the Accession of the Republic of Moldova to the European Union for the years 2024-2027. The Plan ensures the implementation of the Association Agreement and the Association Program 2021–2027, as well as the integration of the conclusions and recommendations of the European Commission from the opinion on the Accession Questionnaire. Compared to the previous version, which was applied only for the implementation of the provisions of the Association Agreement, the updated 2023 version included 134 new actions resulting from the initial iterations of preparing to start the negotiation phase. In March 2024, it was updated according to the recommendations of the 2023 Enlargement Package. Currently, the Plan contains 1,328 actions structured by each negotiation chapter and grouped by each respective cluster. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs and European Integration coordinates the implementation of the Plan's actions, and the involved authorities must report quarterly on the progress of measures included in the Plan, according to their areas of competence. To fulfill the recommendations from the Enlargement Package, 386 actions were to be implemented by August 2024⁸.

The main conclusions of the 2023 report on the Republic of Moldova in the framework of the EU enlargement policy (European Commission, SWD (2023) 698 final) highlight the fact that since obtaining the status of candidate country, the Republic of Moldova has made significant progress. These changes were made in accordance with the recommendations of the European Commission, strengthening the internal legislative framework in harmony with EU norms. The report also highlighted the adoption of relevant laws under the first negotiation cluster, including a new Electoral Code, and improvements in transparency regarding political party financing, measures that contribute to strengthening democracy and the rule of law. The Report also highlights that public sector reforms have been initiated, measures have been adopted to reduce corruption, and the framework for civil society involvement in decision-making and the promotion of social dialogue has been strengthened. The

⁸ At the time of drafting this study, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and European Integration (MAEIE) had not made public any information presenting the degree of implementation of the actions scheduled to be completed by August 2024, with a reporting deadline of August 15.

steps taken have contributed to improving the capacity to implement reforms essential for the start of accession negotiations.

The negotiating framework for the accession of the Republic of Moldova to the EU presented at the first Intergovernmental Conference Republic of Moldova - EU of 25 June 2024 the Council considers that the Republic of Moldova must continue to strengthen its public institutions in order to implement the necessary reforms (EU Council, 2024). Thus, the Council position indicates the need to ensure effective coordination between all levels and institutions involved in the process. As in the case of the other candidate countries in negotiations, the negotiating framework reiterates the principles and conditions underlying the negotiation process that set the benchmarks for successful accession. It is noted that accession is an open-ended process. Although the ultimate goal is the full accession of the Republic of Moldova to the EU, this is not guaranteed and depends on meeting the established criteria and stages. For this reason, the EU's revised enlargement methodology focuses on political coordination, accountability, and predictability. The European Commission is mandated to monitor Moldova's progress and adjust the pace of negotiations according to the reforms implemented, especially in key areas such as the rule of law, democracy, and governance. If, during the negotiations, the Republic of Moldova fails to meet the accession criteria and commitments according to the performance indicators and agreed deadlines, the EU reserves the right to suspend or postpone the negotiations.

Only at the end of the screening process will the official degree of convergence between the Republic of Moldova's legislation and the EU *acquis* be determined, allowing for the establishment of benchmarks and negotiation positions for each chapter or negotiation cluster. This is expected to be completed in the first semester of 2025. The negotiations will be structured in thematic clusters, and the first cluster to be addressed will be that of fundamentals. This includes key areas such as the rule of law, justice reform, economic governance, and public administration. For this cluster, the Republic of Moldova must develop and negotiate roadmaps with the EU institutions involved in order to ensure that by the end of the negotiations, the rule of law is fully functional and the public administration is reformed in line with the principles of good governance.

The 2024 Report on the Republic of Moldova accompanying the 2024 Commission Communication on EU Enlargement Policy, published on 30 October 2024, highlights that the Republic of Moldova has demonstrated significant resilience in the EU accession process, effectively managing the challenges of the Russian Federation's aggression against Ukraine and the Russian Federation's attempts at internal destabilization through hybrid actions.

The report covers the period between June 15, 2023, and September 1, 2024. Thus, according to the assessments set out in the report, during the reference period,

certain progress was recorded in key areas such as the judicial system, the fight against corruption, the fight against organized crime, competition; economic and monetary policy, and public administration reforms. However, in these areas, the implementation of the recommendations was partial and insufficient, which negatively affects the general public's confidence in the reforms.

The report highlights that, at this stage, the Republic of Moldova is at an early stage of preparedness in the field of environment and climate change, particularly regarding the implementation of the monitoring, reporting, verification, and accreditation system aimed at introducing carbon pricing and aligning with the EU Emissions Trading System (EU ETS). Also, other areas that are in early stages are agriculture and rural development, the development of the own resources system, and the implementation of measures to combat VAT and customs fraud. It is noted that no progress has been recorded in the field of fisheries and aquaculture.

Significant and satisfactory progress has been identified in areas such as taxation, customs union, energy, education and culture, environment, and climate change. Also, the areas specific to cluster 6 (external relations and foreign policy, security and defence) are characterized by a moderate and good degree of preparation.

In line with the spirit of the report, it can be concluded that the progress achieved during the reference period demonstrates the Republic of Moldova's strong commitment to EU accession. However, consistent support and guidance are required to ensure the sustainability of the reforms initiated over the past year. Accordingly, in December 2023, the Parliament of the Republic of Moldova adopted the National Integrity and Anti-Corruption Program (2024-2028) (National Anticorruption Center, 2023).

In the referendum held on October 20, 2024, regarding the inclusion of the objective of the Republic of Moldova's accession to the EU in the Constitution, 50.35% voted in favor. Following the validation of the referendum, the Constitution of the Republic of Moldova was amended in the preamble with two new paragraphs reaffirming the country's European identity and the irreversibility of its European path, as well as establishing EU integration as a strategic objective. Also, art. Article 140 of the Constitution was amended to provide that the accession of the Republic of Moldova to the EU treaties and revision acts is established by organic law, and after effective accession, the EU treaties and acts take precedence over any conflicting domestic legislation. Even if it is a marginally favorable vote, it is the first time in the history of the Republic of Moldova when the amendment of the Constitution is carried out as a result of a national referendum.

The referendum result highlights that European integration remains a highly politicized issue, being supported mainly by right-wing and center-right political forces, while the left of the political spectrum opposes this aspiration. This situation

reflects, on the one hand, the lack of an internal political consensus on European integration, especially among parliamentary parties. On the other hand, the rigid doctrinal positioning of left-wing parties keeps them isolated from European political families such as The Left or the Party of European Socialists (PES). A closer alignment with these European political structures, similar to that of pro-European parties, could lend legitimacy to their discourse regarding the options, approach, and pace of the Republic of Moldova's accession to the EU.

Also, as a consequence of the excessive politicization of the subject of European integration, the referendum result demonstrates the existence of an obvious rupture between the resident population of the Republic of Moldova and the diaspora. For example, within the diaspora, 76.96% of the total valid votes were cast in favor of amending the Constitution. Meanwhile, within the Republic of Moldova, only 45.38% of the total valid votes supported the constitutional amendment. Additionally, the limited public awareness regarding the purpose of the referendum and foreign interference played a significant role in shaping this outcome.

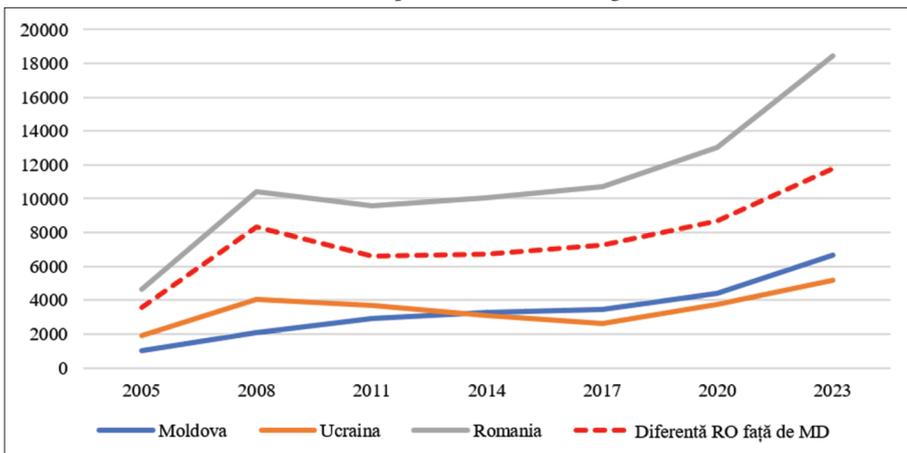
Even though the amendment of the Constitution of the Republic of Moldova was an essential step in the European integration process, the results of the referendum indicate the need for a more effective public communication strategy. This should focus on explaining the implications of the negotiation and pre-accession process in order to increase citizens' trust and support. At the same time, it is imperative to train experts in European integration, capable of facilitating the implementation of local development policies in line with EU strategies and policies. Such an approach would contribute to strengthening cooperation between the national and local levels, especially in the autonomous territorial units (the Transnistrian region and the Gagauz Autonomous Territorial Unit), promoting a preparation for accession and integration into the EU, taking into account the affordability of citizens.

The economic and value chain transformation of the Republic of Moldova is essential for the future of its competitiveness within the single market, given global changes and current EU-specific challenges. Therefore, the pre-accession process of the Republic of Moldova to the EU must aim at implementing the recommendations derived from the reports coordinated by Enrico Letta and Mario Draghi in order to effectively align with the norms and pressures of the single market. Yet, an analysis of the *Economic Reform Programme 2024-2026*, adopted by the Government of the Republic of Moldova on February 1, 2024, reveals that the emphasis is primarily placed on fiscal consolidation, budgetary discipline, stimulation of labor demand and supply, as well as support for the population affected by recent extreme events (ministry of Finance, 2024). Also, increasing economic security by diversifying energy supply sources and reducing dependencies on the Russian Federation remains a strategic priority for ensuring long-term economic stability. However, it is highlighted that

domestic priorities regarding economic development are still quite distant from current debates and approaches specific to the single market, such as: applying the taxonomy of green and climate-neutral investments; restoring and strengthening essential value chains within the EU; and ensuring the functioning of a high-performance social market economy that leads to the achievement of real and social convergence objectives at EU level. Thus, almost half of the objectives of the Growth Plan for the Republic of Moldova for the period 2025-2027, proposed by the European Commission on October 9, 2024, aim to transform the economy of the Republic of Moldova so that it becomes sustainable, climate-neutral, inclusive, resilient in relation to critical resource dependencies (European Commission, 2024).

Over the past two decades, the Republic of Moldova has experienced an average annual economic growth rate of 4.6%, which has been reflected in the increase of its GDP. For instance, according to World Bank data, Moldova's GDP per capita was USD 1,034 in 2005, rising to USD 6,650 in 2023. According to this macroeconomic indicator, in 2014, the Republic of Moldova surpassed Ukraine. The growth was primarily driven by consumption supported by remittances rather than production, which remains the main factor behind macroeconomic imbalances. Consequently, domestic trade accounts for nearly half of the GDP. Furthermore, when comparing Romania with the Republic of Moldova, there is a significant gap that has tended to widen since Romania's accession to the EU. For instance, in 2023, the difference amounted to USD 11,770, compared to USD 3,580 in 2005.

Figure 8 Key telecommunication and internet indicators in the Republic of Moldova compared to the European and world average

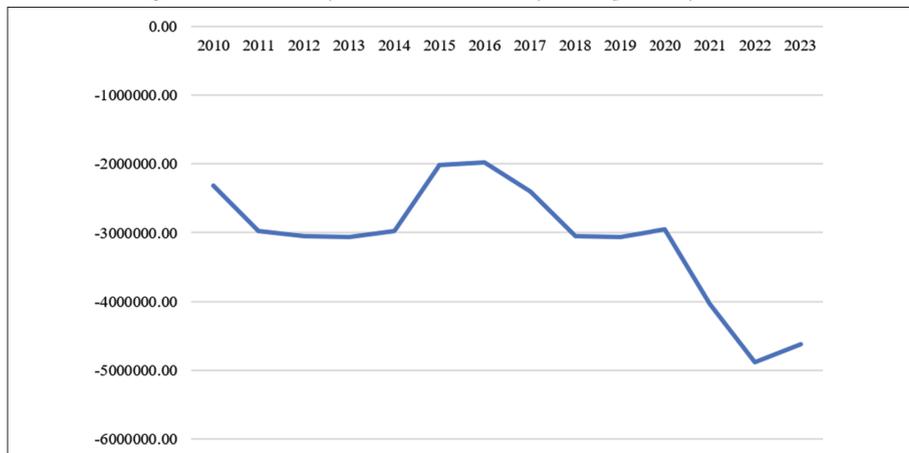


Source: World Bank, 2024

According to the data underpinning the Economic Reform Program for the period 2024–2026, the incremental pace of economic growth in the Republic of Moldova is largely attributed to low productivity levels, dependence on external resources, and

a mono-sectoral specialization (particularly the agro-food industry). In the absence of consistent structural reforms, this phenomenon contributes to maintaining the development gap with the economies in the region. With a GDP per capita of approx. 30% of the EU average, in line with that of Ukraine, the latent economic growth affects the standard of living, but also the economic diversification and strengthening of the Republic of Moldova's presence within other value chains of the single market, excluding those specific to the agri-food industry. Even though, since the 1990s, the Republic of Moldova has been facing significant challenges in access to energy and high prices, an aspect that significantly affects competitiveness, the pre-accession process represents a major opportunity for economic transformation based on green energy resources, a social market approach, and a solid corporate governance framework.

The economy of the Republic of Moldova is characterized by a persistent trade deficit, a phenomenon that significantly impacts macroeconomic stability, economic growth, competitiveness, as well as the internal industrial transformation towards convergence with the EU Single Market. According to the data presented by the National Bureau of Statistics of the Republic of Moldova (see the accompanying graph), we note that the overall trend of the trade balance is negative, and a significant decline was recorded in the period 2020-2022 during the pandemic. In 2023, the recovery of this indicator is quite small. Thus, since the entry into force of the Association Agreement, the Republic of Moldova has had difficulties in balancing the trade balance, being dependent on imports, especially from the EU. For example, according to data from the National Bureau of Statistics of the Republic of Moldova, in 2023, the Republic of Moldova recorded a 6.5% decrease in exports compared to 2022, totaling USD 4,048.6 million. On the one hand, the decline in exports was caused by their reorientation from CIS countries toward EU member states. On the other hand, in 2023, the share of domestically produced goods in total exports stood at 70.9%, although this represented a decrease of 3.2% compared to 2022. The export complexity index was 0.34, indicating a predominance of raw materials in the export structure.

Figure 9 Evolution of the Trade Balance of the Republic of Moldova

Source: National Bureau of Statistics of the Republic of Moldova, October 2024.

The reduction of the industrial structure and hyper-channeling on a few economic branches (especially the agri-food industry, which represents approximately 45% of exports) limits participation in EU value chains with high added value. The prospects for economic growth and strengthening the presence of Moldovan products in European value chains must be based largely on a balancing of exports by sector. Thus, the emphasis should be placed in particular on the machine-building industry, which currently has a share of 20% in exports, non-energy mineral resources, the share in exports being approximately 10%, as well as on construction materials, the share in exports being 7%.

In recent years, there has been a slow increase in the labor force of the Republic of Moldova. For example, according to data from the Labor Force Survey conducted by the National Bureau of Statistics of the Republic of Moldova, in 2023, the employment rate was 43.1%, the labor force participation rate was 45.9%, and the unemployment rate stood at 4.6%. The share of employed persons in public administration, education, health, and social assistance was 22.9%, in the agricultural sector 20.9%, in trade and accommodation and food service activities 17.7%, in industry 14.4%, and in construction as well as in the transport sector 7.1% each.

The low level of investment and labor migration has exacerbated this problem. Therefore, in the context of accession negotiations, one of the strategic priorities of the Republic of Moldova is to connect to the value chains within the EU single market by adopting a new productivity model, based on the valorization of innovation and green and socially fair technologies. As the active population of the Republic of Moldova is decreasing, and a significant part of the labor force continues to migrate, especially in the talent category and in the STEM area, it is essential that structural reforms aim

to increase productivity through green, digital, and professional skills investments. From this point of view, the approach of bringing back talents, even for temporary periods, is essential to boost the transformation of smart specialization areas in which the Republic of Moldova can excel (such as: biomedicine, biopharmaceuticals, bioinformatics, agricultural processing, information and communication technology, etc.).

The economy of the Republic of Moldova faces insufficient innovation and a lack of industrial diversification. There is a need to create a domestic ecosystem of innovative enterprises that can generate economic opportunities and contribute to the modernization of traditional sectors. In the absence of reforms to support entrepreneurial spirit, production lines remain heavily anchored in outdated and energy-intensive technologies. Also, the economic sectors in which substantial resources are allocated, especially agriculture, continue to have low added value, even if the resulting products meet the regulations and requirements specific to the single market. Therefore, in the context of deepening the pre-accession processes to the EU, it is important to continue and diversify the deliberative processes of designing, implementing, and periodically reviewing smart specialization strategies. In August 2024, the Government of the Republic of Moldova approved the The National Programme of Smart Specialization of Moldova for 2024-2027 – “SMART Moldova”, which was designed based on the results of the experimental exercise to identify smart specialization niches conducted in 2019-2021 with the support of the Joint Research Centre of the European Commission. The program thus focuses on the following smart development niches: advanced biotechnologies in agriculture; micro/nanomaterials and electronic engineering; alternative energy; and personalized medicine. Being a first exercise of such scope, it is necessary that, for better alignment with the economic and industrial priorities of the EU, this process be continued and diversified at the level of development regions through the design of Regional Smart Specialization Strategies (RIS3), so that these become institutionalized instruments within regional development policies. Accompanied by interactive entrepreneurial discovery sessions within a quadruple helix framework consisting of universities, research centers, enterprises, public authorities, and civil society, the processes of designing and implementing regional smart specialization strategies will contribute to economic and industrial transformation through a mixed approach (top-down and bottom-up). Additionally, it is recommended that, following this exercise of regional iterations, the National Smart Specialization Program be revised in order to incorporate the new regional perspectives.

In order to align more closely with the standards of the Single Market, the financial support provided by the EU in the context of advancing negotiations on accession chapters will aim to implement strategic reform measures targeting the economic and

industrial structure of the Republic of Moldova, so that it can be gradually integrated into the EU's internal value chains beyond those related to the agro-food industry. Thus, the Growth Plan for the Republic of Moldova will help the authorities and the business environment of the Republic of Moldova to explore the opportunities and economic potential to strengthen access to the European single market (Gherasimov, 2024). In this context, public investments, largely co-financed by the EU through the second pillar of the Growth Plan for the Republic of Moldova for the period 2025-2027, must be primarily oriented towards decarbonization, digitalization, and strengthening professional skills within domestic production chains. Thus, according to the current priorities and specific approaches of the Single Market (notably outlined in the report coordinated by Mario Draghi), it is expected that the reforms will lead to:

- the adoption of renewable energy technologies and the diversification of energy sources, as well as energy storage technologies, including the expansion of the national energy system's capacities to manage overload or overstrain situations. This type of investment must be accompanied by the implementation of green energy solutions for heating and cooling homes, especially in rural areas and urban areas at risk of energy poverty.
- transforming industrial processes to reduce carbon emissions and strengthen recycling actions by adopting state-of-the-art technologies and social responsibility measures. Industrial transformation processes must be oriented towards ensuring a reasonable level of economic security and at the same time provide for alternation towards temporary production in the field of defense or critical domestic needs (such as pharmaceuticals and medical products). Support for businesses must also be accompanied by the implementation of low-emission transport solutions. In addition, the transformation of industrial processes must aim to meet the commitments undertaken in the Integrated National Energy and Climate Plan 2030 (INCEP), which will have to be adopted by the end of 2024, in line with the commitments undertaken at the first intergovernmental conference;
- continuing and deepening the processes of digitalization and technological innovation in emerging areas such as artificial intelligence, automation and cybersecurity. These processes have the role of contributing to reducing external dependencies.

In order to encourage investment in sectors with growth potential, support innovation and integration into regional value chains and the single market, the Republic of Moldova needs to review its policies in the field of economic development, industrial development, research and development and innovation, as well as trade. The transition to a green economy and industry, much closer to the values of a social market economy, should be seen as an opportunity for the Republic of Moldova,

rather than merely a compliance requirement with the EU *acquis*. Simultaneously, in the context of these value chain transformations, the Republic of Moldova can offer opportunities to European companies, particularly those already investing in Romania (Gherasimov, 2024). Moldova's economic and industrial transformation can be supported by Romania through facilitating participation in the value chains developed by Romanian industries, especially those located in the border regions (North-East and South-East), as well as through the Strategic Technologies for Europe Platform (STEP) platform and the Important Projects of Common European Interests (IPCEIs) currently in development and maturation.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA AND ROMANIA AS A KEY ELEMENT OF ROMANIA'S FOREIGN POLICY

Since 1991, relations between Romania and the Republic of Moldova have been built upon two main pillars: supporting Moldova's European path and enhancing concrete bilateral cooperation. Up until 2021, Romania played a decisive role in assisting the democratization and Europeanization processes of the Republic of Moldova, acting as a reliable strategic partner, even during periods of clear diplomatic tensions (such as between 2001-2003 or 2007-April 2009). The overarching goal of bilateral relations was to bring the Republic of Moldova closer to the European space and values, as well as to encourage the country's commitment to a European trajectory. As a result of this approach, it is now well understood in Chisinau that the European path of the Republic of Moldova inevitably passes, first and foremost, through Bucharest (Gherasimov, 2024).

Today, relations between the two states are based on: a) the Declaration on the Establishment of a Strategic Partnership between Romania and the Republic of Moldova for the European Integration of the Republic of Moldova, signed on April 27, 2010, and b) the Action Plan for the implementation of the Declaration, signed in 2012. The planning, coordination and evaluation of cooperation between Romania and the Republic of Moldova in the field of European integration is carried out within the framework of the Romania - Republic of Moldova Intergovernmental Commission for European Integration. This was established in 2012, based on the Action Plan. To date, however, only five meetings of this Commission have taken place, with the latest held in June 2018.

At the time of the signing of the Declaration, support was focused on the negotiation, signing, ratification, and entry into force of the EU-Republic of Moldova Association Agreement, as well as on visa liberalization. Moreover, in implementing the provisions of the 2010 Declaration, Romania also contributed to strengthening cooperation within the Eastern Partnership, as well as to mobilizing the European resources needed to support reforms in the Republic of Moldova. An important focus of the support was therefore on contributing to the modernization of public administration.

After the entry into force of the EU Association Agreement with the Republic of Moldova, and implicitly of the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement,

Romania has made considerable diplomatic efforts to assist the Republic of Moldova in implementing the measures agreed with the EU. Thus, according to statistical records, since 2015, the EU has become the main trading partner of the Republic of Moldova, with a share of over 60% in exports and approx. 50% in imports.

Since the submission of the Republic of Moldova's application for EU membership, the bilateral relationship between Romania and the Republic of Moldova has reached a new level of strategic engagement. The new strategic objective is to provide unconditional support to the Republic of Moldova so that it may become an EU member state, in line with the goal set by the current leadership of the country. This has created a distinct context in the bilateral relationship, whereby Moldova's objective of joining the EU has also become Romania's objective. As highlighted in a recent study, there is a shared perception among political elites in Moldova that the country currently has two ambassadors to the EU institutions: the first being Moldova's own ambassador, and the second being Romania's (Toderas and Pascal, 2025, p. 172). Extending this to public opinion, the same perception exists at the broader societal level.

Over time, Romania's assistance to the Republic of Moldova has significantly evolved, moving from an initially less structured model to a results-oriented approach. In the initial years, the support provided by Romania was primarily focused on general actions, lacking a clear prioritization of objectives and rigorous monitoring of outcomes. However, beginning in 2010, within the framework of the obligation to report development assistance as an EU member state, the assistance paradigm underwent a significant shift towards a strategic approach focused on achieving concrete and measurable results (Bărbulescu et al., 2018). According to data from the International Development Cooperation Agency - RoAID, Romania directs to the Republic of Moldova approximately two-thirds of the total official bilateral development assistance offered to partner states.

A key moment in this paradigmatic shift was the signing, in 2010, of an Agreement on the implementation of the technical and financial assistance program based on a non-reimbursable financial aid of 100 million euros granted by Romania to the Republic of Moldova. This agreement established a solid basis for specific projects, targeting infrastructure and the modernization of educational institutions. Subsequently, in 2013, a new agreement formalized the general framework and conditions of development cooperation, reinforcing Romania's commitment to supporting Moldova's democratic transition. A similar agreement, worth 100 million euros for seven years, was signed on 11 February 2022.

The provisions and conditions of this non-reimbursable technical and financial assistance agreement are very close to the specifics of the European funds allocated by the EU to third countries: promoting internal reforms in the spirit of approximation

to the fundamental values of the EU and supporting the EU integration process. Furthermore, the non-reimbursable financial and technical support is primarily intended for the modernization of the educational and energy infrastructure in the Republic of Moldova. Also, a new area supported by technical assistance aims at preparing the Republic of Moldova for the accession negotiations stage. Thus, over the past three years, several programs have been implemented involving policy transfer and approaches, as well as professional training in the field of European affairs, provided by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the European Institute of Romania, the Romanian National Institute of Administration, and the Department for Relations with the Republic of Moldova. For example, between September 13 and 26, 2023, the Romanian Diplomatic Institute conducted a professional training program in the field of European affairs, aimed at dignitaries and public officials from the Republic of Moldova involved in preparing for accession negotiations (IDR, 2023). Designed as a pilot program, it was delivered in training series, involving approximately 400 participants. This served as a preparatory initiative for theme and the topics covered were, among others, Romania's experience within the EU, accession criteria, and the implementation of European legislation.

In 2023, Romania was one of the main bilateral donors to the Republic of Moldova, contributing 59.8 million euros, which accounted for 3.4% of the total external assistance⁹(Government of the Republic of Moldova, 2023). According to the country's ranking, Romania ranked fourth, after the USA, Japan and the Kingdom of Sweden. The funds were directed towards investment projects and grants aimed at strengthening public administration, supporting democratic and economic reforms, energy efficiency, developing institutional capacities, as well as strengthening civil society and independent media.

Romania's support for the European path of the Republic of Moldova is currently also reflected through the Moldova Support Platform, established in 2022 at the initiative of Romania, France, and Germany, with the participation of the United States. The platform aims to provide the Republic of Moldova with political, financial, and logistical assistance, as well as expertise for the implementation of domestic reforms in the context of its rapprochement with the European Union. To date, the platform has convened five times, three times in 2022, and once each in 2023 and 2024. According to data provided by the Government of the Republic of Moldova, the platform's meetings have generated financial commitments totaling 1.93 billion euros, of which 1.4 billion euros were pledged in 2022, approximately 150 million

⁹ It should be noted that this total also includes allocations from European funds through the Interreg regional cooperation objective of the EU cohesion policy, as well as assistance provided by international financial institutions such as the European Commission, EBRD, the World Bank, IMF, and others.

euros in 2023, and 380 million euros in 2024. These commitments are intended to provide financial support in the form of grants or concessional loans.

In the forthcoming period, in the context of Romania's accession to the OECD, development assistance provided by Romania to the Republic of Moldova needs to be restructured and increasingly oriented towards facilitating institutional and societal changes, in accordance with the commitments made during the accession negotiations. Furthermore, synergy with interventions funded by the EU through pre-accession financial support will be necessary. Depending on the progress achieved in the Republic of Moldova's EU accession negotiations, Romania's development assistance is expected to gradually decrease. In this context, and considering its own experience with EU accession, Romania bears a significant responsibility in preparing the Republic of Moldova to transition from a recipient to a donor state. A swift negotiation process and subsequent pre-accession of the Republic of Moldova to the EU could generate an administrative shock, not only due to the loss of development aid received from donor countries but also because of the increased responsibility to contribute effectively to development assistance.

Romania has also supported the Republic of Moldova through credit mechanisms, being one of its main bilateral creditors. In 2016, in the context of maintaining internal financial stability following the banking frauds of 2012–2014, Romania granted the Republic of Moldova a loan of 150 million euros. The loan also aimed to strengthen Moldova's resilience in order to facilitate its integration into the European economy. The disbursement of the loan tranches was based on the principle of conditionality, providing support only insofar as democratic reforms continued to advance.

In addition to direct assistance, Romania has become an essential economic partner for the Republic of Moldova, particularly in trade and investment. These matters are analyzed, evaluated, and planned jointly by the two countries within the framework of the Romania-Republic of Moldova Joint Intergovernmental Commission for Economic Cooperation. Established in 2005, the Commission has held 12 meetings to date, with the latest organized in April 2024. Notably, the protocol signed during the latest session of the Joint Commission places strong emphasis on enhancing economic cooperation, aiming to address most of the issues identified in the Republic of Moldova's internal assessment ahead of the launch of EU accession negotiations. In effect, given the absence of regular meetings of the Romania - Republic of Moldova Intergovernmental Commission for European Integration, this protocol has also acquired the role of facilitating Moldova's European integration.

As early as 2014, Romania became Moldova's main trading partner, hence its position in the economy of the Republic of Moldova has strengthened significantly. Today, Romania has far surpassed both Ukraine and the Russian Federation in Moldova's trade balance. According to data from the National Bureau of Statistics

of the Republic of Moldova (2024), in 2023, 35.1% of Moldova's total exports were directed to Romania, compared to 14.7% to Ukraine and only 3.6% to the Russian Federation. Regarding imports, in 2023 Romania ranked first, accounting for 15% of total imports, followed by Ukraine with 12.4%, China with 11.7%, Türkiye with 8.5%, Germany with 7.1%, Italy with 5.4%, and both the Russian Federation and Poland with 3.7% each. Conversely, in Romania's trade balance, the Republic of Moldova ranked as the 15th largest export market, representing 2.23%, and the 23rd largest source of imports, accounting for 0.89% (ARICE, 2024). Nevertheless, between 2018 and 2023, bilateral trade increased by a factor of 1.5.

In recent years, a number of large companies with Romanian state or private capital have continued to invest in the Republic of Moldova, contributing to the development of various economic sectors. In the last decade, Romania's position has remarkably strengthened in the country ranking of foreign direct investments: from fifth place in 2015 to second place in 2023. By 2023, Romania's total investments in the Republic of Moldova amounted to approximately 780 million dollars, generating a total turnover of nearly 1 billion euros and creating over 10,000 jobs (ARICE, 2024).

Thus, through the recent infusion of Romanian capital, particularly from Banca Transilvania SA, the banking sector of the Republic of Moldova has managed to overcome the systemic crisis triggered by the banking frauds of 2012-2014. At present, both private investments from Romanian banking companies and Romania's diplomatic efforts have contributed to the gradual alignment of Moldova's banking system with the EU Banking Union. For example, between 2022 and 2024, the National Bank of Romania provided the National Bank of Moldova with technical assistance through an institutional twinning project, focusing on strengthening supervision, corporate governance, and risk management in the financial sector. The goal was to prepare for Moldova's accession to the Single Euro Payments Area (SEPA) as a non-EEA member. Nonetheless, the level of private Romanian capital investment remains below potential, marked by continued hesitation and uncertainty due to the current regional context.

Since 2015, investments made by the National Natural Gas Transmission Company "TRANSGAZ" S.A., both on the territory of Romania and that of the Republic of Moldova, have amounted to 430 million euros (Transgaz, 2023). The investments aimed to reduce the energy dependence of the Republic of Moldova on the Russian Federation. The most emblematic project is the construction and commissioning in 2021 of the Ungheni-Chisinau gas pipeline. The gas pipeline can currently provide up to 75% of the average consumption of the Republic of Moldova. Moreover, in September 2023, TRANSGAZ took over, through its subsidiary Vestmoldtransgaz, the operation of the national natural gas transport system in the Republic of Moldova, which facilitates the transit of gas from Romania to the Republic of Moldova.

On the other hand, in the field of electricity, over the past decade C.N.T.E.E. Transelectrica S.A. has implemented several strategic energy interconnection projects with the Republic of Moldova, which currently enable the reduction of dependence on electricity generated by the Cuciurgani gas power plant, located in the Transnistrian region and covering approximately 60% of Moldova's domestic electricity needs. The current electricity interconnections allow for the bidirectional transfer of large volumes of electricity, thereby ensuring domestic supply, particularly during the cold season. A major outcome of these investments was the synchronization of the Republic of Moldova to the European continental grid ENTSO-E in 2022. At present, C.N.T.E.E. Transelectrica S.A. is implementing and preparing a new portfolio of major interconnection projects with the Republic of Moldova aimed at strengthening regional energy security, especially in the current geopolitical context. The projects include the Suceava – Balti interconnection (currently in procurement and execution stages) and the Vulcanesti - Chişinău interconnection (a project prepared for implementation that will expand the Isaccea - Vulcanesti connector and is expected to be completed in the second half of 2025) and the Gutinas - Straseni interconnection (a project currently in the preparation and development phase, financed by the United States Agency for International Development, and expected to be completed by the end of 2029) (Carţin, 2024).

Investments in the energy sector have led to a shift in the Republic of Moldova's approach toward the advance and scheduled procurement of the necessary energy resources for medium-term periods, particularly during the colder months. For example, the current interconnection systems between Romania and the Republic of Moldova allow for the purchase of scheduled and variable quantities (depending on domestic capacities) of electricity produced by S.N. Nuclearelectrica S.A.

The most important result of these investments, however, refers to the fact that, in the context of the energy crisis caused by the military invasion of the Russian Federation in Ukraine, the projects carried out by Transgaz and Transelectrica contributed to breaking the energy dependence of the Republic of Moldova on the Russian Federation. For the next period, new projects need to be prepared and implemented so that breaking the energy dependence on the Russian Federation becomes irreversible. Also, progressively and through projects from European funds, but also with the contribution of private investments, the Republic of Moldova must gradually become autonomous in terms of ensuring the energy resources necessary for domestic consumption from renewable sources. From this perspective, it is very important for Romania to provide the Republic of Moldova with the transfer of approaches and tools necessary for the implementation of large-scale projects in the energy sector, mainly financed through revenues obtained from the market auctioning of greenhouse gas emission certificates (GES I and GES II) at the EU level.

Within the strategic partnership for the European integration of the Republic of Moldova, military cooperation between Romania and the Republic of Moldova also constitutes an important pillar. In 2012, the Agreement between the Government of Romania and the Government of the Republic of Moldova on cooperation in the military field was signed. At the same time, the National Defense Strategy for the period 2020-2024 emphasizes the importance of stabilizing the security of the Republic of Moldova in the context of the deteriorating security situation in the region. Therefore, Romania's support in the field of defense aims to facilitate the interoperability of the armed forces with a view to the gradual integration of the Republic of Moldova into the EU's common security and defense policy. Therefore, through the second Amending Protocol, signed in Bucharest on 24 May 2024, a series of amendments were made to the 2012 Agreement, allowing for the provision of mutual assistance, including logistical and financial support for the participation of the Republic of Moldova in EU military missions.

The social ties between Romania and the Republic of Moldova are very close and are focused on collaboration in the field of education. Since the early 1990s, Romania has supported the reform of the educational system in the Republic of Moldova, facilitating its convergence with the Romanian system through assistance programs, knowledge transfer, and mutual recognition agreements of qualifications. Additionally, Romania has offered a significant number of scholarships to young people from the Republic of Moldova, thereby supporting the training of an educational elite capable of contributing to the country's development and modernization. As a result, Romania has significantly contributed to breaking away from the Soviet model of governance of the educational system and its associated educational paradigm. In higher education, a remarkable achievement was the adoption by the Republic of Moldova of the principles of the Bologna Declaration in 2005 and, subsequently, the active participation of the Republic of Moldova in the development of the European Higher Education Area. The assistance provided by Romania also targeted facilitating the transfer of best practices, tools, and approaches through joint programs, logistical and academic support, and university partnerships.

The start of accession negotiations offers opportunities for rapid integration into the European Education Area. For Romania, a major challenge in this regard is to substantially contribute to bringing the higher education institutions of the Republic of Moldova into the European Universities Initiative (Toderas, 2022). Starting with the 2022 call, institutions from across the entire European Higher Education Area, not only those from EU member states, can participate in this initiative. However, according to results announced by the European Commission, none of the universities from the Republic of Moldova have been included in the selected university consortia to date. Therefore, in the upcoming period, Romania's role in higher education must

focus on efforts to deepen institutional convergence and increase the capacity to absorb funds allocated for this sector, both through the European Social Fund and through the Erasmus+ Program or Horizon Europe. The Romanian Executive Unit for Financing Higher Education, Research, Development, and Innovation (UEFISCDI), in partnership with the National Agency for Research and Development of the Republic of Moldova, has been addressing this aspect for several years through the bilateral/multilateral subprogram “Complex Bilateral Projects with the Republic of Moldova”. Its aims are to integrate researchers from the Republic of Moldova into international scientific networks that Romania is already involved in and to increase the number of joint applications as well as the success rate of researchers from Romania and the Republic of Moldova in obtaining funding through European programs (UEFISCDI, 2024). There is also a noticeable need to diversify these opportunities in both higher education and pre-university education.

The projects financed by Romania have supported, in particular, the modernization of schools and kindergartens, the reduction of energy vulnerabilities, and the support of civil society. These initiatives contribute not only to the improvement of living conditions in the Republic of Moldova, but also to European integration, regional stability and increased resilience to external shocks. However, there are still enough challenges, especially in terms of coordinating support with EU Member States and maintaining the necessary conditionality for the continuation of reforms.

To maximize impact, Romania needs to continue to provide structured and performance-based support, encourage economic investment and ensure better visibility of its interventions. It is also essential that Romania continues to increase its presence in the Republic of Moldova and coordinate efforts with other international actors to ensure complementarity and synergy of interventions.

Through an integrated and coherent approach, Romania will continue to play a decisive role in supporting the Republic of Moldova’s anchoring on an irreversible path of accession and integration into the EU. For the coming years, there is a recognized need for support in conducting accession negotiations and subsequently facilitating and accelerating the ratification of the Republic of Moldova’s Accession Treaty to the EU. Therefore, the resumption of regular meetings of the Romania - Republic of Moldova Joint Intergovernmental Commission for European Integration is a necessity, in order to assess progress and coordinate the planning of resources and availability to achieve the Republic of Moldova’s objective of accession to the EU in the shortest possible time. At the same time, Romania must also consider the development and, if necessary, the application of an alternative scenario in case the negotiations reach a political deadlock, whether due to internal EU causes (such as failure to meet the

unanimity requirement) or internal causes within the Republic of Moldova (such as changes in government, institutional “fatigue” related to implementing requirements derived from chapter negotiations, etc.).

ROMANIA'S EUROPEAN PATH: LESSONS OF BEST PRACTICES AND THEIR TRANSFER TO THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA

Lessons are learned both from best practices and from failed or underperforming practices. The transfer of experience must take into account the various categories of practices and consider the nuances of institutional similarities and convergences. The lessons learned by Romania that are currently relevant for the Republic of Moldova are structured around three levels. The first level refers to the importance of ensuring internal political consensus and prescriptive strategic planning. The second focuses on the way to substantiate the negotiation strategy of the accession chapters, and the third on the finalization and continuous strengthening of the institutional system and internal governance. The chapter also highlights a series of preliminary recommendations, which represent constitutive elements of the final recommendations of the study. Given the objectives of this research, we note that the aim of this chapter was not to treat Romania's European path in a monographic manner, but to briefly present the main findings relevant to the Republic of Moldova, taking into account the current negotiation framework.

4.1. Securing Internal Political Consensus and Prescriptive Strategic Planning

With a view to strengthening the national political commitment to European integration, as well as for ensuring the irreversibility of Romania's European path, the credibility of the endeavor was ensured by accompanying the application for EU membership with guarantees of an existing political consensus. Thus, the "Snagov Declaration", signed on 21 June 1995 by the leaders of the parliamentary parties in Romania, represented a turning point in the creation of a national political consensus on EU and NATO accession. The consensus demonstrated the efficient management of the attitudes and behaviors of the main parties from the moment of submitting the application until Romania's actual accession to the EU. The common vision of the ruling and opposition parties, expressed through this Declaration, was essential in maintaining the stability and success of the country's aspirations even in moments of political tension or alternation in government. Based on Romania's experience, in the case of the Republic of Moldova we can observe such moments of political consensus recurrently since 2005, both in terms of the format of the parliamentary parties and at the level of the extra-parliamentary parties. The most recent similar initiative took

place on May 26, 2024, when 13 parties from the Republic of Moldova signed the “Pact for Europe” with the aim of expressing a joint commitment to achieving the strategic objective of EU accession. In the context of current geopolitical challenges, the Pact thus reinforces the Republic of Moldova’s irreversible course toward joining the EU.

In Romania’s case, a national strategic approach was adopted; however, it was not prescriptive in nature, but rather emergent. Additionally, the approach did not materialize through an independent governmental strategic document; rather, it was derived from the governing programs, as well as from the National Programme for Romania’s Accession to the EU. The first version of the National Programme for Romania’s Accession to the EU was drafted in March 1998 and was subsequently updated periodically. The programme later served as the basis for negotiating strategies for the accession chapters. For example, in 2001, the general accession negotiation strategy aimed at EU accession on 1 January 2007, and negotiations on all chapters were to be completed by the end of 2004 (Pușcaș, 2007, p. 49). There were also a number of sectoral strategies. The consequences of choosing this path and mode of action from a strategic perspective became evident later, both in the period leading up to the opening of accession negotiations (1999), throughout the negotiation process (2000-2004), and during the preparation for Romania’s actual accession to the EU (2005-2006). Thus, unlike other candidate countries at that time, in the case of Romania, the process of preparing, conducting, and closing the negotiations was rather intermittent. The preparation started slowly, then, after going through some internal political crises, the internal processes accelerated, but not enough to allow for the gap with the other candidate countries to be recovered. This explains the decoupling formalized by the European Council in Copenhagen on 12-13 December 2002. In fact, the decoupling represented a strong incentive for accelerating the internal processes so that the target set for 2007 would not be missed.

We note that after achieving the objective of Romania’s accession to the EU, the processes of deepening European integration have progressively slowed down. Although sectoral and horizontal strategies have been designed and implemented, in the absence of a concrete post-accession vision resulting from an adopted government strategy¹⁰, these proved insufficient to boost the implementation of the reforms necessary for deepening European integration. At the same time, the lack of coherent post-accession strategic objectives diminished institutional and political enthusiasm for continuing essential reforms. This situation also affected preparations for joining the Schengen Area and the Economic and Monetary Union. The absence of a post-accession vision and strategy remains evident today, as governmental and

¹⁰ It should be noted that a post-accession strategy was in fact drafted; however, it was not adopted by the Government of Romania. See: Romania’s Post-Accession Strategy, document available at: <http://arhiva.gov.ro/upload/articles/100071/strategie-post-aderare2a.pdf>, accessed on 16.09.2024.

sectoral strategies fail to ensure coherence and convergence with national priorities, EU policies, or the domestic process of deepening European integration. For example, this shortcoming became particularly apparent during the design and negotiation of Romania's National Recovery and Resilience Plan (September 2020 - November 2021) (Toderas, 2024, pp. 47 - 67), as well as in the programming of European funds allocated to Romania through the cohesion policy under the 2014 - 2020 and 2021 - 2027 multiannual financial frameworks.

Therefore, taking into account Romania's experience, it is essential that the public legitimacy secured through the referendum of October 20, 2024, as well as the domestic political consensus, be followed by the development and implementation of prescriptive strategic planning, based on a normative act adopted by Parliament. In 2023 the Government of the Republic of Moldova adopted the National Action Plan for the Accession of the Republic of Moldova to the EU for the years 2024-2027, as an operational document, yet this document fails to show how the objective is to be achieved. However, a prescriptive strategy adopted by Parliament also has the major advantage of establishing that, regardless of the context and interferences, the goal of the Republic of Moldova's accession to the EU by 2030 takes precedence above all else. Such a strategy can provide the foundation for approaches and measures addressing difficult issues that involve implementing reforms with significant societal impact (see, for example, those arising from environmental requirements or climate change), or those involving major national dilemmas (such as the inclusion of the administrative-territorial units on the left bank of the Dniester in the negotiation process). A prescriptive strategy also has the advantage of ordering internal political agendas, especially in the context of possible changes in government or coalition governments. In addition to the fact that the application of strategic planning in a prescriptive manner will constitute an important internal administrative and societal mobilizing factor, at certain moments of relationship with the EU institutions involved in technical negotiations, the prescriptive approach will constitute an advantageous argument. When negotiations are concluded, the strategy can be reviewed and adjusted for the post-accession phase.

In order to respond to the challenges that may arise along the way, as well as to align with the complexity of the EU decision-making processes, the strategy review process can move to the use of the emerging strategic approach. In this regard, the approach proposed in 2006 in a study by the European Institute of Romania (IER) (Cojanu et al., 2006) is still very relevant and can be used: anticipation and prevention of the EU *acquis* and policy approaches – generation of or association with supporting coalitions – strengthening competitiveness by capitalizing on opportunities already existing within the EU – ensuring credibility and financial and economic stability – joining the euro area – benefiting from the advantages of common security and

defense. Moreover, the EU Association Agreement with the Republic of Moldova, including the establishment of the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA), already allows the Republic of Moldova to implement most of the specific elements in the aforementioned sequence.

A continuous challenge, associated with the accession stages and processes, which is also related to strategic planning, was public communication. As Romania's EU accession negotiations advanced, the propagation of myths and false information about the EU in the public space intensified. These spread especially in the context of negotiations on difficult chapters (such as agriculture, industries, etc.) and intergovernmental conferences, which led to specific operational arrangements for the implementation of the necessary reforms. In order to counter this phenomenon and ensure correct information to the public, an agile and preventive public communication strategy was adopted. In the preparation and negotiation of the accession chapters, public communication measures were based on several internal documents of the Romanian Government. It should be noted that the degree of transparency also depended greatly on the nature of the internal institutional rules of the European institutions involved in the process (Pușcaș, 2007, p. 47), but also on those of the member states, taking into account the multitude of national preferences associated with enlargement. It was only in 2005 that a strategic government document was adopted regarding internal and external communication regarding Romania's integration into the EU (Government Decision 523/2005). Several projects were also implemented with financing from pre-accession funds in order to strengthen strategic communication and analyze the reactions collected. Thus, the authorities developed their capacity to anticipate risk situations related to disinformation, but also opportunities to communicate the benefits of EU accession. The messages sent were clear, concise, and accessible, capturing the attention of the general public and facilitating understanding of the accession process. Communication was also directed at all affected target groups, so that each category would understand the effects and benefits of the reforms, as well as the benefits of EU accession. Another important objective was to inspire civic engagement and stimulate public participation, so that citizens would be actively involved in the accession process at the local level. The central public administration, in particular the Ministry of Public Information (in the period 2000-2004) and subsequently the General Secretariat of the Government, in close collaboration with the Ministry of European Integration, constantly monitored the impact of communication, measuring and evaluating its effects on the awareness and level of information of the general public. This comprehensive and well-structured approach contributed to ensuring efficient and transparent communication during the accession process, preventing the spread of disinformation and strengthening public

support. Internal political consensus, single-color governance as well as the existence of a pre-accession strategy were favorable factors in managing public communication.

Therefore, Romania's experience in public communication that can be leveraged by the Republic of Moldova demonstrates that informing the general public must be coupled with the negotiation strategy and accession preparation. Public communication should thus be proactive and agile to counter the spread of misinformation and myths related to the accession processes, especially during negotiations on difficult chapters or those that have a direct impact on changing behaviors at the individual or household level (such as the taxonomy criteria). Public messages must be clear and accessible to all affected target groups to ensure understanding of the effects of reforms and the benefits of EU accession. Given the current regional context, it is advisable to establish a single communication center, ideally located within the Bureau for European Integration, so that public communication experts can design messages in close cooperation with the technical negotiation teams.

4.2. The Foundation of the Negotiation Strategy

In the case of Romania, the negotiation strategy was based on a progressive opening of chapters based on the criterion of ease of chapters, either because they did not involve a complex *acquis*, or because domestic preferences were in line with the approaches of the EU or of the majority of the Member States. Based on this consideration, in the first year of negotiations, nine chapters were opened, and six of them were provisionally closed. In December 2000, when initial evidence showed that the pace of negotiations was far too slow and there were signs of a clear decoupling from the other candidate countries, a political objective was set to open all negotiation chapters by 2002 and to close the majority of chapters with a medium level of difficulty. This political objective was partially achieved, as by the end of 2002, all chapters had been opened, but not all chapters with a medium level of difficulty had been closed. However, the most important aspect is that at the European Council of June 2001 the design of a roadmap for all member states that were in the negotiation process, which would lead to the completion of the negotiations by the end of 2002 was proposed (Pușcaș, 2007, p. 48). In practice, this represented an incentive to boost the processes specific to the implementation of internal reforms, but also a certainty that there was a clear deadline for completing the negotiations, with the risk of decoupling from the other candidate countries.

Compared to the negotiation mechanism applied in the case of Romania, the current enlargement framework has introduced the progressive negotiation approach of the 35 chapters in six thematic clusters. Thus, only the chapters included in the respective thematic cluster can be opened, unitarily or as a package. Clusters can be closed upon the decision of the Council based on in-depth political assessments.

The Council also decides whether new clusters can be opened, or, in the case of certain chapters, if negotiations need to be reopened due to situations of revocation of reforms or failure to fulfill operational arrangements by failing to respect the principle of irreversibility of the commitments assumed. In the view of the European Commission, the mechanism proposed in 2020 ensures, on the one hand, a greater degree of coherence and a better concentration of common efforts for the conduct of accession negotiations with candidate countries. On the other hand, the mechanism introduces the possibility for candidate countries to benefit from permissive time frames for carrying out the systemic and structural reforms necessary to meet the political criteria related to each negotiation chapter.

Within the current negotiation framework based on the grouping of the 35 chapters into six thematic clusters, the strategy applied by Romania can be partially used in the case of the Republic of Moldova's negotiations with the EU. The chapters belonging to the first cluster are challenging, not necessarily due to the complexity of the *acquis*, but because they require a significant political determination to ensure the irreversibility of the European path. Thus, besides the chapters related to the rule of law criterion (chapters 23 and 24), as well as the requirements for compliance with sound financial management principles (chapter 32), this cluster also includes a series of requirements that are not the subject of specific negotiation chapters, such as the functioning of democratic institutions and public administration reform. Moreover, as stated in the negotiation framework proposed by the EU for the Republic of Moldova (EU Council, 2024), progress made on the chapters or requirements within the first cluster will determine the overall pace of the negotiations and will be taken into account when deciding whether to open or close new clusters or chapters. It should also be noted that all chapters included in the first cluster will be opened first and closed last.

Romania's experience with the specific challenges of the current chapters 23 and 24 is highly relevant. The chapters constituting the first accession criterion, especially chapter 24 on Justice and Home Affairs, as well as the horizontal aspects related to the efficiency of administrative capacity, public policies, and public management, were the most difficult to negotiate. This difficulty stemmed from both a high level of corruption and from delays in judicial system reforms. All semi-annual monitoring reports painted a grim picture, showing only marginal progress. Chapter 24 was opened only in April 2002 and was among the last to be closed, in December 2003. For this reason, the provisional closure of chapter 24 was conditional upon the fulfillment of seven criteria included in a specific safeguard clause, which remained in effect until the actual accession. Furthermore, for the closure of the negotiation phase and subsequently for the signing of the Accession Treaty in May 2005, the European Commission requested the establishment of a Cooperation and Verification Mechanism (CVM) for a transitional, yet indefinite, period. This mechanism aimed

to monitor the implementation of reforms in the judicial system and anti-corruption measures. Within this framework, the Commission periodically assessed progress and provided recommendations for improving the administrative and judicial systems. The CVM reports were based on periodic analyses and continuous dialogue between the European Commission, authorities, civil society, representative business sectors, and opinion leaders. In implementing the CVM, Romania benefited from additional support in the form of European funds and international expertise. The lifting of the CVM constituted a principal political criterion for Romania's and Bulgaria's accession to the Schengen Area.

The CVM approach cannot be applied to the current candidate countries undergoing negotiations because, in 2020, a different mechanism for monitoring respect for the rule of law was established, applicable to all member states (EU Euratom Regulation, 2020). Instead, the CVM approach is applied *ex-ante* to accession: if backsliding on the first accession criterion is observed, the entire negotiation process slows down or is blocked. In the case of certain candidate countries from the Western Balkans group, this conditionality has caused major delays in the opening of new clusters and negotiation chapters. For example, although Montenegro is the most advanced candidate in this group, the European Commission found that progress on these chapters has been limited in meeting the established conditions, leading to the imposition of three additional conditions (Butnaru-Troncota et al., 2024, pp. 68-72).

The key lesson from Romania's experience for the Republic of Moldova that, delays in implementing reforms specific to the first cluster or failure to meet expected parameters can lead to postponement of the opening, respectively the closing of other chapters or negotiation clusters. In this case, the negotiation process may exceed the current time estimate by far more years. On the other hand, if the Republic of Moldova proceeds decisively and prescriptively from the first year of negotiations, it will have a strong chance to accelerate the negotiations on the other clusters and thus decouple from Ukraine. As acknowledged in paragraph 59 of the General Negotiating Position of the Republic of Moldova, presented at the first Intergovernmental Conference between the Republic of Moldova and the EU on 25 June 2024, the Republic of Moldova is well positioned in the accession negotiations due to the constant alignment of its legislation with the EU *acquis*, a process that began in 2014. Thus, under the Association Agreement, the Republic of Moldova has made significant progress in harmonizing its legislation with European norms. The target set for completing internal preparations to fully comply with the EU *acquis* is by 2030.

In conducting negotiations on clusters and chapters, the presidencies of the EU Council play an essential role. Since accession negotiations are intergovernmental, they are led by the Council presidency, or rather by each state, with the candidate country. In this arrangement, the European Commission's role is limited to carrying

out the actual negotiation, based on a mandate received from the Council (Bărbulescu, 2015, p. 269). Therefore, the candidate country must support technical negotiations by strengthening diplomatic relations on a bilateral basis, including through the timely preparation of specific margins related to the rotating presidencies of the EU Council. This approach was successful in the case of most of the Member States that joined in the 2004/2007 wave. For example, according to Romania's experience, the opening of negotiation chapters, the intensification of negotiations on various complex dossiers, as well as the provisional closing of chapters, took place during the periods when the EU Council presidencies were held by member states supportive of the major enlargement. In this regard, it is worth mentioning the rotating presidencies of the EU Council held by Portugal, France, Spain, Greece, Italy, and Ireland. On average, six chapters were negotiated for each presidency. Thus, Romania's strategy was based on maximizing the opening or provisional closing of chapters during favorable presidencies, for the preparation of which bilateral relations were crucial.

According to the progress and developments in the negotiations, difficult chapters such as Competition Policy, Agriculture, Environment, Justice, and Home Affairs were left for the final stages of the negotiations, even though it was known that the rotating presidency of the EU Council would be held by the Netherlands (the second half of 2004). In this context, preparations for the management of bilateral relations began well before the critical period of the Dutch presidency and relied heavily on preventive diplomatic actions.

In this sense, one of the relevant lessons learned from Romania's strategy for negotiating the accession chapters is that bilateral diplomatic arrangements must be prepared and implemented well before taking over the first stage of the Trio Presidency. It should be noted that the EU Council Presidency held by Spain was one of the most prolific and complex negotiation periods, with Romania managing to secure favorable clauses and transitional periods on a number of specific aspects related to the internal market and industrial policy¹¹. For example, since the second half of 1999, efforts were

¹¹ Paradoxically, during the period 1997–2004, through the involvement of epistemic communities, certain EU member states were able to interpret the realities in Romania more accurately than Romania itself understood the potential trajectories of its own economic and social development. A typical example is that of Spain, which, in the context of negotiations over the multiannual financial frameworks for the periods 2000–2006 and 2007–2013, succeeded—on the basis of robust evidence—in demonstrating that the accession of countries such as Poland, Romania, and others would lead to the emergence of the so-called “statistical effect.” As the Spanish government argued at the time in preparation for Agenda 2000, this phenomenon was expected to result in a significant reduction in the allocations received by Spanish regions under the cohesion policy, due to an artificial shift from the former Objective 1 regions to former Objective 2 regions. See: Bărbulescu (2006, pp. 81–90). Similar analyses regarding EU enlargement—particularly in relation to the potential accession of Ukraine—are currently being undertaken, especially given the ongoing debates on the future of EU funding mechanisms, including those specific to cohesion policy. In this context, the analysis conducted by Darvas et al. (2024) is particularly illustrative.

made through bilateral relations to open difficult negotiation chapters (for example: Justice and Home Affairs, Environmental Protection, Energy and Economic affairs, and Monetary Union) in the margins of the Spanish presidency in 2002. In order to support these bilateral relationship efforts, specialized European integration offices were established within the diplomatic missions of member states of major interest to Romania, especially in cases where reluctance or additional technical requirements were anticipated. By the end of the negotiations, Romania secured 50 transitional periods and derogations - the highest number and the longest duration (for water and wastewater) among the countries in the fifth enlargement wave (Pușcaș, 2007, p. 53).

If we examine the anticipated scenario in the case of the Republic of Moldova's chapter-by-chapter accession negotiations, for the next four years (2025-2028), the following member states will successively assume the EU Council Presidency: in 2025, Poland and Denmark; in 2026, Cyprus and Ireland; in 2027, Lithuania and Greece; and in 2028, Italy and Latvia. We note that half of the eight rotating presidencies of the Council of the EU for the next four years will be held by Member States that joined in the 2004 wave, two of which are former republics of the USSR. Another important aspect specific to this calendar arrangement is that each presidency trio includes at least one member state that joined the EU in the 2004 enlargement wave. Therefore, compared to Romania's situation during the 2000-2004 period, the arrangement of EU Council presidencies is significantly more favorable for the Republic of Moldova. In other words, each year the Republic of Moldova will benefit from a window of opportunity under the premise of a favorable presidency, provided that the merits are demonstrated. Therefore, depending on the specific arrangement of the chapters within the six clusters, the specific agendas of complex dossiers (for which they will request more favorable safeguard clauses and transitional provisions) must be managed to be negotiated within the framework of the intergovernmental conferences organized during the presidencies held by member states favorable to the Republic of Moldova.

According to the current evolution of the EU's thematic concerns, it is anticipated that, during the negotiation period, the most relevant challenges will stem from the technical requirements related to the full implementation of the reforms specific to the first cluster. For the remaining thematic clusters, horizontal aspects such as compliance with the taxonomy (especially environmental and climate change criteria) and elements of upward convergence (uptake of the 20 principles of the European Pillar of Social Rights in all public policies and public management activities) will be challenging. For the technical aspects, the negotiation strategy should be based on securing favorable and tangible transitional clauses, while for the political aspects, efforts should focus on avoiding, as much as possible, situations in which the European Commission might trigger safeguard clauses. Therefore, based on Romania's

experience with the accession negotiations, as well as with the current context of implementing reforms under the NRRP (National Recovery and Resilience Plan), we can infer that, in the case of the Republic of Moldova, the timely implementation of reforms is essential, as well as showing, through solid evidence, that their effects lead toward institutional and regulatory convergence with the EU, and that there is no risk of their reversal. Voluntary adherence to the reformed Stability and Growth Pact, especially to the specific component of the European Semester, will contribute to accelerating the achievement of the transformative effects of nominal and upward convergence. This will represent a relevant advantage in the context of negotiations within the Intergovernmental Conferences, as well as in strengthening national positions through bilateral diplomatic channels with member states. Also, considering Romania's experience, it is essential for the Republic of Moldova to strengthen its foresight capacity based on scenarios, including those grounded in the use of counterfactual analysis.

4.3. Completion and Ongoing Strengthening of the Institutional System and Internal Governance

In the case of Romania, the coordination system of the process of preparing for negotiations, and, subsequently, that of negotiation and preparation for EU accession was a dual-headed one, in which responsibilities were divided between the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the center of government, through a structure under the direct authority of the Prime Minister. Based on the internal-external criterion, the two authorities had distinct responsibilities in managing relations with the EU, and this ensured a balance between competencies and institutional interests. In order to achieve a higher level of performance in the negotiation process, and following a series of institutional shortcomings (Ilie, 2005, p. 43-54), the Ministry of European Integration was created in 2001. The main role of this ministry was to coordinate negotiations and to ensure internal policy-related preparation for Romania's EU accession. Negotiations were formally carried out by a national delegation coordinated by a designated minister. In this double-headed arrangement, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs managed foreign relations in terms of bilateral and multilateral components and played an active role in monitoring the pre-accession process, maintaining the status of foreign policy coordinator in relation to the EU. Its involvement was also essential in capitalizing on windows of opportunity or resolving blockages from a foreign policy perspective.

In the negotiation process, the Ministry of European Integration had a significant normative power, by being assigned the function of approving the normative acts that entered the Government's decision-making flow. Its role was to supervise the flow of normative acts so as to ensure that the commitments assumed during the technical

and political negotiations were not violated or revoked. There were several instances when the initiators of the normative acts initially failed to include the Ministry of European Integration as a consulting authority, but during the approval process the impact on commitments assumed was revealed. Therefore, over time, several ex-ante impact analysis filters were established for the proposed normative acts to be adopted, regarding their effects on the negotiation process and subsequently on the preparation for effective accession. Thus, at the level of the central public administration, a centralized approach to the coordination of negotiations and pre-accession processes could be ensured, including in the monitoring of the transformations achieved. From a methodological point of view, the Ministry of European Integration tried to guide its approach on the policy coordination scale approach, developed in 1996 by Les Metcalfe (see Les Metcalfe, 1996) - intensively promoted by the European Commission services within the group of the fifth-wave candidate countries. The normative power of this institution also stemmed from the fact that during the negotiations it brought together the best experts and civil servants in the field of European affairs. The centralized approach was justified by the fact that, at that time, the central public administration lacked sufficient competent human resources familiar with the decision-making process and EU policies. Therefore, until the creation and training of contingents specialized in policy areas, the Ministry of European Integration largely replaced the analytical duties of ministries or central public administration authorities in order to conduct negotiations.

The centralized approach also had some disadvantages. Firstly, assembling teams of civil servants specialized in European affairs proved to be quite challenging. In some authorities and agencies of the central public administration, specialized structures in the field of European integration were operationalized only towards the end of the negotiation period. Secondly, with the completion of the negotiations and the signing of the accession treaty, the role and importance of the Ministry of European Integration decreased significantly, while the other ministries did not strengthen their sectoral management capacities in specific European affairs-related areas. Romania's experience in this regard is relevant for the Republic of Moldova in the sense that the centralized approach through a distinct ministry or authority has the advantage of ensuring a coherent and predictable framework for the conduct of negotiations, as well as for preparation for effective accession to the EU. However, it is important that the ministries and specialized authorities are also equipped with teams as well prepared and motivated as those in the coordinating authority.

After the completion of accession negotiations, the level of interest in the coordination of European affairs gradually decreased, both for political parties and decision-makers, and for the general public. However, periodically, certain critical moments generated an increase in the level of interest in the subject. For example,

significant interest was generated by nominations of Romania's representatives for the position of European Commissioner or by Romania's representation at certain European Council meetings where topics of strategic importance to Romania were on the agenda. Therefore, from the moment of signing the Accession Treaty until 2012, the Romanian coordination system of European affairs underwent multiple institutional changes. Even though the changes were inspired by other European models and informed by comparative analyses with EU member states to identify best practices and offer improvement suggestions, none of the proposed institutional arrangements functioned efficiently. The main cause of these periodic changes was the fact that, after Romania's accession to the EU, at the internal political and administrative level it was not clarified whether European affairs were a matter of "internal affairs" or "external affairs". To improve the efficiency of the internal decision-making process and clarify this institutional dilemma, it was necessary to consider that, in the context of increasing complexity of EU decision-making processes and the strengthening of internal expertise at the central and regional authority levels involved, in several member states European affairs evolved into a standalone system, distanced from traditional foreign affairs. This led to difficulties in maintaining the association of European affairs with foreign affairs, especially after the historical moments of accession. Also, the inefficiencies of the Romanian system for coordinating European affairs were caused by institutional instability, the lack of an integrated legislative framework, the shortage of specialized personnel, the ineffective collaboration between the Government, Parliament, and Presidency, and, not least, by the lack of a post-accession strategy. It was only in January 2013 that the internal system for coordinating European affairs was stabilized through the abandonment of the parallel arrangement established since 2001, when the Ministry of Foreign Affairs took over the coordination of European affairs. Even if the current coordination arrangement does not ensure a high level of performance, it offers an adequate level of effectiveness in formulating and negotiating national positions in the EU decision-making process.

Another important dimension of the internal institutional system in the negotiation and pre-accession process was ensuring good cooperation between the Government and the Parliament. Given that the accession negotiations were intergovernmental, where the government played a fundamental role in drafting and negotiating position documents with the Council, the Parliament's role was to ensure the adoption of harmonized legislation at a very accelerated pace. The relationship between these two powers regarding the coordination of the accession process was not regulated by any legislative act or agreement but was based on the common goal of EU accession (Bărbulescu et al., 2013). Therefore, from the pre-accession period until the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty, the strengthening of the role of the executive in coordinating

European affairs should be understood in the context of the specific requirements and dynamics of accession negotiations. However, after the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty, the role of national parliaments increased considerably. Therefore, even in the case of candidate countries undergoing negotiations, the division of responsibilities between the two branches of power must be regulated in a way that facilitates and accelerates the process of ensuring alignment with EU legislation and sectoral and horizontal approaches. In the case of Romania, the framework for cooperation between the Government and the Parliament was conceived and adopted long after accession to the EU, following instances of tension and inter-institutional conflict. For example, the legislative framework on cooperation between the Parliament and the Government in the field of European affairs entered into force only in December 2013 (Law no. 373, 2013). The regulation establishes the cooperation arrangement between the Parliament of Romania or one of its Chambers and the Government of Romania in the field of Romania's participation in the EU decision-making process, as well as in monitoring the harmonization of national legislation with European legislation. This regulation also established a regime of parliamentary control over Romania's representation in the European Council.

The Republic of Moldova can learn a great deal from Romania's experience regarding the coordination of European affairs. The main lesson is related to the importance of establishing the appropriate governance framework that aims, including in the post-accession period, to establish the competencies of the institutions involved in the European integration process. It is also important that, through the involvement of the specialized epistemic community, an internal public debate takes place regarding the national conception of European affairs, so as to achieve consensus on when these are considered to be "external" or "internal" affairs. This will facilitate the establishment of clear competencies and will help avoid confusion on the responsibilities of the institutions involved, establishing mechanisms for efficient cooperation between the Government, the Parliament, and the President of the Republic of Moldova. Romania's experience proves that institutional stability in coordinating European affairs is important, especially during coalition governments or periods of cohabitation. Frequent changes in the institutional structure may negatively affect the efficiency of the negotiation process and the preparation for effective accession. Therefore, the Republic of Moldova should aim to make sure that the current arrangement of coordination structures remains stable for as long as possible, in order to ensure continuity and coherence in the management of European affairs in a longitudinal manner. A prescriptive accession strategy would ensure the long-term stability of this internal arrangement. At the same time, given Romania's experience with the cooperation between the Government and Parliament in the field of European affairs, the Republic of Moldova should develop and implement

an integrated legislative framework to regulate the coordination of European affairs, providing a solid foundation for institutional activity and inter-institutional collaboration, especially between the Government, Parliament, and the Presidency. It is important to periodically conduct independent process evaluations to identify shortcomings in institutional arrangements and to propose solutions that enhance effectiveness and improve performance.

The provisional closure of the chapters did not mean the cessation of activities related to adjusting the legislation and internal institutions. On the contrary, until the negotiation phase was completed, a continuous function of monitoring and determining alignment with EU legislation and sectoral and horizontal approaches had to be ensured. In this regard, the Ministry of European Integration played a decisive role, as it had the mandatory authority to review draft legislative and normative acts that impacted the pre-accession process. Thus, it was possible to ensure that after the closure of the negotiation chapters, the consistency of the internal legislation and the internal institutional framework resulting from the negotiations with the Community *acquis* was maintained. At the same time, from an analytical perspective, this function was also fulfilled by the European Institute of Romania (IER) through pre-accession impact studies (PAIS), which were carried out with financial support from the pre-accession instrument accessible to Romania. For example, in 2004, within the framework of a thematic study, a methodology was developed to assess the degree of alignment of Romanian legislation with the EU *acquis*, and all chapters that were provisionally closed or under negotiation at that time were analyzed in detail (see Fuerea et al., 2004). After accession, based on strategy and policy studies, the IER continued its efforts to independently analyze the alignment of domestic legislation with the EU *acquis* on various topics considered relevant for the reference periods. This approach represents a quality practice in supporting internal decision-making in the field of European affairs based on independently collected and analyzed empirical evidence. This practice is, of course, also accompanied by the valuable contribution produced by epistemic communities from academia and research, or specialized civil society.

With the start of accession negotiations, in addition to ensuring the conformity of domestic legislation with the *acquis communautaire* and the implementation of institutional reforms committed to during negotiations, Romania had to improve and decentralize its public funds management system. The progress made in this regard led to the gradual increase in additional pre-accession financial assistance. Thus, according to the *more-for-more* principle and because it proved both absorption capacity and justified needs, in 2002, the European Commission proposed increasing financial assistance to Romania by 40% until 2006. One of the conditions established at that time was the development of administrative and institutional capacities

to implement, by 2004, the Extended Decentralisation Implementation System (EDIS) for managing the European funds granted to Romania through PHARE and ISPA. In other words, the implementation of EDIS represented at that time the preliminary stage for establishing the national system of management and control of European funds specific to cohesion policy. The following areas have benefited from substantial allocations from pre-accession funds as a priority: agriculture and rural development; transport infrastructure and the environment; economic and social cohesion; and investments in the development of institutional capacity for the effective implementation of the *acquis*. Additionally, at the end of the negotiations, Romania secured an allocation from the cohesion policy amounting to approximately 500 euros/capita, in 2004 prices, for the immediate post-accession period (2007-2009) (European Commission, 2004). This amount was slightly higher than what Poland, the other large Eastern European country, obtained during its negotiation process.

The strategic decision at that time was to institutionalize the national system for the management and control of European funds within the Ministry of Finance through the creation of the Managing Authority for the Community Support Framework (AMCSC). This structure had responsibilities and duties in the programming and management of pre-accession financial assistance, as well as in the preparation and programming of structural and cohesion funds for the post-accession period (multiannual financial framework 2007-2013).

As a general directorate within the Ministry of Finance, this structure was largely detached from the flow of policies specific to European affairs. On one hand, this separation provided greater autonomy in managing pre-accession and, subsequently, post-accession funds. However, on the other hand, it generated a disadvantage in the direct alignment with the institutional changes and innovations resulting from the application of the *acquis* or institutional reforms. Being less connected to the flow of national policies, the AMCSC faced the challenge of transposing EU rules for managing European funds into a partially decentralized national framework, where specialized ministries had not yet fully institutionalized the rules for managing European funds and lacked sufficient and well-prepared administrative capacities to ensure their proper management. Thus, in the absence of enhanced coordinating and enforcement power of this authority over ministries, local authorities, and regional structures, the absorption rate of European funds was quite low during the first years after accession. Therefore, it was necessary for this structure to be reorganized several times. Such a transformation took place immediately after accession, when AMCSC was reorganized into the Authority for the Coordination of Structural Instruments (ACIS), maintaining its status as a general directorate. In 2011, the structure was reorganized twice. First, it was moved within the Government's working apparatus and placed under the direct authority of the Prime Minister as a department without

legal personality. Then, in September 2011, with the creation of the Ministry of European Affairs, ACIS was transferred to this ministry. Through this successive reorganization, it was only in 2011 that a connection with the specific European affairs process could be ensured, and a higher degree of authority could be granted in linking European funds to the flow of internal public policies. Currently, this structure forms the “crucible” of the Ministry of Investments and European Projects and is responsible for programming and coordinating European funds related to cohesion policy. In 2021, within this structure, Romania’s Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP) was also designed and negotiated. It can thus be stated that only since 2011 has the internal system for managing European funds become stable and has achieved a high degree of authority concerning the sectoral and synthesis ministries, as well as regional structures. Consequently, the degree of absorption of European funds has progressively improved, and a decentralization of the process of implementing programs to the development regions has gradually been ensured.

From this brief presentation, a relevant lesson for the Republic of Moldova can be highlighted. **The management and control system is difficult to build and is a parallel process to the negotiation process.** A facilitating factor is the institutionalization of public financing based on multiannual programs and deriving from government public policies. It is worth noting that this process has already been underway for over a decade in the central public administration of the Republic of Moldova. However, from the early stages of establishing the management and control system for pre-accession funds, the coordinating structure/authority for these instruments must be fully integrated with the coordination of the flow specific to European affairs. This integration is essential also because, meanwhile, the cohesion policy has introduced a series of conditionalities linking the programming of funds to the implementation processes of EU policies and approaches at the national, regional, and local levels (such as the 20 enabling conditions specific to the 2021–2027 multiannual financial framework). As currently shown by the preliminary guidelines specific to the future post-2027 cohesion policy (from which the Republic of Moldova will receive a margin of five years out of the seven if it joins on January 1, 2030 - according to the first working scenario of this study), this approach will be further strengthened and associated with the reforms deriving from the European Semester.

Regarding the way of ensuring the necessary human resources for carrying out the pre-accession processes, Romania focused on infusing the competencies available at that time, including through the creation of new categories of positions within the public administration. For example, at the beginning of 2003, a body of European integration advisers was created under the coordination of the Ministry of European Integration (Emergency Ordinance 19/2003). This body brought together specialists in European affairs who had completed initial training programmes in the fields

covered by the EU accession preparation process, specific to various sectors and areas corresponding to EU policies. They were recruited through a competitive process by the Ministry of European Integration, with support from the General Secretariat of the Government, and subsequently employed in the relevant ministries as contractual staff. In 2006, the title of these specialists was changed to European Affairs Advisers.

A particular aspect regarding financial motivation was that salaries were set in parity with those of diplomatic advisers, with increases of up to 50% depending on experience, education, or other performance and merit criteria. Another distinctive feature of this body of advisers was that they carried out their activities within structures directly coordinated by the ministers. In addition to the European affairs advisers, a professional body of public managers was established in 2004 to generate and support change in public administration in the context of EU accession and subsequently in deepening EU integration. They were assigned to specific public positions and worked under the direct subordination of a senior civil servant. Similarly, the level of remuneration was different from other categories of civil servants. By progressively creating specialized structures within central and local public authorities, European affairs specialists contributed to the Europeanization of public administration. At the same time, to improve skills and increase administrative efficiency and performance, their rotation and mobility were encouraged.

Based on Romania's experience, an important lesson that the Republic of Moldova can draw is that, in the accession process, it must invest in the continuous training of specialized personnel and facilitate their mobility in order to build a team of experts capable of efficiently managing European affairs. In this regard, it is important that, from this stage, units dedicated to European integration are also created at the level of specific local public administration structures. These units should have longitudinal attributions, explicitly targeting the post-accession period and ensuring the continuity and coherence of European integration policies at the subsidiary level. It is also advisable to encourage the rotation and periodic mobility of specialists for European affairs. Along the same lines, to attract and retain high-quality human resources in the field, salary incentives must be performance-based and competitive with the salaries offered in the relevant consulting sector in the region.

As we can observe, Romania's experience in accession negotiations and the preparations for actual EU membership is relevant for the Republic of Moldova in its negotiation process, which will be unique in its way. Of course, the transfer of best practices or learning from unsuccessful experiences must take into account the context, as well as the method of adaptation to the reference framework. Given

the high degree of institutional convergence between Romania and the Republic of Moldova, we consider that this transfer can be carried out relatively easily.

FUTURE SCENARIOS ON THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA'S EU INTEGRATION PROCESS AND ROMANIA'S VIEW REGARDING THEM

The future of any foreign policy initiative is highly dynamic, involving a series of continuities, discontinuities, unforeseen events (such as the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the Russian Federation's aggression against Ukraine), and a high degree of uncertainty. To explore such a topic, we consider that the scenario construction method is very useful in foreign policy forecasting, being mainly used in the military field, as it allows the articulation of possible future developments based on the identification of patterns, the estimation of uncertainties and probabilities, as well as the introduction of unexpected elements. The scenario method thus makes the unpredictable at least partially predictable, at an imaginative level. We aim to use a scientific analytical model accepted within the community of foreign and security policy analysts (Fukuyama, 2007). This refers to the process of scenario building (Lempert, 2007, p. 112), which involves:

- identifying the most important aspects of the issue under analysis;
- identifying the main factors that can influence the analysed problem (differentiated based on the degree of uncertainty, from very likely (close to status quo) to very unlikely ('black swan' scenario), and the type of impact (very positive, neutral, very negative);
- creating alternative scenarios.

It should be noted that in constructing the scenarios, we start from analyzing the geopolitical interests expressed by the Republic of Moldova, Ukraine, the EU, the Russian Federation, NATO/USA, and Romania.

The scenarios will focus on topics such as the accession of the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine to the EU and/or NATO, the postponement of accession, the freezing of negotiations, their abandonment, as well as the possible escalation of tensions with the Russian Federation and the emergence of new security threats in the area. They will also take into account the possible costs to the EU depending on each scenario, as well as the impact of these scenarios on Romania.

The scenario method will help us build a bridge between the certainties of the present (through a retrospective analysis of the results achieved by the Republic of Moldova in terms of European integration since the launch of the Eastern Partnership) and the uncertainties of the future. The model developed by Lempert (2007) is intended, in the first phase, to rank the most significant factors based on their level

of uncertainty and their impact on trends relevant to the phenomenon under study. In the second phase, it generates a series of distinct scenarios that explore various possible manifestations of these key factors, of differing intensities and with either positive or negative impacts. The purpose of using this type of analysis methodology is to identify the crucial factors that influence the EU's relationship with the Republic of Moldova and to assess their impact on Romania's interests in its relationship with the states in the region. Separating the known elements (certainties) from the unknown ones (uncertainties) has the role of clarifying the possible impact of the factors on the phenomenon. The method thus helps to avoid ignoring certain possibilities and assumptions that are not usually taken into account by decision-makers, being a tool for anticipation and reduction of improbability.

The main purpose of the analysis is to substantiate Romania's potential contribution to shaping regional security and supporting the integration of the Republic of Moldova into European structures, thereby ensuring the security of the EU and NATO's eastern border. Imagining alternative scenarios, based on a structured analytical process, allows decision-makers to think about and, thus, adapt to something completely different from the known present. Therefore, the purpose of the analysis is a concrete one, being directly addressed to political decision-makers in the field of Romanian foreign policy, consisting of a set of positioning recommendations, regarding future developments in the national, regional and global context of the next 5-10-20 years, with an emphasis on risks and opportunities, complemented by a broad overall analysis of developments in the strategic neighborhood over the last decade. Before outlining the scenarios, we aim to present the relevant factors that should be taken into consideration for these developments.

Factors in Scenario Development

Here are, briefly, the key factors we have aimed to consider in constructing the scenarios.

We started from the principle of strategic interdependence and from the existence of five current nodal points, on which we built the possible developments within the scenarios:

- The EU - Moldova relationship: how the accession negotiations between the two are progressing. In this case, the internal factor will also be taken into account, i.e., the possibility that the EU will go through an institutional reform process that would change the voting method from unanimity to qualified majority. The European leadership will also be taken into account, in the sense of Euro-optimism or Euroscepticism/populism/ultranationalism.
- EU - Russian Federation relationship: whether sanctions are maintained, tightened, or whether attempts are made to resume talks to normalize relations

- between the two and the impact of this on the security and future of the Republic of Moldova.
- The EU-US/NATO-Russian Federation relationship: how rapprochement with NATO can affect EU accession negotiations and the relationship with the Russian Federation.
 - The aggression of the Russian Federation against Ukraine and how this event may affect the Republic of Moldova's EU accession, whether through decoupling from Ukraine or not, and how the outcome of Russia's aggression against Ukraine, whether victory or defeat, will impact regional security and, consequently, the geopolitical future of the Republic of Moldova
 - The influence of internal dynamics in the Republic of Moldova, such as social fragmentation and economic development, on the political choices of decision-makers in Chisinau.

Thus, we have developed five future scenarios. Methodologically, the first scenario represents the most positive outcome for the Republic of Moldova, the last one the most negative, while the third scenario reflects the maintenance of the status quo. The second and fourth scenarios represent minor positive and negative variations, generated by certain changes driven by the factors outlined above.

Scenario 1: Best case scenario: the Republic of Moldova in the EU by 2030

The Republic of Moldova will become an EU member state by 2030, as assumed by the authorities in Chisinau. Ukraine will be decoupled from the Republic of Moldova in the accession process, so the Russian Federation's aggression against Ukraine will not slow down Chisinau's accession process. The European Union is completing the institutional reform process, eliminating the unanimity barrier for other states to join the EU. This aspect accelerates the accession process of the Western Balkans, with the Republic of Moldova immediately following. At the same time, the Russian Federation's aggression against Ukraine continues, triggering even stronger support from the EU and the US for the integration of Eastern states into Western international structures. Thus, increasingly more pressure is put on Moscow, which might close a deal with Kyiv, in the medium/long term. Following this decision, Ukraine will *de facto* undergo a territorial reorganization process, so that Crimea will remain Russian territory and other regions such as Donetsk, Kherson, Luhansk, and Zaporizhzhia will remain under predominantly *de facto* Russian control, but will be Ukrainian *de jure*.

Against this background, NATO becomes a valid option for the Republic of Moldova, which will support the referendum to change the Constitution regarding the neutrality of the state. The rapprochement with NATO will generate an acceleration of the integration of this state into European structures.

The Russian Federation is feeling the effects of sanctions imposed at the international level, which is affecting the Russian economy, given the resources it

uses to support its aggression against Ukraine, ultimately causing a withdrawal of actions on other levels/regions. At the internal social level, Putin has increasingly less popular support. Thus, the Republic of Moldova is no longer a priority of Moscow's foreign policy, leading to the latter's diminished support for the Transnistrian region or/and the Autonomous Territorial Unit of Gagauzia. This causes the Transnistrian region to move towards a normalization of relations with the authorities in Chisinau, which generates a special status (undefined legally) that does not prevent the accession of the Republic of Moldova to the EU (see the Northern Ireland model; the Cypriot one, etc.). Moreover, the Transnistrian region joins the EU sectorally. For example, it can join economically, given that in the first half of 2024, exports of companies from the Transnistrian region to the EU increased by 10 percentage points from 70 to 80% (IntelliNews, 2024). Romania continues to be the main supporter of the EU integration of the Republic of Moldova. Likewise, the authorities in Bucharest continue the series of projects aimed at reducing the energy dependence of the Republic of Moldova on the Russian Federation (gas, electricity, etc.). Domestically, the Republic of Moldova continues the necessary reforms for EU accession, led by either a pro-European government or a coalition sharing the same objective, which fosters social stability. Economically, the Republic of Moldova achieves a high absorption rate of pre-accession funds, which accelerates the implementation of reforms and makes accession by 2030 possible.

Influencing factors:

- The EU will maintain an increased interest in the Republic of Moldova and will support this state in implementing all the necessary reforms in order to adopt the *acquis communautaire*. Moreover, the decisions of the Brussels-based authorities will not be influenced by the relationship with the Russian Federation and/or the aggression of the Russian Federation against Ukraine, in the sense that European decision-makers will opt for decoupling the Republic of Moldova from Ukraine in the accession process. At the same time, internally, the EU will undergo a process of institutional reform, which will amend the treaties that currently require unanimity for a state's accession to the EU. Thus, the voting system will be changed to favor qualified majority. Given this change, the Western Balkans' accession process will be accelerated, making it possible for Moldova to become an EU member state by 2030. Moreover, populists/ultra-nationalists will become increasingly less relevant on the political stage. In regard to relations with the Russian Federation, the EU will maintain a unitary position, so that it will continue to impose sanctions against the Russian Federation. In the energy sector, the EU will continue the process of breaking the Russian monopoly, diversify its sources of traditional energy supply, and increase the use of renewable/green energy.

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- **The Russian Federation** will focus on continuing its aggression against Ukraine. This will generate a concentration of resources on this foreign policy objective, leading to the withdrawal of the Russian Federation from other regions of interest, including the Republic of Moldova. Thus, the Russian Federation will diminish its support for the Transnistrian region and will put a halt to its economic pressures targeting Chisinau. This will be possible in a context where the Western-imposed sanctions will have increasingly more negative effects, socially leading to less and less popular support for Putin, which, in the medium/long term, will lead the Russian Federation to accept an agreement with Ukraine, which will be favorable to Ukraine. At the international level, the Russian Federation will lose its negotiating power.
 - **Ukraine** will be decoupled in the EU accession process from the Republic of Moldova, given the Russian Federation's aggression against it. Against the backdrop of Western financial and military support, Ukraine will continue to put pressure on the Russian Federation, which, under the sanctions' effect, will accept an agreement. Thus, Ukraine will accept the loss of Crimea both *de facto* and *de jure*. Additionally, regions such as Donetsk, Kherson, Luhansk, and Zaporizhzhya will remain predominantly under Russian control *de facto* but will continue to be recognized as Ukrainian *de jure*. Russian military forces will withdraw from Ukraine. Consequently, Ukraine will be able to focus in the medium and long term on rebuilding its internal security and stability, as well as on its EU accession.
 - **The USA/NATO** will continue to support Ukraine both financially and militarily in the context of the Russian Federation's aggression against Ukraine. Moreover, it will continue to impose sanctions on the Russian Federation. With the decoupling of Ukraine from the Republic of Moldova, the US will support Moldova's accession to NATO, which will be possible with the change of the Constitution. The rapprochement with NATO will further accelerate Moldova's accession to the EU.
 - **Romania** will continue to support the integration of the Republic of Moldova into European structures, being the most vocal state in this regard. Moreover, Romania will support the decoupling of the Republic of Moldova from Ukraine in the integration process, given the Russian Federation's aggression against Ukraine and how this will delay Ukraine's reform process. Last but not least, it will adopt concrete measures to support reforms in the Republic of Moldova and reduce this state's energy dependence on Moscow. Given its geographical position and strategic interests, Romania will have to support first and foremost the integration of the Western Balkans into European structures before that of Moldova, which will generate a division of resources. These dynamics will

- increase Romania's role as a regional security provider and will increase its negotiating power in Western structures (EU and NATO).
- **Domestically**, the Moldovan authorities will implement all necessary measures to meet the Copenhagen criteria and will adopt all decisions that contribute to the implementation of the Community *acquis*. The bilateral relationship with the Russian Federation will not be seen as a strategic option. The Republic of Moldova will use the Russian Federation's aggression against Ukraine and the Russian Federation's involvement there as an opportunity to attempt a normalization of relations with the Transnistrian region. Thus, the authorities in Chisinau will decide together with those in Brussels the conditions of accession: together with the Transnistrian region under the conditions in which relations are normalized and Russian control decreases considerably or, rather, accession without the Transnistrian region, which will become a region of legally undefined special status, which will benefit from partial economic integration, following the model of Northern Ireland and/or Cyprus. At the political level, decoupling from Ukraine will be seen as an opportunity by Moldovan leaders, who will maintain a pro-European strategy, through a pro-European government (including a coalition government). This will be possible, given that at the social level, pre-accession funds and external support will create tangible benefits for the population, which will develop massive support from it for EU accession and will generate economic growth and social benefits.

Scenario 2: Republic of Moldova-Ukraine together

Given the precedent factor, the EU maintains the decision that the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine will start and finish the accession process together. This will generate delays for the Republic of Moldova, given the aggression of the Russian Federation against Ukraine. This will come from the decision-makers in Brussels after the European Union completes the institutional reform process, through which it removes the unanimity barrier for the accession of other states to the EU. This aspect accelerates the accession process of the Western Balkans, followed by the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine.

At the regional level, Ukraine is heading towards a frozen conflict with the Russian Federation, allowing the reconstruction process to begin in regions under its full control. As a result of this decision, Ukraine will de facto go through a process of territorial reorganization, so that Crimea and other regions such as Donetsk, Kherson, Luhansk, and Zaporizhzhya will remain unstable areas with high Russian control. Against this backdrop, NATO accession will not be an option neither for the Republic of Moldova nor for Ukraine. Given the instability created by frozen conflicts in Ukraine, the accession process will be delayed for both states, and a

difficult negotiation process to establish the status of the above-mentioned regions will follow. The same process is implemented in the case of the Transnistrian region in the Republic of Moldova, which, following negotiations with leaders in Brussels, will become a special status region (legally undefined) that does not prevent the EU accession of the Republic of Moldova (see the Northern Ireland model; the Cypriot one, etc.). Moreover, the Transnistrian region will sectorally join the EU in the medium and long term (for example, economically). Romania continues to be the main supporter of the Republic of Moldova's integration into European structures. Likewise, the authorities in Bucharest continue the series of projects aimed at reducing the energy dependence of the Republic of Moldova on the Russian Federation (gas, electricity, etc.).

Domestically, the Republic of Moldova continues the necessary reforms for EU accession, by means of a pro-European or coalition government, which has the same objective: generating social stability. The EU will resume the dialogue with the Russian Federation, easing sanctions as Moscow retreats troops. The same is true for the US to the extent that the new president will be in favor of regional stability and a strategic partnership with the EU. Moscow will continue to exert influence on the region through its available economic and political leverage, but it will not generate another aggression, considering the costs of that in Ukraine.

Influencing factors:

- **The EU** will maintain an increased interest towards the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine and will support these states in implementing all the necessary reforms in order to adopt the *acquis communautaire*. Nevertheless, the Republic of Moldova will not be decoupled from Ukraine in the negotiation process, leading to delays in the Republic of Moldova's accession process, considering the reconstruction process that Ukraine has to undergo and the investments necessary for implementing reforms. Internally, the EU will undergo a process of institutional reform, which will amend the treaties that currently require unanimity for a state's accession to the EU. Thus, the voting system will be changed to favor QMV. Given this change, the Western Balkans' accession process will be accelerated, while the accession of the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine will take place in the medium term, thus not putting too much pressure on European structures. Moreover, populists/ultra-nationalists will become increasingly less relevant on the political stage. Given that Ukraine is heading towards a frozen conflict, the EU will reduce its sanctions against the Russian Federation and will try to resume dialogue in order to maintain a certain level of regional stability.
- **The Russian Federation** will apply the frozen conflict strategy in Ukraine, given the EU and the US financial and military support for Ukraine, making

victory for the Russian Federation very difficult. This will also be possible due to the effects of Western sanctions on the Russian economy. The Russian Federation will enter a kind of fatigue, leading to it being unable to compete with Western resources and technology, yet also unable to declare itself defeated. Thus, it will apply the classical frozen conflict strategy, allowing it to maintain *de facto* control over some regions in Ukraine so without allowing it to join NATO. Domestically, Russian decision-makers will be able to declare the achievement of foreign policy objectives and will be able to focus on other areas/domains of interest, such as the internal economic one, given that they will reduce the resources invested in Ukraine. This will maintain a high level of popular support for Putin. In regard to regional security in Eastern Europe, the Russian Federation will continue to exert moderate economic and political influence, especially by means of the energy factor and of the existing frozen conflicts.

- **The USA/NATO** will continue to support Ukraine both financially and militarily in the context of the Russian Federation's aggression. This aid will diminish as the Russian Federation's aggression against Ukraine turns into a frozen conflict. Moreover, it will resume dialogue with the Russian Federation to maintain a certain level of regional stability. Neither the Republic of Moldova nor Ukraine will be seen as possible NATO member states in the short and medium term, given the frozen conflicts on their territory. As for the U.S. position in the region, it will depend on the new president, but the maintenance of the strategic partnership with European NATO allies will remain a constant.
- **Ukraine** will continue to resist the aggression of the Russian Federation, which will generate delays in implementing the reforms necessary for integration into European structures. In the medium term, the conflict will turn into a frozen one, allowing the authorities in Kyiv to partially redirect resources towards implementing the necessary reforms for alignment with the Community *acquis*. Moreover, Ukraine will negotiate the status of regions such as Donetsk, Kherson, Luhansk, and Zaporizhzhya, as well as Crimea, which will remain undefined special status regions – something that will not prevent accession to the EU, given the precedents: the case of Northern Ireland and/or the Cypriot one.
- **Romania** will continue to support the integration of the Republic of Moldova into the European structures by being the most vocal state in this regard. Moreover, it will adopt concrete measures in support of the reforms in the Republic of Moldova and aim to reduce this state's economic/energy dependence on Moscow. Given its geographical position and strategic interests,

Romania will have to support first the integration of the Western Balkans into European structures before that of the Republic of Moldova, leading to a division of resources. These dynamics will increase Romania's role as a regional security donor state, and its negotiating power within Western structures will increase.

- **Domestically**, the Moldovan authorities will implement all necessary measures to meet the Copenhagen criteria and will adopt all the indispensable reforms to implement the *acquis communautaire*. The bilateral relationship with the Russian Federation will not be seen as a strategic option, so a pro-European government composed of elected officials with a pro-EU doctrine or a coalition government aiming at the same goal will be maintained. Economically, the Republic of Moldova, along with its European partners led by Romania, will adopt all the necessary measures to reduce this state's dependence on Moscow in terms of energy (for example, gas and/or electricity). At the social level, the pre-accession funds and external support will create tangible benefits for the population, strengthening the popular support for EU accession.

Scenario 3: Maintaining the Status Quo

The Republic of Moldova and Ukraine will jointly begin accession negotiations, which will continue in the medium term, without a clear time perspective for accession. Given that European leaders will not decouple the Republic of Moldova from Ukraine, the accession of the Moldovan state will be delayed and will be dependent upon events in Ukraine. This decision will be made by officials in Brussels after the European Union fails to complete the institutional reform process, aimed at eliminating the unanimity barrier in the case of the accession of other states to the EU. This has the potential to delay the accession process of the Western Balkans, and implicitly that of the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine.

At the regional level, the Russia Federation's aggression against Ukraine is becoming a war of attrition, so that regional instability drags on, leading to a feeling of fatigue, both on the EU's part in regards to accession of the two states but also on the part of the Republic of Moldova, entering a kind of fatigue due to the accession process being delayed indefinitely. This has repercussions on the popular support levels for EU integration, which will enter a downward trend, generating political fragmentation on the East-West axis that leaders in Chisinau will adopt externally.

Given the Russian Federation's aggression against Ukraine, NATO is not a valid option for Ukraine or for the Republic of Moldova, which hesitates to begin the steps for Constitutional change aimed at eliminating the neutrality status, having in mind the Russian threat.

Influencing Factors:

- **The EU** will maintain its interest in the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine and will support these states in implementing all the necessary reforms in order to adopt the *acquis communautaire*. However, the Republic of Moldova will not be decoupled from Ukraine in the accession process, leading, for both states, to a medium and long-term accession delay or a postponement of accession until the stabilization of Ukraine. The EU will continue its financial and military aid to Ukraine, leading to dissatisfaction among European citizens, given that this will lead to higher prices or only partial implementation of important social policies. This, in turn, will make room for Eurosceptic or populist/ultranationalist leaders, who will have an attractive discourse for at least a part of the European population. Thus, internal political fragmentation will occur in the EU, making institutional reform impossible. The EU, despite maintaining sanctions, will also try to normalize the relationship with the Russian Federation, so as to achieve a kind of regional stability. Last but not least, the process of breaking the Russian monopoly on energy in the EU by using alternative resources or by identifying new sources of supply/developing the legislative framework will continue.
- **The Russian Federation** will continue its aggression against Ukraine, but will become involved in influencing regional security, thus using its economic and political leverage to influence the Republic of Moldova, as well as the relationship with authorities in the Transnistrian region, to block Moldova's European path. The Russian Federation's aggression against Ukraine will use the majority of resources available, but the authorities in Moscow will use fake news and disinformation campaigns to influence the population in the Republic of Moldova. Moreover, the Russian Federation will use the delay in the accession process of the two states in its favour, using means of social fragmentation through discourse. However, at the international level, the Russian Federation will experience a decrease in its negotiating power, taking into account the duration of its aggression against Ukraine.
- **The USA/NATO** will continue to financially and militarily support Ukraine as a result of the aggression of the Russian Federation. It will also resume dialogue with the Russian Federation to maintain a certain level of regional stability. As for the U.S. position in the region, it will depend on the new president, but the maintenance of the strategic partnership with European NATO allies will remain a constant.
- **Ukraine** will continue to resist the aggression of the Russian Federation, leading to delays in the implementation of the reforms necessary for integration into European structures. This will maintain a low level of security in the entire

region. Also, given that Ukraine is negotiating accession together with the Republic of Moldova, its delay will generate consequences for Chisinau in the medium- and long-term, affecting citizens' preferences regarding positioning on the East-West axis.

- **Romania** will continue to support the integration of the Republic of Moldova into European structures, being the most vocal state in this regard. It will also adopt concrete measures to support reforms in the Republic of Moldova; however, given that decoupling from Ukraine is not happening, negotiations are likely to continue over the medium to long term. Given its geographical position and strategic interests, Romania will have to support first the integration of the Western Balkans into European structures before that of the Republic of Moldova, leading to a division of resources. These dynamics will increase Romania's role as a regional security donor state, and its negotiating power within Western structures (EU and NATO) will increase. However, this opportunity will diminish as the accession process is delayed without a clear deadline.
- **Domestically**, Moldovan authorities will implement all necessary measures to meet the Copenhagen criteria and will adopt all the indispensable reforms to implement the *acquis communautaire*. However, given that the accession process does not progress palpably, the Republic of Moldova will enter a fatigue state, generating a feeling of antipathy from the population towards European structures (see the case of Türkiye). This will be fueled by disinformation and fake news campaigns led by the Russian Federation, creating social divisions with political repercussions. Thus, a coalition government to continue implementing a strategy that prioritizes EU accession will be difficult to form. Rather, this will become a long-term objective, while the public discussion agenda will be replaced by immediate needs. The Transnistrian region will continue to maintain a close relationship with Moscow, impacting the security of the entire state as well as negotiations with the EU.

Scenario 4: The Republic of Moldova-buffer zone between East and West

As part of the negotiations between the EU and the Russian Federation, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine will be included in a buffer zone between the two, no longer having real prospects for medium- and short-term integration into the EU and/or NATO. This will happen against the background of fatigue from the West over support for Ukraine in the face of the Russian Federation's aggression. This agreement will also be beneficial for the Russian Federation, as it will withdraw most of its troops from Ukraine and will be able to focus on other foreign and/or domestic policy objectives, given the negative effect of sanctions on the Russian economy.

At the regional level, this agreement will generate some stability, where the losing parties – namely, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine - will continue to be caught in between the two great powers. Although officially, the EU will not give up on negotiations with the two states for EU accession, they will be de facto frozen in the medium and short term. The Republic of Moldova and Ukraine will continue to be candidate states, but their interest in European integration will also decrease, leading to the re-emergence of the fragmentation between East and West at the social level.

Influencing Factors:

- **The EU** will officially maintain its position towards the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine, which will remain candidate states, but, as a result of the agreement with the Russian Federation, negotiations will be frozen in the medium and short term. The EU will not be able to complete the institutional reform process, so the voting system will remain unchanged, with unanimity being required for a new state to become an EU member. Given the costs already incurred, the EU will gradually reduce the aid provided to Ukraine, and the integration of the Western Balkan states will also be delayed. This decision will also come against the backdrop of growing public dissatisfaction with the financial aid provided to Kyiv, due to its impact on rising prices and, consequently, on the quality of life of European citizens. Thus, the EU will turn inward by developing social measures, and externally, it will try to rebuild the relationship with the Russian Federation to develop a certain degree of regional stability. Thus, under the conditions of keeping the two states in a gray zone, the possibility of accession to the EU and/or NATO in the short to medium term will become a negotiating point between Brussels and Moscow.
- **The Russian Federation** is on the verge of securing victory in the context of its aggression against Ukraine, yet the already used resources make continuing the aggression in Ukraine or other states, such as the Republic of Moldova, an inefficient option for Moscow. Thus, the Russian Federation will negotiate keeping the two states in a neutral/buffer zone with the EU. The sanctions imposed by the EU will be gradually lifted, allowing the Russian Federation to secure access to Western technology and to gain time for economic and social internal reconstruction. At the same time, this decision will allow it to redirect resources domestically, towards social and economic policies, so that Putin will secure popular support. The absence of a clear loser will allow the Russian Federation to declare itself the victor over the West in its internal discourse.
- **The USA/NATO** will diminish financial and military support for Ukraine in the context of the Russian Federation's aggression against it. It will also resume dialogue with the Russian Federation in order to maintain a level of regional stability. Neither the Republic of Moldova nor Ukraine will be seen

- as possible NATO member states, given the ongoing or frozen conflicts on their territory. As for the U.S. position in the region, it will depend on the new president, but the maintenance of the strategic partnership with European NATO allies will remain a constant.
- **Ukraine** will continue to resist the Russian Federation's aggression, yet the support from the EU and NATO/USA will increasingly diminish, making it impossible to win in the face of the aggression of the Russian Federation, so that the Ukrainian state, along with the Republic of Moldova, will be the bargaining chip in the agreement between the EU and the Russian Federation. These will be caught in a gray/buffer zone, with the negotiation process being *de facto* frozen in the short- and medium-term. At the internal political level, Ukraine will be fragmented between East and West. Given that separatist regions will continue to be under Moscow's control, NATO will not be a valid option.
 - **Romania** will align itself with the EU decisions to include the two states in a buffer zone, continuing to be an EU and NATO border state in the short- and medium-term, which will put pressure on the Romanian state to ensure the security of the border of the two organizations. Romania will miss the opportunity to be a regional leader and a security provider for the states of Eastern Europe.
 - **Domestically**, Moldovan authorities will implement measures to meet the Copenhagen criteria and will adopt necessary reforms to implement the *acquis communautaire*. However, given that the accession process will be frozen in the short- and medium-term, the Republic of Moldova will enter a fatigue state, generating a feeling of antipathy from the population towards European structures (see the case of Türkiye). This will generate a possible rapprochement with the Russian Federation and the return of pro-Russian political leaders to power. Like Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova will continue cooperation with the EU through the Association Agreement, but the lack of short- and medium-term accession prospects will bring the social fragmentation between East and West back to the fore. Economically/energy-wise, it will continue to be dependent on the Russian Federation. The Transnistrian region will continue its bilateral relationship with Moscow, further eroding the security of the Moldovan state and making negotiations with the EU more difficult. The reforms will not be fully implemented, and the Republic of Moldova will remain stuck between East and West.

Scenario 5: Worst case scenario: the Republic of Moldova – Indefinitely Non-EU

The EU decides to indefinitely freeze the negotiation process with the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine and stop the aid given to Ukraine. It also freezes the pre-accession funds for the two states. Thus, Kyiv and Chisinau return to being *de facto* partner states within the Eastern Partnership, no longer having any real chances of joining the EU. Ukraine is included in the Eurasian Economic Union, and the Republic of Moldova, with the installation of a pro-Russian government, begins negotiations with the Russian Federation to also join the Eurasian Economic Union. Thus, pressure is put on the EU and NATO to invest heavily in protecting their external borders, especially in the Eastern one, which negatively fuels the regional security dynamics by developing the security dilemma. The EU fails to implement the proposed institutional reform that would facilitate the voting system. NATO is no longer an option for the Republic of Moldova or/and Ukraine, even in the medium and long term. Romania is missing the opportunity to be a regional leader, a security donor for the states of Eastern Europe.

Influencing factors:

- **The EU** decides to indefinitely freeze the negotiation process with the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine and stop the aid for Ukraine. The Russian Federation secures a victory as a result of the aggression against Ukraine, while the EU directs its resources toward defending its borders. Internally, the EU will fail to complete the institutional reform process, so the voting system will remain unchanged, with unanimity being required for a new state to become an EU member. Given the costs already incurred, the EU will stop aid to Ukraine, and the integration of the Western Balkan states will also be delayed. This decision will also come against the backdrop of growing public dissatisfaction with the financial aid provided to Kyiv, which is reflected in rising prices that, therefore, affect the quality of life of European citizens. Thus, the EU will turn inward by developing social measures, and externally, it will try to rebuild the relationship with the Russian Federation in order to develop a certain degree of regional stability. Thus, it will freeze negotiations with Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova in exchange for non-intervention by the Russian Federation in the Republic of Moldova or Georgia. At the regional geopolitical level, the EU will return to the pre-2022 security dynamics, this time focusing on the domestic level. It will also start investing heavily in defense, with PESCO becoming increasingly developed. France will become the most vocal state in this regard.
- **The Russian Federation** secures victory as a result of its aggression against Ukraine and sends signals that it wants to advance towards the Republic of

- Moldova, but the aggression against Ukraine and the Western sanctions have greatly affected the Russian economy, so that, faced with an agreement with the EU, the Russian Federation accepts not to invade the Republic of Moldova in exchange for the indefinite freezing of negotiations between the EU and Ukraine/Republic of Moldova. Thus, the Russian Federation resumes its great power position at the international negotiating table.
- **The USA/NATO** will stop financial and military support for Ukraine following the aggression of the Russian Federation. It will also resume dialogue with the Russian Federation in order to maintain a certain level of regional stability. Neither the Republic of Moldova nor Ukraine will be seen as possible NATO member states, given the ongoing or frozen conflicts on their territory or the foreign control over their territories. As for the U.S. position in the region, it will depend on the new president, but a constant will remain the preservation of the strategic partnership with European NATO allies, who will focus on defending external borders. This, in turn, will generate a new security dilemma, fueling a renewed arms race.
 - **Ukraine** loses as a result of the Russian Federation's aggression and finds itself under total control of the authorities in Moscow, which, in turn, distances it from the EU and NATO. Otherwise, authorities in Kyiv develop a pro-Russian policy. Romanian minorities in Ukraine are discriminated against, leading to raised concerns from the Romanian state. Economically, Ukraine renounces the Association Agreement with the EU and joins the Eurasian Economic Union. Accession to NATO and the EU is no longer possible, even in the medium and long term.
 - **Romania** focuses on maintaining a high level of security at the internal level, directing all its resources in this sense, given that Ukraine lost as a result of the Russian Federation's aggression and that the Romanian state represents a part of the EU and NATO Eastern border. At the EU level, Romania tries to support the integration of the Republic of Moldova, but without success, returning to the existing pre-2022 cooperation. Romania will miss the opportunity to be a regional leader, a security provider for the states of Eastern Europe, but will be involved in the military development of the eastern flank of NATO/EU.
 - **Domestically**, the Republic of Moldova is on the verge of being invaded by the Russian Federation, with European perspectives no longer being an option. This will generate a possible rapprochement with the Russian Federation and the return of pro-Russian political leaders to power. Also, the Republic of Moldova will continue cooperation with the EU through the Association Agreement, but the lack of accession prospects will bring the social fragmentation between East and West back to the fore and will facilitate Moldova's exit from the

Association Agreement and the start of negotiations for joining the Eurasian Economic Union. Economically/energy-wise, it will continue to be dependent on the Russian Federation. The Transnistrian region will continue its bilateral relationship with Moscow, leading to further erosion of the security of the Moldovan state. The reforms will not be fully implemented, and the Republic of Moldova will move closer and closer to the Russian Federation.

DYNAMICS OF THE EUROPEAN INTEGRATION PROCESS OF THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA

6.1. Stakeholders' Perspectives

In order to identify the perceptions of decision-makers in the Republic of Moldova regarding the prospects of EU accession, semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with relevant representatives from among the senior civil servants and decision-makers within the central public authorities of the Republic of Moldova, who have direct responsibilities in the field of European integration, in the period October-November 2024. Thus, 15 interviews were conducted with representatives of the central public administration of the Republic of Moldova and one interview with representatives of the National Authority for the Interreg Europe Program within the Ministry of Development, Public Works and Administration of Romania. The interview questions concerned aspects such as: the prospects of the European integration process, work scenarios appropriate to the current context, strengths and weaknesses, opportunities and threats to the European integration process of the Republic of Moldova in the current context, the role and potential of Romania's contribution in this process, as well as the strategic communication approach.

A. Feasibility of the Republic of Moldova's Accession to the EU by 2030

The first two questions of the interview grid focused on identifying stakeholders' perceptions regarding the feasibility of the political objective of the Republic of Moldova's accession to the EU by 2030, including by stating and justifying the scenario considered appropriate for the current context. Thus, almost all interviewed decision-makers stated that the accession of the Republic of Moldova to the EU by 2030 is feasible, yet conditional on maintaining the accelerated pace of reforms, political stability, and continued EU support. As the interviews show, the current geopolitical context and external support, especially from some EU Member States and Romania, are considered essential factors favoring the achievement of this goal. At present, there are no EU member states that express objections toward the Republic of Moldova and, consequently, none that could block or create significant obstacles in the negotiation process. At the same time, in the context of the events in Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova is perceived by the EU and other international organizations as a strategic partner for stability and security in the region. This drives the rapid enlargement of the EU to the Republic of Moldova, provided that the accession requirements are fulfilled, in particular in terms of strengthening the rule of law, reducing corruption,

and the firm commitment to the European path. It is considered that the support of the EU and the international community for the implementation of reforms is focused on achieving this objective.

The interviewed stakeholders who consider that there are real chances for the Republic of Moldova to join the EU by 2030 stated that the feasibility of this process derives from the country's internal socio-economic development options. The responses received indicate that, regardless of the referendum results, the population's support for accession remains high, and the political commitment is firm. Some of the interviewed stakeholders emphasized that, in recent times, the pace of transposing European legislation has accelerated, and a set of economic and judicial reforms has been implemented. Trade with the EU also continues to grow. From a domestic perspective, some respondents also highlighted convergence with EU approaches in various areas, such as education, research, regional development, and culture, as well as energy interconnection, which benefits the achievement of this objective by 2030. For example, it is estimated that the integration of the Republic of Moldova into the EU internal energy market will be fully completed before 2030, through the coupling of centralized electricity markets, and that the accession process will not affect prices for end consumers.

Only one response indicated that the prospect of Moldova's accession to the EU by 2030 is quite uncertain. The main reasons cited include the complexity of the necessary reforms, resistance to change from some internal structures in the process of consolidating democratic institutions and implementing rigorous anti-corruption policies, as well as internal political and economic instability. Rapid accession of the Republic of Moldova to the EU is also unlikely due to the internal transformations currently underway in the EU.

More than half of the interviewed decision-makers opted for the first scenario in which the Republic of Moldova will join the EU by 2030. Those who supported this scenario justified their choice by citing the government's firm commitment to this objective. Thus, the process is supported by the majority of political parties, based on an internal consensus, as well as by civil society and the general population, something that constitutes a window of opportunity for advancing accession. The reforms already implemented in the areas of justice, reducing corruption, and respect for human rights demonstrate the state's capacity to align with EU norms and standards, contributing to the steady reduction of resistance to change. Another important argument is that the inclusion of this commitment in the Constitution of the Republic of Moldova will compel future governments to ensure the continuity of the process, thus accelerating negotiations and pre-accession. Some respondents also cited the influence of the geopolitical context, emphasizing that the evolution of relations between the EU and the Russian Federation, as well as the situation in Ukraine, may contribute to

accelerating the accession of the Republic of Moldova for strategic reasons. However, although this scenario is considered realistic, several responses highlighted the need for additional support from the EU in the form of resources and technical assistance to meet the accession criteria. In addition, several responses also highlighted the fact that the feasibility of this scenario depends on internal political stability, administrative capacity, the steady pace of reform implementation, and the evolution of regional security.

A quarter of the interviewed stakeholders were in favor of the second scenario, in which the Republic of Moldova would join the EU together with Ukraine, but not before 2030. The choice of this scenario is justified by the need for a longer period and additional resources to meet the accession requirements. In their opinion, the process should be gradual and focused on achieving concrete results in the implementation of structural reforms, infrastructure modernization, absorption of pre-accession funds, and development of partnerships. At the same time, in the current geopolitical context, a synchronized and prudent integration would ensure constant support from the Member States and EU institutions, thus reducing reluctance towards a rapid enlargement of the Union.

In contrast, only one of the interviewees considers that, in the current context, Scenario 3 is appropriate - namely, the scenario in which the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine will jointly begin accession negotiations, which will continue indefinitely, but without clear timeframes or deadlines. This positioning is justified by the complexity of the European integration process, which requires deep reforms and adjustments in various areas, as well as by the tense geopolitical context, which requires a cautious approach from the EU. A gradual enlargement would allow the Republic of Moldova to progressively adapt to European standards, while providing regional stability and reducing risks for the Union.

Likewise, only one person among those interviewed was in favor of scenario 5, in which the Republic of Moldova does not join the EU, and the Union decides to indefinitely freeze the negotiation process with the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine, *de facto* bringing the two countries back within the Eastern Partnership. The selection of this scenario is based on the EU's reluctance towards rapid enlargement, as well as the Union's internal challenges. Political instability in Moldova, corruption, economic problems, and the conflict in Ukraine heighten regional uncertainty, prompting the EU to adopt a cautious approach and keep the two states within the framework of the Eastern Partnership, without offering them a clear accession perspective.

B. The contribution of the interviewed stakeholders to the development of the SWOT analysis

In order to develop the SWOT analysis, the interview grid included four questions regarding the strengths and weaknesses, as well as the opportunities and threats

characteristic of the current context of negotiations and preparations for the accession of the Republic of Moldova to the EU. Thus, the interviewed decision-makers were asked to specify and rank the considerations according to their importance from the perspective of the technical negotiation process, the internal political context, administrative capacities, internal socio-economic developments, as well as the security context in the region.

Strengths

According to the analysis of interviews, the most important characteristic strength of the current context of negotiations and preparations for the accession of the Republic of Moldova to the EU is the firm political commitment to European integration. By implementing essential reforms and aligning the policy and legislative agendas with the aim of transposing the EU *acquis* into the domestic regulatory framework, the authorities demonstrate existing strong political will.

Another strength that is characteristic of the current context, invoked by respondents, refers to the favorable geostrategic position, which determines strong support from EU institutions and some Member States. It is considered that, currently, the Republic of Moldova benefits from an unprecedented openness from EU institutions, as well as from significant political and financial support from some Member States. Several responses emphasized that this support has intensified, especially in the current geopolitical context, and has led to the resizing of strategic partnerships, including those with Romania and NATO.

Political stability and domestic support for European integration are also considered strengths specific to the current context. Some respondents highlighted the fact that, although the Republic of Moldova faces certain political vulnerabilities, the current government has managed to maintain a clear pro-European direction. Thus, in the context of the Association Agreement, in recent years, a large part of the national legislation has been harmonized with the EU *acquis*, facilitating negotiations and subsequent integration. Furthermore, in addition to the significant popular support for European integration, several responses highlighted the fact that a considerable number of Moldovan citizens already hold the citizenship of an EU Member State, which constitutes an advantage in the enlargement process.

Another key strength highlighted by the respondents is that, in recent years, the administrative capacity required for the technical preparation of negotiations has been significantly enhanced. Some responses highlight the fact that, in this regard, institutions dedicated to European integration have been created, such as the Bureau for European Integration. At the same time, civil servants in the central administration are already actively involved in the harmonization of legislation and in the conduct of screening sessions, which reflects an advanced level of preparation for the negotiation process. The focus is currently on the implementation of reforms

and the efficient management of the technical and financial assistance provided by the EU and by certain Member States.

Last but not least, the strong historical, cultural, and economic ties with Romania and other European states are considered a specific strength in the current context. This aspect favors rapprochement with the EU and facilitates the transition to European norms and standards. These connections are consolidated through economic, educational, and research partnerships, which support both the attraction of investments and the integration of the Republic of Moldova into the EU value chains. Based on these solid ties, in the last decade, the Republic of Moldova has made important steps in strengthening energy security and diversifying energy supply sources.

Weaknesses

In terms of identifying those weaknesses specific to the current context that could hinder the negotiation process, the following key aspects can be identified: political instability, systemic corruption and challenges in the justice sector, reduced administrative capacities, economic vulnerabilities and dependence on external resources, as well as security risks generated by the tense regional context.

In the opinion of the majority of interviewed decision-makers, political instability, fragmentation along geopolitical lines, and the lack of a clear strategic direction affect the credibility of the Republic of Moldova with its European partners, creating uncertainty regarding its long-term commitment to the EU. It is worth noting that some responses emphasize that this political instability is largely fueled by disinformation and manipulation of public opinion by certain opposition political actors, a phenomenon that contributes to maintaining a climate of distrust and reluctance towards European integration.

The lack of a transparent and fair judicial system undermines the trust of both citizens and investors, affecting the business climate and governance processes. Those who have brought up this weakness believe that the high level of corruption at the administrative level and political influences on the judiciary slow down the implementation of the reforms necessary to meet the accession requirements.

The insufficient number of adequately prepared human resources in the public sector constitutes another key weakness in the accession process. Public institutions in the Republic of Moldova are facing a constant outflow of staff, leading to a loss of institutional memory and the fragmentation of approaches in the implementation of public policies. In this category of weaknesses, some responses also highlight the fact that inefficient resource management and coordination difficulties between different administrative structures make it difficult to adopt and implement the EU acquis. Additionally, the insufficiency of administrative infrastructure hampers direct interaction with EU institutions, affecting the quality of the negotiation process.

In addition to administrative problems, economic vulnerability and dependence on external resources are limiting factors in the integration process. The fragile economy of the Republic of Moldova, characterized by a low GDP and a significant dependence on remittances from the diaspora, does not provide sufficient stability to support the reforms necessary for accession. Several responses also suggest that, due to the high energy dependence, especially on external sources, the economic situation is becoming progressively more complicated. These structural problems require major investments and efficient management of European funds, aspects that are currently hindered by limited administrative capacities in implementing large-scale investment projects in energy infrastructure.

Last but not least, some responses cited the fact that the security risks generated by the tense regional situation represent a significant weakness in the current context. The Russian Federation's military invasion of Ukraine, the frozen conflict in the Transnistrian region, and the Russian Federation's hybrid actions, including disinformation campaigns and interference in electoral processes, create a state of insecurity affecting the political and economic stability of the Republic of Moldova. According to those who raised this weakness, these factors lead some EU member states to approach the Union's enlargement process toward the Republic of Moldova with caution, since the accession of a candidate country located in an unstable geopolitical region may involve additional risks for European security.

Opportunities

Following the analysis of the responses, it emerges that the most significant opportunities available to the Republic of Moldova in the current context of negotiations are: access to financial and technical support, economic development and integration into the European single market, strengthening of national security, improvement of infrastructure, and increased attractiveness for foreign investment.

One of the main advantages that the Republic of Moldova can have in the current negotiation context is access to European funds and technical assistance programmes. In the opinion of the respondents, the allocated European funds contribute to the strengthening of administrative capacities, the modernization of institutions, and the economic environment. At the same time, these financial resources allow investments in education, health, research, environmental protection, and private sector development, facilitating the implementation of essential reforms for alignment with EU norms and standards.

In connection with access to European funds, another major accession-specific opportunity is the development of national infrastructure. Some of the interviewed stakeholders believe that by accessing European funds allocated for the modernization of transport, energy and telecommunications, the Republic of Moldova has a unique chance to upgrade its road infrastructure, railway systems, and energy

interconnections. In this regard, investments in infrastructure will facilitate economic growth, tourism development, and closer integration of regions, reducing the rural-urban disparities.

An alternative set of opportunities concerns the Republic of Moldova's prospect of expanding its trade relations and accessing a stable and prosperous economic space through its gradual integration into the European market. In addition to the Association Agreement, the deepening of economic relations with the EU in the context of accession negotiations allows for increased exports, improved product quality, and strengthened economic competitiveness. Thus, in several responses, the argument is also made that access to EU markets contributes to higher incomes for entrepreneurs and job creation, thereby leading to a reduced exodus of talent and labor. Moreover, some of the interviewed decision-makers believe that the EU accession negotiations send a positive signal to foreign investors, providing the Republic of Moldova with the opportunity to attract foreign investments. Currently, political and economic stability associated with the European integration process increases investors' confidence.

In a geopolitical context marked by regional insecurity, the negotiation process for Moldova's accession to the EU currently offers increased stability, which, according to some respondents, should be interpreted as an opportunity. By collaborating with EU member states and participating in European security initiatives, the Republic of Moldova benefits from support in strengthening defense capabilities, protecting borders, and countering hybrid threats, including in the field of cyber and energy security. This strategic partnership contributes to reducing vulnerabilities and increasing the resilience of the state.

Threats

The main threat identified in the responses of the interviewed stakeholders refers to the influence of the Russian Federation, which exerts significant pressure, manifested through political and economic influences. The majority opinion is that these pressures have the potential to destabilize the process of Moldova's accession to the EU. Thus, the Russian Federation's intervention is notable for its support for pro-Russian and Eurosceptic political forces, destabilizing the democratic process and promoting narratives that undermine citizens' trust in Moldova's accession to the EU. Additionally, risks related to regional instability, fueled by the events in Ukraine and their possible extensions, are frequently cited as threats that may reduce the EU's support for its enlargement towards the Republic of Moldova. At the same time, parliamentary elections in EU member states and elections in the United States can be considered potential threats that may influence the negotiation process.

A second category of threats, ranked according to the priorities identified by the interviewed stakeholders, is related to the internal political instability. Political changes

following the upcoming parliamentary elections and the lack of internal cohesion may delay or even prevent the implementation of the reforms necessary to complete the accession negotiations. This instability is often linked to internal political conflicts and the difficulty of the Moldovan authorities to reach an ideological consensus on the political and economic directions essential for the accession process. Phenomena such as rising inflation and unemployment generate deep social discontent, which is currently manifested by favoring populist and Eurosceptic movements. This gives rise to a possible threat, in the event of a change in government, through the rise of Eurosceptic and pro-Russian political forces, which could lead the Council and the European Commission to change their options, so that EU enlargement to the Republic of Moldova is no longer a priority.

Some respondents indicated that the high level of corruption and resistance to the justice system reform represent a clear threat that may influence the negotiation and the accession process of the Republic of Moldova to the EU. Thus, it is argued that this challenge, accompanied by inefficient governance, may negatively affect the Republic of Moldova's ability to fulfill the commitments undertaken in the accession negotiations.

Moldova's economic vulnerabilities, including dependence on energy imports and economic instability, are identified as factors that may threaten Moldova's ability to negotiate and adapt to EU requirements. For example, the lack of a well-developed research and innovation infrastructure may slow down the alignment of research, development, and innovation with EU priorities. From an economic perspective, several responses point to the rationale that regional instability has the potential to discourage efforts to reduce economic vulnerabilities by discouraging investors from committing to Moldova.

C. Romania's Role in Conducting Negotiations and Processes Specific to the Accession of the Republic of Moldova to the EU

Two of the interview questions focused on specifying the role that Romania plays in the conduct of negotiations and in the specific processes related to the Republic of Moldova's accession to the EU, as well as on the assistance that Romania can offer in support of these negotiations. All the answers emphasize that Romania plays an essential and multidimensional role in Moldova's European integration process. Romania is recognized as the main firm supporter of this process and is considered a fundamental strategic partner. Thus, the majority of respondents admit that Romania not only supports the accession process but is actively involved in ensuring a solid and sustainable integration of the Republic of Moldova into the EU. Moreover, Romania's diplomatic effort, with direct impact on the positive perception of this process among the EU member states, is appreciated.

In some answers, it is noted that, due to the historical and cultural ties, Romania has facilitated and continues to facilitate the Republic of Moldova's access to European institutions and networks, offering active diplomatic support at the EU level. In the opinion of the respondents, in the context of the accession negotiations, this diplomatic support needs to be intensified.

The transfer of expertise, good practices, and innovative approaches is yet another essential contribution that Romania brings into the process. Thus, in some answers, it is highlighted that the technical support provided by Romania is considerable, especially in key areas such as justice, public administration, regional development, and economic reforms. To enhance administrative capacity, the anticipated assistance from Romania involves the transfer of a team of civil servants from the central public administration to the Republic of Moldova – a team that would actively aid in negotiations and the transposition and implementation of the EU acquis.

Moreover, it is recognized that, through institutional partnerships and lifelong learning programs, Romania contributes to enhancing the administrative capacities of the Republic of Moldova. Respondents consider that this support is essential for the implementation of the EU acquis. In this context, it is expected that, in the screening and chapter-by-chapter negotiation process, Romania will provide valuable expertise for the development of strategic negotiating positions, minimizing commitments, and respecting the established calendar. At the same time, within the framework of this transfer of expertise, it is important to ensure open and honest communication on how to avoid errors made in its own negotiation and accession process, as well as identifying solutions for potential blockages. Equally, having a recent experience of EU accession, Romania is expected to support the authorities of the Republic of Moldova in developing an effective public communication strategy. This should ensure correct information to citizens and contribute to increasing the degree of public support for the European integration process. At the same time, within this transfer of expertise, it is important to ensure open and honest communication regarding ways to avoid the mistakes made during Romania's own negotiation and accession process, as well as to identify solutions for potential deadlocks. Equally, based on the recent experience of EU accession, Romania is expected to support the authorities of the Republic of Moldova in developing an effective public communication strategy. This should ensure accurate information to citizens and contribute to increasing public support for the European integration process.

In the context of ensuring regional security and stability, several responses highlighted the fact that Romania has a significant contribution to the security of the Republic of Moldova, especially in regard to energy security and socio-economic stability. Furthermore, Romania is expected to intensify its collaboration with the Republic of Moldova to strengthen defense and security capabilities. Also, it is noted

that, given the significant number of citizens of the Republic of Moldova holding Romanian citizenship as well, there is a need for Romania to provide additional security guarantees.

From an economic perspective, in addition to intensifying trade, respondents appreciate that Romania supports the Republic of Moldova in promoting a favorable framework for attracting foreign investment. However, in the opinion of some respondents, the focus should continue to be on facilitating Moldova's access to EU value chains.

However, it should be noted that several responses emphasized that Romania can provide expertise and technical support to the Republic of Moldova, but the success of this process depends on the commitment and capacity of the Republic of Moldova to implement the necessary reforms. While Romania's support is important, accession depends largely on Moldova's internal efforts, something that Romania cannot substitute.

D. Improving Public Communication in Promoting the European Integration Process of the Republic of Moldova

In the opinion of the interviewed decision-makers, in order to support European integration, authorities in the Republic of Moldova must place much greater emphasis on the process's transparency, as well as on coherence and on the adaptability of messages to various social groups. Thus, the majority of those interviewed consider that the transparency of the negotiation process is essential for strengthening citizens' trust, providing clear information about the stages of the process, but also about the benefits and challenges of the reforms that need to be implemented in order to meet the requirements derived from the negotiations. On the one hand, in the opinion of the majority of interviewed stakeholders, combating toxic narratives and disinformation must build on providing clear explanations, supported by facts and evidence, regarding the necessary reforms and their beneficial effects on daily life. On the other hand, in order to maintain public interest and counter disinformation, several respondents emphasize the need for regular and constant communication through the media, social networks, and public events to mobilize citizens in support of this process. The emphasis must therefore be placed on the active and preventive explanation of public policy intentions.

Another important aspect mentioned in the responses refers to the need to improve the structuring of public communication and adapt messages to different categories of the population. Information campaigns should target young people, the business environment, civil society, and rural residents by using accessible language and concrete examples highlighting the benefits of EU accession, such as economic growth, improved infrastructure, and energy security. Thus, each social and professional

category should receive communication tailored and appropriate to their level of understanding.

At the same time, several respondents consider that, in public communication, emphasis should be placed on the convergence between the Republic of Moldova's and the EU's values. Therefore, communication should capitalize on the notable examples and on the benefits of the Republic of Moldova's participation in multiple European programs, such as those in the fields of education, research, innovation, regional development, and cross-border cooperation etc. In the opinion of some of the interviewed decision-makers, strengthening the international image of the Republic of Moldova is also a priority. The use of strategic partnerships with certain member states is essential for promoting a positive image of the Republic of Moldova within the EU.

The main conclusion emerging from the analysis of the interviews is that the majority perception of the interviewed stakeholders indicates a real feasibility of the Republic of Moldova's accession to the EU by 2030, conditional on maintaining the pace of reforms, political stability, and constant support from the EU. Although there are opinions highlighting the challenges of the integration process, including the need for a longer period for the implementation of reforms, internal and external support remains an essential factor in advancing the negotiations and achieving this strategic objective. Thus, according to the opinion of the interviewed stakeholders, Romania plays an essential and multidimensional role in the European integration process of the Republic of Moldova, providing diplomatic support, technical expertise, and assistance for strengthening administrative capacities. However, the success of the Republic of Moldova's accession depends decisively on its commitment and capacity to implement the necessary reforms, a process in which Romania's support can be a catalytic factor, but not a substitute for internal efforts.

The perceptions and considerations of the interviewed stakeholders are valued in the development of the SWOT analysis regarding the dynamics of the European integration process of the Republic of Moldova. Furthermore, these form the basis of a set of recommendations aimed at supporting the acceleration of the implementation of necessary reforms in the context of EU accession negotiations and contributing to the improvement of public communication regarding this process.

6.2. SWOT analysis regarding the Dynamics of the European Integration Process of the Republic of Moldova

In the following, we will develop a SWOT analysis regarding the dynamics of the European integration process of the Republic of Moldova, as we believe that this

will provide us with a balanced overview of the subject. Addressing both internal and external factors allows us to explore the broader environment in which a subject operates. This provides a holistic view, essential for the in-depth perspective we envision. It is also essential in developing subsequent recommendations, as by identifying the most relevant opportunities and threats, the analysis helps us propose actionable strategies that add practical value to the study findings.

Strengths:

- The Republic of Moldova has been one of the leaders of the group of six in terms of European integration since the launch of the EaP. This means that the reforms that this state must implement to integrate into European structures are not revolutionary, but rather a continuation of those already implemented, making the accession process easier to approach;
- The pro-European governance that became a constant after 2020 (the election of Maia Sandu, a pro-integration president) and was sedimented in 2022, with the beginning of the Russian Federation's aggression against Ukraine. This aspect provides consistency and continuity in the European path that this state can have;
- The Republic of Moldova has a clear and committed National Accession Plan, which will make the negotiation process easier to follow and more organized. It also demonstrates the general will of the political leaders in Chisinau to make the necessary efforts for accession;
- The Association Agreement provides the appropriate framework for an accelerated negotiation and ratification of the Accession Treaty;
- The internal justice system will be significantly reformed according to the requirements resulting from the screening, so that the negotiations in the first cluster will proceed and close smoothly;
- There is strong public support and cross-party political agreement for EU accession, which legitimizes the acceleration of accession negotiations and preparations;
- There is a well-defined strategy for conducting negotiations on clusters and chapters;
- The internal institutional and governance system specific to accession negotiations and preparation is well-defined and fully functional;
- There is a high degree of internal political stability and political willingness to implement systemic and structural reforms resulting from the negotiation process;
- Internal administrative capacities are open to transformation and innovation;
- There is a high degree of institutional openness to learning and embracing the transfer of policies and approaches from other EU Member States;

- The internal system of public policies and public management is prepared for the implementation of reforms derived from the accession negotiations;
- A significant part of the *acquis communautaire* is already transposed into the domestic legislation of the Republic of Moldova through the application of the provisions of the EU-Republic of Moldova Association Agreement;
- The EU has become the main economic partner of the Republic of Moldova.

Weaknesses:

- Social fragmentation and political polarization between East and West. Although, following the outbreak of the Russian Federation's aggression in Ukraine, it was expected that the Republic of Moldova's balancing attitude towards the Russian Federation would be increasingly stronger, this being evident also through the EU candidacy, the results of the referendum on EU accession in October 2024 demonstrated the opposite. Its result (only 50.46% voted YES for accession) is a clear effect of the phenomenon of social fragmentation and polarization, in addition to the disinformation campaigns to which Moldovan citizens were subjected regarding the EU (Europa Liberă România, 2024).
- The Republic of Moldova is still energy dependent on the Russian Federation. Additionally, from an energy point of view, limited interconnections with Romania and the absence of balancing capacities in the energy system limit the integration of renewable energy sources and reduce the Net Transfer Capacities (NTC), hindering electricity trade with other EU member states;
- The Republic of Moldova continues to be the least economically developed state in Europe, which may delay its accession due to the lack of funds necessary to implement the necessary reforms;
- The level of corruption is still high;
- The process of negotiating and preparing for accession is very complex and involves a consolidated administrative effort;
- The time frame set for completing the negotiations is very tight;
- Meeting the requirements resulting from screening and negotiation chapters involves substantial financial resources, which cannot be covered from own resources;
- Administrative capacities are limited and concentrated only at the center of government;
- There is no incentive system for the technical expert teams involved in the negotiation preparations or in the actual accession process;
- The level of funding from pre-accession instruments is still very limited and is conditional on achieving transformative results at the institutional level;

- The status of the Transnistrian region is still unclear, which will complicate the negotiation and accession preparation process;
- The Republic of Moldova does not have full control over its entire territory, for example, in the Transnistrian region, which may delay its accession to the EU;
- The existence of separatist regions, such as the Autonomous Territorial Unit of Gagauzia, may block accession;
- Although there is public support for accession, the affordability elements derived from the implementation of the arrangements agreed upon following the negotiations will significantly erode the degree of support.

Opportunities:

- The external context, especially at the level of EU member states, is favorable;
- Pre-accession funds will be supplemented according to the more-for-more principle and thus will contribute to structural change in the economy and society;
- Good bilateral relationship with Romania, which is a supporter of the integration of the Republic of Moldova into European structures;
- Identifying new sources of supply with the help of Romania and the EU to break the Russian energy monopoly;
- The Transnistrian region will have special status (legally undefined), which does not prevent the Republic of Moldova from joining the EU (see the Northern Ireland model; the Cypriot one, etc.). Moreover, the Transnistrian region joins the EU sectorally (for example, economically);
- The willingness of several Member States in the region to support the accession process, including a high interest from frugal Member States or those that are usually not open to such a large and rapid enlargement;
- The EU's fulfillment of its promise to provide an extensive package of pre-accession financial incentives (from Interreg or IPA), including those intended for the reconstruction of Ukraine;
- The possibility of obtaining easier transitional clauses for longer periods, including exemptions from the conditions related to the application of rules derived from the taxonomy;
- Domestic productivity will increase considerably in the coming years, which will be reflected in direct participation in European value chains;
- The accelerated growth of macroeconomic indicators in the coming years will open up the possibility of prospects for preparation for accession to the Eurozone;
- Accelerating the opening and conduct of negotiations for the chapters in the other five clusters, provided that the requirements derived from the chapters in the first cluster are effectively implemented;

- Opening of accession negotiations to the Schengen area, depending on the effective implementation of the requirements derived from the first cluster's chapters;
- Internal political stability will be maintained to conduct and close negotiations as soon as possible, even in the absence of single-party governments;
- Negotiations with the EU can prompt the development of the public administration (improving administrative capacities and developing the necessary infrastructure) in the Republic of Moldova, aiming to implement and administer European legislation and regulations. Also, training programs and exchanges of experience with experts from EU Member States can improve the competencies of civil servants in the Republic of Moldova, contributing to better management of public policies and increasing professionalism in the administration. Cooperation programs will contribute to connecting the Republic of Moldova with European networks, support socio-economic integration, and strengthen regional security and stability;
- From a socio-economic perspective, the European integration process offers the Republic of Moldova the opportunity to attract foreign direct investment, develop stronger trade relations with EU member states, and consolidate its internal market. Alignment with EU standards means opening up markets and the possibility of capitalizing on the country's economic potential;
- At the meeting of the High-Level Group on Central and South-Eastern Europe Energy Connectivity (CESEC) in January 2024, the Republic of Moldova, Ukraine and Slovakia officially joined the Vertical Gas Corridor (Greece-Bulgaria-Romania-Republic of Moldova-Ukraine), through the signing of a Memoranda of Understanding establishing steps towards the security of gas supply of the CESEC region, facilitating the transport of natural gas from Greece to the Republic of Moldova and to underground storage facilities in Ukraine, including natural gas from the Republic of Azerbaijan and LNG from Greece. In order to increase the transport capacity on the Trans-Balkan pipeline, the project was submitted under the call for the selection of priority strategic projects (PECI – Priority Projects of the Energy Community);
- Decoupling from Ukraine and overtaking some candidate countries from the Western Balkans Group, which will provide the possibility for the Republic of Moldova to join the EU in 2030.

Threats:

- The aggression of the Russian Federation against Ukraine is affecting the national security of the Republic of Moldova, as well as the accession process;

- The fact that the accession of the Republic of Moldova will depend on the negotiation process between the EU and Ukraine, as they are part of the same group;
- Chisinau's accession may be delayed by the Balkans' accession to the EU, given that they have already started the negotiation process and have opened chapters. Against this backdrop, politically, the accession of the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine before the Balkans could trigger balancing reactions towards the EU, which would not be in the interest of the organization. This could, in turn, delay the accession of the two neighboring states on the eastern border. Last but not least, although it is not a precondition, the fact that Albania, North Macedonia, and Montenegro are already NATO members may represent an advantage for them.
- The accession of the Republic of Moldova may be delayed if the EU does not undergo institutional reform and, therefore, cannot change the voting method, which currently allows any member state to use its veto right to block the enlargement;
- The Russian Federation may win the aggression against Ukraine, which will affect the security of the Republic of Moldova, potentially making it the next country attacked;
- The Russian Federation may reach an agreement with the EU so that the Republic of Moldova, along with the other EaP member states, remains a buffer zone between Moscow and Brussels, eliminating the possibility of EU accession.;
- The alternation in government of parties opposing the accession of the Republic of Moldova to the EU or advocating for slower negotiations;
- The progressive opening of negotiation chapters is conditional upon reaching specific intermediate milestones for chapters on the rule of law and reforms in the justice system;
- The US and NATO will have a minimal role in this dossier;
- The Russian Federation will maintain its media and political influence in the Republic of Moldova;
- Disagreements over the status of the Transnistrian region will escalate.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SUPPORTING THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA IN THE CONTEXT OF EUROPEAN INTEGRATION

7.1. Recommendations to facilitate the accelerated implementation of necessary reforms aimed at bringing the Republic of Moldova closer to the European Union

The recommendations are structured on the triad: strategic, tactical, and operational. Each recommendation is developed in such a way as to address the definition of concrete needs resulting from desk and field research, support tools and mechanisms, as well as possible financing options for the support provided by Romania to the authorities of the Republic of Moldova in order to prepare and conduct EU accession negotiations.

The recommendations are formulated in a way that takes into account previous experiences of transfer processes (especially in the case of the negotiation of the Association Agreement), as well as the Romanian knowledge and experience that can be transferred from the administration level. The recommendations do not refer to what Romania already does extremely well in this context, such as diplomatic support for the bilateral relationship between Member States.

a. The Strategic Level

Recommendation 1: Ensuring support that is unitary, structured and complete, coherent, convincing, and performance-oriented. The purpose of the support provided to the Republic of Moldova in the context of European integration must primarily aim at achieving institutional convergence between Romania and the Republic of Moldova in the context of EU governance regimes. Achieving institutional convergence will subsequently facilitate the deepening of relations within the EU (common policies and programs, substantiation of common preferences, generation of support coalitions in the EU decision-making process, etc.).

It is necessary that the support provided targets both the transfer of successful and high-quality practices as well as the lessons learned from Romania's failures. It is important to have an internal reflective approach regarding Romania's experiences during its journey as a candidate country and later as an EU member state. It is also essential that there are up-to-date analyses at the level of the central public

administration regarding the state of negotiations of the Republic of Moldova on the relevant chapters in order to ensure proactive support, not just on request.

Beyond the shared historical past, what prevails is the argument of supporting the Republic of Moldova in achieving the best possible outcome during the process preceding its accession to the EU and in all aspects favoring its European integration, which will bring obvious advantages not only to it, but also to the region, and, implicitly, to Romania. To this end, the diplomatic effort must be supplemented with steps that lead to maximizing financial allocations and a high absorption rate from those allocations.

b. Tactical Level

Recommendation 2: Establish an integrative approach at the level of the national strategic framework, so that:

- The sectoral and horizontal government strategies contain specific objectives related to supporting the Republic of Moldova in the conduct of negotiations on chapters and preparations for EU accession. The existence of such provisions will allow ministries and public authorities to provide, in their planning and budgeting documents, specific measures and actions in this regard;
- the institutional strategic plans (ISPs) include explicit objectives and measures for providing support to the Republic of Moldova in conducting negotiations on chapters and for preparing for EU accession. This also ensures the necessary budgetary allocations for this purpose, as well as the reporting of the results obtained related to the development assistance provided.

Recommendation 3: Establish a national focal point for providing support for the European integration of the Republic of Moldova. This should act as an interface between a set of clearly defined requirements of the public administration of the Republic of Moldova and the expertise available in the public administration of Romania. Such a structure would relieve the specialized structures of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, RoAID, or other ministries and authorities of administrative tasks, by managing the coordination of support. The focal point would ensure coherent and unitary support offered by Romania to the Republic of Moldova in the European integration process. At the same time, it would have the role of guiding the support so that it complements EU interventions (TAIEX, Twinning, or other regional cooperation initiatives through Interreg Europe).

In order to have the necessary authority and recognition, the institution designated as a national focal point must have competencies in terms of the analysis of European affairs, and be visible and recognized at the level of the EU Member States and at the internal level. At the same time, it must be endowed with sufficient administrative capacities to function as a project implementation unit, especially for those projects financed from European funds. It is important that it also obtain the status of an

executive unit in order to be able to subsequently operate and award financing grants, including for private legal entities.

Recommendation 4: Accelerate the maturation processes of strategic connectivity projects with the Republic of Moldova (energy networks, railways, national roads and highways, port areas, data, etc.) and the identification of new ideas for joint strategic projects to be initiated and developed through conception and maturation processes. In these areas of intervention, it is anticipated that for the post-2027 financial period, the allocation will be significantly supplemented for this region, but it will be conditional on the use of the Connecting Europe Facility (CEF). In addition to the fact that this aspect implies a high degree of centralization of the management of the funds, the mechanism used generates competition between the projects submitted by the Member States and by the eligible candidate countries. Therefore, in order to be submitted within the framework of the periodic competitions, the projects will have to be complete at least one quarter before the deadline, given that they will also involve partner authorities from the Republic of Moldova. At the same time, under the first pillar of the Growth Plan for the Republic of Moldova for the period 2025–2027, projects will include both road and rail infrastructure initiatives along the TEN-T network (the European transport corridor linking the Baltic Sea, the Black Sea, and the Aegean Sea to the Republic of Moldova) as well as projects aimed at expanding interconnections with the EU electricity grid, through the completion of a new power line and the launch of construction on two additional lines. In the absence of a portfolio of mature projects that meet environmental requirements, there is a risk of decommitment of funds allocated through these financial mechanisms. Recourse, in extremis, to solutions to advance projects is not beneficial because it does not guarantee the subsequent availability of allocations under advantageous eligibility conditions.

For these efforts, European funds for the development of border regions can also be used, such as those allocated under the INTERREG EUROPE, URBACT IV, INTERACT IV, Interreg NEXT Romania-Republic of Moldova, and Interreg NEXT Black Sea Basin programmes. Although the budgets of the cooperation programs are significantly smaller compared to the financial envelope allocated to the Growth Plan for the Republic of Moldova for the period 2025–2027, these programs should be viewed as opportunities to create partnerships and support infrastructure projects. Thus, through their purpose, cross-border cooperation projects can contribute to the development of strategic infrastructure projects that will be included in the Growth Plan for the Republic of Moldova for the period 2025-2027 or that will be included in the programmes managed directly by the European Commission.

c. Operational Level

Recommendation 5: Revitalizing the activity of the Romania - Republic of Moldova Joint Intergovernmental Commission for European Integration. In order to provide support in a coherent and structured manner, the Commission must fulfill its duties regarding the evaluation of the cooperation framework and the planning of new actions in the field of European integration of the Republic of Moldova. Therefore, it is important that this Commission also ensures the necessary decision-making to concentrate Romania's support efforts for the Republic of Moldova within a synergistic and complementary framework. Also, the Commission's work can be a suitable context for harmonizing the national positions of the Republic of Moldova in the negotiation process, especially in the case of derogations or transitional measures/periods. Thus, following these iterative discussions carried out within the Joint Commission, the Romanian authorities will be able to assist the Republic of Moldova by exploring and generating coalitions of support at the level of thematic networks and working groups coordinated by the European Commission or by the Council by identifying and building coalitions of support within thematic networks and working groups coordinated by the European Commission or the Council, thereby advancing Moldova's stated priorities. We should keep in mind that many of the aspects of derogation or transitional clauses will come from the current generation of approaches regarding taxonomy, governance in the public and private sectors, conditionality regarding access to essential life services, etc.

Recommendation 6: Providing financial incentives to civil servants participating in expertise transfer missions in the Republic of Moldova. In order to mobilize expertise from the public administration, expertise transfer missions to the Republic of Moldova must provide for civil servants, in addition to per diem, transportation and insurance expenses, including daily allowances for the activities performed, similarly to the system used by the European Commission within TAIEX missions (for example, Flat Daily Allowance-FDA of 350 euros per mission day/working day).

Recommendation 7: Establish an institutional mechanism for the medium-term (1–3 months) and long-term (more than 3 months) secondment of civil servants from Romania's central public administration to the Republic of Moldova. The mechanism could be similar to the arrangements applied in the case of EU-funded Twinning missions, including a financial incentive component similar to the one described in the previous recommendation. The mechanism could also aim at the short-term return of Romanian experts, originating from the Republic of Moldova, who are involved in the processes of deepening Romania's integration into the EU. This secondment mechanism should also be addressed to experts involved in the development of projects specific to areas representing critical value chains (strategic

projects, especially in the field of transport infrastructure, projects included in the STEP platform, or future IPCEI projects).

Recommendation 8: Supporting the economic and industrial transformation of the Republic of Moldova by involving experts from the Republic of Moldova in the specific processes of implementing the National Strategy for Research, Innovation and Smart Specialization 2022-2027 at the national level, as well as the regional smart specialization strategies (RIS3) at the regional level, especially those in the North East and South East development regions. Even though the Republic of Moldova carried out a first experimental exercise in four areas of smart specialization in 2019-2021, with the support of the JRC, and based on them adopted in August 2024 the National Smart Specialization Program of the Republic of Moldova for 2024-2027 “SMART Moldova”, the process of reviewing the areas of entrepreneurial discovery (EDP) needs to become a recurring one. Also, to ensure convergence in the approach, it is advisable for Romania’s support to focus on the implementation of the program as well as on the development of regional smart specialization strategies (RIS3). This process will subsequently allow for easier involvement of the Republic of Moldova in major smart specialization projects offered through various programs (Horizon Europe, Life, EU4HEALTH, Digital Europe, etc.) and priority forms of EU support (such as IPCEI).

Recommendation 9: Intensify the transfer of expertise from Romania to the Republic of Moldova in the field of education at all levels, with a view to enabling Moldova’s participation in the European Education Area starting from the pre-accession stage. Intensifying cooperation is necessary for the thorough preparation of reforms and investments in the field of education that will be supported by Pillar 3 of the Economic Growth Plan for the Republic of Moldova, as well as by the Erasmus+ Programme, as well as by the European Social Fund. On the one hand, intensifying cooperation should facilitate the negotiations related to Chapter 26. On the other hand, intensifying cooperation should facilitate the progressive inclusion of the Republic of Moldova in the governance structure of the strategic framework for European cooperation in the field of education and training in view of the further implementation and development of the European Education Area. Also, in the case of higher education, the aim of intensifying this cooperation is to strengthen the administrative capacity of higher education institutions, as well as the authorities related to this sector, in order to participate in the calls of the European Universities Initiative. Starting with the 2022 call, educational institutions from the entire European Higher Education Area (EHEA), not only EU Member States, can also participate in this initiative. In the coming years, it is important that universities in the Republic of Moldova become attractive for inclusion in transnational alliances of universities supported by this initiative.

7.2. Recommendations on public communication to support the authorities of the Republic of Moldova in promoting the European integration process.

a. Strategic Level

Recommendation 10: Support the Republic of Moldova to participate in the activities of the European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO) from the candidate country stage. In order to bring the Republic of Moldova into the European digital space, Romania can advocate for the priority, exceptional, and expedited establishment of a joint hub for combating disinformation. The specific activities of this joint hub will ensure the detection and countering of disinformation campaigns by producing informative content and organizing media education activities, along with supporting authorities in monitoring online platforms. The joint hub can be financed through the Connecting Europe Facility (CEF), as is the case with the other 14 hubs currently operational in the EU. As an intermediate step, Romania can advocate for the inclusion of the Republic of Moldova in the activities of the Joint Center for Combating Disinformation coordinated by Sofia University, by covering any additional costs involved.

b. Tactical Level

Recommendation 11: Intensify support in the field of public communication regarding the effects of the European integration process by providing positive examples regarding Romania's European path. These can provide relevant examples of how the Romanian economy and society have been transformed since accession to the EU. They should target priority areas such as agriculture and rural development, major transport infrastructure, improving living conditions and environmental protection, modernizing education and health infrastructure, the dynamics of macroeconomic indicators, etc. Positive examples should be intensively promoted in the media of the Republic of Moldova and aim to counter fake news and disinformation regarding the effects of European integration. In order to have a societal impact, positive examples of Romania's experience can be used in video spots, infographics, and success stories designed by the communication team within the Bureau for European Integration. Such a public communication project can be financed from the state budget through the Department for Relations with the Republic of Moldova.

c. Operational Level

Recommendation 12: Continue and diversify the organization of joint experience-sharing exchanges between public communication and journalism experts from the Republic of Moldova and Romanian authorities and media organizations specialized in European integration. It is advisable for journalists

and public communication specialists to benefit from short-term internships in central public administration institutions and media organizations specialized in European affairs from Romania. Such internships can also be offered vice versa, to journalists and communication experts from Romania who provide support to authorities and media organizations in the Republic of Moldova.

Recommendation 13: The organization of short-term professional training programs in the field of EU public policies, aimed at enhancing the understanding among public communication experts and journalists from the Republic of Moldova of the foundations and objectives of EU policies affecting European citizens (such as the impact of specific measures under the European Green Deal). Training programs can be organized within consortia of universities and specialized public institutions (such as the European Institute of Romania, the National Institute of Administration, Romanian Diplomatic Institute). Professional training programs should provide in-depth training, both from the perspective of general aspects of the functioning of the EU and from the perspective of particular aspects specific to various sectors of activity. It is important that such a training program be carried out in the form of modules: the first module should be addressed to all participants and should cover the following topics: EU institutions, decision-making process, implementation of EU policies, internal regulatory and procedural adjustment. Subsequent modules may focus on technical aspects related to the main EU policies and how the Republic of Moldova will have to adapt to their regulations and perspectives, as well as the impact on citizens. Both modules should provide practical activities related to the formulation and adjustment of public communication tactics, as well as stimulating the mobilizing spirit in favor of European integration at the level of local, professional, and social communities.

CONCLUSIONS

The dynamics and progression of the Republic of Moldova's European integration process have been influenced both by the geopolitical context and by internal political changes. Over the past two decades, the geopolitical reality has fundamentally changed in the Central and Eastern European space. NATO and the EU have expanded eastward, integrating former communist states, including some that belonged to the USSR, into Euro-Atlantic structures. The Russian Federation, with the coming to power of Vladimir Putin in 2000, has moved towards a policy of hostility, of direct competition with the West. In the absence of arguments of a political, economic or social nature, the Russian Federation has forced the blocking of some states and populations in its sphere of interest using military force and energy blackmail. The Republic of Moldova has also been drawn into this orbit. The population has been vulnerable to manipulation and hybrid warfare. The result has been a fragmented society that often reacts disproportionately and uncertainly in the choices it makes. Very often, the Russian Federation used identity cleavages that it exploited in its own interest, thus the Transnistrian region and the Autonomous Territorial Unit of Gagauzia were used to exert pressure and control over the government in Chisinau.

The Republic of Moldova's relations with the EU have been characterized by fluctuating developments, influenced also by internal political vectors. Keeping distance or getting closer to the EU corresponded to the electoral cycles, with governments or presidents against or in favor of getting closer to the EU. Broadly speaking, this reality of geopolitical choice has overlapped with a similar policy towards Romania, but an opposite one in relation to the Russian Federation. If broadly speaking, the period of Igor Dodon's presidency was marked by maintaining a closeness to the Russian Federation and a distance in relation to the EU and Romania, the subsequent period, after the election of Mrs. Maia Sandu as president, was characterized by a considerable effort to get closer to the EU and Romania.

European support was considerable, and the political openness towards the Republic of Moldova, in the context of deepening cooperation within the bilateral framework conferred by the EaP through the more-for-more principle, attracted the population towards an increasingly evident attachment to the EU and democratic values. After the moment in 2014, when the Russian Federation annexed Crimea, the EU was more attentive and more determined to support the European path of the Republic of Moldova. Since 2014, citizens of this state have had free and visa-free access to the EU space. This was followed by deepening within the Association Agreement and an integrative deepening at several levels, especially of an economic

nature, as a result of the extension of customs agreements and the free trade area. The economy of the Republic of Moldova has benefited from the opening of the single market for Moldovan products. These benefits were immediately transferred to the Transnistrian region or Gagauzia, despite the persistence of political and societal barriers.

The geopolitical context and the internal political reality of the Republic of Moldova were deeply marked by the unprovoked and unjustified military invasion of the Russian Federation in Ukraine, which represents a flagrant violation of international law. This event complicated the general geopolitical context, introducing significant repositioning and mutations on the international stage. The EU has reassessed its policies regarding the Eastern Neighborhood, including those of the EaP states. An obvious opening is manifested by the start of accession negotiations of the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine. The two states remain procedurally connected, being placed together in this process. If in the first part of the process of rapprochement with the EU, through the special attention received from the EU and the opening of accession negotiations, the Republic of Moldova can be said to have been a beneficiary of the new geopolitical reality marked by the aggression of the Russian Federation against Ukraine, in the second stage things become more complicated. Analyzing the progress of the Republic of Moldova together with that of Ukraine may result in delays in major decisions regarding the accession process, especially in the event of a prolonged Russian Federation aggression or a ceasefire agreement that freezes the conflict or keeps the region in uncertainty at the intersection of geopolitical interests. The equation of the complicated negotiations ahead is also made more difficult by the need for the EU to reposition itself in relation to the acceleration of the integration process of the Western Balkans. The new geopolitical reality requires adequate responses and leads to a different order of the internal and external affairs of the European Union. However, the membership of the Republic of Moldova in the European Union would bring added security to the entire continent, and the enlargement of the EU to the Republic of Moldova would mean a more comprehensive and, thus, stronger security space in the face of the increasingly complex range of threats (Gherasimov, 2024).

In conclusion, the Republic of Moldova is severely affected by the Russian Federation's aggression against Ukraine, economically, socially, and in terms of national and societal security. The hybrid war supported by the Russian Federation against this vulnerable state contributes to a process of eroding democracy and threatens the consolidation of the rule of law and political balance. The conflict in the Transnistrian region and the Autonomous Territorial Unit of Gagauzia are used by the Russian Federation to generate instability and to block the initiatives of the authorities in Chisinau related to the process of European integration. The frozen conflict in the Transnistrian region in the context of the events in Ukraine has shown signs of

reactivation on several occasions. Political leaders in the Autonomous Territorial Unit of Gagauzia publicly support, including through visits to Moscow, the Putin regime and its policies towards the Republic of Moldova and its European integration.

The aggression of the Russian Federation against Ukraine, although an event that affected international security, created an unprecedented opportunity for the Republic of Moldova, namely the chance to apply for EU membership. The aggressive behavior of the Russian Federation was felt at the EU level as an unprecedented threat to the stability and security of the entire European continent, which led the leaders in Brussels to go beyond the lowest common denominator and unanimously accept the candidacy of the Republic of Moldova to the EU alongside that of Ukraine. At the other end of the decision-making pole, considering the reforms already implemented under the Eastern Partnership, the signing and ratification of the Association Agreement, as well as the political agenda, the authorities in Chisinau have demonstrated relatively consistent leadership within the group of six states under the Eastern Partnership. With the granting of candidate status, the efforts of the authorities in Chisinau have intensified regarding the adoption of necessary reforms to meet the criteria (an element identified as a strength in the SWOT analysis). This is also attested to in the European Commission's monitoring report, yet we cannot overlook the fact that the path will not be an easy one, given the weaknesses identified in the SWOT analysis: the necessary reforms in the justice system, the still high level of corruption, gender inequality, the digitalization process that must be continued, the issue of the Transnistrian region that may delay EU accession.

The relations between Romania and the Republic of Moldova have been defined by constant support for the European integration of the Republic of Moldova. This aspect has transformed this collaboration into an essential element of Romania's foreign policy. Over the last three decades, Romania has played a determined role in the democratization and Europeanization of the Republic of Moldova, significantly contributing to its development through bilateral projects and substantial financial assistance, positioning itself as the most important bilateral economic partner. The major role played by Romania was noted in aspects such as the visa liberalization process, supporting the breaking of energy dependence on the Russian Federation, the Republic of Moldova obtaining candidate country status, etc.

In the coming period, Romania must continue this support by facilitating the Republic of Moldova authorities in conducting accession negotiations and contributing to the implementation of reforms necessary to complete this stage. Romania's experience in the EU accession process offers several valuable lessons for the Republic of Moldova and can be used to guide the Republic of Moldova more effectively, avoiding the strategic bottlenecks and errors recorded. Thus, creating a clear governance framework, adopting a well-defined inter-institutional strategy and

developing a solid partnership with the EU institutions, but also with the Member States that will hold the rotating presidency of the Council of the EU in the next three years, are key aspects for the successful conduct of the negotiation process and subsequent accession to the EU. Also, implementing a robust institutional mechanism for coordinating the negotiations and creating a national integration preparation program are necessary steps to ensure a predictable and coherent process for obtaining EU membership status.

As is evident from the scenarios developed, in order for the Republic of Moldova to be able to achieve its set objective, namely that of becoming a member state by 2030, at the internal level, the issue of the Transnistrian region will have to be resolved in a relatively short term, through a possible economic integration of this region into the European market, which is feasible, given the already existing trade. On the other hand, the integration of the Republic of Moldova into the EU will also require a demarcation of borders, probably by adopting a model similar to the Cypriot or Irish one. At the external level, it would have to be decoupled from Ukraine in the negotiation process – something that is unlikely. Thus, an identified threat was the dependence of this state's accession to the EU on the end of the Russian Federation's aggression in Ukraine and its accession to European structures. Given this, as well as the accession process of the Western Balkans and the aggressive behavior of the Russian Federation, the Republic of Moldova has relatively small chances of becoming an EU member state in the short term. Moreover, this negotiation that the EU has chosen to conduct in tandem may represent a major threat to the Republic of Moldova, given that the Russian Federation's aggression against Ukraine may continue indefinitely, generating a sense of frustration on the part of the authorities in Chisinau, which may lead to the development of a sense of fatigue and, ultimately, to the possibility of a lack of interest in the EU.

The recommendations resulting from the analysis are structured on three levels: strategic, tactical, and operational, taking into account the national specifics. At the strategic level, the recommendation to support the acceleration by the Republic of Moldova of the implementation of the reforms necessary for closer alignment with the EU highlights the need to provide coherent and unified support to achieve institutional convergence between Romania and the Republic of Moldova in the context of European integration. From a tactical perspective, the Romanian government's strategies should include clear objectives regarding supporting the Moldovan authorities in preparing for accession negotiations, as well as supporting the implementation of the specific requirements of the negotiation chapters, backed by adequate resources. At the operational level, it is recommended to create a national focal point to manage the coordination of technical and financial support, thus ensuring a unified and efficient approach. At the same time, it is recommended to provide incentives for officials

involved in the integration process and second them in the medium and long term to the Republic of Moldova.

With regard to supporting the authorities of the Republic of Moldova in promoting the European integration process, it is strategically recommended that Romania continue its efforts to include the Republic of Moldova in the EDMO, as well as to establish a joint hub coordinated by Romania for combating disinformation. From a tactical point of view, it is recommended to intensify communication by exemplifying the benefits of European integration, based on Romania's path within the EU. In addition, from an operational point of view, exchanges of experience between public communication specialists from the Republic of Moldova and Romania would contribute to improving communication skills on European issues, supporting correct and efficient information of the public in the Republic of Moldova about the positive effects of European integration.

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ANNEX 1¹²

INTERVIEW A

1. *Is it feasible for the Republic of Moldova to join the EU by 2030?*

Please provide a maximum of 3 arguments that support or contradict this perspective.

Moldova's accession to the EU by 2030 is achievable, and European integration opens numerous opportunities for the promotion and preservation of national cultural heritage. Moldova can benefit from the European Union's support in restoring historical monuments, developing cultural tourism, and promoting local traditions on international markets. Additionally, European cultural programs such as Creative Europe offer funding and resources to support the arts, the film industry, and cultural initiatives. EU integration would facilitate cultural exchanges and stimulate national creativity, contributing to the strengthening of Moldova's cultural identity as part of the European mosaic.

2. *Which of the following possible scenarios can be considered appropriate to the current context?*

Please choose only one scenario or specify an alternative scenario.

- Scenario 1: The Republic of Moldova will join the EU by 2030
- Scenario 2: The Republic of Moldova will join together with Ukraine, but not by 2030
- Scenario 3: The Republic of Moldova and Ukraine will begin joint accession negotiations, which will continue indefinitely without clear time frames for accession
- Scenario 4: The Republic of Moldova and Ukraine will be included in a buffer zone between the EU, respectively NATO, and the Russian Federation, with no real prospects of EU accession
- Scenario 5: The Republic of Moldova does not join the EU. The EU decides to freeze the negotiation process with the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine indefinitely, and the two countries will de facto return to the group of partner countries within the Eastern Partnership
- Other scenario (please specify)
- Please briefly justify the selected scenario from the perspective of the following criteria: political vision, complexity of the negotiation and pre-accession process; resistance to change; evolution of EU relations with the Russian

¹² In the publication process, all interviews were anonymized.

Federation or NATO, respectively the USA with the Russian Federation; evolution of the Russian Federation's military incursions in Ukraine.

The most appropriate scenario is that the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine will join the EU together, but after 2030. This pre-accession period allows Moldova to develop and strengthen its cultural scene and create international partnerships in the arts and heritage sectors. The time needed for accession can be used to intensify cultural collaborations with European countries, attracting support for restoration and promotion of national traditions. Thus, Moldova will be able to build a recognized and respected cultural identity on the European stage, preparing for a deep and meaningful integration into the European community.

3. Which are the main strengths of the current context of negotiations for Republic of Moldova's accession to the EU? Please specify and order the considerations according to their importance from the perspective of the technical negotiation process, internal political context, administrative capacities, internal socio-economic developments, as well as the security context in the region.

One of the most important strengths of Republic of Moldova in the current negotiation context is its cultural wealth and national heritage, which have the potential to create a strong bond between Republic of Moldova and the European Union. EU support in promoting and protecting local culture can help strengthen Moldova's national identity and bring it closer to European values. Additionally, cross-border cultural partnerships support intercultural dialogue, drawing attention to Moldovan traditions and facilitating integration into a diverse and inclusive European cultural context.

4. Which are the weaknesses characteristic of the current context of negotiations for Republic of Moldova's accession to the EU? Please specify and order the considerations according to their importance from the perspective of the technical negotiation process, internal political context, internal administrative capacities, internal socio-economic developments, as well as the security context in the region.

One of the weaknesses is the insufficiently developed cultural infrastructure, which limits Republic of Moldova's ability to promote and capitalize on its cultural heritage. However, this obstacle can be turned into an opportunity through EU support, which provides funding for the preservation and promotion of heritage. By developing modern cultural infrastructure, Republic of Moldova can showcase its traditions and identity, becoming an attraction centre for regional and European cultural tourism.

5. What opportunities can Republic of Moldova benefit from in the current context of negotiations? Please specify and order the considerations according to their importance from the perspective of the technical negotiation process, internal political context, internal administrative capacities, internal socio-economic developments, as well as the security context in the region.

EU accession offers Republic of Moldova unique opportunities to promote its culture and develop its creative industry. European programs dedicated to culture, such as Creative Europe, financially support artistic projects and heritage preservation, facilitating Moldovan artists and creators' access to the European cultural market. Moreover, cross-border cultural partnerships promote intercultural dialogue and open opportunities for exchange of experience, restoration projects of historical monuments, and joint artistic initiatives. Moldova can become a model for cultural integration, showing how traditional values and national identity can contribute to European diversity.

6. What threats can influence the negotiation process and later the actual accession of Republic of Moldova to the EU? Please specify and order the considerations according to their importance from the perspective of the technical negotiation process, internal political context, internal administrative capacities, internal socio-economic developments, as well as the security context in the region.

Among the possible threats is the lack of resources for preserving cultural heritage, but EU accession offers solutions in this regard. By collaborating with the European Union, the Republic of Moldova can attract funds for restoring and modernizing cultural objectives, thus reducing the risks of degradation. Additionally, international cooperation through joint cultural projects can support the European integration process, promoting a positive image of the Republic of Moldova and strengthening cultural ties with member states.

7. What role should Romania play in the negotiation process and the specific processes of Moldova's actual EU accession? Please specify and order the considerations according to their importance from the perspective of the technical negotiation process, administrative capacities, as well as the security context in the region.

Romania plays a crucial role as a supporter of the Republic of Moldova's European path, and cultural collaborations play a central role in this process. Romania can facilitate its access to European cultural networks and support cultural exchanges between the institutions of the two countries. Additionally, bilateral partnerships for cultural and heritage projects strengthen the cultural connection between the two states and facilitate the Republic of Moldova's access to resources and expertise in heritage preservation, thus supporting European integration.

8. What can Romania offer to support Moldova's EU accession negotiations and the actual preparation of Moldova for EU membership status? Please specify and order the considerations according to their importance from the perspective of the technical negotiation process, administrative capacities, as well as the security context in the region.

Romania can support the Republic of Moldova's integration process through joint cultural initiatives and by facilitating access to European funds dedicated to heritage and the creative industry. Bilateral partnerships in the arts and culture can contribute to the development of the Republic of Moldova's cultural infrastructure, and joint heritage restoration and preservation projects are essential for promoting cultural identity in the European context. Thus, through cultural cooperation, Romania can play an important role in preparing the Republic of Moldova for European integration, contributing to the development and strengthening of a vibrant and sustainable cultural sector.

9. What public communication elements should be applied by the authorities of the Republic of Moldova in promoting the European integration process? Please specify a maximum of 3 strategically important aspects to improve public communication in terms of transparency, timing, consistency, and contextual adequacy, etc.

To promote the European integration process, the authorities of the Republic of Moldova should place a strong emphasis on cultural values and the benefits of cultural partnerships with the EU. Public communication should highlight how European programs can support culture and the arts in Moldova, preserving and promoting local traditions in an international context. Consistency and rhythm in cultural messages are essential to strengthen public support, explaining how Moldovan culture can contribute to the mosaic of European diversity and how traditional values align with European community principles.

Thank you for your support.

ANNEX 1

INTERVIEW B

1. Is it feasible for the Republic of Moldova to join the EU by 2030?

Please provide a maximum of 3 arguments that support or contradict this perspective.

Recent progress in the reform process and European integration: The Republic of Moldova has made significant progress in aligning its legislation with European standards, as part of the implementation of the Association Agreement and the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA). These advancements, along with the EU's support for reforms in justice, the fight against corruption, and economic development, support the rapid advancement of the country on the European integration path. Geopolitical context and international support: In light of regional crises and the need for stability and security in the EU's eastern neighbourhood, there is increased momentum for the integration of Eastern European countries, particularly those with clear pro-European aspirations, such as the Republic of Moldova. EU member states and institutions have indicated their willingness to support the EU's eastern expansion, provided that the accession requirements are met. Rapid implementation of reforms supported by the international community: The current government and Moldova's pro-European political alignment contribute to the implementation of major structural reforms, supported by international organizations such as the IMF and the World Bank, as well as EU grants and funding. This support provides a significant boost towards meeting the necessary standards for accession.

2. Which of the following possible scenarios can be considered appropriate for the current context? Please choose a single scenario or specify an alternative scenario.

- Scenario 1: The Republic of Moldova will join the EU by 2030
- Scenario 2: The Republic of Moldova will join together with Ukraine, but not by 2030
- Scenario 3: The Republic of Moldova and Ukraine will begin accession negotiations together, which will continue indefinitely, without clear timeframes for accession
- Scenario 4: The Republic of Moldova and Ukraine will be included in a buffer zone between the EU, NATO, and the Russian Federation, with no real prospects for EU membership
- Scenario 5: The Republic of Moldova will not join the EU. The EU decides to indefinitely freeze the negotiation process with Moldova and Ukraine, and the two countries will de facto revert to the group of partner countries within the Eastern Partnership
- Other scenario (please specify)

- Please briefly argue the selected scenario from the following perspectives: political vision, the complexity of the negotiation and pre-accession process, resistance to change, the evolution of EU relations with the Russian Federation or NATO, and respectively the USA with the Russian Federation; the evolution of the Russian Federation’s military incursion into Ukraine.

The current government of the Republic of Moldova maintains a firm commitment to European integration, prioritizing the necessary reforms to align with EU standards. However, the continuity of this political vision is essential, and internal political changes could generate risks and slow progress towards accession. Accession requires an extended and complex negotiation process, including legislative adjustments, economic reforms, and strengthening of administrative institutions. Given these challenges and the Republic of Moldova’s limited administrative capacities, a horizon until 2030 may only be realistic if additional resources and technical support are obtained from European partners. The implementation of structural reforms is crucial but sometimes faces internal opposition from interest groups and vulnerable segments of society, which may perceive the changes as destabilizing. Overcoming this resistance requires an effective communication strategy and compensatory policies to protect affected groups. Tensions between the West and Russia influence the Republic of Moldova’s integration process, as the EU and NATO seek to avoid challenges on the eastern flank. Political and strategic support from the USA and the EU, particularly for security and stability, can facilitate the Republic of Moldova’s accession, but the escalation of conflicts could put pressure on the Republic of Moldova, including from Russia. A favourable evolution of the conflict in Ukraine, with the maintenance of Ukraine’s territorial integrity, could improve security prospects for Moldova and implicitly its chances of accession. However, an escalation or prolongation of the conflict risks destabilizing the region and increasing security risks, complicating accession. Thus, while the Republic of Moldova’s accession to the EU by 2030 is a possible scenario, it significantly depends on internal political stability, administrative capacity, and the evolution of the regional security context.

3. Which are the main strengths characteristic of the current context of negotiations for the Republic of Moldova’s EU accession? Please specify and rank the considerations according to their importance from the perspective of the technical negotiation process, internal political context, administrative capacities, internal socio-economic developments, as well as the regional security context.

Stability and pro-European political commitment of the current government;
EU’s commitment to eastern expansion and supporting Moldova’s reforms.

4. Which are the weaknesses characteristic of the current context of negotiations for the Republic of Moldova's EU accession? Please specify and rank the considerations according to their importance from the perspective of the technical negotiation process, internal political context, internal administrative capacities, internal socio-economic developments, as well as the regional security context.

Limited administrative capacities;

Internal political instability;

Vulnerabilities in the regional security context.

5. What opportunities can the Republic of Moldova benefit from in the current context of negotiations? Please specify and rank the considerations according to their importance from the perspective of the technical negotiation process, internal political context, internal administrative capacities, internal socio-economic developments, as well as the regional security context.

Financial and technical support from the EU;

Stimulation of democratic reforms and the rule of law;

Economic development and integration into the European Single Market;

Strengthening national security through strategic partnerships.

6. What threats could influence the negotiation process and subsequently the actual accession of the Republic of Moldova to the EU? Please specify and rank the considerations according to their importance from the perspective of the technical negotiation process, internal political context, internal administrative capacities, internal socio-economic developments, as well as the regional security context.

No answer

7. What role should Romania play in conducting negotiations and specific processes for Moldova's effective EU accession? Please specify and rank the considerations according to their importance from the perspective of the technical negotiation process, administrative capacities, and regional security context.

External negative pressures and influences;

Internal political instability;

Economic vulnerabilities and financial risks;

Fragile regional security.

8. What can Romania offer to support Moldova's EU accession negotiations and its effective preparation for EU member status? Please specify and rank the considerations according to their importance from the perspective of the technical negotiation process, administrative capacities, and regional security context.

Active diplomatic support at the EU level;

Transfer of expertise and best practices;

Support for strengthening regional security;

Financial support and joint development programs;

Promotion of common cultural and identity interests in the European space through joint cultural and educational projects.

9. What public communication elements should the authorities in the Republic of Moldova apply in promoting the European integration process? Please specify a maximum of 3 strategic aspects to enhance public communication in terms of transparency, regularity, consistency, and context adequacy.

Transparency and continuous information: Communication about the progress of the integration process should be constant, accessible, and detailed, including periodic updates on the implementation of reforms and concrete benefits for citizens. This helps increase public trust in the authorities' efforts and removes uncertainties through clear, fact-based explanations. Tailored and targeted messages for different public categories: Authorities should develop diverse information campaigns with clear messages adapted to the interests and needs of each population segment, from young people to rural and urban areas, entrepreneurs, professionals in administration, etc. This ensures relevance and accessibility, increasing public support for European integration. Consistency and clarity in presenting the benefits of integration: Communication should emphasize the short- and long-term benefits of accession, such as economic growth, improvement of public services, and enhanced security. This consistent and positive message helps form a coherent image of the European future, strengthening citizens' trust in the advantages of the integration process.

Thank you for your support.

ANNEX 1

INTERVIEW C:

1. Is it feasible for the Republic of Moldova to join the EU by 2030? Please provide a maximum of 3 arguments to support or oppose this perspective.

Certainly, it is very feasible because there is the necessary political will both in Brussels and Chişinău. The process of transposing EU legislation into national law is very active, and there is massive public support for the European integration process.

2. Which of the following possible scenarios can be considered appropriate for the current context? Please choose one scenario or specify an alternative scenario.

- Scenario 1: The Republic of Moldova will join the EU by 2030
- Scenario 2: The Republic of Moldova will join together with Ukraine, but not by 2030
- Scenario 3: The Republic of Moldova and Ukraine will begin accession negotiations together, which will continue indefinitely, without clear temporal prospects for accession
- Scenario 4: The Republic of Moldova and Ukraine will be included in a buffer zone between the EU (and NATO) and the Russian Federation, no longer having real prospects for EU accession
- Scenario 5: The Republic of Moldova will not join the EU. The EU decides to indefinitely freeze the negotiation process with the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine, and the two countries will effectively return to the Eastern Partnership countries' group
- Other scenario (please specify)
- Please briefly argue the selected scenario from the following criteria: political vision, the complexity of the negotiation and pre-accession process; resistance to change; evolution of EU relations with the Russian Federation or NATO, respectively the USA with the Russian Federation; the evolution of Russia's military incursions in Ukraine.

By 2030, the regional context offers favourable premises and windows of opportunity for the Republic of Moldova to join the EU.

3. Which are the main strengths characterizing the current context of negotiations for the Republic of Moldova's EU accession? Please specify and order the considerations based on their importance from the perspective of the technical negotiation process, the internal political context, administrative capacities, internal socio-economic developments, as well as the regional security context.

Moldova's strengths include the political firmness to advance the process, deepening the necessary structural reforms, the involvement of external assistance in areas where internal resources are limited, strengthening multidimensional security (energy, economic, financial, etc.), implementing EU sectoral standards, fortifying bilateral dialogue with EU member states, multi-faceted support, and the transfer of accumulated experience from Romania.

4. Which are the weaknesses characteristic of the current context of negotiations for the Republic of Moldova's EU accession? Please specify and order the considerations based on their importance from the perspective of the technical negotiation process, the internal political context, internal administrative capacities, internal socio-economic developments, as well as the regional security context.

Weaknesses would include the lack of qualified/prepared human resources in the public sector, the frequent turnover of staff, which affects the continuity of files, the fragmentation of approaches by different political groups based on geopolitical criteria, the massive presence of misinformation influencing public opinion, corruption of citizens by bad-faith actors, and a non-transparent and unfair justice system.

5. What are the opportunities that the Republic of Moldova can benefit from in the current context of negotiations? Please specify and order the considerations based on their importance from the perspective of the technical negotiation process, the internal political context, internal administrative capacities, internal socio-economic developments, as well as the regional security context.

We have finally obtained the possibility to connect and move forward on the accession vector, following a favourable political and regional context. The benefits already felt are evident: increased living standards and wages, infrastructure modernization, increased investment rates and external development funds, strengthening informational and energy security, assistance from strategic partners in the implementation of the committed structural reforms, etc.

6. What threats can influence the negotiation process and the subsequent actual accession of the Republic of Moldova to the EU? Please specify and order the considerations based on their importance from the perspective of the technical negotiation process, the internal political context, internal administrative capacities, internal socio-economic developments, as well as the regional security context.

Negative outcomes from the bloody war in Ukraine and/or the extension of military insecurity hotspots onto the territory of the Republic of Moldova, changes in internal and external political dynamics, fuelling tensions and instabilities

from external malicious actors, as well as, of course, failure to meet deadlines and deliverables in Chişinău.

7. What role should Romania play in conducting the negotiations and processes specific to the Republic of Moldova's effective accession to the EU?

Please specify and order the considerations based on their importance from the perspective of the technical negotiation process, administrative capacities, as well as the regional security context.

As an EU member state, which has accumulated vast experience in implementing community policies, and as the Republic of Moldova's primary strategic partner, Romania's role is paramount. It will not only provide multi-dimensional assistance, including sectoral experts, but also promote and guide the Republic of Moldova in all relevant forums and efforts, as Greece did for Cyprus, which, like Moldova, faces an unresolved territorial conflict.

8. What can Romania offer to support the Republic of Moldova's EU accession negotiations and the effective preparation of Moldova for EU membership?

Please specify and order the considerations based on their importance from the perspective of the technical negotiation process, administrative capacities, as well as the regional security context.

Romania can offer many things: lessons learned and positive experiences in the European integration process, continuous professional training for Republic Moldova's public officials, public information campaigns on the benefits of EU integration, financial and material assistance, support in strengthening the country's security.

9. What elements of public communication should be applied by the authorities in the Republic of Moldova to promote the European integration process?

Please specify up to 3 strategic aspects in order to enhance public communication, considering transparency, rhythm, consistency, and appropriateness to the context, etc.

It is crucial to actively and preventively explain public policy intentions, with arguments on the advantages they offer, preparing public opinion for necessary transformations and healing, and applying efficient tools for preventing and combating toxic narratives and misinformation.

Thank you for your support.

ANNEX 1

INTERVIEW D

1. Is it feasible for the Republic of Moldova to join the EU by 2030? Please provide a maximum of 3 arguments to support or contradict this perspective.

There are real chances for the Republic of Moldova to join the European Union by 2030. This is due to the support of the European Union and the active desire for expansion. On the other hand, the citizens of Moldova demonstrated in the previous referendum that they see their future within the European Union. Additionally, other external factors, such as the war in Ukraine, further accelerate the accession process.

2. Which of the following possible scenarios can be considered adequate for the current context? Please select a single scenario or specify an alternative scenario.

- Scenario 1: The Republic of Moldova will join the EU by 2030
- Scenario 2: The Republic of Moldova will join along with Ukraine, but not by 2030
- Scenario 3: The Republic of Moldova and Ukraine will begin accession negotiations together, which will continue indefinitely, without clear timeframes for accession
- Scenario 4: The Republic of Moldova and Ukraine will be included in a buffer zone between the EU, NATO, and the Russian Federation, with no real prospects of EU accession
- Scenario 5: The Republic of Moldova will not join the EU. The EU will decide to indefinitely freeze the negotiation process with the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine, and the two countries will effectively return to the group of partner countries within the Eastern Partnership
- Other scenario (please specify)
- Please briefly argue the selected scenario from the perspective of the following criteria: political vision, the complexity of the negotiation and pre-accession process; resistance to change; the evolution of EU relations with the Russian Federation or NATO, respectively the USA with the Russian Federation; the evolution of Russia's military incursion into Ukraine.

Political vision – there is a political consensus in the Republic of Moldova regarding European integration, and the support of the majority of political parties, as well as civil society, provides a favourable framework for continuing the necessary reforms for accession.

Complexity of the negotiation and pre-accession process – although the accession process is complex and involves numerous reforms, Moldova has made significant progress in recent years, implementing reforms in

the fields of justice, anti-corruption, and human rights. These progressions can accelerate negotiations, especially with the support of the EU. **Resistance to change** – the citizens of the Republic of Moldova have shown a strong desire to align with European standards, which reduces resistance to change. This social dynamic can support the government in implementing the necessary reforms.

Evolution of EU relations with the Russian Federation – tensions between the EU and Russia have increased, particularly due to the conflict in Ukraine. The EU is motivated to expand its influence in the region, including in the Republic of Moldova, to counterbalance Russia's influence.

3. Which are the main strengths of the current context of negotiations for the Republic of Moldova's accession to the EU? Please specify and rank the considerations according to their importance from the perspective of the technical negotiation process, internal political context, administrative capacities, internal socio-economic developments, and the security context in the region.

Internal political support;
Progress in structural reforms;
International support;
Socio-economic context;
Administrative capacities.

4. Which are the weaknesses characteristic of the current context of negotiations for the Republic of Moldova's accession to the EU? Please specify and rank the considerations according to their importance from the perspective of the technical negotiation process, internal political context, internal administrative capacities, internal socio-economic developments, and the security context in the region.

Internal political instability;
Persistent corruption;
Socio-economic difficulties;
Instable security context;
Lack of effective communication.

5. What are the opportunities that the Republic of Moldova can benefit from in the current context of negotiations? Please specify and rank the considerations according to their importance from the perspective of the technical negotiation process, internal political context, internal administrative capacities, internal socio-economic developments, and the security context in the region.

Increased international support;

Access to EU funds;

Strengthening bilateral relations;

Attracting foreign investments;

Improving living standards;

Stabilizing regional security.

6. What threats could influence the negotiation process and the eventual effective accession of the Republic of Moldova to the EU? Please specify and rank the considerations according to their importance from the perspective of the technical negotiation process, internal political context, internal administrative capacities, internal socio-economic developments, and the security context in the region.

Internal political instability;

External influence from the Russian Federation;

Endemic corruption;

Regional tensions;

Lack of administrative capacities;

Lack of citizen trust in institutions and in the integration process.

7. What role should Romania play in the negotiation process and in the specific processes of the effective accession of the Republic of Moldova to the EU? Please specify and rank the considerations according to their importance from the perspective of the technical negotiation process, administrative capacities, and the security context in the region.

The role that Romania should have in the negotiation process and the effective accession process of the Republic of Moldova to the EU is essential. Romania should support the Republic of Moldova within European institutions, promoting the country's European agenda and facilitating dialogue with other member states. It can also provide technical expertise and experience in implementing the necessary reforms, thus helping to strengthen Moldova's administrative capacities.

Romania's involvement in bilateral projects and development initiatives can assist the Republic of Moldova in meeting the accession criteria. Additionally, Romania should play an active role in ensuring regional security, collaborating with the Republic of Moldova and the EU to counter external threats. Moreover, Romania can help strengthen the Republic of Moldovan citizens' trust in the European integration process through informational campaigns and cultural exchanges.

8. What can Romania offer to support the EU accession negotiations of the Republic of Moldova and to effectively prepare Moldova for EU membership status? Please specify and rank the considerations according to their importance from the perspective of the technical negotiation process, administrative capacities, and the security context in the region.

Romania can offer significant support for the EU accession negotiations of the Republic of Moldova by facilitating dialogue with European institutions and lobbying for Moldovan interests within the Union. It can also contribute to the development of the Republic of Moldova's administrative capacities through training and knowledge transfer programs, helping to implement the necessary reforms. Romania can financially support infrastructure and development projects that will ease Moldova's integration into European standards. In terms of security, Romania can collaborate with the Republic of Moldova to strengthen defence and security capacities, contributing to regional stability. Additionally, Romania can promote cultural and educational exchanges that will strengthen the ties between the two countries and support citizens' confidence in the European integration process.

9. What public communication elements should the authorities in the Republic of Moldova apply in promoting the European integration process? Please specify a maximum of 3 strategic aspects to enhance public communication from the perspective of transparency, rhythm, consistency, and contextual adequacy.

The authorities in the Republic of Moldova should implement a public communication strategy that prioritizes transparency, providing clear and accessible information about the benefits of European integration and the progress made. It is important to maintain a consistent rhythm in communication, organizing regular campaigns and updates on ongoing reforms, so citizens remain well-informed and involved. Consistency in messaging is essential, ensuring that all institutions communicate the same vision and objectives related to European integration. Additionally, authorities should adapt their communication to the current socio-economic context, addressing citizens' concerns and responding to questions about the impact of integration on daily life. Active involvement of civil

society and the media in the communication process can increase the credibility of the messages and build stronger public support for European integration.

Thank you for your support.

ANNEX 1

INTERVIEW E

1. Is it feasible for the Republic of Moldova to join the EU by 2030? Please provide a maximum of 3 arguments supporting or contradicting this perspective.

The perspective of the Republic of Moldova joining the EU by 2030 is quite uncertain, given the complexity of the necessary reforms and the resistance to change from some internal structures. Moldova faces serious challenges related to strengthening democratic institutions and implementing rigorous anti-corruption policies, which complicate the European path. Moreover, the EU itself is going through a period of internal transformations and hesitation regarding rapid expansion, which reduces the chances of quick accession. Moldova may meet certain objectives, but political instability and major economic challenges may delay or even prevent its accession by 2030.

2. Which of the following possible scenarios can be considered appropriate for the current context? Please choose one scenario or specify an alternative scenario.

- Scenario 1: The Republic of Moldova will join the EU by 2030
- Scenario 2: The Republic of Moldova will join the EU together with Ukraine, but not by 2030
- Scenario 3: The Republic of Moldova and Ukraine will start accession negotiations together, which will continue indefinitely, without clear timelines for accession
- Scenario 4: The Republic of Moldova and Ukraine will be included in a buffer zone between the EU, respectively NATO, and the Russian Federation, with no real prospects for EU accession
- Scenario 5: The Republic of Moldova does not join the EU. The EU decides to indefinitely freeze the negotiation process with the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine, and the two countries effectively return to the status of partner countries in the Eastern Partnership
- Other scenario (please specify)
- Please briefly argue for the selected scenario from the perspective of the following criteria: political vision, complexity of the negotiation and pre-accession process; resistance to change; the evolution of EU relations with the Russian Federation or NATO, respectively the USA with the Russian Federation; the evolution of the Russian Federation's military incursion into Ukraine.

Scenario no 5, where the EU decides to freeze the negotiation process with the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine, can be considered realistic, given the challenges and existing hesitations within the Union regarding rapid expansion. Political

instability in the Republic of Moldova, persistent corruption, and economic issues underline the difficulty of rapid integration, while the conflict in Ukraine adds a dimension of regional insecurity. The EU is cautious about the integration of Eastern Partnership states and may prefer to keep the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine within this partnership, without offering a clear prospect of membership, in order to avoid additional risks and to focus its internal resources.

3. Which are the main strengths characteristic of the current context of negotiations for the Republic of Moldova's EU accession? Please specify and rank the considerations according to their importance from the perspective of the technical negotiation process, internal political context, administrative capacities, internal socio-economic developments, as well as the regional security context.

In the current context of negotiations, the Republic of Moldova's main strengths are limited by political instability and economic challenges. Despite the desire to move towards the EU, Moldova's ability to implement sustainable reforms is affected by fragile governmental structures and a high dependence on external assistance. The lack of a solid economic base limits the capacity for reform and, implicitly, alignment with European standards. Also, the regional situation adds significant external pressure, making the Republic of Moldova's European path even more difficult.

4. Which are the weaknesses characteristic of the current context of negotiations for the Republic of Moldova's EU accession? Please specify and rank the considerations according to their importance from the perspective of the technical negotiation process, internal political context, internal administrative capacities, internal socio-economic developments, as well as the regional security context.

The Republic of Moldova has a series of weaknesses that could hinder its rapid integration into the EU. First, chronic political instability affects the continuity of reforms and the efficient implementation of European policies. Moreover, systemic corruption and the lack of an independent judicial system undermine the Republic of Moldova's credibility with the EU. Limited administrative capacities, alongside a fragile economy dependent on external aid, add further obstacles to accession. These structural problems may lead the EU to consider the Republic of Moldova unprepared for short-term membership and prefer a long-term partnership instead of full integration.

5. What are the opportunities that the Republic of Moldova can benefit from in the current context of negotiations? Please specify and rank the considerations according to their importance from the perspective of the technical negotiation process, internal political context, internal administrative capacities, internal socio-economic developments, as well as the regional security context.

The Republic of Moldova's opportunities are limited by the complexity of the accession requirements and difficult economic conditions. Even though the EU is open to cooperation, the lack of consistent internal support for reforms and economic challenges reduces the Republic of Moldova's ability to fully capitalize on integration opportunities. Furthermore, the tense international context may lead to a more cautious approach from the EU, limiting short-term accession prospects and transforming European integration into a long-term process without immediate guarantees.

6. What threats could influence the negotiation process and subsequent effective accession of the Republic of Moldova to the EU? Please specify and rank the considerations according to their importance from the perspective of the technical negotiation process, internal political context, internal administrative capacities, internal socio-economic developments, as well as the regional security context.

One of the greatest threats is the pressure from the Russian Federation, which opposes the expansion of European influence in the former Soviet space and could attempt to destabilize Moldova politically and economically. Additionally, the Republic of Moldova's dependence on energy imports and its internal economic vulnerabilities may limit its negotiation capacity and ability to adapt to EU requirements. Internally, corruption and political instability represent risks that could significantly delay the accession process.

7. What role should Romania play in the negotiation process and the specific processes of the Republic of Moldova's effective EU accession? Please specify and rank the considerations according to their importance from the perspective of the technical negotiation process, administrative capacities, as well as the regional security context.

Romania should be a supporter of the Republic of Moldova's European path, but the prospects for rapid integration remain uncertain due to the Republic of Moldova's internal economic and political challenges. Romania can provide expertise on reforms, but without internal political stability and strong political will from Republic of Moldova, the effects of this support will be limited. It is important for Romania to maintain cautious diplomatic support and collaborate with the EU to realistically assess the Republic of Moldova's chances of joining.

8. What can Romania offer to support Moldova's EU accession negotiations and to prepare Moldova for full EU membership? Please specify and rank the considerations according to their importance from the perspective of the technical negotiation process, administrative capacities, as well as the regional security context.

Romania can offer expertise and technical support to the Republic of Moldova, but the impact of these efforts depends on Republic of Moldova's capacity to implement the necessary reforms. Romanian assistance may speed up some processes, but without genuine internal commitment from the Republic of Moldova and strong political support, the effects will be limited. Romania can continue to support the Republic of Moldova in European forums, but the accession process largely depends on Moldova's commitment and ability to meet European requirements.

9. What public communication elements should be applied by the authorities in the Republic of Moldova to promote the European integration process? Please specify up to 3 strategically important aspects for improving public communication in terms of transparency, regularity, consistency, and relevance to the context, etc.

The Moldovan authorities' public communication should be realistic and present both the benefits and challenges of the European integration process. It is essential for citizens to be informed not only about the economic and political advantages but also about the necessary structural changes and the potential socio-economic impact. The lack of balanced communication can lead to unrealistic expectations and growing dissatisfaction among the population, especially in the face of difficult reforms.

Thank you for your support.

ANNEX 1

INTERVIEW F

1. Is it feasible for the Republic of Moldova to join the EU by 2030? Please provide max. 3 arguments to support or contradict this perspective.

The Republic of Moldova's objective to join the EU by 2030 is achievable, and European integration opens immense opportunities for the development of research and innovation in the country. Accession to the EU would allow the Republic of Moldova access to European research funds and programs, such as Horizon Europe, thus stimulating collaboration with top academic institutions and companies from across Europe. Moreover, EU support in the field of education and research would allow the Republic of Moldova to develop a high-quality academic system and to strengthen its capacity to attract talent and resources. These initiatives would consolidate the economic and social development of the country and would position the Republic of Moldova as an emerging centre of research and innovation in the region, turning it into a valuable partner for the EU.

2. Which of the following possible scenarios can be considered adequate to the current context? Please choose one scenario or specify an alternative scenario.

- Scenario 1: The Republic of Moldova will join the EU by 2030
- Scenario 2: The Republic of Moldova will join together with Ukraine, but not by 2030
- Scenario 3: The Republic of Moldova and Ukraine will start accession negotiations together, which will continue indefinitely, without having clear time perspectives for accession
- Scenario 4: The Republic of Moldova and Ukraine will be included in a buffer zone between the EU/NATO and the Russian Federation, having no real prospects of EU accession
- Scenario 5: The Republic of Moldova does not join the EU. The EU decides to indefinitely freeze the negotiation process with the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine, and the two countries return de facto to the group of partner countries within the Eastern Partnership
- Other scenario (please specify)
- Please briefly argue the selected scenario from the perspective of the following criteria: political vision, complexity of the negotiation and pre-accession process; resistance to change; evolution of EU relations with the Russian Federation or NATO, respectively the USA with the Russian Federation; evolution of the Russian Federation's military incursion into Ukraine.

Scenario 2, in which the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine join the EU together, but after 2030, offers the Republic of Moldova the opportunity to gradually develop

its research and innovation capacities, preparing to become an active and well-integrated member of the European Union. A prolonged pre-accession process would allow the Republic of Moldova to access European funds and resources dedicated to research, thus consolidating the research infrastructure and promoting collaboration with European universities and research centres. This scenario would contribute to the modernization of the academic field, stimulating innovation and economic development through successful collaborations in future-oriented fields such as information technology, the environment, and public health.

3. Which are the main strengths characteristic of the current context of negotiations for the Republic of Moldova's accession to the EU? Please specify and rank the considerations according to their importance from the perspective of the technical negotiation process, internal political context, internal administrative capacities, internal socio-economic developments, as well as the regional security context.

Among the Republic of Moldova's main strengths are the commitment to European values and the desire to improve the research field through international collaborations. The current context offers the Republic of Moldova the opportunity to access funding programs for the development of research institutions and to attract highly qualified human resources from Europe. In addition, EU support for the reform of the educational and research sectors can stimulate the creation of centres of excellence in the Republic of Moldova, thus facilitating international collaboration and promoting the development of a knowledge-based economy. Thus, the Republic of Moldova can capitalize on its research and innovation potential, becoming a valuable partner in the European space of education and innovation.

4. Which are the weaknesses characteristic of the current context of negotiations for the Republic of Moldova's accession to the EU? Please specify and rank the considerations according to their importance from the perspective of the technical negotiation process, internal political context, internal administrative capacities, internal socio-economic developments, as well as the regional security context.

Among the weaknesses is the lack of a sufficiently well-developed research and development infrastructure to meet EU requirements. However, this shortcoming can be seen as an opportunity for investment and development by accessing European funds dedicated to academic reforms and research institutions. Also, the limited administrative capacity could be improved through strategic partnerships with EU member states, within joint research and innovation projects. Through a strategic approach and increased collaboration with the EU, the Republic of Moldova could turn these weaknesses into competitive advantages, consolidating its long-term position.

5. What opportunities can the Republic of Moldova benefit from in the current context of negotiations? Please specify and rank the considerations according to their importance from the perspective of the technical negotiation process, internal political context, internal administrative capacities, internal socio-economic developments, as well as the regional security context.

The Republic of Moldova has the opportunity to develop its research and innovation system through European funding, which will contribute to the modernization of the educational and research infrastructure. Accession to the EU would open access to collaboration and development programs such as Horizon Europe, facilitating the Republic of Moldova's participation in international research projects. These partnerships can support economic development through innovation, creating opportunities for young researchers and attracting investments in key sectors. The current favourable context offers the Republic of Moldova the chance to become a regional innovation centre, contributing to the growth of the knowledge-based economy and sustainable European integration.

6. What threats may influence the negotiation process and the actual accession of the Republic of Moldova to the EU? Please specify and rank the considerations according to their importance from the perspective of the technical negotiation process, internal political context, internal administrative capacities, internal socio-economic developments, as well as the regional security context.

Among the possible threats is also the lack of a well-established research infrastructure, which may slow the Republic of Moldova's modernization and its alignment with EU standards. However, this threat can be overcome through partnerships and through the European Union's support for strengthening research and innovation capacities. Through investments and international collaborations in the field of education and research, the Republic of Moldova can overcome these difficulties and ensure a solid European path, turning this vulnerability into an opportunity for sustainable development.

7. What role should Romania play in conducting the negotiations and the specific processes of the Republic of Moldova's actual accession to the EU? Please specify and rank the considerations according to their importance from the perspective of the technical negotiation process, administrative capacities, as well as the regional security context.

Romania must play an essential role as a mentor and strategic partner of Moldova in the accession process, placing special emphasis on the development of research and innovation. Collaborations in the field of education and access to European research funds through partnerships with Romania can contribute to

the transformation of the Republic of Moldova's academic system. Romania can support the Republic of Moldova through knowledge transfer and can facilitate access to mobility programs for researchers and students, thus contributing to the formation of a new generation of specialists prepared for European integration.

8. What can Romania offer to support the Republic of Moldova's accession negotiations and the Republic of Moldova's effective preparation for EU member state status? Please specify and rank the considerations according to their importance from the perspective of the technical negotiation process, administrative capacities, as well as the regional security context.

Romania can actively support the Republic of Moldova in its preparation for EU accession, focusing on the development of research and innovation capacities. Through access to joint research programs and through institutional partnerships, Romania can offer the Republic of Moldova resources and knowledge to build a solid and competitive research base. Additionally, cross-border collaboration initiatives in the academic field can stimulate exchanges of expertise and attract talent, thus contributing to the Republic of Moldova's integration into the European research and innovation community.

9. What public communication elements should the authorities of the Republic of Moldova apply in promoting the European integration process? Please specify max. 3 strategically important aspects to improve public communication from the perspective of transparency, frequency, consistency, and contextual adequacy, etc.

To promote European integration, Moldovan authorities should emphasize the development opportunities in research and education, explaining the benefits of collaboration with the EU in these fields. Public messages should be coherent and transparent, detailing how European research and innovation programs can bring significant benefits to Moldovan youth and the academic community. Transparency and the regularity of communication are important to maintain public interest and to build a solid base of support from society, thus favouring a sustainable European path.

Thank you for your support.

ANNEX 1

INTERVIEW G

1. Is it feasible for the Republic of Moldova to join the EU by 2030?

Please provide a maximum of 3 arguments to support or contradict this perspective.

It is feasible only in the context of maintaining the European vector further with the fulfilment of the assumed commitments;

The existence of an integral and independent justice system.

2. Which of the following possible scenarios can be considered appropriate for the current context? Please choose only one scenario or specify an alternative scenario.

- Scenario 1: The Republic of Moldova will join the EU by 2030
- Scenario 2: The Republic of Moldova will join together with Ukraine, but not by 2030
- Scenario 3: The Republic of Moldova and Ukraine will start accession negotiations together, which will continue indefinitely, without clear temporal prospects for accession
- Scenario 4: The Republic of Moldova and Ukraine will be included in a buffer zone between the EU, respectively NATO, and the Russian Federation, no longer having real prospects of EU accession
- Scenario 5: The Republic of Moldova does not join the EU. The EU decides to freeze indefinitely the negotiation process with the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine, and the two countries de facto return to the group of partner countries within the Eastern Partnership
- Other scenario (please specify) Please briefly argue the selected scenario from the perspective of the following criteria: political vision; complexity of the negotiation and pre-accession process; resistance to change; the evolution of EU relations with the Russian Federation or NATO, respectively the USA with the Russian Federation; the evolution of the Russian Federation's military incursion in Ukraine.

It would have been appropriate to complete this questionnaire after the second round of the presidential elections, in order to provide more objective answers based on the election results. the Republic of Moldova's accession to the EU by 2030 will only be possible by fulfilling the assumed commitments, maintaining the European vector, and accelerating reforms.

3. Which are the main strengths characteristic of the current context of negotiations for the Republic of Moldova's accession to the EU? Please specify and order the considerations according to their importance from the perspective of the

technical negotiation process, internal political context, administrative capacities, internal socio-economic developments, as well as the regional security context.

Openness and support of EU institutions and leaders of member states for the Republic of Moldova;

The assumption of firm commitments by the current government;

The regional security context which has driven/accelerated the processes involving the Republic of Moldova's EU accession.

4. Which are the weaknesses characteristic of the current context of negotiations for the Republic of Moldova's accession to the EU? Please specify and order the considerations according to their importance from the perspective of the technical negotiation process, internal political context, internal administrative capacities, internal socio-economic developments, as well as the regional security context.

The war in Ukraine;

The geopolitical context (including the frozen conflict);

The hybrid war carried out by Russia on Moldovan territory (disinformation, spreading false messages about EU integration, involvement in election fraud, etc.);

Stagnation of judicial reform;

Corruption;

Political instability;

Reduced capacities of central and local public authorities and institutions;

Personnel turnover;

Insufficient information provided to the population, especially in rural areas, regarding the benefits of EU integration;

Insufficient communication about the support granted by the EU to the Republic of Moldova.

5. What opportunities can the Republic of Moldova benefit from in the current context of negotiations? Please specify and order the considerations according to their importance from the perspective of the technical negotiation process, internal political context, internal administrative capacities, internal socio-economic developments, as well as the regional security context.

Judicial reform, the fight against corruption;

Consolidated and resilient institutions and authorities;

Development and economic growth;

Developed infrastructure, attraction of investments;

Food quality control;

Reform of the educational, healthcare, and social protection systems;

Increase in salaries and pensions;

Transformation/Development/Attractiveness of the Republic of Moldova which could indirectly lead to the peaceful resolution of the Transnistrian conflict;

Respect for citizens' rights and freedoms;

Social cohesion;

Waste management, environmental protection, population education in this regard.

6. What threats can influence the negotiation process and later the actual accession of the Republic of Moldova to the EU? Please specify and order the considerations according to their importance from the perspective of the technical negotiation process, internal political context, internal administrative capacities, internal socio-economic developments, as well as the regional security context.

The results of the elections in the Republic of Moldova that would promote the candidate supported by Moscow, which would imply at least a scenario similar to that of Georgia;

Hybrid war;

Stagnation of reforms;

Corruption;

Reduced capacities.

7. What role should Romania have in the conduct of negotiations and the specific processes of the Republic of Moldova's effective accession to the EU? Please specify and order the considerations according to their importance from the perspective of the technical negotiation process, administrative capacities, as well as the regional security context.

Lobbying and advocacy in European institutions in favour of the Republic of Moldova;

Mediating certain discussions, facilitating dialogue with some EU member states sceptical about the Republic of Moldova's accession.

8. What can Romania offer to support the EU accession negotiations of the Republic of Moldova and for the effective preparation of the Republic of Moldova for EU member state status? Please specify and order the considerations according to their importance from the perspective of the technical negotiation process, administrative capacities, as well as the regional security context.

Providing security guarantees to the Republic of Moldova considering the significant number of Moldovan citizens who also have Romanian citizenship;

Exchange of experience, sharing of best practices and lessons learned during the accession process;

Technical assistance;

Strengthening the capacities of public servants at central and local level;

Cooperation in the field of diaspora relations, actions to strengthen the Moldovan diaspora and Romanians everywhere, through joint projects and initiatives.

9. What public communication elements should be applied by the authorities of the Republic of Moldova in promoting the European integration process? Please specify up to 3 strategic aspects for improving public communication in terms of transparency, regularity, consistency, and adequacy to the context, etc.

Honest dialogue with citizens so they perceive the importance of their involvement in the country's transformation process;

Strengthening trust-based relations with the media that would transmit the messages to the population;

Communicating the benefits of EU integration for citizens, with concrete examples, depending on education level, living environment, etc.;

Strengthening communication with civil society and pro-European extra-parliamentary parties;

The method of communication must present the authorities as bearers of the common interests of the population;

Promotion of both public institutions and the services they offer to the public.

Thank you for your support.

ANNEX 1

INTERVIEW H

1. Is it feasible for the Republic of Moldova to join the EU by 2030?

Please provide max. 3 arguments that support or contradict this perspective.

The integration of Moldova into the European Union by 2030 can be considered an ambitious but achievable perspective if economic and institutional reforms continue at an accelerated pace. In particular, the Republic of Moldova's ability to implement democratic reforms is an essential indicator, and EU support, materialized through financing programs and technical support, is a decisive factor. In addition, the tense geopolitical context determines the European Union to reaffirm its commitment to the countries of the Eastern Partnership, and the Republic of Moldova benefits from this openness. This framework offers the country the opportunity to reach the necessary standards and to demonstrate the ability to be a reliable partner for the EU.

2. Which of the following possible scenarios can be considered appropriate for the current context? Please choose only one scenario or specify an alternative scenario.

- Scenario 1: The Republic of Moldova will join the EU by 2030
- Scenario 2: The Republic of Moldova will join together with Ukraine, but not by 2030
- Scenario 3: The Republic of Moldova and Ukraine will begin accession negotiations together, which will continue indefinitely, without clear temporal perspectives for accession
- Scenario 4: The Republic of Moldova and Ukraine will be included in a buffer zone between the EU, respectively NATO, and the Russian Federation, no longer having real prospects of joining the EU
- Scenario 5: The Republic of Moldova does not join the EU. The EU decides to freeze indefinitely the negotiation process with the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine, and the two countries de facto return to the contingent of partner countries within the Eastern Partnership
- Alternative scenario (please specify)
- Please briefly argue the selected scenario from the perspective of the following criteria: political vision, complexity of the negotiation and pre-accession process; resistance to change; evolution of EU relations with the Russian Federation or NATO, respectively the USA with the Russian Federation; evolution of the military incursion of the Russian Federation in Ukraine.

A simultaneous accession with Ukraine, but after 2030, seems more realistic, considering the complexity of the integration process and the numerous regional challenges. Since both countries share the same geopolitical challenges, a

partnership in this process would facilitate support from the EU. This scenario also considers the resistance of some EU member states to rapid expansion, so both countries could benefit from a synchronized approach, with clear but more cautious prospects for accession.

3. Which are the main strengths characteristic of the current context of negotiations for the Republic of Moldova's accession to the EU? Please specify and rank the considerations according to their importance from the perspective of the technical negotiation process, internal political context, administrative capacities, internal socio-economic developments, as well as the regional security context.

Among the Republic of Moldova's strengths are the progress in consolidating the rule of law and democratic institutions, which ensures better alignment with European standards. At the same time, the constant support of the EU in terms of technical and financial assistance has contributed to the strengthening of the country's administrative capacities, and internal security benefits from NATO support, thus being protected from potential external threats. The Republic of Moldova's economic sustainability is also supported by these progresses, making it a strong candidate for the EU.

4. Which are the weaknesses characteristic of the current context of negotiations for the Republic of Moldova's accession to the EU? Please specify and rank the considerations according to their importance from the perspective of the technical negotiation process, internal political context, internal administrative capacities, internal socio-economic developments, as well as the regional security context.

Among the major weaknesses is the lack of solid administrative capacity, which hinders the rapid and efficient implementation of reforms. Socio-economic instability is also a limiting factor, complicating the adaptation to the EU's economic requirements. In addition, the Republic of Moldova remains vulnerable from a security point of view, due to Russian external influence and the nearby conflict, aspects which place pressure on the authorities and slow the progress toward accession.

5. What opportunities can the Republic of Moldova benefit from in the current context of negotiations? Please specify and rank the considerations according to their importance from the perspective of the technical negotiation process, internal political context, internal administrative capacities, internal socio-economic developments, as well as the regional security context.

At present, the Republic of Moldova can benefit from increased support from the EU, which is reflected in funding and assistance programs for institutional development. Closer integration into European economic networks offers the

Republic of Moldova an opportunity for economic growth and social stability. In addition, the regional security context favours the Republic of Moldova, which is seen as a strategic partner by the EU, and this contributes to strengthening defence and security capacities.

6. What threats can influence the negotiation process and subsequently the effective accession of the Republic of Moldova to the EU? Please specify and rank the considerations according to their importance from the perspective of the technical negotiation process, internal political context, internal administrative capacities, internal socio-economic developments, as well as the regional security context.

Among the threats that can affect the accession process are the interventions of the Russian Federation, which, through political and economic influences, can create internal tensions. At the same time, economic uncertainty and regional instability are risks that may discourage the European Union in its commitment to enlargement. Another threat is represented by the possible internal political instability, which could delay or hinder the implementation of the necessary reforms.

7. What role should Romania have in conducting negotiations and the specific processes of the Republic of Moldova's effective accession to the EU? Please specify and rank the considerations according to their importance from the perspective of the technical negotiation process, administrative capacities, as well as the regional security context.

Romania can act as a mentor for the Republic of Moldova in the integration process, offering technical assistance and sharing its accession experience. In addition, Romania has the responsibility to support the Republic of Moldova in European forums, advocating for a favourable EU approach regarding enlargement to the East.

8. What can Romania offer to support the EU accession negotiations of the Republic of Moldova and to effectively prepare the Republic of Moldova for EU member state status? Please specify and rank the considerations according to their importance from the perspective of the technical negotiation process, administrative capacities, as well as the regional security context.

Romania has the capacity to support the Republic of Moldova's EU accession process through its expertise in negotiation processes and the experience accumulated as an EU member state. Technical and financial assistance in fields such as justice, education, and rural development can facilitate the Republic of Moldova's modernization process. Romania can also offer support in strengthening

the Republic of Moldova's administrative capacities, necessary for adapting to EU norms.

9. What elements of public communication should be applied by the authorities of the Republic of Moldova in promoting the European integration process? Please specify max. 3 aspects of strategic importance in order to make public communication more effective from the perspective of transparency, rhythm, consistency, and context adequacy, etc.

Authorities must develop public communication that is transparent and accessible, in which the progress of European integration is clearly explained, and the benefits of accession are well outlined. Message consistency, rhythm, and its adaptation to the general public will ensure stronger support and broader awareness of the benefits of European integration.

Thank you for your support.

ANNEX 1

INTERVIEW I

1. Is it feasible that by 2030 the Republic of Moldova will join the EU? Please provide max. 3 arguments to support or contradict this perspective.

Despite numerous challenges, the accession of the Republic of Moldova to the European Union by 2030 is a feasible objective due to a combination of favourable factors and firm commitment from the authorities. In recent years, the Republic of Moldova has implemented fundamental reforms in the fields of justice, rule of law, and democratic governance. For example, recent reforms in justice, targeting the independence of the judicial system and combating high-level corruption, are in line with the Copenhagen criteria and show that the Republic of Moldova is prepared to embrace EU standards. At the same time, constant financial and technical support from the EU has allowed the Republic of Moldova to develop its administrative capacities and modernize its infrastructure, essential for European integration. The current international context, marked by tensions with the Russian Federation, has determined the EU to prioritize stability in the region, and Moldova, which has adopted a pro-European stance, benefits from extensive support. Moreover, public support for EU accession is a central element, as it establishes a solid basis for internal political support and contributes to the social stability necessary for the implementation of reforms. Thus, with continued commitment from the authorities and with EU support, the Republic of Moldova's accession by 2030 becomes a realistic and achievable goal.

2. Which of the following possible scenarios can be considered appropriate for the current context? Please choose only one scenario or specify an alternative scenario.

- Scenario 1: The Republic of Moldova will join the EU by 2030
- Scenario 2: The Republic of Moldova will join together with Ukraine, but not by 2030
- Scenario 3: The Republic of Moldova and Ukraine will begin accession negotiations together, which will continue indefinitely, without clear time prospects for accession
- Scenario 4: The Republic of Moldova and Ukraine will be included in a buffer zone between the EU and NATO, and the Russian Federation, having no real prospects of joining the EU
- Scenario 5: The Republic of Moldova does not join the EU. The EU decides to indefinitely freeze the negotiation process with the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine, and the two countries de facto return to the group of partner countries within the Eastern Partnership
- Alternative scenario (please specify)

- Please briefly argue the selected scenario from the perspective of the following criteria: political vision, complexity of the negotiation and pre-accession process; resistance to change; evolution of EU relations with the Russian Federation or NATO, respectively the USA with the Russian Federation; the evolution of the Russian Federation's military incursion in Ukraine.

The most appropriate scenario for the Republic of Moldova would be accession to the European Union by 2030, however, this perspective depends on the continuous progress of reforms and the geopolitical dynamics of the region. Moldova has taken important steps toward European integration, and the current geopolitical context favours this pro-European orientation. However, for this scenario to become reality, the country must maintain a steady pace in implementing reforms and ensure internal political stability.

3. Which are the main strengths characteristic of the current context of negotiations for the Republic of Moldova's accession to the EU? Please specify and order the considerations according to their importance from the perspective of the technical negotiation process, internal political context, administrative capacities, internal socio-economic developments, as well as the regional security context.

Moldova's capacity to implement legislative reforms and to consolidate democratic institutions remains a strength, thus ensuring alignment with EU values and standards. One of Moldova's most important strengths is its firm commitment to European values, demonstrated through the implementation of democratic and economic reforms. In addition, administrative capacity has been improved, which supports the integration process. Last but not least, increased regional security through strategic partnerships with the EU and NATO represents a considerable advantage.

4. Which are the weaknesses characteristic of the current context of negotiations for the Republic of Moldova's accession to the EU? Please specify and order the considerations according to their importance from the perspective of the technical negotiation process, internal political context, internal administrative capacities, internal socio-economic developments, as well as the regional security context.

The current context of negotiations for the Republic of Moldova's accession to the EU highlights several significant weaknesses that complicate the integration process. Political instability is a major barrier, which affects not only the continuity of reforms but also the general perception of the EU regarding Republic of Moldova's commitment to European democratic values. Similarly, the limited administrative capacity of public institutions represents a fundamental issue: from resource management to the application of European norms, these institutions face structural difficulties that affect governance efficiency. Economic vulnerability, marked by a fragile economy and lack of sustainable resources, further emphasizes

the challenges, while the regional security context adds additional pressure. The influence of the Russian Federation in the region and in the Republic of Moldova's internal politics, as well as the conflict in Ukraine, amplify insecurity and create a state of uncertainty that affects the European trajectory. These weaknesses require special attention, and Moldova must invest resources to overcome them if it wants to reach its goal of EU accession.

5. What opportunities can the Republic of Moldova benefit from in the current context of negotiations? Please specify and order the considerations according to their importance from the perspective of the technical negotiation process, internal political context, internal administrative capacities, internal socio-economic developments, as well as the regional security context.

The Republic of Moldova has a series of major opportunities in the context of negotiations for EU accession, which can accelerate the integration process and contribute to the country's development. Firstly, increased economic cooperation with the EU allows access to structural funds and direct investments, which are essential for infrastructure development and increasing productive capacities. Technical assistance programs offered by the EU support Moldova in the reform process, modernizing the public system and improving administrative capacity. At the same time, in the context of regional security, the EU sees the Republic of Moldova as a reliable partner in efforts to stabilize the region. Through this strategic positioning, the Republic of Moldova benefits from support to strengthen defence and increase resistance to destabilizing external influences. Another opportunity lies in deeper alignment with the European market, which allows Moldovan products to access broader and more stable markets, contributing to economic development and job creation. These opportunities provide Moldova with the necessary framework to transform into a modern, consolidated, and secure European state.

6. What threats can influence the negotiation process and later the effective accession of the Republic of Moldova to the EU? Please specify and order the considerations according to their importance from the perspective of the technical negotiation process, internal political context, internal administrative capacities, internal socio-economic developments, as well as the regional security context.

A major threat is the external influence of the Russian Federation, which can destabilize Moldova's internal political process and affect the European trajectory. Also, regional instability and conflicts can undermine national security and limit progress toward the EU. Moreover, socio-economic difficulties can generate resistance to the reforms necessary for accession.

7. What role should Romania have in conducting negotiations and specific processes of the effective accession of the Republic of Moldova to the EU? Please specify and order the considerations according to their importance from the perspective of the technical negotiation process, administrative capacities, as well as the regional security context.

Romania must play the role of a strong advocate for Moldova within the EU, promoting its integration and ensuring that Moldova's voice is heard in Brussels. Additionally, Romania can support Moldova through the transfer of know-how and expertise in the field of administrative reforms and in adapting to European standards.

8. What can Romania offer to support the EU accession negotiations of the Republic of Moldova and to effectively prepare the Republic of Moldova for EU member state status? Please specify and order the considerations according to their importance from the perspective of the technical negotiation process, administrative capacities, as well as the regional security context.

Romania can contribute to the success of Moldova's integration process through its diplomatic support and by offering expertise in the implementation of necessary reforms. The technical assistance Romania can provide helps modernize public administration and align with European standards. In addition, collaboration on infrastructure projects can contribute to economic development and bring Moldova closer to the EU.

9. What public communication elements should be applied by the authorities of the Republic of Moldova in promoting the process of European integration? Please specify max. 3 aspects of strategic importance in order to make public communication more effective from the perspective of transparency, regularity, consistency, and adequacy to context, etc.

A strategically important aspect is ensuring continuous transparency regarding the benefits and progress achieved in the integration process. The consistency of messages and their adaptation to the needs of different social groups contributes to building broad public support for this process.

Thank you for your support.

ANNEX 1 INTERVIEW J

1. Is it feasible for the Republic of Moldova to join the EU by 2030? Please provide a maximum of 3 arguments that support or contradict this perspective.

The accession of the Republic of Moldova to the European Union by 2030 is feasible; Arguments in support of this perspective:

Stability of institutions that guarantee democracy, the rule of law, human rights, and the protection of minorities;

Adoption of EU legislation, which is in progress;

General support for European integration has increased in recent years, which was demonstrated at the recent Referendum.

2. Which of the following possible scenarios can be considered appropriate for the current context? Please choose a single scenario or specify an alternative scenario.

- Scenario 1: The Republic of Moldova will join the EU by 2030
- Scenario 2: The Republic of Moldova will join together with Ukraine, but not by 2030
- Scenario 3: The Republic of Moldova and Ukraine will begin accession negotiations together, which will continue indefinitely, without clear temporal perspectives of accession
- Scenario 4: The Republic of Moldova and Ukraine will be included in a buffer zone between the EU, respectively NATO, and the Russian Federation, no longer having real prospects of EU accession
- Scenario 5: The Republic of Moldova does not join the EU. The EU decides to freeze indefinitely the negotiation process with the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine, and the two countries de facto return to the contingent of partner countries within the Eastern Partnership
- Alternative scenario (please specify)
- Please briefly argue the selected scenario from the perspective of the following criteria: political vision, complexity of the negotiation and pre-accession process; resistance to change; evolution of EU relations with the Russian Federation or NATO, respectively the USA with the Russian Federation; the evolution of the Russian Federation's military incursion into Ukraine.

Accession by 2030 is possible if political stability, European support, and sustained efforts in implementing reforms are maintained.

3. Which are the main strengths characteristic of the current context of negotiations for the accession of the Republic of Moldova to the EU? Please specify and rank the considerations in terms of their importance from the perspective of the technical negotiation process, internal political context, administrative capacities, internal socio-economic developments, as well as the regional security context.

The Association Agreement with the EU and the Free Trade Area;

Internal political support and political stability. Significant external support;

Population support for European integration;

Strategic position and cultural ties.

4. Which are the weaknesses characteristic of the current context of negotiations and the accession of the Republic of Moldova to the EU? Please specify and rank the considerations in terms of their importance from the perspective of the technical negotiation process, internal political context, internal administrative capacities, internal socio-economic developments, as well as the regional security context.

Political instability;

Issues related to corruption;

Economic problems and dependence on external resources;

Judicial reforms and lack of trust in the justice system.

5. What opportunities can the Republic of Moldova benefit from in the current context of negotiations? Please specify and rank the considerations in terms of their importance from the perspective of the technical negotiation process, internal political context, internal administrative capacities, internal socio-economic developments, as well as the regional security context.

Increased access to EU markets through deepening economic relations with the EU;

External financing and support for reforms;

Strengthening energy security;

Improvement of international image.

6. What threats may influence the negotiation process and later the effective accession of the Republic of Moldova to the EU? Please specify and rank the considerations in terms of their importance from the perspective of the technical negotiation process, internal political context, internal administrative capacities, internal socio-economic developments, as well as the regional security context.

- Internal political instability;
- Issues of corruption and governance;
- Geopolitical influence of Russia;
- Resistance to change from certain groups in society.

7. What role should Romania have in the conduct of negotiations and the specific processes of effective accession of the Republic of Moldova to the EU? Please specify and rank the considerations in terms of their importance from the perspective of the technical negotiation process, administrative capacities, as well as the regional security context.

- Political and diplomatic supporter;
- Technical and administrative support;
- Strengthening economic and infrastructure ties;
- Promoting cultural and educational cooperation.

8. What can Romania offer to support the EU accession negotiations of the Republic of Moldova and to effectively prepare the Republic of Moldova for the status of EU member state? Please specify and rank the considerations in terms of their importance from the perspective of the technical negotiation process, administrative capacities, as well as the regional security context.

- Technical assistance and institutional expertise;
- Investments in infrastructure;
- Partnerships in education and training;
- Cooperation in the field of energy security;
- Active diplomatic support;
- Local and regional development projects.

9. What public communication elements should be applied by the authorities of the Republic of Moldova in promoting the process of European integration? Please specify max. 3 strategically important aspects to improve public communication from the perspective of transparency, regularity, consistency, and adequacy to the context, etc.

- Continuous information campaigns;
- Information and debate events;
- Transparency and clarity in presenting progress;

Creating a sense of European belonging;

Prompt response to disinformation.

Thank you for your support.

ANNEX 1

INTERVIEW K

1. Is it feasible for the Republic of Moldova to join the EU by 2030? Please provide max. 3 arguments that support or contradict this perspective.

The accession of the Republic of Moldova to the European Union by 2030 is an achievable target, given the country's firm commitment to democratic and economic reforms. Essential reforms, such as strengthening the rule of law and fighting corruption, have brought Moldova closer to European standards, and the EU actively supports this process. In addition, Moldovan citizens have clearly expressed their desire to be part of the European family, and this public support is a key element for the political stability required on the European path.

2. Which of the following possible scenarios can be considered suitable for the current context? Please choose only one scenario or specify an alternative scenario.

- Scenario 1: The Republic of Moldova will join the EU by 2030
- Scenario 2: The Republic of Moldova will join together with Ukraine, but not by 2030
- Scenario 3: The Republic of Moldova and Ukraine will start accession negotiations together, which will continue indefinitely without clear timelines for accession
- Scenario 4: The Republic of Moldova and Ukraine will be included in a buffer zone between the EU/NATO and the Russian Federation, with no real prospects of EU accession
- Scenario 5: The Republic of Moldova will not join the EU. The EU decides to indefinitely freeze the negotiation process with Moldova and Ukraine, and both countries de facto return to the contingent of partner countries within the Eastern Partnership
- Other scenario (please specify)
- Please briefly argue the selected scenario from the perspective of the following criteria: political vision; complexity of the negotiation and pre-accession process; resistance to change; evolution of EU–Russia or NATO, and respectively USA–Russia relations; the evolution of the Russian Federation's military incursion in Ukraine.

The most suitable scenario in the current geopolitical and internal context of the Republic of Moldova is the one in which the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine will start accession negotiations together, but these will continue indefinitely, without a clear perspective of accession. This option reflects the complexity of the European integration process, which involves extensive reforms and adjustments at political, economic, and social levels. Moreover, the tense relations between the EU and the

Russian Federation, as well as the conflict in Ukraine, require additional caution. The European Union, facing both internal and external challenges, must carefully analyse the risks and implications of a rapid enlargement, while the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine must demonstrate that they can meet the accession criteria in the long term. Thus, a gradual negotiation process would allow Moldova to progressively adapt to European standards, while also ensuring essential regional stability.

3. Which are the main strengths characteristic of the current context of negotiations for the accession of the Republic of Moldova to the EU? Please specify and rank the considerations according to their importance from the perspective of the technical negotiation process, internal political context, administrative capacities, internal socio-economic developments, and the regional security context.

The Republic of Moldova presents several strengths in the current context of negotiations and preparations for accession. Firstly, the Republic of Moldova's alignment with European values through democratic reforms is an essential aspect, reflecting the country's desire to become part of the European Union. Specifically, the Republic of Moldova has made progress in the area of judicial independence and the fight against corruption—key aspects for accession. The country's administrative capacity has been expanded through numerous assistance programs, and collaborations with the EU have enabled the development of solid institutional structures. Additionally, public support for European integration is a stabilizing factor that ensures the continuity of long-term reforms. Regional security, supported by strategic partnerships with NATO and the EU, is another advantage for the Republic of Moldova, enabling the country to face external challenges. These aspects indicate that the Republic of Moldova is prepared to continue the integration process in a stable and sustainable way.

4. Which are the weaknesses characteristic of the current context of negotiations for the accession of the Republic of Moldova to the EU? Please specify and rank the considerations according to their importance from the perspective of the technical negotiation process, internal political context, internal administrative capacities, internal socio-economic developments, and the regional security context.

One of the main weaknesses of the Republic of Moldova in the EU accession process is internal political instability, which affects the continuity of reforms and administrative efficiency. Additionally, the limited capacities of public institutions hinder the application of European standards and the adoption of effective policies. The security context in the region, marked by tensions and Russian influence, creates additional obstacles, making the country more vulnerable to external threats.

5. What opportunities can the Republic of Moldova benefit from in the current context of negotiations? Please specify and rank the considerations according to their importance from the perspective of the technical negotiation process, internal political context, internal administrative capacities, internal socio-economic developments, and the regional security context.

One of the greatest opportunities for the Republic of Moldova is the intensification of relations with the EU, which provides access to development funds and technical assistance to accelerate reforms. This close cooperation supports the Republic of Moldova in modernizing institutions and reaching European standards. Moreover, the geopolitical context offers the Republic of Moldova the opportunity to position itself as a reliable partner of the EU, thus strengthening internal stability and security.

6. What threats can influence the negotiation process and the effective accession of the Republic of Moldova to the EU? Please specify and rank the considerations according to their importance from the perspective of the technical negotiation process, internal political context, internal administrative capacities, internal socio-economic developments, and the regional security context.

The accession process of the Republic of Moldova to the EU faces multiple threats that can significantly impact its European path. The influence of the Russian Federation, manifested through economic pressure, political manipulation, and propaganda, is a constant challenge. Especially through the support of pro-Russian political forces, Russia can destabilize the democratic process in Moldova, compromising the continuity of the reforms necessary for European integration. Regional instability, caused by the conflict in Ukraine and ongoing tensions in the EU–Russia relationship, increases the Republic of Moldova's uncertainty. Furthermore, internal socio-economic factors, such as rising inflation and unemployment, generate social dissatisfaction that could favour populist and Eurosceptic movements, thus reducing public support for EU accession. Moreover, administrative limitations and the complexity of the reforms required by the EU represent a major internal challenge, as Moldovan institutions need additional resources and expertise to meet EU requirements. These threats underline the importance of reinforced external support from the EU to help the Republic of Moldova overcome obstacles and ensure a safe European path.

7. What role should Romania have in carrying out the negotiations and the specific processes of the effective accession of the Republic of Moldova to the EU? Please specify and rank the considerations according to their importance from the perspective of the technical negotiation process, administrative capacities, and the regional security context.

Romania's role in the accession process of the Republic of Moldova to the EU is essential and multidimensional. Firstly, Romania should act as a strong supporter of Moldova within the European Union, facilitating diplomatic dialogue and keeping Moldova's accession on the European agenda. Due to the historical and cultural relationship between the two countries, Romania has a strategic interest in supporting Moldova's European path and in strengthening cooperative relations. Romania can also provide technical assistance through institutional partnerships, transferring expertise in key areas such as justice, public administration, and regional development policy. Intergovernmental partnerships and collaborations with Romanian institutions, such as the European Institute of Romania, can contribute to the Republic of Moldova's preparation for EU accession. On the international level, Romania has the responsibility to represent the Republic of Moldova's interests in European forums, advocating for an inclusive approach by the EU and supporting enlargement policies to the east. In this regard, Romania must strengthen regional cooperation and encourage EU member states to support the Republic of Moldova's accession, thereby ensuring stability and development in the entire region.

8. What can Romania offer to support the EU accession negotiations of the Republic of Moldova and for the effective preparation of the Republic of Moldova for EU membership status? Please specify and rank the considerations according to their importance from the perspective of the technical negotiation process, administrative capacities, and the regional security context.

Romania can offer considerable support to the Republic of Moldova in its efforts to join the European Union through a series of well-targeted initiatives and collaborations. Besides diplomatic support, which helps promote the Republic of Moldova's interests on the European stage, Romania can transfer expertise and knowledge gained during its own EU integration process. Collaboration in key areas such as justice reform, rural development policy, and infrastructure contributes to the modernization of the Republic of Moldova and its alignment with EU standards. In preparing for membership status, Romania can facilitate the Republic of Moldova's access to European economic and transport networks, supporting the development of transport infrastructure and energy interconnection. The latter is essential for reducing the Republic of Moldova's dependence on energy sources outside the EU, thus strengthening the region's energy security. Also, through local development partnerships and cross-border cooperation, Romania can support the growth of the Republic of Moldova's administrative and institutional capacities, which are essential for the success of European integration.

9. What public communication elements should be applied by the authorities of the Republic of Moldova in promoting the European integration process? Please specify max. 3 aspects of strategic importance for improving public communication from the perspective of transparency, consistency, frequency, and contextual adequacy, etc.

To promote the European integration process, the authorities of the Republic of Moldova should implement a public communication strategy based on transparency, consistency, and adaptation to context. Firstly, transparency is essential to ensure the credibility of the process and to provide citizens with clear information about the steps and benefits of EU accession. Authorities must periodically provide updates on the progress and challenges faced, which will increase public trust in the European path. Secondly, consistency in communication ensures that the pro-European message is transmitted uniformly and correctly. Messages must be coordinated among all state institutions to avoid contradictions and to promote a united image of the country to its citizens. Finally, adapting communication to various social groups is crucial for maintaining broad public support. Each group, from youth to seniors and from urban to rural areas, must be targeted with personalized messages explaining the concrete advantages of European integration in daily life. This approach will contribute to creating a national consensus around the objective of European integration and to strengthening long-term public support.

Thank you for your support.

ANNEX 1

INTERVIEW L

1. Is it feasible for the Republic of Moldova to join the EU by 2030?

Please provide a maximum of 3 arguments to support or contradict this perspective.

Yes, it is feasible for the Republic of Moldova to join the European Union by 2030 on the basis of the following arguments:

The Republic of Moldova is firmly committed to implementing the structural reforms necessary for integration into the European Union.

The Republic of Moldova is supported by EU member states and by Romania, as a strategic partner. Thus, the EU offers the Republic of Moldova political support and external assistance necessary for the implementation of reforms.

The European Union represents for the Republic of Moldova an option for socio-economic development, which determines the support of this path from the population.

2. Which of the following possible scenarios can be considered adequate to the current context? Please choose only one scenario or specify an alternative scenario.

- Scenario 1: The Republic of Moldova will join the EU by 2030
- Scenario 2: The Republic of Moldova will join together with Ukraine, but not by 2030
- Scenario 3: The Republic of Moldova and Ukraine will start accession negotiations together, which will continue indefinitely, without clear temporal perspectives for accession
- Scenario 4: The Republic of Moldova and Ukraine will be included in a buffer zone between the EU/NATO and the Russian Federation, no longer having real prospects of EU accession
- Scenario 5: The Republic of Moldova will not join the EU. The EU decides to indefinitely freeze the negotiation process with the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine, and the two countries return de facto to the group of partner countries within the Eastern Partnership
- Other scenario (please specify)
- Please briefly argue the selected scenario from the perspective of the following criteria: political vision, complexity of the negotiation and pre-accession process; resistance to change; evolution of EU relations with the Russian Federation or NATO, respectively the USA with the Russian Federation; evolution of the military incursion of the Russian Federation in Ukraine.

Scenario 1 can be considered adequate according to the current context, considering the following aspects:

- The national referendum, held on October 20 of the current year, which reflects the population's support for the European path, will be followed by the introduction of European values into the Constitution of the Republic of Moldova and will commit the authorities, regardless of their political colour, to promoting policies that correspond to European values. The population's support for the pro-European approach is also reflected in the results of the recently held presidential elections.
- The administrative staff already familiar with and involved in the negotiation process is the human resource that can ensure the continuity of this process.
- Resistance to change is present, but once the support for the European path is reaffirmed, it may decrease in intensity. At the same time, resistance to change may diminish once the structural reforms are continued.
- The evolution of relations between the major powers leaves its mark on the internal politics of the Republic of Moldova, but the perspective of socio-economic development is more attractive for the citizens of the Republic of Moldova.
- The military incursion of the Russian Federation in Ukraine determines the Republic of Moldova to revise its neutrality status and to intensify cooperation with NATO. On the other hand, this incursion raises increased vigilance from the authorities, in order to maintain stability and internal order, and causes some restraint in the full support of the European path by the citizens.

3. Which are the main strengths characteristic of the current context of negotiations for the Republic of Moldova's accession to the EU? Please specify and order the considerations based on their importance from the perspective of the technical negotiation process, internal political context, administrative capacities, internal socio-economic developments, as well as the security context in the region.

Strengths:

- the current internal political context is favourable;
- the security context represents a stimulus in initiating mechanisms to consolidate security and reset national priorities;
- the evolution of the socio-economic situation in the Republic of Moldova is rather modest and requires multiple interventions in various fields, which reconfirms the fact that the Republic of Moldova needs support for development and advancement;

- the negotiation process started in an open and favourable framework, in the current regional context in which the security of both the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine is strongly threatened;
- the administrative system is adapted to the needs regarding the conduct of the negotiation process (creation of the Bureau for European Integration, creation/adjustment of the coordinating units for the European integration process in the institutions of the central public administration);
- current public servants are already engaged in the negotiation process and in activities related to this process: legislative harmonization, screening sessions, as well as various training activities.

4. Which are the weaknesses characteristic of the current context of negotiations for the Republic of Moldova's accession to the EU? Please specify and order the considerations based on their importance from the perspective of the technical negotiation process, internal political context, internal administrative capacities, internal socio-economic developments, as well as the security context in the region.

Weaknesses:

- the accession negotiation and direct interaction with European administrative institutions are largely new processes for the Moldovan administration;
- the negotiation process is carried out at an accelerated pace, unusual even for the EU;
- the administrative system registers a high personnel turnover, a fact generally characteristic of the labour market in the Republic of Moldova;
- the presence of reticence in society regarding progress on the European path is amplified by disinformation and hybrid threats;
- the current security context increases the level of vigilance in foreign relations, requiring a change in approach to the neutrality of the Republic of Moldova.

5. What opportunities can the Republic of Moldova benefit from in the current context of negotiations? Please specify and order the considerations based on their importance from the perspective of the technical negotiation process, internal political context, internal administrative capacities, internal socio-economic developments, as well as the security context in the region.

Opportunities:

- Russia's aggression against Ukraine, but also the active foreign policy of the Republic of Moldova have led to the European Union's openness towards the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine and advancement on the European path;
- preparations for accession negotiations have contributed to the strengthening of internal administrative capacities. At the same time, it is essential to create a foundation (in reference to personnel) in the public administration, which

will constitute a key benchmark/link for the entire negotiation and accession process;

- conducting the negotiation process in an accelerated regime determines rapid advancement on the European path;
- in this context, the adjustment of national priorities with development opportunities and in relation to recommendations from the European Union to be implemented during the negotiation and accession process takes place.

6. What threats can influence the negotiation process and later the effective accession of the Republic of Moldova to the EU? Please specify and order the considerations based on their importance from the perspective of the technical negotiation process, internal political context, internal administrative capacities, internal socio-economic developments, as well as the security context in the region.

Threats:

- evolution of domestic politics;
- hybrid threats;
- impact of disinformation on the formation of public opinion;
- personnel turnover in the administrative system.

7. What role should Romania have in the conduct of negotiations and the specific processes of the Republic of Moldova's effective accession to the EU? Please specify and order the considerations based on their importance from the perspective of the technical negotiation process, administrative capacities, as well as the security context in the region.

For the Republic of Moldova it is essential that Romania continues:

- to develop a bilateral cooperation framework favourable to the socio-economic development of both states;
- as a strategic partner, to actively support and further promote the European integration project of the Republic of Moldova;
- to continue providing support in the form of technical assistance and exchange of experience necessary in the negotiation and integration process into the European Union;
- to contribute to the development of institutional capacities necessary for conducting negotiations and implementing reforms;
- to contribute to the strengthening of regional security and support the socio-economic stability of the Republic of Moldova;
- to ensure the role of mediator in case of the appearance of uncertainties/misunderstandings.

8. What can Romania offer to support the EU accession negotiations of the Republic of Moldova and the effective preparation of the Republic of Moldova for the status of EU member state? Please specify and order the considerations based on their importance from the perspective of the technical negotiation process, administrative capacities, as well as the security context in the region.

- In the negotiation and accession process to the European Union, Romania can support the Republic of Moldova by:
- offering expertise from the perspective of its own experience regarding the negotiation, accession and post-accession process;
- open communication regarding the possibilities to avoid its own errors committed during the negotiation and accession process;
- identifying potential solutions for impasse situations.

9. What elements of public communication should the authorities of the Republic of Moldova apply in promoting the European integration process? Please specify max. 3 aspects of strategic importance to increase the effectiveness of public communication from the perspective of transparency, frequency, consistency, and adequacy to the context, etc.

- It would be appropriate to take into account the following aspects in public communication:
- communication that increases public interest in the European Union and the development perspective of the Republic of Moldova;
- succinct, targeted, clear communication with messages adapted depending on the audience;
- message that leaves no room for interpretation or contradiction;
- visual communication elements (schemes, diagrams, graphs, figures).

Thank you for your support.

ANNEX 2¹³

1. Is it feasible for the Republic of Moldova to join the EU by 2030? Please provide a maximum of 3 arguments to support or contradict this perspective.

Interview M

Yes, because:

- there is a firm commitment to reforms and European integration;
- there is strong support from EU member states and from Romania;
- the perspective of socio-economic development motivates the population to support this path in the long term.

Interview N

Yes, conditioned by the stability of political will and also depending on the evolution of events in Ukraine and the pressure of the Russian Federation. The arguments are based on:

- internal political will and that of EU institutions;
- there is no opposition from some member states that could block the accession negotiations of the Republic of Moldova to the EU;
- the accession of the Republic of Moldova does not involve high costs.

Interview O

Yes, it is feasible because:

- the degree of interconnection is high and full integration into trans-European networks will be completed by 2030;
- there is a high degree of price convergence.

Interview P

No answer

2. Which of the following possible scenarios can be considered adequate to the current context? Please choose only one scenario or specify an alternative scenario.

- Scenario 1: The Republic of Moldova will join the EU by 2030
- Scenario 2: The Republic of Moldova will join together with Ukraine, but not by 2030

¹³ The interviewed individuals chose not to have the transcripts of the interviews published. In this case, the authors have summarized the relevant information in the table below.

- Scenario 4: The Republic of Moldova and Ukraine will be included in a buffer zone between the EU/NATO and the Russian Federation, no longer having real prospects of EU accession
- Scenario 5: The Republic of Moldova will not join the EU. The EU decides to indefinitely freeze the negotiation process with the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine, and the two countries return de facto to the group of partner countries within the Eastern Partnership
- Other scenario (please specify)
- Please briefly argue the selected scenario from the perspective of the following criteria: political vision, complexity of the negotiation and pre-accession process; resistance to change; evolution of EU relations with the Russian Federation or NATO, respectively the USA with the Russian Federation; evolution of the military incursion of the Russian Federation in Ukraine.

Interview	Chosen Scenario	Invoked arguments
Interview M	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The current political context is favourable; - EU support helps the Republic of Moldova reduce resistance to change, regardless of the complexity of negotiations; - International relations influence the European path, but socio-economic development remains a priority.
Interview N	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Currently, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine are conducting the process in parallel. However, later during negotiations, a decoupling is possible.
Interview O	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The Republic of Moldova is accelerating preparations for accession, focusing on transposing EU legislation and developing interconnections.
Interview P	-	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - No answer

3. Which are the main strengths characteristic of the current context of negotiations for the Republic of Moldova's accession to the EU? Please specify and order the considerations based on their importance from the perspective of the technical negotiation process, internal political context, administrative capacities, internal socio-economic developments, as well as the security context in the region.

Interview M

- Firm political commitment to European integration ensures the support of necessary reforms and alignment of legislation with EU standards;
- The regional security context determines the initiation of mechanisms for security strengthening and the resetting of national priorities;
- Technical and financial support from the EU contributes to the realization of reforms and strengthening of institutional capacities;
- Administrative capacity and the technical negotiation framework are continuously strengthened.

Interview N

- The existence of unprecedented openness from the European Commission and member states;
- More than half of the Republic of Moldova's population already holds citizenship of an EU member state;
- More than 2/3 of the Republic of Moldova's foreign trade is oriented toward the EU market.

Interview O

- The institutional and functional framework is well developed;
- The transposition and implementation of the EU acquis in the relevant field is at an advanced level, a process carried out in the context of implementing the EU-Moldova Association Agreement;
- The degree of integration into the EU market in the field is advanced and feasible to be fully completed within a maximum of 2 years;
- Ensuring competitive markets in the reference field is at an advanced stage;
- Political and strategic support from the EU is strong and has intensified in the current geopolitical context;
- The Republic of Moldova has access to EU funds and technical support to modernize infrastructure in the relevant sector;
- Compliance with the EU acquis and the green transition contributes to the diversification of supply sources and the increase of domestic production, reducing vulnerability to external sources.

Interview P

No answer

4. Which are the weaknesses characteristic of the current context of negotiations for the Republic of Moldova's accession to the EU? Please specify and order the considerations based on their importance from the perspective of the technical negotiation process, internal political context, internal administrative capacities, internal socio-economic developments, as well as the security context in the region.

Interview M

No answer

Interview N

Implementation of the EU acquis will require enormous costs and sacrifices for the Republic of Moldova, which can be a possible risk.

Interview O

- The military invasion of the Russian Federation in Ukraine substantially affects the development processes of the Republic of Moldova;
- The administrative-territorial units on the left bank of the Dniester do not cooperate in the European integration process of the Republic of Moldova;
- Qualified and trained human resources to implement specific EU integration processes and mechanisms are insufficient;
- Limited time and insufficient resources for the rapid transposition of the EU acquis.

Interview P

No answer

5. What opportunities can the Republic of Moldova benefit from in the current context of negotiations? Please specify and order the considerations based on their importance from the perspective of the technical negotiation process, internal political context, internal administrative capacities, internal socio-economic developments, as well as the security context in the region.

Interview M

- The regional geopolitical context favours the acceleration of the EU accession process for the Republic of Moldova;
- There is firm political support from EU member states, especially Romania, for European integration;
- Through internal reforms and external technical support, internal administrative capacity is strengthened and legislative harmonization processes with the EU acquis are accelerated;

- Access to the EU single market ensures the expansion of trade relations with EU member states and favours the attraction of foreign direct investment as well as the increase of Moldova's economic competitiveness.

Interview N

- Increased attractiveness of the Republic of Moldova for foreign direct investments as accession negotiations progress;
- Infrastructure development will contribute to development and economic growth, as well as increasing state budget revenues, which will allow the implementation of more generous social policies;
- The negotiation methodology is known and applied to other candidate countries, allowing for both the transfer of expertise and experience, and the effective following of steps applied by more advanced candidates;
- The rotating presidencies of the EU Council favour accession negotiations;
- The rapid rise in quality of life as a result of negotiations and implemented reforms will be a magnet for the reintegration of administrative-territorial units on the left bank of the Dniester.

Interview O

- The geographical position facilitates interconnection with trans-European networks and leads to the attraction of new investments;
- Internal administrative and expertise capacities are strengthened, especially in still underdeveloped or untapped areas/resources.

Interview P

- The Republic of Moldova will benefit from funds for the regional development of infrastructure and the economy, which will support the socio-economic integration of the region, as well as democracy and the rule of law;
- In the context of accession negotiations, implemented reforms, training programs, and exchange of experience will increase the professionalism of public servants and governmental efficiency;
- EU accession will strengthen the internal and regional stability of the Republic of Moldova.

5. What threats can influence the negotiation process and later the effective accession of the Republic of Moldova to the EU? Please specify and order the considerations based on their importance from the perspective of the technical negotiation process, internal political context, internal administrative capacities, internal socio-economic developments, as well as the security context in the region.

Interview M

No answer

Interview N

- Internal political changes can be a determining factor, which would lead to delays in the negotiation and accession process of the Republic of Moldova to the EU;
- The evolution of the Russian Federation’s military invasion of Ukraine influences the ability to maintain the current foreign policy course;
- Changing the priorities of the European Commission could slow down or interrupt EU enlargement for geopolitical reasons;
- The administration’s inability to implement the necessary reforms within the set timeframe, which is quite short.

Interview O

- The proximity of the conflict in Ukraine can influence investors’ decisions and may generate crises that could affect the entire Republic of Moldova or only the administrative-territorial units on the left bank of the Dniester.

Interview P

- No answer

6. What role should Romania have in the conduct of negotiations and the specific processes of the Republic of Moldova’s effective accession to the EU? Please specify and order the considerations based on their importance from the perspective of the technical negotiation process, administrative capacities, as well as the security context in the region.

Interview M

- Key partner in facilitating negotiations and consolidating political support at the European level;
- Providing technical assistance and expertise in managing EU funds and transposing the EU acquis;
- Offering training, institutional exchanges, and strengthening administrative capacities for EU accession;
- Supporting socio-economic stability, energy security, combating corruption, and sustainable development of the Republic of Moldova.

Interview N

- Providing expertise in developing chapter negotiation positions favourable to the Republic of Moldova;

- Establishing a budgetary support program for implementing reforms throughout 2024–2028;
- Continuing the promotion and encouragement of all forms of investment in the Republic of Moldova;
- Maintaining a positive perception at the EU institutions level and among member states regarding the Republic of Moldova's EU accession.

Interview O

- Providing technical assistance in European affairs to rapidly advance the negotiation and EU accession process;
- Offering support at EU structures level for smooth integration into the EU single market.

Interview P

- Diplomatic and political support at the European level;
- Ensuring the transfer of expertise and technical knowledge in the negotiation and legislative harmonization process;
- Supporting the development of administrative capacities, especially in areas such as justice, public governance, and regional development;
- Creating partnerships between government institutions of the Republic of Moldova and those of Romania.

7. What can Romania offer to support the EU accession negotiations of the Republic of Moldova and the effective preparation of the Republic of Moldova for the status of EU member state? Please specify and order the considerations based on their importance from the perspective of the technical negotiation process, administrative capacities, as well as the security context in the region.

Interview M

- Providing specialized technical assistance and expertise for the accession negotiation process and post-accession preparation;
- Organizing experience exchanges, staff training, good practices, and strengthening institutional capacities for European integration;
- Offering practical expertise for developing and implementing reform strategies and effectively implementing necessary reforms in the EU accession process;
- Contributing to the development of a public communication strategy that ensures correct information and increases public support for the European integration process.

Interview N

- Detaching key permanent experts, directly integrated into Moldovan institutions, to support the transposition and implementation of the EU acquis;

- Developing and offering continuous training programs for preparing Moldovan civil servants for EU accession and representing Moldova's interests in the decision-making and policy implementation process;
- Developing and implementing a public communication strategy regarding accession negotiations;
- Promoting a positive image of the Republic of Moldova among member states.

Interview O

- Facilitating the adapted adoption of Romanian legislation;
- Financing and achieving infrastructure interconnections on Romania's side;
- Developing mutual aid mechanisms in case of crises;
- Offering political support at the European Commission and other EU institutions.

Interview P

- Utilizing common regional development opportunities targeting economic stimulation and job creation;
- Facilitating partnership development and investments in key sectors such as education, health, innovation, or environmental protection;
- Providing expertise, counselling, and assistance in managing EU funds.

7. What elements of public communication should the authorities of the Republic of Moldova apply in promoting the European integration process? Please specify max. 3 aspects of strategic importance to increase the effectiveness of public communication from the perspective of transparency, frequency, consistency, and adequacy to the context, etc.

Interview M

- Providing information in a clear and accessible way regarding progress in the European integration process;
- Objectively explaining the benefits of accession and the necessary reforms, in terms of resulting stages and challenges;
- Ensuring a regular, consistent, and coherent flow of messages through various communication channels;
- Adapting communication to the context and needs of different target groups by personalizing content and presentation formats to address the concerns of each population segment.

Interview N

- Focusing on literacy of the population, local public authorities, civil society entities, academic environment, business environment, and interest representation groups;

- Emphasizing accountability in the negotiation process;
- Raising awareness of the responsibilities derived from accession negotiations;
- Informing and familiarizing with opportunities, application methods, and implementation of EU-funded projects and the responsibilities involved;
- Involving the diaspora in promoting the preparation process for the Republic of Moldova's EU accession.