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NEWSLETTER

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Synthesis and Foreign Policy Debates

The newsletter is developed by Mădălin Necșuțu, editor-coordinator

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News in Brief



The Republic of Moldova joined the largest package of European sanctions against the Russian Federation in relation to actions undermining the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine. They target hundreds of people, including those originally from the Republic of Moldova or who worked in Transnistria. On the other hand, the spokeswoman of the Russian Foreign Ministry, Maria Zakharova, said that Moscow “will not leave unanswered” Chisinau’s decision to align with a package of European sanctions against the Russian Federation. Moscow has banned the entry into the Russian Federation for 11 deputies of the ruling party of the Republic of Moldova (PAS), on the grounds that the authorities in Chisinau “persecute” the Russian-language press. In October, the government suspended the broadcast licenses to six TV stations and blocked more than 30 websites, through which Russia allegedly tried to influence the local elections in the Republic of Moldova.



The government approved the establishment of the European Integration Bureau. This institution will work in close collaboration with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and European Integration and will prepare Moldova for the accession negotiations with the European Union, but will also coordinate this extensive process. The establishment of the European Integration Bureau is motivated by the need to benefit from in-depth sectoral expertise in several technical fields, thus ensuring the continuity of the EU accession process. The European Integration Bureau will manage the accession process internally, coordinating the work of the Working Groups for all 35 negotiation chapters, the alignment of the national legislation with the *acquis communautaire*, and will ensure communication and continuous training in the field of European Affairs. The bureau will be headed by the Minister of Foreign Affairs and European Integration, Nicu Popescu.



President Maia Sandu strongly condemned any form of domestic violence, on the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women, which women face worldwide. “There is no excuse for violence against women. There is no excuse for violence, in general [...]” “The Republic of Moldova is not an exception. Annually, about 40 women lose their lives due to violence, and many other women suffer all kinds of abuse,” said Maia Sandu. The Republic of Moldova has ratified the Istanbul Convention to protect the life and dignity of girls and women. Support centres have been created and soon an institution will operate to coordinate and monitor the activities of public institutions to combat violence. “In order to combat violence against women, the involvement of the whole society is necessary. I call you to talk with children, with young people in order to cultivate in them the values of respect and human dignity. I call you to fight violence, abuse, disrespect and stereotypes together”, added Maia Sandu.

The Republic of Moldova faces a new decisive step on its European path



The President of the European Council, Charles Michel (L), next to the President of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelensky (C) and the President of the Republic of Moldova, Maia Sandu (R) during a joint press conference held in Kyiv on November 21, 2023.

Photo source: Presidency Republic of Moldova

The Republic of Moldova is again facing an important moment that will mark its European future. The Moldovan authorities have completed 94 percent of the necessary actions to implement those nine recommendations of the European Commission last year in June. The

November 8 report attests to progress in most areas, but it obviously draws attention to the justice sector, where there are still many outstanding tasks.

However, despite the favourable technical aspect, the Republic of Moldova needs a

positive political vote from all 27 EU member states. There are no signs that there could be any problems from any European country to give green light to the Republic of Moldova, but Ukraine’s situation is not yet settled, especially because of Hungary, which still has

► reservations about whether or not to give its vote for Ukraine to open up the accession negotiations.

Apparently, the Republic of Moldova is in a more favourable situation than Ukraine in the European process, but Chisinau still wants to show solidarity with Kyiv. Even though last year there were voices in Kiev saying that Moldova was boarding Ukraine's train to the EU "without a ticket", this time it is the Republic of Moldova's turn to be with Ukraine in moments of uncertainty. We refer here to the decision that will come on December 14th-15th at the European Council in Brussels, when Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova and Bosnia and Herzegovina could receive the green light to start the accession negotiations with the EU.

On November 21st, President Maia Sandu had a trilateral meeting with her Ukrainian counterpart Volodymyr Zelensky, but also with the President

of the European Council, Charles Michel, where they discussed the last details before the December summit in Brussels. Maia Sandu wanted, from the image point of view, to once again stand in solidarity with Ukraine on this European path chosen by the two neighbouring states.

If the Republic of Moldova receives a positive vote, the first intergovernmental conference for accession negotiations with the Republic of Moldova will be held next spring. This meeting will start the process of screening the national legislation against the *acquis communautaire* along 33 negotiation chapters, grouped into six areas. The strategy of Chisinau is a brave one, namely to focus on the most difficult chapters like justice, and in parallel work at a sustained pace on the other areas.

Chisinau is aware that it should engage at full speed in this process that can take years, and that this window of

opportunity can change due to several factors. First, the war in Ukraine, and second, the European Union that may undergo a reforming process.

Internally, we are talking about the parliamentary elections of July 2025, when the current power may no longer hold an absolute majority and may have to enter into governing alliances with various parties in which the political will for EU accession may not be the same.

Therefore, a sustained effort is needed in the current domestic and international context to advance on the European path. The current authorities in Chisinau only have to speed up the process, but at the same time, they must also deliver quality in the implementation of reforms to create the conditions for an irreversible European path of the Republic of Moldova.

Madalin Necshuțu

Justice, justice, justice! This is the priority of our society, but also in our dialogue with the EU

The Minister of Foreign Affairs and European Integration, Nicu Popescu, stated in an interview that he is confident in the chances of the Republic of Moldova to receive the green light from the European Council following the meeting of the heads of state and government of the EU that will take place on 14-15 December in Brussels. We discussed the conclusions of the recent report of the European Commission which recommends the European Council to give a positive vote for the start of accession negotiations between the EU and the Republic of Moldova, but also about the need to continue the reforms.



The most important remains the justice system reform. About the engagement of civil society, the relations with Ukraine and the countries of the Western Balkans, as well as about the preparations made in the sense of the connection of the Republic of Moldova to the EU norms, read in the following lines:

■ **Are you confident that the Republic of Moldova will receive a positive vote at the European Council on November 14-15 in Brussels, which will give the green light for launching the accession negotiations with the Republic of Moldova? Are there still states to be convinced? We know that the negotiations are always carried out until the last minute, what should we expect?**

■ Indeed, these negotiations will be carried out until the last moment. The negotiations take place between the states of the European Union and here we are carefully following the discussions within the EU. We have bilateral contacts and close friendships with every EU state, and in the coming weeks we will continue the discussions, monitoring, but also our constant efforts to convince the member states that, at the next European Council the Republic of Moldova should receive the green light for the launching of the accession negotiations.

We are going to those discussions with an excellent record, but also with excellent homework done, especially on two dimensions. On the one hand, you know that, in June 2022, the Republic of Moldova received those nine recommendations from the European Commission. The findings and evaluation of the EC is that the Republic of Moldova has fulfilled 94

percent of the necessary actions for the implementation of those nine recommendations. We still have certain measures to take, which we are focusing on at the moment. On the more technical side of transposition and implementation of the *acquis communautaire*, in the legislative field, the Republic of Moldova is a leader.

Among all the candidate states for EU accession, the Republic of Moldova has made the most substantial progress. If you compare the EC report for each candidate state, you will see that our country has managed to advance substantially on the largest number of chapters – 9 out of 33 chapters.

We have a well-made file, but obviously, at this stage, we cannot say what will be the result of this future European Council.

■ **The government approved the establishment of the European Integration Bureau within the Foreign Office. Could you please briefly explain the responsibilities of the new structure and its mission?**

■ The Ministry of Foreign Affairs and European Integration has done an excellent job to bring our country closer to this success, namely the EC recommendation for starting the accession negotiations. A tremendous amount of work has been done and this success is largely due to the team of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the cooperation with the state institutions. At the same time, in the next stage we are entering a new dynamic that is much more demanding and voluminous in terms of work, much more technical, and in this new stage we will need to have sectoral experts in very narrow and technical fields, for example in the fishing, taxation policies. In the

next stage, the activities will take place predominantly domestically.

Yesterday (November 22 - n.r.) we adopted the government decision on the establishment of the European Integration Bureau. We have done what all candidate states did at some stage. For example, Romania, at the stage of the accession process, had a Ministry of European Integration and a chief negotiator. It was Mr. Vasile Pușcaș who recommended us to establish this unit. In other countries, ministries were not necessarily created, but a general secretariat or an office, as in the case of North Macedonia, Albania, Montenegro. We also followed this path in order to have a group of sectoral experts from absolutely all fields that will focus on the technical areas in order to adjusting our country to the European requirements.

Justice remains the “lighthouse” of sectoral reforms

■ **Of the 33 chapters, if Brussels gives us the green light, what strategy do you have? With which chapters should the Republic of Moldova start the negotiations with the EU and how is work currently being done from a sectoral point of view?**

■ There are several areas. First of all, at this stage - and this is very visible in those nine recommendations - the main effort that the Republic of Moldova should make is in the field of justice. It is also with this field that we are going to start the EU accession negotiations when the member states give the green light to this process.

Justice, justice, justice! This is the priority for our society, but obviously also in our dialogue with the EU.

4 Synthesis and Foreign Policy Debates

We all know how much the Republic of Moldova has suffered and is suffering because of corruption, oligarchic influences, the captured state system which was built for many years and which must be dismantled. Obviously, this is the first priority for our society and for the Government in its relationship with the EU.

We will start with the most difficult areas and in parallel we will progress on the others.

■ How is it better for the Republic of Moldova to go along this European path? Together with Ukraine, in this coupling that has helped us so far, or maybe we are entering a new phase in which it will depend only on Chisinau how it negotiates technically its accession chapters with the EU?

■ The experience of other waves of enlargement shows that, at certain stages, states are part of a single package, but later, depending on the speed of reforms, these packages are done, undone and redone in a different configuration. And here I will give you some examples. In 1997, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Estonia and Poland started negotiations, while Romania, Latvia, Lithuania and Slovakia started them in 1999. And by 2004, Lithuania, Latvia and Slovakia managed to join the first enlargement wave.

Another example concerns the states of the Western Balkans. The European and EU accession perspective was granted at the EU-Western Balkans summit in Thessaloniki in 2003. At that time, Croatia was bundled with Albania and North Macedonia. Meanwhile, Croatia joined in 2013 and the other states are currently negotiating.

In our case, it will depend a lot on the speed of reforms in the Republic of Moldova, Ukraine, and other states.

■ Compared to the other states that want to join, the Republic of Moldova falls in the category of smaller states. Could this accession process take shorter for us?

■ Now it depends on the ability of our society and institutions to continue to support the pro-European forces, the necessary reforms, and obviously on the ability of our public administration to cope with this enormous workload. Croatia, for example, is larger than some countries that have not yet succeeded in joining the EU in the Western Balkans. There is no direct correlation between the size of the state and the accession process.

I think it is much more important to focus on our own dynamics and our own reforms. Let's do our homework and exchange experience with other candidate states such as Albania, North Macedonia, Ukraine or Georgia. But basically, let's be aware that the speed of this progress depends on the speed with which we can achieve reforms.

■ You also have cooperation with the Balkan states through the processes that have been started by these states. Do you also receive support from them in our process of European integration?

■ Yes, we do. We had already learned quite a lot from the Balkan states. We have permanent contacts. Now in September, with the support of a EU project, we had quite a large team of our colleagues involved in the European

integration process from several government institutions who were in North Macedonia and Serbia to see on the ground how the process of connecting the standards of these states to the European requirements takes place.

For example, in North Macedonia, there is a team led by a deputy prime minister. In the case of Serbia, it is a team led the minister for European Affairs. So, we also have an excellent dialogue at the political level. I even received congratulatory messages from my counterparts in the Balkans on November 8 when the European Commission recommended the start of negotiations with the Republic of Moldova. Just yesterday (November 22 - n.r.) I had a discussion with the Foreign Minister of Montenegro, who explained to me, for example, that previously, in the case of Montenegro, they had a Minister for European Affairs who was also the chief negotiator. That model proved problematic for Montenegro, concluding that it was necessary to ensure continuity and maintain the mandate of the chief negotiator regardless of changes in government. They are currently fine-tuning this mechanism.

Even in the case of Romania, at the time of accession to the European Union, if you remember, Mr. Pușcaș was chief negotiator, but separately there was also a specialised ministry.

There are several models. We will learn from all of them and make adjustments along the way. The dialogue on the best ways to structure the European Union accession effort continues and takes place practically on a weekly basis.

Experience and cooperation with the states of the Western Balkans

■ So there is no competition with the states of the Western Balkans package? Because there is the impression of a competition between the states of the Western Balkans and those of the Eastern Partnership.

■ There is no competition, on the contrary, we have excellent cooperation. By the way, next week I will go to Skopje in North Macedonia and I will have again talks with our Macedonian colleagues and friends. Indeed, there were certain sensitivities last year - several representatives of the Balkan states had this feeling that the Balkan states have been candidate states for a very long time.

The expansion process has not progressed very quickly, but we can now say that those sensitivities have been overcome. There is also an understanding of the fact that the progress on the discussion regarding the expansion to the East - to Moldova, to Ukraine - helps and accelerates the progress in the Balkans as well. And last year, on the day the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine received the candidate status, North Macedonia and Albania also took a step forward in their accession process.

On November 8, when the European Commission recommended the start of negotiations, the European Commission made this recommendation both for Moldova and Ukraine and for Bosnia and Herzegovina. So, there is already this understanding that together we can work to accelerate the process of

enlargement of the European Union towards the Balkans and the East.

■ Will you continue to engage civil society in the process of European integration, perhaps in chapter negotiations, where they can also lend you a helping hand with their expertise? We know that last year, on those questionnaires requested by the European Commission, you received considerable help from civil society.

■ Absolutely, definitely. We have excellent cooperation, we have representatives of civil society in the National Commission for European Integration, chaired by President Maia Sandu.

We regularly send updates to Brussels, the so-called non-papers, some informative notes on the progress we are making. Our friends and colleagues from the civil society helped us to refine them, so that the case and the progress of the Republic of Moldova are presented in the most credible manner in Brussels.

And here, indeed, on this occasion, I want to thank our colleagues from civil society, who are also part of this common effort of our society to take the country to the European Union. We are all aware that the European future of our country is the best guarantee of maintaining peace, stability, progress, strengthening democracy and freedom of our country.

Strengthening the cooperation with civil society is one of the EC recommendations that we consider fulfilled, obviously, provided that the same degree of involvement continues in the future.

■ Mr. Popescu, lately several voices have been activated from among people with a reprehensible political past, close to oligarchs and pro-Russian forces, who criticize the activity of your ministry regarding the European course. What would be your answer, in the context of what we might suspect is an attempted sabotage coming on the eve of the European Council summit to take place in December in Brussels?

■ I think we are all aware of the fact that, unfortunately, in our country, there are quite a few individuals who have served these oligarchs. Some who also served Plahotniuc and Dodon had tasks at that time to promote the interests of these people who did not serve the interests of the country, neither externally nor domestically. In doing so, they have harmed the country. Many of them participated in the embezzlement of funds, internationally isolating the Republic of Moldova.

Unfortunately, in the meantime, they have decided to re-profile, spending their time gossiping and spreading lies, and, of course, this leads to a degradation of public discussion. At the same time, I believe that we all have enough discernment to be able to analyse the results of our foreign policy through the prism of facts. Or the facts are absolutely clear - the Republic of Moldova is today more firmly than ever anchored in the European space, it has more friends than ever.

The interview was taken by Madalin Necshutu in the "Punctul pe Azi" programme from the TVR Moldova

Editorial

Moldova – “recalibration” of EU requirements and the risk of their politicization

Editorial, Denis Cenușă,
expert asociat al Expert-Group

Moldova’s opportunity to start the European Union (EU) accession process was cemented by the European Commission’s recommendation to launch political-institutional negotiations, published on 8 November 2023. November 8, 2023. For the first time, along with Ukraine and Georgia, Moldova was included in the EU enlargement package, where six states from the Western Balkans and Turkey are already anchored.

In Brussels, the Moldovan diplomats familiarize themselves with the multiple programmes and platforms offered to the candidate states. There is awareness of the need to deepen the bilateral dialogue in order to benefit from technical and financial assistance in the pre-accession process. At the same time, in Chisinau, the authorities are accelerating preparations for negotiations by (re)calibrating institutional capacities. The launch of the European Integration Bureau (EIB), within the State Chancellery, represents a strategic investment in the supervision of inter-institutional interactions, both horizontally and vertically, during the accession negotiations. The new institution will facilitate communication between 35 working groups that will work on the negotiation chapters with the EU. At the same time, two political-



institutional platforms operate at the national level: the National Commission for European Integration, which is overseen by the Office of the President, and another national governmental Commission - under the auspices of the executive. Although the national mechanism for managing the future negotiation process looks practically complete, there is a lack of clarity regarding the technical-cognitive capacities of the institutions in technical sectoral fields – from ministries to state agencies –, where human resources with expertise are lacking. Therefore, there remains the risk of witnessing a situation where the negotiations benefit from an explicit “form”, but not from a robust “substance”.

By mid-December, the Moldovan authorities are to implement a set of reforms as part of the requirements of the European Commission. According to the EU assessments, only six out of nine requirements have been fully implemented. The remaining arrears have been reformulated by the European side, but they no longer sound like a precondition to launch the accession negotiations. Anyway, Chisinau will have to demonstrate progress in order to impress the political actors in the European capitals on whom the December decision on the opening of negotiations depends. For now, no sign of resistance from the EU states regarding the Moldovan file has surfaced. At the meeting of the European Council on December 15,

it will be decided whether Moldova, together with Ukraine, will start accession negotiations. Until then, the Moldovan authorities will have to be extremely cautious to prevent any crisis that could jeopardize a favourable decision. Deficiencies in the electoral process for the November 5-19 local elections were overlooked by the EU, although OSCE/ODIHR signalled multiple serious deviations, committed by the government, justified including by geopolitical risks. However, these do not seem to worry the EU, which refrains from criticizing the government, including in order not to provoke a negative decision before the launch of accession negotiations becomes a *fait accompli*. However, if the government experiences major failures in the outstanding areas of justice reform, anti-corruption policies and deoligarization, the EU will be forced to react in order not to lose its credibility. The latest polls are already showing a slight decline in the public support for the European direction which was below 50% in August 2023.

The new-old requirements of the EU and Moldova's outstanding task

Moldova still needs to implement reforms, but there is no sense of urgency. The EU reiterated some of the demands from June 2022, underlining those that remained unresolved in the field of justice, the fight against corruption and the elimination of risks related to oligarchic influence. It is obvious that these issues are part of the fundamental political pillars of the accession process, and the reforms they involve are for the medium and long term. Progress will be measured during the negotiations, and tangible results will be attributed to specific mini-reforms. Therefore, by mid-December,

Moldova must demonstrate that it is working on reforms. At the same time, the complete fulfilment of the measures is not achievable in absolute terms and within the limits of a definite timetable.

The EU requirements that have not been met yet by the Moldovan side target traditionally flawed policies in Moldova, which in the past have caused major political crises. Broadly speaking, the outstanding tasks relate to ensuring the rule of law and fighting high-scale corruption. Although in the last year's iteration, the EU requirements were considered too diffuse and respectively confusing, at the stage of implementation and evaluation, the European Commission reformulated the unfulfilled conditions in an even more general way in its report from November 2023. So, one year after the first setting of pre-accession objectives for Moldova, the EU decided to resort to requirements with a greater dose of elasticity. As a result, as a solution for removing the arrears, the decision-makers in Chisinau can present even minor progress. At the same time, it is practically impossible to increase the accuracy and reduce the subjectivity in the process of evaluating the progress made by the Moldovan authorities.

The EU also kept a number of requirements in place for Ukraine (3 out of 7 requirements) and Georgia (9 out of 12 requirements). However, the conditions that the EU sets for these two countries are more concrete, which facilitates an unbiased assessment of progress and greater clarity on the actions that national governments need to take. However, for unclear reasons, the EU chose to articulate more vague requirements for Moldova. Obviously, such an approach can help the Moldovan authorities to report positive results to Brussels more easily.

The risk of politicizing the EU requirements

Even if the requirements reformulated by the European Commission in November 2023 seem more diluted and imprecise than those of June 2022, the tone of the EU requirements acquires a greater harshness. This makes it more difficult for the Moldovan authorities to present European requirements as advisory recommendations. At the same time, the government represented by the Solidarity and Action Party, together with the Presidential Office, use the EU requirements to insist on certain decisions and justify them, respectively.

An example of the politicization of EU pre-accession requirements can be seen in the pro-active way in which the government is moving in the file regarding the selection and appointment of a new Attorney General. Previously, on November 9, the Constitutional Court ruled as unconstitutional the provision of the Law on the Prosecutor's Office (in the version of the law until October 2022), on the basis of which Maia Sandu dismissed Alexandr Stoianoglo, after almost two years of suspension from office.

Some EU requirements may also serve to be instrumentalized by the national governments of the candidate countries, such as Moldova, in order to achieve certain domestic political strategies. However, broadly speaking, the pre-accession requirements are used by the EU to bring Moldova into compliance with the member state criteria. It is equally true that the current government and the others that will succeed it will always be able to use EU requirements to legitimize the need to push through certain complicated and/or unpopular reforms, including through controversial measures from the point of view of legality.

The EC report draws attention to the discrepancy between the offer of the education system and the demands of the labour market



The co-president of the European Union – Republic of Moldova Civil Society Platform, Liliana Plihovici, spoke in the interview given for the FES /EPA foreign policy bulletin about the social dimension, the dialogue with civil society of the latest report of the European Commission, a document that recommended to the European Council to give the green light to the Republic of Moldova for opening the accession negotiations with the EU. However, the decision is a political one and will be taken by the European Council on December 14-15 in Brussels. We discussed the progress and challenges of the Republic of Moldova in the field of ensuring human rights, the trends on the labour market in the Republic of Moldova, the education system, gender equality and, last but not least, the investment climate in the Republic of Moldova. We invite you to read this interview in the following lines:

■ How do you see from a social perspective the efforts that the current government is making to get closer to the European Union?

■ Getting closer to the European Union is a continuous and lasting process, which involves complex reforms in all areas of development, reforms that must strengthen the rule of law, transform state institutions into friendly institutions totally focused on

the citizens' interest. This process must result in greater well-being for each person. In the conclusions of the latest report of the European Commission, on the social dimension, more progress is mentioned compared to the first report. The report mentions the Government's approval of the National Programme on the acceleration of gender equality in the Republic of Moldova, the National Programme for Child Protection, as well as the

improvement of the dialogue process with the civil society organizations.

When I talk about the social dimension, I also mean human rights, including the aspects related to ensuring gender equality and the protection of children's rights, the dialogue with civil society and the social assistance and protection for different disadvantaged categories of population. The progress mentioned in the report speaks to the fact that we are moving in the right direction, even if this process is quite slow.

■ What changes should the Republic of Moldova make in order to build a society based on the EU values, including gender equality?

■ It is important to mention that the European Union is built on six fundamental values, such as respect for human dignity, human rights, the rule of law, equality, democracy, freedom, including freedom of movement. These values should also be the basis of our society, and this cannot be achieved only through the efforts of the state and the application of the tools available to the government and parliament. The construction of the Moldovan society, which puts the above-mentioned values at the foundation of its operation, must involve the effort of every person who lives on the territory of our country. The first change we should make is the involvement and commitment of each of us, regardless of ethnicity, political vision, faith and other things that make us different, as well as the awareness that the European Moldova must be

built with everyone's contribution. This would mean respecting pluralism, being more tolerant and supportive, not discriminating, creating equal and fair conditions for the affirmation of women and men, and building an independent judiciary.

The EC report appreciates the decision of the Republic of Moldova to create a National Agency for Prevention and Combating of Violence against Women and Domestic Violence, the approval of the National Programme on the prevention and combating of violence against women and domestic violence for the years 2023-2027, as important progress on this dimension. The report, however, points out that the Republic of Moldova must take additional measures to eliminate gender-based violence, by implementing the approved programmes. At the same time, the report also draws attention to a number of other issues on which Moldova still has backlogs, including the pay gap, which accounts for 14 percent currently.

Another aspect highlighted in the report and where Moldova still has a lot to do is child protection. The report states that we still have children who are neglected and abused. Attention is also drawn to children's limited access to friendly justice, negligence towards children, especially street children. The recommendation for Moldova is to undertake more actions to record specific progress in this area.

The expectation from our country is to do more. It is rightly asked to do more, because there are problems that we see even without the European Commission's report, that is why the state must invest more in ensuring gender equality, in reducing the poverty rate among children and the negligent attitude towards them, to more effectively implement policies aimed at improving the situation of people with disabilities, who must

enjoy facilitated access to services and public infrastructure.

The EC report also draws attention to the fact that Moldova needs to accelerate structural reforms to increase opportunities for formal job creation and the availability of skilled labour. Further reforms are needed to reduce the gaps in the education system and the large share of young people who are not included in education, employment or training. The government adopted a national employment programme for 2022-2026. In addition, it has taken steps to reduce the high level of undeclared work in the labour market by strengthening controls and incentives to bring jobs into the formal economy. However, it is recommended that the Republic of Moldova make more progress here as well, adjust its programmes to respond to the needs of young people on the labour market and increase their employment rate. In general, there is a need to increase the employment rate of the population in the labour field, as well as the labour productivity.

■ **The Republic of Moldova is facing, according to statistics, major problems regarding the lack of labour force, especially qualified labour. What can be done to diminish the exodus of specialists abroad?**

■ From my point of view, there are some dimensions on which the state must intervene. I believe that the dialogue between the central authorities, which are developing public policies in the field, and the business environment, which is the generator of jobs, must be intensified. There is a need to better analyse the demands of the labour market and the profile of tomorrow's employee, and the university and vocational education programmes should be designed to respond to this challenge. The university and vocational education

curricula must be based on the complex analysis of labour market development prospects to make it possible for the needs of tomorrow's labour market to be covered by skilled labour. This would greatly increase the satisfaction of employers and give more opportunities to young graduates to be employed, effectively capitalizing on the investments made by the education system in young people.

If this aspect is neglected, we risk further contributing to the increase in the number of people who graduate from a university or vocational education institution and who do not find work in their profession. Currently, we are facing an acute shortage of skilled labour force, but also a large number of young graduates of vocational and university education institutions who cannot find a job according to their profession. This happens for a few reasons: not enough attention has been given to the process of professional orientation at the level of secondary and high school education, university and vocational schools' programmes and the offers have not always been based on forecasts and trends of labour market development. Things change step by step. It is important that young people are advised by professionals in the process of choosing the profession. The time passed when the choice of profession was guided by certain clichés that formed the opinion of the society.

Priorities in the negotiations with the EU

■ **What priorities in the socio-economic area should be set by the Republic of Moldova in its path of accession to the EU?**

■ I believe that more investment should be made in adjusting programmes that bridge the gap

between the education system's supply and the labour market demands, to offer young people a more employment options. A greater promotion of dual education would provide an increased degree of assurance to Moldova with a skilled workforce as required by the labour market and would create employment opportunities after graduation.

At the same time, I think that more thorough work should be done on the implementation of the National Employment Programme. Increasing the minimum wage to an acceptable average in the European Union would contribute to reducing the labour migration rate in Moldova. In 2023, the minimum wage in Moldova is 4000 MDL, which is 2 times lower than the minimum wage in Bulgaria, 3 times lower than the one in Romania, and 10 times lower than the minimum wage in Germany.

Perhaps more should be done to reform the National Employment Agency (ANOFM) to provide more effective information and advice services for the labour market, to increase the rate of people who, after receiving the advice and assistance of this agency, are employed. At the same time, this reform should aim to make the institution friendlier and more attractive to young people, which today seem to avoid entering into communication and contact with this agency. This means they do not regard this institution as a partner that can help them in finding jobs.

The Republic of Moldova should invest more in innovation, which is an essential engine of economic development. If more investment were made in innovation, in the development and implementation of

ideas and technologies that optimise goods and services or increase the efficiency of the production process, more goods and services would be produced, what stimulates the salaries and the efficiency of companies.

The reality today in this area looks different from the desired state. In 2022, Moldova invested approximately 0.2% of the Gross Domestic Product in research and development. If we compare this with the European Union average, this accounts for about 2.3% of GDP.

I believe that the Republic of Moldova should invest in stimulating innovation, including in the agricultural sector. Moldova is still an agricultural country and innovation in agriculture can directly lead to increased performance in this sector and the attractiveness of the sector for the population, which has had recently the tendency to migrate to the urban areas.

If I were to continue with the social dimension, there is also a need for investments in the development of the mass media, of the public institutions for monitoring the respect of human rights, with a view to reducing discrimination and increasing the degree of tolerance. Here we are talking about tolerance towards other ethnicities, people with different religious views or different sexual orientation, that is things that are part of the general concept of what Moldovan society is.

How to attract foreign investors

■ **Mrs. Palihovici, one of the main wishes of this government is to attract foreign investors. How can this be done in a very troubled security**

climate in the region, but also in the absence of a skilled workforce?

■ Expanding areas that encourage free entrepreneurship, such as Free Economic Areas, created to attract domestic and foreign investment, facilitate the implementation of modern technologies and create new jobs, is one way to attract investors. Although opinions in society are divided regarding the necessity of these areas, I personally believe they are an important tool for attracting investments, a tool that has not yet been fully exploited in Moldova.

At the same time, the decisive factors that influence the decision of investors to come or not to a country are political stability, the level of taxation, how friendly the local business environment is and how strong the rule of law is, as well as the level of corruption. So, the answer to your question of what to do to attract investors is to implement complex reforms that strengthen the rule of law, eliminate corruption, create an attractive tax environment for investors, encourage innovation and investment in new technologies. The investment component in the education and training of the workforce is equally important.

From the perspective of reducing the risks generated by the regional security context, Moldova should continue to be part of all negotiation and peacekeeping platforms. We are too small a country to be an independent player. Our diplomacy should continue to be focused on strategic partnerships that would guarantee us more security and give even more confidence to investors that they are not putting their investment capital at major risks.

SECURITY & DEFENCE DIGEST

The Platform for Security and Defense Initiatives

Security and defence aspects in the process of accession of the Republic of Moldova to the EU

Following the dramatic changes in the regional security environment, given the military invasion of the Russian Federation in Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova applied to join the European Union (EU) in March 2022, obtaining the status of a candidate country in June 2022. The accession process is a complex one. Even if, in April 2023, the European Parliament recommended that the negotiations with the Republic of Moldova regarding the EU accession begin by the end of 2023, the country is not exempted from fulfilling the nine steps identified by the European Commission as necessary for the opening of negotiations. The Chisinau authorities mention that this recommendation results from the successful implementation of reforms and actions that have contributed to the resilience and consolidation of the Republic of Moldova. But Brussels also believes that the country's accession represented a geostrategic investment in a united and strong Europe, emphasizing the importance of continuing the reform process in the Republic of Moldova not only to achieve the political objective of joining the EU, but primarily for

the tangible improvement of the citizens' livelihoods. Becoming a strategic priority for the current Government, the opening of the accession negotiations of the Republic of Moldova was recently, on November 8, recommended by the European Commission and could be approved in December 2023. However, this support is provisional and, respectively, the perspective of the opening of the accession negotiations calls for a pragmatic and realistic approach in all areas, including security and defence.

The Republic of Moldova obtaining the status of a candidate country paves the way for the opening of accession negotiations with the European Union. However, each country's progress towards the EU will depend on its own merits in meeting the Copenhagen criteria adopted in 1993, but also on the EU's ability to absorb new members. The last state to join the EU was Croatia in 2013, and the accession negotiations lasted for seven years. For the Republic of Moldova, the start of negotiations would be an advanced stage in the accession process, because in the historical evolution of

EU enlargement, acquiring the status of a candidate for EU accession does not mean the start of negotiations. An example of this is Albania, which, although it obtained the candidate status in 2014, only in March 2020 did the members of the European Council approve the decision of the General Affairs Council to open accession negotiations.

The EU accession process is a complex one with several stages, involving various established criteria and conditions. This allows each country to progress on its own merits, but it also means that the steps towards the EU can be reversed if the basic conditions are no longer met. The June 2022 report of the European Commission that analyses the level of preparation of the Republic of Moldova from the point of view of the standards submitted to the EU member states indicated modest results of the country on reform issues. According to that report, referring to security, **some level of preparedness** was noted in the area of *Justice, freedom and security* (Chapter 24) and **a moderate level of preparedness** in three areas, one of

which refers to *foreign policy, security and defence* (Chapter 31).

Fighting corruption, an essential element of national security

In this context, with reference to the security field, there should be mentioned that the Moldovan authorities have made nine commitments to the EU with an implementation deadline until July 2023. Although the nine commitments involve indirect actions with security, one cannot neglect the chapter with reference to the *fight against organized crime* - an important aspect related to the national security. The results obtained in the implementation of this chapter are rated as **good** (4.35 p. out of 5). In particular, it is worth noting the approval of the Strategy for the development of the domestic affairs (2022-2030), as well as six sectoral programmes for the operationalization of the Strategy for the years 2022-2025, in the field of integrated border management, the management of the migration flow, asylum and the integration of foreigners, preventing and managing emergency and exceptional situations, preventing and combating crime, order and public security, strengthening citizens' safety and digitizing the internal affairs system. The new strategy was developed taking into account the best practices in the field of strategic planning. In addition, within the General Police Inspectorate, the National Contact Point for Arms and Ammunition was established.

In addition, it should be reminded that the Republic of Moldova signed the Association Agreement in 2014, and this contributed to the harmonization of the Moldovan

legislation with that of the EU during the last nine years, but also to the Security Sector Reform. Thus, quite a lot has been advanced in some areas of security. The fact that the EU has provided considerable support to the Ministry of Internal Affairs and its subdivisions, the fulfilment of actions within the framework of the commitments assumed in the field of public order and the rule of law, the fight against corruption and organized crime and other relevant areas have already made a headway in the implementation of actions in the process of accession compared to other sectors.

Security Sector Reform

Regarding the national security policy, Moldova has committed to reform the security sector, being directly involved in a political dialogue on foreign and security policy within the EU-Moldova Association Council. A high-level EU-Moldova security and safety dialogue policy was launched in March 2022 and the annual consultations on security and defence resumed in 2021. It should be noted that the rate of alignment of the Republic of Moldova to the declarations of the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and restrictive measures fluctuated between 50% and 80%, being an indicator of incoherence and a signal of possible political and strategic constraints, especially vis-à-vis Russia that could influence the degree of trust of partners. That is why the presentation of the strategic vision by the President of the Republic of Moldova, Maia Sandu, within the new draft of the National Security Strategy of the Republic of Moldova, attests to an essential change in the political and strategic discourse of

Chisinau by establishing that the main external threat is the Russian Federation.

In this framework, one cannot ignore that the opening of the EU Partnership Mission in Moldova (EUPM) which is a non-executive, unarmed civilian mission within the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) represents a clear commitment of the EU to strengthen Moldova's security sector resilience, highlighting a growing institutional capacity to work with international actors. In addition, the ongoing security cooperation with the EU reflects a positive evolution of institutional capabilities in the defence sector and cyber security. And last but not least, through the establishment of the Centre for Strategic Communication and Combating Disinformation on 31 July 2023, there are premises for strengthening the state's capacity to ensure the security of the information space and increase the degree of resilience of society in the face of hybrid threats. Moreover, so far, there have been no initiatives to strengthen cooperation between institutions in the fight against disinformation, information manipulation and foreign interference, which poses a danger or may harm national security and jeopardize the achievement of national interests.

However, there are limits to institutional capacity: despite the progress made under the European Instrument for Peace, the 2022 Report highlights that there are significant capacity challenges. Here are highlighted the deficiencies at the level of infrastructure, human capital and, most importantly, at the level of results in terms of reforms and state modernization. The reform process faces internal budgetary and political

constraints, which indicates a limited institutional capacity to develop a pre-emptive attitude to national security and defence challenges. At the same time, **the dependence on external support highlights a reduced capacity for autonomy in the security sector.**

Thus, in order to prepare the country for the EU accession, the National Action Plan for the Accession of the Republic of Moldova to the European Union 2024-2027 (NAP) was developed. According to the informative note of the draft Government Decision, the NAP is a new document, which, unlike the National Action Plans for the Implementation of the Association Agreement, includes six clusters focused on the 33 chapters and 2 criteria, including the entire EU acquis. The plan provides for a series of measures to align the national legislation with the EU acquis. The NAP expressly includes the field of security in Chapters 24 and 31, even though from the perspective of the broader approach to security and resilience aspects, several chapters target this segment. Thus, economic stability, energy security, infrastructure, food and epidemiological security, all are important areas that strengthen the state's defence capacity and resilience. However, in the classical sense of the definition of security, the most important provisions aimed at strengthening and developing force structures are found in chapter 31.

It is important to note that the European Union perceives and promotes the strengthening of security in an integrated way, and the same principle is found in the NAP. Thus, the importance of fighting corruption, preventing money

laundering, reforming the judicial system, and other important aspects for the state resilience and security can be deduced from the plan.

Defence, a subject of common interest

Returning to the defence sector, there should be underlined that the cooperation of the Republic of Moldova with the EU in the military field was not a subject of common interest. Until 24 February 2022, when the Russian Federation launched the war against Ukraine, Moldova's defence cooperation with the EU was limited to the participation of two officers from the National Army in the training missions of the European Union in Mali and the Central African Republic under the PSAC umbrella. Additionally, the military and civilians within the Ministry of Defence participated in certain short-term training courses to familiarize themselves with the PSCF missions and tools. In the same context, the representatives of the Ministry of Defence expressed their intention to intensify military cooperation by joining the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) projects and participating in the activities of the European Defence Agency (EDA) as well as joining the European Peace Facility (EPF). Thus, cooperation in the field of security and defence increased substantially last year, especially in the area related to the modernization of the army and the increase in military capabilities with which Moldova intends to contribute to international security operations under the auspices of the UN, NATO and the EU. Moreover, the efficiency and speed of the financing of military equipment programmes through the European Peace Facility have exceeded

the expectations of the defence specialists. Thus, the European Union consciously assumed the role of complementing NATO's efforts in the field of cooperative security.

However, in the context of the accession of the Republic of Moldova to the EU, the strengthening of capacities in security and defence remains a problem that requires more autonomy by increasing the defence budget. In this sense, it is important that aspects of defence planning were introduced in the NAP, such as the adjustment of the National Defense Strategy and the Military Strategy. Likewise, the plan also includes the aspect of strengthening the capacity of the National Army to manage crisis situations through the use of the European Instrument for Peace. This instrument will in fact substantially reduce the financial burden on the national budget. At the same time, the use of only this financing instrument also presents a degree of risk considering the EU's priorities as a result of the challenges in the current security environment, including the effects of the crisis in the Middle East. Thus, if the EU priorities change, it is very likely that part of these funds will be re-directed for other needs.

It should be noted that countering hybrid threats becomes a priority element from the point of view of security and defence, so the plan specifically stipulates that the review of strategic defence planning documents must take place including through the prism of hybrid threats. Moreover, it is planned to develop an Operational Protocol for Countering Hybrid Threats. Another aspect of the plan is the commitment to participate with a military contingent in one of the EU's crisis management missions.

Currently, the Republic of Moldova does not have contingents deployed in EU missions.

Last but not least, lately, the Chisinau authorities have mentioned that the resolution of the Transnistrian conflict is not a condition imposed by Brussels for the accession of the Republic of Moldova to the EU. However, we cannot neglect the lack of concrete answers regarding the option of accession in the context of the existence of an unsettled conflict whose negotiation process is not functional. The main limits in the settlement of the Transnistrian conflict are complex. In addition, any formulation of proposals or solutions may present a challenge in itself for the European integration process. But this does not limit the advancement of the Republic of Moldova in harmonizing its legislation with the international and European standards in matters of national security and defence.

Thus, on the one hand, the implementation of actions related to the fulfilment of the EU accession

commitments can serve as a catalyst for the reintegration of the Transnistrian region, although the two processes could advance at different speed. It is also argued that the EU accession process could facilitate a constructive dialogue and international cooperation in order to find a sustainable solution for the Transnistrian conflict, while promoting the security and stability necessary for the accession of the Republic of Moldova. On the other hand, the situation on the left side of the Dniester presents constant challenges to the national security and defence and remains one of the main obstacles to the European integration. Although previously, the Cypriot case was not considered an example that could be applied in the Republic of Moldova, however, some experts, as well as European authorities (Josep Borrell), mentioned that the Republic of Moldova can join the EU based on the example of Cyprus, which joined the EU having an unresolved territorial conflict.

Thus, accelerating the implementation of reforms, developing and

strengthening the institutional capacities, as well as capitalizing on partnerships and other regional cooperation tools are essential to advance in the EU accession process. Recently, the Minister of Defense signed the accession document of the Republic of Moldova to the South-East European Defense Ministers' Meeting Process (SEDM) as a full member (since 2003 the Republic of Moldova has had an observer status). Having the status of a candidate country for accession to the EU, the Republic of Moldova, by signing the respective document, expressed its interest in contributing with concrete steps to the regional security and stability, which is deliberately aligned with the objectives of the SEDM Process. All these efforts in ensuring the opening of negotiations regarding the accession process of the Republic of Moldova to the EU must not neglect the role of the entire society in this process, as it is of national interest that this effort aims at increasing the citizens' confidence in the institutional capacities to ensure national security.

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