

# No Time to Waste: Moldova's Quest to Open EU Accession Negotiations

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*The upcoming European Council in Brussels is expected to make a decision on the opening of accession negotiations with Moldova, Ukraine, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, as well as the granting of EU candidate status for Georgia. The importance of this decision for Moldova is accentuated by the current geopolitical context. Beset by multiple crisis in recent years, Moldova's European ambitions are threatened by an intensified Russian hybrid war characterized by stronger interference in electoral processes. The next round of national elections in Moldova, planned for 2024 and 2025, will be critical to the sustainability of its European integration process. Hence, the opening of the accession talks and the follow-up steps could accelerate the internal reform agenda and ensure greater popular support for genuine pro-European political forces.*

## Positive Technical Assessment

The first country report on Moldova as part of the enlargement package, published by the European Commission at the beginning of November 2023, acknowledges Moldova's solid progress with implementation of the nine policy steps set out in June 2022. The Commission states that six of them have been fully completed, while the other three related to justice system reform, the fight against corruption and de-oligarchisation, require further action by the Moldovan authorities. Moldova must now: (a) advance the appointment of new members of the judicial and prosecutorial self-governing structures, as well the appointment of a new Prosecutor General; (b) strengthen the institutional capacities of the anti-corruption bodies; and (c) continue implementation of the de-oligarchisation action plan. Based on its assessment, the Commission has recommended that the European Council begin accession negotiations with Moldova, and will report to the member states on progress with the remaining three steps by March 2024.

The deadline set by the Commission is not arbitrary. If the European Council gives a "green light" to Moldova in December, preparations for the negotiation framework and the screening

process will begin in January 2024. Furthermore, if the Commission evaluation in March 2024 is positive, the first intergovernmental conference is likely to be organized in the following month, just before the end of the mandate of the Von der Leyen Commission. As in the case of Albania and North Macedonia, an intergovernmental conference might be immediately followed by the formal start of the screening phases. Hence, the Commission approach is to facilitate a predictable but merit-based transition for Moldova through the early stages of the accession process.

## Timing Might Be Critical

The upcoming European Parliament elections, coupled with the 2024 presidential and 2025 parliamentary elections in Moldova, could bring an element of unpredictability to the future of Chisinau's accession path. First, the electoral periods will affect the decision-making process on both sides and could pause the discussions on strategic issues related to the accession talks. In 2019, appointment of the college of commissioners led by von der Leyen took place five months after the elections to the European Parliament. In a similar scenario, given that the presidential election in Moldova might take place in November to December 2024 and parliamentary elections in July 2025, there might be little room for key political decisions related to Moldova's accession.

In addition, the formation of a new majority in the European Parliament and appointment of new heads of the EU institutions might lead to an updated agenda or new priorities, including revisions to the enlargement framework. Even though President of the European Council Charles Michel has recently stated that the EU must be ready for a new wave of enlargement by 2030, there is a lack of consensus among the member states on the prospects for the next wave. The cleavages are easy to identify. Some countries, such as Austria or Greece, are more concerned about an accelerated accession of the Western Balkan states, while others, such as Poland or Sweden, cannot conceive of an enlargement process that does not include Ukraine. The reluctance of the member states to highlight a timeframe for enlargement suggests the need for further reflection on the process, as noted in the Granada declaration.

## Russia's Destabilization Efforts

When assessing Moldova's dossier and preparation for the start of accession talks, European leaders must take account of the importance of this decision for countering Russia's increased hybrid attacks on Moldova. In the past two years, Moscow has invested considerable resources in a diverse range of political parties and figures in Moldova, aiming to bribe the electorate and institute election fraud. The local elections that took place in November 2023 were characterized by extensive amounts of undeclared funds that were used for vote buying. The widespread phenomenon of illegal funding was partially addressed by the exclusion of the "Chance" party, controlled by the convicted oligarch Ilan Shor, from the electoral race two days before the elections. However, this decision was taken by the temporary Commission for Emergency Situations and not by the law enforcement bodies, which underlines the current inability of the justice system to systemically address such issues.

Given the proximity of the next elections, Russia can be expected to boost its engagement with political proxies and in voter manipulation and engineering. The formation of a genuine pro-European coalition in the next parliament might therefore be challenging. To address Russia's malign influence, the EU must act as a more pragmatic player to anchor Moldova in an enhanced and results-oriented accession process. The intermediate goals of this process should be focused on more investments and greater benefits offered to Moldovan citizens, which might later translate into higher electoral support for pro-European political elites. According to a recent [poll](#), 59.2% of Moldovans support Moldova's accession to the EU and about 48% of citizens know of one or more projects financed by EU in their community in the past five years. The EU therefore has a solid base to build on in the coming years.

## Policy Recommendations

- *Open accession negotiations with Moldova.* The European Council Summit in December must acknowledge Moldova's progress in implementing a number of key reforms and, as a result, decide to open accession negotiations. As described above, the member states must reflect on the multifaceted aspects of this decision for Moldova's European ambitions and demonstrate commitment and determination to advancing this endeavour.
- *Promote the gradual accession of Moldova.* The medium-term goals of the EU accession process should be focused on membership of the single market and greater access to EU funds. In recent years, Moldova has been invited to join various EU regional initiatives and projects, coupled with financing opportunities. This practice should continue and be upgraded to a step-by-step harmonization of domestic policies with European ones, as well as broader opportunities for Moldovan business, services and citizens.
- *Increase technical and advisory support for Moldova's accession.* The Moldovan authorities have already formed 33 working groups responsible for the negotiations and started the self-screening process. The government has allocated additional budgetary resources to supplement the institutional capacities of the public administration in the context of the EU accession process. However, EU technical and advisory assistance will be key to preparing and assisting officials to understand the complexity of the negotiations and the volume of work in the coming years.
- *Invest more resources in communication campaigns about EU accession.* An intrinsic value of EU accession should be a better understanding of the sizable benefits that go hand in hand with its advancement. Moldovan citizens need to be aware of their role in speeding up European integration and the stakes of this objective for the country's future. Both the Moldovan authorities and the EU must intensify their communication with their citizens through various online and offline channels.



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