

Foreign Policy Association together with Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung offer you a newsletter on foreign policy and European integration issues of the Republic of Moldova. The newsletter is part of the "Foreign Policy Dialogue" joint Project.

foreign policy association
APE
asociația pentru politică externă

**FRIEDRICH
EBERT
STIFTUNG**

NEWSLETTER

MONTHLY BULLETIN • DECEMBER 2023 • NR.12 (214)

Synthesis and Foreign Policy Debates

The newsletter is developed by Mădălin Necșuțu, editor-coordinator

TOPICS OF THE EDITION:

1. Collective expert interview: *The justice chapter should be a priority, together with the security, political, social and economic issues*
2. Editorial by Lina Griu, foreign policy expert: EU enlargement: *security solution for the entire continent. What's next for the Republic of Moldova?*
3. Analysis by Platform for Security and Defence Initiatives (PISA): *Security aspects in the context of the opening of the accession negotiations of Moldova with the European Union*

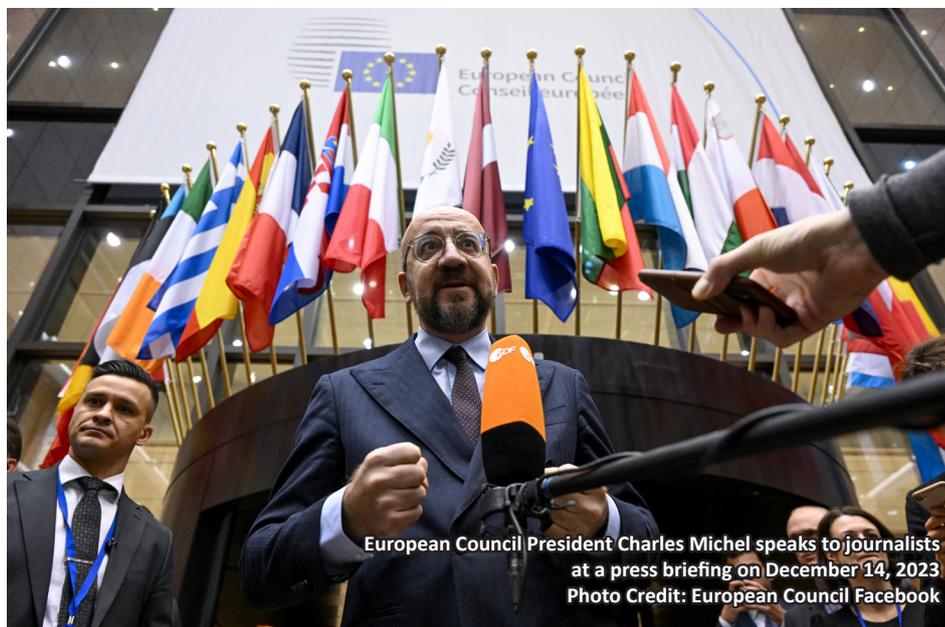
News in Brief

The Republic of Moldova has made progress in promoting the European agenda in 2023, and the authorities have managed to face the challenges of the hybrid war, energy blackmail and economic problems, according to a study of the Foreign Policy Association (APE). However, there are still outstanding tasks regarding the rule of law, justice, and respect for human rights in the Transnistrian region, according to the same study. "There is a clear vision from the authorities with regard to promoting reforms and the European integration agenda. At the same time, there remain areas that require additional attention", said the director of the Association for Foreign Policy, Natalia Stercul. Also, the expert in security and strategic communication of the Platform for Security and Defence Initiatives (PISA), Elena Mirzac, said that in 2023, the European Union stood out as a security provider, including for the Republic of Moldova, and the biggest threat to the country's security remains the Russian Federation.

The Government announced that the single allowance at the child birth will increase by more than 9,000 MDL and will reach 20,000 MDL starting from 1 January 2024. Next year, more than 33,000 children will benefit from the single allowance at birth, the Minister of Labour and Social Protection, Alexei Buzu, stated during the Government meeting. According to the minister, in 2024, the quality of social benefits will increase and the bureaucratic procedures for families with children will be eliminated. "These families will also benefit from a monthly payment in the amount of 1,000 MDL for the first 24 months of the child, an allowance that is established based on the individual contributions of the insured persons. Starting from 2024, the adoptive parents will be able to benefit from three new allowances for the first time", said Buzu. The provisions of the decision apply to children born on 1 January 2024. The last increase in this regard was made last December.

The Cabinet of Ministers approved, on December 21, the establishment of the National Cyber Security Agency. The institution will have the mission to implement the state policies in the field of cyber security, in order to ensure a high level of security of the networks and IT systems of service providers. Also, within the Agency, a response team to cyber incidents at national level will be formed and a single national point of contact will be established, which will ensure the interaction of national public authorities and institutions with similar authorities in other states. The institution will be responsible for the protection of critical information infrastructure, the identification and record of service providers, the implementation of a mandatory mechanism for reporting cyber incidents, but also for the supervision and state control of compliance by service providers with the regulatory framework in the field of cyber security.

Republic of Moldova, face to face with the opportunities and threats of 2024



European Council President Charles Michel speaks to journalists at a press briefing on December 14, 2023
Photo Credit: European Council Facebook

The Republic of Moldova is preparing for 2024, a year marked by two aspects of major importance: the opening of negotiations on accession chapters with the European Union and the presidential elections. However, the

regional context remains just as murky due to the uncertainties and vulnerabilities created by the Russian military invasion of Ukraine, an external theatre of war with reverberations inside Moldova.

The pro-Russian political forces from the separatist Transnistrian region, but also from the Gagauz autonomy in southern Moldova, can always create hotbeds of instability for Moldova and the pro-European government

► in Chisinau. The pro-Russian political forces will also contribute to creating a political climate of uncertainty, a situation that suits Moscow's political-military goals.

With the green light received from the European Council on 14 December 2023, Moldova will enter the phase in which it will have to accelerate sectoral reforms on all 33 accession chapters. All eyes will surely be on the justice reform, where the system will be fiercely opposing the reforms.

The fight will not be an easy one and will stretch over the coming years. No one expects progress overnight, although this was the slogan the ruling party when it came to power in July 2021. The expectations were then raised far too high against a background of endemic corruption in the system.

Here, however, the government will also have to make fine adjustments in order not to give the impression that the justice reform must be imposed by political force on the magistrates. And there must be

an intrinsic will among the magistrates to reform, without hiding behind the excuse of political interference in this process. First of all, this is a political process and then one of the judicial guild, after we all could see that the system is not capable of reformation from within.

Also, there is a need to strengthen the defence capabilities of the Republic of Moldova. Chisinau must provide itself with a minimum of security and defence, even if it has strong partners on the security side. This effort will also strengthen the dissuasive capacity of the Moldovan Army and change the balance of forces compared to the Transnistrian paramilitary forces, led at the top by people from Russia's intelligence structures.

Last but not least, there is a need to develop contingency plans regarding the Transnistrian region for the reintegration of the region into the de facto borders of the Republic of Moldova and to avoid an economic and humanitarian crisis, in the event that the free Russian gas will no longer arrive in the region. Ukraine

has clearly said that it will no longer allow the transit of Russian gas at the end of 2024. Also, the Republic of Moldova must be prepared economically, as well as politically, to reintegrate Transnistria.

In addition, the Moldovan authorities must make contingency plans for participating in the reconstruction of Ukraine, because this security crisis can also bring economic opportunities for the Republic of Moldova. In this sense, the most practical would be to have a coordinated plan of cooperation with Romania as transit countries through which various goods and flows of goods will enter for the reconstruction of this war-torn country.

In other words, the Republic of Moldova must transform from a reactive to a pro-active country with anticipatory capabilities that builds tools and reserves to be able to act quickly in the sense of increased navigation capabilities through these troubled waters in which it is directly involved.

Madalin Necsutu

Collective expert interview: The justice chapter should be a priority, together with the security, political, social and economic issues

For this FES/APE foreign policy newsletter, we have discussed with several experts in different fields to find out what Moldova's tasks in 2024 should be, after the decision of the European Council of 14 December 2023 to give green light for the opening of accession negotiations with Moldova. The justice reform is

by far the biggest challenge, but also a requirement of the EU and of the Moldovan citizens. Last but not least, the security problems generated by the Russian invasion of Ukraine is another matter that must be solved with priority. From here derives the possibilities of attracting foreign investments for development, having

ensured security and the rule of law. Read in the following lines what the consulted experts think about what should the priorities of the Republic of Moldova in 2024 be, but also the measures that should be taken in the view of the presidential elections that will take place in the autumn of 2024:



Angela Gramada,
*director of the Experts
for Security and Global
Affairs (ESGA)*

■ **What are Moldova's tasks in terms of reforms for 2024? What should it start with and what should its priorities be, now that it has received the green light from the European Council?**

■ First of all, we have to accept the fact that the reforms are being made for a better life in the Republic of Moldova, not for the European Union, and this means accepting the change of mentality, of the paradigm with which we approach this extremely complex process.

Secondly, I think it would be logical to continue with what we have not completed yet – the justice reforms. More specifically, those recommendations that have not been fulfilled yet and for which a deadline has been defined – until spring. Unfortunately, the system is opposing and the representatives of this mechanism do not understand that in the long run everyone loses a multitude of opportunities that they could benefit from more quickly.

Overall, the priorities will not change radically, simply the measures needed to be taken must identify the political will needed to be adopted and implemented. It will be difficult, but not impossible. Postponing reforms means nothing more than postponing your own well-being.

Countering the sabotage of the democratization of Moldova

■ **Republic of Moldova is preparing for presidential elections in 2024. How do you assess the political atmosphere in the country in the perspective of the presidential elections scheduled for 2024?**

■ A complicated period is ahead, especially in the context of the internal emphasis on regaining some positions lost on the political scene by certain political forces. I don't think we will be able to witness an easy electoral campaign for Maia Sandu.

We must pay attention to how her image is used by potential opponents to destroy her image as a leader capable of mobilizing internal and external resources in favour of the Republic of Moldova. In addition, it is presented by those sabotaging the country's democratization as a political actor who exploits the citizens' fears. Another important thing is the attempt to discredit her image by associating her with certain decisions of the Parliament or with failures of some members of the Executive, intentionally omitting to specify the limits of her presidential mandate.

The last thing I would like to emphasize is that we still do not know who the real opponents are for the presidential election campaign and what their resources are: money, internal and external supporters, media resources. It is going to be a tough campaign, which will also have an impact on the

parliamentary elections, which means that everyone will be trying to get the maximum to validate themselves for the last part of the electoral cycle in front of the voters.

The justice system reform – who is opposing?



Cristina Ciubotaru,
legal expert

■ **How do you see the justice system reforms in 2024? What should take priority and why?**

■ I would like to have genuine policies and not politicization of justice. In general, in Moldova, all processes are politicized, including by the European Union, unfortunately. I would very much like those conditionalities which we have been praised for having completed partially or totally to be truly fulfilled. However, things are different. From my point of view, in the field of justice, but especially in the anti-corruption, the situation is dramatic.

The politicization of judicial, prosecution and anti-corruption processes continues

4 Synthesis and Foreign Policy Debates

to the detriment of professionalism. I expect professional approaches, because at the moment, we have a lot of amateurism, tolerated by the EU institutions, unfortunately, and this generates disappointment. We need much tougher and more objective evaluations in assessing the fulfilment of conditionalities, because only in this way will the citizens be encouraged regarding the European future of Moldova.

History seems to be repeating itself, because we experienced a disappointment when, after many hopes related to the accession of a pro-European government in 2012, also supported practically unconditionally by the EU, in 2014, one billion dollars was stolen from Moldovan banks. After which, in the next elections, the disappointment of the voters threw us into the arms of pro-Russian parties. It is a pity that the lesson of the dangers of unconditional support of the governments from Chisinau was not learned. I am afraid that we will not experience a similar moment in the next presidential and parliamentary elections, because the undeserved praise from the EU, against the background of internal crises, could make us swing again towards a government with a different foreign policy orientation, and I don't want this. Many supporters of European integration are disappointed that democratic backsliding are not punished and many end up saying: I want Moldova to be part of the EU, but if the EU means that what the government does is good - then I don't want in such an EU.

Only a healthy criticism and insistence on real reforms on the part of the EU, punishing the government's democratic backsliding and abuses can generate support from our pro-European electorate. Supporting European values in the Republic of Moldova is more important than supporting a political party that defies these values and establishes a monopoly on the European course. European integration

is the desire of several parties, and the time has come for the EU to treat Moldova more seriously when it comes to its progress, especially in the area of justice and anti-corruption. Only the justice and anti-corruption mechanisms can penalise the abuses of the administration, while the paralyzing reforms in these sectors only encourage the abuses by the government.

■ **The political discourse of the Government is that the system opposes and does not allow the reforms. That there is that kleptocratic system created in the last three decades that opposes reforms. How do you see things?**

■ I think they are cheating and it is more about an opposition to European standards on the part of the reformers than on the part of the justice system. I haven't really heard judges and prosecutors saying they don't support the actual reform. They may disagree with the methods and or the goals of the reform. Moreover, clear reform goals do not exist as long as there is no reform strategy and an understanding of the problems and solutions offered by the reform. The reform in our country mostly consists of "out of the blue" revenge interventions and reactions to the political disturbances of the moment. There is no justification for the brutal political interventions in justice. Honestly, I get the impression that we are in a state where the three powers in the state are: the Parliament, the Government, and the Presidency, because justice is no longer perceived as part of the state.

The judiciary has reached derision, a pariah unable to ensure the balance of power in the state. When justice no longer matters, governance has no limits, the law is no longer the red line whose crossing imposes legal consequences. Because there is no one to impose them. Any decision inconvenient to power automatically

leads to the lynching of judges or prosecutors: "thieves", "thugs", and "the system is opposing". And this is very dangerous. A party's self-proclaimed as "messianic" and infallible is perhaps the most dangerous thing, because it means that no one can contradict it. Parties and governments are represented by also by people, who are also natural to make mistakes, and when they make mistakes, it would be natural to answer.

When the judiciary is reformed to no longer be able to balance the government, to establish absolute control over what the judiciary does, then things get downright serious. The hate speech of politicians against judges who issue decisions that do not suit the power is probably the most eloquent illustration of the "justice reform" and the true intentions of the reformers.

Just recently, the Prime Minister, Dorin Recean, and the President of the Parliament, Igor Grosu, urged the citizens to retain the names of the judges from the panel of the Chisinau Court of Appeal who ordered the annulment of the decision to remove from the electoral race in the local elections a party, allegedly affiliated to Ilan Sor, and urged the so-called independent bodies for the extraordinary evaluation of judges to evaluate the three judges "to the blood". However, when the judges, including those from the aforementioned panel, issue decisions favourable to the government, citizens are assured that this is true justice and that the reform is bearing fruit. When it suits or doesn't suit them, justice must have the last word, a word that must be treated with respect. Because otherwise, later, the same convenient decisions can be called into question by other politicians.

Let's not forget that everyone has rights. Even those whom the government labels as "thieves"

and “thugs”. Today it doesn’t seem serious at first sight that the “thief” or “bandit” is deprived of rights, but tomorrow anyone can find that they no longer have rights. The role of the court is to apply the Law impartially and ensure respect for the rights of each person, based on the evidence presented to it. If [Ilan Șor] did something bad, let him be held accountable for it. Statements like “criminal organizations” and “we’ve all seen the evidence” do not justify the lynching of the judges, and society’s reactions were more on the side of the targeted judges, even on the part of those who do not sympathize with Ilan Șor.

I am glad that the prime minister was also charged by the Moldovan Judges’ Association, and in the end, even by the Superior Council of Magistrates, especially since the latter is a body created by the current government itself following the pre-vetting process (the extraordinary evaluation). Even they categorized these statements as an inadmissible political interference in justice.

But this discourse itself is not out of the ordinary for the Republic of Moldova. It is the usual hate speech propagated by the Presidency, the Government and the Parliament, against the background of the narrative that the judicial system opposes, does not want to be reformed, and here my question is: who, in fact, opposes? Is the judicial system opposed to reform or are politicians opposed to embracing genuine European standards?

Maybe the system is against it too. Certainly, the corrupt will always oppose, both those in the judiciary and in politics. I just have big doubts that at this moment corruption is the one who opposes it.

I believe that one of the three powers in the state is simply fighting for existence. And this struggle is far from “the system is fighting back.” This is rather the easiest argument to invoke by the power when it fails to make certain changes or when it simply fails. It’s easier to blame the judiciary for any failure.

Special court

■ **Could the election of a new general prosecutor and the establishment of that anti-corruption court promoted by President Maia Sandu be able to boost things in the judiciary next year?**

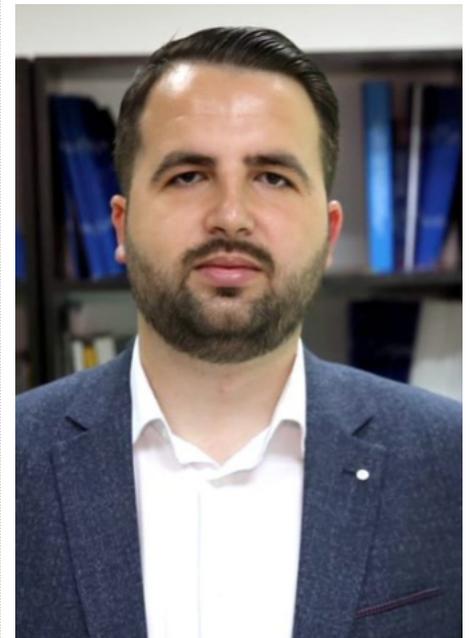
■ I have always been a fervent supporter of the creation of anti-corruption court. I believed and continue to believe that, if there is a need for specialization at ANI regarding verifying assets or specialization at NAC and AP with regard to criminal prosecution in corruption cases, I do not understand why this specialization is not possible in courts? If special anti-corruption knowledge and skills are needed before the trial, then it is natural that the specialization should exist also in the courts.

The creation of an anti-corruption court would be likely to give speed to all anti-corruption processes. Namely, the procrastination of corruption cases often undermines people’s trust in justice. Even if in the end the corrupt defendants end up being convicted, after two, three or more years, when no one follows and no one cares about the fate of those files, the impression of impunity is created.

It may seem surprising to some, but in our country the conviction rate on corruption cases exceeds 80-90%. But because it comes so late, society no longer perceives those

condemnations. Enforcement of penalties and forfeitures is a problem. But also the delays, and the problems of enforcement of penalties and confiscations could be solved by creating the anti-corruption court. It depends a lot on how this court or those specialized panels will be created to judge such cases.

If this court will be perceived as belonging to the political factor, just as the extraordinary assessment of judges and prosecutors is currently perceived, this institution may be compromised. I really want it to be a genuine anti-corruption court, which does not bend to the expectations of politicians, but which has the courage to deliver justice and anti-corruption measures.



Mihai Mogildea,
deputy director of the
Institute for European Policies
and Reforms (IPRE)

■ **What priorities do you see in terms of the necessary reforms in Moldova in 2024?**

■ To a large extent, the priorities must be related to the three steps that our country still has to fulfil from the nine recommendations of the European Commission from June 2022. The three conditionalities relate to completing the process of appointing the heads of key institutions from the justice, but also of the general prosecutor.

At the same time, there is another conditionality related to the strengthening of anti-corruption institutions, and here probably the European Union is expecting a good organization of the development process of the Anti-Corruption Court, as it was conceptualized by the Moldovan authorities.

Another conditionality refers to the oligarchization plan, which includes several steps that need to be completed. So, these are the priority actions until the end of March.

According to the preliminary calendar sent by the European Union, at the beginning of next year, the process of examining the conformity of the national legislation with the European one with regard to several chapters is going to start. It will most likely start with the justice chapters. From the preliminary discussions, the understanding is that there are two other chapters that will be addressed. This is about chapter 8 on competition, and chapter 7 on the intellectual property.

Regarding the above-mentioned chapters, the actual screening process will begin in January. I expect that one of the priorities will be strengthening the institutions and capacities of the authorities in the field of national security. Here, together with the approval of the National Security Strategy,

other sectoral documents are to be adopted. I am referring to the new Military Strategy and the sectoral strategies that need to be adapted to the National Security Strategy.

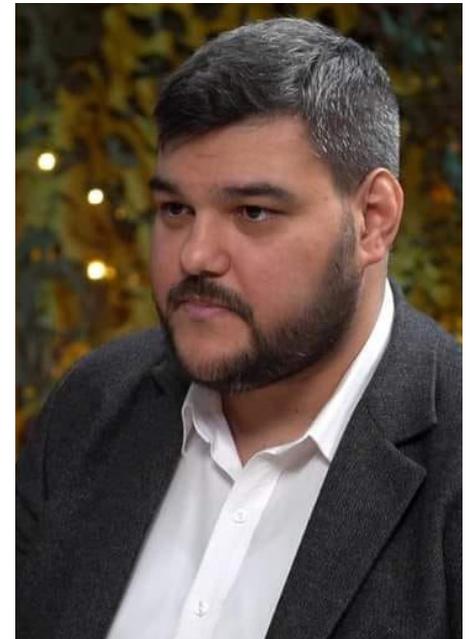
At the same time, we hope that the Center for Combating Disinformation and Strategic Communication will become operational and start producing the results expected by everyone. According to the director of the Center, Ana Revenco, the Center has to become operational towards the end of March. This means that, at the end of next year, we will already be able to draw the first conclusions about what this Center succeeded and failed to do in the context of the presidential elections that should take place in 2024.

Elections under a democratic spectrum

■ **How should the justice system work against those who commit electoral fraud, in the view of the 2024 presidential election?**

■ I expect the Anticorruption Prosecutor's Office and the courts to work much more effectively to identify and hold accountable the persons guilty of electoral corruption, of illegal financing of political parties, because this phenomenon will increase next year and the cases of electoral corruption will be much more widespread among rural communities.

Therefore, all these processes should be put in place, so that the culprits are brought to justice in time and we no longer witness last-minute decisions regarding the exclusion of some political parties from the electoral campaign, as happened this year in the local elections.



Mihai Isac,
political and security analyst

■ **Now that the European Council gave green light to Moldova for opening the accession negotiations, what are Moldova's tasks with regard to the reforms in 2024? What should it start with and what should its priorities be?**

■ Of course, the justice chapter should be a priority, together with chapters related to the security of the economic, social and political life in the Republic of Moldova. The Moldovan authorities should quickly implement these reforms, not for Brussels, but first of all to increase the standards of living of the Moldovan population.

The improvement of human rights legislation and greater involvement of European Union partners in the peaceful resolution of the Transnistrian conflict as well as the elimination of the consequences of the Russian war of aggression against the country in the early 90s should be also priorities for the authorities.

It would also be necessary to improve the legislation in the field of national

security, in order to respond better to the hybrid war launched by the Russian Federation against the Republic of Moldova. The rapid adoption of economic legislation that allows the absorption of European pre-accession funds should be an important priority.

The local public administration reform should take place until the next local elections (2027) to facilitate the implementation of structural reforms necessary for the accession to the European Union.

Speeding up the integration process in the energy system of the European Union should be a priority area for the Republic of Moldova, not only on paper, but also through the construction of the necessary infrastructure.

Dirty election campaign

■ **How do you assess the political atmosphere in the Republic of Moldova in the perspective of the presidential elections scheduled for 2024? Do you anticipate a dirty campaign or President Maia Sandu will win a second term rather easily?**

■ We will witness, of course, a dirty campaign, financed by funds from illegal activities or directly from the budget of the Russian Federation. The involvement of fugitive oligarchs in undermining constitutional authorities is obvious, but this could only be done with the direct support of a major state actor, such as the Kremlin. Maia Sandu does not have a popular opponent, but it is expected that the anti-European opposition will use the opportunity of the presidential election campaign to attack her directly, as well as the current government. The main goal is to weaken the confidence of the electorate in president Maia Sandu, but the important involvement of the diaspora guarantees a new mandate for her.

The pro-Russian opposition will try to field more pseudo-pro-European candidates, backed by illegal funds, to force a second round of presidential elections. In this way, they will try to undermine the image of the current head of state, who plays the role of electoral locomotive for the main pro-European political force, PAS, in any electoral exercise.

The biggest stake of these pro-Russian forces is the parliamentary elections of 2025, when they will try to change the composition of the Parliament through elections. The authorities in Chisinau must adopt as quickly as possible legislative measures aimed at limiting the possibility of illegal financing of elections and parties, both inside and outside the Republic of Moldova.

■ **How much will the stability of Moldova depend on the war in Ukraine in 2024?**

■ The developments on the fronts in Ukraine will decisively influence the internal and external political situation of the Republic of Moldova. If the Russian military forces approach the Transnistrian region, the separatist regime will intensify pressure against Chisinau for political and economic concessions. Also, other regions such as Gagauzia and Taraclia will be the scene of unconstitutional actions.

If the Russian army manages to achieve some victories on the front in Ukraine, the anti-constitutional forces, supported by elements of the criminal world, will intensify the street protests directed against the ruling party. Any day won by Ukraine's resistance to the illegal Russian military invasion must be

used by Chisinau to win its own war for the reforms necessary for integration into the European Union and the improvement of the quality of life of the Moldovan citizens.

Priorities in the economy



Adrian Lupusor, executive director of Expert-Grup

■ **What should Moldova do in terms of economic reforms in 2024? What should be its priorities?**

■ There are three main priorities. First, let's start with supporting the development of small and medium-sized enterprises by facilitating their access to financial resources and by stimulating the technologisation of companies. Then, supporting them in accessing the European market. There is also a need to support the integration of small and medium-sized companies into value chains and their integration with larger investors.

There is a need to stimulate fair competition in all economic sectors. For this we also need a functioning Competition Council. This is the first block of measures - the development of small and medium enterprises through the lens of strengthening the organizations for the entrepreneurship development and the liberalization of economic sectors.

The second block refers to the state enterprises. Here we need to improve the corporate governance, increase the transparency of companies, professionalize the boards of directors and prepare the state companies that compete with the private sector - either through full or partial privatization or issue of shares. This would also allow for the boosting of the stock market.

The third thing is about the macro-financial stabilization measures. Here I am mainly referring to two problems that must be solved in the coming years. Firstly, we are talking about the budget deficit and secondly, the current account deficit. The government must focus on fiscal consolidation. This is about the increase of the fiscal space through two measures: fighting against tax evasion and informal employment and the second – the uniformity of the fiscal space through the gradual elimination of fiscal facilities. Because we have a problem in the Republic of Moldova related to a rather uneven Fiscal Code as a result of the influence of certain interest and lobby groups.

We should stimulate fiscal consolidation by increasing the fiscal space, and not by increasing the fiscal pressure. Before applying tax increases, we should exhaust the

potential of these two mentioned sources.

As for the current account deficit, this is related to a policy of improving the cooperation between the government's economic policy and the monetary and foreign policy of the National Bank of Moldova (NBM), which must be better coordinated. The NBM's interventions must also follow economic growth objectives, when we do not have inflationary risks, and for this the NBM, together with the Government, must communicate better without prejudicing the NBM's independence. We need better cooperation between the economic policy and monetary policy.

The current account deficit must also be solved by increasing the competitiveness of the national economy, as I've already mentioned, by developing the SMEs and the export potential of SMEs.

How to attract foreign investors

■ Can Moldova do something to attract foreign investors in 2024? What would be the most appropriate strategy in this regard?

■ First of all, we must convince the investors that, in the Republic of Moldova, the economic policy decisions are taken in a disciplined, transparent and long-term way, that the decisions are not taken arbitrarily, depending on limited interests or lobbying interests and depending on the situation.

We need proper economic governance that inspires long-term investor confidence. For this, I don't think we need to invent anything

super sophisticated. This is simple – the fiscal policy, the economic and budget policies should observe the standards of good governance, transparency, and inclusion.

In other words, the government should convince the potential investors that, in the Republic of Moldova, the Government follows the public interest and not obscure interests, and the influence of lobby groups is limited. This is what the Government needs to convince the potential investors about.

Secondly, but equally important, we are talking about the quality of the bureaucracy, regulations, laws, but first and foremost, investors must be sure that the government is benevolent and sincerely oriented towards attracting investment for economic development and is not influenced by different lobby groups.

Equally important is the de-monopolization of different market segments. We have many economic sectors where there is a high level of economic concentration. I mean, they are different holdings or companies that are affiliated to a person or groups of close persons and this creates entry barriers for investors. In fact, this is precisely what scares investors, and here I reiterate the importance of a functional Competition Council to convince investors that in the Republic of Moldova such anti-competitive arrangements are reduced to a minimum and we have a functional free market.

■ Thank you!

*The interviews were conducted by
Madalin Necsutu*

Editorial

EU enlargement: security solution for the entire continent. What's next for the Republic of Moldova?

Editorial by Lina Grâu,
independent journalist

At the end of 2023, the Republic of Moldova has entered, indisputably, a new historical stage, one that could lead, in the case of a positive combination of factors, to the accession of the Republic of Moldova to the European Union.

The vote of the European Council marks not only an unimaginable perspective a few years ago for the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine, but it also means that, in the face of the incredible violence of Russia's war of aggression, European countries have come to understand that so-called "grey areas", or "buffer areas" can no longer exist in Europe. The idea from the years before the war, that a "sanitary belt" around Russia would guarantee the security of the European Union, but also a positive development of the countries in this "buffer zone", proved invalid. Old Europe understood that Russia would invest in corrupting, hijacking and aggressing neighbouring countries in order to expand its influence and generate instability as much as possible. Faced with this danger, the European leaders have returned to discussions on EU enlargement as the only security solution for the continent, but also as a historic chance for the entire generations of citizens of the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine to fulfil their European dream.

In the current geopolitical context, the moment of December 2023 was practically the "last wagon" in the train to the EU for the Republic of Moldova, at least in the short and medium term. The European parliamentary elections will take place in June 2024, after which it will take at least a few months to create the new structures of the European Parliament



and the new European Commission. Let's not forget the fact that between June and December 2024 the presidency of the European Council will be held by Hungary. And so, the moment of December 2023 was practically the only one that gave the Republic of Moldova a break to prepare and launch the technical negotiations for the EU accession, a process which, if it is launched until the European elections in June, will be able to continue at the level of technical experts regardless of the electoral or political setbacks in the EU.

What's next?

The European authorities, as well as the Moldovan ones, have warned that the road will not be an easy one. It will require not only the effort of the authorities, but also a constant and solid support from society.

"I am glad to be able to announce the start of the procedures for the opening of accession negotiations with the Republic of Moldova, less than 24 hours after the adoption of the decision of the European Council. It is a well-deserved reward for

the fantastic effort made by the Republic of Moldova. We congratulate you and look forward to seeing you in the EU!" said Gert-Jan Koopman, Director General of DG NEAR.

The first chapter with which the accession negotiations of the Republic of Moldova to the EU will begin is justice and the fight against corruption. To start with, there will follow a complex technical process of preparation for negotiations and evaluation of the legislation for Chisinau, the so-called screening. Chisinau is quite advanced with the preparations, which started a year ago: the pre-screening has started and it has already set up the internal negotiation mechanisms – 35 working groups, over 600 people involved in the process, and the coordination role will be taken over by the recently created European Integration Burau.

The technical point which will mean the start of accession negotiations will be a joint Moldova-EU intergovernmental conference, which is being prepared for the spring of 2024.

Until the next summit of the European Council, in March 2024, Chisinau must fulfil the three outstanding tasks left since the granting of candidate country status. The first concerns the justice reform, more precisely the appointment of all members in the Superior Council of Magistracy, the Superior Council of Prosecutors, the Supreme Court of Justice, and the General Prosecutor. The second concerns the capacity building of the anti-corruption bodies, in particular of the Anticorruption Prosecutor's Office. And the third one is the implementation of the de-oligarization plan.

De-coupling from Ukraine?

Several European officials declared that in the future the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine will no longer go "as a package" and each state will be evaluated according to the progress made in the democratic reforms and negotiations.

Against the backdrop of Russia's aggression in Ukraine, Chisinau applied for EU membership on 3 March 2022, a few days after Kiev did so. The applications were examined and approved at the same time, on 22 June 2022, the two countries being granted the status of EU candidate countries. For this reason, until now, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine were seen "as a package".

But after the launch of the accession negotiations, Chisinau could have a faster course due to a clearly pro-European government and considering the small size of the country, the consistent support of Romania, but also the fact that Ukraine is forced to consume forces and resources in the war with Russia. In addition, Hungary's opposition will not disappear either - Victor Orban has promised to continue to block negotiations with Ukraine. This, in addition to the fact that Hungary will hold the presidency of the European Council in the second half of next year.

What could slow down or compromise the EU membership?

The main risks that can be seen at the moment relate, internally, to a possible inconsistency in reforms or the decrease of the European appetite at the government level, in the case of the seizure of power in

Chisinau by parties reluctant to change and democratization.

The Presidential elections are to be held in the Republic of Moldova at the end of 2024, and parliamentary elections in mid-2025. And if the current pro-European president Maia Sandu is not yet going to have a competitor with a chance to outclass her, then there is a risk for the parliamentary elections that pro-Russian and pro-oligarchic forces will come together to try to take over power.

On the other hand, the European integration also requires massive and constant support from the population. The latest polls show an increase from 51 to 55 percent of the population's support for European integration during this year. This support must be fuelled with reforms and positive changes visible to the population, with concrete projects and access to EU funding for development at the local level, all communicated in an efficient and accessible way both at the level of experts and intellectuals, as well as at the grassroots level.

In addition, the authorities must not forget that precisely this aspect - the population's support for the EU - will be the main target of Russian propaganda in the Republic of Moldova in the years to come. Lies and fake information about the EU will also be peddled by oligarchic and pro-Kremlin parties, who will invest heavily in promotional campaigns and corrupting the electorate to come to power in the 2025 parliamentary elections.

Thus, the real decisive moment for the European integration of the Republic of Moldova will be the parliamentary elections to take place in 2025. If they bring to power a coalition of truly pro-European parties, the goal of the EU integration by 2030 seems to be an achievable one.

Is the Transnistrian region a problem for European integration?

The issue of the separatist enclave of Transnistria does not seem to be a priority at the moment in the dialogue between Brussels and Chisinau. The EU treats the Republic of Moldova as a state within the limits of its international borders, i.e. including the Transnistrian region. With

Russia's aggression, Ukraine completely closed its border with Transnistria and the pro-Russian enclave lost all physical ties to its patrons in the Kremlin. The Russian troops deployed in Transnistria, as well as the enclave's huge 20,000-ton Russian munitions depot, have led Ukraine to permanently keep military units ready for retaliation on the border of the separatist region. Under these conditions, the only contact with the outside world for Tiraspol is possible only through Chisinau. The economic and social levers it obtained in this way make Chisinau optimistic about the chances of settling the Transnistrian problem before the EU accession. "If this is not be possible, we will have to come up with certain clarifications of this status, of how the Republic of Moldova will function within the EU," said Nicu Popescu in Brussels.

And President Maia Sandu recently declared that the Republic of Moldova cannot follow the approach that it will become a member state of the EU only after the resolution of the Transnistrian conflict, "because this would mean giving the Kremlin the right to veto the European integration process of the Republic of Moldova".

Under what conditions is 2030 a realistic target?

In conclusion: the Republic of Moldova received a hopeless historical chance to break away from Russia's sphere of influence and become a member of the EU. A chance that seems to be a realistic one under several conditions: for Ukraine, supported by Western allies, to resist Russia's aggression, thus protecting the Republic of Moldova; for Romania to continue its technical and logistical support; for the EU to maintain its desire for enlargement after the next elections, despite the increase in the share of populists in Europe; and within the Republic of Moldova, there should continue to be an efficient pro-European government and a consistent support from the population for European integration.

Once these conditions are met, the target formulated by the current authorities - the year 2030 - seems to be an achievable one for the Republic of Moldova, which has been confirmed several times by European officials.

SECURITY & DEFENCE DIGEST



The Platform for Security and Defense Initiatives

Security aspects in the context of the opening of the accession negotiations of Moldova with the European Union

On 14 December, 2023, twenty seven member states of the European Union (EU) gave the green light to the opening of accession negotiations with Ukraine and Moldova. Although everyone expected a veto from Hungary, the Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán walked out of the room abstaining from the vote. Although, in this context, there is talk of a disbursement of 10 billion euros for Hungary, a large-scale crisis was avoided, because a blockage - even if it was only the fact that a small country of less than 10 million inhabitants weighs barely 1% of the European GDP - it would have constituted a political signal for Moscow, an enormous encouragement for Putin to achieve his neo-imperialist goals.

A failure to open negotiations would have been a hard blow not only for Ukraine, but also for the reform processes in the Republic of Moldova. Thus, the European Council's decision to start negotiations is a historic one for the Republic of Moldova, but it also represents a victory for Ukraine and Europe. At the same time, the European Council offered the status of a candidate country to Georgia.

Beyond positive feelings, however, the negotiation with the EU is about written rules and clearly defined targets as a result of the realization of the 35 chapters of the *acquis communautaire*. And from the perspective of security and defence, according to the European Commission's June 2022 Report, the fields of *Justice, freedom and security* (Chapter 24) and *Foreign policy, security and defence* (Chapter 31) require from Moldova real progress in the alignment

with the EU accession conditions.

Together with the decision to launch the accession negotiations, in achieving the proposed objectives, there could emerge a problem with the absorption capacity of the support that will be offered by the EU and the member countries to reform the defence sector.

In this context, we cannot overlook the fact that, on November 15, the decision for the approval of the National Security Strategy of the Republic of Moldova was voted in the Parliament. It should be noted that the previous National Security Strategy of the Republic of Moldova was adopted in 2011. Later, in 2016, a new draft was developed which was rejected by ex-president Igor Dodon. The objectives of the new National Security Strategy, which was recently approved, are clearly defined and establish the need to increase the state's capacity to prevent and counter

the materialization of the risks to national security, the main threat being the Russian Federation, as well as to ensure the EU accession process, but also cooperation with partner states for security and stability at the international level.

Security and increasing resilience

Also, it is important that through the adoption of the new Strategy there is an awareness of the need to consolidate, develop and modernize the national defence system in order to guarantee the sovereignty and integrity of the country. Increasing the national resilience to hybrid threats is a valuable factor in strengthening the culture of security. Beyond the fact that joining the EU is one of the main security objectives within the Strategy in accordance with the national interest, however, there must be a common approach both at the strategic and operational levels that the negotiation will be a long process for the Republic of Moldova, and the security sector is not reforming by itself through attractive statements alone.

Thus, in the next period, in terms of security, the Republic of Moldova must also take into account the

fact that: (-) The accession of the Republic of Moldova to the EU largely depends on Ukraine's ability to defeat Russia; (-) The accession process is not irreversible; (-) The strengthening of the security and defence sectors must continue rapidly, and the national resources must be at stake; (-) The regulation of the Transnistrian conflict should not disappear from the security agenda, even if there is the premise of accession according to the Cypriot scenario.

A vital interest for the EU is to bring Russia back into the legal field by respecting the international order based on established norms. And that means deterring Russia from continuing the war in Ukraine and restoring its sovereignty within its internationally recognized borders. Moreover, the occupation of Ukraine by Russia will allow the materialization of the scenarios regarding the expansion of aggression towards the Republic of Moldova, but also further on the European continent. In this context, we cannot neglect that the North Atlantic Alliance (NATO) is perceived, including from the perspective of EU member countries, as an organization intended to ensure security and defence at the European level. Moreover, although there is currently closer cooperation between the EU and NATO, the EU does not have the political commitment to defend a member of its own, let alone a candidate country.

The need to support Ukraine

However, the EU and its member states separately provide extremely important assistance in supporting Ukraine to resist, namely the

financial and material support provided is approximately at the same level as the assistance provided to Ukraine by the United States of America (\$40-50 billion annual).

It is considered that the accession process is not an irreversible one, because several factors can influence this path, and the political factor is an important one. However, the change of the predominantly pro-European political power in Chisinau with a pro-Russian one will inevitably lead to the postponement of the accession or even the halting of this process. This has happened in the recent history of the country several times. In this context, it has become imperative that the government can counter the hybrid attacks by which the Russian Federation tries to support the political forces that can destabilize the situation in the country. A good part of these hybrid threats is the distribution of propaganda and fake news generated in Moscow. Therefore, it is necessary to strengthen the resilience of society to deal with the flow of false information. And the recently established StratCom will also have to ensure a common approach regarding the narratives that would promote the benefits of joining the European Union, because the information war can be won by developing a security culture at the population level, but also by increasing strategic culture at the level of institutions and the political elite.

In this context, it is important to stimulate and generate a political dialogue in an expanded format, in order to identify political forces, which in the next parliamentary elections can constitute functional coalitions with the aim of continuing the process of the country's

accession to the EU. In the same way, all the actors involved in the political process that support the accession of the Republic of Moldova to the EU must understand that relying on a single political party and entrusting this mission to only one party represents the creation of a single point of failure, jeopardizing the entire accession process. Moreover, let's not forget that more and more parties, which only a few months ago declared that they supported the invasion of Ukraine by Russia and protested in front of the European institutions against the accession of the Republic of Moldova to the EU, now declare themselves deeply pro-European, who, once in parliament, would claim to be part of history, but like the Trojan Horse, they can delay the accession process.

Modernization of the army, in close dependence on financial allocations

Returning to the security and defence sector of the Republic of Moldova and its consolidation, according to chapter 31 of the National Accession Plan for the years 2024-2027, the reform and modernization of the National Army, and increasing the resilience of our country to new security challenges will depend a lot on the funds which will come in the form of certain projects for the acquisition of weaponry, capabilities and services. Of course, this will increase the professionalism of the military in the Republic of Moldova and the transformation of the defence institution into a security provider. However, the force structures of the Republic of Moldova should develop capacities for planning and absorption of these funds, a problem

that is more obvious for the Ministry of Defense. Starting from 2022, in particular, the EU contributes with substantial funds to the development of the National Army, but a concrete result or a concrete operationalized capability is not observed yet. This is because the expectations are in immediate results, but the problem is in the cost and time necessary to equip the National Army with the weapons systems needed to strengthen the defence capability and in recruiting and training the personnel needed to operate the acquired systems. This situation is similar to the problem of Ukraine,

which during the war, expecting direct military aid from NATO and EU countries, faced both operational, bureaucratic and even political issues. In this context, it is necessary to find a strategy that would align the national and EU efforts to develop certain military capabilities. Also, in the context of ensuring the continuity of the National Army's endowment programs, the Moldovan authorities, although the defence budget has been increased, should allocate more resources for the attractiveness of the contract-based military service. Thus, in case the security priorities of the EU countries

change, the endowment programs should not be jeopardized.

Last but not least, although it is considered that the Transnistrian problem is not an impasse in the accession process, we cannot neglect that its regulation depends on external factors, such as developments in the security environment and the war situation in Ukraine, as well as internal ones, because EU membership is granted to the state, but not to the territory, i.e. progress in carrying out reforms matters.

The opinions expressed in the newsletter are not necessarily those of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) or of the Foreign Policy Association (APE).



Foreign Policy Association (APE) is a non-governmental organization committed to supporting the integration of the Republic of Moldova into the European Union and facilitating the settlement of the Transnistrian conflict in the context of the country Europeanization. APE was established in fall 2003 by a group of well-known experts, public personalities and former senior officials and diplomats, all of them reunited by their commitment to contribute with their expertise and experience to formulating and promoting by the Republic of Moldova of a coherent, credible and efficient foreign policy.



Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) is a German social democratic political foundation, whose purpose is to promote the principles and foundations of democracy, peace, international understanding and cooperation. FES fulfils its mandate in the spirit of social democracy, dedicating itself to the public debate and finding in a transparent manner, social democratic solutions to current and future problems of the society. Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung has been active in the Republic of Moldova since October 2002.