

► need to be implemented qualitatively so that they can mark the irreversibility of the European road. It is not enough just to tick off certain chapters, but to transform them completely.

On the other hand, the struggle is not only with the lack of human resources and the still low institutional capabilities of the Republic of Moldova in terms of expertise, but especially with the elements of hybrid warfare with which Russia is fighting against the Republic of Moldova. We cannot exclusively blame Russia's hybrid aggression for the shortcomings, but we have to realize that this is the main obstacle

which the governments are currently struggling with.

What is more, another four-year electoral cycle is needed to enshrine these efforts. We are now at the half-way point and there is still a long way to go towards 2030. On the other hand, Russia will support political forces that are against the European path and whose mission is to dynamite the processes of rapprochement of the Republic of Moldova with the EU.

In this regard, we have the conclusive example of the 2019 "unorthodox alliance" between the Action and Solidarity Party (PAS) and the Party of Socialists of

the Republic of Moldova (PSRM), which have been unceremoniously entwined for only six months. A repeat of this scenario, in which PAS would form an alliance with a dubious force that would join them in government, claiming to be pro-European, would not be ruled out. Therefore, the European road is only half way along, and the outcome of this autumn's parliamentary elections is crucial for the continuation of this European road. Will Chisinau ride this wave, or will it be dragged along or lost in the sea of missed opportunities of the last 34 years?

Madalin Necsutu

It is essential to have genuinely pro-European forces in government, which come to power exclusively through the honest vote of the people

Deputy Prime Minister for European Integration, *Cristina Gherasimov*, gave an interview for the FES/APE foreign policy newsletter in which we discussed Moldova's European course and the obstacles that stand in the way of this goal. We also talked about attempts by foreign actors to interfere in the country's domestic politics and how resilient state institutions have become in the face of these threats. Last but not least, we touched on this year's parliamentary elections. Read the full interview below:

■ March marked three years since Moldova applied to join the EU. This was against the extremely troubled backdrop of the Russian



military invasion of Ukraine. What progress has Moldova made since then, bearing in mind that the whole process is taking place at breakneck speed compared to the accession path of some countries that are now EU members or aspiring members in the Balkans?

■ Of course, we have had to catch up from the gaps accumulated over the last three decades, but in parallel with this process and the multiple crises we have faced, in only three years we have managed not only to achieve candidate status, but also to launch accession negotiations in June 2024.

Moreover, despite unprecedented external interference, through the democratic will of our citizens we have anchored the objective of European integration in the Constitution of the Republic of Moldova. We still have work to do, but it is a good start.

■ At what stage of the European journey are we today and what are the main issues we are currently working on and the main objectives?

■ We are halfway through the process of screening national legislation – a huge effort involving dozens of institutions responsible for preparing country presentations. This year we also hope to start negotiations on thematic groups of chapters, so-called clusters. In parallel, we are strengthening the capacities of the institutions to be able to complete the remaining steps until accession as efficiently as possible.

Increased resilience

■ What is the feedback from Brussels on the reforms you are

currently carrying out? Is the EU satisfied with the progress we are making?

■ In these years we have strengthened our energy security and, with European support, we will make sure that Russia can never again use energy as a weapon or a blackmail tool against our people. We have also succeeded in strengthening the capacities of the institutions that ensure public order, citizen security, border protection, so that our country is less vulnerable.

The digitization and accessibility of public services continues and the burden of red tape has been significantly reduced. Changes are also taking place in the justice system which are first and foremost for the benefit of the people – for there is no honest citizen in this country who would not want equality before the law and for thieves to go to jail.

We would not have gotten here if we had not shown good faith, if we had not carried out real reforms and not faked them, as has happened so many times in the past. In the same way, the Growth Plan for Moldova – the largest economic support programme in the history of our country – is, above all, proof of the trust that the European Union has in us and of Brussels' desire to have us on its side as a Member State.

Political corruption as a vulnerability

■ What are the chapters where things are going more slowly or where do we have certain backlogs? Is justice one of them? What can we do to improve the pace of reform in this problematic sector?

■ It is difficult to talk in terms of 'slow' or 'backlog'. There are areas (such as fisheries) which were previously very little regulated, for objective reasons, but also areas where European legislation is much more present (environment, agriculture). In a number of areas, the regulatory area is somewhat narrower, i.e. there will not even be much need for adaptation. So it would not be right to make a distinction between pupils who pass and those who fail. I assure you that work is going on in all the institutions involved – from morning to evening, Monday to Sunday.

Justice, for its part, is an extremely complex chapter and, as we saw in last year's referendum, political corruption is a very serious threat to our democracy. There is even a risk that the will of the people will be undermined by those who believe that votes can be bought and that it is absolutely normal to buy them. As you know, adjustments have been made at the level of the institutions responsible for fighting corruption, we are going ahead with the vetting of prosecutors.

De facto, this complex reform is in process – and we will continue on this path to ensure that corrupt elements will no longer have a place in the system. This is the only way citizens will be able to regain their trust in justice and in having their rights protected.

■ Can we negotiate with the EU to take over funding on certain projects previously supported by USAID? Is the EU willing to help the Republic of Moldova in this regard? Have you discussed this with Brussels?

■ Of course, we would like the halted projects to be resumed with

the support of the US or other international partners, with whom we are in talks to fill the temporary gap, we hope. But I emphasize that the US remains an important partner for the Republic of Moldova and we value the transatlantic relationship.

■ **How are the negotiations and the lobbying we are doing in several European capitals? Some countries are still reluctant about Moldova's accession. How are you tackling these possible challenges?**

■ The decision to launch accession negotiations with our country has been unanimously approved by the 27 Member States, so I don't think we can talk about reluctance. The success of this journey depends, as I said before, largely on what we do at home. And what we want is to be assessed on our own merits, to be able to join when we are ready.

Strong partnerships

■ **Are you discussing with your partners in Europe, including Romania, to send more specialists who could lend a helping hand and boost Moldova's European integration process with their expertise?**

■ We already benefit from the support of experts from many Member States as well as the EU institutions. We also have very good collaborations with colleagues from other candidate countries. But our needs evolve according to the stage we are at. We are pleased that our partners are also showing flexibility and adapting to these needs.

■ **How are we doing on human resources? Do we have enough civil servants in the state institutions for an effective European course? Are they sufficiently motivated and trained to carry out these not easy tasks?**

■ We have very good colleagues here at home. They are dedicated people who understand very well the historic mission they have been entrusted with – to complete the most important project of transformation and modernization of the country. Of course, there is always room for improvement.

But other candidate countries had the same starting point and I am convinced that we will reach an even higher level. We are working on a training plan for civil servants and partners are helping us to make sure that our institutions are ready for the tasks ahead.

Vote crucial for the future

■ **How important is it for the Republic of Moldova to have continuity for a new electoral cycle in terms of the work done for EU membership – de facto, to have a pro-European majority after the parliamentary elections? Otherwise, could we miss this historic opportunity that we have - to join the EU in the set timeframe of 2030?**

■ It is essential to have truly pro-European forces in government, which come to power exclusively through the honest vote of the people. The fact that there are leaders who openly declare in their public messages that they want a different geopolitical path shows how much they themselves respect the Constitution of the country they claim to respect and defend. And others claim to support European integration, having boycotted the democratic referendum exercise.

Elections in 2025 are not just for the next four years, but for the next decades – that is why it is crucial to vote for those political forces that have proven by deeds that they are committed to taking our country into the European Union.

■ Thank you!

Editorial

From triumph to trouble: Moldova's European journey, between achievements and imminent risks

*Editorial by Madalin Necsutu,
journalist TVR Moldova
and Balkan Insight*

The last three years have been Moldova's most turbulent years since declaring independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, but also its greatest opportunities. A week or so later, on 3 March 2022, after the Russian military invasion of Ukraine began on 24 February 2022, Moldova applied for EU membership alongside Ukraine and Georgia, a significant step that had not been previously planned.

The ruling party – the Action and Solidarity Party, PAS – had previously declared, when it took power in July 2021, that it was only at the end of its four-year mandate in 2025 that it planned to submit its application for EU membership. In the three years since 3 March 2022, the Republic of Moldova has gone through a complex process: it received EU candidate status in June 2022, opened accession negotiations in June 2024, and is currently working intensively on the reforms required by the EU.

The Republic of Moldova has benefited from perhaps the most favourable European path of an aspiring country in an unfavourable context that Europe has not encountered in almost 80 years – a war on the territory of the old continent. So, two atypical situations that determined each other. PAS's political performance in these almost four years of government has not been extraordinary, especially against



the backdrop of several overlapping crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the energy crisis and rising inflation, a physical war in the neighbourhood and a hybrid war at home. However, the ruling party has navigated out of the inertia of the times to this episode where the Republic of Moldova is negotiating on accession chapters with the EU and aims to become an EU member in 2030.

Expertise and civil society and EU money

This success is by no means to be shared by the political powers alone. Civil society has a special merit in this achievement. Without civil society expertise, the authorities would certainly not have been able to meet the challenges of the accession process.

On the other hand, this road to accession is also boosted by the generous funds that the EU has pumped into Moldova in recent years and will continue to concentrate in the near future. The EU is the largest provider of financial assistance to Moldova. As of 2021, over €2.2 billion has been mobilized.

The European Commission has also devised a growth plan for the Republic of Moldova that will be realized on three major tracks: supporting the country's socio-economic and fundamental reforms, improving access to the EU single market, increasing financial support over the period 2025-2027 through a specific reform and growth mechanism for Moldova.

The Council and the European Parliament have agreed on a provisional agreement

on the financial pillar of the plan, called the Reform and Growth Facility, which means that over the next three years – 2025-2027 – the EU will provide a substantial financial package for Moldova’s development of €1.9 billion. Specifically, the EU will provide grants worth €385 million and loans worth €1.5 billion, totalling about €1.9 billion. Of this amount, €315 million will be disbursed in April 2025 alone, which will be a huge financial injection to kick-start large-scale projects ahead of the parliamentary elections scheduled for this autumn.

Crucial elections and full hybrid war

Despite generous funding from Brussels for Moldova, Russian propaganda propagandistically screens the benefits of EU membership and promotes fake news and misinformation about what Moldova’s EU membership would mean.

The misinformation is made through a conservative grid that follows the ex-Soviet mentality of many Moldovan citizens, still divided between *Ruski Mir* (Russian World) and a part of the society that embraces Western democratic values.

Against the backdrop of an extreme polarization in society that was best reflected in the figures of last autumn’s referendum on EU integration, when the referendum narrowly passed, there needs to be a better understanding in society about what each citizen wants for him or herself and his or her family. Normally, this should not even raise doubts. But the reality is different. Despite the fact that the EU is offering historic sums of money in exchange for reforms which, at the end of the day, will only help Moldova to develop itself, people’s minds and hearts are being poisoned by Russian propaganda which is being manifested daily in Moldova’s information space.

If Russia means these days, more obviously than ever, only the path of war and destruction, a good part of Moldovan society is not convinced of this because of the “Chinese water torture” of fake news and perceptions that Russian propaganda disseminates daily in the minds of Moldovans.

Sometimes the impression persists that Moldovan society is not capable of discerning between good and evil and indulges in this Stockholm syndrome imprisonment towards the *Ruskkii Mir*. It is an inexplicable attraction to the morbid that Russia takes advantage of, no matter how much the EU would increase the material and political side and no matter how many reforms pro-European politicians would make.

Added to all this is the handicap that the pro-European government has so far not been able to explain the benefits of the European Union in a simple and understandable way, especially in rural areas.

Connecting more to existing realities

It is imperative for all pro-European politicians to connect with everyday realities and get out of the office and into the field in door-to-door information campaigns. Some prefer chit-chat or sterile arguments on social media, but the reality is that no one is talking to citizens face to face to explain precisely why the EU is an alternative for them and not the Russian world.

Pro-European politicians in power are often marked by the fear of making mistakes, which paralyzes them in their attempt to communicate simply and effectively with citizens. This form of discouraging any communication initiatives are also consequences of the hybrid war Russia is waging in Moldova. It is difficult to explain to the locals

what FIMI tactics (**Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference**), disinformation and fake news are, or to talk to them about psy-ops operations. But there is no other way but to fight through correct information.

Also, a possible pro-Russian government could launch a broad campaign to limit the prerogatives of President Maia Sandu, a process that has also taken place in Georgia, and such an approach would certainly be opposed by pro-European political forces, but also by a large part of the population. All this would create a situation of chaos that Russia wants in the Republic of Moldova.

Last but not least, the way in which the war in Ukraine will be concluded and the peace that will be signed afterwards will inevitably determine the position of pro-Russian and pro-European parties in Moldova, but will also inevitably determine the vote of Moldovan citizens in the autumn parliamentary elections. Against this backdrop, President Maia Sandu drew attention at the Supreme Security Council on March 25 to Russia’s intensified efforts on electoral corruption in the Republic of Moldova through proxy campaigns and actors, such as the fugitive oligarch Ilan Shor and others.

Increasing resilience and firm actions are needed to prevent a repetition of the situations that occurred in previous elections in the Republic of Moldova, such as the presidential elections, the referendum and local elections. It is important for the Republic of Moldova to devise prophylactic deterrent measures to nip such malicious actions in the bud and to stop acting reactively to these Russian hybrid war manoeuvres again. The Republic of Moldova’s European road must be paved with increased security measures and more courage on the part of the institutions of law enforcement to apply the laws in force.

For the state to be able to provide social assistance, it must have economic growth

Liliana Palihovici, president of the Institutum Virtutes Civilis and co-chair of the Republic of Moldova-European Union Civil Society Platform, gave an extensive interview to the FES/APE Foreign Policy Newsletter in which we discussed about the European future of the Republic of Moldova. We talked about how much the expertise coming from the civil society area matters for Moldova's European path and how Moldova has managed to materialize so far the historic opportunity it has been given by Brussels. We discussed the dangers of halting this path and how it is smarter for the state to invest the historic €1.9 billion in financial aid from the EU over the next three years. We invite you to read the full length of the discussion we had with Liliana Palihovici:

■ In general, how do you see the European course of the Republic of Moldova since the signing of the application for membership on 3 March 2022 and up to now? Has the Republic of Moldova taken sufficient advantage of this favourable context?

■ We are living historic moments for the Republic of Moldova. We have had a Cooperation and Partnership Agreement with the UE since 1998, followed by the Association Agreement with UE signed in 2014 and ratified in 2014 by the Moldovan Parliament, which opened new opportunities and a new stage of Moldova's accession to the European Union.

With obtaining the European Union candidate country status, Moldova has entered an entirely different



stage of the dialog between Moldova and the European Union, one that is taking place in a geopolitical context with multiple challenges. I would have liked this process, which means a lot of negotiation and a huge reform effort, to benefit from a continuous increase in public support and to take place in a context of peace. Unfortunately, this is not the case, and Russia's war against Ukraine I think brings more tension into the negotiation process with the EU.

Negotiations with the EU are taking place simultaneously with Moldova and Ukraine. Therefore, it is no secret that things in both countries are happening in parallel and it is clear

that the Republic of Moldova, where there is peace, has more capacity and power to focus on reforms and on realizing the commitments it has undertaken in the EU accession process than Ukraine.

Taking this context into account, I believe that Moldova has moved quickly, passing through several stages – the submission of the first application, then the submission of the second application, followed by the European Commission's report with a lot of recommendations and the generation of that plan for realizing the commitments or recommendations of the European Commission.



The pace of the negotiations has been quite intense, taking into account the fact that at the same time Moldova was also facing a refugee crisis and a complex economic crisis, generated by the consequences of the war in Ukraine.

The government not only had the negotiations with the EU on its agenda, but also had to face the existing challenges: the consequences of the pandemic, the consequences of the war, the energy crisis and others. I am glad that all this has not slowed down the process of dialog and negotiations, on the contrary, it has generated great support from the 27 EU Member States.

We have a great opportunity now that we cannot miss, which is why we need to keep moving forward on the implementation of reforms, as the most complicated part of the negotiations with the EU is to fulfil our reform agenda.

The conference for launching the negotiations has taken place. While other countries took 5-7 years to achieve certain milestones, the Republic of Moldova has completed them in two years. I am pleased about this, and here I must emphasize the merit of the governments in the negotiation process. At the same time, these achievements make me confident that we can still speed up the pace, because we have the support of the European Union Member States.

We must understand that others cannot do the necessary reforms for us. We have to change things the way we want them to be. For example, if we like to see how the justice system works in the vast majority of European Union countries and how much confidence European citizens have in the justice system in their countries, this must also be the case in the

Republic of Moldova. If we appreciate the social protection in EU countries, if we like the roads or the villages there look like, we must be more insistent, more persevering and we must also do more to ensure that these things look the same here in the Republic of Moldova.

If I were to get back to the original question – whether Moldova has benefited sufficiently from EU assistance in recent years – I think so. There is always room for improvement, but if we look at the overall context, I think Moldova has done quite well in these two years.

The huge contribution of NGOs

■ **The contribution of the civil society, especially in the last three years, to this European aspiration has been very important. What do you think are the most important contributions that civil society has made to Moldova's European path?**

■ Civil society organizations have contributed in various ways and substantially to the results that we have in the process of European integration, whether we are talking about a non-governmental organization focused on policy analysis, evaluation of reforms, or one that operates at district or village level. Each one has made its own contribution and I will give some eloquent examples.

When the Republic of Moldova submitted the first membership application to the EU and then the second one, the government had to answer a long list of questions on reforms and the state of play in various areas in a very short time. You can imagine that the capacities of the ministries are quite limited to complete an EU request for information of such complexity. This has been made

possible thanks to non-governmental organizations which have come forward with their expertise to help the government to develop answers to those questions. Their contribution has been acknowledged and appreciated by the government on several occasions.

Another important contribution are the shadow reports of civil society organizations on the implementation of Moldova's commitments to the European Union in the process of preparation for negotiations. One such example is when the Republic of Moldova presented the European Commission's report on the implementation of the nine conditionalities imposed by the Brussels executive. The civil society organizations developed an alternative report, which of course was much more critical than the government's report. The report of the civil society organizations also focused on citizens' information capacity. We also focused on issues relating to respect for human rights in the Republic of Moldova, including ethnic minorities, and on the left bank of the Dniester, because the Transnistrian region is also part of Moldova. Moreover, our shadow report on the implementation of reforms was not only critical but also included recommendations for reforms.

At the same time, the contribution of civil society organizations was also seen in the preparation of Moldova for the bilateral screening. NGOs have been invited to participate in the working groups for the bilateral screening, to contribute to the elaboration of the presentations for the joint screening meetings in order to ensure that the presentation made by the Republic of Moldova on one sector or another is complex and detailed, providing a clear picture of the reality in the country.

I know very many non-governmental organizations that have been working

for years at community and district level, explaining to citizens what accession to the European Union means, what the benefits are for the Republic of Moldova and, at the same time, what our commitments are as a country, because you cannot be just a consumer of goods and democracy. You have to make your contribution here. We also want Moldovan citizens to become more resilient to manipulation and disinformation. Civil society organizations have also contributed enormously in this dimension.

I would like to point out two other important things, namely the two very active civil society platforms – the National Platform of the Eastern Partnership of Civil Society Forum and the Republic of Moldova–European Union Civil Society Platform. More than 100 non-governmental organizations at national, regional and local level are part of the first platform, while the latter is made up of representatives of trade unions, employers' associations and civil society organizations, which monitor the process of implementing the EU-Moldova Association Agreement and the process of implementing reforms in the accession negotiation process.

For example, the organization that I represent, supported by the European Union and the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, has over the last two years assisted state institutions in developing analyses for the transposition of four European directives. The analyses were carried out in the field of gender equality, equal opportunities for women and men on the labour market, women's representation on the boards of the companies listed at the stock exchange. Such analyses and analytical papers have been carried out by various non-governmental organizations which have the necessary expertise to facilitate the process of transposing European

legislation into the national law. I believe this is a vast contribution.

I believe that partnerships between civil society organizations and local authorities are also important in the process of European integration. These partnerships have resulted in social laundries, day centres for children from disadvantaged families, centres for people with disabilities or elderly people who have no one to help them. We are talking about a variety of other social services, including mobile teams providing home care to people with disabilities who cannot reach health centres.

The above are just a few examples of actions of non-governmental organizations carried out with the resources provided by the European Union, thus making a significant contribution to the reform process as part of the EU accession.

Economic development as a vital source of social protection

■ **Do you think the authorities pay enough attention to social programmes? Could more be done and where could more be invested?**

■ The effort that the state makes through its policies is considerable, but not enough. Unfortunately, the number of poor and needy people is not small in the Republic of Moldova. Therefore, much more assistance is needed. A state which does not have continuous economic growth can face difficulties. Moldova experienced a 4 percent fall in GDP during the period of the Covid-19 pandemic, with negative trends in the years that followed, caused by the war, the energy crisis and inflation. All these crises have had a negative impact on people's well-being, and in such situations, there is a need for greater state investment in the social sphere. Bearing in mind the capacities

of the state, it is very clear that the state cannot face this challenge alone and should have a much more effective and focused dialogue with civil society organizations that can contribute with added value.

NGOs have contributed to the creation of over 50 social services. I believe that more could have been achieved and that the state should learn how to better manage this relationship with various actors in society in order to increase the impact of its social policies. You need to develop smart mechanisms to co-interest business to invest in social projects.

We have social services mostly created by civil society organizations with donor funds, then taken over by local public administration. I believe that we would have a greater impact in developing the network of social services if we did not rely only on state resources, but also on a strengthened partnership between the state, civil society organizations and the business sector.

Generating economic added value with EU funds

■ **How do you see this €1.9 billion infusion coming over the next three years? Where should this money go in particular and what do you see as the priorities so that citizens can see an improvement in their living standards as soon as possible?**

■ Taking into account all the economic development parameters and the geopolitical context in which we find ourselves, I think it is a great opportunity for Moldova to invest this money intelligently to generate economic growth.

Moldova has a large number of poor people who need help from the state. For the state to be able

to provide this assistance, it needs to have economic growth. The burden on the state will increase and the capacity to help people will decrease. That is why I believe that this money should be invested in development as a priority. Following the discussions in the European Parliament, some of this money will indeed go towards supporting the development of entrepreneurship. I do not know exactly today how much money will be allocated to support small and medium-sized enterprise initiatives, but some of this money will go there and I think that is the right approach. The more economic initiatives we support, the better chance we have of people themselves generating income, paying taxes and making the state stronger, so that the state in turn can respond to social needs.

At the same time, part of the resources I believe will be allocated for agricultural development. We are a country in which the economy is very much influenced by the agricultural sector, it is just that the resources which will come to co-finance this sector should also be accompanied by certain conditionalities. Those investing in agriculture must be encouraged to adopt new technologies, taking into account climate change and its effects.

No less important is the infrastructure that needs to be modernized. If we want to develop rural areas, we must also create the right infrastructure there. We are seeing a migration of the population from rural to urban areas, we have a depopulation of villages. Why? Because people are looking for better conditions – water, sanitation, which are mostly lacking in rural areas.

If we invest properly in rural communities, stimulate business development there, we can give a different development perspective to

the country as a whole. It is important that these resources be also backed up by a comprehensive reform of public institutions.

The amount of €1.9 billion is huge, so we need to make sure that we have a very effective monitoring mechanism for this investment in order not to admit any element of corruption or embezzlement of European funds for development programmes.

I think it is important to invest correctly and I mentioned about regional development above. We need to balance the resources going to urban and rural areas. If we want to have truly sustainable development, we need to encourage more development poles in Moldova and not to concentrate everything in Chisinau, Balti and Comrat. We must ensure that all regions have equitable access to these resources to develop.

Justice reform, I believe, will also benefit from some of these financial resources, because when you don't have trust in the justice system, you can't trust that big investors will come here. Every investment must be guaranteed and secured. When we gave the opinion of civil society organizations on the draft Growth Plan for Moldova, we emphasized that we see the economic and social sectors as priorities. As far as the social sector is concerned, we are also talking about investments in retraining the workforce, because the economic sector which benefits from resources for development must have a qualified workforce which is prepared for what they are developing on the market.

That is why we have recommended that part of the resources should be given to investments in educating the labour force in Moldova. This is also reflected in the priorities that have already been announced.

We also need investment in the energy sector. There are projects that were launched with funding from the United States of America, which, after the change in the political situation there, were stopped. However, we are convinced that those projects must be completed, because they will help to ensure Moldova's energy security. This is also reflected in the opinion put forward by civil society organizations on the draft Moldova Growth Plan, namely to continue financing projects in the energy sector, with a focus on electricity infrastructure and renewable energy sources.

Moldova could also strengthen its energy security by encouraging household consumers to invest in energy, which would enable us to feel much more secure in crisis situations similar to the ones we have experienced. I have proposed that part of the resources be allocated to encouraging research and innovation in the economic field. If we do not keep up with modern technologies, the economic sector cannot be competitive, so this must be a priority.

The role of civil society in the implementation process of Moldova Growth Plan must be an important one, because it is not only a question of resources to finance the projects of civil society organizations, but also of providing NGOs with the possibility of long-term monitoring of each implemented project, of each reform financed from this programme. In this way, we can ensure more transparency and correctness of the government institutions' processes.

We, as a civil society, do not want to have situations where this year a reform is announced, which we vote for and launch, and a year later we vote for laws that cancel everything we launched a year ago under the umbrella of another reform.

Investments must be sustainable and long-term. At the same time, we need to strengthen the capacities of state institutions to monitor the correct spending of money.

■ How important is the involvement of civil society in the process of European integration in all its dimensions and are the authorities doing enough in this respect? How do you assess the dialogue between the authorities and civil society organizations?

■ We have a dialogue and there is cooperation, but we would have liked this dialogue to be much more intense and more organized, perhaps more structured. We have various consultations, for example with the European Integration Bureau, in advancing the negotiations with the EU. In these consultations, civil society organizations have asked for more time to analyse complex documents, to be invited even to the working groups working on those documents that transpose European legislation into Moldovan law. There has also been an initiative to establish an Economic and Social Committee in Moldova, which would serve as a common platform for dialog between the government and all civil society actors. Such an institution that gives opinions on every document debated by the European Parliament or the European Commission operates at the European level.

In this way the executive and legislative institutions can familiarize themselves with the views of society. Today Moldova has several fragmented elements of consultations and some opinions, whether of business, civil society or trade unions, may not reach the attention of the authorities and some promoted actions may disadvantage certain parts of society. The government must never neglect

the expertise that exists in the non-governmental sector, because they are also citizens of the country who can directly contribute to speeding up the country's reform processes.

Lobby for resumption of US funding

■ How do you see the decision of the new administration in the White House to cut USAID funds, which were important for civil society in the Republic of Moldova. In your opinion, will the EU be able to successfully replace this vacuum left by the cessation of US funding for civil society in the Republic of Moldova?

■ I would ask this question in a different way. Moldova, in fact, must now work hard to establish an intense dialog with the new administration of the United States of America, in order to clearly demonstrate to them that the resources which have been invested by the United States of America in the Republic of Moldova have had an enormous impact on the development of the Republic of Moldova, the development of democracy, infrastructure and the economy.

If I were to make an analysis now, I believe that the Moldovan Government has all the arguments at hand to demonstrate the impact of those investments. If we remember the embargo on the export of Moldovan wines imposed by the Russian Federation, then with the support provided by the USAID, investments were made in renovating wineries in Moldova. Investments in wineries brought Moldovan wines to a different quality and opened new export markets. Investments were also made in renovating the irrigation system. Those investments have had a super

impact on Moldova's economic development. Today we are proud of the Moldovan wines which have developed with the USA support.

We have had an increase in the number of family farms offering tourist services in rural areas, again with the USAID support. There has been investment in road infrastructure, if we remember the Chisinau-Soroca highway. American investments have clearly contributed to the increase in prosperity in Moldova.

I believe that it will take some time for the Republic of Moldova to re-establish the dialog through diplomatic channels in order to return, if not all, at least some of the resources that the United States invested in Moldova.

Moldova should continue the dialog with both the European Union and other countries on projects started with American funding.

The strength lies in our capacity of implementing an active foreign policy. It is true that our further success depends to a large extent on what happens in the region, on the geopolitical context, the ceasefire negotiations, which I hope will have a positive outcome and put an end to the war in Ukraine, ensuring a just peace for Ukraine.

The political context in the Republic of Moldova matters just as much in our success, whether we become a member of the European Union in 2030 or not. If the political processes in Moldova take a direction that is not aligned with the European course, we may lose as a society.

■ Thank you!

It would be fair if EU money went to developing public infrastructure and empowering local public administrations

Alexandru Bujorean, leader of the Coalition of the Towns and Municipalities League and co-founder of the "Together" bloc, gave an interview in which we discussed the European future of the Republic of Moldova. We talked about the security threats to Moldova in the context of Russia's military invasion of Ukraine and the possibility of a just peace. We also discussed about the unity issue of pro-European political forces three years after the submission of the EU membership application and his vision of Moldova's multi-sectoral development with the help of European funds. Read the full interview with the pro-European politician and Mayor of Leova, Alexandru Bujorean.

■ In general, how do you see this process of the European path of Moldova since the signing of the membership application on 3 March 2022 and up to now? Have the Chisinau authorities been able to make the most of this historic opportunity?

■ First of all, back in 2014, when the Association Agreement with the EU was signed, this in itself was a confirmation of the efforts made by our country. Obtaining the status of candidate country comes on the one hand as a result of a constant effort made by our country and government institutions. Let us not forget the geopolitical context. This unjust war on our borders has meant, on the one hand, the opportunity to move forward on



the path of European integration and, on the other hand, to obtain a partial guarantee that, being among the democratic and prosperous states, such as those of the European Union, we have a certainty that we will not be on the list of countries that are a target for the Russian Federation.

But we have a lot of work to do, because those conditionalities that we have to fulfil in the negotiation process, starting from the reform of justice and public administration and other structural reforms, are extremely important. There are

certain shortcomings in this regard and there is room for improvement.

Benefits of EU membership

■ What could perhaps have been done better in your view and what would have been the best policy approach from the current government in order to continue the European course?

■ The accession process itself is a process of negotiation, and at the basis of this process are both Community and national interests of

the Republic of Moldova. The rules of accession and becoming part of the EU, as well as the way we will operate in the next ten years within the Union, will have a direct impact on the Moldovan citizens, which is why it is very important who and how negotiates. Above all, it must be done in the interests of the Republic of Moldova.

On the one hand, it is important to see what kind of aid will be felt in short and medium terms, because we see a worrying level of scepticism not only in the Republic of Moldova, but also in the European Union.

On the other hand, from the moment the Association Agreement was signed until the Republic of Moldova obtained the status of candidate country, it has had only to gain from this process. Numerous funds have come into the country, including the latest ones announced by the European Commission and the European Parliament, amounting to EUR 1.9 billion, which will go towards Moldova's economic recovery and including the implementation of several projects of major importance. Whether we are talking about infrastructure, public policies and services at local and regional level, or, last but not least, about ensuring independence in relation to the energy problems and crises which our country, the region and the whole world have been going through in recent years.

Fair justice attracts economic development

■ **The justice sector remains a sensitive one and I would ask you how do you see the progress made so far and what needs to be done**

better in this vital sector of reforms for EU accession?

■ Justice reform is not only in the national interest or in the interest of Moldovan citizens. It is also about predictability, including for the business environment and foreign investors. No foreign investor will come to a country in which the investments may be subject to attacks or even dispossession on the basis of court rulings, as has unfortunately happened in Moldova.

I think the system is still sufficiently resistant to judicial reform. However, it was wrong from the outset to characterize the whole justice system as corrupt and biased. We also have honest prosecutors and judges in this country, but unfortunately, they all have to go through the same evaluation procedures, even though many of them have proven their integrity and professionalism over time.

From the outset, a very clear division should have been made on the basis of certain indicators, for example, the number of cases and convictions, including ECtHR convictions, that our country has had due to decisions issued by Moldovan magistrates. I believe that this very clear division between people who have been sinful in their professional career and those who have shown good intentions should have been made from the outset. This was not done, and I think that this is where it went wrong.

On the other hand, certain models that have worked in other countries have proved less effective here. And this has sparked outrage in the system, including from judges and

prosecutors who over time have proved to be fair. This is where I think the biggest mistake has been made.

However, the process of *vetting* and *pre-vetting* must inevitably continue, once we are engaged in this process, and more efforts must be made, commensurate with the support our country enjoys. The government has benefited from openness on the part of the EU, including by providing resources and technical, methodological and other support.

Solutions for smart investments with EU money

■ **The Republic of Moldova will receive 1.9 billion in development funds from the EU over the next three years. What are the priority areas where this money should be invested in order to see an increase in living standards for citizens?**

■ I work in local public administration. I am in daily contact with citizens, and I can say with certainty that it would be right, as was the practice in other countries at the stage when they obtained candidate country status, for some of these funds to be allotted for local and regional development. It would be right if EU money were to go towards developing public infrastructure, building the capacity of local public administrations, and increasing the quality of public services at local level.

This would allow for immediate impact. But there are strategic areas that should not be left behind. Unfortunately, due to certain decisions taken overseas, the Republic of Moldova has lost substantial US support in the energy

sector. We are talking here about the interconnection of the national network with the European network in Romania, namely the Vulcanesti-Chisinau network. We are talking about over 300 million dollars.

I think that it would be wise to compensate these sources so that at least next year we can become independent in this respect, to have access to the alternative market for the procurement of energy resources. Firstly, I am referring here to electricity, because today we continue to be dependent both on the Cuciurgani power station and on the entire energy system built during the Soviet period, the latter being designed to keep the former union republics dependent on Moscow.

Last but not least, we should think about programmes for migrants, which would boost economic development, including local economic development, so that we become attractive to our fellow countrymen working abroad and I believe that every one of them would like to return home in the near or distant future. But the question is what to return to now?

I therefore believe that developing the local economy, in particular by creating the conditions for attracting foreign investors, would be a priority. It is worth noting that this objective is reflected in the substantial financial support generously provided by the European Union.

Gloomy political scenarios

■ **Moldovan society is very polarized and this was seen in last year's referendum. There is also this scenario in which pro-European forces cannot form a majority. What**

would happen in such a scenario with all these achievements so far?

■ I think it would be a tragedy if the forces hostile to Moldova's European path were to accumulate a parliamentary majority in the next Parliament. It would be dramatic, but not tragic, because the Republic of Moldova has ended up in a rather complicated economic situation, and today we are practically dependent on the support which the European Union and external partners are giving us.

That is why I am far from thinking that if the Russian Federation, during the period when it controlled everything in the Republic of Moldova, did not offer a single penny for public infrastructure, for modernizing educational institutions, for training small and medium-sized enterprises, it would do so now, even if it had interlocutors at the helm in Moldova.

I tend to believe that the maturity and wisdom of the pro-European political forces will prevail, as we see that on the pro-Russian left-wing segment there are several political projects aimed at absorbing the votes from the centre-left.

On the other hand, on the right wing, we continue to see a furious attempt to monopolize the European course and to favour a single political party. We can see from all the polls that this party has no chance of winning a majority in Parliament on its own.

Therefore, my wish and my appeal would be to discuss it as much as possible, to find formulas through which voters disappointed by certain mistakes committed by the current government, but ultimately caused by the multiple crises that the country has gone through, would

have an opportunity to vote for other genuine pro-European parties. Such parties must not be obstructed. On the contrary, they must be helped and stimulated, including through access to the media, to get their message across to voters.

Lack of cohesion among pro-European parties

■ **What is needed from pro-European political parties at the moment to join and secure a future new majority? Is there a consensus at the moment among these pro-European political parties?**

■ If on the pro-Russian left of the political spectrum we see a coordination of actions, on the pro-European side, unfortunately, we see a struggle which is a competitive one. Although it is not an ideological struggle, these few genuinely pro-European parties do not have institutionalized communication among themselves as the political opponents of the pro-European parties affiliated to the oligarchic groups and the Kremlin seem to have.

The biggest problem and challenge, in my view, is to send a very clear message to all citizens of the Republic of Moldova that this is the last chance we still have, that the European integration train is still at the station of the Republic of Moldova, and if we miss it, we risk not having the opportunity to integrate our country into the European value space. This is why the stakes are higher than the interests of the parties, the interests of certain individuals and even the comfort of certain officials.

There is a need to unite forces, a message of unification, unity and

consolidation of everything that is pro-European. A common message is needed for everything that means uncompromising and everything that means capacity and professionalism in the act of government.

Dangers and obstacles

■ **What would it mean if pro-Russian forces come to power this autumn? Is there a danger of Moldova turning into a new Belarus, or perhaps a more attenuated form like Georgia?**

■ The Georgian scenario is unfortunately as real as it can be for the Republic of Moldova. In Tbilisi, too, at a certain stage, a pro-Russian majority got in the Georgian Parliament, and Georgia

was somehow left to be led by a pro-European president, but with limited powers, as is the case here.

And for this not to happen, we need to send a very clear message to citizens who need to look beyond the political battles and be guided by the national interest when they go to the voting booth.

This is what the pro-European parties must do. I want to believe that this unjust war will be over soon and there will be a just peace for Ukraine. This means that Ukraine will stay where it is, the Republic of Moldova will stay where it is. Russia's influence will no longer be so pronounced, especially as we can see that the left bank of the Dniester can no longer be supplied with energy without the support of the

Republic of Moldova, Ukraine and the European partners.

That is why it is imperative for Tiraspol to communicate constructively, first and foremost with decision-makers in Chisinau and Brussels. This situation can be used as a tool for communication and negotiation, or perhaps even for resolving this conflict.

Of course, Moscow will continue to have imperialist ambitions and will stick to them. This is happening not only in the Republic of Moldova, but also in other countries, but we believe in our European partners, we believe that the European Union will remain united in the face of these challenges and will stand by us, and just as it has not left us before, it will not leave us alone in the face of Russia's interests.

■ **Thank you!**

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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.



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