

POLITICAL ARTICLE

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(EN)

MOLDOVA'S JOURNEY TOWARDS EU MEMBERSHIP



Picture: EU delegation to the Republic of Moldova

June 25th 2024 marked a historical date in Moldova's integration into the European Union. The first Intergovernmental Conference took place, officially opening accession negotiations. Earlier in June, a representative of the European Commission (EC) confirmed that all three remaining areas of reform had been completed, namely judicial reform, de-oligarchization and the protection of national minorities. It is included in a series of issues that the Belgian presidency of the Council of the European Union aimed to speed up over the past months, due to the impending take-over of the position by their Hungarian counterpart.

The journey to accession negotiations

The cooperation between the European Union and Moldova began in the years after the end of the Soviet Union. It started with the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement, which was signed in 1994 and entered into force in 1998.

In 2004, when the agreement expired, the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) was introduced. This was supposed to foster a strong neighbourhood around the European Union, creating prosperity and stability for the neighbouring countries and the European Union itself. Between 2005 and 2008 the Action Plan for Moldova introduced the gradual implementation of the EU's norms in Moldova and increased cooperation between the two parties. At the end of the Action Plan, the European Commission was content with the progress that had been made by the Republic of Moldova but also recognised that there was still work to be done. The official inauguration of the Eastern Partnership (EaP) happened in 2009. Since then, cooperation has been deepened with a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) in 2016. Durin early 2022 Moldova officially applied for EU membership, due to the Russian invasion of Ukraine and its implications for Moldova. In June of the same year, the European Commission recommended to the Council of the European Union that Moldova be granted candidacy status. Nevertheless, the EC also highlighted that serious steps needed to be taken by Moldova on various issues, including judicial reform, de-oligarchization and the protection of national minorities. During the same month, the Council granted Moldova its candidacy status. Two years later, Moldova has arrived at the first Intergovernmental Conference for accession negotiations.

The current state of the Republic of Moldova

Moldova has made significant progress since the start of its cooperation with the European Union. The country is currently governed by pro-European president Maia Sandu and Prime Minister Dorin Recean from the Party of Action and Solidarity (PAS). The non-profit organisation Freedom House considers Moldova a transitional or hybrid regime, with a democracy score of 3.14/7. There is still a clear gap that needs to be bridged. There is a need for an improved checks and balances system, a more independent judiciary and a continuation of the fight against corruption. Freedom House reports that civil society organisations noted "significant deviations from legislative procedures within the parliamentary majority," for example.

It can be concluded that Moldova's economy is relatively weak. A study on Moldova's economy from 2009 to 2019 found that the country struggled with high inflation rates. The country had an unemployment rate of only 4,9%; however, it had a low labour force participation rate because of numerous factors like outward migration flows and skill mismatches. Another issue that Moldova's economy faces is its weak diversification, partially due to the inadequate modernisation enforced in companies that were bought cheaply during the privatisation process. In 2022, Moldova's economy took a massive hit with the energy and refugee crisis it faced as a result of the war in Ukraine.

It slightly recovered in 2023 and is predicted to grow by 2,2% in 2024, according to the World Bank Group.

Russian influence

A complicated problem that Moldova faces is that Russia still considers Moldova a part of the Russian sphere of influence and has been present in Transnistria since 1991. It has continuously attempted to exercise power over the country and interrupt its efforts to integrate into the European Union. During the early years of the Association Agreement, Russia introduced measures such as bans on the import of Moldovan goods and restrictions on the stays of Moldovans in Russia. In the wake of the Russian war in Ukraine, Russia has attacked Moldova from various fronts, violating its airspace, spreading disinformation, trying to influence elections, and inducing an energy crisis. Russia has evidently negatively influenced Moldova's efforts towards the EU and an established democracy

In Moldova's breakaway region Transnistria, Russian influence is especially prevalent. Its economy is largely dependent on Russian gas that is supplied for a very low cost to a local plant, which is subsequently locally sold by the government. The government's agreement with Gazprom is almost expiring and if it is not renewed, it could prove disastrous for Transnistria's economy. Despite this, the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Josep Borrel, claims that "Moldova's path is independent of what is happening in Transnistria. Cyprus became a member of the European Union having a territorial problem. Moldova can do it." However, on a national level, matters are not that detached between Transnistria and Moldova. In February of this year, Transnistrian leaders demanded "protection" from the Kremlin, which is interpreted by some experts as an attempt to put pressure on Moldova. This crisis in Transnistria is predicted to influence Moldovan presidential and foreign policy elections later this year.

The rest of the roadmap to membership

Continuing to look at the future, Moldova's integration process could slow down soon due to the prominence of extreme right and populist parties in Europe. Specific EU member states might even attempt to block Moldova's accession because of bilateral issues, as Hungary has attempted with Ukraine.

How much work on reforms remains to be done by Moldova will be assessed in the upcoming period. The European Union will subsequently have to propose its conditions for 35 different policy areas. In any case, there will still be work to be done by Moldova before being able to join the European Union. Iulian Groza, executive director of the Institute for European Policies and Reforms in Chişinău, and Moldova's former vice-minister of foreign affairs in charge of European integration expects that Moldova could potentially join the EU by 2030.

The effect of expansion on the European Union

In light of the progress made by Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova, frustrations and dissatisfaction have grown in the Western Balkans. Pressure has been put on the European Union to accelerate the enlargement process of all ten of the prospective member states.

Internally, the European Union will also have to introduce reforms to accommodate the enlargements it is planning. Enlargement will have significant consequences for its institutions and budget. The European Parliament will face alterations to its composition, as the number of seats will have to be shared between a bigger group of member states, meaning that especially smaller states will feel the loss of seats. The European Commission will become larger with the addition of new member states. The Council's decision-making process will change, as, yet again, more parties will be present in the negotiation process. The Franco-German working group on EU institutional reform published a report in 2023 that included a recommendation to expand the use of qualified majority voting. This is because reaching unanimity becomes more complex with each enlargement of the Union.

With the addition of a country like Moldova, which has a relatively weak economy, wealthier EU countries are concerned that they will receive fewer cohesion funds. The extent and speed of these reforms within the European Union will depend on its member states' will and political agenda.

Thus, the motivation to accelerate integration is currently there within the EU and considerable effort has been made by Moldova during the past thirty years. Despite this, it will take a considerable amount of time before both the EU and Moldova will be ready for Moldova's EU membership. Especially Moldova's economy and judicial and political systems will need to be improved. Pressure from Transnistria and the exercise of power from Russia will continue to complicate the efforts towards these objectives. Even though the road seems to be long, it is clear that Moldova is actively choosing to continue to head down a European path.