CHALLENGES OF THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA ON ITS WAY TO THE EU ACCESSION

PROVOCĂRI ALE REPUBLICII MOLDOVA ÎN DRUMUL SĂU LA ADERAREA LA UE

CZU: 327(478):061.1UE:327.5 **https://doi.org/10.59295/spd2024s.28**

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Summary. *The purpose of this article is to analyze the Republic of Moldova's way to EU accession trough identification of existing external and internal challenges that can affect somehow the process. It is an analytical study that is based on an interdisciplinary approach. The methods used in this research paper are documents analysis, alongside with review of academic literature, civil society studies and media sources. Also were applied observation, systemic approach and event-analysis methods. In this way are identified external challenges as EU factor, regional security context, external influences. Through internal challenges are analyzed the reform process, capacity to keep the pace of European integration process and Transnistrian conflict.*

Keywords: *challenges, EU, negotiations, opportunities, reforms.*

INTRODUCTION

Relationship between the Republic of Moldova and the EU has evolved significantly over the years, reflecting European aspirations of the Republic of Moldova, as well as EU commitment to sustain reform and development process of the country. Once the Republic of Moldova was granted candidate status by EU on June 23, 2022, the dynamics of European integration of the country went on a rapid trace. On 14 December 2023 European leaders decided to open accession negotiations with the Republic of Moldova. This decision was made on the base of European Commission's evaluation of the registered progress made by the Republic of Moldova in implementation of 9 steps specified in European Commission Opinion. According to European Commission report presented in November 2023, 6 of 9 steps were accomplished: were addressed deficiencies highlighted by OSCE/ODIHR and the Council of the Venice Commission; was adopted necessary legislation in order to fight more effectively against organized crime and consolidated the cooperation with international partners in the domain; was ensured the accessibility and the quality of provided public administration services; was completed the Public Financial Management reform; was consolidated the role of civil society through the creation of a platform for dialogue with state authorities; and were consolidated national mechanisms and laws to protect

human rights and guarantee gender equality [1]. Thus, European structures recognized the commitment of the Republic of Moldova to continue and maintain sustainable progress in the reform process. After, Moldova has advanced firmly in the fulfilment of the remaining steps by appointing on the base of a transparent procedure the new Prosecutor General in June 2024, by adopting of new regulations for financial flows, contributing to the de-oligarchisation process and by consolidating the national anti-corruption structures and resources.

As all requirements were completed, after two years as Moldova was granted the candidate status, EU Council approved on June 21, 2024 the negotiating framework for negotiations with the Republic of Moldova and the accession negotiations were opened on June 25, 2024. In this context, the declarations of Chisinau to obtain EU membership until 2030 seems to have good perspectives, if the existing track of advancement of European integration process is kept. In this regard, Jānis Mažeiks, the Head of the Delegation of the European Union to the Republic of Moldova pointed that: “2030 is a very ambitious term. However, this ambition is shared by both, Moldovan authorities and European officials. This means that it is possible. This objective is optimistic, but it is achievable if there will be no deviations from the undertaken course of the reform process and necessary resources will be allocated [2].” Indeed, the achievement of EU membership is a task that mostly depends on efforts of the Republic of Moldova to align with European standards and values, to advance reforms and successfully conduct accession negotiations. However, there are some challenges, external and internal, that can affect the course of country’s European integration. Republic of Moldova is both, within a complex geopolitical context with influences from different actors and under the continuous regional and international evolutions. At the same time, different domestic problems can influence the capacity of the republic to benefit entirely from opportunities offered by the EU. Thus, in analyzing the relations between the EU and the Republic of Moldova it is necessary to study the challenges Moldova faces on its way to obtain EU membership in order to identify correctly the priorities and perspectives of European integration of the country.

MATERIAL AND METHOD

The research is conducted on the base of a set of general and particular scientific methods and techniques with an interdisciplinary character that allowed the comprehensive study of the relationship between EU and the Republic of Moldova from the perspective of opportunities and challenges that can be identified at current stage. In order to provide an in-depth vision of the research problem was applied the documents analysis, alongside with review of academic literature, civil society studies and media sources. Other methods as observation, systemic approach and event-analysis have contributed to the evaluation of the internal and external factors that can influence the trace of the Republic of Moldova towards EU membership, as well as gave insights on the main evolutions, trends and opportunities in this process. Another method is the institutional

one, that focused on the study of the role of the institutions that directly are involved and regulate the process of European integration of the Republic of Moldova. At its turn, the analysis of data provided by different poles of public opinion led to the determination of level of support for Moldova accession to EU.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The candidate status of the Republic of Moldova has changed the nature of its relationship with the EU. Moldova has now the clear perspective to join with EU and starts a complex process of negotiations on diverse chapters of acquis communautaire that represent the body of EU legislation and standards. On its way towards EU membership, Republic of Moldova will benefit from different opportunities such as enhancement of political cooperation with EU and its member states, benefits from EU initiatives aimed at promoting security and stability in the region, strengthening of democratic institutions, EU financial and technical assistance to fulfill development initiatives, access to diverse European programs and policies etc. Thus, through recent evolutions can be mentioned that the macro-financial assistance for Moldova was increased to 150 million euros; the country was granted additional duty-free access for more agricultural products for a year; was launched the Hub for internal security and border management in Moldova, as well as the high level political and security dialogue EU-Moldova; EU has paid a grant of 75 million euros for consolidation of national energy sector; and the participation of Moldova in EU programs has extended [3].

At the same time, Republic of Moldova faces multiple challenges in its path of accession to EU. These challenges are determined by regional tensions, multiple crises and some domestic issues that can influence and/or, to some extent, even drag the European integration process. There can be identified external and internal challenges, that will be discussed below.

Among external challenges, firstly should be mentioned European integration process itself and EU internal dynamics. This implies different aspects. Primarily, it regards the EU's absorption capacity, which is, according to Tanja A. Börzel, Antoaneta Dimitrova and Frank Schimmelfennig, the capacity of EU to admit new member states in a certain period of time without threatening the political objectives established by Treaties [4, p.161], that certainly implies the stability and functioning of EU. That means EU, that at its turn meets with some internal problems as institutional crisis and economic issues, should be ready to reshape some of its existing mechanisms and accept new members, ensuring their smooth integration into the community. In this respect, the EU conditionality policy contributes significantly to the preparation of the candidates to join the European family, diminishing the risk that new members will jeopardize the Union's activity. Then, the admission of new member states must receive the consent of all EU member states. The fact that Republic of Moldova has the support of EU member states for its EU membership aspiration shows that the country will be admitted as soon as it will fulfil its commitments as candidate state.

Another challenge is the regional security context generated by war in Ukraine. On one hand, the war triggered the European integration process for the Republic of Moldova, encouraging it to seek the closer ties with EU, looking to enhance its security and stability by aligning itself with European values and principles. Also, it changed strongly the EU's perception and position regarding the European aspirations of its Eastern neighbors, making real the membership perspective for Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia, which was not provided by the last Eastern Partnership summit on 15 December 2021 [5]. On another hand, it led to multiple crises in the Republic of Moldova - the refugee, energy and economic ones, which affect somehow the implementation of EU conditionality and reform process. At the same time, for the Republic of Moldova it is very important to prove its capacity to become EU member state due to its own merits, domestic qualitative transformation and Europeanization and not to geopolitical factors and circumstances.

As a third external challenge is considered the influence of Russian Federation in the Republic of Moldova. It is exercised in different ways: trough Moldovan dependency on Russian energy resources, Transnistrian conflict, economic embargoes, mass-media etc. As Moldovan researchers note, another way of consolidation of Russia's position in Moldova is by strengthening of pro-Russian political parties that would keep Moldova divided and unable to follow a pro-European foreign policy direction [6, p.259]. However, Moldovan authorities managed to reduce the impact of Russian Federation in diverse domains. EU has become the main trade partner of Moldova, representing 52.2% of its total trade [3]. In energy sector, according to analysts, Moldovan government succeed to refute its debt to Gazprom and to develop alternative supply routes, achieving in this way independence from Russian gas [7]. Significant measures were undertaken in order to improve the Moldova's resilience towards disinformation, by legislation amendments, introduction of sanctions for disinformation actions, suspension of several TV station licenses and blocking sites in order to protect the national informational space, foundation of National Cyber Security Agency [8] etc.

Speaking about internal challenges, first of all it should be underlined the need of realization of a deep reform in the field of judicial system and fight against the corruption. These two dimensions are critical for the process of convergence with European standards and necessary to ensure efficient and sustainable integration into the European structures. By how efficiently are addressed these key domains depends successful reform of other domains. According to the Public Opinion Barometer of the Republic of Moldova, citizens have somewhat trust in law enforcement agencies as follows: in court -16.8%, in General Prosecutor's Office – 17.1%, in General Police Inspectorate -28.4% and in National Anti-Corruption Center – 22.3% [9]. It is obvious that improvement of justice sector and fight against corruption will not happen fast and it is required time that adopted laws and measures have results. In this respect, for the achievement of a modern, transparent and efficient judicial system a very good step represents the adoption by the Parliament of the Republic of Moldova of the Strategy for Ensuring the

Independence and Integrity of Justice sector for 2022-2025 [10], which is in the process of implementation.

Next challenge for Moldova is the capacity to ensure the stability in face of changes. At the moment, the European integration process of the country is supported and realized by pro-European President, Government and Parliament. All efforts of both, government and civil society are focused on the promotion of necessary reforms and alignment to European standards. On March 13, 2023 the Government of the Republic of Moldova approved the new Coordination Mechanism for Moldova's EU Accession Process [11]. It establishes the way of coordination of European integration process, responsible authorities and the way of organization and functioning of the Working Groups for accession negotiations of the Republic of Moldova to EU and the composition of the negotiation team. Responsible institution for the coordination of European integration process at national level since 2023 is the Bureau for European Integration. It ensures the fulfillment of commitments assumed by the Republic of Moldova within the accession process to EU, coordinates the EU acquis' implementation in cooperation with the Legislation Harmonization Center, assist the Working Groups for accession negotiations, coordinates the negotiation process and regulates the strategic communication in the field of European integration.

On July 10, 2024 Republic of Moldova launched the second stage of accession negotiations with EU, starting the bilateral screening process in order to analyze the readiness of the country to apply European legislation and to see if all acquis' components can be adopted at national level. It is for the first time when a candidate state hosts this kind of event. In this context, Deputy Prime Minister for European Integration, Head of Bureau for European Integration Cristina Gherasimov stated: "The fact that we have reached this point just over two years after receiving candidate status for EU membership reflects the tremendous effort exerted by national institutions and society as a whole. Simultaneously, it stands as testament to the EU's unprecedented openness, offering us a concrete prospect of joining the great family of democracies on our continent [12]." Thus, in conditions of upcoming presidential and parliamentary elections in 2024 and 2025 respectively, is important to ensure that initiated process will keep the pace. It is necessary to work with opposition parties to adopt a common direction of actions, to engage more civil society and to communicate efficiently with the population. According to public opinion poll "Citizens' perception about Moldova's European integration process", realized by the Institute for European Reforms and Policies in cooperation with CBS-AXA in June 2023, 59,2 % of respondents support Moldova's accession to EU [13]. However, it is still necessary to communicate with population in order to inform and explain correctly the process and results of accession negotiations with EU and what benefits European integration has.

Finally, a challenge is the Transnistrian conflict. It is preferred that the Republic of Moldova joins EU already as an integrated country. However, there are also opinions that Moldova's accession to EU does not depend on conflict settlement and the re-

public can move forward without Transnistria and will settle the conflict already as an EU member. Meanwhile, EU will continue the dialogue with Chisinau and Tiraspol in order to facilitate the reintegration process [14]. Anyway, peaceful resolution of Transnistrian conflict is one of the main objectives of Moldovan government. There is no predictable timetable for its settlement, as it is a complex and difficult task, involving diverse aspects and issues, starting with political dialogue and continuing with measures in health, education, pension system etc. Oleg Serebrian, Deputy Prime Minister for Reintegration states that Chisinau should bring Transnistrian region into the legal field of the Republic of Moldova till 2030, so that the left bank of the Dniester River would be also prepared for accession to EU. That would be possible in the field of custom, taxation and banking. The creation of a single customs area would solve many economic problems. The authorities want that both banks of the Dniester River benefit from equal conditions [15]. Indeed, Europeanization of the Transnistrian region and advantages of EU membership are considered the best ways of conflict settlement.

CONCLUSIONS

Although the road to accession to EU is strewn with diverse challenges the Republic of Moldova is determined to overcome them through ambitious legislative and institutional reforms and internal transformation. It is expected that accession negotiations will accelerate the process of modernization and development of the country through the domestic preparation for accession. The main objective of the Republic of Moldova is to conclude accession negotiations by 2030. If it succeeds, it means that Republic of Moldova will be able to obtain EU membership. What is important is that Republic of Moldova must preserve its pace of reforms and fulfillment of assumed commitments within accession process, proving that it has the capacity to integrate into European community based on its own merits. Additionally, that will contribute to the overcoming of other existing challenges. Another key aspect is assurance of the continuous support for the European integration of the country by strategic communication with population, increased engagement of civil society into European integration process and transparency in decision-making and accession negotiation process.

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N.B. Article is writen within project 101132314 — RE-ENGAGE - Re-Engaging with Neighbours in a State of War and Geopolitical Tensions