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Moldova's European leap of faith

In light of Europe's new security context, the European Council Summit would do well to move Moldova an inch closer to integration

At the European Council Summit in Brussels on 23-24 June 2022, EU member states will discuss and decide on the Republic of Moldova's application for EU accession. The decision that will be taken at this meeting could have a considerable impact on the country's European integration process, which is a key priority of Moldovan government's foreign policy.

After years in which the rule of law and good governance have suffered from kleptocratic regimes, Moldova's candidate status could boost key reforms in these areas and generate systemic changes needed to advance the EU accession.

At the same time, EU member states' response to Moldova's application will test the EU's ability to (re-)act strategically and uniformly in an extremely complicated security context. Their joint efforts in support of Ukraine's independence must also be accompanied by a firm commitment to support the accession prospect of the so-called 'Trio countries' – Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova.

Several European governments' policy towards the Russian Federation has seen a paradigm shift. But this should also be followed by a wider openness to the immediate inclusion of the associated countries in the value, political, and economic space of the EU.

Growing European interest

The Moldovan leadership has signed the application for EU membership on 3 March 2022, a few days after Ukraine and Georgia. Although the submission of the application was influenced by the other two states, the current government in Chisinau has sent a clear political signal to Brussels that it is committed to the accession process.

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Shortly after, Chisinau doubled down on its commitment by accelerating the completion of the European Commission's questionnaire. In about a month, the Moldovan authorities were able to complete and submit the answers to more than 2,100 questions, which covered virtually all key aspects of the political and institutional system, but also of the policy framework in Moldova. The rapid mobilisation of the necessary resources for this exercise has shown the determination and will among the government to capitalise on the current window of opportunity. By comparison, it took countries such as Albania and Northern Macedonia four months to submit the answers to the accession questionnaire, while in the case of Bosnia this process took about 14 months.

In the last three months, Chisinau has been visited by over 30 delegations of senior officials from the European Union countries. During this period, the high-level dialogue between Moldova and the European Union in the field of politics and security was launched, aiming at increasing the country's resilience to external challenges.

These events, together with the launch of the 'Support Platform for Moldova' in early April – at the initiative of France, Germany, and Romania – have increased the interaction between European countries and Moldova, channelling more external assistance to overcome the national and regional crises.

Beyond the bilateral dialogue, Moldova has demonstrated after 24 February that it is one of the EU's main partners in the context of the war in Ukraine. The organised management of the refugee flow to the EU countries, ensuring the transit of the commercial and humanitarian transport from the EU to Ukraine, but also observance of the EU financial sanctions regime for the Russian Federation, were just some of the actions facilitated by the authorities in Chisinau.

A catalyst to move in the right direction

The European Commission's opinion on Moldova's application for the EU membership was published on 17 June. The conclusions and recommendations of the European Commission can weigh heavily on the decision of some EU states, which have not yet established their position on offering the status of candidate country to Moldova. Although the

fulfilment of the Copenhagen accession criteria is necessary and Moldova should not be an exception to the rule, EU member states should also take into account the stakes of granting it candidate country status.

The decision can have major implications for Moldova's short- and medium-term development. First of all, Moldova could have access to significantly higher pre-accession funds compared to the currently established allocations. For the 2021-2027 EU budget, the so-called 'Pre-Accession Assistance Instrument' includes funding of around €14.2bn for the countries of the Western Balkans and Turkey. These funds could be directed to central and local authorities, the business community and civil society, helping to modernise the infrastructure and improve the living standards of the population.

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Secondly, the status of candidate country, coupled with the assistance instruments, could accelerate the progress of reforms in Moldova and make the government accountable for implementing the commitments assumed in relation to the EU. The positive past experience of the EU conditionality, skilfully applied for disbursement of macro-financial assistance, demonstrates the effectiveness and usefulness of this mechanism in connecting the funds to the reform actions. At the same time, the status of candidate country could increase societal support for Moldova's accession to the EU currently estimated at 55 per cent.

No need to 'skip' stages

In the run-up to the Brussels summit, EU member states took different stances on whether or not to grant candidate status to Moldova. At the declaratory level, some heads of state and government have emphasised the need to comply with all stages and procedures set out in the EU Treaty, speaking quite reluctantly about the prospects of the three EU associated countries. Other leaders, especially those from the Central and South-Eastern Europe, have emphasised the importance of the geopolitical and security context, which is forcing the EU to change its approach to examining membership applications.

The paradigm of the EU states towards the application for Moldova's accession should take into account the impact of a favourable decision on the development and reform trajectory. Although Moldova has some delays with regards to the rule of law and the fight against corruption,

they should understand the strategic importance of granting this status to Moldova, which can be a trigger for mitigating the impact of current crises on the resilience of Moldovan society and the sustainability of Europe's geopolitical orientation.

The Republic of Moldova does not intend to 'skip' certain stages of the EU accession process. The opening of the EU accession negotiations, as well as the dynamics of the negotiations over the accession chapter, will certainly be conditioned by results in the implementation of key reforms by the authorities. However, now it is the time for the EU to demonstrate its ability to act as a global player and reconsider its approach to foreign policy and security in Eastern Europe based on the new regional realities.

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