



**EU'S ENLARGEMENT,
THE MOLDOVAN CASE :
REFORMS, OBJECTIVES,
PROGRESS**

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On July 13th 2023, Daniela Morari, discussed with us where Moldova stands in the accession process, its progress, its particular difficulties and the effects of the war in Ukraine on its economy. during an interview with Confrontations Europe[1]. Here is a transcript of these discussions.

◆ **How does the war in Ukraine affect Moldova right now? And what is the situation in your country regarding this event?**

Daniela Morari : To describe the impact of the war, we often say that our nation finds itself in a position of extraordinary vulnerability, second only to Ukraine, given the multifaceted nature of the war's aftermath.

First, the war disrupted our trade relations with eastern regions. It has not only impacted our exports but has also extended to our imports, representing a critical element in our connection to global trade. In consequence, we have to find alternatives to everything which burdens our economy with additional costs. The inflation reached over 35%. Since the beginning of the war, we welcomed a huge number of refugees. But unlike some of our colleagues from the Western Balkans, who have prior refugee welcoming experience from the Balkan Wars, we are constantly looking for new solutions. Ukrainian refugees now represent about 4% of our population among which half of them are children. One of our main challenges is to integrate them to school, social health etc. We also aim at allowing populations, living close to our border with Ukraine, to visit their pharmacies and other health infrastructures. This refugee crisis is an important shift for our administration, we keep on learning how to manage it.

Another major challenge is that of security. We have created a security hub that will allow our law enforcement and all potential actors and agencies to be in contact with the EU and its member states. It's important for us to know, prevent, and act by joining our forces. From trafficking to airspace and cyberspace, our security is at risk : our airspace has been violated a few times, we suffer from numerous cyber-attacks, we recently went through a shooting at Chişinău International Airport where two border policemen were killed. This insecurity climate doesn't stimulate investors and therefore hurts the economic development of the country although we have implemented many investing incentives.

We experienced two consecutive challenging winters in terms of energy supply. But last year's winter was the first time we had gaz reserves coming from the West instead of the East. We didn't use a drop of Russian gas. We had problems connecting with ENTSO-E, the European continental grid, but the war forced us to tackle numerous challenges in record time.

[1] Interview conducted on 13 July by Thomas Dorget

Managing our energy needs was one of the most difficult challenges we faced. However, thanks to the support of the EU and our partners, we managed to overcome this issue and now we're looking at the horizon, organizing ourselves to have a more comfortable winter.

We also developed an important assistance to vulnerable groups in our population, mostly in response to the significant price hikes. Gas prices skyrocketed, multiplied by eight, while electricity costs quadrupled. However, we calculated that the population could only bear a threefold price increase. We had to find solutions to compensate the rest through extra support on key issues.

I believe this provides a glimpse of how the war has impacted us in various ways. Naturally, its effects are multifaceted and complex. It is crucial for us to know that we are not standing alone and that we are receiving the necessary high-level political support and attention from our partners. In this context, hosting the meeting of the EPC, the European Political Community, on June 1st was a significant indicator of support for the Republic of Moldova.

◆ **How do you see the development of the European political community in your relationship? How can you structure this relationship?**

DM : By hosting this summer's EPC, we wanted to offer European leaders the opportunity to take decisions for the continent at large, as close as possible to their understanding of the challenges the continent is facing, discuss them and find common solutions.

Hosting the event in Moldova also held special importance, significance, and symbolism for us. It showcased our capacity to organize such an event, and every detail was of utmost importance to us. It not only enhanced our bilateral relations with the European Union but also served as a source of support and a catalyst for achieving broader objectives beyond our individual interests. We are very satisfied with the different feedback from this event on our soil.

◆ **To what extent do you feel that the war is changing the relationship between Moldova and the European Union?**

DM : You know that we applied last spring for the EU membership. Although we have been on this path for a while, this is a crucial step for the Moldavian people. It is crucial that the EU and its member states understand we don't have other options as a country. Leaders must acknowledge this situation in their decision-making process.

After applying for the membership in March, we received the candidate status in June and are now working assiduously to fulfil the nine steps set by the Commission. Recently we went through the oral update which evaluated that out of the nine steps three were completed, three are in making good headway, and three are in progress.

We have been confronted with a multitude of simultaneous crises, each demanding our attention and necessitating viable solutions. We are steadily advancing, buoyed by the encouraging feedback from the oral update, which left us feeling quite content and optimistic about the progress we've made. As we invest our best efforts during the summer and autumn, our primary aim and aspiration revolve around receiving the essential evaluations and recommendations. These critical inputs will pave the way for the next significant milestone, the commencement of accession negotiations in earnest. We firmly believe that this step will firmly anchor us in the irreversible trajectory of the process.

“This motivation will serve as our driving force to perpetuate the reform, akin to the lifeblood coursing through our efforts”

We categorize our efforts into three primary avenues.

First and foremost, our focus is on effective delivery. In our collaborative efforts with the EU, we aim to discern the ways in which foreign expertise, advice, and support can assist us in achieving successful outcomes. We are meticulous in our consideration of various time dimensions within this context.

Another avenue that has seen significant enhancement is our role as a candidate country. We find ourselves engaged in numerous aspects, starting with participation in EU programs. These encompass various domains such as customs, fiscal matters, and EU4Health. Additionally, we are in ongoing negotiations for other programs, including the single market program, digital Europe, civil protection mechanisms, and our application to join BEREC, the Association of European Telecommunication Regulators. Furthermore, we are actively pursuing additional requests related to social protection and judicial cooperation.

We believe that participating in these associations and enrolling in various programs fosters more profound collaboration among our experts and institutions within the EU. It provides us with access to knowledge, tools, and fresh opportunities. An illustrative example of this is our recent entry into the Connecting European Facility, where three significant projects have been approved, marking our inaugural involvement in infrastructure endeavors. This direct involvement allows us to contribute to impactful initiatives like bridge construction and border crossing point renovations, directly benefiting our citizens with practical and tangible improvements.

We are actively exploring the possibility of participating in working groups and councils as observers and extending invitations to our ministers. This would provide us with valuable insights into their operations. As an illustration of our commitment to this goal, we recently hosted a substantial group of approximately 191 civil servants in Brussels over the course of two days. They participated in comprehensive training sessions covering a range of topics related to the EU, accession processes, and financing programs and instruments. This signifies a significant expansion of our efforts compared to what we have done in the past.

Moreover, another notable achievement is our successful implementation of roaming agreements. We are sincerely appreciative of the collective efforts that went into making this achievement possible. It represents a longstanding objective we've pursued for two decades, dating back to the Eastern Partnership, albeit with evolving priorities. It's worth highlighting that we were able to finalize the voluntary agreement ahead of the APC, an accomplishment announced by the Polish president, the President of the European Commission, and our own president, Maia Sandu.

We have witnessed companies voluntarily joining our initiatives, and we are currently engaged in discussions with various telecommunication associations and companies to encourage further participation. Concurrently, we are on a trajectory toward harmonizing roaming legislation, a crucial step toward establishing a framework for drone-like home services. This represents a significant and practical development, as I believe it will be the second direct benefit for our citizens, following the earlier validation of our efforts. We are in the process of submitting an application for payment setup, which will facilitate direct payments. This, in turn, will greatly enhance the practicality of cooperation for both businesses and individuals.

“ In essence, our efforts reflect our commitment to identifying new benchmarks and measures that contribute to the gradual integration of our country, rendering the process irreversible ”

This approach is geared towards advancing our cooperation and better preparing us for eventual full membership.

◆ On a more political aspect, do you see the European political community as a first step towards the addition of Moldova to the EU? Apart from all the gradual integration and the program integration that you mentioned.

DM : I would like to emphasize that the European political community, as discussed and announced by the French president, is not an alternative to Moldova's EU accession.

It's essential to clarify this point because there have been questions raised regarding this issue. The idea behind the European political community is not to interfere with Moldova's EU accession process but rather to complement it. The recent statement by the French president in Bratislava was encouraging, as it focused on the accession and enlargement process. It's not about whether we should pursue EU integration, but rather how we can prepare for it and align our efforts accordingly.

We are fully committed to this understanding, and Moldova is actively working towards the necessary reforms and transformations. We acknowledge that this is a complex and challenging process, and we are aware that it requires expertise, advice, guidance, and sometimes financial support, particularly for costly reforms. This is especially true given the various crises we have faced. We are dedicated to making progress and ensuring that we meet the necessary criteria for EU accession.

◆ **On the journey towards EU accession, what do you reckon would be the main challenges in terms of reforms and transformation?**

DM : In the journey towards EU accession, we face a multitude of challenges in terms of reforms and transformation. It's difficult to pinpoint a single challenge, as it's a complex web of factors. One of the most significant challenges has been the simultaneous occurrence of multiple crises. Each crisis, on its own, is challenging, but when they happen concurrently, it becomes particularly demanding.

Despite these challenges, we've made significant progress. We successfully managed the refugee crisis, navigated through difficult winters, and addressed security challenges. While these were tough endeavors, we believe that we handled them well.

Looking ahead, we anticipate encountering more hybrid challenges in the coming months and weeks. These may involve disinformation campaigns, cyber threats, and other complex issues. To address these challenges, we are actively working on building resilient institutions and seeking support from the EU and our partners.

We've learned valuable lessons from past challenges. For example, we're establishing specialized institutions to combat disinformation and seeking sanctions against destabilizing actors. These measures are steps in the right direction, but the effectiveness will become clearer with time.

In terms of the substantial work required, we're now tackling systemic issues. It's not just about passing laws; it's about transforming entire systems. This demands determination and extensive effort. Areas such as the justice sector, anti-corruption measures, and de-oligarchization are among our priorities. We collaborate closely with EU experts, the Venice Commission, the Council of Europe, and various Commission departments.

For instance, we're in the process of pre-vetting and transforming institutions like the Superior Council of Magistracy and Superior Council of Prosecutors. However, building a track record and proving the effectiveness of these reforms will take time, and this remains a long-term priority.

Additionally, we face challenges in sectors with a substantial list of directives to harmonize. Some of these directives require substantial financial resources. Prioritization and careful planning are crucial. We've initiated coordination through working groups established by negotiation chapters, and the work has already begun.

Challenges also arise in sectors requiring extensive coordination among various stakeholders. These challenges demand a systematic approach.

At present, our primary focus is on opening negotiations. We have a clear roadmap outlining what we need to fulfill. Our goal is to convince the Commission and Member States that we've made significant progress. What matters most is the sustained effort over time, as rule of law and progress are ongoing commitments.

Our progress is reflected in international assessments and reports. We've seen substantial improvements in various indexes and reports from recognized international organizations. While we may subjectively assess our progress, it's the evaluations of these experts that truly reflect the effort and transformation we're undergoing. For instance, in the matters of press freedom, we have jumped from the 80th to the 28th position.

◆ **On a more personal level, would you say that your main mission as ambassador of Moldova towards the EU is to lead this accession process, this integration process between your country and the European Union?**

DM : Of course! This year, one of our primary objectives is to achieve a favorable report. We have a Commission report that we highly recommend, and we are committed to ensuring its successful delivery. To accomplish this, we will make concerted efforts, reaching out to member states and diligently advocating our readiness to initiate negotiations.

Simultaneously, we aim to establish the first set of cooperative bridges across various fields, launching negotiations and engaging in different programs. Personally, I am committed to signing and participating in as many programs as possible. Currently, we have a list of programs already signed, with four more under negotiation and approximately eight in the initial stages of the process.

Additionally, we continue our efforts to find solutions to address various aspects of the crisis and the impact of the war. This includes initiatives such as solidarity lanes, railway repairs, resolving the energy crisis, and progressing in the development of an alternative electricity line with Romania. We are also focusing on practical elements such as bulk travel and have launched the UPM mission. Furthermore, securing additional assistance for the EPF (European Peace Facility) and bolstering our defense and military capabilities remain critical priorities for our mission in Brussels.

◆ **To move on a bit to NATO, how do you see the outcome of the NATO summit in Vilnius? Moldova is intrinsically a neutral country, it is enshrined in your constitution. Do you see accession to NATO as an objective, a long-term objective?**

DM : We are keen on enhancing our cooperation with NATO, even though we maintain our status as a neutral country and have not pursued NATO membership. Our primary objective is to strengthen collaboration and maintain a close relationship with NATO. An encouraging sign of our inclusion in this cooperation was the invitation extended to our Minister of Foreign Affairs to the NATO ministerial meeting preceding the NATO summit in Vilnius.

We are deeply appreciative of the support and assistance offered by NATO and its allies in enhancing Moldova's resilience and overall security. We also enthusiastically welcome the NATO-EU security dialogue involving Moldova, recognizing its significance in bolstering our security.

On the subject of security, our dialogue with the European Union has substantially expanded. In just over a year, the EU-Moldovan security dialogue has made remarkable progress since its launch in March 2022, just two days following a critical period. A notable achievement was securing a substantial package from the European Peace Facility (EPF), which effectively doubled our defense budget. In 2021, our budget was 7 million, which increased to 40 million in both 2022 and 2023. This marks the first time we've invested significantly in strengthening our defense and military capabilities.

However, we understand that building a robust defense and security infrastructure requires a comprehensive, long-term approach. Our neutrality does not equate to passivity; it necessitates the means and tools to defend our sovereignty and a broader comprehension of security challenges. In light of airspace violations and a deeper understanding of societal support following the war in Ukraine, we recognize the importance of proactive security measures.

Our cooperation extends to various EU institutions dedicated to security matters, including spatial imagery and supports our home affairs. Additionally, we launched the European Peace Mission (EPM) swiftly in May, focusing on crisis management and addressing hybrid threats from multiple angles, a response to the various potential crises we may face.

We appreciate the EU's support in countering cyber-attacks, hybrid threats, and disinformation through various projects and initiatives. Bilateral dialogues on security play a pivotal role in understanding security challenges comprehensively. It is essential to zoom in and out, gaining insight into events on the ground while comprehending the bigger picture and the interplay of various processes.

This broader perspective is especially valuable in our dealings with the Transnistrian region, a crucial element of our overall understanding of security dynamics.

◆ To conclude on political developments, how do you perceive the results of the elections in Slovakia and Poland? How can it impact the adhesion process, the integration process of Moldova towards the EU? Do you follow closely these political developments?

DM : It's essential to note that it's not limited to just these two countries; there are seven countries undergoing elections this year. Naturally, we are closely following these developments as they hold significance. However, what's equally crucial is the formation of new governments in these countries and their stance on enlargement and cooperation with us.

I am optimistic that the general support for enlargement remains a common thread, regardless of the political party or orientation in power. We've witnessed instances in other countries where governments changed but the commitment to enlargement persisted. Nevertheless, there may be nuances and variations in this support, which will become clearer as decisions are made.

Our approach is rooted in realism and pragmatism, recognizing the complexity of the integration process. We believe that including us in discussions about the future of Europe is essential. By doing so, we can provide a more realistic perspective and align our requests accordingly. We view our requests as gradual and pragmatic, emphasizing the need for us to fulfill our responsibilities and transform as part of this journey. Inclusion in the process serves as motivation and grants access to essential instruments and tools. We are eager to learn and committed to being a reliable partner in this ongoing exercise.

◆ In that sense, what country showed most political support to Moldovan integration? Not to be too caricatural or controversial, but what country showed the least political support to the Moldovan adhesion?

DM : We maintain a robust cooperation with all countries, benefiting from significant support from our neighbor, Romania, which offers both political assistance and valuable expertise. Moreover, we have forged strong connections with the latest accession countries from East and Central Europe, the Balkans, Eastern Europe, Bulgaria, Croatia, and beyond, enabling us to tap into a wealth of knowledge and experiences. Our direct interactions and learning exchanges are ongoing.

In our interactions with all European countries, we are fostering substantial cooperation. We have close ties at the highest levels of leadership, involving the President, Prime Minister, and Foreign Minister. Notably, in partnership with France, Germany, and Romania, we established the Moldovan Support Platform to navigate the challenging crises we have faced. This platform, coupled with bilateral contacts and numerous visits, has led to growing collaboration with countries both within and outside the EU.

“ Considering our relatively small size, it can be challenging to engage with all 27 member states simultaneously ”

Therefore, the European Political Community (EPC) has played a pivotal role in elevating our visibility and facilitating direct interactions between our President and counterparts from other states. We are expanding upon this foundation and are actively participating in EPC meetings, further solidifying our connections. The first meeting proved particularly valuable, as it took place just before the onset of our most challenging energy crisis. Our President had the opportunity to address our predicament and collaborate on solutions, highlighting the added value of such interactions.

While political landscapes can change with elections and other developments, it remains crucial to sustain and enhance our cooperative efforts in a short timeframe, building upon the strong foundation we have established.

◆ What would be your main analysis or vision of the upcoming European elections in 2024?

DM : It is still somewhat premature to make a definitive judgment at this stage, as several important variables remain in play. Factors such as the evolving situation within the EU, the outcome of the winter season, and the ongoing developments related to the war will continue to influence the landscape. As we approach the elections in spring, we may witness some changes, subtle shifts and nuances in the prevailing conditions. In response, it is important for us to maintain a strong sense of determination and vigilance.

Assessing the level of citizen participation in various countries is a complex task, as it hinges on dynamic developments and multifaceted factors. It is crucial to examine which segments of society are more inclined to actively engage in the electoral process. Globally, there is growing anticipation, particularly among younger generations, who are increasingly eager to play a more active role, especially in the context of the ongoing war. A noteworthy example of this enthusiasm was the significant turnout at the rally for European integration on May 21st, mirroring a similar phenomenon during our quest for independence. The scale and enthusiasm exceeded expectations, underscoring people's strong desire to connect and align with our cause.

While it remains challenging to predict if similar events can be replicated in other countries, my inclination suggests that the possibility is indeed feasible.

◆ Could you develop a bit on the situation in Transnistria and how it impacts the whole subject we discussed in terms of Moldovan relationship to the EU ?

DM : Our foremost priority is to maintain a calm and stable situation, as we firmly believe that becoming the next epicenter of conflict would not serve the interests of Moldova, Ukraine, or the EU. Our aim is to promote peaceful and normal conditions. We also recognize that the populations in the Transnistrian region share our desire for peace. To this end, Chişinău continues to engage in dialogue with Tiraspol. In the current circumstances, we find that the one-plus-one format in our cooperation is effective, especially considering Ukraine's closure of the border. This arrangement provides Chişinău with greater control over various processes, including trade, import-export activities, and connection to the ENTSO-E energy network.

We place great value on our cooperation with the EU, which has played a pivotal role in our path toward reintegration. An exemplary case is the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) agreement with the EU, which facilitates approximately 70% of Moldova's trade (including Transnistria). DCFTA has been of great importance since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Moscow. This underscores the significant impact of such agreements on our interconnectedness and prosperity.

Furthermore, our inclusive approach has yielded positive results, such as visa liberalization and the issuance of passports, which has led to an increase in the number of Moldovan passports in the Transnistrian region, fostering prospects for unity. However, at present, our primary focus is on maintaining security and identifying critical elements that can further motivate the country's integration. Discussing political settlements remains challenging in the current context.