

ROMANIA'S ROLE IN EU ENLARGEMENT: CHALLENGES, OPPORTUNITIES, AND STRATEGIC PREFERENCES FOR THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA'S ACCESSION

Nicolae TODERAȘ, PhD

Lecturer, National University of Political Studies and Public Administration
Bucharest/Romania

Abstract

The article analyses how Romania promotes its national preferences in the EU enlargement process, with a particular focus on supporting the Republic of Moldova in becoming an EU member. The characteristics and dynamics of the current wave of EU enlargement are examined and several challenges that may delay the accession of some of the candidate countries are discussed. Additionally, the opportunities and challenges related to Romania's contribution in helping the Republic of Moldova prepare for the pre-accession stage and subsequently for EU membership are explored.

Keywords

EU enlargement; national preferences; Republic of Moldova.

1. INTRODUCTION

The EU enlargement represents a complex process, influenced by both strategic factors and the national preferences of member states. The current enlargement is characterized by a different prioritization of integration, beginning with a gradual economic integration through access to the Single Market, followed by effective political integration into the EU. This shift in perspective underscores the importance of economic convergence and the reduction of social disparities,

making it easier to meet the political conditionalities specific to accession. At the same time, the EU must address the concerns of member states regarding the costs of enlargement, the potential decrease in financial allocations from European funds, and the risks associated with ensuring internal cohesion.

The technical and political challenges, such as the overburdening of European institutions and the redefinition of solidarity, highlight the need for a balance between meritocracy and solidarity. Additionally, the pressures generated by multiple crises and the implications of the interests and ambitions of the Russian Federation in Eastern European countries, as well as those of other global actors, underscore the importance of a strategic approach tailored to the context. Therefore, the current enlargement is not only a strategic investment by the EU in ensuring stability and prosperity in Europe, but also a process of adapting the EU's institutional architecture to manage new realities. This necessitates rethinking decision-making policies and financing mechanisms to facilitate the transition of candidate countries to EU member states.

This article aims to present some reflections on how Romania could promote its national preferences regarding EU enlargement. The first part introduces and discusses several contextual elements, both from the perspective of the specific characteristics of the current wave of enlargement and the dynamics of the enlargement process. The second section examines Romania's strategic role in supporting the Republic of Moldova's accession to the EU. It highlights the ways in which Romania contributes, as well as the main results and effects achieved so far. Subsequently, the article presents and discusses both the opportunities and challenges related to Romania's national preferences in helping the Republic of Moldova prepare for eventual EU membership.

2. NATIONAL PREFERENCES AND THE CHALLENGES OF EU ENLARGEMENT: BETWEEN MERITOCRACY AND STRATEGY

National preferences represent the aggregation of all forms of preferences generated by institutional and non-institutional actors. National preferences are determined by the specific interests and values of each EU member state, influencing how they perceive and adopt EU integration or enlargement initiatives. These national preferences are shaped by internal political, economic, and cultural factors, which create differences in the level of commitment to common policies and values (Leruth 2015). Essentially, the primary source of national preferences lies in the interest expressed by political power, including the one at the regional level, and by the opposition. The secondary source consists of interest groups, as well as elites or epistemic groups. In other words, the national preferences represent a consolidation of internal options regarding the arrangements of enlargement.

The EU enlargement policy highlights the ambivalent nature of national preferences. On one hand, preferences are generated in relation to certain candidate countries, such as Poland having preferences for Ukraine, or Romania having preferences for the Republic of Moldova. On the other hand, national preferences condition the adoption of a rational approach to maximizing potential gains or losses. For example, the current wave of enlargement will once again generate statistical deficit. Similar to the 2004 and 2007 wave, when Spain adopted a rational behaviour to compensate for potential losses from the EU's cohesion policy (Bărbulescu 2006), the enlargement towards Ukraine will generate a phenomenon of similar magnitude. Regions in countries such as Poland, Romania, the Czech Republic, but also France – those in stagnation or regression, are targeted by this. The fear of losing resources allocated through the distributive method will represent an obvious challenge in managing the pace and scope of the enlargement.

EU enlargement is a policy strongly influenced by critical junctures that favour certain political decisions over technocratic ones. For example, the Russian

Federation's military invasion of Ukraine has generated an exceptional window of opportunity in the case of three candidate countries. A visible effect of the opportunities generated was the evident politicization of the enlargement (Butnaru-Troncotă 2024). Until now this has also provided benefits such as obtaining unanimity and action in record time. There has been a return to the symbolism of the definitive recovery of these countries from under the influence of the Russian Federation. In the 2004 and 2007 wave, this concept was invoked more softly, in the sense of breaking away from the totalitarian-communist past (Bărbulescu 2015). However, in the case of Eastern enlargement, a meritocratic approach prevailed, whereby each candidate country was to accede at its own pace and based on its performance (Juncos and Pérez-Solórzano Borragán 2022) in relation to the Copenhagen criteria and the degree of transposition of the *acquis communautaire*. This same approach is maintained for the current candidate countries, even though in the cases of Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova, the applications for membership and the initiation of accession negotiations were driven more by emotional reasons than meritocratic ones. Nevertheless, although the merit-based approach to accession remains a determinant in the current context of enlargement, the European Council on 27 June 2024 specified in the Strategic Agenda 2024-2029 that the enlargement process should also be interpreted "as a geostrategic investment in peace, security, stability, and prosperity."

A major difference from previous waves of enlargement is that in the current context, candidate countries are given the opportunity to be progressively introduced into the Single Market before their accession to the EU. This new perspective of gradual accession, first incrementally into the Single Market, representing the economic dimension of the EU, and subsequently into the EU, representing the political dimension, is specified in the Letta report from April 2024. According to Enrico Letta (2024, 139), this perspective ensures better preparation and stability of the candidate countries' economies so that they have the ability to cope with competitive pressure and market forces within the EU. Of course, this perspective of gradual accession is conditioned by compliance with the first Copenhagen criterion, which refers to the "*stability of institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights, and respect for and protection of*

minorities." Additionally, the gradual integration into the Single Market should stimulate socio-economic convergence between candidate countries and the EU through balanced financial mechanisms that reduce disparities and address the concerns and national preferences of member states. The consideration articulated by Enrico Letta is politically endorsed by Ursula von der Leyen in the Political Guidelines 2024-2029, a document that underpinned her appointment on 18 July 2024 as President of the European Commission (European Commission 2024a), as well as in the Mission Letter for the Commissioner-designate for Enlargement dated 17 September 2024 (European Commission 2024b).

The scale of the current enlargement can be compared to the 2004 and 2007 wave, both in terms of the number of countries (9, excluding Turkey, but including Kosovo), and especially in terms of the geographic scope and the economic and social complexity that characterizes the countries. The population would increase by 75 million people, which would represent 17% of the current total population of the EU. Additionally, the current group of candidate and potential candidate countries are characterized by emerging economies and markets, similar to the situation of the member states that joined in 2004 and 2007 during their pre-accession period. For the current candidate and potential candidate countries, excluding Turkey, Montenegro, and Serbia, the GDP per capita relative to the EU average varies between 30% and 40% in purchasing power parity. For instance, in the case of Romania, this indicator was 26% in the year 2000.

Considering that the enlargement carries a transformational force and democratic change (Ciot and Damaschin 2021), competition is generated among the candidate countries. Those who do their homework better, especially in terms of strengthening the rule of law, economic governance, and public administration reform, advance more easily in the accession negotiations. Moreover, the chapters included in the first cluster are definitive for the dynamics of the negotiation processes for the rest of the clusters because they represent the foundation of EU accession. Since 2020, additional requirements regarding the functioning of democratic institutions and public administration reform have been added to this cluster. Similar to other candidate countries in

the Western Balkans group, the implementation of these reforms is hindered by political memory and deeply entrenched institutional legacies (Luli 2023). The political regimes prior to the 1990s have left a profound mark on state-building and democratic processes.

Similar to the candidate countries from the Western Balkans, Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia have additional conditions set beyond the requirements established in each negotiation chapter, particularly concerning the context of regional conflicts, such as reconciliation and good neighbourly relations (Griessler 2024). Except for the case of Cyprus, these preconditions were not as evident in previous waves of enlargement. In the case of the Republic of Moldova, the challenge of resolving this precondition is more of an internal nature rather than one of external bilateral relations. The current approach adopted by the Moldovan authorities is a constructivist one. The accession process is expected to generate prosperity, which in turn will favor internal reconciliation actions. However, the results of the referendum held in October 2024 indicate that this approach has not yet yielded the expected effect. It is still premature for the effects to appear, given that major investments, especially those in connectivity infrastructure, have not yet commenced, and the GDP per capita is increasing incrementally.

The 2004 and 2007 wave did not affect the EU's decision-making capacity. On the contrary, as Toshkov (2017) argues, it accelerated the decision-making process and contributed to the expansion of decision-making areas. However, in the current context, several aspects must be considered that cause decisions regarding enlargement to be delayed:

1. Polycrises and political traps condition political agendas to be oriented more towards solving or mitigating their effects (Nicoli and Zeitlin 2024), and not on deepening European integration. In this context, the topic of enlargement is often left on a second plan. Resorting to the politicization of the enlargement in association with countering the military intervention of the Russian Federation is an effective strategy for accelerating decisions regarding the candidate countries from the East (Butnaru-Troncotă 2024).
2. Even though major progress has been made demonstrating the irreversibility of the European path of the candidate countries, there is a risk

that this process could be derailed. For example, the Eastern Partnership (EaP) and subsequently the association agreements have made significant contributions to implementing judicial reforms and reducing corruption in key sectors in the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine. However, the inequalities among the EaP countries have been skillfully exploited by the Russian Federation through conventional and hybrid tactics to derail reforms and efforts to move closer to the EU (Ambruş 2022). Consequently, the effectiveness of the approach promoted by the EU through the EaP and later the association agreements has been significantly reduced. The referendum held in the Republic of Moldova in October 2024 highlighted the potential of the strategy to derail the European integration process.

3. Within some EU institutions, there is an institutional fatigue regarding the monitoring of reforms carried out by candidate countries, especially concerning the irreversibility of reforms. On one hand, there are too many countries in the flow of the enlargement policy. On the other hand, against a backdrop of a shortage of personnel, the Recovery and Resilience Facility contributes to the overloading of the institutional agendas, particularly in the case of the Commission and the Council.
4. The institutional architecture of the EU is not prepared for such a challenging enlargement. In the last decade, there have been numerous institutional blockages that have hindered the deepening of European integration, such as migration, green transition or support for Ukraine. There is a need for a paradigm shift regarding the decision-making method for issues that fall under the unanimity decision. Also, there is a need for changing the way the EU budget is made, and redefining distributive policies (such as Cohesion and the Common Agricultural Policy).
5. The objective of economic, social, and territorial cohesion based on the principle of solidarity is being redefined. In recent years, the idea that macro-financial support and pre-accession assistance should be granted on merit, not on solidarity or emotions, has gained support. In other words, progress has to be made in meeting the accession conditions resulting from the negotiation on clusters and chapters. The introduction in 2020 of the fragmented approach to opening and negotiating chapters within 6 thematic

clusters sufficiently counteracts the politicization of the accession process. EU uses its transformative power through the discretionary decision of technocratic groups at the expense of political ones. Therefore, many technical reports are often used as instruments of political pressure on candidate countries (Gateva 2015). In addition, alongside the preferences of the governments of member states, the preferences of various interest groups must also be taken into account because they will bear a disproportionate share of the short-term costs (Moravcsik and Vachudova 2003). For example, farmers and small enterprises will be directly targeted by the fact that enlargement, in any of its forms, will cause a significant reduction in subsidies and grants.

6. The method of accession has not yet been established. Some viewpoints suggest that enlargement should be progressive, in successive waves in groups of a few countries, or by the one-by-one method, based on demonstrated merits. There are also views that consider it necessary to take into account the order in which negotiations with candidate countries were opened – Montenegro and Serbia being the most advanced. In the case of Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova, and Georgia, the steps are still largely based on emotion. Moreover, based on recent internal political turn, Georgia has de facto decoupled from the other two candidate countries in the Eastern group. In the case of Ukraine, major technical decisions will be on hold with the idea of waiting for the outcome of the military invasion.

In conclusion, although it has accelerated decision-making capacity in the past, the current EU enlargement faces multiple challenges, including political and economic crises, institutional fatigue, and structural blockages. The implementation of reforms in candidate countries is essential and demonstrates the value and merit of the endeavor. However, focusing solely on this aspect involves risks such as the derailment of the integration process or the simulation of reforms. Therefore, to address these challenges, the EU must adapt its enlargement methods, redefine cohesion policies, and balance the interests of member states with those of candidate countries, ensuring a sustainable, equitable, and manageable accession and integration process.

3. ROMANIA'S ROLE IN THE EUROPEANIZATION OF THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA

Romania plays a significant role in supporting EU enlargement and the transfer of expertise. The support for enlargement is currently achieved through the generation and maintenance of support coalitions at the level of the Council and in the technical working groups of the Commission, aiming to accelerate decision-making processes that are favourable and acceptable to both sides, the EU as a whole and the candidate countries. Romania has consistently had a favourable approach to EU enlargement towards the Western Balkans and Eastern Europe. A key success achieved by Romania in recent years has been gaining the support of member states in the region in favour of granting the Republic of Moldova the status of candidate country and opening accession negotiations.

Since the Republic of Moldova gained independence, Romania has prioritized supporting the processes of democratization and Europeanization in the Republic of Moldova. Until 2010, Romania's interventions, based on limited contagion mechanisms and diplomatic pressure, had a diffuse and slow impact on the processes of modernization and Europeanization (Bărbulescu et al. 2018). However, starting in 2010, Romania modified its approach to supporting the Republic of Moldova's relation with the EU by actively participating in institutional convergence processes and strengthening the democratic institutions of the Republic of Moldova. In this regard, a mix of facilitation mechanisms was utilized, such as the EU-funded TAIEX and Twinning programs, as well as national development assistance programs offered by RoAID. Thus, Romania managed to contribute to the strengthening of democratic institutions and the alignment of the Republic of Moldova's policies with EU regulations. This support was complemented by economic interventions that transformed Romania into the main commercial partner of the Republic of Moldova, thereby consolidating bilateral relations. Through numerous bilateral projects and substantial financial assistance, Romania contributed to breaking the Republic of Moldova's energy dependence on the

Russian Federation (Brie, Costea, and Toderas 2025). Although there are still areas of energy dependence on the Russian Federation¹, several major investments in the interconnection of operators from the Republic of Moldova to the European Network of Transmission System Operators for Electricity (ENTSO-E) were operationalized between 2022 and 2024. These investments progressively increased the capacity limit for electricity supply from Romania and other EU member states in the region to the Republic of Moldova. As a result of these investments, the Russian Federation can no longer use energy blackmail to derail the European integration process of the Republic of Moldova.

In the domain of bringing the Republic of Moldova closer to the EU, Romania's evident role has been notable in the visa liberalization process, which materialized in April 2014, in the Republic of Moldova obtaining candidate country status for EU accession in June 2022, and in entering the negotiation stage in June 2024. Currently, Romania is the main member state supporting the preparation and conduct of the Republic of Moldova's negotiations with the EU on accession chapters. Institutional convergence, shared values, and the common language are factors that facilitate the provision of targeted, agile, and unconditional support in the negotiation process.

In terms of expertise transfer, this primarily targets aspects related to negotiations on accession chapters and obtaining more manageable transition periods and conditions. Then, the transfer of expertise aims at preparing the candidate countries for their gradual inclusion in the single market. The first package is based on past experience and the promotion of negotiation tactics used in the case of more difficult chapters. However, in the current context, past experience is useful but not sufficient. Therefore, the second package of expertise transfer needs to be more connected with specific processes of deepening European integration, such as the implementation of the European Semester, the revised Convergence Pact, or the European Green Deal.

¹ See the case of the Cuciurgan Thermal Power Plant, which supplies 70-80% of the Republic of Moldova's electricity needs. The power plant produces electricity using gas that comes from the Russian Federation.

It should be mentioned that the association agreements signed by the EU in 2014 with Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova, and Georgia have led to the liberalization of trade between the EU and the three countries, as well as to a gradual preparation for the moment of eligibility to submit an application for membership. The groundwork was also prepared because the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) and the Eastern Partnership (EaP) were designed based on the EU's previous enlargement to Central and Eastern Europe, thus resorting to many of the principles of enlargement (Drăgan 2015), through explicit incentives and conditionalities.

Considering that the region lacks a solid road infrastructure and is characterized by evident energy poverty, Romania has the role of obtaining derogations from the rigorous application of taxonomy provisions, especially in the case of constructing high-speed roads or investments in nuclear energy. Another clear role of Romania would consist in ensuring the participation of representatives from the Republic of Moldova in thematic meetings organized by the European Commission or in the Council working parties as an observer state.

4. STRATEGIC OPPORTUNITIES FOR ROMANIA IN SUPPORTING THE INTEGRATION OF THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA INTO THE EU

A major opportunity for Romania lies in the fact that the current negotiation framework for the Republic of Moldova is very similar to the negotiations held in 2021 in the context of designing the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (Toderas 2024; Toderas and Costăchescu 2024). Therefore, in supporting the Republic of Moldova during the negotiation period, Romanian authorities can leverage their experience from recent dossiers specific to the implementation of the NRRP or aspects related to aligning policies and internal legislation with the provisions of the European Green Deal. Thus, compared to the specific context of the 2000s, experiences related to decarbonization and the adaptation of agricultural and industrial processes are currently highly relevant. Additionally,

subjects related to compliance with the provisions of the Stability and Growth Pact and preparation for the internal implementation of the European Semester are of particular importance. The existing institutional and normative convergence between the two states is a favorable factor for better preparation for the moment of accession, when the authorities of the Republic of Moldova will need to precisely apply the arrangements specific to these economic governance and policy instruments. Therefore, to effectively support the negotiation iterations, it is opportune for Romania to assist the Republic of Moldova at this stage by seconding a contingent of public officials with experience in European affairs, particularly those specialized in current dossiers. It should be noted that approximately half of the experts selected to be part of the EU High-Level Advisers contingents have been from Romania.

In the context of preparing for the EU's enlargement for the next decade, the border regions close to countries that will join the EU will need more substantial support. From this perspective, in the case of Romania, half of the development regions are targeted. Therefore, for the upcoming programming period, Romania needs to prepare for a mixed approach to European funds. To ensure adequate financial allocation for mature projects, the authorities in Romania, together with those from the neighbouring candidate countries, must develop major connectivity investments, such as transport, especially rail, energy networks, and data interconnection projects. As stated in the report signed by Mario Draghi (2024, 223), a medium-term strategic priority for the EU is to promote transport as a vector of European integration by strengthening solidarity corridors and integrating Ukraine, Moldova, and the Western Balkans into the European TEN-T transport corridors. Given this priority established at the EU level, the development of a joint master plan between Romania and the Republic of Moldova, negotiated intergovernmentally under the coordination of the European Commission's services as a strategic document that would support such an endeavour, would be advisable. The joint master plan must start from the specific priorities of extending the TEN-T to Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova as established in Regulation (EU) 2024/1679. To be connected to the EU railway network, both Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova need to entirely change their track gauge. For the Republic of Moldova, it is also essential to

electrify the entire railway network. These types of interventions require rethinking the governance of allocated funds and the management of financial allocations. To design and mature strategic infrastructure projects in the transport sector, a fully functional management authority equipped with adequate administrative and logistical capacities will be needed. Therefore, Romania's fundamental role in this regard is to ensure a transfer of expertise, including through the medium- and long-term secondment of a contingent of specialists, who will design and implement projects in the road and rail infrastructure sectors.

Another opportunity for Romania is to formulate convergent positions with the Republic of Moldova on certain thematic priorities of common interest in order to substantiate the post-2027 cohesion policy. Support will not be limited to peer-to-peer guidance in current programming and the formulation of national preferences in negotiating the Partnership Agreement and programs with the European Commission. This will also represent a mutual advantage in strengthening a support coalition, similar to the Visegrad Group.

Given the changing context, and the fact that discussions are currently underway about the future of the Cohesion Policy post-2027, it is important for Romania to aim for the explicit inclusion of specific measures for connectivity and territorial cohesion in programs funded by the cohesion policy as predefined allocations for intensifying territorial cohesion between candidate countries. A specific criterion for thematic concentration could even be used for member states that are neighbours to candidate countries, especially Romania and Bulgaria. In the case of Romania's accession to the EU, the institutional framework for managing pre-accession and post-accession European funds represented a crucial factor in the effective integration of the best practices for fund management (Marinaş and Cercel 2011). Romania now has the opportunity to contribute to the institutionalization of such a system in the Republic of Moldova. Harmonizing the systems will be an advantage in creating large-scale joint programs, and the effects will consist of achieving institutional and upward convergence.

In the context of conducting accession negotiations, it is opportune for Romania to promote the lessons learned from its pre-accession process. A more

pronounced emphasis should be placed on involving representatives of civil society and independent analytical groups in preparing national positions on negotiation chapters (Ciot and Şargarovschi 2024). Based on the analysis of data from two international indexes (the EaP Index of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum and the Freedom House Index), Costea and Brie (2025) shows that Republic of Moldova's civil society has become more consolidated and resilient in recent years in the context of the war in Ukraine and the European integration. Therefore, it can make a significant contribution to the implementation of pre-accession reforms. Additionally, this exercise should be extended to the development of partnership structures in the context of initiating the programming processes for European funds that will be allocated to the Republic of Moldova for the pre-accession and post-accession periods, including the implementation of the Growth Plan for the Republic of Moldova.

5. CHALLENGES FOR ROMANIA IN SUPPORTING THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA'S ACCESSION TO THE EU

Like other member states in the region, Romania has also adopted an ambivalent character in relation to the candidate countries. The diversity of interests and preferences existing in relation to each candidate country represents a challenge that is difficult to manage. Of course, the primary attention is directed towards the Republic of Moldova. The dilemma Romania faces is in supporting the merit-based accession formula, not based on the moment of opening negotiations. Thus, Romania could support the current ambition of the Republic of Moldova to join the EU in 2030, provided that all negotiation chapters are closed, with the risk of generating tensions with Serbia and Ukraine. This choice is based on the fact that the current leadership of the Republic of Moldova has the ambition to complete all the negotiations by the end of 2027. This is credible because monitoring on various indicators demonstrates a clear positive trend in the integration process (Brie 2022). According to this ambition, the accession of the Republic of Moldova to the EU

could be possible by 2030, which means that by 2028 the Republic of Moldova should obtain the status of an acceding country by signing the Treaty of Accession to the EU. The political elites, even those from opposition parties that support accession, promote this timeline (Toderas and Pascal 2024). On one hand, the referendum organized in October 2024 legitimizes this working scenario. Although 50.72% voted affirmatively for the introduction of the objective of EU integration into the Constitution of the Republic of Moldova, it must be taken into account that the referendum was organized in an unsuitable political context, with evident external interference from the Russian Federation, as well as against a backdrop of public unawareness regarding the actual implications of the pre-accession process. On the other hand, the European Commission's report on the enlargement package from November 2024 (European Commission 2024c) confirms that this internal political ambition is feasible, provided that fundamental reforms are implemented on time and without irreversible actions.

Given this very tight timeframe, the support provided by Romania to achieve the Republic of Moldova's objective of EU accession by 2030 must be well-structured and adapted to the context, as well as to the competition from other member states in the region that are interested in supporting the Republic of Moldova. From this perspective, the challenge lies in the agility and targeting capacity of the support offered, considering that the Republic of Moldova simultaneously benefits from support from other member states in the region, particularly Poland and the Baltic States. Therefore, on one hand, the Republic of Moldova needs to precisely identify its priorities, defining specific needs in relation to each negotiation chapter, which Romania could address through its support. In parallel, Romania must respond consistently and appropriately, allocating resources and expertise according to these needs to maximize the impact of its interventions. On the other hand, Romania must improve its coordination mechanisms with other member states in the region to ensure the transfer of policies and approaches in a synergistic manner. Coordination with member states in the region is essential to avoid overlaps and to consolidate complementary assistance. Thus, creating a common collaboration platform between these states and the Republic of Moldova can facilitate the

implementation of coherent and well-directed interventions. Additionally, monitoring and analysing the support provided remain critical factors. Defining clear impact indicators and using them to evaluate results contribute to the continuous adaptation of support to the needs of the Republic of Moldova. Through this approach, Romania can ensure the efficiency of its interventions, providing sustainable and relevant support aimed at achieving the objective of the Republic of Moldova's accession to the EU by 2030.

Another challenge that Romania should manage refers to the evident support for the decoupling of the Republic of Moldova from Ukraine. Considering that the candidate countries from the ENP group are approached together, the mission of decoupling will be quite difficult. Achieving a possible decoupling will depend on the progress made by the Republic of Moldova in meeting the conditions derived from negotiations, as well as on the developments of the Russian Federation's military invasion in Ukraine.

An economic challenge refers to the estimation of potential losses. For example, enlargement towards Ukraine would evidently lead to a reduction in allocations from the EU's cohesion policy post-2027. For this, Romania needs to significantly improve its capacity for collecting and analysing data from credible sources to forecast potential reductions in allocation. A request for potential compensations can only be successful if it is doubled by credible and robust evidence.

There are areas of expertise that Romania cannot cover but are of major interest in preparing for effective negotiations. For example, the implementation of public-private partnerships in infrastructure development or the provision of public services, the functioning of corporate governance of state-owned companies and strategic planning and budgeting for implementing performance-based budgeting in the public sector. For example, the reform of the state budget formation process by strengthening the coordination between financial planning and public policy planning began in 2002, under the guidance of the World Bank and the Department for International Development - DFID (Dragomir 2016, 87). The same type of reform was initiated in 2002 in Romania in the context of EU accession negotiations (see ex-chapter 29). In the case of the Republic of Moldova, major progress has been made to date in coupling the policy making process, including through the application of performance-based

budgeting criteria. However, in Romania's case, progress has been minor and has occurred in the context of explicit conditions set by the European Commission, especially in the context of designing, negotiating, and implementing Romania's National Recovery and Resilience Plan (Toderas 2023). In other areas of major interest, Romania is currently underperforming and would not be credible in providing expertise. Examples in this regard include improving fiscal consolidation by reducing budget deficits and public debt, digitalising public services, carrying out administrative-territorial reform, and establishing regions as territorial-administrative units. Regarding regional development in the Republic of Moldova, it should be noted that the legislative framework was conceived between 2004 and 2006, inspired by the conceptual model developed in Romania. However, the Republic of Moldova has taken several important steps that significantly differentiate its approach to regional development from that of Romania, such as defining regional development agencies from the outset as public institutions with legal personality (whereas in Romania, these agencies have the status of non-governmental, non-profit, public utility organizations). In the context of creating the national system for managing European funds, this approach allows the Republic of Moldova to implement a decentralized system for managing funds allocated for regional development from the start. Thus, unlike the development agencies in Romania, those in the Republic of Moldova can be designated as Managing Authorities for the management of regional development programs from the very first financial exercise accessible to the Republic of Moldova, potentially even during the pre-accession period. In Romania's case, the development regions obtained the status of Managing Authority only in the third multiannual financial framework, 15 years after EU accession.

Therefore, Romania needs to compensate significantly on other topics for which it holds expertise and performance results, such as managing the banking sector, managing the public procurement system, implementing social policies and employment, and reforms in the field of agriculture and rural development. On the other hand, sharing experience can also be relevant from the perspective of lessons learned from underperformance or failure, precisely so that the candidate countries can better understand the mechanisms of change and the

potential causes of failure. Moreover, the relevance and effectiveness of the transfer of expertise depend very much on the ambitions set by the candidate countries on various negotiation chapters or on additional aspects of the acquis, such as concurrent accession to the Schengen area or the Eurozone. In the case of the Republic of Moldova, current performances in the banking system can facilitate targeting accession to the Eurozone concurrently with EU accession.

Another challenge is transferring the lessons learned regarding the efficient management of the syndrome of helplessness and fatigue resulting from the pace and scope of the negotiation, during pre-accession and subsequent effective integration processes. In Romania's case, this syndrome manifested starting in 2006 and gradually intensified, especially in areas such as environmental protection, competitiveness strengthening, taxation, and customs union, among others. In this regard, the number of infringement procedures initiated in recent years by the European Commission against Romania is illustrative. Therefore, in the transfer of experience and lessons learned from Romania to the Republic of Moldova, it is important to emphasize the aspect of determination and undertaking internal processes in a timely manner. A motivating and encouraging approach should be maintained, even in the event of changes in government with political forces that do not show interest in conducting accession negotiations and implementing the resulting reforms. The referendum held in October 2024 highlighted the risk of institutional fatigue and the erosion of public support.

6. CONCLUSIONS

Romania needs to have and apply a strategy regarding enlargement in order to substantiate its national preferences in relation to each candidate country. Romania must strengthen its forecasting capacities and abilities for fast and agile intervention in areas where it has credibility or is open to share the lessons learned from underperformance or failure.

National preferences in relation to EU enlargement need to be adequately supported, both through support initiatives for candidate countries and through

compensatory measures that can be obtained as a result of potential losses following this process. A framework of continuous consultation with interest groups, civil society, and epistemic actors would generate strong support coalitions and significantly strengthen national positions in the pre-accession process of candidate countries. Romania must have the capacity to form support coalitions at the member state level to promote national preferences. The model and format of the extended Visegrad group are illustrative in this regard.

Romania plays a decisive role in the Europeanization process of the Republic of Moldova, supporting democratization and alignment with the EU through political, economic, and expertise transfer initiatives. Bilateral interventions, support for accession negotiations, and major investments in energy infrastructure have strengthened bilateral relations and the resilience of the Republic of Moldova. Additionally, Romania's experiences in the pre-accession process, management of European funds, and implementation of structural reforms provide a valuable model for the European integration of the Republic of Moldova. Strategic major connectivity infrastructure projects require time, human resources, and logistics to be matured. Therefore, Romania must plan its next generation of accessible European funds through cohesion policy or other financing opportunities from the EU budget in close collaboration with the Republic of Moldova.

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