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Moldova's Road to EU Membership

Applying Gradual Integration

Abstract

Moldova has progressed rapidly on its EU integration journey, transitioning from having no European perspective to swiftly opening accession negotiations. However, this accelerated process presents challenges, as Moldova must balance increased EU interest with its limited administrative, financial, and political capacities. To address this, the EU has adopted a 'gradual integration' approach, allowing candidates to gain incremental access to benefits during the pre-accession period in a merit-based and reversible manner. The New Growth Plan (NGP) for Moldova exemplifies this concept, combining conditional funding with sectoral integration to drive reforms and socio-economic convergence. To assess the effectiveness of this plan, the paper examines what gradual integration entails for Moldova and compares its NGP with that of the Western Balkans. The findings suggest that, despite having been quickly drafted, Moldova's NGP represents a genuine effort by the EU to capitalise on the new-found enlargement momentum. However, as the NGP only extends to 2027, this paper argues that the EU's 2024–2029 institutional and 2028–2034 financial cycles present critical opportunities to deepen integration and better prepare Moldova for future membership.

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From having no prospects to opening negotiations: how did Moldova get here?

Although part of Europe, Moldova has historically lacked a formal European perspective – the recognition by EU member states that a country could aspire to EU membership. Moldova, alongside other countries such as Ukraine and Georgia, was forced to explore alternative ways of building ties with the EU. This sharply contrasted with the Western Balkans (WB), whose European perspective was explicitly affirmed at the 2003 Thessaloniki Summit. However, the situation began to shift with the outbreak of the war in Ukraine. Following Ukraine's lead, Moldovan leaders submitted an application for membership. In a surprising turn of events, the EU swiftly confirmed a European perspective for this long-overlooked Eastern European country. Moldova subsequently secured European perspective status in 2022, received candidate status in 2023, and opened accession talks in 2024. These rapid developments have placed Moldova in a position where it must balance heightened interest with its limited administrative, financial, and political capacities to manage expectations effectively.

The EU, having learned from its mistakes with the WB – where only Croatia joined in 2013, leaving the other six partners behind – has opted to adapt its enlargement strategy. Unlike the previous binary approach, where a country was either a member or not, the EU has embraced 'gradual integration' as the preferred path forward. This concept was largely popularised by think tanks such as the European Policy Centre (CEP-Belgrade) and the Centre for European Policy Studies (CEPS-Brussels), which have long advocated for gradual integration, formalised through the Staged Accession Model in 2021 (Mihajlović et al., 2023). Other think tanks have also promoted related ideas, including phased integration, single market inclusion, and sectoral cooperation (Subotić, 2024a). Reflecting this shift, the European Council's June 2022 Conclusions highlighted the importance of advancing 'gradual integration' in a reversible, merit-based manner during the enlargement process.[1] Although this initiative initially targeted the WB, it soon became evident that it would also apply to new candidates such as Moldova, setting a precedent for a more flexible and inclusive enlargement process.

The European Council took a notable step forward by adjusting, though not revolutionising, the accession process in 2022. Despite this move, the concept of gradual integration remained vague, prompting discussions about its exact definition and implementation. The first concrete follow-up to advance this idea

[1] https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/57442/2022-06-2324-euco-conclusions-en.pdf.

was the New Growth Plan (NGP) for the Western Balkans.[2] Initially outlined as a four-pillar framework in June 2023, the NGP was officially published in November and subsequently endorsed by the European Parliament and EU Council in April 2024. For it to come to fruition, policymakers had to reach a consensus on introducing the conditionality principle, determining the increased funding amounts (along with the balance between grants and loans), and identifying areas where sectoral integration would benefit both the EU and candidate countries. Following this experience, the European Commission proposed the New Growth Plan for Moldova in October 2024.[3] Drawing from the WB's experience, it can be inferred that it will take at least six months for Moldova's NGP to be adopted by the European Parliament and EU Council.

Sectoral integration: steps towards deeper economic ties

The 'sectoral' part of the NGP for Moldova focuses on providing access to parts of the EU single market during the pre-accession phase and involving the country in various economic initiatives. The NGP outlines targeted actions in five priority areas to help Moldova leverage the benefits of the single market: (i) free movement of goods and integration into supply chains; (ii) trade and transport facilitation; (iii) integration into the EU energy market; (iv) integration into the Digital Market; and (v) access to the Single Euro Payments Area (SEPA). These measures are considered 'sectoral' because their implementation does not necessarily require reforms across all clusters or in the rule-of-law domain. For instance, SEPA access requires alignment with specific banking and payment standards. Similarly, Moldova's ongoing trade facilitation under the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) has provided enhanced, though underutilised, access to the EU single market. As Moldova improves its readiness in specific sub-areas of the acquis, further access will be granted. Although not specifically designed to drive core reforms in the rule-of-law area, sectoral integration aims to deliver tangible benefits to ordinary citizens over time, reinforcing the perception that the enlargement process is both dynamic and alive.

Despite its promising framework, deeper sectoral integration remains too premature to serve as a tool for quickly addressing Moldova's core challenges and advancing its path towards EU membership. Given that sectoral integration is closely tied to a candidate country's level of acquis alignment, it is important to acknowledge that more time will be needed for Moldova to fully reap its benefits. In fact, it is still too early to determine whether Moldova will be able to fulfil the

[2] https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/8f5dbe63-e951-4180-9c32-298cae022d03_en?filename=COM_2023_691_New%20Growth%20Plan%20Western%20Balkans.pdf.

[3] https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/ff73c5dd-3fd1-4dcd-ab7d-ad04760c538c_en?filename=Growth%20Plan%20for%20Moldova%20-%20Commission%20proposal.pdf.

conditions required to achieve certain sectoral advantages. For instance, SEPA stands out as an initiative closely linked to sectoral integration. In the case of the WB, despite being on the agenda since the introduction of the 2020 Economic and Investment Plan – receiving renewed attention with the NGP for the WB – only Albania and Montenegro managed to gain access to SEPA in late 2024. Meanwhile, Serbia, the region's largest economy, has yet to achieve the same success. Furthermore, the EU has stated in Moldova's Negotiating Framework that closer integration will be enabled only 'if Moldova makes sufficient progress on reform priorities agreed in the negotiations'.[4] Given this precedent, along with Moldova's current low level of alignment with the EU acquis, it remains premature to predict which aspects of sectoral integration Moldova might be able to pursue in the near future.

As Moldova advances its efforts to deepen economic ties with the EU ahead of obtaining membership, it is important to recognise that these initiatives build upon existing foundations. In fact, like other candidate countries, Moldova is already partially integrated into different sectors. This includes participation in areas that do not require full acquis alignment through various EU programmes, such as EU Customs, Fiscalis, LIFE, EU4Health, Horizon Europe, the Connecting Europe Facility, Erasmus+, and the European Solidarity Corps. Moldova also takes part in several Interreg programmes and is a member of the EU Macro-Regional Strategy for the Danube Region. Additionally, Moldova, alongside the WB, participates as a contracting party in the Energy Community. Thus, for Moldova and the EU to fully understand the potential and scope of future sectoral integration, the effective implementation of the screening process will be crucial. This process, launched in July 2024, is expected to last at least a year. In the cases of Albania (European Commission, 2023a) and North Macedonia (European Commission, 2023b), screening reports were specifically used as tools to identify opportunities for 'accelerated' integration. Given that the EU and Moldova began bilateral screening in July 2024 (Government of Republic of Moldova, 2024), starting with the Fundamentals cluster, the coming period will be crucial for identifying clear and feasible measures in the short, medium, and long term, depending on the level of acquis alignment.

[4] https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/45ilqaal/ad00011en24.pdf.

Horizontal approach of the NGP for Moldova

Assessing the strength of Moldova's Reform and Growth Facility

The 'horizontal' nature of the NGP for Moldova is closely tied to the Staged Accession Model, which emphasises the gradual provision of increased financial incentives to candidates to generate the political will necessary for reforms. The Head of the Directorate-General for Enlargement, Gert Jan Koopman, has described the NGP as 'a form of staged accession' (Todorović & Subotić, 2023). Within the NGP framework for Moldova, this approach is exemplified by the Commission's proposal for the €1.8 billion Reform and Growth Facility (RGF), allocated between 2025 and 2027. Regarded as the NGP's 'centrepiece', the RGF links funding access to the successful implementation of reforms across all negotiating clusters, with a particular focus on the rule of law. For the first time, the EU will require Moldova to submit a Reform Agenda – a transparent blueprint that will determine the disbursement rate of EU funding based on its successful fulfilment. If payment conditions are not met, the European Commission reserves the right to suspend or adjust payments, reinforcing the reversibility principle. This approach signals the EU's recognition that geopolitics cannot override the need for genuine reforms, ensuring they remain central to Moldova's integration process.

At first glance, the size of EU assistance allocated to Moldova as part of the RGF may not seem particularly significant, but a closer examination of the figures relative to the WB paints a very different picture. Over the course of three years, Moldova is set to receive a total of €285 million in grants, while the six partners from the WB are slated to receive a significantly larger sum of €1.61 billion over a period of three and a half years. These absolute figures might give the impression that the WB countries are receiving a much larger share of the funds. However, the situation changes dramatically when the per capita allocation is considered, where the difference in population size between Moldova and the WB plays a crucial role. When looking at the per capita distribution, a clear and stark disparity emerges: each person in Moldova will receive an average of €38 per year, compared with only €27 per person annually in the WB (see Table 1). In other words, the per capita amount allocated to Moldovans is nearly 41 per cent higher than the amount allocated to individuals in the WB. Thus, although a 'latecomer' in the game of accession negotiations, Moldova has managed to convince the EU institutions that it merits non-refundable investment.

The relevance of EU assistance to Moldova becomes even more pronounced when factoring in loans, particularly in comparison with the WB. While the WB is set to receive €5.6 billion in financial support, Moldova will receive €1.8 billion up to 2027. However, the per capita distribution reveals a striking contrast: the WB receive an average of €94 per person annually, whereas Moldova's per capita support soars to €238 (see Table 1). This equates to a staggering 153 per cent more financial assistance per capita for Moldova. This is not to say that the assistance given to the WB is irrelevant or insufficient. As was already explained in another work, the WB's NGP represents a 'top-up' on the already existing Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA) (Subotić, 2024b). In contrast, Moldova has been facing much deeper economic troubles and is comparatively worse off than the WB in terms of its attempts to bridge the socio-economic gap with the EU. It is thus understandable that the EU has sought to compensate for its previous lack of engagement with Moldova by providing stronger financial support at this juncture.

Table 1. The Reform and Growth Facilities for Moldova and the Western Balkans

	Total (€)	Grants (€)	Loans (€)	Per capita based on total (€)	Per capita based on grants (€)
Moldova	**1.79 bn**	**285 mn**	**1.5 bn**	**238**	**38**
Albania	922 mn	264 mn	658 mn	95	27
Bosnia and Herzegovina	1.08 bn	313 mn	767 mn	95	28
Kosovo	883 mn	253 mn	630 mn	144	41
Montenegro	383 mn	110 mn	273 mn	178	50
North Macedonia	750 mn	215 mn	535 mn	104	30
Serbia	1.59 bn	455 mn	1.14 bn	68	20
WB6 avg.	5.6 bn	1.61 bn	3.99 bn	94	27

To fully grasp the scale and importance of the new financial assistance as part of the RGF, it is important to examine the EU's previous record of financial engagement with Moldova. Over the past two decades, the EU has consistently sought to support Moldova's economic recovery. Prior to the RGF, EU funding for Moldova came from the European Neighbourhood Partnership Instrument (ENPI, 2007–2013), the European Neighbourhood Instrument (ENI, 2014–2020), and various macro-financial assistance (MFA) injections.[5] However, the proposed 2025–2027 RGF of €1.79 billion alone surpasses the €1.67 billion in combined grants and loans that Moldova has received from the EU since 2007 (see Table 2). Moreover, Moldova received an average of €75 million in grants annually between 2007 and 2024, whereas it will now receive €98 million per year – a 30 per cent increase. In terms of loans, the EU's annual support will skyrocket from an average of €22 million over the past 17 years to a remarkable €500 million per year in the upcoming period. This increase in both grants and loans reflects the EU's heightened commitment to Moldova's development, signalling a clear prioritisation and an attempt to scale up the relationship in the changing geopolitical circumstances.

Table 2. The EU's committed financial assistance to Moldova over time[6]

	Total amount (€)	Grants (€)	Loans (€)
2007–2013 ENPI	**561 mn**	**561 mn**	**0**
2010–2012 MFA	90 mn	90 mn	0
2014–2020 ENI	**518 mm**	**518 mn**	**0**
2017–2020 MFA	100 mn	40 mn	60 mn
2020–2021 MFA	100 mn	0	100 mn
2022–2024 MFA[7]	295 mn	75 mn	220 mn
2025–2027 RGF	1.79 bn	285 mm	1.5 bn

5 MFA is part of the EU's wider engagement with neighbouring and enlargement partners and is intended as an exceptional crisis response instrument. It is available to enlargement and EU neighbourhood partners experiencing severe balance-of-payments problems. It demonstrates the EU's solidarity with these partners and the support of effective policies at a time of unprecedented crisis.

6 https://economy-finance.ec.europa.eu/international-economic-relations/candidate-and-neighbouring-countries/neighbouring-countries-eu/neighbourhood-countries/moldova_en#:~:text=Following%20a%20request%20by%20the,term%20loans%20at%20favourable%20financing. The figures presented here reflect the EU's commitments, which do not necessarily equate to actual disbursements on the ground, as these depended on Moldova's capacity to effectively absorb the allocated funds and maintain a productive relationship with the EU.

7 Originally, the total sum adopted in 2022 was €150 million, with €30 million in grants and the rest in loans. With this proposal, the Commission is standing by Moldova as the country continues to implement its reform agenda while at the same time facing the fallout from Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, battling an energy crisis, and hosting a large number of refugees from Ukraine.

Addressing three key challenges in Moldova with the new financial commitment

Moldova faces several critical and long-standing challenges on its path to EU membership, including low socio-economic convergence, weak rule of law, and geopolitical marginalization. The EU now has a unique opportunity to address these obstacles. The following paragraphs examine these key challenges in greater detail and highlight how, through the introduction of the NGP, the EU can support Moldova in overcoming them.

Firstly, Moldova's current lack of socio-economic convergence is alarming and highlights significant challenges to its EU integration aspirations. In 2023, Moldova's GDP per capita stood at only 29 per cent of the EU average, substantially lower than the WB6 average of 39 per cent (see Table 3).[8] That represents a relative difference of 35 per cent. Moldova is far outmatched by Montenegro, whose average is 50 per cent, while Moldova is only trailed by Kosovo with 27 per cent. The European Commission also notes that, while Moldova has made some progress in developing a functioning market economy, its level of preparation remains at an early to intermediate stage. Limited progress has been made in addressing competitive pressures and aligning with EU market forces, leaving Moldova ill-equipped to handle the demands of integration. Structural barriers exacerbate these challenges, including chronic under-investment, low labour force participation, significant skills mismatches, and a pervasive informal economy (European Commission, 2024). Additionally, Moldova's energy sector remains vulnerable, while corruption and weak governance continue to erode investor confidence and hinder economic development. These issues collectively restrict Moldova's growth potential and impede its ability to converge with EU standards. Even if Moldova were politically ready for membership, its economy would not be. As Moldova proceeds towards membership, gradual reform of its economy will be essential to ensure it can meet the EU's rigorous demands and achieve meaningful convergence with member states.

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[8] https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/ff73c5dd-3fd1-4dcd-ab7d-ad04760c538c_en?filename=Growth%20Plan%20for%20Moldova%20-%20Commission%20proposal.pdf.

Table 3. Comparison of socio-economic gaps[9]

	Vis-à-vis EU27
Moldova	**29%**
Montenegro	50%
Serbia	44%
North Macedonia	42%
Bosnia and Herzegovina	35%
Albania	34%
Kosovo	27%
WB6 avg.	39%

Secondly, Moldova's rule-of-law standards are far from satisfactory, as reflected in its performance in key EU accession chapters, namely Chapters 23 (Judiciary and Fundamental Rights) and 24 (Justice, Freedom, and Security). These chapters assess critical aspects of the rule of law, which are foundational for Moldova's EU integration. In both of these chapters, in terms of 'level of preparedness' Moldova's score of 2 aligns with that of Bosnia and Herzegovina, placing it below the WB6 average of 2.33 for Chapter 23 and 2.67 for Chapter 24 (see Table 4). However, in terms of 'level of progress' Moldova's performance in Chapter 23 with 2 is above the WB6 average of 1.5, while in Chapter 24 it falls below the regional average of 2.25, underscoring significant challenges in aligning its justice and security systems with EU standards (see Table 4). While Moldova currently has a better rate of progress than countries such as Serbia, North Macedonia, and Kosovo, which score lower, it still needs to accelerate reforms in these critical areas to catch up with more advanced countries in the region, such as Montenegro and Albania, which score higher (see Table 5). With the NGP containing conditionality as its pillar, linking access to funding to the fulfilment of concrete improvements in the rule of law and other indicators agreed in the Reform Agendas, the EU will have more leverage to ensure that gradual integration has a transformative effect on Moldova.

[9] For more on the WB6's socio-economic gap, see Todorović & Milinković, 2024.

Table 4. Comparison of rule-of-law level of preparedness (from 1 to 5)

	Chapter 23	Chapter 24
Moldova	**2**	**2**
Montenegro	3	3.5
Serbia	2	2.5
North Macedonia	2.5	3
Bosnia and Herzegovina	2	2
Albania	3	3
Kosovo	1.5	2
WB6 avg.	2.33	2.67

Table 5. Comparison of rule-of-law level of progress (from -1 to 4)

	Chapter 23	Chapter 24
Moldova	**2**	**2**
Montenegro	3	3
Serbia	1	2.5
North Macedonia	1	2
Bosnia and Herzegovina	1	2
Albania	2	2
Kosovo	2	2
WB6 avg.	1.25	2.25

Finally, the NGP is as much about messaging as it is about funding, aiming to reaffirm Moldova's European prospects. Moldova has long been a barely visible piece of the European puzzle. Although targeted with EU financial support, it never received the attention it truly deserved. Unlike the WB, Moldova was not granted a clear European perspective, which, from today's standpoint, seems puzzling. According to the Treaty on European Union, any country that is geographically in Europe can aspire to membership. However, it took the war in Ukraine for the EU to recognise the costs of its negligence, prompting a decision to bring Moldova firmly into its sphere of influence. The NGP represents the first serious attempt to channel funding in a way that integrates Moldova into the EU. Previously, the 2016 DCFTA enabled close trade cooperation, but it was driven solely by economic considerations, with no intention to pave a path for Moldova's EU membership. Doing so becomes all the more important because Moldova successfully – but narrowly – passed a referendum on EU membership while facing significant attempts by Russia to undermine its security, territorial integrity, and overall trajectory. All things considered, the NGP is both an economic and a geostrategic tool, designed to place Moldova on the same path as the WB and eliminate the difference in their accession status.

Getting the most out of the EU's next institutional and financial cycles

The EU's 2024–2029 institutional cycle and 2028–2034 financial cycle present a crucial opportunity to accelerate Moldova's accession journey. By leveraging these cycles, the EU can align its strategic priorities with Moldova's progress, ensuring that key reforms are supported by both political commitment and financial resources. In this way, further support could be given to the notion of gradual integration. A cohesive approach that integrates mentorship, institutional participation, clarified opportunities for sectoral integration, and tailored funding mechanisms will enable Moldova to align more closely with European standards while fostering trust and collaboration between the EU and this candidate country. With this foundation, Moldova can transition from a mere acquis alignment to meaningful and deeper integration, paving the way for its future EU membership. The following recommendations outline several measures that can be strategically deployed to maximise the benefits of Moldova's integration in the coming years.

1. **Learn from past mistakes:** Moldova stands at a critical juncture on its path towards EU integration, making the EU's support and mentorship essential for a smooth transformation. Lessons from past accession processes, particularly in the WB, show the importance of addressing challenges and avoiding mistakes. Between 2012, when Montenegro commenced accession talks, and the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, EU enlargement policy was largely stagnant, with limited engagement that primarily sought to maintain regional stability. This highlights the urgency for the EU to prioritise Moldova's integration actively and decisively. While momentum for enlargement exists, it is fragile and is not guaranteed to last. The time to act is now.

2. **Avoid politicisation:** The EU must establish mechanisms to prevent member states from exploiting the accession process to advance narrow interests or impose unrelated vetoes, which undermine trust and stall Moldova's reform progress. Politicisation risks turning enlargement into a battleground for domestic agendas, eroding credibility and disincentivising reforms in aspiring member states. The blockage of North Macedonia highlights how bilateral issues can delay EU integration and harm the process. To address this, the EU should adopt qualified majority voting (QMV) for opening negotiation clusters, as proposed in the German–Slovenian non-paper, to ensure decisions are based on merit and protect the integrity of enlargement.

3. **Strengthen sectoral roadmaps:** In the short term, Moldova and the EU should develop detailed sectoral roadmaps that outline clear steps for deeper integration in key policy areas. This should be done as part of the ongoing screening process. These roadmaps should establish clear opportunities and pinpoint areas where sectoral integration can take place. This would include outlining measurable benchmarks, ensuring that sectoral integration progresses in alignment with Moldova's acquis adoption. By tailoring integration efforts to Moldova's specific needs and institutional capacities, this approach would enhance the credibility and feasibility of the sectoral endeavour.

4. **Enforce conditionality:** In the short term, conditionality mechanisms should be rigorously applied within the framework of the RGF. This will ensure that funds are allocated effectively and meet predefined criteria, fostering governmental accountability and maximising the impact of reforms. The extent of the application of conditionality will be a litmus test of the EU's seriousness and level of commitment to truly contributing to the process of transforming Moldova into a future member state. This is important, as previous experience in the WB shows that unconditional funding simply does not achieve the desired results.

5. **Expand horizons:** In the long term, the next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) should prioritise a further increase in funding allocations. This is particularly important as negotiations on the first draft of the next MFF are set to begin in 2025. Extending to 2034, the funding level will serve as a test case of the EU's confidence in Moldova's ability to complete its reform tasks by the end of the cycle. This commitment is especially crucial given that Moldova remains one of the worst-performing countries in Europe in terms of socio-economic convergence. Strengthened financial support is essential for bridging this gap, as well as for sending a message to citizens that the EU perspective is genuine.

6. **Open the doors of EU institutions:** Gradual integration should go beyond economic aspects to include political integration. Moldova's NGP lacks provisions for this, making it necessary to introduce institutional incentives. These could grant access to EU institutions such as the EU Council, the European Parliament, and the European Commission, aligned with Moldova's progress in meeting EU standards. This could be done based on the right of occasional presence, to ensure regularised exchange of information without impeding the EU's decision-making autonomy. Ideally, increased participation in various bodies should reflect the extent of preparedness in corresponding chapters of the acquis. This approach would foster Moldova's socialisation with EU counterparts and strengthen its administrative capacities. Combining financial and institutional incentives is essential to unlocking the full potential of gradual integration and ensuring Moldova's smooth transition towards EU membership.

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