



Deputies in the plenary session of the Parliament of the Republic of Moldova.
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Between Challenges and Opportunities: What Lies Ahead in 2026?

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Moldova's European journey continues to unfold in a context marked by regional uncertainty, security pressures, and high expectations regarding the pace of internal reforms. The current edition of the Foreign Policy Bulletin examines the key challenges and opportunities facing Chișinău at this stage of the European integration process, against the backdrop of the war in Ukraine and ongoing geopolitical transformations.

The contributions brought together in this issue address the implications of the war in Ukraine for the security of the Republic of Moldova, developments related to the Transnistrian settlement process and the situation in Gagauzia, as well as their impact on internal stability and relations with the European Union. The analysis also looks at risks stemming from economic

vulnerabilities and the difficulties of attracting investment in an unstable regional environment.

A strong focus is placed on the reform agenda, including justice reform, the vetting process, administrative-territorial reform, and the state's institutional capacity to manage European funds and development projects. At the same time, foreign policy priorities, relations with EU Member States, parliamentary diplomacy, and the prospects for opening accession negotiations are explored.

Through interviews and in-depth analyses, this edition offers an overview of how the authorities in Chișinău seek to maintain Moldova's European course in a year shaped by complex challenges, but also by strategic decisions with long-term implications.

News in brief:

■ Europe is currently facing two wars: a military one, waged by Russia in Ukraine, and a hybrid one, directed against democracies, said Moldovan President Maia Sandu in a speech to the PACE. „For two consecutive years, our country has faced massive electoral interference, on several fronts [...] all with a single goal: to capture Parliament, install a Kremlin-controlled government, destroy our democracy, draw the Republic of Moldova into Russia’s sphere of influence, and use it against Ukraine and Europe,» Sandu said.

■ The reform of local public administration in the Republic of Moldova, initiated by the government in consultation with mayors, aims to reduce the number of municipalities through mergers, announced PAS MP Larisa Voloh, vice-chair of the Public Administration Committee. She explained that the new administrative model will allow for greater investment and more accessible public services for citizens, even if the number of municipalities is reduced. The PAS government has announced the reform of local public administration.

■ Lukoil has announced that it has agreed to sell most of its international assets, valued at approximately USD22 billion, to the American private investment firm Carlyle Group. The Republic of Moldova has decided to take over part of Lukoil’s operations in the country, namely the airport terminal and the depot on the Munceşti Street. These assets were privatised in 2005, but the transaction involved certain violations.

Economic growth is possible if state institutions function properly and the private sector feels secure



Marcel Spătari, PAS MP and Chair of the Parliamentary Committee on European Integration
Photo: Facebook

PAS MP and Chair of the Parliamentary Committee on European Integration, Marcel Spătari, gave an interview to the FES/APE Foreign Policy Bulletin in which we discussed the progress of the European integration process. We spoke at length about the priorities of the Chişinău authorities for 2026, as well as their reform plans.

Last but not least, we addressed issues related to investment, European funds, and the authorities' engagement with EU Member States to ensure that the Republic of Moldova remains on its European path. We invite you to read the full interview below.

■ What is the current state of Moldova’s European path, and where do we stand in our relationship with the European Union, given that 2025 marked the first year of implementation of the National Programme for EU Accession for 2025–2029?

We are currently in the technical negotiation phase with the European Commission. This involves direct dialogue with the Commission on the transposition of the *acquis communautaire* within three clusters: Cluster 1 – Fundamental Values, Cluster 2 – Internal Market, and Cluster 6 – External Relations. Several chapters fall under these clusters.

The cluster on Fundamental Values covers areas such as

statistics, the judiciary, and the rule of law. Within the Internal Market cluster, discussions focus on financial control, public procurement, the internal market, the free movement of goods and capital, company law, intellectual property rights, competition policy, financial services, as well as consumer and health protection.

The cluster on External Relations covers foreign policy, security, and defence.

Technical discussions with the European Commission on these areas are therefore at a very advanced stage. This means that draft legislation transposing European law has already been submitted. We are referring to directives and regulations that have been transposed into Moldovan legislation and incorporated into the National Accession Programme (NAP).

For the other three clusters, we also have an implementation programme for the *acquis communautaire*—that is, all the rights and obligations arising from EU membership. We are now waiting for political negotiations to open on all six clusters so that we can accelerate the process of transposing the *acquis*.

At the same time, it is important to emphasise that the workload for our institutions remains unchanged. Whether we are speaking about technical or political negotiations, the difference lies mainly in political-level progress. In this respect, there is currently a blockage related to Ukraine, due to Hungary's position. As long as the European Union identifies a solution for the Republic of Moldova, we must continue to move forward and implement the *acquis communautaire* in order to speed up the accession process.

Priority reforms

■ What are the reform priorities we need to achieve by 2026, and which areas should be our main focus?

■ We need to close as many chapters as possible within the clusters I have mentioned. Some chapters are more complex and will require longer-term efforts. For example, in the area of financial services, we are expected to adopt around 40 laws this year alone, which is a highly demanding task.

At the same time, there are chapters where progress can be made much more quickly, as they involve fewer legislative acts. Significant progress has already been achieved on the customs union with the European Union, and this is now clearly visible. Only two more laws in this area are scheduled to be adopted this year. In addition, there are chapters that do not require new legislation but rather the adoption of government decisions or administrative orders. These chapters do not relate exclusively to the transposition of European law, and negotiations on them can therefore be concluded more rapidly.

Overall, the government has identified around seven priority chapters for this year, and implementation efforts will be focused specifically on these areas.

■ How is justice reform perceived in Brussels, particularly the vetting process—the extraordinary evaluation of magistrates? I ask this because there have been public reactions to cases in which certain judges, despite apparent integrity issues, have passed the vetting process. How is justice reform viewed from Brussels' perspective?

■ We must complete the vetting of judges by the end of this year. The vetting of prosecutors started later, which explains why it is less advanced, but this process also needs to be completed in due course.

Both processes are necessary, but they must be time-limited and cannot continue indefinitely. In this sense, the timetable for justice reform is aligned with the EU accession timetable.

Justice reform falls under Cluster 1 – Fundamental Values – and is closely monitored by Brussels. It will be assessed in the next EU enlargement report, scheduled for publication at the end of this year.

The Ministry of Justice will report progress indicators to the European Commission. This is, naturally, a priority for the government. At the same time, the judiciary must remain an independent branch of state power, as is inherent to a democratic system, and must be capable of self-regulation, with all the necessary tools to promote and safeguard integrity within the

system. Once the vetting process is completed, these mechanisms must function autonomously within the justice system, with minimal or no political interference.

Administrative modernisation

■ **Staying with the topic of reforms, how important is administrative-territorial reform in 2026, given that local elections are scheduled for next year? How important is it that the 2027 local elections be held under a new legal framework that redraws districts and municipalities, introduces a modern, European model of local administration, and moves beyond the current Soviet-inspired structures, such as districts.**

■ It is very important. Public administration reform is assessed by Brussels under a separate criterion within Cluster 1 – Fundamental Values.

We are currently in the public consultation phase launched by the government. After this stage, we will need to move very quickly, as the reform must be implemented at least one year before next year's local elections. The Electoral Code requires that electoral constituencies be defined at least one year prior to the elections themselves.

Administrative-territorial reform is important not so much from an electoral perspective, but above all for strengthening the capacity of local authorities to attract and implement projects financed through European funds. Administrative-territorial units must have sufficient capacity, which requires stronger and larger municipalities.

There is also a need to consolidate second-level administrative-territorial units, such as the current districts, so that they become stronger, with greater administrative capacity and broader geographical coverage, enabling them to manage complex projects.

At present, European funding is allocated primarily—almost exclusively—through central government or civil society organisations. Local authorities do have access to European funds, but not directly from Brussels; instead, funding is channelled through the Government of the Republic of Moldova or other development partners.

Looking ahead, in order to access European funds directly, local authorities will need the necessary skills and expertise, and these capacities must be strengthened. This is the core objective of the administrative-territorial reform.

Currently, the Republic of Moldova has around 900 municipalities, many of which are below the minimum size required by law. Legislation allows for the establishment of an administrative-territorial unit starting from 1,500 inhabitants, yet there are numerous localities with fewer than 1,500 residents.

Spending money strategically

■ **We are already entering the second year in which the Republic of Moldova will receive new tranches from the total EUR 1.9 billion made available by the European Union. What is the investment plan for using these funds in 2026, which areas are considered priorities, and when can we expect to see the effects and benefits of these investments?**

■ The Growth Plan for Moldova is closely linked to a broader framework of reforms and the Reform Agenda. These are therefore two documents that must be viewed together.

The Reform Agenda includes more than 50 reforms and over 150 concrete measures, structured around seven pillars. First and foremost, it focuses on economic competitiveness and business development. Funding will support projects in areas such as digitalisation, infrastructure, and innovation, targeting businesses and the private sector.

The agenda also foresees investments in digital infrastructure, economic governance, energy efficiency, social capital, and the education and health systems, including the construction of two regional hospitals. At the same time, the Growth Plan provides for investments aimed at strengthening democracy and fundamental values, such as the rule of law and human rights.

As a result, the Growth Plan finances a wide range of sectors, and its objective is clearly reflected in its title: to stimulate economic growth.

It is important to understand that sustainable economic growth is only possible if state

institutions function efficiently, if the private sector feels secure, and if it has access to a skilled and competent workforce. This is why investments must target not only the business environment, but also public services—particularly the education system, which must provide the skills required by the private sector.

■ **There is frequent discussion about maintaining the tandem with Ukraine, but also about the possibility of decoupling the two countries at some point. What would be the plan or strategy for 2026, given that Hungary has expressed dissatisfaction with Ukraine's progress in advancing its relationship with the European Union, and that there is a risk other Member States could also shift their position on this issue? What would be the best option for Chișinău?**

■ Our strategy is to accelerate the implementation of the *acquis communautaire* in order to have convincing arguments vis-à-vis the European states. In this context, parliamentary diplomacy plays an important role. At parliamentary level, we maintain regular contacts with the parliaments of EU Member States.

I recently visited Cyprus, which holds the Presidency of the European Union this semester, where I had a bilateral meeting with the President of the Cypriot Parliament. We have also invited the chairs of European affairs committees from the Baltic and Nordic countries, as well as Poland and Germany, to visit the Republic of Moldova. At the same time, we will host visits from Greece and Romania, and we will also reach out to French-speaking countries.

We are working to keep the Republic of Moldova on the agenda of European parliamentarians, as they represent the political voice of the Member States. Ultimately, the decision to open political negotiations—as well as the decision on accession—is taken by heads of state and government within the European Council, which meets twice a year.

It is important to be present in all relevant discussions and forums. From this perspective, it

is more a matter of tactics than of strategy. As you can see, we are diplomatically very active.

Our message is that both accession and the opening of political negotiations must be based on merit, and that countries should advance according to their deliverables to the European Union, the level of implementation of the *acquis communautaire*, and the degree of preparedness for accession.

Digital integration

■ **How do you assess the digital integration of the Republic of Moldova in relation to European systems?**

■ One of the major challenges is the integration of the Republic of Moldova into the digital infrastructure of the European Union. For example, in the area of social security, European integration requires the interconnection of social security information systems across Member States, enabling the exchange of data on the contributions of European citizens in different countries.

This process requires an implementation period involving IT development, financial costs, and coordinated efforts across multiple sectors, as such digital integration is needed in many policy areas.

It is clear that these processes have already begun and that transitional periods are being negotiated with the European Union, which is precisely the purpose of accession negotiations. Certain elements—particularly the application of EU regulations—are non-negotiable, while other aspects may be subject to transitional arrangements.

In some cases, the implementation of interconnections between information systems can be negotiated, depending on the sector. For certain areas, there is little or no room for flexibility, while in others transitional solutions are possible. In any case, this is a complex process and by no means a simple one.

■ **Thank you!**

Deep and rapid reforms are essential for maintaining a credible pace of European integration



Ştefan Bejan,
Watchdog Community
Photo: Facebook



Mihai Isac,
political analyst
Photo: Facebook



Angela Grămadă,
Experts for Security and Global Affairs (ESGA)
Photo: Facebook

We spoke with three experts in an extensive interview conducted for the FES/APE Foreign Policy Bulletin, in which we addressed the most significant risks and challenges that the Republic of Moldova is likely to face this year. Our interlocutors were Mihai Isac and Ştefan Bejan from Watchdog Community, as well as Angela Grămadă, Director of the think tank Experts for Security and Global Affairs (ESGA).

The discussion focused on possible developments related to the Transnistrian issue and the situation in Gagauzia, as well as the war in Ukraine and its consequences for the Republic of Moldova. We also addressed the reform agenda and the country's European path, as well as the ability of the current pro-European government to deliver on the commitments made following the 2025 parliamentary elections.

Ştefan Bejan, *Watchdog Community*

■ What are the main security risks and challenges facing the Republic of Moldova in 2026, and which issues should we pay particular attention to this year?

■ First and foremost, the situation in the Republic of Moldova will largely depend on developments in the

war in Ukraine, including the situation on the front line. A more aggressive Russia would automatically translate into greater challenges for Republic of Moldova. I expect Moldova's airspace to continue to be violated by the Russian Federation, including through the use of drones. There is a risk that some of these drones could be equipped with explosives and enter the territory of the Republic of Moldova.

At the same time, the hybrid war has not diminished; on the contrary, it has taken on new dimensions, particularly following the September elections. No one seriously believes the narrative that Russia has lost interest in the Republic of Moldova. On the contrary, we are witnessing coordinated actions by politicians in Chişinău, journalists, and bloggers—operating at different levels but pursuing the same objective. This pattern of coordination is likely to continue in 2026.

■ In your view, what will be the main challenges facing the government in Chişinău this year?

■ From my perspective, the main challenges will be economic. Visible economic growth would reduce the impact of hybrid warfare. It is essential to keep inflation under control and to stimulate investment. Only under these conditions will the Republic of Moldova be better able to withstand external pressures.

At the same time, in 2024 and especially in 2025, law enforcement institutions—the police, the Security and

Intelligence Service (SIS), and the Prosecutor's Office—were heavily focused on dismantling electoral corruption schemes. As a result, other internal issues have been overshadowed, including drug use and trafficking, arms trafficking, and even issues often perceived as minor, such as road accidents.

Why are these “minor” issues so important? Because they directly affect public sentiment. A society that does not trust its institutions and does not see tangible results is far more vulnerable to manipulation, corruption, and falling into the trap of Russia’s propaganda.

■ **There is also growing discussion around the Transnistrian issue, which could be approached from a new perspective in 2026, given the economic volatility in the eastern regions of the Republic of Moldova.**

■ The Transnistrian issue remains one of the most serious challenges. Russia continues to use the Transnistrian region as a tool of pressure, including through energy crises that directly affect the Republic of Moldova. At the same time, Chișinău appears to be making numerous concessions without achieving tangible results.

What is needed is a clear reintegration plan and a more decisive approach. Human rights violations in the region are becoming increasingly frequent, while leaders in Tiraspol are building political capital through direct attacks on Chișinău. In this context, responses must be firmer and more resolute.

■ **In the same vein as the challenges in pro-Russian areas, could the Gagauz Autonomous Territorial Unit continue to represent a source of instability for the authorities in Chișinău?**

■ Yes. We are facing important elections in Gagauzia, and it is very likely that new elections will take place, including for the position of Bashkan of the region. Chișinău must bring the Gagauz autonomy back within the constitutional framework of the Republic of Moldova; otherwise, the risks of destabilisation will increase.

■ **When it comes to the reform challenges linked to EU accession, which ones do you see as the most important for the period ahead?**

■ I see at least two major reforms as essential. The first is administrative-territorial reform. Local elections are scheduled for 2027, and such a reform must be implemented at least one year in advance. Naturally, there will be discontent at the local level, as the abolition or merger of some municipalities generates resistance. This is why the government must explain very clearly why this reform is in the interest of citizens and of the Republic of Moldova as a whole.

Optimisation in the field of education must also continue. Education is our only real chance to escape poverty, and quality education cannot be delivered in schools with 50 pupils and no qualified teachers. For this reason, optimisation and deep reform in this sector must move forward.

At the same time, long-standing problems persist, particularly in the area of justice reform. Progress is being made, but it remains slow. There are convictions, yet in some cases sentences are not served—either because those convicted are not apprehended or because they manage to flee the country. This is precisely why the reform process must continue. The moment when corrupt individuals and criminals actually end up in prison will be the signal that restores and strengthens public trust.

***Mihai Isac,
political analyst***

■ **What do you see as the main internal political challenge facing the Republic of Moldova in the coming period?**

■ The main domestic political challenge is to accelerate the reform process, which has increasingly become a matter of security. Without deep and rapid reforms, the Republic of Moldova will not be able to maintain a credible pace of European integration. This concerns structural reforms in the justice system, local public administration, and the economy, as well as the strengthening of the overall anti-corruption architecture.

When it comes to combating corruption, the challenge goes beyond addressing corrupt practices within public administration. It also involves putting in place robust mechanisms to prevent the misappropriation of European funds. As Moldova advances on its European path, the risks increase, and institutions must be prepared to manage significantly larger volumes of financial resources in a transparent and accountable manner.

■ **How problematic could the Transnistrian issue become this year, and what prospects do you see in this regard?**

■ The region on the left bank of the Dniester River, under Russian military presence, will inevitably return to the public agenda. This will occur both in the context of negotiations with the European Union and as a result of growing pressure from civil society and the population on both sides of the Dniester, who are demanding concrete solutions to overcome the current situation.

At the same time, the Russian Federation will seek to exploit this context in order to destabilise social cohesion within the Republic of Moldova. We are

likely to see actions aimed at generating tension, mistrust, and polarisation, including through the instrumentalisation of sensitive regional issues. In parallel, pressure from civil society and citizens on the authorities to identify a viable solution to the situation in the Transnistrian region is expected to intensify.

■ **From a political perspective, will Gagauzia remain a vulnerable point this year?**

Yes. Local elections in Gagauzia, the region inhabited by the Gagauz community, will create a renewed opportunity for the Russian Federation to exert political pressure on Chișinău. In addition, the situation surrounding the election of the governor (Bashkan) remains complicated, given that the current governor is unable to exercise her mandate.

As a result, the situation in Gagauzia is likely to continue to be exploited for external political purposes, posing ongoing challenges for the Republic of Moldova.

■ **What risks does the Republic of Moldova face in the context of peace negotiations on Ukraine, and what should Chișinău do in this situation?**

■ The authorities in Chișinău must be extremely careful to ensure that decisions taken in the context of peace negotiations do not set dangerous precedents for the Republic of Moldova. This applies whether we are referring to the status of Russian troops stationed on the left bank of the Dniester, the pressure exerted by the Russian Federation for a possible federalisation of Moldova, or issues related to the status of the Russian language and the Russian Orthodox Church in the Republic of Moldova.

At the same time, the authorities in Chișinău must exercise increased caution in order not to be confronted with a fait accompli resulting from negotiations between the United States, the European Union, and the Russian Federation.

■ **What economic challenges can the authorities of the Republic of Moldova expect to face this year?**

■ Although Moldova's economy has recorded modest growth of only a few per cent, the economic pressure generated by Russia's war against Ukraine remains significant. The indirect costs of the Russian Federation's war against Ukraine continue to be strongly felt in the Republic of Moldova.

At the same time, the authorities need to develop new mechanisms for bilateral diplomacy in order to strengthen and deepen relations with individual European Union Member States. It is not sufficient to maintain good relations with the European Union as a whole; it is essential to build solid, strategic partnerships with each Member State individually.

This approach is necessary to avoid situations similar to those faced by Ukraine, where the opposition of a single country—such as Hungary, and potentially others like Slovakia—can block strategic decisions. The Republic of Moldova must ensure that it does not become hostage to the internal political interests of individual European governments.

■ **What role will the Republic of Moldova's security partnerships with Western states play this year?**

■ Military cooperation with partner states must be continued and deepened. This applies both to European Union Member States and to NATO countries, as well as other strategic partners. The Republic of Moldova should cultivate privileged security relations with key actors such as the United Kingdom and Canada.

The relationship with the United States is also essential for Chișinău. Moldova must learn to engage more effectively in Washington. The international order is being reconfigured, and Chișinău needs to understand and speak the language of the new American political realities in order to clearly articulate its interests, the benefits of a strong partnership with the United States, and its own security and development needs.

The Republic of Moldova would also benefit significantly from strengthening its economic diplomacy. Chișinău should move beyond the assumption that only large investors can rescue the economy. For many regions of the country, attracting small and medium-sized enterprises represents the only viable long-term solution.

Last but not least, the Republic of Moldova needs updated legislation to ensure a genuine separation between religion and politics. It is essential that the Russian Orthodox Church in Moldova no longer be used as an electoral instrument by pro-Russian political forces.

***Angela Grămadă,
Experts for Security
and Global Affairs (ESGA)***

■ **What will be the main domestic policy challenge for the Republic of Moldova this year?**

■ The main challenge is rebuilding dialogue with Gagauzia, in particular with the authorities in Comrat. For the time being, I do not see sufficient initiative on the part of the government to take control of the crisis that began in 2023.

■ **Why do you consider the situation in Gagauzia to be so problematic?**

- Given the manner in which Evgenia Guțul was elected as Bashkan and the fact that she was subsequently convicted, new elections need to be organised.

Neither in May 2023 nor at present have I seen any serious analysis by the ruling party of the resources available, the instruments that could be used, or the measures that could be applied to reduce the influence of Russian disinformation and propaganda in the region.

This represents a major domestic policy challenge, especially since this model could be replicated in other parts of the Republic of Moldova. I am referring, for example, to Orhei in the north of the country, or to other areas where risk factors exist that could have a direct impact on internal security.

■ There is extensive discussion among experts—but less so among the authorities—about the Transnistrian issue. How do you see it evolving in 2026?

An extremely important challenge lies in the authorities' ability to explain much more clearly what the Republic of Moldova's vision is for resolving the Transnistrian conflict, especially in the context of the emerging concept of "decoupling" territorial reintegration from European integration.

Why is this concept of decoupling problematic? Because it was introduced without sufficient justification. This lack of clarity weakens Moldova's ability to explain to its partners—particularly those in the European Union—that the country is capable of managing the European integration process in a unified manner for all its citizens, without creating internal divisions or forms of segregation.

■ How does this affect Moldova's European path?

■ It diminishes the results achieved so far. The Republic of Moldova has previously demonstrated that it is capable of pursuing a unified approach and a coherent vision for reintegration. Instruments such as the Association Agreement have delivered tangible benefits, including for residents on the left bank of the Nistru River. These are models that should be further developed, not abandoned.

At this stage, the concept of decoupling remains poorly substantiated and risks undermining the overall management of the European integration process.

■ How does the Transnistrian issue relate to the regional security context, particularly in relation to Ukraine?

■ At this point, we inevitably enter the realm of security. The Republic of Moldova has sought to distance itself

from the peace negotiations on Ukraine, arguing that these are separate issues and that Moldova's situation is that of a frozen conflict. However, it is also in Ukraine's interest that the issue of the separatist Transnistrian region be addressed before peace negotiations are finalised.

This is important for Kyiv because Transnistria represents a security risk for Ukraine from the southwest. We are therefore facing a window of opportunity that the Republic of Moldova risks missing. Such a failure would weaken Moldova's credibility in the eyes of its European partners, who do not want a "grey area" or a "black hole" of insecurity within a country that is a candidate for European Union membership.

One cannot join the European Union while having an uncontrolled territory or an area lacking constitutional authority. The absence of effective control over the Transnistrian region raises serious concerns related to security and governance.

■ What does the socio-economic picture look like for the Republic of Moldova in this context in 2026?

■ Even though many of the economic risks are driven by external developments, they continue to affect the Republic of Moldova directly. Foreign investors tend to view the entire region with caution, rather than focusing solely on the performance of the government in Chișinău. Even where there are genuine efforts to attract investment and constructive dialogue with international investors, the broader security risks surrounding Moldova shape overall investment perceptions.

This represents a structural vulnerability that the Republic of Moldova cannot fully control, as it depends not only on domestic policies but also on developments across the wider region.

■ What other vulnerabilities and challenges do you see within the domestic political class, and what should we pay particular attention to in 2026?

■ There are political actors who publicly present themselves as pro-European but who, in reality, promote other interests. We see a discourse that appears supportive of European integration, yet is combined with a simplistic notion of sovereignty and practices that contradict European democratic standards.

There is a serious problem within the Parliament of the Republic of Moldova in Chișinău. Although several parliamentary factions exist, in practice they are often composed of political forces that claim to be pro-European but whose actions and messaging serve pro-Russian interests. This political ambiguity undermines the credibility of the Republic of Moldova's European path.

■ Thank you!

Editorial

Between Obstacles and Achievements: Key Milestones for the Republic of Moldova in 2026

**Editorial by Mădălin Necșuțu,
journalist at TVR Moldova and Balkan
Insight**

Even though we have seemingly entered a year that should be more politically stable, the Republic of Moldova will continue to face a number of major risks and challenges, both internally and externally. Let us take them one by one. With the inauguration of Alexandru Munteanu's government at the end of last year, it became clear that Moldova's priorities had shifted. The main focus is now on economic growth, which is intended to generate greater prosperity.

Projected economic growth of around 3% annually in 2026 is unlikely to lead to a substantial improvement in citizens' living standards. Nevertheless, it does represent progress. The authorities will have to address two major issues: how and in which sectors the €1.9 billion in European funds will be invested in order to generate sustainable economic growth, and how foreign investors can be attracted to the Republic of Moldova.

With regard to the second issue, there are serious shortcomings, including labour shortages, the proximity of a war that may be prolonged or end with uncertain outcomes, and deficiencies in consolidating the rule of law along the lines of Western democracies—an inherently complex process that requires time. Under these conditions, it is difficult to expect a significant influx of foreign investment into Moldova.

However, the Republic of Moldova can accelerate infrastructure projects with Romania, its main trading partner, in order to deepen economic ties and facilitate the transport of goods to European markets.

At the same time, Chișinău faces an acute need to modernise its domestic infrastructure, both to improve the movement of people and goods and to enable Moldova to participate—alongside Romania—in the reconstruction process in Ukraine. From an economic perspective, the challenges of 2026 will therefore be significant and, to a large extent, difficult to predict.

Among Chișinău's strengths are the experience of Prime Minister Alexandru Munteanu and his team in the fields of economics and finance, as well as their background



Mădălin Necșuțu, journalist at TVR Moldova and Balkan Insight

Photo: Facebook

in the business environment—assets that could prove to be a clear advantage.

The Transnistrian issue, a time bomb

The current pro-European government has developed a reflex of avoiding open discussions about plans to re-integrate the separatist region of Transnistria. At times, the issue appears to be treated as taboo, with the Presidency, the Government, and Parliament reluctant to address it openly. It is as if the authorities are trying to "sweep the dirt under the carpet," hoping that by not naming uncomfortable realities, they will either not materialise or simply fade away. This ostrich-like tactic of burying one's head in the sand helps no one.

The continued existence of this region under a pro-Russian separatist regime in Tiraspol can today be explained by two main factors: its indirect perpetuation by Chișinău through economic incentives linked to access to the European market, and the long-standing scheme of free gas supplied by the Russian Federation. Ultimately, however, both of these levers remain within Chișinău's control.

Naturally, an abrupt economic short-circuiting of the Transnistrian region would automatically trigger a major humanitarian crisis—one that Chișinău, already grappling with its own difficulties, would struggle to

manage. At the same time, such a scenario would rapidly and forcibly integrate a significant number of voters who are by no means predominantly pro-European.

This is why the issue must be understood as both a potential social and humanitarian crisis and a serious political challenge. A transition period in the reintegration process is clearly necessary. However, this does not mean that the subject should be excluded from open public debate.

On the contrary, an honest discussion could increase pressure on the Tiraspol regime to accept certain concessions aimed at the partial democratisation of the region—even before a possible scenario of implosion. Such an implosion would stem from the region's growing dependence on an increasingly fragile supply of Russian gas, a mechanism that has become ever more uncertain and can be interrupted at any moment—not only by Chișinău, but also by its European partners.

In this context, an open debate is urgently needed on the real requirements of reintegrating the Transnistrian region, including the identification of concrete solutions together with Moldova's Western development partners. These partners are, in fact, the only actors capable of mitigating the financial shock that such a process could entail.

To this end, an international donors' platform already exists, created by Romania, France, and Germany. This mechanism has been used in the past to provide essential financial support—without which the Republic of Moldova would have risked collapse in the face of the pandemic, energy crises, or the economic impact of the war in Ukraine..

Gagauzia, an important milestone for Chișinău

Closely linked to the Transnistrian issue is the need to improve the situation in Gagauzia, a region that has been subjected for decades to Russification through propaganda and Moscow's cultivated hostility toward the centre. The Gagauz population has been conditioned to perceive Chișinău as an adversary. At present, however, there is a window of opportunity: the political machine associated with Ilan Șor has reduced its activity until the next national elections, and pro-European forces should step in through sustained and courageous grassroots political engagement to explain more clearly what accession to the European Union actually means.

For the time being, however, no such trend is evident. This year, despite the suspension of elections to the People's Assembly in Comrat in March, elections could still be held at a later stage, possibly followed by elections for the governor (Bashkan) of the Gagauz

region. For precisely this reason, the time has come for pro-European forces—particularly the Action and Solidarity Party (PAS)—to launch very active local electoral campaigns.

As a result, 2026 will be a decisive year for the evolution of political life in Gagauzia and for the relationship between Chișinău and Comrat.

Reforms, and More Reforms

In 2026, the Republic of Moldova will need a well-structured reform plan. This ranges from justice reform and the vetting process—which has been dragging on longer than necessary—to administrative-territorial reform, which finally appears to be on the agenda of the current government. This reform represents an important step ahead of the 2027 local elections and could help transform Moldova into a more streamlined state, with fewer municipalities, the abolition of Soviet-inspired districts, and a decentralised system aimed at creating development regions capable of accessing European funds through locally developed projects.

Continued efforts and sustained political will are therefore required to reform the existing legal and administrative framework.

At the same time, the Republic of Moldova must continue its cooperation with European Union Member States that have relevant experience, as is already the case with joint infrastructure projects implemented together with Romania and financed through European funds. The authorities in Chișinău need to gain hands-on experience and learn—starting now—how to design competitive projects and access EU funding allocated through open competition.

Last but not least, the Republic of Moldova must reform and professionalise its armed forces in line with modern standards and equip them adequately, in a context marked by increasingly real security threats and a war in its immediate vicinity. Even if this does not imply accession to NATO—a sensitive topic with limited public support, shaped in part by sustained propaganda from the Russian Federation—defence needs and related investments must be understood as a necessity, not a matter of choice.

As a result, 2026 is shaping up to be a challenging and difficult year to manage, given the fatigue accumulated in recent years and the many uncertainties surrounding the future. Despite these constraints, the Republic of Moldova must keep its reform momentum at full speed and undertake these demanding changes—first and foremost for its own development, and secondly for Brussels. European integration ultimately means embracing the democratic values and principles that have underpinned Europe's peace and prosperity since the Second World War.

Continued Geopolitical Turmoil Around Ukraine: Will 2026 Be a Turning Point?

**Analysis by Natalia Stercul,
Executive Director of the Foreign
Policy Association (APE)**

24 February will mark four years since the start of Russia's large-scale invasion of Ukraine. Is it realistic to expect peace in 2026? Will there be a cessation of hostilities, merely a short-lived truce, or—despite the deadlock in peace negotiations—could agreements be reached that lead to a long-awaited and lasting peace? What will be the main geopolitical developments this year, and how might they affect the Republic of Moldova?

Despite a series of negotiations, there are still no tangible signs of peace, and the war continues. Moreover, against the backdrop of ongoing diplomatic efforts, Russian attacks on Ukrainian territory have intensified, becoming increasingly sophisticated and brutal. These combined assaults include the use of attack drones, kamikaze drones, as well as ballistic and cruise missiles.

Air raid sirens are now sounding almost continuously in many regions of Ukraine. Although a significant share of the country's energy infrastructure has already been destroyed, the Russian Federation has stepped up targeted air strikes on thermal power plants, energy facilities, and heating systems across Ukraine during the winter period. These attacks have caused widespread electricity and heating outages, as well as disruptions to water supplies. As a result, millions of Ukrainian civilians are facing extremely harsh living conditions during the winter.

Peace negotiations with US mediation

Although, since returning to the White House, U.S. President Donald Trump has been quite active in promoting his role as a mediator in the negotiation



Natalia Stercul, Executive Director of the Foreign Policy Association (APE)
Photo: Facebook

process, his promise to end the war has, for now, remained unfulfilled. The nature of the diplomatic talks on Ukraine increasingly resembles “business consultations”—a pragmatic, deal-oriented approach—rather than a diplomatic process backed by political pressure that could, in one form or another, satisfy all parties and lead to peace.

Even within this framework, the central question remains whether the Russian Federation is prepared to make any concessions on territorial issues. Moscow's position on security guarantees for Kyiv also remains unclear, particularly regarding the possible presence of Western military forces on Ukrainian territory. In addition, the lack of clarity surrounding the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant, currently under Russian occupation, raises further concerns. While the agenda is broad and complex, there is, at present, no indication of real political pressure being exerted to force Russia to accept a ceasefire.

At the same time, following new rounds of negotiations in Berlin and Florida, it appeared that Kyiv and Washington were moving closer to a possible compromise on a peace agreement. The World Economic Forum in Davos, where the

Ukrainian issue was also expected to feature prominently, was anticipated to yield a framework that would limit Russia's ability to continue avoiding a settlement under U.S.-proposed conditions.

However, the Ukrainian and American delegations ultimately focused once again on discussions related to Ukraine's reconstruction and security guarantees, concentrating on practical implementation mechanisms. The closed-door meeting between President Trump and Volodymyr Zelensky in Davos did not result in any concrete agreement.

The situation on the front line

The Russian Armed Forces continue their offensive operations. Although they have been unable to achieve rapid breakthroughs, Russia has retained the initiative and has not halted its advance along the front line. This allows Moscow to exert sustained, exhausting pressure and, albeit slowly, to push deeper into Ukraine's territory. At the same time, the Armed Forces of Ukraine continue to use all available means to repel Russian attacks along the front.

The Kremlin views 2026 as a key year for achieving its maximalist objectives in the war against Ukraine. Military experts argue that it is precisely this inertia—rather than the speed of territorial advances—that will shape the character of hostilities in 2026. Russia's priorities during this period are expected to include the full occupation of the Donetsk Oblast and Zaporizhzhia Oblast. Analysts do not rule out diversionary actions across multiple sectors of the front.

Large-scale warfare is unlikely to come to an end and will continue to be marked by limited territorial gains, high military casualties, missile strikes, and drone attacks across Ukraine. Both sides face significant vulnerabilities, including shortages of personnel, constraints on weapons supplies, economic pressures, and other structural challenges. Nevertheless, both Russia and Ukraine consider their fundamental interests to be at stake and show no intention of compromising on them.

Moreover, the intensification of fighting, the expansion of Russian offensive forces, increased production of offensive weapons, missiles, and drones, as well as growing external support for Russia from Iran, China, and North Korea, all point to the continuation of the war into 2026.

Republic of Moldova: Security Risks, Reintegration Plans, and EU Accession

The Republic of Moldova continues to feel the full range of destructive consequences of the war in neighbouring Ukraine. Countering security risks and threats remains a priority on both the national and regional agenda. The fall of drones and repeated violations of Moldova's airspace during Russia's large-scale attacks on Ukraine increasingly endanger the country's citizens and require a response from defence structures. The need to strengthen national defence capabilities more actively, including the development of systems for detecting and neutralising drones, is becoming increasingly evident. However, existing capabilities in this area remain very limited.

Accession to the European Union is a key foreign policy priority for the Republic of Moldova, and over the past year the country has made notable progress along its European path. At the same time, the Transnistrian conflict remains one of the serious obstacles to Moldova's EU accession. While this issue is rarely discussed openly, in expert circles various potential and hypothetical settlement scenarios continue to be analysed.

Against the backdrop of increasingly strained relations between the United States and the European Union, it is becoming clear that European states may reassess some of their previous approaches, including the level and modalities of support for countries pursuing European integration. These new realities are likely to encourage more cautious attitudes toward states with unresolved conflicts. For the Republic of Moldova, this context entails additional risks.

The key factor shaping the Transnistrian issue remains the evolution of the military confrontation between Ukraine and the Russian Federation, as well as the final outcome of the war. Consequently, prospects for a Transnistrian settlement depend to a significant extent on Kyiv's position, Ukraine's available resources and capabilities, and the pace and outcome of the fighting.

Chișinău's official position is clearly oriented toward ending the war as soon as possible, eliminating the Russian military presence from the Transnistrian region, pursuing parallel accession to the European Union together with Ukraine, and completing the EU accession process. However, if the conflict is

prolonged and Russian forces advance closer to Moldova's borders, security risks will inevitably increase. Under these circumstances, the trajectory of the Transnistrian settlement will largely depend on developments on the front line. In the absence of major changes, it is highly likely that the situation will remain largely unchanged in 2026.

At present, the reintegration process shows virtually no tangible progress. The Transnistrian region is experiencing economic instability and remains under a state of emergency, repeatedly extended due to persistent energy supply difficulties, dysfunctions in the industrial sector, and a sharp decline in budget revenues. Many experts anticipated that this period of crisis could serve as a turning point for reintegration, but this has not materialised. The reasons lie not only in the reluctance of Tiraspol, but also in Chișinău's limited preparedness to act decisively.

Against this difficult economic backdrop, Transnistria is preparing for elections of the region's leader, scheduled for December 2026. While it remains unclear how political forces in Tiraspol will realign or which candidates will emerge, it is evident that Moscow's position will be decisive. The Kremlin is reassessing its relations with the Republic of Moldova in general and with the Transnistrian region in particular, and official rhetoric suggests that the outcome of this reassessment is unlikely to be favourable for Chișinău.

Statements by the Chișinău authorities regarding a possible union with Romania are unlikely to be received positively in the Transnistrian region and could further distance prospects for reintegration in the short term. At the same time, in a negative scenario marked by the end of the war in Ukraine on unfavourable terms and a potential Russian advance toward Moldova's borders, unification with Romania and accelerated EU accession could emerge as viable options for Chișinău in support of its foreign policy and European integration objectives.

In conclusion, geopolitical turbulence is set to persist, driven by the prolonged war in Ukraine, the difficulties surrounding ceasefire negotiations, and the complex situation on the battlefield. In this context, no major progress is expected in resolving the Transnistrian conflict, and reintegration efforts are unlikely to gain concrete momentum. The primary focus of the Chișinău authorities will therefore remain on advancing domestic reforms necessary to sustain and deepen the European integration agenda.

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foreign policy association



Foreign Policy Association (APE) is a non-governmental organization committed to supporting the integration of the Republic of Moldova into the European Union and facilitating the settlement of the Transnistrian conflict in the context of the country Europeanization. APE was established in fall 2003 by a group of well-known experts, public personalities and former senior officials and diplomats, all of them reunited by their commitment to contribute with their expertise and experience to formulating and promoting by the Republic of Moldova of a coherent, credible and efficient foreign policy.