

Praise from Brussels: Ukraine and Moldova make progress on the path to the EU

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On 4 November, the European Commission published its annual reports assessing the progress of EU candidate countries. Both Ukraine and Moldova received positive evaluations, highlighting their determination and consistency despite the ongoing war and persistent Russian hybrid activities. Moldova was singled out for particular praise, with Commissioner for Enlargement Marta Kos stating that it 'has made the greatest progress on the path to integration'.

The Commission found that both Ukraine and Moldova had met the conditions required to open three out of the six negotiating clusters: 'fundamentals', 'external relations' and the 'internal market'. It expressed hope that both countries would be ready to open the remaining three by the end of the year. The report emphasised that completing accession talks by 2028 is an ambitious goal that can only be achieved if reform efforts are accelerated. For Ukraine, this applies chiefly to the fundamentals cluster, particularly the area of the rule of law.

The Commission's report confirms the positive momentum in aligning national legislation with the EU *acquis* in both Ukraine and Moldova. To sustain this progress, Moldova must implement demanding reforms, including changes to its administrative and institutional structure, while Ukraine must focus particularly on the rule of law. At the same time, the fact that Brussels offered only mild criticism in this area may embolden the Ukrainian government to stall ongoing reforms and renew attempts to curtail the powers of anti-corruption institutions and to restrict media freedom.

Commentary

- **The Commission found that Ukraine had made substantial progress, yet the report's positive tone came as a surprise to the expert community.** The favourable assessment stemmed from several factors, including the successful completion of the screening process, the development of 'roadmaps' in the areas of the rule of law, public administration, democratic institutions, and the adoption of an action plan concerning national minorities. The report noted progress in all 33 chapters under review, with none showing signs of regress. This assessment contrasts with concerns raised by non-governmental organisations, notably in a shadow report that highlighted stagnation in implementing reforms in the most critical areas of the judiciary and fundamental rights (Chapters 23 and 24 within the fundamentals cluster). The Commission's report

acknowledged some of these concerns; however, they did not define its overall tone.

- **Criticism of Ukraine focuses on the rule of law and the fight against corruption**, particularly attempts to restrict the powers of anti-corruption bodies (see: '[Ukraine: the independence of anti-corruption bodies is being dismantled amid scandals involving top politicians](#)'). It is highly probable that only a swift legislative revision (see: '[Ukraine: Verkhovna Rada restores independence of anti-corruption bodies](#)') and the drafting of a roadmap for reforms in this area enabled Ukraine to avoid a negative assessment – specifically, the determination that the country is backsliding. Nevertheless, the Commission noted that political pressure on anti-corruption institutions has not ceased (see: '[Rivalry between state services: the fight for control over combating corruption in Ukraine](#)') and called for their independence to be reinforced. Brussels also expects Ukraine to fill vacancies on the Constitutional Court, ensure the participation of independent experts in judicial selection commissions, and eliminate the practice of dismissing cases due to expired deadlines for pre-trial investigation (the so-called Lozovyi amendments).
- **The document represents a success for Ukraine, although its government has remained silent regarding the criticism it contains.** President Volodymyr Zelensky has emphasised that this year's report provides the most favourable assessment of Ukraine since it was granted candidate status; he has also urged the EU to remove artificial obstacles on the country's path towards integration. The omission of unfavourable remarks and the framing of accession risks solely in terms of a Hungarian veto (see: '[Hungary hardens its stance on Ukraine](#)') poses the risk that the government in Kyiv will interpret the Commission's restrained criticism as tacit approval for continued obstruction of reforms. This perception may already have been reflected in two recent developments: a search of the premises of a NABU official, conducted by the prosecutor's office without a warrant and through the use of force, on the eve of the report's publication; and the Ukrainian parliament's adoption, at first reading, of a bill restricting media freedom.
- **Moldova has the opportunity to meet the conditions required to open the remaining three negotiating clusters by the end of the year.** The lowest levels of preparedness were reported in chapters concerning the country's readiness to operate within a competitive free-market economy, environmental and climate-related issues (including ecological matters), and the agricultural sector. These areas will pose key challenges for the Moldovan government, alongside the justice system, which still requires far-reaching reforms; the document explicitly states that its quality must be improved. Implementing the unpopular reform of local administration, together with changes to the existing administrative structure to reduce the number of *raions* (higher-level local government units) and municipalities, will be another demanding task.