Analyses OSW

CENTRE FOR EASTERN STUDIES 13.11.2026 www.osw.waw.pl

Moldova pulls ahead of Ukraine on the path to EU accession

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On 9 November, EU Enlargement Commissioner Marta Kos addressed the Moldovan parliament, announcing that Chișinău would soon receive a positive Interim Benchmark Assessment Report (IBAR) confirming its compliance with the interim rule-of-law benchmarks. This will pave the way for Moldova to begin closing negotiating chapters. On 4 November, the European Commission published its annual Enlargement Package, which for the first time included roadmaps for the four most advanced candidates in accession negotiations – Montenegro, Albania, Moldova and Ukraine – setting out specific objectives for the coming year.

According to the roadmaps, Moldova could close as many as 25 of the 35 negotiating chapters in 2027, allowing it to conclude accession talks in early 2028. Ukraine, by contrast, is expected to close just seven of its 33 chapters over the same period. The assessments of both countries are positive, although the European Commission noted a marked slowdown in the pace of reforms in Ukraine. Kyiv could meet the IBAR benchmarks in the first half of 2027, but only if it implements the required rule-of-law reforms. The differing assessments effectively signal a divergence in the accession paths of the two countries, which have pursued EU membership as part of the same package and at a broadly similar pace since 2022.

Ukraine: high marks despite a slowdown in reforms

In its report on Ukraine, the European Commission upgraded its assessment of the country's preparedness for EU membership in nine of the 33 negotiating chapters – the highest number since the accession process began. This stems primarily from the alignment of national legislation with the EU *acquis*. At the same time, reform momentum weakened compared with the previous year, with progress accelerating in only six chapters and slowing in eight. Kyiv made good or very good progress in 10 chapters.

Ukraine owes its relatively positive assessment for the past year less to its own efforts than to the favourable stance of Brussels, which sought to avoid portraying the country in a negative light. The European Commission also took into account legislative changes introduced after the reporting period ended on 1 September, as well as progress achieved since 2022. However, this does not mean that it is taking a lenient approach towards Kyiv. The report clearly indicates that progress in three of the five chapters of the crucial Cluster 1 (Fundamentals) – covering the judiciary and fundamental rights (Chapter 23), justice, freedom and security (Chapter 24) and public procurement (Chapter 5) – is primarily attributable to independent anti-corruption institutions and civil society rather than the government's commitment to reform. Institutions such as the National Anti-Corruption

Bureau have continued to *effectively investigate* crimes committed at the highest levels of government, despite attempts to curtail their autonomy and pressure from security agencies. The Commission also stressed the need to safeguard their long-term independence and strengthen their institutional capacity.

The Commission's proposed roadmap for Ukraine, under which the country would begin closing negotiating chapters as early as June 2027, appears overly optimistic, as meeting this timetable would require Kyiv to fully implement the reforms set out in the IBAR. The Commission intends to support these efforts through a joint task force and expects Kyiv to receive a positive assessment no later than May 2027. The Ukrainian government, for its part, maintains that it will meet the benchmarks by March and close seven chapters by the middle of the year. Nevertheless, the scale of the backlog is enormous. Since June, Ukraine has met only around 20% of the interim benchmarks set by the Commission, according to estimates by the Ukrainian Centre for European Policy. These primarily concern judicial reform and the fight against corruption, areas in which the authorities lack the political will to implement the necessary changes, even though *EU funding for Ukraine is conditional on these reforms*.

Moldova: acceleration on fragile foundations

The European Commission's latest report on Moldova is its most favourable since assessments of the country began in 2023. The Commission recorded 'good' progress in 25 of the 33 chapters assessed and 'very good' progress in the chapter on foreign, security and defence policy. Crucially, it found that Moldova had made 'very significant progress' towards meeting the interim rule-of-law benchmarks, paving the way for Chișinău to begin closing negotiating chapters. According to the roadmap, Moldova is expected to close nine chapters in the first half of 2027 and another 16 in the second.

Moldova's high rating largely reflects its success in aligning national legislation with the EU *acquis*, although progress in implementing it has been markedly slower. This is particularly evident in the judiciary. The vetting process has already covered all judges at courts of appeal and presidents of first-instance courts, while five new appointments have enabled the Supreme Court to reach a quorum. However, only 12 of its 20 positions have been filled. None of the judges serving on anti-corruption panels have yet undergone vetting, while the process for prosecutors specialising in organised crime remains at a very early stage. The procedure has also triggered a wave of resignations, and most of the resulting vacancies remain unfilled, prolonging judicial proceedings. Despite an increase in the number of indictments, Chișinău still struggles to turn investigations into final convictions.

The European Commission also highlighted problems with the governing style of the Party of Action and Solidarity (PAS). It criticised the hasty adoption, without public consultation, of new rules for selecting foreign members of commissions responsible for vetting judges and prosecutors. It also raised concerns about the parliamentary code, which notably prohibits MPs from switching parliamentary groups. Furthermore, it noted inadequate dialogue between the governing majority and the opposition, pointing out that PAS frequently ignores legislative proposals submitted by the opposition and routinely rejects its motions to amend the parliamentary agenda.

The report also highlighted weaknesses in Moldova's state apparatus and economy, both of which are crucial to the country's capacity to implement reforms and sustain them

politically. The vacancy rate in the civil service exceeds 20%, while the budget deficit is projected to rise from 3.9% of GDP in 2025 to around 6% in 2026. The weak economy and the high cost of living are undermining public support for the country's pro-European course and, consequently, for the ruling PAS.

Outlook: one package, different speeds

The pace of Moldova's accession negotiations will increasingly depend on domestic developments. Likely political turbulence ahead of the 2027 local elections could slow an unpopular reform of local government, while the timetable for closing 25 chapters within a single year will place a particularly heavy burden on the country's small and understaffed public administration. Meanwhile, a lack of access to pre-accession funds will complicate the implementation of reforms under the most costly chapters covering environment, energy and transport; according to the government, this will shift the burden of the required investment onto the state budget and the private sector.

The report's limited treatment of the Transnistria issue is telling. Beyond a general statement of support for a peaceful resolution of the conflict and an acknowledgement that the Moldovan government had 'intensified its efforts' to reintegrate the region, the European Commission made no recommendations in this regard. Although the EU has consistently maintained that the unresolved conflict does not constitute an obstacle to Moldova's accession – so as not to give Moscow a means of effectively blocking the process – Transnistria remains a serious challenge. First, countries reluctant to support enlargement could use the issue as a pretext to obstruct Moldova's accession, particularly during the final stages of negotiations and the ratification of the accession treaty, when the consent of all member states will be required. Second, it poses purely technical obstacles that could complicate Moldova's compliance with certain requirements covered by the negotiating chapters.

Chișinău's lack of control over the region makes it impossible to apply EU rules on customs and border controls, product quality and safety standards, and financial sector supervision throughout the country. Accession before the region's actual reintegration would require developing a special legal and institutional framework (similar to that adopted by Cyprus before joining the EU), but the government has yet to begin any substantive work towards this end.

For Ukraine, the report and roadmap serve as a warning and set out specific tasks for the authorities. These include accelerating reforms concerning the rule of law, the judiciary and law enforcement agencies. The coming months will test the sincerity of President Volodymyr Zelensky's pledges and the governing camp's ability to mobilise. Without reforms under the Fundamentals cluster, which are essential for securing a positive IBAR assessment, Ukraine will be unable to make further progress in its accession negotiations. Moreover, any further corruption scandals will undermine the willingness of European countries to maintain financial and military assistance, thereby weakening Ukraine's capacity to sustain its resistance.

The documents published by the European Commission highlight the gap between Ukraine and the other three most advanced candidates, including Moldova. Since June, both countries have *opened four of the six negotiating clusters* and, according to the Commission, meet the conditions for opening the remaining two by the end of the year. These cover the

environment, energy and transport (Cluster 4) and agriculture, cohesion policy and the budget (Cluster 5). The Commission expects both clusters to be opened before the end of 2026. Both capitals have also declared their intention to conclude accession negotiations in 2028: Chișinău at the beginning of the year and Kyiv by its end.

However, while the Commission described Moldova's target as 'ambitious but achievable', it characterised Ukraine's proposed deadline merely as 'ambitious', noting that meeting it would require a faster pace of reform. Brussels continues to refrain from openly discussing the decoupling of the two countries' accession processes, so as not to send a negative signal to a country resisting Russian aggression. For this reason, it is seeking to avoid drawing a clear distinction between the two candidates and to keep Ukraine in the same group as Moldova, even at the cost of delaying the latter's progress.