

BEYOND MILESTONES: WHAT REFORMS MEAN IN THE LIVES OF MOLDOVAN CITIZENS

*Statement by the Civic Movement “Building Trust” for the Republic of Moldova–European Union
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The Republic of Moldova is at an important point in its European path. The opening of negotiations on Clusters 1 and 6, progress under the Reform Agenda, and the unprecedented financial support provided through the Growth Plan confirm a genuine institutional rapprochement with the European Union. The Civic Movement “Building Trust” supports this direction and believes that the progress achieved so far calls for a more mature assessment of the next stage: not only which reforms have been adopted, but what they actually change in the functioning of the state and in people’s lives.

The problem we see is not the absence of reforms. It is the gap between reform as reported and reform as experienced. Laws are adopted, milestones are checked off, institutions are reorganised, and negotiation chapters are opened. At the same time, citizens continue to judge the state through very concrete experiences: how much they pay for energy, how much income remains after price increases, how accessible a public service is, whether the administration listens to them, whether positions are filled on merit, and whether public money produces visible results.

The analyses carried out by the Movement throughout 2026 repeatedly identified the same vulnerability. In “Governance under Review”, the monitoring of 325 sectoral commitments showed that a significant share of them were formulated without sufficient measurable benchmarks to allow the results to be objectively verified. In the amalgamation process, in the amendment of the Electoral Code, and in our analysis of the Parliament Code, we highlighted the difference between the existence of a consultation procedure and citizens’ real influence over the decision. The Baraboi case showed, at local level, why the “voluntary” nature of a reform must mean not only compliance with a procedure, but also genuine respect for the community’s choice. These examples do not call into question the need for reform. They show why the functioning of democratic institutions must also be assessed through the quality of the decision-making process, not only through the final act adopted.

The same question arises in public administration reform. Reorganising an institution or creating a new structure does not, in itself, increase the capacity of the state. For citizens, reform becomes real when the institution is more competent, the service is better, responsibilities are clearer, and leadership is accountable for results. Meritocracy is therefore not a secondary issue. In an administration that will be managing increasing volumes of European funds, recruitment and appointment mechanisms must protect institutions from patronage and link position, remuneration and responsibility to performance. Documented salary disparities across public entities and the emergence of structures with high administrative budgets raise the same question: what public value is generated by the cost borne by the taxpayer?

The EUR 1.9 billion Growth Plan is a significant European support package and can accelerate economic convergence in a way that domestic resources alone would not allow. Approximately EUR 504 million has already been disbursed, and the mechanism based on conditionality and performance represents important progress. Yet the fulfilment of a milestone is not the end of a reform; it is the beginning of verifying its results. The question for the next stage should therefore be: what new economic, institutional and social capacity has the mobilised resource created?

This question is also legitimate because most of the Facility consists of concessional loans rather than grants. The terms are favourable, but the debt will have to be repaid. Every euro received or borrowed should therefore be traceable through a simple and public chain: reform, financing, project, beneficiary, result, impact. Economic growth was only 0.6% in the first half of 2026, following a period of weak and volatile performance. At the same time, the absolute poverty rate for 2025 was 31.1%, and 40% in rural areas. These figures do not demonstrate the failure of the Growth Plan, which is still being implemented. They do, however, establish the baseline against which its success should be measured.

For citizens, these pressures accumulate. Inflation, energy costs and fiscal changes all converge in the same household budget. The recent increase in the regulated gas price to more than MDL 26/m³ including VAT shows how important it is for energy reforms to be assessed not only through market opening and diversification of supply, but also through reduced household vulnerability, transparency in procurement and effective risk management. At the same time, the budget deficit and rising public debt require a more careful discussion not only about how much the state borrows, but also what it borrows for and what economic capacity these resources generate.

Another essential test is what happens across the country. The Republic of Moldova continues to lose population, while rural poverty is almost twice as high as urban poverty. Administrative-territorial reform may create larger and potentially more capable local authorities. But on its own, it cannot create jobs, services, transport, investment, or reasons for young people to stay. European integration will become convincing in communities when it reduces not only the distance between Chișinău and Brussels, but also the distance between Chișinău and the rest of the country. The territorial distribution of investment, access to services after reorganisation, and trends in depopulation should be monitored just as closely as the rate of fund absorption.

Agriculture will be one of the most difficult tests. Administrative compatibility with the Common Agricultural Policy is not enough if Moldovan producers do not also acquire the economic capacity to compete in the European market. The Paying Agency, together with control and traceability systems, constitutes indispensable institutional infrastructure. At the same time, farmers must be able to bear compliance costs and have access to advisory services, credit, irrigation, processing and markets. The success of the Strategic Plan for Agricultural Policy (PSPA) and of European funding should not be measured only by subsidies distributed, but by productivity, farm income, climate resilience, processing capacity and the ability of farms to compete in the European market.

All these examples point to one cross-cutting concern: progress towards accession must be accompanied by increasingly rigorous verification of impact. We believe it would be useful for the Republic of Moldova–European Union dialogue to consider three levels together: the reform adopted, the capacity created for implementation, and the demonstrable result for the beneficiary. The same logic could be applied to public administration, the Growth Plan, territorial investment, agriculture and public services.

Civil society can contribute to this verification. Its role should not end once a draft law has been consulted upon. Independent organisations can provide what administrative self-reporting captures less effectively: the experience of the final beneficiary, territorial effects, implementation problems and early warning signals of risk. This requires genuine access to data, implementation reports, indicators, audits, and information on beneficiaries and project results. A European civil society is not expected to automatically applaud every reform, but to verify whether it produces the result for which it was adopted. Evidence-based criticism of a reform is not the opposite of European integration; it can be one of the mechanisms through which integration becomes more credible, more effective and more beneficial to citizens.

After approximately five years of continuity in many public policies, it is natural for assessment to shift from intentions to structural results. We are not proposing that outcomes be assumed in advance, nor that the Republic of Moldova's economic difficulties be simplistically attributed to a single government or to the European process. We propose that they be measured transparently: what has improved, what has stagnated and what has deteriorated in the economy, in institutions, in communities and in people's lives.

In this assessment, we also consider an intermediate stage essential for a genuine appraisal of progress: not only whether legislation has been adopted, but also **the extent to which it is effectively aligned with European standards and the EU acquis, the extent to which the drafting process was transparent and based on genuine and inclusive public consultation, and whether the principles of the rule of law, good governance, democratic participation, transparency and institutional accountability were respected in the adoption and implementation of reforms.**

The adoption of a law or the formal fulfilment of a milestone does not, in itself, guarantee the existence of a genuine reform. It is equally important to assess whether the legislation correctly transposes European standards, whether institutions and affected groups had a genuine opportunity to contribute to the decision-making process, whether comments submitted during consultations were duly examined and addressed with reasons, and whether institutions have the capacity, independence and resources required to apply the new rules.

Only after assessing the **quality of the legislation and of the process through which the reform is developed** should its concrete effects be examined: whether institutions function better, whether the economy becomes more competitive, whether public administration is more accountable and transparent, whether public services improve, and whether citizens and communities genuinely experience the benefits of the European integration process.

The question we therefore wish to bring to the attention of the Association Council is simple, yet fundamental: **is it sufficient for the Republic of Moldova's progress to be assessed through the number of legislative acts adopted, milestones formally fulfilled and negotiation chapters opened, or should the next stage of the accession process give greater weight both to the quality and democratic legitimacy of reforms and to their real impact on institutions, the economy, communities and citizens' living standards?**



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We raise this question not as a challenge to the European path, but as a condition for its sustainability. The Republic of Moldova needs faster European integration, but also a comparable acceleration in the quality of governance, economic capacity and the results experienced by citizens. Reforms become sustainable when people can see, in their own lives, why they were necessary.