

## Year of disruptions in Moldova's European integration: Top 3 accomplishments and failures in 2018, OP-ED



### Op-Ed



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The European integration issue occupied a central place on the agenda of the Moldovan political class in 2018, but not owing to the achieved results, but to the multiple failures. In the course of the year, the government regularly ignored the numerous appeals made by the European Union – from the revision of the decision on “fiscal amnesty” and hastening of the investigation into the banking fraud to the annulment of the Chisinau local mayoral elections. The violation of the commitments made to the European partners resulted in the deterioration of the country's reputation and freezing of the financial assistance. The EU regards the parliamentary elections of February 24, 2019 as a test for the government on which the resumption of the financial assistance also depends ([IPN, September 18, 2018](#)).

The regression seen in Moldova seriously affected the dialogue between the European institutions and the rulers of the Democratic Party. Instead of correcting the mistakes, the ruling party tried to offset the deterioration of the relations with Brussels by the intensification of discussions with the U.S. ([Free Europe, December 7, 2018](#)) for which it used the anti-Russian positioning. The inhibited dynamics on the Brussels-Chisinau axis contrasted with an intense dialog with the Social-Democrats in Bucharest, who also went through bitter situations in their relations with the EU. The rotating presidency of Romania in the EU in the first half of 2019 ([IPN, June 18, 2018](#)) is regarded with major expectations by the Democratic Party, which needs allies inside the EU to overcome the

post-electoral difficulties in 2019. The Moldovan rules already benefitted from the support of the Romanian authorities, which [opposed mentioning Moldova in a negative context](#) in the conclusions of the Council of the EU at the end of November 2018.

The affiliation with the European People's Party helped the anti-government opposition to promote a more realistic approach in relation to the situation in Moldova inside the European Parliament. Consequently, the MEPs adopted two extremely critical resolutions on Moldova. The [first resolution](#) was a reaction to the invalidation of the elections in Chisinau (July 5, 2018), while [the second](#) gave low grades to the implementation of the Association Agreement (November 14, 2018). The visible involvement by the European Parliament was qualified by the Democratic Party practically as interference in the Moldovan internal political affairs ([IPN, July 9, 2018](#)). A significant role in the informing of European officials about the Moldovan status quo was played by the non-governmental sector. This managed to channel to the EU different reform recommendations that were rejected by the Democratic Party in national debates.

### The three major accomplishments

Even if with different reservations, in the first half of 2018 the reforms agreed with the EU had a more positive pace. Consequently, the EU was one step close to providing macro-financial assistance in September 2018 already. The decision was yet abandoned after the local mayoral elections in Chisinau, which were won by the extraparlimentary opposition, were invalidated in July. From that moment, the perception has been that the reform agenda agreed with the EU slowed down and emphasis was rather placed on populist measures aimed at recruiting voters. The populist initiatives were incorporated into the sensitive sectors of the electorate, such as public sector employees whose luring can have a multiplying electoral effect. Thus, [under the new law on the salaries of budget-funded employees](#) that took effect on December 1, 2018, the pays of over 80,000 budget-funded employees will increase by about 10% to 80%. Other populist actions referred to the population from rural areas where such infrastructure projects as the repair of roads were implemented, often without the necessary preparation and by evidently favoring the electoral constituencies that do not support the opposition ([Expert-Forum, November 15, 2018](#)).

Unquestionably, the EU – Moldova dialogue went through a period of deterioration and detachment on the part of the Moldovan government. However, several results that positively marked the European integration process in the country can be underlined.

**1. Improvement of knowledge in the EU about the reform agenda in Moldova.** The Moldovan realities were considerably popularized at regional and continental levels. This forced the government to act in a hurry and to make mistakes that could be elucidated by the opposition, the independent media and civil society. The exactness of the reports compiled by the European institutions increased and these reports contain the drawbacks of the most recent policies of the government. The volume of critical information furnished to Brussels often contradicted the positive version of state of affairs illustrated by the Moldovan authorities. The government's irascibility owing to the impossibility of controlling external communication could be seen in the accusations of damaging the country's image in Brussels made against the opposition. The better familiarization with the structure of reforms allows the EU to calibrate its actions so as to more efficiently support the implementation of the Association Agreement.

**2. Maintaining of pro-EU sympathies in society regardless of obstacles.** The maximization of the political conflict between the forces that associate themselves with the EU, the government led by the Democrats and the extraparlimentary opposition created favorable conditions for dissipating the support for the EU. But neither the anti-EU media attacks ([IPN, July 9, 2018](#)) nor the contradictions between the power and the opposition diminished drastically the pro-European sympathies. Some of the estimates show these increased in the course of 2018 without being altered by the massive efforts made by President Igor Dodon to solidify contacts with Moscow and the Eurasian Economic Union ([IPN, May 22, 2018](#)). Neither the dual game of the government that constantly opposed the justified requirements of the EU in the reform sector and simultaneously used a pro-European message insisting on the insertion of the European integration in the Constitution ([IPN, October 22, 2018](#)) provoked massive declines in the public support for the EU. The freezing of the macro-financial assistance also didn't have a negative impact on the pro-EU course. Apparently, the citizens treated the EU's gesture as deserved punishment of the government ([IPN, September 18, 2018](#)). Some of the polls reveal the maintaining or even rise in the pro-European sympathies compared with the pro-Eurasian Union ones. Others show a drastic decline of 10% in the number of pro-European sympathizers (*See Table*). However, in none of the cases the public option favorable to the Eurasian Union exceeded the pro-EU one.

Table. Evolution of pro-EU sympathies in 2018, %

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<i>IRI</i>			<i>IPP</i>		
Period	<i>EU</i>	<i>Eurasian Union</i>	Period	<i>EU</i>	<i>Eurasian Union</i>
<i>Feb. 2018</i>	<i>43</i>	<i>42</i>	<i>May 2018</i>	<i>46.4</i>	<i>33.8</i>
<i>June 2018</i>	<i>46</i>	<i>36</i>	<i>Nov. 2018</i>	<i>37.8</i>	<i>29.5</i>
<i>Oct. 2018</i>	<i>48</i>	<i>37</i>			

Source: Institute for Public Policy; IRI.org

**3. Consolidation of exports to the EU, owing to Romania.** The advancement of the commercial interconnection with the European market is one of the important results achieved in the European integration sector. In the course of 2018, exports to the EU rose to about 70% of all the exports. In general, the deliveries to the European consumers increased owing to the reorientation of producing and exporting companies.

The geographic proximity and the multiple sociocultural and historical similitudes enabled [about half of the Moldovan products supplied to the EU](#) to stop in Romania. This way, the neighboring country strengthened the position of the main export market for Moldova, while Russia was dispossessed of several trade instruments of influence even if President Igor Dodon is trying to recover them. Nevertheless, the foreign trade with the EU necessitates sustainability and diversification that would make trade flexible and resistant to the protectionist practices that are in the ascendant at international level. For the purpose, the range of agri-food products (of animal origin) should be extended and production capacities should be increased so as to meet the quotas on export set by the EU (apples, tomatoes, processed sugar, sweet corn, etc.). The quality of products and food safety are two crucial conditions that should be met for fully satisfying the demand on the European market and discovering other markets inside the EU, besides the Romanian one. In this regard, high-quality foreign investment is needed, which would hesitate to enter Moldova until confidence in Moldovan justice is not strengthened.

### The three major failures

The electoral interest prevailed in the political decisions taken by the government. This sacrificed the opportunity to make corrections in the Moldova-EU relationship with the aim of paving the necessary legal way, even if in a controversial way, for the parliamentary elections of 2019. In such conditions, the Democratic Party deliberately allowed failures in the relations with the EU, without being able to manage them in a manner that would be beneficial to the national interest.

Even if the main failures in the European integration process are attributed to the government of Moldova, at least one failure can be attributed to the EU whose hesitations to activate the conditionality encouraged the Democratic Party to annul the results of the Chisinau elections.

**1. Strengthening of the status of “captured state”.** From the unofficial speeches at European level, the recognition of the existence of the “state capture” penetrated the official documents, such as the resolutions of the European legislature. More exactly, on July 5, 2018, the MEPs underlined the fact that the state institutions in Moldova are in a profound crisis, the Democratic standards are violated and the judiciary fulfils political orders. These are all considered an example of “state capture” ([European Parliament, July 5, 2018](#)). At a distance of several months, in November 2018 ([European Parliament, November 14, 2018](#)), another resolution voted by the largest part of the MEPs noted that Moldova is captured by oligarchic interests and these subdued most of the institutions in the state – from Parliament and justice to the police, public administration and the media. The political character of the European Parliament’s resolutions is evident, but never before 2018 the “state capture” phenomenon was recognized so straightforwardly.

**2. Freezing of financial assistance.** After two years of the restoration of the EU budget support for Moldova that was blocked in 2015 owing to the crisis in the banking system, the subject of stopping of the European

assistance owing to the crisis in the banking system was brought again up for discussion. This time the causes for the suspension are related to the rule of law that was powerfully shaken by the quality of court decisions that led to the annulment of the outcome of the elections in Chisinau. The European institutions specified a number of preconditions for resuming financing, both macro-financial assistance and budget support. The main condition invoked was the conduct of free and fair parliamentary elections. Others refer to the fulfillment of the shortcomings, namely the finalization of the investigation into the banking fraud with the recovery of the stolen funds, fighting of political corruption and ensuring of an independent judiciary system ([EU Delegation, November 27, 2018](#)).

**3. Failure of conditionality mechanism.** The impossibility for the EU to prevent the Moldovan government's deviation from the political preconditions centered on the rule of law was a serious failure witnessed in 2018. In practical terms, the request to rectify the court decisions on the annulment of the elections in Chisinau didn't resist the government's political survival interest ([IPN, December 3, 2018](#)). In fact, the Democratic Party neglected Brussels for two times - the first time when it flouted the commitment on the rule of law and the second time when it refused to solve the political crisis caused by annulling the votes of the citizens of Chisinau. This way, Moldova set a dangerous precedent for other associate countries – Georgia and Ukraine ([IPN, July 16, 2018](#)), where signs of “state capture” can also be seen, in particular owing to the massive presence of oligarchic groups in the political and public life ([IPN, October 8, 2018](#)).

### Instead of conclusions

The year 2018 brought, on the one side, the drastic reduction in the government's capacity to mislead the European partners concerning the state of reforms. The opposition and civil society turned instead into the main credible messengers of the EU in Moldova. At the same time, the pro-European sympathies remained above the Eurasian course despite the decline in the bilateral relations with the EU. Also, the rise in exports to the EU was consolidated through Romania and this diminished the negative impact of Russian's bans at least temporarily.

On the other hand, by its actions the government repeatedly exemplified the profoundness of the “state capture” phenomenon that generated the invalidation the results of the mayoral elections in the capital city. Consequently, the EU suspended not only the macro-financial assistance, but also the budget support that will be restored depending on the way in which the upcoming elections are held. Moldova set a risky precedent in the region and the conditionality mechanism applied by the EU turned out to be inefficient before the survival political interests of the local elites.

The internal involutions in the EU in the field of rule of law in Hungary, Poland and Romania and Russia's new aggression in eastern Ukraine multiplied the number of pressing problems on the EU's agenda. For this reason too, the narrow political interests in the country could have easier derail Moldova's European integration. Ultimately, the government's actions in 2018 offered again useful lessons to the EU, which the latter is to learn to prevent new episodes of distancing by Moldova from the European integration objective.

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