

Guest article:**Measuring up for Membership. What Can We Learn by Applying a Gender Lens to Relations between the Republic of Moldova and the EU?****Kerry Longhurst¹**

Abstract: *The Republic of Moldova became an EU accession candidate in December 2023 and is currently busy laying the foundations for future membership negotiations. If the ambitious goal of entering the European Union in 2030 is maintained, much has to be done within a short space of time to ensure that the country meets all the membership criteria and achieves alignment with the EU's *acquis communautaire*. The aim of the current article is to deploy a novel 'gender lens' through which to consider the Republic of Moldova's evolving EU perspectives and, in so doing, capture fresh and nuanced findings that traditional, political, economic, security scholarly, and policy approaches to EU enlargement tend to discount. Findings suggest that Moldova performs significantly better on multiple gender-indicators than its country peers in the Eastern Partnership (EaP) region. However, despite palpable improvements and examples of alignment with EU gender norms and international best practice, the article ascertains notable shortcomings and disparities with relevance for Moldova's EU accession. The article adopts a mixed-method qualitative approach, intersecting content analysis of key documents, social and economic data and civil society reporting with stakeholder interviews. The added-value of the research derives from its use of a gender lens aligned with the specificity of the Republic of Moldova, which represents a novel contribution to EU enlargement studies.*

Keywords: *EU, Republic of Moldova, gender, EU enlargement, Europeanisation.*

JEL classification: *B54, F50, O52, P3.*

Introduction

This article explores the interplay between the Republic of Moldova, EU enlargement and gender by deploying a novel 'gender lens' to examine the country's rapid gravitation towards the EU that has transpired over the past two and a half years. Fuelled by Russia's all-out invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, the Republic of Moldova became an official EU accession state in December 2023. The following February saw the start of the preliminary 'screening' phase of the accession process, which will determine the overall framework for future negotiations and their timetable.

¹ **Kerry Longhurst**, PhD, is a Jean Monnet professor at Collegium Civitas in Warsaw, Poland.
E-mail: kerry.longhurst@civitas.edu.pl.

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Whilst the ongoing war in Ukraine and its potential for spillover provide a legitimate rationale for the Republic of Moldova's speedy EU entry, an expedited process driven by geopolitical and security issues might mean that critical factors (political, economic, and social, including those with a gender dimension) that are relevant for EU membership are overlooked. A potential for side-lining gender issues is already apparent in the nascent academic literature on the next enlargement. Thus far, analysts have been mostly concerned with the security aspects of enlargement, the implications for the EU as an autonomous actor, as well as questions to do with EU's institutional reforms and resource challenges (Orenstein, 2023; Jones, 2024). Under these circumstances, there is a paucity of consideration being given to gender factors.

With these thoughts in mind, the current article hypothesises that – in the context of the Republic of Moldova's advance towards membership – important gender-related factors with strong bearings on the country's successful and sustainable EU integration are being potentially deprioritised and subjugated to the dominant geopolitical discourse, which emphasises a fast-track accession. A recent development that supports this hypothesis occurred in June 2023, when the European Commission gave its update on the Republic of Moldova's progress towards nine priority steps that it set out the previous year in relation to the country gaining EU candidate status. On that occasion, the Commission reported that the Republic of Moldova had successfully completed the step concerning gender equality and tackling gender-based violence (GBV) (European Commission, 2023a). However, contemporaneous independent research found little more than moderate progress in this sphere and pointed to the hazards of exaggerating the extent to which the country was making concrete and sustainable improvements in this area (Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum, 2024; Longhurst, 2024).

Exploring the relationship between the Republic of Moldova and the European Union through a gender lens is pertinent for several reasons, but first and foremost because the prospects of its leap towards EU membership have become intertwined with gender issues. Whilst on several gender indicators – important at an international level – the Republic of Moldova performs very well and also distinguishes itself as the only EaP country to have an independent EU-compliant Equality Council, some cultural factors tend to hinder change 'on the ground'. Moreover, the country's performance is marked by discrepancies between law, policy implementation and practice (Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum Index, 2024).

The Republic of Moldova became an official EU candidate, and subsequently an accession state, with a female President and – until February 2023 – a female Prime Minister at the helm. Elected in November 2020 on a pro-EU/ anti-oligarch platform, Maia Sandu overcame prevailing gender-based barriers and smear campaigns focused on her being a non-married female and on her sexuality (Huffpost, 2016; Nokta, 2022), to become this country's first female President. As such, she symbolises the nexus between gender equality and European integration. However, at the same time, there is a strong domestic pushback on both gender and EU integration. Moscow-leaning political parties, and other interest groups and individuals linked with the Russian Federation and/or oligarchs, as well as the church, emphasise that EU's policies on gender, LGBTQIA+ rights, and equal opportunities in general, will damage traditional family values and put Moldovan society at risk. Such controversies were vivid during

the domestic debates and media coverage of the Republic of Moldova's ratification of the CoE Convention on preventing and combatting violence against women and domestic violence (Istanbul Convention) in 2022, with pro-Russian/anti-EU disinformation campaigns pushing narratives on western subversion and Brussels' promotion of 'gender ideology'. In this context, campaigners also claimed that the Istanbul Convention was contributing to the imminent collapse of the West, and that Russia alone can protect Christian values in the Republic of Moldova (watchdogmd.org, 2022, 2024).

A further important rationale for applying a gender lens relates to the war in Ukraine, which continues to have significant gendered effects with implications for the Republic of Moldova and its capacity to meet the EU's accession conditions. Not only do women and children (including those who settled in the Republic of Moldova) make up the largest portion of displaced people inside and outside of Ukraine (OSCEPA, 2023), but the war has also prompted a sharp rise in GBV (including conflict-related gender-based violence and intimate partner violence), and also in 'old' and 'new' forms of sexual exploitation and abuse (VOICE / HIAS, 2023; Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum, 2024). These developments invariably place strains on the institutional capacities of the Republic of Moldova and bring an extra urgency to its reforms in this sphere and to its capacity to align with the Istanbul Convention.

This article proceeds from the assumptions that EU enlargement is a gendered phenomenon, and that the accession process and its outcomes have multiple gendered implications, both intended and unintended. For example, EU accession potentially affects the rights and livelihoods of men and women in different and unequal ways. It is also likely to impact upon levels of female political participation, entrepreneurship and access to justice. To explore this assertion, the current article asks, 'what can we learn by applying a gender lens to contemporary relations between the Republic of Moldova and the EU'? The article focuses on the period since March 3, 2022, the day the country presented its application for EU membership, and relies on content analysis of key policy documents, civil society reports, and primary data from Moldovan and international statistical sources, which are corroborated with insights gathered from the author's interviews with five Moldovan gender experts conducted in March 2023.

The article's main purpose is not to evaluate the EU's gender policies per se, but rather to fill a knowledge gap by looking at prevailing gender issues in the Republic of Moldova, and to highlight their significance for EU accession. The article is organised into three main sections. It begins with a brief exploration of the interplay between gender and EU enlargement from academic and policy viewpoints, as a means to establish the state of the art. It goes on to identify key features of this country's gender landscape with a focus on political representation, the economy and the labour market, and reflects on the Republic of Moldova's adoption of the Istanbul Convention. By way of a conclusion, the article summarises the main discussion points involved in the "triangular" topic of the Republic of Moldova – EU enlargement – gender.

1. The gender – EU enlargement nexus from academic and policy points of view

Literature on the gender dimensions of EU enlargement began to emerge in the early 2000s in anticipation of the integration of new Member States². In this context, authors were critical of the lack of robust gender equality mechanisms embedded in the EU's conditionality toolkit, which meant that those issues were relegated to the weaker realm of 'soft law'. Thus, though equality is deeply enshrined in the EU treaties³, the accession process did not strongly enforce the EU's gender values upon candidate states in the 2004 and 2007 enlargement rounds to the degree to which equality advocates had hoped for (interview with a Moldovan gender expert, 2023).

Though her analysis was based on the 2004 'big-bang' enlargement of two decades ago, Silke Roth's claim that from a gender perspective the EU enlargement process is 'contradictory' remains pertinent. Roth argued that the strict adherence to the EU's political and economic standards, and the adoption of neo-liberal ideologies, ushered in economic modernisation in Central Europe and helped countries gain compatibility with EU markets. Nevertheless, it also contributed to a decline in female economic and social rights in some of the countries. Moreover, Roth found that though the enlargement process was supposedly configured to promote gender mainstreaming, and to export superior anti-discrimination norms to the new Member States, in reality the EU and the governments of the accession states did little to offset the gendered costs of EU enlargement (Roth, 2004, 2008).

Authors also noted inherent weaknesses in the EU's conditionality practices, and in particular the limited involvement of domestic stakeholders concerned with equality in the accession negotiations and in the implementation of EU's *Acquis Communautaire*. For example, Avdeyeva and others posited that equality policies and institutions in the new EU Member States had been marginalised during the negotiations (Avdeyeva, 2015; Pirju, Panaitescu, Sorcaru, Marinescu and Popa, 2024). Similarly, Lohmann concluded that the way the accession process played out, namely without due consideration to gender, actively impeded women's civic participation, and also diminished the role of female-led NGOs in enlargement-related matters (Lohmann, 2005). Bretherton's research also highlighted deficiencies in the EU's capacity to promote gender equality in its accession methodology. With a prevailing contradiction between 'ideas and interests', the prospect of EU membership conditionality being used to overcome gender inequalities in candidate states was reduced (Bretherton, 2002, 2011).

Another body of literature germane to the current case honed in the interplay between EU integration and post-socialist political and economic transitions, and their consequences for gender equality, female labour force participation and economic activity. Prior to the implosion of the region's command economies, Eastern and Central Europe had had the highest levels of women in the work force globally. However, as Galligan and Clavero note, the dramatic post-1989 structural

² In 2004 Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia became EU members, followed by Bulgaria and Romania in 2007.

³ Art. 2, 3(3) and 21 of the Treaty on the European Union (TEU), Art. 8 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU), and Art. 21 and 23 of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights.

shifts, coupled with strict systemic reforms – associated with the EU’s membership requirements – weighed against qualitative improvements in gender equality and anti-discrimination, which saw women’s economic roles weaken (Galligan and Clavero, 2012). Similarly, Steinhilber posited that the passionate embrace of neo-liberalism by the post-communist governments in the region left little space for gender inequalities to be prioritised in national development strategies at that time (Steinhilber, 2006).

Turning to EU policy, it is evident that much has changed since the previous rounds of enlargement with regard to the EU’s approach to gender. Recent changes with a bearing on the EU prospects of the Republic of Moldova were sparked by the 2019 European elections, and the arrival of the European Commission’s first female president who ushered in a more gender-balanced Commission (Abels and Mushaben, 2020, Debusscher, 2022). Since then, though not without its critics, the EU has elaborated a stronger, more actionable and measurable notion of “gender mainstreaming” with implications for all aspects of European integration, including a tighter linkage between the accession process and the promotion of gender equality and women’s rights. As a consequence, in recent years the EU has developed a detailed and ambitious legal and normative ecosystem for gender, equality, and inclusion more broadly, which places far-reaching requirements on Member States and, by extension, on accession states.

The EU’s ‘Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025’ is the conceptual backbone of the EU’s gender policy objectives (European Commission, 2020), and underpins the aim of creating a ‘Union of Equality’ set forth by Ursula von der Leyen. The Gender Equality Strategy also emphasises an ‘intersectional approach’, to embed gender across all aspects of European integration and into all EU external actions through the EU’s Gender Action Plan, which is now in its third iteration (GAP III). Launched in 2020, GAP III – ‘An ambitious agenda for gender equality and women’s empowerment in EU external action’ – aims to ensure that, by 2025, at least 85% of the EU’s new external actions contribute to gender equality and to the empowerment of women and girls (European Commission, 2023b). In both its internal and external contexts, the EU highlights how important it is to end gender-based violence, challenge gender stereotypes, bridge labour market gender gaps, achieve equal participation across different sectors of the economy, address gender pay and pension gaps, close the gender care gap, and achieve gender balance in decision-making and in politics. Since its inception, the Gender Equality Strategy has concretely given rise to:

- (i) the pay transparency directive
- (ii) a proposal for a new directive to combat violence against women
- (iii) a directive on gender balance on corporate boards
- (iv) new work-life balance rights
- (v) a new European care strategy, and
- (vi) the European Commission becoming a party to the Istanbul Convention in 2023.

The same legal and normative requirements placed on Member States are also applicable to the enlargement countries, as part of the EU’s membership conditionality

toolbox. In its annual Enlargement Package (in which the Commission appraises the state of enlargement and analyses the progress of individual candidate countries vis-à-vis its membership criteria), the gender equality, and cognate themes, are also assessed (European Commission, 2023c). In the Commission's inaugural enlargement report for the Republic of Moldova, published in November 2023, gender was mentioned no less than 30 times across all six negotiating clusters and chapters. The report concluded that, despite an overall solid performance, there was limited access to justice for women, insufficient financial and human resources to advance women's rights, and the persistence of patriarchal attitudes and discriminatory stereotypes on the roles and responsibilities of women and men within family and society. The report also found a high prevalence of gender-based violence against women, lack of consideration for new forms of trafficking in persons, lack of diverse educational choices for women and girls, and gender occupational segregation (European Commission, 2023d).

2. Findings: The Republic of Moldova's performance across key gender indicators – a variegated picture

The Republic of Moldova's commitment to gender equality is enshrined in its national programme aimed at 'promoting and ensuring equality between women and men in the Republic of Moldova for the years 2023-2027'. The programme aligns with the country's European integration strategy and, as such, maps neatly onto the objectives and priorities of the EU's Gender Equality Strategy and of GAP III described above. This national programme seeks to accelerate gender equality by:

- (i) expanding services to support carers by improving social protections
- (ii) reducing the gender gap in pay for equal work or work of equal value
- (iii) eradicating stereotypes regarding the employment of men in feminised areas
- (iv) reducing the gap in decision-making at local and central levels, including among underrepresented groups of women, for example from minorities
- (v) ensuring wider participation of relevant authorities and institutions in the development and adoption of sectoral policies, instruments, and measures aimed at eliminating structural gender inequalities, and their effective implementation
- (vi) improving existing regulatory and institutional frameworks, including by establishing performance indicators in budget programmes that take into account gender issues
- (vii) promoting gender equality in the humanitarian aid sector, and
- (viii) ensuring equal access to quality services in the public and private sectors (Moldovan Government Resolution No. HG203/2023, 2023).

According to key global and regional measures, the Republic of Moldova performs well on the gender front. In the World Economic Forum’s (WEF’s) 2023 *Global Gender Gap Report*, with an overall score of 0.78 (0 = imparity; 1 = parity), the country takes an impressive 19th place out of a total of 146 countries. This also means that, according to the WEF, the Republic of Moldova is significantly ahead of several EU states in the gender gap sphere. Since 2020, it has also been the overall top scorer in WEF’s regional section on Central Asia / Eurasia. Moldova also performs well in the context of the UNDP’s Gender Development Index (GDI) and is situated amongst the leading group of countries (group one), which is composed of states with high equality in human development indicators between men and women.

Table 1. The Republic of Moldova’s gender gap compared with that of the other EaP countries, 2023

Score and rank	Republic of Moldova	Belarus	Armenia	Ukraine	Georgia	Azerbaijan
Global Gender Gap Index	0.78 / 19	0.75 / 41	0.72 / 61	0.71 / 66	0.70 / 76	0.69 / 97
Economic participation & opportunity ^(Subindex 1)	0.86 / 3	0.81 / 7	0.71 / 52	0.71 / 55	0.69 / 68	0.76 / 27
Educational attainment ^(Subindex 2)	0.99 / 53	0.99 / 75	0.99 / 35	0.99 / 56	1 / 28	0.99 / 54
Health & survival ^(Subindex 3)	0.97 / 40	0.98 / 1	0.95 / 139	0.97 / 45	0.97 / 56	0.93 / 146
Political empowerment ^(Subindex 4)	0.31 / 44	0.21 / 69	0.21 / 71	0.17 / 87	0.16 / 91	0.07 / 134

Source: World Economic Forum (WEF)’s Global Gender Gap Report, 2023.

Notwithstanding its impressive ranking and favourable position vis-à-vis some EU states and its regional peers, when additional focal points and variables are brought into play, a patchier gender picture emerges which is also characterised by structural factors that tend to impede change. For instance, a recent Gender Equality Index, published by an independent Moldovan Think Tank in 2024, contradicts the WEF’s findings and highlights backsliding in women’s access to resources, education, and in perceptions and stereotypes, as well as stagnation in women’s roles in the labour market and particularly in the health sector. The same Index found improvements only in the sphere of politics (Centrul Parteneriat Pentru Dezvoltare, 2024). Meanwhile, the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum’s Index pointed to sizeable gaps between new gender laws and actual implementation, which questions WEF and UNDP’s claims about Moldova’s striking performance and high ranking in their studies (Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum, 2024). To explore these complexities, three salient themes linked to the evolving interplay between the Republic of Moldova, EU enlargement, and gender are subsequently explored:

- *Women, politics, and power*
- *Women, the economy, and the labour market*
- *Gender-Based Violence.*

Women, politics, and power

The reality on the ground suggests a variegated picture when it comes to women, politics and power, with instances of progress as well as significant shortcomings.

From a positive perspective, not only is Maia Sandu the country’s first female President, but pending her re-election in Autumn 2024, she will become one of the Republic of Moldova’s longest-serving heads of state in recent times. Moreover, Sandu enjoys a relatively high level of public trust. Though opinion polls consistently show that Moldovans in general have very low levels of trust in politicians, polls from 2023 suggest that people view President Sandu as the most trustworthy amongst political figures by a significant margin (bop.ipp.md/en, n.d.).

The Republic of Moldova has also set up several mechanisms and incentives to improve women’s representation in politics. Since 2022, party candidate lists for national and local elections need to reflect a minimum rate of 40% for each gender. This regulation was implemented for the first time in the context of the local elections of November 2023. If this minimum is not respected, the electoral body will not register the list in its entirety. Additionally, according to this new law, political parties will financially benefit from the state budget proportionally to the number of women (and young people) from their ranks that are elected to office.

The composition of the Moldovan Parliament has been steadily moving towards an ever-higher level of female representation. The proportion of females in the Republic of Moldova’s legislature has been consistently growing since 1991, when it stood at 2.1%. IPU Parline reported in April 2024 that 40% of Moldovan MPs were women, which put the Republic of Moldova in the 26th place out of 181 ranked countries for female representation in parliaments. The Republic of Moldova’s national parliament is therefore closer to gender-parity than most EU states and is on a par with the gender make-up of the European Parliament. Furthermore, its legislature is also above the average in the Eastern Partnership (EaP) context in terms of gender balance (IPU Parline, 2024). The parliament’s role in monitoring and promoting equality and women’s rights, and in holding the government to account in these spheres, was also augmented in 2022 by the creation of a dedicated Platform for Moldovan Women MPs (Moldpress, 2022).

Table 2. Women in national parliaments in the EaP states (lower or single house)

Country	MD	AR	AZ	GE	UA	European Parliament	European average	Global average
Female MPs	40%	36%	18%	19%	21%	39%	31%	27%

Source: IPU Parline <https://data.ipu.org/women-ranking/>, 2024.

Such impressive growth in women’s representation in the Moldovan Parliament is not reflected at the local level despite the new gender requirements of the electoral law. Whilst the mayoral elections of November 2023 saw more female candidates, only

24% of them won (215 women) and became mayors, which amounts to a rise of only 2% compared to the 2019 election. Furthermore, if we look through a sharper gender lens at the results of the 2023 mayoral/local elections, we observe a ‘gender loss’ of 4.8%. According to UNDP *et al.*, the gender loss is the gap between the share of female candidates and that of females eventually elected to the position. It is this difference that ‘directly expresses the competitiveness of women, relative to men, in the electoral race, but more importantly - the voter’s willingness to vote for a woman or to disregard the candidate’s gender in determining the voting option’ (UNDP *et al.*, 2024).

Table 3. The election of women as mayors in the Republic of Moldova

Mayoral election date	2007	2011	2015	2019	2023	2027 (projected)	2031 (projected)
% of women candidates becoming mayors	18%	18%	20.5%	22.4%	24%	26%	28%
Gender loss (aggregated national figure)	-5.5%	-0.9%	-2%	- 4.7%	-4.8%	No data	No data

Source: UNDP *et al.*, 2024.

The proportion of women holding roles in government is also truncated. At the time of writing this paper, women held four ministerial posts in the Moldovan government with portfolios for health, justice, environment and European integration (the Minister for European integration is also a deputy prime minister). Hence, women hold only 25% of all ministerial posts, which is below the EU average of 33.9% (2022 figure), yet still above the Republic of Moldova’s EaP peers (2022 figures) (World Bank, n.d.). Meanwhile, though the Republic of Moldova performs well on the question of gender equality in the judiciary (in 2022, 51.2% of Moldovan judges were women) (statbank.statistica.md), equality does not extend to senior judicial roles, which remain the preserve of male judges (interview with a Moldovan gender expert, 2023).

Women, the economy, and the labour market

Despite sizeable improvements in the Republic of Moldova’s overall economic performance over the past decade, the country’s socio-economic landscape remains uneven and gendered in several ways.

To begin, although the Republic of Moldova has made rapid strides since 1991 in reducing poverty, statistics suggest that poverty is a ‘feminised’ phenomenon rooted in stubborn systemic factors. A combination of unequal roles in (unpaid) housework and child rearing, low employment rates amongst women and a tendency for females to be employed in the informal sector and subsequently without social protections and guaranteed minimum salaries, reinforces women’s economic vulnerability and a greater likelihood of slipping into poverty (interview with Moldovan gender expert, 2023). Consequently, poverty continues to be more prevalent in female-led

households than in those headed by men (National Bureau of Statistics of the Republic of Moldova, n.d.). Women over sixty years of age and residing in rural areas are the most vulnerable in this respect due to limited work opportunities, significant unpaid domestic responsibilities and reliance on remittances from family members working abroad. The situation is exacerbated by retirement conditions, which palpably catalyse the ‘feminisation’ of poverty amongst the country’s aging population. Pensions are unequal with significant disparities between the sums received by Moldovan men and women. Statistics from 2023 suggest that males (non-agricultural sector) receive 1000 lei MDL more per month than their female counterparts, which when looked at from a historical perspective suggests that the pension gender gap is widening rather than shrinking (statbank.statistica.md, n.d.).

The Republic of Moldova has a stubborn gender pay gap, which averages 13.6% in favour of males. The gender pay gap varies across sectors with the biggest differences recorded in information and communications (38.1%), and in the financial and insurance sectors (32.5%) (statbank.statistica.md, n.d.).

What sustains the gender pay gap and the gendered aspects of the Moldovan economy is the fact that women are less active in the job market and are also likely to have ‘vulnerable employment’ (ILO, n.d.). This includes seasonal agricultural work, as well as part-time and informal work arrangements, which lack adequate social protections. This systemic situation perpetuates deficiencies in gender-equality practices, and consequently creates a permissive environment for a continuation of gender-based discrimination in the workplace, despite the new legislation in this field (interview with a Moldovan gender expert, 2023).

Gender-Based Violence

The prevalence of gender-based violence (GBV) within a society is an important indicator of the quality of women’s rights, and a reflection of the acceptance of gender equality.

The Republic of Moldova has made significant progress in establishing legal frameworks concerning GBV, and has joined the relevant European and international conventions, including the Council of Europe’s Istanbul Convention, which came into force in Moldova in May 2022. In response to the Council of Europe’s baseline study on the Republic of Moldova by the Group of Experts on Action against Violence against Women and domestic violence ‘GREVIO’ (Council of Europe, 2023), a national programme for the Prevention and Combating of Violence Against Women and Family Violence 2023-2027 was established. In March 2023, the first specialised service for victims of sexual violence was set up and, in April 2023, the government adopted a new regulation allowing third parties to initiate sexual-violence investigations. A new State Agency for the Prevention of Domestic Violence against women has been set up with dedicated teams of police, doctors, and social workers being trained alongside one another to improve the coordination and effectiveness of investigations into sexual violence (interview with a Moldovan gender expert, 2023). Legal amendments have also been made in order to redefine the concept of rape and change the penalties for

domestic violence, ensuring that preventive detention is possible.

Despite these strides to create a GBV ecosystem aligned with the European and international best practices, in 2023, 685 people were victims of registered family-violence crimes, of which 71.2% were female (statbank.statistica.md). The actual number of incidents is likely to be far higher, since GBV in all its forms is one of the least reported crimes, with victims fearing stigma, reprisals, and/or lacking trust in the law enforcement and justice systems (interview with a Moldovan gender expert, 2023). Furthermore, the war in Ukraine and the large-scale arrival of vulnerable groups into the Republic of Moldova have triggered new forms of GBV and sexual abuse, the extent of which has yet to be fully documented (interview with a Moldovan gender expert, 2023).

Strong gender-defined social roles, stereotypes, and traditional authority structures, which subjugate women's rights, reinforce the gap between *de jure* and *de facto* improvements in GBV in the Republic of Moldova (Pirju, Panaitescu, Sorcaru, Marinescu, and Popa, 2024). Traditional social norms, which reinforce patriarchal values and often condone violence against women, are part of a vicious circle that also sustains women's economic dependence on men and creates risk factors for domestic and intimate partner violence (interview with a Moldovan gender expert, 2023).

There is still a high proportion of people who consider women's presence in politics inappropriate, and who believe that women are not suited to decision-making and leadership positions (Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum, 2024). These stereotypes are also fuelled by political actors and agents of foreign (Russian) or oligarchic influence who seek to weaponize gender issues ([watchdog.md](#), 2024).

3. Conclusions

This article elaborated a novel and exploratory 'gender lens' to consider EU-Republic of Moldova relations in the context of the latter's membership prospects, and to highlight issues and debates that tend to be sidelined in the existing enlargement literature. The article asked the question 'What can we learn by applying a gender lens to contemporary relations between the Republic of Moldova and the European Union?', and it concludes by formulating four answers to this question.

First, it is evident that gender factors are far more securely rooted in the EU's *acquis communautaire* and in the conditionality toolbox than was the case in the 2004 and 2007 enlargement rounds. Gender, inclusion, women's rights, and equality are strongly anchored across all the membership negotiating clusters, while the monitoring and progress report methodologies pay attention to these issues with clear benchmarks in mind. The validity of this observation notwithstanding, the prospect of a fast-track enlargement for the Republic of Moldova in which compromises are made, and security issues subjugate other factors within the negotiating practices, means that the EU will probably not hold Moldova to account on its gender-related membership obligations, which may prompt backsliding. In conclusion, based on the evidence presented in this article, there is a significant tension between a gender-inclusive enlargement and an expedited EU accession.

Second, though the Republic of Moldova is well-placed in the international gender rankings, a deeper delve into the subject, and reference to national statistics and expertise reveals inconsistencies and a social landscape still characterised by traditional patriarchal norms, which sustain inequalities and gender-based risks and vulnerabilities, including violence. Furthermore, though improvements have occurred, democratic institutions and the rule of law remain weak in this country, facts that limit the extent to which gender-related laws and norms are consistently applied. In sum, the case of the Republic of Moldova shows that, despite having an EU-compliant gender ecosystem, there are shortcomings in policy implementation. The country's polarised political system also means that a cross-party consensus on gender equality has not emerged. Instead, gender and equality issues have become heavily weaponised along a pro-EU versus a pro-Russian axis.

Third, when it comes to women, politics, and power, though the Republic of Moldova performs relatively well in terms of 'representation', this progress is less clear when it comes to 'substance'. Whilst gender parity based on numbers seems to be in reach in the parliament and in the judiciary, the Republic of Moldova still does not have a 'critical mass' of female decision-makers across government bodies and in senior roles in state institutions. Briefly, the incentives and procedures established to promote equal opportunities and gender-responsive governance are not yet consistently applied. In this scenario, it is questionable as to whether the screening process and subsequent membership negotiations between the Republic of Moldova and the EU will be sufficiently gender sensitive and equipped to fully evaluate and plan for the gendered impacts of accession.

Fourth, on the theme of women, the economy, and the labour market, the application of a gender lens reveals a stratified landscape. Females do more unpaid domestic work, earn less than males, and are poorer, even when retired and even if they have a higher level of education and training. These factors make it more likely that women live in poverty and/or become dependent on remittances from abroad. The persistence of the informal economy also reinforces female economic vulnerabilities, since it deprives women of social insurance, maternity leave, job security, and structured career opportunities to a higher degree than it affects men. In conclusion, based on current trends and in anticipation of the structural changes brought on by future EU membership, Moldovan women are unlikely to profit, at least in the short term, especially if a fast-track enlargement occurs.

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