

MEETING THE EUROPEAN UNION ACCESSION CRITERIA FOR THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA THROUGH ALIGNMENT WITH THE ACQUIS IN THE AGRICULTURAL SECTOR

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Abstract. The adoption and implementation of the EU acquis in the agricultural sector are crucial aspects of the Republic of Moldova's accession process to the European Union. Firstly, on June 27, 2014, an ambitious and innovative Association Agreement was signed between the European Union and Moldova, which included a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA). This agreement establishes the foundations for a more robust political alliance and greater economic integration, whilst promoting shared values and enhanced co-operation in areas of mutual interest. Regarding trade, the DCFTA facilitates Moldovan exports and imports by reducing tariffs and simplifying customs procedures, making them more efficient and faster. Additionally, the Agreement further encourages trade by progressively aligning Moldovan legislation, regulations, and procedures – including standards – with those of the European Union. The present study analyses the process of adopting and implementing the European Union acquis in the agricultural sector of the Republic of Moldova, highlighting the importance of this process in the context of European integration. The study examines the legislative framework, agricultural policies, and economic implications of harmonisation with EU norms. A mixed *methodology* was used for this study, including: documentary analysis involves the examination of pertinent national and European legislation, official reports, and public policy documents; a comparative study is required in order to evaluate how other candidate states have adopted the agricultural acquis and to determine the lessons that can be applied in Moldova's case. *The objective* of this study is to identify the main challenges and opportunities associated with the adoption of the EU acquis in the agricultural sector of the Republic of Moldova, emphasizing the impact of this process on the national economy and integration into the European single market. Moreover, the objective of the present study is to furnish recommendations that will facilitate the acceleration of the process of compliance with European standards. *Conclusion of the study.* The adoption and implementation of the EU acquis in the agricultural sector represent a crucial step in the accession process of the Republic of Moldova to the European Union. Notwithstanding the challenges presented by this transition, including the necessity for modernising agricultural infrastructure, adjusting subsidy policies, and improving quality control mechanisms, the long-term benefits are substantial. *The following are the key advantages.* The increased competitiveness of Moldovan agricultural products in the European market is attributable to their alignment with EU standards. The present paper sets out the argument for the importance of increased access to European funds for the purpose of agricultural development and technology modernisation. The enhancement of food security and sustainability within the agricultural sector is to be achieved through the implementation of eco-friendly and efficient practices. In order to accelerate the harmonisation process, it is essential that there is close collaboration between authorities, farmers and European partners. In addition, continuous investment in agricultural education, infrastructure and research is required. Consequently, the Republic of Moldova has the potential to transform this process into a strategic opportunity for its economic development and sustainable integration into the European Union.

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Moreover, the Agreement entails a reduction in tariffs on agricultural products. Moldova has committed to the elimination of tariffs on the majority of its agricultural products following a transitional period of up to ten years. This aspect is of particular importance for:

- Alcoholic beverages, such as wines;
- certain processed food products.

In addition, Moldova has pledged to remove tariffs applied within specific tariff rate quotas (TRQs) for various products considered sensitive, including:

- Pork;
- poultry;
- dairy products;
- processed meat products;
- sugar.

Moreover, the European Union has eliminated tariffs on agricultural products from the first day, with the exception of certain sensitive products for which a tariff rate quota (TRQ) has also been established. Consequently, the annual trade of these sensitive products is subject to limitations and customs duties. Should Moldovan imports reach a specified threshold, the European Union may exercise its prerogative to suspend the tariff reduction for these goods for a period of six months. In accordance with the provisions stipulated in the agreement, the imposition of export duties is not applicable in this instance. This also includes a provision known as the "standstill" clause (Ministry of Agriculture and Food Industry). This clause serves to guarantee that neither the EU nor Moldova will be permitted to raise customs duties or introduce new taxes that would have an impact on goods originating from the other party. Furthermore, the agreement prohibits quantitative restrictions on both imports and exports. The Association Agreement has been instrumental in consolidating the political, economic, and cultural relations between the two parties, paving the way for enhanced co-operation in a multitude of domains, including trade, justice, security, environment, and regional development. Following the ratification of the Association Agreement, the Republic of Moldova initiated a series of reforms to harmonise its legal framework and standards with those of the European Union. The implementation of the Association Agreement has been a complex and sometimes challenging process; however, Moldova has made significant progress in its institutional, economic, and social reforms within this framework. The relationship between the Republic of Moldova and the European Union has evolved significantly over the past decades, with the signing and implementation of the Association Agreement marking a crucial milestone in Moldova's path toward European integration and in strengthening co-operation with the European Union (Varied Ranges of Agri-Food Products). The collaboration between the Republic of

Moldova and the European Union in the agricultural sector and rural development includes the following aspects, amongst others:

- Promoting mutual understanding of agricultural and rural development policies.
- Strengthening administrative capacity at the central and local levels to plan, evaluate and implement policies in line with EU norms and best practices.
- Promoting the modernisation and sustainable development of agricultural production.
- Sharing knowledge and best practices related to rural development policies to support the economic prosperity of rural communities.
- Disseminating knowledge and promoting extension services for agricultural producers.
- Enhancing coordination on issues addressed within international organizations to which both parties are members.

The EU *acquis* constitutes the body of legislation, rules, standards, and practices established by the European Union across various fields, which are mandatory for both member states and candidate countries. With regard to agriculture, the *acquis* comprises EU regulations and directives that govern various aspects of agricultural production, trade in agricultural products, and environmental protection in the context of agricultural activities.

The relevant sectors for agriculture within the EU *acquis* includes:

- Common Agricultural Policy (CAP);
- Quality standards for agricultural and food products;
- Plant and animal health;
- Food safety;
- Use of pesticides and other agrochemicals;
- Environmental protection in the context of agricultural activities.

The European Union has established a comprehensive regulatory framework and stringent standards for ensuring food quality and safety. These include stipulations pertaining to the provenance, composition, processing, and labelling of agricultural and food products. The promotion of sustainable and environmentally friendly agricultural practices is of paramount importance, and these include the efficient management of natural resources, biodiversity conservation, pollution reduction, and responsible use of water and soil resources. In order to comply with the EU *acquis* and strengthen its prospects for EU accession, the Republic of Moldova must adopt and implement these European Union standards and norms in the agricultural sector. The alignment with the EU *acquis* in agriculture involves the harmonisation of legislation, the institutionalisation and modernisation of the agricultural sector, and the development of administrative capacities to ensure the effective

enforcement and application of EU rules and standards (Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area).

The main criteria for European Union accession applicable to the agricultural sector include:

1. Legislation and standards. Moldova should adopt and implement EU legislation and standards in the agricultural sector. This includes strict rules on food safety, agricultural quality, environmental protection and animal welfare.

2. Administrative capacity. It is crucial for Moldova to develop a strong administrative capacity to manage and implement an agricultural policy that is aligned with EU policies. This implies strengthening institutions and governance systems in the agricultural sector.

3. Competitiveness and sustainability. Moldova should increase the competitiveness and sustainability of its agricultural sector. This involves modernising agricultural infrastructure, supporting innovation and research in agriculture, and promoting sustainable agricultural practices.

4. Policy coherence. Moldova should ensure policy coherence in the agricultural sector so that its objectives are in line with those of the European Union and contribute to the sustainable development of the agricultural sector.

The Republic of Moldova has demonstrated a commitment to aligning its agricultural policies with those of the European Union, evidenced by the adoption and implementation of relevant legislation and standards. These efforts encompass legislative amendments to align national laws with those of the European Union, as well as initiatives to enhance agricultural infrastructure and administrative capacity. Nevertheless, corruption and poor governance persist as significant challenges in Moldova, impeding the nation's capacity to implement EU legislation and standards in the agricultural sector with effectiveness. Moreover, the Republic of Moldova faces challenges related to the modernisation of agricultural infrastructure and the attraction of investment in the sector. This, in turn, has the effect of limiting the country's ability to enhance the competitiveness and sustainability of its agricultural sector (Antoci, 2018). Furthermore, the country is confronted with a paucity of suitably qualified human resources and inadequate capacities within the agricultural sector, which hinders the effective implementation of European Union policies and standards. In order to advance in the EU accession process and align more closely with the EU acquis in agriculture, Moldova must make continuous efforts to overcome these challenges and accelerate reforms in the agricultural sector (Goodman David 2011). In order to achieve this objective, it is essential to enhance the effectiveness of existing institutions, address issues of corruption, encourage investment, modernise infrastructure, and cultivate human resources and competencies within the agricultural

sector. Adherence to the EU acquis in the agricultural sector offers both advantages and challenges for producers in Moldova. Firstly, the alignment with the acquis is conducive to the facilitation of access to European markets for Moldovan agricultural products. This, in turn, engenders increased export opportunities and a concomitant increase in the incomes of producers. The implementation of European standards in Moldovan agricultural production has been shown to engender a high level of quality and food safety, thereby strengthening consumer confidence and enhancing the reputation of Moldovan agricultural products on the international market. In order to comply with the EU acquis, financial and technical assistance from the European Union is available to support the modernisation and technological advancement of Moldova's agricultural sector, thereby improving efficiency and competitiveness for producers. Major challenges in implementing European standards and regulations include Significant initial costs for producers to adapt to the new requirements, including investments in infrastructure, technology and professional training. Exposure to increased competition in European markets, as Moldovan producers face increased competition from EU producers, who benefit from more advanced resources and technologies, affecting the competitiveness of Moldovan agricultural products. Alignment with the EU acquis is of crucial importance in enhancing the competitiveness of Moldovan agricultural products in the European single market. The implementation of European standards has been demonstrated to enhance the quality and food safety of Moldovan agricultural products, thereby conferring a competitive advantage in the European market. The approximation of the acquis has been demonstrated to encourage the diversification of agricultural production and innovation in Moldova's agricultural sector, thereby creating new opportunities for development and maximising the country's agricultural potential. Moreover, adherence to the EU acquis law facilitates Moldovan producers' access to European funds and markets, thereby stimulating economic growth and the sustainable development of the agricultural sector. It is evident that aligning with the EU acquis in agriculture will be a pivotal step in enhancing the competitiveness of Moldovan agricultural products within the European single market. This will result in substantial benefits for both producers and the Moldovan economy as a whole. The comprehensive implementation of the EU acquis in agriculture within the Republic of Moldova poses a considerable challenge, necessitating substantial investments in agricultural infrastructure, technology, research, and development, in addition to enhancing safety and quality standards. It is imperative to possess sufficient financial resources and to manage them effectively to ensure progress in this direction.

In order to facilitate this transition, it is imperative to consider the mobilisation of domestic funds and the securing of external financing, including assistance and loans from the EU. The accession of the Republic of Moldova to the European Union is set to have a considerable impact on the agricultural sector. The accession of Moldova to the European Union will result in the opening of European markets to Moldovan agricultural products, thereby providing new export opportunities and fostering economic growth.

- However, to fully benefit from this access, Moldovan farmers will need to comply with European standards and regulations, which may require additional investments in modernization and the improvement of production processes.

- EU accession will intensify competition in the agricultural sector, as Moldovan farmers will have to compete with European producers both in domestic and international markets. This will create a need for restructuring and specialization in sectors where the Republic of Moldova has comparative advantages, as well as investments in technology and innovation to maintain competitiveness.

- EU accession may impose higher standards for the quality and safety of agricultural products, which could lead to an overall improvement in the quality of Moldovan products and an increase in consumer confidence, both in the domestic and international markets.

- To comply with EU standards and regulations and remain competitive, Moldova's agricultural sector will need to modernize and diversify. This may involve investments in technology, infrastructure, education, and research to support innovation and the sustainable growth of the sector.

Consequently, EU accession will present substantial opportunities for the Republic of Moldova in the agricultural sector. However, it will necessitate significant endeavours to surmount the challenges and successfully transition towards compliance with the EU *acquis*. Achieving alignment with the EU's accession criteria for the Republic of

Moldova through adherence to the EU's *acquis* in agriculture is a multifaceted yet pivotal process for effective integration into the EU and the sustainable development of Moldova's agricultural sector. The implementation of structural reforms in agriculture is imperative for enhancing competitiveness, improving the quality of agricultural products, and adapting to the requirements of the European market. The effective implementation of EU legislation and standards in the agricultural sector is contingent upon the strengthening of public institutions and administrative capacities.

In the process of aligning with the EU *acquis*, the Republic of Moldova will need to place special emphasis on environmental protection and the promotion of sustainable agricultural practices.

In conclusion, it is evident that in order for the Republic of Moldova to integrate into the European Union, it is necessary for the country to meet the specific criteria and conditions imposed by the EU. Following the fulfilment of all the necessary requirements and the formal acceptance of Moldova by the member states, the country will officially accede to the European Union. Presently, Moldova holds the status of a candidate country. Furthermore, Moldova is obliged to implement a series of legislative, political and economic reforms in order to comply with the EU's standards in all the relevant sectors. In the agricultural sector, it is imperative that full compliance with the standards set by the European Union is ensured. Recommendations for Moldova's EU Accession in Agriculture:

- Development of a comprehensive strategy for the implementation of EU legislation in agriculture with clear goals, timelines and specific measures;

- encouraging investments in agricultural infrastructure, such as irrigation systems, grain storage facilities, and processing units, to enhance the competitiveness of Moldova's agricultural sector.

By adhering to these recommendations, Moldova can expedite its alignment with the EU *acquis* in agriculture, thereby enhancing its proximity to full EU membership.

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