

EU-Moldova people-to-people contacts

Since the Republic of Moldova joined the Eastern Partnership regional initiative 10 years ago, its ties with the EU have grown closer. In recent years, however, the country's political, economic and societal stability has become increasingly wobbly, and public trust in institutions and even NGOs remains low. The EU is working to strengthen the role of civil society organisations in public life.

EU-Moldova ties

Since 2009, Moldova has strengthened its ties with the EU and joined the [Eastern Partnership](#) (EaP). The EU introduced a [visa-free regime](#) for Moldovan citizens in 2014. The [EU-Moldova Association Agreement](#) (AA), with its Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area, was signed in [June 2014](#) and entered fully into force on 1 July 2016, [boosting](#) EU-Moldova political and economic ties. Yet, recent problems involving an erosion of [democratic standards](#) and the rule of law, a lack of fair and transparent [elections](#), a not so impartial judiciary, and insufficient [anti-corruption](#) and anti-money-laundering efforts have strained EU-Moldova ties.

With a view to increasing the concrete benefits for Moldovans, the EU adopted new multiannual programming for the country, the 2017-2020 [Single Support Framework](#), in September 2017. It focuses on governance reforms, economic development, connectivity and people-to-people contacts. The importance of bringing tangible results to citizens was also highlighted in the November 2017 EaP [Summit Declaration](#), while a [Joint Staff Working Document](#) identified 20 deliverables that need to be achieved in the context of the EaP by 2020. In addition to increasing engagement with civil society organisations (CSOs) as a top cross-cutting priority, mobility and people-to-people contacts are among these 20 deliverables. [Statistical analysis](#) of civil society in Moldova, commissioned by the EU Delegation in Chisinau, shows that the most popular areas of CSO activity are mobility, people-to-people and education. Youth and children are the main target groups.

The role of civil society in EU policies towards Moldova

According to the 2018-2020 EU [Roadmap](#) for engagement with civil society in Moldova, the situation of civil society in the country is 'characteristic for countries with unconsolidated democratic systems', defined by a weak enabling environment that hampers the public impact of CSOs. According to a recent mapping of CSOs in Moldova, the country had 11 562 officially registered non-commercial organisations as of April 2018. CSOs have limited infrastructure, and largely depend on direct grants. In recent years, [concerns](#) about the shrinking space for civil society have been growing, partly due to legislative initiatives for banning foreign funding for CSOs involved in political activities.

The EU's engagement with Moldovan citizens and CSOs

The [EaP Index 2017](#) recommends that civil society engage 'more actively in monitoring the implementation of public policies and of the commitments under the EU-Moldova Association Agreement'. It also recommends that the EU re-orient financial assistance to support 'projects aiming to deliver direct benefits to citizens' as well as 'domestic agents of democratic change', such as civil society, grassroots organisations and independent media, in addition to small and medium-sized enterprises. The EU organises biannual meetings with CSOs, including marginalised groups, ahead of the EU-Moldova [human rights dialogue](#) and [Association Council](#) meetings. In addition to this, CSOs are consulted on new EU programmes and on strategic documents such as the association agenda and implementation report, the democracy action plan, the single support framework and the annual action programmes.

Visa liberalisation: progress and perceptions

Since 28 April 2014, Moldovan citizens with a biometric passport can travel to the Schengen area without a visa, and more than [1.5 million](#) Moldovans have already used this opportunity. Despite the fact that this development has brought about increased social interaction between the EU and Moldova, and that the

EU is the largest donor to civil society in Moldova, the public perception of the EU in Moldova has worsened since 2016. Whereas 52 % of respondents to a 2016 [survey](#) conducted for the EU's annual survey report on Moldova said they had a positive image of the EU, this number decreased to 43 % in 2017, only increasing slightly to 48 % in 2018. At the same time, however, 87 % of respondents (up 8 % from 2017) said they were aware of the EU's financial support. This percentage is the highest in the region and significantly above the regional average of 57 %.

Education and training

Support for Moldova's integration into the European research area is provided through the EU's support programme for research, [Horizon 2020](#). Moldova was the first Eastern Partner to [sign up](#) to this programme in 2014. The country also actively participates in the Erasmus+ programme and benefits from cooperation, exchanges, capacity building and mobility opportunities in the field of education and youth. In March 2015, Moldova joined the European programme for culture, Creative Europe. Between 2015 and 2017, over 900 Moldovan students and academic staff made use of Erasmus+ [mobility](#) to study and teach in the EU. Furthermore, more than 3 000 young people and youth workers from Moldova have participated in Erasmus+ exchanges, youth policy dialogue and volunteering activities. Nine Moldovan institutions are involved in capacity-building projects in the field of youth, fostering civic engagement and entrepreneurship as part of the EU4Youth initiative implemented under Erasmus+.

The role of the European Parliament and the European Committee of the Regions

The European Parliament plays a key role in EU-Moldova relations, in particular through its delegation to the EU-Moldova Parliamentary Association Committee and its democracy support activities (lead Member of Parliament for Moldova: Petras Auštrevičius (ALDE, Lithuania). As part of these activities, the Parliament sent an [official delegation](#) to Moldova to observe the February 2019 parliamentary elections. In its November 2018 [resolution](#) on the Implementation of the EU-Moldova AA, Parliament expressed concern about signs of a further shrinking of space for the country's civil society. In its July 2018 [resolution](#) following the invalidation of the mayoral elections in Chişinău, Parliament called on authorities to respect international principles and guarantee an enabling environment for civil society. The European Committee of the Regions engages with Moldova through the Conference of Regional and Local Authorities for the Eastern Partnership ([CORLEAP](#)).

The EU-Moldova Civil Society Platform

The EU-Moldova AA (Article 442) stipulates the establishment of a [civil society platform](#), tasked with promoting regular meetings of representatives of the civil societies of both parties. Established in May 2016, the EU-Moldova civil society platform consists of members of the European Economic and Social Committee and members of European civil society networks, including Cooperatives Europe and the EaP Civil Society Forum, on the one hand, and representatives of Moldovan civil society, on the other. The platform can make recommendations to the Association Council at ministerial level. The Association Committee (senior civil servant level) and the Parliamentary Association Committee are obliged to obtain their representatives' views on the fulfilment of the AA objectives on a regular basis.

Civil society in Transnistria: a work in progress

According to the above-mentioned [EU roadmap](#), the situation of civil society in the breakaway region of Transnistria differs significantly from the rest of Moldova. In addition to creating 'Government Organised Non-Governmental Organisations' (GONGOs), the de facto authorities in the self-proclaimed Transnistrian Moldavian Republic (PMR) only tolerate CSO activities in certain areas, such as environment and social rights, and encourage CSO activities related to social affairs and vulnerable people. Activities in other areas, such as human rights and media freedom, however, are largely discouraged. In February 2018, the de facto [Supreme Council](#) adopted a new 'law on NGOs' – in force since 19 May 2018 – forbidding NGOs to engage in (very broadly defined) 'political activities' and to receive external funding. The EU supports a peaceful settlement based on the territorial integrity of Moldova, with a special status for Transnistria. As part of EU support for confidence-building initiatives between the two parties, some [350 jobs](#) have been created and 70 people from both sides have set up businesses. The EU supports similar measures in Moldova's Gagauzia region.

