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THE EUROPEAN UNION'S ROLE IN ACHIEVING THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS: PROGRESS AND INFLUENCE IN THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA

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Abstract

This research examines the European Union's (EU) impact in implementing the United Nations 2030 Agenda and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The study limits its observations to the case study of the Republic of Moldova (RM), given its long cooperation with the EU and the current struggles it faces. Moldavian progress against SDGs shows a positive trend, partially due to the EU's direct and indirect impacts. Through donations to the 2030 Agenda and aligning the EU-integration objectives of RM with the SGD targets, the EU exerts a positive direct influence. Additional impact comes from the pressure against the Moldavian government to adjust and align its regulatory framework with the European standards and participation in the EU-funded developmental programmes. The indirect effect is making Moldova reach better governmental potential, the rule of law and protection of human rights. The EU combats negative domestic and external obstacles that slow down Moldova's development and the reach of the 2030 Agenda.

Keywords

2030 Agenda • United Nations • European Union • Sustainable Development Goals • Republic of Moldova

1. Introduction

In the face of recent global challenges, the international community, represented by the United Nations (UN), has agreed on implementing a global strategy to combat poverty, environmental challenges, discrimination and injustice. The action plan, entitled "The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development" (in short, 2030 Agenda), comprises 17 main Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and 169 targets (United Nations 2015). Their role is to create a vision and set objectives for a more prosperous world.

While the 2030 Agenda combats challenges faced by all nations, it is essential to acknowledge the role played by different actors in its implementation. The European Union (EU) emerges as a significant agent in this context. The EU contributed to developing the strategic vision and is now committed to facilitating this initiative. The EU's dedication to realising the 2030 Agenda is articulated in the intent to help in worldwide SDG implementation and the Global Gateway policy (European Commission 2023a). Inevitably, such actions promote the EU as a world player and institute it as a leader in influencing global trends.

Therefore, the research aims to understand the role of the EU in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and the multifaceted contribution it has to the achievement of the SDGs. However, the scale and impact of the 2030 Agenda could make it difficult to assess, distinguishing the EU's role alongside other significant actors. Hence, the paper will focus on understanding and describing the ways in which the EU contributes to this process by looking at the concrete case of the Republic of Moldova (RM).

Moldova was chosen due to its complex relationship with the EU, marking periods of distancing and rapprochement (Tostes and Renni 2021). Most recently, the RM became a EU candidate (as of March 2022) facing severe problems of post-COVID-19 reconstruction and repercussions from the Russian military intervention in Ukraine. This gives a unique possibility to understand how the EU reacts to different scenarios and whether the relationship's 'warmth' impacts this context.

The analysis will concentrate on describing Moldova's success in achieving the SDGs so far. After understating the *status quo*, the article will proceed to define the EU's impact in reaching the current results and how the EU contributed to achieving these goals.

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2. 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and SDG Implementation in RM

2.1. The strategic interaction between RM and UN

Starting in 2015, RM and the UN interacted under three Cooperation Agreements. The first is not technically a part of the 2030 Agenda, but a Partnership Framework continuing the UN–RM cooperation based on the Millennium Development Goals[1] (MDGs). The 'Towards Unity in Action' (UNPF-TUA) Action Plan (UNPF-TUA 2012) was set up as the strategic document delineating cooperation for the period 2013–2017, becoming a crossroads between the continuation of two global strategies implementation in Moldova. The UNPF-TUA agreement had three strategic areas: Democratic Governance, Justice, Equality and Human Rights; Human Development and Social Inclusion; and Environment, Climate Change and Disaster Risk Management. Each of these offered additional targeted outputs in association with the selected MDGs.

In 2016, Moldova established the National Coordination Council for Sustainable Development, a special institutional framework led by its prime minister to focus and monitor the implementation of SDGs in Moldova (Government of the Republic of Moldova 2020). It was targeting the cooperation agreement under the 2030 Agenda specifically, starting with the 'Republic of Moldova – United Nations Partnership Framework for Sustainable Development' (PFSD) for the period of 2018–2022 (PFSD 2017). Within this collaboration, the UN and Moldavian administration agreed to contribute in the areas of Governance, Human Rights and Gender Equality; Sustainable, Inclusive and Equitable Economic Growth; Environmental Sustainability and Resilience; and Inclusive and Equitable Social Development.

The final cooperation agreement, the 'United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework the Republic of Moldova 2023–2027' (UNSDCF), continues the approach of the PFSD, with similar priorities, but concentrates on achieving a few distinct outcomes (UNSDCF 2022). In this last cooperation agreement, Moldova targets 218 key activities out of 232 in total implemented by the UN (United Nations in Moldova 2023). The main priority areas of impact are Just and Inclusive Institutions and Equal Opportunity for Human Development; Participatory Government and Social Cohesion; Enhanced Shared Prosperity in a Sustainable Economy; and Green Development, Sustainable Communities and Disaster and Climate Resilience.

Even under a superfluous analysis of the cooperation frameworks, it is clear that the UN mission in Moldova shows consistency when it comes to setting the objectives for strengthening Moldova's development (Table 1). Within UNPF-TUA strategic cooperation, the UN targeted several areas of improvement, starting with Poverty eradication (the equivalent of SDG-1), improving Education (SDG-4), Health and Access to Medicine (SDG-3), fighting Environmental challenges (SDG-13), promoting Women Rights (SDG-5), develop better Governance and Justice systems (SGD-16) and finalising with Improving International Cooperation (SDG-17). The same areas of impact can be seen within the PFSD and UNSDCF. Although the principles are addressed in a different order, many goals continue and complement the targets and struggles of Moldova from the previous framework (Government of the Republic of Moldova 2020).

The action plans and priorities follow a path-dependent logic, combating and improving the aspects identified in continuous communication with the government and civic society (PFSD 2017; UNSDCF 2022). As was previously established, these are constantly addressing similar areas of impact: Governance and Justice, Human (social and economic) Development, and Environmental Resilience and Sustainable Transition. Moving to the 2030 Agenda, the main difference is that one of the strategic pillars, on Human Development and Social Inclusion, was split into two, targeting Social and Economic aspects separately (since PFSD in 2018). Nevertheless, the targeted outputs remained mainly the same, offering support in strengthening education, health, work conditions and social-service sectors (Table 1).

For each pillar in the cooperation frameworks, the transition to new or reconsidered outputs is based on the constant analysis of the work done and the efficiency of the previously implemented strategies. For example, in the UNSDCF cooperation plant, the change logic concerns not only strengthening the potential of Moldovan institutions but also empowering the citizens to access and reproduce their rights (UNSDCF 2022). This change can be tracked in the official report for the PFSD strategy, where the principles of involving and targeting civil society were suggested for increased efficiency of SGD implementation (Kosheleva and Cretu 2021). Similarly, the 2023–2027 cooperation agreement emphasises data application, utilisation and storage. This was a continuous issue for previous years of cooperation. Only around three-fourth of Moldova's statistical data (77% according to UNSDCF 2022) were useful for tracking the national progress against SDGs (and previously MDGs). More than 30% of the data collected were disaggregated (50% allow full coverage and 25% partial alignment with UN, UNSDCF), impeding the possibility to perform a robust analysis (Government of the Republic of Moldova 2020). The situation started to be mediated in the last years. Beginning in 2022, Moldova introduced a special chapter for presenting the efforts on SDG implementation within the annual statistical reports (National Bureau of Statistics of the Republic of Moldova 2022, 2023). Nevertheless, the aforementioned

1 The Millennium Development Goals are the predecessors of the SDGs, covering the precedent UN Global Plan for the period 2000-2015.

Table 1. UN Programmes and Targeted Outputs during 2030 Agenda (2015–2030)

UN Programme	Pillars of Impact/Strategic Priorities			
UNPF-TUA 2013-2017	Democratic Governance, Justice, Equity and Human Rights	Human Development and Social Inclusion		Environment, Climate Change, and Disaster Risk Management
	- Transparency, Accountability, and efficiency of public authorities - Uphold Justice and Rule of Law - Protection of Human Rights, non-Discrimination, and Gender Equality - Engagement of Media in Society to uphold Human Rights and Rule of Law	- A better Economic Growth (improve innovation, Agriculture sector, work conditions) - Quality and access to Health Care Services - Access to equitable Education - Access to Quality Social Services		- Improve Environmental Management - Promote Climate Change Resilient and Sustainable Economic Growth
PFSD 2018-2022	Government Human Rights and Gender Equality	Inclusive and Equitable Social Development	Sustainable, Inclusive and Equitable Economic Growth	Environmental Stability and Resilience
	- Transparency and Independence of Justice System - Access to Quality Justice - Zero Tolerance for Corruption (in Justice) - Strengthen Human Rights and improvement of legal practices and policy.	- Strengthen Health Care System - Strengthen Education System - Strengthen Social Protection and Social Services sectors.	- Improve education to promote needed market skills - Boost Transport (road) Infrastructure - Strengthen Financial Sector - Improve Business Climate	- Promote Renewable Energy and address Energy consumption and efficiency - Boost Agriculture/Agri-food Sector
	SDGs: 5; 10; 16; 17	SDGs: 1; 3; 4; 5;10; 16; 17	SDGs: 1; 2; 4 5; 8; 9; 10; 11; 12; 17	SDGs: 2; 3; 4; 5; 6; 7; 9; 11; 12; 13; 15; 17
UNSDCF 2023-2027	Participatory Governance and Social Cohesion	Just and Inclusive Institutions	Enhanced Shared Prosperity in a Sustainable Economy	Green Development, Sustainable Communities and Climate Resilience
	- Strengthen Human Rights Legislative Framework - Data transparency, usage and storage in Institutions (statistics) - Possibility to exercise and Respect for Civic Liberties and Rights - Ability to address Humanitarian Crises and Promote Justice for All	- Policies promoting Human Rights and are data/evidence-based - Access to Health, Education and Food Services (quality of public sector) - Improving Quality of Social Services - Fight against gender violence, discrimination and stereotyping	- Inclusive and Sustainable Economic Development - Empower Women in Economy and Decent Work Conditions - Innovation and Crisis Management competencies for Businesses - Empower entrepreneurship, employability and safety at work	- Government and policy capacity to tackle and promote Environmental policy - Management in the use of Natural resources and combat Climate Change - Enhance Value Added from Agricultural products - Capacity boost for Public and Civic stakeholders to combat Environmental Degradation
	SDGs: 1; 5; 10; 16; 17	SDGs: 1; 2; 3; 4; 5; 10;16; 17	SDGs: 1; 2; 3; 4; 5; 7; 8; 9; 17	SDGs: 5; 6; 7; 11; 12; 13; 15' 17

Author's Interpretation based on UN documentation.

problem still compromises this step, as the data on SDG-2 are presented only for the years 2015–2016, and the data for SDGs-12, 14 and 15 are updated until 2018–2019 (see National Bureau of Statistics of the Republic of Moldova 2022). In 2023, the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) of RM understood the need to present more recent data. However, they are also lagging in consistency (e.g. SGD-2 uses a different measure for the same goal 2.1.2, compared with 2022), and some indicators are missing the most recent years of reporting (National Bureau of Statistics of the Republic of Moldova 2023).

Another noticeable difference was switching the expected outputs of strengthening the agricultural sector from the priorities on Human Development in UNPF-TUA to be present as an Environmental output since PFSD. The main reason for switching can be attributed to two major factors. Those are the importance of the Agricultural Sector for the national economy (UNPF-TUA 2012; PFSD 2017; National Bureau of Statistics of the Republic of Moldova 2022, 2023; UNSDCF 2022) and its vulnerability in the face of Climate Change Risks (PFSD 2017). In this regard, the pillar for national economic development could be seen as the most volatile. The targeted outputs

vary significantly between the association frameworks. The difference is perceived even between the PFSD and UNSCF plans, as these focus on various aspects. The list ranges from boosting innovative potential in the first cooperation agreement to addressing the issues of transport infrastructure and mismatching education and work-related skills in PFSD. In 2023, it focused on addressing women's participation in the economy and reinstituted the importance of Innovation and business skills but dropped the infrastructural aspect.

One of the focuses in the UN–RM cooperation is the country's ability to respond to climate change and build sustainable economic models. Such practices as improving institutional response (through developing better regulatory structures) to environmental risks and waste management are following (or mentioned as important outputs, e.g. in PFSD 2017) throughout the cooperation strategies. Yet, another relevant aspect is the attention to tackling energy consumption in Moldova. Given its dependence on Russian gas and Transnistrian[2] electricity production, Moldova's energy security has become a sensible and complex issue for the country (Latkovskyi and Marushchak 2019; Nakashidze 2021; Tostes and Reni 2021; Wesolowsky 2021; Albulescu 2023).

As the cooperation frameworks continue similar impact patterns, outputs are also very focused. It is clear by observing the Governance pillar, tackling the goals of improving the judiciary system, promoting transparency and combating corruption. These continuous issues impede Moldova's transition to a fully operational democratic regime. The aims to promote healthcare, education and social services quality are also highlighted as part of the strategy to promote Social Development in RM. Despite some changes in the cooperation frameworks, this continuity of targets makes it easier to track the country's progress against SDGs.

2.2. Moldova's progress towards SDGs

Moldova's efforts to cooperate with UN representatives and reach the agreed objectives were usually characterised as successful or achieving relatively adequate levels of improvement (Gheorghe et al. 2016; United Nations Moldova 2017; Kosheleva and Cretu 2021). In the previous cooperation for the Millennium Developmental Goals, Moldova's progress was significant, reaching its final targets by 2012, and continued to improve until the end of the strategy in 2015 (Ghitu, Novac, and Gryga 2015). The cooperation for global strategy and under the UN banner proved of significant importance for the country. According to the rankings of the World Bank, Moldova has passed the threshold of 'Low Income' country, and in 2003, it was in the 'Low Middle Income' group. In 2019, Moldova passed to the next threshold and is now categorised as 'Upper Middle Income'.

Nevertheless, the consistency in the pillars of cooperation agreements indicates that the positive impact is not promoting radical changes or solving the issues completely. Such a scenario is possible when the rate of change and achieving the developmental goals are met with strict obstacles (e.g. Latkovskyi and Marushchak 2019; Nakashidze 2021; Iaţco and Bors 2022; Tkachuk 2022). Internal and external political, security, civic and socio-economic struggles impacted the implementation of the MDGs and SDGs. Therefore, the country reaches its developmental potential at a slower rate.

An example of such an issue is the Moldavian energy security crisis in 2021, when Gazprom accused Moldova of unpaid transactions, pushing the narrative that it is heavily indebted. According to Gazprom, RM owed over US$700 million and threatened to stop gas supplies just before the winter season (Wesolowsky 2021). As a result, the prices for natural resources (gas +177%, coal +213%) and electricity (+269%) were the ones that marked the highest price increase in 2022 (National Bureau of Statistics of the Republic of Moldova 2023). Russia's influence over the territorial integrity and weaponisation of natural resources became an important vulnerability over the years (Wesolowsky 2021; Albulescu 2023), allowing Russian influence to penetrate the internal political dialogue[3] and push for national political instability (e.g. during the presidency of Igor Dodon. Nakashidze 2021; Tkachuk 2022). This put heavy pressure on the national government, aggravated by the COVID-19 global pandemic in the same period. Given these contexts, the imminent attention to these crises drives Moldova's government's attention away from the SDGs.

The external crises are not the only reason for the slow development and SGDs reach. Internal political instability and corruption similarly create a disadvantageous and discontinuous environment for achieving strategic targets. Within the timeframe of SDG implementation, Moldova was struggling with oligarchic influence over the governance process, corrupt institutions and regulatory inefficiency (e.g. the role of Vlad Plahotniuc in the period 2016-2019. Latkovski and Marushchak 2019; Tanas 2019; Nakashidze 2021; Tkachuk 2022), affecting the incorporation of good practices and reach of positive change in the social and economic spheres. The same issues led to a degeneration of institutional transparency and the rule of law in the country and a constitutional crisis in 2019 (Tanas 2019; Tkachuk 2022).

Knowing these struggles, it is important to acknowledge that RM experienced a few years of drawbacks. The external and

2 The separatist region of Republic of Moldova exerts strong ties and influence from Russia, becoming a frozen-conflict after 1992. This is a major aspect and considered important obstacle in promoting national development and consolidating democratic rule (PFSD 2017; Latkovskyi and Marushchak 2019; Government of Republic of Moldova 2020; Nakashidze 2021; UNSDCF 2022).

3 Some consider this to be the response to Moldova's choice in the presidential elections of 2020, when Pro-EU candidate Maia Sandu replaced Pro-Russian President Igor Dodon (Wesolowsky 2021).

internal instability took a heavy toll, especially on improving Moldova's governance capacity and respect for human rights. This priority area includes three main elements, counting Governance/Rule of law, Justice and Corruption monitoring, and is directly affected by political stability. Several international research institutes, such as Freedom House, Transparency International and World Justice Project (WJP), tracked the gap.

According to Freedom House, the respect for political rights (max. 40 points) and civil liberties (max. 60 points) has a visible fluctuation (Figure 1). The lowest scores are marked in 2019, when the Republic of Moldova reached a peak in its political crisis, with two conflicting governments in the office simultaneously (Tanas 2019; Tkachuk 2022). Nevertheless, in the following period, with the instauration of a new government and following the victory of the pro-EU party and president in 2020 and 2021, the situation stabilises and the scores slightly increased.

The fight against corruption is another relevant output targeted by the UN in Moldova. According to Transparency International, the perceived level of corruption in the public sector worsened (most transparent 100 points) during the same political instability period (2016–2019). Even if the degree of transparency rises and reaches its best marks in 2022 (Figure 2), the overall scores highlight a severe problem for RM. In comparison, in the same year, the European average reached 66 points (Transparency International 2023), with the most corrupt EU members scoring over 40 (Hungary: 42 and Bulgaria: 43).

The WJP captures the country's performance on a set of principles, transposed finally in the Overall Rule of Law score (measured from 0 to 1). Some of the most relevant parameters include (1) Constraints on Government Power, measuring the legal and indirect (i.e. press influence) means to hold officials accountable; (2) Fundamental Rights reflect the progress of a country to follow (certain rights in) the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights; (3) Regulatory Enforcement marks the degree to which a new regulation (legal and administrative) is implemented and enforced within and outside the governmental institutions; and (4) Civil Justice measures the accessibility and correctness (non-discriminative, transparent and independent) of the justice system. According to WJP (Figure 3), Moldova worsened its situation in 2016–2019, concerning the respect for Fundamental Rights, Constraints

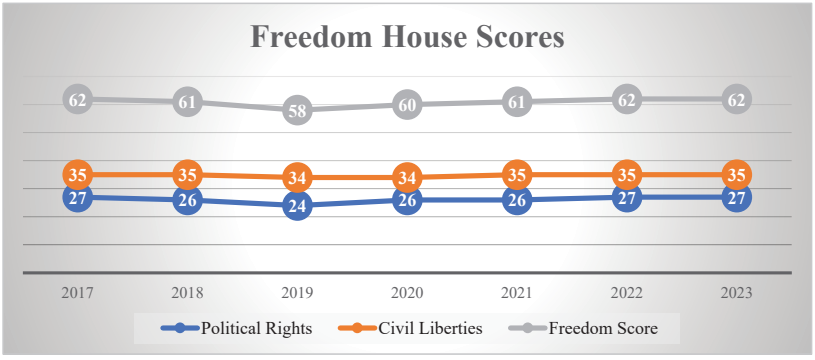

Figure 1. Freedom House Score. Republic of Moldova.
Data Source: freedomhouse.org.

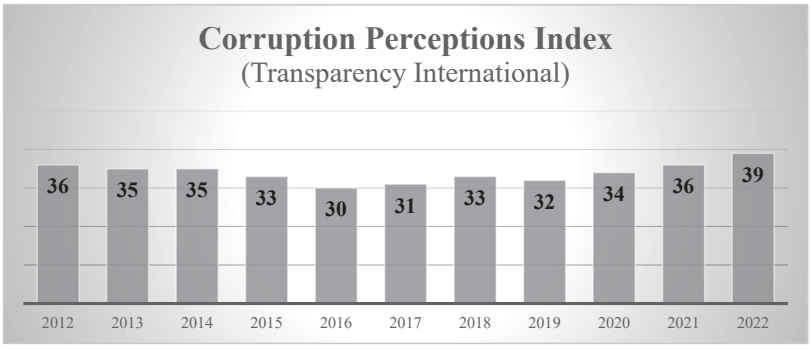

Figure 2. Corruption Perception Index Moldova (Transparency International).
Data Source: transparency.org.

on Government Powers and Regulatory Enforcement. All the rest, including the overall score, faced stagnation, with most parameters starting to rise since 2020.

A significant improvement can be seen in the case of Civil Justice and Constraints on Government, which have increased by 0.07 points since the start of the 2030 Agenda. These could be considered as good markers in Moldova's journey to become an EU member and reach better social development.

WJP indicators reveal an important aspect concerning Moldova's effort towards SDGs. Between 2014 and 2017, the Government of RM, under the influence of the EU, implemented multiple regulatory frameworks, combating discrimination and violence against women and minorities, strengthening human rights and the rule of law (Nakashidze 2021; Tostes and Renni 2021; Tkacuk 2022). The political crisis, which affected the enforcement capacity of the government, the pro-Russian presidency of Igor Dodon and the oligarchic influence in this timeframe affected and delayed the impact of these legislations. This indicates that the regulatory initiative is insufficient unless supported by the intent of the government to follow and reinforce these practices. All the indicators selected to measure Moldova's governance and rule of law show improvements after the crisis was mediated. Additionally, the victory of the pro-EU party in the parliamentary and presidential elections after 2020 is a factor that can be considered. The intent of the current government to become an EU member, and by reaching the next step after association (being registered as an EU candidate), might have promoted the necessary level of motivation to follow the previously established regulations.

The next set of priorities, reflecting on Moldova's Social Development and Inclusion, targets three main outputs: Health, Education and Social Services. Moldova fared differently in the context of these outputs. The weakest performance in this pillar can be considered in the Healthcare System, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic. The country managed adequately, given its limitations and issues in the governmental and healthcare sectors (Kosheleva and Cretu 2021). Nevertheless, the national indicators were far from ideal. According to the official data, up until 2023, only 31.5% of the population is vaccinated with two doses of the COVID-19 vaccines (Ministry of Health of the Republic of Moldova 2023). The low vaccination performance is bound to put pressure on healthcare institutions and thus create additional discrimination and gaps for vulnerable groups.

Moldova has yet to overcome several issues in the area of access to public health services. According to the National Institute of Statistics of RM, the ratio of physicians per 10,000 population dropped compared with the MDG-period results (Figure 4). After a significant decline in medical personnel in 2015, Moldova did not reach its previous indicators, even until 2022. A different situation is in the context of available hospitalisation beds, which steadily increases over the years. However, it is hard to conclude whether the degree of positive impact is determined significantly by applying national strategies and SDGs or whether the indicator's proportional increase is due to the depopulation.

Concerning the Education System, the situation is similar. The Republic of Moldova has good access to primary and lower secondary education (Table 2). These levels are mandatory; therefore, the table shows that all resident and additional non-resident populations enrol in these degrees of study.

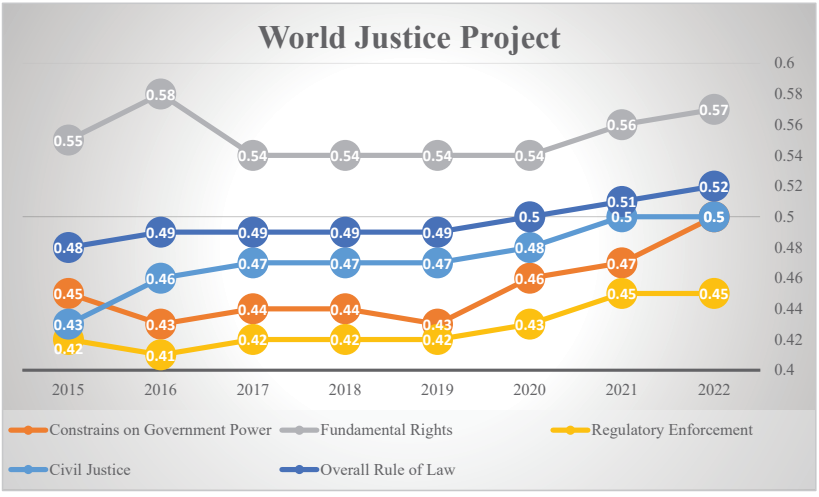

Figure 3. World Justice Project. Rule of Law.
Data Source: worldjusticeproject.org.

The situation is not the same for the next levels. The upper secondary education drops below 100%, as not all pupils have access or decide to continue their studies. An important note is that the enrolment rate is steadily increasing, with over 15% in the period of the 2030 Agenda.

As for these three levels of education, RM has a good representation in education for both boys and girls. Nevertheless, at the level of higher education, the enrolment gender gap is continuously widening. Since 2015, the enrolment in tertiary education for males grew by 15.7%, while for girls, the increase amounts to 24.6%. In 2023, the difference between males and females to continue their studies after secondary education is 21.6%. Such numbers raise great concerns for gender equality and further for the workforce prospects and labour conditions (Iatco and Bors 2022).

The quality of education is also a factor to consider. Despite Moldova's better performance in PISA tests in its last participation year (2018), the country is underperforming in all three areas (reading, math and science) compared with the OECD average (OECD 2019). More so, the gender gap is present in a similar trend. According to the report, girls significantly outperform boys in reading and science and are equal in their understanding of math. The problem with the education system continues, as it does not provide necessary career guidance for its students (Iatco and Bors 2022). These qualitative issues might be a potential explanation for the enrolment gap at the tertiary level, where the poor academic performance of boys and career choices impact their decision to become students in higher education. Therefore, despite the achieved results, Moldova has yet to properly address its issues in the Education System.

The quality and accessibility of Social Services is also a distinct output sought in this priority area. In this context, both access and quality of the social services have marked positive improvements (Figure 5). Since the start of the 2030 Agenda, Moldova has increased the population to which it provides social support, reaching 1.5 times the value in 2015. Simultaneously,

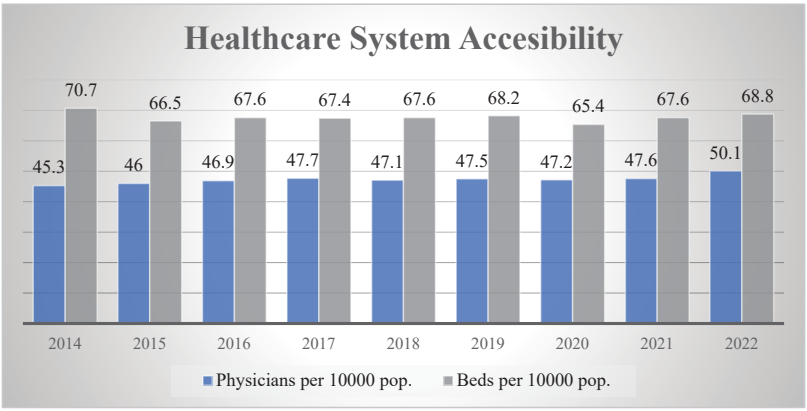

Figure 4. Healthcare System Accessibility.
Data Source: National Bureau of Statistics of the Republic of Moldova.

Table 2. Gross Enrolment Ratio of Resident Population (%)

	Primary education		Lower secondary education (gymnasium)		Upper secondary education		Tertiary education	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
2014/15	106.2	105.1	105.8	105.9	65.1	67.3	44.1	57.3
2015/16	105	103.7	106.7	106	66.7	68.9	43.6	57.1
2016/17	104.1	102.9	107.5	106.9	73.6	73.3	45.7	58.4
2017/18	104	102.3	107.8	106.8	76.5	75.5	45.9	59.9
2018/19	107.3	102.3	107.4	105.1	76.3	76.6	47.3	62.5
2019/20	107.2	105.3	106	103.9	78.5	80.5	47.6	65.2
2020/21	107.2	105.9	104.9	103.6	81.7	81.8	51.3	71.7
2021/22	107.6	106.6	104.3	103.5	82.5	83.5	56.9	79.5
2022/23	105.8	104.2	105.3	102.5	84.3	83.6	59.3	81.7

Data Source: National Bureau of Statistics of the Republic of Moldova.

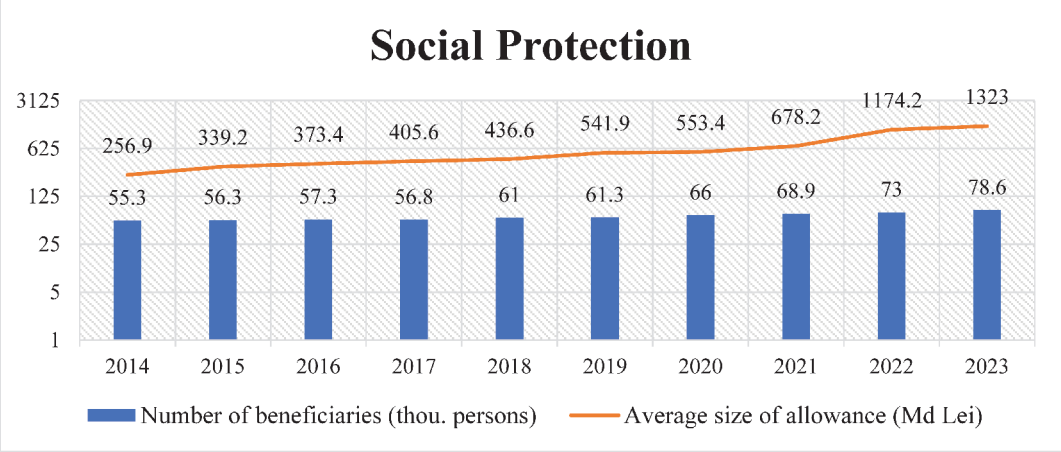

Figure 5. Social Protection Accessibility and Quality.
Data Source: National Bureau of Statistics of the Republic of Moldova.

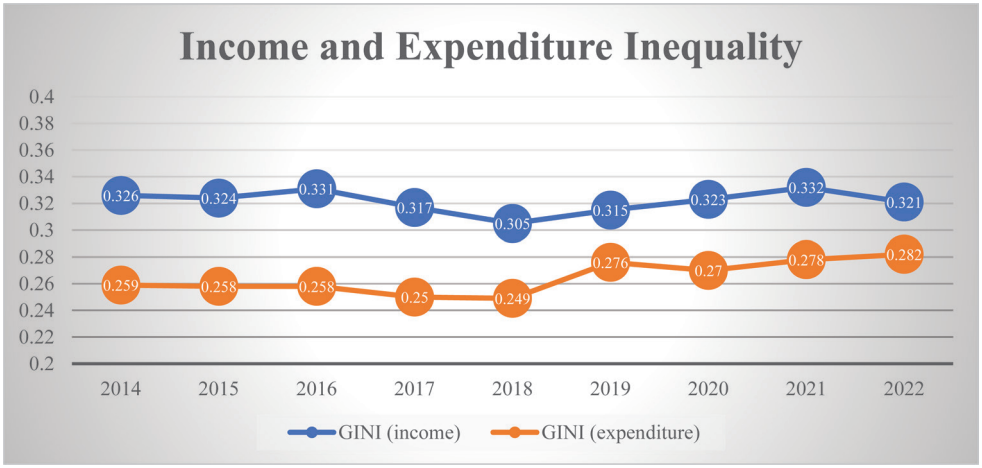

Figure 6. Income and Expenditure Inequalities (GINI).
Data Source: National Bureau of Statistics of the Republic of Moldova.

the average amount of the provided support has grown. In the past 8 years, the allocations have risen by four times, significantly increasing in 2022 (double to that in 2021).

The degree of inequality in Moldova, according to the GINI coefficient, is not very high (Figure 6). In some interpretations provided by UNICEF,[4] the income inequality can be defined as a reasonably acceptable gap (in the range of 0.3–0.4) and the expenses are in the range of relative inequality (in range of 0.2–0.3). The concern is raised in the period 2019–2021, when the inequality slowly grew, compared with previously decreasing trends. The slope is downgrading again starting from 2022, yet it is premature to suggest that this is a qualitative change or an independent event. Regardless of its utility, the GINI coefficient does not address the well-being conditions. It is common to have lower markers for poorer countries and a higher GINI index for developed nations.

To compensate for the GINI's short-sightedness in representing Human and Social Development, it is best to look at other objective, international indicators for the quality of life in Moldova. Despite the existing issues, the general Human Development Index (HDI) was constantly growing for RM since 1994[5] (Figure 7). Starting from 2015 and up to 2020,

4 According to UNICEF: https://www.unicef.cn/en/figure-27-national-gini-index-20032017#:~:text=Although%20there%20are%20no%20internationally,high%20income%20disparity%2C%20above%200.5 (Accessed on 05.09.2023).

5 Data according to Statista.com. *Human development index score of Moldova from 1900 to 2021*. Retrieved from: https://www.statista.com/statistics/1085281/human-development-index-of-the-republic-of-moldova/#:~:text=The%20Human%20Development%20Index%20(HDI,levels%20and%20GDP%20per%20capita (Accessed on 15.07.2023).

Moldova had a steady growth curve, with a decline in 2021. This decline could be associated with the negative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, which affected national economies and living conditions all around the globe. Nevertheless, this graph reconfirms the previous conclusions from the World Bank on the improving situation in RM.

HDI and GINI are good points to transition to analysing the Economic Development priorities, as both measure social and economic changes. The HDI captures a general overview, combining life expectancy, education and economic performance. It makes it a better marker for tracking Moldova's Socio-Economic development. Coupled with GINI, it also indicates the economic inequality in the country, highlighting possible social injustices. To shift the focus on the economic aspect, the analysis of GDP and GDP per capita confirms the previously drawn conclusions (Figure 8). The graph captured the impact of the global pandemics, as 2020 is the only year with a GDP and GDP per capita (in current costs) decline in the timeframe of the 2030 Agenda.

The UN targets in RM exceed a mere interest in promoting economic growth. Their tasks also concern equitable and safe work conditions, as well as non-discriminatory participation in economic activities (labour and income).

As is with other fields in the country's development, assessing Moldova's work conditions and non-discrimination faces a sizable problem. The data and evaluation are limited mostly to the Moldova territory without Transnistria (Iatco and Bors 2022). The work conditions face severe challenges on the right side of the river, controlled by the Moldavian Government. The labour market is characterised by various forms of discrimination, including age, gender, disability and ethnic characteristics (Iatco and Bors 2022; National Bureau of Statistics of the Republic of Moldova 2022, 2023). Low payment also motivates the population to search for unofficial jobs, affecting their access to security and medical attention as employees. The left side combats similar and even worse problems without the possibility of the Moldavian government assessing and controlling the situation.

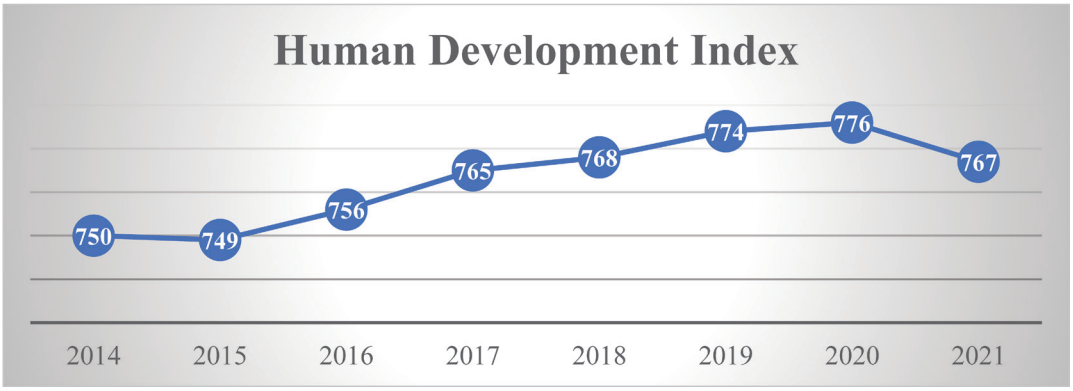

Figure 7. Human Development Index Moldova (2014-2021).
Data Source: statista.com.

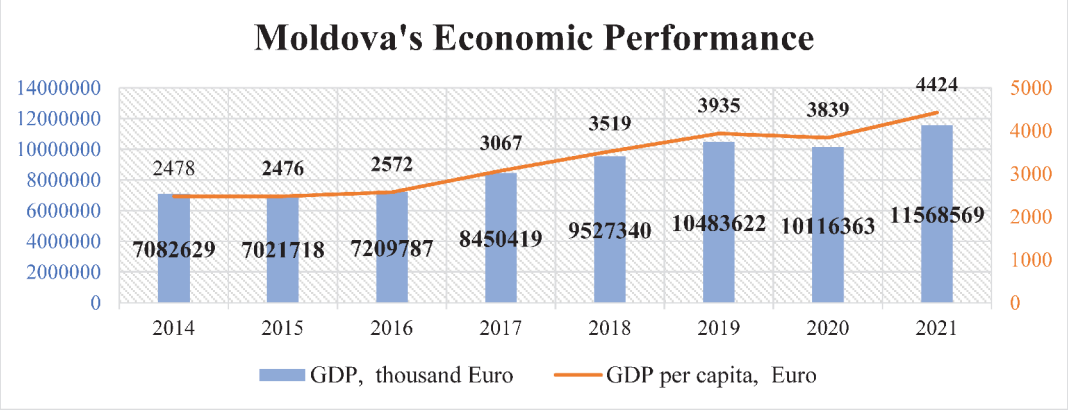

Figure 8. Economic Performance (GDP and GDP per capita).
Data Source: National Bureau of Statistics of the Republic of Moldova.

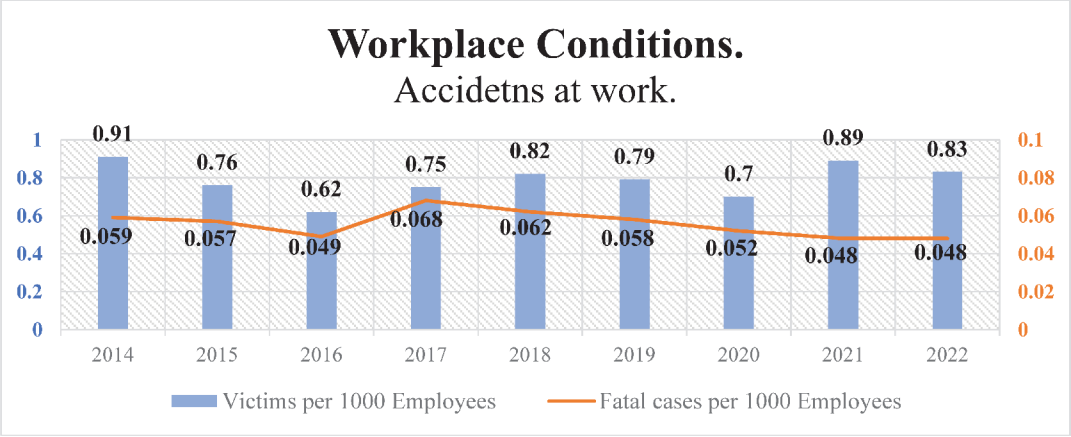

Figure 9. Safety at Workplace.
Data Source: National Bureau of Statistics of the Republic of Moldova.

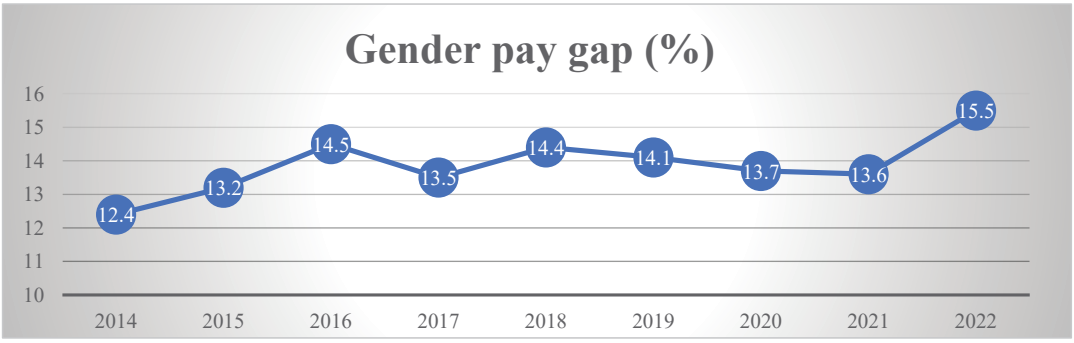

Figure 10. Unadjusted Gender Pay Gap.
Data Source: National Bureau of Statistics of the Republic of Moldova.

These problems can be seen in the national statistics. Safety at the workplace was improving, measured by the rate of fatal cases in the last years. Yet, the index of workplace accidents fluctuates with no clear trend (Figure 9). The gender pay gap (unadjusted formula[6]) is continuously widening (Figure 10), reaching its peak in 2022. Based on Iatco and Bors' (2022) assessment, gender discrimination can be one of the potential explanations for the continuous increase in the pay gap, alongside other aspects such as the problems with the education system and career choices. The complexity of the problem is clear when looking at the unemployment rates (Figure 11). Although the male population struggles with a higher rate of unemployment and the girls are more statistically likely to finish higher education, the gender pay gap is negatively affecting the female population. This unravels a structural problem rooted deeply in the socio-economic sphere and not only reflected within the economic performance. A possible scenario to explain the gap comes as a combination of the aforementioned factors when unofficial employment is becoming more alluring to the male population (possibly given the possibility of higher pay and tax evasion), demotivating them to follow with their education and be less represented in the unemployment statistics. The disbalances constantly create issues in the labour market regarding skills, income and value-added, leading to additional divide and struggle for the discriminated and vulnerable groups.

The problem might become less intense with the years, given that the average monthly labour cost per employee has doubled since the start of the 2030 Agenda. In 2015, this indicated a cost of 5811.6 Lei, reaching 13,085.1 Lei in 2022 (data source: NBS). The same is true for the average net income (Females: 3506.6 in 2015 and 8117 in 2022; Males: 4028 in 2015 and 9780 in 2022, Lei, data source: NBS). Therefore, the continuous decrease in unemployment could be a reaction to the improving conditions in the labour market, both for males and females.

Finally, Moldova is improving rather slowly in the priority area of Environmental Risks and Disaster Resilience. The pillar

6 Unadjusted formula calculates the average discrepancy between the average gross income of females from the average gross income of males, reported as percent from the male income.

outputs target the climate change reforms, agricultural sector production (as the one affected by it) and the transition to sustainable and greener energy consumption (see Shiscan and Kaim 2020) to overcome the created dependency (Tanas 2019). In this regard, the governmental efforts addressing the environmental risks have increased, given the amount of financing allocated for these tasks (Figure 12).

During the period of PFSD, the budget grew considerably, especially starting with 2021. Nevertheless, the pollution factor did not follow this trend. According to NBS, Moldova increases its emission into the atmospheric air (as an example of the environmental damage not being controlled/diminished). It is hard to predict a trend in the graph (Figure 13), as it stays in a rather constant state for the period 2014–2020. Yet, in 2021, the emissions reached an unprecedented spike. This is an insufficient observation to draw any long-term conclusions, yet it raises concerns about RM's ability to reduce environmental damage.

Concerning the Agricultural and Agri-food sector performance, crop production was slowly growing, with a serious fluctuation of the quintal/hectare in the 2020–2022 timeframe (Figure 14). The same years register the lowest (total) agricultural production (National Bureau of Statistics of the Republic of Moldova 2023). The climate or meteorological factors (e.g. the drought in 2022, caused by the lowest 5-year period level of precipitations in 2022, NBS) are almost certain to be causing a severe drop and rise in agricultural production. Second, in the same period, the country was affected by major global crises, such as lockdown during the COVID-19 pandemic and instability caused by the Russian Aggression in Ukraine. With governments addressing these issues, it limited necessary finances and resources (i.e. bank loans and governmental aid) for combating the collapse of the agricultural sector. It only reconfirms the risks for the Moldovan economy associated with climate change and political instabilities. The importance of agriculture is not only in the perception of income and GDP. It is also the second with the highest employment percentage in Moldova (National Bureau of Statistics of the Republic of Moldova 2022, 2023).

However, the impact cannot be tracked in the Unemployment statistics (Figure 11) and has only a small decrease when assessing national GDP (Figure 8). Agriculture accounts for a significant percentage of the national GDP, fluctuating from 10.9% in 2020, up to 13.5% in 2021 (NIS), which could explain some of the GDP reduction in 2020 and increase in 2021.

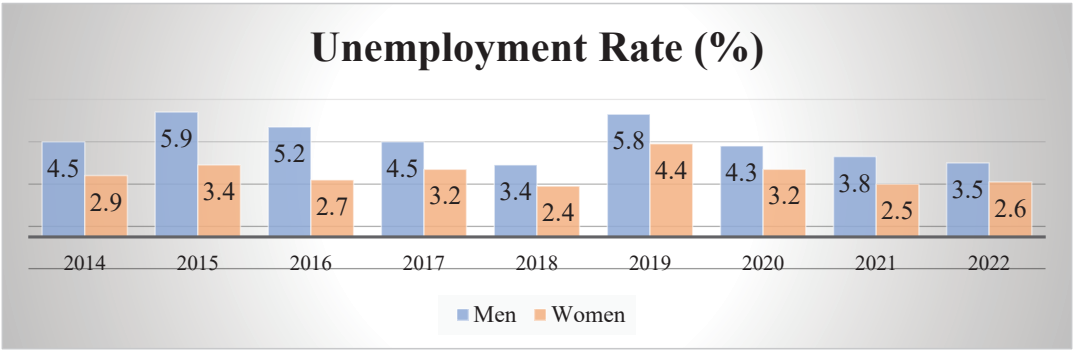

Figure 11. Unemployment Rate.
Data Source: National Bureau of Statistics of the Republic of Moldova.

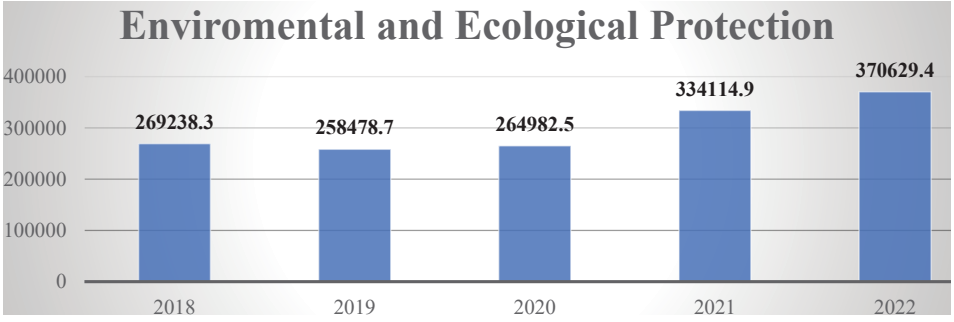

Figure 12. Expenditure for the Environmental and Ecologic Protection.
Data Source: National Bureau of Statistics of the Republic of Moldova.

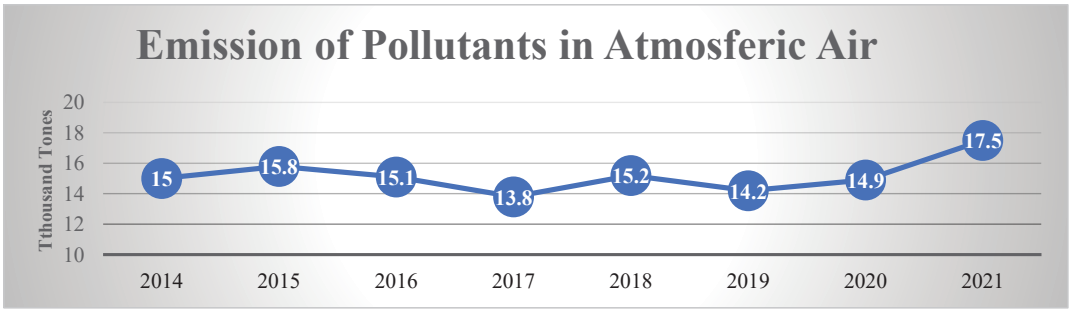

Figure 13. Pollution of Atmospheric Air.
Data Source: National Bureau of Statistics of the Republic of Moldova.

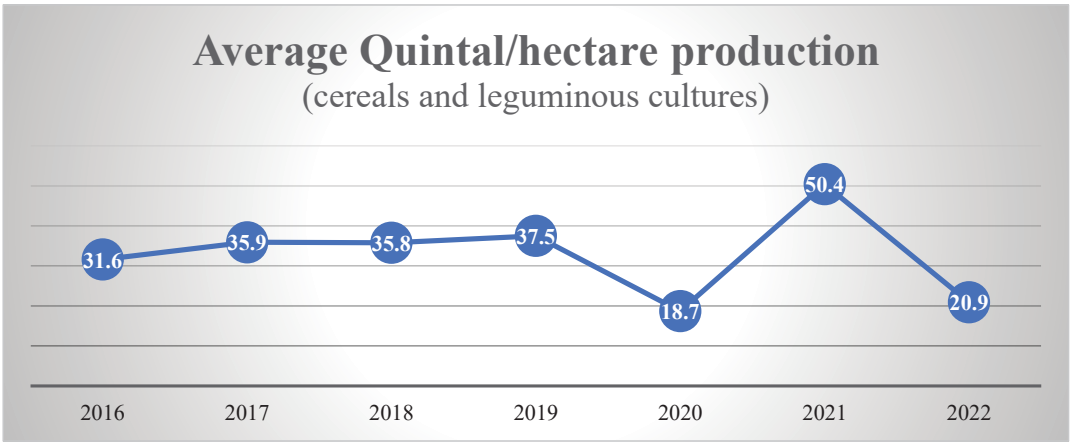

Figure 14. Agricultural Production Indicators.
Data Source: National Bureau of Statistics of the Republic of Moldova.

Nevertheless, it does not show sufficient effect to produce an impact on the unemployment statistics. The explanation might vary from the illegal employment in the sector to the possibility of these effects being countered by the performance of other industries.

The most important topic for Moldova is energy dependency. The situation is dire concerning the national imports of coal, natural gas and oil, as these represent close to or over 100% of the national total consumption (Figure 15). Even the energy consumption and production are linked to the separatist region of Transnistria, with 80% of Moldova's electricity being imported from the left bank of the river (Albulescu 2023). Out of the total energy use, more than two-third of Moldova is imported, making it critically dependent and vulnerable. In 2020, only 25.06% of RM's energy consumption came from renewable energy (e.g. biofuel, Figure 15), which was insufficient to overcome the energy-weaponisation crisis, requiring a closed link to EU's electric grid and gas pipe (Wesolowsky 2021; Albulescu 2023). The UN sources, however, define an even worse scenario, indicating that only 6% of its electricity is generated by renewable sources (UNSDCF 2022).

As an overview, the analysis has shown several times how the political, energy and social problems, both internal and external, affect Moldova's reach of SDGs. These are serious obstacles that are at the core of impeding faster development and transitioning to a democratic regime. The progress is still positive, with many indicators, such as Human and Economic Development, Justice, Education, Environmental expenditure and others creating better living conditions. Nevertheless, the Moldavian efforts relied heavily on the support from its partners (e.g. Tanas 2019; Shishcan and Kaim 2020; Nakashidze 2021; etc.). The next part will focus on determining the impact of the EU on Moldova's quest towards SDGs.

3. EU's Impact on RM's Development and Reach of SDGs

Undeniably, the RM–EU relationship had known its times of tighter and colder cooperation (Latkovskyi and Marushchak 2019; Tostes and Renni 2021). With continuous interaction, the relationship complexity also develops, adding new layers of legal and economic sophistication. This multiscalar

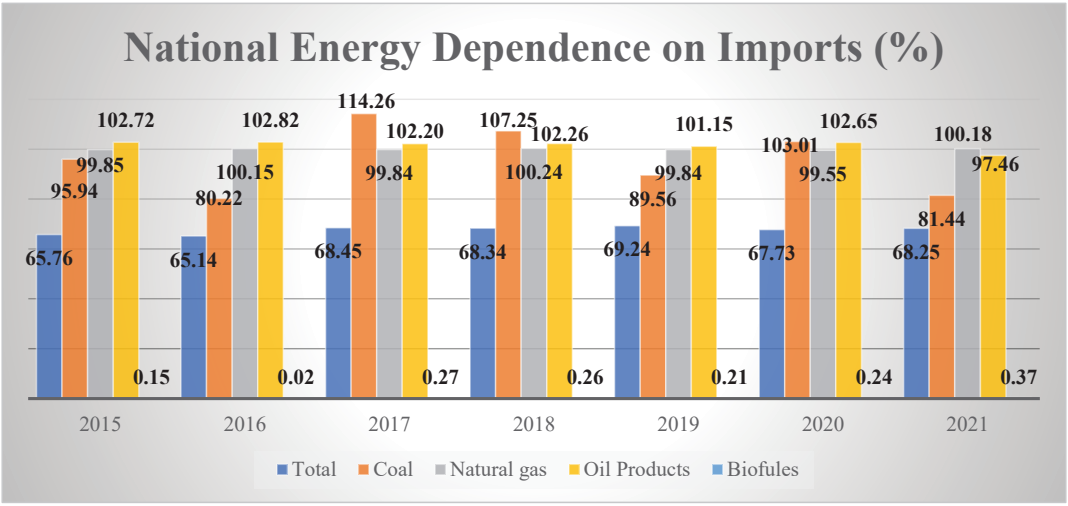

Figure 15. National Dependence on Energy Imports.
Data Source: Calculated by author based on the NBS data.

collaboration directly and indirectly impacted Moldova's potential to reach the SDGs.

The direct impact is seen via donations for the UN–RM coordination frameworks. For the PFSD, the EU was the greatest contributor in the past 2 years (2021–2022). EU's impact overshadows the next (non-EU) donors, such as the USA with a contribution of 11,032.7 and The UK at US$5,716,000.[7] The impact of its member states also complements the role of the EU. Moldavian governance could jointly access over US$15,882,000 as separate donations from Austria, Czech Republic, Estonia, Germany, Netherlands, Romania, Slovakia and Sweden for implementing the PFSD and selected priority areas.

Transitioning to UNSDCF, the first year of the relationship framework continues this trend. The total contribution of the EU for SDGs in Moldova amounted to more than twice the value of the second biggest benefactor (the UK – US$13,813,200). The donations from individual EU members, including Austria, Czech Republic, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, Netherlands, Slovakia and Sweden also add to the impact of the EU, which together allotted for more than half of the total amount of available resources (Figure 16).

The most recent and main priorities of EU investment in the SGDs in Moldova for the UNSDCF programme are eradication of poverty (SDG-1), education sector (SGD-4), ensuring gender equality (SDG-5), access to water (SDG-6), ensuring economic growth and decent employment (SDG-8), improve industry and innovation (SDG-9), reduce inequalities (SDG-10), ensure peace, justice and functional institutions (SDG-16) and promote international cooperation for SDGs (SDG-17) (United Nations in Moldova 2023). As the previous section shows, many of these areas represent critical outputs in the cooperation frameworks. Most of the targeted outcomes for the enumerated SDGs already show good improvement trends.

Another direct impact is that the relationship of EU and UN cooperation with Moldova is intertwined into a joint interest to promote national development. It is clear through the efforts of UN ambassadors and partners to engage in developing the 'European Moldova 2030' and 'Building European Moldova' national strategies for the medium and long term (United Nations in Moldova 2023). The existing cooperation frameworks also consider the EU vector of Moldova, aligning the targets to fit into the EU integration and SDG achievement simultaneously. Starting with the UNPF-TUA framework (Gheorghe et al. 2016), the strategy includes coordinating efforts for MDG reach, national growth and EU association. The practice continued with PFSD and UNSDCF frameworks, stipulating the intent of promoting these concomitant targets (PFSD 2017; UNSDCF 2022).

Except for directly financing the activities and making resources available for the SDG implementation, the EU's impact can be tracked on the level of affecting Moldova's national strategy (separate from the UN impact). RM's intent to become closer to the EU led to the signing of the Association Agreement (AA) in 2014, the no-visa regime and the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) (Nakashidze 2021; Simionov, Pascariu, and Bureiko 2021; Tostes and Renni 2021). Promoting new legal layers in

7 United Nations Moldova. UN INFO Moldova. Total available resources by contributing partner. Retrieved from: https://app.powerbi.com/view?r=eyJrIjoiMjk3YzMxM2QtMGYwNy00MmI3LWI1YTUtYjY0ZGE1ZDdlN2VjIiwidCI6IjBmOWUzNWRiLTU0NGYtNGY2MC1iZGNjLTVlYTQxNmU2ZGM3MCIsImMiOjh9 (Accessed on 02.08.2023).

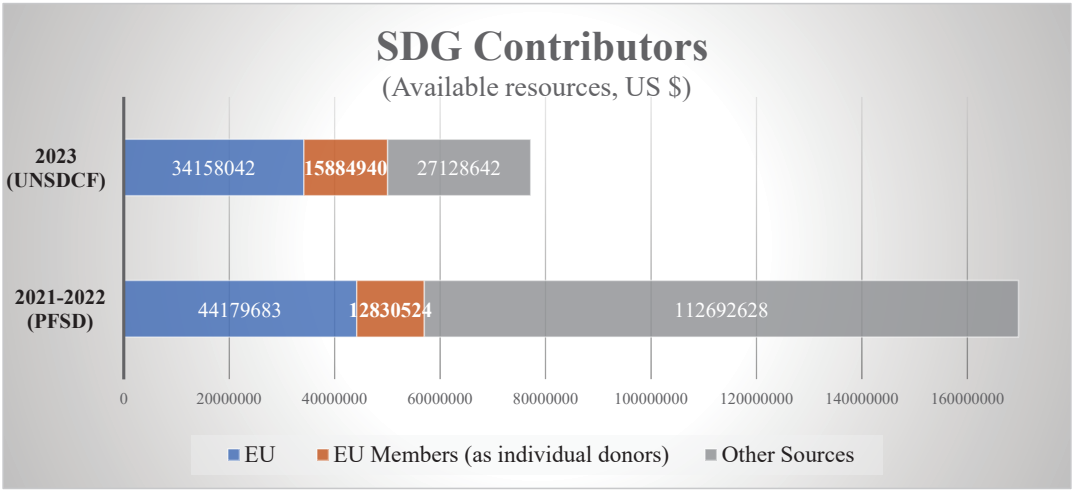

Figure 16. Sustainable Development Goals Available Resources by Contributors.
Data Source: United Nations Moldova. UN INFO Moldova.

EU–RM cooperation positively impacted the regulatory and economic areas (Tostes and Renni 2021).

The AA pushed Moldova to adopt multiple regulations and legislative changes to combat discrimination and corruption and reinforce the rule of law (Nakashidze 2021). Therefore, the AA is considered as one of the acceleration parameters in achieving SDGs (Government of the Republic of Moldova 2020). The DCFTA was an additional factor in generating economic growth in RM. The impact of both is reflected in the national statistics. For example, to see the jump in the GDP growth rates from the period 2016–2017 (Figure 8). The AA was signed in 2014 but reached its full effect, including economic integration with the EU's marketplace via DCFTA, in 2016. There is no sufficient basis to consider a direct correlation between the two events. Nevertheless, the AA and DCFTA provided financial assistance for reform implementation (Tkachuk 2022).

The EU's role exceeds the mere impact on the national regulatory framework. The application of AA legislation was a serious concern for the EU and one that required taking action. Moldova's poor performance in reinforcing these regulations, mostly due to internal political struggles and a failure of the banking system, led to a stopping of financial streams to Moldova. After the scandal in 2014 resulting from international money laundering, the International Monetary Fund and EU announced a need to form a new government. They seized financial support until a new agreement could be made to ensure better regulatory control (Jaromin 2015). The decision was an awakening call for RM's leaders (Gheorghe et al. 2016). The next, softer critiques (e.g. 'The EU has showered Moldova with aid but has become increasingly critical of Chisinau's track record on reforms', Tanas 2019) were taken more seriously. The future government considered the 'practical' reproach and took action, as seen in the governmental indicators statistics (e.g. the post-2019 period in Figures 1–3).

Finally, but not least important, is the impact that the EU has through the application of the developmental programmes available to Moldovan organisations (Shiskan and Kaim 2020; Simionov, Pascariu, and Bureiko 2021; Tkachuk 2022). The impact of EU projects is recognised by Moldavian society, being associated with hope for a better future. Yet, recognising the legal frameworks of cooperation is somewhat elusive (such as the Easter Partnership policy, see Simionov, Pascariu, and Bureiko 2021). Their impact comes in various areas of SDG implementation and will increase in its impact. According to the European Commission (2023b), 135 million euros from the 2021–2027 Interreg programme planned to be spent on cooperation with Russia and Belarus, will be reallocated to the projects involving Moldavian and Ukrainian partnerships. As for the previously implemented projects, their impact on achieving the SDGs is also relevant. For example, EU's financed projects positively impact the Environmental and Sustainability potential in Moldova. Shiskan and Kaim (2020) have shown a direct relationship between the SDG progress in Moldova and the European-funded initiative being implemented. This translated into waste management projects, agri-food entrepreneurship and circular model adoption in the RM's communities.

4. Conclusions

The UN's developmental agenda for the period 2015–2030 was developed with the contribution of and heavily supported by the EU. The EU's determination to become a more prominent global player by helping other countries achieve the SDGs adds to the seriousness of its intent. The current research set its target to observe the impact that the EU has on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. The analysis is considering the case study of the Republic of Moldova.

Moldova has made good progress on implementing and reaching the SDGs despite its struggles with domestic and external obstacles. Internal political instability, corruption and weak institutions, coupled with territorial separatism in Transnistria and Russian pressure, slowed the national development rates. In this regard, the EU counterbalances the negative effect coming from Moldova's energy dependence (and Russia's intent to destabilise the country and the whole region) and internal instability. The numerous examples shown in this research, such as connecting Moldova to the EU's electric grid and gas supply lines (Tanas 2019; Wesolowsky 2021) or offering support for the Ukrainian refugees which created burdens for RM's social support (Tkachuk 2022), contributed to improving the race against SDGs. Similarly, the AA and other strategic relationships with the EU pushed for a better institutional and regulatory framework, creating better living conditions in the country.

The EU's impact can be tracked on two main levels. The contribution of the SDGs in Moldova and the alignment of the UN–RM cooperation frameworks with Moldova's objective to become an EU member can be considered as a direct influence. The intertwinement of the EU integration into the UN 2030 Agenda cooperation only strengthens the potential for the EU to grow its positive impact. Regarding this example, the SDG implementation also contributes to the diffusion of the EU's soft power, as the EU is associated with hope and a better future (see Simionov, Pascariu, and Bureiko 2021).

The indirect impact on SDGs comes from the EU's diplomatic relationships with Moldova. Through the alignment of regulations and legal standards (Latkovskyi and Marushchak 2019; Nakashidze 2021; Tkachuk 2022) and critical monitoring of Moldova's progress in their implementation (Gheorghe et al. 2016; Tanas 2019), the EU is successful in pushing national developmental track closer to reaching the SDGs. At this point, the direct and indirect factors become a symbiotic impulse, as the 2030 Agenda is synchronised with Moldova's journey to become an EU member by 2030 (United Nations in Moldova 2023). Additional indirect impact covers Moldavian organisations' participation in the EU-funded development programmes. Collaboration in different EU projects has already proven beneficial for RM (e.g. Shishcan and Kaim 2020).

The research limits itself to one case study analysis, including a country that orbits the EU's influence since the Eastern Neighbourhood Partnership. The impact and influence of the EU might be less obvious and efficient when observing other countries on other continents. Yet, the study has shown that the tighter the cooperation with the EU, the higher the chance for a greater performance in achieving the SDGs and socio-economic development.

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