

Iuliana Stratan

Quality Evaluation of Official Development Assistance Provided to the Republic of Moldova

SUMMARY

The purpose of this paper is not to assess the role or performance of international financial institutions in the Republic of Moldova, but rather to focus on a somehow insufficiently investigated topic and namely: quality evaluation of official development assistance provided by donors.

Several factors were considered when determining the efficiency of official development assistance: consolidation of units within the Ministry of Finance, update of the electronic platform for foreign aid management, transparent evaluation of donors' policies from the perspective of the two critical lines of research in this field: effectiveness and coherence. At the same time, special emphasis was placed on conceptualizing and researching the political conditionality imposed by some of the donors for reflecting local changes and if development partners achieve the objective of having efficient and qualitative official development and technical assistance based on the dynamics of political conditionality use. As a result of the conducted research, it is established that high political volatility and weak institutional capacity have hampered the efforts to implement the reforms supported by development partners, thus it is necessary to further increase the capacity of the program portfolio, adjust foreign assistance in the sociopolitical, institutional context and from the perspective of the current economic crisis.

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INTRODUCTION

The disagreement about the quality of Official Development Assistance (ODA) and its input to the country's development and modernization has grown over the last two decades. It is contended that assistance led to increased governmental bureaucracies, perpetuated bad governments, enriched the elite from the Republic of Moldova (the poorest country in Europe) or it was simply wasted. The quality of foreign assistance based on an analytical framework links aid effectiveness to political regimes. Hence, it is considered that the interaction between official development assistance and a strong policy framework has a positive impact on the growth of our country, which gets developed with good fiscal, monetary and trade policies, but has little effect due to weak policies.

Immediately after the independence proclamation, the Republic of Moldova has actively pursued to join international organizations and benefited from official development assistance (Vasa, 2018). The role of the aid in the modernization of the country has been and remains to be significant. However, the question emerges if the official development assistance provided by development partners is efficient. The answer is not as good as it could be and not as good as it should be. Against the too-high expectations of what it could achieve, foreign assistance often had a positive impact, although sustaining its benefits has frequently proved to be a challenge. Moldova's modernization and development challenges over the last 30 years remain unchanged. Our country has been facing more and more global challenges over the

last two years. Climate changes, financial crises, food and oil price fluctuation, security threats and increased deficit of water and resources, problems caused by COVID-19 pandemic, and by the crisis resulting from the war in Ukraine increasingly affect the prospects and course of development, modernization, and fight against poverty in the country. The volume of foreign aid provided to the Republic of Moldova during 2020 accounted for over 692.6 mils. Euro, according to the data provided by donors (Report, Ministry of Finance, 2020).

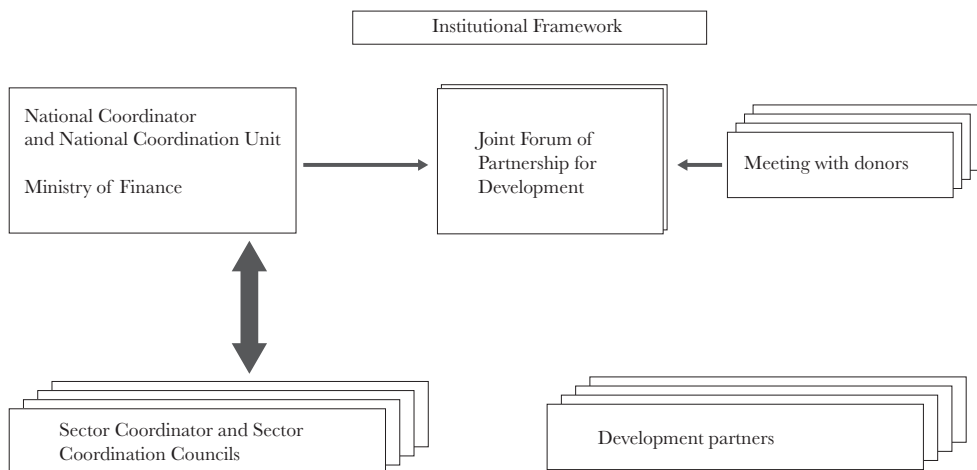
NATIONAL NORMATIVE FRAMEWORK REGULATING THE WAY IN WHICH FOREIGN AID IS COORDINATED

The modality of foreign aid coordination at the national level is regulated by the Government Decree No. 377 dated 25.04.2018 on regulation of the institutional framework and the mechanism of foreign assistance coordination and management, subsequently amended by Decree No. 458 dated 25.09.2019 on certain measures for streamlining the mechanism of foreign assistance coordination and management and upon the change of some Government Decisions (Republic of Moldova Official

Gazette, Decree No. 377, 2018).

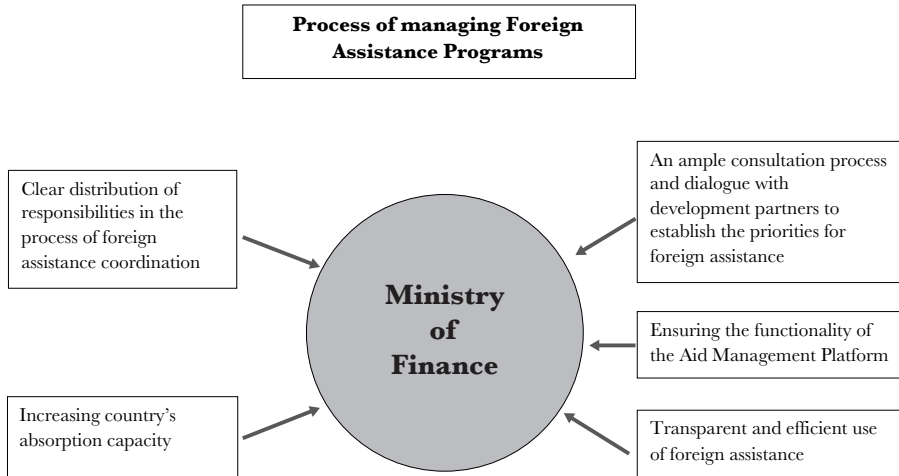
To increase transparency and visibility of foreign financial and technical assistance provided to the Republic of Moldova, but also to monitor the outcomes achieved because of implementing programs with the development partners' support, the Ministry of Finance, being the national authority for official development assistance coordination (The Republic of Moldova Official Gazette, Decision No. 377, 2018), develops the report on foreign assistance. It should be kept in mind that the country's main document for strategic planning during the reporting period was the National Development Strategy "Moldova 2030". The draft of the new strategy was submitted to the Parliament for review, but by the end was withdrawn by the Government. This is a violation of procedural rules, given that the idea of referring to an official document, which constitutes the result of the efforts of public institutions jointly with development partners, is directly accredited (Juc, et al., 2022: 7-19). Simultaneously, the "Office for Foreign Aid Programs' Management" was created based on the Government Decree No. 338 dated 03.06.2020 (The Republic of Moldova Official Gazette, Decree No. 338, 2020) with the aim to continuously

Figure 1: Institutional framework for the coordination of ODA



Source: edited by the author based on Foreign Assistance Report, 2020

Figure 2: Process of foreign assistance programs' management



Source: edited by the author based on the law from the Official Gazette of the Republic of Moldova, Decree No. 377, 2018.

improve the process of coordination and implementation of foreign assistance provided to the Republic of Moldova. We consider the establishment of this office to be inefficient, as the implementation and monitoring of foreign assistance programs continue through the implementation units.

Cooperation with the development partners (World Bank, International Monetary Fund, European Union), as well as with neighboring countries, Romania, and Ukraine, is an essential condition for the development and modernization of the Republic of Moldova. Harnessing the transparency of official development assistance helps in overcoming political constraints. Transparency is one of the main pillars for qualitative research on the evaluation of official development assistance provided by development partners. It is important for the citizens' access to publicly available information about the actions of those in the Government and the consequences of these actions, about the volume of financial or technical assistance received by the Government, hence all these criteria play an important role in nurturing the political commitment. When political commitment becomes uncertain, several

governmental failures emerge. The synthesis of local specialized literature in this area identifies a start of official development assistance research (Gaibu et al., 2011); (Lozovanu, 2014); (Sandu, 2009: pp. 311-328). Studies on ODA at the national level got developed rather intensively over the last decade. At the same time, there is no record of the amount and results of foreign assistance, as only some semiannual or annual statistical data is registered, without having any thorough analysis of the foreign aid volume since the country's accession to international financial institutions (1992). We refer to the official reports published by the State Chancellery (until 2017), Ministry of Finance (since 2018) or specialized publications of some think tanks (Expert Grup, IDIS "Viitorul") from the country and abroad (Stratan, 2021: 215-218). According to the study carried out by the Expert Grup, the foreign assistance provided to the Republic of Moldova in 2021 as grants, technical assistance, humanitarian aid, and capital transfers registered a remarkable increase and accounted for 201 million dollars, double compared to 2020 (Foreign Assistance Monitor No. 1, 2022). Hence, the authors of the respective report noted that the increase in

foreign credits and financing over the last period does not imply any major risks, as the Republic of Moldova has a low level of indebtedness. Respectively, there is additional space for contracting other external loans, especially in the context of financial requirements in 2022. It may be noted that the volume of assistance has increased to a record level for the Republic of Moldova. As of 31.12.2021, the main creditors within the framework of relations with the country's strategic development partners are, the IMF with 33% of the total, the World Bank (IDA and IBRD) – 30%, EIB – 14%, the European Commission – 6%, and the EBRD – 5%. (Foreign Assistance Monitor No. 1, 2022).

Given the security situation in the region (management of the Ukrainian refugees' crisis) and the effects of the pandemic and energy crises, which increasingly affect the economy of the country (including rising prices), we consider that the Republic of Moldova needs more official development assistance (financial and technical). But it should be coordinated more efficiently and transparently by the Government. The Republic of Moldova is a country with all the necessary ingredients to advance towards European integration, and an efficient and transparent coordination would have immediate effects in such areas as infrastructure (modernization of roads and railway networks), health, and education, which are crucial for the sustainable development of the country.

The *European Union (EU)* is among the leaders in terms of foreign assistance provided to the Republic of Moldova. The cooperation relationship with the EU dates back to 1994 when the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement was signed between the European Communities and their Member States. Since 2014, the relations are based on the EU- Moldova Association Agreement, serving as a basis for a stronger political association, as well as economic integration. Although much of its attention is devoted to internal integration, it is obvious that the European Union cannot and does not wish to be an isolated entity. Instead, it expressed the desire and ambition to get a prominent

place in the operation of international relations, alongside the general objective to build good relations with political and economic partners in the country. The European Union also wants to use its position as an emitter to promote some of the values it considers important. Democracy, social well-being, human rights, and liberalism are among these values. Globally, it can be noted that the European Union is currently facing many challenges. The departure of the United Kingdom in early 2020 means that for the first time in its history, it has lost a member state rather than gained one. The consequences of the financial and economic crisis which started in 2008 and the economic impact of the COVID-19 crisis are likely to further stress the economies of EU Member States.

The European Union perceives the development cooperation policy as an important tool for both missions. According to the opinion of the political theorist Victor Juc, the European Union treated the Republic of Moldova as a segment of the Russian Federation's geopolitical and geostrategic interests, arrangements that continued until the outbreak of the events in Ukraine in 2013 – 2014 (Juc, 2018: 5-43 and continuing through the start of the war between the Russian Federation and Ukraine. Through assistance and support for democratic reforms, the *European Union* brought concrete benefits to our country. In the last 7 years, Moldova has benefited from more than half a billion euros (518.15 million EUR) in grants of bilateral assistance and had access to 200 million euros (loans and grants) under macro-financial assistance programs (Press Release European Commission, 2021). To mitigate the socio-economic impact of the increase in natural gas prices, Moldova was awarded a grant of 60 million euros, obtained at the end of 2021 from the European Commission. The economic recovery plan for the Republic of Moldova will mobilize up to 600 million euros for 2021- 2024 in macro-financing assistance, grants, and investments, supported by mixed and financial guarantees. When comparing to the neighboring country, Romania, it may be

noted that the Recovery and Resilience Mechanism for 2021- 2027 will provide a total of 29.2 billion euros, of which grants in the amount of 14.2 billion euros and loans in the amount of 14.9 billion euros. It could be assumed that the duration of the program envisaged for the Republic of Moldova is only for the period of the current government mandate.

In 2022, to reduce the humanitarian and economic impact, the EU is stepping up its support with financial assistance packages intended for managing the crisis of refugees from Ukraine:

- 8 million euros as humanitarian assistance to provide emergency support at border crossing points;
- 15 million euros to support efficient and dignified processing of refugees' applications.
- 15 million euros to support the EU border assistance mission (EUBAM).
- 150 million euros for the macro-finance assistance program (first tranche).

Budget support of 53 million euros comes in addition to the emergency assistance already granted by the EU to the Republic of Moldova (Press release EU, 2022).

The robust and powerful effects of EU political conditionality in our country, especially in the area of justice and the fight against corruption, is a prerequisite for financial assistance. The developments of the last decade show that the EU political conditionality remains to be a significant influence. Respectively, using conditionality, it remains questionable whether the EU achieves its goal of encouraging the observance of human rights and democratic principles in our country. The concept of political conditionality is not so much researched in the local specialized literature, even though it is applied by the EU in different policy areas and encompasses different incentive mechanisms for different reform objectives. Sometimes, politics leaves negative footprints in the cooperation with the EU, followed by interruptions of development aid, which leads to worsening of the situation in the country, thus it can be called punishing the population "for the decisions of the government".

It should be noted that the concept of the "first generation of political conditionality" (Molenaers et al., 2015: 2-12) emerged in the post-Cold War period. Political conditionality is a complex phenomenon and is not consensual, having political and social scientists, economists, or researchers as its main stakeholders. Molenaers, Dellepiane and Faust consider it necessary to deepen the dynamics around the political conditionalities, especially the negotiation processes and the results along the aid chain, from donors' internal policies, political dialogue spaces to the political economy of the beneficiary institutional reform and adaptation strategies of donors. All these aspects influence the use, aim, and efficacy of political conditionalities.

We consider that the Republic of Moldova remains vulnerable to the European Union's conditionality, and its effectiveness in this regard is significantly diminished by political instability. As a result of the presidential elections in November 2020, President Maia Sandu managed to rebalance the foreign policy agenda by establishing ties with the EU and its neighbors. Over the last 2 years, Moldova has faced major macroeconomic, political, climatic, and health shocks and is currently facing the impact of the war in Ukraine, thus it would be welcome for the Government of the Republic of Moldova to change its attitude towards the communication with the society on European integration. A report by IDIS Viitorul suggests the stringent need to organize a national information and education campaign about the European Union, indicating several actions in this respect. Hence, different stakeholders should be involved, such as: central and local authorities, civil society from Chisinau and districts, international financial institutions (especially EU delegations and embassies of EU states in Moldova), and political parties (Cepoi, 2014: 26).

A gigantic step for the Republic of Moldova was the signing of the application for accession to the European Union on March 03, 2022. *This procedure is a historical one for our country, but at the same time rather lasting until obtaining*

a positive response to its ambitions of “accession perspectives” recognition. For the EU to respond positively to the Republic of Moldova’s expectations, a plausible and politically acceptable dynamic perspective must be defined to support the motivation of the associated states (Emerson et al., 2021:26). However, the events evolved in a positive aspect for the country’s history, the European Union enlargement paradigm changed, and the enlargement policy got a new impetus. Hence, in April 2022, during an international conference in Berlin (Press Release EU, 2022), organized upon the initiative of Romania, Germany, and France, the representatives of 36 EU member states and G7 group, and 9 international financial institutions, agreed on a package of official development assistance for the Republic of Moldova of *695 million euros*. The official development assistance is intended to support a national anti-crisis program and to increase the resilience of the Republic of Moldova, meaning direct financial assistance for the country’s budget, grants, and concessional loans aimed at implementing reforms and Europeanizing the country. It is up to the efficiency and competence of the authorities for the degree of absorption of provided grants to be as high as possible. Especially since during the European Council of June 23, 2022, the EU leaders granted the Republic of Moldova the status of a candidate country for the EU. This historic moment will bring new opportunities to progress easily and quickly on the path of reforms, with the desire to bring European economic and social standards to Moldova, including a review and update of the development partners’ portfolio. In our view, this opportunity for Moldova was based on several elements that have speeded up the process, namely: the reaction of the West to the Russian Federation’s war against Ukraine and of course the image of the current government, being the first government that led such a good pro-West political harmonization.

A vital contribution to the development and modernization of the Republic of Moldova belongs to the *World Bank*, the only development partner that has extensive research, analy-

tical and technical capabilities (actions aimed at providing know-how in the form of training or capacity building), which continues its dual mission: responding to immediate concerns while supporting long-term reforms. Since 1992, when Moldova became a member of the World Bank, this international financial institution has offered low-interest loans, interest-free credits, and grants to our country. The World Bank is composed of the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD) and the International Development Association (IDA). It is worth noting that from 2020, Moldova benefits from access to the IBRD (which provides loans and advice to poor countries with middle incomes) and is moving towards the complete graduation of the IDA (part of the World Bank which helps the poorest counties in the world, by providing loans called “credits” and grants for projects that help economic growth), having exceptional access to financing.

The goal of the World Bank Group is to end extreme poverty and to promote common prosperity. Significant progress was registered over the last two decades in relation to poverty reduction in our country. However, the latest events in our society have shown that the Republic of Moldova is not immune to political, economic, climatic, and health shocks and failures, whether they are the results of the war in the neighboring country, Ukraine (with an increasing number of refugees) or the global COVID-19 pandemic. Thanks to the technical and advisory assistance of the Bank, the Government can adopt better policies, programs, and reforms, which lead to a higher level of economic growth, financial stability, and poverty reduction. The objectives suggested by the World Bank are achieved by financing projects with a positive transformation impact on our society. This takes place through the collection and analysis of data supporting the RM Government by contributing to the creation of efficient policies that can benefit the entire population and lay the basis for the prosperity of future generations, protection, and *improvement of human capital*.

The *World Bank's* development aid pillar is firmly anchored at the country level. The World Bank's engagement program aims to support the advancement of the EU accession agenda in partnership with donors, to ensure complementarity while remaining flexible to adapt to the changing environment. The Country Partnership Framework for 2018-2021 (CPF) and the Performance and Learning Review of the CPF became the main element of the World Bank's country programs, placing the operational activity of the Bank in the context of the National Development Strategy "Moldova 2020". It remains to be seen whether the proposed development outcome and the performance evaluation of the World Bank have been achieved.

The retrospective developed several lessons for improving the formulation and implementation of the Bank's Country Partnership Framework (CPF). The new Country Partnership Strategy for the Republic of Moldova is planned for the beginning of 2023. Due to Covid-19, but also the collection restrictions that vary from one institution to another, a time gap between these two strategies is evident, nevertheless, the teams have explored various virtual tools for meetings or consultations. At the moment, the Republic of Moldova faces major risks in four areas, namely: *politics and governance* (increased social pressure from food and fuel prices and strong polarization of the electorate); *macroeconomic area* (the economy became vulnerable due to the war in Ukraine, which has had a negative impact on trade, remittance channels, energy and food prices, economic vulnerability, especially that of agriculture, to extreme weather conditions and potentially unsustainable domestic debt); *institutional capacity* (weak implementation capacity at the government level, focus on implementing critical reforms diverted from the need to address urgent issues arising from emerging crises).

According to the World Bank's data, the CPF (The World Bank, Moldova, 2018) envisages a review of the comparative advantaged of the World Bank as compared to other development

partners, as well the corporate priorities of the institution, also referring to a performance assessment of the previous CPF achievements and shortcomings (The World Bank, Moldova, 2021), as well as adjusting the country's priorities. In recent years, the flexibility of the World Bank program has been felt, being key to getting adjusted to the emerging needs and changing priorities. To prepare the new CPF, the team undertakes consultations with several key stakeholders and namely: (i) *the Government*, being the client of the Bank, which supervises the implementation of the operations financed by the Bank, defines policies, and implements the financed programs. Government actions and policies impact the broader development prospects of the country. The consultations with the Government (organized in the line ministries) are essential and are usually rather technical, detailed, and based on the previous or ongoing dialogue, including those emerging during the portfolio reviews and other policy discussions. (ii) *Non-government actors* which includes civil society organizations or nongovernmental organizations, interested groups, such as beneficiaries, academia, and others. These stakeholders have different and often opposing views or positions regarding what they believe the role of the World Bank is or should be in the country. Some of them are development practitioners and implement local programs, some support activities financed by the Bank through government contracts, while others are policy oriented, etc. It is important to involve this group, taking into consideration its diversity. (iii) *The Parliament of the Republic of Moldova*: while there are advantages to engaging with this institution, given its policy-making role, it is important to note that the *bank is an apolitical organization*. Consultation with parliamentarians may lead to involvement in the country's politics. Depending on the circumstances, this may create risks that could affect the relationships with the client (Government). (iv) *Development partners*: the role of development partners is relatively important in the Republic of Moldova. The consultations with donors are usually carried

out through existing structures in the country, such as the Development Partners' Group (this group is coordinated by the UN and the World Bank through monthly meetings). Consultations with this group aim to identify areas of collaboration and complementarity to reduce duplication in resource-constrained contexts. The World Bank's current financial assistance portfolio for the Republic of Moldova includes 16 active projects and accounts for *1 410.54 mil. USD*, including loans for *1 406.36 mil. USD* and grants for *4.18 mil. USD*, of which *44.30 mil. USD* are cancelled. Financial assistance in the amount of *1 182.08 mil. USD* was provided through the International Development Association (IDA); financial assistance in the amount of *224.28 mil USD* was provided through the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD), as well as grants for *4.18 mil USD* (The World Bank Projects and operations, 2022). Regrettably, we cannot provide an exact estimate of the foreign aid provided by the World Bank since the Republic of Moldova became a beneficiary (1992) or at least for the period of implementation of a development strategy for the development of the country. And the lack of analysis of the volume of official development assistance offered by the World Bank hinders the quality of research in this context.

The beneficiary, meaning the Ministry of Finance, creates through the line ministries the Project Implementation Unit, which is carrying out the project, meaning the implementation and monitoring of World Bank's foreign assistance programs. The project is implemented based on specific institutional arrangements, respectively, the Project Implementation Unit concludes an implementation agreement with the Beneficiary (the line ministry) according to the terms and conditions approved by the World Bank (International Development Association/International bank for Reconstruction and Development). Hence, some of the obligations of the Project Implementation Unit include some conditionalities and namely: appointing project management, preparing tender documentation for performed mainten-

ce works, monitoring, and reporting (the report will cover the period of one calendar semester) to be provided to the World Bank and Beneficiary (line ministry). Things are often confused, and it is not clear for the civil society who is to be blame in case when the negative effects contributed to the non-completion of the works or non-achievement of the objectives. In the context of supporting this finding, it should be mentioned that the Expert Grup report reviewing several projects of development partners, including that of the World Bank, and namely "Local Roads Improvement Project" (Foreign Assistance Monitor 2, 2022: 7), points out a series of factors that contributed to the retention of project works. Nevertheless, in our opinion, the suggestions and solutions offered to the Government are not tackled from the perspective of the instrument. We recommend a transparent, coordinated, and comprehensive dialogue between the Project and the line ministry to streamline budget transparency and management of public procurement and foreign assistance.

The limited capacity of the Government to coordinate and implement complex reforms, ensuring transparency in the process of implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of programs, would constitute actions to increase the absorption capacity of the support offered by the World Bank. Programs should not be based on the best possible forecasted results. Finally, country strategies must be flexible, not rigid and narrow. Thus, provision of assistance in the absence of sustained progress on reforms only pushes the country further into debt and may weaken incentives for future reforms. To analyze project performance, the World Bank uses annual surveillance, including interim annual performance reviews. The importance of World Bank oversight is clear, supporting its efforts through monitoring and capacity building. However, a more active dialogue with the Government of the Republic of Moldova, local authorities and interested parties would foster the improvement of the objectives proposed by the Bank.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

By assessing the quality of *Official Development Assistance provided to the Government* and with a view to maximizing the effectiveness of the evaluation of official development assistance provided by development partners, we note and recommend the following:

1. Updating the electronic platform for foreign aid management, including program results and reports of international financial institutions, as well as improving communication processes with the public on foreign assistance.
2. Consolidating the units within the Ministry of Finance, which is the institution responsible for the management of foreign assistance. This would be possible by supplementing the number of officials and improving the internal framework to manage more efficiently the coordination of foreign assistance programs, thus it will be possible to transparently evaluate donor policies from the perspective of the two critical lines of research in this field: effectiveness and coherence.
3. The new humanitarian, commercial and inflationary challenges require a lot of effort to be addressed, which could divert the attention of the authorities from achieving the assumed commitments. That is why it is necessary for the Government to ensure the effectiveness of the transparency of official development assistance, an area that requires increased attention in terms of studies and research.
4. Conceptualizing and researching political conditionality to reflect changes in the quality of ODA provided by donors.
5. High political volatility and weak institutional capacity have hampered the efforts to implement the reforms supported by the World Bank, thus it is necessary to further increase the capacity of the program portfolio, adjust foreign assistance in the socio-political, institutional context and from the perspective of the current economic crisis.

6. Recent crises have focused attention on immediate challenges, however donors' commitment to addressing the Republic of Moldova's long-term development agenda remains strong, with the clear objective of advancing the EU accession agenda, to ensure complementarity while remaining flexible to adapt to the changing environment.

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