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The European Union and Moldova – shaping a bright future together

*Check Against Delivery
Seul le texte prononcé fait foi
Es gilt das gesprochene Wort*

Lecture at Moldova State University

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

First let me express my thanks to Chisinau University and in particular the Rector, Mr Gheorghe Ciocan for this invitation to talk to you today. It is an honour to be at this eminent institution, renowned for its academic excellence. I congratulate you on the palpable spirit of learning and scholarly achievement you foster here.

I am particularly pleased to have this opportunity to address such a youthful audience, because you represent the future. I have had very productive meetings today with your country's leaders, but you are the ones who will be taking their place in the future and whose responsibility it will be to make the right choices.

But I have confidence you will choose well, after all, as Benjamin Disraeli, a former Prime Minister of Great Britain said, "*Almost everything that is great has been done by youth*"!

I want to use this opportunity to encourage you to live up to those words and to do great things, both for yourselves but also for the proud and beautiful country in which you live. You are in a position to contribute to its success and development. It is in your hands to make a difference.

And this is the right time to get involved. Since my last visit to your country two years ago things have clearly changed a great deal.

There is a tangible difference to the quality of the discussions we are having and there is also a new spirit in the air. I know many Moldovan graduates have often seen no alternative than to pack their bags when they finished their studies and seek their livelihood abroad. Changing Moldova's economic fortunes will not happen over night, but I am convinced the country is now on the right track for political and economic reform. That will translate into more jobs and opportunities at home, and specifically, more jobs and opportunities for you.

That transition is an essential part of building Moldova's future. A country needs its brightest and best, and that means you. Moldova needs you to invest in it and in your lives here and to help construct the bright future it deserves.

As I said when I met your President earlier today, we recognise the reform achievements Moldova has made in the last 12 months. And the EU strongly encourages you to continue. We know it is not easy – and there are no short-cuts to progress. But no matter how difficult the short-term sacrifices may be, the ultimate goal – prosperity and security – will prove worth it.

Although the lion's share of the work can only be done by the people of this country, never forget the EU is your friend and we are ready to help however we can. We fully support Moldova's ambitious reform programme. And we are working through the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) to provide the maximum support available.

2007 was a fruitful year for EU-Moldova relations, which went from strength to strength under the guidance of the ENP Action Plan. The ENP is the EU's policy to build prosperity, security and stability for its neighbours and friends. A policy that offers our neighbours substantial encouragement and support in their reform efforts, if they want it. It is our way of building tighter relations with countries on our borders, and of seeking to bring you closer to us.

Moldova has made great strides in coming closer to us by adopting a comprehensive strategy for reforming its judicial system, ratifying UN conventions, and improving the democratic conduct of local elections. You have also been working with us on border management and confidence-building measures for Transnistria, reforming the customs service and adopting a new energy strategy.

All these measures are important first steps on the long road to reform. Although it will take time to see their effect, certainly for ordinary people, they are essential building blocks for the work that lies ahead. So I salute those with the foresight to push ahead and ensure their implementation.

But there is still much work ahead. We particularly want to see more progress in the fields of democracy, respect for human rights and the rule of law and media freedom – not just in legislation but **in practice**. It is also crucial for Moldova's economic development that the government steps up the fight against corruption. Without that, the investment climate, so essential for ensuring jobs for you and your successors, will not improve.

And of course the parliamentary elections in 2009 must be fully free and fair, in line with Moldova's commitments as a member of the Council of Europe and the OSCE. That means equal access to the media for all candidates and no harassment or intimidation.

Dear friends,

The defining feature of ENP is differentiation. With each of our ENP partners we craft a specific and unique relationship. Where countries indicate that they have higher ambitions, and want to go further in developing their relationship with the EU, we respond.

This is a new departure for the EU – as recently as three years ago our relations with Moldova were much less developed, with far fewer opportunities available.

But now it's a case of more for more. The more Moldova works to be close to the EU, and the greater your commitment to reform, the more we will offer in terms of assistance to reach those goals, and opportunities to expand and deepen our relations.

So in response to the progress Moldova has made over the last year the EU has opened itself up to you. To give you a flavour:

New Visa Facilitation and Re-admission Agreements entered into force on 1 January 2008, which makes it much easier for students, businessmen, teachers and others to travel to the EU.

We have granted additional trade preferences, which means that from 1 March this year Moldovan products will have unlimited and duty free access to the EU's market. It will take slightly longer for specific agricultural products, but the objective is the same: to help Moldova increase its production capabilities and gain better access to our market.

We are also discussing the financing of your new Energy Strategy, and providing other financial assistance for public administration reform, strengthening the judiciary, and upgrading the health sector.

In the future the EU's internal programmes on health, research and the environment will be open to Moldova's participation, and I hope you will seize the opportunities they offer.

People-to-people contacts are particularly important to us. I firmly believe that travelling to each others' countries and sharing living and working experiences is fundamental to building sound relations between us. That is why we want to set up a pilot Mobility Partnership between the EU and Moldova, which would give Moldovans more possibilities for living and working in the EU. I should point out that Moldova is the only country in our neighbourhood with which we are discussing such a partnership.

We are also setting up exchanges between all levels of society – local government, civil society, academics, journalists, businessmen and more. And of course I want a particular focus on our young people. That is why the ENP has a specific emphasis on scholarships for students, enabling more young people to come to the EU and study there for fixed periods of time. I know that a few Moldovan students have attended the College of Europe and other universities across the EU as a result of our scholarship scheme, and I hope more will do so in the future.

But of course all this is just the start - we will continue to respond to the way Moldova pursues its reform path and the choices you make. You will shape your own relationship with us.

As the country makes further concrete progress towards economic and political reform, the EU will offer more opportunities for closer relations. As part of that, I assured President Voronin today that the EU is open to the idea of a new Agreement with Moldova, providing we see a breakthrough in the reform process. If Moldova continues to come closer to us, we will certainly respond.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

As you see, the special partnership between the EU and Moldova is growing stronger by the day and there is enormous potential for the future. I am confident that there is the will on both sides to take our relations to an even higher level and I hope the Commission's forthcoming report on Moldova's progress will put us in a position to do so.

But perhaps most importantly of all, I hope that you, the cream of Moldova's youth, also see in our deepening relations an opportunity for yourselves to play a role. This is a moment of great promise for Moldova when she needs the talents and energies of all of her people. There will be immense rewards to be reaped in the coming years from the knowledge that you have played a part unchanging history, in creating something new of which you can be rightly proud. As I said at the beginning, you are Moldova's future, and it is in your hands to make a difference. I urge you to rise to the challenge and take an active role in building your country's future.

Thank you.