Disability Rights in Moldova: Priorities for EU Engagement and Partnership 2028–2034

Policy paper for the Delegation of the European Union to the Republic of Moldova

Executive Summary

This policy paper proposes that disability inclusion be treated as a measurable, cross-cutting priority in the EU–Moldova partnership for the 2028–2034 programming period. Moldova's EU accession process offers a strategic opportunity to align national reforms with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), the EU Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021–2030, and the European Commission's assessment of Moldova's progress under the enlargement framework (OHCHR, 2006; European Commission, 2021; European Commission, 2025). The paper identifies key challenges, strategic opportunities and practical priorities for EU engagement, with a focus on independent living, accessibility, inclusive education, employment, social protection, participation, data and accountability.

1. Main Challenges in Disability Rights in Moldova

Despite significant progress over the last decade, persons with disabilities in Moldova continue to face systemic barriers that limit their full participation in society. The transition from a medical and welfare-based approach toward a rights-based model remains incomplete. Reforms supported by the European Union and other partners — including deinstitutionalization, inclusive education, community-based services, accessibility improvements and civil society strengthening — have produced important results, but they require consolidation, sustainable financing and stronger local implementation.

The scale of disability-related exclusion in Moldova requires a coordinated whole-of-government response linked to the EU accession agenda. According to the **National Bureau of Statistics** (NBS), as of 1 January 2025, Moldova had **160,000 beneficiaries of disability pensions and state social disability allowances**, including **11,400 children aged 0–17**. Persons with disabilities represented **6.7% of the usual resident population**, while children with disabilities accounted for **2.3% of all children under 18** with usual residence in Moldova (National Bureau of Statistics, 2025). However, the 2024 Population and Housing Census, the first national census to include the Washington Group Short Set of Questions on Functioning, found a functional disability prevalence rate of 12.8% among the population aged five years and older—almost twice the administratively recognized disability rate of 6.7%. This gap suggests that many people with

significant functional limitations remain outside formal recognition and support systems. Disability inclusion must therefore be integrated across all EU-supported reforms, not limited to targeted social assistance measures.

Key challenges include:

- **Incomplete deinstitutionalization and insufficient community services**, particularly for persons with intellectual and psychosocial disabilities and persons with high support needs. Supported living, personal assistance, community mental health services, respite care, family support and accessible housing remain unevenly available across regions.
- **Persistent poverty and additional disability-related costs.** Many persons with disabilities and their families cannot fully cover expenses related to assistive devices, rehabilitation, medicines, accessible transport, personal assistance and other support services. NBS data show that the average disability pension was **2,648.9 MDL** as of 1 January 2025, compared with **3,975.2 MDL** for pensioners overall. In 2024, **13.4% of households** included at least one person with disability, and **32.2%** of those households were composed exclusively of persons with disabilities, increasing the risk of poverty, isolation and unmet support needs (National Bureau of Statistics, 2025).
- **Limited accessibility** of public infrastructure, transport, housing, information, communication and digital services. Accessibility barriers continue to restrict access to education, employment, healthcare, justice, social services, voting and public participation. Accessibility should therefore be treated as a cross-cutting condition for EU accession reforms, public procurement, digital transformation and infrastructure investments.
- **Low employment rates and economic inactivity** among persons with disabilities, especially women, rural residents and persons with high support needs. In 2024, the labor force participation rate of persons with disabilities was only **18.4%**, compared with **48.1%** among persons without disabilities. Participation was lower among women with disabilities (**16.9%**) and in rural areas (**15.0%**), confirming the need for supported employment, reasonable accommodation, vocational training, employer incentives and inclusive labour market measures (National Bureau of Statistics, 2025).
- **Continuing inequalities in education**, particularly regarding quality of inclusion, transition to employment and lifelong learning opportunities. In the 2024/25 academic year, **11,100 students with mental or physical disabilities** were enrolled in educational institutions, including **10,600 students in general education institutions** and **500 students in special schools**. While this demonstrates progress in enrolment, UNICEF research highlights persistent challenges related to institutional preparedness, attitudes, access to support services, assistive technologies and the quality of inclusion (National Bureau of Statistics, 2025; UNICEF Moldova, 2024).
- **Weak local capacity** to implement disability-inclusive policies and services across all regions. Rural areas face additional barriers due to limited-service availability, transport constraints, lower labor force participation and uneven access to specialized support.

- **Insufficient participation of organizations of people with disabilities**, including organizations representing persons with intellectual and psychosocial disabilities, in policy design, monitoring and budgeting processes. Their participation should be systematic, accessible and financed.
- **Limited use of disability-disaggregated data in planning and budgeting**, despite important progress in national statistics and the application of internationally comparable approaches such as the Washington Group questions. Moldova's disability-related statistical releases and the 2024 Population and Housing Census create a stronger basis for evidence-based policymaking, but data must be consistently disaggregated by disability, age, sex, location and support needs.
- Refugees with disabilities also require attention in Moldova's disability-inclusive reform agenda. According to the **Disability and Age Task Force briefing note of March 2025**, approximately **127,000 refugees from Ukraine** remained in Moldova, and **10% of refugees** identified through the 2024 Socio-Economic Insights Survey were persons with disabilities. OHCHR protection monitoring found that **12% of interviewed Ukrainian refugees** were persons with disabilities identified through the Washington Group questions, with barriers related to accessibility, healthcare, employment, mental health and financial security (Disability and Age Task Force, 2025).

These challenges are directly connected to Moldova's obligations under the **UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities** and to reforms required under EU accession chapters related to fundamental rights, social policy and employment, education, public administration, statistics, public procurement, digital transformation and transport. The **European Commission's Moldova Report 2025** confirms the importance of continued reforms across the fundamentals, social policy and employment, education, statistics, public administration and inclusive growth areas (European Commission, 2025). Disability inclusion should therefore be treated as a practical indicator of Moldova's alignment with EU values and standards.

2. Main Opportunities for Disability Rights in Moldova

The EU accession process creates a unique opportunity to accelerate disability inclusion as a cross-cutting reform agenda rather than treating disability solely as a social protection issue.

Important opportunities include:

- The implementation of the **National Program for the Accession of the Republic of Moldova to the EU 2025–2029**, approved by the Government in May 2025, provides a framework for legislative alignment and institutional reform across sectors relevant to disability rights (Government of the Republic of Moldova, 2025).
- The development and implementation of the **National Programme for Social Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities** provides an opportunity to consolidate reforms related to accessibility, community-based services, participation and alignment with EU standards (United Nations Moldova, 2023; Ministry of Labour and Social Protection, 2026).

- The adoption of EU standards under **Chapter 19 on Social Policy and Employment**, **Chapter 23 on Judiciary and Fundamental Rights** and **Chapter 26 on Education and Culture**. Disability inclusion should also be reflected under **Chapter 18 on Statistics**, **Chapter 5 on Public Procurement**, **Chapter 10 on Digital Transformation** and **Chapter 14 on Transport Policy**, given the cross-sectoral nature of accessibility, data and public service reform.
- Growing national experience in community-based service delivery resulting from EU-funded initiatives implemented by civil society organizations, local authorities and international partners.
- Digital transformation and public administration reform, which create opportunities to embed accessibility and universal design requirements from the outset. EU-supported digitalization should include accessibility-by-design requirements, plain language communication, alternative formats and inclusive user testing with persons with different types of disabilities.
- Increased availability of disability-related data through national statistics, the 2024 Population and Housing Census and social inclusion monitoring systems. These sources provide an opportunity to strengthen evidence-based planning and align Moldova's monitoring systems with EU and CRPD standards.
- Strong and experienced disability organizations capable of supporting reform implementation and monitoring progress. Organizations of persons with disabilities can play a strategic role in policy co-design, independent monitoring, community outreach, accessibility audits and evaluation of EU-funded investments.

Moldova can also build on recent inclusive education investments. UNICEF and the Global Partnership for Education reported that Moldova is expanding assistive technologies for children with disabilities, including devices for children with visual and hearing impairments. Such initiatives demonstrate how EU and partner support can move from policy commitments to practical inclusion (Global Partnership for Education & UNICEF, 2024).

If disability inclusion is integrated into accession reforms from the beginning, Moldova can avoid creating new barriers and align directly with European standards and the **EU Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021–2030**, which places strong emphasis on accessibility, independent living, participation, employment, social protection, education and global disability rights engagement (European Commission, 2021).

3. Strategic Priorities for Disability Rights, 2028–2034

Priority 1. Independent Living and Deinstitutionalization. Accelerate the transition from institutional care toward community-based support through supported living, personal assistance, family support, respite care, community mental health services and accessible housing. Establish sustainable financing mechanisms, clear national targets and accountability systems. Particular attention should be given to persons with intellectual and psychosocial disabilities, people with high support needs, children transitioning from residential care and adults who lack family support.

Priority 2. Accessibility and Universal Design. Make accessibility a mandatory requirement across public infrastructure, transport, digital services, housing, public procurement

and communication systems. Accessibility should be embedded in all EU-funded investments through accessibility audits, universal design standards, accessible procurement rules, monitoring mechanisms and complaint procedures.

Priority 3. Inclusive Social Protection and Poverty Reduction. Modernize disability-related benefits and introduce disability-responsive budgeting that accounts for the additional costs associated with disability. Strengthen access to assistive technologies, rehabilitation, personal assistance and community support services. The income gap shown by NBS disability pension data demonstrates the need to review benefit adequacy and ensure that disability-related costs are recognised in social protection, employment and anti-poverty policies.

Priority 4. Inclusive Education and Skills Development. Move beyond school enrolment indicators toward quality inclusion, learning outcomes, accessible curricula, teacher preparation, transition planning and lifelong learning opportunities. Policies should prioritise support teachers, assistive technologies, accessible learning materials, school-level inclusion plans, anti-stigma measures and pathways from education to vocational training and employment.

Priority 5. Employment and Economic Participation. Expand supported employment, reasonable accommodation, vocational training, entrepreneurship support and employer incentives. Ensure that people with disabilities benefit from EU-supported economic development and labor market programs. Given the low labor force participation rate among persons with disabilities, employment measures should include targeted outreach to women with disabilities, rural residents and persons with intellectual and psychosocial disabilities.

Priority 6. Participation and Democratic Inclusion. Strengthen the meaningful participation of organizations of persons with disabilities in public decision-making, EU accession processes, monitoring of reforms and budget consultations. Participation should be accessible, financed and representative, including organisations led by persons with intellectual disabilities, psychosocial disabilities, women with disabilities, parents, rural communities and refugees with disabilities.

Priority 7. Data, Monitoring and Accountability. Develop disability-disaggregated monitoring systems aligned with EU standards and the CRPD. Use census, administrative, survey and service-level data to guide policymaking, allocate budgets and measure outcomes. Indicators should track not only service coverage, but also independent living, poverty reduction, employment, education quality, accessibility, participation, deinstitutionalization and satisfaction with support services.

4. Suggestions for EU Engagement and Partnership, 2028–2034

The European Union should position disability inclusion as a measurable cross-cutting priority across all cooperation instruments and accession-related support.

We recommend that the EU:

- **Mainstream disability inclusion across all sectors**, including governance, justice, employment, education, health, digitalization, transport, local development and public administration reform.
- **Establish disability-related indicators and results frameworks** across EU-funded programs to measure participation, accessibility, independent living, employment,

inclusive education, poverty reduction and social inclusion. These indicators should be aligned with CRPD principles, EU disability priorities and Moldova's national statistical systems.

- **Support implementation of the National Program for Social Inclusion and the EU Accession Program 2025–2029** through targeted investments that directly benefit persons with disabilities.
- **Scale up successful EU-funded disability initiatives** by supporting national expansion of community-based services, independent living models, inclusive education mechanisms, supported employment and civil society-led monitoring initiatives.
- **Make accessibility a condition for EU financing**, requiring accessibility audits, universal design standards and compliance monitoring for all infrastructure, transport, public service and digital investments.
- **Strengthen and finance organizations working in the disability field**, including organizations **of persons with disabilities**, parent-led organizations, service-providing NGOs and groups representing persons with intellectual, psychosocial, sensory and multiple disabilities. EU support should include direct and flexible financing, institutional development grants, technical assistance, leadership development and support for coalition-building. This would enable disability organizations to participate meaningfully in EU accession reforms, contribute to policy design, monitor public budgets, conduct accessibility and service-quality assessments, and hold institutions accountable for implementing CRPD and EU disability commitments.
- **Support disability-inclusive public administration reform**, ensuring that all public services and digital government platforms are accessible, easy to understand and responsive to diverse support needs.
- **Promote disability-inclusive local development**, recognizing that rural areas face higher risks of exclusion, limited services, lower labor market participation and reduced accessibility.
- **Support disability-inclusive refugee and migration responses**, ensuring that refugees with disabilities and older refugees can access mainstream services, disability-specific support, healthcare, employment, accessible information and community participation.
- **Invest in disability-disaggregated data systems and monitoring capacity** so that Moldova can use NBS data, census data, administrative records and service-level information to plan reforms, allocate budgets and report progress under EU accession and CRPD commitments.

The EU-Moldova partnership should recognize disability inclusion as both a fundamental rights obligation and an essential component of successful EU accession. Progress in disability rights can serve as a practical indicator of Moldova's commitment to human rights, social cohesion, democratic participation and inclusive growth.

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