



in cooperation with



## First Friends of the Eastern Candidates (FoEC) Network Meeting & Willy Brandt Programme Seminar

### **The new enlargement momentum: the Eastern candidate countries on a shared European path**

**8-9 October 2026**

#### **Venue**

Radisson Blu Leograd Hotel, Loft Lounge, Chisinau

Chisinau MD, Strada Mitropolit Varlaam 77, MD-2012, Moldova

#### **Agenda**

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has fundamentally transformed the geopolitical landscape of Europe and accelerated the strategic importance of EU enlargement towards the Eastern candidate countries. Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia have emerged as key partners in shaping the future security and stability of the European continent. Yet, despite the renewed political momentum generated by the enlargement process, democratic reforms continue to unfold in an increasingly challenging environment, characterised by political polarisation, institutional fragility, external interference and growing societal pressures.

While all three countries have committed themselves to ambitious reform agendas, their paths towards European integration remain uneven and vulnerable to both domestic and external challenges. Democratic backsliding, hybrid threats, disinformation campaigns, electoral interference and foreign influence operations have become central obstacles to the consolidation of democratic institutions and to the credibility of the accession process itself.

At the same time, the success of the enlargement process will depend not only on the implementation of the EU acquis, but also on the ability to foster inclusive political dialogue, strengthen democratic institutions and support political actors committed to European values. In this context, European progressive forces have an important role to play in promoting democratic governance, social cohesion and resilient political alternatives capable of sustaining reform efforts over the long term.

Against this background, the first Friends of the Eastern Candidates (FoEC) Network Meeting will bring together Members of the European Parliament, representatives of progressive political parties from the Eastern candidate countries, policymakers, academics and civil society representatives to discuss the major democratic challenges facing Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia and to explore how progressive cooperation can better contribute to their European future. The conference will examine the current state of democratic reforms in Moldova, analyse the growing impact of hybrid threats and electoral interference across the region, and discuss concrete strategies through which European progressive actors can strengthen democratic resilience, support institutional reforms and reinforce pro-European political forces.

The conference is organised by the Foundation for European Progressive Studies (FEPS), in cooperation with its partner organisations, within the framework of the Friends of the Eastern Candidates (FoEC) Network and the FEPS Enlargement Programme.

The conference will be preceded by the seminar of the S&D Willy Brandt Programme.

## Thursday 8 October

**Morning**      *Participants' arrival*

### **S&D Willy Brandt Programme Seminar**

***"Moldova's path in the EU integration: EU member state by 2030?"***

*@Radisson Blu hotel Leograd, Chisinau, Loft lounge*

**15:30-16:00**    **Welcome coffee**

**16:00-16:15**    **Opening remarks**

by S&D Group Vice-President for EU Enlargement **Ms. Kathleen Van Brempt MEP**

**16:15-17:00**    **High-level panel discussion**

Moderator: **Mr. Nacho Sanchez Amor MEP**, S&D AFET Coordinator

Keynote speech: **Ms. Cristina Gherasimov**, Deputy Prime Minister for European Integration, Republic of Moldova

With the participation of:

- **Mr. Adrian Balutel MP**, Chair of the Committee on European Integration



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- **Mr. Gaik Vartanean MP**, National Alternative Movement (MAN)
- **Mr. Ion Manole**, Promo-LEX Association, Executive Director
- **Mr. Vasile Dincu MEP**, Foreign Affairs Committee (AFET)

**17:00-17:45 Discussion with participants**

**17:45-18:00 Closing remarks**

by **Mr. Sven Mikser MEP**, European Parliament Rapporteur on Moldova

**18:30**

**Working dinner with keynote speech by Marcel Spatari**, Member of the Moldovan Parliament, Chairman of European Integration Committee (PAS)  
*Radisson Blu hotel Leograd, Chisinau*

**Friday 9 October**

**Friends of the Eastern Candidates**

*@Radisson Blu hotel Leograd, Chisinau, Loft lounge*

**8:30-9:00**

**Registration**

**9:00-9:20**

**Welcome remarks**

**Lászlo Andor**, FEPS, Secretary General

**Felix Hett**, Representative for Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova, FES

**9:20-10:35**

**The state of democracy in Moldova: Democratic reforms and EU integration**

Moldova's accession process unfolds in an increasingly complex political environment. While the government has secured a strong parliamentary mandate to advance ambitious democratic and institutional reforms, political polarisation, economic fragility and the unresolved issue of Transnistria continue to pose significant challenges. This panel will examine Moldova's evolving political landscape, assess the main opportunities and risks for democratic reform, and discuss how European progressive actors can contribute to strengthening democratic resilience, fostering inclusive political competition, and supporting the country's European path.

Speakers:

**Nicoleta Hriplivî Caminschi**, Lawyer, Promo-LEX



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**Alexei Tulbure**, Founder and Director, Oral History Institute of Moldova

*Reactions:*

**Olga Ursu**, Member of the Moldovan Parliament, National Alternative Movement/Mișcarea Alternativa Națională (MAN)

**Marcel Spatari**, Member of the Moldovan Parliament, Chairman of European Integration Committee (PAS)

**Igor Batog**, Member, Foundation for Democracy and Progress (FDP)

Open debate

*Moderation:*

**Ana Mihailov**, Country Director, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Moldova

**10:35-11:05**

**Coffee break**

**11:05-12:30**

**Ensuring economic and social progress on the way to accession**

Social cohesion represents a key challenge for the Eastern candidate countries as they navigate complex democratic reforms, geopolitical pressures, and the social consequences of prolonged conflict and political polarisation. Persistent inequalities, declining trust in public institutions, regional disparities and growing societal fragmentation risk undermining democratic resilience and weakening public support for the European integration process. At the same time, fostering inclusive governance, civic participation and social dialogue is essential for building more resilient and cohesive societies. This panel will examine the main challenges to social cohesion in Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine, explore the relationship between democratic reforms, social inclusion and public trust, and discuss how the EU and European progressive actors can better support policies that strengthen social cohesion, promote inclusive development and reinforce democratic resilience throughout the enlargement process.

*Speakers:*

**Felix Hett**, Representative for Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova, FES, Moldova

**Marina Soloviova**, Independent Economic Think-tank "Expert-Grup", Moldova

**Maia Barkaia**, Interdisciplinary Researcher and Associate Professor at Georgian Institute for Public Affairs, Board Member of the Movement for Social Democracy, Georgia

*Reactions:*



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**Sofiia Kostytska**, Lawyer, Policy Professional on Public Governance, European Integration, Ukraine's recovery;  
Member of SD Platform

**Nacho Sánchez Amor**, Member of the European Parliament, Standing Rapporteur for Moldova, Group of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats

**Dimitri Tskitishvili**, Founder of the Progressive Forum

Open debate

Moderation:

**Emiel Bongaerts**, Project Manager Southeast Europe & Eastern Partnership, Progressief Nederland (PRO)

**12:30-12:45**

**Keynote speech**

**Sven Mikser**, Member of the European Parliament, Standing Rapporteur for Moldova, Group of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats

**12:45-14:00**

**Lunch at the hotel**

**14:00-15:30**

**Supporting democratic reforms in the Eastern Candidate countries: The role of European social democratic forces**

Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine are undergoing profound political transformations, marked by reform ambitions, democratic challenges and evolving party systems. The future of EU enlargement will depend not only on institutional reforms in candidate countries but also on the ability to build broad democratic coalitions among European and national progressive forces, capable of sustaining the European path. This panel will examine the political dynamics shaping democratic reform in the three Eastern candidate countries and discuss how European social democratic actors can support democratic resilience, strengthen pro-European political alternatives and contribute to inclusive, socially-oriented reform agendas throughout the accession process.

Input: **Amy Eaglestone**, Lecturer, Leiden University

**World café discussion**

**Table 1:** *What democratic and institutional reforms should we advocate for in our strategies for EU enlargement?*

Moderation and Table Team:

**Sabina de Silva**, Researcher, CeSPI, Italy



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**Hedwig Giusto**, Head of the International Programmes and Editor in Chief of the Progressive Post, FEPS, Italy

**Table 2:** *How can the enlargement process go beyond institutional checklists to make EU integration tangible for ordinary citizens?*

Moderation and Table Team: **Juul Evertse**, Project Officer, PRO International, the Netherlands

**Emiel Bongaerts**, Project Manager Southeast Europe & Eastern Partnership, PRO International, the Netherlands

**Table 3:** *How can we support political pluralism without inadvertently strengthening actors who do not share a commitment to democracy or European integration?*

Moderation and Table Team:

**Gerhard Marchl**, Head of European Politics, Karl-Renner-Institut, Austria

**Julia Wild**, Acting Gender Coordinator and Project Officer, FEPS

At the end of the session, the moderators will report to the plenary. Each table will need to produce 1 Call-to-Action/recommendation (1 sentence each). Hence, participants will contribute to the formulation of one recommendation per table to be then presented to the plenary.

**16:50**

Meeting point for the walking city tour at [BRISTOL Central Park Hotel](#), Alexander Pushkin Str. 32, MD-2012 Chisinau, Moldova

**17:00-19:00**

**Walking city tour with a guide**

**19:00**

**Dinner**

at [Fuior](#), 30 Puskin str., MD-2038, Moldova, (+373 68 944 944)

#### **Closed-door roundtable participants:**

**Alexei Tulbure**, Director, Oral History Institute of Moldova, Moldova

**Amy Eaglestone**, Lecturer, Leiden University, Netherlands

**Ana Mihailov**, Country Director, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Moldova, Moldova

**Anh Helge**, Regional Representative Eastern Europe, Olof Palme International Center, Sweden

**Ani Chankotadze**, Representative, For Georgia Political Party, Georgia



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**Antony Beumer**, Former Secretary General, PES and S&D Group, Coordinator PES Contact Group Ukraine

**Dan Marius Palihovici**, Programme Coordinator, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Moldova, Moldova (TBC)

**Denys Sultanhaliiev**, Member of the International Department, SD Platform, Belgian/Ukraine

**Dimitri Tskitishvili**, Founder of the Progressive Forum, Georgia (tbc)

**Emiel Bongaerts**, Project Manager Southeast Europe & Eastern Partnership, PRO International, the Netherlands

**Felix Hett**, Representative for Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Moldova

**Gerhard Marchl**, Head of European Politics, Karl-Renner-Institut, Austria

**Hedwig Giusto**, Head of the International Programmes and Editor in Chief of the Progressive Post, FEPS, Italy

**Igor Batog**, Executive Director, Foundation for Democracy and Progress (FDP)

**Ine Goris**, Office of Kathleen Van Brempt, Member of the European Parliament, Vice-President for EU Enlargement S&D Group, Belgium

**Ion Sula**, PSDE Party, Moldova

**Jorgen Siil**, S&D political adviser responsible for the Willy Brandt Programme

**Julia Wild**, Acting Gender Coordinator and Project Officer, FEPS

**Julia Wanninger**, S&D political adviser for the Moldova delegation

**Juul Evertse**, Project Officer, PRO International, the Netherlands

**Kathleen Van Brempt**, Member of the European Parliament, Vice-President for EU Enlargement S&D Group, Belgium

**László Andor**, Secretary General, Foundation for European Progressive Studies (FEPS), Belgium

**Maia Barkaia**, Interdisciplinary Researcher and Associate Professor at Georgian Institute for Public Affairs, Board Member of the Movement for Social Democracy, Georgia

**Marcel Spatari**, Member of the Moldovan Parliament, Chairman of European Integration Committee (PAS)

**Marina Soloviova**, Program Director for Economic Policies, Independent Economic Think-tank "Expert-Grup", Moldova

**Nacho Sánchez Amor**, Member of the European Parliament, S&D Group, Spain



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**Nicolas Derobert**, Press Officer, S&D Group

**Nicoleta Hriplivîi Caminschi**, Lawyer, Promo-LEX, Moldova

**Nicolo Carboni**, Foreign Affairs Dept., Partito Democratico, Italy

**Olga Ursu**, Member of the Moldovan Parliament since 2025, National Alternative Movement/Mișcarea Alternativa Națională (MAN), Moldova

**Pia-Maria Wieninger**, Member of the Austrian National Council, Social Democratic Party (SPÖ), Austria

**Sabina de Silva**, Researcher, CeSPI, Italy

**Sébastien Gricourt**, Co-Director of the Balkans Observatory, Fondation Jean Jaurès

**Silver Meikar**, Assistant Sven Mikser, S&D Group, Estonia/Belgium

**Sofiia Kostytska**, Lawyer and Policy Professional, Member SD Platform

**Sven Mikser**, Member of the European Parliament, S&D Group, Estonia

**Taisia Haritonova**, NDI, Moldova (TBC)

**Vasile Bumacov**, PSDE Party, Moldova

**Vasile Dincu**, Member of the European Parliament, S&D Group, Romania



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