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DIGITAL GOVERNANCE AND TRUST IN MOLDOVA'S EU ACCESSION PROCESS

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Abstract. This article examines the relationship between digital governance, institutional trust and accession readiness in the Republic of Moldova. It addresses a specific problem in accession monitoring: legal alignment, platform availability and service counts may be recorded without showing whether digital public services improve administrative experience. The purpose is to derive a trust-sensitive analytical model for Moldova rather than to test a statistical hypothesis. The study uses qualitative policy-document analysis and conceptual synthesis on a corpus of 24 source items, including Moldovan policy documents, European Commission enlargement documents, multilateral administrative assessments, interoperability and cybersecurity sources, election-observation materials and scholarly literature. Manual deductive coding applied five categories: strategic alignment, service quality, accountability, institutional capacity and inclusion. The findings show that Moldova's digital agenda is increasingly embedded in accession-related state-building, while evidence remains stronger for service availability and infrastructure than for user experience, complaint resolution or segmented satisfaction. The article proposes a trust-through-service-quality model and argues that assisted access and cyber-resilience should be treated as constitutive dimensions of public service quality. The contribution is conceptual and measurement-oriented, and requires future empirical testing.

Keywords: *administrative capacity, assisted access, citizen-centred services, cyber-resilience, e-government, interoperability, public administration reform, service delivery.*

Rezumat. Articolul examinează relația dintre guvernarea digitală, încrederea instituțională și pregătirea pentru aderare în Republica Moldova. Acesta abordează o problemă specifică în monitorizarea aderării: alinierea legislativă, disponibilitatea platformelor și numărul de servicii care pot fi înregistrate fără a demonstra, dacă serviciile publice digitale îmbunătățesc experiența administrativă. Scopul este de a obține un model analitic sensibil la încredere pentru Moldova, mai degrabă decât de a testa o ipoteză statistică. Studiul utilizează analiza calitativă a documentelor de politici și sinteza conceptuală pe un corpus de 24 de elemente sursă, inclusiv documente de politici moldovenești, documente privind extinderea Comisiei Europene, evaluări administrative multilaterale, surse de interoperabilitate și securitate cibernetică, materiale de observare a alegerilor și literatură științifică. Codificarea deductivă manuală a aplicat cinci categorii: aliniere strategică, calitatea serviciilor, responsabilitate, capacitate instituțională și incluziune. Constatările arată că agenda digitală a Moldovei este

din ce în ce mai integrată în construirea statului legată de aderare, în timp ce dovezile rămân mai puternice pentru disponibilitatea serviciilor și infrastructură decât pentru experiența utilizatorului, soluționarea reclamațiilor sau satisfacția segmentată. Articolul propune un model de încredere pentru calitatea serviciilor și susține că accesul asistat și reziliența cibernetică ar trebui tratate ca dimensiuni constitutive ale calității serviciilor publice. Contribuția este conceptuală și orientată spre măsurare și necesită teste empirice viitoare.

Cuvinte cheie: *capacitate administrativă, acces asistat, servicii centrate pe cetățean, reziliență cibernetică, e-guvernare, interoperabilitate, reformă a administrației publice, furnizare de servicii.*

Abbreviations

CUPS – Unified Service Delivery Centres (Centrele Unificate de Prestare a Serviciilor).
 EC – European Commission.
 EU – European Union.
 GTMI – GovTech Maturity Index.
 ICT – information and communication technology.
 MPass – Government electronic authentication and access-control service.
 MConnect – Government interoperability and data-exchange platform.
 NPA – National Programme for the Accession of the Republic of Moldova to the European Union.
 ODIHR – Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights.
 PAR – public administration reform.
 SIGMA – Support for Improvement in Governance and Management.
 SWD – Commission Staff Working Document.

1. Introduction

Digital governance has become part of the administrative infrastructure through which candidate states demonstrate readiness for European Union membership. In the Republic of Moldova, this relationship is particularly visible because accession reforms, public administration reform and the digital transformation agenda now operate in the same institutional space. The 2025 Moldova Report and the wider 2025 Enlargement Package assess Moldova under the fundamentals logic of the enlargement process, while the National Programme for Accession 2025–2029 and the Digital Transformation Strategy 2023–2030 place service delivery, interoperability and digital public infrastructure inside a broader administrative-modernisation agenda [1–4].

This article uses the term digitization for the conversion of analogue information or procedures into digital form, digitalization for the redesign of administrative processes through digital tools, digital transformation for wider organisational and institutional change, e-government for the digital provision of public services, and GovTech for whole-of-government public-sector modernisation using digital technologies. The distinction is not only terminological. A document can be digitized without a procedure being simplified, and a portal can be available without the underlying administration becoming more predictable, accountable or inclusive.

The scholarly literature supports this distinction. Digital transformation is not reducible to the introduction of information and communication technology; it changes organisational routines, institutional roles and service relationships [5, 6]. Public value

research similarly argues that public-sector ICT should be assessed against citizen-centred outcomes rather than only efficiency or transactional volume [7, 10, 11]. The trust literature adds a second caution: transparency and e-government can support trust when they improve legibility, fairness and responsiveness, but disclosure or service availability alone does not necessarily produce confidence in institutions [8, 9]. Comparative work on critical citizens reinforces this point: where confidence in public institutions has eroded, the driver tends to be perceived government performance and responsiveness rather than the presence or absence of communication channels [13]. For a candidate state, this distinction matters directly, because it locates the trust-relevant variable in the quality of the administrative encounter rather than in the count of services placed online.

The unresolved issue is sharper in candidate-state contexts. Accession monitoring necessarily evaluates legal alignment, institutional capacity and progress in reform implementation. However, the lived administrative experience of citizens is not identical to the presence of online services or the formal transposition of *acquis*-related commitments. The gap addressed here is therefore specific: previous digital-government and trust studies explain why service experience may matter, and accession documents explain what Moldova must align, but the relationship between digital public service quality, cyber-resilience and trust-sensitive accession readiness remains insufficiently specified for Moldova as a candidate state.

The article does not claim to measure public trust directly. It does not use survey data, interviews, experiments or administrative microdata on individual users. Instead, it examines how trust-relevant mechanisms appear in the documentary architecture of Moldova's accession and digital-governance reforms and develops a conceptual model for later empirical testing. The research question is: how are digital governance, public service quality and cyber-resilience framed in Moldova's accession-related reform documents, and what model can be derived for trust-sensitive accession monitoring? The working analytical proposition is that digital governance can support institutional trust only when it is translated into service quality, assisted access, accountable feedback and resilient public infrastructure. This proposition structures the qualitative analysis; it is not treated as a statistically tested hypothesis.

The article makes three contributions. First, it clarifies the Moldova-specific mechanisms through which digital reform may become administratively meaningful for citizens. Second, it integrates cyber-resilience into the analysis of public service quality, rather than treating it as a separate security appendix. Third, it proposes a measurement-oriented model that distinguishes documentary findings from policy recommendations and identifies indicators for future empirical validation.

2. Materials and Methods

The study applies qualitative policy-document analysis with conceptual synthesis. This design is appropriate because the research object is the reform architecture of a candidate state rather than individual attitudes or behavioural outcomes. The method allows the article to analyse how official documents, multilateral assessments and scholarly concepts define the relationship between digital public services, administrative capacity and trust-relevant governance mechanisms.

The corpus consisted of 24 source items collected and checked between June 2025 and June 2026. The institutional component included Moldovan policy documents, European

Commission enlargement materials, multilateral administrative assessments, World Bank project evidence, interoperability materials and election-observation sources. The scholarly component included peer-reviewed and foundational works on digital government, public value, transparency, trust and street-level bureaucracy. Table 1 gives the complete declared corpus and the purpose for which each item was used; no source is used as analytical evidence without being identified in the reference list.

For verifiability, each quantitative and contextual statement was tied to a numbered corpus item. The reference list contains all 24 items used in the analysis. Official URLs and DOI links were checked on 17 June 2026. Where a source provided both a landing page and a downloadable report, the cited reference identifies the official source page or the stable report file. Scholarly sources [5-13] are used for conceptual framing, while Moldova-specific documentary findings are derived from institutional, multilateral and election-observation sources [1-4, 14-24].

Table 1

Analytical corpus used in the qualitative policy-document analysis (source: author's classification based on references [1–24])

Source band	Ref.	Source item	Purpose in the analysis
Policy / accession	[1]	European Commission, Moldova Report 2025, SWD(2025) 758 final	Accession assessment; public administration reform; hybrid-threat context
Policy / accession	[2]	European Commission, 2025 Communication on EU enlargement policy	Regional enlargement frame and fundamentals logic
Policy / accession	[3]	National Programme for the Accession of the Republic of Moldova to the EU, 2025–2029	National reform sequencing and chapter structure
Policy / digital strategy	[4]	Digital Transformation Strategy of the Republic of Moldova, 2023–2030	Digital-state objectives, service-delivery ambitions and interoperability agenda
Administrative evidence	[14]	Electronic Governance Agency, review of public-service modernisation	Official service-digitalization counts and implementation narrative
Administrative evidence	[15]	Electronic Governance Agency, MConnect Events information	Interoperability infrastructure and data-exchange scale
Administrative evidence	[16]	World Bank, From queues to clicks: digitalization transforms Moldova's public services	Service use, World Bank-supported digitisation and service-efficiency evidence
Administrative evidence	[17]	World Bank, Modernization of Government Services Project implementation report	CUPS, training, service redesign and project indicators
GovTech assessment	[18]	World Bank, GovTech Maturity Index 2025	Comparative GovTech maturity frame
Administrative assessment	[19]	OECD/SIGMA, Public Administration in the Republic of Moldova	PAR capacity assessment and service-delivery conditions
Election / resilience	[20]	OSCE/ODIHR preliminary findings on 28 September 2025 parliamentary elections	Cyber-attacks, disinformation and illicit-financing context
Election / resilience	[21]	OSCE/ODIHR final report on 2025 parliamentary elections	Confirmed election-administration and interference assessment

Continuation Table 1

Interoperability	[22]	Interoperable Europe, Moldova 2025 monitoring supporting document	Interoperability, MPass and digital public infrastructure context
Cyber-resilience	[23]	UNDP Moldova, advancing digital transformation in Moldova	Digital resilience and EU Cybersecurity Reserve context
Policy monitoring	[24]	Annual implementation report of Moldova Digital Transformation Strategy	Implementation progress and monitoring frame
Academic	[5]	Mergel, Edelmann and Haug, digital transformation definition	Conceptual distinction between technology adoption and institutional change
Academic	[6]	Janowski, digital government evolution	Transformation and contextualisation framework
Academic	[7]	Twizeyimana and Andersson, public value of e-government	Public-value benchmark for digital services
Academic	[8]	Tolbert and Mossberger, e-government and trust	Link between e-government experience and trust
Academic	[9]	Grimmelikhuijsen et al., transparency and trust	Limits of transparency as a trust mechanism
Academic	[10]	Bannister and Connolly, ICT and public values	Public-value critique of efficiency-led ICT reform
Academic	[11]	Cordella and Bonina, public-value perspective	Public-sector reform and ICT value creation
Academic	[12]	Lipsky, street-level bureaucracy	Human mediation and discretion in service delivery
Academic	[13]	Norris, critical citizens	Trust, democratic performance and institutional legitimacy

Selection followed four inclusion criteria: direct relevance to Moldova's digital governance, accession process or administrative reform; authoritative provenance, defined as an official institution, multilateral organisation or peer-reviewed scholarly source; availability in English or in an official English translation; and relevance to at least one of the five coding categories. Sources were excluded when they were journalistic commentary, duplicated factual claims already available in official documents, or offered only general regional background without specific analytical value for the research question.

Coding was deductive. Five categories were used: strategic alignment, public service quality, transparency and accountability, institutional capacity, and inclusion. Each document was read manually and coded in a structured spreadsheet, with one row per source item and columns for source identifier, document type, coded excerpt or analytical paraphrase, coding category, interpretation and relevance to the research question. Where page numbers or stable sections were available, they were recorded in the spreadsheet. The coding procedure was repeated after seven days. Discrepancies were resolved by re-reading the relevant passage and checking whether a second corpus source supported the classification. The most frequent discrepancy concerned the boundary between strategic alignment and institutional capacity, because accession documents often present capacity-building commitments as alignment tasks. Table 2 reports the codebook and coding examples; the examples are analytical paraphrases of coded evidence, not additional empirical claims.

No statistical processing was performed because the study did not generate or analyse a numerical dataset. Descriptive numerical statements are used only when reported in official or multilateral documents, and they are treated as contextual documentary evidence rather

than as independently verified measurements. The article does not generalise from documents to citizen attitudes. Claims about rural users, older users, disabled users, diaspora users or territorially constrained populations are therefore framed as monitoring gaps or inclusion categories, not as measured behavioural findings. No software-based text mining, machine learning classification or inferential statistics were used. The method is reproducible at the level of corpus, codebook and interpretive procedure, but it does not provide inter-coder reliability statistics. This is a methodological limitation and is addressed in the discussion.

Table 2

Coding framework and examples (source: author's methodological design derived from the corpus [1–24])

Category	Operational meaning	Coding example from the corpus	Analytical function
Strategic alignment	Digital reform is linked to accession obligations, chapter commitments, PAR and interoperability requirements.	NPA commitments linked with digital service delivery and PAR; Moldova Report assesses capacity under fundamentals.	Tests whether digital governance is accession infrastructure or a parallel ICT agenda.
Public service quality	References to simplification, completion, processing time, visit reduction, life-event design or user satisfaction.	World Bank-supported services report reduced red tape and increased use of online services; MGSP report records service redesign and CUPS indicators.	Tests whether reform is experienced as service improvement rather than only online availability.
Transparency and accountability	Visibility of rules, deadlines, responsible bodies, complaint channels, feedback and public reporting.	Documents provide strategic transparency but less systematic publication of completion, complaint and segmented satisfaction indicators.	Tests whether digital systems reduce opacity or simply publish administrative information.
Institutional capacity	Interoperability, staffing, coordination, legal absorption, cybersecurity and operational continuity.	MConnect, MPass, CUPS and SIGMA capacity findings show that back-office integration and staff capacity remain decisive.	Tests whether digital reform can be sustained across agencies and under hybrid-pressure conditions.
Inclusion	Assisted access, rural users, older users, disabled users, diaspora users and territorially excluded populations.	CUPS and mobile-first digital-service narratives appear as inclusion mechanisms, while diaspora and territorial gaps remain less operationally specified.	Tests whether digitalization widens access or creates new barriers for marginal users.

3. Results

The results reported in this section are documentary findings produced by the coding procedure. They describe how the corpus frames digital governance, service quality, capacity and inclusion. They do not report citizen perceptions, do not infer measured changes in institutional trust and do not present policy recommendations; interpretation and recommendations are reserved for the discussion.

3.1. Digital governance is increasingly positioned as accession infrastructure

The first documentary finding is that digital governance in Moldova is no longer framed only as a sectoral ICT programme. The NPA 2025–2029 and the Digital Transformation Strategy connect digitalization with institutional alignment, administrative service delivery, data exchange and public-sector modernisation [3, 4]. This is reinforced by

European Commission and SIGMA materials, which assess Moldova's administrative capacity through the fundamentals logic of enlargement and treat public administration reform as a condition of accession credibility [1, 2, 19].

This alignment is analytically important because it changes the status of digital public services. They become evidence of implementation capacity, not only technical deliverables. A functioning digital service can demonstrate that legal alignment, back-office procedures, staff capacity and user-facing delivery have been connected. Conversely, a service that is available online but still dependent on fragmented registries, unclear rules or repeated physical verification demonstrates the limits of formal alignment.

The corpus also shows a tension between strategic ambition and implementation conditions. Strategy documents define broad 2030 objectives, while administrative assessments emphasise absorption capacity, agency coordination and continuity of service delivery. The relevant analytical issue is therefore the extent to which digital platforms are converted into consistent service quality across agencies and territories.

3.2. Service availability is better documented than service quality

The second finding concerns measurement. Official and multilateral sources provide evidence of expanding digital service availability and platform use. The Electronic Governance Agency reports that 303 out of 648 public services were fully digitalized in 2025 [14]. The World Bank reports that more than 87 critical public services were digitalized with its support and that the share of people using online public services increased from 25% in 2018 to 54.7% [16]. MConnect materials report large e-scale data exchange, including more than 2.5 million messages processed daily through the MConnect ecosystem [15].

These indicators are relevant, but they do not by themselves measure trust. They record availability, use or infrastructure activity. The documentary corpus contains less systematic evidence on completion rates by user segment, complaint resolution, failed transactions, assisted-access outcomes or satisfaction disaggregated by rural users, older users, disabled users and diaspora users. The result is a measurement asymmetry: digital progress is visible in service counts and platform statistics, while trust-relevant service experience is less visible in comparable public indicators. Comparative benchmarking does not resolve this asymmetry; it reproduces it. The 2025 GovTech Maturity Index places Moldova in Group A, its highest maturity band, on the strength of core government systems, online service portals, digital citizen engagement and institutional enablers [18]. The World Bank, however, states that the index is not a ranking and is not meant to evaluate an economy's GovTech readiness or performance. A top-band classification therefore scores the presence and design of platforms, not whether citizens complete services and experience them as reliable. The asymmetry is structural to how digital governance is currently assessed, not merely a gap in Moldovan reporting.

This does not invalidate Moldova's digital reform. It specifies what the available evidence can and cannot support. The documents can support a claim that Moldova has expanded digital public infrastructure and service availability. They cannot, without additional empirical data, support a direct claim that institutional trust has increased because of those services.

3.3. Assisted access is a core condition of inclusive digital governance

The third finding is that assisted access appears as a necessary part of Moldova's digital-governance architecture. The World Bank implementation evidence records the

establishment and operation of CUPS service-delivery centres and the training of staff involved in citizen-centred administrative service delivery [17]. In methodological terms, this matters because assisted access changes the interpretation of digitalization statistics. A digital service accessed through a trained service centre is still part of digital governance, but its inclusion effect depends on human mediation, not only on online availability.

The importance of assisted access is consistent with street-level bureaucracy theory. Digitalization changes where discretion and mediation occur; it does not remove them [12]. In Moldova's case, the service centre, the authentication platform, the registry interface and the civil servant form a combined delivery system. A purely portal-centred measurement approach would therefore understate the role of assisted access and overstate the inclusiveness of digital service availability.

The corpus identifies inclusion as a boundary condition rather than a fully resolved achievement. Rural access, disability access, older users, diaspora users and populations outside effective central administrative control are present in the policy problem but less consistently operationalised as measurable service-quality categories. This is a limitation of the current monitoring frame.

3.4. Cyber-resilience is trust-relevant but not always integrated into service-quality assessment

The fourth finding is that cyber-resilience should be treated as part of service-quality assessment. The 2025 electoral context illustrates the relevance of this point. OSCE/ODIHR materials reported a competitive election process affected by foreign interference, illicit financing, cyber-attacks and disinformation [20, 21]. UNDP also records that Moldova became the first EU candidate country to benefit from deployment of the EU Cybersecurity Reserve Unit in September 2025, in the context of protecting critical infrastructure before parliamentary elections [23].

For digital governance, this evidence has a direct implication. Identity, payment, notification and registry systems are public infrastructure directly relevant to institutional confidence. A disruption, data breach or manipulated public narrative about digital-service failure can affect both technical continuity and confidence in accession-oriented reform. Cyber-resilience should therefore be coded as part of institutional capacity and public service quality, not only as a separate cybersecurity topic.

Table 3

Summary of documentary findings from manual coding (source: author's coding of references [1–4, 14–24])

Analytical area	Strength of documentary evidence	Main finding	Interpretive implication
Strategic alignment	Strong	Digital governance is embedded in accession and PAR documents.	Implementation capacity, not legal alignment alone, becomes the key assessment criterion.
Service availability	Strong	Service counts, platform functions and usage statistics are documented.	These indicators do not directly measure completion quality or institutional trust.
Service quality	Moderate	Some evidence on time, access and user satisfaction exists in project documents.	Comparable public reporting by service and user segment remains under-developed.

Continuation Table 3

Assisted access	Moderate to strong	CUPS and staff training show that assisted delivery is part of the architecture.	Assisted access should be treated as core digital infrastructure, not an exception.
Accountability feedback	Weak to moderate	Complaint, feedback and dashboard logic appear less systematically than service availability.	Trust-sensitive monitoring requires completion, complaint and resolution indicators.
Cyber-resilience	Moderate	Election and digital-resilience sources show that cyber risk is politically salient.	Cybersecurity must be integrated into service-quality and trust measurement.
Inclusion	Moderate	Inclusion is recognised, but marginal-user categories are unevenly operationalised.	Rural, disabled, older, diaspora and territorially constrained users require separate indicators.

The documentary evidence suggests that Moldova's digital ecosystem contains significant reusable platforms, including MPass, MConnect and related interoperability services [4, 15, 22]. The same evidence also indicates a monitoring requirement: as service delivery becomes more dependent on integrated digital infrastructure, operational security, redundancy, auditability and public communication become part of the service-quality mechanism. Table 3 summarises the coded documentary findings by analytical area.

4. Discussion

The results support a conceptual, not empirical, claim. Moldova's documentary architecture makes it plausible that digital governance can contribute to institutional trust, but only through intermediate mechanisms: service completion, procedural predictability, assisted access, accountability feedback and resilient infrastructure. The available documents do not demonstrate that trust has already increased. They show that the conditions for trust-sensitive digital governance are present but unevenly measured. The discussion therefore interprets the coded findings and derives a model; it does not convert documentary evidence into direct claims about citizen attitudes.

The proposed trust-through-service-quality model therefore treats digital infrastructure as an input, not an outcome. The model has five stages. Digital platforms, legal alignment and interoperability standards create technical and regulatory conditions. Service mechanisms then translate these inputs into user-facing experience through simplification, visibility, interoperability, assisted access and feedback. Institutional mechanisms determine whether these improvements are sustained inside agencies through coordination, staffing, back-office integration and cyber-resilience. Trust outcomes depend on predictability, fairness, accessibility and responsiveness. Accession outcomes depend on whether implementation capacity is credible beyond formal transposition. Table 4 presents this conceptual synthesis.

This model differs from a service-count approach. The number of online services is a useful input indicator, but it cannot establish whether citizens experience the state as more reliable. A more trust-sensitive measurement frame would report completion rate, processing time, complaint resolution time, assisted-access use, interoperability failures, service-specific satisfaction, cybersecurity incidents affecting service continuity and segmentation by vulnerable user categories. These indicators would make accession monitoring more sensitive

to administrative experience without requiring the Commission or the Moldovan government to abandon existing legal-alignment measures.

Table 4

Trust-through-service-quality model for Moldova (source: author's conceptual synthesis based on results and references [5–13])

Stage	Core element	Expected effect	Indicative empirical measure
Input	Platforms, legal alignment, interoperability standards, accession commitments, cyber baseline	Creates technical and regulatory conditions for reform	Re-engineered procedures; platform uptime; interoperability compliance; cyber baseline coverage
Service mechanism	Simplification, visibility, interoperability, assisted access, feedback	Converts infrastructure into citizen-facing administrative experience	Completion rate; processing time; assisted-access uptake; complaint resolution time
Institutional mechanism	Coordination, staffing, back-office integration, performance use, cyber-resilience	Converts tools into durable administrative capacity	Cross-agency data exchange; staff training coverage; service-level agreement compliance; incident response time
Trust outcome	Predictability, fairness, accessibility, responsiveness	Creates conditions for public confidence in administrative performance	Service-specific confidence; satisfaction by user segment; perceived fairness; repeat-use intention
Accession outcome	Implementation capacity across accession-relevant PAR and digital commitments	Supports accession credibility beyond formal transposition	Commission reporting; SIGMA indicators; chapter milestones; reform-agenda completion

The policy implications are recommendations derived from documentary analysis, not empirical findings. They concern service-quality indicators in Cluster 1 reporting, process redesign before online deployment, CUPS as digital infrastructure, cyber-resilience for identity, payment and registry systems, and dashboards that distinguish availability, completion and satisfaction. Table 5 presents the rationale for each recommendation.

Table 5

Policy-use implications for accession monitoring and future research (source: author's policy synthesis based on results and references [1–24])

Area	Recommended use	Rationale
Accession monitoring	Embed service-quality indicators in Cluster 1 public administration reporting.	This would show implementation capacity rather than only legal transposition.
Service design	Apply a 'no portal before process' rule for high-volume services.	Digitising unreformed procedures transfers administrative friction into the interface.
Inclusion	Treat CUPS and other assisted-access routes as permanent digital infrastructure.	Digital inclusion depends on mediated access for users who cannot complete services independently online.
Trust measurement	Publish service-level dashboards for completion, complaints and satisfaction by segment.	Trust-relevant performance must be observable by service, not only aggregated at platform level.
Cyber-resilience	Classify identity, payment and registry systems as infrastructure directly relevant to institutional confidence.	A cyber incident affecting core public services is also a legitimacy risk.
Future evidence	Combine administrative data, surveys and intercept interviews in a mixed-method evaluation.	The conceptual model requires empirical testing against citizen experience.

The article distinguishes between two unsupported interpretations. One interpretation would treat growth in portals and platform use as sufficient evidence of reform. That interpretation is not supported because service availability is not equivalent to service quality. A second interpretation would treat Moldova's capacity constraints as evidence that digital reform cannot produce meaningful gains. That interpretation is also insufficient because the corpus records platform development, service redesign and assisted-access infrastructure. The more defensible interpretation is conditional: Moldova has made documented digital-governance progress, but the trust value of that progress depends on more precise service-quality measurement and stronger integration of cyber-resilience and inclusion.

The main limitation is the single-coder qualitative design. The coding procedure is transparent and reproducible, but it does not provide inter-coder reliability statistics. The second limitation is evidentiary: the study uses public documents, official statistics and multilateral reports, not primary citizen-experience data. It therefore cannot independently validate institutional claims or measure changes in public trust. The third limitation is temporal: Moldova's accession process and digital infrastructure are evolving rapidly, and some 2025-2026 evidence may be revised or superseded. Future research should test the model using mixed methods: administrative service-level data, a citizen survey stratified by region and user segment, and intercept interviews at service centres and consular access points. The model would be weakened if service availability increased without corresponding improvements in completion, satisfaction, complaint resolution or confidence among marginal users.

5. Conclusions

This article advances a limited and defensible claim. It does not show that digital services have already increased institutional trust in Moldova. It shows that Moldova's accession-related documentary architecture contains a plausible trust pathway, but that the pathway depends on service quality, assisted access, accountable feedback and cyber-resilience.

The main finding is a measurement gap. Moldova's progress is more visible in service availability, platform development and interoperability infrastructure than in public indicators of completion, complaint resolution, marginal-user experience and service-specific confidence. This gap matters because accession readiness is not only a matter of formal alignment; it is also a question of whether the state can implement reforms in ways that citizens experience as predictable, accessible and fair.

The article's contribution is the trust-through-service-quality model. The model gives future research a falsifiable structure: if service quality and cyber-resilience improve without any corresponding improvement in citizen confidence, the proposed pathway is weak; if service availability grows while user completion and satisfaction remain uneven, claims about digital transformation are insufficiently supported. For Moldova and for other small candidate states, the implication is precise: digital governance should be assessed not by the number of services placed online, but by the quality, security and inclusiveness of the administrative experience it produces.

Research Data Availability Statement: No new datasets were generated. The study is based on publicly available policy documents, official communications, multilateral reports, election-observation materials and scholarly literature listed in the references. The coding

spreadsheet records source identifiers, document type, coding category, coded excerpt or analytical paraphrase, interpretation and relevance to the research question. It can be made available by the author on reasonable request, subject to the requirements of the journal's peer-review procedure.

Ethics Statement: The study did not involve human participants, interviews, surveys, experiments, personal data or administrative microdata. Ethical approval was not required.

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Contribution of Authors

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