

VALUE-ADDED AGRICULTURE IN THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA – INCREASING THE EXPORT POTENTIAL AND INTERNATIONAL COMPETITIVENESS

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Abstract

The paper analyses the sub-sectors of the Moldovan agriculture with a potential to transform into high value-added, in terms of production, processing and exports. The Moldovan agri-food sector is still relying on the production and export of raw material, rather than processed products. The low value-added level of agri-food exports determines the country's specialization and hinders its transformation process. The methods approached during the research are based on the quantitative analysis of production and foreign trade of value-added products. At the same time, the qualitative approach with respect to analysis of export potential and estimation of the degree of competitiveness through the Revealed Comparative Advantage (RCA) indicator has been also used. The obtained results revealed that the Republic of Moldova has the necessary prerequisites for enhancing its export potential of value-added products, as the primary agriculture is already developed and additional efforts are required. The agricultural policy should set the main directions for enhancing the value-added agriculture, particularly: support for increasing the quality of products and for processing industry, promotion of by-products, support for new varieties and sub-sectors of the agricultural system and enhancing the synergy among producers and processors.

Key words: value-added agriculture, export potential, competitiveness, Republic of Moldova

INTRODUCTION

The agri-food sector in Moldova is regularly changing and various external and internal factors have a significant impact on its development and transformation. Enhancing the attractiveness of Moldovan agri-food products on foreign markets will become an important determinant in the development of the country's economy (Lucasenco, Ceban 2020) [16], bearing significant benefits for farmers, themselves, also.

As a fundamental pillar of the Moldovan economy, the agricultural sector - along with its ancillary sub-sectors—exerts a substantial influence on the country's GDP (Herzfeld, Lucasenco, Zvyagintsev, 2022) [12]. At the same time, it simultaneously contributes to employment generation and the preservation of macroeconomic stability.

However, the agricultural sector in Moldova faces numerous challenges, including climate changes (Corobov, 2002; Cojocar, 2020) [9, 5], insufficient agricultural infrastructure, limited access to complex information (Zbanca

et al, 2017) [25], limited access to advanced technology (Petrea et al, 2020; Cimpoeș, 2021) [1, 4], issues related to marketplace for value-added products (Cimpoeș, Golban, 2013) [3] and underdevelopment of value-added production. Nevertheless, agriculture remains a pillar of the national economy and an important source of income, and increasing and diversifying agricultural exports represents a strategic objective.

Taking into account the globalization process and demands from foreign markets on value-added agricultural products, Moldova has a considerable potential to capitalize on its agricultural resources by promoting value addition.

According to Lu and Dudensing (2015) [15], value-added agriculture is a set of practices that determine farmers to align with consumer preferences for agricultural or food products with form, space, time, identity, and quality characteristics that are not present in raw agricultural commodities. At the same time, its main role is to convert the agricultural outputs into commodities that have a greater value, are

more diversified and that are more appealing to consumers (Cornelisse, Hyde, Kime, 2024) [8]. A broader definition of value-added agriculture is provided by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (2024) [21]. It focuses on changing the form of a product, the manner of production, as well as value enhancement through segregation.

The innovation and coordination aspects of the value-added have been approached by Coltrain, Barton and Boland (2000) [7], while Ja'afar-Furo, Bello and Abdurhman (2011) [13] see it through the prism of enhancing the income generation of rural environment communities. Almost the same approach in terms of revenues is foreseen in the Maryland Agriculture Code (2024) [17], where value-added agriculture is based on the alteration of a raw agricultural product in order to increase its value to a consumer and contribute with more income to a farmer, producer, or processor.

Improving the features of some agri-food products represents another researched direction by Womach (2005) [24].

Amanor-Boadu (2003) [1] foreseen the value-added agriculture as a reward for the effort of producers and maximization of internal efficiencies. Thus, value-added agriculture refers to the processing of agricultural raw materials into more complex and valuable products that can be exported to international markets, generating additional income and strengthening the country's competitive position in the global market.

This article aims to analyse the importance of value-added agriculture in the Republic of Moldova and to identify the main ways in which this sector can contribute to increasing export potential and international competitiveness. In particular, it focuses on diversifying agricultural products, improving processing infrastructure and implementing effective marketing strategies to open new markets and attract foreign investment.

Thus, the paper will provide a vision on maximization of added value in agriculture, in order to increase the international competitiveness of Moldova and consolidate its position on export markets.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The methodological framework integrates both qualitative and quantitative research methods to facilitate a comprehensive analysis of the agricultural sector, encompassing its key challenges and potential avenues for development, particularly in relation to increasing its value-added contribution.

By exploring the underlying economic conditions, production and trade dynamics, and the role of value-added processes, this paper aims to offer actionable insights for enhancing Moldova's agricultural export competitiveness. The research design is exploratory and analytical, combining a review of secondary data sources with primary data collection to understand current agricultural practices, value-added processes, export performance, and competitiveness challenges. A mixed-method approach was selected by authors to gather detailed qualitative insights and quantitative data.

Data for this study was gathered from both primary and secondary sources to ensure the robustness and viability of the findings. Secondary data was collected from various public and private sector reports and databases, including the National Bureau of Statistics of the Republic of Moldova [18], UNCOMTRADE [22], WITS database [23], Export Potential Map [10], etc. This secondary data provided a foundation for the analysis of Moldova's agricultural sector and helped identify relevant trends and patterns in the value-added agricultural products market.

Primary data is based on development of case studies for the following branches of the agri-food sector: wine production, fruit and vegetable processing, dairy and meat processing and cereal and technical crops processing.

Therefore, the methods approached during the research are based on the quantitative analysis of production and foreign trade of value-added products, and the qualitative approach in terms of export potential and degree of competitiveness at the international level,

through the Revealed Comparative Advantage indicator.

Thus, by combining primary and secondary data, the paper provides for a comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing Moldova's agricultural exports. The findings will contribute to identifying strategies for improving Moldova's agricultural export performance, with an emphasis on enhancing its international competitiveness in global markets.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

In order to assess the competitiveness level and export potential, there were selected a series of branches that have possibilities to be developed in order to increase their productivity, access on foreign markets and increase of the value-added component.

Wine production

During 2016 – 2023, the area of vineyards has decreased from 135.3 thous. ha to 115.1 thous. ha. In 2023, about 42.4% of vineyards is in the ownership of rural households, while 35.1% - in peasant farms and only 22.5% - in agricultural enterprises. The area of technical grapes has decrease from 114.4 thous. ha to 97.9 thous. ha, while of table grapes – from 19.9 thous. ha to 17.2 thous. ha.

Following the trend in surface diminishment, production of grapes has also experienced a decreasing pattern. Thus, production of all types of grapes has diminished during 2016 – 2023 from 615.7 thous. tons to 571.1 thous. tons. Technical varieties intended for winemaking have a downward trend from 529.0 thous. tons to 463.4 thous. tons, while table grapes production has enhanced its values from 86.7 thous. tons to 107.7 thous. tons.

Despite the decrease in production and area, the average yield per hectare is increasing for all types of grapes. Therefore, for technical varieties, it increased from 46.9 q/ha to 52.3 q/ha, while for table grapes – from 47.2 q/ha to 73.8 q/ha.

In terms of value-added production for the grapes sub-sector, production of wine has increased from 2,764.5 mil. MDL to 4,124.6 mil. MDL in monetary terms, while in natural values, in 2023 it reached 13.3 mil. dal,

identical figure with 2016. It's worth mentioning that the highest value of production was reached in 2019 – 17.6 mil. dal. According to experts, the wine sector accounts for about 16% of the total value of agricultural output (Colesnicova, Iatisin, Toaca, 2024) [6].

The foreign trade with wine has a net positive trade balance, exports overcoming significantly the imports. Thus, in 2024, Moldova exported wine in the amount of 143.5 mil. USD., the maximum value of the last 9 years.



Fig. 1. Foreign trade with wine of fresh grapes (HS-2204), mil. USD

Source: WITS Database, 2025 [23].

The RCA indicator for Moldovan wine is far above 1, accounting for 23 in 2024, which indicates on a high competitiveness level on foreign markets. The highest figure was reached in 2020 – 27, while the lowest of 17 – in 2022. The last two years register a steady increase in the competitiveness level of Moldovan wine.

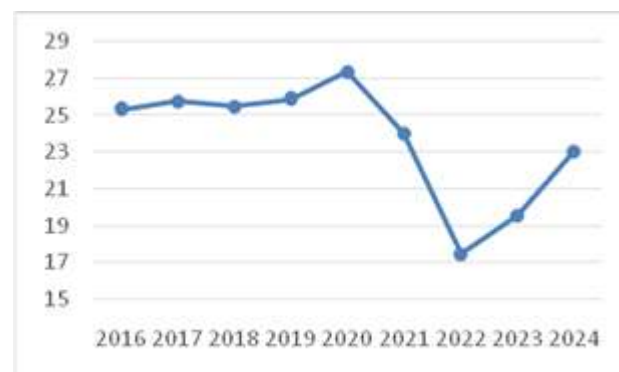


Fig. 2. RCA for wine of fresh grapes (HS-2204)

Source: authors' calculations.

With respect to export potential, Moldova has important reserves for the export of wine of fresh grapes and sparkling wine, which would

bring additional value-added to the agricultural sector and the national economy.

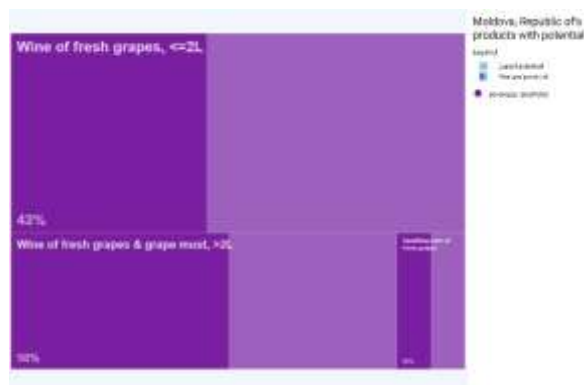


Fig. 3. Export potential for wine of fresh grapes
Source: Export Potential Map, 2025 [10].

Fruit and vegetable processing

A strategic direction of Moldovan agricultural sector is represented by the development of value-added production in the horticultural area (Ceban, Lucasenco, 2023) [2].

The total area of planted fruit trees, nuts and berries have increased slightly during 2016 – 2023 from 134.6 thous. ha to 135.4 thous. ha. In 2023, the fruit trees were mainly concentrated in peasant farms – 43%, followed by agricultural enterprises – 36% and rural households – 21%. In 2023, most of the fruit surfaces were under apple plantations, nuts and plums.

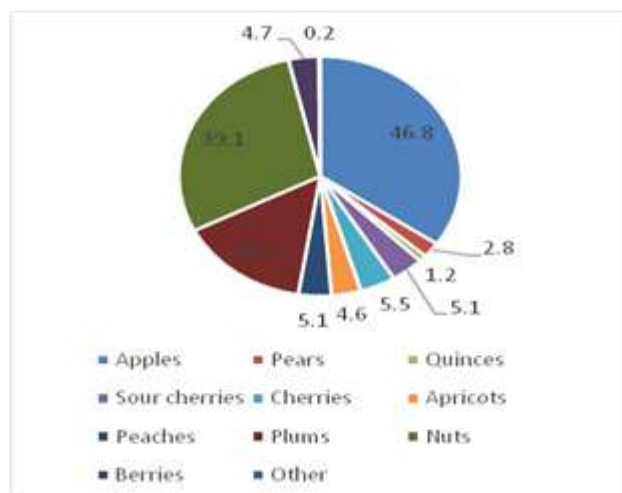


Fig. 4. Distribution of fruits, nuts and berries by planted area, 2023, thous. ha
Source: National Bureau of Statistics, 2025 [18].

Even if the area of fruits, nuts and berries was relatively stable, in the same period, production has experienced a significant boost

from 595.7 thous. tons in 2016 to 762.2 thous. tons in 2023, with a maximum level of 876.0 thous. tons in 2021. Production of apples increased with about 25%, pears +0.02%, quinces +38%, sour cherries – twofold, cherries – twofold, plums +51%, nuts +53%, berries – twofold. Only apricots and peaches have experienced decreases in production.

The vegetable sector plays an important role in ensuring the food security of the population, due to their inclusion in daily diet and necessity for nutrients for the proper functioning of the human body.

During 2016 – 2023, the vegetable area has increased from 28.3 thous. ha to 39.3 thous. ha. Nevertheless, in 2023, 81.7% of surfaces belonged to rural households, while 10.7% to peasant farm and only 7.6% - to agricultural enterprises. Even if the surfaces increased in the mentioned period, production has experienced decrease from 280.8 thous. tons to 269.7 thous. tons, mainly due to diminish in production in rural households – with 21%. At the same time, in peasant farms vegetable production have increased with 79%, while in agricultural enterprises – with 42%.

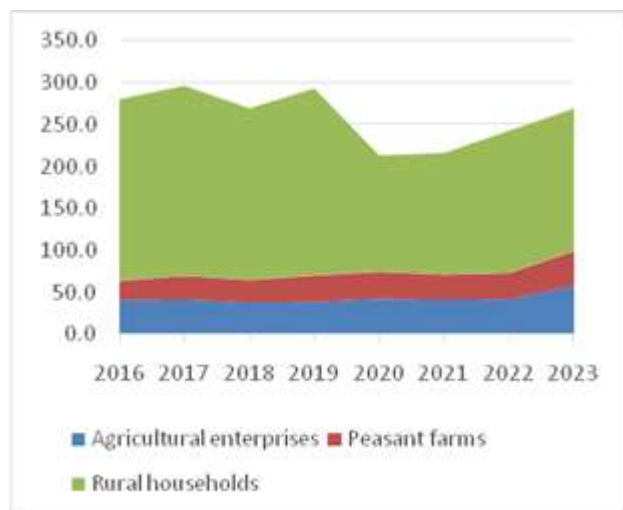


Fig. 5. Dynamics of vegetable production by types of ownership, thous. tons
Source: National Bureau of Statistics, 2025 [18].

The average yield per hectare is also experiencing a considerable decrease from 97 q/ha in 2016 to 68.6 q/ha. The sharpest decline has been experienced in rural households – almost twice, while in peasant farms and

agricultural enterprises it increased with 15% and 47%, respectively.

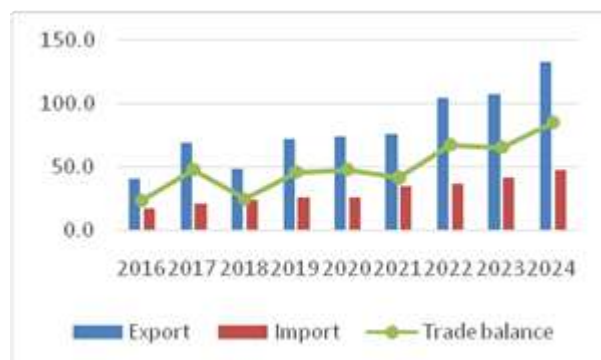


Fig. 6. Foreign trade with preparations of fruit and vegetables (HS-20), mil. USD
Source: WITS Database, 2025 [23].

With respect to value-added production, the processing and preservation of fruits and vegetables experienced a notable boost, rising from 2,174.5 million MDL to 3,689.7 million MDL. In physical terms, output of fruit and vegetable juices grew by 22%, canned fruits and vegetables by 10%, and processed and preserved fruits by 4%.

The foreign trade balance for fruit and vegetable preparations remains positive, with a substantial rise in export revenues, reaching 133.5 million USD in 2024.

The RCA index for Moldovan fruit and vegetable preparations remained constant at a value of 8 in 2024, in line with the levels recorded in 2021, 2020, 2019, and 2017. The lowest RCA values were observed in 2016 and 2018, both registering a score of 5.

These figures indicate that Moldovan fruit and vegetable preparations possess a sustained competitive advantage in international markets.

Important steps are required for enhancing the competitiveness level, among which can be mentioned increase of quality of production, attractive packaging, promotion of processed organic products, as well as market diversification and increase of consumer awareness through a country brand.

With respect to export potential, Moldova has some reserves for the export of apple juice, prepared nuts and seeds, fruit jams, preserved peas and prepared sweetcorn.

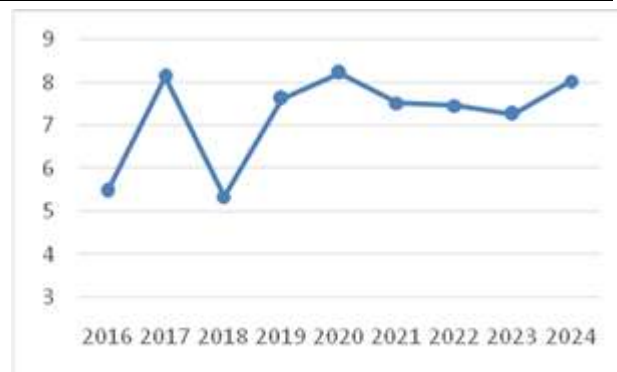


Fig. 7. RCA for preparations of fruit and vegetables (HS-20)

Source: authors' calculations.

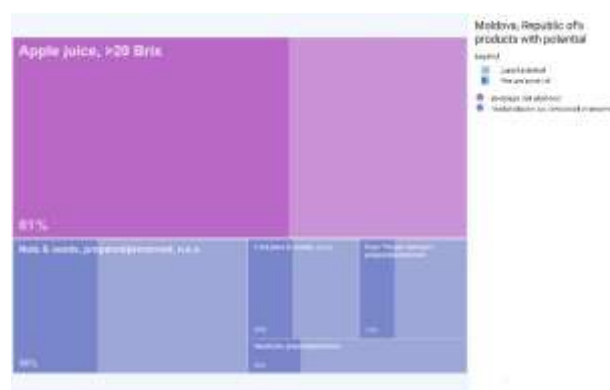


Fig. 8. Export potential for preparations of fruit and vegetables

Source: Export Potential Map, 2025 [10].

Dairy processing

Consumption patterns in Moldovan population are widely based on the livestock products and products from processing industry (Stratan, Ceban, Lucasenco, 2022) [20].

During 2016 – 2024, the number of milking cows has decreased dramatically from 127.7 thous. heads to 63.1 thous. heads. A positive trend is noted only in the distribution of cows by types of ownership. If in 2016, 95.4% of total of milking cows were concentrated in rural households, then in 2024 – it accounted for 83.4%, thus being noted the first positive signs of the most recent reforms in the agricultural policy related to introduction of direct payments per head of animal and per kg of provided product.

Against the trend in reduction of the number of milking cows, the total production of milk has also experienced a significant decrease from 462.1 thous. tons in 2016 to 231.0 thous. tons.

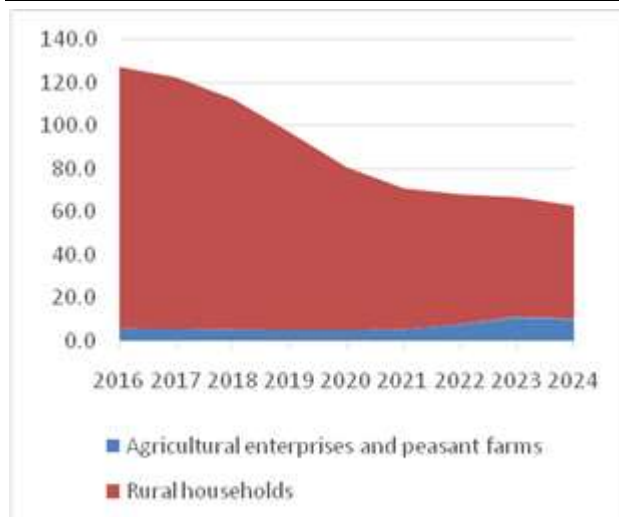


Fig. 9. The number of milking cows by types of ownership, thous. heads
Source: National Bureau of Statistics, 2025 [18].

The sharp decline is due to the decrease in milk production in rural households (almost a 3 time decrease), while in agricultural enterprises, production of milk increased with about 71%. Production of dairy products has experienced an increase from 22,237.5 mil. MDL to 3,128.9 mil. MDL, while in natural values, production of milk and cream decreased with 48%, production of milk and cream in solid form – with 77% and production of butter – with 49%.

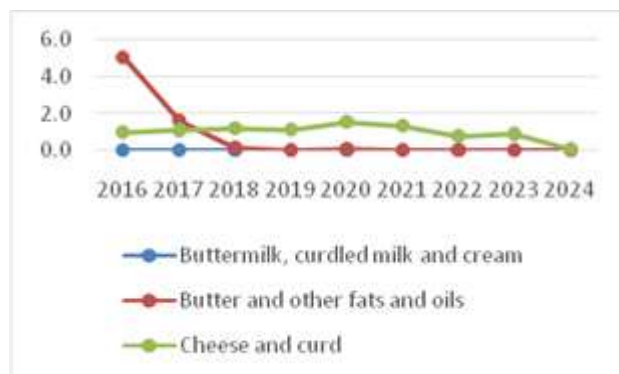


Fig. 10. RCA for selected dairy products
Source: WITS Database, 2025 [23].

The foreign trade with value-added dairy products has negative trade balances for all the analysed products. Thus, in 2024, the trade balance for dairy products presented persistent deficits: -22.8 million USD for buttermilk, curdled milk, and cream; -26.7 million USD for butter and other fats and oils; and -59.2 million USD for cheese and curd. The RCA indicators for these product groups display considerable variation, with values

nearing zero for buttermilk, curdled milk and cream, as well as for butter and related fats and oils in recent years, indicating a lack of competitiveness. In contrast, cheese and curd demonstrate only a modest comparative advantage on international markets.

Meat processing

During 2016 – 2024, the number of cattle decreased from 186.1 thous. heads to 101.0 thous. heads. In 2024, 71.5% of the total number of cattle was in the ownership of rural households. At the same time, production of beef diminished from 15.8 thous. tons in 2016 to 7.1 thous. tons in 2023.

The number of pigs is also decreasing from 453.2 thous. heads to 350.7 thous. heads, with a concentration of pigs in agricultural enterprises in the amount of 65.7%. Nevertheless, pork production has increased from 92.9 thous. tons in 2016 to 94.1 thous. tons in 2023.

The number of poultry in agricultural enterprises is relatively stable, with a slight decrease in the analysed period from 4036.3 thous. pieces to 3972.1 thous. pieces. Poultry production in all types of ownership has experienced a slight decrease from 69.9 thous. tons to 65.0 thous. tons.

In terms of industrial aspects, production, processing and preservation of meat and meat products is constantly increasing, from 3,131.3 mil. MDL to 7,122.3 mil. MDL. In natural values, meat production increased with 68%, cold meats production – with 70%, while canned meat remained almost the same, with a slight increase. Processing companies register higher costs of producing canned meat, especially for glass or tin jars, sterilization, packaging, energy. In order to reduce costs, the processing companies need to source cheaper raw materials, which is only possible by reducing customs duties on frozen pork and chicken from the EU (Litvin, Scerbacov, 2023) [14].

Foreign trade with processed meat products, such as for the dairy products, has a negative trade balance for both, sausages and similar products and other prepared or preserved meat. Thus, in 2024, the deficit of trade balance for sausages and similar products accounted for -

4.6 mil. USD, while for other prepared or preserved meat -7.3 mil. USD.

The RCA values are constantly under 1, pointing on the lack of competitiveness of Moldovan meat processed products on foreign markets. Although 122 agents operate on Moldovan market with respect to meat processing, the production is still intended for local market and local consumption (Ghencea, Stanciu, 2024) [11].

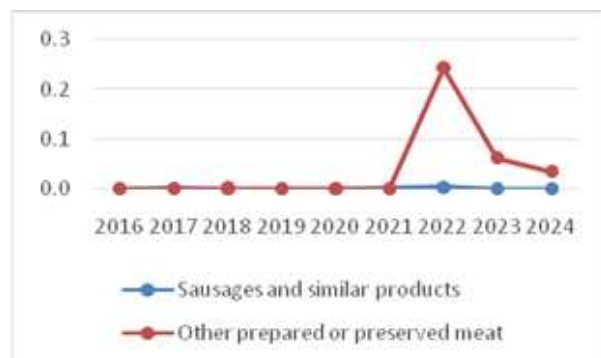


Fig. 11. RCA for selected meat processed products
Source: authors' calculations.

Cereal and technical crops processing

The area of autumn wheat during 2016 – 2023 has increase slightly from 367.2 thous. ha to 375.1 thous. ha. At the same time, production of wheat also increased with 21% in the same period. The area of sunflower has increased from 362.4 thous. ha to 391.9 thous. ha, whilst production – with 12%.

The industry of oil production has experienced a significant increase, from 1,767.1 mil. MDL to 5,792.7 mil. MDL. Almost a twofold increase is registered within the manufacturing of milling products (from 384.7 mil. MDL to 715.3 mil. MDL). In natural values, production of chemically unmodified crude oils experienced a threefold increase, production of flour – a 14% increase, while decreases are registered in production of pasta – with 40% and production of bread – with 3%.

For the analysis of foreign trade with value-added products from the group of cereals and technical crops, positive trade balance is recorded for sunflower-seed oil, while negative figures are seen for wheat flour, pasta and bread, pastry, cakes and biscuits.

Table 1. Foreign trade with value-added products from the cereal and technical crops group, mil. USD

	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Wheat or meslin flour							
Export	1.1	1.1	0.7	0.6	3.4	5.9	7.5
Import	11.1	9.7	10.4	8.8	10.8	10.0	9.5
Tradebalance	-10.0	-8.5	-9.7	-8.2	-7.3	-4.1	-2.0
Sunflower-seed oil							
Export	65.2	67.6	101.1	118.7	368.0	242.4	113.3
Import	3.4	3.3	4.9	6.5	49.7	13.7	54.8
Tradebalance	61.8	64.3	96.3	112.1	318.3	228.7	58.6
Pasta							
Export	0.0	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.6	0.2	0.1
Import	6.7	8.3	9.9	11.5	14.3	14.1	14.1
Tradebalance	-6.7	-8.2	-9.8	-11.4	-13.7	-13.9	-14.0
Bread, pastry, cakes, biscuits							
Export	15.3	15.7	16.8	18.8	21.8	24.3	23.3
Import	22.2	26.1	26.6	35.6	41.9	49.3	59.4
Tradebalance	-6.9	-10.4	-9.8	-16.8	-20.1	-25.0	-36.1

Source: UN COMTRADE, DATABASE, 2025

RCA values for sunflower-seed oil are quite high, reaching a maximum level of 109 in 2022, while in 2024 – 98, which indicates on a strong competitiveness with respect to the world markets.

In the last 3 years, wheat flour has also values over 1, reaching 6 in 2024 and also positive values (over 1) are registered for bread, pastry, cakes, biscuits (2 in 2024).

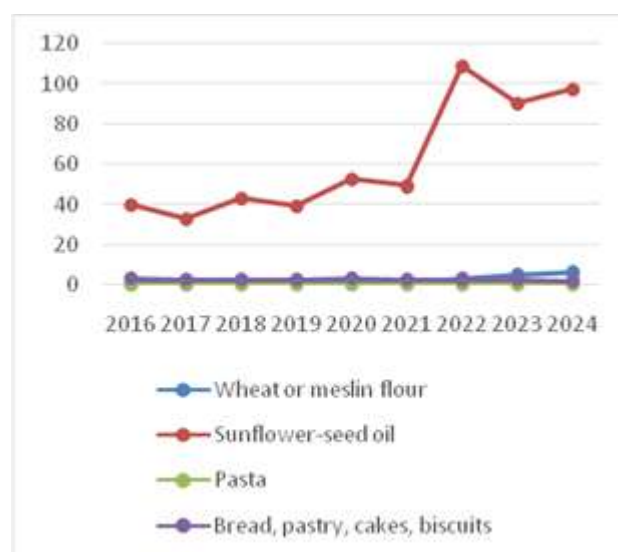


Fig. 12. RCA for selected value-added products from the group of cereals and technical crops
Source: authors' calculations.

The export potential indicators mark increased figures for such products as: sunflower oil, with lower, but also important numbers for sweet biscuits, bread and pastry and waffles.

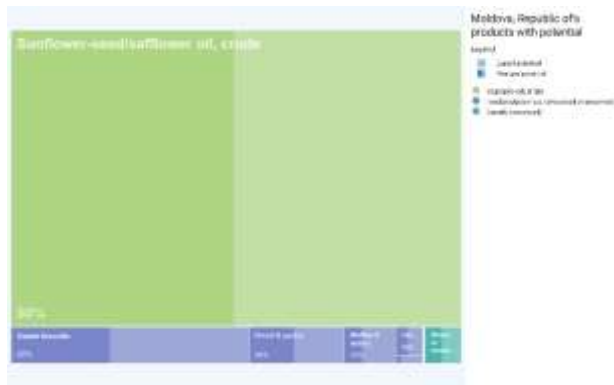


Fig. 13. Export potential for selected value-added products from the group of cereals and technical crops
Source: Export Potential Map, 2025 [10].

CONCLUSIONS

The agricultural sector of Moldova represents a critical component of the national economy and holds considerable potential for expansion through the advancement of value-added agriculture and the promotion of specialized high-value products. While the sector faces a range of challenges, there are clear opportunities to increase Moldova's competitiveness on international markets. The findings of this study highlight the importance of diversifying agricultural products, improving processing infrastructure, and developing effective marketing strategies.

The analysis of sectors such as wine production, fruit and vegetable processing, dairy, meat, and cereal crops processing reveal that, while Moldova has made significant efforts in some areas, there is considerable potential to further capitalize on its agricultural resources through value addition.

The paper also indicates that Moldova's agricultural exports, especially in sectors like wine and sunflower oil, demonstrate competitive advantages on the global market, presenting opportunities for further export growth. To achieve this, it is essential for the country to invest in infrastructure, technology, and international marketing, as well as to attract foreign investment. By embracing these strategies, Moldova can enhance the value-

added processes within its agricultural sector, improving both income generation for farmers and overall economic stability. Thus, the development of value-added agriculture represents a promising direction for strengthening Moldova's agricultural export performance and securing its place as a competitive player in the global market.

Thus, the results disclosed that the Republic of Moldova has room for improvement its export potential of value-added products, as the primary agriculture is already developed and additional efforts are required. The agricultural policy should set the main directions for enhancing the value-added agriculture, particularly: support for increasing the quality of products and for processing industry, promotion of by-products, support for new varieties and sub-sectors of the agricultural system and enhancing the synergy among producers and processors.

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