

# FORMALIZATION OF INFORMAL CONSTRUCTIONS IN CHIȘINĂU: PROGRESS, CHALLENGES, AND STRATEGIC INTERVENTIONS

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## Abstract:

This presentation explores the current state of informal constructions in Chișinău, with a focus on recent developments, institutional responses, and strategic approaches to integrating such constructions into the legal urban framework. Amid rapid urban growth and complex property rights histories, informal development—particularly in peri-urban areas and high-density neighborhoods—has emerged as a significant challenge to sustainable urban planning.

The main **objectives** of the presentation are to:

1. Provide an overview of informal construction trends in Chișinău, including:
  - unauthorized annexes, extensions, and reconfigurations in multifamily housing blocks;
  - informal adjustments to public utility networks (electricity, heating, water, and sewer systems);
  - illegal land occupations and unpermitted structures.
2. Highlight the recent policy and urban planning measures aimed at formalization, such as:
  - recognizing certain rights of occupants over informal buildings, while simultaneously enforcing responsibilities related to safety and quality standards;
  - promoting equity between citizens by avoiding favoritism toward those who bypassed legal procedures.
3. Discuss the integration of international guidelines, such as the UNECE Framework Guidelines for Land Administration and the Recovery Action Plan, into local planning and regulatory instruments.

**The methodology** includes spatial analysis of recent unpermitted constructions, case studies from key areas of the city (notably Buiucani and Ciocana sectors), and institutional observations based on Chișinău's municipal authorization and inspection system.

**Preliminary results** reflect measurable progress, such as the update of cadastral records and clarification of administrative procedures. However, significant challenges remain, including outdated urban plans, legal ambiguities, and social resistance to regularization efforts.

The presentation will also outline a series of strategic **recommendations** to support the formalization process and prevent future informal development, including:

- developing a clear and predictable legal framework to integrate existing constructions into the formal system without compromising safety and technical standards;
- creating a unified regularization mechanism with differentiated procedures and conditional amnesty periods;
- implementing a digital system for construction monitoring, permitting, and control to ensure better institutional coordination;
- increasing public infrastructure investment in affected areas to support integration into urban utility networks;
- enhancing local administrative capacity through staff training, technical guidance, and institutional strengthening;
- conducting public awareness and community engagement campaigns to reduce resistance and promote compliance;
- encouraging multilevel governance collaboration through institutional partnerships and working groups.

These measures aim to strike a balance between the right to housing, sustainable urban development, and the consistent enforcement of urban legislation—while reflecting the local context and drawing on international best practices.

## 1. Introduction

Like many post-Soviet capitals, Chişinău has undergone rapid and often unregulated urban transformations since the 1990s, driven by political, economic, and institutional transitions. The collapse of the centralized urban planning system, followed by poorly defined reforms in land ownership and spatial regulation, created an unstable framework for urban development.

This transitional period was marked by a prolonged legislative vacuum and inconsistent enforcement of existing planning norms. A key element in this context was the ambiguity surrounding land and property ownership: many plots lacked clear legal status, having been inherited, informally occupied, or traded outside the legal circuit. Simultaneously, internal migration—fueled by the economic decline of rural areas and the relative economic attractiveness of the capital—intensified pressure on the existing housing stock.

The acute shortage of affordable housing, particularly for vulnerable groups and low- to middle-income households, became a catalyst for the proliferation of unauthorized constructions. In the absence of a coherent housing policy and public or cooperative construction initiatives, many residents resorted to informal solutions to meet their housing needs. As a result, the expansion of individual households, occupation of public or agricultural lands, and construction on plots with unclear legal status became relatively widespread practices.

Moreover, institutional capacity at both local and national levels was limited—not only in terms of human and financial resources but also in terms of administrative competencies and decision-making autonomy. In many cases, the lack of administrative response was interpreted by the public as a tacit endorsement—or even encouragement—of unauthorized construction. This administrative tolerance, sometimes reinforced by corruption or political pressure, contributed to an urban development model in which individual initiative supplanted formal planning frameworks.

In the absence of an updated and functional General Urban Plan with clear, enforceable rules, urban development followed a fragmented and often chaotic logic, leading to structural imbalances in land use, infrastructure, and urban services. Simultaneously, the lack of a consistent policy for regularizing informal constructions led to the accumulation of a significant

stock of buildings and housing with uncertain legal status, undermining the city's long-term functionality and urban quality of life.

## **2. The Current State of Informal Construction in Chisinau**

### **2.1. Affected Areas**

Informal construction in Chişinău is unevenly distributed but can be found across nearly all urban and peri-urban zones. It varies according to urban context, land status, demographic pressure, and the degree of local authority oversight. Beyond geographic location, these interventions differ in scale and complexity—from makeshift annexes to entire residential blocks built outside the legal framework. The following typologies of affected areas can be identified:

#### **a) Peri-urban areas (Truseni, Codru, Bubuieci, Durlesti)**

Located at the administrative periphery of the municipality, these areas have become major residential growth poles over the past two decades. However, this expansion often occurred without updated urban planning tools or clear construction regulations. Many individual houses or housing compounds were built without permits, on land with unclear legal status—such as former agricultural land, pastures, or plots not properly incorporated into the urban area. These areas frequently lack access to public utility networks (water, sewerage, gas, electricity) or rely on informal connections, compromising both quality of life and housing safety. Additionally, the absence of proper access roads, public spaces, and community infrastructure increases these settlements' vulnerability.

#### **b) Inner-city neighborhoods**

In already built-up urban zones, informal construction typically involves individual interventions to existing housing stock. Common practices include:

- unauthorized annexes in apartment courtyards;
- enclosing balconies or converting them into living spaces without proper approvals;
- ground-floor extensions or transformations of commercial spaces into housing (or vice versa), in the absence of regulatory documentation;
- illegal rooftop additions or risky structural modifications that impact building stability.

These interventions often disrupt the aesthetic coherence of residential ensembles and the functionality of utility infrastructure. In some cases, they compromise structural integrity and pose safety risks, particularly without proper technical oversight.

#### **c) Green spaces and public land**

A distinct phenomenon involves the unauthorized occupation of green spaces, former agricultural plots, or public lands with special status (e.g., riverbanks or infrastructure corridors). These poorly monitored and often unmapped areas are vulnerable to informal subdivision and the construction of improvised or semi-permanent structures.

Without prompt and effective institutional responses, such occupations can quickly evolve into consolidated informal settlements, complicating future regularization or urban rehabilitation efforts. In some instances, these plots are involved in litigation or restitution claims, limiting the ability of authorities to intervene, while construction continues unchecked.

### **2.2. Underlying Causes**

Informal construction in Chişinău cannot be attributed to a single cause. It is the result of the interplay between historical, legal, socio-economic, and institutional factors. In the absence of a systemic approach, these causes have become mutually reinforcing, perpetuating unauthorized building practices. Key contributing factors include:

#### **a) Ambiguous property rights**

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the legal framework for land ownership underwent abrupt and inconsistent changes. Many plots—particularly in peripheral or former

agricultural zones—lacked clear legal status, and land cadastre records were incomplete or non-existent. This situation led to widespread informal occupation, unregistered transactions, and ownership disputes, creating fertile ground for unregulated development.

**b) Lack of coherent urban planning**

Chişinău's General Urban Plan (GUP) is outdated and no longer reflects current urban realities. The absence of updated and coherent planning documentation across the metropolitan area has produced a regulatory vacuum, with construction either authorized through ad hoc exceptions or proceeding entirely outside legal frameworks. Without a strategic development vision, obtaining legal permits has been difficult, encouraging informal solutions.

**c) Limited administrative capacity**

Institutions responsible for territorial development oversight—including construction inspection services, urban planning departments, and local administrations—face chronic shortages of human, financial, and logistical resources. This has led to weak territorial control, delayed responses, and a lack of effective preventive or corrective measures. In some cases, a shortage of qualified personnel has even compromised the quality of planning documents and decision-making processes.

**d) Administrative tolerance and corruption**

Informal construction has often been tacitly tolerated by authorities, either to avoid social conflict or due to a lack of political will. In some instances, institutional corruption has facilitated the issuance of documents or retroactive legalization of unauthorized buildings. This has fostered a culture of impunity, where individuals or developers feel emboldened to build illegally, assuming that post-facto legalization is achievable.

**e) Legislative gaps**

The legal framework for construction authorization, regularization, and sanctions has undergone frequent and sometimes contradictory revisions. In the absence of clear criteria and a unified legalization policy, temporary amnesty measures have been exploited indiscriminately. This has sent confusing signals to citizens and investors, implying that non-compliance may eventually be tolerated or remedied through ex-post legal adjustments.

**f) Social necessity**

For many low-income or vulnerable households, informal construction has been the only viable housing option. A lack of social housing, high real estate costs, and the absence of effective public support mechanisms for housing access have driven people toward alternative solutions. In this sense, informal construction reflects not only a legal issue but also a symptom of social exclusion and inequality in urban access.

### **2.3. Typologies of Informal Construction**

Informal buildings in Chişinău exhibit significant variation in form, depending on location, land status, intended use, and the degree of deviation from planning and technical norms. In the absence of effective oversight, these interventions have evolved from makeshift housing to increasingly sophisticated forms of illegal development, some of which have major implications for safety and urban coherence.

**a) Single-family homes in peri-urban areas**

A significant number of households have been constructed in peri-urban localities such as Durlesti, Truseni, Codru, or Bubuieci without building permits. These houses are often built on land with uncertain or agricultural status, lacking approved urban documentation and legal utility connections. The absence of basic infrastructure and public services exacerbates the precariousness of these zones and complicates future urban integration.

**b) Unauthorized extensions to existing buildings**

Intra-urban interventions often involve additions to existing housing blocks—such as enclosed balconies, illegal attic conversions, or ground-floor extensions—carried out without technical

designs, structural assessments, or the consent of co-owners and authorities. These works negatively affect the city's visual character, structural safety, and access to light and ventilation.

**c) Reconfigurations that compromise structural integrity**

Some unauthorized works involve internal reconfigurations of apartments or commercial spaces. Problems arise when these modifications affect structural elements—beams, columns, or load-bearing walls—without technical expertise or regulatory approval, jeopardizing building safety in the event of seismic activity or other hazards.

**d) Construction on disputed or legally ambiguous land**

Another category involves buildings erected on plots with disputed or unclear ownership. These may be under litigation, claimed by multiple parties, or part of the public domain without proper registration. Such developments carry high legal risks and are difficult to integrate into the formal system.

**e) Multi-unit housing blocks with incomplete documentation**

During the real estate boom of the 2000s, several collective housing blocks were built without fully complying with legal procedures—lacking detailed plans, utility provider approvals, final inspections, or neighbor consent. These buildings face challenges in legalization, utility access, and official registration, undermining property rights and investor security.

## **2.4. The Scope of the Phenomenon**

Accurately estimating the scale of informal construction in Chişinău is challenging due to the lack of an integrated monitoring system and the absence of up-to-date neighborhood-level data. However, based on field observations, legalization requests, and preliminary studies conducted by local authorities and independent experts, it is estimated that approximately 15–20% of the individual housing stock (detached houses) in peri-urban areas has been built without construction permits. In some suburbs, such as Truşeni, Bubuieci, or Codru, the share of informal dwellings may exceed 30%.

This estimate excludes the hundreds of cases of unauthorized extensions, rooftop additions, or ad hoc interventions in collective housing blocks, which are not systematically recorded in the local authorities' databases. Moreover, between 2000 and 2010, several apartment blocks were constructed based on incomplete or flawed documentation, resulting in legal uncertainty regarding property rights and final occupancy permits.

## **3. Institutional Response and Formalization Attempts**

### **3.1. Proposed (but Partially Implemented) Strategies**

In response to the complexity and magnitude of informal construction, municipal and national authorities have outlined several strategic directions over the past decade to better control and rectify the city's chaotic development. While some of these measures have been incorporated into public policies, urban plans, or strategic documents, their implementation has been partial, fragmented, or hindered by institutional, financial, and political constraints.

#### **3.1.1. General Urban Plan (GUP) Review and Detailed Urban Plans (DUPs)**

One of the most significant initiatives has been the revision of the General Urban Plan (GUP)—the key document regulating land use at the municipal level. Given that the current version is outdated and does not reflect urban expansion or the proliferation of informal buildings, its revision has become a priority. The reform entails mapping existing realities, redefining functional zoning, and introducing more flexible regulations in affected areas.

In parallel, the development of Detailed Urban Plans (DUPs) is envisioned for neighborhoods with a high density of unauthorized interventions. These DUPs aim to provide a normative

framework adapted to existing conditions, enabling the regularization of built structures and setting clear rules for future development. Additionally, they can serve as instruments for attracting public investment in infrastructure by prioritizing underserved areas.

### **3.1.2. Establishment of "Regularization Zones"**

Inspired by successful international examples (e.g., Latin America, Southeast Europe), this strategy involves the designation of specific perimeters where existing informal buildings can be preserved and legalized, provided they meet criteria for safety, functional compatibility, and accessibility. In these "regularization zones," urban planning standards may be adapted to reflect the on-the-ground reality, aiming to avoid costly, often socially unviable demolitions.

This approach allows for the gradual integration of informal constructions into the legal urban fabric by adjusting height regulations, setbacks, planning indicators (e.g., FAR, site coverage), and utility and street networks. It also provides a pragmatic solution for local governments faced with thousands of potential disputes and individual complaints.

### **3.1.3. Legalization of Buildings Erected Without Permits**

The new Urban Planning Code of the Republic of Moldova (effective from January 2025) introduces a distinct procedure for legalizing buildings erected without construction permits, in cases where the statute of limitations for sanctions or demolition has expired. This procedure acknowledges the urban reality in which the state can no longer enforce compliance solely through coercive measures and instead opts to regulate existing situations through administrative and planning tools.

According to the Code, local authorities may issue a certificate acknowledging the construction, based on a technical and urban assessment to determine whether the building meets minimum safety standards and can be reasonably integrated into the built environment. This reflects the state's acceptance that, in the absence of viable legal enforcement, the rational course is to incorporate these structures into the formal framework and regulate their further use.

To balance this process against the interests of law-abiding property owners, the Code also provides for compensatory payments. A draft decision by the Chişinău Municipal Council, currently on the agenda, outlines the fees for issuing such certificates. These payments are intended to:

- cover the administrative and technical costs of the assessment and regulation process;
- reflect the economic benefit gained by the builder from bypassing permitting procedures;
- contribute to municipal infrastructure investment and the rehabilitation of areas affected by informal development.

Through this approach, local government adopts a pragmatic and equitable stance that neither ignores past illegalities nor perpetuates them through inaction. Legalization is not an amnesty but a conditional corrective mechanism with clear costs and responsibilities aimed at restoring functional urban order and preventing future occurrences.

Moreover, the registration of buildings in the Real Estate Register (RER) does not, in itself, constitute a guarantee of construction quality in terms of compliance with essential requirements. This registration is based solely on a declaration made by the property owner, without undergoing any technical verification. Consequently, any subsequent transfer, use, or exploitation of the property must be assumed with full awareness of this limitation. New owners or users must be informed of this procedural constraint and cannot legitimately raise claims against public authorities for structural or regulatory nonconformities discovered during the building's use.

### **3.1.4. Public Awareness Campaigns for Residents and Construction Professionals**

An essential yet often overlooked component is public education and awareness regarding the consequences of unauthorized construction. Informational campaigns can help reduce illegal

interventions by clarifying permitting procedures, highlighting technical and legal risks, and promoting alternative legal pathways for building.

Such campaigns should target not only residents of affected neighborhoods but also key stakeholders such as builders, architects, engineers, developers, and notaries—actors who significantly influence construction and registration processes. A mix of outreach tools—mass media, social media, community meetings, printed or online guides—could enhance message dissemination and foster a shift in public attitudes.

### **3.2. Ongoing Challenges**

Despite sporadic efforts to regulate and formalize informal construction, Chişinău continues to face a series of critical obstacles that hinder progress. These challenges are both structural and institutional, stemming from a combination of factors: a fragile regulatory framework, administrative bottlenecks, social pressures, and the lack of a coherent public policy vision.

#### **a) Excessive Bureaucracy and Administrative Delays**

The legalization process remains burdened by a cumbersome procedure involving multiple steps, unclear timelines, and interinstitutional dependencies that cause delays. Citizens attempting to regularize their homes are often discouraged by the complexity of required documentation, unclear responsibilities across agencies (urban planning, cadastre, judiciary), and lengthy processing times. In the absence of a unified, predictable framework, the process becomes inaccessible to many, further perpetuating informality.

#### **b) Complex Legal Situations and Longstanding Informal Occupation**

A significant number of residents live in structures built without permits or on land with unclear legal status for over a decade. Often, these properties were acquired through informal agreements without registration or legal verification. This creates a dual ambiguity: legally, the building does not exist; socially and physically, it is inhabited, connected to utilities (often through improvised means), and integrated into the urban landscape.

Addressing such cases requires resolving ownership issues, potential litigation, and complex legal clarifications, which are currently hampered by the absence of fast-track mechanisms or dedicated adjudication bodies.

#### **c) Lack of Firm Administrative Decisions**

Local authorities often oscillate between extremes: strict enforcement (demolition of unauthorized structures) or complete inaction, hoping for future legislative solutions. This strategic ambiguity fosters a culture of tolerance for illegality, sending the signal that urban rules can be circumvented without consequence.

Without a clear, sustained policy—either toward regularization or enforcement—municipal authorities lose normative credibility and the ability to manage urban growth effectively. Local communities, in turn, lose trust in the rule of law in urban governance.

#### **d) Restrictive but Poorly Enforced Legislation**

While the legal framework provides for harsh penalties for illegal construction (fines and demolition orders), enforcement is rare. In practice, many demolition orders are not executed, and penalties do not serve as real deterrents. This disconnect between written law and actual enforcement undermines legal credibility and reinforces informal construction as a "de facto norm."

Conversely, overly rigid provisions that lack remedial pathways for already-built structures make enforcement unrealistic and unjust, particularly for vulnerable households.

#### **e) Insufficient or Dysfunctional Legal Instruments**

Although the new Urban Planning and Construction Code introduces important updates, many of its provisions related to regularization are either underdeveloped or not harmonized with related legislation (cadastre, land use, local administration). The absence of implementing

regulations, guidelines, and dedicated administrative structures renders many of these tools inapplicable in practice.

Without a clearly defined institutional architecture for implementation—including multidisciplinary teams, digitized planning data, and intergovernmental cooperation—informal construction continues to grow unchecked by institutional oversight.

## **4. Strategies and Objectives for Legal and Equitable Urbanization**

### **4.1. An Integrated Approach to the Phenomenon**

The issue of informal construction in the municipality of Chişinău is a complex, multidimensional challenge that reflects both structural dysfunctions within public administration and acute social needs among the population. A sustainable resolution requires an integrated strategy that moves beyond fragmented solutions, addressing the legal, urban, social, and institutional dimensions in a coherent and coordinated manner.

#### **a) Clarifying Cadastral Status and Property Rights**

A fundamental initial step is the update and correction of cadastral data to accurately reflect the situation on the ground. This involves full digitalization of land and property records, reconfirmation or re-evaluation of property boundaries, and the elimination of overlapping claims and ownership conflicts that hinder regularization processes. Legal clarity regarding land and construction ownership is essential for providing a predictable framework that ensures legal security for residents and enables effective urban management.

#### **b) Reforming Legislation and Updating Urban Planning Documents**

Urban planning legislation must undergo comprehensive reform to align with current socio-economic realities, including the flexibilization of certain rigid and inaccessible regulations. Concurrently, the General Urban Plan must be updated and complemented by the development of Zonal and Detailed Urban Plans as key instruments for controlled and sustainable urban development. These documents should include clear criteria for integrating informal constructions into the city's formal structure, offering a legal pathway for regularization and preventing further unauthorized sprawl.

#### **c) Social Policies to Support Housing Access**

A significant driver of informal construction is the lack of affordable housing alternatives. Therefore, the implementation of social policies to support low-income households is essential—whether through access to social housing, subsidized credit schemes, or advisory services in real estate and urban planning. These measures can reduce pressure on urban land and prevent the emergence of new informal settlements.

#### **d) Strengthening Administrative Capacity and Engaging Local Communities**

Another vital component of the integrated approach is the enhancement of institutional capacity among local authorities responsible for urban planning, land registry, and construction oversight. This includes continuous staff training, digitalization of administrative procedures, and the introduction of effective monitoring and enforcement mechanisms. Equally important is the active involvement of local communities and residents in decision-making processes related to urban development. Participatory platforms and public consultations can foster transparency, legitimacy, and accountability among all stakeholders.

### **4.2. Proposed Objectives for Reducing the Phenomenon**

In order to reduce and ultimately eliminate informal constructions in Chişinău, it is critical to define clear, well-grounded, and locally adapted objectives. These must address both the prevention of new unauthorized developments and the resolution of existing ones through legal and safe means.

**a) Halting Chaotic Modifications to Residential Blocks (Annexes, Replanning, Additions)**

A top priority is the prevention of unauthorized and uncontrolled alterations to existing apartment buildings. Interventions such as illegal annexes, improper balcony enclosures, unapproved additions, or internal reconfigurations that compromise structural integrity endanger both buildings and occupants, degrade urban aesthetics, and diminish community well-being. Clear regulations and strict enforcement aim to curb these practices while promoting compliant interventions that meet technical and urban planning standards.

**b) Enforcing Strict Control Over Infrastructure Networks (Electricity, Water, Sewerage, etc.)**

The uncontrolled extension and use of public utility networks in areas affected by informal construction pose major risks to public safety and the functionality of urban infrastructure. A key objective is to establish a rigorous monitoring and control system for utility connections, preventing illegal hookups and overloads. This ensures adequate living conditions for residents while minimizing the risk of accidents and system failures.

**c) Protecting Public Property and Preventing Unauthorized Land Occupation**

Protecting public land—including green spaces and municipal or state-owned plots—from illegal occupation through unapproved construction or fencing is a critical objective. This requires firm legal and administrative measures to prevent de facto alienation of public assets, safeguard urban heritage, and stop the uncontrolled spread of informal settlements. Maintaining control over these areas is vital for upholding urban standards and supporting sustainable city development.

**d) Establishing Clear Regularization or Sanctioning Mechanisms with Adequate Legal Support**

A clear and functional legal framework is indispensable for the effective implementation of urban policies. Transparent and equitable procedures must be defined for regularizing existing informal constructions, particularly where they meet safety and urban compatibility criteria. At the same time, firm and enforceable sanctions should be applied to structures that cannot be legally integrated, thereby deterring illegal practices and reinforcing the authority of planning regulations. This dual approach—responsible regularization and clear sanctioning—will help restore order in urban spaces and rebuild public trust in authorities.

### **4.3. Projects to Improve Public Services in Affected Areas**

To mitigate the negative impact of informal constructions on urban quality of life and prevent the social exclusion of residents in these areas, regularization must be accompanied by substantial investment in basic infrastructure. Many peri-urban zones affected by unauthorized development lack adequate access to public utilities (water, sewerage, electricity, public lighting), transportation networks, and essential services (education, healthcare, sanitation).

Local authorities have therefore prioritized the following types of urban development projects:

- extending utility networks (water, sewerage, electricity) in underserved areas through phased projects tailored to informal settlement density and integration potential;
- creating waste collection points and sanitation systems, particularly where such services are currently absent or improvised;
- developing roads and access infrastructure in unauthorized neighborhoods to ensure emergency service access and public transport connectivity;
- constructing basic community facilities such as modular kindergartens, social centers, or temporary public spaces to reduce marginalization;
- digitalizing mapping and infrastructure inventory processes as a prerequisite for systematic interventions.

#### **4.4. Application of UNECE Guidelines and the Recovery Action Plan in the Chişinău Context**

Although the municipality of Chişinău does not yet formally apply the UNECE Guidelines on Informal Settlements or implement a dedicated Recovery Action Plan, the principles outlined in these international documents are fully aligned with the strategic directions recently adopted by the local administration.

The concept of inclusive and gradual formalization—focusing on housing as a lived space rather than an object of punishment—is already reflected in ongoing planning documents, particularly in suburban areas. Furthermore, the recognition of the right to adequate housing, the multisectoral approach to urban services, and community engagement are guiding principles in recent efforts to revise urban regulations and restructure municipal housing policy.

Nevertheless, closer alignment with international standards is needed, including:

- translating and adapting the UNECE Guidelines to fit the local legal and administrative context;
- creating an institutional mechanism for cross-sectoral coordination in implementing regularization and service improvement plans;
- defining minimum housing and infrastructure access indicators to prioritize interventions;
- identifying external funding sources, including European funds and technical assistance from international organizations, for pilot implementation phases.

#### **4.5. An Intervention Model for the Regularization of Informal Alterations. Case Study: Botanica District**

The Botanica district of Chişinău, particularly the area enclosed by Valea Crucii, Cuza Vodă, and Sarmizegetusa streets, illustrates a distinct urban phenomenon: localized yet widespread informal interventions in public or shared spaces. These include illegal annexes, façade alterations, sidewalk encroachments, and the transformation of garages into commercial units. Although less visible than illegal peri-urban developments, such practices contribute significantly to urban degradation, undermine equitable land use, and erode the authority of urban governance.

The first step in addressing this issue involves conducting a detailed physical and cadastral audit to inventory all existing annexes, extensions, and alterations. This data is then cross-referenced with official urban planning documentation and cadastral records to determine which constructions may be eligible for legalization and which require removal.

Next, community dialogue sessions are organized, inviting resident associations and property owners to engage in discussions about the available options—either for the regularization or conversion of these structures—in order to identify mutually acceptable solutions.

Based on the audit findings and community feedback, a local regularization guide is developed. This guide sets out clear and transparent criteria for legalizing modifications, including standards related to height, setbacks, safety, and aesthetics, as well as models for urban integration adapted to the specific context of the neighborhood.

For this intervention model to be effective and sustainable, it must be supported by an appropriate legal framework. It is therefore recommended that legal provisions be drafted to explicitly allow the formalization of informal constructions only after all evaluation steps have been completed—including technical compliance checks, urban integration, and the acquisition of relevant approvals. Legalization should be permitted exclusively when all guide-based criteria are cumulatively met, and the regulatory framework must clearly stipulate this pathway in order to provide legal certainty for residents and a clear instrument of enforcement for public authorities.

Pilot redevelopment projects are then implemented in vacated or reconfigured spaces, including urban amenities such as street furniture, landscaped green areas, and informational panels that foster public space stewardship and enhance the quality of life for residents.

In parallel, a phased enforcement strategy is introduced, offering a grace period during which owners can undertake voluntary regularization with administrative support. Where legalization proves impossible, sanctions are applied, and illegal interventions are dismantled.

Finally, the intervention's outcomes are monitored from both urban and social perspectives, assessing its impact on the community and the urban fabric. The pilot model is thus prepared for scaling and replication in other neighborhoods of Chişinău facing similar challenges.

## **5. Practical Example: Fire in an Illegally Built Attic in Durlești**

A recent case in the Durlești suburb of Chisinau underscores with alarming clarity the severe risks posed by informal constructions and the limitations of the current urban regulatory and enforcement system. In May 2025, a major fire broke out in an illegally constructed attic annexed to a multi-family residential building. The attic was not included in the originally approved construction project, which had foreseen only a standard metal tile roof. Furthermore, the structure was built using flammable materials, and its wooden beam framework—coated for aesthetic purposes—replaced the reinforced concrete slab specified in the technical documentation.

The local authority had initially refused to issue a construction permit for the building due to its proximity to high-voltage power lines. However, following a court ruling in 2015, the municipality was compelled to grant the permit for a D+GF+8F (basement, ground floor, and eight floors) residential block. The land was subsequently sold, and the new owners requested the addition of another floor. Despite the local authority's refusal to issue an urban planning certificate or construction permit for the redesign, the court once again ruled in favor of the investors. A decision issued in November 2018 forced the municipality to issue the necessary authorizations.

This case reveals a critical tension between judicial rulings and the authority of local public administrations: courts lack the technical expertise to assess whether a building complies with urban planning and construction regulations. Yet, through their decisions, they can compel authorities to issue permits—even when legal, technical, and safety-related objections are raised by municipal institutions. Such rulings, made in the absence of rigorous technical evaluation, can lead to serious consequences, as illustrated by the Durlești fire.

The municipality did not participate in the final reception of the building, resulting in a responsibility vacuum during the operationalization phase. After the building was put into use, the attic was constructed without any declaration or authorization. This raises another major issue: the absence of post-construction monitoring mechanisms. Technical control bodies such as the National Technical Supervision Inspectorate (INST) intervene only in response to complaints or incidents; systematic oversight of unauthorized alterations is virtually nonexistent.

According to public statements, the attic was unauthorized, built from combustible materials, and structurally non-compliant with the original technical design. Had the initial regulations been followed, the building would not have exceeded two or three stories, with a landscaped green area. In reality, every stage—from permitting and design to final inspection and usage—was circumvented, particularly in terms of fire safety standards.

On 27 May 2025, the National Technical Supervision Inspectorate issued a press release confirming that multiple irregularities were identified in the authorization, design, reception, and operational stages of the building. The case has been referred to the competent legal authorities. This incident conclusively highlights several systemic deficiencies:

the absence of effective monitoring of construction sites and post-reception modifications;

- poor coordination and communication among key stakeholders—designers, local administration, technical inspection agencies, and courts;
- the risks posed by judicial decisions that, without in-depth technical review, compel authorities to issue permits in conflict with public safety principles;
- the inability of local administrations to prevent and manage unauthorized construction in a consistent and effective manner;
- the lack of an integrated final inspection system involving all relevant stakeholders to ensure full compliance with approved urban and technical documentation.

Accordingly, this case offers a compelling argument for the adoption of systemic measures aimed at both preventing and formalizing informal constructions. Recommended strategic interventions include: revising the legal framework governing field inspection and final reception; introducing technical review mechanisms for urban planning litigation in courts; creating updated public registries of unauthorized modifications to buildings; and, not least, strengthening the institutional capacity of local authorities for real-time inspection and enforcement.

Formalization must not be reduced to a mere administrative act of retroactive recognition. It should be an integrated process starting with identification, followed by thorough legal and technical assessment, and culminating in strategic urban planning integration.

## 6. Conclusion

The municipality of Chişinău faces a complex and long-standing challenge: managing the legacy of informal constructions that have accumulated over recent decades as a result of legislative gaps, administrative limitations, and social pressures on the housing market. This phenomenon has led to a fragmented urban landscape fraught with technical, social, and legal risks—undermining housing safety, equitable access to infrastructure, the operation of public services, and coherent urban development.

The issue is not merely one of unauthorized buildings, but of an informal, unplanned mode of city-making that undermines the public interest and compromises quality of life. Cases like the attic fire in Durlleşti clearly illustrate the dangers of unauthorized interventions and the limitations of the current institutional framework in both preventing and addressing such issues.

Overcoming this impasse requires a radical shift—from passive tolerance to active, accountable, and coordinated governance. This entails the establishment of a clear, transparent, and predictable legal framework that enables both the strict sanctioning of violations and the fair regularization of existing situations, based on equitable and well-defined criteria.

Sustainable and equitable urban development in Chişinău must rest on integrated policies—legal, urban, social, and administrative—that support the reform of urban planning documentation, foster active community involvement in decision-making, ensure access to decent housing for vulnerable groups, and protect public assets.

Concrete experiences, such as the efforts to regularize and integrate the informal neighborhood in the Botanica district into the utility network, can serve as good practice models—provided they are supported by administrative commitment and clear criteria.

Strengthening administrative capacity for the control, monitoring, regularization, and sanctioning of informal constructions must go hand in hand with investments in basic infrastructure and public services in affected areas. Only this dual approach can prevent further social marginalization and ensure dignified living conditions for all residents.

Adapting to international standards and best practices—such as those outlined in the UNECE Guidelines and the Recovery Action Plan—offers a necessary methodological framework for a gradual, inclusive, and responsible approach. Only through a concerted, sustained, and transparent effort can Chişinău transform the challenge of informal construction into a real opportunity for equitable, safe, and sustainable urban reconstruction.

