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ANALYSIS OF THE PUBLIC TRANSPORT PRICING IN CHISINAU

ANALIZA PREȚURILOR TRANSPORTULUI PUBLIC ÎN CHIȘINĂU

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Abstract: *Analiza politicii tarifare din Chișinău evidențiază faptul că tariful unic de 6 MDL, introdus în 2022, contribuie la simplitate administrativă și protecție socială, însă limitează flexibilitatea financiară și posibilitatea de diferențiere a serviciilor. Deși tarifele sunt printre cele mai mici din Europa, ele reprezintă 1.51% din salariul mediu, ceea ce le face relativ mai puțin accesibile comparativ cu orașe precum Barcelona. Diferența majoră de venituri și lipsa unor subvenții consistente afectează sustenabilitatea pe termen lung. Compararea cu modelul Barcelonei, bazat pe zone tarifare și integrare multimodală, arată un echilibru economic superior și un nivel avansat de digitalizare. În contextul creșterii orașului și schimbării tiparelor de mobilitate, Chișinău are nevoie de modernizare prin bilete digitale, monitorizare în timp real și introducerea unor tarife diferențiate pentru eficiență și transparență sporită.*
Cuvinte cheie: *tarif, mobilitate urbană, accesibilitate, sustenabilitate financiara, digitalizare transport*
JEL CLASSIFICATION: **H41, H54, O18, R41, R48**

INTRODUCTION

Transportation pricing is an important factor in urban mobility, directly influencing affordability, accessibility and sustainability. In mun. Chisinau the incomes are relatively modest, so the cost of rides by trolleybuses, buses, taxis and alternative transport such as electric scooters is a highly relevant issue. The purpose of this study is to analyze transportation pricing in Chisinau and compare it with the equivalent from Barcelona to find similarities, differences and possible improvements. The following objectives have been set: to examine pricing mechanisms for trolleybuses and buses in Chisinau; to compare them with the metro and buses in Barcelona; to identify key factors influencing price differences; to propose recommendations for public transport pricing modernization in Chisinau.

PROPOSED RESEARCH METHODS

Presented in this article investigation was implemented based on such research methods as: comparative analysis, statistical evaluation of tariffs and qualitative assessment of affordability and policies. The information base includes official tariff data, statistical reports, academic literature and policy documents from Chisinau and Barcelona.

THE RESULTS OF RESEARCH

In academic literature, pricing is seen as a reflection of broader principles such as efficiency, equity and sustainability. According to Small, density is the defining feature of urban areas and transportation systems are designed to cope with this density by ensuring the effective movement of people and goods (Small, 2004). Several concepts of transport pricing have been established in the theory. A cost-based approach emphasizes operating and maintenance expenses, thereby ensuring that providers can sustain their activity over the long term. In contrast, value-based pricing considers the perceived benefits to passengers, such as comfort, speed and safety and may justify higher fares in exchange for higher quality. Equity-oriented pricing, highlights the role of social fairness, whereby vulnerable groups, such as students, benefit from reduced tariffs. Congestion pricing and dynamic tariffs have been introduced in some metropolitan areas to manage demand and reduce overcrowding, particularly during peak hours (Litman, 2022). Finally, systems may adopt either flat-rate tariffs or

distance/zone-based tariffs, which differentiate prices according to trip length or geographic zones. Underlying these concepts are principles of pricing that ensure consistency and fairness: efficiency in infrastructure use, equity and accessibility for all users, cost recovery for sustainable operations, transparency in fare calculations and flexibility to integrate multimodal systems (Litman, 2022).

Transport tariffs are determined by a variety of economic, operational, social, political and technological factors. Such variables as fuel costs, inflation, labor wages and the cost of spare parts directly influence operating expenses. The size and age of the vehicle fleet, the efficiency of routes and the level of demand all shape the sustainability of pricing policies, between peak and off-peak periods. Social considerations reflect the need for affordability, to avoid excluding vulnerable groups from access to mobility. Due to political and regulatory factors, tariffs are frequently subject to municipal or government policies. In addition, environmental and urban planning factors influence pricing strategies. With growing attention to sustainable development, many cities consider tariffs that encourage the use of eco-friendly modes (European Commission, 2020). Finally, technological progress, including smart cards and mobile ticketing, has enabled dynamic pricing models that adjust fares in real time based on demand, improving efficiency and revenue management.

Public transport in Chisinau consists mainly of trolleybuses and buses, which provide standardized services throughout the city. The important reform in recent years occurred in 2022, when a unified tariff structure was introduced, establishing a single fare of 6 MDL for both modes of transport, regardless of the distance travelled or the route used. Passengers may purchase single-use tickets or long-term subscriptions valid on all trolleybus and bus routes. The monthly general pass costs 234 MDL, while students benefit from discounted passes of 164 MDL per month, reflecting a socially inclusive pricing policy. Longer-term subscriptions provide even greater savings per ride, encouraging consistent use of public transport and fostering loyalty among regular users. The evolution of pass prices and per-trip costs is illustrated in Figure 1.

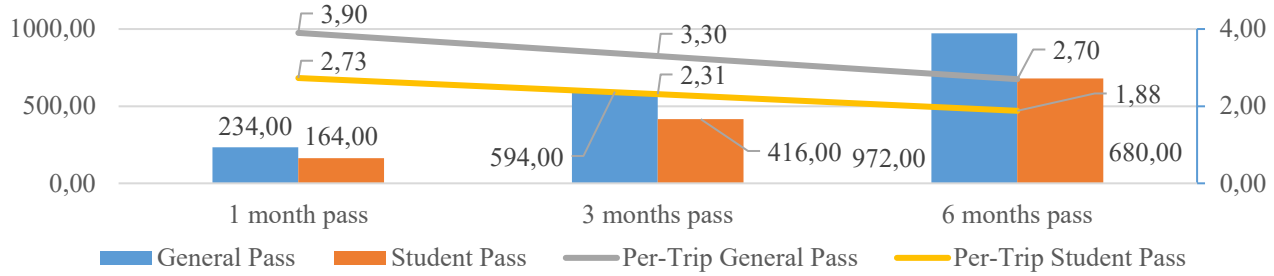


Figure 1: Prices of general and student public transport passes and the per-trip prices of general and student public transport prices, mun. Chisinau, 2025, MDL
Source: elaborated by the author based on (RTEC, 2026)

For frequent travelers, the per-trip price (assuming 60 trips/month) when using a monthly pass falls below 4 MDL, making public transport the most affordable mobility option within the city. The introduction of digital payment options and electronic passes in recent years has further enhanced the efficiency and transparency of the fare collection system (figure 2).

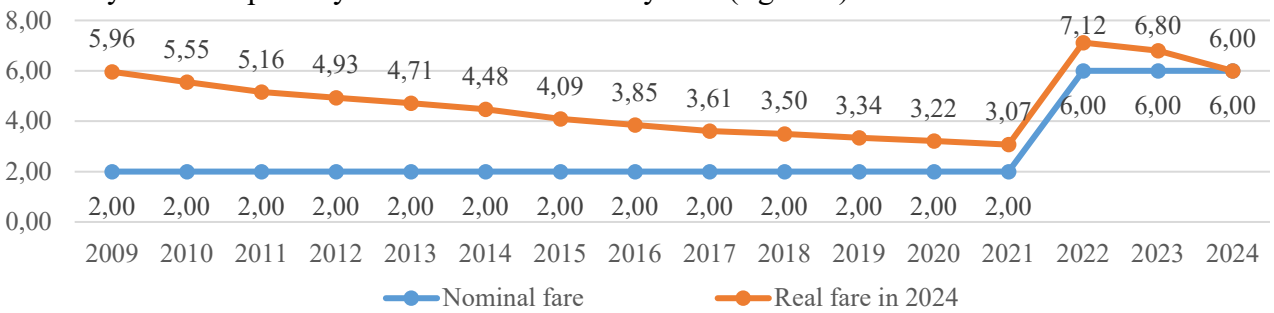


Figure 2: Dynamic of the single ticket fare for public transport in Chisinau, 2009-2024, MDL
Source: elaborated by the author based on (Worldbank, 2026)

Despite the apparent stability of tariffs, the real purchasing power of commuters has been influenced by inflationary pressures and changes in operational costs. The nominal and real single-ticket prices for the period 2009–2024 show that although nominal prices gradually increased, real fares, which are adjusted for inflation, remained relatively constant until 2022. This trend indicates a deliberate municipal policy to maintain affordability despite rising costs for fuel, maintenance and wages. The 2022 fare adjustment from 2 to 6 MDL was therefore less a measure of price increase and more an attempt to ensure cost recovery and service sustainability. Chisinau's public transport pricing model aims to strike a balance between affordability and cost efficiency. Nevertheless, the flat fare system does not account for distance or trip duration, meaning that short-distance users subsidize those traveling longer routes. Although this ensures social equality and administrative simplicity, it limits the ability of operators to optimize revenues or manage demand during peak hours.

To better understand the position of Chisinau within a European context, it is useful to compare its pricing structure with that of Barcelona, a city with integrated, multimodal and technologically advanced transport system. The comparison highlights insights regarding tariff models, affordability and transport policy orientation. Barcelona's tariffs are almost twice as high as those in Chisinau (Table 1). A single ticket costs 58.80 MDL, while multi-zone tickets increase proportionally.

Table 1. Public transport fare structure and affordability in Chisinau and Barcelona, 2025

	Chisinau	Barcelona
Single ticket fare	6.00 MDL	58.80 MDL (2.90 €)
10-Ride/Pack ticket	-	254.49 MDL (12.55 €)
1-month General pass price	234.00 MDL	428.10 MDL (22.80 €)
3-month Student pass price	416.00 MDL	892.32 MDL (44.00 €)
Average monthly salary	15,472.10 MDL	66,169.72 MDL
% of salary spent	1.51%	0.69%

Source: elaborated by the author based on (TMB Barcelona, 2026), (ATM Barcelona, 2026), (World Salaries, 2026)

Passengers may purchase multi-ride passes, such as 10-ride ticket or unlimited monthly passes, valid across metro, bus and commuter rail networks. This integrated system offers flexibility and convenience, rewarding frequent users and supporting multimodal connectivity.

Affordability represents a central element of comparison. The monthly pass in Chisinau represents approximately 1.51% of the average monthly salary, while in Barcelona it accounts for 0.69%. Although the nominal fare in Barcelona is significantly higher, the much greater average income levels make it relatively more affordable. This observation reveals a key difference in relative affordability: despite low fares, transport costs weigh more heavily on household budgets in Chisinau than in other Western European cities. In contrast, Chisinau maintains a flat fare of 6 MDL or 234 MDL/month, valid across all routes and distances. This approach simplifies administration and ensures equal access, but it lacks the spatial sensitivity that characterizes advanced urban transport systems. The absence of distance- or time-based differentiation may result in inefficient resource allocation, as long-distance passengers pay the same fare as those traveling short routes and peak-hour demand remains largely unmanaged.

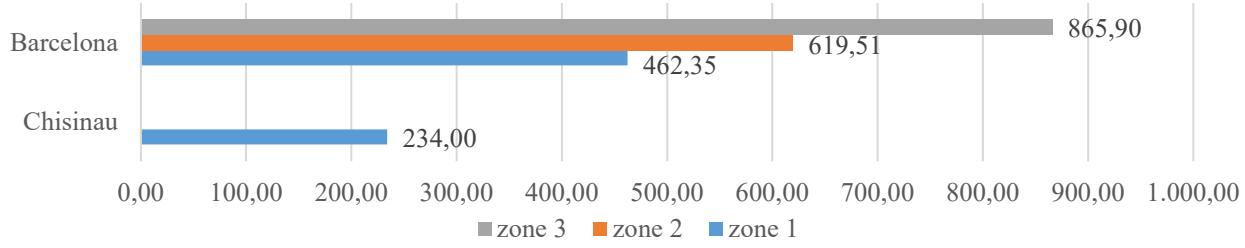


Figure 1: Monthly public transport pass prices in Chisinau and Barcelona, 2025, MDL
Source: elaborated by the author based on (TMB Barcelona, 2026), (ATM Barcelona, 2026)

Barcelona applies a zone-based fare system, where ticket prices vary depending on the number of zones crossed. However, this gap must be interpreted cautiously, since the service quality, frequency, coverage and modal integration in Barcelona are considerably superior. The Spanish city's network operates with extensive metro lines and electric buses ensuring higher comfort and environmental performance, which justify the higher fares.

The relationship between income levels and transport affordability is better illustrated by using the share of salary spent on public transport in several European cities. Both Chisinau (1.51%) and Barcelona (0.69%) fall within the range considered socially acceptable (under 2%), demonstrating that both systems maintain a degree of fairness in accessibility. Other European cities shares are Madrid – 1.01%; Prague – 0.86%; Vienna – 1.47% (World Salaries, 2026).

An interesting aspect concerns the cost efficiency of regular travel, as reflected in Figure 4.

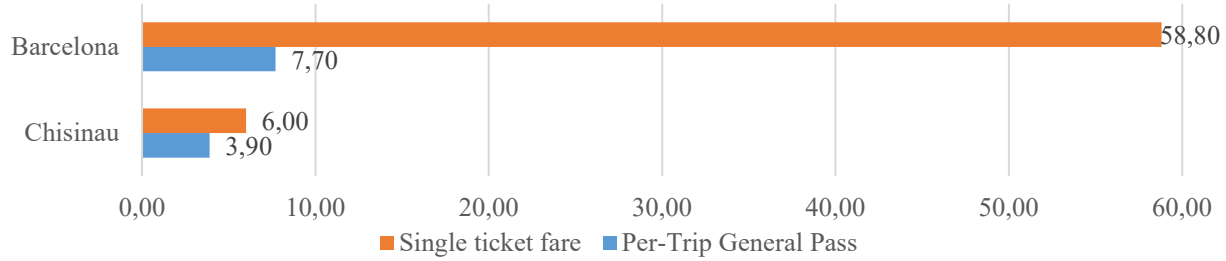


Figure 4: Cost per ride: single ticket and monthly pass, Chisinau and Barcelona, 2025, MDL
Source: elaborated by the author based on (RTEC Chişinău, 2026), (TMB Barcelona, 2026), (ATM Barcelona, 2026).

In both cities, long-term passes reduce the per-trip cost substantially compared to single tickets. In Chisinau, assuming 60 rides per month, a monthly pass reduces the per-ride cost to about 3.9 MDL. In Barcelona, the equivalent drop is to approximately 7.70 MDL per ride. This confirms that both cities promote the use of subscription-based mobility, encouraging frequent travelers to adopt sustainable modes and reduce reliance on private vehicles.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The analysis led to several essential conclusions: the unified fare system demonstrates the municipality's commitment to social inclusiveness and affordability, ensuring equal access to transport regardless of distance; although Chisinau's fares are among the lowest in Europe, they still represent 1.51% of the average monthly salary, compared to 0.69% in Barcelona. This indicates that, relative to income, transport in Chisinau is less affordable than it may appear in nominal terms; Barcelona applies to a zone-based, integrated fare system, designed to encourage multimodal mobility, improve cost recovery and promote environmental sustainability. In contrast, Chisinau maintains a socially protective model, prioritizing affordability over cost efficiency; the lack of differentiation by distance or time restricts revenue optimization and demand management, especially during peak hours.

Based on this study, several recommendations can be proposed to improve the efficiency, sustainability and fairness of public transport pricing in Chisinau: introduce gradual differentiation of tariffs; expand digitalization and integrated ticketing; enhance data collection and performance monitoring; encourage integration with sustainable mobility initiatives; international cooperation.

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