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Safeguarding Moldova's Presidential Election and EU Referendum: A Pre-election Risk Assessment

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Moldova's presidential elections and the referendum for EU accession could constitute a make-or-break moment for consolidating democracy in the country. Action must be taken now to secure election integrity and undercut Russia's ability to foment violence and instability.

Introduction

The Republic of Moldova is at a turning point, facing critical decisions that will define its future. The country's European orientation, backed by a national consensus according to [recent polls](#), reflects citizens' desire for stability, prosperity, and a strengthened rule of law—all of which they perceive as more accessible within the European Union. At the same time, Russia aims to thwart Moldova's pro-European aspirations and keep the country under its influence through interference in electoral processes and hybrid warfare tactics. In the context of Russia's hybrid war against Europe, [the next 15 months will be crucial for Moldova](#).

The presidential election and referendum on European integration in October 2024 and the parliamentary election in 2025 will be the first voting since the [EU Commission decided to open accession negotiations](#) with Chișinău. These elections will play an important role in determining Moldova's path and testing the country's internal resilience in the face of external pressures. They are crucial not only for Moldova but also for its international partners, who need to assess and adjust their aid, whether it be technical assistance, economic support, or security cooperation.

Russia attempted to [wreak havoc](#) on Moldova's democratic process in last year's races, and there is [ample reason](#) to believe that the Kremlin will do the same during this year's and next year's campaigns. Moldova is again likely to find itself organizing and conducting elections while countering strenuous efforts to destabilize them.

The Electoral Framework

The upcoming presidential and legislative elections constitute another test for the resilience of state institutions. Previous races highlighted ongoing gaps in Moldovan electoral law, despite the [multiple amendments](#) to the electoral code aimed at ensuring fair political competition. These



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amendments were adopted partially in response to the pro-Russian Shor Party's use of illicit funding and voter corruption for electoral gain but were implemented also to curb external interference in elections.

Past elections exposed persistent shortcomings in Moldovan electoral legislation, and led to the adoption in December 2022 of a new Electoral Code that equips authorities with more tools to address the risks of voter corruption and illicit funding. The leader of the Shor Party and several of its members were convicted after the Central Electoral Commission (CEC) and the courts prosecuted them for multiple irregularities, including vote-buying and campaign finance offenses. In the run-up to the local elections, the CEC [canceled the registration](#) of all Chance Party candidates—substitutes for the unconstitutional Shor Party—two days before the vote.

More recently, Moldova's Constitutional Court [affirmed](#) that the referendum on EU membership can take place on the same day as the presidential election. A result in favor of membership would trigger constitutional amendments including a [declaration that](#) integration into the European Union is a strategic objective of the Republic of Moldova.

In the meantime, if the authorities fail to enact new measures to address the Kremlin's continuing destabilization efforts, [Russia and its proxies, such as Shor](#), will have more opportunity to interfere in the presidential election and the EU referendum. Russia's primary objective for 2024 is to [undermine the outcomes of the EU referendum](#), and protests by pro-Russian groups will continue to serve as a means to erode confidence in the incumbent government.

Diaspora Voting

Another important issue for this election is that, for the first time, the Moldovan authorities are partially implementing [mail-in voting](#). This measure will be implemented first for Moldovan citizens in six host countries that meet criteria such as experience with implementing mail-in voting and the safety and reliability of postal services. The United States, Canada, and four northern European countries qualified for this first exercise. Civil society organizations such as the [Promo-Lex Association](#), along with the Venice Commission, recommend making postal voting a permanent feature next year and expanding its application to all countries where it is considered safe and reliable.

[The 2020 presidential election](#) saw the highest voter turnout since 1994, with 263,177 Moldovan voters abroad participating in the second round of voting on November 15, 2020, accounting for around 16% of the total number. Given the significant share of diaspora voters and their potential to influence election results, authorities must pay special attention to organizing elections and mobilizing voters outside Moldova. They must learn from past elections, during which a scarcity of polling stations resulted in overcrowding and long waiting times at some stations abroad.



The Political Landscape

In 2020, Maia Sandu [was elected president](#) and a year later her party—the Party of Action and Solidarity (PAS)—took control of the government after [winning](#) 63 of parliament’s 101 seats. The overwhelming victory meant that PAS could pass laws on its own, and it has indeed initiated an [ambitious reform agenda](#) to address corruption, institutional reform, and EU integration. The last item spurred the new electoral code and other, [greater steps](#) to align Moldova with the EU. Accession negotiations began in December 2023, and the government is planning for EU membership in 2030.

More recently, Moldovan parties opposed to Sandu’s drive to secure EU membership established an electoral bloc, [Victorie \(Victory\)](#), announced in Moscow, that includes Shor and leaders of the pro-Russia Gagauzia region. Efforts by this group, other pro-Russian parties such as the Socialist Party of Moldova ([PSRM](#)), and Shor’s proxy parties (Chance, Renaissance, and Victory) to thwart EU accession are likely to intensify. Developments in Transnistria, an eastern region that, with Russian support, declared its autonomy from Moldova about 30 years ago, are one reason for this. In February 2024, the region’s pro-Russian separatist leaders appealed to Moscow for [protection, an echo of similar calls](#) from districts of Ukraine that Russia illegally annexed in 2014 and 2022. Pro-Russian groups are also likely to be active given Gagauzia’s previous attempts to [stoke separatist sentiments and tensions with Chişinău by holding an illegal referendum on independence in 2014](#).

The Kremlin’s [primary strategies](#) for destabilizing Moldova are likely to include a [wide range of hybrid measures](#), including disinformation, malign finance, emerging technologies, election interference, economic coercion, and cyberattacks, many of which were deployed during the 2023 local elections. The head of Moldova’s Information and Security Service said then that Russia [illicitly channeled](#) more than \$55 million into influencing elections and buying votes.

Russia is likely to continue channeling influence through a cohort of openly pro-Russian figures beyond Shor. They include former Democratic Party leader Vladimir Plahotniuc, whom the US Treasury Department [sanctioned](#) in 2022 for his efforts to use Moldovan law enforcement not only to target business and political rivals, but also to capture the state.

Russia invested heavily to maximize its advantage in the elections and subsequently create chaos and division within society. Although some of these politicians promoted close ties with Moscow and opposed Moldova’s accession to the European Union, they are now attempting to pose as pro-Europeans or direct their propaganda toward the centrist electorate, targeting votes from both pro-European and pro-Russian factions. As Moldova has officially launched the [EU accession process](#), the opposition parties are trying to tap into the undecided, pro-European voter base, with



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a potential single candidate such as the [former prosecutor general of Moldova Alexandr Stoianoglo](#).

Between December 2022 and November 2023, Moldova's Committee for Exceptional Situations (CES) [suspended](#) a dozen television stations due to concerns about disinformation, threats to national security from Russian propaganda, and allegations of control by internationally sanctioned individuals and entities. The Security and Intelligence Service [blocked](#) access to 73 websites on similar grounds. Moldova's state of emergency [ended](#) in December 2023, but the broadcasters' suspensions and the website blocking have [remained in place](#).

Despite the government's actions, efforts by Shor members and other Moldovan politicians continue to distort the country's media landscape. Many television channels that were suspended responded by migrating their content to websites and social media platforms, where they display [anti-government ads](#) far in advance of elections.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Moldova's presidential elections and the referendum for EU accession could constitute a make-or-break moment for consolidating democracy and undercutting Russia's ability to foment violence and instability. Russia is already mobilizing significant resources to undermine Moldova's efforts to accelerate its pro-European trajectory. Increasing turnout, cross-regional cooperation between pro-European civic groups, and voter education are just a few of the key priorities in the coming months in Moldova.

With several months remaining until the election, Moldovan authorities must make a substantial and immediate effort to explain the benefits of European integration, especially at the grassroots level. Regional media, election-monitoring organizations, and civil society more broadly need increased resources to effectively provide impartial information and engage voters in the country and abroad. Key segments of society need to be well informed and mobilized to exercise their constitutional right to vote: youth and first-time voters, rural voters, economic actors such as entrepreneurs with great opportunities to grow in a stronger market, and the Moldovan diaspora. These segments are not systematically targeted by customized voter information campaigns to date, and some of the complexities of the EU integration process remain inaccessible to them. As Moldova grapples with poor voter education and echo chambers that increase political polarization and amplify disinformation, many of its citizens are unaware of the overall implications of their electoral choices.

There is still a significant gap in Moldovan civil society between civic action more broadly and the efforts to promote the integrity of the electoral system, not just in terms of procedures, but also representation. Knowledge-sharing and cross-regional cooperation with civic groups from



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Romania and the broader region on citizen electoral monitoring, independent media’s role in signaling misconduct, and voter information could be very helpful given the short time frame.

International partners and donors should also increase efforts to strengthen local investigative capacities to better safeguard the electoral processes from illicit funding and external interference. This can include specialized training for law enforcement and CEC officials in detecting and investigating electoral crimes. Campaigns to educate voters about the dangers of illicit funding and foreign interference, raising awareness of the legal avenues for reporting suspected electoral violations, and protecting whistleblowers who report electoral misconduct are also essential.

The upcoming 2024 presidential election and the subsequent 2025 parliamentary elections are pivotal moments for Moldova’s democratic future. The recent attempts to manipulate local elections are a forewarning of the challenges that might intensify in these upcoming electoral contests. Moldova’s ability to conduct free, fair, and transparent elections, safeguarding them against external interference, will significantly determine the country’s democratic course and European orientation.

In light of the Kremlin’s attempts to exert influence through local politics, [bolstering the integrity of Moldova’s electoral processes is imperative](#). Strengthening institutions responsible for oversight, ensuring transparency in campaign financing, and enhancing mechanisms to counter disinformation campaigns are critical steps toward securing the integrity of the upcoming elections. The significant challenge of illicit flows of external money to Russian-supported groups must be addressed.

Given these developments, implementing strict monitoring tools in a timely manner to detect and prohibit illicit funding from Russian citizens or proxy actors is crucial to maintaining the integrity and independence of Moldova’s democratic institutions.

The lessons learned from the recent local elections serve, as [stated by GMF previously](#), as a call to action—underscored by the need for continued international support and collaboration to fortify Moldova’s democratic institutions and civic education. This assistance not only safeguards the integrity of the electoral processes but also reinforces Moldova’s resilience in the face of external pressures, securing its path to a European future.