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REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA 2024 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION AND EU REFERENDUM: PRE-ELECTION RISK ASSESSMENT

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Executive Summary

This report contains an analysis of the pre-electoral context in Moldova and the main risks emerging in the political landscape, the legal framework, the electoral administration, and the mass media.

With local elections completed in 2023, Moldovans will be called to the ballot box on October 20 this year to elect the country's president and vote on a constitutional referendum regarding Moldova's European Union membership. The elections are also influenced by voters' and officials' awareness of parliamentary elections scheduled to take place in 2025. These electoral exercises are crucial for shaping Moldova's future and upholding its democratic values. Factors such as new electoral legislation, the threat of Russian interference in Moldovan politics, and ongoing information warfare further challenge already overstretched Moldovan institutions. The incumbent political class is determined to stay in power and will have to maneuver through the mounting obstacles put in place by Russian-funded proxies who are capitalizing on voters' dissatisfaction with the slow pace of the reforms. The primarily pro-Russian opposition is itself undergoing a process of realignment resulting from an ongoing fight for the role of representing Russian interests in Moldova. National electoral bodies are for the most part well prepared and experienced in conducting such elections, but they are still working to overcome several challenges—including consolidation of internal capacities in IT and campaign financial monitoring. International partners must carefully consider these aspects if they hope to help the Moldovan state conduct free and fair elections in accordance with international standards so that Moldovan citizens can freely exercise their voting rights. This pre-election risk assessment builds upon the findings of the [previous assessment](#) released by the German Marshall Fund in July 2024.

The Political Landscape

The electoral period in Moldova is shaped by the ongoing European integration process, the war in Ukraine, and persistent Russian interference in Moldovan affairs. On June 25, 2024, Moldova officially began EU accession [negotiations](#), clearly expressing commitment to the necessary reforms. This journey will be challenging, despite hopes for swift progress. Maintaining Moldova's trajectory toward European integration is a primary goal for the ruling party and several extra-parliamentary actors. In this context, the 2024 presidential elections, the constitutional referendum, and especially the 2025 parliamentary elections are seen as pivotal. The pro-European agenda is closely tied to Maia Sandu and the Action and Solidarity Party (PAS), making their continued control over key state institutions essential. The ruling political class has adopted a three-pronged strategy: re-electing President Sandu, securing a PAS-dominated parliamentary majority, and achieving a favorable outcome on the constitutional referendum. Ultimately, their overarching strategic objective is to ensure a pro-European majority in the next parliament.



The presidential election is set for October 20, 2024. Recent public opinion polls indicate that President Sandu has a strong chance of re-election, with around [34% of popular support](#). Despite her limited presidential powers, she has successfully cultivated an image of an engaged leader who is particularly active in foreign affairs. Throughout her tenure, Sandu has worked diligently to strengthen Moldova's ties with Europe, demonstrating both openness and readiness to become a trusted partner. However, domestically, progress has been slower. The sluggish pace of reforms in the justice and anti-corruption sectors, coupled with perceptions of weak governance, has eroded PAS's political capital, affecting Sandu's base of support. This decline is not yet critical, and the potential competitors do not pose a threat to Sandu. Nevertheless, President Sandu will have to manage her campaign carefully to avoid further declines in support that could jeopardize her re-election prospects.

The opposition parties have seized the opportunity to challenge Sandu in the upcoming presidential election and thirteen candidates have already declared their intention to run. Among the notable figures running are Renato Usatii, the former mayor of Balti and leader of "Our Party"; Ion Chicu, the former socialist prime minister and current leader of the Party of Development and Consolidation of Moldova; Irina Vlah, the former governor of Gagauzia; and controversial journalist Natalia Morari. Other candidates, including some from the pro-European center-right, are expected to join the race in the coming weeks. However, none of these candidates has any substantial popular support in recent opinion polls. One significant absence from the list of candidates is Igor Dodon, leader of the Socialist Party, who continues to maintain [one of the highest ratings after Maia Sandu](#). Contrary to expectations, Dodon has endorsed former prosecutor Alexandr Stoianoglo as a "unified opposition" candidate, despite Stoianoglo's limited political and popular backing. This move suggests a potential realignment among the left-wing actors representing Russian interests in Moldovan politics. Without Dodon in the race, one of the key figures to watch is the fugitive oligarch Ilan Shor. Despite having been sentenced to 15 years in prison for his involvement in the high-profile "billion-dollar bank scandal", Shor enjoys around 21% of popular support according to recent polls. He has previously demonstrated his ability to challenge the Moldovan political establishment through substantial financial backing, as seen in his orchestration of "popular" protests and the surprise victory of Evghenia Guțul in the Bashkan elections in Gagauzia. There is a significant risk that Shor might employ similar tactics in other regions during the upcoming electoral cycles. With his first political party, "Shor," declared unconstitutional and its successor, the Chance Party, facing potential [suspension](#) over financial irregularities, Shor and his Kremlin backers are likely exploring alternative strategies. The launch of the ["Pobeda" \(Victory\) political bloc](#) in April 2024, which has united several Shor-affiliated marginal parties, may have been one such strategy. The bloc's declared priority is to oppose Moldova's EU integration and strengthen ties with Russia. The bloc has [announced](#) its presidential candidate although the Central Electoral Commission (CEC) has [refused](#) to register the bloc due to various irregularities, including issues related to its legal representation, its name, and missing asset declarations.



With no solid opposition figures able to compete with Maia Sandu in the presidential election, it appears that the Kremlin’s focus extends beyond the immediate electoral outcome, targeting other short-term and long-term strategic objectives. In the short term, the left aims to pressure authorities by compromising President Sandu and PAS and potentially boycotting or undermining the referendum, while simultaneously boosting their visibility and legitimacy in preparation for next year’s parliamentary elections. For smaller political parties, participation in these electoral exercises serves to expand their electoral base and increase visibility, which is especially crucial before the parliamentary elections. In practical terms, it also helps them qualify for [public funds](#) based on recent electoral results.

A final tactic—that of fielding multiple candidates—serves as a smokescreen and fulfills several functions. It keeps authorities busy countering the narratives and illegalities of these “filler” parties, while providing multiple platforms and increased media coverage for spreading mutually reinforcing messages and disinformation. Based on the experience of the 2023 general local elections, this tactic is likely to be employed in the upcoming parliamentary elections as well, with “filler” parties creating a smokescreen to facilitate the entry of at least one Shor-controlled party into Parliament. The current mayor of Orhei, who received last-minute support from the leader of the Chance Party just before the latter was disqualified from the elections, serves as an example of this strategy. Authorities will need to clarify their stance on this influx of Kremlin-backed actors and proceed with extreme caution to mitigate the risks and minimize the negative impact on the elections. Most importantly, the long-term goal of the Left is to undermine Moldova’s pro-Western stance and its EU accession process. To achieve this, Russia is broadening its support beyond the hardline pro-Russian parties, betting on a diverse mix ranging from moderately pro-Russian to pro-Moldovan political actors, and even to [so-called “pro-European” ones](#). This strategy is designed to offer disillusioned voters an array of fake alternatives to the PAS Party. Ultimately, this approach may reflect the Kremlin’s efforts to replace the traditional East-West geopolitical polarization with a more nuanced divide, exploiting historical rifts within Moldovan society, fomenting social unrest, and potentially triggering [instability](#).

At the opposite end of the political spectrum, President Sandu, confident in her re-election but aware of the risks, aims to capitalize on her foreign policy achievements while addressing criticism over domestic reform failures. To energize the pro-European electorate and mitigate voter discontent, she decided to hold a constitutional referendum alongside the presidential elections. The decision was contested by the opposition, but was further supported by Parliament and [upheld](#) by the Constitutional Court. For the referendum to be valid, at least one-third of registered voters must participate, with a simple majority voting in favor of including EU integration as a constitutional priority. Initially seen as an electoral tool to boost Sandu’s and PAS’s image, the referendum aims to enshrine European integration as Moldova’s selected path of development, making it harder to reverse progress if pro-European forces lose power. With opinion polls showing



[50–60% support](#) for EU integration, the chances that the referendum will succeed are relatively high.

Nevertheless, Russia’s disinformation efforts in Moldova pose several risks, including the possibility that the referendum could fail due to low turnout or a negative result, undermining EU integration at the start of membership negotiations. To counter these risks, the government has launched a widespread [information campaign](#) to educate citizens about the referendum’s objectives and the benefits of EU membership for Moldova. The opposition has repeatedly [challenged](#) this campaign, accusing PAS of using administrative resources to promote a favorable outcome before the official start of the electoral period, but their efforts have been unsuccessful.

Finally, another significant risk for the referendum is that PAS and Sandu’s strong association with European integration could backfire. The opposition will try to exploit PAS’ past failures to weaken public support for this path. A failure of the referendum could damage the ruling party’s image and undermine the legitimacy of Moldova’s EU integration efforts, providing the pro-Russian opposition with additional ammunition to discredit PAS and question the depth of Moldovan support for EU integration.

The parliamentary elections set for the second half of 2025 are another significant factor shaping Moldova’s political landscape. With the election nearly a year away, [opinion polls](#) reveal a mixed picture, with some of the pro-democratic electorate disillusioned with the ruling party and a substantial share of undecided voters. This picture raises concerns about the composition of the next parliament and the potential threat to Moldova’s pro-Western orientation. The PAS party will have difficulty replicating its solid parliamentary majority. Its failure to implement key reforms, ongoing crises, and corruption allegations have eroded its support. Additionally, PAS struggles to maintain legal legitimacy while countering pro-Russian opposition efforts that aim to undermine its credibility and increase public dissatisfaction. In response, PAS aims to minimize losses and maintain a strong position for potential coalition negotiations. Meanwhile, several new pro-European political projects, including the Coalition for Unity and Wellbeing (CUB), the League of Cities and Communes (LOC), the Party of Change (PPS), and the Dignity and Truth Platform (DA), have formed the “Together” political block. Igor Munteanu, the representative of the CUB Party, ultimately decided to run separately as a presidential candidate. For the moment, these actors remain relatively unknown and have yet to build a voter base to succeed in the upcoming elections. In this context, attention should be given to the National Alternative Movement (MAN), led by Chisinau mayor Ion Ceban. A former Socialist, Ceban has rebranded himself as a pro-European leader and gained significant support as a dynamic mayor. Targeting younger, pro-European, center-left voters, Ceban could become a key player and potential power broker in the next parliamentary elections.

PAS would prefer a coalition with another pro-European party in a future parliament, but if suitable allies are not found, it may have to choose between partnering with the Socialists or a proxy controlled by Shor. In such a scenario, Dodon and the Socialists could regain influence. The worst-



case outcome for PAS would be absorbing the political costs of this alliance, which could harm Moldova's strategic development. In the best case, a coalition could increase PAS's accountability over time but might also lead to inefficiencies, compromises on strategic goals, and potential conflicts between Parliament and the president.

Legal Framework and Electoral Administration

Moldova's electoral legislation is considered well-developed and suitable for [democratic elections](#). The new Electoral Code adopted in 2022 addressed remaining gaps and consolidated electoral practices aligning, them with international standards. Elections are managed by the CEC, which is highly experienced in conducting complex elections and is deemed mostly free and fair by independent monitoring missions. Nevertheless, in 2023, the OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (OSCE/ODIHR) raised [concerns](#) about a decline in the quality of the electoral process, particularly with regard to the swift exclusion of the Chance Party from the electoral race and the restrictions placed on its members.

The Constitution and the Electoral Code form the core of Moldova's electoral legal framework, although additional provisions are found in other laws. Further details are provided by CEC [bylaws](#), including regulations on political party financing, the state voter register, and media coverage of elections.

The new Electoral Code, effective as of January 1, 2023, was developed by the CEC with input from the Constitutional Court, the Venice Commission, and OSCE/ODIHR, and incorporated recommendations from public consultations with civil society organizations. It introduces changes to the structure of electoral bodies, enhances the professionalism of CEC and District Electoral Councils (DEC) members, and updates regulations for electoral campaigns and campaign financing. It also specifies instances in which two-day voting is allowed, provides for additional identification documents to be used in voting, and clarifies media coverage rules. Amendments to the Law on Political Parties and the Criminal Code aim to strengthen oversight of political financing and media accountability. Additionally, the Law on Partial Implementation of Voting by Mail, approved by Parliament, will allow for testing of this voting method in a limited number of cases.

The most important updates in the new Electoral Code include changes to the **CEC composition and structure** as well as to the status of CEC members and DEC chairs. To reduce political influence and enhance independence, CEC members will no longer be appointed proportionally by parliamentary parties but by a broader range of state bodies, including the president, the Superior Council of Magistracy, the Ministry of Interior, and Parliament (representatives from the majority, the opposition, and civil society). The Code also reduces the CEC from nine to seven members and makes their positions permanent. This is perceived as positive change, and as in line with international practices and prior OSCE/ODIHR [recommendations](#). [The change](#) is expected to enhance institutional impartiality and political neutrality, as well as the overall efficiency of the electoral administration. Additionally, DEC chairs will become permanent CEC employees,

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strengthening local presence and oversight. They are expected to monitor party expenses, maintain voter lists, and support voter education between electoral cycles. Nevertheless, this also presents risks associated with the additional burden on the CEC related to consolidating the capacities of the DEC presidents, as well as overseeing their involvement in the CEC activities between electoral cycles. This need presents a window of opportunity for international partners to provide support for training and capacity-building for the presidents of the DECs.

Another important innovation in the new Electoral Code is the provision allowing **elections to be held over two days** (Saturday and Sunday) in certain precincts, either in-country or abroad, during special circumstances such as emergencies or pandemics—as determined by the CEC at least 25 days before the polls. This amendment addresses past instances of long queues on election day preventing many voters, particularly those residing abroad, from casting their ballots. This is a new practice for Moldova, and although criticized by the opposition over concerns about ballot security and voter privacy, it aligns with [international standards](#) by ensuring the universality of the vote as outlined in General Comment 25 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. For effective implementation, the CEC will need to better engage the Moldovan diaspora and encourage pre-registration to ensure timely decisions on multi-day voting.

The new Electoral Code allows for a broader range of **identification documents** to be used for voting in the upcoming elections. Citizens can now vote using an identity card, a provisional identity card, or a national passport (even one that has expired). These changes aim to facilitate voting for certain groups, reduce administrative burdens, increase inclusiveness, and boost voter participation. Since these documents are used only to retrieve and verify the voter’s identity in the Voters’ Register, ensuring the security and smooth operation of the register on election day is crucial. While the risk of widespread fraud from expired or forged documents is low, there remains a risk that claims of such irregularities can be used to challenge the credibility and legitimacy of the electoral process.

A key aspect of the newly adopted Electoral Code is the provision of precise **guidelines for media coverage during elections**. In light of new hybrid threats to Moldovan society, these provisions aim to ensure fair and balanced electoral coverage, equitable access for all candidates, and the prevention of misinformation. These regulations are designed to uphold the integrity of the electoral process by cultivating an informed electorate and promoting transparency. However, implementing these media regulations presents many challenges. Ensuring compliance, especially with the rapid spread of information online, requires robust monitoring mechanisms, which Moldova currently lacks, and cooperation with digital platforms. The Moldovan NGO “Association of Free Press”, contracted by META to identify and report false information, offers a promising example. Additionally, balancing free speech with the need to prevent misinformation requires careful oversight. The Audiovisual Council (AVC) has limited capacity to monitor and sanction violations in traditional media, leaving online media largely unchecked and further hindered by understaffing.



Effective communication with voters, both at home and in the diaspora, is crucial given the many innovations in the new Electoral Code and related legislative changes. Informing Moldovans about these opportunities will increase the likelihood of achieving the intended benefits. Moreover, transparent communication can help neutralize potentially damaging narratives aimed at discrediting the electoral authorities and undermining the credibility of Moldova's electoral processes.

Campaign financing remains one of the most sensitive subjects in Moldovan electoral landscape. Despite recent legislative improvements, many concerns persist ahead of the upcoming elections. The most pressing risks involve illegal funds entering the country undetected, through methods such as cash mules or [MIR virtual cards](#). These funds have been used in past elections to manipulate the process by illegally financing political campaigns, bribing voters, spreading online disinformation, and orchestrating protests, including violent ones with paid participants. To mitigate these threats, additional [amendments](#) were made to the Electoral Code, the Law on Political Parties, and the Criminal Code. These changes include stricter reporting requirements for financing initiative groups and electoral campaigns, a ban on philanthropic and sponsorship activities by political parties, lower ceilings for cash donations, and penalties for failing to submit financial reports or comply with CEC financial monitoring and reporting requirements. Additionally, the CEC's financial oversight capacity was enhanced by the establishment of a specialized division for monitoring political party and campaign finances. However, challenges persist due to staff shortages, software system updates, and delays in analyzing candidates' declared versus actual campaign expenses.

Several key recommendations can be pursued to tackle challenges in campaign financing and ensure a transparent electoral process in Moldova. Strengthening the capacity of legal bodies to detect and prevent illicit money flows is crucial, as is enhancing the CEC's ability to monitor and enforce campaign finance laws. Providing increased funding and better training, as well as adopting advanced monitoring technologies, will empower the CEC to detect and address violations more effectively.

International support remains crucial for Moldova. Continued collaboration with international partners can provide the necessary expertise and resources to refine the legal framework governing campaign financing. Public awareness is another critical area for improvement. Educating the public and political actors about the importance of transparency and legal compliance in campaign financing can foster a culture of accountability. Public campaigns and educational programs can help citizens understand their rights and the significance of clean elections, thereby encouraging them to demand higher standards from political parties.

A key development in this electoral cycle is the newly adopted [law on mail-in voting](#), passed in April 2024, that aims to secure voting rights for the Moldovan diaspora. In recent elections, Moldovan authorities increased the number of polling stations abroad. However, this practice is costly and does not fully resolve the issues it was meant to address. Ballot shortages and long lines [persisted](#), particularly during the 2020 presidential elections, in Italy, France, Germany, and the



United Kingdom. The 2024 election and the referendum are seen as a trial for mail-in voting before the practice is implemented more broadly in future parliamentary elections. Despite opposition criticism, the law addresses the practical challenges of expanding polling stations abroad. If implemented effectively, it will increase voting opportunities for the diaspora and other voters unable to physically reach polling stations on election day. To be able to vote by mail, Moldovan citizens from several eligible countries (the United States, Canada, Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Iceland) will have to register online in advance to receive their voting ballots. All those wishing to vote by mail will have to use the CEC online application designed for the registration of diaspora voters, which has been adapted for the mail-in voters' registration. Although the law provides clear criteria regarding the reliability of the locations where the mail-in vote can be carried out, the opposition has criticized the exclusion of voters in Russia and Ukraine. The law does not provide any penalties for illegalities committed in the context of the mail-in vote (buying votes), so the risk remains that this voting modality can be compromised. The authorities will have to ensure that the law is uniformly and impartially applied to avoid future allegations of illegal interventions that may undermine the credibility of electoral processes in Moldova.

Challenges to Electoral Participation and Eligibility

During the 2023 local elections, international observers [raised concerns](#) about voters being excluded from the lists if they had moved to a different district less than three months before election day. This restriction, specific to local elections and outlined in CEC [bylaws](#), aims to prevent the possibility of bribing voters to move to a specific electoral district in order to fraudulently influence the elections' result. For other elections, both the Electoral Code (Art. 61) and the CEC Regulation on electoral lists (Art. 24–44) ensure that voters who change their residence are still eligible to vote. The risk of exclusion due to relocation is thus minimal.

On the other hand, increased concerns persist regarding potential limitations to the right to be elected. These concerns are fueled mainly by the developments surrounding the banning of the Shor Party and later the de-registration of Chance Party members on the eve of the 2023 local elections. In June 2023, the Constitutional Court of Moldova declared the Shor Party unconstitutional on the grounds that the party had engaged in activities that undermined the rule of law, such as illegal financing and other violations of the principles of democratic governance. The Constitutional Court's decision was supposed to set a significant legal precedent in Moldova signaling stricter enforcement of laws governing political party activities and funding in the upcoming elections. However, in practice there are no legal barriers preventing wealthy actors from acquiring one or more political parties in a very short time. This is exactly what Shor did, establishing the Chance Party to run in the local elections of 2023. Two days before the local elections, the Commission for Exceptional Situations (CES) issued a [decision](#) canceling the registration of all 8,605 Chance Party candidates, based on the Security and Information Service's findings that there had been significant campaign finance violations and national security threats, including attempts to corrupt the judiciary, bribe public officials, influence political actors, and spread disinformation. However, in March 2024, the Constitutional Court ruled that the restriction on the ability of persons associated with parties that have been declared unconstitutional to run for



office was itself unconstitutional. This difficult episode illustrates the growing pressure from Russian-funded political proxies in Moldova and the legal challenges complicating the Moldovan authorities' ability to respond. President of the Parliament Igor Grosu put it bluntly: "It is our duty to keep bandits at a distance from the electoral processes." The risk of such scenarios repeating in the upcoming presidential and parliamentary elections is relatively high, with negative repercussions for the perceived integrity and the legitimacy of the electoral process. Outlawing a political party on grounds of illegal funding does not necessarily solve the problem, as practice shows that politicians can easily acquire new political parties, rebrand them, and continue the same practices indefinitely. Better regulations are needed for the registration of political parties and the eligibility requirements for participation in elections. For the moment, the Electoral Code has not yet been amended to reflect the final decision of the Court. It is expected that the CEC will adopt relevant bylaws clarifying the ruling closer to the elections.

Mass Media and the Information Space

A transparent and fair electoral process is to a great extent contingent on an independent mass-media that objectively informs the public, to some degree shaping voters' behavior. This is particularly important during election cycles, when there is increased voter interest in the candidates and increased demand for media services. In Moldova, the mass-media landscape is marked by controversy. On the one hand the overall media climate is perceived as [partly free](#): freedom of speech is for the most part protected within a vibrant media and information space, and "[quality information \[is\] available](#), most of it being editorially independent, based on facts, and not intended to harm." On the other hand, experts assess Moldovan media as affected by [serious issues](#). [For this reason](#) its score dropped slightly in the [assessment](#) carried out by Reporters Without Borders. Besides the problem of ownership transparency and political control, the fragile financial sustainability, unfair competition, and dysfunctional advertising market further undermine the development of this sector. Moldovan authorities and the media have taken steps that resulted in slight improvements, but the situation remains worrisome. Above all, disinformation threatens to disrupt the Moldovan political processes, creating instability and crises. Moldovan authorities will need to do more to counteract its effects leading up to the coming election cycles.

Television is the most trusted source of news and information for most Moldovans (53%), with online media increasing as a source of information. According to local and international observers, Moldovan independent mass media outlets are not financially sustainable, since they are heavily [dependent on grants](#). Several media outlets have recently experimented with revised business models, but few have been successful. Unfair competition and an inefficient advertising market also hinder the further development of the media sector in Moldova. In the long term, these issues perpetuate the risks of political control over the Moldovan media outlets. Additional concerns remain with regard to the freedom of access to information. Journalists often face [restrictions](#) on their right to access information, especially from local authorities. These restrictions are manifest



in delayed responses, ignored requests from journalists, and arbitrary refusals to cooperate illegally justified by the need to protect personal data.

In recent years, Moldovan authorities have made efforts to improve the legislation governing the media sector, reacting both to emerging challenges during election cycles and recommendations from international partners. Several new laws have been passed, including the law on advertising and the law on access to public information, which aim to better align Moldovan legislation with international standards. The Code of Audiovisual Media Services was [amended](#) to provide a clearer definition of “disinformation”, and sanctions for the repeated broadcast of content classified as disinformation have been put in place. The AVC adopted a methodology for identifying and evaluating cases of disinformation in audiovisual content. Finally, Parliament approved the “[concept of strategic communication](#) and countering disinformation” for 2024–2028, which was developed by the newly created Center for Strategic Communication and Countering Disinformation (CSCCD).

With several elections ahead, authorities struggle to effectively neutralize the hybrid threats while also respecting the law and international standards. The information warfare carried out by Kremlin under the guise of “free journalism” is aimed at amplifying the inherent divisions in Moldovan society, undermining the authorities’ legitimacy and ultimately derailing Moldova from its EU integration track. Ignoring these threats or applying ill-prepared or poorly thought-out solutions will increase the risk of criticism at home and damage to Moldova’s image internationally.

To curb the rising tide of disinformation, in 2022 and 2023 the authorities banned 12 TV stations and around 30 websites, some of which were among the most watched. At this moment, nine TV stations remain banned. [RTR](#) and [NTV](#) have given up their licenses, and AVC declined to renew the license of TV “Primul in Moldova”. These media outlets were [accused](#) of spreading Russian disinformation and propaganda and of threatening national security. Authorities have scrambled to identify appropriate legal instruments to shield the Moldovan information space from Russian hybrid warfare. But the often hasty decisions and lack of transparency in changes to legislation have raised many concerns among the [media community](#) and [human rights defenders](#). Kremlin mouthpieces and Moldovan opposition parties have accused the authorities of censorship and of limiting press freedoms.

Online disinformation remains a threat despite these efforts to stop it. According to a [report](#) prepared by the Moldovan NGO Watchdog, fugitive oligarchs continue to pour tens of thousands of euros into online advertising to promote their disinformation campaigns. It seems that the Moldovan government has been unable to stop the spread of Russia-funded disinformation. A long-term solution has been the establishment of the [CSCCD](#), created to enhance cooperation among institutions in combating the disinformation, manipulation, and foreign interference that threaten the national security and democratic interests of Moldova. After a prolonged phase of institutional



development, the center is operational and is focused on consolidating communications among state institutions and developing counter-disinformation content designed to protect the Moldovan informational space from external malign influence. Still, with this year's elections fast approaching, the effectiveness of the center in carrying out its tasks remains to be seen.

Conclusions and Recommendations

With two months remaining until the presidential election and the constitutional referendum, the overall pre-electoral and social-political context in Moldova is characterized by a struggle between continuity and disruption, careful optimism and an urgent need for risk mitigation. Moldova has embarked on the strenuous path toward EU integration and has initiated accession negotiations. Although determined to continue this process, the incumbent political class is struggling with a number of risks. These include falling popular support, mounting pressure from the pro-Russian opposition at home, and Russian meddling in Moldovan politics through propaganda and disinformation.

The presidential election will become a training ground for the upcoming 2025 parliamentary elections, and the pro-Russian opposition parties are already repositioning themselves as part of an internal competition to represent Russian interests in Moldova. At the same time, it seems that Russia is altering its tactics for interfering in Moldovan politics by working through a wider spectrum of political actors representing a diverse set of ideologies. Thus, another risk to be closely followed is that of the hijacking of Moldova's pro-European movement with the help of moderately pro-Russian or pseudo-pro-European parties supported by the Russian Federation. The constitutional referendum that is set to take place simultaneously with the presidential elections aims to enshrine European integration in the constitution as a national priority. Although it is expected that the referendum will succeed, the disinformation and the concerted action of the pro-Russian opposition may present a substantial risk to the validation or success of this electoral exercise. The 2025 parliamentary elections are the main target for all political actors—the ruling party as well as the opposition. The continuity of the pro-European movement is contingent upon PAS' ability to preserve the majority or establish a functional ruling coalition after the elections. There is a high risk that the next parliament will see a rise in the number of representatives of the pro-Russian opposition and therefore a disruption in the momentum Moldova has achieved. Concerns persist regarding possible limitations of the rights of certain politicians associated with the fugitive oligarch Ilan Shor to run for office, given the unclear status of articles 16(2)e,f, which the Constitutional Court declared unconstitutional but have not yet been removed from the Electoral Code. Finally, there is the constant threat from the rising level of online disinformation that the Moldovan authorities must counter.

Recommendations

This pre-electoral risk assessment has highlighted key areas of concern and pointed to necessary actions to be taken in the lead-up to Moldova's pivotal 2024 presidential election and constitutional



referendum. The political landscape is fraught with challenges. Several recommendations are listed here to help navigate this complex terrain.

- *Bolster the capacity of Moldova's electoral administration.* This involves enhancing training programs for the Central Electoral Commission (CEC) and District Electoral Councils (DEC) members, particularly in IT and financial monitoring of political parties and electoral campaigns. Adequate resources and funding must be allocated to the CEC to improve operational efficiency and oversight of campaign financing.
- *Enhance the legal framework governing elections.* The final decision of the Constitutional Court regarding the right to run for office and be elected must be implemented, ensuring clarity and consistency. Stricter regulations for the registration and monitoring of political parties will prevent the recurrence of illegal practices.
- *Develop comprehensive strategies to counter foreign interference,* particularly from Russia. This involves strengthening cybersecurity measures and monitoring disinformation campaigns. International collaboration is essential to securing the expertise and support needed to mitigate these hybrid threats effectively.
- *Enhance the capabilities of legal bodies and the CEC to detect and prevent illicit funds.* Campaign financing remains a sensitive issue. Transparency in campaign financing should be promoted through public awareness campaigns and stricter reporting requirements.
- *Expand voter education and engagement.* Extensive campaigns should inform citizens about new electoral provisions such as mail-in voting, two-day voting, and the use of additional identification documents. These initiatives must also reach the diaspora, utilizing multiple channels and languages to maximize engagement.
- *Explain the constitutional referendum's importance* and its impact on Moldova's EU integration. Thorough information campaigns are necessary. Contingency plans must be in place to address potential low turnout or negative outcomes.
- *Strengthen regulations and provide robust monitoring mechanisms for fair media coverage during elections.* These steps are needed to ensure balanced reporting. Partnerships with digital platforms and independent media organizations can help combat misinformation and disinformation, ensuring that the electorate is well-informed.
- *Build institutional resilience.* State institutions must be strengthened to resist external pressures and maintain electoral integrity. This involves continuous training, resource allocation, and international cooperation.

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