Noroc Olanda

DEMOCRACY BUILDING IN MOLDOVA:

Diaspora's Vision for Moldova's Resilient Future

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WHITE PAPER
SCOPE

The White Paper aims to serve as a policy instrument, crafted by diaspora professionals, to articulate a collective vision for building democratic resilience in Moldova. By leveraging the expertise of Moldovan diaspora communities, it seeks to:

INFLUENCE POLICY DECISIONS:

Shape policy priorities in both Moldova and the EU, emphasizing the importance of Moldova's EU membership and reforms progress while highlighting the diaspora's potential as a driver of national development.

FOSTER COOPERATION:

Encourage robust collaboration between governments, international organizations, the private sector, and civil society to amplify Moldova's democratic trajectory and European aspirations.

EMPOWER DIASPORA AND POLICYMAKERS:

Inspire diaspora communities and decision-makers to take an active and sustained role in advancing Moldova's European integration.

This White Paper targets stakeholders in the EU, including the European Parliament (EP), the European External Action Service (EEAS), Directorate-General for Enlargement and Eastern Neighbourhood (DG ENEST), and the Moldovan institutions such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), State Chancellery/Bureau for Diaspora Relations (BRD), the Moldovan Parliament and the Presidency; as well as Moldovan diaspora civil society and the broader international civil society community.

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Republic of Moldova stands at a critical juncture in its **European integration journey, a path that promises transformative opportunities for democratization, economic growth, and societal modernization.** In October-November 2024, Moldova held two pivotal votes: the presidential election and the EU accession constitutional referendum. These elections, seen as a litmus test for the country's European trajectory, will be followed by parliamentary elections in 2025, which will further impact Moldova's fragile democratic landscape due to external interference from Russia and grievances from population. For Moldova, European integration is more than a geopolitical aspiration; it is a comprehensive strategy for internal reform and societal advancement. The EU framework offers Moldova a robust mechanism to strengthen state institutions, enhance economic competitiveness, and align with global standards of governance and human rights. However, this process requires an unwavering commitment to reforms that prioritize long-term benefits over short-term political gains — a message consistently emphasized by scholarly and practitioner's communities.

The current political reality presents a precarious juncture. Ongoing hybrid threats, including the illicit financing of political parties—primarily those linked to the **fugitive oligarch Ilan Shor and its pro-Russian proxies**—cybersecurity threats, ongoing destabilization attempts and **foreign information manipulation and interference** (FIMI), pose significant risks to the integrity of future elections. The current **energy crisis**, that is created by Russia's unilateral cessation of gas deliveries (particularly to the Transnistrian region) is another warfare mechanism that is going to destabilize the country, influence Moldovan elections, and create tensions between authorities in Chisinau and Tiraspol. On a societal dimension, polling indicates a razor-thin divide between the pro-reform, pro-EU governing party and the opposition, including Russian financed, with the latter leveraging socio-economic grievances, slow reform process and geopolitical tensions to erode public trust in Moldova's European trajectory. The October referendum, which resulted in a narrow 50,35% "YES" vote for enshrining EU integration as a constitutional priority, was widely manipulated by Shor led campaigns (with at least 138,000 identified as involved in vote-buying schemes). Yet this also underscores the growing polarization of Moldovan society and governance mistakes made by the ruling party.

Moldova's path to the European Union is further complicated by economic hardship and governance deficiencies. With approximately one-third of the population living below the poverty line, access to essential services remains limited for rural residents, women, youth, individuals with disabilities, and the elderly. Socioeconomic challenges exacerbate public ambivalence toward the EU, with many Moldovans viewing integration primarily as a means of economic improvement rather than a commitment to shared values such as democracy and human rights. Meanwhile, Russian influence continues to cast a shadow over Moldova's political and cultural landscape, sustained through pro-Russian political actors, including the leadership in the Gagauzia autonomous region, the Orthodox Church, and the unresolved Transnistrian conflict.

Still, amid these challenges, **Moldova's diaspora has emerged as a critical actor in shaping the country's future.** Over the past three decades, the diaspora has evolved into a formidable force, driving both economic and political change. Diaspora's financial remittances remain a lifeline for Moldova's economy and its transfer of skills, expertise, and best practices made Moldovans abroad agents of socio-political transformation. In recent years diaspora's influence has grown exponentially. By 2018 diaspora representatives were actively lobbying for electoral reforms to expand their voting rights and participation. The 2021 parliamentary elections marked a turning point, with over 86% of diaspora voters backing the pro-EU Party of Action and Solidarity (PAS), led by President Maia Sandu. The 2024 presidential elections and EU referendum further demonstrated the diaspora's electoral clout. Over 82% of diaspora voters supported Maia Sandu's re-election and 77% endorsed the EU constitutional referendum, tipping the scales in favor of the pro-European agenda.

This White Paper, informed by the research, expertise and lived experiences of diaspora professionals, aims to articulate a forward-looking vision for Moldova's resilience and prosperity as it seeks EU membership. By anchoring Moldova's democratic resilience in the principles of European integration, this document offers a roadmap for harnessing the collective power of the diaspora, national institutions, and international partners. It envisions a Moldova that not only meets the benchmarks of EU membership but emerges as a beacon of stability and progress in the Eastern Partnership region. Finally, this Paper will explore pathways to maintain this momentum while fostering collaboration between governments, international organizations, civil society, and the private sector.

SECTION 1:
GOOD GOVERNANCE AND ELECTORAL INTEGRITY

1.1 The Governance Framework

Following the parliamentary elections on July 11, 2021, Moldova's 11th Parliament was constituted, comprising three main political factions: the Party of Action and Solidarity (PAS), the Bloc of Communists and Socialists, and the Shor Party. Historically, Moldovan political parties have been intertwined with business interests. Notably, Vlad Plahotniuc, former chairman of the Democratic Party of Moldova, maintained control over his business conglomerate while serving as a member of parliament. His dominance in Moldovan politics, initially in alliance with former Prime Minister Vlad Filat (charged with taking bribes) between 2009 and 2015, and subsequently alone until 2019, was marked by the subjugation of economic sectors and governmental apparatus.

This control extended to the media and law enforcement agencies. Even in the lead-up to the 2024 parliamentary elections, fugitive oligarchs Ilan Shor and Vlad Plahotniuc continued to exert influence over certain political, judicial, and law enforcement entities. In June 2023, the Constitutional Court declared the Shor Party unconstitutional (whose leader was sentenced for his role in a $1 billion dollar bank theft), resulting in its five members continuing as independent deputies without the option to join other parliamentary factions.

In the 2020 presidential election, Maia Sandu of the Party of Action and Solidarity was elected President with 52,72% of the votes, reflecting a significant political shift. One key to Sandu's victory was the electorate's fatigue with the corruption prevalent in Moldovan politics and disappointment with the former pro-Russian President, Igor Dodon. Her campaign focused on anti-corruption reforms and bridging geopolitical divides, aligning Moldova's transformation with its EU membership aspirations. Following Moldova's EU candidate status and the opening of EU accession talks, Moldova held simultaneous presidential elections and a referendum on EU accession. President Maia Sandu secured re-election with 55% of the vote in the runoff against the pro-Russian candidate Alexandr Stoianoglo; while the referendum resulted in a narrow approval of 50,35%.

Moldova's electoral process faced significant challenges, including (Russian) foreign interference and vote-buying. President Sandu condemned these actions, stating that external forces and criminal groups attempted to undermine Moldova's democracy. But there are also internal dynamics to consider. The Moldovan electorate is deeply divided, with 46,7% believing the country is heading in the wrong direction in terms of poverty reduction, decrease of high prices, employment and anti-corruption measures. Economic hardships, particularly in rural areas and among the elderly, have left communities vulnerable to political exploitation by figures like Ilan Shor.

Concomitantly, following its EU integration agenda, the PAS government has propelled the good governance reforms aimed at advancing its accession prospects since it secured EU candidate status in June 2022. By November 2023, according to the European Commission report, Moldova has demonstrated a commitment to overhauling its judiciary to ensure independence, transparency, and efficiency. Significant progress includes the pre-vetting of candidates for the Superior Council of Magistracy (SCM) and the Superior Council of Prosecutors (SCP), based on legislation aligned with Venice Commission recommendations. The Parliament has also adopted laws aimed at strengthening the integrity and accountability of judicial institutions. The government has initiated comprehensive reforms to enhance the effectiveness of anti-corruption bodies and improve the legal framework for combating corruption. To bolster administrative capacity and economic resilience, Moldova has undertaken reforms to improve public service delivery and policy implementation. The adoption of a new law on salaries aims to standardize compensation across the public sector, addressing disparities and enhancing institutional efficiency.

Several persistent challenges continue to impede progress across key areas. While legislative measures have been introduced to enhance judicial independence and accountability, effective implementation remains a significant hurdle and the accountability of the judiciary should be improved. The public administration sector faces challenges such as low productivity growth, governance deficiencies, and limited competition. The World Bank emphasizes that addressing these issues is crucial for fostering a more conducive environment for investment and growth. Additionally, the large state footprint and tax distortions further complicate the economic landscape, necessitating comprehensive reforms to enhance market competitiveness and efficiency. And finally, Moldova continues to grapple with systemic corruption that permeates various sectors. Freedom House notes that pervasive corruption and critical deficiencies in the justice sector and the rule of law continue to hamper democratic governance. This entrenched corruption erodes public trust and poses a substantial barrier to effective governance.

1.2 Risks and Threats

1.2.1 Sabotage by Spoiler Parties

Moldova's political landscape is increasingly influenced by entities operating as 'spoiler parties', which, under the guise of legitimate opposition, serve external interests aimed at destabilizing the nation's democratic processes. A prominent example is the political alliance orchestrated by fugitive oligarch Ilan Shor, who has been internationally sanctioned for facilitating Kremlin-backed interference in Moldova's elections.

In April 2024, Shor announced the formation of the "Victory" ("Pobeda") Bloc in Moscow, uniting various pro-Russian elements. While this bloc is unlikely to secure significant parliamentary representation in 2025 elections, its primary function is to operate as a spoiler party. By siphoning votes from centrist and pro-European factions, the bloc disrupts electoral outcomes and amplifies societal divisions. Moldovan intelligence and international analysts identify Shor's operations as instruments of Russian interference, aiming to orchestrate protests, propagate disinformation, and undermine democratic processes. Russia's strategic interest in supporting Shor is evident: his activities deepen polarization, foster anti-government sentiment, and undermine Moldova's aspirations for European integration, effectively serving as a tool of hybrid warfare against the country.

Furthermore, by amplifying economic grievances among citizens, Shor fosters skepticism toward EU integration, the ruling PAS party, and President Sandu's leadership. His strategy involves exploiting socio-economic challenges to build loyalty among disenfranchised groups through material support, social engagement, and disinformation.

These efforts frame the EU as a threat to Moldova's cultural identity and security while cultivating dependency through paid protests and other activities. This pseudo-political network effectively targets those most susceptible to anti-EU, anti-PAS, and anti-Maia Sandu rhetoric.

The Moldovan government has taken steps to counteract these destabilizing efforts. In September 2024, the Central Electoral Commission barred the Shor Party from participating in the EU referendum, a decision upheld by the courts. Despite these measures, the persistent influence of spoiler parties underscores the challenges Moldova faces in safeguarding its democratic institutions against external manipulation. The situation necessitates continued vigilance and comprehensive strategies to strengthen the resilience of Moldova's political system.

1.2.2. The Downside of Centralization of Power

Following the fall of the Plahotniuc regime and the departure of other influential oligarchs, Moldova underwent a significant power shift. Initially dominated by the Socialists (PSRM), the political landscape eventually transitioned to the current ruling Party of Action and Solidarity (PAS), which now holds a dominant position. With a strong majority in Parliament and control over key government institutions, PAS has centralized power to advance its reform agenda. This concentration of authority has created a synergy between the different branches of government, potentially enhancing policy implementation and reform momentum. This unified approach has been instrumental in advancing Moldova's European integration efforts. The European Commission's report acknowledged Moldova's continued reform efforts to strengthen democracy and the rule of law, despite multiple challenges.

Despite these advancements, the concentration of power raises concerns regarding democratic balance and inclusivity. The absence of robust opposition diminishes the system of checks and balances essential for a healthy democracy. Freedom House's 2024 report highlights that while Moldova maintains a competitive electoral environment, the dominance of a single party could potentially undermine the pluralism necessary for democratic resilience. PAS has demonstrated limited coalition-building or collaboration with other political entities (outside of the current Parliament), further marginalizing opposition parties. Moldova's political spectrum is now marked by polarization, with PAS facing a fractured opposition comprising 4–6 pro-Russian parties and 7–8 smaller pro-European groups.

A political environment where dissenting voices are sidelined risks eroding voter confidence, reducing participation, and weakening the capacity of the political class to unite against external destabilizing forces. Moreover, much of the opposition remains under Russian influence, complicating efforts to achieve national cohesion in the face of hybrid threats.

SECTION 2:
SECURITY AND GEOPOLITICS

2.1 The Security Framework

Russia has been present in Moldova since its independence and, over the past two and a half years, has significantly intensified its hybrid warfare. This includes disinformation campaigns, economic coercion, energy war and the use of political proxies, such as fugitive oligarch Ilan Shor, to destabilize the country and weaken the pro-European government. False flag operations, cyber-attacks, bomb alerts and wide use of social media bots are among such examples. These risks, coupled with the broader destabilization efforts by Moscow, emphasize Moldova's precarious position as it attempts to safeguard its sovereignty and democracy.

Since 2022, Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine has directly impacted Moldova, Ukraine's neighboring country, affecting the country's security, energy, economy, humanitarian situation, and internal political dynamics. This war has underscored Moldova's geopolitical vulnerability and created a reality where Moldova has intensified efforts to reduce energy dependency on Russia. It has also led to a severe disruption in relations between Chisinau and Moscow, with Russia officially declared a national threat in the New Security Strategy of Moldova. At the same time it has raised serious concerns about Moldova's own security. With an armed force of around 8,500 personnel, Moldova ranks 134/145 in the global military strength index. In 2022 surveys identified the risk of war in the region as the second biggest concern (following high prices). Although this concern has fallen to fourth place, overtaken by economic priorities, it remains highly present in society.

In response to the situation, Moldova has initiated the security reform, with the support of the EU, significantly increasing investments in defense and security. In December 2023, the Moldovan government published a new Security Strategy focusing on strengthening the defense and security sector, gradual progress toward resolving the Transnistrian conflict, building security partnerships with democratic nations and combating corruption and establishing strong law-enforcement institutions. To counter hybrid threats, Moldova also established the Center for Strategic Communication and Combating Disinformation.

Furthermore, the security budget has increased significantly in the past two years. In 2024, it is almost four times higher than in 2013, reaching 96 billion MDL for the defense sector (around 100 million euros). However, this amount represents only 0,65% of GDP, considerably less than the desired 1-2%. To modernize its army, Moldova would need around 250 million euros yearly.

The EU's decision to grant Moldova candidate status and thereafter open accession negotiations in June 2024, in response to Russia's aggression of Ukraine, was an important geopolitical signal for the entire region. EU support has been instrumental in addressing Moldova's challenges. The Growth Plan for Moldova, set to provide €1.8 billion between 2025 and 2027, is designed to support reforms, facilitate market integration, and address socio-economic disparities. The EU Partnership Mission has also aided in further addressing security challenges. Moldova also became the first country to sign Security and Defence Partnership with the EU. The EU Enlargement report acknowledged that Moldovan authorities made significant progress in aligning their foreign, security, and defense policies with EU standards under Chapter 31. The adoption of a new National Security Strategy and Defense Strategy demonstrates Moldova's commitment to enhancing its defense capabilities, countering hybrid threats, and aligning with EU sanctions and restrictive measures, including those targeting Russian aggression. However, further efforts are needed to strengthen and develop conflict prevention capacities and fully integrate into multilateral export control and non-proliferation regimes.

The government communicated potential security disruption during elections, although the scale of actual disruptions exceeded expectations. This poses significant challenges for the 2025 parliamentary elections, which will be another test for the government's resilience.

2.2 Risks and Threats

2.2.1. Destabilization via Energy Warfare

Energy security has emerged as a paramount concern for the country. As of January 1, 2025, Russia stopped supplying gas to Moldova, using as reason cessation of the gas transit deal with Ukraine. This has led to a new energy crisis, affecting the whole country, but particularly the Transnistrian region which is fully dependent on Russian gas. The region is facing an acute energy crisis due to an unpaid $709 million debt. This cessation led to rolling blackouts and heating shortages, severely impacting daily life and foreign trade. Imports plummeted by 43%, and exports by 60%, particularly affecting the metals, machinery, and chemical industries.

For more than two years, Russian gas has been allocated exclusively to Transnistria, and in exchange Cuciurgan MGRES power plant then sold electricity to the right bank of the Nistru River. With no Russian gas reaching Transnistria, electricity production from MGRES has significantly decreased, and Transnistrian authorities are using coal instead. In January 2025 the situation was dire, with electricity shutdowns and public services operating in a reduced mode. Following the 10 days deal with support from the EU, Transnistrian authorities refused solutions from Chisinau authorities and the EU support, that would last till April, citing the conditionalities it entailed, particularly the raise of tariffs. Currently, Tiraspol is getting gas from Hungary, through a complicated scheme, paid by Russia. However, the deal is short-term and a long-term solution is currently missing. Part of the Russian energy warfare tool, the current situation creates a significant challenge for Moldovan authorities and will exacerbate tensions ahead of Moldova's parliamentary elections later this year.

Steps such as integrating with the ENTSO-E network, investing in renewable energy, and building high-voltage pipelines to Romania demonstrate progress towards more energy diversification. However, these initiatives rely heavily on external financial support, as Moldova lacks the resources to fully implement these changes independently. The government has established a system of compensation, yet it addresses particularly the vulnerable population, and the opposition parties also instrumentalize the high energy prices.

2.2.2 Administrative and Political Fragmentation

Transnistria remains a central issue in Moldova's sovereignty struggles, with Russia playing a pivotal role in the region's dynamics. The most visible influence is the military presence, consisting of about 800 Russian peacekeepers and 1,500 soldiers from the Operational Group of Russian Forces (OGRF), tasked with guarding a large Soviet-era arms depot in Colbasna. Russia also wields soft power over Transnistria's population through cultural, educational, and historical ties. Russian media dominates the region's information landscape, reinforcing pro-Russian narratives, while many residents hold Russian passports, along with Moldovan ones, granting them certain legal and social benefits.

The Chisinau government has maintained dialogue with local authorities while avoiding escalation. The war in Ukraine has shifted dynamics, providing Moldovan authorities with new leverage due to the closure of Transnistria's border with Ukraine, Moldova's energy diversification efforts, and limited Russian access to the region. Around 97,5% of Transnistria's residents hold Moldovan passports, making their well-being a responsibility of the Moldovan government in crises such as energy shortages. Yet so far there has not been a visible commitment to the region's reintegration and it seems to be a low priority for the government.

The situation in Gagauzia is also complex, with regional leaders closely aligned with Moscow. Evghenia Gutul, unacknowledged Gagauz governor (by the Moldovan government), affiliated with Ilan Shor, has actively mobilized against the central government while promoting closer ties with Russia which heightened tensions with Chisinau. Russian is the dominant language in Gagauzia, and many of its residents do not speak Romanian, creating cultural and linguistic divisions. The region's loyalty to Moscow has been made obvious when Gagauzia held a referendum in 2014 advocating for Moldova to join the Russia-led Customs Union, despite the country's Association Agreement with the European Union. The Shor Party has leveraged Gagauzia as a base for anti-government activities, including protests and disinformation campaigns. Limited engagement from central authorities has allowed the Shor Party to strengthen its influence in the region.

SECTION 3:
SOCIETY AND MASS MEDIA

3.1 The Media and Society Dynamic

Moldova presents a complex framework as society is deeply polarized, with divisions across political, economic, and regional lines significantly influencing genuine support for the current governmental agenda on EU reforms and, subsequently, voter behavior. Trust levels vary widely across institutions: local authorities and the Moldovan Orthodox Church enjoy high public confidence, while the judiciary remains largely distrusted. In recent elections (as well as upcoming ones), politicians framed welfare and security concerns—citizens' primary issues—within a geopolitical narrative, presenting Europe as a path to prosperity and security, contrasted with Russian-backed alternatives.

The 2024 election outcomes highlight these divides. Rural voters largely opposed EU integration (24 out of 32 regions voted against EU integration), with pro-Russian narratives leveraging dissatisfaction over economic challenges and disinformation campaigns. Limited reform progress and the fact that EU's membership is not felt as translating into concrete benefits for population further exacerbates these divides. Disputes over diaspora voting further deepen societal tensions, with pro-Russian leaders labelling diaspora votes as illegitimate, questioning their role in shaping Moldova's future and labelling Maia Sandu 'diaspora's President'. Unlike four years ago, the pro-Western Sandu lost the in-country votes to Stoianoglo, former Prosecutor General of Moldova, supported by Igor Dodon's party, who obtained 51,33% while diaspora tilted the balance in her favour. President Sandu attributed these results to Russian interference, including documented vote-buying schemes involving 140,000 individuals by the convicted fugitive oligarch Ilan Shor, which exposed the vulnerability of certain segments to manipulation.

Economic inequality is a critical driver of societal polarization. The Human Development Index positions Moldova at 86th out of 193 countries and territories, placing it within the high human development category. Despite this, socio-economic growth remains volatile and predominantly urban-centric, hindered by entrenched vulnerabilities and structural factors. Rural areas face severe financial struggles, with 31% of Moldovans living below the poverty line, a quarter of young people aged 15–34 remain disconnected from education or employment, with reports highlighting low labour force participation and limited economic opportunities.

The government's communication strategy has faced criticism for its limited outreach to rural areas and disengagement in regions like Gagauzia, creating a vacuum exploited by Russian-affiliated parties. Disinformation campaigns, amplified by geopolitical tensions and the war in Ukraine, further destabilize the political environment. Efforts to combat these challenges include the creation of the Center for Strategic Communication and Countering Disinformation and initiatives like the bilingual Telegram channel Prima Sursa for rapid, fact-based communication. Concomitantly, Moldova's civil society organizations (CSOs) play a pivotal role in strengthening the country's resilience, security, and stability, particularly in the context of its European aspirations. Among these, the Association of Independent Press leads the Stopfals.md campaign, which combats disinformation by debunking false and biased information; the Civic Coalition for Free and Fair Elections (apolitical alliance of 39 CSOs) provides election monitoring, media oversight, and civic education; and the Promo-LEX organization runs Observation Missions that monitor the observance of democratic principles in the work of electoral bodies with 45 long-term observers and about 740 short-term observers in 600 polling stations.

In this context, the media plays a pivotal role in shaping public opinion and influencing democratic processes. In a positive development, Moldova climbed to 40th place on the RSF Press Freedom Index (up from 89th), signaling progress in media freedom. However, the sector remains vulnerable to propaganda and disinformation, which undermine independent journalism. Government's attempts to counter disinformation by suspending licenses have created debates about a need to establish a clear framework in order to avoid disproportionate measures. The EU's report highlighted persistent issues with media independence. Parliament has delayed implementing Council of Europe recommendations regarding the appointment and dismissal of board members for the Audiovisual Council and the public broadcaster Teleradio Moldova (TRM), leaving room for political influence. Despite these hurdles, Moldova's investigative journalism scene remains robust. Outlets like Ziarul de Gardă (ZDG), Anticoruptie.md, RISE Moldova, and Newsmaker.md continue to expose corruption and hold power to account.

Investigations by outlets such as ZdG have revealed sophisticated electoral corruption schemes, forcing law enforcement bodies to act. Notably, two investigations ahead of the second round of presidential elections and before the referendum exposed a clandestine network orchestrated to influence the elections and referendum. These reports detailed: vote-buying operations (financial incentives to support pro-Russian candidates and the "No" vote in the referendum); modern corruption methods (payments were funneled through Russian bank accounts, and communication occurred via Russian networks) and direct external influence (evidence pointed to instructions from Moscow, highlighting foreign interference in Moldovan elections). The investigation "Protesters to rent" revealed how individuals affiliated with the Shor political bloc organized these operations, including paying participants to protest.

Furthermore, in the separatist region of Transnistria, media is tightly controlled to serve political agendas. There, local outlets promote the local's leadership agenda and align with Russian narratives, with strict editorial controls enforced by security services and funding from the regional budget or the Sheriff holding company. According to international reports, independent journalism is virtually nonexistent. Freedom House assessment of media landscape in Gagauzia indicates how it is influenced by local politicians. Gagauzia Radio Television, funded by public money, has become a platform for pro-Russian narratives under Shor Party leadership, undermining Moldova's European integration. Russian disinformation further destabilizes the political environment in both regions.

3.2 Risks and Threats

3.2.1. Foreign Interference and Manipulation of Information

Russian interference and disinformation operations have been relentless in Moldova. The 2024 report by the Moldovan Intelligence and Security Service (SIS) detailed a Russian-orchestrated campaign to influence Moldovan elections, led by a command center in Moscow involving fugitive oligarch Ilan Shor. The report revealed that 33,000 activists, 119 territorial cells, and 1,900 primary cells were mobilized to manipulate public opinion. Social media platforms such as TikTok, Telegram, and Facebook were integral to this scheme, serving as tools for mass disinformation and voter mobilization. These findings underscore the systemic nature of foreign electoral interference in Moldova.

While electoral corruption is not new to Moldova, the scale observed during the latest referendum and presidential elections was unprecedented. Investigative reporting by Ziarul de Gardă has highlighted the increasing sophistication of vote-buying practices by corrupt fugitive oligarch Ilan Shor, including the use of bank cards, mobile applications, software, bots, and advanced technologies. These methods circumvent traditional mechanisms, complicating detection and prevention. Although law enforcement institutions attempted swift interventions, they faced challenges in addressing these new tactics effectively. The need for technologically advanced and diversified anti-corruption tools is urgent to ensure credible electoral processes.

Russian disinformation campaigns in Moldova exploit societal vulnerabilities to question the legitimacy of the pro-Western government and specifically EU integration efforts, as WatchDog.MD report shows. These narratives emphasize fabricated failures of EU-aligned policies and amplify fears of economic and social instability. Election observers documented a doubling of violations during the 2023 local elections, including vote buying, misuse of state resources, and bussing voters from Transnistria to influence outcomes which increased during the 2024 Presidential elections.

Moldova's susceptibility to disinformation is exacerbated by the dominance of Russian media outlets such as Channel One and RTR, which disseminate Kremlin-controlled narratives, while also lacking critical local alternatives. Regions like Gagauzia are particularly vulnerable, as residents predominantly consume Russian-language media that often manipulates cultural and political fears. The country's ranking in the Disinformation Resilience Index highlights its limited capacity to counter these threats, leaving it highly susceptible to external manipulation. This is further linked with the fact that Moldova's media landscape has a narrow geographic focus, with most reporting concentrated in Chisinau and nearby districts. Media and disinformation experts attribute the referendum's failure in many regions partly to inadequate media engagement outside the capital.

3.2.2. Polarization of Society

As Moldova remains particularly vulnerable to disinformation, societal polarization is further exacerbated. The country ranked 32 out of 41 in the 2023 European Media Literacy Index, reflecting low levels of media literacy and the population's limited ability to distinguish between credible and misleading information. The fragmented media landscape, influenced by linguistic, regional, and political divides, contributes to creating dividing lines in society. Disinformation campaigns frequently exploit societal fears, such as alleged Romanian domination, to inflame divisions and destabilize the political landscape. Sophisticated disinformation tactics, including deepfakes and targeted campaigns on platforms like Facebook, TikTok, and Telegram, further fragment public opinion.

This vulnerability is amplified by economic hardships that make Moldovans more susceptible to populist narratives offering quick solutions. Citizens express in polls strong dissatisfaction with the economy (31%) and disapprove of the government's economic growth efforts (34%). Data shows how the Moldovan electorate is profoundly divided, with stark contrasts in political, social, and cultural values exacerbating existing tensions. It reveals that 46,7% of respondents believe Moldova is heading in the wrong direction, reflecting widespread dissatisfaction with the country's governance. Additionally, corruption, unemployment, and the future of their children rank high on voters' agendas, underscoring an electorate preoccupied with immediate socio-economic challenges. This focus on day-to-day survival contributes to frustration with the broader political and economic system, creating fertile ground for discontent and polarizing rhetoric.

Polarization is further aggravated by the contrasting voting patterns of Moldovans residing abroad versus those living within the country. The Moldovan diaspora, overwhelmingly supportive of European integration, often prioritizes governance reforms and alignment with Western values. This contrasts sharply with segments of the domestic population, particularly those in rural areas and Russian-speaking regions, who may lean toward more conservative or pro-Russian positions. This disparity is frequently exploited by political actors seeking to deepen divisions through an "us versus them" narrative, particularly during election campaigns.

SECTION 4:
DIASPORA ADVOCACY AND DIPLOMACY

4.1 The Diaspora Dynamic

The Moldovan diaspora, comprising over a quarter of the country's population (between 1.2 and 2 million Moldovans—live and work abroad), plays a pivotal role in Moldova's sustainable development. Defined broadly by the government to include Moldovans living abroad, their descendants, and associated communities, diaspora is a development actor that contributes economically, socially, politically, culturally, and through skills transfer.

Diaspora contributions to Moldova's economy are substantial, particularly through remittances, which represented 11,8% of GDP in 2023. Although remittances decreased slightly from 2022, they remain a critical source of household income, financing daily needs, education, healthcare, and housing. Beyond remittances, diaspora members invest directly in Moldova's economy, often through government-supported programs.

For example, the PARE 1+1 Programme, launched in 2010, channeled remittances into small and medium enterprises (SMEs), funding 1815 investment projects and 793 businesses by 2021. Its successor, PARE 1+2, has since supported 68 businesses and maintained over 430 jobs. Similarly, the DAR 1+3 Programme, co-funded by diaspora members, local authorities, and development partners, has financed infrastructure, environmental, and cultural projects in rural communities.

Diaspora organizations have been instrumental in addressing social challenges in Moldova. Through hometown associations, members co-fund initiatives benefiting vulnerable groups, such as children, women, and the elderly. Under the UNDP-run Migration and Local Development project (supported by Swiss funding), hometown associations in 98 localities implemented community projects in partnership with local administrations and diaspora members. Furthermore, over 135 associations in 29 countries (according to the 2021 Mapping of Moldovan Diaspora Associations) contribute to cultural preservation, the transmission of traditions, education (including Romanian language instruction for children), and the protection of migrants' rights.

A more recent and promising trend is the transfer of expertise, skills, and know-how through diaspora-led initiatives or government-established projects supported by international partners. In recent years platforms, expert groups as well as transnational diaspora projects in sectors such as higher education, citizen advocacy, EU integration, capacity building have been co-established and co-facilitated by diaspora members or organisations (such as Diaspora Connect, Moldova4EU Diaspora Task Force, Moldova - EU Club and initiatives led by Noroc Olanda). These successes have encouraged, *inter alia*, the government to expand and scale up the Diaspora Engagement Hub (a programme that facilitates the transfer of highly qualified diaspora experts) to address needs across a broader range of sectors that require expertise and know-how.

Finally, Moldovan diaspora has emerged as a key political actor, advocating for reforms and influencing electoral outcomes. Platforms like Adoptă un Vot, initiated in 2016, have mobilized Moldovans abroad during elections, pushing for changes such as extended voting periods and alternative voting methods. In the 2021 parliamentary elections, 86% of diaspora voters supported the pro-European Party of Action and Solidarity (PAS), contributing to its victory. In the 2024 EU referendum, diaspora voters overwhelmingly favored European integration, with 77% of diaspora votes supporting EU membership, tipping the national result in favour despite opposition within Moldova. Similarly, diaspora engagement was critical in the 2024 presidential elections, where 82% of diaspora voters supported President Maia Sandu, securing her victory despite a narrow loss domestically.

4.2 Risks and Threats

4.2.1. Limited Engagement with Diaspora Civil Society

An encouraging trend within the Moldovan diaspora is the rise of civic initiatives aimed at strengthening democracy and supporting Moldova's European integration. These efforts include promoting electoral participation, combating disinformation, conducting information campaigns, and mobilizing diaspora communities. However, the development of diaspora civil society remains fragile, and ignoring this growing sector risks undermining its potential to contribute to Moldova's progress.

During the referendum and presidential elections, civil society in Moldova and the diaspora played a crucial role in countering disinformation and promoting civic participation. Through independent campaigns like Diaspora4EU (providing verified data and arguments on EU integration and promoting civic participation), Citizens for Europe (fighting anti-EU propaganda), and În rând cu lumea (educating through cultural activities), diaspora activists mobilized communities with firsthand accounts, candid videos, explainers, and best practices about life in the EU. These efforts successfully encouraged honest voting and demonstrated that safeguarding democracy is a collective endeavor. To build on this success, scaling up independent, apolitical civic campaigns remains essential.

A recent analysis, based on a limited survey (98 respondents representing diaspora members from a wide range of countries), highlights several forms of engagement, at individual, network or organisational levels, aimed at promoting democracy and democratic processes. Two key directions emerged – 1/electoral participation: over 54% of respondents actively promoted voter participation through campaigns, social media posts, and direct discussions with friends and family; and 2/combating disinformation: 57% encountered false narratives on platforms like TikTok, Facebook, and Telegram, particularly regarding the EU referendum and Moldova's integration process. Although many attempted to counter disinformation, they struggled to influence pro-Russian voters or those outside their immediate networks.

These efforts, while impactful, are hampered by limited outreach, a lack of resources, and difficulties in countering well-coordinated propaganda campaigns. In terms of limitations and challenges faced, it appears that those who actively participated in the activities described above were not very successful in engaging with people outside their communities (or "bubbles"), making it difficult to attract new voters. Likewise, the respondents described the difficulty of combating false narratives propagated on social media, resulting in very limited influence over undecided or pro-Russian voters.

Furthermore, despite the emergence of numerous diaspora associations, their collective impact is constrained by weak collaboration and the absence of a unifying platform.

A fragmented civil society prevents Moldovan diaspora organizations from effectively amplifying their voice in decision-making, advocacy, and coordinated responses to national challenges. Capacity-building programs have shown promise in addressing these challenges, but they remain insufficiently scaled. So far only two such (sporadic) efforts took place. Akadémia Diasporei (AD), launched in 2022 by diaspora-led organizations like Noroc Olanda, Diaspora Connect and AIM France, focused on advanced capacity building and the 2024 Diaspora Impact launched by the Bureau for Relations with Diaspora.

Despite these successes, most diaspora organizations still require institutional knowledge and resources to scale their impact effectively.

SECTION 5:
RECOMMENDATIONS AND PATHWAYS FORWARD

To chart a path forward, it is crucial to assess the potential impact of current risks and threats. By addressing these challenges through targeted initiatives and fostering resilience via international collaboration, Moldova can navigate this critical period and advance toward a stable, democratic, and European future.

5.1 The impact of risks and threats

The **upcoming parliamentary elections will be a decisive moment** for Moldova. Russia will continue its hybrid warfare strategy, deploying a wide range of interference measures—funding pro-Russian candidates, weaponizing energy dependency in Transnistria, and spreading disinformation. Moscow's objective is clear: to secure a strong presence of its allies in Moldova's next parliament and obstruct the country's EU integration. Given that Moldova's right bank has successfully decoupled from Russian gas, Russia is intensifying efforts to destabilize Transnistria's energy sector, using the crisis as leverage.

To counter these threats, Moldova requires economic stabilization measures, as Russian proxies often exploit narratives around cheap gas dependency. Advancing Moldova's EU accession through a merit-based approach and strengthening the government's engagement with Transnistria are also critical steps for reintegration and long-term stability.

Table 1 below presents **a structured summary of the risks and threats** discussed in this White Paper and the potential impact on Moldova's democratic ecosystem.

Table 1: Current Risks and Threats to Democracy resilience in Moldova		
Risk/Threat	**Description**	**Potential Impact**
Sabotage by Spoiler Parties (Russia-financed and Plahotniuc–financed) and FIMI	Russia-led campaigns exploit societal vulnerabilities to undermine EU integration and polarize public opinion. Spoiler parties like the "Victory" Bloc disrupt democratic processes by amplifying societal divisions and disinformation. Access to illicit finances allows them to organise voter buying campaigns and use sophisticated tools to manipulate elections.	Electoral instability, increased polarization, and weakened trust in democratic institutions. Erosion of trust in pro-European policies, manipulation of electoral outcomes, and societal division
One party government and low administrative capacities	The dominance of a single party creates risks for democratic balance and inclusivity, marginalizing opposition voices. The multiple crises put a strain on the reform process.	Reduced checks and balances, voter disengagement, and weakened political unity against external threats.
Destabilization via Energy Warfare	Russia's cessation of gas supplies and energy dependency lead to shortages and economic disruptions. It can also trigger a humanitarian crisis in the Transnistrian region.	Rolling blackouts in Transnistria, trade decline, and heightened tensions in Transnistria and with opposition parties.
Administrative and Political Fragmentation leads to further polarisation	Russian influence in Transnistria and Gagauzia perpetuates cultural and linguistic divides and fosters discontent.	Weak national cohesion, limited reintegration efforts, and increased susceptibility to hybrid warfare
Polarization of Society	Economic hardships and disinformation deepen societal divisions.	Fragmented public opinion, reduced support for reform, and vulnerability to populist narratives
Limited Engagement with and between Diaspora Civil Society	Limited resources and collaboration, as well as the fragmented diasporic ecosystem weaken the impact of diaspora-led civic initiatives. Communication between diaspora and national authorities on countering disinformation as well as between diaspora civil society and national civil society is limited.	Reduced ability and capacities to counter disinformation, mobilize voters, and support democratic processes. Further polarisation within civil society by non-inclusion of diaspora organisations in interventions related to fighting disinformation, in relevant national debates or projects.

5.2. The pathway forward

To effectively secure Moldova's democratic resilience, a **comprehensive, multi-pronged approach** is needed. This implies modernizing law enforcement to keep pace with sophisticated vote-buying schemes by integrating advanced technological and legal safeguards; expanding media and digital literacy programs to reach a broader audience across all regions, age groups, and linguistic communities; enhancing state and civil society collaboration to build grassroots resilience—particularly in vulnerable communities—by fostering trust, civic responsibility, and critical thinking skills; and strengthening independent regional media to counter disinformation outside Chişinău and supporting investigative, solution-oriented, and explanatory journalism to make fact-based reporting more accessible and impactful.

Looking ahead, the **Moldovan diaspora will remain a key driver of development and democracy**, contributing through economic investments, professional expertise, civic engagement, and advocacy networks. However, to maximize its impact, stronger collaboration and communication will be required—both among diaspora organizations (associations, networks, leaders) and between diaspora actors and Moldovan institutions. Civic engagement within the diaspora must also be expanded and scaled up, ensuring that it remains a powerful counterweight to external influence and democratic backsliding.

Ultimately, Moldova's success in securing a democratic and European future depends on a **unified response from the government, civil society, media, diaspora, and international partners.** A well-coordinated strategy that amplifies resilience and engagement will be essential in neutralizing external threats and fortifying Moldova's democratic trajectory.

To do so, the European Union actors, its partners (such as the United Kingdom, Norway, Switzerland, Canada and other like-minded stakeholders), as well as the Moldovan stakeholders and diaspora CSOs should consider the following **recommendations:**

EU institution, Member States and its partners should:

- **Advance Moldova's EU accession by supporting comprehensive governance reforms** that ensure transparent, depoliticized institutions, enhanced accountability and oversight, and stronger local governance and economic development.
- Encourage **coalition-building and political dialogue among political factions** to promote inclusivity and reduce marginalization.

- **Enhance Moldova's resilience** against **hybrid threats and electoral interference**, adapting EU electoral observation tools based on lessons learnt from Moldovan election experiences.
- **Bridge societal divides by re-engineering EU projects** to foster dialogue across political, regional, and social groups.
- Develop sustainable **funding mechanisms** and explore EU and international partnerships **for diaspora-driven initiatives.**
- **Fill critical gaps** left by the **halt of USAID projects**, particularly in **EU accession-related reforms**, especially in the areas of energy security, investigative journalism and diaspora capacity building.
- **Improve strategic communication on EU** (what it is and how it functions) support and benefits in Moldova through accessible campaigns and social media.

Moldovan stakeholders should:

- **Combat electoral interference** by holding perpetrators accountable and **strengthening electoral and law enforcement bodies** against vote-buying and disinformation.
- Learn about **regulating online political advertising** and social media to counter disinformation while promoting **media literacy and civic engagement.**
- **Counter spoiler parties** through robust strategies that are inclusive of **civic education and voter awareness campaigns.**
- Enhance energy security by **accelerating renewable energy investments**, integrating fully into **ENTSO-E**, and **securing funding** for high-voltage pipelines to Romania and energy storage projects.
- **Engage with Gagauzia and Transnistria** through cultural, linguistic, media, and economic programs to reduce Russian influence and support **reintegration efforts.**
- Support diaspora collaboration by **investing in diaspora-led initiatives in partnership with civil society organizations (CSOs)** to enhance democratic resilience.
- Diversify the enabling environment for diaspora CSOs through **improved legal frameworks and funding mechanisms** and integrate diaspora expertise into governance reforms and policy-making.
- **Promote a balanced public debate** on **diaspora's contributions** to Moldova's development and integrate diaspora voices into **democratic processes.**

Diaspora actors should:

- **Build and maintain strong networks** to foster joint initiatives, advocacy, and knowledge-sharing.
- Collaborate with independent media and **support investigative journalism** to counteract disinformation and divisive narratives.
- Organize **needs and data-driven voter mobilization campaigns** and engage in electoral awareness initiatives.
- Actively **engage in public consultations and policy discussions** on Moldova's EU integration, governance, and diaspora policies.
- Share **first-hand experiences of EU benefits** to challenge anti-EU rhetoric and encourage public support for integration.
- Act as ambassadors for Moldova's EU accession, **engaging with policymakers in host countries** to secure political and financial support.
- **Expand and professionalize diaspora associations** to increase their impact on policymaking, civic engagement, and economic development.

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