



# Policy Brief

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## How To Help Moldova Secure Its Fragile Democracy

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## Summary

As it approaches its parliamentary elections, Moldova is in a turbulent situation, with ongoing economic and social challenges, society polarized, and the political landscape marked by a split among pro-EU forces while pro-Russia ones appear increasingly united. Moldova is no longer a captured state, but oligarchic networks are still influential. The elections will be decisive for its geopolitical trajectory. Pro-EU actors face the challenge of overcoming their divisions and forming a credible governing coalition, while pro-Russia and populist forces aim to exploit societal grievances, economic vulnerability, and external disinformation to erode trust in democratic institutions. Vote-buying, illegal campaign financing, and disinformation, particularly via digital platforms beyond the state's regulatory reach, remain potent tools for those seeking to manipulate the elections' outcome. At the same time, an active civil society and independent media keep a close watch on democratic backsliding and political shifts. They play an indispensable role in strengthening the country's resilience, but resource limitations and the termination of US assistance threatens their effectiveness.

Moldova's international environment further complicates its trajectory. The war in Ukraine, the presence of Russian forces in Transnistria, and the frozen negotiation format for solving the situation there heighten security concerns. Russia continues to undermine its EU integration through political pressure, energy leverage, and hybrid influence campaigns. Simultaneously, Moldova has deepened its ties with the EU, the United States, and regional partners such as Romania and Ukraine, receiving substantial financial, technical, and security support. It benefits from the EU's Black Sea Security Strategy, the European Peace Facility, and a three-year €1.9 billion EU Economic Growth Plan, alongside EU and US military and development assistance.

The pro-EU parties are fragmenting and ostracizing each other, while the left-wing and pro-Russia parties are coalescing to be as effective as possible. It will be difficult for a single party or bloc to win an absolute majority. Moldova thus faces three near-term scenarios around the elections, reflecting the political polarization and, in two cases, highlighting the likely fragility of a resulting governing coalition. The most probable outcomes are continuity in government and in EU integration under the PAS or a fragile pro-EU coalition government. The less likely outcome is an unstable broad pro-Russia coalition government that would be destructive for Moldova's EU path.

For the EU, its member states, and other Western actors, supporting Moldova is a matter of reinforcing its democratic resilience. They need to help its institutions withstand pressures in the short term, and to strengthen the political, civic, and security foundations that can anchor the country in Europe in the long run. This requires a wide range of financial, technical, and political measures to give Moldova the tools to resist foreign interference and the confidence to pursue reforms. They include supporting the consolidation of democratic institutions, enhancing electoral integrity, reinforcing civil society, and maintaining a credible path toward EU accession.

## Introduction

This brief presents an overview of the political situation in Moldova and its international context ahead of the parliamentary elections on September 28, with a view to how the country's Western partners can do more to help the country defend its fragile democracy against unprecedented hybrid attacks, keep reform efforts alive, and withstand Russia's attempts at destabilization. It first sets out the domestic situation with regard to the polarization between pro-EU and pro-Russia forces, and to the enduring challenges to the democratic process. It then looks at how the international context shapes the domestic one. The brief concludes by setting out near-term scenarios around the elections and policy recommendations to Western actors, in particular the EU and its member states, for how to best help Moldova navigate a political landscape scarred by foreign subversion and deliver tangible progress toward EU accession as the most powerful answer to sustained authoritarian pressure.

## The Domestic Situation

Moldova is classified by Freedom House as a "partly free",<sup>1</sup> transitional or hybrid regime, and by the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) project as an "electoral democracy".<sup>2</sup> But, despite reforms, it still suffers from endemic corruption and oligarchic influence. The impact of the €1 billion banking scandal labeled the "Theft of the Century" and of the "Russian Laundromat" in which more than \$20 billion were laundered through Moldovan banks in 2014<sup>3</sup> is difficult to repair as they implicated core state institutions such as the judiciary and law-enforcement and financial-oversight bodies. Many individuals involved have left the country to escape justice. Corrupt practices and the failure to resolve cases of grand corruption have led to alarmingly low public confidence in state institutions. The reform of the judiciary has not been properly implemented, leaving the door open to the return of corrupt and clientelistic practices.

In July, Vladimir Plahotniuc, the dominant figure in Moldova's politics for many years, was arrested in Greece.<sup>4</sup> He left the country in 2019 and evaded justice despite being the subject of arrest warrants related to the abovementioned scandals and sanctioned by the EU, the United Kingdom, and the United States. His arrest is a test for the judiciary and state institutions as the public expects a successful extradition and a prosecution carried through to clear punishment. Other fugitives still need to be brought to justice, including Ilan Shor, the oligarch sentenced to 15 years in prison for his role in the "Russian Laundromat", and Veaceslav Platon, another oligarch implicated in this scandal.

Economic recovery from successive crises is difficult to achieve in one of the poorest countries in Europe with a dependence on EU aid. Despite efforts to reduce economic disparities, rural areas are still deeply affected. The economy suffers from inflation and a demographic problem due to migration to EU states.

Competition for political power has become more opaque and harder to regulate, and electoral clientelism is a serious threat.<sup>5</sup> With vote-buying and media manipulation becoming more widespread and coordinated by actors based abroad, there are concerns about the quality of governance, who truly holds power, and the long-term prospects for democracy.



Poverty and the precarious economic situation of the many people on low wages or pensions create a fertile ground for clientelistic networks. Many do not see selling their vote as corruption but as a way to earn extra income. Especially in rural areas, but also among economically vulnerable urban groups, vote-buying is the order of the day, as seen in last year's presidential election and referendum to amend the constitution to include the goal of EU membership. Meanwhile, there is growing dissatisfaction with the government and the pace of the EU accession process, with many having yet to feel the benefits of closer ties and seeing little change after four years of pro-EU reforms.

Pro-Russia and populist actors and parties exploit these problems, which coordinated Russian disinformation campaigns amplify. Shor is the most important and his political network strives to win over voters not only with electoral bribes (money, jobs, or in-kind) but also with benefits not provided by the state such as "social shops" that offer low-price goods<sup>6</sup> or amusement parks,<sup>7</sup> as well as traditional campaign elements such as free entertainment. Disinformation is rife online with many suspended Shor-affiliated pro-Russia channels and Russian-language ones having moved to platforms such as TikTok or Telegram that are beyond the regulatory reach of the authorities.

Civil society has played an increasingly important role in recent years but still faces considerable challenges, though there are no concerns about civic space shrinking. CIVICUS classifies Moldova's civic space as "narrowed" with a score of 71 out 100.<sup>8</sup> Civil society organizations (CSOs) are perceived as having a positive impact, particularly in voter education, media literacy, and countering disinformation. They have responded well to crises such as the war in Ukraine and spikes in disinformation. Since the 2021 elections, the parliament and the government have been more open to cooperating with CSOs, whose involvement in decision-making has increased.<sup>9</sup> However, challenges persist regarding parliamentary transparency and the inclusion of civil society voices in governance.

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Moldova scored 73.36 out of 100 in the latest World Press Freedom Index.<sup>10</sup> The media sector is polarized between pro-Russia and pro-West outlets, and still vulnerable to being taken over by oligarchic and political networks, despite recent improvements in this regard. There are many independent outlets but their ability to operate is limited by lack of funding.

CSOs such as election-monitoring organizations, media outlets, and civil society in general lack the resources to carry out effectively their democratic functions, including providing impartial information and engaging voters. They have been severely hurt by the termination of US assistance this year, especially media actors as the Washington had invested in diversifying the sector.

The competition in the elections is between parties favoring EU integration and Western security cooperation and parties with pro-Russia narratives that capitalize on societal fears and Kremlin-backed disinformation. Historically, both sides mainly competed on economic and social issues like corruption

and national identity, with EU membership playing a secondary role. But the war in Ukraine and rising security concerns have pushed EU integration and national security to the forefront.

In the 2021 elections, the liberal pro-EU Party of Action and Solidarity (PAS) won 63 out of 101 seats with a platform of combating corruption and introducing comprehensive state reforms. It claimed a huge achievement when Moldova was given the status of EU candidate in 2022 and accession negotiations opened in 2023. However, the Covid-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine, the energy crisis caused by Russia, high inflation, and reform fatigue have reduced the party's popularity.

### **The pro-EU camp is fragmented, with little meaningful cooperation among its main actors. This has weakened the reform movement.**

The presidential election and EU referendum in October 2024 profoundly polarized society between the pro-EU and pro-Russia camps. In the second round, the pro-EU Maia Sandu won 54% of the vote against Alexandr Stoianoglo, the candidate backed by pro-Russia parties, while the EU constitutional amendment was backed by 50.38% of votes. The votes highlighted deep divisions and the growing importance of the EU in politics.

The pro-EU camp is fragmented, with little meaningful cooperation among its main actors. This has weakened the reform movement. Currently the only party in parliament that consistently supports EU integration and reform, the PAS risks ending up isolated with no viable partners for a governing coalition after the elections. Despite calls to consolidate pro-EU forces into a single alliance, two new blocs—the pro-EU Împreună (Together) and the centrist Alternativa—are contesting the elections. Împreună shrank from four parties to two after allegations that oligarchic interests infiltrated the leadership of two of its components.<sup>11</sup> The PAS has included two members of the parties that left the bloc on its candidates list in an effort to integrate key pro-EU figures, and it has been criticized for thus limiting opportunities for other pro-EU parties.

Alternativa—composed of the National Alternative Movement, the Party of Development and Consolidation of Moldova and the Common Action Party—Civil Congress—as well as Alexandr Stoianoglo, claims to support EU integration but presents a more sovereigntist approach to appeal to center-left voters disillusioned with the PAS. Civil society actors and pro-reform figures view Alternativa with suspicion, citing its leadership's roots in the former communist and socialist parties as well as connections to oligarchic networks. These concerns were amplified by Romania's decision to ban one of its leaders from entry on security-related grounds.<sup>12</sup>

The pro-Russia camp is broadly divided into two main forces. The more hardline, uniting four marginal parties, is the Pobeda (Victory) bloc, which Shor formed last year after the Constitutional Court banned his first party and the authorities moved to suspend its successor. Pobeda promotes pro-Russia policies, has called for the "union of Moldova with Russia", and rejects EU integration. In July, the Central Electoral Commission (CEC) rejected its application to register for the elections,<sup>13</sup> and at the time of writing Pobeda's appeal has been rejected. The Shor-financed Greater Moldova (Moldova Mare) party is another pro-Russia force, which calls for drawing Romania's Moldova region into a union and the "return"

of Ukraine's Budzhak region. In August, the CEC rejected its application to register too, but this was overturned on appeal. What is certain is that Shor will follow the strategy used in the 2023 local elections: when a candidate or party is banned or not registered, all of the network's resources are redirected to a Plan B candidate or party. Shor's network has support particularly in the pro-Russia regions and showed its ability to influence electoral outcomes through vote-buying and media control in the surprise election in 2023 of Evghenia Guțul as governor of Găgăuzia, who in July was sentenced to seven years in prison over illegal party financing.<sup>14</sup>

The second, center-left, pro-Russia force is the Patriotic Bloc consisting of the Party of Socialists, the Party of Communists, the Heart of Moldova Republican Party, and the Moldova's Future Party.<sup>15</sup> It was formed following visits to Moscow by the leaders of these parties but takes a softer tone than Pobeda. It promises good relations with Russia to secure export markets and cheap gas. During a July meeting of these leaders with Russia's Deputy Prime Minister Alexandr Novak, it was emphasized that an "energy dialogue" would resume immediately should they form the next government.<sup>16</sup> The performance of this bloc could be affected by the recent claim by the communist's leader about his socialist counterpart concerning a party-funding criminal case.<sup>17</sup>

In a May 2025 International Republican Institute (IRI) poll, the PAS led with 36% of respondent saying it would be their first choice, followed by the Socialist and Communist bloc with 17%, and Alternativa with 12%.<sup>18</sup> The vote threshold for a party entering the parliament is 5% (and 7% for an electoral bloc), which no other formation exceeded in the poll.

Finally, if the populist, anti-establishment Our Party (Partidul Nostru) clears the threshold, it could be a kingmaker, having often criticized the pro-EU and pro-Russia camps.

## **The International Context**

Moldova's trajectory is shaped by a difficult international context with the country still caught between Russia and the West. Its security situation is uncertain, given the war in Ukraine, the presence of about 1,500 Russian troops in the breakaway Transnistria region, and tensions in the autonomous Găgăuzia region. Moldova has in recent years been striving for integration in Euro-Atlantic structures and membership in the EU. Under its current leadership, and especially since 2022, it has very good relations with the EU and neighbors Romania and Ukraine.

Security concerns of all kinds are predominant. Yet, there is no national consensus on seeking membership in NATO. In the May IRI poll, 32% of respondents said they were in favor and 46% against. This limits Moldova's membership in regional security formats. The main platform for resolving the Transnistria conflict, for example, has been the "5+2 format" (Moldova, Transnistria, Russia, Ukraine, the United States, the EU, and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe). However, it has been frozen since Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, making a replacement a key priority. On the other hand, there is cooperation with NATO, including joint exercises and training programs.

The EU has stressed Moldova's regional importance in its Black Sea Security Strategy published in May.<sup>19</sup> The security partnership with the EU expanded when the country joined the European Peace Facility in 2023, and Moldova has begun receiving military equipment for non-lethal purposes. An EU civilian mission under the Common Security and Defence Policy was launched in 2023 to strengthen resilience to hybrid threats, including cyberattacks and foreign disinformation.

Immediately after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Chișinău and Kyiv applied for EU candidate status and were granted it in June 2022. Accession negotiations for both began in 2024 but those with Ukraine have stalled due to Hungary's opposition, and the EU is considering opening a first "negotiating cluster" for Moldova alone.<sup>20</sup> So far, Hungary has stated its support for Moldova's accession and Chișinău's contacts with Budapest focus on ensuring that progress is not affected by the latter's stance on Ukraine, and the idea of decoupling Moldova from Ukraine has been mentioned many times by Hungarian officials. In a July poll, 54.2% of respondents said they supported EU membership and 32.3% said they did not.<sup>21</sup>

Since Sandu and the PAS came to power, and especially since 2022, Moldova has made progress in EU integration through policies that link the country to the EU institutions. It has obtained substantial financial and technical assistance from member states, and also the United States, to support the necessary ambitious reform agenda.

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Moldova is the largest recipient of EU funds per capita in the Eastern Neighborhood since 1991, due to its membership of the Eastern Partnership and to the 2014 Association and Free Trade Agreement.<sup>22</sup> In October 2024, the EU agreed a three-year €1.9 billion Economic Growth Plan for the country.<sup>23</sup> It has provided Moldova with substantial support in strengthening democratic institutions and civil society, playing a key role in promoting good governance, the rule of law, independent media, and active civic participation. This support has contributed decisively to advancing the country's reform efforts and EU integration.

The United States has also played a key role in supporting Moldova. It recognizes the country's importance for regional security; for example, by including it in the Black Sea Security Act of 2023. Since Moldova's independence, Washington has provided over \$123 million in military assistance.<sup>24</sup> And the US Agency for International Development provided more than a billion dollars in key areas, especially to reforms in public administration, justice, anti-corruption, media environment, as well as to agriculture, education, IT, tourism, and energy independence (including a \$300 million energy security package in 2022). US diplomacy also focused on the country's democratic progress, notably during a political crisis in 2019. However, as part of its global policies, the Trump administration has ended the different US aid programs to Moldova and applied a 25% tariff on all its products.

Moldova is part of regional connectivity and infrastructure initiatives such as the Three Seas Initiative, which will help it in the future in energy interconnection, infrastructure and transportation projects. It also engages with Romania and Ukraine in a trilateral format for coordinating their efforts on EU integration, regional security, and especially infrastructure development.<sup>25</sup>

Romania has become Moldova's most active partner, providing it with energy-infrastructure support, interconnection projects (such as the Iași-Ungheni-Chișinău gas pipeline), and direct budget assistance. It covers a large share of the costs of Moldova's military participation in multinational security operations. Romania supports the country in preparing for and participating in these, including with logistical support, transport, communications, financial and medical services, and emergency evacuation. France and Germany have also expanded their engagement with the country in recent years. Paris signed a defense-cooperation agreement with Chișinău in 2024 and has provided individual air-defense systems. In 2021, Germany signed an agreement to modernize Moldova's military capabilities. In 2023, Moldova received 19 German Piranha armored vehicles, with delivery of 14 more expected later this year.<sup>26</sup>

Russia does not view favorably Moldova's growing ties with the EU, the United States, and Ukraine, including its alignment on Russia sanctions. It has therefore stepped up its rhetoric against the government and Sandu, calling Chișinău a "puppet of the West" and threatening repercussions if it attempts to join NATO or continues its EU integration. Russian media and political operatives have tried to polarize the population by portraying the 2024 EU referendum as a betrayal of the neutrality enshrined in the constitution. These narratives have gained ground particularly in Găgăuzia and Transnistria, regions where Russian influence remains strong.

Russia promotes influential Moldovan actors to thwart the country's pro-EU course. Its destabilization efforts mainly target the electoral process, as seen in the local elections in 2023 and the presidential election and EU referendum. In the runup to the September parliamentary elections, networks close to Moscow have been implementing illegal campaign financing, vote-buying schemes, and disinformation campaigns, cyberattacks, and espionage. In response to support Moldova, the EU, the United Kingdom, and the United States have in recent years sanctioned pro-Russia politicians and oligarchs, including Shor, who are hiding from justice abroad and destabilizing the country.

## What Lies Ahead?

Moldova faces three near-term scenarios around the September elections, reflecting the political polarization and, in two cases, highlighting the likely fragility of a resulting governing coalition. The most probable outcomes are continuity in government and in EU integration under the PAS or a fragile pro-EU coalition government. The less likely outcome is an unstable broad pro-Russia coalition government.

### *Government Continuity With the PAS*

In this scenario, the PAS manages to mobilize the urban electorate and the diaspora in the West, overcoming disinformation campaigns and vote-buying attempts by pro-Russia parties, to win a narrower majority of seats than in 2021 on a lower turnout. Forming another government on its own, it pushes



ahead with more structural reforms, particularly in the judiciary and public administration, maintaining Moldova on its EU accession path. However, political polarization increases, the opposition accuses the PAS of monopolizing power and democratic backsliding, and protests flare up. The EU continues to support the government, while encouraging initiatives to broaden political dialogue and reduce polarization. It urges the PAS to engage more constructively with opposition parties and civil society to ensure democratic resilience alongside the EU integration agenda. The pro-Russia parties challenge the electoral results and the government's legitimacy, alongside Moscow's interference, eroding public trust in the democratic process. They organize protests, provoke social unrest in Găgăuzia, and call for new elections. Russia tests Moldova's resilience through another energy crisis in Transnistria and intensifies its rhetoric and political pressure.

At the time of writing, the indications are that the PAS will struggle to equal its 2021 performance. But, if the Western diaspora, which traditionally votes in a pro-EU way, mobilizes as strongly as it did in the presidential and referendum votes in 2024, and outperforms the turnout in traditionally pro-Russia Găgăuzia and Transnistria, the PAS could win a smaller majority. If Our Party is not successful in clearing the 5% threshold, the PAS would benefit from the former's vote share being redistributed proportionally among the successful parties, translating into more seats.

### ***A Fragile Pro-EU Coalition Government***

In this scenario, the PAS wins the largest share of seats but falls short of a majority. Alternativa and Our Party win enough seats to become kingmakers. Following weeks of negotiations, including compromises on slower reforms, they form a fragile pro-EU governing coalition with the PAS. The opposition parties claim that the new government lacks legitimacy. The EU cautiously continues to support the new government but demands more tangible reforms before moving forward with the next accession steps. Russian interference intensifies, aiming to break the coalition and derail Moldova's EU trajectory. With emerging political stagnation and sharper conflict between pro-EU and pro-Russia forces, society becomes more polarized. Political instability forces the government to focus more on managing crises in the country and within the coalition than on EU-related reforms. The risk of indefinite delay in progress in accession negotiations grows.

Given the political climate, a combination of the PAS not winning a majority, Alternativa performing well, and Our Party clearing the 5% threshold is very conceivable. The latter two are the only forces that the PAS could then consider for a pro-EU coalition. The resulting government's stability could not be taken for granted: coalition governments have historically been fragile due to ideological and personal rivalries as well as competing interests, as seen with the successive Alliances for European Integration in 2009–2015. In case of such a pro-EU coalition government, there is no doubt that Russia will increase its interference, fueling political deadlock and policy stagnation.

### ***A Destructive Pro-Russia Coalition Government***

The Patriotic Bloc has performed well but it cannot form a government without the support of other parties. In this scenario too, Alternativa and Our Party win enough seats to become kingmakers. Following

weeks of negotiations, a broad coalition government is formed. It starts to undermine recent reforms, in particular in the judiciary. Civil society and the independent media face pressure while pro-EU forces mobilize in protests. Relations with Western partners cool rapidly. The EU suspends visa liberalization and accession negotiations, and it begins reconsidering the free-trade agreement. EU budgetary, infrastructure, and economic development funding, including the Growth Plan, are frozen. Moldova's membership in the European energy network and market is reviewed. Western direct investment and lending start to decrease. Given the diversity of its components and their competing interests, the government is fractious. Moldova starts drifting toward isolation, instability, and greater Russian control over politics. It becomes more energy-dependent on Moscow and thus more vulnerable to energy blackmail with steep increases in the price of gas and disruptions in supply. There are concerns that Moldova's territory and infrastructure could be used to support Russia's war effort in Ukraine.

It is possible that the pro-Russia parties manage to coordinate their campaigns, with their messaging resonating in rural areas, among pensioners, and in economically vulnerable communities. It is also possible that the CEC's rejection of Pobeda for the elections will help the Patriotic Bloc gather more of the pro-Russia vote, with Pobeda supporters mostly opting for the latter rather than dispersing their vote across different parties. The impact of vote-buying should not be underestimated: the authorities documented at least 84,000 bought votes in the 2024 EU referendum.<sup>27</sup> Neither should election interference: Sandu recently warned about illegal transfers of up to €100 million from Russia.<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, such a coalition government could be particularly fragile, possibly resulting in snap elections.

## **What Help Does Moldova Need?**

Moldova is holding its elections under extraordinary pressure, with a fragmented and polarized political landscape and its fragile democracy tested by unprecedented Russian interference. The stakes are high not only domestically: the country's capacity to safeguard its democratic process and maintain its EU course is inseparable from the security of the Black Sea region and of Europe. For the EU, its member states, and other international actors, supporting Moldova is a matter of reinforcing its democratic resilience in the face of hybrid aggression, not only during and immediately after the elections but beyond, regardless of the outcome. Destabilization efforts by oligarchic networks and Russia will intensify before, during, and after the vote, requiring quick, coordinated, and visible responses. Assistance must be designed to strengthen Moldova's electoral institutions, ensure transparent political financing, and empower the civic and political forces committed to democracy and reforms.

The EU, its member states, and other international actors should:

- Expand civilian security assistance to improve Moldova's resilience against sabotage, subversion, and destabilizing demonstrations during and after the vote.
- Support coalition and network building among reform-minded actors. This includes facilitating post-election coalition formation among pro-EU parties. This should also include fostering stronger ties between Moldovan pro-democracy actors and their counterparts in Georgia, Ukraine, and the Western Balkans.

- Implement comprehensive, real-time monitoring tools to detect and prohibit illicit malign campaign financing from Russian actors or proxies. Technical support for oversight of campaign-finance transparency is crucial for maintaining the integrity and independence of Moldova's democratic institutions.
- Bolster independent media, fact-checking platforms, and the recently created Centre for Strategic Communications, including by providing resources to improve rapid-response capabilities against deepfakes and AI-driven disinformation. Sustained investment is needed so that disinformation narratives can be countered before they dominate public debate.
- Increase coordination to align sanctions and intelligence-sharing mechanisms targeting Russian proxies, oligarchic networks, and their disinformation campaigns in Moldova.
- Increase support for the National Cybersecurity Agency and strengthen partnerships with European cyber-defense structures. Protecting state institutions, including the CEC, and critical infrastructure from cyberattacks should be prioritized as Russian ones become more sophisticated.
- Maintain strict EU conditionality based on reforms (especially in the judiciary and against corruption) with a clear EU accession calendar. This should include predictable rewards for progress, including accelerated access to EU funding and integration benefits. This will reduce the space for Russia to exploit reform fatigue.
- Support Moldova in reducing its dependence on Russian energy imports by investing in interconnections with Romania and Ukraine.
- Engage the diaspora by supporting platforms for knowledge transfer and skills-sharing between professionals abroad and civil society or government institutions in Moldova, as well as by encouraging diaspora participation in voter mobilization and civic awareness campaigns to boost turnout and to counter disinformation.

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