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RISK ASSESSMENT: ELECTORAL INTEGRITY IN MOLDOVA

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Introduction

Russia's continued aggression against Ukraine since February 2022 has not only destabilized European security but has also intensified hybrid threats across Eastern Europe. In the Republic of Moldova (hereinafter Moldova), Russian-backed actors have increasingly used disinformation, cyberattacks, and covert influence operations to undermine democratic institutions, erode public trust, polarize society, and weaken the pro-EU trajectory.

Moldova's progress on the path toward EU accession, formally opened in 2022, has unfolded amid overlapping crises. The country has navigated severe energy insecurity following the abrupt reduction of Russian gas supplies, broader security risks amplified by the war in Ukraine, economic and social vulnerability (including due to climate change affecting agriculture), and polarization and political fragmentation. These pressures have tested institutional resilience and public confidence, making electoral integrity not only a matter of democratic legitimacy but of national stability and security.

The October 2024 presidential election and constitutional referendum brought the victory of the incumbent pro-EU President Maia Sandu and the adoption of an amendment to include the goal of EU membership in the constitution. While the election observation mission of the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (OSCE/ODIHR) noted well managed voting and free campaigning, it flagged the misuse of administrative resources, uneven media coverage, and foreign influence and interference.¹ The Civic Coalition for Free and Fair Elections deemed the process only partially free and fair, citing illicit financing, foreign intervention, and voter manipulation that "seriously undermined the integrity of the electoral process".² The Constitutional Court validated the votes, but directed parliament to amend legislation to curb electoral corruption and the involvement of religious bodies in political activities.³

In a June 2025 opinion poll by the International Republican Institute (IRI), for the first time in over 20 years of the organization polling in Moldova, 49% of respondents said they considered that the country was heading in the right direction and 48% in the wrong one.⁴ Despite the small margin, the poll indicated that public support for the government's reform agenda and EU accession is constant and even slightly consolidating.

¹ Republic of Moldova Presidential Election and Constitutional Referendum 20 October and 3 November 2024 ODIHR Election Observation Mission Final Report, OSCE/ODIHR, [587451_0.pdf](#).

² Statement on the Results of the Presidential Election and Referendum of 20 October 2024, Civic Coalition for Free and Fair Elections, 6 November 2024, [Coalțiȃ Civică Alegeri Libere și Corecte](#).

³ Judgment validating 2024 presidential elections, Constitutional Court of Moldova, 28 November 2024, [Constitutional Court's Decision](#).

⁴ IRI Moldova Poll indicates Greater Optimism in Country's Direction, Economic Concerns and Continued Negative Views of Russia | International Republican Institute, 11 June 2025.



Power and Participation: Political Dynamics

In Moldova, the main risks to electoral integrity related to the political landscape come from political fragmentation and polarization, reduced popular trust in political parties, the weak organizational capacities and financial basis of parties, and oligarchic and pro-Russia interests.

The Political Landscape

The political landscape has traditionally been split between pro-West, pro-Russia forces, and an important segment in the center that is instrumental in coalition making (this is the space previously occupied by the Democratic Party of the oligarch Vladimir Plahotniuc who fled the country in 2019 and was recently arrested in Greece). This central segment is rather pragmatic and nonaligned geopolitically, concerned with issues such as stability, order, and development.

Against the background of the 2019–2021 de-oligarchization “revolution”, Maia Sandu’s Party of Action and Solidarity (PAS) managed winning for the first time a strong pro-West majority in parliament in the 2021 elections. The deterioration of governance had left space for new political forces to compete for the pro-EU electorate and the pragmatic center.

In the June 2025 IRI poll, 36% of respondents said they would vote for the PAS, 17% for the Socialists and Communists, and 12% for the Alternativa bloc. Our Party had 4%, under the 5% threshold for being allocated seats. However, those saying they were undecided were around 15%, and answers to other questions suggest pro-government and pro-EU support may have been overstated by respondents.⁵

As the pro-EU parties did not manage to build real alternatives to the PAS, pro-Russia figures have adopted pro-EU rhetoric in an attempt to tap the pragmatic center vote. The Alternativa bloc (formed of former Socialist and Communist figures) has been on the offensive to present itself as a pro-EU force, putting forward “professionals” as candidates, while also using the mantra of traditional values and neutrality. Even on national identity and condemning Russia’s aggression against Ukraine, it has taken views mirroring the profile of the centrist voters, such as calling the country’s language Romanian.⁶

On the left, the main political force remains the Socialists, who formed the For Moldova electoral bloc with the Communists as well former Gagauzia governor Irina Vlah and other political figures, including some linked with Moscow-based fugitive oligarch Ilan Shor. For Moldova was unveiled by supposedly “civil society” figures who also visited Saint Petersburg in June to meet with second-rank Russian public figures.

⁵ On the question of who they voted for in the second round of the 2024 presidential election, 54% said Sandu and 34% Alexander Stoianoglo. However, the result, excluding the diaspora vote, was 51.3% for Stoianoglo and 48.7% for Sandu. Similarly, 63% said they voted “yes” in the referendum and 34% “no”, whereas the result (again excluding the diaspora) was 45.5% “yes” and 54.6% “no”.

⁶ What is behind Alternativa Bloc, TV 8, 31 January 2025, [TV8.md - /VIDEO/ Ce stă în spatele blocului „Alternativa”? „Nu este de mirare că s-au unit acești politicieni”](#).



The formation of these electoral blocs on the left and in the center indicates that there is a Moscow-blessed coordinated effort to avoid the dispersion of votes across parties and to increase these parties' chance of forming a majority in parliament.

Shor supports a plethora of political parties and actors, mainly through illegal financing, a well-established vote-buying network built on an infrastructure of “social shops”⁷ across the country, and media outlets.

Despite efforts to eliminate oligarchic influences and illegal financing from political life, the situation is far from ideal, with vote-buying and political corruption remaining one of the main risks to electoral integrity.

Political Representation and Participation

There are 64 political parties registered in Moldova, with more than half declaring themselves pro-EU. However, most parties are dormant and only 30 participate in elections.⁸ Several become active only during elections, often with an unclear agenda and a suspected pro-oligarchic and pro-Russia orientation.⁹

There have been efforts to make parties more transparent regarding their management structures and financial resources. The Central Electoral Commission (CEC) has started to impose sanctions on parties that do not respect financial rules and, following repeated violations, to ask for limitation of their activities and even their dissolution. In February 2025, the CEC asked the Ministry of Justice to initiate the dissolution of five political parties (including the Chance Party, one of the Shor's political projects) and to limit the activities of another two for six months¹⁰.

Following recent legislative changes, parties had to present to the Public Service Agency their statute, program, and members of the central leadership structure by 14 July to be able to register for the elections. The CEC announced on 14 July that only 25 political parties fulfilled this condition and that another 14 were undergoing verification.¹¹ New rules were also introduced in May and June concerning “camouflage” electoral blocs and “successor” political parties to those declared unconstitutional. As recommended by international bodies, the laws list criteria to identify such blocs and parties, such as overlapping messages, symbols, financial matters, or leadership. The decisions of the Public Service Agency and the CEC are to be reviewed by the courts. So far,

⁷ Shor's network has established since 2015 about 100 shops (including mobile ones) selling discounted products to vulnerable people. This has been criticized for gathering the personal data of people for political purposes and unclear delimitation of social and political activities (for example, anti-government protesters are given vouchers to use at the “social shops”).

⁸ List of political parties, ADEPT, [Lista partidelor politice din Republica Moldova - alegeri.md](https://a.cec.md/ro/cec-face-publica-lista-partidelor-politice-care-au-dreptul-2781_114198.html).

⁹ Igor Botan, executive director of ADEPT, interview by the author, Chisinau, 12 June 2024.

¹⁰ Press release, the Central Electoral Commission, 17 February 2025, [CEC sesizează Ministerul Justiției în vederea dizolvării a patru partide politice și limitării activității a două partide politice pentru o perioadă de 6 luni](https://a.cec.md/ro/cec-face-publica-lista-partidelor-politice-care-au-dreptul-2781_114198.html).

¹¹ Press Release on the list of political parties that can register for parliamentary elections, the Central Electoral Commission, 14 July 2025, https://a.cec.md/ro/cec-face-publica-lista-partidelor-politice-care-au-dreptul-2781_114198.html.



the impact of the new rules remains unclear. These regulatory changes are, however, an additional factor for uncertainty and potential polarization, as these actions can be portrayed as over-regulating political activities and politicized decisions by public bodies.

The second round of the 2024 presidential election saw a high turnout (54.3%), notably among young voters (52%). The number of those voting abroad was also high (330,000). Turnout will most probably not be at the same level for the parliamentary elections, including due to lack of trust in political parties. In the June IRI opinion poll, 30% said they trust political parties (which are at the bottom of the list, next to courts and prosecutorial bodies). Moreover, in a March 2025 opinion poll, approximately 45% of respondents said they did not feel represented by any existing political party.¹² This demographic includes individuals disillusioned with political actors as well as pro-EU citizens hopeful for the future. Successfully mobilizing this unrepresented group will be central to forming an effective post-election coalition. The PAS has opened its candidates' list to non-party public figures from all fields in an effort to attract the voters in the pragmatic pro-EU center.

The issue of banning political actors who subvert democratic rules and are financed by hostile foreign regimes is a contentious issue. While there is some public understanding that these pose major challenges to the fairness and credibility of electoral processes, there is a need for more effort to strengthen resilience against them. Moreover, as such interventions must meet high legal thresholds and be accompanied by transparent evidence and judicial oversight,¹³ hasty processes and implementation issue might open the door to criticism of politicization and limitation of political pluralism. Hence, institutional transparency and strong public communication are essential to ensure that such measures are seen as rule-based rather than partisan tools.

Polarization Along Geopolitical and Identity Lines

Opinion polls indicate there is a strong, pragmatic pro-EU sentiment in Moldova.¹⁴ The increase in support for EU integration is rooted more in its tangible benefits—such as freedom of movement, employment, education, and travel—than in a deep commitment to European values.¹⁵ There is an important segment of the population, especially in Gagauzia as well as in the northern and southern districts, in which support remains low. However, pragmatic attraction to Russia has been decreasing due to the war in Ukraine and difficulties for Moldovans to travel to the country or to work or study there.¹⁶ There is an ongoing gradual shift of geopolitical views, but it needs to be better understood. Addressing polarization along geopolitical lines through pragmatic

¹² Iulian Groza, executive director of Institute for European Policies and Reform, interview by the author, 10 June 2025, Chisinau.

¹³ Joint Opinion on the Law on the Amendment of Certain Legislative Acts (electoral legislation), as Adopted by the Parliament of the Republic of Moldova on 3 August 2023, CoE Venice Commission and OSCE/ODIHR, 853–55, [https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/?pdf=CDL-AD\(2023\)034-e](https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/?pdf=CDL-AD(2023)034-e).

¹⁴ In the iData–Barometrul survey in March, 58.6% of respondents said they supported EU integration and 32.5% that they opposed it.

¹⁵ Interview Iulian Groza, executive director of Institute for European Policies and Reform (IPRE), 10 June 2025, Chisinau.

¹⁶ Ibid.



arguments needs to continue. Civic actors are better placed to do so in order to avoid politicization during election periods.

National identity remains another divisive issue. For example, the recent consultative opinion of the Council for the Prevention and Elimination of Discrimination about the discriminatory nature of the name and content of the History of Romanians school subject was perceived by some fueling polarization.¹⁷ Such superficial measures do little to foster true social cohesion, and they may create confusion and unnecessary politicization when disconnected from broader reforms. Moldovan and Romanian identities are frequently framed as being mutually exclusive, even if many people navigate both fluidly. Sharing personal stories of dual belonging could be more useful in building social cohesion.

Legal Clarity and Effective Implementation

The risks for electoral integrity coming from regulatory and institutional frameworks are related to hasty legislative processes, weak implementation mechanisms, under-resourced institutions, reactive measures, and low trust in public institutions. However, there are also strengths when it comes to good awareness of the level of risks, political will to deal with these risks, and some recent experience in addressing them.

Regulatory Changes and Legal Gaps

The OSCE/ODIHR report on the 2024 presidential election found that the overhaul of the Electoral Code in 2022 was positive, even with some last-moment changes. It also stated that the legal framework for elections is supplemented by comprehensive CEC regulations, covering a wide range of issues.¹⁸

The intensity of the interference with the electoral process in 2024 through illicit financing and disinformation, showed that there are still some regulatory gaps and unclear areas. This was confirmed for the authorities when they started better enforcement of the existing legal framework; for example, regarding passive corruption. As mentioned, the Constitutional Court asked parliament to make legislative changes regarding political corruption and the involvement of religious bodies in elections. Similar calls came from the Coalition for Free and Fair Elections, including for greater transparency of parties' activity. Moreover, as part of the EU accession process there is a long list of legal acts that have to be harmonized with EU law, as well as some pending recommendations, especially on the audiovisual and mass-media regulatory framework (see below).

In response to electoral vulnerabilities identified during the 2024 presidential election and constitutional referendum, amendments to a large number of laws have been initiated, including to the Electoral Code, the Criminal and Criminal Procedure Codes, the Law on Political Parties, the Law on Countering Extremist Activity, the Law on Mass Media, and the Audiovisual Media

¹⁷ Ministry of Education will defend History of Romanians course in courts, 11 June 2025, [NewsMaker.md](#); and Maia Sandu considers that the Equality Council exceeded its competences, [Moldova1.md](#).

¹⁸ OSCE/ODIHR, 2024 Final report, *ibid*.



Services Code. Moreover, as part of attempts to strengthen the national security architecture in the face of Russia's hybrid campaign, changes have been initiated to the law regarding the Centre for Strategic Communication and Combating Disinformation (Stratcom Centre), to fortify the Supreme Security Council's role, and to set up a National Crisis Management Centre under the prime minister to ensure interagency coordination.

Many of the legal acts have been tabled in parliament only in the spring and even as late as May. The intention was to approve them by the end in July of this parliament's last session. The delay in certain cases reportedly is due to extensive discussions with stakeholders, international bodies, and civil society experts.¹⁹ In most cases, the laws were presented as individual members' initiatives in order to facilitate their adoption, but this raised questions about the ownership of the initiatives and about hidden agendas. In several cases, such as on the media regulatory framework, public debates have been shaped by attempts to discredit the process, but also by an unclear understanding of the objectives and approaches proposed.

The most important changes to the electoral framework entered into force at the end of May and the beginning of June, with the law addressing electoral corruption and extremist activities²⁰ going through three readings and being returned by the president for additional changes before entered into force of 14 June.²¹ In April, the OSCE/ODIHR issued an Urgent Opinion on the law that acknowledged its ambitious goal but warned that several provisions risked overreach.²² The latter included vague definitions of "extremism", undefined procedures for the suspension of parties and religious associations without adequate safeguards, and excessively broad criteria for dissolving successor parties. While the OSCE/ODIHR recommendations seem to have been addressed, the extent to which this will meet the concerns will become apparent only during implementation.

Changes to the audiovisual code and mass-media legislation have also been tabled in parliament in the last months. The aim was to address several outstanding EU²³ and Council of Europe recommendations on strengthening the independence of the Audio-Visual Council (AVC) and the public broadcaster, on improving transparency of ownership in mass media, on extending the AVC's competences to online video-sharing platforms, and on introducing the notion of "trusted notifiers" (in line with the relevant EU directive). The public debate fuelled by opposition political

¹⁹ Interviews with public institutions and CSOs in June 2025, Chisinau, as well as public debates on parliamentary platform.

²⁰ Analytical Note on Law No. 100/2025 Aimed at Combating Electoral Corruption, ADEPT, 23 June 2025, <https://adept.md/en/activities/article/analiz-detaliat-a-legii-nr-1002025-privind-combaterea-corupiei-electorale>.

²¹ Law 100 of 13 June 2025 on combating electoral corruption, published in the Official Journal on 14 June 2025, [LP100/2025](#).

²² [Moldova: Urgent Opinion on the Draft Law No. 381 of 17 December 2024 "On Amendments to Certain Normative Acts on the Effective Combat Against the Phenomenon of Electoral Corruption and Related Aspects" | OSCE](#).

²³ See recommendation on mass-media in chapter 23 in the EU enlargement report on the Republic of Moldova, October 2024, [Moldova Report 2024 - European Commission](#).



actors focused mainly on taking out of context certain provisions coming from the EU framework as well as on vague formulations.

Due to the delayed adoption of the laws, the relevant authorities, such as the CEC, the AVC, and the Public Service Agency, have had very limited time to make changes to subsequent implementing acts. This creates a burden for these resource-strapped institutions. The relevant changes to regulations had to be made after only very short public consultations periods.²⁴ However, the fundamental elements of the electoral law have not been affected, notably the rules relating to the translation of votes into seats, the membership of electoral commissions, and the drawing of constituency boundaries.²⁵

Electoral Administration and Implementation

According to the OSCE/ODIHR, the election administration bodies worked professionally and demonstrated impartiality in decision-making for the 2024 presidential election.²⁶ This view is shared by domestic and international election-monitoring civil society organizations (CSOs), which have underlined the improved efficiency, proactivity, and transparency of the CEC and the AVC.²⁷

Notable achievements for the CEC included strengthened institutional capabilities, especially regarding the oversight of political financing, where it applied enhanced scrutiny to campaign income and expenditure reports.²⁸ The 37 district electoral councils were professionalized, with improved training and procedures.²⁹ The introduction of voting by correspondence marked a significant step forward in accessibility for diaspora voters, accompanied by innovations such as the electronic electoral register for out-of-country voters. Despite these advances, observers noted concerns regarding the misuse of administrative resources and the limited impartiality in handling electoral complaints.³⁰

Interagency Cooperation

The election administration bodies face also complex new challenges: overseeing online political advertising and securing digital systems against cyber threats. The CEC has identified six priority areas in which strong interagency cooperation is needed: online political activities, campaign financing, cybersecurity, diaspora voting, voting in Transnistria, and candidates' integrity checks.³¹

²⁴ Nicolae Panfil, democracy program director of Promo-LEX, interview by the author, Chisinau, 12 June 2025.

²⁵ Code of Good Practice in electoral matters, Council of Europe, Venice Commission, 30 October 2002, <https://rm.coe.int/090000168092af01>.

²⁶ OSCE/ODIHR, 2024 Final report, *ibid*.

²⁷ Interviews with Polina Panainte, secretary of the Coalition for Free and Fair Elections, online, 20 June 2025 and Dritan Taulla, head of ENEMO Election Observation Mission, online, 17 June 2025.

²⁸ Annual Report 2024, Central Electoral Commission of Moldova, <https://a.cec.md/ro/rapoarte>.

²⁹ Final Report on the 2024 Presidential Elections, Promo-LEX Observation Mission, <https://promolex.md>.

³⁰ OSCE/ODIHR 2024 Final Report, *ibid*.

³¹ Pavel Postica, deputy chairman of the CEC, interview by the author, online, 20 June 2025.



Working groups for these are being set up for regular information exchange, coordination, and crisis response.³²

Cybersecurity

During the 2024 presidential election, the Service for Information Technologies and Cyber Security (STISC) reported a 13 hours coordinated series of cyberattacks on 3 November targeting the information technology infrastructure used for voter turnout and to facilitate data flows from polling stations.³³ During the meeting of the Supreme Security Council in March, the STISC leadership detailed its multilayered preparedness strategy for 2025 elections, such as continuous threat monitoring, system audits, specialized training for election staff, and coordinated actions with national institutions and EU partners.³⁴

Communication and Public Outreach

In the area of communication and public outreach, the CEC has carried out effective voter education and mobilization campaigns; for example, through multimedia guides on how to vote by mail or abroad. However, it lacks a strategic communication framework for politically sensitive topics like diaspora participation or countering attacks on its legitimacy. Opposition politicians continue to criticize the CEC and the AVC (mainly referring to the appointment of their members in 2021 as part of the PAS government's effort to reduce oligarchic control over regulatory bodies). Online and offline intimidation attempts have also been reported against the CEC leadership and staff,³⁵ underlining the need for greater institutional protection and more effective public communication.

Post-Electoral Challenges

Five out of the six judges on the Constitutional Court will see their six-year term expire on 16 August 2025. In May, the process started for the selection of new judges or the reappointment of existing ones by the parliament (two judges), the government (two judges) and the Superior Council of Magistrates (one judge). The court has emphasized that delays might lead to paralysis that would compromise its ability to hear cases and to perform constitutional tasks. Even if the law envisages a clear timeline and process, opposition figures have portrayed the selection of new judges as politicized and raised the legitimacy issue of a parliament whose mandate is ending appointing judges of the Constitutional Court for the next six years.³⁶ Considering the role of the

³² For the six areas, competences are shared by several institutions, such as the AVC, the Stratcom Centre, the Service for Information and Security, the Police, the Fiscal Service, the National Anti-corruption Centre, the Integrity Agency, the Public Service Agency, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Road Transport National Agency.

³³ Press release, STISC, [Comunicat de presă | Serviciul Tehnologia Informației și Securitate Cibernetică](#).

³⁴ Press release, STISC, [Participarea Directorului STISC la ședința Consiliului Suprem de Securitate](#).

³⁵ Pavel Postica, *ibid*.

³⁶ [The ruling party of Moldova is preparing to turn its four controlled judges of the Constitutional Court into six, that is, to seize the Constitutional Court completely, Pravda Moldova](#).



court in the validation of election results, there is a risk that the ground is being prepared for calls not to recognize the elections' results.

The elections to the Gagauz People's Assembly on 16 November face serious electoral integrity risks, including unreliable voter lists, entrenched vote-buying practices, administrative interference, disinformation, and foreign-driven narratives. Although the case concerning the political financing by the Shor network—implicating Evghenia Gutsul who was elected governor of Gagauzia in 2023—is slowly making its way through the courts, a sense of impunity persists. Shor-funded initiatives, including those targeting youth, continue to operate widely.³⁷ Legal and administrative confusion has deepened following the chaotic abolition of the local electoral commission in 2023 and recent unclear attempts to re-establish it. Meanwhile, manipulative and often blatantly false narratives about the relations between Chisinau and Comrat are spreading, and independent journalists and activists—such as Natalia Zaharescu and Mihail Sirkeli of Nokta.md—are facing increasing intimidation and attacks.³⁸

Competition and Influence in a Leveling Playing Field?

The main risks for electoral integrity coming from election campaigning, financing, and information security are the illegal financing of political parties and through third parties, vote-buying, the abuse of administrative resources, the reduced capacities to oversee online campaigning, widespread disinformation campaigns, Russia's heightened hybrid campaign and foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI).

Election Campaigning and Financing

Illegal political financing and vote-buying are expected to remain major challenges in the upcoming electoral process.

In cases of active political corruption—particularly involving Shor-affiliated politicians—most of the accused have either fled the country, reportedly with assistance from Russia,³⁹ or have not yet been subject to a final court ruling. This contributes to a feeling of impunity against the background of overall slow progress in fighting high-profile corruption cases from the past.

Approximately 140,000 individuals associated with the Shor vote-buying network have been identified. The slow process was due also to unclear competences between the National Anti-Corruption Centre and the police on passive corruption, unlike for active corruption where the competence of the former is clear. After this was clarified in March, the police accelerated the process, with about 10,000 people receiving administrative fines. Prosecutors estimate that the number of those involved might be higher than 300,000. In September and October 2024, about \$39 million circulated through the network, according to the Service for Information and Security

³⁷ Gagauz elections are marked by incertitude, 19 June 2024, [Veridica.md](#).

³⁸ How was Nokta founder Mihail Sirkeli subject to an intimidation campaign, 8 April 2025, [Ziarul de Gardă](#).

³⁹ Briefing to Parliament on Political Corruption Cases, Security and Intelligence Service of Moldova, March 2025.



(SIS).⁴⁰ Nevertheless, the persistence of impunity and of loyalty within the Shor network are likely to sustain its operations.⁴¹ How coordination will occur and electoral rewards will be distributed for the parliamentary elections remains unclear.

Around 85% of the declared financial resources of political parties come from the state,⁴² which gives well-established parties such as the PAS, the Socialists, and the Communists a solid foundation for campaigning. Transparent funding from party members or individual donations remains minimal. Mayors continue to be key electoral agents for all political parties, largely due to the high level of public trust in local authorities. In the June IRI opinion poll, local authorities enjoyed the highest level of trust among institutions, with 80% of respondents holding a positive view of them. Based on the experience of previous elections, the abuse of administrative resources is likely to remain a persistent challenge.

Online campaigning and political microtargeting will continue to pose significant challenges, particularly in terms of oversight. According to monitoring by the CEC, with support from International IDEA, in the 2024 presidential election, candidates spent around €85,000 on advertising on Meta, while unregistered political actors spent over €176,000 that was not declared to the CEC. Meta's reaction to remove illegal political advertising was late and the ads reached millions of users.⁴³ The CEC will continue monitoring online political campaigns with International IDEA's support.⁴⁴ However, interagency cooperation among the CEC, the AVC, the SIS, and the newly created Stratcom Centre needs to be strengthened, alongside improved coordination with Big Tech. Enhancing monitoring and reporting capacities, as well as fostering collaboration with fact-checkers and CSOs specializing in oversight of online platforms, will be essential given the differing policies and features of each platform.

Information Security

Moldova continues to face acute risks from FIMI, disinformation, and digital influence operations. In response, several mechanisms and actors have emerged to address these threats, but significant institutional, financial, and coordination gaps remain.

Media Literacy and Critical Thinking

Efforts to enhance media literacy have expanded, particularly through formal education and grassroots initiatives. The Independent Journalism Centre (IJC) has led school-based media education programs, as part of the implementation of the Media Literacy Plan 2024–2026 of the Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of Education. However, according to the IJC, the resources are limited and success hinges on scaling up these efforts sustainably, as well as on aligning with

⁴⁰ Report on foreign interference with electoral processes in Moldova, Security and Intelligence Service, [Ziarul de Gardă](#).

⁴¹ Polina Panainte, *ibid*.

⁴² Report on 2024 financing of political parties, the Central Electoral Commission, 31 May 2025, [CEC Press Release](#).

⁴³ Monitoring the election campaign on social media platforms: expenses and coverage. Campaigns for 2024 presidential elections and referendum in Moldova, International IDEA, [IDEA Raport de sinteză_A4.indd](#).

⁴⁴ Pavel Postica, *ibid*.



the overall curriculum reforms.⁴⁵ Other CSOs, notably the Institute for War and Peace Reporting, the Independent Press Association (API), and the National Youth Council (CNTM), have promoted critical-thinking skills among youth and local communities. This is a key part of democratic resilience for electoral integrity.

Investigative Journalism and Electoral Transparency

Investigative journalism outlets play a key role in uncovering electoral corruption, illegal financing, and opaque party structures.⁴⁶ However, this sector was among the hardest hit by the abrupt ending of US assistance earlier this year. As a result, the quality and quantity of journalistic investigations have declined significantly.⁴⁷ This is also due to the very limited advertising market in Moldova, which severely restricts the financial sustainability of independent media outlets.

Disinformation Response and Social Media Platforms' Engagement

Combating disinformation has relied on a multipronged approach involving fact-checking, information campaigns, and collaboration with online platforms. The Stratcom Centre has taken a mainly prophylactic, proactive role in fighting disinformation, but it remains understaffed and with reduced public visibility. CSOs such as the API, and Watchdog.md have been at the forefront of efforts to monitor online disinformation, to identify coordinated inauthentic behavior, and to conduct real-time debunking. Yet, the absence of a centralized coordination mechanism, such as a dedicated FIMI task force or a single contact point for the social media platforms, has weakened the national response.

The strengthened oversight from the AVC has meant that the traditional audiovisual channels are being strictly controlled, but this is not the case for online or other media.⁴⁸ Thus, some traditional outlets might reduce their election-related content, due to the higher costs to meet the AVC reporting requirements. Moreover, online media offer monetization incentives as well as allowing microtargeting, making it the preferred medium for political campaigns. Still, television remains the second-most popular information channel, even if with varying access across age groups and the rural/urban divide. Thus, there is a need for concerted effort by the AVC, the SIS and the StratCom Centre to target online disinformation as well.

Market Fragility and the Shifting Influence Ecosystem

Moldova's audiovisual, print, and digital media sectors suffer from an extremely limited advertising market. The end of US funding significantly eroded media resilience, particularly for regional and audiovisual outlets. Meanwhile, donors have increasingly shifted toward engaging influencers, who now capture much of the domestic advertising revenues as well. While

⁴⁵ Anastasia Nani, deputy director IJC, interview by the author, 11 June 2024, Chisinau.

⁴⁶ Ziarul de Garda undercover investigative work into Shor's political corruption network received the 2025 European Press Prize, [Serving Moscow - European Press Prize](#).

⁴⁷ Anastasia Nani, *ibid*.

⁴⁸ Liliana Vitu, *ibid*.



influencers play an important role in outreach, this risks deprioritizing more sustainable investments in public-interest journalism, audiovisual storytelling, and local content production.

Hybrid Threats

Russia's hybrid campaign against Moldova is growing more complex and more resourced.⁴⁹ It combines online and offline tactics, internal and external networks, and audience targets; it tailors content and objectives depending of the platform used; and it is flexible enough to react to countermeasures.⁵⁰

According to the SIS, Russia's hybrid threat during the 2024 presidential election included the activities of pseudo election observers, cyberattacks on electoral infrastructure, subversive attempts to disrupt public order, vote-buying schemes, and plans to compromise voting abroad through false bomb alerts. In new media, Russia's preferred channels are Telegram (with over 160 channels administered by pro-Kremlin figures), TikTok, and YouTube.⁵¹ According to the prime minister's spokesperson, by April Russia had invested around €200 million—about 1% of Moldova's GDP—on propaganda and disinformation efforts.⁵²

The Matryoshka and Pravda operations are coordinated Russian disinformation campaigns against Ukraine that have also been targeted against Moldova's democratic institutions and pro-EU orientation. Matryoshka relies on emotionally manipulative fake videos, disguised as academic lectures or news reports, to discredit the country's external image.⁵³ Pravda is an automated network of over 190 websites coordinated from Crimea that flood the online space with tens of thousands of pro-Kremlin articles tailored to Moldovan audiences.⁵⁴

The Kremlin is extensively preparing the ground for its offline methods ahead of the parliamentary elections. Military exercises organized by the de facto authorities in Transnistria with participation of Russian troops have started on the left bank of the Dniester River. Sports activities are organized by Moscow proxies in Chisinau and involve sanctioned Russian or Belarusian figures. Public-order and false-flag incidents are likely being prepared.

Following the gas supply crisis caused by Russia in the winter of 2024/2025, Transnistria is going through a budgetary and economic crisis. According to the media outlet Zona de Securitate, the "external trade" by Transnistria companies this year fell by over 30% and production by over 40%. The de facto authorities there blame Chisinau for the crisis, accusing it of blocking strategic exports, without mentioning that the state budget suffered a 50% drop as a result of the end of free gas deliveries from Russia. Additional issues with gas supplies or even the de facto authorities

⁴⁹ Watchdog.MD team, interview by the author, 11 June 2025, Chisinau.

⁵⁰ [Moldova Faces Unprecedented Hybrid Aggression | Wachdog.md.](#)

⁵¹ SIS Report on foreign interference in electoral processes, [Ziarul de Gardă.](#)

⁵² Governmental spokesperson Daniel Voda on Russia investing 200 million EUR in disinfo and propaganda against Moldova, [Veridica.md.](#)

⁵³ [Russian Disinformation Network "Matryoshka" Relocates to Bluesky Amidst X Exodus | DISA.](#)

⁵⁴ [The Pravda Network - DFRLab.](#)



disconnecting switching off Transnistria's main electricity plant MGRES might cause major disturbances and socioeconomic costs for the region that Chisinau will be blamed for.⁵⁵ This might lead to a very large number of people from Transnistria going to vote in the parliamentary elections at the stations provided for them.

While there is some public awareness about Russia's hybrid attack against Moldova, the picture is mixed. In the June IRI opinion poll, 48% of respondents said that Russia had interfered with the 2024 presidential election (with 22% saying it interfered a lot) and 42% that there was no interference, while 35% said that Russian interference had a significant or some impact.

Monitoring and Oversight: Threats to Civic Space

Strong rule of law is essential for electoral integrity. Effective legal remedies ensure the protection of electoral freedoms and a fair process. The justice reform initiated in the last years, centered on the vetting process of prosecutors and judges, has not led yet to higher trust in the judiciary (in the June IRI opinion poll, trust in the courts was at 28%). The vetted Superior Council of Magistrates seems to enjoy increased trust within the legal profession, with 83% of judges in one survey reporting improved transparency, up from 61% in 2020.⁵⁶ The courts, especially first-instance ones, remain understaffed, and frequent changes in the leadership of prosecutorial bodies have not improved the public image or the effectiveness of the legal system.

Moldova's democratic space is increasingly under pressure as independent media and civil society face coordinated harassment, digital attacks, and legislative initiatives aimed at curbing critical voices.

Traditionally, CSOs play an important role in election monitoring, with the Coalition for Free and Fair Elections offering a platform for coordination between its members as well as advocacy, support and fundraising. For the parliamentary elections, the coalition and its members have managed to mitigate the funding gaps left by the end of US funding, with organizations preparing their traditional monitoring activities. Promo-LEX is setting up its election observation mission with long- and short-term monitors in the regions, the IJC and the Association for Electronic Press will expand their media monitoring, the API will continue fact-checking (including in real-time), the CNTM will carry out youth mobilization and education, and the Association for Participative Democracy ADEPT will carry out information campaigns and education as well as other activities targeting local resilience. The Legal Resource Centre from Moldova will carry out integrity check on the candidates. One organization of legal professionals established by a former Socialist member of parliament has already registered observers for the elections. When it comes to

⁵⁵ Tiraspol does not have money for salaries in the public sector, Zona de Securitate, [Tiraspolul nu are suficienți bani pentru salariile angajaților din sectorul bugetar - Reintegrare](#).

⁵⁶ The latest survey commissioned by the Legal Resources Centre from Moldova in February-April 2025, polling 476 legal professionals (judges, prosecutors, and lawyers) showed high self-perceived independence among judges (93 %) and broad support for vetting reforms. Still, significant concerns persist about corruption within the legal professions, especially among lawyers. [Justice and corruption perceptions within the legal profession opinion poll, CRJM 2025](#), June 2025,



international actors, the European Network of Election Monitoring Organizations will deploy a mission, but the scale of it will depend of available funding. IRI will also carry out election-observation activities (its exact plans were discussed at the time of writing).⁵⁷

Foreign Agents and the Criminalization of Civil Society

In April, the Socialists and Communists bloc introduced a “foreign agents” law in parliament,⁵⁸ which would impose the label of “foreign agent” on CSOs receiving international funding while engaging in “political activity”. The public defamation of CSOs by politicians has become increasingly normalized. For instance, the Socialist member of parliament Bogdan Țirdea and Chisinau Mayor Ion Ceban have repeatedly accused CSOs and the independent media of being part of “criminal organizations” funded by “globalist networks,” targeting groups they label as “Sorosists” or “anti-family”.⁵⁹

Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation and Legal Harassment

Investigative journalists and watchdog CSOs have faced a growing number of strategic lawsuits against public participation. These are typically initiated by businesspeople or public officials attempting to silence reporting on corruption, illicit finance, or political manipulation. Studies by the Legal Resources Centre from Moldova found that over 70% of such lawsuits are dismissed in court, confirming their abusive nature.⁶⁰

Cyberattacks and Digital Threats

Several independent media outlets—such as Ziarul de Gardă, TV8, NewsMaker, and Nokta.md—have reported being the target of sustained cyberattacks, including coordinated distribute denial of service attacks and phishing attempts. CSOs such as the Institute for European Policies and Reforms have reported experiencing hundreds of such attacks over short timeframes.⁶¹

Inclusion and Representation

While Moldova’s 2024 presidential election saw a notable increase in participation by youth and diaspora voters, several structural and political risks threaten inclusive participation ahead of the September 2025 parliamentary elections.

In 2024, turnout reached 52% among first-time and young voters (18-35 years old). Participation was even higher in university towns—Chisinau (60%), Bălți, Cahul, and Comrat all recorded an

⁵⁷ Interviews off-line and online with CSOs, June 2025.

⁵⁸ Foreign agents law is proposed for adoption in Parliament, [Jurnalism.md - Reporter în localitatea ta](#).

⁵⁹ Overview of attacks against CSOs in 2024, Legal Resource Centre, January-February 2025, [Radiografia atacurilor împotriva OSC și ADO în 2024](#).

⁶⁰ How to counteract strategic lawsuits against public participation, Legal Resource Centre of Moldova, July 2024, [Libertatea-de-exprimare-a-mass-media-EN-Summary_final.pdf](#).

⁶¹ Iulian Groza, *ibid*.



increase. There was also a big increase in young voters' turnout (37%) in Gagauzia.⁶² Young people accounted for 39% of the vote abroad.⁶³ This progress, however, remains fragile. Vulnerable youth, particularly those from low-income families or communities with limited civic trust, are at heightened risk of radicalization, political manipulation, and disengagement.⁶⁴

The socioeconomically vulnerable population is also a special category to consider. There is a correlation between standard of living, education and trust in the authorities, civic actors, or social networks. In the June IRI opinion poll, 15% of respondents said they did not trust any political or public figure. A significant portion of those involved in the Shor vote-buying network apparently come from this segment of the population. Over the years, these individuals have participated in a broad spectrum of activities: starting with reliance on the "social shops," followed by engagement in protests for money, and culminating in paid efforts to mobilize voters at elections.⁶⁵

Russian actors like the Evrazia foundation continue to exploit economic precarity and institutional mistrust through social handouts, media influence, and promises of opportunity. It operates through multiple channels: sponsored travel, social media, and alternative narratives for youth; training for education professionals; pilgrimages and financial support for religious figures; and material aid and symbolic gifts for vulnerable categories.⁶⁶ These enable targeted disinformation and soft pressure, eroding trust in democratic institutions and promoting pro-Russia or anti-establishment sentiments.

Diaspora participation was bolstered in 2024 by the record number of polling stations abroad and the pilot introduction of postal voting in six countries (which is not allowed inside Moldova). The turnout in postal voting reached 72% in the first round and 80% in the second round of presidential election. Thus, the CEC proposed and the parliament approved increasing to ten the number of countries where postal voting will be used in 2025. The diaspora vote became a contentious issue with many calls to restrict voting abroad. Due to its strong electoral impact, political actors (including Chisinau Mayor Ion Ceban and Our Party leader Renato Usatii) are increasingly targeting the diaspora. Disinformation targeting the diaspora is a concern as it might lead to disengagement and delegitimization.

Russian-speaking regions and minorities face compounded risks. In Gagauzia, electoral preferences remain shaped by Russian media and identity politics. In Transnistria, organized transport of voters across the Dniester River continues to raise concerns over coercion, vote control, and unequal access to campaigning. These practices threaten the principle of free and fair elections as voting becomes entangled in clientelist and opaque arrangements.

⁶² Cristian Vizir, president of the National Youth Council of Moldova, interview by the author, 12 June 2025, Chisinau. According to CNTMN, the increase in youth turnout was of about 20%.

⁶³ CEC voters' presence for 2024 presidential elections, <https://pvt12024.cec.md/>.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Promo-LEX, Observation Mission Reports, 2023–2025.

⁶⁶ [A Russian Non-Profit Interferes in Moldova's EU Referendum — And Builds an Anti-Western Influence Machine | OCCRP](#).



Conclusions and Recommendations

Moldova is confronted with a growing web of internal and external threats as well as risks to electoral integrity. Russian hybrid actions—ranging from political corruption and disinformation to efforts to destabilize public order and energy security—pose the most significant danger.

While there is widespread awareness of these challenges, national institutions often are reactive, hindered by limited resources as well as legal and administrative constraints. Moldova's international partners, especially the EU, are helpful, but addressing these gaps will require sustained long-term efforts, including after the 2025 parliamentary elections. CSOs are well attuned to the vulnerabilities but increasingly under pressure, which has been exacerbated by the loss of US funding that was only partially offset by the EU and other donors.

Electoral integrity must be treated as a national security priority, requiring not only emergency preparedness (stress tests, rapid-deployment mechanisms, contingency funding) but also forward-looking strategies for the post-elections period. This report seeks to raise awareness of the magnitude of the risks, the structural difficulties in mitigating them, and the urgent need to rethink and strengthen support frameworks for civil society, media, and institutions.

The first EU-Moldova summit on 4 July was a great opportunity to reaffirm high level political support for the EU course, recognition of the country's efforts at legislative and institutional level, as well as assistance measures, including to support electoral integrity against Russia's hybrid campaign.

Recommendations for International Actors

Support for Maintaining Moldova's EU Accession Course

- Setting up platforms for sharing best practices from EU member states and other countries facing similar risks. For example, Lithuania for public bodies offering cyber support to political parties, Finland for cybersecurity education for the entire population or France for countering FIMI and making information public.⁶⁷
- Increased dialogue and exchange of information with neighboring and other countries on Russia's hybrid campaign, with the aim of containing the activities of Russian-backed actors (banks, foundations, media, private companies) that use third countries' infrastructure.
- Look into updating the EU sanctions list to include entities whose activities undermine Moldova's democratic integrity or security, thereby providing a clear legal basis to restrict or to prohibit their operations within EU territory.

⁶⁷ [Hybrid CoE Research Report 10: Preventing election interference: Selected best practices and recommendations, September 2023, The European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats.](#)



- Support Moldova's civic actors to develop post-electoral strategies to counter attempts to delegitimize election results and to create a more conducive environment and better public awareness on the importance of pro-EU coalition building.
- Support for public institutions to conduct fast post-election analysis focusing on major cyber, FIMI, public-order, or election administration incidents. Encourage publicly reporting and attributing cyber and information-security incidents.

Sustainable Donor Engagement for Protecting Civic Space

- Encourage multi-annual core funding, alongside project-based funding, for CSOs and independent media.
- Create or reinforce civic-resilience platforms offering legal aid, cybersecurity and digital services, and communication support.
- Support investigative journalism and community-rooted media outlets.
- Carry out civic-space resilience contingency planning that looks into post-elections scenarios.

Recommendations for Moldova

Legal and Institutional Readiness

- Ensure that the new legal reforms already adopted are matched with operational capacity and accountability mechanisms before the September 2025 elections.
- Ensure bans on extremist or successor parties are clear, evidence-based, and legally reviewed.
- Include CSOs in the monitoring and training of judges in partnership with regulatory bodies.

Operationalize Interagency Mechanisms

- Fully activate the six CEC working groups, and move beyond formal exchanges to joint activities, real-time data sharing, and electoral-risk scenarios.
- Involve civic observers and journalists to support transparency and resilience testing.

Digital Oversight and Disinformation

- Establish formal protocols between the CEC, Stratcom, the AVC, and platforms like Meta, Google, and TikTok for takedowns and transparency.
- Partner with fact-checkers (StopFals.md, Watchdog.md) and civic tech groups.
- Establish an elections communication cell at the governmental level to monitor and debunk disinformation in real time.



Counter Hybrid Threats

- Set up a hybrid threat task force under the Presidential Administration, reporting to the Supreme Security Council.
- Ensure implementation of EU recommendations regarding hybrid threats and prepare to request additional EU support if needed.
- Improve coordination of FIMI countermeasures, including rapid attribution of narratives and collaboration with media watchdogs and EU partners.

Strategic Communication and Community Engagement

- Support narratives of Moldovan and Romanian identities as complementary through campaigns and storytelling focusing on personal stories.
- Use schoolteachers, artists, and entrepreneurs as public voices of cohesion.
- Use District Electoral Councils, CSOs, local influencers, and citizen assemblies to build grassroots trust in elections.

Structured Support Package for Moldova

The German Marshall Fund/Transatlantic Foundation recommends the development of a structured support package for Moldova, built around the following pillars:

- Technical assistance to support Moldova's EU accession, institutional reforms, and resilience against foreign interference.
- Structured dialogue platforms to enable regular engagement between stakeholders and international partners.
- Analysis and policy research to inform evidence-based decision-making.
- Study visits and peer exchanges to expose officials and civil society to best practices in democratic governance.
- Coalition and network building to strengthen collaboration among reform-minded actors in Moldova and across the region, including support for the facilitation of post-elections coalition building among pro-EU parties and sustaining their long-term commitment to the EU agenda.



Electoral Integrity Risk Calendar

Timeline	Risk	Mitigation
14 July Start of the Election Period	Incomplete secondary legislation by the CEC, the Public Service Agency, and the AVC, or legal confusion (for example, on political finance, campaign rules, electoral blocs registration).	Annotated guidelines prepared by CSOs Civic/legal awareness campaign.
20 July–19 August Candidates' Registration (Registration of electoral blocs started on June 20)	Integrity-compromised candidates registered Complaints of bureaucratic, hasty, or unclear legal process Litigation over disqualifications	Transparent vetting Real-time reporting tools Civic/legal monitoring networks Public information campaigns
Late July–August	Deepening economic and energy crisis in Transnistria Sociopolitical destabilization attempts through disinformation campaigns or false-flag provocations	Hybrid task force established Early messaging Alerting EU and neighboring countries about hybrid threats
August 24 Setting-up Transnistria and Diaspora Polling Stations	Accusations of voter suppression or favoritism	Publish transparent criteria Consult diaspora CSOs Partner with host-country CSOs on monitoring and communication
27 August Independence Day	Symbolic narrative manipulation Heating-up disinformation campaigns/public-order disruption Military exercises on the left bank of the Dniester River	Monitoring and countering (with pre-bunking on why Russia attempts manipulation to produce anxiety) Diplomatic messaging and coordination Enhanced monitoring of social platforms (Telegram especially)



29 August–26 September Campaign Period	<p>Illegal campaign financing</p> <p>Cyberattacks on electoral infrastructure (for example, the CEC and party platforms)</p> <p>Vote-buying and misuse of administrative resources</p> <p>Opaque digital microtargeting</p>	<p>Strengthened finance monitoring</p> <p>Cyber Security Operation Centre ready to ask for international support</p> <p>Digital crisis teams/mechanisms setup</p> <p>Platform advertising transparency partnerships</p>
28 September Elections Day	<p>Organized transport of voters from Transnistria, risk of group manipulation or voter intimidation</p> <p>Cyberattacks targeting voter data, real-time reporting, or result tabulation</p> <p>Shor network activated</p>	<p>Real-time monitoring of transport and vote buying patterns.</p> <p>Contingency information technology systems (offline backup, duplicate systems to ensure continuity of operations).</p> <p>Cooperation for cyber incident management between the CEC and the EU Agency for Cybersecurity and the Cybersecurity Service for the Union institutions, bodies, offices and agencies</p>
29 September Start of Post-Elections Period	<p>Political actors refusing to recognize results.</p> <p>Mobilized protests targeting the CEC and Constitutional Court</p> <p>Online/offline hate speech, anti-EU or anti-diaspora rhetoric</p>	<p>Scenario-based preparedness plan for public order, involving the CEC, the police, and the courts.</p> <p>Early convening of diplomatic and civic response groups</p> <p>Messaging coordination across the government, CSOs, and international actors.</p>

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