

MOLDOVA POLICY ALERT



2024 Moldavian Elections: Insights and Priorities for Democratic Resilience



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The 2024 constitutional referendum and presidential elections conducted in Moldova represented important milestones for the country's democratic development and consolidating its resilience in front of aggressive outside interference. Election observers noted that despite significant external challenges, the elections met national and international standards, though notable issues such as media bias and voter accessibility remain. Moldovan democracy will continue to face growing external and internal pressures, which represent an existential threat given the current tense security climate in the region. The resilience demonstrated in this election offers a narrow but critical window of opportunity for Moldova to strengthen its democratic foundations. In the upcoming months, Moldovan authorities need to urgently address the top vulnerabilities brought to the surface during the recent electoral exercises, to ensure the integrity of the 2025 parliamentary elections and the very existence of the Moldovan state. Among the top priorities are the pressing need to dismantle criminal voter-buying networks, revise the legal framework to safeguard upcoming parliamentary elections, and address socio-economic disparities that provide fertile ground for external interference.

I: The results of the elections

The Moldovan presidential elections resulted in a decisive victory for the incumbent president Maia Sandu, a result attributed to the strong presence at the polling stations of the pro-European voters and increased efforts of law enforcement to crack down on the Russian-sponsored voter corruption schemes before the runoff. The second round of the presidential elections was marked by an overall **higher voter turnout** (54,31%) compared to the first round (51,4%). Sandu secured the support of 55.35% of the Moldovan citizens, with a significant share of these voters representing those in the diaspora. Her opponent, former general prosecutor Alexandr Stoianoglo was voted by 44,65% of the voters, most of them residing within the country.

The Moldovan presidential elections as well as the Constitutional Referendum enjoyed a high level of transparency thanks to several international election observation missions ([OSCE/ODIHR](#), [ENEMO](#), [IRI](#), and [NDI](#)), as well as a national electoral observation effort ([Promo-LEX](#)) that monitored both exercises. Additionally, the elections were closely scrutinized by the [Coalition for Free and Fair Elections](#) - an independent civil society network of non-governmental organizations specialized in democratization, electoral matters, and mass media. The overarching conclusion of the election observation missions is that Moldova has made **important progress in harmonizing its legal framework** to the international standards for democratic elections, however, despite that, the biggest threat to the integrity of the elections held, was **“a broad and concerted campaign of malign foreign influence from Russia”**.

All election observation mission conclusions agree that the elections were overall efficiently administered. Besides the Central Electoral Committee, the **election administration bodies** included 37 District Electoral Councils and 2143 Precinct Electoral Bureaus. The activity of the **CEC was conducted transparently and professionally**, following the legal provisions and deadlines. The transparency of the central electoral body has to be mentioned given the consistent efforts made by this institution to ensure timely online publication of all relevant materials, the decisions taken, as well as live streams and recordings of its sessions. Still, on several occasions, observers have pointed to several inconsistencies in the activity of the CEC. An example in this regard is the lack of clarity during the results tabulation of the first round of the presidential election, when the **CEC’s webpage presented only the total number of valid votes expressed**, as well as the votes cast for each of the referendum options, without also presenting the total number of participants in the referendum.

Particular attention has to be given to the successful organization of the voting process for the Moldovan citizens residing abroad. In previous electoral cycles, this drew serious criticism towards the authorities when many Moldovan citizens had their voting rights infringed because of insufficient ballots/insufficient polling stations abroad. The CEC addressed this issue with the deployment of a **larger number of polling stations abroad** as well as **the successful implementation and testing of postal voting** (in a limited number of countries), an innovation for the Republic of Moldova meant to provide Moldovan voters with an alternative option for democratically expressing their vote.

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The referendum and the presidential elections were regulated by an updated legal framework that includes a newly adopted Electoral Code in force since January 1, 2023, as well as updated law on Political Parties, the Code of Audiovisual Media Services, and the Criminal Code that have been strengthened with regard to campaign financing and oversight, as well as electoral and political corruption. Nevertheless, the electoral observers have pointed to the fact that certain contradictions remain, specifically concerning the short campaign period before the second round of the presidential elections (see below).

The electoral campaign provided sufficient time for the [candidates to campaign freely](#) and voters could inform themselves about the available options at the referendum and presidential contenders in both rounds of the presidential contest. Electoral observers have pointed to the fact that public campaigning was not as prevalent as in previous campaigns, [with many candidates focusing on the online media for their campaigning](#). During the electoral campaign for the run-off, an electoral [debate](#) was organized and broadcast online as well as by several TV stations with national coverage.

Media institutions provided free as well as paid airtime for all the electoral competitors in the first and second rounds. However, national [media monitoring](#) of the main TV and Radio broadcasters showed a generally more favorable or neutral media coverage of the government and incumbent candidate compared to the other presidential contestants. Similar observations were made by the OSCE/ODIHR international election observation mission that pointed to the fact that overall the monitored TV stations covered the presidential candidates in a relatively equal manner, [with slightly more airtime being devoted to the incumbent candidate](#), who was also covered mostly in a positive or neutral key.

Both election days were generally carried out under the legal provisions and without major infringements. Most frequent irregularities reported by independent observers referred to the [vote secrecy](#) and organized [transportation of voters](#) to the polling stations, illegal under the Moldovan legislation. One of the persisting concerns, emphasized by the independent electoral observers is the limited or no [accessibility](#) of the polling stations for voters with disabilities. Several [complaints](#) have been registered by the electoral authorities, including one requesting the recount of the votes cast for the Referendum outside the country. However, CEC rejected it as unfounded, this decision being later also supported by the Constitutional Court.

II: Main challenges of the elections

In parallel with these developments, the dominant theme of both rounds of the elections and by far the most important challenge was the prolonged hybrid attack on the integrity of the democratic processes and specifically the massive [voter corruption](#) effort [orchestrated by the Russian Federation](#).

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The [European Parliament resolution](#) adopted before the Moldovan elections sent a strong warning signal against continued Russian attempts to derail Moldova's pro-European trajectory. Furthermore, this challenge was consistently noted by all international election observation mission reports, which also mentioned authorities' efforts to address the emerging risks.

At the same time, it has to be emphasized that [voter corruption activities have been documented](#) by Moldovan authorities in previous elections, however with no noticeable results in curbing this phenomenon. Only before the second round of the presidential elections has the law enforcement intensified their activities in a last-minute attempt to safeguard the Moldovan elections. According to the [preliminary data](#), the goal of the criminal network allegedly established and funded by the oligarch Ilhan Shor, wanted for corruption in Moldova, was to buy circa 300,000 votes.

Based on [data published by Moldovan Police](#), in a couple of months before the presidential elections, around 39 million USD had been transferred from Russia for corrupting Moldovan voters. It is estimated that around 130,000 Moldovans have received various amounts of money in cash or through a Russian bank well in advance of this year's elections. Several [investigations](#) carried out by Moldovan journalists have informed public opinion about the inner workings of this massive voter-buying criminal network, helping significantly increase voter's awareness about the sheer scale of these illegal activities.

Addressing the issue of voter corruption presents several challenges. Being organized as an informal multilevel network without legal status or officially declared political goals, without an admission of guilt by the voters, authorities will have a difficult time establishing the connection between the money received by the voters and the vote they have expressed. An additional layer of complexity to this task is added by the fact that a significant part of targeted Moldovan citizens reside in the Transnistrian region and outside the reach of the Moldovan authorities. To address some of these challenges the Parliamentary Committee on National Security, Defense, and Public Order has [recommended amending the legislation](#) in order to prevent voter corruption in the future.

Data about the geographical distribution of votes at the referendum and the presidential elections have emphasized several long-standing rifts in the Moldovan political landscape with profound implications for the future political cycles. Political preferences in Moldovan society are stratified along the geographic criteria and the rural-urban divide. The pro-European voters are predominantly residing abroad, with a larger share of the domestic voters leaning towards voting for pro-Russian parties and more susceptible to Russian propaganda. Coupled with the poor economic status of the majority of the rural population in Moldova, these societal categories to be easily co-opted by the criminal voter-buying activities carried out by malign actors. The scale of these voter corruption efforts has raised increased criticism regarding the effectiveness of law enforcement and anti-corruption institutions.

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This is particularly worrisome given the fact that fighting corruption was the top priority on the agenda of President Sandu and that of the ruling party.

Finally, additional challenges were presented by the fact that the Electoral Code provisions on the electoral campaign generated several **contradictions** when applied to the second round campaign period. Specifically, these refer to the misalignment of the start of the second-round campaign with the deadlines for dispute resolution, deadlines for campaign events, and campaign financial reporting requirements. The election observation missions recommended that the legal framework governing the elections in Moldova be further analyzed to eliminate these contradictions.

III: Key priorities ahead of the upcoming parliamentary elections

With less than a year till the upcoming Parliamentary Elections, the Moldovan institutions have a narrow window of opportunity to ensure the security of the electoral processes. This has to include targeted efforts aimed at dismantling the voter buying network uncovered by the Moldovan law enforcement as well as diminishing the external malign influence that undermines state security. In the context of a stalling and controversial, reform process of justice and anti-corruption sectors, there is a high risk that the integrity of the upcoming parliamentary elections will be compromised. Given the overall security climate in the region, this subject has to be also seen as a matter of national security.

Authorities need to review the legal framework governing the elections and operate amendments targeted at reducing opportunities for voter corruption as well as removing remaining inconsistencies and conflicting provisions in the Electoral Code specifically on the second-round campaign. This will help address the issues generating conflicting deadlines and confusion among the participants in the electoral exercise.

To overcome the mistrust and growing rifts in the Moldovan society, authorities need to develop an open dialogue about the European integration process and the benefits this process presents to the wider society. Additionally, innovative cooperation formats need to be developed to involve the Moldovan regions in mutually advantageous cooperation. This is particularly relevant for Gagauzia and Transnistria which claim to have been ignored for a long time by the Moldovan authorities. This needs to be accompanied by a unifying message targeted at all societal strata regardless of the social status or region from which citizens come.

Finally, Moldovan authorities need to prioritize economic development policies to provide tangible benefits to the poorest and most marginalized layers of society who are the most vulnerable to propaganda, disinformation, and involvement in illegal voter corruption activities.

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IV: What should the EU do?

Given the growing threat of foreign influence in democratic elections, the European Union should continue supporting Moldovan authorities, with a particular focus on anti-corruption initiatives. The EU should provide targeted funding and technical assistance to strengthen Moldova's anti-corruption institutions. This includes supporting the establishment of an independent Anti-Corruption Court and enhancing the capacity of the Anti-Corruption Prosecutor's Office to effectively investigate and prosecute electoral fraud and corruption.

In the context of the growing cyber threats, the European Union could assist Moldova in strengthening its cybersecurity infrastructure. This includes sharing best practices, providing training, and facilitating access to advanced technologies to protect against foreign interference.

The EU should facilitate and encourage constructive dialogue between Moldovan authorities and marginalized regions, such as Gagauzia and Transnistria. By fostering inclusive discussions on the benefits of European integration for all stakeholders, the EU can help bridge societal divides and strengthen national unity on these issues.

Given the Republic of Moldova's challenging economic situation, the EU should focus on targeted assistance programs aimed at supporting vulnerable populations. Addressing these disparities could help reduce susceptibility to propaganda and voter corruption-related activities.

Last but not least, the EU should enhance its support for civil society organizations that work on promoting democratic values, transparency, and accountability in Moldova. Empowering these organizations can help create a more informed electorate resistant to corruption.

About the author:



Petru Culeac – co-founder and Executive Director of the Moldova Development Institute, a newly established organization dedicated to improving the social, political, and economic landscape in Moldova. With over 15 years of experience in Moldova’s non-profit sector, Petru has an in-depth understanding of the country’s context and its development agenda as well as extensive organizational management experience. Until 2023, Petru served as Executive Director of Soros Foundation Moldova, a renowned non-profit foundation, part of the Open Society Foundations network, recognized as a key civil society actor in the Republic of Moldova. Under Petru’s leadership, the foundation expanded its portfolio and successfully implemented numerous technical assistance projects, including for Moldovan authorities in areas such as anti-corruption, justice reform, elections, and education, as well as emergency response projects at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Previously, Petru worked in areas of democracy promotion, free and fair elections, local development, citizen engagement, and youth activism, successfully cooperating with local and international organizations, such as USAID, Chemonics, East Europe Foundation, and IFC. Petru’s academic background includes degrees in Business Management, and European and International Studies from institutions in Moldova, France, and the United States.

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