



Republic of Moldova

Presidential elections
and Referendum 2024

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Presidential elections and constitutional referendum: a first test for Moldova's pro-European future

Introduction

On October 20, 2024, the Republic of Moldova will hold the first round of presidential elections, together with a constitutional referendum on joining the European Union. These democratic processes provide citizens with the opportunity to express, through their vote, their vision for the country's future direction, amid a complex and tense geopolitical context. The voters' decisions will influence not only the strategic trajectory of the Republic of Moldova for the coming years but also the country's image on the international stage. The constitutional referendum has the potential to solidify Moldova's pro-European path by anchoring this objective in the Constitution. At the same time, there is a risk that an uncertain outcome or failure due to low turnout could exacerbate political instability, jeopardizing the European integration process. The Russian Federation plays an active role in this context, using various instruments of influence, such as interference in the electoral process, propaganda and actions aimed at destabilizing the Republic of Moldova, in an effort to keep the country in its sphere of influence.

The importance of presidential elections

The Republic of Moldova is a parliamentary republic, where the president's constitutional powers are primarily limited to representing the state internationally and guaranteeing its sovereignty, independence, unity, and territorial integrity.¹ However, presidential elections hold significant importance, as politicians have consistently exploited societal divisions, turning each electoral contest into a geopolitical confrontation between pro-European and pro-Russian forces.

Over the past three years, the Republic of Moldova has experienced significant diplomatic momentum, driven by the regional geopolitical context, particularly the war in Ukraine. This period has been marked by strengthened international support, materialized through economic support and high-level visits by officials such as Antony Blinken,² Emmanuel Macron³ or Olaf Scholz,⁴ as well as a substantial deepening of the bilateral relationship with Romania. A key moment in foreign policy was hosting the European Political Community Summit in 2023, regarded as one of the most important diplomatic events since the proclamation of independence in 1991.⁵ Additionally, in June 2022, the Republic of

¹ Presidency of the Republic of Moldova, "Status and Duties of the President of the Republic of Moldova". Accessed at: <https://presedinte.md/rom/statutul-si-atributiile>

² "US Secretary of State Antony Blinken arrived in Chisinau", Jurnal.md, May 29, 2024. Accessed at: <https://www.jurnal.md/ro/news/428a66eb14a62914/secretarul-de-stat-al-sua-antony-blinken-a-sosit-la-chisinau.html>

³ "Emmanuel Macron in Chisinau: Moldova's European aspirations are absolutely legitimate", Radio Free Europe Moldova, June 15, 2022. Accessed at: <https://moldova.europalibera.org/a/macron-vrem-s%C4%83-transmitem-un-mesaj-pozitiv-%C8%99i-clar-fa%C8%9B%C4%83-de-cererea-depus%C4%83-de-r-moldova/31899674.html>

⁴ "German Chancellor Olaf Scholz in Chisinau: "We will support Moldova all the way," *Ziarul de Gardă*, August 21, 2024. Accessed at: <https://www.zdg.md/stiri/video-cancelarul-germaniei-olaf-scholz-la-chisinau-vom-spriijini-r-moldova-din-rasputeri/>

⁵ European Council, "Meeting of the European Political Community, June 1, 2023". Accessed at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/ro/meetings/international-summit/2023/06/01/>

Moldova obtained candidate status for EU membership,⁶ and in June 2024, the European Union officially opened accession negotiations with the Republic of Moldova.⁷

The outcome of the 2024 presidential elections will significantly impact the perception of the Republic of Moldova within the European and international community. A potential victory of a pro-Eastern candidate could undermine the favorable diplomatic momentum the country has cultivated and might strain relations with Western partners. The geopolitical significance of these elections has been heightened by Maia Sandu's decision to hold a constitutional referendum on EU integration alongside the presidential elections.⁸ In the context of internal tensions and the war in Ukraine, the results of both the elections and the referendum will also influence fundamental aspects such as the security and stability of the Republic of Moldova.

For example, the Security and Intelligence Service (SIS) of the Republic of Moldova, a central element of the national security system, is directly subordinated to the president. In recent years, SIS has undergone a comprehensive reform process, strengthening its institutional capacity to counter subversive activities. The information provided by SIS has underpinned the decisions of the Commission for Exceptional Situations (CSE) regarding the suspension of 12 television channels and the blocking of over 70 websites between December 2022 and November 2023, in response to concerns related to disinformation, threats to national security, and connections to entities under international sanctions.⁹ Furthermore, SIS played a central role in preventing destabilization linked to protests orchestrated by the Shor Group in 2023 and in curbing the activities of Russian-affiliated espionage networks operating within the Republic of Moldova.¹⁰

Last but not least, the 2024 presidential elections and referendum will essentially mark the unofficial beginning of the electoral campaign for the parliamentary elections scheduled for 2025. The Russian Federation has repeatedly criticized President Maia Sandu, accusing her of actions against the interests of Moldovan citizens¹¹ and of promoting a Western-influenced agenda.¹² Moreover, Moscow has claimed that Maia Sandu poses a threat to the Moldovan national identity, especially after the official recognition of the Romanian language

⁶ Mihaela Conovali, "Republic of Moldova granted EU candidate country status", NewsMaker, June 23, 2022. Accessed at:

<https://newsmaker.md/ro/republica-moldova-a-primit-statutul-detara-candidat-pentru-aderarea-la-ue/>

⁷ "The Republic of Moldova has officially started accession negotiations with the European Union", Government of the Republic of Moldova, June 25, 2024. Accessed at: <https://gov.md/ro/content/republica-moldova-inceput-oficial-negocierile-de-aderare-la-uniunea-europeana>

⁸ "Moldova will hold a republican constitutional referendum on EU membership on October 20" Moldpres, May 16, 2024. Accessed at:

<https://www.moldpres.md/news/2024/05/16/24003609>

⁹ "The more than 70 websites blocked by SIS for the period of the state of emergency do not escape the ban", *Ziarul de Gardă*, January 16, 2024. Accessed at:

<https://www.zdg.md/stiri/stiri-sociale/cele-pest-70-de-pagini-web-blocate-de-sis-pentru-perioada-starii-de-urgenta-nu-scapa-de-interdictie/>

¹⁰ "PCCOCS and SIS employees raid Parliament: head of the Legal Department, Ion Creanga, detained for treason", *Ziarul Național*, July 31, 2024. Accessed at:

https://www.ziarulnational.md/ultima-ora-angajati-ai-pccocs-si-sis-descinderi-in-parlament-un-sef-de-directie-suspectat-de-tradare-de-patrie/#google_vignette

¹¹ "Zakharova called Sandu's policies comparable to experiments of the Third Reich", TASS, May 9, 2024. Accessed at: <https://tass.ru/politika/20750113>

¹² Pavel Zubov, "Zakharova called Sandu a "terminator man" infiltrated by the West", *Gazeta.ru*, September 15, 2024. Accessed at: <https://www.gazeta.ru/politics/news/2024/09/15/23927485.shtml>

as the state language of the Republic of Moldova.¹³ A clear victory for Maia Sandu and a successful referendum would counter the Kremlin's rhetoric, strengthening pro-European parties ahead of the 2025 parliamentary elections. Conversely, a favorable outcome for pro-Russian candidates would fuel Russia's propagandistic discourse, bolstering these forces in the political landscape of the Republic of Moldova.

Presentation of candidates

A total of 11 candidates have been registered by the Central Electoral Commission for the 2024 presidential elections.¹⁴ The current President of the Republic of Moldova, Maia Sandu, continues to lead the opinion polls, maintaining an uncontested position as the frontrunner. According to a poll published on October 7, 36.1% of respondents, excluding the diaspora, expressed their intention to vote for Maia Sandu.¹⁵ This trend is also confirmed by a survey conducted by the International Republican Institute between May and June, which indicated that 34% of respondents plan to support Maia Sandu in the October 20 elections.¹⁶

On the other hand, the same poll shows a high level of distrust towards Maia Sandu among citizens, at 37%, surpassed only by Ilan Shor (40%), who was involved in the scandal of the theft of a billion dollars from Moldovan banks in 2014. Although Maia Sandu is not associated with corruption scandals, the high level of distrust can be explained by a mandate characterized by multiple challenges, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the energy crisis, heightened inflation, the challenges of the war in Ukraine and the slow pace of reforms in key areas. Although managing these crises was largely the responsibility of the Action and Solidarity Party (PAS), which won a parliamentary majority in 2021, citizens frequently associate government decisions with Maia Sandu. This association contributes directly to the decline in her popularity, amplifying the level of dissatisfaction and disapproval among a section of the population.

On July 8, Igor Dodon, leader of the Party of Socialists of the Republic of Moldova (PSRM), announced that he would not run in the upcoming presidential elections,¹⁷ despite being considered the most popular opposition candidate, with 19% support in the polls.¹⁸ This decision has created uncertainty regarding who will emerge as the opposition's leading candidate capable of advancing to a potential second round of the presidential race. Although Dodon and the PSRM have endorsed former Prosecutor General Alexandr Stoianoglo, he

¹³ "Zakharova called Sandu a "threat to the Moldovan people", TASS, November 2, 2023. Accessed at: <https://tass.ru/politika/19182185>

¹⁴ Iurie Rotari, "Who are the presidential candidates and what they promise to Moldovans", Radio Free Europe Moldova, September 26, 2024. Accessed at: <https://moldova.europalibera.org/a/cine-sunt-candidatii-la-prezidentiale-si-ce-le-promit-moldovenilor/33134715.html>

¹⁵ "Who are the favorites in the presidential and parliamentary elections?" Watchdog, October 7, 2024. Accessed at: <https://watchdog.md/polls/208313/cine-sunt-favoritii-in-cursa-a-legerilor-prezidentiale-si-a-celor-parlamentare/>

¹⁶ International Republican Institute, "National Poll of Moldova | May-June 2024", July 15, 2024. Accessed at: <https://www.iri.org/resources/national-poll-of-moldova-may-june-2024/>

¹⁷ "Igor Dodon will not run for President of the Republic of Moldova", Veridica, July 8, 2024. Accessed at: <https://www.veridica.ro/stiri/igor-dodon-nu-va-candida-la-prezidentiale-in-republica-moldova>

¹⁸ International Republican Institute, "National Poll of Moldova | May-June 2024", July 15, 2024. Accessed at: <https://www.iri.org/resources/national-poll-of-moldova-may-june-2024/>

benefits from a more modest support, with only 10.1% of voter intentions.¹⁹ The PSRM's decision to support Stoianoglo has caused confusion even among the socialist electorate, as during his candidacy announcement, Stoianoglo expressed support for Moldova's integration into the European Union—a stance that contradicts PSRM's traditionally pro-Russian orientation.²⁰ Additionally, Alexandr Stoianoglo holds Romanian citizenship, which adds another layer of controversy, especially given that Igor Dodon has repeatedly criticized Maia Sandu for holding dual citizenship.²¹

Alexandr Stoianoglo, of Gagauz ethnic origin, is relatively unknown on the national stage, has a limited command of the Romanian language, and is considered to lack charisma, which diminishes his electoral appeal. One of the allegations tarnishing his public image is his supposed connection to businessman Veaceslav Platon. In April 2017, the Chisinau Court sentenced Platon to 18 years in prison for large-scale fraud and money laundering.²² In 2020, Platon was released from detention following a request initiated by Stoianoglo, who was serving as Prosecutor General at the time. Platon later fled to the United Kingdom, where he continues to exert influence over the political scene in Chisinau.²³

During the presidential campaign, Alexandr Stoianoglo is consolidating his image as a political victim in relation to Maia Sandu and the Action and Solidarity Party (PAS).²⁴ In 2021, after PAS won a parliamentary majority, Stoianoglo was suspended from his role as Prosecutor General and arrested in the context of a criminal investigation, accused of abuse of office, passive corruption and false statements. In 2023, Maia Sandu officially dismissed him from office.²⁵ In the same year, the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) found that the Moldovan authorities had violated Stoianoglo's rights by suspending him in 2021, as he was not given the opportunity to appeal the decision.²⁶

¹⁹ "Who are the favorites in the presidential and parliamentary elections?" Watchdog, October 7, 2024. Accessed at: <https://watchdog.md/polls/208313/cine-sunt-favoritii-in-cursa-alegerilor-prezidentiale-si-a-celor-parlamentare/>

²⁰ "Alexandru Stoianoglo pleads for European integration and Moldova's neutrality", Infotag, July 8, 2024. Accessed at: <https://www.infotag.md/politics-ro/317321/>

²¹ Olga Scripnic Scripnic, "Alexandr Stoianoglo, and Romanian citizen, and supporter of the idea that heads of state should hold only "the Moldovan one", Agora, October 1, 2024. Accessed at: <https://agora.md/2024/10/01/alexandr-stoianoglo-si-cetatean-roman-si-sustinator-al-ideii-ca-sefii-statului-trebuie-sa-o-detina-doar-pe-cea-moldoveneasca>

²² "Veaceslav Platon sentenced to 18 years in prison. Businessman deprived of last word", *Anticorupție.md*, April 20, 2017. Accessed at: <https://anticoruptie.md/ro/dosare-de-coruptie/veaceslav-platon-condamnat-la-18-ani-de-inchisoare-omul-de-afaceri-a-fost-lipsit-de-ultimul-cuvant>

²³ Viorica Mija, "Platon's release: restart in the case of former Prosecutor General Alexandr Stoianoglo", *Anticorupție.md*, July 11, 2024. Accessed at: <https://anticoruptie.md/ro/dosare-de-coruptie/eliberarea-lui-platon-restart-in-dosarul-fostului-procuror-general-alexandr-stoianoglo>

²⁴ "Stoianoglo: I am the victim of a state-coordinated political order", *Știri.md*, July 6, 2022. Accessed at: <https://stiri.md/article/social/stoianoglo-sunt-victima-unei-comenzi-politice-coordonate-de-stat/>

²⁵ "Alexandr Stoianoglo dismissed as Prosecutor General after 2-year suspension", Radio Free Europe Moldova, September 26, 2023. Accessed at: <https://moldova.europalibera.org/a/alexandr-stoianoglo-a-fost-demis-din-functia-de-procuror-general-dupa-2-ani-de-suspendare/32609981.html>

²⁶ Nadejda Coptu, "Former prosecutor general wins at ECHR", Radio Free Europe Moldova, October 24, 2023. Accessed at: <https://moldova.europalibera.org/a/fostul-procuror-general-castiga-la-cedo/32651589.html>

Renato Usatii, a controversial figure in Moldovan politics, currently ranks third in the polls, with approximately 7.5% of voter intentions.²⁷ His charismatic personality and active presence on social media have contributed to his growing popularity, with the potential to overtake Alexandr Stoianoglo in the electoral race. Usatii is not a new presence in Moldovan politics; in 2015 and 2019 he won the mayoralty of Balti municipality in the first round after organizing several electoral concerts. His political peak was in the 2020 presidential elections, when he won 16.9% of the votes, finishing in third place.²⁸ Prior to his political career, Renato Usatii lived in the Russian Federation for many years, where he was vice-president of the Moscow Railway Builders Union. His alleged connections to the criminal world have been frequently discussed in the public sphere, with photos showing him alongside Grigore Caramalac, one of Moldova's most notorious criminals, a refugee in Moscow for over two decades and close to the FSB, the Russian Federation's internal security service, which oversees operations against the Republic Moldova.²⁹ In a 2013 interview, Usaty said that his "hero" is Vladimir Putin and characterized himself as "a Soviet man".³⁰ At the same time, in 2020, the Russian Interior Ministry announced that Renato Usatii was wanted internationally in connection with a criminal case related to the organization of a criminal group.³¹ Throughout his political career, Usatii has made numerous controversial statements, including proposing to turn the U.S. Embassy into a karaoke club or to build a replica of the Great Wall of China along the border with Romania.³² At the same time, he condemned Russia's invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022. In the current election campaign, Usatii expressed his desire to turn the Republic of Moldova into a presidential republic³³ and claimed that the only solution to save the country is "a dictatorship of order in the interest of the state".³⁴

Irina Vlah, the former Bashkan (governor) of Gagauzia, enjoys 4.1% support according to the October poll, reflecting a decline from the 5.8% recorded in the August poll.³⁵ Although

²⁷ "Who are the favorites in the presidential and parliamentary elections?" Watchdog, October 7, 2024. Accessed at: <https://watchdog.md/polls/208313/cine-sunt-favoritii-in-cursa-alegerilor-prezidentiale-si-a-celor-parlamentare/>

²⁸ "Portrait of Renato Usatii, candidate for President of the country", Știri.md, October 1, 2024. Accessed at: <https://stiri.md/article/politica/portretul-candidatului-renato-usatii-la-functia-de-presedinte-al-tarii/>

²⁹ "What is Renato Usatii's homeland?", Ziarul de Gardă, November 17, 2024. Accessed at: <https://www.zdg.md/investigatii/ancheta/care-este-patria-lui-renato-usatii/>

³⁰ Valentina Basiul, "Portrait of a... "Soviet man": Renato Usatii", Radio Free Europe Moldova, January 28, 2016. Accessed at: <https://moldova.europalibera.org/a/27516625.html>

³¹ "Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs Has Put Renato Usatii on the International Wanted List", TASS, July 23, 2020. Accessed at: <https://tass.ru/proisshestiya/9038469>

³² "Candidate portrait: first-round mayor, Russian businessman and party leader. Who is Renato Usatii, Agora, September 19, 2024. Accessed at: <https://agora.md/2024/09/19/portret-de-candidat-primar-din-primul-tur-afacerist-in-rusia-si-lider-de-partid-cine-este-renato-usatii>

³³ "Renato Usatii has launched his presidential campaign: 'I am ready to take full responsibility for Moldova'", Agora, September 21, 2024. Accessed at: <https://agora.md/2024/09/21/renato-usatii-s-a-lansat-in-campania-prezidentiala-sunt-gata-sa-imi-asum-intreaga-responsabilitate-pentru-moldova>

³⁴ Laura Macari, "Renato Usatii, candidate of the "Our Party" in the presidential elections: 'Moldova can be saved only through a dictatorship'", Agora, August 21, 2024. Accessed at: <https://agora.md/2024/08/21/renato-usatii-candidatul-partidului-nostru-la-alegerile-prezidentiale-r-moldova-poate-fi-salvata-doar-printr-o-dictatura>

³⁵ "Who are the front-runners in the presidential and parliamentary elections?" Watchdog, October 7, 2024. Accessed at:

she began her political career in pro-Russian parties such as the Party of Communists (PCRM) and the Party of Socialists (PSRM), Vlah has gradually distanced herself from them, and in November 2023, she launched the civic organization "Moldova Platform".³⁶ At its launch, Vlah emphasized her pro-European stance, stating: "My political experience shows that Moldova's future lies in Europe—this is not just a slogan or a symbol displayed on buildings".³⁷ Despite this pro-European rhetoric, she continued to make frequent visits to the Russian Federation between January 2023 and January 2024, using indirect routes through Istanbul or Yerevan.³⁸ Vlah accused the current pro-European government of establishing a "dictatorship" and of "discriminating" against "territories inhabited by citizens with views different from those of the government," although she avoided explicitly referring to Gagauzia's autonomy.³⁹ In recent statements, Vlah has increasingly highlighted the risk of Moldova becoming involved in a conflict, particularly due to the increased defense budget, and has called for the strengthening of the country's neutral status.⁴⁰ She also urged her supporters to vote "no" in the referendum on EU accession.

Other candidates in the presidential race include Ion Chicu, former minister during the period when oligarch Vlad Plahotniuc held political control in the country and prime minister during Igor Dodon's presidency; Vasile Tarlev, who served as prime minister from 2001 to 2008, under the communist government and the presidency of Vladimir Voronin; Journalist Natalia Morari, highly active on social media and supported by oligarch Veaceslav Platon; as well as former prosecutor Victoria Furtuna, who launched her campaign with a video filmed in Suvorov Square in Tiraspol. Furtuna claims that the current government in Chisinau is seeking to involve Moldova in the conflict in Ukraine, including by reactivating tensions in the Transnistrian region.⁴¹ Although these candidates score very modestly in the polls, they are playing an active role in the campaign to discredit President Maia Sandu, attacking her almost exclusively and calling for a boycott of the referendum on European integration.

<https://watchdog.md/polls/208313/cine-sunt-favoritii-in-cursa-alegerilor-prezidentiale-si-a-celor-parlamentare/>

³⁶ "Former Bashkan of Gagauzia, Irina Vlah, launches the Public Association "Platforma Moldova": a socio-political project", *Ziarul de Gardă*, November 16, 2023. Accessed at:

<https://www.zdg.md/stiri/politic/fosta-bascan-a-gagauziei-irina-vlah-se-lanseaza-in-politica-nationala-cu-propriul-partid/>

³⁷ Irina Vlah, "My experience in politics", Facebook, November 15, 2023. Accessed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=898453464977275&set=a.407691097386850>

³⁸ Măriuța Nistor, "Irina Vlah, "pro-European" on the Chisinau-Moscow route. Unanswered questions", *Ziarul de Gardă*, March 7, 2024. Accessed at:

<https://www.zdg.md/stiri/video-irina-vlah-pro-europeana-de-pe-cursa-chisinau-moscova-intrebari-fara-raspuns/>

³⁹ "Irina Vlah also announces her presidential candidacy, says she will vote 'no' in referendum", Radio Free Europe Moldova, July 17, 2024. Accessed at:

<https://moldova.europalibera.org/a/si-irina-vlah-isi-anunta-candidatura-la-presedintie-iar-la-referendumul-privind-aderarea-la-ue-va-vota-nu/33039760.html>

⁴⁰ "Irina Vlah: Now is not the time to spend on defense" IPN.md, February 2, 2024. Accessed at:

https://www.ipn.md/ro/irina-vlah-acum-nu-este-momentul-cand-trebuie-sa-8004_1102469.html

⁴¹ Cristian Bolotnicov, "From Tiraspol, former prosecutor Victoria Furtuna announced her presidential candidacy," Radio Free Europe Moldova, July 30, 2024. Accessed at:

<https://moldova.europalibera.org/a/de-la-tiraspol-fosta-procuroare-victoria-furtuna-si-a-anuntat-candidatura-la-prezidentiale/33056540.html>

Another candidate is Octavian Țîcu, supported by the alternative pro-European forces united under the political bloc "Together".⁴² However, his electoral support is around 1-2%, confirming once again that Maia Sandu remains the only pro-European candidate.

Republic of Moldova on the road to reform

In recent years, the Republic of Moldova has stepped up efforts to strengthen the rule of law as part of its commitments in the process of European Union accession. These efforts align with the pledges made by Maia Sandu and her government in 2020 and 2021, which focused on combating corruption and undertaking profound judiciary reforms.

The justice reform, initiated in 2022, entails an extensive external evaluation process for judges and prosecutors in key institutions. The first phase, now completed, involved the evaluation of candidates for the formation of the new composition of the Superior Council of Magistracy (SCM) and the Superior Council of Prosecutors (SCP). The second phase, currently underway, includes the evaluation of judges from the Supreme Court of Justice, the leadership of the General Prosecutor's Office, and other high-ranking judges and prosecutors.⁴³ Final decisions regarding the dismissal of evaluated magistrates will be made by the newly formed SCM and SCP. The evaluation is conducted by a mixed commission, composed of national and international experts, based on two main criteria: ethics and integrity, including a thorough analysis of the assets of magistrates and their families.⁴⁴

The implementation of justice reform in Moldova has faced significant challenges from the outset, with the evaluation process marked by delays and strong opposition from the judiciary. For instance, only 5 out of 28 candidates for the Superior Council of Magistracy (SCM) passed the external evaluation,⁴⁵ and the formation of the new SCM took 21 months. In the case of the Superior Council of Prosecutors (SCP), the process was completed after 13 months. During the second phase of the justice reform, which involves the evaluation of the Supreme Court judges, a significant number of magistrates (20 out of 25) chose to resign before the evaluation procedure began.⁴⁶ A similar situation occurred at the Chisinau Court of Appeal, where 20 out of 40 judges voluntarily resigned before being evaluated.⁴⁷ This trend is driven by the severe consequences of failing the external evaluation, which include losing special pension rights and being barred from holding judicial or prosecutorial positions for a

⁴² Vlad Țurcan, "Octavian Țîcu, candidate of the "Together" bloc for the presidency", Cu Sens, October 2, 2024. Accessed at:

<https://cusens.md/ro/reportaje/octavian-ticu-candidatul-blocului-impreduna-la-functia-de-presedinte/>

⁴³ Aleksandr Nugmanov, "Vetting in Moldova: at what stage is the justice reform and why the results are late in coming" NewsMaker, February 27, 2024. Accessed at:

<https://newsmaker.md/ro/vetting-in-moldova-la-ce-etapa-este-reforma-justitiei-si-de-ce-rezultatele-intarzie-sa-apara-cronologie-nm/>

⁴⁴ Pre-Vetting Commission Members. Accessed at: <https://vetting.md/membrii/>

⁴⁵ "Only 5 out of 28 passed the test. The Pre-Vetting Commission has completed the evaluation of candidates for positions in the SCM from among judges", BIZLAW, February 7, 2023. Accessed at: <https://bizlaw.md/public/doar-5-din-28-au-trecut-testul-comisia-pre-vetting-a-finalizat-evaluarea-candidatilor-la-functii-in-csm-din-randul-judecatorilor>

⁴⁶ Nadejda Coptu, "How much the state will pay for judges' resignations in 2023", Radio Free Europe Moldova, November 2, 2023. Accessed at: <https://moldova.europalibera.org/a/cat-va-plati-statul-pentru-demisiile-judecatorilor-din-2023/32667186.html>

⁴⁷ Nadejda Coptu, "Almost half of the judges of the Chisinau Court of Appeal have resigned to avoid vetting", Radio Free Europe Moldova, May 2, 2024. Accessed at: <https://moldova.europalibera.org/a/aproape-jumatate-din-judecatorii-curtii-de-apel-chisinau-si-au-dat-demisia-pentru-a-evita-vettingul/32930800.html>

period of 5-7 years.⁴⁸ While these mass resignations have temporarily disrupted the functioning of the judicial system, the justice reform continues, with the goal of being completed by the end of 2025.⁴⁹

In addition to justice reform, the Republic of Moldova has made major progress in recent years in strengthening its energy resilience. A crucial step in this regard was the diversification of natural gas supply sources, accelerated by Gazprom's coercive reduction of gas deliveries to the Republic of Moldova.⁵⁰ At the same time, the national gas transportation networks, previously controlled by Gazprom, have been taken over by Vestmoldtransgaz, a company majority-owned by the Romanian operator Transgaz.⁵¹ Another strategic project is the construction of the Vulcanesti-Chisinau power line, which is set to be completed by the end of 2025 and will reduce Moldova's reliance on electricity from the Transnistrian region by enabling electricity imports from Romania. Additionally, two other strategic energy interconnection projects with Romania are underway: the Balti-Suceava power line (expected to be completed in 2027) and the Straseni-Gutinas power line (expected to be completed in 2028).⁵²

At the same time, the Republic of Moldova has undertaken substantial measures to strengthen its resilience against hostile actions from the Russian Federation. In 2023, Chisinau implemented the principle of diplomatic parity in its relations with Moscow, which led to a significant reduction of the Russian diplomatic presence in the country.⁵³ This reduction also diminished the number of undercover FSB and GRU officers.⁵⁴ Also in 2023, Moldova adopted a new National Security Strategy, which, for the first time, identified Russia as a major threat to the Moldovan state.⁵⁵ In July 2023, the Center for Strategic Communication and Countering

⁴⁸ Pavel Păduraru, "What hides the exodus of judges from the system? An allowance of hundreds of thousands of lei and pensions of tens of thousands of lei", Jurnal.md, May 8, 2024. Accessed at: <https://www.jurnal.md/ro/news/02a08b82f4d7586a/ce-ascunde-exodul-judecatorilor-din-sistem-o-indemnizatie-de-sute-de-mii-de-lei-si-pensii-de-zeci-de-mii-de-lei.html>

⁴⁹ "Igor Chiriac: We are determined that justice reform will be completed by the end of 2025", Moldova 1, June 4, 2024. Accessed at: <https://moldova1.md/p/29839/interviu--igor-chiriac-suntem-determinati-ca-reforma-justitiei-sa-se-inceie-la-finele-anului-2025>

⁵⁰ Ministry of Energy, "Natural gas and petroleum products". Accessed at: <https://energie.gov.md/ro/content/gaze-naturale-si-produse-petroliere>

⁵¹ Government of the Republic of Moldova, "CSE decision: gas transmission networks in the Republic of Moldova will be operated by Vestmoldtransgaz", September 5, 2023. Accessed at: <https://gov.md/ro/content/decizia-cse-retelele-de-transport-gazelor-din-republica-moldova-vor-fi-operate-de-catre>

⁵² "Construction of the Vulcanesti - Chisinau power line begins. How much the project will cost and who will implement it", Ziarul de Gardă, March 29, 2024. Accessed at: <https://www.zdg.md/stiri/stiri-economice/incepe-construcia-linii-electrice-vulcanesti-chisinau-cat-costa-proiectul-si-cine-l-va-implementa/>

⁵³ "Diplomatic parity // Employees of the Russian Embassy in Chisinau leave the territory of the Republic of Moldova", IPN.md, August 14, 2023. Accessed at: https://www.ipn.md/ro/paritatea-diplomatica-angajatii-ambasadei-rusiei-la-chisinau-parasesc-teritoriul-7978_1098823.html

⁵⁴ NSC experts' discussions with experts and officials from the Republic of Moldova during the fact-finding visit on September 17-19, 2024

⁵⁵ Cristian Sava, "Russia is the main threat to the Republic of Moldova and the entire region. National Defense Strategy for 2024-2034, approved by the Chisinau government." TVR Moldova, October 5, 2023. Accessed at: <https://tvr Moldova.md/article/6d70923b7d94580a/rusia-este-principala-amenintare-in-adresa-republicii-moldova-si-a-intregii-regiuni-strategia-apararii-nationale-pentru-anii-2024-2034-aprobata-de-guvernul-de-la-chisinau.html>

Disinformation was established, aimed at enhancing inter-institutional cooperation to combat disinformation, information manipulation, and foreign interference.⁵⁶

However, the Republic of Moldova continues to face significant socio-economic challenges, which directly affect the living standards of the population. The economic context, marked by a net minimum wage of 220 euros and a minimum pension of 135 euros, limits the positive impact of these reforms on citizens. Moreover, the country has been affected by a series of crises, including the COVID-19 pandemic, the energy crisis, record inflation of 34%, the war in Ukraine, the influx of refugees, and supply chain disruptions. Opposition forces are exploiting social discontent, arguing that Maia Sandu's pro-European government is responsible for the price increases that have significantly worsened living conditions. Russia is using various criminal networks, primarily those managed by oligarch Ilan Shor, to inject large amounts of cash to fund anti-government demonstrations or buy votes in these elections. For example, in a single night, law enforcement authorities confiscated approximately \$1.2 million in cash found in possession of various individuals arriving by plane from Moscow, and the investigation revealed that this money was intended for destabilizing efforts in Moldova.⁵⁷

Constitutional referendum on EU accession

The referendum on October 20, 2024, promoted under the aegis of the Republic of Moldova's accession to the European Union, is mainly aimed at amending the Constitution.⁵⁸ This democratic mechanism allows the government to bypass the requirement of a constitutional majority of 67 votes needed to amend the Constitution through parliamentary procedure, as the Action and Solidarity Party (PAS) holds only 63 seats. Citizens will be asked the question: "Do you support amending the Constitution for Moldova's accession to the European Union?"⁵⁹

A majority affirmative response will result in the inclusion of a provision in the preamble of the Constitution recognizing the European identity of the people of the Republic of Moldova and the irreversibility of the country's European path. Additionally, EU integration will be enshrined as a national strategic objective. A new chapter titled "European Union accession" will also be introduced into the Constitution. This chapter will specify that Moldova's accession to the EU's founding treaties will be approved by Parliament through an organic law, and after accession, the EU's founding treaties and legally binding acts will take precedence over any conflicting national provisions.⁶⁰

⁵⁶ "The Center for Strategic Communication and Combating Misinformation has been established." Parliament of the Republic of Moldova, October 5, 2023. Accessed at: <https://multimedia.parlament.md/a-fost-instituit-centrul-pentru-comunicare-strategica-si-combatere-a-dezinformatii/>

⁵⁷ NSC experts' discussions with experts and officials from the Republic of Moldova during the fact-finding visit on September 17-19, 2024

⁵⁸ Iurie Rotari, "Explainer: What is the October 20 referendum about?" Radio Free Europe Moldova, August 8, 2024. Accessed at: <https://moldova.europalibera.org/a/explainer-despre-ce-este-referendumul-din-20-octombrie/33069196.html>

⁵⁹ "Voted in Parliament: the exact question we will answer in the referendum." *Anticoruptie.md*, May 17, 2024. Accessed at: <https://anticoruptie.md/ro/stiri/votat-in-parlament-intrebarea-exacta-la-care-vom-raspunde-la-referendum>

⁶⁰ "October 20, 2024, constitutional republican referendum: Citizens will answer the question 'Do you support the amendment of the Constitution with a view to Moldova's accession to the European Union?'" Parliament of the Republic of Moldova, May 16, 2024. Accessed at:

Validation of the referendum is conditional on reaching a turnout threshold of at least 33.3% of the total number of voters registered on the electoral roll, which represents around 1 million citizens.⁶¹ However, statistical data highlights a significant challenge in mobilizing the electorate. In the 2020 presidential election, only 1,364,597 voters participated in the first round, representing a turnout of 48.81%, with around 150,000 votes coming from the diaspora.⁶² The risk of the referendum failing to be validated is heightened by historical precedents, such as the 2010 constitutional referendum to change the process of electing the president, which failed due to insufficient turnout (30.29%).⁶³

According to a survey conducted in July, representative of the entire territory of the Republic of Moldova, 66.1% of respondents stated that they intend to participate in the referendum. Of these, 65.8% would vote "in favor" of amending the Constitution, while 34.2% would vote "against".⁶⁴ In addition, a poll conducted in September shows that 68.3% of the respondents are determined to vote in the referendum, with 63.2% supporting the Republic of Moldova's accession to the European Union.⁶⁵

A favorable outcome in the referendum would grant increased legitimacy to the Republic of Moldova's pro-European orientation, weakening the opposition's ability to promote a pro-Russian political agenda. As a result, the failure of the referendum has become the primary objective for the pro-Russian opposition in the Republic of Moldova this autumn. Boycotting the referendum is likely to be a shared strategy among these forces, aiming to prevent the required participation threshold from being reached and, consequently, to undermine the country's European trajectory.

For example, the Party of Socialists, led by Igor Dodon, has called for a boycott of the referendum, calling it "illegal". Dodon warns that a positive vote would result in the "immediate" loss of part of Moldova's sovereignty to the European Union, suggesting that European directives would automatically be incorporated into national legislation.⁶⁶ The Party for the Development and Consolidation of Moldova (PDCM), led by Ion Chicu, which portrays itself

<https://multimedia.parlament.md/20-octombrie-2024-referendum-republican-constitutional-cetatenii-vor-raspunde-la-intrebarea-sustineti-modificarea-constitutiei-in-vederea-aderarii-republicii-moldova-la-uniunea-eur/>

⁶¹ "PAS explains: what we need to know about referendum validation". Știri.md, September 30, 2024. Accessed at:

<https://stiri.md/article/politica/pasa-explica-ce-trebuie-sa-stim-despre-validarea-referendumului/>

⁶² "Gender analysis: 2020 presidential elections" Central Electoral Commission of the Republic of Moldova, 2021. Accessed at:

https://a.cec.md/storage/ckfinder/files/Analiza%20de%20gen-Preziden%C8%9Biale%202020_web_RO.pdf

⁶³ Lidia Gorka, "Infographic: History of referendums in the Republic of Moldova" TVR Moldova, September 27, 2024. Accessed at:

<https://tvr Moldova.md/article/bd766cb94bfa3806/infografic-istoria-referendumurilor-din-republica-moldova.html>

⁶⁴ Institute for European Policy and Reform (IPRE), "Opinion poll: over 66% of Moldovan citizens intend to participate in the constitutional referendum on Moldova's accession to the EU" July 30, 2024. Accessed at:

<https://ipre.md/2024/07/30/sondaj-de-opinie-pestre-66-dintre-cetatenii-moldoveni-intentioneaza-sa-participe-la-referendumul-constitutional-privind-aderarea-republicii-moldova-la-ue/>

⁶⁵ CBS-Research, "Socio-Political Poll September 2024," WatchDog, September 23, 2024. Accessed at: <https://watchdog.md/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Prezentare-Sondaj-Septembrie-2024.pdf>

⁶⁶ Party of Socialists of the Republic of Moldova, "PSRM urges the country's citizens not to participate in the October 20 referendum," July 10, 2024. Accessed at:

<https://socialistii.md/psrm-prizyvaet-grazhdan-strany-ne-uchastvovat-na-referendume-20-oktjabrja/>

as pro-European, also advocates boycotting the referendum.⁶⁷ On the other hand, the "Victoria" bloc, controlled by fugitive oligarch Ilan Shor, urged voters to participate in the referendum and vote "against", arguing that EU accession would turn Moldova into a "periphery of Romania". Shor has suggested that his supporters back the Eurasian Economic Union to protect the "remnants of Moldovan identity". Meanwhile, Irina Vlah, former Bashkan of Gagauzia, urged voters to vote "no" in the referendum, while Renato Usatii has not yet expressed an official position.⁶⁸

Russian interference

The Russian Federation is intensifying hybrid attacks against the Republic of Moldova as the presidential elections and constitutional referendum approach. The Kremlin is primarily conducting these actions through the Shor Group, employing strategies focused on two key objectives: corrupting the electorate and spreading disinformation, with the aim of discouraging voter turnout at the referendum.⁶⁹ Although the Shor Party was declared illegal by the Constitutional Court in June 2023, fugitive oligarch Ilan Shor subsequently established several political entities, which were united in April 2024 in Moscow under the political bloc "Victory".⁷⁰

For a period of time, the Shor Group exploited a legal provision that allows individuals to carry up to 10,000 euros in cash across the border without the need to declare the source of the money. Using "couriers" who made repeated trips to Moscow, the group transferred significant funds intended to finance anti-government protests and bribe voters, particularly those in financially vulnerable situations. In response to the authorities' efforts to limit cash transfers, the Shor Group adopted new methods of illicit financing. These include the use of Russian MIR bank cards and the opening of accounts for civil servants and pensioners in Gagauzia at the Russian Promsvyazbank, led by Petr Fradkov, son of former Prime Minister and former head of the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service Mikhail Fradkov. These accounts are topped up monthly with 2,000 MDL as "allowances" from the Moscow-based non-profit organization "Eurasia," which has direct ties to Ilan Shor.⁷¹ Recently, the Shor Group has implemented an additional illicit funding mechanism, involving the signing of so-called

⁶⁷ Ana-Maria Dolghii, "Supports European integration but boycotts the referendum. Chicu explains party's decision." Newsmaker, June 24, 2024. Accessed at: <https://newsmaker.md/ro/sustine-integrarea-europeana-dar-boicoteaza-referendumul-chicu-explica-decizia-partidului/>

⁶⁸ Iurie Rotari, "Yes or no: Where do the parties stand on the referendum on European integration?" Radio Free Europe Moldova, July 19, 2024. Accessed at: <https://moldova.europalibera.org/a/da-sau-ba-ce-pozitie-au-luat-partidele-fata-de-referendumul-privind-integrarea-europeana/33040974.html>

⁶⁹ Information and Security Service of the Republic of Moldova, "Assessment of the Russian Federation's Involvement in the Electoral Processes in the Republic of Moldova in 2024-2025", March 5, 2024. Accessed at: <https://sis.md/sites/default/files/comunicate/fisiere/Scenarii%20de%20influen%C8%9B%C4%83%202024-2025.pdf>

⁷⁰ "Fugitive Ilan Shor gathered his clone party leaders in Moscow to create a common political bloc" TV8, April 21, 2024. Accessed at: <https://tv8.md/2024/04/21/foto-fugarul-ilan-sor-si-a-adunat-liderii-partidelor-clona-la-moscova-pentru-a-crea-un-bloc-politic-comun/256042>

⁷¹ "Kremlin buys Gagauzia and Orhei with MIR cards? NBM admits existence of cross-border transfer platforms." Bani.md, June 13, 2024. Accessed at: <https://bani.md/kremlinul-cumpara-gagauzia-si-orheiul-cu-carduri-mir-bnm-admite-existent-platformelor-transferurilor-transfrontaliere/>

"employment contracts" with Moldovan citizens, disguised as voluntary activities for the "Eurasia" organization.⁷²

In August, anti-corruption prosecutors conducted searches at the homes of alleged "volunteers" associated with Ilan Shor, launching a criminal investigation into the illegal financing of political parties and money laundering by an organized criminal group.⁷³ The investigations revealed that these individuals were receiving monthly payments from obscure sources for activities aimed at influencing the presidential elections, including organizing demonstrations and protests.⁷⁴ Stanislav Secieru, the presidential adviser on defense and national security issues, estimated that Russia could allocate up to 100 million euros to interfere in this year's presidential elections and referendum.⁷⁵

Although the authorities have managed to prevent violence during protests organized by the Shor Group over the past two years, including in managing complex relations with the Gagauz region, the group continues to strengthen its electoral influence by creating a base of financially dependent voters. The primary objective is to influence the presidential elections and referendum, but especially the 2025 parliamentary elections. Viorel Cernauteanu, head of the General Police Inspectorate, stated that in September alone, 15 million dollars from the Russian Federation were transferred to the Republic of Moldova, money intended for voter bribery. According to police data, some 130,000 people are involved in this electoral fraud scheme.⁷⁶ It is estimated that the Shor group aims to control around 300,000 votes, which could be manipulated in favor of any candidate or political party aligned with the group.⁷⁷ A precedent was set in the 2023 local elections, when Tatiana Cociu, the alternative candidate backed by the Shor Group, a relatively unknown figure, won the Orhei mayoralty in the first

⁷² "DOC: A new scheme hatched by the criminal group Shor. How the fugitive oligarch is trying to legalize money brought from Russia." Nord News, June 26, 2024. Accessed at: <https://nordnews.md/investigatii/doc-o-noua-schema-pusa-la-cale-de-gruparea-criminala-sor-cum-incearca-oligarhul-fugar-sa-legalizeze-banii-adusi-din-rusia/>

⁷³ "God, give Putin the power to take Odessa and us.' NAC transcript from the case opened on illegal financing of political parties, money laundering and falsification of financial reports." *Ziarul de Gardă*, October 1, 2024. Accessed at: <https://www.zdg.md/stiri/doamne-da-i-lui-putin-puterea-sa-ia-odesa-si-pe-noi-stenograma-cna-din-dosarul-pornit-pe-finantarea-ilegala-a-partidelor-politice-spalare-de-bani-si-falsificarea-rapoartelor-finan/>

⁷⁴ "Five people detained following more than 50 raids in files opened in connection with the illegal financing of political parties, money laundering and falsification of financial reports." *Ziarul de Gardă*, October 1, 2024. Accessed at: <https://www.zdg.md/stiri/stiri-justitie/cinci-persoane-retinute-in-urma-a-pestre-50-de-perchezitii-desfasurate-in-cadrul-unor-dosare-pornite-pe-finantarea-ilegala-a-partidelor-politice-spalare-de-bani-si-falsificarea-rapoartelor-financiare/>

⁷⁵ Gabriel Gavin, "Moldova accuses Russia of trying to rig its EU referendum," Politico, September 27, 2024. Accessed at: <https://www.politico.eu/article/moldova-russia-eu-referendum-membership-social-media/>

⁷⁶ "15 million dollars transferred from Russia to corrupt Moldovan voters." IPN.md, October 3, 2024. Accessed at: https://www.ipn.md/ro/15-milioane-de-dolari-transferati-din-rusia-pentru-coruperea-8013_1107753.html

⁷⁷ NSC experts' discussions with experts and officials from the Republic of Moldova during the fact-finding visit on September 17-19, 2024

round after the main candidate, Alexei Lungu, was excluded from the race by a decision of the Central Electoral Commission (CEC).⁷⁸

The large number of candidates with pro-Russian ties underlines the fact that for Moscow, the main stake is not to win the presidential elections but to undermine the constitutional referendum. This goal becomes much easier to achieve when there are 7-8 candidates running a complex disinformation campaign, exploiting people's vulnerabilities and fears. Among the propagandist narratives are alarmist scenarios about Moldova's involvement in the war in Ukraine or the escalation of the Transnistrian conflict if the country joins the European Union.⁷⁹ In addition, false information is spread about the authorities' alleged intention to sell agricultural land to European companies.⁸⁰ Another sensitive issue being exploited is the perceived threat to traditional values, including rumors about the closure of the Moldovan Orthodox Church and the promotion of the LGBT agenda in schools.⁸¹ By choosing these themes, Russia seeks to instill fear and uncertainty among citizens, aiming to undermine confidence in Moldova's European path and influence the outcome of the referendum.

Conclusions

The presidential elections on 20 October 2024 have significant geopolitical stakes, heightened by the decision to hold a constitutional referendum to amend the Constitution with a view to joining the European Union. The Central Electoral Commission has registered a total of 11 candidates for this election. Maia Sandu, the current pro-European president of the Republic of Moldova, remains the undisputed leader in the polls, despite facing high levels of public distrust, primarily due to rising prices and the slow pace of reforms, particularly in the justice sector.

The Russian Federation's interference in the elections in the Republic of Moldova has reached an unprecedented level and the organization of the constitutional referendum has led to a change of strategy on Moscow's part. Russia is exerting its influence by using a considerable number of candidates, some of whom present themselves as pro-European, in order to conduct a complex disinformation campaign. The central objective of this campaign is to influence the outcome of the referendum, in particular by preventing the referendum from reaching the validity threshold of 33.3%, so that it is declared null and void, undermining and discrediting the pro-European course of the Republic of Moldova. The disinformation campaign exploits citizens' vulnerabilities and fears, amplifying concerns about Moldova's

⁷⁸ Cristian Bolotnicov, "Plan B worked? In Orhei the candidate affiliated with Ilan Shor won the mayor's office and the majority in the council. PAS wins at the district level," Agora, November 6, 2023. Accessed at:

<https://agora.md/2023/11/06/planul-b-a-dat-roade-la-orhei-candidata-afiliata-lui-ilan-sor-a-castigat-primaria-si-majoritatea-in-consiliu-pas-castiga-la-nivel-raional>

⁷⁹ "Falsehood promoted by Russian propaganda: Moldova will be drawn into war if it joins the EU" TV8, October 2, 2024. Accessed at:

<https://tv8.md/2024/10/02/video-fals-promovat-de-propaganda-rusiei-moldova-va-fi-atrasa-in-razboi-daca-va-adera-la-ue/266576>

⁸⁰ "President Maia Sandu and Prime Minister Dorin Eecan deny allegations of possible sale of land to foreign citizens", Infotag, September 30, 2024. Accessed at:

<https://www.infotag.md/economics-ro/319191/>

⁸¹ Eugenia Apostu, "Three days of fasting and 'sporadic prayer' against the ban on the Moldovan Metropolitan", Radio Free Europe Moldova, September 25, 2024. Accessed at:

<https://moldova.europalibera.org/a/trei-zile-de-post-si-rugaciune-spornica-impotriva-interzicerii-mitropoliei-moldovei/33134755.html>

potential involvement in the war in Ukraine, the escalation of tensions in the Transnistrian region, erosion of national identity, or the promotion of an LGBT agenda. The Shor group, led by exiled oligarch Ilan Shor from Moscow, serves as Russia's main tool for influencing the Moldovan electorate. Through illegal mechanisms, large sums of money are funneled into the country, aimed at bribing financially vulnerable voters. These votes are then manipulated in Moscow's interests with the intention of influencing the election results in favor of a pro-Russian political agenda.

The constitutional referendum has the potential to strengthen the Republic of Moldova's pro-European orientation, anchoring this goal in the country's constitutional framework. However, there is a risk that the outcome could lead to increased political instability. The wording of the referendum question focuses on the revision of the Constitution, rather than on a clear decision for or against European Union accession. Thus, an unfavorable outcome should not be automatically interpreted as a rejection of the pro-European direction, but rather as an expression of hesitancy towards constitutional changes—a hesitancy that has been fueled by an extensive disinformation campaign.

After the presidential elections and referendum, the Republic of Moldova will prepare for parliamentary elections in 2025. The outcome now will of course influence next year's vote, with the ultimate stakes being a pro-reform, pro-Western president and government, or a president isolated on the international political scene and a government closer to Moscow, which could undermine Moldova's path to the European Union through controversial initiatives. The example of Georgia also hovers over the Republic of Moldova, and reality shows us that Russia is carrying out extensive hybrid operations in order to maintain its influence in the countries of the post-Soviet space, which it views as its direct and non-negotiable sphere of influence. The European Union and the countries of the democratic world must support the Republic of Moldova in withstanding this tremendous assault from Russia. The citizens of the Republic of Moldova must choose their own future, without the pressure or bribery of criminal structures that Russian intelligence services are using to destroy the stability of this small country as it seeks to break free from Moscow's influence.

