MAIA SANDU, IMPORTANT VICTORY IN MOLDOVA'S PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS

Russia loses, but doesn't give up

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Cover: Rift between the flags of Republic of Moldova and Russia - image created with ChatGPT, Maia Sandu, source: Reuters

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Maia Sandu, Important Victory in the Republic of Moldova's Presidential Elections

Russia Loses, but Doesn't Give Up

Clear victory for incumbent President Maia Sandu

Maia Sandu, the incumbent president of the Republic of Moldova, succeeded in winning the second round of the presidential elections on Sunday, November 3, securing 929,964 votes (55.33%). Her opponent, Alexandr Stoianoglo, who was strongly supported by pro-Russian parties and networks of criminal structures backed by Russian intelligence services, received 750,644 votes (44.67%).

Figure 1. Maia Sandu has been re-elected as President of the Republic of Moldova[1]

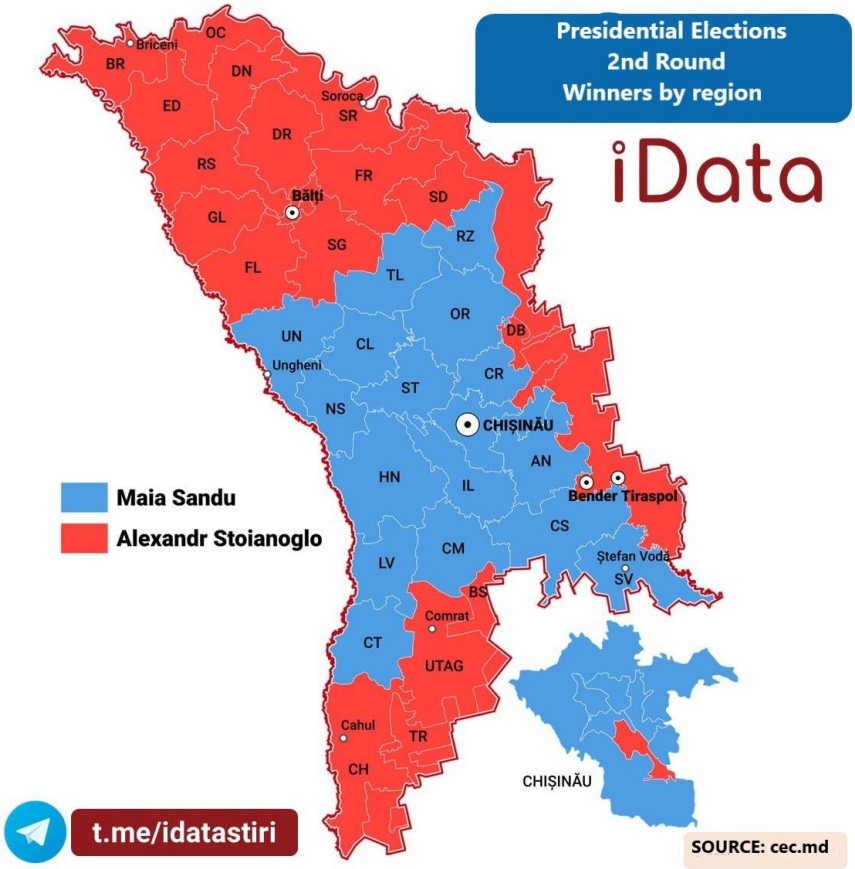
A total of 1,699,945 citizens of the Republic of Moldova cast their votes, both within the country and in the diaspora, representing 54.34% of the total electorate. Voter turnout in the diaspora was substantial, with 328,887 voters, accounting for 19.35% of the total turnout, marking a historic high. On the national territory, Alexandr Stoianoglo emerged as the winner with 51.33% of the votes, while Maia Sandu managed to overturn the result thanks to the overwhelming support from the diaspora, where she received 82.83% of the votes. Young people participated massively in the diaspora, with nearly 40,000 voters

1 Maia Sandu, 'Today, with gratitude and responsibility, I have once again received your trust to continue the path we have chosen together,' Facebook, December 24, 2024. https://shorturl.at/GbofN

in the 18-25 age group and almost 90,000 in the 26-35 age group, making up one-third of the total voters in these age categories.

Unlike in previous elections, there was a significantly higher voter turnout in Russia and certain CIS states, such as Belarus and Azerbaijan. This increased mobilization was exclusively due to organized crime networks associated with oligarch Ilan Shor, who facilitated voter transportation from Russia using charter flights to Minsk, Baku, and Istanbul. While Maia Sandu lost in these locations, the result did not substantially affect her overall score in the diaspora. In Chisinau, the capital of the Republic of Moldova, voter turnout slightly exceeded the national average, reaching 56.35%. The majority of votes cast favored Maia Sandu, who garnered 57.38% of the votes. Maia Sandu and Alexandr Stoianoglo shared equal support across the country's districts (administrative units), each winning in 16 districts. Stoianoglo received considerable support in Gagauzia, securing 97.04% of the votes, largely due to his Gagauz ethnic background, as well as in Transnistria, where he obtained 79.40%. In both regions, heavily influenced by Russian anti-Western narratives, voter turnout was strong; Transnistria recorded 11,000 more voters than in the first round, while in Gagauzia, Alexandr Stoianoglo doubled his votes, receiving support from nearly 64,000 people. Additionally, Alexandr Stoianoglo won in the country’s second-largest urban center under constitutional control, the municipality of Balti, where he achieved 69.98% of the votes. It is also noteworthy that Maia Sandu won in Orhei district, obtaining 52.24% of the vote, despite Orhei being considered a stronghold of the influential oligarch Ilan Shor.[2]

[2] Central Electoral Commission, "Presidential Election Results," CEC, November 4, 2024. https://pv.cec.md/cec-presidential-results-tour2.html



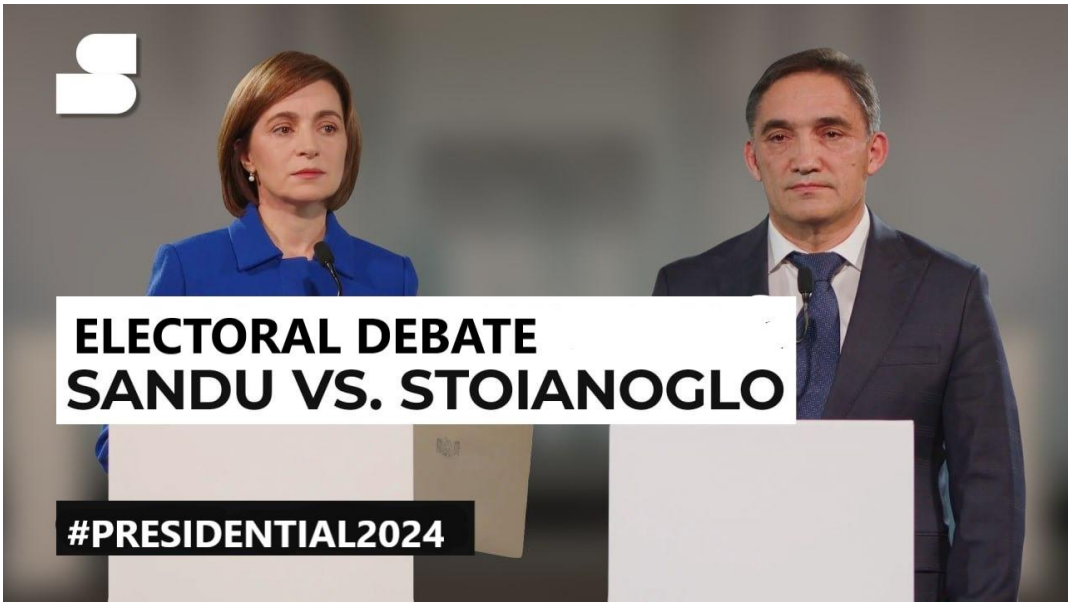
(Figure 2. Winners by region)[3]

Intense political confrontation over the past two weeks

Most candidates who did not advance to the second round of the elections declared their support for Alexandr Stoianoglo. The only candidate who urged voters to support Maia Sandu was historian Octavian Ticu, representing the pro-European bloc "Together." In the first round, he received a modest 14,326 votes, or 0.97% of the total, compared to the other candidates.[4] In contrast, Stoianoglo received the open support of five former candidates – Irina Vlah, Victoria Furtuna, Vasile Tarlev, Ion Chicu, and Natalia Morari – all affiliated with the influence network surrounding Igor Dodon, the pro-Russian former president of the Republic of Moldova defeated by Maia Sandu in 2020, and the exiled pro-Russian oligarchs Ilan Shor and Veaceslav Platon. Together, these candidates accumulated 242,502 votes, or 15.69% of the total, providing substantial support to Stoianoglo, who had garnered 401,215 votes (42.45%) in the first round.[5] Renato Usatii, a controversial politician with populist rhetoric, who came in third with 13.79% of the votes

[3] IData, "Results by District", *Telegram*, November 3, 2024. https://t.me/idatastiri/173
[4] Olga Bejan, "Octavian Ticu and Iurie Renita Urge Bloc 'Together' Supporters to Vote for Maia Sandu," *Stiripesurse.md*, October 30, 2024. https://stiripesurse.md/video-octavian-ticu-si-iurie-renita-indeamna-sustinatorii-blocului-impreuna-sa-o-voteze-pe-maia-sandu/
[5] Iurie Rotari, "Almost All Against Maia Sandu: Who the Presidential Candidates Support in the Second Round", *Radio Free Europe Moldova*, October 31, 2024. https://moldova.europalibera.org/a/aproape-toti-impotriva-maiei-sandu-pe-cine-sustin-in-turul-doi-candidatii-la-prezidentialele/33181627.html

(213,169 votes), chose not to endorse either candidate in the second round, describing them as "equally weak" and advising his supporters to vote as they wished.[6]



(Figure 3. Electoral Debate: Maia Sandu vs. Alexandr Stoianoglo)[7]

On October 27, the only electoral debate between the two candidates took place, without a moderator. This format was arranged as a compromise solution after Stoianoglo's team rejected the proposal for a neutral moderator. Sandu dominated the discussion, referring to Stoianoglo as a "Trojan horse" for Russian influence in Moldova and demanding explanations for several controversial decisions made during his time as Prosecutor General, including the release of oligarch Veaceslav Platon and his refusal to use incriminating evidence in which former president Igor Dodon allegedly received around $600,000 from oligarch Vlad Plahotniuc. In an attempt to appeal to the pro-European electorate, Stoianoglo expressed support for Moldova's European integration and acknowledged Romania as a primary strategic partner, despite having boycotted the October 20 referendum. His pro-Russian stance was highlighted when he criticized the sanctions imposed on Russia and argued that Moldova should pursue a "balanced" foreign policy, maintaining open relations with both Russia and China to ensure the country's economic and strategic stability.[8] Additionally, in a statement made after voting

[6] "Where Will Usatii's Over 200,000 Votes Go in the Second Round? The Third-Place Candidate Announces His Decision", *Ziarul de Gardă*, October 28, 2024. https://www.zdg.md/stiri/politic/la-care-dintre-candidati-vor-merge-in-turul-ii-cele-peste-200-de-mii-de-voturi-date-lui-usatii-candidatul-clasat-pe-locul-3-si-a-anuntat-decizia/

[7] Cu Sens, "Electoral Debate: Maia Sandu vs. Alexandr Stoianoglo", *Telegram*, October 27, 2024. https://t.me/cusens/336

[8] "Electoral Debate Between Presidential Candidates Maia Sandu and Alexandr Stoianoglo", *Privesc.eu*, October 27, 2024. https://www.privesc.eu/arhiva/107295/Dezbatere-electorala-intre-candidatii-la-functia-de-presedinte-al-Republicii-Moldova--Maia-Sandu-si-Alexandr-Stoianoglo

on November 3, Stoianoglo addressed citizens in Russian, advocating for "independence" and good relations "with both the West and the East".[9]

Russia's massive election interference

The Russian Federation's interference in attempting to influence the outcome of the presidential elections in the Republic of Moldova reached an unprecedented level. In addition to implementing voter bribery strategies on national territory, free charter flights were organized from Russia to Belarus, Azerbaijan, and Türkiye, aimed at increasing the number of voters in favor of Alexandr Stoianoglo.[10] Additionally, several buses carrying Moldovan citizens returning from Russia crossed the border on the night of November 1 to 2. According to information provided by the General Police Inspectorate, these citizens initially landed at Istanbul Airport, from where they were transported for free to the Republic of Moldova.[11] Moreover, false bomb alerts were reported at multiple polling stations in Germany, the United Kingdom, and Romania, intending to disrupt the voting process among Moldovan citizens residing in the European Union.[12] Nationally, approximately 200 violations were reported on election day, including at least 25 instances of attempted voter bribery.[13]

On October 24, Viorel Cernauteanu, head of the General Police Inspectorate, disclosed new details regarding voter bribery actions conducted through Promsvyazbank (PSB Bank), a Russian bank whose CEO, Piotr Fradkov, is the son of former Prime Minister and head of the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service, Mikhail Fradkov. According to Cernauteanu, the preparations began in late spring, involving the distribution of specific applications via private Telegram groups. The Republic of Moldova was divided into several responsibility zones, each overseen by a coordinator from the Shor group. A dedicated Telegram group was created for each zone, and access was granted only to individuals who presented identification and had residence in the respective area.

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[9] Alina Cotoros, "Alexandr Stoianoglo Voted for 'A Moldova with Relations with East and West.' His Statement on Putin's Potential Arrest", *Adevărul.ro*, November 3, 2024. https://adevarul.ro/stiri-externe/republica-moldova/alexandr-stoianoglo-a-votat-pentru-o-moldova-cu-2398985.html

[10] IGP, "Organized Air Transportation of Voters from Russia to Belarus, Azerbaijan, and Türkiye", *Jurnal.md*, November 3, 2024. https://www.jurnal.md/ro/news/28bf7d1b107768b4/igp-transportare-organizata-a-alegatorilor-pe-cale-aeriana-din-rusia-catre-belarus-azerbaidjan-si-turcia.html

[11] Andreea Josan, "Moldovans in Russia Return Home for the Elections. Several Buses Crossed the Border: 'We Note Organized Transportation'," *TV8*, November 2, 2024. https://tv8.md/2024/11/02/moldovenii-din-rusia-se-intorc-acasa-de-alegeri-mai-multe-autocare-au-trecut-frontiera-constatam-o-transportare-organizata/268757

[12] "False Bomb Alerts at Multiple Polling Stations in Germany and the United Kingdom", *Radio Free Europe Moldova*, November 3, 2024. https://moldova.europalibera.org/a/alerte-false-cu-bomba-la-mai-multe-sectii-de-votare-din-germania-si-marea-britanie/33185799.html

[13] "Almost 200 Electoral Violations Documented by Police Two Hours Before Polling Stations Closed", *Jurnal.md*, November 3, 2024. https://www.jurnal.md/ro/news/f42c23c4a6822890/aproape-200-de-incalcari-electorale-documentate-de-politisti-cu-2-ore-inainte-de-inchiderea-sectiilor-de-vot.html

(Figure 4. Searches conducted by police officers and prosecutors in the Republic of Moldova)[14]

In October, the police documented and suspended the activity of 97 such groups. According to authorities, over 1.4 million transactions were conducted through PSB Bank, and by October 23, a total of 138,448 unique phone numbers from the Republic of Moldova had interacted with the Russian bank. Cernauteanu specified that the number of phone contacts facilitated through PSB Bank does not necessarily reflect the actual number of individuals involved, as money transfers were often made on behalf of other beneficiaries.

Authorities in Chișinău estimate that at least 39 million dollars were allocated to sway the electorate, with over 24 million distributed in October and 15 million in September. In the week leading up to the elections, police conducted raids to halt vote-buying with cash, seizing substantial sums across 19 districts in the Republic of Moldova as part of efforts to prevent interference in the second round of elections.[15] Additionally, video recordings and investigations by journalists who infiltrated these networks were published, revealing how voters—primarily elderly individuals—were paid and encouraged to vote for Alexandr Stoianoglo in the second round of the elections.[16]

Next battle: parliamentary elections in 2025

For pro-European forces, Maia Sandu's victory in the presidential elections does not mark a complete defeat of Russia's attempts to destabilize the country. The 2025 parliamentary elections will offer Russia a new opportunity to undermine Moldova's pro-European trajectory and establish a parliamentary majority capable of obstructing the reform process initiated by President Maia Sandu and the pro-European government. Russia may attempt to replicate the situation seen in Georgia, where the pro-Western president, Salome Zourabichvili, has been politically isolated, while the government and its parliamentary majority pass controversial legislation on human rights, slow down

[14] Moldovan Police, "IGP: Over 20 Searches Conducted and 2 People Detained in Connection with Ongoing Criminal Investigations into Illegal Funding and Electoral Corruption," *Politia.md*, November 1, 2024. https://politia.md/ro/content/igp-peste-20-de-perchezitii-efectuate-si-2-persoane-retinute-temeiul-mai-multor-cauze-penale

[15] "Press Briefing by General Police Inspectorate Chief Viorel Cernăuțeanu", *Privesc.eu*, October 24, 2024. https://privesc.eu/arhiva/107290/Briefing-de-presa-sustinut-de-seful-Inspectoratului-General-al-Politiei--Viorel-Cernauteanu

[16] Ana-Maria Dolghii, "Shor's Network List Leaked to the Public? Clarifications from the Police and Anti-Corruption Prosecutor's Office", *NewsMaker*, October 25, 2024. https://newsmaker.md/ro/lista-cu-reteaua-lui-sor-scursa-in-spatiul-public-precizarile-politiei-si-procuraturii-anticoruptie/

reforms, and engage in conflict with the EU and the U.S. Without resorting to military intervention, Russia has effectively stalled Georgia's progress toward EU integration, achieving a significant strategic victory in its confrontation with the West.

For the ruling Party of Action and Solidarity (PAS) in the Republic of Moldova, supported by President Maia Sandu, the main challenge will not only be securing a victory in the 2025 parliamentary elections but, more critically, forming a parliamentary majority committed to a reformist agenda essential for advancing the country's European integration. A key factor in the upcoming elections will be the positioning of the National Alternative Movement Party, led by Chisinau Mayor Ion Ceban, who could significantly influence the balance of power. Although Ion Ceban has a controversial political background—as a former member of the Communist Party and later the Socialist Party, and accused by independent media of meetings with FSB agents[17]—he now presents himself as a committed pro-European. As Mayor of Chisinau, Ceban has demonstrated an ability to collaborate effectively with Romanian officials and attract investments from the European Union. He has held numerous meetings with mayors, county council leaders, and Romanian politicians, particularly from the Social Democratic Party (PSD), currently in power in Romania.[18] At the same time, Ceban stands out as a critic of PAS, and as the 2025 parliamentary elections approach, his party is expected to position itself as an alternative political force to the current government. During the second round of the presidential elections, his statement was neutral, refraining from criticizing the incumbent president and merely encouraging citizens to vote.[19]

Russia's hybrid warfare will not cease. The gas blackmail

The Russian Federation will launch new large-scale hybrid actions to undermine the pro-European government's chances in the upcoming elections. There is a very high possibility that Moscow may trigger a new energy crisis, especially in light of Ukraine's decision not to renew its gas transit contract with Gazprom after December 31, 2024. This could disrupt or limit access to Russian-supplied gas for the separatist region of Transnistria, which has benefited from free Russian gas since its establishment 30 years ago, potentially sparking significant social issues. This concern extends beyond gas for domestic consumption, to the gas used in Transnistria's industrial sector. The steel plant and cement factory in Rybnitsa, along with the power generation plant in Cuciurgani—all reliant on free Russian gas—are the main contributors to the regional budget. These facilities ensure the stability of the separatist region by generating the revenue needed to support public expenditures in Transnistria.

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[17] Cristina Mirca, "Having Coffee with FSB Political Technologists: Chișinău Mayor Ion Ceban Allegedly Advised by Moscow Operative", *TVR Moldova*, November 1, 2023. https://tvrmoldova.md/article/9393645ab28e2806/foto-video-la-cafea-cu-polit-tehnologii-fsb-ului-primarul-ion-ceban-ar-fi-consiliat-de-oamenii-moscovei.html

[18] Alexandru Damian, Dragos Ilie, "Ion Ceban's Adventures in Romania", *Romanian Center for European Policies*, December 19, 2022. https://www.crpe.ro/ro/aventurile-lui-ion-ceban-in-romania/

[19] "Ion Ceban Voted: How the Chisinau Mayor (Did Not) Campaign for the EU Integration Referendum", *Ziarul de Gardă*, October 20, 2024. https://www.zdg.md/stiri/politic/ion-ceban-a-votat-cum-nu-a-facut-campanie-primarul-capitalei-pentru-referendumul-privind-integrarea-europeana/

(Figure 5. Transnistrian and Gagauzia regions)[20]

Russia may place the blame on Ukraine for the situation, possibly claiming that it can no longer transport gas through the hub in the city of Sudzha, located in the Ukrainian-occupied area of the Kursk region. This could lead to an energy and social crisis, forcing Chisinau to handle a difficult situation just before the parliamentary elections. The Republic of Moldova lacks the financial resources to ensure the stability of Transnistria, a region with 366,532 inhabitants, and will therefore need rapid assistance from the EU, particularly from Romania.[21] Additionally, the Cuciurgan power plant, located in Transnistria, supplies electricity to the Republic of Moldova at below-market prices, benefiting from a substantial margin due to the absence of raw material costs. Therefore, beyond exerting pressure on the Chisinau government to manage a humanitarian crisis in Transnistria, Russia also has the potential to create an energy crisis in Moldova. According to Moldovan Energy Minister Victor Parlicov, Russian gas could be supplied to Transnistria via the Turkey-Bulgaria-Romania route. However, uncertainties remain regarding Gazprom's intentions to redirect supplies this way, as Gazprom has yet to reserve any gas transit capacity along the proposed route.[22] Another solution would be for Moldova to negotiate a transit contract with Ukraine to receive gas directly from the Russian-Ukrainian border, paying transit fees directly to Ukraine, thereby excluding Gazprom from the process. Negotiations have taken place between

[20] Generated using Grok AI at the request of New Strategy Center, January 16, 2024

[21] Government of the Republic of Moldova, "Over 357,000 Residents of the Transnistrian Region Are Citizens of the Republic of Moldova", January 31, 2024. https://gov.md/ro/content/peste-357-mii-de-locuitori-din-regiunea-transnistreana-sunt-cetateni-ai-republicii-moldova

[22] Victor Parlicov, "Gas Can Be Brought to the Transnistrian Region via Türkiye", *Știri.md*, August 13, 2024. https://stiri.md/article/economic/victor-parlicov-gazul-poate-fi-adus-in-regiunea-transnistreana-prin-turcia/

Moldovagaz and Gazprom in St. Petersburg, but no agreement has been reached so far.[23]

Russia will continue its actions to destabilize the Republic of Moldova

The coming months will be crucial for the Republic of Moldova, requiring unity among all pro-European forces and a higher level of political maturity from pro-European politicians. Compared to the first round of the 2020 presidential elections, Maia Sandu secured nearly 170,000 more votes in the first round of 2024, reflecting a significant increase in electoral support. However, the challenges of this election cycle have been amplified not only by attempts to manipulate the electorate but also by a genuine protest vote against the PAS party, which gained a parliamentary majority in 2021. Since 2020, the Republic of Moldova has endured an extremely challenging economic and social period, marked by the Covid-19 crisis, followed by the European energy crisis driven by Russia, the war in Ukraine, and a record inflation rate of 34%—all of which have eroded public confidence in the government. Maia Sandu will need to implement government reshuffles, accelerate key reforms, and simultaneously support the development of a democratic opposition capable of attracting votes from discontented pro-European voters. These efforts are essential to increase the likelihood of forming a reformist majority after the elections.

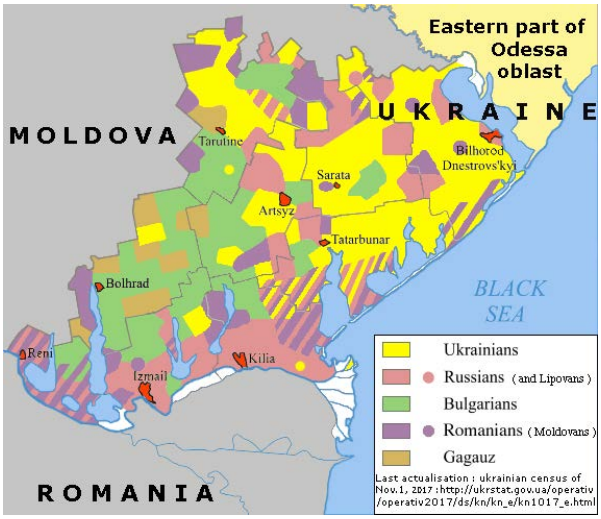
Ensuring the integrity of the electoral process is essential, particularly with the 2025 parliamentary elections approaching. The persistence of electoral corruption practices could turn the Republic of Moldova into a state where elections lose their significance, and results are dominated by a single force. This reality would severely undermine the country's pro-European trajectory, signaling instability, insecurity, and an inability to uphold the rule of law.

It should be noted that Russia has refined its tactics, continuing to support politicians and parties with a pro-Russian profile and rhetoric, while simultaneously building support for certain politicians who present themselves as open to pro-European ideals. This strategy aims to expand Russia’s electoral base, drawing votes from various segments of the Moldovan electorate. For Moscow, the new government formed after the 2025 parliamentary elections does not necessarily need to be overtly pro-Russian; instead, it should advocate for a polycentric policy that supports re-establishing ties with Moscow and opening up to China. The adoption of controversial laws, as seen in Georgia, would delay the reform process and strain relations with the EU. Ultimately, the narrative will emerge that the EU either does not want Moldova or seeks to impose conditions that threaten its traditions and national identity, positioning a renewed orientation toward Russia as the only viable path, as Moscow claims to accept Moldova as it is.

Such a scenario would strain relations with the EU, and particularly with Romania and Ukraine, Moldova’s neighbors, who would view a new government with potential hostile policies towards both states with deep concern. Ukraine, in particular, would feel threatened, as it risks losing its only non-EU, non-NATO neighbor that has positioned

[23] „Ukraine is being dragged into pipe negotiations”, *Kommersant*, October 25 2024. https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/7264101?from=glavnoe_6

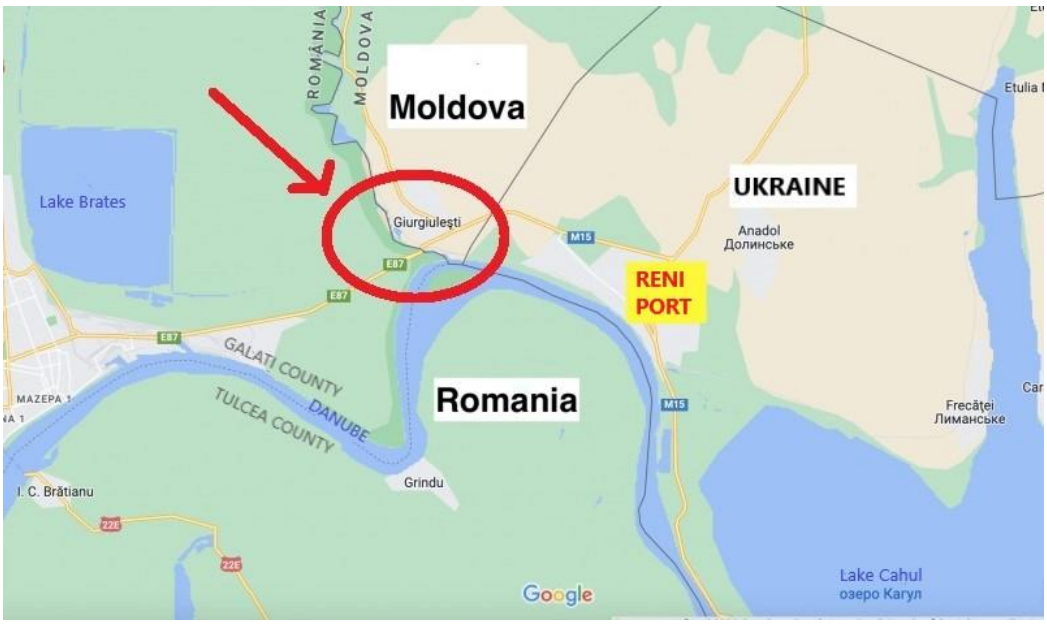
itself firmly and unequivocally on its side. Additionally, the presence of the Russian military contingent in Transnistria, composed of approximately 1,600 troops, would gain greater strategic significance should a pro-Russian government come to power in Chisinau. The Republic of Moldova also has an autonomous region, Gagauzia, with 165,000 inhabitants, the majority being Gagauz, Orthodox in religion, speaking a Turkic language, and largely pro-Russian. Despite having benefited from various EU-funded projects, 95% of Gagauzia's population voted against the October 20 referendum supporting EU membership—an opposition even stronger than in Transnistria. However, there is also a Gagauz population in Ukraine, about 25,000, situated south of the Republic of Moldova in the Odesa region, in an area known as Budjak, stretching from the Danube Delta to the Dniester estuary. This is a strategic area for Ukraine, as it hosts all of Ukraine's Danube ports. Budjak is an ethnic mosaic, with Ukrainians (40%), Bulgarians (21%), Russians (20%), Romanians (13%), and Gagauz (4%), with Russian remaining the lingua franca among these ethnic groups residing here.



(Figure 6. Ethnic Composition of the Ukrainian Region of Budjak)[24]

In 2015, following the annexation of Crimea, Russia attempted to establish a so-called Independent Republic of Budjak, hoping to activate the Novorossiya scenario and cut off Ukraine's access to the Black Sea and the Danube. This effort failed at the time; however, a shift by the Republic of Moldova toward the Russian camp could bring this scenario back into focus, especially if the situation on the Ukrainian front continues to deteriorate.

24 Spiridon MANOLIU, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Budjak-ethnic.png



(Figure 7. Port of Giurgiulesti)[25]

Another important aspect to consider is that the Republic of Moldova has a small outlet to the Danube through the port of Giurgiulesti. Should Russia succeed in installing a pro-Russian government in Chisinau following the upcoming parliamentary elections, Russian special forces could infiltrate the area to sabotage traffic on the Danube. This scenario would threaten not only Ukraine's grain exports, which are crucial for generating revenue to sustain the war, but also Romania's economic interests. The Black Sea has two main access points: the Dardanelles and Bosphorus Straits and the Danube River. If Russia gains influence in the Republic of Moldova, the country's narrow 420-meter access to the Danube could become a significant strategic asset for Moscow.

In this critical context, the European Union and the international democratic community must firmly support the Republic of Moldova to counteract Russian pressures in the coming months. Romania plays a fundamental role in supporting the Republic of Moldova. It has provided assistance on all fronts thus far, standing by Moldova in every challenging moment, and it must continue to do so alongside the EU and the United States.

[25] "Romania Wants to Purchase the Giurgiulești Port in the Republic of Moldova," *Ziarul Profit*, September 29, 2023. https://www.ziarulprofit.ro/romania-vrea-sa-cumpere-portul-giurgiulesti-din-republica-moldova/

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