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Observation of the early parliamentary elections in the Republic of Moldova (11 July 2021)

Election observation report
Ad hoc Committee of the Bureau
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1. Introduction

1. On 28 April 2021, following the failure of the parliament to give a vote of confidence to the President's two nominees for Prime Minister within the legal time frame, President Maia Sandu dissolved the parliament and established the snap parliamentary elections to be held on 11 July 2021.

2. On 30 April, the Chairperson of the Central Election Commission (CEC) of the Republic of Moldova sent the Parliamentary Assembly a letter of invitation to observe these early parliamentary elections.

3. At its meeting on 28 May 2021, the Bureau of the Assembly decided to set up an ad hoc committee comprising 20 members (SOC-7; EPP/CD-6; EC/DA-3; ALDE-3; UEL-1) and the two co-rapporteurs of the Committee on the Honouring of Obligations and Commitments by Member States of the Council of Europe (Monitoring Committee), which was given the task of observing the early parliamentary elections of 11 July 2021. The Bureau also authorised a pre-electoral mission made up of seven members – one member of the ad hoc committee representing each political group and the two co-rapporteurs of the Monitoring Committee. The Bureau approved the composition of the ad hoc committee (Appendix 1) and appointed Mr Stefan Schennach (Austria, SOC) as its Chairperson.

4. In accordance with the co-operation agreement signed between the Parliamentary Assembly and the European Commission for Democracy through Law (Venice Commission), on 4 October 2004, representatives of the Venice Commission were invited to join the ad hoc committee as legal advisors.

5. In order to assess the organisation of the election campaign and the political climate that prevailed in the run-up to the election, the Bureau sent a pre-electoral delegation to the Republic of Moldova on 10-11 June 2021. The election observation mission wishes to thank Mr William Massolin, Head of the Council of Europe Office in the Republic of Moldova, and his staff, the secretariat of the Moldovan delegation to the Assembly and the Permanent Representation of the Republic of Moldova to the Council of Europe for their excellent co-operation and contribution to the preparation and organisation of the pre-election visit.

6. At the end of its visit, the pre-electoral delegation noted with concern the deeply polarised environment and the chronic political instability, which had led to the calling of these snap elections. With regard to the legal framework, the delegation praised the return to the proportional representation from closed party lists but regretted that several other recommendations made after the previous elections, which could have remedied many of the recurring problems and systemic weaknesses, still remained to be addressed. It expressed concern over the lack of transparent implementation of criteria for opening additional polling stations abroad and the incapacity of the CEC to effectively control the funding of the campaigns of political parties. The delegation also drew attention to a number of long-standing problems which had still not been resolved. The statement published by the pre-electoral delegation at the end of its mission is set out in Appendix 2.

7. For the main observation mission in July, the ad hoc committee of the Assembly (PACE delegation) was involved as part of the International Election Observation Mission (IEOM), which also included delegations from the Parliamentary Assembly of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE PA), the European Parliament, and the election observation mission of the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights of the OSCE (OSCE/ODIHR).

8. The ad hoc committee met from 8 to 12 July 2021 in Chișinău, where it met the leaders and representatives of the parties running for election, the chair of the CEC, the head of the OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission and his staff, the Heads of the Council of Europe Office in the Republic of Moldova, the OSCE mission in the Republic of Moldova and the European Union delegation, as well as representatives of civil society and the media. The programme of the ad hoc committee's meetings is set out in Appendix 3.

9. On the day of the election, the PACE delegation split into 12 teams to observe the election in the capital, Chișinău, and the surrounding area, as well as in Comrat, Anenii Noi, Causeni, Balti, etc.

10. The IEOM concluded that the early parliamentary elections of 11 July 2021 had been well managed amidst an improved legal framework and that voters were offered a wide choice of alternatives, but concern over the impartiality of the election authorities undermined trust while inadequate campaign finance rules left potential breaches unaddressed. The legal basis forms a sound basis for democratic elections to take place. However, further improvements are needed, particularly to legislation dealing with complaints and appeals, as well as campaign finance oversight. Candidates were able to campaign actively despite pandemic-related restrictions. Election day itself was calm and transparent, and the process was overwhelmingly found to be positive despite isolated cases of overcrowding. The media played an important role during the campaign period. Numerous television debates broadcast nationwide allowed all parties to communicate their policies as well as providing information to voters. However, the bias of major media outlets due to their party affiliation weakened media safeguards on political pluralism.

11. The PACE delegation underlined that serious work now lay ahead to form a government able and willing to undertake the reforms that Moldovans are asking for, particularly concerning the deeply rooted corruption and the lack of independence of the judiciary. Democracy could also only flourish with a comprehensive media reform that provides clear rules on transparent media ownership and forms the basis for balanced and informative journalism. The press statement published by the IEOM at the end of the elections is set out in Appendix 4.

12. The PACE delegation wishes to thank the heads and members of the parliamentary delegation of the OSCE-PA, the OSCE/ODIHR EOM and the European Parliament for their excellent co-operation within the IEOM. It also wishes to thank the Council of Europe Office in Chișinău for its co-operation and support.

2. Political context

13. It should be underlined that the Republic of Moldova has signed and ratified the European Convention on Human Rights (the Convention, ETS No. 5) and its Additional Protocol (ETS No. 9), which enshrine several principles that are essential for effective democracy, including the right to free elections (Article 3 of the Additional Protocol), freedom of expression, freedom of assembly and association, and the prohibition of discrimination (Articles 10, 11 and 14 of the Convention). This implies the full implementation of decisions from the European Court of Human Rights in this field.

14. Since 1994, the Assembly has observed all elections in the Republic of Moldova, with the exception of the presidential election of November 2020, which had to be cancelled because of the Covid-19 pandemic.

15. The previous parliamentary elections took place on 24 February 2019. The PACE delegation concluded that they had been competitive and fundamental rights had generally been upheld. With regard to the electoral law, the new electoral system reinforced certain concerns expressed by the Venice Commission, in particular the fact that electoral players in single-member constituencies were reportedly subject to undue pressure or manipulation from wealthy local business leaders. With regard to the voting of Moldovan citizens living in the Transnistria region, the members of the PACE delegation noted that on the day of the election, the transfer of voters had been arranged by means of buses and that hundreds of voters had waited in and around polling stations; in addition, there had been fewer members of precinct election bureaus as compared with other polling stations. While recognising the efforts of the Moldovan authorities to organise the election and being aware of the complexity this involves, the PACE delegation was nonetheless convinced that the competent authorities should have created equal and transparent conditions for all Moldovan citizens, so that citizens

living in the region of Transnistria could have express their wishes freely and in appropriate humane and sanitary conditions. This could also have made it possible to avoid any allegations of pressure on voters and political speculation.

16. Furthermore, the delegation noted with regret that certain recurring problems had still been present during the election campaign, including intimidation and isolated cases of violence against candidates, allegations of threats against supporters of opposition parties, pressure on public-sector employees to oblige them to attend election campaign events during working hours, mass misuse of administrative resources, allegations of vote buying, or the distribution of electoral gifts involving charitable foundations associated with political parties.

17. Five parties and coalitions and three independent candidates entered the 101-seat parliament:

– Socialist Party (PSRM) – Zinaida Greceanii – 31,15% (39 seats, +10 seats)

– NOW Platform of DA and PAS (ACUM) – Maia Sandu & Andrei Nastase – 26.84% (26 seats – new)

– Democratic Party of Moldova (PDM) – Vladimir Plahotniuc – 23.62% (30 seats, +11 seats)

– SOR – Ilhan Shor – 8.32% (7 seats – new)

– Independent candidates (3 seats).

18. For the first time since independence, the Party of Communists (PCRM) led by ex-President Voronin, failed to obtain any seats.

19. The results of the 24 February 2019 elections triggered a constitutional crisis. The Constitution of the Republic of Moldova mandates that a government must be formed within three months of official results of parliamentary elections being proclaimed by the Constitutional Court.

20. On 8 June 2019 a coalition government led by Maia Sandu was formed by the Party of Socialists (PSRM) and the ACUM (NOW Platform of DA and PAS) alliance. However, the Democratic Party (PDM) petitioned the Supreme Court, claiming that the government had not been formed in time. The Constitutional Court interpreted the three-month deadline as 90 days, which meant the deadline had been 7 June, and concluded that snap elections should be held. The following day the Court suspended President Igor Dodon from exercising his presidential powers and duties for failing to dissolve parliament, and appointed former Prime Minister Pavel Filip of the PDM as acting President. Filip subsequently issued a decree calling for early elections for 6 September.

21. Igor Dodon and the PSRM–ACUM coalition called the process illegal. After a week of dual government meetings, some protest, and the international community mostly supporting the new government coalition, Pavel Filip stepped down as prime minister on 14 June but still called for new elections.[1] The Constitutional court repealed the decision on 15 June effectively ending the crisis. Leader of the Democratic Party Vladimir Plahotniuc fled the country the day before.

22. However, the new government was subsequently ousted in a motion of no confidence in parliament on 12 November in a dispute over a draft law assumed by the government to delegate a part of its plenary powers to the prime minister to propose a “shortlist” with the candidates for prosecutor general's position. A new PSRM-PDM government, headed by Ion Chicu, was formed on 14 November 2019. The Democratic Party left the coalition on 7 November 2020, during the presidential election, to allow the formation of a new government under the new president. The Chicu cabinet remained in office as a minority government, supported by the Șor Party, with the PDM ministers replaced by independents.

23. On 15 November 2020, former prime minister and PAS (ACUM) leader Maia Sandu was elected president. Ion Chicu resigned as prime minister on 23 December. President Sandu tried to appoint Natalia Gavrilița to the position of prime minister twice in order to trigger early elections. The Constitutional Court ruled on 23 February 2021 that the president should not have nominated Gavrilița twice. She then nominated Igor Grosu to the position on 16 March, who failed to get his government approved due to a lack of a quorum. The two failed attempts made early parliamentary elections possible. However, on 31 March the parliament voted to impose a 60-day state of emergency to curb the Covid-19 pandemic, during which a snap election could not be held. On 15 April the Constitutional Court ruled in favour of dissolving parliament. On 28 April it declared the state of emergency voted by the parliament on 31 March unconstitutional as the decision of parliament which had instituted it had been adopted in violation of the rules of procedure, having

1. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moldova#cite_note-82

failed to establish why exactly the executive need extended powers. On the same day, President Maia Sandu signed the dissolution decree of the Parliament and established the snap parliamentary elections to be held on 11 July 2021.

24. Parliamentary majorities in the Republic of Moldova have often been unstable and volatile. In this regard, from 2016 onwards, the co-rapporteurs of the Assembly's Monitoring Committee have raised concerns about the "political turnarounds" brought about by members of parliament, which tend to drastically alter the parliamentary majority. For instance, since the last parliamentary elections of February 2019, some 30% of MPs had switched political factions at least once, if not several times, which seriously put in question the representativity of the Moldovan Parliament.

3. Legal framework and electoral system

25. The legal framework for these early elections is provided by the 1994 Constitution, the 1997 Electoral Code[2] (most recently amended in July 2020) and other relevant legislation, supplemented by the rules laid down by the CEC, and is regarded by the IEOM as generally conducive to the holding of democratic elections.

26. According to the Election Code, "(1) the Parliament shall be elected for a four-year term by a universal, equal, direct, secret and freely expressed suffrage. (2) Elections to Parliament shall be conducted based on one national electoral district in which 101 deputies shall be elected."[3] The minimum representation thresholds in parliament are as follows: 5% for a political party; 7% for an electoral block, 2% for an independent candidate.[4]

27. Concerning the formula for mandate allocation, the Election Code applies the d'Hondt formula and provides that "the Central Electoral Commission shall assign the seats to candidates in line with the order in which they have been recorded in the lists."[5]

28. Over the years, the Venice Commission and the OSCE/ODIHR have issued many opinions on the various changes to the Election Code of the Republic of Moldova as well as on the legislation on political parties.[6]

29. The legal electoral framework underwent significant amendments since the last parliamentary elections, in particular in 2019, including the return from a mixed system, which had been introduced for the 2019 parliamentary elections, to a proportional electoral system; the lowering of electoral thresholds for parties and blocs, the repeal of a ban on donations from foreign incomes of Moldovan citizens; the lowering of donation limits for individuals and legal entities; the establishment of a campaign fund limit; and the re-introduction of a campaign silence period.

30. Some other key aspects of the electoral framework were also revised, including the lowering of thresholds for parties and blocs. The overall 40% gender quota for candidate lists, first applied in the 2019 parliamentary elections, was strengthened by introducing a placement requirement that at least 4 out of every 10 candidates on the lists must be of the same gender, which is a previous OSCE/ODIHR and Venice Commission recommendation. A minimum turnout requirement of one-third of registered voters was also re-introduced.

31. Nonetheless, other recommendations to improve the legal framework remain outstanding. The IEOM deemed that further improvements are needed in particular to the legal framework on the complaints and appeals process and campaign finance oversight.

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2. Parliamentary elections are more specifically covered by Title III of the Election Code, Articles 78-102.
3. Article 79 of the Election Code. By default, the legal provisions quoted later on in the present memorandum refer to articles of the Election Code.
4. Article 94.
5. Articles 95-96.
6. See for the most recent opinions: Urgent joint opinion on the draft Law no. 263 amending the Electoral Code, the Contravention Code and the Code of Audiovisual Media Services (CDL-AD2020)027); Joint opinion on the law for amending and completing certain legislative acts (Electoral system for the election of Parliament; CDL-AD(2018)008); Joint Opinion on the legal framework governing the funding of political parties and electoral campaigns (CDL-AD(2017)027); Joint opinion on the draft laws on amending and completing certain legislative acts (electoral system for the election of the Parliament; CDL-AD(2017)012).

4. Election administration

32. The parliamentary elections were administered by a revised three-level system of election commissions: The Central Electoral Commission (CEC), 37 District Electoral Councils (DECs), and 2 150 Precinct Electoral Bureaus (PEBs); completed by 150 polling stations abroad.[7]

33. The CEC is a permanent body composed of nine members: one member is appointed by the President of the Republic of Moldova, the other 8 members by the parliament, taking into account the proportional representation of the majority and of the opposition in parliament. The CEC composition has to be approved by a parliament decision by a majority of the votes.

34. 34. The CEC members are appointed for a five-year term of office. The chairperson, the deputy chairperson and the secretary of the CEC are elected amongst the CEC members with the majority votes of all its members.[8]

35. The DECs and PEBs are established for each election. The Election Code provides that DECs will consist of an odd number of members, at least 7 and not more than 11. At least three of them must have completed higher legal education or public administration education. PEBs are managed by 5 to 11 members; three of them being nominated by local councils and the remainder by parties represented in the parliament, one from each party. Each polling station includes between 30 and 3 000 voters.[9]

36. Most IEOM interlocutors expressed confidence in the capacity of the CEC to deliver on its mandate professionally in an open and transparent manner, in keeping with the deadlines. However, some interlocutors voiced apprehensions over the election administration's ability to maintain its impartiality with regard to establishing polling stations abroad and for voters residing on left bank of the Nistru river (Transnistria) and its decision not to prohibit the potential transportation of voters on election day. The IEOM noted that while women were well-represented in the election administration, the CEC was composed entirely of men.

37. On 3 June, the National Extraordinary Commission for Public Health adopted Covid-19 prevention measures for the electoral period and the CEC distributed the necessary equipment and materials to the PEBs. While the budget requested by the CEC for these elections was only partly granted by the government before the elections, this did not appear to affect the overall operation of the election administration.[10]

38. Voting abroad and notably the lack of transparent implementation of criteria for opening additional polling stations became a major campaign issue, which raised tensions within the CEC and beyond. The Assembly's pre-electoral delegation recalled in its statement that the role of the CEC was to ensure the right of all citizens to participate effectively in the elections. The number and the location of polling stations must be in proportion to that of the voters living in different countries.

39. On 5 June, the CEC decided to establish 139 polling stations abroad[11], which was followed by public protests and statements from the government and civil society, criticizing the low number of polling stations and the CEC's application of the legal criteria. On 8 June, the CEC revised its decision and increased the number of polling stations abroad to 146. Following legal challenges by seven political parties, the Chișinău Court of Appeal annulled the CEC's decision of 8 June, ordering it to revise the number of polling stations abroad, taking into account the ministry for Foreign Affairs and European Integration opinion. Subsequently, on 23 June the CEC increased the number of polling stations to 150[12].

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7. Articles 14 and 31.
8. Articles 16-17.
9. Articles 28 and 30.
10. On 30 April, the CEC estimated the budget for early elections in the amount of 125 million MDL (1 euro=21.5 MDL). On 12 May, the ministry of Finance allocated 70 million MDL, with the remaining budget pending further review. On 7 July, the approval of additional 22.4 million MDL to the CEC was postponed due to lack of quorum at the session of the government.
11. The number of polling stations abroad has grown from 100 in the 2016 presidential election to 123 in the 2019 parliamentary elections and 138 in the 2020 presidential election. In the latter election, 92% of the voters abroad voted in favour of Maia Sandu.
12. Polling stations abroad included: Italy – 31, Russian Federation – 17; USA – 13, Romania – 12; Germany, United Kingdom – 11; France – 10; Spain– 5; Canada, Ireland – 4, Portugal – 3; Belgium, Israel, Turkey – 2; Austria, Azerbaijan, Belgium, Bulgaria, China, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Greece, Hungary, Japan, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway, Netherlands, Poland, Qatar, Sweden, Switzerland, United Arab Emirates – 1

40. The CEC initially decided to set up polling stations in Bender and Corjova, localities in the Transnistria region. However, on 15 June, the CEC repealed its decision following discussions within the Joint Control Commission and warnings of the Moldovan Police Inspectorate that the electoral process could be jeopardised at the polling stations in Bender and Corjova.

41. From 22 May, the CEC and its Centre for Continuous Electoral Training conducted extensive online and in-person training for all DECs and started training for PEB members on 16 June. The voter information campaign organised by the centre addressing issues such as accessibility of polling for voters with disabilities, vote-buying, and epidemiological measures. The campaign includes podcasts, videos, and social media posts in the state language and Russian, with sign language interpretation.

5. Voter lists and candidate registration

42. Every citizen who is 18 or older by election day is eligible to vote, except those deprived of the right to vote by a court decision.[13] The voters' lists are centralised through the State Register of Voters. The registration is passive. Voters can check their data on the voter lists online or at polling stations during a period of 20 days. They can request corrections on the voter list to the CEC or the PEC till the day before the election day at the latest. On election day, voters omitted from the voter list who can prove their residence within the boundaries of the considered precinct, as well as voters from Transnistria, students and those with absentee voting certificates, can be added to a supplementary voter list.

43. As of 21 June, 3 282 288 voters were included in voter lists. According to the CEC, some 237 300 voters were registered without domicile or residence and some 258 600 voters reside in Transnistria.[14] There is no register for voters abroad and PS are established on the basis of turnout from the last election, the pre-registration of voters and ministry for Foreign Affairs and European Integration data.

44. No concerns were expressed with regard to the accuracy of the voter register. The legal framework ensures the transparency and accessibility of voter lists, with public display of voter lists at the PEBs as well as availability of the lists in a searchable and downloadable format online. Voters had sufficient opportunity to request corrections of their details and submit complaints on inaccuracies in voter lists to the PEBs until the day before election day. The only long-standing problem regarding the lists is that the law does not provide for an automatic removal of data on deceased people from the voter register.

45. According to the Election Code, any citizen of the Republic of Moldova eligible to vote can stand for elections.[15] He or she cannot be a member of the military personnel, a prisoner or a person with criminal records. The nomination period lasts from 60 to 30 days before the election day.[16]

46. Candidates are required to present a list of documents in-person for registration, which includes among others: protocols of meetings held by the political party central or territorial body, by other socio-political organisations, or by the electoral bloc to nominate the candidate; for independent candidates, signatures collecting lists with a sufficient number of signatures in support of such candidates; candidate's biographical data; candidate's statement accepting to run for the position he/she was nominated for; candidate's statement of wealth and personal interests for the last two years preceding the year of elections as per the Law on disclosure of wealth and private interests; declaration of personal responsibility on non-existence of legal/ judicial constraints to stand as candidate or to hold a public office, non-existence of acts of final findings regarding the disclosure of wealth and private interests, incompatibility statuses and seizure of unjustified wealth, acts that are not prescribed, etc.[17]

47. The CEC registered 23 electoral contenders for the forthcoming elections, including two electoral blocs, twenty political parties and one independent candidate:

Building Europe at Home PACE	Joint Action Party – Civic Congress	Electoral Bloc Renato Usatii
Shor Political Party	Action and Solidarity Party	Electoral Bloc of Communists and Socialists
Movement of Professionals "Speranţa – Надежда" (Hope)	Democratic Party of Moldova	Dignity and Truth Platform

13. Article 42.
14. ODIHR Interim Report of 22 June 2021, Section VI, page 5.
15. Article 12.
16. Article 46.
17. Article 49.

National Unity Party	Democracy at Home Party	Political Party WE
Party of Development and Consolidation of Moldova	Alliance for Union of Romanians	Green Ecologist Party
Party of Law and Justice	People's Power	Party of Regions of Moldova
Party Patriots of Moldova	Party of Change	New Historical Option Party (Partidul Politic Noua Opţiune Istorică)
Working People's Party	Veaceslav Valico (independent candidate)	

48. The Assembly delegation noted that whereas all registered lists complied with the legal gender quota and placement requirements (47% of the 17 991 registered candidates were women) and eight parties had nominated more women than men, only four lists were led by women and the number of women in the top three positions remained insignificant.

6. Election campaign, financing and the media coverage

49. In accordance with the law, contestants could start campaigning after registration by the CEC, with the campaign silence period beginning on 10 July, the day before election day. It is prohibited to campaign for election prior to candidate registration, which runs counter to international standards on freedom of expression (including Article 10 of the Convention). The law guarantees the freedom to campaign, with some limitations on the use of colours, sounds, symbols and images in campaign materials. Contestants have guarantees of campaigning on an equal basis and with equal opportunities, and candidates enjoy certain legal protections. Candidates holding certain high-level public positions must step down from their posts. The law prohibits the misuse of public resources and vote-buying is subject to criminal sanction.

50. The OSCE/ODIHR observed that contestants were able to campaign effectively despite a number of pandemic-related restrictions, and they were visible throughout most of the country. Most campaigning was conducted through traditional and online media, social networks, leafleting, campaign stands in public areas, door-to-door canvassing, gatherings and billboard advertisements. In general, men were more visible than women as speakers at campaign events. Further, there was an observable absence of messages targeting women and national minority groups during the campaigns.

51. The election campaign predominantly focused on tackling corruption, post-pandemic economic recovery, the need to reform the justice sector, regional development, education, decentralisation and social protection. The PACE delegation was informed by different interlocutors that the public discourse during the campaign was dominated by mutual accusations over corruption. Numerous people with whom the PACE delegation members spoke mentioned citizens' lack of trust in State institutions, largely linked to the corruption scandals. A large proportion of the public remains convinced that corruption is widespread in the country and that the judicial system is not sufficiently independent. The country's geopolitical orientation remained subject of discussion, even if it did not dominate the campaign. Unification of the Republic of Moldova with Romania is a key policy objective for the Alliance for Union of Romanians (AUR) and National Unity Party (PUN).

52. Various interlocutors informed the PACE delegation of persisting long-standing concerns, in particular cases of intimidation and hate speech, particularly against women candidates and minority groups; cases of misuse of administrative resources; allegations of vote-buying intentions and concerns over possible large-scale organised transportation of voters on election day. The delegation deplored such practices in the election campaign and asked the relevant authorities to take all necessary measures to eliminate them.

53. In the run-up to the election day, OSCE/ODIHR observers noted that, at times, campaign rhetoric involved sharp criticism, personal insults and intolerant language that had intensified at the end of the campaign period, but they did not observe any instances that would clearly have constituted incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence under international standards. During the pre-election period, OSCE/ODIHR had received several allegations of pressure on mayors by law-enforcement and public-integrity agencies. On 16 June, the President called on political parties and State agencies not to put pressure on mayors. OSCE/ODIHR had also received credible allegations that civil servants, public sector workers and other citizens had been pressured to attend campaign events. The mutual promotion of the Şor Party and the more than 30 Merişor shops, that are affiliated with this party, enforced a concern of the use of economic incentives to create political loyalty to the party. The IEOM recalled in its preliminary findings that any offering of inducements to voters is against international standards as it erodes public confidence in the integrity of elections.

54. Campaign finance is regulated by the Election Code and the Laws on Political Parties. The Election Code stipulates that "expenditures incurred for preparing and holding elections shall be covered from the State budget"[18] and represent up to 0.2% of the State budget. Half is distributed to parties in proportion to their performance in parliamentary elections and the other half proportionally based on their results in the last local elections. Parties and campaigns are also financed through contestants' own funds and donations.[19] Funding from foreign enterprises, institutions, organisations or individuals is prohibited.[20] Although the legal provisions regarding the funding of election campaigns and political parties have been improved, and reports on parties' election spending were generally provided in accordance with the requirements, many interlocutors were convinced that significant financial resources could still have been raised for electoral purposes and potential third-party donations and foreign funding remained an issue throughout the campaign period. For example, on 18 June, the Security and Intelligence Service requested the CEC to take action to address suspected foreign support of the AUR party's campaign.

55. Contestants are obliged to submit financial reports every week starting from the official launch of the campaign and a final report for the entire campaign not later than two days before election day. The CEC is responsible for campaign finance oversight and has to publish weekly financial reports from contestants on its website within 48 hours. The CEC may impose sanctions or request other competent bodies to do so.[21] The CEC however admitted its incapacity to effectively control the funding of the campaigns of political parties, *inter alia* due to disguised funding through concealed advertisements, manipulated opinion polls and fake donations.

56. The Election Code and the Audiovisual Code establish the framework for media conduct during the election campaign. Broadcasters are obliged to cover elections in an accurate, balanced and impartial manner. Each contestant is entitled to respectively five minutes of free airtime on each national television and ten minutes on radio channels. Contestants are entitled to participate in debates that national broadcasters are obliged to organise free of charge. Additional paid airtime can be purchased up to two minutes a day per broadcaster.

57. The media environment in Moldova is diverse and includes 56 licensed TV stations and 62 radio stations, while the circulation of print media is decreasing. There was no reported undue interference into Internet freedom or online media outlets, contributing to independent reporting and a plurality of news. At the same time the PACE delegation was deeply concerned about the limited media pluralism due to a very high degree of affiliation of media with the main political parties, and the obscure nature of the sources of their financing. For example, former PDM leader Vladimir Plahotniuc is widely believed to be the beneficial owner of Prime TV, Publika TV, Canal2 and Canal3; PSRM leader Igor Dodon – of Primul in Moldova and NTV; Ilan Șor – of TV6. This party affiliation of major media outlets influences the agenda of public debate and undermines the watchdog role of the media. Besides, it raises doubts as to the fairness of the campaign as the advertising media are controlled by these political parties. Independent news production and investigative journalism need mostly to rely on international funding.

58. The Audiovisual Coordination Council informed the Parliamentary pre-electoral delegation that equality of access to the media for parties and candidates was guaranteed by law. However, the delegation was informed of cases of pressure, threats and verbal and physical attacks against independent journalists. OSCE/ODIHR observers also reported significant issues with access to public information, which particularly hampered investigative reporting. The Audiovisual Council itself issued two public warnings to the 10 TV channel for biased coverage and disregarding provisions for viewers with special needs. The same broadcaster was fined for not publishing its rules on campaign coverage. All in all, during the campaign, some 48 debates were held, providing a fair opportunity for the contesting parties to present their platforms and debate with each other.

59. The OSCE/ODIHR media monitoring revealed that public *Moldova 1* was rather balanced in its coverage of the major contestants' campaigns by providing 8, 15, 22 and 10% of news coverage to AUR, BeCS, PAS and PPDA respectively. Other contestants received less than 5% coverage. Prime TV devoted to AUR, BeCS, BeRU, PAS, PPDA and SOR 13, 11, 7, 19, 23 and 13% respectively. The tone on both TV stations was predominantly neutral or positive. NTV displayed an explicit bias in favor of BeCS and against PAS in both the amount of coverage and tone by devoting 41% to BeCS and 24% to PAS; 70% of the BeCS coverage was in a positive tone, while 69% of the coverage devoted to PAS was in a negative tone. Both

18. Article 38.
19. Article 41.
20. Article 39.
21. Article 43.

Jurnal TV and PRO TV showed favor of PAS. On Jurnal TV 14% of coverage was devoted PAS, comparing to 12% to BeCS; 31% of the BeCS coverage was in negative tone, while 35% of PAS coverage in positive tone. PRO TV devoted 15 and 18% of coverage to BeCS and PAS respectively, while BeCS was covered in 37% negatively and PAS in 19% positively.

7. Election day

60. On election day the PACE delegation split into 12 teams and observed the voting process in a number of polling stations in Chișinău and its surroundings, as well as in and around Comrat, Anenii Noi, Causeni and Balti. The PACE teams assessed the exercise as one of the most positive observations based on the respective experiences of the members of the mission.

61. In the polling stations observed, polling day was peaceful and orderly, which was much appreciated by the observers, given the polarised campaign atmosphere before the election day. The Assembly observers noted no tension or campaign elements around the polling stations, and no confusion, tension, excessive overcrowding, or mass transportation of voters by buses observed in the polling stations for voters from the Transnistria region, even in the difficult circumstances where the polling station had been informed of its opening on the eve of the election day. Some instances of transportation of voters to polling stations were observed by other members of the IEOM and allegations of vote-buying, especially targeting voters residing in Transnistria, were made by some political actors during the day.

62. All PACE teams reported that international observers were well received. There were representatives of the main parties in all observed polling stations and the NGO Promo Lex had representatives in about half of them. The accessibility of polling stations for people with disabilities was noted by all PACE teams as the most recurrent problem, though one that was to some extent offset by the use of mobile voting.

63. Based on the OSCE/ODIHR statistics, the IEOM assessed opening positively in all but one of the 114 polling stations observed. Established procedures were generally followed, even if 15 of the polling stations observed opened with slight delays.

64. Voting was assessed positively in 99% of the 1 253 polling stations observed. The voter identification and electronic verification was efficient, with only few isolated technical issues. The layout of polling stations was adequate to conduct polling in 97% of observations. However, overcrowding was reported in 5% of observations, resulting from limited space inside polling stations and, at times, poor queue control. Group voting was noted in 2% of cases. On some occasions observers reported that video cameras were not focused on the ballot box and covered a wider area within polling stations. Although ballot secrecy was not compromised, people who voted could be identified in the footage potentially exposing voters to undue influence.

65. IEOM observers noted that only around a third of polling stations (32%) were accessible for independent access by people with disabilities inconsistent with international standards.

66. The counts were also positively evaluated in all but 4 of the 100 observations. The negative assessments related primarily to the PEB's omitting procedural steps, such as not establishing the number of issued ballots by counting the signatures in the voter lists (11 cases) and not counting the total number of ballots found in stationary ballot box before separating them by the contestant (22 cases). In one third of the observed counts the validity of contested ballots was not decided by a vote of PEB members.

67. The CEC announced a voter turnout of 48.4%. The CEC started posting preliminary election results live on its website, one hour after the closing of the polls, thus contributing to the transparency.

68. Regarding health measures, they were generally observed but as the day progressed, the members of the polling stations no longer or no longer wore the mask correctly. Voters' temperatures were routinely recorded, and a mask was provided when the voter was not wearing one.

69. On election day, the CEC registered seven election-day-related complaints, including two complaints on campaigning on election day, one complaint regarding organised transportation of Transnistrian voters and three complaints related to irregularities in voting procedures. The last three complaints on voting irregularities were forwarded to the DECs for their consideration and the others – to the police.

70. The CEC announced the results on 12 July, which were recognised by the Constitutional Court on 23 July:

PAS, led by Igor Grosu	774 753 votes, 52.80%, 63 seats (+48)
PECS, led by Vladimir Voronin and Igor Dodon	398 675 votes, 27.17%, 32 seats (-3)
ȘOR, led by Ilan Șor	84 187 votes, 5.74%, 6 seats (-1)
Total number of registered voters:	3 052 603
Total number of votes cast:	1 480 965 (48,51%)
Total number of votes cast abroad	212 434[22]
Valid notes:	1 467 216
Invalid/blank votes:	13 749

8. Conclusions and recommendations

71. The PACE delegation compliment the citizens of the Republic of Moldova on these elections, which ran smoothly and peacefully despite the deep polarisation and negative campaigning that preceded election day. As part of the IEOM, it nevertheless shares the concerns about the impartiality of the election authorities and their capacity to handle election disputes.

72. The legal electoral framework provides an adequate basis for the conduct of democratic elections, if it is applied in good faith. However, further improvements should be made into legislation dealing with complaints and appeals, as well as campaign finance oversight.

73. With regard to the election campaign, the contestants were able to campaign actively, except for in the Transnistria region, despite some anti-covid restrictions in place and the fundamental freedoms key to democratic elections were largely respected. The voters had an ample choice of 20 parties, 2 electoral blocs and 1 individual candidate from among whom to select their preferences, even if trust in the State authorities among the population remains particularly low. The campaign focused predominantly on fighting corruption, post-pandemic economic recovery, judicial reform, unemployment and massive emigration/brain drain, and was mostly dominated by mutual accusations over corruption.

74. The number and location of polling stations abroad remains an issue that needs to be solved: competent authorities would need to find a stable and systemic way to guarantee the right to vote for its citizens worldwide, so as to enable Moldovans abroad to carry out their democratic duty to vote without the undue sense of political manipulation from different sides.

75. The voting in the polling stations observed by the PACE teams was technically well organised, the members of polling stations were co-operative with observers, and the voting process was transparent. The delegation noted a few cases of non-compliance with voting procedures, but they were non-intentional. A significant number of polling stations were not accessible for people with physical disabilities. In some polling stations there were queues because of the requirement to respect social distancing.

76. Whereas in previous elections, there have been widespread allegations of vote buying, controlled voting, or voter intimidation, the PACE observers did not observe any of this on E-day.

77. The PACE delegation remains concerned about the bias of major media outlets due to their party affiliation and underlines that democracy can only flourish with a comprehensive media reform that provides clear rules on transparent media ownership and forms the basis for balanced and informative journalism.

78. The results of these early parliamentary elections appear to validate the reasoning behind the political decision to dissolve the parliament in April, the aim of which was to end the long-standing tug-of-war between the various political forces and bring some steadiness into the system. The Republic of Moldova has endured years of political instability, corruption and scandals, which cannot be uprooted by these early elections alone. However, these elections have changed the legislative landscape: PAS has for the first time won an absolute majority of seats on its own, and it is the first time since 1994 that neither the PSRM nor PCRM have won the most votes or seats. Former PAS coalition partner DA and the Democratic Party of Moldova (formerly connected to oligarch Vladimir Plahotniuc, who fled the country in 2019) are no longer represented in parliament for the first time in over a decade. The new composition of the parliament will hopefully discourage the long-criticised practice of “party hopping”.

22. of which Italy (31) – 66 293 votes cast; Germany (11) – 25 960; United Kingdom (11) – 23 926; France (10) – 23 001; Romania (12) – 15 146; Ireland (4) – 8 709; USA (13) – 7 651; Spain (5) – 6 594; Russia (17) – 6 154; Portugal (3) – 4 729.

79. The new elected parliament held its first session on 26 July. On 29 July, Igor Grosu, the interim leader of PAS, was elected President of Parliament. Natalia Gavrilița was appointed as Prime Minister-designate the following day. On 6 August, the Natalia Gavrilița-led cabinet of 13 minister was sworn into office with 61 votes, all from PAS. The new government has announced that it will focus on reforming the justice system, improving anti-corruption efforts, attracting investment, creating high-paying jobs and raising pensions.

80. PACE and the Venice Commission are ready to continue the collaboration with the Moldovan authorities to further improve the legal framework and electoral practices in the country and to contribute to their implementation.

Appendix 1 – Composition of the ad hoc committee

Based on the proposals by the political groups of the Assembly, the ad hoc committee was composed as follows:

Chairperson: Mr Stefan Schennach, Austria

Socialists, Democrats and Greens Group (SOC)

– Ms Marina BERLINGHIERI, Italy
– Mr Antonio GUTIÉRREZ, Spain
– Mr Andi-Lucian CRISTEA, Romania
– Mr Stefan SCHENNACH, Austria
– Mr Christian PETRY, Germany

Group of the European People's Party (EPP/CD)

– Mr Krzysztof TRUSKOLASKI, Poland
– Mr Christian KLINGER, France
– Ms Laima Liucija ANDRIKIENĖ, Lithuania
– Ms Boriana ÅBERG, Sweden
– Mr Aleksander STOKKEBØ, Norway

Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE)

– Mr Jacques LE Nay, France
– Ms Diana STOICA, Romania

European Conservatives Group and Democratic Alliance (EC/DA)

– Mr Alberto RIBOLLA, Italy
– Ms Olena KHOMENKO, Ukraine
– Mr Oleksii GONCHARENKO, Ukraine

Group of the Unified European Left (UEL)

– Mr Tiny KOX, Netherlands

Co-rapporteurs AS/MON (ex officio)

– Mr Pierre-Alain FRIDEZ, Switzerland
– Ms Inese LĪBIŅA-EGNERE, Latvia

Venice Commission

– Ms Katharina PABEL, Austria, substitute member

Secretariat

– Ms Ivi-Triin ODRATS, Administrator, Election Observation and Interparliamentary Cooperation Division
– Mr Gaël MARTIN-MICALLEF, Legal advisor, Venice Commission

– Ms Anne GODFREY, Assistant, Election Observation and Interparliamentary Cooperation Division

Appendix 2 – Statement of the pre-electoral delegation of the Parliamentary Assembly

A pre-electoral delegation from the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) visited Chişinău on 10 and 11 June to assess the election campaign and the preparations for the early parliamentary elections to be held on 11 July 2021.

The visit took place in a deeply polarised environment and amid chronic political instability, which had led to the calling of snap elections. The delegation regrets that, despite the apparent political consensus on holding early polls, most political forces appear to focus on confrontation, rumours and division rather than trying to reunite society around key strategic issues. It nevertheless salutes the fact that all major political forces have decided to participate in this electoral process, which allows the Moldovan people to make their choice from among a wide political spectrum of parties and electoral blocs.

With regard to the legal framework, the Assembly's pre-electoral delegation welcomes the fact that, since the previous elections in 2019, the Republic of Moldova has adopted changes to its Electoral Code that have returned the country from a mixed electoral system – which had led to criticism from the Venice Commission – to a system of proportional representation from closed party lists. It regrets, however, that several other recommendations made after the previous elections, which could have remedied many of the recurring problems and systemic weaknesses, still remain to be addressed.

The delegation was informed about a number of long-standing concerns that persist, in particular cases of intimidation and hate speech, including against women candidates and minority groups; cases of misuse of administrative resources; allegations of vote buying intentions and concerns over possible large-scale, organised transportation of voters on election day; and a lack of effective campaign finance oversight. The Assembly's delegation deplores such practices in the election campaign and asks the relevant authorities to take all necessary measures to eliminate them.

A month into the election campaign, the political parties and candidates have, overall, been able to campaign freely. The CEC informed the delegation that the registration of parties and candidates was inclusive. 17 parties and electoral blocs have been registered to compete in these snap elections and two applications are still pending.

The Assembly's delegation shares the concern expressed by most election stakeholders over the lack of transparent implementation of criteria for opening additional polling stations abroad, which has raised tensions with the CEC and which it observes is one of the most disputed issues of the campaign. It recalls that the role of the CEC is to ensure the right of all citizens to participate effectively in the elections. The number and the location of polling stations must be in proportion to that of the voters living in different countries.

Another issue that gives cause for concern is the decision by the CEC to set up polling stations in the Bender municipality and the village of Corjova, which are beyond the effective control of the constitutional authorities of the Republic of Moldova. Moldovan citizens in the Transnistrian region have the right to vote, but they should be able to exercise this right in locations where adequate conditions of security exist, and where the access of national and international observers can be ensured without compromising their safety or creating dangerous precedents.

Many interlocutors highlighted the lack of public trust in state institutions resulting from multiple corruption scandals and the lack of independence of the judiciary. With regard to campaign financing, while legal regulations on campaign and party finance have generally improved and the parties' election expenditure reports are provided in due form, the CEC admitted its incapacity to effectively control the funding of the campaigns of political parties, notably due to disguised funding through concealed advertisements, manipulated opinion polls and fake donations, inter alia.

The Audiovisual Co-ordinating Council informed the delegation that equal access of parties and candidates is ensured according to the legislation. However, the delegation appeals to the Council to improve the transparency of its decision-making process. The delegation remains concerned about the limited media pluralism due to a very high degree of affiliation of media with the main political parties, and the obscure nature of the sources of their financing. This continuing monopolisation of media outlets raises doubts as to the fairness of the campaign. The delegation asks the public broadcaster in particular to ensure equal access and, most importantly, well-balanced and fair coverage for all registered political parties and candidates according to the legislation.

The PACE pre-electoral delegation regrets the lack of female candidates in top positions of the party lists and calls on all political forces to make enhanced efforts to achieve gender balance.

It recalls that the Assembly has observed all parliamentary and presidential elections in the Republic of Moldova since 1994, apart from the November 2020 presidential election, which could not be observed because of the Covid-19 pandemic. The delegation was informed that there was no significant increase in Covid cases after the presidential election, which raises confidence in the capacity of the Moldovan state authorities to provide adequate sanitary conditions on election day. Nonetheless, many challenges arising from the Covid-19 pandemic, notably economic and social challenges, still remain to be addressed in the interest of the Moldovan people, alongside the fight against corruption and efforts to improve the independence of the judiciary.

The authorities of the Republic of Moldova stressed the importance of objective observation of the coming elections; they assured the Assembly's pre-electoral delegation that all appropriate measures will be taken to ensure equal conditions for all parties and candidates participating in the elections.

The delegation held meetings with the President of the Republic of Moldova, the Prime Minister ad interim, the Speaker of the Parliament, the leaders of the parliamentary and extra-parliamentary political parties participating in the elections or their representatives, the Chairperson and members of the Central Election Committee, the Chairperson of the Audiovisual Co-ordinating Council, the Chairperson of the National Integrity Agency, representatives of civil society and the media, and representatives of the international community.

The Parliamentary Assembly will send a 22-member delegation to observe the early parliamentary elections on 11 July 2021.

Members of the delegation:

– Stefan Schennach (Austria, SOC), Head of delegation
– Laima Liucija Andrikiene (Lithuania, EPP/CD)
– Jacques Le Nay (France, ALDE)
– Alberto Ribolla (Italy, EC/DA)
– Pierre-Alain Fridez (Switzerland, SOC), co-rapporteur of the Monitoring Committee (ex officio)

Appendix 3 – Programme of the meetings of the International Electoral Observation Mission, Chișinău, 8 to 12 July 2021

Thursday, 8 July 2021

09:45-10:00	Logistical briefing
10:00-10:15	Welcoming Remarks by the Heads of Parliamentary Delegations – Ditmir Bushati, Special Co-ordinator and leader of the short-term OSCE observer mission – Stefan Schennach, Head of the PACE Delegation – David McAllister, Head of the European Parliament Delegation – Pia Kauma, Head of the OSCE PA Delegation
10:15-10:35	Introduction on the country – Claus Neukirch, Head of the OSCE Mission to the Republic of Moldova – William Massolin, Head of the Council of Europe Office in the Republic of Moldova – Ambassador Peter Michalko, Head of the European Union Delegation to the Republic of Moldova
10:45 – 13:00	Information briefing of the OSCE/ODIHR Electoral Observation Mission – Part I – Welcome and Overview of the EOM – Tamás Meszerics, Head of Mission – Political Overview, Contestants and Campaign – Paul O'Grady, Political Analyst – Legal Framework and Electoral System, Electoral Disputes – Marla Morry, Legal Analyst – Election Administration, Voter Registration and Observers – Rashad Shirinov, Election Analyst – Media Landscape – Elma Šehalić, Media Analyst – Safety and Security – Oleksandr Stetsenko, Security Expert – Questions and Answers Moderator: Vasil Vashchanka, Deputy Head of Election Observation Mission, OSCE/ ODIHR
14:00-14:45	Panel on Election Administration and Legislation – Dorin Cimil, President, Central Election Commission – Lilia Gutu, Chief of the General Department of Licensing, Authorization and Monitoring, Audio-visual Council – Tatiana Badan, President, Congress of Local Authorities of Moldova – Vasile Bolea, Member of Parliament, Chairperson of the Legal Committee of the Parliament Moderator: Mr. David McAllister, Head of European Union Delegation
15:00 – 16:15	Panel with Representatives of civil society – Igor Botan, Executive Director, Association for Participatory Democracy – Nicolae Panfil, Director, Promo-Lex – Alina Andronache, Partnership Centre for Development, Gender representative – Mihail Sirkeli, Piligrim-Demo – Iulian Groza, IPRE / Mihai Mogildea, IPRE's delegate member in the Coalition for Free and Fair Elections Moderator: Pia Kauma, Head of OSCE PA Delegation
16:30 – 17:45	Media Panel – Ecaterina Mitin-Stratan, Director, TV Moldova 1 – Galina Vasilieva Newsmaker – Valeriu Vasilica, Director, IPN press agency – Ludmila Fruculita, NTV Moldova

– Petru Macovei, Executive Director, Association of Independent Press (on online press)
– Nadine Gogu, Director, Independent Journalist Centre of Moldova

Moderator: Stefan Schennach, Head of PACE Delegation

Friday, 9 July 2021

09:00-11:00	Briefings with representatives of the political parties
9:00 – 9:20	Electoral Bloc of the Communists and Socialists, BECS (PSRM / PCRM), Hayk Vartanian
9:20 – 9:40	Party for Action and Solidarity (PAS), Igor Grosu
9:40 – 10:00	Dignity and Truth Platform Party (DTPP): Andrei Nastase
10:00 – 10:20	Şor Party, Denis Ulanov
10:20 – 10:40	Electoral Bloc Renato Usatii, Ilian Casu
10:40 – 11:00	Democratic Party of Moldova (PDM), Pavel Filip
	Moderator: Ditmir Bushati, Special Co-ordinator and leader of the short-term OSCE observer mission
11:15-12:30	Observation Procedure – ODIHR Core Team – Part 2 – Briefing with OSCE/ ODIHR LTO Co-ordinator, Carlo Pappalarado – Briefing on election day procedures and observation forms, Rashad Shirinov, Election Analyst, and Max Bader, Statistic Expert – Briefing with OSCE PA Staff on Information sharing, communication, and other modalities
	Moderator: Vasil Vashchanka, Deputy Head of Election Observation Mission, OSCE ODIHR

Saturday, 10 July 2021

17:00-18:00	PACE delegation meeting with drivers and language assistants for election day
18:00	PCR testing for the PACE delegation

Sunday, 11 July 2021

07:00- 21:00	Observation in polling stations

Monday, 12 July 2021

08:00-09:00	Debriefing, in person, of PACE delegation
09:00	PCR testing for the PACE delegation
15:30	Press conference

Departure of members

Appendix 4 – Press release of the International Election Observation Mission

Moldova's early parliamentary elections were competitive and well run despite the inadequate handling of election disputes and campaign finance issues, international observers say

CHIŞINĂU, 12 July 2021 – Moldova's early parliamentary elections were well managed amidst an improved legal framework and voters were offered a wide choice of alternatives, but concerns over the impartiality of the election authorities undermined trust while inadequate campaign finance rules left potential breaches unaddressed, international observers said in a statement today.

The joint observation mission from the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly (OSCE PA), the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE), and the European Parliament (EP) found that the legal framework forms a sound basis for democratic elections to take place. However, further improvements are needed, particularly to legislation dealing with complaints and appeals, as well as campaign finance oversight.

> *"On top of some longstanding challenges, Moldova has been through many crises in recent years, and these early elections took place in the context of a broader political cycle, characterized by instability and political deadlock," said Ditmir Bushati, Special Co-ordinator and leader of the short-term OSCE observer mission. "Today, a new process begins. We now look forward to working closely with our colleagues in the new Moldovan parliament to find solutions to the shortcomings we have identified and deliver concrete results for the people of Moldova."*

Election day itself was calm and transparent, and the process was found to be overwhelmingly positive despite isolated cases of overcrowding. The deeply polarized environment did not prevent substantial campaign themes from being discussed, including the economy, the fight against corruption, social and welfare issues, and judicial reform. The media played an important role during the campaign period. Numerous television debates broadcast nationwide allowed all parties to communicate their policies as well as provided information to voters. However, the bias of major media outlets due to their party affiliation weakened media safeguards on political pluralism.

> *"We compliment the Moldovan people on these elections, which ran smoothly and peacefully despite the deep polarization and negative campaigning that preceded election day. Serious work now lies ahead to form a government that is able and willing to undertake the reforms that Moldovans are asking for, particularly concerning the deeply-rooted corruption and the lack of independence of the judiciary," said Stefan Schennach, Head of the PACE delegation. "Democracy will only flourish with a comprehensive media reform that provides clear rules on transparent media ownership and forms the basis for balanced and informative journalism."*

Candidates were able to campaign actively despite pandemic-related restrictions. Observers also noted that while campaign finance rules are in place to ensure the transparency of both campaign contributions and expenditure, their enforcement is lax and investigations into potential violations are inadequate. At the same time, the impartiality of the judicial and election authorities was called into question by their handling of electoral disputes.

> *"I am glad that Moldova could organize and run these important elections efficiently and smoothly, as was clearly observed in polling stations, despite the continued challenge of the COVID-19 pandemic," said Pia Kauma, Head of the OSCE PA Delegation. "However, when looking at the electoral process as a whole, some shortcomings, including on campaign finance oversight and election dispute resolution, need to be addressed to enhance transparency and further reinforce trust in the system."*

The campaign atmosphere was generally calm, and the fundamental freedoms key to democratic elections were largely respected. Towards the end of the campaign, the sharp criticism and personal insults intensified, but did not tip over into incitement to hostility or violence. Preparations were managed well, efficiently and transparently by the election administration. At the same time, doubts over the impartiality of the Central Election Commission (CEC) were a concern. Trust in the CEC was undermined by decisions that appeared to be lacking in neutrality, including on the number of polling stations set up abroad as well as for Transnistrian voters.

> *"We have observed a vibrant campaign in the run-up to this vote, and Moldova clearly has a sound basis to hold democratic elections, both in terms of legislation and technical preparation," said Tamas Meszerics, Head of the ODIHR election observation mission. "More is still needed though to ensure a process that is fully in line with the democratic commitments the country has signed up to, building trust with the people of Moldova in the long term."*

Voters could choose from a broad range of political alternatives. In addition, extensive online training offered by the national election authorities for all members of the local election administration was interactive and efficient overall, while the national voter information campaign was comprehensive and inclusive.

> *"We call on all stakeholders to show political maturity and responsibility and give priority to the country's interests. The result of this election should be a starting point from which the new government should accelerate genuine and ambitious reforms," said David McAllister, Head of the EP delegation. "We will follow post-electoral developments closely and we'll be ready to support the people of Moldova in implementing all the necessary reforms."*

The international election observation mission to Moldova's early parliamentary elections totalled 313 observers from 41 countries, consisting of 221 ODIHR-deployed experts and long-term observers, 59 parliamentarians and staff from the OSCE PA, 22 from PACE, and 11 from the EP.