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Observation of the presidential election (20 October and 3 November 2024) and constitutional referendum (20 October 2024) in the Republic of Moldova

Election observation report
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1. Introduction

1. On 16 May 2024, the Parliament of the Republic of Moldova[1] announced the holding of the presidential election simultaneously with a constitutional referendum that aimed to affirm the country's European path and integrate the European Union (EU) *acquis* into the domestic legal system. On 29 May, the President of the Central Election Commission (CEC) invited the Parliamentary Assembly (PACE) to observe both the presidential election and the constitutional referendum.

2. On 27 May 2024, the PACE Bureau decided to set up an ad hoc committee composed of 20 members appointed by all political groups, plus the two co-rapporteurs of the Committee on the Honouring of Obligations and Commitments by Member States of the Council of Europe (Monitoring Committee), to observe the 20 October presidential election and constitutional referendum in the Republic of Moldova. It appointed Ms Thórhildur Sunna Ævarsdóttir (Iceland, SOC) as Chairperson of the ad hoc committee ("head of delegation") and authorised a pre-electoral mission to be carried out a month ahead of the election. The list of members of the PACE delegation is set out in Appendix 1.

3. The Republic of Moldova joined the Council of Europe on 27 June 1995 and since then has been under the PACE monitoring procedure, which commits the authorities to invite the Assembly to observe national elections and referendums. PACE has observed elections in Moldova since 1994 (with one exception – the 2020 presidential election because of the health pandemic). For thirty years, the Assembly has been committed to supporting Moldova's democratic development.

4. In line with the co-operation agreement signed between the Assembly and the European Commission for Democracy through Law (Venice Commission) on 4 October 2004, Ms Veronika Bílková (Czechia) represented the Venice Commission as a legal expert at both rounds of the presidential election and the constitutional referendum.

5. The pre-electoral delegation visited Chisinau on 17-18 September 2024. At the end of the two-day mission (see programme in Appendix 2), it concluded that Moldova stood at a critical crossroads ahead of the presidential election and the simultaneous constitutional referendum. While recognising positive steps like the 2022 Electoral Code reforms, the increase in polling stations abroad, and the introduction of partial postal voting, members expressed concern over mounting geopolitical pressures – specifically Kremlin-backed disinformation, illicit financing, and alleged vote-buying – that threaten the country's sovereignty and election integrity. The delegation urged the Moldovan Government and the CEC to raise public awareness about these threats without stifling free speech or open political competition. It stressed the importance of engaging voters, ensuring public officials remain neutral, and maintaining the integrity of the CEC during this pivotal period (see the complete statement in Appendix 3).

6. Due to the impossibility for Ms Ævarsdóttir to be present for the main election observation mission because of domestic developments in her country, the Bureau appointed me on 15 October 2024 to replace her as chairperson of the ad hoc committee. Due to prior commitments, I had to renounce my participation in the presidential runoff on 3 November. My colleague, Mr Jone Blikra (Norway, SOC), replaced me as head of delegation for this second round. This report thereby combines the observations made by the PACE delegation under three different heads.

7. During the two rounds of the presidential election on 20 October and 3 November, and the constitutional referendum on 20 October, the PACE delegation worked as part of an International Election Observation Mission (IEOM) alongside delegations from the Parliamentary Assembly of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE PA), the European Parliament (EP), and the election observation mission of the OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR). The programmes of the meetings for both rounds are detailed in Appendices 4 and 5, respectively. On both occasions, our heads of delegation participated in the drafting of the joint statement of preliminary findings and conclusions which were presented at press conferences on 21 October and 4 November 2024.[2]

8. The PACE delegation extends its appreciation to the Moldovan authorities for their invitation and assistance, as well as to all interlocutors and international partners for their effective co-operation. The delegation also acknowledges the support of the Council of Europe Office in Chisinau for facilitating the organisation of the three visits conducted by the election observation mission.

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1. In the body of this document, the term «Moldova» is used for descriptive purposes and for readers' convenience, without prejudice to the use of the official name of the State.
2. Full texts are hyperlinked in IEOM Statement of Preliminary Findings and Conclusions – 20 October 2024 and IEOM Statement of Preliminary Findings and Conclusions – 3 November 2024

2. Political landscape between the 2020 and 2024 presidential elections

9. Following the election in October 2020 of Ms Maia Sandu – the first female president – with 57.7% of the vote, Moldova has shifted decisively toward pro-European governance after years of political turbulence. Prime Minister Ion Chicu resigned in December 2020, and the Socialist-dominated parliament obstructed the new president's attempts to appoint a new prime minister, leading to a power struggle. In April 2021, President Sandu dissolved the parliament, after the Constitutional Court had ended a Covid-19 state of emergency, which led to snap elections in July 2021. Her Party of Action and Solidarity (PAS) won a safe majority (52,8%), enabling a pro-European government led by Prime Minister Natalia Gavrilița to form a stable government,[3] thus ending the political impasse.

10. Following the launch of the full-scale war of aggression of the Russian Federation against Ukraine, President Sandu prioritised full European Union membership. After applying in March 2022, Moldova was granted candidate status by June 2022. Accession negotiations began in December 2023, with plans for membership by 2030. During an annual public address on 28 December 2023, the President requested the parliament to initiate a referendum on constitutional amendments on the irreversibility of Moldova's EU path. After the favourable assessment of the constitutionality of the proposed amendments by the Constitutional Court, a parliamentary majority approved the decree on the constitutional referendum, scheduling it to be held simultaneously with the presidential election on 20 October 2024.

11. Central to EU integration has been combating corruption.[4] In June 2021, President Sandu established the Anticorruption Independent Consultative Committee, leading to high-profile prosecutions, including the suspension of Prosecutor General Alexandru Stoianoglo and the arrest of former President Igor Dodon.

12. Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 posed severe challenges, disrupting Moldova's economy due to reliance on Russian oil and gas, causing inflation and sharp economic decline. The European Bank for Reconstruction and Development provided €2 billion in aid to the country, which helped Moldova to transit quickly to non-Russian energy sources, with the Prime Minister declaring that the country had weaned itself off Russian gas by mid-2023. Moldova's handling of the Ukrainian refugee crisis has been praised internationally. Over 780 000 Ukrainian refugees have entered Moldova since the Russian invasion, with around 107 000 choosing to stay. Despite being one of Europe's poorest countries, Moldova has managed to accommodate a substantial number of refugees, thanks in part to civic initiatives like Moldovans for Peace.

13. From the outset of Russia's full-scale war of aggression against Ukraine, Moldova faced sustained Russian cyberattacks and heightened tensions over the Transnistrian region of the Republic of Moldova (hereafter "Transnistria"), where unauthorised Russian military manoeuvres increased fears of conflict in the months that followed. In response to the Russian war of aggression and attempts to undermine national security and stability, authorities declared a new state of emergency, which lasted until the end of 2023.

14. In parallel, Moldova faced significant internal challenges from pro-Russian political forces. In June 2023, the Şor Party, led by fugitive oligarch Ilan Şor,[5] was banned for attempting to destabilise the constitutional order. To circumvent the ban, Şor established new political formations that organised protests and allegedly engaged in vote-buying to influence the local elections on 5 November 2023. During the summer 2023, the Moldovan Parliament amended laws to prohibit members of unconstitutional parties from running for office. However, on 3 October 2023, the Constitutional Court ruled these amendments unconstitutional due to their overly broad nature and lack of safeguards. The Venice Commission also criticised these amendments for imposing excessive restrictions without proper judicial review.[6]

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3. PM Gavrilița resigned in February 2023 amid political pressure and was replaced by the incumbent Dorin Recean.
4. Corruption ranks as one of the most important issues for Moldovan people, outranked only by economic concerns, such as the cost of living and high consumer prices, and on par with low incomes and unemployment.
5. Ilan Şor is believed to have been behind the disappearance, in 2014, of approximately $1 billion from Moldovan banks. In 2014 he was elected Mayor of Ohrei and in 2017 was sentenced to 7.5 years in prison for fraud and money laundering (doubled to 15 years in 2023).
6. The Venice Commission and OSCE/ODIHR prepared two joint opinion on these amendments (CDL-AD(2023)031 and CDL-AD(2023)048-e). While the opinions recognise the legitimacy of the possibility of revoking a person's right to stand in an election on the basis of a criminal conviction for serious offences aimed at undermining the constitutional order of a country, they note that the law allows the deprivation for persons not only convicted but also suspected, accused or indicted of such acts, which is problematic under Article 3, Protocol 1 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ETS No. 9). The Venice Commission and the ODIHR also adopted a Joint Amicus Curiae brief on the ineligibility of persons connected to political parties declared unconstitutional (CDL-AD(2023)049).

15. Following these developments, the Commission for Exceptional Situations banned certain individuals from local elections shortly before the candidate registration deadline, limiting their ability to appeal. The Venice Commission and OSCE ODIHR criticised these actions as violations of European standards. In March 2024, the European Court of Human Rights accepted the Şor Party's appeal against its ban, and Moldova's Constitutional Court declared the banning of individuals associated with the party unconstitutional due to vague legislation.

16. On 21 April 2024, Ilan Şor and associates, including Gagauzia's new Bashkan (Governor) Evghenia Gutul, founded the "Victorie – Pobeda" electoral bloc in Moscow. In August, the CEC refused to register this bloc, citing irregularities – a decision upheld by the courts. The CEC also refused to register initiative groups affiliated with the "Revival" Party and the "Chance" Party, both part of the "Victorie-Pobeda" bloc; these refusals were upheld by the Chisinau Court of Appeal and the Supreme Court of Justice.

17. Throughout these events, especially during the November 2023 local elections and after the announcement of the constitutional referendum on EU accession, the Kremlin intensified its hybrid interference to maximise its influence on the elections and to sow chaos and division within an already polarised society. This included disinformation campaigns, malign financing, election interference, and cyberattacks. Its three-pronged strategy has involved traditional pro-Russian parties with Soviet nostalgia opposing the EU, Şor-affiliated parties promoting alignment with the East, and some politicians posing as pro-Europeans to attract centrist voters.

18. Amid external pressures and internal political divisions, the PAS government has also faced growing public dissatisfaction, mainly due to high inflation and soaring energy and gas prices but also because of slow progress in PAS's flagship judicial reforms – particularly the vetting of judges and prosecutors. This has tarnished the party's image, exacerbated by pushback from within the judiciary against anti-corruption efforts. Administrative disruptions occurred; from 2022 until May 2024, there was only an 'acting prosecutor general' until President Sandu appointed Ion Munteanu on 31 May 2024. The National Integrity Authority worked slower than expected, having vetted only the members of the Superior Council of Magistracy and Superior Council of Prosecutors, with about 250 key positions still awaiting vetting in October 2024.

19. The new judicial map adopted on 31 May 2024, which reorganises appeals courts into Central, Northern, and Southern regions, also faced criticism, notably by the Bashkan of Gagauzia, who challenged this reorganisation before the Constitutional Court, arguing that it violates Gagauzia's judicial autonomy as guaranteed by the Moldovan Constitution. These issues aggravated tensions between on the one hand, the government's anti-corruption initiatives and the existing judicial structures and on the other hand, and public discontent over the government's failures to bring corrupt politicians and oligarchs to justice.

20. Furthermore, the prospects of a constitutional referendum faced significant challenges stemming from Moldova's deeply polarised society. Largely perceived as assisting the re-election of President Sandu, the risks of a large-scale boycott by the opposition were high. At least one-third of registered voters needed to participate for the referendum to be valid, and previous referendums had suffered from low engagement.[7] Pro-Russian opposition groups, notably led by Şor and his "Pobeda" coalition, actively sought to undermine the referendum by encouraging boycotts and leveraging strong support in regions like Gagauzia, Bălți, and Orhei. Additionally, sustained disinformation campaigns, propagated by Russian narratives, spread scepticism about European Union integration and aimed to reduce voter enthusiasm. Closer to the referendum date, the opponents understood that, with Maia Sandu standing at 36% in the polls, the boycott tactics would not stop the referendum, and they turned to propagating a "no" vote.

21. This presidential election and referendum being the first to be held after Moldova's EU candidacy status and the opening of accession negotiations, the stakes for the constitutional referendum to succeed were particularly high: a failed referendum would have undermined President Sandu's pro-European government, weakened Moldova's path toward EU accession, and empowered anti-EU factions in the upcoming 2025 parliamentary elections, thereby influencing the country's geopolitical direction for years to come.

22. Although the official electoral period for this presidential election and constitutional referendum began on 22 July 2024 and the campaign on 20 September 2024, Moldova has effectively been in a "super election cycle" since the local elections of November 2023. The current presidential election has been therefore seen by many as a dress rehearsal for the upcoming parliamentary elections in 2025, which will be pivotal in determining Moldova's domestic political direction as a parliamentary republic.

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7. The Venice Commission and the ODIHR advised against a turnout quorum as it encourages disengagement campaigns and may lead to failed referendums, frequently observed in Europe (CDL-AD(2022)025, para 138).

3. Key findings of the PACE delegation

23. The pre-electoral mission took place one month before the scheduled election and referendum day, a couple of days prior to the official commencement of the electoral campaign. The delegation met a diverse range of stakeholders, including with the incumbent president and eight other presidential candidates, offering direct insights into the positions and priorities of those contending for the presidency. The delegation also conferred with high-ranking government officials, including the Deputy Prime Minister for European Integration and the Speaker of Parliament, key institutional bodies such as the Central Election Commission, the National Integrity Agency, and the Audiovisual Council, and representatives from civil society and the media, the ODIHR Head of Mission and core team, and members of the Moldovan delegation to the PACE. It identified a number of key issues impacting this electoral process, which were followed up by the two main observation missions on the two election days.

3.1. Legal framework

24. The adoption of a new Electoral Code in December 2022, effective from January 2023, introduced significant improvements and modernised the electoral process. The revised code enhanced transparency in campaign financing and increased media access for all electoral contestants. It addressed long-standing recommendations, such as allowing voters to support more than one candidate, revising the nomination process for CEC members to enhance impartiality, strengthening the CEC's oversight of political parties and campaign financing, and clarifying legal appeal procedures.

25. The Council of Europe and OSCE/ODIHR welcomed these changes in 2022, noting that many of their prior recommendations were fully or partially implemented.[8] Notably, the Electoral Code was adopted after a comprehensive consultation process led by the CEC, involving election stakeholders and civil society organisations, though it lacked participation from the parliamentary opposition.

26. Despite these advancements, several interlocutors pointed out that the 2022 Electoral Code had been reviewed eight times since coming into force, including shortly before the opening of this electoral period. Amendments included changes to election and referendum dates, bans on previously suspended political parties from participating, the introduction of partial postal voting from abroad in selected countries, provisions for simultaneous elections and referendums, and new rules for campaign conduct, financing, and scheduling of the second election round. These amendments were adopted without cross-party support or public consultation.

27. Several issues remain unaddressed, such as the accuracy of the voter register, the right to vote of people with intellectual and psychological disabilities, restrictive eligibility requirements for presidential candidates, the political balance in the CEC’s composition, lack of regulation on two-day voting, and unclear criteria for establishing polling stations abroad. Also, the application of general campaign regulations to the short second round period resulted in conflicting provisions and ambiguities. For instance, the start of the second round of campaigning is not aligned with the deadlines for the tabulation of results and the adjudication of disputes, which undermines the effectiveness of legal remedies and limits campaign opportunities. Also, the law does not explicitly regulate campaign finance for the second round.

28. Most interlocutors appreciated the increase in polling stations abroad (231) and the new partial postal voting initiative involving 6 countries at this first pilot stage.[9] However, the reduction of polling stations in the Russian Federation, Israel, and Ukraine for security reasons, caused concerns. Opposition politicians questioned the selection of countries for postal voting, accusing authorities of choosing those with high support for the incumbent president. Civil society organisations like Promo-LEX and the Venice Commission recommend making postal voting permanent and expanding it to all safe and reliable countries.[10]

29. The simultaneous holding of the referendum and presidential election required rapid legislative adjustments. Although international standards do not prohibit holding the two simultaneously,[11] doing so hastily and without adjusting campaign regulations created an uneven playing field for presidential candidates. The absence of rules requiring public authorities to remain neutral, and insufficient regulations on their

8. CDL-AD(2022)025.

9. The first pilot phase was implemented in six host countries that met criteria such as experience with implementing mail-in voting and the safety and reliability of postal services: the United States, Canada, Iceland, Finland, Sweden and Norway.

10. The Venice Commission also recommended ensuring that any future amendments to electoral legislation are adopted by broad consensus after extensive public consultations with all relevant stakeholders, well in advance of elections, thus ensuring confidence in the electoral process (CDL-AD(2024)022).

involvement do not provide adequate safeguards against the misuse of administrative resources during the campaign. Several interlocutors also emphasised the need for legislation to mandate the dissemination of objective information on both referendum options, clearly explain the consequences of a “yes” or “no” vote and present a clear referendum question to enable informed choices.

30. Overall, all stakeholders agreed that the legal electoral framework is adequate to ensure the conduct of democratic elections. Regardless of the various legislative changes made during a period of less than a year, the latter contributed to improving the electoral process. The remaining ambiguities and legal lacunae need to be addressed rapidly, where necessary even before the 2025 parliamentary elections.

3.2. Institutional framework

31. The delegation received generally positive feedback on the work of the Central Election Commission before and during Election Day. The CEC made significant efforts to ensure the independence and impartiality of the electoral process, making every stage public and accessible, which enhanced transparency. Decisions were adopted impartially and collegially, with draft decisions openly discussed during streamlined sessions that included input from candidates, referendum participants, and public institutions involved in election preparations. However, we were told that the minutes of the sessions were sometimes delayed, and not all documents that the CEC received were published on its website, affecting transparency. Overall, the election administration enjoyed the trust of interlocutors.

32. The 2022 Electoral Code professionalised the district electoral councils (DECs) management, a decision that effectively contributed to combating illegal financing of electoral competitors. All 37 DECs were well-equipped and professional, and the permanent appointment of DEC chairpersons improved the efficiency of election preparations.

33. However, some downsides were also noted in the functioning of the CEC: for instance, the CEC did not systematically publish all complaints received – primarily those alleging misuse of office or administrative resources – which limited transparency. Furthermore, when handling complaints about campaign violations, neither the CEC, the police, nor the Anticorruption Prosecutor’s Office provided public information on how most allegations – such as misuse of administrative resources by the government and other campaign violations, allegedly committed by PAS, were resolved.

34. Several interlocutors of PACE and the IEOM expressed concerns about the imbalanced composition of the CEC. Appointed in 2021, the permanent CEC consists of nine members: one nominated by the president and eight by parliamentary factions proportional to their representation. Currently, this results in one member nominated by the president, five by the parliamentary majority, and three by the opposition, giving the ruling party a significant advantage. Considering this longstanding political imbalance, the delegation urged the CEC to maintain its integrity, particularly in handling the complex registration process and ensuring a level playing field.

35. The 2022 Electoral Code foresees the establishment of a more impartial CEC; however, this change will not take effect until 2026, after the 2025 parliamentary elections. Meanwhile, given the politically polarised context, authorities need to find a workable solution – possibly through introducing interim measures that include a more inclusive component – in order to increase the opposition's trust in the politically neutral and balanced functioning of the CEC.

3.3. Registration of voters and candidates

36. All citizens aged 18 or older can vote, unless a court revokes this right due to intellectual or psychosocial disabilities, a practice that conflicts with international standards. Voter registration is passive and centralised. As of 2 October 2024, the State Voter Register (SVR) listed 3 302 142 voters. This included 284 755 without a registered address, 274 475 residing in Transnistria, and 20 896 pre-registered to vote abroad (including 1 809 for postal voting). These voters were not on printed lists but could be added on election day.

37. Despite an estimated diaspora of 1.1 million, only 117 326 citizens are officially registered abroad; therefore, many remain on domestic voter lists, which does not allow efficient planning of voting from abroad. Some stakeholders question the SVR's accuracy regarding deceased citizens abroad or in Transnistria, as removals depend on family notifications. However, none of our interlocutors considered the magnitude of this

11. The Revised Code of Good Practice on Referendums by the Venice Commission advises against such overlap when the referendum is about the institution facing election (CDL-AD(2022)015, guideline III.9.c)

issue to be significant enough to question the integrity of the SVR. Voters were generally provided with a wide range of opportunities to check and correct inaccuracies in the voter list, although several stakeholders noted that the precinct electoral bureaus (PEBs) were not open for voters to amend the lists or to request mobile voting, especially for the second round of the presidential election.

38. To run for State presidency, candidates must be at least 40 years old, have lived in Moldova for at least 10 years, be proficient in Romanian, and, per the 2022 Electoral Code, hold a higher education degree – a requirement viewed as discriminatory and against international standards.[12] The lengthy residency requirement and unregulated language proficiency checks may also lead to discrimination.

39. Candidates can be nominated by political parties, electoral blocs, or voter groups (for independents). Registration involves two steps: the CEC registered 13 initiative groups from 18 applications between 21 and 31 August 2024. These groups had to collect 15 000–25 000 signatures by 20 September 2024. Twelve groups submitted nominations; 11 candidates (seven men and four women) were registered, offering voters a choice. One candidature was rejected for insufficient valid signatures.

40. The 2022 Electoral Code allows voters to support multiple candidates, requires signature collection for party-nominated candidates, and clarifies nomination rules, addressing previous recommendations. However, the lack of legal criteria to define independent candidates raised concerns about potential arbitrary decisions.

41. For the referendum, only political parties and blocs can register as participants, excluding citizens and civil society organisations – a restrictive provision that was criticised by several civil society and media representatives.

42. Within the deadline, 19 political parties and electoral blocs applied to register as referendum contestants. Of these, the CEC registered 16. Subsequently, on 14 September 2024 the CEC decided to deregister the «Chance» party after the Court of Appeals of Balti decided to limit this party's activity for a period of three months due to violations related to financial obligations, making it ineligible to participate in the referendum. After the de-registration of the «Chance» party, the total number of referendum contestants was reduced to 15. The right to campaign for referendum is granted only within the scope of two offered options, "yes" or "no". Two parties registered for a "no" campaign, the rest for a "yes".

3.4. Electoral campaign and foreign interference

43. The electoral campaign generally respected fundamental freedoms of expression, assembly, and association. Candidates campaigned freely, providing voters with a **genuine choice** among political options. However, certain issues affected the level playing field and the integrity of the process.

44. Some PACE interlocutors raised concern over the overlap between the campaign start date and the ongoing candidate registration process. Candidates needed to present a requested number of signatures (15 000-25 000) by 20 September 2024 after which the CEC had seven days to verify the signatures. Four of the 13 initially registered candidates, who had submitted their signatures early, could begin campaigning on 20 September, while others who submitted signatures later could only start later, the last one as late as 29 September. This discrepancy challenged the principle of equal opportunity and contravened the Code of Good Practice in Electoral Matters. Individual candidates also experienced delays with opening bank accounts as this could only be done once they were registered, which delayed their campaigning.

45. The campaign itself was calm and low-key, especially regarding the constitutional referendum. Some campaign rhetoric raised concerns. Certain candidates resorted to personal insults, anti-LGBTI messages, and there were credible reports of religious figures participating in the campaign, violating the separation of church and State. The tone became more negative in the second round, with some supporters using hate speech and divisive messages along political and identity lines. Xenophobic remarks against one candidate, though swiftly condemned by the other candidate, remained a concern. Propaganda materials and messages aimed at discrediting both Maia Sandu and Alexandr Stoianoglu were distributed through fliers, videos and vandalised posters.

12. The Venice Commission and the ODIHR found this requirement to be at odds with article 3 of the Protocol 1 to the European Convention on Human Rights, as well as with General Comment 25 to Article 25 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (CDL-AD(2022)025, para 136).

46. Debates were organised but these were undermined by the reluctance of some candidates to participate, limiting voters' ability to make fully informed choices. Candidates **focused** mainly on economic and social issues. Despite the referendum centring on foreign policy and geopolitical orientations, these topics were not central in the two rounds of the presidential campaign. The incumbent frequently highlighted the European Union's financial aid and its impact on infrastructure projects.

47. The unprecedented scale of foreign interference and disinformation, predominantly on behalf of the Russian Federation, had a heavy footprint on the campaign. Interlocutors reported evidence of illegal financing of electoral campaigns, illicit monetary offers to voters and disinformation campaigns, aimed at influencing the electoral behaviour of citizens. Law enforcement estimated that the number of individuals involved in various corruption schemes might have exceeded 300 000 and the sums allocated for electoral corruption might have totalled hundreds of millions of dollars. Allegations of direct foreign support for certain candidates and parties were made by the authorities, but the latter did not disclose involved parties or take pre-election measures.

48. In addition, unregistered third parties actively engaged in campaigning without formal regulation, promoting messages related to both the referendum and the presidential campaign. The absence of legal provisions regulating third-party campaigning posed risks of illicit funds entering politics and challenged institutional capacity to address these activities. The network associated with Ilan Şor, including the Victory bloc and Renastere party, had the highest number of violations related to prohibited campaigning, aiming to undermine election integrity through massive vote-buying schemes under investigation.

49. Disinformation campaigns and voter influence targeted particularly the constitutional referendum, with the aim to sway the country from its path of European integration and strengthening of democratic institutions. The repercussions of such a sustained attack on democratic values and institutions raise serious concerns for the future.

50. At the same time, the timing of the announcement of a €1.8 billion financial package from European partners ten days before the election and the imposing of EU sanctions on the Baskan of Gagauzia and several high-level officials of the autonomous region, also received criticism as potentially influencing voters.

51. Investigations into foreign interference and vote-buying intensified before the runoff election on 3 November 2024, resulting in detentions, searches, seizures, and fines. While the efforts of the police, the National Anticorruption Center, and other authorities in addressing illicit financing and voter corruption are commendable, it is unfortunate that preventive measures were not updated in time, and interventions were insufficient relative to the scale of the problem. Since foreign interference is likely to persist or even intensify ahead of the 2025 parliamentary elections, a more structured approach is necessary to combat these issues and mitigate their long-term negative consequences.

52. The misuse of administrative resources in the electoral process is another significant concern expressed by our interlocutors. While candidates are barred from using such resources, high-ranking officials like the President, Prime Minister, and Speaker of Parliament are exempt from suspending their duties when actively campaigning. These officials participated in institutional events during the campaign, raising concerns about tilting the playing field in favour of the ruling party. Although not prohibited by law, this lack of neutrality and insufficient regulations contributed to the perception of an uneven playing field.

53. The government's role in the referendum campaign in particular drew criticism. Our interlocutors complained that the government conducted a large public campaign highlighting the benefits of EU membership without providing objective explanations of the referendum options, thereby blurring lines between governmental functions and party activities. The CEC faced difficulties in adjudicating complaints regarding the misuse of administrative resources, indicating a lack of clarity in the regulatory framework. Instances of misuse were observed but often not officially reported.

54. In summary, while fundamental freedoms were respected and voters had a range of choices, issues like unequal campaigning opportunities, misuse of administrative resources, foreign interference, and unregulated third-party activities affected the fairness and integrity of the electoral process. Addressing these concerns is essential to strengthen democratic practices and public trust in future elections.

3.5. Media landscape

55. Moldova's media landscape has experienced significant changes. Conditions for media operations without interference have generally improved, as reported by many civil society and media representatives. During the campaign, radio and television coverage was tightly regulated to ensure fairness, accuracy, and

impartiality. The Audiovisual Council actively monitored media coverage, sanctioned outlets that violated rules, and addressed complaints promptly. While some broadcasters made efforts to provide balanced coverage, media monitoring revealed significant disparities.

56. In the first round, the incumbent president received the most coverage across all monitored TV channels, both in her official capacity and as a candidate, often without a clear distinction between the two roles. This, coupled with extensive uncritical coverage by the public broadcaster and a pro-EU bias in some private media, contributed to an uneven playing field. The regional public broadcaster Gagauziya Radio Television was noted for disseminating false narratives about the referendum and certain candidates. Moreover, the lack of genuine electoral debates – partly due to candidates' reluctance to participate – limited the public's ability to make fully informed choices.

57. In the second round, the ODIHR-monitored media outlets devoted equal amounts of airtime to both candidates, however the tone of coverage differed in favour of President Sandu. She was covered almost exclusively positively or neutrally, whereas the media covered Mr Stoianoglo’s candidacy more critically.

58. The shift from traditional television to online and social media as primary information sources complicated the media environment. While internet penetration and mobile usage facilitate access to information, they also make it easier for disinformation to spread unchecked. Although authorities and social media companies (Meta, X) took some measures to contain disinformation, disinformation and manipulative content remained widespread. Numerous portals and social media channels, especially on Telegram, were reportedly controlled by Ilan Şor and pro-Kremlin entities. These platforms spread fake news and negative narratives about the European Union and Moldova's prospects for European integration, aiming to manipulate voters and undermine democratic institutions. On 10 October 2024, authorities blocked 15 channels and 95 Telegram chatbots linked to Şor, citing their use in facilitating illegal political financing and vote-buying schemes. However, the absence of comprehensive regulations for the online environment allowed unregistered third parties to continue influencing the electoral process.

59. The government implemented measures to address national security threats stemming from foreign interference and undue influence by political figures. These included restricting the rebroadcasting of certain audiovisual outlets and blocking websites involved in spreading disinformation, particularly following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022. While these steps were seen by many as necessary to protect national security and social cohesion, they also resulted in a **r**educed space for expressing a plurality of opinions and scrutinising government actions.

60. The role of investigative journalists became crucial in exposing illegal party and campaign financing schemes. However, publishing information on personal data created an issue. On 25 October 2024, following news articles about vote-buying investigations, some media outlets published the names of approximately 3 800 individuals allegedly involved in a large-scale vote-buying scheme linked to Ilan Şor. This action raised concerns that releasing such personal data without thorough verification and based on anonymous sources breached journalistic standards, violated the presumption of innocence, and could endanger the privacy and safety of these citizens, especially in the current polarised political climate.

61. Overall, while voters had access to sufficient information, the media environment faced challenges that affected the fairness and inclusivity of the electoral process.

3.6. Campaign financing

62. The legal framework for campaign financing in Moldova largely aligns with recommendations from the Venice Commission and Group of States against Corruption (GRECO), even if weekly reporting requirements were considered burdensome by several stakeholders. The CEC generally managed to efficiently process electoral contestants’ campaign finance reports, but delays in their publication may have hampered the ability of voters to make an informed choice, especially ahead of the second round of the presidential election.

63. All campaign-related transactions are mandated to be made to and from the designated bank accounts of initiative groups. This favours party-nominated candidates, as political parties are allowed to open these accounts before registration, while independent candidates must wait until after registration. This disparity, coupled with administrative obstacles in opening accounts and obtaining fiscal identification numbers, caused delays for several contestants and hindered the timely start of their campaigns.

64. Many observers also raised alarms about “shadow funding” in electoral campaigns, particularly from foreign sources. These illicit funds often enter the system as cash, prepaid cards, cryptocurrencies, or electronic transfers. Moldovan authorities admit they currently lack the capacity and resources to effectively combat and prevent these illegal activities.

65. Civil society organisations, such as PromoLex, pointed to some candidates underreporting their campaign expenditures, raising concerns about transparency and accountability. Additionally, many contestants in the constitutional referendum declared no income or expenses in their official campaign finance reports. Observers questioned the purpose of their participation if they engaged in no financial activity, suggesting possible undisclosed funding or ulterior motives.

66. In response to these challenges, Moldovan institutions intensified efforts during the second round of the presidential election to investigate vote-buying schemes and illicit financing. The General Police Inspectorate uncovered a vote-buying operation involving $39 million allegedly transferred from Russia's Promsvyazbank to Moldovan voters via 1.4 million text messages. The National Anti-Corruption Centre is processing over 1 000 reported violations related to vote-buying and has issued fines exceeding 2 million lei. The CEC initiated thorough investigations into several political parties and candidates suspected of illicit financing. While these actions are commendable, concerns remain that preventive measures were insufficient relative to the scale of the problem, highlighting the need for a more structured approach to safeguard the integrity of future elections.

4. Election day observations

67. On the first election day on 20 October 2024, the partner organisations of the IEOM deployed altogether over 300 short term observers in over 1 200 polling stations. The 12 PACE teams were deployed in Chisinau and its surroundings, as well as in the following cities and their surroundings: Anenii Noi, Balti, Cahul, Cantemir, Causeni, Ceadir-Lunga, Comrat, Cricova, Criuleni, Dubasari, Edinet, Floresti, Gongaz, Hincesti, Leova, Orhei, Riscani, Singera, Soroca, Taraclie, Varnitsa and Vulcanesti. On the runoff polling day, four PACE teams were deployed in Chisinau and its surroundings and in Anenii Noi, Balti, Cricova, Criuleni, Dubasari, Falesti, Floresti, Orhei, Rezina, Singerei, Varnitsa and their surrounding villages.

68. All members of the PACE delegation considered that the elections were technically very well organised, with well-trained, predominantly female, officers in most polling stations. The two election days were calm and well managed, without major incidents that could significantly affect the voting process. The runoff election day was somewhat more affected by instances of potential voter corruption tactics, including organised voter transportation (observed in two DEC37 polling stations in Varnitsa and Rezina) and voters taking photos of their ballots (observed by one team in Singerei). Rare cases of sudden overcrowding and tension in and around polling stations were reported.

69. Opening procedures were assessed very positively by all PACE teams. PEB members were ready on time and all the necessary materials had been delivered. Video cameras provided by the CEC were installed and functional with very few cases where the SAISE electronic voter verification system did not work immediately, but these technical hitches were quickly resolved.

70. The voting procedures were also assessed overwhelmingly positively by our members, though minor inconsistencies were noted. Some polling stations were quite small and some layouts were poorly arranged which made the voting process difficult. The SAISE system to check ID or voters worked efficiently in most polling stations observed. Video cameras were also operational in most polling stations visited but some observers commented that occasionally the cameras installed to monitor the ballot boxes had a broader view of the premises, potentially compromising the secrecy of the vote.

71. Our delegation particularly commended the commitment of the thousands of women – who made up 88% of the PEB members in polling stations observed by the IEOM – for ensuring that the electoral process was conducted with integrity and transparency.

72. On the downside, the vast majority of polling stations observed were not suitable for people with movement restrictions and access to many polling stations was difficult for the elderly. Although polling stations were equipped for voting in wheelchairs, the tables meant for this purpose were often pushed to the corner or basic equipment such as the stamp was missing. People who wished to use these booths, had to beg for sufficient equipment. I underscored at the press conference that the right to vote is a fundamental human right and exclusion because of personal characteristics is unacceptable.

73. Counting of votes was carried out efficiently, with minor breaches observed. PEB members occasionally skipped procedural steps during counting, to finish less late. Our members also observed rare cases of protocols being signed in advance before filling in the figures.

74. All in all, the findings of the members of the PACE delegation coincide with the ones detailed in the two IEOM joint statements of preliminary findings and conclusions. As usual, whereas the methodology of "mobile observation" used by the international parliamentary bodies with teams visiting polling stations in a wider region enables to get a good general picture of election management, it is not the most conducive method of detecting frauds and infringements. This purpose is better served by local observers, for instance, the key civil organisation Promo-LEX was represented in almost all polling stations visited by our delegation. Their excellent work of observation and detecting infringements throughout this electoral period merits a special recognition.

75. The Promo-LEX instructed observers recorded as many as 778 and 791 incidents respectively on the two polling days. The most frequent violation observed was the breach of voting secrecy, with 175 and 229 cases involving photographing ballots and other actions encroaching on voter privacy. Whereas nearly 100 cases related to the disruption of the process of filming the voting and counting of ballots and other incidents related to the filming of voting procedures were recorded during the first round, this figure dropped to 51 instances on the runoff polling day. On the other hand, the number of technical glitches detected in the functioning of the State automated election system, including instances where the system incorrectly showed whether a person had voted, increased to 127 incidents, raising concerns about the electoral infrastructure's reliability. Mistakes in voter rolls such as wrong addresses and the inclusion of deceased persons, were observed respectively in 76 and 65 cases, casting doubt on the accuracy of voter list updates. Additionally, problems with ballot box security, missing or damaged seals, unauthorised presence of individuals campaigning in or near polling stations, and cases of vote-buying were reported.

76. The police reported 225 incidents, including the photographing of ballot papers or the organised transportation of voters. On the second polling day, the authorities faced false bomb threats made against a number of polling stations and the bridge over the Dniestr from Rybnitsa to Rezina. In addition, 14 false bomb alerts were received at polling stations abroad. According to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, such alerts were recorded in 13 cities, all of which turned out to be false (Bologna, Paris (Montreuil), Marseille, Liverpool, Northampton, Bucharest, Brasov, Minsk, Madrid, Berlin, Hamburg, Frankfurt and Kaiserslautern).

5. Establishment of results and post-electoral developments

77. At the time of the writing of the report, the final confirmed results by the Constitutional Court of the presidential election were not yet available.[13] On 9 November 2024, the Central Electoral Commission officially declared the 3 November 2024 presidential runoff valid. The voter turnout was 54.31**%** of the total number of 1 699 945 eligible voters. Maia Sandu won the elections with 930 139 (55,35%) out of the 1 680 569 valid votes cast, while 750 430 (44,65%) votes were cast for Alexandr Stoianoglo, supported by the Party of Socialists of the Republic of Moldova.

78. The highest ever in the Moldovan electoral history number of 328 855 voters turned up in the 231 polling stations abroad (almost 90 000 people more than in the first round), who ensured Maia Sandu's victory (Maia Sandu – 83.83%, Alexandr Stoianoglo – 17.17%), whereas Alexandr Stoianoglo won most votes on the territory of Moldova. He was favoured by 51.2% of those who took part in the 3rd November elections in the country, compared to 48.8% for Maia Sandu. In Chisinau, Maia Sandu won with 57.38% against the 42.62% for Alexandr Stoianoglo.

79. In the first round, a total of 1 562 705 or 51.68% of voters cast their ballots. The results were the following:

– Maia Sandu – 42.45% (656 354)

– Alexandr Stoianoglo – 25.98% (401 726)

– Renato Usatii – 13.79% (213 168)

– Irina Vlah – 5.38% (83 230)

– Victoria Furtuna – 4.45% (68 777)

– Vasile Tarlev – 3.19% (49 317)

– Ion Chicu – 2.06% (31 793)

13. On 28 November 2024, the Constitutional Court will examine the election results and the complaint on the confirmation of the election results, and decide whether to validate the mandate of President of Moldova, won by Maia Sandu. If the elections are validated, Maia Sandu will become the first president elected by people to win two terms.

– Octavian Țîcu – 0.93% (14 326)

– Andrei Năstase – 0.64% (9 946)

– Natalia Morari – 0.61% (9 444)

– Tudor Ulianovschi – 0.52% (7 997)

80. The voting patterns in the Autonomous Territorial Unit of Gagauzia and Transnistria during the second round are noteworthy. In Gagauzia, voter turnout increased by over 3 300, with Alexandr Stoianoglo receiving 97.40% of the votes. In Transnistria, nearly 10 000 additional voters crossed the Dniestr River to cast their ballots at the 30 polling stations of District Electoral Council (DEC) #37, where 79.40% voted for Alexandr Stoianoglo and 20.60% for Maia Sandu. However, the overall participation rate from Transnistria remained very low, with only 26 136 out of approximately 296 000 eligible voters from the region casting their votes.

81. Following the announcement of the results, members of the Party of Socialists (PSRM) organised a protest in front of the CEC, demanding the resignation of its members, whom they accused of political subordination to the Party Action and Solidarity. The Socialists claimed that the runoff presidential election was marked by serious irregularities. Alexandr Stoianoglo did not attend the rally. On the same day, Deputy Speaker of Parliament and PSRM member, Vlad Bătrîncea, announced that the PSRM had filed a complaint with the CEC regarding alleged violations during the runoff election. Igor Dodon, leader of the PSRM, submitted their list of complaints to international observers and diplomatic missions in the Republic of Moldova.

82. On 25 October 2024, the CEC declared the republican constitutional referendum valid with a turnout of 50.72%. In this context, 1 532 264 voters received ballot papers for the referendum. Out of the total number of 1 488 874 valid votes cast, 749 719 (50.35%) people voted for the “yes” option and 739 155 (49.65%) people voted for the “no” option. 42 518 ballots were invalid.

83. Article 208(1) of the Electoral Code, concerning the “Adopting, publishing and entry into force of the decision subject to a Republican Referendum” stipulates that “a republican referendum decision shall be considered adopted if it gained the majority of voters who participated in the referendum”. This implies that the number of voters who participated equals the number of ballots found in the ballot box. The Constitutional Court's ruling bases its decision on the number of valid votes, which confirms that the referendum received enough support to pass. This followed the CEC’s application of Article 81(10) of the Electoral Code, according to which invalid ballot papers are not included in the total number of valid votes cast. This interpretation is consistently applied to all election results.

84. The very close vote led to confusion and different interpretations among different political camps, notably because calculating the results based on the total number of ballots cast – including invalid ones – would give the “yes” vote 48.23%. The CEC’s preliminary results webpage displayed only the total number of valid votes divided per referendum option and did not reference the total number of participants. One complainant officially challenged the referendum results and requested a recount of the votes cast abroad. The CEC rejected this request as unfounded, a decision that was upheld in subsequent adjudications.

85. On 31 October 2024, the Constitutional Court reviewed the results protocol submitted by the CEC, along with related appeals and recount requests. The Court confirmed the validity of the constitutional referendum, interpreting the law to base the results on valid votes cast. Two out of six judges issued dissenting opinions. On 5 November, the decision confirming the referendum results was published in the Official Journal of the Republic of Moldova.

86. A protest organised by the Party of Communists, joined by other opposition politicians, was held in front of the Constitutional Court on the day it convened to validate the referendum results. The PSRM had declared on 30 October 2024 that it did not recognise the outcome of the referendum.

6. Conclusions and recommendations

87. The presidential election and constitutional referendum in the Republic of Moldova were conducted in a highly polarised political environment, marked by unprecedented attempts to corrupt the electoral process. Despite significant external interference, particularly from the Russian Federation, and attempts by affiliated entities to discredit and destabilise the electoral process, the Moldovan authorities and people succeeded in organising elections that were democratic and well-managed. While pervasive vote-buying schemes raise

serious concerns about the integrity of the process and the moral compass of society, the electoral process was largely free from intimidation, and Moldovans worldwide were able to express their preferences regarding the country's leadership and further integration with the European Union.

88. However, the elections highlighted deep societal divisions, exacerbated by confrontational campaigns and manipulations from various actors. Malign practices such as vote-buying, illegitimate funding, and misuse of administrative resources undermined the integrity of the electoral process. The lack of prompt investigations into these misconducts is a matter of concern, calling for greater accountability from competent authorities.

89. Disinformation campaigns amplified on social media contributed to an imbalance in an otherwise relatively open media environment. We are concerned that social media remains unregulated; for an increasing number of people, it is the primary source of information. There is a pressing need for stricter rules governing the online environment to combat disinformation that can affect citizens' voting decisions. Addressing these challenges is essential to strengthen democratic practices and public trust in future electoral processes.

90. The president-elect now faces the critical task of healing societal rifts and guiding the country toward EU integration amidst existing divisions and new pressures emerging with parliamentary elections on the horizon next year. Success will depend on implementing further democratic reforms, combating disinformation, and ensuring that Moldova's democratic processes remain inclusive, legitimate and transparent.

91. In light of the above, our delegation invites the relevant authorities of the Republic of Moldova to address the above issues, and to:

– **Investigate electoral irregularities**: Ensure swift, credible, and transparent investigations into all irregularities and allegations of vote manipulation. Strengthen the capacities of election administrators and law enforcement to tackle electoral corruption and increase voter awareness of prohibited activities.

– **Combat foreign interference and disinformation**: Develop a structured approach to counter foreign interference and disinformation campaigns, implementing proactive measures to mitigate long-term negative impacts. Enhance communication regarding efforts to address vote-buying and foreign interference to build public trust while respecting national security considerations.

– **Improve the electoral legal framework in due time**: Address ambiguities in the electoral law, such as the accuracy of the voter register and the voting rights of people with intellectual and psychological disabilities. Reduce restrictive eligibility requirements for presidential candidates, including alleviating lengthy residency and higher education criteria, to make candidacies more inclusive.

– **Enhance election administration**: Increase the impartiality of the CEC to reflect diverse political representation. Consider introducing interim measures by adding a more inclusive component until the switch-over to a fully professional CEC. Adequately fund the CEC to enable comprehensive monitoring and oversight of campaign financing and to prevent misuse of public resources.

– **Ensure fair media practices**: Guarantee unbiased and equal media coverage of all electoral candidates, especially by public broadcasters. Address the rise in hate speech and xenophobic language during campaigns. Promote media literacy programmes to educate citizens on critically assessing information sources, particularly on social media.

– **Strengthen campaign financing transparency**: Improve transparency and accountability in campaign financing, ensuring equal treatment for all candidates. Implement stronger oversight of third-party campaigning and online financing, simplifying financial reporting without compromising transparency.

– **Enhance inclusivity and accessibility**: Ensure polling stations are accessible to voters with mobility impairments, including the elderly, and eliminate obstacles faced by persons with disabilities during the voting process. Safeguard the voting rights of people with intellectual and psychological disabilities to allow full participation in the electoral process.

– **Broaden civil society participation**: Reconsider restrictive provisions that prevent citizens and civil society organisations from participating in referendums, encouraging broader engagement in democratic processes.

– **Demonstrate commitment to democratic principles**: Show strong and genuine political will to address the identified shortcomings, adhering to the Reykjavik Principles for Democracy to strengthen democracy and good governance. Collaborate closely with international partners, including the Venice Commission, to effectively implement these recommendations.

92. The Parliamentary Assembly stands ready to support the Republic of Moldova in implementing these recommendations. Strengthening democratic practices and ensuring the integrity of electoral processes are vital steps toward consolidating democracy and fostering public trust in the country's institutions.

Appendix 1 – Composition of the pre-electoral delegation of the Parliamentary Assembly

Chairperson: Ms Thórhildur Sunna Ævarsdóttir, Iceland

Socialists, Democrats and Greens Group (SOC)

– Ms Thórhildur Sunna Ævarsdóttir, Iceland

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

– Mr Chris Said, Malta

European Conservatives Group and Democratic Alliance (EC/DA)

– Mr Oleksii Goncharenko, Ukraine (excused)

Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE)

– Ms Valentina Grippo, Italy

Group of the Unified European Left (UEL)

– Ms Laura Castel, Spain

Co-rapporteurs AS/MON (ex officio)

– Mr Pierre-Alain Fridez (Switzerland, SOC)
– Ms Zanda Kalniņa-Lukaševica (Latvia, EPP/CD)

Secretariat

– Ms Ivi-Triin Odrats, Deputy Head of the Elections Division, Secretary of the ad hoc committee
– Ms Carine Roller-Kaufman, Assistant, Elections Division

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

Monday, 16 September 2024

17:30-19:00	Informal briefing meetings of the Chairperson with Ambassador Jānis Mažeiks, Head of the European Union Delegation to the Republic of Moldova, and Falk Lange, Head of the Council of Europe Office in the Republic of Moldova
20:00	Informal information point for the members of the delegation

Tuesday, 17 September 2024

08:00-08:45	Delegation briefing, short presentations – Opening remarks by the Chairperson – Presentation of the current political situation and pre-electoral environment by Falk Lange, Head of the Council of Europe Office in the Republic of Moldova – Presentation of Monitoring Committee co-rapporteurs' visit to Chisinau in July 2024 by Pierre-Alain Fridez, co-rapporteur – Practical information by the Secretariat
08:45-10:15	Meeting with Ambassador Urzula Gacek, Head of the OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission, and members of the core team
10:15-11:00	Meeting with Ambassador Kelly Keiderling, Head of the OSCE Mission in the Republic of Moldova, and Paolo Tatti, OSCE Political Officer.
11:15-12:45	Meeting with representatives of NGOs involved in election observation – Paulina Panainte, ADEPT, Secretary of the Coalition for Free and Fair Elections – Nicolae Panfil, Promo-LEX Association – Iulian Groza, Institute for European Policies and Reforms – Roman Banari, General Secretary, National Youth Council of Moldova – Steve Young, Cmi Martti Atishaari, Peace Foundation – Cristina Berlinschü, ADEPT Association
14:00-15:30	Meeting with media representatives – Mariana Rata – TV 8 – Evgheni Solari – Newsmaker – Anastasia Antoceanu – Agora
15:30-16:00	Meeting with Lilian Chișca, Chairperson of the National Integrity Agency
16:15-17:00	Meeting with Cristina Gherasimov, Deputy Prime Minister for EU Integration, and representatives of ministries responsible for different aspects of the elections
17:30-18:30	Meeting with Liliana Vițu, Chairperson of the Audio-visual Council
20:00	Working dinner with ambassadors of the Council of Europe member States, hosted by Guido Beltrani, Director of the Swiss Cooperation Office in Moldova

Wednesday, 18 September 2024

09:00-09:45	Meeting with Angelica Caraman, Chairperson and members of the Central Electoral Commission
10:00-10:30	Meeting with Maia Sandu, President of the Republic of Moldova
11:00-11:45	Meeting with Igor Grosu, Speaker of the Parliament of the Republic of Moldova
12:00-13:45	Working lunch with members of the Moldovan delegation to PACE

14:00-18:00 Meetings with the main presidential candidates

14:00-14:20	Natalia Morari, independent
14:20-14:40	Alexandr Stoianoglo, Party of Socialists (PSRM)
15:10-15:30	Ion Chicu, Party of Development and Consolidation of Moldova
16:10-16:30	Andrei Nastase, independent
16:30-16:50	Irina Vlah, independent
16:50-17:10	Renato Usatîi, Our Party
17:20-17:40	Octavian Ticu, Together bloc
17:40-18.00	Vasile Tarlev, Future of Moldova
18:15-19:00	Debriefing meeting of the pre-electoral delegation and preparation of the statement

Appendix 3 – Statement of the pre-electoral delegation of the Parliamentary Assembly

Republic of Moldova: PACE delegation concerned about significant foreign interference in forthcoming Moldovan elections

A pre-election delegation from the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE), concluding its visit to the Republic of Moldova on 17-18 September 2024, stressed that the country is at a critical crossroads. The upcoming presidential election and constitutional referendum on 20 October 2024 could be a turning point for bolstering democracy and strengthening state institutions. Moldovan authorities are faced with the difficult task of ensuring the integrity and security of the vote whilst simultaneously upholding the core values of the Council of Europe.

Led by Thórhildur Sunna Ævarsdóttir (Iceland, SOC), the six-member cross-party PACE delegation conducted its mission in Chisinau. They met with key officials, including the Deputy Prime Minister for European Integration, the Speaker of Parliament, presidential candidates, the Central Election Commission (CEC), as well as the chairs of the State Integrity Agency and the Audiovisual Council, civil society and media representatives, international observers, and members of the Moldovan delegation to the PACE.

The delegation acknowledged the 2022 Electoral Code reforms, which addressed long-standing recommendations and set a stronger framework for the upcoming elections. They also noted positively the increase in the number of polling stations abroad and a new partial postal voting initiative.

While the Republic of Moldova has made significant strides, particularly in securing EU candidate status and beginning accession talks, it was brought to the attention of the delegation that these achievements were under siege from mounting geopolitical pressures. Kremlin-backed disinformation, illicit financing, and alleged vote-buying pose serious threats to Moldova’s sovereignty, security, and election integrity.

The delegation urged the Moldovan Government and the CEC to ramp up public awareness about these threats, while ensuring that efforts to combat disinformation do not stifle free speech or hinder open political competition. With just a month left, they stressed the importance of engaging voters and ensuring public officials remain neutral.

Despite a longstanding political imbalance in its composition, the CEC must maintain its integrity, especially in handling the complex registration process. The coming month will test both the government and the CEC's ability to ensure a level playing field.

The PACE team called on all political actors to respect the Electoral Code and refrain from corruption or illegal tactics.

Though not all issues could be resolved before election day, the delegation urged Moldovan authorities to address what they can. PACE will send a full team to observe the 20 October votes alongside OSCE/ODIHR, the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, and the European Parliament, with conclusions to follow after the elections.

Appendix 4 – Composition of the ad hoc committee (1st round – 20 October 2024)

Chairperson: Ms Petra Bayr, Austria

Socialists, Democrats and Greens Group (SOC)

– Mr Constantinos Efstathiou, Cyprus
– Mr Stefan Schennach, Austria
– Ms Thórhildur Sunna Ævarsdóttir, Iceland (excused)
– Ms Petra Bayr, Austria
– Mr Jone Blikra, Norway
– Ms Sascha Faxe, Denmark

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

– Mr Pablo Hispán, Spain
– Mr Jan Filip Libicki, Poland
– Mr Chris Said, Malta
– Mr Cristian-Augustin Niculescu-Țâgârlaș, Romania
– Ms Belén Hoyo, Spain

European Conservatives Group and Democratic Alliance (EC/DA)

– Mr Oleksii Goncharenko, Ukraine
– Mr Harald Weyel, Germany
– Mr Andrew Percy, United Kingdom
– Mr José María Sánchez García, Spain

Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE)

– Ms Valentina Grippo, Italy
– Mr Petri Honkonen, Finland
– Ms Yuliia Ovchynnykova, Ukraine

Group of the Unified European Left (UEL)

– Ms Laura Castel, Spain

Co-rapporteurs AS/MON (ex officio)

– Mr Pierre-Alain Fridez (Switzerland, SOC)
– Ms Zanda Kalniņa-Lukaševica (Latvia, EPP/CD)

Accompanying person

– Mr Paweł Skalik, accompanying Mr Jan Filip Libicki

Secretariat of political groups

– Ms Marianna Ntalla, SOC

Venice Commission

– Ms Veronika Bílková, Vice-President of the Venice Commission

– Mr Pierre Garrone, Secretary of the Council for Democratic Elections and Head of Division in the secretariat of the Venice Commission

– Mr Adrià Rodriguez-Perez, Secretariat of the Venice Commission

Secretariat

– Ms Ivi-Triin Odrats, Deputy Head of the Elections Division, Secretary of the ad hoc committee,

– Mr Bogdan Torcătoriu, Senior Elections Officer, Elections Division, Secretariat of the ad hoc committee

– Ms Carine Roller-Kaufman, Assistant, Elections Division

Appendix 5 – Programme of the meetings of the International Electoral Observation Mission (1st round – 20 October 2024)

Friday, 18 October 2024

10:00-10:15 Welcome and introductory remarks
- Lucie Potuckova, Special Co-ordinator and leader of the short-term OSCE observer mission
- Petra Bayr, Head of PACE Delegation
- Michael Gahler, Head of the European Parliament Delegation
- Johan Büser, Head of the OSCE PA Delegation

10:15-10:30 Introduction on the country
- Ambassador Kelly Keiderling, Head of the OSCE Mission to Moldova
- Falk Lange, Head of the Council of Europe Office in Moldova
- Ambassador Jānis Mažeiks, Head of the European Union Delegation to Moldova

10:30-12:30 Briefing by the ODIHR Election Observation Mission
- Welcome and overview of the election observation mission's work – Ambassador Urszula Gacek, Head of Mission
- Political overview, the Contestants and the Election and Referendum Campaigns – Cara Stern, Political Analyst
- Media – Sanita Jemberga, Media Analyst
- Legal Framework, Electoral dispute resolutions – Yelena Kovalyova, Legal Analyst
- Election Administration and Voter Registration – Maria Krause, Election Analyst
- Security – Katarzyna Witt, Security Expert

Questions and answers

13:30-15:00 Panel with representatives of civil society
- Nicolae Panfil, Programme Director, Promo-LEX
- Ilie Chirtoacă, Executive Director, Legal Resources Center
- Igor Boţan, Executive Director, Association for Participatory Democracy

15:15-16:45 Campaign and Election Coverage Panel
- Petru Macovei, Executive Director, Association of Independent Press, Stopfals.md
- Mariana Rata, Senior News Editor, TV8
- Denis Dermenzchi, Director, IPN News Agency
- Nadine Gogu, Executive Director, Independent Journalism Center
- Olga Gnatkova, Deputy Editor-in-Chief and co-founder, NewsMaker

Saturday, 19 October 2024

09:30-11:30 Candidates contesting the elections
- Vlad Batrincea (Representative of Alexandr Stoianoglo)
- Irina Vlah
- Ion Chicu

12:00-13:00 Election administration and legislation
- Angelica Caraman, President, Central Election Commission
- Liliana Vitu-Esanu, Chair, Audio-visual Council
- Viorel Furdui, Executive Director, Congress of Local Authorities of Moldova
- Igor Chiriac, Secretary, Legal Committee of the Parliament

13:00-14:00 ODIHR election observation mission - briefing continuation
- Election Day procedures, Maria Krause, Election Analyst
- STO Reporting, Max Bader, Statistical Analyst
- Briefing by Long Term Observers deployed in Capital City

– Moderator: Stefan Krause, Deputy Head of Mission

Sunday, 20 October 2024

All day Election Day – Observation in polling stations

Appendix 6 – Press release of the International Election Observation Mission (1st round – 20 October 2024)

Moldova's Election and Referendum Well-Managed and Competitive, Despite Serious Attempts to Undermine Its Integrity, International Observers Say

CHISINAU, 21 October 2024 – Moldova's 20 October presidential election and constitutional referendum were well-managed, and contestants campaigned freely in an environment characterized by concerns over illicit foreign interference and active disinformation efforts. While this affected the integrity of the process, additionally, campaign conditions did not allow for a level playing field among contestants, international observers said in a preliminary statement released today.

The election administration worked professionally and demonstrated impartiality in their decisionmaking. In a competitive but only minimally visible campaign, voters were offered a variety of political alternatives among presidential candidates, who were registered in an inclusive process. However, the manner in which the presidential election and referendum campaigns were conducted simultaneously, and media coverage that favoured the incumbent and the government, did not provide fully equal opportunities. Misuse of public resources in the campaign was noted, the statement says.

"Moldova deserves credit for implementing a number of reforms to increase public confidence in the electoral system, in the context heavy Russian propaganda. From implementing cybersecurity measures to ensuring a high degree of women's participation, there is much to celebrate in this election," said Lucie Potůčková, Special Co-ordinator and leader of the short-term OSCE observers. "There are, however, some areas for improvement. The overlapping period between candidate registration and the campaign, for example, has created an uneven playing field, which is something we would like to see improved."

The campaigns took place in the context of the government addressing national security threats resulting from the war caused by the Russian Federation's invasion of Ukraine. Law enforcement authorities, many international actors and civil society organizations have proclaimed that Moldova is the target of an ongoing "hybrid war" directed from abroad that includes illicit financing of political actors, disinformation campaigns, and cyberattacks.

"Yesterday marked a pivotal moment for Moldova, despite Russia's full-scale aggression against Ukraine and intensive Kremlin-backed interference in the electoral processes," said Petra Bayr, Head of the delegation from the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. "We commend the country's leadership for boldly consulting the population on this fundamental choice, and stand ready to support Moldova in further strengthening its inclusive and open society. Success will depend on further democratic reforms and the ability to combat disinformation and external interference, ensuring Moldova's democratic process remains legitimate and transparent."

"We welcome the results of the referendum," said Michael Gahler, Head of the delegation from the European Parliament. "Despite the unprecedented massive, malign and illicit Russian interference, especially through vote buying, hybrid attacks and disinformation, the people of the Republic of Moldova chose a future in the EU. We commend the competent Moldovan authorities for holding a well-managed and efficient election under these extraordinary circumstances. We call on all stakeholders to resist any interference, in order not to allow it to distort the results of the second round of the presidential election and the 2025 parliamentary elections."

While the revised legal framework for the presidential election provides an adequate basis for holding democratic elections, frequent amendments, introduced shortly prior to the election and without sufficient consultation, diminished the coherence of election legislation and potentially affected legal certainty. The legal framework for the referendum, which was on the question of enabling the parliament to integrate EU rights and obligations into national law without further constitutional reform, has certain shortcomings, including insufficient safeguards against the misuse of public resources and, as such, is not fully in line with international standards and OSCE commitments. While there are no international standards prohibiting the concurrent holding of the two contests, doing so without adjusting campaign regulations contributed to an unlevel playing field for presidential contestants.

"The substantial number of international observers that deployed to observe the elections serve as a testament to the international community's steadfast support for Moldova's democratic path," said Johan Büser, Head of the delegation from the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly. "In the context of Russia's full-scale war of aggression against Ukraine, pro-Russian actors have directed foreign interference and disinformation campaigns, while traditional views on minorities and LGBT rights were sometimes framed as reasons to vote 'No' on the EU referendum."

Election day was calm and well-organized, and the voting process was assessed overwhelmingly positively by the observers, with only a few procedural problems noted. The vote count and tabulation were assessed positively, overall.

“The electoral authorities have been transparent and professional in their work, and this was reflected in our overwhelmingly positive assessment of election day,” said Urszula Gacek, head of the election observation mission from the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights. “Our observation over the last several weeks shows that the conditions did not provide the contestants with a level playing field. The recommendations we will make based on our observation will be aimed at addressing this and other areas in need of improvement, to increase the resilience of and citizens’ confidence in electoral processes in the country.”

Recent changes created a robust legal framework for campaign finances, but oversight was diminished due to the limited capacity and resources of the electoral authorities. Campaign donation and expenditure limits apply separately to election and referendum participants, meaning political parties and election blocs participating in both contests had the ability to spend more.

During the campaign, radio and television political coverage was tightly regulated to ensure fairness, accuracy and impartiality, but ODIHR media monitoring showed that the incumbent received the most coverage overall in news and editorial programmes in both her official capacity and as a candidate, without clear distinction between the two. Coverage of the referendum in all newscasts was very limited. In line with electoral media laws, candidates were granted sufficient free airtime.

The effectiveness of the resolution of election disputes was limited in the handling of some cases. Although the dispute resolution deadlines comply with international good practice, the Central Election Commission and the appellate court did not always comply with legal deadlines. As most of the Commission’s decisions on inadmissibility were upheld upon judicial review, some important campaign-related issues were not examined on their merits.

Appendix 7 – Composition of the ad hoc committee (2nd round – 3 November 2024)

Chairperson: Ms Petra Bayr, Austria (excused)

Socialists, Democrats and Greens Group (SOC)

– Mr Jone Blikra, Norway (acting head of delegation)

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

– Mr Cristian-Augustin Niculescu-Țâgârlaș, Romania

European Conservatives Group and Democratic Alliance (EC-DA)

– Mr Oleksii Goncharenko, Ukraine

Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE)

– Ms Valentina Grippo, Italy / Italie

Group of the Unified European Left (UEL)

– ...

Co-rapporteurs AS/MON (ex officio)

– Mr Pierre-Alain Fridez (Switzerland, SOC)
– Ms Zanda Kalniņa-Lukaševica (Latvia, EPP/CD) (excused)

Venice Commission / Commission de Venise

– Ms Veronika Bílková, Vice-President of the Venice Commission
– Mr Adrià Rodriguez-Perez, secretariat of the Venice Commission

Secretariat

– Ms Ivi-Triin Odrats, Deputy Head of the Elections Division, Secretary of the ad hoc committee
– Ms Carine Roller-Kaufman, Assistant, Elections Division

Appendix 8 – Programme of the meetings of the International Electoral Observation Mission (2nd round – 3 November 2024)

Saturday, 2 November 2024

12:00-12:45 Introduction on the Country
- Ambassador Kelly Keiderling, Head of the OSCE Mission to Moldova
- Falk Lange, Head of the Council of Europe Office in Moldova
- Ambassador Jānis Mažeiks, Head of the European Union Delegation to Moldova

13:45-15:45 Briefing by the ODIHR Election Observation Mission
- Welcome and overview of the election observation mission's work – Ambassador Urszula Gacek, Head of Mission
- Political overview, the Contestants and the Election and Referendum Campaigns – Cara Stern, Political Analyst
- Media – Sanita Jemberga, Media Analyst
- Legal Framework, Electoral dispute resolutions –Yelena Kovalyova, Legal Analyst
- Election Administration and Voter Registration – Maria Krause, Election Analyst
- Security – Katarzyna Witt, Security Expert
- Statistical Analyst – Mikaela Jarnbert
- LTO Regional Briefing for teams deployed to Chisinau and surrounding areas

Questions and Answers

16:00-17:00 Candidates contesting the elections

16:00-16:30 On behalf of Maia Sandu
- Adrian Balutel – Chief of Staff to the President Maia Sandu and Vice President of Action and Solidarity Party
- Stanislav Secrieru – National Security Advisor
- Igor Zaharov – EU Affairs Advisor

16:30-17:00 On behalf of Alexandr Stoianoglo
- Vlad Batrincea – Vice President of the Parliament of Moldova and Chair of Bloc of Communists and Socialists
- Olga Cebotari – Party of Socialists of the Republic of Moldova

Sunday, 3 November 2024

All day Election Day – Observation in polling stations

Appendix 9 – Press release of the International Election Observation Mission (2nd round – 3 November 2024)

Moldova's well-managed presidential run-off offered voters genuine choice, despite legal deficiencies, unbalanced media coverage and impact of foreign interference, international observers say

CHISINAU, 4 November 2024 – The 3 November second round of Moldova's presidential election was administered efficiently and professionally, and offered voters a choice between genuine political alternatives, international observers said in a statement of preliminary findings and conclusions today. Candidates were able to campaign freely, but the quiet, ten-day campaign was marked by an increase in negative rhetoric from across the political spectrum targeting both contestants, often spread through online social networks. The challenges posed by foreign interference and vote-buying continued to reverberate during the run-off campaign, the statement says.

The presidential election was conducted under the 2022 Electoral Code, which, despite frequent revisions, provides an adequate basis for holding democratic elections. The application of general regulations to the short second-round period resulted in conflicting provisions and ambiguities, limiting the effectiveness of legal remedies and campaign opportunities, while overly burdensome financial reporting requirements, combined with limited disclosure, negatively impacted the transparency of campaign finances for the second round. The incumbent, Maia Sandu, continued to benefit from the misuse of public resources, albeit this was significantly less widespread than in the first round, and from unbalanced media coverage. This did not provide the contestants with equal opportunities, the observers said.

"The high voter engagement, by women in particular, both in Moldova and abroad, reflects a strong commitment to shaping the country's future. This process was well managed at polling stations and demonstrates that Moldovans across political views can come together and communicate openly and respectfully," said Lucie Potůčková, the Special Co-ordinator and leader of the OSCE short-term observers, and Head of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly delegation. "Despite the polarization often highlighted on social media, these interactions serve as a reminder of the resilience of real-life connections and dialogue. I commend the Moldovan authorities for their efforts to protect the integrity of the election, countering foreign interference, and ensuring a peaceful and secure voting environment. Such measures strengthen trust in democracy and highlight the unity that lies beneath differing perspectives."

The run-off was held amid continuing investigations into interference from abroad and vote-buying schemes intended to influence the outcomes of the first-round, and the constitutional referendum that was held simultaneously. These investigations included detentions, searches of premises, the seizure of materials, and the issuing of fines.

"These elections were organized under extremely challenging circumstances, facing unprecedented schemes to corrupt the electoral process. Despite this, the electoral administration deserves our full recognition for a job well done. None of this would have been possible without the hundreds of committed women working at polling stations," said Jone Blikra, Head of the PACE delegation. "The second round has, unfortunately, confirmed how deeply divided Moldova truly is. The president-elect will need to build bridges to heal these societal rifts, especially with parliamentary elections on the horizon next year."

Overall, the media provided voters with sufficient information to make an informed choice, including through a debate between the two candidates. The public broadcaster provided more coverage of the two candidates in the second round, although a large portion of its radio coverage was devoted to the government, without critical analysis. Media monitoring showed that, while the four television channels monitored devoted fairly equal amounts of airtime in their newscasts to both candidates, they displayed a concerning bias in their tone, with coverage of Sandu almost exclusively positive or neutral, while that of her opponent, Alexandr Stoianoglo, was more critical, including in less positive and some negative coverage in editorial programmes.

Preparations for the second round were efficient and professional, and the election administration met legal deadlines. The Central Election Commission continued to work in a collegial and transparent manner and held open sessions. The Commission continued its voter education programme between rounds, including through dedicated materials for students and first-time voters.

"We praise the Moldovan people for running the presidential election professionally and with an extraordinary sense of duty and dedication, despite the continued massive interference from Russia and Russian-sponsored actors," said Marta Temido, Head of the European Parliament delegation. "The determination of the Moldovan authorities and people to protect the integrity of the democratic process was noticeable during this second round. We encourage the authorities to continue these efforts in view of next year's parliamentary elections, and we will stand ready to support Moldova in defending its democracy."

Election day was generally calm and well-organized, and the voting process was assessed overwhelmingly positively by the observers, with only a few procedural problems noted. The vote count and tabulation were assessed positively overall.

“In our team’s assessment of the process, we saw that the lack of regulations adapted for the second round of the campaign created some challenges for candidates and impacted the transparency of campaign finance, for example. Our media monitoring also showed bias benefiting the incumbent”, said Urszula Gacek, Head of the election observation mission from the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights. “Our role as ODIHR is to help Moldova in addressing these and other issues we note in our observations, and we will be providing concrete recommendations that we hope will benefit Moldova’s electoral processes in the future.”

In the period leading up to the run-off, the observers also monitored the tabulation of the first-round and constitutional referendum results, and the resolution of related appeals. On 31 October the Constitutional Court certified that the “Yes” position had passed, interpreting the law as establishing the results based on valid votes cast. Voters and contestants had the opportunity to file complaints about election day violations and to appeal results, but the failure to register certain complaints and questions over which mechanisms were appropriate for appealing certain issues limited access to legal remedies.