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Moldova's EU Referendum

A Deep Dive into the Factors Shaping Citizens' Views on EU Integration

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Abstract

The narrow result of Moldova's constitutional referendum on EU accession has unveiled the nation's deep polarization over its strategic orientation, rooted in a historical East-West divide amid geopolitical and domestic pressures. This paper analyzes the factors that have shaped public opinions regarding EU integration, including Moldova's domestic political dynamics and low trust in public institutions, as well as, the influence of Russia as an external actor. It highlights the geopolitical shifts following the Russian invasion of Ukraine that have accelerated Moldova's EU candidacy, while exploring the EU's role in supporting Moldova's European aspirations through economic aid and strategic agreements and its influence in Moldovan public support for EU integration. Lastly, the paper identifies recommendations for the EU to sustain Moldova's path to integration and address broader challenges within the enlargement process.

Introduction

The geopolitical shifts stemming from the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February of 2022 found Moldova in a position of pursuing strategic alternatives while navigating its constitutional military neutrality. With a population in which the majority (55%)¹ supports military neutrality, security threats posed by a neighboring war, and a potential aggressor on its borders, this country turned to the European Union (EU) for tackling these vital challenges. While the journey of Moldova towards the EU has started ever since its independence, recently Moldovans have elected to actively pursue EU integration as a strategic national goal.

On 20th of October, 2024, Moldovans voted to enshrine EU aspirations in their constitution. This decision was taken through a referendum which was initiated by the pro-EU President of Moldova. The purpose of this referendum was to ask citizens if they support a constitutional change that reflects Moldova's EU integration aspirations. The verbatim question that was posed in the referendum was "*Do you support the amendments to the Constitution in order to enable the Republic of Moldova to join the European Union?*"² Meanwhile, the specific constitutional changes affirm the European identity of Moldova and cite EU integration as a strategic goal by establishing the irreversibility of Moldova's European path. They also enable the parliament of Moldova to adopt laws regarding EU accession and establish the precedence of EU laws over national laws.

This referendum was held simultaneously with the first round of Presidential elections, with approximately 3.3 million eligible voters. It is required that at least one-third of registered voters participate for it to be considered valid. Voter turnout met the necessary threshold, ensuring the referendum's legitimacy. The turnout was approximately 51.4%, with over 1.5 million of registered voters participating.³

¹ Samorukov, Maksim. 2024. "In Odesa's Shadows: What Is Russia's Strategy in Moldova?" Carnegie Russia Eurasia Center, October 4.

² International Election Observation Mission. 2024. "Republic of Moldova – Presidential Election and Constitutional Referendum, 20 October 2024." Statement of Preliminary Findings and Conclusions. Chisinau: ODIHR EOM.

³ Radio Moldova. 2024. "Presidential election results: Maia Sandu lead and EU Referendum controversy." 10 20.

The timing of this referendum came at a key political and geostrategic momentum for Moldova and its EU integration process. With the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the war that followed, the stakes for Moldova could not be higher. On one hand, there lies the security threat coming from Russia and the increased risk that this shift in Moldova's position entails, on the other hand, there lies the positive momentum of Moldova's accelerated path toward the EU. Thus, those stakes hung upon the will of Moldovans to take a major geopolitical decision, namely, if they want to keep their country in the grey-zone or further integrate it into the EU⁴. It is noteworthy that, in practice, on the ground this decision came down to citizens deciding whether they are pro or anti EU.

The results of this referendum were disturbingly narrow, from a pro-EU integration perspective. With 50.4% of citizens voting in favor of EU integration (saying yes to constitutional changes) and 49.6% voting against, the difference came down to around 13,000 votes⁵. 23 out of 32 districts in Moldova voted against. The capital, Chisinau, the pro-European epicenter, had a majority of voters in favor of the constitutional changes at 56%. As foreseen, the lowest level of support was recorded in Gagauzia, a Russian speaking region with only 5% pro. Meanwhile, as not foreseen before, 31% of voters from Transnistria, a breakaway region, voted pro. The decisive difference in the result was made by the diaspora which accounted for 16% of the total votes and 77% of those supported the constitutional changes⁶. This result, ultimately, reflects deep polarization in Moldova regarding EU integration, influenced by domestic political dynamics, as well as, social trust in public institutions amid geopolitical pressures that have enhanced EU's role and Russia's interference.

Key Factors Shaping Public Opinion on EU Integration

Moldova is traditionally caught between the east and west, and both those spheres play a crucial role in shaping Moldova's identity. Influences from its history, politics, cultural and socio-economic context play a crucial role into shaping the identity of Moldova. On one hand, this country is a former Soviet republic and a portion of its population reminisces this relatively recent past. A part of its soviet legacy, besides the memories of its population, is further preserved in its breakaway region of Transnistria which is still supported by Russia since the early 1990s.⁷ On the other hand, Moldova shares a common heritage with Romania, as many Moldovans identify culturally and linguistically as Romanian, as they used to be part of a joint state before Moldova became part of the Russian empire.⁸ Even today, a quarter of Moldovans hold Romanian passports and share deep cultural ties with the country.⁹ These influences act as opposing forces in promoting Moldova's integration into the EU.

Domestic political dynamics have placed Moldova between the EU and Russia for a long time. Position-opposition relations in Moldova have been dictated solely by the position of political

⁴ Paul, Amanda. 2024. "Moldova's election and referendum – what's at stake?" European Policy Centre. October 17.

⁵ Sauer, Pjotr. 2024. "Moldovans back joining the EU by razor-thin majority." The Guardian. October 21.

⁶ Ciolan, Ionela, and Mihai Mogildea. 2024. "A Quiet Victory: Key Takeaways from Moldova's EU Membership Referendum." ISPI 90. October 24.

⁷ Harward, Christina. 2024. Russia Poses Long-Term Threats to Moldova's European Integration Beyond the October Elections. Washington, DC.

⁸ Calus, Kamil. 2015. In the Shadow of History: Romanian-Moldovan Relations. Warsaw, September.

⁹ Neacsutu, Madalin. 2021. "Quarter of Moldovans Now Have Romanian Passports." Balkan Insight. May 27.

parties vis-à-vis the EU. The Communist political party in power from 2001-2009, held a shallow pro-EU political discourse while cultivating close ties with Russia at the same time. During this period, because of the pragmatic approach of this party and the hope of citizens of Moldova in joining the EU, support for EU Integration went from 32% in 1998 to 78.8% in 2008¹⁰. Their mandate was characterized by maintaining a balance between EU and Russia. This strong support for EU integration led to the election of the Alliance for European Integration from 2009 to 2013. The aim of this coalition was to promote pro-European reforms and integrate Moldova more closely with the EU. During this mandate EU integration was set as a clear political objective and the negotiations with the EU Commission regarding the Association Agreement and Visa Liberalization for Moldova started.

During this period, the EU aspired to turn Moldova into a model state within the Eastern Partnership (EaP). From 2014 to 2016 the Democratic Party of Moldova came in power, they advocated for a balanced relationship with both the EU and Russia. Nevertheless, their mandate was marked by multiple crises with corruption scandals as well as a major banking fraud, which ultimately significantly affected the support of Moldovans for EU integration reaching a significant decline to 40% in 2015¹¹. Following that, from 2016-2021 the Socialists of Moldova came into power, holding two mandates. They openly sought to strengthen ties with Russia while criticizing the previous governments' pro-European stance. Thereafter, the Party of Action and Solidarity came in power in 2021 and they still remain in power. This mandate is marked by the focus of the government in anti-corruption reforms and strengthened ties with the EU. In addition, they faced the biggest geopolitical shift because of the Russian war in Ukraine, which in turn also affected Moldova's trajectory in a new direction which intends to go further away from Russia.

The Role of Institutional Trust in EU Integration Support

These ups and downs throughout the years have undoubtedly affected the morale of the citizens in regard to EU integration. The aforementioned shallow political discourses in favor of EU integration, combined with high enthusiasm by the citizens, a lack of substantial reforms and major corruptive scandals have significantly eroded the citizens' trust in public institutions. Moreover, since the early 2000s Moldova has seen emerging oligarchic influences who infiltrated the political elites and led to concentration of power among few. This has fostered widespread corruption and erosion of the integrity of public institutions.¹²

Corruptive schemes and oligarchic influences have taken a toll on citizens' trust on public institutions and in turn on EU integration. Citizens have associated the Government's corruption with its (shallow) pro-European orientation, leading to decreased trust in the institutions and declined enthusiasm for EU membership. To illustrate, the public opinion barometer of Moldova shows that as of 2024 only 3.3% of the citizens have a great deal of trust in the Government, and 20.4% somewhat trust it. The respective figures for the Parliament are 2.9% and 17.5%, for the Justice 1.3% and 13.9%, for the National Anti-Corruption Center 2.8% and 15.6%, and for the

¹⁰ Korosteleva, Elena. 2010. "Moldova's European Choice: 'Between Two Stools'?" *Europe-Asia Studies* 1267–1289.

¹¹ Calus, Kamil, and Marcin Kosienkowski. 2018. "Relations between Moldova and the European Union." 99-113. Manchester University Press.

¹² Cenușa, Denis. 2016. *Moldova: Between Protests and "State Capture"*. Barcelona Centre for International Affairs.

General Prosecutor's office 2.3% and 14.7%.¹³ These institutions are the main actors which are involved in delivering on key reforms related to EU integration, and in turn are the key actors that are responsible for cultivating pro-EU views. Therefore, low trust implies existing challenges in sustaining support for EU integration.

EU-Moldova Relations: Balancing Stability and Reform

The EU's promotion of stabilitocracy and reluctance to openly criticize the Government amid deeply rooted corrupt practices had adverse effects on citizens' support for EU. The Union has offered unequivocal support to the previous pro-EU authorities in Moldova "despite evident examples of corrupt, unlawful and undemocratic practice."¹⁴ This was due to concerns that a weakening of the Government's position could result in a new pro-Russia government in power, thus, they opted to maintain stability over open criticism to undemocratic practices. Although the EU did not want to cause a pro-Russia government in Moldova, they were also strategically not moving too quickly with Moldova as to not cause confrontation with Russia.¹⁵ This in turn gave ground to the opposition in Moldova to claim that the EU was complicit or indifferent toward corruption in Moldova,¹⁶ further diminishing the appeal of EU integration.

Moreover, this unconditional support for the authorities still continues now with Moldova's accelerated path towards the EU. In order to receive the candidate status Moldova was presented 'nine steps' to fulfill in June 2022. Subsequently, in November 2023 the EU announced that six out of nine steps had been fulfilled and Moldova was given accession status, whereby they settled for the fulfillment of less steps than initially proposed. Furthermore, despite EU's estimation, the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum has carried out further analysis of the 'nine steps' and has concluded that none of the steps were satisfactory accomplished¹⁷. Considering that the EU enlargement process consists of a mix of meritocracy and political decision-making, a superficial approach to achieving reforms might be harmful to Moldova's EU path in the future once the accession negotiations commence. Additionally, this continued practice of lack of overt criticism might again affect the morale of the citizens in supporting EU integration.

EU's Positive Influence: Economic Assistance and Concrete Agreements

On the other hand, many acts taken by the EU have had a positive impact on public opinion. Firstly, the economic assistance and development aid that EU provided for Moldova had a positive impact on the overall sentiment towards the EU. Between 2010 and 2013, Moldova gained 550 million euros in assistance, in 2014 it received 130 million euros¹⁸. Since 2022 the funding has

¹³ P.I. Institute for Public Policy. 2024. Public Opinion Barometer: Republic of Moldova. October. Accessed November 20, 2024. <http://bop.ipp.md/en>.

¹⁴ Calus, Kamil, and Marcin Kosienkowski. 2018. "Relations between Moldova and the European Union." 99-113. Manchester University Press.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Noi MD. 2015. Socialists: The EU and the US are to blame for the situation in Moldova. May 5. Accessed November 20, 2024.

¹⁷ Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum. 2024. "Eastern Partnership Index 2023: Charting Performance in the Eastern Partnership: Democracy and Good Governance, Policy Convergence and Sustainable Development."

¹⁸ Calus, Kamil, and Marcin Kosienkowski. 2018. "Relations between Moldova and the European Union." 99-113. Manchester University Press.

significantly increased to 295 million euros,¹⁹ while from 2025-2027 Moldova will receive 1.8 billion euros.²⁰ Thus, the economic opportunities that the EU presents to Moldova, especially since 2022, are significantly and consistently appealing to the public. Secondly, all the concrete agreements that were signed between Moldova and the EU, i.e. the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement in 1994, inclusion of Moldova into the Eastern Partnership initiative in 2009, the signing of the Association Agreement including a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area, and the Visa Liberalization for Moldovan citizens in 2014, have all had concrete benefits and positive impacts in building up a momentum whereby bigger groups of citizens were supportive of the EU integration process.²¹

Geopolitical pressures on EU enlargement

The process of EU enlargement has been heavily reliant on the dynamism of geopolitics. Moldova has been considering the option of joining the EU since its independence, nevertheless membership was out of the question for the EU until the geopolitical shift that occurred since the war in Ukraine. Before the war started in 2022, enlargement was realistically discussed only in light of the Western Balkans. This prominence of the Western Balkans from an enlargement perspective came after the bloody breakup of Yugoslavia in the 90s. Subsequently, this geopolitical constellation changed with the Russian invasion of Ukraine, whereby within the same year both Ukraine and Moldova received candidate status. Thus, this shift of dynamics preceded the candidate status for all EaP countries, which begs the question: would the EU otherwise be proactive and offer these countries membership perspective, were it not for the shift of dynamics?

Russian Interference: Election Fraud, Hybrid War and Disinformation

On the other side of the coin, the major influence on the result of the referendum has possibly come from Russian interference and probable electoral fraud. Soon after the referendum voting was closed, the Moldovan authorities have stated that there was an attempt to disrupt the referendum through buying up to 300,000 votes, alluding of Russian involvement. To contextualize, this amounts to 20% of the cast ballots. Moreover, two weeks prior to the referendum Moldovan police and the Anti-Corruption Agency announced they had evidence that 130,000 individuals were to take bribes from Russian-associated sources in attempt to affect the results.²²

The impact of Russian interference, consisting of acts of hybrid war and disinformation, is ubiquitous and goes beyond the elections in threatening the entire path of Moldova towards the EU. Kremlin fosters fear and skepticism among Moldovans by orchestrating disinformation campaigns that portray EU membership as threatening the sovereignty and economic wellbeing of Moldova. Furthermore, Russia financially and mediatically supports pro-Kremlin political parties

¹⁹European Commission. 2024. "Economy and Finance: Moldova." July 25. Accessed November 20, 2024.

²⁰ 2024. "Historic Support for Republic of Moldova: The European Union Offers a Financial Package of €1.8 billion euro for the Development of the Country." EU4Moldova. October 10.

²¹ Calus, Kamil, and Marcin Kosienkowski. 2018. "Relations between Moldova and the European Union." 99-113. Manchester University Press.

²² Erizanu, Paula. 2024. "How Russia attempted to steal Moldovan election, referendum, and what comes next." Kyiv Independent. October 25.

and candidates, so their anti-EU voices are amplified. They have also interfered in Moldova's democratic institutions, influenced elections, stalled reforms, and disturbed the energy supply, all to the detriment of support for EU integration.²³

In addition, Russia also has been exploiting the existing regional divisions in Moldova. They have been leveraging their economic influence in the region of Gagauzia through promising economic and financial benefits if citizens oppose EU integration.²⁴ From the referendum results we can conclude that such influences have been successful in swaying Gagauzians towards the anti-EU camp. Likewise, Kremlin also exploits its presence in the region of Transnistria to heighten security concerns and propagate the potential of conflict if Moldova moves closer to the EU. Additionally, Kremlin also has exploited the Moldovan Orthodox Church, as a subordinate of the Russian Orthodox Church, in influencing citizens against EU integration. The church has previously rallied against the social reforms that concern inclusion and women's rights which are embedded as EU values²⁵. The church is quite influential in the Moldovan public with 21.5% of the population having a great deal of trust in the Church, while 41.8% somewhat trust it.²⁶ This systemic approach combined with the Russian nostalgia (that a portion of the population feels due to the recent history of Moldova) has negatively affected public support for EU integration by instilling doubts and fears among Moldovans, pushing them to consider alliances that align with Russian interests.

Conclusions and Strategic Recommendations

Moldova's EU integration is both a strategic opportunity and a daunting challenge, while the result of Moldova's constitutional referendum on EU integration reflects the nation's complex geopolitical and domestic dynamics. The narrow approval of the referendum, with 50.4% in favor, underscores deep societal polarization fueled by historic ties and influences by both Europe and Russia. Moldova's pro-EU trajectory has gained momentum in response to fighting corruption, the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the EU support that has followed as a result. In contrast, the pro-EU trajectory is hampered by internal challenges, like distrust in public institutions, and external interference by Russian disinformation and electoral meddling. Moldova's identity as a nation straddling East and West remains a key factor shaping public opinion and political decisions, leaving its European aspirations both promising and precarious.

The EU should follow a roadmap with five focal points to support Moldova's EU integration and strengthen its democratization process:

1. EU Should Support Moldova in Strengthening Institutional Integrity and Reforms.

To sustain Moldova's EU integration trajectory, the EU should prioritize addressing corruption and supporting the enhancement of the integrity of key institutions, by implementing robust anti-corruption measures, providing technical assistance, and

²³ Harward, Christina. 2024. Russia Poses Long-Term Threats to Moldova's European Integration Beyond the October Elections. Washington, DC.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Korosteleva, Elena. 2010. "Moldova's European Choice: 'Between Two Stools'?" Europe-Asia Studies 1267–1289.

²⁶ P.I. Institute for Public Policy. 2024. Public Opinion Barometer: Republic of Moldova. October. Accessed November 20, 2024. <http://bop.ipp.md/en>.

supporting reforms in governance, judiciary, and public administration. These reforms are critical for restoring public trust in institutions as key drivers of EU integration.

- 2. EU Should Engage in Countering Disinformation and Promotion EU Values.** EU must become proactive instead of reactive in respect to strategic communication in all enlargement countries, especially in countering Russian disinformation campaigns that portray EU membership as a threat to Moldova's sovereignty and economic well-being. Strategic communication efforts should emphasize the tangible benefits of EU integration, such as economic assistance, visa liberalization, accession negotiations, and trade opportunities. Tailored messaging is particularly necessary for regions like Gagauzia and Transnistria, where skepticism toward the EU is higher, and where Russian narratives exploit regional divisions.
- 3. EU Should Support Moldova in Ensuring Electoral Integrity and Democratic Resilience.** Given the evidence of attempted vote-buying and interference during Moldova's referendum, the EU should support initiatives that ensure free and fair elections. This includes bolstering Moldova's electoral infrastructure, strengthening cybersecurity, and collaborating with international partners to monitor elections. Protecting the democratic process is essential, particularly with Moldova's upcoming parliamentary elections, where external interference could undermine public trust and EU aspirations.
- 4. EU Should Uphold Credibility in the Enlargement Process.** To maintain public trust in EU integration, the EU must uphold a transparent and merit-based accession process which remains overtly and constructively critical, ensuring a genuine progress without compromising credibility. While geopolitical considerations have accelerated Moldova's candidacy, the EU must ensure that substantive reforms are genuinely achieved, avoiding the perception of superficial progress. Clearly defined benchmarks and consistent evaluation will reinforce public confidence and the credibility of the EU's enlargement commitments.
- 5. EU Should Promote Economic, Regional and Inclusive Development.** Regional disparities in support for EU integration, such as the 5% pro-EU vote in Gagauzia, highlight the need for targeted investments in underdeveloped areas, so that Russian influence does not find fertile ground in exercising its influence. Increased economic assistance and infrastructure projects should aim to reduce inequalities and demonstrate the EU's commitment to Moldova's prosperity. Supporting Moldova's energy diversification efforts is also critical for reducing external pressures.

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