

# Moldova

**61**  
/100

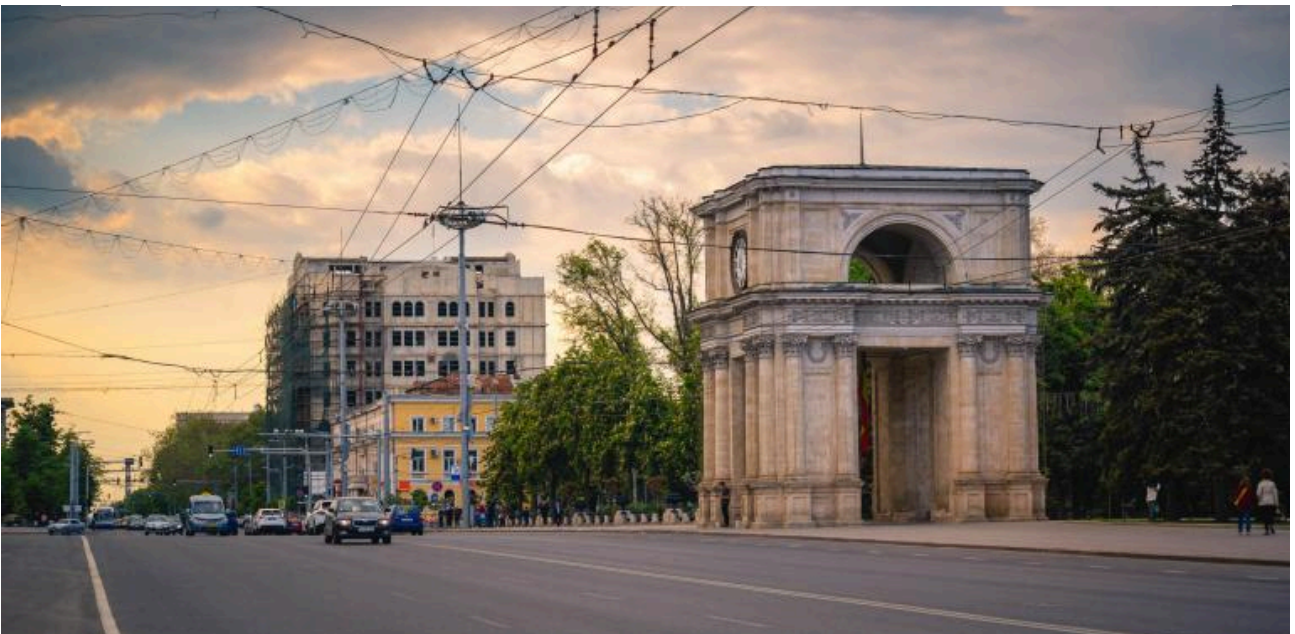
PARTLY FREE

<u>Political Rights</u>	<b>26</b> /40
<u>Civil Liberties</u>	<b>35</b> /60

## LAST YEAR'S SCORE & STATUS

**62** /100    **Partly Free**

Global freedom statuses are calculated on a weighted scale. See the methodology.



## Note

The numerical scores and status listed above do not reflect conditions in Transnistria, which is examined in a separate report. *Freedom in the World* reports assess the level of political rights and civil liberties in a given geographical area, regardless of whether they are affected by the state, nonstate actors, or foreign powers. Disputed territories are sometimes assessed separately if they meet certain criteria, including boundaries that are sufficiently stable to allow year-on-year comparisons. For more information, see the report [methodology](#) and [FAQ](#).

## Overview

Moldova has a competitive electoral environment, and freedoms of assembly, speech, and religion are mostly protected. Nonetheless, pervasive corruption, links between major political figures and powerful economic interests, and critical deficiencies in the justice sector and the rule of law all hamper democratic governance.

## Key Developments in 2023

- In mid-March, Moldovan police claimed that pro-Moscow actors sought to orchestrate “mass disorder” during an antigovernment protest held in Chişinău. Police arrested 54 people at the Şor Party-backed protest, saying they had engaged in “questionable behavior.” Police also responded to four bomb threats on the same day as the protest.
- In April, a Chişinău court turned down an appeal filed on behalf of Ilan Şor, an oligarch who was implicated in the theft of \$1 billion from three banks in a 2014 scandal; received a prison sentence in 2017; and fled Moldova in 2019. The court doubled his prison sentence to 15 years.
- In June, the Constitutional Court ruled the Euroskeptic and pro-Moscow Şor Party unconstitutional and ordered its dissolution over what it said was the consistent use of illegally sourced funds and acts that threatened the country’s constitutional order.
- Local elections were held in November, with authorities saying that the campaign was marred by interference by Moscow. The elections were also affected by Moldovan authorities’ efforts to bar candidates affiliated with the dissolved Şor Party from running.

# Political Rights

## A. Electoral Process

**A1** 0-4 pts

**Was the current head of government or other chief national authority elected through free and fair elections?**

**4/4**

The president is elected by direct popular vote for up to two consecutive four-year terms. If no candidate receives more than 50 percent of the votes in the first round, the two leading candidates compete in a second round. Former prime minister Maia Sandu of the Action and Solidarity Party (PAS) defeated incumbent president Igor Dodon in November 2020. Sandu won 57.7 percent in the second round, while Dodon won 42.3 percent. Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) observers called the election competitive but reported that electoral authorities did not investigate allegations of first-round irregularities.

A prime minister nominated by the president and confirmed by Parliament holds most executive authority. Dorin Recean of the PAS was appointed prime minister, along with a new cabinet, in February 2023, following the resignation of Natalia Gavrilița and her cabinet earlier that month.

**A2** 0-4 pts

**Were the current national legislative representatives elected through free and fair elections?**

**3/4**

Voters elect members of the 101-seat, unicameral Parliament to serve four-year terms. All members are elected through proportional representation from closed party lists or as independents.

In April 2021, the Constitutional Court found sufficient grounds to allow Sandu to dissolve the incumbent Parliament following the December 2020 resignation of then prime minister Ion Chicu. The PAS won 63 seats in the July 2021 snap polls. The Electoral Bloc of Communists and Socialists, which included the Socialist

Party (PSRM) and the Communist Party, won 32. The Euroskeptic and pro-Moscow Șor Party won 6. OSCE observers considered the elections well administered, competitive, and largely respectful of fundamental freedoms, but noted the negative impact that media bias, a lack of effective campaign finance oversight, inadequate legal frameworks for electoral dispute resolution, and weak judicial independence had on impartiality and trust in the electoral process.

In May 2023, Evghenia Guțul, who is associated with the Șor Party, was elected governor of the Autonomous Territorial Unit of Gagauzia, in a contest marred by accusations that the Șor Party had engaged in vote buying. Days after Guțul was elected, officers of the National Anticorruption Center (CNA) raided the local offices of the Central Election Commission (CEC). The CNA said that decedents and individuals living outside of Moldova were present on the voter roll.

The PAS did relatively well in local elections held in November 2023, winning mayoral posts in rural areas, while opposition candidates prevailed in Chișinău and other large cities. The Moldovan government said that the electoral campaign was affected by interference on the part of its Russian counterpart, citing what it said was the illegal funding of pro-Moscow parties.

**A3** 0-4 pts

<b>Are the electoral laws and framework fair, and are they implemented impartially by the relevant election management bodies?</b>	<b>2/4</b>
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The July 2021 parliamentary elections marked a return to an electoral system based on proportional representation. Those elections were affected by fewer irregularities than the February 2019 polls, when a mixed system featuring single-member constituencies and seats allocated proportionally by party list was used. OSCE observers said that the legal framework governing the 2021 elections aligned with international good practices. They also commended the implementation of key revisions in line with previous recommendations.

Lower-level electoral commissions and the CEC both performed well in the July 2021 elections. OSCE observers reported that the election administration was generally considered trustworthy. However, some key decisions made by the CEC appeared to follow partisan lines. The CEC also faced allegations of improper

conduct, including the exclusion of the opposition from the CEC leadership-selection process.

The November 2023 local elections were affected by authorities' efforts to prevent those affiliated with the banned Şor Party from running. In July, Parliament adopted electoral-code amendments that barred the leaders of parties deemed unconstitutional from participating in elections for five years, effectively barring Şor Party leaders. In early October, the Constitutional Court declared the amendments unconstitutional, citing their scope. A day later, the Commission for Exceptional Situations (CSE) used its emergency powers to ban Şor Party members who were implicated in criminal activity, had been barred from previous polls over funding concerns, or were the subject of international sanctions from running. Parliament also adopted new electoral-code amendments targeting Şor Party-affiliated candidates. Later in October, the CEC prepared a list of 102 individuals who were prohibited from running for office, though the list was not made public.

Following these developments, Ilan Şor pledged his support to several registered parties—especially the Chance Party, which had been formed in July—and independent candidates. In November, days ahead of the elections, the CSE banned Chance Party candidates, though the Chişinău Court of Appeal annulled the CSE's decision in December, after the polls were conducted.

Authorities also sought to remove individual candidates from contention during the November 2023 elections. In the city of Bălţi, Arina Korshikova, an independent candidate supported by Şor, progressed to the second round, but the District Electoral Board cancelled her registration and removed her from the ballot.

OSCE observers commented on the broad powers of the CSE, which is led by Recean, on electoral matters. The observers stated that the “blanket exclusion of numerous candidates without a possibility for effective legal remedy is contrary to OSCE commitments and international standards.”

*Score Change: The score declined from 3 to 2 because the government used emergency powers to ban former members of a dissolved political party from*

*contesting local elections, overriding a court ruling on their eligibility shortly before balloting began.*

## **B. Political Pluralism and Participation**

**B1** 0-4 pts

**Do the people have the right to organize in different political parties or other competitive political groupings of their choice, and is the system free of undue obstacles to the rise and fall of these competing parties or groupings?**

**3/4**

Political party legislation in Moldova is generally liberal but does include restrictions.

Under the Law on Political Parties, parties seeking registration must enlist 1,000 members. The law had required parties to enlist 4,000 members from at least half of all districts, but the Supreme Court of Justice (CSJ) ruled that obligation unconstitutional in 2020, prompting its revision that year. More political parties went on to participate in the July 2021 parliamentary elections when compared to previous elections. However, the amended party-registration restrictions still disproportionately affect regional, municipal, and local parties, as well as parties representing geographically concentrated ethnolinguistic minority populations (for example, Gagauzians and Bulgarians).

In June 2023, the Constitutional Court ordered the immediate dissolution of the Șor Party, citing the consistent use of illegally sourced funds and acts that threatened the country's constitutional order. Authorities also targeted the Chance Party; in late October, before its candidates were barred from the November elections, law enforcement officers raided the party's headquarters and the homes of party members.

**B2** 0-4 pts

**Is there a realistic opportunity for the opposition to increase its support or gain power through elections?**

**4/4**

Opposition parties have a strong presence in Parliament and other elected offices and can gain support through elections. Following the July 2021 parliamentary elections, the PAS displaced the PSRM from national office. In May 2023, Evghenia Guțul, who was affiliated with the Șor Party, was elected governor of the Autonomous Territorial Unit of Gagauzia.

**B3** 0-4 pts

**Are the people’s political choices free from domination by forces that are external to the political sphere, or by political forces that employ extrapolitical means?**

**2/4**

Politically powerful business magnates—known as oligarchs—and foreign actors strongly influence Moldovan politics at the national and local levels, undermining accountability to voters. Moscow in particular has been accused of influencing Moldovan affairs through oligarchs like Ilan Șor and through sympathetic media outlets. Șor, who lives in exile, maintains political influence within Moldova through proxies. In November, President Sandu accused Moscow of funding sympathetic political parties in Moldova to influence the local elections.

In September 2023, Moldovan authorities ordered the deportation of Vitaly Denisov, head of the Moscow-sponsored Sputnik Moldova media outlet. Several days later, a Russian investigative outlet reported that Denisov was an active Russian military intelligence officer specializing in disinformation operations abroad.

**B4** 0-4 pts

**Do various segments of the population (including ethnic, racial, religious, gender, LGBT+, and other relevant groups) have full political rights and electoral opportunities?**

**3/4**

Women and members of ethnic, religious, and other minority groups do not face direct legal barriers to political participation, though representation of women, people with disabilities, and members of the Romany minority has historically been low. Several members of Moldova’s ethnic-minority groups, including Gagauzians, Bulgarians, and Roma, hold parliamentary seats.

Women's representation in Parliament and in high-level government positions has significantly increased in recent years. President Sandu is the first woman to hold that post in Moldovan history. Women held 40.8 percent of Parliament's seats as of December 2023.

LGBT+ people organize and advocate for equal rights but are discouraged from political engagement due to societal discrimination and harassment.

## C. Functioning of Government

**C1** 0-4 pts

**Do the freely elected head of government and national legislative representatives determine the policies of the government?**

**3/4**

Since the PAS government's 2021 appointment, policies have generally been determined by elected legislative and executive officials. However, key decisions have also been made by the CSE after the government declared a state of emergency in response to the Russian military's 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The state of emergency was renewed multiple times and was lifted on December 31, 2023.

Despite holding a nonpartisan office with few executive powers, President Sandu actively participates in policymaking.

**C2** 0-4 pts

**Are safeguards against official corruption strong and effective?**

**1/4**

Corruption remains widespread. While anticorruption efforts have not yielded significant results, the European Commission (EC) reported in November 2023 that the government had embarked on some reform. The EC cited June amendments to a whistleblowers' law. It also noted legislative amendments passed in July that refined the mandates of the CNA and the Anticorruption Prosecutor's Office (PA).



In July 2023, Vasile Plevan, a deputy chief of the PA, failed a vetting process to join the Superior Council of Prosecutors (CSP), a body that governs, appoints, and disciplines prosecutors. The Pre-Vetting Commission, which assesses candidates for judicial-sector posts, reported that Plevan did not meet its criteria on ethics and financial integrity. Plevan lost an appeal at the CSJ in December.

The CNA and the PA were both affected by a scandal involving Iulian Muntean in 2023. Muntean, a professor, was vetted and appointed to the Superior Council of Magistracy (CSM), a body meant to ensure the judiciary's independence, in September, despite being the subject of a corruption probe in 2018. Later in September 2023, the PA began investigating two CNA staff members involved in vetting Muntean. In October, CNA chief Iulian Rusu submitted his own resignation.

Moldova is still recovering from a 2014 banking scandal in which \$1 billion was stolen from three banks. Vladimir Plahotniuc and Ilan Șor, key actors in the affair, left Moldova in 2019. In April 2023, the Chișinău Court of Appeal turned down an appeal submitted by Șor's defense lawyers and increased his prison sentence to 15 years. (Șor was first sentenced to prison over the affair in 2017.) No sentence was issued in Plahotniuc's case by year's end.

In September 2023, lawmakers Irina Lozovan and Alexandr Nesterovschi were stripped of their immunity by Parliament and later arrested by the PA. Both lawmakers had joined the Rebirth Party, which authorities assert is controlled by Șor, and allegedly accepted bribes from him to do so.

**C3** 0-4 pts

<b>Does the government operate with openness and transparency?</b>	<b>1/4</b>
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Although the PAS government appears to be more transparent than its predecessors, serious issues persist, including the late publication of plans, draft policies, budgets, and bills for consultation. Efforts to transparently appoint public officials have been marred by procedural failures and allegations of political bias.

## Civil Liberties

# D. Freedom of Expression and Belief

**D1** 0-4 pts

**Are there free and independent media?**

**2/4**

Outlets connected to oligarchs and political parties dominate the Moldovan media sector. With few exceptions, nationally broadcasting television stations are owned by people affiliated with political parties. Reporters face difficulty accessing important information in the public interest and are subject to threats of legal action from politicians and other public figures.

Moldovan authorities have restricted access to Russian media since Moscow's full-scale invasion of Ukraine began in 2022. The Informational Security Law of 2022 bans Russian television news programming from being broadcast in Moldova. Under the law, 50 percent of television content must be sourced from European Union (EU) member states, the United States, and countries that ratified the European Convention on Transfrontier Television. In October 2023, the Audiovisual Council (CA) sanctioned two distributors in the Autonomous Territorial Unit of Gagauzia, which it said rebroadcast Belarusian and Russian news programming in violation of the audiovisual-services code.

In 2023, the Intelligence and Security Service (SIS) continued its practice of restricting access to Russian websites, such as rubaltik.ru, which it blocked in February for spreading false information and inciting hatred or war. In two separate decisions made in October, the SIS banned 53 websites, including those of several major Russian media organizations.

In late October 2023, the CSE ordered the suspension of six television channels' licenses on the advice of the SIS. Prime Minister Recean said the channels were "subordinate to the Plahotniuc and Șor criminal groups." A number of Moldovan media institutions expressed concern over this decision. OSCE observers reporting on the November local elections said the CSE's suspensions "do not

appear to constitute proportionate restrictions of freedom of speech.” In December, the Council for the Promotion of Investment Projects of National Importance temporarily halted the functioning of companies operating those channels, along with two other television outlets, citing state security concerns.

**D2** 0-4 pts

<b>Are individuals free to practice and express their religious faith or nonbelief in public and private?</b>	<b>3/4</b>
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While the constitution guarantees religious freedom and separation of the state from religion, the law also provides special status to the Moldovan Orthodox Church. Orthodox symbols have been placed in public institutions, and Orthodox churches are sometimes present within public hospitals and some schools.

**D3** 0-4 pts

<b>Is there academic freedom, and is the educational system free from extensive political indoctrination?</b>	<b>3/4</b>
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Academic freedom is generally respected. However, the Orthodox Church has strong influence over the educational system, with education officials at all levels frequently promoting the church and Orthodox beliefs.

**D4** 0-4 pts

<b>Are individuals free to express their personal views on political or other sensitive topics without fear of surveillance or retribution?</b>	<b>4/4</b>
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Individuals are generally able to engage in discussions of a political nature without fear of retribution.

## **E. Associational and Organizational Rights**

**E1** 0-4 pts

**Is there freedom of assembly?**

**3/4**

Freedom of assembly is constitutionally guaranteed and mostly upheld in practice.

In late 2022, the Șor Party began staging antigovernment protests in Chișinău. Some of the demonstrators admitted that they were paid for their participation. Protests backed by the Șor Party continued in 2023. On March 12, Moldovan police claimed that pro-Moscow actors sought to orchestrate “mass disorder” during an antigovernment protest held in Chișinău. Police arrested 54 people at that Șor Party-backed protest, saying they had engaged in “questionable behavior.” Police additionally said they responded to four bomb threats that day. In May, pro-EU demonstrators rallied in Chișinău, while counterprotesters who supported the Șor Party gathered in several cities.

**E2** 0-4 pts

**Is there freedom for nongovernmental organizations, particularly those that are engaged in human rights- and governance-related work?**

**3/4**

The nongovernmental organization (NGO) sector is active and largely operates without undue restrictions. At the same time, there are very few genuine sources of financial support for NGO activities inside Moldova. Most of the active NGOs remain highly dependent on foreign funding for their programs and activities.

**E3** 0-4 pts

**Is there freedom for trade unions and similar professional or labor organizations?**

**2/4**

Trade unions do not encounter major obstacles in Moldova. However, trade unions are not active or visible, nor do they play an effective role in protecting workers' rights.

## **F. Rule of Law**

**F1** 0-4 pts

**Is there an independent judiciary?**

**1/4**

Moldova's judicial branch is highly susceptible to political influences that hamper its independence. Judicial appointment processes have lacked transparency. In a 2022 report, the Group of States against Corruption of the Council of Europe (CoE) said that Moldova did not implement its previous recommendations for judicial reform. But in a November 2023 report, the EC said that the government had made some progress in pursuing judicial reform, citing laws focusing on the CSJ and on the vetting of high-level judges and prosecutors.

In August 2023, the CSJ annulled decisions made by the Pre-Vetting Commission, effectively rejecting 21 candidates and requiring them to be evaluated again. Candidates for CSM and CSP positions were among those affected. The Ministry of Justice criticized the court's decision, saying it violated deadlines and otherwise issued tardy decisions.

In September 2023, Iulian Muntean, a recently appointed CSM member, was revealed to be under criminal investigation for corruption in 2018. Muntean's appointment had followed an integrity check performed by the Pre-Vetting Commission. Parliament held special hearings over the appointment, which were inconclusive. Later in September, Muntean resigned from the CSM.

**F2** 0-4 pts

**Does due process prevail in civil and criminal matters?**

**1/4**

Due process rights are poorly upheld in the Moldovan justice system. Lengthy judicial processes are common, and judges face heavy caseloads. Moldovans often seek redress at the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR).

In 2021, Prosecutor General Alexandr Stoianoglo was arrested on charges relating to corruption and abuse of power. In 2022, the ECtHR shared complaints lodged with the government by Stoianoglo, who said he was illegally arrested and was suspended from his post for political reasons. The Justice Ministry later

maintained that the government did not violate the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) in its treatment of Stoianoglo. In September 2023, President Sandu signed a decree removing Stoianoglo from his post. His removal was based on a special commission’s evaluation of his activity, which found his performance “unsatisfactory.”

No progress has been made on the prosecution of those involved in the expulsion of seven Turkish teachers and their illegal transfer to Turkey in 2018.

**F3** 0-4 pts

<b>Is there protection from the illegitimate use of physical force and freedom from war and insurgencies?</b>	<b>2/4</b>
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Prisoners and detainees face maltreatment and torture, and the officials responsible for such abuses generally enjoy impunity. The perpetrators of acts of torture and maltreatment against postelection protesters in 2009 remain largely uninvestigated and unpunished. Those involved in the case of Andrei Braguța, who died in police custody in 2017 after a traffic violation, have not yet been adequately sentenced.

**F4** 0-4 pts

<b>Do laws, policies, and practices guarantee equal treatment of various segments of the population?</b>	<b>2/4</b>
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The 2012 Moldovan Law on Ensuring Equality provides a framework for preventing and addressing discrimination. The law’s main operational body, the Equality Council, has been praised for its effective work and principled stances on complex discrimination issues, but it has been underfunded by successive governments.

Women, people with disabilities, Roma, members of linguistic minority groups, Muslims and other non-Orthodox believers, people of African and Asian descent, older residents, and LGBT+ people often face employment discrimination. Some of these groups also encounter discrimination in education, housing, and public services. Hate speech against minority groups is promoted by some media outlets and public figures.

Schools and universities generally do not provide education in the Ukrainian, Gagauz, Bulgarian, or Romany languages. Low-quality public schools in the south, attended by many Gagauzians and Bulgarians, often fail to prepare graduates for admission to Romanian-language universities.

Moldova received 120,700 people displaced from Ukraine as of December 2023. While the country has largely welcomed these refugees, the Roma among them have faced mistreatment and discrimination. In 2022, the European Roma Rights Centre (ERRC) reported that Roma refugees were placed in segregated housing with poor living conditions. Also in 2022, Human Rights Watch (HRW) noted that Roma were sometimes denied access to publicly run facilities.

In January 2023, the Moldovan government approved a temporary protection mechanism for displaced people from Ukraine that went into effect in March. A report released in September by the US-based NGOs HIAS and VOICE noted that Ukrainians who do not gain temporary protection status would lose access to some services and to the formal labor market. The report also noted that Roma refugees often had difficulty providing the necessary identification to gain that status. As of December, some 26,400 people had received temporary protection status.

## G. Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights

**G1** 0-4 pts

**Do individuals enjoy freedom of movement, including the ability to change their place of residence, employment, or education?**

**3/4**

The law protects freedom of internal movement and foreign travel, and the government generally respects these rights. There are no formal restrictions on the right to change one's place of employment or education, but bribery is common in educational institutions. Travel to Transnistria is subject to checks by the de facto territorial authorities.

**G2** 0-4 pts

**Are individuals able to exercise the right to own property and establish private businesses without undue interference from state or nonstate actors?**

**2/4**

Although Moldovan law guarantees property rights, they are undermined by a weak and corrupt judiciary. Widespread corruption also affects fair competition and normal business activity. Allies of powerful individuals have been accused of benefiting economically from selective enforcement of business regulations.

**G3** 0-4 pts

**Do individuals enjoy personal social freedoms, including choice of marriage partner and size of family, protection from domestic violence, and control over appearance?**

**2/4**

Most personal social freedoms are protected, but domestic violence and sexual abuse are common. A 2016 report by several Moldovan NGOs found that more than 63 percent of women and girls over the age of 15 had experienced some form of gender-based violence in their lifetime, while over 20 percent of men admitted to having had nonconsensual sex with a woman. Domestic and gender-based violence laws are inadequately enforced. Abuses that do not result in significant injury are subject only to administrative penalties.

In 2021, Parliament ratified the CoE's Istanbul Convention on preventing and combating violence against women.

Sexual harassment in the workplace remains common, and such incidents are inadequately addressed. In April 2023, a sexual harassment case involving the head of the Court of Accounts was made public.

Child marriages are reported in the Romany community. Neither marriage nor civil unions for same-sex couples are legally recognized.

**G4** 0-4 pts

**Do individuals enjoy equality of opportunity and freedom from economic exploitation?**

**2/4**



Due to weak protection of labor rights by authorities and trade unions, reports of exploitative labor practices—including long work hours, low wages, and fully or partially undocumented work or wages—are common. The rural population, women, and Roma are especially vulnerable to these practices. Regulations meant to prevent exploitative or unsafe working conditions are poorly enforced.

Human trafficking remains a problem, though the authorities do attempt to prosecute traffickers. In its *Trafficking in Persons Report 2023*, the US State Department noted that the Moldovan government had created a national referral mechanism for trafficking and a national antitrafficking action plan in 2022.



#### On Moldova

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#### Country Facts

Global Freedom Score

**61/100** Partly Free

#### Other Years

2023

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