

Moldova

36
/100

TRANSITIONAL OR HYBRID REGIME

Democracy Percentage	35.71 /100
Democracy Score	3.14 /7

LAST YEAR'S DEMOCRACY PERCENTAGE & STATUS

36 /100 Transitional or Hybrid Regime

The ratings are based on a scale of 1 to 7, with 7 representing the highest level of democratic progress and 1 the lowest. The Democracy Score is an average of ratings for the categories tracked in a given year. The Democracy Percentage, introduced in 2020, is a translation of the Democracy Score to the 0-100 scale, where 0 equals least democratic and 100 equals most democratic. See the methodology.



Author

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Score changes in 2024

- Electoral Process rating decreased from 4.00 to 3.75 due to the influence of illegal financing on the electoral process in 2023, as well as nontransparent changes in electoral legislation which were implemented right before the local elections (despite being deemed unconstitutional by the Constitutional Court), restricted candidates' right to be elected, and effectively disenfranchised some voters.
- Corruption rating improved from 2.25 to 2.50 due to law enforcement actions countering illegal party financing by the Ilan Shor group, which is considered to be a “criminal group” by the authorities.
- As a result, Moldova's Democracy Score remains at 3.14.

Executive Summary

In 2023, Moldova experienced complicated, and to some extent controversial, political developments marked by a number of radical measures adopted under the justification of external threats. The political process was heavily influenced by the urgency to implement the reform agenda driven by the imperative to open European accession negotiations and the persisting geopolitical crisis in the region stemming from Russia's aggression against Ukraine.

The first signs of declining public approval for the ruling Party of Action and Solidarity (PAS) became evident with the results of the November 5 local elections. PAS obtained 32.8 percent of the votes at the level of the 32 rayons (territorial districts), a worse result than either PAS candidate Maia Sandu achieved in the second round of the 2020 presidential elections or the party won in early parliamentary elections in 2021. ¹ PAS also did not win the mayoralty of any central city of the 11 municipalities and lost the capital, Chişinău. ² Furthermore, despite accusations of vote buying, the government failed to prevent the victory of fugitive businessman Ilan Şor's proxy, Evghenia Guţul, as governor of the Autonomous Territorial Unit of Gagauzia (ATUG); Guţul was sworn in on July 19. ³

Moldova's government institutions continued to be influenced politically by the Party of Action and Solidarity that holds 63 out of 101 seats in the legislature,

ensuring a linear legislative process, without disruptions or infightings within the ruling party in the law-making process. However, civil society organizations highlighted significant deviations from legislative procedures within the parliamentary majority, including concerns related to agenda setting, public consultations, and overall transparency. ⁴ These shortcomings undermined the country's system of checks and balances, affecting democratic control over decision-making and eroding public trust in the institutions. Nevertheless, polls indicated a gradual increase in trust in the office of the president, the government, and Parliament in 2023 compared to the previous year. ⁵ President Maia Sandu of PAS remained a driving political force during this period. ⁶ This strengthened the perception that, due to her political affiliation, she is influencing the decision-making process in favor of her party beyond the president's limited constitutional mandate in Moldova's semiparliamentary system of government.

Accountability in the governance process lacked strong, unconditional, and depoliticized enforcement, particularly concerning personnel decisions related to top positions in state institutions. Both the president and the government shielded members of the administration who faced criticism for poor or controversial decisions. ⁷ Instead of receiving sanctions and being excluded from future government positions, these officials were often reassigned or retained their roles. For instance, the former minister of energy and infrastructure, Andrei Spânu, ⁸ who was accused of carrying out natural gas purchases under non-transparent conditions at high prices, returned to the government in July 2023 under Prime Minister Dorin Recean as the new minister of infrastructure and regional development. Additionally, in the aftermath of a shooting that took place at Chişinău International Airport in June, several officials were able to keep their post or move offices despite severe criticism from the public. ⁹ ¹⁰ ¹¹

In July 2023, Parliament approved the modifications to the budget proposed by the government, which included significant salary increases—in some cases almost doubling their monthly pay—for government officials. ¹² About 1,300 public servants in the central government will receive raises, costing a total sum of about 80 million Moldovan lei (\$4.3 million). This followed another 8,000-lei (\$414) increase in ministers' monthly salaries that came into effect in January 2023, which together with the newest increase would bring them up to 50,000

Moldovan lei (\$2,590) ¹³ from 19,520 Moldovan lei (\$1,570) in 2022. The government's decision faced criticism from some public employees, such as the prosecutors, who said the pay raises were unfair, ¹⁴ as well as from the opposition. ¹⁵ Less than two weeks prior to the commencement of the electoral campaign for the local elections in November, the government adopted the "Bonus for Moldova" package, which included salary hikes for public sector workers, including doctors, police officers, and teachers, alongside one-time payments for various social groups. ¹⁶ These moves raised concerns that the PAS might be using the grants to sway the electorate in its favor during the November local elections. On top of this, PAS received somewhat favorable media coverage on many channels that had been perceived as unbiased in the past, including the public broadcaster TeleRadio-Moldova (TRM).

Justice reforms remained a focal point for the government, with continuous efforts to vet judges and prosecutors and eliminate corruption from the judicial sector. However, the vetting process yielded mixed results, with a pass rate below 50 percent. ¹⁷ The credibility of the vetting process was marred by a scandal involving Iulian Muntean, ¹⁸ who, despite being implicated in corruption cases from 2018, ¹⁹ passed his assessment by the Independent Evaluation Commission, an independent judicial body commonly known as the Pre-Vetting Commission, and was appointed as member of the Superior Council of Magistracy (CSM) by the PAS-dominated Parliament. ²⁰ Complicating matters, the Supreme Court of Justice overturned 21 decisions made by the Pre-Vetting Commission, necessitating a reevaluation of those cases. Subsequently, the government, backed by President Sandu, made a controversial decision allowing future vetting commissions to disregard SCJ decisions if reasonable suspicions about the candidates' integrity exist. This development threatens to cast a shadow over the justice reforms and President Sandu herself, who was criticized ²¹ for saying that the SCJ's decisions were "illegal" and "almost random." ²² This raised concern about potential breaches of the constitution by her government, particularly Article 120, which designates decisions by the highest court as binding. ²³

The case of former prosecutor general Alexandr Stoyanoglo, who was dismissed by Sandu in September 2023, ²⁴ resurfaced following the October decision of the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) ²⁵ that Moldova was guilty of breaching the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR), ²⁶ specifically the

right to access effective judicial remedy, regarding Stoyanoglo's suspension from the position of prosecutor general in October 2021. ²⁷

The government's focus on security and the prevention of interference by criminal groups associated with oligarch Ilan Șor ²⁸ —who is under international sanctions and was sentenced in absentia by the Chișinău Court of Appeal in April 2023 for involvement in a 2014 banking fraud case ²⁹ —led to the implementation of strict measures restricting the right of some candidates to stand for election.

³⁰ To pass the measures, the ruling party invoked the state of emergency through the Committee for Exceptional Situations (CSE), which had been extended ten times since October 2021. These measures were criticized by the nongovernmental organization (NGO) Promo-LEX's Election Monitoring Mission, which said the restrictive mechanisms set a "dangerous precedent." ³¹ Promo-LEX also argued that these restrictions are "broad and insensitive to individual circumstances." ³² The Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) assessed that, although the November elections were peaceful and efficiently managed, they were negatively impacted by restrictions applied by the government to address external interference and security concerns. ³³ The government has actively employed security arguments to justify disproportionate bans on participating in elections against political parties associated with Șor, such as the Chance Political Party.

Another of the PAS majority's controversial decision linked to elections is a proposal, presented at the end of December 2023, to modify the electoral code to allow referendums to be held on the same day as elections. ³⁴ Likewise, it was proposed to move forward the date by which Parliament was required to set election dates, from 60 days before the president's term expired to 90 days. Both amendments were approved in early 2024 and are likely to be used by PAS to increase Sandu's chances of reelection.

The local elections in November were significantly shaped by the political influence of the ruling party on the one hand and the mobilization efforts of Șor's allies on the other. President Sandu, in several television appearances, tied future access to European and public funds to voting for "European mayors," ³⁵ intending to discourage support for candidates associated with criminal groups linked to Șor that express anti-Western views. ³⁶ Before the most recent

elections, considerable numbers of mayors had defected from political parties and migrated to new ones in the 2019 local elections, with 36 percent of those who migrated to new parties choosing PAS. Based on the assessment of Promo-LEX, 65 percent of independent candidates running in the November 2023 elections support the government. ³⁷ Conversely, Șor affiliates efficiently mobilized a significant number of local candidates, even in major cities such as Bălți. ³⁸ Known political affiliates of Șor included the Chance Political Party, formerly the “Ours” Party, ³⁹ and another older political party, the Revival Party. Șor was alleged to be financing vote-buying operations, ⁴⁰ which investigations by anticorruption agencies and intelligence have been uncovering. Additionally, a considerable factor contributing to Șor’s popularity lies in his narrative of personal victimization due to the legal prosecution against him and his group, as well as his populist rhetoric.

Throughout the year, the Moldovan authorities remained vigilant regarding the high risks associated with Russian hybrid interference in the country. In July, intelligence and law enforcement agencies revealed that they had uncovered a spy network comprising three individuals, one of whom is a Moldovan national. The network’s activities were aimed at subverting social and political processes in Moldova and fostering dependence on Russia through the manipulation of public opinion. ⁴¹ To counter the spread of disinformation, including false narratives related to Russia’s aggression in Ukraine, the Security and Intelligence Service (SIS) blocked dozens of webpages in 2023, many linked directly to Russia. ⁴² The CSE had also temporarily suspended the licenses of 12 television channels, some of them controlled or heavily used by opposition forces, since December 2022, and discussions over the suspensions’ legitimacy and efficiency persisted throughout 2023. ⁴³

Support from the European Union (EU) and other Western partners in 2023 proved vital to the government’s ability to manage the security crisis and external interference, preserve domestic legitimacy, and compensate for difficulties in implementing the reform agenda. The approval in December of the opening of accession negotiations with the EU, following the granting of candidate country status in June 2022, creates new opportunities for reforms and transformations in Moldova. Additionally, the EU initiated a new Civilian Mission for Partnership in

Moldova, **44** focusing on providing support for crisis management capacity building and enhancing resilience against hybrid warfare.

While certain aspects of human rights are not respected, such as the use of the Russian language in elections, the situation on the ground is quite stable and manageable in Moldova. However, the human rights situation remains complicated in the breakaway region of Transnistria, which is internationally recognized as part of Moldova but which has operated with de facto independence since a brief military conflict in 1992. Civil society activists urged that the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA) make the organization of soccer games in Transnistria contingent on improvements in human rights, **45** including an international investigation into the murder of opposition leader Oleg Horjan. **46**

At-A-Glance

Moldova remained governed by a comfortable parliamentary majority led by the Party of Action and Solidarity, which is committed to Western values and actively engaged in reforms aimed at promoting European integration. However, the quality of reforms in key sectors of the rule of law remained somewhat modest throughout 2023, with negative precedents regarding the right of candidates to be elected and the irrevocability of decisions made by the court. There were two important electoral exercises—the election of the executive in the Autonomous Territorial Unit of Gagauzia and the Moldovan local elections—whose results were undermined by cases of illegal or nontransparent financing, mainly involving the political allies of the fugitive Ilan Șor. The result of the local elections showed the ruling party underperforming in large cities, including the capital, Chișinău, while showing political will to create local coalitions with the Party of Socialists of the Republic of Moldova (PSRM), which it accuses of being pro-Russian. Civil society organizations benefited from government openness and greater participation in the decision-making process, but faced criticism and reluctance from the opposition, especially in cases where they were perceived as progovernment. Media legislation related to advertising has improved, with clearer powers to fight monopolies in the Competition Council and the Audiovisual Council. Despite criticism from a number of civil society organizations, the government suspended the licenses of six television channels on charges of involvement in Russian disinformation operations, after the new audiovisual media services code defined

“disinformation” and Parliament approved the creation of the Center for Strategic Communication and Countering Disinformation. disinformation. The criminalization of separatism has influenced the government’s relations with Transnistria, while changes to the tax code relating to value-added tax (VAT) refunds, on the other, have altered the dynamics between the central government and Gagauzia. Meanwhile, positive signs were observed in public administration reform as the government adopted a new strategy for 2023–30. Justice reform continued with vetting, which, however, faced challenges in the Supreme Court of Justice, leading to repeated evaluations of magistrates and prosecutors by the Pre-Vetting Commission. The highlight of the anticorruption policies was the Anticorruption Prosecutor’s Office assuming control over high-level corruption cases with the aim of making the fight against corruption more efficient.

National Democratic Governance 1.00-7.00 pts

Considers the democratic character of the governmental system; and the independence, effectiveness, and accountability of the legislative and executive branches.

2.75
/7.00

- Despite having a majority of 63 out of 101 members in the legislature, the ruling Party of Action and Solidarity appointed Dorin Recean, who is not a PAS member, as the new prime minister in February. **47** After about five months, Recean reshuffled his cabinet, appointing Andrei Spînu to head the Ministry of Infrastructure and Regional Development, Dan Perciun to the Ministry of Education and Research, and Adrian Efros to the Ministry of Internal Affairs. Despite these changes, the government maintained a solid political position by relying on the strong majority of PAS in Parliament. The opposition’s attempt to censure Recean’s government over deepening poverty and inflation failed in September. **48**
- The Commission for Exceptional Situations continued to control decision-making processes. The government, together with Parliament, has extended the state of emergency 10 times since October 2021, citing an “imminent threat to national security” due to the implications of Russia’s February 2022 invasion of Ukraine and the subsequent war. **49** The last extension pushed the state of emergency’s expiration date from October 2 to the end of December. The Moldovan think tank Expert-Grup explained that although the state of emergency allowed the government to expedite decision-

making, its all-but-automatic continuation, as well as the expanded scope of its application, allowed the government to avoid engaging with other political and institutional interests. The state of emergency gave the government considerable room for maneuver, which led to deviations from transparency procedures and public consultations. ⁵⁰

- On March 16, 10 mayors affiliated with the PSRM declared their intention to join the “Movement for the People,” a platform established in February ⁵¹ by Șor’s allies that was supported by the pro-Russian Șor Party. (The Șor Party was subsequently declared unconstitutional in June, ⁵² and began the process of dissolution in August. ⁵³) This platform has been designed to attract fringe political entities that opposed the government. The Socialists attributed the mayors’ defection to political corruption and urged the Office of the Prosecutor General to investigate and prevent such cases. ⁵⁴
- Over the 12 months ending in June 2023, there was a notable increase in the travels of members of Parliament (MPs) abroad. ⁵⁵ Traveling legislators incurred per diem and other costs amounting to 2.3 million lei (\$128,000) over that period, approximately one-third more than their 1.8 million lei in expenses over the similar period of 2021–22. ⁵⁶ These trips were predominantly undertaken by PAS members, accounting for 65 percent of the costs, while 27 percent of the costs were incurred by staff members of the Secretariat of the Parliament, and only 8 percent by representatives of the Electoral Bloc of Communists and Socialists, which included the PSRM. ⁵⁷
- Throughout 2023, the legislative process during parliamentary sessions lacked predictability concerning agenda setting, ⁵⁸ which was frequently modified in a radical manner without prior notice. ⁵⁹ Parliamentary regulations, especially provisions related to the drafting of the agenda, were frequently disregarded by PAS. ⁶⁰ Draft laws were only sporadically accompanied by opinions from parliamentary standing committees, the General Legal Directorate, ⁶¹ or the National Anticorruption Center, which sometimes were published during or even after voting procedures. ⁶² These practices contradict good governance principles.
- On June 19, ⁶³ the Constitutional Court ruled that the Șor Party had violated constitutional provisions related to the rule of law, citing actions taken by the party that the court said affect the sovereignty and independence of the Republic of Moldova, as well as attempts to gain

political power through undemocratic means such as nontransparent party financing. ⁶⁴ Based on the Constitutional Court’s conclusions and those of law enforcement agencies, the court decided to approve the dissolution of the Șor Party, with three of the court’s five judges signing onto the decision to declare it unconstitutional. ⁶⁵ The court-ordered process of dissolving a political party has never before been carried out in Moldova. Two of the court’s five judges, Serghei Țurcan and Vladimir Țurcan, issued separate dissenting opinions. ⁶⁶ The dissenting judges wrote that, based on the evidence presented, the government’s argument against the constitutionality of the Șor Party should be rejected, for reasons including that other authorities are responsible for determining the legality of the Șor Party’s actions. Representatives of the Șor Party rejected accusations that the party had attempted to overthrow Moldova’s democratic order. ⁶⁷

- On October 11, ⁶⁸ the government approved a law mandating that all airlines operating in Moldova provide passenger data of travelers arriving in the country. ⁶⁹ Airlines must submit the information between 24 and 48 hours before flights, and the Ministry of the Interior’s Unit for Passenger Data will store the personal data for five years. This measure aims to align with the provisions outlined in the EU’s 2016 Passenger Name Record (PNR) Directive ⁷⁰ and is intended as a preventive security action in the face of “hybrid threats.” ⁷¹ The measure was prompted by a June incident at Chișinău International Airport in which a Tajik citizen seized a gun from a border police officer and tragically killed two security staff members. ⁷²

Electoral Process 1.00-7.00 pts

Examines national executive and legislative elections, the electoral framework, the functioning of multiparty systems, and popular participation in the political process.

3.75
/7.00

- During 2023, important elections took place in May in the Autonomous Territorial Unit of Gagauzia to choose its new executive, and throughout Moldova in November to elect mayors and members of the local and municipal councils. These elections have shown both the level of influence of Șor’s political allies and the political support for PAS and the government.
- In April and May, ⁷³ during two rounds of elections in Gagauzia, the population elected Evghenia Guțul, an ally of Ilan Șor’s, to the executive

position of *bashkan* (governor), with 52.34 percent of the 53,500 people who voted. **74** In the second round on May 14, Guțul secured 27,376 votes, narrowly defeating her rival Grigorii Uzun, who ran as an independent with support from the PSRM, by about 2,500 votes. Guțul's supporters made up less than one-third of the 92,505 people in Gagauzia who had the right to vote. **75** In the second round, participation reached 54.46 percent, surpassing the turnout recorded in 2019, when the incumbent bashkan at the time, Irina Vlah, secured victory with 91.2 percent of the votes in the initial round and a turnout of 50.3 percent. **76** Guțul belonged to the Șor Party at the time of her election, but, after the party was banned, she announced in June that she would become a political independent. **77**

- On May 13, one day before the second round of the elections in Gagauzia, Moldova's Central Electoral Commission (CEC) opened proceedings against eight candidates related to noncompliant campaign financing. **78** Based on its evaluation of campaign finance reports published on the website of the Central Electoral Council of Gagauzia, the CEC in Chișinău found that the candidates had all received donations exceeding the 11,700-lei (\$651) legal maximum. The largest discrepancies were reported in the cases of Guțul, who had received donations from 65 people that surpassed the allowed limit by a combined 458,000 lei (\$25,472), and Victor Petrov, the founder of the pro-Russian populist People's Movement of Gagauzia, who had donations from 21 people surpassing the limit by a combined 436,800 lei. Other candidates found in violation of the financing regulations were Uzun, whose donations exceeded legal limits by a total 184,800 lei; Serghei Cimpoeș, 148,300 lei; Dmitrii Croitor, 102,100 lei; Nicolae Dudoglo, 59,090 lei; Mihail Formuzal, 18,600 lei; and Gheorghii Pavlioglo, 15,600 lei. **79** These noncompliance findings raised the potential of illegal financing, with consequent repercussions on the quality of the region's Bashkan elections. Moldova's Anticorruption Prosecutor's Office reportedly was focusing investigations on the victorious Guțul. **80**
- The voter list for Moldova's local elections includes 2,761,954 voters, about 6,000 less than in the last national elections in 2021.
- Between September 30 and October 13, the 60 political parties **81** registered for the local elections collectively spent 9.1 million lei (\$497,000) on their campaigns. **82**

- Prime Minister Recean, while not a member of PAS, was reported to have engaged in several activities promoting the party. These activities included personally distributing party newspapers in March ⁸³ and July, ⁸⁴ participating in the PAS's National Congress, and kicking off the PAS campaign for the local elections during working hours. ⁸⁵ Other minor cases of the misuse of administrative resources were observed in the case of Chişinău. ⁸⁶
- During at least one TV appearance, in September as the local elections were about one month away, President Sandu warned voters that if they cast ballots for “representatives of criminal groups” and not “European mayors,” their localities could lose future access to European and central government funds. ⁸⁷ This message was amplified by other government actors and was aimed at discouraging voter support for candidates associated with Şor's affiliates and with other political parties that are perceived as pro-Russian. ⁸⁸ Sandu's statement was criticized by opposition representatives, mainly those who advocate friendly relations with Russia. ⁸⁹
- On September 25, just 12 days prior to the electoral campaign's start, Recean unveiled a 1.65-billion-lei (\$90 million) government spending package dubbed “Bonus for Moldova” (“Spor pentru Moldova”). This initiative included salary hikes for public sector workers such as doctors, police officers, and teachers, alongside one-time payments for various social groups. ⁹⁰ Civil society organizations monitoring the elections labeled this move an “abuse of administrative resources,” ⁹¹ while the opposition accused the government of engaging in “electoral bribing.” ⁹²
- On October 4, the PAS parliamentary majority adopted changes to Article 16 of the electoral law ⁹³ enabling the exclusion of individuals from elections based on a new set of criteria, in an effort to root out Şor influence. ⁹⁴ Parliament passed the changes without seeking expert legal advice or holding public consultations. President Sandu promulgated the new changes while she was out of the country attending the summit of the European Political Community in Granada, raising legality questions. ⁹⁵ Earlier October 4, the government also enforced comparable restrictions within the framework of the CSE, ⁹⁶ though the commission appeared to be exceeding the mandates offered by the state of emergency or existing legislation. ⁹⁷ The PAS majority adopted the new law in the second reading, despite a ruling by the Constitutional Court on October 3 concluding that

the new electoral code provisions ⁹⁸ were “unconstitutional” because they conflict with the “right to be elected” as outlined in Articles 38 and 54 ⁹⁹ of Moldova’s constitution. ¹⁰⁰ The CEC subsequently said that it had drawn up a list of 102 people who were ineligible to participate in the local elections, based on information from law enforcement agencies. ¹⁰¹ The CEC added that it needed to keep the list confidential to protect personal data and respect the listed people’s presumptive innocence. ¹⁰² The government moved aggressively against Șor’s affiliates on the premise that they are pro-Russian actors, substantiated mainly by international sanctions adopted in 2022 and 2023 against Șor and some of his affiliates, who, according to the United States ¹⁰³ and the EU, ¹⁰⁴ are destabilizing to Moldova within the larger context of malign Russian interference. ¹⁰⁵

- For the local elections on November 5, the CEC registered 3,900 individuals vying for the existing 898 mayoral positions, along with 11,085 candidates competing for over 56,000 councilor seats. ¹⁰⁶ Out of the total 3,900 registered mayoral candidates for the position of mayor, more than half represent PAS, the Șor-linked Chance Party, and PSRM. The percentage of independent candidates for mayor slightly decreased from the last local elections in 2019, falling from 10 percent to 8 percent. Meanwhile, the representation of women increased from 27 percent of mayoral candidates to 30 percent. ¹⁰⁷
- In December, three opposition parties not currently represented in Parliament—the Change Party, the League of Cities and Communes (LOC) and the Dignity and Truth Platform Party (Plataforma DA, or PPDA)—announced the creation of a bloc for the next presidential elections, scheduled to be held in late 2024, and the parliamentary elections due by mid-2025. ¹⁰⁸ Their intention is to serve as a pro-EU alternative to PAS.

Civil Society 1.00-7.00 pts

Assesses the organizational capacity and financial sustainability of the civic sector; the legal and political environment in which it operates; the functioning of trade unions; interest group participation in the policy process; and the threat posed by antidemocratic extremist groups.

4.75
/ 7.00

- During the evaluated period, the government showed openness towards civil society organizations. In its 2023 report on Moldova, the EU assessed that the financial and legal environment of Moldova allows the functioning of civil society. ¹⁰⁹
- Throughout the year, civil society organizations published reactions regarding hate speech during the local elections, numerous cases of electoral legislation violations, the cancellation of the selection process for a director of the national energy regulator, and instances of intimidation against NGO representatives. ^{110 111 112 113} At the same time, civil society organizations faced continuous attacks from opposition politicians and even judges, who accused international ¹¹⁴ and national NGOs of having close links with the government and conducting “espionage” ¹¹⁵ in favor of the ruling party. ¹¹⁶
- On January 26, Moldova’s Institute for European Policies and Reforms (IPRE) condemned what it said were attempts to intimidate its Executive Director, Iulian Groza. Eugen Rurac, the interim head of the General Directorate of Criminal Prosecution within the National Anticorruption Center, had filed a criminal complaint against Groza charging that he had illegally accessed personal data, including real estate records. ¹¹⁷ IPRE asserted that these alleged attempts at intimidation ¹¹⁸ were a consequence of Groza’s involvement in the preselection process for the chief prosecutor position at the Prosecutor’s Office Combating Organized Crime and Special Cases (PCCOCCS), in which Rurac was one of the contenders. ¹¹⁹ In response to the complaint, the organization explained that between May and August 2022, it had engaged a group of experts to evaluate candidates for positions in the Superior Council of Magistracy and the Superior Council of Prosecutors (CSP). As part of this evaluation, the hired experts examined the accuracy of candidates’ declarations of immovable assets, mentioned as part of their required declarations of wealth and personal interests over the past five years. To conduct this research, IPRE signed a contract with the Public Services Agency to access Moldova’s real estate cadastre web service. However, one unnamed expert mistakenly accessed information beyond the scope of the research, an action not authorized by IPRE. In his criminal complaint, Rurac interpreted the unauthorized accessing of private data as a breach of Law No. 133/2011 on the Protection of Personal Data.

- On May 9, Socialists, Communists, and Șor political affiliates organized a march to commemorate Victory Day, which marked the anniversary of Nazi Germany's surrender to the Soviet Union in World War II.” ¹²⁰ Some participants were reported to be wearing controversial pro-Russian insignia such as the St. George's ribbon, which was banned in 2022 as a provocation in the context of the Russia's then-recent invasion of Ukraine. However, on April 11, upon referral by PSRM deputies, the Constitutional Court had declared this ban unconstitutional, except in cases where the symbol is used to promote war crimes or crimes against humanity. ¹²¹ The Socialists reported that they transported participants from the region with party money.
- On May 21, at the request of President Sandu, the government organized a pro-EU rally called the European National Assembly of Moldova. ¹²² The event cost 4.7 million lei (\$260,000) ¹²³ in public money and brought together about 75,000 people from all over the country in Chișinău. ¹²⁴ At the same time, small groups of Moldovan diaspora representatives organized meetings in different European capitals. The PSRM boycotted the event and condemned its organization during the state of emergency and under conditions of socioeconomic difficulties, alleging that the government planned to transport participants to the event by bus from territories outside the capital using public funds. ¹²⁵
- May and June were engulfed in scandal surrounding legislative attempts of legislative modifications to change Victory Day's name to Day of Commemoration and Reconciliation in Memory of Those Who Fell in World War II, and move its official celebration one day earlier, from May 9 to May 8. PAS deputies put forward the proposal on May 24. ¹²⁶ The moves to rename the holiday sparked protests from the Șor-affiliated Revival Party ¹²⁷ and resistance in the parliament from a combined bloc of deputies from PSRM and the Party of Communists of the Republic of Moldova (PCRM), ¹²⁸ . Bowing to public pressure, PAS shelved the name-change proposal and focused solely on changing the day of the celebration. ¹²⁹ However, the moves to change the holiday were ultimately abandoned altogether. ¹³⁰
- LGBT+ people and their supporters held a Pride March took place on June 18 in Chișinău, for the first time without the need for heavy police protection. ¹³¹ The event was assessed as one of the most peaceful since 2013, ¹³² when the first march was allowed. There were counter-protests by

about 100 clerics advocating for the “traditional family.” The mayor of Chișinău, Ion Ceban of the National Alternative Movement (MAN), opposed the organization of the Pride March, arguing that what he called “propaganda to children” was not “reasonable.” ¹³³ The LGBT+ rights advocacy organization ILGA-Europe’s 2023 ranking of 49 countries’ protection of LGBT+ rights put Moldova in 24th place in 2023, higher than its neighbors Ukraine and Romania, which are ranked 39th and 41st, respectively. ¹³⁴

- In June, Marina Tauber, an independent MP who had previously been affiliated with the Șor Party and was Jewish, made comments comparing criminal proceedings being brought against her to the Holocaust. Tauber, who faced charges related to accepting illegal financing from criminal groups and falsifying party finances, accused Sandu and the EU of committing “a new genocide” against the Jewish people, herself, and Șor, who was also Jewish and was living in exile in Israel. The Israeli ambassador to Moldova, Joel Lyon, objected to the inappropriate use of the term “Holocaust” and urged Moldovan authorities to counter any distortion or denial of the Holocaust, particularly when coming from members of the Moldovan Parliament. ¹³⁵
- On August 7, ¹³⁶ Promo-LEX appealed to UEFA president Aleksander Čeferin, and the soccer union’s Executive Committee, urging them to consider the human rights situation in the Transnistrian region, particularly in light of the murder of opposition leader Oleg Horjan, as a condition for the organization of soccer games in the breakaway region.
- In November, during the 12th meeting of the EU-Moldova Civil Society Platform, it was reiterated that civil society organizations will continue to monitor the implementation of Moldovan authorities’ commitments towards the EU and support reform processes. ¹³⁷
- On September 19, 35 representatives of civil society organizations met in a hybrid format for a fourth round of consultations as the Moldovan government developed a Civil Society Organizations Development Program for 2024–27. ¹³⁸ The program is aimed at improving involvement in government decision-making processes and consolidating civil society organizations’ activities.
- On October 30, six media outlets and human rights NGOs expressed concern about the CSE’s continued withholding of television broadcast

licenses, as six more television channels had their licenses suspended over accusations of Russian disinformation. The media outlets and NGOs questioned the restrictions' proportionality, transparency, and compatibility with the values of a democratic state. ¹³⁹

Independent Media 1.00-7.00 pts

Examines the current state of press freedom, including libel laws, harassment of journalists, and editorial independence; the operation of a financially viable and independent private press; and the functioning of the public media.

3.00
/7.00

- New legislation on advertising took effect starting on January 8. ¹⁴⁰ Under the new legislation, the responsibility for supervising the advertising market was assigned to the Competition Council and the Audiovisual Council, while the police were responsible for supervising advertisements involving vehicles.
- On January 27, ¹⁴¹ the Audiovisual Council adopted ¹⁴² a list of “must-carry” TV channels ¹⁴³ that television service providers are required to broadcast. ¹⁴⁴ . On August 11, the modifications adding the must-carry list to the audiovisual media services code were published in the Official Gazette. ¹⁴⁵ Broadcasting obligations entered into force on September 11. ¹⁴⁶ The criteria for listing, developed by the Audiovisual Council in 2022, includes factors such as public financing and the inclusion of local content. However, the final list included several channels that, according to an independent assessment, showed media coverage that somewhat favored the government. ¹⁴⁷ The modifications to the audiovisual media services code also introduced a legal definition for the concept of “disinformation.” ¹⁴⁸
- On July 31, the Parliament approved the establishment of the Center for Strategic Communication and Combating Disinformation, a legislative initiative of President Sandu. ¹⁴⁹ This is the first agency in the history of Moldova established to counter disinformation. Former interior minister Ana Revenco was appointed its director with a five-year mandate. As of the end of 2023, the center was still a work in progress.
- On September 18, the Audiovisual Council adopted a methodology for the detection and evaluation of disinformation in audiovisual content, ¹⁵⁰ focusing on cases of disinformation that endanger national security. The

authors stated that the methodology was adopted following good practices as defined by the EU and in line with the principles outlined in the European Convention on Human Rights. However, the document lacks specificity regarding the legal basis for the defining threats to national security. ¹⁵¹

- In 2023, the Audiovisual Council implemented sanctions for various violations of the Audiovisual Code, including the use of unverified information, ¹⁵² carrying too small a proportion of Romanian-language content, ¹⁵³ noncompliance with the must-carry list of TV channels, ¹⁵⁴ discriminatory or personal attacks on journalists, ¹⁵⁵ electoral campaigning, ¹⁵⁶ and the retransmission of Russian TV channels. ¹⁵⁷
- In March, Chişinău mayor Ceban alleged that certain media outlets, including publicly funded outlets, had engaged in manipulation and the dissemination of misinformation ¹⁵⁸ in their negative coverage of city hall's activities.
- Throughout 2023, there were several cases of personal verbal attacks and denigration against journalists, usually towards those covering the activities of elected officials. The Association of Independent Press (API), a Moldovan press freedom NGO, reacted strongly against these cases. ¹⁵⁹ In one example, on February 7, local journalist Mihail Sirkeli, ¹⁶⁰ editor in chief of online portal Nokta.md, was denigrated during the talk show *Let's Discuss Together* ¹⁶¹ on Gagauziya Radio Televizionu (GRT TV). ¹⁶²
- On September 14, during a press conference, Minister of Agriculture and Food Industry Vladimir Bolea used coarse language against a journalist, mistakenly thinking that the microphone was off. Some media NGOs condemned the minister's language, ¹⁶³ while others said that it did not rise to the level of a direct attack. ¹⁶⁴ Some NGOs demanded that Prime Minister Recean ¹⁶⁵ penalize Bolea in accordance with the Law regarding the Government, but the administration did not take any actions against the minister. ¹⁶⁶ .
- In 2023, both public and private media outlets demonstrated political partisanship in their coverage of public events. ¹⁶⁷ In May, media institutions reported on the simultaneous pro- and antigovernment protests taking place surrounding the European National Assembly of Moldova called by President Sandu. According to an evaluation published by Moldova's Independent Journalism Center (IJC) NGO, ¹⁶⁸ the pro-Şor Party television stations Primul în Moldova and Orizont TV/TV6 portrayed the progovernment protests in a negative light but favored the antigovernment

protests. In contrast, the national broadcaster Moldova 1 and private TV channels such as Vocea Basarabiei, TVR Moldova, Jurnal TV, Pro TV Chişinău, and TV8 depicted the pro-government protests in a manner that was “slightly” favorable to the government, often with a “triumphalist tone.”

- In June, the API condemned the obstruction of access to information of public interest by the mayor of Costeşti village, Vasile Borta, who did not allow journalists access to drafts of decisions being considered by the village’s council. ¹⁶⁹
- On September 21, photojournalist Elena Covalenco announced ¹⁷⁰ that she had been banned for three years from entering the Transnistria region following her coverage of the situation in the region in July. ¹⁷¹ On September 22, the Moldovan government’s Bureau of Reintegration, which deals with Transnistria conflict resolution issues, condemned the ban as an abuse and promised to take appropriate legal actions, although it did not detail specific measures. ¹⁷²
- In October, at the request of the Security and Intelligence Service, the CSE decided to suspend the operation of six television channels (Orizont TV, Prime TV, Publika TV, ITV, Canal 2, and Canal 3) and 30 websites. These media outlets were accused of being part of Russia’s disinformation campaign and hybrid operations ¹⁷³ to derail local elections on November 5. ¹⁷⁴ ITV, Orizont TV, ¹⁷⁵ Prime TV, and Publika TV all released denials of the allegations. ¹⁷⁶

Local Democratic Governance 1.00-7.00 pts

Considers the decentralization of power; the responsibilities, election, and capacity of local governmental bodies; and the transparency and accountability of local authorities.

2.50
/ 7.00

- Throughout the year, relations between the central and local authorities were influenced by the organization of the local elections in November. The central government’s had a working relationship with the Gagauz autonomous region that was tense or at times entirely absent, especially after the May elections for the Gagauz executive, and had similar relations with the region of Transnistria after Moldova’s Parliament criminalized separatism in amendments to the penal code at the beginning of the year.

- On February 2, Parliament voted in the second reading to modify the penal code, ¹⁷⁷ introducing penalties for carrying out, instigation, or financing separatist actions. The bill was initiated in December 2022, and authorizes prison sentences of two to five years in the case of separatist actions, up to three years for instigation, and up to 10 years for financing separatist actions. ¹⁷⁸ On January 9, before the law was adopted the following month, the separatist administration of the Transnistrian region had condemned the law then under consideration as being detrimental to negotiations for the resolution of the conflict. ¹⁷⁹ Russian authorities have also criticized the law. ¹⁸⁰
- On March 15, the government adopted the Public Administration Reform Strategy for the years 2023–30, concentrating on civil servant management, institutional framework, strategic planning, reducing bureaucracy, and improving electronic services. ¹⁸¹ A significant feature of the strategy is the potential for the “voluntary amalgamation” of territories around highly populated localities in order to increase the effectiveness of local government, subject to requirements for territorial continuity and maximum distances from administrative centers. ¹⁸²
- On July 19, ¹⁸³ Guțul was appointed as bashkan by the People’s Assembly of Gagauzia, the legislative body of the autonomy. No representative of the central authorities was present at the inauguration. While the Assembly approved Guțul’s proposed structure for her administration, it requested that she revise its composition by November 15, ¹⁸⁴ urging her to reduce the number of organizational units in the proposed organigram and replace non-Gagauz-speaking individuals within the team. ¹⁸⁵ On September 20, after multiple attempts, the People’s Assembly approved the composition of Guțul’s executive committee, allowing the heads of the Departments of Interior Affairs, Information and Security, and Construction and Infrastructure to be appointed. ¹⁸⁶
- President Sandu has been delaying the signing of the decree that would allow Guțul to join the executive, invoking suspicions regarding Guțul’s affiliation with a “criminal group” or her acting in the interest of another country without providing a clear timeline for making a final decision. ¹⁸⁷ The Presidential Office and other institutions have not replied to Guțul’s request ¹⁸⁸ to be included in the composition of the government, despite their legal obligation to do so under Law No. 344 of December 23, 1994. ¹⁸⁹

- On July 17, ¹⁹⁰ the head of the Russian Communist Party announced at a press conference in Moscow that Oleg Horjan, the leader of the political opposition in Transnistria and head of the Transnistrian Communist Party, had been found dead in his home the previous night, in an apparent murder. ¹⁹¹ Moldova's Parliament organized hearings on this case, ¹⁹² while the Moldovan government proposed initiating an international investigation under the auspices of the OSCE, ¹⁹³ but this proposal was ignored by the Transnistrian administration in Tiraspol. Horjan had faced political persecution for criticizing Transnistria's de facto administration, as well as the Sheriff Holding. ¹⁹⁴ In November 2018, he was sentenced to four and a half years in prison for committing violent actions against the authorities. He was released in December 2022. On July 23, the Supreme Court of Justice in Moldova declared Horjan's previous sentencing illegal. ¹⁹⁵
- On October 5, Parliament passed in the second reading a law amending Article 6 (11) of the tax code to require the executive of Gagauzia to refund VAT to registered businesses and other economic operators in the autonomous region from the local budget, not the national one as it had before. ¹⁹⁶ The PAS deputies who pushed the law argued that in the last five years, 640 million lei (\$34.7 million) had been allocated from the national budget to refund VAT to economic operators in Gagauzia and that the new law would be fairer to Moldova's other territorial units. ¹⁹⁷ VAT payments collected by Gagauz economic operators were contributed to the national budget, meaning that if reimbursements do not likewise come from the national budget, Gagauzia has to use local funds and reduce expenditures on other local needs. The law was signed into law by President Sandu on October 21, and entered into force on November 1. The People's Assembly of Gagauzia brought the case to the Constitutional Court, but the court declined to examine it in a November 30 decision. ¹⁹⁸ The legal changes were not followed by the establishment of a mechanism clarifying when the central authorities should intervene to support Gagauzia's budget to refund VAT to local businesses. In protest of the VAT changes, the People's Assembly of Gagauzia voted in December to abandon the mixed working group it had established in 2015 with the deputies of the Parliament of Moldova as a common platform for dialogue. ¹⁹⁹ Representatives of the Gagauz People's Assembly had last left the mixed group in 2019 due the Moldovan Parliament's lack of support for three bills proposed by Gagauz

legislators in 2016 aimed at improving the status of the autonomous region.

200

- As a result of the Moldovan local elections on November 5, PAS won mayoral races in 291 of 895 localities **201** with 32.5 percent of the overall vote nationwide. PSRM elected mayors in 144 localities with 16 percent of the vote, followed by the European Social Democratic Party (PSDE) with 103 mayors and 11.5 percent of the vote. The only party openly associated with Șor, the Revival Party, won in 27 localities, collecting 3 percent of the vote). The number of independent candidates elected as mayor rose to 116. In the votes for local councils, PAS won the majority, with 357 councilors elected out of a total 1086 nationwide, followed by PSRM with 256 and PSDE with 88 mandates. PAS majorities on the councils of 19 out of 32 territorial units. **202** Where PAS did not elect enough councilors to appoint the president of town councils, the party's councilors were open to creating coalitions even with the Socialists, for example in the territorial units of Căușeni **203** , Șoldănești, Dubăsari, and Ștefan-Vodă. **204** The ability to create coalitions between PAS and the Socialists illustrates a capacity for cooperation at the local level, despite political rivalry at the central level in Parliament.
- In the Chișinău Municipal Council, PAS and reelected mayor Ceban's MAN party won 20 seats each, of 51 total. PSRM came in third with six seats, and MAN will need its support to assemble a majority. **205**

Judicial Framework and Independence 1.00-7.00 pts

Assesses constitutional and human rights protections, judicial independence, the status of ethnic minority rights, guarantees of equality before the law, treatment of suspects and prisoners, and compliance with judicial decisions.

2.75
/7.00

- In 2023, the Pre-Vetting Commission continued evaluating candidates for the Superior Council of Magistracy and the Superior Council of Prosecutors. A total of 67 judges and prosecutors had undergone the evaluation process, which started in July 2022 for the CSM and in February 2023 for the CSP. **206** The results showed that less than 25 percent of the CSM candidates passed the evaluation. Meanwhile, approximately 44 percent of CSP candidates—8 out of 17—passed the evaluation process. **207** Twenty-one candidates who did not pass the evaluation appealed the decisions of the

Pre-Vetting Commission to the Supreme Court of Justice, and the court overturned those decisions. **208**

- On August 1, the Supreme Court of Justice (SCJ) adopted 21 separate decisions concluding that the evaluations carried out by the Pre-Vetting Commission of 21 candidates for positions in the CSM and the CSP were affected by “serious problems” of legality in terms of substance and procedural aspects. The court asked the Pre-Vetting Commission to repeat the investigation process of the 21 candidates. **209** The Pre-Vetting Commission started evaluating the 21 candidates again in September, **210** with procedures based on the SCJ rulings and the Pre-Vetting Law. **211** In the repeated evaluation process, three candidates competing for seats in the CSP again failed. **212** However, another candidate previously rejected for a position in the CSM passed the repeated vetting procedure. **213** The latter case is a clear demonstration that the vetting process can be flawed and therefore needs scrutiny and guaranteed opportunities for magistrates and prosecutors to challenge the decisions of the Pre-Vetting Commission in the Supreme Court of Justice.
- In an interview published on August 10, President Maia Sandu characterized the decisions of the SCJ to regarding these appeals as “illegal” and indicative of resistance within the system against judicial reforms. **214** In response, the Association of Judges of the Republic of Moldova pointed to the constitution’s Article 120, which said that the SCJ’s decisions were irrevocable, **215** and condemned the president’s statement as “generalized and defamatory.” **216** Additionally, in August, Anticorruption Prosecutor Veronica Drăgălin stressed the importance of respecting the SCJ’s decisions in the spirit of the rule of law. **217** In October, the judicial inspectorate of the CSM announced its intention to verify the decisions made by the SCJ. **218**
- The Supreme Court of Justice’s decisions demanding the Pre-Vetting Commission to repeat the evaluation for the 21 candidates were criticized by the Ministry of Justice, which said they were “ignoring the legislative power and the integrity vetting mechanism,” as well as a “dangerous precedent for the fight against corruption.” **219**
- On August 18, **220** Parliament voted in favor of changes to the Pre-Vetting Law proposed by Sandu. **221** The modifications allow future vetting commissions to ignore the decisions of the SCJ if they are deemed

“arbitrary or manifestly unreasonable.” **222** These modifications contradict Article 120 of the constitution. **223**

- On October 6, Vitalie Miron, a member of the Pre-Vetting Commission appointed by PAS, resigned **224** in protest of the new legal modifications to the Pre-Vetting Law. **225** The Pre-Vetting Commission asserted that Miron’s resignation of Vitalie Miron will not negatively influence its activity or the vetting process. **226**
- In 2023, out of the 12 available seats on the CSM, only nine were filled following the pre-vetting and parliamentary appointment processes. **227** One of the appointed CSM members, Iulian Muntean, **228** who had been positively evaluated by the Pre-Vetting Committee **229** and approved by the PAS parliamentary majority, **230** resigned due to an ongoing corruption investigation involving bribes from students dating to 2018 (see Corruption). **231** On September 21, the Pre-Vetting Commission published a disclaimer that, during its evaluation of Muntean, no information was provided regarding the corruption allegations against him. **232**
- On August 2, **233** President Sandu submitted a request for an opinion from the Council of Europe’s Venice Commission on the draft Law on the Anticorruption Judicial System and Amendments to Some Normative Acts, which aimed to establish an anticorruption court. **234** The Venice Commission recommended establishing an anticorruption chamber within the SCJ, and offered several other improvements to the draft. **235** Parliament approved a version of the law reflecting those recommendations in the first reading on November 30. The future court authorized by the legislation will be part of a broader anticorruption system consisting of three components: the Anticorruption Court, the Anticorruption Board of the Chişinău Court of Appeal and the Supreme Court of Justice. The judges of the Anticorruption Court and the members of the Anticorruption Board will be preselected by three international experts nominated by the development partners and three representatives of civil society organizations nominated by the CSM. **236** Given the negative situations linked to the Pre-Vetting Commission, it is necessary to ensure that neither the international experts nor the civil society organizations involved in the selection have links with the government to avoid politicization.
- On September 26, President Sandu signed a decree dismissing General Prosecutor Stoyanoglo, almost two years after his suspension. **237** His

dismissal came a couple of weeks before the European Court of Human Rights ruled that Moldova had violated Stoyanoglo's right to legal remedies, as set out in Article Six of the European Convention on Human Rights. Therefore, he was not able to bring a challenge in the Moldovan judicial system against the CSP's decision to suspend him in 2021. ²³⁸ Sandu argued that her decision to dismiss Stoyanoglo ²³⁹ was based on the recommendation of the EU, in alignment with the conditions set for implementing EU accession negotiations. ²⁴⁰ The presidential decree was examined by the CSP, paving the way for the launch of a new contest to select the next prosecutor general. ²⁴¹ The candidates for the position were required to submit their forms by November 22, although the selection process was still ongoing as of the end of 2023. ²⁴² The ECtHR ruling improved Stoyanoglo's chances of being reinstated to his former position, a process that would require the annulment of President Sandu's decree on his dismissal, ²⁴³ and may consequently destabilize the position of a newly appointed prosecutor general. ²⁴⁴

Corruption 1.00-7.00 pts

Looks at public perceptions of corruption, the business interests of top policymakers, laws on financial disclosure and conflict of interest, and the efficacy of anticorruption initiatives.

2.50
/7.00

- On January 15, the Chişinău Court of Appeal revised the restrictions placed on Marina Tauber, then the deputy chair of the Şor Party, removing her house arrest and allowing her release under judicial control. Tauber has been under investigation since 2022 on charges related to accepting money from an organized crime group and falsifying financing reports submitted to the Central Electoral Commission. According to the National Anticorruption Center's investigations, in the first half of 2022, the Şor Party incurred expenses totaling 600,000 euros (\$668,000). However, the party had reported only 228,000 lei (\$12,500), raising suspicions of financial irregularities and potential discrepancies in its financial reporting. ²⁴⁵ On May 1, as she was attempting to travel to Israel, Tauber ²⁴⁶ was once again detained at the request of the Anticorruption Prosecutor's Office. ²⁴⁷
- On May 16, ahead of the runoff in the elections for the executive of Gagauzia, anticorruption officers carried out unannounced searches at the

Central Electoral Committee of Gagauzia on charges of corruption. On the same day, Moldova's CEC announced that initiated proceedings three days earlier against eight candidates in the Gagauz elections for accepting donations exceeding the legal limit of 11,700 lei per donor, from a total of 106 donors across all of the candidates. The central CEC said it had notified Gagauzia's separate CEC of the violations, but no action had been taken. **248**

- In 2023, the idea of merging the Anticorruption Center and the Anticorruption Prosecutor's Office was abandoned based on advice from experts representing the Consultative Independent Anticorruption Committee, a joint independent international and national body established by Sandu. **249** According to a law modifying the criminal procedure code that was adopted in July 2023, the Anticorruption Prosecutor's Office will be focused solely on combating grand corruption, while the Anticorruption Center will handle other corruption cases. Olesea Stamate, a PAS deputy who heads the parliamentary Committee on Legal Affairs, Appointments, and Immunities, explained that maintaining this division prevents the shifting of responsibilities and potential blockages in corruption cases. **250** The approved changes will take effect in January 2024. Anticorruption prosecutors have expressed dissatisfaction with being limited to high-level corruption cases. **251** On various occasions, Stamate also raised concerns about the existing interinstitutional conflicts between the two anticorruption agencies. **252**
- In July, the Anticorruption Prosecutor's Office announced that Evghenia Guțul has the status of accused in the dossier regarding illegal financing by the Șor Party. Guțul claimed that the Anticorruption Prosecutor's Office had attempted to blackmail her by proposing to close the case against her if she gave up the bashkan position in Gagauzia and testified against other members of the former Șor Party. **253** On July 18, interim general prosecutor Ion Munteanu declared that if it is proven that the elections in Gagauzia were fraudulent, the results would be annulled and new elections might be organized, but Guțul rejected this proposition before her appointment as bashkan on July 19. **254**
- Starting in September, the National Anticorruption Center and the Anticorruption Prosecutor Office have opened criminal investigations against several candidates in the local elections on charges of illegal financing in relation to Șor affiliates. The candidates under investigation

were Mihail Bagas, ²⁵⁵ Alexander Nesterovschi, ²⁵⁶ and Irina Lozovan. ²⁵⁷ In the case of Bagas, a childhood friend of Șor's, the anticorruption agencies were prompted to act by public statements made by Arina Spătaru, the leader of Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE), who claims to have worked as an undercover agent to collect information about Șor's political proxies in Moldova. ²⁵⁸ Spătaru was reportedly involved in conversations with Nesterovschi, a Șor affiliate, between April and September, when she publicly revealed the operation. ²⁵⁹ According to the Anticorruption Prosecutor's Office, Spătaru received \$50,000 from Nesterovschi in Moldova after visiting Israel, where she met with Șor to discuss how she could take over pro-EU political parties. ²⁶⁰ Bargas's LOC party denied the allegations, but investigations are ongoing. ²⁶¹

- In September, the Anticorruption Prosecutor's Office initiated a criminal investigation ²⁶² against two officers of the National Anticorruption Center—Iurie Gațcan and Arcadie Rotaru—regarding the Pre-Vetting Commission's positive evaluation of Iulian Muntean despite the open corruption cases against him. ²⁶³ The Anticorruption Prosecutor's Office is investigating allegations that Gațcan and Rotaru failed to gather, analyze, and provide the commission with the necessary information about Munteanu. Gațcan was appointed to the Pre-Vetting Commission in June after being put forward by PAS. Two weeks after the scandal involving Muntean, the head of the Anticorruption Center, Iulian Rusu, who was appointed for a five-year term in February 2022, submitted his resignation request in October. ²⁶⁴
- In October, two weeks after Muntean scandal hit, the director of the National Anticorruption Center, Iulian Rusu, resigned. ²⁶⁵ The resignation appeared to signal an end to the rivalry over the distribution of interinstitutional anticorruption responsibilities between him and the head of the Anticorruption Prosecutor's Office, Veronica Dragălin. On May 12, Rusu had admitted that cooperation between the two anticorruption bodies was poor and that anticorruption prosecutors are not receptive to the requests coming from anticorruption inspectors to initiate criminal cases.

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Footnotes

- 1 “Rezultatele alegerilor din 5 noiembrie 2023” [Results of the elections of November 5, 2023], Alegeri.md, updated November 29, 2023, https://alegeri.md/w/Alegeri_locale_generale_din_2023_%C3%AEn_Republica....
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- 5 Barometer of Public Opinion: Republic of Moldova, August 2023, <http://bop.ipp.md/ro>.

More footnotes





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Country Facts

Global Freedom Score

61/100 **Partly Free**

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