



Moldova's election and referendum well-managed and competitive, despite serious attempts to undermine its integrity, international observers say

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

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

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

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

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

"We welcome the results of the referendum," said Michael Gahler, Head of the delegation from the European Parliament. "Despite the unprecedented massive, malign and illicit Russian interference, especially through vote buying, hybrid attacks and disinformation, the people of the Republic of Moldova chose a future in the EU. We commend the competent Moldovan authorities for holding a well-managed and efficient election under these extraordinary circumstances. We call on all

stakeholders to resist any interference, in order not to allow it to distort the results of the second round of the presidential election and the 2025 parliamentary elections.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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