

Foreign Policy Association together with Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung offer you a newsletter on foreign policy and European integration issues of the Republic of Moldova. The newsletter is part of the "Foreign Policy Dialogue" joint Project.

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# NEWSLETTER

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## Synthesis and Foreign Policy Debates

The newsletter is developed by Mădălin Necșuțu, editor-coordinator

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### News in Brief



The Republic of Moldova obtained significant support during the Chisinau meeting with over 65 international delegations, on September 17, within the framework of the Partnership Platform for Moldova. Thus, nine financing agreements were signed that will support infrastructure investments and the transition to a green and sustainable economy for the benefit of citizens. The Government of the Republic of Moldova and the Government of Canada signed a preferential loan agreement in the amount of 120 million Canadian dollars (about 79 million euros). The Government of the Republic of Moldova and the Government of the United States of America have agreed on an amendment worth 12 million US dollars (about 10.7 million euros) to the assistance agreement for strengthening democratic institutions. The Ministry of Energy, the National Centre for Sustainable Energy, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Germany, the German International Cooperation Agency (GIZ), the European Union and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Norway concluded a multilateral agreement, signing a Cooperation Intention in the field of energy efficiency in the residential sector of Moldova. The total value of the partners' financial support is over 20 million euros.



The mission to observe the presidential elections and the constitutional referendum, launched by the Promo-LEX association, detected several uncertainties, gaps and irregularities related to the use of administrative resources, electoral advertising and other dysfunctions. The findings are contained in the mission's second report, presented on September 20. The report "refers to several legal provisions that were found somewhat problematic, such as the lack of a clear demarcation between the activities carried out by the incumbent president and the campaign activities", said the head of the observers' mission in the presidential elections and the republican constitutional referendum from October 20, Nicolae Panfil. Promo-LEX representatives reported 13 cases of abusive use of administrative resources, such as signature collection actions in public institutions during working hours, taking credit for works and services implemented with public money and engaging in excessive promotion campaigns of a single option regarding the referendum and spending public money to promote that option.



The head of diplomacy of the Republic of Moldova, Mihai Popșoi, declared on September 23, from the UN forum in New York, that in order to solve the multiple problems faced by the international community "there must be cooperation and solidarity between states". "The head of Moldovan diplomacy spoke about the consolidation of international peace and security, noting that in order to solve the multiple problems faced by the international community, there must be cooperation and solidarity between states. At the same time, Deputy Prime Minister Mihai Popșoi emphasized the importance of digitization, but also the involvement of young people both at the national and international level", reported the representatives of the Foreign Office in Chisinau. The event, held in New York, is part of the 79th session of the UN General Assembly.

## The referendum - a project of national unity on the way to the EU



The "Citizens for Europe" volunteers carry out an information campaign in the villages of the Republic of Moldova and explain to the citizens what the European Union is in view of the referendum on October 20. Photo: Citizens for Europe

The Republic of Moldova is faced with an important choice to show both domestically and externally that the country's path to the European Union is one that unites the society regardless of ethnicity, language or ideology.

The October 20 referendum is not just a voting exercise. It should reflect a reality in which the citizens of the Republic of Moldova are aware of a very simple choice: either they want to live in prosperity and peace generated by

the European Union, or they want to remain anchored in the sphere of influence of the Russian Federation, where there is no prosperity, but instead there is war.

For all rational people, regardless of political

► conviction, this should be an extremely simple choice. But the propaganda and lies poured into the citizens' heads make this choice complicated as a natural consequence of the "Chinese drop" technique as a method of slow torture of a prisoner. The Moldovan citizens have the chance to escape from this position of prisoners and to free themselves by voting, through an option that will bring them to the civilized world, the only solid wish expressed in the Declaration of Independence of August 27, 1991.

It is necessary for all political and apolitical forces in society to join and

create that joint feeling of desire to see the Republic of Moldova in the European Union. This is a train that Moldova cannot afford to miss. Chisinau can no longer sit back wondering where it would have been if it had been as determined as the Baltic countries some 20 years ago. The Republic of Moldova has no alternatives and no time to waste.

The geopolitical context is unique for Moldova to join the EU together with Ukraine and those few countries in the Western Balkans that have been on this path not for two or three years like the Republic of Moldova, but for

two decades. But for this goal, support is also needed, not just political will. It is necessary for all citizens to be aware of this moment, and this is probably the key to a successful election campaign for this referendum. The timing and quality of reforms are the key ingredients that must be on everyone's mind. From politicians to citizens in the favourable scenario of maintaining pro-European forces in Moldova so that the European dream becomes a reality and not a chimera of perpetual disappointments for the country.

*Madalin Necsutu*

## ***The highest risk that I see is the low or insufficient turnout to validate the referendum***

*In the interview with the director of the WatchDog Community, Valeriu Pasa, we discussed openly about the positive scenarios, but especially the negative ones for the referendum for European integration which will be held simultaneously with the presidential elections on October 20. We discussed about the fakes promoted by Russian propaganda, but also about what civil society does to provide correct information on what the Republic of Moldova - European Union relationship means. We also discussed about how the dialogue on this referendum should have been so that there was a broad consensus among the actors from all sections of the society. We invite you to read our interview in the following lines:*

■ **First of all, what are your observations from your "Citizens for Europe" campaign? How do people perceive the European Union in terms of the well-being and values it represents?**



■ **People treat this issue differently. There are no ideas generally accepted by everyone. Generalizations are superfluous in such an analysis.**

**If we are talking about the referendum, most people think that the referendum is**

**necessary, that it is right to consult their opinion and pass on the responsibility for the decision to the citizens. Most of the people we talked to positively appreciate the referendum. There are many technical uncertainties about the referendum, however. For example,**

few people understand that there will be separate ballots. More specifically, that on the ballot, in fact, will be the draft law amending the Constitution. It's not a simple question. It is a question followed by the validation of the draft law amending the Constitution. In essence, what we are trying to explain to them is that the procedure is the same as in Parliament, only that in Parliament 101 deputies vote, while in the referendum - all citizens. But the essence of the decision is the same, we vote on a bill. This is the first time that the citizens of the Republic of Moldova can approve a draft law and not any one, but to amend the Constitution.

For the rest, if we talk about the perception of the European Union, most citizens look positively at the European Union, its values, order. The issues such as the rule of law, the order - are very important to them. The absolute majority of citizens highly appreciate the rule of law that is enshrined in the countries of the European Union. Most of the optimistic hopes related to the European Union refer to welfare, order, rule of law.

But there are also people who are hesitant because of a slightly deformed or even strongly distorted perception of what the application of the rules in the EU means - rules for carrying out an economic or household activity.

Especially in the rural areas, there are these scarecrows that rules will be imposed and they will not be able to raise domestic animals etc.

### ***The scarecrows and fakes of Russian propaganda***

■ **What are the main fakes that people hear and assimilate in relation to the European Union?**

■ There are many false narratives about values that are based on the lack of basic knowledge of some population, such as family regulation. Some of our citizens believe that the European Union

is going to impose regulations on same-sex marriage or things like that. And we explain to them that in fact there are no such provisions in the European Union treaties that can be imposed on us.

These things are national policies and they differ from state to state. There are states that have enshrined in the Constitution marriage as a union between a man and a woman only. But a completely different topic is the one related to non-discrimination. Although the Republic of Moldova has already joined the Istanbul Convention, the European Union did not impose it on us either. So, these are matters of national policy.

Obviously, they are also scared about the fact that joining the EU somehow constrains the Orthodox Church. Here we give examples of Orthodox states, for example Romania, where the Church is supported by the state, unlike in the Republic of Moldova. Or pilgrimages to holy places, such as Mount Athos, where the entire Orthodox community goes to pray. Mount Athos in Greece is in the European Union.

We have to bring such examples to people. In addition, we also explain to them about the accession procedure, that there are some negotiations to come. It is important that the authorities also explain to the citizens that they will negotiate to obtain favourable conditions, especially when it comes to the implementation challenges the European requirements in the economic and environment sectors. We explain to them that the implementation and monitoring periods will be negotiated.

The state of justice causes a lot of scepticism among the citizens of the Republic of Moldova because people understand that with existing situation in the justice sector it is rather difficult to comply with the EU norms. That must be the priority, I think, for a new parliamentary term - a review of the justice reform strategy, learning from

the lessons of the current reforms and of what worked well and what didn't. Tangible and realistic results are needed.

There are also scaremongers addressed by Russian propaganda to national minorities who would have something to lose in the event of the accession of the Republic of Moldova to the EU and that they will be discriminated against. In particular, we observe this in the Gagauz autonomy, which is one of the biggest lies, because the European Union, on the contrary, imposes much more consistent policies and rigors on the member countries for preservation and development of ethnic identities.

The EU also imposes greater respect for established autonomies. UTA Gagauzia would only gain, because it would have an ally in the European institutions in its dialogue with Chisinau. Normally, the authorities of UTA Gagauzia should be most interested in joining the EU, while they oppose and try to sabotage the European integration process, which shows that they are not promoting the interests of the Gagauz people, but the interests of a foreign state.

### ***Scenarios for voting in the referendum***

■ **What are the scenarios you see regarding the outcome of the European integration referendum? Let's take one maximally positive and one maximally negative, and see what the consequences might be?**

■ Talking about risks, I rather see the risk of relatively low voter turnout in relation to the excessively high number of voters' lists. In reality, the actual number of voters is much lower, perhaps 40 percent lower than the number of registered voters [2.7 million citizens are officially registered].

Under these conditions, even if the referendum is validated, it creates an opportunity for the Kremlin propaganda to insinuate, after the referendum, that

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few people participated and thus has no legitimacy. This is a risk that we need to address. We need to work hard and explain to the citizens what the reality is.

I do not see the risk of a negative result so that the majority will vote against the European integration and against amending the Constitution. No opinion poll foreshadows such a risk. There would be a hypothetical risk that the "YES" vote would be insufficiently convincing.

I do not see this risk even if the parties controlled by the Russian Federation are calling for the boycott of the referendum.

The biggest risk I see is related to low or insufficient turnout for the validation of the referendum, which would mean a negative result and an extremely bad signal externally. Namely, that the Moldovans are not able to mobilize at the polls, so they do not really want European integration that much. This could gradually lead to a decrease in the intensity of relations with the EU and the EU funding. Therefore, there would be a risk of missing, at least for the time being, the opportunity for rapid accession, in the course of four to five years.

■ **Noise and the distortion of realities**  
**What kind of narratives do you think Russia will build in the event of a referendum that is validated, but not by a very high score? Will they do this while actually thinking about next year's parliamentary election which is very important at stake?**

■ The Russian propaganda will say that the majority of Moldovan citizens are against joining the EU and that's why they didn't come to vote. Which is a fake, but they will juggle these numbers and they will do it in order to keep mobilized that part of the voters that is loyal to them, that still supports rapprochement with Russia - about 25 percent - and they

will try to influence those who are less determined.

They will also try to discourage those who support the EU and make even them think they are a minority. To some extent, Russia manages to do this even now, which is also visible in the polls.

If you ask those who are against joining the EU - the 25 percent or so - they think they are the majority in society. And this even if all the polls show that the majority of the citizens of the Republic of Moldova are in favour of the country's accession to the EU. About 35-40 percent who are pro-EU think they are in minority. Can you imagine what a distortive effect on the perception of reality this Russian propaganda creates?

■ **In the event of a tight referendum, could we also expect street protests instrumentalized by the pro-Russian parties? The USA, Great Britain, and Canada have been warning Moldova since June that this will be the Kremlin's tactic in the event of a tight referendum.**

■ If the pro-EU option gets less than 60 percent, this result is tantamount to losing this referendum, in my view. Why? Because it will be a strong argument for the pro-Russian forces to keep their voters very active, and on top of that, they will add even more propaganda. For example, that 200 polling stations were not opened in Russia, where they claim there are 700,000 Moldovans, while in reality there are less than 150,000. They will say they were not allowed to vote, that the elections were rigged and that they missed a few percentages for the pro-Russian option to win.

Thus, instead of getting the effect of closing this endless debate that has been going on for decades, we will get the opposite effect, namely a resuscitation, a mobilization and inspiration for the pro-Russian forces to believe that a little more is needed for them to prevail.

Therefore, I believe that any positive result below 60 percent for the "YES" vote would equal the loss of this referendum. Even if the Constitution is amended, this division in society will not be alleviated, on the contrary, it will be more pronounced, and the pro-Russian forces will become even more active and aggressive.

■ **Will the result of the referendum influence the dynamics of the accession negotiations with the EU? What could happen in this process and in the Chisinau-Brussels relationship?**

■ I don't think the result of the referendum will influence the accession negotiations too much. A good dynamic is prefigured anyway on these negotiations. But on the political level, an unconvincing result will affect those criteria that still concern the compliance with the criteria of democracy in the Republic of Moldova and adherence to European values. The dynamism of the bilateral relationship depends on these things.

So, I believe that the result of this referendum will be a strong argument for further political approvals.

■ **Can this referendum be seen as a lesson to the entire political class that such a move needs first to be negotiated among parties before being thrown into the market by only one party?**

■ Certainly, and it should not be negotiated only with the parties. In general, such a political exercise needs to be well planned, something that has not really been done. Risks such as overly large electoral lists also had to be mitigated. And that had to happen before the referendum was announced. In my opinion, it is a lesson for the government, for the president, how not to do it in the future.

## Editorial

# How to rise above the ego: why should Moldovans vote in the referendum?

*Editorial by Madalin Necsutu,  
journalist with the TVR Moldova  
and Balkan Insight*

**The referendum for European integration continues to generate a lot of discussion in society. From who initiated it, who should promote it, and in general what the consequences of this approach can be. What is certain is that all the political actors, the civil society or prominent personalities of public life, except for the pro-Russian forces, are of the opinion that this referendum needs to succeed. However, the efforts are modest and disparate.**

Some might say that President Maia Sandu made a risky bet by initiating the referendum to find a platform to promote ideas for a second presidential term. And the most relevant example comes from Great Britain, where former Prime Minister David Cameron also made a risky bet that Great Britain would not leave the EU, but left in 2019, following a similar referendum generically called “Brexit”. Moreover, the level of resilience to disinformation of Great Britain, as well as the political culture of hundreds of years, only if we think of the Magna Carta of 1215, is infinitely higher compared to that of the young state of the Republic of Moldova, which is only 33 years old. No one expected that disinformation and fake news would shake the political culture of the United Kingdom to its foundations and create serious economic, social and political problems for London.



### **From “everyone’s president” to a “playing president”**

With all the risks that such an exercise entails, Maia Sandu decided to go ahead with this idea of the referendum, which is as brave as risky. Kind of like “all-in” in a poker game. Or a double-edged sword. What is certain is that this movement concretely labels Maia Sandu as a “playing president” and strips her of that image of “everyone’s president”.

The angriest are obviously the pro-European parties which would have supported such an approach, if they had been consulted beforehand. But this only happened post-factum, after the president had already announced that a referendum would be held, and those parties need to come to terms with the idea.

Although the pro-European parties have de facto said they will support

the referendum, these parties are moving anaemically or aren’t doing anything to promote the referendum. The entire responsibility now rests on the shoulders of PAS. If they play it right, PAS can, at the limit of fairness, use this opportunity to inform about the referendum as a pre-campaign for the July 2025 parliamentary elections. Everything also depends on whether PAS will move quickly and take advantage of this opportunity.

For the rest, the campaign is carried out, as can be seen, mainly by civil society representatives and volunteers. However, their resources are limited in people and funds to help with logistics. Even so, civil society’s door-to-door campaign is perhaps more effective and credible than the campaign of any party promoting this cause. Even if that was not the decision of the civil society, its representatives are intrinsically involved in this idea promoted by the pro-

European political forces, especially by the president Maia Sandu and the Action and Solidarity Party.

### **Propaganda and fake news at full speed**

Against this background of confusion and inaction in the pro-European camp, pro-Russian political forces and Moscow propaganda are working fervently to achieve as low a score as possible for this referendum. While in the case of the presidential elections, the pro-Russian parties use certain messages aimed at creating a chorus of discontent, with regard to the referendum, they are either silent or attack it.

The main theses thrown into the market are that the referendum is a useless one and the people should not mobilize to vote in this insignificant election. On the religious side, where the Church is included as an electoral agent, we are served the fact that joining the EU will automatically mean the legitimization of same-sex marriages. Such an approach, they say, will affect the traditional family as the basic unit of society. A total erroneous fact, but stamped by Russian propaganda as a prerogative of joining the EU. Also, that joining the EU will automatically mean throw Moldova into war amid discussions about the creation of an EU army, a fact that will directly hit Russia's security interests. And these fakes can continue "à la longue".

Russia's immediate goal is to demobilize people to go to the polls and vote in favour of this referendum. Moscow also resorted to the tactics of rather weak presidential candidates, precisely in order not to mobilize a large number of voters, especially from the European diaspora. A close race between Maia Sandu and a representative of the pro-Russian forces would have certainly been a catalyst that would have brought

people to the polls in large numbers. As the behaviour of the voters in the Republic of Moldova always shows, namely the mobilization to vote against a political figure rather than voting pro-another political figure works. Thus, the downplaying of the referendum on the one hand and the obsessive and resourceful push of anti-referendum ideas is the formula Russia is going to use in approaching this referendum.

### **Risks and challenges**

In terms of risks, we're dealing with a wide range here. The scenario in which the referendum will pass, but at a limit of less than 55% will be a topic that Russia will exploit at the parliamentary elections in July 2025, where the real stake of this electoral calendar year is. The false narrative that the Moldovan citizens are not that pro-European will be pushed. And that the idea of joining the EU belongs to the ruling party which is anyway a "servile puppet" of the West.

Any low score will be used by Russia to dynamite the idea of the European Union, even if in legal terms this referendum is not crucial for the European course of the Republic of Moldova. In no case, invalidating the referendum or validating it with a low score will automatically lead to the abandonment of the European path by the Republic of Moldova.

The European Union understands very well the weak resilience of Moldova to Russia's hybrid war against the country. Moreover, the EU countries also oppose repressive measures to censor Russian propaganda cannons, especially on social networks. Thus, if measures against Russian propaganda had been applied, we would not have had such problems that we are discussing about today. But no, the EU wants to win this battle with Russian propaganda by democratic means, not

by imposing Kremlin, Iran or North Korea-type solutions. This is not what it is about. From this point of view, it is an asymmetrical confrontation. It's like someone coming with a gun to a sword duel. But that's how things work in the European Union.

Also, the maximum scenario that Russia will try to use in the event of the referendum passing with a low score is to challenge the results in the street. As there is no natural basis for such protests, Russia's proxies in the Republic of Moldova will mobilize once again the socially vulnerable to come out for paid protests. They will try to escalate the situation in order to overthrow the pro-European power through street force. The USA, Great Britain, and Canada warned about such a scenario back in June.

However, we have to recognize that the result of the referendum will also be a signal and an indicator for the European Union about how much the citizens here want to become part of the EU. Maybe some of the enthusiasm and political momentum will die, but the important thing is that we are now in a technical phase. Anyway, at the declarative level, the EU will not change its attitude towards the Republic of Moldova until after the election of a new pro-European majority after the parliamentary elections in 2025. That is what Russia wants – for the EU to show the slightest sign of disappointment in Moldova, for it to push the false narrative that in fact the EU does not want the Moldovans in and that they belong mentally and as a political option to the Russian space. In the remaining few weeks, a campaign is needed to raise awareness that standing aside in the case of the referendum is not an option. In a word, it requires everyone to put their personal interests on the second place and act as a unified force. After all, this is the central idea of the European Union - unity in diversity!

# There is a lot of speculation about war in order to create panic among the citizens

**W**e have discussed with the executive director of the Institute for Strategic Initiatives (IPIS), Vadim Pistrinciu, about how the referendum for EU integration can be promoted, but also about the risks that this exercise entails from malignant actors such as the Russian Federation. He explained for the FES/APE foreign policy newsletter the reasons for optimism for the result of the referendum, but also about the opacity of the political class to be united for the European integration objective. Last but not least, we discussed the future of the EU- Moldova relationship. You can read the full interview with Vadim Pistrinciu in the following lines:

■ What are the scenarios you see regarding the outcome of this referendum? Let's take one maximum positive and one maximum negative and see what the consequences might be?

■ A maximum positive scenario would be a result of over 60 percent. It can even be over 55 percent, depending on participation. But what matters a lot in order to say, indeed, that it was a very good exercise, is to have a higher turnover as possible. This is the most important thing. Why? Because we know that the electoral lists in the Republic of Moldova are quite large and do not correspond to the true number of voters, while the diaspora has a big, but still limited capacity for participation.

If we consider that one million citizens are outside the country, even with 150,000 participants in the referendum in the diaspora, is still a low percentage.

If is to look at the polls, and there were several polls lately, we can see that the referendum passes with a fairly solid score. I even saw some figures of 60 percent in favour of the referendum.



However, we still have one month left of the referendum campaign. As representatives of civil society, we also think a lot about negative scenarios. The enemies of the referendum are bothered by this and thus many fakes are thrown around.

The information war has acquired a rather aggressive and intensive turn. We see all over social media that there are constant attacks with a lot of false narratives. The attacks are of a very high intensity, with a diversity and flexibility for such fakes. Regarding these false narratives, some of them are real challenges. There is a lot of speculation on the topic of war, in order to create panic among the citizens. And if you ask me, no one has any doubt that the Moldovans are pro-European, everyone knows that Moldovans are pro-European.

Because of this, a lot of money is invested in such campaigns to spread fakes. There are huge sums thrown into play, compared to the size of Moldova,

precisely to change people's behaviour. In the south of the country, we have observed how the governor of UTA Gagauzia, who represents the conglomerate of Ilan Șor's parties, very often makes toxic statements for inter-ethnic peace.

We are closely monitoring the events in the Gagauz region. We communicate with the citizens and our colleagues there. We are somehow trying to lessen the negative effect of these fake news. So I would say that I see the worst case scenario in the process of the referendum campaign but I don't see it in the result of the referendum

**Intensive promotion of the referendum by the civil society**

■ Do you think the promotion of this referendum is done in a proper way? What can be corrected in this sense in the few weeks that separate us from this election?

■ It's quite an effort. We observe a lot of people with an open heart explaining to the citizens why they have to participate in the referendum. There are many organizations and volunteer groups with many young people, who are in an intensive process of combating fakes and disinformation.

We have volunteers who also go to the regions. Broadcasts are made, we use many influencers or opinion leaders who got involved in this information process.

I find this movement very encouraging. We see many types of influences for supporting the referendum. But the most important thing is that we, in civil society, deal with education when we talk to them about Europe. We try to explain to the citizens the reality and the truth about Europe. And although it seems a bit boring at first when you explain, this effort still has an effect. When we go to communities with small information and education campaigns, we try to collect the opinion of the citizens and we notice that those who have succeeded in Europe, or have been, have seen how things are there, understand well what the consequence is for the Republic of Moldova. And this helps.

What should be done? Obviously, I would say that the pro-European parties, and there are many that call themselves pro-European parties, should be fully involved in this campaigning process, because they have an interest that this referendum is not impacted by the Russian disinformation.

They need also to think about political reasoning. A failure of the referendum will not only be the fault of the one who initiated it, but will be seen as the inability of the Moldovans to secure their vote. And it is likely that Europe, being preoccupied with its own problems, will look much more reserved

at the momentum of the Republic of Moldova in the European process.

Of course, on a technical level, the negotiations with the EU will not suffer, but the enthusiasm to help Moldova will not be the same. And this must be understood first and foremost by opinion leaders and leaders of pro-European political parties.

■ **Cascading Russian propaganda fakes**  
**What kind of narratives do you think Russia will build in the event of a referendum that is validated, but not by a very high score? Will they do this while actually thinking about next year's parliamentary elections which have an important stake?**

■ Russia did not stop the propaganda. Moscow will try to discredit the processes with all the false narratives it launches. I said that they are very flexible for all segment of the population for which they have tailored narratives.

I think they will mainly say that the referendum was not legitimate, that it was organized on the same day as the presidential elections. They will probably also challenge the result and the number of participants. In other words, they will challenge everything.

And we have noticed that they have no limits when it comes to fakes. They can say to some categories of people that the results were rigged, to others - that the legitimacy of the referendum was not respected, etc. Usually, the Kremlin media and all its cronies always criticize the diaspora vote. The vote of the diaspora is rhetorically and falsely questioned. We expect absolutely all kinds of false narratives, even from the most implausible.

### **Signs for Brussels**

■ **Will the result of the referendum influence the dynamics of the chapter**

**negotiations with the EU? What could happen in the Chisinau-Brussels dialogue?**

■ I don't think the score will matter much. I have also seen in other European countries that there were different scores.

I think Brussels will understand very well the situation of information warfare in which we find ourselves. We see these statements about the information war we are in, from both European states and the US. The rather difficult conditions in which the referendum is taking place are also being understood by the partners abroad.

I think that if the referendum is validated, they will not get very sensitive about the outcome. For them, it is important that the elections be free, while the result – accepted by the law.

For us, for our civic spirit, we need to show it is an important exercise. We need to show that we are many and we are resilient in the face of the attacks we are exposed to.

■ **In the event of a tight referendum result, could we also expect street protests instrumentalized by the pro-Russian parties, as the USA, Great Britain, and Canada warned Moldova back in June, that this would be the Kremlin's tactic if the referendum is validated with a tight result?**

■ I'm sure they will try protests before and after the referendum. They tried to block it on other occasions, for example when US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken visited Chisinau.

They will not stop, but something else is their ability. If we turn to polls, we clearly see that Moldovans are pro-European. There are no segments of the population with an aggressive position against the referendum as to



protest. So, there can only be artificial and paid protests, as they have done before. They can generate challenges, but they cannot generate a reversal of the situation.

### **Lessons for political negotiations**

■ Can this referendum serve as a lesson to the entire political class

that such a move needs to first be negotiated among the parties before throwing such an idea into the market by only one party?

■ I really hope this lesson is learned, but it's all in the past now. There are certain legitimate objections from some parties and opinion makers that this referendum could be negotiated, but all these things are in the past. What matters now is what we will demonstrate to the entire

Europe and to ourselves through this vote in this referendum.

■ Are you optimistic about a positive result from what you are seeing in the regions?

■ Sure, I'm optimistic, but vigilant. As I told you before, I am very concerned about all the attacks and disinformation that are happening now.

■ Thank you!

## **Risks and challenges associated with the organization of the referendum for European integration**

*Analysis by Angela Gramada, director of Experts for Security and Global Affairs (ESGA)*

**14** years after the last similar democratic exercise (5 September 2010), the Republic of Moldova is organizing a new referendum. This time, it is about a constitutional referendum, where citizens will be expected to express their opinion on the European integration of the country. And even if the leaders of the European Union gave us the green light in terms of starting negotiations, we must first pass the "exam" at home and only then in each of the European capitals. So the first exam will be the referendum from 20 October 2024. Are we ready or not? This is what we are going to prove.

The announcement about the organization of the referendum for European integration has aroused multiple emotions among political actors, but also among citizens. Some have quickly cleared their throats, others, however, do not know what



strategy to adopt and how to approach the challenge even now, when there is only one month left until the voting day. Consequently, we face several challenges or even risks that may

threaten the European path of the Republic of Moldova and which will be highlighted during the period of organization and validation of the referendum.

A month before the referendum in which the citizens are expected to express their opinion, at least three main scenarios can be outlined, which will have to be faced or accepted.

Working hypotheses or post-referendum scenarios that we will have to work with after the final results of the referendum:

***The referendum is validated by the vote of an extended number of people with the right to vote***

In order to validate the referendum, according to the electoral law, it is necessary that at least one third of the citizens with the right to vote participate in this process. However, an ideal scenario looks as following: the voters of the Republic of Moldova will give maximum support for an approach unofficially declared a long time ago, but which became a reality in a complex geopolitical context, namely the illegal Russian aggression against Ukraine.

If supporters of the referendum for European integration will be in a high number, the challenges will mostly refer to procedures, rules, norms and reforms (economic and justice reforms, the fight against corruption etc.) that we will all have to undertake, not just politicians or civil servants.

It will not be easy, but at least we will have a clear signal that we want a qualitative change in the country. In this case, the biggest challenge will be to accept that the change will have to happen in each of us and that we are part of a society responsible for the

opportunity it has open for us. Another challenge will be the quality of change and the deadlines set for the implementation of reforms and European procedures. It will be important not to forget that we are doing the transformation primarily for us, not for the European Union.

A firm support of the pro-European approach at the referendum, in an extended number, will also provide us with the internal resources necessary to fight the external forces trying to divert the European course, or the internal political forces that militate against the development and democratization of the country.

The challenges are related to the fact that not all citizens with the right to vote know that voting is not mandatory and believe that if they take the ballot for the presidential elections, they will automatically receive the one for the referendum.

The information campaigns regarding the two voting exercises do not present these subtleties of the electoral legislation. Those who got involved in the promotion of the referendum only talk about the advantages and opportunities that the status of a member country of the European Union can offer. And those who initially chose the “No” option in the referendum will encourage citizens with the right to vote not to take the ballot to express their will in favour of the European integration or, if they do take it, to vote against.

At the moment, those who advocate against the European integration make a bigger “noise”, being also more aggressive in promoting their anti-referendum message. Pro-European actors

continue to wear gloves, their intention being not to upset anyone and not to “hurt the feelings” of the opponents.

***The referendum is validated with a narrow victory***

If the referendum will be validated with a minimum number of supporters of the European idea, in addition to the challenges mentioned above, most of which refer to actions and involvement for qualitative transformation, we will have to add to the list risks associated with attempts by some political forces to challenge the result of the referendum, especially during the parliamentary elections planned for 2025.

Certainly, the forces that have already announced their “No” option in the referendum will build their electoral campaign for the upcoming election specifically on an anti-European message, invoking the small number of people who decided for the majority. They will focus on further weakening the credibility of the European approach. If we look at the messages they are delivering in the information space, they are already talking about the monopolization of administrative resources by the ruling party, accusing it of rigging the elections.

What solutions do we have in this situation? Monitoring the electoral process as efficiently as possible. And we are not talking here only about the representatives of the political parties, who have announced their participation, or about the civil society organizations specialized in such processes.

It is about each of us, who must be alert to what will happen on the

day of the referendum and report any attempt to rig the election. We must defend our political will by all the legal means at our disposal. Even if validated with a narrow victory, there must be no doubt that the results of the referendum are correct.

***The referendum is not validated, not enough people voted, neither for nor against***

In the case of this scenario, the option of the supporters who made a minimal effort to take the second ballot - the one for the referendum - will no longer matter from the point of view of the electoral process.

However, it will matter politically in the long run. Because it will undo

all the efforts and resources we have invested not only in the last few years, it will mean the undoing of the will expressed in the thirty years of independence.

If there is no constructive approach, capable of unifying the good forces of society in the right direction, in order to obtain a positive result in the referendum that could later be strengthened with positive changes in political, economic and social life, as well as with qualitative transformation of mentality, we will not succeed in becoming sustainable. We will become even more vulnerable to internal and external challenges, and the future will be bleak.

The European Union offers us working tools to improve our socio-economic situation, it guides us with the help of democratic tools

how to strengthen our political, economic and social institutions to gain resilience and well-being; it explains to us, the citizens, how to create levers of control over the decision-makers and how to hold them accountable.

The question we have to ask ourselves at this point is only one: can we prove to ourselves that we accept aid, that is, the process of European integration as a method, so that we can then effectively manage our own development goals? This is exactly what the referendum for European integration is about –about the effort made now for a safer, more stable future, where I, as a citizen, count and am heard.

The opinions expressed in the newsletter are not necessarily those of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) or of the Foreign Policy Association (APE).



**Foreign Policy Association (APE)** is a non-governmental organization committed to supporting the integration of the Republic of Moldova into the European Union and facilitating the settlement of the Transnistrian conflict in the context of the country Europeanization. APE was established in fall 2003 by a group of well-known experts, public personalities and former senior officials and diplomats, all of them reunited by their commitment to contribute with their expertise and experience to formulating and promoting by the Republic of Moldova of a coherent, credible and efficient foreign policy.



**Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES)** is a German social democratic political foundation, whose purpose is to promote the principles and foundations of democracy, peace, international understanding and cooperation. FES fulfils its mandate in the spirit of social democracy, dedicating itself to the public debate and finding in a transparent manner, social democratic solutions to current and future problems of the society. Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung has been active in the Republic of Moldova since October 2002.