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Election Integrity and the Quality of Democracy: Challenges and Pathways to Good Governance

Chișinău, 2025

CZU 324:[321.7+316.776.23](082)
E 35

The work of the materials of the international scientific conference *"Election Integrity and the Quality of Democracy: Challenges and Pathways to Good Governance"*

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DESCRIEREA CIP A CAMEREI NAȚIONALE A CĂRȚII DIN REPUBLICA MOLDOVA

Election Integrity and the Quality of Democracy: Challenges and Pathways to Good Governance / editors: Natalia Putină, Mariana Iaţco. – Chişinău : [S. n.], 2025 (CEP USM). – 286 p.

Referinţe bibliogr. la sfârşitul art. – [50] ex.

ISBN 978-9975-62-850-1.

324:[321.7+316.776.23](082)
E 35

ISBN 978-9975-62-850-1

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Preface

In an era of rapid technological change, geopolitical instability, and evolving societal expectations, the integrity of electoral processes stands as a cornerstone of democratic governance. Elections serve as the mechanism through which citizens express their political will, hold leaders accountable, and shape the future of their nations. However, in recent years, election integrity has faced mounting challenges, from foreign interference and disinformation campaigns to electoral fraud, voter disenfranchisement, and the growing influence of artificial intelligence in shaping public opinion. These challenges pose significant threats to the quality of democracy and demand rigorous scholarly inquiry, innovative policy responses, and sustained civic engagement.

This volume, *Election Integrity and the Quality of Democracy: Challenges and Pathways to Good Governance,* provides a comprehensive examination of the multifaceted issues affecting electoral processes in various regions, offering critical insights into the mechanisms that safeguard democratic principles, as well as the vulnerabilities that undermine them.

The contributions in this book span a wide range of topics, including analyses of geopolitical stakes and external influences on elections, implications of the post-digital era for democratic processes, and the intersection of corruption, economic instability, and war with electoral outcomes. Attention is given to voter awareness and democratic participation, highlighting factors that shape political engagement and trust in democratic institutions. Additionally, the role of electoral mechanisms and the effectiveness of public authorities in ensuring free and fair elections are explored in depth.

The challenges posed by disinformation and foreign interference emerge as critical themes throughout the book, with discussions on the interplay between artificial intelligence and misinformation, countermeasures to information manipulation as a national security threat, and empirical insights into civic attitudes regarding electoral integrity. Another key area of exploration in this volume is the resilience of democratic institutions in the face of electoral fraud and clientelism. Various studies address the pressing need for vigilance and reform, questioning whether electoral fraud can ever be fully eradicated and analyzing the influence of external powers through electoral manipulation.

This book also addresses the broader geopolitical implications of elections in the region, examining soft power strategies employed by influential actors and how national electoral processes impact regional stability. The implications of electoral outcomes for European integration and broader international alignments are discussed, emphasizing the interconnectedness of national and international political landscapes. The collection concludes with reflections on the broader theoretical and conceptual frameworks that underpin democratic resilience. Discussions on political culture, hybrid tactics in democratic disruption, and the evolving nature of democratic governance contribute to a deeper understanding of the challenges and opportunities in strengthening electoral integrity.

By bringing together these diverse analyses, *Election Integrity and the Quality of Democracy: Challenges and Pathways to Good Governance* provides a crucial scholarly resource for academics, policymakers, and civil society actors committed to strengthening democratic institutions. The book not only diagnoses the threats to electoral integrity but also outlines potential pathways toward more transparent, inclusive, and resilient democratic systems. In a time when democracy faces unprecedented challenges, such rigorous inquiry and informed debate are more necessary than ever.

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The Proceedings of the *International Conference „Election Integrity and the Quality of Democracy: Challenges and Pathways to Good Governance"* is published within the framework of the *project BST-24. 023.MD37.1, entitled "Election Integrity and Democracy in the Republic of Moldova (ELIDEM)"* and is implemented by the **Center for Political and Administrative Studies,** with funding from the **Black Sea Trust for Regional Cooperation.**

THE PERCENTAGE DESIGNATION MECHANISM IN THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA: CHALLENGES AND RESULTS

CZU: 336.14:061.2(478)
https://doi.org/10.59295/eiqd.01

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Abstract. *The percentage designation is a mechanism through which the natural person redirects part of the amount related to the state budget to the non-governmental sector. This action is made to a social utility organization or religious cult, selected by the individual. Although it is a relatively new phenomenon in our country, significant progress has been made in increasing the visibility of local organizations, making them more active, while people have started to redirect 2 percent of their income tax to a non-profit organization.*

For a better understanding of the percentage designation mechanism, as a concept, evolution and result in the Republic of Moldova, the author has set the following tasks: to define the concept of percentage designation; to highlight the purpose of the percentage designation mechanism; to examine the evolution of the legislative framework regarding the percentage designation mechanism; to analyze the course of percentage designation in the Republic of Moldova; to emphasize some results obtained by non-commercial organizations since the adoption of the law; and to determine key problems regarding the application of the percentage designation mechanism in the Republic of Moldova; and to propose recommendations by representatives of the associative environment regarding the improvement of the implementation of the percentage designation mechanism.

For a more in-depth analysis, the author examined the annual reports of the State Fiscal Service regarding the percentage designation, legislative acts in the field, press statements of civil society representatives, website pages, articles and other relevant sources regarding the analyzed subject. In this context, it is mentioned that since its implementation the percentage designation mechanism is not perfect neither for its beneficiaries nor for taxpayers. Therefore, the recommendations highlighted in the article should be taken into account especially by the decision-making actors in the Republic of Moldova.

Keywords: *noncommercial organizations, citizens' participation, natural person, percentage designation mechanism, state fiscal service*

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Defining the concept of percentage designation

Through the percentage designation, the natural person redirects a part of the amount from the state budget to the non-governmental sector. This mechanism would rather be a tool of participatory democracy. It is a possibility for citizens to participate in the process of distributing the public budget, which was previously only the state's responsibility. Thus, percentage designation is not only an alternative source of financing for the activities of public associations and religious cults, but also a way of strengthening relations between these organizations and the population of the Republic of Moldova. (Tinerii și desemnarea procentuală, 2020).

In other words, this phenomenon is an absolute benefit for society once they are expected to develop. (Maleca, 2017: p.161). This mechanism aims not only to support organizations, but also to increase their visibility and actions in the community. Because an organization that is not known in the community, which does not work for the benefit of the community, the probability that it will benefit from percentage designation is very small. The organization must conduct a promotional campaign through its activities, through its actions, to explain to the citizen that he has the right to designate this amount and there is already competition to designate this particular amount in favour of this organization. Educating the citizen is also one of the goals of civil society. Thus, through the percentage designation, the citizen is also educated (Decide unde să meargă 2%, 2023).

On July 18, 2014, the Parliament voted the "2% Law" (Legea, 2014). According to the law, between January 1 and April 30, individuals have the opportunity to direct 2% of their income tax to an organization or religious cult of their choice. The legislative framework also stipulates that a person who has two or more sources of income is obliged to file an income tax return. If the person has income from a single source, they are not obliged to file an income tax return, but if the person wants to exercise their right to the percentage designation, they must file a return, i.e. make an extra effort (Cu dreptul, 2022).

The percentage designation (the 2% mechanism) is made to a selected public utility organization or religious cult.

The public utility status (PUS) obtained by a noncomercial organisation is a "special status" that requires the state (government) to recognize that a certain non-commercial organization (private institution, public association or foundation) carries out public utility activities. These are activities that contribute to the development and support of strategic areas of development of the state, for example: education, social protection, creation of new jobs, etc.

Also the organizations must prove that they ensure high standards of organizational management and is transparent to the public. All these these aspects are verified and confirmed by a special commission who issues a certificate. Until 2018, the Certification Commission operated under the Ministry of Justice. Now this responsibility belongs to the Agency for Public Service.

Following the obtaining of the status, non-commercial organizations (NCOs) can benefit from certain facilities in accessing public funds, or in using public property. Although the list of "benefits" of public utility status remains relatively modest, another side effect of holding the status is the differentiation of holders from other organizations in front of potential donors (Macrinici, 2013: p.8).

Public utility status is granted for a period of five years and can be renewed upon request whenever necessary. Until the entry into force of Law No. 86/2020 on non-commercial organizations, public utility status was granted for a period of 3 years. On November 30, 2020, about 100 ONCs held public utility status (Chirtoacă, Gribincea, 2020: p.3-5).

According to the „2% law", beneficiaries of the percentage designation are:

a) public associations, foundations and private institutions that are registered in the Republic of Moldova and carry out public utility activities in accordance with Law No. 86/2020 on non-commercial organizations, provided that they have been operating for at least one year prior to the request for registration and have no debts to the national public budget for previous fiscal periods;

b) *religious cults* that are registered in the Republic of Moldova and carry out social, moral, cultural or charitable activities.

At the initiative of civil society organizations, this law was amended by Parliament on July 21, 2016 (Legea, 2016). The purpose of the amendments was to provide equal conditions of access, use of amounts and reporting for all beneficiaries of the "2% Law", as well as to improve the actual mechanism of percentage designation.

If initially it was intended that legal entities would also have the possibility to direct 2% of their income tax to a public utility organization, however, in the final regulatory act it was accepted that only individuals would benefit from this possibility.

The Ministry of Finance itself vehemently opposed the inclusion of legal entities in offering 2% of their income tax in order to avoid certain conflicts of interest.

On November 30, 2016, the Government adopted the Regulation on Percentage Designation (Hotărârea, 2016), which is also the instrument for implementing the "2% Law". The Regulation establishes the mechanism by which taxpayers – individuals – can direct 2% of their income tax to the beneficiaries of the percentage designation.

A year later, in 2017, the 2% Law was implemented for the first time and individuals who were required to pay taxes were able to direct 2% of their income tax to one of the organizations included in the List of 2% Beneficiaries. However, representatives of the associative environment recommend that the directed amount be divided among several organizations or that the taxpayer be able to choose the option of allocating the money to a budgetary priority. This results in a large variation in the distribution of funds and it would be good if this practice were also taken into account in the Republic of Moldova, as it has already existed for several years in other states.

The history of percentage designation in the Republic of Moldova

Nr.	**Y*ear***	The number of taxpayers who made the percentage designation	Total validated amount	Number of beneficiaries registered in territorial administrative units
1	2017	21204	2 821 243,60	302
2	2018	28388	5 631 042,36	393
3	2019	35937	7 691 666,30	504

4	2020	26776	5 816 737,19	534
5	2021	34805	9 151 236,11	665
6	2022	34955	9 958 023,66	710
7	2023	38651	124855141,46	780
8	2024	35175	14511676,03	914

Source: Raportul statistic, http://sfs.md/ro/pagina/desemneaza-2

The dynamics show that the citizens of the Republic of Moldova are in solidarity and the amounts directed are increasing, except for the pandemic year, 2020. Specifically, in 2020, the 2% mechanism was affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, the state of emergency established by the authorities to stop the spread of the virus, the movement restrictions and the reduced working hours of the State Tax Service offices. Also, the tax reform that capped the income tax at 12% "cut" the amounts directed by taxpayers who were previously required to pay a percentage rate of 18%, these being taxpayers with higher incomes (Macrinici, Chirtoaca, 2021: p.4).

However, from one year to another, there is a positive trend in both the number of beneficiaries of the percentage designation, the number of taxpayers who make the percentage designation, and the amount of percentage designations (SFS a publicat rezultatele desemnării procentuale, 2023).

According to the latest data made public by the Tax Inspectorate, a record was registered in 2024, the amount of money directed to public utility organizations or religious cults increased considerably, as did the number of taxpayers using this mechanism. In 2024, the total validated amount also showed a slight increase, as did the number of beneficiaries compared to 2023. Although the additional resources of noncommercial organizations are often dedicated to solving social problems in local communities, namely non-profit organizations operating at the local level do not accumulate sufficient financial resources from the percentage designation. Few of them are registered in the list of beneficiaries of the percentage designation, or citizens in rural localities are not sufficiently informed about this opportunity. At the same time, the employment gap between rural and urban populations must be taken into account. This also affects the amounts collected for local/community organizations.

The percentage designation is completed and submitted by individuals with their annual income tax return, and 2024 was the eighth year in which tax-paying individuals in the Republic of Moldova had the right to redirect 2% of their income tax to a non-profit organization or religious entity. The revenues obtained by civil society organizations through the percentage designation mechanism amounted to over 14 mln lei (MD) in 2024. This is the highest annual value designated, but the mechanism is far from fulfilling its full potential, especially when it comes to local civil society. Practically only 5-6% of taxpayers know about the existence of this mechanism (Campanie de promovare, 2023).

In 2024, 918 of beneficiaries registered in territorial administrative units obtained a certain amount of money from individuals to perform organization’s actitivies.

Most of the designations with the largest amounts were designated for organizations based in the municipality of Chisinau. Although taxpayers residing in the municipality of Chisinau designated about 50% of the total validated amount, beneficiary organizations in

the municipality of Chisinau received the largest part of the amount – 10,068,693.84 lei (MD), or approximately 69.4% of the total validated amount. Most of the organizations to which 2% was directed are based in the municipality of Chisinau, which represents about 57.3% (524 out of 914 beneficiaries) of the total number of beneficiaries of the percentage designation in 2023, the rest went to organizations registered in the other districts of the country. This phenomenon can be argued by the fact that they are more transparent, known, are more credible to citizens, as well as that they implement activities that have a greater impact on the population. The remaining 43% of the total accumulated amount went to organizations registered in other districts of the country.

In terms of the geographical dimension of the country, the Statistical Report for 2024 shows that in the municipality of Balti, 1602 taxpayers directed 555,632 lei (MD), in the district of Edineț 1164 taxpayers – 288,264 lei (MD), in the municipality of Chisinau 10245 taxpayers offered 7,284,764,307 lei (MD) and, respectively, in Ceadîr – Lunga, 1596 taxpayers directed 316,000 lei (MD).

From the above, we note that representatives of the associative environment from rural communities is still modest in its results and, in order to improve the situation, public associations must intensify their actions to promote a better image among citizens, so that they are more convincing, attractive and credible. Already registered organizations are urged to communicate more actively with potential taxpayers from whom they could benefit from the 2%. It is considered that the organizations that have benefited from significant resources have been active in promoting the activities they carry out. This is what makes the difference between those who benefit from more money and those who benefit from less. Organizations are also urged to improve their transparency, to publish annual activity and financial reports, to include a column on how much money they have benefited from the "2% mechanism" and whether this money was used according to the statutory purposes (Cecirlan, 2022).

To avoid the majority of civil society organizations based in Chisinau getting the largest amount of money from the percentage designation, one recommendation would be for taxpayers in a given region to redistribute 2% of their state tax payments specifically for organizations registered in that area (30% din alocații desemnate prin „mecanismul 2%" ajung la 1% din beneficiary, 2022).

Also, most of the resources are concentrated in four types of organizations. These are social protection organizations, religious cults, followed by sports organizations, and charitable and health organizations. These organizations collect more than 80% of all resources. Accordingly, organizations of other profiles, such as educational ones, have a much smaller margin of resource use. Thus, representatives of the associative environment believe that educational institutions should also be on the list of beneficiaries, they could use the 2% mechanism to supplement the school fund. An option is to register public associations next to their educational institutions.

Small beneficiaries receive up to 6,00 lei (MD) per year through this mechanism, medium-sized ones: from 1000 - 15000 lei, and large ones reach 9,000,00 lei (MD) annually. The problems mentioned by them relate to the administration of funds and the reporting process on the mechanism.

The largest amount received by an organization in 2024 was 943,131.53 lei, which represents approximately 6.5% of the total amount validated. The beneficiary of this

amount is the Public Association of Veterans and Pensioners of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Republic of Moldova *(Asociaţia Obştească a Veteranilor şi Pensionarilor Ministerului Afacerilor Interne din Republica Moldova).* The organization benefited from the largest designation amount for the eighth consecutive year.

The list is followed by 2 other associations, namely: "ENERGIE" Foundation for the Support of Veterans and Workers of the Energy Sector (Fundația de Susținere a Veteranilor și Lucrătorilor Sectorului Energetic "ENERGIE"), with an amount of 931 205,15 lei (MD) and Public Association Association of Veterans and Pensioners of the Main State Fiscal Inspectorate "UNI-M" (Asociaţia Obştească Asociaţia Veteranilor şi Pensionarilor Inspectoratului Fiscal Principal de Stat "UNI-M") - 347 607,72 lei (MD).

At the end of the list of beneficiaries of the percentage designation is recorded the Religious cult "Church dedicated to St. George" village of Sestaci, district of Soldanesti (Comunitatea religioasă „Biserica cu hramul Sf. Gheorghe" s. Şestaci, r. Şoldăneşti). It received only 6.48 lei (MD).

Based on the above, it is mentioned that a conflict of interest is attested when the organization responsible for distributing the money accumulated through the "2% mechanism" is also an indirect beneficiary. However, many organizations have reported that members of the state structures are administratively "motivated" by their managers to allocate the 2% to the respective organization. Thus, representatives of the associative environment have begun to criticize and come up with some recommendations regarding changing this situation. Some recommend prohibiting CSOs affiliated with public institutions from benefiting from the "2% mechanism", or prohibiting employees of public institutions from making this redistribution to affiliated CSOs and ensuring transparent control (Cecirlan, 2022).

Referring to the number of individual taxpayers who made designations in 2024 by age, the statistical report of the State Tax Service also shows that of those aged 18-30, there were 3484 taxpayers, 31-50 years old, 19387 people, 51-70 years old - 11805 people and respectively, over 70 years old - 499 taxpayers. We also note that the channels through which the declarations were submitted in 2024, electronically - 12673 taxpayers, and on paper 22502 taxpayers.

Regarding the internal situation of non-profit organizations benefiting from the percentage designation, representatives of the associative environment also identified some gaps. They mentioned that in many cases, the costs of administering the budget accumulated through the "2% mechanism" exceed the benefits that it could offer. The proposal is to create a mechanism so that beneficiaries can direct the funds received to other organizations that accumulate larger amounts. Or to extend the reporting period for the accumulated money. Currently, this period is two years. It is also requested that banks offer a free account for the financial means distributed through the "2% mechanism". One recommendation is to simplify the method of reporting income obtained through the mechanism. Currently, the procedure is complicated and is the same for an organization that annually accumulates 900 thousand lei (MD) and one that accumulates 7 lei (MD). For this reason, many organizations would like to give up this mechanism. Another problem would be related to the reporting of the use of funds received from the percentage designation. The reports come in PDF format, data that cannot be disaggregated. It is proposed to change the format. The data should no longer

come on the platforms of public institutions, but all reports should be uploaded on a single platform (30% din alocații desemnate prin „mecanismul 2%" ajung la 1% din beneficiary, 2022).

Given the fact that few organizations are beneficiaries of the percentage designation, if we consider that over 14 thousand civil society organizations are registered in our country, we believe that it is appropriate for organizations that have not registered up to this point to register and benefit from the possibility of attracting these financial sources of income (Cecirlan, 2022).

Although the law was first adopted in 2014 and implemented in 2017, however, in the 8 years of implementation, the percentage designation mechanism is not perfect for either its beneficiaries or taxpayers. Therefore, the recommendations highlighted in the article should be analyzed and taken into account, especially by decision-makers in the Republic of Moldova.

Conclusions

Following the analysis conducted above, we further highlight some conclusions and results regarding the percentage designation in the Republic of Moldova.

Some categories of taxpayers are still excluded from the right to designate by percentage, such as taxpayers practicing professional activities (lawyers, notaries, bailiffs, mediators), although the limitations in the law have generally been excluded. The exclusion from the 2% targeting of persons who have the right to do so according to the law is not justified and negatively influences the ability of the mechanism to constitute an indirect source of financing for the non-commercial sector.

A considerable part of the 2% amounts reach beneficiary organizations that have connections with state institutions – are created by former or current employees of state institutions – and/or that have connections with public and political figures.

From a territorial perspective, the main beneficiary of the 2% mechanism is still the municipality of Chisinau. Although the 2% amounts and the number of 2% beneficiary organizations in the Republic of Moldova are increasing in 2024 compared to previous years, more effort is needed to popularize the 2% mechanism both among non-profit organizations and taxpayers outside the municipality of Chisinau.

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THE CHALLENGES OF MODERN DEMOCRACY

CZU: 321.7:004
https://doi.org/10.59295/eiqd.02

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Abstract. *Modern democracy is going through a period of adaptation and redefinition, facing several challenges that test its resilience. These challenges include decreasing levels of political participation, declining citizen trust in institutions and the integration of digital technologies into the electoral process. Studies highlight that declining political participation affects the legitimacy of the democratic process and the adoption of solutions such as e-voting raises questions of security and privacy. This article explores the multiple dimensions of these challenges and analyses how trust, participation and technology intersect to define the future of democracy. Drawing on recent examples and the literature, it proposes a deeper understanding of how democracy can evolve in the context of an increasingly digitised society.*

Keywords: *democracy, legitimacy, legitimacy, political participation, digital technologies, legality*

The evolution of the concept of democracy and its multiple forms

Democracy, as a form of government of a people, is one of the most widespread political regimes in the world. However, its functioning depends crucially on the degree of participation of citizens in the process of governance. The active involvement of citizens legitimises the democratic regime and defines the political character of a country (Lijphart, 1997: p. 1-14).

The concept of democracy has evolved significantly over time, adopting various forms and models that reflect the complexity of the relationship between the rulers and the ruled. This diversity of forms of democracy illustrates its adaptability to different social, economic and political contexts. At the centre of democracy is the fundamental idea of popular sovereignty, manifested both in the active participation of citizens in decision-making and in the control, they exercise over the institutions of government (Dahl, 1998).

The main ways in which democracy is organised and operates include direct democracy, which allows citizens to participate directly in the decision-making process, and representative democracy, in which the will of the people is expressed through elected representatives. Elections are an essential mechanism of representative democracy, allowing citizens to choose their representatives and express their preferences about how they want to be governed (Lijphart, 1997: p. 1-14). Direct

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democracy, on the other hand, increases the active involvement of citizens in the process of governance by providing the opportunity to decide through referendums, citizens' initiatives or popular vetoes (Qvortrup, 2014). Citizens should decide whether these tools of direct democracy should be used extensively or whether the rules of representation should prevail, which remains a controversial issue in many democratic states.

Direct democracy provides not only the right to elect leaders, but also to express opinions on important issues, thus contributing to a higher quality of civic participation. However, it should be noted that it is not the rule, but rather the exception, and is often only introduced when the mechanisms of representative democracy encounter major difficulties. In the context of the European Union, there has been a significant increase in the use of referendums, which play an important role in the integration and legitimacy of supranational institutions. Thus, while direct democracy can complement representativeness and increase citizen participation, it is more often used as a solution to democratic crises than as a regular model of governance.

In the modern era, pluralist and polyarchic democracies emphasize the diversity of centers of power and competition between interest groups, stressing the importance of compromise and diversity. Participatory democracy extends citizen involvement through consultation and deliberation, while consociational democracy ensures balance between ethnic, religious or linguistic groups in a divided society (Lijphart, 1999).

E-democracy is a recent innovation that uses digital technologies to facilitate citizen engagement and transparency in political processes (Chadwick, 2003: pp. 443-455). On the other hand, models such as elitist and social-elite democracy emphasize the influence of small groups or the elite in decision-making. In addition, informational democracy reflects the importance of access to information as a foundation for informed decision-making. Other forms, such as formal or 'window-dressing' democracy, draw attention to regimes that only formally adhere to democratic norms without implementing real principles. This diversity underlines that democracy is not a monolithic concept, but a dynamic one that adapts to social and technological change (Held, 2006).

The principles of political democracy in modern society

The development of political democracy is closely linked to the emergence of modern capitalist society and is identified with the principle of popular sovereignty. This principle guarantees the right of citizens to determine and control the governance of the nation and forms the basis of legitimate and participatory governance (Dahl, 1998). The functioning of a real democracy depends on the observance of certain fundamental principles. The state must function as a constitutional state, in which all actions are governed by law and abuses of power are prevented by clear legal mechanisms (Rawls, 1993). The constitution is the foundation of any democratic regime, providing the legal framework for fundamental rights and freedoms and for the functioning of political institutions.

Democracy requires the wide and active participation of citizens at both the macro and micro levels of society, involving them in the decision-making process and in all spheres of social life. Democratic institutions must reflect the collective will, represent

citizens' interests and promote their aspirations. Genuine representation is essential to strengthen citizens' trust in democratic institutions (Lijphart, 1999).

The mass- media play a crucial role in shaping civic and political consciousness and are an indispensable tool of modern democracy. The independence and objectivity of the media are essential to ensure accurate information and to prevent undue influence by political power or other interest groups (McQuail, 2010).

These principles ensure the stability and functioning of democracy, helping to protect citizens' rights and strengthen the rule of law.

The challenges and adaptability of contemporary democracy

Contemporary democracy has proved capable of providing effective solutions in many contexts, but it is not without its limitations, especially in times of crisis, such as the financial and banking crisis, the euro crisis or the economic crisis in the European Union. These situations have revealed the inefficiency of certain democratic mechanisms, but they have also demonstrated the adaptability of democracy in the face of new challenges. Through its flexibility, modern democracy seeks to overcome the limits of its effectiveness, find solutions to complex problems and respond to emerging crises (Dahl, 1998). However, democracy faces significant challenges that generate social and political tensions. According to D. Fisichella and R. Dahrendorf, these include unequal political representation in democratic societies, conflicts of interest between technocratic and political structures, institutional bottlenecks, and oligarchic and institutional challenges (Dahrendorf, 2003). These phenomena highlight the fragility of the democratic equilibrium, especially in the context of rapid economic, social and cultural change.

Democracy is also subject to global pressures such as the increasing influence of international organizations, the growing role of non-formal leaders in social and political life, and the diminishing power of traditional political leaders at national and international levels. These pressures reflect the complexity of contemporary global problems that require coordinated and innovative responses (Held, 2006), such as those caused by the economic, social and technological interdependence of states, but also by the impact of human activities on the environment and society. These problems include climate change, social and economic inequalities, migration, security threats and the crisis of democracy, all of which have profound global implications.

The crisis of democracy and democratic regress have become major current concerns. Declining voter turnout, rising populism and the manipulation of information by online technologies are undermining trust in democratic institutions (Freedom House, 2023). These issues require innovative approaches and international cooperation to ensure sustainable and equitable global development.

As mentioned above, democracy today faces a major challenge: low voter turnout, both in elections and referendums. Citizen participation in elections is essential for the legitimacy of democratic decisions and is one of the most important forms of political activity (Lijphart, 1997: p. 1-14). Low voter turnout raises questions about the representativeness of the democratic process and citizens' trust in political institutions. Among the main factors influencing voter apathy are a lack of interest in politics, a sense of the wastefulness of voting, excessive polarization of political discourse and a lack of

adequate civic education (Franklin, 2004). A key factor in increasing voter turnout is civic education, which provides citizens with the knowledge to understand the workings of the political system and the direct impact of voting on public decisions. At the same time, the use of modern technologies, such as digital political information platforms or e-voting, helps to reduce access barriers and encourages citizens to participate in the democratic process (Alvarez & Hall, 2004). However, the implementation of e-voting needs to be accompanied by cybersecurity and transparency measures in order to gain public trust and avoid potential manipulation.

Increasing participation also depends on reducing the socio-economic inequalities that limit access to political processes. People from disadvantaged backgrounds are often less involved, leading to persistent gaps in political representation. In this context, political inclusion programas and information campaigns targeting under-represented groups can play a crucial role.

Another modern solution for contemporary democracy is the introduction of electronic voting (e-voting), which is seen by many as an innovative idea to increase citizen participation in the electoral process. E-voting encompasses a variety of methods, including the transmission and counting of votes via digital networks such as mobile phones, private networks or the Internet. Proponents of e-voting argue that it can widen access to democratic processes for disadvantaged groups, such as people with disabilities or those living across national borders (Norris, 2001). There are two main forms of e-voting: Internet voting at the polling station and remote voting. The benefits of e-voting include increased voter mobility, reduced election costs and rapid publication of results (Alvarez & Hall, 2004). e-voting can also overcome traditional barriers, such as limited access to polling stations or travel difficulties, by providing equal opportunities for all citizens to participate (Krimmer, 2010).

Information and communication technologies (ICT) play a central role in e-democracy. By reducing the distance between citizens and political representatives, ICTs enable more direct participation and facilitate the exchange of information and political dialogue (Chadwick, 2003: p. 443-455). E-Democratization thus has the potential to revitalize representative democracy by offering new forms of participation and reducing inequalities in representation.

However, the introduction of e-voting poses challenges in terms of cybersecurity, voter confidentiality and transparency of the electoral process. The introduction of e-voting must be accompanied by measures to protect against manipulation of the results and to ensure public confidence (Trechsel et al., 2005). Despite these challenges, e-voting is an important way of adapting democracy to the needs of contemporary society, promoting civic engagement and strengthening democratic society.

The role of the European Union in promoting democracy

In the European Union (EU), democracy is undergoing a continuous process of adaptation, based on reforms and institutional innovations aimed at strengthening democratic mechanisms. Recent crises have accelerated these transformations, prompting the EU to diversify its strategies for political participation and strengthen the democratic resilience of member states. European democracy is thus constantly evolving, reflecting the need to respond to the challenges of an interconnected and fast

changing world. The European Union complements its human rights commitments with an active engagement in promoting and strengthening democracy. This approach is based on the principles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international and regional standards on the functioning of democratic institutions and the conduct of electoral processes (UN, 1948). Since 2015, EU support for democracy has been aligned with the goals of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, focusing in particular on Goal 16 on accountable institutions and inclusive governance and Goal 10 on reducing inequality (UN, 2015).

On 17 November 2009, the Council of the European Union adopted conclusions on democracy support in the EU's external relations, which set out a tailored, country-specific strategy that promotes coherence and active stakeholder involvement (Council of the EU, 2009). The Agenda for Change, adopted by the European Commission in 2011, emphasizes the centrality of human rights, democracy and good governance in EU development policy (European Commission, 2011).

In 2012, the EU agreed a strategic framework on human rights and democracy and has since implemented three action plans to translate these principles into rules. Following the Arab Spring in 2011, the European Neighborhood Policy was updated to reflect the principle of "more for more", linking EU assistance to progress in democratic transition. Countries that have undertaken political reforms have benefited from incentives such as economic integration, extended financial assistance, increased mobility of citizens and wider access to the EU's internal market (Council of the EU, 2012).

In October 2019, the Council of the European Union adopted conclusions reaffirming the principles established in 2009 and identifying new challenges to democracy. These include the undermining of democratic processes and institutions, declining public trust in institutions and politicians, shrinking democratic space for civil society, violations of human rights and fundamental freedoms, and manipulation through various online technologies (Council of the EU, 2019). These issues have been identified as urgent priorities for EU external action.

In November 2020, the Council reaffirmed the Union's commitment to accelerate efforts to promote democracy by adopting the EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy for 2020-2024. The plan has five main strands, including "Building resilient, inclusive and democratic societies" (Council of the EU, 2020). It should also be recalled that the crucial role of civil society was underlined by the EU Council in its 2012 Conclusions "Roots of Democracy and Sustainable Development": Europe's engagement with civil society in external relations". These were reaffirmed in the conclusions of 19 June 2017, which underline support for an accountable and resilient civil society as an important tool for good governance and the rule of law in global democracies (Council of the EU, 2017). In the longer term, the EU has developed policies that integrate human rights and democratic principles, including country-specific strategies to prioritize actions and objectives. Human rights and democracy clauses in international agreements allow for the suspension of cooperation in cases of serious violations. In addition, the EU has financial instruments to support civil society organizations working to promote human rights and democracy (European Commission, 20/21), which I will discuss later.

Election observation is an essential tool of the European Union (EU) to support democratic transitions in partner countries, to promote human rights and the rule of law,

and to contribute to conflict prevention and peace building. EU Election Observation Missions (EOMs) analyze electoral processes over the long term, from the start of the campaign to the announcement of final results and the handling of disputes. EOMs are deployed at the invitation of the host country and include both long-term observers (who monitor all stages of the electoral process) and short-term observers (STOs) who focus on polling day and vote counting (European Union, 2016).

The final report of the EOM provides both conclusions and key recommendations for electoral reform, and is a benchmark for future EU assistance initiatives. In addition to observation activities, the EU provides technical and material support to partner countries in the electoral field with the aim of strengthening institutional capacity and promoting reforms throughout the electoral cycle (European Commission, 2021).

In November 2021, the EU and its Member States launched the Team Europe for Democracy (TED) initiative to coordinate support for democratization worldwide. TED is based on three pillars: researching best practices in democracy support, creating a global TED network, and providing national expertise in supporting democratization (European External Action Service, 2021). The EU also actively participates in multilateral fora such as the UN, the Council of Europe and the OSCE, promoting democracy as a fundamental principle. In addition, EU leaders participate in the US-led Summit for Democracy, a forum to promote collective responses to global democratic backsliding and support the renewal of democratic values (Summit for Democracy, 2021). The European Union uses several financial instruments to promote democracy and human rights beyond its borders, providing financial and technical assistance to strengthen democratic values and the rule of law. The main instruments include the Instrument for Neighborhood, Development and International Cooperation (IVDCI) - Global Europe and the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA III) for the period 2021-2027. IPA III aims to support candidate and potential candidate countries in their efforts to meet the necessary criteria for EU membership, such as democratic reforms, strengthening the rule of law and respect for fundamental rights (European Commission, 2021). An example of a project funded under IPA III is the Interreg IPA Romania-Serbia Programme 2021-2027, which promotes cross-border cooperation between the two countries. This programme supports initiatives aimed at strengthening institutional capacities and promoting democratic values in the region (Musat & Partners, 2024).

On the other hand, IVCDCI - Global Europe is the European Union's main financial mechanism for external actions for the period 2021-2027. It finances programas supporting sustainable development, stability and international cooperation, with a total budget of €79.5 billion. The promotion of EU values and interests at global level is supported through programas to promote democracy, human rights, gender equality and the rule of law, to support institution building and governance in partner countries, and to fight disinformation and promote public diplomacy. It also supports civil society and local organizations by funding NGOs and local actors for community development and other projects aimed at increasing citizens' participation in decision-making. The IVCDCI is a flexible instrument that allows the EU to respond quickly to new global challenges, to provide long-term support as well as solutions to emergency situations and, importantly, to operate independently of agreements with partner country governments, funding Election Observation Missions (EOMs) and other complementary

initiatives related to electoral processes (European External Action Service, 2022). One example is the Active Citizens Fund programme, funded by the EEA and Norway Grants 2014-2021, which has invested €48 million in 325 projects focused on promoting democracy, human rights and social inclusion. These initiatives have actively engaged more than 380,000 citizens across the country, contributing to the strengthening of civil society and active citizenship, as well as increasing the capacity of vulnerable groups (Structural Funds, 2023). In addition, the European Commission's CERV (Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values) programme provides funding to civil society organisations working to promote respect for the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights. This programme supports organisations in their efforts to protect, promote and inform the public about fundamental rights and democratic values, and to promote dialogue, transparency and good governance (European Commission Representation in Romania, 2024).

Another important instrument is the European Endowment for Democracy (EDF), established in 2013. This fund, which operates autonomously as a foundation under private law, provides rapid and flexible support to political and civil society actors involved in democratic transitions, with a particular focus on the EU's eastern and southern neighbourhood. The lack of complex bureaucratic formalities makes the EDF particularly efficient and allows it to respond quickly to the needs of its partners (European Endowment for Democracy, 2023). An example of an EDF-funded project is the Civil Society and Non-State Actors Strengthening Programme (European Commission). This programme aims to strengthen the capacity of civil society organisations in ACP countries to participate actively in democratic processes and promote human rights at local and national levels. The EDF has also funded initiatives such as the Support Programme for Elections and Democratic Processes, which provides technical and financial assistance for the organisation of free and fair elections and the strengthening of democratic institutions in partner countries (European Commission). Through these instruments, the European Union maintains its leading role in the promotion of democratic values worldwide, contributing to political stability and sustainable development in partner regions.

Challenges to democracy in Romania

Romania has been criticised by European policymakers and some Member States for the persistence of institutionalised corruption and the slow pace of democratisation compared to other post-communist countries. This situation can be explained by the way in which the new political class was formed after 1989, characterised by limited access to intellectual personalities and the promotion of individuals who lacked the qualities of elite political leaders, such as dedication, responsibility or political insight (Gallagher, 2005). The failure to build a credible and competent political class have had a negative impact both on the functioning of the public administration and on Romania's position in the European Union. Instead of competence and meritocracy, people were promoted according to patronage criteria, which reduced the country's administrative capacity and damaged Romania's image in European decision-making forums. Internal political conflicts, often without dialogue and compromise, were also exported to the European arena, contributing to the erosion of the country's prestige (Stan, 2013). In recent years, Romania has experienced political instability, with short-lived governments and a lack

of coherence in public policy. Examples such as the liberalization of energy prices at an inopportune moment or the abandonment of coal-fired power generation have demonstrated the lack of effective strategic planning, while other countries are reconsidering these energy capacities (European Commission, 2022). Populism has become a prominent feature of the Romanian political landscape, reinforced by the decreasing accountability of politicians and the lack of morality of some candidates put forward for public office. Election campaigns often reflect these weaknesses, focusing on populist promises rather than real solutions to citizens' problems (Gherghina, 2014).

Although Romania has made significant progress by joining the EU and NATO, differences with Western European states remain, mainly due to the lack of political accountability and the distance between the parties and the electorate. Parties not only disregard voters' interests, but also contribute to a crisis of confidence in democracy, which affects both the domestic scene and the country's international positioning (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2020). The electoral process in Romania reflects a number of shortcomings that affect public confidence in democracy and the political class. Exaggerated and unfulfilled electoral promises, deliberately made, generate an "inflation of demands" and turn political competition into a demagogic unfolding. The electorate, often insufficiently informed, is misleading, leading to a decline in trust in politicians and lower voter turnout (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2015). The recent election campaigns in Bucharest and the 2024 presidential elections have highlighted the lack of responsibility and morality of some candidates. According to the decision of the Constitutional Court of Romania (CCR), the electoral process was seriously flawed by aggressive disinformation campaigns, algorithmic manipulation of social media and non-compliance with electoral legislation. The CCR annulled the first round of the presidential election, invoking Article 246(f) of the Constitution, which requires it to supervise compliance with the electoral process (CCR, 2024). Although the CCR's decision was justified by the seriousness of the violations, it raised serious questions about the involvement of state institutions such as the SRI, the SIE, the Permanent Electoral Council and the Ministry of the Interior, which were passive rather than proactive. According to the Attorney General's Office, the subsequent investigations targeted crimes of electoral corruption, money laundering and digital manipulation, demonstrating the systemic dimension of the problems in the electoral process (Attorney General's Office, 2024). The post-cancellation context is tense, with civil society calling for transparency, clear rules for the online environment and a level playing field for all candidates. Digital campaigns, while effective, need to be well-regulated to avoid excessive manipulation and algorithmic exploitation, thus ensuring a level playing field for electoral debates (Howard, 2018). Romania needs to learn from these systemic failures and prioritize the correction of electoral processes through effective cooperation between authorities, political parties and civil society. Without concrete measures, the risk of an ongoing crisis of confidence in democracy remains significant.

Conclusions

For a democracy to function for the benefit of its citizens, it is essential that democratic institutions act 'according to the law', respecting legal norms and democratic legitimacy acquired through free and fair elections. However, the legitimacy that

generates social trust and institutional order can become vulnerable in the face of economic, social or political crises. Such vulnerabilities, exacerbated by globalisation and economic recessions, fuel, public discontent, often expressed through civil disobedience or mass protests, which undermine trust in politicians and state institutions (Lefort, 1988).

While globalisation has brought significant benefits, it has also increased the challenges to democracy. The intervention of corporations and capital markets in policymaking often undermines the authority of states and fuels perceptions that they have become more powerful than national governments (Stiglitz, 2002). In addition, the gap between the demands of society and the responsiveness of the political system - limited by the competence and resources of ruling parties - contributes to what is perceived as a 'democratic deficit' (Dahl, 1998). The weaknesses of democracy are also reflected in complex bureaucratic decision-making procedures and the difficulty of managing social conflicts. These weaknesses can only be overcome through the effective functioning of the rule of law, a redefinition of politics by associating the political class with morality and law, and a clear separation of powers in the state (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2020). Major changes in contemporary society - including economic and social crises, ideological crises and waves of civil disobedience - require the continuous adaptation of democracy. Building an effective democratic society does not mean building an ideal society, but a functioning society that guarantees the rule of law, fundamental rights and the separation of powers. The ultimate goal of democracy must be its effectiveness as a system of governance capable of responding to global challenges (Held, 2006).

Contemporary democracy is a dynamic system that can only respond to complex challenges by constantly adapting and strengthening its institutional mechanisms. However, this adaptability depends on respect for the rule of law, the promotion of meritocracy and the proper regulation of external influences such as corporations or global markets. In the face of economic and social crises, democracy must demonstrate efficiency, transparency and the ability to protect citizens' interests. Romania, for example, needs reforms that will restore confidence in institutions and reduce the democratic deficit, thus providing a sustainable model in the context of an increasingly integrated European Union.

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DEZINFORMATION AND ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE. THE CASE OF THE REPUBLIC IF MOLDOVA

CZU: 316.776.2:004.8:324(478)
https://doi.org/10.59295/eiqd.03

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Abstract. *Artificial Intelligence (AI) is playing an increasingly important role in shaping the information environment, and in the Republic of Moldova, where vulnerabilities to disinformation are high, it can have a direct impact on democratic processes, including elections. AI is used to rapidly generate fake news, manipulative images or videos that can influence public perceptions and voters' decisions. In elections, disinformation fueled by AI can distort public debate, polarize society and erode trust in electoral institutions and processes. The Republic of Moldova, in a sensitive geopolitical context and a fragmented political scene, provides fertile ground for AI manipulation. Orchestrated disinformation campaigns can use AI to target specific segments of voters, creating personalized messages that exploit their fears or beliefs. For example, spreading false narratives about candidates or parties can directly influence the outcome of an election. However, AI can also be an ally in detecting and combating these threats. Social platforms, supported by advanced algorithms, can identify and remove manipulative content. To protect elections, Moldova needs adapted legislation, increased media education and international partnerships to counter the harmful use of AI for electoral purposes.*

Keywords: *disinformation, artificial intelligence, Republic of Moldova, social media platforms, electoral process*

Propaganda, information manipulation, fake news and disinformation are not new. The phenomenon of disinformation has gained momentum in the 21st century, affecting more and more countries regardless of their level of economic and political development. According to the results of the World Economic Forum survey, disinformation ranks first among short-term technological risks, while cyber threats rank fourth (The Global Risks Report). The impact and scale of the phenomenon has been directly influenced by the development of artificial intelligence which facilitates the spread of disinformation.

Throughout history there have been quite a few examples when misinformation has been at the heart of different historical events to manipulate public opinion or to achieve political ends, from the disinformation campaign organized by Emperor Augustus against his adversaries in ancient Rome to the infodemics organized during the COVID-19 vaccination campaign. The way disinformation has been organized has

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changed a lot over the centuries, from spreading rumors to the use of advanced tactics of contemporary state and non-state actors. One of the best-known operations organized by a state actor is Operation Infecktion, organized by the Soviet Union during the Cold War, which aimed to discredit the United States by falsely suggesting that it had conceived of HIV/AIDS as a biological weapon (Bereskin, 2023: 6).

Throughout history, the way disinformation has been organized has changed a lot, but as in the past, the most well-known objectives are: destabilizing trust in institutions, polarizing public opinion and influencing political or economic decisions. Another frequently used aim is to create information chaos, so that users are overwhelmed by conflicting streams of data, causing them to lose their ability to critically evaluate information sources. This has been facilitated by the invention of the Internet and social networks, propaganda and disinformation became much less expensive, without a limit of broadcasting channels, being accessible to everyone and allowing anonymity. An ordinary citizen can be a creator and distributor of information and a participant in propaganda. The Internet and social networks have become the main spearheads of this new campaign, both of society and governmental campaigners. Also, blogs, fake websites are modern propaganda tools. Propaganda messages are repeated on the web, which exposes individuals to constant troll messages, which alter their behavior.

Social networks influence people's cognitive characteristics and cause them to select information that is consistent with their pre-existing beliefs, and to filter out what is inconsistent with them. Associated with propaganda, the phenomenon of fake news becomes a tool of propaganda, while the source is unknown, malicious and aims to misinform, manipulate, builds a one-dimensional monologue and polarizes society. YouTube, Facebook, Telegram and Tik Tok are fertile platforms for the global broadcasting of fake news.

While the recent research on the impact of social media platforms in spreading misinformation is mixed, it is essential to recognize their role nonetheless. Their algorithms, designed to maximize user engagement (Donovan, 2021) can amplify false information and extend its coverage (Is Social Media a Threat to Democracy?).

There is still disagreement among researchers on their impact, but already several studies suggest that these platforms also encourage echo chambers, or autonomous online communities of ideas similar to individuals. Echo chambers are worrying in the context of misinformation. Studies highlight that disinformation often has the effect of a 'preaching to the choir', reinforcing rather than changing individual attitudes. When individuals are repeatedly exposed to information that aligns with their existing beliefs, it can reinforce preconceived beliefs of misinformation, making them increasingly difficult to counter. As such, disinformation not only hinders critical thinking and the ability of citizens to discern authentic content, but potentially disempowers, polarizes and fragments the larger society (Bereskin, 2023: 10).

Disinformation is not an activity organized exclusively by state actors, there are enough examples where individuals organize disinformation actions. For example, in Macedonia, teenagers created fake news sites about American politics and generated viral revenue among specific political groups. The diversity of disinformation operatives is thus evident - from highly organized, state-sponsored operations such as the Internet Research Agency (IRA), which systematically orchestrated campaign, to ordinary

individuals. The IRA, a St. Petersburg-based entity, has engaged in extensive disinformation campaigns targeting both the United States and Europe. The IRA employs several strategies to influence the information space such as buying accounts or "stalking" to change narratives circulating in the information space. Robots are also used for this purpose, initially engaging in topics that are later distorted into narratives with a strong political and ideological charge.

The level of coordination among actors varies and can range from independent actors and highly organized efforts involving groups and state-sponsored agencies working in tandem, as well as more fragmented and ad hoc collaborations. Understanding the extent and nature of this coordination is crucial, as it influences the scale, sophistication, and impact of the tactics used in disinformation.

Alongside technological aspects, psychological aspects are factors that directly influence disinformation. Most often, the success of disinformation campaigns is ensured by appealing to emotions, because emotions, especially intense emotions, influence people's decisions and behavior faster than logical reasoning. More often than not, disinformation exploits fear, anger, pride, empathy or compassion to manipulate the public (Psihologia dezinformării în era digitală: strategii, tactici și impact). Appealing to emotions works well in the context of social networks, where algorithms favor content that triggers strong reactions, accentuating the effects of misinformation. Emotional messages are often more memorable and more likely to be shared, amplifying their impact on social platforms.

Since the advent of artificial intelligence (AI), including generative AI, the phenomenon of disinformation has amplified. Whereas the creation and dissemination of disinformation campaigns used to be campaigns were costly in terms of time and money, AI now facilitates the creation of misleading content on a large scale, thus increasing the risks of disinformation (Monteit, 2024: 33).

Artificial intelligence: concept and characteristics

Artificial intelligence began to take shape in the 1950s, when the famous mathematician who cracked the Enigma code during the Second World War - Alan Turing - devised the Turing test. A test that measured the ability of machines to behave as human-like as possible. Over time, a period of intense study and development has followed. From the chatbots Eliza and Perry, the Deep Blue supercomputer that won a game of chess against world champion Gary Kasparov, the development of algorithms capable of understanding and replaying human language, to Ghat GPT, which today has become the most searched topic on Wikipedia in 2023, and the most discussed AI system in history.

In her 2020 book" Deepfakes, generative artificial intelligence" expert Nina Schick warned that soon anyone with a smartphone will soon be able to produce Hollywood-level special effects with minimal skill or effort. 2023 saw a proliferation of their synthetic media or content - be it visual, auditory or multimodal - that has been created or modified using artificial intelligence (PAI's Responsible Practices). These models can either be tuned to generate a variety of highly realistic and convincing results that" can simulate artifacts, people or events", Deepfakes use deep learning, a subset of machine learning, to generate realistic videos or images in which people appear to say

or perform actions they never actually did. A viral image on the internet in 2023, generated by AI of Pope Francis in a white down jacket, has been described as the first real case of mass-scale AI misinformation and illustrated concerns about the hyper-realism of deepfake and the potentially abusive propensity for misuse.

The impact of AI on disinformation

The year 2024 saw increased attention on artificial intelligence, whether from the prospect of two researchers in the field being awarded Nobel Prizes, discussions on the influence of AI on electoral processes, or the impact it was having on education in general. In the first half of 2024, several papers have appeared analyzing the phenomenon and trying to identify the impact it has including on misinformation. Some researchers see generative AI as a source of danger in terms of misinformation (Poibeau) and those who believe that the emergence of generative systems does not fundamentally change the situation, either qualitatively or quantitatively (Simon, 2023).

According to existing definitions Generative Artificial Intelligence refers to the set of deep learning models capable of generating high quality text, images and other content from the data they have been trained on (Bennett, 2020). Two important characteristics of generative AI are its ability to generate plausible content and its ease of use and access to all profiles and purposes. Researchers who consider AI a danger for disinformation explain this by the intersection of the two dimensions.

The impact of AI on disinformation from the perspective of scientific research, news articles and social media

Argument	Explanation of the statement	Presupposed effect
1. Increasing disinformation	Because of its affordability and ease of use, generative AI can be used to create misinformation on a large scale with minimal cost to individuals or organizations.	Increasing the amount of disinformation allows malicious actors to "flood the zone" with false or misleading information, blurring factual information, or sowing confusion.
2. Increasing the quality of disinformation	Thanks to its technical capabilities and ease of use, generative AI can create higher quality misinformation.	Increasing the quality of misinformation leads to greater persuasiveness because the content is more plausible and harder to verify. It can contribute to an epistemic crisis.
3. Increasing personalization of disinformation	Due to its technical capabilities and ease of use, generative AI can create high quality misinformation	Increasing the persuasiveness of disinformation consumers, with the same results as above.

	customized to user preferences.	
4. Unintentional generation of plausible false information	AI can generate useful content (e.g. Code generation). However, it can also create seemingly plausible but completely inaccurate information that could be distributed unintentionally.	Misinforming users of generative AI and potentially those with whom they share information.

Source: Misinformation reloaded? Fears about the impact of generative AI on misinformation are overblown. https://misinforeview.hks.harvard.edu/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/simon_generative_AI_fears_20231018.pdf

The dual nature of AI was explained by UN Secretary-General António Guterres in his address to the Security Council, noting that while AI can accelerate human development, it also poses significant risks if used maliciously. He said, "The emergence of generative artificial intelligence could be a defining moment for disinformation and hate speech - undermining truth, facts and safety, adding a new dimension to the manipulation of human behavior and contributing to widespread polarization and instability (Can artificial intelligence (AI) influence elections).

According to the UNESCO Guide for Election Practitioners: 'Elections in Digital Times', AI has the potential to improve the efficiency and accuracy of elections. It reaches voters and engages more directly with them through personalized communication tailored to individual preferences and behavior. AI-powered chat bots can provide real-time information about polling stations, candidate platforms and voting procedures, making the election process more accessible and transparent. Artificial intelligence also improves data management by ensuring detailed election data is accurately collected, stored and analyzed, allowing officials to make quick decisions and identify trends effectively. Automated systems make election administration more efficient by managing large data sets quickly and accurately, significantly reducing human error. This leads to more reliable and faster results, thereby strengthening public confidence in the electoral process. In addition, AI strengthens election security by fortifying cyber security measures against cyber threats, ensuring the integrity and resilience of the electoral infrastructure by detecting anomalies and fraudulent activities (Can artificial intelligence (AI) influences elections).

Daniel Innerarity, in Artificial Intelligence and Democracy, observed that artificial intelligence can engage individual voters in the electoral process through chat bots and social media discussion forums. It can glean valuable information from user comments and enable real-time data analysis for campaign strategists to adjust their approach based on public opinion. But artificial intelligence carries greater risks. The increasing sophistication of AI-generated content makes disinformation more persuasive and has a stronger emotional impact. It is also easier to create and increasingly difficult to detect and counter. As AI technology advances, the distinction between genuine information and fakes becomes more complex (Innerarity). AI-generated deepfakes -

highly realistic but false audio, video and images - can be used to mislead voters and undermine trust in the electoral process. Deepfakes can make people appear to do or say things they never did. As highlighted by the UN Secretary-General, cyber-attacks on critical infrastructure based on artificial intelligence could seriously affect global peace and security, as the technical and financial barriers to accessing artificial intelligence tools are lowered (Can artificial intelligence (AI) influences elections?).

The use of artificial intelligence also involves the collection and analysis of large amounts of personal data, which raises privacy concerns and requires robust data protection measures to maintain voter confidence and comply with privacy legislation.

Deploying AI in elections raises numerous ethical issues, such as ensuring that AI systems are not biased and do not unfairly influence election results. It is also essential to establish who is responsible for overseeing the use of AI in electoral processes to ensure transparency and accountability. AI algorithms can be manipulated to favor certain candidates or parties, either intentionally or unintentionally. Bias in AI systems can result from the data used to train them or from the design of the algorithms. This can reinforce existing forms of discrimination, prejudice and stereotyping. Biased AI algorithms could incorrectly influence voter behavior, compromising the fairness of the electoral process. Created using AI, these hyper-fakes are becoming increasingly difficult to detect as image and sound quality improves with technological developments (Deep fake Detection Challenge Results).

Several international and regional organizations have initiated various ways of regulating IA. The United Nations (UN) has advocated for a comprehensive and collaborative approach to AI governance, focusing on setting global standards and ethical guidelines, developing national strategies, mitigating long-term global risks, addressing skills gaps, promoting international collaboration, developing regulatory frameworks, and raising public awareness. Artificial intelligence regulation is the development of public sector policies and laws to promote and regulate artificial intelligence and implicit algorithms, an emerging issue in jurisdictions globally. Between 2016 and 2020, more than 30 countries have adopted dedicated AI strategies. Most EU Member States have launched national AI strategies, as have Canada, China, India, Japan, Mauritius, Mauritius, the Russian Federation, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, the USA and Vietnam. The Global Partnership for Artificial Intelligence was launched in June 2020, affirming the need for AI to be developed in line with human rights and democratic values to ensure public trust in the technology. In the US, Henry Kissinger, Eric Schmidt and Daniel Huttenlocher issued a joint statement on November 2021, calling for a government commission to regulate AI.

An advisory body on artificial intelligence was also launched at the UN, which includes experts from government, business, the technology community, civil society and academia. Its role is to support the international community's efforts to regulate artificial intelligence, and in early 2024, Volker Türk, the UN human rights chief, warned that powerful propaganda and disinformation campaigns could disrupt elections, mislead people and spread misogyny and hatred, and called for AI policies and practices anchored in human rights. In March 2024, the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution, proposed by the United States and supported by more than 120 member states, promoting "safe, secure and trustworthy" AI systems that respect human rights

and contribute to sustainable development. The resolution calls on all stakeholders to refrain from using AI in ways that violate human rights and emphasizes the need to bridge the digital divide, in particular helping developing countries. Through the AI for Good Summits, the UN facilitates international collaboration, the exchange of best practices and the alignment of AI development with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

In terms of regional actors, in May 2024, the Council of the European Union approved the "Artificial Intelligence (AI) Act" to harmonize the rules on artificial intelligence. This legislation aims to balance innovation, transparency, accountability and the protection of fundamental rights by classifying AI systems according to risk. High-risk AI systems will be subject to strict requirements, while extreme practices such as cognitive-behavioral manipulation and predictive policing will be banned.

The AI law will also be implemented from 2026 in the European Union. This legislation is part of the EU's wider regulatory strategy, which also includes the Code of Practice on Misinformation, which requires platforms to monitor political advertising, and the Digital Services Act, which sets the obligations for online services to ensure a safer digital environment.

Disinformation in Republic of Moldova and artificial intelligence

The information space of the Republic of Moldova abounds in elements of anti-Western propaganda and manipulation (especially about the European Union and NATO) and against the national interests of the Republic of Moldova. The narratives circulating in the information space (especially online) are strongly influenced by geopolitics, by the regional security environment, by the war in Ukraine and have grown substantially in the context of the election campaign in 2024 (Marzac, 2024).

The research and analyzes carried out by the experts over the years, have shown that: disinformation has a negative impact on national and human security, polarizes Moldovan society on various criteria, undermines/politically prevents the implementation of policies in the field of security and the democratic process, creates a "security trap" (it is not clear what is the direction and means of Ensuring security), influences the agenda and the decision-making process (e.g. preventing participation in pacification missions, collaboration with certain organizations or partners, implementation of development projects, development of defense capabilities, etc.), decreases trust in state institutions and creates non-compliance with the rules imposed by them (e.g. Pandemic period) (Marzac).

The society of the Republic of Moldova is heterogeneous, fragmented linguistically and religiously, including different ways of reporting on the major events that took place during the 20th century (for example, the Second World War, the collapse of the USSR, the expansion of NATO). A good part of the population is nostalgia for the Soviet period. There are also features of the environment that facilitate the reception of fake news or other forms of disinformation coming from Kremlin. One of the most significant and with a constant and considerable impact is the presence of the Russian-speaking community with all the political consequences that derive from it: political organization, ethnic parties, cultural leverage of Moscow, etc. Associated with the widespread knowledge of the Russian language among the population, these two factors

contribute to the creation of an information space favorable to the direct consumption of Russian media products, without additional translation costs. In the context of the exceptional situation, some TV channels have been closed, but a good part of them continue to operate online, a space where disinformation is facilitated by new technologies. Regardless of whether we are talking about news or entertainment shows, they present an image only in Russian version of various global or regional issues, being intensively promoted. The Republic of Moldova is one of the countries of the world where the mobile internet and the one through social networks is the one that works well and is accessible, but the information available in the online environment can be distorted, tainted by fake news, increasingly present, despite some measures taken in the context of the war in Ukraine. At the same time, new technologies have a significant contribution in the efforts to limit the effects of fake news by developing mechanisms for automatic verification of the credibility of information by evaluating the sources on the flow up to the original one.

In the document developed by the Intelligence and Security Service (SIS) "Evaluation of the involvement of the Russian Federation in the electoral processes of the Republic of Moldova in 2024-2025" (Evaluarea implicării Rusiei în procesele electorale) it is mentioned that the Russian Federation maintains as a strategic goal the attraction of the Republic of Moldova in its area of influence. In this vein, the tactical objectives pursued in the next two years are: 2024 – compromising the referendum for European integration, meddling in the presidential elections, as well as compromising the political candidates associated with it. 2025 – the accession of political parties that are under the influence of the Russian Federation in the Parliament of the Republic of Moldova with the aim of creating a pro-Russian majority, or at least a moderate one in relation to European integration.

SIS mentions 3 ways of achieving these objectives: supporting political actors under the direct or indirect control of the Russian Federation, creating several crises, with different magnitudes, in several areas of socio-political life. The third way is the one under our analysis and refers to - large-scale informational attack to amplify the psychological effect of crises through the extensive use of social networks, especially Telegram channels, attempts to restore or build TV channels to propagate the necessary messages and the placement in the public space of false information, with major media impact (Evaluarea implicării Rusiei în procesele electorale).

The information space was during the year 2024 and will continue to be the main instrument of influence in the following year, managed both at the level of the Russian special services (propaganda centers controlled by them) and at the level of social-political actors in the Republic of Moldova (on its own), connected with the Russian factor. According to the opinion poll carried out in August, there is an increase in the number of Moldovans who are soaped on Telegram, TikTok, where there is an increase in the number of channels promoting propaganda (Tik Tok, ranking 3rd after Facebook and YouTube with 28%, as sources of information for Moldovans (Facebook – 69%. YouTube 65%)) (Sondaj IRI). For comparison, in January 2022, according to the results of a survey conducted by the sociological company iData, the top social networks were as follows: Facebook – 90.2%; Instagram – 45.9%; Odnoklassniki – 33.5%; Tik-Tok – 25.5%; Telegram – 18.5% (Top 5 rețele sociale folosite de moldoveni în ultima lună).

The Governmental Readiness Index for AI shows that the Republic of Moldova ranked 90th out of 193 countries evaluated in 2023, in contrast to 2021, when it ranked 86th and the country's vision of artificial intelligence was rated as zero (Government AI Readiness Index 2023). Analyzing the population's perception of artificial intelligence, according to a survey conducted in 2023, 45 percent of Moldovans do not fully understand the concept of "artificial intelligence" and only 15 percent can clearly say what it implies. The research also shows that 42 percent don't know what Chat GPT is and only 11 percent access this tool to accomplish their tasks. 18% of Moldovans believe that sooner or later artificial intelligence will put them out of work (Poll: Magenta Consulting).

In the context of the changes that have taken place in the field of technologies, the Republic of Moldova has proposed for consultation from February to March 2024 the "White Paper on Data Governance and Artificial Intelligence (White Paper)" a document that presents the vision of accelerating the creation of a data governance ecosystem and the adoption of artificial intelligence (AI) for the Development of the Republic of Moldova, stated as follows: A data governance and AI ecosystem for sustained and sustainable growth centered on human needs.

The vision contains a commitment to sustainability, sustainable development and economic and social prosperity. It assumes confidence in the safety and reliability of AI, emphasizing the role of the state in overseeing ethical and responsible use of technology. The focus is on excellence in adopting innovative technologies and communicating the transformative impact of AI on economic growth and social welfare in the context of Moldova's alignment with technological progress and transition to a data and knowledge-based economy (Cartea Albă privind guvernanța datelor și inteligența artificială).

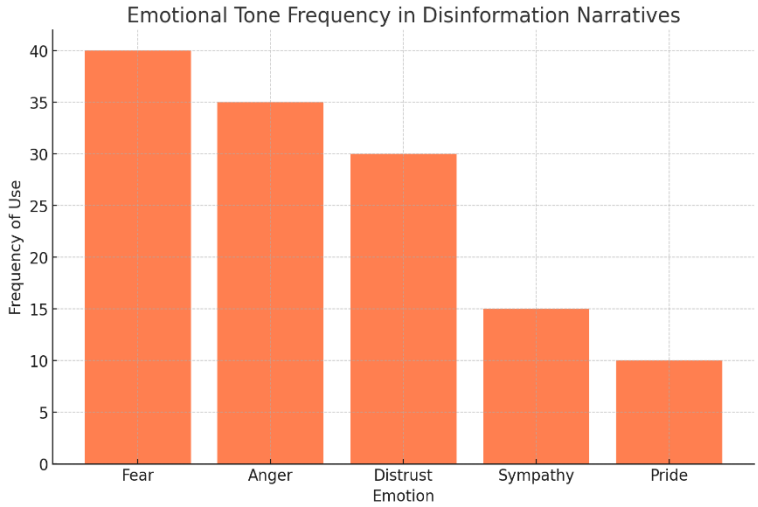
Referring to disinformation and artificial intelligence in the Republic of Moldova, we will mention the report of the analysis conducted by the American company OpenAI, specialized in artificial intelligence, presented on 30 May 2024 on how its artificial intelligence tools are used to spread disinformation or manipulate public opinion. According to this report in the Russian Federation, two operations have been identified in the Russian Federation to create and spread content critical of the US, Ukraine and the Baltic countries. In one of the operations, an open AI model was used to create a Telegram posting bot. In the case of China, it was used to generate texts in English, Chinese, Japanese and Korean, which were then posted on social networks such as Twitter or Medium. OpenAI's analysis also highlights how generative artificial intelligence is being incorporated into disinformation campaigns as a means of improving certain aspects of content generation, such as making more persuasive posts in foreign languages (AI and Covert Influence Operations: Latest Trends).

With reference to the Republic of Moldova, the report describes a Russian-based network, generically referred to as "Bad Grammar", which operated predominantly on Telegram and targeted audiences in Ukraine, Moldova, the Baltic countries and the US. OpenAI says it has banned several accounts that used its AI models to create fake comments that were then posted on Telegram, saying they were being used by people in Russia. The content posted by these accounts was in Russian and English, focusing on several political topics such as the war in Ukraine, the political situation in Moldova and the Baltic countries, as well as the US. Russian-language comments on Telegram

accused the presidents of Moldova and Ukraine of corruption, lack of popular support and "betraying" their own people in the West. English-language comments instead focused on topics such as immigration, economic hardship and current events, often arguing why the US should stop supporting Ukraine (Confirmat: Inteligența Artificială, folosită pentru a dezinforma în Moldova și Ucraina).

Monitoring disinformation in the online space of the Republic of Moldova in the period October - December 2024 with the help of artificial intelligence

In October, Telegram (8.6 mln. views) was the most commonly used platform to distribute fake narratives due to its structural advantages that facilitate the dissemination of targeted narratives. On the other hand, Facebook (10 mln. Views), which is the most widely used social media platform in the Republic of Moldova, have generally targeted different audiences, while YouTube and TikTok have been mainly aimed at young people.

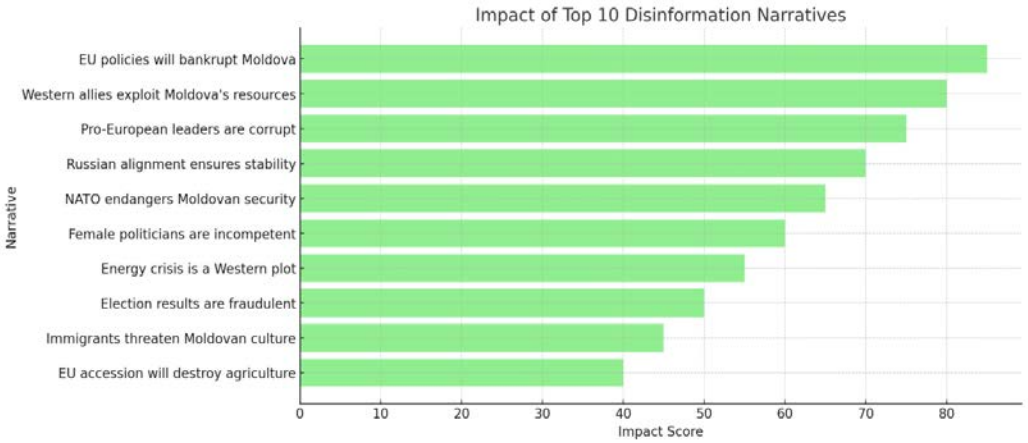


Source: *Disinformation monitor on social media. Using AI power tools to assess the scale and impact of disinformation*, https://pisa.md/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/Disinformation-Report_octombrie.pdf

Among the most manipulated and exploited emotions were fear and anger, used to polarize the citizens of the Republic of Moldova, very actively promoted, combined with amplification of distrust in state institutions. The most widely distributed false narratives were those in the economic and security fields, gender-based and cultural misinformation, which, although present, still ranked second. The chart shows that fear (40%) and anger (35%) were the most frequently invoked emotions in disinformation content, distrust (30%) was another key factor, aimed at undermining trust in pro-European leaders and institutions, sympathy (15%) and pride (10%) were rarely used, often associated with narratives portraying alignment with Russia as culturally or historically favorable. Emotional manipulation through fear and anger effectively polarizes audiences, making them more vulnerable to divisive narratives. These

emotions also encourage the rapid dissemination of content, as users feel compelled to share emotionally charged posts (Disinformation monitor on social media. Using AI power tools to assess the scale and impact of disinformation).

Among the actors behind these disinformation companies, the Russian Federation was the first to use state media and organized coordinated campaigns to shape narratives in the online space. The Republic of Belarus has also supported disinformation campaigns, acting as a regional amplifier for Russian narratives. And last but not least we are referring to local pro-Russian groups and troll farms that played auxiliary roles, focusing on misinforming the general public.



Sourse*: Desinformation monitor on social media. Using AI power tools to assess the scale and impact of disinformation*, https://pisa.md/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/Disinformation-Report_octombrie.pdf

The most impactful narratives in the context of the referendum and elections were those related to the European Union, for example - "EU policies will bankrupt Moldova" had the biggest impact, resonating with economic anxieties - "Western allies will exploit Moldova's resources", "Pro-European leaders are corrupt and compromised" - EU membership affects agriculture, etc. Among narratives with moderate impact, we highlight those promoting Russia - "Alignment with Russia ensures stability", mostly present on Telegram and local pro-Russian channels, which invoked pride and sympathy based on historical and cultural ties to reinforce narratives about the cultural and political superiority of the Russian Federation among the targeted groups. Followed by the narrative that - "NATO is jeopardizing Moldova's security", mostly present on Telegram and Facebook, aimed to induce fear by exploiting Moldova's neutral position and military vulnerabilities. The presence of candidates in the electoral campaign was also targeted with disinformation. The promotion of the gender-based disinformation narrative - "Female politicians are incompetent", was quite intensively promoted especially on Telegram and Instagram, aimed to discourage female candidates and perpetuate existing stereotypes in society.

Narratives with low impact in October were those related to the energy crisis - "The energy crisis is a Western plot" and exploited the rise in energy prices, followed by

election fraud ("The election results are rigged") inciting protests, and the destructive effects Moldova's accession to the European Union will have on agriculture ("EU accession will destroy agriculture and property rights"), which targeted rural farmers (Disinformation monitor on social media. Using AI power tools to assess the scale and impact of disinformation).

The disinformation landscape in Moldova in November and December 2024 was marked by a strategic and coordinated effort to exploit societal vulnerabilities and amplify public discontent. Using - key platforms such as Telegram, Facebook and TikTok, disinformation campaigns targeted economic, security and cultural anxieties to polarize public opinion and undermine trust in democratic institutions. Although economic and security themes persisted, the energy crisis became a dominant topic in the winter months, exploiting public dissatisfaction with rising costs. At the same time, anti-government narratives intensified, aligning with public frustration with the alleged shortcomings of the leadership. Fear was the dominant emotion, particularly in narratives about NATO, energy prices and government actions. Mistrust complemented fear, undermining confidence in institutions and policies. Nostalgia and pride were used strategically in pro-Russian narratives to evoke emotional links to historical and cultural traditions, targeting older people (Disinformation monitor on social media. Using AI power tools to assess the scale and impact of disinformation).

Emotional analysis of disinformation narratives

EMOTION	FREQUENCY	KEY NARRATIVES
Fear	45%	NATO threat, energy crisis, immigration
Distrust	35%	Government corruption, EU policies, election fraud
Anger	10%	Fraudulent elections, anti-government messages
Nostalgia	5%	Russian cultural alignment
Pride	5%	Russia as a cultural and moral guardian

Source: *Disinformation monitor on social media. Assessed during period 1 November – 31 December 2924*, https://pisa.md/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/Disinformation-monitor-on-social-media_DECEMBER_2024-1-1.pdf

The Russian Federation has remained the dominant actor, with state-sponsored campaigns shaping narratives on various platforms. Local pro-Russian groups and troll farms worked in sync to amplify these narratives, creating the impression of organic support. The Republic of Belarus played a supportive role, acting as a regional hub for disseminating the narratives.

Disinformation related to the energy crisis blamed the EU and the Moldovan leadership for the gas price hikes, promoting the Russian Federation as the only reliable supplier. Promoted mainly on Telegram and Facebook, these messages amplified economic anxieties and increased public pressure on the government to re-establish ties with the Russian Federation and thus ensure the country's energy security.

Conclusions

Disinformation is a global problem that affects the Republic of Moldova with a direct impact on national and human security. Artificial intelligence has amplified and will continue to amplify these effects with consequences that are difficult to fully estimate. Disinformation is also being propagated intensively with the help of social networks that favor content with a strong emotional impact, which polarizes and affects people's ability to discern between truth and falsehood.

Artificial intelligence has a dual character, highlighted by various researchers, which on the one hand is a way of streamlining many processes, but with major risks such as the dissemination of misinformation and manipulation of public opinion. These characteristics have prompted organizations to develop various AI regulations to limit abuses of artificial intelligence.

The Republic of Moldova, like other countries, is affected by disinformation, especially anti-Western narratives and manipulation of information coming from external actors, especially from the Russian Federation. The process is catalyzed by artificial intelligence which is used both to create false narratives and for dissemination on platforms such as Facebook, Telegram or Tik Tok that polarize the public using their fear and anger.

The analysis of disinformation in Moldova's information space leads us to emphasize the need for specific strategies to counter the coordinated influence of state and non-state actors, especially in the context of the upcoming parliamentary elections. The difficulty of this process is determined by the imperative of maintaining a balance between combating disinformation and freedom of expression. At the same time, collaboration between Teh platforms and the state is necessary to counter disinformation amplified by artificial intelligence, but difficult in the context of the new vision of the Meta that will not restrict freedom of experimentation. The advantages of artificial intelligence should be used by state institutions to counter misinformation through various software that could be acquired through collaboration with the private sector and technological innovation organizations.

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ELECTORAL SYSTEM IN ROMANIA – LEGAL FRAMEWORK, INTERINSTITUTIONAL COOPERATION

CZU: 342.8 + 324(498)
https://doi.org/10.59295/eiqd.04

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Abstract. *The paper seeks to retrace the electoral journey of modern Romania, highlighting the general synchronization process of democratization of the vote, as well as the changes that occurred in the legislative and administrative electoral approach, having into consideration the specific requirements of the international law. The first part is presenting the historical overview of the pos-communist period, while the second part is dealing with presentation (structure and functions) of the Romanian electoral bodies considering the present legal situation. It also highlights the cooperation between these bodies, as well as the cooperation with other administrative entities, especially with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the judicial authorities in order to create an efficient electoral system. Nevertheless, it is presented the role of the Romanian permanent electoral institution (Permanent Electoral Authority) within World Association of Electoral Bodies (A-WEB), an organization that brings together electoral management bodies from over 100 countries on five continents*

Keywords*: democracy, electoral system, constitution, legislation, cooperation*

Historical overview

One of the main objectives of the December 1989 Revolution was the removal of the communist regime and the establishment of a political system based on the freely expressed willpower of the citizens.

In this regard, a legal framework was established by the Provisional Council of National Union (Consiliul provizoriu de Uniune Națională -CPUN). One of the core burdens of the political government union constituted by the Agreement signed in 1st of February 1990 was to adopt an electoral law that allow the foundation of the new democratic regime in post-communist Romania through free elections.

Therefore, Decree-Law no. 92 of March 14, 1990 (Monitorul Oficial Nr. 35 of March 18, 1990) for the election of the Parliament and the President of Romania was not only an electoral law, as it also consecrated the principles of the new government of Romania, the structure of the main public authorities, so that this new regulation prefigured the future constitutional regime (Enache, Constantinescu, 2001). This initial normative act established the option for the Republican form of state, enshrined the two-

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headed structure of the executive, consisting of the President of Romania, directly elected by the citizens, and the Government legitimized by the vote of the Parliament. As far as the Parliament is concerned, it was to fulfil the role of ordinary legislator, having a bicameral structure that would not differentiate the Senate from the Chamber of Deputies, neither in terms of attributions nor in terms of the way of election (*Iliescu, 2005).*

The first democratic parliamentary elections were held at the same time as the presidential elections, on May 20, 1990. For the Parliament, 75 political parties and formations submitted lists of candidates, to which a number of independent candidates were added. Three candidates have been registered for the position of President. Due to the permissive electoral system, 27 political parties won parliamentary mandates, including 10 national minority organizations and one independent candidate (Bejan, Datculescu, Liepelt, 1991).

The adoption of the first democratic Constitution in 1991 mainly confirmed the regulations confined in Decree-Law no. 92/1990. Thus, the Fundamental Law of 1991 enshrined the republican form of state, the direct election of the President of Romania, the bicameral structure of the Parliament, the equality of the Chambers of Parliament and the non-differentiation of the way of electing deputies and senators. In the chapter on the fundamental rights, freedoms and duties of citizens, the Constitution reiterated the right to vote for all citizens who have reached the age of 18 (except for the mentally insane, persons placed under interdiction or sentenced by a final court decision to the loss of electoral rights as provided from art 24 of the 1991 Constitution and set the age limit for election at 23 years for deputies and 35 years for senators as well as for the President of Romania (Constitutia României din 1991, art. 35).

The Constitution also established the principle of local autonomy, exercised through directly elected authorities (county council, local council and mayor) as provided of the Article 119-121 of the 1991 Constitution.

Article 72 of the Constitution expressly specifies that the other aspects of the system were to be regulated by organic law. Therefore, the legislative framework on parliamentary and presidential elections was adopted, thus being structured the Laws no. 68/1992 (for the election of the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate) and no. 69/1992 for the election of the President of Romania (Monitorul Oficial Nr. 164 of July 16, 1992).

The electoral system regulated by Laws no. 68/1992 and no. 69/1992, supplemented by a multitude of subsequent normative acts, including the adoption of a new electoral law in 2004 (*Legea nr. 373/2004).* After the revision of the Constitution in 2003, kept in force the essential regulations until 2008, the most important change being the raising of the electoral threshold in 2000 to 5% for parties and a maximum of 10% for electoral alliances *(Article. I pct. 5 of the O.U.G. nr. 129/2000).* According to the electoral system regulated by Laws no. 68/1992 and no. 69/1992, four sessions of parliamentary and presidential elections were organized, in 1992, 1996, 2000 and 2004.

As for the presidential elections, in view of the extension, by the revision of the Constitution in 2003, of the term of office of the President from four to five years according to Article 83 of the 2003 Constitution, the conditions for the separation of presidential and parliamentary elections were created. Accordingly, the first separate holding of these elections took place only in 2008-2009.

Other rather technical changes to the electoral system concerned the reduction of the number of deputies and senators, the consequence of the reduction of Romania's population, the duration of the electoral campaign (it was limited to 30 days) and the obligations of the media in terms of its coverage *(2003 Constitution – Article 75 paragraph 4)*, the introduction of voter cards and the establishment of the Permanent Electoral Authority *(Legea nr. 373/2004)*..

Democratic electoral bodies: the permanent electoral authority. The central electoral bureau and its subdivisions

The Permanent Electoral Authority is an autonomous administrative institution with legal personality and general competence in electoral matters, which has the mission of ensuring the organization and conduct of elections and referendums, as well as the financing of political parties and electoral campaigns, in compliance with the Constitution, the law and international and European standards in the field.

The Permanent Electoral Authority carries out its activity in compliance with the principles of independence, impartiality, legality, transparency, efficiency, professionalism, responsibility, sustainability, predictability and legitimacy (www.roaep.ro).

For the organization and conduct of each electoral campaign and each election, the Central Electoral Bureau, electoral bureaus of electoral constituencies and electoral bureaus of polling stations are organized (www.bec.ro, 2024)

In this regard, the legislator is considering a distinct material and temporal competence of the two electoral public entities, thus being different both the assembly of attributions of the public authority, but also the sphere of the attributions in time (Vedinas 2021).

Beyond the scope of competences and attributions that shall be the subject of the analysis of this paper, both entities represent the specificity of the public, administrative law regime, which is based on the fact that the mission of the administration consists in satisfying the public interest, and the public power regime is the apparatus of means and procedures that make it functional at the parameters expected by the recipients of its activity (Voican, 2020).

In this specific area, the administrative law regime works in order to conduct elections in accordance with the common principles of the European electoral heritage, which are the foundation of a true democratic society, five fundamental rules must be respected: suffrage must be universal, equal, free, secret and direct. Moreover, elections must be organized periodically. All these principles constitute the European electoral heritage which must be strictly respected by all European states (Venice Commission, Explanatory Report, 2002).

This electoral heritage, which must be reflected in national legislation at European level, must take into account the norms of international law in electoral matters. The relevant universal rule is enunciated by Article 25(b) of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which expressly provides for the entire set of principles, with the exception of direct suffrage, which is presumed (*Article 21 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights*). At European level, the common rule is Article 3 of the Additional Protocol to the European Convention on Human Rights, which expressly provides for the right to periodic elections by free and secret suffrage *(Article 3 of the*

Universal Declaration of Human Rights[)] . The other principles have been recognized as deriving from the jurisprudence (*ECHR, no. 9267/81, Mathieu-Mohin and Clerfayt v. Belgium)*. The right to direct elections has also been admitted by the Strasbourg Court, at least implicitly *(ECHR, No. 24833/94, Matthews v. the United Kingdom).* Therefore, these international, European constitutional principles must be expressly mentioned in national constitutions and legislations.

The existence of convergent national laws and practices allows the precise determination of the content of the principles. These practices should be conducted in this regard in a regime of public administration, by specific public institutions. Romania has fulfilled these obligations adopted at international level by adopting the specific legislation and by regulating the public entities as they are presented throughout this paper.

Both of these bodies were established by the Law No. 286 of 27 June 2003 amending and supplementing Law No.68/1992 for the election of the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate – *Article 23.* The Central Electoral Bureau is composed according to this law of 7 judges of the Supreme Court of Justice, the president of the Permanent Electoral Authority and 15 representatives of the political parties and their alliances, which participate in the elections – *Article 24.*

These bodies are therefore interconnected having into consideration the structure, but also the attributions of the Permanent Electoral Authority **between two electoral** periods, as provided by Article 23:

b*) monitors the identification of polling station locations and electoral bureau headquarters;*

r) organizes tenders for the selection of computer programs to be used by the Central Electoral Bureau for centralizing voting results;

The attributions of these bodies later enhanced by subsequent legal norms: Law no. 373/2004 for the election of the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate, with subsequent amendments and completions, Law no. 334/2006 on the financing of the activity of political parties and electoral campaigns, with subsequent amendments and completions, Law no. *33/2007 on the organization and conduct of elections to the European Parliament, Law no.* 35/2008 for the election of the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate and for amending and supplementing Law no. 67/2004 for the election of local public administration authorities, of the Local Public Administration Law no. 215/2001 and Law no. 393/2004 on the Statute of Local Elected Officials, with subsequent amendments and completions, Government Emergency Ordinances no. 1/2007, 8/2007, 9/2007, 20/2008, 32/2008, 36/2008, 97/2008, 11/2009, 55/2009, 95/2009, 4/2014, 12/2014, Law no. 208/2015 on the election of the Senate and the Chamber of Deputies, as well as for the organization and functioning of the Permanent Electoral Authority, Law no. 115/2015 for the election of local public administration authorities, for the amendment of the Local Public Administration Law no. 215/2001, as well as for amending and supplementing Law no. 393/2004 on the Statute of Local Elected Officials *(https://www.roaep.ro/prezentare/en/despre-noi/*).

The activity of amending the normative acts envisaged the harmonization of the national legislation with the provisions of the Council Directive 2013/1/EU of December 20, 2012 and the implementation of the ten outstanding recommendations on the

financing of political parties, formulated by the Group of States Against Corruption (GRECO), following Romania's evaluation in 2010 *(https://www.just.ro/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Greco-Eval3_tema1_-2010_EN.pdf).*

Present legal framework

This paper is presenting the present legal situation as regulated by the Law No. 208 of July 20, 2015 on the election of the Senate and the Chamber of Deputies, as well as on the organization and functioning of the Permanent Electoral Authority (*Monitorul Oficial, nr 553, 2015, July).*

Article 7 of the Law no 208/2015 consecrates a permanent competence of the Permanent Electoral Authority, for the organization of the electoral process. In this regard, the Permanent Electoral Authority issue rulings, decisions and instructions.

On the other hand, the same normative act stipulates a limited temporal competence for the central Electoral Bureau and its structures. In this regard, the Central Bureau is formed during the organization of the elections, as well as the constituency electoral bureaus at county level, of the Bucharest municipality, sector electoral offices, in the case of the Bucharest municipality, and a constituency electoral bureau for Romanian citizens with domicile or residence abroad, as well as electoral bureaus of the polling stations.

As regards the Permanent Electoral Authority, its organization is regulated by Chapter II of the Law No 208/2015.

This electoral body is headed by a president, with the rank of minister, assisted by 2 vice-presidents with the rank of secretary of state. They cannot be members of a political party in order to ensure the independence of the institution.

The President shall be appointed by a decision adopted in a joint session of the Senate and the Chamber of Deputies, upon the proposal of the parliamentary groups, from among the personalities with training and experience in the legal or administrative field

The President is assisted by 2 vice- one appointed by the President of Romania and the other by the Prime Minister.

The term of office of the president and the terms of office of the vice-presidents of the Permanent Electoral Authority are 8 years each and may be renewed only once as stipulated by Article 101 of the Law no 208/2015.

The Permanent Electoral Authority has a Secretary General appointed by the Prime Minister on a competitive basis and also 2 deputy general secretaries, appointed by the president of the Permanent Electoral Authority – according to Article 101 par 11 -**11** **[1]** the Law no 208/2015.

The apparatus has a central structure as well as territorial operational structures. Within the central structure of the specialized apparatus of the Permanent Electoral Authority, departments operate divided into the following main areas of activity:

a) legislation, electoral litigation, relationship with Parliament and the European Union;

b) computerization of electoral processes;

c) control of the financing of political parties and electoral campaigns;

d) electoral logistics;

e) coordination and monitoring of activities in the territory;

f) support for electoral bodies;

g) international cooperation.

In addition to the departments operating in the above-mentioned areas, within the central structure of the specialized apparatus of the Permanent Electoral Authority, functional compartments are organized with a support role in the financial, legal, administrative, registry, internal audit and protection of classified information fields, at the level of general directorate, directorate, service, office or compartment, as the case may be.

Within the central structure of the specialized apparatus of the Permanent Electoral Authority, a maximum of 3 positions of permanent representative to international organizations, operating in the field of competence of the Permanent Electoral Authority, may be established - Article 102 par 1- 1 3 of the Law no 208/2015.

The organization and functioning of the Permanent Electoral Authority's own apparatus, the number of positions, the status of the staff, its attributions and the organizational structure are established by the organization and functioning regulation, approved by decision of the permanent bureaus of the two Chambers of Parliament, at the proposal of the Permanent Electoral Authority.

The staff of the Permanent Electoral Authority has the same status as the staff of the apparatus of the two Chambers of Parliament - Article 102 par 2 of the Law no 208/2015.

The Permanent Electoral Authority is exercising its permanent duties as provided in Article 103 of the Law No 208/2015 submitting to Parliament an annual report on its activity.

On the other hand**, the structure of the electoral bureaus** reflects its temporal limited competence, not having a specific apparatus. Nevertheless, the structure of these electoral bodies is limited to the citizens with the right to vote. The law provides also incompatibilities with the quality of a member of electoral bureau: candidates in elections, their spouses, relatives and in-laws up to the second degree inclusive may not be members of electoral bureaus - Article 7 par. 2 of the Law no 208/2015.

It is for the first time when the law provides the function involving state authority for the members of the electoral bureaus in fulfilling their duties, according to Article 7 par 3 of the Law no 208/2015, even if they are not considered civil servants *per se*.

In general, the term "authority" comes from the French "autorité", and therefore the Latin "auctoritas, -atis", having several meanings, among which the one used by the Roman legislator is that of the *organ of state power competent to take measures and issue provisions of a binding nature or representative of such an organ of state power*. (Zapsa, Tomulet, 2017).

The Romanian legislation defines within Article 2 par 1 b) – Law no 554/2004 on administrative ltitigation public authority as: *any organ of the state or of the administrative-territorial units that acts, in the regime of public power, for the satisfaction of a public interest; within the meaning of this law, the legal entities of private law which, according to the law, have obtained the status of public utility or are authorized to provide a public service shall be assimilated to public authorities.*

The function of public authority requires the correct and impartial exercise of the function of member of the electoral bureau, which is mandatory. Failure to comply with this obligation shall entail contraventional or criminal liability, as the case may be, as provided by Article 7 par 3 Law no 208/2015.

At the national level, a Central Electoral Bureau is established, consisting of 5 judges of the High Court of Cassation and Justice, the president and vice-presidents of the Permanent Electoral Authority and at most 12 representatives of political parties, political alliances, electoral alliances, according to the law, as well as a representative designated by the parliamentary group of national minorities in the Chamber of Deputies - Article 11 par 1 of the Law no 208/2015.

Electoral bureaus and offices shall work in the presence of the majority of their members and shall take decisions by the vote of the majority of the members present. The Central Electoral Bureau shall work in the presence of the majority of its members and shall adopt decisions and resolutions by the vote of the majority of the members present. In case of a tie, the vote of the president is decisive, as stipulated within Article 8 of the Law no 208/2015.

According to the provisions included within Article 7 par 5 of the Law no 208/2015, the Permanent Electoral Authority shall not interfere with the organization of the electoral bureau, only in the case of polling stations with less than 500 registered voters, when it may establish that the president of the electoral bureau of the polling station.

At the level of each of the 43 electoral districts, **a constituency electoral bureau** shall be established, consisting of 3 judges, a representative of the Permanent Electoral Authority and at most 12 representatives of political parties, political alliances, electoral alliances and organizations of citizens belonging to nation al minorities participating in the elections, in the respective electoral district. The constituency electoral bureau for Romanian citizens with domicile or residence abroad shall be headquartered in the municipality of Bucharest - Article 13 par 1 of the Law no 208/2015.

All the attributions of the Central Bureau are provided by Article 12 in order to ensure the uniform electoral legislation that is frame working the national democratic electoral process. In this sense, the decisions of the Central Electoral Bureau shall be binding for all authorities, public institutions, electoral bureaus, as well as for all bodies with powers in electoral matters, from the date of their announcement in a public meeting. The decisions shall be announced in a public meeting and by any means of publicity, and the decisions shall be published in the Official Gazette of Romania, Part I.

Art 14 of the Law 208/2015 institutes the powers of the constituency electoral bureaus that entitles these bodies to supervise the appropriate organization of polling stations, monitor and ensure the uniform application and compliance with the legal provisions regarding elections by all authorities, institutions and bodies with responsibilities in electoral matters within the constituency.

The constituency electoral bureaus shall receive from the electoral bureaus of the polling station the minutes containing the results of the elections at the level of the electoral district in which it operates, as well as the complaints, appeals and minutes. They will further submit all these data and documents to the Central Electoral Bureau rendering to Article 14 par 1 of the Law no 208/2015.

The decisions of the constituency electoral bureau shall be made known in a public meeting and by posting on its website and shall be communicated to the interested parties. As stipulated within Article 14 par 1 j) of the Law no 208/2015.

As regarding **the electoral bureaus of the polling stations,** they shall be composed of a president, a deputy, who are usually magistrates or lawyers, and at most 8 representatives of the parliamentary political parties and of the Parliamentary Group of National Minorities in the Chamber of Deputies on behalf of the organizations of citizens belonging to national minorities that are members thereof and participate in the elections. The electoral bureaus of the polling stations may not operate with fewer than 5 members.

If the electoral bureaus of the polling stations do not reach the threshold of 8 representatives their number shall be completed with representatives of the other political parties, organizations of citizens belonging to national minorities, political alliances and electoral alliances participating in the elections, by drawing lots - Article 15 par 1 and **1 [1])** of the Law no 208/2015.

In cases of force majeure, the replacement of the presidents of the electoral bureaus of the polling stations or their deputies is carried out by the Permanent Electoral Authority, by computerized drawing of lots, from among the persons registered in the body of electoral experts - Article 15 par 3 of the Law no 208/2015.

The cooperation between these two bodies is reflected also by the fact that the auxiliary technical apparatus of the Central Electoral Bureau is provided by the Permanent Electoral Authority as well as the Ministry of Internal Affairs – Article 14 of the same normative act.

Article 18 par 1 j) presents the attribution of these electoral bureaus which reflects the subordination to Central Electoral Bureau but also the principles of transparency and ensuring public interest, that are characterizing democratic public authority. In this regard, these electoral bodies issue to each representative of political parties, political alliances, electoral alliances and organizations of citizens belonging to national minorities from the composition of the bureau a copy of each report, certified by the president of the electoral bureau of the polling station. For the same reason, they issue, at the request of both the observers of non-governmental organizations and the press representatives accredited to the respective polling stations, through the president of the polling station, a copy of each report recording the election result in the respective station.

The electoral bureaus of the polling stations abroad shall be composed of a chairman, a deputy chairman and at most 8 representatives of the parliamentary political parties and of the Parliamentary Group of National Minorities in the Chamber of Deputies on behalf of the organizations of citizens belonging to national minorities that are its members and participate in the elections.

Cooperation with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and its divisions

A very important provision is related to the appointment of the presidents and their deputies of the electoral bureaus of the polling stations abroad and their deputies. According to paragraph 2 of the Article 18 of the Law no 208/2015, they are appointed by the Permanent Electoral Authority upon the proposal of the heads of diplomatic missions and consular offices, the appointments being made public by posting on the

website of the constituency electoral office for Romanian citizens with domicile or residence abroad.

The cooperation with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs is also reflected within paragraph 8 of the same normative provision, Article 18: In the event that the electoral bureaus of the polling stations cannot be completed in the regular procedure provided by the law, they shall be completed by the president of the constituency electoral bureau for Romanian citizens with domicile or residence abroad with personnel provided by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, as well as by other public authorities.

The attributions of the electoral bureaus of the polling stations as provided by Article 18 of the Law no 208/2015 are conducted in direct cooperation with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in some specific situation:

-Receival of the following materials:

-the ballot papers, the control stamp and the stamps with the mention "VOTED", the forms for concluding the minutes and other materials necessary for the conduct of the electoral process -from the mayors,

- two ballot papers, one each for the election of the Senate and the Chamber of Deputies, cancelled by the president of the constituency electoral bureau, which they will display in a visible place, on the day preceding the elections – these are received from the constituency electoral bureau for Romanian citizens with domicile or residence abroad, based on the minutes.

-Submitting to the constituency electoral bureaus or the sector electoral office the minutes containing the voting results, by electronic means and on paper, the used and uncontested ballots, the invalid and contested ballots, together with the submitted contestations and the materials to which they refer, as well as the electoral lists used within the polling station, filed by type of list; the electoral bureaus of the polling stations abroad hand over these materials, with the exception of the used and uncontested ballots, to the constituency electoral bureau for Romanian citizens with domicile or residence abroad, on the basis of a minutes.

The cooperation with the Ministry of Foreign affairs with the electoral bodies is also reflected by Article 23 in organizing polling stations in the states where the diplomatic missions and consular offices of Romania are located. This polling station are organized, as a rule, in the headquarters of the diplomatic missions, consular offices, consular sections, if these operate in different headquarters, and cultural institutes. With the consent of the authorities in the respective country, polling stations may be organized in other places. In this regard, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs shall transmit to the Permanent Electoral Authority the draft list of polling station locations abroad.

In fact, the coordination activities of the preparation and organization of the voting process abroad are ensured by the electoral office for the polling stations abroad, with the logistical support of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Permanent Electoral Authority ensure the information of Romanian citizens with domicile or residence abroad regarding registration in the Electoral Register, the conditions for voting abroad, as well as the places where voting takes place abroad.

In July, when this specific Law no 208/2015 had been adopted, The Permanent Electoral Authority and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs agreed to work together to

promote Romania's experience in electoral matters and regional cooperation in the electoral field abroad, in which sense Collaboration Protocol had been signed on July, 15, 2015.This Protocol provided that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs shall support, according to its attributions, some international projects of the Permanent Electoral Authority (www.roaep.ro).

Organizing, in Bucharest, a workshop on the codification of electoral law (19 – 20.10.2015), to which representatives of the European Commission for Democracy through Law (Venice Commission) will also be invited to participate;

Organization, in Bucharest, of the 13th European Conference of Electoral Management Bodies, by the Venice Commission, in collaboration with AEP (14 – 15.04.2016).

Another project of the Permanent Electoral Authority that benefited from the support of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was materialized, in Romania, in 2017, by the General Assembly of the World Association of Electoral Bodies (A-WEB), an organization that brings together electoral management bodies from over 100 countries on five continents. In this respect, the 3rd General Assembly took place in Romania. At this important electoral summit participates over 400 representatives with the electoral management bodies from five continents: Europe, South America, Asia, Africa and Oceania (https://addisabeba.mae.ro/en/romania-news/5709).

According to the A-WEB Charter, this association of electoral management bodies promotes efficiency in the organization of free, fair, transparent and participatory elections worldwide.

Its objectives are to identify the latest trends, challenges and developments in democratic electoral management and electoral processes, as well as to facilitate the effective exchange of experience and expertise among members, in order to strengthen electoral democracy worldwide (www.roaep.ro).

The President in office at that time of the Permanent Electoral Authority, in the person of Mr. Daniel Barbu, was appointed President of this organization for a period of 2 years, starting with December 31, 2017.

PEA has been a member of A-WEB since the establishment of the organization in October 2013, Romania hosting, in March 2015, the meeting of the Executive Committee of A-WEB (www.cdep.ro).

Cooperation with the judicial entities

In order to effectively apply the provisions of electoral law, the possibility of challenging the failure to comply with electoral legislation before an appeal court must be guaranteed. This applies in particular to the establishment of election results: citizens have the right to challenge the results of elections, invoking irregularities in the voting procedure. This also applies to decisions taken in the pre-election period, in particular as regards the right to vote, electoral lists and the eligibility or validity of candidacies, compliance with the rules of the electoral campaign and access to the media or party financing.

This is the reason the Romanian legislation included for all these phases the possibility to appeal the decisions of these electoral bodies, creating a mechanism that is not only administrative, but judicial, as well. In order not to endanger the constitutional

order, the specific legislation provides Constitutional Cort electoral attributions as regarding the election of the President of Romania. The attributions are related to the pre-electoral phase – resolving complaints regarding the registration or non-registration of the candidacy for the position of President of Romania as regarded by Article 38 of the Law no 47/1992 on organizing and functioning of the Constitutional Court. In the same time the appeal to electoral bodies is guaranteed in the electoral phase according to Article 53 par 1 of the Law No. 370/2004 for the election of the President of Romania - validating the result of each ballot, ensuring the publication of the election result in the mass media and in the Official Gazette of Romania, Part I, for each ballot. Article 37 par 2 of the Law No 47/1992 provides the post-electoral phase, Constitutional Court validating in this stage the result of the elections for the position of President of Romania.

Conclusion

Romania acknowledged to fulfil the international, European requirements in the field of electoral law, adopting legislation and impartial electoral mechanisms even if it is not a state with a long-standing tradition of the independence of the administration from political power. The successive legislators understood that only transparency, impartiality and independence from any political manipulation will ensure good administration of the electoral process, starting with the pre-electoral period until the completion of the processing of the results.

The democratic framework is nevertheless realized by a central permanent electoral body working alongside with administrative structures responsible for maintaining organization and function the effective electoral processes. The cooperation between these bodies and, in the same time, permanent contact with local and central public authorities, as well as judicial entities as hereby described is essential for a functioning electoral system.

Respect for the five principles of the European electoral heritage (universal, equal, free, secret and direct suffrage) is essential to democracy. Primarily, including them into national legislative system must be followed to ensure their respect. Secondly, it is not enough for electoral law stricto sensu to contain rules appropriate to the European electoral heritage, but these must be included in their context: the credibility of the electoral process must be guaranteed and the procedural framework must allow the effective implementation of the rules proclaimed.

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ARE WE ON A SLIPPERY SLOPE? MAPPING DEMOCRACY THREATS IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE

CZU: 321.7:324(4-191.2-11)
https://doi.org/10.59295/eiqd.05

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Abstract. *The extremist and populistic forces are undeniably on the rise all over the Old Continent. However, the countries of Central and Eastern Europe seem to be more fragile, when it comes to maintain their democracy. Latest results of the elections in Slovakia, Austria or the Czech Republic, whether the continuing support for Viktor Orbán's policies, show the strength of Eurosceptic groupings and empower their leaders to take a firm stance on issues currently under discussion in the European Union. Lastly discovered election interference during the first round of the presidential elections in Romania raises concerns about the readiness of other countries to detect extraneous engagement in electoral process or governing. Finally, the great polarization of the societies, that can be spotted in numerous Central – Eastern European countries, significantly impedes achieving social consensus, which is necessary to maintain social cohesion as a pillar of democracy.*

The analysis of the current electoral trends in countries of Central-Eastern Europe and identification of factors influencing support for extremist or populistic options allows to indicate general and specific factors weakening democracy in the region.

Keywords: Central and Eastern Europe, democracy, elections, electoral trends

Introduction

It is a weakness of democracy to allow within the functioning of the system changes that lead to its dismantling. Once gained power without proper balance may lead to attempts of sealing it, using different measures: controlling the judicial system, the media or through corruption. Every election is the test of trust for political parties, the voters giving the grades expressed in percentage points of support. Current political stage in Central and Eastern Europe is changing dynamically: parties considered populist and with similar goals gaining strength, rising question whether a pattern of political thinking in societies of the region is emerging? That change influences political narrative of all the parties, enforcing them to take stronger stance in political discourse to be noticeable in it. In result, centrist parties rallying most voters around them reach for more left or right-wing views or use current people's concerns to create a populist program. Thus,

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parties traditionally identified as left-wing or right-wing sharpen their rhetoric, becoming more radical. This process enforces polarization of the society, creating the favorable environment for extremism to grow.

This article identifies the factors behind the electoral performance of currently ruling parties in chosen countries of Central and Eastern Europe, answering the question if the factors shaping support polls are rather internal or external? Answer to that question combined with the analysis of the results of the recent parliamentary elections in the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Austria and Poland and the election polls showing support ahead of the next elections allow to state whether there is a pattern of thinking indeed.

The article is partly based on research conducted by the College of Eastern Europe (KEW) as part of the project "Protecting European Values - Mapping threats to democracy in Central and Eastern Europe" and should be treated as a brief overview, as the volume of the article does not allow to make the complete analysis. The choice of the countries to analyze is based on research already conducted by KEW.

Electoral trends in central and Eastern Europe

Czech Republic

The current government of the Czech Republic is formed by a coalition of four parties: the center-right SPOLU coalition (Občanská demokratická strana (ODS), Křesťanská a demokratická unie - Československá strana lidová (KDU-ČSL) and Tradice Odpovědnost Prosperita 09 (TOP 09)) and the center-right STAN party (Starostové a Nezávistli). The government is led by Petr Fiala. When the coalition took power after the 2021 parliamentary elections, the SPOLU coalition recorded the highest support in the country at 27.8%, followed by 27.1% recorded by the center-right ANO party, which became the largest and most important opposition party. Next, the liberal coalition of the Pirate Party and STAN (Mayors and Independents) received 15.6% of the vote and entered the government. Of the notable election results, the result of the populist, right-wing SPD (Svoboda a přímá demokracie) should also be noted, with 9.6% of the vote. The rest of the parties did not record a result exceeding 5% (the electoral threshold). Voter turnout was 65.4% (politpro.eu). The 2021 elections in the Czech Republic were overwhelmingly influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic. The fight against the pandemic became a bargaining chip in the elections, eventually leading to a change in the prime minister's seat and the ruling party, but SPOLU's win proved minimal. In 2021, there was no left-wing party in the lower house of the Czech parliament. The aligned electoral results of the two largest political blocs in the Czech Republic, as well as events in early 2022, resulted in a vote of no confidence in the government, ultimately rejected as early as September 2022. On September 3, 2022, a protest was held in Prague against the government's policies, especially those related to high energy prices, the Fiala cabinet's pro-EU and pro-NATO policies, and sending military aid to Ukraine. About 60,000 people protested (Czarnecki, 2022). In March and April 2023, further protests have already gathered approximately 100 thousand people, demanding more effective fight against inflation and energy prices (Tatarenco, 2023). Support for the government of Petr Fiala in the Czech Republic throughout its term (the

term ends in September 2025) was and remains one of the lowest in the EU. In August 2022, it stood at 28% (www.ies.lublin.pl). Currently, according to the Global Leader Approval Rating Tracker, the government is supported by 17% of citizens, while as many as 75% oppose its actions (Morning Consult). What is worth mentioning, the unpopular Fiala's government is working towards bettering the condition of independent media: in 2022, despite protests of far-right and populists, the bill tightening the conflict-of-interests rules passed, which resulted in the leader of ANO, Andrej Babiš, selling one of the biggest media groups (MAFRA Group) which served as a tube for his political views.

The European Parliament elections were held in June 2024. Public support of the two springing forces of Czech politics was distributed almost equally: 25% of the vote was gathered by ANO, 22% by the SPOLU coalition. The election campaign focused on migration and regulation of the European Green Deal (www.kew.org.pl). What is worth noting, members of the EP from ANO party joined the new Patriots for Europe group, considered being an alliance of nationalists.

In the coming months, we can expect an acceleration of the election campaign in the Czech Republic. The first test of the Czech parties' readiness for elections came as early as September 2024, when partial elections to the Senate and local elections were held. These were won by the ANO party, with 35.38% of all votes. The highest percentage of voters for Andrej Babiš's movement was recorded in Olomouc (40.42%) and Silesia-Moravia (47.22%), which were most affected by the autumn floods. Although voter turnout was only 30.47% of eligible voters (Czarnecki, Tatarenko, 2024), ANO's victory confirmed its strongest position on the Czech political scene. The Pirate Party's defeat in the local elections, on the other hand, led to a breakout in the government coalition, when the Pirates exited coalition with STAN and left Petr Fiala's government. Current election polls indicate that the ANO movement can count on 33.9% of the vote, while the other political force, the SPOLU coalition, can only count on 19.1%. Third place in the poll is held by STAN (10.6%), and fourth place is held by the far-right SPD with 7.5% support. The Pirates record support at 6.2%. Above the electoral threshold, the poll also places the KSČM Communists (5.7%) and the right-wing Auto (5.3%) (www.politpro.eu). According to current polling data, ANO does not have the absolute majority to govern on its own. For a right-wing governing coalition to form, ANO would have to cooperate with the SPD and Auto parties.

The Czech political scene has shifted to the right of the political spectrum since the last parliamentary elections. The initial consensus among parliamentary groups related to unequivocal condemnation of Russian aggression against Ukraine and the transfer of military and humanitarian support to Ukraine has now become a topic of lively debate, primarily due to Czech fatigue with the consequences of the ongoing conflict. The rapid decline in support for the government has been linked to the deterioration of the economic situation, especially inflation and rising energy prices, because of the inclusion of Russia in EU sanctions. Already in 2022, 63% of citizens were dissatisfied with the political situation in the country (ies.lublin.pl). Currently, 68% of Czechs are dissatisfied (ies.lublin.pl).

The current Czech government has taken a pro-EU stance since the beginning of its tenure, supporting EU actions against Russia and Ukraine. Recent Eurobarometer

surveys indicate that only 43% of Czechs trust EU institutions. There is much more support for helping Ukraine: 78% of Czechs believe the Czech Rep. should provide humanitarian aid to Ukraine, while 63% support sanctions on the Russian government, companies and individual citizens. Czechs, on the other hand, are rather opposed to financially supporting Ukraine, with 54% surveyed against; guaranteeing Ukraine's status as an EU candidate, with 60% surveyed against. 56% of Czechs also oppose the purchase and transfer of arms to Ukraine (ies.lublin.pl).

The course of Czech politics coincides with that of Poland, making the neighboring countries good allies and advocates of the Ukrainian cause in the EU. However, an analysis of election polls points to a coming political change. Inferring from the policies Andrej Babiš has already pursued while serving as prime minister, a change in the ruling team would bring the Czech Republic a cooling of relations with Poland and a renewal of ties with Slovakia and Austria, as well as the return of Andrej Babiš's partnership with Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán.

Slovakia

Slovakia's last parliamentary elections were held in September 2023. As a result, a coalition of the left-wing parties SMER-SSD (22.94% of the vote) and Hlas-SD (14.70%) and the national party Slovenská národná strana (SNS, 5.62%) took power and the government was once again headed by Robert Fico. Thus ended the period of political crisis surrounding the government. The opposition, which eventually seized power in 2023, sought early elections almost from the beginning of Igor Matovič's term in government. The first request for a referendum on this issue was submitted in 2021 (it was rejected with the charge of unconstitutionality), the next one in mid-2022 (referendum on amending the constitution in terms of the possibility of holding early elections, ultimately invalid). The cabinets of successively Igor Matovič, Eduard Heger and Ludovit Ódor had to face the COVID-19 pandemic, the economic crisis caused by it, and then the outbreak of war in Ukraine, the energy crisis and growing disinformation. Accelerated elections brought the expected defeat of the previous ruling team. The liberal Progressive Slovakia (17.97%) became the largest opposition party in the Slovak parliament (Lewkowicz, 2023).

Slovak society has remained sharply divided for years. The main axes of division are attitudes toward cooperation with the United States, Russia, and now also Slovakia's involvement in aid to Ukraine, with specific political circles bringing together voters with views. Even before the outbreak of war in Ukraine in 2022, a clear division became apparent between supporters of the government option seeking closer cooperation with NATO and the EU, which also involved broad support for Ukraine, and opponents of interference in the escalating conflict in the East gathered around opposition parties of both the right and left. After February 24, 2022, the Slovak government joined in humanitarian, economic and military assistance to Ukraine. Sending military equipment and ammunition, as well as allowing the stationing of foreign troops (on behalf of NATO), was sharply criticized by the left-wing SMER-SD and Hlas-SD, as well as the far-right SNS and L'SNS. The Slovak public was also rather opposed to the transfer of armaments to Ukraine (Lewkowicz, 2023).

Disinformation, especially from pro-Russian media, is also contributing to the polarization of Slovakia's political scene. Since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, Slovak government closed several webpages linked to Russia. A 2022 Globsec Trends survey showed that as many as 48% of Slovaks believe that the United States, Western European societies, migrants and liberal democracy are the biggest threats to their country. 49% of those surveyed in 2022 said they would like to have a strong political leader who doesn't care about elections and parliament. The survey results show a positive view of authoritarian power. 51% of the public did not see Slovakia as a Western European country but located “between” the West and the East. Although support for NATO as a guarantor of security in the region increased, 56% of Slovaks believed that the conflict in Ukraine was caused by the United States (Globsec Trends, Slovakia, 2022). The outbreak of war in Ukraine has failed to erase Russophile sentiment in Slovakia, associated with the pan-Slavist movement, liberation from Nazism by the Red Army and a general lack of bad associations with Russia. Robert Fico's current narrative indicates an ambivalent attitude toward the war. This is a tactical move, aimed primarily at SMER voters with pro-Russian sympathies or negative attitudes toward cooperation with the United States and NATO, and Eurosceptic voters. For, the Slovak prime minister's policies do not indicate a pro-Kremlin orientation. The Slovak government continues to provide political and humanitarian support to Ukraine, and the reduction of military aid has taken place only at the governmental level: private companies producing military equipment and ammunition, as well as state-owned companies, can continue to sell their products to the Ukrainian side. The pro-Russian element of Robert Fico's policy may include opposing further sanctions packages imposed on Russia, as well as maintaining open relations with both sides of the conflict. After the April 2024 presidential election, which was won by Peter Pellegrini, leader of the coalition party Hlas-SD, there was talk of Slovaks confirming their support for such government policies. However, in the June 2024 elections to the European Parliament, Progressive Slovakia emerged as the strongest political option (28% of the vote), three percentage points ahead of SMER-SSD (www.kew.org.pl).

Lately, the Slovak political debate has been oscillating around topics including tightening government control over public media and culture. The opposition is also concerned about restrictions on the independence of media currently in private ownership (Lewkowicz, 2024). The latest major protests in Slovakia were sparked by Culture Minister Martina Šimkovičová's decision to dismiss the directors of the Slovak National Theater and the National Gallery. The personnel changes in these positions took place in an atmosphere indicating that the reason for the dismissals was criticism of the culture ministry's policies. Some 30,000 people took to the streets in protest to the policies pursued by Minister Šimkovičová (Lewkowicz, 161/2024) |).

Current electoral trends in Slovakia reflect the complexity of the country's political situation and the division within the society. A Polit Pro poll indicates that Progressive Slovakia enjoys the greatest support (22.9%), with SMER-SSD losing only 2.7 percentage points to it. In succession, the Hlas-SD party is supported by 12.5% of voters. It is worth noting that the far-right Republic party came in fourth in the tally, with 8.5% support. If elections to the Slovak parliament were held soon, the KDH (6.3%), Slovensko (5.7%) and SaS (5.6%) parties would also find a seat in the National Council.

One of the ruling coalition partners would not be in parliament - SNS currently enjoys the support of 3.3% of Slovaks (politpro.eu).

Election trends in Slovakia less than two years before the elections are anything but clear. Political developments in the region and in Slovakia itself are very dynamic, and polarization in society remains strong. The narrative placing Robert Fico and his government among pro-Russian politicians is based primarily on the emotional perception of the politician and narration created by him. In fact, the declared objection to EU's actions does not translate into concrete activities taken by the current Slovak prime minister. However, the changes being made to public media and cultural institutions raise objections to the democratic course set by the EU.

Hungary

The April 2022 parliamentary elections were won without surprise by the Fidesz-KDNP coalition with 54.1% support, extending its rule, which had lasted continuously since 2010. The ruling coalition also achieved its electoral goal of a constitutional majority (133 seats). Of the 199 seats in the National Assembly, the Fidesz-KDNP coalition won 135 seats. The united opposition scored 34.46%. The far-right Mi Hazánk also entered parliament with 5.88% support (Héjj, 2022). The election campaign fell during the first phase of the conflict in Ukraine. The outbreak of the war did not affect the electorate of either the ruling coalition or the opposition alone; the views of either side toward Russia or Ukraine had already been known to the Hungarian public much earlier, hence the government's reaction to the outbreak of the war did not translate into a change in the electoral outcome. Since the beginning of the conflict in Ukraine, the Hungarian government has pursued a policy of "staying out of the war." Hungary does not send armaments to Ukraine, nor does it agree to the transit of weapons through its territory. At the same time, statements on Russia's actions in the conflict remain very balanced.

The result of the 2022 parliamentary elections was the most favorable ever for Fidesz. The ruling party quickly capitalized on the potential flowing from its constitutional majority, introducing an amendment to the Constitution as early as May 2022. The amendment dealt with the possibility of imposing a state of emergency in the event of a war taking place in the country's neighborhood. The amendment to the Constitution has yielded, after the introduction of a state of war emergency in Hungary from May 24, 2022, to governing the state by means of ordinances bypassing parliament (1 Héjj, 180/2022). Such a procedure has already been used in Hungary in recent years. Indeed, the state of emergency was introduced during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the constitutional amendment introducing the new form of emergency was intended to extend the possibility of using rule by decree when the legitimacy of such action related to the pandemic began to expire.

In the Hungarian government's maintenance of a single narrative reaching the public, the nationalization and politicization of most media outlets has prevailed. On the other hand, the opposition has little opportunity to reach citizens with its demands in the public media. What is more, the Office for the Protection of Sovereignty, whose head is appointed by the prime minister, was established in December 2023. The premise of the office is to counter threats to Hungary's sovereignty. To this end, the office can analyze the documents of private entities, including the media and NGOs, detecting those that

undermine the official government and party line (Kew, 2025). In Reporters Without Borders' "Press Freedom" ranking, Hungary is placed 56th. By comparison, the Czech Republic is ranked 16th, Poland 22nd and Slovakia -23rd (www.rsf.org). It is worth noting that Hungary also has strong private independent media centers operating primarily on the Internet. However, their government funding is significantly limited.

Hungary has been pursuing a policy of so-called "opening to the East" since 2011, meaning maintaining good relations with Russia, Belarus, Azerbaijan and the East Asian region, including China. As part of this policy, energy cooperation with Russia, which is Hungary's main supplier of natural gas, is constantly being developed. Russia's Rosatom is also responsible for the expansion of the Packs nuclear power plant. This makes Hungary the most dependent member of the EU on Russia. The Hungarian government has criticized EU sanctions on Russia, seeing them as the cause of the country's high inflation, economic and fuel crisis. The message that EU sanctions are more harmful to the Community itself than to Russia is spread in the pro-government media. Interestingly, Eurobarometer surveys do not indicate as bad an attitude among Hungarians themselves toward the EU as one would expect from the government narrative. Although as many as 60% of Hungarians consider the EU's economic situation to be bad, 50% trust the EU institutions. In addition, 66% of those surveyed indicated a sense of attachment to the EU, which was higher than the EU average (63%) (Eurobarometer survey, 2024).

A sign of slow change in Hungary's Fidesz-dominated political scene came in the June 2024 elections to the European Parliament. Although the ruling party continued to enjoy the highest support (45%), it achieved its lowest result in two decades. 30% of the vote went to the right-wing TISZA party, led by Peter Magyar. This is the best result for an opposition party in years. The importance of TISZA's result is all the greater because the Hungarian right-wing, excluding fringe groups, was monopolized by Fidesz (://www.kew.org.pl, 2024). TISZA's success is attributed to its charismatic leader, but for the party to realistically challenge Fidesz's power, it is necessary to refine its political program and win over a certain electorate. According to College of Eastern Europe expert Zsuzsanna Végh, behind Peter Magyar's party's success in the European elections was its campaigning on social media, giving direct access to voters, which allowed it to bypass the official political and media spheres dominated by Fidesz (politpro.eu).

Just over a year remains until Hungary's next general election. PolitPro's data on Hungarian electoral trends shows the opposition TISZA as the current leader (39.5%), but Fidesz is losing only 0.2 percentage points to it. The advantage of these two parties over the others is clear. The third on the list, Demokratikus Koalició, enjoys the support of 6.3% of voters. Above the electoral threshold (5%) is still only the far-right Mi Hazánk with 5.7% support (politpro.eu). Electoral trends clearly indicate the dominance of the right in Hungary. With trends shaping up this way, the next election may prove to be a test of the loyalty of the ruling party's electorate.

The dominance of Fidesz in Hungary at present is certain, but not unassailable. Although Viktor Orbán's policies remain unpredictable from a European perspective, the politician is guided by pragmatism, remaining within the orbit of Euro-Atlantic influence and interests. At the same time, Hungary is the country that, of all EU members, has moved furthest away from the liberal democracy model. Despite the existence of relevant

laws, the EU is not prepared to function with a country that undermines its liberal order, hence Hungary is more of a problem for the EU than the EU is for Hungary.

Austria

The current political situation in Austria differs from other countries in the region, not least because Austria is officially a neutral country. The last parliamentary elections were held in Austria in September 2024. They were won by the far-right Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs (FPÖ), thus achieving the best electoral result in the party's history - 28.8%. The second-best result was achieved by the center-right Österreichische Volkspartei (ÖVP) with 26.3% support, followed by the center-left Socialdemokratische Partei Österreich (SPÖ) with 21.1% of the vote. Also in parliament were the Liberals of das Neue Österreich und Liberales Forum (NEOS), supported by 9.1% of voters, and the Green Party with 8.2% support. Comparing the results of the 2024 and 2019 elections, one notices a change primarily in the electorate of the SPÖ and FPÖ: in 2019, the SPÖ was the largest party in the Austrian parliament (38.3%) - the result recorded in the last election is 12% worse. In contrast, support for the far right increased by 12% (www.politico.eu). The electoral fluctuations of the other parties were not as significant. The coincidence of the decline in support for the SPÖ and the increase for the FPÖ cannot be explained solely by the radicalization of some of the SPÖ's supporters, but it must be assumed that some of the People's Party voters were attracted by the far right. The FPÖ is currently the strongest player on the Austrian political scene. This was reflected in the assignment of party leader Herbert Kickl to form a government. Austrian President Alexander van der Bellen decided this on January 5, 2025, after the failure of coalition negotiations between the ÖVP, SPÖ AND NEOS. The libertarians do not have enough seats in parliament to govern on their own, so Herbert Kickl wants to hold coalition talks with the center-right ÖVP. The problem in coalition negotiations is bound to prove to be the resentment the FPÖ has for the other groups in parliament. After the announcement of the election results, after which it became clear that forming a government without the far right would require a broad coalition of the People's Democrats, Social Democrats and Liberals, these parties strongly denied any desire to build a government with the FPÖ (Jędruchów, 2025). If coalition talks between the FPÖ and ÖVP fail, early elections will have to be held in Austria.

The FPÖ's political dominance and the party's very good electoral result came as no surprise. The libertarians also won the European Parliament elections held less than four months earlier with 25.4% of the vote. The advantage of the far right, however, was not yet so apparent. The ÖVP, the party of former chancellor Karl Nehammer, got the second result (24.5%), only 0.9% worse. The SPÖ also got a good result with 23.2% of the vote. The Liberals and Greens received 10.1% and 11.1% of the vote, respectively (Tatarenco, 2023), indicating their secondary importance on the Austrian political scene. FPÖ deputies joined the new Patriots for Europe grouping in the European Parliament.

The FPÖ's demands, with which the party ran in both European and national elections, include the lifting of EU sanctions against Russia, an end to sending arms to Ukraine - currently Austria, despite its neutrality status, allows the transit of arms destined for Ukraine through its territory, a reduction in the EU's powers and budget, and a more radical migration policy leading to a halt in the migration of non-EU

populations to its territory. Noteworthy is the convergence of most of the FPÖ's demands with the party line of Hungary's Fidesz. An expression of Viktor Orbán's sympathy for the Austrian far right was the Hungarian prime minister's unofficial visit, officially to take part in a debate on peace in Europe, organized by the Swiss magazine Weltwoche. During his visit to Austria, Viktor Orbán was also invited to the Austrian parliament, but only met with FPÖ representatives there. During the visit, a Vienna Declaration was also signed, treating of cooperation between Fidesz and the FPÖ, especially on issues of limiting migration from outside the EU and combating "left-wing educational experiments" (www.ots.at). The Hungarian prime minister's visit, as well as the FPÖ's actions, were assessed unequivocally negatively by the rest of the Austrian political community. Despite its unofficial nature, it clearly favored one political option in Austria. Also, the Vienna Declaration can be read as a declaration of cooperation between Austria and Hungary on the issues taken up therein, although the document has no such legal force.

There is a fear of "orbanization" of Austrian politics. The point of common ground between the FPÖ and Fidesz programs is, first and foremost, the restriction of migration. In Austria, the narrative around this topic, which remains one of the most divisive in society, takes on neo-Nazi overtones through the FPÖ. In the context of migration, it is primarily about the term "Festung Europa," which the Nazis used to refer to the entirety of the lands occupied by Third Reich troops and fortified to repel Allied attacks. Now, by contrast, it's about strengthening the EU's external borders so that immigrants can't get in. The reference to the propaganda fortress is unfortunately not the only reference to Nazi ideology. Just before the parliamentary elections, a recording hit the internet showing three FPÖ politicians singing a song common in the Third Reich during the funeral of a former party member (DW, 2024). Experts, interviewed during a study visit to Vienna in October 2024, pointed to the public's indifference to the progressive normalization of Nazi jargon, which is increasingly appearing in the political and social spheres. The acceptance of increasingly extreme behavior is due to the ineffective actions of the opposition and too little influence from the public, who, after protests that have no effect, are discouraged from continuing to act against extreme attitudes and the groups promoting them. Sympathy for the extreme right in Austria is also not as stigmatized as it is in Germany. According to Philipp Ther, an Austrian social historian, the highest percentage of votes cast for the FPÖ was recorded in regions where families supporting the NSDAP party settled after its collapse. Economic stagnation and then an economic crisis triggered by a pandemic and war in Ukraine deepened public discontent, which resulted in the results of the recent elections.

Current election trends recorded by PolitPro give the Freedom Party of Austria 36.8% support. Support for the Conservatives and Social Democrats is nearly equal at 19.7% and 19.4%, respectively. Support for the Liberals is set at 10.5% and the Green Party at 8.7% (politpro.eu). This means that in the four months following the election, the FPÖ has managed to increase its lead over the other parties by almost 8%, mainly at the expense of the ÖVP, to a lesser extent the SPÖ. If this trend continues, and the Conservatives do not agree to form a government with the far right, there is a possibility that early elections could allow the FPÖ to govern on its own. If that happens, it would be Austria's first far-right government since the end of World War II.

Poland

Poland's last parliamentary elections were held in October 2023. The ruling right-wing Law and Justice (PiS) party received the most votes, with 35.38%, but this was insufficient to govern on its own, in the absence of potential coalition partners. The centrist Civic Coalition (KO) came in second with 30.7% of the vote, followed by a coalition of center-right parties Trzecia Droga - Polska 2050 and the Polish People's Party (PSL), receiving 14.4% of the vote. The New Left also entered parliament with 8.61% support and the right-wing Freedom and Independence Confederation with 7.16% of the vote (sejmsenat2023.pkw.gov.pl). The government was formed from a coalition of KO, Poland 2050-PSL and the Left. The change that has taken place in Polish politics has been widely described as pro-EU and liberal. Nevertheless, the election result of PiS, which removal from power required a broad coalition of three parties, still indicates the party's strength on the Polish political scene.

Among the most important issues in the Polish political debate are the Russian-Ukrainian war, migration, inflation, but also the current government's efforts to reverse legal changes, particularly in the judiciary and media, introduced by the previous ruling team. Changes to the judiciary introduced by the previous government led to a conflict with the European Commission, which froze part of the Reconstruction Fund in 2021 due to challenges to the rule of law in Poland. The funds were not paid to Poland until after changes made by the current government.

Another big change was the replacement of the staff of public television, which had been the propaganda tube of PiS. However, with this change, television lost most of its audience, which was primarily reached by information messages that coincided with the policies of the previous government. As the Fall 2024 Eurobarometer survey indicates, television is the dominant medium from which Poles get their information on European politics - for 60% of citizens it is the primary source of information. Internet portals (37%), radio (22%) or social networks (21%) scored much lower. The press (9%) is also doing poorly in Poland (Eurobarometer survey, 2024). The Reporters without Borders ranking places Poland 47th in terms of media freedom. The 2024 score is ten positions better than the previous year (rsf.org), which indicates a positive assessment of the changes taking place in the Polish media. It should be noted, however, that the private media in Poland, which during the PiS government was a platform for political opposition to speak out, is now engaged in holding the previous government accountable, which does not favorably affect the quality of current political discourse, reducing media control over the current government.

In the case of Poland, the change of government has not changed the policy pursued towards the war in Ukraine. In view of the ongoing conflict, there is a rare consensus on the Polish political scene. Poland has been and remains one of Ukraine's biggest allies in the EU, providing humanitarian aid, but most importantly also supporting the sending of financial and military aid by the EU. The Polish government's action in this matter is widely supported by the public: 86% support sending humanitarian aid, 80% support sending military aid, 79% support sending financial aid. In addition, 86% of Poles believe that the EU should maintain sanctions against the Russian government and companies, and 75% believe that Ukraine should be guaranteed EU candidate status (Eurobarometer survey, 2024). The voice for reducing aid to

Ukraine, especially military and financial aid, and seeking to improve relations with Russia comes only from the right-wing Confederation, but this party has too small electorate to significantly influence current policy.

The June 2024 elections to the European Parliament once again showed that Poland has developed an unofficial two-party system: the two strongest parties, KO and PiS, collected a total of almost 75% of all votes: KO won the election with 37.06%, while PiS received 36.16% of the vote. It is worth noting the good result of the Confederation (12.08%), which was not indicated by the results of the parliamentary elections in October a year earlier. The center-right Third Way- PSL (6.91%) and the Left Party (6.3%) did poorly (wybory.gov.pl). The results of the EP elections compared to the 2023 parliamentary elections show a strengthening of the KO and the Confederation. This signifies a progressive polarization of society: a simultaneous increase in liberal and pro-European sentiment, as well as Euroscepticism. The driving force behind the political divisions, however, are the KO and PiS parties, gathering the most voters and the media sympathetic to them. Paradoxically, the programmatic differences between the two parties are minor, and it is only the narrative run by them that creates them into completely opposite political blocs.

Election trends in Poland have changed minimally relative to the support expressed in the EP elections. PolitPro data show a leading position for KO with 35.3% support, followed by PiS with 32.4% of the vote. The support of the right-wing Confederation is at 11.4%, Third Way-PSL at 10.4%. The Left is the worst performer with 9.5% support (politpro.eu). The test for the current government will certainly be the presidential elections, which will be held in the second half of May 2025. The election date falls a year and a half after the parliamentary elections; hence the election of the president will also express an opinion on government policy. The election of the president in Poland will also determine the shape of the political scene: currently the government and the president are in opposition to each other.

Conclusions

The outbreak of full-scale war in Ukraine in 2022 has highlighted the pressing issue of the need for greater security in Central and Eastern Europe. The sense of insecurity created by the war, as well as the economic and political impact of the war in the region, has increased support for political options advocating a reduction in military aid to Ukraine and normalization of relations with Russia in the Czech Republic, Austria and Slovakia. In addition, in Slovakia, the desire to satisfy the need for security has led to a sense of the possibility of abandoning democracy in favor of the power of a charismatic leader. In Hungary, a further step can be observed: it is precisely such a charismatic leader who has created the vouchsafed authority to govern on his own, bypassing an already subordinate parliament. In contrast, the government's position and actions toward the war and the various parties to the conflict did not affect the political scene in Poland and Hungary. The reason for this behavior in the case of Poland lies in the broad consensus on the need to help Ukraine. In Hungary's case, it is the dominance of the government option on the political scene and in society.

Groups enjoying high voter support in Poland (Law and Justice) the Czech Republic (ANO), Slovakia (SMER) and Hungary (Fidesz) have sought or are deepening

the partisanship of the media. The lack of pluralism, in turn, fosters the spread of disinformation and negatively affects freedom of speech and opinion, thereby limiting the opposition's options, forcing it to use private media.

The polarization of society, particularly evident in election polls in Poland and Slovakia, is also leading to an expansion of the spectrum of political narrative. There is a normalization of terms previously considered extreme. In this regard, the state of political debate in Austria, where terms from Nazi jargon are being used, is alarming.

Of particular interest are the results of the European Parliament elections and the interest in the Patriots for Europe grouping among the countries analysed. In the end, this grouping included representatives from Austria (FPÖ), Hungary (Fidesz), the Czech Republic (ANO) and Poland (Ruch Narodowy). It should be noted that the FPÖ, ANO and Fidesz play a leading role in national politics, which may indicate that governments formed from representatives of these parties will be inclined to cooperate, both on a regional and European level.

In conclusion, threats to democracy are both internal and external in Central and Eastern European countries. The ongoing war in Ukraine and EU policies related to it are shaping the political discourse around the issue of security. Faced with an external threat, societies tend toward accepting authoritarian power. On the other hand, internal factors, such as the politicization of the judiciary or the media, allow for the control of the message to the public and the creation of a level of insecurity. Ultimately, the ineffectiveness of democratic forms of resistance to the actions of the authorities or the actions of parts of the political scene leads to indifference and weakening of civil society, on which democracy is based. Despite the similarities of the political scenes of the analyzed countries of Central and Eastern Europe, the internal conditions affecting political developments make it impossible to create a uniform model for the development of threats to democracy typical for Central and Eastern Europe.

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WITHOUT CORRUPTION - TOWARDS A KNOWLEDGE SOCIETY THROUGH EUROPEANIZATION AND GLOBALIZATION

CZU: 328.185(478)
https://doi.org/10.59295/eiqd.06

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Abstract. *This article attempts to address corruption as a major threat to democracy, the rule of law, social equity, and justice. It undermines the principles of effective administration, erodes citizens' trust in state institutions, jeopardizes the market economy, and endangers the stability of state institutions. Corruption is a global security problem, long considered a major issue, but only recently recognized as a first-degree challenge to international security, to the extent that it is now loudly declared a gross violation of fundamental human rights.*

Developing a common policy concept for security and defense at the international level to optimize the fight against corruption involves creating shared databases and an institutionalized system of contacts to enhance and develop a new dimension of collaboration within multinational coalitions; reforming sectoral services through institutional depoliticization; developing and implementing a modern concept of reform; introducing legislative and institutional changes; and improving staff management and training in accordance with international standards.

The process of Europeanization contains the necessary ingredients to modernize the country and eliminate the fragility that makes Moldova unattractive to its own citizens.

Keywords*: corruption, national and international security, democracy, global security problem, corrupt countries, democratic transition, globalization, democratization, political corruption*

Introduction

Corruption represents a global threat to security, a phenomenon that undermines the development of any nation and erodes citizens' trust in state institutions. This scourge profoundly affects the functioning of the state, creating systemic vulnerabilities that undermine institutional stability, cause significant economic losses, and limit a country's potential for growth and progress. At the same

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time, corruption compromises good governance, negatively influencing decision-making processes and the state's capacity to implement policies that benefit citizens and communities.

The phenomenon of corruption is a first-tier international security challenge, deeply impacting the mechanisms of a functional market economy. It erodes the principles of fair competition, discourages foreign direct investment, and compromises the respect for fundamental human rights, including equal access to opportunities and resources. Furthermore, corruption damages a state’s image, potentially isolating it from the interests of the international community.

Corruption reduces the quality of social, educational, and healthcare programs, affects the quality of life, increases social inequality, undermines political accountability, transparency, and inclusiveness, and imposes the selfish interests of narrow groups of individuals on society, deteriorating democratic processes.

Corruption, as a typical phenomenon of bureaucratic and budgetary states that direct the nation’s energies into perpetually feeding their own resources rather than enabling healthy, normal evolution, is universal and not exclusive to Moldovan society. Corruption is considered the improper use of a public office, interpreted as benefiting personal or specific group interests, which directly impacts economic and social development, distorts the potential benefits of free market forces, and leads to companies "bidding on commissions" to secure profitable economic contracts.

As a result, such situations often mask activities related to the functioning of the state. This leads to public outrage and social unrest. According to the author, the system itself is corrupt, and the only way to change this would be to reform the system by establishing an external (foreign) monitoring and control mechanism. The legacy of this system, the so-called leadership networks, was initially redirected to serve objectives unrelated to public administration, aimed instead at personal interests and the enrichment of decision-makers, their relatives, and close associates.

Integrity is a virtue that encompasses a series of moral traits such as honesty, fairness, and probity. Integrity can only flourish in a climate that values human dignity, where people can express their choices and are free to make decisions.

Governance lacking integrity leads to poor-quality and unjustifiably expensive public services, which are borne by the public budget. To combat systemic corruption and increase public integrity, consistent efforts are needed to restore citizens' trust in governance. A significant success would also involve improving the efficiency of corruption cases and highlighting individuals who contribute to delays in judicial proceedings through civil society monitoring. More active involvement by civil society as a neutral arbitrator in monitoring judicial processes related to corruption cases, along with preparing monitoring reports, would lead to the desired and premeditated changes. Any country where state assets are embezzled and the problems or needs of ordinary citizens are ignored has no future.

Among the many types of corruption, such as professional, economic, or financial-business-related corruption, political corruption includes activities such as the illegal financing of electoral campaigns, promoting individuals to government positions based solely on political criteria, thereby exacerbating threats, risks, and vulnerabilities to national, regional, and international security.

Externally, persistent corruption negatively impacts the credibility and image of states. Corruption is a global security issue, long considered a major problem, but recently recognized as a first-tier international security challenge. Today, it is loudly stated that corruption flagrantly violates fundamental human rights. Recent studies highlight the significant connection between transnational organized crime and corruption as major threats to political stability, human security, democracy, and economic development (Zeneli, 2016: p. 10-17).

In some countries, corruption is the system itself. The governments of these countries are oriented toward objectives unrelated to public administration but rather focused on the personal enrichment of leadership networks or political parties. It is no surprise that such governments are despised by the majority of citizens worldwide due to excessive bureaucracy, pursuing personal interests at the expense of national interests, making decisions contrary to public opinion, accepting bribes, hiding public information, etc.

Thus, the structural dynamics combined with acute corruption and international security violations confirm once again that corruption is a serious problem that must be properly assessed. Corruption and inequality feed off each other, creating a vicious cycle between corruption, the unequal distribution of power in society, and the unequal distribution of wealth. For example, the Panama Papers case demonstrated how easy it still is for the wealthy and powerful to exploit the opacity of the global financial system to enrich themselves at the expense of the public good. High-profile corruption cases, from Petrobras and Odebrecht in Brazil to the case of former Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych, illustrate how secret deals between businesses and politicians deprive national economies of billions of dollars in revenues, which are diverted to benefit a few at the expense of the many. This type of systemic corruption violates human rights, hinders sustainable development, and fosters social exclusion (Transparency International, 2017).

Corruption represents a major threat to democracy, the rule of law, social equity, and justice. It undermines the principles of effective administration and erodes citizens' trust in state institutions. It endangers the market economy and the stability of state institutions. Addressing essential issues within the security and defense system is imperative, with the objective of strengthening the prestige of armed forces by promoting respect for human rights and developing the professional integrity of soldiers in the National Army.

The process of democratic transition in the Republic of Moldova represents a multidimensional phenomenon characterized by the high complexity of dual transitions—political transition and the transition to a market economy. It should be noted, however, that Moldova's dual transition was further complicated by the necessity of establishing statehood, acknowledging that "besides democratization and marketization, post-communist states have inherited weak and inefficient bureaucratic institutions that required reform" (Kuzio, 2001: p. 168). In this sense, the analysis of the idea of creating the statehood of the Republic of Moldova is not an easy issue and it is worth mentioning that, to a large extent, a political structure has been formed in this territory, taking into account the ongoing international confrontations between the great powers. Over the years of independence, the Republic of Moldova has demonstrated a

high degree of vulnerability in one of its primary state components from the perspective of democratization and national security—*the concept of statehood*. The crisis of statehood is expressed through both internal and external dimensions. Internally, the crisis of statehood in the Republic of Moldova is evident through low public trust in state authorities, the state's inability to govern its entire territory, and the high level of corruption in the country. In this context, according to public opinion surveys conducted nationwide, the population exhibits a high degree of distrust in the main state institutions (Barometer of Public Opinion, 2023). Another direct challenge to the consolidation of statehood is corruption, which has a profound impact on the entire social mechanism and has reached alarming proportions in the Republic of Moldova. Additionally, the vulnerability of Moldovan statehood is directly expressed through the separatism of the Transnistrian region, which calls into question the existence of the state. The external dimension of Moldova's statehood crisis is conditioned by Russia's refusal to recognize the Republic of Moldova's real independence and its neutral status, as well as its direct support for Transnistrian separatism (Cojocaru, 2001: p. 67).

The phenomenon of corruption within the electoral process in the Republic of Moldova constitutes a major challenge to the consolidation of democracy and the guarantee of election integrity. Electoral corruption manifests itself in various forms, such as vote-buying, manipulation of votes, and the illegal influencing of voters, thus undermining public trust in the legitimacy of the electoral process and state institutions.

To combat this phenomenon, Moldovan authorities have adopted legislative and procedural measures. Recently, Parliament submitted a legislative proposal aimed at combating electoral corruption, which establishes shorter deadlines for investigating and adjudicating cases of voter bribery and provides for harsher penalties. The draft has already been reviewed by the parliamentary legal committee and is awaiting a vote in the plenary session.

Moreover, additional legislative measures have been introduced to prevent electoral corruption, including strict deadlines for investigating and resolving voter bribery cases and supplementary regulations for registering political parties. Nevertheless, electoral corruption persists, and public perception of this phenomenon remains high. Studies reveal a significant public perception of corruption, underscoring the need to implement more effective anti-corruption policies and strengthen mechanisms to prevent and sanction acts of electoral corruption.

Foreign interference in Moldova's electoral processes during 2024–2025 represents a serious threat to the country's sovereignty and political integrity. In this context, external actors, particularly the Russian Federation, have intensified their strategies of influence, including the use of hybrid tools such as disinformation, public opinion manipulation campaigns, and support for pro-Russian political parties and movements. These actions aim to destabilize Moldova's democratic process, undermine citizens' trust in state institutions, and compromise the country's pro-European direction. In this regard, the Moldovan Intelligence and Security Service has conducted a detailed analysis of the data, highlighting an unprecedented intensification of actions taken by the Russian Federation to maintain Moldova in its sphere of influence.

The hybrid mechanisms employed by the Russian Federation focus particularly on undermining democratic processes and compromising the country's European

integration agenda. These actions not only affect Moldova's political stability but also endanger its aspirations to join the European community (Security and Intelligence Service of the Republic of Moldova, 2024).

Russian interference has been exerted on multiple fronts, including amplifying radical tendencies of a separatist-autonomist nature; propaganda and disinformation; exploiting ecclesiastical factors; interfering in Moldova's electoral process; carrying out subversive operations by Russian special services; and exploiting elements of organized crime.

These actions undermine citizens' trust in state institutions and the electoral process, thus affecting the political and social stability of the Republic of Moldova. To counter these threats, a coordinated response from national authorities and international partners is necessary, focusing on strengthening cybersecurity, combating disinformation, and promoting civic education.

Other factors affecting national security include the influence and funding of various political and civic forces by the Russian Federation, the economic crisis, disinformation and public opinion manipulation, the lack of a security culture in society and within the political class, inadequate public communication in the area of security and defence, lack of social cohesion, the refugee crisis, and border security issues (Țicu, 2022). Additionally, crises differ in their specific characteristics and areas of manifestation or action. The connections between organized crime and corruption highlight a link between goal-oriented crimes and means-oriented crimes. Often, organized crime structures use corruption to safeguard their illicit activities in this sphere. Separately, the need to conceal funds derived from corrupt acts forces them to engage in ingenious financial laundering and recycling schemes.

The Transnistrian issue remains one of the main factors contributing to severe corruption risks for state security bodies, as it is a region not controlled by Moldovan authorities. The status quo of this region allows the self-proclaimed authorities in Moldova's eastern districts to illegally maintain armed forces, produce and sell various types of weapons used by international Islamist organizations in regional conflicts or to support criminal structures. All these factors suggest that high levels of corruption and the absence of accountability and transparency are primarily the consequences of governance failures and weak rule of law. Therefore, in the Transnistrian region, there are numerous factors creating power vacuums easily exploited by traffickers, criminals, insurgents, and terrorists, such as increased military spending, low transparency, the creation of legal gray zones, the existence of irregular paramilitary formations, and the lack of effective control over the movement of immigrants into the Republic of Moldova via the Transnistrian segment. In a globalized world, poor governance becomes a liability.

In recent years, the Republic of Moldova has defined a clear European path, committing to strengthening transparent, accountable, and participatory governance, adjusting its legal framework and infrastructure to fortify a free and competitive market economy, and ensuring the protection of fundamental human rights. One of the most important conditions for achieving these goals is combating corruption in all sectors of public life. The necessity of fighting this scourge is confirmed by civil society and all international partners supporting Moldova's European trajectory (Transparency International Moldova, 2014).

In the same vein, it must be noted that the Republic of Moldova faces integration and Europeanization challenges that are unfamiliar to other European states. Modernization and Europeanization are developmental choices—an evolution toward a better life, higher standards, like those enjoyed by European citizens. Europeanization strengthens mechanisms for drafting and implementing policies within European institutions, driving changes to the national institutional framework. Europeanization is not only a political construction but also an institutional one, considering its particular historical evolution. The process of Europeanization encompasses a wide range of actions: urbanization, education, industrialization, communication, democracy, stability, structural differentiation, development models, European integration, eliminating internal disparities, and bridging gaps with other European states. Moreover, Europeanization represents the development of governing institutions at the European level and the division of responsibilities. Therefore, achieving European integration is tied to citizens' demands for the Europeanization of society in each country and at the European Union level.

The Europeanization process inherently contains the ingredients needed to modernize the country and, consequently, to eliminate the fragilities that make Moldova unattractive to its own citizens. However, Europeanization cannot be achieved solely by the European Union but with its support and through the efforts of the political class in Chişinău. Beyond the fact that migration demonstrates Moldovans fleeing the multiple fragilities present in the country's project, it also reveals a significant challenge Moldova faces—depopulation of the country by supporters of European integration. On the one hand, citizens who see clear prospects in proximity to the EU emigrate, while, on the other hand, those remaining in the country adopt a Eurosceptic position due to pro-EU parties that have proven to be corrupt.

Incorporating the European agenda into the daily lives of Moldovans can only occur if there is sufficient public support. Pro-European sentiment has always been stronger among young people. However, their perception of the EU has changed radically since 2012, when political corruption linked to pro-European parties began to dominate the public sphere (Cenusa, 2017).

Even so, aligning the Republic of Moldova with European standards is a complex challenge that requires an integrated and sustainable approach across multiple fields, with education playing a crucial role. Continuous training programs and specialized education are essential for developing the skills needed in the current European context, contributing to the formation of an informed society capable of addressing contemporary challenges. This will not only contribute to citizens' personal and professional development but also to the country's economic and social progress, facilitating integration into the European community.

Combating corruption is a cornerstone in strengthening the rule of law and promoting effective and responsible governance. Corruption undermines citizens' trust in public institutions, affecting the proper functioning of administration and the economy. It creates an environment conducive to social and economic inequalities, discouraging investments and sustainable development.

The *Anti-Corruption Reforms in Moldova report* evaluates efforts to combat corruption in various sectors of the country. Moldova demonstrates strengths in

developing evidence-based anti-corruption policies through inclusive and transparent processes. Asset declarations cover a wide range of officials and assets, are accessible to the public online, and are verified by the National Integrity Authority (ANI). Whistleblower protection is legally guaranteed, covering employees in both the public and private sectors. However, challenges remain. Policy implementation is slow, with only half of the planned measures fully realized. Sanctions for violating conflict-of-interest regulations are inconsistently applied to high-level officials. Although asset declarations are digitalized, essential information is withheld from public access, and data is not available in a machine-readable format. Whistleblower protection mechanisms lack sufficient resources and enforcement powers, and anonymous reporting is not allowed. Improvements are needed in business integrity, particularly in real beneficiary transparency, state enterprise governance, and compliance program implementation. The report highlights best practices, such as the ”National Integrity and Anti-Corruption Strategy (NIAS)” framework and the inclusion of civil society organizations in monitoring, but emphasizes the need for stronger law enforcement and more efficient resource allocation to achieve significant progress in combating corruption (OECD, 2023).

Key achievements of the National Anti-Corruption Center (CNA) for 2023 include 250 operational analysis reports, 905 anti-corruption expertise reports, 13 institutional integrity evaluation monitoring reports, and numerous training sessions for public officials, students, and private sector employees. The CNA initiated investigations into 511 offenses, with the most frequent cases found in local public authorities, internal affairs bodies, the National Food Safety Agency, and the Public Services Agency. The CNA also managed 1,100 criminal cases and seized assets worth 1.8 billion lei. Parliamentary committees expressed support for the CNA's objectives for 2024. The report recommends that the CNA continue its efforts to combat systemic corruption in the public sector, public procurement, external fund management, and the energy sector, as well as to strengthen the recovery of criminal assets. The government is urged to support the CNA’s institutional capacity, while parliamentary committees are encouraged to monitor the CNA’s activities (Parliament of the Republic of Moldova, 2023: p. 1-4).

According to the *Ex-Post Impact Evaluation Report of Law No. 325/2013 on Evaluating Institutional Integrity,* the National Anti-Corruption Center (CNA) assessed 16 public entities between 2021 and mid-2023, identifying common issues such as inadequate anti-corruption measures, ambiguous procedures, and flawed regulations. Specific problems included abusive practices in healthcare contracts, monument inspections, and the issuance of permits. The CNA issued 853 recommendations, which led to the adoption of 16 integrity plans. However, implementation remains a challenge, with only approximately 75% of planned actions completed. The report highlights difficulties such as internal regulatory conflicts, limited human resources within the CNA, and the recovery of funds used in integrity tests. It also examines international best practices, noting that integrity testing is recommended by organizations such as the UN and OECD. The evaluation results show that the law has had a positive impact on good governance and the business environment, but it calls for strengthening the evaluation process, increasing CNA staff numbers, ensuring funding, and amending the

law to address Constitutional Court decisions and practical implementation challenges. Additionally, it recommends exploring international best practices and developing a mechanism to incentivize and protect integrity testers (Parliament of the Republic of Moldova, 2023: p. 1-72).

The study *Anti-Corruption Expertise 2019–2020* provides a comprehensive analysis of the effectiveness of anti-corruption measures implemented in Moldova's electoral context, highlighting associated costs and their impact on the electoral process and citizens' trust in democratic institutions. The study's findings emphasize that, although progress has been made in developing a legislative and institutional framework to combat electoral corruption, the effectiveness of these measures remains limited. The high costs of implementing anti-corruption programs, relative to the results achieved, suggest the need for a re-evaluation of the strategies used. The positive impact of anti-corruption initiatives is evident in raising public awareness about corruption, but their effects on electoral behavior and the integrity of the electoral process are not yet sufficiently convincing (Ionita; Savva, 2021).

The implementation of a comprehensive and well-coordinated strategy should go beyond simple legislative measures. This strategy should integrate educational initiatives aimed at increasing the awareness and responsibility of all actors involved in the electoral process. By fostering adequate education on electoral integrity and promoting transparency, a healthier and more open electoral environment can be created, contributing not only to strengthening democracy but also to ensuring national stability—a prerequisite for the development of Moldovan society. Thus, through training programs and informational campaigns, a better understanding of the importance of transparency and integrity in elections can be facilitated, ensuring a stronger commitment to democratic values.

Combating corruption is crucial for developing a fair and prosperous society, as well as for strengthening democracy and the rule of law. Coordinated efforts by authorities, civil society, and the private sector are necessary to prevent and fight corruption in all its forms. In this regard, the project implemented by the *Pro Marshall Center of the Republic of Moldova* in partnership with the Ministry of Defense of the Republic of Moldova and with support from the *Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung Foundation*, titled "*Cultivating Integrity and Justice to Strengthen Security within the Ministry of Defense*," serves as an illustrative example of promoting transparency and accountability in state institutions. The project aims to develop a stronger institutional and legislative framework to combat corruption, while strengthening integrity and ethics in decision-making processes within the defense sector (Pro Marshall Center of the Republic of Moldova, 2024).

The general objective of the project was to enhance the prestige of the armed forces by promoting respect for the rights of military personnel and cultivating professional integrity within the National Army. The target group of the project included over 1,000 conscripted and contract soldiers. Between September 24 and October 7, 2024, experts associated with the Pro Marshall Center, in partnership with representatives of the Ministry of Defense's Military Inspectorate, conducted field training sessions for conscripted and contract soldiers. The central topic of these training sessions was strengthening the image of military service by promoting respect for the

rights of military personnel and cultivating professional integrity within the National Army. The overall research findings highlighted the need for synergy between state security and defense institutions and civil society to enhance the attractiveness of military service and the Ministry of Defense, as well as to recruit highly qualified personnel from related fields, which would contribute to improving the country's security and defense levels (Pro Marshall Center of the Republic of Moldova, 2024).

In the context of the Republic of Moldova's European integration process, combating corruption is essential for aligning with European Union standards and ensuring transparent and accountable governance. Corruption undermines the EU's fundamental values, such as the rule of law and respect for human rights and can affect the effectiveness of European policies and programs.

Promoting policies of ethics and corruption prevention is an important condition for strengthening the capacity for good governance. Transparency, effectiveness, efficiency, accountability, and promptness in the exercise of public office responsibilities are tangible objectives for ensuring a professional and high-performing civil service body in line with the highest ethical and integrity standards agreed upon by the European Union ("the EU's multi-level system").

A culture of public integrity and zero tolerance for acts of corruption can only be cultivated if human dignity and universally accepted moral values are upheld. Overall, the integrity of a public official or a dignitary is an imperative pursued by any authority or public institution, leading to the realization of democratic principles of state governance and ensuring the fundamental rights and freedoms of citizens (Anti-Corruption Alliance, 2016: p. 1-52).

This phenomenon must be mitigated through rigorous controls and the implementation of a series of preventive measures aimed at addressing criminogenic factors and eliminating the conditions that generate corruption, by detecting corrupt acts and holding the perpetrators accountable. In this process, continuous training programs and specialized education represent an essential direction for aligning with European standards. Education reform and the development of specific educational initiatives are fundamental elements of this process, aiming to transform institutional culture, modernize structures, and strengthen capacities.

After 33 years of independence, Moldova still has the opportunity to recover from lost development prospects. The diversification of internal and external risk factors affecting the national security system is significant. The political threat is manifested through the uncertainty surrounding the state's political security, as political power is responsible for decisions and institutions related to state security. Thus, the instability of political security can be affected by ideological or national vulnerabilities, which may be intentional or structural. Corruption and group influence in Moldovan politics, the phenomenon of political separatism (the so-called Transnistrian Moldovan Republic), and ethnic separatism (the Territorial-Administrative Unit of Gagauz-Yeri) supported by the Russian Federation—which has yet to withdraw its armed forces—political defection, and the low political culture of citizens erode the sovereignty of the rule of law.

No matter how much pro-Russian forces insist, there is no more successful model of development in the region for a country interested in democracy than through the

instruments that constitute European integration. The Europeanization process of the Republic of Moldova heavily depends on the support of European Union member states in stimulating democratic reforms, the rule of law, and the development of a sustainable market economy.

In conclusion, it must be noted that currently, corruption—an issue with enormous destructive power over the security and defense of states—is not on the agenda of high-level multilateral and bilateral exchanges. Experts and professionals in this field are not involved in the process of making critical decisions. Decision-makers are those who must promote democracy, the rule of law, fair competition, individual freedom, contribute to the protection of human rights, strengthen institutional capacities, and provide appropriate assistance to ensure the efficient functioning of a state. Despite the existence of well-conceived legislative frameworks and policies, the effective implementation of these measures is progressing slowly, with only half of the planned actions being fully realized. This situation highlights a gap in law enforcement and the need for a more efficient mobilization of resources. Based on the reports mentioned above, it can be concluded that these deficiencies require a re-evaluation of current strategies to ensure more effective implementation of anti-corruption measures.

The achievements of the Republic of Moldova in the field of anti-corruption policies, as well as the persistent challenges, require attention and coordinated action to ensure the efficient and sustainable implementation of these policies. Institutional support and monitoring by the Government and parliamentary committees are essential for the National Anti-Corruption Center (CNA), especially in the context of preventing systemic corruption in the public sector and managing external funds. This collaboration is crucial for ensuring the efficiency and sustainability of the CNA's anti-corruption efforts.

The world's states, which act in the spirit of authentic democracy and the principle of the rule of law, must adopt, in their fight against any destabilizing manifestations—including terrorism, corruption, organized crime, or other such activities—a defensive attitude to protect the entire system, their citizens, and their countries. Developing a common concept of security and defense policies at the international level, aimed at optimizing the fight against corruption, involves creating shared databases and an institutionalized system of contacts to improve and develop a new dimension of collaboration within multinational coalitions; reforming services in the field through institutional depoliticization; developing and implementing a modern concept of modernization and reform; implementing legislative and institutional changes; and improving the system of training and personnel management in accordance with international standards. For these reasons, effectively combating corruption is imperative for strengthening a lawful, democratic, and prosperous state.

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CIVIC ATTITUDES AND REPRESENTATIONS REGARDING ELECTORAL INTEGRITY IN THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA*

CZU: 321.7:342.841:303.433.2(478)
https://doi.org/10.59295/eiqd.07

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Abstract. *Electoral integrity is a fundamental element of the democratic process, and citizens' perceptions on the correctness of elections directly influence confidence in state institutions. This study analyzes the perceptions of respondents in the Republic of Moldova on the integrity of the electoral process, through a comparison between pre-election and post-election periods. The research is based on qualitative analysis of the collected responses, highlighting the impact of electoral bribery, media influences and the reactions of the authorities in the electoral process.*

The results show that electoral bribes and material benefits continue to be perceived as widespread practices, affecting voter confidence in the fairness of the vote. While some segments of the population view these practices as normalized, others call for stricter measures to prevent electoral corruption. Media influences also play an important role in shaping citizens' perceptions, contributing either to the consolidation of democracy or to the propagation of narratives that undermine the electoral process. The reactions of the authorities are often perceived as insufficient to combat these phenomena, which amplifies the feeling of distrust in state structures.

Keywords*: electoral integrity; electoral corruption; public perceptions; electoral bribery; democratic process; media and influence; electoral reforms*

Introduction

Digital dangers, vote-buying, weakened electoral commissions, and political violence all threaten voting integrity on a worldwide scale. In the digital age, elections have become more vulnerable to cyber threats that compromise the integrity of voter data and the outcome of elections. Cyber-attacks on election infrastructure can disrupt voting, weaken confidence among voters, and deepen political instability (Costea, Putina, Brie,

**This article is made within the project BST-24.023.MD37.1, entitled "Election Integrity and Democracy in Republic of Moldova (ELIDEM)" and is implemented by Center for Political and Administrative Studies, funded by the Black Sea Trust for Regional Cooperation*

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2024). The blockchain relies voting solutions have been proposed to address these weaknesses, but their use remains limited due to infrastructure and legislative constraints.

Another big global issue is the spread of misinformation and fake news, particularly via digital media (Putina, 2020a). Analyzes legal options for fighting the spread of misinformation that distorts voter views and undermines political outcomes (Putina, 2023). Manipulation of public opinion through social media platforms has become a frequent electoral practice in many nations, undermining the credibility of election results.

Vote-buying remains a systematic concern in many democratic systems. Politicians frequently exploit socioeconomic vulnerabilities by offering monetary benefits in exchange for electoral support, eroding democratic legitimacy. Voting integrity is an essential component of democracy, ensuring the fairness of the voting process and maintaining citizens' trust in state institutions. election corruption, vote manipulation, political exploitation of administrative resources, and external pressures all have a significant impact on Moldova's election integrity (Putină, Iațco, 2020; Putină, 2020; Putină, 2020a). Both the pre-election and post-election periods have seen events that have altered public perception of the legitimacy of the democratic process, resulting in an electoral setting ripe for illegal practices and political pressures. Administrative corruption, foreign influence, and media-driven electoral distortions all pose threats to Moldova's election integrity. This study reveals the several variables, including administrative corruption, foreign influence, and media-driven electoral distortions, jeopardize Moldova's election integrity. The paper focuses on the following key themes to highlight the ongoing vulnerabilities in Moldova's electoral procedures. Electoral bribery remains a common issue in Moldova, particularly in rural areas where economic hardship renders voters open to financial incentives. Studies have shown evidence of direct vote-buying, in which political parties provide cash, items, or other benefits in exchange for electoral support (SIS, 2024). These approaches disproportionately harm vulnerable groups, contributing to a culture of electoral fraud that undermines democratic legitimacy (Iațco, Putină, Bevziuc, 2021). These approaches disproportionately harm vulnerable groups, contributing to a culture of electoral fraud that undermines democratic legitimacy. Employees in Moldova's public sector commonly describe feeling coerced during elections. Government officials and political elites use their positions to exert influence over voters, particularly those working in state institutions (Election Observation Mission Report, 2024).

Political and economic interests greatly influence the Moldovan media landscape, which is frequently used to manipulate elections. During elections, disinformation efforts, frequently supported by outside actors, aim to influence voter preferences and delegitimize opposition parties (Election Observation Mission Report, 2024; Center for Independent Journalism Report, 2024; Putină 2024).

An examination of respondents' perspectives reveals a number of reoccurring concerns in the Moldovan electoral process. Participants in the qualitative research commonly described vote-buying, offering material incentives in exchange for candidate support, and using economic or administrative pressure on voters. In addition to these concerns, media manipulation and the use of misinformation methods have raised doubts about the electoral process's transparency, while the authorities' actions have frequently been viewed as insufficient in combatting these issues.

In this context, the current study seeks to examine electoral integrity in the Republic of Moldova by comparing popular perceptions before and after the elections. Elections are essential for maintaining democracy. Election quality is frequently compromised due to issues such as insufficient electoral registrations, a lack of trust in institutions, or attempts to manipulate the system.

There are numerous conflicting definitions of electoral integrity, however it can be described as "the implementation of principles in the conduct of elections that are necessary to support the broader realization of democratic ideals" (James and Alihodzic, 2020, p. 350). There is continuous dispute over a single, universal concept of electoral integrity. Generally speaking, it's defined as: "any election that is based on the democratic principles of universal suffrage and political equality, as reflected in international standards and agreements, and that is professional, impartial, and transparent in its preparation and administration throughout the entire electoral cycle" (Kofi Annan Foundation, 2016).

Without electoral integrity, leaders and officials have little responsibility to the public, public trust in election results is low, and the government lacks the necessary legitimacy. The electoral integrity allows for the peaceful resolution of conflicts, open dialogue, debate, and information exchange between leaders and the public. Integrity is dependent on the public's trust in electoral and political processes. It is not enough to alter institutions; citizens must be convinced that the changes are real and deserve their trust. To ensure election integrity, take into account and consolidate other factors outside of electoral institutions. Election officials, judges and courts, independent media, and national observatories must have independence that politicians respect.

Methodological design for the study

To achieve the objectives outlined in this article, both qualitative and quantitative methods were used, with a systemic and interdisciplinary approach. The primary data were obtained through applied sociological research. The methodological design of the study on perceptions, attitudes, and civic behaviors in the Republic of Moldova before and after the election was built on two foundations: a quantitative research study and a post-election sociological survey. Quality studies were conducted between September and November 2024, with 84 participants from various regions of Moldova.

The selection of participants ensured a balanced representation in terms of gender *(46 women and 38 men)*, age *(19-76 years)*, and socio-professional environment, which included students, teachers, pensioners, entrepreneurs, and public officials. Interviews were conducted both in person and over the phone, with durations ranging from 12 to 73 minutes, providing a detailed view of the dynamics of perceptions and electoral experiences.

Respondents' perceptions on the influence of mitigation and favoritism on electoral processes

The practice of electoral fraud is a chronic and deeply ingrained phenomenon in Moldovan political processes, according to the responses analyzed. These actions not only exploit societal vulnerabilities, but also fosters distrust in the political system, undermining democratic values. Despite their harmful nature, such practices are

perceived by some citizens as normalized, reflecting an increased tolerance for electoral corruption. However, there are also voices who advocate for more stringent measures to prevent and sanction these behaviors, implying that only a firm intervention from the authorities can restore public trust in elections. This situation highlights the need for structural reforms to ensure transparency and integrity in the voting process.

Respondents highlighted the fact that electoral voting remains a common practice in the Republic of Moldova. Respondents confirm the existence and frequency of the phenomenon of electoral meddling, which is viewed as a widespread mechanism of influencing election results. Reporting practices include providing money, food, or other material benefits in order to entice voters or encourage participation in other political actions. The vulnerable groups are identified as the primary targets of these practices, implying a systematic exploitation of socioeconomic issues within these population segments. These political behaviors have been identified as being used by both independent candidates and political parties, eroding trust in electoral processes and their legitimacy.

> *[Female, 22 years old, Chișinău]: Yes. During the 2019 local general elections, a colleague of mine received money and was asked to take a picture of their vote.*
> *[Male, 30 years old, Chișinău]: I personally know people who were bribed with 200 lei to attend rallies.*
> *[Female, 64 years old, Edineț]: During the elections, many people were brought to the square or villages and were given 200 lei, especially those from vulnerable groups.*
> *[Male, 35 years old, Otaci]: The ȘOR Party allows such cases and buys votes from vulnerable people.*
> *[Female, 21 years old, UTAG]: In the elections for the Governor of Gagauzia, the party of the current governor distributed food and money.*

The common perspective found in responses suggests that the electoral divide is viewed as a *normal phenomenon*. According to the responses, the provision of material benefits in exchange for votes is so widespread that it has become a nearly accepted practice in electoral elections. The lack of appropriate punitive measures has fueled this phenomenon, creating a sense of impunity. Furthermore, some voters adopt a pragmatic attitude, accepting half of the vote without changing their political preference, demonstrating a disconnect between democratic values and voting behavior. This situation reflects a systemic issue that undermines democratic processes and reinforces election corruption mechanisms.

> *[Female, 37 years old, Râșcani]: Many say, "I take the money, but when I go into the booth, I still vote for whoever I want."*
> *[Male, 32 years old, Chișinău]: This is a normal practice during elections. Money and food were distributed, primarily by SHOR and socialists.*
> *[Female, 43, Florești]: There was blackmail. Positions were created to retain control over weak individuals.*
> *[Female, 36 years old, Telenești]: Some were asked to photograph their ballots to confirm how they voted.*

[Male, 34 years old, Chișinău]: In my area, disadvantaged individuals were given food in exchange for their votes.

From the responses provided, it is clear that such practices are used strategically to influence vulnerable groups. Respondents emphasize that vulnerable social groups are the primary targets of electoral strategies, being exploited due to their economic or social dependence. The provided benefits, such as money, food, or gifts, are used to maintain control over the votes of these segments. This practice emphasizes existing inequalities in society and contributes to the consolidation of a political system in which electoral decisions are influenced by material interests rather than democratic convictions. This intentional exploitation has long-term implications for the integrity of electoral processes.

[Female, 67 years old, Râșcani]: Money was distributed in villages, particularly among the elderly. Even for rallies, participants received 200 lei.
[75-year-old male from Cimișlia]: The SHOR Party provided financial assistance to their followers. They received 250 lei to vote.
[Female, 49 years old, Chișinău]: Just last October, 11 persons in my village received similar assistance.
[Male, 19 years old, UTAG]: During the municipal elections in my hamlet, an independent candidate utilized money to get support.
[Female, 51 years old, Chișinău]: I know folks who got 800 lei to go out and participate.

Analyzing the expressed opinions, it is clear that such practices undermine trust in electoral processes and democratic principles. According to respondents, electoral manipulation has a negative impact on the credibility of election processes and reduces public trust in their integrity. Respondents indicate that such behavior distorts election results, encourages political cynicism, and discourages active participation of citizens who do not tolerate such practices. Furthermore, this phenomenon has a negative impact on civic education and political engagement, promoting an electoral culture based on corruption and manipulation, rather than elections based on convictions and democratic principles.

[Female, 64 years old, Edineț]: Such methods affect democracy. People are manipulated, and the electoral process becomes unfair.
[Female, 45 years old, Chișinău]: The ȘOR Party managed to secure seats in Parliament through such practices. It is not fair to other citizens.
[Male, 41 years old, Chișinău]: Electoral bribery is a phenomenon that must be severely sanctioned; otherwise, it will further undermine democracy.
[Female, 37 years old, Râșcani]: Everything happens openly, without fear. It is a disgrace to democracy.
[Male, 30 years old, Chișinău]: When you see such things, you lose trust in political leaders.

Another group of respondents declined to react explicitly or to indicate that they are aware of similar mitigating circumstances. This reluctance can be attributed to a variety of interdependent factors. Given the sensitivity of the subject and the sociopolitical climate of the Republic of Moldova, the first reason might be a combination of social, legal, and political ramifications. Furthermore, the perception that such practices are so widespread that they have become a "normality" can contribute to a lack of interest in signaling them.

Respondents' silence may indicate a deep distrust in institutions' ability to ensure anonymity and protect those who consent to such practices. In a context where electoral corruption is perceived as prevalent, citizens can avoid speaking out of a lack of confidence that these revelations will have a genuine impact. Furthermore, this phenomenon suggests a broad perception that political involvement and electoral processes are not sufficiently clear or correct, which discourages active and responsible participation.

Perception of threats of loss of job or benefits in an electoral context

Threats related to the loss of job or other benefits, reported by the respondent, highlight a serious and systemic problem within the electoral processes in the Republic of Moldova. These practices generate a climate of team spirit and vulnerability, especially among public sector employees, who become easy targets of political influences. At the same time, the reluctance of some of the respondents to provide explicit details suggests a deep distrust in the ability to protect victims and sanction abuses. The phenomenon reflects a major democratic dysfunction, in which electoral mechanisms are affected by pressure and manipulation. In order to guarantee a free and fair electoral process, it is necessary for the authorities to intervene firmly and ensure an environment protected from such coercive practices.

One aspect stated by the respondent is that threats of loss of job or benefits are a known reality in the electoral processes in the Republic of Moldova. The responses indicate that there are concrete reports of such practices, especially in the public sector, where employees are often vulnerable to pressure. These methods are used by various political parties to influence citizens' electoral behavior, and their consequences undermine trust in democratic processes. Although some respondents prefer not to provide details, there are also specific cases that demonstrate the extent of these abuses.

> *[Woman, 41, Chisinau]: Yes, I know of such cases. Candidates from Mr. Plahotniuc's party influenced the election of employees from the Ministry of Internal Affairs through blackmail.*
> *[Woman, 64, Edineț]: The ground was prepared for me and I was fired from my job because I did not support the dominant party in the north.*
> *[Man, 32, Chisinau]: The Democratic Party resorted to threats; if they did not vote for them, people risked losing their jobs.*
> *[Woman, 34, Chisinau]: At the hospital in Ialoveni, employees were threatened with losing their jobs if they did not vote for a certain party.*
> *[Man, 35, Otaci]: Especially people who work in the public sector are threatened with losing their jobs. This was a frequent practice and I think it still exists.*

A common perspective in responses suggests that these practices are *a reflection of political leaders' influence on the public sector*. Respondents emphasize that employees in the public sector are vulnerable to pressure, which manifests itself as outright threats or administrative repression. Such practices create a team environment, limiting citizens' freedom of choice. The phenomenon is reported at both the central and local levels, indicating a systemic problem in which political influences undermine the independence of public administration.

> *[Woman, 49, Chisinau]: In my family, a person who worked in the Ministry was fired after the dominant party came to power.*
> *[Woman, 22, Ștefan Vodă]: The mayor of my locality, from the MAN party, threatened employees that they could lose their jobs if they did not vote correctly.*
> *[Man, 30, Chisinau]: In a city hall, employees were threatened that they would be fired if they did not vote for a certain party.*
> *[Woman, 37, Râșcani]: My request to the city hall was postponed without explanation, possibly as a form of political resentment.*
> *[Woman, 43, Florești]: I was the victim of administrative manipulation, being demoted after winning a competition for a public position.*

The answers provided show that the fear of reprisals limits free expression and conscious electoral participation. The phenomenon of threats related to the loss of jobs or other benefits discourages citizens from free expression and affects confidence in the integrity of the electoral process. The fear of political reprisals determines self-censorship and reduces the active participation of citizens, especially those who work in structures subordinate to political parties. This problem exacerbates inequalities in access to democratic rights, strengthening the mechanisms of political control.

> *[Woman, 49, Bălășești]: Such problems are common and affect people's trust in the system.*
> *[Woman, 67, Râșcani]: I personally know someone who was forced to campaign for a mayor.*
> *[Man, 41, Taraclia]: I have heard about cases reported in the media, where employees were threatened with losing their jobs.*
> *[Woman, 36, Telenești]: I know of such cases in the past, when people were pressured to vote for certain parties.*
> *[Woman, 43, Chișinău]: Such practices undermine democracy and affect real political involvement.*

Analyzing the opinions expressed, it becomes obvious that electoral pressures on public employees represent a serious violation of democratic principles. Political threats and reprisals related to elections demonstrate a serious violation of democratic rights and freedom of choice. These practices not only distort the electoral process, but also deeply affect the functioning of public institutions, transforming them into political instruments. In this context, the authorities must adopt strict measures to prevent these abuses and ensure an electoral climate based on transparency and fairness.

[Woman, 41, Chisinau]: Blackmail and threats were used to influence employees in the Ministry of Internal Affairs.
[Man, 32, Chisinau]: Such practices destroy people's trust in democracy and reduce electoral transparency.
[Woman, 64, Edineț]: Fear of political reprisals limits freedom of expression and active involvement of citizens.
[Woman, 37, Râșcani]: Political resentments have a direct impact on local administrative decisions.
[Man, 35, Otaci]: Pressures on public employees continue to exist and are a barrier to a transparent electoral process.

The impact of electoral influence practices through material benefits on democracy in the Republic of Moldova

The phenomenon of influencing votes through material benefits reveals both the structural vulnerabilities of the electoral system and the deficiencies of civic education in the Republic of Moldova. This type of electoral corruption perpetuates inequalities and affects citizens' trust in the integrity of democratic processes. Respondents indicated that these practices are rooted in the collective mentality, which makes their eradication even more difficult. To overcome these obstacles, a joint effort of the authorities, civil society and the international community is necessary. Only by promoting transparent electoral mechanisms and a solid democratic culture can a fair future for the Republic of Moldova be ensured.

The practice of offering material benefits in exchange for votes and promises to influence the electoral process have generated significant negative effects on the fairness and integrity of the democratic system. Such tactics erode the essence of democracy, transforming the electoral process into an act of bargaining rather than one based on political values and convictions. Under the current conditions, citizens from vulnerable categories become easy targets, and elections turn into a field of manipulation rather than an opportunity for the expression of the collective will. These practices undermine the foundation of a governance based on legitimacy and transparency, instead consolidating political structures that do not reflect the authentic will of the electorate. Respondents unanimously expressed that such methods deepen distrust in the electoral system and contribute to maintaining a corrupt status quo.

[Woman, 37 years old, Orhei]: "I am totally against such situations. First of all, because legally it is not correct. Second, that financial remuneration is temporary, and your vote influences the country for a longer time."
[Man, 19 years old, UTAG]: "It is against democracy, against what voting means. It was, is and will be part of our mentality that you can win with such corrupt tactics."
[Man, 34 years old, Chisinau]: "Very negative, because these parties have nothing to offer: neither ideology, nor political programs. With the help of people who receive from them, they only get as far as crossing the electoral threshold and entering Parliament.

The impact of these acts is exacerbated by a lack of effective sanctioning procedures and inadequate civic education. Citizens, particularly those in rural areas, are frequently subjected to manipulative influences from parties in the absence of access to accurate information and democratic education. People accept such incentives due to fragile economic conditions, creating a damaging cycle of electoral corruption. Furthermore, respondents believe that political parties use system flaws for short-term gains, jeopardizing public' trust in democratic institutions. To fight these occurrences, transparent information campaigns and instructional activities in schools and communities become increasingly important.

> *[Woman, 51, Chisinau]: "Pensioners are prone to accepting such offers. They say: 'What else can we do?'"*
> *[Man, 33, Chisinau]: "The parties that are in opposition take money from Russia and give it to the world, just so that people vote against it and do harm."*
> *[Woman, 41, Chisinau]: "It's not fair, it's not good to buy votes, it's not a situation that favors democracy."*

Such tactics have had a significant impact on the impartiality of the voting process, impacting previous election results and distorting democratic representation. The replies supplied by participants reveal that methods of electoral influence through material incentives have undermined elections in recent years, allowing politicians who do not represent voters' true interests to run for government. The concrete instances offered by respondents illustrate that this practice remains a chronic problem, particularly in local and parliamentary elections. The respondents believe that the situation is sustained by a poor legislative framework and a lack of meaningful punishments for those who use such approaches.

> *[Woman, 37, Râșcani]: "The electoral process is seriously affected. Since people from the countryside are not informed, they are also manipulated with such practices."*
> *[Man, 30, Chișinău]: "The ȘOR party, which did not have the electoral threshold percentage, spent money on the electoral campaign, and obtained mandates that were not due to it."*
> *[Woman, 45, Comrat]: "It is not fair, it is not good to buy votes. We are selling our integrity.*

Voting patterns stifle the growth of a real democratic culture in the Republic of Moldova. They exacerbate corruption and contribute to widening socioeconomic and political disparities. Thus, election results become a reflection of the money resources available for purchasing votes, rather than the collective desire of individuals. Respondents stressed that building a transparent and fair electoral climate requires structural improvements, strong legislation, and civic education programs. Change can only occur by raising public understanding of democratic rights and obligations.

[Man, 75 years old, Cimișlia]: "The citizen must be allowed to think for himself. If the Republic of Moldova were a state where the law worked, all those who resort to such means would have been held accountable."
[Woman, 19 years old, UTAG]: "Politicians who make false promises are not politicians. However, a politician must make promises to win votes, but they must also fulfill them."
[Woman, 45 years old, Chișinău]: "It is not right to buy votes, because the future of a country cannot be established with the help of corruption."

The effects of vote-swapping practices on citizens' trust in political parties and democracy in the Republic of Moldova

The impact of electoral-swapping practices through material benefits goes beyond the actual elections, profoundly affecting citizens' trust in political parties and the democratic system in the Republic of Moldova. While some respondents identify a direct link between electoral corruption and the degradation of democracy, others emphasize the gradual loss of credibility of political parties. These practices generate a political culture based on opportunism and lack of accountability, in which democratic values are ignored. Respondents believe that in order to overcome these obstacles, a profound reform is necessary, which should include sanctions against electoral corruption and the promotion of authentic civic education. Only in this way can a functional democracy, based on transparency and respect for the will of citizens, be ensured.

Electoral-swapping practices through material benefits profoundly affect citizens' trust in political parties. Respondents point out that these methods undermine citizens' perceptions of the legitimacy of the democratic process, transforming political parties from agents of change into tools of corruption. Citizens tend to lose trust because these practices create an image of parties as entities that exploit social vulnerabilities for electoral purposes, instead of promoting real policies for the common good. These tactics also reinforce a political culture based on dependency and opportunism, instead of encouraging conscious and deliberative participation in elections.

[Woman, 22, Chisinau]: "I believe that when corruption occurs, the citizen perceives the party as good because it provides them with food, but party X is bad and does not represent me because it does not provide me with any benefits."
[Man, 19, Răzeni]: "I believe that these practices are not good at all. They must be removed from society and must be punished according to the law so that they are no longer promoted."
[Woman, 37, Râșcani]: "I believe that people, in the long run, lose their trust in political parties. People see that there is no change over time and they lose their trust."
[Woman, 41, Chisinau]: "They have very bad, negative effects. If we strive and want towards democracy, such practices represent a setback for society."
[Man, 34 years old, Chisinau]: "Citizens are already used to this, and when the elections come, they wait for someone to come and give them something.

In the long run, these actions undermine Moldovan democracy and maintain a broken political system. Respondents saw a direct relationship between the employment of these approaches and the erosion of trust in democratic institutions. They argue that in the absence of adequate punishment measures, election malpractice becomes the norm, exacerbating citizen dissatisfaction. While some voters lose interest in the voting process, others become reliant on these tangible benefits, compromising the democratic balance. Political parties that utilize these tactics jeopardize their credibility and are unable to create long-term relationships with their constituents.

> *[Woman, 49 years old, Bălășești]: "Basically, we don't trust anyone at all. They all came and promised us the sea with salt. Otherwise, we can't say that there has been any change."*
> *[Woman, 64 years old, Edineț]: "A lot of the population no longer trusts. I don't trust them anymore because it's clear that the country is losing itself and that's it."*
> *[Woman, 45 years old, Comrat]: "Everyone wants power and money, but they don't do anything for the good of the people. Everyone wants to live well, that's why such practices exist.*

Democracy in the Republic of Moldova is seriously affected by these tactics, reflecting a fragile political culture. The practices of influencing voting through material benefits contribute to the consolidation of a political environment dominated by corruption and inequalities, in which voters are perceived as manipulable resources rather than active participants in the democratic process.

> *[Woman, 49, Chisinau]: "God save us from such a democracy!"*
> *[Woman, 49, Bălășești]: "I think there is no democracy at all. It is totalitarianism, a pressure on people who cannot do what they want."*
> *[Woman, 37, Orhei]: "It limits their vision that 'today I have something to eat, tomorrow I will worry about it.' It simply feeds the body, but not the soul and vision."*
> *[Woman, 22, Ștefan Vodă]: "Democracy will suffer because these practices are not welcome in a stable democracy."*
> *[Woman, 36, Telenești]: "Political absenteeism on the part of citizens, because they understand that even if they did not vote, others accepted such benefits.*

Respondents underlined that these practices will continue to impede the growth of a true democratic culture in the absence of significant election reform and civic education initiatives. Furthermore, democracy is viewed as a skewed or nonexistent ideal, which exacerbates public annoyance and lowers political participation. The justifications for why political parties and politicians turn to tactics of influence through tangible advantages. The intricacy of the sociopolitical issues facing the Republic of Moldova is demonstrated by the acts of political parties and politicians that use such tactics. The thirst for power, economic opportunism, and adjustment to the population's socioeconomic weaknesses are just a few of the reasons given by the respondents. The

parties' legitimacy is jeopardized, corruption is sustained, and the public's opinion of the political class is negatively impacted.

These acts also exacerbate social division and undermine attempts to establish a functioning democracy. Reforms that encourage political accountability and openness must be implemented in such a setting. For a variety of political, financial, and opportunistic reasons, parties and candidates turn to such tactics. The desire to obtain or hold onto positions of power is one of the most often cited reasons by responders. Offering tangible benefits turns into a fast way to get votes in an election environment characterized by fierce competition and scarce resources.

> *[Woman, 22, Chisinau]: "Logically, in politics there is nothing outside of self-interest. Because they want to get into government, that is why they offer benefits."*
> *[Man, 19, Răzeni]: "I think that candidates and parties resort to such actions because they recognize that they are not good enough, their promises are not determined enough, they have not earned the trust of citizens through their activities."*
> *[Woman, 37, Orhei]: "Because, unfortunately, the population lives harder, incomes are low. They say that a hungry person is easier to deceive."*
> *[Man, 34, Chisinau]: "Because they have no ideologies. Apart from a single slogan, they have nothing more to refer to and nothing to offer."*
> *[Woman, 43, Chisinau]: "Parties use this means of influence to have power.*

These tactics also reflect the lack of coherent political programs, as well as a lack of confidence among politicians in their ability to convince citizens through other means.

Lack of transparency and economic opportunism are other significant causes identified by respondents. Politicians, motivated by the financial prospects associated with public office, use these practices to access the resources and economic opportunities available once they gain power. At the same time, systemic corruption within political parties facilitates such actions, and vulnerable populations, faced with poverty, become easy targets for these strategies.

> *[Woman, 41, Chisinau]: "Politicians have built various schemes and have enriched themselves illegally. How can they come after all this and be honest?"*
> *[Woman, 37, Râșcani]: "They want everyone to come to power. In Moldova, money is power."*
> *[Woman, 49, Bălășești]: "There is a gain for the parties: people in different positions, financial gains. They have a goal that they achieve through such methods."*
> *[Man, 75, Cimișlia]: "They are afraid of losing their wealth and income."*
> *[Woman, 22, Ștefan Vodă]: "The electorate is very small and they will not be able to gather enough votes, that is why they try to maneuver with their subordinates.*

The parties' actions also indicate *an adaptation to the socio-economic realities of the Republic of Moldova*. Respondents emphasize that such practices are possible due to poverty and the low level of civic education. Instead of focusing their efforts on improving the quality of life of citizens through sustainable policies, the parties take advantage of existing vulnerabilities to strengthen their electoral position.

> *[Woman, 37, Orhei]: "He thinks about what to put on the table for the family, but not to analyze anything else, and it is easier to manipulate and lead."*
> *[Man, 19, UTAG]: "Instead of the parties providing information about what is happening in the country, in the world, they offer money. I cannot judge those people who take money, because that is how they were taught."*
> *[Woman, 49, Chisinau]: "Citizens are content with what they receive. That is why politicians continue with these actions."*
> *[Man, 30, Chisinau]: "The sponsors that each party has want to recover their money."*
> *[Woman, 36, Telenești]: "Lack of confidence in their own ability to win in elections, the desire to return what they invested in the electoral* campaign by reaching a position.

Regions where respondents observed frequent influence gestures by political parties.

The analysis of the responses indicates an uneven distribution of electoral influence practices in the Republic of Moldova, with a higher concentration in economically and socially vulnerable regions. Areas such as the left bank of the Dniester River, the Gagauzia Autonomous Region and the north of the Republic of Moldova are identified as the most exposed, due to poverty and the influence of pro-Russian parties. However, the responses also highlight the presence of these phenomena in other parts of the country, albeit on a smaller scale. Such a distribution reflects both the strategies of political parties and the structural vulnerabilities of different regions. In such a context, it is imperative to strengthen electoral oversight mechanisms to ensure the integrity of the democratic process.

> *[Woman, 22, Chisinau]: "We can see this in the Orhei district, the birthplace of the SHOR party, which brought citizens to rallies and protests, offered money."*
> *[Woman, 41, Chisinau]: "Everyone knows about the Transnistrian region. There, they organize with entire buses and bring people to vote in an organized manner."*
> *[Man, 34, Chisinau]: "In the north and south of the country, where there are pro-Russian parties, they give money, organize people and bring them to vote."*
> *[Woman, 37, Orhei]: "The Orhei area was influenced by such practices. Most of the mayors in the district were from the SHOR party."*
> *[Man, 32, Chisinau]: "Yes, in Transnistria, vote buying was used. "There they offered 40 dollars or 400 lei.*

The Autonomous Region of Gagauzian is often mentioned as an area affected by such practices, given the endemic poverty and the influence of pro-Russian parties in the region. Respondents also identify southern Moldova as a region susceptible to electoral corruption, for similar reasons.

> *[Woman, 21, UTAG]: "Gagauzia, because there is a big problem with poverty in this area."*
> *[Man, 30, Chisinau]: "Southern Moldova, in Gagauzia. And of course SHOR has influenced the people of Gagauzia."*
> *[Woman, 36, Telenești]: "I think mostly the extreme north and south, and maybe Gagauzia. That's where I noticed with my colleagues that there are no proper electoral campaigns."*
> *[Man, 35, Otaci]: "I think in the localities of Gagauzia where the SHOR party is influential and the Northern region where the Socialists party stands out."*
> *[Woman, 43, Florești]: "In Florești district, out of 7 mayors that PAS has, only 2 were included. The rest were the mayors that PAS has been "running" after for a very long time.*

Even in the central region, where pro-European parties predominate, respondents indicate some tensions and unfair practices, but these seem to be less frequent compared to the north and south of the country. In contrast, Chisinau is perceived as less affected, due to the political diversity and the higher level of education of its inhabitants.

Analysis of the answers regarding the conditions under which respondents would be willing to accept offers to vote

This question highlights the high level of awareness of the respondents regarding the importance of an honest and free electoral process. Their statements reflect a categorical rejection of any offers that would compromise democratic values and the fundamental right to vote freely. They emphasize the importance of personal integrity, moral values and a fair electoral process, based on informed and free choices. However, the answers also reveal a layer of complexity, in which economic pressures and material needs can influence the decision of vulnerable citizens. These contradictions highlight a systemic problem that requires a strategic approach to support an electoral culture based on integrity and information.

> *[Woman, 22, Chisinau]: "Not at all because I need to express my opinion, and the vote is only one and it must be used according to your logic."*
> *[Man, 19, Răzeni]: "I would not accept such offers."*
> *[Woman, 40, Glodeni]: "I was never asked to accept such conditions and, to be a sincere and honest person, I would not accept them. I care about the future of my country and I would not accept such conditions."*
> *[Man, 41, Chisinau]: "I am not willing to accept such a thing at all.*

Some respondents approach this question from a personal perspective, stating that their moral values, maturity and sense of civic duty prevent them from considering such

offers. However, a few acknowledge that economic pressures could influence the decision of vulnerable citizens. This highlights the close link between poor economic conditions and the predisposition to accept such corrupt practices.

> *[Woman, 37, Râșcani]: "I could even now, with the cabinet, tell the socialists that I can convince my entire extended family to vote with Dodon. But I am not the man to resort to such things."*
> *[Woman, 43, Chișinău]: "I do not support these vote-buying initiatives, but if my financial situation is precarious, I could accept it.*

The responses provided reveal a strong stance against these practices, but they also highlight structural issues related to poverty, lack of electoral education, and social inequities that can fuel electoral corruption. The need for systemic measures to remove economic pressures and protect the electoral process from external influences is evident.

Conclusions

Electoral integrity is fundamental to the functioning of democracy. It not only promotes trust in electoral processes, but also supports broader democratic ideals by ensuring that elections are fair, transparent, and accountable. As such, continued efforts to strengthen electoral systems worldwide are imperative to sustain democratic governance and public trust in political institutions.

The data and analysis on electoral integrity in the Republic of Moldova have highlighted multiple vulnerabilities that affect the democratic process, in particular the phenomenon of electoral corruption and external influences on voters. Comparative analysis of public perceptions in the pre-election and post-election periods demonstrated that electoral bribery and the use of administrative resources for political purposes continue to be widespread practices, weakening citizens' trust in the fairness of the election. In addition, media manipulation and disinformation were identified as a priori factors influencing electoral behavior, creating a distorted information environment.

According to the findings, political actors continue to feel free because the actions done by the government to stop electoral fraud are seen as insufficient. The current state of affairs emphasizes the necessity of more robust electoral monitoring changes, such as stricter penalties for fraud and greater openness in election campaign funding. Authorities in the Republic of Moldova made significant measures to fight voter corruption during the second round of presidential elections on November 3, 2024. Nonetheless, there have been numerous documented instances of corruption practices, such as buying voters with cash and virtual currency (known as MIR bank cards in the Russian Federation), photographing votes, and organizing voter transportation. Although the authorities have intensified investigations and initiated awareness-raising campaigns on the legal consequences of voter corruption, these measures have proven insufficient, and in some regions even ineffective, to completely eradicate the phenomenon or, at least, to minimize this eminent risk to state sovereignty.

These instances demonstrate the intricacy of political corruption and the necessity of a multifaceted strategy for its prevention and eradication. Not only must structural reforms be implemented, but they must also be tactically carried out at every institutional

level and throughout the electoral process, from election organization to result validation. This should involve (a) bolstering oversight institutions by enhancing the ability of organizations in charge of monitoring electoral processes and guaranteeing their independence; (b) educating citizens through civic education, which assumes the implementation of informational and educational campaigns about the significance of a free and fair vote and the repercussions of electoral corruption; (c) through transparency of the electoral process at all its stages, from campaign financing to vote counting and announcement of results.

Also, the creation of a stricter legislative framework for media regulation during electoral periods can contribute to reducing disinformation and partisan influences. In conclusion, improving the integrity of the electoral process in the Republic of Moldova requires a coordinated effort by the authorities, civil society and international organizations. Only through a systematic approach, based on transparency, accountability and firm application of the law, can public trust in elections and democratic institutions be restored.

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INGÉRENCES ÉTRANGÈRES DANS LES ÉLECTIONS PRÉSIDENTIELLES DE LA RÉPUBLIQUE DE MOLDAVIE 2024

CZU: 324:342.511(478)″2024″
https://doi.org/10.59295/eiqd.08

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Abstract. *The presidential elections on October 20, 2024, organized on the same day as the republican constitutional referendum, and the second round of the presidential elections on November 3 of the same year, represent the fifth presidential election since the independence of the Republic of Moldova. In this election, the citizens had the opportunity to directly choose the president of the country. Thus, the elections in the Republic of Moldova in 2024 are shaping up to be a decisive turning point for the future of the country. These elections were not limited to determining who will govern Moldova, but they were the elections that decided the European destiny of the Republic. From the Republic of Moldova.*

We would witness a massive Russian interference in the electoral process. Since independence, Russia has attempted to disrupt Moldovan politics using various methods, from mild to coercive. Traditionally, the left political parties in Moldova could count on the support of Russia to consolidate a diverse electorate, through different types of support — financial, symbolic, etc. Russia's relays, in economic, religious or cultural circles, its presence in Transnistria, the mass media have for a long time ensured Moscow a special place, called into question by the war in Ukraine. Russia spent about one hundred million dollars to influence the outcome of the election.

This article highlights the main aspects of the presidential elections in the Republic of Moldova, from 2024. Foreign interference in the electoral campaign in the Republic of Moldova is also reflected.

Keywords: Republic of Moldova, presidential elections, vote, interference, vote, voters, *influence*

Introduction

Les élections présidentielles (1er tour) du 20 octobre 2024, organisées le même jour que le référendum sur l'adhésion de la République de Moldavie à l'Union européenne et (2e tour) du 3 novembre, deviennent un événement historique qui a

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marqué le destin du pays. Ce sont des élections qui s'annonçaient comme un tournant décisif pour l'avenir du pays, notamment pour ses aspirations à rejoindre l'espace d'intégration européenne. Les élections présidentielles de 2024 ont également été le théâtre d'ingérences étrangères dans les affaires intérieures de la République de Moldavie. Nous avons assisté à une ingérence russe massive dans le processus électoral. Plus de trois décennies après l'effondrement de l'Union soviétique et l'accession à l'indépendance le 27 août 1991, la République de Moldavie reste l'État dans lequel la Fédération de Russie a ses propres intérêts géopolitiques et, afin de réaliser ses propres intérêts, la Russie essaie de recourir à un ensemble de méthodes, allant des méthodes douces à la coercition.

Bien que, selon les dispositions de la Charte des Nations Unies et les principes du droit international, chaque État ait le droit de déterminer son propre destin, sans que d'autres États n'interviennent dans ses affaires intérieures, nous assistons actuellement à une série d'événements sur la scène internationale dans lesquels ce principe est violé. La République de Moldavie ne fait pas exception à ce phénomène, et les élections présidentielles de 2024 en sont un exemple éloquent.

Le principe de non-ingérence dans les affaires intérieures d'un État

L'implication dans les affaires intérieures des États n'est pas seulement un phénomène ancien, mais un phénomène constant, présent dans les relations internationales. Les interventions étrangères sont loin d'être un phénomène récent, et les États ont toujours pris soin de justifier les violations les plus flagrantes de la souveraineté de ceux contre qui l'intervention était commise. Pour s'en convaincre, il suffit de se souvenir des interventions militaires contre l'Empire ottoman au XIXe siècle, dictées officiellement par le sauvetage des chrétiens persécutés, ou par la politique expansionniste du régime hitlérien, initialement fondée sur la nécessité de protéger les minorités allemandes qui ont été victimes de répressions inacceptables et, plus récemment, des actions de la Fédération de Russie en Ukraine, et notamment en République de Moldavie (Corten Olivier).

L'existence en droit international du principe de non-ingérence dans les affaires intérieures d'un État, selon lequel un État ne peut intervenir dans ce qu'on appelle généralement les affaires intérieures ou la compétence nationale, réservée ou même exclusive d'un autre État (2), a été récemment témoin d'une multitude d'ingérences dans les affaires intérieures d'autres États. Ce principe est lié au droit des peuples à disposer d'eux-mêmes, principe indiscutable du droit international. Si l'on doit se référer au phénomène d'ingérence, alors, selon les dispositions du droit international, l'ingérence désigne l'acte d'un État ou d'une organisation internationale qui intervient dans les affaires intérieures d'un pays tiers, sans son consentement. Une telle intervention contrevient à la notion de « souveraineté pleine et entière des États ». C'est pour cette raison que la Charte des Nations Unies du 26 juin 1945 a établi le principe strict de non-ingérence dans les affaires intérieures de tout État indépendant (article 27) (Ingérence, droit d'ingérence).

Ainsi, en 1965, lors de sa 21e session, l'Assemblée Générale des Nations Unies a adopté la résolution 2131 (XX), dont le dispositif a été inséré dans la résolution 2625 (XXV) du 24 octobre 1970, concernant la Déclaration relative aux principes du droit

international touchant les relations amicales et la coopération entre les États conformément à la Charte des Nations Unies. Depuis lors, la règle est inscrite dans le droit international selon laquelle tout État a le devoir de s'abstenir d'intervenir, seul ou en union avec d'autres États, directement ou indirectement et pour quelque raison que ce soit, dans les affaires intérieures ou extérieures d'un autre État. Ce principe exclut toute forme d'ingérence ou d'action qui porte atteinte à la personnalité juridique de l'État, à sa souveraineté et aux éléments politiques, économiques et culturels qui le constituent. Chaque État a le droit inaliénable de choisir son système politique, économique, social et culturel sans aucune forme d'ingérence d'un autre État. Aucun État ne peut appliquer ou encourager l'emploi de mesures économiques, politiques ou de toute autre nature pour contraindre un autre État à subordonner l'exercice de ses droits souverains et à obtenir de lui des avantages de quelque nature que ce soit. Tous les États doivent également s'abstenir d'organiser, d'aider, de promouvoir, de financer, d'encourager ou de tolérer des activités armées ou terroristes visant à changer le régime d'un autre État par la violence, ainsi que d'intervenir dans les luttes internes d'un autre État *(Ben Raies)*.

Ce principe était l'un des moyens adoptés pour assurer l'égalité entre les États souverains et promouvoir l'autodétermination des peuples (*Gräfrath*). Le principe de non-intervention dans les affaires intérieures est un principe de droit international qui interdit à tout État d'interférer dans les affaires intérieures d'un autre État.

Lorsqu'on analyse le « principe de non-ingérence » ou de non-ingérence dans les affaires intérieures d'un État, il convient de noter qu'il englobe plusieurs aspects. Premièrement, le principe interdit la menace ou l'emploi de la force armée contre un État tiers. Mais, au-delà de la menace ou de l'usage de la force, le principe de non-ingérence couvre un ensemble plus large de tout type d'ingérence dans les affaires d'un autre État. Il s'agit donc de moyens de pression politiques ou économiques qui peuvent être utilisés par un État pour s'assurer que les affaires d'un autre État soient menées comme il le souhaite, pour son propre bénéfice ou celui de ses citoyens. L'interdiction du recours à la force armée contre un autre État, qui implique une action ayant une dimension matérielle et physique, est parfois distinguée de la non-intervention et est appelée « principe de non-intervention » (*Bizeau*). Le principe de non-intervention constitue donc une norme fondamentale, mais son contenu et ses limites par rapport à d'autres normes de ce type n'ont pas encore été déterminés par le droit international moderne avec toute la précision souhaitable (Fischernon).

Le principe de non-ingérence dans les affaires intérieures des États constitue l'un des principes fondamentaux du droit international, qui régit les relations internationales. Ce principe inclut la notion de non-ingérence dans le domaine réservé à la compétence exclusive de l'État, entendue par la pratique étatique de manière extensive. En conséquence, non seulement l'intervention armée, mais aussi toute autre forme d'ingérence ou toute menace, dirigée contre la personnalité publique d'un État ou contre ses éléments politiques, économiques et culturels, est contraire au droit international et constitue un crime au regard de celui-ci. Ce principe a été consacré dans l'article 2 de la Charte des Nations Unies explicitement pour l'organisation nouvellement créée, prévoyant qu'aucune disposition de la Charte « n'autorise les Nations Unies à intervenir dans des affaires qui relèvent essentiellement de la compétence nationale d'un État »,

sauf en cas de menaces graves contre la paix internationale, de ruptures de la paix ou d'actes d'agression. Le même principe est également reconnu pour les relations entre les États (Charte des Nations Unies).

Élections présidentielles 2024

Les élections présidentielles de 2024 en République de Moldavie feront l'objet de discussions parmi les dirigeants politiques, ainsi que parmi les représentants du milieu universitaire. Dans le contexte d'une guerre active à la frontière orientale de la République de Moldavie, ainsi que dans le contexte où la Moldavie a obtenu le statut de pays candidat à l'adhésion à l'Union européenne, les élections présidentielles marqueront le destin et l'avenir du pays. Pour une meilleure compréhension de la situation créée à l'approche des élections présidentielles en République de Moldavie en 2024, il est nécessaire de passer brièvement en revue la situation créée pendant la campagne électorale présidentielle. En analysant la situation, il convient de mentionner qu'au premier tour de scrutin, le taux de participation a été de 51,75% (50,72% au référendum), dépassant le seuil de validation de 1/3 du nombre d'électeurs inscrits sur les listes électorales. Lors des élections présidentielles de 2024 en République de Moldavie, plusieurs hommes politiques et personnalités publiques ont annoncé leur intention de se présenter (Alegeri prezidențiale).

4	Vasile Tarlev Parti pour l'Avenir de la Moldavie	49 316 3,19%
5	Irina Vlah candidat indépendant	83 193 5,38%
6	Ion Chicu Parti pour le Développement et la Consolidation de la Moldavie	31 797 2,06%
7	Andrei Năstase candidat indépendant	9 946 0,64%
8	Octavian Țîcu Bloc électoral « Ensemble »	14 326 0,93%
9	Victoria Furtună candidat indépendant	68 778 4,45%
10	Tudor Ulianovschi candidat indépendant	7 995 0,52%
11	Natalia Morari candidat indépendant	9 444 0,61%

Le deuxième tour de scrutin a été organisé le 3 novembre 2024 car aucun des 11 candidats à la présidence de la République de Moldavie n'a obtenu au moins 50% des

suffrages valablement exprimés (Le vote à l'étranger en 2024). Ainsi, au second tour des élections présidentielles, les deux premiers candidats du premier tour — Maia Sandu (42,49%) et Alexandr Stoianoglo (25,95%) — se sont affrontés.

No/ ordre	**Concurrent électoral**	**II-ième tour, le 3 novembre 2024**
	Maia Sandu Parti Action et Solidarité	930 238 votes 55,35%
	Alexandr Stoianoglo Parti des Socialistes de la République de Moldavie	750 371 votes 44,65%

Les résultats définitifs du deuxième tour ont été les suivants: Maia Sandu (55,35%) et Alexandr Stoianoglo (44,65%).

Malgré l'agression russe à grande échelle contre l'Ukraine et l'ingérence intense de la Fédération de Russie, les citoyens de la République de Moldavie ayant le droit de vote, tant dans le pays qu'à l'étranger, ont participé le 20 octobre 2024 au référendum constitutionnel républicain et au premier tour des élections présidentielles. Ils se sont présentés devant l'une des urnes (dont 231 bureaux de vote ouverts dans 37 pays pour leurs compatriotes). Au total, selon les données fournies, plus de 240 mille électeurs de la diaspora, dont 1 344 ont opté pour le vote par correspondance, ont voté pour le futur président de la République de Moldavie. Pour la République de Moldavie, les élections présidentielles de 2024 ont été une première. Pour la première fois, le vote par correspondance était partiellement disponible lors des élections présidentielles et du référendum constitutionnel du 20 octobre 2024. Cela s'appliquait aux citoyens moldaves de six pays : les États-Unis, le Canada, la Norvège, la Suède, l'Islande et la Finlande. Le vote par correspondance est un moyen alternatif par lequel les citoyens de la République de Moldavie à l'étranger ont la possibilité d'exercer leur droit de vote, en utilisant les services postaux ou de messagerie. Cette méthode est réglementée par la loi n° 109/2024, qui prévoit la mise en œuvre partielle du vote par correspondance, garantissant ainsi une plus large participation au processus électoral (Le vote à l'étranger en 2024).

La campagne présidentielle de 2024 en République de Moldavie dans le contexte d'ingérence étrangère

Si l’on veut établir une corrélation entre le principe de non-ingérence dans les affaires intérieures d’un État et les élections présidentielles en République de Moldavie en 2024, il convient de mentionner qu’elles se sont déroulées dans un contexte géopolitique tendu. La présence d’une guerre active à proximité immédiate de la République de Moldavie a conditionné la présence d’une multitude de menaces à la sécurité nationale (Le vote à l'étranger en 2024). Étant donné qu'en juin 2022, la Moldavie a obtenu le statut de pays candidat à l'adhésion à l'UE et a entamé des négociations d'adhésion en juin 2024, et que la rhétorique politique concernant l'orientation géopolitique du pays s'est intensifiée, le pays est de plus en plus soumis à des ingérences étrangères. Depuis février 2022, dans le contexte de la guerre provoquée par l’invasion de l’Ukraine par la Fédération de Russie, le discours politique sur l’orientation géopolitique du pays s’est intensifié. Le gouvernement a annoncé

publiquement que la Moldavie était la cible d'une « guerre hybride » dirigée depuis l'étranger. Les autorités ont averti que la Moldavie était soumise à diverses formes d'ingérence manipulatrice visant à déstabiliser le pays, notamment le financement illicite d'acteurs politiques, des campagnes de désinformation et des cyberattaques. Les voix de l'opposition ont critiqué les contre-mesures, notamment la suspension de plusieurs agences de presse, comme étant trop restrictives (Mission d'observation électorale).

Malgré l'agression russe à grande échelle contre l'Ukraine et l'ingérence intense du Kremlin dans les processus électoraux, les élections présidentielles de 2024 ont été un moment déterminant pour la Moldavie, a déclaré Petra Bayr, chef de la délégation de l'Assemblée Parlementaire du Conseil de l'Europe. Les élections en République de Moldavie du 20 octobre 2024 s'annoncent comme un tournant décisif pour l'avenir du pays. Ce vote ne se limite pas à déterminer qui gouvernera la Moldavie, mais pourrait marquer le destin européen du pays. Cependant, cette opportunité historique a été menacée par une vague de désinformation russe et d'autres attaques hybrides, qui auraient pu compromettre le vote. À moins d'un mois des élections présidentielles, le conseiller pour la sécurité nationale de la République de Moldavie a averti que la Russie avait lancé une série d'attaques hybrides sans précédent, destinées à entraver toute avancée vers l'intégration européenne.

Si l'intégrité du processus électoral n'était pas préservée, la République de Moldavie pourrait manquer l'opportunité d'adhérer à l'Union européenne (UE) en raison de l'ingérence russe. L'une des principales affirmations trompeuses véhiculées par les médias pro-russes portait sur le fait que le référendum constitutionnel en Moldavie est en réalité une tentative cachée d'abroger le principe de neutralité de la République de Moldavie en le remplaçant dans la Constitution par l'objectif de l'adhésion à l'UE. Cela ouvrirait la voie à l'intégration à l'OTAN, mettant ainsi en péril la sécurité du pays.

La menace russe sur les élections moldaves et sur les institutions de l'État en général ne doit pas être sous-estimée. La présence d'oligarques pro-russes en République de Moldavie exerce une influence considérable sur le pays et domine la vie économique, politique et publique. En outre, la Moldavie est également confrontée au problème de la région séparatiste de Transnistrie, étroitement liée à la Russie, sur le territoire de laquelle sont stationnées des militaires russes. Malgré des ressources humaines et financières limitées, la République de Moldavie a néanmoins réussi à mettre en œuvre plusieurs réformes clés pour renforcer ses institutions démocratiques face aux ingérences extérieures. Cependant, la lutte contre la corruption dans le système judiciaire reste un défi pour le pays. Pour réformer le système judiciaire, condition essentielle à l'adhésion à l'UE, le gouvernement a mis en place un processus de sélection dans lequel les juges et les procureurs sont évalués sur leur intégrité éthique et financière. On suppose que certains juges, sympathisants de la Fédération de Russie, ont tenté de perturber le processus électoral, sachant que leurs antécédents risquaient de les disqualifier dans cette évaluation et de les priver de pouvoir et de perspectives professionnelles dans un État réformé.

En outre, l'intégrité du processus électoral dépend en grande partie de la régulation des médias. Le paysage médiatique moldave est marqué par sa forte concentration entre les mains de quelques groupes, souvent affiliés à des intérêts pro-russes. La Commission européenne a signalé une concentration des médias parmi des

groupes affiliés à des oligarques en fuite et liés au groupe médiatique d'État russe RTR. Ainsi, au cours de la période 2022-2023, sur recommandation des services de renseignement de la République de Moldavie, douze chaînes de télévision diffusant principalement du contenu russe ont été suspendues. Ces chaînes étaient prétendument contrôlées par des individus sanctionnés au niveau international et fournissaient une couverture inexacte de la guerre en Ukraine. Les mesures de suspension ont été prises à la lumière d'éléments montrant que la Russie utilisait ces canaux pour porter atteinte au processus démocratique par le biais de campagnes de désinformation. En septembre 2024, la Moldavie a pris de nouvelles mesures en interdisant cinq médias publics russes.

La Cour constitutionnelle de la République de Moldavie a récemment entravé les tentatives du pouvoir exécutif de réguler les médias et d'assurer une couverture impartiale des campagnes électorales. La disposition en question limitait les apparitions des candidats dans des programmes audiovisuels qui ne sont pas spécifiquement liés aux élections, tels qu'expressément définis dans les politiques éditoriales de la presse. Cette mesure visait à limiter les discussions sur les questions électorales à des programmes spécifiques répertoriés par les médias et contrôlés par le Conseil de l'audiovisuel. En juillet 2024, la Cour a déclaré cette disposition inconstitutionnelle, estimant qu'elle imposait une restriction excessive à la liberté de la presse (*Maréchal*).

Un autre moment qui dénote l'implication étrangère dans les affaires intérieures de la République de Moldavie, notamment dans les processus électoraux en général, et dans le processus électoral de 2024 en particulier, fait référence au financement des groupes pro-russes. Il a été établi que la plus grande concentration d'argent sale envoyé par la Russie via le groupe criminel Shor, pour influencer les élections en Moldavie, se trouve dans la région autonome de Gagaouzie (dans le sud) et à Balti, selon les estimations des autorités de la République de Moldavie. Les efforts visant à contrecarrer le référendum en Moldavie ont coûté à la Fédération de Russie plus de 100 millions d'euros. L'argent a été dépensé pour des actions de désinformation et de déstabilisation de la société, ainsi que pour l'achat de votes (par le biais de paiements directs aux électeurs). Ainsi, début octobre 2024, les forces de l'ordre moldaves ont déjoué un stratagème consistant à corrompre environ 130 000 personnes en Moldavie (soit 5 % de la population moldave) au moyen de cartes électroniques pour boycotter le référendum du 20 octobre, un jour qui coïncidait avec les élections présidentielles. Selon les estimations des autorités de Chisinau, ces sources de financement ont coûté à la Fédération de Russie et au groupe Shor plus de 15 millions d'euros.

Condamné en 2023 pour fraude bancaire pour avoir volé près d'un milliard de dollars à trois banques du pays, Shor est considéré comme l'homme clé dans l'organisation de manœuvres de déstabilisation en Russie. Sur le réseau social Telegram, il accuse régulièrement « l'État policier » moldave d'être devenu une « marionnette obéissante » de l'Occident. Son parti politique – qui porte également son propre nom – a été interdit en 2023 *(*Barnaud).

Le Service de sécurité et de renseignement de la République de Moldavie a recueilli et analysé des données indiquant un niveau d'intensité sans précédent des actions commises par la Fédération de Russie visant à ancrer la République de Moldavie dans sa sphère d'influence. Le mécanisme hybride appliqué vise principalement à attaquer les processus démocratiques et à compromettre le vecteur d'intégration

européenne. Sur la base des données opérationnelles collectées, confirmées et systématisées par le SIS, il a été démontré que la Fédération de Russie maintient comme objectif stratégique l'attraction de la République de Moldavie dans sa zone d'influence. Dans ce contexte, les objectifs tactiques poursuivis pour les deux prochaines années étaient :

1) Pour 2024 – compromettre le référendum sur l'intégration européenne, interférer dans les élections présidentielles, ainsi que compromettre les candidats politiques qui s'y associent.

2) Pour 2025 – l'adhésion des partis politiques sous l'influence de la Fédération de Russie au Parlement de la République de Moldavie dans le but de créer une majorité pro-russe ou au moins modérée en faveur de l'intégration européenne.

Les données pointent vers une stratégie pour 2024-2025, qui comprendra 3 éléments principaux, intercalés les uns avec les autres :

- Soutenir les acteurs politiques sous le contrôle direct ou indirect de la Fédération de Russie.
- Des acteurs politiques se déclarent ouvertement pro-russes. Ils ont des liens directs et confirmés avec les services spéciaux, les consultants politiques, les groupes du crime organisé, l'administration présidentielle du Kremlin et les groupes oligarchiques.

En 2024, les actions d'influence de la Fédération de Russie se concentreront sur les domaines suivants :

- Le référendum sur l'intégration européenne sera la cible d'un discrédit. Le scénario appliqué comprend la création de conditions pour réduire la participation électorale et/ou compromettre l'idée du référendum : selon les évaluations, la partie russe compte sur l'option du « boycott », du « vote contre » et/ou de la formulation d'une question dans le cadre du référendum/véhicule informationnel qui associerait l'intégration européenne à l'adhésion à des alliances et blocs militaires. Dans le même temps, pour la période à venir, il est prévu d'intensifier l'espace d'information, y compris les messages selon lesquels « l'intégration européenne de la République de Moldavie équivaut à la perte de neutralité et au dégel du conflit militaire transnistrain ».
- Aux élections présidentielles de 2024 et législatives de 2025, l'objectif est de saper les chances des candidats pro-européens tout en renforçant un candidat agréable (soit directement contrôlé par le régime du Kremlin, soit avec des vues antirusses modérées, avec lequel il sera possible, plus tard «arriver au pouvoir de discuter »).

Les éléments d'influence hybride de la Fédération de Russie reposent sur l'ingérence dans les affaires intérieures de la République de Moldavie avec la participation d'acteurs politiques, de structures associatives/groupes d'influence pro-russes, de sociétés d'analyse d'informations liées au facteur russe, ainsi que des groupes distincts de citoyens financés clandestinement par des centres subversifs extérieurs. Sur la base de la situation actuelle, la force motrice, y compris celle qui est encline à prendre des mesures qui provoquent la radicalisation et la violence, est le groupe de Shor, à travers ses extensions sociopolitiques, dont la tâche principale pour 2024 est de compromettre les résultats du référendum.

Certaines données témoignent également d'indicateurs de la renaissance de la doctrine « souveraine/étatiste » de la Fédération de Russie en République de Moldavie. Le vecteur d'action des groupes dits « étatistes » a axé leur rhétorique sur des principes populistes, des « approches prétendument patriotiques-nationalistes » - l'aspect de la souveraineté, de la neutralité, l'approche du principe « par nous-mêmes ». Dans le même temps, certaines de ces entités liées à la doctrine ont bénéficié d'un soutien financier direct et/ou indirect du groupe « ȘOR », et leurs actifs sont mis en évidence par des vues pro-russes évidentes. Il est fort probable que ces structures soient guidées par les services de renseignement russes ou par des centres d'influence de la Fédération de Russie liés à l'administration présidentielle du Kremlin, et diffusent les récits stratégiques promus par la Fédération Russe concernant la République de Moldavie. À cet égard, des indicateurs d'ingérence russe dans les affaires intérieures de la République de Moldavie ont été étudiés, notamment dans la perspective de la réanimation d'éléments de la « cinquième colonne », camouflés sous l'« intérêt national souverain ». En outre, dans le contexte des élections présidentielles, des prémisses ont été tracées pour une coalition, sous les auspices de la Fédération de Russie, des forces susmentionnées, avec l'attraction d'autres forces étatistes, afin de promouvoir les spéculations concernant « l'atteinte à la souveraineté par le biais de l'intégration européenne» (Évaluation de l'implication).

Lors du scrutin présidentiel et du référendum sur l'appartenance à l'Union européenne d'octobre 2024, des tentatives d'ingérence ont été détectées. Ainsi, le 17 octobre, la police a annoncé avoir identifié un réseau d'une centaine d'individus soupçonnés d'avoir été entraînés pour provoquer des troubles dans le pays lors des élections qui devaient avoir lieu le 20 octobre. À la suite des actions opérationnelles de la police, plusieurs autres suspects ont été arrêtés – des jeunes d'une vingtaine d'années, qui auraient été envoyés en Russie, en Serbie et en Bosnie-Herzégovine pour suivre une formation dans le but de perturber le scrutin (Géopolitique). Comme le souligne le Parlement européen, les autorités ont découvert un « système de fraude électorale à grande échelle, financé par l'oligarque I. Shor, qui impliquait le transfert de 15 millions de dollars à 130 000 Moldaves » via des comptes bancaires ouverts en Fédération de Russie.

Selon la police citée par la presse moldave, environ 130 personnes étaient chargées de coordonner ces activités de corruption, tandis que 2.000 autres étaient chargées de recruter des candidats pour le vote « non » au référendum et le vote positif en faveur du candidat pro-russe. Plus de 50 000 membres du réseau ont pu recueillir des données auprès d'environ 70 000 électeurs. Ils auraient tous été payés pour leurs actes, entre 200 et 11 000 lei (10 à 560 euros). Dans l'organisation du système de sabotage du processus démocratique, le principal suspect est I. Shor, qui a promis en septembre 2024 sur la chaîne Telegram qu'il verserait une rémunération à tous ceux qui voteraient contre le référendum européen. Ainsi, la vidéo en ligne citée par CNN, « Si vous avez bien fait et que la majorité des gens de votre région ont voté contre, le bonus que vous recevrez personnellement de ma part sur votre carte sera de 5 000 lei, soit 260 euros», sert de preuve des crimes.

Parmi les preuves saisies par la police au cours de l'enquête figurent d'importantes sommes d'argent et des dizaines de milliers de tracts en faveur du «non», comme l'a rapporté Sky News en direct depuis un entrepôt de Chisinau. « Ici, vous pouvez voir

d'énormes piles d'affiches ou de tracts qui auraient été distribués et qui disent „votez non au référendum”. D'un côté il y a les Russes, de l'autre côté il y a les Moldaves. » « Plus de 100 jeunes ont participé à de telles formations en juin, sous prétexte de participer à un programme culturel et touristique », détaillent les autorités, décrivant une série de formations, notamment « des tactiques visant à déstabiliser l'ordre constitutionnel». En outre, comme preuve de l'ingérence de la Fédération de Russie dans les élections présidentielles de 2024 en République de Moldavie, nous servons également l'arrestation, le 11 juin 2024, par la police moldave de passagers arrivant de Moscou par avion. Certains des instructeurs seraient liés à Wagner, un groupe paramilitaire russe en déclin depuis la mort de son chef en août 2023 dans un accident d'avion. D’autres citoyens, dont des Moldaves, ont été formés en Bosnie-Herzégovine et en Serbie, où ils ont suivi une formation plus longue, de début septembre à mi-octobre.

Les enquêtes ont permis de découvrir un système massif d'achat de voix, impliquant des dizaines de milliers de Moldaves payés pour insérer des bulletins anti-Sandu et anti-UE dans les urnes. Selon les déclarations du chef de la police V. Cernăuteanu, en raison de l'ampleur et de la complexité du mécanisme, ces actions de la Fédération de Russie représentent un « phénomène sans précédent ». Un constat corroboré par une étude du New Strategy Center, basé en Roumanie, affirme qu'entre fausses informations et système massif d'achat de voix, « l'ingérence russe a atteint un niveau sans précédent » (*Le président sortant pro-UE).* Selon les données du Service de renseignement et de sécurité de Chisinau, parmi les coordinateurs des actions du groupe en Moldavie figurent les citoyens étrangers Konstantin Goloskokov et Mikhaïl Potepkine - ce dernier étant soumis à des sanctions internationales. Potepkine est connu pour ses liens avec « Wagner » et l'organisation russe « Ferma », impliquée dans le financement et l'organisation des actions de déstabilisation de 2023 en Moldavie (*Calugareanu)*.

Ce n’est pas la première fois que la Moldavie est la cible de tentatives de déstabilisation venues de l’Est. Lors des élections locales de décembre 2023, des discours de désinformation tels que la „russophobie imposée par l'Occident” ont circulé dans tout le pays via les réseaux Facebook », confirme la plateforme indépendante Open Global Rights. De fausses pages ont été créées depuis juillet via le réseau publicitaire de Facebook pour promouvoir des intérêts et des personnalités pro-russes comme Ilan Shor, selon des données de l'ONG Reset publiées dans Le Monde. Des deepfakes ciblant le président M. Sandu ont également circulé. Selon Reset, le coût total de l'opération a été estimé entre 198 000 et 280 000 euros (Quevrain). Au lendemain du référendum du 20 octobre, le Kremlin a immédiatement dénoncé des « anomalies » dans le décompte des voix, et la presse russe s'est empressée d'évoquer une « manipulation » du vote (ibidem).

Les députés soulignent le rôle joué par une multitude d'acteurs malveillants, tels que les oligarques moldaves pro-russes et le réseau RT financé par la Russie, dans la fraude électorale, ainsi que dans les cyberopérations et la guerre de l'information. Ils appellent également l’UE et ses États membres à veiller à ce que toute l’assistance nécessaire soit fournie à la Moldavie pour renforcer ses mécanismes institutionnels et sa capacité à répondre aux menaces hybrides.

Le second tour des élections présidentielles du 3 novembre 2024 s’est déroulé dans un contexte d’accusations d’ingérence étrangère et d’allégations d’achat de voix et

d’intimidation des électeurs. En outre, selon les données de la police de la République de Moldavie, des « preuves raisonnables » ont été trouvées concernant des transports organisés et illégaux vers des bureaux de vote à l'intérieur du pays et à l'étranger. En outre, selon les déclarations des responsables de la police de la République de Moldavie, des activités de «transport aérien de la Russie vers la Biélorussie, l'Azerbaïdjan et la Turquie» de personnes susceptibles de déstabiliser la situation en République de Moldavie ont été détectée (Accusations d'achat de votes).

Selon la vice-première ministre moldave chargée de l'intégration européenne, Cristina Gherasimov, la Moldavie est désormais un terrain d'essai pour les nouvelles méthodes subversives de la Russie, « et tout ce qui fonctionne en Moldavie sera utilisé plus tard dans d'autres pays ». Il met en garde contre les tentatives sans précédent du Kremlin visant à saper les institutions démocratiques, notamment par la violence armée, les explosifs et les drones. L'objectif de la Russie, selon C. Gherasimenco, est d'empêcher la République de Moldavie d'adhérer à l'UE. Le porte-parole du Conseil de sécurité nationale américain, John Kirby, a également évoqué l'ingérence de la Fédération de Russie dans les élections présidentielles en République de Moldavie. Selon les déclarations de Kirby, « la Russie tente de saboter les élections présidentielles en République de Moldavie et a dépensé des millions de dollars pour y parvenir ». La même chose est confirmée par le président du Conseil européen, Charles Michel, qui a averti dans la lettre envoyée aux 27 dirigeants européens que « la République de Moldavie fait face à des moments cruciaux pour son parcours européen ». Le 17 octobre 2024, le Conseil de l’UE a condamné l’ingérence de la Russie dans le processus électoral en République de Moldavie. Peter Stano, le porte-parole de la Commission européenne, a également noté que le vote s'est déroulé dans un contexte d'ingérence et d'intimidation sans précédent de la part de la Russie (...) visant à déstabiliser le processus démocratique en République de Moldavie (Moldavie: l’UE dénonce).

Le secrétaire général de l'OTAN, Mark Rutte, a également réagi à l'ingérence de la Fédération de Russie dans les élections présidentielles en République de Moldavie. Selon lui, la Russie tente de détourner la trajectoire européenne de la République de Moldavie. Il a salué le leadership de Maia Sandu et a déclaré que, par ce qu'elle fait, elle tente de construire une démocratie stable en Moldavie, capable de se protéger, en particulier, de « l'ingérence hybride russe » (Calugareanu).

Dans ce contexte, les déclarations du Premier ministre polonais Donald Tusk, qui a salué le vote positif de la République de Moldavie sur l’adhésion à l’UE, méritent également l’attention. « Exaspérer Moscou, impressionner l’Europe, sauver le pays une fois de plus – c’est Maia Sandu. » Le président de la Commission européenne a salué le vote de la Moldavie en faveur de l'adhésion à l'UE, malgré les « stratégies hybrides » russes. « […] La Moldavie montre qu’elle est indépendante, qu’elle est forte et qu’elle veut un avenir européen », a écrit Ursula von der Leyen sur un réseau social : « Maia Sandu, qui a tourné le dos à Moscou après l’invasion de l’Ukraine et a porté la candidature de son pays à Bruxelles, convoquant le référendum pour valider sa stratégie et déterminer le sort de cette ancienne république soviétique de 2,6 millions d'habitants (Moldavie: l’UE dénonce).

Dans le contexte créé par plusieurs accusations d'ingérence de la Fédération de Russie dans les élections présidentielles en République de Moldavie, le porte-parole de

la présidence russe, Dmitri Peskov, a exigé des « preuves » concernant les « accusations graves » du pro-Président européen de la République de Moldavie. Selon Peskov, « il est difficile d'expliquer l'augmentation des votes en faveur de M. Sandu et de l'adhésion à l'UE ». « Toute personne familière avec les processus électoraux peut détecter des anomalies dans l'augmentation de ces votes », a déclaré Peskov. En outre, pour défendre sa position, le porte-parole russe a dénoncé qu'il y avait "une campagne électorale non libre" en République de Moldavie, et que Moscou voit "combien de personnes ne sont pas favorables à l'idéologie des actions du président sortant".

Conclusions

En analysant l'ingérence de la Fédération de Russie dans les élections présidentielles en République de Moldavie, nous pouvons certainement dire que la Moldavie est un exemple de la manière dont les démocraties libérales en développement doivent se protéger de la désinformation et de l'ingérence étrangère. Les autres démocraties libérales devraient observer ce qui se passe en Moldavie et tirer les leçons de son expérience. Pour la Moldavie, ces élections représentent un tournant décisif. Plus de trois décennies après l'effondrement de l'Union soviétique et l'accession à l'indépendance le 27 août 1991, la République de Moldavie reste un État qui continue de choisir son avenir. La victoire des forces pro-européennes devient synonyme de rapprochement du pays avec l'Union européenne et d'une éventuelle adhésion. La République de Moldavie, une ancienne république soviétique, s'efforce de sortir de la sphère d'influence de la Fédération de Russie, mais la Russie, à son tour, intensifie ses efforts pour la maintenir dans sa sphère d'influence.

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DEVELOPMENT OF CONCEPTUAL APPARATUS OF THE CONTEMPORARY SECURITY STUDIES FOR BETTER ANALYSIS OF SECURING GOOD GOVERNANCE AND DEMOCRACY*

CZU: 355.02 + 321.7
https://doi.org/10.59295/eiqd.09

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Abstract.
The rigor of adapting the conceptual-methodological apparatus specific to the security field currently requires important adjustments in the context of the expansion and deepening of security issues. The diversity of security challenges raises new questions and generates new perspectives for researchers of security phenomena and processes, especially of the democratic processes as well of the securing good governance. So that security research, for a more in-depth understanding of it, acquires important new and novel conceptual-methodological valences in correlation with the general desideratum of the survival of democracy by enhancing good governance, in conditions of the contemporary unprecedented security crisis on a global level, after the Second World War. Security becomes a way, a fundamental condition, an important resource for the foundation of a new framework of analysis in a security context, modeled and flexible, depending on the optimal course towards achieving the general goal of the academic community and the whole society, that of solving sustainable security issues. Thus, the expansion of the conceptual-theoretical framework of the field of security in correlation with the methodological set of human security is able to present, analyze and find viable solutions to contemporary complex and interdisciplinary challenges.

Keywords*: national security, human security, methodology, democracy, good governance*

The notion of security was reevaluated at the end of the Cold War, in the context of new realities, so that the importance of state security diminished, being replaced by new risks, dangers and threats of a political, economic, social, ecological nature, etc. Consequently, an increase in the importance of the non-military dimension of security

*The article is developed within the research subprogram: *01.05.01 Securitatea națională a Republicii Moldova în contextul aderării la Uniunea Europeană: abordări juridice, politologice și sociologice.*

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was generated (Sprincean, 2017: p. 28). Human security, as a new constructivist conception in security studies, determined the emergence of new perspectives on security as a global social phenomenon (Thakur, 1997: p. 54). Optimizing the management of the human security sector aims to consolidate social well-being by raising the level of ensuring the security of the person and human communities, focused on respecting and promoting the interests and needs of the human individual, and the security interests of the state becoming subsidiary, derivative, but also inferior in priority to the security of the citizen, but with a greater degree of achievement than in the past. Human security involves ensuring the protection of individuals taken individually, but also as a social whole (Sprincean, 2016: p. 145). This is possible by ensuring the living and living conditions, the fundamental needs of the human person (Sprincean, Sprincean, Hadjiu, 2024: p. 45). Thus, individual security is based on strategic benchmarks, among which the aim of educating, training and developing the fundamental qualities and virtues of the person stands out, in order to prepare them to face security risks and threats (Sprincean, Becciu, 2021: p. 98). The security of the person, of the human individual, was conceived as a primary element of the security construction, including the system of ensuring national security (Sprincean, 2020: p. 374).

Concern for the well-being of the person, his freedoms, for his security and safety, but also for respect for the human being, in the most general sense, have been fundamental topics since antiquity, for the thinkers of Ancient Greece, first of all for Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, who laid the foundations of the democratic decision-making system with strict connection of the good governance, based on respect for the free vote of the majority of citizens (Sprincean, 2017: p. 87). These important philosophers of antiquity substantiated the principles of the functioning of society, also referring to the need to respect human rights, private property and freedom of expression (Sprincean, 2024: p. 24).

Although the issue of the well-being of human civilization in conditions of safety and respect for the rights and freedoms of the person stands out as an older concern in the history of human thought, the human security paradigm has managed to bring a new breath of fresh air to security studies only in the last 2-3 decades, transforming and replacing the dominant, realistically-based conception of state security in a chaotic world, where only military force can ensure true protection (Sprincean, 2019: p. 39).

The notion of security, throughout the evolution of history and social consciousness, has always been a controversial and widely debated topic, both in specialist circles and by the public concerned with the effective satisfaction of the most fundamental needs of society and the human person, such as the need for security and shelter (Sprincean, 2023: p. 205). According to the illustrious researcher A. Maslow, man's interest in personal security and safety, from the beginning of the formation of the human individual as a social entity, has been an essential concern in the structure of the pyramid of needs, a theory first exposed in 1943 in his work "A Theory of Human Motivation". This conception, belonging to A. Maslow, represents one of the first attempts to approach the issue of security from a behavioral-psychological perspective, emphasizing the needs of the human individual in the context of the personal approach to the notion of security, which is eminently a social-historical category from the point of view of its genesis, taking into account the entire historical evolution of humanity (Maslow, 1943: p. 376).

The conceptualization of the notion of security in contemporary scientific research has been carried out from multiple perspectives, belonging to well-crystallized and well-argued schools and directions in the last two centuries (Sprincean, 2024: p. 311). The traditional-realist school, the liberal-idealist, behavioral, constructivist and others, have determined the evolution of the concept of security as a characteristic of the power of state institutions in relation to other entities in the international arena (in the traditionalist sense), or as a specific synergistic state of all types of systems: technical, social and biological (in the post-non-classical sense) (Sprincean, 2022: p. 211). Likewise, security acquires the meaning of systemic balance, harmonization of social relations and prosperity of society, reflected especially at the individual level, that of the human personality or as a measure of things and a reference element for all types of social subsystems (Sprincean, Mitrofanov, 2021: p. 56).

However, security studies have a less extensive history and evolution compared to the system of social sciences and most socio-political theories, designating a relatively complex area with multiple interdisciplinary aspects that have as their object of research, in most cases, the problem of ensuring security that directly targets the subjective and objective aspects of anticipating dangers and estimating risks, as well as the manifestation of vulnerabilities and consequences of the weakness of socio-political systems (Sprincean, 2023: p. 42). The dual perspective, subjective-objective, of awareness of security issues was studied among the first by A. Wolfers, an important theorist of the security phenomenon who, in his work published in 1962 - "Discord and collaboration: Essays on international politics", mentioned the idea that security, along with well-being, is a value and a way in which a nation can achieve a superior position compared to other nations. But, unlike well-being, which refers more to material aspects and implies the ability to control the entire spectrum of the actions of others, "security in the objective sense denotes the absence of threats to acquired values, and in the subjective sense - the absence of fear that these values could be attacked" (Wolfers, 1962: p. 48).

According to dictionaries, the word security means "to be free from any danger; a feeling of trust and security that the absence of any danger confers; protection, defense, etc." (Sprincean, 2020: p. 122). These meanings of the term "security" denote once again the double aspect (subjective-objective) of the word in question (Sprincean, 2024: p. 234). This bidirectional aspect naturally folds into the constructivist conception, launched at the end of the 20th century, since security can no longer be perceived exclusively in the context of the national interests of the state, but must be extended to the human individual (Sprincean, 2010: p. 115). In this context, B. Buzan, the founder of the Copenhagen School of Security, in 1993, in his work “People, States, and Fear: An Agenda for International Security Studies in the Post-Cold War Era”, notes the shortcomings of the realist and liberal conception of security, as well as the ambiguity of this term, considering that the perception of security, as a product of power in the traditional sense, or as a consequence of peace in the idealistic sense, does not contribute to a complete explanation of the notion (Buzan, 2000: p. 191). The illustrious researcher argues that, in the traditional sense, security is an ideologized, politicized, limited concept, because, if it is only a consequence of military power, it has no means of identifying new threats, being subordinated to the specifics of strategic studies and

becoming dependent on the evolution of technology. In B. Buzan's vision, the concept of security becomes a subjective one, socially transposed, but built on the perception of objective data and facts (Sprincean, 2016: p. 465).

Given the amplification of the global crisis and its threat to the existence of man on Earth, solving the problem of humanity's survival in decent conditions, ensuring all the necessary premises for a high standard of living for each individual, but also for humanity as a whole, in the subsequent periods after overcoming the crises that threaten contemporary civilization, depends largely on finding a functional formula for establishing efficient social control, including through various mass media sources, over the social management process, especially in the case of the managerial process using advanced biological and informational technologies, to which the vast majority of the population does not have access, in order to ensure a sustainable development of the entire human civilization under conditions of equity (Sprincean, 2019: p. 92). Thus, a series of mechanisms can be noted that must be implemented to achieve this goal, being in a systemic interdependence (Sprincean, 2019: p. 10). Democratizing access to political and social decisions of cardinal importance for society, implementation of the patterns and principals of the good governance, strengthening the legal system and the defense of human rights and freedoms, increasing the importance of the scientific substantiation of the governance process and socio-political projects, important mechanisms but which are far surpassed by the mediator role in establishing an efficient social control over the decision-making process in the socio-political sphere, of strengthening and supporting the media as the fourth power in the state and that of the ethical expertise of the projects, policies and macro-social strategies proposed to be implemented in social practice by the political elites (Sprincean, 2022: p. 99).

Naturally and logically, a series of new concepts have been deduced and built on the safeguarding of humanity by overcoming the impasse in which human civilization finds itself at the contemporary stage of evolution, divided into several directions and approaches, depending on civilizational and political factors (Sprincean, 2019: p. 109). Consequently, a series of normative fields and disciplines have been highlighted, with a real praxiological and applicative potential as practical institutional mechanisms with a significant social impact in the process of forming the political behavior of the human person (Sprincean, 2019: p. 31).

Thus, in the context of the socioeconomic and political situation created at the contemporary stage in the evolution of humanity, which denotes a deep impasse in which human civilization finds itself, the emergence and development of various ethical concepts, based on traditional sociocultural structures and constructions, is affirmed as a progressive vision, capable of identifying acceptable directions and ways to resolve the global crisis (Sprincean, Cozonac, 2022: p. 130). In this way, the delimitation and consolidation of different ethical models is asserted as an additional way of political behavioral formation, through the diversity and originality of humanity's potential for self-evaluation, mobilization and self-protection in critical moments, such as the current period, dominated by the danger and threats of the global crisis (Sprincean, 2021: p. 72).

Contemporary science seems to manifest itself as a solution to the dangers outlined above (Sprincean, 2016: p. 82). Namely, the most advanced science and technologies represent a well-cohesive diversity of ideas and paradigms, methodologies

and theoretical constructions, which are well developed and ready to be applied in practice, in the event of a possible crisis of human praxis and which, in extreme situations, would be able to provide substantial support and assistance to the effort of Homo Sapiens to find effective solutions in short periods of time, by educating it and forming adequate political-behavioral reactions (Sprincean, 2022: p. 162). This is beginning to become, and over time will represent, a strategic direction for the development of future science. It is about the express increase of the capacity of science to be more mobile, more flexible, more malleable and more open to possible inconveniences and changes of the traditional principles of science (Sprincean, 2023: p. 160). The non-traditional, inventive and new begins to dominate scientific thinking as well as the profane one and, over a period of time, inevitably, this principle will also be exacerbated and exaggerated as a pillar of scientific knowledge of the future during the unprecedented crisis that will threaten humanity with its disappearance (Sprincean, 2022: p. 347). The erosion of the basic pillars, of the fundamental postulates with the passage of time and with the change of priorities, is as natural and natural, within the development of science, as for the organization and functioning of the social body, in the perspective of reforming the set of political-behavioral models (Sprincean, 2023: p. 30).

Efficient social control can be imposed in the field of applying advanced technologies in the security and defense sphere by establishing and institutionalizing the obligation of ethical expertise (similar to ethical expertise in research) of social, political, ecological or security projects, programs or projects, with implications in the sphere of protecting individual, group, state or regional and international integrity (Sprincean, 2020: p. 71).

The issue of human security was first addressed by the UN in 1992 in the "Agenda for Peace: Preventive Diplomacy, Peacemaking and Peacekeeping" – a report in which UN Secretary-General B. Boutros-Ghali highlighted the need for an "integrated approach to human security" in the context of peacemaking processes in the post-Cold War era, with the aim of elucidating the root causes of conflicts of various levels in that period around the world and in Europe, with a decisive impact on the economic, social and political spheres (An Agenda for Peace). At the current stage, security through this prism is no longer considered the simple absence of war and violence in a given region, but constitutes a comprehensive and complex approach, based on three fundamental principles: (1) The absence or freedom from fear, also treated as security against violence; (2) Freedom from the need for food and nutrition for personal protection, medical care and health security or housing and environmental security; and (3) Freedom to live in dignity through the promotion of the principles of sustainable human development and the protection of human rights.

The 1994 UNDP Human Development Report established the concept of human security worldwide. In the Report, human security was presented as a new concept that imposed the primacy of ensuring the security of the person, replacing the traditional concept of security centered on state security (Raportul de Dezvoltare Umană al Programului Națiunilor Unite pentru Dezvoltare, 1994). Human security was defined only in a double sense, as freedom from fear and as freedom from need (Sprincean, 2023: p. 101).

In March 1999, the Government of Japan, in collaboration with the UN Secretariat, established the UN Human Security Trust Fund. The purpose of this fund

was to provide financial and logistical support for UN projects in the field of strengthening human security in the most vulnerable and affected regions from the perspective of human security, as well as activities, actions and initiatives aimed at increasing the operational impact of human security activities.

A special role in the development of the concept of human security was played by the 2003 Report "Human Security Now" of the UN Commission on Human Security, which argued that human security aims to protect the vital essence of all beings in such a way that these actions enhance human freedoms and the possibilities for human achievement (The Report Human Security Now). The report separates threats into two types: critical or severe and persuasive or widespread. Human security has been assigned seven specific sectors: economic, food, health, environmental, personal, community and political security.

The report repeatedly emphasizes the specificity of human security to be treated only in systemic coherence with the defense of human rights and human development, putting forward new approaches to strengthening human security in two ways: 1) through protection and 2) through the empowerment of the person concerned or the community. The importance of the Report in question is also underlined by the fact that it specifies for the first time the five human elements of the common concept of security, rights and development: 1) focus on the human person, 2) the multisectoral aspect of the concept, 3) comprehensiveness, 4) contextuality and 5) orientation towards the prevention of dangers (Sprincean, 2019: p. 15).

Human security as a concept, although belonging to an earlier stage of security studies, from the perspective of defining its basic components: freedom from needs, freedom from fear and the right to live with dignity, remains the source of inspiration for the next step in the development of security theory, because it supports the achievement of the objectives of the concept of sustainable development and the resolution of individual security threats (Sprincean, 2019: p. 494).

The process of re-evaluating the scale of military threats in the context of ensuring international security was determined by the end of the Cold War. In this context, the perception of security issues was generated by the general assessment of possible security threats and risks (Sprincean, 2022: p. 162). Based on this, the security of the person, of the human individual, was conceived as a fundamental element of the construction of the security system, including its subsystem of ensuring national security. Therefore, the phenomenon of security was reinvented, reevaluated and made aware in the context of new realities, so that the importance of state security decreased, being replaced by concerns for new risks, dangers and threats, such as those related to climate change, social processes, degradation of ecology and the state of the environment, etc. (Sprincean, 2021: p. 109). As a result, an increase in the importance of non-military dimensions of security was generated. Human security, as a new constructivist conception in security studies, led to the emergence of new perspectives on security as a global social phenomenon, being a conception produced by the critical approach of neorealism.

Human security involves ensuring the protection of individuals taken individually, but also as a social whole. This is possible by ensuring the living conditions, the fundamental needs of the human person. Individual security is based on strategic

benchmarks that highlight the purpose of educating, training and developing the fundamental qualities and virtues of the person, in order to prepare him to face immediate risks and threats related to security (Sprincean, 2019: p. 482). These benchmarks represent a foundation for strengthening the mechanisms for ensuring human security at the beginning of the XXIst century (Sprincean, 2024: p. 221).

In this context, it is important to analyze the process of ensuring human security in the context of globalization, emphasizing the ways of achieving global transformations in the field of security, the investigations being directed, mainly, to bring to light the current processes of reconfiguring positions regarding the good governance and resizing democratization in the context of improving the mechanisms that ensure the security of the human person and humanity as a whole (Sprincean, 2019: p. 45). Optimization of the management of the human security sector aims to consolidate social well-being by increasing the level of security of the person and human communities, being focused on respecting and promoting the interests and needs of the human individual and the security interests of the state, becoming subsidiary, derivative, but also inferior in priority to the security of the citizen, but with a higher degree of achievement than in the past (Suhrke, 1999: p. 271).

In the context of new types of warfare, which we have the opportunity to analyze based on the example of the general war launched on 24.02.2022 by Russia in Ukraine, the issue of biological weapons is on the propaganda agenda of the belligerent parties, but without materializing practically to a massive extent. However, in the context of new types of warfare, the use of biological weapons cannot be detected immediately and unequivocally, given the specificity of these weapons, which retain an important potential for use.

In the context of the system of security studies and political sciences, the concern for human security becomes of increased importance due to the methodological arsenal, capable of making it available to other disciplines in order to conceptualize and study with much greater efficiency the specific issues of political processes and institutions in correlation with contemporary changes and influences, largely related to the technological offensive corroborated with a continuous galloping diminution of the rigor of the application and ethical control over political, military and hybrid action.

The issue of security is undergoing significant changes under the impact of the security challenges of the third decade of the XXIst century. In the context in which researchers' attention is increasingly focused on the conceptual and methodological development and expansion of the security phenomenon, new specific categories are required that would bring to the attention of the scientific community certain new perspectives that will have the potential to explain and conceptualize the security phenomenon in new terms (Sprincean, Sohoțchi, 2021: p. 151).

Thus, we believe that the notions of *security symbiosis, identity, dilemma, synergy, equation, democracy, transparency, freedom, justice, cohesion or security equity* need to be proposed and developed, in an organic connection with the latest trends and needs for expansion in the security field. Each of these new concepts requires theoretical development, conceptual development and the disclosure of subtleties and structural components, as well as a thorough analysis of the related methodological implications.

If democracy can be interpreted not only in a political sense, as a system of organizing political life and activity, based on three fundamental pillars: freedom, equality and justice, for which conflicts represent a source of renewal, an inexhaustible source of regeneration, of permanent improvement, but also a reason for structural resettlement, and the proposed concept of *security democracy* is shaping up to be a synthetic category based on deliberations, on the freedom of exposure and participation of each member within the community, in which each participant is invested with a minimum amount of power necessary to achieve effective participation in the decision-making act in different contexts, both formal and informal, with the aim of strengthening the security system, in order to reduce the scale and number of security vulnerabilities of the system in general, but also of the members and participants within that system. Thus, security democracy, par excellence, comes to support the construction of a participatory and inclusive system in the field of security.

From the perspective of security democracy, the reconstruction of the security system depends fundamentally on the adoption of democratic principles as well as the practices in the security governance. Instead of national governments oriented towards the protection and promotion of national interests, as well as international networks of experts or scholars, scientific researchers and administrative decision-makers who make critical decisions regarding the security system without a clearly expressed and established democratic mandate, citizens, those directly affected by security issues, ideally should become the ones who would have all the strength and capacity to shape security systems in accordance with their ideas and interests in a democratically organized process of forming the common will by resorting to the democratic mechanism of majority opinion, which has a direct impact on the decision-making process (Sprincean, Slutu, 2024: p. 94).

As subcategories of security democracy, *radical security democracy*, or *formal security democracy*, etc. can be identified. *Radical security democracy* requires not only the cultivation of alternative practices of protection and security, but also a simultaneous application of political imagination and security potential to motivate, engage, depoliticize, reform and transform the institutional frameworks of the security domain in which those practices are implemented. *Radical security democracy* is therefore a more transformative and system-shifting approach than the usual conception of security democracy, aiming to fundamentally reshape and modify security systems and the social, political and international structures underlying the security domain in a short period of time.

The concept of *security identity* determines, in close correlation with the concept of *political and geostrategic identity*, a new perspective that comes from the object / entity that requires to be protected and subjected to the process of securing and ensuring its integrity.

Security identity is a form of social identity through which a group of individuals or persons identifies with certain options and ways of ensuring security. Likewise, security identity refers to the adhesion of groups or persons to certain national or international organizations that aim to ensure security, adopting in this sense a certain strategy, a set of principles or a personal perspective on security phenomena. For example, pacifist adhesion, militaristic, warlike option, the perspective of neutrality and

neutralism can be elements of the security identity of some societies, groups, communities or individuals. These phenomena occur because individuals, groups and societies are part of historical processes, processes that oscillate between peace and war, between conflict and harmony. As a result, each social entity, but also a separate individual, develops during life and after the accumulation of experience a certain very special and individualized attitude regarding the values related to security, its own perceptions and definitions of its own state of security and safety, but also the most optimal ways of achieving individual balance in relation to security risks and threats.

The formation of a security identity also involves the manifestation of social behaviors, of manifestations of societies, groups or individuals with the aim of ensuring its own security, but also of evaluating security risks and threats for its peers, for other similar social entities. Thus, one can note a mobilizing behavior to successfully avoid security risks, precautionary behavior, counterattack and prevention of dangers, as well as the action to proceed in anticipation of attacks and the escalation of the salt of insecurity.

The concept of security symbiosis involves a significant number of actors of security symbiosis relationships, who are simultaneously participants in the process of inter-relationship and cooperation in the security field. Thus, we will note such actors in the security symbiosis process as: institutions specialized in the field of ensuring state and private security, the state itself as an institution and foundation of the national security macrosystem, the normative-legal framework, active civil society in all forms of organization, the media as an important factor and actor in security symbiosis, responsible for promoting strategic public relations, the academic environment, international institutions, inter-state organizations, multinational corporations with an important impact on the development of an important military and security potential, institutions specialized in providing logistics services, with the function of ensuring, supporting and backing, redirecting, allocating and transferring knowledge, resources, material, intellectual, human or military potential.

As a result of the interrelationship of the various actors of security symbiosis, synergies are inevitably created between these mutual actors, but also between the system and individualized actors. These can be grouped into: *mutual synergies* and *exchange synergies*. Namely, synergies can evolve to the level of coagulating and coordinating factors for the entire security system that is driven in its activity by security symbiosis, mutually advantageous for each participating actor of the system. In this context, mutual security synergies are those that are based on mutual interest and have the ability to mutually amplify the potential of the participants, and exchange synergies represent the relationships prolonged over time that connect generations of various actors of the security synergy, transmitting from the oldest and most obsolete, the experience, memory, accumulated know-how to the newer actors, who come to replace the actors that tend to become less active.

An important concept from the perspective of the proper functioning of the security symbiosis can become the concept of the *interceptor* as an entity endowed with the ability to detect and counteract security risks, dangers and threats, being an integral part of the subsystem of interception and resolution of dangers and threats, as an integral part of the security system.

Security in general can be typified by several criteria. For example, depending on the model adopted, security can be linear, but also circular. The *linear one* concerns the use of resources until exhaustion. *Circular security* denotes a greater concern for the reuse and more rational use of resources that are important for ensuring security. In this context, the importance of circular security management is highlighted, which coordinates and balances the circular security system in order to achieve greater efficiency, given that resources are exhaustible or difficult to regenerate, and the competition for supremacy between opposing security systems is increasingly fierce, the efficiency of these systems having the potential to make a difference.

The concept of *security sustainability*, in addition to that of the resilience of security systems, or resilience in the field of security, has the task of reflecting the perspective in which systems have the capacities and resources to pursue and achieve their goals in the medium and long term. Security sustainability comes to evaluate both the efficiency of security efforts and the resistance and solidity of the results obtained through these efforts to ensure security.

However, a fundamental problem for the entire field of security is the question of whether security itself can be understood, in turn, as a resource, and if so, what kind of resource it represents: exhaustible, reusable, renewable, transmissible, etc. The specifics and characteristics of security as a resource, likewise, is a subject of crucial importance.

We believe that security, in a certain context, can and must be understood as a resource for strengthening the well-being of society, of man and of the community environment. As a resource, security can maximize the results in other areas of social life, provided that it is well managed and proportionally distributed, depending on priorities and security needs.

Sources of security can be multiple: human, natural resources, favorable circumstances, a series of successful, inspired or well-calculated decisions, the cultivation by society of leaders capable of assuming decisions of historical importance for the security of society and the community, etc., but, despite this, security proves to be an extremely volatile and mobile resource, fragile and fine, easy to unbalance but difficult to recover.

Certainly, security is a transferable resource, however, human society has not yet managed to perform a completely rational and predictable management of security as a resource for achieving well-being, stability and prosperity.

Therefore, there is a need to develop indices and indicators for assessing security symbiosis, the level of security democracy, the form of democracy in the security sphere, but also for assessing *security identity*.

In the process of forming and educating the security identity, a rather important factor is the emotional attachment to the values and objects that are protected by the activity of ensuring security.

In correlation with the security identity, it is important to note the *security action*, which represents a manifestation of individuals or groups in the security sphere, in order to ensure security, the optimal conditions of existence in an environment characterized by security risks and dangers.

On the other hand, the security identity can be explained and justified by the *security of identity* as one of its functional components, one of the possible ways of forming the security identity.

The numerous sides and aspects of security reflect the multiple implications and challenges of the security field. Generalizing, it is necessary to mention that the security issue acquires important conceptual-methodological valences in correlation with the general desire for the survival of humanity, as well as with the purpose of democratization and of implementing the good governance patterns. Security, in this context, becomes a path, a fundamental condition, for achieving the general goal of human survival, in the name of which possible goals, compromises or concessions are regimented in a security context, shaped and flexible, depending on the optimal path towards achieving the general goal.

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SOFT POWER" IN THE DIGITAL AGE - GLOBALIZATION AND CHANGES IN POWER DYNAMICS

CZU: 321.7:004
https://doi.org/10.59295/eiqd.10

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Abstract. *Digitalization as a new theoretical concept is actively used by researchers to assess economic, socio-political and other processes in a contemporary society. Digitalization, infiltrating the system of international relations, changes not only the principles of international communications, but also its tools. The peculiarities, risks and prospects of digitalization, in certain spheres and society as a whole, are actively explored in various branches of science, however, the digitalization of the economy, business processes, social institutions, society and people remain priority issues. To analyze digitalization, academic science uses comparative and system analysis. In particular, to determine the tools that contribute to the growth of "soft power" in the digital society, secondary data analysis is used. In the context of the digital transformation of the system of international relations, the scope and range of "soft power" tools are expanding. In addition, digitalization adapts the tools of "soft power" to the modern system of international relations, so that one of the important tools and factors in the growth of "soft power" becomes digital diplomacy. The author of the article defines "digital diplomacy" as a foreign policy instrument, which involves flexible forms of interaction between actors in international relations using new forms of mass communication and network technologies with the aim of influencing the world discourse on pressing issues, promoting interests and producing an operational response to the latest information challenges. It has been established that the growth of the country's "soft power" correlates with the introduction of digitalization tools, however, digital soft influence can lead to negative consequences, namely the emergence and mass distribution of fake news, manipulation of the global agenda and digital inequality, among others. The development of objective criteria and methods for differentiating between legitimate and illegitimate digital tools of a country's "soft power" is a further direction in research on the phenomenon of digitalization of "soft power".*

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Perceptions of attractiveness and trust influence the prosperity and influence of countries. A country's soft power is not guaranteed. Countries have their own brands, an image shaped by the behavior of governments, what they do and say, who they associate with, and how they behave on the global stage. Increasingly, digital diplomacy plays a crucial role in creating and applying soft power. This paper argues that digital diplomacy is increasingly vital in articulating soft power. Digital diplomacy is a new way of conducting public diplomacy, offering new and unparalleled ways to build trust with previously disengaged publics. Soft power is now the driving force behind reputation and influence on the global stage, where digital diplomacy is increasingly playing a critical role.

***Keywords**: digitalization, globalization, "soft power", digital society, digital diplomacy*

Introducere

În prezent, vectorul cercetării în domeniul științelor umaniste este modelat de procesul de digitalizare. Arhitectura relațiilor internaționale și a politicii mondiale este, de asemenea, transformată sub influența schimbărilor tehnologice. Fenomenul digitalizării sau transformării digitale prezintă un mare interes pentru cercetătorii ruși și străini. Problemele digitalizării sunt studiate activ în diferite domenii științifice: ca fenomen socio-politic, socio-economic, precum și fenomen cultural, juridic, tehnic, filozofic etc (Strautiu, 2007).

Acest studiu este dedicat analizei fenomenului digitalizării sau transformării digitale în general și impactului acestuia asupra creșterii „soft power" a actorilor relațiilor internaționale, în special. Componentele informaționale ale „puterii soft", precum și digitalizarea societății și a ființei umane, schimbă peisajul familiar al relațiilor internaționale. În ciuda faptului că conceptul de „putere moale" este bine studiat și descris în lucrările oamenilor de știință ruși și străini, și anume J. Nye, G. Gallarotti, M.M. Lebedeva, O.F. Rusakova și alții, influența procesului de digitalizare asupra sistemului de relații internaționale și asupra procesului de creștere a „soft power" necesită o atenție mai mare (Gallarotti, 2011). Principala problemă științifică este studiul digitalizării ca factor de creștere a „puterii soft" în legătură cu reorientarea multor state către vectorul digital al dezvoltării. Scopul acestui studiu este de a identifica particularitățile reprezentării procesului de digitalizare în discursul academic, precum și componentele cheie ale „soft power" în contextul digitalizării și globalizării relațiilor internaționale. Acest studiu include două secțiuni: particularitățile analizei digitalizării în știința academică; digitalizarea ca factor de creștere a „soft power" (Bjola, 2015).

Metode și metodologie

Conform scopului studiului, se folosesc metode științifice generale și anume: analiză, comparație, generalizare. Pentru a determina particularitățile analizei digitalizării în știința academică, se utilizează analiza comparativă și de sistem. Metoda analizei secundare a datelor este utilizată pentru a identifica resursele care contribuie la creșterea „puterii blânzi" în societatea digitală. Sunt analizate „Clasamentul global al Soft Power".În plus, această cercetare este o continuare logică a studiului componentelor informaționale ale „soft power".

Rezultate acumulate în urma interacțiunii orale

În domeniul academic, lucrările privind digitalizarea și transformarea digitală pot fi împărțite în mai multe clustere tematice. Primul aspect vizează digitalizarea proceselor economice, și anume, dezvoltarea de strategii și programe ale economiei digitale, modelarea riscurilor și consecințelor introducerii inovațiilor și tehnologiilor informației și comunicațiilor etc. sprijinirea procesului de digitalizare a economiei, precum și dezvoltarea și întreținerea produselor software

Anumite aspecte ale digitalizării, de exemplu, Internetul, inteligența artificială și datele digitale, rolul și potențialul lor sunt de mare interes pentru oamenii de știință. Deci, M. Bunz (2014) identifică trei principii tehnologice de bază (combinarea tehnologiilor) care au pus bazele dezvoltării Internetului lucrurilor: o creștere a numărului de dispozitive conectate la Internet; utilizarea cipurilor („RFID de comunicație fără fir") pentru a identifica lucrurile de zi cu zi; trecerea la un nou protocol de Internet . În domeniul mass-media, procesul de digitalizare este destul de clar urmărit odată cu apariția noilor media, și anume rețelele sociale, mesageria instantanee, smartphone-urile și alte gadgeturi inteligente.

Al doilea aspect se ocupă de digitalizarea sistemului educațional: învățământul la distanță și în rețea, dezvoltarea și menținerea informației electronice și a mediului educațional în instituțiile de învățământ superior, mobilitatea academică virtuală a studenților, oamenilor de știință și profesorilor ca componentă. de educație pe tot parcursul vieții datorită diverselor proiecte educaționale de tip MOOC (curs online masiv deschis), de exemplu, Coursera, EdX, Udacity, Open Education etc. De exemplu, Kovba D.M. și Gribovod E.G. consideră mobilitatea academică internațională ca o resursă de „soft power" în contextul digitalizării și globalizării învățământului superior ; Macek A. și Ritonija N., precum și Petrova L.E., Kuzmin K.V. dezvăluie posibilitățile de mobilitate virtuală și de învățare în rețea (Rusakova, Kovba, Gribovod, Popova, 2018).

Al treilea aspect se referă la digitalizarea guvernului, precum și a politicii în general. Acest proces are o dimensiune tehnică, fiind legat de trecerea de la guvernarea electronică la digitală, furnizarea de servicii publice în formă electronică (înlocuirea documentelor analogice cu cele digitale) confirmate cu semnătură electronică. În același timp, are o dimensiune discursivă (discurs mediatic, discurs pe internet) și comunicativă (practici și strategii comunicative).

Astfel, alături de metodele convenționale de diplomație, actorii relațiilor internaționale folosesc diplomația digitală (termenul sinonim cu „hashtag-diplomație").

Al patrulea aspect se ocupă de digitalizarea societății și a oamenilor. Este necesar să se indice studiile care abordează problemele transumanismului, postumanismului, unde tehnologiile moderne, inclusiv inteligența artificială, joacă un rol important în transformarea societății și tranziția la un „postuman", etc. Manikovskaya M.A., concentrându-se pe riscurile și aspectele negative ale digitalizării educației, avertizează asupra consecințelor pe care trebuie să le facă față un om. Digitalizarea umană este fixă, atât la nivel cognitiv, cât și la nivel corporal. Astfel, există o gamă largă de dispozitive inteligente (smartphone, ceasuri inteligente, trackere de fitness) și programe, care monitorizează și digitalizează parametrii fiziologici ai unui om (somn, pași, ritm cardiac etc.).

În acest sens, contextul de cercetare al procesului de digitalizare se extinde. O abordare integrată a domeniilor cheie ale digitalizării în discursul academic a făcut posibilă identificarea unei trăsături importante a acestui proces. Digitalizarea este un proces complex, cu mai multe fațete, care nu trebuie considerat doar din punct de vedere tehnic ca „conversia informațiilor din format analog în format digital". Este studiul valorii, puterii și caracteristicilor comunicative ale digitalizării care ne va permite să anticipăm riscurile și să prevenim rapid consecințele negative ale acestui proces.

Digitalizarea ca factor de creștere a "soft power"

Digitalizarea ca unul dintre procesele cheie ale societății contemporane afectează diverse sfere ale vieții sociale, pătrunzând în sistemul relațiilor internaționale. Ca orice proces, digitalizarea poate schimba echilibrul de putere, cu toate acestea, în funcție de tehnologie și domeniu de aplicare, are un potențial de impact atât slab, cât și dur. Acest proces a diversificat componentele structurale ale „soft power". În sensul cel mai general, „puterea moale" este un concept care este folosit pentru a atinge anumite scopuri, inclusiv cele politice, cu ajutorul valorilor și valorilor nemateriale umanitare și culturale.

Importanța impactului digitalizării asupra „puterii soft" poate fi văzută în dimensiunea de măsurare și instrumentală. Astfel, diferite clasamente „soft power" acordă prioritate indicatorilor care evaluează nivelul de dezvoltare a tehnologiilor digitale și informaționale, pregătirea infrastructurii, sectorului public și privat pentru implementarea acestor tehnologii. Deci, în clasamentul Soft Power 30, unul dintre sub-indicii care evaluează resursele „soft power" a țărilor este subindexul Digital. Acest subindex „include o combinație de valori care surprind conectivitatea digitală a unei țări, eficiența serviciilor online guvernamentale și utilizarea diplomației digitale".

Conform la clasamentul Soft Power 30, în 2019 Rusia nu a intrat în Top 10 în niciunul dintre sub-indici (Enterprise, Engagement, Culture, Government, Education, Digital) (McClory, J. 2017), în plus, a scăzut pe locul 30 după nivelul „soft power" dezvoltare. În timp ce în 2017, Rusia se afla pe locul 26 în acest clasament, intrând în primii zece lideri în sub-indicii Engagement (locul 8) și Digital (locul 10). Cu toate acestea, merită să ținem cont de atitudinea părtinitoare și precaută față de evaluarea utilizării de către partea rusă a tehnologiilor sale digitale, care poate afecta „puterea soft". Trebuie remarcat faptul că, în ciuda scăderii Rusiei în aceste clasamente, digitalizarea este una dintre prioritățile sale, în special în economie și educație, ceea ce poate afecta pozitiv creșterea „puterii blânzi" a Rusiei în viitor (Lebedeva, 2017).

Componentele informaționale ale „soft power" sunt considerate ca „un complex de strategii, tehnologii, resurse și produse utilizate în spațiul informațional în beneficiul

subiecților". Instrumentele de informare și comunicare de „soft power" includ: în primul rând, întreaga gamă de instrumente și strategii discursive valorice, și anume: discursuri media, discursuri pe internet, discursuri false, tehnologie „smart crowd" etc. care construiesc digital și/sau informațional cadrul mesajului transmis; în al doilea rând, mediile convenționale și noi (rețele sociale, mesagerie instant etc.).

Trebuie remarcat faptul că mass-media și tehnologiile digitale contemporane nu reprezintă doar o resursă de transformare digitală a societății, ci formează și un mediu particular care concurează pentru o audiență activă cu spațiul media convențional. În al treilea rând, printre acestea se numără progresele științei și tehnologiei (inteligență artificială, realitate virtuală și augmentată etc.). Și în al patrulea rând, acestea includ instrumente clasice adaptate digital de „putere moale". Astfel, alături de formele convenționale de diplomație în societatea digitală apar noi tipuri de diplomație, și mai ales — diplomația digitală.

Întrucât există o schimbare către comunicațiile multi-vectorale în spațiul mediatizat al politicii mondiale, algoritmul de rețea și cooperare digitală concurează cu negocierile bilaterale. În sensul său cel mai general, diplomația digitală este privită ca un instrument de politică externă, care implică forme flexibile de interacțiune între actorii relațiilor internaționale folosind noi platforme de informare (de exemplu, Twitter, Facebook, Instagram etc.) cu scopul de a influența lumea. discursul asupra problemelor stringente, promovarea intereselor naționale și producerea de răspuns prompt la cele mai recente provocări informaționale (Startegia Europeană de Securitate). Diplomația digitală, ca și diplomația publică, urmărește să arate publicului larg un sistem de valori și caracteristici culturale ale unui anumit actor al relațiilor internaționale prin intermediul proiectelor culturale, umanitare și educaționale.

În ciuda distincției dintre diplomația digitală și cea publică în discursul academic, un număr de cercetători văd diplomația digitală ca o formă de diplomație publică adaptată societății și politicii digitale, și nu ca o formă de diplomație publică formă separată. Mai mult, se subliniază o atitudine precaută față de posibilitățile de utilizare a rețelelor sociale și a tehnologiilor de rețea în practica diplomatică actuală și aplicarea lor formală. Cu toate acestea, în contextul globalizării, digitalizarea instrumentelor „soft power" ajută la accelerarea feedback-ului sub forma unui răspuns informațional, cognitiv și practic și la formarea opiniei publice, a dispoziției sociale și a stării emoționale în modul de care au nevoie actorii de comunicare.

” Soft power”, ideea națională și diplomația

În cadrul relațiilor internaționale, puterea a fost în mod tradițional înțeleasă, definită și evaluată în termeni „duri", adesea în cazuri de intervenții economice sau militare. În cazul ”hard power", aceasta a fost de obicei extinsă sub formă de constrângere, fie prin folosirea forței, amenințarea cu forța, sancțiuni economice sau stimuli de plăți. În comparație cu natura coercitivă a ”hard power", ”soft power" urmărește să folosească în schimb puterea de atracție sau de persuasiune. ”Soft Power" este capacitatea unui stat-națiune de a influența preferințele diferiților actori în spațiul internațional, fie prin atracție, fie prin persuasiune, mai degrabă decât prin constrângere, ”putere grea".

Soft Power are un impact semnificativ asupra deciziilor pe care le iau oamenii, întreprinderile și guvernele. Este, în parte, pentru că soft power sunt toate lucrurile care îi fac pe oameni să iubească o țară mai degrabă decât să se teamă de ea, de exemplu, produse ale oamenilor, instituțiilor și mărcilor, mai degrabă decât ale guvernelor. Joseph Nye (2004), profesorul care a inventat termenul, susține că "soft power" este „un mijloc de succes în politica mondială" pentru cei care știu să o folosească. Cu toate acestea, soft power a fost puternic criticată de oamenii de știință în relații internaționale. O parte din scepticismul larg răspândit îndreptat față de concept este că este „evaziv," „neclar" și „înnebunitor de inconsecvent."

Soft Power încearcă să obțină influență prin construirea de rețele care sunt amplificate în era digitală. Rețelele pot fi atât pozitive, cât și negative, în cazul în care o rețea de „actori răi pe internet" au potențialul de a amenința zilnic securitatea și bunăstarea globală. Anne-Marie Slaughter notează (2016) că cea mai bună modalitate de a combate această amenințare este asigurarea creării de rețele integrate care includ „actori de internet buni" - cum ar fi organismele corporative, civice și publice. Soft Power poate comunica narațiuni convingătoare, poate stabili reguli internaționale și poate utiliza resursele care fac ca o țară să fie în mod natural atractivă pentru lume. În același timp, însă, rolul idealului național nu trebuie uitat.

O națiune conștientă și abilă este unul dintre cele mai importante atuuri ale oricărui stat: asigurarea investițiilor interne, atragerea de turiști și adăugarea de valoare la export. În prezent, guvernele naționale sunt angajate în două tipuri de politici: branding național la nivel macro și produs individual. branding la nivel micro. Cu toate acestea, ambii termeni sunt profund interconectați. După cum notează Steve Thomson, „percepțiile soft power formează o componentă cheie în măsurarea generală a puterii mărcii unei națiuni (Thomson, 2021)"

Soft Power este capacitatea de a influența actorii, în timp ce o națiune conștientă pune în practică această capacitate prin mecanismul diplomației. Diplomația este o metodă consacrată prin care statele/națiunile își exprimă obiectivele de politică externă în timp ce își armonizează eforturile de a influența deciziile și comportamentul altor guverne prin dialog, negocieri și alte asemenea măsuri. Pentru unii, diplomația a fost considerată „o sală de expoziție" în cadrul relațiile internaționale care s-au schimbat în ultimele decenii odată cu apariția tehnologiilor digitale. Inovația tehnologică este o schimbare majoră în definirea soft power.

Direcția mesajelor de soft power s-a schimbat semnificativ, astfel încât cetățenii obișnuiți, nu experții guvernamentali, pot avea o influență mai mare asupra conversațiilor soft power. În această calitate, se poate observa o concentrare mai mare pe conținutul generat de utilizatori în comparație cu sursele diplomatice mai tradiționale. În esență, pentru ca soft power să aibă succes în epoca modernă, ea trebuie să îmbine instrumentele tradiționale de diplomație și negociere cu puterea tehnologiilor noi și emergente.

Diplomația digital

Relațiile internaționale și conduita diplomației au fost puternic afectate de transformările tehnologice recente. În acest context, ideea convențională a puterii ca sumă a puterii militare și a forței economice a pierdut din greutate relativă. Pe măsură ce instrumentele digitale devin tot mai comune și sunt adoptate de tot mai mulți actori statali

și nestatali, strategiile și tacticile de utilizare mai eficientă a acestora evoluează rapid. Ca atare, componenta digitală a soft power crește din ce în ce mai mult în ceea ce privește relevanța și importanța. În domeniul diplomației, importanța și potențialul acesteia sunt incontestabile pentru diseminarea mesajelor și pentru a ajunge la public.

Diplomația digitală este utilizarea instrumentelor digitale de comunicare de către diplomați pentru a comunica atât cu alți diplomați, cât și cu publicul (Thinking Heads,2021). Această comunicare poate fi realizată prin intermediul tehnologiilor digitale și în rețea, inclusiv internetul, dispozitivele mobile și canalele de social media. În cele din urmă, ea este o strategie de gestionare a schimbării prin utilizarea mecanismelor digitale și a colaborărilor virtuale. Ca termen, a fost folosit interschimbabil cu termeni precum „e-diplomație" sau chiar „diplomație". 2.0." În același timp, totuși, este înțeles diferit de guvernele din întreaga lume, Statele Unite ale Americii numind-o „21st Century Statecraft", Regatul Unit definind-o ca „diplomație digitală" (Friedman, 2009), iar Canada notând să fie „Politică deschisă".

Dezbaterile actuale despre diplomația publică și soft power suferă de eșecuri în abordarea rolului pe care diplomația digitală îl poate juca cu adevărat în construirea încrederii în ecosistemul global. Ca mecanism, diplomația digitală nu ar trebui văzută ca ceva care să înlocuiască noțiunile tradiționale de diplomație. Ar trebui mai degrabă să încerce să coexiste și să completeze mecanismele tradiționale de diplomație. Diplomația digitală a fost interpretată într-o varietate de moduri de către cercetători și actorii practice deopotrivă și, ca atare, nu există o definiție sau un cadru larg acceptat. Rămâne un mod convențional de a conduce diplomația printr-o multitudine de mecanisme și medii. Prin utilizarea diplomației digitale, statele se pot implica în moduri noi și inovatoare cu societatea civilă. Nicholas Westcott notează că a permis unor țări să devină mai democratizate, unde tehnologia a permis participarea mai multor oameni (Westcott, 2008).

Diplomația digitală nu este imună la critici. Richard Grant susține că creșterea exponențială a angajamentului de către societatea civilă a schimbat regulile de implicare. Utilizarea mai largă a tehnologiei digitale în spațiile diplomatice a adus mai multe provocări, inclusiv anonimatul utilizatorilor de internet și scurgerea de informații. A existat un impuls în creșterea anonimatului online, unde oricine își poate asuma orice persoană, așa este cazul pe Twitter, Instagram sau LinkedIn, Facebook, Odnoklassniki, VKontakte, Telegram etc. În același timp, rămân provocări legate de canalele digitale și de avertizare. Scurgerea din 2010 a Wikileaks rămâne unul dintre cele mai bine profilate cazuri din istoria recentă.

Wikileaks a publicat 250.000 de canale diplomatice de la misiunile SUA din întreaga lume și Departamentul de Stat din Washington. Ilan Manor a remarcat că a provocat „un pandemoniu răspândit între ministerele de externe din întreaga lume." (Manor, 2015). Telegramele au inclus evaluări nepotrivite ale altor lideri mondiali, guverne străine și chiar țării gazdă a ambasadei. La rândul său, acest lucru a avut un impact asupra brandului național al SUA.

Diplomația digitală include utilizarea tehnologiilor digitale și a platformelor de social media, cum ar fi Twitter, Facebook și LinkedIn, Instagram, Threads de către statele naționale pentru a intra în comunicare cu omologii străini. Competențele digitale sunt unele dintre cele mai căutate competențe în domeniile relațiilor internaționale și

diplomatice. Întrebarea rămâne, totuși, cum pot statele să construiască încredere prin mecanismul instrumentelor digitale? Liderii mondiali şi diplomații folosesc rețelele de socializare pentru a vorbi și a interacționa direct cu publicul pe care doresc să-l influențeze. Un exemplu în acest sens este modul în care Președintele american Donald Trump a folosit Twitter ca parte esențială a strategiei sale de implicare. Activitățile diplomatice au fost, de asemenea, din ce în ce mai susținute de instrumente de pe internet. Nikos Christodoulides observă că multe guverne consideră că internetul și rețelele sociale provoacă instrumente diplomatice unice (Christodoulides, 2005).

În acest sens, statele se pot face reclamă în diferite capacități, ceea ce le permite, de asemenea, să aibă un control mai mare asupra modului în care valorile lor sunt prezentate publicului larg. În cele din urmă, utilizarea rețelelor sociale în cadrul diplomației a creat oportunitatea de a avea o măsurare în timp real a angajamentului. Dă putere statelor naționale să facă schimb de idei, opinii și valori într-un mod rapid, prin simpla apăsare a unui buton.

Valoarea în construirea încrederii, și de ce aceasta este necesar la etapa actuală?

Abordările de succes ale soft power, idealul național şi diplomația publică se bazează pe încredere. În spațiul digital, este mai ușor ca niciodată să câștigi și să distrugi încrederea. Ilan Manor și Elad Segev susțin că diplomația digitală există la două niveluri primare, primul în ministerul de externe și celălalt, în ambasadele din întreaga lume. Din cauza acestei diviziuni, statele își pot modifica mesajele pentru a satisface nevoile publicului local, care este vital pentru construirea încrederii (Manor, 2015).

Misiunile trebuie să utilizeze tactici de comunicare care să răspundă nevoilor publicului local, în special în ceea ce privește istoria, cultura, valorile și tradițiile care le pot consolida reputația în străinătate. Diplomația digitală joacă un rol semnificativ în modul în care actorii (de stat și nestatali) își construiesc încrederea. Utilizarea instrumentelor digitale este vitală, deoarece mai mulți actori concurează într-un spațiu din ce în ce mai mic pentru a ieși în evidență. Diplomația a trebuit în mod continuu să se adapteze și să se modifice în funcție de mediul său.

În contextul digital, nu este diferit. Într-o lume care este mai conectată decât oricând, implicarea digitală joacă un rol din ce în ce mai important, deoarece statele se pot implica cu un număr mai mare de oameni la un cost dramatic mai mic. În același timp, creează oportunități unice în cadrul unor astfel de rețele, atât pentru lideri, cât și pentru guverne, de a împărtăși mesaje și de a stabili agende politice pe canale netradiționale. Cu toate acestea, aceste rețele digitale au creat noi jocuri de putere. În acest spațiu, relațiile stat-societate civilă au o influență mai mare în afacerile internaționale.

Ca instrument, diplomația digitală are puterea de a crește angajamentul global și de a avea impact asupra oamenilor care s-ar putea să nu aibă niciodată ocazia de a păși în ambasada în cauză. Utilizarea rețelelor sociale promovează atât interacțiunea, cât și implicarea, ceea ce, la rândul său, promovează dorințele de actori din cadrul relaţiilor internaționale.

„Starea digitală” globală actuală este puternică. Numărul utilizatorilor de internet la nivel mondial totalizează 4,87 miliarde de oameni, iar utilizatorii rețelelor sociale din întreaga lume totalizează 4,15 miliarde de oameni, dintr-o populație globală totală de

7,83 miliarde de oameni. Cercetările arată că peste 455 de milioane de oameni au început să folosească rețelele sociale între octombrie 2019 și octombrie 2020, ceea ce echivalează cu o creștere anuală de peste 15 la sută. În ceea ce privește construirea încrederii, există din ce în ce mai multe oportunități pentru statele naționale de a se implica cu mai mulți oameni. decât oricând prin mecanismul digital. Astfel, le permite să promoveze o imagine atent adaptată publicului local. Cu toate acestea, inima oricărui angajament diplomatic rămâne persuasiunea, chiar dacă este folosit prin mijloace digitale. Persuasiunea este o parte vitală a oricărui angajament diplomatic, mai ales în cazul diplomației digitale.

În Moldova, tehnologia digitală este esențială pentru politica de diseminare a limbii și culturii moldovenești. Statul a găsit oportunități de a se promova prin mecanismul diplomației digitale și anume prin intermediul rețelelor sociale: Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, etc., (IRI, 2024) mai ales pe fundalul unor jocuri de putere din ce în ce mai puternice între state și blocuri regionale, așa cum se afirmă puterile emergente. În același timp, Guvernul și-a accelerat capacitatea de a extinde sistemele virtuale pentru a submina sau a achiziționa active pentru o anumită temă (cumpărarea activelor statale și/s-au investiția în stat) și pentru a furniza echipamente de comunicare pentru entități și evenimente. Aceste capacități sprijină diseminarea valorilor, inclusiv libertatea de exprimare.

La nivel global se poate observa o nevoie clară de diplomație digitală, dar tensiunea rămâne. Adesea este evident un binar între control și creativitate, guvernele dorind să controleze căile de informare, dar rețelele digitale au nevoie de un sentiment de inovație. Pentru ca rețelele digitale globale să prospere cu adevărat, misiunile diplomatice trebuie să găsească o cale de mijloc. Interacțiunea cu un public dinamic creează atât unele riscuri, dar și noi oportunități. Oamenii vor să vadă mai multe figuri umane ca oficiali guvernamentali, deoarece liniile personale și profesionale s-au estompat. Implicarea online reprezintă, de asemenea, o provocare pentru diplomați, deoarece riscurile sunt mari fie dacă obțineți informații greșite, fie provoacă jenă pentru țara lor cu o postare evaluată greșit. Carolina Chirică, actualul Secretar II (doi) al Moldovei în China, rețelele de socializare favorizează cele scurte, temporare și superficiale în care trebuie să existe un echilibru atent între a fi distractiv și serios. În acest sens, există o adevărată provocare în ceea ce privește modul în care cineva poate fi eficient atunci când cea mai mare parte a diplomației pe care o reprezinți se desfășoară online.

Sfera digitală nu este adesea pe deplin apreciată în rolul pe care îl poate juca în construirea și menținerea unei reputații de încredere. Acum, ministerele de peste mări (MAE) și ambasadele fac parte din diverse rețele globale, unde toate înregistrările sunt împrăștiate, gestionate și examinate. Utilizarea rețelelor sociale de către diplomați a deschis comunicarea între factorii de decizie și cetățeni. Multe ambasade au acum site-uri web interactive, conturi Facebook și un număr de ambasadori au o prezență energică pe Twitter, Instagram și Facebook; totuși, câteva conturi de rețele sociale au tendințe mai mari decât altele. O mare varietate de ambasade au pilotat mici exerciții. Potrivit Twiplomacy (2020), guvernele și liderii a 190 de locații internaționale au avut o prezență legitimă pe Twitter, reprezentând nouăzeci și opt la sută din cele 193 de state membre ale ONU.

Guvernele din doar patru țări nu au prezență pe Twitter, și anume Laos, Coreea de Nord, Sao Tome și Principe și Turkmenistan.

În spațiul digital, cele mai importante provocări cu care se confruntă statele naționale rămân relevante și construiesc încredere. Tendințele digitale se schimbă rapid și din acest motiv Natură rapidă a comunicării digitale, statele-națiune trebuie să se asigure că ele și mesajele lor rămân agile și adaptabile. Acum, mai mult decât oricând, reciprocitatea are loc pe canalele digitale. La rândul său, construirea încrederii la nivel global poate fi din ce în ce mai dificilă. Coronavirusul a fost un catalizator cheie pentru digitalizarea diplomației, unde a existat o schimbare fundamentală în implicarea de la distanță. Liderii care au îmbrățișat doar cu jumătate de inimă platformele digitale se implică acum în mod activ în mecanisme online prin Google Meet, Skype și Zoom. Cu toate acestea, pentru o serie de misiuni diplomatice, s-a dovedit uneori provocatoare din cauza provocărilor continue, cum ar fi conexiunile lente la internet sau lipsa competențelor digitale.

În această realitate, conversația soft power se schimbă față de moștenirea tradițională a diplomației, modelată de acțiuni guvernamentale atente în promovarea celor mai bune atribute culturale naționale la schimbul pasionat de consumatori de masă, lipsit de supraveghere. În mod tradițional, această supraveghere a venit de la instituțiile media care comercializau spațiu limitat de tipărire sau ecran. Astăzi, spațiul ecranului este o mică parte din lumea digitală în care schimbul de energie soft este condus de canale netradiționale care evoluează în mod constant și sunt din ce în ce modelate de indivizi, nu de guverne. Acest lucru a fost agravat doar în urma pandemiei de COVID-19, cu mai multe organizații ca niciodată, care desfășoară summituri, evenimente și schimburi culturale online, cum ar fi **Summitul G20 (2020)** – În 2020, Summitul G20, care reunește liderii celor mai mari economii ale lumii, a avut loc online din cauza restricțiilor impuse de pandemie.

Concluzie

Astfel, digitalizarea poate afecta atât acumularea „puterii soft" de către actorii politicii mondiale, cât și slăbirea acesteia. Pe de o parte, digitalizarea este capabilă să dea un nou impuls dezvoltării componentelor convenționale ale soft power, digitalizându-le, în timp ce, pe de altă parte, formează ramuri nemaivăzute până acum ale producției și schimbului digital, cum ar fi, de exemplu, mediul informatic electronic și educațional din instituțiile de învățământ, MOOC, dezvoltări și tehnologii avansate în domeniul inteligenței artificiale, realității augmentate și virtuale etc.

Soft Power, idealul național și diplomația publică sunt provocări continue pentru orice stat s-au națiune. Una dintre cele mai mari obstacole cu care se confruntă toate țările este rolul digitalului în afacerile internaționale. Diplomația digitală este o parte esențială a oricărui angajament din partea statelor, în special în încercarea de a promova reciprocitatea și încrederea semnificative. Persuasiunea rămâne piatra de temelie a diplomației, mai ales în context digital. În zilele noastre, nimeni nu este capabil să controleze modul în care informațiile și tendințele acesteia circulă pe tot globul. Guvernele au un control limitat în acest fel, iar misiunile străine trebuie să fie agile și bine informate pentru a se putea adapta în consecință (Otto, 2018).

Utilizarea rețelelor sociale de către diplomați a deschis comunicarea între factorii de decizie și cetățeni. Aceste instrumente, în principal Facebook și Twitter, oferă misiunilor diplomatice cu acces direct cetățenilor, atât în afara, cât și în interiorul statului lor. Acest mecanism de comunicare ocolește în mod regulat statele și filtrele media, permițând fără îndoială națiunilor să influențeze cu mai mult succes audiența de peste mări și să atingă obiective diplomatice.

În esență, diplomația digitală a produs o metamorfoză a comportamentului relațiile internaționale convenționale. Acesta definește modificări în sistemele și procedurile misiunilor diplomatice din străinătate. Astfel, diplomația digitală aduce cu ea atât posibilități, cât și provocări. Rețelele sociale pot oferi instrumente mai eficiente pentru a remedia problemele societale și de a preveni terorismul (Busuncian, 2011). În acest caz, în regiunile pline de conflicte, oamenii pot îmbrățișa rețelele sociale pentru a obține sprijin în spațiile în care media este supusă în mod regulat la întreruperi de curent și la cenzură. Există, totuși, unele pericole legate de dezvoltarea dependenței de rețelele sociale ca mijloc de relații internaționale. Indiferent de provocările cu diplomația digitală, oportunitățile par să le umbrească.

Ca urmare, are loc o creștere generală a volumului și ponderii tehnologice a resurselor și a instrumentelor „soft power" utilizate în lumea modernă. Creșterea bazei tehnologice de „soft power", digitalizarea își extinde semnificativ sfera de influență, crește atractivitatea și competitivitatea unei țări la nivel global. Ca orice proces, digitalizarea „soft power" poate duce la consecințe negative și anume: răspândirea știrilor false, formarea de idei falsificate despre evenimentele actuale, manipularea agendei globale etc (Otto, 2018). În acest sens, comunitatea academică are nevoie să dezvolte criterii care pot ajuta la distingerea dintre modurile legitime și cele ilegitime de influență digitală.

Având în vedere că mai mulți oameni folosesc internetul decât oricând, acesta oferă țărilor o oportunitate uriașă de a-și promova percepția soft power și eforturile de branding național. În cadrul acesteia, dacă statele combină atât formele digitale, cât și cele tradiționale de diplomație, ele vor putea avea mai mult succes. Prin promovarea mecanismelor de diplomație digitală, statele-națiune își pot alinia mesajele de branding național pentru a satisface nevoile publicului local. Creșterea pandemiei de COVID-19 a demonstrat în mod clar cum mesageria digitală este o parte vitală a oricărui efort diplomatic. Diplomația se confruntă cu un pivot crescut în ceea ce privește importanța abordărilor digitale, de succes, ale soft power, în timp ce brandingul național devine din ce în ce mai dependent de diplomația digitală decât oricând.

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THE NECESSITY OF FRAUD IN ELECTIONS: WHY FRAUD CANNOT BE ERASED?

CZU: 342.841
https://doi.org/10.59295/eiqd.11

*Marius VĂCĂRELU**

Abstract. *In many countries we are watching some electoral practices that modify the free wish of people to vote. No matter how democratic is a political regime, some practice seems to be universal and their role is always the same: to change the voter's wish to a specific political party or leader.*

It becomes necessary to understand why such behaviours exist and where are finding their sources of inspiration. The very fact that we will not find perfection in the electoral process in any country compels us to understand the causes of this negative phenomenon (election fraud), because today it is easier to access many data that reveal the extent of the irregularities.

In the same time, it is necessary to know how we can assure a free will for citizens, preventing and diminishing the political fraud. Again, this is necessary in light of the high demands that citizens have today, as well as the consequences that such deception has on their relationship with the state

Keywords*: frauds, elections, legislation, purposes, dictatorship*

1. It is almost impossible not to hear during an electoral campaign, and even more so after it concludes and the elections are over, that one or more of the competitors have used methods that are not legal, or – if they have passed the legality criterion – do not adhere to a certain generally accepted moral conduct in society. In fact, there are numerous cases where the first speech of those who lose elections – usually against the party in power that organizes them – begins directly with accusations of electoral fraud, and the reality is not always far from these serious claims.

Setting aside a certain degree of ridiculous, in which very small and electorally irrelevant parties accuse certain maneuvers against their interests, it is necessary to clarify that the phenomenon of election fraud is very old, and the diversity of negative practices used in this regard reveals the moral limits of those involved (Alvarez, Hall and Hyde, 2009). There is a certain "excuse", if we can call it that: the result of successful elections is the acquisition of power over institutions, implicitly over those who work within them, as well as over communities. Since corruption violations – rooted in the very diversion of some of the effects of power – have not been completely eradicated, we can say that the outcome of elections is also expressed in the bribes that may be

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perceived by those who will be declared winner: "The winner takes is all", as a famous song teaches us. In relation to the size of the text, we will only mention at a generic level the most important issues of fraud in political elections, keeping in mind that each paragraph can be further developed in an independent study. Additionally, a specific perspective will serve as the leitmotif of the text – namely, the legal perspective – since fraud means "an illegal action that alters the will or outcome of an electoral process", and violations of legal norms are identified, judged, and sanctioned based on the content of specific legislation.

In criminal law, the explanation of offenses is recognized according to a fixed scheme, which elegantly reveals both the factual aspect and the attitude of those who commit these negative actions, both towards the acts themselves and towards their consequences (Hotca, 2022). Thus, acts that are punishable by imprisonment must be – in the jurisdictions where legality is a real fact – committed with intent (without detailing now the three types of intent recognized by criminal law doctrine), which always means that the author has at least a clear understanding and a conscious acceptance of both their actions and the results that will ensue. Therefore, violations largely exclude the provision in criminal legislation for acts committed without the author simultaneously understanding what they are doing and what results from it, and the exceptions are equally clearly indicated by the legislator.

There is one very important thing to clarify before analyzing the idea of electoral fraud in more detail. Specifically, a principle of criminal law states that the punishment of certain acts depends entirely on their mention in the legislation of the state. Thus, a guarantee is established for the citizen, namely that they will not be subjected to the arbitrariness of the political-administrative power (Samoila, 2022), which is immense compared to what a single individual can do, no matter how wealthy they may be. However, the mention of acts in criminal legislation is a matter that depends on the interests of lawmakers, which are not always the same. Additionally, certain methods that can lead to the fraud of elections – there should be a discussion on this matter regarding Artificial Intelligence (AI) – can either be very new or unimaginable at a given time for a conscientious legislator. It should also be noted that there is a variant of this issue, namely the decriminalization of certain acts by the same legislator. Practically, for a political interest, it is possible that by law certain acts may no longer be considered crimes, and those who committed them will thus be absolved of criminal responsibility. Therefore, it is possible that what has been a crime for years may suddenly no longer be one, perhaps even for a day, and according to the legal principle regarding the application of the more favourable criminal law for the defendant, any person who has committed a serious act – which may have even altered the final result of the elections – could be free and even hold a public office (Nefliu, 2018).

Evidently, some violations of moral norms are not punished criminally, as certain matters are by definition intangible (for example, an unexpressed thought, whether verbally or in written/magnetic/electronic form by a person), while others are not accepted by the legislator, in the sense that there is no desire to transform deviations from moral norms into offenses. However, moral norms are strong in themselves, and their violation can be punished by ordinary people through attitudes of rejection, distancing, or – in electoral matters – by voting for other individuals (Hall, Son and

Heffner, 2018). In all situations, however, the moral norm is what provides the psychological foundation for legal norms, so that they do not operate in a vacuum, and various legislative changes are not analyzed strictly in relation to the entirety of a country's body of laws, but also in light of what moral norms demand or prohibit (Badescu, 2022).

2. Why are electoral processes being fraud? The answer can partly be given from a general psychological perspective, and from another angle, considering the positive effects (for those who commit fraud) that will arise: money, positions in the state, a larger staff, the possibility of advancing in the future to other political roles, etc.

The general psychological aspect is – perhaps – the easiest to explain, in relation to the inherent human experience of each of us. However, I do not wish to consider the thousands of texts that analyze human behavior, attempting to find conclusions of a general, philosophical, sociological nature, etc. I cannot forget, however, that the tendency to cheat, to deceive certain authorities, or to circumvent rules in favor of someone manifests from a young age, even in the early part of childhood. In various children's games, such behavior can be distinguished, which should serve as a strong signal for the ethical education of all citizens, regardless of social status or age as indicated on their identification documents. However, the obvious existence of these conscious violations of rules is no secret to anyone, and this means that a good part of legislation must be as firm in prevention as it is in the section on penalties – with the clarification that the wisdom of the ancestors has always insisted on prevention as a political-educational tool that can save careers, lives, money, time, and property (Poulouhouse, 2015). Nevertheless, if this nonconformist perspective towards moral rules manifests from a young age, does it mean that the same future adults will be able or willing to violate legal norms, including in electoral matters? The answer is affirmative, with a rather pessimistic clarification: adults break the law more easily if this fact is observed in others, and especially if these violations of legal norms are punished rarely or arbitrarily, depending on the social-political status of the offender (Wanders et al. 2021).

However, the issue of the purpose for which election fraud is committed is much more difficult to control. Essentially, while in the previous paragraph we briefly analyzed the psychological basis of any crime, without distinguishing between them, in this section we will mention a few fundamental issues to understand the electoral process.

First of all, any crime has a primary purpose that, as we emphasized in the first section of the text, the author pursues or at least accepts the occurrence of (the purpose) at the moment they carry out the actions that give it substance. In electoral matters, however, the purpose is clearly defined, and the intention is always direct (in criminal law, there are considered to be three forms of intent, and this is the most concrete, referred to in common language as "premeditation"). Therefore, there can be no case in which an author does not have a clear understanding from the outset of the legal norms in electoral matters, the limits of behavior that these impose, and what the effect of successfully carrying out illegal actions in this area is (OSCE/ODIHR, 2013). Any claim by a person regarding a possible confusion about their conduct must be rejected by the prosecuting authorities, as, given the major importance of electoral processes, all those involved are very well aware of the legislation. Thus, the legal principle that "no one can

invoke ignorance of the law" is difficult to apply in practice, but in electoral matters, it is easier to find knowledge of legal norms at the level of society as a whole, compared to other branches of law (civil, commercial, labor, intellectual property, etc.). Being a field in which major operations occur periodically, and not for long durations (a few months in a year), it follows that societal attention is greater, precisely due to the concentration of electoral action at a peak point, which usually lasts less than a week.

Psychologically, electoral fraud has an element that can favor it, namely the cohesion of the political formations involved. Specifically, the direct intent with which these violations of electoral laws are committed requires a significant number of direct perpetrators who must act in coordination to achieve their goal. In this way, the cohesion of the political formations can be verified (Close and Lidia Nuñez, 2016); if they act as a unit, they become perpetrators from the first to the last member of the electoral offenses. It may seem unimportant, but in reality, if this cohesion does not exist or is limited, there are more opportunities for law enforcement agencies to uncover relevant information that can be deduced for prosecution, thus enabling a subsequent conviction of those who planned and executed the premeditated electoral fraud. Clearly, local initiatives are not excluded – especially in the case of local elections, but they can also manifest in national elections – yet they still require prior approval, usually explicit (rather than tacit). This approval arises because it is not rational for a local politician to engage in illegal actions without the support of their own party, as the electoral consequences of a scandal in elections that ultimately proves electoral fraud can cost a political formation significantly, both nationally and in the long term.

The aspect of cohesion is important from another perspective as well, namely the criminal one. There is an expression that says group unity is strengthened only after certain actions – usually (mostly) illegal or somewhat immoral – are carried out together. A party that commits electoral fraud at the local level – but especially at the national level – psychologically reinforces its unity, as the lines of intellectual, moral, property, and age differences disappear or are substantially reduced. In the end, it can be said that "yes, we all did the same things, and the consequences can be directed against any one of us". Essentially, the objective element (the commission of fraud) becomes conscious, and based on this awareness, a new type of party member emerges, one who has demonstrated on this occasion that they are capable of doing more for the party than the average voter. Consequently, they deserve to be included in other party activities because they have shown loyalty and determination in carrying out the orders received. It is no coincidence that what I have described is also found in a certain area of society, namely that of organized crime groups, which test their unity in the same way – first by selecting individuals and then involving everyone in the most significant criminal actions (Calderoni et al., 2020). Therefore, if in certain popular perceptions political parties are compared to or assimilated with criminal groups, we cannot say that this is too far off the mark (in the substantive assessment of their mode of action).

Moreover, an additional issue must be considered: how can members of a party that commits electoral fraud be sentenced to prison? Although it is not always difficult to prove – especially if clear evidence is collected in this regard before election day – electoral fraud, due to the large number of perpetrators, creates major problems concerning prosecution and their trial (Theodoru and Chis, 2020). It is necessary to

prosecute a sufficient number of individuals to deter such actions, but who determines what the threshold number is in this case? Additionally, how much personnel (prosecutors) need to be allocated to detect these electoral frauds? How long will it take to process these cases, and how long will their trials last, since a large number of defendants also mean a significant number of procedural issues in front of the courts, which increases the duration of the litigation and, implicitly, affects the timely resolution of the cases. It is equally true that such criminal action will have a huge political connotation, and this will be exploited by politicians from various political formations, according to their own goals, one of which will be to undermine the independence and neutrality of the judicial system. So, if the frauds are minor, will they be punished? And if the frauds are major, will there not be larger public protests, on the streets, than the number of those involved in a criminal investigation?

3. There is a fundamental factor – alongside the natural tendency of humans to deceive and violate legal and/or moral norms – that favors electoral fraud, and this relates to the general level of education in the society we live in.

The history of constitutional law reveals that for centuries, the number of those who had decision-making power over the election of leaders was quite limited, and there were often general conditions that had to be met for a long time by those who had the right to vote. If we analyze carefully, the civilizational success of ancient Athens was due to the fact that the number of those who could vote was much larger than in other societies; in reality – as highlighted extensively by the two recent Nobel laureates in several works – history has witnessed a concentration of the decision-making process (including electoral) in the hands of a few individuals, rarely more than a few hundred aristocrats and/or priests (Acemoglu and Robinson, 2020).

Paradoxically, this small number of voters meant that decision-making processes yielded better objective-qualitative results than those of today, as the limited number of people who could vote – evidently, they could also be elected – implied that only they were sufficiently knowledgeable about governance issues at the central/national/royal/imperial level. Aristocrats were educated from a young age regarding their leadership mission, and this – considering the much shorter life expectancy of past centuries – meant a lot compared to the general population. The level of education among the populace was low, and their mobility was generally limited – many people did not travel much beyond the village or town where they lived – which provided aristocrats with an advantage: they had money to pay private tutors for education, could buy books, and did not rely on any salary to support themselves. At the same time, there was also the flip side of this issue: only aristocrats were capable of holding positions in the state, meaning that each of them could potentially become king, complicating the way coalitions for voting were formed. With high stakes involved, the interests of those eager to attain the supreme office had to be secured in ways that often meant "buying votes". Electoral coalitions can be based on numerous motives – personal, property-related, or regional affirmation, etc. – but they are not always solely based on words; they also involve the concrete anticipation of benefits in the event of victory. Even if these benefits can be termed "vote buying", they are inevitably taken into account – both now and then – and those who run for various offices are very much aware of this. Political elections are not a beauty contest, and voters have a certain anticipation of what

will happen if the candidate they vote for wins, in relation to the public electoral program. This perspective of what will follow was even more pronounced in antiquity and the medieval era, as the decision-makers were few, and they did not cast their votes merely for words, but for a clear perspective – which, in relation to their wealth, could only be substantial.

Thus, the qualitative discussion about what "vote buying" means is different depending on the number of voters. In a formula from past centuries, when the number of those who could vote was limited, vote buying was something very tangible and lasting, as most of the time the positions for which elections were held were for life. Therefore, a victorious coalition knew that it could benefit from the positive results of the elections not just for 4 or 5 years, but for decades or even centuries – especially in cases where a dynasty was about to change. Those who voted knew they could also gain from the lands of the defeated, and this was a clear motivation to fight in any way for the coalition's victory, an aspect that often led to real wars. In this sense, we recall the impact of the extinction of the Arpad dynasty in Medieval Hungary (14 century), the Rurikids in Medieval Russia (16 century), or the Habsburgs in 18th-century Spain. Thus, the competition was fierce, it was real, and all participants were very aware of the potential benefits or losses. As a special way to understand the formation of political alliances and the typology of negotiation within a strict framework, it is recommended to objectively analyze the elections for the appointment of the head of the Catholic Church. There, several methods of forming alliances can be distinguished, but the negotiations are time-limited, and some of the various informal agreements cannot be annulled later in any way. I have used this generic term (annulment) because it is better known in the non-legal world, but it expresses a reality: the elected one becomes pope for life, and if he does not wish to subsequently confirm through appointments the various agreements that may have been negotiated, there is no way to be revoked from the supreme position – there being only one case of resignation. What history has shown us – and not just in the case of the Borgia family – in the matter of papal elections is that real negotiations have existed in several cases, that the price of agreements has not once been perfectly expressible in money (patrimonial), and that the spiritual position has not once been viewed primarily through a financial-patrimonial lens, but especially political, so much so that at one point the kings of France would be able to move the seat of the leader of the Catholic Church to their country for 68 years (1309 - 1377). Subsequently, a situation would arise where there would be two popes concurrently, until the year 1417, in Rome and Avignon – evidently, the spiritual aspect of the elections did not exist in this case, but only the political one, which allows for the inclusion of this politico-religious institution in the sphere of our study. There is an additional argument for understanding – especially from a historical perspective – the idea of election fraud in this sphere, namely that a conclave for the election of the pope simply "holds captive" the voters in a single space, which can force the reaching of certain voting alliances, based on objective conditions that may manifest during the electoral process. Thus, there have been cases when some cardinals died during those days, and in the case of others, the desire to reach an agreement more quickly was driven by the issue of lack of access to certain treatments, the interruption of which, given their age, could be fatal in a short time (Rendina, 2002).

As the number of voters expanded into the millions, and the duration of the mandates of those elected decreased to just a few years, vote buying became a much simpler practice, but much closer to the idea of fraud (de Mesquita and Alastair Smith, 2011). This is because a person would accept, for a small sum or a minimal service, to entrust power for 4, 5, or 7 years to individuals in whom they do not necessarily have trust, knowing that once elected, these individuals may not do any good for the community, and only the small service offered creates a differentiation between candidates.

In conclusion, vote buying is an ongoing issue, with a history spanning millennia, but with different moral and practical significance. This different significance arises from the fact that in ancient times, if promises were not honored after the vote, it could lead to open revolt and civil war in a short time, whereas now, if a candidate does not fulfill the promises made to those whose votes were bought, there is no direct way to hold them accountable from those at the bottom of the hierarchy. Most of the world's legislations do not accept imperative voting – this obliges the elected official to vote strictly as requested by their own voters – so today there is great freedom of decision post-election, with the risk of possible subsequent revolts being very low.

The expansion of the electorate was slow because the aristocracy was unwilling to relinquish the lucrative positions they held in the state. However, as the general level of education increased, the economy became more complex, and its professionals demanded more decision-making power within communities. To a large extent, the history of many states is a portrait of the struggles for power among various interest groups, where certain perspectives, doctrines, and inventions (with printing being the most significant) altered the balance of power.

With the generalization of the right to vote, requiring only one objective criterion (the voter's age) to be met, the issue of the voter's intellectual preparation regarding governance emerged. In practice, the expansion of voting rights facilitated the occurrence of electoral fraud, as some methods used in this regard could be more easily disguised in front of individuals with lower levels of education (Dawson, 2020). Equally important – at least in the perception of election participants in the position of candidates – is another issue: namely, the shortening of the term they must serve after winning the competition. From a cynical perspective – almost Machiavellian – it may ultimately be acceptable to increase the number of voters who designate the leaders of a country or a local community, but the major problem is the shortening of the duration of these terms. Even more seriously, in democratic countries, there is the possibility of early parliamentary elections, which shortens terms and alters power dynamics not only within political-administrative institutions (government, parliament) but especially within the parties themselves.

As we know, this text does not address the situation of politicians who compete honestly, but rather that of those who fraudulently manipulate electoral processes – obviously, consciously – which means we are dealing with a criminal psychological perspective, as these alterations often fall under articles of the Penal Code. Thus, the major problem faced by an unscrupulous politician is that a term of 4 or 5 years – or even less, if early parliamentary elections occur – is very little for both their future plans and the potential political-economic benefits they aimed for when submitting

their candidacy. Additionally, there may be even more serious issues, namely the incurring of debts to be able to run, and if the term is short, it may not be possible to repay them in full. Short terms that force a person to campaign every 4 or 5 years are not very profitable for party members at the lower levels of the party hierarchy, which can lead some politicians to contemplate the complete dismantling of elections and – unfortunately – even the establishment of a dictatorship or an authoritarian regime. In this regard, there are numerous examples across all continents in every century, including the current one.

4. In a more brutal perspective of the analysis, it must also be considered that the shortening of term lengths, alongside the increase in the number of voters, brings another problem for candidates in political elections. Specifically, the emergence of the press has increased the transparency of political actions, as well as the visibility of all politicians' actions. Before the expansion of the press, only aristocrats engaged in politics, and negotiations took place strictly among "prestigious people", without the general population learning much about their content. With the growing possibilities for information and the increasing number of those choosing new leaders, it has become increasingly difficult to be a politician. Essentially, one can be seen anywhere, by anyone, and what that person sees can reach the knowledge of a large number of voters. In this sense, the emergence of the internet – especially mobile devices that can access it – is a real threat to any politician, who can be filmed or recorded by anyone, and that audio-visual document can quickly reach the public from any point on the globe (Council of Europe, 2017). Thus, there is a forced change in the conduct of the entire political class, and the fact that elections occur at least 20 or 25 times a century means that there is a possibility of the rapid elimination of a significant number of politicians in just two or three electoral cycles, a situation that never happened when politics was conducted by absolute monarchs and aristocrats.

Paradoxically, this strong pressure on politicians has not only positive effects but also creates a genuine desire among them for revenge against the way the political system is organized today, which is expressed through two types of conduct that they, the politicians, can decide based on their constitutional rights to legislate. Specifically, they can legislate cumbersome ways to be held criminally accountable for actions taken during their term, but also – as mentioned above – they can undertake actions to undermine the legality and democracy of their countries. In this regard, it should be noted that the analysis reports on these two characteristics of the state (legality and democracy) over the past 20 years reveal that they are in regression in the majority of countries worldwide (Freedom House, 2024).

Two major issues have been brought about by the advancement of digital technologies in recent years within the electoral sphere.

First, there is the question of the voting age, which has a special connotation in some countries, aiming to lower the voting threshold, typically from 18 to 16 years (Eichhorn and Bergh, 2021). This change allows for greater civic engagement from the younger generation, who may be less wise but are better at recognizing various manipulation tactics online. Thus, it could help to balance the manipulative relationship on the internet, where older individuals have significant vulnerabilities, becoming victims of subtle operations that quietly and frequently convey certain messages.

Although wisdom is not lacking in mature individuals, they often lack specific knowledge related to the electronic environment, leading to a distortion or complete alteration of their electoral behavior (specifically, their voting preferences change).

The issue of age, in terms of electoral fraud, is a delicate yet very important and real matter. Specifically, as a person ages, certain biological transformations occur that reduce their mobility and cognitive abilities. In this context, it is easy for younger family members of these individuals – or social workers in local public administration – if they have a certain political interest, to employ behaviors that "confiscate" the electoral will of elderly people (such as mobile voting, voting together in the same booth because the older person does not see very well, etc.). The problem of manipulating elderly individuals through messages on the internet and television is equally clear. We are not discussing their good faith, but the consequences of aging do not manifest just one day before their death, and the loss of psychological contact with the social environment can occur years before the inevitable departure from the contemporary world. This can be observed, and if a population is aging, the possibilities for manipulation through the internet or mass media increase, precisely as a result of this decline in intellectual and biological capacities. From this, certain discussions arise about setting a maximum age limit for those who can vote, but any chosen level will spark debates, as there will be individuals who will feel that their electoral rights have been affected by disregarding constitutional provisions.

The second problem arising from the advancement of digitalization is related to the ability of the tools of this new technology to conduct electoral campaigns disguised under the names of individuals, referred to in the specialized literature as "bots", without any pause. Thus, the issue is twofold: on one hand, there is the appearance of humanity, and here the discussion leads to the new technologies of Artificial Intelligence (AI), which will play an increasingly significant role in political campaigns in the coming decades, affecting older individuals as well as those with lower levels of education due to the capabilities of these bots (Lee-Geiller, 2024). On the other hand, the impression that these bots will leave on people with limited knowledge of the electronic environment is very important: "intelligent, highly cultured, persuasive, and above all tireless". In the face of this type of "adversary", many people will subordinate their political will, unaware that the programming of the bots belongs to a party with clear, very objective goals. The effects of digitalization and AI on electoral campaigns and actual elections are not yet fully perceived, but from what we have seen in recent years, there is enough potential to alter the will of voters.

5. Election fraud is therefore a normal consequence of power dynamics within society, but especially within each political party. Clearly, every political formation wants to win elections honestly, as this is the only way to fully legitimize its position in the state, and consequently recruit new members who will carry forward its ideology. Therefore, the real causes of fraud must be sought not only in a specific desire of individuals to violate various legislations, but especially in the will of a few initiators of processes that alter the will of the electorate. When these individuals reach a position of power within their own parties, it can lead to negative electoral conduct, which may ultimately bring success, but will prove harmful in the long run both to the respective formation and to the country where these frauds occur.

In fact, when a party begins to engage in actions that alter the will of voters, it will be observed that it transforms more into a formation of leaders willing to win and maintain power at any cost, rather than a political group with a coherent doctrine. In any situation, this transformation – from doctrine to prominent leaders – is a first step towards the disappearance of the party itself, which will reduce its electoral base and subsequently will no longer reach the threshold for entry into parliaments and local councils.

Election fraud is always very costly financially, and smaller political parties cannot engage in such actions because they lack the resources. Therefore, if large parties begin to alter the will of the electorate, they suddenly become prisoners of their own actions, which can lead either to dictatorship or to the coalition of several political formations against them, or even to large-scale social protests that can result in profound changes in a country's political sphere. However, Artificial Intelligence can provide an additional opportunity for those who wish to commit fraud and have the funds to pay for the most powerful bots of this technology.

Thus, the future appears bleak, and to avoid heading in a negative direction, it is necessary for the entire population of countries to be educated electorally in detecting various types of fraud, but especially in the direction of honest and frequent participation in the political game, as it is only through this that the directions for the development of a society are established.

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FRAUDA ELECTORALĂ ÎN REPUBLICA MOLDOVA: ÎNTRE MIT ȘI REALITATE

CZU: 342.841(478)
https://doi.org/10.59295/eiqd.12

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Abstract. *Electoral fraud remains a highly debated topic, often used as a political tool to undermine opponents or justify unfavourable outcomes. For the Republic of Moldova, this topic is of utmost relevance. However, the distinction between perception and evidence is crucial when addressing this issue.*

Fraud can take many forms, including vote-buying, ballot stuffing, manipulation of electoral rolls, or misuse of administrative resources. While isolated incidents occur in many democracies, systemic fraud capable of altering election outcomes is less common, particularly in countries with robust electoral systems.

One significant challenge is the spread of unverified claims about electoral fraud, which can erode trust in democratic institutions and discourage voter participation. These allegations, often amplified by political rhetoric, risk creating a climate of suspicion, even in the absence of concrete evidence.

On the other hand, genuine cases of fraud, though rare, highlight the importance of implementing and maintaining safeguards such as independent election monitoring, transparent vote counting, and strict enforcement of electoral laws.

Ultimately, distinguishing between myth and reality in electoral fraud is essential to protect the integrity of democratic processes while fostering trust and engagement among citizens. Public discourse should be grounded in facts and evidence, not speculation or manipulation, to strengthen democracy and its institutions.

Keywords*: electoral fraud, electoral laws, the integrity of democratic processes, vote-buying, misuse of administrative resources, democratic institutions, election monitoring, transparent vote counting*

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Introducere

În orice societate democratică, procesul electoral reprezintă fundamentul pe care se sprijină legitimitatea guvernării. O guvernare democratică este asociată unui proces electoral integru. Integritatea este trăsătura de bază care legitimează guvernarea.

De cealaltă parte, practic orișice proces electoral este caracterizat prin mesaje și discursuri ale politicienilor, competitorilor electorali , despre iminența fraudării alegerilor. Frauda electorală rămâne un subiect sensibil și controversat, care ridică semne de întrebare cu privire la corectitudinea și transparența alegerilor. Indiferent că este vorba despre manipularea voturilor, influențarea alegătorilor prin mijloace ilegale sau falsificarea rezultatelor, astfel de practici subminează încrederea cetățenilor în instituțiile democratice.

Dar ce forme ia frauda electorală și care sunt consecințele sale asupra societății? În acest articol, vom analiza cauzele, mecanismele și impactul acestui fenomen, dar și măsurile care pot fi luate pentru a preveni astfel de derapaje. Accentul se va pune pe analiza cazului Republicii Moldova, îndeosebi din perspectiva celor mai recente procese electorale, organizate și desfășurate în 2024. Drept bază factologică vor fi utilizate în special rezultatele observărilor procesului electoral realizat de Asociația Promo-LEX, organizația care constant monitorizează alegerile din Republica Moldova începând cu 2009.

Frauda electorală este un subiect care stârnește controverse și emoții intense în societățile democratice din întreaga lume. Adesea prezentată ca o amenințare majoră la adresa corectitudinii procesului electoral, aceasta devine un punct central în discursurile politice și în mass-media, mai ales în perioadele de alegeri. Dar cât din ceea ce auzim este real și cât reprezintă doar speculații sau strategii de manipulare?

În timp ce unii susțin că frauda electorală este un fenomen răspândit care pune în pericol legitimitatea guvernelor, alții argumentează că aceste temeri sunt exagerate și folosite ca instrument politic. Prin acest articol, ne propunem să explorăm limitele dintre mit și realitate în ceea ce privește frauda electorală, analizând date concrete, exemple relevante și impactul acestor dezbateri asupra încrederii publicului în procesul democratic.

Definirea și reglementarea fraudei electorale în Republica Moldova. Atât Codul electoral, cât și legislația conexă, nu definesc concludent termenul de „fraudă electorală”. Legislatorul a instituționalizat noțiunea de „încălcare” a legislației electorale.

Pentru cazul Republicii Moldova cea mai relevantă din punctul de vedere a reglementării este jurisprudența Curții Constituționale. În acest sens, este vorba despre Hotărârea Curții Constituționale nr. 34 din 13.12.2016 (Hotărârea Curții Constituționale, 2016. par. 22). Paragraful 22 al Hotărârii statuează că:

- *anularea alegerilor poate să intervină numai în cazul în care votarea și stabilirea rezultatelor au avut loc prin fraudă;*
- *nu orice fraudă din procesul electoral este echivalentă cu fraudarea alegerilor, ci numai frauda care este de natură să influențeze rezultatele alegerilor;*
- *cererea de anulare a alegerilor trebuie motivată și însoțită de dovezile pe care se întemeiază.*

Aceste trei prevederi pot fi tratate în calitate de principii care creează un cadru care asigură protejarea integrității alegerilor și prevenirea destabilizării prin acuzații

nefondate. Ele reflectă importanța unei abordări bine documentate și orientate pe fapte în cazurile de fraudă electorală.

Prin primul alineat se face legătura directă dintre conceptul de „fraudă electorală" și „anularea alegerilor". Fraudare este asimilată unei încălcări grave care afectează procesul electoral. Astfel se evidențiază că anularea alegerilor nu este un proces arbitrar și nu poate fi declanșată decât în situații extrem de grave. Trebuie dovedit că atât procesul de vot, cât și stabilirea rezultatelor au fost afectate prin practici frauduloase. Accentul cade pe gravitatea și amploarea fraudei, sugerând că nu orice abatere procedurală justifică anularea.

Cu referirea la cea de a doua concluzie a Curții Constituționale, atragem atenția că Înalta Curte subliniază diferența între fraude minore, care nu afectează în mod semnificativ rezultatul final, și fraudele de proporții care alterează voința electoratului. Este un criteriu-cheie pentru a stabili relevanța fraudei în raport cu legitimitatea rezultatului. De exemplu, o eroare administrativă localizată nu este suficientă pentru a justifica măsuri drastice precum anularea alegerilor. Exemplul cu procedura de numărare a buletinelor de vot, când nu toate birourile electorale ale secțiilor de votare (BESV) respectă norma care prevede că doar o persoană trebuie să prezinte tuturor buletinul de vot pe parcursul numărării. Chiar dacă se cunoaște acest fapt, încălcarea in cauză nu servește drept motiv de anulare a procedurii de numărare și calificare a acesteia drept fraudă electorală.

Contextual, Curtea Constituțional dezvoltă ideea și prin paragraful 153 a Hotărârii citate stabilește că „anularea alegerilor poate să intervină numai în cazul în care votarea și stabilirea rezultatelor au avut loc prin fraudă, iar aceasta este de natură să modifice atribuirea mandatului sau, după caz, ordinea candidaților care pot participa la cel de-al doilea tur de scrutin, precum și faptul că cererea de anulare a alegerilor trebuie motivată și însoțită de dovezile pe care se întemeiază."

Consecvent, cel de al treilea postulat al Curții impune o rigurozitate procedurală: cei care solicită anularea alegerilor trebuie să prezinte argumente clare și dovezi solide care să susțină acuzațiile. Această cerință previne abuzurile și utilizarea nejustificată a acuzațiilor de fraudă electorală ca instrument politic. Este o măsură pentru protejarea stabilității procesului democratic.

„Fraudarea alegerilor" în discursul public al competitorilor electorali. În Republica Moldova, ca de altfel și în multe alte state, alegerile încă nu au demarat, dar deja anumiți competitori electorali vorbesc despre fraudare, creând astfel un climat de neîncredere în procesul democratic chiar înainte ca votul să înceapă. Aceste declarații, adesea făcute fără dovezi concrete, pot avea un impact semnificativ asupra percepției publicului, amplificând tensiunile sociale și politice.

Într-un astfel de context, retorica privind fraudarea alegerilor este folosită nu doar ca o armă politică pentru mobilizarea susținătorilor, ci și ca un mijloc de a justifica eventuale rezultate nefavorabile. Această strategie, des întâlnită în competițiile electorale, ridică întrebări legate de responsabilitatea actorilor politici în menținerea unui climat electoral echitabil și transparent.

Sunt situații multiple când anume candidații care pe parcursul perioadei electorale competitorii care invocă fraudarea alegerilor, până la începutul campaniei propriu-zise, urmare a alegerilor desfășurate reușesc să obțină mandate sau chiar să învingă in alegeri.

Este de exemplu cazul Partidului Acțiune și Solidaritate (PAS) care la începutul campaniei electorale pentru alegerile prezidențiale din 2020 vorbea deja despre faptul că alegerile sunt fraudate (Susținătorii PAS..., 2020). Amintim că candidata PAS Maia Sandu a învins în cadrul acelor alegeri. Sau poate fi invocat situația cu partidul politic „Mișcarea Alternativa Națională" care la început de campanie pentru alegerile locale generale din 2023, la fel, invoca că acestea deja ar fi fraudate (Ion Ceban, 2023).

Mesajele repetate ale partidelor politice despre fraudarea alegerilor, mai ales atunci când nu sunt susținute de dovezi concrete, pot avea un impact profund negativ asupra educației civice a cetățenilor. Aceste afirmații generează neîncredere în instituțiile democratice și în procesul electoral, descurajând participarea activă a alegătorilor. În loc să încurajeze o implicare informată și critică, astfel de mesaje pot induce cinism și apatie, convingând cetățenii că votul lor nu contează sau că rezultatele sunt deja „aranjate".

Mai mult, promovarea acestor idei fără dovezi riscă să trivializeze conceptul de fraudă electorală, făcând mai dificilă identificarea și combaterea reală a problemelor atunci când acestea chiar apar. În loc să fie educați să analizeze obiectiv procesul electoral și să-și exercite drepturile în mod responsabil, cetățenii sunt expuși unui climat de suspiciune și manipulare, ceea ce subminează pe termen lung cultura democratică a unei societăți.

Radiografia încălcărilor legislației electorale identificate de către Misiunea de observare (MO) Promo-LEX a alegerilor prezidențiale 2025. Pentru a identifica cele mai constate încălcări ale legislației electorale și standardelor internaționale in domeniul electoral, voi reieși din analiza rapoartelor Asociației Promo-LEX, care este organizația care observat alegerile în mod constant în Republica Moldova din 2009. Potrivit observatorilor (Raport nr. 4 MO Promo-LEX, 2024 p.27-40), cele mai răspândite încălcări care au afectat integritatea procesului electoral au fost:

Utilizarea abuzivă a resurselor administrative. De altfel, utilizarea abuzivă a resurselor administrative în timpul alegerilor reprezintă o practică ce afectează grav integritatea procesului democratic. Prin „resurse administrative" ne referim la infrastructura, personalul, fondurile publice și alte mijloace care ar trebui să fie folosite exclusiv în interesul cetățenilor, nu în scopuri politice sau electorale. Când aceste resurse sunt deturnate pentru a favoriza un anumit partid sau candidat, se creează un teren de joc inegal, în care competiția electorală devine distorsionată.

Unul dintre principalele efecte negative ale acestei practici este subminarea încrederii publicului în alegeri. Atunci când cetățenii observă că instituțiile statului, care ar trebui să fie imparțiale, sunt folosite pentru a sprijini o anumită agendă politică, percepția lor asupra procesului electoral devine una de nelegitimitate. În plus, utilizarea resurselor publice în interes electoral poate transmite mesajul că autoritățile prioritizează interesele proprii în detrimentul responsabilităților lor față de cetățeni.

Un alt impact grav este erodarea concurenței electorale corecte. Partidele sau candidații care abuzează de resursele administrative obțin un avantaj disproporționat față de adversarii lor, având acces la mijloace financiare, logistice și de comunicare superioare, toate pe cheltuiala contribuabililor. Această inegalitate subminează esența democrației, unde toate părțile ar trebui să aibă șanse egale de a-și prezenta platformele și de a câștiga sprijinul alegătorilor.

Mai mult, utilizarea resurselor administrative în scopuri electorale poate avea consecințe economice și sociale pe termen lung. Resursele publice deturnate pentru campanii politice sunt resurse care nu mai sunt disponibile pentru educație, sănătate, infrastructură sau alte nevoi esențiale ale societății. Această deturnare subminează încrederea cetățenilor în capacitatea statului de a administra eficient și echitabil bunurile comune.

Pentru a preveni astfel de abuzuri, este crucial ca instituțiile democratice să funcționeze independent și să implementeze mecanisme clare de control și sancțiuni. Organismele electorale și societatea civilă trebuie să monitorizeze activ utilizarea resurselor publice, iar cetățenii trebuie educați să recunoască și să denunțe astfel de practici. În cele din urmă, alegerile corecte și libere nu depind doar de legi bine scrise, ci și de respectarea lor și de implicarea activă a tuturor actorilor din societate.

Cu privire la cazul Republicii Moldova, experții Promo-LEX atrag atenția că potrivit cadrului legal al Republicii Moldova, în perioada electorală este interzisă utilizarea de către candidați a resurselor administrative (Cod electoral, 2022. art. 54, alin. (6), lit. e)), iar admiterea încălcării prevederilor respective se sancționează (Cod contravențional, 2008. art. 481, alin. (7)). Totuși atragem atenția că utilizarea resurselor administrative este admisă de actorii interesați nu doar în campaniile electorale, dar și în afara acestora, inclusiv în scop de promovare politică în afara perioadei electorale. Din acest considerent, ar fi necesar de reglementat interzicerea și sancționarea utilizării resurselor administrative atât în perioada electorală, cât și în afara perioadei electorale în scop de promovare politică.

Contextual, societatea civilă, în particular Promo-LEX, a promovat adoptarea definiției resurselor administrative formulată de Comisia de la Veneția, una mai largă și exhaustivă (Raport nr. 1 MO Promo-LEX, 2024. p.39-40). Amintim, de asemenea că, că prin *Documentul reuniunii de la Copenhaga a Conferinței pentru dimensiunea umană a CSCE (OSCE)* din 29.06.1990, statele membre s-au obligat să asigure delimitarea clară între stat și partidele politice; îndeosebi, partidele politice nu se pot confunda cu statul (Documentul de la Copenhaga, 1990. par. 5.4.).

Factologic, observatorii au atras atenția în special la:

- utilizarea instituțiilor statului în scopul promovării inițiativelor electorale;
- implicarea în activitățile de campanie a persoanelor care dețin funcții de demnitate publică;
- atribuirea de către candidații electorali a meritelor pentru lucrările/ serviciile de uz public efectuate din bani publici;
- agitație electorală/ colectare semnături cu implicarea funcționarilor din sectorul bugetar în timpul orelor de muncă.

Activități de corupere a alegătorilor. Coruperea electorală reprezintă una dintre cele mai grave forme de subminare a democrației, afectând în mod direct corectitudinea procesului electoral și încrederea cetățenilor în sistemul democratic. Aceasta include oferirea de bani, bunuri, servicii sau alte beneficii în schimbul voturilor, ceea ce deturnează scopul alegerilor de a reflecta voința reală a populației.

Unul dintre principalele efecte negative ale coruperii electorale este distorsionarea rezultatelor alegerilor. În loc ca votul să fie un proces liber și conștient, influențarea alegătorilor prin mită electorală conduce la alegerea candidaților care au acces la resurse

financiare considerabile, nu neapărat la cei mai competenți sau mai reprezentativi pentru nevoile comunității. Acest lucru perpetuează un cerc vicios al corupției, deoarece politicienii care câștigă prin astfel de mijloace sunt mai predispuși să prioritizeze interesele proprii sau ale finanțatorilor lor, în detrimentul interesului public.

Pe termen lung, coruperea electorală slăbește cultura democratică și educația civică. Alegătorii care acceptă mită electorală sunt încurajați să își valorifice votul ca pe o resursă tranzacționabilă, ceea ce reduce implicarea conștientă în procesul electoral și încurajează un comportament pasiv sau oportunist. Astfel, în loc să fie un act de responsabilitate civică, votul devine un instrument pentru beneficii pe termen scurt.

Un alt impact negativ semnificativ este subminarea încrederii publicului în instituții. Atunci când corupția electorală este percepută ca o practică obișnuită, cetățenii pierd încrederea în corectitudinea procesului democratic și devin sceptici față de legitimitatea guvernării. Acest lucru poate duce la o participare electorală scăzută, alimentând apatia politică și destabilizând fundamentele unui stat democratic.

De asemenea, coruperea electorală contribuie la perpetuarea inegalităților sociale și economice. Cei mai vulnerabili membri ai societății sunt adesea ținta acestor practici, fiind manipulați prin beneficii temporare, în loc să li se ofere politici publice care să le îmbunătățească condițiile de viață pe termen lung. În esență, mita electorală îi privează pe cetățeni de șansa unui leadership responsabil și de politici transparente și eficiente.

Pentru a combate acest fenomen, este crucială aplicarea strictă a legilor împotriva corupției electorale, educarea cetățenilor despre impactul negativ al acestei practici și crearea unor mecanisme eficiente de monitorizare. Fără măsuri concrete, coruperea electorală va continua să submineze democrația, alimentând un cerc vicios al neîncrederii și al guvernării ineficiente.

Potrivit legislației Republicii Moldova oferirea sau darea de bani, bunuri, servicii ori de alte foloase în scopul determinării alegătorului sau susținătorului să își exercite sau să nu își exercite drepturile electorale în cadrul alegerilor se sancționează cu amendă sau cu închisoare de la un an la 5 ani, iar pentru persoana juridică – amendă și cu privarea de dreptul de a exercita o anumită activitate sau cu lichidarea persoanei juridice (Cod penal, 2002. art. 181[1]). În perioada alegerilor prezidențiale și a referendumului constituțional din 2024 observatorii Promo-LEX a observat mai multe situații care pot fi calificate drept cazuri corupere a alegătorilor (Raport nr. 4 MO Promo-LEX, 2024 p.37-38).

Dar, important de accentuat că nu e vorba doar de numărul de cazuri ci de caracterul organizat și sistemic al coruperii și de implicațiile din exterior. Astfel, cu privire la caracterul organizat/sistemic al actelor de corupție, constatăm că de circa ani acest tip de corupție implică rețele bine organizate și are scopul de a denatura voința reală a alegătorilor pentru a favoriza un anumit candidat sau partid. La modul nemijlocit e vorba despre implicarea liderului Partidului „Șor", partid declarat neconstituțional - Ilan Șor, condamnat in Republica Moldova cu închisoare cu executare în penitenciar de tip închis, pentru escrocherie și spălarea banilor. Implicarea din exterior s-a manifestat prin faptul că Ilan Șor se află in Federația Rusă și prin intermediul sistemului bancar rusesc a finanțat activitățile rețelei sale din Republica Moldova (Poliția Republicii Moldova, Comunicat, 2024).

Implicarea în campanie a cultelor religioase și a sindicatelor. Cadrul legal al Republicii Moldova interzice efectuarea agitației electorale de către reprezentanții

cultelor religioase și a sindicatelor, fiind prevăzute sancțiuni pentru admiterea încălcărilor respective (Cod contravențional, 2008, art. 52, alin. (2)). De asemenea, este interzisă finanțarea ori susținerea materială sub orice formă a competitorilor electorali de către cultele religioase și sindicate, precum și utilizarea imaginii ce reprezintă culte religioase sau părți componente în programele electorale, în materialele de agitație electorală, în acțiunile de agitație electorală și în publicitatea electorală care vizează, într-un fel sau altul, competitorii electorali (Cod electoral, 2022, art. 54, alin. (5)).

În contextul alegerilor prezidențiale din 2024, observatorii Promo-LEX au identificat mai multe cazuri de implicare a cultelor religioase și un caz de implicare a sindicatelor în campania electorală (Raport nr. 4 MO Promo-LEX, 2024, p.36). Reieșind din rapoartele observatorilor naționali ar reieși că acest fenomen nu a fost așa de prezent in viața politică și electorală din 2016.

Implicarea cultelor religioase și a sindicatelor în campaniile electorale este tratată cu precauție în standardele internaționale privind alegerile democratice. Aceste standarde promovează principii precum imparțialitatea, transparența și echitatea în procesul electoral, iar implicarea unor organizații precum cultele religioase sau sindicatele poate ridica preocupări legate de influența necorespunzătoare asupra alegătorilor.

Cu privire la implicarea cultelor religioase, acestea afectează neutralitate și separarea de procesul politic al bisericii. Standardele internaționale, inclusiv cele susținute de organisme precum OSCE/ODIHR, subliniază că implicarea cultelor religioase în campanii electorale trebuie limitată pentru a proteja neutralitatea procesului electoral. Aceasta pe motiv că religia poate exercita o influență puternică asupra alegătorilor, iar utilizarea acesteia în campanii poate crea presiuni nejustificate asupra conștiinței alegătorilor sau poate duce la diviziuni pe criterii religioase. Amestecul cultelor în alegeri poate submina separarea dintre biserică și stat, care este un principiu democratic fundamental. Riscul manipulării votului este mai mare atunci când liderii religioși susțin public anumite partide sau candidați, creând percepția unei obligații morale sau spirituale de a-i susține.

Cu referire la implicarea în procesele electorale a sindicatelor este un subiect mai sensibil. Standardele internaționale nu prea acordă o atenție majoră acestui aspect, prin comparație cu situația cultelor religioase. La modul practic, în multe democrații, legislația interzice utilizarea resurselor financiare ale sindicatelor în campanii fără acordul explicit al membrilor sau limitează implicarea lor activă la susținerea unor cauze și nu a unor candidați.

Implicarea sindicatelor în campaniile electorale este permisă în anumite limite, însă standardele internaționale recomandă ca aceasta să fie reglementată pentru a evita abuzurile. Sindicatele reprezintă interesele angajaților, iar implicarea lor activă în campanii poate duce la presiuni asupra membrilor să susțină anumite partide sau candidați. Abuzul resurselor sindicale, cum ar fi fondurile colective sau infrastructura, poate crea o competiție inegală între candidați. Există riscul ca sindicatele să se transforme din organizații dedicate drepturilor muncitorilor în instrumente politice.

OSCE și Consiliul Europei recomandă ca regulile privind implicarea cultelor religioase și a sindicatelor să fie clar stipulate în legislația electorală, pentru a preveni utilizarea abuzivă a influenței lor (Codul bunelor practici..., 2002). Principiul-cheie este

egalitatea de șanse între candidați, ceea ce înseamnă că nicio organizație cu o influență disproporționată asupra alegătorilor nu ar trebui să încline balanța electorală în favoarea unui candidat sau partid.

Astfel, în timp ce sindicatele pot avea un rol limitat, în principal pentru a susține interesele muncitorilor, iar cultele religioase sunt încurajate să rămână neutre, standardele internaționale subliniază că implicarea lor directă în campaniile electorale trebuie strict reglementată. Orice influență excesivă exercitată de aceste entități riscă să compromită principiile de imparțialitate și echitate în alegeri, afectând astfel legitimitatea procesului democratic.

Situații ce pot fi calificate drept acte de intimidare/violență în alegeri. Potrivit rapoartelor completate de observatorii Promo-LEX, au fost înregistrate un șir de cazuri de intimidări/violență/vandalizare cu implicarea competitorilor electorali (Raport nr. 4 MO Promo-LEX, 2024. p.39-40). Spre deosebire de scrutinele electorale anterioare, în contextul alegerilor prezidențiale și a referendumului constituțional, s-a constatat o creștere a numărului de cazuri de intimidare/violență.

Situațiile de intimidare/violență s-au manifestat prin confiscarea materialelor electorale fără returnarea acestora competitorilor până la sfârșitul campaniei electorale, reținerea/intimidarea agitatorilor competitorilor electorali, distribuirea publicității în scop de defăimare a competitorilor electorali etc.

La general, actele de intimidare sau violență în alegeri sunt situații în care participanții la procesul electoral (alegători, candidați, observatori, membri ai comisiilor electorale) sunt supuși amenințărilor, presiunilor sau agresiunilor fizice ori psihologice pentru a le influența comportamentul.

Dezinformarea în alegeri. O altă trăsătură a proceselor electorale din ultimii ani în Republica Moldova este afectarea libertății alegătorilor de ași forma o opinie obiectivă asupra platformelor electorale. In acest fel, la alegerile prezidențiale din 2024 lipsa unor dezbateri electorale veritabile a limitat posibilitățile de informare a publicului cu privire la programele și angajamentele electorale ale candidaților/candidatelor (Declarație. Poziția Coaliției civice..., 2024).

Totodată, în mediul online, dezinformarea și atacurile asupra presei independente au creat o atmosferă de polarizare și neîncredere, având ca efect diminuarea accesului publicului la informații corecte despre procesul electoral. CALC subliniază importanța unor reguli mai stricte pentru mediul online, necesare atât pentru protejarea integrității electorale, cât și pentru combaterea răspândirii dezinformării și manipulării care afectează decizia de vot a cetățenilor. În acest sens, există un spațiu considerabil de îmbunătățire în funcționarea autorităților competente în lupta împotriva dezinformării.

La modul general, dezinformarea în alegeri este o amenințare serioasă pentru integritatea proceselor democratice. Prin afectarea libertății de a forma o opinie, aceasta subminează drepturile fundamentale ale alegătorilor și creează un teren fertil pentru manipulare. Combaterea acestui fenomen necesită un efort comun din partea instituțiilor, societății civile, mediului academic și cetățenilor, pentru a proteja principiile democrației și ale alegerilor libere.

Dezinformarea afectează libertatea de a forma o opinie într-un mod profund, influențând percepțiile alegătorilor și distorsionând realitatea. Printre efectele principale se numără:

- Distorsionarea faptelor: Alegătorii pot fi induși în eroare cu privire la programele politice, candidați sau evenimente, ceea ce le afectează capacitatea de a lua decizii informate.
- Polarizarea opiniei publice: Dezinformarea amplifică diviziunile sociale și politice, creând o atmosferă de conflict și neîncredere.
- Compromiterea încrederii în instituțiile democratice: Alegătorii pot deveni sceptici față de procesul electoral și de legitimitatea rezultatelor.
- Crearea unui mediu informațional toxic: Alegătorii sunt bombardați cu mesaje contradictorii, ceea ce poate duce la confuzie și apatie electorală.

Ca și soluții pentru combaterea dezinformării în alegeri ar fi:

- Educația media: Creșterea competențelor cetățenilor în a identifica informațiile false și sursele credibile.
- Reglementări stricte pentru platformele online: Obligarea rețelelor sociale să combată dezinformarea prin transparență, monitorizare și înlăturarea conținutului fals.
- Verificarea faptelor (fact-checking): Promovarea organizațiilor independente care verifică informațiile distribuite în spațiul public.
- Campanii de conștientizare: Informarea alegătorilor despre riscurile dezinformării și despre cum pot recunoaște manipularea.
- Responsabilitatea actorilor politici: Partidele și candidații trebuie să evite utilizarea unor tactici bazate pe dezinformare.

Privind raportarea cheltuielilor de către competitori. Pe final, am considera necesar de a scoate in evidență și subiectul raportării cheltuielilor de către competitori. În Republica Moldova monitorizarea finanțării campaniilor electorale este un subiect de maximă importanță. CEC este organul mandatat cu recepționarea, verificarea, supravegherea și controlul rapoartelor financiare privind finanțarea grupurilor de inițiativă și a campaniei electorale. Conform observațiilor, în ultimii ani are loc un proces de consolidare a rolului Comisiei Electorale Centrale în supravegherea finanțării campaniilor electorale și a partidelor. Concurenții sunt obligați să raporteze săptămânal cheltuielile, iar CEC verifică sumele respective în baza activităților observate. Evenimentele de la ultimele alegeri au demonstrat că eficiența rolului de supraveghere financiară și control este în continuă creștere.

Totuși, potrivit misiunilor de observare Promo-LEX în continuare concurenții nu raportează toate cheltuielile, chiar dacă rata de raportare este in creștere de la campanie la campanie. În funcție de destinația cheltuielilor estimate drept neraportate, cele mai multe au fost estimate pentru materiale promoționale, urmat de cheltuielile pentru retribuirea muncii, organizarea evenimentelor și publicitatea pe rețele de socializare, recompensele voluntarilor/agitatorilor.

Raportarea cheltuielilor de către concurenții în alegeri este un pilon esențial al transparenței și integrității procesului electoral. Aceasta asigură un cadru de încredere între candidați, autorități și cetățeni, contribuind la consolidarea democrației și la prevenirea corupției.

Raportarea cheltuielilor permite cetățenilor să vadă cum sunt utilizate resursele financiare în campaniile electorale. O astfel de transparență îi ajută pe alegători să identifice eventualele influențe externe, cum ar fi finanțarea ocultă sau implicarea unor

entități cu interese ascunse. Obligația de a raporta cheltuielile limitează riscul ca fondurile să fie utilizate în scopuri ilegale sau neetice, cum ar fi cumpărarea voturilor sau finanțarea de către surse nedeclarate. Totodată, aceasta contribuie la identificarea donațiilor care depășesc limitele legale sau vin din surse nepermise.

Regulile privind raportarea cheltuielilor contribuie la menținerea unei competiții corecte între candidați. Ele previn ca unii participanți să beneficieze de avantaje disproporționate prin utilizarea fondurilor nedeclarate sau obținute ilegal. Candidații și partidele politice sunt responsabili în fața alegătorilor nu doar pentru promisiunile lor, ci și pentru modul în care își desfășoară campaniile. Raportarea cheltuielilor arată că aceștia acționează cu bună credință și respectă regulile jocului democratic.

Un proces electoral transparent, inclusiv în ceea ce privește raportarea cheltuielilor, crește încrederea cetățenilor în sistemul democratic. Alegătorii au nevoie să știe că alegerile sunt corecte și că niciun candidat nu se bazează pe mijloace financiare opace pentru a obține un avantaj. Autoritățile responsabile de organizarea alegerilor folosesc raportările financiare pentru a verifica respectarea limitelor de cheltuieli și pentru a identifica eventualele încălcări ale legislației. Acest lucru ajută la menținerea ordinii și legalității în timpul procesului electoral.

Raportarea cheltuielilor de către concurenții în alegeri nu este doar o cerință legală, ci și o practică fundamentală pentru sănătatea democrației. Respectarea acestei obligații asigură un mediu electoral echitabil, transparent și corect, consolidând încrederea cetățenilor în procesul electoral și în reprezentanții aleși.

Concluzii. Frauda electorală reprezintă o realitate incontestabilă în multe procese electorale, dar amploarea și impactul acesteia variază în funcție de contextul social, politic și instituțional al fiecărui stat. Deși nu există procese electorale perfecte, gradul de integritate al alegerilor depinde în mod esențial de capacitatea instituțiilor statului de a identifica, preveni și sancționa astfel de practici. Totodată, un rol crucial îl joacă maturitatea societății, exprimată prin intoleranța față de fraude și prin implicarea activă a cetățenilor în raportarea neregulilor. Consolidarea democrației necesită atât instituții solide și independente, cât și o cultură civică robustă, în care valorile etice și respectul pentru reguli să prevaleze. Astfel, lupta împotriva fraudei electorale nu este doar o sarcină a autorităților, ci și o responsabilitate colectivă, care reflectă sănătatea democratică a unei națiuni.

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TEHNICI DE GESTIONARE A IMAGINII COMPETITORILOR ELECTORALI ÎN ALEGERILE PREZIDENȚIALE DIN REPUBLICA MOLDOVA, 2024: STUDIU DE CAZ

CZU: 324:342.511:303.4(478)″2024″
https://doi.org/10.59295/eiqd.13

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Abstract. *This study examines the techniques employed to manage the public image of electoral competitors, Maia Sandu and Alexandr Stoianoglo, during the 2024 presidential elections in the Republic of Moldova, providing an in-depth perspective on the strategies used to strengthen public support. The research explores external influences, including the role of support from Western partners, as well as the impact of the simultaneous organization of a constitutional referendum on the dynamics of the electoral campaign. The article highlights the key themes that dominated public discourse and analyses how each candidate managed their image in front of the electorate. The findings offer a valuable foundation for understanding the interplay between internal and external factors in the electoral process, emphasizing the importance of strategic adaptation in complex political contexts.*

Keywords: *Republic of Moldova, Presidential Elections - 2024, image, electoral communication, strategies, digital marketing, Maia Sandu, Alexandr Stoianoglo.*

Ipoteze de lucru

Gestionarea imaginii electorale constituie o componentă fundamentală a strategiei de PR politic în context electoral. Un element important al imaginii electorale îl constituie notorietatea candidatului. Lipsa acesteia reduce șansele de victorie ale candidatului.

Strategiile de poziționare ale candidatului se axează pe selectarea narativelor (mesaje-cheie) cu impact asupra opiniei publice.

În contextul geopoliticii moderne, competitorii electorali folosesc suportul liderilor occidentali ca sursă de PR politic internațional.

Metodologia cercetării. Pentru elucidarea subiectului cercetării, au fost aplicate studiul comparat pentru identificarea tehnicilor de poziționare, a temelor de campanie ale concurenților; analiza de conținut pentru a evalua modul în care mass-media influențează imaginea publică a actorilor politici, subliniind temele dominante, tonul și framing-ul (în cadrul în care sunt prezentate evenimentele și personajele politice); De asemenea, evaluarea influenței marketingului digital asupra percepției publicului și

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identificarea tacticilor folosite pentru a construi sau a deforma imaginea unui candidat sau pentru a manipula percepția alegătorilor. O altă metodă aplicată - observația - urmărirea mitingurilor electorale, dezbateri, conferințe de presă în mediile de comunicare pentru a înțelege dinamicile comportamentale ale candidaților și interacțiunile cu alegătorii.

Cadrul teoretic -taxonomia şi elementele de identitate ale imaginii liderului politic

În ultimele decenii au fost studiate şi aplicate mai multe criterii după care se formează şi se evaluează imaginea politică. După 1990, studiul imaginii politice a fost realizat mai mult în domeniul relaţiilor publice (PR-ul politic) şi a devenit mai mult experimental. Numeroşi cercetători în ştiinţele comunicării politice consideră că există doi factori cruciali în formarea imaginii liderului politic şi influenţarea semnificativă a deciziei de vot – poziţia temelor (*issue position*) şi percepţia publică asupra eu-lui social al candidatului (*persona impressions*). (Coman, 2010: p.10)

Dan Nimmo şi Robert Savage consideră că există trei lucruri majore care ajută la formarea percepţiilor oamenilor asupra altor oameni (Nimo, Savage, 1976: p.46).

A. *Situaţia;*
B. *Obiectul de percepţie* – candidatul;
C. *Agentul percepţiei* – potenţialul alegător.

Candidatul, ca un obiect de percepţie, apare înaintea alegătorului în mai multe roluri. Aceste roluri pot fi clasificate în: rolul său politic şi rolul său stilistic. În cazul rolului politic sunt relevante acţiunile sale şi calificările ca oficial public – trecut, prezent şi viitor – şi ca politician reprezentând interesele partizane în comunitate. Rolul stilistic al candidatului se referă la lucrurile pe care un candidat le face şi care nu sunt direct politice, la modul în care acesta acţionează în scopul de a impresiona alegătorii cu capacităţile sale – fie prin mass-media, fie prin contactele personale, şi la calităţile distincte personale de care dă dovadă ca fiinţă umană – aspectul fizic, ţinuta, onestitatea, integritatea, compatibilitatea. Astfel, candidatul, ca obiect de percepţie, se arată publicului sub cel puţin patru aspecte: ca lider, partizan, actor şi persoană privată.

Omul politic încearcă să-şi impună o imagine proprie, care să capteze şi să fixeze atenţia publicului. Este ansamblul de trăsături alese pentru a fi prezentat în faţa opiniei publice.

Roger-Gerard Schwartzenberg descoperă cinci tipuri de personaje ale liderilor politici în statul-spectacol (Schwartzenberg, 1995: p.165):

1. *Eroul*
2. *Omul obişnuit (monseigneur-tout le monde)*
3. *Liderul care fascinează (charismatic)*
4. *Tatăl nostru (Părintele naţiunii)*
5. *Vedeta politică feminină (non-femeia politică)*.

În studiul de mai jos, ne vom refri la finaliștii scrutinului prezidențial – Maia Sandu și Alexandr Stoianoglo. Dacă ar fi să-i distribuim în caseta de roluri identificate de Roger Schwartzenberg, atunci Stoianoglo ar fi potrivit pentru rolul *Omul obişnuit,* Roger Schwartzenberg menţionează că liderul care îşi doreşte această imagine va lăsa impresia unui om ca oricare altul, neangajat politic, pe care nu ambiţia personală, ci dorinţa de a sluji comunităţii îl împinge să candideze. *Maia Sandu s-ar plia rolului de vedeta politică feminină.*

În competiția electorală, însă, este insuficient să-ți creezi o imagine publică, un lider de succes trebuie să devină o marcă pe piața politică. Philippe Maarek este cel care a formulat principii de creare a mărcii liderului politic şi de poziţionare în perioada unei campaniei prezidenţiale (1995). Marca liderului politic /„marque du leader politique" */trebuie să fie într-o perfectă armonie cu personalitatea acestuia. (Maarek, 2001:p.48)* Este crucial ca imaginea publică a liderului să reflecte adevăratele sale trăsături și valori, astfel încât să nu existe un contrast între „marca" politică și comportamentul său real. În caz contrar, o astfel de disonanță ar putea afecta credibilitatea liderului și încrederea electoratului. Autorul francez insistă asupra unor elemente –cheie ale mărcii liderului politic și anume: autenticitatea, coerența, personalizarea mesajului, apelul la emoții. Astfel, și Bolz insistă că „o marcă politică care nu creează o legătură emoțională nu este o marcă puternică*" (*Bolz, 2001: p.116) .

Pe de altă parte, odată cu procesul de creare a „mărcii", liderul politic are nevoie și de o poziționare distinctă în spectrul electoral. Al Ries și Jack Trout sunt autorii care au dezvoltat conceptului de „poziționare" (*positioning*) în marketing, dar ideile lor au fost aplicate și în domeniul politicii. În lucrarea lor ***„****Positioning: The Battle for Your Mind"*este explicat conceptul de „poziționare" ca fiind procesul prin care o marcă (sau un politician) își stabilește un loc unic și favorabil în mintea consumatorilor (sau a electoratului) (Ries, Trout: 1972). Aștfel spus, principiul de poziționare trebuie să ofere alegătorului răspuns la întrebarea: ce-mi va oferi?

În campania electorală sunt importante atât marca, cât și notorietatea actorului politic. Dacă marca definește imaginea și valorile liderului, atunci notorietatea reflectă gradul de recunoaștere și influență pe care acesta îl are asupra publicului, asupra opiniei publice. Notorietatea se construiește prin consolidarea „capitalului de vizibilitate", prin „afirmarea unei identități discursive a omului politic, contribuind la personalizarea discursului politic. (Beciu, 2011: p.281).O notorietate ridicată este esențială pentru a atrage susținători și pentru a influența opinia publică, având un impact direct asupra succesului electoral al unui candidat sau partid.

Context. Alegerile prezidențiale din 20 octombrie 2024 se desfășoară într-un context național și regional deosebit de complex, marcat de evoluții geopolitice semnificative și de schimbări importante în politica externă a Republicii Moldova, care influențează profund agenda electorală și percepțiile electoratului. Războiul din Ucraina a adus în prim-plan subiecte legate de securitatea națională, mai cu seamă luând în considerare și vulnerabilitatea malului stâng al Nistrului -Transnistria, aflată sub influența rusă. În acest cadru situațional, era important candidații să-și articuleze pozițiile față de război, securitatea națională, opțiunile de cooperare cu NATO și UE.

Un factor semnificativ, strategic în contextul alegerilor prezidențiale l-a constituit Referendumul constituțional desfășurat concomitent cu scrutinul prezidențial.

Pentru prima dată, când principalul partid din opoziția parlamentară nu-și lansează propriul candidat în competiție (PSRM îl promovează pe ex -procurorul general Alexandr Stoianoglo.) Ceea ce creează premise pentru a deduce că formațiunea se află în criză de imagine de leadership.

CEC a aprobat un tiraj record, de peste 825.000 de buletine de vot pentru cetățenii moldoveni din străinătate, și deschiderea a peste 200 de secții de votare, în 37 de țări, un număr fără precedent, care este o premieră pentru Republica Moldova. Pentru

comparație, în turul II al alegerilor prezidențiale din 2020, au participat la vot, în total, puțin peste 260 de mii de moldoveni de peste hotare, dintre care aproximativ 250 de mii au votat pentru Maia Sandu. În 2024 în străinătate au votat peste 240 de mii de cetățeni.

În funcție de context, au fost identificate și temele de campanie.

Teme de campanie: puterea și opoziția

Integrarea Europeană: oportunitatea oferită Republicii Moldova odată cu acordarea statutului de țară –candidată pentru aderarea la Uniunea Europeană și startul negocierilor de aderare. „Uniunea Europeană înseamnă pace" - acesta fiind unul din argumentele forte în contextul războiului din Ucraina, promovat intens de PAS și Președinta în exercițiu, Maia Sandu.

Eradicarea corupției, în special –corupția politică. Coruperea electoratului și influența comportamentului de vot este un subiect amplu mediatizat de autorități. In ultima faza de campanie, la 3 octombrie, cu doar 17 zile înainte de scrutin, procurorul general și șefa procuraturii anticorupție fac publică, într-un briefing de presă, „schema" de corupere a 130 000 de cetățeni cărora le-ar fi fost transferați doar în luna septembrie peste 15 milioane de dolari din Federația Rusă, prin banca SberBank, aflată pe lista sancțiunilor internaționale. (https://www.zdg.md/stiri/live-peste-130-000-de-cetateni-au-fost-mituiti-in-contextul-scrutinului-electoral-fiindu-le-transferati-bani-din-federatia-rusa/)

Pe de altă parte, opoziția reproșează guvernării: condițiile netransparente si dubioase de negociere a gazelor („Schema gazele"), scandalul penal în jurul drumului Leova-Bumbăta, utilizarea netransparentă a fondurilor europene**.**

Securitatea națională și menținerea statutului de neutralitate. Candidații de stânga, centru-stânga pun accent pe importanța strategică a menținerii statutului constituțional de neutralitate (Art.11din Constituția RM), acuzând guvernarea PAS de majorarea cheltuielilor pentru modernizarea Armatei Naționale (cheltuielile care au crescut în 2024 cu 62% comparativ cu 2014) și riscul de a fi „atrași într-un scenariu de război, după modelul Ucrainei". Pe de altă parte, dreapta politică argumentează că neutralitatea înseamnă armată dotată, modernă, iar statutul de neutralitate ar fi o „capcană" a Federației Ruse pentru menținerea influenței în regiune.

Datoria de stat. Tema preferată a mai multor oponenți ai PAS. Într -un interviu acordat unui post de TV, ex-premierul și concurentul electoral, precum și pe contul său de Facebook, Ion Chicu declară că „*datoria de stat a mai crescut în iunie - cu alte 2,5 miliarde de lei. Astăzi datoria de stat constituie 107 miliarde de le.; Mai grav - au crecut de 4 ori costurile deservirii datoriilor."* (https://www.facebook.com/ watch/?v=1146884495864040).

Tehnici de poziționare a concurenților electorali

Maia Sandu

Slogan electoral, I tur : *Pentru Moldova!*

Slogan electoral, turul II: „*Scăpăm Moldova!"*

Candidata PAS, Maia Sandu, se lansează în campanie la 20 octombrie 2024, cu sloganul „Maia Sandu pentru Moldova". Sunt organizate trei mitinguri electorale de

lansare – La Chișinău, la Cahul și la Soroca. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8nUbCty_0As_https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3uCoiWSQT08)

La toate trei mitinguri candidata a ținut același discurs, lucru remarcat de unele media.

Retorica electorală. În campania prezidențială din 2020, unul din cele 10 obiective ale programului electoral *Programul pentru țară* îl constituia „scoaterea Moldovei din izolare și apropierea de Uniunea Europeană", dar principalul obiectiv – lupta impotriva corupției pandemice, înrădăcinate în perioada „statului captivat". În scrutinul din 2024, Maia Sandu a recunoscut că reforma în justiție eșuează și sistemul se curăță greu. Așadar, subiectul corupției a fost surclasat de o altă temă centrală de campanie – pregătirea Moldovei pentru aderare la Uniunea Europeană către 2030. Întru consolidarea acestei idei este și organizarea - concomitent cu scrutinul prezidențial - a Referendumului constituțional privind opțiunea de aderare a Republicii Moldova la UE și modificarea Constituției în acest sens.

Retorica Maiei Sandu a fost una pro-europeană și pro-reforme. Mesajele –cheie se bazează pe valori ca „pace, stabilitate, bunăstare, valori care pot fi oferite doar în cadrul familiei europene". Programul electoral **- *Planul meu pentru Moldova* - s-a axat pe trei obiective naționale, care se referă la sectorul social, la cel economic și de infrastructură și la relațiile externe –** „ pregătirea țării pentru aderarea la Uniunea Europeană până în 2030". Acesta este mesajul transmis de candidată și in spoturile testimoniale.
(https://www.facebook.com/maia.sandu/posts/planul-meu-pentru-moldova-se-bazeaz%C4%83-pe-3-obiective-na%C8%9Bionale-primul-este-grija-/1094924795335642/)

Surse PR utilizate în campania de imagine

Referendumul – inițiativă a Președintei anunțată în mesajul de Craciun, la 24 decembrie 2023. Referendumul constituțional din 20 octombrie a avut un rol semnificativ în consolidarea mandatului prezidențial al Maiei Sandu, având un impact major asupra vizibilității sale politice, oferindu-i o platformă constantă pentru a-și promova agendei pro-europene. Astfel, candidatul la cel de-al doilea mandat prezidențial a reușit să capteze atenția mass-mediei, beneficiind de o expunere extinsă, amintind aplicabilitatea teoriei „agenda -setting", elaborată de **Maxwell McCombs și Donald Shaw (McCombs, Maxwell, Shaw,** 1972: pp.176–187).

Acțiunea a asigurat o vizibilitate amplificată pentru Maia Sandu, dar a contribuit și la creșterea sprijinului public pentru obiectivele sale politice, îndreptând atenția societății către prioritățile sale de guvernare. (Peru-Balan, 2024: pp.138- 144)

Factor extern /PR politic internațional

În contextul confruntărilor geopolitice actuale, sprijinul partenerilor occidentali devine crucial pentru garantarea stabilității și securității unui stat. Acesta nu doar că furnizează resurse și ajutor economic, dar conferă și legitimitate pe plan internațional. În acest sens, există mai multe momente-cheie care influențează opinia publică și contribuie la consolidarea imaginii electorale a candidaților, demonstrând importanța unei politici externe orientate către parteneriatele occidentale.

În acest sens, un impact semnificativ asupra consolidării încrederii în candidat, prin efectul tehnicii *transferului de imagine*, l-au avut câteva vizite ale oficialilor

occidentali, dar și alte evenimente de pe agenda politică. Așadar, la 31 august 2024, aflat în vizită oficială la Chișinău, Președintele României, Klaus Iohannis semnează cu Președintele Republicii Moldova, Maia Sandu *Declarația comună cu privire la cooperarea bilaterală* pentru consolidarea rezilienței Republicii Moldova:

„Republica Moldova și-a asumat obiectivul de a fi pregătită pentru aderare la Uniunea Europeană la orizontul anului 2030. Republica Moldova și România vor coopera în vederea avansării la nivel politic și tehnic a negocierilor de aderare a Republicii Moldova la Uniunea Europeană", se stipulează în textul Declarației. De asemenea, în Declarație se menționează despre suportul pe care il „va acorda Romania pentru consolidarea rezilienței Republicii Moldova în fața amenințărilor hibride, dezinformării". (https://presidente.md/presa/declaratia-comuna-a-presedintei-maia-sandu-si-a-presedintelui-klaus-iohannis-cu-privire-la-cooperarea-bilaterala-pentru-consolidarea-rezilientei-republicii-moldova),

La 5 septembrie 2024, la Chișinău, sosește premierul Republicii Polone, Donald Tusk. In marja vizitei, înaltul oficial susține un discurs în Parlamentul de la Chișinău. Ultimul fragment îl vorbește în limba română, fiind o dedicație de susținere și admirație pentru Președinta în exercițiu:

*„Dragi prieteni, puterea voastră constă în determinarea și consecvența voastră pe drumul către Europa și marea autoritate de care se bucură președinta voastră, Maia Sandu, pe întregul continent. Lucrăm împreună cu dumneaei de mulți ani și sunt foarte conștient de respectul și stima pe care le inspiră liderilor din întreaga lume... Voi fi la dispoziția voastră, veți putea conta întotdeauna pe Polonia, doar dacă veți exprima dorința de a continua acest proces istoric de construire a unei Moldove independente și integrale într-o Europă unită".(*https://www.moldpres.md/news/2024/09/05/24006908).

La 17 septembrie 2024, la Chișinău, în plină desfășurare a campaniei prezidențiale, este convocată cea de-a cincea ediție a *Platformei de Suport pentru Moldova*, lansată în 2022, la inițiativa României, Germaniei, Franței.

La 9 octombrie 2024, Parlamentul UE adoptă *Rezoluția de sprijin pentru Moldova,* în care declară solidaritatea aleșilor europeni cu Moldova și cere sancționarea celor implicați în încercarea de a destabiliza țara. Aleșii europeni subliniază angajamentul instituției pentru viitorul european al Moldovei și cer Executivului european, să includă Moldova în prioritățile bugetare din viitor, mai ales prin instrumentul de asistență pentru preaderare, dar și printr-un cadru nou, numit *Planul de Creștere*.

Astfel că deja la 10 octombrie 2024, la Chișinău, sosește în vizită oficială Președinta Comisiei Europene, Ursula von der Leyen. Înaltul oficial european anunță despre un nou sprijin financiar pentru Republica Moldova în valoare de 1,8 miliarde de Euro pentru următorii trei ani (componenta de grant constituind 420 de milioane de euro). Totodată, în cadrul briefingului susținut alături de Maia Sandu, Ursula von der Leyen a îndemnat cetățenii Republici Moldova să iasă la vot pe 20 octombrie. „*Voi sunteți cei care decideți"* (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pOaW8tnSFeQ).

Totodată, modul de adresare „*Dragă Ursula*!" și „*Dragă Maia*!" între cei doi oficiali a avut un impact persuasiv emoțional semnificativ, fiind un gest care sugerează apropiere și familiaritate. „Dragă Ursula, Vă mulțumesc pentru acest nou ajutor

consistent, simbolic denumit - Planul de Creștere Economică, care este nu doar un program de investiții, dar este și un simbol al încrederii al Uniunii Europene în potențialul nostru de transformare și de dezvoltare".

Această utilizare a unui limbaj informal denotă o atmosferă de încredere și colaborare între liderii politici, dar și de a transmite un mesaj de apropiere personală și care poate schimba percepția electoratului.

La 15 octombrie 2024, la Chișinău, are loc reuniunea *Nord Baltic 8 (NB8*) – un format de cooperare regională pe subiecte regionale și internaționale de actualitate, din care fac parte Danemarca, Finlanda, Estonia, Islanda, Letonia, Lituania, Norvegia și Suedia. În cadrul evenimentului, participanții **au semnat un Memorandum prin care reconfirmă sprijinul pentru parcursul european al Republicii Moldova. Totodată, se decide acordarea unui sprijin financiar** în valoare de 2,6 miliarde de lei din partea UE. (https://tv8.md/2024/10/15/memorandum-in-sprijinul-parcursului-european-al-moldovei-rezultatele-intalnirii-nordic-baltic-8-de-la-chisinau/267483).

Tehnici de comunicare

Sunt folosite tehnicile și marketingul digital prin promovarea video-urilor de tip testimonial. Maia Sandu a folosit dialogul direct cu electoratul – atât în cadrul întâlnirilor din teritoriu, cât si prin comunicarea în *social media*, inclusiv prin Facebook, Instagram. Totodată, Președinta în exercițiu lansează așa-numitul *Jurnal de campanie.* Maia Sandu: „Lansăm un jurnal de campanie, în care voi vorbi despre activitățile din campanie, voi răspunde la întrebările oamenilor și vom discuta alte subiecte de interes din următoarea perioadă" (https://www.facebook.com/maia.sandu/videos/1171499334137809).

În episodul 2 din *Jurnal de campanie*, competitoarea vorbește despre „falsurile care au pornit în ultimele zile, și anume cu privire la biserică, la acuzațiile unor candidați electorali." Scandalul în jurul Mitropolirei Moldovei a fost declanșat urmare a declarațiilor deputatului PAS Vasile Șoimaru care a vorbit despre o posibilă interzicere a acesteia, lucru negat ulterior de partidul de guvernământ și Președinta Maia Sandu. Or, impactul acestor declarații asupra enoriașilor ar fi fost sesizabil în context electoral. (https://www.facebook.com/maia.sandu/videos/1026685312252995)

În următoarele episoade ale *Jurnalului* (Episodul 4,5) candidata vorbește „despre polița de asigurare medicală, tentativele ilegale de cumpărare a voturilor și răspunde la cele mai frecvente 5 întrebări culese în satele moldovenești despre UE". Fiecare episod durează aproximativ 3 minute. (https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1087177876345098; https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=2694626497392737).

Acțiuni PR pentru umanizarea candidatei

Pentru a construi o legătură autentică și emoționantă între candidată și electorat, sunt elaborate o serie de activități și evenimente PR care vor sublinia nu doar calitățile profesionale, dar și valorile umane care o definesc. Aceasta ar fi un model de imagine „auxiliară" ca o componentă a imaginii strategice (Peru-Balan, 2022, pp.57-58). Poveștile personale, unele detalii din viața profesională necunoscute de publicul larg pun accent pe empatie și conexiune umană – elemente care contribuie la consolidarea încrederii și susținerii din partea publicului. În acest sens, Maia Sandu participă la podcastul jurnalistei Nata Albot *„Mulțumesc pentru întrebare"*. Președinta a comentat, între altele, zvonul că mănâncă doar un ou la prânz pentru a-și menține silueta și a oferit detalii despre ce conține meniul său. Șefa statului a precizat că nu mănâncă mult, iar de

cele mai multe ori bucatele îi sunt aduce la Președinție de mama sa, care „vine de două trei ori pe săptămână, la troleu, o lasă jos la polițist și se duce acasă. Care e problema?”, a menționat Maia Sandu. (https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=747287454166605).

O altă apariție în public cu impact electoral emoțional a fost participarea Președintei la deschiderea bisericii Adormirea Maicii Domnului din raionul Căușeni, unul dintre cele mai vechi lăcașe sfinte din țară, cel mai mare proiect de restaurare și conservare a unui monument cultural finanțat de SUA în Republica Moldova. Momente de la eveniment au fost folosite in spotul electoral al PAS pentru susținerea candidatei Maia Sandu https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1607482910148240. Gestul de a participa la un astfel de eveniment poate fi interpretat nu doar ca o reafirmare a legăturii cu tradițiile și valorile creștine, dar și ca un răspuns subtil la zvonurile din primul mandat, care sugerau o distanțare a Președinției față de instituțiile religioase.

În seria acțiunilor de umanizare a imaginii electorale se înscrie si apariția la președinție a cânelui Codruț. Prezența animalelor (in special, câinii) în preajma președinților a devenit demult un element de imagine publică, dar este specific mai mult pentru președinții americani. **George Washington,** a crescut 10 câini de vânătoare, **Theodore Roosevelt,** unul dintre cei mai populari președinți, a fost și el un mare pasionat de câini. Unul dintre cei nouă câini ai lui **John F. Kennedy,** pe nume Pushinka, a fost un dar special de la liderul sovietic Nikita Hrușciov. Relevant in acest sens este si momentul următor din discursul de inaugurare a lui Obama (2013) la cel de-ai doilea mandat când se adresează fiicelor sale: „cred un cane va fi de ajuns....” La rândul său**, Emmanuel Macron,** Președintele Franței, are un câine labrador, pe care singur l-a ales dintr-un adăpost pentru animale și l-a botezat Nemo, după Căpitanul Nemo (https://cauta.vet/2021/01/31/cainii-celebri-ai-presedintilor-de-state/_.

Consilierii de imagine au dorit să includă acest element și in constructul imaginii președintelui moldovean. Întâmplător sau nu, un blogger o surprinde pe Maia Sandu, plimbându-se cu Codruț (un cățel cu trei labe după un accident) în curtea președinției – un video devenit viral, ulterior. Astfel de gesturi sunt esențiale în construirea unei imagini care îi permit publicului să perceapă candidatul nu doar ca pe o figură politică, dar și ca pe o persoană obișnuită, cu gesturi simple, o persoană puternică, dar care poate fi și sensibilă (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tfDp7HZe_zA).

Victimizarea

Staff-ul electoral a decis să aplice și una din tehnicile uzuale ale concurenților electorali - „victimizarea”. Într -un video, la 25 octombrie, între cele două tururi de scrutin, Președinta Maia Sandu susține că primește mesaje care o fac să creadă că „ar putea fi ținta”. „Am primit mesaje de la instituțiile noastre despre faptul că sunt grupări, care cred că, în momentul în care eu voi fi scoasă din joc, cum zic ei, lucrurile vor fi mult mai simple.

(https://unimedia.info/ro/news/4286dece9e95f8cf/video-maia-sandu-crede-ca-ar-putea-fi-tinta-institutiile-noastre-mi-au-spus-ca-sunt-grupari-care-vor-sa-ma-scoata-din-joc-ca-lucrurile-sa-fi%20%20maisimple.html?utm_source=Site%20Widgets&utm_medium=Trend%20News%20Widget&utm_campaign=Trend%20News%20Widget)

Alexandr Stoianoglo

Slogane de campanie**:**

Turul I **: *„Dreptate pentru toți!”*** *Moldova trebuie să devină teritoriul dreptății.*

Turul II **: *„Moldova decide!”***

Mitingul de lansare în campanie are loc la 20 septembrie, la Chișinău, în fața Catedralei.

Ex-președintele Igor Dodon, președintele PSRM a anunțat că nu va candida la alegerile prezidențiale din 2024 și că-l va sprijini pe fostul procuror general, Alexandr Stoianoglo. În același mesaj, Igor Dodon invită partidele din opoziție să se unească în jurul candidatului Alexandr Stoianoglo, care nu trebuie perceput ca fiind candidatul PSRM, ci „candidatul poporului ”. Niciun alt partid politic nu a răspuns la această invitație electorală. Paritidele din opoziție – parlamentare și extraparlamentare – au preferat să-și promoveze propriii candidați și aceasta din perspectiva alegerilor parlamentare din 2025 pentru a-și asigura vizibilitatea într-un cadru electoral.

Spre deosebire de candidata PAS, Alexandr Stoianoglo a avut un mare deficit de notorietate, ceea ce i-a făcut mai complicată promovarea către publicul larg. Ex-procurorul general a devenit mai cunoscut opiniei publice în contextul dosarului privind "episodul cu Veaceslav Platon" și după ce a fost adus de mascați la sediul SIS. Chiar dacă, Curtea Europeană pentru Drepturile Omului (CEDO) a stabilit că autoritățile moldovene i-au încălcat drepturile lui Alexandr Stoianoglo atunci când l-au suspendat din funcția de procuror general, în 2021, opozanții politici au continuat să-i creeze o imagine negativă - de om al oligarhului fugar, om al Moscovei. Atât reprezentanții PAS, cat și multe instituții media din țară și din străinătate, l-au catalogat ca pe „candidat pro-rus, pro-Kremlin”, „creatura Moscovei”. Aceste calificative au fost repetate și de contracandidata sa, Președinta Maia Sandu, într-un interviu pentru Nordinfo: "*Oligarhii și Kremlinul au bătut palma și și-au găsit un candidat. Este clar că Kremlinul își dorește ca hoții să revină la putere în R. Moldova, pentru că Kremlinul știe că hoții vor vinde țara noastră și, respectiv, cei de la Kremlin o vor putea folosi în scopurile lor" (https://radiomoldova.md/p/37036/maia-sandu-despre-candidatura-lui-stoianoglo-la-prezidentiale--oligarhii-si-kremlinul-au-batut-palma-).*

De asemenea, chiar in mesajul de debut în timpul dezbaterilor electorale dintre cei doi finaliști, Maia Sandu l-a etichetat pe contracandidatul său „*cal troian*”, prin care *„alții ar vrea să conducă R. Moldova, inclusiv oligarhii fugari”.*

Etichetarea și stereotipurile au un rol semnificativ în comunicarea politică din perspectiva formării opiniei publice și determinarea comportamentului electoral. Mai mulți autori în lucrările lor au abordat modul în care etichetarea este utilizată în comunicarea politică pentru a influența opinia publică și pentru a construi narative politice negative sau a manipula percepțiile alegătorilor. Printre aceștia - **Noam Chomsky, care** în *Manufacturing Consent* (1988), subliniază cum etichetarea poate fi un instrument de control al discursului politic. De asemenea, Shanto Iyengar analizează cum etichetele politice, prin mass-media, pot influența atitudinile și comportamentele alegătorilor (Iyengar, 1991). În una dintre lucrările notabile ale lui Dan Nimmo autorul analizează impactul mass-mediei asupra opiniilor publice și modul în care politicienii și mass-media folosesc tehnici de comunicare, inclusiv etichetarea, pentru a crea imagini favorabile sau defavorabile ale diferitelor subiecte politice sau candidați. Nimmo a

subliniat că etichetarea poate fi un instrument puternic în construirea identității politice și în gestionarea percepției publicului, ajutând astfel candidații să își definească adversarii și să își construiască propria imagine. (Nimmo, 1985). Acest fenomen se produce și în sfera publică națională. Prin urmare, etichetarea este utilizată ca instrument de persuadare a opiniei publice, acestea fiind mai ușor percepute de către publicul larg și având, desigur, și un impact mai mare.

Stoianoglo - focalizarea pe imaginea de „apărător al justiției"

Staff-ul lui Alexandr Stoianoglo a decis să-i construiască imaginea de apărător al dreptății pentru toți: „ *Cel mai dorit și cel mai de preț obiectiv pentru majoritatea absolută a poporului - instaurarea dreptății, victoria adevărului asupra minciunii și violenței, triumful legii asupra dezmățului !"*

Implicit - în retorica concurentului electoral - această putea fi interpretată ca o replică la maniera de guvernare a partidului puterii. Alexandr Stoianoglo a încercat să se poziționeze ca un apărător al statului de drept, axat pe „victoria definitivă a adevărului asupra minciunii și violenței" și „triumful legii asupra dezmățului". Stoianoglo promite transformarea Republicii Moldova într-un „teritoriu al dreptății", asigurarea stabilității și securității naționale, soluționarea problemei transnistrene, consolidarea încrederii cetățenilor în instituțiile statului și se declară susținător al ideii de integrare europeană, dar boicotează referendumul.

Pe plan extern, Stoianoglo promite o politică externă echilibrată, legată de relațiile tradiționale cu UE, Rusia, SUA, China. Prima vizită, în caz de victorie, promite să o efectueze în Transnistria. Prin aceste declarații, candidatul transmite, de fapt, un mesaj electoral strategic – „trebuie să ne concentrăm pe agenda internă", dar este și o replică contracandidatei, care nu a efectuat nicio vizită pe malul stâng al Nistrului, pe durata primului său mandat.

Strategii PR

Strategia de campanie s-a axat pe tema „anti-sistem PAS-Sandu". Staff-ul electoral și- a dorit să-l prezinte ca pe un suveranist, antipod al Maiei Sandu, care va da prioritate intereselor naționale și nu va fi influențată din exterior: „Așa cum o știm pe ea, cinică, lipsită de empatie pentru propriul popor, dar foarte servilă față de interesele străine, față de Soros, față de admiratorii ei din Occident, Maia Sandu va îndeplini orice scenariu antistatal, ea va organiza orice probleme economice pentru cetățenii moldoveni, dacă asta o vor cere scopurile militare sau geopolitice ale stăpânilor ei de peste hotare" (https://socialistii.md/v-kishineve-sostojalsja-oficialnyj-zapusk-predvybornoj-kampanii-kandidata-v-prezidenty-respubliki-moldova-aleksandra-stojanoglo/).

Spre deosebire de Maia Sandu, care a utilizat marketingul digital, Stoianoglo a preferat să-și promoveze imaginea prin întâlnirile directe în teritoriu cu alegătorii din zonele rurale. Candidatul a avut doar două spoturi electorale (dar nici un testimonial specifice pentru prezidențiabili în campaniile electorale). Publicitatea electorală a constituit latura vulnerabilă a strategiei de campanie.

Mesaje -cheie de campanie: trei obiective

- „Nu avem nevoie de o reformă a justiției. Avem nevoie de un triumf al justiției! Un triumf al statului de drept! Nu mai inventați legi pentru a ocoli legile. Nu mai modificați Constituția".

- „Avem nevoie de o relansare a economiei, de atragerea investițiilor. Programele europene de sprijin vor funcționa atunci când îi vom elibera pe antreprenori de inspecțiile și taxele chinuitoare, de instrucțiunile obscure și de actele adiționale. Toată legislația va fi curățată de această maculatură coruptă.
- „Viitorul Moldovei europene moderne este în educație. Grădinițele, școlile, universitățile, centrele de dezvoltare – vor fi zona investițiilor prioritare. Investiții nu doar în pereți și mobilier, ci în primul rând în specialiști, profesori de toate nivelurile. (https://socialistii.md/v-kishineve-sostojalsja-oficialnyj-zapusk-predvybornoj-kampanii-kandidata-v-prezidenty-respubliki-moldova-aleksandra-stojanoglo)

Alexandr Stoianoglo a avut două spoturi electorale: unul pentru turul I de campanie, al doilea –pentru turul II. In primul spot, candidatul promite *„Dreptate pentru fiecare familie, dreptate pentru fiecare generație, dreptate pentru toată țara!" (*https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=398755399958533). Pentru turul doi, staff-ul Stoianoglo schimbă sloganul de campanie: „Moldova decide !" „Moldova decide și alege un viitor stabil", este fraza de final rostită de candidat în spotul electoral (https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1117348110005639).

Un spot electoral al candidatului a fost refuzat pentru difuzare de un post TV. Potrivit scrisorii expediate de postul de televiziune, videoclipul lui Alexandr Stoianoglo nu s-a încadrat în „limitele unei expuneri a programului electoral". Candidatul, însă, a considerat că „nu a trecut cenzura" :„Această acțiune reprezintă o încălcare flagrantă a drepturilor mele de concurent electoral, garantate de lege și un act de manipulare. Alte instituții media au difuzat mesajul meu, însa la Jurnal TV nu a trecut cenzura." (https://agora.md/2024/10/04/un-spot-electoral-al-lui-stoianoglo-refuzat-la-jurnal-tv-nu-a-trecut-cenzura-sau-depaseste-limitele-update).

Victimizarea – ca tactică

Și Alexandr Stoianoglo recurge la tehnica de victimizare. De fapt, pe aceasta s-a mizat din start – „procurorul general victimă a regimului PAS-Sandu. În discursul său de lansare, Stoianoglo, a precizat că a refuzat să fie „un procuror de buzunar pentru guvernare", acesta fiind adevăratul motivul de reținere și demitere și a subliniat cu mândrie originea sa: *„Eu, un găgăuz, candidez la cea mai înaltă funcție de stat"*. Tehnica victimizării în campania electorală se aplică pentru a câștiga simpatia și sprijinul publicului. Aceasta presupune presupune, de cele mai dese ori, construcția unui narativ al „împotrivirii" – lupta împotriva unui sistem corupt sau a unor elite incapabile, corupte. Această tehnică pune accentul pe emoțiile alegătorilor, mai degrabă, decât pe prezentarea unor politici raționale și argumentate și poate fi eficientă doar pe un termen scurt.

Originea candidatului, însă, a devenit subiect de retorică xenofobă în spațiul online. Pentru a stopa mesajele xenofobe ale unor simpatizanți PAS, liderii partidului de guvernământ au considerat necesar să intervină pentru a nu permite proliferarea unui discurs agresiv și a se disocia de o astfel de „susținere" periculoasă a unui candidat într-o o societate multietnică.

Concluzii.

După turul I, Maia Sandu obține 44,65%; Alexandr Stoianoglo – 25.95%. După turul 2, Maia Sandu - 55,35%, Alexandr Stoianoglo – 42,49%. În țară, socialistul Alexandr Stoianoglo a câștigat cu 51,19%. Însă, cu un procent de 82,71% în diaspora,

Maia Sandu obține al doilea mandat de președinte. Între cei doi candidați există o diferență de aproape 170.000 de voturi. La fel ca la alegerile de acum 4 ani, voturile din diaspora au făcut diferența. Voturile din afara Republicii Moldova au stabilit noul președinte.

Analiza comparată a temelor abordate de candidați arată că fiecare actor politic își construiește imaginea în jurul unor valori fundamentale și probleme specifice ale populației. Aceste teme nu sunt alese întâmplător; ele reflectă nu doar prioritățile electoratului țintă, dar și încercarea de a contura un profil de lider în concordanță cu așteptările sociale și politice ale momentului.

Analiza retoricii electorale arată că, prin utilizarea unui limbaj strategic și a unor tehnici retorice eficiente, candidații nu doar că își prezintă viziunea politică, dar reușesc să creeze legături emoționale cu electoratul. Elementele de retorică, cum ar fi apelurile la valorile naționale, la securitatea națională sau la unitatea națională, sunt utilizate pentru a construi o imagine de lider capabil să aducă stabilitate și schimbare.

Referindu-ne la marketingului digital**,** pe măsură ce acesta devine tot mai influent în campaniile electorale, ne convingem de faptul că rețelele sociale permit un dialog direct cu cetățenii, ceea ce le conferă candidaților o oportunitate de a-și modela imaginea într-un mod mai personalizat și interactiv.

Concluzionând, putem menționa că Maia Sandu și-a promovat o campanie axată pe valori europene, reforme interne și promisiunea de integrare a Republicii Moldova la UE până în 2030. Tacticile de promovare au fost în principal marketingul digital, mesaje pro-europene și anti-corupție politică, resursa administrativă, suportul partenerilor occidentali.

Alexandr Stoianoglo, pe de altă parte, s-a poziționat drept un apărător al justiției, „al dreptății pentru toți" cu un discurs orientat spre suveranism și protejarea intereselor naționale. El și-a creat imaginea de om obișnuit ajuns în politică, dar luptător convins împotriva abuzurilor puterii politice.

Prin urmare, imaginea unui candidat în campaniile prezidențiale reprezintă un construct multidimensional, elaborat printr-o serie de tehnici și instrumente de comunicare, care variază în funcție de contextul social, politic, dar și emoțional.

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QUO VADIS, REPUBLICA MOLDOVA?

CZU: [323 + 327](478)
https://doi.org/10.59295/eiqd.14

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Abstract. *Over the 33 years of independence, the Republic of Moldova is like a pendulum clock that was set in motion on August 27, 1991 by the adoption of the Declaration of Independence, and since then and until now, Moldova has been oscillating between East and West and cannot establish its direction of travel. Corruption, lack of vision, but also lack of political will are the internal factors that have been and still are the basis of the uncertainty of a political future and consequently of the social and economic one. At the same time, due to its geographical location and the geopolitical situation in the region, the Republic of Moldova is influenced by external factors, directly, by supporting local political actors mainly in electoral campaigns (presidential and parliamentary) and indirectly, by lobbying or blocking the state's interests in various international contexts, being often used as a battlefield between major international political actors, depending on the interests of each one at the moment. The narrow party interests, the interference of third-party state actors, but also the desire to maintain or return to power of the local political decision-makers contributed to the division and enmity of the Moldovan society, through two narratives that have become traditional, the language and the political vector. Considering the 2025 parliamentary elections, the question arises, Quo Vadis, Republic of Moldova, East or West?*

Keywords*: Energy crisis, election, Russian Federation, Chișinău, Tiraspol*

Introducere

Pe parcursul celor 33 de ani de independență Republica Moldova e aidoma unui ceas cu pendul care a fost pus în mișcare la 27 august 1991 prin adoptarea Declarației de independență, iar de atunci și până în prezent, Moldova tot pendulează între Est și Vest și nu își poate stabili direcția de mers. Corupția, lipsa de viziune, dar și lipsa de voință politică sunt factorii interni care au stat și încă stau la baza incertitudinii unui viitor politic și pe cale de consecință a celui social și economic.În același timp, datorită așezării sale geografice dar și a situației geopolitice din regiune, Republica Moldova este influiențată de factori externi, direct, prin susținerea unor actori politici locali preponderent în campaniile electorale (prezidențiale și parlamentare) și indirect, prin lobarea sau blocarea intereselor statului în diverse contexte internaționale, fiind adesea

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folosită ca un teren de luptă între marii actori politici internaționali, în dependență de interesele fiecăruia pe moment.

Interesele înguste de partid, interferența terților actori statali, dar și dorința de a se menține sau a reveni la putere a decidenților politici autohtoni au contribuit la divizarea și învrăjbirea asocietății moldovenești, prin două narative devenite tradiționale, limba și vectorul politic.

Cu toate că, din punct de vedere teritorial Moldova este așezată pe o suprafață destul de modestă, de doar 33 843 km^2 (Geografie, 2024), încă de la începuturile formării sale ca stat suveran, tânăra republică a fost încercată de mișcări seceseoniste.

Începând cu anul 1989 minoritatea găgăuză stabilită în sudul țării pe fundalul promovării propriei identități etnice, și-a solicitat separarea de Chișinău (Putina, 2011), însă, urmare a dialogului și a maturității decidenților de la vremea respectivă, la 23 decembrie 1994, Parlamentul Republicii Moldova adoptă Legea privind statutul juridic special al Găgăuziei (Legea nr.344, 1994), astfel, apare Unitatea teritorial autonomă Găgăuzia, forma și organizarea autonomiei fiind prevăzute în art. 111 din Constituția Republicii Moldova (Constitutia, 1994).

Marea adunare națională de la Chișinău de la 27 august 1989 și rezoluțiile adoptate la această adunare (trecerea la grafia latină și decretarea limbii române ca limbă oficială a RSSM (Documentul final al Marii Adunări Naționale din 27 august 1989) a servit drept prilej pentru autoritățile din regiunea din partea stângă a Nistrului a RSSM de a se autosepara de Chișinău și a forma la 2 septembrie 1990, Republica Autonomă Sovietică Socialistă Moldovenească cu capitala la Tiraspol (Voronovici, 2015), fapt ce a dus la un conflict între Chișinău și Tiraspol. Astfel, prin prisma cronologiei evoluției sale, conflictul transnistrean poate fi împărțit cel puțin în două părți, prima parte fiind confruntarea politică între 1990 și începutul anului 1992, în care au avut loc și ciocniri armate, iar a doua parte fiind faza confruntării militare pe scară largă, cu participarea efectivului militar al Armatei a 14-a: primăvara anului 1992-iulie 1992 (Melintei, 2021).

Iar de atunci și până astăzi acest conflict a fost înghețat și încă nu a putut fi rezolvat, autoproclamata republică nefiind recunoscută de autoritățile de la Chișinău, dar nici la nivel internațional.

De menționat faptul că pe teritoriul regiunii transnistrene locuiesc în jur de 450 mii de persoane, iar aproximativ 357 mii din ei dețin cetățenia moldovenească (Guvernul RM, 2024), aceștia fiind preponderent vorbitori de limbă rusă.

Opțiunile politice din Republica Moldova și vectorul geopolitic

Odată cu independența, Republica Moldova a cunoscut și democrația, iar primul beneficiu dar totodată și un test al solidarității cetățenilor au fost scrutinele electorale, mai întâi parlamentare urmate de cele prezidențiale.

Republica Moldova a avut 11 legislaturi în perioada 1990 – 2021, în prezent își desfășoară activitatea al 12-lea legislativ cu mandat până în 2025 (www.parlament.md).

În perioada anilor 1991 – 2024 Republica Moldova a avut 6 președinți cu mandat deplin și 3 președinți interimari, actualul președinte, Maia Sandu, a fost realesă prin vot direct la 20 octombrie 2024 și are mandat până în anul 2028, fiind al șaselea președinte cu mandat deplin și al 9-lea ca număr (presedinte.md).

Tot în același context ar trebui de menționat că în perioada 1991–2000, șeful statului era ales prin vot universal, egal, direct, secret și liber exprimat, pentru un mandat de 4 ani. În urma reformei constituționale din 2000, procedura de alegere a președintelui Republicii Moldova a fost modificată, Parlamentul preluând responsabilitatea de alegere a președintelui țării. Prin Decizia Curții Constituționale din 4 martie 2016, s-a revenit la alegerea președintelui prin vot direct de către cetățeni, fără a modifica atribuțiile președintelui (Curtea Constituționala, 2024).

Conform datelor publicate pe site-ul Agenției Servicii Publice de la Chișinău, în Republica Moldova sunt înregistrate 83 de partide politice (ASP, Lista partidelor...), iar potrivit site-ului alegeri.md la nivelul anului 2024 din toate cele 64 de partide politice, doar 30 de formațiuni politice au participat la ultimele scrutine electorale, restul fiind inactive (ASP, Lista partidelor...).

După declararea independenței și odată cu formarea organelor de conducere a început și diviziunea clasei politice, o parte din ea, așa numiții democrați, încă erau în euforia renașterii naționale, a libertății de a lua decizii importante pentru țară și societate, aceștia chiar vociferau idei ca Republica Moldova să se unească cu România, alții vehiculau ideea că țara ar trebui să adere la comunitatea europeană.

Dar era și altă parte componentă a clasei politice, formată din foști nomenclaturiști ai aparatului de conducere sovietic care încă erau dependenți din diverse motive de Moscova și care se opunea cu înverșunare ideilor avansate de noua clasă politică reformatoare, promovând mai degrabă o politică a pașilor mici, fără careva schimbări radicale dar și menținerea în zona de influiență a Rusiei.

Drept urmare, de-a lungul timpului ideile și viziunile primelor partide politice au fost preluate, modificate și adaptate la realitățile vremurilor de multitudinea formațiunilor politice apărute ulterior. Ideologia clasei politice reformatoare a fost preluată de partide nou create cu doctrină liberală, democrată și chiar unionistă, care s-au poziționat pe eșichierul politic de centru, centru-dreapta și în timp, datorită viziunilor lor au fost denumite cu sintagma de partide pro-europene (Partidul Liberal, Partidul Liberal Democrat, Partidul Acțiune și Solidaritate, etc.).

Pe de altă parte, urmașii foștilor birocrați sovietici, au preluat doctrina socialistă și au ocupat eșichierul politic de stânga, din cauza orientării lor politice au fost etichetate ca partide pro-ruse (Partidul Comuniștilor, Partidul Socialiștilor din Moldova, Partidul Politic” Șor”, etc.).

Iar între cele două extremități s-au poziționat partidele de centru, centru-stânga cu o doctrină scocial-democrată, care cel puțin, la nivel declarativ, militează pentru o politică externă echilibrată și pentru relații bune atât cu Estul cât și cu Vestul (Partidul Democrat din Moldova, etc.) (ASP, Lista partidelor...).

Trebuie de menționat faptul că toate opțiunile politice, au avut și încă au adepții săi în rândul electoratului moldovean, care din varii motive este unul destul de pestriț, iar datorită acestui electorat, rând pe rând reprezentații celor trei eșichiere politice au ajuns la guvernare. În dependență de numărul de mandate obținute, dar și de interesele fiecărui partid se combinau programele de guvernare cu doctrine și viziuni câteodată diametral opuse (Străuțiu, 2015).

Din păcate, instabilitatea politică se manifestă uneori prin absența sau numărul redus al unor actori politici stabili, care să reziste după un ciclu electoral (Străuțiu,

Munteanu, Şpechea, 2017), cu excepția Partidului Comuniștilor care a avut două cicluri electorale consecutive.

În acest context, din 1990 - până în prezent se pot identifica câteva perioade care au fost marcate prin decizii importante privind vectorul geopolitic al Republicii Moldova.

1990-1996 – chiar dacă au guvernat împreună partide cu ideologii şi viziuni diferite (Frontul Popular din Moldova, Partidul Democrat Agrar şi mişcarea Unitate-Edinstvo), totuşi s-au realizat obiective importante pentru țară, aderarea la organizațiile internaționale cum ar fi CSI în 1991, ONU şi OSCE, BERD şi FMI în 1992, iar din 1995 Moldova a devenit membră a Consiliului Europei, pe plan intern s-au pus bazele şi s-au adoptat actele normative proprii, a fost adoptată Constituția Republicii Moldova în 1994, preşedintele țării în această perioadă fiind Mircea Snegur (Racheru, 2020).

Cu toate că, în acest interval de timp Moldova s-a confruntat cu mai multe provocări, în mare parte, din cauza încercării de a se apropia mai mult de Bucureşti dar şi de Bruxelles, s-a reuşit totuşi de a menține vectorul de afirmare a proprii identități pe arena internațională, iar segmentul de orientare geopolitcă se poate descrie ca fiind unul plin de incertitudine, oscilând între Est şi Vest atât din cauza factorilor interni cât şi externi.

1996-2001 – la 1 decembrie 1996 în funcția de preşedinte al Republicii Moldova, în mare parte cu susținerea partidelor de stânga, este ales Petru Lucinschi, un fost birocrat în aparatul de conducere sovietic (https://presedinte.md). La 22 martie 199 au loc alegeri parlamentare, surpriza acestor alegeri este Partidul Comuniştilor care obține 40 de mandate în noul legislativ, celelalte mandate fiind împărțite între partidele democratice, care au şi format o alianță pentru a putea forma guvernul, Alianța pentru Democrație şi Reforme (www.e-democracy.md). Pe plan intern această perioadă poate fi caracterizată, ca perioada crizelor, mai întâi în economie, din cauza prăbuşirii rublei ruseşti şi în consecință a deprecierii leului moldovenesc, din cauza orientării exportului practic în totalitate spre piața rusească. Ulterior, tot în 1998, apare şi criza energetică, cauza fiind sistarea furnizării energiei electrice atât din Ucraina cât şi de la Centrala de Cuciurgan. Aceste evenimente au dus la o sărăcire şi mai mare a populației care şi aşa era la limita existenței, dar şi la ridicarea gradului de îndatorare a statului atât față de populație cât şi față de partenerii externi (Europa libera, 1998).

Pe plan extern, Moldova nu a înregistrat careva progrese sau schimbări radicale, având în vedere situația economică critică era nevoie de o susținere acută din partea organismelor internaționale de finanțare, BERD şi FMI, în acelaşi timp se negocia şi cu Moscova referitor la asigurarea cu gaze naturale (În anul 1998 prin convertirea unei părți a creanțelor deținute de gigantul rus asupra Republicii Moldova a fost fondată compania SA ”Moldovagaz”. Gazprom a intrat în posesia întregii infrastructuri de conducte a Republicii Moldova, inclusiv cea controlată de autoritățile din stânga Nistrului.) (https://anticoruptie.md), dar şi pe segmentul continuității exporturilor produselor vitivinicole şi cele din agricultură.

2001-2009 – Urmare a disensiunilor continue a partidelor de guvernământ, dar şi a situației catastrofale din economie, la 25 februarie 2001 au loc alegeri parlamentare anticipate, Partidul Comuniştilor obține 71 de mandate, o majoritate absolută, am putea zice, din perspectivă constituțională. Având în vedere modificare constituției din anul

2000 privind alegerea președintelui de către parlament, la 7 aprilie 2001 este învestit în funcția de președinte, Vladimir Voronin, un alt fost nomenclaturist din perioada sovietică și președintele Partidului Comuniștilor din Moldova (www.e-democracy.md, 2001).

Pe plan intern perioada se poate caracteriza prin aplanarea situației din economie, dar și a primului embargou rusesc asupra produselor moldovenești, în special asupra vinurilor, relații complicate cu Gazprom dar și cu autoritățile de la Tiraspol, gazificarea masivă a localităților și lupta cu organizațiile criminale, la insistența partenerilor de finanțare externi, cu greu, dar se aplică totuși și procesul de privatizare a întreprinderilor de stat și toate astea, pe fundalul monpolizării puterii dar și a economiei de către reprezentații partidului de guvernământ și drept urmare, de către o singură persoană, Vladimir Voronin.

Pe plan extern, chiar dacă în programul de guvernare Voronin a încercat să convingă electoratul că este un statalist, și că Moldova poate să se descurce și singură fără a avea vreo apartenență la Est sau la Vest, totuși era un președinte cu simpatii mai mult decât evidente spre Moscova decât spre Bruxelles.

Însă, în anul 2003 apare un paradox, după ce a refuzat planul de federalizare a Republicii Moldova, cunoscut mai mult ca Memorandul Kozak, Voronin intră în dizgrația Kremlinului și face o piruetă spre Vest, declarând că este pro-european. În pofida faptului că această mișcare politică era una mai mult declarativă, totuși în perioada respectivă s-au pus bazele cooperării dintre Republica Moldova și Uniunea Europeană (EuropaLiberă).

Chiar dacă cochetează cu Bruxellesul, vectorul geopolitic este totuși orientat spre Moscova.

2009-2016 – După scrutinul electoral parlamentar din 5 aprilie 2009, în urma căruia Partidul Comuniștilor obține din nou majoritatea cu 60 de mandate, acesta este contestat prin proteste organizate de forțele politice de opoziție pro-europene, legislativul proaspăt ales se dizolvă și în urma alegerilor parlamentare aniticipate din 29 iulie 2009, comuniștii obțin deja 48 de mandate, iar diferența este împărțită între partidele cu ideologii diferite, dar cu aspirații europene (Partidul Liberal, Partidul Liberal Democrat, Partidul Democrat și Alianța Moldova Noastră) care și creează o majoritate pentru a guverna împreună (Alianța pentru Integrarea Europeană), iar toată această perioadă fiind numită ulterior și perioada alianțelor.

Tot aceiași perioadă mai este cunoscută și ca perioada președinților interimari (Mihai Ghimpu, Vlad Filat și Marian Lupu) din septembrie 2009 – până în martie 2012 partidele politice pro-europene care se aflau la guvernare nu au ajuns la un consens, dar nici nu aveau numărul necesar de mandate pentru a vota un președinte (EuropaLiberă).

În data de 16 martie 2012 cu sprijinul unor deputați socialiști și cu un vot de la un deputat neafiliat, de către 62 de deputați în funcția de președinte al Republicii Moldova este votat Nicolae Timofti, fost judecător la Consiliul Superior al Magistraturii.

Pe plan intern în această perioadă cu sprijinul partenerilor externi se inițiază un șir de reforme, legislația națională se aliniază cu aquis-ul comunitar. În același timp, țara este măcinată de scandaluri de corupție, neînțelegeri între partidele de guvernământ, dar și se produc cele mai cunoscute fraude din sistemul financiar-bancar (Laundromatul rusesc și Furtul miliardului din băncile moldovenești) (Adevărul, *House of cards*..).

Pe plan extern, odată cu schimbarea guvernării, partenerii externi, în mod special Uninunea Europeană, arată o deschidere largă față de Republica Moldova, țara fiind vizitată de mai mulți lideri europeni, de către organismele financiare internaționale se alocă mai multe granturi și credite preferințiale pentru proiecte sociale și economice, apogeul fiind semnarea în 2014 a deciziei privind Regimul liberalizat de vize între Republica Moldova și Uniunea Europeană, și tot în 2014 se semnează acordul de asociere la Zona de Liber Schimb Aprofundat și Cuprinzător cu intrare în vigoare din 2016 (https://trade.ec.europa.eu).

În același timp, urmare a deciziilor guvernării de la Chișinău de a se apropia de Bruxelles, Moscova introduce embargouri la importul de vinuri din Republica Moldova, dar și majorează prețul la gaze naturale livrate de Gazprom către MoldovaGaz.

Politica externă în această perioadă fiind clar orientată spre Uniunea Europeană.

2016-2020 – Odată cu decizia Curții Constituționale din 4 martie 2016 privind alegerea prin vot direct de către cetățeni a președintelui țării, la 13 noiembrie 2016 este ales în funcția de președinte al Republicii Moldova, reprezentatul Partidului Socialiștilor, Igor Dodon (https://presedinte.md).

La 24 februarie 2019 au loc alegeri parlamentare, fiind implementat pentru prima dată sistemul electoral mixt, surpriza acestor alegeri fiind accederea în legislativ a blocului electoral" ACUM" format din două partide de opoziție de orientare pro-europeană (Partidul Acțiune și Solidaritate, Platforma Demintate și Adevăr) (https://alegeri.md).

Pe plan intern perioada este marcată de monopolizarea puterii de către un singur partid, Partidul Democrat din Moldova și în mod special de către președintele acestui partid, așa numitul oligarh, Vlad Plahotniuc, președintele țării având un rol mai mult decât simbolic. Pentru prima dată s-a aplicat posibilitatea de suspendare a președintelui statului de către Curtea Constituțională, motivul invocat fiind refuzul de semnare a decretelor privind numirea în funcție a unor membri ai guvernului, dar și pentru refuzul de a promulga anumite legi, documentele respective pe durata suspendării din funcție a președintelui statului fiind semnate de președintele parlamentului, care exercita și interimatul funcției de șef de stat. În aceiași perioadă au loc proteste ale partidelor de opoziție și a societății civile. În plan economic și social nu se pot observa careva evoluții spectaluoase, situația rămânînd una stabilă.

Un alt aspect interesant al perioadei este plecarea din Moldova în iunie 2019 a așa numitului oligarh, Vlad Plahotniuc și preluarea puterii de către blocul ACUM și Partidul Socialiștilor prin așa numită alianță Kozak, care a fost mediată de SUA și Federația Rusă (https://stiri.md).

Pe plan extern se poate vorbi despre o perioadă de incertitudine generată de vizitele dese ale președintelui Igor Dodon la Moscova, amenințarea acestuia cu denunțarea acordului de asociere cu UE, pe de o parte iar pe de altă parte, încercarea președintelui Partidului Democrat Vlad Plahotniuc de a crea aparențe de viziuni pro-occidentale pentru partenerii de dezvoltare din occident, rezultatul acestor acțiuni generând incertitudine și stagnare în domeniul politicii externe.

2020-2024 – În urma alegerilor prezidențiale din 15 noiembrie 2020, în funcția de președinte al Republicii Moldova este aleasă reprezentata Partidului Acține și Solidaritate, Maia Sandu, cu viziuni pro-occidentale (https://alegeri.md, 2020).

La 11 iulie 2021 au loc alegeri parlamentare anticipate, majoritatea fiind obținută de partidul președintei în exercițiu, Partidul Acțiune și Solidaritate, cu viziuni pro-occidentale cu 63 de mandate, restul mandatelor sunt împărțite între Blocul Electoral al Comuniștilor și Socialiștilor, 32 de mandate și Partidul Șor cu 6 mandate (https://alegeri.md, 2021).

Pe plan intern, pe fundalul pandemiei Covid-19 dar și a războiului ruso-ucrainean, se atestă o stagnare a creșterii economice, creșterea ratei inflației, care generează scumpiri a costului de trai (World Bank, 2024). Totodată, în anul 2021, din cauza unor neînțelegeri între MoldovaGaz și Gazprom, a se citi, Chișinău și Moscova, Gazprom a anunțat micșorarea volumului de gaze livrat către MoldovaGaz, chiar dacă într-un final se ajunge la un consens, în 2021 guvernul instituie stare de urgență în sectorul energetic. La moment, autoritățile de la Chișinău, pentru malul drept al Nistrului cumpără gazele de pe piețele europene, iar până la 31 decembrie 2024 toată cantitatea de gaze, 5,7 mln m^3 /zi livrată de Gazprom pentru MoldovaGaz era direcționată către regiunea transnistreană din partea stângă a Nistrului (Iachimenco, 2024).

Pe domeniul reformelor asumate de guvernarea pro-europeană se atestă rezultate modeste, iar reforma în domeniul justiției, conform opiniei experților și chiar și a liderilor paridului de guvernare se poate cataloga ca un eșec din cauza procedurilor netransparente (Președinte, *Președinta Maia Sandu...)*.

La 20 octombrie 2024, concomitent cu alegerile prezidențiale, în urma cărora Maia Sandu, obține al doilea mandat, are loc și un referendum constituțional privind aderarea Republicii Moldova la Uniunea Europeană. Referendumul este validat la limită cu o diferență de mai puțin de un punct procentual pentru opțiunea „DA" cu 50,35 % față de opțiunea „NU" cu 49,65% (Alegeri*, Referendumul republican constituțional din 2024*). Pe plan extern, odată cu obținerea majorității și formarea unui guvern pro-european de către Partidul Acțiune și Solidaritate, se atestă o deschidere a partenerilor occidentali față de Republica Moldova, actuala președintă fiind bine văzută de cancelariile vestice, încearcă să promoveze în occident ideea unei Moldove europene.

Din momentul invaziei ruse asupra Ucrainei, cei din urmă și-au exprimat intenția și au solicitat să înceapă procesul de aderare la UE, având în vedere conjunctura geopolitică creată, Bruxellesul decide să accepte această solicitare, iar aderarea să se facă la pachet și cu Republica Moldova, cererea de aderare a fost depusă de Moldova în martie 2022.

În același timp, partenerii externi continuă sprijinul financiar pentru Republica Moldova prin colectări de fonduri, granturi și credite de la organismele financiare internaționale.

Scopul analizei efectuate este de a demonstra că datorită multitudinii de partide cu viziuni politice și geopolitice diferite, a acțiunilor dar mai ales a inacțiunilor acestor partide odată ajunse la guvernare, vectorul geopolitic suferă schimbări la fiecare scrutin electoral.

Rolul și importanța regiunii transnistrene în alegerile din Republica Moldova

De-a lungul timpului Transnistria este folosită atât de actori statali cât și politici pe „post de jucător de pe banca de rezervă" și este primenită sau blocată în dependență de interesele acestor actori.

Federația Rusă – autoproclamata Republică Moldovenească Nistreană este practic, în totalitate, creația autorităților de la Moscova și are drept scop menținerea unei situații tensionate în regiune și pe întreg teritoriu constituțional moldovenesc, în mod special.

Pe segmentul politicii interne, ori de câte ori este nevoie, se întreprind acțiuni de destabilizare de către Tiraspol, se recurge la șantaj energetic, prin refuzul semnării unor noi contracte de furnizare a energiei electrice de la MGRES spre Chișinău, prin instalarea de noi posturi grănicerești la frontiera administrativă, dar și împiedicarea sau invers, facilitarea exercitării dreptului de vot pe partea dreaptă a Nistrului de către cetățenii moldoveni cu domiciliul pe malul stâng al Nistrului.

În domeniul politicii externe, conflictul nerezolvat, prezența militarilor ruși, existența celui mai mare depozit militar de muniție și armament din Europa de Est, dar și situația juridică a regiunii, de jure, teritoriu constituțional al Republicii Moldova, de facto, regiune necontrolată de autoritățile moldovenești, oferă Federației Ruse posibilitatea de a avea un control de la distanță asupra acestui teritoriu.

Malul drept al Nistrului - autoritățile de la Chișinău – De 34 de ani de când există problematica transnistreană, toate partidele politice de la Chișinău care au fost la guvernare au abordat acest conflict în programele lor de guvernare, doar că, în afară de faptul că s-au semnat acorduri și protocoale preponderent în domeniul social și economic, nu s-a realizat reintegrarea sau rezolvarea în vre-un fel a situației, iar planurile îndrăznețe a politicienilor au rămas doar pe hârtie.

Pe de altă parte, încă din februarie 1994 este semnat un decret al președintelui Republicii Moldova prin care se asigura dreptul la vot a cetățenilor moldoveni din regiunea transnistreană.

Cu toate că au obținut acest drept constituțional, inițial, un număr foarte mic a locuitorilor cu drept de vot din regiune au făcut uz de el, până la alegerile prezidențiale din anul 2016 și mai ales cele parlamentare din 2019 când numărul votanților din regiunea de est a țării a crescut spectaculos, la 36 848 de alegători care și-au exercitat dreptul la vot.

Acest fapt se poate explica prin mai multe motive, numărul mic a persoanelor din stânga Nistrului care dețineau cetățenie moldovenească, lipsa interesului acestora față de evenimentele politice de la Chișinău, crearea unor impiedimente induse artificial de autoritățile din regiunea transnistreană acelor cetățeni care intenționau să-și exercite dreptul la vot pe malul drept al Nistrului, fapt explicat prin existența unor indicații clare venite de la Moscova pentru administrația de la Tiraspol, lipsa interesului decidenților de la Chișinău față de eventualele voturi venite din stânga Nistrului, dar și lipsa unui cadru normativ clar privind organizarea procesului electoral în regiune.

Odată cu plecarea comuniștilor și instaurarea la guvernare, în 2009, a partidelor pro-europene a început să crească și interesul partidelor de stânga față de voturile date de cetățenii din regiunea transnistreană, miza fiind ridicată la cote maxime la alegerile parlamentare din 2019 și prezidențialele din 2020 și respectiv 2024. În scrutinul electoral prezidențial din 2016 s-a folosit pentru prima dată instrumentul de transportare organizată a alegătorilor din stânga Nistrului, dat fiind faptul că majoritatea moldovenilor din regiune sunt de orientare pro-rusă beneficiarul direct a acestor măsuri a fost candidatul socialist, Igor Dodon, tot el fiind beneficiarul și în 2020, la acest scrutin

conform raportului Promo-Lex, pe lângă transportare organizată s-au folosit și așa instrumente de fraudare precum cumpărarea votului.

În altă ordine de idei, la alegerile prezidențiale din 2024 când au votat puțin peste 26,3 mii de alegători din stânga Nistrului, guvernarea pro-europeană de la Chișinău, prin angajații MAI, a blocat accesul alegătorilor din regiunea transnistreană care veneau în număr destul de mare din direcția Râbnița (malul stâng) pe podul peste Nistru, spre Rezina (malul drept) prin câteva situații de urgență create artificial – mai întâi stoparea traficului pentru verificarea unei cutii suspecte care se afla într-un mijloc de transport, iar ulterior în jurul orei 18:00 circulația pe pod a fost blocată complet preț de câteva ore, motivul fiind un apel la serviciul 112 de la Chișinău cu mesajul că podul ar fi minat.

Pentru a înțelege sensul acestor incidente este important de menționat că în scrutinele electorale statistic vorbind, partidele pro-europene mizează pe voturile moldovenilor din diaspora din occident, iar partidele pro-ruse își pun speranțe în voturile venite de la locuitorii din stânga Nistrului și de la diaspora stabilită în Federația Rusă.

Având în vedere că se desfășura cel de-al doilea tur al alegerilor prezidențiale și se dădea bătălia pentru fiecare vot care putea aduce victoria unuia dintre cei doi candidați, iar rezultatul votului din diaspora încă nu se cunoștea, se pot lansa două ipoteze: 1) îngrijorarea guvernării pro-europene de la Chișinău că un vot masiv în favoarea contracandidatului, Alexandr Stoianoglo, ar putea să-i asigure acestuia din urmă victoria, 2) Incidente create în mod special de opoziția pro-rusă pentru a avea temei de contestare a rezutatelor alegerilor din motivul îngrădirii dreptului la vot a alegătorilor din stânga Nistrului, ipoteză pe cât de posibilă pe atât și lipsită de logică, dat fiind faptul că se conta pe fiecare vot obținut de contracandidatul Maiei Sandu.

Prin supozițiile lansate nu se caută a învinovăți careva actori politici, ci doar se încearcă a accentua interesul clasei politice de la Chișinău pentru voturile cetățenilor din regiunea de est a țării și importanța acestora la numărătoarea finală a buletinelor de vot.

Segmentul politicii externe este umbrit de situația din regiunea transnistreană, și creează o stare de incertitudine pentru Chișinău și cancelariile occidentale privind procesul de aderare la Uniunea Europeană.

Criza energetică din regiunea transnistreană versus alegerile parlamentare de la Chișinău din 2025

De la 1 ianuarie 2025 autoritățile ucrainene au stopat tranzitul de gaze naturale rusești prin conducta care alimenta cu gaze Republica Moldova, inclusiv regiunea transnistreană, dar și alte state din Europa Centrală și de Est.

Decizia de a nu mai prelungi contractul de prestare a serviciilor de tranzitare a gazelor semnat între Naftogaz (UA) și Gazprom (RU) și care are la bază mai mult un scop politic decât comercial, a fost anunțată public de reprezentații Naftogaz încă din toamna anului 2023.

Tot de la 1 ianuarie 2025, regiunea transnistreană nu mai este alimentată cu gaze naturale din motiv că Gazprom „nu mai are posibilitate tehnică și juridică de a livra aceste gaze dar și din cauza datoriilor acumulate de MoldovaGaz către Gazprom”, acestea sunt argumentele invocate de Gazprom, iar despre o posibilă întrerupere a furnizării gazelor ministrul energiei de la Chișinău a fost informat încă din noiembrie 2024, urmare a vizitei ministrului moldovean al energiei, Victor Parlicov, la Sankt-Petersburg unde a avut discuții cu președintele Gazprom, Alexei Miller.

Este important de menționat că aceste decizii ale Kievului și a Moscovei au un impact direct pentru ambele maluri ale Nistrului din considerentul că până la 31 decembrie 2024, urmare a unor înțelegeri anterioare între Moscova, Chișinău și Tiraspol, toată cantitatea de gaze, 5,7 mln m^3 /zi livrată de Gazprom pentru MoldovaGaz, era cedată către regiunea transnistreană. Cu gazul livrat „gratuit", MGRES producea energie electrică pe care o vindea la un preț de dumping Chișinăului (66 USD/Mw/h) pentru comparație, prețul de achiziție a unui Mw/h de pe bursă, în luna ianuarie 2025, costă Republica Moldova între 120-180 Euro.

Printr-un circuit simplu al celor 5,7 milioane metri cubi de gaze, se mențineau pe linia de plutire două economii, malul stâng – avea gaze pentru necesitățile proprii, dar și bani care intră la buget din vânzările de energie către Chișinău, malul drept – avea energie electrică la un preț cu mult sub media regiunii, iar cu diferența de preț își acoperea alte cheltuieli curente.

Urmare a acestor decizii încă din 6 decembrie 2024 autoritățile de la Tiraspol au declarat stare de urgență în economie, care între timp a fost prelungită până în februarie, la rândul lor autoritățile de la Chișinău au declarat stare de urgență din 16 decembrie 2024 pentru o perioadă de 60 de zile.

Începând cu 1 ianuarie 2025, toate sursele media titrează știri despre criza energetică din Transnistria, care ar fi fost creată intenționat de Kremlin pentru a destabiliza Republica Moldova, aceleași narative le are și guvernarea pro-europeană de la Chișinău.

Pentru a înțelege cu exactitate ce s-a întâmplat și mai ales de ce s-a întâmplat, mi-am propus să lansez două ipoteze de lucru pe care o să încerc să și le argumentez.

Ipoteza 1

În această criză energetică Chișinăul și Tiraspolul sunt doar doi pioni pe marea tablă de șah a intereselor geopolitice din regiune, iar jucătorii care mută acești pioni sunt doi actori statali interesele cărora se intersectează aici, acești actori sunt Federația Rusă care deține controlul politic al administrației de la Tiraspol pe de o parte, și Uniunea Europeană care are interese declarate la Chișinău dar și parteneri prin partidul de la guvernare pe care îi susține pe de altă parte, miza jocului fiind două obiective: 1) alegerile parlamentare de la Chișinău din 2025 (încă nu a fost stabilită data alegerilor) aici coincid obiectivele ambilor actori, controlul asupra puterii, fiecare prin aliații săi autohtoni, 2) Reintegrarea prin europenizare a regiunii transnistrene de către Bruxelles prin partenerul său politic de la Chișinău și respectiv, împiedicarea acestui proces de către Moscova prin aliatul său fidel, autoritățile de la Tiraspol.

Ipoteza 2

Această criză energetică a fost gândită și planificată încă pe parcursul anului 2024, beneficiarii fiind aceiași doi actori statali.

Interesul Federației Ruse – de-a lungul timpului și în mod special începând din 2020 mai mulți decidenți politici de la Chișinău cu viziuni pro-europene, prin diverse organizații internaționale, au acuzat Moscova că prin gazul „gratuit" livrat de Gazprom către regiunea transnistreană aceasta finanțează separatismul și menține în viață economia regiunii și astfel periclitează procesul de reintegrare a celor două maluri.

Așadar, autoritățile de la Moscova au luat act de decizia din 2023 a Naftogaz de a nu mai prelungi contractul de tranzit a gazelor și au folosit această situație pentru a

demonstra Bruxellesului și în mod special Chișinăului că cei din urmă nu au capacitatea de a gestiona și a rezolva această criză energetică fără ajutorul Federației Ruse, iar cantitatea de gaze rusești livrată pe malul stâng este vitală pentru regiune chiar dacă, așa cum zice Chișinăul, Moscova finanțează separatismul.

Prin acest procedeu s-au aplicat două lovituri concomitente celor doi aliați UE și Republicii Moldova, 1) autoritățile pro-europene de la Chișinău, nemaiavând posibilitatea de a cumpăra energia electrică la un preț mic de la MGRES, cumpără această energie de pe bursele europene la preț de piață, iar asta se reflectă în facturile consumatorilor, prețul fiind majorat aproape dublu, de la 2,34 lei la 4,1 lei Kwt, la asta se mai adaugă majorarea tarifului la agentul de termoficare și la gazele naturale, ceea ce stârnește nemulțumirea populației și respectiv diminuează încrederea acestora în actuala guvernare. Pe marginea acestor nemulțumiri se va specula și își vor face campanie electorală partidele de opoziție pro-ruse moldovenești; 2) Discreditarea imaginii guvernării pro-europene de la Chișinău și a Bruxellesului, care prin vocea autorităților de pe malul drept al Nistrului și-a oferit ajutorul și sprijinul pentru locuitorii din regiunea transnistreană, acest ajutor fiind refuzat atât la nivel de administrație cât și la nivelul populației, care nu își poate permite să plătească gazele naturale și curentul electric la prețuri de piață.

Interesul guvernării pro-europene de la Chișină și a Uniunii Europene – așa cum am menționat anterior Ucraina și-a anunțat decizia de a nu mai prelungi contractul de tranzit a gazelor rusești încă din octombrie 2023. Făcând un simplu calcul matematic, din octombrie 2023 și până la 1 ianuarie 2025, au trecut 14 luni, și aici apare o întrebare – ce măsuri a luat guvernarea de la Chișinău și partenerii săi externi de dezvoltare pe parcursul celor 14 luni pentru a preveni și/sau a diminua efectul stopării acestui tranzit de gaze?

Pentru a putea răspunde la această întrebare este necesar de văzut ce acțiuni au fost întreprinse de către autoritățile de pe malul drept și cine sunt factorii de decizie.

Pornind de la premisa că regiunea de pe malul stâng al Nistrului este considerată teritoriu constituțional moldovenesc, iar unica sursă folosită pentru aprovizionarea cu gaze a regiunii, timp de 34 de ani a fost conducta ce tranzitează Ucraina și care din 1 ianuarie 2025 urma să devină nefuncțională, se impunea necesitatea examinării acestui eveniment din punct de vedere a existenței unei amenințări la securitatea națională.

Serviciul de Informații și Securitate este responsabil de asigurarea securității Republicii Moldova și generează rapoarte și note informative complexe pe domeniul securității statului inclusiv și cea energetică pe care le prezintă președintelui statului care coordonează activitatea serviciului.

Conform site-ului sis.md, din noiembrie 2023 și până la 23 decembrie 2024, când a fost postat ultimul comunicat, nu se poate găsi nici o relatare despre eventuale riscuri privind securitatea energetică și economică a statului.

Consiliul Suprem de Securitate este un organ consultativ care analizează și prezintă recomandări președintelui țării în domeniul de asigurare a securității statului, pe tot parcursul anului 2024, CSS s-a întrunit doar de două ori, în 28 ianuarie 2024, tema discutată fiind situația din domeniul justiției și în 11 noiembrie 2024, subiectul abordat a fost corupția politică și abia în 14 ianuarie 2025, după 14 zile de criză energetică în

regiunea transnistreană cu stări de urgență în curs de desfășurare pe ambele maluri ale Nistrului, șefa statului a convocat CSS pe subiectul crizei energetice.

Aceiași situație se poate regăsi și pe site-urile Biroului Politici pentru Reintegrare și a Ministerului Energiei, cel din urmă, în afară de publicarea unui plan de măsuri pentru pregătire de sezonul de încălzire 2024-2025, în care se vorbește și despre un posibil scenariu de vânzare a gazelor spre stânga Nistrului, nu a mai publicat nimic relevant pe domeniul prevenerii crizei energetice.

În același context, președinta Republicii Moldova, Maia Sandu, a avut cel puțin două întâlniri oficiale cu președintele Ucrainei, Volodimir Zelenski, dar și cu alți oficiali europeni, nemaivorbind de convorbirile telefonice avute cu aceștia pe parcursul anului 2024, subiectul stopării tranzitului, eventuale soluții de compromis era unul care se cerea discutat de șefa statului cu omologii săi, dar nici pe această dimensinue nu se pot găsi careva informări oficiale.

Aceeași situație se poate observa și pe site-urile oficiale ale administrației de la Tiraspol.

Am făcut în mod deliberat această analiză a comunicatelor publice făcute de instituțiile statului de la Chișinău pentru a demonstra că, chiar dacă, situația cu încetarea tranzitului gazelor rusești prin Ucraina era una certă, iar termenul de 14 luni este unul mai mult decât suficient pentru a elabora un plan și a pentru a căuta și genera soluții de prevenire și reacționare la o eventuală situație de criză, nici o autoritate publică de pe malul drept nu a abordat acest subiect ca o amenințare la adresa securității naționale, cel puțin nu a vorbit despre asta public, necătând la faptul că în prezent și malul drept se află într-o situație complicată din punct de vedere a asigurării cu energie electrică.

Având în vedere faptul că în octombrie 2024 trebuiau să aibă loc alegeri prezidențiale și referendumul constituțional privind aderarea Republicii Moldova la Uniunea Europeană, toate site-urile autorităților publice promovau beneficiile aderării la UE, cca 80% din conținutul publicat pe site-ul președinției este dedicat referendumului, o eventuală abordare publică a unei crize energetice care urma să vină, în mod evident putea să scadă din încrederea și intenția electoratului de pe ambele maluri ale Nistrului, de a vota reprezentanta partidului de guvernământ și de a vota cu opțiunea „DA” la referendum, în consecință urma să ducă la știrbirea imaginii PAS și a președintei în exercițiu în mod special, asta fiind o lovitură de imagine și pentru Bruxelles.

Rezumând, se poate afirma că autoritățile de pe ambele maluri ale Nistrului, în mod intenționat, prin inacțiunile lor au contribuit la amploarea actualei crize energetice.

Tiraspolul – chiar dacă este victima directă a refuzului Gazprom de a livra gaze în regiune, prezintă Chișinăul ca vinovatul principal al crizei energetice. Totodată, se poate presupune că au fost prezentate cifre exacte autorităților de la Moscova, a resurselor energetice pe care le avea în stocuri, pe baza informațiilor oferite de Tiraspol, Kremlinul știe exact cât poate rezista regiunea fără gaze.

Anumiți subiecți din Federația Rusă au interese economice în regiunea transnistreană, Inter RAO EES este proprietara MGRES la fel și Uzina Metalurgică de la Râbnița are în acționariat subiecți din Federația Rusă, aceste obiective industriale trebuie să producă bani, care însă în acest moment, fără gaz rusesc nu pot funcționa. Într-o perioadă relativ scurtă de timp, Moscova e posibil că va relua livrările de gaz pentru

malul stâng, probabil inițial doar pentru a acoperi necesitățile regiunii, ulterior însă se va livra și gaz pentru MGRES care iarășii va produce curent ieftin.

Chișinăul se poate trezi iarăși într-o situație delicată, pe parcursul lunii ianuarie 2025, factori politici de pe malul drept au declarat că Chișinăul nu va mai cumpăra energie electrică de la Cuciurgan, rămâne de văzut dacă într-adevăr se vor respecta aceste declarații.

Chișinăul – prin toate narativele sale partidul pro-european de la guvernare și președinta ori de câte ori au avut ocazia au învinovățit Federația Rusă pentru provocarea crizei, șantaj energetic, etc., în același timp au încercat să promoveze imaginea Uniunii Europene ca salvator a regiunii transnistrene prin oferirea de ajutoare umanitare, compensații și alte beneficii sociale, fapt greu de înțeles de către populația chiar de pe malul drept al Nistrului care locuiește în zona limitrofă cu malul stâng, fiind conectați la sursele de energie ieftină de la Tiraspol le este foarte greu să accepte prețurile majorate la utilități.

Concluzie

Se încearcă a promova printre cetățeni ideea valorilor europene, punerea în lumină a ajutoarelor venite de la partenerii externi, dar și importanța aderării la UE. Pe de altă parte, în contextul invaziei Federației Ruse în Ucraina și prin invocarea unui război hibrid dus de Rusia în Moldova, autoritățile prin acțiunile lor, creează un sentiment de panică și inceritudine în rândul populației, dar și pentru potențialii investitori străini, fapt ce afectează grav dezvoltarea economică a țării. Acest lucru s-a putut observa foarte bine în campania de promovare a referendumului constituțional privind aderarea Republicii Moldova la Uniunea Europeană, dar și în campania electorală pentru alegerile prezidențiale din 20 octombrie 2024 când s-a ajuns la un nivel critic de divizare și învrăjbire a populației pe criterii de viziuni geopolitice.

Partidul de guvernământ încearcă să europenizeze destul de agresiv societatea moldovenească și funcționează după principiul cine nu e cu noi, e împotriva noastră, adică împotriva unui viitor european, chiar dacă acest viitor european este unul destul de vag și nesigur încă, și care din cauza lipsei unei comunicări eficiente din partea autorităților moldovenești riscă să rămână doar o intenție declarată.

Pe plan intern, pe fundalul crizei energetice, a majorării tarifelor la utilități, lipsa unei economii sănătoase, partidul de guvernământ pierde din încredere și scade în sondaje. În același timp se observă o lipsă de coerență și viziune cu privire la acțiuni imediat necesare iar la astea contribuie și comunicarea defectuoasă a liderilor guvernării.

Pe plan extern, chiar dacă rămâne în continuare bine văzut în occident partidul de guvernământ și în mod special lidera acestuia, președinta Maia Sandu situația este una incertă, având în vedere crizele economice și politice cu care se confruntă marile economii europene, Germania și Franța, iar finanțările promise, chiar și sub formă de împrumuturi, pot fi oricând condiționate cu unele concesii pe care ar trebui să le facă Chișinăul.

Cert este faptul că în acest moment cele două maluri se află în situație de urgență, iar malul stâng și în situație de criză energetică.

Cel mai probabil, după anunțul liderului de la Tiraspol și chiar dacă nu există încă o confirmare a autorităților din Federația Rusă, Moscova va relua livrarea gazelor

naturale spre regiunea transnistreană. Asta va duce la o șifonare a imaginii guvernării de la Chișinău, căreia nu i-a reușit să aducă Uniunea Europeană pe post de salvator în regiunea transnistreană, PAS și președinta, Maia Sandu, vor continua narativele cu șantajul energetic și inducerea crizei energetice din regiunea transnistreană de către Federația Rusă, numai că, reieșind din situația care începe să se contureze, Chișinăul pare să fi pierdut această bătălie, chiar dacă, aparent încearcă să zădărnicească planurile Moscovei de a livra gaz în stânga Nistrului.

Pornind de la aceste realități și având în vedere că până la alegerile parlamentare mai este timp, este evident că lupta celor doi actori, Moscova și Bruxelles prin aliații săi de la Tiraspol și Chișinău va continua, unii prin narative anti-europene și prin speculații pe marginea multitudinii de greșeli făcute de actuala guvernare pro-europeană, ceilalți prin invocarea pericolului rusesc, beneficiile democrației și importanța aderării la Uninunea Europeană, toate astea având un cost deloc ieftin pentru populația de pe cele două maluri ale Nistrului.

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WHEN VOTING ISN'T ENOUGH: THE HIDDEN EROSION OF DEMOCRATIC VALUES

CZU: 324:321.7
https://doi.org/10.59295/eiqd.15

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Abstract. *This article examines the paradox of electoral majoritarianism — how elections, once regarded as the cornerstone of democracy, can be weaponized to erode its foundations. While democratic systems rely on electoral legitimacy, an increasing number of governments are using electoral mandates not to uphold democracy, but to weaken institutional checks and balances, restrict civil liberties, and consolidate power. Drawing on the works of scholars such as Cas Mudde, Fareed Zakaria and Yascha Mounk, this study explores the growing divide between democracy and liberalism, highlighting the risks of illiberal democracy, where electoral victories provide a façade of legitimacy while democratic institutions are systematically dismantled. Through case studies of Poland and Hungary, the article illustrates how elected leaders manipulate democratic procedures to entrench their rule, often under the guise of legal and constitutional reforms. The paper argues that democracy cannot survive on elections alone — it requires independent institutions, minority protections, and a robust civil society. By analyzing the subtle yet profound ways in which democratic erosion occurs, this study underscores the urgent need for stronger institutional safeguards and renewed civic engagement to prevent electoral majoritarianism from hollowing out democratic governance.*

Keywords*: electoral majoritarianism, democratic backsliding, illiberal democracy, governance, electoral integrity*

Introduction: the paradox of electoral legitimacy

Democracy, long celebrated as the ultimate expression of popular sovereignty, now faces a profound paradox: its greatest strength, the electoral process, can now also become its greatest weakness. The very mechanisms designed to empower the people — free and fair elections, essential to electoral integrity (Norris, 2014) [1] — are increasingly used to undermine the principles they were meant to uphold. Through this process,

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[1] Electoral integrity encompasses the overall fairness and impartiality of the voting process, ensuring that it effectively safeguards against threats such as election subversion and voter suppression. When elections lack integrity, it can lead to questions about the legitimacy of the results, diminished public trust in the democratic system, and decreased voter participation in future elections.

democratic mandates are used not to preserve democracy but to weaken institutional checks and balances, suppress minority rights, and consolidate power in ways that contradict liberal democratic values. The result is a governance framework that retains the outward appearance of democracy but lacks its substantive integrity.

This is not an attack on democracy from the outside - rather it is an erosion from within. Unlike traditional autocrats, today's authoritarian-leaning leaders do not abolish democracy; rather, they manipulate its mechanisms, weaponizing elections to achieve objectives that would have been the hallmark of open dictatorship in the past. They do not reject democratic institutions outright. Instead, they embrace them, leveraging the legitimacy that elections provide to secure and expand their power. This phenomenon raises urgent questions: *Can democracy survive when reduced to mere electoral procedures? Can the ballot box itself become an instrument of democratic decay?*

The above-mentioned decay of democracy, its increasingly abrupt and perceptible backsliding[2], is no longer an alarmist notion or a speculative theory — but a well-documented and observable process, recognized and analyzed by scholars and policymakers worldwide (Skaaning, 2020; Hyde, 2020; Lührmann, Lindberg, 2019). American scholar and journalist, Joshua Kurlantzick (2013), argues that the current wave of democratic regression is not merely a series of isolated cases but rather a reflection of a broader global crisis of democracy. He examines the underlying causes of democratic decline in various countries, questioning why, in some instances, the middle class — traditionally seen as a pillar of democratic stability — has turned against democracy and whether the global trend of de-democratization can be reversed. German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk, in a way, likens the ongoing crisis of democracy — one that is increasingly recognized and widely discussed — to Cassandra's prophecy[3]. *Future historians* — he asserts — *will have to reconstruct how Western democracies collapsed — democracies that, after 1990 and even more so after 2001, seemed to have increasingly embraced a neo-authoritarian, partially neo-bellicist turn* (Sloterdijk, 2014). Sloterdijk puts forward a stark thesis: the traditional politics of consensus, once the foundation of democratic governance, is losing its significance. Instead, ominous contours of *neo-authoritarianism* are emerging, accompanied by an erosion of the

[2] Democratic backsliding refers to the gradual process of regime transformation toward autocracy, characterized by the increasing arbitrariness and repressiveness of political power. This process typically manifests in the shrinking space for political competition and public participation in governance. The erosion of democracy is closely linked to the weakening of key democratic institutions — such as the peaceful transfer of power and free and fair elections — as well as the restriction of fundamental individual rights, particularly freedom of speech, which serve as the foundation of democratic governance.

[3] The *Cassandra prophecy* refers to the mythological figure Cassandra from Greek mythology, the daughter of King Priam and Queen Hecuba of Troy. According to the myth, Cassandra was granted the gift of prophecy by the god Apollo but was simultaneously cursed—while her predictions would always be accurate, no one would ever believe her. In contemporary discourse, the term *Cassandra prophecy* is used metaphorically to describe situations in which an individual foresees impending danger, catastrophe, or crisis but whose warnings are disregarded or dismissed. It not only signifies the ability to predict negative events but also embodies the frustration and helplessness of those who attempt to alert others to looming threats, only to be met with skepticism or indifference. [B. B.'s note].

principle of non-violence. The growing prominence of violence, both symbolic and direct, has become a defining feature of late modernity. Sloterdijk argues that contemporary democracies are shedding the mask of consensus, replacing it with a politics driven by resentment, fear, and exclusion (Filipowicz, 2011). The increasing polarization of societies fuels not only ideological conflicts but also the normalization of political hostility, weakening the democratic culture of deliberation and compromise. In this climate (Koczanowicz, 2014), political arenas that once served as spaces for pluralistic debate and democratic decision-making are now turning into battlegrounds of deeply entrenched divisions. This transformation, according to Sloterdijk, marks a shift towards a culture of anger, where collective frustration, rather than constructive dialogue, becomes the dominant force shaping political interactions (Sloterdijk, 2014).

One of the most striking consequences of this transformation is the way elections — once seen as the ultimate expression of democratic will — are now being instrumentalized to deepen these divisions rather than resolve them. Instead of serving as a mechanism for collective decision-making and peaceful power transitions, elections are increasingly becoming tools of political entrenchment, used to validate exclusionary narratives and consolidate power. The rhetoric surrounding electoral campaigns often amplifies social and cultural anxieties, reinforcing an *"us" versus "them"* dynamic that erodes the legitimacy of democratic institutions. Moreover, the very function of elections as a safeguard of democracy is being distorted. While formally democratic, many elections now operate within frameworks that favor incumbents, weaken institutional checks and balances, and restrict meaningful political competition. Electoral processes, instead of ensuring accountability, are weaponized to entrench power - an evolution that fundamentally challenges the foundational principles of democratic governance.

Elections have long been regarded as the crowning achievement of democracy - the ultimate safeguard of freedom and public empowerment. But when distorted, they can become its greatest vulnerability. The paradox of electoral legitimacy lies in the fact that those who erode democracy do not reject elections; rather, they instrumentalize them. The ballot box is no longer merely a means of expressing the popular will — it is increasingly used to weaken institutional safeguards, sideline opposition, and entrench power. This process does not unfold with a sudden rupture, nor does it announce itself with the blunt force of an authoritarian coup. Instead, it advances quietly, step by step, cloaked in the familiar language of democratic procedure. The structures remain, but their substance is hollowed out. The principles of pluralism, representation, and transparency are steadily undermined, even as elections continue to be held. In this way, democracy does not die with a bang — rather it fades away, concealed behind the façade of electoral legitimacy.

Weaponizing the ballot: when elections undermine democracy

Democracies are somewhat in a constant state of transformation — social tensions erupt, voters demand new solutions, and political landscapes experience sudden shocks and realignments. A system of governance once considered stable, almost eternal, is now teetering. *Until recently, liberal democracy reigned triumphant. For all its shortcomings, most citizens seemed deeply committed to their form of government. The economy was growing. Radical parties were insignificant* — as Yascha Mounk (2018),

a Germany-born political scholar of Polish descent, notes — *Political scientists thought that democracy in places like France or the United States had long ago been set in stone, and would change little in the years to come. Politically speaking, it seemed, the future would not be much different from the past.*

And yet, today's reality is strikingly different, bringing forth new threats that, at democracy's moment of triumph, were believed to have been permanently overcome. Authoritarian populists are gaining traction worldwide, even in places where democracy once seemed untouchable. Societies are expressing their disillusionment and frustration with current politics — many feel anger or even outright contempt, leading them to disengage from civic life and political participation altogether. While public dissatisfaction with specific parties, leaders, or policies is nothing new, today's trends suggest a broader rejection of liberal democracy as a system.

Until recently, liberal democracy appeared not only as the most legitimate but as the only viable system. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, it became the dominant model of governance, not just in Europe but globally. It spread rapidly into formerly autocratic regions, from Central and Eastern Europe to Latin America, and even to parts of Africa and Asia. There seemed to be no alternative — communism had failed, as the states of the former Eastern Bloc had painfully learned; the governance models of the Far East were ill-suited to European conditions, and the most dangerous regimes had collapsed. The future was supposed to belong to liberal democracy. This belief was championed not only byFrancis Fukuyama, who was later criticized as overly optimistic (Fukuyama, 1992)[4], but also by many political scholars at the time. Though somewhat naïve, this thesis seemed to find confirmation in the political reality of Europe and the world. The so-called *evil empire*, as the Soviet Union was often labeled (http://voicesofdemocracy.umd.edu) [5], had collapsed, and the states of the so-called people's democracies were freeing themselves from communist rule (Schöpflin, 1990). These groundbreaking events led Western politicians and commentators to optimistic predictions that liberal democracy would flourish, and that its replacement of other forms of government — including the various dictatorships that had also plagued the Old Continent — was only a matter of time. Even those who did not take democracy's ultimate triumph for granted did not foresee a reversal of the liberal trend — quite the opposite. Some even predicted that humanity was on the cusp of further improvements, and that liberal democracy was merely a stepping stone toward an even more just and enlightened system of governance. That vision, however, has yet to materialize.

If elections were once the defining hallmark of democracy, today they are equally a means through which democracy is subtly but steadily undermined. The contradiction

[4] Here, one can primarily refer to Fukuyama's now-famous argument, in which he asserted that liberal democracy represents the ultimate outcome of states' institutional and ideological evolution. *What we may be witnessing is not just the end of the Cold War, or the passing of a particular period of post-war history, but the end of history as such… That is, the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government.*

[5] The term *evil empire* to refer to the USSR was coined by the U.S. President, Ronald Reagan. He first used it publicly in a speech delivered on March 8, 1983

of electoral legitimacy — where the very mechanisms designed to uphold democracy are repurposed to weaken its foundations — stands at the core of this transformation. It is not a process marked by dramatic upheaval but rather by incremental changes that, over time, hollow out the core of democratic governance. While elections continue to take place, their role shifts from ensuring representation and accountability to legitimizing exclusionary politics, consolidating power, and weakening the very institutions meant to safeguard democracy.

This phenomenon challenges long-held assumptions about the relationship between elections and democratization. Since the end of the Cold War, scholars and policymakers have often viewed free and fair elections as the cornerstone of democratic consolidation — a necessary step in the political evolution of transitioning states. What's also worth mentioning, the belief that economic development and the expansion of the middle class would naturally foster democracy was deeply embedded in Western foreign policy and the European integration project. This assumption rested on the idea that as the middle class grew, it would not only gain economic influence but also a stronger sense of agency in the political process, particularly through its participation in elections. However, the reality has proven more complex, suggesting that the relationship between electoral processes and democratization may not be as straightforward as once thought. And yet, also in Central and Eastern Europe, following the collapse of communism, states embarked on a long journey of democratic reform, undertaking significant political and economic transformations with varying degrees of success. However, more than three decades of democratic transition in the region have provided ample time to observe distinct patterns of change. In some states, democratization has led to the consolidation of stable and well-functioning democratic institutions. In others, the process has encountered significant obstacles, progressing in an inconsistent and often fragile manner. And in yet other cases, democratic transition has ultimately failed (Kubas, 2018: p.119). Despite the optimism that initially accompanied these reforms, only about 27% of the countries that undertook systemic transformations have successfully consolidated their democracies. The remaining states have settled into hybrid regimes that combine democratic and autocratic features, leaving them particularly susceptible to abuses of power — even by leaders elected through formally democratic means (Nowotarski,2012: p. 3).

Democracy's survival, therefore, is not an inevitable consequence of modernization, nor can elections alone guarantee its endurance. In many instances, electoral processes have been strategically co-opted by leaders who manipulate democratic institutions to entrench their own rule. Where democracy has faltered or reversed, explanations often focus on national contexts — ranging from economic instability and security threats to external authoritarian influences. However, beyond these specific circumstances, a more fundamental issue emerges: the systematic misuse of democratic mechanisms, particularly elections, as tools of political consolidation rather than as genuine expressions of popular sovereignty. Another institution that — while originally intended to uphold the principles of liberal democracy by amplifying the people's voice — has increasingly posed risks to democratic standards is the referendum. In principle, referendums embody the ideals of democracy, as they allow the citizens not only to be heard but also to have a direct impact on decision-making

processes. However, in practice, they often give way to decisions that, from a political standpoint, are irrational or not always aligned with the interests of the nation and the state, leading to inconsistencies in public policies. While in the early 1990s, the fact that the demos could speak with a full voice in so many countries was enthusiastically welcomed, by the early 21st century, scholars have increasingly turned their attention to the question of how to rein in that voice (Mair, 2007; Gąsior-Niemiec, 2007; Antoszewski, 2017). Once regarded as the antidote to autocracy, elections have, in some cases, become the very instruments through which authoritarian tendencies take hold and thrive. Instead of ensuring pluralism and oversight, they provide a veneer of legitimacy while eroding the principles of democratic governance. This blurring of lines between democracy and authoritarian rule signals a profound shift — one in which the formalities of democratic procedure persist, but their substantive meaning is gradually hollowed out.

The democratic mandate of anti-democratic leaders: the cases of Poland and Hungary

As discussed, the broader pattern of democratic backsliding has not spared Central and Eastern Europe. While elections have historically been seen as a milestone in the region's democratic consolidation, they have increasingly been leveraged as instruments of power rather than mechanisms of civic agency. Nowhere has this been more evident than in Poland (Sękowski, Pułról, 2021), where, after 2015, the electoral process not only legitimized but also facilitated an unprecedented restructuring of democratic institutions, tilting the balance of power in favor of the ruling party. That year marked an unprecedented shift in Poland's political landscape. The ruling party, *Prawo i Sprawiedliwość* (Law and Justice, PiS), won the parliamentary elections with a sufficient majority to govern alone, allowing it to exercise unchecked power for the following years (Koczanowicz, 2023). For the first time in post-1989 Poland, representatives of a single political camp controlled both the presidency and the parliament. Due to strategic miscalculations by left-wing parties, PiS was able to form a government without needing to engage in coalition agreements (Balicki, 2022: p. 19).

Such a concentration of power in the hands of one party poses a serious threat to democracy, which fundamentally relies on political pluralism and the coexistence of multiple, cooperating parties. In this context, respect for democratic constitutional mechanisms — and, more broadly, the principles of political and legal culture — becomes crucial. However, the Polish parliament of the 8th term (2015–2019) quickly became an arena of intense political disputes and controversies that undermined parliamentary standards and constitutional principles of governance (Balicki, 2022: p. 19-20). The ruling party rapidly initiated sweeping changes that affected nearly every aspect of political life. The first legislative project submitted to parliament proposed an amendment to the law on the Constitutional Tribunal[6], marking the beginning of a broader effort to curtail its independence. A key moment in this process was the unprecedented and unlawful annulment of previous parliamentary decisions regarding

[6] Parliamentary bill amending the Act on the Constitutional Tribunal (document no. 6) submitted on November 12, 2015.

the appointment of Constitutional Tribunal judges in November 2015 (Balicki, 2022: p. 20).)[7]. These actions laid the groundwork for systematically weakening constitutional bodies and the rule of law more generally (Bień-Kacała, 2015; Drinóczi, 2022). The ruling majority effectively disregarded constitutional norms regulating the functioning of state institutions, including the principle of legality, which also binds parliament. Instead, it asserted the primacy of its political will over legal constraints. This marked the beginning of a prolonged process aimed at systematically dismantling checks and balances, which are essential to liberal democracy and the protection of citizens' rights. In the following years, Poland's constitutionally defined system of democratic safeguards, with the independent Constitutional Tribunal at its core, suffered profound erosion (Sadurski, 2019). Other judicial institutions also faced extensive reforms — more accurately described as deformations — under PiS governance (both in the 2015–2019 and 2019–2023 parliamentary terms, during which the party maintained its majority).

From a liberal perspective, these developments echo the warnings of John Locke, one of the foundational theorists of republican government, which later evolved into modern democratic theory[8]. In *Two Treatises of Government* (Załęski, 2005), Locke famously argued that if a single ruler holds both legislative and executive power, no independent arbiter remains to provide justice or redress grievances. As he writes: *For he* [the prince — B. B.] *being supposed to have all, both legislative and executive, power in himself alone, there is no judge to be found, no appeal lies open to any one, who may fairly and indifferently, and with authority decide, and from whence relief and redress may be expected of any injury or inconveniency that may be suffered from him, or by his order. So that such a man, however entitled, Czar, or Grand Signior, or how you please, is as much in the state of Nature, with all under his dominion, as he is with the rest of mankind. For wherever any two men are, who have no standing rule and common judge to appeal to on earth, for the determination of controversies of right betwixt them, there they are still in the state of Nature, and under all the inconveniencies of it, with only this woeful difference to the subject, or rather slave of an absolute prince* (Locke, 1823: p.143-144). The absence of legal constraints effectively reduces governance to the arbitrary will of the ruler, placing society in a state of nature rather than under the rule of law. This principle is directly relevant to Poland's recent trajectory, where the erosion of judicial independence has weakened the judiciary's ability to function as a check on executive overreach.

[7] The Sejm, acting without legal basis and in clear violation of constitutional and statutory norms, adopted resolutions "declaring the lack of legal force" of the resolutions passed by the Sejm of the previous term, which had been the basis for the appointment of Constitutional Tribunal judges (Documents No. 42–46). Subsequently, the Sejm selected its own candidates for judicial positions that had already been de facto filled by judges who had been lawfully appointed by the previous Sejm but whose oaths of office had not been accepted by the President of the Republic of Poland

[8] Perhaps Locke's greatest achievement in political philosophy was the development of the theory of republican government, which reflected views characteristic of many other classical thinkers. Over time, the theory of classical republicanism evolved into the theories of modern democracies. [B. B.'s note].

At the same time, the sweeping institutional changes were enabled by a decisive electoral victory, granting the party the ability to govern without coalition partners and legitimizing its actions. This democratic mandate was used to justify an extensive restructuring of state institutions, including changes to the legal system, increased control over the media, and constitutional amendments — transformations that gradually eroded democratic checks and balances while preserving the appearance of legitimacy. What began as a political victory soon translated into structural changes that weakened judicial independence, curtailed media pluralism, and sidelined political opposition — yet all of this was enacted under the banner of democracy, backed by the very mechanism designed to preserve it: elections.

Similarly to Poland, Hungary was once widely regarded as a consolidated liberal democracy two decades after the fall of communism. With a vibrant civil society and a growing economy, Hungary was seen as a "most likely case" for successful democratization — so much so that if democracy could not take root there, its prospects elsewhere in post-communist Europe would seem even more uncertain (. Bennett, 2004: p.29). For years, this prediction appeared accurate: the economy flourished, power alternated peacefully between parties, and independent media and civil society organizations thrived. However, this trajectory changed after the 2010 parliamentary elections, in which the conservative party Fidesz, led by Viktor Orbán, secured a decisive victory (Bozóki, 2012)[9]. The party leveraged its 53% vote share — translating into 263 parliamentary seats (five more than the required two-thirds constitutional majority), surpassing the constitutional majority threshold — to implement sweeping institutional changes. The party replicated this success in local elections later that year. In March 2011, the government introduced a new constitutional preamble, known as the "National Avowal", reinstating traditional Hungarian institutional names and changing the country's official designation from the "Republic of Hungary" to simply "Hungary".

At the same time, Orbán forcefully articulated a new vision of governance — one that openly rejected liberal democracy in favor of what he called "illiberal democracy" (Góralczyk, 2018). In an era of growing frustration with liberal democracy, populist leaders have sought to redefine democratic legitimacy, promoting exclusionary models of rule that prioritize majoritarian dominance over institutional checks and minority rights. Among them, Orbán emerged as one of the most vocal advocates of this shift, arguing that Hungary should move away from the constraints of liberal democracy and embrace a "hierarchical democracy", a system rooted in national identity rather than universal rights and pluralism. Under his leadership, Hungary was to become a new, illiberal state based on national foundations (Toth, 2014) — the archetype of this illiberal order, a system where elections remain but core democratic institutions are hollowed out. Hierarchical democracy, as envisioned by Orbán, allows leaders elected through

[9] Although it's worth mentioning that the victory of Fidesz was, in many ways, a societal response to the public's disillusionment with the Hungarian Socialist Party's rule, which, since 2002, had been marred by corruption, reckless spending, and superficial reforms. The release of a scandalous 2006 recording, in which then-Prime Minister Ferenc Gyurcsány admitted to lying during the election campaign, further fueled public outrage. As a result, the strong support for Orbán should be seen less as a wholehearted endorsement of Fidesz's program and more as a determined effort by citizens to remove the discredited socialist elites from power.

democratic processes to implement the supposed will of the people according to their own interpretation, without needing to accommodate the interests of minorities. However, as Mounk points out, *its claim to being democratic need not be disingenuous. In the emerging system, the popular will reigns supreme (at least at first)* (Mounk, 2018: p.11). What differentiates it from true democracy, however, is the lack of respect for independent institutions, individual rights, and dissenting voices that do not align with the ruling party's agenda.

Orbán's conception of illiberal democracy was not just rhetoric — it became the guiding principle behind the systematic dismantling of Hungary's democratic structures. On April 25, 2011, the new constitution was formally adopted. This, however, was merely the first step in a series of sweeping legal and institutional transformations, many of which blatantly violated established political norms and legal principles. One of the earliest and most controversial changes was a new media law that significantly restructured media oversight. The newly established National Media and Infocommunications Authority was given the power to monitor "political balance" in media content and impose financial penalties on outlets deemed non-compliant. Additionally, electoral laws were revised to grant voting rights to ethnic Hungarians living abroad, but only for national party lists — a change that overwhelmingly benefited Fidesz. With its parliamentary supermajority, Fidesz also enacted constitutional amendments designed to entrench its power. One key provision changed electoral rules in a way that made it significantly more difficult for smaller opposition parties, such as the Hungarian Democratic Forum and the Alliance of Free Democrats, to surpass the 5% threshold required for parliamentary representation (Kubas, 2018). The government initially banned election campaign advertisements in commercial media, although this restriction was later overturned due to international pressure.

The judicial system underwent radical restructuring as well. The powers of the Constitutional Court were severely curtailed — new laws barred it from referring to case law established before January 1, 2012, and limited its jurisdiction to procedural matters only. Furthermore, a newly created National Judicial Office was granted authority over judicial appointments, further consolidating political control over the judiciary. Orbán's government also extended the terms of key state officials, allowing Fidesz appointees to retain influence long after electoral cycles. It passed restrictive measures targeting NGOs and civil society organizations, imposed burdensome regulations on foreign-funded groups, and even attempted to shut down the Central European University in Budapest (Kornai, 2015). Human rights organizations raised alarms over laws enabling local authorities to fine or imprison homeless individuals for occupying public spaces (Pająk-Patkowska, Patkowski, 2014). As one might deduce, the measures taken by Fidesz after seizing power thus covered almost all levels of socio-political life.

Despite these sweeping changes, there was no singular moment that marked the outright dismantling of democracy. Instead, democratic norms were gradually eroded, step by step, under the guise of legal and institutional reforms. As Hungarian economist János Kornai observed in 2011, *from 1989–1990 until the spring of 2010, Hungary was a democracy. It is no longer — an autocracy has taken its place* (Pająk-Patkowska, Patkowski, 2014). Crucially, however, all of this occurred through elections. Orbán's rise to power followed formal democratic procedures, legitimizing his leadership within

the framework of electoral democracy. The fundamental difference, however, was that he proved to be an inherently anti-democratic leader. Once in office, he systematically dismantled or co-opted institutions capable of challenging his rule, working to discredit and weaken the very mechanisms that could have exposed the populist illusion he was constructing. Through legal maneuvering and electoral engineering, he reshaped Hungary's democratic framework into what is now widely considered a hybrid regime — an illiberal system that retained the formal structures of democracy while hollowing out its core principles.

The cases of Hungary and Poland illustrate how democracy can be eroded not through sudden ruptures but through a gradual, systematic dismantling of its core principles. Leaders like Orbán and Kaczyński have not rejected democracy outright but have instead exploited its mechanisms to consolidate power while maintaining a veneer of legitimacy. By presenting authoritarian measures as democratic mandates, they have weakened judicial independence, curtailed dissent, and reshaped institutions to serve their interests. This gradual approach to democratic backsliding makes it all the more insidious; when change happens incrementally rather than through abrupt disruptions, it often goes unnoticed or is dismissed as insignificant. Yet, by the time the full extent of democratic erosion becomes clear, the safeguards meant to prevent it have already been dismantled.

Democracy without liberalism: the rise of hybrid regimes

Constitutional scholars such as american researchers Aziz Huq i Tom Ginsburg distinguish between two primary threats to constitutional liberal democracy: authoritarian reversion, a rapid and wholesale collapse into autocracy, and constitutional retrogression, a slower yet significant erosion of democratic norms occurring within the framework of existing — albeit increasingly hollow — rule-of-law institutions. This shift is not merely a retreat from the standards of liberal democracy but a deeper transformation in the very conception and practice of democracy itself. Thus, the three pillars of democracy — competitive elections, the liberal right to political expression and association, and the rule of law as upheld by administrative and judicial institutions — are gradually undermined until they ultimately collapse. This process unfolds openly, in full view of society, yet remains almost imperceptible to the public, in stark contrast to a sudden authoritarian reversal (Huq, Ginsburg, 2018: p.83). While operating within certain "liberal margins" already poses a considerable risk to the democratic system, the situation becomes far more dangerous when democracy is stripped entirely of its liberal character.

Can a system still be called a democracy when its core liberal principles — individual rights and judicial independence — are systematically dismantled? As constitutional retrogression weakens these foundations, democracy itself is increasingly distorted, its very definition reshaped by those seeking to undermine it. The term "democracy" is now frequently co-opted to justify policies that contradict its original principles, turning it into a tool for legitimizing authoritarian rule rather than upholding genuine democratic governance. This deliberate obfuscation makes democratic backsliding particularly insidious—many leaders who erode democratic norms do so under the pretense of defending them, convincing the public that their rise to power

enhances rather than undermines democracy. As a result, even as democratic institutions deteriorate, political leaders continue to portray themselves as defenders of democracy — albeit in a form that has shed its liberal character. This manipulation of democratic language allows them to enact policies that are fundamentally anti-democratic while maintaining an illusion of legitimacy. The challenge, then, is not only to recognize and resist democratic backsliding but also to reclaim the very concept of democracy from those who have weaponized it for illiberal ends. This paradox of democratic legitimacy — where elections serve not as a safeguard of democracy but as a tool for its erosion — raises a fundamental question: can democracy survive when stripped of its liberal foundations?

For decades, societies have held onto the belief that liberalism and democracy are inseparable. However, growing concerns suggest that once one of these elements is abandoned, liberal democracy itself may not survive. Across democracies worldwide, two seemingly distinct trends are unfolding. On one hand, public attitudes are becoming increasingly illiberal — frustrated voters more readily reject minority rights and lose faith in independent institutions, which they perceive as ineffective. On the other hand, political elites, who now control the system, are working to weaken its foundations, becoming increasingly resistant to public accountability. *As a result, liberalism and democracy, the two core elements of our political system, are starting to come into conflict* (Mounk, 2018: p13). As Yasha Mounk emphasizes, while public sentiment leans toward illiberalism, elites are becoming more undemocratic, leading to a fundamental conflict between the two. In turn, this tension gives rise to two dangerous phenomena: illiberal democracy — a system in which elections remain, but rights and freedoms are eroded — and undemocratic liberalism, where legal rights persist, but democratic participation is hollowed out.This growing tension between liberalism and democracy is no longer an abstract debate but a tangible reality shaping contemporary politics. As democratic norms erode, a troubling question emerges: What happens when the very mechanisms meant to uphold democracy become tools for its subversion?

Yasha Mounk (2018) argues that safeguarding liberal democracy requires avoiding two opposing threats: illiberal democracy and undemocratic liberalism. The first leads to a scenario where populist leaders gain public support and ultimately take power by pointing to real weaknesses in the existing system. These anti-liberal politicians, invoking the will of the people, undermine the rule of law, restrict individual rights, and expand their own influence — yet they fail to address the very social issues they initially promised to resolve. As a result, populist rule often turns against the very people it claims to represent. Undemocratic liberalism, on the other hand, is based on the belief that a rational administration, rather than citizens themselves, is best suited to address political challenges. This weakens public agency, leaving citizens increasingly convinced that their interests are neither represented nor taken seriously.

Mounk also warns against the "arrogance of political elites," who often see their role as one of enlightened governance, dismissing public concerns as irrational (Sawczuk, 2019). In contrast, liberals must demonstrate that — unlike populists, who ultimately betray their voters — they can understand, respect, and seriously engage with people's grievances. The solution, Mounk suggests, lies in making democracy more liberal and liberalism more democratic (Sawczuk, 2019: p. 11-12).

This reality calls into question the longstanding belief that once democracy is established, it will naturally sustain itself. The increasing prevalence of democratic backsliding and the rise of hybrid regimes underscore a crucial truth: democracy is not merely about holding elections, but about ensuring the conditions that make elections meaningful. In fact, one of the challenges in identifying the crisis of democracy may stem from the very nature of liberal democracy itself — its essence is not only free elections, but also the rule of law and a set of political customs within institutions. Undermining these elements is therefore symptomatic of the contemporary crisis. Without robust institutions, constitutional safeguards, and a deeply rooted democratic culture, elections risk becoming instruments of legitimizing authoritarian drift rather than mechanisms for reinforcing democratic governance.

This aligns well with Professor Adam Przeworski's observation that democracy cannot be defined merely by elections but also by the accompanying institutional structures and political norms. While elections remain the only effective mechanism for holding politicians accountable, democracy is more than just the process of voting—it requires a framework of checks and balances that ensure its integrity. Przeworski cautions that attaching adjectives such as *electoral*, *liberal*, *constitutional*, *representative*, or *social* to democracy can create conceptual tensions, as these characteristics do not always coexist harmoniously. For instance, defining *constitutional democracy* as a system that limits majority rule and upholds judicial independence implies that the erosion of judicial autonomy may lead to violations of liberal rights and disruptions in the electoral process. The more qualifiers are added, the more complex democracy becomes as a concept, increasing the risk of internal contradictions and democratic crises. Thus, the defining attributes of democracy should not be taken for granted but rather tested empirically to assess the necessary conditions for sustaining electoral competitiveness, safeguarding rights, and preserving the rule of law. Only by ensuring these foundational elements can democracy function as more than just a formal electoral process but as a resilient system of governance [10].

This gradual erosion makes democratic backsliding particularly difficult to counter, as each step appears legally justified. By the time the full extent of institutional decay is recognized, key safeguards have already been dismantled. What emerges is not outright autocracy but a hybrid regime — an illiberal democracy where elections persist but no longer ensure genuine political competition. These developments underscore the urgent need to address the incremental threats to democracy before they become irreversible. These developments underscore the urgent need to address the incremental threats to democracy before they become irreversible. History has shown that democracy does not die overnight; it fades under the weight of manipulated legal norms, weakened institutions, and eroded political culture. The challenge, therefore, lies not only in diagnosing democratic decline but also in fostering societal and institutional resilience.

If the rise of hybrid regimes in Poland and Hungary, as well as in many other states of the region and worldwide, should serve as a warning, it is that democracy cannot

[10] Adding more qualifiers to democracy increases its complexity and exposes it to greater risks of crisis. However, this can also be a useful analytical tool — as Przeworski suggests, we can treat this list as a set of hypotheses, empirically testing which conditions are necessary to preserve electoral competitiveness, uphold fundamental rights, and maintain the rule of law.

be sustained through procedural elections alone — it requires an active commitment to liberal principles, constitutional safeguards, and a political culture that values pluralism and accountability. Without these foundations, even the most established democracies risk hollowing out from within, gradually losing the very essence that makes them democratic in the first place.

Winning the vote, losing democracy: the threat of electoral majoritarianism

The growing tensions between liberalism and democracy, between majority rule and institutional constraints, reveal a fundamental challenge of our time: *Can democracy survive without the liberal norms that have historically supported it?* If democratic legitimacy becomes synonymous with unrestrained electoral majority rule, ignoring constitutional checks and civil liberties, then democracy risks becoming an empty shell, serving not the people but those in power. The answer to this challenge lies not in abandoning democracy but in reinforcing its foundational principles — ensuring that elections remain competitive, independent institutions are protected, and civic engagement thrives. As Przeworski (2022)and other scholars remind us, democracy cannot be reduced to the mere act of voting — it must be an ongoing political and social commitment to pluralism, accountability, and the rule of law.

Suppose racists, fascists, or separatists win in free and fair elections — said American diplomat Richard Holbrooke, referring to Yugoslavia in the 1990s — *that is the dilemma* (Zakaria, 2017). Holbrooke's statement is not limited to the former Yugoslavia but remains highly relevant in many contemporary states. As discussed earlier, the global push for democratization, even in historically repressive countries, such as those within the Islamic world, can sometimes lead to the legitimization of regimes that actively undermine democratic principles. Across the world, democratically elected governments — often re-elected multiple times or reaffirmed through referenda — are systematically violating constitutional limits on their power, stripping citizens of fundamental rights, and eroding the very foundations of liberal democracy. Many scholars have examined this phenomenon, and Fareed Zakaria provides one of the most in-depth analyses. Building on the concept of illiberal democracy already discussed in this article, he extensively explores hybrid regimes — those that maintain electoral processes while simultaneously dismantling the rule of law and institutional checks and balances (Zakaria, 2017: p.21-22).

Although these regimes continue to conduct electoral processes, they disregard essential components of liberal democracy, such as the rule of law, the separation of powers, and the protection of fundamental rights and freedoms, often referred to as “constitutional liberalism”. The severance of constitutional liberalism from democracy paves the way for authoritarian rule, as leaders who secure electoral victories proceed to dismantle the very institutions meant to restrain them. Democracy may still appear to thrive, but without the freedoms that it is meant to guarantee. Throughout history, elections have facilitated the rise of dictatorial regimes, exacerbated socio-political conflicts, deepened economic crises, and heightened ethnic tensions. In some countries, where elections have not been held at all, introducing them, as Zakaria suggests, would not necessarily lead to democratic progress. Instead, the result might be the

empowerment of even more intolerant, reactionary, anti-Western, and antisemitic regimes than the autocratic rulers currently in place (Zakaria, 2017: p.21).

Zakaria identifies these dysfunctions primarily in the Arab world and less developed nations, particularly those of the so-called "Global South," where fragile democracies face severe structural challenges. However, new democracies in Europe confront a different but equally formidable threat: the rise of *facade democracy*, which breeds disillusionment, chaos, and, ultimately, a new, often unnamed, form of tyranny. Yet, as Zakaria argues, the response to these challenges cannot be the abandonment of elections. Instead, it must involve a deeper inquiry into the root causes of democratic decay and strategies to counteract it. This discussion inevitably returns to Joseph Schumpeter's conceptualization of democracy as primarily an electoral process. This concern aligns with Samuel Huntington's argument that democracy is best understood in procedural terms. According to Huntington, political systems can be classified as democratic to the extent that their primary decision-makers are chosen through free, fair, and regular elections, in which candidates compete openly and all adult citizens can participate (Huntington, 1995: p17).

Huntington's definition frames elections — provided they are conducted openly, fairly, and equitably — as the *sine qua non* of democracy. He even argues that: *governments formed through elections may be ineffective, corrupt, short-sighted, irresponsible, dominated by interest groups and incapable of adopting policies necessary for the public good. These features may make such governments undesirable, but they do not make them undemocratic* (Huntington, 1995: p.20). This approach to democracy encompasses two key components: competition and participation, both of which imply the existence of civil liberties and political freedoms, such as freedom of speech, press, assembly, and association, that are essential for political debate and electoral campaigns. According to Robert Dahl, this definition makes it possible to isolate the indicators necessary to evaluate a political system (Dahl, 1971: 1-10). Following Huntington's logic, if a country holds multiparty elections, it is often classified as democratic. To a large extent, this approach appears justified: if the term "democratic" were restricted solely to countries that guarantee a specific set of civil, political, economic, and religious rights — each of which is interpreted differently by various observers — the concept of democracy would risk losing its meaning. As Fareed Zakaria argues, assigning the term a subjective value judgment, equating it with a "good" political system, renders it analytically useless. Hence, the procedural definition of democracy is proposed, establishing the existence of electoral processes as an indisputable foundation of a democratic system. But is this truly sufficient?

The contemporary understanding of democracy, often reduced to the concept of majority rule established through regular universal elections, is widely accepted both in the media and in Polish academic discourse (Szymanek, 2013; p. 24; Szymanek, 2005). In this view, democracy is a system in which political power is delegated through elections, with decision-making ultimately concentrated in the hands of the electoral majority. However, democracy cannot be reduced solely to majority rule. The assumption that the mere existence of a recurring electoral process, through which leaders are selected, automatically qualifies a state as a genuine, consolidated democracy has proven to be deeply misleading. While elections are crucial, they are neither a

necessary nor an adequate condition for classifying a political system as democratic. Liberal constitutionalism is not about *how* power is acquired, but about *how* it is exercised.

This reduction of democracy to the mere act of casting votes also provides a new framework for describing hybrid regimes, a category I examine in my doctoral research under the term electoral majoritarianism. As discussed earlier in this text, this system is characterized by a ruling majority that, having secured electoral legitimacy, grants itself the authority to implement policies that may directly undermine democratic principles. Under the guise of a popular mandate, electoral majoritarianism enables governments to erode judicial independence, silence opposition, and weaken institutional checks and balances, all while maintaining the outward appearance of democracy. In such regimes, democracy ceases to function as a mechanism for protecting pluralism and fundamental rights and instead becomes a tool for consolidating power. Governments operating under this system invoke electoral legitimacy, the authority of the ballot box — that is, they justify their actions solely through electoral victories — allowing them to undermine fundamental rights and freedoms. As a result, democracy is reduced to a mere façade, upheld not by genuine pluralism but by the procedural repetition of elections. Electoral majoritarianism refers to a situation in which political parties or candidates who win a majority in democratic elections subsequently disregard the core principles and institutions of democracy. While the electoral process itself may formally adhere to democratic standards, in practice, the ruling majority often restricts civil liberties, manipulates the media, exerts control over the judiciary, and suppresses political opposition. By citing their electoral victory, those in power claim a mandate to override legal safeguards, ignore checks and balances, and erode the fundamental tenets of democratic governance (Levitsky, Way, 2002; Miller, 2017; Seeberg, 2018; Gandhi, Lust, 2009).

Thus, what emerges is a democracy in name only — a system in which the majority's will is used as a tool to centralize power, marginalize opponents, and gradually strip citizens of their rights and freedoms. As a result, electoral majoritarianism can lead to the steady deterioration of democratic institutions, transforming states into hybrid regimes or even autocracies, where a single party or leader monopolizes control over the political system. This phenomenon underscores the critical flaw in equating democracy solely with electoral legitimacy. The mere fact of securing a majority in elections does not guarantee political pluralism, rule of law, or the protection of minority rights — elements essential to a functioning democracy. Academic literature and reports from international organizations such as Freedom House and Amnesty International have extensively analyzed this issue, highlighting how reducing democracy to elections alone facilitates democratic backsliding and the erosion of political freedoms.

Democracy, particularly in its liberal form, which is intrinsically linked to the above-mentioned concept, promises that power will ultimately rest in the hands of the people. But who are these people, and how will they serve their country and society? As history has shown, even fascist leaders have often come to power through democratic elections, only for their commitment to freedom to end the moment they assumed office. Their professed dedication to liberty, which encompasses both electoral rights and the broader principles of liberal democracy, was, in reality, a commitment to restricting

freedoms and enacting laws that often served only the particularistic interests of the regime.

This phenomenon is evident not only in the experiences of communist-era Central and Eastern Europe but also in 20th-century totalitarian regimes. Adolf Hitler, for example, became Chancellor of Germany through an electoral process despite his open hostility toward parliamentary democracy. In *Mein Kampf*, he contrasted it with what he called "true German democracy" — a system in which the people freely elected a leader who, in turn, would assume absolute power and total responsibility for all decisions. In reality, he was describing an autocratic, one-man rule, in which democratic elections merely served as a tool for legitimizing dictatorship (Stanley, 2018: p.127-131; Mees, 2008, p. 112-113). This was somewhat a blueprint for dictatorship, concealed behind the veneer of democratic legitimacy. The ideals of liberal democracy, including the electoral process, were reduced to mere tools for subverting democratic governance. The logic of democracy was reversed: instead of elections serving to hold leaders accountable, they became instruments of authoritarian control — where it was not the politicians being judged, but society itself (Treisman, Guriev, 2022).

This illustrates a critical point: democracy cannot survive if its core elements are eroded. A system where citizens make decisions collectively must also ensure that the powerful cannot oppress the weak. A system that protects minority rights and guarantees free political expression enables people to hold leaders accountable. Without these safeguards, democracy risks degenerating into the *tyranny of the majority.* Conversely, rights without democratic participation risk creating an elite-dominated system in which ordinary citizens are excluded from decision-making. Ensuring the coexistence of liberalism and democracy is essential to safeguarding both. There is legitimate concern that liberal democracy cannot endure if either element is abandoned. A system where the people hold power prevents elites from overriding the rights of the less privileged, just as a system that guarantees individual rights, a free press, and institutional checks ensures that elections remain genuinely competitive and fair. In this sense, democracy and liberalism are deeply interdependent. However, their mutual reliance does not guarantee stability. In fact, the fragile balance between the two means that dysfunction in one can quickly destabilize the other.

Democracy without rights risks descending into the tyranny of the majority, a danger long feared by constitutional framers. Conversely, a system that upholds rights but lacks democratic accountability can easily become dominated by economic elites and technocrats, who, over time, may seek to further limit public influence in governance. *This slow divergence of liberalism and democracy may be exactly what is now happening* — explains Mounk — *and the consequences are likely to be just as bad as one would predict* (Mounk, 2018: p.6).

The contemporary fear of anti-liberal leaders gaining power does not stem from an imminent threat of totalitarian rule, as in Nazi Germany or Soviet Russia. Rather, it lies in the systematic dismantling of democratic principles by modern populists. These leaders exploit the mechanisms of parliamentary democracy to secure electoral legitimacy, only to erode democracy from within. As Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt argue, most modern attempts to dismantle democracy occur through legitimate means — approved by legislatures, upheld by courts, and often presented as necessary reforms.

Many government efforts to subvert democracy are "legal," in the sense that they are approved by the legislature or accepted by the courts. They may even be portrayed as efforts to improve democracy — making the judiciary more efficient, combating corruption, or cleaning up the electoral process. Newspapers still publish but are bought off or bullied into self-censorship. Citizens continue to criticize the government but often find themselves facing tax or other legal troubles. This sows public confusion. People do not immediately realize what is happening. Many continue to believe they are living under a democracy (Levitsky, Ziblatt, 2018: p.11). Because there is no single moment *— no coup, declaration of martial law, or suspension of the constitution —* in which the regime obviously "crosses the line" into dictatorship, nothing may set off society's alarm bells. These changes, initially subtle, may go unnoticed until it is too late. Democracies around the world have often facilitated the rise of authoritarian figures by failing to notice early warning signs.

Recognizing these seemingly subtle phenomena can help identify potential autocrats before they come to power. In practice, however, this proves difficult. Many democracies currently in crisis have, in a way, left the door ajar, allowing aspiring autocrats to step through. As Levitsky and Ziblatt point out, even departing democratic leaders have often played a role in this process — such was the case with Hitler, Mussolini, and Chávez in the years preceding their rise to power. Despite significant differences between these leaders, their paths to power followed a strikingly similar pattern. Each of them rose to prominence due to the failure of establishment politicians to recognize crucial warning signs—either by handing over power directly (as in the case of Hitler and Mussolini) or by paving the way for their rise (Chàvez) (Levitsky, Ziblatt, 2018: p.21). Once in office, despite vastly different national contexts, all three employed remarkably similar strategies to dismantle democratic institutions and consolidate authoritarian rule.

Levitsky and Ziblatt highlight historical examples of democratic leaders unwittingly opening the door to autocrats, whether by directly transferring power, as in the cases of Hitler and Mussolini, or by creating political conditions that enabled their rise, as with Hugo Chávez. Despite differing national contexts, these leaders followed strikingly similar trajectories: capitalizing on democratic mechanisms to undermine democracy itself. When an authoritarian leader assumes power through democratic elections, the fate of democracy hangs in the balance. Demagogues and populists can emerge in any democracy, yet multiple factors determine whether, and how quickly, they are identified and ultimately removed from power. In some cases, this never happens; in others, authoritarian tendencies only become evident too late, after the leader has already consolidated control (Linz, 1978). Such was the case with above-mentioned Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and his party, Fidesz. In the late 1980s, at the outset of his political career, Orbán appeared to be a liberal democrat. Even during his first tenure as Prime Minister (1998–2002), he governed within the framework of democratic norms. However, his authoritarian turn — which took both Hungarian society and the international community by surprise — occurred only after his return to power in 2010, marking a fundamental shift toward autocratic governance. This demonstrates why electoral majoritarianism is one of the most insidious threats to modern democracy — not because it abolishes elections, but because it hijacks them. Unlike past dictators,

contemporary authoritarian leaders understand that democracy itself can serve as their greatest alibi.

Conclusion: protecting democracy from its own mechanisms

The evident exhaustion of the liberal democratic model has led to the emergence of above-mentioned “hollow states” — political entities that outwardly resemble the systems we once recognized but have fundamentally transformed. Kim Lane Scheppele introduces the concept of the *Frankenstate* to describe this phenomenon. She argues that contemporary illiberal politicians no longer orchestrate dramatic coups, making their actions harder to confront with unequivocal criticism. Instead, through a series of seemingly legal maneuvers — often legitimized, including through elections — they construct a *Frankenstate*: a regime composed of ostensibly democratic elements that, in reality, is neither truly democratic nor committed to the rule of law (Scheppele 2013). Modern authoritarianism thus presents itself in a deceptive guise, positioning states in a gray zone between governance models — not yet outright autocracies, but no longer functioning democracies.

Safeguarding democracy requires more than preserving its outward form — it demands a commitment to its core principles: pluralism, institutional checks and balances, and the protection of fundamental rights. The rise of electoral majoritarianism highlights a dangerous paradox: when electoral victories are treated as an unrestricted mandate, democracy itself becomes a tool for its own erosion. A system where leaders claim legitimacy solely through the ballot box — while dismantling judicial independence, suppressing opposition, and weakening the rule of law — ceases to function as a true democracy. History has shown that democracy does not collapse overnight; it fades through incremental distortions that, at first, may seem legally justified. This slow erosion makes it all the more insidious, as leaders present themselves as defenders of the people's will while hollowing out democratic institutions from within. The challenge, then, is not only to recognize these threats but to resist the normalization of majoritarian rule unchecked by liberal constraints. As scholars like Cas Mudde, Fareed Zakaria, and Yascha Mounk and many more, remind us, democracy’s survival hinges on more than the periodic act of voting. It requires an informed and engaged citizenry, a vibrant civil society, and institutions capable of resisting executive overreach. In an era where democratic backsliding is increasingly subtle, disguised in the rhetoric of reform and popular mandate, safeguarding democracy demands renewed vigilance.

True democracy is not just about winning elections — it is about governing with restraint, accountability, and respect for the rights of all citizens, not just the majority. Without these safeguards, democracy risks devolving into an empty procedural exercise, where electoral legitimacy is weaponized to justify authoritarian consolidation. Preventing this requires constant vigilance, institutional resilience, and an engaged civil society willing to defend democracy beyond the ballot box. If democracy is to endure, it must be protected from those who seek to use its mechanisms to dismantle its essence. The future of democratic governance depends on ensuring that elections remain not just a means of choosing leaders, but a guarantee of pluralism, justice, and shared power — not a license for dominance.

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PERIODS OF ROMANIAN CONSTITUTIONAL LAW - WITH REGARD TO THE RIGHT TO VOTE

CZU: 342.821(498)
https://doi.org/10.59295/eiqd.16

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Abstract. *The development of constitutional law in Romania is based on fundamentally different foundations compared to those of Western European states, primarily due to the delayed formation of the state, despite the fact that it has essentially adopted foreign models for its state organisation and legal system. The Romanian state was a constitutional monarchy at its inception, with limited constitutionalism, before turning into an open royal dictatorship in 1938 and then a military dictatorship in 1940. After the Second World War, Romania returned to constitutionalism nominally, however as consequence of the Soviet occupation, the Soviet political, economic and constitutional system was adopted, leading to the necessary abandonment of former constitutionalism. Consequently, between 1948 and 1989 - and 1991 de jure - Romania lived in an era of de facto unconstitutional constitutions. In the case of Romania, therefore, effective constitutionalism has been established after 1991, when the Constitution of 1991with the adoption of the current Constitution. The lessons of this historical process carry messages that are still relevant today. It is therefore particularly important to look at the right to vote in the above sense in terms of constitutionally defined state objectives and policies. Indeed, until the introduction of universal suffrage, the constitutional ends of the state did not necessarily embody the will of the people, but the will of the ruling elite as laid down in the constitutions. This is why an overview of the development of the constitutional journey to genuine popular sovereignty is remains significant today.*

Keywords*: Romania, Constitution, constitutionalism, suffrage, law history*

Introductory thoughts

International law does not require any further criteria of statehood beyond the three basic conditions of statehood, namely the existence of a contiguous territory, a permanently settled population and sovereign supremacy over it (Jellinek, 1959: p. 394-

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406, 427-434.). These conditions define the state from a formal, external perspective. From an internal, substantive point of view, the criterion of the modern state is provided by Section XVI of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, adopted by the Constituent Assembly of the French Revolution on 26 August 1789, which states that *"Any society in which the guarantee of rights is not assured, nor the separation of powers determined, has no Constitution."* In fact, the Declaration contains a basic model of constitutions bound to the rule of law by enshrining the principle of equality, based primarily on Sections I and VI. (Ionescu, 2019: p. 313-316.). In addition to and based on these, Section III defined the basis of the power of the State in the proposition of popular sovereignty, finally replacing the previous exercise of power based on divine legitimation. Taken together, these propositions have become the basis of international law and an international constraint on domestic state legislation (Szabó, 2015: p. 189.). Popular sovereignty is the guarantee of proportional participatory rights, i.e. the stabilizing factor of the state through elections (Rousseau, 2001: p. 59., 84-85.), leading to the embodiment of equality of rights in legislation, whereby power is subject to law (Dissescu, 1915: p. 166-176.). To put it another way, from the point of view of popular sovereignty, without universal, equal, direct and secret suffrage, popular will and popular sovereignty cannot prevail. If any of the above elements of suffrage are missing, it is not a case of popular sovereignty, but of group rule.

Modern constitutions are expected to lift the constitution out of the realm of ordinary law, and to reflect the Montesquieuian principle of separation of powers (Bolovan, 1998: p. 3.) in the organisation of the state. At the heart of this state organisation is the question of the legislature and the right to vote, based on the equality of rights that underpins it. Consequently, one element of the question of substantive constitutionality is the structure of the legislature.

By exploring and examining the relationship between the past and the law, and the causal links between them, the history of law (Horváth, 1997: p. 13-16.) provides a historical perspective that helps explore and understand the foundations of existing legal institutions. The results of legal history can serve as a legislative starting point for defining the political and legal framework of law in the present in the context of historical lessons (Szabó, 2015: p. 223-226.). Consequently, the constitutional legacy of a state is not a closed legacy of the past, but rather an evolving influence. Constitutional history is an institution that influences the constitutional arrangements and legislation of a state and is open to the future because of changing circumstances (van Caenegem, 2008: p. 50-55, 401-405.). It is in this context that the roots and development of the main basic institutions of substantive constitutionalism, including the main elements of the question of legislation and suffrage, can be sketched.

The constitutional history of the modern Romanian state

The development of constitutional law in Romania (Ionescu, 2019: p. 693-704.) differs from that in Western European countries because of the delayed state formation. The principalities, which were established in the 14th century without a classical system of Estates (Murzea-Matefi, 2015: p. 41-44.), were initially under Hungarian and Polish vassalage (Durandin, 1998: 44-48.). This dependence was soon replaced by the sovereignty and then suzerenity of the Ottoman Empire (Matei, 1980: p. 465-468.). The

combined effects of the crisis of the Ottoman Empire and the Romanian national awakening, with the support of the European powers, led to the unification of the lands of the Wallachia and Moldova from the mid-nineteenth century. After the unification, Romania, which then gained its independence with written constitutions, essentially adopted foreign models for its state organisation and legal system (Guţan, 2022: p. 109-117.), despite the fact that there had been earlier attempts at constitutionalisation in both principalities (Vlad, 2002: p. 14-52.).

Despite the promulgation of the Constitution of 1866, the Romanian state faced serious shortcomings in the substance of its constitutionalism (Selejan-Guţan, 2020: p. 57-59.). Although Romania was a constitutional monarchy (Firoiu, 1992: p. 205-221, 284-297.), this constitutionalism was limited and transformed into an open royal dictatorship in 1938 (Bădescu, 2021: p. 43.), and later into a military dictatorship in 1940 (Focşeneanu, 2018: p. 115-128.). *Consequently, Romania was in an era of limited constitutionalism from its creation until 1938*. The dominant feature of this period was the pursuit of nation-state values and Romanian irredentism, which, once successfully achieved, prioritized to the state's goal of establishing Romanian national supremacy (Guţan, 2022: p. 115-120.). However, the momentum of this state policy was interrupted after the initial results had been achieved. The external cause was the collapse of the peace system at the end of the First World War, while the internal cause was a series of integration failures, which together fractured the Romanian state framework, dismantled limited constitutionalism and resulted in significant territorial losses.

The above processes led to a constitutional paradox, represented by the royal dictatorship and its constitution introduced in 1938 (Focşeneanu, 2018: p. 106-114.). *This period was an era of apparent constitutionalism*: the royal dictatorship had a formal constitution, but by its very nature it could not have any constitutionalism in the substantive sense (Selejan-Guţan, 2020: p. 59.). In less than two years, the royal dictatorship's system of government was also a complete failure. In addition to the internal tensions of the state, the reasons for this can be found in the challenges of foreign policy, especially the territorial losses suffered in 1940 the Soviet Union, Hungary and Bulgaria, which ended the period with the suspension of the 1938 Romanian Constitution (Ionescu, 2019: p. 749-750.). Romania then began to build a total state without a constitution, even without a constitution in principle, with the appointment of Ion Antonescu as *conducător* on 5 September 1940 (Drăganu, 1998: p. 382-383.).

As a result of a guiding principle based on the logic of faith in a more glorious future and national unity for a nation that had suffered humiliation and crisis due to significant territorial losses, Ion Antonescu became a legislator and a national leader, in charge of the state's organisation of violence. *Between 5 September 1940 and 23 August 1944, totalitarian Romania lived in an era of unconstitutionality* (Selejan-Guţan, 2020: p. 59.) in both formal and substantive terms (Firoiu, 1992: p. 347-348.). Romania, which entered the Second World War in an attempt to compensate for and restore these losses, initially made significant advances on the Eastern front, but by the summer of 1944 its participation in the war had become untenable. Despite Ion Antonescu's unwavering insistence on German alliance, the moves of the historical parties and the royal court to prepare the way for Romania's withdrawal from the war, which had been launched in

secret, towards the Allied, led to the successful transition of Romania to the Allied side on 23 August 1944. (Focşeneanu, 2018: p. 129-130.)

Following the arrest of the *conducător,* Romania returned in principle to the path of constitutionalism, but this step could only mean limited constitutionalism at best. Formally and constitutionally questionable, the 1923 Constitution - already repealed by the 1938 Constitution - was restored (Firoiu, 1992: p. 366-376.), but the last waves of the war and the fact of the Soviet occupation also substantially impeded the exercise of this limited constitutionality (Focşeneanu, 2018: p. 129-146.). The left-wing organisations, strengthened and supported by the occupying Soviets, increasingly took the initiative in domestic politics, completely eclipsing the traditional historical parties (Durandin, 1998: p. 337-343.). The traditional elite and royal Romania came under mounting Soviet pressure, which, especially with the uncertainty over Transylvania, aimed to create the constitutional basis for a communist takeover, and ultimately succeeded (Focşeneanu, 2018: p. 147-155.).

As a consequence of the Second World War, the countries of Eastern Europe, including Romania, came under the military occupation of the Soviet Union, and as a result, the Soviet political, economic and constitutional system was adopted in these countries within a short period of time under Stalinist pressure (van Caenegem, 2008: p. 356-361.). This fact obviously meant the rejection of the former constitutionalism (Guţan, 2022: p. 109-120.). The essential starting point of Soviet-style constitutions was the utopian class-based view of society of communist ideology, which proclaimed the denial and extinction of law (Focşeneanu, 2018: p. 12-14.). The characteristic feature of these constitutions was the construction and operation of a totalitarian state (Dănișor, 2006: p. 62-63.). Consequently, Soviet-style constitutionalism could not really be regarded as true constitutionalism in a substantive sense (van Caenegem, 2008: p. 264, 359.), it was in fact a totalitarian state, a communist dictatorship (Selejan-Guţan, 2020: p. 105-110.). *Consequently, Romania lived de facto from 1948 to 1989 - de iure 1991* (Bădescu, 2021: p. 50.) - *in an era of unconstitutional constitutions.*

As mentioned above, in the case of Romania, constitutionality can only be considered in the framework that has been in place since 1991, when the Constitution in force was adopted (Guţan, 2022: p. 122-125.).

Question of Romanian statehood and the states inhabited by Romanians

The development of the Romanian state during the Middle Ages took place in several state formations (Firoiu, 1992: p. 51-133.) and inevitably led to irredentism, a program of state unification, which Romanian literature dates back to the 14th and 15th centuries (Marcu, 1997: p. 141-142.), and marking its first fulfilment during the reign of Mihai Viteazul (Drăganu, 1998: p. 129-130.).

In the traditional Romanian approach, the Romanian nation primarily existed in three considered Romanian states: Transylvania, the Wallachia and Moldova, with that note Bukovina, which belonged to Austria and originally to Moldova, as well as the Romanian-speaking linguistic islands in Istria, the Balkans and Russia, have not been sufficiently emphasised in Romanian public thought or in constitutional history research (Firoiu, 1992: p. 145-146., 203-204., 279-281.). The constitutional foundations of these states were different, but the birth of the linguistically based concept of the nation in the

19th century led naturally to a nation-state programme that set the unity of these states as its goal, indicating the constitutional choice of values for the nation-state (Guţan, 2022: p. 109-117.). The Romanian nation-state was thus both nationalist and irredentist; it included a programme for the creation of an independent and unified modern Romanian nation-state based on equal rights, and the need and goal of the unification of all Romanian nationalities (Focşeneanu, 2018: p. 21-23.). The programme and goal developed in the three states as follows:

The constitutional structure of Transylvania was based on the union of the three political nations as Estates - the *Unio Trium Nationum* - on the basis of the Union of Kápolna of 1437: the German-speaking Saxon, the predominantly, but not exclusively Hungarian-speaking Hungarian and the Hungarian-speaking Székely Estates (Timon, 1903: p. 692-711.). *The Estate based political nations cannot be identified and equated with the modern concept of nations*, such identification is an anachronism and, in this form, leads to serious interpretative problems. *Estate poltical nations were privileged social classes and not understood in linguistic terms.* Therefore, a significant number of Romanian-speaking individuals were integrated into the Hungarian political nation, i.e. the Hungarian nobility in Transylvania and Hungary, over the centuries (Şotropa, 1980: p. 476.), who were not excluded from the enjoyment of political rights, although their numbers were undoubtedly smaller. The members of the political nations held political rights as equal members of an Estate, enjoying rights regardless of their mother tongue (szabó, 1848: p. 60-61.). For this reason, the recognition of a Romanian nation, understood on the basis of language, was not and could not be granted, because it would have fundamentally upset the delicate balance of order constitutional rights that had been established over centuries. For this reason, the Romanian nation as separate Estate did not and could not gain support from the other political order nations or from the imperial court.

In Hungary and Transylvania in 1848, the basic legislative position, which had been gradually evolving for more than five decades, was that the rights of the Hungarian nation, i.e. the nobility (Timon, 1903: p. 552-554.), should be extended to the people excluded from political rights by abolishing feudal privileges (Eckhart, 1935: p. 242-244.). Thus, the extension of rights necessarily implied uplifting the population living under the hitherto restricted rights, including the Hungarian and non-Hungarian-speaking population, which was not considered as the Hungarian nobility, and the essence of the extension was precisely the realisation of this thesis and political programme (Szemere, 1941: p. 39.). The fundamental laws of April 1848 were based on the principle of equality of rights and were also enacted in Transylvania, on the basis of which the Hungarian legislature extended the political rights of the Hungarian nation of the Estate to the widest possible extent to the population of the country, irrespective of language or nationality (Cheresteşiu, 1964: p. 4-6.). The last Diet of the Estates wished to create a modern Hungary as a state, understood together with Transylvania, on the above-mentioned basis, abolishing the feudalist Estate system (Schlett, 2009: p. 655-670.) in the belief and hope that equality of rights would eliminate national antagonisms and foster unconditional loyalty to the state among nationalities (Miskolczy, 2004: p. 221-222.).

These changes had a profound impact on the Transylvanian Romanian community, which had been a numerical majority in the separate Transylvanian state but

had become a minority in the new Kingdom of Hungary. The Transylvanian Romanians, on the basis of their political programme adopted at the Blaj Assembly of 15 May 1848, regardless of the new liberal constitutional order, continued to demand their privileges and recognition as a nation (Ionescu, 2019: p. 715.) on the basis of the Estate, which had by then already been superseded, and then openly opposed the union with Hungary (Bolovan, 2016: p. 415-416.).After the defeat of the Hungarian War of Independence, these demands were finally recognized by law at the last Transylvanian Diet in Sibiu in 1863, when the official languages of the Principality of Transylvania were introduced, German and Romanian, in addition to Hungarian, and the Romanian nation's claims for equal rights and recognition were also fulfilled, with the exception of the Romanian national autonomous territory (Firoiu, 1992: p. 259-261.). The statehood of Transylvania was finally abolished by the Austro-Hungarian Compromise, from which time the Romanian ethnic group of Transylvania could live within the new state framework of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy as a great power.

In Hungary, which included Transylvania, the Act XLIV of 1868 on equality of nationalities was soon adopted as part of the historical constitution on the concept of Hungarian political nation as community of all citizens of the kingdom. The constitution recognised the linguistic fragmentation of the state (Nagy, 1907: p. 157-159.), the *de facto* multi-ethnic Hungarian state, and created the constitutional framework for a state based on the dichotomy of majority-minority (Bethlendi-Szeredai, 2018: p. 142.). Under the law, the Hungarian state language was placed at the centre, while at the same time the linguistic regulation, which was chiselled for reasons of linguistic diversity, sought to establish equality of nationality and citizenship and thus to create a common Hungarian, or more precisely, a Kingdom of Hungary citizen's identity. Despite this, the Transylvanian Romanian community rejected Hungarian liberal policies outright, identified modernisation with the notion of a unified Hungarian political nation, with rapid assimilation and thus with the creation of Hungarian supremacy (Xenopol, 1999: p. XIX-XX.), and perceived anti-Romanian intentions in all the actions of the Hungarian state (Xenopol, 1999: p. 16.).

The constitutional revolution of 1848 abolished the right to vote and created a new electoral system with Act V of 1848. The law did not impose any linguistic conditions for active suffrage, and required Hungarian language proficiency as a condition for passive suffrage only because of the Hungarian language of the legislature, and basically applied property censuses (Romsics, 2017: p. 334.). In what was considered by the law to be a wide proportion of the population at the time, 7-9% of the total population won the right to vote (Cheresteşiu, 1964: p. 5.), but it is an undeniable fact that the sociological limitations of the property censuses meant that the number of national minority representatives did not reflect the proportions of the population (Marcu, 1997: p. 194.).

Regarding the Transylvanian perspective of the processes leading to the creation of the modern Romanian state, it should be noted that during the dualism, political parties of nationalities, including Romanians, were formed (Bolovan, 2016: p. 436-438.). Initially, nationalist parties were based on passivity in domestic politics (Amuza, 2001: p. 257-262.), and soon afterwards they sought to achieve their national goals through the direct or indirect influence of their newly established nation-states bordering Hungary,

which inevitably increased national intolerance (Bíró, 2002: p. 77.). Passivity was abandoned by the Romanian minority with the formation of the united Romanian National Party in 1881 (Bolovan, 1996: p. 439.). From that time onwards, the Romanian National Party's political activity varied in intensity, rejecting the concept of a Hungarian political nation and advocating an equal alliance of the nations of Hungary, mainly for the autonomy of Transylvania, and indirectly for the purposes of Romanian irredentism (Durandin, 1998: p. 196-197.). However, it is a paradox that, although the nationalities considered and rejected the Act XLIV of 1868 as an octroi (Ciato, 1929: p. 14.) and as a means of eroding their nationality (Marcu, 1997: p. 194.), they preserved and developed their identity primarily through their ecclesiastical self-governments and economic, educational and cultural institutions (Bolovan, 2016: p. 533-569.).

Simultaneously with the emergence of the idea of the nation-state, and in accordance with its original purpose, the process of the transformation of the principalities of Wallachia and Moldavia into a single state began. As a first step, the Treaty of Adrianople of 14 September 1829 granted autonomy to the Principalities under Russian protectorate (Murzea-Matefi, 2015: p. 84-85.), and the so-called Organic Regulations, *Regulamentul Organic* (Ionescu, 2019: p. 709-713.), were established, which entered into force in 1831 in Moldova and in 1832 in Wallachia (Carp, 2002: p. 160.). The Organic Regulations set both Principalities on the path of constitutionalism and modernisation (Guţan, 2022: p. 109-110.). The significance of the Organic Regulations can be seen in the fact that, by introducing the same institutions at the same time, and by making the social structures of the two principalities essentially identical, they actually anticipated their unification into a single state (Bolovan, 1998: p. 47.). The events of 1848 in Moldavia and the Wallachia (Bolova, 1998: p. 48-50.) - along with several attempts at constitutionalism (Ionescu, 2019: p. 550-554, 704-708.), especially the *Proclamația de la Islaz* (Bădescu, 2021: p. 34-36.) - could have focused on the actual programme of unification of the Romanian states, which were meant to be part of the Transylvanian state, into one state (Guţan, 2022: p. 109-117.). This state goal, which included all three state entities, thus became, beyond the achievement of independence, the most prominent political objective of the following decades.

Following the Crimean War, Russian protectorate was replaced by a great power protectorate under the terms of the Treaty of Paris signed on 30 March 1856 (Dissescu, 1915: p. 364-365.). The Great Powers, under the direct influence of the Treaty of Paris, soon succeeded in their efforts to unite the two countries and the Constitutional Convention signed on 7 August 1858 at the Congress of Paris paved the way for the creation of a unified Romanian state as the *de facto* constitution of the soon-to-be united principalities (Dissescu, 1915: p. 366-368.).

The final step of the unification of the two Romanian principalities was the election of Alexandru Ioan Cuza as the Prince of Moldavia in Iași from 5 to 17 January 1859 and of the Prince of Wallachia in Bucharest between 24 January and 5 February 1859, which led to the creation of the United Principality of Wallachia and Moldova through a personal union followed by a real union, through a personal union, followed by a real union (Bădescu, 2021: p. 94.). In the new state - which officially named Romania in 1862 - the language issue, which was one of the main factors of nationalism, did not arise at that time due to the essentially homogeneous social conditions (Ionescu,

2019: p. 803-804.), and the modern unitary nation-state was taken for granted as the focus of legislative value choices (Selejan-Guţan, 2020: p. 78-79.). On this constitutional basis - and in accordance with the original programme of nationalism - Romania soon modernized and unified its legal system (Bolovan, 1998: p. 59-65.) primarily by adopting mainly French and Italian models.

Of all the legislative issues, the most significant was undoubtedly the constitution, which was at the top of the legal hierarchy. The first Romanian constitution of 1866 (Selejan-Guţan, 2020: p. 53-57.) - based on the Belgian constitution adopted on 7 February 1831(van Caenegem, 2008: p. 319-329.) and incorporating its unitary state organization (Guţan, 2022: p. 114-117.) - was in line with the social reality of the time (Ionescu, 2019: p. 803-804.). The state order based on the Belgian Constitution set Romania on the path of modern European state development, and despite the fact that the construction of a state organisation based on foreign models and patterns suffered in many cases from real substantive shortcomings (Ionescu, 2019: p. 720.), the creation and success of the independent Romanian nation-state induced by the national idea was fuelled by nationalism, so that the productive side of the idea and its successes cannot be fundamentally disputed.

In this period, suffrage was first regulated by the Electoral Law of 1864, which served as a means of consolidating the power of Alexandru Ioan Cuza as head of state (Bolovan, 1998: 61-62.). The law set up a rather differentiated system based on the wealth censuses common at the time, with voting being secret and based on an absolute majority. The Electoral Law Act of 1866 clarified the electoral provisions outlined in the Constitution of 1866 and remained in force until the adoption of the Electoral Law Act of 9 June 1884, later amended several times (Dissescu, 1915: p. 730-732, 873.). The Act also applied different censuses, setting up an indirect electoral system for the bicameral legislature, where it also granted senatorial seats to the heir to the throne, church leaders and universities on the basis of office or dignity. The differentiated and censorial logic of the electoral system did not change substantially after 1884, despite the clarifications (Dissescu, 1915: p. 732-771.). According to the Romanian electoral law of the time, the number of voters had risen from a few thousand at the beginning of Alexandru Ioan Cuza's reign to tens of thousands by 1866, but even in 1913 only 1.9 per cent of the population had direct suffrage, while 15.7 per cent of the population had indirect suffrage (Pantelimon, 2009: p. 112.).

The next stage in the historical development of the Romanian state was the achievement of independence as a result of the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-1878, recognised by the Congress of Berlin in 1878 and the Treaty of Berlin adopted there (Focşeneanu, 2018: p. 45-47.). Prince Charles of Hohenzollern-Sigmaringen - elected after the dethronement of Alexandru Ioan Cuza in 1866 (Focşeneanu, 2018: p. 35-36.) - assumed the title of King in 1881 and the Kingdom of Romania was established (Murzea-Matefi, 2015: p. 91-93.).

Considering the fact that independent Romania at that time was far from encompassing the whole of Romania's national regions, the justified nation-state basis necessarily embraced and incorporated an irredentist state purpose. According to the above-quoted basic thesis of the political programme, the lands of the Wallachian Basin, Moldova and Transylvania are in fact Romanian states, and the (re)creation of the unity

of these states is a historical necessity (Boia, 1999: p. 14-28.). However, the Kingdom of Romania, as a neighbour of the Great Powers, had only limited capacity to achieve this goal (Murzea-Matefi, 2015: p. 134-142.) until the First World War.

At the outbreak of the First World War, Romania, as a member of the Triple Alliance, was allied with the very state with which it had the greatest territorial claims, while it did not undertake a war against Russia, despite its territorial claims in Bessarabia and its alliance obligations. From 1914, Romania thus adopted a position of withdrawal (Focşeneanu, 2018: p. 63.), entering the war on the basis of the secret political and military agreements of 17 August 1916 in Bucharest (Vesa, 2016: p. 471.). The collapse of the Central Powers in the autumn of 1918 opened up the possibility of achieving the goal of a state (Bolovan, 1998: p. 75-78.). The changes resulting from these events were legally recognized by the peace treaties around Paris. Thus, by the end of 1918, Romania had successfully used the agents of nationalism to achieve the goals of its decade-long political programme, but this success had also fundamentally altered its essentially homogeneous social structure, and thus - in principle - presented it with a real choice of constitutional values (Guţan, 2022: p. 110-111., 117-119.).

The constitutions of modern Romania and the right to vote

The first constitution of Romania, adopted before its independence, the Constitution of 1866, formally described the state organisation of a modern constitutional monarchy (Ionescu, 2019: p. 720-731.) and accordingly included the rights of Romanians on the basis of equality of rights and individual rights (Dissescu, 1915: p. 430., 440-614.). As regards the choice of values in the Constitution of 1866, it should be pointed out that the enjoyment and exercise of the rights contained therein were understood as being linked not only to citizenship but also to the Romanian quality, which was understood as a set of unspecified sacrifices (Stanomir, 2002: p. 106-108.), and other moral obligations, derived from a certain older tradition (Dissescu, 1915: p. 622-623.). All this has a special role to play in the context of the huge gap between the Constitution of 1866 and the reality of the situation during its period of application, as acknowledged by contemporaries (Selejan-Guţan, 2020: p. 90-95.). Elements of this were the predominance of the sovereign power (Selejan-Guţan, 2020: p. 57-59.) resulting in the existence of parliamentary majorities and governments without accountability (Drăganu, 1998: p. 368-369.), i.e. the illusion of separation of powers. All of this was partly recognized by the legislature when, in 1917, in amending the Constitution of 1866, it decided to introduce universal, equal, direct, immediate, compulsory and secret suffrage, while retaining the office of Senator for certain Senate seats (Pantelimon, 2009: p: 112.).

The limited constitutionality and the limited suffrage itself were thus a key issue in the Romanian state system from the outset, challenges that were compounded by the increased territory and the decisively changed social structure of Romania as a result of World War I. In terms of the changed social structure, which posed serious integration challenges, the Alba Iulia Resolutions essentially contained elements (Ionescu, 2019: p. 732-735.) that could have been a value choice for the new Romanian state framework with an integrationist approach (Guţan, 2022: p. 110-111., 117-119.). In particular, point III of the Resolutions contained principles that confronted the constitutional organization

of the new Kingdom of Romania with concrete expectations (Maniu, 1925: p. 5-8.), while at the same time highlighting the substantive shortcomings and limitations of the existing Romanian constitutional order, among which the right to vote, which is direct, universal, secret, equal, independent of gender, and guaranteed to all citizens over the age of 21, should be highlighted. In response to this, there have also been *partial* legislative responses to the right to vote (Pantelimon, 2009: p. 112-113.).

The above constitutional context, the burden of internal integration challenges and international legal obligations, the changed social structure, economic and legal environment, and the combined issues of the growth of the state territory, i.e. the consequences of the Romanian national and state goals achieved in World War I, confronted Romania with the requirement to adopt a new constitution (Ionescu, 2019: p. 732-744.). The task of drafting a constitution was taken up by Ion Ionel Constantin Brătianu, the winner of the 1922 elections, and his National Liberal Party (Focşeneanu, 2018: p. 75-75.).

It was an encouraging sign for the drafting of the Constitution of 1923 that some prominent representatives of academic life and politics (Bolovan, 1998: p. 78-79.) - also preparing alternative drafts of the Constitution (Ionescu, 2019: 740-742.) - attached a special role to the new value choices, including the Alba Iulia Resolutions and the principles contained therein (Boilă, 1922: p. 383.), to the actual decentralization and the specificity of the regions (Grigorovici, 1922: p. 70-71.). However, despite the proposals and initiatives aimed at constitutionalizing the content, the majority position of Romanian politics remained unchanged in favor of the unified nation-state (Gusti, 1922: p. 2.), and thus no change was made to the original nation-state value choice during the constitution-making process (Drăganu, 1998: p. 369-374.), excluding, of course, any nuancing and change of the constitutional value choice from an integration perspective, which also stemmed from the requirements of international obligations (Guţan, 2022: p. 110-111., 117-119.). As domestic policy reasons, they refrained from changing the nation-state thesis (Brătianu, 1922: p. 27-28.) and advocated its strengthening, primarily on the basis of the lessons of the disintegration of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy (Focşeneanu, 2018: p. 82-83.) and the danger of possible minority separatism that could break up the new state framework (Guţan, 2022: p. 110-111., 117-119.). On the basis of the above starting points, in Romania, Article 1 of the Constitution of 1923 placed the unitary and indivisible state, already codified, on the basis of the nation-state (Bădescu, 2021: p. 42., 169.). The choice of values of the nation-state thus affirmed was clarified by the understanding of traditional Romanian constitutional law that the members of the nation are individuals (Budişteanu, 1928: p. 13.), all of which, as a nation, form a kind of spiritual-soul community on the spiritual basis of the consciousness of belonging (Dissescu, 1915: p. 619.). According to this conception, a nation defined as a community can be a depository of the will of the people and thus of sovereignty, it constitutes a nation-state and this nation-state results in a state of law (Gaftoescu, 1939: p. 41-43.). Accordingly, both in the 1923 Constitution and later in the 1938 Constitution, which codified the practice of the 1923 Constitution, despite the declaration of equality of rights, those who did not accept the condition of belonging to the Romanian nation were placed in a subordinate position, due to the vague content of the above constitutional concept (Guţan, 2022: p. 110-111., 117-120.). Accordingly, minorities in the new

Romania were subjected to political, economic and legal vulnerability, and the nation-building techniques promoted by Romanian state nationalism and its law made majority-minority relations and integration and social consolidation impossible (Guţan, 2022: p. 110-111., 117-119.).

On the above basis, the formally declared equality of citizens' rights has been seriously distorted in the drafting and implementation of lower-level legislation (Guţan, 2022: p. 118-119.), and in many cases has been openly unconstitutional, both in the legislature and in the central and local governments and the judiciary. This practice was also evident in later elections. In the bicameral Romanian legislature of the time, elections to the Chamber of Deputies were based on the universal, equal, direct, compulsory and secret suffrage of Romanian citizens, with the right to stand as a candidate being reserved to Romanian citizens aged 25 and over residing in Romania who were entitled to exercise their civil and political rights.

According to the Electoral Act of 1926, each county represented one voting district in the election of representatives and, according to the table of the numerical distribution of representatives by district annexed to the Act, a total of 387 representatives were elected in a system that distorted proportionality, with the party that won 40% of the total votes receiving half of the total seats as a premium (Pantelimon, 2009: p. 113-115.). The other half of the seats were distributed between the winning party and the parties that had obtained an absolute majority or at least 2% of the vote in each constituency (Alexianu, 1926: p. 421-422.). For the Senate elections, the election system was a county list system with universal, secret, equal, direct, active and direct suffrage for Romanian citizens aged 40 and over and honourable and *ex officio* senators were also appointed.

The distorted electoral system, the electoral geography of the policy of reorganising the public administration, and the abuses and violence committed during the elections meant that minorities were not represented in the legislature in proportion to their numbers during the period (Bíró, 2002: p. 445-450). In this context, there were also electoral results in which the candidate of the national minority did not win a seat in areas predominantly populated by minorities in which the electoral register and results were different from the actual minority proportions (Balázs, 2008: 30-31., 57., 69, 112-113, 133.). Even when minority representatives have won seats, they have faced constant attacks questioning their loyalty to the state. It should be noted that, as in the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, minorities formed national parties, thus there were the Hungarian National Party, the German Party and the Jewish National Party respectively (György, 2006: p. 152-154.).

The combination of these reasons led to a series of governmental crises and the radicalization of Romanian political life by the end of 1937 Romania was in a state of ungovernable (Focşeneanu, 2018: p. 97-107.). Elections called after the domestic political crisis of late 1937 saw the radical right gain strength and the ruling party defeated, but still failed to address the challenges that were tearing apart state life, and King Carol II dissolved parliament on 10 February 1938 and imposed an open royal dictatorship (Bolovan, 1998: p. 86-89.) and the establishment of an Italian-style corporative state (Firoiu, 1992: p. 327-328.) and a state of emergency . The crisis of legitimacy of the royal dictatorship inevitably called for the drafting of a new

constitution, which, however, was impossible to implement under the existing 1923 Constitution, given the dissolution of parliament and the tense domestic political situation. King Carol II thus completely disregarded the rules of constitution-making and put the text of the Constitution, drafted in less than two weeks, to an open referendum in the name of the nation, and then, referring to the results of the referendum held on 25-26 February 1938 (Focşeneanu, 2018: p. 108-110.) , proclaimed it on 27 February 1938 (Bădescu, 2021: p. 23., 43.).

The most significant innovation of the 1938 Constitution (Tănase, 1994: p. 278-284.) was the explicit departure from the previously codified principle of equality of rights for citizens, by recognising the priority right of the members of the Romanian nation (Nagy, 1944: p. 81.). Article 27 of the 1938 Constitution formulated the denial of the equality of citizenship and the declaration of the primacy of members of the Romanian nationality among the provisions governing the right to hold office, by implicitly incorporating it in the previous articles. Article 27 of the 1938 Constitution stipulated that civil and military offices and dignities could be held only by Romanian citizens, but that the majority and state-forming character of the Romanian nation had to be taken into account when filling these offices (Nagy, 1944: p. 186.). The 1938 Constitution established a clear distinction between all Romanian citizens (*cetăţeni*), who enjoyed certain rights without distinction of religion or race, and members of the Romanian nation (*naţiunea română*) as state-builders (Guţan, 2022: p. 120.). Under this provision, the 1938 Constitution no longer conceived of the Romanian state as a community of Romanian citizens, but recognised only those of Romanian nationality as state-makers, with national minorities being were considered citizens, but were excluded from membership of the state-making community. The 1938 Constitution further clarified the above point in its Article 29, which derived state power from the Romanian nation as defined above.

The 1938 Constitution reorganised the constitutional structure of Romania on a corporative basis, with the dominance of the king's legislative role (Bolovan, 1998: p. 89-90.) and made suffrage conditional on participation in occupational groups (Pantelimon, 2009: p. 115-116.). All political parties were dissolved and only the Front for National Revival, *Frontul Renașterii Naționale*, was allowed to function as the only authorised party after its transformation into National Party (Focşeneanu, 2018: p. 112-113.).

Even the royal dictatorship under the 1938 Constitution failed to remedy the domestic political crisis in Romania and the political processes that were causing instability and the internal rupture of the state framework were particularly accentuated by the radically changed foreign policy environment after the outbreak of World War II and the combination of its pressures on Romania, which by the summer of 1940 had caused significant territorial losses (Ionescu, 2019: p. 755-757.). Among these, the new Romanian-Hungarian border, established by the Second Vienna Award, generated an elementary social outcry which set the state order established by the 1938 Constitution of King Carol II on an unsustainable course (Selejan-Guţan, 2020: p. 103.). Within days, social and political discontent led to the resignation of the monarch and his departure from the country, and although Romania retained its monarchical form of government, the process of dismantling the remaining semblance of constitutionalism (Ionescu, 2019:

p. 749-750.) and the construction of a new totalitarian state (Firoiu, 1992: p. 347-348.) began ***by appointing*** of Ion Antonescu as *conducător* on 5 September 1940 and the suspension of the 1938 Romanian Constitution (Focşeneanu, 2018: p. 115-119.). Consequently, after 5 September 1940, Romanian constitutionalism - apart from the absence of a formal constitution (Firoiu, 1992: p. 349.) - was not even substantive (Selejan-Guţan, 2020: p. 103-104.), and Romania was soon distorted into a chauvinistic legionary dictatorship (Bădescu, 2021: p. 145-146.) under the leadership of the Iron Guard movement (Bolovan, 1998: p. 93-94.). Although the legionary state was overthrown on 24 January 1941 (Focşeneanu, 2018: p. 122.), the restoration of constitutionality had to wait until 23 August 1944 (Selejan-Guţan, 2020: p. 104.).

The era of unconstitutionalism ended following the arrest of Ion Antonescu, when King Michael I, professing the constitutional foundations of the nation-state, declared his belief in civil rights and freedom in his proclamation of 23 August 1944 and the 1923 leading to the restoration of the Constitution (Ionescu, 2019: p. 758-759.). However, the restoration of limited constitutionalism did not result in a change of constitutional values or state objectives. This continuity was not only professed by the young monarch, the historical parties and the government but also joined by the communists, as the rearguard of the national patriotic forces, according to later interpretations (Fodor, 1976. p. 384.).

The historical parties continued to adhere to the *interbellum* concept of the national state, while the communist and social-democratic united front rested on similar foundations. However the quality of Romanian citizenship being constitutionally replaced by the quality of Romanian worker, by transposing the ideological basis (Deleanu, 1980: p. 141-142.). The left united front programme based on class considerations, which in principle rested on communist principles independent of the national idea, in fact had a sharp nationalist content when it presented the Transylvanian question as a counterweight to the fight against fascism by emphasizing Romanian interests, while, because of the Soviet Union's previously fixed starting point, it was forced to accept the Soviet annexation of northern Bukovina and Bessarabia (Focşeneanu, 2018: p. 144-146.). On these grounds, King Michael I appointed Petru Groza as prime minister, who was associated with the leftist movements on 6 March 1945 (Ionescu, 2019: p. 761-763.). The outcome of the increasingly intense internal political struggle between the left-wing parties, which enjoyed the support of the Soviet occupiers, and the historical parties was inevitable (Tismăneanu, 2006: p. 34-40.).

The era of limited constitutionalism that returned after the Romanian transition in World War II represents a mere three and a half years' journey to an era of unconstitutional constitutions. During this period, despite the *de iure* restoration of the constitutional framework, the combined efforts of the Romanian communist movement and the Soviet government, combined with political pressure, gradually achieved the repression of limited constitutionalism in the Romanian state, and eventually led to the establishment of another total dictatorship (Firoiu, 1992: p. 366-367.).

As a result of foreign policy events and processes that ended World War II, Romania, supported by the Soviet Union, finally achieved its main state objective, the recovery of Northern Transylvania, independent of its state apparatus and allied regimes in World War II. The success of the state policy goal was clearly attributed by the Romanian communist interpretation to the Romanian leftist unity and the transmission

of this interpretation to the whole Romanian society clearly provided a legitimation basis for changing the existing state apparatus, based on limited constitutional foundations, justifying the Soviet occupation of the state and serving to justify the social acceptance of the communist takeover (Durandin, 1998: p. 336-340.).

Romania, after regaining with Soviet assistance the territories lost under the Second Vienna Award, came under increasing pressure from the Soviet Union and the left-wing political organisations it supported (Focşeneanu, 2018: p. 147-154.) to change the foundations of the existing state structure and limited constitutionalism (Drăganu, 1998: p. 385.). Following the appointment of the Groza government, the transformation of the social, economic and legal environment in Romania began on such a political basis (Marcu, 1997: p. 279-281.). Left-wing political forces, strengthened by the marginalisation of the historical parties, were able to form the new legislature (Focşeneanu, 2018: p. 135-143.) in the elections of 19 November 1946, winning 347 out of 414 seats and the coalition of left-wing parties, with Soviet support, achieved its goal less than a year later (Focşeneanu, 2018: p. 147-154.). King Michael I was dethroned on 30 December 1947 and the Romanian People's Republic (Drăganu, 1972: p. 88-89., 94-95.) was proclaimed the same day. Romania was thus constitutionally incorporated into the Soviet bloc.

Following the proclamation of the People's Republic, the parliament elected in November 1946 dissolved itself, and soon afterwards, with the election and convening of the Grand National Assembly on 28 March 1948, a new Soviet-style constitution for the state based on a new ideology was drawn up (Focşeneanu, 2018: p. 177-180.) according to the resolutions and directives of the VI Congress of the Romanian Communist Party (Deleanu, 1980: p. 80.). The Grand National Assembly, in the course of the constitution-making process, repeated the constitutional formal defects of the previous practice, a legitimacy defect which the body finally sought to remedy at its meeting of 13 April 1948, by 401 unanimous votes, adopting the 1948 Constitution in the form of Law 114/1948 (Drăganu, 1998: p. 385-387.). With the adoption and proclamation of the 1948 Constitution, Romania formally entered the era of unconstitutional constitutions, breaking the constitutional development arc.

The new constitutional foundations - practically integrated into and continuing the processes begun after the changeover of 23 August 1944 - soon had profound social, economic, political and legal consequences, and brought about (Deleanu, 1980: p. 68-75.), and culminated in decisive changes in the organisation of the state, the essence of which was the rejection of the previous constitutionalism in the Soviet Union in 1936 Stalinist Constitution of 1936, and the full implementation of the class-based social theory of communist ideology (Deleanu, 1980: p. 80-82.). However, the communist totalitarian state, which was then established and had an apparently constitutional basis, could not in fact be considered a constitutional state in a substantive sense, due to its distinctive features (Dănișor, 2006: p. 62-63.).

The leading role of the working class in the new type of state apparatus placed a new vision of man, a new ideological basis, at the centre of the Soviet-style Romanian legislation. The new image of man was based on a class approach, in opposition to and rejecting the previous identities (Deleanu, 1980: 136-137., 141-142.). The system established by the new constitution declared the domination of a single class or party as

a political group, rejecting the previous constitutional distinctions (Guţan, 2022: p. 120.) and thus by its very nature constituted a totalitarian system, which, pyramidally built up in Romania, eventually led to the introduction of a one-man rule, reinforced by a personal cult (Bădescu, 2021: p. 121-122.). Inevitably, the ruling party not only rejected political pluralism in the construction of its own dictatorship, but also sought to destroy opposition forces by absolutising class struggle. The Constitution of 1948 (Ionescu, 2019: p. 766-770.) thus represented a radical change of the previous political, economic and constitutional environment of Romania, the adoption of the Soviet constitutional model, the necessary rejection of the previous constitutionalism, i.e. the absence of substantive constitutionalism (Bădescu, 2021: p. 46-47.).

Given that the essential feature of the so-called people's democratic constitutions (Deleanu, 1980: p. 67-68.) is the rejection and outright denial of the traditional principle of the division of power (Dănișor, 2006: p. 441-452.) based on Marxist-Leninist doctrines (Boboș, 1983: p. 9-11., 28-29.) , i.e. the concentration of power (Deleanu, 1976: p. 19-20.), on the basis of which the Unitarian conception of the state was increasingly prevalent and thus led to the construction of a highly centralised party-state in Romania as well (Boboș, 1983: p. 36.). As a further characteristic of Soviet-style states, power over the whole of state and economic life was not actually exercised by the bodies declared in the constitutions, but as a particular result of the concentration of power, which actually went to the Communist Party (Bădescu, 2021: p. 46-47., 256-259., 265.), or more precisely to its upper echelons which held power as a monopoly (Alexandru, 2008: p. 77-78.). The concentration of power can be further described as a monolithic (Deleanu, 1980: 390-413.) intertwining of the state and party organisation as a further element of the state organisation established by the communist constitutions (Deleanu, 1980: p. 332-337.), the constitutional foundations of which can be derived from the leading role of the working class and its party in the constitutions (Boboș, 1983: p. 11-14., 28-29., 68-69.), by which the communist party, as the only party, was transformed into a state party, its structure mimicking the structure of the state organs laid down in the constitutions. Accordingly, the organs of the state party not only functioned in parallel with the state organs (Deleanu, 1980: p. 196-200.) but, in addition to the typical personal interconnections, also, by essentially abstracting from their powers, effectively controlled everyday life with or without the subsequent approval of the state organs, even against the rules of the specific law. As part of this system, the implementation of party decisions became a specific task of the state and the law (Ionescu, 1970: p. 35.). On this basis, political pluralism naturally disappeared, in popular democracies, and the enforcement of traditional democracy became admittedly superfluous (Bădescu, 2021: p. 47.), and even - calling it bourgeois dictatorship and hypocritical democracy (Boboș, 1983: p. 23.) - abhorrent. Accordingly, rights (Dănișor, 2006: p. 101-102.) based on formal and extreme equality, especially fundamental freedoms, were enshrined in Soviet-style constitutions as mere declarations (Focşeneanu, 2018: p. 188., 204.), without any possibility of actual judicial protection and enforcement, and were restricted without any legal measure or condition because of the lack of guarantees of legal protection. Thus, the people's democratic constitutions were led by their choice of ideological values, the communist class view (Boboș, 1983: p. 23.), to interpret the declared equality of rights and civil rights on a class and

internationalist basis, and ultimately led to the de facto subordination of individual rights to equality of rights in the name of and on the grounds of the absolutisation of class struggle (Bădescu, 2021: p. 46-47.). Thus, the tensions between the declared rights and equality of rights and the subordination of individual rights led directly to the hierarchization and exclusion of citizens on a class basis (Focşeneanu, 2018: p. 188., 204-205.) and later on a national basis in Romania (Guţan, 2022: p. 120-121.).

The radical transformation of the state and social structure, achieved with Soviet support in the space of a few years, also justified the legal settlement and anchoring of the results achieved on a new constitutional basis (Deleanu, 1980: p. 83-84.), which was adopted through a propaganda-based and broad consultation process that attached party goals and interests to its social legitimacy (Drăganu, 1998: p. 101-102.). On this basis, the Grand National Assembly finally began debating the new Constitution on 22 September 1952 and adopted the 1952 Constitution five days later (Selejan-Guţan, 2020: p. 27.).

The 1952 Constitution, despite being almost completely forgotten today, is in many respects a landmark legislative achievement in Romanian constitutional history. In the classical constitutional sense, it was the first constitution in the history of the Romanian constitution to be drafted and adopted in accordance with the procedures in force, in this case Articles 103 and 104 of the 1948 Constitution, and with the broad social consultation process, as mentioned above, albeit formal in the reality of a totalitarian state (Deleanu, 2003: p. 84.). Likewise, the 1952 Constitution was the first to expire, also in compliance with the existing constitutional procedures, i.e. Article 105 of the Constitution, with the creation, unanimous adoption and entry into force of the 1965 Constitution. The significance of these facts for constitutional history highlights aspects of the development of the Romanian constitution which, on the one hand, point to the anomalies, distortions of content and lack of legitimacy that characterised the era of limited constitutionalism and, on the other, to the fact that the totalitarian state, lacking constitutionality in content, then sought to establish legality, at least in formal terms, after consolidating its position (Drăganu, 1998: p. 101-102.). The combination of these circumstances, however, increases the value of the environment created by the Constitution in force, highlighting the importance of formal legitimacy and the importance of substantive constitutionalism.

The Constitution of 1952 (Bădescu, 2021: p. 48-49.) was unchanged in accordance with the historical period, and in line with the guidelines set by the preparatory work of the party (Deleanu, 1980: p. 83-84.) - it was based on communist ideology, its class approach was set out in its preamble. The party's ideology was outlined in its preamble and in its I and II chapters, whose provisions, in addition to the class approach, identified the sovereignty (Ionescu, 2019: p. 838-839.) and independence, security and peace of the Romanian people as a particular value, while the fundamental rights and duties of citizens were formulated mainly on the basis of class differences according to participation in economic production (Deleanu, 1980: p. 84-86.). The Constitution of 1952 enshrined the structure of the state organization with the leading power and political primacy of the state party (Ionescu, 2019: p. 771.), effectively the exclusivity of the state party's possession of state power. The basic constitutional position in this regard is clearly in line with the totalitarian programme of the transition to communism,

and this was emphasised in the Preamble of the 1952 Constitution itself, and was also clearly inferred from the articles on social order (Deleanu, 1980: p. 86.).

Under the 1952 Constitution, the ideological pressure on the country's population intensified, which did not ease significantly after Stalin's death, but at the same time created an opportunity to assert the construction of a specific Romanian communist path (Bottoni, 2006: p. 14-19.), with a more nationalist flavour. Although some party leaders expressed reservations about this aspiration, the system became even more rigid in 1956, especially after the Hungarian Revolution and War of Independence (Boia, 2017: p. 60.), as confirmed by the military intervention of the Soviet Union in Hungary. The Soviet reaction to the events in Hungary made clear to the members of the Eastern Bloc the limits of deviation from the existing framework, which the Romanian state took note of and soon achieved the withdrawal of Soviet troops from its territory as a result of cooperation with the Soviets (Durandin, 1998: p. 366-368.).

By the early 1960s, also in view of the withdrawal of the Soviet Union, the position of the Communist Party in all political, social and economic spheres had become unquestionable and the internal party infighting had been resolved, stabilising the position of the Romanian domestic communist elite in place of the Muscovite internationalist party cadres (Durandin, 1998: p. 371-380.). Following the death of the General Secretary Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej on 19 March 1965, the Romanian popular line in the party was thus able to elevate Nicolae Ceaușescu, whose Romanian and working-class origins and genuine commitment to the ideal were indisputable, to the post of party secretary without any particular doubts (Durandin, 1998: p. 380-385.). As a direct consequence, a reassessment of the system established by the 1952 Constitution was thus on the agenda within months.

By the mid-1960s, the stabilisation of the party-state system, as described above (Deleanu, 1980: p. 87-88.), and the increased and effective freedom of internal political manoeuvre resulting from the withdrawal of Soviet troops, together with the essentially positive attitude of international expectations towards Nicolae Ceaușescu (Durandin, 1998: p. 383-385.), and the essentially completed social transformation (Drăganu, 1998: p. 105-109.), and the power interests of the new Secretary General, led to the adoption of a new, now more nationalist, constitution. On this basis, the Constitutional Drafting Committee published its draft Constitution on 29 June 1965, which was adopted by the Grand National Assembly at its session of 21 August 1965 by a unanimous vote of 446 members, promulgated and entered into force on the same day (Bădescu, 2021: p. 49.).

The Constitution of 1965, also called the Constitution of "Victorious Socialism" (Deleanu, 1980: p. 87-89.), clarified the class approach of the previous constitutions, and identified the worker-peasant alliance as the basis of popular sovereignty (Deleanu, 1980: p. 19-21., 25., 170-183.) , in which the working class is the ruling class of society, and the peasantry, the intelligentsia and other categories of workers, regardless of nationality, build the socialist order, creating the conditions for the transition to communism (Boboș, 1983: p. 23-35.). The Constitution of 1965 continued to name the state party the Romanian Communist Party, as the leading political force in society (Deleanu, 1980: p. 390-413.),, in fact the only political party, in Article 3 of the Constitution (Ionescu, 2019: p. 525., 532.). The class approach to popular sovereignty was enforced in the organisation of the state (Deleanu, 1980: p. 365-389.) through

general, equal, directly and secretly elected bodies (Deaconu, 2017: p. 91-92.), and since any kind of pluralism - traditional parliamentary (Boboș, 1983: p. 58-60) - was incompatible with the political system, the concentration of power (or more precisely the party monopoly of power, effectively continued to prevail at all levels of power (Bădescu, 2021: p. 49-50.).

In terms of the organisation of the state, the organs of the state were established on the unchanged ideological basis of the socialist constitutions (Deleanu, 1980: p. 458-546.), but as a result of the constitutional amendment of 28 March 1974, the institution of the president of the state was introduced with the declaration of party general secretary Nicolae Ceaușescu as president of the state (Focşeneanu, 2018: p. 195.). The post of State President of the Party General Secretary was a qualitative change in the concentration of power (Boboș, 1983: p. 81-82, 117-118, 187.) and can be seen as a symbolic moment in the construction of the party state, a declaration of the primacy of his will. The President of the State thus not only performed the classical functions of head of state as President of the Council of State and Commander-in-Chief of the army, but also chaired government meetings as required, could call referendums, and exercised the power to appoint and dismiss ministers, the heads of central bodies, members of the Supreme Court and the Attorney General, but also became partly a legislator in the absence of a sitting of the Grand National Assembly (Deleanu, 190: p. 538-546.), while otherwise effectively concentrating power in the hands of his family (Dănișor, 2006: p. 125-126.).

In 1965. The state system set up by the 1965 Constitution, as described above, soon moved away from its self-proclaimed Marxist-Leninist principles, or more precisely from their socialist economic starting points, including the preservation of forced industrialisation and economic sovereignty, in less than a decade (Tismăneanu, 2006: p. 406-423.), but suffered severe state-nationalist distortions with the concentration of power and the elevation of the party-state and the development of a Stalinist cult of personality built around Nicolae Ceaușescu, following his guidelines (Guţan, 2022: p. 111., 121.).

On this basis, from the 1970s onwards, the nationalist tendency, which had already been taken up in public party resolutions, was strengthened, creating a deeper and wider gap between the rights declared in the 1965 Constitution and the violations that were actually taking place. The national-communism of the Romanian state as constructed above (Tismăneanu, 2006: p. 526-530.), the tensions between the declarations of constitutional rights and reality, were then increasingly escaping the attention of the Western powers (Durandin, 1998: p. 401-406.).

The inefficiency of communist economic organisation, the forced industrialisation of state economic policy and the goal of an independent sovereign state free of foreign influence and debt had by the end of the 1970s plunged Romania into general poverty (Tismăneanu, 2006: p. 441-445.), the state having essentially become a war economy (Durandin, 1998: 407-411.). The general deprivation, which thus threatened the very existence of the Romanian nation, was presented as a sacrifice to the homeland and the socialist nation and its mission of creation, while these concepts led to the exaltation of the head of the state, using the cult of personality and the guiding principle that had been built up.

Simultaneously with the above political processes, the Romanian legal system has increasingly emphasised the role of the socialist legal system, according to which socialist law is in fact an instrument for the implementation of party decisions, and thus law is subordinate to the party. The emptying out of law in this way was in fact in line with the aims of the state party to create a Romanian, and at the same time communist, man and state (Boboș, 1983: p. 11-12.).

Given that, as explained above, there is no real constitutionalism or political pluralism after World War II, due to the Soviet occupation and the Stalinist foundations of the state system, the question of political participation, the right to hold office and thus representation in the legislature has essentially been decided by the state party (Boboș, 1983: p. 23-25., 82-88., 101-103.) and not by elections following the dismantling of political parties and civil society organisations (Tismăneanu, 2006: p. 132-136.). In the unicameral Grand National Assembly, a legislature based on universal and equal voting rights for active voters up to the age of 18 and passive voting rights up to the age of 23, the candidates of the Socialist Unity and Democracy Front was allowed to stand, ultimately characterised by reliable party loyalty, i.e. class solidarity and socialist national consciousness, and were also recallable (Deleanu, 1980: p. 436-437., 440-441.).

The 1980's witnessed the continuation and even more pronounced assertion of the state policy that had crystallised in the previous decade. The success of the Romanian communist state was justified by huge mass events, personality cults, the glorification of a historical past, and increased propaganda, as defined and anticipated in point 16 of the July Theses (Guţan, 2022: p. 121.). The reality, however, presented a completely different picture, whereby unfulfilled achievements and general deprivation not only increased social disillusionment to the extreme, but also resulted by then in Romania's total international isolation, while the structures of the party-state were also being solidified (Durandin, 1998: p. 426-439.). The Romanian state was now relying exclusively on its own internal resources, its distorted state system, which was also distanced from its own constitutional law, and its new type of communist nationalism and image of man, threatened the very existence of the Romanian nation in the traditional sense.

The stability of the regime and the unbroken faith in the leader were to be demonstrated by the resolutions and the externalities of the XIV Congress of the Romanian Communist Party in November 1989, where neither the constitutional foundations nor the policies of the party-state were to be changed, and thus the social tensions that had been simmering under the surface of a regime considered stable and unshakable could not be calmed, and soon erupted with elementary force against a system that was in fact unsustainable.

Following the XIV Congress of the Romanian Communist Party, the revolution that broke out in Timisoara a few weeks later, swept away the communist dictatorship and its distorted image of man, with the execution of Nicolae Ceaușescu on 25 December 1989 (Tismăneanu, 2006: p. 618-625.) , set Romania on a new path (Focşeneanu, 2018: p. 229-233.).

The cornerstone of Romania's new path is the 1991 Constitution in force which leads to closing remarks. This Constitution, following a long struggle for popular

sovereignty, established universal, equal, direct, non-discriminatory, and secret suffrage as a reality, fulfilling Romania's aspirations for a European future at the end of the 20th century. From an electoral perspective, several lessons can be drawn from the history of the Romanian constitution. The limited suffrage that remained in place until the end of the First World War primarily served the existing power structure, excluding the majority of the population from exercising political rights— a situation not unique in Europe at the time. Consequently, genuine popular sovereignty did not exist. The distorted electoral system of the interwar period, which favored the ruling government by awarding it 50% of parliamentary seats with only 40% of the vote, clearly does not meet today's constitutional standards. In addition to legal shortcomings, widespread maladministration and electoral abuses effectively restricted the will of the people. During the brief transitional period following World War II, Soviet pressure effectively excluded any notion of popular sovereignty. While the communist period technically introduced universal, equal, direct, and secret suffrage, it was merely an illusion. The nature of the totalitarian regime and its systemic practices essentially excluded genuine popular sovereignty. The so-called elections served only to legitimize a class-based dictatorship; however, even this objective was not fully realized, as it was the party elite - rather than the working class - that held true political and economic power. The democratic environment established by the current Constitution is therefore not only the result of a long and hard-fought struggle but also carries an important lesson: substantive constitutionalism universal, equal, direct, and secret suffrage is a fundamental value that must be preserved. It represents a constitutional minimum that should be upheld, protected, and cherished. Genuine popular sovereignty in this context presupposes a dialogue-based settlement of majority-minority relations, the building of a consensual and con-social democracy. This is the way to fulfil the requirement and programme of Article 4 of the Constitution, according to which the solidarity of citizens is the basis of the Romanian state, irrespective of race, nationality, ethnic origin, language, religion, gender, opinion, political affiliation, wealth or social origin. On the substantive side, it is clear that the solidarity and patriotism enshrined in Article 4 of the Constitution can only be realised if substantive equality is achieved for the population as a whole, as the foundation of genuine popular sovereignty.

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POLITICAL CULTURE AND DEMOCRATIC RESILIENCE: A CONCEPTUAL-THEORETICAL APPROACH. TOWARDS A PLURALIST POLITICAL CULTURE

CZU: 316.74:32 + 321.7
https://doi.org/10.59295/eiqd.17

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Abstract. *This study explores the concept of democratic resilience through the lens of civic-political culture, analyzing how it can contribute to maintaining and strengthening democracy in the face of contemporary challenges. Authoritarian populism and radical transformations in the information ecosystem affect the stability of democratic regimes, highlighting the need for a theoretical redefinition of political culture. The study critiques Almond's normative model of political culture and reconceptualizes it from the perspective of democratic resilience, drawing on Sartori's theory of pluralism. In this sense, pluralist political culture is seen as a central element of democracy, capable of tempering polarization and enhancing the capacity of democratic institutions to withstand authoritarian regression. Democratic resilience is analyzed both as a process and as an outcome, influenced by structural, functional, and actor-based factors. Within this framework, civic agency and political participation become essential, both through bottom-up actions and public policies aimed at strengthening citizens' democratic engagement. The research emphasizes the importance of educational and institutional policies that promote political socialization in a pluralist spirit. The final proposal is an integrated approach to political culture that transcends rigid modernization perspectives and focuses on diversity, constructive dissent, and democratic inclusion.*

Keywords*: democratic resilience; quality of democracy; civic-political culture; pluralistic political culture.*

The rise of authoritarian-populist movements and the simultaneous vulnerability of elites and society due to the demassification and democratization of online information are factors shaping the current global context (Guess & Lyons, 2020; Jee et al., 2022). The contemporary wave of autocratization (Angiolillo et al., 2024) thus represents a major challenge to preserving the quality of democracy and, more

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importantly, ensuring the survival of democratic regimes themselves. In this context, the relatively new concept of democratic resilience—understood as the ability to prevent substantial regression in the quality of democratic practices and institutions (Boese et al., 2021; Crum & Oleart, 2023)—gains particular importance for both analysts and policymakers.

However, as a substantive alternative to the established concept of democratic consolidation, democratic resilience requires further conceptual refinement and clarification to enhance its explanatory power.

Our study aims to contribute to this debate through an exploratory investigation of how civic-political culture can become a constitutive element of the research agenda on democratic resilience. To this end, we seek to decouple the concept from its roots in modernization theories (Inglehart & Welzel, 2005), specifically from their normative dimension, and attempt a reconceptualization from the perspective of the emerging approach to democratic resilience.

Introduction

The 2008-09 economic crisis and the 2015 refugee crisis represented two foundational moments for a phenomenon that has intensified over the past decade—democratic backsliding. The vectors driving this process are both diverse and contentious, whether referring to right-wing populist movements that have surged through Western democracies or to the vast and still insufficiently understood impact of the demassification and globalization of political communication, resulting from the revolution triggered by new communication technologies such as the internet, smartphones, social media, and so forth.

During this period, liberal democracies have witnessed the transformation of independent media and so-called "citizen journalism," empowered by the emergence of social media, into "echo chambers" and "polarized media ecosystems," which favor misinformation and disinformation at the expense of fact-based media. These phenomena have amplified and radicalized pre-existing trends, reflecting both longstanding and newly emerging discontent with liberal democratic systems. This discontent has been further fueled by poor crisis management, lack of transparency, ineffective communication, and the underrepresentation of citizens, exacerbated by the influence (some would argue dominance) of major economic players over political processes and their outcomes.

Analysts and policymakers alike are striving to understand and find ways to manage the illiberal backlash that has engulfed Western democracies over the past 15 years. Through this paper, we aim to contribute to the ongoing discourse by suggesting a distinct approach that involves rethinking the concept of political culture through the lens of democratic resilience theory, considering it a constitutive element of political culture. In doing so, we hope to not only revive interest in political culture but also to clarify the concept of democratic resilience.

Our perspective draws from the concept of pluralism proposed in the late 1990s by Italian political scientist Giovanni Sartori (Sartori 1997; 2000). Through this framework, we attempt to reconceptualize political culture in the context of democratic resilience. What distinguishes our endeavor is the understanding of the rethinking of

political culture not merely as a research project but also as a civic-political action program. The current context necessitates out-of-the-box thinking—mere engagement in theoretical and methodological debates on political culture from the perspective of democratic resilience is necessary but insufficient for contributing to the survival of democratic regimes. From this standpoint, we believe it is essential to write from a dual perspective—that of the political analyst and that of the citizen with a direct stake in the survival of the democratic model, thereby considering political culture both as a research program and as a policy-oriented endeavor. In our view, rethinking the concept of political culture should not have an impact limited to political science research but should also be reflected in concrete sets of public policies aimed at enhancing democratic resilience.

Our paper is structured into three parts. First, we found it necessary to conduct a critical reevaluation of the concept of political culture, attempting to synthesize the main criticisms it has faced over time. Next, we focus on the emerging theory of democratic resilience to identify the foundations upon which we will attempt to reconceptualize political culture. Finally, we propose the concept of pluralist culture as a potential endpoint of our endeavor.

Undoubtedly, this is an exploratory effort, with no ambition of being definitive, but rather a starting point.

What Is and What Is Not Political Culture? A Critical Approach.

The concept of political culture is a contested one, and this has been the case since its introduction into political science approximately 70 years ago. It involves a dual contestation—one concerning its very definition (Formisano 2001, 394) and another regarding its use as part of a particular explanatory approach that fundamentally prioritizes certain historical experiences and values to construct a general framework for understanding democratic mechanisms and phenomena.

The idea of political culture has a long presence, at least in the philosophy and history of political ideas. We find it in the works of ancient thinkers such as Aristotle, who links civic virtues to education and participation (Miller 2020), complemented by aesthetics and high culture as models of critical thinking suitable for civic life (Carnes 1982; Collins 2006, 41-5), or in Plato, who noted in *The Republic* that "it is necessary that there also be as many forms of human characters as there are forms of regimes? Or do you suppose that the regimes arise 'from an oak or rocks' and not from the dispositions of the men in the cities, which, tipping the scale as it were, draw the rest along with them?" (Bloom 1968, 222). Similarly, other authors, both classical and modern, introduce similar ideas and concepts, focusing either on the educational aspects implied by citizenship or on a more complex approach—as in the case of Montesquieu, who connects geo-climatic characteristics with cultural ones to construct what he considered the ethical-moral profile of nations (Singer 2013, Ch. 4; Keohane 1980, Ch. 14). And the list of examples could continue.

Nevertheless, the modern history of the term begins in the mid-20th century with the publication of Gabriel Almond's article on comparative political systems (Almond 1956). The theorization proposed and later developed by Almond has remained—despite sustained criticisms and repeated contestations—the dominant and widely accepted view

within the scientific community concerned with the comparative investigation of political systems. From this perspective, the critical investigation of political culture must necessarily focus on examining Gabriel Almond's foundational vision.

Almond notes that "every political system is embedded in a particular pattern of orientations to political action" (Almond 1956, 396), which he calls political culture. Fundamentally, this can be reduced to a set of meanings and purposes, including attitudes, values, ideologies, as well as more intangible and difficult-to-define aspects such as "national character" or "cultural ethos" (Almond idem). Political culture would have at least two major characteristics. First, it does not overlap with the generic concept of culture, although certain filiations can be established between the two. Almond sees political culture as a subdivision of culture in general, based more on cognitive and evaluative factors. Second, it does not overlap with a specific political system or society (Almond 1956, 397) but has a broader spread that transcends the boundaries of state institutions. Both characteristics give rise to substantial critiques that ultimately question both the definition and the explanatory utility of the concept.

Firstly, Almond operates with the generic concept of culture, which he does not define, assuming it to be self-evident or to have a generally accepted meaning shared by potential readers, an aspect that requires further explanation/investigation.

It should be noted here that Almond operates within the structural-functionalist theoretical framework conceived by American political sociologist Talcott Parsons (Parsons and Shils 1962), an approach also reflected in his subsequent research. Thus, it is reasonable to assume that when discussing culture as a generic concept, he relies on Parsons' definition, a fact Almond himself confirms in a later writing (Almond and Verba 1980, 26-7). In Parsons' view, therefore, culture is understood as being constituted by "ways of orienting and acting" (Parsons 1962, 159), and in *The Social System* (first published in 1951), he adds that "Cultural objects are symbolic elements of the cultural tradition, ideas or beliefs, expressive symbols or value patterns so far as they are treated as situational objects by ego and are not ‘internalized’ as constitutive elements of the structure of his personality." (Parsons 1991, 2). Parsons' approach, centered on the analytical differentiation between personality, social, and cultural systems to facilitate data organization and theorization (Lehman 1972, 361), views culture from a static perspective, as a form of tradition that by definition aspires to self-preservation and resistance to change (see Parsons 2005, 53).

Accepting, therefore, that Almond operates within the broader framework of Parsonian sociological theory, we observe that he understands culture in general and, implicitly, political culture in particular as data, that is, as more or less immutable, consequently eluding dynamism as a constitutive dimension of the cultural phenomenon (even in works explicitly dedicated to studying social change). This assumption is crucial in our opinion because it fundamentally alters the knowledge obtained from using political culture as an analytical tool in the comparative investigation of political systems.

Secondly, Almond's understanding of the concept of political culture proves to be normatively biased and teleological through its association with modernization, particularly political modernization, making the concept implicitly an expression of path dependence, thereby undermining its explanatory and analytical potential. Already in the

1956 article dedicated to comparative politics, Almond suggests the existence of Western models of political culture (e.g., Anglo-Saxon and continental European), and his subsequent works (some specifically dedicated to the post-colonial space) confirm that the value infrastructure of the concept of political culture is inextricably linked to the implicit determinism of modernization theories. In other words, the ideal-types of political culture later found in the research conducted with Sidney Verba or G. Bingham Powell are fundamentally indebted to a normative vision that hierarchizes political cultures based on their proximity to or distance from the models existing in the advanced democracies of the industrialized Anglo-Saxon West.

Thus, in *Comparative Politics: A Developmental Approach*, written with Powell (Almond and Powell 1966), Almond insists on defining the concept of political culture, which he projects as assuming a position on an essentially normative and hierarchical axis, with "primitive" (undesirable) cultures at one end and modern, "advanced" (desirable) cultures at the other. In this context, the way the two authors choose to define political culture as a psychological element of a political system is extremely important. Thus, political culture consists of attitudes, beliefs, values, and skills present at the population level, as well as "propensities and tendencies" present at the local or regional level within ethnic groups or social classes, which they categorize as subcultures, both originating from the process of political socialization (Almond and Powell 1966, 23-4).

In our opinion, the origin of the normative position manifested by the two authors lies in the concept of secularization as an eminently modernizing process, which they understand as "the process whereby men become increasingly rational, analytical, and empirical in their political action" (Almond and Powell 1966, 24), a definition immediately followed by an example contrasting "a political leader in a modern democracy with a political leader in a traditional or primitive African political system" (idem), therefore suggesting the existence of various degrees of rationality in humans depending on ethnicity, race, or belonging to one civilization or another. Later, Almond and Verba will reveal that they conceived political culture starting from the dichotomy of involvement, political activity, and rationality/passivity, traditionality, and commitment to parochial values (Almond and Verba 1980, 24-5), thus illustrating their attachment to the modernist program and the bias underlying their approach to the comparative study of political systems.

This involves translating into the space of comparative politics W.W. Rostow's theses concerning the stages of modernization. These, elaborated during the peak of the Cold War, programmatically had a strong ideological charge, asserting the superiority of the Western development model, which necessarily leads politically to liberal democracy and economically to the free market system, as opposed to an ideologically opposite vision, that of real socialism. In his Eurocentric perspective, the only real way to overcome the development problems faced by non-modern societies is to reproduce the Western model, which implies a path-dependent transition from the "inferior," traditional society (agrarian, non-scientific, and economically unproductive) to the "superior," modern one (industrial, scientific, capitalist, and consumerist), with the main strategy consisting of mobilizing internal and international economies to invest in economic growth (Rostow, 1971, 4-16). Rostow's development strategy thus briefly entailed replacing "traditional," "primitive," and "irrational" values with modern ones

originating from Western historical experience (Webster, 1990, 49). Rostow's model, perhaps due to the specific context in which it emerged, had a major influence on multiple explanatory models in social-political sciences, with comparative politics or political development studies being just a part of them.

The consequences of the two critiques briefly explored above are extremely important, particularly because they were uncritically adopted by a series of researchers who built their explanatory models using an analytical toolkit compromised by assumptions based on ideological biases and stereotypes, resulting in the multiplication of potential methodological errors and subsequently in research findings and predictions.

The emerging theory of democratic resilience.

a) The concept of resilience in political science

The actual instability and unpredictability of the international system create a durable impact on the capacity of democracies to remain functional and to prevent authoritarian backsliding even in advanced free political regimes. In this article, we decouple the concept of democracy resilience from democratic consolidation to explain the correlations between citizens' civic-political culture transformations (input) and the degradation of democratic regimes (output).

Political science uses the concept of democratic resilience in a transdisciplinary manner. It comes from the physics and biological sciences of the 19th century, but it was adopted by the social and political sciences in the second part of the 20th century. There are different explanations for the genealogy of resilience: while an important paradigm of interpretation is focused on the assertion that resilience is a product of the neoliberal governances (Walker & Cooper 2011, Reid 2012, Joseph 2013), another line of analysis affirms it is necessary to investigate the pathways through which resilience has percolated into world politics and shape the international relations (Cavelty, Kaufmann, and Kristensen 2015; Walsh-Dilley and Wolford 2015; Wagner & Anholt 2016, Bourbeau 2018).

The term "resilience" was redefined and expanded to the "heuristic, metaphoric and normative dimensions" as some scholars claim (Holling 2001, Pickett et al. 2004, Hughes et al. 2005). The reason for this transdisciplinary move is the need for experts from social and political areas to adequately respond to the increasing variety of global threats such as economic crises, climate changes and transitions to undemocratic regimes.

The essential part of the definition of resilience in physics, actually used in political science, is the capacity of a system to absorb shocks and return to its original state. Concerning democracies, it is about the ability of these regimes to pass across crises and maintain the initial configuration. It is also useful to analyze democratic resilience as a process or a result. We consider resilience rather a quality of democracy that encapsulates both the process and the final result.

We assume the resilience concept is dominated by vagueness and malleability. It is a "boundary object" and can admit a variety of definitions (Brand & Jax 2007). Concerning social and political sciences, the two authors define resilience as "the ability of the system to maintain its identity in the face of internal change and external shocks and disturbances" and also "the ability of groups or communities to cope with external stresses and disturbances as a result of social, political, and environmental change".

Henrik Thoren (2014) analyses resilience as a unifying concept and argues that "the various uses of the resilience concept are more closely related" and that resilience has the "potential to bridge, integrate, and unify disciplines." This way of interpretation increases the transdisciplinary feature and permits more facile assimilation with democratic regimes.

b) Theoretical explorations of democratic resilience

Democratic resilience is a hybrid concept that does not have a standardized definition. However, academic literature shares a common theoretical view on this kind of regime, which is to preserve the attributes recognized by society (politically legitimate) and established constitutionally.

Democracy is now under a synergy of challenges and threats. According to data provided by Varieties of Democracy (2024), the level of democracy enjoyed by the average person in the world in 2023 is down to 1985-levels; by country-based averages, it is back to 1998, amounting to a "third wave" of autocratization. Since 1992, 36 democratic regimes have broken down. 71% of the world's population – 5.7 billion people – live in autocracies – an increase from 48% ten years ago. According to Freedom House, the majority of the world population live under "partly free" or "not free" conditions, signifying that living in fully free democracies is the privilege of a minority. From a perspective of the duality of individual versus society, and the collective security versus individual autonomy, Norris and Inglehart (2019) view authoritarianism "as a cluster of values prioritizing collective security for the group at the expense of liberal autonomy for the individual."

Little attention has been given to the issue of democratic resilience in the current era of uncertainty. However, this concept will become an important criterion for the quality of democracy and its capacity to survive. While there is plenty of literature on the "erosion", "decline", "de-democratization", and "de-consolidation" of democracy and the associated processes, a limited number of studies have analyzed the resilience of democracy before the beginning of the 2000s.

Defining democracy by referring to values and principles is useful for assessing the qualitative aspects by decoupling from the classical approach of the theories of modernization. One of the minimalist and clear definitions of democracy was given by Joseph Schumpeter (1942), who emphasizes the electoral process. In his view, democracy is "that institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people's vote". However, democracy cannot be reduced to a sterile electoral process and needs to promote a set of values to be largely accepted by communities.

Democratic resilience is often conceptualized in opposition to a corrupted electoral process, which leads to autocratization. Election integrity has become an issue due to the citizens' lack of information, reflecting the degradation of their political culture. Disinformation campaigns and the global proliferation of authoritarian government principles are only two causes of lowering political culture standards. In this context, democratic resilience is conceived by scholars and governmental counsellors as a solution to the external and internal threats to election integrity.

Another over-researched line of democratic resilience is related to a major internal source of democratic backsliding – namely, the rise of illiberalism – and an external

global threat constituted by the expansion of authoritarianism. Merkel and Lührmann (2021) remark that these academics "make one common observation: the main contemporary challenge to democracy is its gradual demise after illiberal or authoritarian-leaning political leaders come to power in elections and aggrandize their prerogatives at the cost of parliaments and independent judiciaries."

Apart from these interpretation paradigms, we analyze the dimension of values and principles associated with the contemporary democratic theoretical model. It is useful to consider the highly abstract versions of the definition of resilience to create an accurate image of how democracies can maintain their integrity after facing an internal crisis or external threats (conventional or hybrid). Burnell and Calvert (1999) consider democratic resilience to be an "attachment to democratic ideals (…), in spite of hostility from the officially prescribed values and norms and apparent indifference from many elements in society." As they remarked in that period, "such resilience is of special interest where considerable propaganda and other resources are invested by the state in discrediting democratic goals, and even more so if the people have no historical memory of sustained and successful democratic politics." This ascertainment is applied entirely to the present context.

Resilience is also a hybrid concept with a descriptive and a normative dimension (Hughes et al. 2005). The descriptive component explains the attributes of a high-quality democracy and includes its principles and values agreed upon by the entire community. The normative aspect encompasses the "what to do" elements such as rules, laws, institutions and procedures to prevent backsliding into authoritarianism. This interpretation "refers more to the interplay of disturbance and reorganization within a system as well as to transformability, learning and innovation" (Brand & Jax 2007). We follow primarily the descriptive dimension in our research because the normative aspect is already studied within institutional theories and comparative constitutionalism.

High-quality democracies aim at the conservation of their values. However, the international context forces democracies to re-evaluate their legitimacy and rethink their functioning principles, even the social contract between the state and its citizens. The accelerating changes in the international system require more adaptation abilities from individuals and institutions to ensure democratic resilience. Bouchard (2013) classifies adaptability and transformation into three positions: "a) resilience as successful opposition and resistance to external shocks and a return to the former state; b) resilience as successful adaptation to a new situation involving adjustment, negotiation and compromise and c) resilience as the opportunity to creatively respond to new challenges showing innovation and thriving in the face of in adversity." In a similar assumption, Humbert and Joseph (2019) conclude that "being resilient is to expect subjects to adapt and transform their habits or behavior in light of a crisis or transformative event."

Using the same criteria of adaptability and flexibility, Merkel and Lührmann (2021) consider three perspectives in defining democratic resilience: functionalist, structural and actor-centered perspective. These can work only together and transform democracy into a durable and qualitative regime. In our research, the most important is the actor-centered perspective, including political parties, civic culture and civil society. Civic culture is a niche domain in political science, but Sidney and Verba's theory needs

to be criticized because the international context changed, and human societies have evolved under the influence of factors such as fragmentation and digitalization.

Citizens' attitudes and behaviors are very relevant to democratic resilience. The more widespread and rooted democratic values and attitudes are in a society, and the more vital and active civil society is, the more immune democracy is to external shocks and threats. In his fundamental work "Democracy in America", Tocqueville argues that the internalization of democratic norms into the collective mentality of people can serve as a barrier against non-democratic tendencies. This assumption can be easily adapted to contemporary realities. Democracy must be linked to a solid tradition of values to have resilience. The deeper democratic principles are rooted in the political traditions of a society, the better they translate into open, participatory and effective institutions. A democratic regime will be more resilient as the more stable the consensus among elites to play by the basic democratic rules of the political game and the fairer the policy output and outcomes of political decisions are perceived by the citizens.

Maintaining citizens' trust in democratic institutions and general satisfaction with democracy are the core of the civic-political culture of these regimes. To explain the road to autocratization, Anna Lührmann (2021) argues that there are three stages initiated by authoritarian actors: mounting citizens' discontent with democratic parties and institutions, anti-pluralists rising to power, and finally autocratizers dismantle democratic institutions. Countries with a history of autocratization are more vulnerable to the process of backsliding because of a lack of rooting the democratic values in the political culture. In the first stage, paradoxically, autocratic leaders come to power through popular vote, and citizens have a decisive role. Consequently, the digitalization of politics comes with disinformation campaigns used by autocrats, which negatively impacts the community's adhesion to democracy.

In sum, democratic resilience is characterized by three combined capabilities: persistence, adaptability and transformability. These are not mutually exclusive. Democratic resilience describes the ability of communities to internalize and share democratic principles, attitudes and processes. In our research, we project an organic (from society to elites) concept development: it starts from the political socialization of individuals, proliferates into civil society and aggregates political preferences.

Towards a Pluralist Political Culture

From the discussions above, we observe that political culture is not a static element of the political sphere; on the contrary, it is a dynamic phenomenon characterized, among other things, by the fluidity of shared meanings produced and reproduced within society. This has a potentially strong effect on the core values that underpin liberal democratic regimes and, consequently, on their resilience and stability. From this perspective, democratic resilience must also address how the network of political values on which the institutional structure of the liberal democratic regime is built is itself resilient. In our view, this resilience can be ensured through the existence of a pluralist political culture. This represents, in fact, the final point of our critical investigation and conceptual reconfiguration of political culture.

Unlike the classical concept of political culture as employed by Gabriel Almond and his successors—which is constructed based on hidden normative, value-driven, and

teleological theoretical assumptions—the concept of pluralist political culture is explicitly normative, teleological, and value-driven. Reconfigured from the perspective of democratic resilience, the concept of pluralist political culture necessarily encompasses these elements because liberal democratic regimes are themselves built upon them. Democracies are not value-neutral; they are paradigmatically normative (see Frega 2017; Bowman 2022) and fundamentally constructed with specific goals considered desirable for society. These defining characteristics of democracies are also essential elements of democratic resilience. For the formal democratic political system (comprising various structures, collections of laws and regulations, organizations, and procedures) to be resilient and capable of facing authoritarian and illiberal challenges, it must presuppose the existence of a pluralist political culture, with which it maintains a dynamic, mutually reinforcing relationship.

What, then, are the main directions in which we rethink political culture from the perspective of democratic resilience? Firstly, we challenge the dominant taxonomic model that distinguishes the political sphere from other socio-economic spheres of human societies. We believe that politics should be understood as a constitutive and interrelated space within the social realm, intimately connected to the social, cultural, economic, or religious life of human communities. Secondly, we reject categories built on normative bias, which classify political cultures based on subjective cultural attributes, implying path dependency and condemning comparative political system investigations to produce knowledge that is at least epistemologically questionable.

Therefore, we will start from Giovanni Sartori's concept of pluralism (Sartori 1997) and the aspects discussed above regarding democratic resilience in the current context of anti-democratic backlash to outline an operational definition of political culture and identify its main dimensions.

Sartori proposes a conceptual clarification of pluralism as a central element of democracy, noting that the term's excessive use in varied contexts risks emptying it of meaning and reducing it to an empty signifier. According to Sartori, pluralism can be approached at three different levels of analysis: cultural, societal, and political. Pluralist culture presupposes difference, dissent, and change as its main characteristics. At the societal level, we must clearly distinguish between societal pluralism and societal differentiation, as it is essential to avoid the easy confusion between pluralism and structural complexity. Finally, Sartori associates political pluralism with the diversification of power characteristic of R. Dahl's open polyarchy, which presupposes the existence of a plural diversity of groups that are both independent and non-exclusive (Sartori 1997, 61-63). Speaking about democracy, Sartori dismisses the belief that political conflict is the foundation of democracies, asserting that the pluralistic worldview's central characteristic is dissent, not consensus or conflict (Sartori 1997, 63). The central indicator of a pluralist society is the existence of cross-cutting cleavages, which are also widely discussed in democratic resilience literature (see Lee in Lieberman et al. 2022, 95-117), considering that "pluralism fares well when cleavages are tempered by multiple affiliations (or even multiple loyalties), but may fare poorly when the lines of cleavage are cumulative and mutually reinforcing" (Sartori 1997, 64).

We choose to define pluralist political culture here as a specific pattern of collective meaning-making regarding the political sphere in all its manifestations.

Political culture is both a way of feeling and a way of thinking about the political phenomenon, as rationally based human agency. It refers to a multitude of political cultures reflecting the diversity present in any pluralist multi-group society, cultures that are, however, united by a set of common values—diversity, dissent, and a shared pluralistic understanding and aspiration towards a good life and well-being (see also Kneer and Haybron 2024).

The concept of pluralist political culture should be understood both as a Weberian ideal type and as a political project, in terms of a public policy objective or institutional reform. Only in this way can it substantially contribute to enhancing democratic resilience. This second aspect arises from the fact that this type of culture can be both strong and vulnerable. It is strong because it can prove to be one of the central pillars of a functional democracy, and vulnerable because it can fall victim to political and/or economic power. As Peter Dahlgren notes, "it can be shaped by citizens, but can also shape them, since various 'technologies of citizenship' (...) such as government and education—and I would add the media—can serve to empower or disempower citizens via the civic culture" (Dahlgren 2000, 335).

From this perspective, we believe that political culture should be viewed as a dynamic process involving at least two dimensions: on the one hand, bottom-up civic action, and on the other hand, top-down action from the political class. Undoubtedly, at least in its early stages, it is a fragile process that can be interrupted or derailed. However, once consolidated, it can ensure stability and resilience for a democratic regime, with potentially significant effects, the most important of which, in our opinion, is the reduction of political polarization that generates anti-democratic extremism.

From a bottom-up perspective, the pluralist political culture should be understood as an empowering environment for citizens, in which their civic agency is the most important indicator of the empowering process. At the same time, as Peter Dahlgren notes, a cultural turn is necessary in understanding civic agency, one that would shed light on meaning, practices, communication, and identities in their intersections with citizenship (Dahlgren 2000; 2006). Here we can see the potential of political culture as a research agenda, investigating how political meanings and practices are constructed at the grassroots level and how they shape the performance of everyday citizenship.

On the other hand, from a top-down perspective, we speak about civic agency from the perspective of political elites. This involves various sets of public policies, such as encouraging associative life, local and national civic education programs that facilitate the political socialization of citizens in a pluralist sense, as well as institutional and procedural political reforms aimed at empowering citizens in problem-solving and decision-making, increasing transparency and simplifying political processes, bringing political decisions closer to the citizen, and so forth. Of course, in this perspective, we operate with the assumption that there is a will and propensity among political elites towards maintaining and consolidating democracy, without which the entire discussion becomes meaningless.

Conclusions

In conclusion, the journey towards understanding and strengthening democratic resilience necessitates a profound reevaluation of political culture. We must move beyond static, normatively biased conceptions of culture, recognizing instead its dynamic and fluid nature. By embracing a pluralistic approach, we acknowledge the inherent diversity within societies and the importance of dissent and difference as drivers of democratic vitality. This paradigm shift requires that we consider political culture as a space intertwined with social, economic, and cultural dimensions, not as a separate sphere. Furthermore, the concept of a pluralist political culture must serve as a guide for action, informing public policies and institutional reforms aimed at empowering citizens and reinforcing the foundations of democracy. We are thus proposing that a focus on civic agency, both from the bottom-up and the top-down, is crucial. This dual approach, combined with the understanding that political culture is a dynamic process capable of shaping and being shaped by citizens, provides a pathway toward enhanced democratic resilience in the face of contemporary threats. Ultimately, the goal is not simply to preserve democracy, but to cultivate a vibrant, participatory, and adaptable political culture that ensures its endurance.

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SUBVERTING THE VOTE: HYBRID TACTICS IN DEMOCRATIC DISRUPTION

CZU: 342.841:321.7
https://doi.org/10.59295/eiqd.18

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Abstract. *Hybrid warfare represents a significant and evolving threat to democratic institutions, particularly electoral processes. By blending traditional military strategies with unconventional tactics such as disinformation campaigns, cyberattacks, and economic coercion, adversaries exploit societal vulnerabilities to destabilize political systems and undermine public trust. Disinformation campaigns amplify societal divisions, manipulate public opinion, and erode confidence in electoral integrity, while cyberattacks target critical infrastructure, creating uncertainty and disrupting democratic processes. The adaptability and ambiguity of hybrid warfare, often blurring the lines between state and non-state actors, further complicates accountability and response mechanisms.*

To counter these threats, democracies must adopt a multifaceted approach. This includes strengthening international cooperation for intelligence sharing and joint responses, investing in media literacy programs to empower citizens against disinformation, and promoting transparency to build resilience within institutions. Civil society organizations also play a vital role in enhancing accountability and fostering civic engagement. As hybrid tactics continue to evolve, democratic nations must remain vigilant and proactive, leveraging technological advancements and fostering international partnerships to safeguard electoral integrity and democratic governance. This article examines these challenges and provides recommendations for developing effective strategies to combat hybrid threats.

Keywords*: Hybrid warfare, democratic resilience, disinformation, cybersecurity, civic engagement*

Introduction to Hybrid Warfare and Democratic Resilience

In the context of an increasingly interconnected global environment, hybrid warfare has emerged as a significant threat to the stability and resilience of democratic institutions. Distinct from conventional warfare, hybrid tactics operate in what is often referred to as the *"grey zone"*. These methods blend traditional military strategies with

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unconventional techniques (Hoffman, 2007), such as cyberattacks, disinformation campaigns, and economic coercion, aiming to exploit the vulnerabilities inherent in open societies. By targeting electoral systems, polarizing public opinion, and undermining trust in governance, hybrid warfare destabilizes democracies in ways that are both pervasive and difficult to counter. Its adaptability and inherent ambiguity make hybrid warfare a persistent and evolving challenge for the 21st century.

A striking example of hybrid warfare is the 2016 US. presidential election, during which Russian operatives engaged in a sophisticated disinformation campaign. Using social media platforms, these actors masqueraded as American citizens, disseminating divisive content on sensitive topics such as race, immigration, and gun control (Rid, 2020). The campaign not only sought to influence voter behavior but also revealed structural weaknesses in democratic systems heavily reliant on digital communication. Similarly, the 2007 cyberattacks on Estonia underscored the vulnerabilities of critical infrastructure in the face of state-sponsored aggression. These attacks, which targeted government websites, financial institutions, and media outlets, disrupted the nation's economy and governance, serving as a harbinger of the potential scale and impact of hybrid threats (NATO, 2019).

Hybrid warfare is not confined to major geopolitical players such as the United States or Russia; smaller nations in geopolitically contested regions also face substantial risks. In Eastern Europe, Moldova has been subjected to persistent disinformation campaigns aimed at discrediting its pro-European Union stance (Pomerantsev, 2014). These efforts are often compounded by the nation's reliance on Russian energy supplies, which creates economic and political vulnerabilities during key moments. Similarly, Georgia has experienced extensive propaganda efforts following the 2008 war with Russia. Russian state media narratives portrayed the intervention as a necessary measure to protect ethnic Russians, reshaping public perceptions and influencing regional dynamics. These examples illustrate how hybrid warfare is tailored to exploit the unique vulnerabilities of individual states, adapting its methods to regional political and social contexts.

The digital revolution has amplified the reach and efficacy of hybrid warfare tactics. Social media platforms, with their algorithmic prioritization of sensationalist and divisive content, have become fertile ground for the dissemination of disinformation (Pomerantsev, 2014). The Brexit referendum in the United Kingdom is a case in point; during the campaign, misleading narratives about immigration and economic policy proliferated, shaping public opinion on critical issues. More recently, the 2024 US. presidential election demonstrated the sophistication of hybrid threats through the use of deepfake technology. Fabricated videos depicting candidates in compromising scenarios eroded trust in the electoral process, underscoring the challenges posed by rapidly advancing technology.

Mitigating the impact of hybrid warfare necessitates a comprehensive and multifaceted approach. Media literacy initiatives have proven effective in enhancing societal resilience by equipping individuals with the skills required to identify and counter disinformation (NATO StratCom COE, 2017). Finland, for instance, has integrated media literacy into its national education curriculum, cultivating a digitally literate population capable of navigating complex information landscapes. Cybersecurity

measures are equally crucial. Estonia's implementation of advanced encryption techniques and real-time threat detection systems has positioned it as a global leader in electoral security, providing a model for other nations (Waltzman. 2017).

International cooperation is another cornerstone of efforts to address hybrid threats. Multilateral organizations such as NATO and the European Union have established specialized task forces to combat disinformation and cyberattacks (Giles, 2016.). These initiatives emphasize intelligence sharing, coordinated responses, and the imposition of sanctions on aggressors, thereby strengthening collective security frameworks. However, their effectiveness hinges on the active participation and commitment of member states, as well as the establishment of clear and enforceable protocols for addressing hybrid operations.

Civil society plays a critical role in countering hybrid warfare by fostering transparency and accountability. Grassroots movements and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) act as watchdogs, exposing disinformation campaigns and advocating for informed public discourse. For example, the Digital Forensic Research Lab has been instrumental in identifying and debunking false narratives, reducing their influence on public opinion. By encouraging civic engagement and strengthening public trust, civil society contributes to the resilience of democratic institutions in the face of hybrid threats.

In conclusion, hybrid warfare presents a multifaceted challenge that requires an equally nuanced and robust response. Through the strategic deployment of disinformation, cyberattacks, and economic coercion, adversaries seek to exploit societal divisions and undermine democratic governance. Addressing these threats demands an integrated approach encompassing media literacy, cybersecurity, international collaboration, and active civil society participation. As hybrid warfare tactics continue to evolve, democracies must remain vigilant and adaptable, ensuring that their institutions and societies are resilient against this complex and persistent threat.

Characteristics of Hybrid Warfare

Hybrid warfare constitutes a sophisticated and dynamic strategy of conflict that integrates traditional military tactics with non-traditional methods, including **cyberattacks, disinformation campaigns, economic coercion, and propaganda**. This strategy operates within the *"grey zone"*, an area that blurs the lines between war and peace, enabling aggressors to achieve political or military objectives without resorting to full-scale armed conflict. The hallmark of hybrid warfare is its ambiguity, which complicates the identification of aggressors and challenges the formulation of appropriate responses, whether military or diplomatic (Mumford, Andrew, Pascal Carlucci. 2022).

Modern hybrid warfare exploits systemic vulnerabilities inherent in interconnected and open societies. Among its most prominent tools is **disinformation**, which manipulates public perception, creates societal discord, and erodes trust in institutions. A notable example is Russia's extensive disinformation campaign during the 2016 US. presidential election. Utilizing social media platforms, Russian operatives disseminated divisive content targeting polarizing issues such as immigration, race relations, and gun control. By tailoring messages to specific demographic groups, these

campaigns successfully deepened political polarization and weakened public confidence in democratic processes. This incident underscores the strategic use of disinformation to undermine societal cohesion and influence political outcomes.

Another key pillar of hybrid warfare **cyberattacks**, which often focus on disrupting critical infrastructure, including communication networks, energy systems, and electoral processes. The 2007 cyberattack on Estonia serves as a paradigmatic example. In this state-sponsored operation, hackers paralyzed government websites, financial systems, and media outlets, significantly disrupting the country's administrative and economic functions. This attack not only demonstrated the potential of cyber warfare to destabilize a nation but also highlighted the vulnerabilities of digitized systems in the face of hybrid threats (Total Military Insight. 2024).

Propaganda, a longstanding component of hybrid warfare, has been transformed by the advent of digital technology. Social media platforms and state-controlled media outlets now enable aggressors to disseminate carefully crafted narratives on an unprecedented scale. During Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, for example, Russian media portrayed the intervention as a liberation effort aimed at protecting ethnic Russians and restoring historical justice. This narrative, amplified through both traditional and digital channels, garnered domestic support and sought to legitimize the annexation in the international arena. Such propaganda not only undermines the sovereignty of targeted states but also manipulates global perceptions to align with the aggressor's strategic objectives.

The ambiguous and multifaceted nature of hybrid warfare makes it a particularly challenging threat for democratic states. By exploiting digital technologies and systemic weaknesses, hybrid strategies can achieve significant disruption without crossing the traditional thresholds of war. *To counter such threats, states must develop comprehensive strategies that combine cybersecurity, media literacy, and international collaboration.* Civil society and independent watchdog organizations also play a crucial role in identifying and combating disinformation, thereby strengthening societal resilience against hybrid operations.

Hybrid warfare exemplifies the evolving nature of conflict in the 21st century, where conventional military engagements are increasingly supplemented or replaced by indirect, covert, and non-linear tactics. By leveraging disinformation, cyberattacks, and propaganda, aggressors exploit the vulnerabilities of interconnected societies, destabilizing governance and eroding trust in democratic institutions. Understanding the mechanisms and objectives of hybrid warfare is essential for developing robust responses and safeguarding the principles of sovereignty and democracy.

Evolution of Hybrid Warfare

The concept of hybrid warfare has undergone significant evolution, adapting to technological advancements and shifting geopolitical dynamics. While hybrid tactics are often associated with contemporary conflicts, their roots can be traced to historical practices that combined direct and indirect methods to achieve strategic objectives (Cheng and others, 2018).

Hybrid warfare is not a modern phenomenon. In ancient conflicts, psychological operations and misinformation were frequently employed alongside traditional combat

strategies. For instance, during the Peloponnesian War, Sparta utilized false narratives and propaganda to sow distrust among Athenian allies, weakening their resolve and undermining the Athenian war effort. This strategic integration of indirect methods highlights the enduring relevance of hybrid tactics in military history (Atkinson, p. 63-75).

The Cold War marked a pivotal period in the formalization of hybrid warfare, as superp-owers sought to exert influence without escalating into direct armed conflict. Both the United States and the Soviet Union engaged in extensive psychological operations, disinformation campaigns, and covert activities. For example, US. interventions in Latin America, such as the support for anti-communist movements in Nicaragua and Chile, reflected a calculated use of indirect strategies to counter Soviet influence. Similarly, the Soviet Union deployed propaganda and subversive activities across Europe to bolster its ideological dominance. These Cold War-era tactics underscored the strategic effectiveness of hybrid methods in achieving geopolitical goals while avoiding overt military confrontation.

The advent of the internet and the proliferation of social media platforms have transformed the landscape of hybrid warfare, amplifying its scope and sophistication. In the 2016 US. presidential election, Russian operatives leveraged digital tools to disseminate disinformation, using automated bots and fake social media accounts to manipulate public opinion. These operations targeted polarizing issues, eroded trust in democratic institutions, and showcased the potential of digital platforms as instruments of hybrid warfare (Colibasanu,2024).

The 2007 cyberattacks on Estonia further illustrate the evolution of hybrid warfare in the digital age. In this case, state-sponsored actors launched a coordinated assault on Estonia's government websites, financial systems, and media outlets. These attacks were designed to destabilize the country's political and economic systems, highlighting the disruptive potential of cyber tools in modern hybrid operations. The incident served as a wake-up call for nations reliant on digital infrastructure, demonstrating the vulnerabilities of interconnected societies.

Hybrid warfare has also expanded beyond traditional political and military domains to exploit emerging vulnerabilities in public health and social stability. During the COVID-19 pandemic, state-sponsored disinformation campaigns targeted vaccine distribution efforts, health policies, and public trust in government institutions. These campaigns prolonged the crisis by undermining coordinated responses and fostering societal divisions. This example underscores the adaptability of hybrid warfare, which seeks to exploit any fissure within societies to achieve strategic objectives.

The evolution of hybrid warfare reflects its adaptability to changing historical, technological, and societal contexts. From ancient psychological operations to Cold War-era covert activities and the sophisticated cyber and disinformation campaigns of the digital age, hybrid tactics have proven to be a durable and effective strategy. By exploiting systemic vulnerabilities and leveraging emerging technologies, aggressors continue to challenge the stability of nations and institutions. Understanding this historical evolution is essential for developing robust defenses against the multifaceted threats posed by hybrid warfare.

Contemporary Challenges and Implications

Hybrid warfare poses profound challenges for democratic societies, primarily due to its reliance on ambiguity and deniability. Unlike conventional conflicts, hybrid strategies often deploy proxy actors, such as criminal networks or cyber mercenaries, to obscure the involvement of state sponsors. This tactic complicates attribution and accountability, allowing aggressors to achieve strategic objectives while minimizing the risk of direct reprisal. A prominent example of this approach was Russia's interference in the 2016 US. presidential election, where groups such as *"Fancy Bear"* and coordinated troll farms were employed to manipulate public opinion and disrupt democratic processes. These methods demonstrate how hybrid warfare blurs the boundaries of responsibility, exploiting the legal and political constraints of targeted nations (Colibasanu, 2024).

The economic dimension of hybrid warfare has gained increasing prominence, highlighting its multifaceted nature. Economic coercion has become a powerful tool for exerting influence over adversaries without resorting to overt military action. Manipulating trade relations, imposing sanctions, or controlling energy supplies are common tactics used to pressure nations into compliance. A clear illustration is Russia’s control over European gas supplies, which has been strategically employed during political disputes to coerce policy changes in affected states. This integration of economic instruments within hybrid operations underscores the sophistication and adaptability of such tactics, complicating traditional approaches to conflict resolution.

Democratic systems are particularly vulnerable to hybrid threats due to their inherent openness, transparency, and reliance on free communication. These very strengths, foundational to democratic governance, can be exploited to create societal divisions and erode trust in institutions. Disinformation campaigns are a cornerstone of hybrid warfare, often targeting contentious societal issues such as immigration, racial inequality, or political polarization. By amplifying existing divisions and disseminating false narratives, adversaries seek to undermine public confidence in governance, destabilize political systems, and weaken social cohesion. This form of manipulation demonstrates the interplay between technological advancements and the vulnerabilities of democratic societies.

Responding to the challenges of hybrid warfare requires a comprehensive and multifaceted approach. Enhancing cyber resilience is essential to protect critical infrastructure from increasingly sophisticated attacks. Investments in advanced cybersecurity measures, such as real-time threat detection systems and encryption protocols, are vital to reducing vulnerabilities and minimizing damage. At the same time, societal resilience must be strengthened through initiatives such as media literacy programs. By equipping citizens with the tools to critically evaluate information, nations can mitigate the effects of disinformation and promote a more informed electorate.

International cooperation is equally critical in countering the transnational nature of hybrid threats. Multilateral organizations play a pivotal role in fostering collaboration, sharing intelligence, and coordinating responses. Joint efforts through institutions such as NATO and the European Union have demonstrated the importance of collective action in addressing hybrid aggression. The establishment of specialized bodies, such as NATO's Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, underscores the significance

of analyzing disinformation trends and formulating effective countermeasures. These collaborative frameworks enhance the ability of nations to respond cohesively and decisively to hybrid challenges.

Hybrid warfare remains a dynamic and evolving threat, characterized by its combination of conventional and unconventional tactics designed to exploit the vulnerabilities of modern societies. Its emphasis on ambiguity and deniability ensures that it remains a persistent challenge for policymakers, defense strategists, and international institutions. A comprehensive understanding of its historical evolution, operational mechanisms, and current applications is essential to developing effective countermeasures. As technology continues to advance and global interconnectivity deepens, hybrid warfare is likely to remain a defining issue in national and international security for the foreseeable future, demanding sustained vigilance, adaptability, and innovation in response strategies.

Undermining Democratic Elections Through Hybrid Tactics. The Role of Disinformation Campaigns

Disinformation campaigns are a cornerstone of hybrid warfare, serving to distort political discourse and undermine trust in democratic institutions. These operations are meticulously designed to propagate false or misleading information, thereby diminishing the credibility of legitimate media outlets and public officials. By exploiting existing societal divisions, disinformation fosters polarization, exacerbates tensions, and creates an atmosphere of uncertainty, complicating citizens' ability to differentiate between fact and falsehood.

One of the most striking illustrations of disinformation's impact occurred during the 2016 US. presidential election. Russian operatives, disguising themselves as American citizens, used social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter to amplify contentious narratives surrounding race, immigration, and gun control. These campaigns targeted specific demographic groups with precision, tailoring content to influence opinions, suppress voter turnout, or shift political allegiances. African-American communities, for instance, were bombarded with messaging intended to discourage participation in the electoral process. By disseminating fabricated stories and sensationalist material, these operations successfully manipulated public discourse and eroded trust in the electoral system. This case highlights the effectiveness of disinformation in exploiting vulnerabilities within open societies to achieve strategic objectives (Postma, Šafář, 2024).

Disinformation campaigns often function in concert with other elements of hybrid warfare to enhance their overall impact. During the COVID-19 pandemic, state-sponsored disinformation targeted public health initiatives, focusing on vaccine distribution and government-imposed health measures. These efforts sought to undermine public trust in official responses, amplify doubts about vaccine efficacy, and exacerbate societal divisions over pandemic management. By leveraging the global health crisis, such campaigns demonstrated the flexibility of disinformation tactics in adapting to current events and exploiting vulnerabilities in public confidence. This example underscores how hybrid warfare can weaponize real-world challenges to destabilize democratic societies further.

The adaptability and pervasiveness of disinformation make it a particularly insidious tool in hybrid warfare. By combining digital technology with psychological manipulation, adversaries can reach vast audiences rapidly and at minimal cost. These campaigns are not merely designed to misinform but to destabilize, polarize, and weaken democratic structures from within. Understanding and countering the strategic use of disinformation is critical to safeguarding democratic institutions and ensuring societal resilience in the face of hybrid threats (Bennett and others, 2021).

Cyberattacks on Electoral Infrastructure

Cyberattacks have emerged as a defining feature of hybrid warfare, aiming to undermine the technological foundations of democratic processes. By infiltrating electoral systems, hackers can compromise voter databases, manipulate results, or simply foster the perception of fraud. These operations, often carried out by state-sponsored actors or their proxies, exploit vulnerabilities in digital infrastructure to disrupt democratic governance and sow distrust among citizens.

The 2020 US. presidential election provides a compelling example of cyberattacks as a tool in hybrid warfare. In the months preceding the election, US. intelligence agencies identified numerous attempts by foreign actors, including Russia, China, and Iran, to interfere with the electoral process. These efforts involved a range of techniques, from phishing campaigns targeting election officials to sophisticated hacking attempts on voter registration databases. Although no evidence suggested that votes were altered, the mere existence of these activities was sufficient to raise public concerns about the security of the electoral system. This case underscores how cyberattacks, even when unsuccessful in achieving their immediate goals, can erode trust in democratic institutions by exploiting the fear of manipulation.

The 2007 cyberattacks on Estonia remain a seminal example of how cyber operations can destabilize a nation. Over the course of several days, coordinated attacks targeted Estonia's government websites, banking systems, and media outlets, effectively paralyzing the country’s digital infrastructure. Allegedly orchestrated by Russian actors, this assault demonstrated the capacity of cyberattacks to disrupt essential services, undermine public confidence, and destabilize societal functioning. This event is widely regarded as one of the first large-scale instances of cyber warfare and has since served as a model for hybrid warfare strategies targeting electoral and governmental systems (Lawson and others, 2024).

Countering such threats requires a proactive and comprehensive approach. Governments must invest in advanced cybersecurity measures, including end-to-end encryption, robust firewalls, and real-time threat detection systems, to safeguard critical infrastructure. Additionally, enhancing coordination between public and private sectors is essential for identifying vulnerabilities and mitigating potential risks. However, as cyberattacks grow increasingly sophisticated, defensive measures must evolve in parallel to ensure the resilience of democratic processes against hybrid warfare tactics.

Cyberattacks in hybrid warfare highlight the intersection of technology, strategy, and psychological manipulation. By exploiting digital vulnerabilities, adversaries seek not only to disrupt systems but to erode trust and stability within democratic societies. Understanding the methods and objectives of these operations is essential for developing

effective countermeasures and protecting the integrity of democratic institutions in an era of rapidly advancing technological threats (Whyte, 2020).

Propaganda and Societal Polarization

Propaganda is a fundamental component of hybrid warfare, strategically deployed to deepen societal polarization and manipulate public sentiment. By constructing narratives that exploit existing societal tensions, hybrid actors aim to exacerbate divisions, weakening the social cohesion that underpins democratic institutions. This deliberate manipulation of information enables aggressors to destabilize target societies while pursuing broader geopolitical objectives.

State-sponsored propaganda has been particularly influential in polarizing societies, both domestically and internationally. During the annexation of Crimea in 2014, Russian state media, including outlets like RT and Sputnik, framed the intervention as a humanitarian mission to protect ethnic Russians. This narrative was carefully constructed to resonate with domestic audiences while simultaneously targeting international observers to legitimize Russia's actions and undermine Ukraine's sovereignty. These campaigns demonstrate the effectiveness of weaponized information in shaping perceptions, fostering division, and achieving geopolitical goals without direct confrontation (Ivančík, 2023).

In democratic societies, propaganda often manifests in subtler forms, leveraging the reach and influence of social media platforms. Algorithms designed to prioritize engagement inadvertently amplify divisive content, creating echo chambers that reinforce preexisting biases and discourage constructive discourse. The 2016 US. presidential election provides a vivid example, where propaganda tactics blurred the lines between legitimate political debate and deliberate manipulation. By disseminating polarizing material, hybrid actors were able to influence public opinion and expose the vulnerabilities of open, information-rich societies to hybrid threats (Lemmon, 2024).

The potency of propaganda lies in its ability to exploit emotional triggers such as fear, anger, and nationalism, provoking irrational and reactionary responses. During the Brexit referendum in the United Kingdom, widely circulated falsehoods about immigration and economic consequences were instrumental in stoking anti-EU sentiment. Although the role of foreign interference in these efforts remains debated, the referendum underscored the ability of targeted propaganda to shape public opinion on critical issues, ultimately altering the trajectory of a nation's political landscape. This case illustrates how hybrid actors exploit democratic processes to sow discord and advance their strategic aims.

Combating the challenges posed by propaganda requires a comprehensive and multifaceted response. Media literacy programs are essential for equipping citizens with the tools to critically evaluate information and recognize manipulative narratives. Regulatory oversight of digital platforms is also crucial to reduce the dissemination of harmful content and ensure transparency in content algorithms. Furthermore, international cooperation is needed to address the transnational nature of propaganda campaigns, enabling states to share intelligence and develop coordinated responses.

Hybrid warfare tactics, including propaganda, disinformation campaigns, and cyberattacks, pose a direct and multifaceted threat to the integrity of democratic systems.

By distorting political discourse, undermining trust in institutions, and exacerbating societal divisions, these strategies erode the foundations of democracy. Understanding the mechanisms of propaganda and its broader implications is critical for developing effective countermeasures and ensuring the resilience of democratic institutions in an era defined by hybrid threats (Juhász, 2024.).

Regional and Global Case Studies. Eastern Europe: The Experiences of Romania, Moldova, and Georgia

In 2024, hybrid warfare in Eastern Europe reached new levels of sophistication, targeting the sovereignty and democratic integrity of nations such as Romania, Moldova and Georgia. These states, positioned at the geopolitical crossroads of Russia and the West, are uniquely vulnerable to destabilization efforts. The hybrid tactics employed include disinformation campaigns, cyberattacks, and the exploitation of economic and political vulnerabilities, all designed to undermine their alignment with Western institutions like the European Union and NATO.

Romania: Disinformation and Electoral Interference

Romania's 2024 presidential election was a stark demonstration of how hybrid warfare can disrupt democratic processes. During the election, far-right candidate Călin Georgescu emerged as a surprise frontrunner in the first round, thanks largely to an extensive disinformation campaign orchestrated by Russian operatives. Moscow leveraged social media platforms such as TikTok, where over 100 influencers were mobilized to amplify pro-Russian and nationalist narratives favorable to Georgescu.

These influencers targeted younger voters with engaging but misleading content, falsely attributing Romania’s economic struggles to EU integration and promoting conspiracy theories about corruption among pro-Western candidates. As a result, public trust in the democratic process was significantly eroded, and social divisions deepened. When Romanian authorities annulled the election results due to the scale of foreign interference, it marked a critical moment in recognizing the vulnerabilities of digital platforms in the democratic sphere (Pop and others, 2024).

Moldova: Persistent Hybrid Threats

Moldova, already grappling with internal divisions, faced intensified hybrid threats in 2024. The pro-European government of President Maia Sandu was targeted by Russian disinformation campaigns aiming to derail the country's European Union accession process. Narratives circulating in Moldova claimed that EU membership would lead to economic decline, higher taxes, and the erosion of national sovereignty. These messages were disseminated through both traditional and social media channels, exploiting existing skepticism toward European integration (Peru-Balan, 2024.).

Energy dependency continued to be a significant vulnerability for Moldova. Russia's state-controlled energy giant Gazprom strategically disrupted gas supplies during critical moments, such as during negotiations between Moldova and the EU on energy diversification. These disruptions were timed to exacerbate political tensions and undermine the credibility of the Sandu administration. The combination of economic

leverage and information warfare demonstrated the multi-pronged approach Russia employs to maintain its influence in Moldova (Youngblood, 2024).

Georgia: Electoral Manipulation and Political Destabilization

Georgia has long been a target of Russian hybrid tactics, and the 2024 parliamentary elections were no exception. The ruling Georgian Dream party, led by billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili, declared victory with 54% of the vote. However, international observers, including the OSCE and EU representatives, flagged the elections as neither free nor fair. Evidence of Russian interference included extensive disinformation campaigns and financial support to pro-Russian parties and NGOs.

Russian-controlled media actively portrayed opposition groups as agents of Western interests, framing them as threats to Georgian sovereignty and traditional values. At the same time, cyberattacks targeted government websites and independent media outlets, further complicating the electoral process. These hybrid tactics aimed to deepen political polarization, weaken Georgia's democratic institutions, and deter its progress toward EU and NATO membership (Le Monde, 2024).

The cases of Romania, Moldova, and Georgia in 2024 highlight the dynamic and evolving nature of hybrid warfare in Eastern Europe. By exploiting the unique vulnerabilities of each nation, including societal divisions, energy dependency, and democratic processes, hybrid tactics have proven to be a powerful tool for destabilization. Addressing these threats requires a multifaceted approach, including enhanced digital literacy to combat disinformation, energy diversification to reduce economic vulnerabilities, and strengthened international cooperation on cybersecurity and election integrity.

Russia and Western Democracies: Analyzing Russian disinformation strategies

Russia's hybrid warfare strategies have evolved significantly, employing increasingly sophisticated disinformation campaigns and cyberattacks to target Western democracies. These operations are designed to erode trust in democratic institutions, deepen societal divisions, and weaken international alliances.

One prominent example is Russia's interference in the 2016 US. presidential election. Russian operatives exploited social media platforms, creating fake accounts and disseminating polarizing content to manipulate public opinion. By amplifying existing societal tensions, such as racial inequality and immigration debates, these actors capitalized on vulnerabilities within American society to sow discord. The impact of these operations extended beyond the United States. During the 2017 French presidential election, Russian-backed groups utilized similar tactics, including the dissemination of hacked information to undermine Emmanuel Macron's campaign, illustrating the seamless integration of disinformation into Russia's hybrid warfare strategies.

The United Kingdom has also been a significant target of Russian disinformation. The Brexit referendum in 2016 saw the proliferation of misleading narratives concerning the European Union, particularly around immigration and economic policy. Russian state media outlets such as RT and Sputnik amplified these messages, exemplifying the

coordinated use of traditional and digital media to influence public opinion and destabilize political processes (Menkiszak, 2024).

A key feature of Russia's hybrid approach is its alignment with long-term strategic objectives, such as undermining the unity of NATO and the European Union. By exploiting societal and political vulnerabilities in targeted nations, Russia's disinformation campaigns hinder collective responses to global challenges and weaken the coherence of Western alliances. These developments highlight the necessity of coordinated countermeasures, including intelligence-sharing and joint policy initiatives among affected states, to mitigate the impact of hybrid warfare (Kakachia and others, 2024).

International Examples: Lessons from the 2024 US. Presidential Election

The 2024 US. presidential election offers a compelling case study on the evolution of hybrid warfare. Disinformation campaigns during this election cycle exhibited unprecedented sophistication, incorporating artificial intelligence and machine learning to craft highly convincing fake news and personalized narratives. These operations specifically targeted voter groups with tailored misinformation to suppress voter turnout or manipulate preferences.

A particularly alarming development was the weaponization of deepfake technology. Fabricated videos purporting to show candidates making controversial statements spread widely on social media, undermining public trust in the authenticity of information. In addition, cyberattacks on voter registration systems created administrative confusion and delays, exacerbating public perceptions of electoral vulnerability. Although these cyberattacks did not alter votes, their psychological impact on public confidence in democratic processes was significant.

Social media platforms played a pivotal role in facilitating hybrid operations during the 2024 election. Algorithms designed to maximize user engagement inadvertently amplified divisive content, enabling disinformation campaigns to reach vast audiences. Despite increased efforts by technology companies to detect and remove malicious actors, the overwhelming volume of misleading content highlighted the ongoing challenges of balancing free expression with the need to mitigate harmful influence campaigns.

The lessons from the 2024 election underscore the critical importance of proactive measures to protect electoral integrity. These measures include enhancing public awareness of disinformation tactics, investing in robust cybersecurity infrastructure, and fostering international cooperation to hold both state and non-state actors accountable for hybrid operations. Addressing these challenges at a systemic level is vital, given their implications for the stability of democratic institutions worldwide (Alaverdov and others, 2023).

Strategies for Democratic Resilience. Media literacy and combating disinformation

Democracies face evolving hybrid threats that exploit vulnerabilities across societal, political, and technological domains. To counter these challenges, a multifaceted strategy that emphasizes media literacy, cybersecurity, and the strengthening of civil society is essential (European Parliament, 2024).

Media literacy is a cornerstone of democratic resilience, equipping citizens with the tools to critically evaluate information and resist manipulative disinformation campaigns. These programs teach individuals to recognize credible sources, identify biases, and understand the emotional triggers often exploited in disinformation, such as fear or anger. A significant focus of media literacy initiatives is on election-related disinformation, where false claims about voter fraud or integrity can undermine trust in democratic processes. For example, the European Commission's "Media Literacy for All" project and Finland's integration (European Commission, 2021) of media literacy into school curricula have demonstrated success in building public awareness and resilience to misinformation (European Digital Media Observatory, 2023). To maximize their impact, media literacy programs must be inclusive, addressing the needs of diverse demographics, including those with limited digital skills or access to information. Tailored initiatives ensure broader societal engagement and a more robust defense against disinformation (Kristin and Vogt, 2024).

Enhancing Cybersecurity measures

The protection of electoral systems is vital for maintaining democratic integrity. Modern election infrastructure, including electronic voting platforms and voter databases, is increasingly targeted by cyberattacks. Robust cybersecurity measures, such as end-to-end encryption and multi-factor authentication, are essential for safeguarding these systems. Estonia's e-governance framework is a leading example, demonstrating how advanced security protocols can bolster trust in digital electoral processes (Estonian Centre for International Development, 2024).

Real-time threat detection and response are equally critical. Tools leveraging artificial intelligence and machine learning help identify and mitigate cyber threats before significant harm occurs. During the 2020 US. presidential election, state and federal collaboration successfully prevented major disruptions, showcasing the importance of coordinated efforts.

International cooperation further strengthens cybersecurity. Initiatives like the NATO Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence facilitate information sharing and joint responses, enhancing collective defense. However, continuous investment and innovation are required to address the rapidly evolving nature of cyber threats.

Strengthening civil society and promoting transparency

A vibrant civil society plays a pivotal role in countering hybrid threats by promoting transparency, accountability, and civic engagement. Civil society organizations (CSOs), such as the Digital Forensic Research Lab, specialize in identifying and debunking disinformation, reducing its impact on public opinion. These efforts are particularly critical during elections, where exposing false claims can prevent them from influencing voter behavior. Transparency initiatives further bolster democratic resilience. Practices like publishing detailed election results and granting access to public records build trust in institutions and provide citizens with accurate information to counter disinformation. Countries like Canada and Sweden have effectively implemented such measures, reinforcing public confidence in governance.

CSOs also enhance resilience through civic education and public participation. Campaigns encouraging voting and community engagement empower citizens to actively defend democracy. For example, grassroots movements in Ukraine have successfully mobilized support for democratic reforms, illustrating civil society's potential to drive positive change even in adverse conditions. An enabling environment is essential for civil society initiatives to thrive. Governments must ensure that CSOs have adequate legal and financial resources, while international support can provide additional expertise and funding. By recognizing and supporting the role of civil society, democracies can build robust defenses against hybrid threats.

Building democratic resilience against hybrid warfare requires a comprehensive strategy addressing disinformation, cybersecurity, and civic engagement. Media literacy initiatives foster critical thinking, cybersecurity measures protect electoral integrity, and civil society strengthens transparency and accountability. While challenges remain, these strategies provide a roadmap for creating resilient democratic institutions capable of withstanding the complexities of modern hybrid threats (Center for Civilians in Conflict, 2024).

Summary and recommendations

Hybrid warfare presents an evolving threat to democratic elections, blending conventional strategies with unconventional tools such as cyberattacks, disinformation campaigns, and economic coercion. These tactics are designed to exploit systemic vulnerabilities, disrupt political stability, and erode trust in democratic processes. The most concerning feature of hybrid warfare is its adaptability, enabling adversaries to target specific weaknesses within different societies. This multidimensional challenge underscores the need for robust and coordinated responses.

The impact of hybrid warfare on democratic elections is profound. Disinformation campaigns manipulate public opinion by spreading false narratives, often intensifying societal divisions. These campaigns not only influence voter behavior but also erode trust in electoral institutions, as evidenced by the 2016 US. presidential election, where foreign actors amplified divisive content on social media. Similarly, cyberattacks on electoral infrastructure, such as voter databases, create chaos and foster doubts about election integrity, further undermining public confidence. Compounding this challenge is the difficulty of attributing responsibility, as hybrid operations often blur the lines between state and non-state actors, complicating accountability and response strategies (Association of the United States Army, 2021).

Addressing these threats requires a multifaceted approach:

- **Strengthening International Cooperation**

Hybrid threats are inherently transnational, making international collaboration essential. Organizations such as NATO and the European Union have established frameworks to address hybrid threats, including specialized task forces for monitoring and countering disinformation and cyberattacks. For instance, the European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats and the NATO Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence have provided valuable platforms for sharing resources and

expertise. Democracies should enhance these efforts by developing multilateral agreements with clear protocols for intelligence sharing, joint investigations, and coordinated sanctions against perpetrators. Such measures can strengthen collective resilience and deter aggressors.

- **Developing Media Literacy Programs**

Media literacy initiatives are crucial for empowering citizens to recognize and counter disinformation. These programs foster critical thinking and provide tools to evaluate the credibility of information. Countries like Finland have successfully integrated media literacy into school curricula, equipping students to navigate online content critically. Public awareness campaigns and partnerships with technology companies further amplify the impact of these initiatives. For example, social media platforms have introduced features to flag disputed content, helping users identify misinformation. To remain effective, media literacy programs must evolve alongside emerging threats, such as deepfake technology and AI-driven disinformation.

- **Promoting Transparency and Civic Engagement**

Transparency and active civic participation are essential for building resilience against hybrid threats. Open government practices, such as publishing election results and ensuring decision-making transparency, foster trust and reduce the effectiveness of disinformation campaigns. Civil society organizations (CSOs) play a pivotal role by acting as watchdogs and exposing false narratives. Initiatives like the Digital Forensic Research Lab exemplify how CSOs can debunk disinformation and raise public awareness. Encouraging public engagement through civic education campaigns and grassroots movements further strengthens democratic resilience. Governments must support these efforts by creating an enabling environment for CSOs, including legal protections and financial resources.

Hybrid warfare poses a significant challenge to democratic elections, but a combination of international collaboration, media literacy, and transparency can mitigate its impact. By investing in these strategies, democracies can protect the integrity of their institutions and maintain public trust. Proactive and adaptable responses will be critical in safeguarding democratic governance against the evolving landscape of hybrid threats.

Conclusion

Hybrid warfare poses a significant and multifaceted threat to the stability and integrity of democratic systems worldwide. By blending traditional military strategies with unconventional methods such as disinformation campaigns, cyberattacks, and economic coercion, adversaries exploit the inherent vulnerabilities of open and interconnected societies. These tactics not only destabilize political institutions but also erode public trust, deepen societal divisions, and undermine democratic governance.

Addressing these challenges requires a comprehensive and adaptive response. Strategies must include strengthening international cooperation to enhance collective resilience, implementing robust cybersecurity measures to safeguard electoral integrity, and fostering media literacy programs to empower citizens against disinformation. Additionally, promoting transparency and civic engagement is essential for reinforcing public trust and accountability within democratic institutions.

As hybrid warfare continues to evolve, democracies must remain vigilant and proactive. Through coordinated efforts at the national and international levels, it is possible to mitigate the risks posed by these threats and ensure the resilience of democratic systems against an increasingly complex and adaptable adversarial landscape.

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MYTHS AND MANIPULATION TECHNIQUES IN THE ELECTORAL CAMPAIGN FOR THE OCTOBER 20, 2024, PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS IN THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA

CZU: 342.84:341.511(478)″2024″
https://doi.org/10.59295/eiqd.19

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Abstract. *The article examines the impact of political myth and manipulation techniques during the electoral campaign of the presidential elections in the Republic of Moldova in November 2024. The purpose of the article is to show that myth, despite the negative attitude towards it, plays an important and, in many ways, unique role in society. It is related to the mythical-religious thinking of contemporary society in that myth forms the semantic field of culture, which is responsible for the values and meanings of peoples and societies, on which the moral health of society and individuals depends. Thus, myth serves our consciousness, providing the images we need and forming the motivations we want in elections and referendums. Through it, frameworks are established, life is governed, normalized and ritualized, introducing the "harmony" necessary for its functioning in society.*

Keywords*: political myths, national security, informational warfare, disinformation, distortion, trolling, fake news.*

Theoretical approach of political myths

First, despite the fact that political myths have always embedded everyday human activity and communication, political mythology does not enjoy adequate attention in the social-political literature, being researched and addressed only partially. The problem of political myths has attracted the attention of historians and political scientists of the republic, especially in the period 1989-1991, when the constitutional foundations of the Republic of Moldova as a democratic state governed by the rule of law were laid. The subject was approached in the area of social psychology, electoral sociology, political sociology with the aim of explaining in relatively easy to perceive nuances how electoral

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behavior was influenced by the construction of certain political myths to generate emotion and adherence.

The domain of political myths is supposedly some scientific research in the fundamental articles and monographs of Western scientists: R.Girardet (Mituri şi mitologii politice), L. Sfez (Mythologies politiques du cinéma français), V. Kernbach (Miturile esențiale, Dicționarul de mitologie generală), J. Sorel, E. Cassirer (The Myth of the State, Eseu despre om. O introducere în filosofia culturii umane) G. Gurdorf, M. Edelmann, T.Henry (Political Myth), T. L. Thorson (in the 4th edition of A History of Political Theory), R. Bart, K. Jung, I. Kant, C.L.Strauss, and others in post-Soviet space C.Gadjiev, G.Belov, G.Poceptov, A.Prigojin, A.Piatigorski, V.Halipov etc., in which an analysis is made under different aspects of the process of generation of political myths, the essential structures and functions of them in cadres of the political system. The symbolico-mythological dimensions in the concept of political image developmente are addressed in the Republic of Modova in the works of (Peru-Balan A., 2022:23).

Myths are widely used in the social-political sphere. A myth is considered a political myth when the narrative provides an ideologically marked account of the past, present, and future of the political community. The French sociologist George Sorel was the first to use the notion of "myth" in relation to political phenomena. So, the myth constitutes in essence a whole with the conventions of the social group, is the expression of this convention in the language of mixtures and for this reason we cannot decompose it into parts.

Currently, a series of studies have appeared that treat and analyze the phenomenon of mythology and collective mindsets in a very broad context. However, researchers more talk about mystifications referring to myths with negative connotations, to falsehoods. The myth does not describe history. But history has shown that these beautiful ideals of future societies are nothing but dystopias, that is, the opposite of utopias. In this sense, there are examples of the totality of the 20th century, when both communism and fascism have failed to deliver what they promised people. By following, we could affirm, that the architecture of social-political reality dictates the appearance of the “demand-supply” dichotomy. Political myths take shape as a function of community demand. Thus, good revolutions "of catfish" from South-Eastern Europe has realized the need for reformist leaders, just as the young democracy of the Moldovan state at various stages has claimed “revolutionary”, “reformist”, “democratic”, “dogmatic” alternatives. Hence, probably, the aphorism: “Every people is worth of its drivers”.

Secondary, information warfare, disinformation, distortion, trolling, and fake news are not just simple words that do not concern us directly; they are integral parts of a sophisticated and well-orchestrated campaign aimed at "brainwashing" and the systemic implantation of information at a subconscious level through various methods of mass manipulation.

We are living in an era where information wars are gaining ground over physical wars, thanks to propaganda offensives and skillful psychological manipulation of the masses. In the media battles of Moldovan politics, the focus is often not on promoting reformist visions capable of lifting the country from its knees but rather on discrediting opponents, with the goal of compromising them in the eyes of the electorate. Ultimately,

the fate of individuals and the nation as a whole is decided by the flow of manipulated information behind the screens.

The use of myths to influence voters' behavior is one of the ways to achieve political goals, myths are actively used in ideology and propaganda, in social communication and advertising, in manipulation. Mythologizing techniques are used in shaping mass consciousness. In modern society, a new direction of mythologizing is emerging - political mythologizing. Political myth is a transformed form of political consciousness in which knowledge and understanding of political facts is replaced by images, symbols, fictions, legends and belief in them.

A report published by the **Romanian Center for European Policies** (Moşneaga Valeriu, Bencheci Marcel, Hîrbu-Bencheci Diana, 2016, nr.3 (LXXIV) shows that the Republic of Moldova is one of the most affected European countries by disinformation campaigns coming from Russia. The content of these campaigns is taken and promoted by visible politicians, representatives of the Orthodox Church of Moldova, as well as pro-Russian media outlets. In this sense, the Republic of Moldova is a testing ground for projecting Russian influence in Eastern Europe and one of the most exposed and vulnerable countries to the information war organized by the Kremlin. Russian propaganda is systemic and omnipresent in the public, private, and associative sectors of the Republic of Moldova; it has a well-organized and supplied hierarchical structure; it relies on media retransmitted from the Russian Federation and on servile local media; the narratives promoted are built on a “black-and-white” (good vs. evil) model, being simple, accessible, captivating, and focused; the political class in the Republic of Moldova often lacked initiative in setting the foreign policy and security agenda due to detachment and passivity.

The elements listed are amplified by the lack of national unity and social cohesion, and the population is confused and misinformed as a result of active propaganda, including due to corruption, indifference, or complicity of public authorities.

Although the official state policy is strictly pro-European, the perception of the European integration process in the citizens' consciousness is ambiguous, strongly influenced by the historical past shared with Russia, as well as with other Soviet republics; the presence of the Russian language as the most widespread unofficial language of communication (in the 2014 census, 13.2% of the citizens of the Republic of Moldova declared themselves Russian speakers, but in reality, their number is much higher), as well as Russia's geostrategic interests in the region.

An analysis of the media development environment in the Republic of Moldova shows gaps between the political decision-making process regarding European integration and the reality perceived by citizens. The political course change of the country does not necessarily coincide with the emergence of such behaviors and attitudes for all community members, because Moldovan society is extremely fragmented along political criteria, geostrategic orientation, ethnicities, and the presence of a low political culture (Damian A., Șubernițchi V. 2022:12). External propaganda and disinformation have become tools to undermine and weaken national and regional security and stability by using traditional tools (press, radio, TV, movies) and newer ones (Internet, social media). Technologies create a qualitatively new environment for operations: influences, beliefs, and mass manipulation. Artificial intelligence (AI) is used by the opposition to

generate and disseminate fake news and videos, which are extremely difficult to identify as manipulated files. Deepfakes can be particularly effective in compromising the political reputation of candidates, thereby influencing election campaigns without the need to hack electoral systems.

The elements of hybrid warfare present in the Republic of Moldova exert pressure on national security and defense, self-governance, and pose obstacles to achieving national interests.

The legislation of the Republic of Moldova in the field of national security does not cover the current security needs and fails to provide rational and prudent policies. Additionally, inter-institutional coordination is at a low level. We are witnessing an increase in the activities of external influence agents (NGOs, media, political forces, church), the lack of a strong national media, and a unified voice.

In the last decade, the citizens' feelings of skepticism, distrust, or even fear towards the information dissemination system have grown alarmingly.

A frightened society is divisive, enamored, creates an atmosphere of general mistrust, an appeal to the authorities, a "strong hand", which often stimulates the escalation of fears and suspicion for their own approval. The destruction of social bonds breeds uncertainty, fear and intolerance. And the weaker the state power, the more inclined it is to intensify the fight against "enemies", to create an image of the enemy - both external and internal. Often the state in such a society demonstrates its power by further strengthening the fight against "criminality" and "enemies". "This often led to the emergence of conflicts between sovereigns, wars being the process often encountered in interstate activity, and considered the most effective and most secure in achieving state interests". (SacaV., 2001:218-220)

No one denies, however, the mass communication's essential role in democracy: information remains vital for the smooth functioning of society, and two of the key conditions for a democracy today are: the existence of a valid communication network and a maximum of free information.

Ștefan Buzărnescu (1996) defines manipulation as "the action of determining a social actor (individual, group, community) to think and act in a manner compatible with the initiator's interests, rather than their own, through the use of persuasion techniques that intentionally distort the truth, yet give the impression of freedom of thought and decision-making." (Buzărnescu, St. 1996:35).

The political myth has a great power to penetrate consciousness. Political practice shows that the political imaginary constantly intervenes to explain the past and legitimize the present - in both totalitarian and democratic societies. People are bombarded daily with numerous persuasive messages. Research on this topic shows that the reaction to a message often depends on the characteristics of the person trying to convince, regardless of the value of the message itself. In this context, psychologists have identified three key characteristics:

1. credibility of the communicator;
2. physical qualities and "charm" of the communicator;
3. perceived intentions of the communicator.

Disinformation (Zamfir, Vlăsceanu, 1993:342) is defined as any intervention in the basic elements of a communication process that deliberately alters the messages

being conveyed, with the aim of causing specific attitudes, reactions, and actions in the receivers (referred to as "targets" in disinformation theory) that align with the desires of a certain social agent. The disinformation agent does not necessarily have to be the disinformation source itself; it can also be an institution, an organization, etc.

As an immediate reality, disinformation has two dimensions: one unintentional and one intentional, aimed at a specific segment of opinion.

From an intentional perspective, disinformation can be analyzed (Buzărnescu, 1996:87) in terms of the symbolic forms through which information is coded in a message:

1. as we know, codes can be expressed through natural language, nonverbal language (gestures, facial expressions), concrete symbols (colors, panels, lights), and abstract symbols specific to artificial language (scientifically developed), such as mathematical formulas, logical expressions, etc;
2. another intentional method for disinformation is polysemic coding of the message. The multitude of inherent meanings in a statement, generating a corresponding diversity of opinions, leads to a diversity of attitudes ranging from complete adherence to rejection.

Strategic disinformation is effective when it presents as fundamental social values either those that are favorable to the source or those marginal to the interests of the target audience. In this way, the community is diverted from its main concerns, fundamental social values are neglected, and the competitiveness of the community declines.

The elements of disinformation actions are:

1. Commanders are those who conceive and design the action's content, defining both real and potential targets. They can be decision-makers (governments, military headquarters, or socio-professional groups) and pressure groups. While the first category uses specialized services, pressure groups also employ ad-hoc teams of amateurs who are highly effective in creating and maintaining confusion.
2. Specialists are those who plan the tactical sequences of the action and coordinate all the ways to control the concrete effects of the emitted messages. They simulate all categories of effects to ensure that they control both the own effects and the requirements of re-designing elements in response to counteraction efforts by the target.
3. Control is the link between the commanders, who direct the action, and the influence agents. To control the social space under their responsibility, controllers recruit and maintain a vast network of correspondents, usually indirectly, through third parties who act as scouts. These individuals, selected from among insignificant people, are tasked with testing the willingness of a personality with access to valuable data to collaborate with the commanders and planners.
4. Influence agents are recruited from those who have prestige within their professional group and who are to be disinformed through messages received from planners via controllers. Experience has shown that influence agents can be: opinion leaders in intellectual circles, who, in their desire to take practical action, agree to launch shocking messages into the public space; This is done through a compromising fact to ensure long-term collaboration.
5. Leaders of associations: In the context of pluralistic systems, the associative environment is favorable for recruiting and cultivating influence agents. By emphasizing

humanitarian interests, protected by an internationally valid legal framework, the disinformation can attract many naïve individuals into association structures, often professionals who are leading figures in their field.

6. Intermediaries are recruited from influential personalities in the community to act as opinion leaders and agents of influence, who appear neutral and independent but serve hidden interests behind the messages they emit.

7. Relays – individuals or institutions that prove useful in amplifying and programming the messages constituting the disinformation content.

These developments clearly demonstrate that the variety of ways in which social organizations are formed and operate, the diversity of nations, and the differences, gaps, and incompatibilities between them, are all products and expressions of the social information processors. The trend of globalizing public information offers a free field for intermediaries specializing in using communication for purposes that can affect it; furthermore, the possibilities offered by scientific research create new communication channels, which increasingly modify not only the possibilities of reception but also the ways in which information is processed and preserved for social use.

The 2024 presidential elections and disinformation in the Republic of Moldova

During the 2024 presidential election campaign, negative campaign activities were observed. The public space in the Republic of Moldova continued to be affected by numerous fakes and manipulations. As it was an election year, propaganda sources were more active than ever, spreading various disinformation messages about the EU, NATO, speculations about dragging Moldova into the war, or "liquidating" the country.

Fugitive oligarch Ilan Șor, socialists Bogdan Țîrdea and Igor Dodon, Gagauzia leader Evghenia Guțul, and even the spokeswoman for the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs Maria Zakharova were among those who actively polluted the public space with disinformation, becoming the "champions" of fake news in 2024.

In the first ten days of October, as the election campaign gained momentum, some candidates diversified their arsenal of falsehoods spread on social media. The most outrageous and easy-to-debunk came from Victoria Furtună and Tudor Ulianovschi: "Moldovans are taking microloans to pay utilities" and "PAS closed the maternity wards." Other falsehoods and manipulations appeared in the speeches of Irina Vlah, Vasile Tarlev, and the leader of PSRM, Igor Dodon, who campaigned for the independent candidate Alexandr Stoianoglo.

The myths promoted in the electoral campaign of October 20, 2024 were:

1. *The Myth of the Savior Leader and/or the myth of the unimprisoned dissident in the name of Ilan Șor or Veaceslav Platon;*

From these perspectives, the candidates can be presented as the only viable solution to solve economic, political, or social problems. A notable example of promoting a national hero image was the campaign of Victoria Furtună, who ventured into the fight against repaying loans for Moldovans. A narrative that was observed was: "Moldovans cannot repay 3 billion lei taken from microfinance companies," as stated by candidate Victoria Furtună on October 8. This message was a repetition of one she posted in a video on October 3, in which she promised: "The cancellation of debts for

disadvantaged individuals. The problematic loans of the disadvantaged population amount to approximately 2.5-3 billion lei. We will offer a new chance through a credit amnesty for those who cannot pay."(Borodin, 2024)

However, it is unclear how Victoria Furtună arrived at the figure of three billion lei in non-repayable loans and how she assessed that these loans were taken by "pensioners and needy citizens to survive."

In a comment for StopFals.md, economist Stas Madan, project director at the association Expert-Grup, explained: "First of all, not all of the 14 billion lei were granted exclusively to the population. Around 25-30% of this amount was granted to legal entities. Secondly, the claim that one in five people cannot repay their loan is also false, as the share of non-performing loans is 12%. So, we are talking about a sum of 1.7 billion lei in loans to microfinance organizations that are facing repayment difficulties (including from businesses), which is practically half of what the candidate insinuates."(Zaharia, 2024)

The case of the “knight of the lady”. Veaceslav Platon states on social networks that he believes that in these presidential elections "there are two good candidates - Alexandru Stoianoglo and Natalia Morari". According to Platon, Stoianoglo "is a decent man and cannot harm anyone", and Morari "has the best electoral program". (Andonii, LIVE, TikTok)

2. The Myth of Immediate Prosperity

Unrealistic promises regarding rapid economic growth, tax reductions, or pension increases within a very short time. "Cooperation with Russia is in the interest of the Republic of Moldova" to gain support and funding for the 2024 and 2025 elections. There is a high probability that these structures are guided by Russian intelligence services or influence centers connected to the Kremlin administration, disseminating the strategic narratives promoted by the Russian Federation in relation to the Republic of Moldova. In this regard, the service is investigating indicators of Russia's interference in Moldova's internal affairs, including the revival of "fifth-column" elements, already known to the service, camouflaged under the "sovereign national interest."

3. Myths Related to the Opposition or Conspiracy Myths

Creation of negative narratives about opposing candidates, such as corrupt connections or dependence on foreign interests.

According to Promo Lex Report No. 5 on the presidential elections of October 20, 2024, it was observed that representatives of Maia Sandu's candidate (PAS) distributed electoral materials (flyers printed in approximately 666,000 copies) promoting 6 main hypotheses/predictions in case her opponent were elected president:

1. The return of fugitive bandits and their seizure of power.
2. A president disrespected by everyone abroad.
3. The closure of the European market.
4. A danger to the free movement of citizens within the EU.
5. The emigration of young people.
6. Suspension of EU financial aid and the risk of being involved in war.

Similarly, Maia Sandu's opponents distributed false information about the future of the country in the event of her victory in the elections. On October 26, 2024, a video spot was posted on social media by PR representatives containing several arguments to

vote against Maia Sandu (PAS), accusing her of unpopular actions such as closing educational institutions, opposition media, raising gas prices, etc.

In these elections the manipulation techniques were spread very widely.

The narratives in disinformation campaigns were aligned with geopolitical interests sponsored by the Russian Federation. These campaigns aimed to exploit Moldova's economic vulnerabilities, historical ties, and social tensions, undermining democratic processes. Key platforms—such as Telegram and TikTok—were strategically used and contributed to the dissemination of falsehoods, having a major impact. The narratives promoted encouraged an increase in distrust toward public institutions, a constant fear of losing statehood, and a weak resilience for the country's security.

In this way we distinguish the classical spectrum the electoral programs of the political formations are based on the classical norms of mythological thinking, having the following structure:

- the component of fear infiltrated among the population through the amplification of crises, the socio-economic recession in which the society is;
- presentation of the profile of an "enemy / invented enemy" because of which society faces various difficulties, a fact that exempts political parties of any responsibility for problems arising in the community;
- shaping the image of the "hero/savior" in favor of which the political myth will be unfolded;
- the use of archaic symbols (adapted images of father and mother, religious elements etc.);
- eulogizing the glorious past considered as a "golden age" to which society must immediately return.

The development of disinformation was used by candidates. The spread of false or misleading information to influence voters' perceptions was very popular in this electoral campaign.

"The government is closing maternity wards". On the October 11, in the Facebook post, independent candidate Tudor Ulianovschi stated that he had discussed with voters in Cimișlia the closure of the district's maternity ward. "One of the painful topics that concerns people is the closure of the Cimișlia maternity ward and its transfer to Hâncești, a decision made at the initiative of PAS." Between 2018 and 2021, nine maternity wards were closed, where between 47 and 219 children were born annually: Leova, Basarabeasca, Ocnița, Briceni, Taraclia, Șoldănești, Dondușeni, Glodeni, and Fălești. No Minister of Health, regardless of their government affiliation, contributed to the closure of these maternity wards. The district hospitals voluntarily ceased maternity services, without coercion, due to specific circumstances and with the consent of the Founder. There is no reason for speculation here," explained Ala Nemerenco on Facebook.

"Maia Sandu banned money transfers from Russia". Irina Vlah also discussed financial issues with her voters. In a video posted on October 8, she is seen talking to a passerby, confirming that "Maia Sandu has banned money transfers from Russia" and promising that if she becomes president, she will lift "all these bans." Of course, she does not mention that a president has no power to prohibit or approve the use of transfer systems.

"Moldova will integrate into the EU without Transnistria". Irina Vlah also addressed the Transnistria issue. In an October 11 post, she stated: "Sandu has cut off all dialogue with Tiraspol, and the 'hotheads' in her team have even proposed 'entering Europe' by abandoning Transnistria. This behavior is unacceptable and, moreover, contradicts the Constitution. As president, I will guarantee a peaceful reintegration with Transnistria."The false claim that Moldova is abandoning the Transnistrian region has been heavily promoted by pro-Russian media over the past year, despite President Maia Sandu repeatedly denying any "abandonment" of the region.

"A secret plan is being prepared to dismantle our nation's statehood, independence, and sovereignty—Moldova". On October 1, candidate Vasile Tarlev published an appeal to all presidential candidates to sign a "national pact for the protection of Moldova's lands." While this narrative has been previously explained in another article, another idea used in past electoral campaigns is worth noting: that the Republic of Moldova is at risk of being dismantled.

"Today, we see that a secret plan is being prepared in the country to dismantle our nation's statehood, independence, and sovereignty—Moldova. We are categorically against such actions of discreditation, impoverishment, and the liquidation of the Republic of Moldova," wrote Vasile Tarlev. The narratives "We won't give our country to foreigners" and "Moldova is at risk of disappearing" were used by Igor Dodon in his 2020 election campaign, which he lost to Maia Sandu. Vasile Tarlev is using them again now, and Dodon is repeating this message in the current campaign. "I believe that European integration, as promoted by Maia Sandu, means surrendering sovereignty to Brussels," said the PSRM leader in an October 4 live broadcast.

In the current campaign, some candidates are taking populism to an absurd level, combining it with falsehoods to create a completely imaginary reality—detached from the real lives of people. This certainly does not contribute to informing the public but instead severely distorts the democratic mechanism, which relies on free and fair elections throughout the electoral process. (Zaharia, 2024)

Another way of dividing electorate was polarization. Dividing society by emphasizing ethnic, religious, or economic conflicts. Objective: To mobilize a clearly defined segment of the electorate. Selling land to foreigners—picked up by Ion Chicu and Igor Dodon. On September 27, Realitatea.md aired a video interview with the EU ambassador to Chișinău, discussing disinformation regarding the sale of land to foreign citizens. The interview was translated in real-time, and later, the Realitatea group published a news piece quoting the ambassador, claiming that after Moldova's EU integration, agricultural land could be sold to foreign citizens.

This statement is false. The Realitatea group later corrected the misinformation, explaining that it resulted from a translation misinterpretation. The news article was removed from the website. However, the Land Code of the Republic of Moldova, adopted in December 2023, clearly states that ownership of agricultural or forest land cannot be acquired or held by foreign citizens, whether individuals or legal entities.

According to the Civic Coalition for Free and Fair Elections, which brings together a number of NGOs specialized in the electoral field, these actions manifested themselves through "illegal financing of electoral campaigns, corrupting voters and disinformation campaigns, all aimed at influencing the electoral behavior of citizens.

The clandestine support provided to a subversive network and the involvement of an unregistered political organization in electoral mobilization activities had a major impact on the fairness of the electoral process". To complete the picture, we would also add here the massive illegal transportation of Moldovan voters from the Russian Federation to open polling stations in Belarus, Turkey and Azerbaijan, according to the authorities and the media.

This electoral campaign was also marked by the emotionalization of discourse by making appeal to strong emotions (fear, pride, anger) to distract attention from real issues. "Dragging Moldova into war" – a topic also exploited by candidate Irina Vlah. The fear that the government is "dragging the country into war" is also used by candidate Irina Vlah, who has self-proclaimed herself as the "president of peace" during her campaign. In a video from a meeting with voters, posted on Facebook on September 28, Irina Vlah says, referring to President Maia Sandu: *"What distinguishes two women: one takes care, while the other buys weapons. Do you see the difference?"*

This topic is present in almost all of Irina Vlah's messages, including in the launch statement of her electoral campaign "Peace Caravan", published four days earlier, on September 24: *"I will ensure that our citizens are safe, that nothing threatens peace in Moldova. War was the favorite topic of the outgoing president, but we will talk about peace."*

One of the forms of electoral influence and manipulation was the microtargeting and online manipulation by using social media to spread personalized messages to different groups of voters. Exploiting platform algorithms to amplify populist or radical messages.

During the electoral period from September to October 2024, €49,597 was spent to promote the political projects of Ilan ȘOR and discredit Moldova's European path, funding 128 publications. Simultaneously, specific voter groups were targeted—mainly young people (18-34 years old) and middle-aged individuals (55-64 years old). The geographical targeting was based on population density, but an analysis of these campaigns indicates a priority focus on certain areas: Chișinău, Bălți, Transnistria, and Gagauzia. (SIS Report)

"Our defense is led by NATO generals "While" defending" the Orthodox Church of Moldova at a press conference, Victoria Furtună also touched on the NATO issue, stating: *"After all, it is written: 'Thou shalt not kill.' But what does the current government and the current president do? They are leading us rapidly toward war. Our defense is already led by NATO generals, and our policies—by American advisors. Everything is done to continue the bloodshed in the heart of Europe."*

False claims about the relationship between Moldova's National Army and NATO are frequently spread and debunked. Moldova has cooperated with NATO since 1992, signing periodic partnership agreements that primarily focus on military training and strengthening defense capabilities. This cooperation remains within the limits of Moldova's military neutrality, as stated in its Constitution, and does not involve NATO military personnel taking control of the army (Zaharia, 2024)

It was not strange in this electoral campaign the spread of fake news and trolling through creation of fake websites or use of anonymous accounts to discredit political opponents.

Several issues raised in the Intelligence and Security Service (SIS) report, recently presented in Parliament, concern disinformation, propaganda, external informational interference, and vote-buying during elections. Experts consulted by Mediacritica warn that these challenges may persist in future parliamentary elections if authorities do not intervene. In this regard, the SIS has identified a network that systematically distributes pro-Kremlin (including pro-war) narratives in Moldova, consisting of:

1. Over 160 Telegram channels (110 focused exclusively on Moldova's socio-political situation, managed either by anonymous actors or pro-Kremlin bloggers/influencers; 50 others based in Russia);
2. Over 90 TikTok channels;
3. Over 70 Facebook groups/accounts;
4. 43 bots on VKontakte (automated comment-writing).

An analysis of the main narratives promoted through the sponsored publications of Ilan ȘOR's campaign reveals the following targeted topics:

1. Interference in sovereignty and electoral processes (anti-government attitudes and calls for civil disobedience).
2. Anti-West, anti-EU, anti-referendum messages.
3. Promoting the image of Russia / Eurasian Economic Union.
4. Fueling fear of war vs. militarization of Moldova.
5. Ilan ȘOR's political and social projects vs. Moldova's socio-economic decline and discrediting of state institutions and the legally elected government.

At the same time, the SIS has identified an increasing role of Russian influence in Moldova's information space, including the financing of media projects affiliated with the "ȘOR" group. Example: The "SOSEDI" project (managed by Dumitru Buimistru).

A new tactic used by cyber actors affiliated with Russian interests has been the creation of web domains mimicking official government and non-governmental resources (e.g., mec-gov.md, moldova-mediu.md, eupm-moldova.md, moldovasocial.com, parlament-moldova.com, etc.). These were used to spread disinformation (narratives undermining European values and inducing social panic) via mass email campaigns.

The SIS report highlights the unprecedented scale of disinformation and propaganda campaigns conducted during Moldova's presidential elections. Foreign actors, such as Russia Today (RT) and Kremlin-affiliated agents, actively interfered in electoral processes, while Telegram, TikTok, Facebook, and VKontakte were massively exploited to distribute propaganda and fake news.

The theme of the participation of the residents of the Eastern region in the general elections of the Republic of Moldova is not new, it had its beginnings even in the initial period of the establishment of the separatist regime in that area, with the multilateral and illegal support of the Russian Federation. It's just that since then, the two general plans in which the discussion is being held - whether this participation constitutes a benefit or, on the contrary, a danger for the fate of the Republic of Moldova - have experienced an evolution or, rather, a pronounced involution, both, in parallel.

One of the priorities of every state is ensuring the security of the informational space. However, this goal must be balanced with the protection of freedom of expression,

a fundamental principle of democracy. Freedom of expression is a fundamental right, but it is not absolute. In most democracies, it is limited by laws that prohibit hate speech, defamation, or false information that can cause serious harm.

Civil society plays a crucial role in educating the public about disinformation and promoting critical thinking. On the other hand, authorities must implement effective policies that discourage the spread of fake news without infringing on press freedom.

In some countries, governmental actions are insufficient or even nonexistent, leaving society vulnerable to disinformation. In others, excessive restrictive measures may threaten press freedom. A balanced strategy is essential.

When disinformation comes from those in power, combating it becomes even more challenging. The solution lies in a strong independent press, an active civil society, and the development of citizens' critical thinking skills. Even experienced journalists can fall into the trap of disinformation, either due to haste or a lack of resources for thorough fact-checking. Strict journalistic standards and multiple-source verification are essential for maintaining credibility.

In an era of informational overload, distinguishing truth from falsehood requires a conscious effort and vigilance from both individuals and institutions. The experience of these elections has highlighted the urgent need to develop more effective collaboration mechanisms with social media platforms. We observed how coordinated groups successfully disseminated disinformation across multiple platforms, particularly on Telegram, without significant resistance.

Conclusions

The October 20, 2024, elections represent a defining moment for democracy in the Republic of Moldova, providing valuable lessons on the resilience of democratic processes in the face of contemporary challenges.

The electoral process demonstrated remarkable maturity in technical and administrative aspects. The professionalism of electoral staff, the transparency of procedures, and innovations in voting accessibility are notable achievements. Despite an intense disinformation environment, the significant voter turnout suggests strong civic engagement.

However, the intensity and sophistication of disinformation campaigns reveal persistent vulnerabilities in the information ecosystem. Our observations indicate how anti-democratic narratives can effectively exploit the population's economic and social anxieties.

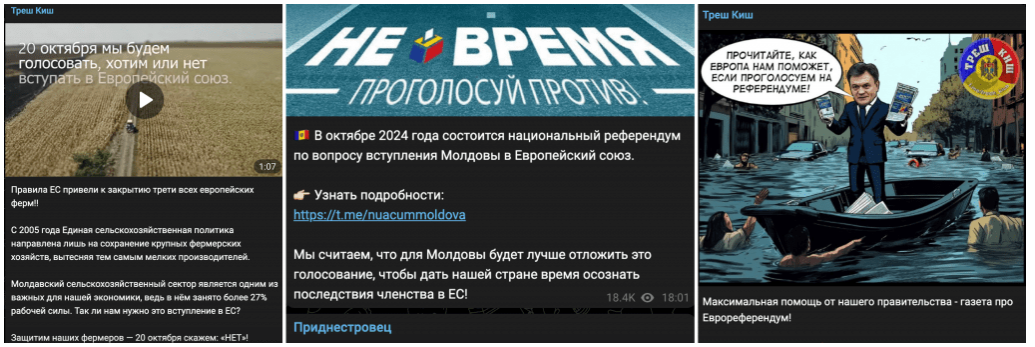
The situation of the current government is not to be envied. The only clear thing at this stage that it must do is to initiate a process of extensive information and public discussions as wide as possible with all social layers, political forces, the scientific environment, the associative sector, the bona fide representatives of the population of the Transnistrian region and so on regarding these and other benefits and dangers for the security of the Republic of Moldova and for the fate of the Moldovan society, at a moment of crossroads in History. Without such a process of information and consultation, which would ensure broad support for future actions or inactions, the current government has an uncertain future, as does the country's European course.

The experience of these elections provides crucial lessons for future electoral processes, not only in the Republic of Moldova but also in other democracies facing similar challenges. It is essential to:

- maintain and further develop the good administrative practices observed;
- strengthen the capacity to respond to disinformation campaigns;
- invest in civic education and democratic participation;
- enhance regional cooperation in combating threats to democracy.

The elections in the Republic of Moldova demonstrate that the success of democratic processes cannot be measured solely by flawless technical administration. Instead, it requires a holistic approach that includes combating disinformation, promoting civic education, and strengthening public trust in democratic institutions.

The challenges faced and the ways in which they were managed provide valuable lessons for the entire region, emphasizing the importance of continuous vigilance in safeguarding democratic processes and the need for constant adaptation to new threats against electoral integrity.



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POST-DEMOCRACY AND ITS CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES
POST-DEMOCRAȚIA ȘI PROVOCĂRILE EI CONTEMPORANE

CZU: 321.7:324(498)″2024″
https://doi.org/10.59295/eiqd.20

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Abstract. *The article examines the phenomenon of post-democracy with the aim of providing a meaningful understanding of the concept. The author, speaking about the genesis of democracy, demonstrates its contemporary limits and challenges through its parabolic descent. Through the case analysis of the cancellation of the presidential elections in Romania in December 2024, the author demonstrates the slide of democracy towards post-democracy. At the same time, the article emphasizes that just as democracy is the result of human action, post-democracy can also be avoided through the efforts of the political factor and favorable geopolitical circumstances*

Keywords*: democracy, post-democracy, progressive democracy, sovereign democracy, democratic parable, metastasized political system, electoral process.*

Introduction

Democracy, due to its implications in the social and political life of society, has become a permanent theme in political theory and a topical issue in the democratic practice of contemporary society. The well-known phrase of T. Masaryk emphasizes that we have no better form of government than democracy. In this regard, Winston Churchill noted in his famous speech in November 1947 before the House of Commons that *no one claims that democracy is perfect or omniscient.* Indeed, it has been said that democracy is the worst form of government except for all the forms tried over time. Despite its imperfections, democracy remains the best way to manage the public affairs of a society, only if the principle of popular sovereignty is respected, which means that government can be legitimized only by the will of the governed. This principle must be distinguished from democratic procedures, which are means that allow the will of the people to be highlighted. The main procedure is elections. Other procedures help the democratic system to function properly – separation of powers, limitation of mandate for the people's representatives, specifying certain constitutional rules, etc. (Tămaș, 1996; p. 82-83). W. Churchill's definition is not the only one from this point of view. Friedrich Hayek demonstrates to us that not the best people come to power. In Chapter X "*Why the Worst Get to the Top*" of his renowned work, he

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denotes the moral effects of collectivism, the social goals that justify any means, the totalitarian state that encourages useful habits in citizens and explains the success in politics that such individuals enjoy: "Shortly *after installation, (they) have a choice between disregarding current morality and failure. Those without scruples and those who do not back down from anything will probably have, for this reason, more success (...)*" (Hayek, p. 88).

Despite its imperfections, democracy remains the most acceptable form of government. The 20th century was one full of major events that changed the world and its peoples. Balancing between various antagonistic socio-political and ideological manifestations, it is the century in which democracy became widespread and consolidated in several countries around the world. Philosophers, economists and especially political scientists (Karl R. Popper, Friedrich A. Hayek, Colin Crouch, *Ralf* Dahrendorf, Robert A. Dahl, Arend Lijphart, Samuel P. Huntington, Giovanni Sartori, Alvin Toffler, etc.) have formulated several arguments in favor of the superiority of democracy as an institution, have described the advantages, disadvantages and limits of democracy in the institutional framework of its functioning, the paradoxes and challenges of contemporary democracy, have tried to forecast the future developments of democratization as a process in the context of the multitude of problems that contemporary society faces.

As a result of these efforts, the scientific vocabulary has been enriched with another notion - ***postdemocracy*** . The prefix " post" indicates an unstable, intermediate, transitional state of contemporary society, when the usual coordinates have already been left, but new forms of existence have not yet been acquired. Many authors write about the transformation of democracy in recent decades. Obviously, the current crisis of democracy is associated not only with corruption and inefficiency. This is partly due to the fact that it is still not clear what democracy means in a globalized world. Democracy is a political system in which the majority of society has the opportunity to actively participate in political life. Democracy in its modern sense began to take shape in the late 19th - early 20th centuries, based on the expansion of the right to vote and the emergence of a mass electorate. The short era of its relative maturity occurred in the 50s - 70s of the 20th century, associated with the emergence of the "welfare state". But already during this period, and even more noticeably in the following decades, signs of deterioration of democratic institutions and procedures began to appear, paving the way for post-democracy.

The 90s of the 20th centuries were a triumphant march of democracy throughout the world. It seemed that it depended on us in which country and in which world we would live in the near future. Gradually, however, the illusion began to dissipate. Democracy, human rights and universal human values still sound like a prayer everywhere, but many understand that behind all this are hidden the economic and geopolitical interests of states, international organizations and corporations. The wave of transformations of the 90s of the 20th century turned out to be a well-directed and skillfully staged spectacle. The democratic sentiment was quite sincere, but the course of events depended mainly on the scriptwriters and the main characters in the person of the political and economic elites. This, in particular, is convincingly stated in Naomi Klein's book " The Shock *Doctrine "* (Klein, N., 2009).

As a result, outside the West, democracy is established, copying only the external forms of political systems, without affecting the key mechanisms of managing the social process. Specific terms also appear, for example, "progressive democracy", "managed democracy", which for public opinion gradually transforms into "sovereign democracy". At the same time, the liberal optimism of the 90s of the 20th century gives way to disappointments and pessimistic forecasts for the future. The new "revolutionary wave" that marked the world in the first decades of the 21st century unfolded not only under democratic, but also radical, anti-Western slogans, with opposition movements becoming a way of designing the new geopolitical configuration.

The pragmatic political game is often presented as a "civilizational choice" of post-democracy. The development of post-democracy most likely consists in the further development of revolutionary scenarios, which can instantly change the balance of power and bring new political personalities to power. A revolution instantly destroys the pseudo-democratic facade of power and violates the generally accepted principles of the political game.

Currently, the transformation of democracy is described by very different epithets: *postmodern democracy, network democracy, information democracy, digital democracy, media democracy, imitative democracy, manipulative democracy or even totalitarian democracy, etc.* Post democracy is a general term, which is more polemical than substantive. This term was first introduced by the English sociologist Colin Crouch in 2000 and gained fame and spread throughout the world in 2004 thanks to his book of the same name (Crouch, C., 2010). It has been translated into over 30 languages and has been widely discussed in a variety of countries. In 2011, based on an analysis of the global economic crisis, Crouch published a new book, The Strange Non-Death of Neoliberalism, in which previous ideas received empirical confirmation and development. Thus, post-democracy as a "suggestive" concept reflects, first of all, the "experience of political powerlessness" and the lack of political pluralism. Post-democracy reflects the uncritical acceptance of the existing order, which manifests itself in the political indifference of the masses, in psychological fatigue and stifling apathy. In this type of democracy, the "*freedom of non-choice"* is formed. Such a system gives us the right to decide for ourselves what form of non-choice we can freely and rationally adhere to. Society, authorities, social institutions are completely indifferent to what kind of life individualized subjects lead, what they do and what goals they pursue. Absolutely nothing depends on the decision made by the subject. Thus, an illusion of freedom and democracy is born, realized as controlled permissiveness and pluralism that does not oblige you to nothing (Crouch, C., 2010). An individualized society creates a multitude of private practices, which are irreducible to each other, and the possibilities of collective action are practically reduced to zero. Post-democracy has developed its own mechanisms for avoiding and neutralizing heated socio-political discussions. The mass media form a common "agenda", thanks to which certain topics are "thrown" into public opinion, and here it is no longer so important whether the participants speak "for" or "against"; it is enough that this topic has entered the public consciousness and has ceased to be something unusual and even shocking. Political correctness, which dominates the Western world, allows us to avoid unpleasant turns in discussions and reject those opinions that seem too radical (Ionin, 2010). According to the Russian sociologist Ionin,

political correctness serves two main functions: it serves to justify the domestic and foreign policies of Western states and unions, and, on the other hand, to suppress dissent and ensure ideological and value consensus. Postdemocracy is the governmental practice and conceptual legitimation of democracy, which has escaped appearances, deficiencies and people's disputes and therefore reducible only to the play of state mechanisms and combinations of social energies and interests · In the 2000s, the concept of "postdemocracy" began to be widely used in academic debates or in the journalistic community as a simplified description of the current state of representative democracies. It is presented as a model of democracy, in which, since the late 1990s, certain elements of crisis have been observed: the growing political influence of economic actors and supranational organizations, the progressive weakening of nation states, the decline of civic activity, summarized in the concept of post-democracy, which, however, does not mean the "death" of democracy. In other words, Western democracy is marked by a split between political form and content, in which democracy continues to exist formally, but its content has been lost, or more correctly, it has changed radically. Despite the formal preservation of democratic institutions and processes, democratic principles and values lose their meaning, the energy and vitality of politics return to where they were in the era preceding democracy - to small elites and wealthy groups, concentrated around centers of power, seeking to gain their privileges (Crouch, C., 2010). Political decisions are increasingly determined and justified by the economic interests represented by powerful business elites. At the same time, the fundamental foundations of democracy, such as the common good, social interests and self-determination of citizens, are gradually regressing, manifesting themselves in a crisis of egalitarian politics and the trivialization of democracy itself. It is a crisis of democracy, of freedom closely linked to democracy, of justice, of the economy, of security starting from the individual security of the citizen to the security of society, of morality and trust. You can no longer believe in institutions that act in this way. For example, what can the American citizen think about the justice of his country when the so-called " *advance pardons* " are made.

Colin Crouch describes his theory using the " *democratic parabola* ", the essence of which is the evolution of democracy: - starting with the *pre-democratic period,* the highest point of development is reached - *democracy itself,* and then, through a downward parabolic descent - *post-democracy is achieved,* which partially preserves the characteristics of both a pre-democratic and a democratic society. At the same time, the movement unfolds on new points of coordination, preserving what has been accumulated, returning, according to some criteria, to the society of the pre-democratic period. Thus, in Colin Crouch's vision, post-democracy is not the disappearance of democracy (since there is only a partial return to the pre-democratic period), and it is not an exact copy of pre-democracy (since many features of the democratic era are preserved), but presents itself as a special phase of democracy in decadence.

Here, party politics and electoral campaigns are increasingly devoid of content, intended to determine the real policy of the government. The electoral campaign becomes a political stage, but the real politics takes place behind closed doors. "*Electoral debates are a well-directed and staged performance by teams of competitive professionals, carefully and meticulously selected"* (Crouch, C. , 2010 , p.19) . The citizen is de facto powerless and although; by choosing his political representatives, he

no longer has the power to protect his interests in the emerging political system. In practice, the citizen plays a passive, apathetic role, with little or no political influence. In this way, the democratic principles of civic participation and policies, focused on the common good, the balance of interests and the policy of social inclusion, are leveled. At the same time, there is a significant weakening of the influence of the working class, and the class of politicians, merging more and more closely with the business elite, cedes part of its powers to it. Thus, an extensive lobby of large transnational corporations can be traced in political decision-making. Corporate interests are realized through the "*global ghost company"*, which is becoming a key institution in the post-democratic world. The main problem is that the concentration of enormous power in the corporate sector gradually affects the functioning of the state, due to the fact that corporate personnel not only dominate the economy, but also become an independent class, which runs the state. The company acts as a place of concentration of power. Thus, politics as such is practically left to the "*closed elite*". The mass media also operates on the basis of economic logic and can no longer fulfill its democratic role as the "*fourth estate*" in the state. Control over the mass media is in the hands of a small group of people, who, using advertising technologies in journalism, help politicians "*solve the problem of communicating with the masses*" (Crouch, C., 2010, p.43) . Thus, Colin Crouch defines post-democracy, on the one hand, as a state of disillusionment, which follows a democratic period, and, on the other hand, as a state in which the interests of an influential minority have become much stronger and more important than the interests of ordinary people, who are manipulated by political elites. The current situation is fertile ground for the activities of various populist movements, which transform politics into *show business*, where those who play their role better are more successful.

However, post-democracy is not an accomplished fact, but rather a process that has affected to a greater or lesser extent all liberal democracies. This is clearly seen in Romania, where the presidential elections on December 6, 2024 were canceled. The degradation of democracy, the limitation of freedoms, the adoption not only of a rhetoric and ideology against nature, because that is precisely what it is about, precisely in order to make it impossible for those who are lucid and willing to engage in public life to do so. All this has happened everywhere in Europe. Were elections stolen? Of course, they were stolen. The US presidential elections in 2020, for example, but also many others. But as in Romania, it did not happen anywhere. The others stole the elections, somehow without being seen. In Romania, going from weaker leaders to increasingly weaker leaders in terms of character and mind (intellectually), the latter were no longer able, at a certain point, even to steal unseen. And then a situation was reached, in which they too, in panic, brought the most serious measure of the same system and the same errors. They could no longer keep the system in balance.

The most radical violation of democracy, therefore, took place precisely in Romania. The decision of the Constitutional Court to annul the entire ongoing electoral process regarding the election of the President of Romania, without providing transparent evidence or respecting the established legal procedures, left the Romanian people in a state of confusion and distrust. The CCR decision being final and generally binding, although by this Court's decision, over 37,000 Romanians had already voted abroad in the second round. Many voices in Romania have described this act as ***a coup***

d'état , which undermines the fundamental principles of democracy. To date, no clear explanation or solid legal justification has been offered to the public, which further erodes trust in Romanian political institutions and the rule of law.

The loser is once again the citizen. This is extremely clear: this annulment of the vote took place because those who reached the second round were not the candidates of their interests, of the oligarchy in power. Sometimes the gaps in a law make it vulnerable to those who want to violate it. But there is no law that cannot be violated. Sanctions are not applied automatically. Their application requires a judgment and this judgment is made by people. Unfortunately, the political system in Romania is *metastasized, it is a political-legal cancer that has reached the generalization phase,* he emphasizes. Adrian Severin, former Minister of Foreign Affairs of Romania. But it is not only about the Romanian system.

The suspicions towards Ursula von der Leyen, the head of the European Commission, caused by the lack of the ***73 billion euros during the covid period,*** which she cannot justify where and for what they were spent, are precisely what he talks about, or the pardon of the son and members of the Biden family by the Democratic President of the USA Joe Biden before leaving the White House. Today's errors are obvious - an ideology, which comes, in essence, to exalt the rights of the minority against the majority. It is about a principle - *we exalt the rights of a minority against the majority*, - so that in this way we can reach the domination of what is difficult to dominate. It is clear that dominating a minority is simple, dominating a majority is complicated and you can only dominate it if you introduce an ideology, through which you overturn the laws of nature, overturn the rule of law.

How is it possible that we have arrived here? Well, it's possible, because everything has been turned upside down, the hierarchy of values has been turned upside down. *This unfortunate coup d'état, - the same Adrian* Severin mentions, - *opened a lot of cans and made people appear, ... who were kept in reserve for the moment when it was appropriate to call on them. And now this moment has come, because some candidates, some corrupt political leaders, suckers, tricksters, who ended up taking over the leadership of the state, were no longer able to steal the elections in a subtle, subtle, disguised way, as happened on the last occasions.... They suddenly woke up, that they no longer had candidates in the final. And then they had to resort to this extreme solution of a coup d'état, which compromises everything, compromises all institutions, definitively compromises citizens' trust in state institutions, which means compromising the state itself* - concludes the former Romanian Foreign Minister (Severin A., Gândul, Youtube, 21.01.25).

According to political theory, the state operates on the basis of trust between citizens and its institutions. Even if they are dissatisfied with the institutions, even if they suspect that these institutions were engaging in all sorts of immoral and illegal acts, the citizen still hopes that it will work out in the end. This time, no one can claim that one can trust the state institutions. And the more days pass, the clearer things become. Even those who claimed that the president of Romania can stay beyond the term limit until a new president is elected and takes the oath, even if this happens a month or so after the expiration of the mandate, even they say that that provision refers to a marginal, exceptional situation, which targets a time horizon of a few days, given that a new president is elected until the date the old president's mandate expires.

So, he is elected, but he hasn't had time to take the oath, there are still one or two days and things will surely settle down. This is not an exception, related to the duration of the mandate, which can be extended by a law of Parliament and in other than exceptional conditions such as war and catastrophe. But, anyway, it can only happen for a short time. And here goes a month or so and instead of returning to the second round, they (the rulers) set the date of the new elections (04 and 18 May 2025) with new candidates, brutally and illegally violating the right of the 9 million Romanian citizens to free, direct and secret vote, which is actually one of the fundamental principles of democracy.

On the other hand, Traian Basescu he is worried and revolts, *that it is unacceptable for someone to become president without making public appearances.* Călin Georgescu's victory in the first round is, in Băsescu 's view, *a major national security failure ... The messages manufactured by IT (Artificial Intelligence) brought Georgescu to the position of leader in the first round of voting ,... because it is difficult to understand the campaign of robots , or we voted for a robot* , - concludes the former president of Romania · *It is unacceptable to accept a big fake, which risks transforming democracy into an IT show, directed perhaps by 18-year-olds , especially when all possible signals have been sent to the member states of the European Union to be careful about manipulating elections through internet means. Why have we come to the point where the first two people in political life are simply blown away by the electorate?* asks Traian Băsescu. - *So, we are talking about deep corruption. Transferring the state budget to the reserve fund at the disposal of the prime minister, and then allocating it billion by billion to political clients in order to succeed in the elections?! Is such a thing not possible,* - the ex-president is outraged Romania. - *So, corruption, lack of perspective for young people, mockery of the so-called increase in pensions, because they (the* government) *say increase when indexing, etc.,* - concludes Băsescu (EURO NEWS, News, 26.11.24).

These are just some of the causes that determined the will of the majority of the electorate. It is clear that the people, in our view, voted not for Călin Georgescu, but against those in power, against the system, against the rulers. The people voted for an unknown candidate against the power, and therefore voted for change. Perhaps it is the case, in our opinion, to draw conclusions from recent real practice and **to introduce into the ballot the option to vote against everyone, to make a rational choice real and not the choice of the lesser evil.**

In the same vein, profiler HD Hartman mentions: *Canceling the 2024 elections in Romania means, in other words:* ***if you can't defeat the far right, ban it.*** The Romanian case demonstrates how *these restrictions on freedom of expression are the first salvos of a larger war of repression.* The presidential elections in Romania were annulled on the grounds that *"a Tik-Tok, infiltrated by Russians, misinformed the voters. ... It is shocking that the elections were annulled because someone lied on Tik-Tok.* ***To be clear, there was no accusation of vote fraud. Georgescu won the first round of the elections by a landslide.*** *According to opinion polls, Georgescu is still the candidate with the best chance of winning – 60%, but the political establishment is still determined to find ways to block him, the most promising being the hope that he would have received unclear funds* (Gândul, Youtube, 14.01.25). All this demonstrates how the ideological struggle profile is transformed into a real war. Statehood costs. Any state that wants to exist as a

state must have money to support itself. According to Hartman's calculations, only *the USA, Russia, China and Japan can allocate 3-4% of their GDP for national security and defense* (Gândul, Youtube, 14.01.25) . The theory of states based on *mother America* (the USA) is over. If you want to be a state, to be respected, to be defended by the USA, you have to be able to pay for your own existence.

The important thing is not to vote, but to vote correctly. *This is progressive, Sorocaist, globalist democracy)* (Gândul, Youtube, 14.01.25). The reaction of the vast majority of European leaders to the elections in Romania tells us that from now on the important thing is not to vote, but to vote correctly. In these times of geopolitical turbulence, it seems that *the European Union has lost its democratic compass, which does not bode well for its future* - concludes profiler Hartman (Gândul, youtube, 14.01.25). Seeing how things are happening in Europe, this autism, this break with reality of European leaders, this refusal of realism, a refusal that also characterized the heads of the previous American administration, shows us that ***democracy is sick***. But they refuse to recognize this fact, they refuse to see that democracy no longer works, that freedoms are no longer where they should be, they refuse to see that the economy no longer works, etc. This pardon that Joe Biden made, while Donald Trump was giving his inauguration speech, seems to us a perfect definition of the Biden administration, it shows the lie that we have been intoxicated with for decades and the state of democracy today. Pardon means the forgiveness of a mistake. You made a mistake, the mistake was found, you are punished and through a pardon your mistake is forgiven, you no longer have to serve the sentence. How can you pardon someone in advance for a punishment that they have not yet received. How to pardon someone for a possible act. This is impunity, coming from the highest level. But that's exactly what Joe Biden did.

This context full of twists and turns is marked by a situation full of gravity inversely proportional to the indifference it arouses, which is the cancellation of the presidential elections in Romania on December 6, 2024. This episode marks, in the view of the profiler H. D. Hartman, "an *unprecedented turning point, because it is the first time that* ***a vote is canceled within the European Union,*** *without the European Union, the European institutions, the member states being upset. Strange, because in addition to the profile of the candidates, there are many questions to ask. For example:* ***What happens if, in addition to some unfounded, unjustified suspicions, the European Union supports a coup d'état?*** - asks political analyst HD Hartman *(The Thought, Youtube, 14.01.25).*

The facts are overwhelming. The Constitutional Court of Romania made a turnaround based on a poorly substantiated report, two days before the second round and 4 days after the validation of the first round, by annulling the presidential elections at the command of a group of people led by Iohanes. *If anyone thinks that this* ***act of violation of democracy*** *in a NATO member country, an ally of the United States of America, is not analyzed second by second, act by act, person by person in Washington, they are sorely mistaken,* - HD Hartman notes. - *Whoever imagines that we are impressed that Antony Blinken declared a forgery at the request of Alexandru Muraru, a member of the Chamber of Deputies of the Romanian Parliament, means that they think we are all stupid. Nobody impresses us. After that, Predoiu came to tell us that the Americans also say what we say. Which means that he also took the Americans for fools. ... Then we*

wonder why we have hundreds of thousands of people on the streets (in protest). Here is the drama. This is the case of stolen, rigged elections.

This is your progressive democracy, in which you do not work, do nothing for this country, for a true democracy and try to maintain your authority by rigging elections. *We have a problem! No one in Washington believes you. ... There is no evidence. From the analyses in Washington, it is already clear that what happened in Romania was on the orders of Iohanes and the malfunctioning of a group of Romanians, of hypochemen, men and women, not very large, ... about 60 people, who* ***wanted these elections to be canceled because their man was not working out (***Gândul, youtube, 14.01.25), - emphasizes the political analyst. Here things are very clear. The problem is that you cannot be an ally of the United States of America when you steal your own elections. That is no longer democracy, no longer fairness, no longer the rule of law. You can no longer be an ally of the USA when you suspend your own democracy. *Romania is heading towards a popular uprising of a revolutionary type, towards an insurrectionary state if the situation is not truly resolved and if the guilty are not punished,* - notes the profiler HDHartman. *(Gândul*, youtube, 14.01.25)

Democracy is an extremely complex phenomenon, a model of organizing the political system in which community members must be politically equal, govern together and have their own qualities, resources and institutions necessary for self-government. To prevent the " *slip towards post-democracy* ", policies are needed to reduce the influence of the corporate elite, policies to reform political practice as such and those actions and measures that concerned citizens themselves can take. On the very day of his inauguration, January 20, 2025, Trump, by a presidential decision, repealed regulations that set criteria other than merit in promoting or hiring staff: *I will end government policies that attempt to integrate race and gender into every aspect of public and private life,* - Trump declared. - *Starting today, the official policy of the United States will be that there are only two sexes - male and female*. Thus, radical and wasteful diversity, equality and inclusion programs within American federal agencies have been rejected.

Conclusions

Colin Crouch 's theory, which quite accurately describes the negative processes currently taking place in world politics and the global economy, is of significant interest in terms of studying the trends in the development of democracy at the present stage, potential threats to democratic values and institutions, as well as finding ways to prevent these threats and overcome existing crises. At the same time, the question remains open under what conditions a state can truly transform into a national one and cease to be an instrument of transnational elites. In this situation, much can depend, as practice shows us, on the position of the majority, still silent, and on the confluence of geopolitical circumstances.

Democracy has proven to be the most widespread political form of organizing society, but also the most problematic to achieve in practice. Like any political phenomenon and process, democracy evolves over time, and in the projection of the parabola, democracy at the contemporary stage enters the post-democracy period. The recommendations given by the Venice Commission for Democracy in Law (Youtube,

Europa Liberă, Ştiri, 29.01.25) reveal that the annulment of the December 2024 presidential elections in Romania was made in violation of several democratic standards:

1. The right of a Constitutional Court to act ex officio and annul the elections must be clearly regulated by law and must be provided for only in exceptional situations.

2. The Commission drew attention to the fact that the Court's practice of instituting proceedings ex officio produces a negative effect, because instituting proceedings ex officio, the rule that provides for deficiencies in electoral matters is circumvented.

3. The decision of the Constitutional Court of Romania was not made on the basis of evidence, but on the basis of information provided by the Intelligence Services. In addition to this information, no evidence was provided, and a Court's decision to annul the elections should have referred to the evidence.

4. The Venice Commission for Democracy in Law also draws attention to the lack of the right to challenge the Court's first instance decision in a court of law. The Venice Commission's report on the annulment of the presidential elections at the end of 2024 shows that Romania has several shortcomings in the electoral process, especially when artificial intelligence is also used in the campaigns. As a rule, voters must trust that their vote is final. The annulment of part of the elections or the entire process as a whole is justified only in completely and utterly exceptional circumstances.

The competence of the Constitutional Court to annul elections can be regulated either in the Constitution or in an Electoral Code applicable to all elections (Youtube, Europa Liberă, Ştiri, 29.01.25). So, democracy, - we will conclude, - has been suspended and must be reestablished by law in Romania. The Report mentions that Parliament urgently needs to amend the electoral legislation and that of the CCR to comply with democratic standards (Youtube, Europa Liberă, Ştiri, 29.01.25). Democracy is not a natural state of humanity, but is the result of human action and therefore depends on the stakes of society and the sociocultural and geopolitical circumstances of the moment, which is also what the case of the 2024 presidential elections in Romania tells us.

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ELECTION INTEGRITY AND THE QUALITY OF DEMOCRACY: CHALLENGES AND PATHWAYS TO GOOD GOVERNANCE

Machetare computerizată: *Tatiana Capliuc*

Bun de tipar *10.03.2024*. Formatul *70×100 1/12*
Coli de tipar *23,75*. Coli editoriale *23,1*.
Comanda *16/25*. Tirajul *50 ex*.

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