THE ROLE OF NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS IN SHAPING MOLDOVA'S INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS: A FOCUS ON DEMOCRACY PROMOTION

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Organizațiile neguvernamentale sunt percepute tot mai frecvent drept actori non-statali semnificativi în configurarea relațiilor internaționale și a politicii externe a Republicii Moldova. Lucrarea de licență analizează evoluția și rolul acestora în promovarea democrației, în special în contextul parcursului european al țării. Este examinată contribuția ONG-urilor la consolidarea unei societăți civile participative și responsabile. Modul în care aceste entități susțin dialogul internațional este prezentat ca fiind unul complex, întruchipând colaborarea civică internațională. În acest sens, este evaluat rolul lor în consolidarea rezilienței democratice și în afirmarea Republicii Moldova drept partener de încredere pe arena internațională, în contextul provocărilor persistente.

In the light of civil society's amplified role in governance processes, the growing presence of NGOs in international relations has been recognized as a specific feature of contemporary global dynamics. In Moldova, NGOs have been positioned as intermediaries between domestic reforms and international standards, particularly in relation to the country's aspiration of European integration. Therefore, the significance of NGOs' involvement in international relations and foreign policy for democracy promotion in the Republic of Moldova was researched.

Once viewed as issue-specific actors, NGOs have evolved into essential contributors to international policy agendas and domestic reforms. Importantly, numerous scholars, including Steven Charnovitz have mapped their transformation [6, p.190]. Over the passage of the time, their engagement has been widely acknowledged, Article 71 of the UN Charter, serving as an instance [4, p.112]. In Moldova, this shift was reflected in the role played by NGOs in the post-independence democratic transition, as well as in their participation in EU-supported initiatives. Furthermore, inappropriate stance of state-centric theories in fully capturing the complexity of NGOs' engagement in today's rapidly evolving international context was confirmed. Also, methodological refinement was proposed for assessing their practical impact, legitimacy and adaptability in diverse contexts.

The strategic role of non-governmental organizations in influencing the Moldova's foreign policy has been thoroughly analyzed. Since gaining independence, civil

society in Moldova has undergone a gradual transformation, with NGOs evolving into strategic partners and contributors to country’s external credibility. The dynamic is mirrored in the pattern of NGO registrations, which reflected periods of institutional consolidation and phases of political or economic fluctuation (Fig.1).

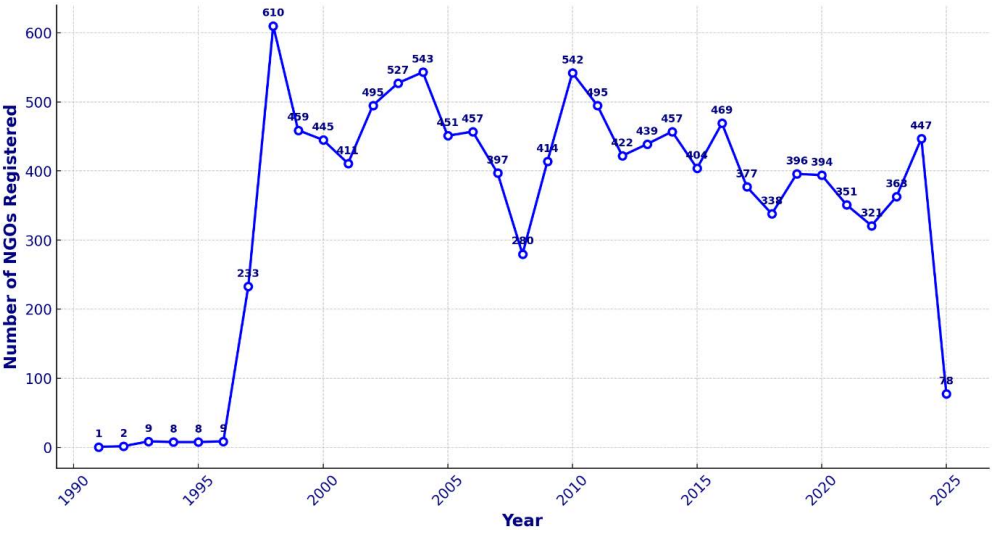


Fig.1. Number of NGOs registered each year in the Republic of Moldova (1991-2025).

Accordingly, the evolution of their role was notably supported by numerous aspects, including the institutionalization of cooperation mechanisms and their involvement in elaborating Moldova’s national security and foreign policy concepts under the EU-Moldova Action Plan [5, p.24]. Despite challenges related to political volatility, NGOs have maintained strategic relevance considering their electoral monitoring efforts, advisory influence and institutional expertise. Beyond a reasonable doubt, the capacity of various NGOs to respond to geopolitical crises, particularly via humanitarian support for refugees during the Russian invasion of Ukraine and subsequent cooperation with foreign partners, has strengthened Moldova’s international stance as a responsible actor on the global stage.

Interestingly, the role of Moldovan NGOs in public diplomacy was affirmed through their consistent engagement in civic education, digital communication, and resilience to disinformation. In fact, such platforms as the 10th edition of Moldova European Integration Forum, co-organized by IPRE and APE, exemplified external signaling and domestic consensus-building, central to public diplomacy in contemporary international relations [9]. Nonetheless, despite a decrease in intensity, politically motivated attacks during the 2024 electoral campaign continued to threaten the legitimacy of Moldovan NGOs [8, p. 24]. In this context, it was emphasized that their

digital platforms must be strategically maintained, considering that they serve valuable outreach and donor engagement.

The contribution of NGOs to international civic collaboration aimed at promoting democracy in Moldova was reflected in a comprehensive manner, through their work in electoral transparency, civic education, governance monitoring. Thus, ADEPT's use of professionalized election observation mechanisms and the presence of platforms for raising public awareness illustrate the ways in which structured civic efforts have strengthened democratic oversight [1, p.26]. However, concerns remain regarding the autonomy and sustainability of civil society. The proposed 2025 "foreign agents" law have raised doubts about the durability of democratic commitments [2]. The quality of democracy was shown to depend to a certain extent on the empowerment of NGOs, when democratic processes risk masking structural weaknesses.

European support has played a fundamental role along the way, through numerous initiatives, "INSPIRED Moldova" representing one of them [7]. Together with "The Council of Europe's 2025-2028 Action Plan for the Republic of Moldova", these have reinforced NGO capacity and public engagement [3, p.61]. Similarly, the integration of democratic values into education through projects like "FP7" has helped shape civic-minded professionals and foster long-term democratic culture [10, p.7]. Nonetheless, the relevance of such programs becomes even more apparent when viewed against the backdrop of persistent public detachment. Accordingly, European programs that position NGOs as valuable actors in democratic education and reform must be strategically amplified in terms of public visibility, so that their societal role is recognized by the society at large.

Overall, NGOs have been shown to indeed shape Moldova's international relations by advancing democratic values and fostering constructive engagement, primarily with European partners. Ultimately, in line with the recommendations presented, structured cooperation with state institutions and sustained public visibility, via civic education and stable funding, should be treated as long-term priorities for the enhancement of democratic resilience and international credibility.

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Recomandat
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