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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