

Working paper



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BACKGROUND PAPER | WORKING PAPER

EU's democracy promotion at the test of hybridity in the Republic of Moldova

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SUMMARY

This report shows that Moldova's democratic development unfolds within a hybrid governance environment marked by a persistent divergence between horizontal and vertical trust, entrenched informal power networks, and pragmatic, non-binary geopolitical orientations. Social cohesion is sustained through strong interpersonal and community-based trust, while confidence in domestic institutions remains volatile, socially stratified and reversible. This divergence stabilizes everyday life but constrains institutional accountability and democratic consolidation. Citizens broadly support European integration as a practical horizon linked to stability, mobility and protection rather than as an abstract democratic ideal. As a result, EU democracy promotion has often stabilized hybrid governance rather than transforming it, as reforms are selectively adopted without generating durable institutional trust.

The report advances three priorities for EU engagement: deeper social embedding through local and community actors, stronger links between reforms and visible everyday benefits, and tighter monitoring of selective reform implementation to support democratic resilience in Moldova.



Introduction

“As Moldova navigates democratic development under conditions of hybridity and external pressure, the effectiveness of EU engagement hinges on its ability to transform societal trust into durable institutional legitimacy rather than merely stabilizing existing governance arrangements.”

Moldova’s contemporary political trajectory unfolds at the intersection of institutional fragility, resilient informal social structures, and sustained geopolitical pressure. The parliamentary elections of 28 September 2025 confirmed a continued societal orientation toward European integration, despite external interference, economic uncertainty, and information warfare. Electoral outcomes, supported by survey evidence, indicate that support for European integration is driven less by ideological alignment than by pragmatic expectations of stability, security, and long-term opportunity. Political behavior in this context reflects adaptation rather than polarization, as citizens navigate competing narratives while maintaining electoral support for European-oriented governance.

Over the past two decades, the European Union has emerged as the most significant external actor supporting Moldova’s democratic development through political conditionality, financial assistance, sectoral reforms, and engagement with state institutions and civil society. Recent high-level European statements linking Moldova’s territorial integrity, political unity, and European integration to broader EU security interests further underscore the strategic importance of Moldova within the Eastern Neighbourhood. At the same time, extensive scholarship highlights that democratic transformation has remained partial and uneven. Formal democratic institutions coexist with informal power networks, selective reform implementation, and recurrent crises of political legitimacy, raising questions about the effectiveness of EU democracy promotion in hybrid political contexts.

Moldova’s hybrid political order is rooted in historical legacies of Soviet administration, post-independence state-building challenges, and prolonged economic vulnerability. These factors have produced limited institutional autonomy and persistent elite networks capable of permeating formal governance structures. While horizontal trust remains relatively strong due to family, community, religious, and diaspora ties, vertical trust in political and state institutions is volatile, socially stratified, and sensitive to political and economic shocks. This divergence stabilizes everyday social life but constrains civic engagement, institutional accountability, and democratic consolidation.

Geopolitically, Moldova operates within a space of strategic competition involving the European Union, Russia, China, and Turkey. External influence is exercised through energy dependence, media environments, economic investment, and identity narratives. These pressures do not divide society along rigid geopolitical lines but generate layered and pragmatic geopolitical imaginaries shaped by socio-economic vulnerability and differentiated information environments.

Against this backdrop, the report examines how hybridity, trust structures, and geopolitical competition interact to shape Moldova's democratic trajectory and condition the impact of EU democracy promotion. Rather than assessing democratic progress along a linear continuum, the analysis focuses on how institutional performance, informal networks, and citizen perceptions jointly shape possibilities for democratic resilience, identifying both constraints and context-sensitive opportunities for EU engagement.

Literature Review & Theoretical Framework of Democracies under Hybrid Pressure

Scholarly approaches to governance in the Eastern Neighbourhood and the Western Balkans have increasingly moved beyond linear models of democratic transition and convergence. Rather than assuming that post-socialist political systems evolve along a predictable path toward consolidated liberal democracy, recent research emphasizes the persistence of hybrid political orders that combine democratic procedures with informal and illiberal practices. In these contexts, elections, parliaments, courts and administrative institutions coexist with patronal networks, personalized authority and selective rule enforcement. Hybridity is thus understood not as a transitional anomaly or a stage of incomplete democratization, but as a durable and adaptive mode of governance shaped by historical legacies, uneven institutional development and sustained interaction with external actors (Bolkvadze et al. 2024).

Hybrid regimes are characterized by their capacity to endure repeated cycles of reform without undergoing fundamental transformation. Formal institutions provide symbolic legitimacy, international recognition and procedural compliance, while informal networks structure access to resources, political loyalty and decision-making power. This duality enables hybrid regimes to absorb institutional reforms selectively, adapting them to existing power configurations rather than allowing reforms to reshape those configurations. As a result, political change often appears episodic and reversible, producing alternating moments of reform momentum, stagnation and crisis without linear progress toward democratic consolidation (Levitsky, Way, 2010; Bolkvadze et al. 2024).

A central mechanism sustaining this form of governance is the divergence between vertical and horizontal trust. Bøås, Giske and Rieker (2024) distinguish between vertical trust, understood as

citizens' confidence in political institutions, legal frameworks and formal governance structures, and horizontal trust, referring to trust embedded in interpersonal relations, family ties, community networks and informal solidarity structures. In well-functioning democratic systems, these two forms of trust tend to reinforce one another: institutions perform predictably, citizens participate and comply, and collective expectations of fairness and accountability stabilize governance (Inglehart & Welzel 2005).

In hybrid regimes, however, vertical and horizontal trust frequently diverge. Horizontal trust remains strong and resilient, functioning as a coping mechanism in conditions of economic insecurity, institutional inconsistency and political uncertainty. Citizens rely on family networks, community ties, religious structures and diaspora connections to secure welfare, information and protection. Vertical trust, by contrast, remains volatile, selective and contingent, shaped by political alignment, perceived institutional performance, corruption scandals and distributive outcomes (Knott, 2018; Hale, 2014). This divergence allows societies to remain socially cohesive at the micro level while limiting institutional accountability and civic mobilization at the macro level.

This trust divergence plays a stabilizing role in hybrid governance. Strong horizontal trust provides social resilience and reduces the likelihood of systemic breakdown, while weak and conditional vertical trust constrains sustained demands for institutional reform. Citizens may recognize the symbolic value of democratic institutions without expecting them to deliver justice, welfare or accountability consistently. In this way, hybrid regimes maintain a functional equilibrium in which institutions remain formally intact but substantively contested, and governance proceeds through adaptation rather than transformation (Levitsky & Way 2010).

Hybrid stabilization is further reinforced by the interaction between domestic governance structures and external engagement. Bolkvadze et al. (2024) demonstrate that hybrid regimes possess porous and inconsistent institutional boundaries that create openings for external actors. Informal networks act as access points through which geopolitical actors engage political elites, business groups, media owners, religious authorities and local intermediaries. External influence therefore rarely operates solely through formal diplomatic or institutional channels, but is mediated through personalized and informal relationships embedded in domestic power structures.

Citizens operating within such environments rarely adopt binary geopolitical orientations. Instead, they develop pragmatic, layered and context-dependent preferences shaped by socio-economic vulnerability, differentiated information environments and individual trust trajectories (Metodieva, 2024). Support for European integration, for example, is often grounded in expectations of stability, mobility, legal protection and economic opportunity rather than in abstract democratic ideals. At the same time, alternative external actors may retain symbolic or pragmatic appeal for specific social groups, particularly where economic insecurity, linguistic

identity or media exposure shape perceptions of governance and security (Ambrosio, 2016; Daniel et al., 2024).

Within this environment, the European Union operates as both a normative and a strategic actor. The EU defines democracy promotion as a comprehensive institutional package encompassing elections, rule of law, anti-corruption, judicial independence and civil society participation. However, research shows that in hybrid regimes, EU engagement often contributes more to governance stabilization than to democratic transformation (Buras et al., 2024). By working primarily through state institutions and professionalized civil society organizations, the EU relies on actors whose societal legitimacy is uneven and whose capacity to challenge informal power structures is limited.

This dynamic produces a stabilitocracy effect, in which elites selectively adopt reforms to secure international legitimacy and material support while preserving informal mechanisms of control (Richter, Wunsch, 2020; Hale, 2014). Anti-corruption bodies may be established but under-resourced, judicial reforms adopted but obstructed through informal interference, and civil society funded but disconnected from broader communities. Formal indicators of progress improve, yet citizens' everyday experiences of governance change slowly or inconsistently, limiting gains in vertical trust.

The divergence between trust in the EU and trust in domestic institutions further illustrates this pattern. Citizens may express high confidence in the EU as an external guarantor of stability and rule-based order while remaining sceptical of national institutions tasked with implementing reforms. This asymmetry places EU democracy promotion in a structurally constrained position: it is expected to deliver improvements that domestic actors struggle to produce, yet it depends on those same actors for implementation (Buras et al., 2024; Metodieva, 2024).

This theoretical framework conceptualizes hybridity as a stable governance condition sustained by trust divergence, informal power networks and pragmatic geopolitical orientations. It provides a focused analytical lens for examining Moldova's political trajectory and for understanding why democratic reforms often produce partial and uneven outcomes. Rather than assessing democratic development along a linear continuum, this approach allows analysis of how trust, governance and external engagement interact to generate both resilience and vulnerability within a hybrid political environment.

Methodology and fieldwork

Survey Implementation

The methodological approach combines vignette-based survey research with in-depth project process tracing in order to capture both the measurable patterns of horizontal-vertical trust and geopolitical perceptions across the population and the causal mechanisms through which EU

democracy-promotion initiatives interact with institutional and societal dynamics. As the standardised questionnaire delves into citizen perceptions about public institutions, decision-makers, public services, media habits, views on EU interventions, and the importance of these engagements, the embedded vignette section offers a structured way to analyse how individuals evaluate hypothetical scenarios that involve a fictive crisis scenario harming the Moldovan economy. A diverse bundle of geopolitical players offer assistance to Moldova to address the fictive crisis – thus capturing citizen perceptions and trust in geopolitical actors that operate and compete in EU’s Eastern Neighbourhood. Vignettes allow the identification of underlying orientations that respondents may not state directly in closed questions, offering an innovative approach of capturing underlying assumptions among ordinary Moldovan citizens. The survey data (see Bjørkhaug *et al.* 2025), provide the quantitative backbone of this analysis, capturing distributions of vertical and horizontal trust, views on EU external engagement, and geopolitical preferences.

Data collection was launched in 10 pre-selected urban locations in Chisinau (capital) and 6 urban locations Balti (secondary city). The total sample size achieved in Moldova was $n = 555$ – 359 samples collected in Chisinau and 196 in Balti. The dataset misses 1 sample in Chisinau and 4 in Balti from the original sample size target, due to the Summer holiday season.

The demographic distribution achieved is as follows:

Tab. 1. Demographic distribution in counts

		Interview city		
		Chisinau	Balti	All
Total		359	196	555
Sex	Male	155	86	241
	Female	204	110	314
Age	18-29	52	34	85
	30-49	167	82	250
	50-59	81	47	128
	60+	59	33	92
Citizenship	Moldovan only	269	177	447
	Has other citizenship	90	19	108
Education	Primary or no	57	58	116
	Secondary or vocational training	165	111	276
	Higher	136	27	163
Ethnicity	Moldovan	252	176	427
	Other	103	20	124
Religion	Christian	289	167	456
	Other religion	10	11	20

	No religion/Atheist	44	14	58
Self-perceived financial status	Poor	36	46	82
	Below average	70	74	145
	Average	193	57	249
	Above average	35	13	48
	Well off	9	1	9
What is your individual monthly income in EUR	Below 300	45	93	138
	300-800	164	55	220
	801-1400	78	18	96
	More than 1400	30	19	49
How do you identify yourself politically	Liberal	65	49	115
	Conservative	17	19	35
	Moderate	28	24	52
	Social-democratic	56	50	105
	Socialist/Communist	32	16	48
	Right	38	2	40
	Other	14	5	19

Data collection officially started on 10 April and ended 30 June 2025. Survey training was organized in Chisinau from 5 to 6 April and in Bălți from 8 till 9 April 2025.

Capital and secondary city

In line with the project's analytical framework, Bălți is treated as a secondary city rather than as a simple regional counterpart to the capital. In the proposal and subsequent project papers, secondary cities are conceptualized as urban spaces that occupy an intermediate position between national political centres and peripheral localities, combining elements of institutional presence, socio-economic vulnerability and differentiated exposure to geopolitical narratives. Unlike capitals, secondary cities are less embedded in transnational governance networks and benefit less directly from international assistance, while remaining more institutionally dense and politically salient than rural areas.

The inclusion of Bălți alongside Chişinău allows the analysis to capture how trust dynamics, political preferences and geopolitical representations operate outside the capital but within an urban context where state institutions, media ecosystems and social stratification remain visible. As a historically industrial city with higher levels of socio-economic insecurity, linguistic diversity and exposure to alternative media environments, Bălți provides a critical lens for examining how democratic attitudes and European orientations are negotiated under conditions of structural vulnerability. This comparative design strengthens the analysis by highlighting which patterns are

specific to the capital and which reflect broader dynamics shaping Moldova's hybrid political environment.

Survey-vignette implementation

The survey employed a vignette-based approach in which respondents were presented with a hypothetical yet realistic scenario depicting a severe economic crisis in Moldova. The scenario was designed to reflect conditions that could plausibly emerge in the national context, including widening trade imbalances, rising living costs, accelerating inflation, and an increasing risk of state default. This vignette framework was applied across multiple country cases within the broader research project, including Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Moldova, and Georgia, with minor contextual adjustments to ensure relevance to each national setting.

Within the scenario, external actors propose assistance to the Moldovan government in response to the unfolding crisis. Alongside the European Union, several non-democratic external actors—commonly referred to as “black knights,” namely Russia, China, and Turkey—are portrayed as offering alternative forms of support. These proposed assistance packages vary in nature and scope, ranging from direct financial aid and debt restructuring arrangements to trade concessions and integration-oriented options such as EU or BRICS membership pathways.

Respondents were asked to evaluate each proposed support package by ranking its expected effectiveness in addressing the economic crisis on a five-point scale, from “very good impact” to “detrimental impact.” In a subsequent stage of the vignette, participants were invited to select the three assistance packages they considered most desirable among those offered by the different geopolitical actors.

This vignette design captures both implicit and explicit perceptions of competing external actors in a crisis context. By placing respondents in a simulated high-stakes economic environment, the instrument allows for an assessment of the relative appeal and perceived credibility of different geopolitical players. The resulting data provide insights into the extent to which the European Union and alternative external actors are viewed as viable crisis managers, as well as how Moldovan public opinion navigates geopolitical competition and hybrid influence in situations of economic vulnerability.

The study employed a quota-based sampling strategy, with target distributions structured according to key sociodemographic variables: gender (men and women), age categories (18–29, 30–54, and 55+), and level of education (primary or lower, secondary or vocational, and higher education). To limit potential clustering effects linked to particular interviewers or fixed survey locations, quota attributes were randomly distributed across interviewers and data collection sites. This approach reduced the likelihood that specific demographic groups would be

systematically associated with individual interviewers or locations, thereby minimising bias and strengthening the internal balance of the sample.

The Computer-Assisted Personal Interview (CAPI) system was developed using CSPro 8.0.1, with data collection conducted via CSEntry version 8.0.1 on Android devices. Sample allocation data was preloaded into the CAPI, allowing interviewers to locate selected areas through Google Maps and identify eligible respondents using a built-in menu system. Interviewers were restricted to conducting interviews within a 500-meter radius of the designated locations.

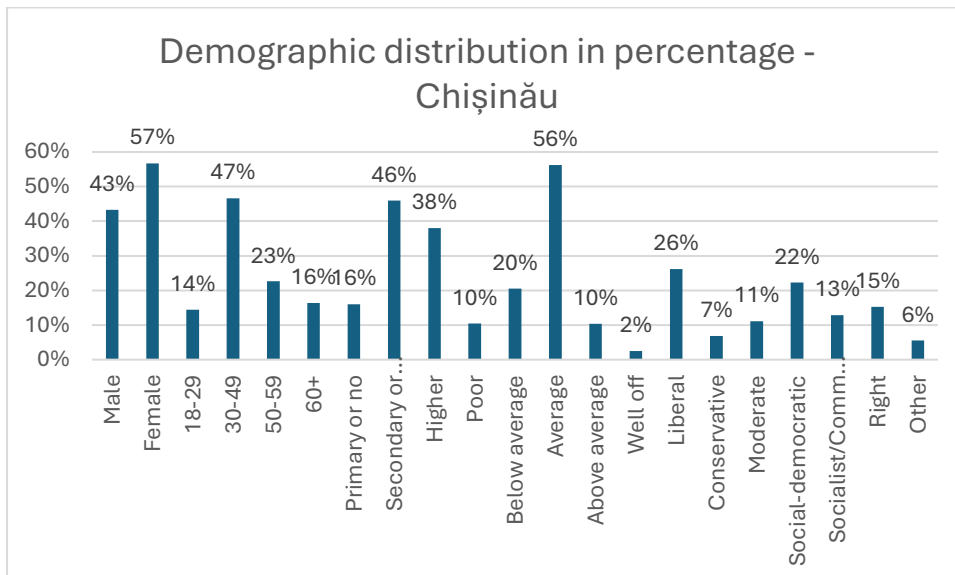
When starting a new questionnaire, CAPI has a pre-installed control mechanism that controls whether the respondent fits the quota. The interviewer must therefore confirm before proceeding towards the questionnaire.

The CAPI was installed on mobile devices, with data initially stored offline in encrypted SQLite databases. After a completed interview, the enumerators were trained to safely upload data to a secure Dropbox server administered by NUPI via the CSEntry application.

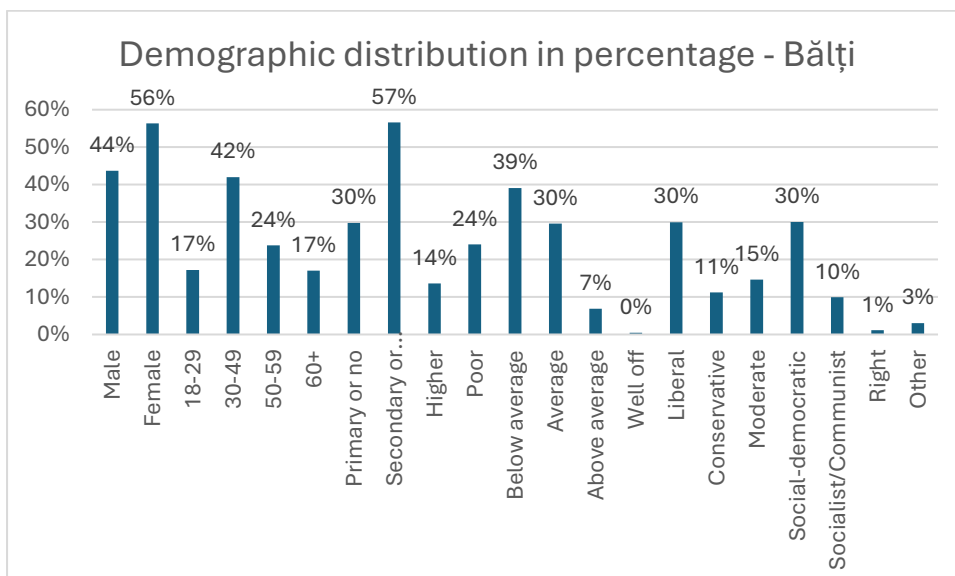
For the vignette section, three sequence orders were pre-assigned. During each interview, the CAPI program randomly selected one of the sequences for each respondent. This reduces potential order bias in the responses, i.e., that the interviewer tends to favour the first rescue package on the expense of the last one, or vice versa. The CAPI system also captured metadata, including GPS coordinates of interview locations and duration. This is important data to both monitor the progress of the data collection process as well as ensuring the quality and validity of the data.

To further enhance sample validity, participation was restricted to individuals holding Moldovan citizenship, operationalised through passport ownership. Due to the unavailability of detailed GIS or boundary datasets from the National Bureau of Statistics of Moldova prior to fieldwork, survey locations were selected based on contextual and local knowledge. For logistical reasons, data collection was conducted exclusively in urban settings, focusing on two cities: the capital, Chişinău, and the secondary city of Bălţi. Responses from both locations were pooled for analysis, reducing the risk of overrepresenting the capital while also avoiding bias associated with reliance on a single urban site.

Graph 1. Demographic distribution in percentage – Chişinău capital city



Graph 2. Demographic distribution in percentage – Bălţi secondary city



Baseline population data used to calculate quota targets were collected through a census exercise conducted by master’s-level students from Moldova State University and Alecu Russo State University and subsequently transferred to NUPI for quota stratification. Based on these calculations, quota assignments were randomly allocated across the selected urban survey locations.

Project Process-tracing methodology and the focus group sessions

The project process-tracing study (conducted in the period of December 2024 and May 2025) reconstructs the implementation trajectories of two EU-funded projects: Securing integrity,

efficiency and independence of the justice system in Moldova - #Justice4Moldova (implemented by the Institute for European Policies and Reforms (IPRE) and EU4Dialogue: Supporting understanding between conflict parties (implemented by Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e.V. and in partnership with Institute for Development and Social Initiatives “Viitorul” (IDIS) as the Moldovan partner).

Both projects meet the required criteria for project process tracing: a) each exceeds €100,000 and EU-funded; during the research both were ongoing (#Justice4Moldova is to 28.02.2026; and the EU4Dialogue ended on 15.07.2025), allowing access to implementers, that demonstrate institutional stability and openness to research collaboration, and to contactable beneficiaries. The projects correspond to the research purpose. The first case falls under civil society support and judicial governance, while the second aligns with civil society support and conflict reconciliation.

Selecting two different sectors (justice reform vs. peace building dialogue) enables a comparative analytical lens, revealing how distinct types of EU soft-power engagement operate in similar national contexts. Both projects have generated substantive media engagement, public commentary, and policy relevance in Moldova.

The research adopted a three-stage sequential data collection strategy: desk review (review of project materials, public communications and available monitoring data), key informant interviews (conducted with EU Delegation officials, implementing partners (IPRE and IDIS), and diverse groups of beneficiaries across both projects) and focus group sessions.

The focus group sessions included representatives from the EU and co-funders, two to four representatives from the implementing partners, and about four beneficiary representatives. Each session lasted around two hours. The sessions were facilitated by one researcher from NUPI and one researcher from Lund University together with two researchers from the relevant work package (Moldova State University). Three additional researchers from Moldova State University, all directly involved in the project, took detailed notes throughout the session.

Focus groups sessions were focused on how the participants reflect about the project – how it came about, how it was implemented and their respective roles in it when they talk and reflect about this in a group session – what kind of dynamics are brought about when they talk about the project together with people from the other categories of actors (e.g. funder, implementer, beneficiary).

Based on the previously developed review of the desk material available from the project and the Key Informant Interviews (that is the KIIS with the EU and/or co-funder; implementing partner(s); and beneficiaries), was produced a thematic battery of issue-areas emerging from the initial analysis that was presented to the focus group participants to attain their views and reactions. The role of the two focus group sessions moderators was to introduce these issue-areas and

guide the discussion without acting to leading. The important thing in these sessions was dynamism in the sessions itself.

The moderators were transparent with the invitees regarding the purpose of the focus groups. Also, it was made clear that the objective or intention of the focus group sessions was to gain insight into how projects in this field come about and how representatives of different categories of groups think about their role, involvement, and take aways from their involvement in such projects. Lessons learned what works and how to achieve impacts that last beyond the duration of such projects. The focus group sessions presented therefore also a platform for mutual learning. The participants gave their consent to participate at focus group sessions. Straight after the end of the focus group sessions were transcribed the notes that covered the entire session.

The project process tracing in the Republic of Moldova involved several structural, institutional, and operational challenges. These difficulties affect both access to data and the interpretation of causal links between project activities and observed outcomes. The period under examination corresponds to ongoing and sometimes rapid reforms in the justice sector and evolving geopolitical tensions affecting conflict dynamics in the region. In this context, reform benchmarks shift over time, making it complex to isolate project-specific contributions to institutional change. The #Justice4Moldova project engages directly with judicial integrity, anti-corruption measures, and public scrutiny of political actors. These topics are inherently sensitive. As a result, some stakeholders (particularly judicial actors, prosecutors, or public officials) were hesitant to participate in interviews (some requested not to mention their names) or provided guarded responses. Civil society actors might emphasize successes or systemic failure selectively, depending on advocacy objectives.

Although both projects are EU-funded and therefore commit to transparency, key internal documents such as interim monitoring reports, internal evaluation memos, and internal decision-making rationales are not publicly accessible. This leads to gaps in the documentary record, especially regarding mid-project adjustments; reliance on interviewee recall, which may be incomplete or subjective and the risk of over-reliance on external communication outputs.

Both projects involve a diverse set of beneficiaries, but their visibility and accessibility differ. For the #Justice4Moldova project, beneficiary groups such as lawyers and judges are often embedded in hierarchical institutional structures, reducing ease of access. For EU4Dialogue, beneficiaries include participants in dialogue platforms where confidentiality and trust are paramount. Contact lists cannot always be shared due to data protection and political security concerns.

To address these challenges, the project trace research integrated several safeguards such as triangulation across documentary, interview, and focus group data, careful ensuring of

confidentiality, and cross-case comparison to distinguish contextual effects from project-specific mechanisms.

Relating democracy promotion to social trust and cohesion

The 2025 Moldova survey data show that social trust and cohesion operate within a highly layered and uneven social environment shaped by historical legacies, socio-economic vulnerability and ongoing political uncertainty. Trust does not evolve uniformly across society. While some improvement is visible in attitudes toward specific public authorities, particularly at the local level, the overall trust landscape remains fragmented and strongly stratified along socio-economic, regional and generational lines. Rather than indicating institutional consolidation, these patterns point to a form of conditional and selective trust that varies depending on context and perceived proximity to decision-making.

Survey results consistently indicate that interpersonal trust remains the most stable component of Moldova's social fabric. Respondents overwhelmingly report relying on family members, relatives, neighbours, religious figures and informal personal networks when facing economic hardship or everyday insecurity (Bjørkhaug et al., 2025). These networks function as primary sources of support and problem-solving, often compensating for perceived gaps in institutional reliability. Their importance cuts across age groups, regions and income categories, although reliance is strongest among economically vulnerable and peripheral populations.

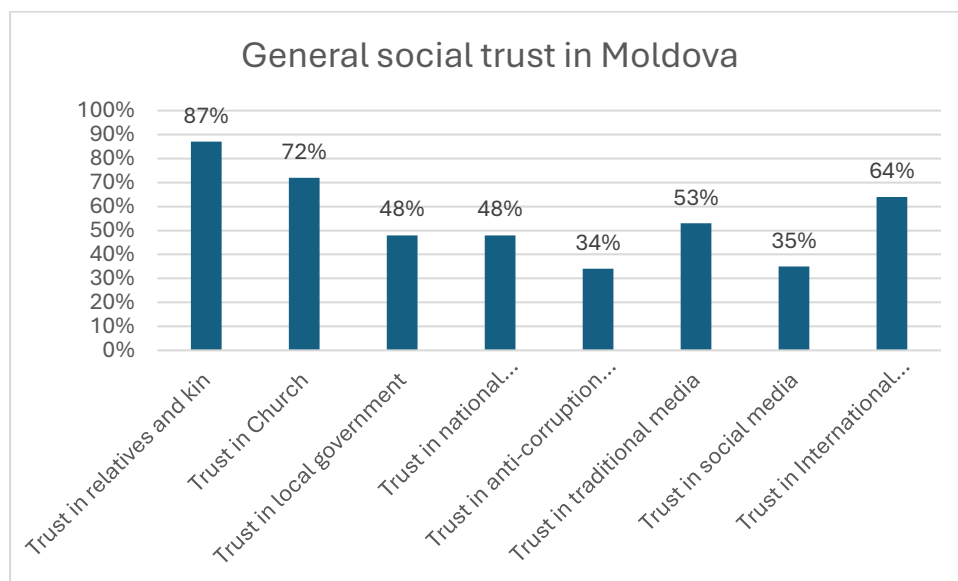
By contrast, trust in formal institutions and organized civic actors remains more volatile. Even where modest improvements are reported, confidence tends to be conditional and closely tied to concrete performance rather than generalized institutional legitimacy. Many respondents differentiate sharply between local actors they interact with directly and national-level institutions perceived as distant or politicized. These findings suggest that social cohesion in Moldova is sustained primarily through interpersonal and community-based relations, while institutional trust remains uneven and vulnerable to disruption.

This configuration helps explain why social stability can persist despite persistent dissatisfaction with governance outcomes. Strong interpersonal networks provide everyday resilience, but they do not translate automatically into broader civic engagement or sustained confidence in democratic institutions. As a result, improvements in institutional performance do not necessarily produce proportional gains in public trust, particularly in contexts marked by economic insecurity and information fragmentation.

The situation of social trust highlights a critical but often overlooked dimension of governance perceptions in Moldova: dissatisfaction exists, but it remains limited in intensity and scope. General social trust is clearly stratified. Horizontal trust dominates, with very high confidence in relatives and kin, followed by the Church, while trust in national institutions, anti-corruption

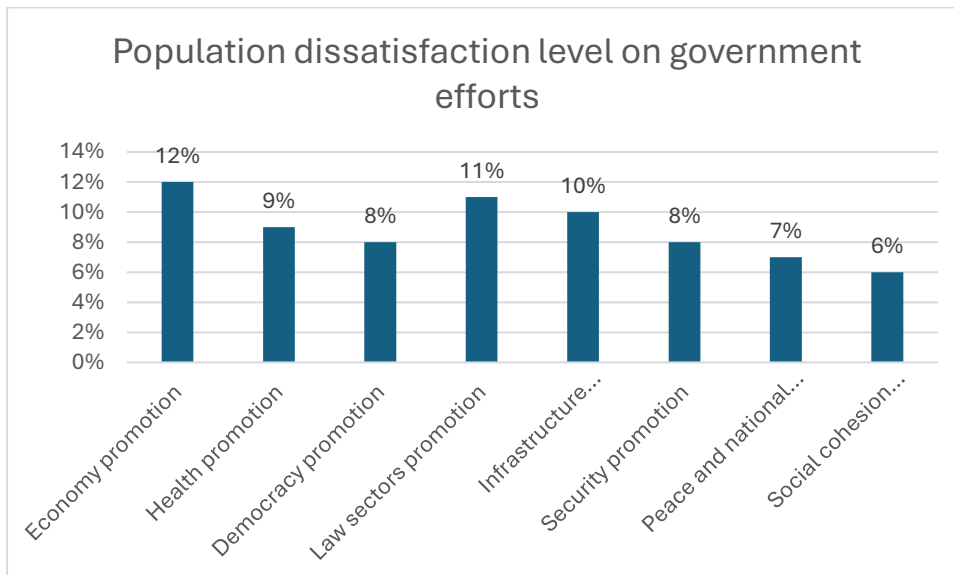
bodies and social media remains comparatively low. At the same time, trust in local government, traditional media and international actors occupies an intermediate position, suggesting neither rejection nor full confidence. This pattern confirms a core feature of Moldova’s hybrid governance environment: citizens rely primarily on interpersonal and socially embedded structures, while maintaining cautious, conditional trust toward formal institutions. Importantly, this configuration reflects skepticism rather than alienation. Low institutional trust does not translate into widespread hostility, but into pragmatic distance and moderated expectations.

Graph 3. General social trust in Moldova



The proportion of citizens who are fully dissatisfied with government efforts across key policy areas remains remarkably small, ranging between 6 and 12 percent. Even in sensitive domains such as economic development, infrastructure or the rule of law, the share of those who are deeply dissatisfied does not exceed this threshold. This is a decisive empirical finding. It helps explain why large-scale disinformation campaigns and external interference failed to destabilize the electoral process: such campaigns tend to gain real traction only when the segment of the population that is intensely angry and fully dissatisfied becomes substantially larger. In Moldova, dissatisfaction is present but contained, concentrated mainly in a “not fully satisfied” category rather than in outright rejection. For both domestic authorities and external actors, the strategic implication is clear. The central challenge is not crisis management, but prevention: avoiding a spillover from moderate dissatisfaction into deep grievance by addressing everyday governance issues, communication gaps and service delivery failures before they accumulate into systemic anger.

Graph 4. Population dissatisfaction level on government efforts in various sectors in Moldova

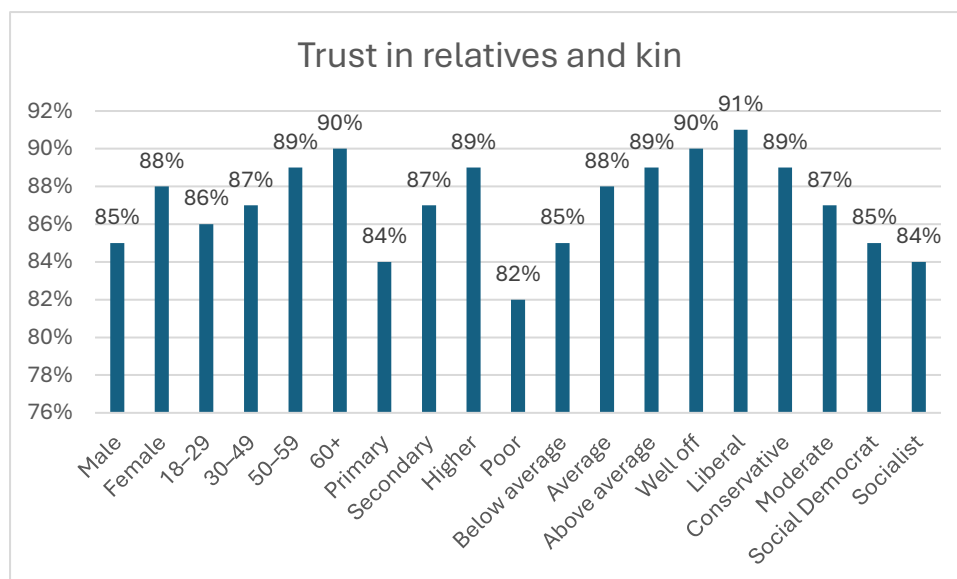


The distribution of horizontal trust in relatives and kin across demographic, socio-economic and political categories demonstrates the remarkable stability and universality of societal relations in Moldova, while also revealing subtle variations that reflect deeper cleavages within the hybrid social order (Bjørkhaug et al. 2025). Political identity introduces a final layer of differentiation: trust is highest among respondents identifying as liberals (around 91%), followed by conservatives (approximately 89%) and moderates (about 87%), while social democrats (85%) and socialists (84%) register comparatively lower, though still high, levels of kinship trust. These patterns indicate that strong reliance on family networks cuts across ideological orientations, but that citizens who position themselves closer to the political center or left express slightly less intense reliance on kin structures, possibly reflecting differing social environments, media ecosystems or institutional expectations. When combined with financial-status trends, rising from 82% among the “poor” to about 90% among the “well off”, the data suggest that although kinship trust is universal, it intensifies among economically vulnerable groups while remaining robust among the more affluent, consistent with research on informal coping strategies in contexts of economic insecurity. Age and education reinforce this gradient: trust increases steadily from young adults (86%) to older cohorts (90%), and from primary education (84%) to higher education (89%), showing that life-cycle insecurity and accumulated social capital both shape reliance on kin networks. Gender differences remain minimal but consistent, with women displaying slightly higher trust than men, reflecting broader patterns of social embeddedness and care-based networks.

These patterns reveal that kin-based trust is deeply embedded in Moldova’s social fabric, sustained across class, ideology, generation and gender. The persistence of such high horizontal trust, regardless of political alignment or socio-economic position, reinforces a defining feature of Moldova’s hybridity: interpersonal networks, rather than formal institutions or organized civil society, remain the primary and most reliable source of social security (Bøås, Giske, Rieker, 2024; Levitsky, Way, 2010). This structural configuration not only stabilizes everyday coping strategies

but also shapes how citizens interpret political authority, engage with external actors and respond to democracy-promotion initiatives, underscoring the need for strategies that acknowledge the centrality of informal trust ecosystems.

Graph 5. Trust in relatives and kin in Moldova



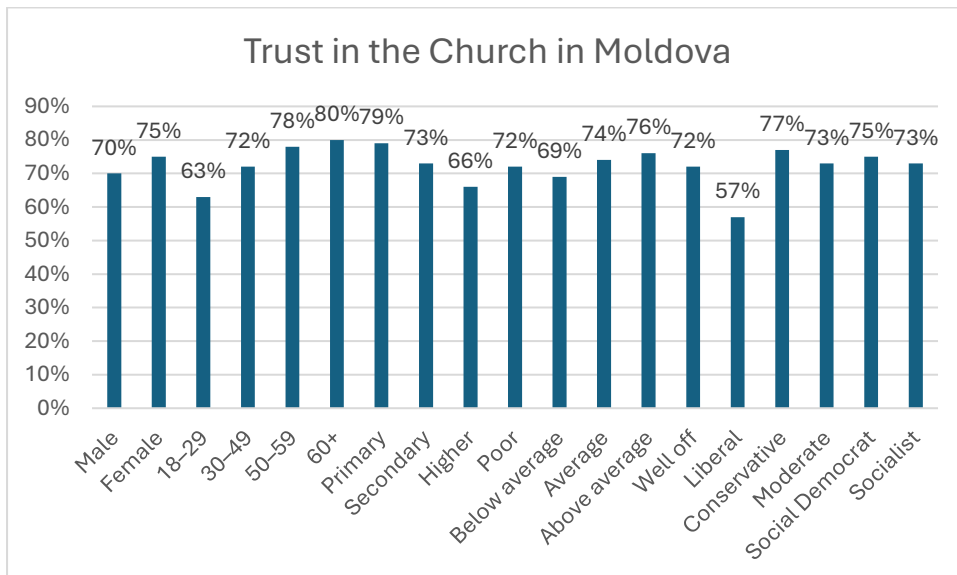
Taken together, these patterns indicate that horizontal trust is not merely widespread but structurally embedded across social categories. Its stability across class, ideology, age and gender confirms that interpersonal networks constitute the primary axis of social security in Moldova’s hybrid environment, outweighing formal institutions in moments of uncertainty. This universality, rather than any single demographic variation, is the key finding for understanding how hybridity is socially sustained.

Vertical trust, in contrast, remains highly volatile and deeply uneven. The 2025 data reveal continued scepticism toward national-level institutions, including the government, parliament, judiciary, anticorruption bodies and political parties. While local-level trust has improved slightly—reflecting the increasing visibility of municipal reforms and local service delivery—the broader institutional environment remains characterized by uncertainty and inconsistency. The central government continues to face fluctuating levels of approval, influenced by economic performance, political messaging, corruption scandals and external crises. Trust in the judiciary remains particularly weak, as citizens perceive the sector as politically influenced or slow-moving. At the same time, the Moldovan population expresses significantly higher levels of trust toward external actors, especially EU institutions, international organizations and Western partners. This pattern is consistent with the analysis of Buras, P., Dumoulin, M., Kelmendi, T., Marx, M. (2024), who highlight that in many Eastern Neighbourhood countries, the EU functions as a symbolic guarantor of rule-based order, integrity and stability in contexts where domestic elites struggle to convince the public of their commitment to reform. In Moldova, this produces a persistent asymmetry in vertical trust: citizens view international actors more favourably than

national elites, even when they simultaneously rely on informal domestic networks over any formal institution.

The demographic, socio-economic and ideological distribution of trust in the Church illustrates its enduring centrality as a vertical authority within Moldova's hybrid trust ecosystem, while revealing notable variations across key population groups. Gender continues to be a decisive factor, with women expressing higher trust (around 75%) than men (approximately 70%), underscoring the Church's role as a normative and emotional anchor particularly among female respondents. Trust also increases steadily with age—from roughly 63% among those aged 18–29, to around 72% in the 30–49 cohort, nearly 78% in the 50–59 age group, and reaching approximately 80% among respondents aged 60 and above—reflecting the stronger attachment of older citizens to traditional institutions and continuity-oriented moral frameworks. Education produces an inverse pattern: trust is highest among those with primary schooling (about 79%), decreases among those with secondary education (73%), and drops further among individuals with higher education (approximately 66%), suggesting that exposure to diverse information sources and civic pluralism reduces the Church's relative authority. Financial status yields a non-linear profile: trust is high among the “poor” (72%), dips among the “below average” group (69%), rises again among “average” (74%) and peaks among the “above average” respondents (76%), before returning to 72% among the “well off.” This distribution indicates that the Church retains legitimacy among both vulnerable households and segments of the middle class, though it is less central for more affluent citizens. Political identity adds a final layer: trust is lowest among liberals (approximately 58%), substantially higher among conservatives (around 78%), and remains elevated among moderates (73%), social democrats (75%) and socialists (73%). (Bjørkhaug et al. 2025) These ideological patterns mirror broader value divides: groups aligned with tradition-oriented, stability-focused or left-leaning narratives demonstrate higher trust in religious authority, while liberal respondents—more exposed to secular, civic or Western-oriented discourses—express significantly lower trust. These demographic and ideological trends reveal that the Church commands strong vertical legitimacy among women, older citizens, lower-educated groups and individuals positioned ideologically toward conservatism, social democracy or socialism. This profile underscores the Church's capacity to shape attitudes toward governance, social norms and geopolitical alignment, potentially acting as both a stabilizing actor and a gatekeeper in processes of democratic transformation. For democracy promotion actors such as the EU, these dynamics highlight a critical structural reality: effective engagement requires navigating a trust landscape in which religious authority remains deeply embedded and capable of influencing public interpretations of reform, identity and external partnerships.

Graph 6. Trust in the Church in Moldova

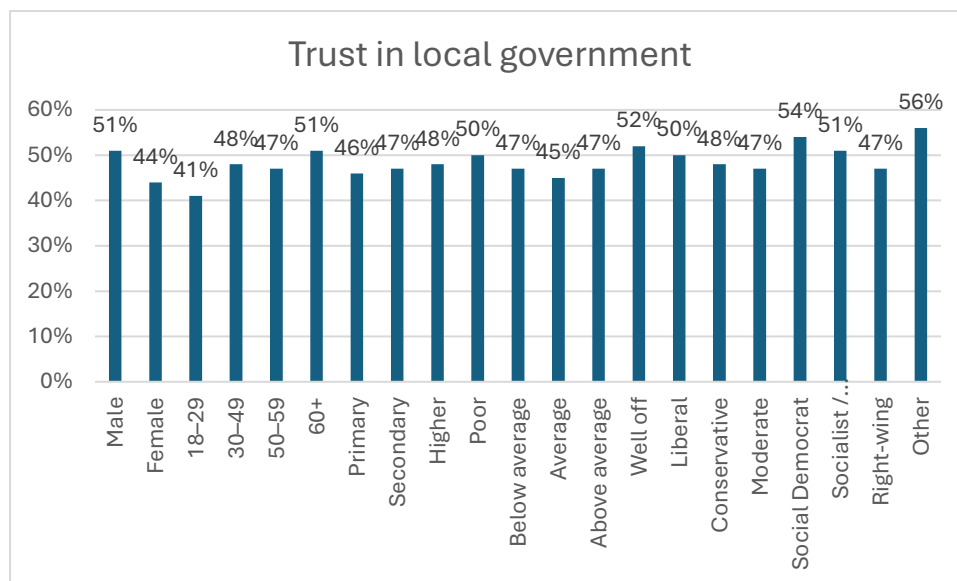


Trust in the Church illustrates the persistence of non-state vertical authorities capable of shaping norms, political interpretation and geopolitical orientation. While the Church functions as a stabilizing reference point for specific social groups, it also mediates how democratic reforms and external actors are interpreted, adding an additional layer of complexity to democracy promotion efforts.

Trust in local government in Moldova exhibits a moderate and highly stratified profile, shaped by demographic, socio-economic and ideological differences that reflect the broader hybridity of the country’s political order. Gender differences are notable: men report considerably higher trust in local authorities (around 51%) than women (approximately 44 %), suggesting distinct experiences with institutional accessibility, responsiveness and perceived fairness. Age introduces a steady upward trend: trust increases from roughly 41 percent among those aged 18–29, to about 48% among 30–49-year-olds, stabilizes around 47% for respondents aged 50–59, and peaks at approximately 51% among those aged 60 and above. These generational differences indicate that older citizens—more habituated to hierarchical local governance structures and community-level administrative networks—tend to perceive local authorities as more legitimate or dependable. Education adds another layer of variation: trust rises modestly from 46% among respondents with primary schooling, to 47% among those with secondary education, and to 48% among individuals with higher education, reflecting slightly greater institutional confidence among more educated citizens despite persistent governance challenges. Financial status reveals a non-linear pattern: trust is relatively high among the “poor” (50%), decreases among the “below average” (47%) and “average” (45%) groups, rises among the “above average” (47%), and reaches its highest level among the “well off” (52%), suggesting both low- and high-income groups may experience more stable or predictable interactions with local government than middle-income households. Political identity further diversifies this landscape: liberals report trust levels around 50%, conservatives approximately 48%, moderates 47 percent, and right-wing identifiers 47%, while trust rises substantially among social democrats (54%) and

socialists/communists (51%). Respondents identifying as “Other” express the highest trust (56%), suggesting alignment with local power structures or community-level loyalties rather than national ideological narratives. (Bjørkhaug et al. 2025) Together, these patterns reveal that vertical trust in local government is fragmented, contingent and deeply influenced by socio-demographic positioning and ideological orientation. While higher than trust in national authorities, confidence in local institutions remains significantly weaker than the robust horizontal trust found within kinship networks, underscoring a central feature of Moldova’s hybrid environment: formal institutions acquire legitimacy unevenly, shaped by lived experience, identity, and economic vulnerability rather than by stable institutional performance.

Graph 7. Trust in Local government in Moldova

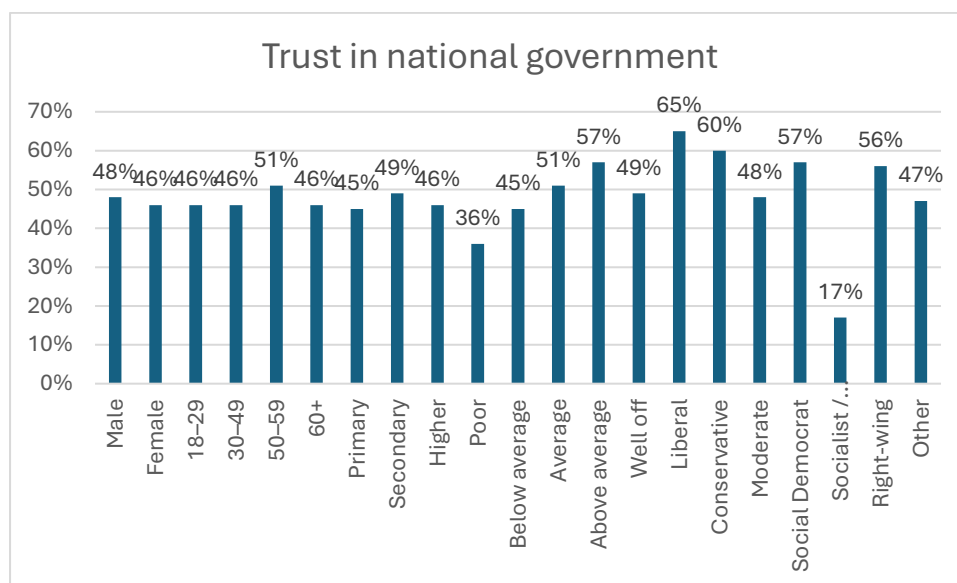


Overall, trust in local government appears as situational and experience-based rather than institutionalized, reinforcing the hybrid pattern in which proximity and familiarity generate conditional legitimacy without producing durable confidence in formal governance structures.

Trust in the national government remains modest overall but displays pronounced fragmentation across demographic, socio-economic and ideological groups, illustrating the structural volatility of vertical trust within Moldova’s hybrid regime. Gender differences persist, with men expressing slightly higher trust (around 48%) than women (approximately 46 percent), reflecting differentiated experiences of institutional accessibility, representation and policy responsiveness. Age patterns show limited confidence among younger and middle-aged respondents (both around 46%), a clear peak among individuals aged 50–59 (about 51%), and a subsequent decline among those aged 60 and above (approximately 46%). This suggests that the cohort most exposed to governance reforms and labour market engagement tends to view national authorities more favourably than both younger, reform-oriented respondents and older citizens shaped by long-term political instability. Educational differences add further nuance: respondents with secondary education express the highest trust (49%), followed by those with

higher education (46%), while individuals with primary education exhibit the lowest confidence (45%). These patterns indicate that institutional perceptions do not rise linearly with educational attainment; rather, more educated citizens may evaluate governmental performance against higher normative expectations. Financial status introduces one of the clearest divisions: trust is lowest among the poorest respondents (around 36%), increases among “below average” (45%), rises further among “average” households (about 51%) and peaks among the “above average” group (approximately 57%), before declining slightly among the “well off” (49%). This distribution suggests that economic vulnerability is closely associated with institutional scepticism, while moderate-to-higher-income groups—often more engaged in public administration and reform-oriented sectors—express comparatively higher confidence. Political identity produces the sharpest contrasts: liberals report the highest trust in the national government (around 65 percent), followed by conservatives (60%), right-wing identifiers (57%) and moderates (48%), while trust declines among social democrats (58%) and is very lower among socialists/communists (approximately 16%). Respondents identifying as “Other” exhibit moderate trust (46%) (Bjørkhaug et al. 2025)

Graph 8. Trust in national government in Moldova



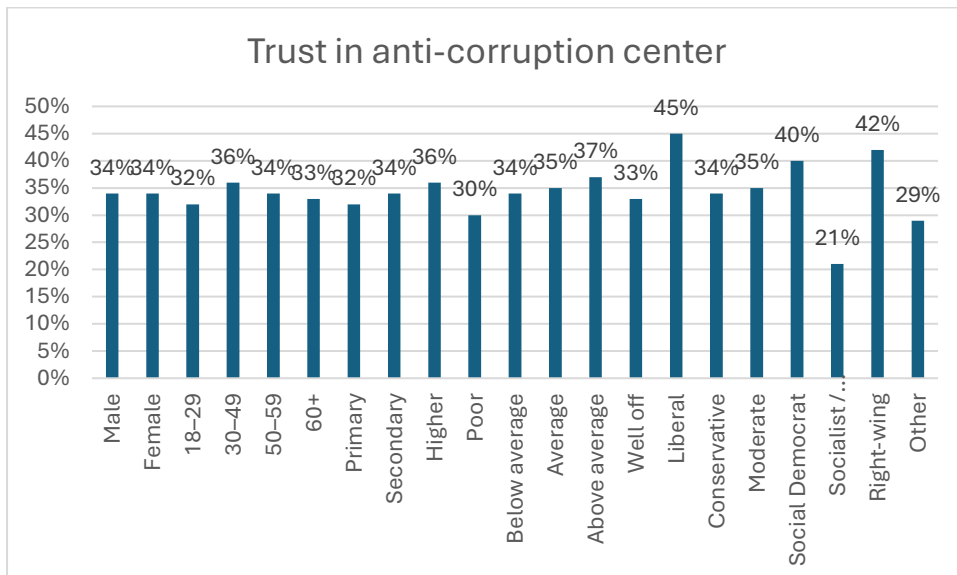
These ideological differences highlight the extent to which perceptions of government legitimacy are intertwined with partisan alignments, political narratives and evaluations of reform trajectories. These demographic, socio-economic and ideological patterns reveal a vertical trust landscape marked by deep internal fragmentation, contrasting sharply with the stability and universality of horizontal trust. National institutions therefore struggle to consolidate broad-based legitimacy across social groups, reflecting a central feature of hybridity: institutional trust remains conditional, selective and susceptible to shifts in political performance, socio-economic vulnerability and competing geopolitical narratives.

Taken together, these patterns show that trust in the national government is shaped less by institutional design than by distributive outcomes, partisan alignment and perceived reform trajectories, making legitimacy highly sensitive to political and economic fluctuations.

Trust in the National Anti-Corruption Center (NAC) reveals a pattern of consistently low-to-moderate confidence across all demographic groups, with small variations that nonetheless illuminate broader dynamics of institutional legitimacy within Moldova's hybrid governance context. Gender differences are minimal, with men and women reporting nearly identical levels of trust (both around 34%), indicating that perceptions of the NAC are shaped less by gendered socialization and more by wider political and structural factors. Age introduces slightly more variation: trust peaks among respondents aged 30–49 (36%) and remains moderate among the 50–59 cohort (34%), while younger adults (18–29) and older individuals (60+) express lower trust levels (32 and 33% respectively), suggesting that both the most economically mobile and the most socio-economically vulnerable groups show greater scepticism towards formal anti-corruption structures. Education levels show a gradual upward trend, with trust rising from 32% among those with primary education to 34% among those with secondary education and 36 percent among respondents with higher education, reflecting the well-established correlation between institutional literacy and confidence in state-level accountability bodies. Financial status is also weakly but consistently correlated with trust: individuals with below-average or average financial conditions display mid-level trust (34–35%), while the “above average” category reaches the highest trust level (37%); conversely, those identifying as “poor” or “well off” show lower trust (30–33%), indicating that both economic precarity and economic insulation may foster scepticism toward anti-corruption authorities. Political identity produces the sharpest contrasts: liberals (45%) and right-wing identifiers (42%) express significantly higher trust, followed by social democrats (40%), moderates and conservatives in the mid-30s, while socialists and communists report markedly low trust (around 21%), and those identifying as “Other” remain similarly sceptical (28 %). (Bjørkhaug et al. 2025)

These ideological divides reflect competing narratives about anti-corruption institutions in Moldova—reformist and pro-European groups tend to view the NAC as part of a broader integrity-building agenda, whereas left-leaning and anti-establishment constituencies are more inclined to interpret anti-corruption campaigns as politicized or selectively enforced. The demographic and ideological patterns show that trust in the NAC is shaped far more by political alignment and socio-economic positioning than by basic demographic traits, underscoring how anti-corruption legitimacy becomes contested terrain in hybrid regimes where institutional authority is continuously refracted through perceptions of partisanship, elite competition and external alignment.

Graph 9. Trust in anti-corruption center of Moldova



Viewed collectively, the differentiated trust profiles across national institutions reveal not isolated credibility problems but a systemic pattern of conditional institutional legitimacy. Trust fluctuates according to political alignment, economic position and perceived reform performance, reinforcing a central feature of hybrid regimes: institutional authority is selective, reversible and continuously contested rather than consolidated.

Social cohesion remains present but fragile, with internal contradictions that reflect Moldova’s social-political hybrid nature. The 2025 data show that many Moldovans still describe their Neighbourhoods as cohesive, but political conflict within communities has increased, particularly in urban centers such as Chişinău and Bălţi. These conflicts are rarely rooted in interpersonal animosity; rather, they arise from exposure to competing political narratives, party rivalries, media-fueled polarization and identity-based disputes. Ethno-linguistic tensions remain particularly salient in northern regions and in Bălţi, where linguistic identity, economic insecurity and media consumption patterns intersect, reinforcing long-standing regional and cultural cleavages.

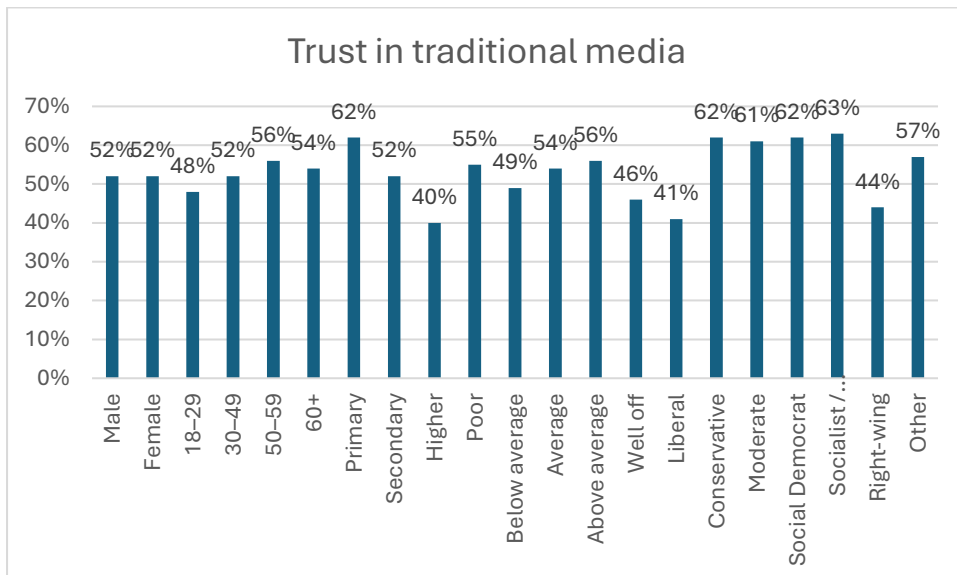
Linguistic divides reinforce these patterns: Romanian speakers generally express more trust in EU actors and greater alignment with pro-European narratives, whereas Russian speakers often express scepticism toward national institutions and rely more heavily on community-based networks shaped by Russian-language media ecosystems (Bjørkhaug et al. 2025). These dynamics confirm Metodieva, 2024, who argues that attitudes in the Eastern Neighbourhood are profoundly shaped by information environments, linguistic identities and competing geopolitical narratives, rather than by institutional performance alone.

Trust in traditional media in Moldova presents a relatively stable pattern across socio-demographic groups, with only modest variations and no extreme polarization, which confirms the role of television and established news outlets as a persistent anchor of information credibility within a hybrid media environment. Gender differences are minimal, with men and

women reporting nearly identical trust levels (around 52%), suggesting that gender does not structure media confidence in any meaningful way. Age, however, introduces a clearer gradient: trust increases from 48% among young adults (18–29) to a peak of 56% among those aged 50–59, before stabilizing slightly lower among respondents aged 60+. (Bjørkhaug et al. 2025) This trajectory reflects generational media socialization, where older groups remain more embedded in television-centered information routines, while younger adults—more digitally oriented—express comparatively lower confidence. Education reveals a sharper divide: trust is highest among individuals with primary education (62%), declines among those with secondary education (52%), and falls further among respondents with higher education (40%). (Bjørkhaug et al. 2025) This suggests that greater media literacy and exposure to diverse sources may heighten scepticism toward legacy media institutions, especially in contexts where concerns about political capture and oligarchic influence are salient. Financial status produces a non-linear pattern: those in poverty and above-average earners report comparatively high trust (55–56%), whereas well-off respondents show a notable decline (46%). (Bjørkhaug et al. 2025) This may indicate that both vulnerable groups (who rely heavily on television as their primary information channel) and moderately secure middle-income groups maintain confidence in traditional media, while economically advantaged individuals—who tend to have broader access to alternative sources—display more critical orientations. Political identity introduces the strongest variations: conservatives, moderates, social democrats and socialist/communist identifiers cluster between 60–65%, signaling heavier reliance on and confidence in mainstream televised narratives, while liberals (40%) and right-wing identifiers (45%) express significantly lower trust. (Bjørkhaug et al. 2025) These ideological divides reflect broader contestations over media ownership, framing, and perceived alignment of traditional media with centrist or left-leaning narratives, reinforcing the idea that trust in Moldova’s media landscape is not merely informational but also embedded in political and cultural orientations. Overall, the five dimensions taken together demonstrate that traditional media continues to command substantial credibility in Moldova, particularly among older, less educated, and left-leaning citizens, while younger, educated, and liberal-leaning groups increasingly distance themselves from legacy media formats.

Overall, the trust profile of traditional media highlights its continued role as a stabilising informational anchor for older, less educated and left-leaning groups, while simultaneously revealing its declining credibility among younger, educated and liberal audiences. This divergence is structurally important for understanding how information asymmetries shape political perception in hybrid environments.

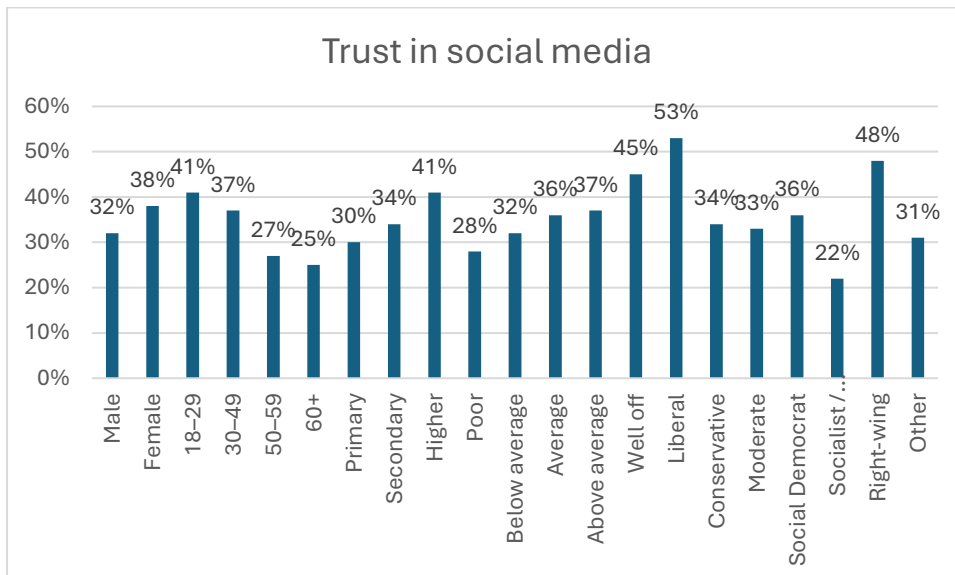
Graph 10. Trust in traditional media in Moldova



Trust in social media displays a markedly segmented profile across demographic and socio-economic groups, revealing that digital information environments are interpreted through generational, educational, financial and ideological filters. Women report substantially higher levels of trust in social media than men (approximately 38% versus 32%), suggesting a gendered divergence in how online platforms are perceived as credible or useful sources of information. Age patterns are even more pronounced: trust peaks among young adults aged 18–29 (around 41%) and gradually declines with age, falling to 37% among the 30–49 cohort, 27% for those aged 50–59, and only 25% among respondents 60+, confirming that digital-native generations integrate social media more comfortably into their information routines. Educational differences further reinforce this gradient: individuals with higher education exhibit the greatest trust (41%), followed by those with secondary education (34%), while respondents with only primary education express the least trust (30%). A similarly stratified pattern emerges across financial status, where trust rises steadily from 28% among those who consider themselves poor to 45% among the well-off, indicating that economically secure groups may be more digitally connected, exposed to diverse online content, or confident in navigating algorithmic environments. Political identity also structures attitudes toward social media: liberals and right-wing identifiers show the highest trust levels (around 52% and 48%, respectively), while conservatives, moderates and social democrats register more moderate trust (33–37%), and socialist/communist identifiers express the lowest trust (22%). (Bjørkhaug et al. 2025)

These distributions show that social media trust is neither uniform nor random but patterned along socio-demographic lines that shape exposure, digital literacy, and ideological predispositions—an important consideration for interpreting vulnerability to disinformation, political mobilization online, and differentiated access to credible information across the Moldovan population.

Graph 11. Trust in social media in Moldova



These distributions show that social media trust is neither uniform nor random but patterned along socio-demographic lines that shape exposure, digital literacy, and ideological predispositions—an important consideration for interpreting vulnerability to disinformation, political mobilization online, and differentiated access to credible information across the Moldovan population.

Taken together, these distributions indicate that trust in social media is structured primarily by generational, educational and economic divides, rather than by ideology alone. This segmentation shapes differentiated exposure to disinformation, political mobilization and external narratives, reinforcing uneven vulnerability within the hybrid information environment.

A crucial analytical distinction in the Moldovan case concerns the divide between horizontal trust and trust in organized civil society. As was mentioned by experts, while interpersonal trust remains high, citizens express limited trust in NGOs and civic organizations, whose legitimacy is uneven across regions and social groups.

This gap between interpersonal trust and organizational trust represents a critical bottleneck for democracy promotion, as it limits the capacity of civil society to translate social cohesion into sustained civic mobilization and institutional accountability.

Trust in international organizations in Moldova remains consistently high across all social groups, but the distribution reveals meaningful internal variations that illuminate broader patterns in vertical trust. Gender differences are negligible, with men and women expressing almost identical levels of confidence (both around 64%), suggesting that international organizations function as a rare sphere where trust is not significantly gendered. By contrast, age introduces a more gradual differentiation: younger respondents (18–29) report lower trust at roughly 61%, while those aged 50–59 and 60+ reach 66%. (Bjørkhaug et al. 2025) This upward curve indicates that older generations—who experienced longer periods of institutional volatility—tend to place greater confidence in external guarantors of stability than in domestic actors. Educational

attainment amplifies this dynamic: respondents with primary education show the lowest trust (62%), while those with secondary and higher education reach 67%, reflecting the strong association between cultural capital and the internalization of international governance norms. A similar gradient appears across financial status, with trust rising from 61% among poorer households to 67% among those above average, before slightly declining to 64% in the “well-off” category. This suggests that individuals in moderately stable economic positions view international organizations as reliable anchors, whereas the most affluent may feel more self-sufficient and thus less dependent on external institutional assurances. Political identity introduces the sharpest divides: liberals register exceptionally high trust (75%), followed by conservatives, moderates, social democrats and even socialist/communist identifiers at around 63–66%, indicating broad—but not uniform—cross-ideological acceptance. The only clear outlier is right-wing respondents, whose trust collapses to 44%, reflecting ideological scepticism toward multilateralism and global governance structures. (Bjørkhaug et al. 2025) These patterns together show that while trust in international organizations is structurally strong and comparatively stable, it is also mediated by socio-economic resources, generational experiences, and political imaginaries—factors that shape how Moldovans locate external actors within their broader hybrid trust ecology.

Graph 12. Trust in International Organizations in Moldova



Taken together, trust in international organizations functions as a compensatory form of vertical trust, reflecting citizens’ search for rule-based stability beyond the national state while simultaneously underscoring the limits of domestic institutional legitimacy.

Finally, the 2025 Moldova survey data demonstrate main theses of the scholars and experts that trust and cohesion are deeply shaped by structural inequalities related to income, mobility, education, language and geography. These inequalities influence the extent to which citizens feel represented by institutions, connected to national political debates or capable of accessing

public services. The persistence of inequality not only undermines institutional trust but also creates pockets of vulnerability that external actors can exploit through disinformation or political manipulation. As Metodieva, 2024 emphasizes, information ecosystems are unevenly distributed, and exposure to competing geopolitical narratives varies systematically across social groups, reinforcing stratified trust and polarized perceptions of democracy and external engagement.

The empirical findings point to three dynamics that are most consequential for understanding hybridity, trust divergence and the limits of democracy promotion in Moldova. First, the persistent dominance of horizontal trust over institutional trust constitutes a structural feature rather than a transitional condition, anchoring social resilience while constraining civic mobilization and institutional accountability. Second, vertical trust is fragmented and conditional, shaped primarily by political alignment, economic security and perceptions of reform credibility, making institutional legitimacy reversible and vulnerable to shocks. Third, non-state normative and informational authorities continue to mediate political interpretation for large segments of the population, shaping how governance performance and external actors such as the EU are evaluated. Other observed variations across gender, age or education remain analytically relevant but secondary to these core structural dynamics.

For EU democracy promotion, these dynamics imply that institutional reform alone cannot generate sustained trust in hybrid contexts. The EU operates in an environment where citizens rely primarily on informal networks, assess institutions through partisan and socio-economic lenses, and interpret reforms through mediated information ecosystems. As a result, EU engagement may stabilize governance without producing deep institutional legitimacy, unless reforms are accompanied by strategies that address trust fragmentation, information asymmetries and structural inequalities.

Democracy promotion must therefore include comprehensive strategies to reduce structural inequalities, improve media literacy and enhance access to balanced information across linguistic and regional divides. Reducing inequality builds a more inclusive foundation for trust in institutions and reduces the appeal of alternative narratives that promise stability through non-democratic means. In conclusion, relating democracy promotion to social trust and cohesion in Moldova requires a deep understanding of how historical legacies, informal networks, institutional performance, socio-economic divides and geopolitical forces interact to shape trust dynamics. The data show that while horizontal trust remains strong, vertical trust is inconsistent and stratified, social cohesion persists but is fragile, and external actors both stabilize and disrupt trust patterns. Hybrid governance structures continue to shape the landscape in which trust and democracy interact. For democracy promotion to be effective, external actors must adopt approaches that reflect the fluctuating nature of trust, engage with informal networks, address structural inequalities and strengthen the legitimacy of domestic institutions. Without

such an approach, democracy promotion risks reinforcing existing hybrid patterns rather than enabling meaningful democratic resilience.

Geopolitical representations and preferences

Geopolitical representations and preferences in Moldova are shaped by the way citizens simultaneously relate to domestic institutions, external actors and everyday social networks in a hybrid political environment where uncertainty, fragmented trust and competing narratives coexist (Bolkvadze et al. 2024). ReEngage Moldova Survey and vignette data reveal that Moldovans do not interpret the geopolitical landscape through binary choices between Europe and Russia but rather through layered expectations concerning welfare, security, stability, identity and sovereignty that reflect their socio-economic vulnerabilities, media exposure patterns and trust ecologies (Bjørkhaug et al. 2025). This multidimensional orientation results in a pragmatic mode of evaluation in which external actors are judged not solely by ideological affinity but by perceived usefulness, credibility, proximity and responsiveness to Moldova's structural challenges.

The vignette on foreign assistance during an economic crisis illustrates this layered logic: respondents overwhelmingly rate EU assistance as good or very good, placing the EU at the top of the hierarchy of potential external partners (Bjørkhaug et al. 2025). Russian, Chinese and Turkish support packages, while perceived as less beneficial, are nonetheless evaluated positively by sizeable minorities, indicating that citizens do not reject alternative patrons outright. Instead, they maintain a repertoire of multiple geopolitical imaginaries, treating external actors as potential sources of complementary benefits rather than mutually exclusive options. This pattern reflects a deeply rooted pragmatism shaped by Moldova's history of alternating dependencies, economic precarity and exposure to competing strategic influences. It also indicates that multi-alignment is not an ideological doctrine but an everyday coping mechanism under conditions of hybrid sovereignty.

These preferences emerge within stratified vertical trust configurations. Survey results show that while government and local administrations enjoy moderate trust, external democratic actors such as the EU and Western embassies consistently score higher, reinforcing an asymmetry in which international actors are perceived as more reliable guarantors of order and predictability than domestic elites.

Religious institutions also occupy an important position within this vertical trust structure, reflecting their historical embeddedness and their capacity to offer moral authority and social stability in contexts of institutional uncertainty (Bjørkhaug et al. 2025; Hale, 2014). Citizens with high cultural capital—university graduates, professionals and those residing in Chişinău—are more exposed to governance reforms, EU-linked opportunities and transnational information

flows and therefore more inclined to attribute credibility to EU institutions. By contrast, those with lower economic and cultural capital, particularly residents of Bălți or economically fragile households, rely more heavily on familiar information environments, local patronage structures and Russian-language media outlets that frame alternative actors as protectors of stability, identity or welfare. As a result, geopolitical preferences are distributed unevenly across social space, reflecting the unequal accumulation of resources, opportunities and symbolic power, a configuration characteristic of hybrid regimes where social stratification shapes both trust and geopolitical orientation.

Media habits deepen these stratifications. The survey shows that Pro TV Chişinău and Jurnal TV remain among the most trusted television outlets, while Facebook and Telegram occupy an ambivalent position as widely used but only partially trusted platforms (Bjørkhaug et al. 2025). This hybrid media environment incorporates Romanian-language, Western-oriented narratives alongside Russian-language and oligarch-linked channels, reflecting the broader fragmentation of Moldova's information space (Metodieva, 2024). Background studies document the continued influence of Russian media ecosystems and Russkiy Mir infrastructures, which maintain cultural resonance among older and Russian-speaking audiences and circulate narratives linking Russia to traditional values, affordable energy and geopolitical protection (Bolkvadze, Guedet, Machavariani, Petrov, Sniadanko, Stercul, Strazzari, Teosa, 2024; Tolstrup, 2009). These parallel media spheres reinforce differentiated geopolitical imaginaries and contribute to uneven exposure to disinformation and polarizing frames, further entrenching trust asymmetries across linguistic, generational and regional lines.

In parallel, Western-oriented outlets construct imaginaries of Europe as a space of rule of law, mobility and modernization. This coexistence of contradictory representations produces a fragmented symbolic landscape in which citizens internalize both pro-European and pro-Eurasian cues, sometimes simultaneously, reflecting the layered and non-exclusive nature of geopolitical identification in hybrid regimes. This media fragmentation also fuels disinformation: Russian-language audiences, especially in Gagauzia and Transnistria, are systematically exposed to content portraying the EU as culturally threatening or strategically aggressive, while Romanian-speaking audiences are more embedded in networks circulating EU-friendly narratives. Geographical, linguistic and generational divides thus intersect with media ecosystems to structure geopolitical imaginaries in ways that reinforce the underlying hybridity of the political system.

Vertical trust in state performance interacts with geopolitical representations in a similarly non-linear fashion. The survey shows that evaluations of government performance are mixed: satisfaction with the economy, democracy, health and security hovers around 40–50 percent, with significant minorities expressing moderate dissatisfaction rather than absolute rejection (Bjørkhaug et al. 2025). These results complicate narratives portraying Moldova as a failing or

collapsing state and instead suggest a pattern of cautious, conditional legitimacy characteristic of hybrid governance systems. While institutional performance remains uneven, many citizens perceive incremental improvements, especially at the local level, where service delivery is more visible and less politicized. At the same time, respondents identify poverty, lack of jobs and insufficient education—not ideology or religion—as the primary risks for violence and political conflict, underscoring the central role of socio-economic vulnerability rather than identity polarization in shaping perceptions of instability.

This socio-economic reading of instability means that external actors are interpreted through the lens of material vulnerability: the European Union may be framed as a guarantor of welfare, rule of law and economic opportunity, while alternative powers may be portrayed as protectors against inflation, energy crises or geopolitical insecurity. The direction of these interpretations depends heavily on media exposure, individual trust trajectories and the distribution of economic and cultural capital, which shape how citizens evaluate competing external narratives.

Horizontal trust adds another crucial layer to geopolitical preferences. Survey data demonstrate that Moldovans overwhelmingly rely on family, relatives abroad, neighbours and local religious communities when facing economic hardship or personal insecurity (Bjørkhaug et al. 2025). These dense interpersonal networks function as everyday infrastructures of resilience and, in many cases, are more influential than formal institutions, particularly in contexts of weak or uneven state capacity (Bøås, Giske, Rieker, 2024; Rothstein, Stolle, 2008). Diaspora networks reinforce this dynamic: with a large share of Moldovan households connected to relatives in EU member states, transnational experiences of work and mobility circulate through remittances, communication and return visits. These interactions embed pro-European imaginaries within the horizontal trust ecology, as relatives abroad serve as living evidence of economic opportunity, institutional predictability and functional governance, even when domestic institutions remain contested.

The perceptions of non-democratic tendencies aggravated by democratic development further illuminate how geopolitical representations in Moldova are structured around scepticism toward externally driven political change. Rather than interpreting democratic development as a neutral or purely normative process, a substantial share of respondents associates it with corruption, elite capture, and institutional erosion, reflecting a critical geopolitical framing of external democratic influence.

At the aggregate level, the dominant critical representations center on corruption and elite capture. Across most social categories, the perception that democratic development fueled corruption consistently exceeds or rivals other negative interpretations. This framing positions democracy assistance not as a universally legitimizing force, but as an externally mediated

process perceived to benefit specific actors rather than society at large, reinforcing ambivalent or adversarial geopolitical representations.

Financial status strongly conditions these perceptions. Among respondents with poor financial status, 48% state that democratic development fueled corruption and 52% report that programs only benefit the elites, indicating an almost exclusive association of democratic development with distributive injustice. Similarly, among respondents with below-average financial status, 37% associate democratic development with corruption and 31% with elite benefit, while only 7% express uncertainty. (Bjørkhaug et al. 2025) These distributions suggest that economically vulnerable groups are more likely to frame democratic development through a geopolitical lens of exclusion and unequal power relations.

Among respondents with average financial status, critical perceptions remain dominant, with 44% identifying corruption and 35% elite capture, while only 2% report uncertainty. This indicates that scepticism toward democratic development is not confined to economically marginal groups but extends into the socio-economic mainstream. Respondents identifying as well off, however, articulate a different configuration, with 55% indicating that democratic development undermined the judiciary and rule of law and 45% associating it with corruption. (Bjørkhaug et al. 2025) The absence of elite-benefit responses in this group suggests a more institutionally focused geopolitical critique rather than a distributive one.

Political self-identification reveals the most pronounced geopolitical differentiation. Respondents identifying as liberal display a fragmented critical representation: 48% associate democratic development with undermining the judiciary and rule of law, 36% with corruption, and 16% express uncertainty. This pattern indicates internal tension within pro-democratic geopolitical orientations, where normative commitment to democracy coexists with scepticism toward its externally driven implementation. Among conservative respondents, perceptions are highly consolidated, with 100% associating democratic development with corruption, signaling a strongly negative and homogeneous geopolitical framing. (Bjørkhaug et al. 2025)

Respondents identifying as social democratic predominantly associate democratic development with elite capture, with 59% indicating that programs only benefit the elites and 41% identifying corruption. This configuration reflects a geopolitical representation centered on social inequality and distributive injustice rather than institutional decay. Among respondents identifying as socialist communist, this pattern intensifies: 64% report elite capture, 29% corruption, and only 7% institutional undermining. (Bjørkhaug et al. 2025) These distributions point to a geopolitical imaginary in which democratic development is framed primarily as an externally imposed project serving narrow interests, rather than as a vehicle for popular sovereignty.

Right-wing respondents exhibit a mixed but predominantly critical orientation. In this group, 44% associate democratic development with corruption and 37% with undermining the judiciary and

rule of law, while 19% report uncertainty. (Bjørkhaug et al. 2025) This suggests a geopolitical representation combining institutional distrust with scepticism toward external influence, without the strong distributive emphasis observed among left-oriented groups.

Taken together, these findings demonstrate that critical perceptions of democratic development in Moldova are deeply embedded in broader geopolitical representations and preferences. Corruption, elite capture, and institutional erosion function as key interpretative frames through which external democratic influence is evaluated. These frames vary systematically across economic and political groups, indicating that scepticism toward democratic development is not uniform but structured by material conditions and ideological orientations. Within Moldova's contested geopolitical environment, democratic development is thus not perceived solely as a pathway toward integration with liberal international norms, but also as a site of power asymmetry, selective benefit, and institutional vulnerability, shaping how different social groups position themselves toward external geopolitical actors.

The assessment of EU assistance to the Moldovan government during the economic crisis further consolidates the EU's geopolitical representation in Moldova as a stabilizing and supportive external actor. Across financial, social, and ideological groups, positive evaluations dominate, reinforcing a pragmatic, performance-based perception of the EU rather than one grounded exclusively in normative or democratic expectations.

From a socioeconomic perspective, respondents across all financial strata predominantly evaluate EU assistance positively. Among those with poor financial status, 68% assess the EU's role as having a very good (32%) or good (36%) impact, despite higher exposure to economic vulnerability. This positive assessment increases steadily with financial status, reaching 95% among respondents with above-average financial means and remaining high among the well-off at 77%. (Bjørkhaug et al. 2025) These patterns suggest that EU crisis assistance is perceived as materially relevant across class divisions, contributing to a shared geopolitical image of the EU as an effective economic partner in Moldova.

However, socioeconomic vulnerability also correlates with greater critical perceptions. Among respondents with poor financial status, negative evaluations reach 22% when combining bad (15%) and detrimental (7%) assessments, compared to only 1–4% among those with above-average or average financial status. (Bjørkhaug et al. 2025) This indicates that while the EU's economic role is broadly legitimized, segments experiencing acute economic hardship retain a more ambivalent or contested geopolitical representation, potentially linked to unmet distributive expectations.

Political self-identification further sharpens these geopolitical representations. Respondents identifying with liberal, moderate, conservative, social democratic, and right-wing orientations overwhelmingly evaluate EU assistance positively, with combined very good and good

assessments ranging from 87% among conservatives to 96% among social democrats and 96% among those on the political right. (Bjørkhaug et al. 2025) These high levels of approval suggest that EU economic assistance transcends ideological cleavages and functions as a unifying geopolitical reference point in Moldova.

In contrast, respondents identifying as socialist communist display a markedly different pattern. Only 30% assess EU assistance positively, while 57% report no impact (35%) or negative effects (33% combined bad and detrimental). (Bjørkhaug et al. 2025) This divergence highlights a persistent alternative geopolitical representation in which the EU is viewed with scepticism or perceived as ineffective, reinforcing ideological distance from Western-oriented economic governance models.

The low proportion of “do not know” responses across most groups, generally ranging between 0% and 4%, indicates a high level of awareness and salience of EU economic involvement in Moldova. (Bjørkhaug et al. 2025) This suggests that EU assistance during the economic crisis is not an abstract geopolitical signal but a tangible and recognizable intervention shaping public perceptions.

Taken together, these findings position EU economic crisis assistance as a central pillar of pro-European geopolitical preferences in Moldova. Unlike perceptions of democratic development, which reveal fragmentation and contestation, economic assistance generates broad-based legitimacy and cross-cutting support. This reinforces the interpretation advanced in Part 5 that geopolitical orientations in Moldova are increasingly structured around pragmatic evaluations of external actors’ capacity to deliver stability and material support, with the EU benefiting significantly from this performance-based logic.

A comparative reading of perceptions regarding EU democratic support and EU economic crisis assistance in Moldova reveals a clear divergence between normative and performance-based geopolitical legitimacy. While evaluations of EU support for democratic development are fragmented and socially differentiated, assessments of EU economic assistance display significantly higher and more consistent levels of approval across demographic and ideological groups. For example, perceptions that EU democratic support helped to promote democracy range widely, from over 60% among liberal and moderate respondents to below 10% among those identifying as socialist communist, with substantial shares reporting either no effect or the aggravation of non-democratic tendencies. In contrast, evaluations of EU economic crisis assistance show a strong consolidation of positive perceptions, with between 77% and 96% of respondents across most financial and political groups assessing its impact as very good or good. (Bjørkhaug et al. 2025)

This contrast suggests that democratic conditionality is interpreted through a more contested geopolitical lens, often associated with elite capture, corruption, or institutional fragility. Indeed,

between 35% and 64% of respondents in several groups state that democratic development fueled corruption or primarily benefited elites, reinforcing scepticism toward the EU's normative influence. Conversely, economic assistance appears largely insulated from such critiques. Even among economically vulnerable respondents, positive assessments of EU crisis support remain dominant, with 68% of those with poor financial status and 83% of those with below-average financial status evaluating its impact positively. Among politically conservative, moderate, and right-wing respondents, positive evaluations reach or exceed 90%, underscoring the cross-ideological appeal of EU economic intervention. (Bjørkhaug et al. 2025)

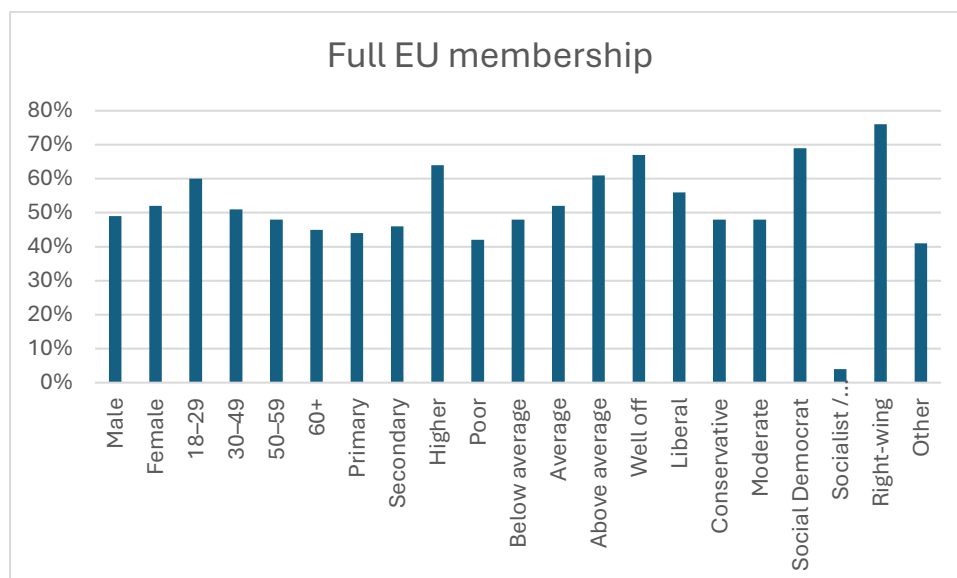
The divergence is particularly pronounced among respondents with socialist communist orientations. While only 30% of this group assess EU economic assistance positively, their scepticism is even more pronounced regarding democratic development, where a majority associate EU-linked reforms with corruption or elite capture. (Bjørkhaug et al. 2025) This indicates that ideological distance from the EU translates more strongly into rejection of democratic conditionality than into outright rejection of economic assistance, which retains a degree of pragmatic legitimacy even among sceptical groups.

Overall, the data suggest that in Moldova, geopolitical preferences toward the EU are increasingly shaped by tangible economic performance rather than by abstract democratic norms. Economic crisis assistance functions as a stabilizing anchor of EU legitimacy, fostering broad-based support and reducing ideological polarization. By contrast, democratic conditionality remains a site of geopolitical contestation, filtered through perceptions of domestic governance failures and uneven distribution of benefits. This asymmetry reinforces the argument that Moldova's geopolitical orientations are not uniformly pro- or anti-European, but are instead selectively structured around the perceived effectiveness of EU engagement in addressing concrete socioeconomic challenges.

Across all socio-demographic categories, support for Moldova's full EU membership remains generally positive, though its intensity varies considerably. Women express higher support (52%) compared to men (49%), indicating a modest but consistent gender gap in favor of EU integration. Age patterns show the strongest backing among young adults aged 18–29 (60%), followed by a gradual decline with age: 51% among those 30–49, 48% among 50–59, and 45% among respondents aged 60 and above. Education displays a clear stratification: individuals with higher education demonstrate the highest endorsement (65%), compared to 46% among secondary-educated and 44% among those with only primary education. Socio-economic status correlates strongly with pro-EU attitudes: support rises from 42% among low-income respondents to 68% among the well-off, suggesting that perceptions of economic security shape views of integration. Political identity reveals the most pronounced divergence: right-wing identifiers express the strongest support (75%), followed by Social Democrats (70%) and Liberals (55%). Conservatives (48%) and Moderates (49%) are more cautious, while Socialist/Communist identifiers show

extremely low support (3%), representing the only category with clear opposition. Respondents identifying as “Other” report moderate approval (40%). (Bjørkhaug et al. 2025) From an academic perspective, these patterns reinforce broader findings in the political sociology of European integration. First, the positive relationship between education, income and support for EU membership is consistent with theories of cognitive mobilization and material self-interest, which suggest that better-resourced individuals perceive themselves as more capable of benefiting from supranational governance. Second, the strong cohort effect—where younger generations display markedly higher support—aligns with generational replacement theories, indicating that long-term Europeanization processes may progressively deepen societal backing for integration. Third, political identity emerges as the primary axis of polarization: right-wing and centrist pro-market groups perceive the EU as a vehicle for modernization, institutional reform and geopolitical alignment, whereas left-populist or post-Soviet ideological groups frame it as a threat to national autonomy or social protection models. Finally, the near-zero support among Socialist/Communist identifiers highlights the persistence of ideological cleavages rooted in historical geopolitical narratives, demonstrating that EU membership debates in Moldova are not merely socio-economic, but deeply embedded in identity politics and competing visions of national development.

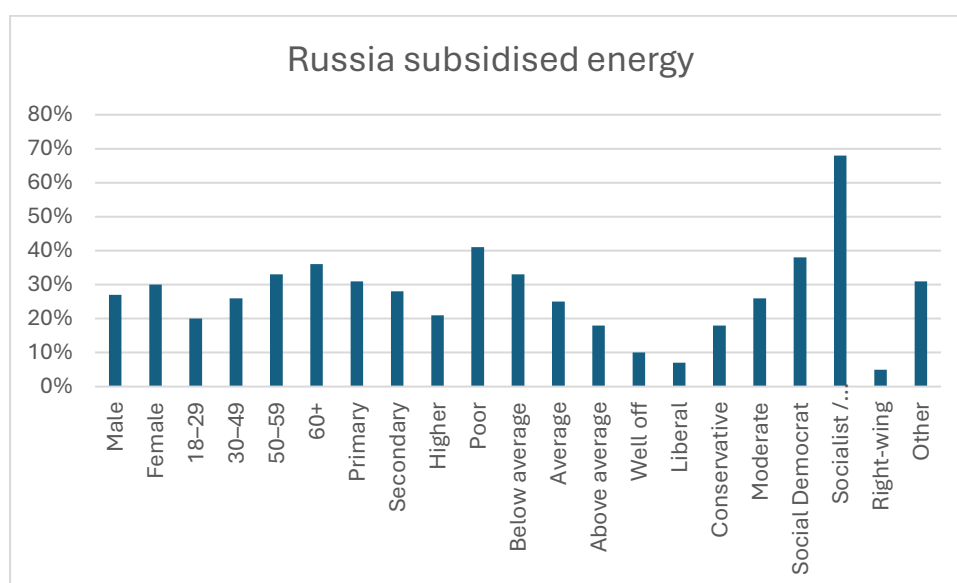
Graph 13. EU full membership support in Moldova



Trust in the narrative that Russia provides subsidized petroleum energy varies consistently across key sociodemographic and political dimensions. Gender differences are minimal, with women (30 percent) slightly more likely than men (27 %) to believe that Russia offers subsidized petroleum products. Age has a clearer gradient: trust rises steadily from 20 % among respondents aged 18–29 to 36% among those aged 60 and above, indicating stronger resonance of this narrative among older cohorts. Education moderates these perceptions: individuals with primary education show the highest agreement (31%), while trust decreases with higher levels of

education, reaching 21% among those with tertiary degrees. Financial status presents the starkest divide—belief in subsidized Russian petroleum is most common among poorer respondents (41%) and declines sharply as economic status improves, down to just 10% among the well-off. Political identity produces the strongest polarization: support for this narrative is exceptionally high among those identifying as socialist or communist (67%) moderately present among social democrats (37%) and moderates (26%), and extremely low among liberals (7 percent) and right-wing respondents (6%). (Bjørkhaug et al. 2025) These patterns suggest that acceptance of the claim is shaped by socioeconomic vulnerability, lower educational attainment, older age, and left-leaning ideological orientations, reflecting both material expectations and enduring geopolitical narratives within certain segments of the population.

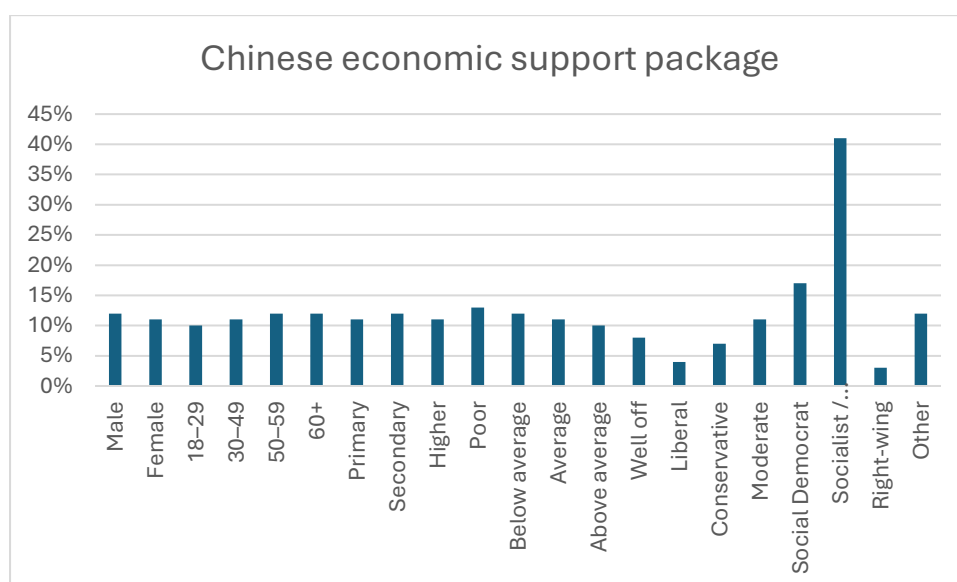
Graph 14. Russia subsidised energy support for Moldova



Across socio-demographic and political categories, support for a potential Chinese economic support package remains consistently low, with only marginal variation between groups. By gender, men (12%) and women (11%) show similarly limited endorsement, indicating that perceptions of Chinese aid are not influenced strongly by gendered patterns of political or economic expectations. Age introduces a slightly clearer gradient: younger adults (18–29) express the lowest support (10%), while older groups—particularly those aged 50–59 and 60+ (both 12%)—show somewhat higher approval, possibly reflecting generational experiences with state-centric economic models or higher economic insecurity among older cohorts. Educational differences remain muted but still notable: respondents with secondary education register the highest support (12%), while those with primary or higher education express more scepticism (11%), suggesting that neither low nor high educational attainment translates into greater enthusiasm for Chinese assistance. Financial status reveals a more pronounced pattern: support declines steadily as material well-being improves. Individuals identifying as poor exhibit the highest approval (13%), with support falling to 12% among those below average, 11% among

average respondents, 10% among the above-average group, and only 8% among the well-off. (Bjørkhaug et al. 2025) This distribution suggests that the appeal of Chinese economic aid is shaped by perceptions of vulnerability: those facing economic hardship may view external assistance—regardless of geopolitical source—as an opportunity for alleviation, whereas more prosperous groups may associate Chinese support with political conditionality, economic dependency, or strategic ambivalence.

Graph 15. Chinese economic support in Moldova

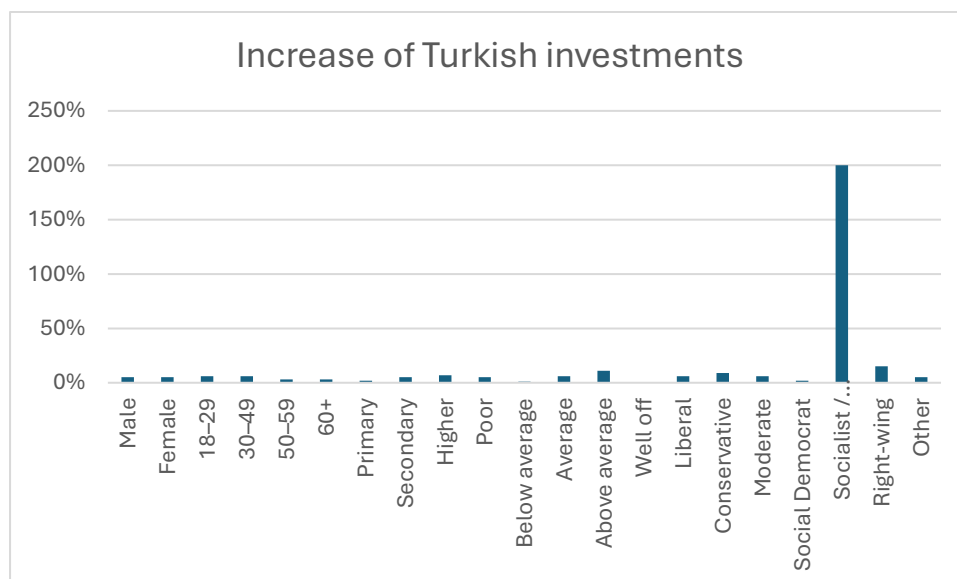


Political identification of Moldova - China collaboration presents the most significant divergence. While liberals (3%), conservatives (7%), moderates (11%), and social democrats (17%) show relatively low support, endorsement rises sharply among self-identified socialists/communists (41%). By contrast, right-wing identifiers demonstrate near-complete rejection (3%). (Bjørkhaug et al. 2025) This polarization reflects ideological alignments associated with geopolitical narratives: left-wing constituencies, particularly those with socialist orientations, may perceive China as an alternative model of development or a counterweight to Western political influence, whereas right-leaning groups tend to view Chinese aid as incompatible with their preferred geopolitical and economic orientation. These patterns demonstrate that support for a Chinese economic support package in Moldova is not a broad-based preference, but instead a niche position concentrated among economically vulnerable citizens and a specific left-wing political segment. The consistent scepticism across most demographic groups aligns with the broader regional context in which perceptions of China are shaped less by direct economic engagement and more by geopolitical signaling, media framing, and comparisons with EU-aligned development models. From an academic perspective, these findings illustrate how material insecurity and ideological orientation act as key mediators of geopolitical preference formation, reinforcing theoretical expectations in political economy and foreign policy attitudes research: individuals with fewer economic resources and those aligned with left-wing ideologies are more

receptive to non-Western development alternatives, while the broader public remains anchored in European trajectories of integration and assistance.

Across demographic groups, support for the increase of Turkish investments in Moldova's infrastructure projects remains low overall, yet with notable variation. Gender differences are minimal: both men and women register identical levels of agreement (5 percent), suggesting that gender is not a meaningful predictor for this perception. Age, however, introduces a clearer gradient. Younger respondents (18–29 and 30–49) show the highest openness (6%), while older groups (50–59 and 60+) fall to 3%. This may reflect generational differences in exposure to Turkey's regional role, perceptions of geopolitical partnerships, or differing levels of trust in foreign-funded infrastructure initiatives. Educational attainment correlates positively with support. Respondents with higher education express the strongest approval (7%), followed by secondary education (5%), while those with only primary education remain least receptive (2%). This pattern suggests that informed or internationally connected individuals may view Turkish investment as beneficial or strategically relevant, whereas lower-educated groups remain more sceptical or disengaged from international economic dynamics. Financial status also shapes perceptions. Those in above-average financial conditions show the highest support (11%), followed by individuals with average income (6%) and the poor (5%). Respondents with below-average income express very low support (1%), and the well-off remain ambivalent at 0%. This may indicate that individuals with stronger economic security perceive foreign investments as an opportunity for modernization, while more vulnerable groups may see them as irrelevant or potentially risky. Political identity reveals the most dramatic divergence. Support is minimal among Liberals, Conservatives, Moderates, Social Democrats, and those choosing Other (ranging from 2% to 4%). However, respondents identifying as Socialist/Communist exhibit exceptionally high support, which is likely an artefact of the relative measure or a reflection of an extremely concentrated distribution within a small subgroup. (Bjørkhaug et al. 2025) This finding suggests that left-leaning statist groups may interpret Turkish investments as aligned with developmental or infrastructural state-building agendas, whereas other ideological camps show little enthusiasm. Right-wing identifiers, by contrast, express only 5% agreement, signaling ideological distance or geopolitical caution toward Turkey. These results show that public endorsement of increased Turkish investment in Moldova is limited and uneven across society. Support tends to rise among younger respondents, those with higher education, and individuals with stronger economic standing, pointing to a small but distinct constituency that perceives Turkish infrastructure involvement positively. The overwhelming outlier found among Socialist/Communist identifiers suggests a unique ideological framing rather than broad societal acceptance. Overall, these attitudes highlight Moldova's cautious public orientation toward non-EU external actors and underscore the need to contextualize economic cooperation initiatives within domestic perceptions of geopolitical alignment, development strategy, and national sovereignty.

Graph 16. Turkish investments support in Moldova



These vulnerabilities are further compounded by the European Union’s limited embeddedness in horizontal trust networks and its reliance on professionalized civil society organizations that often lack broad public legitimacy and social rootedness. The Moldovan case demonstrates that geopolitical preferences under hybrid conditions are neither ideological nor stable. They are practical, adaptive and embedded in social inequalities, trust structures and media ecosystems rather than fixed alignments or value commitments. Citizens navigate geopolitical options by hedging between external actors to secure welfare, stability and identity under conditions of persistent uncertainty, a strategy characteristic of societies exposed to sustained external competition and weak institutional credibility. This non-linear hybridity shapes the terrain on which democratic development unfolds and conditions both the possibilities and the limits of the European Union’s democracy-promotion efforts in Moldova.

Zoom in representations and perceptions of the EU and democracy promotion assistance

Representations and perceptions of the European Union and its democracy promotion assistance in Moldova emerge from a dense and multi-layered intersection of individual expectations, historical legacies, structural inequalities, media environments and the broader hybrid political context in which reforms unfold. Vignette and survey data show that citizens articulate imaginaries of the EU that are both aspirational and pragmatic, reflecting hopes for institutional stability, improved living standards and security, while also revealing doubts and ambivalences shaped by socio-economic vulnerabilities, information fragmentation and uneven institutional performance. These imaginaries combine two distinct dimensions: the EU perceived as a political horizon symbolizing prosperity, rule-based governance, mobility and belonging to a wider European polity; and the EU evaluated through the tangible outcomes of its concrete

democracy-promotion initiatives in sectors such as justice, public administration and regional cooperation. The result is a complex pattern of representation: citizens recognize the EU as a prominent and desirable reference point, yet their perceptions of EU engagement fluctuate depending on visibility, personal experience and the social and economic conditions that shape everyday life.

The vignette on foreign assistance during an economic shock provides an illustrative entry point into these geopolitical imaginaries. A clear majority of respondents rate EU assistance packages as good or very good, significantly higher than offers attributed to Russia, China or Turkey. (Bjørkhaug et al. 2025) This suggests that the EU occupies a privileged symbolic position as the most reliable external actor in crises, associated with stability, financial predictability and governance support. Yet sizeable minorities still view Russian, Chinese or Turkish support favourably, indicating that Moldovans exhibit a naturalized form of multi-alignment rather than a strong ideological orientation. This multi-alignment does not reflect a calculated strategic choice but an everyday pragmatic response to uncertainty, shaped by historical familiarity, linguistic proximity, legacy infrastructures and the perceived need to keep multiple external channels open. Geopolitical preferences are therefore fluid, relational and shaped by the interplay between trust in domestic institutions, media consumption patterns and lived economic realities. They reflect not a binary choice between Europe and alternative powers but a spectrum of orientations influenced by structural constraints and shifting political narratives.

These representations vary markedly across demographic groups, reflecting stratifications in cultural capital, social capital, economic capital and exposure to information. Young Moldovans—especially those with higher education and those living in Chişinău—tend to express consistently more positive attitudes toward the EU (82% of Chişinău responders think that EU is important for Moldovan economy - vignette survey). They are embedded in information environments that provide greater access to European norms, mobility opportunities, professional networks and governance discourses. Their educational trajectories, often involving foreign-language competence and interaction with transnational spaces, reinforce cultural capital that aligns with pro-European imaginaries. By contrast, older citizens, residents of Bălţi and individuals within Russian-speaking communities often express more cautious or ambivalent perspectives on EU, shaped by information spheres dominated by alternative geopolitical narratives, by economic precarity and by lower exposure to direct benefits associated with EU integration. (76% of Bălţi responders think that EU is important for Moldovan economy -vignette survey).

The perceptions of EU democratic support in Moldova reflect not only evaluations of external assistance but also deeper geopolitical representations and preferences structured across social, economic, and political lines. At the aggregate level, the EU is predominantly positioned as a positive external actor: 42% of respondents associate EU support with democracy

promotion, while an additional 24% link it to peace and territorial integrity. Together, these two categories account for 66% of responses, indicating that the EU is primarily framed within a pro-European geopolitical narrative that combines normative democratic expectations with security and stability considerations. By contrast, only 8% of respondents perceive EU support as aggravating non-democratic tendencies, while 13% identify no effect and 12% express uncertainty, suggesting that explicitly negative geopolitical representations remain marginal at the societal level.

Gender-based differences are minimal and do not substantially alter this overall pattern. Among men, 42% associate EU support with democracy promotion and 23% with peace and integrity, while among women the corresponding figures are 42% and 24%. Negative perceptions remain limited in both groups, at 9% among men and 8% among women. (Bjørkhaug et al. 2025) This near-identical distribution indicates that geopolitical representations of the EU in Moldova are not meaningfully gendered and circulate broadly across the population without significant differentiation along this axis.

Age-based distributions reveal clearer geopolitical structuring. Among respondents aged 18–29, 40% associate EU support with democracy promotion and 32% with peace and integrity, resulting in a combined positive perception of 72%, while only 4% perceive EU support as aggravating non-democratic tendencies. This group also shows relatively low uncertainty at 14%. In contrast, respondents aged 60 and above report lower levels of positive association, with 38% indicating democracy promotion and 18% peace and integrity, while negative perceptions rise to 11% and uncertainty reaches 17%. (Bjørkhaug et al. 2025) These differences suggest that younger cohorts more strongly situate the EU within a coherent and positive geopolitical horizon, whereas older cohorts display more fragmented or ambivalent geopolitical representations.

Educational attainment further structures geopolitical preferences. Among respondents with higher education, nearly half (49%) associate EU support with democracy promotion, compared to 40% among those with secondary or vocational education and 36% among those with primary or no formal education. At the same time, higher-educated respondents report a higher share of negative perceptions at 12%, compared to 8% among those with secondary education and 6% among those with primary education. This indicates that higher education strengthens pro-European geopolitical alignment while simultaneously increasing critical reflexivity rather than unqualified endorsement. Respondents with lower education levels are more likely to frame EU support in terms of peace and integrity (27% among those with primary education) and exhibit higher uncertainty (16%), suggesting a more pragmatic and less ideologically anchored geopolitical orientation.

Financial status introduces additional differentiation. Among respondents with average financial status, 49% associate EU support with democracy promotion and 22% with peace and integrity,

while only 8% perceive negative effects. This positive association increases further among those with above-average financial status, where 62% report democracy promotion and 28% peace and integrity, with no respondents indicating aggravated non-democratic tendencies. In contrast, respondents with poor financial status show a more fragmented pattern, with only 28% associating EU support with democracy promotion, 24% with peace and integrity, 10% identifying negative effects, and a relatively high level of uncertainty at 23%. (Bjørkhaug et al. 2025) These distributions suggest that socioeconomic positioning shapes the extent to which the EU is integrated into a positive geopolitical narrative, though not in a strictly linear manner.

Political self-identification produces the strongest geopolitical polarization. Respondents identifying as liberal show the most pronounced pro-European orientation, with 58% associating EU support with democracy promotion and 25% with peace and integrity, while only 2% perceive negative effects. Similarly high levels of positive perception are observed among moderates (57% democracy promotion, 20% peace and integrity) and social democrats (48% and 30%, respectively). Right-wing respondents also display predominantly positive representations, with 46% associating EU support with democracy promotion, though negative perceptions rise to 16%. Conservative respondents exhibit lower democratic endorsement at 32% and high uncertainty at 28%, indicating ambivalence rather than outright rejection. In stark contrast, respondents identifying as socialist communist articulate an opposing geopolitical representation: only 4% associate EU support with democracy promotion, while 39% perceive it as aggravating non-democratic tendencies and 32% report no effect. (Bjørkhaug et al. 2025) This distribution reflects a fundamentally different geopolitical imaginary in which the EU is positioned as a destabilizing rather than legitimizing external actor.

Taken together, the data demonstrate that geopolitical representations and preferences in Moldova are strongly structured by age, education, financial status, and especially political ideology. While a dominant pro-European geopolitical orientation is evident across much of society, supported by consistently high percentages associating the EU with democracy promotion and peace, the presence of ideologically grounded counter-representations highlights the continued contestation of Moldova's geopolitical alignment. These findings underscore that perceptions of EU democratic support function as indicators of broader geopolitical positioning rather than isolated evaluations of policy effectiveness.

Perceptions of the EU's importance for Moldova's economy are consistently high across demographic groups, but the intensity of this assessment varies in patterned ways. Women are notably more convinced than men of the EU's economic relevance (82% vs. 77%), reflecting a broader pattern in which female respondents demonstrate stronger support for external anchors of stability. Age differences reveal that young adults (18–29) express the highest confidence in the EU's economic role (92%), while support declines among respondents aged 60+ (66%), suggesting generational divides shaped by different economic experiences, labour mobility

opportunities and exposure to EU-linked networks. Education strengthens perceptions of EU importance: respondents with higher education report the strongest endorsement (85%), compared with 80% among primary-educated and 77% among secondary-educated groups, indicating that familiarity with institutional landscapes and economic policy may reinforce pro-EU economic narratives. Financial status also maps onto these differences: the “above average” group reports the strongest perception of EU relevance (96%), whereas “poor” and “well-off” respondents register lower, though still substantial, levels of support (60% and 76%). The political identity distribution reinforces these trends: liberals (90%), moderates (80%) and social democrats (92%) all exhibit high recognition of the EU’s economic importance, while right-wing respondents (93%) also show strong support, revealing that economic expectations from the EU cut across ideological lines. The only group with significantly lower endorsement is the socialist/communist category (14%), consistent with their broader scepticism toward Western integration. (Bjørkhaug et al. 2025) These patterns collectively show that the EU’s perceived economic role functions as a cross-cutting anchor of public expectations, strongest among younger, educated and financially stable groups, but uneven among older and left-leaning constituencies whose geopolitical imaginaries remain more ambivalent.

At the same time, distrust of NGOs, fueled by media narratives portraying civil society as donor-driven, elitist or detached from local needs, limits the channels through which EU democracy-promotion initiatives can anchor themselves. This pattern shows that in hybrid political systems organized civil society is often perceived as externally aligned and socially disconnected, making it vulnerable to delegitimization campaigns and public scepticism (Bolkvadze et al. 2024). Thus, while horizontal trust networks often favor Europe indirectly through diaspora influence and transnational social ties, vertical trust in organized civil society remains weak, reducing the effectiveness of EU-backed civic initiatives (Freyburg, Lavenex, 2017; Richter, Wunsch, 2020).

This configuration creates a structural paradox: the actors most capable of countering authoritarian tendencies and articulating democratic norms—professionalized NGOs—lack broad-based societal trust, while those who enjoy strong interpersonal legitimacy—family networks, religious communities and diaspora circles—are not always institutionally or normatively aligned with democratic reform agendas. This paradox further entrenches hybridity by stabilizing informal social cohesion without translating it into institutionalized democratic accountability.

These dynamics are structured in significant ways by the unequal distribution of economic, social and cultural capitals. Those with higher cultural capital, often university educated and concentrated in Chişinău, are embedded in more diverse information ecosystems, enjoy greater mobility opportunities and interact more frequently with EU-linked institutions, which reinforces their perception of the European Union as a credible horizon of modernization (Metodieva, 2024; Buras et al. 2024). By contrast, citizens with lower economic capital, including the 27% of

respondents with monthly incomes below 300 euros and the 42% who self-identify as poor or below average, experience everyday insecurity more intensely and therefore value external actors not for normative reasons but for perceived material benefits (Bjørkhaug et al. 2025). In these groups, Russian-language media continues to play a central role in shaping external preferences, particularly through messaging that attributes economic problems to Europeanization while presenting alternative patrons as sources of stability, identity protection and economic relief.

Religious institutions, which command comparatively high trust among lower-income groups, further reinforce conservative imaginaries that may align more closely with narratives circulated by Russian-linked networks than with those associated with EU governance reforms (Bjørkhaug et al. 2025; Hale, 2014). Generational divides intensify these stratifications. Younger respondents aged 18 to 29 are significantly more exposed to digital platforms such as Instagram, TikTok and Telegram, where both pro-European and anti-European narratives circulate but where youth-oriented content often emphasizes mobility, digital citizenship and transnational belonging. Older respondents, especially retirees or those with limited internet literacy, remain more reliant on television, where editorial lines are shaped by ownership structures, oligarchic interests and external influence.

This divergence means that geopolitical representations are also generationally layered: younger Moldovans gravitate toward Europe's symbolic horizon of opportunity, while older Moldovans maintain more ambivalent or conditional orientations shaped by economic vulnerability, memory politics and entrenched media consumption patterns (Knott, 2018; Levitsky, Way, 2010). Linguistic cleavages intersect with these patterns in critical ways. Romanian-speaking households tend to consume Western-oriented media and express higher trust in EU institutions, while Russian-speaking communities are more exposed to Russian-language television and online outlets (Bjørkhaug et al. 2025; Metodieva, 2024). These differences do not necessarily produce antagonistic geopolitical blocs, but they structure the symbolic environment through which citizens evaluate external actors. Romanian speakers are more likely to perceive the EU as a guarantor of rule of law and prosperity, whereas Russian speakers may interpret the EU's normative agenda as intrusive or culturally misaligned (Bolkvadze et al. 2024). The media ecosystem thus reproduces the linguistic duality of Moldovan society and embeds it within broader geopolitical imaginaries characteristic of hybrid regimes.

Geographically, urban–rural divides further structure external preferences. Chişinău residents, benefiting from more visible reform projects, greater institutional performance and higher levels of cultural capital, express stronger orientation toward the European Union. Residents of Bălţi and other economically fragile regions, where post-industrial decline, outmigration and unemployment persist, may perceive Russian assistance as more immediately relevant or symbolically resonant, particularly when external actors are evaluated through lenses of material security and historical familiarity rather than normative alignment. Socio-economic divides thus

map onto geopolitical divides not through ideological polarization but through differentiated access to resources, information, mobility and institutional performance, a pattern characteristic of hybrid political orders. These patterns are consistent with the analysis of multi-actor engagement presented by Daniel, Laryš, Švec, Musil, Ditrych, 2024, who argue that external influence in hybrid regimes operates through unevenly distributed social infrastructures that shape receptivity to competing geopolitical narratives. Security imaginaries add another layer to geopolitical representations.

Perceptions of the European Union's importance for Moldova's security are consistently high across all socio-demographic groups, though the intensity varies. Women attribute slightly greater importance to the EU in this domain (76%) compared to men (71%). Age differences show a clear generational gradient: the highest levels appear among young adults (18–29: 80%), followed by those aged 30–49 (76%) and 50–59 (73%), while respondents aged 60+ register a noticeably lower, yet still majority, level of support (61%). Educational attainment also shapes perceptions—individuals with higher education express the strongest belief in the EU's security relevance (76%), compared to those with secondary (72%) or primary (73%) education. Financial status further amplifies this pattern: support increases steadily from 57% among the poorest respondents to 87% among those above average, indicating a link between economic stability and pro-EU security views. The sharpest divides emerge across political identities. Liberals (85%), Social Democrats (88%), right-wing identifiers (84%), and those selecting "Other" (84%) overwhelmingly view the EU as crucial for security, while Conservatives (75%) and Moderates (74%) express somewhat lower yet substantial support. In stark contrast, only 30% of those identifying as Socialist/Communist share this view, highlighting a pronounced ideological cleavage regarding geopolitical orientation and security perceptions. (Bjørkhaug et al. 2025)

Younger and urban respondents tend to view NATO and the European Union as anchors of security, while older and Russian-speaking respondents are more inclined to associate stability with neutrality or historical ties to Russia. However, these security preferences remain pragmatic rather than ideological: citizens judge external actors based on perceived competence, past behavior and trustworthiness rather than on rigid geopolitical loyalties, a pattern characteristic of hybrid regimes operating under conditions of uncertainty. The experience of regional conflicts, migration pressures and energy crises affects how people imagine security, vulnerability and protection, reinforcing flexible and situational security imaginaries rather than fixed alignments.

These imaginaries also influence the reception of EU democracy-promotion efforts: if the EU is perceived as a guarantor of stability, its governance and rule-of-law programmes gain traction; if it is associated with austerity, conditionality or cultural disruption, support may weaken. This fluidity illustrates the complexity of democratic development under hybrid conditions, where external actors are evaluated less on normative commitments than through fluctuating associations of risk and opportunity. Disinformation ecosystems further complicate these

dynamics. Anti-EU messaging often highlights economic hardships, social inequalities or bureaucratic inefficiencies and attributes them to Europeanization, while pro-Russian content emphasizes traditionalism, sovereignty, affordable energy and cultural continuity (Ambrosio, 2016; Tolstrup, 2009; Lührmann, Lindberg, 2019).

At the same time, Western-oriented campaigns present the European Union as a pathway to modernization, stability and legal protection (Bolkvadze et al. 2024). These competing narratives do not cancel one another out but instead generate overlapping and sometimes contradictory representations within the same households. This reflects a core insight of hybridity analysis: information environments, trust structures and geopolitical orientations coexist in layered forms without resolving into coherent ideological alignments.

When these dynamics intersect with Moldova's hybrid trust ecology, the resulting patterns are particularly complex. High trust in external actors such as the EU exists alongside entrenched reliance on interpersonal networks and persistently low trust in organized civil society (Bjørkhaug et al. 2025). Citizens may aspire to EU integration while simultaneously distrusting NGOs that promote democratic reforms, perceiving them as distant, elite-driven or externally oriented (Howard, 2003; Daniel et al. 2024). They may value EU economic assistance yet interpret governance reforms through a lens of institutional scepticism shaped by past reform failures and politicized implementation. At the same time, they may rely on diaspora networks that circulate pro-European experiences while consuming Russian-language media that promotes sovereigntist or conservative narratives.

Hybridity thus produces internal inconsistencies that are not indicators of political incoherence but adaptive responses to structural uncertainty and fragmented authority. From the perspective of democratic development, these geopolitical representations generate both opportunities and vulnerabilities. High trust in the EU and positive evaluations of its assistance provide a potential foundation for governance reform and institutional modernization. Yet the stratified distribution of trust, persistent socio-economic precarity and fragmented media ecosystems create openings for competing actors to frame democracy promotion as foreign interference or elite-driven experimentation.

Across all demographic dimensions, the perception that the EU is important for strengthening democracy remains consistently high, with notable variations between groups. Women express higher levels of agreement (79%) compared to men (74%), continuing the gender pattern observed in other EU-related perceptions. Age differences are more pronounced: support peaks among young adults aged 18–29 (90%), gradually decreasing among older groups, particularly those 60+ (60%). Education correlates positively with perceived EU importance: respondents with higher education report the strongest endorsement (85%), while those with secondary education register slightly lower levels (70%). Financial status also shapes attitudes: individuals

in above-average economic conditions show the highest support (92%), whereas respondents with poor financial status express lower—yet still majority—agreement (58%). Political identification reveals the widest disparity: Social Democrats (90%), Liberals (85%), and Right-wing identifiers (88%) are the most convinced of the EU's role in supporting democracy, while Socialist/Communist respondents show sharply lower levels (28%). (Bjørkhaug et al. 2025) Overall, trust in the EU as a guarantor of democratic standards is strong, but shaped significantly by age, education, economic wellbeing, and ideological orientation.

Representations of the EU are impacted by media consumption patterns as well. Television remains the most trusted source of information, with Pro TV Chişinău and Jurnal TV maintaining high credibility, while Facebook and Telegram exert significant influence, particularly among younger audiences. (Bjørkhaug et al. 2025) Disinformation campaigns originating from external actors target vulnerable groups—especially older individuals, rural communities, Russian-speaking audiences and those with lower levels of formal education—who rely more heavily on traditional media or unmoderated online spaces. These campaigns promote narratives portraying the EU as threatening identity, undermining sovereignty or imposing unwanted cultural values, while framing Russia as a protector of tradition and stability. At the same time, pro-European narratives highlight mobility opportunities, economic prospects and governance improvements linked to EU integration. As a result, many households experience internally competing imaginaries, where narratives of opportunity coexist with narratives of threat, producing cognitive ambivalence rather than clear ideological alignment.

Security perceptions further shape these imaginaries. Younger, urban and Romanian-speaking respondents tend to associate the EU and NATO with security, democratic stability and alignment with the West. Older and Russian-speaking groups remain more sceptical, often associating security with neutrality, tradition or historical connections with Russia. (Bjørkhaug et al. 2025) However, security imaginaries in Moldova remain pragmatic rather than ideological. Citizens seek predictability in an unstable regional context, and their trust in external actors—whether the EU, the United States, Russia or Turkey—is determined more by perceived competence, familiarity and historical memory than by geopolitical loyalty.

Analyzing the EU role in democracy promotion, EU assistance and democracy promotion initiatives in Moldova have produced visible improvements at national level. The research of EU-funded interventions finds that EU support for Moldova constitutes a coherent and comprehensive framework, organized around critical dimensions including economic integration, institutional and rule of law consolidation, and increased resilience to hybrid and emerging threats.

The project tracing examined two EU-funded projects implemented in the Republic of Moldova, to evaluate whether and how EU-funded interventions contribute to governance reforms and

social trust-building in Moldova: 1) Securing integrity, efficiency and independence of the justice system in Moldova - #Justice4Moldova (implemented by the Institute for European Policies and Reforms (IPRE); and 2) EU4Dialogue: Supporting understanding between conflict parties (implemented by Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e.V. and in partnership with Institute for Development and Social Initiatives “Viitorul” (IDIS) as the Moldovan partner).

The analyzed projects are strategically aligned with EU priorities on rule of law, democratic governance, and conflict transformation, with a particular focus on strengthening civil society, media engagement, and dialogue mechanisms in the Republic of Moldova and the wider Eastern Partnership region.

The selection of the #Justice4Moldova and EU4Dialogue projects reflects a deliberate analytical strategy aimed at capturing two complementary dimensions of EU democracy promotion in Moldova: institutional transformation and societal trust-building. Together, these projects allow for an assessment of how EU engagement operates across both formal governance structures and informal social arenas within a hybrid political environment.

The #Justice4Moldova project represents a core example of EU engagement with hard institutional reform. Its central feature is a focus on judicial integrity, efficiency and accountability through support for anti-corruption architecture, vetting processes, digitalization of courts and enhanced oversight mechanisms. A defining characteristic of the project is its reliance on professionalized civil society and independent media as intermediaries between EU norms and domestic institutions. This design makes the project particularly suitable for examining how EU-supported procedural reforms interact with informal resistance, institutional inertia and public trust. Process tracing and focus group evidence show that while the project has generated measurable procedural improvements and increased transparency at higher institutional levels, its societal impact remains uneven and strongly mediated by communication practices and citizens’ everyday experiences of justice.

By contrast, the EU4Dialogue project captures the softer, relational dimension of EU democracy promotion. Its key feature is an emphasis on non-political, issue-based dialogue as a mechanism for trust-building across societal, regional and conflict divides, particularly in relation to Transnistria and Gagauzia. The project’s multi-level and multi-country design, combined with thematic platforms on environment, history, energy and gender inclusion, makes it analytically relevant for assessing how EU engagement contributes to horizontal trust, social cohesion and resilience under conditions of geopolitical contestation. The focus group findings indicate that EU4Dialogue is effective in creating micro-level networks of trust and safe spaces for interaction, while simultaneously highlighting limitations in terms of societal reach, policy spillover and long-term sustainability.

The two projects illustrate a central empirical insight of the report: EU democracy promotion in Moldova operates through a dual logic. On the one hand, it strengthens institutional capacity and formal accountability mechanisms; on the other, it supports social infrastructures of dialogue and cooperation. The contrast between the projects reveals that while institutional reforms are more visible and measurable, they face deeper resistance linked to informal power networks, whereas dialogue-based initiatives generate trust but struggle to scale beyond elite and NGO circles. This combination makes the selected projects particularly well suited for analyzing both the achievements and structural constraints of EU democracy promotion in a hybrid regime context.

#Justice4Moldova project is focused to strengthen the role of civil society and independent media in improving the independence, integrity, efficiency, and accountability of Moldova's justice system, in line with European standards and international human rights commitments. In this context, its specific objectives are to promote the implementation of justice sector policies transparently and through monitoring and support from civil society, political organizations, and the media, to ensure greater independence, integrity, and efficiency in the justice and anti-corruption sectors. The EU4Dialogue project aims to create an enabling environment for de-escalation, trust-building, and constructive engagement across conflict divides. Its specific objective is to foster mutual understanding and cooperation through inclusive, multi-level dialogue processes. A defining feature of the project is its regional, individual, and multi-country approach, combined with the systematic promotion of EU best practices and strict adherence to human rights standards, including gender equality and the EU Strategy on Women, Peace and Security. This integrated the work on different dimensions: Women's Platform for Agenda Setting; Climate, Energy and Water Dialogues; Changemaker's Forums with Alumni Activities; Platform for Dialogue between Historians; Psychosocial Support to Aid Workers; Policy Skills in Politically Sensitive Context Course; etc.

The focus group session on #Justice4Moldova examined the performance of the Moldovan judiciary within broader EU-supported reform frameworks. The discussion emphasized the judiciary's pivotal role in sustaining societal resilience, combating disinformation, and countering hybrid threats through integrity, efficiency, and transparency. Participants from the Ministry of Justice, the Prosecutor's Office, and the Superior Council of Magistracy presented concrete progress in judicial reform, particularly around the vetting process, anti-corruption architecture, and digitalization. These measures were acknowledged as historically significant, yet simultaneously constrained by systemic resistance, limited capacity, and uneven communication with the public.

The focus group session on EU4Dialogue project addressed the softer dimension of resilience, trust and dialogue in a polarized society marked by unresolved territorial divisions (notably Transnistria and Gagauzia) and wider geopolitical tensions. Implementers and beneficiaries from

civil society, academia, and EU institutions reflected on the successes and limitations of dialogue projects intended to foster cross-regional cooperation on “non-political” issues such as history, environment, and energy.

While these projects successfully built micro-level networks of trust, they often struggled to achieve deeper, long-term policy influence or broad societal penetration. Together, the projects illuminate complementary but distinct aspects of Moldova’s European trajectory. The discussion on #Justice4Moldova project highlights structural transformation and institutional integrity, while EU4Dialogue project emphasizes social cohesion and cross-border engagement. Both reveal that while Moldova’s European integration agenda has advanced significantly, some challenges of communication, and sustainability remain.

Thus, the research highlighted converge on a central theme: the EU’s democracy-promotion engagement and the persistent shared concern: how to build and sustain trust—vertically between citizens and state institutions, horizontally across divided communities, and externally between Moldova and the EU. This challenge unfolds against a backdrop of acute geopolitical uncertainty, democratic fragility, and hybrid threats emerging from regional instability.

Both focus groups on the traced projects illustrate a notable shift from donor-driven reform toward co-owned Europeanization. Moldovan participants consistently emphasized that EU projects have become increasingly aligned with local needs, contrasting earlier experiences where reform initiatives were externally framed. For example, the Ministry of Justice and Prosecutor’s Office representatives underlined that recent EU-funded projects demonstrate genuine responsiveness to Moldova’s sectoral priorities, rather than standardized templates: “... the EU plays a crucial role in helping align our national legislation with European standards. This support is ongoing and highly impactful. The European Union’s input has been especially significant in providing expertise that helps us adopt the highest legal standards. For instance, the Ministry of Justice focuses heavily on expertise. A recent example is our transposition of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR)—a complex legal framework. In this case, what we needed most wasn’t financial assistance but expert guidance from countries that had already implemented the regulation successfully.” (Focus group with beneficiary on #Justice4Moldova)

The EU funded projects in Moldova are seen as EU’s dual strategy—supporting governance reforms and societal resilience simultaneously: “EU’s support for Moldova goes far beyond the justice sector. It spans economic development, healthcare, education, infrastructure, security, and more. having the EU as a strong and reliable partner is absolutely vital. So yes, the debate around the EU’s role and efficiency is valid—but in Moldova, it’s not theoretical. It’s deeply practical. And for us, the EU is not just a partner—it’s an essential lifeline for reform, for stability, and for development” (Focus group with beneficiary on #Justice4Moldova)

On another hand, local ownership faces some limitations. Many Moldovan experts noted dependence on external financial assistance due to domestic fiscal constraints. Without EU funding, core reforms in the judiciary and dialogue sectors would likely stall. Moreover, ownership tends to concentrate among elite actors—senior officials, urban NGOs, and established think tanks—while grassroots inclusion remains limited. Thus, it is recognized the need to decentralize engagement, empowering local governments, regional institutions, and small NGOs to participate more directly in EU projects.

Speaking about the EU contribution to the institutional trust and transparency, the focus group session on #Justice4Moldova project has demonstrated that the reform of justice institutions stands at the center of Moldova’s democratic consolidation. Participants articulated a shared understanding that judicial integrity is indispensable for building trust, countering disinformation, and strengthening societal resilience against hybrid threats. Key progress areas include the vetting process for judges and prosecutors, the random allocation of cases to prevent corruption, and the digitalization of court procedures. These measures have improved procedural transparency and accountability, particularly at higher judicial levels. The creation of whistleblower protection mechanisms and the modernization of the National Integrity Authority also mark important institutional advances. In 2024, within the #Justice4Moldova project, was conducted the national opinion poll on integrity in the justice sector that revealed that: “30% of survey participants believe that things have improved in the judiciary over the past three years. Of course, 53% still view corruption as a significant issue. However, an interesting finding is that people who are more informed about the reforms are more likely to believe that progress is being made. This once again underscores the importance of communication and transparency” (Focus group with implementing agency on #Justice4Moldova; IPRE, 2024)

Yet, these technical reforms are still struggling to transform the deeper culture of justice. The Soviet-era legacy of bureaucratic control and performance metrics based on case quantity rather than quality persists. The reform’s most challenge is mindset change—moving from a system that serves the state to one that serves citizens. Thus, participants acknowledged that public trust cannot be rebuilt through technology or new laws alone; it requires consistent communication, moral credibility, and fairness in the lived experience of justice.

The justice reform focus group offered detailed insights into Moldova’s ongoing anti-corruption drive. Since 2016, a comprehensive strategy and its subsequent iterations have sought to align national institutions with European standards. Concrete achievements include the operationalization of the Anti-Corruption Prosecutor’s Office, the strengthening of the National Integrity Authority, and the modernization of investigative tools to trace illicit financial flows. The introduction of the vetting process triggered some institutional pushback. Moreover, while digitalization curtails corruption opportunities, it does not eliminate informal networks of influence. Corruption is not merely a legal issue but a social phenomenon that thrives where

public institutions lack legitimacy and citizens lack faith in due process. This recognition has led Moldovan reformers to reframe anti-corruption as a matter of citizen trust restoration, focusing on victims' rights, fair treatment, and institutional empathy: "We are now refocusing the justice system on the restoration of victims' rights and freedoms. When this becomes the central value, public trust will follow. People will be more willing to come forward, to testify, and to engage with the justice process—because they will feel protected, heard, and valued. We must communicate clearly to our citizens: the justice process exists for their rights, not for statistics." (Focus group with beneficiary on #Justice4Moldova). The shift from punitive to restorative justice, if maintained, may gradually transform public perceptions.

The focus group session on EU4Dialogue project broadened the scope from national reform to national/regional reconciliation. Participants examined how non-political dialogue platforms, provided by project, contribute to mutual understanding between divided communities—particularly between Chişinău, Tiraspol, and Gagauzia. So, while this project has steered away from direct political entanglement, it has consistently aimed to foster inclusive, cross-dimensional dialogue, bringing together individuals from different regions and viewpoints in a shared space for reflection and understanding.

The project's design—emphasizing shared, non-political issues such as environmental cooperation, historical research, and cultural exchange—proved effective in creating safe spaces for interaction. The inclusion of historians, educators, and environmental activists fostered empathy and cooperation across long-standing divides. The Dniester River, as a shared natural resource, emerged as both a metaphor and a practical avenue for collaboration. As focus group participants have mentioned: "Confidence-building measures like the ones we engage in—focused on shared natural resources, dialogue, and civil society partnerships—are essential" (Focus group with beneficiary on EU4Dialogue).

Another, thematic finding reflects that EU initiatives contribute to consolidation of the civil society as a bridge between institutions and citizens. However, some communication gaps persist between civil society and state actors. While collaboration has improved, mutual trust remains uneven, particularly regarding sensitive issues such as corruption investigations or disinformation countermeasures. Government institutions often view civil society as critical or adversarial, while NGOs sometimes perceive authorities as non-transparent. It is recognized the need for coherent strategic communication frameworks that combine official messaging, civic education, and digital literacy.

Also, the analysis underscored the importance of cultural and gender-sensitive approaches in resilience-building. The EU4Dialogue project's "Women for Peace" component exemplified this, providing female professionals with access to EU institutions and opportunities to present policy proposals derived from local dialogue experiences. These activities not only promoted gender

inclusion but also legitimized local voices at the European level. Similarly, education emerged as a transformative domain. Moldovan participants highlighted civic education and history teaching as tools for reconciliation and democratic learning. The comparative reflections with South Caucasus counterparts revealed Moldova's relative progress in institutionalizing memory and promoting democratic narratives in education. In this context, focus group participants mentioned that: "Moldova has made real progress in institutionalizing memory and promoting democratic values through education. We have official memory days commemorating the victims of totalitarian regimes and fascism, and our school curricula emphasize peace, tolerance, and the values of democracy" (Focus group with beneficiary on EU4Dialogue).

Nevertheless, some limitations were apparent. The project's impact remained largely confined to academic and NGO circles, with little penetration into local communities or policy institutions. Participants questioned whether such dialogue initiatives, while valuable symbolically, can achieve sustainable transformation without parallel political processes. The EU's cautious non-political framing, while necessary for neutrality, may also constrain potential spillover into substantive conflict resolution.

In some respect is pointed a bureaucratic rigidity in EU project management—favoring large think tanks over small local organizations, that may in a way reduce inclusiveness and undermine genuine bottom-up participation. Stakeholders expressed concern that: " ... the EU prefers large-scale projects that involve massive organizations ... But these are often think-tanks, not real grassroots NGOs. This approach fails to support the development of a vibrant civil society in the countries involved... Bureaucrats prefer large projects because they are easier to manage than dealing with many small, local organizations...But the key element is missing—the development of real public participation at the local level". (Focus group with beneficiary on EU4Dialogue). n another hand, was underlined that sometimes small-scale projects can bring tangible results:" ...small-scale but practical measures—when well implemented—can bring tangible, lasting results. These are real results that directly improve people's comfort and quality of life. We've worked on projects with schools and kindergartens. One example I'd like to share is a project we carried out in a small town in southern Moldova, called Cantemir. It wasn't a massive investment—just a €1 million project—but it had a huge impact" (Focus group with beneficiary on EU4Dialogue).

Generally, the Moldovan case illustrates that democracy assistance is most impactful when it strengthens both institutional capacity and societal legitimacy. EU support to judicial integrity, for example, has contributed to improved legal frameworks, merit-based selection procedures, and mechanisms for accountability. However, as the focus group findings suggest, reforms that are not accompanied by public communication and civic ownership risk remaining technical achievements without democratic resonance. Citizens must be able to recognize and experience

justice reforms as improvements to their daily interactions with the state, not only as institutional restructuring visible to experts and policymakers.

Similarly, the EU's efforts toward dialogue and reconciliation demonstrate a strategic understanding that democratic stability extends beyond formal institutions. Trust-building across societal divides—whether political, regional, or identity-based—constitutes a necessary precondition for sustaining democratic norms. In this regard, the EU's investment in platforms that enable cross-community interaction reflects a broader shift toward supporting social infrastructures of democracy, not merely its legal or administrative frameworks. Yet, the sustainability of such initiatives depends on the long-term empowerment of local actors who can sustain dialogue independently of external funding.

Taken together, the analysis of EU engagement through projects reveals Moldova's transformation as both impressive and incomplete. Many Moldovan participants lamented that successful pilot initiatives often end abruptly when funding cycles close. There is the question of measurability. Projects aiming to build trust, dialogue, or resilience are inherently difficult to quantify. This creates tension between the EU's demand for measurable indicators and the intangible nature of social change. From a systemic perspective, the Moldovan case exemplifies the tension between European integration as a normative process and as a political reality. On one hand, the EU provides Moldova with normative frameworks—rule of law, good governance, gender equality, environmental sustainability—that anchor its modernization. On the other hand, these frameworks operate in a context of geopolitical pressure and limited administrative capacity. In this environment, reform success is often fragmented and uneven. Also, there is a concern that Moldova's reform momentum is donor-dependent. Without domestic financial sustainability and political continuity, institutional progress could regress after external support diminishes. This dependency highlights the need for fiscal decentralization, capacity-building, and stronger inter-institutional coordination within Moldova. Finally, there is still some fragility of societal trust. Despite notable reforms, Moldovan citizens remain somehow sceptical of public institutions, not because reforms are absent, but because their impact is not yet felt in citizens' daily lives. This disconnect underscores the importance of communication, transparency, and participation as integral—not auxiliary—components of reform.

Therefore, for the EU to continue to be in Moldova a genuine democratizing force and not act merely as a stabilizer of the status quo, it must move beyond episodic project support and instead anchor reforms in long-term institutional development. Replacing short funding cycles with multi-year frameworks that support institutional learning, mentorship, and staff retention would help shift reform incentives from compliance to internalization. This approach strengthens domestic capacity to sustain reform trajectories independently of external pressure, making democratic change more resilient and less contingent on political volatility. In this way, the EU's role in democracy promotion can evolve from managing hybridity to enabling structural

transformation—supporting the emergence of institutions that are not only formally Europeanized, but substantively democratic.

Conclusions

The interaction between trust divergence, geopolitical competition and hybrid governance constitutes the structural core of Moldova's contemporary political environment. Hybrid governance in Moldova is sustained through the coexistence of formally democratic institutions and deeply embedded informal power networks, producing uneven, volatile and socially stratified forms of vertical trust while preserving comparatively strong horizontal trust rooted in family relations, community ties, religious institutions and diaspora networks. This divergence between institutional trust and interpersonal trust plays a dual role. On the one hand, it stabilizes everyday social life by compensating for weak or inconsistent state performance. On the other hand, it limits the transformative potential of democratic reforms by preventing trust from being transferred from informal social networks to formal institutions. Hybridity thus persists not as institutional collapse, but as a functional equilibrium in which democratic procedures coexist with constrained accountability.

Within this configuration, geopolitical competition becomes a structural and permanent feature of political life rather than an episodic external disturbance. Citizens interpret governance, security and welfare through a political environment characterized by uncertainty, fragmented information spaces and competing external narratives. Survey and vignette data show that Moldovan citizens rarely adopt rigid geopolitical alignments. Instead, they display pragmatic and layered orientations shaped by socio-economic vulnerability, trust trajectories and everyday coping strategies. The European Union is widely perceived as the most credible and desirable external actor, yet alternative actors retain symbolic and pragmatic relevance for certain groups, reflecting adaptive responses to hybrid sovereignty rather than ideological inconsistency.

Trust patterns in Moldova are strongly stratified along generational, socio-economic, linguistic and regional lines. Younger, urban and better-educated respondents are more embedded in European mobility networks, transnational experiences and reform-oriented discourses, which reinforces pro-European orientations and higher expectations of institutional performance. Older citizens, residents of economically fragile regions and individuals with lower economic or cultural capital rely more heavily on informal authorities, traditional institutions and familiar media ecosystems, resulting in more cautious and conditional geopolitical evaluations. Importantly, these divisions do not undermine democratic participation. Rather, they are reflected within electoral behavior and political competition.

Recent presidential elections, the EU integration referendum and parliamentary outcomes demonstrate that, despite sustained hybrid threats, disinformation and external interference,

pro-European forces have retained a dominant position at the national level. Electoral competition remains pluralistic and regionally differentiated, yet the overall trajectory indicates a stable commitment to Moldova's European path. The convergence between survey findings and electoral results suggests that Moldova is navigating hybridity rather than being immobilized by it. European integration functions as a stabilizing reference point even in regions exposed to stronger external influence, indicating resilience rather than erosion of democratic orientation.

EU assistance and democracy promotion initiatives have contributed to visible national-level outcomes by anchoring electoral competition, reinforcing constitutional continuity and sustaining reform momentum in key governance sectors. These effects are increasingly reflected in citizens' perceptions of political stability and international credibility. At the same time, societal trust remains relatively low, though survey and fieldwork evidence indicate a gradual and modest improvement in recent years. This trend suggests that trust is not static, but responsive to sustained reform signals, political continuity and visible institutional effort.

Nevertheless, EU democracy promotion faces structural limits in hybrid environments. Citizens evaluate reforms primarily through their perceived impact on everyday experiences such as access to justice, service delivery, economic security and fairness in state–citizen interactions. When reforms remain technical, slow-moving or unevenly distributed, institutional trust remains conditional and reversible. The EU's emphasis on procedural compliance, regulatory alignment and cooperation with state institutions and professionalized civil society organizations risks reinforcing stabilitocratic dynamics, in which formal reform adoption coexists with informal power retention.

Organized civil society continues to display relatively low levels of societal trust, despite modest improvement, limiting its effectiveness as a transmission belt between EU-supported reforms and broader society. This places the EU in a structurally difficult position: it relies on actors whose social legitimacy remains contested to deliver reforms intended to strengthen trust. Meanwhile, informal networks and community-based actors that enjoy higher interpersonal legitimacy remain only weakly integrated into democracy-promotion strategies.

Yet hybridity does not preclude democratic transformation. The European Union retains high symbolic legitimacy and is consistently perceived as the most credible external partner. The persistence of electoral support for European integration represents a critical opportunity. Moving beyond the stabilization of hybridity toward democratic consolidation requires EU democracy promotion to become more socially embedded by linking reforms to everyday concerns, engaging trusted local intermediaries, strengthening communication, and addressing socio-economic vulnerabilities that shape trust divergence. In hybrid regimes such as Moldova, democratic resilience depends not only on formal institutional alignment, but on the social internalization and lived credibility of reform over time.

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ABOUT RE-ENGAGE

Russia's war against Ukraine has radically altered European security. Confronted by the direst security crisis in decades, EU policymakers are forced to fundamentally rethink their security policies. Europe has demonstrated unexpected unity and resolve, adopting a series of sanctions against Russia, increasing national defence spending, but also by deciding on a historic revival of the EU enlargement process.

Still, there is an urgent need to make sure that this process contributes to democratic, well-functioning and stable neighbourhood states, capable of countering external threats, particularly those posed by hybrid warfare. A thorough investigation is required to determine how this can be achieved without compromising the EU's values and security in the current context.

RE-ENGAGE's overarching ambition is to assist the EU in refining its foreign policy toolbox, including its enlargement and neighbourhood policies. This will enhance the Union's geopolitical leverage and provide better tools for democracy promotion in its neighbourhood. To achieve this goal, RE-ENGAGE will conduct in-depth studies in six candidate countries – three in the Western Balkans (Albania, Bosnia & Herzegovina and Serbia) and three in the Eastern Neighbourhood (Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine).