

The Future of the U.S.- Moldova Partnership

By Elias Yousif and Rachel Stohl

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The Future of the U.S.-Moldova Partnership

How Moldova and the United States can build a stronger partnership for a shared future.

By Elias Yousif and Rachel Stohl

Amidst a period of hard-fought transformation, Moldova is on a nascent but promising path toward security, economic development, and democratization. But despite recent progress, there remain significant headwinds. At an especially pivotal moment, stronger, more deeply ingrained cooperation with the United States has the potential to sustain and expand on Moldova's early successes. Based on two expert roundtables, a public event, desk research, and supplementary consultations, this white paper presents initial insights on building a stronger architecture for the U.S.-Moldova partnership. The paper covers three overarching partnership areas – defense and security, development and foreign investment, and democratization and political resilience. For each, the paper summarizes the current landscape, draws on insights from experts, and suggests next steps for both Washington and Chişinău.



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Introduction

Moldova is in the midst of a period of hard-fought transformation. Despite decades of struggle following the collapse of the Soviet Union, new leadership representing widely held ambitions for Moldova's integration with Europe and the West has forged a path toward prosperity, security, and democracy. Under the government of Maia Sandu, Moldova has secured European Union candidacy, made substantial progress in shoring up the country's democratic institutions, outlined a new national security vision, and expanded efforts to encourage development and foreign investment. The progress of the last five years has been remarkable, especially considering the challenges posed by the protracted conflict in Ukraine, difficulties faced by neighboring former Soviet satellite states, and Russian efforts to disrupt Moldova's westward drift.

But these achievements, important though they are, remain nascent and face increasingly difficult terrain ahead. After several years, maintaining momentum and demonstrating the value of political, financial, social, and economic investment remains a challenge. The international community, and the United States in particular, has a critical role to play in this regard.

Moldova's vision for the future and its prospects for reaping the rewards of its recent investments depend on integration with the West, including eventual EU ascension. But beyond Europe, a deeper, more durable, and strategic partnership between Moldova and the United States could be critical to ingrain and expanding on recent achievements. Across economic, political, and security domains, the United States is especially well-placed to support Chișinău's reform and modernization ambitions. And while recent efforts are already bearing fruit, embedding the partnership within a more lasting framework that moves beyond the circumstantial can help ensure its continued resilience.

Unfortunately, efforts to advance such a partnership now face an increasingly challenging operating environment. The Trump administration's abrupt departure from traditional policy approaches, its revisionist interpretations of events and partnerships in Europe, and its eagerness to sidestep allies in seeking a more normalized relationship with Russia all present powerful headwinds for a stronger U.S.-Moldova relationship. Nevertheless, these same circumstances illustrate why a more deeply ingrained partnership with stronger political resilience is so important and so urgent.

Though the challenges remain significant, there is still an opportunity for impact. Moldova sits at a critical geostrategic crossroads, nestled between Ukraine and the EU, and at the tip of the crescent of control envisioned in Russia's revanchist ambitions. Accordingly, events in Moldova will have rippling effects across the region. In many ways, Moldova is a microcosm of the political and security challenges facing Europe more broadly. Navigating them successfully would provide practical lessons learned and

offer an important counterpoint to the regional trends toward political repression, economic stagnation, and insecurity. In this context, Moldova’s needs are not inconsequential but, in relative terms, are of a reasonable scale and scope. Accordingly, moderate but persistent and thoughtful investments from the United States would have an outsized impact on the trajectory of Moldova’s transformation.



Moldovan Ambassador to the United States, H.E. Viorel Ursu, speaking at a July 2024 event at the Stimson Center.

Over the past year, the Stimson Center has explored the opportunities for and challenges to a stronger U.S.-Moldova partnership. Based on two expert roundtables, a public event, desk research, and supplementary consultations, this policy memo presents initial insights on building a stronger architecture for the U.S.-Moldova partnership. The memo covers three overarching partnership areas—defense and security, development and foreign investment, and democratization and political resilience. For each, the memo summarizes the current landscape, draws on insights from experts, and suggests next steps for both Washington and Chişinău.

Defense and Security

The Threat Landscape

Moldova's security environment remains fraught and presents a lasting challenge to progress in all other domains. The challenges are myriad, ranging from the conventional military threat posed by Russia to hybrid conflict to transnational criminal activity.

The war in neighboring Ukraine presents the most dynamic and severe of those security threats. In addition to the massive influx of Ukrainian refugees, the trajectory of the conflict and its eventual outcomes are likely to be defining features of Moldova's security environment. Moscow's efforts to control strategic territory in Ukraine's south and to develop a land bridge to the Russian-backed separatist region of Transnistria represent a potentially existential threat over the medium and long term. Though Russian control extends only to the Kherson Oblast in the south, it remains to be seen how conflict termination shapes the final lines of control or the long-term trajectory of the security environment in the region. In the meantime, the conflict has disrupted other national security imperatives—from energy resources to commercial activity—circumstances that are likely to persist for the foreseeable future. Rapidly evolving U.S. approaches to the conflict and an apparent willingness to bypass both European partners and Kyiv in pursuit of a bilateral settlement with Russia add to both the risks and complexities for Moldova.

The crisis in Ukraine relates closely to the unsettled conflict with the breakaway region of Transnistria. For Russia, which continues to maintain a troop presence in the territory, Transnistria represents a bridgehead beyond Ukraine and deeper into central Europe. In addition to the conventional security risks and the challenge to Moldovan sovereignty presented by Transnistria, the situation also jeopardizes Moldova's energy security. While Moldova has successfully transitioned away from the Russian gas that once transited through Transnistria, the country's largest powerplant remains in the breakaway region, providing a coercive lever that Russia has already exercised in efforts to pressure Chișinău.

Indeed, Russian coercion remains strongly focused on hybrid warfare activity aimed at disrupting and discrediting Moldova's reform efforts. This includes intense political manipulation, disinformation campaigns, voter manipulation, cyberattacks, and instigation of violence, all of which leverage the fragility of state institutions, including in the defense and security realm.

These challenges are exacerbated by—and, in many circumstances, directly connected to—transnational crime and other illicit activity. Historically weak domestic security and intelligence institutions coupled with persistently high levels of corruption have created a fertile environment for illicit enterprises, ranging from human trafficking, to cybercrime, to arms smuggling, and more. Often, the organizations

engaged in these activities provide useful entry points for foreign interference, supplying pathways and mechanisms for Moscow to co-opt or leverage.

Though Moldova's ambitions for the future are multidimensional, developing a more capable, sophisticated, and resilient defense and security sector will be key to unlocking progress in other areas. Attracting investment, curbing emigration, developing trust in political institutions, safeguarding democratization efforts, and preserving the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Moldova are all predicated on improving the ability of Chișinău to provide meaningful security.

Insights, Findings, and Recommendations

AMBITIONS

Though Moldova and the United States have a history of defense cooperation, the war in Ukraine dramatically increased the scale and scope of what had been a relatively modest partnership. In just a few short years, Moldova became one of the largest recipients of U.S. foreign assistance in Europe, which has included millions in security assistance. In 2024, the U.S. ambassador indicated that U.S. foreign military financing (FMF)—a security assistance program providing foreign partners grants to purchase U.S. weapons—had reached \$45 million over the preceding year, just \$10 million short of the cumulative amount of FMF provided to Chișinău between FY2010 and FY2021. The war and Moldova's proximity to the crisis has elevated the salience of U.S.-Moldova security cooperation and provided a strong, foundational basis for engagement.

For Moldova, that engagement is critical to its overarching National Security Strategy, which lays out, in detail, the comprehensive, multidimensional, and interdisciplinary ambitions for the country's defense and security modernization. Desires to achieve 100% NATO interoperability and to transition away from Soviet or Russian origin platforms all speak to the centrality of international defense cooperation in its vision for the future. For Moldova, this means moving beyond purely operational or circumstantial cooperation to a more enduring framework that positions Chișinău as a strategic-level partner in the eyes of U.S. policymakers.

Elevating Moldova in Washington's regional alliance network is also seen as key to ensuring that the partnership persists beyond the conflict in Ukraine. However war termination manifests, Russia's overarching regional ambitions represent a long-term security challenge for Moldova, requiring consistent and steady international defense cooperation that does not necessarily fluctuate with the ebb and flow of local tactical or operational dynamics.

Behind these aspirations is a bold vision for the future of Moldova's security establishment. These include the development of a professional, well-equipped Armed Forces; more robust defense integration with regional allies and alliances; a reformed law enforcement and sophisticated intelligence sectors; and greater resilience in the cyber, energy, and agricultural domains. Across all these lines of effort are explicit and implicit requirements for collaboration with and assistance from international partners, including the United States.

CHALLENGES

Moldova's defense and security objectives are ambitious and will confront a number of practical and political challenges in the context of U.S. security cooperation. On a strategic level, while the United States' previous approach towards Europe has elevated Moldova's relevance in U.S. international security policy, the steep increase in regional security cooperation remains closely linked to the war in Ukraine. Accordingly, both the trajectory of the conflict as well as its eventual termination could erode American strategic interest in and the resources made available for the theatre. In the absence of more deep-rooted security cooperation ties, a circumstantial approach to security cooperation complicates Moldova's defense modernization efforts and its ability to develop longer-term plans for advancing its national security strategy.

Relatedly, the Trump administration's sudden reversal of U.S. policy towards Ukraine in favor of unilateral, extractive, and transactional approaches has created even more uncertainty, not only about the future of the fighting but also regarding the durability of any negotiated cessation of hostilities. Doubt about U.S. security guarantees, whether in the context of continued fighting or as a part of a ceasefire, is likely to upend assumptions about Washington's approach to Ukraine, Russia, and Europe more broadly, with obvious implications for Moldovan security. Indeed, recent events are justifiably shaking confidence in the United States' commitment to Moldova's security, sovereignty, and independence, as well as its interest in supporting Chişinău's defense modernization efforts.

Adding to the difficulty are the unique parameters that narrow the pathways for ingraining U.S.-Moldova defense cooperation. Moldova's constitution commits it to "permanent neutrality," and while the tenet does not necessarily prevent security cooperation activities, it does preclude the country's entry into formal military alliances. For the United States, whose architecture for regional security cooperation is based largely on the NATO framework, Moldova's neutrality eliminates one of the more readily available and structurally robust avenues for closer defense ties. Indeed, the preclusion of NATO membership goes a long way in explaining why Moldova remains one of just a handful of countries in Europe that does not maintain a longer-term strategic partnership with Washington.

Similarly, efforts to develop stronger defense ties in the context of Chişinău's constitutional neutrality touch on domestic political sensitivities in Moldova. Opponents of reform efforts, including Moscow, have already sought to conflate security cooperation with formal alliance-making to suggest that the partnership is antithetical to the country's neutrality commitments. Accordingly, a deepening partnership between the United States and Moldova could present even greater fodder for disinformation campaigns or even a pretext for more intrusive activities.

Additionally, Moldova's aim of transitioning from Russian to NATO standard platforms could trigger intelligence and operational security concerns for the United States. While the United States may be eager to develop Moldova as a defense market, Washington is often reticent to share its more sophisticated defense technologies with partners it perceives as being susceptible to espionage or having compromised cybersecurity sectors. The presence of Huawei-enabled technology in Moldova's government infrastructure, for example, could be seen by U.S. policymakers as presenting too great a risk of technology capture and undermining Chişinău's requests for key capabilities.

Politically, at a time when Washington seems determined to offshore European security burdens to partners it believes are not doing their fair share, requests by Moldova for assistance could touch on an especially delicate nerve. The Trump administration’s pervasive skepticism of foreign assistance will invariably lead to questions about what practical value supporting Moldova’s defense sector delivers for the United States. Addressing these questions could prove challenging and may need to meet a higher burden of proof than was once necessary.



“America Days 2023” in Cahul, Moldova. © U.S. Embassy Moldova / Flickr.

OPPORTUNITIES

Despite the various challenges that could impede efforts to deepen U.S.-Moldovan security ties, there remain ample opportunities for both countries to seize. The dramatic expansion of security cooperation efforts following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine provides an important foundational basis on which to extend the partnership from the operational to the strategic level.

Notwithstanding the technical and political constraints associated with the term “ally” in the U.S. and Moldovan contexts, other designations or models of cooperation could help elevate Moldova’s standing in U.S. regional engagement, including, for example, Major Non-NATO ally status. Perhaps even more importantly, policymakers in both Washington and Chişinău should explore analogous examples of bilateral or multilateral frameworks that have underpinned other security cooperation partnerships. These

could include security cooperation partnerships the United States has developed with Finland (prior to its NATO ascension), Austria, other former Soviet Republics, or even states like Tunisia and Kosovo.

Moreover, the expansion of bilateral security relationships with members of the NATO alliance adds a useful dimension to Moldova's defense development. Deepening cooperation with countries like France, Sweden, and Germany not only diversifies the pool of Moldova's defense partners amidst transatlantic uncertainty, but could also complement and sharpen Chișinău's approach to Washington. In this context, Moldova could demonstrate how U.S. security cooperation can and will integrate with broader European efforts while offsetting demands that would otherwise have to be satisfied by the United States, thereby facilitating more targeted and tailored cooperation.

Lessons can also be drawn from the successes of existing mechanisms of U.S.-Moldova security cooperation. The success of the State Partnership Program, for example, which pairs U.S. National Guard units with sister countries to support local capacity-building efforts, has illustrated the importance not just of technical assistance efforts but also interpersonal relationships for ingraining the bilateral defense ties.

Whatever modalities for cooperation take hold, framing the partnership will be essential for its durability and depth. Moldovan efforts to illustrate the "value-add" of the partnership to Washington can build on longstanding U.S. priorities and emerging security concepts the United States is developing for the European theatre more broadly. Trans-Atlantic ambitions for enhanced regional security integration, for example, speak directly to the important geostrategic role Moldova plays in linking central and south-eastern Europe. Similarly, the development of Moldova's defense and security capacities can be linked to nascent U.S. efforts to operationalize its "Black Sea Strategy."

Moreover, for the United States, Moldova represents an often-overlooked frontline in Russia's efforts to reshape the European security environment. Moscow has used Moldova as a testing ground for hybrid warfare operations, drawing lessons that are likely to shape similar efforts across the continent. Accordingly, supporting Moldovan security modernization provides the United States an opportunity to sharpen its experience with and approaches to Russian grey zone operations while frustrating Moscow's ability to further hone its skills in this domain.

Beyond Europe, the United States' persistent interest in expanding its share of the global defense market, especially vis-à-vis its geopolitical competitors, could provide additional incentives for cooperation. Denying Russian, Chinese, or Iranian access to Moldova's defense sector more broadly could be a galvanizing imperative for Washington and one that connects to the United States' broader, extra-regional goals.

RECOMMENDATIONS

There is ample value in a deeper U.S.-Moldovan security partnership. But in charting a path forward, identifying the intersection and framing of shared interests and aspirations will be as important as defining the technical modalities of cooperation. Especially in a moment when the contours of U.S. national security strategy seem unsettled, cooperation should be rooted in fundamental aspects of U.S. foreign policy. In this context, Moldova should consider how its engagement with Washington speaks

to longstanding U.S. interests in increasing regional defense integration, addressing the continent's overreliance on the United States for its security, and in denying adversaries strategic regional depth—be that in physical or political terms.

As part of these efforts, and with an eye toward building bilateral resilience, Moldova should continue to diversify its engagement efforts. Maintaining and expanding Chişinău's engagement with congressional stakeholders across political divides, for example, could be critical to anchoring and regularizing the partnership beyond any one crisis or administration. Given recent elections, changes in committee memberships, and the arrival of freshman legislators, Moldova should invest early in connecting with new members and briefing relevant caucuses on the basics of the Washington-Chişinău partnership. Similarly, continued collaboration with civil society organizations in Washington, Moldova, and beyond can add to the quality and scale of the discourse on these critical issues and help sustain the political salience of the U.S.-Moldova partnership for policymakers.

Nevertheless, whether for legislative or executive audiences, Moldova must demonstrate a willingness to invest in its own security in parallel to assistance efforts. Frank bilateral conversations at various levels about sustainment, absorptive capacity, and Moldova's eagerness to shoulder an increasingly heavier share of its own defense burden will be important in this regard. Doing so not only lengthens the time horizons that will define bilateral security cooperation but also illustrates a Moldovan commitment not to shrink from the stark security challenges it faces ahead.

In developing such a framework, both Moldova and the United States should be proactive in addressing misunderstandings and misperceptions of security cooperation that have already been the subtext of disinformation campaigns. "Pre-bunking" myths around security cooperation and Moldovan neutrality, as well as committing to transparency in both defense cooperation and development, will be critical to safeguarding against efforts by opportunists to co-opt deeper engagement for destabilizing or regressive purposes.

Over the medium term, Moldova and the United States should build on their strategic dialogue and their Defense Capacity Building Bilateral Concept for security cooperation, linking strategic, operational, and tactical objectives with defined benchmarks and specific U.S. assistance programming. Doing so will require a clearer understanding of Moldova's operational concepts, doctrine, and needs, as well as a more granular evaluation of the country's other partnerships.

More immediately, Washington and Moldova should consider borrowing elements from the U.S. "fusion center" model. In other contexts, fusion centers have brought together various law enforcement, intelligence, and military professionals from multiple partners to collaborate on crosscutting national security issues. For Moldova, such an initiative could aid in operationalizing the linkages between the various dimensions of its security needs—conventional defense, cybersecurity, etc.—but also provide Chişinău with insights on how partner countries confront these issues. A fusion center could also expand the scope of cooperation beyond Moldova and draw in other partners like Romania to assist regional integration efforts and identify potential trilateral cooperation synergies.

Economic Development and Cooperation

Economic and Financial Landscape

Moldova has made substantial progress in improving its short and long-term economic prospects. Domestic institutional developments, more robust regulatory ecosystems, and efforts to attract foreign investors have all helped Chișinău see stronger economic growth and build deeper economic ties with the West.

While much of these efforts have been geared towards paving the way for Moldova's EU ascension—a central tenet for the country's economic vision—the economic partnership with the United States has also been a top priority. The U.S.-Moldova Strategic Dialogue helped usher in both development assistance as well as private investment across various sectors, including in energy and agriculture. Those efforts are already yielding dividends, with Moldova now exporting more to the United States than it does to Russia, which has historically been its largest trading partner.

Perhaps most critically, with support from partners like the United States, Moldova has made substantial progress in reducing its energy dependence on Russia. Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Moldova has leveraged alternative gas infrastructure—including importing liquified natural gas (LNG) from the United States for the first time in 2024—to effectively wean itself off of Russian energy supplies and end direct imports of Russian gas as of late 2023.

Still, economic and financial challenges persist. The energy politics related to Russian gas transit from Ukraine to Transnistria, as well as Moldova's continued dependence on the electricity generated in the breakaway region, all continue to present vulnerabilities that Moscow has been keen to exploit. On a more macro level, Moldova remains among the poorest countries in Europe and continues to face structural barriers in terms of regulation, competition, and infrastructure. Despite recent economic growth, poverty and lack of economic opportunity (especially in rural areas) continue to drive high levels of emigration—trends that are unlikely to be reversed in the near term.

Critically, much of the United States' economic assistance to Moldova has been administered through USAID programming, amounting to hundreds of millions of dollars for energy security, rural economic development, agricultural projects, and more. But with the freezing of USAID projects and the likelihood that the agency may cease functioning altogether as the Trump administration drastically slashes foreign aid, the prospects for similar support in the future are questionable.



NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte with President of Moldova, Maia Sandu, 2024. © NATO North Atlantic Treaty Organization / Flickr.

Insights, Findings, and Recommendations

AMBITIONS

Moldova's economic ambitions follow several crosscutting lines of effort, all of which center on EU ascension and a general reorientation towards Western markets. Moldova was granted EU candidacy status in June 2022, formally opened accession negotiations in June 2024, and is in the midst of an EU reform process that is both valuable in terms of securing membership but also addressing structural barriers to stronger economic growth.

But with a goal of EU membership by 2030, Moldova also sees an important window of opportunity to deepen its economic partnership with Washington before its foreign trade is more structurally defined by its membership in the bloc. Indeed, Moldova hopes to eventually see 7-10% of its exports going to the United States by 2030.

Similarly, both Moldova and the United States have demonstrated an interest in increasing both U.S. access to Moldovan markets and accelerating direct investment in the country. The U.S.-Moldova Strategic Dialogue will continue to be a cornerstone of these efforts and is hoped to include assistance from Washington for countering corruption, advancing institutional development, and supporting investments in infrastructure.

CHALLENGES

The prospects of a more structural economic partnership between Moldova and the United States face increasingly stiff hurdles. As with all aspects of the U.S.-Moldova partnership, the arrival of the Trump administration creates a great deal of uncertainty, especially in the economic domain. The administration has taken unprecedented steps in slashing foreign aid, presenting such assistance as both wasteful and a misuse of U.S. taxpayer dollars. The administration's effective closure of USAID scuttles what had been a driving force in the bilateral economic partnership and instrumental in facilitating reforms intended to enable greater economic growth and investment. In this context, U.S. assistance is likely to be far fickle, even if the long-term returns on these programs would create meaningful value for the United States.

Similarly, the administration's mercantilist approach to international trade and its willingness to wield tariffs to extract political concessions from even close allies could present a threat to Moldova's ambitions for its partnership with the United States. The negative trade balance the United States maintains with Moldova, for example, could fall prey to the administration's protectionist trade approaches and hinder efforts to increase Moldovan exports to the United States.

Irrespective of administration, China's economic role in the country is likely to give U.S. policymakers and investors pause. The United States has grown increasingly sensitive to the presence of Chinese investment institutions and economic instruments in Moldova. Concerns about technology capture or that Beijing will be the incidental beneficiary of U.S. support could inhibit further investment. The presence of Huawei in key telecommunication and IT sectors, for example, could create policy incentives in Washington to limit U.S. investment or add conditions to U.S. trade.

OPPORTUNITIES

Though the environment is precarious, there remain important opportunities to deepen the economic partnership between the United States and Moldova. The energy sector is an issue area that is likely to draw interest and support from across the political spectrum in Washington. Expanding the United States' market share of Moldova's LNG, denying market share to Russia, and supporting the country's energy independence are likely to be compelling policy imperatives for any U.S. administration.

Substantial European economic assistance may also galvanize greater engagement from the United States. The €1.9 billion pledge from the EU's Reform and Growth Facility is likely to have a profound impact on Moldova's economic development while also encouraging greater trade integration with Europe. Although the assistance represents a net positive for Moldova, it may send a signal to Washington to make its own investments in the country in order to cement a degree of market share before Moldova's trade outlook is singularly defined by its physical, economic, and political proximity to the EU.

Similarly, while the presence of Chinese companies and institutions in Moldova presents a potential barrier, it could also frame efforts to encourage more robust U.S. investment. As the United States seeks to counter China's global influence and wrest back market share in key geographies, there may be an opportunity for Washington to provide alternative instruments to support Moldova's economic development. This could be especially true in Moldova's emerging tech sector, where collaboration could be framed as providing the United States early access to a growing market and countering potential inroads from competitors.

More generally, expanding U.S. trade with and investment in Moldova provides both countries an opportunity to dull the ability of other external actors to leverage economic ties for their own ends. At a time when strategic competition remains at the forefront of U.S. strategy, increasing the United States' economic presence in Moldova could be seen as insulating the country from its vulnerability to economic coercion, be that from Russia, China, or other U.S. adversaries. Critically, any such approach must demonstrate in concrete and practical terms how engagement delivers returns for the United States and the Trump administration specifically. Appeals to shared values, political visions, or altruism alone are highly unlikely to find receptive audiences in the White House.

RECOMMENDATIONS

As is true across all aspects of the partnership, Moldova should frame its efforts to deepen economic ties with the United States in terms of expanding U.S. market share and investment opportunities. The Trump administration is unlikely to look favorably at “aid” efforts and will be assessing partnerships more transactionally. Couching the partnership within the terms of economic opportunity for Washington will be critical in this regard.

In this context, Moldova and the United States should work together on developing Moldova's energy infrastructure, including reducing its dependence on Transnistrian power and improving its access to the European electricity market. Additionally, the United States should offer expert personnel to provide in-person technical assistance for regulatory reforms related to the country's energy sector, thereby unlocking additional opportunities for diversifying the country's energy market.

Other institutional development efforts could leverage a new compact with the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC), which has previously provided over \$280 million in assistance for judicial and health reforms as well as infrastructure. A new arrangement could focus on regulatory, judicial, and technical economic reforms that could encourage growth and create a more inviting environment for U.S. investment. However, as with other elements of the U.S. foreign assistance enterprise, the prospects for the MCC remain uncertain. Whether it too becomes subject to aggressive cuts to not just the funding but the instruments of U.S. international aid will inevitably shape Moldova's opportunities and modalities for additional economic support.

As with security cooperation, Moldova should ensure its engagement with Congress and civil society on economic development cooperation remains robust. At a time when the executive branch's commitment to support international development efforts remains unpredictable, informing other stakeholders and catalyzing continued discourse on the importance of the economic partnership between the United States and Moldova will be all the more important.

Democratic Resilience

Democratization Landscape

Moldova's democratic transformation has been impressive. Though nascent, the Sandu government's reforms have placed the country on a strong footing to continue the long-term process of democratization. The achievements thus far are all the more remarkable considering the challenging economic and security circumstances in which they are taking place.

However, these reform efforts remain embryonic. Democratic institutions are still fragile and must contend with increasingly fraught political contexts. Moreover, the narrow margins of the Sandu government's 2024 election victory underscore concerns that Moldova's political reform project depends too squarely on the President herself and that a change in administration could end or undo progress made thus far.

Nevertheless, Moldova's EU ascension has proven instrumental in advancing critical legal and political reforms. The passage of new electoral legislation, improvements to the electoral code, efforts to strengthen the Central Election Commission, and to improve broader political transparency have all marked important achievements of the EU negotiations and point to the importance of EU ascension in embedding Moldova's democratization. The successful passage in 2024 of a constitutional amendment enshrining Moldova's commitment to joining the EU speaks to its importance in sustaining and expanding the country's political progress.

The United States has been a critical partner in these efforts, particularly through its support for rule of law and anti-corruption reforms. Beyond the executive branch, Moldova has also worked with Congress and civil society to strengthen its democratic institutions and processes. This has included the launch of the [Strategic Dialogue Civil Society Platform](#), which has helped foster direct discourse and exchanges between Moldovan civil society and U.S. policymakers, and direct engagement with U.S. lawmakers through the [House Democracy Partnership](#).

Insights, Findings, and Recommendations

AMBITIONS

The Sandu government hopes to achieve "irreversible" levels of democratization, ensuring that its political liberalization process remains immune from routine electoral or political ebbs and flows. The EU ascension process is seen as highly critical in this regard, which underscores the importance of the passage of the constitutional amendment committing the country to the pursuit of EU membership.

Structurally, Moldova is still aiming to build the capacity and legitimacy of its democratic institutions. Improvements to the Central Election Commission, both in terms of resourcing and technical expertise, remain an important objective, as does enhancing transparency in parliamentary, governmental, and political party processes and funding.

Judicial reforms are also crucial and continue to be an area where the United States has made important contributions. Despite the adoption of new laws and procedures for the vetting of senior judicial officials, implementation remains slow. Similarly, Moldova continues to try and enhance its ability to combat corruption, including strengthening vetting processes for judges, professionalizing and resourcing prosecution services, and raising the clearance rate for the country's long backlog of cases. Additionally, Moldova continues to try and augment its ability to initiate and pursue corruption investigations, including through stronger inter-agency cooperation.

In broad terms, these efforts are geared towards practically strengthening the country's democratic infrastructure while also engendering public confidence, trust, and buy-in for Moldova's democratic transformation. Indeed, ensuring that the people of Moldova themselves remain committed to democratization is crucial to ensuring the durability and longevity of political progress.

CHALLENGES

Democratization efforts always face practical and political challenges, and Moldova's are no different. On the technical level, the pace of institutional capacity building in a resource-constrained environment continues to weigh on political reform efforts, generating frustration among the Moldovan people and international supporters.

But more fundamentally, political volatility in both Moldova and the United States presents a strategic challenge to the country's effort to progress its democratic development. In Moldova, despite support for reform efforts, political polarization is becoming more acute, with significant constituencies that are skeptical of—or even hostile to—the Sandu government's vision for the future. Indeed, the presidential elections in 2024 delivered a relatively narrow victory to Maia Sandu, with non-expatriate voters lending the majority of their ballots to her opponent. Similarly, Moldova's political polarization is also reflected in the relative public ambivalence towards European Union membership, with just a razor-edge majority voting in favor of the constitutional amendment committing the country to joining the bloc.

This polarization speaks not just to Moldova's relationship with the EU but with the West more generally, including the United States. In effect, there are competing visions for Moldova's future, often expressed along ethnolinguistic lines, that relate to the country's broad political orientation and its relationships with key external stakeholders. These divides provide important openings for Moscow's efforts to disrupt Moldova's democratic transition and have been fundamental to the Kremlin's continued interference in Moldova's political life. Indeed, the pace and scale of Russian-directed misinformation campaigns have grown substantially, as has direct interference in Moldovan politics. Recent events in neighboring Romania, which resulted in the nullification of election results due to an alleged Russian disinformation campaign, illustrate just how potent and poisonous the Kremlin's efforts can be.

The challenges are made worse by increasingly uncertain political circumstances in the United States. Already, it is clear that the Trump administration is unlikely to be swayed by ideological arguments for supporting democratization efforts in Moldova. Key U.S. support in judicial reform and anti-corruption efforts may now be subject to a more transactional-based litmus test from Washington, which will want to know, in commercial or raw power terms, what return it is getting for these investments. Moreover, the Trump administration's combative and even dismissive approach to European partners in the context of Ukraine points to a growing transatlantic divide over Russia and apparent American overtures to President Putin. With a White House that seems increasingly eager to align its perspectives with Moscow at the expense of traditional allies, its willingness to support Moldova's democratic transformation in the face of Russian opposition is now uncertain.

OPPORTUNITIES

The Trump administration's sudden political detachment from Europe significantly narrows the opportunities for cooperation on Moldova's democratic reform efforts. Much of the rhetoric from Washington suggests not just disinterest but even antipathy for political liberalism on the continent—indeed, recent partisan [commentary](#) by some Trump administration officials regarding elections in Germany and other European allies suggests Washington may not be a good faith partner in encouraging healthy European political developments.

Even so, reframing U.S.-Moldovan political engagement could better align Chișinău's needs with the new political reality in Washington. Thinking more narrowly, Moldova may have the opportunity to encourage U.S. partnership and support in sectors like law enforcement, criminal justice, or anti-corruption as a means of creating a more welcoming investment environment while also enjoying the knock-on benefits such support will have on political reform initiatives.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In light of the change in administration, the degree to which the U.S.-Moldova partnership will hinge on shared democratization objectives remains an open question. However, there remain opportunities for both countries to gain from stronger cooperation that contributes to Moldova's political reform efforts.

Continued collaboration on anti-corruption and institutional capacity-building efforts offers such an opportunity. Though the mechanisms for this support may change, U.S. assistance in this domain should be framed as a pre-requisite for developing the sort of political and socio-economic environment that is conducive to improved trade and investment.

For Moldova, it will be critical to invest even more in its ongoing partnerships with U.S. lawmakers and civil society, both as a matter of encouraging resourcing for democratization assistance but also as a matter of promoting the sort of professional exchanges that have their own capacity-building benefits.



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Conclusion

The re-election of President Trump adds to the challenges of expanding the U.S.-Moldova partnership while illustrating precisely why a more deeply embedded relationship is so essential for Chișinău's long-term future. Architecture that provides a backstop to the partnership, based both on effective modalities of cooperation across economic, security, and political domains but also on broader Moldovan engagement across stakeholder communities, will be critical in generating the bilateral resilience to weather increasingly uncertain political futures.

To be sure, the abrupt pivot in U.S. foreign policy with respect to Europe, the war in Ukraine, Russia, and international assistance will all weigh heavily on Moldova's efforts to draw on American support. Fast-moving events in Washington are already undermining many ongoing or planned initiatives. More broadly, the administration's more transactional approach to international affairs, alongside its apparent preference for power politics, portends a potentially volatile period of geopolitical bargaining in Europe that could be deeply detrimental to Moldovan stability and reform efforts.

Yet, Moldova and the United States continue to have shared interests that should form the basis of more structural and enduring bilateral ties. Moldova's defense modernization efforts, its economic development, and its political reforms all represent not just ambitions for the country but also important practical opportunities for the United States that merit appeal across the political spectrum. Effectively framing these opportunities—be that in terms of investment opportunities, commercial market share, or strategic competition—should be central to maintaining the current trajectory of Moldova's transformation efforts.

Additionally, such efforts should include robust engagement with non-executive branch stakeholders, who represent important sources of both financial and political support. At a time of notable volatility at the White House, continued engagement with congressional audiences, civil society, and expert communities in Washington, Chișinău, and beyond is likely to become an even more important aspect of the bilateral relationship.

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