

Moldova's European Future



NOVEMBER 12, 2024

**Briefing of the
Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe**

Washington: 2024

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The Helsinki process, formally titled the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe, traces its origin to the signing of the Helsinki Final Act in Finland on August 1, 1975, by the leaders of 33 European countries, the United States and Canada. As of January 1, 1995, the Helsinki process was renamed the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe [OSCE].

The membership of the OSCE has expanded to 57 participating States, reflecting the breakup of the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia, and Yugoslavia.

The OSCE Secretariat is in Vienna, Austria, where weekly meetings of the participating States' permanent representatives are held. In addition, specialized seminars and meetings are convened in various locations. Periodic consultations are held among Senior Officials, Ministers and Heads of State or Government.

Although the OSCE continues to engage in standard setting in the fields of military security, economic and environmental cooperation, and human rights and humanitarian concerns, the Organization is primarily focused on initiatives designed to prevent, manage and resolve conflict within and among the participating States. The Organization deploys numerous missions and field activities located in Southeastern and Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, and Central Asia. The website of the OSCE is: <www.osce.org>.

ABOUT THE COMMISSION ON SECURITY AND COOPERATION IN EUROPE

The Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, also known as the Helsinki Commission, is an independent U.S. Government commission created in 1976 to monitor and encourage compliance by the participating States with their OSCE commitments, with a particular emphasis on human rights.

The Commission consists of nine members from the United States Senate, nine members from the House of Representatives, and one member each from the Departments of State, Defense and Commerce. The positions of Chair and Co-Chair rotate between the Senate and House every two years, when a new Congress convenes. A professional staff assists the Commissioners in their work.

In fulfilling its mandate, the Commission gathers and disseminates relevant information to the U.S. Congress and the public by convening hearings, issuing reports that reflect the views of Members of the Commission and/or its staff, and providing details about the activities of the Helsinki process and developments in OSCE participating States.

The Commission also contributes to the formulation and execution of U.S. policy regarding the OSCE, including through Member and staff participation on U.S. Delegations to OSCE meetings. Members of the Commission have regular contact with parliamentarians, government officials, representatives of non-governmental organizations, and private individuals from participating States. The website of the Commission is: <www.csce.gov>.

Moldova’s European Future

NOVEMBER 12, 2024

Page

COMMITTEE STAFF PRESENT

Isabella Baker, Policy Fellow, Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe	1
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PARTICIPANTS

Mr. Stephen Nix, Esq., Senior Director for Eurasia, International Republican Institute	2
Dr. Donald N. Jensen, Senior Advisor for Russia and Europe, United States Institute of Peace	4
Dr. Stephen Blank, Senior Fellow, Foreign Policy Research Institute	7

Moldova's European Future

November 12, 2024

Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe Washington, DC

The briefing was held from 1:59 p.m. to 3:22 p.m., Room 2255, Rayburn House Office Building, Isabella Baker, Policy Fellow, Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, presiding.

Ms. BAKER: All right. Thank you all for coming today. I think we will begin now.

Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. Welcome. My name is Isabella Baker, and I am a policy fellow with the U.S. Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, also known as the U.S. Helsinki Commission. Today's briefing will be on the subject of "Moldova's European Future."

Our conversation will analyze the results of Moldova's recent Presidential elections and EU referendum; their impact on Moldova's pursuit of a European future; and explore policy recommendations to further consolidate Moldova's democracy, particularly against further malign Russian interference.

On October 20 of this year, a constitutional referendum enshrined EU accession as a national objective passed by a majority vote. Two weeks later, the Moldovan people reelected incumbent President Maia Sandu in a second-round runoff. These developments, bolstered by historic turnout, represent a steadfast commitment to democracy and a renewed mandate to building a stronger, more secure European future for Moldova. Putin's imperialist Eastern European strategy hedges against unity. Moldova's pursuit of unity and advancement of its EU path fractures the Kremlin strategy, while strengthening domestic institutions and civil society resilience.

Within just the last 30 days, Moldova has signed a memorandum of understanding with Nordic and Baltic states to enhance democratic and economic consideration. Moldovan representatives welcomed for the first time the EU Political and Security Committee to Chişinău, and President Sandu engaged in dialog with key heads of State at the European Political Community Summit to advance reform efforts. Moldova's path to EU accession nevertheless continues to be undermined by both hybrid and kinetic Russian interference. Regional unity against these threats is paramount, therefore, particularly in light of Russia's genocidal invasion of Ukraine, Moldova's eastern neighbor. Western coalition allies must collaborate to address these vulnerabilities and support Moldova's capacity for sovereign self-determination.

To help us explore these issues, we will hear from three expert panelists. After brief introductions, they will have the time to deliver remarks and then we will open the floor to a Q&A exchange.

Speaking first, and on the results of the historic significance of Moldova's Presidential election and referendum, is Mr. Stephen. Mr. Nix is a senior director for Eurasia at the International Republican Institute, where he has worked since 2000. In his current role, he oversees programs in Belarus, Georgia, the Kyrgyz Republic, Moldova, Russia, and Ukraine. Nix resided in Kyiv, Ukraine for more than 3 years, and assisted in the drafting of crucial reform legislation, including the constitution, the Presidential and parliamentary election laws, and the law on the Constitutional Court of Ukraine. He received his *juris doctorate* from the Georgetown University Law Center in 1989.

Our next panelist, discussing hybrid Russian interference, is Dr. Donald Jensen. Dr. Jensen is a senior advisor for Russia and Europe at the United States Institute of Peace. He writes extensively on Russian domestic politics and Russian foreign and security policies, specializing in hybrid warfare and the policies of other post-Soviet states, especially Ukraine and Moldova. A former U.S. diplomat, Dr. Jensen provided staff support for the START, INF, and SDI treaty negotiations. From 1996 to 2008, Dr. Jensen was a associate director of broadcasting and head of the research division at Radio Free Europe. Dr. Jensen received his B.A. from Columbia University and his M.A. and Ph.D. from Harvard University.

Our third and final panelist, Dr. Stephen Blank, will be discussing what obstacles might inhibit Moldova's EU accession, and the significance of these elections and referendum in that EU context. Dr. Blank is a senior fellow at the Foreign Policy Research Institute, and an internationally recognized expert on Russian foreign and defense policies, as well as international relations across the former Soviet Union. He has consulted for the CIA, major think tanks, and foundations, and chaired major international conferences in the USA and abroad. He has published over 1,300 articles and monographs on Soviet, Russian, U.S., Asian, and European military and foreign policies. Dr. Blank received his M.A. and Ph.D. in Russian history from the University of Chicago and his B.A. in history from the University of Pennsylvania.

After hearing from our three panelists, I will open the Q&A and take a couple of questions from the floor. We invite our audience to think about questions throughout this event and to take advantage of the fact that you are sharing a room with three eminent experts in this space. After the Q&A, we will revert to the panel for closing remarks. Given the very optimistic turnout today, which I am delighted to see, I anticipate a frank and insightful session. With that, I pass the floor to Mr. Stephen Nix for his remarks. Thank you.

Mr. NIX: Thank you very much for having me today. My plan today is to provide you with some facts about the Presidential elections, both rounds, as well as the EU referendum, then provide some analysis thereof, and then take a look toward the future to parliamentary elections, which we assess are likely to take place in the autumn of 2025 and will be critical for Moldova's continuing democratic development and its accession to the EU.

The Presidential elections, as our first speaker said, took place. This is the fifth Presidential election since Moldova's independence. It came at a critical and decisive moment for Moldova with regard to their country's path toward Europe. Eleven candidates ran for the presidency. Since no candidate received 50 percent plus one of the votes, the election

resulted in a runoff between two candidates from Moldova's two largest political parties. That would be Maia Sandu, who represents PAS, Party of Action and Solidarity; and Alexandr Stoianoglo, representing the Party of Socialists, a very pro-Russian party, pro-Russian candidate.

IRI's international election observation mission—we had two, one for each round—drew a number of conclusions. First of all, both elections were well administered, demonstrating resilience in the face of gross Russian interference. Before election day, Moldovan law enforcement authorities and the Audiovisual Council took steps to counter illicit finance and malign information operations, uncovering allegations of a massive vote-buying network linked to the Russian Federation, and banning approximately 100 Telegram channels and accounts belonging to the fugitive oligarch Ilan Shor and his affiliates.

The Central Election Commission successfully increased polling stations abroad and implemented postal—[audio break] —obtained polling stations in Transnistria despite security concerns. Strong participation from citizens and international observers also ensured a high level of transparency at polling stations.

Moldova has made impressive strides to align its legal frameworks to international conventions for democratic elections. Yet, despite this progress, Moldova's institutions are under constant assault from malign actors who are intent on destabilizing the country, usurping the will of the Moldovan people. Undeniably, the greatest threat to Moldova's electoral integrity is malign foreign influence directed from the Kremlin. The 2024 electoral period saw unprecedented levels of brazen Russian interference throughout the election cycle.

Principally, the tentacles of foreign influence included a vote-buying network that allegedly paid up to 130,000 Moldovan citizens to act in line with the fugitive oligarch Ilan Shor and his criminal network. They also were involved in the training of provocateurs on methods of destabilization, information manipulation, alleged cyberattacks on the Central Election Commission, and other illegal activities. On election day, this interference manifested in carousel voting schemes and influence agents in the proximity of polling stations.

The second round, the runoff, saw escalated attempts at outside interference, which included AI-generated robocall death threats, an increased number of bomb threats at international polling locations, and attempted arson at the Central Election Commission of Moldova. Collectively, these pernicious acts attempted to undermine the fairness of the election and to erode confidence in the process. Consequently, Moldovans and the democratic community must remain vigilant during future elections.

The constitutional referendum was approved by voters, well surpassing the 33 percent turnout requirement. The referendum was confirmed by the Constitutional Court, thus enshrining Moldova's desire for a European future into its constitution. The diaspora turnout in the first round was essential for pushing the constitutional referendum over the required 50 percent level of support. Moldovan diaspora, the majority of whom currently reside in the European Union, represented almost 18 percent of the turnout and voted in support of Moldova's accession to the European Union at a rate of almost 77 percent.

The Presidential runoff election resulted in incumbent Maia Sandu winning an election by over 55 percent of the popular vote. President Sandu's clear mandate was supported by the highest recorded turnout of diaspora voters. During the runoff, 328,000

Moldovan diaspora turned out to vote, representing almost 20 percent of overall turnout. The diaspora voted for Maia Sandu at nearly 83 percent, thus securing her reelection.

In sum, the Moldovan government must continue to undertake efforts to resist foreign authoritarian influence in its electoral processes as it prepares for critical parliamentary elections in 2025. The escalation of Russian interference tactics during the Presidential election demonstrates the piloting of new Russian techniques which are expected to further escalate during the upcoming parliamentary elections. These elections will be critical for forming a new government during President Maia Sandu's second term.

The U.S. Government must support Moldova as a strategic partner and ally in order to offset Russia in the parliamentary elections. Such support will be paramount and should continue the European trajectory for Moldova. The U.S. Government must also work to counter foreign malign influence so that nongovernmental and State institutions are better equipped to confront the many threats that foreign authoritarians pose to Moldova's democracy. The U.S. Government must also be prepared for the probability that the same techniques will be used not only in Moldova but in other countries in Eastern Europe and the region.

Thank you, and I look forward to your questions.

Ms. BAKER: Thank you, Mr. Nix.

Dr. Jensen, I pass the floor to you.

Dr. JENSEN: I even turned the microphone on properly. [LAUGHTER.] Thank you for having me. It is a privilege to speak here. I have not seen my—Steve, friends—in quite a while. It is good to see them again.

I want to talk about Russia's malign influence. It has never clear whether to call it disinformation, malign influence, or gray zone activities. However, let us talk about that stuff which was so critical to Russian foreign policy and played a critical role, as Steve—this Steve—said in the election season so far. However, I also want to talk a little bit about how this kind of activity, this hybrid warfare. If we can use the H-word, fits into Russian foreign policy more generally, why we should care, and how the U.S. and its allies might begin to combat and push back on it.

As Steve said, the recent voting results—both for the referendum and the Presidential elections—is to keep Russia—excuse me—keep Moldova on a Western path. However, its democracy is fragile. The people are divided, economically, ethnically, linguistically, and in many other ways. Russia's actions are not an anomaly, but a pattern, an integral part of their foreign policy, an instrument. It is a weapon that they use. They use it not only in Moldova, but in Georgia, Ukraine, and many others—I hate to use the word post-Soviet countries— but I will say, in the countries along their periphery. They use it as well, in Italy, Spain, and elsewhere as well.

It is important to keep in mind that this is a strategy by Moscow. This is not—it is based on opportunity. It is based on tactical flexibility, and so forth. Russia does this for a reason, sometimes successfully, not always, sometimes contradictory. However, Russia wants to cause chaos for strategic effect. That itself is good enough, even if it sometimes appears very contradictory. As Steve said, Russia's influence in both channels of electoral activity in the past month and a half has been substantial. Cyberattacks, espionage, reported training of thugs in Bosnia, training—Republika Srpska training camps, and so forth. I have a pile of stuff in my office going down in detail all of what was involved. [FSB]Federal Security Service involvement, [GRU] Glavnoye

razvedyvatel'noye upravleniye involvement, the creation of money, transfers electronically, and so forth.

That would take a separate briefing. However, for all the attention that Shor—the alleged—the oligarch, Shor, gets, there are many other bad players in the situation as well. We have to not focus so much just on those two, or the Governor of Gagauzia, but see this as a Russian strategy that it uses in many, many countries, and we start to realize that, in Moldova, Russia is at war with Moldova, period. It is just that its weapons are not drones and missiles and armored vehicles. Its weapons are money, coercion, corruption, disinformation, and other things. For Moscow, this is all part of the same bag of tricks. We have to be more sensitive, I think here in the West, to the way that they do this.

It is backed, in a way, by sort of the implicit threat of military action. However, one could argue that Moldova today, after 3 years of very intense Russian hybrid activity, is at least as much in danger as it would have been had there been more Russian military soldiers parked along its borders or in an enhanced presence in Transnistria. However—[coughs]—excuse me—you have to also keep in mind that Russia—excuse me—that Moldova is a vulnerable society. Its fragility is relatively weak compared to some of the other countries along the Russian periphery. That is why it is so very important for the United States to—and the West—to help them resist, help them develop this resilience that is so essential for it to go along its Western path. It is absolutely critical.

One of my colleagues in the audience asked before we sat down about the differences between the two countries. Well, that is a separate briefing, but Moldova has unique features that I would argue make it more vulnerable than some of the other countries we have talked about. Number one would be the ethnic, religious, and economic divisions within the country. Number two would be the very alarming electoral outcome, where the diaspora really put them over the top. If you go back and look at the polls, you will see that just a few days before the election all the polls had Sandu and her party doing much better, and the referendum, than people had predicted.

Why? Because the Russians handed out money, almost—handed out rubles, extensively lobbied, propaganda, and these other weapons I talked about, at the independent voting in particular, and that had an effect. One of the interesting points about this election is that for all the countries I have looked at, and the role of Russian hybrid warfare, this is one example where you can almost clearly measure the effect of this kind of activity. In a lot of countries, you cannot. I think about a Wall Street Journal editorial two weeks ago which talked about this and Georgia are two countries where Russian influence is obvious, it is palpable, and it is almost measurable.

There should be a lesson for those of us who want to push back against Russia's malign influence and also strengthen the resilience of Moldova and its neighbors. Now, again, this is not the last and only attempt by Russia to destabilize the country. They started two or three years ago, using energy as a weapon, bribing politicians, propaganda, and all sorts of things. If you track the narratives on Russian-financed media about what is going on in the country, it is not only an invented fiction but it is also very tactical, very able to adjust to various circumstances on the ground. As I said earlier, that is one of the keys to the Russian approach. They do not need a strategy, as we understand it in various think tanks in the West. They are very opportunistic. They study weaknesses, they study vulnerabilities, and so forth.

Now, two points as I wind up. One is Gagauzia, where it was 93 percent, I think, for the pro-Russian candidate. Gagauzia is a very, very interesting place. The losing Presidential candidate, Stoianoglo—is that how you pronounce it? Stoianoglo is ethnically Gagauz. Russia plays that card very, very aggressively. Its tensions with the center, ethnically different from the majority of Moldovans, a vulnerable place that Russia, as we have seen in so many other places, can take advantage of, can exploit almost before our eyes. In Transnistria, which is probably something the other Steve is going to talk about, things are a little bit better. The vote there went, I think, 70 percent for the Russian candidate.

The fact that the Ukrainians have closed the borders has meant that they have had to turn to Romania and the European Union for some of their economic activity. That seems—although it is not proven—that seems to have stabilized the situation and have it going in the right direction. However, as we have seen elsewhere, you do not go in the right direction without support from your partners, support from the West, and a very serious campaign to push back against Russian malign influence.

That, I think, should be our goal because, as Steve said, the parliamentary elections are coming in July. The parliamentary elections will elect a legislature which will be instrumental in the activities preparing Moldova for eventual European Union accession. Therefore, if a Russian party goes into a coalition with PAS, Sandu's party or Russia exerts its other kind of malign influence elsewhere, the EU accession process can be stopped, hindered, and spread out, and ultimately go off the rails, as we have seen in some other post-Soviet countries nearby.

Therefore, what can we do? First of all, we need to do the kind of work we do at [USIP] United States Institute of Peace, frankly, about improving institutions, battling corruption, and strengthening the rule of law. These are not big-ticket items. These are something you can do with good planning, good engagement with Russian—with—excuse me. I did it again. Third time. With Moldovan civil society. That is number one. Number two, we need to strengthen Moldova's energy independence from Russia. The natural gas now comes from Russia, via Ukraine, into Transnistria, and then westward again. This is a very vulnerable chokepoint for Russian influence. We have seen that happen, most notably in Ukraine 10 or 15 years ago, but elsewhere as well.

Third, I think we need to call upon and work with the Moldovan government to be a little more proactive in dealing with the Transnistrian and Gagauz issues, where they are both separatist forces, as I have seen. However, I think some of those people have grievances that maybe can be better addressed more effectively by a focus on building resilience, with of course Western support as well. Fourth, I would add that the issue of combating disinformation is a tough one. You know it when you see it. Certainly, we know it and saw it in the elections in the past few weeks.

However, I think a more systematic attempt, as we are trying at USIP at least, to help Moldovans identify disinformation, help them know when to pull out—when to pull out a piece of paper as garbage, a news report, and when to know something is valid and legitimate. That takes a sophisticated eye. It takes training. It takes patience on our side, and it takes cooperation between Moldova and its allies.

Therefore, a lot of challenges ahead. They can be accomplished. Certainly, the outcome of the elections, whether the diaspora put them over the top or not, is another step in the right direction. However, as we have seen elsewhere in recent months, nothing is inevitable in this part of the world. Countries go off the rails or go backward or sideways.

We all—I think we all can work together more effectively to make sure that Moldova goes forward. Thank you.

Ms. BAKER: Thank you, Dr. Jensen.

Dr. Blank, I give the floor to you.

Dr. BLANK: Thank you, Isabella. It is a great honor to speak to this audience in Moldova. As my colleagues have said, there is not much—so much, so ably, there is not much for me left to say. However, I will do it anyway.

Moldova is a front in Russia's war against the West. The Balkans as a whole are a theater—one theater. However, the West as a whole is the target. Therefore, just to give you an example, the bomb scares last week at election polls here in the United States, those were Russian. We now know that Russia, on at least two occasions, has tried to place incendiary packages on civilian aircraft flying from Europe to the United States that would blow up in midair, killing hundreds of people. We know that the Russians are waging massive disinformation campaigns on American media. The case in Tennessee, which you may have read about in the papers, where the FBI busted one of these is an example. There were plenty of others that we found before the election.

Now, in Moldova, the Russians are investing a great deal of time, energy, and resources, despite the fact that a lot of experts tend to say that the Balkans is not that serious a theater for Moscow. I think if you have studied Russian history, you will realize very quickly that is nonsense. It is a critical theater for Russia, by which it hopes to expand its influence and standing as a great power and thwart European integration, which is a fundamental strategic objective of the Putin administration. It has been for at least 15 to 20 years.

Now, the election returns are not returns that allow us to be complacent. Sandu would not have won, and the European Union accession referendum would not have been won, without diaspora votes. That means there is substantial domestic discontent. That discontent is one of the elements that Russia intends to exploit. They refuse to recognize the outcome of Sandu's election. They will not accept the referendum vote either. Therefore, they are going to keep trying to use the instruments that Don has talked about, and that Steve has talked about, and that I will talk about also.

They will continue to do so because Moldovan society is vulnerable in several ways. What you have to understand about the Russian war is Russia does not create these vulnerabilities. It exploits them. It aggravates them. Therefore, just as it tried to exploit and aggravate the polarization we see in the United States, which all of you are aware of, it seeks to do the same in Moldova. There are numerous vulnerabilities there. First of all, the military one. Russian forces in Transnistria are a constant threat to the security of Moldova because there is a constant threat of invasion, particularly if Ukraine falls.

As a matter of fact, in 2014 the Russians tried to use the forces in Tiraspol, the capital of Transnistria, to move to Odessa after setting off riots there in order, quote, "to stabilize the situation." Therefore, they would have created an entire belt, what Putin then called Novorossiia, new Russia, all the way to Moldova, deprive Ukraine of access to the Black Sea, and created a new order, basically, in the Black Sea and the Balkans. Therefore, the military pressure is constant. The other day there were—Russian drones overflew Moldova. Therefore, this is not something that is quiescent. It is happening.

Second, Don mentioned this, energy. Russia ostensibly sells cheap energy to its customers, and then once they are hooked—like a pusher with heroin—raises the price. That is an exact analogy, by the way. It is not something fanciful, and it establishes energy dependence, plus getting lots and lots of money for itself and for its proxies in these countries. Like Ilan Shor or the others that have been mentioned here. When the government, in this case, Sandu's government, tries to reduce dependence on Russian energy, that creates hardship in the country because of the fact that the Balkans are an energy-importing area. That hardship then becomes an excuse—for voting Russian, and another vulnerability for the Russians to exploit. Because in Moldova, as here, it is the economy, stupid. I mean, people vote on their economic situation.

A third source of pressure is Russian access to control over the media. It is not just disinformation. Russian forces actually own media in Moldova, Bulgaria, in Great Britain, and if they could, they would do so here. The Tennessee case is an example of their trying to buy influence in American media. In this case, I believe, in internet-based media, not newspapers and TV stations. However, nonetheless, critical. Therefore, it is a general tactic. This is a problem throughout the Balkans as well, as I suggested. If you look at Serbia—and I have written and published about that in Serbia. Therefore, it is an attempt by Russia to continuously leverage and pressure its media presence, as well as its ability to influence elites and the public, and to corrupt and blackmail elites into serving it.

It is extremely difficult to curtail. One of the reasons is that the U.S. Government for the last 30 years has had no systematic information policy to counter Russia, either in terms of Russian domestic media at home or what the Russians are doing abroad. Admittedly, as Don said, it is very difficult, but it needs to be done. Hopefully, the Trump administration will address this problem, because it is a weapon that Russia uses globally. Not just Moldova. It is being used here. It is in Africa. It is in Latin America. It is all over Europe, and if you follow Russian foreign policy, you can see that it creates major difficulties for the U.S.

To give you a quick vignette, 10 years ago I was speaking to SOUTHCOM and a colonel raised his hand and said: What can we do about the fact that the first television channel in Argentina is controlled by the Russians? I had to say to him: Nothing. You cannot do anything about it. The U.S. military cannot intervene in foreign media. The U.S. Government had to have a counter, and it did not, and it does not. Therefore, in Moldova what we are dealing with is just a representative sample of what you are seeing elsewhere.

Fourth, Don mentioned the ethnic cleavage. The Gagauz are a Christianized Turkic people. That is, they are Turkic in ethnic origin, but they became Christians. Therefore, for example, Stoianoglo's name,—oglo is a Turkish last name meaning son of, like Johnson, son of John in English. Stoianoglo is the son of Stoian, which is a Balkan name. They feel themselves to be discriminated against. They feel aggrieved. This creates an enormous opportunity for the Russians. As Don said, they got 93 percent of the vote in the last election. Furthermore, they were attracted to Russia.

Since the Russian government defines it as Russians—and this is the Soviet definition—actually, it is the czarist definition—Russian speakers are Russians. Therefore, for example, in my hometown we have—which is Brooklyn, New York—we have thousands of Russian speakers who are supposedly eagerly awaiting the second coming of Vladimir Putin. By this definition, I and my mother's family would have also been Russians,

because my mother's parents grew up in czarist Russia and spoke Russian. Therefore, as a result, Russian speakers are a pretext for Russia to intervene abroad.

This is a line of reasoning that goes back to the czars. It was used by Catherine the Great in the partitions of Poland. It was used by Hitler, by the way, for his incorporation of Eastern European states into the Reich. It was also used by Stalin in 1939 to "liberate," quote, Poland Belarus and Ukraine from the oppressive Polish government that was oppressing Russian speakers and peasants. It is a pretext, but it is an effective weapon of destabilization throughout Eastern Europe. Therefore, again, it is not Moldova alone. Just as we have major ethnic issues in the Balkans as a whole, we have major ethnic issues in Moldova that lend themselves to exploitation by Russia.

Fifth, is corruption. Now, there is corruption in every major political system. Having gone to school in Chicago, I remember back in the old days that Chicago was a very corrupt city. If we had time, I would give you a vignette of that. However, the fact of the matter is that in Moldova corruption—and throughout the former Soviet Union—corruption is a way of life. One of my Ukrainian refugee friends said to me that the Ukrainians have lived by corruption for 500 years. It is not going to stop. Well, it is not going to stop if we do not address ourselves to making it stop and creating conditions for improved governance, democratic transparency, and so forth, which are all essential to bringing Moldova into the EU.

That is the work that has to be done both by the Moldovan government and by foreign institutions, like IRI, its democratic party equivalent, the EU, and so on. Therefore, that is a fifth vulnerability because if corruption is rampant and you own access to media and energy, you can either blackmail or simply bribe politicians to do as you like. We see this in Bulgaria. We see this in Serbia, and we see it in Moldova. Therefore, again, it is ubiquitous.

Domestic reform, therefore, is a difficult problem for Moldova. If the election had been confined to merely those residents of Moldova who live in the city—in the State, Sandu would have lost and the EU referendum would have probably lost also. Therefore, we and the European Union need to constantly be on the case to help the Moldovans improve governance, improve economic conditions, reduce ethnic tensions, and reduce exposure and vulnerability to Russian energy and to Russian media.

I would argue that the most important thing we could do to take out the pressure—or take off the pressure from Russia is to win the war in Ukraine because that will decisively force Moscow out of the Balkans to a very large degree. It will deprive them of a lot of the money and capability they have, given the fact that this would also require re-orienting European oil and gas supplies, which we have not done enough of. Therefore, these five areas—six areas—excuse me—are all areas where reform is needed. They are needed by the domestic authorities and by foreign authorities like the European Union and the two parties that have, in the United States, their democracy-based organizations helping Moldova and, for that matter, other Balkan countries improve their governance, transparency, and thus their security. Thank you.

Ms. BAKER: Thank you, Dr. Blank.

Therefore, now we have heard from all three of our panelists, and I will use my privileged position as moderator to begin our Q&A. Therefore, we have heard a lot of discussion today about all the ethnic cleavages in the autonomous region in the south, Gagauzia, as well as along the eastern border, Transnistria. Therefore, considering these cleavages,

the different languages, religions, and backgrounds, how can we consider a path forward to EU enlargement while still balancing a coalition at home?

We can begin with Mr. Nix and then move down.

Mr. NIX: Sure. There are a lot of things—a number of things that the government of Moldova can do to address the cleavages that we have discussed today with Gagauz and people up north, in Balti. I think the government, between now and the parliamentary elections, has to make a concerted effort to really do listening tours. Clearly, the Gagauz feel aggrieved. I think they really need the government to listen to these grievances. Therefore, I think you are going to see the Sandu government travel more to Gagauz. They have got to go there. They have got to speak Russian and be sympathetic to the issues that the Gagauz have.

Quite frankly, the same strategy should be employed in the north, where the Sandu campaign had very, very poor results. Therefore, again, it is a matter of reaching out. It is a matter of speaking Russian language. At IRI we have done some youth events because we did some polling and saw that youth were positive toward EU accession in Gagauz. Therefore, we did some youth events involving President Sandu and the prime minister. They need to do more things like that. We are in a position to help the government do that, to try to increase the connectivity between Chişinău and the north and the south.

Ms. BAKER: Dr. Jensen.

Dr. JENSEN: Yes, I agree with Steve. The issue of corruption is really a tough one to crack. We—I hate to have another commercial for our work, but USIP has done a lot of good work in Ukraine about this—strengthening the rule of law, strengthening the judiciary, and making people understand the rights and responsibilities of citizens. It is not a high-ticket item, but it is very important. The NGO community in Ukraine, led by women in many cases, I think is something that needs a great deal of support. You guys do great work there, but I think in general, in cooperation with the Moldovan government, that Western partners can do a lot just by working with the society in a way that makes it less top-down, makes the government, as you said, less passive, and reaches out and dealing with some of these problems in advance.

I used the word “fragility” earlier, and I mean that, fragile. This is in many ways a dangerous situation. I was very troubled by the fact that in the last few days, as I said, so many votes seem to go against Sandu and the referendum. I think that is a warning that we ought to do more with our Moldovan partners. I think it can be done but, again, we are in a very critical window now between now and the parliamentary elections. Whatever happens, as Steve—this Steve—said, in Ukraine, according to some of—you know, The Dossier Center website, which is put out by the Khodorkovsky people and they had a very interesting article about two weeks ago that the plan was—and you and I have heard this many times—that militarily Russia would invade Ukraine—would invade Moldova, until the war started to go badly. They switched to the more non-kinetic ways of exerting pressure.

As I said earlier in my remarks these are part of the same thing. It is not war or peace. Russia knows that it can get away with a lot of stuff under the radar, and that the U.S. might be engaged elsewhere. Britain, France, Italy, and Germany might also be well engaged and not willing to put the kind of effort into these kinds of reforms that we need to put—we need to have. However, we have to do it anyway because, in the long

run, this is not about Moldova, Ukraine, or Georgia. It is about Putin's war on the West. These are merely the most vulnerable, easily, dislodgable bricks in a broader campaign to upset the world order. I think we cannot separate the one in one locale from the other, because Putin, Patrushev, and Naryshkin, and all these people in Moscow talk about it every day. I think we ought to take them seriously.

Ms. BAKER: Dr. Blank?

Dr. BLANK: Well, building on what my colleagues have said here, I would argue also for this—since we have an administration that is coming in, they can build on what the Biden administration has done to expand energy production. It is not commonly known that the Biden administration has fostered policies that make the United States the largest oil and gas exporter in the world right now. However, we need to help get energy to European countries that were hitherto dependent on Russian energy. One way is to tighten up the sanctions regime to deprive Moscow of the revenue it gets that can fund its war effort and its foreign efforts abroad as well.

Second, by doing so, and to use President-elect Trump's phrase, "drill, baby, drill" means nothing unless you have a market to sell all that stuff. You know, the companies are not going to drill if they cannot sell it. If you could sell it to the Balkans, that is—you know, it is not the hugest market in the world by any means, but it is also a way of building pipelines into the Balkans, interconnected through Eastern Europe, and relieving all of these states' dependence on Moscow, and thwarting Moscow's ability to wage war, while also undermining a major instrument of corruption, and also the revenues by which Moscow can fund its media operations in Moldova. Of course, my colleagues' recommendations are ones that I support as well.

Ms. BAKER: All right. We have heard from all of our panelists a very clear summary of all of the multilayer issues in Moldova, about its process to EU accession and the obstacles in its way. I will now open the floor to questions from our audience. You are all very welcome to join us at the podium here. Please State your name and affiliation. Therefore, if you have a question, we would invite you to line up here and we would love to hear from you. Thank you. Whoever would like to go first, you are very welcome. If you would please State your name and affiliation before beginning your question.

QUESTION: [Unheard audio] I am running for the House of Representatives. I relocated on December 4. My first question is, hydroelectricity was a leading electrical generator prior to nuclear. I am just wondering, with ocean water desalination as it will be a good hydroelectric conductor, instead of focusing on coal-powered nuclear energy would not building hydroelectric desalination plants every hundred miles be a better—a greater investment?

Ms. BAKER: This is a very clear and interesting question. I wonder if we can tie it to the region? If you have specific questions about the Black Sea region or Eastern Europe?

QUESTION: Certainly. However, it will not be—it will not be tied. However, I have a different question, but it is not—it is not about electrical policy.

Ms. BAKER: As long as it is about Moldova's European future or the broader region, we would welcome it.

QUESTION: Countries side with the nearest superpower. Within other civilizations' policies and politics, should not we be concerned about mistrust and hatred for generations to come because to define—imagine in Russia is the definition of someplace you have

never experienced and someplace that is institutionalized. Since it is a completely different civilization, they have a completely different walk of life.

Ms. BAKER: Thank you for your question. I will address it with our moderators. Therefore, I believe the question is—thank you, Dr. Blank—to distrust, youth, and hate, and how to combat that.

Dr. BLANK: Well, the best way to combat hatred is by democratic education, with a capital D. Not talking about the Democratic Party. I am talking about democracy more broadly. One of the founding principles on which this country is built is that the more you educate people—that a well-educated citizenry is essential for democracy. A well-educated citizenry is one that is impervious to appeals to hatred. Therefore, more democracy in Europe and, for that matter elsewhere, is in general a good thing, to the extent that we can do it.

I would take issue with your original point that countries next to each other necessarily are subordinate to them. I assure you that the Baltic States and Poland do not intend to become subordinate to Russia, even though it is their neighbor. I can speak from personal experience on this, but you have talked to experts on these countries, and they will tell you first-rate that they identify completely with the West. The progress they have made since 1991, which is quite astonishing in many respects, indicates the superiority of democracy over their neighbors' autocratic imperialism.

Ms. BAKER: Thank you, Dr. Blank. While I would be happy to address this question with our other two panelists, it looks as if we have many questions to address. Therefore, with your consent, I will move forward. All right. Please State your name and affiliation.

Mr. SAWYER: Hi. This is Mark Sawyer. I am with the Centre for Information Resilience.

As Mr. Nix mentioned we are just under a year from parliamentary elections. You know, all of us in this room represent quite a few offices, NGO's, private companies. Are there concrete things that the United States or those of us in the audience can do in the next nine months, in this more short-term window, to degrade Russia's capabilities for hybrid warfare and harden Moldova for the next election cycle? Thank you.

Mr. NIX: Sure. Thank you for the question.

Let us first talk about how the Moldovan government addressed this issue, and then we can talk more in general about what its partners, Moldova's partners, can do to help them. The government woke up after the first round—once this huge, massive, unprecedented vote-buying scheme was unveiled they did take appropriate steps. They basically went to the three major cellphone carriers and sent text messages to everyone with a cellphone in the country saying the following: Vote buying and vote selling is a felony. It is punishable by a two-year prison term and a fine of 2,000 euros. They also broadcast that on public transportation. In fact, I was in a grocery store and I heard it on the PA system. Therefore, they took steps to educate the public, that this is against the law. If you do this in the second round, you will be prosecuted.

Therefore, they did take steps. We feel, in our observation in the second round, that the methods used were less effective. Those who were willing to sell their votes in the first round were reluctant to do it in the second because of these warnings from the government. Looking forward to the future, I mean, again, these techniques are going to be tried again. Once the Kremlin finds something that is effective, they are going to continue to use it. Therefore, that is why we are concerned about parliamentary elections.

I think that is where the United States and the European allies need to step up the sharing of intelligence with Moldovan authorities so that they can get to this network sooner and confront it, rather than wait for a first round of a Presidential election to take place before the government had the means and the intelligence and the wherewithal to combat it. Therefore, that is what we are hoping for. That is what the United States and its partners can do to help Moldova.

Ms. BAKER: Thank you. Would any of our other panelists like to join in? All right, Dr. Blank.

Dr. BLANK: If I understand your question correctly it is what can we do, right, in the next nine months? Well, as I said, one thing we can do—and I hope the Biden administration and the incoming Trump administration will do this—is give Ukraine the weapons it needs to win. Winning for Ukraine takes the pressure off Moldova militarily, and that pressure is enormous. It helps create the foundation for everything else. Second, a victory for Ukraine opens up alternative energy sources for Southeastern Europe because Ukraine has the potential to become an energy exporter. Not just oil and gas but green energy as well, provided, that is, you have a reconstruction of Ukraine, and that is part of the quote, “victory package.”

Third, organizations like Steve’s, the Democratic Party organization that does similar work, and the EU need to work with Moldovans on a permanent basis to educate the population about democratic ways of governance and participation. Fourth, we need to get alternative sources of energy in there now, not just after Ukraine is liberated. I have written about this in earlier articles, about, you know, building pipelines, interconnectors, and green energy capabilities in the Balkans, which need them. This would facilitate the whole movement of the Balkans into the EU, or those countries that are already in the EU would improve conditions. Like, say Bulgaria.

Fifth, the U.S. Government finally needs—and I hope the Trump administration will do this—to undertake an information policy that exposes the Russian lies and exposes the information warfare they are doing throughout Europe. Now, sixth, because of what we are now seeing with the attacks on civilian infrastructure, airlines, cyber, elections, and so forth, that the Russians are undertaking, you have upgraded intelligence cooperation among all Western states to thwart this Russian offensive. In other words, the response needs to be strategic, and it needs to be the whole of the government.

Ms. BAKER: Thank you. Oh, Dr. Jensen.

Dr. JENSEN: Just to amplify one thing that Steve said, which I fully agree with. Which is to say, the Russian information operations are very extensive, very sensitive to local circumstances, and very sensitive, in this case, to the fact that there is an election going on. Therefore, if you track Telegram channels, which most of you probably know about, you track narratives. They are consistently hitting some themes that the Moldovan government seems, as you said, not fully capable of responding to. When they were counting the votes there were attacks by Russia on the Central Election Commission—the Moldovan Central Election Commission. Every part of what was, by all accounts, a free and fair election was attacked by Russia in a very sophisticated way.

However, the other part of it is more longstanding. As I said, the Russians have been involved in trying to destabilize Moldova for a long time. Most recently, since Sandu came to power. There is a set of different narratives—energy, economics, ethnic prejudice, and so forth—which they hit also at the same time. It is a very formidable arsenal of weapons.

I think we do not fully appreciate how much resonance it can have when you are a farmer in rural Moldova, or in rural Ukraine, or whatever it might be. Do you see the point? Therefore, we do not really have a sophisticated way of pushing back on this kind of stuff.

The Russians are always moving—TV, radio. When I was at [RFE] Radio Free Europe it was a short wave, which the younger people in the audience have probably never heard of. However, the weapons are there, and the Russians are very, very sophisticated in picking out an arsenal that they think might work in a given situation. If you look at Italy, which I look at a lot politically, France, Germany, Moldova, Ukraine, and Georgia, they are always the same techniques in a way, but they are employed in different—and I would argue very dangerous and sophisticated—ways. We need to look at that threat, as I have said several times this afternoon, at more—I hate the word, “holistic,” but in a broader way.

Ms. BAKER: Thank you, Dr. Jensen. We will move on to our next question. Mr. Deputy Ambassador, if you could State for the record your name and affiliation?

Mr. LUNGU: [Off mic]—that you understand more the complexity of everything that is going on. Mr. Jensen just pointed out that Russian interference is very complex, and they play with a lot of narratives. The result of the referendum, it is also—it is also based not only on illegal bribery and illegal putting of money, but also, its narratives, it is influence, and it is a lot of instruments which probably we do not—we do not fully understand them now.

Therefore, the idea is the following, just as numbers. Only in October and September, 39 million euros were poured into Moldova. Just sums that were discovered by the police and the prosecution office. Just as a comparison, the United States offers Moldova per year assistance—budgetary assistance of \$50 million. Again, there is a narrative trying to mention—or, they are trying to separate somehow what is happening internally, with the people living in Moldova, and the people from the diaspora. They do not like people from the diaspora because they cannot influence them the same way they influence those who are in Moldova. That is why there is this try to do this separation.

One of the speakers was speaking about discontent. I will give an example related to discontent, and probably if we take from the people what they now have, and I will speak now about the region of Ungheni, which receives the most impressive investments and money from the EU. 80 percent of the people living in Ungheni have a Romanian passport. Imagine the following situation, if Romania would decide to take their citizenship for 80 percent of the people and unite—and the European Union would decide—would decide not to invest in Ungheni the money that it has invested until now. Would they be content in that situation? That would be my question for the Russians, or for the people that—and for Ungheni who has voted against the referendum.

Ms. BAKER: Excuse me, Mr. Deputy Ambassador. What would be your question for our panelists?

Mr. LUNGU: Yes, I will come to the question. I am coming to the question. The idea is the following, what I am saying. The idea is the following. Therefore, Russia is intervening and is playing against the rules. Romania which has its citizens, the EU is also operating following the values and the principles. The United States, until it approves some assistance that needs to be—to be directed to Moldova, you have to follow all the procedures—appropriation committees, things, Department of State. Therefore, you have a big cycle of doing that.

Russia plays differently. Now we are speaking about what happened to the election. Russia now already is thinking about how it will prepare—or already is preparing for parliamentary, two years ahead. I would say another thing, we speak now today about the European future. Sincerely, my advice would be probably that it would be necessary that the path for what we are doing now in the EU would be better understood. In this sense, you can help better, or by interference and by assistance, you can create synergies.

The idea is the following—that is what I am coming to my question. It was mentioned that the U.S. must support us as strategic partners and allies. The format of interaction—the highest format of interaction now between Moldova and the U.S. is strategic dialog. There are countries with which there is a strategic partnership. Therefore, the idea would be, to reflect—and my question would be, or my appeal would be—to contribute to how we would see our partnership in the future, meaning transiting from only strategic dialog to something more.

Again, speaking about ally, it is a nice word. However, I know that when you have a certain type of ally that imposes the U.S. can offer you something. Therefore, it would be very cool and great that for Moldova we define what type of ally we are, and what can we get from this status of ally. We know that there are NATO allies. We know that there are non-NATO allies, and different. Therefore, my question would be the following: How do you see U.S. support in—not intervention, but support, more in this sense, bearing in mind that we are going to this path? If Russia does not manage, so at a certain point we will become a member State. Or, at least prepare to be a member State.

Parliamentary elections, that is super fine. It is a key point. However, I am telling you now what Russia is doing. They are already developing the narratives and referendum that Maia Sandu did not win, the referendum did not pass in Moldova. These will be used at each step that we do with the European Union. You have to do a reform on cluster—on cluster five, which relates to the agriculture chapter 12 or chapter 13. The Russians will come via their proxies and they will say: Look what is being done. Therefore, my question, again, how do we see the future and how do we align our forces in a way that we create synergies? That is a reflection. I do not ask that you give the answers now. Thanks.

Ms. BAKER: Thank you. Mr. Nix, please.

Mr. NIX: Let me just pick up on your comment, Anton, about parliamentary elections. Therefore, let me go into some more detail about the scheme—the Russian scheme. I received a briefing from the minister of internal affairs while I was there for the elections. The scheme consisted of three main components, although there are many more. Number one, Moldovan citizens were flown to various places—Doha, Istanbul, and other places in the region—and given cash in the amount of 9,999 euros, which is one euro below the limit that one is allowed to take into Moldova.

Second, there is a bank that the ministry has identified that has made massive transfers of funds to Moldovan citizens. In fact, the day after the first round there were 14,000 transactions made from this bank in Moscow to Moldovan citizens. Third, there was another scheme where the Shor network just handed out gift cards. Therefore, again, it was cash. It was electronic transfers and gift cards. 110,000, at a minimum, Moldovan citizens were engaged in an attempt to buy their vote. This is massive, given the size of Moldova. Massive. Dispositive of the outcome of the election, if it is successful.

Thankfully, the Moldovan government did take the steps that I referenced earlier to, I think, suppress this effort in the second round. However, we have to be prepared for this to happen again. Therefore, my suggestion would be that the new administration develop some sort of a task force where the U.S. is sharing intelligence with their Moldovan counterparts so they can confront this earlier in the election cycle than during the actual campaign, and then thwart it.

Ms. BAKER: Dr. Jensen, and Dr. Blank, do you have any suggestions for the incoming administration, so far as the U.S.-Moldova partnership goes?

Dr. BLANK: Well, I have already stated, you know, what I think the incoming administration should do. In general, the West has to have a higher estimation of the importance of the Balkans in its strategy against Russia. However, what is necessary is that the West develop its plans in tandem with the Moldovan government. The Moldovan government and the West have to coordinate in these things to identify the source—the corrupters and the institutions involved, to expose Russian informational networks, to expose Russian sabotage and espionage. Not only in Moldova but around it as well. As I said, it has to put pressure on Moscow in Ukraine, because, again, that takes off some of the pressure from Moldova.

Ms. BAKER: Would any of our other panelists like to comment?

Dr. JENSEN: Just to add to what these two gentlemen said, which is I think we need to look as well not at—we have to, obviously, look at the external pressures on Moldova. However, the bottom line for me is that we increase Moldova's resilience and encourage greater success at integrating some of these problems, the regions into society, so these issues go away or are minimized to the extent more than they have. I do not want to—I have many Moldovan friends. I do not want to criticize. However, there is a passivity there, I think, that—they are on the back foot a lot, as we saw in the elections. They thankfully caught up.

However, I think we need to look at this kind of holistic view of the country as a potential European aspirant, as a potential European Union member, and realize that a lot of the effort of building this resilience has to come from the country, the leadership of the country, the civil society of the country, with its Western partners. The three of us, I think, very articulately, talked about the banks in Moscow and the money that changes hands. That is all true. However, we need to address the problem too, which is, I think, deeper than just Russian influence, although Russian influence is certainly the most dangerous threat for now and for the foreseeable future. Yet, again, the issue is building a viable democratic society, and they are on the way. However, they are just—there is a considerable way to go as well, and all of us here need to help.

Ms. BAKER: All right. Thank you. We can move on to our next question. Please State your name and affiliation. Let us keep questions to a respectable time so we can continue with all of them. [LAUGHTER.] Thank you.

Ms. CLUFF: I will do my best. Hi. My name is Sarah Cluff. I see some familiar faces in the audience. I was Sarah Martin. I am now Sarah Cluff. Therefore, I am with Freedom House. I am our program officer in charge of programs in Moldova.

Therefore, a lot of our conversation today has been around the geopolitical angle of the country. I want to try to address and unpack civil society a little bit. Therefore, the narrative that—or, the reality of Russian interference and Russian manipulation is not something I am going to contest. It is very true. It is very obvious. However, there are

genuine concerns that come from the Moldovan citizenry. There are things that the government is doing, and that the—and that the incumbent president has done, that warrants criticism. As civil society, how do you navigate this very complicated and very politicized question of providing feedback and criticism, without falling into the, well, everything against PAS and everything against Sandu is just Russian propaganda? Thank you.

Ms. BAKER: All right. Thank you. We will begin with Mr. Nix.

Mr. NIX: Sure. Well, I will rise to the defense of President Sandu in this instance, who has done incredible things since she has been elected to office. Not just in terms of Moldova's accession to the EU, the steps she is taken. Again, she inherited a huge economic mess. She inherited hundreds of thousands of Ukrainian refugees. She inherited a huge energy issue and has tried to deal with all these many, multifaceted, complex issues constructively and democratically. It is not easy. It is easy to criticize someone in that position. It is more important, I think, to support somebody in that position.

That is certainly what we do at IRI. We try to build political parties, build governance, as I stated earlier, to try to link up the central government more with the north and with the south. That is what we will continue to do. This is—as Don has described and Steve has described—a very fragile State. Therefore, I would come out on the side that the government deserves more praise than it does criticism at this point. We need to do everything we can to continue to support this country on its path to Europe and defend it from Russian aggression.

Ms. BAKER: Dr. Jensen or Dr. Blank? Dr. Blank, start us off.

Dr. BLANK: Yes. If you read the European Commission report from Moldova—you are shaking your head so you are familiar with it—you all see that they have made it in many areas of progress. Therefore, progress has to be rewarded, both by the European Union and by the United States, in order to encourage further progress, there. Second, to the extent that you improve governance, you improve governance under the rule of law. The rule of law protects dissent. Therefore, criticism of the regime is not necessarily subversive in intent, let alone content, and even if it is subversive in content, it can be protected by law such as we have here in the United States, or other democracies have their own version of it.

Therefore, that is one concrete example of what you are talking about. However, also, to the extent that the administration can improve economic conditions, and reduce the conditions that allow for ethnic grievance, criticism will diminish. It will be channeled into legal channels. You will be able to see that if you are an observer of what is going on in Moldova, as you and, you know, your colleagues are.

Dr. JENSEN: I will speak anecdotally and impressionistically, and without your—having been there. Transnistria is a very interesting place. Everybody I know from Moldova has said that the vociferous tendencies have declined in the last couple of years because Transnistria has been linked to the EU and Romania, and trade and economic grievances, as my friend said, have gone down. Therefore, there are places where progress has been made, and you can almost see it. You can certainly feel it. Therefore, it is not a hopeless effort in any case. However, as I guess we are all saying the average Moldovan has to feel a stake in the Western journey. As we saw it two weeks ago, not enough do.

Ms. BAKER: Dr. Jensen, thank you. We can proceed to our next question. Please State your name and affiliation.

Mr. JÖKS: Good afternoon. I am Karl-Heikki Jöks. I am from the Joint Baltic American National Committee.

I recall Mr. Stephen recommending that the Moldovan government should go to the minority communities and speak to them in Russian and try and engage with them and learn their issues. However, I see an issue with trying to communicate with them in Russian, as what was previously pointed out is that when you speak Russian, Russia will view you as a Russian or a Russian citizen, and it does not help the situation if we are integrating ourselves into their sphere. Therefore, how would you recommend instead communicating with them and integrating them into normal Moldovan society, without increasing the issues that Russia can use?

Ms. BAKER: Thank you. Beginning with Mr. Nix.

Mr. NIX: Well, first of all, as a Russian speaker, I will politely decline Vladimir Putin's offer to offer me protection. [LAUGHTER.] Do not need it. Neither does my wife, who is Ukrainian. With regard to this issue, I mean, let us face the facts: Is that people in Gagauz speak Russian. They no longer really have direct access to Russian TV, but they watch Russian TV on the internet. Therefore, this is a gradual thing. Eventually, just like in Ukraine, as Ukraine is moving away from the Russian language toward Ukrainian, our polling data tells us that will happen in Moldova too. However, it will be gradual.

What I am talking about is dealing with the political crisis that could erupt in 2025 if the current government doesn't secure more votes in the north, in the south, and in the Russian-speaking areas. Therefore, there has to be an effort short term to listen to those people, listen to their grievances, and move toward them. As I said earlier, increase the connectivity. In the long term, you know, I believe, as Moldova continues to move toward the EU, that the language issue will become a minor issue. However, it will take time. It will take time.

Ms. BAKER: Dr. Blank or Dr. Jensen?

Dr. JENSEN: Just to followup on what you said, Steve. There are many countries in the region which are multilingual. As your polling data shows, in Ukraine more people are speaking Ukraine not because Russian speaking is somehow suppressed. It is just they speak Ukrainian for other geopolitical reasons that makes all sorts of sense. Therefore, it is a problem not reaching these people, whatever language they speak. It is the reaching of the people in whatever way that you can that makes a difference. RFE, for example, has programmatic outreach to Russian-speaking areas in Ukraine. That is what you strive for—connecting, not necessarily forcing them to change their language. Because they are going to pick that up or—they are going to speak what they want anyway, based on a calculation of costs and benefits.

Dr. BLANK: As Don has said, you need to reach voters in their language, and speak to their concerns. Now, everybody in this room has probably seen at least one of the post-mortems of last Tuesday's elections which complains that the Democratic Party lost because it did not address voters' concerns about the economy or about other issues. The media here is full of that, and everybody in America speaks English or understands English. Therefore, they all spoke the same language. However, they did not really speak the same language in the sense that they did not address themselves to what is on people's minds.

In Moldova, where you have an ethnic and linguistic problem, if you cannot address people in their language and address yourself to their most pressing concerns, you have left the field open to Moscow. It may be different in the Baltic states, where you do have another case of substantial Russian diasporas, but who are nonetheless being integrated into Baltic society more and more over the past 33 years. In Moldova, the election results show that there are substantial vulnerabilities at home. If not for the diaspora, Sandu would have lost and the European Union referendum would have lost. That means that the Moldovan government has a lot of work to do to reach citizens, and that means you have to address yourself to them in a language that they understand, and to the concerns that motivate them.

Ms. BAKER: Okay. We have time for a couple more questions. Therefore, if you would please, State your name and affiliation.

Ms. HARVEY: Hi. My name is Anna Harvey, and I am a recent graduate from the Stanford Center for Russian, East European, and Eurasian Studies, and one of Ms. Baker's Moldova Fulbright colleagues.

This last summer, I was in Estonia as a research assistant. In both Moldova and Estonia, something that I saw was, that within the Russian-speaking communities, many people felt like they did not have satisfactory alternatives to Russian State media when it came to language of choice media. Therefore, I guess this is a good followup to the previous question, of how do we reach those people who maybe do not have access to other media, even if it exists. They do not necessarily choose to go to Radio Free Europe, for example, or Meduza for their media. What can the U.S. Government do? What can the Moldovan government do to combat this disinformation that we see within the Russian State media space, and provide alternatives for those people who are not moving away from Russian-language sources? Thank you.

Ms. BAKER: Thank you. This may be our last question, as I want to give our panelists time to give their final remarks. Would anyone like to address this?

Mr. NIX: Just real quickly, it is important to note that the Moldovan government is empowered to regulate television, but it does not have regulatory powers over the internet. Russia has taken full advantage of that fact. The Moldovan government has curtailed Russian TV broadcasts, but Moldovan citizens can still access Russian news, and Russian disinformation via the internet. Therefore, again, one of the ideas that I think parliament will debate this year, or early next year, will be developing a regulatory scheme that would address this problem on the internet.

Ms. BAKER: Dr. Blank.

Dr. BLANK: Yes. As I mentioned, you have to address people in the language that they understand. There is no alternative here. The U.S., in its information policies as Don said, has instruments at its disposal to do that. Deutsche Welle, [BBC] British Broadcasting Corporation, and Radio 24 France probably have similar instruments at their disposal, because they are able to broadcast worldwide. Therefore, they obviously can broadcast in Russian. It is also necessary for the Moldovan government to train, as part of its disinformation policies, people who speak and read Russian fluently, and who can go into these communities and expose the lie, but also address themselves to whatever is on its citizens' minds. That is in keeping with its democratic mandate.

You know, I will give you an example from here. Yesterday Representative Ocasio-Cortez sent out this message to people who voted for her and Trump. How come? She got

these answers, because—I mean, these are the last two people you would expect to be juxtaposed in an election. Yet, you know, several hundred or thousand people did it. The same thing is true with the Moldovan government. You can send out inquiries to your Russian-speaking population. What is your grievance against the government? You know, let us try to have a conversation and address it.

There are ways to deal with Russian information policies' threats, but you have to carry out that confrontation with the Russians head-on. It needs to be done both by Moldova and by its patrons in Europe and in the United States. It has to be done in the language of the audience, not in the language of the institutions.

Ms. BAKER: Do we have one question for the Helsinki Commission?

Dr. MASSARO: No, we do not.

Ms. BAKER: Okay. In that case, we will use our remaining time to give our panelists time to give final remarks, address any subjects that we did not have time for earlier, and give any final thoughts or recommendations for the Moldovan government on their path to EU accession.

Therefore, we will begin in opposite order with Dr. Blank and move our way back.

Dr. BLANK: Well, I have already given an extensive list of recommendations, so I am not going to repeat it. I mean, they are all in the transcript and in my testimony. However, I would urge all of you to report back to your offices the absolute necessity for the incoming administration to treat Moldova—and for that matter the Balkans—in a strategic sense. Not to see these as isolated or the countries that are somehow detached from the problem of the Russian war in Ukraine. That is misleading in the highest degree. It is a barrier to effective policymaking, let alone to a sound U.S. strategy.

A sound U.S. strategy for Moldova, as well as I would argue from the Balkans in general, is that Russia must be defeated in Ukraine. This opens up a lot of possibilities for the Balkans in terms not only of dealing with ethnic grievances but also reducing Russian military pressure on the Balkans and Russian energy leverage, and thus information leverage. That is a derivation, in many cases, from Russia's ability to gain huge revenues in energy, and so forth. In that way, not only Moldova, but its neighboring Balkan governments can then better address themselves to their domestic problems and create what we might call a virtuous circle, as they strive either to join the EU or to improve their ability to carry out their membership requirements there.

Ms. BAKER: Thank you.

Dr. Jensen, finishing remarks.

Dr. JENSEN: Yes. You said if Russia loses—if Russia wins in Ukraine. If Russia wins or loses, this is just my personal opinion, Russia will still be Russia. That means Moldova, Georgia, Ukraine, and Estonia have to worry about their big neighbor to the east. That means the questions of resilience, of enlightened leadership, of reaching out to disaffected communities are very critical, not only for Moldova's national security but for everybody's. Again, as Steve said, this is one big problem, which is the future of Russia and the regime. I do not think it is going to finish any time soon—or get very mild anytime soon. Therefore, the time for now, whether it is in Moldova or Georgia or elsewhere, is to show our support, to help them, and stop what is a very, very alarming trend in Russian foreign policy.

Ms. BAKER: Thank you.

Mr. Nix, final thoughts.

Mr. NIX: Sure. I have made my recommendations with regard to what the [USG] United States Government and our European allies can do in Moldova. I would like to address the connectivity of Moldova and Ukraine that Steve brought up and then Don followed up on. A lot of people in this room, Paul and others, know very well that in addition to the taking of Donbas and the conquest of Kyiv, the third objective of Russia's war plan was an amphibious assault on Odessa, after which Russia would then go north, would take Chişinău. I have made that drive. It is a three-hour drive, five-hours by armored vehicle. Take Chişinău, link up with the Russian 14th army, and then go east and link up with forces in Donbas, therefore encompassing what Steve referred earlier to as what Putin calls Novorossiya. That was the original goal.

Thankfully, Ukrainians took out the warship Moskva in the Black Sea. This is—this is information that I got from the Ukrainian side, not the U.S. side. However, that ship had one of the most sophisticated air defense systems of any ship in the Russian fleet. If the Ukrainians could take out that ship, the Russians calculated, think what they could do to a troop ship or a supply ship during an amphibious landing. Therefore, Russia backed off its plan to attack Odessa, thus saving Moldova. Therefore, back to Steve's point, the USG and Europe have to do everything that they can to assist Ukraine in winning this war because it affects not just Moldova. It affects Belarus. It affects Russia itself. Therefore, again, emphasis on assisting Ukraine as it relates to Moldova. Thank you.

Ms. BAKER: Thank you. This is a very good note to end on, as what happens in Moldova does have consequences much greater than the borders of its own country. Thank you so much, all of you, for coming today. It has been a pleasure having you here to discuss Moldova's European future. Thank you so much for your expert remarks. This meeting is closed. Thank you. [Applause.]

[Whereupon, at 3:22 p.m., the briefing ended.]





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