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HOW MUCH DOES YOUR VOTE COST?



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CÂT VALOREAZĂ VOTUL TĂU?

SUMAR

„Cât valorează votul tău?” examinează în mod critic diversele dimensiuni ale corupției electorale și impactul acesteia asupra proceselor democratice. Studiul este structurat în jurul a trei componente principale: mecanismele de influențare a votului, consecințele corupției electorale și strategiile de prevenire și combatere a acesteia.

În primul rând, cercetarea analizează diversele metode de manipulare a voturilor, incluzând cumpărarea directă a voturilor, presiunile economice, campaniile sofisticate de dezinformare și practicile clientelare. În al doilea rând, sunt evaluate consecințele extinse ale acestor practici asupra integrității democratice, încrederii publice și guvernării, subliniindu-se erodarea responsabilității și implicațiile economice generate de practicile electorale corupte. În final, proiectul propune un set cuprinzător de măsuri destinate protejării integrității procesului electoral și asigurării unor alegeri transparente, libere și corecte. Aceste măsuri includ consolidarea cadrului legal, instituirea unor instituții electorale independente și integrarea de soluții tehnologice avansate.

Prin această abordare multidimensională, proiectul urmărește să ofere recomandări de politici publice și perspective practice care să contribuie la restabilirea și menținerea încrederii cetățenilor în instituțiile democratice.

Cuvinte-cheie: corupție electorală, finanțare ilegală, securitate națională, influențarea votului, statul de drept, ordinea constituțională.

SUMMARY

The “How Much Does Your Vote Cost?” critically examines the various aspects of electoral corruption and its impact on democratic processes. This study is structured around three core components: the mechanisms of vote influence, the consequences of electoral corruption, and the strategies for its prevention and countering.

Firstly, the research explores various methods by which votes are manipulated-ranging from direct vote buying and economic pressures to sophisticated misinformation campaigns and clientelism. Secondly, it evaluates the far-reaching consequences of such practices on democratic integrity, public trust, and governance, highlighting the erosion of accountability and the economic repercus-

sions associated with corrupt electoral practices. Finally, the project proposes a set of comprehensive measures, including the strengthening of legal frameworks, the establishment of independent electoral institutions, and the integration of advanced technological solutions, aimed at safeguarding electoral integrity and ensuring transparent, free, and fair elections. Through this multi-dimensional approach, the project seeks to provide actionable insights and policy recommendations that can help restore and maintain public confidence in democratic institutions.

Key-words: electoral corruption, illegal financing, national security, vote influence, rule of law, constitutional order.

Introduction

Since the beginning of human history, elections have had the purpose of establishing and consolidating a form of government. The first clear forms of democracy appeared in Ancient Greece, more specifically in the city-state of Athens. However, at that time, only Athenian men who had completed their military training had the right to vote. Both in antiquity and in the Middle Ages, free voting was an unexpected phenomenon for those times, but present within human societies. Thus, for the election of the rulers of the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation, or for the election of the Popes leading the Catholic Church, voting was indispensable.

The right to vote has always been a foundational pillar of democracy on Moldovan territory, evolving within a historical context shaped by deep political and social transformations. During the Soviet era, voting was frequently seen as little more than a formality, with elections tightly controlled by state institutions, thereby failing to reflect the genuine will of the populace.

With the advent of independence, Moldovan citizens embraced a renewed sense of freedom and responsibility, and the right to vote became a powerful emblem of national sovereignty and aspirations for democratic governance. Even so, the transition to a truly representative electoral system has faced numerous challenges: from external interference and endemic corruption to the pressing need for significant institutional reform to guarantee transparency and fairness in the electoral process.

Today, the right to vote in Moldova is safeguarded by a modern legal framework, however, the sustained engagement of civil society and state institutions remains vital to prevent any attempts at undermining democracy. Cultivating trust in the electoral system and fostering informed political participation are indispensable requirements for reinforcing democracy and ensuring a form of governance that genuinely reflects citizen's aspirations.

At the same time, Moldova is facing threats and challenges related to the Russian propaganda and oligarchical structures permanently attempting to capture democracy. An alarming element is the presence of criminal groups, closely linked to the controversial figure of Ilan Șor (Former Member of Parliament in the Republic of Moldova) and his associated parties. These entities not only distort internal electoral results but also have the potential to extend their influence to neighboring countries, creating the risk of a regional-scale corruption process. This situation threatens the democratic stability not only of Moldova but of the entire region, as electoral manipulation mechanisms can spread to bordering states.

For these reasons, this project aims to analyze in detail the issues identified in examining the criminal causes associated with these practices, as well as the solutions adopted to combat corruption. Thus,

through a complex and multidimensional approach, the project will highlight both the existing challenges and the strategic measures that can contribute to restoring the integrity of the electoral process and consolidating democracy throughout the region.

How the Machine of Vote Influence Works

Moldova has a recent criminal case initiated on the constituent elements of the offense provided for in article 181² paragraphs (1) and (5), namely: falsification of financial management report of initiative groups and political parties and report on the financing of electoral campaigns with the intent to substitute or conceal the identity of donors, the amount of funds collected, or the destinations and volume of funds used, as well as the use of undeclared, non-compliant, or foreign-sourced funds, committed on a large scale. This case also involves the intended acceptance of financing of a political party, initiative group or electoral competitor by and organized criminal group or a criminal organization. These offenses were born after the activities of the "Șor" party were revealed (in particular, the case of the "Șansa" party (an organization affiliated to the "Șor" party)). The latter one was financed by the fugitive oligarch and former Member of the Parliament Ilan Șor). The case reveals a sophisticated network of illegal financing of political parties, initiative groups, and electoral competitors, combined with money laundering, perpetrated by an organized criminal group of exceptional proportions. The investigation was remarkable in its scope: over 650 searches conducted throughout the Republic of Moldova and more than 250 special investigative measures, all coordinated by a single anti-corruption prosecutor along with 156 criminal investigation officers.

During these operations, the authorities seized substantial amounts of money 10,000,000 MDL (approximately 511,000 EUR), preliminary records, mobile phones, bank documents, and other relevant evidence. The investigation, uncovered that these networks of illicit financing were fueled by shadowy sources. As a result of the searches, three regional leaders of the major territorial organizations of certain political parties were detained; these individuals were paid monthly from hidden funds to influence voters' behavior in upcoming presidential elections and the Republican Referendum, as well as to mobilize participation in rallies, flash mobs, and protests. Altogether, the offense caused pecuniary damage amounting to 195,000,000 MDL (approximately 9,963,620 EUR).

Consequently, the criminal case is not merely a collection of evidence but a veritable odyssey in the fight against corruption, where the manipulation of electoral processes is interconnected with elaborate money laundering strategies. The operations carried out by the authorities reflect an unwavering determination to expose and sanction these acts,



culminating with the conviction of one of the defendants and the confirmation of his involvement in this corruption network.

By acknowledging guilt for the illegal financing of a political party, the defendant systematically orchestrated the transport – primarily from Chișinău and its suburbs – and the distribution, through intermediaries, of significant sums of money and unaccounted, undeclared gifts to individuals who provided various services, whether officially or unofficially, on behalf of “Șansa” – the subsidiary party of the “Șor” party. In March 2024, this operation culminated with the delivery of a black package containing 613,500 MDL, intended to be redistributed throughout the country, thereby violating legal provisions regarding the financing of political parties.

As the investigations deepened, members of the organized criminal group, once exposed and subjected to stringent controls, were forced to adopt increasingly sophisticated strategies to conceal their financial sources and camouflage their illegal activities. This ongoing adaptation enabled the criminal acts to persist, revealing a dangerous ingenuity that reached unprecedented levels, orchestrated in the context of influence stemming directly from the Russian Federation.

Within this framework, a new form of money laundering and illegal financing was documented – one that eliminates cash transactions in favor of a cutting-edge digital mechanism: PYYPL cards (bank cards). These cards, issued in the United Arab Emirates and regulated by the authorities in Abu Dhabi, allow financial transactions to be conducted without oversight from Moldova’s fiscal authorities, as the client database is hosted outside the country. Subsequently, accounts were created at the commercial bank “Promsvyazbank” in the Russian Federation, which is under international sanctions, and through the “PSB” application (mobile banking app). Amounts ranging from 900 to 45,000 MDL were transferred in Russian rubles.

The report also emphasizes that following the exposure of these practices, the criminal group adopted a new strategy by introducing MIR cards (bank cards), issued by Russian banking entities. This combination of traditional methods of illicit financing with digital innovations underlines the scale and sophistication of networks that could threaten the integrity of the democratic processes and political systems in all of our countries.

During the criminal investigation, it was determined that the organized criminal group included individuals based in the Russian Federation and operated through a rigorously structured hierarchy:

Territorial Leaders: In total, 130 individuals each received 45,000 MDL per month. They oversaw the group’s activities, compiled lists of recruits – both activists and sympathizers – collected by the sector presidents and systematically transmitted this data to Russia for bank account registration and opening.

Sector Presidents: In total 1,927 members, each earned 4,600 MDL per month. Their responsibility was to recruit and manage local activists and sympathizers, then forward rosters to the territorial leaders.

Activists: Over 50,000 individuals were each paid 2,500 MDL monthly. They recruited and organized supporters within their respective sectors, reporting back to the sector presidents.

Supporters: Over 70,000 individuals received between 900 and 1,800 MDL per month. These recruits were specifically instructed – often in exchange for money – to vote „No” in referendums and support designated candidates.

Between April 2024 and October 2024, more than 1.4 million SMS messages or calls were dispatched to 138,488 „PSB” users. These messages contained instructions along with sums in Russian rubles, with transfers amounting to over 15 million USD in September alone and exceeding 24 million USD in October, all intended to facilitate electoral corruption. In addition, 97 Telegram bots were identified, used both to store personal data and create bank accounts in “PSB” (banking mobile app) as well as to disseminate instructions for action during elections.

Consequences of Corruption

In the rural context of Moldova, particularly in economically disadvantaged areas, voter bribery remains a significant challenge. An illustrative scenario is the situation observed in villages where people whose monthly pension of approximately 210 EUR falls considerably below the national minimum consumption basket of around 500 EUR, as recorded in 2023. Due to these economic hardships, many people in similar conditions become vulnerable targets for political parties practicing electoral corruption.

The method frequently employed by parties such as the “Șor” Party involves providing material incentives – food packages, firewood, or cash – to voters experiencing economic difficulties. In many cases, party representatives directly approach economically vulnerable individuals with essential goods, explicitly linking their generosity to expected electoral support. This practice directly contravenes Moldova’s Electoral Code, specifically Article 181¹ – Corruption of Voters – which criminalizes offering goods or money to influence voter choice.

The economic vulnerability of many citizens is systematically exploited by parties aiming to manipulate electoral outcomes. These activities distort genuine democratic processes and perpetuate cycles of poverty and political dependency. This widespread practice exemplifies a broader issue in which economic instability creates fertile ground for electoral corruption. It highlights the urgent need for strengthened enforcement of existing legal provisions and the establishment of effective social

support mechanisms to mitigate the socio-economic conditions facilitating such corrupt practices.

A particularly illustrative case regarding electoral fraud and foreign interference unfolded recently during Romania's 2025 presidential elections. Nationalist candidate Călin Georgescu was initially approved by Romania's Central Electoral Bureau (BEC). However, subsequent findings forced the Constitutional Court to intervene, declaring his candidacy unconstitutional [2]. The Court cited significant evidence of fraud, highlighting an extensive campaign conducted primarily through social media networks.

The Constitutional Court explicitly documented coordinated manipulation through thousands of fake accounts and artificial profiles. These fake users systematically disseminated pro-Russian propaganda, spreading misinformation and targeting rival candidates. The network had operated since at least 2016, progressively increasing its sophistication and reach over time. Analysts traced this campaign's origins to shadowy figures using digital platforms to shape Romanian public opinion, exploiting online algorithms to amplify extremist and anti-democratic narratives.

Furthermore, the Court noted how social media was intentionally used to discredit democratic institutions and polarize voters. Fake profiles systematically promoted Georgescu's candidacy, while simultaneously launching defamatory attacks against competitors. The sheer volume of these orchestrated messages – numbering in thousands per day – was unprecedented, distorting electoral fairness and significantly compromising voters' ability to make informed decisions.

Even more troubling, Romanian investigators identified direct Russian infiltration in Georgescu's campaign. Authorities have presented concrete evidence of external funding and logistical support from groups aligned with Kremlin interests. Intelligence services further revealed that Georgescu collaborated closely with an organized group led by a retired Romanian general. This clandestine group reportedly planned a coup d'état, operating similarly to a military command structure. Their objectives included dramatically altering Romania's constitutional order by changing the nation's name, flag, anthem, and ultimately installing a different political regime.

In Georgescu's case, despite initial validation by the Electoral Bureau – including the confirmation of first-round results – only the Constitutional Court's decisive intervention prevented deeper institutional harm.

The Romanian situation offers clear parallels to recent developments in the Republic of Moldova, where electoral processes have similarly faced aggressive foreign-backed manipulation through online platforms. Both nations have experienced concerted campaigns aiming to undermine democratic elections and destabilize political institutions. Recognizing

these patterns emphasizes the critical importance of strong constitutional oversight, transparent electoral procedures, and robust defenses against digital propaganda and external interference.

Also, recent political developments within the European Parliament highlight growing concerns over electoral transparency, foreign influence, and democratic stability.

In recent years, the Identity and Democracy (ID) party – a coalition of nationalist and right-wing populist parties in the European Parliament – has faced both internal and external controversies. Several member parties and individuals have been investigated or sanctioned, highlighting concerns over far-right ideologies in Europe.

In May 2024, the ID group expelled nine members of Germany's far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) party, following controversial remarks by AfD's lead candidate, Maximilian Krah, who suggested not all members of the Nazi-era Waffen-SS were criminals. This expulsion sought to distance the group from extremist views and safeguard its political legitimacy.

In July 2024, the dissolution of the ID group marked a significant realignment among Europe's nationalist parties. Its successor, "The Conservatives and Patriots", includes parties previously accused of questionable electoral practices and foreign financial backing, such as Germany's AfD and France's National Rally – both documented recipients of Russian funding.

Beyond internal parliamentary actions, individual countries have taken measures against far-right figures linked to nationalist movements. For instance, Romania barred nationalist politician Călin Georgescu from participating in the May 2025 presidential elections. This decision was based on allegations of Russian interference in his campaign and concerns over his anti-EU and anti-NATO sentiments, reflecting a broader apprehension about foreign influence and the spread of extremist ideologies within national politics [1].

These developments underscore the ongoing challenges Europe faces by addressing the rise of far-right ideologies and ensuring the integrity of its democratic institutions. The actions taken against parties and individuals associated with the ID group highlight a concerted effort to counteract extremist narratives and protect the foundational values of the European Union.

Particularly notable is the German party AfD, whose trajectory has raised alarms across Europe due to allegations of illicit campaign funding and suspected foreign financial involvement. German authorities have investigated AfD extensively for receiving large sums of undisclosed funds routed through foreign intermediaries, notably via Swiss-based entities. For instance, in 2016, AfD leaders were discovered to have utilized anonymous donors to circumvent strict German transparency laws,



resulting in significant financial penalties. Further controversy arose when it was revealed that a German billionaire had secretly provided substantial support to AfD campaigns through indirect channels, highlighting the ease with which domestic electoral integrity can be undermined by concealed financial interests.

Additionally, AfD's strategic use of propaganda and misinformation further complicates the landscape of electoral integrity. The party effectively harnesses social media platforms to disseminate polarizing and often misleading messages, amplifying nationalist narratives and fueling public distrust toward democratic institutions. Such tactics not only distort public discourse but also create vulnerabilities easily exploited by external actors interested in influencing election outcomes. Analysts stress that AfD's persistent attacks against independent media, judicial independence, and electoral transparency directly challenge the fundamental norms of liberal democracy [6].

These cases reflect broader challenges facing European democracies: the convergence of nationalist political forces with clandestine financial networks and sophisticated propaganda campaigns that threaten electoral fairness.

The *Ždanoka v. Latvia* case exemplifies the tension between individual electoral rights and national security in a volatile geopolitical environment. Tatjana Ždanoka, a leading figure of the Latvian Russian Union (LKS) and former Member of the European Parliament, was disqualified from Latvian parliamentary elections due to her historic anti-independence activities and visits to Russian-occupied Crimea. Latvia justified the exclusion by citing her continued ideological alignment, her access to sensitive EU parliamentary information, and the deterioration of regional stability following Russia's invasions of Georgia (2008) and Ukraine (2022). Ždanoka claimed that her past conduct was no longer relevant, invoking Article 3 of Protocol No. 1 to the European Convention on Human Rights, and argued that Latvia's measures were politically motivated rather than bona fide security safeguards [6].

The European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) upheld the restriction as lawful and proportionate, recognizing Latvia's legitimate aim to protect its democratic stability and territorial integrity from ongoing threats. The ruling affirms that democracies may impose electoral restrictions against perceived internal dangers when such measures are evidence-based, proportionate, and subject to regular review. This principle extends to entire political parties, as illustrated by Spain's prohibition of organizations linked to ETA, where courts applied a "successor party" doctrine to uphold bans on groups perpetuating terrorism.

Spanish authorities faced significant legal and political difficulties when seeking to prohibit parties accused of supporting ETA's violent separatist agen-

da, such as *Herri Batasuna* and *Batasuna v. Spain*. The key complexity arose from party "succession", in which newly political entities appeared to continue the agenda and ideology of previously banned organizations. Each time Spanish courts and authorities prohibited a party affiliated with ETA's separatist cause, similar new parties emerged, often retaining leadership figures, organizational structure, and political strategies [5].

In response to this challenge, Spanish courts developed the legal concept of "substantive continuity" or "successor party" criteria. According to these standards, a newly created party can be considered a direct successor to a banned one if it shares the same ideological objectives, membership, leadership, financial sources, or operational methods, especially if these methods include tacit or explicit support for terrorism. Through this approach, both the Spanish Constitutional Court and later the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) upheld bans on successor parties by emphasizing the fundamental requirement that political groups respect democratic values, reject violence unequivocally, and operate transparently within the rule of law.

A crucial case illustrating this principle was *Herri Batasuna and Batasuna v. Spain*, where the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) upheld Spain's decision to dissolve political parties explicitly linked to ETA. The Court recognized that protecting democracy might require strong measures against parties threatening democratic institutions through violence or terrorism. Despite the severe nature of party dissolution, the ECtHR found Spain's actions justified, as the banned parties had actively contributed to ETA's terrorist agenda, posing a clear, immediate, and ongoing threat to democratic stability and public safety [5].

This jurisprudence carries significant implications for other democracies confronting threats to constitutional order or security. It affirms that democracies may lawfully defend themselves against extremist political groups or their successors when these parties perpetuate an anti-democratic, violent, or terrorist-oriented agenda. However, courts emphasize that such bans must be narrowly tailored, carefully evidenced, and free from political bias or undue interference with fundamental freedoms. Spain's experience thus provides a critical precedent for balancing democratic openness with the preservation of democratic integrity.

A related concern arose during the Electoral Forum 2025, where government officials, civil society representatives, and European partners discussed Moldova's electoral vulnerabilities. The forum, held ahead of the upcoming parliamentary elections, highlighted emerging threats including propaganda campaigns, disinformation, cyberattacks, and systematic vote-buying. According to EU Ambassador Janis Mazeiks, these activities aim to distort public opinion on Moldova's European path and amplify so-

cietal tensions. He stressed that electoral integrity depends on transparency and robust institutional capacity to counter such interference.

Forum participants noted that Moldova faces hybrid threats, where political corruption intersects with foreign influence operations. While international observers acknowledged that recent presidential elections and the constitutional referendum were generally well-managed, they reported incidents of voter bribery, illicit financing, and foreign intervention, particularly by the Russian Federation. The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) raised concerns about misuse of administrative resources and unequal media access, undermining electoral fairness and pluralism.

In response, Moldovan authorities have launched urgent legal and institutional reforms. Key measures include consolidating the Anti-Corruption Prosecutor's Office and the Office for Combating Organized Crime into a single entity to streamline investigations and better address links between political parties and criminal organizations. Lawmakers are also working on legislative improvements to enhance diaspora voting opportunities and tighten oversight of postal voting procedures. Additionally, opposition parties have proposed simplifying accreditation for observers and electoral representatives, and strengthening penalties for campaign financing violations.

Prevention and Countering Measures

The Republic of Moldova has pioneered a robust legal regime to prevent and punish electoral corruption, illicit party financing, and criminal infiltration. Under Article 181¹ of the Criminal Code, any offering or provision of money, goods, services, or other benefits to influence voters – whether to induce or deter voting – is expressly criminalized, with an aggravated offense for those directly involved in the electoral process (e.g., candidates, campaign representatives, observers, or electoral officials).

Article 181² establishes detailed prohibitions on the management of political finances: paragraph (1) outlaws falsifying financial reports or concealing donor identities, fund amounts, or sources (particularly foreign or illegal funds); paragraph (2) criminalizes misuse of administrative resources during elections; paragraph (3) penalizes extortion or coercive solicitation of campaign donations; paragraph (4) forbids misapplication of state-allocated funds to parties or electoral funds; and paragraph (5) targets, as an aggravating factor, any knowing acceptance of financial support from organized criminal groups. Paragraph (6) further incentivizes whistleblowers by granting immunity to first-time accomplices who voluntarily report or assist in investigations.

Complementing these provisions, Article 181³ criminalizes large-scale illegal financing of political parties, initiative groups, electoral competitors,

or referendum campaigns from illicit sources. By designating electoral corruption as an autonomous criminal offense in 2016, Moldova underscored its commitment to constitutional order, electoral transparency, and the rule of law. These statutes furnish Moldovan authorities with comprehensive tools to investigate, prosecute, and deter electoral malpractice, thereby safeguarding democratic integrity.

On December 17, 2024, the Members of the Parliament of the Republic of Moldova have introduced Legislative Initiative Project No. 381, highlighting the necessity of combating electoral corruption and its related aspects. This legislative initiative aims to strengthen the legal framework, enhance institutional mechanisms, and impose stricter penalties for electoral fraud and corruption-related offenses.

Through this initiative, lawmakers seek to ensure greater transparency in the electoral process, prevent illicit political financing, and protect democratic integrity. The proposed measures include increased oversight of campaign financing, heavier penalties for vote-buying, and the enhancement of anti-corruption institutions to monitor and investigate electoral fraud.

In this context, the findings of the Constitutional Court contained in Decision No. 25 of November 28, 2024 – concerning the confirmation of the election results and the validation of the mandate of the President of the Republic of Moldova – are particularly pertinent. Thus, the Court ruled:

In the context of delivering this decision, the Court cannot disregard the conclusions drawn by both national and international observers, nor the cases of voter corruption carried out by unprecedented methods as documented by the National Anti-Corruption Center and the General Inspectorate of the Police.

The Court observes that the number of cases of voter corruption reported by the investigative authorities, coupled with the magnitude of the sequestered financial means, underscores the unprecedented scope of this phenomenon – especially when viewed in comparison with the situation reported in previous elections (the early parliamentary elections of July 11, 2021; the presidential elections of November 1, 2020; the new parliamentary elections of March 15, 2020; the parliamentary elections of February 24, 2019; or the presidential elections of October 30, 2016) [4].

Moreover, the Constitutional Court, through the aforementioned Decision, has underlined several pertinent normative aspects and highlighted the pressing need to complete the relevant legal framework.

At first glance, the existing regulatory framework confirms a minimal fulfillment of the state's positive obligation to adopt laws that combat electoral corruption. However, considering the high number of voter bribery cases reported by investigative authorities during the first and second rounds of this year's presidential elections, the Court believes that author-



ities must make every effort to prevent such cases in future elections. The Court highlights that those legal mechanisms for combating electoral corruption that could be improved to ensure their effectiveness, especially in light of the unprecedented methods used in the cases recorded during this election cycle.

The Court notes that authorities have a constitutional obligation to take the necessary measures to guarantee the free expression of the people's will in elections and the democratic development of the country.

State intervention is imperative to enhance enforcement tools in cases related to electoral corruption offenses and contraventions, as well as to refine the legal regulations governing procedures against actions that may have direct or indirect connections with the mechanisms used in electoral corruption.

The project proposes significant changes to the Penal Code to enhance the punitive framework for electoral corruption:

Aggravation of Penalties: Amendments to Articles 181¹ and 182² seek to increase the penalties for crimes committed in the interest of organized criminal groups or criminal organizations. This includes:

Introducing new aggravating circumstances such as when the offense is committed by multiple persons, affects several individuals, or involves the use of financial resources from public or external funds.

Establishing a complex approach whereby both natural persons and legal entities face stricter sanctions. For instance, fines for legal entities would be revised upward to match the severity of the offense.

Expanding Criminal Liability: The proposal extends the scope of what constitutes the criminal offense of electoral corruption. In addition to direct acts of bribery or fraud, the new provisions encompass the "promise" of illicit remuneration – whether in money, goods, services, or other benefits – as a means to influence voters' behavior, either by compelling or deterring the exercise of electoral rights.

Introducing New Aggravating Factors: Specific clauses are added to account for scenarios where corruption is committed "in the interest of a criminal group or organization". These modifications reflect the understanding that such cases pose a particularly high social danger and must be met with correspondingly robust legal responses.

These changes are intended not only to serve as a deterrent but also to ensure that electoral corruption, especially when linked to organized crime, is prosecuted with maximum rigor.

Moreover, the Constitutional Court, through its decision on the Political Party "Șor" offers a profound narrative of how electoral corruption can infiltrate and undermine the democratic fabric of a nation. At its core, the decision meticulously recounts the evolution of the "Șor" Party – from its origins under a different name and modest beginnings to its transformation into a political force riddled with controversy and legal transgressions.

The document details a long and troubled history, beginning with the early electoral participation of the group and the eventual ascension of its leader, Ilan Șor, whose personal legal troubles and convictions for offenses such as fraud and money laundering have become emblematic of the party's shadowy legacy. This narrative is not merely a chronicle of individual misdeeds, it unfolds as a broader commentary on how repeated breaches of electoral laws, financial irregularities, and the manipulation of democratic processes can corrode public trust.

Throughout the decision, the Court lays bare a catalog of irregularities: the misappropriation of unreported funds, the orchestration of voter manipulation schemes, and even the suspected collusion with foreign entities intent on destabilizing the electoral system. Each instance is carefully documented, painting a picture of a political entity that consistently violates the principles of transparency and accountability. The Court's analysis reveals a pattern – a recurring infringement on the integrity of the electoral process that not only endangers fair competition but also poses a direct threat to the democratic order [3].

In its deliberations, the Court considered extensive evidence, including multiple judicial decisions and opinions from various national and international bodies. These contributions reveal the gravity of the situation: the actions of the "Șor" Party, characterized by both overt financial misconduct and subtler forms of electoral manipulation, are in sharp contrast to the foundational values enshrined in the nation's constitution. The decision is a clarion call for accountability, emphasizing that in a democratic society, political entities must operate in full respect of the law. Failure to do so threatens not only the integrity of elections but also the broader principles of pluralism and state sovereignty.

Ultimately, the decision serves as a powerful testament to the necessity of robust legal safeguards in the electoral arena. It contends that the systemic corruption exemplified by the "Șor" Party – through its illegal financing, persistent violations, and potential links to organized criminality – cannot be tolerated in a society committed to the rule of law and democratic governance. This case, therefore, becomes a crucial reference point for international discussions on electoral corruption, highlighting the urgent need for comprehensive reforms and vigilant oversight to protect democracy from those who would undermine it for personal or political gain.

Conclusions

Electoral corruption is a widespread phenomenon that directly undermines democracy, freedom, constitutional order, and the rule of law. Recent experiences from Moldova and other European nations clearly demonstrate its severe and destabilizing impact on democratic legitimacy and institu-

tional credibility. Electoral corruption erodes public trust, discourages active civic participation, weakens institutional frameworks and erodes the rule of law, leading to political instability, vulnerability to external interference and, ultimately, profound deterioration of our democracies.

Across Europe, the legal classification of electoral corruption is still treated as an administrative violation or minor offense, significantly reducing the preventive impact of penalties. This inconsistency in member states supports an environment where illicit practices can easily grow, particularly in regions facing economic hardship or political instability.

Against this backdrop, the European Union's recent initiatives to introduce a unified Anti-corruption Directive represents a significant step forward and a concrete response to these challenges. Moreover, the text of the European Parliament criminalizes illegal financing of political parties. Such legislative harmonization across member states is essential for setting a clear and unified standard for prosecuting electoral corruption and ensuring robust sanctions across all jurisdictions.

The Republic of Moldova, through its pioneering adoption of a comprehensive criminal framework against electoral corruption since 2016, sets a positive example of proactive legal reform. Moldova's experience highlights the effectiveness of treating electoral corruption explicitly as a serious criminal offense, a model that could benefit many other jurisdictions. Nevertheless, the Moldovan case also illustrates the importance of supporting robust legislative frameworks with effective enforcement mechanisms, dedicated investigative institutions, and independent judicial oversight to ensure that such laws achieve their intended results.

It is crucial that all of our countries enhance efforts through a unified European legislative and institutional framework to effectively combat electoral corruption, illegal financing, and foreign interference. Moreover, increased cooperation and sharing of best practices among member states would strengthen collective resilience against this severe phenomenon.

Ultimately, electoral corruption must be recognized as not merely a legal or administrative challenge, but as a fundamental threat to democracy itself. Only through a coordinated and decisive European approach – including common legislation, effective institutional collaboration, proactive monitoring, robust educational initiatives, and appropriate sanctions – Europe can fully restore and secure its democratic integrity and constitutional order. Such measures affirm a steadfast commitment to safeguarding democratic freedoms and guaranteeing that electoral processes truly represent the people's will.

To effectively address electoral corruption, which represents a profound threat to constitutional and democratic order, coordinated, consistent, and

unified actions at both national and European levels are required. In this context, the following recommendations are proposed:

Strengthening and harmonizing the legislative framework across the European Union through the adoption of a unified European anti-corruption directive. This would ensure electoral corruption practices are uniformly treated as serious crimes, rather than merely administrative offenses, across all member states, with appropriately severe and effective penalties.

Establishing common monitoring and investigative mechanisms to swiftly identify and efficiently sanction cases involving illegal financing, foreign interference, and electoral corruption.

Developing and deploying advanced technological solutions to ensure transparency in political party financing and to effectively monitor social media platforms, thereby preventing electoral manipulation and disinformation.

Promoting educational programs aimed at raising public awareness regarding the severe implications of electoral corruption, while emphasizing the necessity of active and informed civic engagement.

By enacting these measures, European nations can collectively reinforce democracy's foundations and ensure that electoral processes remain transparent, legitimate, and truly representative of the people's will.

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