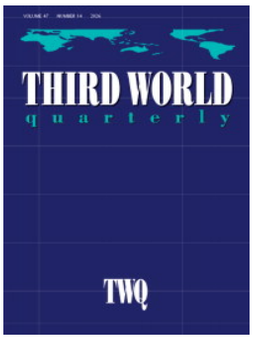

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Political polarisation and democratic backsliding: Moldova's Paradox

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ABSTRACT

Moldova has been prone to socio-political polarisation due to historical, ethno-linguistic, and geopolitical factors. However, portraying modern Moldova as being torn between the West and the East oversimplifies the case. In Moldova, socio-political polarisation is indeed on the rise, but for the most part it is moderate rather than extreme, and the major fault lines are kaleidoscopic, cross-cutting, and touch upon much more pragmatic issues, such as economy and corruption. We argue that, on the one hand, by raising the stakes for all political forces, socio-political polarisation induces democratic backsliding: most Moldovan leaders indeed empowered the executive, dismissed prosecutors, restricted independent media, and raised electoral barriers. However, and paradoxically so, in Moldova spikes in socio-political polarisation secure political pluralism and act as a safeguard against autocratisation. Defying conventional political polarisation theories, Moldovans do not seem ready to give up key democratic principles for the sake of the prevalence of one political force over the other. In order to support our claims, we use survey data, existing indexes of ideological and affective polarisation, authors' calculations of geographic polarisation, as well as several expert interviews.

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Introduction

Socio-political polarisation has recently been on the rise worldwide, manifesting in countries regardless of their political regime, economic development, or geographic region. Although political polarisation has long been on scholars' radar, its contemporary scale and pernicious consequences for democracy reignited researchers' interests. Many countries, such as Hungary, Turkey, and Venezuela, slid into full-fledged autocracies, in large part due to unprecedented levels of socio-political polarisation (e.g. Svolik 2019). In other countries, such as India, Brazil, Poland and the United States, democracy is jeopardised by polarisation at this

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very moment. In a vicious circle, anti-democratic measures by incumbents further fuel socio-political polarisation (Frantz et al. 2025).

In this paper, we focus on Moldova, a small Eastern European multiethnic nation, which has been historically deeply divided along geopolitical, cultural, and ethno-linguistic lines. We follow Esteban and Ray (1994) and conceptualise socio-political polarisation as a phenomenon when 'a population of individuals may be grouped according to some vector of characteristics into clusters, such that each cluster is very similar in terms of the attributes of its members, but different clusters have members with very dissimilar attributes' (page 819). Socio-political polarisation is often connected to geographic polarisation (Johnston, Manley, and Jones 2016), which we calculate using precinct data. In line with these definitions, the Moldovan society is polarised. Some Moldovans, typically those living in the central and southern regions, speak Moldovan or Romanian, are on average younger and wealthier, and aspire to see their country as a truly European nation. Others, primarily from the northern regions, Transnistria, or minority enclaves such as the Gagauz and Bulgarian communities in the south, are more likely to speak Russian, tend to be older, less affluent, and live in rural areas, and favour closer ties with Russia.

We also document the presence of affective polarisation in the Moldovan society. Following Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes (2012) and Arceneaux and Johnson (2013), we define affective polarisation as the extent to which partisans feel warmly towards members of their own party and hostile towards supporters of the opposing party. In this article, we appreciate the complexity of polarisation in Moldova—marked by overlapping cleavages—which helps explain why most forms of polarisation (ideological, affective, and geographic) are moderate rather than extreme.

Theoretically, both types of socio-political polarisation—ideological and affective—are shown to cause democratic backsliding (Orhan 2022; Svolik 2019, 2020). Democratic backsliding is '… the state-led debilitation or elimination of any of the political institutions that sustain an existing democracy' (Bermeo 2016, 6). The country might revert to authoritarianism through many ways, such as electoral manipulations, violation of civil rights, aggrandisement of incumbents' power, restriction of the media, increased political repressions, exclusionary policies and encroachment upon minority rights, state-eroding corruption and others.

Our main innovative argument is that, while socio-political polarisation prevents Moldova from building a well-functioning democracy, which is consistent with the mainstream theory, it salvages Moldova from sliding into full-blown authoritarianism. We hypothesise that this is because socio-political polarisation increases the stakes of autocratic government. Unlike highly polarised contexts where competition based on party identities becomes a zero-sum game, polarisation in Moldova remains sufficiently fluid to allow voters to update preferences in response to government performance, which is usually subpar. Every time Moldova is on the cusp of the irreversible authoritarian grasp of power, Moldovans seem to vote in a less polarised manner – not all of them, but often enough people to tilt election results. In contrast, when people realise that a politician of their liking failed them, they vote against that candidate. Empirically, this is reflected in a regular change of power between political forces. Such behaviour stands out among many other polarised societies and warrants exploration.

While several alternative explanations—such as cross-cutting cleavages, weak partisan identification, institutional competition, and international influences—undoubtedly shape Moldova's cyclical democracy-autocracy pattern, which we analyse in detail below, we argue

that socio-political polarisation activates and connects these phenomena in a way that is crucial for explaining Moldova's political development. Polarisation raises the stakes of political victory without eliminating competition. As a result, incumbents engaging in corruption, media capture, or executive aggrandisement—such as during the Plahotniuc-era state capture or under Dodon—face a credible chance of being voted out of office. At the same time, polarisation, intensified by the existing cleavages and international cross-pressures, incentivizes elites to deploy divisive rhetoric and institutional manipulation in order to win elections and hold on to power, contributing to democratic backsliding. The mechanism therefore predicts a cyclical equilibrium: polarisation increases the likelihood of democratic erosion, but decreases the probability of long-term authoritarian consolidation.

To substantiate our theoretical claims, we adopt a case study methodology, which offers analytical depth, facilitates the identification of causal mechanisms, and enhances internal validity (Gerring 2004). Our empirical strategy draws on secondary data sources, original calculations of geographic polarisation, and ten semi-structured expert interviews. The ten experts were selected through a two-stage process combining snowball referrals with purposive variation across think tanks, government, journalism, academia, sociology, and the judiciary. They were interviewed in 2025 in their preferred language for between one and two hours. The semi-structured guide is presented in Supplemental Appendix. The resulting data helped contextualise quantitative findings and cross-validate patterns in the empirical evidence.

The paper is organised as follows. In the next section we introduce a major theoretical framework about the connection between polarisation and democratic backsliding, drawing on overarching theoretical concepts as well as Moldovan context. In the following section we show evidence of moderate levels of socio-political, geographic, and affective polarisation in Moldova, arguing that fault lines are many, cross-cutting and touch upon much more pragmatic issues which the Moldovans deem salient, such as the economy and corruption. The following section underscores the complexity of the relationship between political polarisation and democratic backsliding in Moldova. In conclusion, we summarise our arguments and draw political consequences.

Theoretical framework: polarisation and democratic backsliding

The most widespread theoretical argument posits that under socio-political polarisation, people from different political camps are ready to trade-off democratic principles for partisanship (e.g. Graham and Svolik 2020; Svolik 2019, 2020). Empirically, countries that experience higher levels of socio-political polarisation are more prone to democratic backsliding (Arbatli and Rosenberg 2021; Chiopris, Nalepa, and Vanberg 2025; McCoy and Somer 2019; Svolik 2019, 2020). When the society is highly polarised, people are willing to forgo democratic principles in order to prevent an opposing force from assuming power. Paradoxically, this might happen in spite of the high overall support for democracy (Chiopris, Nalepa, and Vanberg 2025; Svolik 2020).

Moreover, political elites themselves are frequently willing agents of polarisation. In most cases politicians strategically choose to engage in speeches full of political vitriol against opponents in order to win elections (Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes 2012; Lau et al. 2017). In the digital age of 24-h cycle news and social media, the effect of both political rhetoric and actions on societal polarisation is amplified (e.g. Levy 2021).

Most recently, an alternative theory is emerging that makes democratic backsliding endogenous to socio-political polarisation (Frantz et al. 2025). Scholars argue that incumbent attacks on democracy—whether *via* executive aggrandisement, clampdowns on alternative viewpoints and media freedom, or prioritising loyalty over competence—lead to an increase in polarisation. When voters in opposition express concerns about democratic backsliding and criticise the government, incumbent supporters respond with disbelief (motivated reasoning) and blame the other side for being biased (Frantz et al. 2025).

Moldova represents a fertile ground to study the relationship between political polarisation and democratic backsliding because it is a moderately polarised country along many lines and it has experienced both spikes in polarisation and ebbs and flows in democracy, neither sliding back into authoritarianism, nor becoming a full-fledged democracy. Most scholarship suggests the following reasons for Moldova's 'hybrid' state of affairs: combination of political pluralism and weak state (Way 2003), crony capitalism, media capture, corruption, on the one side, and hopeful civil society, on the other side (Knott 2018); contentious politics and empowerment of weakened political institutions as safeguards against oligarchic state capture and power usurpation (Marandici 2024).

The case of Moldova provides partial confirmation to both theories: that socio-political polarisation leads to democratic backsliding and, in its turn, democratic backsliding increases political polarisation. Yet, Moldova adds an important nuance to these theories: socio-political polarisation constitutes a safeguard against autocracy (Figure 1).

Moldova has never become a fully-fledged democracy, especially in the realm of political accountability and rule of law. Lucan Way described Moldova's political system as 'pluralism by default': although there are truly competing elitist groups who serve as a check on each other, none of them are accountable to the population in the democratic sense (Way 2002, 2003, 2022).

On the other hand, paradoxically, political polarisation in Moldova substantially increases stakes for different political interests, which makes full autocratisation undesirable even by politicians, let alone society, and thus impossible. Some scholars even cite Moldova along with countries such as Bolivia, Ecuador, Maldives, North Macedonia, Slovenia, South Korea,

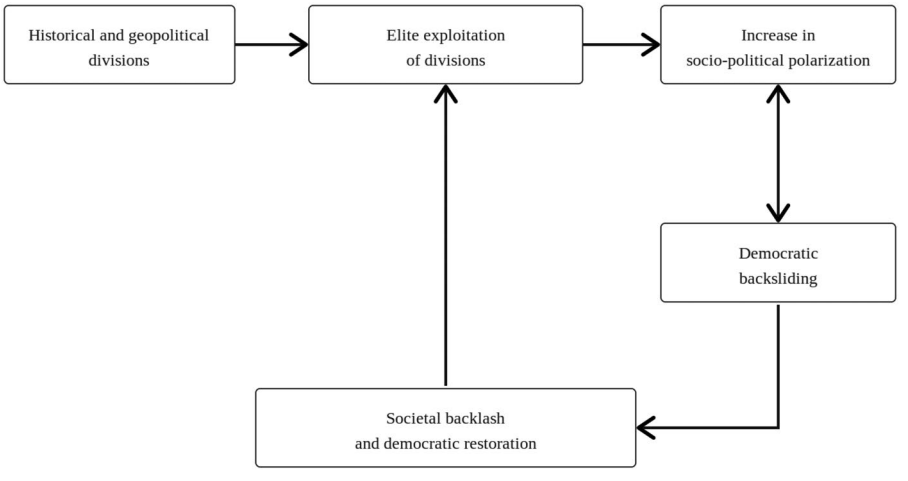

Figure 1. Socio-political polarisation and democratic backsliding in Moldova.

and Zambia that were able to reverse authoritarian trends (Papada et al. 2023, 28). As a result, Crowther argues that Moldova today is stuck with a deeply flawed democracy (Crowther 2023).

In hindsight, there is no unidirectional development path for Moldova, such as democratisation or authoritarianism, but rather a repetitive cycle of democratic declines and comebacks (Marandici 2024). As Marandici (2024) shrewdly puts it, "The same actors who opposed autocracy at one stage often became central figures in later democratic backsliding episodes. The same holds for the EU as a promoter of democracy. During the oligarchic rule, the EU played an ambivalent role, reacting only after considerable delay" (106).

We argue that this cycling stems from an interesting paradox: spikes in socio-political polarisation in Moldova simultaneously prevent democratisation and preclude authoritarianism. Moldovans appear to be able to 'wake up' from the populist rhetoric and even alter entrenched identities, engage in protest voting and demand real changes—including government responsibility, sound economic policy, anti-inflation and anti-corruption measures, as well as protection of minority rights. Every time the government fails to deliver its promises, Moldovans vote it out of office, either *via* elections or protests or both. As a result, the level of socio-political polarisation in Moldova is in constant flux, which defies any linear predictions.

Our argument departs from Way (2003), who recognised the dual role of pluralism as preventing both full democracy and autocracy, and other scholars who emphasised the cycling nature of democratic backsliding and comebacks (e.g. Marandici) in an important way: we bring forward the concept of socio-political polarisation as an important driver of both democratic backsliding and preventing authoritarianism. In the next section we explore the roots of polarisation in Moldova, after which we present empirical evidence of polarisation and talk about democratisation trends and show their interconnectedness.

Polarisation in Moldova: nuancing the West–East cleavage

Moldova has been developing its statehood in the context of deepening polarisation between two geopolitical poles, or civilizational projects—'West' (EU/Euro-Atlantic integration) and 'East' (Russia/Eurasian project) (Dolghi et al. 2025; Simionov 2023). According to the authors, identity factors (national/ethnic, linguistic, and religious) and historical legacies structure this East–West cleavage and are constantly activated both by political leaders and civic society. Generally, pro-West actors are perceived as promoting liberal-democratic norms (democracy, human rights, gender equality, rule of law, Western international institutions such as EU and NATO), while pro-East agents propel Eurasian integration, protection of ethno-linguistic minorities, Soviet nostalgia and close ties to Russia. These internal cleavages are being intensified by Moldova's accelerated move to the European Union and simultaneous deterioration of the relations with Eurasia in the post-2022 European security era (Parmentier 2023). External actors capitalise on Moldova's polarisation and divide the country further by pursuing distinct interests: Russia prioritises geopolitical and geoeconomic influence; Romania pursues cultural absorption; and the EU orients its conditionality towards procedural compliance and regulatory convergence. At the same time, geopolitical competition ensures no single elite monopolises full external legitimacy.

The prevailing media narrative echoes this story and almost exclusively portrays Moldova as a geopolitical battleground, polarised along a West-East axis between European and Russian spheres of influence (e.g. Chin and Overby 2024). This binary framing, although very

important and meaningful, misrepresents the complex socio-political dynamics shaping Moldova's contemporary landscape (Ohana 2007). The polarisation observed during the 2024 presidential elections and the Eurointegration constitutional amendment referendum does not stem from a monolithic cultural or geopolitical divide (Marandici 2022, 2023, 2025; Simionov 2023), but rather from a multifaceted interplay of elite-driven identity politics, institutional fragility, and media-amplified grievances (Interview 3).

Moldova's pluralistic, multidimensional ethnic and linguistic identities have emerged from centuries of intricate influences. Positioned at Europe's Eastern gateway and at the crossroads of empires, the region has witnessed cultural infusions that have formed competing national identities. The short independence in 1917–1918; the Romanian period from 1918 to 1940, known as the 'Union' (Unirea); the trauma of World War II, including the Holocaust under Nazi-allied Romanian regime (1941–1944), and the Moldavian SSR in the Soviet era spanning 1940 to 1941 and then from 1944 to 1991, formed the foundation for ongoing debates about linguistic, cultural, and national identity (King 2000). During the Soviet era, Moldova experienced deportations to Siberia, an emphasis on the Russian language, and disruptions in Moldovan-Romanian ties. Yet, the 1960s--1980s economic growth, social stability and relative prosperity left a meaningful mark, which can partially explain Soviet nostalgia. The country ultimately gained independence in 1991. Historical contexts, debates over occupation versus liberation, and the role of ethnic groups and languages have created lasting legacies subject to continuous reinterpretation.

The collapse of the Soviet Union intensified internal ethnic tensions, which culminated in the Transnistrian armed conflict in 1992. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, amid nationalist movements and the possibility of reunification with Romania, the region with a predominantly Russian-speaking population mobilised in resistance. Upon closer inspection, violence escalated primarily due to the administrative actors and external pressures rather than ethnic divisions per se (Kaufman 1996; Interview 7). Despite the conflict's limited scale, the bloodshed left a lasting impact on Moldovans' consciousness (Interview 4; Interview 2).

Moldova today is 'manifestly multiethnic', with its inhabitants continually debating the concept of nationhood (King 2000; Interview 6). Moldova's socio-political landscape defies reduction to 'pro-European' or 'pro-Russian' camps aligned with linguistic or ethno-cultural identities. The 2024 census, excluding Transnistria, reveals this sophistication (National Bureau of Statistics of the Republic of Moldova 2025). Among the resident population, 76.7 % declared Moldovan ethnicity, 8.0 % Romanian, 5.1% Ukrainian, 4.0% Gagauz, and 3.4% Russian. For mother tongue, 48.1% declared Moldovan, 31.8% Romanian and 11.6% Russian; Romanian rose by 9.2 percentage points from 2014. (National Bureau of Statistics of the Republic of Moldova, 2025). Geographically, linguistic minorities are more concentrated in the north (Ukrainians) and south (Ukrainians, Gagauz and Bulgarians) of the country. Major cities, such as Chişinău and Bălţi, as in other parts of the former USSR, are more Russified. Although Transnistria ('Pridnestrovie') is stereotypically portrayed as being fully Russified, approximately one-third of its population is Moldovan and uses Moldovan as their primary language (Comai & Venturi 2015; Interview 7; Interview 3). Most residents of Transnistria possess several citizenships—Moldovan and Russian, or Ukrainian. In the Republic of Moldova, between 30 and 60% of the population has a second citizenship, predominantly Romanian (Ganohariti 2020; Interview 4; Interview 10). Moreover, using a certain language as primary is not perfectly aligned with voting patterns: the city of Chisinau remains more pro-European than some of predominantly Moldovan- or Romanian-speaking areas, such

as those in the north of the country, despite having more Russian-speaking residents. According to the most recent study, although a strong correlation between language and pro-/anti-EU positions persists, with the Romanian speakers holding more pro-EU attitudes and the ethnolinguistic minorities being anti-EU, the overlap is not perfect (Slav 2025). The same is true about the imperfect overlap between Soviet nostalgia and Moldovans' geopolitical preferences: 53% of respondents who would have approved a Soviet restoration in a hypothetical scenario would have also voted in favour of Moldova's accession to the EU (Popescu 2005; Marandici 2022).

The electorate of Renato Usatîi, who came third in the 2024 presidential election, fascinatingly combines pro-EU Russian speakers and EU-sceptical Romanian speakers (Slav 2025). Finally, geopolitical preferences do not translate into votes: although most Moldovans (around 70%) support neutrality and measured EU integration, pro-EU candidates and even a referendum on the same topic rarely command support greater than 50-53% (IMAS, 2025). Such narrow margin indeed indicates politicisation and high polarisation of the EU integration in Moldova (Burmester 2025). However, if ethnic and linguistic identities are not perfectly aligned with polarised voting patterns, what else explains Moldovans' political choices?

There are several plausible explanations. First, Moldovans' geopolitical preferences are not only based on cost-benefit calculations and identity, but also on national proxies and party cues (Torres-Adán 2023). Moreover, Soviet nostalgia, usually masterfully exploited by the Moldovan Left, plays an important role in explaining people's support for leftist parties, albeit unevenly distributed among different regions and generations (Marandici 2022).

Second, given that Moldova is one of the poorest and most corrupt countries in Europe, people's priorities focus on socio-economic issues, including low wages, extreme poverty, limited economic opportunities, economic mismanagement, depopulation, energy crisis, inadequate social protections and corruption (Interview 4; 5). Multiple polling organisations consistently indicate that Moldovan citizens prioritise socio-economic and governance concerns over ethnicity or geopolitical issues (iData 2025; IMAS 2025; IPP 2024). Even preferences for Moldova's future as a member of the European Union or the Eurasian Economic Union mask people's personal cost-benefit calculations (Interview 2). Over the past 25 years, most political forces, regardless of their official left-right divisions, promoted equally populist and socialist agendas (Interview 3; 10). Moreover, Moldovans might follow the general trend of the politicisation of European integration (De Wilde 2011): some Moldovans might vote against European integration not just due to country's geopolitical divisions, but for similar reasons why many Germans or British disapprove of the EU.

Relatedly, since many political leaders in the independent Moldova fail to achieve political and economic successes, Moldova's elections are typically protest driven, reflecting dissatisfaction with rather than approval of candidates (DeSisto and Pop-Eleches 2025; Pop-Eleches 2010; Slav 2025). In 2001 voters backed communists to punish a poorly managed democratic transition and impoverishment, while in 2009 they turned against communists over corruption, broken promises, and power usurpation. The Dodon–Sandu competition reflects broader frustration with governance—disappointment with the oligarchic capture under the pro-European government helped Dodon in 2016, and backlash against his corruption and pandemic-era mismanagement helped propel Sandu's decisive 2020 victory (Interview 3).

Moreover, Moldova's level of socio-political polarisation along the East–West axis is rather volatile. The number of people who answered in the affirmative that they would 'vote for the accession to the European Union if the referendum were held next Sunday'

since 2001 was in constant flux: 76% in 2007, 45% in 2011, 54% in 2018, 65% in 2022 and again 54% in 2024. However, when neutral category was added, 44% answered they prefer Moldova as a neutral independent state, 33% want Moldova to be a member of the EU, only 10%—to be a part of the Eurasian Economic Union and 3.5%—to reunite with Romania (Interview 6). This pragmatic stance—neutrality—is seen by many as a means of safeguarding security and avoiding conflict (IMAS 2025; Interview 3). Although different survey results should be taken with a grain of salt due to data quality and differences in question framing, the ability to spot a discerning pattern adds cautious optimism (Interview 6; 8).

Finally, Moldovan politics is replete with examples of political leaders who have reversed their geopolitical views by 180 degrees. In 2005, Voronin's government tossed the pro-CIS rhetoric away and started the course towards Europeanization. In 2005, the communist government ratified the EU-Moldova Action Plan. Another example is associated with Renato Usatîi, a rather popular anti-establishment politician in Moldova. In 2016 Usatîi publicly endorsed Dodon for the runoff, and in 2020 Usatîi changed his mind and supported Sandu. In 2024, he endorsed neither. These examples illustrate that politicians in Moldova often pursue their own goals, such as re-election or rent seeking, under the disguise of East-West divide.

Despite the challenges of national identity and being caught between two opposing geopolitical powers, today, the majority of Moldovans support a neutral status for the country and advocate for eventual EU accession (Simionov 2023). This is consistent with the Moldovan politics over the last 10 years: in 2014 Moldova obtained visa-free access to the EU; in 2016, the EU–Moldova Association Agreement on free trade was fully enforced; in 2022, EU granted candidate status to Moldova. Finally, on 4 July 2025, the European Union and Moldova held their first summit in Chișinău, which reflects the high level of bilateral relations between Moldova and EU today.

All in all, most experts who closely watch Moldovan politics warn against pro-EU and pro-Russia labels (Șupac 2024), because such polarisation is simplistic and does not reflect reality. Although Chinn's (1997) observation that 'both nation and state remain clouded by the disputed question of identity' is still relevant, these identities in Moldova are kaleidoscopic. The overlapping cleavages help explain a moderate level of ideological, affective and geographic polarisation in Moldova (rather than extreme), which we empirically demonstrate in the next section.

Empirical evidence of polarisation in Moldova

Moldova is a relatively polarised country, both politically and socially. However, Moldova's level of socio-political polarisation—ideological, affective, and geographic—is highly volatile and for most years is moderate rather than severe, as usually presented in media accounts (Interview 3). Figure 2 shows Moldova's index of political polarisation since 1990. The index is close to the concept of affective polarisation defined above and reflects 'the extent to which political differences affect social relationships beyond political discussions. Societies are highly polarised if supporters of opposing political camps are reluctant to engage in friendly interactions, for example, in family functions, civic associations, their free time activities and workplaces' (Coppedge et al. 2025a, 2025b; Pemstein et al. 2025). The index ranges from 0, implying that people with opposing political views interact in a friendly manner, to 4,

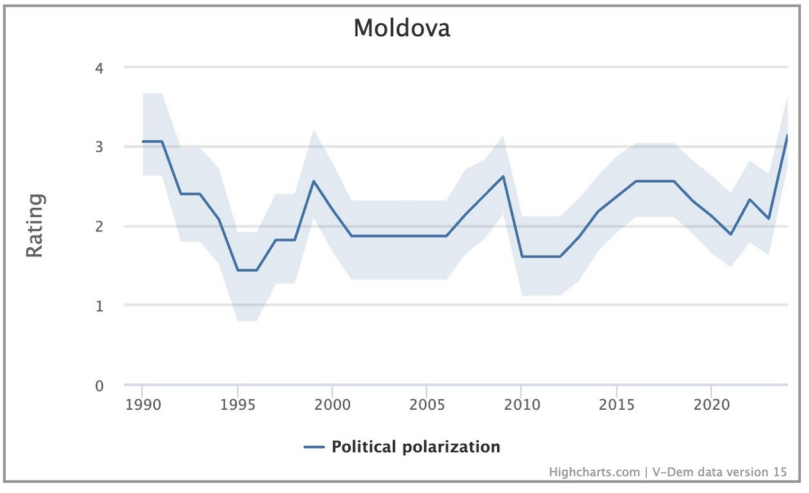

Figure 2. Socio-political polarisation (affective) in Moldova, 1990–2024 (Coppedge et al., 2025a).

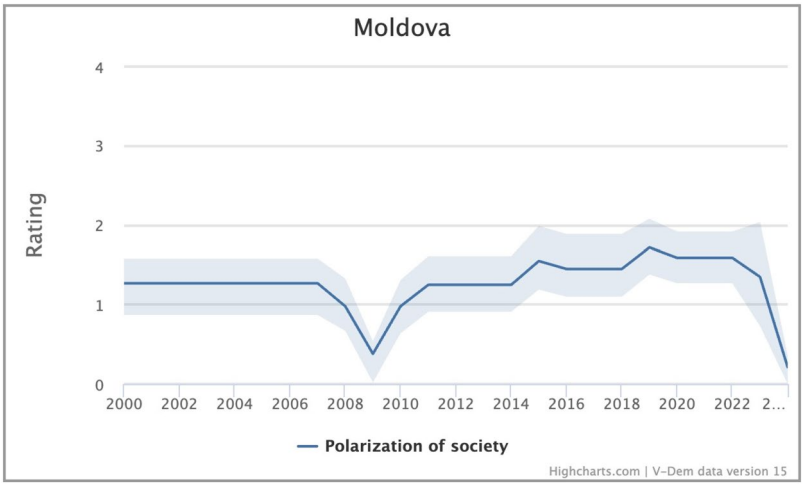

Figure 3. Socio-political polarisation (ideological) in Moldova, 2000–2024 (Coppedge et al., 2025a).

indicating that people with opposing political views are hostile to each other. Since 1990 most of the time the polarisation index in Moldova is oscillating around 2, which indicates that supporters of rival political camps are just as likely to treat each other cordially as they are to behave antagonistically. The heightened levels of polarisation in Moldova correspond to important domestic events, especially elections, as well as certain geopolitical crises: the collapse of the USSR in 1991 and Moldova's independence; communist party securing majority in 2001; Voronin's resignation and the beginning of the liberal pro-European leadership in 2009; Dodon's victory in 2016; the Ukrainian crisis in 2022 and electoral campaign before 2024 presidential elections.

Figure 3 represents another measure of polarisation of society, which reflects 'the extent to which … differences in opinions result in major clashes of views and polarisation or, alternatively, whether there is general agreement on the general direction this society should

develop'. This index is more reflective of the bimodal ideological polarisation (Esteban and Ray 1994). The changes in this index over time echo the dynamics of the affective polarisation index presented in Figure 2, which serves as a cross-validation of the used measures. Lower numbers for polarisation of society index correspond to higher polarisation. Moldova's index of the polarisation of society most of the time (for which data are available) is between 1 and 2, which allows us to categorise Moldova as a country with moderate level of polarisation, implying 'moderate' or 'some' clashes of views.

The geographic aspect is particularly salient for a country like Moldova that has pockets of spatially concentrated ethnic minorities (Gagauz, Bulgarians) and historically has experienced problems with territorial integrity during the Transnistrian conflict. Marandici (2022) demonstrates the highly localised and geographically uneven nature of Soviet nostalgia in Moldova—an important determinant of voting intentions and political ideology.

Recent research has underscored that the geographical polarisation is not just an isolated phenomenon; instead, the geographical dimension lies in the heart of the broader process of ideological polarisation. According to Johnston, Manley, and Jones (2016), although ideological and geographic polarisation are separate concepts, increasing geographical polarisation in the US presidential vote coincides with the ideological polarisation.

Moreover, the populist wave in developed democracies since the mid-2010s has been described as 'the revenge of places that don't matter' (Rodríguez-Pose 2018). Intensified urban-rural political divide has been faulted for fuelling political polarisation (Brown and Mettler 2024). In addition, polarisation has activated historical regional divisions within countries, such as the Partitions of Poland (Herodowicz et al. 2021) and the East-West divide in Germany (Greve, Fritsch, and Wyrwich 2023). Since the support for political forces tends to vary from place to place due to differences in demographic composition as well as idiosyncratic factors, intensification of political cleavages may lead to increased geographic polarisation as well.

To calculate indices of geographic polarisation, we consider the voting results from the first and second rounds of 2016, 2020, and 2024 presidential elections—the three direct presidential elections since their reinstatement in 2016. While examining the first-round results takes into account the diverse political landscape of a multiparty democracy, focusing on runoffs also has substantial advantages: since only two candidates take part in the second round, we are able to ignore issues, such as strategic voting and coalition building. In addition, the partisan landscape and even personalities of the leading candidates remained relatively stable between 2016 and 2024; Maia Sandu was on the ballot in all three runoffs, and Igor Dodon in two of them (see Section on Moldova's historical background for detailed description of electoral outcomes).

We compile precinct-level voting records from the Central Electoral Commission of Moldova for the period 2016–2024. Because participation from abroad and voting in precincts designated for Transnistrian voters may hinge on precinct-specific conditions—such as availability, accessibility, opening hours, and other idiosyncratic considerations—we exclude those observations. This restriction leaves only precincts in which Moldovan residents could cast ballots (Ministry of Foreign Affairs and European Integration of the Republic of Moldova 2024). Although this exclusion necessarily narrows the scope of generalisability, it also provides a safeguard against arbitrary alterations to electoral procedures—for instance, the sharp reduction of polling places in Russia during the 2024 presidential elections. Moreover, it enables a more direct focus on the central question of whether Moldovans can

vote peacefully alongside compatriots holding opposing views within the country. The resulting sample size varies from 1958 observations in 2024 to 1979 in 2016 (data available upon request).

We calculate two indices—the index of dissimilarity and the Theil's *H*. The index of dissimilarity can only be calculated for two groups (e.g. voters of each candidate in runoff elections) and can be interpreted as a proportion of population that would have to relocate in order to achieve the completely uniform distribution of votes for politicians across spatial units (precincts) and calculated as follows (Sakoda 1981):

$$D = \sum_{i=1}^{N} \left| \frac{a_i}{A} - \frac{b_i}{B} \right|$$

Where a_i and b_i are group's *a* and *b* respective populations in the unit *i*, *A* and *B* are the total groups populations, and *N* is the number of units. The index ultimately tells us how similar voting patterns are across precincts with higher numbers corresponding to greater dissimilarity, or spatial segregation. The intuition is the following: if a large share of the population must relocate in order for the votes to be evenly distributed, then the population is currently highly divided spatially.

Theil's *H* is another standard measure of multigroup geographic polarisation, used to analyse, inter alia, racial segregation (Hinrichs 2024). Its interpretation is less intuitive, but higher values correspond to greater segregation. Theil's *H* attains a value of 0 in the case of complete absence of segregation (i.e. voting for each party is the same across all the spatial units), and the value of 1 when the groups are completely segregated. It is a population-weighted entropy-based measure with *N* localities and *K* parties, which is calculated as follows:

$$H = \sum_{i=1}^{N} w_i \left(\frac{E - E_i}{E} \right)$$

Where w_i are population weights.

E is the overall entropy defined as follows:

$$E = -\sum_{k=1}^{K} p_k \ln p_k$$

Where p_k is the party *k*'s total vote share.

E_i is a unit-level entropy measure calculated analogously.

Table 1 presents the overall dynamics of the two measures of geographic polarisation. Theil's *H* for the first round voting outcomes are relatively low. Theil's *H* increased between 2016 and 2020, likely due to relatively good showing of 'third force' candidates with strong

Table 1. Geographic polarisation indices.

	1st round	2nd round	
Election year	Theil's H	Index of Dissimilarity	Theil's H
2016	0.099	0.372	0.173
2020	0.121	0.358	0.166
2024	0.092	0.344	0.154

regional bases, Renato Usatîi (Our Party) in and around Bălți, and Violeta Ivanov (Shor Party) in Orhei. Geographic polarisation, however, subsided by 2024 along with increased margin of victory for Maia Sandu.

Theil's *H* for the second round outcomes are predictably higher due to the more polarising nature of the runoff elections. Geographic polarisation, however, tends to decrease throughout the period. Dissimilarity index has similar dynamics: 34.4% of Moldovan voters in 2024, 35.8% in 2020, and 37.2% in 2016 needed to relocate in order to reach an even distribution of votes across precincts. We interpret it as a relatively high level of geographic polarisation, which has been slowly decreasing. While identifying the exact causes of these dynamics is beyond the scope of our research, we would like to point relatively low prominence of urban-rural divide in Moldova: as Marandici (2022) demonstrates, the starkest contrasts in the level of support for hypothetical Soviet restoration are between rural districts in various parts of Moldova rather than between the cities and the countryside.

Figure 4 presents kernel density estimation of the distribution of a PAS candidate winning margin across precincts using centred margin scores to account for year-to-year shifts in partisan strength (for raw scores see Figure A1 in the Supplemental Appendix). An important limitation of our analysis is that we do not make attempts to attribute these changes to switching parties or differential turnout; instead, we take a more descriptive path documenting how the distribution of margins of victory changed over time.

The figures demonstrate the following tendency: vote margin distribution became more concentrated near the mean value in 2020 and 2024. We do not see any evidence of formation of two distinct geographic camps; rather, the exposure towards the alternative political view remains relatively high. Our calculations indicate that, throughout 2016–2024, 70 to 75% of eligible voters were registered in the precincts where each presidential candidate in the second round received at least 25% votes. The clear exceptions, however, are the cluster of precincts with almost universal Socialist support. These precincts are located predominantly in the ethnic minorities-dominated districts of Gagauzia and Taraclia. The share of spatially concentrated ethnic minorities in the Moldovan electorate, however, is limited: according

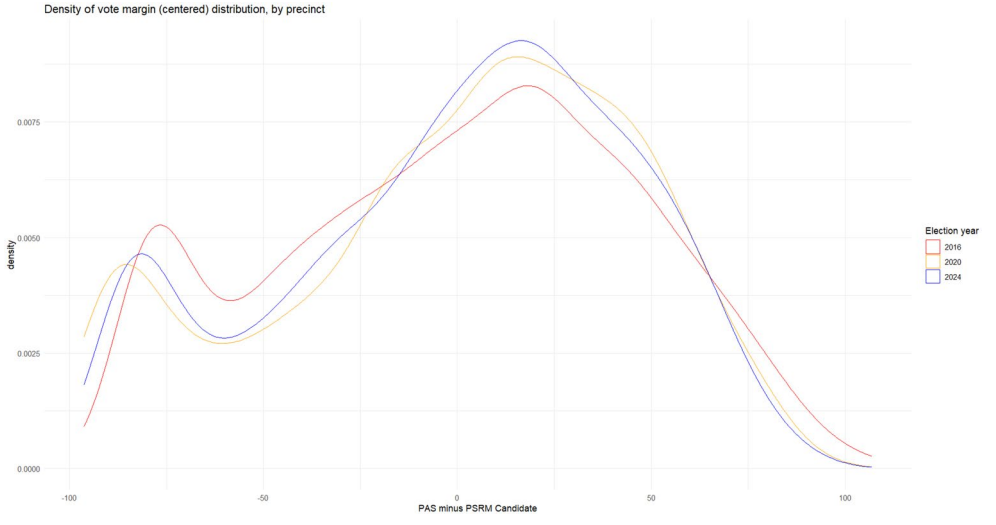

Figure 4. Density of vote margin (centred) distribution, by precinct.

to the results of the 2024 census, 4% of Moldovan population identify as Gagauz, and 1.6% as Bulgarian (National Bureau of Statistics of the Republic of Moldova, 2025). Their role in close elections, nevertheless, might be decisive.

To further corroborate our findings, we construct a panel at the level of districts – 35 first-level administrative-territorial divisions. In Figure 5(a,b) we contrast PAS margin of victory at the district level with the shift from PAS to PSRM in the next elections. Our intuition is as follows: under geographical polarisation, we would expect that pro-PAS districts shift further towards PAS, while pro-PSRM districts further towards PSRM. Our analysis, however, shows that this is not the case: 2016 and 2020 vote margins have very little predictive power with respect to the next election shift (R-squared is consistently less than 0.1, and *p*-value is greater than 0.05).

The analysis in this section concludes that by most indicators of polarisation—ideological, affective, and geographic—Moldova is indeed a moderately polarised country. This is consistent with our theoretical account of the complex nature of Moldova's polarising cleavages. Curiously, while levels of ideological and affective polarisation are currently increasing, geographic polarisation is not on the rise in Moldova, and a significant proportion of Moldovans have high and stable exposure to supporters of another political ideology in their neighbourhoods. One possible reason could be that ideological differences and negative affect are more responsive to the contemporary geopolitical and domestic conditions, while the phenomenon of geographic polarisation—if it happens—takes time. However, this question warrants further empirical exploration.

How polarisation simultaneously prevents both democracy and autocracy in Moldova

The previous section documents moderate-to-high levels of socio-political, affective, and geographic polarisation in Moldova. In this section we shed light on how polarisation is intertwined with democratisation and democratic backsliding in the Moldovan context.

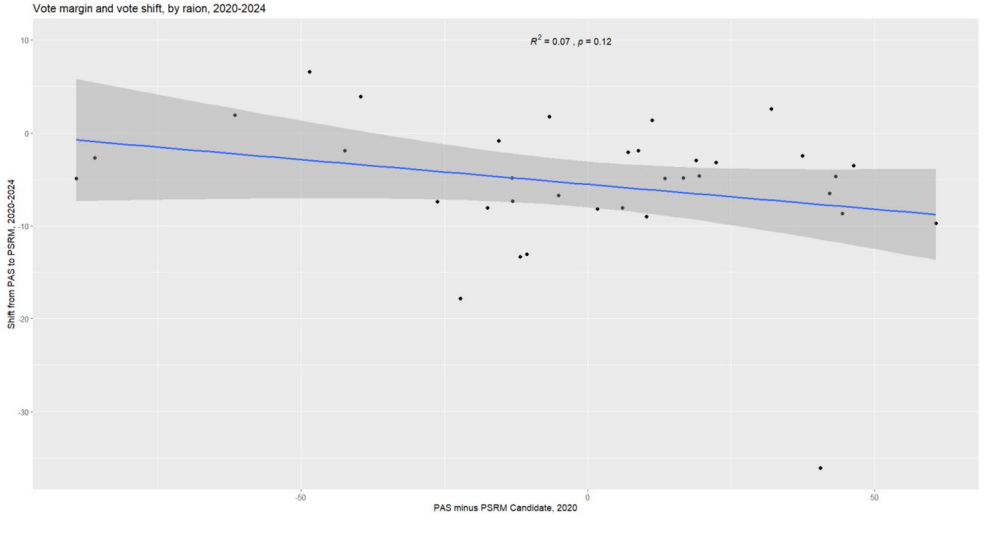

Figure 5. (a) Vote margin and vote shift, by raion, 2020–2024. (b) Vote margin and vote shift, by raion, 2016–2020.

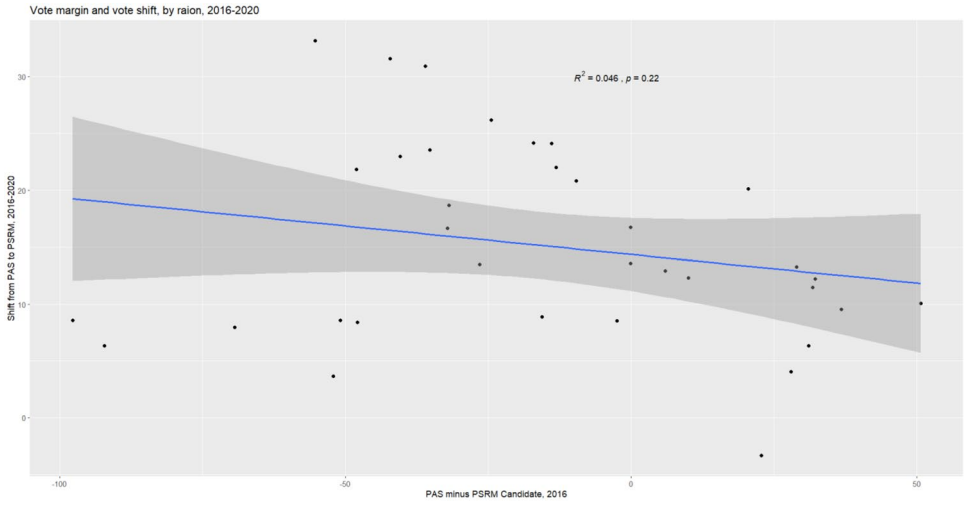

Figure 5. Continued.

First, as predicted by theory, citizens in all socio-political camps become willing to sacrifice democratic principles—such as minority rights and respect for constitutional rules—in order to keep opposition out of power, even though most endorse democracy as a whole and Moldova's eventual accession to the EU. Moreover, political elites—both in government and opposition—actively fuel this process by moving towards ideological extremes, often resorting to uncompromising rhetoric, and sometimes taking anti-democratic actions that further divide society. The digital media environment amplifies such cues. Curiously, Moldova also confirms that causality can run in the opposite direction: incumbent attacks on democracy—through executive aggrandisement, repression of media and dissent, or patronage—deepen polarisation, because government critics highlight democratic erosion, while supporters dismiss these concerns as biased. Anti-democratic behaviour by opposition actors can similarly heighten negative affect and polarisation. Most importantly, and quite counter-intuitively to the conventional wisdom, socio-political polarisation in Moldova also prevents full-blown autocratisation in the Moldovan politics.

We now trace the trajectory of a liberal democracy index in Moldova, which corresponds to the maximalist concept of democracy, rather than merely electoral, and emphasises 'constitutionally protected civil liberties, strong rule of law, an independent judiciary, and effective checks and balances that, together, limit the exercise of executive power' (Coppedge et al., 2025a, 2025b; Pemstein et al. 2025). This conception is better suited for studying democratic backsliding because independent judiciary and civil freedoms often represent two spheres with most violations when a country's democracy starts eroding (Bermeo 2016). Right after independence and the 1992 Transnistrian conflict, liberal democracy in Moldova was low–moderate and polarisation was already palpable (Figure 6). As democracy score inched upward, the level of political polarisation drifted downward. However, around 1998 the level of political polarisation rose, which was followed by democratic backsliding under communist President Voronin. This is consistent with the theoretical claim that political polarisation precedes democratic backsliding.

The economic and political hardships in the 1990s caused a high level of popular dissatisfaction with the political stalemate, disappointment in the market economy and in

democratic reforms, which prompted the formation of the new Moldovan Communist Party—PCRM (The Party of Communists of the Republic of Moldova). The party promised people a return to good old times, such as stability, reversal of privatisation, price controls, and free universal healthcare. It secured a majority in the parliament and elected communist President Voronin. During his first term in office, communist President Voronin (from 2001 to 2009) adopted several measures that strengthened ties with Russia. These actions alone were not illegitimate, but they were accompanied by anti-democratic practices, such as aggrandising executive power, misuse of office for private gains, enhancing control over the judicial branch, and restricting freedom of the press (Quinlan 2004). The political leaders resorted to electoral manipulations, such as raising thresholds for parties and banning election blocs.

During the 2000s, the Communist leadership shifted from its originally pro-CIS orientation towards European integration, most probably in order to secure presidential office. They attempted to simultaneously pander to the European Union and maintain constructive relations with Moscow. However, Russia imposed economic sanctions that included embargoes on wine and fruit, which had a particularly harsh impact on the rural population. During the eight years of the communist governance under President Vladimir Voronin (2001–2009), Moldova experienced a paradoxical economic trajectory characterised by nominal growth, yet persistent structural failures. Anti-democratic actions, divisive rhetoric, and economic hardships are reflected in the drop of a democracy score in 2004–2005 and rising polarisation in 2005–2009 (Figure 6), which culminated with the contested April 2009 elections, mass protests, and the fall of the communist government. At the end of the day, Moldovans took to the street in sheer numbers—the so-called 'Twitter Revolution' (Marandici 2023), which contributed to the government overthrow. When protests unfolded, President Voronin resorted to a toxic and divisive rhetoric, calling the events 'an anti-constitutional coup' and organisers 'fascists intoxicated with hatred' (Barry 2009). The polarising rhetoric did not stop the revolution and people's dissatisfaction with lowering levels of democracy. This is consistent with the alternative theoretical view that democratic backsliding is endogenous to political polarisation: after democracy was in demise under Voronin, the society found itself

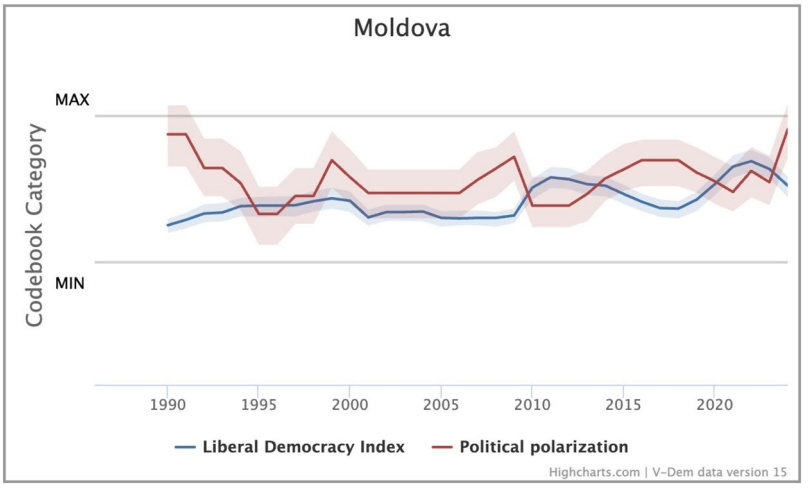

Figure 6. Liberal democracy index and political polarisation in Moldova, 1990–2024 (Coppedge et al., 2025a).

split between the PCRM and the new pro-European Alliance for European Integration increased.

New political movements characterised the period from 2009 to 2016. Disillusioned and tired from the monopolistic and clumsy communist government, Moldovans changed it and supported European integration. However, under the tripartite coalition government—the Liberals (PL), Liberal Democrats (PLDM) and Democrats (PDM)—people's hopes for shaking off communism and aligning with Europe were dashed. The resulting politics was a mix of money laundering, misappropriation of large financial entities, clientelism, cronyism, and nepotism in political and judicial appointments with only negative spill-overs to the population (Ciurea 2017). In 2014, Moldova signed the Association Agreement with the European Union, which was viewed as an important step in the European Union accession process. However, subsequent events—most notably several high-profile corruption scandals—overshadowed this cautious optimism. In 2014, as part of a staggering money-laundering operation known as the 'Laundromat' scheme, colossal sums of money ($20–80 billion)—an extraordinary amount for a small and impoverished state like Moldova—were illicitly transferred from Russia to Europe *via* Moldovan banks. In November 2014, an additional $1 billion—approximately 12% of Moldova's Gross Domestic Product—was siphoned from the country's three largest banks (Kroll 2017). These scandals led to the imprisonment of former Prime Minister and founder of Liberal Democratic Party of Moldova Vlad Filat (2009–2013) in 2015. Against this backdrop, ordinary Moldovans experienced serious economic hardships, including rising poverty rates and sharp increases in the prices of electricity (37%), gas (15%), and bread (15%) (Brett, Knott, and Popşoi 2015). These developments contributed to widespread public disillusionment with the government and triggered a shift in voter preferences towards opposition parties. Although the democracy score ticked upward as a reaction to peaceful power alternation in 2009, it soon flattened and declined due to this oligarchic capture (Figure 6).

During that time Igor Dodon, a former rising figure in the Communist Party, emerged as a prominent opposition figure, positioning himself as a champion of traditional values and closer ties to Russia. Dodon successfully leveraged public disillusionment with the pro-European establishment to command significant popular support as a leader of the Party of Socialists. Despite being enemies in public, Dodon and Vladimir Plahotniuc, Moldovan business magnate and the leader of the pro-European Democratic Party of Moldova, maintained cooperation behind the scenes. This tacit alliance was devised to preserve the existing power structure through staged political competition. As a result, in 2016, following a dubious procedure of constitutional changes and the return of the institution of direct presidential elections, Dodon won with 52% of the vote against Maia Sandu (Interview 3, Interview 5). However, Dodon's presidency was characterised by usurpation of power, systemic corruption and patronage, offering no benchmark for legitimacy (Marandici 2024; Interview 3). Under Dodon's presidency (2016–2020) the index of democracy steeply declined, while polarisation grew significantly (Figure 6). By 2020 Dodon's reputation collapsed due to corruption allegations and mishandling of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In 2020, Maia Sandu defeated Dodon by 57.72–42.28%, reversing the 2016 electoral results, by positioning herself as a modern, internationally experienced leader untainted by Moldova's corruption networks. Sandu's Harvard education and World Bank background helped her gain recognition and attract resources from the West. Her Party of Action and

Solidarity (PAS) gained a parliamentary majority in 2021, emphasising uniting, rather than divisive issues, such as modernisation, social responsibility, anti-corruption, administrative and judicial reform, and accelerated European Union integration. All in all, there is a discernible trend: when politicians keep stringing voters along with empty promises, while simultaneously destroying economy and stealing democracy, Moldovans choose to change government and restore their albeit flawed democracy.

Sandu's victory in 2020 united Moldovans and signalled strong consensus about the democratic future, but soon democracy index started to decline, while political polarisation is on the rise once again (Figure 6). Although Sandu was trying to unite Moldovans with anti-corruption, rule of law and EU accession agenda, a lot of government actions are perceived by opposition as directed against minorities and thus anti-democratic. According to the Venice Commission (2021), authoritarian features are especially evident in the violation of minority rights, opaque electoral campaign practices and judicial dismissals (Venice Commission 2021). For example, in 2023 Chisinau toughened its stance towards Gagauzia and Transnistria. The government made separatism subject to criminal prosecution. Many local politicians from breakaway regions, as well as Western diplomats, criticised the new law as being polarising, anti-democratic, and even illegal (ODIHR 2023; Interview 7). The efforts to remove the chief prosecutor and the head of the anti-corruption procuratorate raise questions about their justification. (European Court of Human Rights, 2023; Venice Commission 2021; Interview 1; Interview 9; Interview 10). The opposition politicians often behave in a disturbing anti-democratic manner, which further fuels polarisation (Interview 8). For example, oligarch and opposition figure Ilan Shor was involved in vote buying and allegedly helped boost anti-EU and anti-Sandu votes; a leaked fake-list of his alleged supporters later triggered a wave of online abuse. Although there are ongoing debates about the scale of corruption, there is little doubt that anti-democratic practices took place, and the 'Shor's network' mobilised and bribed voters (Eșanu et al. 2022). On the other hand, during the 2023 municipal elections, Shor-linked candidates were disqualified without due process by the Commission for Exceptional Situations, a body with no electoral mandate (OSCE, 2023). Moreover, the government refused to admit into the Cabinet a democratically elected governor of the Gagauzian autonomy, the so-called 'Bashkan', due to connections with Russia. In August 2025, she was jailed on charges of corruption and illegal funding of the now banned party. The government frames such actions as a necessary and inevitable response to Russia-backed interference into Moldovan politics, while the opposition views them as overt violations of the minorities' rights.

Domestic and international forces on both political sides utilise media to their advantage. Left-wing media outlets not only appeal to the Soviet nostalgia, but also undermine credibility of and trust in pro-European leaders, democratic institutions, and liberal values (Simanschi 2025). After the Moldovan government banned Russian TV channels in 2022-2023, the main battleground for informational warfare moved to social media (e.g. Dolghi, Mărcuț, and Polgár 2025). Overall, media restrictions from both government and opposition distort the information environment and impact media access for the population (OSCE, 2025), which increases chances of echo chambers and greater polarisation (Levy 2021). Moldovan think tanks estimate that disinformation efforts cost about 1–2% of Moldova's GDP (Reuters 2025; Interview 2). The detrimental impact is further compounded by the fact that both PAS and opposition factions, including Shor's proxies, the Socialist Party (PSRM), and the

Communist Party, exploit societal divisions through polarising narratives, portraying rivals as existential threats.

It is not surprising that the above-described actions by both government and opposition and especially their perception by ordinary Moldovans decreased people's trust in political parties and institutions to an all-time low (IMAS, 2025) and increased socio-political polarisation. In 2024 presidential elections the margin of Sandu's victory over her main challenger Stoianoglo was narrower (10.7%) than in 2020 over Dodon (15.4%). Consistent with the low trust in political institutions and parties, the 2025 polls about elections did not bode well for any political forces.

Curiously, despite the gloomy forecasts, the September 2025 parliamentary elections in Moldova reproduced a pro-European legislature, albeit fragmented. PAS remained the dominant force with 50.2% of the vote and 55 of 101 seats, which is enough for a single-party majority government, although down from its 63 seats in 2021. The left-wing Patriotic Bloc emerged as the main opposition with 24.2% and 26 seats. There is hope for a more unified and democratic development of Moldova in the near future, which is yet to be reflected in the polarisation and democratisation indexes.

Conclusion

Polarisation is tearing at the seams of democracies and autocracies across the world. In this paper, we shed light on the sources and consequences of the heightened socio-political polarisation in Moldova. First, we demonstrate that ordinary Moldovans are much less polarised along the East-West axis than is usually assumed. According to different surveys, most Moldovans, albeit a fluctuating number, support eventual EU integration, and ethno-linguistic and cultural differences do not completely overlap with political choices. Yet, the referendum about including EU aspirations into the Constitution passed with a razor-thin margin and pro-EU candidates and parties rarely win in a landslide, signalling high degree of polarisation. We propose three major explanations for this conundrum: salience of socio-economic issues that often trump geopolitical divisions, instigation by government, opposition, and foreign powers, and strong anti-incumbent sentiments manifesting in protest voting. Empirically, we traced the existing indexes of ideological and affective polarisation that confirm moderate levels of polarisation in Moldova with certain spikes that correspond to geopolitical triggers and salient domestic events, such as elections or corruption scandals. We also calculated two geographic polarisation indices at the precinct level (excluding a breakaway region of Transnistria) and demonstrated that geographic polarisation is lower than expected, and that there is a decreasing tendency. Moldovans steadily demonstrate their readiness to peacefully coexist with each other. It is often politicians who masterfully exploit the existing ethno-linguistic and geopolitical cleavages and strategically engage in divisive rhetoric. Their black-and-white narratives are amplified by media outlets, foreign countries and organisations.

Finally, Moldova demonstrates a peculiar interplay between socio-political polarisation and democratic backsliding. Conventional wisdom predicts that polarisation increases the stakes of victory to the point when people trade off their democratic allegiance for partisan candidates. Moreover, anti-democratic actions by incumbents and opposition figures further ignite socio-political and affective polarisation. Paradoxically, Moldovans partially defy this trend: they listen to politicians' polarising rhetoric up to a point after which they start judging

politicians by real deeds—economy, social benefits, responsibility etc. Moldovans do not blindly support a candidate on the basis of pro-European versus pro-Russian labels, as often misrepresented by the media. At the end of the day, socio-political polarisation in Moldova prevents authoritarianism.

What does the future hold? Is there a healing strategy for divided societies, such as Moldova? Although many scholars warn us that once countries become deeply polarised, there is no way back, the situation is different in Moldova. The remedial recipe is quite simple: politicians should find a unifying agenda and stop fanning the flames of polarisation by resorting to hate rhetoric, anti-democratic actions and corruption. Contemporary reforms in Moldova need government-led dialogue fostering inclusive citizenship and cultural diversity (Ohana 2007; Șupac 2024).

Ethical approval

The research used secondary data and non-identifiable expert interview data. The data were reported on an anonymous basis. IRB approval was not required.

Disclosure statement

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