

**Deputy Assistant Administrator Alexander Sokolowski Testimony before
the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Europe
“A Look at U.S. Policy in Georgia and Moldova Ahead of Their 2024 Elections”
July 23, 2024**

Chair Kean, Ranking Member Keating, and distinguished members of the Subcommittee on Europe, thank you for your invitation to speak today about USAID’s efforts to support democratic development across Georgia and Moldova. I welcome the opportunity to share information about USAID’s work to strengthen the foundations of freedom in these countries.

Georgia and Moldova have been two important U.S. partners seeking closer ties with the West for over thirty years. Since independence, despite being in an increasingly threatened and turbulent neighborhood, they have made remarkable progress and significant reforms. As a result of these efforts, in partnership with the United States, last December, we saw the opening of European Union (EU) accession talks with Moldova and the achievement of EU candidate status for Georgia, conditional on further democratic reforms.

Yet, in Georgia, we are now facing a moment of profound concern for the country’s future. Tens of thousands of patriotic Georgians have spoken out and protested on repeated occasions the ‘foreign influence’ law to protect and defend Georgia’s democracy and its hopes for European integration.

The recent passage of the foreign influence law is a step in the wrong direction that is threatening civil society and polarizing Georgia. This action, and other anti-democratic steps and rhetoric, stalled and could derail Georgia's hopes for EU membership and cause grave concerns about the future of Georgia's democracy. The passage of the 'foreign influence' law causes alarm among so many not just because it was based on a Russian law, which has greatly limited civil society there, but because the model of governance it represents – one of increasing distrust toward civil society and restriction of its activities.

U.S. support for Georgian democracy, and Georgia's impressive past accomplishments on this road, were built on the shared values of individual and societal freedoms, human rights, and a common vision of democratic governance, embracing a strong, active, and vibrant society in constant dialogue with government. We want to see Georgia adhere to these values and realize this vision. A first step in getting back toward this vision would be to repeal the law and seek to reset and renew the dialogue between civil society and the government.

The Georgian government's decision has also impacted U.S.-Georgian ties and the trajectory of our partnership. Given the gravity of the current situation, across agencies, we have also conducted a comprehensive review of bilateral cooperation between the United States and Georgia and our assistance to Georgia, and we have worked closely with our State Department colleagues on that effort.

Since 1992, USAID has provided approximately \$1.9 billion in assistance to Georgia to strengthen democratic institutions and governance, improve health and education, and promote inclusive economic development. Today, targeted U.S assistance to those institutions and organizations that are working towards a democratic Georgia and a Euro-Atlantic path has become all the more important.

Georgians will head to the polls in October to determine their country's future and the course of their democracy. USAID is supporting a robust, multifaceted set of programs to try to foster free and fair elections. This includes pre-election assessment missions; long-term and short-term international and domestic observation; support for transparent accountable election administration; independent media's coverage of the elections, and other efforts. As in past Georgian electoral cycles, and now more than ever, we believe that comprehensive and robust oversight from multiple sources will be crucial for ensuring the integrity of the electoral process and instilling public trust in these elections.

Turning to Moldova, the country has suffered greatly as a result of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine.

USAID has stepped up and pivoted programming in the immediate aftermath of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 to help address the refugee, the energy, and the economic crises that Moldova experienced as a direct result of Russia's military aggression against neighboring Ukraine. USAID has supported diversification of Moldova's energy sources

that has enabled Moldova to break away from its 30-year dependence on Russian energy supply. We continue to foster increased trade with the European market. With U.S. support, Moldova successfully shifted its trade toward Europe, so that now approximately 55 percent of its trade is with Europe.

Moldova is also a part of USAID's Democracy Delivers Initiative which works to surge support, resources, and attention to democratic countries to help them take advantage of windows of opportunity to implement reforms for their citizens.

Moldovans have made their intentions clear by seeking sustained sovereignty, strengthening their democracy, and integration with Europe. This year's presidential elections in Moldova will be another chance to reaffirm those choices and a crucial test for its democratic processes and institutions. USAID assistance has improved access to voting for all Moldovans and continues to strengthen transparency in the electoral process. USAID supports civil society to increase awareness about election processes, to monitor elections, to train judges on electoral legislation, and to improve the country's electoral code. We have helped modernize the Central Electoral Commission's information technology systems, strengthened oversight of political financing, promoted electoral education, and aligned electoral legislation to international standards. USAID also bolsters voter education and get-out-the-vote activities, and helps organize televised debates for citizens to hear candidate priorities ahead of elections.

USAID is also helping build resilience against cyber-attacks on Moldova's government data systems. In response to widespread cyber-attacks in the summer of 2022, for example, USAID promptly deployed experts to strengthen Moldova's cybersecurity capabilities. Additionally, USAID attracted private sector investments from Google and Cisco to stand-up the first ever Moldovan Cybersecurity Academy to teach cybersecurity basics to students, government, and businesses.

The coming months and years will be key tests for Moldova's democracy. We are intensifying our focus and increasing our support to help show that democracies like Moldova are delivering for their people. Thanks to steadfast support from Congress, USAID assistance to both Georgia and Moldova has demonstrated substantial results, catalyzing and consolidating fragile democratic gains in an increasingly threatened region. This October, the conduct and results of elections in Georgia and Moldova will help determine their further political and development paths and the prospects for further progress in the region.

Chair Kean and Ranking Member Keating, thank you again for the opportunity to discuss our efforts to strengthen the foundations of freedom, sovereignty, and prosperity in Georgia and Moldova. I look forward to your questions.