

MOLDOVA

Trade Union Monitor

May 2025

**FRIEDRICH
EBERT
STIFTUNG**

POLITICAL, ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL FRAMEWORK CONDITIONS

POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS

Politics in the Republic of Moldova in 2024 continued to be marked by the country's ambition to join the European Union, and increasingly, the domestic power struggle. This culminated in a successful referendum on enshrining the European Integration in the constitution, and the close-call reelection of Maia Sandu to the presidency in the fall of the year. The government led by Sandu's pro-European Party of Action and Solidarity (PAS) considers the opening of accession negotiations with the EU a major strategic achievement. However, the implementation of required reforms – particularly in the areas of justice and anti-corruption – remains sluggish and is hindered by structural and institutional weaknesses. While progress has been made on some EU benchmarks, observers criticize the lack of coherent political dialogue and the underperformance of state institutions.

Moldovan politics remain, for the time being up until parliamentary elections in September 2025, characterized by a strong concentration of power in the executive branch. The PAS parliamentary majority allows far-reaching political action, often without meaningful participation from opposition forces or civil society. Legislative transparency is limited, major reforms are rushed through and important changes are implemented last minute. This undermines public trust in the government and deepens political polarization.

Externally, Moldova maintains a firm position in support of Ukraine and has condemned Russia's aggression, which has further strained its relationship with Moscow. Pro-Russian parties – such as the Socialist-Communist bloc and the Renaissance Party – capitalize on the growing dissatisfaction of parts of the electorate, particularly in rural areas. The domestic political climate is polarized, and anti-European narratives are gaining traction. Moldova's European path remains vulnerable to internal instability and the government's ability to implement reforms effectively.

ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL SITUATION

Moldova's economic situation remains difficult. After deep recession in 2022 and modest recovery in 2023, economic growth has slowed significantly to 0,1 % in 2024. The meagre growth was driven by a strong rebound in agriculture due to favorable weather conditions. Other sectors such as industry and construction stagnate due to low investment, weak demand, and high uncertainty. Structural weaknesses – such as low productivity, lack of innovation, and limited capital access – continue to hamper development.

Although inflation has declined (from an average of 13 % in 2023 to around 5 % in 2024), consumer prices remain high and continue to reduce households' purchasing power. Household consumption fell in 2023, especially in the services sector, due to soaring energy prices. Central heating and gas prices rose sharply, putting additional pressure on families. The government's energy compensation program ("Help at the Meter") was revised for winter 2023/24, but reached significantly fewer beneficiaries due to stricter eligibility criteria.

The poverty rate remains high: about one-third of the population lives below the absolute poverty line, with significant rural-urban disparities (40 % vs. 17 %). The labor market is characterized by low participation (around 45 %), a growing skills mismatch, and ongoing emigration. The unemployment rate rose slightly to 3.8 %, with youth and women disproportionately affected. Informal employment is widespread – 17 % of the workforce lacks formal contracts. Demographic decline and population aging further exacerbate these trends, while public sector wages and working conditions fail to retain young professionals. Overall, Moldova remains a low-productivity economy vulnerable to external shocks and reliant on remittances and donor support.

TRADE UNION CONTEXT

The Moldovan trade union landscape continues to be dominated by the National Confederation of Trade Unions (CNSM),

which unites 24 sectoral federations and around 271,000 members. Despite its international affiliation (ETUC, ITUC, PERC) and selective achievements – such as securing a 25 % increase in the minimum wage to 5,000 MDL in 2024, followed by a further, though partial, increase to 5,500 MDL in 2025 – the overall influence of trade unions on public policy remains limited. Social dialogue is relatively functional at the national and sectoral levels, but often weak or absent at the enterprise level. Collective bargaining coverage is declining, especially in the private sector, where union representation is scarce.

Trade union membership continues to decline, and unions struggle to attract young members. Women make up 64 % of union members, but hold only 37 % of leadership positions. The unions’ organizational and societal power remains constrained by limited strategic orientation, public mistrust, and lack of internal renewal. While Moldova’s legal framework largely complies with ILO standards, practical implementation is inconsistent – especially in sectors with low employer organization or high informal employment.

TRADE UNIONS IN MOLDOVA – FACTS AND FIGURES

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

Until the demise of the Soviet Union, Moldovan trade unions were part of the all-Soviet labour unions system. The Soviet trade unions were regarded as a pillar of the party-state regime, being politically subordinated to and used by the state to exert control over workers and society. They were more of a state instrument than the genuine trade unions that are typical of market economies. In practical terms, Soviet trade unions were a giant bureaucratic machine in the service of the Communist Party, which were in charge of collecting membership fees and organising members’ lives around their places of employment, such as housing, transport to and from the workplace, holidays, childcare, canteens etc. Since the power to fix wages belonged exclusively to the state and, at the same time, employment was fully guaranteed, trade unions had no responsibilities with regard to collective bargaining or securing jobs, not to mention organizing strikes.

After Moldova gained independence in 1991, following the collapse of the Soviet Union, trade unions became independent organisations from the political and legal points of view. By default, they inherited a vast membership (~1.5 million people), an important collection of assets like sanatoriums, hotels

and holiday resorts, as well as a distinctively Soviet organizational culture. These assets soon led to corrupt behaviour on the part of some union leaders, resulting in illegal transactions and personal enrichment. As part of the transition process from a command to a post-socialist market economy, the unions had to deal with new challenges, particularly in regard to representing workers in collective bargaining. They were slow and not very efficient in taking over such roles as setting the price for labour and influencing the development of employee-friendly economic and social policies, for which they lacked both capacity and willingness. The latter was to some extent a result of their corrupt behaviour, and consequently political dependence. The Soviet legacy in terms of the traditional understanding of trade unions’ role also impeded the unions’ transformation into a genuine labour movement. The Moldovan state still retains the leading role in regulating the conditions of capital – labour relations, while trade unions have limited capacity and power to influence policies and the price of labour, despite the existing social dialogue platforms.

TRADE UNION LANDSCAPE

The trade union movement in Moldova has the following features in terms of the way the representation of employees’ interests is organised: (a) there is only one trade union confederation, which for a small country like Moldova seems to be a good solution to ensure a stronger representation of trade unions in the tripartite social dialogue between trade unions, employers and government; (b) there is centralisation of resources and bargaining power at the level of sectoral union federations, hence the increased importance of their work – which involves securing sectoral collective agreements; and (c) there is a relatively limited role of enterprise-level unions, which have low bargaining power. Consequently, collective agreements at the enterprise level most often only transpose the provisions of higher-level collective agreements, without offering additional rights and guarantees to employees.

The main body, the National Confederation of Trade Unions of Moldova (CNSM) unites on voluntary principles 24 national-branch union centres that bring together about 271,000 union members according to the data provided by the Confederation.

The CNSM comprised 24 sectoral unions in 2025 and 5,403 primary trade union organisations, suggesting that the unions lost around 100 primary organisations in the course of one year. Women have their own organisation within the CNSM, as do the youth.

Table 1
Main trade union confederations in Moldova

Confederation	Chair/Deputy Chair	Members	International Memberships
National Confederation of Trade Unions of Moldova (Confederația Națională a Sindicatelor din Moldova, CNSM)	Igor Zubcu, Chair Deputies: Sergiu Sainciuc, Lilia Frant	270,832 (2024, 2022: 330,000)	ITUC (since 2010), ETUC (since 2022)

Table 2

Main sector trade unions in Moldova

Sector Trade Unions	Confederation	Chair/Deputy Chair	Members	International Memberships
Trade Union Federation of Education and Science of the Republic of Moldova (Federația Sindicală a Educației și Științei din Republica Moldova, FSES)	CNSM	Ghenadie Donos	2024: 101,069 (2022: 106,277)	IE, ETUCE
Trade Union Federation "Health" of Moldova (Federația Sindicală "Sănătatea" din Moldova)	CNSM	Igor Zubcu	2024: 39,685 (2022: 37,028)	PSI, EPSU
Federation of Public Service Employees' Unions of the Republic of Moldova (Federația Sindicatelor Angajaților din Serviciile Publice din Republica Moldova SINDASP)	CNSM	Vlad Canțir	2024: 16,412 (2022: 27,951)	PSI, EPSU
National Federation of Agricultural and Food Trade Unions (Federația Națională a Sindicatelor din Agricultură și Alimentație "AGRO-INDSIND")	CNSM	Vasile Mămăligă	2024: 12,590 (2022: 34,069)	EFFAT, IUF

The chairperson, Igor Zubcu, and the two vice-chairpersons, Sergiu Sainciuc and Lilia Frant, form the CNSM leadership. The CNSM has been a member of the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) since February 2010 and also a member of the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) since October 2022. CNSM congresses, which are held every five years, elect the chairperson, members of the council and executive committees. They decide on the duties of the statutory organs and the programmes they are supposed to follow. The last congress took place in June 2022 with Igor Zubcu being re-elected as the chairperson of the CNSM. In 2023 at the 5th PERC General Assembly, Zubcu was also elected as the president of the Pan-European Regional Council of the International Trade Union Confederation (PERC). This appointment contributed to the consolidation of the position of the trade union movement from the Republic of Moldova on the international level.

Moldovan unions' membership has experienced a dramatic decline over the past three decades, from 1.5 million in 1993, to 568,375 in 2007, 397,536 in 2015, 330,000 in 2021, and 270,832 in 2024 according to data provided by the unions. This is mainly due to the general decline in the number of employees in Moldova, continuous out-migration, and members' withdrawal from unions as a result of unions' low efficiency and the public distrust towards them. Women accounted for 64 % of the membership in 2023, while the share of women's representation in the CNSM's decision-making bodies was only 37 %. In 2023, the trade union density was assessed at 42 % of employees and 19 % out of all employed population, significantly higher than the OECD average of 16 % for employees. Though the data shows a relatively stable situation, interviews with unions indicate several alarming signals: very low unionization in the private sector, an accelerated decline in unionization in some sectors (which makes it difficult for some unions to survive, forcing them to merge), a

decrease in the number of collective labour agreements (CLAs), and blockages in the functioning of social dialogue.

TRADE UNIONS AND THEIR CORE TASKS

Key legislation governing trade union rights and the social dialogue are Article 42 of the Constitution, the Law on Government, the Unions Law, the Employers Law, the Law on the Organisation and Functioning of the National Commission for Consultations and Collective Bargaining and of the Commissions for Collective Consultations and Collective Bargaining at sectoral and territorial level, as well as the Labour Code. Moldova's legislation on trade unions largely complies with the ILO standards on freedom of association. The Moldovan Government has ratified to this date 44 ILO conventions and one protocol, with two conventions having been rejected.

In their working environment, trade unions are – in theory – independent and can freely organize their activities, having also the right to strike. However, there are restrictions in the case of employees working in areas related to health care, energy and water supply, telecommunications, air traffic, the defence system, public and legal order, as well as some categories of public service employees. One of the main difficulties is the insufficient representation of employers' associations, which are missing in many sectors. Weak employers' representation is also characteristic at the enterprise level, where it matches the poor capacity and low bargaining power of employees' representatives.

In Moldova, the organisation of employees has two legally recognised forms: unions and elected representatives of employees. In practice, only unions exist. Social dialogue in Moldova takes place at three related but still distinct levels: national, sectoral and at the enterprise level. Due to the consolidation and centralisation of resources and skills, trade unions are

especially active at the national and sectoral levels, where there is a certain parity of industrial relations, while at the enterprise level the balance in the employer–union relationship is often biased in favour of employers. The social dialogue at the national and sectoral levels, is usually tripartite, which provides a central role for the government and sectoral ministries. This situation has often been a source of blockages as political crises and changes in government make the tripartite dialogue extremely difficult – and even inexistent at times.

At the national level, the National Commission for Consultation and Collective Bargaining (NCCCB) brings together representatives of the government, trade unions (CNSM), and employers (CNPM) in a tripartite format. This body negotiates and concludes national-level collective agreements on issues including wages, working hours, rest periods, social protections, and labour rights. As of 2024, 21 national-level collective agreements have been finalized, and 18 NCCCB sessions were held between 2022 and 2024. At the branch level, commissions for consultations and collective bargaining are more frequently established depending on the presence of central public authorities (ministries), national branch trade union centres, and employers' associations. These committees are typically tripartite, but if one of the partners is absent, they operate as bipartite. Currently, collective agreements are in place in 19 of the 24 national trade union centres.

At the territorial level, commissions for consultations and collective bargaining are established based on the administrative structure of the country's 32 districts. These commissions are tripartite, involving territorial structures of trade unions, territorial structures of employers (or the largest private economic units), and local public administration. Collective agreements are concluded at the territorial level, with current agreements in 9 districts, indicating that tripartite social dialogue at this level remains modestly developed.

At the level of economic units (institutions, organizations, and enterprises), "employer–employee" social dialogue committees are set up on a bipartite basis, with equal representation from employers and union/employee representatives. Collective labour agreements are concluded at the unit level, with approximately 1,000 to 1,100 agreements (new or amended) concluded annually. According to national trade union centres, there were 4,143 collective agreements in force in 2022. Broadly, employers and employees often lack a culture of dialogue, as well as transparent and effective procedures for information and consultation, and for preventing and resolving workplace conflicts and grievances. The low representation of employers' organizations in some sectors and of trade unions in private enterprises complicates collective bargaining at this level.

At the bilateral level, there have been some interactions; for instance, the Covid-19 pandemic crisis enhanced the interface between trade unions and authorities. The CNSM and CNPM (National Confederation of Employers of the Republic Moldova) jointly sought state funding for technical unemployment through a letter addressed to the Prime Minister. However, this initiative faced a passive response from the government, resulting in no action taken to fulfil their request.

The social partners have negotiated collective bargaining agreements stemming from the Labour Code of 2003, covering specific obligations. The application of these agreements is mixed, being implemented at the enterprise level in the private sector and at the sectoral level in the public sector. Collective bargaining coverage was estimated at 43 % in 2020, significantly above the OECD average of 32 % at that time. No more recent official figure is available, but according to 2025 trade union reports, the number of collective labour agreements (CLAs) has declined, and blockages in social dialogue have increased, particularly in the private sector. These developments are attributed to factors such as continued union membership decline, low employer representation, and widespread informal employment, which together suggest a likely decrease in collective bargaining coverage since 2020. In response, CNSM has proposed a national action plan to promote collective bargaining, aiming to improve coverage in line with EU Directive 2022/2041, which recommends coverage of at least 80 % of employees

TRADE UNIONS AND THEIR POLITICAL WEIGHT

After a sustained advocacy campaign by Moldovan trade unions, the national minimum wage increased to 5,000 MDL on 1 January 2024, marking a 25 % rise or an additional 1,000 MDL. Alongside this, the reference values used to calculate public sector wages were also adjusted, contributing to a 37 % increase in average public sector salaries between 2022 and 2024. Staff in public healthcare institutions saw a 25 % pay increase, and various new salary supplements were introduced for specific categories of public employees.

In 2024, the National Trade Union Confederation of Moldova (CNSM), jointly with sectoral trade unions, submitted detailed proposals to the Ministry of Finance to revise the Unified Salary System Law (no. 270/2018). These proposals aimed at ensuring a single reference value equivalent to the minimum wage, along with a comprehensive re-evaluation of job classifications in the public sector to restore equity and remove inconsistencies in salary grade assignments. CNSM insisted that salary increases should occur through real increases in base pay, not through the expansion of bonuses or allowances.

In parallel, CNSM proposed that the minimum wage be further increased to 6,000 MDL from 1 January 2025. This proposal was accepted by the National Confederation of Employers, and both organizations signed a joint statement submitted to the Government in support of this initiative. However, following tripartite consultations, the Government approved only a partial increase. As of 1 January 2025, the minimum wage was raised to just 5,500 MDL per month – significantly below the 6,000 MDL proposed by CNSM and its social partners.

To support this process, CNSM worked with the International Labour Organization (ILO) to commission an independent analysis of Moldova's wage system. This analysis concluded that to align with EU Directive 2022/2041 on adequate minimum wages, Moldova's minimum wage should reach 6,200 MDL in 2025, amounting to 38 % of the national average wage, with a target of 50 % by 2027.

Beyond wage advocacy, CNSM also advanced fiscal policy reforms to improve the financial well-being of workers. These efforts led to new tax deductions, including for union membership dues, health insurance, childcare costs (2,500 MDL/month per child), and education expenses. Furthermore, CNSM successfully opposed proposed changes that would have limited employer deductions for union-related expenses and preserved financial support for union activities.

In the private sector, CNSM advocated for improvements to wage-setting laws and proposed a bipartite national collective agreement to link minimum wages in the real economy to forecasted average wages. The union also worked with the Ministry of Labour to amend Government Decision no. 743/2002, aiming to clarify wage-setting rules and complexity coefficients.

CNSM additionally played a key role in combating informal employment. It initiated the national campaign “Trecem pe Alb” and contributed to the adoption of the 2024–2025 National Program for Reducing Undeclared Work, which includes measures such as the implementation of a national electronic employee registry and enhanced powers for the Labour Inspectorate.

Through these actions, CNSM not only sought to secure fair remuneration and decent work but also aimed to align Moldova’s labour standards with European norms while strengthening the role of collective bargaining and social dialogue in shaping national economic and labour policies.

Dan Marius Palihovici, Program Coordinator, FES Moldova

Felix Hett, Resident Representative, FES Moldova

CONTACT

Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung | Department Eastern Europe
Hiroshimastr. 28 | 10785 Berlin

Responsible:
Dr. Constantin Groll, Serbia/Montenegro, Ukraine,
Moldova, Trade Unions
constantin.groll@fes.de

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