Schweizerische Eidgenossenschaft   Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation SDC
Confédération suisse   Agenția Elvețiană pentru Dezvoltare și Cooperare
Confederazione Svizzera
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Terms of Reference
CALL FOR PROPOSAL: Assessment of Moldova's Civil Society and Mass-Media Sectors with the view of shaping further the Swiss support

1. Introduction

The Swiss Representation in Moldova (SR-M) intends to mandate a team of two experienced consultants (one international and one national) to conduct an assessment of the Moldovan civil society sector and mass-media, and their support needs. The services are solicited in the context of shaping Swiss supported interventions in the Governance domain under the upcoming Swiss Cooperation Program for Moldova 2025-2028. These terms of reference define the objectives, scope and requirements of the assessment, and outline the framework for the prospective consultancy.

2. Background

The Republic of Moldova is facing **structural challenges** in the political, economic and social spheres caused, among others, by demographic decline, corruption and low social cohesion. The Covid-19 pandemic, the war in neighbouring Ukraine, with the subsequent significant inflow of refugees and the energy crisis brought a cascade of shocks that affected the fragile economic and social security of the population. The government had to focus on both dealing with crises and keeping the pace of the initiated reforms to meet the expectations of the population for better living standards and the requirements for Moldova's accession to the EU. **Governance** related challenges persist and encompass, among others, the inconsistent application of transparency and accountability mechanisms and of human rights standards. Moreover, Moldova is affected by an insufficient level of mutual acceptance and integration across historical, political, and other divides.

In 2022, there were 15,538 registered non-profit organisations in Moldova, of which 25% were considered active. According to the USAID-funded Civil Society Organizations' (CSO) Sustainability Index[1], the overall **sustainability** of Moldovan CSOs has not changed over the last few years, reaching a score of 3.7 out of 7. Since 2023, there is a legal framework allowing companies to make tax-deductible donations and public institutions to provide non-reimbursable funding for CSO projects. The 2% designation mechanism[2] brings increased contributions to CSOs, yet with little effects on their financial sustainability. Despite some legal improvements regulating CSOs' financing, the dependence on donors' funding remains substantial. In 2022, Moldovan CSOs have obtained almost MDL 4.4 billion in revenues from economic activity, grants and other sources. Yet, 70% of CSOs' annual income comes from external donor grants. This gets CSOs more accountable to donors than to their constituents and beneficiaries. In the same time, CSOs struggle with their own internal governance and management systems. In terms of **service provision**, following the invasion of Russia in Ukraine in February 2022, Moldovan CSOs have shown a high capacity to mobilize and partner with public institutions, private entities and the donor community to provide rapid need-tailored response for refugees. However, this has not had a positive impact on the CSOs' service provision in the long run. Currently, contracting of CSOs' services by the state remains low due to bureaucratic and financial issues. Despite a demonstrated openness of public authorities to working with CSOs, some shortcomings in terms of the intensity and quality of cooperation still persist. In terms of **population trust**[3], the positive perceptions of CSOs reached a record of 30% of respondents in 2021, having declined again to 24% in the second half of 2022.

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[1] The CSO Sustainability Index is an analytical tool, developed in 73 countries, that addresses civil society progress and setbacks on seven key components (legal framework, organisational capacity, financial sustainability, advocacy, service delivery, sector infrastructure and public image of CSOs), assigning a score to each dimension on a scale from 1 to 7.

[2] Government regulation, adopted in 2016, which allows Moldovan taxpayers designate 2% of their income tax to benefit non-commercial organizations.

[3] Public Opinion Barometer, 2023.

In the Autonomous Territorial Unit of **Gagauzia**[4], there were 550 CSOs registered in 2020, of which 28% were active -- one of the highest ratios compared to other regions of Moldova. This is the result of the increased support to CSO development in the region over the last years. The majority of active CSOs are based in urban areas and act at community/regional level. Their main challenges are financial sustainability and maintaining human resources. The level of knowledge of Romanian and English languages is relatively low, which creates obstacles to local organizations to apply for donor funding and to participate in social dialogue at national level.

The situation of civil society and the legislative framework differ in the breakaway **Transnistrian region** (TN). CSOs' activities are tolerated in some fields (environment, education, health, sports, culture) and encouraged in others (social affairs, support to vulnerable people), but they remain difficult in fields related to human rights and media freedom. In 2020, there were 631 registered CSOs in TN, of which only 100 (under 16%) were active. 'Government organised non-governmental organisations" (GONGOs) are widely spread. The 'Law on NGOs', adopted by the de-facto authorities in 2018, forbids CSOs to conduct political activities and receive external funding for their implementation. Nevertheless, the development of civic initiatives on the left bank is progressing. The majority of CSOs are acting based on donors' support and are organized in thematic networks. The strongest ones have a double registration on both banks of the Nistru River, which increases their access to external funding.

Media freedom in Moldova is the highest among Eastern Partnership countries, its ranking having risen to the 28th place[5], a notable improvement by 63 places since 2019, despite persisting issues such as polarisation, oligarchic influence and monopolized advertisement market. The Audio-Visual Council and the public broadcaster TeleRadio Moldova company have reportedly undergone depo-liticization. While media remains one of Moldova's most trusted institutions in 2023 (41% of respondents having trust), it ranks below the Moldovan Orthodox Church (58%) and Local Public Authorities (56%) in trust levels. Media consumption patterns have started to change. In 2023, the internet overtook TV as the primary source of information, with 54% of Moldovans citing it as their first source of information, followed by TV (30%), radio (5%), and print media (1%). The most popular media outlets shifted from those mainly rebroadcasting content from the Russian Federation in 2019 to those producing local content in 2023. Media concentration and lack of ownership transparency, along with funding, remain the central obstacles to media pluralism. Excessive politicisation continues to divide Moldovan media into pro-Russian and pro-Western. The legal framework governing media improved thanks to the enforcement of new laws on audio-visual media services (2019), advertising (2022), counteracting disinformation and propaganda (2022) and on access to information (2023). **Disinformation and propaganda** remain a concern for Moldova. Fighting against them became a governmental priority from 2022 onwards, a shift from prior years, when primarily CSOs addressed the issues. Public authorities often resorted to punitive measures, e.g., withdrawing licences and applying fines. This has raised some concerns and critical reactions from civil society and human rights defenders. Accessing donors' funding has become a lifeline for most independent media; these funds constitute a substantial portion of their budgets. Local media is the most vulnerable. Only two-thirds of them established an online presence. Incidents of intimidation and harassment against journalists and media outlets declined over time; however, during crises and elections, such cases still occur, especially at local and regional levels.

Swiss support to Moldovan Civil Society & Mass-Media

Different types of **civil society organizations** (CSOs) are partners in many Swiss-supported projects in all three domains of cooperation of the Swiss Cooperation Programme in Moldova: health, (local) governance and economic development, as well as in humanitarian assistance interventions. They play an important role within Swiss-funded interventions driving national reforms and local

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[4] A southern region of Moldova, inhabited by a Turkic speaking Gagauz ethnic group, with a population of some 160.000 people.
[5] Reporters without Borders Media Freedom Index study, 2023.

development by demanding the respect of good-governance principles, defending the rights of right-holders, providing varied services and engaging communities. As well, Switzerland supports since 2017 the implementation of a dedicated, locally designed program promoting social inclusion through CSOs and their alliances. Targeting constituency-based CSOs (more than 250 CSOs in total), organized in thematic networks representing the interests of four vulnerable / excluded groups (Roma, persons with disabilities, elderly and youth), as well as local civic participation councils of CSOs in six Moldovan districts, the Swiss-funded intervention capacitated them to influence, from the perspective of inclusion and (gender) equality, decision and policy-making processes at national and local levels. As a result, CSOs has become more skilful and active in analysing policies, advocating for policy amendments, monitoring transparency of central and local public authorities, and an inclusive implementation of policies in the areas of social protection, health, education, employment, etc. The supported CSOs have also mobilized communities and created participation models promoting democratic practices for local development. Since 2022, the Swiss interventions have focused on capitalization, upscaling and sustainability of models and good practices. The approach shifted to improving the organizational and financial sustainability of the targeted CSOs and diversifying their mobilization and advocacy methods and tools, incl. digital ones.

Switzerland also supports two **media** CSOs to improve the access of vulnerable groups to information and platforms for the expression of their voices, as well as to incentivize media cover more and better human rights and inclusion topics. Different interventions, such as the amendment of the Journalist's Deontological Code, monitoring the media coverage of vulnerable groups' issues, competitions and awards for the best media products on human rights and inclusion, contribute to building media's accountability and consumers' demand for reliable, qualitative and accessible information of public interest. Efforts have been joined with other stakeholders, e.g., IT specialists, in developing and promoting innovative (incl. digital) tools to facilitate access to information and participation, and raise awareness on propaganda and 'fake news'.

In addition, Switzerland has provided direct support, through a Small Grants Program, to grassroots CSOs, cultural NGOs and independent media outlets with two overarching goals: (1) Foster peace and security, democracy and human rights; and, (2) Build trust and social cohesion, and a free and open society through culture and arts.

3. Goal and objectives of the assessment

This assessment is expected to provide strategic recommendations, entry points and relevant in-sights for the conceptualization of a potential continuation of support to the civil society sector and mass-media, which shall be well integrated into the framework of the upcoming Swiss Cooperation Program 2025-2028 for Moldova and aligned to the national development priorities as well as con-tribute to strengthen balanced and inclusive nation building.

The consultants will work closely with the National Program Officer (NPO) for Social Inclusion and with the Senior Regional Advisor on Peace, inclusive Governance and Nation Building, and will as-sist the SR-M with the following:

a) Better understanding the **dynamics** of Moldova's **civil society and mass-media sectors** as well as the existing **gaps, needs, and development opportunities** that could be addressed with Swiss support, and where Switzerland could bring an added value;

b) Defining a long-term **vision** and **scenarios for the Swiss support and its expected impact** over the sectors in the next six to eight years, and in identifying options for **priority fields of action** and **entry points;**

c) Providing an overview of the **sector stakeholders** and a basic **risk assessment**.

More specifically, the assessment will respond, among others, to the following questions:

	Guiding questions
Context and needs	• Given the present global, regional and local context, what are the possible trends/ scenarios for the evolution and the role of civil society organizations and independent media? What are the main lessons learnt from the civil society sector development over the last five years in light of ongoing reforms and support provided by development partners? What are the main lessons learned from the response to the recent crises? • What are the main gaps, needs, and opportunities for the development of Moldova's civil society and independent media sectors? • Who are the main strategic stakeholders that have an influence on developments (drivers and restrainers of change)? What are the main risks to be taken into account?
Swiss response to date (relevance, efficiency, effectiveness, sustainability, added value)	• Has the Swiss support been relevant, efficient, and effective? What are the potentials for scaling up and sustainability? • What was the main Swiss added value?
General strategic orientation for a potential new intervention	• How could Switzerland increase relevance, effectiveness and coherence of its support for Moldova's civil society and independent media? What aspects should be prioritized in the event of a new Swiss support to the sectors? • How could Switzerland integrate the development - humanitarian - peace-building nexus in its support to civil society and independent media? Particular attention should be given to the question of how Switzerland could use its comparative advantages to contribute to increasing the role of civil society and mass-media sectors in building social cohesion and peace-building. • What are the approaches, incl. business models, applicable in the sectors to support the independence (incl. from donors' agenda) and the financial sustainability of civil society organizations and mass-media outlets?
Policy Dialogue and donor coordination	• How should Switzerland strengthen its contribution to policy dialogue and donor coordination in the sectors? Who are the like-minded donors?
Transversal themes/issues (gender, inclusion, anti-corruption, digitalization)	• How responsive is the Moldovan civil society and mass-media sectors to environmental issues, gender equality and the inclusion of the left behind groups? How could Switzerland support the sectors in better addressing them? • Could the promotion of digitalization be an entry point for Switzerland in supporting the civil society and mass-media sectors? • How could Switzerland contribute to addressing corruption related issues through the support provided to the civil society and mass-media sectors?
Implementation modalities	• What modality(-ies) of funding and implementation would match the recommended/ identified fields of interventions and entry points?

	• What support modalities, e.g., support earmarked to specific projects, support earmarked to specific thematic areas, core support for the improvement of internal governance, or others, would bring the best results, incl. in terms of strengthening the sectors' resilience and professionalism? • Are there local or international organizations in the civil society and mass-media landscape that have a relevant activity portfolio and the needed capacities to act as implementing agencies/partners for a potential Swiss support, and who are these organizations?

4. The scope of work

This mandate, in terms of the **thematic frame**, will examine the civil society and independent mass-media from the following perspectives: (i) potential to contribute to social cohesion and peace building; (ii) internal governance and institutional resilience; (iii) influence on public sector reform processes; (iv) capacity of stakeholders resp. their alliances/networks to provide to grassroots organizations and civic initiatives resp. to their constituencies access to financial resources and expertise, and to support citizens in varied ways in actively participating in setting the public and political agenda. In addition, the mandate is expected to provide a snapshot of the **civil society and mass-media landscape** with its current evolution trends, nuances, and growing diversity.

Geographically, this mandate will assess the situation at national, district and local levels, including (as access to information permits) in the TN region, drawing special attention to areas where ethnic, national and linguistic minorities are predominant, e.g., Balti, Taraclia, Soroca, Gagauz region, as well considering the peculiarities of civil society and media stakeholders in urban and rural environments.

5. Methodology and approach

The assignment will include a desk review, exploratory work and collection of qualitative data through interviews during field trips or remotely (in case of potential travel restrictions), analysis of data and evidence, and reporting. The SR-M estimates that the overall assignment should be completed in a total of **maximum 40 working days**. The work plan (including a detailed time-table) will be discussed and agreed upon by the consultants and the SR-M, and will be included in the inception report.

Work methods shall include, but will not be limited to:

- **Desk review** of key documents: policy papers, strategies, recent studies and reports.
- Development of an **inception report** that will summarize the main findings of the desk review.
- **Presentation** of the inception report to the SR-M, including discussions on a shared understanding of the context and mandate, as well as on identified limitations and concerns of the consultancy.

  N.B.: *This will be an opportunity to clear up misunderstandings and/or ask for clarification on specific aspects, and for finetuning objectives, approaches or scope of the assignment.*

- **Field trips and meetings** in Chisinau and regions (incl. in the TN region, if possible) may include (i) visits to Swiss-funded projects for interviews with implementing partners and beneficiaries; interviews with relevant central (e.g., State Chancellery) and local authorities, regulatory institutions (Audio-Visual Council), international NGOs, UN Agencies, OSCE, Swedish Embassy, USAID, InterNews, etc., and relevant national and local civil society and mass-media entities (e.g., district participation councils, youth centres, hometown associations, Local Activity Groups, think-tanks and resource centres).

  N.B.: *In case field trips are not possible because of travel restrictions, these activities shall be adjusted to enable remote collection of information.*

- **Communication with the SR-M**, including:
- Regular exchanges with the NPO Social Inclusion, so that necessary adjustments to the assessment process are made in due time, and interesting issues and findings are discussed and co-analysed as soon as they are identified, and not only at times of reporting.
- **Briefing** with the SR-M team at the beginning of the mandate and **debriefing** on the main findings and recommendations at the end of the field mission.
- Preparation and submission of the **draft and final versions of the assessment report**.
  > **N.B.:** *The SR-M and the consultants may agree on other activities deemed important for accomplishing this mandate.*

The following indicative work plan gives an overview on the main assignment activities, estimation time and distribution of responsibilities between the consultants:

Activities	Workdays	
	International Consultant	National Consultant
Preparation		
• Desk review • Inception report development • Communication with the SR-M • Preparation of the field mission	6	8
Field work (main assessment)		
• Travel to and from Moldova for the international consultant • Briefing and debriefing with the SR-M • Field trips and interviews with stakeholders	9	7
Reporting		
• Draft assessment report development • Final assessment report development • Briefing and debriefing with SR-M	5	5
TOTAL	**20**	**20**

6. **Deliverables**
a. **Inception report** will summarize the main results and conclusions of the desk review of existing policy papers, strategies, reports on recent studies and assessments. In addition, it will include details on the adjusted objectives and the time schedule of the field trips. The inception report will contain relevant background information for the exploratory work in the field. It should not exceed 10 pages (excluding annexes).
b. **Briefing and debriefing meetings**
c. **Assessment report** will analyse and synthesise the collected information, evidence and data. The findings, conclusions and recommendations shall be based on proven evidence. The assessment report shall include the description of the used research methodologies. The **draft assessment report** will be submitted in accordance with the agreed time schedule, taking into account the comments received during the debriefing with the SR-M. The **final assessment report** will incorporate the feedback received from SR-M. The final report shall not exceed 25 pages (excluding executive summary and annexes).

- Excellent coordination, communication, and reporting skills.

The national consultant[6] will contribute with her/his expertise on the peculiarities of the local context; will work on the data collection and analysis, logistical aspects, and on reporting. She/he will organize and facilitate the meetings and interviews with relevant stakeholders. The national consultant shall meet the following requirements:
- Excellent knowledge of the Moldovan civil society and mass-media sectors;
- Be well connected to main stakeholders;
- Excellent analytical, interpersonal, and reporting skills;
- Fluency in English, Russian and Romanian.

Requirements for technical proposal

The following documents are requested for the application package:

A brief technical proposal (max. 5 pages) containing proposed approaches, methodology, work plan and timeline, activities and deliverables, a description of consultants' roles and responsibilities, and a budget for executing the assignment (template for the financial offer will be provided);

a) A work sample from a similar mandate carried out within the last five years;
b) Detailed CVs in English for both consultants.

The completed application shall be sent electronically to Natalia Cernat, at the address natalia.cernat@eda.admin.ch **no later than** on **30 June 2024**.

8. Logistical aspects

The international and the national consultants will be contracted by the SR-M who will take responsibility for all related costs of the mandate according to the agreed budget.

The SR-M will share (in electronic format) with the selected team of consultants all key documents available that are necessary for the assessment. The documents will be made available after the signature of the contracts.

Timeframe / Schedule

The assessment shall be conducted between **August and October 2024** and completed in a total of maximum **40 working days**. A more detailed timeframe and schedule will be developed by the consultants in cooperation with the SR-M. The final report, based on the SR-M's feedback, shall be submitted no later than on 30 October 2024.

Guido Beltrani
Director of Cooperation

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[6] The SR-M can help with identification and selection of the local consultant/resource person, if the International Consultant requires so.

The **final report** shall comprise the following chapters:

- Executive summary
- Background and rationale for the assessment
- Research methodology
- Analysis of the civil society and mass-media landscape, including gaps and needs
- Inputs for further strategic Swiss engagement with civil society and mass media, under the upcoming 2025-2028 Cooperation Program for Moldova. The inputs should focus on a retrospective assessment of the key results of the Swiss support so far; options and scenarios regarding possible new interventions; an overview of drivers and restrainers of change, risks and opportunities
- Conclusions and recommendations (potential entry points)
- List of reference publications
- List of abbreviations
- Annexes with additional information/data, e.g., qualitative data from interviews, e.g., the most significant citations; mapping of the main stakeholders; a tabular comparison of the main options and scenarios; possible Theory of Change for the Swiss support for civil society and mass media; etc.

N.B.: *All deliverables shall be written in English, using Arial font, size 11. The SR-M reserves the right to request changes in the structure of deliverables or the inclusion of additional information.*

7. Assessment team composition and required competencies

The assessment will be conducted by a team, consisting of one international consultant and one national consultant. The consultants are expected to submit their offers as a team.

The international consultant will have a primary role and the overall responsibility for the process and the results of the assignment. He/she shall:

- Coordinate the process of assessment.
- Study, collect and analyse information, evidence and data.
- Provide methodological guidance.
- Lead the meetings and field trips, prepare for the briefing and debriefing meetings with the SR-M.
- Coordinate with the national consultant.
- Assume responsibility for the quality of deliverables and results, incl. factual accurateness and quality of writing of the final versions of both the inception and the assessment report.
- Deliver presentations and stay in contact with the SR-M.

Requirements from the international consultant:

- Professional background, expertise and experience in the fields of sociology, civil society, mass-media, or in other relevant fields;
- Good knowledge of the policies of the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs / the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation in relevant areas, and of the general context of the Eastern European region and of Moldova;
- Proven experience in similar mandates;
- Excellent analytical and interpersonal skills;
- Fluency in spoken and written English; working command of local languages is an asset;