REQUEST FOR EXPRESSIONS OF INTEREST

Consulting services - “conducting research / survey on Moldova's image perception and awareness on selected foreign markets and develop the country branding strategy”

(MSME Competitiveness Project)

**REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA**

**MICRO, SMALL AND MEDIUM-SIZED ENTERPRISES COMPETITIVENESS PROJECT**

Sector: General industry and trade sector

IDA Credit No. 71740

IBRD Loan No. 94230

Project ID No. P177895

Reference No. MD-CEP- 474714-CS-CQS

The Republic of Moldova has received financing from the World Bank toward the cost of the Micro, Small and Medium-Sized Enterprise Competitiveness Project (MSME) and intends to apply part of the proceeds for consulting services.

The consulting services (“the Services”) include a bespoke research study, the findings of which will be analyzed to understand the familiarity, reputation, influence, and perceptions of Moldova in selected key markets, which will allow to set recommendations and benchmarks for Moldova’s nation brand strategy. On top, the objective is to address both the strengths and weaknesses of Moldova's current brand and create a unique and compelling narrative that capitalizes on Moldova’s strengths, thus enhancing Moldova's international reputation and attractiveness to investors, tourists, and partners. Findings will be identified based on answers about Moldova from the local audience and research on Moldova’s image internationally.

The assignment is expected to be implemented during the period September 2025 through March 2026, requiring an estimated level of effort of approximately 300 man-days.

The Terms of Reference (TOR) for the primary procurement stage for the assignment are attached to this request for expressions of interest*.*

The Project Implementation Unit of the MSME Competitiveness Project now invites eligible an experienced foreign specialized communication firm or a consortium of such firms (“Consultants”) to indicate their interest in providing the Services. Interested Consultants should provide information demonstrating that they have the required qualifications and relevant experience to perform the Services (required qualifications and experience of the firm, but not individual experts’ bio data).

The Consultant shall furnish documentary evidence (including information about the completed contracts and contact information of clients to whom similar services have been provided) to demonstrate that it meets the following experience requirements:

* Company’ proven experience in carrying out similar assignments by having at least 5 (five) years of experience in international communication, branding and media relations.
* Company’ demonstrated experience in brand strategy, with proven experience in working with different countries all over the world on development, planning and implementation of the country’ brand strategies.
* Company’ demonstrated experience in conducting field and market research, surveys, including carrying out sample-based surveys.
* Possess a portfolio of works that would prove professional excellence and prove professional capacity and previous successful experience of the company and staff with at least three similar successfully implemented assignments.
* Company’ proven ability to handle complex international communication campaigns and provide strategic inputs on topics related to the assignment.
* Has successful prior experience in implementation of donors’ and/or IFIs’ sponsored projects.
* Prior working experiences or familiarity with Moldovan and European markets will be an asset.

The selection criteria are:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **#** | **Criteria** | **Points** |
| 1. 1
 | Competence and experience in brand strategy, with proven experience in working with different countries all over the world on development, planning and implementation of country’ brand strategies. | 35 |
| 1. 2
 | Track record of similar assignments by having at least 5 (five) years of experience in international communication, branding and media relations as well as in conducting field and market research, surveys, including carrying out sample-based surveys. Prior working experiences or familiarity with Moldovan and European markets will be an asset | 30 |
| 1. 3
 | Demonstrated ability and experienced staff with at least three similar successfully implemented assignments as well as first-hand prior experience with implementation of complex international communication campaigns and branding. | 25 |
| 1. 4
 | Has successful prior experience in implementation of donors’ and/or IFIs’ sponsored projects | 10 |

The attention of interested Consultants is drawn to Section III, paragraphs, 3.14, 3.16, and 3.17 of the World Bank’s “Procurement Regulations for IPF Borrowers” November 2020 (“Procurement Regulations”), setting forth the World Bank’s policy on conflict of interest. A Consultant will be selected in accordance with the „Consultant’s Qualification-based Selection” method set out in the Procurement Regulations.

Consultants may associate with other firms to enhance their qualifications; but they should indicate clearly whether the association is in the form of a joint venture and/or a sub-consultancy. In the case of a joint venture, all the partners in the joint venture shall be jointly and severally liable for the entire contract, if selected.

The Expression of Interest shall clearly state the name of the Consultant (individual Firm, Joint Venture or sub-consultancy). The Consultant shall provide relevant references (assignment name, Client, time frame, the role of the firm (main Consultant/Partner in JV/sub-consultant, contract amount, tasks performed etc.) to confirm its experience and qualifications.

Further information can be obtained at the address below during office hours.

Expressions of interest must be delivered in a written form to the address below (in person, or by mail, or by e-mail) by **July 30**, **2025**, COB.

**Project Implementation Unit of the MSME Competitiveness Project**

**Attn. Mr. Aureliu Casian, Executive Director**

**180, Stefan cel Mare Ave., office 815, MD-2004, Chisinau, Republic of Moldova**

**Tel: + 373 22 296-723; + 373 22 296-724;**

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**web:** [www.uipac.md](http://www.uipac.md)

**TERMS OF REFERENCE**

**Consultancy services –** **conducting research / survey on Moldova's image perception and awareness on selected foreign markets and develop the country branding strategy**

**A. Introduction**

The Government of the Republic of Moldova (GoM) is pursuing a policy agenda to support export-led economic growth. In this regard, an improved business environment is essential to foster sustainable private sector growth. Significant regulatory and institutional weaknesses in the business environment have been identified by the recently conducted Investment Climate Assessment as major obstacles to the private sector’s ability to perform efficiently and grow, and they also negatively affect investor confidence. The presence of cumbersome regulations undermines the competitiveness of private Moldovan enterprises and prevents increased investment by increasing the cost of doing business, and ultimately providing fertile ground for corruption, favoritism, and the informal economy.

The World Bank has been supporting the Government in its competitiveness and reform efforts through two Competitiveness Enhancement Projects (CEP), which closed successfully and focused on: (i) regulatory reform; (ii) small and medium enterprises’ access to business development services and quality certifications, through a matching grant facility (MGF); (iii) access to finance, through a line of credit (LoC) for exporters; and (iv) quality infrastructure, including equipment and institutional reform in the area of metrology, standards, testing, and quality.

During the implementation of the CEP II, supported activities have resulted in approximately $215 million in new exports, more than 1,000 jobs, an estimated $15 million in savings to the private sector associated with the implementation of the electronic one-stop-shop for permits, as well as other reforms.

In order to sustain the results of the CEP II and other programs implemented and to support the continued implementation of reforms to improve business environment and facilitate export promotion, GoM is currently implementing a new project, the Micro, Small, Medium Enterprises (MSME) Competitiveness Project, which takes a more comprehensive approach to business competitiveness with funding from the International Development Association and the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development.

**B*.* Project Description**

The MSME’s project development objectives (PDO) are: (i) to reduce the regulatory burden, increase access to finance, increase the export competitiveness of Moldovan enterprises, and (ii) in case of an Eligible Crisis or Emergency, to respond promptly and effectively to it.

The PDO will be achieved through a set of activities that aim to: (a) digitize government-to-business services and inspections, streamline permissive documents, and enhance national quality infrastructure to reduce the regulatory burden enterprises face; (b) support access to finance for enterprises through credit guarantees and enhance the capacity of the Credit Guarantee Fund (CGF), and (c) support the development of MSMEs and enhance their export competitiveness; d) support project management; e) support the government's response in case of an emergency.

The project consists of the following components:

***Component 1 – Regulatory reform and Digitization***. This component supports GoM in reducing the regulatory burden on businesses by further digitization both at the national and local levels, enhancing and digitizing inspection services, improving interoperability and integrated service delivery for businesses, simplifying the regulatory environment, and improving the National Quality Infrastructure System (hereinafter NQI).

***Component 2 –******Access to Finance***.This component aims to support the CGF under the Organization for Entrepreneurial Development in providing of financial guarantees to MSMEs, to deliver more effective programs and assistance that have positive spillovers for the growth of MSMEs and export-oriented sectors to expand the business, enter new markets, start new export activities, and introduce new technologies needed for productivity gains.

***Component 3 – MSME Development and Export Competitiveness***, focusing on supporting firms through matching grants, export readiness, supplier linkages, and export promotion programs. The objectives of this component are linked with GoM’s goals of simplifying the rules for MSME operation, supporting business establishment, growth and internationalization, enabling more efficient support programs for MSMEs, as well as facilitating the inflow of investments.

***Component 4 – Contingency Emergency Response (CERC)*.** This is an unfunded contingency component that can be activated in case of a relevant emergency event. Following an eligible crisis or emergency, the Borrower may request the World Bank to reallocate Project funds to support an emergency response. Once triggered, this component will draw from the uncommitted loan resources under the Project to address the emergency.

The project implementation is delegated to the Project Implementation Unit (PIU), an autonomous legal entity established by the Government. The PIU will act as the “Client” for the proposed assignment and will handle contract signing and processing the payments. The contract will be implemented in collaboration with Invest Moldova Agency as key Beneficiary of the assignment.

**C. Context of Moldova’s image perception**

Internationally, the knowledge about the Republic of Moldova is not very vast. There are a series of ratings that measure the impact of the countries’ international perceptions and reputation on global scale. Consulting companies has been developing nation and place branding strategies for various local and national governments around the world, collaborating with prime ministers, presidents, mayors, heads of tourism boards, and directors of investment agencies. Thus, in 2022 Blooom Consulting conducted the Country Brand Ranking research, placing Moldova on the 38th out of 44 place at the European level, in Trade category. Another important global research is The Good Country Index, which measures how much each of the 169 countries on the list contribute to the planet, and to the human race, through their policies and behaviors. Republic of Moldova is on the 40th out of 169 place in the Good Country Index, highlighting the fact that the country has to contribute more to the common good of humanity and planet. At the same time, in International Peace and Security category, Moldova is ranked 2nd of 169, this saying that it contributes more than average to keeping the international peace and security. Since february 2022, when our neighbour country, Ukraine was attacked by Russia, Moldova has demonstrated solidarity and unity, accomodating more refugees per capita than any other country. Since then, Moldova’s image has increased substantially, this being demonstrated by its rank in Peace and Security category. Yet at the Culture category, Moldova is ranked on 94th out of 169, stating the fact that the country contributes less good than average to culture, through international events. Brand Finance is also one of the world’s leading brand valuation consultancy. Annually, Brand Finance is conducting a comprehensive research study on perceptions of nation brands, which consists of extensive public opinion surveys and expert assessments – Global Soft Power Index - and Moldova is not part of the research at all. This give us the possibility to understand that Moldova is not very visible on the international area, and as an impact, the attraction of foreign investments, the trade and country promotion is getting more difficult.

At the same time it is worth mentioning that MIA is currently implementing an Export Brands Program which include assessment, selection and rating of top export brands (companies) from Moldova. This assignment it is basically focused on the enterprise level, although it has effects on the country branding even if these are minor.

The actual assignment has to address “macro” level both the strengths and weaknesses of country’ current brand perception as state and create a unique and clear message that capitalizes on Moldova’s strengths, thus improving Moldova's international reputation and attractiveness to investors and partners.

Thus, the expectations are that these two assignments will complement each other and since both are implemented in parallel, MIA and PIU will make sure an efficient communication between both Consultants is established to ensure a synergy between the tasks.

In conclusion, Moldova strives to improve its global reputation and attract foreign investment, tourism, and international talents. To achieve this, a well-defined and strategic country branding initiative is essential. The Invest Moldova Agency supported by the World Bank MSME Competitiveness Project is planning to conduct a reasearch study on Moldova’s country perception and develop the country branding strategy.

**D. The objective of the assignment**assumes a bespoke research study, the findings of which will be analysed to understand the familiarity, reputation, influence, and perceptions of Moldova in selected key markets, which will allow to set recommendations and benchmarks for Moldova’s nation brand strategy. On top, the objective is to address both the strengths and weaknesses of Moldova's current brand and create a unique and compelling narrative that capitalizes on Moldova’s strengths, thus enhancing Moldova's international reputation and attractiveness to investors, tourists, and partners. Findings will be identified based on answers about Moldova from the local audience and research on Moldova’s image internationally.

**E. Scope of Work**

While perfoming the assignment, the Consultant will be expected to undertake the following tasks:

1. **Analyze the current perception of Moldova based on 6 key segments: international business, international tourists, Moldovan diaspora (returned home and living abroad) students and relevant stakeholders mandated for country branding**

Under this task, the Consultant will have to carry out the following acitivites:

* 1. Conduct surveys and interviews with local and foreign audiences to understand their perceptions and attitudes towards Moldova following the suggested sample size and segment described in the table 1 below.

**Table 1. Segment & sample size**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Segment | Suggested Sample Size | Notes |
| 1 | International Business community (foreign audience mainly) | – 55-65 | Mix of existing foreign investors, business associations, chambers of commerce |
| 2 | International tourists (foreign audience) | 85-100 | Can include tourists in Moldova and those who have visited in past 2 years (e.g., via social media ads or airport intercepts) |
| 3 | Moldovan Diaspora (returned / local) | 60-70 | Those recently returned and doing business/living in Moldova |
| 4 | Moldovan Diaspora (abroad – foreign audience) | 120-150 | Focus on key countries (Italy, France, USA, Germany, UK)  |
| 5 | Students (both local and foreign audience) | 50-70 | Local and international students enrolled in Moldovan universities |
| 6 | Stakeholders (local) | 20-30 | In-depth interviews, not surveys — more qualitative |

* 1. Analyze media coverage, social media discussions, and other public communications about Moldova in key selected markets during the 2021-2025 timeframe.
	2. Benchmark Moldova's image against three other countries with similar profiles and challenges. Countries will be selected with Invest Moldova Agency.
	3. Explore how local perceptions align or differ from international perspectives, identifying potential gaps or areas of synergy.
	4. Analyze existing brand assets (e.g. Moldova Wine, Tree of Life, Diaspora Invest) and past campaigns to identify synergies, inconsistencies, and gaps in messaging, design, and positioning.
	5. Evaluate the impact of previous promotional campaigns and key sectoral initiatives in shaping Moldova’s image.
	6. Analyze how local cultural, historical, and socio-economic factors contribute to Moldova’s brand identity.
1. **Based on the research findings and additional insights, the Consultant shall conduct a strategic diagnostic of Moldova’s nation brand. This may include, but is not limited to:**
2. Identification of Moldova’s **brand strengths** (e.g., natural resources, culture, values, strategic location) from both internal and external perspectives.
3. Assessment of perceived **challenges or weaknesses** (e.g., visibility gaps, infrastructure, narratives in foreign media).
4. Exploration of **opportunities** in alignment with global and regional trends (e.g., reshoring, regional tourism, digital nomadism).
5. Recognition of **potential threats or risks** (e.g., geopolitical volatility, competition from peer countries).

The Consultant is encouraged to apply either a SWOT analysis or an equivalent proprietary strategic framework (e.g., Brand Positioning Matrix, Digital Demand, Nation Brand Impact Ladder, etc.) as long as it ensures: (i) a comprehensive and structured diagnosis of Moldova’s current brand position; (ii) an evidence-based basis for strategy formulation and (iii) relevance to the branding, investment promotion, and international positioning objectives of the Republic of Moldova.

1. **Develop a comprehensive country branding strategy that includes actionable recommendations for implementation. The strategy paper shall incorporate:**
	1. Value proposition for Moldova as a country and its offering across investment, tourism, talent and student attraction sectors, including:
		1. Defining Moldova’s unique selling points that differentiate it from other countries.
		2. Developing clear and compelling narrative that highlights Moldova’s strengths and potential.
		3. Develop and validate the draft strategy in consultation with appointed stakeholders. This shall include at least 5 focus groups and 30 interviews organised with the support of the Agency with key stakeholders, including government officials, public and local community leaders, business, tourism experts, citizens, to gather insights and perspectives to ensure that the strategy reflects the views and aspirations of the Moldovan people.
	2. Clear and measurable objectives for the country branding, aligned with national development goals.
	3. Key messages and themes defined that will resonate with the selected target audiences.
	4. Well defined positioning strategy that places Moldova favorably in the minds of international audiences.
	5. Messaging matrix for different sectors (e.g., tourism, investment, culture, etc.)
2. **Develop and propose the branding strategy Activation Plan,** including
	1. Outlining specific campaigns and initiatives to activate the brand.
	2. Creating a toolkit of digital instruments needed to activate the brand incorporating but not limited to:
		1. A content strategy (formats, tone, storytelling structure)
		2. A channel strategy (what to use where, e.g. LinkedIn for investors, Instagram for tourists, etc.)
		3. Guidelines for reactive reputation management in crisis situations.
	3. Suggesting digital and traditional marketing strategies to promote Moldova locally and internationally.
	4. Based on the above, draft the detailed action / implementation plan with timeline, budget, and KPIs in support to the proposed country branding strategy.
	5. Recommendation of a brand governance model, ideally tailored to Moldova’s public administration.

The Consultant shall design visual branding elements and templates that ensure consistent representation of Moldova across key channels (digital, print, event collateral, presentations), in line with the Tree of Life identity.

**F. Reporting and deliverables**

The Consultant will be working under the overall supervision of the Invest Moldova Agency Country brand’ department.

During the implementation of the assignment the Consultant will develop the following deliverables:

 **1) Comprehensive report on the current perception of Moldova both abroad and domestically, benchmarked against three peer countries.**

The report shall include:

* Results of **quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews** conducted with a minimum of **350 and maximum of 530 respondents** across all six key audience segments:
(i) international business representatives,
(ii) international tourists,
(iii) Moldovan diaspora living abroad,
(iv) Moldovan diaspora recently returned home,
(v) local and international students,
(vi) institutional stakeholders involved in Moldova’s country branding (public, private, and civil society).
* A synthesis of **perception metrics, emotional associations, and narratives**, drawn from both local and international sources.
* **Analysis of media coverage and digital discourse** (social media, international press, public forums) between 2021–2025.
* **Comparative benchmarking** of Moldova’s brand performance against at least three countries with similar geopolitical or economic positioning.
* A **strategic diagnostic framework** (e.g., SWOT, Brand Impact Ladder, Digital Demand Model, or equivalent), offering a structured, evidence-based assessment of Moldova’s:
	+ Strengths and unique assets;
	+ Weaknesses and perception gaps;
	+ Opportunities for positioning and engagement;
	+ Threats and risks in the current international climate.

The report will serve as the analytical foundation for the country branding strategy**.**

* + 1. Document outlining Moldova’s value proposition and a comprehensive country branding strategy paper, including: stakeholder-validated strategic narrative, positioning strategy, messaging matrix, visual brand architecture, brand governance model, and an activation plan. The strategy shall contain actionable recommendations for implementation, including timeline, budget, KPIs, and risk mitigation measures.

**G. Timeline**

The assignment is expected to be implemented during the period September 2025 through March 2026, requiring an estimated level of effort of approximately 300 man-days.

**H. Reporting Arrangements**

The Consultant will report directly to the Invest Moldova Agency, coordinating with the Project Implementation Unit (PIU). All deliverables will be reviewed and approved by the Invest Moldova Agency Director or other appointed person.

**I.** **Requirements for the Assignment**

This assignment will require a Consultant, which shall be an experienced foreign specialised communication firm or a consortium of such firms. The Consultant may associate with local firms for the implementation of the assignment. The Consultant shall furnish documentary evidence (including information about the completed contracts and contact information of clients to whom similar services have been provided) to demonstrate that it meets the following experience requirements:

* + Company’ proven experience in carrying out similar assignments by having at least 5 (five) years of experience in international communication, branding and media relations.
	+ Company’ demonstrated experience in brand strategy, with proven experience in working with different countries all over the world on development, planning and implementation of country’ brand strategies.
	+ Company’ demonstrated experience in conducting field and market research, surveys, including carrying out sample-based surveys.
	+ Possess a portfolio of works that would prove professional excellence and prove professional capacity and previous succesful experience of the company and staff with at least three similar successfully implemented assignments.
	+ Company’proven ability to handle complex international communication campaigns and provide strategic inputs on topics related to the assignment.
	+ Has successful prior experience in implementation of donors’ and/or IFIs’ sponsored projects.
	+ Prior working experiences or familiarity with Moldovan and European markets will be an asset.

**J. Terms of Payment**[[1]](#footnote-1)

The Contract will be a lump-sum contract for small assignments in accordance with the World Bank standards. The tentative payment schedule is as follows:

**10% of the contract amount** upon acceptance of the Inception Report, which shall be based on the original technical proposal to confirm or propose changes to the methodology of the contract; if necessary, propose changes to the proposed work plan for the delivery of each activity, the area of expertise and the list of deliverables, etc. The inception report shall present all activities in terms of deliverables highlighting the milestones. The report shall list and comment on any developments that have occurred since the TOR agreed upon by the parties that could have an impact on the project design and relevance of the activities to be developed under the project.. This report shall be submitted within 1 month after the contract’ effectiveness.

**35% of the contract amount** upon acceptance of the 1st report, which shall include a comprehensive report on the current perception of Moldova abroad and internally, and against other country benchmarks in accordance with the requirements described under Scope of Work chapter, Tasks 1 and 2. This report shall be submitted within 4 months after the contract’ effectiveness.

**40% of the contract amount** upon acceptanceof the 2nd report, which shall include the document outlining Moldova's value proposition and country branding strategy paper that encompases actionable recommendations for implementation, including the timeline, budget, and KPIs in accordance with the requirements described under Scope of Work chapter, Tasks 3 and 4. This report shall be submitted within 6 months after the contract’ effectiveness.

**15% of the contract amount** upon acceptance of the final report, describing all activities performed. This report shall be submitted within 7 months after the contract’ effectiveness.

1. Payment schedule and sequences of deliverables are tentative and will be defined during the negotiation of the technical and financial proposals (work plan, timelines, etc.) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)