



Moldova's European Defining Moment: Presidential Election and Referendum in the Shadow of Russia's War in Ukraine

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Executive Summary

Moldova's presidential election and the referendum on membership of the European Union (EU), which take place on 20 October 2024, constitute a defining moment for the country. Together with parliamentary elections in 2025, they will not only determine Moldova's geopolitical alignment – whether it continues its pro-European path or makes a U-turn towards Russia – but could also shape the future of EU integration in the whole of Eastern Europe. Seen in the wider context of a possible victory by Georgian Dream in the Georgian parliamentary elections on 26 October and a perception that Ukraine might have to accept “negotiations” on limiting its sovereignty, a negative outcome for pro-European forces in Moldova would be a victory for the Kremlin's ambitions and a serious blow to the vision of a “Europe whole, free and at peace”.

Moldova is at the epicentre of Russia's hybrid warfare, which acts in symbiosis with Russia's aggressive warfare in Ukraine. Moscow's objective in both cases is to topple pro-western governments and reverse the European integration in the wider region.

The Moldovan government has set an ambitious goal of becoming an EU member state by 2030. Although not considered entirely realistic, a positive outcome for EU integration in the elections and referendum could not only inspire Moldovans in the accession process, but also provide a positive boost in Brussels. An unhelpful result in the referendum and presidential election would risk hampering the internal reform and EU accession processes in Moldova and could lead to integration fatigue among the EU member states.

Regardless of the outcome of the 20 October votes, Moldova will need enhanced support from the EU institutions and member states to increase its resistance to Russian hybrid warfare, accelerate the reform process and provide technical and administrative assistance with the accession negotiations.

Introduction

The Republic of Moldova will hold presidential elections on 20 October 2024. The result of elections in this tiny country sandwiched between a European Union (EU) member state, Romania, and war-torn Ukraine will have fundamental geopolitical implications. The incumbent pro-European president, Maia Sandu, who is seeking a second term in office, is being challenged by several pro-Russian opposition candidates.

There will also be a referendum on whether the country should amend its constitution to reflect the aspirations of Moldovan citizens to join the EU. A candidate country since December 2022, the European Council decided to open accession negotiations with Moldova in December 2023, and held the first intergovernmental conference at ministerial level to open the negotiations on 25 June 2024. The [bilateral screening](#) process began in July. This is the first stage of the negotiations, where the candidate country is invited to make presentations on its state of preparation for the adoption and implementation of EU legislation and the measures it intends to take to further align its legislation with EU law. The Moldovan government has set an ambitious goal of becoming an EU member state by 2030.

Particularly since Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the EU has allocated [substantial amounts of financial support](#) to Moldova in the form of macro-financial assistance, humanitarian assistance to help civilians affected by the war and support to modernise the Moldovan Armed Forces. During a visit to Chişinău on 10 October 2024, President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen [announced](#) the largest financial assistance package to Moldova since its independence, amounting €1.8 billion over three years, to be invested in growth-oriented sectors and public services such as infrastructure, energy and business development.

The population of Moldova, however, is deeply split over the geopolitical choice between the EU and Russia. The explosive power of this choice has increased further since Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. About half the population living in Moldova is pro-European. To this group should also be added most of the Moldovan diaspora, about 10 per cent of the total electorate, which mainly works in EU member states. A sizable minority, however – about one-third of the Moldovan population – is pro-Russian. This proportion is substantially larger in certain regions, such as in the Transnistria separatist region, where Russia has troops, and in the Autonomous Territorial Unit of Gagauzia in southern Moldova (see map), as well as in parts of northern Moldova, where it constitutes an absolute majority of the local population. The remaining approximately 10–15 per cent of the electorate are “centrists” who tend to lean towards “both the EU and Russia”.¹



1 Author’s interview in Chişinău, September 2024.

Based on an analysis of the upcoming presidential election and referendum, the purpose of this report is to devise scenarios for the outcome of the elections and policy implications for the future of the EU integration process in Moldova.

The Presidential Elections: Pro-Russian Candidates Line up Against Sandu

The Central Election Committee ([CEC](#)) has registered 11 candidates for the 20 October presidential elections. The main candidates are incumbent president Maia Sandu, former Prosecutor General Alexandr Stoianoglo, leader of the populist “Our Party” Renato Usatîi, former governor of Gaguzia Irina Vlah, leader of the Party of Development and Consolidation of Moldova (PDCM) Ion Chicu and former prime minister Vasile Tarlev.

An opinion poll conducted by the CBS-Axa Center for Sociological Research, published on 7 October by the NGO [Watchdog](#), gave Sandu 36.1 per cent support, followed by Stoianoglo (10.1%), Usatîi (7.5%), Vlah (4.1%), Chicu (2.5%) and Tarlev (1.8%). All the other candidates received less than one per cent support. The poll, however, registered a fairly large number of undecided voters or voters who had not yet decided whether to take part in the election (24.4%). As no candidate is expected to achieve the 51 per cent majority of votes cast required in the first round, there will be a second round of voting on 3 November between the two front-runners. It is likely that Maia Sandu will win against any other candidate in the second round of voting, albeit not by a wide marginal.

Sandu's most likely opponent in the second round is Alexandr Stoianoglo. He was dismissed by Sandu from his position as Prosecutor General in 2021, after her Party of Action and Solidarity (PAS) secured a majority in parliament. Stoianoglo was arrested and accused of corruption, but this led to [a political scandal](#) as the new government failed to produce any evidence of wrongdoing. He later won a case against Moldova in the European Court of Human Rights, which ruled that his right to a fair trial had been violated.

Stoianoglo has voiced support for Moldova's EU integration but is nominated by the Socialist Party of the Republic of Moldova (PSRM), led by former president Igor Dodon, which is one of the most pro-Russian political parties. It was a surprise when Dodon chose not to run as a candidate himself but to support Stoianoglo instead, especially since he has no PSRM credentials. Stoianoglo was previously more associated with the Democratic Party under Vladimir Plahotniuc, the now exiled oligarch who controlled much of Moldova's political and economic life before being ousted in an unholy alliance between Sandu and Dodon in 2019. The likely explanation is therefore that Moscow wanted Stoianoglo as a candidate over Dodon.²

Most of the other candidates mentioned above have adopted either strongly pro-Russian or centrist political stances. Sandu and the PAS have little competition on the pro-European side. This could make the election quite open if the opposition were to unite around one candidate in the second round. Regardless of the outcome of the second round, however, this candidate will be in the best position to establish himself/herself as the leader of the opposition in the 2025 parliamentary elections.

2 Author's interview in Chişinău, September 2024.

A Referendum on Solidifying EU integration

When Maia Sandu launched the idea of a referendum in December 2023, and asked parliament to prepare for it in the autumn 2024, it was seen by many as a risky project with an uncertain outcome.

Clearly, there are some advantages to holding a referendum from the president's point of view. A majority of the population supports EU membership for Moldova, even if this is only by a narrow margin. The referendum could also serve as tool for mobilising votes for Sandu in the presidential election from guest workers in the Moldovan diaspora. This group was a decisive factor in Sandu's victory in the 2020 presidential election and the PAS victory in the 2021 parliamentary election.

Sandu's aim is probably also that a positive outcome from the referendum will settle the battle over Moldova's geopolitical direction once and for all and make it harder for political opponents to change course. The argument goes that a yes vote would have to be considered even if a pro-Russian candidate were to win the presidential election.

There are also numerous risks associated with the referendum, not the least holding it so early in the accession process before the potential benefits of EU membership have become apparent to the population. It is also risky to hold a referendum in a country with high levels of poverty and a high degree of Soviet nostalgia. In addition, the opposition will have a chance to mobilise for the referendum and Russian influence campaigns will intensify. Finally, it is unclear what a no vote in the referendum would mean.

As of 20 September 2024, the CEC had registered 15 political parties that intended to participate in the referendum campaign, 13 of which had registered to push for the yes option. Of these 13 parties, all but two are fairly insignificant and have a very low level of support among voters. The exceptions are PAS and the National Alternative Movement (MAN) led by Chişinău's mayor, Ion Ceban.

Although Ceban registered for yes in the referendum, his pro-European credentials are widely questioned in Moldova. He is also strongly rumoured to be affiliated with Russia and his registration for yes is widely seen as a ploy.³ He was elected mayor for the first time in 2019 with the support of the PSRM. MAN is insignificant outside of Chişinău. It has few local branches and little support. Ceban decided not to stand in the presidential elections, possibly biding his time for the 2028 elections when Sandu would have served her two terms in office.

Only two parties have signed up for the no option in the referendum. These are the Communist Party of the Republic of Moldova and the Revival Party, which is closely associated with Ilan Shor, an exiled politician who was sentenced in absentia in 2023 to 15 years in prison for his role in a bank theft. Shor has been Russia's [main tool of influence](#) in Moldova since Igor Dodon lost the 2020 presidential election.

According to the CBS-Axa Center for Sociological Research [opinion poll](#), 63.2 per cent of the Moldovan population supports EU integration for Moldova while 32.4 per cent oppose it. If accurate, the referendum on enshrining the Moldova population's will on EU membership will result in a win for yes.

3 Author's interview in Chişinău, September 2024.

Nonetheless, there is an element of uncertainty. To be approved, not only must a majority vote yes, but the turnout must reach at least 33 per cent of all registered voters. However, the opposition seems to have no clear strategy for how to deal with this complexity. Ilan Shor is working hard for a no vote, and in this way helping to boost voter turnout, while Igor Dodon is campaigning for a boycott, hoping that a low turnout makes the referendum invalid.

Russia's Destabilisation of Moldova

While Russia wages an aggressive kinetic war against Ukraine, it is also waging a [hybrid war against Moldova](#). Russia's hybrid warfare is fought on a daily basis through financial support for pro-Russian politicians in Moldova, spreading disinformation and various narratives, and cyberattacks, sabotage and acts of hooliganism.

Russia's hybrid war against Moldova has intensified since the invasion of Ukraine. Russia's objective is to topple the pro-western governments in Kyiv and Chi in u and return these countries to Moscow's perceived sphere of interests. In practice, for Moldova, this means blocking EU accession and re-establishing Moscow's control over Moldova politically, economically and in the information sphere.

This would mean, for instance, that Moldova's 2023 [National Security Strategy](#), as well as other official documents such as the 2024 [Security and Defence Partnership with the EU](#), which define Moldova's resilience and security in terms of European integration, would have to be rewritten. An especially sensitive issue for Russia is Moldova's constitutional neutrality. Article 11 of the Moldovan [Constitution](#), adopted in 1994, proclaims its "permanent neutrality" and "does not admit the presence of any foreign military troops on its territory". For 30 years, Moldova has unsuccessfully tried to use this wording in the constitution to remove Russia's troops from Transnistria. It is important to remember, however, that neutral, non-aligned status did not protect Ukraine from being invaded by Russia in 2014.

Although the current National Security Strategy does not discuss Moldova's neutrality, Russia has always strictly interpreted this as a prohibition on Moldova cooperating with western partners on military and security-related issues, as well as allowing only extremely low levels of military spending and, in practice, that the Moldovan Armed Forces should have virtually no military capability.

The Kremlin would prefer Moldova to be a weak, poor and corrupt state isolated from its neighbours and the EU, which would make it more dependent on Russia. This would also make Moldova a pawn in the hands of Russia in "resolving" the Transnistrian conflict not in line with international law but according to Russian preferences, such as through the "federalisation" of Moldova, as in the 2003 "Kozak Memorandum" which gave the green light for an indefinite Russian military presence in the region.

Strategically, Moldova would then act as a buffer zone for Russia against both the West and Ukraine, as well as a launching pad for further destabilisation efforts and potentially even for military strikes. Russia is already pressuring Ukraine militarily from the east and the south-east and – together with Moscow's ally, Belarus – from the north. With Moldova from the south-west, Russia would almost be able to encircle Ukraine.

The Russian disinformation campaign against Moldova starts at the highest government level and is delegated throughout the system. Foreign Minister Sergei [Lavrov](#) has repeatedly warned that Moldova's elite is "following in the footsteps of the Kiev regime", illustrating

the intensely aggressive nature of the Russian narrative around Moldova. In an [interview](#) in September 2024, Russian foreign ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova compared Maia Sandu's policies with those of the Third Reich during the Second World War.

Destabilisation efforts during the current elections

On 8 October the European Parliament passed a [resolution](#) strongly condemning “Russia’s intensifying hostile actions, interference and hybrid operation in the run-up to the presidential elections and constitutional referendum in Moldova”.

Russia spends enormous sums on destabilising Moldovan elections. In September 2024, Moldova’s National Security Advisor, Stanislav Secieru, [estimated](#) that Russia would spend US\$100 million on interference in Moldova’s democratic processes in this year’s election and referendum.

According to a report by [Watchdog](#), pro-Russian politicians have spent over €31,000 on promoting disinformation on Facebook alone. The key themes pushed on social media are that the West will involve Moldova in the Russo-Ukrainian war, that Russia is the main market for Moldovan farmers and that “hybrid war” is a term invented by Moldova’s current government to stifle opposition.

In early October, the Moldovan National Police [announced](#) the discovery of an “unprecedented vote rigging scheme”. Detectives reported that more than US\$ 15 million in Russian funds had been channelled into the bank accounts of more than 130,000 Moldovan citizens in September alone. According to the investigators, Ilan Shor, the founder of several now-banned pro-Russia political parties, helped launder the funds to be used to bribe voters through a network of banks.

Russia usually targets certain groups in the Moldovan population for these measures, mainly pensioners (especially in rural areas), Russian speakers and voters in regions such as Gagauzia and Transnistria, where pro-Russia voters prevail. The southern region of Gagauzia, which has around 150,000 residents, mostly of Turkic origin, has seen particular interest from Russia in 2024. In early March, the Governor of Gagauzia, called *Bashkan*, Evghenia Guțul, who won a disputed election with the support of Ilan Shor in 2023, travelled to Russia [to meet with Putin](#) and gain his support to resist what he called the Moldovan authorities’ “illegal actions” in Gagauzia. While Transnistria is de facto outside Chișinău’s control, by influencing Gagauzia, which is a fully integrated region within Moldova with a degree of autonomy, Russia hopes to exploit a vulnerability for Chișinău.

Another Russian innovation in this year’s election has been the targeting of [priests](#) from the Metropolitan Church of Chișinău and All Moldova – the country’s largest orthodox church, which is under the Russian Orthodox Church – through so-called pilgrimages organised and financially supported by the Russian Patriarchate through Ilan Shor. These particularly target clergy with limited resources, especially in rural areas, but are also intended to “strengthen cooperation and fraternal ties between the Orthodox clergy of the two countries”. The Moldovan priests have an opportunity to visit holy sites in Russia and are given MIR cards – a Russian payment card for electronic fund transfers established by Russia’s Central Bank – through which salaries and church aid can be transferred.

A more sinister way of interfering in and destabilising the situation in Moldova are the [examples of vandalism](#), allegedly also paid for by Shor, which have targeted official buildings in Chişinău such as TeleRadio Moldova, the Ministry of Labour, the Government Building and the Central Election Commission. Moldovan police have arrested several suspects who were part of a larger group trained and paid to carry out vandalism and destabilisation. They had been taken to a training site outside Moscow where they were trained in how to organize violent protests.

Russia is supporting several not only openly pro-Russian, but also centrist candidates in the presidential election. Russia will probably concentrate on a best option closer to the election date. For Moscow, despite its importance per se, the presidential election is just a dress rehearsal for the 2025 parliamentary elections. The presidential election will set the mood for the parliamentary election, however, and Russia wants to reduce the advantage of the presidential election for PAS, which is still leading in the polls despite the critical economic situation in the country.

Russia appears prepared for defeat in the presidential election, however, and is already laying the groundwork for a narrative that reduces the legitimacy of the election results, arguing that “elections will be fraudulent” and speaking of “illegitimate president Maia Sandu”.⁴

The referendum is more important to Russia than the presidential election, as it opens the door for Russia to manipulate certain outcomes. Russia's tactic here is also to raise questions about the legitimacy of the referendum by making the result unclear and disputed. For Russia, the lower the turnout the better. Of course, a victory for no or an invalid turnout would be considered a huge success.

Scenarios and Policy Implications

No matter which of the scenarios outlined below comes to pass, Russia is expected to learn from the election and adjust its tools for the upcoming parliamentary elections. It will continue to question the legitimacy of the referendum as an “elite project”, seek to discredit the turnout, and use disinformation, deep fakes, cyberattacks and other hybrid means to antagonise regions, pit ethnic groups against each other and against the government, and alienate the diaspora. The use of force after the elections – in a much more violent way than the acts of vandalism during the election campaign – cannot be ruled out. Paid protestors and provocateurs (so-called *titushki*) have been used by Russia before in Moldova and elsewhere in Russia's neighbourhood, not least in Ukraine.

Scenario 1: Maia Sandu wins the presidential election and there is a yes vote in the referendum

This is the most likely outcome based on the opinion polls. This result would provide a boost for the reform process inside Moldova and its accession talks with the EU, while also energising the PAS for the 2025 parliamentary elections. Moldovan citizens' EU aspirations would be enshrined in the country's constitution.

However, a yes vote would not dramatically change the mood of Russia and the pro-

4 Author's interview in Chişinău, September 2024.

Russian opposition forces in Moldova, which are aware of the importance of the upcoming parliamentary elections. Nor would it prevent them from continuing to cast doubt on a European path for Moldova, which does not depend entirely on the referendum itself. The legitimacy of the referendum will be questioned, especially if the turnout is below 50 per cent. If 35 per cent of all voters take part in the referendum and half of them vote yes, this would represent only a small fraction of all voters in Moldova.

In these narratives, regional differences will be played out where an extremely low turnout in regions such as Gagauzia, due to a strong boycott campaign and a low level of support for yes, will be contrasted with regions where there is stronger support, giving rise to the narrative that EU integration is an elite project driven by Chişinău that only represents the “president’s own political ambitions”. The allegedly small number of polling stations (30) on Chişinău-controlled territory in the vicinity of Transnistria, for the residents of the separatist region, and only two polling stations in Russia for Moldovan citizens living there will continue to be contested by Russia and the pro-Russian opposition in Moldova.

Nonetheless, this scenario will give the EU institutions and member states a chance to increase pressure on Moldova for reform. Even though PAS has had both executive and legislative power for some years, justice and anti-corruption reform still lag behind due to internal resistance from within the judiciary.

The EU should increase its technical support and administrative resources for Moldovan state institutions to help them approximate national legislation with the EU acquis, especially in the “Fundamentals” and “Internal Market” clusters of negotiating chapters. Lack of resources is the biggest problem in the Moldovan state system.

The EU member states should also enhance their partnerships for providing technical assistance to different sectors of Moldovan society, such as agriculture, IT services, education and academia.

Scenario 2: Maia Sandu wins the presidential election but there is a no vote in the referendum, or the turnout is too low

A not unlikely outcome, given the risk that the referendum will not be approved due to a low turnout. There would not be any immediate or dramatic changes from the current situation as the constitution would remain as it is today. Some processes might slow down but not completely stop. Even the opposition sees benefits (mostly financial) from EU accession.

In the longer term, however, this will be a hard psychological blow to the yes side and Moldova’s EU accession process. It would be some time before a new referendum could be held. In the meantime, a no vote could serve as a breeding ground for a “centrist narrative” based on “Moldova not choosing sides” but “cooperating with everyone”.

Other narratives could be directed against the EU itself: that “the EU is in a state of decline”, that “Europeans are getting poorer due to the sanctions on Russia”, that “the EU means war” or that “the EU is decadent and opposes the traditional values embraced by Moldova, “Gayropa”, etcetera.

A success for centrists in the upcoming parliamentary elections would further slow reform and dramatically undermine the credibility of the EU integration process. This was very much what happened in the period 2009–2019, when supposedly pro-European centrist parties ruled Moldova, while the country in practice became a captured state under Vladimir Plahotniuc.

In this scenario, the EU should put even more effort into supporting the Moldovan state institutions and authorities to combat Russian disinformation and other means of hybrid warfare beyond the coming elections, by providing more funding and specialists. This might also include assistance to counter violence from pro-Russia protesters. The EU should also enhance support for independent media in Moldova to help them become more professional and increase the quality of their content in order to counter Russian media and EU fatigue.

Scenario 3: Maia Sandu loses the presidential election but there is a yes vote in the referendum

This is a highly unlikely scenario but, if realised, the new president would hardly feel bound by the result of the referendum. Inspiration for the new president could come from the current Georgian Dream government in Georgia, the policies of which run counter to EU integration, against the will of the majority of the population in Georgia, despite Georgia's EU aspirations being enshrined in the country's constitution. Doubts over the legitimacy of the referendum will be identical to those in scenario 1.

This scenario would require the EU to reprioritise its policy on the Moldovan leadership and begin a dialogue with the new president to find common ground on continuing accession negotiations and Moldova's alignment with the EU acquis.

Furthermore, the EU's efforts to contribute to a strengthening of Moldova's crisis management structures, enhance its resilience to hybrid threats, including cybersecurity threats, and counter foreign information manipulation and interference will become more difficult and face increased resistance from the new authorities. Since 2023, this work has been carried out primarily by the EU Partnership Mission (EUPM) in the Republic of Moldova, a civilian mission under the EU Common Security and Defence Policy. To extend the mandate of the EUPM beyond May 2025 would probably be difficult in line with this scenario.

Scenario 4: Maia Sandu loses the presidential election and there is a no vote in the referendum or the turnout is too low

This is, of course, the geopolitical nightmare scenario for Maia Sandu, the PAS government and the entire pro-European community in Moldova, as well as for the EU. Although the scenario would not necessarily mean an immediate formal end to the accession process, but rather lead to a slower process as in the Western Balkans, it could severely damage the process in a way that would be difficult to repair in the future.

EU accession is a demand-driven process, and the EU never forces anyone to join. There are several examples of countries that have aborted their EU integration process. For example, Norway and Switzerland rejected EU integration following referendums while Iceland formally withdrew its membership application, and one member state (the United Kingdom) has left the EU.

However, a failure of Moldova's EU integration could have a greater impact than for some Western European countries. Since Moldova is generally considered to be the easiest to integrate of the three EU candidate countries in the Eastern Partnership – in terms of geographical location, size, language and level of conflict – questions would then arise over the accession potential of Ukraine and Georgia. The withdrawal of Moldova might also lead to enlargement fatigue in the EU and call into question the EU's entire eastern enlargement project.

This scenario would force the EU to concentrate on damage limitation, for both the EU integration process in Moldova and the internal processes in Brussels and the EU capitals. It would be hard to make any progress on Moldova's EU accession, especially if this scenario were followed by successes for pro-Russian or centrist forces in the 2025 parliamentary elections.



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