

Stagnation on the Road to Europe: Moldova after the Presidential Election

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- In November's presidential elections, a pro-Russian candidate, Igor Dodon, defeated Maia Sandu, who ran on a platform of reform in line with the European path. While Dodon is unlikely to officially reverse Moldova's Association Agreement with the EU, his victory will have real domestic and geopolitical implications.
- In the campaign, both Dodon and Sandu prioritized the fight against embedded corruption and the oligarchic system over geopolitical factors, but Dodon's pro-Russian stance and the Russian Orthodox Church's aggressive support for him ensured that the East-West divide was pertinent for voters. Political polarization will likely deepen under Dodon.
- The ambiguous position of the country's most powerful man, Vladimir Plahotniuc, who officially supported Sandu but whose influential television channels promoted Dodon, cast doubt on his support and whether he preferred Dodon to act as an implicit threat to Moldova's EU partners.
- Moldova's president has a limited mandate, with predominantly supervisory responsibilities, but the office's representative role abroad and its capacity to shape domestic public opinion is significant. Mixed messages coming from the government and a lack of genuine will to tackle the problem of state capture could further endanger rule of law in Moldova and deepen the distrust of its Euro-Atlantic partners.

Introduction

After more than seven years of orientation towards Europe in both rhetoric and action, on November 13 Moldova elected a president who is looking to strengthen ties with the East. Igor Dodon, the leader of the Party of Socialists (PSRM), won the second round of elections on November 13 with 52.11 percent of the vote, finishing 4 percentage points ahead of Maia Sandu, the leader of the Action and Solidarity Party (PAS). The outcome has underlined the fragility of Moldova's institutions and oligarchic influence, and revealed a deeply polarized society, divided primarily by geopolitical orientation. Although during the electoral campaign both candidates preferred to refrain from addressing foreign policy questions and instead focused on the fight against corruption, they did not miss a chance to frame the debate in geopolitical terms.

Political background: against the backdrop of corruption

The theft of one billion dollars from the banking system and other corruption scandals have dominated politics in Moldova in the last few years and have led to the emergence of new political movements and actors. Two presidential candidates, Maia Sandu and Andrei Nastase of Dignity and Truth, launched their political careers at the helm of civic movements that would later transform into center-right political parties. Regardless of the coalition government's rhetorical commitment to European values and ideals, the lack of reforms and effective impunity in the billion-dollar theft generated massive dissatisfaction and street protests in 2015 and 2016. The so-called pro-European parties have not only lost voter support, but have also heavily discredited the European idea. In terms of foreign relations, the billion-dollar theft has weakened the trust of Moldova's Euro-Atlantic partners and resulted in conditioning development assistance on progress in fighting corruption.¹

In this atmosphere, the Constitutional Court decided to reinstate direct presidential elections in March 2016. The decision repealed amendments adopted in July 2000 that had granted the parliament power to elect the president by a majority vote of three-fifths of MPs. It was taken just 19 days before the end of the president's mandate and cited alleged procedural violations in 2000, as well as difficulties appointing the president in earlier elections as grounds. Even though 89 percent of the population prefers direct elections according to a 2015 poll by the International Republican Institute (IRI),² the court's decision bypassed the political processes and preempted changes to the electoral laws. Moreover, the lack of any public consultation or the legislature's participation seriously undermined the legitimacy of the court, and bolstered allegations that it is directly influenced by Vladimir Plahotniuc, the country's wealthiest oligarch and least popular politician.

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Electoral campaign and outcome

Once the Constitutional Court validates the results of the elections, Igor Dodon will become the third directly elected president of the Republic of Moldova since its independence in 1991. The first round of elections took place on October 30 with Igor Dodon (47.98 percent) and Maia Sandu (38.71 percent) proceeding to the second round on November 13.

Dodon won the second round with a difference of 67,488 votes,³ surrounded by allegations of fraud and procedural violations. Immediately after the second round, Sandu submitted claims to the Central Electoral Commission (CEC) with evidence of violations of the right of Moldovans residing abroad to participate. Although she has repeatedly asked the Minister of Foreign Affairs and European Integration, Andrei Galbur, and the Chair of the CEC, Alina Rusu, to resign due to mismanagement and allegations of fraud, they have stayed in their positions.

As a whole, international election monitors found the elections in Moldova to be free and fair, albeit with some irregularities. Monitoring missions organized by the Promo-Lex Association identified several problems during the second round, including violation of ballot counting and providing false information favoring Dodon; carousel voting in certain polling stations in Transnistria and the Autonomous Territorial Unit of

Gagauzia; and a shortage of polling stations abroad, which effectively denied a number of citizens of their constitutional right to vote. The OSCE’s observer mission emphasized the increasingly polarized media coverage, abuses of administrative resources, and lack of transparency in campaign financing.

The second round also saw high turnout from Transnistrian voters, in contrast to the previous patterns of low Transnistrian participation in Moldovan elections.⁴ The Transnistrian administration, in particular Yevgeny Shevchuk, demonstrated tacit openness and support, refrained from any artificial impediments at the so-called customs border control units, and allegedly encouraged people to vote by organizing free transportation. Compared to the first round of elections, the turnout in the second round in localities surrounding the Transnistria region increased by 9,764 people, and a majority of Transnistrian voters supported Dodon.⁵ The high participation generated dissatisfaction on the ground in Varnita, Rezina and Sanatauca as some locals were unable to vote, and increased doubts about the fairness of the elections.

The electoral campaign was characterized by unequal access to media and numerous campaign violations. Withdrawing from the electoral battle after the first round of elections, Marian Lupu, the leader of Vladimir Plahotniuc’s Democratic Party, declared that his decision had been guided by the desire to offer the most popular pro-European candidate the chance to win the race. Despite this, Sandu had limited access to Plahotniuc’s media empire, which includes three national TV channels. Instead Dodon benefited from favorable coverage on Plahotniuc’s channels, and from smear campaigns against Sandu, leading some to argue that Dodon and Plahotniuc must have reached an agreement.⁶

The utter disregard for journalistic ethics and professional standards during the campaign not only contributed to the spread of lies and false information about Sandu, but also promoted messages appealing to stereotypes. Playing on fears and morality was a distinctive feature of this election. Plahotniuc’s television channels repeated narratives promoted by Dodon, including linking Sandu to the banking scandal and to former prime minister Vlad Filat, who was recently convicted of corruption in the billion-dollar theft. Outlets also hinted at her “nontraditional sexual orientation,” given the fact that she is single and childless; argued that she wants Moldova to accept 30,000 Syrian refugees; and claimed that her education reforms led to 400 suicides among teenagers. These

claims were widely repeated and spread quickly in community spaces, mainly among church-goers.

The church was heavily used to influence voters’ choices, many of whom are highly religious. It also acted as a tool for Russia to express its preferences. In September, Igor Dodon received the blessing of the Russian Patriarch Kiril, which was a clear sign of approval and support from the Russian Federation. Moscow communicated its endorsement through the church and media outlets that enjoy high popularity among Moldovan citizens. According to IPP’s Barometer of Public Opinion,⁷ the most popular channel is Prime TV

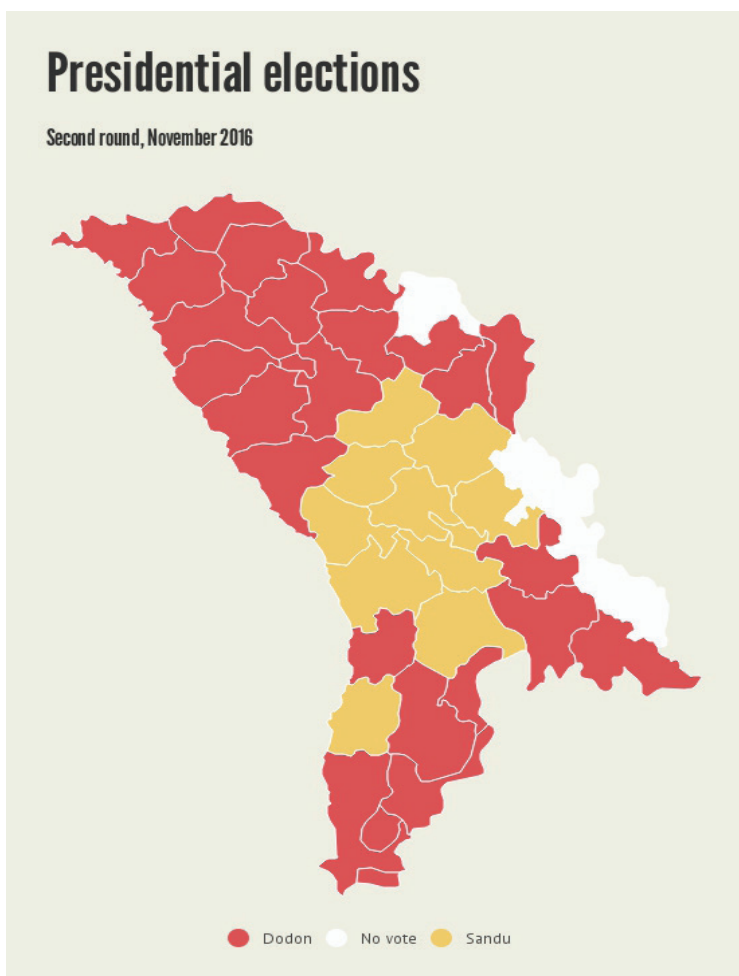


Figure 1: Results of the second round
Source: CEC

(rebroadcasting the Russian national channel ORT), which is preferred by 64.2 percent of respondents as their main source of information. Trust in Russian media is also higher when compared to Moldovan, European, or Romanian media.

Despite these smears, and despite being a relatively new figure in Moldovan politics, Sandu, a former minister of education, gained impressive support without using complex electoral strategies.

The geopolitical factor and the East-West controversy

Unlike in previous elections, the candidates chose not to fully present their electoral platforms, but largely focused on the fight against corruption. Geopolitical considerations, Moldova's development path, and foreign policy considerations took a back seat but nevertheless played an important role in voters' choices.

Igor Dodon made clear his desire to forge closer relations with Russia from the very beginning. He promised to reopen the Russian market to Moldovan agricultural products, create facilities for Moldovan working migrants, and steer the country towards federalization as a model for reintegrating Transnistria. Moreover, in one of his interviews with Russian media, Dodon expressed open admiration for Russian president Vladimir Putin and aspirations to follow his example.⁸

Statements referring to Moldova's neutral status and its relations with NATO as well as with its immediate neighbors, Romania and Ukraine, caused tensions in political circles abroad and introduced ethnic and linguistic considerations into the debate. Dodon explicitly condemned pro-unionist movements allegedly supported by certain Romanian politicians and urged particular changes in the education sector that would more clearly differentiate the two countries.

Ukraine's elite perceived Dodon as a pro-Russian candidate from the beginning, and tensions heightened following his claims that Crimea belongs to Russia, thus undermining Ukraine's territorial integrity. After being reminded that good neighborly relations between Moldova and Ukraine depend on respecting each other's territorial integrity and sovereignty, he later clarified the statement, saying that he only meant to describe a de facto situation.

Contrary to her opponent, Maia Sandu seldom addressed foreign affairs, but her image as a new type of politician—building up a grassroots party with no financial or business interests and pursuing the principles of democracy and human rights—clearly positioned her as a promoter of Western values and European integration. Educated at Harvard, and with a background in economics and international experience at the World Bank, Sandu fired up her supporters with anti-corruption and anti-oligarchic messages and demonstrated a clear understanding of the social problems stemming from deep poverty. She has also gained the support of the EU's most powerful political family, the European People's Party.

Conclusions

Although not yet invested as president, Dodon's statements during the election campaign hint at his future orientation and policies. Judging from his past comments on Ukraine and Romania, relations with Moldova's neighbors will most likely decrease in intensity and go through changes. Despite his limited powers, the president will have a significant impact on public opinion and will probably deepen the existing political polarization.

Realizing his inability to dominate the domestic agenda, Dodon will likely turn to foreign policy and focus on representing the country abroad. In order to pay back Russia for its support, the newly elected president might go through with the idea of a national referendum on the country's geopolitical orientation and initiate talks on cooperation with the Eurasian Union. Nevertheless, he is unlikely to go ahead single-handedly due to significant opposition and the imminent threat of protests.

Despite his prior statements denouncing the Association Agreement and the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) with the EU, Dodon started hedging his bets soon after being elected. After announcing his first visit to Moscow, he quickly reassured Brussels of an upcoming visit, and acknowledged that the EU

provides a more sizeable pool of financial support than Russia. This suggests the continuation of the current EU–Russia balancing act. On the domestic front, Dodon’s alleged links to Plahotniuc likely preclude any progress in fighting state capture.

With regard to EU–Moldova relations, a standstill is likely since endemic corruption and the lack of serious reforms have transformed the governing coalition from a success story to a distrusted partner. The new president’s rhetoric makes any positive change doubtful; on the contrary, a deterioration might be expected. Hopes by the government and its executive coordinator Plahotniuc that a pro-Russian president will make the cabinet look more palatable to the EU may turn out to be naive. As for other EU bodies, the EPP regards Sandu as a pro-European leader and is encouraging the further cooperation of center-right parties ahead of the 2018 parliamentary elections. The biggest challenge for the newly formed pro-Western parties in the next two years will be keeping their popularity while strengthening their voice in the regions.

According to the Constitution, the president is the commander of the armed forces, with the power to supervise and approve the participation of the armed forces in military exercises and peacekeeping missions. This raises serious concerns with regard to Moldova’s current participation in NATO military exercises (28 of them to date) and involvement in peacekeeping missions under the UN and OSCE umbrella.⁹ These established partnerships allow the Moldovan armed forces to strengthen their internal capacities by receiving

institutional support, as well as to professionalize the army.

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The elections showed that dialogue between the Moldova and Transnistria is possible when mutual support is needed to obtain political gains. It also demonstrated Transnistrian authorities’ high level of influence over the population on the left bank, which is susceptible to bribes and ready to follow orders.¹⁰ The outcome of the elections raises serious questions about the future, including the territory’s reintegration, and its possible influence on Moldova’s foreign policy choices. The fact that the majority of left bank residents expressed a preference for Dodon, a supporter of the Eurasian Economic Union as well as Russian president Vladimir Putin, will need to be addressed by the political elite. Moldovan authorities’ current strategy of small steps should prioritize people-to-people links as well as opportunities to engage citizens on the left bank, regardless of the political deadlock.

Moldova will likely struggle hesitantly between East and West in the next two years, as this is the most beneficial state of affairs for the political elite in power. The 2018 parliamentary elections could present an opportunity for the new pro-Western parties to take the lead and change the game. Regaining the trust of Moldova’s Euro-Atlantic partners will only be possible through a serious and transparent reform agenda, which will require taking a stand in crucial domestic and foreign policy matters.

¹ EU Budget Support for the Republic of Moldova – pending the fulfilment of several conditions, 8 July, 2015, http://eeas.europa.eu/archives/delegations/moldova/documents/press_corner/press_release_eu_budget_support_2015_07_08_en.pdf

² Public Opinion Survey Residents of Moldova, September 29- October 21, 2015, http://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/wysiwyg/2015-11-09_survey_of_moldovan_public_opinion_september_29-october_21_2015.pdf

³ Presidential elections on October 30 and November 13, 2016, <http://www.e-democracy.md/elections/presidential/2016/>

⁴ 18 284 votes on additional lists next to Transnistrian region, Agora.md portal, 14 November 2016, <http://agora.md/stiri/24702/harta--18-284-voturi-pe-listele-suplimentare-langa-regiunea-transnistreana>

⁵ Central Electoral Commission, Decision Nr. 572, 18 November 2016, http://www.cec.md/files/files/raportalegeriprezidentialefinali_7447937.pdf

⁶ The new presidents of Bulgaria and Moldova are less pro-Russian than advertised, The Economist, 14 November 2016, <http://www.economist.com/news/europe/21710168-both-countries-are-continuing-long-standing-game-playing-russia-and-west-against-each>

⁷ October 2016 Barometer of Public Opinion, Institute for Public Policy, page 32, http://ipp.md/public/files/Barometru/BOP_10.2016.pdf

⁸ Statement of the day Igor Dodon: I want to make the citizens of the Republic of Moldova proud of their country and not to seek unification with Romania / Romania is guilty for the conflict in Transnistria, Mediafax.ro portal, 16 November 2016, <http://www.mediafax.ro/externe/declaratia-zilei-igor-dodon-vreau-sa-li-fac-pe-cetatenii-rep-moldova-mandri-de-tara-lor-nu-sa-vrea-unirea-cu-romania-romania-este-vinovata-pentru-conflictul-din-transnistria-15970397>

⁹ Peacekeeping missions, Defence Ministry of the Republic of Moldova, <http://www.army.md/?lng=2&action=show&cat=163>

¹⁰ Bribing cases during election have been observed on the right bank too.

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