

The good, the bad and the ugly of Moldova's recent elections

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Executive Summary

The validation of Moldova's recent presidential election results by the national Constitutional Court on 28 November has seemingly turned a new page in the country's highly contested and turbulent political process. On the surface, the incumbent president, Maia Sandu, an enthusiastic supporter of European integration, has achieved a categorical victory and obtained a new mandate. In fact, the recent elections and referendum exposed a growing illiberal and anti-western tide in Moldova. A radical change in governing philosophy and partner engagement will be required to avoid a pro-Russian majority in the parliamentary elections in 2025.

Bad news, good news and ugly reality

The presidential election and the referendum on European Union integration revealed important and insightful signals about current political dynamics in Moldova. However, these signals are not optimistic. For instance, even though the incumbent president, Maia Sandu, won against Russia-backed Alexandr Stoianoglo by an apparently wide margin (55% to 44%), these figures are misleading. In-country support for Sandu reveals a negative trend compared to the previous presidential elections and Sandu actually lost the popular vote to Stoianoglo if diaspora votes are excluded. The EU integration referendum tells an even more depressing story. While expectations and polling before the referendum [estimated](#) over 60% support for EU integration, voting showed that slightly over 50% of voters favoured Moldova joining the EU.

Nonetheless, the electoral exercise also highlighted some potentially positive aspects. Based on various accounts, only between 10% and 20% of the electorate holds a genuinely anti-western opinion in Moldova. There are still several months before the more critical parliamentary elections, which means that there is sufficient time for the authorities to engage with swing voters to convince them that their objectives can only be achieved if Moldova

becomes an EU member state. This group was largely lost due to Russia's [unprecedented electoral interference](#), which was conducted against a backdrop of weak counter-efforts by the Moldovan authorities.

For various reasons, however, this opportunity is unlikely to be grasped. Based on the Moldovan government's existing priorities and technical competencies, it is doubtful that it could mobilise to counter effectively Russia's electoral interference. Furthermore, there is a growing gap between the Russia-related threats and Moldova's capabilities that cannot be bridged quickly because of decades-long disregard for investment in and development of national security. This is the ugly aspect of these voting exercises – and the EU is unlikely to be able to mobilise in a timely manner to compensate for Moldova's lack of capacity and capabilities.

A brutal review of the voting results

Despite the overt optimism generated by Moldova's recent presidential election and the result of the EU integration referendum, a careful analysis of the data suggests that the Moldovan population's enthusiasm for the EU is currently malleable and borders on rejection. These electoral exercises have not yet "determined Moldova's geopolitical alignment" but they do serve as a strong warning that the country's EU path is easily reversible. They also suggest that Moldova's population is subject and vulnerable to the same wave of increasing illiberalism that has affected countries in and outside the region.

The first challenge, when comparing the 2020 presidential election with the most recent one, is that Maia Sandu received fewer votes from the country residents. The relative loss of 41,105 voters in 2024 elections represents 2.45% of valid votes, which is a considerable change in terms of both value and significance. This unfavourable dynamic for EU-leaning political forces was further strengthened by an increase in support for the pro-Russian candidate (22,305 votes).

Furthermore, while Maia Sandu won the popular vote among residents of Moldova in the 2020 presidential elections, she lost it in 2024, gaining 36,126 fewer votes than Stoianoglo. It was this detail that prompted Igor Dodon – Sandu's opponent in the 2020 presidential elections and the leader of the pro-Russian Party of Socialists – to [contest the legitimacy](#) of Sandu's victory. It is an interesting fact that Dmitry Peskov, President Putin's press secretary, made a similar statement, [challenging](#) the legitimacy of Sandu's victory by invoking her loss of in-country popular support.

Candidate / party	2020			2024			Difference, in-country (2024 vs 2020)
	Total	Abroad	In-country	Total	Abroad	In-country	
Sandu (PAS)	943,006	243,605	699,401	930,139	271,843	658,296	- 41,105
Dodon/Stoianoglo (PSRM)	690,615	18,498	672,117	750,430	56,008	694,422	+ 22,305

Fig.1: Data on the 2020 and 2024 presidential elections and the 2024 constitutional referendum (source: alegeri.md, cec.md)

Dodon dubbed Moldova's diaspora, which is largely pro-European and has been extremely active in the last few elections, a "parallel electorate". Pro-Russian politicians claim that Moldovans living in Moldova have greater voting legitimacy than those residing outside its territory.

The claim that those living abroad supposedly have less of a stake in the country's development, resonates with the majority, creating fertile ground for attempts by pro-Russian political forces to limit the voting rights of Moldovan citizens who have lived abroad for more than a specified number of years. A pro-Russian parliamentary majority, which is a highly likely scenario following parliamentary elections in 2025, could initiate such a legislative change to consolidate its grasp on power. Russia and its political proxies in Moldova could also develop and conduct influence operations targeted at the diaspora, aiming to antagonise Moldovan residents against citizens living abroad, portraying them as "out of touch with local reality."

These efforts, if formalised through laws or regulations, would not necessarily face the resistance of the majority. This is indicated by the fact the referendum results show that only 50.35% of the almost 1.5 million who voted were in favour of including EU integration in the Constitution, while 49.65% were against. The numerical difference between these two groups was slightly over 10,500, which is an insignificant number. Moreover, if the diaspora vote is excluded, only 38% of Moldova residents voted in favour.

Alongside the inability of the pro-European authorities to persuade the population of the benefits of joining the EU, these trends suggest a growing level of illiberalism among the Moldovan population. This wave has not yet exhausted its energy.

Some grounds for optimism

The underlying social and political mechanisms driving these election results are not a recent development. In fact, survey results of popular preferences in Moldova [reveal](#) emerging dynamics consistent with increasing illiberalism shortly after Maia Sandu and her Party of Action and Solidarity (PAS) came to power in 2022. These changes coincide with a significant increase in Russia's influence operations in Moldova, following its overt military aggression against Ukraine in February 2022.

It is this correlation that allows for some optimism as it means that the growing anti-EU sentiment of recent years is mostly linked to Russia's strategic deception and exploitation of fear. While consolidated political preferences are extremely difficult to change, this circumstantial variation in political preferences is malleable.

Another reason for optimism is the period left before the parliamentary elections, which are [expected](#) to take place no later than September 2025. This offers sufficient time for effective engagement with the public's political perceptions about the benefits of EU integration, but is not so long that the public might lose the feeling of urgency and grow indifferent. Therefore, the presidential elections and the referendum came at a convenient time to prompt a reality check for the ruling PAS and Moldova's Western partners.

Despite this opportunity, however, given current developments in the ruling party, its level of technical expertise along with its implementation capacity, and the resources it is willing to mobilise, the PAS government appears unlikely to be able to address the growing illiberalism and anti-Western sentiment. PAS has consistently struggled to handle and embrace constructive criticism since it took control of the government in 2021. In one example, the ruling party reacted defensively to the disagreements of the head of the Anticorruption Prosecutor's Office, Veronica Dragalin, a successful former Assistant United States Attorney, who PAS appointed in 2022. Improvement cannot be achieved by rejecting technical expertise and being complacent. It is worth noting that Sandu's loss of the popular vote is linked to the failure of PAS to deliver on its flagship electoral promise to fight corruption. PAS has also had the highest turnover of cabinet members and state secretaries in Moldova's post-Soviet history.

Ending the impasse

The biggest deficiency of the PAS ruling party has been its elitist approach to politics. In confronting a highly active and aggressive Russian anti-West influence campaign, PAS has only attempted to actively engage with Moldova's citizens during the electoral campaign. To turn the tide, the Moldovan authorities will have to adjust their strategy, and prioritise the following:

- Imperatively develop and conduct a nationwide public information campaign that addresses the benefits of EU integration, focused on pragmatic reasons rather than values. This emphasis is because the World Value Survey [reveals](#) that Moldovans score very highly on survival values and very low on values of self-expression.
- It is critical that this strategy actively reveal and publicly demonstrate the hostile nature of Russia and its harmful designs towards Moldova's citizens. Previously, the Moldovan authorities have studiously avoided such actions.
- Develop a strategy of denial in response to Russia's influence operations, which will require effective blocking of Russian access and activities in Moldova's information domain. This will mean building an active defence that denies access to news and information of Russian origin.
- Better capitalise on the EU's efforts and the resources available to counter hybrid threats in Moldova. This will mean requesting more robust EU involvement and replacing the current philosophy of passive advice with a more hands-on and rapid-reaction approach, which would include participation in the planning and implementation of activities to counter hostile foreign actions.



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