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## BULLETIN

# Moldovans to Vote in Combined Presidential Election and European Referendum

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Moldova will hold presidential elections on 20 October. The favourite is Maia Sandu, who is seeking re-election. In contrast, the pro-Russian opposition has not consolidated and has nominated a number of candidates, which reduces their chances of electoral success. A referendum on an amendment to the constitution to include European integration as a strategic goal of the country will be held in parallel. The simultaneous votes is intended to mobilise a pro-Western electorate. The likely success of the pro-European option will represent a consolidation of Moldova's current course, contested by pro-Russian groups.

**Sandu's Re-election Prospects.** President Sandu has been [in office since December 2020](#) and, despite her formally limited prerogatives, [leads both the Party of Action and Solidarity \(PAS\), which has had a majority in parliament since the July 2021 elections](#), and [the Dorin Recean government](#). She started [the country on the path away from dependence on Russia](#) and began pro-European reforms. Shortly after the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Moldova applied for EU membership. It [was granted candidate status in June 2022](#) and began accession negotiations with the Union in December 2023.

Sandu is the election favourite because of her image as the personal guarantor of EU integration. According to an iData poll from September, she has the support of 27% of resident voters. This means that she may not win in the first round, however, the polls do not take into account the diaspora of more than 1 million—against 2.5 million resident Moldovans (excluding Transnistria)—which *en masse* support the country's Western aspirations. In the 2020 elections, the diaspora cast 15.5% of the vote, of which 93% was in favour of Sandu.

The president announced she would continue structural reforms in a second term. Above all, she promises economic improvements, necessary as Moldova's GDP in 2024 is barely 92% of its 1991 value, and investment in infrastructure. Sandu stresses that EU accession will ensure increased

prosperity, as well as peace and security for the country. She also announced a continued fight against corruption and explains the lack of major success in this area, including convictions of the principals behind the theft of one billion dollars (around 12% of GDP) from Moldova's banking system in 2014 or recovery of even part of the money, by the resistance of judges and prosecutors to reform.

**Pro-EU Referendum.** On Sandu's initiative, a referendum on amending the constitution will be held together with the presidential election. It concerns the addition of the phrase the "European identity of the nation" and puts EU integration as a strategic goal of the country into the preamble, as well as adds a section stipulating that EU treaties will be adopted as organic laws that need a majority vote of 51 out of 101 MPs. This means that the future EU accession treaty will not require an additional referendum in Moldova. Sandu and PAS argue that the amendment will ensure that the country stays the course even if reluctant EU groupings come to power, a scenario that may materialise after next year's parliamentary elections in which PAS is unlikely to gain an independent majority.

The combining of the two votes is intended to mobilise a pro-Western electorate disappointed with the pace of reforms. That is why Sandu and PAS are presenting the referendum as a *de facto* vote for accession, which the government set as a

goal to be completed by 2030. According to iData, with an expected turnout of 67% for the referendum, 46% report they will vote “for” and 39% will vote “against” it, while 13% of respondents are uncertain. The final result could be much better than predicted through the mobilisation of the diaspora. The accession messaging is directed not only to the population of Moldova, as seen by intensified visits of EU leaders in August and September. Chişinău received the presidents of Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, and Romania, the German Chancellor, and the prime ministers of Poland, Luxembourg, and Greece. It also hosted the fifth edition of the Moldova Support Platform, a forum of more than 60 Western countries and international organisations that during the meeting offered an additional €380 million to support reforms. In parallel, Russia is trying to influence the results of the voting. Its propaganda targets the LGBT community and threatens Moldova’s entanglement in the war next door, suggesting that Ukrainian F-16 fighter jets will operate from Moldovan airports. The Russian Foreign Ministry, purportedly defending the rights of the Moldovan diaspora, also called for more electoral commissions on the territory of Russia.

**Divided Opposition.** Sandu’s main challenger who probably can count on 11% of the vote will be the formally independent Alexandr Stoianoglo, a Gagauzian-born former prosecutor general dismissed on Sandu’s order in 2023. He promises to restore “true justice” and preserve the country’s neutrality. Although he claims to be in favour of EU integration, at the same time he questions the sense of it while manipulating examples of its costs and benefits. He denies being under Russian influence and claims not to have visited Russia in at least 10 years. Stoianoglo’s trump card is the backing of the second force in parliament, the Party of Socialists (PSRM). Its leader, the former president Igor Dodon, is not running, although according to polls he would have been Sandu’s main challenger. He probably feared that another defeat would ultimately discredit him in front of the electorate and that Russia would regard him irretrievably as an unpromising partner. His calls to unite the opposition around Stoianoglo, though, have been ineffective. Such cooperation was rejected by the regional [populist politician Renato Usatîi](#), hostile to Dodon and appealing to a moderately pro-Russian electorate—according to iData, he could win 13%, but in other polls only 6% of the vote. Even the pro-Russian Party of Communists, which forms a joint bloc with the PSRM, supported another candidate, the former prime minister Vasile Tarlev (6%).

Ilan Şor, [Russia’s favourite](#), cannot run in these elections because he is in exile in Moscow after being sentenced to 15 years in prison in Moldova for orchestrating the billion-dollar theft. In his place he has anointed the parliamentarian Vasile Bolea, who is in conflict with Dodon and forced a split in the PSRM. However, in August the Central Election Commission refused to register Bolea’s electoral committee, the Victorie Political Bloc, set up by five Şor-controlled parties in Moscow in April, due to financial irregularities and formal errors. The commission also did not register Bolea as

an independent candidate, viewing it was an attempt to circumvent the law as he actually belongs to the Renaştere party, also controlled by Şor. Ahead of the presidential election and referendum, Şor intensified attempts to destabilise Moldova by spreading Russian propaganda and disinformation through social media and online television. Entering as tourists, his supporters bring cash from Russia to illegally fund his political parties.

The main bastion of Şor’s influence in Moldova is the autonomous Gagauzia. With Bolea not allowed to run, its residents are likely to support the pro-Russian Irina Vlah, a former governor (başkan) of the autonomous area and independent of Şor, with 6% support in polls. Gagauzians will reject the pro-European option in the referendum, perhaps even with a 90% majority. This is the result not only of their traditionally pro-Russian sentiment but also of Şor propaganda and the activity of the current başkan, Evghenia Guţul, elected as Şor’s candidate in 2023. She regularly visits Russia, where, speaking from the position of a high-ranking state dignitary, she deprecates Sandu’s pro-European policy and misleads Gagauzia residents with false promises of Russian aid allegedly blocked by the PAS central government.

**Conclusions.** President Sandu is likely to win re-election, although probably only in the second round of elections, a result of voter frustration with the insufficient improvement promised in her first term, as well as the living situation and slow fight against corruption. Despite this, the Moldovan public, with significant participation of the diaspora, will probably opt for the pro-European option in the referendum. The enshrinement of EU integration in the constitution as a result will have symbolic significance and mobilise society around this idea. However, contrary to Sandu’s assertions, it will not guarantee that the country’s pro-European course will be maintained if Eurosceptic groups take power, which cannot be ruled out in the run-up to the July 2025 parliamentary elections.

Russian influence in Moldova is strong, but reorganisation is underway, leaving the pro-Russian opposition divided. Russia is likely to have shied away from strong involvement in the current elections after recognising that no one has a chance against Sandu, while the presidential office has little formal prerogatives. At the same time, Russia’s strategic goal remains to promote parties that will win a governmental majority and stop Moldova’s EU integration. Therefore, Russia sees it as a test of strategy, including how effective the candidates’ messages manifest varying degrees of pro-Russian views, ahead of the 2025 elections.

Poland’s interest, beyond its support of EU enlargement, is to make the most of the period of pro-Western governance in Moldova. In particular, it could use its upcoming presidency of the EU Council to more actively lobby European institutions for increased assistance and persuade [partners](#) to directly support the transition expected by Moldovan society. Better use of Poland’s potential could be made by reconstituting the position of the prime minister’s plenipotentiary for the promotion of reform in Moldova.