



Report

MOLDOVA VOTES 2024: A CHOICE BETWEEN RUSSIA AND THE EU

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About the Author

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Content

Introduction..... 3

Background 4

Moldova’s presidential candidates 8

War in Ukraine: the impact on Moldova 9

Russia’s hybrid campaign in Moldova 11

Outlook for Moldova in 2025 14

Conclusions and recommendations 15

Introduction

It is now or never for the Republic of Moldova and its democratic future. On October 20, 2024, the small landlocked country situated between Romania and Ukraine will hold two votes that will determine its position within Europe against a backdrop of renewed East-West confrontation.

In the presidential election, the pro-EU and reformist incumbent Maia Sandu is **seeking to win a second term to advance her administration's European and reform agenda that began in 2020**. Moldovan voters will also be asked in a referendum whether or not to amend their country's 1994 constitution to make EU membership an irreversible strategic objective.

Since Sandu came to office four years ago, Moldova has made significant progress towards European integration. Popular support in Moldova for the EU stands today at a substantial rate (63 percent¹), despite widespread Russian coercion and the country's profound ideological and ethnic divisions. In June 2024, Moldova reached a critical milestone when it received the European Council's formal approval to start EU accession negotiations².

But Russia has been carrying out a hybrid destabilization campaign against Moldova that aims to keep the former Soviet state within its sphere of influence.

¹ "IRI Polling Shows Strong support for EU accession in Ukraine and Moldova | International Republic Institute," Ben Thompson, International Republican Institute, accessed October 16, 2024, <https://www.iri.org/news/iri-polling-shows-strong-support-for-eu-accession-in-ukraine-and-moldova/>

² "EU opens accession negotiations with Moldova," European Commission, accessed October 16, 2024, https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/eu-opens-accession-negotiations-moldova-2024-06-25_en

The Kremlin mobilizes a wide range of elaborate methods in pursuit of this geopolitical goal, including the funding of political proxies, disinformation, and the channeling of illegal financial flows³.

While an opportunity exists in the October elections to reaffirm Moldova's path towards Europe, Moscow will continue to exacerbate tensions. The anti-corruption and pro-EU Party of Action and Solidarity may lose its majority in Moldova's parliamentary elections next year. This would make it extremely difficult for Sandu to implement her policies since executive power lies solely with the parliament⁴.

Background

In the three decades following its exit from Soviet rule in 1991, Moldova has found it difficult to assert itself outside of Russia's influence. Historically, the country has

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been a contested space between the great European powers. While the Soviet Union's collapse emancipated Moldova from Russian control, independence has exposed deeply rooted tensions between its Romanian and Russian speaking populations. This challenge facing

³ Fredrik Wesslau, "Russia's hybrid war against Moldova," SCEEUS Stockholm Centre for Eastern European Studies, SCEEUS Report No. 15, 2024, accessed October 16, 2024, <https://www.ui.se/globalassets/ui.se-eng/publications/sceeus/2024-publications/russias-hybrid-war-against-moldova.pdf>

⁴ Constitution of the Republic of Moldova, The Constitutional Court of the Republic of Moldova, accessed October 16, 2024, https://www.constcourt.md/public/files/file/Actele_Curtii/acte_en/MDA_Constitution_EN.pdf

Moldova's European integration process has been made even more difficult by high-level corruption⁵.

In 2014, \$1bn (equivalent to 12 percent of Moldova's GDP) was stolen from the Moldovan banking system, which severely harmed the socio-economic welfare of its population⁶. Today, many **Moldovan citizens, particularly from rural areas, are heavily dependent on social assistance and remittances**⁷. Meanwhile, Russia has often threatened to withhold gas deliveries as part of an effort to coerce decision-making in Chisinau vis-a-vis Moldova's relations with the EU⁸. Four years ago, Moldovan voters chose freely to make a decisive break from this negative trajectory.

In 2020, **Sandu was elected as Moldova's first-ever female president on a mandate to fight corruption, implement institutional reforms, and advance European integration**⁹. The building of a broad consensus across the ethnically and ideologically diverse Moldovan population behind EU membership

⁵ "Moldova - Transparency.org," Transparency International, accessed October 16, 2024, <https://www.transparency.org/en/countries/moldova>

⁶ "Ex-PM Vlad Filat held over \$1bn bank scam," BBC News, accessed October 16, 2024, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-34569887>

⁷ "Moldova Overview - The World Bank Group," The World Bank Group, accessed October 16, 2024, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/moldova/overview>

⁸ "Moldova: Russia threatens gas supply in Europe's poorest state," Steve Rosenberg, BBC News, accessed October 16, 2024, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-59048894>

⁹ "Moldova's new pro-EU president pledges to be 'honest and transparent'," RFE/RL's Moldovan Service, accessed October 16, 2024,, <https://www.rferl.org/a/m/31018319.html>

has been a key success of Sandu's presidency. Today, almost every Moldovan politician wants to avoid being seen as pro-Russian¹⁰.

In parallel, Moldova's government has won vital Western backing (both political and financial) for its efforts to combat high-level corruption (particularly in the judiciary) and **align with EU foreign and security policy**¹¹. Moldova officially commenced EU accession talks in June 2024, only two years after it achieved EU candidate status alongside Ukraine. This marks a significant political boost for Sandu as she aims to take her country into the EU by 2030¹².

Moldova's elections on October 20 will be a test on whether the country can **maintain its European path or fall back into Russia's orbit**. Sandu hopes that the Moldovan Constitutional Court's approval to hold an EU accession referendum on the same day as the presidential vote will galvanize Moldova's pro-European electorate behind her administration's reform agenda. Sandu told supporters when she launched her re-election campaign in Chisinau that 'integrating Moldova into the broad European family' is the mission of 'our generation of democracy.'¹³

¹⁰ "Moldovan elections to spotlight decline of support for Russia," Vladimir Solovyov, Carnegie Russia and Eurasia Center, accessed October 16, 2024, <https://carnegieendowment.org/russia-eurasia/politika/2024/09/moldova-russia-elections-influence?lang=en>

¹¹ "Moldova-EU security and defence partnership agreement," European External Action Service, accessed October 16, 2024, https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/g12nbsvs/security-and-defence-partnership_eu-md_for-website-publication.pdf

¹² "What does the launch of EU accession talks mean for Moldova?," Luarentiu Plasma, The German Marshall Fund of the United States, accessed October 16, 2024, <https://www.gmfus.org/news/what-does-launch-eu-accession-talks-mean-moldova>

¹³ "Sandu launches Moldova re-election bid, referendum campaign on joining EU," Alexander Tanas, Reuters, accessed October 16, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/sandu-launches-moldova-re-election-bid-referendum-campaign-joining-eu-2024-09-20/>

But at the same time, the elections present an opportunity for the Kremlin to derail Sandu's European integration efforts and reassert control over Moldova's post-communist transition. **In parallel to its full-scale war on Ukraine, Russia has waged a hybrid destabilization campaign against the former Soviet state**¹⁴. Rather than initiate a direct military intervention as it has done in Ukraine, the Kremlin aims to destabilize Moldova and reverse its EU path with non-kinetic warfare. In October, the European Parliament adopted a resolution on Russia's interference in Moldova, which noted that Moscow has spent approximately €100 million to undermine Moldova's democratic process¹⁵.

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Maria Zakharova, the Russian foreign ministry spokesperson, recently accused the West of pushing Moldova into 'exactly the same catastrophe' as Ukraine in a statement designed to instill fear and distrust amongst Moldova's Russian-leaning population towards Sandu¹⁶. **As Moldova enters its 2024-25 election cycle, an intensification of Russia's hybrid destabilization campaign against the aspiring EU member state can be expected.**

¹⁴ "At Ukraine's Edge, Russia Presses Hybrid War on Tiny Moldova," James Rupert, United States Institute of Peace, accessed October 16, 2024, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2023/07/ukraines-edge-russia-presses-hybrid-war-tiny-moldova>

¹⁵ "Strengthening Moldova's resilience against Russian interference ahead of the upcoming presidential elections and a constitutional referendum on EU integration," European Parliament Plenary, accessed October 16, 2024, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-10-2024-0016_EN.pdf

¹⁶ "West pushes Moldova towards catastrophe after testing it in Ukraine," TASS Russian News Agency, accessed October 16, 2024, <https://tass.com/politics/1841915>

Moldova's presidential candidates

A total number of 11 candidates have been registered for the presidential elections on October 20. The main contenders are:

- **Maia Sandu (Party of Action and Solidarity)**¹⁷. The pro-European and reformist candidate and current president of Moldova from the anti-corruption and pro-EU Party of Action and Solidarity. Sandu is campaigning for a 'Yes' vote in the EU accession referendum¹⁸ and seeking to secure a second term to advance her pro-European and pro-reform agenda.
- **Alexandr Stoianoglo (Party of Socialists)**¹⁹. A political newcomer and former prosecutor general, who is supportive of Moldova's EU integration and considered to be Sandu's main challenger. His presidential bid received a boost after former president Igor Dodon from the pro-Russian Party of Socialists pulled out of the election and appealed to other opposition leaders to do the same to ensure Stoianoglo becomes the sole candidate to take on Sandu²⁰.

¹⁷ Biography, The Office of the president, accessed October 16, 2024. <https://presedinte.md/eng/biography>

¹⁸ "Moldovan president launches campaign to promote EU referendum," Reuters, accessed October 16, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/moldovan-president-launches-campaign-promote-eu-referendum-2024-03-18/>

¹⁹ People of Interest. Rise Moldova, accessed 16 October 2024. <https://profiles.rise.md/profile.php?id=191210140700&lang=eng>

²⁰ "Political Newbie Stoianoglo Adds Intrigue to Moldovan Elections," Vladimir Solovyov, Carnegie Russia and Eurasia Center, accessed October 16, 2024, <https://carnegieendowment.org/russia-eurasia/politika/2024/07/moldova-opposition-stoianoglo-sandu?lang=en>

- **Renato Usatii (Our Party)**.²¹ The nominee from the pro-Russian Our Party, who served as the mayor of Balti, one of Moldova's main urban centres (2019-21). His links with Russia and oligarchic networks²² have diminished his political standing.

War in Ukraine: the impact on Moldova

Pervasive poverty, weak public administration, and an over-reliance on Russian energy have undermined Moldova's socio-economic development since it became an independent state in 1991. These structural challenges have meant that Moldova has suffered acutely from the fallout of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

In October 2022, the Russian gas giant, Gazprom, slashed its deliveries to Moldova from 9 million to 5.7 million cubic meters²³. **This instigated an energy crisis in Moldova that left its breakaway Russian-speaking enclave, Transnistria, without any electricity.** Moldova's national energy regulatory agency raised the electricity tariff for household consumers at a severe rate of 25%²⁴. The sharp

²¹ People of Interest. Rise Moldova, accessed 16 October 2024, <https://profiles.rise.md/profile.php?id=200315094607&lang=eng>

²² "Moldova: Controversial Politician Renato Usatii Released," OCCRP Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project, accessed October 16, 2024, <https://www.occrp.org/en/news/moldova-controversial-politician-renato-usatii-released>

²³ "Moldova says Russia's Gazprom cuts gas supplies by 30%," Reuters, accessed October 16, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/moldova-says-russias-gazprom-cuts-gas-supplies-by-30-2022-10-01/>

²⁴ "Fresh Electricity Price Hike Hits Moldova Hard," Madalin, Necsutu, Balkan Insight, accessed October 16, 2024, <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/11/30/fresh-electricity-price-hike-hits-moldova-hard/>

increase in the cost of energy has had the effect of dividing the Moldovan population between those who want to maintain cultural and economic relations with Russia and others who are committed to the European path²⁵.

But at the same time, Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has seen a diminishing of Russian influence in Moldova in favour of European integration. Polls have shown that a majority of Moldovans condemn Russia for its unprovoked aggression against Ukraine²⁶. Meanwhile, Sandu has made the development of Moldova's relations with its western EU and NATO neighbour Romania a key priority of her presidency²⁷. In 2022, Moldovan exports to the EU reached 60%, compared to less than 25% for the Commonwealth of Independent States (including Russia)²⁸. **Russia's war on Ukraine also prompted Moldova to enhance cooperation with NATO while upholding its constitutional neutrality²⁹.**

²⁵ "How an energy crisis is testing Moldova's mettle to turn away from Russia," Madalin Necsutu, Euronews, accessed October 16, 2024 <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2022/11/09/how-an-energy-crisis-is-testing-moldovas-mettle-to-turn-away-from-russia>

²⁶ "CBS Research poll: 40% of Moldovans believe Russian Federation is to blame for provoking war in Ukraine," Viorica Rusica, Radio Moldova, accessed October 16, 2024, <https://radiomoldova.md/p/5234/cbs-research-poll-40-of-moldovans-believe-russian-federation-is-to-blame-for-provoking-war-in-ukraine>

²⁷ "Presidents of Moldova, Romania in Chisinau sign Joint Declaration on bilateral cooperation for consolidation of Moldova's resilience," MOLDPRES State News Agency, accessed October 16, 2024, <https://www.moldpres.md/en/news/2024/08/31/24006768>

²⁸ "International trade in goods of the Republic of Moldova in December 2022 and 2022," National Bureau of Statistics of the Republic of Moldova, accessed October 16, 2024, https://statistica.gov.md/en/international-trade-in-goods-of-the-republic-of-moldova-in-9539_60309.html

²⁹ "NATO and Moldova continue to strengthen their partnership," NATO, accessed October 16, 2024, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_223927.htm

That said, Russia's aggression has witnessed relations deteriorate between Chisinau and Moldova's pro-Russian regions. Gagauzia, the autonomous southern Moldovan region, frequently criticizes Chisinau for its pivot towards Europe and claims it disrespects the rights of its predominantly Russian-speaking population³⁰. In February 2024, officials in Transnistria issued a declaration requesting Russia to 'implement measures to protect 'the breakaway enclave in response to what they see as 'increased pressure from Moldova these of escalation The .³¹' internal tensions threatens to unravel Moldova's societal and democratic cohesion as its decisive elections approach.

Russia also uses disinformation to destabilize Moldova and undermine its constitutional order.

Russia's hybrid campaign in Moldova

Russia's weaponization of Moldova's profound social divisions and politico-economic challenges form a core element of its hybrid warfare. Political proxies under the leadership of fugitive Moldovan oligarch Ilan Shor have been financed by Russia to undermine and ultimately topple Sandu's legitimate pro-European government³². A Russian group has targeted more than 130,000 Moldovans

³⁰ "Will Gagauzia become Moldova's Second Breakaway Region?" Galiya Ibragimova, Carnegie Russia and Eurasia Center, accessed October 16, 2024, <https://carnegieendowment.org/russia-eurasia/politika/2024/05/gagauzia-moldova-putin-shor?lang=en>

³¹ "Moldova: Breakaway Transnistria asks Russia for protection," DW News, accessed October 16, 2024, <https://www.dw.com/en/moldova-breakaway-transnistria-asks-russia-for-protection/a-68396033>

³² "National Security Council Coordinator for Strategic Communications John Kirby commented on Russian attempts to destabilise Moldova," U.S. Embassy Moldova, accessed October 16, 2024,

(5% of the registered electorate) with bribes to vote against the EU accession referendum and lend their support to pro-Moscow parties, according to Moldova's national police chief Viorel Cernautanu³³.

Russia also uses disinformation to destabilize Moldova and undermine its constitutional order. Shor-affiliated political leaders have benefited from false narratives surrounding Sandu's presidency, such as a Romanian takeover of Moldova's sovereignty³⁴. Tensions increased between Chisinau and Gagauzia when Evghenia Gutul, the pro-Russian and Shor-linked governor of the autonomous southern Moldovan region, stated that Chisinau had been pushing Moldova's unification with Romania .³⁵

Another narrative runs that Moldova faces a higher risk of war should it decide to renounce its neutrality and accede to NATO³⁶. The war in Ukraine, the energy crisis, and the sudden influx of Ukrainian refugees into Moldova have all added to

<https://md.usembassy.gov/national-security-council-coordinator-for-strategic-communications-john-kirby-commented-on-russian-attempts-to-destabilize-moldova/?fbclid=IwAR1F4MHuQqJVEogtJDb1VKy9Igf3r6RbHH6xs8TMWj5-3D26GBLuvum6Zms>

³³ "Moldova alleges pro-Russian vote-buying scheme ahead of key vote," Alexander Tanas, Reuters, accessed October 16, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/moldova-alleges-pro-russian-vote-buying-scheme-ahead-key-vote-2024-10-03/>

³⁴ "Russia's Disinformation Targets Moldova's Ties with Europe," Steven Youngblood and James Rupert, United States Institute of Peace, accessed October 16, 2024, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2024/07/russias-disinformation-targets-moldovas-ties-europe>

³⁵ "Death of Moldova': Head of Gagauzia slams potential reunification with Moldova," TASS Russian News Agency, accessed October 16, 2024, <https://tass.com/world/1771947>

³⁶ "Russia's Information War in Moldova," Maya Orenstein, Foreign Policy Research Institute, accessed October 16, 2024, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2024/10/russias-information-war-in-moldova/>

the perception that Sandu's pro-European agenda is associated with instability³⁷. These falsehoods have recently started to be transmitted through social media platforms after the Moldovan government suspended Shor-affiliated TV channels in 2022³⁸.

Sandu's lack of progress on judicial reform has often been cited as a shortcoming of her administration^{39,40}. But it is the case that the Moldovan president's efforts have been thwarted by Russia's ability to mobilize substantial illegal financial flows. In 2023 alone, Moldova's Information and Security Service detected that €55 million of Russian money had been funneled to influence Moldovan elections and buy votes⁴¹. Law enforcement and the trial process of illegal political activities in Moldova was undermined as a result⁴².

³⁷ "A referendum at the crossroads: Moldova's democratic test amidst presidential elections," Alexandru Demianenco, New Eastern Europe, accessed October 16, 2024, <https://neweasterneurope.eu/2024/06/14/a-referendum-at-the-crossroads-moldovas-democratic-test-amidst-presidential-elections/>

³⁸ "Moldova accuses Russia of trying to rig its EU referendum," Gabriel Gavin, POLITICO, accessed October 16, 2024, <https://www.politico.eu/article/moldova-russia-eu-referendum-membership-social-media/>

³⁹ "Moldova's Sandu Stakes Reelection on EU Integration," Vladimir Solovyov, Carnegie Russia and Eurasia Center, <https://carnegieendowment.org/russia-eurasia/politika/2024/02/moldovas-sandu-stakes-reelection-on-eu-integration?lang=en¢er=russia-eurasia>

⁴⁰ "Moldova - Time to Choose Moscow or Brussels," Anda Bologna, Center for European Policy Analysis, accessed October 16, 2024, <https://cepa.org/article/moldova-time-to-choose-moscow-or-brussels/>

⁴¹ "Moldova's security chief says Russia spent €55 million on destabilisation campaign," Elsa Court and The Kyiv Independent news desk, The Kyiv Independent, accessed October 16, 2024, <https://kyivindependent.com/moldovas-security-chief-says-russia-spent-55-million-on-destabilization-campaign/>

⁴² "Treasury Targets Corruption and the Kremlin's Malign Influence Operations in Moldova," U.S. Embassy Moldova, accessed October 16, 2024, <https://md.usembassy.gov/treasury-targets-corruption-and-the-kremlins-malign-influence-operations-in-moldova/>

Outlook for Moldova in 2025

Sandu and her Action and Solidarity party are determined to remain in office to advance Moldova's process of European integration. Moldova's president believes the referendum on EU accession will mobilize the Moldovan electorate to reaffirm the pro-European trajectory that their country has taken since 2020⁴³.

But Moldova faces severe Russian-orchestrated challenges that will test whether the country can maintain its path towards the EU. In the near term, it is likely that Russia will intensify its hybrid destabilization campaign to reassert control over the former Soviet republic. Despite the fallout from its aggression against Ukraine, Russia still finds itself in a relatively strong position to achieve this geopolitical objective.

While strong popular support for EU membership currently exists in Moldova, it cannot be taken for granted. Around half of the country's population remains aligned with Moscow⁴⁴. The EU accession referendum will be an important measure of the extent to which Moldovans still have faith in their government's pro-European and pro-reform agenda. If voters reject Sandu's referendum or turnout in low numbers on October 20, the Shor-led pro-Russian

⁴³ "Moldova Pro-West President Sandu To Seek Reelection, EU Referendum," RFE/RL's Moldovan Service, accessed October 16, 2024, <https://www.rferl.org/a/moldova-pro-european-president-sandu-second-term/32745383.html>

⁴⁴ "National Poll of Moldova | May-June 2024 | International Republican Institute," International Republic Institute, accessed October 16, 2024, <https://www.iri.org/resources/national-poll-of-moldova-may-june-2024/>

'Victory' party coalition in Moldova⁴⁵ may feel emboldened politically ahead of the crucial parliamentary elections in 2025.

Conclusions and recommendations

Moldova stands at a critical juncture in its post-Soviet transition. Under Sandu's leadership, the country has taken decisive steps towards consolidating its process of European integration. The decision to hold a referendum on EU accession alongside the presidential elections in which Sandu is seeking a second term offers a historic opportunity for Moldovan citizens to reaffirm their country's identity as a free and democratic European country.

But the elections also come with substantial risk to Moldova and its democratic future. **Russia has been mobilizing a comprehensive range of hybrid warfare methods to undermine and ultimately reverse Moldova's path towards Europe.** Russia's war against Ukraine has exacerbated Moldova's structural economic challenges and social tensions. Russian political proxies, Russian money, and Russian disinformation are all being utilized in a malign campaign against the legitimate democratically-elected Moldovan government.

The fragility of the political and economic situation in Moldova means that its pro-European trajectory cannot be taken for granted. Moldova's Western partners, primarily the EU, will need to formalize its support for Sandu's government to ensure wider regional stability and security. This could be achieved through:

⁴⁵ "Moldovan Fugitive Oligarch Launches New Anti-EU Bloc in Moscow," Madalin Necsutu, Balkan Insight, accessed October 16, 2024, <https://balkaninsight.com/2024/04/22/moldovan-fugitive-oligarch-launches-new-anti-eu-bloc-in-moscow/>

1. Ensuring the implementation of sanctions on individuals who have captured Moldova's judiciary and undermined its independence and effectiveness.
2. Engaging with the private sector and civil society organizations to help identify reforms that Moldova needs to make to stimulate sustainable economic growth.
3. Enhancing Moldova's law enforcement capabilities to track and seize illegal financial flows that Russia mobilizes to undermine Moldovan state institutions.
4. Supporting the development of positive relations between Moldova's Romanian- and Russian-speaking populations to build social and democratic resilience.