INTERVIEWS 06.11.2024

‘The Moldovan people are definitely pro-European’

Ana Mihailov from Chisinau on Maia Sandu’s re-election as president and the search for common ground with the pro-Russian electorate

On Sunday, Moldovans re-elected President Maia Sandu for a second term. She managed to defeat a serious competitor, Alexandru Stoianoglo, in a race that went down to the wire. What led her to victory?

The incumbent Sandu won the presidential run-off, defeating her rival Stoianoglo, who was backed by the pro-Russian Socialist Party, with a convincing 55.35 per cent to 44.65 per cent. The race was very tight, with both candidates predicted to win by a narrow margin after the first round of voting. Indeed, Sandu’s results within Moldova’s borders show that she lost the election by an insignificant margin of 48.8 per cent to Stoianoglo’s 51.2 per cent.

This time, as in the previous presidential election, she owes her victory to the diaspora, which mobilised in unprecedented numbers, with a record turnout exceeding that of the 2020 presidential election by some 24 per cent. Diaspora activism in the second round intensified following revelations of electoral fraud in the first round, which came to light through a journalistic investigation into pro-Russian oligarch Ilan Shor. The latter, which reached an emotional climax among voters, the war in neighbouring Ukraine and the geopolitical factor – EU integration versus sliding into Russia’s sphere of influence – were decisive for Sandu’s victory.

What are the main differences between the candidates?

Sandu, the incumbent president and the informal leader of the ruling Party of Action and Solidarity (PAS), is a pro-European politician who has contributed to the accelerated Moldovan advancement on the European path. During her term, Moldova obtained EU candidate status in 2022 and began EU accession negotiations last

July. Although this success probably wouldn't have been possible without the Russian aggression in Ukraine and the geopolitical context, credit must be given to Sandu for seizing the momentum and achieving this remarkable result. Sandu enjoys a great deal of support from the international community and has been able to move the country out of the international isolation into which the Plahotniuc regime had dragged it. She condemned the war in Ukraine and joined EU sanctions.

In contrast to Sandu, though he declares himself pro-European and has in the past (as an MP on the ticket of the Democratic Party) contributed to Moldova's Association Agreement and visa liberalisation with the EU, Stoianoglo does not have a strong public European profile. Positioning himself as an independent candidate – but running on behalf of the pro-Russian Socialist Party – has played a trick on him. He did not support the referendum on EU integration, explaining that he was not against the referendum in general, but disagreed with the way it was decided. Stoianoglo also condemned the Russian invasion of Ukraine and is in favour of developing economic relations both with the EU and with Russia, China and other countries in the interests of the country.

How did the voting go? What does the record turnout mean? Were there any reports of serious violations?

Overall, the voting process can be characterised as calm, although some irregularities were reported, including the photographing of ballots and campaigning near polling stations. There were false bomb alarms at polling stations abroad and in Transdniestria, as well as at the bridge over the Dniester River.

A completely unforeseen situation was the organised transport of people by air from Russia to vote in Azerbaijan, Turkey and Belarus. There were accusations of Russian interference, which the latter denied, through its proxy, the fugitive oligarch Shor. This is an example of the scale of the electoral fraud that has taken the Moldovan authorities by surprise. However, it should be noted that for security reasons, Moldova opened only two polling stations in Russia, which has the largest number of Moldovan citizens. In a video distributed by the Russian media, Moldovan passengers expressed their anger at being deprived of the right to vote and explained their decision to travel to other countries to do so.

A few weeks before the election, Moldovan police announced that they had uncovered a network of 130 000 people who received money transfers via the Russian banking system to influence the outcome of the referendum. Police claimed that Shor had transferred some $24

million in October alone.

All of the above, as well as the journalistic investigation into the Shor network, motivated Moldovans overseas to mobilise to vote in an unprecedented manner. The turnout in the second round was 54.34 per cent compared to 51.4 per cent in the first round.

Do you think the losing side might initiate some kind of protest?

I'm ruling them out for now. Shortly after the results were announced, when it became clear that the diaspora vote would tip the scale in favour of Sandu, Stoianoglo conceded defeat, saying that democracy means first of all maturity in the face of the results. He urged to put an end to the imposed hatred and division and called on the mass media and NGOs to inform objectively, renouncing manipulation, hysteria and the artificial division of society. Although he mentioned irregularities at the polling stations abroad and in the Transnistrian region, he did not suggest that they might contest the results or organise protests. So, earlier warnings that Shor might try to destabilise the situation through mass unrest did not come true. Nor did the narrow margin of the referendum result trigger any protests.

These elections have highlighted some vulnerabilities in Moldova's pro-European course. Is the country really more divided between pro-European and pro-Russian camps than expected?

I think the election results actually reflect the level of support for European integration among the Moldovan people better than the referendum results. There is also a certain level of support for the EU among Stoianoglo's voters. So, the Moldovan people are definitely pro-European, there is no doubt about that. However, it is true that support for the EU has fluctuated in Moldova, and this is directly linked to the performance of the pro-European parties. An example in this sense is the 2014 bank fraud when support for the EU dropped significantly.

The low EU referendum results can also be explained by how the decision to hold the referendum was taken and the way in which the whole process was handled. By allowing one party to monopolise the referendum issue and refusing to engage with other pro-European parties, Moldova missed the opportunity to build a broad political and social consensus around European integration as a national idea. This could have helped to strengthen the social cohesion that is so precarious at the moment. All this, together with the xenophobic and hate speech in the run up to the presidential election, has only exacerbated the divisions in society and left a bitter taste.

Last week, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said that the West might lose Moldova in a few years if it continues with its current rhetoric. Do you agree with him?

I think the threat is real. Although Russia did not succeed in destabilising the situation in Moldova with the referendum and the *presidential* election, the latter was only a testing ground for the more important *parliamentary* election due next year. And we have already seen that Russia is always several steps ahead of the Moldovan authorities' ability to anticipate and counteract Russia's hybrid threats. Political stability remains fragile, and in the face of future possible destabilisation by Russia, including through parliamentary elections, Moldova's pro-European political class should learn to cooperate to ensure a sound majority coalition, as a majority for the incumbent ruling Action and Solidarity party is highly unlikely. And then I really don't know what it will take for the EU to reconsider its read lines.

Will the ruling party be able to find common ground with the pro-Russian electorate?

So far, the ruling party has not been able to find common ground even with pro-European parties, let alone with the pro-Russian electorate. This requires a certain flexibility, capacity for dialogue and political maturity. I would say that the Moldovan pro-Russian electorate is not that radical and if the issue is approached skilfully, common ground can be found.

How limited will the president's powers be if a pro-Russian parliament is elected next year?

If a pro-Russian political force comes to power, and this cannot be completely ruled out, such a possibility is real because Moldova is a parliamentary republic and the presidential powers are limited. But such a risk can be avoided through political maturity and the ability to build alliances. And Sandu's PAS should start doing this now. I cannot imagine a coalition with the Socialists – which would be the easiest of all, given their popular support and joint coalitions at local level following last year's local elections – after all, that happened in the presidential election when the Socialists were portrayed by PAS as Russian agents, thieves and Trojan horses. What remains is to start looking for partners in the pro-European camp. Another 'Save Moldova' election campaign may not work in next year's parliamentary election.

The interview was conducted by Olga Vasyltsova.



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