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A new path for Moldova starts at the ballot box

Amid war, crises and a referendum, what direction will the country take?

All the main presidential candidates for the autumn elections have been chosen in Moldova. Voting is scheduled for 20 October. On the same day, the country will hold a referendum on European integration — if it passes and the majority of voters support the European choice, this foreign policy vector will be enshrined in the Moldovan constitution.

The upcoming elections will take place against the backdrop of Russia's war with Ukraine. In this confrontation, the Moldovan authorities fully support Kyiv. Repeatedly and at the highest levels – from the president to the foreign minister – they have condemned the Russian invasion of their neighbouring state.

The war became a catalyst for the acceleration of Moldova's and Ukraine's European integration: in 2022, the two countries simultaneously received the candidate status for EU accession, and in 2024, they also synchronously began negotiations with the European Union on joining the community. The will of the European Union certainly played a key role here. On the one hand, Brussels revised its approach to enlargement and the speed at which applicants for membership pass the stages of rapprochement with the EU. On the other hand, it sent a strong signal of political support to Kyiv and Chisinau.

The Moldovan authorities have quite skilfully converted this support in their favour. President Maia Sandu, who expects to be re-elected for a second four-year term in October, has made European integration her banner. The referendum mentioned above was devised by Sandu's team as a strategy to ensure her re-election. The plebiscite will do little to influence the speed of rapprochement with the EU, but it will mobilise pro-European voters to go to the polls and vote for the main pro-European candidate, Maia Sandu.

Crisis after crisis

The bet on European integration is quite straightforward to justify. Moldova's rapid progress along this path – from the declared desire to join the EU to the start of negotiations – is an unquestionable success of the ruling team against the background of quite a lot of problems and unrealised promises. When Sandu went to the polls in 2020 to defeat the former president – the pro-Russian Igor Dodon – she positioned herself as an unequivocally pro-European politician. By defeating Dodon then, Sandu largely ensured the victory of her Action and Solidarity Party in the 2021 parliamentary elections.

Since 2021, for the first time since the rule of the Party of Communists (which led the country from 2001 to 2009), all power in Moldova has been in the hands of one team — Sandu's team. On the one hand, it was an undoubted triumph. On the other hand, no Moldovan government in the entire history of the republic's independence has so far faced as many large-scale crises as the current leadership. Sandu's team took office against the backdrop of the coronavirus pandemic, which hit the already weak economy hard. Then came the energy crisis: gas prices soared to unprecedented heights at the end of 2021 and in 2022. The shock was borne by consumers, whose dissatisfaction was transmitted to the government. Then came the war.

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Moldova faced the breakdown of traditional logistical chains: the Russian and Belarusian markets, which consumed large quantities of Moldovan agricultural products, became almost inaccessible due to the high cost of transport. This was compounded by the refugee crisis: hundreds of thousands of Ukrainians fleeing the war passed through the country. About 100 000 people stayed (about 80 000 of them are living here now).

Together, all the factors had the expected effect — they led to economic difficulties and social problems. However, the authorities coped with them relatively well and European financial support helped to compensate for the rise in gas prices: compensations were paid directly to the population.

But the leadership of the republic did not cope well with the promised reforms, primarily the reform of the justice system. The scandals surrounding the dismissal of the country's former prosecutor general, who later won a case against Moldova in the European Court of Human

Rights (ECHR), as well as non-transparent tenders for important positions in the law enforcement system hurt the image of the government, which had promised to build strong, honest, transparent and accountable institutions.

Changing the narrative

On the anti-corruption front – defeating corruption was also one of Sandu's and the pro-presidential Action and Solidarity Party's main promises – there has been little change. High-profile cases such as the 'theft of the century' (the withdrawal of $1 billion from Moldovan banks in 2014) have not been investigated and their defendants have not been punished.

'There is a qualitative decline in the Anti-Corruption Prosecutor's Office. In terms of the number of cases, processes, cases sent to court. The dynamic is minimal in the National Anti-Corruption Centre and the Prosecutor's Office. It is not clear why this happens when more and more money is spent on them, and the returns are lower,' Transparency International Moldova expert Mariana Calugin said in a commentary for IPG. According to her, the process of external evaluation of judges and prosecutors – pre-vetting and vetting – has essentially failed.

Sandu also calls the results of the reform and the fight against corruption 'modest'. In other words, the authorities recognise the problems. But recognition is not enough to win the elections. This explains why the focus has shifted to European integration — certainly a successful direction in terms of evaluation: before Sandu, the country did not have candidate status and negotiations, but now it does.

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Polls show that more than 66 per cent of the population in Moldova supports EU accession and Sandu, whose name is firmly associated with European integration, remains the most popular politician in the country — 39.3 per cent of those who have made up their minds are ready to vote for her in the presidential election. This figure is more than twice as high as that of her nearest rival — the leader of the Party of Socialists, ex-President Igor Dodon. Only 16.9 per cent of voters are ready to support him.

Dodon, who insists that Moldova should develop relations with Russia and has previously said that the republic should join the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) rather than the EU, decided not to run in this

election. He supported the presidential nomination of former prosecutor Alexandr Stoianoglo — the same man who was dubiously removed from office in 2021, won a case against Moldova in the ECHR in 2023 and continues to sue the Moldovan authorities. For many, this move by the socialist-in-chief came as a surprise.

Although Stoianoglo's chances of winning do not look serious, his nomination has created a certain intrigue. In fact, Stoianoglo is trying to position himself at the centre of the political field. On the one hand, he was supported by the socialist Dodon, which may bring him votes on the left that Sandu will never get. On the other hand, he condemned the war in Ukraine, something the same Dodon did not do, and declared that he is a supporter of Moldova's European integration. This is designed for a different – pro-Western – electorate. However, Stoianoglo's political image has not yet been clearly defined, which makes him a 'dark horse' in this electoral race.

In general, the current election campaign may break the record for the number of participants in the race. If, of course, all those who announced their participation in the elections manage to collect signatures in their support (at least 15 000 are required) and are registered by the Central Election Commission. As of 13 August, more than 16 politicians had announced plans to run for the post of head of state.

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Russia also has its own candidates in these elections. Moscow operates in Moldova through the fugitive Moldovan businessman Ilan Shor. The Israeli, Moldovan and, more recently, Russian citizen is wanted by Moldova for his involvement in the aforementioned 'theft of the century'. It was through banks controlled by him that money was withdrawn a decade ago. In 2023, Shor, who fled from Moldova to Israel, was sentenced in absentia to 15 years in prison. At the end of last year, he moved from Israel to Moscow, where in the spring he announced the creation of the 'Victory' bloc. The bloc and Shor himself advocate a U-turn from the EU to the EAEU and harshly criticise Sandu and the Moldovan government in general. Prominent Russian politicians such as Konstantin Kosachev, vice-speaker of the Federation Council, meet with him.

The presidential candidate from the Victory bloc will be Moldovan MP

Vasile Bolea. His chances of winning, however, are close to zero. Nevertheless, this is the case when the most important thing is participation. Many of those who announced their intention to run for the presidency have done so not for the sake of winning, but in order to gain a platform from which they can criticise the authorities throughout the country. If we take into account that 15 candidates criticise Maia Sandu with varying degrees of loudness, the election campaign may turn out to be a barrage of fire from all political guns against the incumbent president. And here it is not obvious what the final result will be for the undisputed favourite.



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