



MOLDOVAN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION 2024

BACKGROUND

On **20 October 2024**, Moldovans will simultaneously vote for their new president and in a referendum on future European Union (EU) membership. A second-round run-off is scheduled for November 3 if no candidate wins outright. Many observers are increasingly concerned about escalating Russian influence campaigns in the country as the election draws closer.

In July 2021, the Party of Action and Solidarity (PAS), advocating for reform and led by pro-Western President Maia Sandu, clinched a decisive victory in the snap parliamentary elections, securing an absolute majority — a first in two decades. This victory led to the establishment of a government dominated by a single party, breaking the cycle of fragile coalition governments often involving parties accused of corruption. Although the Moldovan presidency is more ceremonial with limited official authority, Sandu's election in 2021 was significant. Under the current government, there has been a commitment to strengthen legal governance and move further away from Russian influence and closer to Europe and the West. However, the government's reform initiatives have been hampered by the impact of the conflict in Ukraine, economic strain, and rising inflation and energy costs, leading to some diminishing support for Sandu, and leaving voters susceptible to Russian influence campaigns.

The outcome of Moldova's presidential election will set the stage for an even more critical political contest in 2025: the parliamentary elections. These elections will be crucial in determining the future of Moldova's ties with Russia. Even political parties with modest support, reaching around 6 percent of the vote, can form factions in the legislature. This means that if pro-Russian forces increase their representation, it will be significantly more challenging for President Sandu to form a government focused on advancing EU integration. The road ahead for Moldova's pro-EU politicians is likely to be even more difficult.

WHY YOU SHOULD CARE

EU Accession: Despite robust support for European alignment, Moldova's domestic population remains vulnerable to Russian interference. As Moldova directly borders Ukraine, EU accession talks are likely seen as dangerous to the Kremlin. Nevertheless, in response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the EU granted Moldova candidate status, marking the first official step toward accession. While this was a victory for pro-EU Moldovans, Russia, unsurprisingly, responded negatively, escalating their influence campaigns in Moldova. Should the upcoming October 20 EU referendum fail, Moldova's European aspirations could suffer a significant setback leading to serious political, economic, and social consequences. Such a defeat would weaken the influence of pro-European forces and create opportunities for pro-Russian factions to gain ground, potentially shifting Moldova's geopolitical direction away from EU integration.

KEY INDIVIDUALS

Maia Sandu: The current president and leader of the pro-European Party of Action and Solidarity (PAS).

Alexandr Stoianoglo: The main opposition candidate backed by the Party of Socialists (PSRM). He is typically seen as pro-Russian but supports Moldova's EU integration.

Ilan Shor: Leader of the Shor Party, a populist and pro-Russian group banned in 2023. Shor was convicted in absentia in April 2023 for funneling over \$50 million from abroad to influence elections. He is not running but remains incredibly influential in Moldova.

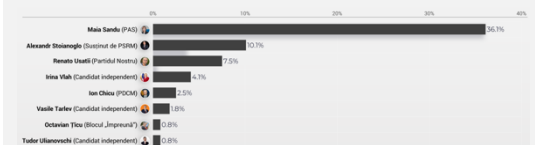
Renato Usatii: Running as an independent candidate.

Irina Vlah: Former governor of the autonomous region of Gagauzia and running as an independent candidate. She has historically taken pro-Russian stances with frequent visits to Moscow. However, she now claims to support EU integration.

Ion Chicu: Former prime minister and the leader of the Party of Development and Consolidation of Moldova.

LATEST POLLS

Presidential Electoral Preference (%)



(September 2024, WatchDog)

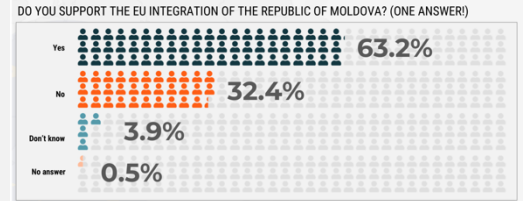
- Maia Sandu: 36.1%
- Alexandr Stoianoglo: 10.1%
- Renato Usatii: 7.5%
- Irina Vlah: 4.1%
- Ion Chicu: 2.5%



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Russian Hybrid Operations: With EU ascension on the line, the stakes are high for both Russia and Moldova in the upcoming election. Russia has made extensive efforts to disrupt President Sandu's re-election and will likely continue to do so up until the election. In October, Moldovan authorities uncovered a large-scale vote-buying scheme allegedly organized by Russia and Ilan Shor. The operation aimed to bribe at least 130,000 Moldovans with a total of \$15 million to sway the election against President Sandu and the EU referendum. This plot is just one of many Kremlin efforts to disrupt Sandu's re-election and derail Moldova's EU aspirations. Moscow's determination to preserve its sphere of influence in response to Moldova's growing EU and Western alignment is evident and highlights its disregard for the sovereignty of neighboring states.

EU Integration (%)



(September 2024, WatchDog)

- Yes: 63.2%
- No: 32.4%
- Don't Know: 3.9%

KEY OUTCOMES

- » **Pro-Europe Outcome:** While a Sandu victory and a majority “yes” vote on the EU referendum is likely, Russia will continue to wage its hybrid-warfare campaign and it may intensify its interference in Moldova’s political landscape, especially in the lead-up to the 2025 parliamentary elections.
- » **Mixed Result:** Critics have dismissed the EU referendum as a tactic to boost Sandu’s presidential bid. Although some candidates support EU membership, they urge voters to reject the referendum or abstain. A “no” vote would hurt Sandu’s reputation but have no legal effect. A poor result could also weaken the Party of Action and Solidarity in next year’s parliamentary elections, threatening EU accession prospects.
- » **Pro-Russian Result:** If Maia Sandu loses her re-election and the EU referendum fails, it would underscore Moscow’s significant influence in Moldova and could further embolden Russia’s regional strategy.

RECENT EVENTS

- September 19, 2024:** Moldovan authorities charged former chief of the Moldovan General Staff, Igor Gorgan, with high treason after he was exposed as a Russian GRU informant.
- October 3, 2024:** A large-scale voter fraud and attempted vote-buying scheme was uncovered, allegedly perpetrated by Ilan Shor and Russia.
- October 9, 2024:** Ahead of the presidential election, the European Parliament adopts a resolution condemning Russian interference in Moldova.
- October 11, 2024:** Moldova’s National Investigation Inspectorate, INI, takes down Ilan Shor’s telegram accounts.

TOPIC EXPERTS: NIKKIE LYUBARSKY

DATE SOURCES: Atlantic Council, Carnegie Endowment, Reuters, WatchDog

Read more:

[*IntelBrief: Russian Interference Tactics in European Democratic Processes Ramp Up*](#)

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