

Pro-Russian candidate leads in Moldovan presidential election

Markus Salzmann**3 November 2016**

Pro-Russian candidate Igor Dodon won the first round of Moldova's presidential election. He fell just short of an absolute majority, taking 48.5 percent of the vote. He must now participate in a run-off election on 13 November against Maia Sandu, who obtained 38.2 percent of the vote.

The election is seen as decisive in determining whether Moldova will deepen its orientation to the European Union (EU) or strengthen ties with Russia. Dodon is the chairman of the Socialist Party (PSRM) founded in 1997. He joined in 2011 after leaving the Communist Party (PCRM) with many others. He was minister of trade between 2006 and 2009. His party represents a tiny privileged elite which has profited from strong ties with Russia and maintains close relations with Moscow and Russia's oligarchic clans.

Dodon announced that in the event of his victory, a referendum on cancelling Moldova's trade agreement concluded with the EU in 2014 would be held. Instead, the country would join a Russian-led customs union. In several interviews with the Russian press, he explained that the association agreement with the EU was a serious mistake.

The Harvard graduate Sandu represents the country's pro-European elite. Until 2012, she was an adviser to the World Bank in Washington. She subsequently became minister for education in the former liberal-led government. Politically, she advocates drastic market reforms and aggressive opposition to Russia.

Sandu was nominated by the Liberal Democratic Party (PLDM). She was originally projected to win just 15 percent of the vote. But then Marian Lupu, the candidate of the Democratic Party (PDM), which is also pro-Western, withdrew his candidacy to the benefit of Sandu. Vladimir Plahotniuc, the country's biggest oligarch, was a backer of Lupu.

The political elite is in deep crisis. Since 2014, six prime ministers have been in office. While for a time up to 70 percent of the population favoured a pro-EU course, endemic corruption and bitter poverty—the average income is €240 per month—have resulted in a shift in public opinion.

Last year, tens of thousands took to the streets for weeks of protests after it emerged that the central bank had permitted €1 billion (equivalent to 12 percent of the country's GDP) to disappear without a trace into the foreign bank accounts of the corrupt elite. Sandu was among the initiators of the pro-European protests against the government at the time. Under the pretext of combatting corruption in the country, the alliance "Dignity and Justice" called for a "Maidan" in Moldova.

Sandu is seeking to pull off a balancing act in the presidential campaign. She is attempting to distance herself somewhat from the corrupt elites and parties, while at the same time depending upon their support.

The deep mistrust of the entire political elite was reflected in an extremely low election turnout. In a country with a population of 3.5 million, less than half of all eligible voters went to the polls. Sixty-three percent of voters were over the age of 41, a result of the mass migration of younger people unable to find work in Europe's poorest country.

The vote marks the first time the president has been directly elected in Moldova since 1996. In 2000, parliament changed the electoral law and has appointed presidents ever since with a three-fifths majority. Earlier this year, the constitutional court declared this procedure unconstitutional and ordered a direct election for the presidency. This decision was aimed at avoiding months of political crisis, which would have been unavoidable in the deeply fractious parliament.

The lead for the pro-Russian candidate Dodon has provoked concern in Brussels and Washington. Situated between the NATO and EU member Romania and Ukraine, Moldova occupies a strategically important position. The EU and NATO have been trying for some time to draw the country into their sphere of influence.

In addition, Transnistria, a small stretch of land east of the Dniester River, where 17 percent of the population lives, has been in effect independent since the establishment of Moldova in 1991, and has 2,000 Russian soldiers stationed there for its protection. The President of Transnistria, Yevgeni Shevchuk, announced in September his intention to apply for the region to be accepted into the Russian Federation.

Igor Dodon spoke out openly against NATO during the election campaign, which apparently secured him support. “We will not tolerate soldiers from NATO or other states on the territory of our country,” he stated.

Sandu represents a diametrically opposed standpoint. She calls for Moldova to assume the role of a spearhead against Russia and defends the increased militarisation of Romania and Moldova. For the first time, exercises of NATO troops took place on the territory of Moldova in May of this year, in clear violation of the country’s constitution.

At the same time, NATO is strengthening ties with the government in Chisinau. The NATO programme “Science for peace and security” (SPS) began three initiatives at the beginning of the month. Among other things, they were aimed at enabling the armed forces to respond more swiftly to attacks and protect themselves against cyber attacks. At NATO’s summit in Warsaw earlier this year, the Moldovan defence minister called for support to force Russian troops out of Transnistria.



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