Pro-Russian candidates win presidential elections in Bulgaria and Moldova

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Pro-Russian presidential candidates won run-off elections in both Bulgaria and Moldova on Sunday. The results have caused domestic and international tensions and have deepened the crisis of the European Union (EU), because the EU and NATO member Bulgaria and strategically located Moldova, situated between Romania and Ukraine, will both now orient more strongly towards Moscow.

In Bulgaria, the former general Rumen Radev stood for the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP), while the president of parliament, Zezka Zatcheva, was the candidate of the pro-EU ruling party, the GERB. Radev won decisively with more than 58 percent of the vote. Zatcheva secured just 35 percent of the vote. Radev had led in the first round of the election on November 6.

The election provoked a huge domestic political crisis. After the defeat of the candidate he had nominated, Bulgarian Prime Minister Boyko Borisov (GERB), who has been in office since 2014, announced his resignation on Sunday. Borisov is to remain temporarily in power, but the country will be left without a fully functioning government for several months because current President Rossen Plevneliev is not permitted to call new elections so close to the end of his term in office.

While the most powerful executive position in Bulgaria is that of prime minister, the president is the formal head of state and the commander-in-chief of the armed forces, and the election was seen as decisive in determining the country's orientation. In contrast to Plevneliev, a right-wing critic of Russia, observers consider Radev as an opponent of the EU. He has repeatedly called for a lifting of EU sanctions on Russia and spoken out in support of Crimea belonging to Russia.

However, observers do not expect the general, who was partially trained in the United States, to seriously call into question Bulgaria's membership in either the EU or NATO. His pro-Russian orientation is above all bound up with economic considerations. More than 30 percent of the country's economic activity is dependent upon Russia. Bulgaria relies almost entirely upon Russia for its gas supply, and tourism from Russia (several hundred thousand Russian citizens own holiday homes in Bulgaria) contributes significantly to the economy.

Radev profited above all from hostility to the government, which is seen as corrupt and anti-working class. A quarter century after the reintroduction of capitalism and nine years after joining the EU, Bulgaria is an impoverished country. With GDP per head of population amounting to $7,500, half of all residents live in poverty. The 58-year-old Zatcheva defended the government and the EU during the campaign. She insulted her rival as a "red general" and declared that under her presidency, Bulgaria would maintain its European orientation.

Radev is a Bulgarian nationalist and belongs to the political far right. He sought to direct the social anger during the campaign into anti-refugee xenophobia and anti-Turkish sentiments. He raged that Bulgaria could not become "the migration ghetto of Europe" and warned that neighbouring Turkey would soon "open the gates" and flood Bulgaria with refugees.

Some commentators compared him with Hungarian Prime Minister Victor Orban and the leader of Poland's governing party, Jaroslav Kaczynski, who both combine nationalism with xenophobia.

For the GERB, which is a member of the conservative European People's Party, it was the first electoral defeat since its founding 10 years ago. In the past, the party benefited from the discrediting of the

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Socialist Party and a diverse range of right-wing conservative parties. The GERB sought to boost illusions in the EU, which have since been punctured.

After Radev's electoral victory and the resignation of the government, commentators expect a period of political and social instability. "The mixture of fear, insecurity, xenophobia, the perception of poverty and the feeling that they have been forgotten by Europe, coupled with the expected predominance of nationalist protests, is highly explosive," a comment by *Deutsche Welle* stated.

Moldova

In Moldova, pro-Russian candidate Igor Dodon won 52 percent of the vote, while his pro-European competitor Maia Sandu got 48 percent.

This prompted alarmed responses in Brussels and other European capitals. The EU and NATO have been trying for some time to draw the country out of Russia's sphere of influence. During the campaign, Dodon announced he would cancel the association agreement with the EU and join a trade bloc with Russia. However, he cannot carry this out without the consent of parliament, where his opponents hold a majority.

Dodon benefited from widespread opposition to the right-wing liberal government, which has been in power in a series of various coalitions since 2009. The impoverished agricultural country, with a population of 3.5 million, has faced a political crisis for years. Prior to the 2014 parliamentary election, a scandal broke out that still determines political debate today. Almost a billion dollars disappeared from Moldovan banks.

For the first time, residents from Transnistria, which separated from Moldova after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, participated in the election. They voted overwhelmingly for Dodon.

Moldova is Europe's poorest country. According to international aid organisations, 41 percent of the population live on less than $5 per day. Since July 2014, the country has been linked with the EU in an association agreement. As a result, Russia imposed punitive measures that severely affected the agricultural sector and further deepened the economic crisis.

Sandu, who secured second place in the first round of the election, defended the pro-European and pro-market policies responsible for rampant poverty. She led her campaign with a vague pledge to combat corruption and develop closer ties to Brussels. The association agreement was "the basis for the development of the country," she stated on television. She also called for the unconditional withdrawal of Russian troops from Transnistria.

Dodon represents a section of the ruling class that is closely bound to Russia and profits from this relationship. He announced he would immediately travel to Russia for talks. He also spoke out sharply against the EU, declaring, "The advantages of our westward orientation could not balance the disadvantages of turning away from Russia." During the campaign, he described life in Moldova as "unbearable" and complained that the partnership with Russia had been destroyed.

Dodon, an experienced politician, is well aware that the intensifying economic and political crisis is producing social tensions that would be directed against all of the country's political factions. He therefore called for calm soon after the announcement of the first electoral results. "We don't need any destabilisation or confrontation," he stated.

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