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NEWSLETTER

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Synthesis and Foreign Policy Debates

The newsletter is developed by Mădălin Necșuțu, editor-coordinator

TOPICS OF THE EDITION:

1. Interview with Felix Hett, FES representative for Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova: "The elections have been just a test"
2. Editorial by Alexandru Tanase, former Minister of Justice and Chairman of the Constitutional Court: "About the surprise of the "unexpected" result of the referendum"
3. Interview with Ian Lisnevschi, sociologist at Intellect Group: "When politicians embrace an issue meant to unite society are doing more harm"
4. Analysis by Denis Cenușa, political analyst of the Expert Group: "Two key lessons from the presidential election and the referendum: the protest vote and the active diaspora"

News in Brief



The Central Electoral Commission of the Republic of Moldova published on October 21 the official data of the presidential elections, according to which in the first round of the presidential elections, the turnout was 51.5%. The majority, 42.45 percent of voters, opted for the incumbent president Maia Sandu. On the second place is former general prosecutor, Alexandr Stoianoglo, who is running on behalf of the Socialist Party of Moldova (PSRM), who got 25.98% of votes. Maia Sandu and Alexandr Stoianoglo will face each other in the second round of the presidential elections, which will take place on November 3. In the constitutional referendum for European integration, 50.46 percent voted in favour and 50.54 voted against. In order to validate the referendum, the presence at the polls of at least one third of the voters was needed. Therefore, the referendum was validated by the Central Electoral Commission.



In the second round of the presidential elections, Maia Sandu asked citizens to vote responsibly, warning of the risks for democracy and attacks on the integrity of the electoral process. Her opponent, Alexandr Stoianoglo, reiterated his commitment to European values and emphasized the need for a victory for Moldova, at the same time criticizing the incumbent president. The statements were made during the electoral debates on Sunday, October 27, for the run-off, which will take place on November 3. The candidate of the Socialist Party for the position of president, Alexandr Stoianoglo, says that he has long adopted the model of European integration as a system of values and that he is ready to respect the supremacy of the law, defend the principle of justice, impartiality and serve the interests of the majority. "I have nothing to add, except one thing - it's time for Moldova to win. We are all interested in this," said Alexandr Stoianoglo.



The OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) said on 22 October that the presidential election and constitutional referendum on 20 October were well administered and that contestants campaigned freely in an environment characterized by concerns about illegal foreign interference and active disinformation efforts. However, the simultaneous running of the presidential election and referendum campaigns, as well as the media coverage that favoured the incumbent and the government, did not provide a fully level playing field. Abuse of administrative resources in the campaign was observed. Recent changes have created a strong legislative framework for campaign finance, but oversight has been diminished by the limited capacity and resources of the Central Election Commission. The report also states that the legal framework for the referendum has certain deficiencies and thus is not in full compliance with international standards and OSCE commitments in several aspects.

Moldova is stepping on a future of thin ice



The President in office, Maia Sandu, and her opponent Alexandr Stoianoglo, during the debates organized on October 27 at the Palace of the Republic of Moldova. Source: Maia Sandu/Facebook

Moldova is sliding on thin ice regarding its future. There is currently a lot of uncertainty regarding the future leadership of the country and the way in which the Republic of Moldova will continue its European path. Will it run at full throttle with a pro-European leadership willing to make the necessary reforms,

even the least popular ones, or will we revert to the "gentle calf with two mothers" tactic, in a histrionic swing between East and the West and the return to the kleptocratic system domestically.

It would be incorrect to place the blame entirely on fraud and theft. We should think about how

to stop the propaganda and better explain to citizens every day what the EU stands for. It is necessary to come down from the ivory tower and go to the grassroots, even in the most inconvenient localities, to explain to the people what options exist at this moment for the Republic of Moldova and how

► the existential danger is simply hovering around them. Society's division and polarization has reached an extremely high level and both camps are marching on scaremongers. They are as real as can be, but also as fake as can be at the same time.

The weak result of the referendum is also the result of the self-isolation of the pro-European leadership of the Republic of Moldova, which has been living in its own informational bubble for some time. On the other hand, Russia is working through its exponents in an unprecedented hybrid war. This war intensively exploits phobias, but above all dissatisfactions in Moldovan society. People want to live better today, they want justice done today and above all they want to be listened to today.

It is time for the current pro-European leadership to come down more among ordinary people and explain things to them. They should stop being afraid of possible mistakes and stop acting timidly with half measures in many cases. It takes a lot of convincing for the impoverished population to shake off this Stockholm syndrome of empathizing with the aggressor of their future both internally and externally.

Regardless of the outcome of the presidential elections, society will remain deeply divided. Coagulation around a common idea is the only chance by which Moldova can survive these attacks in an unprecedented hybrid war. As long as Moldova does not become a resilient state as quickly as possible in the face of these attempted attacks by external actors and their

internal proxies, we will always have a borderline pendulum between joining the EU and remaining in the Russian sphere of influence.

And here we are not talking about referendums on the limit of joining the EU, as other European countries that are EU members have also had before, but about a mentality connected to the European spirit and values. It is more than ever an extremely important choice for Moldova, which could once again miss the European train that it should have boarded somewhere in the early 2000s alongside the Baltic countries. The window of opportunity will not remain open for too long and these months until the parliamentary elections will be crucial for the future of the Republic of Moldova.

Madalin Necsutu

The elections have been just a test

In an interview for the [IPG Journal](#), the FES representative for Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova, Felix Hett, spoke about the results of the first round of presidential elections in the Republic of Moldova, about their stake, but also about how the diaspora vote saved the referendum on amending the Constitution regarding European integration. Felix Hett also spoke about Russia's involvement through the fugitive oligarch Ilan Shor in these elections and what was Moscow's strategy in this regard. We invite you to read this interview in detail:

■ The presidential elections in the Republic of Moldova were described by many observers as predictable and without any particular tension. But the result of the first round was a surprise.



What key factors do you think influenced the election result?

■ Maia Sandu was expected to win the first round of voting – and she did. As expected, Sandu

will have to face a run-off in two weeks' time against runner-up Alexander Stoianoglo. The result of the parallel referendum came as a surprise to many: for a long

time, it looked as if the majority of Moldovans were against the inclusion of EU integration as a goal in the constitution. It was not until the early morning that the picture changed: the vote from the diaspora tipped the scales. It looks as though US-based Moldovans came to the rescue of the EU integration path. Sandu took a big risk by linking her re-election to the referendum. For her personally, it paid off. But as a result, the impression will remain that only just under half of voters were in favor of EU accession – although the referendum was not about EU per se, but about changing the constitution. The latter is a very sensitive topic in Moldova, whose neutrality is enshrined in the constitution. In effect, this means that the almost traditional polarization of Moldovan society was not overcome in the EU integration dimension either. The referendum was unnecessary for the EU accession process. The nature and content of the constitutional amendment were viewed very critically by civil society. Sandu failed to build a cross-party coalition for European integration.

Decisive diaspora vote

■ How did the vote go at home and abroad?

■ Largely calm. There were few reports of electoral fraud or incidents at polling stations - which is rather surprising given the destabilization campaign by “criminal elements” in conjunction with Russia, which the president emphasized once again on election night. The situation was tense

in Russia, where only two polling stations in Moscow were open for up to 350,000 Moldovans and long queues formed. The Moldovan government cited “security reasons” for the reduction of polling stations in Russia. However, no one knows exactly how large the Moldovan diaspora is - the latest figures for Russia are from 2021, and it is possible that many Moldovans left the country in the wake of the war of aggression against Ukraine. 60 polling stations were open in Italy, 26 in Germany and 17 in the USA. In total, around 240,000 of up to one million Moldovans living abroad cast their vote. This means that around 15 percent of the 1.5 million voters came from abroad.

Geopolitical orientation

■ **In the current presidential election campaign, none of the candidates have spoken about integration into the Eurasian Economic Union and none have spoken out against the country’s European integration. Does this mean that the war in neighboring Ukraine has irrevocably shifted Moldovan politics towards a pro-European consensus?**

■ At first glance, the Eurasian Economic Union is no longer an issue. However, the alternative of a neutral seesaw policy between the EU and Russia is. The opposition candidates have appealed to this tradition. Promises are in essence that better relations with Moscow will lead to more favorable energy prices and export opportunities for Moldovan goods. The Sandu government’s economic record is not very good - mainly, of course, for objective reasons such as the war in Ukraine and

the Covid pandemic. But when people’s concerns are dominated by inflation, unemployment and low salaries, their susceptibility to Russian disinformation increases. And on the other hand, some are wondering whether the Western aid money could not have been used more effectively. The European course must also bring concrete improvements in the reality of people’s lives.

■ **Russia tried to influence the outcome of the election through some candidates. Was this strategy successful? Why?**

■ According to all that is known, Russia is acting in concert with the fugitive Moldovan oligarch Ilan Shor. The candidates suspected of being directly controlled by Shor all received less than five percent of the vote individually. However, the victory of one of these candidates was clearly not the goal: Moscow and Shor wanted to create chaos, force Sandu into the second round of voting and torpedo the referendum. This seems to have been at least partially successful. Furthermore, the decisive battle will be fought in the 2025 parliamentary elections - Moldova has a parliamentary system after all. There are some indications that the elections were just a test run. In this respect, it is too early to talk about the success or failure of the Russian strategy.

Western support

■ **How do you assess the role of external actors such as the EU and the USA in this election process?**

■ The EU and the US have clearly sided with Sandu, not least because of the EU support package of 1.8 billion euros announced by Ursula von der Leyen during a

visit to Chişinău one week and a half before the election. While the motivation here is to support the fragile Moldovan democracy, this benevolent interference in Moldova is often interpreted as one-sided partisanship for Sandu and her PAS party. The dramatization of the election of a head of state with limited powers as a decisive battle between East and West unfortunately damages the credibility of Western states as advocates of democratic principles, at least in the eyes of many Moldovans.

Favorites in a tight race

■ **What are your forecasts for the second round of voting? What can you say about Maia Sandu's opponents?**

■ Sandu is the favorite for the second round of voting, but

much will depend on what recommendations the losing candidates will give to their supporters. Second-placed Alexandr Stoianoglo is an unpleasant opponent for Sandu. Not only because of his moderate stance, but also because he was removed from the office of Prosecutor General under Sandu in 2021, violating his right to a fair trial according to a ruling by the European Court of Human Rights in 2023. He is thus emblematic of the PAS government's problems, as a standard bearer of European integration, in upholding the rule of law in the fight against domestic and foreign policy opponents. Stoianoglo thus has the potential of unifying the protest vote against Sandu.

■ **Can we expect the reforms to make progress in the near future or that the political situation in the country will stabilize?**

■ Experience shows that pre-election periods are not good times for reforms, and the time until the last possible date for the parliamentary elections on July 11, 2025 is short. The elections could also be held earlier if PAS wants to take the momentum from Sandu's possible success in the second round into the election campaign. As the parliament decides on the government, troubled times lie ahead: Russia and the Moldovan oligarchs in exile will continue to try to position their forces. In the necessary fight against this destabilization from outside, it will be important for Moldova's political culture not to delegitimize any opposition to the government as "pro-Russian".

<https://www.ipg-journal.de/interviews/artikel/die-wahlen-waren-nur-ein-testlauf-7855/>

Editorial

About the surprise of the “unexpected” result of the referendum

Editorial by Alexandru Tanase,
former Minister of Justice and
Chairman of the Constitutional Court

Many of those surprised by the result seemed confused realising that the referendum passed with a relatively small margin – just by over 12 thousand votes. Regrettably, the official propaganda created the illusion of an almost unanimous social consensus in favour of the European idea, while the multitude of “dedicated” polls generated a false perception of the real “temperature” of our society. Those who looked at the situation lucidly were not surprised, as this result was largely predictable. It is true that the support for pro-Europeanism has increased in recent years, however, it has been influenced by the reality we are living in. Let’s try to understand some of the reasons that led to this result.

1. The “adoption” by the current power of the pro-European message

As usual, we missed a unique opportunity to consolidate the society around common values, using them selfishly in the narrow political interest of parties. PAS was the initiator of this referendum, practically integrating it into President Maia Sandu’s campaign.

Assuming of this idea by the head of state and the ruling party has undoubtedly brought a lot of visibility and weight to the proposal to amend the Constitution. However, this association also had the opposite effect: it led some of the pro-European supporters, who



do not support PAS, to vote against the initiative. Although it is difficult to estimate the number of these voters, it is certain that they are not negligible.

2. Structure of the Moldovan electorate

About 50 percent of the voting population is Romanian-speakers, a large part of them having a pro-European orientation, while the other 50 percent include minority ethnic groups or Russian Moldovans who feel nostalgic for the defunct empire.

Percentages may vary, but all the past elections have demonstrated the existence of a clear rift along these lines. From this perspective, the results of the referendum are not surprising. They faithfully reflect the reality of the structure of the society in which we live.

3. Re-russification of Moldova

Being part of the diaspora, I have visited Chisinau this summer. What I can say is that I haven’t seen in the last 30 years a more russified Chisinau. After the Russian military invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, a very large number of Russian speakers, who had left Moldova after the declaration of independence, returned home.

The Moldovan citizenship law, which is excessively liberal, allows persons born abroad, who have at least one of their parents, grandparents or great-grandparents born on the territory of the former Moldovan Soviet Social Republic, to become citizens of the Republic of Moldova.

The law stipulates that the descendants of people who, until 28 June 1940, lived in Bessarabia, Northern Bucovina, Hertsa Land and in the Moldovan Soviet Social Republic are recognized as citizens of the Republic of Moldova, and the date of acquiring citizenship is considered the date of written consent to this effect. Recognition, unlike naturalization, is a simple administrative procedure, which allows obtaining the Moldovan passport in record time. Thus, the Public Service Agency has issued daily, in recent years, “kilograms” of approvals for obtaining Moldovan identity documents.

If I’m not mistaken, they tried to stop the process around June of this year, when it was already far too late. Until now, it remains an enigma why the process of issuing in bulk of Moldovan identity documents was not suspended immediately after the Russian invasion or with the decision of military mobilization in Russia. Why weren’t some elementary filters established in the law, which would have allowed us to understand who are the thousands of “prodigal sons” who remembered that they are Moldovans after three decades of living in the “Putinist paradise”? These people voted in the referendum and influenced its outcome.

4. Vote-buying

There’s been way too much discussion on this topic lately, so I won’t get lost in the details. One thing is certain: the attempts to dismantle vote-buying schemes have failed. Although the Putinist groups managing these schemes have publicly sent messages to boycott the referendum, we cannot know for sure what other instructions were sent to those who went out to vote. It would be interesting, for example, to find out what messages the 68,777 people who voted for

Furtuna candidate received - did they vote in the referendum or not, and if they did, how did they vote?

5. Russian propaganda and rural reluctance

Referendums are not part of our political and legal culture, and the Moldovan voter treats this exercise with great distrust. In 2010, a referendum was held to amend the Constitution so that the president is elected through direct vote by all citizens.

I personally visited hundreds of villages to explain the need for that change, and people seemed receptive. The idea was a very popular one! However, the referendum did not pass. In subsequent election campaigns, I tried to understand what caused that reluctance.

We found that people do not fully understand what a referendum means, which has created fear and vulnerability to Russian propaganda. At that time, many of those with a lower level of education and information believed the lies spread by the Communist Party, that amending the Constitution would mean the return of Romanian gendarmes to Bessarabia.

Without any doubt, a significant number of voters, who directly benefit from the rapprochement with EU (through roads, renovated schools and kindergartens, etc.), have been convinced by the “Markelis” that if the referendum passes, they will be transformed from mother and father in “parent number 1” and “parent number 2”, while and their children will be forced to change their gender.

Politics - the art of the result

All the talk about the “Pyrrhic victory”, legitimacy versus legality,

are mere rhetorical exercises, not to say demagogy. In the end, what is legal is legitimate. The law stipulates a clear procedure for amending the Constitution. The Constitutional Court approved the draft law subject to the referendum. If the court finds that the legal requirements for validating the referendum have been met, the text in the ballot will become the text of the Constitution.

No less than 750,075 Moldovans said YES to the amendment of the constitution. I believe that the Moldovan society achieved a victory, even if it was a borderline one. In this context, I will quote Professor Valentin Naumescu: “When you fight for your future, all victories become huge!”

Finally, a clarification of the practical consequences of this referendum is required. The referendum to amend the Constitution is valid if at least one third of the voters registered on the electoral rolls participate in the vote.

Given that just over 3.3 million citizens with the right to vote are registered in the State Voters’ Register, the threshold of 1.1 million voters participating in the polls was exceeded, with a total of 1,488,874 people having voted in the referendum. Therefore, once the Constitutional Court validates the referendum, the approved amendments will become an integral part of the Constitution, without any additional conditions. The constitution will be republished in the Official Gazette, including the changes brought about by the constitutional referendum on October 20.

Thus, the new constitutional text will enter into force, directly influencing the legal and political framework of the Republic of Moldova, opening new horizons for future reforms and for the European path of the country.

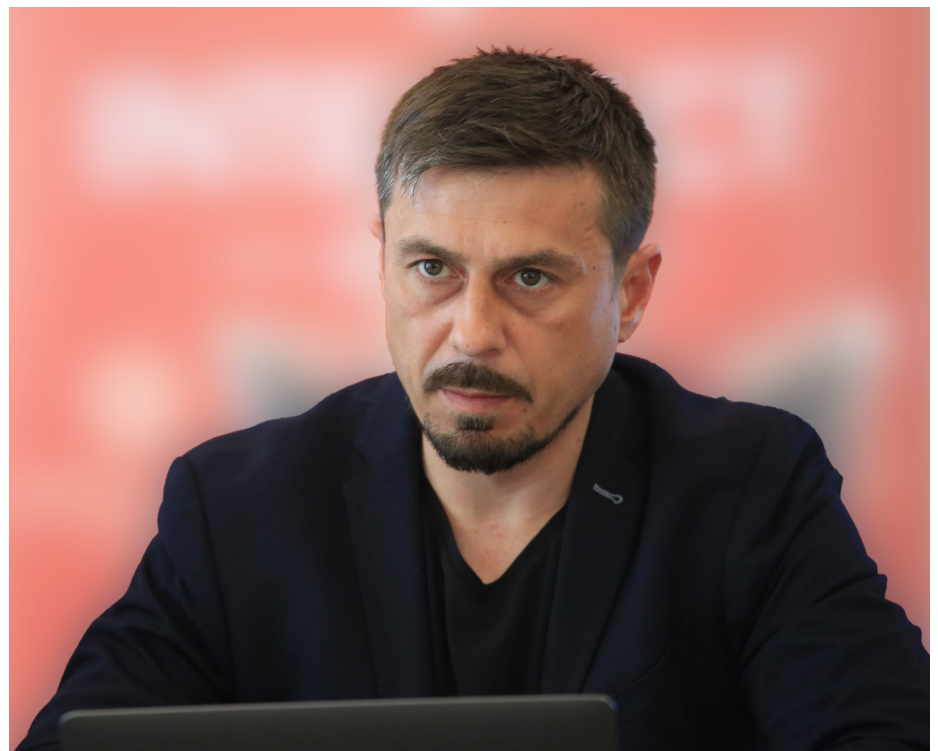
When politicians embrace an issue meant to unite society are doing more harm

Spoke with the sociologist Ian Lisnevschi, director of the sociological company Intellect Group, about the constitutional referendum on the accession of the Republic of Moldova to the EU, but also about the presidential elections in which the incumbent president, Maia Sandu, and the former prosecutor general, Alexandr Stoianoglo, will compete in the run-off. We discussed about the profile of Moldovan voters, as well as about the key messages and electoral offer of the presidential candidates. Read the interview below:

■ Mr. Lisnevschi, how polarized is the society in the Republic of Moldova today and what are the main causes that led to this situation in your opinion?

■ We have to understand that there are several causes of this problem that started 5-10 years ago, and these problems have not been solved in any way, which aggravated the situation. But in any case, we are talking about the political class in Moldova that divided this society and continues to do so.

The strategy is quite primitive and focuses on the comfortable electorate. Each party and candidate focus on its electorate. They try to mobilize it through various methods, putting people in a face-to-face battle, one segment against the other. Unfortunately, this



method has always worked in the Republic of Moldova and this has been continuously used. It's because of this that we are having this polarised society.

Discrediting through certain topics

■ What are the reasons for such a low result? Was such a score predictable, as the polls showed that the score would be higher for YES?

■ Yes, it was. Ten months ago, when the discussions about the

referendum only started, and it was not even known in which round of the presidential election this referendum would be organized, we warned about these risks. When politicians try to address any of the topics, even if they are endorsed by society, politicians can discredit it because of their anti-rating.

When politicians try to focus on an idea that has the potential to unite society, unfortunately, they do worse. When it comes to the European integration, this happens when pro-European parties address this topic without delivering results.

In the case of left-wing parties, this topic is neutrality.

These are two topics that politicians take up and discredit. Thus, there is this risk that the vote will not be for European integration, but for or against the one who proposed this in such a referendum. Here it is also the case that the proposal comes from the party in power, because power is never seen very well by society.

Society is always faced with eternal problems, which have not even changed during the last 30 years. No one is really addressing these issues carefully or seriously. Unfortunately, this also happened this time.

■ Did the association of the referendum for European integration with the image of President Maia Sandu help or not?

■ One of the camps says it was a vote against European integration. It's not really like that, rather it was a vote against Maia Sandu. The vote was not about the European integration.

In the Republic of Moldova, over 60 percent of people are in favour of European integration, or at least are not against it. They see no problem with European integration and neutrality. They see no problems in good relations with Belarus or Russia. In all surveys, Moldovans are between 94-98 percent for good economic relations with Romania, Ukraine, and Russia.

Moldovans are somehow more peaceful and don't want to get involved in geopolitical conflicts, while the politicians are trying to divide them. Because the

issue of European integration was politicised, the risks have materialized.

Moreover, the issue of referendum was monopolized by one candidate. However, the referendum could have been supported even by socialists and communists, who are not opposed to the European integration. But that didn't work and as a result we had this protest vote.

Deficient communication

■ What do you think about the way the Moldovan authorities communicated about this referendum?

■ It was never clear what we were voting for. Amending the Constitution? What kind of change is that and what will it achieve? After the vote, will we be in the EU or not? The problem is that when pro-European parties propose good ideas, they don't think about the consequences.

Citizens want the problems or promises to be solved the following day. Well, realistically this is not possible and the politicians have to take this into account, but anyway, in a month or two, they will need to show some results. If they don't, a massive disappointment will begin, which they will not be able to stop.

A similar situation happened two years ago and also four years ago, and if you'll notice, support for the European integration is waning. This support in Moldova dropped somewhere to 45 percent and this decrease is due to the fact that the politicians involved too much in an issue supported by the majority of citizens in the Republic of Moldova.

Methodology and voters' profile

■ Intellect Grup was the closest to the actual scores obtained by the presidential candidates in the first round. Only in the case of the second and third places – Stoianoglo and Usatii – there were certain differences, but taken together the figures are correct there as well. What was the methodology by which you conducted these highly accurate surveys?

■ We also had this problem 5-6 years ago. I wouldn't say that the other polls were far from the results. Why? Because, if you will notice, the number of undecided voters is very high.

Moreover, among the undecided there are also those who are afraid to answer for who they will vote for. We tend to see a margin of error in terms of methodology, but we don't take into account the psychological aspect. In fact, no one will show the percentage of people who refuse to participate in the survey, but this is quite high.

For example, in our last survey, out of 1,200 people, more than 200 people refused to answer, because they were afraid to answer such questions. Moreover, a rather low percentage of sincerity is also recorded.

Therefore, the questionnaire should contain some specific questions. We have introduced a new methodology called "gaming". Specifically, we try to play certain games with the respondents. For example, we ask such questions as: What wines do you prefer? Which actor does a

certain politician look like? Through this psychological method, citizens perceive the survey as a game, forgetting about their fears and answering honestly. We developed this method together with our expert colleagues in Kiev, Ukraine. They used it more often and it worked.

The second thing, the year 2020 helped us a lot, when we were the first - and we are the ones who successfully conducted an exit poll – that managed to conduct a survey where the data coincided with the real ones. Thus, now things were very clear to us.

The third factor, here in the Republic of Moldova a rather interesting electorate appeared, similar to the one in Great Britain. It's called the 'Shy Tory effect', when citizens are ashamed to say they support a particular party.

This is about the Party of Ilan Șor, or the Victoria Bloc, which was banned. This party still has supports, between 5 and 8 percent. In order to understand where this electorate will migrate, you have to analyse it, and the portrait of this electorate will have to be taken into account. Research is needed to see what the psychological state of the society is and how people react as these factors influence the political outcomes. The people are not, unfortunately, honest due to fear, shame etc.

Tight race

■ **What are your forecasts for the winner of the second round of**

voting and what are the arguments for one or the other candidate?

■ Even if we publish the official data, we send it to our partners lately, for example, the International Association of Political Technologists, the Europe Poll. We don't publish them here. Why? Because here they emphasise the rating. Those who analyse the situation don't take into account such indicators as the undecided, the social state, and the mental state. We would like to draw attention to these problems which are quite serious and which we should solve, regardless of who wins.

Getting back to your question, both candidates have similar chances. Both made many mistakes. Both Mrs. Sandu and Mr. Stoianoglo, in the last debates, somehow did not decisively influence the electorate. The division between the fans of Mrs. Sandu and those of Mr. Stoianoglo has maintained. I personally did not see any vision of the future from either candidate.

Even Mrs. Sandu did not present a clear vision of how the Republic of Moldova will go through the crises to come. And Mr. Stoianoglo didn't create this future either, even if he tried to be somehow warmer and more diplomatic. You like it or not, the people vote for the image. For some, the European Union means people's well-being - income, profit, travel - or neutrality - we don't get into war, we don't want war.

In the election campaign, both candidates had to create this

image. Unfortunately, none of them succeeded in this. In the first round, there campaign was about Maia Sandu. All the candidates attacked her, and Maia Sandu defended herself, but the background information was about Mrs. Sandu.

There were only a few candidates talking about their electoral programme, about their plans. Nobody read programmes, however programmes are needed for the politicians themselves, to know in which direction they are going. They need to understand the programme in order to answer questions like, for example, from where they will get money for certain things.

In a poor country, this question is a constant one. If the answer is "from loans", then this is not a credible answer for the people. You need to plan activities that will bring a certain income, will bring investments. It is hard to believe that investors will come to a country that lacks the main resource, which is people.

Again, these questions remained unanswered. The candidates have a few more days and they will try to convince the voters, but each will talk to his/her pool of voters. Under these conditions, the situation can only get worse. We see clashes on social networks, which radicalize the situation in the country even more. This is risky because some groups that have other interests that we don't know can take advantage of this situation.

Two key lessons from the presidential election and the referendum: the protest vote and the active diaspora

Expert Group political analyst
Denis Cenușa

On October 20, two important political exercises were held for the democratic progress of Moldova. The constitutional referendum revealed that the polarization of society along geopolitical criteria still persists. While the presidential election showed that the use of administrative resources or the enormous support from abroad is insufficient to win the election in a single round.

Both exercises were accompanied by Moscow's attention. Its "proxy" elements, which operate on the territory of Moldova and are located in the camp of the fugitive oligarch Ilan Șor, used methods of informational interference, promoting erroneous information about the EU and the influence of this actor on Moldova. Also, hybrid tactics of discrediting the competence and legitimacy of the authorities were detected, through the transfer of informal social payments from Russia, complementary to official Moldovan pensions. Given that 1/3 of the population of Moldova lives in absolute poverty, with limited access to basic needs (food, health services, etc.), the use of "charity diplomacy" gave Russia the opportunity to instrumentalize poverty.

As a result of the effectiveness of Russian interference (which should not be underestimated) and the inability of the Moldovan authorities to stop Russia, the situation of Moldova is divided into



two realities. The first is formed by the poor population, who accept payments from Șor and Russia due to their poor socio-economic condition, being guided by the logic of survival. The second reality is represented by the authorities, the government, the ruling party and its supporters, who perceive the behaviour of the poor strictly through the lens of criminal law. Both realities demonstrate a reduced understanding of the dimension of societal security, where social imbalances represent a greater danger than exogenous factors. In the case of Moldova, poverty is used as a hybrid tool by Russia.

Protest vote

In addition to the votes tainted by electoral corruption imported from Russia, through Ilan Șor's networks, there were also protest votes. A number

of voters, which may reach over 400,000 people, did not support the referendum because they are either ideologically oriented towards Russia, or they voted against it in protest against Maia Sandu, the initiator of the referendum.

At the declaration level, according to the Moldovan authorities, around 300,000 votes were bribed. If we take into account this figure, which has not yet been proven, it would appear that of the total of 739,155 voters who voted "no", more than 400,000 people opposed the amendment of the Constitution for other reasons.

The 300,000 voters categorized as Șor's electoral victims are rather supporters of the Eurasian vector. That is why the largest group of the other more than 400,000 voters voted "No" in the referendum in protest against

Sandu and her government. More than 50,000 negative votes came from the diaspora, where the tendency to vote in protest against the current president also persists. This aspect shows that participating in election was not seen as a moral duty and a strategic intuition for the country by the absolute majority of Moldovan citizens. The close association of the referendum with Sandu harmed both the president and the results of the plebiscite.

Active Diaspora

The diaspora vote showed that the fate of the electoral processes inside Moldova can be influenced by votes from abroad.

In the referendum, 180,836 votes in favour came from abroad. This accounts for approximately 24 percent of the total 749,719 votes from the “yes” camp. Theoretically, in the absence of the diaspora vote, 684,488 negative votes (out of the current total of 739,155) would have decided the fate of the referendum in the opposite direction of the “yes” voters, or 568,883 votes out of the ultimately 749,719 awarded without the vote of the diaspora (180,836). Consequently, the gap between the “against” and “for” votes would have been approximately 115,000 votes against amending the Constitution. Because of the narrow victory of 50.4 percent to 49.6 percent, the referendum faces criticism regarding its legitimacy. However, from approximately 49 percent of the total electorate present to vote, 50.4 percent voted in favour, that is, only approximately 25 percent

of the total eligible voters. The other 75 percent voted “against”, boycotted the referendum or did not participate in it at all.

Also, in the presidential vote, 239,419 voters from the diaspora tipped the balance of power in favour of the current president. This proves that polishing a perfect image of Sandu in the West has become a successful investment in attracting the diaspora living in Western states. Besides Sandu, with 169,294 votes (out of total of 656,852 votes), other candidates who accumulated most of votes from abroad were Renato Usatii with 35,107 votes and Alexandr Stoianoglo with 19,287 votes out of a total of 401,215.

Compared to Stoianoglo, where the diaspora vote accounted for about 5 percent of the general electoral support for his candidacy, Sandu has a major dependence on the diaspora - practically 26 percent of the total votes obtained in the first round. This may partly explain Sandu’s decision to promote erroneous narratives that the EU will abandon the visa-free regime for the country if people hostile to European integration come to power. Such false information could be aimed at mobilizing the diaspora even more in the second round.

In 2020, Sandu managed to attract the votes of 243,605 Moldovans from the diaspora, compared to 18,498 who supported Dodon. The difference in diaspora votes obtained by Sandu in the second round of 2020 and the first round of 2024 is 77,311 votes, and the stake of the president’s team is that those voters

will be attracted to vote again.

Conclusions

The run-off between Sandu and Stoianoglo will be difficult for both candidates. Sandu uses administrative resources and enjoys the support of civil society and the media. She presents her opponent as Moscow’s candidate, who will bring Moldova into a state of international isolation. In turn, Stoianoglo, as an independent candidate, is supported by the Socialist Party, which still has close ties to Moscow, which could damage his image and credibility. At the same time, there are still suspicions that fugitive businessman Veaceslav Platon would support Stoianoglo. The case won at the ECHR by the former prosecutor general is a powerful asset against the current president, who fired him under a law which was later declared unconstitutional.

In order for Sandu to attract additional votes from voters at home and in the diaspora, she will try to present Stoianoglo as her antipode. On the other hand, Stoianoglo is not opposing the EU integration, he has Romanian citizenship, and he contributed to obtaining the visa-free regime with the EU in 2014, as well as to the ratification of the Association Agreement. The determining factors for the run-off results could become Sandu’s success in attracting more votes from the diaspora, on the one hand, and Stoianoglo’s mobilization of the protest vote against Sandu, on the other. It remains to be seen whether these will be enough for the victory of Sandu or Stoianoglo in the second round of presidential elections.

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