



Prime Minister of the Republic of Moldova Maia Sandu during visit to Kyiv, Ukraine. 11-07-2019
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Moldova's Presidential Election: A Real Turning Point?

By William H. Hill

On Monday morning, November 16, major news outlets across Europe and North America trumpeted the decisive victory in Moldova's presidential election of a "pro-West" challenger over the incumbent, "pro-Russia" president. In Moscow, a prominent newspaper and news site lamented, "Russia loses Moldova." In a reversal of their contest for the Moldovan presidency in 2016, former Prime Minister Maia Sandu dealt President Igor Dodon a crushing defeat. Given Dodon's regular trips to Russia and frequent meetings with Russian President Putin throughout the course of his four-year term, the

result certainly appeared to most observers as a sharp geopolitical setback for the Kremlin.

Sandu's landslide win certainly is a ringing endorsement from Moldovan voters for a policy of European integration, in particular a closer relationship with the European Union. However, the recent election campaign and its results in Moldova reflect a reality far more complex than a simple contest between pro-Russian and pro-Western proxies. There is certainly no shortage of ardent advocates for both Moscow and Brussels

in Moldovan society, but there are also common frustrations over the failure of politicians from both camps over the past two decades to deliver on promises to remedy Moldova's enduring problems—poverty, corruption, lack of opportunity, population loss due to outmigration, and weak rule of law. These problems were all exacerbated by the failure of the current Chicu government in dealing with the coronavirus pandemic.

Escape from the Captured State

The 2020 presidential elections in Moldova took place against a background of recent, bitter political disillusionment. In June 2019 an unprecedented coalition of the left-wing, pro-Moscow Socialist Party (PSRM) and the center-right ACUM bloc (NOW in Romanian, made up of the Party of Action and Solidarity—PAS—and the Platform for Dignity and Truth—DA) successfully removed from power Vladimir Plahotniuc, the oligarch who had essentially captured the country's government over the previous four to five years. PAS leader Sandu became prime minister, while Socialist Party leader Zinaida Greceanii took the post of speaker of the parliament; the parties divided up the other government ministries. Russia, the EU, and the U.S. all supported this unusual left-right coalition and Plahotniuc's ouster.

The coalition collapsed after only five months over Sandu's push for judicial reform and was replaced by a "technocratic" government headed by former Finance Minister Ion Chicu, a longtime crony of President Dodon. Shady dealings and parliamentary maneuvering eroded this government's slim majority, leaving the country without effective leadership or a clear sense of direction.

The arrival of the coronavirus pandemic slowed or halted large portions of the country's political, social, and economic activity. But Moldova was not going anywhere under the technocratic government anyway. Two major EU reports leveled harsh criticism at the government for failure to meet commitments under the Association Agreement, in particular judicial reform, and significant amounts of assistance were held up. In July Moldova reached staff-level agreement with the IMF on a \$558 million package, after a protracted effort to reform the banking sector after the 2014 \$1 billion "theft of the century." However, in October the Superior Council of Magistracy reinstated five judges who had been suspended in 2016 for participation in the so-called "Russian laundromat," a multi-billion-dollar scheme to launder illegal Russian funds through Moldovan banks. In late October the EU's top diplomat, Josep Borrell, summed up the challenges facing Moldova: "weak state institutions, persisting high levels of corruption and oligarchic structures, a deficient judiciary, an aging population, and economic challenges faced by young people, leading to poverty and brain-drain through emigration."

The Sources of Sandu's Big Win

Last spring, President Dodon scheduled the 2020 presidential elections for November, near the end of his four-year term. While the formal campaign began by law in late August, informal jockeying for position and competition began much earlier among potential hopefuls and their parties. Dodon relied heavily on his connection with Russia. He visited Moscow often, meeting with President Putin and other senior officials. In April he announced a 200 million Euro budget support and infrastructure project loan from Russia,



CHISINAU, MOLDOVA/MARCH 11, 2017: President of the Republic of Moldova Igor Dodon during an interview with the Russian television. Photo courtesy of shutterstock.com/Truba7113

which the parliament quickly approved. However, after a surge of public protest over alleged hidden obligations in the agreement, the Constitutional Court ruled the agreement unconstitutional. Russia provided relatively modest overt support to Dodon through the year. However, there were widespread allegations of substantial electoral contributions from Moscow to the PSRM and Dodon's campaign, as well as the provision of a large number of "political technologists" from Russia to work on site in the Dodon campaign.

As has generally been the case in Moldova, the administration of the 2020 presidential election ran smoothly, and it was clearly competitive. The campaign, on the other hand, was marked by numerous accusations of misbehavior and violations of electoral law. Moldova's former de facto ruler, Plahotniuc, was unrepresented in the contest, as

the Democratic Party declined to field a candidate, and Pro Moldova faction candidate Andrian Candu, Plahotniuc's godson, was denied registration as a candidate due to insufficient signatures. President Igor Dodon, running as an independent, nonetheless had the backing of the Socialist Party and a clear, if somewhat lukewarm, endorsement from Moscow. PAS's Maia Sandu was the leading pro-European candidate, while her former colleague from the ACUM bloc, DA's Andrei Nastase, trailed badly.

The most important new factor in Moldova's 2020 presidential elections was the candidacy of Renato Usatii, mayor of the country's second largest, heavily pro-Russian city Baltsi. Usatii first burst upon the Moldovan political scene in 2014, when his *Partidul Nostru* (Our Party), for which polls forecast a strong showing, was disqualified only days before the parliamentary elections. Usatii moved back and

forth between Moldova and Russia, with criminal charges lodged against him in one and then the other country; Usatii claimed them all to be politically motivated. This year, Usatii commanded considerable political support among Moldova's northern, heavily Russophone districts, and he harbored a deep resentment against Dodon, whom he blamed for the charges lodged against him in Russia.

While the first round of voting on November 1 produced a repeat of the 2016 runoff between Sandu and Dodon, there were a couple of surprises. In contrast to 2016, Sandu led Dodon, with 36.2 to 32.6 percent of the total vote. This turnabout was largely due to Usatii's performance, which pulled almost 17 percent of the vote, much of it presumably drawn from Russophone or left of center voters who otherwise might have gone for Dodon. Sandu also received slightly more than 100,000 votes from the Moldovan diaspora, out of a total of slightly more than 150,000 votes cast from abroad.

Usatii and Sandu met on November 3. While he did not explicitly endorse her, he called on voters to oppose Dodon and corruption. Both of them also expressed support for early parliamentary elections.

After a bitter two-week runoff campaign, Sandu won an unexpectedly decisive victory over Dodon in the November 15 second round, 57 to 43 percent. Usatii's implicit support apparently helped, as Sandu emerged with an advantage of some 20,000 votes out of a total of almost 1.4 million cast inside the country. However, some 263,000 Moldovans living outside the country voted in the second round—over 100,000 more than in the first round—with 243,000 of them supporting Sandu.

Thus, her ultimate margin of victory was 253,000 votes, a complete landslide in the context of recent Moldovan politics.

Post-Election Challenges and Prospects

While president-elect Sandu's decisive win delighted her most ardent pro-European supporters, it is less clear whether and how this may translate into real political, economic, and social change in the country. Moldova's government is a mostly parliamentary system, with a relatively weak presidency. While the office of president does have some real constitutional powers, without a majority in parliament and a compatible government, any Moldovan head of state would have trouble effecting significant changes in domestic or even foreign policy.

Almost two years after the last, indecisive parliamentary elections and 18 months after Plahotniuc's flight, Moldova's parliament lacks a clear, stable majority, and the technocratic government is widely viewed as a stalking horse for Dodon and the Socialists. The government has had a few successes with major international partners, such as the IMF, but has also received harsh criticism from others, in particular the EU. The pandemic has hit Moldova hard, and it has put added strain on the economy and institutions of governance, which were already not doing well. Popular confidence in Moldova's political leaders and institutions continues to be extremely low.

While the euphoria over Sandu's victory may linger for a while, Moldova needs a new parliament and new government for there to be real hope for

change. For this to happen, there will need to be early parliamentary elections, and the prevailing, relatively even, electoral balance between the country's major political factions will need to tilt in Sandu's direction. The size of her majority and the sources of her vote provide some grounds for optimism that this may happen. For the moment, however, Sandu's win must be seen as only the first, optimistic step on the long road to fundamental reform.

The first weeks after the election indicate the old order will die hard. In early December, Socialist deputies joined with pro-oligarch factions in the parliament to force through several controversial bills, including the 2021 state budget, measures on Russian language and broadcasting, and a law transferring control of the state intelligence service from the president to the parliament. President-elect Sandu led a large demonstration on December 6 denouncing the measures and calling for early parliamentary elections. The Constitutional Court has at least temporarily blocked the transfer of the intelligence service. However, it seems clear that Dodon and those supporting or aligned with him are determined to limit Sandu's powers once she takes office.

A major advantage in Sandu's post-electoral prospects is the fact that she waged a centrist, relatively non-ideological, and non-geopolitical campaign. Her central theme stressed the fight against corruption, an issue which Moldovans from all parts of the political spectrum can support. This pragmatic centrism enabled her to appeal to center and center-left voters who would not normally support parties generally viewed as having right to center-right, Romanophone leanings.

Another important issue is the nature of Usatii's cooperation. Sandu's 2020 totals inside Moldova went up over her 2016 totals in all regions, but especially in the north, a traditional left and left-center, Russophone stronghold. These were likely Usatii voters turning to Sandu, perhaps as a result of his implicit support after their November 3 meeting. Both Usatii and Sandu are now pressing for early parliamentary elections. One of the questions

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central to Moldova's near-term political future is how strong and how long-lasting this political alignment will be.

The major source of Sandu's crushing victory was the unprecedented scale of the Moldovan diaspora vote. Moldovan expatriates turned out in record numbers, especially in major European countries, and over 90 percent went for Sandu. This election is concrete evidence of the decade-long claim from Moldovan center-right politicians that if expatriates could and did vote, the country's political landscape would be dramatically different. What remains to be seen is whether the scale of the diaspora's political mobilization and participation will become a regular, constant part of Moldovans' political life. Quite clearly, if the diaspora votes in the next parliamentary election in the same numbers and direction as in the 2020 presidential contest, there could be dramatic political changes.

The Geopolitical Context and the Russia Factor

Geopolitics also plays a significant role in Moldovan politics, both from the inside and the outside. The Transdniestrian region is a recognized part of Moldova; no country in the world, not even Russia, recognizes the authorities in Tiraspol. In practice, however, Chisinau does not exercise authority in the Transdniestrian region, and Chisinau and Tiraspol are in fact separate and largely independent actors. The Transdniestrian political settlement process played almost no role in the 2020 presidential election campaign. While many Moldovan politicians express the fear that Transnistria could provide a very large, overwhelmingly pro-Russian bloc of voters in Moldovan elections, only a relatively small number of Transdnistrians eligible to vote actually cast ballots in 2020. Of the 31,000 who came to the polls in the runoff, over 85 percent went for Dodon, a high proportion of a small block of votes.

Externally, Russia remains an important factor in Moldovan politics, for a number of reasons: the continuing, unwanted presence of Russian troops in the Transdniestrian region; the continuing failure to reach a political settlement, in

part because of Russian support for Tiraspol; the large number of Moldovans working in Russia and sending remittances back home; Moldova's ongoing dependence on Russia for energy, in particular natural gas; and the declining but still important trade relationship. Russia was also an issue because Dodon made it one. Since the 2014 parliamentary elections, Dodon advertised his orientation toward and closeness with Russia. No leader visited Russia and met with Putin as often as Dodon.

For at least 20 years, Moldovan politicians have been fighting over the country's geopolitical, cultural, and linguistic orientation. At times advocates of European integration have been in the ascendancy. At other times, advocates of closer relations with Russia have held sway. Over



Map courtesy of OSCE

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the years, neither side has won a decisive, lasting majority of the voting public.

Since Moldova gained independence in 1991, Russia has expressed its interest in close relations, playing the most influential role among Chisinau's foreign partners. However, Russian leaders have never been able to achieve the degree of influence they desire, or to overcome the desire of a substantial portion of the Moldovan population to become more fully a part of Western Europe. The Kremlin at first supported Dodon and the Socialists vigorously, but the attraction seems to have dimmed somewhat, at least from Moscow's side. Observers in Chisinau and Moscow assert that Dodon was unable to produce the improvement in relations Moscow hoped for. Part of this may have been because Chisinau was effectively captured and run by Plahotniuc, who fell out with Moscow not long into Dodon's term.

Whatever the reasons, Russia's support for Dodon during the 2020 campaign appeared relatively limited and ineffective, in spite of its reported personnel, technical, and financial assistance to his campaign. Moscow's clumsy attempt to provide Moldova a large infrastructure loan created a political firestorm and was eventually blocked by the Constitutional Court. The inconsequential

nature of Russian assistance was perhaps best exemplified by an autumn gift of five snowplows, which Dodon proudly paraded through Chisinau's central square. To be sure, there were statements by Foreign Minister Lavrov, Foreign Intelligence Head Naryshkin, and finally President Putin at the Shanghai Cooperation Organization summit that warned of Western, in particular American, meddling in Moldova. But these charges had the air of political ritual and were not reflected in any decisive actions. President Putin and his spokesman Dmitrii Peskov quickly congratulated Sandu on her victory and voiced the expectation that her election would "facilitate constructive development of relations" between the two countries.

Foreign Policy Priorities of President-elect Sandu

For her part, president-elect Sandu has been cautious in her public pronouncements on Russia. She drew a warm response from Moscow with an early promise to seek constructive relations. Russia's initial moderate, perhaps even detached, reaction to Dodon's decisive loss is seen by some as perhaps part of a pattern of Russian re-thinking and re-calibration of its relations with the states on its periphery that once formed part of the Soviet Union and, before that, the Russian Empire. Moscow has clearly been stretched in trying to manage its response to the stubborn protests against Lukashenko in Belarus, the Azerbaijan-Armenia war over Nagorno-Karabakh, and the post-election street protests in Kyrgyzstan which produced an abrupt change of government. These crises add considerably to the diplomatic, military, and economic strain imposed by the war in the Donbas. The Kremlin probably does not expect to

gain relief from western-imposed sanctions anytime soon, but it also may be reluctant to undertake actions that might add further to those sanctions. All these considerations may lead Russia to adopt a more pragmatic approach to relations with Moldova under a Sandu presidency.

On the other hand, Sandu's relatively modest call for the withdrawal of Russian troops from the Transdniestrian region drew an immediate, critical response from the Russian Foreign Ministry. Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov and other senior Russian officials denounced her statement as destabilizing and counterproductive to seeking a Transdniestrian settlement. It is not yet clear whether these exchanges mark the end of a post-election honeymoon or presage any assertive moves in the region by Moscow.

The specter of Moscow somehow blocking Sandu's ambitions for domestic reform and deeper integration with Europe, however, is probably exaggerated. Russia can remain stubborn on the issue of removing its troops, and it can encourage Transdniestrian negotiators to be stubborn in the political settlement process. However, some Transdniestrian businesses are already benefitting from participating in trade with the EU under Moldova's Association Agreement, while Russian subsidies keep the Transdniestrian regime afloat. Russian pressure on Moldova is thus most likely to increase Moscow's economic burden while convincing ever more Moldovans, including some on the left bank, that the road toward development and prosperity lies to the West, and not the East.

Sandu's foreign policy priorities will focus on Moldova's two immediate neighbors (Ukraine and Romania) and the European Union. Arrangements are reportedly underway for an early visit to Kiev,

and for a visit to Chisinau by Romanian President Iohannis. But there has been no talk of geopolitical reorientation, of abandoning Moldova's neutral status fixed by the constitution, or of joining alliances, in particular NATO. Instead, the incoming president continues to emphasize anti-corruption, judicial reform, and economic recovery—all relatively practical, non-ideological issues around which a broad political coalition might be built.

President-elect Sandu has received an outpouring of promises of support from European officials almost across the board, and she can almost certainly expect significant economic assistance and political support from Brussels. The U.S. under a Biden administration will also line up strongly behind Sandu, although it is far too early to predict what this may mean in practical terms.

What Lies Ahead?

The central, most important question is what will happen now in Moldovan politics, especially with the parliament and government. The West has been here before: in July 2009, a pro-Western coalition took power after eight years of rule by President Vladimir Voronin and his left-leaning, pro-Moscow Party of Communists. Western officials offered enthusiastic support, but five years later, over \$1 billion was stolen from Moldovan banks by some of these same Western-leaning leaders. Continued, repeated failures by Moldovan government officials professing a pro-western orientation have left much of the population disillusioned, and the Western leaders who supported them chastened and much more cautious.

Moldova now has an opportunity to break with the domestic political patterns and geopolitical merry-

go-round of the past two decades. Maia Sandu's resounding victory shows that it is possible to build a new coalition joining center-left, Russophone, and diaspora voters to a traditional center-right, Romanophone political movement in support of practical economic and judicial reforms. However, Sandu's election, no matter how heartening, offers no guarantees of further success. Those outside Moldova can offer advice, assistance, support, and encouragement, but in the end real change and reform is something that must be done by Moldova's political leaders and voters themselves. The presidential election was a giant step in the right direction. One may only hope it will be followed by further steps in the same direction.

The opinions expressed in this article are those solely of the author.







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