

“Inevitable” geopolitical elections in Moldova – the Europeans bet on opposition, Russia favours the incumbent

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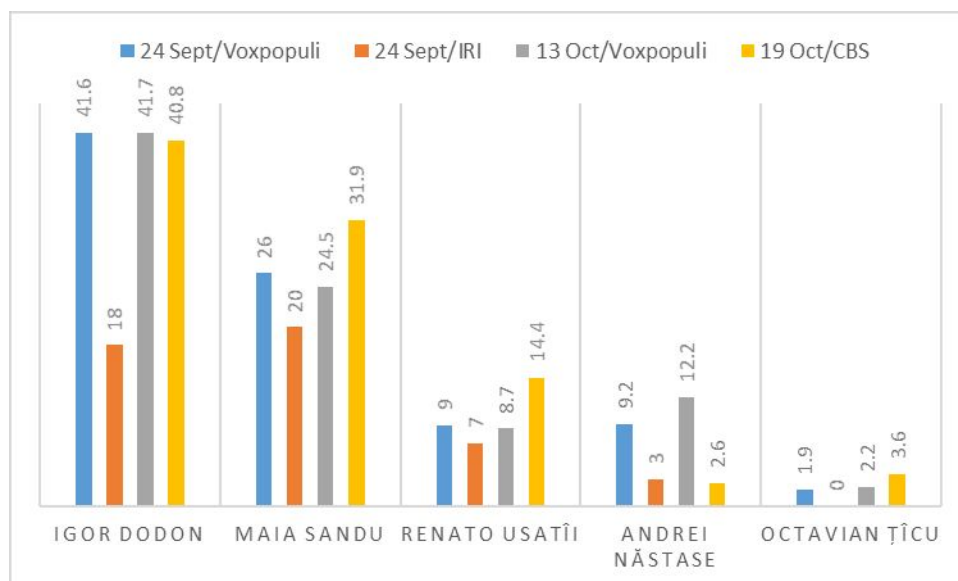
The geopolitical saga of the Moldovan presidential elections has commenced. Before the voting day on November 1st, 2020, both political voices from the EU and Russia have picked their favorites. The EU looks at the elections as yet another test, after which it will decide how to calibrate its financial assistance. The Russian politicians are shaping instead a narrative that aims to counter the Western presence. Foreign minister Sergei Lavrov ([Mid.ru, Oct. 2020](#)), and Sergei Narishkin ([Gazeta.ru, Oct. 2020](#)) who leads the Foreign Special Service of Russia, have insinuated that the US would help the opposition to start a “coloured revolution”, if the pro-Russian candidate claims the victory. Moscow is using the comparison with the ongoing power struggles in Belarus and Kyrgyzstan to illustrate what can happen in Moldova.

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Only two out of eight electoral candidates are scoring strongly in the national polls - the incumbent president Igor Dodon and the ex-Prime Minister Maia Sandu. This will make them the best placed in the first round, and rivals in a second-round run-off. However, to make more accurate forecasts is becoming more complicated. The multitude of polls mushroomed in the fall has confusing effects on voters. This could increase the incidence of indecisiveness and even inertia among the least politically educated social categories.

Internally, the pro-EU opposition candidates reciprocate in accusations of political egocentrism, making it harder to prepare the ground for their effective mobilization in the highly probable second round. Maia Sandu has built her electoral program around the idea of "good people", which she and her party – Solidarity and Action Party – are ready to empower through electoral victory against Igor Dodon. The latter rallies with the promise to continue and complete the work that was sabotaged by the 2016-2019 oligarchic regime. His focus turns towards even more socially oriented policies that ideally could benefit the rural population and the public-sector workers. Though the pandemic put the government into 'knockdown' (*19.031 infections per 1 million population as of 19 October 2020*), the poor management of the sanitary crisis has no central place in the electoral campaign. The polls unveil that the public is not punishing the incumbent president for various missteps made by him or Ion Chicu's government that he fiercely defended throughout the pandemic (*See the Figure below*). Regardless of the risks of contagion and social distance rules, Dodon and Sandu are the candidates who are most often travelling outside the capital for people-to-people meetings. Both of them avoid electoral debates, limiting themselves to individual talks via their online channels.

Figure: Voting intention in Sept.-Oct. 2020



The relationship with the outside world was filled up with several important events. On 12 October, Angela Merkel's Christian-Democrat Union articulated a message on social media that ardently supports voting for Maia Sandu, because she is trustworthy and well intended. Following this, the leadership of the European People's Party, Donald Tusk, addressed the Moldovan public in Romanian asking also for votes for Maia Sandu. Thus political circles in the EU have been signalling whom they are rooting for. This could also

be seen as a signal to other EPP-affiliated candidates - Tudor Deliu (Liberal-Democrat Party) and Andrei Năstase (Platform Dignity and Truth). They have refused to step down from the elections to boost Maia Sandu's chances.

On the other side of the electoral competition, Igor Dodon carefully calculated the risks of running together with his party – the Socialists - for the re-election. This caution lies in fear of eventual disqualification by the Constitutional Court based on the accusations about the illegal financing of the Socialists. Therefore, he competes as an independent, though he still has political support from his allies in the Socialists Party. A significant external backing behind Igor Dodon is the voice of the Kremlin. Unlike the EPP, who can place their eggs in various baskets, Moscow has no alternative but Igor Dodon. Against the backdrop of the events in Belarus and Kyrgyzstan, the Kremlin eyes closely the electoral situation in Moldova. The Kremlin tries to revive the macroeconomic credit it offered to Moldova, after the Constitutional Court rejected it for contradicting the law. Besides, Vladimir Putin has given a personal promise to send humanitarian aid ([Kremlin, 28 September 2020](#)) in the form of fuel (20.000 tons valued at approx. EUR 5.4 million) to Moldovan farmers that faced historical droughts.

In less than two weeks from the elections, investigative journalists have published serious evidence about Igor Dodon's intimate collaboration with the special services of Russia between 2016 and 2019. The provided proofs about benefits from Russia offered to Igor Dodon in exchange for following a pro-Russia agenda. Consequently, pressures build up on Igor Dodon with emerging accusations of state treason and espionage, in addition to allegations of corrupt ties to the oligarch Vladimir Plahotniuc.

A sure first round, followed by an unpredictable run-off

It is unlikely that the case of espionage and treason allegedly committed by Igor Dodon will impede him from passing the first round of elections. But, indeed, this will become a topic that can be easily picked up by Maia Sandu. On the other hand the Moldovan diaspora in Russia can play a critical role in demanding the channelling energies in favour of Dodon.

Civil society is the focus of a smearing campaign launched by the Socialists that combines the propaganda of Viktor Orban and the Kremlin about George Soros influencing Moldova through NGOs that have been ever financed by the US and the EU. This discrediting of the civil society is serving to cover up information about Russian interference, while undermining the voice of the leading Moldovan NGOs and making them dangerously "toxic" for any affiliation with Maia Sandu.

Apart from electoral competition, Moldova is in the middle of a geopolitical contest. Russia hopes to maintain the comfort of having a fully controllable president in Chisinau. Meanwhile, the West is investing its hopes in the main leader of the opposition, who has proved to be an uncompromising reformer and pro-European politician.