

Moldova's Presidential Elections and EU Referendum: A Critical Moment

By Anastasia Pociumban

On October 20, Moldovans will vote in both presidential elections and a constitutional referendum on EU integration. These elections are critical as they will set the stage for the 2025 parliamentary elections and indicate the level of support for President Maia Sandu and her liberal, pro-EU Party of Action and Solidarity (PAS). The outcome will also reflect public opinion on Moldova's EU integration efforts, which have been central to Sandu's agenda. Despite achievements in governance, the PAS government faces criticism for falling short of building social cohesion and delivering all promised reforms. The EU can support Moldova by focusing on economic development and stability, job creation, enhancing administrative capacity, and supporting Moldova's resilience against Russian hybrid threats.

PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS AND CHALLENGES

Maia Sandu [leads the polls](#) among 11 candidates, with Renato Usatii, a populist politician and businessman, and Alexandr Stoianoglo, a former prosecutor general supported by the Socialist Party of Igor Dodon, as her closest rivals.

Sandu was elected in 2020, initially facing an opposition-controlled government. After PAS secured an absolute majority in 2021, the government aimed to pursue ambitious reforms, targeting corruption, the judiciary, and economic growth. However, external crises, particularly Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, severely impacted the country. Moldova faced security concerns, a refugee crisis, economic instability, and energy shortages, which stretched the government's administrative capacity and slowed domestic reforms.

Amid these challenges, Moldova, following Ukraine, applied for EU membership, achieving candidate status in 2022. In June 2024, the EU invited Moldova to begin accession talks, marking a significant geopolitical shift. Yet, public support for EU integration remains fragile, [especially in Gagauzia](#), where Russian influence is strong. There is little engagement by the central government with the autonomous region, and disinformation campaigns have deepened existing societal divides.

If Sandu wins a second term, it would bolster her mandate ahead of the 2025 elections and reinforce the government's EU integration agenda.

THE REFERENDUM AND ITS IMPLICATIONS

The referendum aims to amend Moldova's constitution, defining EU integration as a strategic goal and including

the supremacy of EU law over national legislation, therefore affirming the nation's European identity. The referendum is highly controversial and has been a target of disinformation campaigns and manipulations. If the referendum fails, no changes will be made, and another one cannot be held for two years. Nonetheless, Moldova could still continue its EU accession path, albeit with weakened legitimacy.

To pass, the referendum requires the participation of 33 percent of the population and 50 percent plus one vote in favor. [Polls suggest mixed results](#) – while over 67 percent of voters are expected to participate, only 56.1 percent may vote in favor. [Earlier polls](#) showed lower support, with 47.8 percent in favor of EU integration. Should the referendum succeed, it will nevertheless likely face challenges from opposition parties, which may attempt to delegitimize its outcome before the 2025 elections.

Among the 15 political parties involved in the referendum, only the Communist Party and Renastere, linked to fugitive oligarch Ilan Shor (currently residing in Russia and sanctioned by the US and the EU), are [registered](#) to campaign against it. Other parties, including Chisinau Mayor Ion Ceban's National Alternative Movement (MAN), have supported the EU path or chosen to boycott the referendum, as in the case of Igor Dodon's Socialist Party. Figures like Dodon and Usatii, who previously promoted pro-Russian rhetoric, are now opting for a more cautious stance, advocating for a boycott rather than direct opposition to EU integration, which is a nuanced shift that shows some distancing from Russia.

KEY CHALLENGES AND RUSSIAN INFLUENCE AND DISINFORMATION

Moldova's [economic and social concerns](#) – such as high inflation, rising prices, and limited well-paid employment opportunities – are at the forefront of the election. While security was the dominant issue immediately after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, economic difficulties have since become voters' primary concern. However, security remains a key priority for the Moldovan government, especially given the ongoing war in Ukraine and Russia's long-term influence in Moldova. Russian disinformation campaigns, illicit financial flows, and hybrid attacks are destabilizing Moldova and straining its administrative resources.

Russian interference in both the elections and the referendum is a significant concern. Disinformation narratives claim that Sandu is manipulating the referendum to gain votes, and that EU membership would drag Moldova into the war. Other narratives suggest that PAS is monopolizing the EU agenda, a criticism shared by some pro-EU parties – also due to

RUSSIAN HYBRID ACTIVITIES IN MOLDOVA

- **“STOP EU” Telegram Bot:** Ilan Shor's campaign uses a Telegram bot to recruit Moldovans to spread anti-EU rhetoric by offering financial incentives for signing up, recruiting others, and sharing content on social media. The creation of such tools is a shift towards digitalized, decentralized methods of recruiting and radicalizing citizens against Moldova's pro-European policies.
- **Disinformation Campaigns:** The [“Nu Acum” campaign](#) spreads misleading information, urging voters to delay EU integration efforts, claiming that Moldova should focus on its internal problems before pursuing further alignment with the EU. This narrative mirrors strategies seen in other countries to stall reform and integration progress.
- **Religious Involvement:** Religious platforms on Facebook, Telegram, and YouTube are increasingly being used for political purposes, such as [a priest in Bălți denouncing EU integration](#) during a sermon. Earlier in the year, several Moldovan priests were reported to have participated in pro-Russian campaigns after traveling to Moscow.
- **MIR Card Payments for Protesters:** Russian financial networks have transferred [funds via Russian MIR cards](#) – Russia's payment system for electronic fund transfers – to support protest activities. In Gagauzia, pensioners and public-sector employees can apply and receive €100 in addition to their monthly income through these cards.

In recent months, anti-EU campaigns have intensified, both online and offline, with [fraud schemes impersonating PAS and Sandu](#), social media campaigns and paid protests. These activities reflect a sophisticated Russian effort to disrupt Moldova's pro-EU trajectory. It is believed [that \\$15 million](#) have already been channeled into Moldovan accounts for these efforts.

the timing of the current referendum as they would prefer to hold it during parliamentary elections. The opposition parties are using presidential elections to start their campaigns for the upcoming parliamentary elections in which there will be a high number of parties trying to get the votes from PAS. There are also campaigns equating EU integration with the loss of Moldova's traditional values and heritage, which exploit public fears to weaken support for EU membership (see info-box for examples).

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STRENGTHENING MOLDOVA'S EU PATH

The upcoming elections and referendum are pivotal for Moldova's future and its path toward EU integration. The referendum is likely to pass by a narrow margin, but Russian proxies

will continue efforts to delegitimize the results. The EU can play a key role in supporting Moldova's resilience and its EU accession path by focusing on economic stability, enhancing administrative capacities, improving communication on EU benefits, and countering Russian hybrid threats. This should be seen as a long-term, sustainable support for enhancing the administration's capabilities.

To help Moldova progress on its EU path, the EU and its member states should:

- Prioritize aid for job creation, economic stability, and energy security, especially in regions like Gagauzia that are vulnerable to Russian influence. The recent [EU support package](#) is a positive step in this regard.
- Strengthen Moldova's administrative capacity and support its Public Administration Reform and decentralization.
- Improve communication on EU integration benefits, particularly in rural areas, involving both ruling and opposition parties in these efforts.
- Collaborate with Moldovan authorities to counter hybrid threats, including Russian disinformation, financial interference, and religious exploitation, through reinforcing border security, intelligence, and counterterrorism to combat the Russian destabilization effort.
- Push for visible progress on anti-corruption, judicial reforms, and institutional strengthening, increasing EU assistance to enhance public trust and meet EU accession standards.

Moldova's future in the EU hinges on its ability to navigate these challenges, demonstrate tangible benefits to its population, and build social cohesion. With continued support, outreach to population and engagement of other pro-European parties, Moldova can secure its European path and strengthen its resilience against external threats.



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