

Moldova: A Pivotal Election?

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The first round of Moldova's presidential election on October 30, 2016, occurred at a challenging time for this small state located between Romania and Ukraine. The Russian-leaning Socialist Party leader Igor Dodon won 48% of the vote against his leading competitor, former Minister of Education (and former World Bank economist) Maia Sandu, who received 39%. The election goes to a second round on November 13.

This is the first time since 1996 that Moldova's president is being elected by a popular vote. Although the new president will have limited powers in the country's largely parliamentary system, he or she could have an opportunity to steer the domestic and foreign policy developments of long-troubled Moldova in a new direction, thanks to the democratic legitimacy and symbolic power of the newly elected office.

Background

Moldova faces an array of challenges related to its post-Soviet heritage and long-standing efforts to balance Western integration and good relations with Russia. Since independence in 1991, Moldova has coped with the secession of Transnistria, a Russian-backed territory with some 15% of the country's population and a substantial but [faltering industrial base](#). Moldova also confronts high rates of [out-migration](#) and recurring Russian bans against [wine](#) and other agricultural imports.

In recent years, Moldova has suffered from a protracted crisis of governance. From 2001 to 2009, the country was run by a reformed Communist Party. In a contentious election, pro-Western forces then prevailed, but infighting, corruption, and popular protest gradually weakened their authority. Since 2013, four pro-Western ruling coalitions have collapsed in succession, the last time as [fallout](#) from a massive bank fraud involving the alleged disappearance of \$1 billion, equivalent to more than 12% of Moldova's 2014 gross domestic product. The scandal resulted in the imprisonment of Vlad Filat, a former prime minister once popular in the West who presided over the initial pro-Western coalition from 2009 to 2013.

The government that came to power in January 2016 also claims a pro-Western mantle, but its many opponents [believe](#) it primarily represents the interests of unpopular local oligarch (and longtime Filat rival) Vladimir Plahotniuc. Although Filat is the only senior official to have been sentenced for the bank fraud, his supporters [view](#) his imprisonment as politically motivated and as the culmination of his feud with Plahotniuc.

Public confidence in Moldova's governing institutions is at historic lows. Recent [polls](#) commissioned by the U.S. International Republican Institute indicate that some 80% of Moldovans believe the country is heading in the wrong direction and are dissatisfied with its democratic development. Almost 90% think corruption is a major problem.

Presidential Election

The presidential election is an indirect consequence of the bank scandal. Anticorruption protests in January 2016 [called](#) for reforms, including direct presidential elections. Moldova's parliament had elected the president since 2001, but in March 2016, the Constitutional Court ruled that the establishment of such indirect elections had violated procedures. Some Moldovan observers [considered](#) the new decision to be questionable on procedural grounds but recognized that it accommodated a key demand of the opposition.

Moldovans may be united in their assessment of the country's current state, but they are divided with regard to the solution. Broadly speaking, two distinct constituencies compete. As reflected in the election, the more conservative, Russian-leaning constituency dominates; its candidate is Dodon, who broke with the Communists in 2011. Dodon's Socialists narrowly won Moldova's 2014 parliamentary elections, but pro-Western parties collectively won more seats to retain power. Dodon has consistently campaigned on a pro-Russian platform, including holding a referendum to withdraw from Moldova's Association Agreement with the European Union (EU). Dodon also [campaigns](#) against "European" values and cites Russian President Vladimir Putin as a role model.

Maia Sandu, founder of the new Action and Solidarity Party (PAS), represents a more liberal, Western-leaning constituency. Initially, candidates from several pro-Western parties planned to compete, risking fragmentation of their vote. Ultimately, two other candidates withdrew to publicly back Sandu: protest leader Andrei Nastase and, unexpectedly, former Speaker of Parliament Marian Lupu, who represents the current government but withdrew days before the election. Sandu publicly [rejected](#) Lupu's endorsement, due to her suspicion that the government preferred Dodon's victory and was actually seeking to tarnish her reputation. Although Sandu came in second nationwide, she won Chisinau, Moldova's capital, with 51% of the vote.

Entering the second round, Dodon has the advantage, falling short of outright victory in the first round by just over 2%. Whether he repeats his first-round win or Sandu rallies, Moldova's future president will have limited powers and will need to govern in tandem with the current government, which [says](#) it recognizes the need for reform while pledging to maintain a pro-Western agenda. Still, the voters' decision could be a bellwether of Moldova's future course.

Issues for Congress

Together with Ukraine and Georgia, Moldova has been one of three post-Soviet states most committed to Western integration. This is reflected through Moldova's Association Agreement with the EU, which includes free trade provisions, and a visa-free agreement. Moldova has neutral status and does not seek membership in NATO. However, it enjoys close cooperation with NATO, which [launched](#) a Defense and Related Security Capacity Building package for Moldova in June 2015.

Congress has been supportive of Moldova's Western trajectory. U.S. foreign assistance to Moldova has exceeded \$1.4 billion since 1992. In 2014, Congress welcomed the establishment of a U.S.-Moldovan Strategic Dialogue, encouraged increased assistance, and called for greater security and intelligence cooperation ([S.Res. 500](#), [H.Res. 562](#)). Congress also passed legislation to provide a "surge" in U.S. international broadcast programming in Moldova (as well as in Ukraine and Georgia) "to counter misinformation from Russian-supported news outlets" ([P.L. 113-96](#), [P.L. 113-272](#)). In FY2015, Moldova received \$11.25 million in Foreign Military Financing funds through the [European Reassurance Initiative](#).

Given Moldova's crisis of governance and the rise of a pro-Russian presidential candidate, some may wonder about the future of Moldova's pro-Western agenda. Recent developments suggest that Moldova's engagement with the West is still fragile. After the second round of Moldova's presidential election, shoring up the country's determination and ability to stay the course may require some new thinking.