

# MAIA SANDU RE-ELECTED MOLDOVA'S PRESIDENT FOLLOWING TIGHT RUN-OFF RACE & AMIDST ALLEGED RUSSIAN INTERFERENCE

**Key takeaways from the second round of the country's presidential elections**

**4 November 2024**

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

Moldova's pro-European President Maia Sandu has comfortably won the second round of the country's presidential elections, securing 55.3% of the popular vote, against 45.7% for her main challenger, Alexandr Stoianoglo, the candidate of the Russia-friendly Party of Socialists. Despite an initially close race in which countryside votes were counted first, Sandu's victory was eventually confirmed by the capital Chisinau and support from the Moldovan diaspora.

As in the case of the first round of the presidential election, the second was also overshadowed by alleged Russian interference aimed at tipping the result in favour of Stoianoglo.

While Sandu and the ruling Party of Action and Solidarity (PAS) hoped to cement Moldova's pro-EU aspirations with a landslide victory in the recent constitutional referendum held with the first round, only a knife-edge majority voted to enshrine the country's EU trajectory in the constitution. At the same time, the results of both the presidential election and the referendum remain arguably significant (particularly in view of Russian meddling efforts) and may provide new impetus for EU membership talks.

With the elections now concluded, Sandu and the PAS-led government are expected to focus on domestic issues, particularly rooting out corruption and improving the economy. Whether her pro-European agenda can be advanced in the coming years will also depend on the country's upcoming parliamentary elections, set to be held in 2025.

 Below, Aretera provides further insight into the second round of Moldova's presidential elections, as well as its likely political and policy impact.

## POST-ELECTION LANDSCAPE

On 3<sup>rd</sup> November, Moldovan citizens went to the polls to vote in the second round of the country's presidential elections. With 100% of the vote counted, incumbent President Maia Sandu, the candidate of the ruling and pro-European Party of Action and Solidarity (PAS), has won the presidential run-off vote, securing 55.3% of the popular vote.

Sandu narrowly beat her run-off rival Alexandr Stoianoglo, a former prosecutor supported by the pro-Russian Party of Socialists of the Republic of Moldova or PSRM, who received 44.7%. While Stoianoglo initially seemed to have won most of the domestic popular vote, the votes cast by Moldova's traditionally pro-European foreign diaspora and in the capital Chişinău were counted last, eventually tipping the results comfortably in Sandu's favour.

After securing 42.5% of the popular vote (nearly 656,000 votes) in the first round on 20<sup>th</sup> October, Sandu this time picked up nearly 930,000 votes, beating Stoianoglo, who secured close to 401,000 votes in the first round<sup>1</sup> and more than 750,000 in the second. Sandu also picked up nearly as much votes as she did in the 2020 presidential election, although her margin of victory was 2% less compared to four years ago.

Most of the candidates who ran in the first round but did not advance to the second called on their supporters to vote against either Sandu or Stoianoglo instead of directly endorsing their respective opponent. Most importantly, Bălţi Mayor Renato Usafîi, who secured the highest share of votes after Sandu and Stoianoglo in the first round (14%), also refused to endorse either of the two final candidates.

## PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION RESULTS

Presidential Election Results Breakdown				
Candidate	Affiliation	Popular Vote (%) – First Round	Popular Vote (%) – Second Round	Number of Votes
<b>Maia Sandu</b>	Party of Action and Solidarity – PAS (pro-EU, centrist)	42.5	55.3	929,964
<b>Alexandr Stoianoglo</b>	Party of Socialists of the Republic of Moldova – PSRM (pro-Russian)	26	44.7	750,644

Source: [Central Election Commission of the Republic of Moldova](#). Turnout: 54.3% in the second round, 51.7% in the first round.

## ELECTIONS HELD AMID RUSSIAN INTERFERENCE

Prior to announcing the election results on 3<sup>rd</sup> November, Moldovan security officials said the country was targeted by a large-scale election interference campaign from Russia – also the continuation of a meddling attempt seen during the first round of the vote. In addition to a series of cyberattacks against the electoral system, officials claimed that Moldovans were illegally transported from the country's breakaway and Russian-controlled Transnistria region to cast their votes in government-controlled territory. Moldova also warned EU capitals that Russia sought to disrupt voting at polling stations abroad to discourage ethnic Moldovans from participating in the elections.

<sup>1</sup> See [here](#) for Aretera's overview of the first round of the presidential elections from October 2024

This comes after pro-Kremlin operatives and Ilan Șor, a fugitive pro-Russian Moldovan billionaire, was accused of orchestrating a \$15 million vote-buying scheme, targeting hundreds of thousands of Moldovans. Previous allegations against the Kremlin also included financial support to pro-Russian political actors, launching disinformation campaigns and meddling in the vote at the local level.

## POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS

By winning the run-off race against Stoianoglo, President Sandu has secured her second four-year term as head of state. Under the Moldovan constitution, the President has a largely ceremonial role as most actual power lies with the country's parliament and government. However, the head of state is also tasked with representing the country in the international political arena and can also influence public policy by shaping the public discourse along politically important issues.

Under Sandu's Presidency, Moldova has started unofficially shifting from a parliamentary system to a semi-presidential one, in which the head of state has an influential role in certain issues, particularly foreign affairs, while she is also instrumental in setting the domestic political and policy agenda together with Prime Minister, Dorin Recean. This unofficial influence has undoubtedly been reinforced by the election results, with Sandu expected to continue to play an important role in the country's international relations.

## LIKELY POLICY IMPACT

Simultaneously with aiming to secure a second term as President, Sandu and the ruling PAS hoped to cement Moldova's European aspirations via a constitutional referendum held together with the first round of the election. While the pro-EU camp won the referendum (with 50.4% of the vote), it did so only by a razor-thin margin of less than 12,000 votes. In view of pre-election polls, which predicted a landslide victory for the pro-EU camp (well above 60%), the referendum result was a major disappointment for Sandu and her supporters. Nevertheless, the results of both the referendum and the presidential election are significant for the pro-EU camp, not only in view of the mounting Russian efforts to tamper with Moldova's democratic system but also given alleged Russian meddling in the recently held parliamentary elections in Georgia<sup>2</sup>, another EU candidate country.

Ever since her election as President in 2020, Sandu has been focused primarily on extracting her country from the Russian geopolitical orbit and bringing Chișinău closer to the European Union. Supported by PAS' victory in the 2021 snap parliamentary elections, this effort was accelerated after Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 as Moldova has been increasingly facing Russian interference in the form of hybrid attacks. While Moldova received EU candidate status in June 2022 and membership talks were formally opened in June, its path towards joining the European bloc remains uncertain due to domestic political reasons and the international political environment. At the same time, Sandu's victory – along with the victory of the pro-EU camp in the recent referendum – could provide new impetus for membership talks. Officially, Moldova aims to join the EU by 2030.

Simultaneously, President Sandu and the PAS-led government are also expected to focus on domestic issues, particularly the economy. In recent years, the country has been struggling from the aftermath of the COVID-19 crisis and Russia's war against Ukraine, which resulted in reduced Russian gas supplies and high inflation, benefitting Stoianoglo at the polls. The economy is widely expected to be on the ballot in the country's upcoming parliamentary elections in 2025.

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<sup>2</sup> See [here](#) for Aretera's overview of the post-election crisis in Georgia from October 2024

## LOOKING AHEAD

Whether Sandu's pro-European agenda can be advanced in the coming years heavily depends not only on the results of the presidential elections, but also the upcoming parliamentary elections. Sandu's victory at the polls on 3<sup>rd</sup> November will likely ensure an uninterrupted and smooth legislative process in the short term, as the ruling PAS holds 62 seats in the 101-member parliament. Going forward, geopolitical polarization is likely to remain a major challenge, with Moscow looking to exploit Moldova's domestic divides to prevent the country from further aligning itself with the EU.

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