



Moldova at the crossroads: European Union or Russia?

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Republic of Moldova at a crossroads: European Union or Russia?

Presidential elections and the referendum in support of Moldova's EU membership

First round results

On October 20, the Republic of Moldova held the first round of the presidential elections, alongside a referendum aimed at amending the Constitution, a move intending to underscore the country's irreversible commitment to joining the European Union. Preliminary data provided by the Central Electoral Commission (CEC) indicate a voter turnout of 51.68% for the presidential elections, surpassing participation rates from the first rounds of the 2016 (49.19%) and 2020 (48.54%) presidential elections.¹ There was also a notable increase in turnout among Moldovan citizens abroad, with 240,548 voters casting their ballots, nearing the record set in the second round of the 2020 presidential elections, when 263,177 people voted.²

After the polls closed in the Republic of Moldova, a euphoric atmosphere settled in Chisinau, fueled by the high voter turnout and its alignment with pre-election polls. These polls had outlined a favorable scenario in which Maia Sandu had a chance of winning, albeit narrowly, in the first round of the presidential elections. However, once the vote counting began, the results defied general expectations. According to preliminary data from the CEC, with 100% of the polling stations processed, Maia Sandu, the incumbent pro-Western president, secured 42.45% of the votes, followed by Alexandr Stoianoglo, the candidate supported by the Socialist Party of the Republic of Moldova (PSRM), with 25.98%. In third place was Renato Usatii, leader of Our Party, with 13.79%, followed by Irina Vlah, the former Bascan (governor) of Gagauzia, with 5.38%, and Victoria Furtuna, who received 4.45%.³ All these candidates contested Maia Sandu's policies and were either supported by pro-Russian parties or had a pro-Russia stance during the electoral campaign. Consequently, a second round of the presidential elections will take place on November 3, where Maia Sandu will face Alexandr Stoianoglo.

¹ "Record turnout of over 51.5% in Moldova's pro-EU elections and referendum", *Digi24*, October 20, 2024. Accessed at: <https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/actualitate/prezenta-record-de-pestre-514-la-alegerile-si-referendumul-pro-ue-din-republica-moldova-2975649>

² Central Electoral Commission of the Republic of Moldova, "Voter turnout". Accessed at: <https://pv.cec.md/cec-template-presidential-presence.html>

³ Central Electoral Commission of the Republic of Moldova, "Preliminary Results Presidential Elections". Accessed at: <https://pv.cec.md/cec-template-presidential-results.html>

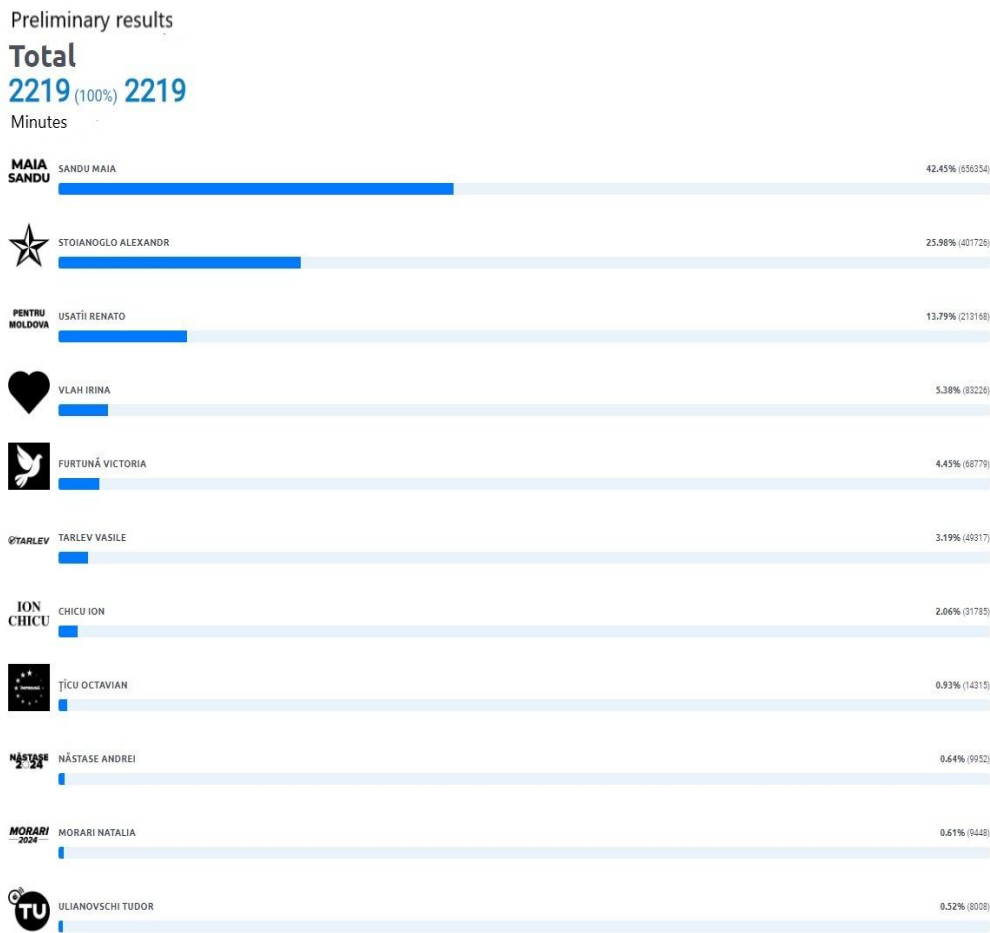


Figure 1. Preliminary results Presidential Elections
 Source: Central Electoral Commission

Comparing the preliminary results of the presidential elections with pre-election opinion polls, there is a significant discrepancy between initial predictions and the actual performance of the candidates.⁴ This difference, especially in the case of Alexandr Stoianoglo, who was polling at around 9-11% and ended up receiving 26% of the vote, highlights an exemplary mobilization capacity by networks managed by Russian-affiliated actors.⁵ It is important to note that just two days before the elections, an audio message was circulated on Telegram groups used by the network of pro-Russian oligarch Ilan Shor for coordinating activities, in which he urged his supporters to vote for Alexandr Stoianoglo.⁶

⁴ CBS-Research, "Socio-Political Poll: October 2024," *WatchDog*, October 17, 2024. Accessed at: <https://watchdog.md/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Sondaj-Octombrie-2024.pdf>

⁵ "iDATA poll | Maia Sandu would win the presidential elections if they were held tomorrow", *Radio Chisinau*, October 17, 2024. Accessed at: <https://radiochisinau.md/sondaj-idata-maia-sandu-ar-castiga-alegerile-prezidentiale-daca-acestea-ar-avea-loc-maine---202416.html>

⁶ Dumitru Ciorici, "Orders from Moscow in Shor's network", *Telegram posting*, October 18, 2024. Accessed at: <https://t.me/DumitruCiorici/16540>

Referendum results

The constitutional referendum in the Republic of Moldova registered a voter turnout of 49.81%, bringing approximately 1.47 million citizens to the polls, surpassing the validation threshold of 33.3%.⁷ Preliminary results, based on the counting of 100% of the polling stations, indicate an extremely close outcome: 50.46% (751.235) of the votes were cast in favor of amending the Constitution, while 49.54% (737.639) were against it.⁸

The analysis of the results highlights an uneven geographical distribution of voting preferences across the Republic of Moldova, revealing clear polarization between the northern and southern regions on one side, and the central region on the other. The northern and southern areas voted against the referendum, while the capital, Chisinau, and the central districts (administrative-territorial units) voted in favor. The municipality of Chisinau stands out with a majority of 55.98% supporting the constitutional amendment.⁹ In contrast, the other regions of the country displayed an opposite trend, with a predominance of votes against the amendment. Specifically, only 8 districts registered a majority in favor of the referendum, while 24 districts voted against it.¹⁰ A negative vote was also observed in regions bordering Romania, which have benefited from European Union funds, such as Ungheni (56.75% against) and Cahul (56.19% against), raising suspicions of electoral fraud activities.¹¹

⁷ "Referendum 2024. Plebiscite results in the districts", *Ziarul de Gardă*, October 20, 2024, Accessed at: <https://www.zdg.md/stiri/politic/live-text-referendum-2024-rezultatele-plebiscitului-in-raioane/>

⁸ Central Electoral Commission of the Republic of Moldova, "Referendum preliminary results". Accessed at: <https://pv.cec.md/cec-template-referendum-results.html>

⁹ "Presidential Elections and Referendum 2024: How people voted in Chisinau municipality. Statistics by sectors", *TV8*, October 21, 2024. Accessed at: <https://tv8.md/2024/10/21/infografic-alegeri-prezidentiale-si-referendum-2024-cum-s-a-votat-in-municipiul-chisinau-statistica-pe-sectoare/267944>

¹⁰ "Referendum 2024: How Moldovans voted. Statistics by districts", *TV8*, October 21, 2024. Accessed at: <https://tv8.md/2024/10/21/harta-referendum-2024-cum-au-votat-moldovenii-din-tara-statistica-pe-raioane/267938>

¹¹ "Ungheni and Cahul, two cities that benefited from most EU projects, voted NO in referendum", *Ziarul de Gardă*, October 21, 2024. Accessed at: <https://www.zdg.md/stiri/ungheni-si-cahul-doua-orase-care-au-beneficiat-de-cele-mai-multe-proiecte-ue-au-votat-nu-la-referendum/>

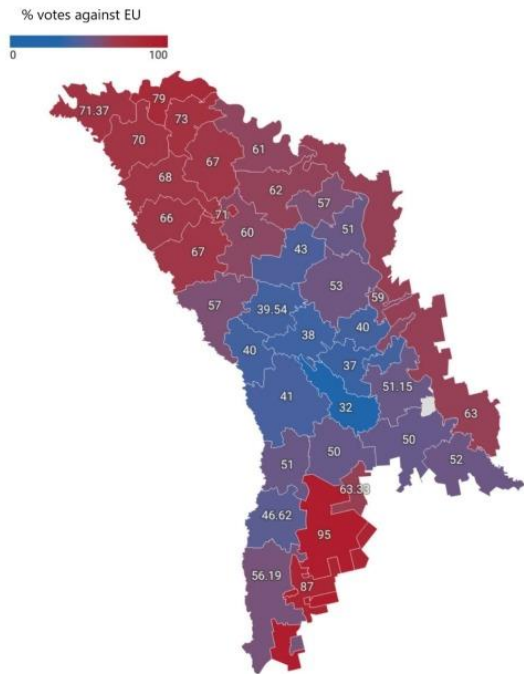


Figure 2. Votes % (in red) against the amendment the Constitution
Source: Stefan Grigorita

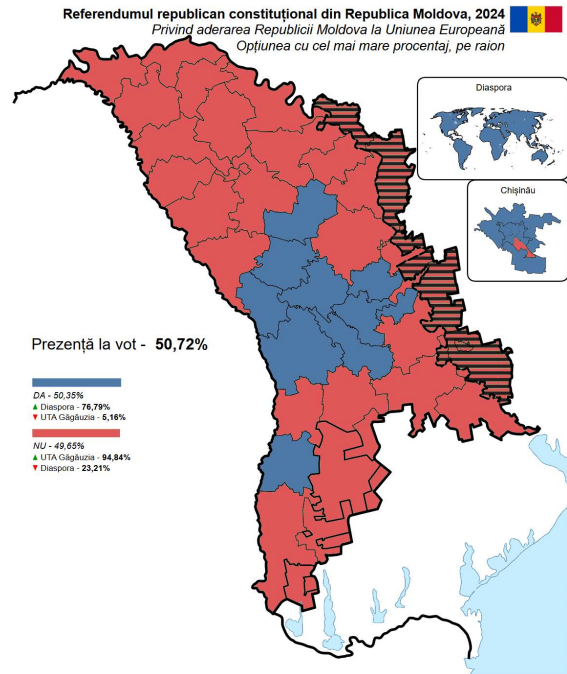


Figure 3. Referendum results by regions
Source: Wikimedia Commons

In Balti, the third largest city in the Republic of Moldova, 70.58% of participants voted against the amendment of the Constitution.¹² In the Autonomous Territorial Unit of Gagauzia, opposition to the European Union was overwhelming, with 94.83% voting against. Notably, even voters from the Transnistrian region proved to be more pro-European than those in Gagauzia or Balti, with 37.44% of the 15,526 citizens residing in Transnistria who participated in the vote supporting the constitutional amendment. The referendum succeeded, in fact, due to significant support from the diaspora, which overwhelmingly voted in favor, with 76.96% of the votes supporting the constitutional amendment, ultimately reversing the negative result recorded in the country.¹³

¹² "Referendum in Balti: lower turnout than in Transnistria - less than 30% voted YES", *TVN.md*, October 21, 2024. Accessed at: <https://tvn.md/vox-pop-baltiul-a-votat-mai-pasiv-decat-transnistria-nici-30-din-balteni-nu-au-votat-da-la-referendum/>

¹³ Central Electoral Commission of the Republic of Moldova, "Referendum preliminary results". Accessed at: <https://pv.cec.md/cec-template-referendum-results.html>

Preliminary results
External

231 (100%) **231**
Minutes

235503
Total valid votes

Do you support amending the Constitution to allow Moldova to accede to the European Union?



Figure 4. Referendum preliminary results
Source: Central Electoral Commission

Russia's hybrid war

The outcome of the referendum was influenced by a number of factors, including a broad disinformation campaign and external interference orchestrated by the Russian Federation, primarily implemented by the structures managed by Ilan Shor's affiliates. This large-scale hybrid warfare, applied in a small state such as the Republic of Moldova, has exerted a considerable influence on public opinion, and the law enforcement institutions were overwhelmed by the scale of the phenomenon of electoral bribery.

The referendum results fell short of pre-election poll predictions, which indicated 63.5% support for EU accession.¹⁴ The association of the European integration process with the process of amending the Constitution has generated reluctance among a significant portion of the population. This trend was amplified by intense propagandistic narratives promoted by pro-Russian forces, including alarmist scenarios about Moldova's involvement in the war in Ukraine, the escalation of the Transnistrian conflict,¹⁵ the selling of agricultural land to foreigners upon joining the EU,¹⁶ and the perceived threat to traditional values, threatened by the promotion of the LGBT agenda.¹⁷ The dissemination of these themes, with an unimaginable

¹⁴ CBS-Research, "September 2024 Socio-Political Poll," *WatchDog*, October 17, 2024. Accessed at: <https://watchdog.md/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Sondaj-Octombrie-2024.pdf>

¹⁵ "Falsehood promoted by Russian propaganda: Moldova will be drawn into war if it joins the EU" *TV8*, October 2, 2024. Accessed at: <https://tv8.md/2024/10/02/video-fals-promovat-de-propaganda-rusiei-moldova-va-fi-atrasa-in-razboi-daca-va-adera-la-ue/266576>

¹⁶ "President Maia Sandu and Prime Minister Dorin Ececan deny allegations of possible sale of land to foreign citizens", *Infotag*, September 30, 2024. Accessed at: <https://www.infotag.md/economics-ro/319191/>

¹⁷ Eugenia Apostu, "Three days of fasting and 'sporadic prayer' against the ban on the Moldovan Metropolitan", *Radio Free Europe Moldova*, September 25, 2024. Accessed at: <https://moldova.europalibera.org/a/trei-zile-de-post-si-rugaciune-spornica-impotriva-interzicerii-mitropoliei-moldovei/33134755.html>

intensity across all possible distribution channels by Russia's agents of influence, heavily impacted the final results.

Moscow, through the Shor group, operated on two fronts: spreading disinformation and corrupting the electorate.¹⁸ Well-documented journalistic investigations reveal how the Shor group recruited and financially rewarded economically vulnerable individuals to vote against the pro-EU referendum and President Maia Sandu, while also recruiting new members. Initially, party activists were paid in cash for their activities, but recently, according to the investigation, these payments started being transferred to bank accounts opened at Promsvyazbank, a Russian bank led by Piotr Fradkov, the son of former Prime Minister and former head of the Foreign Intelligence Service of the Russian Federation, Mikhail Fradkov.¹⁹ The effectiveness of these subversive tactics is amplified by Moldova's precarious socio-economic context, characterized by extremely low minimum wages and pensions (220 euros and 135 euros, respectively), which increases the population's vulnerability to manipulation and corruption, especially in rural areas.

Immediately after the first preliminary results came in, Maia Sandu stated that the Republic of Moldova faced an unprecedented attack on democracy during the election day and in the preceding months. According to her, the scale of electoral fraud was unparalleled, with information suggesting that the criminal group Shor had aimed to corrupt 300,000 votes.²⁰ Shortly before the elections, Viorel Cernauteanu, head of the General Police Inspectorate, had declared that in September alone, \$15 million had been transferred to the Republic of Moldova from the Russian Federation, intended to corrupt the electorate, with over 130,000 people being beneficiaries of these funds.²¹

Three days before the elections, the authorities in Chisinau announced the identification of over 100 young individuals who were reportedly trained in the Russian Federation and in Balkan countries (Serbia and Bosnia-Herzegovina) to provoke incidents after the elections and challenge law enforcement, with this plan being attributed to Ilan Shor's group. The police released hidden camera footage recorded during such training sessions, where young individuals are seen in a classroom

¹⁸ Information and Security Service of the Republic of Moldova, "Assessment of the Russian Federation's Involvement in the Electoral Processes in the Republic of Moldova in 2024-2025", March 5, 2024. Accessed at: <https://sis.md/sites/default/files/comunicate/fisiere/Scenarii%20de%20influen%C8%9B%C4%83%20024-2025.pdf>

¹⁹ Măriuța Nistor, "Serving Moscow. Trei luni printre "robii" lui Șor. ZdG undercover investigation", *Ziarul de Gardă*, October 11, 2024. Accessed at: <https://www.zdg.md/investigatii/ancheta/video-in-slujba-moscovei-trei-luni-printre-robii-lui-sor-investigatie-zdg-sub-acoperire/>

²⁰ "Press briefing by Moldovan presidential candidate Maia Sandu after polling stations close," *Privesc.eu*, October 21, 2024. Accessed at: <https://privesc.eu/arhiva/107250/Briefing-de-presa-sustinut-de-candidata-la-functia-de-presedinte-al-Republicii-Moldova--Maia-Sandu--dupa-inchiderea-sectiilor-de-votare>

²¹ "15 million dollars transferred from Russia to corrupt Moldovan voters." *IPN.md*, October 3, 2024. Accessed at: https://www.ipn.md/ro/15-milioane-de-dolari-transferati-din-rusia-pentru-coruperea-8013_1107753.html

simulating protests and chanting slogans such as "our language is Russian," "no to dual citizenship," and "we don't want Europe." Another video, allegedly from a training camp in the Balkans, shows young people learning how to make explosives and operate drones.²²

Although the referendum result is in favor of amending the Constitution, the significant turnout of the diaspora, which tipped the balance toward a positive vote, is already being exploited by pro-Russian political actors, including officials from the Russian Federation, to challenge the legitimacy of the outcome. Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov stated that "in the context of political repression and restrictions on press freedom, there is considerable internal opposition to President Maia Sandu's ideology."²³ Furthermore, Russian television channels have launched a campaign to discredit Moldova's elections, promoting allegations of widespread electoral fraud, particularly among the diaspora. A report broadcasted by Channel One (Pervyi Kanal) at 09:00 mentioned that, after 90% of the ballots were processed, 53% of the votes were against European integration. However, once the data from polling stations abroad arrived, the results began to balance out.²⁴ The report included footage from polling stations in Italy, the United Kingdom, and Romania, insinuating that voters were transported to the polls in an organized manner.

Presidential election final. Who is Alexandr Stoianoglo.



Figure 5. Maia Sandu and Alexander Stoianoglo, contenders in the second round of the presidential elections in the Republic of Moldova

Source: Radio Chisinau

²² Iurie Rotari, "Authorities arrest four youths and investigate 100 others for preparing 'destabilization' after training in Russia and the Balkans," *Radio Free Europe Moldova*, October 17, 2024. Accessed at: <https://moldova.europalibera.org/a/autoritatile-arestteaza-patru-tineri-si-documeteaza-alti-100-pentru-pregatirea-de-destabilizari-dupa-antrenamente-in-rusia-si-balcani-/33162084.html>

²³ "The Kremlin noted a significant number of opponents of Sandu's course in Moldova", *Interfax*, October 21, 2024. Accessed at: <https://www.interfax.ru/russia/987746>

²⁴ "Russian TV channels began to discredit Moldovan elections with reports of "mass falsifications"", *Agentstvo*, October 21, 2024. Accessed at: <https://www.agents.media/rossijskie-telekanaly-nachali-diskreditirovat-vybory-v-moldove-soobshheniyami-o-massovyh-falsifikatsiyah/>

Alexandr Stoianoglo, the candidate supported by the Socialist Party of the Republic of Moldova (PSRM), led by Igor Dodon, was polling at a maximum of 11% before Sunday's elections, with some surveys even placing him in third place, behind Renato Usatii.²⁵ Between 2009 and 2014, Stoianoglo served as a member of the Moldovan Parliament, representing the Democratic Party, led by oligarch Vlad Plahotniuc. During 2009-2010, he held the position of Vice President of Parliament, and in his second term, he chaired the Parliamentary Committee on State Security, Defense, and Public Order. In 2015, Stoianoglo ran for the position of Bascan (Governor) of the Autonomous Territorial Unit of Gagauzia, being of Gagauz ethnic origin, and finished in sixth place.²⁶

In 2019, Alexandr Stoianoglo was appointed Prosecutor General by a presidential decree issued by Igor Dodon, following a selection process organized by the Superior Council of Prosecutors.²⁷ In 2021, after the Party of Action and Solidarity (PAS) secured a parliamentary majority, Stoianoglo was suspended from his position and arrested as part of a criminal investigation, facing charges of abuse of office, passive corruption, and false statements. In 2023, Maia Sandu officially dismissed him from his role as Prosecutor General. In the same year, the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) found that the Moldovan authorities had violated Stoianoglo's rights by suspending him in 2021, as he was not given the opportunity to appeal the decision.²⁸

One of the accusations that tarnishes Alexandr Stoianoglo's public image is his alleged connection to businessman Veaceslav Platon. In April 2017, the Chişinău Court sentenced Platon to 18 years in prison for large-scale fraud and money laundering.²⁹ In 2020, Platon was released from detention following a motion initiated by Stoianoglo, who at the time was Prosecutor General. Platon subsequently fled to the UK.³⁰

²⁵ "iDATA poll | Maia Sandu would win the presidential elections if they were held tomorrow", *Radio Chisinau*, October 17, 2024. Accessed at: <https://radiochisinau.md/sondaj-idata-maia-sandu-ar-castiga-alegerile-prezidentiale-daca-acestea-ar-avea-loc-maine---202416.html>

²⁶ Măriuța Nistor, "Prosecutor, defendant, candidate. Cine este Alexandr Stoianoglo, candidatul PSRM la Prezidențiale", *Ziarul de Gardă*, October 7, 2024. Accessed at: <https://www.zdg.md/investigatii/dosar/video-procuror-inculpat-candidat-cine-este-alexandr-stoianoglo-candidatul-psrm-la-prezidentiale/>

²⁷ Cornelia Cozonac, "PREZIDENTIALE- 2024// Alexandr Stoianoglo: criminal files, friendship with Platon and falsehoods about the war", *Anticorupție.md*, October 18, 2024. Accessed at: <https://anticoruptie.md/ro/electorala-2016/prezidentiale-2024-alexandr-stoianoglo-dosarele-penale-prietenia-cu-platon-si-falsurile-despre-razboi>

²⁸ Nadejda Coptu, "Former prosecutor general wins at ECHR", *Radio Free Europe Moldova*, October 24, 2023. Accessed at: <https://moldova.europalibera.org/a/fostul-procuror-general-castiga-la-cedo/32651589.html>

²⁹ "Veaceslav Platon sentenced to 18 years in prison. Businessman deprived of last word", *Anticorupție.md*, April 20, 2017. Accessed at: <https://anticoruptie.md/ro/dosare-de-coruptie/veaceslav-platon-condamnat-la-18-ani-de-inchisoare-omul-de-afaceri-a-fost-lipsit-de-ultimul-cuvant>

³⁰ Viorica Mija, "Platon's release: restart in the case of former Prosecutor General Alexandr Stoianoglo", *Anticorupție.md*, July 11, 2024. Accessed at: <https://anticoruptie.md/ro/dosare-de-coruptie/eliberarea-lui-platon-restart-in-dosarul-fostului-procuror-general-alexandr-stoianoglo>

In May 2024, at the initiative of former journalist and presidential candidate Natalia Morari (Veaceslav Platon's partner), several opposition politicians gathered to discuss the possibility of nominating a single candidate for the upcoming presidential elections. Among the participants were Igor Dodon, Ion Chicu, Irina Vlah, and Tudor Ulianoschi. During that period, rumors circulated suggesting that former Prosecutor General Alexandr Stoianoglo could be a potential candidate, but the discussions did not lead to a consensus, at least at a public level.³¹

Although in 2021, Alexandr Stoianoglo publicly called Ilan Shor as the "leader of the Shor organized crime group" from the parliamentary podium, in an interview given a few days before the elections, he stated that while Shor is one of the beneficiaries of the billion-dollar theft from Moldova's banking system, he could not consider him a criminal without an official conviction.³²

Conclusions

The results of the referendum and the first round of the presidential elections reveal growing dissatisfaction with the current government and Maia Sandu, driven by the natural erosion of governance in an exceptionally challenging economic and geopolitical context, marked by Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine. At the same time, it is important to recognize that Moldova is currently the site of one of the largest operations orchestrated by Russian intelligence services, primarily the FSB, as Moldova falls within its sphere of responsibility. The narrow victory in the referendum will have a direct impact on the second round of the presidential elections. For the current president, winning the election will be a significant challenge, given the massive mobilization of pro-Russian candidates against her. Essentially, Maia Sandu will be standing alone against a coalition of opposition, while Russia will heavily invest to demonstrate that it can orchestrate the defeat of Moldova's current president, who is strongly supported by all Western leaders. With pro-European vote falling below 51%, it is crucial to implement a strategy focused on mobilizing the urban electorate and regions with pro-European affinities that had exhibited low or questionable turnout in the first round. Moldovan authorities will need to dismantle some of the organized crime networks that have effectively purchased votes, to curb the illegal actions of Moscow-backed groups. The European Union and the United States must show concrete support, coming to Chisinau to emphasize their backing for Maia Sandu. In this context, the role of the diaspora becomes crucial, as their exemplary mobilization will be key to countering attempts to rig the internal vote.

³¹ "Opposition, gathered at the same table to decide whether to have a common candidate in the presidential elections", *Ziarul de Gardă*, May 19, 2024. Accessed at: <https://www.zdg.md/stiri/politic/opozitia-adunata-la-aceeasi-masa-pentru-a-hotari-daca-va-avea-un-candidat-comun-la-alegerile-pentru-functia-de-presedinte/>

³² "Who Stoianoglo serves. Dissection of the RTVI interview | Nokta Live", *Nokta.md*, October 4, 2024. Accessed at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X80dccQ-2Po&t=577s>

A success by pro-Russian forces in Moldova in rejecting the referendum could have discouraged the opposition in Georgia, where parliamentary elections will be held on October 26. The election result in Moldova is also causing concern in Kyiv, as a potential victory for a pro-Russian president would deprive Ukraine of its only neighbor outside the EU and NATO that maintained a favorable attitude towards Ukraine, the other neighbor, Belarus, being a loyal ally of Russia.

The same concern is echoed in Romania, an EU and NATO neighbor of Moldova, with whom it shares special historical, cultural, political and economic relations. A defeat for Maia Sandu could lead to a deterioration in bilateral relations, as was the case when pro-Russian presidents Vladimir Voronin and Igor Dodon were in Chisinau.

Russia will now focus on preventing Maia Sandu's re-election in the second round, on November 3rd. A narrow victory for her will not intimidate Russia, which has a second chance in next year's parliamentary elections to undermine Moldova's pro-European course. The example of Georgia is eloquent, where Georgia's pro-Western president is politically isolated and the government has a lenient stance towards Russia, delaying reforms and adopting controversial initiatives that alienate the country from the EU and the US. It will be a big challenge for Moldova's current ruling party, PAS, led by Maia Sandu, not only to win the elections but also to secure a parliamentary majority capable of advancing a reformist agenda to continue the country's EU accession process.

The referendum result in the Republic of Moldova, however, also reflects a deeper societal divide, beyond Russia's obvious actions to undermine the electoral process. The reforms needed to join the EU are painful, time-consuming and require a political consensus that extends beyond an electoral cycle. Without the EU's constant and consistent support, such a reform process may become reversible, especially when it is constantly sabotaged by Russia, which still maintains numerous levers of influence, built over decades of domination.

