

# Pro-EU forces in Moldova claim victory in questionable vote

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The tiny European state of Moldova is increasingly being drawn into the maelstrom of NATO's war against Russia. On Monday, the US-allied government of Maia Sandu claimed victory in a referendum held the day before over whether the country should join the European Union. According to the Central Election Commission, 50.39 percent of voters supported and 49.61 percent opposed EU ascension. Slightly more than half of those eligible to cast a ballot did so.

The validity of the vote is highly questionable. Until about 2 a.m. on October 21, news reports had indicated that, with nearly 94 percent of the votes counted, the proposal that Moldova change its constitution and join the EU was going down to defeat by a clear, if relatively small, majority. The situation then changed dramatically over the course of several hours. Ballots received from Moldovans elsewhere in Europe and in North America were included in the count, which tipped the scales in the opposite direction and delivered the pro-EU camp a razor-thin victory. The outcome was decided by just 10,564 ballots.

Shortly thereafter, Moldova's president, a former World Bank economist, declared the matter resolved. The country's voters had resisted, she said, an "unprecedented" Russian-organized campaign of election interference, which included: disinformation, vote buying, cyberattacks, and even the preparation of an armed insurrection. Such claims, for which no concrete evidence has been presented, are about as dubious as Israel's insistence that every hospital, school and refugee camp it bombs is a Hamas command center.

Within a day the US State Department congratulated "the Moldovan people for making their voices heard in record numbers," insisted that, "the Government of Moldova and the Central Election Commission ensured the election was well-managed and competitive," and applauded the country for preventing "unprecedented Russian efforts to deny the Moldovan people their right to choose their own future." European Parliament President Roberta Metsola thanked the nation for its "bravery" and stated, "Well done Republic of Moldova!"

Moldova's Central Election Commission has already rejected as "unfounded" a challenge to the results presented by the leader of the country's Communist Party, which claimed that it

has information about violations at polling stations abroad.

Even if one were to accept the idea that Moldova's overseas embassies and the US and EU's spy agencies treated the country's ballot boxes with the utmost honor, the fact that the Moldovan diaspora from western Europe and North America played the decisive role in determining the outcome of the vote is of major political significance. While there are hundreds of thousands of poor Moldovans spread out across these regions, the population is highly stratified, and it is unlikely that the cleaners, domestic workers, and other low-paid employees laboring 10 hours and more a day made their way to a balloting location. Rather, it would have been the most well-to-do, most secure, most successful at finding a comfortable place for themselves in the west who voted. That is, a demographic that will overwhelmingly support EU membership from the standpoint of its material interests.

Furthermore, two large populations were essentially excluded from the voting process. Approximately, 150,000 Moldovans live in Russia. Only 10,000 ballots were distributed there and only two polling locations opened, both in Moscow.

There were also no voting booths in the Moldovan region of Transnistria, a breakaway republic allied with Moscow and in which it has 1,500 troops stationed. Transnistria is home to around 367,000 thousand Moldovan citizens, many of whom also Russian passport holders.

Anyone in this area who wanted to cast a ballot had to cross the internal border into Moldova proper. According to the authorities in the breakaway republic, the government in Chisinau did not even propose having balloting happen in their region and also rejected out of hand the validity of any referendum organized by local agencies.

Despite their claims of victory, the US, the EU and the Sandu government face a crisis in Moldova, which they attempt to manage through a combination of bluster, lies, manipulation, violence and repression. There is widespread and growing opposition to the war, hatred of NATO, suspicion of the US and EU's real aims, fear over what will happen to the tiny dependency of a country, and general sympathy for Russian people in Moldova, which is surrounded on three sides by Ukraine. Nine percent of Moldova's population of 2.6 million identify as Russian, many speak Russian as a first, second, or

third language, Russian is a common lingua franca in many parts of the country. The population as a whole is a patchwork of different peoples, languages, religions, and ancestries.

The country, among the poorest in Europe, is crippled by inflation, which daily erodes real wages. The poverty rate stands at 13.3 percent, and the minimum wage amounts to about \$283 a month. One quarter of those aged 15-34 are neither employed nor pursuing an education. Life expectancy at birth is just 68.6 years, and the population is shrinking at a faster rate than everywhere else on the continent due to emigration, low birth rates and high mortality.

President Sandu barely managed to eek out a pro-EU result in Sunday's vote. Surveys conducted by right-wing Western research institutes have insisted for years that there is substantial support for joining hands with Brussels. The right-wing International Republican Institute, for instance, recently put the number at 63 percent. However, as one specialist on the region told the AP on Monday, they "overestimated the pro-EU feeling."

Moldova's leader herself also failed to win a personal victory this past weekend, winning only 42 percent of the vote in the presidential election that took place simultaneously with the referendum. Her leading opponent, Aleksandr Stoianoglo, with a more pro-Russian orientation, garnered 26 percent of the ballots. Even these numbers understate the depth of the skepticism towards Sandu, as there were 11 candidates in this first round of presidential voting and many anti-EU forces advised a boycott. In short, it is very unclear as to whether Moldova's current president will hold onto power after the run-off election scheduled for November 3.

Presiding over an explosive combination of economic discontent and anti-war moods, President Sandu has increasingly turned to authoritarian methods. In November 2023, two days before balloting was to begin for local elections, a leading opposition party was banned, resulting in 600 candidates being kicked out of the race. In May of this year, she forced through her choice for prime minister, despite not having the necessary parliamentary votes. Evgenia Gutul, the elected governor of Gagauzia—home to an ethnic minority of Turkic-Christian people, who have raised objections to federal cultural policies downgrading the status of the Russian language in Moldova—is facing charges of being a Muscovite stooge.

This spring, the government in Chisinau pushed through amendments to the criminal code that provoked condemnation from Amnesty International. Authorities changed the definition of treason to include acts that occur during peacetime, and any action can now be deemed treasonous even if it does not cause direct harm to the state. In another major change, assisting a foreign state, foreign organization, undefined "unconstitutional entity", or their representatives, in carrying out "hostile activities against the security of the state" including "through disinformation campaigns" is a new form of "high treason." In

short, anyone identified as being pro-Russian is a traitor.

The US State Department is already gearing up for the prospect that the widespread opposition existing in Moldova to President Sandu will manifest. In its October 22 press release applauding the country's recent pro-EU vote but clearly worried about the November 3 presidential election, the American agency stated, "The United States remains concerned Russia will again attempt to prevent Moldovans from exercising their sovereign right to choose their own leaders." In other words, if the vote does not go the way Washington wants, it will be declared illegitimate.

The geostrategic location of Moldova has placed the country at the center of the US and EU's war calculations and efforts to break-up and subjugate Russia. In late May, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken promised a \$135 million aid package to support Moldova's energy security and counter Russia. NATO runs many programs in the country and is centrally involved in training its military. Among the efforts that the alliance lists on its country page for the Black Sea nation is, "support for the training of public information specialists within the country's armed forces"—in other words, experts in pro-American propaganda.

Writing for the Center for Strategic and International Studies in June, Daniel Runde and Thomas Bryja declared, "Now is the time for the West to 'go big' on Moldova." "U.S. policymakers should view Moldova's current pro-Ukrainian government and path to economic resilience as critical to Ukraine's success in the war, given that the alternative—a pro-Russian or corrupt Moldovan leader—could thwart Moldova's aspirations of Western alignment, leave Ukraine cornered, and ultimately dim Kyiv's prospects for survival," they added.



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