

## Moldovan politics after the presidential elections

After a 15 year break, Moldovans elected their president through direct vote on 13 November. The leader of the pro-Russian Socialist Party, Igor Dodon, won the elections with slightly more than 52% of the votes. After seven years of rule by the increasingly unpopular so-called pro-European forces, Dodon promised to revise the Association Agreement with the European Union and to strengthen ties with Moscow.

Despite this strong rhetoric during the election campaign, a significant immediate impact on day-to-day politics is unlikely as the president has only limited competencies. Neither is a radical shift in Moldova's relationship with the EU and the implementation of the Association Agreement to be expected. As the so-called pro-European alliance has shown in past, a strong geopolitical rhetoric serves first of all to mobilise potential voters and has little impact on actual politics. Given the tacit support Dodon enjoyed from Plahotniuc's media during the election campaign, early parliamentary elections, if at all, will only be triggered once it is in the interest of the main oligarch.

### Because the court said so

Since 2001 the Moldovan president used to be elected by the Parliament with a 3/5 majority (61 votes). This provision created stalemates in the past and provoked early elections in 2009 and 2010, after the parliament was unable to find such a majority.

Four years later, in March 2016, the Constitutional Court surprisingly decided that the changes made in 2001 were unconstitutional and reinstated the popular vote. Though controversial, the decision was welcomed by most since over 90% of Moldovans favoured a direct vote.

### Igor Dodon - the pro-Russian candidate

The 41-year-old leader of the Socialist Party had previously been minister of economy in the Communist-led government between 2006 and 2009.

Dodon was the clear favourite on the pro-Russian left. He currently leads the biggest opposition party in parliament. At the same time, the minimum age limit of 40 for presidency disqualified Renato Usatii, an also popular, but younger pro-Russian opposition candidate. Conveniently for Dodon, Communist Party leader Vladimir Voronin - another key figure on the left and a former president - announced that his party will not participate in what he called "unconstitutional elections".

A main point of Igor Dodon's election rhetoric was to "restore strategic ties with Russia" with the aim to re-open the Russian market for those Moldovan exports affected by Russian embargoes during Moldova's rapprochement with the EU since 2009. At the same time, Dodon scandalised Ukraine's Parliament by saying in an interview that "Crimea was de-facto Russian territory". Ukraine re-called its ambassador for consultations and Kyiv's Rada discussed eventual sanctions both against Dodon and Moldova.

Other priorities in Dodon's list were: provoking early elections, solving the Transnistrian conflict through federalisation, securing Moldova's geo-political neutrality, stopping the "unionism" movement that promotes unification of Moldova and Romania and, of course, a Moldovan renaissance. Throughout the elections Dodon also promised to bring back the USD 1 bn that was stolen from the banking system two years earlier and to fight against Vladimir Plahotniuc, the oligarch who "controls the country".

Polls were crediting Dodon with 40-45% of support before the elections.

### The pro-European candidate - Maia Sandu

On the pro-European, centre-right side of the political arena, the situation was not that clear. At least three candidates were shown by polls to have chances to face Dodon in the second round. All were credited with 12-15% of votes.

Andrei Nastase, the leader of popular protests that dominated political life in Moldova in 2015, retreated in favour of Maia Sandu on 21 October 2016. He did so in order to make sure that at least one "truly anti-oligarchic candidate (Maia Sandu) makes it into the second round" and to prevent Marian Lupu - the formal leader of the Democratic Party - whose unofficial leader is Vladimir Plahotniuc.

Maia Sandu had previously worked as an advisor to the executive director of the World Bank until 2012, when she returned to Moldova to become a reformist Minister of Education. Her program was dominated by promises to fight Plahotniuc and corruption, to start an international investigation of the bank fraud and to deepen European integration. The polls initially credited her with 12% of support.

### A dirty election campaign

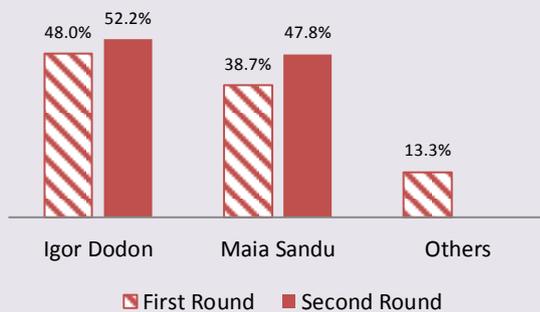
The short two-month campaign had two different dimensions. In the open and official debate the two candidates were accusing each other of being Plahot-

niuc’s puppet and being involved in the massive bank fraud that shocked Moldova in 2014/2015.

Plahotniuc’s Democratic Party and Plahotniuc himself openly supported the candidacy of Maia Sandu. However, most experts agreed that this was a move to discredit her. In fact, all the media controlled by Plahotniuc was actively spreading biased, negative and often fabricated news about Maia Sandu. These included highly sensitive topics for the Moldovan voters, such as her having ties with the lesbian and gay community and speculations that she had agreed to bring 30,000 Muslim refugees to Moldova. Also, a group of orthodox priests postulated some more than questionable assertions about Sandu. However, this was only a small part of the church’s support for Dodon.

This smear campaign largely explained why Maia Sandu lost the election. Even an unprecedented mobilisation from the diaspora with the number of votes increasing from about 67,000 in the first round to over 138,000 in the second round and more than 86% of their votes in favour of Maia Sandu could not prevent this outcome.

**Election results of the candidates**



Source: Central Election Commission

**Impact on policies**

Despite the strong rhetoric, the impact on day-to-day politics will be limited as the Moldovan president has only confined competencies. Even though he will have formal powers in initiating and promulgating legislation, nominating the prime-minister, dissolving the parliament, declaring military mobilisation and negotiating international treaties – all of these need to be coordinated with or can be overturned by the parliamentary majority. The president does, however, have a role in appointing the new judges, including two out of six in the constitutional court.

Despite Dodon’s Russia-friendly rhetoric it is unlikely that the implementation of the Association Agreement will be affected. As the example of the so-called pro-European forces has shown in the past, geopolitical

orientation is rather a means to mobilise the electorate with little impact on actual policies or speed of reforms.

Dodon’s victory is more of a symbolic one and a platform for the next parliamentary elections. If he succeeds in lifting Russia’s embargo on Moldovan fruits and wine, without provoking a Ukrainian one, his party will be in pole-position for the 2018 parliamentary elections – the real struggle for power.

While Dodon also promised to do everything possible to provoke early elections, the legal power of the president to do so is limited. Given the tacit support his campaign enjoyed from Plahotniuc’s media, it is unlikely that early elections will be triggered at a point in time which would be inconvenient for the main oligarch.

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Note: This text is the sole responsibility of the author and does not necessarily reflect the opinion of the German Economic Team.

**German Economic Team Moldova (GET Moldova)**

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