



## Beyond East and West: A New Direction for Moldova?

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*On Sunday, the 15 November 2020, Maia Sandu was elected as the new president of the Republic of Moldova. The 48-year-old politician obtained almost 58 % of the total votes in the run-off with the former president Igor Dodon and, even without the support from the diaspora, she will start her mandate on 24 December 2020. It was an overwhelming victory and a strong signal towards checks and balances and against corruption and nepotism. This result might represent a clear turning point for Moldova which has a concrete possibility to move ahead and build a more stable and prosperous future. Furthermore, it confirms the desire of Moldovan people to strengthen their relations to the European Union and it might even have a positive impact for the dynamics of the region.*

In 2016 Sandu, leader of the Party of Action and Solidarity (PAS), was the opposition candidate in the presidential elections – the first direct elections after 20 years. But on this occasion Igor Dodon, then leader of the Party of Socialists of the Republic of Moldova (PSRM), won the elections in the second runoff with 52.11% of the total votes and became the fifth president of Moldova. Compared to that, the elections in 2020 took place in a different context. In the first round, on 1 November there was a close margin between incumbent Dodon and the reformist Maia Sandu who has already gained a small advantage over her rival. The candidates obtained respectively 32.61% and 36.16% of votes, but since they did not reach the 50% threshold, another runoff was scheduled for 15 November. The president could count on the support of the Moldovan villages while Sandu dominated among urban voters with higher levels of education, the urban youth and the diaspora. Against any predictions, she won the presidential elections. Even more impressive is the fact that the votes from Transnistria, which are considered controversial and overwhelmingly also this time went to Dodon, did not make a difference despite doubling to 31.000 compared to 2016. The circumstances which lead to the defeat of Dodon are likely linked to the numerous scandals of corruption which have crashed the news in the last decade and the increasingly alarmist rhetoric of her rival during the campaign. For this reason, Sandu established the fight against corruption as one of the pillars of her political campaign and made it a priority of her agenda. Her programme is considered pro-Western by the majority, but it actually focuses on reforming the country.

The newly-elected president was Minister of Education from 2012 to 2015, and Prime Minister (PM) of Moldova from June to November 2019. The parliamentary crisis which followed the parliamentary elections in February 2019 led to the appointment of the liberal and pro-European leader of the ACUM coalition (consisting of PAS and the Dignity and Truth Platform – DA) as the new PM in a coalition with the PSRM. The experiment was far from successful, since she was ousted by the parliament in a vote of no-confidence over the appointment of a new General Prosecutor after a few months and thus could not implement the programme of reforms she intended to pursue. Only one day later, the non-party economist and former Minister of Finance Ion Chicu was nominated by President Igor Dodon as a “technocratic” PM and elected by the socialist and democratic parties in parliament. With this decision, the ongoing reform processes were

stopped. Moreover, Dodon used this expedient to control the executive, which is the decision-making institution in a parliamentary republic.

## Moldova and the EU

The relations between EU and Moldova have been intensifying since the finalisation of the Association Agreement and the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) in 2014. Being Moldova's largest trading partner and investor, the EU is committed to help the country in the fight against corruption, in support of reforms with a special regard to the strengthening of the democratic standards and the rule of law. The assistance the EU provides to Moldova is based on a criterion of conditionality: *No reforms – No assistance!* This credo reinforces the idea that an effective mechanism of aid and collaboration depend upon the respect of the core principles of democracy and rule of law. The struggle of Moldova related to the path of reforms in the direction advocated by the EU caused a few backslidings with the consequent interruption of the economic funding, as it happened in 2015 and in 2018. The brief mandate of Maia Sandu as PM of Moldova and the improvements in the rule of law pursued by her government lead Brussels to resume the payments under budgetary support in October 2019. In the same year, the European Commission approved a new programme of budget assistance to support the rule of law and the reforms in the energy and finance sector. Furthermore, a relevant number of multidisciplinary programmes – partnered by the EU – have been introduced to support the civil society and to increase the general welfare.

In this perspective, the election of Maia Sandu could reinforce the partnership between Moldova and EU in the framework of the Eastern Partnership (EaP). The fear is that the current internal issues among the EU member states, when it comes to budget assistance and rule of law, might complicate the situation. Brussels is facing a major challenge regarding the redistribution of EU funds among the member states due to the Covid-19 pandemic and this procedure stressed even more the existent internal polarisation of different blocks. This conversation might monopolise the political discourse within the decision-making institutions in the upcoming months, abandoning Moldova to its fate. This election can be the golden opportunity for Moldovan citizens to live in a country based on the principles of democracy, rule of law and a system of guarantees which rather protects than usurps them. But without a solid assistance from the Western supporters of Sandu's course, it might hardly succeed.

## Moldova and the Russian Federation

At this point it is not constructive to stress the geopolitical orientation of the two presidential candidates, which will only lead to a pro-EU vs. pro-Russia confrontation. Without question, Moscow and Chişinău remained close under the presidency of Igor Dodon, who often visited Russia to negotiate gas tariffs and the withdrawal of the Russian army from Transnistria. Conversely, Sandu worked to restore the relations with the EU institutions and to reinforce her ties rather to Romania and Ukraine than to Russia. Nevertheless, she has never openly criticized the conduct of the Kremlin and it seems that in the long run she is willing to collaborate to normalise the relations between both countries. As president she intends to build a stronger and more effective dialogue with the Kremlin given its strategic importance in the region and aiming to end the issues related to the question of Transnistria. Due to the common ideological roots and the strong bond between the PSRM and the Russian Federation, Moscow certainly could have done more to support Dodon, but did not interfere. Furthermore, Putin was among the first to congratulate Sandu on her victory of the elections. The question remains, if there is a possibility to find common ground regarding Transnistria.

## PS: The way ahead for President Sandu

### 1. **Build political alliances in the parliament or opt for snap elections**

As Moldova is a parliamentary republic, Maia Sandu needs the support of the parliament to be able to orientate her reform path. Nevertheless, the governing coalition already made clear its unwillingness to collaborate with the new head of the state. On 3 December, the parliament adopted a law to move the control of the country's intelligence service back to the parliament. This means a clear limitation of the presidential powers. Therefore, Sandu appealed publicly to the people of Moldova calling such actions as an "attempt of usurping the power of the president" and asking for the resignation of the PM Chicu to opt for snap elections. However, this solution is the least beneficial for the governing parties, which might unlikely gain more seats considering the current lack of popular support. Sandu could propose to extend the collaboration agreement between the ruling technocratic government and the parties PSRM and Democratic Party of Moldova (PDM), which had mentioned to end after the presidential election trying to work together with the parliament. Nevertheless, given the already hostile change of legislation towards her – even if the Constitutional Court has ordered to revoke the above-mentioned law – an agreement seems highly unlikely. Another possibility would of course be the further mobilisation of her voters creating pressure for a dissolution of the parliament. This comes with the risk of a general destabilization of the country considering the possible unforeseeable consequences.

### 2. **Accelerate process reform and keep on track with the EU relations**

It is extremely important to increase the cooperation and maintain the financial support in this delicate phase of transition. The latest events involving the Moldovan parliament highlight once again the weakness of this democratic system and the need of support from the EU. Sandu has the potential and the will to change the path of the country, but must be able to rely on the Moldovan institutions, and above all on the EU respectively its member states. Otherwise, all the efforts made so far will vanish. The institutional reform process, which has started years ago, had a positive impact on the economy, the society, and the governance of the country, but remains incomplete. Recently another factor has emerged: The security of energy supplies is a pillar of the EU energy policy and Moldova is strongly interested in differentiating its energy mix to reduce the state's dependence on Russian gas. This common objective might lead Moldova to strengthen the cooperation with EU members states.

### 3. **Ensure peaceful relations with the Russian Federation and win over pro-Russian voters**

Sandu will have to convince the electors who voted for Dodon that her purpose is not to leave them behind or even alienate the Russian Federation. In this regard, the Kremlin might be more preoccupied with the unstable situation in the shared neighbourhood than to try to interfere with her agenda. But nevertheless, Sandu must convince the voters by her actions. Moreover, the question of Transnistria requires a balanced approach, it is important to pursue a constructive dialogue within the 5+2 talks in the interest of all parties involved to avoid any further conflict. The key point is indeed Sandu's attitude towards Moscow, and Russia's willingness to negotiate the possibility to leave its strategic position in the region.

### 4. **Strengthen the relations with the neighbourhood**

Moldova is working on the relations with the neighbouring countries of Ukraine and Romania. The close relations with Bucharest might be a useful strategy to gain the attention of the distracted EU institutions with the possibility to increase the dialogue and work towards membership. However, an even closer cooperation between the two countries could raise unintendedly the discussion of re-unification. In the recent parliamentary elections in Romania, the Alliance for the Unity of Romanians surpris-

ingly passed the threshold and their Co-president George Simion – infamous for his advocacy for re-unification – will now be represented in the parliament. Apart from that, the Romanian president Klaus Iohannis shows that without the support of the parliament, the implementation of necessary reforms becomes almost impossible. Regarding Ukraine, Moldova has always managed to foster a positive relation to the neighbouring country despite Dodon’s closeness to the Kremlin. In the framework of the European Union Border Assistance Mission, Ukraine supports Moldova’s territorial integrity while Sandu publicly stated that she does not recognize the annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation. Moreover, both countries signed the “Memorandum of Understanding in the Area of Security of Gas supply” in 2019 to gradually decrease their dependence from the Russian gas. The intentions of Ukraine are clear, but Sandu will have to succeed in the delicate attempt of cooperating with Kyiv without deteriorating her relations with Moscow.

The recent presidential elections have shown that Moldovan citizens are longing for a change. The country has long enough been in limbo, being pushed and pulled towards East and West, but this is not a pro-European victory or a pro-Russian loss. This result demonstrates that the country is ready and willing to move forward, because after all those lost years of failing to improve the situation for the Moldovan society, it is time for politics to deliver. If they can’t and won’t, the people will continue to move away in either direction.

### PPS: Breakthroughs from Europe/ IDM Short insights 8

The [IDM Short Insights 8](#) identify three challenges for Maia Sandu after her victory in the presidential elections in Moldova held on 15 November 2020. The video is available on the YouTube channel [IDM Vienna](#). It was first published within Breakthroughs from Europe, a weekly format of the Bratislava-based think tank GLOBSEC, taking on the most important political and socio-economic developments of the week: <https://fb.watch/1WkyBn8-xr>

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