

# Why Did a Pro-Russian Candidate Win the Presidency in Moldova?

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## E-Notes

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Maia Sandu (l) was recently defeated by Igor Dodon (r) in Moldova's presidential election  
(Source: tsargrad.tv)

On November 13, [over 52.1% of Moldovans voted](#) for Igor Dodon of the Socialist Party. He is the country's fifth elected president and only the third elected directly by the people. Those dissatisfied with the outcome took to social media to protest under the now popular slogan [#notmypresident](#); a couple of hundred people also took to the streets calling for the Central Election Commission (CEC) members to resign. Dodon's opponent, Maia Sandu, gained [47.9% of the vote](#) and has not yet formally conceded. Following numerous instances of mismanagement by the CEC and allegations of voter fraud, Sandu announced plans to challenge the election results at the Constitutional Court. However, given the four percent difference in the number of votes, and, even more so, the fact that the Constitutional Court is known to be heavily influenced by the Executive Coordinator of the Ruling Coalition, oligarch Vladimir Plahotniuc, the Court is likely to rule in Dodon's favor and validate the election. On the off chance that it decides to cancel the results, the country is likely to see mass protests by Dodon's supporters. In fact, Dodon already threatened Sandu's backers in no uncertain terms demanding that they tone down their rhetoric and leave the streets; otherwise, they run the risk of being [confronted by much larger groups of his own followers](#). The situation remains tense and somewhat uncertain. Therefore, it is helpful to evaluate how Moldova got to this point.

The presidential race itself was marred by controversy before campaigning even started. Direct presidential elections were reintroduced in March 2016 following a [controversial Constitutional Court ruling](#), which canceled the 2000 Constitutional reform that mandated Parliament must elect the president. This ruling was seen as politically motivated and aimed at derailing the protest movement against government corruption.

The partisanship, divisiveness, and personal attacks waged during the presidential campaign will leave deep scars on Moldova's political scene because it opened old wounds of ethno-linguistic tension and caused new ones stemming from misogyny, homophobia, and geopolitical fear-mongering. The presumed winner of the election, Igor Dodon, hopes to move forward, but many voters are not willing to accept his olive branch. Apart from his [anti-European, anti-Romanian, and anti-Ukrainian message](#), Dodon led a negative campaign that divorced the facts from reality, and he was funded by powerful backers in Moscow and Moldova. Here are the three major factors that influenced the election in Dodon's favor:

A political [endorsement from Moscow](#) made Dodon automatically a front runner in the election, particularly because the above-mentioned Constitutional Court ruling barred Renato Usatii, the other pro-Russian candidate, who was polling higher than Dodon, from running. The ruling set the age requirement for presidential candidates at a minimum of 40 years. Despite his harsh criticism of Dodon, Usatii still endorsed him in the runoffs—a decision that was dictated by Usatii's own dependence on Moscow. At the same time, the Communist Party, lacking a feasible candidate, decided to [boycott the election](#) in the first round. They then halfheartedly supported Dodon in the runoffs not only to keep what was left of their electoral base, but also not to burn bridges with Russia. Clearly, had it not been for the Kremlin's stamp of approval in the form of a personal blessing from Patriarch Kirill, Dodon would have struggled more to connect with Russian-speaking Moldovans and religious rural voters. In fact, having the Church in his corner allowed Dodon to wage a dog whistle campaign questioning Sandu's sexual orientation, morality, and faith, ultimately questioning her fitness for office.

Moreover, without the backing and covert support from Vladimir Plahotniuc, Dodon would have found it difficult to get his message across. After all, it is Plahotniuc who controls more than half of the Moldovan media market, including the rebroadcasting rights of the leading Russian news channel, which promoted Dodon as the Kremlin's favorite. Dodon's ties with Plahotniuc go back to when Dodon was the Minister of Economy (2006-2009) and Plahotniuc was laying the foundation for his business empire, including by privatizing government-owned real estate. After Plahotniuc switched sides in 2009 when pro-EU parties came to power, Dodon stayed in opposition, but soon defected from the Communists and took over the Party of Socialists. He has been in opposition for the last seven years, but has nonetheless cooperated with the Plahotniuc-backed government on a number of crucial occasions. Most notably, in 2012, he helped to provide the necessary votes in the parliament to re-elect<sup>[1]</sup> the President Nicolae Timofti, thus maintaining the pro-European parties in power. Despite this cooperation, during the 2016 campaign, Dodon not only absolved himself of any responsibility for reelecting Timofti, but also was instrumental in channeling the anti-government corruption sentiment to cast a shadow on Sandu even though she was not connected to a major bank fraud case known as the [billion dollar scandal](#). As Sandu was running on an integrity platform, these allegations caused significant damage. Lacking the traditional media access enjoyed by Dodon, Sandu's camp failed to respond to these and other allegations effectively, making the damage irreparable.

While the election monitoring mission of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe's ([OSCE](#)) [Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights concluded](#) that the second round of the presidential election in Moldova was competitive and respectful of voters' rights, there were still troubling cases of voter manipulation and electoral fraud. Dodon's margin of victory stands at 67,488 votes, which is a relatively large margin considering the 1.6 million votes cast. However, this margin has shrunk from the moment preliminary results were announced due to what the [CEC calls honest errors](#). Yet, more importantly, this election saw an unusually high number of Moldovan citizens residing in Transnistria voting. According to numerous media reports, there was a concerted effort to [bribe and bus people from Transnistria into Moldova](#) proper to vote for Dodon. It is estimated that about 20,000 Transnistrians voted in these elections, compared to almost no participation in previous elections. This mobilization effort would have been impossible without the explicit approval of the separatist authorities. Some of these [voters from Transnistria confirmed on camera](#) that it was the Transnistrian leader Yevgeny Shevchuk who mobilized them. Local experts believe it was Plahotniuc who asked Shevchuk for a favor on Dodon's behalf, and Moscow signed off on the voter mobilization effort to solidify Dodon's chances. The phenomenon itself not only casts a shadow of doubt over the election outcome, but also needlessly antagonized many people from Moldova proper against their fellow citizens from Transnistria, who are perceived as having contributed to the rigging of the election even though the 20,000 votes would not have changed the results. On the other hand, there was a positive development in this year's elections as a record number of

Moldovans living abroad exercised their right to vote. In fact, more than twice as many people voted compared to the parliamentary election in 2014 despite a very limited number of polling stations opened by the Moldovan government abroad. The Romanian government provided [free travel to polling stations for Moldovan students in Romania](#), but, unlike in Transnistria's case, there have been no reports of bribes.

Dodon's victory was hardly unexpected. He garnered much of the popular dissatisfaction with endemic government corruption taking place under the rule of nominally pro-European parties. Backed by Russia and the most influential oligarch in Moldova, Dodon's victory was all but assured. From this perspective, the support that Maia Sandu was able to garner is remarkable. She was virtually unknown only a few years ago; trailed Dodon in pre-election polls by double digits; and lacked Dodon's financial and political machine, but nonetheless almost pulled a major upset. Now, Sandu faces the challenge of maintaining the support of the coalition that propelled her to these heights by continuing the mutually-beneficial cooperation with her competitor-turned-ally Andrei Nastase and his party. Such cooperation will not be easy as Nastase and Sandu will soon become competitors again in the parliamentary campaign, but the success of the pro-Western forces will depend on their ability to stand united against the pro-Russian Igor Dodon and oligarch Vlad Plahotniuc.

Despite gaining no new powers, a nationally elected president will employ his newly gained popular legitimacy to project his agenda onto the public as well as state institutions. A president has a high international profile and an important role in defense and national security. Therefore, Moldova's relations with neighboring Ukraine and Romania are likely to suffer as a result of Dodon's antagonizing rhetoric. Relations with the European Union are also going to stagnate at best and, perhaps, see a downturn if Dodon pursues his anti-European agenda. On the other hand, Dodon is likely to score some political points by negotiating better market access for Moldovan goods and Moldovan workers in Russia. Despite Dodon being legally required to renounce his party membership once in office, the Socialists will nonetheless benefit and set themselves on a winning trajectory going into the next legislative elections.

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[1] At that time, the president was still elected by the parliament, not through direct elections.