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MOLDOVA ELECTION ALERT #3

Moldova before the runoff elections: smear campaigning, disinformation, and accusations of voter fraud



Polling station in Moldova. Source: zois-berlin.de (imago images ITAR-TASS)

The presidential election result in Moldova was greatly influenced by voters living outside of the Republic of Moldova, with diaspora voters abroad making up 11% of the overall votes cast in the first round. Two completely divergent election results emerged from these voters, with voters in Transnistria overwhelmingly supporting Igor Dodon (74,24%), while less than 4% of diaspora abroad voted for the incumbent. Concerning voters in Transnistria, observers also raised concern over several incidents of bussing of voters from Transnistria to polling stations.

The run-off campaign was also overshadowed by an unprecedented smear and disinformation campaign against Maya Sandu. Anti-civil society campaigns accusing them of being Western influenced ‘foreign agents’, were also launched ahead of the first round of elections and have continued in this campaign. EPDE member Promo-LEX was one of the targets. Igor Dodon was also accused of receiving support from Russia, which is not the first time such an allegation was made against the incumbent during this election.

Peculiarities of the diaspora vote

Runoff presidential elections will be held on November 15 between the opposition candidate Maya Sandu and the incumbent president, Igor Dodon, after Maya Sandu surprisingly won the first-round of elections with 36.16% against Igor Dodon’s 32,61%. The votes of Moldovan diaspora typically supporting pro-European candidates and that demonstrated an unprecedented level of mobilization, were decisive for this victory. Despite pandemic-related restrictions in many host countries, long queues and inclement weather, the diaspora had the highest ever voter turnout with more than 150 000 votes cast, or over 11% of the overall votes cast in the first round. This represents an increase of 7.5% compared to the second-round of the 2016 presidential elections. The sudden influx of diaspora voters highlighted a number of shortcomings in the organization of the voting process in these polling stations, mainly related to small premises and technical malfunctions that led to long queues and failures to comply with safety and anti-COVID-19 measures. Ahead of the runoff, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and European Integration and the Central Electoral Commission (CEC) changed the location of several polling stations in Great Britain, Germany, Italy, Israel, and Romania, supplemented the number of operators and polling booths and reallocated the ID-scanners. The [number of](#)



[ballots](#) will be increased up to the maximum legal number of 5000 ballots per polling station abroad, as there is a further increase of turnout abroad expected during the second round. Further measures to ensure safety of voters and election commissioners have been introduced.

Compared to the diaspora vote, voters residing in Transnistria were less active even though the separatist authorities exempted all residents leaving the region on Election Day from the mandatory quarantine upon return. During the first round, 18000 votes had been cast, which is approx. 1000 votes more than in 2016. Although the CEC banned the organized transportation of voters to polling stations on Election Day, restricting the movement of vehicles with more than eight seats except for regular busses, [Promo-LEX](#) observers recorded numerous instances of bussing in of voters residing in Transnistria by small vehicles travelling across the Dniester river throughout Election Day. Observers and [journalists](#) also reported cases where voters were rewarded either in-kind or by cash after casting their vote, thus somewhat validating the allegations of vote-buying of Transnistrian residents and prompting few representatives and sympathizers of opposition candidates to prevent Transnistrian voters from exercising their right to vote.

While the police [stopped](#) a number of cross-border commuting vehicles, more than ten days after elections, no public information was released about the number of complaints filed by the police on the organized transportation of voters.

The vast majority of Transnistrian residents voted for Igor Dodon (74.24%), perceived as a Russian-leaning candidate, while Maya Sandu, seen as a pro-European candidate, received the second score (13.34%). The diaspora vote showed an exactly opposite situation: less than 4% voted for the incumbent president who scored third after Maya Sandu and Renato Usatîi, one of the critics of Igor Dodon and his main rival in the left-centrist segment. The overall first-round electoral results showed that the capital, some central and southern districts, and diaspora supported Maia Sandu, while the voters from northern districts, Gagauzia, and Transnistria voted for the incumbent president.

Smear campaign ahead of the runoff

Uncomfortable with these results, on the day after the election, the incumbent president declared himself the winner and made some [statements](#), which were widely perceived as scandalous, that diaspora citizens represent a “parallel world” and that their vote is at odds with the voting preferences of citizens living in Moldova. This statement practically started the election campaign for the runoff election that was marked by an unprecedented smear campaign targeting Maya Sandu and the civil society organizations, as well as media which were critical about the performance of the governing Socialist party. The attacks against Maia Sandu were launched by the incumbent president in a press conference on November 3 while presenting his electoral program, accusing his opponent of having caused all the problems that he is going to solve. This aggressive rhetoric was adopted and actively spread both by the media holding controlled by the Socialist party and the Russia-based media. A parallel disinformation campaign was launched by supporters of Igor Dodon, reactivating [fake news](#) stories used

against Maia Sandu back in the 2016 presidential campaign. These included stories such as the legalization of homosexuality and reunification with Romania, but also some ‘novelties’ concerning sensitive subjects for Moldovan society which currently faces social and economic crises, such as selling farmland to foreigners, imposing a new lockdown or stopping the payment of salaries and pensions.

Pressure against citizen election observers

Civil society organisations receiving funds from the EU and US were another target for a mudslinging campaign. Launched before the first round of elections by the deputy of the Socialist Party, Bogdan Tîrdea, this campaign [gained momentum](#) before the runoff elections. Similar to anti-civil society campaigns in Romania and Hungary, the same anti-Soros rhetoric has been used, portraying NGOs as ‘foreign agents’ of Western interests that would capture the state and its institutions; and its leaders as ‘billionaires’ who allegedly live a luxury lifestyle in an impoverished society and who supposedly financially support the candidate Maia Sandu. Although civil society [condemned these attacks](#), these conspiracy theories have been actively spread by the Socialists controlled media and social networks, along with messages inciting hatred and violence. The EPDE member organisation Promo-LEX, which reported cases of obstruction of observation by electoral officials and the intimidation of its observers by the police during the first round, was one of the targets of the slander campaign. Promo-Lex qualifies this as an attempt to intimidate national observers to silence them during the second round of elections.

Involvement of Russian authorities in the election campaign

Overall, the campaign was marred by reciprocal accusations from both candidates of not declaring all their campaign expenditures or about the intent to rig elections by buying votes and by bussing voters either living in Transnistria or abroad. A few days before the runoff, one of the presidential candidates and a fervent critic of the Moldovan head of state, Renato Usatîi [accused](#) Igor Dodon of receiving consistent funding from the Russian Federation and [submitted to the CEC](#) a notification to withdraw him from the electoral race, according to the electoral legislation.

It is not the first time during this election campaign that the issue of Russian influence over the incumbent president has been raised. Previously, both [Moldovan](#) and [Russian](#) journalistic investigations revealed that Igor Dodon has been assisted in his campaign by a group of Russian political consultants, whose services are not included in the election campaign financial reports. Throughout the election campaign, the Russian president Vladimir Putin has openly endorsed Igor Dodon in [September](#) and [October](#), the last time in a friendly-threatening tone, emphasising the importance of the Russian market for Moldovan economy. At the same time, in its [last statement](#), the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs on November 11 underlined that it is “against any interference of foreign forces in the internal electoral process of Moldova”, claiming without no evidence that massive bussing of voters in Western Europe and USA was recorded by international observers and mass media. It is worth mentioning that the international observers from the CSI states have not released any statement after the first



round of elections, while the OSCE/ODIHR and ENEMO observation missions mentioned only the allegations about possible bussing of the Transnistrian residents. The single case of an organised transportation of voters abroad [was reported](#) in Russia by the Promo-LEX Election Observation Mission. The Russian MFA's comment was followed by the [declaration](#) of the incumbent president and candidate Igor Dodon that he will request the Central Election Commission to annul runoff voting results in some polling stations located in Western Europe for alleged voter fraud. Some of the [opposition representatives](#) have raised concerns that if he would lose, Igor Dodon will likely reject the election results and would challenge them. The fact that several organisations have already announced the organisation of pro-Dodon marches for the next day after the runoff election could be a signal of possible destabilisation of the situation after runoff elections.

The stake of the runoff elections is very high and has already created a very tense political and social situation in the country. It is very important that both electoral candidates and the law enforcement bodies will ensure that the voting will be held in a calm atmosphere and any possible incidents will be stopped, appropriately documented, and investigated.

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More reports on the presidential election campaign in Moldova can be found [here](#).

More information also available at www.epde.org

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