



By: Tomorrow's Affairs Staff

Moldova stands at a historical crossroads between the EU and Russia



The forthcoming presidential elections and referendum on October 20 have significant implications for not only the 2.5 million Moldovans but also the European Union and Russia.

Moldovans will then elect the head of state, but equally important will be the constitutional referendum on whether the country will continue its path to EU membership or not.

Since Russia invaded Ukraine in early 2022, the EU has provided strategic support to the young Eastern European democracy by embracing its ambition to become part of the bloc.

Even though Moldova was hesitant about its strategic orientation before February 2022, whether towards traditionally close Russia or towards the EU, its reaction after the Russian invasion of Ukraine was uncompromisingly pro-European.

Brussels accepted that move and rapidly put Moldova on track for full membership. Moldova applied for EU membership in March 2022. It was accepted in June 2022, prompting EU leaders to initiate accession negotiations in December 2023.

However, on October 20, this visible effort by both parties to remove Moldova from Russia's sphere of influence will be put to the test.

A risky move

Moldova's pro-European president, Maia Sandu, took enormous **responsibility** for the fate of her country's pro-European project at the end of last year. At that time, Maia Sandu announced her intention to run for the position of head of state again, and she also announced that she would request a referendum on the country's EU membership on the same day as the presidential elections.

Her move at the time was risky and, at the same time, brought under the pressure of the not-so-great results of her Party of Action and Solidarity in the local elections held in

November 2023, when they did not win in the capital Chisinau and several larger cities.

"Member states of the European Union are more open than ever, we have the necessary political will for this step, and our citizens want to be part of the EU," said President Sandu, launching the pro-EU campaign at the beginning of the year.

However, Russia is not sitting idly by either, and its attempts to prevent Moldova from leaving the "brotherhood" they shared during the Soviet Union, as well as in later years, culminate with the approaching election and referendum day.

Moscow directly bribed around 130,000 voters in the referendum to vote against the European course

The Moldovan police recently **announced** that Moscow directly bribed around 130,000 voters in the referendum to vote against the European course, calling that action an "unprecedented, direct attack."

But this is only one in a series of pressures from Moscow towards Moldova, calculated to keep this country, sandwiched between Ukraine and Romania, permanently in the Russian sphere of influence.

Ilan Shor, a Moldovan politician and oligarch, is leading a robust anti-EU campaign from exile in Moscow, using media, social media, and direct influence on at least four Moldovan political parties.

The threatening **campaign** from the disputed region of Transnistria, where Russia still has its military forces, is also intensifying, as Moscow-controlled media frequently publish reports on military exercises.

Doubts about the referendum

One of the risks the pro-Europeans in Moldova

face, including President Sandu, is the possible low turnout in the referendum and therefore its failure. A third of voters must vote for it to succeed as a constitutional referendum.

The turnout for the 2019 referendum, which coincided with the parliamentary elections and was just a few percentage points (38%) above the threshold, is still fresh in memory.

Maia Sandu's eventual entry into the second election round is another risk if she does not receive majority voter support on October 20. This will likely result in her opponents concentrating their votes towards her rival in the second round, where pro-Russian voters will hold a significant portion of the total votes.

In the polls, President Sandu has a significant advantage over the remaining candidates

In the **polls**, President Sandu has a significant advantage over the remaining candidates, and her approval rating is above 30%. At the same time, polls indicate a large turnout in the referendum, with the majority (about 53%) choosing the country's pro-European course.

However, it's also possible that some pro-EU voters won't cast ballots in the referendum because they don't want their pro-EU votes to go directly to Maia Sandu's presidential account, which could be a risk associated with holding both the referendum and the presidential election at the same time.

Has the West done enough?

The European Union could not know until the end of the elections and the referendum whether it had done enough to animate the Moldovans to stay on the course of joining the Union. For the past year, EU leaders have been busy with the campaign for the European Parliament and then with the constitution of institutions in Brussels, so there was no energy to give Moldova a stronger incentive.



Antony Blinken's pledged \$135 million in aid for the country's energy security

US State Secretary Antony Blinken's visit to Moldova at the end of May, during which he pledged \$135 million in aid for the country's energy security, partially compensated for this.

The difficulties with the supply of energy due to the war in neighbouring Ukraine are one of the most painful issues for the Moldovan government, as well as the main weapon of the pro-Russian forces, which, due to rising prices and energy insecurity, are targeting the pro-European government.

If only one of the two votes on October 20 fails to produce a pro-European result, it will call into question, if not permanently end, Moldova's European ambitions and the EU's willingness to support it in moving away from Russia.

Maia Sandu's electoral defeat, although now less likely, will also mean the defeat of the entire pro-European front in Moldova. Even more so, it will be a failure of the constitutional referendum, where the possible lack of support for the European course will leave Moldova on the periphery of European influence in the long term.