



By: Tomorrow's Affairs Staff

# Referendum in Moldova – an alarm for the EU



The just concluded **referendum** in Moldova on EU accession brought relief to Brussels due to the thin but still greater than half support for the European path of the former USSR republic.

European leaders celebrate the bravery of the citizens of Moldova for choosing the path to the EU and, even more so, for defeating sceptics and a large portion of the population that seeks close relations with Russia in the referendum race.

"Well done, Republic of Moldova! Thank you for your bravery," Roberta Metsola, the President of the European Parliament and one of the high-ranking EU officials who visited Moldova before the referendum, wrote on X.

Donald Tusk, the Polish Prime Minister and former President of the European Council, greeted the Moldovans, describing them as a "brave nation."

Despite the festive occasion, European leaders find little time to extend their congratulations to each other and to Maia Sandu, the pro-EU President of Moldova. Even after the referendum, Moldova remains one of the main battlegrounds where the EU and Russia compete for influence.

Moreover, there are numerous reasons for Brussels to view the results of the Moldovan referendum as a cause for concern. The referendum demonstrates that the EU has not fully executed its plan to swiftly **include** the European periphery and remove it from Russia's influence.

## Sharp divide

Less than half a percent of Moldovans ruled in last Sunday's referendum that the country should stay on the path to EU membership. Although not binding, the referendum results are a political guide that all future ruling sets must follow.

In this respect, the pro-European forces and their leader Maia Sandu can expect an

increase in support. But the sharp divide, with a less than one percent margin in favour of the pro-EU option, leaves Moldova with plenty to worry about.

In last Sunday's elections, which coincided with the referendum, President Sandu failed to secure another mandate and will now compete against Aleksandr Stoianoglo in two weeks.

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This candidate, who is supported by the pro-Russian Socialist Party, will have a large reservoir of additional votes because it is expected that he will be supported by other political options, united against the pro-European policy advocated by Ms Sandu.

Even if President Sandu wins another mandate on November 3, Moldova will need to demonstrate its pro-European stance in parliamentary elections the following year before it can declare itself irreversibly on the path to the EU.

This is a very short time frame in which the EU needs to demonstrate much more commitment to Moldova's European ambitions if it intends to keep this Romanian and Ukrainian neighbour on the path to full membership.

## Enthusiasm for rapid EU enlargement has faded

Following the start of Russian aggression against Ukraine, Moldova submitted its application for EU membership in March 2022, and in June of the same year, Brussels accepted it along with Ukraine's candidacy.

That was the period when European leaders

vigorously advocated for the acceleration of EU enlargement as the only effective response to Russian expansion. In addition to the Western Balkan states that have been in line for membership for 20 years, potential membership has expanded to include Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia, a zone that Russia sees as its backyard.

But the initial enthusiasm for expansion due to the Russian invasion of Ukraine has faded over time, and the Moldovan referendum results are a clear warning to European leaders to do more.



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After two and a half years, the EU has made political moves, such as granting candidate status and opening negotiations with candidates for membership, but the effect of such measures is nowhere near enough.

The President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, during her recent stay in the capital of Moldova, Chisinau, **highlighted** the support of EUR 1.8 billion over the next three years from the European package for eliminating the economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Moscow is looking for a new chance

However, it turns out that political declarations, even a large package of financial support for Moldova, cannot effectively

counter the flow of millions of dollars in illegal Russian bribes directly to the citizens of Moldova ahead of last Sunday's vote.

At least 300,000 Moldovans, according to President Sandu, received a financial gift from Moscow through a branched network of deliverymen, so that in return they would vote against joining the EU in the referendum and against Maia Sandu's candidacy. Individual "gifts" of slightly more than \$100 were, apparently, very convincing to a large number of voters from one of the poorest countries in Europe.

This underground operation left Russia in the game. Moscow disputes the results of the referendum, but it will not stop there. The extremely small difference between pro- and anti-European forces leaves Moldova completely politically polarised, which for Russia only means that it needs to increase the pressure and look for a chance for a turnaround in the second round of the presidential elections and especially next year's parliamentary elections.

Can the EU respond to this dirty game? The approach it has taken up to this point, including the significant pause caused by the European Parliament elections and the restructuring of the Brussels administration, has proven to be extremely challenging.

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Moreover, the EU leader's initial impulse to speed up the admission of new members due to Russian aggression against Ukraine clearly had no impact.

Enlargement is still not a popular topic in the EU. On average, about 50% of Europeans are **in favour** of continuing the expansion of the Union to the countries of the Balkans and former members of the USSR. However, support for this expansion is less than half in

the two most influential EU members, Germany (42%), and France (35%).

This implies that politicians in the two most powerful members of the Union do not receive many votes or support when advocating for further enlargement, so it is not expected that they will be particularly persistent in increasing the number of EU member states.

If apathy towards the admission of new members prevails in the key European capitals and that process is left to the current long and complicated procedure, the expected rounding of the European space with countries from the zone in which Russia is also very interested will not happen.

The results of the referendum in Moldova warn that the dividing line is very thin and that the passivity of the Europeans so far can only lead to Russia's further penetration and its long-term stay this time.