



New Moldovan President Presents Opportunity to Limit Kremlin Suzerainty in Moldova

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Key Takeaway: *Pro-Western Moldovan politician Maia Sandu won the Moldovan presidential election by defeating pro-Kremlin incumbent President Igor Dodon on November 15, 2020. Sandu's election limits the Kremlin's opportunity to expand its influence toward the eastern Balkans and presents the United States with an opportunity to reverse the Kremlin's recent gains. However, the Kremlin will likely exploit its control in the Moldovan Parliament to contest Sandu's electoral mandate. The United States and its allies should support Sandu's efforts to expand, strengthen, and intensify cooperation agreements with Western countries as well as Sandu's stated objective to end Russia's military presence in the breakaway region of Transnistria to limit a dangerous Kremlin position in the eastern Balkans and on Ukraine's western border.*

Pro-Western Moldovan politician Maia Sandu defeated pro-Kremlin incumbent Igor Dodon in Moldova's presidential election on November 15, 2020, presenting an opportunity to reverse the Kremlin's influence in this key state between Ukraine and the eastern Balkans.¹ Sandu leads the European-focused Action and Solidarity Party (PAS). She lost the 2016 presidential race to Dodon, but then became Moldova's prime minister in 2019. Dodon's pro-Kremlin Party of Socialists of the Republic of Moldova (PSRM) ousted her in a no-confidence vote later in 2019.² Sandu won in 2020 with a platform focused on Moldova's economic crisis, anti-corruption judicial reforms, and Dodon's poor response to the COVID-19 pandemic.³ Sandu promises to integrate Moldova with the West and increase diplomatic and economic relations with Romania and Ukraine.⁴ Dodon pushed for closer integration with the Kremlin and with Transnistria, the Kremlin-occupied breakaway region in Moldova.⁵ Sandu's focus on anti-corruption reform rather than Western versus Kremlin rhetoric likely won her the election.

Sandu was not the Kremlin's preferred candidate, but Russian President Vladimir Putin accepted the results of the election and expressed willingness to cooperate with Sandu.⁶ The Kremlin did not contest the election results despite running a previous information campaign claiming the West was preparing a color revolution in Moldova, a common Kremlin narrative in the post-Soviet space.⁷ Dodon's re-election would have allowed the Kremlin to further its campaign to gain suzerainty over Moldova and further embed its military presence without serious contestation in Transnistria.⁸

Sandu's election challenges the Kremlin's efforts to use Moldova as a base for increased Russian military pressure against western Ukraine and influence in the eastern Balkans. The Kremlin uses Moldova's breakaway region of Transnistria as a military stronghold on Ukraine's western border and to prevent Moldova from increasingly aligning with NATO and other Western structures.⁹ The 1500 Russian troops in Transnistria do not directly militarily threaten the rest of the Balkans but could support the deployment of advanced air defenses or other systems that could pressure NATO member Romania. Russia can use the base to support other subversive actions in western Ukraine and the Balkans and more broadly act as a symbol of Russian military power in the western former Soviet Union.¹⁰

Sandu will challenge the presence of Russian troops in Transnistria and the Kremlin's effort to secure concrete guarantees of Moldova's status as a neutral state. The Kremlin seeks to legitimize the enduring Russian military presence in Transnistria and prevent Moldova from aligning with Western organizations. Despite the

presence of Russian troops, Moldova's constitution states Moldova is “permanently neutral;” does not accept the stationing of foreign troops on its territory; and cannot join military, political, or economic alliances aimed at war preparations.¹¹ The Kremlin is pushing for Moldova and Western actors such as NATO and the EU to make statements that guarantee Moldovan “neutrality.” The Kremlin seeks to ensure that Moldova will not join any Western structures. Russian leaders have evinced concern that further Moldovan integration with Western structures could allow the West to contest both Russia’s military presence in Transnistria and pro-Kremlin policies promoted by Dodon’s PSRM party.¹²

The Kremlin has set concrete guarantees of neutrality as a precondition for any discussion of the status of its forces in Transnistria. Dodon made efforts toward these concrete guarantees, seeking pledges from the EU and NATO in 2019 and stating that he wanted “international recognition of Moldovan permanent neutrality.”¹³ Dodon made this request after multiple visits to the Kremlin and likely sought favor with the Kremlin in exchange for discounted natural gas.¹⁴ This effort to obtain Western guarantees that Moldova would not integrate with Western structures was never likely to succeed—neither NATO nor the EU has a strong enough reason to make any such pledges.¹⁵ Sandu will likely contest Kremlin-instigated guarantees of neutrality as she has pledged to increase outreach to the West and seeks to end Russia’s peacekeeping presence in Transnistria.¹⁶ She has already stated her plans as president-elect to require Russia to withdraw its troops in favor of a civilian mission under the auspices of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE).¹⁷

Sandu’s presidency exacerbates the Kremlin’s losses in Moldova earlier in 2020. The Kremlin has steadily lost ground since its successful ousting of Sandu as prime minister in November 2019. Russia effectively used preferential economic measures in multiple sectors to co-opt the Moldovan government after supporting the no-confidence vote against then-Prime Minister Sandu in November 2019.¹⁸ Dodon’s pro-Kremlin government made several deals with Russia, including an infrastructure loan and a major gas deal.¹⁹ The Kremlin additionally secured several bilateral agreements to draw Moldova closer into Kremlin-dominated structures like the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and away from Western institutions.²⁰ The Kremlin faced setbacks to its influence of the Moldovan government in 2020, after PSRM’s coalition eroded.²¹ The Kremlin lost a comfortable Kremlin-amenable majority in Parliament and the Moldovan Constitutional Court blocked a Kremlin-backed loan which it ruled would have influenced Moldovan politicians to advance Kremlin political interests in April 2020.²² The Kremlin seemingly abandoned Dodon during his re-election campaign and de-prioritized Moldova after these losses. The Kremlin may turn to other, more reliable Moldovan actors to advance its campaigns, particularly as regards to campaigns to further integrate Transnistria with Russia. Current Speaker of Parliament and PSRM party leader Zinaida Greceanii is a strong candidate for Kremlin influence due to her strong pro-Russian rhetoric and Kremlin ties.²³

The Kremlin will contest Sandu’s election through the pro-Kremlin PSRM party while still ostensibly cooperating with her. The majority of Moldova’s Parliament opposes many of Sandu’s proposed policies, and Dodon’s PSRM faction is attempting to create a new coalition that would effectively limit Sandu’s domestic actions.²⁴ The PSRM party pushed a bill through Parliament to effectively take the security services out of the president’s control; Sandu derided the bill as an attempt to seize power on December 3.²⁵ It is unclear if the Kremlin influenced this move, but it is still a milestone for the Kremlin’s in its efforts to undermine Sandu’s power over Moldova’s domestic affairs. Sandu has pledged to call snap elections in early 2021 and will likely secure enough seats to ensure the PSRM’s coalition cannot completely block her actions.²⁶ However, the elections present the Kremlin another chance to contest Sandu and the PSRM is clearly preparing to shift its efforts to Parliament after losing the presidency. The party will likely attempt to handicap Sandu’s powers using means beyond limiting security service control. Sandu is pro-European but not explicitly anti-Kremlin. She has voiced her willingness to cooperate with the Kremlin so long as that cooperation does not lead to corruption or political manipulation.²⁷

Sandu’s election presents the United States with new and unexpected opportunities in Moldova to develop democratic institutions, assist the country’s integration with Europe, and push back against Russian influence in Eastern Europe and the Balkans. Sandu intends to strengthen Moldova’s economy by enhancing working relationships with the United States and forming new relationships with Ukraine and Romania.²⁸ Moldova is one

of the top three recipients of the United States Agency for International Development's (USAID) economic aid in Europe.²⁹ Sandu intends to build on Moldova's existing status as a member of NATO's Partnership for Peace program, and seeks to join the EU.³⁰ While Moldova will not be joining NATO anytime soon, Sandu can take steps to increase the Moldovan military's alignment with NATO standards to increase cooperation. The United States should politically support Sandu in these efforts and increase aid for projects aimed at economic growth, poverty reduction, and anti-corruption reforms to seize the opportunity Sandu presents to reverse the Kremlin's dangerous gains in 2019 and to balance against the Kremlin's efforts to influence Moldova through the pro-Kremlin faction in Parliament.

¹ Corneliu Rusnac, "Pro-Western candidate wins Moldovan presidential election," *AP News*, November 16, 2020, <https://apnews.com/article/ukraine-russia-eastern-europe-referendums-maia-sandu-2e1d04e167be69101a1f7fefecd95761>; Sandu won in the second round of elections, after leading in the first round.

² Nataliya Bugayova, "Russia in Review: Putin Advances in Ukraine and Its Neighboring States," *Institute for the Study of War*, October 15, 2019, <http://www.iswresearch.org/2019/10/russia-in-review-putin-advances-in.html>; Alexander Tanas, "Moldova's fledgling government felled by no-confidence vote," *Reuters*, November 12, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-moldova-politics/moldovas-fledgling-government-felled-by-no-confidence-vote-idUSKBN1XM1G4>.

³ ["Maia Sandu – Program and National Objectives as President (Romanian and Russian,") *Maia Sandu President*, 2020, <https://maiasandu2020 dot md/program/>; Denis Cenusă, "Moldova heads to an electoral run-off as "apocalyptic" discourse gains ground," *New Eastern Europe*, November 4, 2020, <https://neweasterneurope.eu/2020/11/04/moldova-heads-to-an-electoral-run-off-as-apocalyptic-discourse-gains-ground/>; Denis Cenusă, "What Will Change for Moldova?" *Visegrad Insight*, November 17, 2020, <https://visegradinsight.eu/what-will-change-for-moldova/>; ["Public debate Maia Sandu vs Igor Dodon. Maia Sandu: "Today we wanted to have a debate on economic issues, because a strong economy means well-paid jobs at home, higher pensions and honest successful businesses,") *Maia Sandu President*, 2020, <https://maiasandu2020 dot md/dezbatere-publica-maia-sandu-vs-igor-dodon-maia-sandu-astazi-am-vrut-sa-avem-o-dezbatere-pe-teme-economice-pentru-ca-o-economie-puternica-inseamna-locuri-de-munca-bine-platite-acasa-pensi/>; Madalin Necșutu, "Belarus should be a warning for Moldova ahead of election, says presidential hopeful Maia Sandu," *Euronews*, September 28, 2020, <https://www.euronews.com/2020/09/25/belarus-should-be-a-warning-for-moldova-ahead-of-election-says-presidential-hopeful-maia-s>.

⁴ Steve Rosenberg, "Moldova election: Pro-EU candidate Maia Sandu wins presidency," *BBC*, November 16, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-54942847>.

⁵ ["The Candidate's electoral platform to the position of President of the Republic of Moldova,") *Igor Dodon*, 2020, https://dodon dot md/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/2p_platforma_electoral_a_ind_md_final.pdf.

⁶ "Russia looks forward to mutually beneficial relations with new Moldovan leader — Kremlin," *Tass*, November 16, 2020, <https://tass.com/politics/1224077>; "[Congratulations to Maia Sandu on winning the presidential elections in Moldova,]" *Kremlin*, November 16, 2020, <http://kremlin dot ru/events/president/news/64423>.

⁷ "[SVR claimed the US is preparing a "revolutionary" scenario in Moldova,]" *Interfax*, October 20, 2020, <https://www dot interfax dot ru/world/732339>; "[Meeting of the Council of Heads of State of the SCO Member States,]" *Kremlin*, November 10, 2020, <http://kremlin dot ru/events/president/news/64385>; "[Commentary by the Information and Press Department of the Russian Foreign Ministry on the preparation of the second round of the presidential elections in the Republic of Moldova,]" *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation*, November 11, 2020, https://www dot mid dot ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/4420073; "[Meeting of the Valdai Discussion Club,]" *Kremlin*, October 22, 2020, <http://kremlin dot ru/events/president/news/64261>; "[Sergey Lavrov's lengthy interview with three radio stations: full transcript,]" *Komsolskaya Pravda*, October 14, 2020, https://www dot kp dot ru/daily/217195/4303719/?utm_campaign=external&utm_medium=main_top&utm_source=quote_previ ew&utm_term=0; Madalin Necșutu, "Russian Advisers 'Working for Moldovan President's Re-Election Campaign'," *Balkan Insight*, October 20, 2020, <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/10/20/russian-advisers-working-for-moldovan-presidents-re-election-campaign/>.

⁸ Vladimir Socor, "Russia's Current Political Objectives in Moldova," *Eurasia Daily Monitor* Vol. 16, No. 16 (February 7, 2019), <https://jamestown.org/program/russias-current-political-objectives-in-moldova/>.

⁹ Vladimir Socor, "Russia's Current Political Objectives in Moldova," *Eurasia Daily Monitor* Vol. 16, No. 16 (February 7, 2019), <https://jamestown.org/program/russias-current-political-objectives-in-moldova/>.

¹⁰ Madalin Necșutu, "NATO Urges Russia to Withdraw Troops from Moldova," *Balkan Insight*, July 12, 2018, <https://balkaninsight.com/2018/07/12/nato-urges-russia-to-redraw-its-troops-from-moldova-07-12-2018/>.

- ¹¹ Vladimir Socor “President Dodon Introduces Nuances to Moldova’s Neutrality,” *Eurasia Daily Monitor* Vol. 16, No. 134 (October 1, 2019), <https://jamestown.org/program/president-dodon-introduces-nuances-to-moldovas-neutrality/>.
- ¹² Vladimir Socor “President Dodon Introduces Nuances to Moldova’s Neutrality,” *Eurasia Daily Monitor* Vol. 16, No. 134 (October 1, 2019), <https://jamestown.org/program/president-dodon-introduces-nuances-to-moldovas-neutrality/>.
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²⁹ USAID, US Foreign Aid by Country: Moldova, 2020, https://explorer.usaid.gov/cd/MDA?fiscal_year=2020&measure=Obligations&implementing_agency_id=1; “U.S. relations with Moldova,” *US Department of State*, January 7, 2020, <https://www.state.gov/u-s-relations-with-moldova/>.

³⁰ Maia Sandu, interview by Steve Rosenberg, Chisinau, Moldova, November 16, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-54942847>.