Three Takeaways from the Nearly Failed EU Referendum in Moldova

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01.11.2024 doi: 10.59704/b586421167a15dce

Moldova's accelerated path towards the European Union nearly came to an abrupt halt. On 20 October 2024, the people of Moldova participated in a referendum asking whether they "support amending the Constitution with a view to Moldova's accession to the European Union". The constitutional changes aimed to emphasize "the European identity of the people of the Republic of Moldova and the irreversibility of the European course" in the preamble and to enshrine "EU integration as a strategic objective of the Republic of Moldova". The referendum was held concomitantly with the first round of the presidential election.

The results are concerning. In a high voter turnout, 49.54% of citizens voted "no", expressing their aversion towards Moldova's EU integration – falling short by only 13,596 votes compared to the "yes" camp The outcome of the referendum in rural areas is even worse: in 24 out of 32 regions the majority of Moldovans voted against EU integration. Like in previous elections, the diaspora made all the difference: more than 180,000 Moldovans abroad (around 77% of diaspora voters) expressed their pro-European orientation and turned the election around.

Both Maia Sandu, Moldova's sitting President seeking re-election, and EU officials were quick in attributing the referendum's near-failure primarily to unprecedented Russian interference. Sandu's allegations that "criminal entities" had the goal of buying 300,000 votes and that "the state institutions documented 150,000 people being paid to vote" have not yet been confirmed by law enforcement institutions. So far, the police have documented at least 400 cases of documented vote-buying.

While massive Russian interference in the election process is evident (though the full proportion remains yet to be investigated), it would be too short-sighted, and also dangerous for Moldova's future path towards the EU to attribute the outcome of the referendum solely to external interference. Other significant factors contributed to the unsatisfactory results.

Moldova's path towards the EU so far

A far better outcome of the EU referendum was expected, particularly by Moldovans who voted in the country and have been the main beneficiaries of the EU's most recent unprecedented support. Just weeks ago, Commission president Ursula von der Leyen announced a historic financial package of €1.8 billion for Moldova's development. The Economic Growth Plan aims to strengthen Moldova's capacity to implement essential reforms and stimulate the national economy. It is the most recent support project in a series of unprecedented political and financial measures.

A few months after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the European Commission issued its opinion on 17 June 2022 regarding Moldova's application for EU membership. The Commission highlighted Moldova's strong institutional foundation to reach the stability of institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights and respect for and protection of minorities. On this basis, the Commission recommended that Moldova be given the perspective to become a member of the EU and be granted candidate status. As a result, on 23 June 2022, the European Council made the historic decision to grant candidate status to Moldova and Ukraine. This political decision was a strong sign of solidarity towards both countries in the face of Russian aggression.

To facilitate Moldova's EU accession process, the EU has significantly scaled up its financial assistance since the start of the war in Ukraine. Brussels

disbursed €177.9 Mio in 2022 and €344.1 Mio. in 2023, becoming Moldova's largest external donor. Since October 2021, the EU has provided over €1.09 billion to support Moldova's energy security, manage the refugee crisis, enhance security and defense cooperation, and strengthen the country's reform agenda.

However, even though the support from the EU for the country is significant, it could not overcome a fundamental problem of the referendum, namely linking a political question with the personal future of a politician.

Never tie a personal vote to a strategic one

Politicians like Matteo Renzi, David Cameron, and Maia Sandu share a common tactic: they each tied the outcome of a significant, strategic national issue to their personal political fortune. Unlike Renzi and Cameron, however, Sandu narrowly avoided outright failure in this referendum. Sandu had advocated for organising the referendum since late 2023. Her calculus was, first and foremost, to position herself as the candidate that personifies the EU integration project and, thereby, increase voter turnout in her favour. Moreover, she anticipated that a solid pro-European majority in the referendum would weaken the domestic pro-Russian faction and send a clear political message to Brussels and EU Member States capitals that Moldovans support her leadership and are determined to seize the historic opportunity for EU accession created by Russia's invasion in Ukraine.

Importantly, there was no legal requirement for the Moldovan government to organize an EU referendum at this stage. Only the final step in the process of joining the EU requires candidate countries to ratify the Accession Treaty in accordance with their constitutional rules, which may include parliamentary vote, referendum, or other modalities of democratic legitimisation. Currently, Moldova is in the initial stage of EU membership negotiations, known as "screening", in which the EU Commission and the candidate country assess compliance with all 35 chapters of the EU *acquis*. In the case of Moldova, the screening started in July 2024, with results expected in a Commission report by the end of 2025. The lack of other objective reasons justifying the organisation of the EU referendum explains why several donor representatives openly questioned its ratio. "Why risk a potential failure, especially in these tense times, if Moldova has the full support of the EU anyway?" many would ask.

A concern with Maia Sandu's insistence to tie the presidential election to the referendum is that a significant number of EU supporters either reluctantly voted for Sandu and "yes" to EU integration or boycotted the election out of dissatisfaction with her tenure. A considerable number of citizens voted against the EU referendum or abstained as a sign of protest against Sandu and PAS, viewing EU integration as closely associated with the president and the governing party.

Maia Sandu and her PAS have become the sole promoters of EU integration in the country

Following the parliamentary election of July 2021, PAS won a landslide victory, securing 52.8% of the vote. For the first time in Moldovan history, a pro-European party gained the absolute majority in Parliament. PAS has since governed the country, supported by an allied executive and President Sandu. Before her election in November 2020, Maia Sandu was the leader of PAS and still enjoys far-reaching influence in the party, extending beyond her formal presidential powers. Less than half a year before the next parliamentary election, there is no serious and credible pro-European political alternative to PAS on the horizon.

The lack of viable pro-European parties poses a strategic challenge for PAS as the 2025 parliamentary election approaches. ´The lack of natural coalition partners means that the current governing party would need to gain the absolute majority yet again, which, according to polls, is not a likely scenario. Otherwise, PAS will land on the opposition bench. The revisionist opposition parties, on the other hand, are more fragmented but compatible and, therefore, likely to form a coalition following the parliamentary election.

Because PAS has become the sole promoter of EU integration, it has dominated the pro-European political discourse over the past years. However, the governing party was not able to organise a visible and convincing pro-EU information and communication

campaign able to reach ordinary citizens and address legitimate concerns about EU integration. PAS seemed powerless in the face of the destructive and toxic disinformation campaign organised by anti-EU opposition parties, which did not leave any room for a genuine political debate. Consequently, the EU referendum became less a forum for constructive exchange on the benefits and challenges of EU accession and more a battleground shaped by polarizing narratives.

Acknowledging the concerns of the anti-EU camp is a crucial step

Over the past years, the PAS government has not managed to tackle the key challenges facing Moldova: corruption, justice reform, economic issues, poverty, emigration, etc. This is partially due to the fact that the government faced many negative externalities, including the highest inflation in Europe following COVID-19, as well as the war in Ukraine and its many consequences for Moldova: strong increase in energy prices, the refugee crisis and its burden for the state welfare system.

At the same time, Moldova has faced a significant "brain drain," with over 168,000 people leaving the country in the past three years. Scarcity of skilled professionals is one of the major structural issues in government institutions. The approach of PAS to predominantly involve PAS or PAS-affiliated human resources in the act of governing has exacerbated this issue. Moldova's involvement in the pre-accession process since 2022 additionally takes away capacities that are much needed to implement the reform agenda. In particular, the screening process is a very labour-intensive and time-consuming exercise.

In this context, it is no surprise that more recent polls indicate widespread public dissatisfaction with PAS's governance. While Russian interference certainly played a considerable role, the disinformation campaigns and anti-EU narratives fell on very fertile ground.

What's next?

The results of the referendum have been a sobering revelation for EU supporters in Moldova and their allies in Brussels, who expected a clear vote by its citizens in favour of EU integration. Following the announcement of the final results, President Sandu declared that "the referendum was won by a majority vote" and that "Moldova once again saved its democracy and the path to progress".

The EU referendum proved that Moldova is a country sharply divided between the "West" and the "East" and highly vulnerable to Russia's disinformation and hybrid warfare. But it also demonstrated the decreased support for President Sandu and her PAS after three years in government. Most importantly, the referendum revealed that the European idea is far from a guaranteed success, even with Russia actively waging an aggressive war in neighboring Ukraine.

The upcoming second round of the presidential election on 3 November is the next decisive vote on Moldova's European future. Sandu faces Aleksandr Stoianoglo, a former prosecutor general supported by the pro-Russian Socialist Party. If elected, Stoianoglo promises to both continue EU integration and improve relations with Russia in the national interest. In the context of the nearly failed referendum, Russian interference and internal grievances, President Sandu faces an uphill battle. A loss on Sunday could forecast unfavorable prospects for PAS in the equally consequential 2025 parliamentary elections.

If PAS wants to be successful, it must find a way to cut through the disinformation and negative narratives surrounding EU integration, effectively communicating both its advantages and acknowledging its real challenges to ordinary Moldovan citizens. One of the main weaknesses of the pro-EU campaign was that it did not take up those false narratives about European integration or engage with the anti-EU camp. In the weeks and months leading up to the referendum, pro-Europeans mainly debated with like-minded pro-Europeans. Not only the future of the party but the future of Moldova's European trajectory rests on PAS' ability to bridge this divide.

This publications reflects the author's personal opinions.

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SUGGESTED CITATION

Corman, Mihai-Razvan: Three Takeaways from the Nearly Failed EU Referendum in Moldova, Verfassungsblog, 01.11.2024, doi: 10.59704/b586421167a15dce.

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Langzeitarchiviert bei IntRechtDok unter: doi.org/10.17176/20241102-000137-0.