

Igor Dodon's election: A victory for Moldova's oligarchs?

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The Moldovan presidential election, which took place on 13 November, was framed as a straight choice between pro-Russian and pro-European candidates. The subsequent victory of Igor Dodon has been viewed as marking the end of Moldova's Europeanisation and a potential return to Moscow's sphere of influence, some seven years after the 'Twitter Revolution' that brought down the Moldovan communists. [Daniel Brett](#) looks at why Dodon won, how he won, and the potential consequences of his victory for the country.



Igor Dodon's narrow [victory](#) in Moldova's presidential election has been portrayed by some commentators as the country returning to Russia's sphere of influence and the end of its democratisation efforts. But why did voters really choose to support Dodon over his rival Maia Sandu and what does Dodon's victory mean for future developments in Moldova?

Moldovan politics is often seen through the prism of geo and ethno-politics, but this does not tell the full story. Dodon's victory can be seen as a return of the 'Old Guard' and a reflection of the failure of the political elite tasked with moving Moldova forward after the revolution. The events of 2009, when the so called '[Twitter Revolution](#)' erupted against the then Communist government, did not usher in a new era of politics, but rather a battle for control between Moldova's two main oligarchs, [Vlad Filat](#) and [Vlad Plahotniuc](#), each with their own parties supporting them. The theft of [one billion dollars from Moldovan banks](#) led to the fall of the fragile 'pro-European' coalition and to the jailing of Filat, although many viewed him as the fall-guy and instead point the finger at [Plahotniuc](#).

A period of instability followed, in which Moldovan politicians put their own interests ahead of those of the country, including [rejecting](#) the reformist former education Minister Maia Sandu as Prime Minister. Liberal Party leader [Mihai Ghimpu](#) declared that 'she will have to come to me, I won't go to her'. Although Vlad Plahotniuc was unable to fulfil his ambition of becoming Prime Minister, when a government was formed it was nevertheless viewed as 'Plahotniuc's government' with the oligarch wielding power behind the scenes.

Until February 2016, Moldova had been a parliamentary system with the president largely a ceremonial figurehead selected by parliament, until the Supreme Court [decided](#) to change the law and to make the presidency directly elected, although remaining a largely ceremonial role. Suspicion again fell on [Plahotniuc](#) and his desire to consolidate his power. However, his obvious unpopularity meant that even if he wanted to run for the presidency he

would never win, despite his media resources.

The presidential campaign

The election quickly became a contest between three factions. First, there was a group based around the Socialist (PSRM) leader Igor Dodon that spoke to rural, older, Russian and Gagauz voters and was seen as being backed by Russia. The PSRM emerged from a split within the [Party of Communists of the Republic of Moldova](#) (PCRM). The split came about because many younger PCRM members (Dodon is 41) became frustrated by the party's leader, Vladimir Voronin, and his unwillingness to step aside.

Second, there was a faction that might be termed the 'Plahotniuc group' of established politicians who spoke of being European in the hope that it might result in support from the West. Plahotniuc, with the aid of PR agency [Podesta](#), embarked on a not [entirely successful](#) campaign in the West to create the [image](#) of himself as a [pro-European businessman](#) whose involvement in politics was purely altruistic, while pledging his support for European candidates. Meanwhile his actions in Moldova were largely intended to secure the victory for a suitable candidate: either his favoured choice or someone who would be favourable to him and his interests.

Finally, there was a group of younger pro-reform European politicians that eventually coalesced behind Maia Sandu. Following the [withdrawal](#) of Plahotniuc's favoured candidate [Marian Lupu](#) it became clear that in the first round the question would be whether Dodon would manage to get over 50% of the vote, and thereby be elected without the need for a second round. He did not achieve this, polling 48.5%, while Sandu placed second on 38.2%, therefore necessitating the second round of voting on 13 November.

The second round saw particularly dirty campaigning. Although Plahotniuc spoke about supporting 'European' candidates, his media empire supported both Dodon and Ilan Shor – a banker who was involved in the 2014 banking theft and who has more recently been deployed by Sandu's enemies. Unsolicited by Sandu, [he wired money](#) to her election effort, which was leaked to a blogger and to the Moldovan media before the Sandu campaign was even aware of the money.

In contrast to previous elections where the 'pro-European' parties had invested considerable efforts in encouraging the diaspora to vote, this campaign was marked by attempts to disenfranchise the young and the [diaspora](#) via the back door. Voters had to vote where they were registered, which disenfranchised in particular students living away from home, while long queues and the lack of ballot papers made diaspora voting difficult. The [Orthodox Church](#) also flexed its muscles by aligning itself with Dodon. It attacked [Sandu for being an unmarried woman](#), re-enforcing its role of the attack dog of East European politics.

It might be asked why Plahotniuc and others chose to support Dodon privately, while publically claiming to back Sandu. Although they may be from different parties, many are cut from the same cloth as Dodon: part of the post-Soviet elite who made their money in murky circumstances and whose commitment is to their bank balances first and foremost. Indeed, Dodon was Economics Minister in the last Voronin government – the period when Plahotniuc was able to gain control of various resources. Sandu, by virtue of her background outside of this elite and her track record as Education minister, posed the greatest threat to this group.

Dodon's campaign and support among ethnic Russians and Gagauz benefitted from the crass nationalist politics emerging from Bucharest. The campaign to ['re-unify'](#) Romania and Moldova has increased in volume in Romania, although this is primarily aimed at domestic Romanian politics and is part of an increasingly nationalist tilt of politics there. The same discussion plays out in Moldova as well, and naturally enough is a concern among ethnic Russian and Gagauz voters. It is however worth noting that pro-Unification candidates polled under 3% of the vote in the first round of the election, showing that despite the plans of Romanian nationalists, there is no appetite from anyone in Moldova for unification.

At the same time, criticism can also be levelled at Sandu: during the campaign, she made few efforts to connect to

rural, Russian or Gagauz voters. Her defeat was narrow and a more concerted effort to appeal to these voters may have helped. It seems that Sandu and some Moldovan intellectuals have written off such voters as beyond redemption, but by not even trying to reach out to them they left the field open to Dodon and other anti-reformists who did attempt to appeal to them.

What does Dodon's victory mean?

Dodon's presidency will not be easy: Moldovan politics is deeply divided and the party system is highly volatile. It is also important to note that the President lacks power in accordance with the constitution. However, Dodon's political instincts make it likely that he will attempt to consolidate power around himself. Faced with a divided parliament, he can claim a popular mandate. He has already called for early elections: if the elections were won by the PSRM it is likely that a situation similar to Romania under Ion Iliescu would arise, where the system is parliamentary on paper but presidential in practice.

An early sign of the direction of Moldova under Dodon may be seen in his demand for the resignation of Defense Minister Anatol Salaru and Security Council member Mihai Ghimpu. Dodon has no powers to sack them according to the constitution and it is likely that this will be an early test of the relationship between parliament and president. The results of this will potentially point to how domestic politics may unfold.

Dodon's authoritarian [populism](#) could be seen in the run up to the election. In interviews he promised everything to everyone, maintaining good relations with the EU alongside improving relations with Russia. The only firm policy articulated was to reject unification. As for the fight against corruption, it is likely that anticorruption efforts will be watered down or that they will become politicised.

There are three less certain areas. It is unclear what will become of the pro-reform opposition – will they be able to work together and will they be able to make inroads? Secondly, what becomes of the populist Renato Usatii, who served as both an ally and rival to Dodon, (but who is now subject to an Interpol arrest warrant and has fled to [Russia](#)) as well as the Communist party who did not even run in the presidential election and are now a former shadow of themselves?

The final area of uncertainty is [Transnistria](#) where there will be a presidential election on 11 December. With Dodon's ascent to power, some of the rationale for Transnistrian separation is reduced, but it is unlikely that the Transnistrian leadership will willingly give up their power and wealth. Dodon is in favour of a federalist solution for Moldova, which is potentially a workable compromise, but this would be a long-term project. He has also been critical of the Transnistrian leadership, which does not bode so well for Chişinău-Tiraspol relations. The situation may depend on whether Moscow would rather work with Chişinău rather than Tiraspol.

A swing to the East or more of the same?

Dodon's victory is likely to improve relations with Moscow, while there will be a probable worsening of the relationship with Kyiv and Bucharest (depending also on the results of the Romanian parliamentary elections on 11 December and how nationalistic Romanian politics becomes in the run up to the centenary of Romanian unification). It is highly unlikely that Moldova will abandon its relationship with the European Union because it isn't in the interests of the economic elite to do so.

Where there may be a shift is in Dodon's ability to extract concessions from the EU and US. While the 'pro-Europeans' were able to extract some benefits from the EU, US and Romania, Dodon's positive relationship with Russia puts him in a position to potentially extract more for doing less. He is in a position to use his relationship with Russia to leverage further concessions from the EU, weakening any conditionality that the EU/US may wish to put in place.

Perhaps the most revealing insight into the thinking of the 'pro-European' politicians and elite came in an interview shortly before the second round. Plahotniuc commented '[the European brand is recovering](#)', in much the same way

as one would describe a Burger chain recovering from a food poisoning scandal. For the Moldovan elite, Europeanisation is not about political institutions, shared values, democratisation, or even a set of policy objectives, but rather something akin to a marketing slogan.

While Dodon's victory is a symbolic rejection of the 'pro-European' politicians who have led the country since 2009, it is also unlikely to mark any radical re-orientation in Moldova's domestic or international politics. Dodon's victory is a victory for the status quo. Political reform and anti-corruption efforts are likely to stall, and there is the potential for conflict between parliament and president, but some progress on resolving the Transnistrian issue may well be possible. The real winners in this election are Moldova's oligarchs who have been able to defeat a candidate whose reformist agenda threatened their interests.

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