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Moldova: general elections on 28 September 2025, a litmus test for Maia Sandu's European agenda

On 9 September, addressing [the European Parliament in Strasbourg](#), Moldovan President Maia Sandu delivered a truly existential plea. *'If our democracy cannot be protected, then no democracy in Europe is safe,'* she insisted. Beyond diplomatic rhetoric, the Moldovan president was appealing for help, describing the 28 September parliamentary elections as the 'final battle' for European accession and the 'most crucial vote in history' for her country.

Since coming to power in 2020, Maia Sandu has made Moldova's European integration her central political goal, transforming a country traditionally torn between East and West into an official candidate for European Union membership. But this goal, accelerated by the war in Ukraine and the geopolitical opportunities it has opened up, is now reaching a moment of electoral truth. *'It's a race against time to anchor our democracy within the European Union, where it will be protected from the greatest threat we face: Russia,'* she [declared before MEPs](#), summarising five years of a European agenda now subject to the verdict of the ballot box.

For Maia Sandu's supporters, a victory for the Action and Solidarity Party (PAS) would definitively consolidate the European gamble, paving the way for accelerated accession negotiations. A defeat, on the other hand, could lead to a period of political instability or a pro-Russian coalition, turning Moldova into a 'springboard for hybrid attacks against the European Union', in the words of the Moldovan president.

This European gamble, which defines Maia Sandu's political identity and her country's geostrategic future, raises three crucial questions in the run-up to the election. What are the foundations of this gamble? How has the war in Ukraine rearranged the situation? Finally, what will be the outcome of this gamble after 28 September?

A EUROPEAN POLITICAL OFFER BUILT OVER THE LONG TERM

In November 2020, Maia Sandu won by a large margin ([57.7% of the vote](#)) against incumbent President Igor Dodon and took office with a programme of internal reforms focused on tackling corruption. Faced with an electorate weary of the sterile geopolitical quarrels that had paralysed the country during the previous decade, the new president deliberately favoured a pro-reform discourse. At that time, Europe appeared only as a distant normative horizon, a democratic reference rather than an immediate political project. However, in under five years, this vague aspiration would become a strategic obsession, transforming the September 2025 parliamentary elections into a new referendum, following the one [in October 2024](#), on the country's European anchoring.

This change began with a methodological revolution. Bolstered by the [legislative majority won in July 2021](#), with 52.8% of the vote and 63 out of 101 MPs, Maia Sandu finally had the institutional levers to implement her reform

agenda. But rather than presenting these changes as simple administrative modernisations, she developed a systematic framing strategy: each reform became a 'step towards Europe'. The anti-corruption law? A prerequisite for accession. Judicial reform? Harmonisation with European standards. Transparency measures? Preparation for the *acquis communautaire*. Even if not all of these reforms have been completed, the direction has been set.

This discursive Europeanisation of domestic reforms has had a dual political effect. On the one hand, it has given narrative coherence to an agenda that might otherwise have appeared technocratic and scattered. On the other hand, it has gradually transformed European aspirations into a concrete political necessity. Moldovans no longer vote only for or against specific reforms, but for or against Europe itself. The [Moldovan president](#) has thus succeeded in politicising European integration without appearing to impose an external ideological choice.

Maia Sandu's political strength therefore lies in her ability to articulate reformist pragmatism with the rhetoric of urgency. European integration is no longer presented as one choice among many, but as a '*question of survival*'. This dramatisation found its most accomplished expression in her September 2025 speech to the European Parliament: accession to the European Union became a '*race against time*' to definitively anchor Moldovan democracy in the face of the '*greatest threat: Russia*'.

This existential rhetoric is based on spectacular diplomatic achievements, which form the core of Maia Sandu's electoral argument. Official candidacy submitted in March 2022, candidate status obtained in June 2023, accession negotiations opened in December 2023 and the [first EU-Moldova summit](#) on 4 July this year: in under three years, Moldova has become one of the most advanced candidates for enlargement. This achievement is all the more remarkable given the tense geopolitical context, which has made Moldova a strategic priority for Europe. The [joint visit](#) by Emmanuel Macron, Friedrich Merz and Donald Tusk to Chisinau on Independence Day on

27 August 2025 to support Maia Sandu is a perfect illustration of this.

Faced with sceptics who doubt the country's ability to join the European Union quickly, the Moldovan president is developing a resolutely pragmatic approach. She advocates a process '*based on merit*', stressing that the European Union '*has never been about perfection, but about protecting fragile democracies until they are consolidated*'. This approach, which explicitly positions Moldova alongside Ukraine on a 'parallel trajectory', addresses domestic concerns while flattering Moldovan national pride.

This discursive strategy has aimed to defuse the opposition's argument that Moldova is 'not ready' for Europe. By reversing the burden of proof (it is no longer Moldova that must earn Europe, but Europe that must protect Moldova), Maia Sandu has transformed her country's weaknesses into arguments for accelerated integration.

As the [legislative elections](#) approach, the central challenge for the president is to transform this diplomatic performance into electoral mobilisation, particularly among the large diaspora living in European countries. While the European political offer has proven its effectiveness on the international stage, its translation into popular support remains uncertain. [Polls](#) reveal a persistent gap between support in principle for European integration and enthusiasm for the concrete reforms it entails, as shown by the contrasting results of the [referendum in October 2024](#): with 50.35% of the vote, Moldovans voted to include the objective of joining the European Union in the Constitution.

WHEN THE WAR IN UKRAINE RESHAPES THE EUROPEAN WAGER

The contrast is striking in its brutality. In November 2020, Maia Sandu promised to focus on domestic reforms, true to her background as an economist. Five years later, in the Strasbourg chamber, she made the war in Ukraine the central argument of her election campaign: "*The Kremlin's goal is clear: to capture*

Moldova through the ballot box, use us against Ukraine and turn us into a springboard for hybrid attacks against the European Union." This metamorphosis reveals how the Russian invasion of 24 February 2022 has upset the political equation in Moldova, transforming what was conceived as an agenda of internal modernisation into a question of geopolitical survival.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine immediately had a clarifying effect on the political situation in Moldova. Far from her previous hesitations, Maia Sandu unambiguously condemned Russia's aggression from the very outset of the conflict and put the traditionally pro-Russian parties on the defensive. This stance broke with Moldova's tradition of constitutional neutrality and the population's fundamental hostility to NATO membership, marking a definitive shift towards alignment with the West. In a matter of weeks, Moldova became a direct player in the conflict: urgently welcoming nearly a million Ukrainian refugees (around 110,000 are believed to still be present), strengthening cooperation on energy and customs infrastructure, and coordinating security with Kyiv.

Nevertheless, this solidarity has come at a price. Energy and inflationary shocks are hitting Moldova's already fragile economy hard. Inflation exceeded 30% in October 2022, and power cuts became more frequent after Russian bombing of Ukrainian infrastructure. After a sharp decline in GDP in 2022 (4.6%), growth recovered slightly in 2023 (1.2%) but remained sluggish in 2024 (0.1%). [The €1.8 billion support plan](#) proposed by Ursula von der Leyen in October 2024, which the [co-legislators approved in February 2025](#), has yet to produce any tangible results in six months. For Maia Sandu, these trials paradoxically have become arguments in her favour: they demonstrate Moldova's vulnerability and the need for rapid European integration. *'Without the European Union, we risk becoming a Russian hybrid base,'* she insists, turning immediate difficulties into a justification for European urgency. The strategy is working: in two years, Moldova has caught up with Ukraine in the race for membership, even gaining a slight lead due to the absence of active war on its territory.

This diplomatic achievement has created a paradox that Maia Sandu is skilfully exploiting in her campaign. On the one hand, she highlights the 'parallel trajectory' with Ukraine to reassure people about the feasibility of accession. On the other, she emphasises that Moldova, not being in open war, can progress more quickly in the negotiations. This argument aims to respond to sceptics who doubt Moldova's ability to join the European Union within a reasonable timeframe. However, the Ukrainian parallel also reveals the weaknesses of Maia Sandu's gamble. While Ukraine benefits from European solidarity reinforced by its status as a heroic victim, Moldova must justify its accession solely on the basis of its democratic and economic merits. Even more worrying, the war in Ukraine exposes Moldova to Russian reprisals without offering it the security guarantees enjoyed by Kyiv. This asymmetry is creating vulnerability that the opposition is quick to exploit.

The changing electoral perception of European integration perfectly illustrates this ambivalence. In 2022, at the time of the application, Europe appeared to offer the promise of security and prosperity in the face of the chaos in Ukraine. Three years later, with the legislative elections approaching, this promise has turned into a daily constraint: painful reforms, European conditionality, increased geopolitical pressure.

The pro-Russian opposition is exploiting this weariness by presenting the European agenda as 'submission to Western interests' that unnecessarily exposes Moldova to Russian reprisals. The former president, Igor Dodon, on his Facebook account, welcomes developments in US policy which, he believes, herald a Russian-American agreement and suggest a return to a more 'realistic' approach to relations with Moscow. This argument targets voters who are tired of five years of geopolitical tensions.

The central challenge for Maia Sandu is to convince people that Europe protects more than it exposes. Her main argument is based on the urgency of the situation: we must act quickly. This rhetoric of urgency is based on an analysis of Russian intentions, which are presented in terms of an attempt to *'capture Moldova through the ballot box'* before European accession

puts it, perhaps permanently, out of reach. However, this strategy of fear carries obvious electoral risks: by dramatising geopolitical issues, Maia Sandu risks fuelling the anxiety of an electorate already battered by successive crises. The opposition can easily turn the argument around: it is precisely Moldova's pro-European orientation that exposes it to Russian threats.

ANTI-EUROPEAN FORCES ON THE ELECTORAL OFFENSIVE

In her speech on 9 September 2025, Maia Sandu delivered a striking assessment of the electoral battle unfolding in Moldova: *'An unlimited hybrid war waged by the Kremlin, on a scale unprecedented before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine.'* This escalation in Russian interference is turning the Moldovan parliamentary elections into a laboratory for democratic destabilisation, where new weapons of hybrid warfare are being tested. According to the president, Russia's geopolitical objective is clear: 'to capture Moldova through the ballot box, use us against Ukraine, and turn us into a springboard for hybrid attacks against the European Union'. Faced with this offensive, anti-European forces have formidable assets that Maia Sandu's European gamble is struggling to counter.

Russian interference in Moldova reveals the growing sophistication of techniques for destabilising democracies. The Moldovan president details an impressive arsenal: massive funding of pro-Kremlin parties, direct electoral corruption through the distribution of bribes, disinformation campaigns using deepfakes and fake news sites, and manipulation of social media by troll farms. This array of tactics goes far beyond traditional methods of influence and constitutes a genuine attack on the integrity of the Moldovan democratic process, which could also be deployed against other European democracies, including consolidated democracies such as [Germany and France](#).

This hybrid warfare skilfully exploits the structural weaknesses of Moldovan society: endemic poverty facilitating electoral corruption, linguistic and identity divisions allowing polarisation, and energy dependence

creating economic vulnerabilities. By exploiting these weaknesses, the Russian offensive is turning every social difficulty into an argument against European integration. However, polls show that socio-economic issues dominate the concerns of [Moldovan public opinion](#), with corruption and poverty, low incomes and demographics at the top of the list, well ahead of international issues. In the same poll, a majority of the population believes that the country is heading in the wrong direction (52.7% versus 38.1%), which may be a source of concern for the ruling party.

In this context, the effectiveness of the anti-European offensive relies heavily on exploiting the social fatigue that has accumulated after five years of intensive reforms. Promises of European prosperity are coming up against a still difficult economic reality: stagnant wages, mass emigration and persistent corruption despite reforms. This disappointment allows the opposition to present the European agenda as a costly mirage that distracts Moldova from its real interests.

Pro-Russian parties, notably the Patriotic Bloc^[1], in particular are exploiting the weariness with European conditionality. Every demand for reform becomes proof of 'submission to Brussels', and every European criticism of Moldova's progress fuels the sovereigntist discourse. This strategy transforms European standards, presented by Maia Sandu as democratic guarantees, into external constraints imposed on Moldovan sovereignty.

Even more subtly, the opposition is playing on security fears created by the pro-Western position. While Maia Sandu presents European integration as a form of protection, her opponents portray it as a dangerous provocation that unnecessarily exposes Moldova to Russian reprisals. For them, Maia Sandu's policy does not guarantee peace, but rather risks dragging the country into war with Russia. The potential destabilisation of Transnistria, a separatist territory in eastern Moldova, increases the level of uncertainty in the country.

Faced with this multifaceted offensive, the central challenge for the president is to reinvent her European

[1] The "Patriotic Bloc" is an electoral alliance built around Igor Dodon and Vladimir Voronin, bringing together the main pro-Russian left-wing parties in Moldova: the Party of Socialists (PSRM), the Party of Communists (PCRM), as well as *Inima Moldovei* (Irina Vlah) and *Viitorul Moldovei* (Vasile Tarlev). Officially registered at the beginning of August, this bloc aims to counter the pro-European agenda of the current government in the parliamentary elections of 28 September 2025.

The parties linked to Ilan Shor (a sulphurous opposition figure) were not authorised to compete, their registration having been refused by the Central Electoral Commission for non-compliance with electoral rules.

discourse to overcome democratic fatigue. Her strategy is based on dramatisation: transforming the elections into an existential choice between 'democracy' and 'dictatorship', between "Europe" and 'Russia'. But this polarisation carries obvious risks by fuelling precisely the tensions that her opponents denounce. In fact, the challenge for Maia Sandu is to continue to embody hope rather than constraint. This means moving beyond the discourse of security urgency to rediscover a positive vision of Europe's future. But after five years of successive crises, is the Moldovan electorate still receptive to a message of hope? Or has democratic fatigue created a demand for stability that only the opposition can satisfy?

This question reveals the central paradox of Maia Sandu's European gamble: the more she emphasises Russian threats to justify European urgency, the more she fuels the social anxiety that the opposition exploits to propose 'reconciliation' with Moscow. The more she dramatises geopolitical issues, the more she risks wearying an electorate in search of normality. In this respect, the breakthrough of the Alternativa Bloc, which claims to be centrist (pro-European, but ultimately seeking to normalise relations with Russia), will probably be one of the keys to the election. For Europe, the stakes go beyond Moldova alone: a victory for pro-Russian forces would confirm the effectiveness of new hybrid weapons and encourage their deployment against other European democracies. A victory for Maia Sandu, on the other hand, would demonstrate that democratic resilience can triumph over destabilisation, paving the way for a consolidation of the European security architecture.

A FULL-SCALE TEST OF EUROPEAN SOFT POWER

The election of 101 MEPs on 28 September represents a moment of truth for Europe. Over and above Maia Sandu's personal destiny and Moldova's geopolitical future, it is the very effectiveness of the European model of influence that is being assessed at the ballot box. Five years on from the Moldovan

President's European gamble, three scenarios are emerging, each of which holds crucial lessons for the EU's enlargement strategy.

The first scenario is that of a clear victory for the Action and Solidarity Party (PAS), which would definitively establish Moldova's European roots and validate Maia Sandu's strategy. This scenario would pave the way for an acceleration of the accession negotiations, with the objective of effective integration before 2030. For Europe, this victory would demonstrate that European soft power can triumph over Russian hybrid warfare, even in the most geopolitically exposed areas. This consolidation would also reinforce the credibility of Europe's enlargement policy, long criticised for its slowness and excessive conditionalities. The message would be clear: Europe effectively protects the democracies that are anchored in its institutions.

The second scenario is that the PAS fails to win a total of 51 seats, followed by the formation of a pro-Russian coalition, which would be a difficult scenario for Brussels. This configuration could permanently block Moldova's accession process and transform the country into a 'hybrid base' for the destabilisation of Ukraine and Eastern Europe. For Moscow, this success would validate the effectiveness of new 'democratic capture' techniques, based on the Georgian model, and encourage their deployment elsewhere. This scenario would reveal the structural limitations of European soft power in the face of authoritarian regimes determined to invest heavily in destabilisation. It would also raise the question of the reversibility of integration processes: once negotiations are suspended, can European momentum be revived? Europe would then have to fundamentally rethink its methods of influence in geopolitically contested areas.

Finally, the third and last scenario would lead to a close result, giving rise to difficult cohabitation or governmental instability, which would plunge Moldova into political uncertainty for several years. This intermediate scenario would formally maintain the accession process while slowing it down considerably. The PAS has ruled out this scenario *a priori* by refusing any form of alliance after the legislative elections, but

it is nevertheless quite likely. For Europe, this situation would set a worrying precedent: that of a candidate country permanently paralysed by internal divisions. Moldova's paralysis would highlight the limits of European conditionality: how can democratic reforms be demanded of a country whose institutions are blocked by political instability? Europe would then have to invent new tools to support unfinished democratic transitions.

Whatever the outcome of the elections, the Moldovan experience already offers decisive lessons for enlargement policy. First, it encourages us to consider the need to rethink timelines: in a context of hybrid warfare, the traditional slowness of accession

negotiations becomes a factor of vulnerability. The European Union must learn to speed up its processes without sacrificing its democratic requirements, to explicitly integrate protection against external interference and hybrid warfare, and to improve and rethink its pre-accession policies in order to generate tangible and immediate benefits, which alone can resist the demagogic promises of anti-European forces. These are the issues at stake in the upcoming parliamentary elections in Moldova.

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