

Possible Russian Gains in Georgia and Moldova

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The Kremlin continues to pursue its longstanding hybrid warfare efforts to regain effective control of the territories of the former Soviet Union even as it seeks to gain control of Ukraine through military force. The full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine is, in fact, supporting Russian hybrid warfare efforts in former Soviet states, particularly Moldova and Georgia, as pro-Russian local political leaders and influencers benefit from the implicit threat of Russian aggression against their own states. Moscow seeks to regain momentum in its efforts to reconsolidate control over the post-Soviet space through the ongoing elections in Moldova and Georgia and will seek to capitalize on successes in those elections to advance its objectives in Ukraine and elsewhere in the former Soviet Union.

Russia has implemented various methods from its hybrid warfare playbook to influence the recent Georgian elections and directly interfere in the recent Moldovan election. The Kremlin relied on information operations in both Georgia and Moldova and is tailoring its methods to the distinctive characteristics of Moldova's and Georgia's histories, governments, geopolitics, and societies. ISW offers the following updates on the October 26 parliamentary elections in Georgia and the October 20 first-round presidential election and EU referendum in Moldova. ISW will continue to analyze Moscow's attempts to influence and interfere in these elections and forecast how the Kremlin can exploit the results of these elections in future reports.

Georgia

Preliminary results show that the ruling Georgian Dream party has won the 2024 Georgian parliamentary elections, sparking widespread allegations of voter irregularities and setting the stage for protests, further complications in Georgia-West relations, and enhanced Kremlin influence in Georgia and the South Caucasus.

Georgia's ruling Georgian Dream party won a simple majority of around 54 percent in the Georgian parliamentary elections held on October 26, 2024, according to preliminary results that the opposition is challenging.[1] Preliminary results released by the Georgian Central Election Commission (CEC) on October 27 with 99 percent of precincts reporting suggest that the Georgian Dream party won nearly 54 percent of the seats in parliament, while the four main pro-Western opposition parties together won about 38 percent. The results suggest that Georgian Dream will gain around 89 seats in the 150-member parliament, short of the "constitutional majority" of 113 seats required to enact the constitutional changes it hoped for, such as banning pro-Western opposition parties.[2] Western and Georgian opposition exit polls had suggested that Georgian Dream

would only win a plurality of votes (around 40 percent) giving the combined opposition parties a clear majority.[3]

International election observers, Western officials, and the Georgian opposition are contesting the election results alleging systematic violations. Georgian President Salome Zourabichvili announced on October 28 that she does not recognize the results of the election, calling it a “total robbery” and stating that the Georgian people witnessed a “Russian special operation,” suggesting unspecified large-scale Russian interference.[4] Most of the pro-Western opposition parties poised to gain seats in the parliament also rejected the results of the election, calling them fraudulent while some, including the Coalition for Change and Unity-National Movement, stated that they will reject their parliamentary mandates (and presumably refuse to take their seats in a parliament formed on the basis of this election).[5] The Helsinki Commission Chair to the US State Department, National Democratic Institute (NDI), International Republican Institute (IRI), Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy (ISFED), and other international election observing bodies have stated that the Georgian parliamentary elections were marred by violence, voter intimidation, violation of voter secrecy, instances of ballot stuffing, vote buying, violations of “neutrality zones” around polling stations, attacks against opposition members and offices, and double voting, among other irregularities—statements consistent with those of many Georgian civil society organizations and Georgian election observers who have called for the annulment of the results.[6] Western officials also questioned the validity of the election results with many EU, UK, and US officials highlighting irregularities, urging Georgian authorities to investigate them, and even questioning the future of EU-Georgia relations.[7]

Georgian President Zourabichvili and the Georgian opposition could seek to contest the results of the Georgian parliamentary elections through legal mechanisms and demonstrations. The Georgian Constitution established legal mechanisms through which the Georgian president, at least one-fifth of parliament, or the public defender can dispute the “constitutionality of referendums or elections” (Chapter Six, Article 60.4.h) by referring violations to the Constitutional Court.[8] The Georgian Constitutional Court, however, has recently aligned itself with the Georgian Dream party by refusing to suspend the controversial Georgian Dream-proposed “foreign agent” law while also ruling that Zourabichvili violated the Georgian Constitution in 2023 by making international working visits without Georgian Dream’s approval, consistent with the party’s accusations against her.[9] The Georgian Parliament requires 76 members for a quorum, and if the current election results stand, then Georgian Dream will likely form a government even if the opposition candidates do not take their seats.[10]

The opposition and Georgian civil society will likely engage in large-scale demonstrations in support of electoral challenges but have not yet announced specific legal steps that they will take, instead calling for now for the support of the international community.[11] Zourabichvili, in coordination with the main pro-Western opposition parties, urged Georgians to gather outside the Georgian parliament to protest the election results on October 28.[12] Chairperson of the Unity-National Movement (UNM) opposition party Tina Bokuchava stated that her party “will fight like never before” for Georgia’s European future and suggested that there will be large-scale protests in coordination with Zourabichvili.[13] Georgian society has yet to conduct large-scale protests regarding the election results as of October 27, manifesting only small protests likely in anticipation of Zourabichvili’s formal

announcements.[14] Georgian Dream has likely prepared for a protest scenario given Georgian society's rich history of protests, particularly in the runup to the election. Georgian Interior Minister Vakhtang Gomelauri announced on October 24 the purchase of several new water cannons for Georgian riot police, likely in anticipation of possible protests.[15]

The European Union (EU) may further halt Georgia's EU membership progress while taking additional steps in response to allegations of widespread electoral irregularities.

President of the European Council Charles Michel called on the Georgian CEC and authorities to investigate the plethora of voting irregularities highlighted by international election observers while urging Georgian Dream to demonstrate its commitment to Georgia's EU path, indicating that the EU will assess the future of Georgia-EU relations in November.[16] Various EU member state officials also voiced concern over reports of voting irregularities and showed support for the Georgian people's EU aspirations.[17] EU officials have previously repeatedly voiced concerns over Georgia's democratic backsliding, particularly under Georgian Dream's rule, and recently suggested that Georgia must conduct free and fair parliamentary elections - among other requirements - in order to successfully resume its currently halted trajectory towards EU membership.[18] EU officials have also hinted at the possibility of revoking Georgia's visa-free access to the Schengen zone.[19] Some Western countries have already frozen funding to and cooperation with Georgia because of its democratic backsliding, and the failure of Georgian authorities to address election fraud claims will likely continue this trajectory and further harm Georgia's Euro-Atlantic aspirations.[20]

The atmosphere of instability in Georgia will likely derail the Georgian peoples' Euro-Atlantic aspirations while enhancing Russian influence in Georgia and the broader South Caucasus.

Georgian society largely remains committed to Georgia's EU and NATO membership. A Caucasus Barometer survey conducted by the Caucasus Research Resource Centers (CRRC) in April and May 2024 reported that 70 percent of Georgians support EU membership and 57 percent of Georgians support NATO membership.[21] A failure to properly investigate election irregularity allegations will likely distance Georgia from the West given the repeated warnings of Western countries and officials. A likely large-scale opposition protest movement against the election results would demonstrate the continued willingness of the Georgian people to advocate for their Euro-Atlantic aspirations, yet Georgian Dream rhetoric surrounding the election results and its previous response to protests suggests that a Georgian Dream government is more likely to crack down against protests and redouble its movement away from the West. Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze celebrated the election results and stated that allegations of systematic fraud are unfounded lies by the opposition and that voting irregularities are a common occurrence in all countries.[22] Georgian Dream has previously used force against protesters, particularly during demonstrations against the "foreign agent" law passed in May 2024, including with water cannons, intimidation tactics, and police crackdowns.[23] A refusal to acknowledge and systematically address the issues surrounding the parliamentary elections will likely instigate greater protests from the opposition which, in turn, could open the possibility for further Georgian Dream crackdowns against the opposition and broader Georgian civil society. Such a development would not only distance Georgia from its Western partners due to continued anti-Western rhetoric, crackdowns on civil society, and overall democratic backsliding, but would likely also support Kremlin efforts to enhance Russian influence in Georgia, the South Caucasus, and broader post-Soviet space. The Russian information space has largely celebrated the Georgian Dream victory, clearly indicating that the party is the Kremlin's preferred choice.[24] ISW

recently assessed that the Kremlin will likely leverage a Georgian Dream victory and the party's pro-Russian rhetoric as an opportunity to enhance its role in Georgia amid previously waning influence in the region in order to reassert its perceived zone of influence and revive imperial boundaries and buffer zones.[25]

Moldova

The presidential election will move into a second round on November 3, but it is not yet clear if the Moldovan Constitutional Court will finalize the results of the October 20 referendum amid allegations of serious irregularities.

The Moldovan Central Election Commission (CEC) confirmed on October 24 and 25 the final results of the October 20 first round presidential election and EU referendum. The Moldovan CEC reported on October 24 that Maia Sandu received 42.49 percent of the vote (656,852 votes) and that Alexandr Stoianoglo received 25.95 percent (401,215).[26] The CEC reported that 50.35 percent (749,719) voted in favor of the referendum, with 49.65 percent (739,155) voting against.[27] The CEC stated that 50.72 percent of all registered voters participated in the referendum – over the 1/3 required for the referendum to be deemed valid.[28]

The Moldovan CEC validated the results of the referendum and submitted its report on the referendum to the Moldovan Constitutional Court, which has 10 days (i.e. until November 4) to either confirm or reject the referendum results.[29] The Moldovan Electoral Code states that the court has 10 days to examine the CEC documents and confirm or reject the results of the referendum.[30] The Electoral Code also states that the Constitutional Court can declare the referendum "null and void" if there were "serious violations" of the electoral code during voting or vote counting that "influenced the results of the referendum as a whole." Should the court nullify the results, there will a repeat vote within two weeks, whereas if the court approves the results, the referendum's proposed amendments to the constitution will enter into force upon their publication in the Constitutional Court's Official Gazette. The Constitutional Court could, notably, announce its decision about the referendum results after the November 3 presidential runoff.

Moldovan authorities continue to discuss electoral violations during the October 20 voting, and it is unclear if the Constitutional Court will nullify the results of the referendum due to these reported violations. Moldovan General Police Inspectorate Head Viorel Cernauteanu reported on October 24 that Kremlin-linked Moldovan opposition politician Ilan Shor and Russian state bank Promsvyazbank (PSB) brought \$15 million into Moldova in September 2024 and another \$24 million in October 2024.[31] Cernauteanu reported that 138,000 Moldovans received money through PSB but that the scale of Shor's voter bribery is likely must higher as each money transfer was likely disbursed to several people within Shor's network. Cernauteanu stated that Moldovan police have uncovered two vote buying schemes – either by transferring money through PSB or using couriers to physically pay people for their vote.

The Moldovan General Police Inspectorate reported on October 26 that it had drawn up more than 630 reports on "passive electoral corruption" between October 24 and 26 and that the police sent more than 400 of these to the National Anticorruption Center for examination and legal action.[32] President of the Moldovan CEC Angelica Caraman stated on October 26 that Moldovan police found that the

Kremlin- and Shor-linked Victory electoral bloc committed "countless" actions that violated electoral legislation in the campaign period and on election day, including distributing "agitational materials" related to the referendum and organizing unlawful meetings with voters.[33] Caraman also noted that authorities collected video showing "obvious" signs of violations of the principle of secrecy during voting and even attempts to influence voters.

A self-described Moldovan "officer" reportedly sent an anonymous email to several Moldovan journalists and outlets on October 25 with a list of 3,789 people in "Shor's network." [34] The "officer" reportedly stated that their unspecified workplace has been investigating the Shor network for years and has passed information about "thousands" of "collaborators from Shor's network" to the Prosecutor's Office and the judiciary, but that most prosecutors "destroy the files" and prolong the cases. The letter also alleged that Shor has "bought" most of the employees in the Prosecutor's Office for Combatting Organized Crime and Special Cases and that Shor instructed the people within the network to vote no in the referendum and to vote for Stoianoglo or Victoria Furtuna in the presidential election. ISW cannot confirm the letter or its claims. Several Moldovan outlets reported that they verified some of the names on the list and confirmed that the people worked or still work for "Shor's network." [35]

The Moldovan Constitutional Court may deem these electoral violations "serious" enough to nullify the results of the referendum. On the other hand, these reported electoral violations were part of efforts to increase the number of votes against the referendum, but since the referendum still passed and met the required turnout despite, the court may find that these violations did not "influence the results of the referendum as a whole."

The Moldovan Communist Party demanded a recount of the votes cast at polling stations abroad, claiming that there were violations at diaspora polls that amount to a "possible massive fraud operation." [36] The Communist Party complained that many polling stations located in EU states displayed EU flags and that this amounted to "electoral agitation" for voters to support the referendum. Moldovan CEC Spokesperson Rodica Sirbu stated on October 24 that the Constitutional Court will be able to decide if a recount is necessary during its 10-day review of the CEC's report. [37]

Current President Maia Sandu and former Prosecutor General Alexandr Stoianoglo will face off in the second round of voting on November 3. Stoianoglo received more support in the first round of voting than pre-election polling suggested. A poll by Moldovan think tank Watchdog from October 11 to 16 just before the October 20 election showed that nine percent of respondents would vote for Stoianoglo. [38] Earlier polling in August and September 2024 also showed 9.9 percent and 11.2 percent, respectively, supporting Stoianoglo. [39] These polls only surveyed Moldovan voters residing within Moldova and did not take into account the diaspora vote, but Stoianoglo only received a limited number of votes from abroad (19,287). [40] Polling of Moldovans within Moldova therefore likely provides relatively accurate depiction of his overall voter support base.

It is unclear how much support Stoianoglo will receive from other opposition candidates in the second round. Renato Usatii, the former mayor of the pro-Russian city of Balti and head of his "Our Party" political party, came in third with 13.79 percent of the vote (213,169 votes). [41] Usatii's possible endorsement of Stoianoglo would likely allow Stoianoglo to challenge Sandu seriously in the second round. Usatii, however, has a mixed record on endorsements in previous elections, and it is

unclear if he will endorse Stoianoglo, Sandu, or neither. Usatii endorsed former Moldovan President Igor Dodon in the second round of voting in 2016 but called on his supporters to oppose Dodon in the second round of elections in 2020 (essentially indirectly endorsing Sandu).[42] Usatii stated on October 22 that he would consult with his party and report in the "coming days" about his decisions regarding the second round of voting.[43]

Should the rest of the opposition candidates endorse Stoianoglo, he could receive roughly an additional 274,000 votes in the second round, assuming that turnout rates remain the same. It is unclear at this time, however, if opposition candidates will back Stoianoglo or if all opposition voters would even vote for him. Some Moldovans who voted for other opposition candidates may vote for Sandu in the second round, especially as many opposition candidates, including some who are Kremlin-affiliated or Kremlin-friendly, adopted pro-EU platform that sounded similar to Sandu's.[44] Stoianoglo's presidential platform ostensibly supports Moldova's European integration but labels Russia a "development partner" with which Moldova "must be friends." [45] Stoianoglo reiterated these themes in a debate against Sandu on October 27, stating that he is a "supporter of the EU" but did not participate in the referendum because he thought the referendum only pursued Sandu's "personal goals." [46] He also claimed that if elected, he would establish relations with all of Moldova's "development partners," including the EU, the US, Russia, and the People's Republic of China (PRC).[47] More Moldovans within Moldova voted for the referendum (568,883) than voted for Sandu in the first round (487,558), and these approximately 80,000 voters may vote for Sandu and not the anti-referendum Stoianoglo in the second round. Voters intent on supporting the referendum but less enthusiastic for Sandu might, contrarily, stay home in the runoff, which could give Stoianoglo an advantage.

More Moldovans living abroad may vote for Sandu in the November 3 second round if patterns from the 2020 presidential election repeat. Significant increases in turnout between the first and second rounds in the 2020 presidential election among the largely pro-Sandu Moldovan diaspora helped Sandu eventually secure her victory against Dodon by 16 points.[48] A total of 150,022 Moldovans living abroad voted in the 2020 first round, whereas 263,177 voted in the 2020 second round.[49] A total of 239,419 Moldovans living abroad already voted in the 2024 first round - a significantly higher turnout than in the 2020 first round, likely due to the lifting of COVID pandemic restrictions and a desire to vote in the EU referendum.[50] 169,294 Moldovans living abroad voted for Sandu in the 2024 first round, and 243,605 Moldovans living abroad eventually voted for her in the 2020 second round against Dodon. Turnout will be important, however, and it is not yet clear if the runoff will generate more or less turnout than the first round that coincided with the referendum.

The Kremlin will likely try to prevent Sandu's re-election on November 3, possibly even by igniting violent protests in the lead up to the runoff or following the announcement of the results. Southeastern Europe-focused outlet *Balkan Insight* reported on October 18 that sources within Moldovan security structures with direct knowledge of the investigation stated that Shor funded the training of young Moldovans in Moscow, Republika Srpska, and Serbia by Serbian and Bulgarian nationals connected to Russian intelligence services and the Wagner Group.[51] The young Moldovans reportedly learned protest and destabilization tactics that involved weapons and explosives. The US Embassy in Bosnia and Herzegovina called on October 24 for Bosnian authorities to "thoroughly investigate" the reported training camp in Republika Srpska.[52] These reports suggest that Moscow

was trying to ignite violent protests in Moldova, and although Moldovan authorities have arrested some people involved in the training scheme, there remains a threat that Kremlin-linked actors will try to foment violence either in the lead up to the November 3 runoff or in the weeks following to contest the results.

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