

Election Watch for the Digital Age



Moldova

Preelection assessment

Presidential elections set for November 2020

Moldovans will vote this November in the country's second presidential elections since the country switched back to a direct electoral system in 2016. Igor Dodon of the Socialist Party (PSRM) is running for reelection against former prime minister Maia Sandu of the Action and Solidarity Party (PAS), and other, less-popular candidates. The PSRM and PAS were recently allied in an unlikely coalition government, which was formed in 2019 to remove the oligarchic regime built by the Democratic Party of Moldova (PDM) since it came to power in 2015. PDM leader and oligarch Vladimir Plahotniuc fled the country after stepping down.

Despite the removal of Plahotniuc's kleptocratic government, Moldovan democracy remains characterized by corruption, a politicized judiciary, and limited transparency. Oligarchic influence affects the electoral environment through the poorly regulated media sphere, where ownership and control is concentrated, reporting is highly partisan, and journalists self-censor. TV is the dominant source of news, so partisan manipulation of traditional media marks the overall information environment. Moldova's highly politicized relationship with Russia and Europe is also reflected in the media sphere. The November vote is likely to feature many of the issues seen in past elections, including vote buying, misuse of public resources, and tension around voting access for residents of Transnistria, a breakaway territory.

Moldova has a score of 65 out of 100, with 100 representing the least vulnerable in terms of election integrity, on Freedom House's Election Vulnerability Index, which is based on a selection of key election-related indicators. Moldova's score reflects weak institutions and rule of law. The country is rated **Partly Free** in *Freedom in the World 2020*, with a score of 60 out of 100 with respect to its political rights and civil liberties, and as a **transitional or hybrid regime** in *Nations in Transit 2020*, with a score of 35 out of 100 for the country's democratic progress. To learn more about these annual Freedom House assessments, please visit the Moldova country reports for [Freedom in the World](#) and [Nations in Transit](#).

Freedom House has identified the following as key issues to watch ahead of election day:

- **False or misleading information:** Propaganda and disinformation have been observed in past elections and should be expected during the 2020 electoral period, both from domestic and foreign sources. A [study](#) by the Center for Media, Data and Society found that misinformation often originates from the mainstream media and official channels, such as government officials or influential business people, rather than inauthentic websites. A number of the accounts that

Facebook removed for spreading false and misleading information ahead of the 2019 parliamentary elections belonged to government officials. The significant number of Russian-speakers in the country also increases the potential reach of Russian-language misinformation.

- **Influence operations:** A 2019 [report](#) by the Oxford Internet Institute identified online manipulation campaigns by government agencies and political parties. So-called “cyber troopers” took to Facebook and Instagram to support particular narratives, attack the political opposition, and stoke division. Various influence operations have also targeted discourse about Moldova’s relationship with Russia and Europe. Inauthentic accounts on Facebook and Instagram that originated in Moldova engaged in manipulative tactics during the 2019 parliamentary elections, and Russian-backed online media manipulation has also been reported. Similar domestic and foreign online influence campaigns are likely during the 2020 electoral period.
- **Cyberattacks:** Cyberattacks are a frequent concern for civil society and electoral bodies. During the 2019 parliamentary elections, the Central Electoral Commission was targeted with DDos attacks, apparently in an attempt to interfere with the publication of preliminary election results. Election-related cyberattacks are likely in 2020, given the overall prevalence of digital security threats and their deployment during past elections.