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## PRO-EU, PRO-RUSSIA CANDIDATES GO HEAD-TO-HEAD IN MOLDOVA VOTE

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EurActiv

Moldova will go to the ballots on Sunday (30 October) for a presidential election viewed as a tug-of-war between supporters of European integration and advocates of closer relations with the ex-Soviet countrys former master Moscow.

The crisis-hit country of 3.5 million, wedged between Ukraine and Romania, will for the first time since 1997 elect a president by national vote instead of having parliament select the head of state.

The popular ballot now forces Moldovans to make a tough choice for their country, which has been rocked by protests and political turmoil since the mysterious disappearance of  million  some 10% of the countrys GDP - from three banks last year.

Presidential candidates are pressing diametrically-opposed visions for the countrys future: deeper ties with the European Union and closer relations with Moscow.

The country signed an historic EU association agreement in 2014, despite bitter opposition from Russia, and the result of Sundays elections could fuel strife between pro-European and pro-Russian forces.

### Europes dwindling appeal

The government-backed candidate in Moldovas presidential race withdrew on Wednesday, saying it was a tactical move to ensure the presidency remained in pro-European hands.

On Wednesday government choice Marian Lupu said he would step aside to boost the chances of fellow pro-Western candidate Maia Sandu. Sandu last week told Reuters that a split among pro-European politicians could harm Moldova.

This is a tactical decision. Moldova needs a pro-European president. Polls show she (Sandu) is more favoured, Lupu told journalists.

The president in Moldova is more than just a figurehead  he or she can return laws to parliament, dissolve the assembly in certain situations and appoint the prime minister.

EU officials have admitted that Europes appeal has dwindled in the ex-Soviet republic in spite of the 2014 association agreement.

Pirkka Tapiola, who heads the EU mission to Moldova, told AFP that 70% of Moldovans had

supported a European course for the countrys development but that this figure had dropped following a string of failed pro-Western government reforms.

The fact that we have had successive governments that have called themselves pro-European \* has taken a toll on the popularity of the European vector, Tapiola told AFP.

Presidential candidate Igor Dodon, who heads the Socialist Party, has vehemently advocated against turning toward Europe.

What have we received from Europe? Nothing, said Dodon, who currently leads in voting intention polls, during a recent rally.

Dodon, who served as economy minister from 2006 to 2009 under a Communist government, has pledged to restore a strategic partnership with Russia and to void the economic portion of the association agreement with the EU.

I am not against the EU, Dodon said, stressing that the implementation of reforms demanded by Brussels, including in the justice system, are in Moldovas interest.

Maia Sandu of the centre-right opposition, currently second in voting intention polls, has promised to make Moldova European.

We advocate European integration because we see true democracy and prosperity for workers in the EU, Sandu told AFP.

Sandu, a former education minister who worked for the World Bank, conceded that authorities in Chisinau will have to convince Moldovans and European partners of their sincerity before even setting a timeline for the countrys possible accession to the EU.

#### A divided nation

Moldovan voters seem as divided as their political leaders, with half the population in favour of bolstering ties with the EU while the other looks east to Russia and hopes the country will enter a Russian-led customs union that also includes Belarus and Kazakhstan.

Moldova needs to be part of the EU, said 66-year-old former construction worker Mihai Scutelnic. But before that we need to put our country in order.

But for others like 67-year-old Ion Badii, the countrys Communist past and strong ties with Moscow are more appealing.

Its better to have close ties with Russia because Europe does not need our commodities, he said.

But Tapiola of the EU warned against attempts to label the countrys different political factions as pro-Russian and pro-European, saying it made for artificial polarisation.

I think that some may have preferred to direct the discourse into pro-EU or pro-Russia because it is an easy discourse compared to the main discourse, he said.

What are the reforms which are needed, what are we going to do with the justice system, how are we going to deal with corruption?

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Kaynak/Source: