

International

Moldova pro-Europeans win resounding election victory

'I hope that today will be the end of a difficult era for Moldova'

CHISINAU: Moldova's main pro-European party has won a resounding victory in parliamentary polls, results showed yesterday, strengthening the hand of President Maia Sandu as she pushes to reform her ex-Soviet country. Sunday's snap election—called by Sandu in April to shore up her position against pro-Russia forces—saw her centre-right Action and Solidarity (PAS) party take 52.7 percent of the vote. A coalition of socialists and Communists, led by former Kremlin-backed president Igor Dodon, came second with 27.2 percent, the Central Election Commission said Monday with 99.95 percent of votes counted. After early results showed her party leading late on Sunday, Sandu hailed what she said had been a vote for change in a country beset by poverty and corruption.

"I hope that today will be the end of a difficult era for Moldova. I hope that today will be an end to the rule of thieves over Moldova," she said in a statement on Facebook. Wedged between Ukraine and EU member Romania, the country of about 2.6 million has long been divided over closer ties with the European Union or maintaining Soviet-era relations with Moscow.

With lawmakers loyal to 46-year-old Dodon blocking Sandu's promises of reform after her election win in November, she dissolved parliament and scheduled the snap vote. The 49-year-old former World Bank economist's promises of honesty and competence resonated with many Moldovans, who in recent years have seen their nation rocked by political

crises and corruption scandals.

'Symbol of change'

"This is a test for Sandu and her government," Alexei Tulbure, a political analyst and the country's former ambassador to the United Nations, told AFP. "This government will have to show very quickly that it is more effective than the previous one" and start moving ahead with reforms, Tulbure said.

Sandu, who also served briefly as prime minister, has for many Moldovans become "a symbol of change", he said. The vote saw 101 lawmakers elected for four-year terms to the country's one-chamber parliament. Moldova's diaspora—which accounts for more than a third of the country's eligible voters and widely backed Sandu during the presidential election—cast more than 200,000 votes compared to a record figure of 262,000 in the second round of the presidential election.

Long queues formed outside the polling stations abroad Sunday and some voters—particularly in Germany and France—reserved a seat for Saturday evening, media in Moldova reported.

Observers had said a win for Sandu's party would be a blow to Russia, which wants Moldova to remain in its sphere of influence. "Even with a parliamentary majority, it will not be easy to carry out her grandiose plans for in-depth change," independent analyst Victor Ciobanu said.

"There will be severe opposition" from the pro-Russian side, he said. Dodon told journalists late



CHISINAU: Supporters of the Party of Action and Solidarity (PAS) celebrate victory during parliamentary elections in Chisinau, yesterday. Moldovan President Maia Sandu pledged an "end to the rule of thieves" as her pro-European party looked set to win snap parliamentary elections. —AFP

Sunday that he would "decide whether to protest the election results" after all electoral violations were analysed, with Moldovan police saying they

had received 242 such reports. "If Sandu succeeds, then this is an indisputable break with Russia," Tulbure said. —AFP

UK's PM Johnson to 'restore our freedoms' after COVID lockdown

LONDON: Prime Minister Boris Johnson was set to confirm "Freedom Day" next week with the lifting of most pandemic curbs in England, but will urge caution with experts worried the government is moving too fast.

Johnson was due to hold an afternoon news conference confirming that the government's tests have been met to allow a full reopening of the economy on July 19, along with the final measures of a months-old lockdown.

But with Britain now averaging more than 30,000 daily cases of the fast-spreading Delta coronavirus variant, scientists are fretting that the ending of measures such as mandatory mask-wearing spells trouble.

And the government's decision to allow more than 60,000 football fans to attend Sunday's European Championship final between England and Italy has added to the fears, after near-total flouting of distancing rules.

Johnson, however, insists the time is right to move from legally enforced rules to personal responsibility, and use the summer months to prepare for a potentially more damaging wave of COVID-19 in the winter.

"We are tantalisingly close to the final milestone in our roadmap out of lockdown, but the plan to restore our freedoms must come with a warning," he said in remarks previewing the announcement. "While the phenomenal vaccine rollout has offered every adult some protection against the virus, and the crucial link between cases, hospitalisations and deaths is weakened, the global pandemic is not over yet.

"Cases will rise as we unlock, so as we confirm our plans today, our message will be clear," Johnson said. "Caution is absolutely vital, and we must all take responsibility so we don't undo our progress, ensuring we continue to protect our NHS (National Health Service)."

While infection rates have jumped, deaths remain relatively stable in Britain after a mass vaccination campaign, and right-wing media are acclaiming July 19 as "Freedom Day". But there are signs the campaign is petering out, with take-up rates among younger adults waning.

Sarah Clarke, a board member of the UK's Faculty of Intensive Care Medicine, said there had been a 60 percent increase in ICU admissions over the past week and "we have over 500 patients being admitted per day into intensive cares".

"I would absolutely err on the side of extreme caution," she told Times Radio about Johnson's plan to end rules on masks and social distancing in England. Keeping the public safe is "not sustainable if we all decide to take our masks off and think that the vaccine programme no longer applies".

The UK's other nations—Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland—set their own health policy and are moving more cautiously. —AFP

Pope to spend few more days in hospital

VATICAN CITY: Pope Francis will spend a few more days in hospital following his colon surgery, the Vatican said yesterday, adding that the football-mad pontiff was cheered by Argentina and Italy's weekend victories. Francis will "remain hospitalised for a few more days in order to optimise the medical and rehabilitation therapy," spokesman Matteo Bruni said.

The 84-year old underwent planned surgery

Bulgaria anti-graft party claims mandate

SOFIA: A Bulgarian protest party led by a singer-turned-politician claimed the right to form a government yesterday, a day after the country's second general election in three months punished the established parties. With almost all the votes cast inside Bulgaria counted, the centre-right GERB party of former Prime Minister Boyko Borisov is on 23.9 percent, slightly ahead of the There is Such a People (ITN) party of singer Slavi Trifonov on 23.6 percent.

ITN, which has campaigned against corruption, could still take the lead once votes from overseas Bulgarians are added to the tally. With GERB struggling for parliamentary allies, 54-year-old Trifonov said in a statement on his 7/8 TV channel on Monday that "we expect to receive a mandate" from President Rumen Radev to form a government.

ITN would also need partners in parliament, but Trifonov said the party intended to govern alone as coalition "has become a dirty word in recent years". Trifonov, who has spent decades entertaining Bulgarians with pop-folk tunes and cover versions of traditional songs, went on to unveil his proposed cabinet.

He nominated veteran Nikolay Vasilev as prime

German Greens seek to claw back support

BERLIN: Mired in a plagiarism scandal and falling behind Angela Merkel's conservatives in the polls, the German Greens will be going on the offensive as they launch their election campaign yesterday. The Greens had surged ahead of the CDU-CSU conservative bloc earlier this year after nominating young hopeful Annalena Baerbock as their candidate to succeed Merkel following Germany's September 26 election.

But a series of gaffes by Baerbock have left the conservatives as firm favourites to emerge the biggest party in the election—which will see Merkel bow out after 16 years in power. The Greens will lay out their roadmap to the election on Monday, with party co-leader Robert Habeck also embarking on a tour of his home region of Schleswig-Holstein before the campaign proper kicks off in August.

The party will be looking to win back support lost amid missteps by Baerbock, 40, including failing to declare bonuses to the Bundestag, putting inaccuracies in her CV and allegedly plagiarising sections of her campaign book.

Baerbock has acknowledged she made "mistakes" and was "annoyed" with herself, but has since looked increasingly uncomfortable. The former trampolinist has even faced rumours she will step aside in favour of Habeck, though Habeck himself dismissed that theory as "nonsense" in an inter-

view with the daily Sueddeutsche Zeitung at the weekend.

"We have just elected Annalena as our candidate... with almost 100 percent" of the vote at a party congress, he said, insisting there was "no debate" about a possible switch.

But the plagiarism allegations in particular have proven damaging for Baerbock in a country where several ministers have resigned in recent years over similar scandals. After the publication of Baerbock's book "Jetzt" (Now) in June, an Austrian plagiarism expert wrote an explosive blog post claiming sections of the book were copied from the internet.

Baerbock and her supporters have called the accusations overblown and said the political treatise did not have to meet the same attribution standards as a scientific paper. But the Greens' ratings have continued to slide, with a poll for the Bild daily on Sunday showing them on just 17 percent—well behind the conservatives on 28 percent.

The CDU-CSU had a dismal start to the year amid anger over the government's pandemic management, bickering over who to field as their chancellor candidate and a corruption scandal involving shady coronavirus mask contracts. However, the bloc's ratings have slowly improved since it picked Armin Laschet, 60, as its candidate to succeed Merkel, and with the launch of its election manifesto in late June.

'Chancellor by default'

Baerbock had also been ahead of Laschet in surveys of which personality Germans would prefer to see as their next chancellor. But a recent poll had the North Rhine-Westphalia state premier in front

him to the balcony and stood by him, Bruni said. He was photographed Sunday looking cheerful in a wheelchair as he greeted staff and a fellow patient. Francis is in the same suite used by Pope John Paul II—who also led the Angelus prayer from there—and has celebrated mass in the apartment's private chapel with those looking after him.

The pontiff temporarily ran a fever last week after his operation for "severe diverticular stenosis with signs of sclerosing diverticulitis". But a chest and abdomen scan and other tests revealed no particular abnormalities.

Diverticula are small bulges or pockets that develop in the lining of the intestine. Diverticulitis occurs when they become inflamed or infected. Sclerosis is normally defined as a hardening of tissue. —AFP



SOFIA: A man casts his ballot at a polling station during the country's parliamentary election in Sofia. —AFP

minister among a team made up of mostly young and foreign-educated people, a high proportion of them women. There would also be a minister from the marginalised Roma minority for the first time.

Trifonov promised there would be no pardons for lawbreakers, nodding to widespread anger over the corruption and impunity that fuelled street protests last year and which has damaged the traditional parties of government. Partial official results show the opposition Socialists slumping to 13.6 percent and the Turkish minority MDL party

— who have traditionally played the role of king-makers — on 10.6 percent.

Two other parties that emerged from last summer's protests, the right-wing Democratic Bulgaria and left-leaning Stand Up! Mafia Out, are on 12.5 percent and five percent respectively. Sunday's vote was called because no party managed to form a government after the last election in April.

The latest poll was marred by low turnout, possibly because many people had already left for summer holidays. —AFP



Annalena Baerbock

on 25 percent, with Baerbock behind on 19 percent.

With the environment shaping up to be a key issue on the campaign trail, Laschet on Sunday promised to speed up efforts for Germany to achieve its goal of becoming climate neutral by 2045. "If we want fewer people to fly, we have to build railways faster, for example. Everything is going much too slowly," he said.

He also called for greater international cooperation to tackle climate change, insisting that "without China, without Russia, without other major players, it won't work". But critics say Laschet's current success in the polls has less to do with his platform and more to do with the flat-footed campaign of the Greens.

The CDU-CSU alliance "has Annalena Baerbock to thank for its comfortable position", Der Spiegel magazine wrote on Saturday. "At the moment it looks as though (Laschet) will almost become chancellor by default," it said. —AFP