

A Fragile Vote for Europe

Pro-EU Coalition Wins Majority in Polarized Moldovan Elections

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Moldova stays on course toward closer EU integration after Sunday's general election delivered a narrow parliamentary majority for the ruling coalition. In a poll framed as a choice between Europe and Russia, the three pro-EU parties - the centrist Liberal Democrats, left-leaning Democrats, and centre-right Liberals - captured 46 percent of the popular vote, and 55 seats in the 101-member Parliament. But as they prepare to form a new government, electoral momentum also rests with pro-Russian forces. The Kremlin-backed Socialist party, calling for Moldova to renege on the EU Association Agreement to join the Russian-led Customs Union, surged from obscurity to win the largest share of the popular vote with almost 21 percent. The slightly more moderate Communist party finished third with 17 percent. The upshot is a polarised political environment that will require a nuanced and inclusive approach by the new government and the EU.

Analysis: A Qualified Endorsement of Moldova's European Path

In security terms, the Moldovan elections represent a stabilising moment - largely because of what did not happen. First, Moldovan institutions proved resilient in the combustible pre-election climate, amidst speculations of an impending Russian coup or Maidan-style mobilization. Last week, the Central Election Commission deregistered the "Patria" party of Renato Usatii, a Kremlin-connected businessman, for violations of the electoral code, a decision duly endorsed by the Supreme Court. Instead of mounting a protest campaign, as many had feared, Usatii fled to Moscow. Against the backdrop of the Ukraine crisis - and the Kremlin's unpredictable behaviour - the fact that Moldovan elections took place without disturbance is no small feat.

Moscow's muted response to the elections provides further ground for cautious optimism. The Kremlin stopped short of any fresh threats or hints that it would not recognize the results. Given the many ways it can stir trouble for Moldova - from military escalation in Transnistria through enticement of separatism in Gagauzia, further trade coercion and disruption of energy supplies to harassment of the 700,000 Moldovans working in Russia - Moscow's restraint is noteworthy, indicating a deliberate choice to limit direct confrontation with Brussels to Ukraine, at least for now.

The EU can see the election as a qualified success, not least because the alternative - a Socialist-led government intent on pulling Moldova out of its Association Agreement (AA) - would have undone years of political and economic investment by Brussels. It could have also dealt a potentially fatal blow to the EU's troubled Eastern Partnership programme, of which Moldova is a rare success story.

Moreover, 45 percent is a respectable score for a notoriously quarrelsome coalition that staked its fortunes on European integration and costly sectoral reforms, with few tangible benefits, besides the highly significant visa-free regime, to show

for it. The Moldovan electorate, while distrustful of their corrupt political class, seems to have retained some degree of confidence in Europe, particularly among younger, better-educated and urban voters. Their support for European integration is all the more significant as it comes without either a clear membership perspective or the extraordinary circumstances of war, as in Ukraine. Nonetheless, the outcome also came down to Russian mismanagement of the campaign: had Moscow not overplayed its hand with Usatii, or had the Communist and the Socialists joined forces, the balance of power in the new parliament could have looked very different.

Outlook: The Dangers of Polarisation

The three-party coalition government likely to emerge - with a programme geared toward implementation of the Association and DCFTA Agreements, and a pledge to apply for EU Membership at some point during its mandate - will be fragile and plagued by mistrust between party leaders. This may prove significant in an increasingly hostile political environment where the pro-Kremlin Socialists are the largest single party, and Igor Dodon, its chairman and Vladimir Putin's personal acquaintance, an assertive opposition leader. The danger of geopolitically driven domestic polarization is clear.

This puts the Communist party of ex-president Vladimir Voronin - who seeks to renegotiate rather than scrap the AA, as the Socialists do - in a pivotal role as a non-antagonistic opposition, a platform made more likely by Voronin's personal dislike of Dodon. To a large extent, the sustainability of Moldova's European choice hinges on the ability of the coalition to engage constructively with the Communists in parliament, and reach out to their supporters in the Russian-speaking community. Sunday's electoral success of the pro-Russian parties offers a timely warning that, unless it builds a wider and more inclusive base of legitimacy, the new government - and Moldova's EU integration - are living on borrowed time.

Recommendations: Firm Support With an Open Mind

- ◆ The **Commission and the EEAS** should be prepared to activate contingency plans for further targeted assistance to Chisinau in the event of Russia's further use of trade or energy coercion after Sunday's elections, while being ready to address Moscow's concerns over Moldova's DCFTA or other issues
- ◆ The **EEAS and EU Member States** should ensure equitable sharing of the benefits of EU assistance (and the future DCFTA) and use their leverage to promote inclusive dialogue between the elected parties and with a broad section of civil society, particularly the Russian-speaking minority.
- ◆ The **Commission** should improve the visibility of EU-funded projects, and step up efforts to inform Moldovan citizens of the opportunities arising from visa liberalization and integration into the EU single market.
- ◆ The **Visegrad-Four governments** should co-ordinate and scale-up their political and technical support to Moldova, including capacity building focused on implementing the AA and DCFTA.

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