



BULLETIN

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International Implications of Elections in Moldova

by Bartosz Cichoński

Developments in the wake of Moldova's parliamentary election could trigger an international crisis. An attempt to depose the government cannot be ruled out, which theoretically could provide Russia with a pretext to recognize the independence of Transnistria. More likely, unrest will be curbed—yet this scenario is also fraught with danger to security in Europe, because the victorious Communists will lean towards a Russia-proposed pattern for the unification of the country, one which provides for Transnistria's blocking influence on foreign and security policy and for a continued presence of Russian troops there.

Causes of Crisis. On Sunday, 5 April, the Moldovans voted in a parliamentary election. According to early voting returns, the Party of Communists of the Republic of Moldova (PCRM) won 61 out of the 101 seats, the Liberal Party (LP) and the Liberal-Democratic Party (LDP) won 15 and 14 seats respectively, and the Alliance Our Moldova (AOM) got 11. The above estimates, had they been accurate, would have made the Communists capable of forming a government on their own and ensuring the presidency for their candidate (in Moldova the head of the state is elected by the parliament). Initially the opposition staged a peaceful demonstration, but did not attempt to challenge the early returns. It was only on Tuesday that the protest evolved into riots amidst rumors of voting fraud and after aggressive groups chanting slogans for the unification of Moldova with Romania had joined the crowd. On April 9 the Central Electoral Commission of Moldova published the final returns, which gave the PCRM 60 seats, the LP and the LDP 15 seats each, and the AOM 11 seats. This difference, seemingly slight, could have important consequences: the Communists will not be able to elect the president on their own votes alone and—should this procedure be blocked—the authorities will have to call another parliamentary election.

The allegations of electoral fraud were merely a catalyst of the discontent which had been mounting for years among Moldova's elites. In the elections, pro-European young Moldovans and the educated urban population were dominated, for the third time in succession, by the rural majority voting for the Communist party. According to the protesters, the Communists have been hindering economic reforms that could bring Moldova closer to membership in the European Union and have been too appeasing towards Russia over the Transnistria crisis settlement.

OSCE representatives who were monitoring the election found it generally in line with OSCE and Council of Europe standards, a number of detected irregularities notwithstanding. EU High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy Javier Solana and the U.S. Department of State recognized the result of the election and called on the parties to the conflict to arrive at an agreement. This being the case, the Euro-Atlantic community's support for any attempt at overturning the election results, similar to that in Ukraine in late 2004, can be ruled out.

Scenarios of Further Developments. Whatever the official assessment of the 5 April vote by the OSCE, EU and the U.S., doubts surrounding the election of a successor to President Voronin are bound to affect negatively the development of Moldova's relations with Western states and Euro-Atlantic organizations, while bringing about a deeper rapprochement with Russia. The support Russia extended to the PCRM before and after the elections was certainly meant to sway that party to take decisions advantageous to Russia. For the past several months Russia's representatives were

conducting intensive behind-the-scenes talks with President Voronin on the unification of Moldova according to a scenario proposed once already in 2003 (known as the “Dimitri Kozak memorandum”). That proposal provided for a consolidation of Russia’s military presence in the republic and for a federalization of the state that would vest Transnistria with power to block the government’s foreign and security policy decisions. In 2003 Russia’s proposals were rejected following an intervention by Javier Solana. As things are now, chances for a similar initiative—a “second Kozak memorandum”—being implemented are incomparably better because, with past years’ experiences to go by, the Moldovan authorities will be less inclined to heed the EU’s opinion, just as they will be more alert to the consequences of possible Russian economic sanctions. Russia could take advantage of a period when President Voronin and the PCRM’s position is going to be weaker to expeditiously obtain consent to binding decisions on a Transnistria issue settlement. After all, Moldova’s Communists have more than once executed shifts in the country’s foreign policy, depending on the circumstances.

While the outcome of the 5 April elections cannot be formally challenged, this is not to say that there will be no recurrence of unrest. If the violent phase of protests was indeed incited (as some commentators allege, pointing at Russian or Romanian intelligence services), it cannot be ruled out that on the occasion of another outbreak of demonstrations another attempt at deposing the government will be made. Russia could find such a turn of events a sufficient reason for recognizing the independence of Transnistria—possibly under the pretext of the need to defend the Russian-speaking population (*sootechestvenniki*), which accounts for nearly 60% of the separatist republic’s population, against compulsory Romanization should Moldova be incorporated into Romania. Russia used this argument once already, to justify its armed intervention in the Transnistria conflict early in the 1990s. A similar rationale was offered for Russian intervention in Georgia last August.

The recognition of Transnistria by Russia would bring about a temporary suspension of the EU and NATO’s relations with Russia. Ultimately, however, the parties would resume cooperation, bearing in mind such current priorities as the launch of transit for the ISAF operation in Afghanistan through Russian territory or the need to negotiate a new Russian-American agreement on strategic nuclear forces. Should Russia recognize Transnistria, Romania would focus on annexing the right-bank part of Moldova rather than on preventing the disintegration of this neighboring state. It follows that the outlined scenario, while not carrying a threat of an international armed conflict, involves non-military security risks, because a state creation that would ultimately constitute itself on the territory of Transnistria would not be subject to oversight by the international community, but it would be protected by Russian armed forces and controlled by officers of Russian intelligence services and by mafia structures. This could facilitate the area being used for the production of or trafficking in arms and drugs and for smuggling people into Europe.

Recommendations. Poland, the EU and NATO have a limited scope for action. The blocking of the Kozak memorandum by Solana in 2003 has not been followed by a more active policy towards Moldova, even though the latter has been expecting support from EU states, in particular in connection with Russia’s economic sanctions of 2005–2007. Meanwhile, following investment by Russia-backed business groups in the energy, telecommunications and mass media sectors, Russia has acquired powerful instruments to influence Moldova’s authorities and the public. The EU states have been incapable of balancing this influence.

It would be a mistake to wait for the division of Moldova—for instance, in the hope that the recognition of Transnistria by Russia would bring about a revision of President Barack Obama’s policy towards Russia (a policy seen in some Central European countries as incompatible with the region’s interests), or in expectation of the enhancement of intra-NATO solidarity. Both phenomena would be short-lived. Neither would the formalization of Transnistria’s *de facto* separation reduce the scale of resulting threats to European security.

Priority should be accorded to counteracting the coup d’état scenario, which could lead to the final break-up of Moldova. In this context, sending an EU stabilization mission to Chişinău should be considered. As pressure is brought to bear on the opposition to contain violence, efforts should also be made to involve the PCRM leadership in a political dialogue with the EU aimed at preventing the implementation of initiatives of the “second Kozak memorandum” kind. Given the uniqueness of the situation, it would be worthwhile to consider presenting to Moldova new initiatives that would make EU membership a closer prospect. Without them, the said dialogue will hold small appeal for the PCRM.