

Moldova between Elections: Europe or Isolation?

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»» The situation in Moldova on the eve of the snap parliamentary elections is as tense as after the April elections. Then, the post-election protest and violence following the landslide Communist victory rocked Moldova's traditionally tolerant and peaceful society. The effect is still resonating among Moldovans, and the country is unlikely to return to the Communist designed "Republic of Moldova", especially given the local impact of the global economic crisis. Many, especially the family and close associates of outgoing president Vladimir Voronin, feel too much is at stake. A smaller but determined group has nothing much to lose.

The street protests in Chisinau against the election fraud could have marked a new coloured revolution in the post-soviet space. However, the outbreak of violence in front of the parliamentary building and the tough government response to the "coup d'etat" stopped the "Twitter revolution". Or rather no revolution took place in the first place, in contrast to what current state-run propaganda and the West's rather naive press coverage have suggested. A bunch of mainly young people gathered, who were quickly joined by agents provocateurs – surely spurred on by the security forces. Although not limited purely to Moldovans, the gathering certainly did not include Romanians. The young generation, who have long faced discrimination in the Communist project, clearly feel left out of their country.

Importantly, opposition activists' arrests, police violence, restrictions against journalists and a number of deaths have damaged the country's existing democratic credentials. However, the incumbent Communist party – especially Mr Voronin – has not fully succeeded in its intention to retain the same degree of control over Moldova's

HIGHLIGHTS

- On the eve of the snap parliamentary election, Moldova is facing further political polarisation that threatens to make it a failed state.
- The chances of Moldova's isolation are increasing as the ruling Communist Party pursues a zero-sum game, while the opposition is too fragile to provide an alternative.
- The EU should help Moldova deal more confidently with Transnistria and the EU integration process, rather than aiming to shore up the current status quo represented by ex-president Vladimir Voronin.

»»»»» politics and economy. The Communists lacked one vote in the 101-seat Moldovan parliament to elect the country's president and failed to do so, which led the country into the current ongoing constitutional and political crisis. The opposition is far from winning any war, but clearly emerged from the battle with an advantage: ex-president Vladimir Voronin, who had been elected speaker of parliament, has had to call early elections to be held on 29 July.

ZERO-SUM POLITICS

The snap elections may not resolve the political crisis. Polarisation within Moldova's politics and society has only deepened since the events of April. The Communist Party of Moldova (CP) feels there is no need to respond to popular dissatisfaction, nor the international outcry at how it has dealt with post-election events. Instead, it is merely hoping for a replay of its previous strategy of obtaining a 61-vote majority to form the executive without a coalition partner. Such a zero-sum game might be suicidal for both the Communist Party and its leader Vladimir Voronin. The former (and currently nominal) president has a strong grip over the party, but feels insecure enough not to consider entering into political dialogue. Instead, he tries to stay in power by guaranteeing his family's control of Moldova's economic assets.

The Communists' rhetoric has become more aggressive not only against opposition parties (which have been accused of the coup d'état, of betraying Moldova's statehood for the sake of joining with Romania, and of provoking civil war), but also against those who simply do not support the current regime. This is compounded by aggressive rhetoric towards Romania, which the "Republic of Moldova" project is designed against. An unwillingness to comply with the human rights demands from civil society at home and the international community persists. The Voronin regime ignored appeals from the EU and the Council of Europe to create a national commission including the oppo-

sition and international observers to investigate the April events and more general human rights violations. The government commission's investigation of deaths and police brutality is pro-forma, while the police officers involved are being promoted to ensure their loyalty in the snap elections. Obviously, self-preservation is more important to the Communists than a pro-European image.

While the Communists may think that raising the stakes will increase the number of votes for them, they have already lost the symbol of "Romanian aggression" against Moldova. Following his visit to Moscow, Voronin brought 20 million USD of Russian money to pay for the reconstruction of the presidential and parliamentary buildings looted in the riots. The Russian promise of 500 million USD in additional financial help sounds like the usual play to secure votes for the Communists – these days Moscow is not quick to comply with its financial promises.

If the Communists are not able to obtain 61 votes in the parliament, the political sentiment is likely to turn against Voronin himself. Despite the Party's efforts to shore up the state bureaucracy, its "Republic of Moldova" state projection will go increasingly out of fashion since it mainly targets Romania. The more aggressive Voronin becomes, the more antagonistic his project will appear. He can try to change the constitution, but the more he tries to maintain his grip on power, the more he inadvertently stresses that he has already completed his two subsequent terms. Ironically, any new post-election protest could be pushing not for regime change, but a generational change within the regime. Although there are no poll results to back this claim, most Moldovans are highly likely to accept this scenario, especially given the Voronin family's grip on both economy and politics. This could lead to Voronin losing his position amongst the Communists. The carefully balanced power status quo may fall apart without a clear successor to the ailing leader.

THE OPPOSITION

Despite the ruling party's determination to disregard the protests of the EU, the opposition seems to lose more from its own internal weaknesses than the government's attacks. It is deeply old fashioned, too, even compared to the Communists, who were at least able to build a more modern façade.

Today, the main opposition parties lack funds and clear ideas on how to address the current political situation. As many as four opposition parties advertise themselves as liberal, in a country completely devoid of a middle class. Both ideologically and organisationally, the opposition fails to present a credible alternative to the incumbent majority party. The street mobilisation in April was spontaneous and civil society's only achievement was to gather information about the protest's repercussions.

The Liberal Party's popularity might be further hindered by the governance record of Chisinau

mayor Dorin Chirtoaca, the party's vice-president – although he still remains the biggest hope for new leadership among the opposition. Importantly, Moldovans do not seem to blame the opposition entirely for the post-election protest, and do not deem it to have been a national security threat. The main question is how society will react if polarisation continues, especially combined with election manipulation. The decision to hold the elections on a Wednesday certainly suggests that Voronin is not giving up: he will do everything to keep away the opposition

voters, many of whom work abroad and are not able to return on weekdays.

REBELLIOUS EX-SPEAKER

The difference in this campaign could be made by the ex-speaker (in 2005-2009) of the Moldovan parliament, Marian Lupu, who had been named as one of the main communist candidates to the post of president before the April elections. After the government's violent reaction to the protests, he broke with the Communist Party and took the leadership of the small Democratic Party of Moldova (DPM), harbouring a clear presidential ambition of his own. His step seems genuine – if the DPM were to form a coalition with the CP, Voronin could not lead the country alone and the Communists would need to rule in a more conciliatory mode. Moreover, Lupu's key message is to put an end to the political polarisation, which may help him and his new party move firmly into the political centre. Although many deem polarisation to be Voronin's strategy to divide opposition votes, (unpublished) polling results show that Lupu is taking votes from both sides.

April's election results have led to an ongoing political and constitutional crisis, while polarisation could lead to a paralysed country. This certainly goes against the declared Communist goal of strengthening the state. There are two possible scenarios: a) Moldova might become what Belarus once was, or b) polarisation will lead to Voronin's defeat, and towards a re-definition of the post-Voronin Communist Party.

The question is, how far are the Communists (or Voronin in particular) willing to go to further isolate the country? Or, having learnt their lesson, would the Communists be willing to change their conception of the "Republic of Moldova"? The latter has proved too exclusive for many pro-Romanian youths.

While Voronin's insecurity prompts him to keep going regardless, the Communists are likely to



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»»»» end up needing to redefine their party. They will need to come up with a more inclusive and ultimately more European stance, which includes Romania. The choice is between a new Moldova and a closed state where the Communists will lose their power ever further.

THE EU IN MOLDOVA: DIVIDED AS USUAL

Despite the EU's visible engagement, its role in resolving the political crisis in Moldova is limited. In spite of the reconciliation efforts of the EU special representative for Moldova and the increased number of visits to Chisinau by numerous EU top-level officials, no strong and coherent EU response was given to the April events. The EU, shadowed by the US, mainly called for dialogue between the government and the opposition. It also urged an independent investigation, involving the opposition and EU experts, into the allegations of the government's abuse of power against the protesters. However, none of these demands was accepted by Moldova's government, which left Brussels in a weak political position.

Voronin's self-confidence has been further strengthened as the EU has failed to use conditionality towards Moldova. The EU has not clearly condemned the government's human rights violations. When the EU Ambassadors did provide such condemnation, the special representative then downplayed it. Nor has respect for human rights, political freedoms and democratic dialogue been explicitly mentioned as a condition for a further upgrade of EU-Moldova relations or EU aid. While the European Parliament has called for stronger conditionality, the Council in its conclusions from 15 June ambiguously mentioned that the negotiations on the new enhanced agreement between the EU and Moldova will start "as soon as circumstances allow". Further reading of the Council's position suggests that Moldova's visa policy towards Romania and "good neighbourly

relations" seem more important for the future of EU-Moldova relations than Moldova's democratic progress. Similarly, EU member states did not respond to the Parliament's appeal for a more active EU engagement in the troubled neighbourhood by establishing the rule of law mission and strengthening the mission of the EU Special Representative in Moldova.

Another, relatively new issue in the EU's democracy promotion policies regarding post-soviet countries concerns the role of the election observation missions. Although international observation undoubtedly serves as an additional stimulus for the government to ensure a fair election process, the mission statements are used by the different political actors in their post-election strategies. As happened in 2008 in Georgia, the early conclusions of the OSCE Office for Democracy and Human Rights on the elections stated that these had met many international commitments, but "further improvements were required to ensure an electoral process free from undue administrative interference and to increase public confidence". This second part of the statement was overlooked by Moldova's government and the pro-government media.

The EU's soft power is further undermined by Russia's "generous" policy towards the post-soviet space. Despite the severe economic crisis at home, Moscow has promised to provide its neighbours in need with financial support which would not be conditioned upon reforms, but rather upon preserving the political status quo. Russia's support to the Communists is grounded in Moscow's interest in keeping Voronin in power.

CONCLUSIONS

Obviously the usual pre-election play with Moscow is important for Voronin to try to enlist more EU support for him as "guarantor of the status quo". EU policy-makers should

finally realise that Voronin is not Lukashenka. Brussels should not give such political and economic benefits to Chisinau without any quid pro quo in terms of improving the human rights situation and further democratisation.

Brussels should not buy the Communist claim that building up bureaucracy is a positive step. The state apparatus is used to cement the elite's power, especially Voronin's position. There are fears that Voronin may want to choose isolation or turn his country into a Belarus, where a tiny elite could live well amidst even growing poverty. However, such analysis ignores all Moldova's past achievements as well as the growing determination and spirit of the young generation.

Another important issue that the EU needs to press concerns what kind of country Moldova wants to be. This question has been "dramatised" since Romania's integration to the EU. Neither the anti-Romanian attitude of the Communists, nor the pro-Romanian attitude of the opposition parties, shows a confident Moldovan state and society. Furthermore, the aggressiveness of the Communists towards Romania reveals their fear of losing what they have built up and seriously calls into question their supposedly pro-European stance.

This issue is crucial. In the current situation, even an offer from the EU of a feasible integration perspective for the both banks of the Dniester would not help. Only a confident Moldova could deal with Transnistria - in terms of developing real policies and actions towards the breakaway region - and become serious about EU integration. But the Moldovan elite only wants to deal with these issues in its own way. The EU must therefore also seek to engage with other players in Moldova's society.

So far the clear winner of the Moldova crisis is Transnistria (and Russia), as the problems in Chisinau have suddenly outgrown those of the frozen conflict. European engagement with conflict resolution in Transnistria has to go

hand in hand with further engagement in Moldova as the political crisis may well turn the country into a more fragile state. For the EU to continue with the same policies and approaches, thus perpetuating the status quo, is not a viable option.

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