



# Moldova: a narrow win for pro-Europeans

by Nicu Popescu

On paper, the electoral victory of Moldova's pro-European coalition looks solid enough: 55 of 101 parliamentary seats. However, the voting system is skewed slightly in their favour, and in terms of the popular vote, they came neck and neck with the left-wing opposition.

area with the EU. With the assistance of the EU, US and the international financial institutions, the government has invested in infrastructure (particularly roads), and modernised the agricultural, health and education sectors. Yet these achievements were somehow not enough to convince voters of the ruling coalition's merits.

Political party	Votes (%)	MPs
Liberal democratic party	20.16	23
Democratic party	15.8	19
Liberal party	9.67	13
Socialist party	20.51	25
Communist party	17.48	21

It is true that most incumbent governments suffer in the polls, particularly those implementing austerity measures and unpopular reforms. A combination of factors made many former coalition supporters stay at home on polling day: compared to the 2010 elections, voter turnout dropped from 62% to 55%. So what went wrong for Moldova's leaders?

## A close call

In many ways, the outgoing pro-EU coalition has not performed badly since it came to power five years ago. Moldova has often boasted one of the highest growth rates in Europe – peaking at 8% in 2013 – and almost doubled the value of its exports since 2010. It has signed and ratified an EU Association Agreement and was the first post-Soviet state to have achieved a visa-free regime with the Union. Moreover, as of last September, Moldova has a deep and comprehensive free trade

The coalition has made mistakes. Despite the high levels of economic growth, there was little job creation. And the fight against corruption has been ineffective, with the coalition having constantly been marred by scandals. The most controversial issues were the takeover of Chisinau's airport and the biggest state-owned bank in 2013 by murky Russian business interests. The proliferation of TV channels and other media – a healthy sign of increased pluralism – has also fuelled perceptions of growing corruption. Unlike Ukraine or Georgia, Moldova does not ban the broadcasting of Russian TV, thereby allowing a steady flow of pro-Russian propaganda to stream directly into the homes of ordinary Moldovans.

External pressures also took their toll. In retaliation for signing the Association Agreement, Moscow introduced a near blanket embargo on Moldovan exports to Russia – including fruits, vegetables, wines and other foodstuffs. Given that roughly 20% of Moldovan exports go to Russia – compared with around 50% to the EU – the Kremlin's embargo was not lethal, but it was painful nevertheless, and helped to turn many farmers against the Union and the pro-Europe parties.

## Drift or shift?

This time round, Moldovan voters were tired of the communists who governed between 2001 and 2009 and disillusioned with the current government. And it just so happened that the new political forces on the scene – the Socialist party and the Patria party (which was later disqualified) – campaigned on strongly pro-Russian platforms.

This in part explains the electoral success of the Socialist party, which came first with 20.51% of the popular vote. Yet even by the opportunistic standards of Moldovan politics, the Socialist party's leadership has a remarkably inconsistent record. Its leader, Igor Dodon, spent much time as economy minister under the previous communist government trying to persuade the EU to launch talks on an Association Agreement and a free trade area. In 2011, he argued that Moldova should not join the Russia-backed Eurasian Customs Union, declaring the project to be both 'unprofessional' and 'utopic'. In 2012, Dodon and two of his socialist colleagues provided the governing coalition with the votes necessary to stay in power rather than call early elections over the election of the country's president.

By 2014, however, the party's tune had changed. Throughout the year, Dodon ran TV ads promoting the Eurasian Union, in what was probably the most expensive televised political campaign in Moldovan history. President Putin met Dodon three weeks before the elections, and a photo of the occasion was splashed on billboards across Moldova. The party now also denounces the Association Agreement with the EU.

However, the Socialist party's cohesion based on euro-scepticism might soon be put to the test. Of its 25 elected MPs, five have Romanian passports, and the party is now insisting they give up their second citizenship. It would not be a surprise if some of them preferred to remain EU citizens rather than party members: personal comfort might yet trump Eurasian promises.

## Around the corner...

The pro-EU coalition has little room for manoeuvre and is in need of a radical overhaul. It drastically needs to clean up its act and attract a new cohort of ministers and top officials (possibly even from abroad, as Ukraine is doing) who are willing and able to depoliticise certain key institutions such as the tax office, the anti-corruption centre, the customs service and the office of the prosecutor general. If not, the risk is that pro-Russian parties will come to power with a landslide majority at the next election – which may occur sooner rather than later.

Within 15 months, in March 2016, the current president's term will expire, and a new parliamentary vote will be required to elect a new head of state. Moldova's president is elected by a qualified majority of 61 MPs, and the current coalition has only 55. In the event of a failure to elect another president, parliament would be dissolved. This has happened before – in 2009 and 2010 – because the winners could not muster the required majority. A way to avoid such an outcome would be to strike a deal with the communists over the new president or to reform the constitution so that the post is directly elected.

## ...and further down the road

Besides tactical considerations and almost daily political realignments, Moldova is in a better position structurally than other post-Soviet states. The Association Agreement has been ratified, provisionally applied and declared constitutional without the possibility of appeal. This also means that Moldova cannot legally join the Eurasian Union.

Even in the event of a pro-Russia government coming to power, the only way for Chisinau to join Moscow's Eurasian Union is to repeal the Association Agreement – a move which would block Moldova's access to its biggest market and possibly see the country lose its visa-free regime. None of Moldova's political parties, however, currently seem so committed to Russia so as to run this risk.

For the EU, finally, the outcome of the elections shows once again that, despite all odds, Moldova can still come to represent a success story in the east – just like Tunisia in the south. The country could yet become an example for others to follow, provided it accelerates reforms and is more serious about combating corruption.

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