



BULLETIN

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Moldova's Slow Reawakening

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Moldova's biggest protest in decades, organised by the civic platform Dignity and Truth, is turning into a permanent demonstration. On the one hand, the protest shows a more mature society capable of self-organisation and increasing its demands for reforms. On the other hand, the protest risks taking a negative turn if the government continues to disregard popular discontent. The opposition, sponsored by Russia, is likely to capitalise on any opportunity to exacerbate the political crisis and win ground. The EU has to walk a thin line between shielding grass roots protest and persuading the government to re-start reforms immediately, especially in the justice and banking sectors.

Reawakening. Moldova is in a protest mood. Throughout this year, farmers have been contesting the government's plans to raise value added tax. Unionists rallied on several occasions, to advocate the reunification of Moldova with Romania. But the protests that stand out from the rest are those organised by the civic platform Dignity and Truth (DA). Established in February 2015, DA is a disparate collective of civic activists, former officials, journalists, lawyers, experts and representatives of NGOs. Its public appeals for peaceful manifestations are powered by a deep feeling of injustice and the high level corruption that remains unaddressed in Moldova. Popular support for DA grew slowly. The first meeting, in April, was attended by approximately 4,000 people, compared to 50,000 in May. After a summer lull, the protest activity surged in early autumn, culminating with a mass rally on 6 September on the central square of the capital Chisinau, attended, according to the organisers, by nearly 100,000 people.

However, unlike other public manifestations in 2015, Moldova's biggest protest in decades, driven by DA, is becoming permanent. DA set up a tent city in front of the Moldovan government building. The number of tents rapidly mushroomed from around 30 to around 300, while citizens from different corners of Moldova provided financial (around €4,500 was donated on the first day) and moral support. It certainly represents a serious test for the governing coalition, but also for DA, which remains divided on whether it should remain as it is or become a party. The "mayor" of the tent city resigned after only a week, exposing disagreements inside DA. But, regardless of emerging divisions and the uncertain final outcomes of protests, the movement has brought several immediate gains for Moldova.

Immediate Gains. There was an acute deficit of publically manifested, bottom-up pressure on the government to tackle corruption. Until recently, specialised non-governmental organisations, funded by foreign donors, pushed for the rule of law and anti-corruption on behalf of society. These issues failed to generate the peaceful social discontent that that would have forced the government to at least start listening. The DA protest filled this void, and compelled the authorities to meet with representatives of the platform. It is likely to win more sympathy among Moldova's disappointed friends in the EU, who have acknowledged that outsiders cannot care more about Moldova than Moldovans do themselves. Another temporary success of this protest is the exercise of collective action necessary to address collective problems. Citizens of Moldova previously focused largely on individual survival strategies, but the continuous, self-organised protest in Chisinau is a sign that there is a growing understanding that individual problems are best addressed through the joint action. It is noteworthy that the protests do not benefit from the support of political parties or administrative resources. It is a major grass roots experiment supported by private donations of citizens (including pensioners) who bring money and food to the tent city. Such solidarity is no small thing for a society fragmented by massive labour migration (out of 3.5 million, more than 500,000 citizens have left Moldova) to the EU and Russia. Such migration brought financial benefits (remittances equal up to 25% of Moldova's GDP), but it also dislocated and split families, and reshaped the entire societal fabric.

Social pressure also signals that the public not only wants to influence the outcome of the vote once every four years, but also to play an active role in between elections too, in particular when the government openly serves narrow private interests instead of public ones. If this trend is sustained, it would represent a qualitative change for Moldova. Probably the most important departure from the past is that protesters have managed to avoid geopolitics, keeping out of debate on Moldova's foreign policy orientation (that is, towards the EU or towards Russia). This particular game has been played skilfully by politicians during electoral campaigns, to avoid issue-based debate. Hence, the protests have deprived political elites of their preferred tool for winning public support, and nudged them towards uncomfortable substantive debate. DA's attempts to build an inclusive consensus around issues that really matter to the public may be a recipe to transcend ethnic or identity divisions reinforced by politicians to cover up predatory tactics. Last but not the least, while DA as a movement may disintegrate or be overtaken by old guard politicians, it also may serve as a launch pad for new political leaders. This is essential for the renewal of Moldova's political class.

Risks around the Corner. Despite many promises and gains, the protest movement carries its own risks for Moldova. Besides calls for investigation of high level corruption and requests for the General Prosecutor, the head of the National Bank and the Anti-Corruption Agency boss to step down, DA demands the resignation of the top leadership (president, prime minister and speaker of parliament) and the organisation of early elections. While the entire political leadership is indeed responsible for the country's dire situation, its sudden resignation would do more harm than good, ushering Moldova into even deeper political crisis. Furthermore, elections conducted at short notice allow new political parties almost no time to develop, and thus risk reproducing the current power configuration in parliament, or boosting Russian oriented parties that appeal to anti-corruption and anti-oligarchic sentiments. Instead of creating a fresh reformist push, the outcome of instant elections could represent a serious drawback for Moldova. Protesters need to fine tune their demands to avoid such a self-defeating scenario.

The reactions of the governing coalition have at best been unconstructive. For example, a parallel event was organised at the same place (the Liberal Party meeting in June), and a concert was held in another location (the concert sponsored by Unite in September), in order to dissuade people from going to protests. Several mass media outlets also portrayed the protests as the creation of oligarchs. As DA established a permanent footprint in front of the government building, the authorities speculated about how long the protesters had the right to stay on the central square. It was rumoured that the Ministry of the Interior planned an event on the main square, but it became public that DA had reserved the place until the end of September. While forced eviction is improbable, it is not possible to rule out the use of violence in the coming months. One way that this could be triggered is through infiltration of protests, and provocations organised by members of parties or non-registered organisations that benefit from Russia's financial support and guidance. For instance, on 6 September several members of Antifa (a pseudo-antifascist organisation) and the "Our Home—Moldova" party were detained when on their way to join protesters on the main square, they engaged in a brawl with police in front of the Prosecutor's Office.

After the trolling methods failed, the governing parties changed tack and combined warnings of apocalyptic scenarios in the event of political destabilisation (the prime minister's statement on the sharp depreciation of the national currency) with quasi reforms and anti-corruption measures (the Speaker of parliament announced that an invitation had been extended to Romania's anti-corruption prosecutor). This stance suggests short sightedness on the part of the political class, and a hope of buying time in order to maintain the unravelling status-quo. Self-organised mass protests demonstrate that Moldova's society has outgrown its political class. If the latter does not heed this message, the conflict is likely to intensify.

Tasks for the EU. While it raises new challenges, the emergence of institutionalised, bottom-up pressure, which has wide support, also provides the EU with a window of opportunities. The EU should take several steps in order to convert Moldovan society's protest energy. First, it should extend its protective shield by warning the authorities that any attempts to evict the protestors by force will be met with a prompt response. Second, the EU should maintain regular dialogue with DA, and quietly encourage protesters to come up with realistic demands that can form the basis of a road map leading to desired outcomes. Third, instead of disbursing money to well established NGOs for big projects, funds should be prioritised to support small, grass roots initiatives on local and national levels. Fourth, top-down pressure on government to restart reforms and tackle high level corruption aggressively should be increased. The EU could send a signal that the replacement of the Prosecutor General and/or the head of the National Bank with people whose integrity is not called into question may prove the seriousness of anti-corruption intentions. Finally, given popular demands for accountability, the EU should supplement technical and institutional-building support for anti-corruption activities, with a more hands on, result-oriented approach. A robust EUJUST mission staffed with judges and anti-corruption prosecutors, to be embedded with Moldovan colleagues, could be an effective way to jump-start the battle with corruption.