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Moldova's Two-Government Crisis: Resolution and Mid-Term Prospects

Jakub Pieńkowski

From 8 to 14 June, there were two competing centres of power in Moldova. The Party of Socialists and the ACUM bloc, with the support of the EU, the U.S., and Russia, formed a coalition and the Maia Sandu cabinet. But the present Pavel Filip government of the Democratic Party resisted resigning for nearly one week. The oligarch Vladimir Plahotniuc, who stands behind the Filip government, accuses the coalition of a coup d'état. The Constitutional Court controlled by him suspended President Igor Dodon, who supported the coalition, and delegated his power to Filip. However, the oligarch's party was unable to retain power. The downfall of Plahotniuc may be the most profitable for Russia because it will consolidate its control over the Socialists and will present itself to the EU and the U.S. as a constructive partner to resolve the crisis in this post-Soviet area.

Post-Election Political Scene. In the elections held in February in the 101-seat parliament, 35 seats were gained by the pro-Russia Party of Socialists (PSRM), associated with President Dodon. The Democratic Party (PDM), in power at the time, won 30 seats. Officially, PDM uses pro-European slogans but actually it is oligarch Plahotniuc's main tool for political and business purposes. The real pro-European bloc, ACUM, composed of Maia Sandu's Party of Action and Solidarity and Andrei Năstase's Dignity and Truth Platform, won 26 seats.

After the elections, PDM and PSRM planned to establish a government coalition. They were natural partners who in the past had been informal allies, for example, the oligarch bought votes from Transnistria to support Dodon during the presidential election in 2016. This time, however, Russia, a patron of the Socialists, refused to allow them to enter this coalition. It was afraid that Plahotniuc would completely subsume PSRM and Dodon. Russia was also irritated by the assertiveness of the Filip government, which, for example, deemed *persona non grata* Dmitry Rogozin, deputy prime minister and an envoy of the Russian president on Transnistria. The pro-European ACUM rejected cooperation with PDM because it demanded de-oligarchisation, meaning the elimination of Plahotniuc's influence over state institutions. With the EU expressing its disappointment in the lack of reform and European integration, ideas dismissed by the oligarch, the ACUM bloc reluctantly offered the Socialists cooperation on de-oligarchisation. PSRM, however, did not take up the offer, as it has been a beneficiary of Plahotniuc's system and feared confrontation with him.

Moldova's "Grand Coalition". Despite ideological differences and mutual reluctance, PSRM and ACUM were prompted to cooperation by the EU and the U.S., both opposed to strengthening the oligarch system by the expected PDM-PSRM government, and also by Russia, which was afraid of losing influence with the Socialists. Unexpectedly, on 3 June, the Commissioner for Enlargement and European Neighbourhood Policy Johannes Hahn, Russian Deputy Prime Minister and Special Presidential Representative for Trade and Economic Relations with Moldova Dmitry Kozak, and the Director of the Office of Eastern European Affairs at the US State Department Bradley Freden arrived at Chişinău. In parallel talks, they persuaded the PSRM and ACUM leaders to form a coalition against Plahotniuc and guaranteed their support.

On 8 June, PSRM, compelled by Russia, concluded an agreement on temporary cooperation for “de-oligarchisation and restoration of constitutional order” with ACUM. The coalition chose the Socialist’s leader Zinaida Greceanii as speaker of parliament. They adopted a declaration recognizing Moldova as “a captured state”. Then, they dismissed the chiefs of the National Anticorruption Centre and the Information and Security Service—used by Plahotniuc to fight his opponents. They passed laws allowing the dismissal of the General Prosecutor and the Central Election Commission.

On the same day, the Sandu government received a vote of confidence from 61 MPs of the coalition sworn in by President Dodon. Năstase, ACUM’s co-leader, was nominated deputy prime minister and minister of internal affairs. The Socialists received only the deputy prime ministership for the reintegration of Transnistria and the ministry of defence—not important in Moldova. Such small involvement will allow them to burden its coalition partners with government failures.

Plahotniuc Defends His Power. On 7 June, the Constitutional Court—controlled by the oligarch—announced a deadline to create the government that would prevent the coalition’s formation. The court ordered Dodon to dissolve parliament and call early elections. According to Moldova’s constitution, this is a presidential right, not an obligation. At PDM’s request, on 8 June, the court recognized all actions of parliament after 7 June to be unlawful. It also suspended Dodon, who had refused to dissolve parliament. The duties of the president were then “temporarily” transferred to the incumbent prime minister Filip of PDM, who called for early elections on 6 September.

Over 90% of Moldovans do not trust Plahotniuc. However, almost all Moldovan media are owned by him and were trying to convince the public that the Filip government was the only legal one and that the opposition was conducting a *coup d’état*. Dodon was accused of betraying Moldova for Russia. Media threatened a heightened risk of Russian intervention, which would only be prevented by meetings and “tent towns” supporting the PDM government. In fact, most of the participants in these events were paid and were positioned to prevent the Sandu cabinet from entering government buildings. The coalition was supported by the governor (başkan) of autonomous Gagauzia and some mayors. However, central offices remained loyal to the Filip government. A few policemen supporting the coalition were arrested. The army stayed neutral.

International Reactions. Key foreign partners recognized the actions of the ACUM-PSRM coalition as democratic and legitimate. Among them was confirmation by the U.S. and a common statement by Poland, France, Germany, the United Kingdom, and Sweden. In the name of the EU, the Sandu government was recognised by High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Federica Mogherini and Commissioner Hahn. The coalition government was also recognized by Russia. The government of Romania was the only EU country still supporting the Filip cabinet and early elections in Moldova. The Romanian authorities maintain a close relationship with PDM, hoping for its support on Romanian historical policy recognising Moldova as the second Romanian national state. However, the Romanian government eventually changed its position and President Klaus Iohannis called on the EU to solve the crisis in Moldova. Ukraine offered mediation to its parties, based in part on fears that Russia would use its commitment in Moldova to present itself to the EU and the U.S. as a constructive partner and try to get them to concede in the Donbas case.

The Filip government then tried to quash coalition supporters. It agreed to the sale of land originally planned for the construction of the U.S. embassy in Chişinău—opposed for a long time by the pro-Russian Socialists. It also decided to move the Moldovan embassy from Tel-Aviv to Jerusalem. However, this did not have the intended effect, because the Israeli government, having doubts about the validity of this decision, did not comment.

Conclusions and Predictions. On 14 June, the Filip government resigned because it did not have the support of the EU, the U.S., or Russia, and lacked a significant part of Moldovan society. The week of turmoil probably was used by Plahotniuc to secure his interests and destroy evidence of abuse. He fled Moldova. Probably he will move finally to Turkey or a Middle Eastern country that had close relations with the Filip government. This is an advantageous scenario for Dodon, whose main goal is to eliminate Plahotniuc as competition and take over his influence. However, accusing the oligarch of abuse in a criminal court, as sought by the ACUM bloc, could also reveal shady political and business connections to the president.

The PSRM-ACUM coalition was established thanks to unexpected cooperation between the EU, the U.S., and Russia for various reasons unfavourable to Plahotniuc. The Russians probably will gain the most from it. They may be able to convince their Western partners that not only are they a constructive partner but also that Russia’s participation is necessary to regulate every conflict in the post-Soviet area. They can rely on this example to try to persuade the EU and the U.S. to support future Russian plans for the reintegration of Moldova through federalisation and then make an analogous case for the settlement of the conflict in Donbas. At the same time, if Plahotniuc moves out of power, Russia will make Dodon and PSRM more politically dependent on it.

The assumption of power by the Sandu cabinet does not mean the implementation of pro-European reforms. What is more, the Socialists may try to compromise ACUM, hoping to gain an independent parliamentary majority after early elections, which can take place in October together with local government elections. However, despite its pro-Russia declarations, PSRM will not abandon cooperation with the EU, rather it will treat it instrumentally, seeking only economic profits.