



Possible Consequences of the Presidential Election in the Republic of Moldova

Jakub Pieńkowski

The first direct presidential elections in Moldova in 20 years will take place on 30 October. The withdrawal of Marian Lupu, the ruling Democrats' designated candidate, four days before the election and the transfer of his votes to the pro-EU Maia Sandu will, in fact, strengthen the position of pro-Russian Socialist Igor Dodon, who is leading in the polls. Should Dodon win, he may pull back from the prevailing idea in the country of closer ties with the European Union and instead propose strengthening relations with Russia. This would pose a challenge to the EU's Eastern Policy, the effectiveness of which was to be confirmed by pro-Union changes in Moldova.

Direct Elections Again. On 4 March, Moldova's Constitutional Court overturned—for procedural reasons—an amendment to the constitution introduced in 2000 through which parliament elected the president. At the same time, the court confirmed the validity of the mandates of presidents elected in this fashion, including the Party of Communists' Vladimir Voronin and independent Nicolae Timofti. In connection with the end of Timofti's pro-EU, but passive term, new direct elections should have been carried out in May. The court moved them to autumn to allow more time for the campaign. However, a decision to uphold an amendment to the constitution that raised the required age of candidates from 35 to 40, raised controversy. It nullified the candidacy of populist Renato Usatîi (37 years old) of the pro-Russia, extra-parliamentary Our Party, even though he was an early favourite in polls at the time (with 20% support).

Direct presidential elections every four years were restored mainly to avoid a repeat of the political deadlock that lasted from September 2009 to March 2012. During that period, parliament, despite having a solution and two early elections in 2009 and 2010, was unable to attain the 61 votes in the 101-seat chamber necessary to elect a president. As a result, three politicians consecutively became acting president. Similar stagnation loomed again: the ruling coalition of the Democratic Party of Moldova and the Liberal Party, even with the support of non-attached deputies, has only 57 votes at its disposal. The restoration of direct presidential elections, then, eliminated the danger of the dissolution of parliament. The early elections that would have resulted from this situation would have meant a change in government: the Democrats had only 8% of the popular support at the time while the Liberals would not have even passed the 6% electoral threshold.

These circumstances led some opposition media to the conclusion that the timing and content of the judgement to delay the election was the result of pressure put on the judges. The alleged source of this pressure is influential oligarch Vlad Plahotniuc, officially only a former MP, the parliamentary coordinator of the coalition and vice-president of the Democratic Party, but actually its informal leader. Plahotniuc's position came from associating party activists and government officials through business arrangements. In this way, he changed the centrist, pro-European moderate Democrats into a typical party of power. In March 2013, he orchestrated the collapse of his largest political rival, Prime Minister Vlad Filat of the then-coalition partner Liberal-Democratic Party of Moldova, who was arrested in October 2015. The influence of Plahotniuc is perceived negatively: more than 90% of the population distrusts him.

The Candidates. The favourite now in the elections is the leader of the pro-Russia Party of Socialists of the Republic of Moldova, Igor Dodon (with over 30% support). He has not declared his intention to terminate Moldova's Association Agreement with the EU, but he considers the establishment of special political and economic relations with Russia to be his country's main objective in the international sphere. He promises to reintegrate the breakaway republic of

Transnistria by transforming Moldova into a federation and maintaining its neutral status. He is critical of the ongoing process to culturally re-Romanize the country, and above all, the idea of unifying Moldova with Romania. The prospect of a Dodon presidency is the result of the public's disappointment with the pro-European governments. Trust in them was fundamentally undermined by a scandal in which \$1 billion was lost from the Moldovan banking system in 2014. The European Union, mired in internal crises, has become less attractive to Moldovan voters as well. According to studies carried out in October 2016, 53% of Moldovans would vote in favour of joining Russia's Eurasian Union while only 38% would support accession to the EU.

The pro-Western, extra-parliamentary opposition party joined the elections divided. Andrei Năstase, the leader of the protests following the banking scandal and founder of Civic Platform Dignity and Truth, can count on 13% of the vote. Maia Sandu, the minister of education from 2012 to 2015, known for her uncompromising fight against corruption and as the founder of the Action and Solidarity Party, has similar support to that of Năstase. Both candidates announced a proposal for a settlement to the bank scandal and that they would put a halt to Plahotniuc's appropriation of the state. In terms of international politics, they have outlined a platform of integration with the EU and close relations with Romania as their main goals, but have expressed scepticism of the idea of unification, an idea that is popular only among 15% of Moldovans. With the risk that neither candidate would make it to the second round of voting on their own, two weeks before the elections Sandu was named the common candidate. This came after a survey by the Konrad Adenauer Foundation found that if running under one banner, Sandu would garner 27% of the votes while Năstase would have 22%.

Ruling coalition partner the Democratic Party of Moldova put forward its own candidate for president, Marian Lupu. He declared a desire to reintegrate Transnistria and bring Moldova closer to the EU. He had only 13% support among voters, but as long as the pro-Western opposition remained divided he had a real chance to enter the second round of voting. Four days before the election, and in a joint press conference with Plahotniuc, he withdrew his candidacy and called on his supporters to vote for Sandu.

Possible Voting Abuse. According to the 2014 census, Moldova has 2.9 million inhabitants (including those in Transnistria and Moldovans abroad). However, the CEC announced in August that 3.2 million people were entitled to vote. The CEC explained the discrepancy in the count as the result of undocumented inhabitants of Transnistria not being included in the census but did not provide the methodology for its calculation. Meanwhile, NGOs found the names of deceased people on the lists of voters. In previous elections, so-called "dead souls" were found to have cast ballots (per the OSCE), although it was not considered mass fraud.

Doubts also have been raised by voting organisations abroad. The CEC has established 100 polling stations for about 750,000 Moldovans residing abroad. Although almost half of them live in Russia, only five stations will be opened there. This likely will prevent a significant number of them from voting, the majority of whom support Dodon.

Conclusions and Recommendations. A Dodon victory in the presidential election may result in a gap between the declarations of the government and the president in foreign policy and, in the long term, a pro-Russian turn in Moldovan politics. As president, Dodon could restore the faith of a disappointed electorate in a victory for the Socialists. If the party maintains its momentum into November 2018, it is possible it will help form a new government. If this happens, it would mean a pro-Russian orientation in the main decision-making bodies of Moldova.

Lupu's resignation was meant to explicitly indicate the pro-EU course of the state. Meanwhile, the government's actions show they are merely declaratory in relation to reform aimed at bringing Moldova closer to EU standards. Reports by both domestic and international monitoring institutions indicate only modest progress, particularly in the fight against corruption and the de-politicisation of the judiciary. Lupu's withdrawal, seen as a sign of limiting personal ambition in favour of rapprochement with the European Union, is therefore aimed at improvement of the image of the Moldovan government.

The Democrats seek primarily to protect the existing oligarchic system in the country. The withdrawal of Lupu, rather than strengthen Sandu, may be aimed at decreasing her support, because part of the electorate may doubt her honesty and be convinced that she is working in concert with Plahotniuc. Moreover, Lupu's resignation removes the test of a vote, which probably would show low support for the Democrats.

Therefore, in a duel between Sandu and Dodon, Moldova's authorities are likely to remain passive and would prefer he wins. He is, in fact, part of the current establishment and possibly even as president would respect the existing political and business alignment of forces. On the other hand, an eventual Sandu victory—with her promising to take down Plahotniuc—could unite the real pro-Western opposition around her and ultimately undermine the foundations of the country's oligarchic system. Her mandate, though, would be challenged if there was enough suspicion that she collaborated with Plahotniuc to win the election because he could try to discredit her if he is attacked, citing the support he gave her through Lupu in the election.

Owing to the high risk of destabilisation of the country—the low level of economic development, conflicting visions of strategic choices in foreign policy, the aspirations of separatist Transnistria—Moldova should still be a particular interest of the EU. Even if a candidate hostile to the bloc wins, it is necessary to continue the financial support and advice on concrete reforms, all while consistently and rigorously checking the use of the funds. The parliamentary elections of 2018 will be crucial for the longer-term direction of Moldova's geopolitical orientation. To persuade citizens to choose groups favourable to the implementation of EU standards, strong support for Moldovan NGOs and civil society is a requirement. It is also necessary to improve the EU's information channels to effectively compete with the dominant Russian media in Moldova.