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Unionism in the Politics of the Republic of Moldova and Its Relations with Romania

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The centenary of the union of the Moldovan Democratic Republic (Bessarabia) with Romania on 27 March has revealed identity disputes within Moldovan society. The intensity of these disputes just before the parliamentary election favours the pro-Russian Party of Socialists. Romania supports the Democratic Party government, which makes pro-Romanian gestures, but only affects reforms in Moldova. This may weaken Moldovans' hope for further rapprochement with the EU and encourage the seizure of power by the Party of Socialists.

The Moldavian Democratic Republic, established in 1917 in Bessarabia on territory between the Prut and the Dniester, joined Romania one year later. In 1940, the Soviet Union annexed Bessarabia. Its central part was connected with the territories on the left bank of the Dniester, constituting today's separatist Transnistria, creating the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic. In 1991, it declared independence as the Republic of Moldova. Unionist moods apparent in peoples' desire to reunite with Romania weakened with the outbreak of war in Transnistria and the emerging economic crisis combined with a strengthening post-communist nomenclature. Today, unionism remains a tool in political discourse, but there is little chance of its implementation due, among other things, to low support in both countries and unfavourable international conditions.

Attitudes of Moldovan Society Towards Unionism. According to an IMAS survey carried out in February, 25% of Moldovan citizens want to unite with Romania, and 62% are opposed. Support for unification is growing slowly as the result of the passing of generations who grew up amid Soviet anti-Romanian propaganda, and because of a sense of political disenfranchisement among a younger generation who have lost hope for European integration. That is why, more and more often, they view Moldova's only chance of EU accession as lying in a process based on the unification of East and West Germany in 1990. They are noticing economic development in Romania, a state once poorer than the Moldavian SSR. Nowadays, Moldova is the poorest country in Europe. In 2017, its GDP per capita was less than \$2,100, while Romania's was about \$9,600. Apart from Ukraine and Russia, Moldova is also the most corrupt in Europe. In Transparency International's 2017 report, it scored only 31 out of 100 points, while Romania scored 48. A great part of society is frustrated by the fact that, since 2016, the real power in Moldova has rested with one man who holds no official office, oligarch Vlad Plahotniuc, the head of the officially pro-European Democratic Party (PDM). According to the 2017 Economist Intelligence Unit report, Moldova is no longer a democracy but a hybrid regime with authoritarian elements.

Some Moldovan citizens treat their declarations about Romania instrumentally. This is evidenced by the 2014 census (not carried out in Transnistria) when only 7% of them declared Romanian nationality. According to NGOs, about 1 million of Moldova's 3.5 million population have Romanian citizenship, which can be obtained in a simplified manner for descendants of former Romanian citizens. The census suggests that most of them applied for Romanian citizenship not for reasons of national identity, but out of a

pragmatism that allows them to work and travel freely around the EU. Six MPs opposing unionism, representing the Party of Socialists (PSRM) hold Romanian passports.

Attitudes of Moldovan Parties Towards Unionism. Pro-Romanian events and declarations of spiritual unity with Romania were adopted by about 140 local governments, mainly as a result of grassroots initiatives, in connection with the 27 March anniversary. Unionist parties are currently in crisis and are unlikely to pass the 6% electoral threshold in autumn. The Liberal Party, which regularly received about 10% of votes, now has just 2% support. First, it compromised itself by creating a coalition with PDM, and was later eliminated by Plahotniuc from the government. The National Unity Party, formed after a split in the Liberal Party, has only 0.5% support despite the participation of former Romanian President Traian Băsescu in its campaign. Most unionists now support the pro-European Party of Action and Solidarity or Dignity and Truth Platform Party opposition, which are Romania friendly but avoid making unionist declarations openly. The Party of Action and Solidarity has the support of 16% of the electorate, and the Dignity and Truth Platform Party has 7%.

The unionists' actions are beneficial for President Igor Dodon and his PSRM, which has 39% support. Shifting the public debate on identity issues could help them gain a majority in the autumn election. Anti-Romanian resentment is strong, especially in the north of Moldova, in the separatist Transnistria and autonomous Gagauzia, which declared 2018 to be "the hundredth anniversary of the Romanian occupation." That is why Dodon styles himself not only as a friend of Russia, but also as a defender of an independent Moldova threatened by unionism. He perceives declarations in favour of unification as a high treason and calls for support for Moldovan sovereignty. He also tries to provoke Romania, threatening to accuse Bucharest of hostile actions against Moldova at the UN and the Council of Europe.

The governing PDM has 16% support and tries to present itself as a pragmatic party, whose goal is to integrate with the EU and avoid political disputes. PDM and Plahotniuc treat the maintenance of good relations with Romania instrumentally, as necessary for securing Bucharest's diplomatic support in dealing with an EU that is becoming increasingly disappointed by Moldova's lack of reforms. Therefore, PDM politicians make many symbolic gestures towards Romanian partners, emphasising cultural, linguistic and historical unity. Among others, the Speaker of the parliament, Andrian Candu, went to Bucharest for the commemoration ceremony on 27 March, while the government ignored Dodon's appeals to investigate the unionists. In fact, PDM is reluctant to embrace unionism, as demonstrated by its rejection of an application by the liberals for special recognition of the anniversary session of the parliament.

Romania's Attitudes Towards Unionism. For Romania, Moldova is not just a neighbour with common linguistic and cultural connections, it is also a state peopled by Romanian nationals. Romania does not recognise Moldovans as a different nation, but as Bessarabian Romanians. Bucharest also opposes calling the Romanian spoken in Bessarabia "Moldovan." Therefore, Romania promotes Romanian national identity among Moldovans, for example by dedicated special scholarship grants at Romanian universities.

In Romania, 27 March is a public holiday and an opportunity for pro-unification celebrations. However, according to a CURS poll carried out in January, only 27% of the Romanian population consider reunification to be necessary. Indeed, the small People's Movement Party, headed by former President Traian Băsescu, is the only parliamentary group to support reunification in its programme. However, even President Klaus Iohannis, who is very self-controlled compared with Băsescu, does not exclude the possibility of reunification in the distant future, if this is what both Romanians and Moldovans want. Open rejection of unification could be damaging to politicians who also need the votes of Moldovans who are Romanian citizens.

Romania supports any Moldovan authority that does not deny the state's Romanian identity. Thus, while Bucharest is aware of Plahotniuc's abuses, it still supports him, fearing that the pro-Russian PSRM will gain power. This relationship was consolidated in 2016 when the Social Democratic Party (PSD), officially the PDM's sister party, came to power in Romania. This March, PSD deputies openly declared that they would support PDM in the autumn election.

Conclusions. On the occasion of the centenary of the union of Bessarabia and Romania, unionism became the main topic of public debate in Moldova. Pro-Russian Dodon, emphasising his strong objection to this idea, styles himself as the defender of Moldovan sovereignty, while the parties of the real pro-European opposition fail to take a clear stance. Drawing voters' attention to identity issues may help the Party of Socialists to gain a majority in the autumn parliamentary election, either alone or in coalition with PDM controlled by Plahotniuc, whose actions dissuade Moldovans from EU integration.

In addition, if the socialists gain power or the coalition scenario wins out, either would undermine the effectiveness of the Eastern Partnership programme, led until recently by Moldova. Poland would be able to rely on limited constructive support from Romania, where symbolic and identity issues are key in relations with Moldova. Satisfying these expectations, Plahotniuc can secure further support from Romania, despite the pressure for real reforms from other EU countries. Should the Party of Socialists come to power, it could cause a freeze in relations between Moldova and Romania, and promote Moldovan rapprochement with Russia.