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Moldova's Shifting International Orientation

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The European Union's confidence in Moldova's governing Democratic Party was undermined by its undemocratic practices. Vladimir Plahotniuc, the oligarch at the head of the party, is trying to regain EU financial support by amending Moldova's constitution to take into account European integration. In the face of EU tenacity, he is also looking for rapprochement with its competitors, Russia and Turkey. This may be an attempt to strike a balance between them and the EU. The lowering of democratic standards in Moldova is a challenge for Poland and other promoters of the Eastern Partnership.

Since January 2016, Moldova has been ruled by a coalition led by the Democratic Party (PDM). Although Pavel Filip is the prime minister, party leader and oligarch Vladimir Plahotniuc informally exercises power. He maintains a tactical, informal alliance with pro-Russian President Igor Dodon, associated with the Party of Socialists (PSRM). They are joined by a common desire to keep an oligarchic and autocratic system, as evidenced by the lack of structural reforms to bring Moldova closer to EU standards, and by fear of the pro-European non-parliamentary opposition led by Maia Sandu and Andrei Năstase. Plahotniuc and Dodon simulate a conflict. For example, the president was suspended four times at the request of the PDM when he did not sign laws or confirm appointments. Dodon did not resist this, but neither did Plahotniuc did seek impeachment. Their cooperation is confirmed by, among other things, both parties votes for tax abolition and [changes to electoral law](#).

Moldova's Doubtful European Orientation. Plahotniuc declares a desire to get closer to the EU and promotes himself as the only guarantor of Moldova's pro-Western orientation required to maintain EU support. However, the government has lost the confidence of the EU institutions, due to failure to resolve the theft of \$1 billion from the banking system in 2014 and the lack of justice system reforms. Additionally, [Andrei Năstase's election as mayor of Chişinău was invalidated under PDM pressure in June this year](#). This was condemned by a resolution of the European Parliament (EP) which led the European Commission (EC) to suspend €100 million of macro-financial help for Moldova. In November, the EP adopted a report on the implementation of the Association Agreement, in which it was pointed out that oligarchic interests dominated in Moldova, and that the country was moving away from democratic standards and the rule of law. That is why the EP called the EC and the European Council to implement sanctions on participants of the "\$1 billion fraud" scandal and to pay out funds after February 2019 only in the event of a fair parliamentary election in Moldova in that month.

The PDM argues that its opponents (Sandu and Năstase) are misleading EU institutions when reporting on the government's violation of democratic standards. In fact, Plahotniuc's satellite party Şor is led by the Ilan Şor, mayor of Orhei, who is accused in the "\$1 billion fraud" scandal. Eurosceptic MEPs participated in the Şor rally in August, accusing Sandu and Năstase of obstruction and condemning the EU institutions' critical policy towards the Moldovan government.

The PDM tried to prove its pro-European image with the initiative to amend the constitution to make European integration a strategic goal for Moldova, but this change was rejected by parliament in October. The PDM did

not have a constitutional majority, support from the pro-Russian PSRM was not possible, and Plahotniuc's former allies from the small [pro-Romanian](#) parties made their support conditional on formally changing the official language of Moldova to Romanian, knowing that the PDM would reject this demand. Andrian Candu (PDM), speaker of the parliament, has –announced that a further attempt to amend the constitution will take place via a referendum.

A Pro-Moldovan Fourth Way. In the face of EU intransigence, Plahotniuc is seeking rapprochement with its competitors. Since September, he has been calling on Moldovans to abandon pro-European, pro-Russian and pro-Romanian orientations in favour of a pro-Moldovan “fourth way” focused on the country's interests. Although PDM activists say this is intended as a means of getting closer to the EU, it is a signal that Plahotniuc is ready to use other states to balance the bloc's political and economic influence.

Wishing to win the gratitude of Turkey, Moldova in September deported Turkish citizens associated with the Gülen movement. The only other state in the European region to do this was Kosovo. A month later, during the visit of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan to Chişinău, a bilateral Strategic Cooperation Council of the High Level was established. Erdoğan announced Turkish political and economic support for Moldova, including increasing development assistance and opening branches of two Turkish state banks in this country.

Until recently, the PDM government has manifested assertiveness towards Russia in order to guarantee EU support despite the lack of reforms. To this end, in August 2017 Moldova declared Dmitry Rogozin, Russian deputy prime minister and plenipotentiary for the Transnistrian conflict, persona non grata. In August, after the poisoning of Sergei Skripal and his daughter, Moldova was the only member of the Commonwealth of Independent States to expel Russian diplomats. The government apparently opposed the policy of the president, who had already visited Russia 13 times since the end of 2016 and, in spite of the lack of prerogatives, in April 2017 made Moldova an observer state to the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU). However, in practice Dodon cooperates with Plahotniuc, who does not have good contacts with the Russian authorities. The result of Dodon's actions was to minimise Russian retaliation against Moldovan diplomats and Gazprom's consent to the appointment of Vasile Botnari from PDM as chairman of Moldovagaz in February 2017.

Plahotniuc currently expresses his desire to improve direct relations with Russia. This is evidenced by the government's calm both in the face of the illegal complementary elections to the Russian State Duma held in Transnistria in August, and in relation to exercises by Russian troops based there despite Filip's demands to the UN forum that these troops should be withdrawn. In addition, the government did not condemn Dodon's idea that the status of Transnistria in Moldova should be settled by referendum. In July, Russia replaced Rogozin with Dmitry Kozak, the deputy prime minister and author of the 2003 re-integration plan for Transnistria. He has been given an extended mandate regarding Russian economic cooperation with Moldova, which indicates Russia's readiness to open a new chapter in bilateral relations. The first consultations aimed at renewing cooperation between these countries were held in Moscow in November between deputy foreign ministers.

However, Plahotniuc and Dodon want to avoid Moldova being subject to Russia. The pro-Russian president has relaxed his position by demanding merely a revision (rather than termination) of the Association Agreement with the EU, in order to facilitate cooperation with both the EEU and the EU. Both politicians care about EU financial assistance, which Russia will not be able to replace, and access to the EU market, which accounts for more than 60% of Moldovan trade. Meanwhile, Moldova's participation in the EEU has not resulted in the abolition of Russian customs restrictions, the opening of a new labour market or lower gas prices.

Conclusions and Prospects. The simulation of pro-European orientation by the Moldovan government, together with Plahotniuc's determination to preserve the current system of power, may keep EU financial aid on hold. Criticism from the EU institutions may also discourage some voters of the officially pro-European PDM. The amendment of the constitution to take into account European integration would be the final proof of the PDM's pro-European stance. At the same time, by courting closer relations with Turkey and Russia, Plahotniuc intends to balance the EU's political influence, partly to cover the lost funds and win new voters. The financial assistance of these countries would, even if modest, reduce the effectiveness of EU pressure on the Moldovan government. However, Russian support in particular could prove costly in terms of economic and political concessions.

The parliamentary election in February 2019 may bring a formal renewal of Plahotniuc's PDM coalition with Dodon and his PSRM. Given the scale of the oligarch's influence, a self-sufficient socialist government seems to be unlikely, even in the event of the expected electoral victory. Should PSRM manage a swift takeover of power in Moldova, this would not be beneficial for Russia because its budget is unable to subsidise the Moldovan economy. It would also be disadvantageous for Poland and the EU, because it would allow Plahotniuc to pay renewed lip service to pro-European reforms. This would result in undermining the idea of European integration in the eyes of Moldovans and strengthen Russian influence at low cost. As a result, it may induce those EU Member States standing against the Eastern Partnership to limit funds for this programme in the new financial cycle and persuade them to seek more involvement in other directions of EU foreign policy.