

Moldova: Violent protests in aftermath of elections

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Bloody street fighting in the wake of parliamentary elections in Moldova held on April 5 has focused international attention on the former Soviet republic situated between Romania and Ukraine.

The ruling Communist Party (PCRM), led by President Vladimir Voronin, which has governed alone for the last eight years, initially was reported to have polled 50 percent of the votes cast to take 61 of the 101 seats in parliament. The result was later corrected to 60 seats.

Having won a total of 41 seats, the three parliamentary opposition parties—the Liberal Party (PL), the Liberal Democratic Party (PLDM) and the Alliance for Our Moldova—will now wield considerable influence in the forthcoming election of a new head of state, who will need to win at least 61 votes in the new parliament. The new president will be elected in June, after Voronin is forced to stand down, having already served two terms in office.

The day after the elections, some 4,000 opposition supporters gathered in the capital, Chisinau, to protest alleged voting fraud. The next day, clashes broke out between the police and a crowd of mostly young people that had swelled to about 10,000.

The demonstrators threw stones and incendiary bombs at the police. The police used tear gas and water-cannons.

The demonstrators managed to occupy the parliamentary buildings for a short time, setting fire to parts of them. In the evening, they threw computers and furniture from the upper floors of the burning parliament building onto the street and briefly hoisted Romanian and European Union (EU) flags. When security forces tried to clear the buildings, hundreds of people on both sides were wounded. One young woman was killed.

According to media reports, about 1,000 people came together again in Chisinau last Wednesday afternoon. Another 10,000 demonstrated on Sunday.

It quickly became clear that the demand for a vote recount was only a pretext for the opposition forces. Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) election observers had certified that the ballot was in line with Western European standards. Petros Efthymiou, the Greek observer, declared on Election Day, “These elections were very good and they have given me great confidence in the future of this country.” The German election observer, Manfred Grund from the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), also described the election as “all-in-all fair.”

The Communist Party regime upholds capitalist relations and is corrupt and largely discredited, especially among young people. Nevertheless, the opposition parties are less concerned with democracy in Moldova than with the interests of the narrow, better-off social layer of company managers and business people who both distance themselves from the Communist Party and its pro-Russian orientation and demand stronger links with Romania and the European Union.

Extreme right-wing tendencies back this demand. The anti-communist organisations Remember Moldova and Hyde Park used the Internet and SMS messaging to build the protests. Gabriel Stati, son of multi-millionaire Anatol Stati, was arrested in Kiev last Wednesday. He is alleged to have paid off right-wing provocateurs in the rioting.

Many of the demonstrators waved Romanian flags and chanted, “Long Live Greater Romania!” The extreme right-wing Noua Dreapta (New Right) assembled at the front of the rally on April 7, brandishing their symbol of the Celtic Cross. Right-wing forces in the Republic of Moldova have long demanded integration with Romania.

Some 1,000 right-wing youths gathered in the Romanian capital of Bucharest waving placards with slogans such as “Into the Garbage with Communism.”

Although Romania’s prime minister, Emil Boc, officially condemned the violent protests, he called for the Moldovan government to uphold the democratic rights of the opposition. The Romanian *Adevarul* newspaper compared the demonstrations to the bloodily suppressed workers’ revolts in East Germany and Hungary in the 1950s.

Moldovan President and CP leader Voronin blamed Romania for the disturbances, expelled its ambassador and ordered Romanian citizens visiting Moldova to obtain visas.

Both Russia, on one side, and the United States and the EU, on the other, took pains to play down the significance of the rioting and dampen the conflict. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov merely accused the demonstrators of “vandalism,” suggesting that in Moscow’s view the disturbances were not of a political nature and were not to be compared to the so-called “rainbow revolutions” that toppled pro-Russian governments in Georgia and Ukraine.

Robert Wood, spokesman for the US State Department, said that Washington’s attitude to the Moldovan elections was “generally positive.” He said that now “it’s a matter of the people refraining

from acts of violence. That won't help at all." The EU also condemned the violent protests.

Following last August's confrontation between the US and Russia over the attempt by the US-backed government of Georgia to forcibly integrate South Ossetia into the Georgian state, neither side wants to see a similar escalation of tensions at the present time. The Republic of Transnistria (or Trans-Dniester), which is not recognized internationally, is in a similar situation to South Ossetia. Having broken away from Moldova, Transnistria is now under the protection of Russian troops. A pro-Western coup d'état in Moldova would have incalculable consequences for relations with Moscow.

Moldova came into existence at the beginning of the 1940s, following the Hitler-Stalin pact, which resulted in the detachment of parts of Bessarabia from Romania and their annexation by the Soviet Union. Stalin decided to leave the region of Transnistria, with its predominantly Russian population, within the new Soviet Republic. Moldova remained one of the most prosperous Soviet republics until the end of the 1980s. While industrial centres in the east, bordering Ukraine, were developing, most of the peasant population in the west was able to profit from internal Soviet trade.

When the Stalinist regimes disintegrated in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, Moldova became embroiled in civil war. The so-called "People's Front"—a motley movement dominated by extreme right-wing organisations striving for the separation of Moldova from the Soviet Union—was formed in 1989. Invoking anti-Russian chauvinism and promising freedom and prosperity, the People's Front succeeded in bringing together a half a million people in Chisinau in August 1989.

Industrial workers in the east vehemently opposed this movement. Following a general strike in the summer of 1989, a plebiscite in Rybnica and what was later to become the capital city of Tiraspol resulted in a large majority calling into being the independent, pro-Russian "Soviet Republic of Transnistria."

In the summer of 1990, the leadership in Chisinau proclaimed independence from the Soviet Union. After Moldova officially became independent in August 1991, it refused to recognise Transnistria.

Chisinau quickly mustered special forces, tasked with reclaiming renegade Transnistrian territories. By the spring of 1992 the conflict had escalated into open warfare, costing the lives of over 1,000 people. Transnistria defended itself with the help of the Russian army stationed in Tiraspol.

The conflict has continued to smolder up to the present day. By safeguarding the ceasefire, Russian troops guarantee the territory's de-facto independence. Nevertheless, attempts are continually made to annex the region to Moldova. Transnistria accounts for two thirds of the industrial production of the entire country.

The collapse of the Soviet Union led not only to bloody conflict, but also to a vast socio-economic retrogression. Between 1990 and 2000, the Moldovan gross domestic product (GDP) declined by about a third. Industrial production constituted only about a tenth of GDP, while agricultural production sank to less than half.

The population's standard of living fell by about 25 percent compared to 1990. The state pension amounted to between 50 and 80 euros per month. Unemployment now officially stands at 10

percent, but this is a gross underestimation. In many areas, every third person is without a job.

Nothing is left of what was once known as the granary of the Soviet Union. A great proportion of the agricultural land lies fallow because farmers lack money to work the fields. Rural areas present a picture of what the country was like a hundred years ago. In many places there is no running water and electricity for only a few hours a day. Farmers labour with horse ploughs instead of modern machines.

Industry has almost come to a standstill. Production in Transnistria can be maintained only with the help of Russian finance. Money transferred to their homeland by the approximately 600,000 Moldovans working abroad now amounts to more than the country's entire annual budget.

Voronin and his Communist Party assumed power in 2001, after the right-wing liberals of the previous government had become so discredited that strikes and protests were continually breaking out. Voronin promised to reinstate Russian as the country's second language, to improve transport links to Russia and White Russia, to curb privatisation of state enterprises and to raise the standard of living.

After the elections, however, these promises were soon forgotten and Voronin continued with the old course. In elections held in 2005, the Communist Party suffered a major loss of votes and Voronin was reelected as head of state only with the help of the Christian Democratic Party.

In order to keep his corrupt government in power, he attempted to effect a split between Russia and the European Union. After 2005, he turned more resolutely towards Western Europe in an effort to attract investment. The Republic of Moldova is a member of NATO's Partnership for Peace, but has foregone seeking membership in NATO itself for fear of provoking Moscow.

Even if the Communist Party in Moldova succeeds in holding onto power, political, economic and social tensions, compounded by the world economic crisis, will increase. Moldova will remain a political minefield that can explode at any moment.



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