Moldova election heralds political instability

Andrei Tudora, Tina Zamfir
6 March 2019

Parliamentary elections were held in the Republic of Moldova on the February 24. The election signalled the culmination of a protracted process of disintegration of the forces that have defined the political establishment in Moldova in the last 20 years.

Under the weight of intensifying geopolitical tensions and popular hostility, the EU-backed Liberal Democratic Party of Moldova (PLDM) and the Liberal Party (PL), brought to power after the 2009 "colour revolution" against the Russian leaning Party of Communists, essentially lost all political significance. The Party of Communists, the direct descendent of the Stalinist Communist Party of Moldova, was routed at the polls and, for the first time since 1998, will have no representatives in parliament.

The election was won by the pro-Russian Party of Socialists of the Republic of Moldova (PSRM), which received 31 percent of the votes and will have the highest number of deputies, followed by the newly formed EU-backed ACUM coalition with 27 percent and the ruling Democratic Party of Moldova (PDM) with 24 percent. The PDM will have the second highest number of deputies, due to the peculiarities of the electoral system.

Voter turnout in the country of 3.5 million inhabitants was close to 49 percent. Almost 56 percent participated in the last election in 2014.

The pro-EU opposition immediately contested the results, focussing especially on the vote from the Russian speaking breakaway province of Transnistria that favoured the PDM and PSRM. The week prior to the elections saw a concerted effort by pro-EU forces to paint the vote as tainted by Russian influence campaigns. In an act of censorship, Facebook closed 200 pages and accounts from Moldova that it suggested were linked to the Moldovan government. Nathaniel Gleicher, Facebook's cybersecurity policy chief, claimed that these accounts, which "typically posted local news and political issues," "shared manipulated photos, divisive narratives, and satire."

The governing Democratic Party of Moldova is set to remain the principal political decisionmaker in the coming period. The party was a junior member in the pro-Western coalition, coming in last in the 2014 elections. As working people were becoming increasingly hostile to the coalition's IMF-imposed free-market policies, endemic corruption and alignment with the NATO military provocations against Russia, the coalition disintegrated and the PDM managed to outmanoeuvre its rivals and consolidate power.

PDM officials paid lip service to Moldova's constitutional neutrality, instituted minimal social assistance programs, and broke away from the more radical elements, who were demanding a union with neighbouring EU member Romania, which shares historical and linguistic ties to Moldova. The PDM has faced open hostility from Germany and other European powers, which have supported violent protests against it, and cut important financial aid to the country. The organizations making up the ACUM coalition have been built up in the course of these protests.

Much is being made in the media of the figure of oligarch Vladimir Plahotniuc, head of the PDM and de facto head of government. Lurid accounts of his criminal business dealings are offered to argue that he is a political aberration who has "captured" the Moldovan state. In fact, Plahotniuc is the definitive political product of the last 30 years of capitalist restoration in Eastern Europe.

Beginning his career in the quasi-criminal milieu of the former Stalinist bureaucrats after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Plahotniuc's fortunes were tied to the Party of Communists of Moldova and to the Social Democratic Party, the former Stalinist ruling party of Romania.

In 2001 Plahotniuc was appointed head of Petrom

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Moldova, the largest Romanian company operating in the country. He joined the Democratic Party, a political outfit close to the Communists but inclined to faster EU integration and market reforms, after the former became part of the pro-Western regime in 2009. With Plahotniuc's control over a large part of the Moldovan media and his role as a go-between among the various factions of the governing coalition, he quickly became indispensable to its functioning and to its handlers in Washington and Brussels.

Relations soured with Germany and the EU in 2015 after Plahotniuc side-lined the pro-Romanian factions favoured by Angela Merkel, but he has enjoyed the support of successive US administrations. He also has the backing of the current Romanian government led by the Social Democratic Party, and its head, Liviu Dragnea. Dragnea and the PSD, favoured by the Trump White House, have long been engaged in a tug of war with the EU.

Romania has continued to supply the Moldovan government with funds to offset the loss of EU funding and maintains numerous local assistance and infrastructure projects in Moldova. Romanian news outlets also reported that Romania and Viktor Orban's Hungary opposed the passing of an EU foreign affairs document condemning the Moldovan government for not respecting "democratic principles, the rule of law and human rights." These accusations were fuelled by the annulment of the elections in the capital Chisinau, won by a pro-EU ACUM candidate.

It is likely that Plahotniuc will manage to gather the necessary number of defections from the other parties to continue with a PDM Government, with or without the participation of the ACUM bloc. The Socialist Party of President Dodon has already stated that it is entertaining the prospect of another election. Another possibility is that the Socialist Party of Dodon, who has repeatedly stated that he intends to maintain Moldova's Association Agreement with the EU, will form a government with Plahotniuc organised around Moldovan "independence."

Regardless of the manoeuvres of the local bourgeoisie, the interests of the impoverished workers of Moldova, many of whom work abroad in Romania, the EU or Russia, will not be represented.

The Republic of Moldova, one of the poorest countries in Europe, is 137th in the world by income per capita, according to the IMF. Economic growth has declined from 6 percent to little more than 2 percent, while foreign investment collapsed from over €500 million in previous years to just €40 million.

According to a study conducted by the Institute for Public Policy, around half of all Moldovans would like to leave the country if they had the chance to do so. The reasons given for this were poverty and the absence of any perspective for the future. The population is already declining sharply. Around 1 million people have left the country in recent years. The average pension is €90 per month, while the average income is around €230. €1 billion were wiped out four years ago in a banking scandal, equivalent to one-eighth of Moldova's gross domestic product.

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