

Moldova's Election of a 'pro-Russian' President: Implications for Europe

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In November 2016, Moldova elected Igor Dodon as president in the first presidential elections since 1996. In his campaign, Dodon promised to restore Moldova's relations with Russia and possibly revoke the Association Agreement (AA) with the European Union. He also promised to improve relations with Transnistria, a de facto state within Moldova in which Russia deploys around 1,500 to 2,500 troops. In March Dodon sent a request to the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) to grant Moldova to become an observation country to the union. However, the powers of the president in Moldova are limited, and it is not certain that Dodon will have the chance to implement all of his policies. What is the likelihood of Moldova leaning more towards Russia, and what possible effects could such a change have on Europe?

The two main directions in Moldovan politics are, simply put, the so called pro-European liberal and the so called pro-Russian communist or socialist directions, respectively. People in practice, however, often vote along identity lines: those who identify with Romania usually vote for pro-European parties, whereas minorities (for example Gagauzians, Russians and Ukrainians) and people who rather disapprove of a union with Romania usually vote for pro-Russian parties.¹

Moreover, citizens also adhere to economic rationales when voting. Since its independence, Moldova has experienced economic turmoil, and is often referred to as one of the poorest countries in Europe. This may be related to the fact that it is also among the most corrupt countries in Europe.² Politics have been infiltrated by

oligarchs, known to use economic leverage to gain political influence. In 2015, it was revealed that one billion USD had been stolen from three of Moldova's largest banks before the parliamentary election in 2014. The sum stolen amounted to about an eighth of the country's GDP, and caused a massive devaluation of the currency.³ The scandal resulted in a governmental crisis, and the coming year the prime-minister post changed five times while popular protests lasted for 15 months. In the summer of 2016, the former prime-minister Vlad Filat was sentenced for complicity to the theft. It remains unresolved to what extent other politicians were involved. This scandal hit the pro-European coalition hard, specifically the Liberal Democratic Party which Filat represented. It also lowered the trust towards the EU in general, as Brussels was seen as having neglected the government's corruption schemes prior to the big theft in 2014.⁴

In a survey conducted in September 2016, 90% of the 1,518 people questioned stated that politicians only govern in the interests of *some* groups, and 96% stated that corruption was a big or a very big issue. Among the issues the survey participants stated concerned them the most, the three most mentioned were corruption, low income, and unemployment. A majority also contended that Moldova was not moving in the right direction.⁵

Dodon has managed to represent promise of change. His party—the Socialist Party—has not been openly involved in any scandals. The party also proclaims a switch from a pro-European to a pro-Russian foreign policy. Maia Sandu, leader of the Action and Solidarity Party, who came second in the election after Dodon,

represents a new pro-EU party without any record of political scandals. However, Sandu had herself previously been a member of the discredited Liberal Democratic Party. She was expected to be the most popular among Moldovans living abroad, which in 2015 was 18% of the population,⁶ many of which were not able to vote due to a poor organisation of polling stations abroad. Furthermore, Dodon's stance towards improving relations with Russia is arguably appealing as this raises the potential for Russia to lift the sanctions held on Moldova. Russia has held import bans and import duties on Moldovan products since the Association Agreement was signed with the EU. Other attractive promises of Dodon concerned his social policies towards the poorer population in rural areas, including the raising of pensions, and ensuring better health care away from the cities.

There were thus many factors contributing to Dodon's victory, all of which relate to the three most mentioned issues in the survey: corruption, low income, and unemployment, and can therefore explain Dodon's success.

What are the implications for Europe and Moldova?

Since Moldova is a parliamentary republic where the president has limited powers, it will be difficult for Dodon alone to implement his promises. Nevertheless, he did keep his promise of strengthening relations with Russia, and made his first international visit to the Kremlin in January 2017. At the press-conference, President Vladimir Putin confirmed that Russia also wanted the Moldova-Russian relations to improve, and said they had discussed an integration process of Moldova to the Eurasian Economic Union

(EEU).⁷ On March 21st Dodon sent a letter to the president of the Supreme Eurasian Economic Council, asking for Moldova to be granted observation status to the EEU. The decision on granting the observation status will be given at the end of May when the heads of states of the member countries will meet. This shows a dedication by Dodon to pursue his promises.

The government has, however, not shown any signs of changing their agenda. The Moldovan Prime-Minister, Pavel Filip, stressed before the elections that he hoped the elected president would understand the importance of maintaining the EU-Moldova relations: *“this government, in place until 2018, will remain strongly pro-European. I’m hoping for good teamwork; we must keep Moldova’s best interests at the center of our hearts and minds.”*⁸ Furthermore, Vlad Plahotniuc, leader of the Democratic Party, and the man known to control the parliament, stated that he would block every attempt for Dodon to cancel the AA.⁹ Arguably, it is unlikely that the government would make any decisions without the approval of Plahotniuc.

It thus seems unlikely that Dodon with the current government in place will be able to implement his promises. However, Dodon’s Socialist Party is now the biggest party in parliament and may continue to grow, and by the 2018 parliamentary election secure a place in a new government. The question then becomes whether they will pursue a change or not? Former President Vladimir Voronin and the Communist Party claimed to be pro-Russian but entered the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) in 2003 when it was perceived beneficial. Similarly, Dodon might have a pro-

Russian rhetoric but no aim of giving up or renegotiating the relations with the EU as long as the relations are favourable. Already towards the end of his campaign Dodon had softened his rhetoric and rather than cancelling the Association Agreement, he focused on ‘reforming’ it, or specifically the economic parts (the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement, DCFTA) in order to facilitate trade with Russia.¹⁰

Since the EU is now Moldova’s largest trading partner,¹¹ a reformation of the AA or only DCFTA would likely have negative effects on the Moldovan economy. It might also lead to the cancellation of the visa freedom that Moldovans now possess to the EU. This would not only be unpopular among Moldovans, it would also target the economy as remittances from Moldovans abroad contribute a significant share of the country’s total GDP (23% in 2015¹²). Due to these factors, neither Dodon, nor any other Moldovan politician is likely to pursue a dramatic move away from Europe.

For the EU, a change in the EU-Moldovan relations would have serious implications for its influence over and relations with the ENP countries. The foundation of the ENP lies in establishing security in the EU’s neighbouring regions by promoting democracy and trade. If Moldova would renegotiate or cancel the AA or DCFTA, the idea and concept of the ENP might be under threat. It could imply that the EU is no longer the most powerful or beneficial ally, and also move the Russian sphere of influence closer to the EU’s borders. From a Russian perspective, influence over Moldova, as well as other neighbouring post-Soviet countries, is essential in regards to domestic politics

and in the international arena. It is perceived to advance Moscow's geopolitical sphere in relation to Europe, and continue to hold cultural influence over neighbouring countries. Previous advancements in the region have also increased Putin's domestic support; the more activist foreign policy boosts the image of a more powerful Russia.

Both the EU and Russia have interests in Moldova and other neighbouring countries. However, unless either of them will intensify their engagement with Moldova, the current position of Moldova is likely to remain. Finally, the Transnistrian issue is another important contributor to the status quo of Moldova's foreign policy alignment. That Moldova does not fully control its own territory and borders hinder domestic reform, and thus a deepening of the EU-Moldova relationship. From a Russian perspective, troops in Transnistria are an important element in ensuring its influence over Moldova, and maintain a geostrategic status quo.

Summary

Dodon was elected president of Moldova due to a number of reasons. He represented a relatively new party with no records of corruption and that also proclaimed a pro-Russian direction, as a change to the previous pro-European. A change was desired as the previous coalition had been involved in massive corruption scandals, making the population distrust the members of parliament and the general direction politics were heading. Dodon also made concrete promises to improve the livelihood for the rural population. However, with the current government being pro-European and the presidential powers being limited, Dodon will have

difficulties implementing all of his policies before the elections in 2018. If the Socialist Party continues to grow and do well in the next elections, chances of a reorientation might increase. However, since breaking off with the EU will have economic consequences, even a future Socialist Party led government might prefer to pursue a policy keeping the geostrategic status quo. Thus, absent any major changes in the EU's or Russia's engagements with Moldova, the Moldovan government is not expected to dramatically alter its current politics. Therefore, even the election of a more pro-Russian president might not necessarily have any great implications for Moldovan foreign policy alignment.

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Endnotes

¹ Johansson, A., 'Dissenting Democrats. Nation and Democracy in the Republic of Moldova', 2011, Department of Political Science, Stockholm University, p.154

² Moldova ranks 123 of 176 on Transparency International's 'Corruption Perceptions Index' 2016. 1 is the least corrupt and 176 is the most corrupt countries, <https://www.transparency.org/country/MDA>

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⁴ Osrodek Studiow Wschodnich, 'The Unfinished State. 25 Years Since Independent Moldova', 14 December 2016, pp.67-68, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-studies/2016-12-14/unfinished-state-25-years-independent-moldova>

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<http://en.kremlin.ru/catalog/countries/MD/events/53744>

⁸ Government of Republic of Moldova, 'Moldova's Prime Minister Committed to a Pro-Europe Path', 14 September 2016, <http://www.gov.md/en/content/moldovas-prime-minister-committed-pro-europe-path>

⁹ Moldova.org, 'Vlad Plahotniuc to President Dodon: We will block every attempt of cancelling the EU Association Agreement', 18 January 2017, <http://www.moldova.org/en/vlad-plahotniuc-president-dodon-will-block-every-attempt-cancelling-eu-association-agreement/>

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¹¹ Cantir, C., and Kennedy, R., 'Balancing on the Shoulders of Giants: Moldova's Foreign Policy toward Russia and the European Union', 2015, Foreign Policy Analysis 11, pp.397-416

¹² The World Bank, 'Personal Remittances, received (% of GDP)', Retrieved 10 February 2017, <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/BX.TR.F.PWKR.DT.GD.ZS?contextual=region&locations=MD>

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