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***PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS IN MOLDOVA:
A STRESS TEST FOR DEMOCRACY AND THE
STATE’S EUROPEAN PERSPECTIVE***

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Introduction

Moldovan parliamentary elections have been scheduled for February 24th, 2019 together with a consultative referendum on reducing MPs' from 101 to 61 and the voters right to recall MPs. Elections are crucial for Moldova's future which acrobats between the West (namely the EU and NATO) and East (namely Russia). International stakeholders closely monitor the electoral process as a stress test on democracy, transparency, and political accountability. State's politics are plunged into corruption affecting its function, major reforms, and economic growth. Under this situation, elections' next day will be decisive for Moldova's future affecting both its internal and external affairs.

Moldovan Political System

Moldova has established a parliamentary representative republic, where the Prime Minister is the head of the Government exercising the executive power. The 101 seats Parliament exercises the legislative power, while judiciary is independent. The Prime Minister is nominated by the President and approved by the Parliament. Head of the state is the President who is elected directly by the citizens. In 2016, the state held its first direct presidential election since 1996, after quitting an indirect system.



Moldovan Prime Minister, Pavel Filip Molodovan President, Igor Dodon
(Photo source: www.presedinte.md, www.gov.md)

The Prime Minister of Moldova is currently Pavel Filip of the Democratic Party of Moldova (Partidul Democrat din Moldova – PDM) who took office in January 2016. The

President of the country is Igor Dodon backed by the Party of Socialists of the Republic of Moldova (Partidul Socialiștilor din Republica Moldova – PSRM) who was elected in 2016 after defeating in the runoff the Party of Action and Solidarity's (Partidul Acțiune și Solidaritate - PAS) candidate Maia Sandu (52% to 48%).

Moldovan Electoral System

February 24th, 2019 election will be held by a new mixed electoral system which replaced the previous proportional one. The new electoral rules include both party lists allocated proportionally (50 seats), and single-member constituencies (51 seats). According to the Venice Commission has warned that single-mandate constituencies may jeopardize transparency and credibility of elections allowing powerful business interests to manipulate and influence the electoral body.

Furthermore, on February 24th, 2019 Moldovan voters will vote not only for their new lawmakers, but also for the referendum on reducing the state's MPs from 101 to 61 and establishing the right of recalling MPs.

Current Political Situation

Political situation in Moldova may be characterized as polarized and turbulent enriched with strong elements of corruption, lack of accountability, and non-transparency. The country is still shocked by the 2014 Central Bank's scandal when 1 billion dollar was stolen. The case had cost to the former prime Minister Vlad Filat 9 years in prison but the case has never solved, neither the money have found. Apart from that, the Parliament has voted in favor of the "fiscal amnesty" law which it allows people to declare money and property without providing information from where they come from by paying a 3% tax on the registered assets. Opposition strongly reacted against the adopted law claiming that the Government promotes corruption, fraud, and money laundering. The World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) also criticized the "fiscal amnesty" law claiming that it could "undermine the Moldovan government's commitment to fight corruption." According to freedom House corruption is located among high-ranking officials undermining state's functionality, judicial independency, and social development.

Moldova has been graded as a "hybrid regime" (namely a non-democracy) by the

Freedom House and the Economist Intelligence Unit. The international community watches the state moving far from European democratic standards and values towards autocracy. Justice reforms have reached a deadlock allowing political and economic influence affecting its actions and decisions. Stagnation of Justice reforms led the European Union (EU) to announce in October 2018 cut off funding support to this sector. Moreover, the EU expressed its concern for Moldova's route towards the European integration. In fact, the state is "captured" by one oligarch, Vlad Plahotniuc who is the leader of ruling PDM and a rich businessman controlling the majority of media. The EU and U.S have repeatedly expressed their concerns regarding democratic downgrade of the country underlying that the February 24th, 2019 elections will be a critical test for fair and transparent election and consequently for Moldova's democratic standards.

Currently, state politics are dominated by the ruling PDM and the President's Igor Dodon's party; the Party of Socialists of the Republic of Moldova (Partidul Socialiștilor din Republica Moldova – PSRM). In 2014 parliamentary election PSRM took 25 seats, the Liberal Democratic Party of Moldova (Partidul Liberal Democrat din Moldova - PLDM) got 23 seats, Party of Communists of the Republic of Moldova (Partidul Comuniștilor din Republica Moldova - PCRM) took 21 seats, PDM got 19 seats, and Liberal Party (Partidul Liberal - PL) got 13 seats. However, by the end of 2017 PDM had achieved to increase its MPs from 19 to 47 becoming the Parliament's largest party. It seems that PDM and PSRM enjoy somekind of political ally, although they belong to different "spheres of influence" namely PDM is a pro-western and PSRM is pro-Russian. According to Freedom House the two parties "mimicked" their "geopolitical rivalry" with "PDM playing the role of defending the EU integration and PSRM promoting the Eurasian vector."

Pro-western opposition; Party of Action and Solidarity (Partidul Acțiune și Solidaritate - PAS) and Dignity and Truth Platform Party (Partidul Platforma Demnitate și Adevăr - PPDA) leaders, Maia Sandu and Andrei Nastase joined their forces presenting the ACUM bloc aiming at presenting a united opposition against PDM and PSRM. Sandu and Nastase's pre-electoral campaign focused on corruption and democratic deficit of current ruling political forces promoting their affiliation with the most powerful EU Parliament party; the European People Party. ACUM keeps accusing the ruling PDM for non-transparent methods against the opposition which lead in unfair and non-legitimate

election.

External Actors

Parliamentary elections in Moldova have a strong sense of “geopolitical rivalry” namely between the EU and NATO on the one side and Russia on the other. The country enjoys a strategic position sharing borders with Ukraine to the East and Romania to the West. For Russia, Moldova belongs to its geopolitical sphere of influence and it would never permit any change of the current power of balance. Entrance of NATO (and the EU) in Moldova would undermine national security of Russia. On the other hand, Euro-Atlantic structures seek to include Moldova in their direct influence. In fact, Moldova is the natural extension of Romania, an already EU and NATO member where the Alliance has established a powerful anti-missile defense “shield”. Taking into consideration that Moldova is next to Ukraine (and Crimea) where Russian operations are conducted it is easily understood why the small and poor Moldova has “special geopolitical weight.” Of course, one should keep in mind the state’s “open sore”; the Transnistrian conflict (and Gagauzia although it is a different case) where Russia maintains strong military forces.

Under these circumstances, Russia continues to exercise a manipulative influence in Moldova taking in advantage mutual cultural ties, the extensive use of Russian language, the use of media and internet, economic and energy factors. A major factor is the pro-Russian policy of the state’s President Igor Dodon who openly promotes Moldova’s direction towards Russia facilitating the latter influence activities within the country. Although, the country has taken measures to restrict the Russian influence and propaganda it is more than certain that Russia will continue to intervene in Moldovan affairs. Taking into consideration that Moldova is highly dependent (almost 100%) on Russia regarding energy supply and by the end of 2019 the country should renegotiate a new contract with GAZPROM it is easily understood the impact it may have in Moldova’s politics.

Assessment

Political situation in Moldova is characterized as complex since a lot of internal and external factors influence political behavior and decisions. The fact is that the country has reached a deadlock regarding its route towards Euro-Atlantic integration. Corruption, money laundering, human rights, rule of law, justice and media independency, and state’s

institutions transparency and accountability are the major fields where critical reforms should be implemented. The EU, OSCE, and U.S urge Moldova to overcome political stalemate accelerating country's reforms. It is not yet clear what direction the country seeks for; Does Moldova remain committed in its EU and NATO path, or it will strengthen its Russian orientation moving towards Eurasian Union? However, this is not the real question of the parliamentary elections. *The true question is the country choice between democracy and oligarchy; between a modern European state according to Europe's values and standards and a "hybrid regime" or a "captured state."*

It is expected PSRM to win the elections but it is not certain if it will achieve a single parliamentary majority. ACUM Block (PAS – PPDA) stands in the second place, while PDM it is believed will get the third one. It is under question if other parties will achieve to enter the Parliament. 4,000 national and international observers (3,412 nationals and 776 international from 57 organizations) will monitor the election confirming that it was free and fair. The EU and U.S have repeatedly said to Moldovan authorities that these elections are a "stress test" for democracy. Moreover, the EU funding will start again only if it is certified that the electoral process was transparent, free, and legitimate.

Russian influence in Moldova is a fact and it will not be avoid it on February 24th, 2019 parliamentary elections despite state's authorities efforts to reduce external intervention in domestic affairs. A powerful network of Moldovan politicians (and parties), journalists, political analysts and Russian experts work actively and intensively promoting Russian interests in the country. In Moldova it is well founded the mentality that the country is dependent by Russia in economy, energy, and security. Apart from that, there are strong cultural and spiritual bonds between a certain part of Moldovan population and Russia. It should be underlined that in the 2016 presidential elections the pro-Russian candidate and current President of the country got 99% of the votes in Gagauzia. In addition, Russia has deployed a significant number of military forces in Transnistria supporting separatists and obstructing any peaceful resolution of the conflict. It is assessed that if Russia feels that is isolated in Moldova losing an exclusive field of influence it will not hesitate to use military force (as it happened in Georgia and Ukraine) to secure its interests.

As a conclusion, there are three scenarios regarding the next day of the

parliamentary elections:

a. **PSRM victory and formation of single-party Government:** It is the ideal scenario for the state's President Igor Dodon who needs parliamentary support to implement his policy. In such a scenario, Dodon will be the absolute dominant of Moldovan politics influencing internal and external Moldovan policy. In the domestic field, PSRM will try to re-control sensitive state institutions such as defense and security structures, and justice system which are currently under PDM control. In foreign policy, it is expected Moldova to move away from the Euro-Atlantic structures approaching the Eurasian vector. Russia will become privileged interlocutor of Moldova exercising decisive influence in major political decisions. For instance, NATO will be forced to close its Information and Documentation Center in Chisinau. The President Dodon promotes (the Russian plan) federalization of Moldova aiming at resolving the Transnistrian conflict and Gagauzia case in favor of Russian interests. Moreover in such a scenario, it is expected deterioration of Moldova – Romania relations since the latter is “a threat” according to PSRM. One should keep in mind that in such a scenario, if opposition refuses to accept the electoral results it will lead in political turmoil and destabilization which may resolved by Russian intervention with its forces deployed in Transnistria upon Dodon's request.

b. **PSRM and PDM coalition Government:** It is the most possible scenario which will lead in certain domestic and foreign policies. First of all, it would be an ideal scenario for PDM (and its leader Vlad Plahotniuc) which sees its popularity to be reduced due to accusations of corruption and scandals involvement. Cooperation between the two parties is favored by the new electoral system which allows PDM to maintain its leading role in single-member constituencies and PSRM to dominate in electoral lists. Opposition (namely ACUM Bloc) will be weakened and isolated in domestic state institutions. Moldova's progress towards Euro-Atlantic integration will be restraint and the country will strengthen its relations with Russia. PSRM and PDM should compromise establishing special fields of interests for each one. Relations with Romania will be weakened, while PSRM and the President Igor Dodon will intensify its efforts of resolving the Transnistrian conflict via the federal scenario providing advanced rights to Tiraspol (mainly the right of veto).

c. **PSRM and other parties' coalition except PDM:** It is the most unlike

scenario since it implies cooperation between the pro-Russian PSRM and pro-Western PPDA. It will divide ACUM Block since PAS and its leader Maia Sandu has excluded any possibility of cooperation with PSRM or PDM. However, PPDA leader Andrei Nastase has not excluded cooperation with PSRM claiming that his only goal is to topple PDM from power. Such a scenario would create a complex political situation in the country due to the fact that PSRM and PPDA have totally different political agenda. It would be a compromised co-existence having direct impact in Moldova's relations with the EU, NATO, Russia, and Romania. PPDA would achieve to enter the Government, but on the other hand the pro-western opposition would be divided and weakened.



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