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Elections

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

WE ARE THE NEW FACES AND WE WANT TO CHANGE OUR COUNTRY	3
<i>Interview with Svyatoslav Vakarchuk, Leader of the political party "Golos"</i>	
WHAT SHOULD UKRAINE EXPECT FROM THE NEW EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT?	5
<i>Yar Batoh</i>	
EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND THE EASTERN PARTNERSHIP: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES IN THE NEW TERM	13
<i>Maryia Hushcha</i>	
THE IMPACT OF EUROPEAN-RUSSIAN RAPPROCHEMENT BY THE IDENTITY AND DEMOCRACY PARTY ON UKRAINIAN-EUROPEAN INTEGRATION.	21
<i>Justin Tomczyk</i>	
ELECTIONS IN THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA AND THEIR CONSEQUENCES: ANOTHER POINT OF NO RETURN?	31
<i>Sergiy Gerasymchuk</i>	
PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS-2019 AND POSTELECTION CRISIS IN MOLDOVA: CHALLENGES AND PERSPECTIVES FOR UKRAINE	38
<i>Artem Fylypenko</i>	

ELECTIONS IN THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA AND THEIR CONSEQUENCES: ANOTHER POINT OF NO RETURN?

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Foreign Policy Council "Ukrainian Prism"

The article focuses on outcomes of the elections in the Republic of Moldova that took place on 24 February 2019, coalition negotiations between the Democratic Party of Moldova (DPM), Party of Socialists of the Republic of Moldova (PSRM), and ACUM bloc (which includes the Party of Action and Solidarity led by Maia Sandu and the Dignity and Truth Party of Andrei Nastase), final composition of the government and its impact on the Moldovan political agenda. The author argues that the key outcome of the elections is sort of a 'hybrid coalition' between explicitly pro-Western and explicitly pro-Russian forces that eventually may lead Moldova to a geopolitical deadlock.

It is typical for Eastern Europe that elections play a crucial role in defining foreign policy agenda of a country. The traditional division into rightist, leftist, and centrist political parties is often substituted by pro-Western and pro-Russian party division.

When the author was discussing the 2019 elections in the Republic of Moldova, most of his Moldovan vis-à-vis, who represented civil society and expert community, stressed that the 2019 elections will be a point of no return for the Republic of Moldova in terms of its foreign policy orientation. After decades of Moldovan attempts to find a 'third way' and a balance between the EU and Russia, the elections of 2019 had to outline the true preferences of the Moldovan voters and to define either a

pro-Russian or pro-Western vector of the Moldovan foreign policy.

The political forces competing for the votes of the Moldovan electorate were split into three segments. The ACUM bloc headed by Maia Sandu and Andrei Nastase was positioning itself as an explicitly pro-Western political force. ACUM was focusing on the necessity of pro-Western reforms, fighting corruption, counterweighing oligarchic regime in the Republic of Moldova.

Contrary to that, the PSRM and the President of Moldova Igor Dodon were rather supporting stronger relations with Russia and Russia-led integration projects, e.g. the Eurasian Union.¹ The PSRM attitude towards

1 *Moldova's Dodon: EU Uncertainty Highlights Need to Keep Close Russia Ties*, "Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty", 22 February 2019
[<https://www.rferl.org/a/moldova-dodon-eu-uncertainty-ties-russia/29784171.html> access: 04 October 2019].

the oligarchs was ambivalent. Although being de-facto engaged in cooperation with the DPM, known for representing interests of the Moldovan oligarch Vlad Plahotniuc, the PSRM preserved space for manoeuvre by exploiting populist slogans. The PSRM also expected that this approach might eventually even result in their majority in the Moldovan parliament. If this scenario would have come true, President Igor Dodon could have achieved the power that only President Vladimir Voronin had had in Moldova from 2001 until 2009, when Communist majority in the parliament secured support for all his initiatives.

In its turn, the DPM was declaring pro-Western orientation and was trying to justify its activities by exploiting a threatening narrative of a pro-Russian revenge, but the image of its leader Vlad Plahotniuc, often blamed for corruption, falling living standards, and the erosion of democracy in Moldova, was putting into question the credibility of such declarations and caused suspicion of the European leaders.

Optimists, mostly those engaged in campaigning in favour of the ACUM bloc, expected that the elections might bring into power the leaders of vocally pro-Western ACUM bloc and that would inevitably bring Moldova on the European path. However, such optimism was groundless and was not perceived as a feasible option.

When in February 2019 it became clear that no party secured a majority, it manifested that not the results of the elections but the composition of the governmental coalition and the respective government will be the indicator of geopolitical choice of Moldova in the future.

Most Probable Scenarios That Never Became Implemented

The most probable scenario of the coalition composition, judging from the comments of Moldovan politicians and political observers, was an alliance between the PSRM and DPM. Both political forces had common formal ideological background belonging to the Socialist International and, what is more, had a record of cooperation in the past during ad hoc voting in the parliament.

This scenario was also facilitated by the majoritarian-proportional electoral system that had been introduced despite the EU recommendations² by joint efforts of the DPM and the PSRM. The DPM controlled the defence and law enforcement agencies as well as had influence on most city mayors in Moldova and therefore had good chances to apply administrative resources for ensuring high electoral results. In its turn, with failures of the pro-European political forces and corruption-related scandals, as well as due to increased pro-Russian sentiments among Moldovan citizens, the PSRM had chances to improve its record of popularity and benefit from proportional elections.

On the one hand, this scenario could have ensured strength of the government and state institutions by securing strong majority in the parliament. On the other hand, such approach could have resulted in isolation of Moldova and in deterioration in the relations with the EU (neither Igor Dodon nor Vlad Plahotniuc managed to ensure close cooperation with the EU leadership), whereas opposing political parties from the ACUM bloc would have been shifted to the margins of Moldovan politics.

2 *Council Conclusions on the Republic of Moldova*, Council of the European Union, Foreign Affairs Council, 26 February 2019
[<http://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-6280-2018-INIT/en/pdf> access: 04 October 2019].

However, surprisingly, such a coalition was rejected by both the DPM and the PSRM. Furthermore, the DPM reached out to the ACUM bloc to form a coalition government, aiming to promote its ties with the West and even offered ACUM the position of the prime minister in the future coalition, yet also without success.

On 7 and 8 June 2019, the Moldovan Constitutional Court (allegedly controlled by the DPM) issued a controversial decision that new parliamentary elections had to be held if no government was formed by a three-month (90 consecutive days) deadline starting from its validation of the election results on 9 March. Arguably, being unable to keep the situation under control, Plahotniuc by this move attempted to reload the parliament.

The most probable outcome of such a scenario could have been a deep political crisis in domestic politics. Foreign policy could have undergone 'stagnation'. Neither the EU nor Russia was interested in interacting with an invalid government whose decisions could have been challenged by successors. As it was demonstrated by previous crises in the Republic of Moldova (due to incapability of the parliament to elect the president in 2009–2012, the president had the 'acting' status), such waiting for a political resolution could have run over time.

All these circumstances alongside with the pressure from external players both in the East and in the West caused the creation of a barely expected 'hybrid' coalition between ACUM and the PSRM. A 'temporary political agreement' was signed on 8 June by the leadership of these political forces enabling the formation of a parliamentary coalition and launching of the government established

to fight corruption. The governing coalition also declared its key objective – to 'de-oligarchise' state institutions that would now operate in the interest of the Moldovan people.

Weak attempts of the DPM to remain in power and to compete with the government of Maia Sandu failed. The cautious approach of Ukraine and Romania (both Ukrainian special envoy Viktor Kryzhanivsky and the advisor to the President of Romania Bogdan Aurescu visited Moldova and allegedly tried to set a dialogue among the DPM, PSRM, and ACUM) was neglected by both Moldovan political players and their Western partners, as well as by Russia. When the leader of the DPM left the country for an undisclosed destination³, there was no one to question the legitimacy of Maia Sandu's government. Both Ukraine and Romania despite the political cautiousness and despite being rather hesitant to accept legitimacy of the new government also followed the approach of the bigger players: the US, the EU, and Russia.

Pros of the 'Hybrid Coalition'

Since the very moment of its emerging, the coalition of the PSRM and ACUM (formed on 8 June) was perceived both internally and at the international level as a temporary and a tactical one. The key message of the signed cooperation agreement was based on passing the so-called 'captured state' legislative package. The Parliament of the Republic of Moldova denounced 'the current oligarchic regime, led by Vladimir Plahotniuc, leader of the Democratic Party, guilty of unlawful and unconstitutional control over the Office of the Prosecutor General, the judiciary system, National Anticorruption Centre, National Integrity Authority,

3 M. Necsutu, *Moldova Faces New Turmoil After ex-Leader Leaves*, "Balkan Insight", 17 June 2019 [https://balkaninsight.com/2019/06/17/moldova-faces-new-turmoil-after-ex-leader-leaves/ access: 04 October 2019].

Central Electoral Commission, Security and Intelligence Service, National Bank of Moldova, and other authorities, which must operate autonomously, independently from the political factor, being democratically monitored; established that the Democratic Party under Vladimir Plahotniuc acted as a party of totalitarian expression, abusing the public funds to promote projects in their own interests, institutions, positions, and law enforcement to intimidate and eliminated political opponents and to apply political corruption through blackmail and bribery; condemned endemic corruption – the main threat to the freedom, security, and well-being of the Republic of Moldova and its citizens; found that there is a particularly severe situation in the areas of justice, safeguarding and protection of human rights and attested a profound deterioration of basic standards of the civil rights and freedoms, including degrading treatment, torture and abusive deportation of political asylum seekers.⁴ Basically, the Parliament of the Republic of Moldova blamed Vlad Plahotniuc for using the state as a tool for his personal enrichment and exploiting state agencies for assuring his personal power.

The parliament found the support of key external players, which can be summarised by the Council of Europe statement in this regard. The statement said that the Council of Europe ‘praised the resilience and restraint of the Moldovan people during this crisis [...] noted that people have great expectations that the new coalition

will change the functioning of democratic institutions [...] urged the authorities to bear in mind that the legal steps taken today to “de-oligarchise” the country will have long-term effects and should therefore ultimately contribute to consolidating state institutions, strengthening their independence and ensuring that new legislation and its implementation comply with Council of Europe standards’.⁵

Most of the actors involved appreciated the pragmatic agreement, based on the definition of common political objectives. At the first glance, indeed, the distribution of power looked balanced within the newly established governing coalition. ACUM gained five out of 11 parliamentary commission chairs. At the same time, the cabinet of ministers included mostly ACUM nominees, whereas Maia Sandu became prime minister and Andrei Nastase became vice prime minister and minister of interior.

However, even a brief look into the details proves that the PSRM has also gained a lot, including, for example, the parliament speaker’s position. While a government can be overthrown with a simple majority vote (51 votes), two-thirds (61 votes) of the 101 votes in parliament are needed to change the speaker.

As rightly mentioned by Vlad Socor,⁶ the net result was a consensus between the coalition’s components for Moldova to resume its European course that

4 *Declaration on Recognition of the Captive Character of the Republic of Moldova Voted by the Parliament of Moldova on 8th of June 2019*, ACUM, 08 June 2019 [<https://acum.md/statement-on-recognition-of-the-captive-character-of-the-republic-of-moldova/> access: 03 October 2019].

5 *PACE Co-rapporteurs: ‘De-oligarchising’ the Republic of Moldova Should Aim at Consolidating State Institutions*, PACE, 27 July 2019 [<http://www.assembly.coe.int/nw/xml/News/News-View-EN.asp?newsid=7586&lang=2&cat=3> access: 04 October 2019].

6 V. Socor, *Moldova’s ‘Hybrid’ Governing Coalition: Physiognomy, Goals, Prospects*, “Eurasia Daily Monitor”, Vol. 16, No. 114, 07 August 2019 [<https://jamestown.org/program/moldovas-hybrid-governing-coalition-physiognomy-goals-prospects-part-two/> access: 04 October 2019].

Plahotniuc's system, arguably, had halted. At the level of declarations, the European course was understood in ways that insulate it from 'geopolitics' (although it looks rather as wishful thinking more than a pragmatic approach). It entailed the rule of law, implementation of the EU Association Agreement (including legislative harmonisation with the EU as well as European standards of governance and public administration), an attractive business environment, and locking Moldova into the EU's economic space (this latter goal is an accomplished fact due to the DCFTA⁷, although not in itself an indicator of Europeanisation).

So far, it is fair to admit that both parties to the coalition avoid any vocal confrontation with a view to the local elections, which are scheduled to be held in Moldova in autumn 2019. Prime Minister Maia Sandu expects the 'hybrid coalition' to last for a year at least. President Dodon's plans are much more ambitious and he expects up to four years of co-existence with ACUM, so as to share responsibility for the likely unpopular economic reforms and the attendant social costs.

Coalition's Pitfalls

The enthusiasm of President Dodon is understandable and can be explained by the fact that he is the one who benefitted most from the failure of Plahotniuc's regime as well as the creation of the 'hybrid coalition'. In addition to the speaker's position, there are a few political positions in the government that belong to his quota, e.g. the vice prime

minister for Transnistrian settlement and the defence minister. Dodon's advisers received both these positions.

Moreover, if under Plahotniuc's de-facto rule the role of the president of Moldova was limited to ceremonial, the new coalition assigned to him authority that the previous parliament had rejected, including a right to appoint the intelligence service chief. Besides, the coalition also gave the National Security Council, an advisory and consultative body chaired by the head of state, a right to subpoena secret documents.⁸ All these appointments and changes provide Igor Dodon with real leverages of influence, in particular in the area of reintegration of the Republic of Moldova and in the security field. Furthermore, even in case of government's failure and collapse of the coalition, Speaker of the Parliament Zinaida Greceanii will remain in place.



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Another achievement of President Dodon and his team is appointment of a member of the PSRM team as the head of the Constitutional Court of the Republic of Moldova.⁹ Earlier, the president's attempts to block governmental decisions resulted in his

7 The Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas (DCFTA) are free trade areas established by the EU with Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine.

8 V. Socor (n 6).

9 *Ex-Ambassador in Russia Headed Constitutional Court in Moldova*, "Evropeyska Pravda", 19 August 2019 [<https://www.eurointegration.com.ua/rus/news/2019/08/19/7099825/> access: 04 October 2019].

numerous suspensions in accordance with the Constitutional Court rulings. However, having a person loyal to his political force as the head of the Constitutional Court gives the president of Moldova certain guarantees of immunity and assures his 'veto' right. Generalising, in case the government and the president will get into disputes, the president may either end the coalition or block the governmental decision without significant risk to be suspended by the Constitutional Court.

On the top of all that, President Dodon also got a chance to improve his reputation significantly. The anti-corruption bodies of the Republic of Moldova have already whitewashed the reputation of the PSRM claiming there is no evidence of the Socialists being financed by the Russian Federation¹⁰ the respective accusations had been voiced by the team of Vlad Plahotniuc during the June crisis in the Republic of Moldova¹¹).

In addition, the PSRM will be able to receive further bonuses. For the general public and international community, the coalition consisting of the Socialists and pro-EU opposition will have signs of an inclusive government coalition that will look like an effort to overcome social polarisation and will demonstrate readiness of the PSRM for political dialogue with former opponents. What is more, representatives of the PSRM can speculate that it was their good will that paved the way for Maia Sandu as the head

of the government and their contribution to the failure of Vlad Plahotniuc was essential. These speculations may eventually propel the support of the electorate to the PSRM and in case of snap elections they may get even more votes than in the beginning of 2019. Also, President Dodon can utilize these arguments in 2020 during the presidential campaign, when he will bid for his second term.

Although the leaders of the ACUM-PSRM coalition avoid discussing geopolitical implications of their tandem, it is clear that Russia is also among the beneficiaries of the deal. Kamil Calus correctly points out that 'the Russian government wanted to present itself primarily as a pragmatic actor, which is both willing to cooperate with its Western partners and essential to resolving the important problems in the post-Soviet area'¹². This approach is also supported by some Western scholars¹³, who admit that the focus has shifted to the speed and effectiveness of the so-called de-oligarchisation process. Optimists believe that this would entail cleaning state institutions, the judiciary, and practices associated with the corrupt regime patronised by Vlad Plahotniuc. However, even most optimistic researchers still agree that being strongly focused on anti-corruption and European integration, the ACUM bloc will likely face some resistance from their more populist, pro-Russian coalition partner.¹⁴

10 Prosecutor's Office Checked the Video, in Which Dodon Confirmed Socialist Party Was financed from Russian Federation, "Evropeyska Pravda", 23 September 2019 [https://www.eurointegration.com.ua/rus/news/2019/09/23/7101069/ access: 04 October 2019].

11 Videoproof 3. Dodon Received Money Transfers from Russia, "PublikaMD", 09 June 2019 [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XyChe0PqCw access: 04 October 2019].

12 K. Calus, *End of the Dual Government in Moldova*, "OSW", 17 June 2019 [https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2019-06-17/end-dual-government-moldova access: 04 October 2019].

13 L. Allin, B. Jarabik, *Draining the Moldovan Swamp*, Wilson Center; A blog of the Kennan Institute, 21 June 2019 [https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/draining-the-moldovan-swamp access: 04 October 2019].

14 C. Rebegea, *The Long Road Ahead for Moldova*, CEPA, 03 July 2019 [https://www.cepa.org/no-euphoria-in-chisinau access: 04 October 2019].

Russian Long-term Strategy

Prior to the parliamentary elections in Moldova, Russia's destructive activities (in Eastern Europe and in Moldova itself) caused particular concern and required significant attention. As an interested and arrogant external player, Moscow has been acting dynamically to get total control over Chisinau and was looking for a pretext to interfere in the country's internal processes. Although during the June crisis Russia tried to persuade the West that it wants to be an honest broker and a constructive player, Moldova was and remains among geopolitical targets of Russia's neo-imperial 'russkiy mir' policy in Eastern Europe. Russia's attitude towards Moldova likely will remain offensive and oriented towards regaining geopolitical control over Moldova.



Moscow expects to regain such control primarily through bringing pro-Russian forces into power in Moldova and their radical change of the course of Moldova's state policy in accordance with the objectives of the Russian foreign policy

It is fair to assume that Moscow expects to regain such control primarily through bringing pro-Russian forces into power in Moldova and their radical change of the course of Moldova's state policy in accordance with the objectives of the Russian foreign policy. The existing 'hybrid' coalition is also perceived by the Kremlin as a tactical and an interim one. However, while in the West there are expectations that the coalition aims at reforming the country, Moscow perceives it as a tool for strengthening Igor Dodon and the PSRM by legal and legitimate means. When their power will be

assured, Russia, most likely, will increase its interference with the internal processes in Moldova. If ACUM creates crucial obstacles to the Kremlin's plans, Moscow will become more and more brutal.

Observations (strengthened power of Dodon and the PSRM, their chances to improve the record at the local and parliamentary elections as well as during the 2020 presidential campaign) prove that the current strategy taken up by Moscow with regard to Chisinau is of upstream nature and goes from subtle through moderate (within political dialogue and based on democratic and legal procedures) to a rude (pressing, destabilising, 'revolutionary') and even explicit coercive intervention with the view to capturing power by pro-Russian forces and further planting of the 'russkiy mir' paradigm.

These risks should not be overlooked and cannot be ignored by the representatives of pro-Western forces in the Republic of Moldova and by their partners in the US and in the EU. Otherwise indeed the interim 'hybrid' coalition may pave the way not only to de-oligarchisation of the Moldovan state but also to its dismantling in favour of Russian interests in the region. If it happens, then finally it will be a point of no return for the Republic of Moldova.

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