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Elections

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PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS-2019 AND POSTELECTION CRISIS IN MOLDOVA: CHALLENGES AND PERSPECTIVES FOR UKRAINE

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Parliamentary elections of 2019 in the Republic of Moldova became a turning point in modern history of this country. The winners' inability to form a coalition and a government led to a political crisis, which was resolved by creating an alliance of two political forces with diametrically opposite political positions – the pro-Russian Party of Socialists of the Republic of Moldova and pro-European political bloc ACUM. These political opponents united against the ruling Democratic Party of Moldova and its leader, tycoon Vladimir Plahotniuc. The crisis was resolved thanks to a common position of main external actors – the USA, Russia, and the European Union. This created a fundamentally new reality not only for Moldova but also for Ukraine. There was the actualization of old challenges, including Moldovan pro-Russian forces' return to power and the creation of conditions for the Transnistrian settlement according to the Russian model.

Parliamentary Elections and June Crisis

On 24 February 2019, parliamentary elections took place in Moldova. For the first time, the elections to the legislature were held under a mixed system: 50 MPs were elected by party lists, 51 by single-seat constituencies. Fifteen political parties and blocs took part in these elections. Under the current law, political parties had to overcome the 6% barrier to be elected to the parliament, and electoral blocs – the 8% barrier.

The introduction of the mixed system was beneficial to the ruling Democratic Party of Moldova (PDM), which had been losing

popularity due to corruption scandals. PDM leader – tycoon Vladimir Plahotniuc – became a kind of embodiment of corruption and misconduct, concentrating all the negatives of a party rule. In fact, PDM had controlled not only the parliament and the government, but also the Constitutional Court (CC), judiciary, and law enforcement of Moldova.

A major electoral struggle unfolded between three leading political forces: the ruling PDM, the pro-Russian and pro-presidential Party of Socialists of the Republic of Moldova (PSRM), and the pro-European ACUM bloc, which was formed by two political parties – Action and Solidarity Party (PAS) and Dignity and Truth Platform Party (DA).


As a result of the parliamentary elections, the PSRM won 35 seats in the parliament, and the Democratic Party of Moldova received 30 seats. The political bloc ACUM took the third place, with 26 seats. 'Șor' Party won seven seats. Also three independent candidates were elected¹.

None of the political parties received a majority sufficient to form the government. For three months, negotiations on the establishment of a governing coalition had been unsuccessful. Both the Socialists and ACUM had stated their reluctance to form a coalition with the Democratic Party.

Only on 08 June 2019, the creation of a new majority coalition between the PSRM and the bloc ACUM was announced. A new coalition government was announced. Representative of the PSRM, Zinaida Greceanii, was elected the parliament speaker; Maya Sandu, the leader of the Action and Solidarity Party, became the prime minister, and Andrei Nastase, the leader of the Dignity and Truth Platform Party, became the deputy prime minister and minister of the interior.

PDM and its leader Vladimir Plahotniuc, who was still in power in Moldova, did not like this option. On 07 June, the day before the coalition was formed, the Democrat-controlled Constitutional Court ruled that three months allowed for forming a coalition should be calculated from the date of the MPs' mandate approval – 09 March. After three months, according to the constitution, the president has a right to dissolve the parliament. However, the Constitutional Court did not clearly set a date and only the next day, on 08 June, explained that the last day for forming a new government was 07 June 2019. It also declared Zinaida

Greceanii's election as the speaker of the parliament unconstitutional. By the same decision, the CC recognised all documents that would be adopted by the new Moldovan parliament as illegal².



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On 09 June, the Constitutional Court suspended President of the Republic of Moldova Igor Dodon from his office. The website of the CC reported that Igor Dodon violated the constitution by not dissolving the parliament. Powers of the president were temporarily transferred to Prime Minister Pavel Filip (Democratic Party), who also became provisionally the acting president. In his new capacity, Pavel Filip dissolved the parliament and authorised early elections on 06 September.

As a result, a dual regime was created in the country, when two governments and two presidents were in parallel, a number of government buildings were blocked by PDM supporters, and police leadership refused to obey the new government. However, the Democratic Party government gradually lost support of the external actors – the US, the EU, and the Russian Federation.

External players have played a key role in resolving the crisis in favour of the new coalition. The most significant was the position of the United States of America,

1 *Rezultate lealegerilor au fost remise Curții Constituționale. Ceurmează? (The Results of the Elections Were Submitted to the Constitutional Court. What is Next?)*, "Europalibera.org", 04 March 2019 [<https://moldova.europalibera.org/a/29802866.html>].

2 *Moldovan President Suspended, Snap Elections Called amid Deepening Crisis*, "Euronews", 09 June 2019 [<https://www.euronews.com/2019/06/09/moldovan-court-relives-dodon-of-duty-as-president>].

which until the very last moment hesitated to recognise the new coalition. In fact, an opinion exists that it is a visit of the US ambassador in Moldova to PDM's office in Chisinau that forced the Democrats to end resistance and to terminate the dual regime.



External players have played a key role in resolving the crisis in favour of the new coalition

The reasons for the defeat of the Democratic Party were the unpopularity of this political force and of Vladimir Plahotniuc personally within Moldova, namely:

- A high level of corruption of the ruling top and actual concentration of power in the hands of Vladimir Plahotniuc's close circle;
- A high level of informal relations of high-ranking officials (kumetrizm – nepotism). In fact, Plahotniuc controlled the parliament, the government, and the judiciary. A striking example was a cancellation of Chisinau mayoral election results in June 2018, which were won by Andrei Nastase, the leader of the Dignity and Truth Platform. This provoked a negative reaction both internally and externally;
- Plahotniuc contributed to Igor Dodon's victory in the 2016 presidential elections. The Democrats' policies were aimed at positioning themselves as a single pro-European force and engaging support of the EU and the United States. From this perspective, the victory of Igor Dodon, who represents a pro-Russian vector, facilitated such a positioning, in contrast to the possible victory of pro-European Maya Sandu, but as a result, it led to the decrease of the Eurointegration dialogue in Moldova.

- Plahotniuc's entourage, including former Speaker of the Parliament Adrian Kandu, is considered to be involved in a case of withdrawing the equivalent of USD 1 billion from the banks of the Republic of Moldova.
- External partners were dissatisfied with the Democratic Party regime. It did not suit Russia because of openly anti-Russian actions. The EU was annoyed by the high level of corruption and authoritarian style of government, its failure to comply with the law. Plahotniuc had some support from the United States, which saw him as a guarantee of stability and a pro-Western course, but they were also dissatisfied with the corruption of the ruling regime.

100 Days of a 'Strange' Coalition: Strengthening Dodon's Influence

Thus, a coalition of political forces with different ideological orientations appeared in the Republic of Moldova: the pro-Russian PSRM, whose formal leader is Moldova's President Igor Dodon and the pro-European bloc ACUM. From the beginning, the leaders of these forces emphasised that their main task was 'de-oligarchisation' – removal of the state apparatus from adherents of Vladimir Plahotniuc and the Democratic Party, justice reform, and fight against corruption. They called for a moratorium on 'ideological and geopolitical differences' (Igor Dodon).

Most positions in the new government were given to ACUM, first of all, ministries responsible for economic and social dimensions. Also the pro-European parties received the post of minister of foreign affairs (Nicu Popescu).

Among the key positions received by the Party of Socialists are the deputy prime minister for reintegration (Vasile Sova) and the minister of defence (Pavel Voicu). Vasile Sova has a long diplomatic career and participated in the Transnistrian settlement

process. Prior to his appointment, he held the position of an advisor to the president of Moldova on reintegration.

As soon as the Constitutional Court of Moldova overturned its previous judgments, which laid a legal basis for the dual regime and the crisis, the legitimacy of the elected speaker of the parliament and the formed government was confirmed. Subsequently, all judges of the Constitutional Court resigned. Former PDM leader Vladimir Plahotniuc left the country. Most of PDM's and personally Plahotniuc's adherents left their positions in the governmental structures, which were taken by the coalition's representatives. The Democratic Party has lost almost all its positions and influence.

During the crisis, Ukraine took a restrained position, not openly supporting any of the parties to the conflict due to fears about a possibility of imposing a settlement model on Moldova under the Russian scenario. It is possible that this model can be applied in Ukraine in the future for the conflict settlement in Donbas. A statement issued by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine on 09 June noted, 'Currently, it is important for the country and the security situation in the region to prevent external interference aimed at implementing the Russian scenario of federalization of the country'. On 12 June, Special Representative of Ukraine for Transnistrian Settlement Vyktor Kryzhanivskyy had a working visit to the Republic of Moldova, where he met with both sides.

Three months of the existence of the 'strange' coalition in Moldova showed that fears of the Ukrainian side were not unfounded. Igor Dodon was one of the main beneficiaries of Vladimir Plahotniuc's removal from power.

In the short term, he strengthened his positions in power. The coalition adopted changes to the law, which restored the president's partial control of the Information and Security Service (SIS). Later, Secretary General of the Presidential Administration Ruslan Folca was appointed as the director of the National Anti-Corruption Centre. Thus, Igor Dodon gained control of another force structure. Victor Gaiciuc, a person who expressed enthusiasm about the separatists of Donbas, became the head of the Security Council.

On 19 August, despite a negative reaction from society, a member of the parliament representing the Socialists, Vladimir Turkan, was elected the chairman of the Constitutional Court. Prime Minister Maya Sandu criticised the election, saying, 'It cannot be allowed that de-oligarchization of the state from the Plahotniuc's regime ends with the capture of an important body by any other political force, whatever it may be'. It has also emerged that the election of a PSRM representative as the chairman of the Constitutional Court was a result of certain political arrangements³.

Although formally foreign policy is a prerogative of the ministry of foreign affairs and European integration, which is controlled by ACUM, Igor Dodon, both personally and through his Defense Minister Pavel Voicu, has the ability to influence foreign policy, in particular, relations with Russia. While ACUM representatives focused on working with Western partners, Igor Dodon and PSRM representatives were active in the East. The minister of defence of Moldova twice, in July and August, visited Russia, where he negotiated restoration of cooperation between the two countries, which had been interrupted during the

3 Moldova intră sub Igor Dodon, asistat de blocul ACUM (Moldova Enters under Igor Dodon, Assisted by the ACUM bloc), "DW", 19 August 2019 [https://www.dw.com/ro/moldova-intr%C4%83-sub-igor-dodon-asistat-de-blocul-acum/a-50083730].

previous leadership of the country. The president also, bypassing the government, invited Minister of Defense of the Russian Federation Sergey Shoigu to celebrate the anniversary of Moldova's 'liberation from fascism'. Formally, Shoigu's visit was 'unofficial'. But the Russian defense minister not only visited the unrecognised Transnistrian Moldovan Republic but also met with Dodon.

Despite the declared desire to avoid disagreements between coalition members over geopolitical and ideological issues and to join forces around 'de-oligarchisation' issues, there are more and more differences between coalition members on ideological questions.



During the crisis, Ukraine took a restrained position, not openly supporting any of the parties to the conflict due to fears about a possibility of imposing a settlement model on Moldova under the Russian scenario

Igor Dodon took the initiative to celebrate the 75th anniversary of the 'liberation of Moldova from fascism' on 24 August. For a pro-European-oriented part of Moldovan society, this date is questionable, since the very fact of Bessarabia's accession to the USSR in 1940 is regarded as an annexation of a part of Romanian territory, which, same as the Red Army's second arrival in Moldova in 1944, was accompanied by mass repressions. In her turn, Maya Sandu

initiated a commemoration of victims of totalitarian regimes on 23 August. The idea sparked criticism from pro-Russian propagandists, who accused the prime minister of provocation.

Is There a New Plan for the Transnistrian Settlement?


Despite the fact that shortly after the formation of the coalition, both representatives of the ACUM bloc and Igor Dodon himself declared that federalisation was unacceptable for Moldova, the president began to take initiatives to politically resolve the Transnistrian conflict. He has made a number of vocal statements about prospects of the Transnistrian settlement. Thus, at the end of July, Igor Dodon emphasised that taking into account 'the internal consensus of political forces represented in the government of the country', as well as support of the current parliamentary majority by Western partners, Russia, and other external forces, he believes that the most favourable situation is emerging for a joint search for a political solution to the Transnistrian issue⁴. He later expressed his desire to meet with the president of the unrecognised Transnistrian Moldovan Republic (PMR), Igor Krasnoselsky, in autumn.

In the beginning of September, in an interview with Spiegel magazine, Dodon said, 'Transnistria in the Moldovan state will receive a special status in the form of a very strong autonomy'. According to him, the presidential administration has developed a concept that will be presented to the coalition partners⁵.

4 *Додон в День Конституции: Несмотря на трудности, Молдова состоялась как независимое государство на международной арене! (Dodon on Constitution Day: Despite Difficulties, Moldova Is Accomplished as an Independent State on the International Arena)*, "KP.md", 29 July 2019 [<https://www.kp.md/online/news/3554456/>].

5 *President Dodon Sees Transnistria as "A Very Strong Autonomy" within Moldova*, "Infotag", 04 September 2019 [<http://www.infotag.md/rebellion-en/278537/>].

Deputy Prime Minister for Reintegration Vasile Sova recently expressed a similar idea. In an interview with the Russian news agency RIA Novosti, he stressed that in the near future a coordination mechanism would be created, which would deal with the conflict in Transnistria. Representatives of the presidential administration, parliament, government, and other agencies would take part in the process. At the same time, he said, there are no requisites for changing the format of the peacekeeping mission from a military to a civilian one⁶; this came as completely opposite to the opinion of the previous leadership of the Republic of Moldova, which emphasised the necessity to change the mission format.



***The Shoigu's initiative
for utilizing munitions in
Kolbasna is the first test of
the West's willingness to accept
Russian rules of the game***

Igor Dodon's initiatives coincided in time with initiatives and declarations of the Russian officials. During his visit to Moldova, Russian Minister of Defense Sergey Shoigu proposed starting a process of utilizing munitions stored in a warehouse in the village of Kolbasna. According to some estimates, this warehouse, located on the territory of uncontrolled Transnistria, stores about 20,000 tons of munitions.

From the other side, Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Lavrov declared principles on which Transnistrian settlement could be reached: 'special status within the Republic of Moldova, provided that Moldova retains its sovereignty, i.e. it will not be absorbed as a state and remain neutral, meaning it will not join military-political blocs'⁷.

Igor Dodon's statement about willingness to give a 'very strong autonomy' to Transnistria also has provoked a negative reaction from the coalition partners. Prime Minister Maya Sandu stressed that she did not know what Mr. Dodon was talking about, as ACUM remain within their previous positions: A political solution can be found only in the context of preserving territorial integrity of the Republic of Moldova, with a certain autonomy of Transnistria, like Gagauzia's model⁸. Thus, in the ruling coalition, there is no common position about how to solve the Transnistrian conflict. At the same time, Transnistrian leadership continues to insist on developing independence of their unrecognised republic⁹.

What Are the Challenges for Ukraine?

The development of the situation in Moldova creates additional challenges for Ukraine:

1. Strengthening of the pro-Russian forces, which can lead to a changing vector of Moldova's foreign policy: So far, despite the differences, the ruling PSRM-ACUM coalition

6 *Власти Молдовы прокомментировали идею о замене миротворцев в Приднестровье (Moldovan Authorities Commented on the Idea of Replacing Peacekeepers in Transnistria)*, "Point.md", 04 September 2019 [<https://point.md/ru/novosti/politika/vlasti-moldovy-prokomentirovali-ideiu-o-zamene-mirotvortsev-v-pridnestrove>].

7 *Лавров: Россия не признаёт независимость Приднестровья (Lavrov: Russia Does Not Recognise the Independence of Transnistria)*, "OMG", 16 August 2019 [<https://omg.md/index.php?newsid=17049>].

8 *Premier Sandu Does Not Believe in Transnistrian Conflict Settlement Now*, "Infotag", 05 September 2019 [<http://www.infotag.md/rebellion-en/278561/>].

9 *PMR Has Proved Its Viability and Sustainability – Tiraspol Leader*, "Infotag", 02 September 2019 [<http://www.infotag.md/rebellion-en/278505/>].

continues to maintain unity. However, political experience gives some advantages to Igor Dodon, who strengthens his position both inside and outside the country.

As ACUM is responsible for the economic bloc of the government, the pro-European forces are more vulnerable to public criticism – which is working in favour of the Socialists. ACUM thus becomes responsible for both the curtailment of social programs that have operated under the Democratic Party and for the unpopular reforms that have to be implemented.

2. The victory of the pro-Russian forces creates additional conditions for settlement of the Transnistrian conflict under the Russian scenario. The purpose of this scenario is reintegration of the separatist region with rights to a broad autonomy, which implies coordination of the main directions of domestic and especially foreign policy. At the same time, a key goal is achieved – the progress of Moldova towards the European Union is halted, and conditions are created to prevent Moldova from joining NATO (although Moldova is a neutral country under the constitution). And most importantly, this model can become universal for conflict resolution in the post-Soviet space. First of all – in Ukraine.

The Shoigu's initiative for utilizing munitions in Kolbasna is the first test of the West's

willingness to accept Russian rules of the game. Russia is trying to act as a peacemaker to get out of the sanctions regime. Given the latest sentiments in the European Union, there is a chance that Russian proposals will be welcomed in the West. At the same time, Russia does not want to withdraw its troops from Moldova and intends to dispose of only unconditional munitions.

3. Success in Moldova creates conditions for Russia's participation along with other international actors in the creation of spheres of influence, a system that can conditionally be called Yalta-2. The basis of this system, along with the existence of spheres of influence, is the possibility of deciding the fate of states without a participation of the states themselves, by the will of the 'great powers'.

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