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Moldova's Power Transition: A Chance for the EU to Act in Its Eastern Neighborhood

by **Cristina Gherasimov**

A new transfer of power has taken place in the EU's Eastern neighborhood that raises vigilant hopes for the future of the Eastern Partnership. This is a chance for Moldova to address its democratic deficit and rebuild its international reputation after vested interests captured its state institutions. The new government, however, needs the support of EU partners. While this pro-reformist executive brings big opportunities – including for the EU – it also poses risks that need to be cautiously considered.

Moldova, a tiny country between Ukraine and Romania, one of the six Eastern Partnership countries, kept the EU on high alert last week (June 7-14, 2019). The country was submerged into a political crisis on June 8 after the outgoing government refused to cede power to a legitimately appointed new one with opposition leader, Maia Sandu, as Prime Minister. Six days later, after intense international and domestic pressure, the former government finally resigned.

The parliamentary elections in Moldova on February 24, 2019, produced a hung parliament in which none of the represented parties were able to independently form a government. After months of protracted negotiations, an unexpected coalition was formed. The pro-Russian Socialists' Party – which is informally led by President Igor Dodon – and the ACUM ('Now') bloc – which is formed of two strongly pro-European parties led by Maia Sandu and Andrei Nastase – joined forces despite different views on major issues such as the country's foreign policy. This alliance, against all geopolitical odds, pushed the former ruling Democratic Party into opposition. Its party leader Vlad Plahotniuc – who transformed Moldova in a captured state, making use of all state resources to maintain himself in power during the past five years – fled the

country. The new government now has the complex task of cleansing the system of the consequences of his oligarchic rule and the corrupt practices that strangled the economy, political opposition, civil society, and the independent media.

The EU seems ready to help. On June 15, the EU Commissioner for European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations, Johannes Hahn, promised "substantial EU support and advice" to the new government. Two days later, the Foreign Affairs Council in Luxembourg discussed the country's political situation. Commissioner Hahn is also paying a visit to Chisinau on June 19 to discuss with Prime Minister Sandu how the two parties could work together to more quickly defreeze the EU's macro-financial assistance for Moldova. Both sides waited for this new political opening to restore Moldovan democracy, which was rapidly fading under Plahotniuc's tight grip.

Upcoming Opportunities for the EU

The EU could test its will and capacity for a renewed Eastern policy in the region. The fact that EU member states did not manage to issue a joint statement on the political crisis that unfolded last week is a reflection of the lack of a common vision and, more broadly, the existence of differentiated interests of various EU actors in the shared neighborhood. This also explains EU's weak capacity and lack of tools to frame a clear Eastern policy toward its neighbors in a year when the EU should be celebrating a decade of the Eastern Partnership. A coordinated support for the Sandu government could be an opportunity for the EU to clarify for itself as a global player how far it is willing and able to go to support complex democratization processes in the neighborhood in the context of rising power competition in Eastern Partnership countries.

A strong and stable democracy in Moldova is in the EU's best interest if it wants to have a safe eastern border. By taking an active role in supporting the new government, the EU can help solve mounting security concerns. ACUM campaigned on an anti-corruption platform aimed at dismantling Plahotniuc's oligarchic regime and reset Moldova's track record of pro-European reforms. Sandu's government also prioritizes the strengthening of the rule of law, the reform of the judiciary, and the creation of economic opportunities for its citizens to invest and work in the country. By strengthening such processes – which have been highlighted by EU actors numerous times as lagging behind in implementation – the EU can help restore security and stability at its border in a country that became a serious source of brain drain, labor migration, and money laundering schemes.

The Sandu government has the political will and the human capital to transform Moldova into a success that would also benefit the EU. The EU once labeled Moldova the “poster child” of the Eastern Partnership. That was too early and too rushed, since key reforms that would consolidate democracy were not implemented once they started challenging the vested interests of the ruling elites who eventually blocked the reform process. The EU and its member states learned their lesson and became more cautious when assessing reform implementation in the region. They do need to showcase, however, that the Eastern Partnership is a credible initiative that is able, in the long run, to secure a “ring of friends” for Europe. It would also give EU partners a strong reason to continue supporting democratic efforts in the Eastern Partnership region in the context of the negotiations of the next Multiannual Financial Framework for 2021-2027, the EU's long-term budget. This is particularly important in light of the difficulties the EU also currently encounters

in the other two frontrunners in the region, Georgia and Ukraine. Key reforms in these states have also stalled, vested interests are strongly entrenched in their politics, and each deepened its conflicts with Russia as a result of expressing their Euro-Atlantic aspirations. Of all previous governments, it is the current one that has the potential to prove that the EU has not lost on the efforts it has invested in Moldova.

Hidden Risks for the EU

The EU may not see results any time soon. The last decade has shown on numerous occasions that transformation processes in the post-Soviet space, particularly in countries with entrenched vested interests in their domestic politics, are complex phenomena that first and foremost require time. Moreover, a top-down approach to democratization proved mostly unsustainable so far. Principles of good governance need to be embedded at the societal level, and only then can they be effectively transposed into politics. The vast majority of genuine pro-reformers in Armenia, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine come from civil society. Reforms have the chance to be organically embraced only where there is strong societal support for pro-European aspirations. The EU needs to be cautiously aware that the creation of the Sandu coalition government is an act of political maturity and an important step forward in restoring democracy. But the new executive also may need to take a few steps back considering the complex underpinnings that the alliance with the pro-Russian Socialists rests on.

Equally important, the EU and its member states have to be prepared not to see results at all. The coalition government has at its core irreconcilable ideological and geopolitical differences that can significantly shorten its lifespan and throw the country into snap elections. ACUM advocates for closer ties with the EU, while Socialists see Moldova integrating with Russian-led regional projects. Investing support and diplomatic efforts into this government may result in another missed opportunity and even more Eastern Partnership fatigue.

The Russia factor is strongly present in this alliance and may undermine the full extent of reforms if these prove to jeopardize its interests in Moldova. As a result, EU actors may get caught up in a renewed geopolitical competition with Russia. Moscow made it clear that it supports this coalition government, even while the political crisis was quickly unfolding. By having the pro-Russian Socialists in the coalition, Russia has simultaneously ensured a seat at the table and punished Plahotniuc for challenging its elites. How dependent on Moscow the

Socialists and President Dodon himself are not clearly known. President Dodon, however, never shies away from publicly displaying his close relationship with Putin. A recent video – which was leaked by the Democratic Party of Plahotniuc – catches the President with Plahotniuc during coalition negotiations admitting that the Russians allegedly support the Socialists with financial allocations of \$700,000-\$800,000 per month. While President Dodon has denied the accusations of receiving foreign funding – which is banned under Moldovan legislation – it is clear that whatever amount of support he gets from Kremlin, he would not have entered this coalition without the approval of the Russians. In light of competing priorities, the EU – and certain member states who want a better relationship with Russia – may be caught unwilling or unprepared to play an active role if this disturbs their already difficult relationship with Russia.

Moldova illustrates that democratization in the post-Soviet space is by far not a linear process as many would

expect. It is clear that the risks for the EU of supporting this coalition government are as big as the opportunities it could bring if the executive delivers on the reforms it committed to under the EU-Moldova Association Agreement and the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement. The European community could contribute to a democratic reset in Moldova, which is in the EU's best interest. The EU could equally repeat the same mistakes again. The EU, however, strives to be a global player. If so, this is an opportunity to prove it – even if the stakes of doing so are high.

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