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Voting under watchful foreign eyes

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The last week before the parliamentary elections in Moldova is not lacking in drama. On Monday morning, police arrested 74 people who were allegedly preparing for post-election riots in Serbian training camps. In the evening, President Maia Sandu warned of a Russian takeover of the country if the wrong people win on Sunday. Hundreds of millions of euros are on their way to the republic to buy hundreds of thousands of votes, she said. If 'pro-Russian forces' win the election, Moldova could become the starting point for a Russian attack on Odessa in Ukraine. The president's message is clear: only her Party of Action and Solidarity (PAS), which has ruled alone until now, can preserve independence and peace. On Tuesday, the Kremlin countered with a warning of an imminent NATO occupation of Moldova. Igor Dodon, former president and leader of the Patriotic electoral bloc, which is ahead in some of the notoriously unreliable polls, sees his country, in Trumpian fashion, in a defensive battle against a 'liberal-globalist Brussels diktat.'

This is not the first time Moldova has had an election dominated by alarmism, geopolitics, and the question of East vs West. The last one was the presidential election a year ago, which was coupled with a referendum on EU integration. Here, a lot of drama was followed by a rapid easing of tensions: on the night after the first round of voting, Maia Sandu spoke of up to 300 000 votes being bought, but ended her rhetoric on vote buying relatively abruptly when the results from the diaspora arrived later and it became clear that the referendum had been successful. Although several dozen criminal proceedings were subsequently opened and a number of judgments handed down, the investigations were ultimately unable to conclusively prove the extent of the alleged fraud.

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The challenge of Moscow's influence via bribery and media manipulation is real. The only point of contention is its scale. Many Moldovans suspect that the PAS government is exaggerating the problem. Polarisation is considered a successful campaign strategy,

then.

especially in view of the government's very poor economic record. Following the war-induced recession of 2022, growth has stagnated and consumer prices have risen by over 60 per cent since then. Gas prices for households have tripled during the PAS' term in office, and electricity prices have more than doubled — a consequence of the severing of energy ties with Russia. The proportion of the population living below the absolute poverty line rose from a quarter to a third. At the same time, sales of premium cars boomed — an indication that the abundant aid money flowing in after Russia's attack on Ukraine benefited some, but not all.

Collateral damage

Against this backdrop, the PAS seems to believe that it can only win if it succeeds in overshadowing people's everyday concerns with geopolitics. In doing so, it knows that the European Union is firmly on its side: Friedrich Merz, Emmanuel Macron, and Donald Tusk honoured the 2.5 million-strong republic at the end of August on the occasion of its Independence Day. EU Enlargement Commissioner Marta Kos announces almost weekly that EU accession – provided the right government is in place – is only a matter of time. There are a number of reasons for this clear support for the 'pro-Europeans.' The economic crisis is primarily a consequence of Russia's war of aggression, and the stabilisation of Moldova is in Europe's interest. But at the same time, narratives about the fight against Russia's hybrid war fit well with the times.

Not all criticism of the government's course is sponsored by Moscow. Moreover, following the widespread failure of the European Neighbourhood Policy elsewhere, Brussels urgently needs a shining example of reform. Deviations from democratic standards in media policy, access to elections, or botched judicial reform are generously overlooked — if not celebrated as evidence of geopolitical serenity or a resilient democracy. After all, Brussels' financial support, already around €300 million or about 1.8 per cent of Moldova's economic output in the current year alone, is absolutely critical. Among other things, the EU's millions are helping to mitigate the worst effects of the energy price crisis through compensation payments to households.

Little discussion is given to the question of what collateral damage EU policy is causing in Moldova. Within the country, the discrediting of any

opposition is exacerbating social divisions. According to surveys, up to two-thirds of the population perceive visits by European dignitaries as one-sided support for the PAS. EU fatigue is spreading. The PAS has failed to promote Western integration through national consensus. Instead, EU accession threatens to become caught up in the wheels of polarisation.

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That said, it is difficult to discern a Russian master plan to seize power in Chişinău. Two electoral blocs cobbled together from a total of eight parties – Dodon's Patriots and the so called, Alternative led by Chişinău Mayor Ion Ceban – are the most promising contenders. Added to this is Our Party led by the colourful entrepreneur Renato Usatîi, who gives the strong impression that he is prepared to support the highest bidder after the election. Even if these nine parties collectively win more than 50 per cent of the vote, it is highly unlikely that they would be able to form a government together. The party leaders are already finding it difficult to hide their mutual animosity.

Russia's strategy, in which the oligarch Ilan Shor, who fled to Moscow, is also actively involved, is therefore primarily aimed at disruption. However, the Moldovan authorities seem to have largely contained Shor's networks in the country. Evghenia Guțul, the governor of the Gagauzia region elected in 2023 and close to Shor, was sentenced to seven years in prison in early August for illegal party financing. The harsh sentence against the mother of two children was apparently also intended to have a deterrent effect. For weeks, the police have been keeping up the pressure of their investigation with numerous house searches. Street protests have also been largely discredited due to the well-documented flow of money to 'activists.' Moldova's middle class and youth may be critical of the PAS government, but they do not want to be seen as Moscow's henchmen demonstrating against the government.

The need to unite

The most likely outcome of the election is a simple majority for the PAS, which is seeking to achieve this by mobilising the diaspora to the maximum extent possible. The number of polling stations abroad has been increased by 67 to 301 compared to last year. However, in areas where the government expects little support, voting options have been restricted — this includes Russia and the breakaway region of

Transnistria. Opinion polls do not capture the mood in the diaspora, and 30 to 40 per cent of those surveyed in the country recently said they were still undecided. The PAS is banking on victory amid this uncertainty. The search for a coalition partner has apparently been postponed until after the election. Although the polarising election campaign has not made the task any easier, there is hope that sufficient opportunism and a breakup of the opposition electoral blocs will prevail.

A future Moldovan government that is serious about European integration must therefore unite the country instead of further dividing it.

Even the more unlikely scenario of a government without the PAS would not be a tragedy. After all, Moldova has no alternative to Europe as long as Ukraine lies between it and Russia. Only 3.3 per cent of all exports now go to Russia, down from well over half in the past. A resumption of the formerly lucrative gas relations is impossible as Kyiv controls the transit. Most importantly, the Moldovan elites' turn toward Europe has a tradition dating back more than 20 years. It began under President Vladimir Voronin after his failed attempt to resolve the conflict over the breakaway region of Transnistria with the help of the Kremlin at the end of 2003. Voronin and his Communist Party are now part of the patriotic electoral bloc. Despite all the pro-Russian rhetoric, they will have no interest in losing state sovereignty or restricting their foreign policy options.

Paradoxically, the Transnistria conflict remains the central obstacle on the path to EU membership. This is because, as Brussels constantly reiterates, albeit mostly behind closed doors, after the experience with Cyprus, it has vowed not to allow any more countries with unresolved territorial conflicts to join the EU. A future Moldovan government that is serious about European integration must therefore unite the country instead of further dividing it. If future elections were no longer a decisive battle over geopolitical orientation, the Europeanisation of Moldova would have a greater chance of success.



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