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Moldova's Parliamentary Elections of November 2014

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Highlights

- Ruling pro-European parties and long-established Communist Party lost significantly.
- Moldova's Socialist Party were the biggest winner.
- The elections concern more than ethnic and geopolitical cleavages.
- Endemic corruption is harming established parties' reputation and electability.
- Moldova's elections demonstrate continued electoral and institutional volatility.

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1 Background

The parliamentary elections of December 2014 in the Republic of Moldova (hereafter Moldova) were the eighth elections since independence from the USSR, held 20 years after the first competitive parliamentary elections (1994) and conducted 5 years after the Twitter Revolution (2009) that brought down Vladimir Voronin's Communist (PCRM) government. Given Moldova's ethnic mix, its geographical location and complex history as well as the continuing frozen conflict in the de facto state of Transnistria (where Moldovan elections are not conducted), the media have framed Moldova's elections through the prism of ethnic politics and as pivotal in indicating Moldova's future geopolitical orientation.

The 2014 elections were interesting for several reasons. Firstly, while the pro-European parties (Liberal Democrats/PLDM, Democrats/PDM and Liberals/PL) managed to form a coalition after 2009, their 2014 vote share fell significantly (Table 1). PCRM also suffered significant losses, while a new party, the Socialists (PSRM), gained from the structural weaknesses of both PCRM and the pro-European parties. However, these results need to be analysed not through a simple division between ethnic Russian speakers looking to Russia, and Moldovan/Romanian speakers looking to the West and the EU (e.g. Herszenhorn, 2014). Rather, we must recognize that voters' choices are not driven only by ethnic politics, geopolitical or transitional attitudes but also by the incapacity and unwillingness of Moldova's political elite to reform political institutions and political culture. Secondly, regional divides need to be contextualised within Moldova's electoral system, where, as a

single constituency, it is the share of absolute votes (not regionally proportional votes) that need to be analysed; any regional divides are outweighed by demographics.

Table1: Votes and Seats Won in 2010 and 2014

Party	2010			2014			Change
	Votes	%	Seats	Votes	%	Seats	
Socialist Party of Moldova (PSRM)				327,910	20.51	25	25
Liberal-Democratic Party (PLDM)	506,253	29.42	32	322,188	20.18	23	-9
Communist Party of Moldova (PCRM)	677,069	39.34	42	279,372	17.48	21	-21
Democratic Party (PDM)	218,620	12.7	15	252,489	15.8	19	4
Liberal Party (PL)	171,336	9.96	12	154,507	9.67	13	1
Alliance "Our Moldova"(AMN)	35,289	2.05	0				
Movement for European Action (MAE)	21,049	1.22	0				
Humanist Party of Moldova (PUM)	15,494	0.9	0				
National Liberal Party (PNL)	10,938	0.64	0	6,859	0.43	0	0
Christian-Democratic People's Party (PPCD)	9,083	0.53	0	11,782	0.74	0	0
United Moldova (PMUEM)	8,238	0.48	0				
For Nation and Country (PpN?)	4,894	0.28	0	1,697	0.11	0	0
Social-Political Roma Movement of Moldova (MRRM)	2,394	0.14	0				
Conservative Party (PC)	2,089	0.12	0				
Popular Republican Party (PPR)	1,997	0.12	0				
"Ravnopravie" Movement (MR)	1,781	0.1	0				
Republican Party of Moldova (PRM)	1,763	0.1	0				
Moldovan Patriots (PPM)	1,580	0.09	0	1,498	0.09	0	0
Ecologist Green Party (PVE)	1,380	0.08	0	1,366	0.09	0	0
Labour Party (PM)	873	0.05	0				
Communist Reform Party (PCR)				78,719	4.92	0	
'Moldova's Choice - Customs Union' Electoral Bloc (BeAMUV)				55,089	3.45	0	
People's Anti-Mafia Movement (MPA)				27,843	1.74	0	
Liberal Reform Party (PLR)				24,956	1.56	0	
People's Party of Moldova (PPRM)				12.11	0.76	0	
People's Force Party (PFP)				11,672	0.73	0	
Renaissance Party (PR)				4,158	0.26	0	
Democratic Action (PAD)				2,564	0.16	0	
"Democracy at Home" (PDA)				2,449	0.15	0	
Centrist Union of Moldova (UCM)				633	0.04	0	
Independents	19: 18,832	1.09	0	4: 18,651	1.17	0	
Total of parties getting below 6%	91,452	5.31	0	183,357	11.12	0	
Invalid	11,907	0.69		50,948	3.08		
Total (Turnout)	1,720,993		101	1,649,508		101	
	65%			56%			

2 Rules

Moldova is a unicameral parliamentary republic consisting of 101 MPs. Elections use proportional representation on closed lists in a single state-wide constituency every four years. Turnout must reach one third of registered voters for a valid election.

The electoral system should incentivise parties to work together, and it should work against independents and smaller parties; however, this has not yet occurred. Rather, Moldova's threshold of 6% for parties is one of the highest in the world. While electoral thresholds were lowered during 2009-2010 (Cantir, 2011), since 2013, they have been raised back to 6% for parties, 9% for electoral blocs of two parties and 11% for electoral blocs of three or more parties. These thresholds may have been raised to prevent PSRM from entering parliament, but instead they kept out the Communist Reform Party (PCR).

A second important element is the redistribution of seats. In 2010 (8.6% of votes cast, 147,715 votes) and in 2014 (a 16.4% of votes cast in 2014, 303,042 votes) a significant number of votes were redistributed away from losing parties, i.e. those who fell below the electoral threshold, to winning parties; more this number of redistributed votes doubled between 2010 and 2014. Until 2009, Moldova used the D'Hondt system. They then switched to the equality or Robin Hood system (Botan, 2010), where seats are distributed to each elected party sequentially (starting with the largest first). The D'Hondt system was seen to favour larger parties like PCRM, and the equality system to favour allocation to smaller parties (see also Cantir, 2011). Thus the system was changed not to improve representation, but to weaken the power of the PCRM and to assist the opposition parties, who because of their divisions scored lower individually but higher collectively.

The volatility of the electoral rules (e.g. the constant changing of electoral thresholds) indicates the unwillingness of those in power to increase the competitiveness of Moldova's political system, whose high PR thresholds are lower only than Iran, Turkey and Russia (Council of Europe, 2003). Moreover, it illustrates the willingness of pro-European parties to use the electoral system to constrain their opponents (PCRM 2009-2010, PSRM after 2014).

The 2014 elections were the first where Soviet-era passports were no longer accepted, rendering 21,729 people unable to vote (Promo-LEX, 2015). While this could be interpreted as a sign of modernizing and de-Sovietizing Moldova, it can also be seen as an attempt to prevent those retaining Soviet-era passports (e.g. the elderly) from voting. Such voters are seen as conservative and thus likely to vote either for parties that appear more pro-Russian geopolitically or more statist economically, or for those with authoritarian tendencies.

3 Substance

The attempt by PCRM to hold onto power in the April 2009 elections through fraudulent means brought people onto the streets. The mass protests brought down the PCRM government, forcing new elections. The so-called Twitter Revolution, chiefly led by Moldova's young post-Soviet generation (Knott, 2013), signified a watershed of hope, with the promise of European integration and political reform offered by the tripartite coalition that came to power. However, in 2013-14, any remaining hope dissipated with the collapse of the coalition and government, which managed to hold on until 2014 to avoid early elections. The pro-European coalition had lost its legitimacy, due to its inability to improve on the issues of greatest concern: anti-corruption and socio-economic reform. While Moldova's media has improved since PCRM left office, becoming freer and fairer, it remains subject to political interference, given the ownership of media by the political elite (in particular PDM's Plahotniuc, who owns four out of five national channels) and the biased stance

of these outlets to the political interests of their owners (OSCE, 2014b).

The Ukraine crisis that began in November 2014, the on-going civil war in the east and Russia's annexation of Crimea casts a long shadow over Moldovan politics. For many observers outside and inside Moldova, the frozen conflict in Transnistria, with an ethno-linguistically Russian population and elites that overtly look to Moscow rather than Brussels, meant that Moldova was at risk of potential instability vis-a-vis Russia. Thus the elections took place against a backdrop of regional instability. According to unofficial reports, propaganda in rural areas emphasized that a vote for the EU was a vote for war; how widespread or effective this was is unknown.

The party system is highly volatile and fragmented. Far from a single ethnic geopolitical cleavage pitting a pro-Russian, ethnic Russian, socially and economically conservative left, (PCRM, PSRM, PN), against a pro-European, ethnically Moldovan/Romanian, socially liberal, free market right (PL, PDM, PLDM), the reality is more complex. Moldovans identify additional cleavages fracturing their society as well: generational, urban-rural, class, and between those connected to the state/system and those outside of the state (Samuelson, 2013). Moreover, these categories overlap, so identities can shift depending on the context, and this is reflected in voting behaviour. PCRM voters are not necessarily elderly rural Russian-speaking peasants, fearful of the EU, nor are Romanian speakers necessarily the core supporters of pro-European parties such as PLDM. However, parties do instrumentalise symbolic and geopolitical debates in defining themselves vis-a-vis other parties (Danero Iglesias, 2015).

Organizationally, parties are top down enterprises, based on patronage networks and charismatic domination, which makes them prone to schism. The PCRM slogan of *Doar comunitii, doar Voronin* (Only the Communists, Only Voronin), or the Ghimpu family's role in the PL illustrates this charismatic domination. The only way for new leaders to emerge from within is via a split. Both PDM and PSRM were established by factions leaving PCRM to increase the power of their leaders (PDM: Marian Lupu, PSRM: Igor Dodon). Thus the volatility of the party system stems less from ideological and more from personal differences.

Issues such as corruption, poverty, economic issues and anger towards Chisinau led to the emergence of two forms of outsiders entering the electoral process: independent candidates and a political party led by a charismatic millionaire. The journalist and activist Oleg Brega, who stood as an independent, garnered the most attention and votes. Brega, a long time critic of the political authorities (Vdovii, 2014), was attacked and physically assaulted twice in two days during the summer, in one incident by the driver of a former PCRM MP (ICJ, 2014). Despite having few funds, Brega returned the strongest result by an independent candidate since 2001; however, it was not enough to get him elected.

The second outsider was the Patria Party (PP), led by 36-year-old millionaire businessman Renato Usatii. Usatii's populist campaign was avowedly pro-Russian, but more substantively focused on anti-corruption rhetoric and reversing privatisation (Champion, 2014). In the last days of the electoral campaign, Patria, which had been polling at 710%, was deregistered (E-Democracy 2014). Following allegations of foreign financing, Moldova's Central Electoral Commission requested the Court of Appeals dismiss PP, which the court did three days before the election. Moldova's Supreme Court upheld the decision the day before the elections. The OSCE (2014a) voiced concern about the expedited process of this deregistration, given the timing. Moreover, the use of the courts which

comprise judges aligned with the pro-European parties to uphold this decision demonstrates the politicisation of the dismissal. The situation was made more complex by allegations that Patria was controlled by the FSB (Publika.MD 2014), as well as by a cache of guns police found during a raid on a paramilitary movement linked to Patria. Following the banning of Patria, Usatîi fled to Russia, fearing arrest, and did not return until May this year. He then ran for mayor in the city of Bli and won convincingly in the first round.

The closing stages of the election were made more confusing by the presence of a number of bogus parties (Seton-Watson, 1963). These parties appeared with similar names and iconography to established parties, to confuse voters and to take votes from these parties. PCRM attempted to prevent PCR from taking part in the elections; however, the courts rejected these attempts (OSCE, 2014b). PCR seems to have played a crucial role in taking votes away from PCRM and PSRM; that they did not figure in opinion polls suggests voter confusion. The 4.92% of the vote that went to PCR was crucial in denying PCRM and PSRM a majority. Similarly, the People's Anti-Mafia Movement (MPA), established by a former Voronin advisor, seems to have been intended as a spoiler party to take votes away from other anti-corruption candidates. In combination with high electoral thresholds, this made it difficult for new parties to enter and for established parties to gain decisive majorities.

4 Results

Compared to 2010 (65%), turnout shrank to 56% (Table 1). However, in historical perspective, the number of ballots was still higher than 2001/2009, where the total number of votes cast was never greater than 1,600,000 (2001/2009). The number of invalid ballots also increased, likely because of the suspension of Patria Party shortly before the election.

Overall, the 2014 elections exhibited a number of interesting shifts. Firstly, PCRM, the largest party since 2001, lost about half their vote (and seats). Secondly, PLDM, the second largest since 2009, lost almost half their votes, along with nine seats. By contrast, the other pro-European parties gained voters and seats, even if overall the coalition's total seats fell due to PLDM's losses. Lastly, and significantly, PSRM, who did not run in 2010, picked up the votes and seats lost by PCRM and PLDM, to gain the largest vote share (21%) and number of seats (25/101).

With the surge in support for PSRM, the number of parliamentary parties increased from four to five, while no independents crossed the necessary threshold. The percentage of votes for parties who did not win seats jumped from 8% to 16%. Among these was PCR, who narrowly missed the single-party threshold (6%) by receiving only 5%.

While Moldova is often depicted as a state divided ethnically, linguistically and geographically, because it is a single constituency, in 2014 all parties derived their greatest support from Moldova's capital city, Chisinau. This effect is most visible for the smallest of the pro-European parties (PL), but it is also evident in terms of the two biggest parties (PLDM and PSRM), who stand on opposite sides of the pro vs. anti-EU cleavage.

The results of Moldova's 2014 elections were certainly a shock in terms of the increasing support for PSRM and flagging support for PLDM and PCRM. PSRM was able to capitalise on declining popular trust in PCRM and dissatisfaction with the pro-European parties following the 2013 scandal

and breakdown of the government; the involvement of PLDM leader Vlad Filat at the heart of this scandal hurt trust in PLDM and Filat himself substantially. Thus pro-European parties demonstrated themselves to be as dirty and corrupt as PCRM, pushing voters to seek an alternative to these established parties.

5 Effects

Following the November 2014 parliamentary elections, Moldova experienced several struggles and scandals: the difficulty of forming a government and choosing a prime minister, the loss of one billion USD from Moldova's GDP and growing antipathy towards pro-European parties.

A reduced mandate for the pro-European parties, the growth of rival PSRM, and on-going tensions among the pro-European parties caused difficulties for the pro-European parties in forming a coalition. Finally in February 2015, PLDM and PDM formed a minority coalition (Alianta Politic pentru Moldova European, Political Alliance for a European Moldova). They proposed, and successfully secured, the election of Chiril Gaburici to the post of prime minister by 60101 votes.

Gaburici, a 38-year-old businessman, had not held political office previously. Significantly, Voronin (former PCRM prime minister) endorsed his appointment, suggesting that such an unconnected figure was necessary. However, with no previous political experience, Gaburici was established as a puppet to be manipulated rather than empowered. Gaburici's weak position became evident in dealing with the lost billion scandal, in which it emerged during 2014 that 15% of Moldova's GDP had disappeared from three of Moldova's largest banks; these have since been placed under special administration. Frustrated at the intractability of the relationship between Moldovan politics and the banking crisis, Gaburici lasted just four months in office before resigning in June 2015 under the auspices of his own scandal, concerning allegations of fake degrees.

At the time of writing (September 2015), a new government had been formed, the Alliance for European Integration 3 led by PLDM candidate Valeriu Strele as prime minister. This follows the rejection of PLDM's previous candidate, Maia Sandu (Education Minister 2012-2015), by PL and PDM, who objected to her overly tough stance in tackling the banking crisis (e.g. her desire to remove the head of the National Bank of Moldova). Strele, as a wealthy career politician, is therefore likely to be a weak prime minister, beholden to the strongmen of the pro-European coalition (Vlad Filat and Vlad Plahotniuc) and their interests, and out of touch with public concern over rising economic uncertainty, heightened by the hole in Moldova's finances.

However, the continuous instability of the governmental coalitions, and the political and economic scandals that have repeatedly led to their demise, means that support and trust for the pro-European coalition is suffering, most notably the ascendancy of a new civic society movement (Platforma Civic Demnitate i Adevr (DA), Civic Platform for Dignity and Truth) which since May 2015 had been organising protests that culminated in the largest protest in Moldova's history on 6 September 2015, in a call for early elections, the resignation of Moldova's President, Nicolae Timofti, and a fuller investigation of the banking fraud. As such, the question remains how long the Alliance can hold off early elections before 2018 and whether they will win enough seats to be able to form a coalition in future elections, threatened both by the pro-Russian PSRM and the emergence of potentially new political forces from within civil society, such as DA.

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