

# The EU risks alienating the Moldovan population if it fails to take a tougher line with the country's pro-European parties

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05/03/2015

*The EU signed an association agreement with Moldova in 2014. [Denis Cenusa](#) writes on the EU's relations with the country since 2009, when a pro-European alliance of parties first came to power. He argues that the failure of these parties to successfully address the issue of corruption is having a damaging effect on the European integration movement within Moldova, and that the EU should more readily apply conditionality to encourage the government to pursue necessary reforms.*



The EU has attempted to transform Moldova through partnerships with pro-European political parties. This approach, however, has largely failed. Today, European officials need to calibrate their trust in so called 'pro-European' governments in relation to these actors' deeds and actions on the ground. Failure to do so could seriously damage not only the quality and sustainability of reforms, but also the image of the EU among Moldovans.

## EU-Moldova relations since 2009

In 2009, following civil unrest which led to early elections being called, the then ruling [Party of the Communists of the Republic of Moldova](#) was replaced by an alliance of formally 'pro-European' parties: the [Liberal Party](#), [Liberal Democratic Party of Moldova](#), [Our Moldova Alliance](#) and [Democratic Party of Moldova](#) (the table below shows election results for these parties since 2009). From that moment, European integration became the main focus of these political parties, who used pro-European rhetoric to consolidate their electorate and to gain political weight for the first time. The EU believed that the non-Communist parties entering government would be fully dedicated to the European cause and offered substantial political and financial support. This led to EU-Moldova relations gaining new momentum.

**Table: Percentage vote shares in Moldovan elections from 2009 until 2014**

Party	Vote share April 2009	Vote share July 2009	Vote share 2010	Vote share 2014
Party of Communists	49.5	44.7	39.3	17.5
Liberal Party	13.1	14.7	10	9.7
Liberal Democratic Party	12.4	16.6	29.4	20.2
Our Moldova Alliance	9.8	7.3	2.1	-
Democratic Party	3	12.5	12.7	15.8
Party of Socialists	-	-	-	20.5

**Note:** Only parties that gained representation in parliament during this period are shown. For more information on the parties see: [Party of the Communists of the Republic of Moldova](#), [Liberal Party](#), [Liberal Democratic Party of Moldova](#), [Our Moldova Alliance](#), [Democratic Party of Moldova](#) and [Party of Socialists](#).

The willingness of the EU to back the pro-European political elite in Moldova stemmed both from the significant political changes taking place in the country, and from internal transformations within the EU. In terms of the

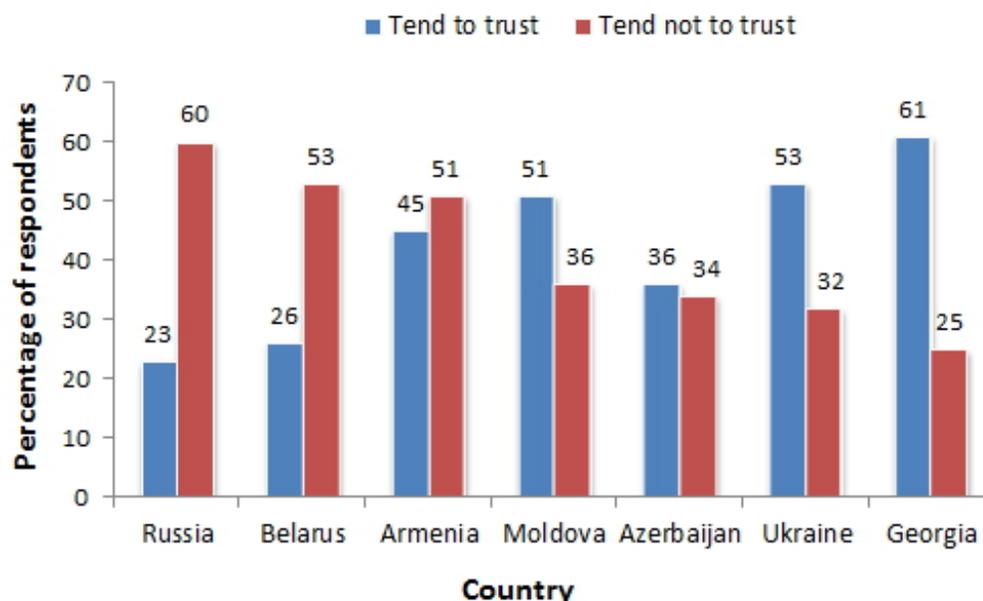
domestic situation within Moldova, the EU simply followed the lead of Moldovan citizens, who had supported the three ‘pro-European’ parties first in the July 2009 elections, again in elections in 2010, and most recently in elections in November 2014. On the other hand, in the post-Lisbon period, the EU has articulated a more coherent policy with respect to its eastern neighbourhood. This has entailed in particular the launching of the Eastern Partnership, which encapsulates a more engaged approach from the EU to each of the six post-Soviet countries to its east.

This ‘optimistic’ phase of relations between the EU and the ruling pro-European parties has now lasted over five years. The EU was keen to afford a high level of trust to the pro-European elite given their pro-European rhetoric, and therefore readily accepted commitments. The more positive approach Brussels took toward Chisinau (Moldova’s capital) also derived from the fact that for the first time since the Lisbon Treaty, dialogue with a non-Communist government became possible in the country.

However local realities were not taken into consideration. The EU developed high expectations in relation to the new pro-European government, but these parties were, at the same time, strongly criticised within Moldova itself on the grounds that they represented the interests of oligarchic groups, or facilitated corruption. This accusation largely refers to the Democratic Party and the Liberal Democratic Party, who currently sit in a ‘minority coalition’ without the Liberal Party (the other important pro-European party still in parliament). Indeed, allegations of corruption were at the heart of the dismissal of the Liberal Democratic Party’s leader, Vlad Filat, from the position of Prime Minister in 2013.

This lack of understanding of the features of the ruling pro-EU parties has cost the EU its image, time and money. First, by actively supporting these parties and failing to adequately reproach actors for breaching commitments, the EU has effectively allowed itself to be criticised in the context of Moldovan public opinion. The EU’s image has suffered from its association with the two ruling parties (the Democratic Party and Liberal Democratic Party), whose leadership is frequently attacked in the country’s media. As the chart below shows, the EU’s ‘Neighbourhood Barometer’ survey in 2014 indicated that 36 per cent of Moldovans tended ‘not to trust’ the EU, which is higher than in Georgia and Ukraine. Although the EU is still supported by large sections of the population, 25 per cent of Moldovans regard it ‘negatively’ overall.

**Chart: Percentage of citizens in eastern neighbourhood countries who tend to ‘trust’ or tend ‘not to trust’ the EU (2014)**



**Note:** Chart does not include ‘don’t know’ responses. **Source:** [European Union](#)

Second, the EU’s political support has been misused by the pro-European parties, who have exploited it for their own political and electoral interests, but have not used it to help implement difficult and unpopular reforms. Moreover, the pro-European parties have started to lose ground in terms of political influence, which allowed emerging pro-Russia parties to increase their presence in the Parliament after the elections in November 2014.

Despite all of the investments – both political and financial – made by the EU in Moldova during this period, it is quite possible that the pro-European parties will lose the required support needed to govern in the near future. If this occurs, it will be because the public’s hostility toward the parties outweighs the identification voters have with the issue of European integration, which has been used by these parties to acquire and maintain power.

The EU therefore seems to be caught in a trap in relation to the pro-European political elite in Moldova. It cannot formulate strong, visible and vocal criticism against the pro-European government because it would risk altering the views of the population toward the reforms the EU is proposing. Indeed, the EU is correct to reason that despite criticism of the pro-European parties in Moldovan society, they still remain the most likely actors capable of implementing these reforms.

At the same time, core reforms concerning the justice sector and fighting corruption are being undermined, and the EU’s application of conditionality has so far been relatively dysfunctional. In addition, the geopolitical context is decidedly unfavourable given Russia’s regional activity has contributed to the emergence of pro-Russian political parties in Moldova. Hence, the EU is in a precarious position with respect to criticising the pro-European parties, even though this is necessary in order to produce a greater level of responsiveness and willingness to implement reforms.

The real risk in this sense is that the EU could lose both its pro-European partners, as a result of growing dissatisfaction among the electorate, and the general pro-European mood within Moldova. The Neighbourhood Barometer indicates that 80 per cent of Moldovans are dissatisfied with the quality of democracy in the country: the highest level of all of the countries contained in the survey. Moreover, corruption (cited by 28 per cent of respondents) tops the list of the biggest perceived problems Moldova, surpassing unemployment (17 per cent) and the economic situation (13 per cent).

These two issues – corruption and a fragile democracy – are not new and are not linked exclusively to the pro-European coalitions. However, the persistence of these problems indicates a lack of interest and political willingness on the part of the government to solve them. Despite the EU’s readiness to provide assistance in these areas, there have been few dramatic changes since 2009. The conditionality imposed by the EU has proven largely ineffective due to the unwillingness of the government to properly address systemic corruption.

Ultimately, by accommodating the prevailing realities within Moldova and accepting the status quo maintained by the pro-European parties, the EU risks bringing criticism upon the European integration movement within the country. If the EU is to successfully navigate this situation it will need to involve other stakeholders as well, including the media, civil society and other social movements. It must also distance itself from the efforts of the pro-European parties to use EU support to serve their own limited needs. However, if the EU can ensure that Moldova’s European integration is an irreversible process then it will be rewarded by the full support of the population.

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*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics. Featured image credit: [EEAS](#) (CC-BY-SA-3.0)*

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