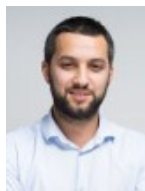


Eastern Partnership summit: Moldova's difficult path toward European integration



On 24 November, leaders from the EU's member states and the six Eastern partner countries will gather in Brussels for the 2017 Eastern Partnership summit. [Alexandru Damian](#) writes on Moldova, noting that although the country has sought to develop close ties with the EU, the current political situation is threatening to derail its progress.

In the leadup to the 2017 Eastern Partnership summit, scheduled for 24 November, Moldova is again under the spotlight in Brussels. Once considered the front runner of the Eastern Partnership, the country's commitment to a European path is rapidly fading. The government in Chisinau, which can, at least in principle, be described as 'pro-European', has shown little desire to push for reforms in key areas, such as the justice sector, and is currently placing all of its emphasis simply on maintaining power at all costs in parliamentary elections that will be held in November next year.

Until now, the attitude of many EU actors has been to turn a blind eye to some of the more problematic developments in the country. As long as Moldova paid lip service to the reform process and remained on an EU course, these actors were willing to overlook a lack of progress. But the latest events in Chisinau have revealed that although Moldova remains in need of EU financial assistance, the authorities have shown unwillingness to tackle key reforms, and recently [defied a recommendation from the Venice Commission](#) on electoral reform. They have also shown greater willingness to adopt anti-EU rhetoric.

In the last couple of months, the EU has not only delayed a [decision on a 100 million euro macro-financial assistance programme](#), but also decided to [cut a budget support programme for justice reforms](#) (the third instalment, worth 28 million euros, will not be transferred to Chisinau due to "insufficient commitment" from the government in supporting the reform process). There were also frozen payments announced in another four policy areas, marking an unusually tough stance from the EU.

Why has the situation deteriorated?

Moldova's commitment to its European path has always been a kind of 'realpolitik' for Chisinau: a win-win situation both for Brussels, which could maintain a degree of influence over the country, and for Moldovan governments, who could highlight their record on Europeanisation. But as the EU process has developed over time, with Brussels pushing for reforms and new pro-European political forces emerging in the country (both parties and NGOs), the dynamic has changed, and the current government, which is backed by the controversial [Vladimir Plahotniuc](#), is now under pressure.

The government has recently hit all-time lows in public support, with recent polls showing that the Democrat bloc, who dominates the current Parliament, may poll under [8 percent](#). Protests have also spread across the country, organised by the extra parliamentary opposition and civil society. Thus, the new realpolitik of the ruling coalition has become simply maintaining power at all costs.

Recently, an arrangement between the 'pro-European' parties in power and the Socialist Party has made possible a reform to the electoral system, but the nature of this reform has set alarm bells ringing. The mixed electoral formula, passed with wide consensus in Parliament, provides for half of the deputies to be elected in single-seat majority constituencies and the other half to be elected on proportional party lists. This should favour larger parties who are well established and have access to campaign resources, especially the Democrats and the Socialist Party, and will make things more challenging for newly established parties.

A joint opinion by the Venice Commission and the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights previously stated that the proposed legislation raises serious concerns and has important shortcomings. These include a lack of broader consensus, unclear criteria and discretionary methods for establishing constituencies, the vulnerability of constituency members when it comes to influence from specific business interests, and a lack of clear criteria on representing Transnistria and Moldovan citizens living abroad.

To understand why a theoretically pro-European alliance would go against these recommendations in co-operating with the Socialists, it is necessary to understand the relationship between Vladimir Plahotniuc, who backs the pro-European alliance, and Igor Dodon, Moldova's President and the former leader of the Socialist Party.

Despite public animosities, the two leaders share a common goal: the preservation of power and the status quo, and the prevention of new pro-European parties ([Action and Solidarity](#) and the [Dignity and Truth Platform](#)) from winning the next parliamentary elections. Similar machinations played a crucial role in the presidential elections of 2016, when despite public support for the pro-EU candidate Maia Sandu (supported by an alliance of extra parliamentary parties), the Democrats helped facilitate a narrow victory for Igor Dodon. Public support for the country's two largest parties is wavering, which was underlined in a failed referendum supported by the Socialist Party on 19 November that aimed to dismiss the Mayor of Chisinau. This has shifted the political calculus and both parties are now firmly focused on maintaining power at all costs.

The EU's response

In October, for the third time in six months, Moldova was again on the agenda of the European Parliament. Although a proposal by the [EPP Group to freeze EU assistance to Moldova](#) was postponed for a future session, there is now growing recognition that the EU's policy in the country is no longer working. A victory for the Socialist Party in the 2018 elections, with newly established parties struggling to make an impact under the new electoral system, would seriously derail Moldova's already difficult journey toward European integration.

Although the European Parliament continues to show large divisions over how to deal with Moldova, the European Commission's response to the latest developments has been altogether tougher. In a speech delivered on behalf of High Representative Federica Mogherini in October, clear cases were highlighted in which the country is not fully pursuing actions linked to the Association Agreement it has signed with the EU. The speech highlighted the link between electoral law reform and the EU's macro-financial assistance programme, as well as the link between the pending budget support payments and progress on democracy, the rule of law, and human rights.

What next?

Postponing the financial assistance payments has already caused trouble in Chisinau, as the first two instalments were budgeted by the government for 2017. However, the pressure is still low on the Moldovan Government with the EU still in the process of deciding which option to assume: a 'nuclear' one by freezing assistance and increasing pressure on the government, including over the electoral reform, or continuing along the same path while recognising there is a possible point of no return on the horizon with the 2018 elections.

Romania, the largest single donor to Moldova, is also playing a controversial game in its relations with the country. Behind the discourse communicated to the public, which emphasises Romania's intention to support Moldova on its EU path, Bucharest is essentially choosing to support a government with an almost non-existent approval rating at present. This is sparking disillusionment among pro-European and pro-Romanian citizens in Moldova.

As the Eastern Partnership summit kicks off on 24 November, the EU would be well advised to place greater pressure on the Moldovan government to reassess its electoral reform and give a legitimate path for newly established parties to enter parliament and strengthen the country's multi-party democracy. But pressure is also needed to prevent the current government from simply paying lip-service to reform efforts more broadly. Ideally, Romania would also join such an approach, despite the Romanian government so far appearing to be out of tune with public sentiment in its neighbour.

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