

# Moldova's political crisis is calling the country's commitment to European integration into question



*The EU has voiced criticism of Moldova following a decision by the country's Supreme Court to invalidate recent mayoral elections in Chisinau. [Alexandru Damian](#) explains that with parliamentary elections scheduled for later this year, there is concern in the West at the direction the current government is taking, and the possibility of the pro-Russian Party of Socialists winning power.*



EU-Moldova Association Council in March 2017, Credit: [EEAS](#) (CC BY-NC 2.0)

Earlier this month, the European Parliament adopted, with a large consensus, a [resolution](#) which underlines once more that the commitment made by the Republic of Moldova to European integration is rapidly fading. Following the invalidation of mayoral elections in the country's capital, Chisinau, the Parliament demanded the European Commission suspend all financial support to Moldova over concerns of a deterioration of the rule of law and democratic standards. There are also concerns over the increasing oligarchic control of the country, with a concentration of all political and economic power in the hands of a narrow group of people.

## The roots of the crisis

The resolution, proposed by five out of the eight EP groups, was supported by a large majority, with 343 votes for, 35 against and 160 abstentions. But what triggered this reaction? In June, early elections called in Chisinau were unexpectedly won by the opposition's candidate, supported by an alliance of recently founded pro-European parties, centred around [Action and Solidarity](#) and the [Dignity and Truth Platform](#). Andrei Nastase, a pro-western activist, managed to win the elections with 52.5% of the vote in the second round, surpassing the pro-Russian candidate.

But the elections, [recognised](#) as fair and transparent by international observers, and with no calls to void the results by other participants, were subsequently invalidated in the courts. The reasoning: a live Facebook session made by Andrei Nastase during election day asking citizens to express their right to vote. This was the first time a decision like this had been taken in Moldova, even though in practice during all previous elections live Facebook sessions have been used by the candidates. The opposition and civil society groups stated that the punishment was not even envisaged by the relevant legislation and accused the government of interfering in the justice system. Wide protests followed, while Moldova's international partners, including the European Union, the United States and Canada, adopted an unprecedented harsh position, calling the decision a "[threat to democracy](#)".

The new pro-European parties, recently founded, pose a huge challenge for the Democratic Party that is currently dominating the Moldovan Parliament. For years, the narrative promoted by the Moldovan authorities to the EU and US representatives was that the Democrats were the pro Europeans who were combating the Socialists and the pro-Russians in Moldova. Regardless of what was happening in the country or the slow pace of reforms, the West concluded that a theoretically pro-western government in Moldova is better than a pro-Russian one.

But, most recently, with the new parties on the stage, this narrative is becoming difficult to promote. The increasing cooperation between the Socialists and the Democrats, has set alarm bells ringing in the West. This cooperating has included changing the country's electoral law despite the recommendations of the [Venice Commission](#), and de facto support given by the Democrats for the election of pro-Russian candidate [Igor Dodon](#) as President, against Maia Sandu, the pro-European candidate of the opposition. The new pro-European parties are now challenging the status quo and the power split between the Socialists and the Democrats.

The invalidation of the elections in Chisinau has served as a wakeup call for Moldova's international partners. Trust in the "pro-European" government in Moldova had already begun to decline in the last few years, as hints emerged on their close connection with the Socialists. There have also been few apologies offered by the government for failures to implement reforms demanded by the EU or for major corruption scandals, notably the [missing \\$1 billion](#) that vanished from the Moldovan financial system. Previously, in 2015, EU financial assistance was frozen, and in October 2017, the Commission suspended the budgetary allocations for judicial reform.

### **The response of the Moldovan authorities**

For the first time, anti-EU rhetoric, which is generally associated with the Socialist Party, has been adopted by the Democrats and their associated media outlets in responding to the European Parliament vote. As Moldova will organise parliamentary elections this autumn, there was an obvious need to prevent any spill-over effect by undermining the EU resolution. Ranging from public statements to controversial news footage presented by the media, the response has included a distortion of what the resolution was about, coupled with critical statements directed at the EU.

At first, [blame was levelled](#) at the leaders of the opposition, who were accused of having asked their partners in the European Parliament to block financial assistance. To corroborate this story, media outlets in Chisinau promoted images of an empty European Parliament during the discussion on Moldova, suggesting a lack of interest and knowledge about the proposal under debate. The official response by the Democrats was that "there was no consensus on the resolution", and that European officials had been misinformed by both the opposition and the EU Delegation in Chisinau.

The Prime Minister denounced the resolution as being "abusive and politicised", asserting that Moldova was being "punished" because the executive refused to intervene in the justice system, as demanded by the West. Moreover, he underlined that the justice system criticised by the European Parliament had been reformed with EU assistance, and that if it is not working properly, the European Union is also to blame. In a discussion with EU ambassadors in Chisinau, the tone changed, becoming more dramatic still: the Moldovan authorities stated that the financial assistance would have been used to offer food in kindergartens and that the opposition and their European supporters were effectively blocking this programme for the affected children.

### **What next?**

For the government in Chisinau, the only aim is to maintain power at all costs after the parliamentary elections. Their recent flirtations with anti-EU rhetoric reflect the fact that the new pro-European parties are receiving significant attention in Brussels. The old narrative promoted by the Democrats of the party being an alternative to pro-Russian actors in Moldova is rapidly fading. Faced with wide protests and all-time lows in public support, they are inclined to continue to split power with the Socialists and prevent the new pro-European parties from winning the election. With the new [electoral reform](#) in place, adopted via an agreement between the Democrats and the Socialists, the new parties' chances have dropped substantially.

For the EU, the invalidation of the elections might have set alarm bells ringing, but this could be too little, too late. The autumn elections, if organised on the new mixed electoral formula – a combination of single-seat majority constituencies and proportional party lists – favours the pro-Russian Socialists, who may be able to win the contest. The EU's continued support for the government over the last few years, despite its failure to implement reforms, has also helped to discredit the popularity of European integration in Moldova. After the election, the West may have to deal with a parliament dominated by the pro-Russian Socialist Party.

Moldova, once considered a best practice model among Eastern Partnership countries, is rapidly changing course. This year's election will be decisive for the country's European future.

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*Note: This article gives the views of the authors, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics.*

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