
Parliamentary elections in the Republic of Moldova: a three-way test

Corina Stratulat

On Sunday, 28 November 2010, the voting booths opened for the fourth time in the last 18 months in the Republic of Moldova. At stake was once again the election of a parliamentary majority (i.e. three fifths of the deputies or at least 61 out of the 101 seats possible) that could designate the next President of the country. But final official results indicate that this latest round of elections did not do the trick either: the two opposing camps – the Communist Party (42 seats) and the pro-European forces (59 seats) - again fell short of the threshold needed to pull the country out of political impasse. This disappointing outcome poses a serious test for the Republic of Moldova, Russia, and the European Union.

A President was supposed to emerge after the elections of 5 April 2009 but the ensuing Moldavian Parliament failed on two consecutive occasions to agree on a future head of state. This brought about early parliamentary elections on 29 July 2009 but still no breakthrough in the appointment of the President. To free the Parliament from what appeared to be an impossible decision, a referendum consulted the Moldavian citizens on 5 September 2010 about the possibility of modifying the Constitution in order to allow for the direct election of the President. As less than one third of the voters bothered to turn out, the referendum was declared invalid and the fresh parliamentary vote of last Sunday became unavoidable.

Test 1: *Whereto for the Republic of Moldova?*

The final count of the Sunday vote puts the Communist Party (PCRM) in the lead with 39.29% of the votes (42 seats), followed by the Liberal Democratic Party (PLDM) with 29.38% (32 seats), the Democratic Moldavian Party (PDM) with 12.72% (15 seats), and the Liberal Party (PL) with 9.96% (12 seats). Thus, in stark contrast to various exit poll predictions, a potential coalition between the democratic forces will not muster a sufficient majority to designate a President. Instead, the communists have secured enough popular support to block the election of any presidential candidate put forward by their political adversaries.

To be sure, the president of PCRM, Vladimir Voronin, has expressed readiness to discuss potential alliances with any of the democratic parties to break out of the current deadlock. Such a “rainbow” coalition would provide the communists with a comfortable majority to appoint the President, but it would also cast clouds of uncertainty over the political direction of the country. Given PCRM’s soft spot for Russia and its inherent anti-Western sentiments, a comeback of the communists to the helm of the country is likely to test the commitment of the Republic of Moldova to the democratic and European integration reform agenda. If nothing else, the Moldavian Communist Party is expected to be a rather unpredictable dialogue partner for the European Commission.

So far, none of the democratic parties seemed interested in joining forces with the communists, which many in the West read as a sensible reaction. However, the lure of gaining office and ending the frustrating political stalemate might eventually persuade one of the democratic parties to team up with PCRM. Such move would fracture the unity of the pro-European alliance; already tested by infighting and scandals during the past months. But if the democrats stick together and refuse cooperation across ideological lines, the communists in opposition would be challenged to act on their declared openness to broad and constructive political dialogue. If PCRM were to help out in the election of the President even from a backbench position, it would mark a sea change in its credibility and the country’s prospects.

For their part, the democratic forces will struggle to remain united and still face the enormous task of overcoming the evident scepticism among the 40% of Moldavians about Europeanisation plans. Without popular legitimacy, any political efforts to modernise the country and meet EU's conditionality is likely to be constantly sabotaged by the unenthusiastic citizens. Thus, the democrats must find a way to bring people on board with the European integration project.

Ultimately, failure to choose a President is no longer an option, as further instability and new elections can only tire out the already confused and disheartened electorate, as well as weaken this poverty-stricken country in the current hostile economic environment.

Test 2: What of Russia's response?

The spotlight also falls on Russia to demonstrate its declared intention to become a constructive partner with Europe, especially on security issues. Moscow has so far delayed a revival of the "5+2 talks" on Transnistria on the grounds that it was awaiting the result of this latest round of Moldavian parliamentary elections. Voting day over, it is now time for Russia to demonstrate that it is genuinely interested in cooperating with Europe by helping to resolve the long-running conflict in Transnistria and by pulling its troops out of the region. The incidents recorded in Transnistria on the day of the vote already put a dent into the optimism about Russia's potentially positive contribution. And the possibility that the communists will win a greater say at the decision-making table in the Republic of Moldova following Sunday elections, stands to make this test of sincerity all the more real (and difficult) for Russia.

Test 3: Will the EU make a difference?

As for the European Union, the challenge raised by the situation in the Republic of Moldova is twofold. On the one hand, the EU needs to draw some conclusions and respond suitably to the election results. Just over 50% of the voters who opted for the centre-right parties highlight the European vocation of the Republic of Moldova. Yet the narrow margin should motivate the EU to raise its game in support of the Moldavian reformist forces. The pro-European political parties in the Republic of Moldova need to be able to persuade the unconvinced voters that they are competent modernisers of their country and capable representatives of the Moldavian interest in the talks with the European Union. To this end, the EU and Moldavian democrats should push to complete existing initiatives aimed at economic development (e.g. a deep and comprehensive Free Trade Area) and visa liberalisation, which can bring real added-value to citizens' lives, credibility to the democratic forces, and a change of heart for the more reluctant Moldavians. Especially in 2011, there is a window of opportunity to make concrete progress as both the upcoming Hungarian and Polish Presidencies have made the Eastern Partnership a priority.

On the other hand, the EU is challenged to help thaw out the frozen Transnistrian conflict on its doorstep. This is an important responsibility for the EU irrespective of the ideological colour of the next Moldavian government because it touches on the security of the region and the ability of Europe to deal with problems on its borders. The recent attempts of Chancellor Merkel to make common cause with Russia on the Transnistrian issue are certainly a step in the right direction. But the EU as a whole must back Germany in order to render this effort compelling. Unlike the other conflicts to the east of the Union's borders, Transnistria is arguably a workable problem and the EU must find agreement among its Member States to press convincingly for a solution. The EU's contribution to resolving the Transnistrian conflict would benefit the Republic of Moldova, but it could also demonstrate that the European Union *can* make a difference in at least one of the conflicts playing out in its Eastern Neighbourhood.

Corina Stratulat is a Junior Policy Analyst at the European Policy Centre.
