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THE PARLIAMENTARY ELECTION IN MOLDOVA

THE END OF EUROPEAN ILLUSIONS

The Moldovan parliamentary election is not about geopolitical or societal choices; it is about a power grab by oligarch Vladimir Plahotniuc, and the erosion of pluralism, freedoms and European aspirations under the EU's watch.

The parliamentary election shows that the people's voice matters little in Moldova today. The two opposition parties, the pro-Russian Socialist Party of Moldova (PSM) and the pro-EU bloc 'ACUM', won 31% and 26% of the votes, respectively. However, Vladimir Plahotniuc's Democratic Party will continue to run the country despite its poor public record, low legitimacy and huge negative ratings.

The Democrats are most likely to form the government due to their victories in majoritarian districts and possible backdoor deals. With 8.4% of the vote, the Shor Party, whose leader Ilan Shor was convicted of money laundering and bank fraud in 2017, will support a Democrat-led coalition. No wonder that Moldovans, who have systematically supported the coun-

try's European choice, increasingly choose to pursue their dreams through emigration.

The EU has played a significant role in the election outcome. Shortly after the Communist Party lost power under societal pressure in 2009, the EU became a key supporter of the new pro-EU coalition run by two oligarchs, Vladimir Filat and Vladimir Plahotniuc, which received generous financial and political support. Besides money and public endorsement, the EU offered Moldova a visa-free regime, as well as deeper political and economic integration through the Association Agreement.

However, under the slogans of European reforms and the stealthy 'implementation' of the EU's Action Plans, the ruling coalition simply refurbished the commu-

nist-built power structure and established direct oligarchic control over the state. Its first five years in power (2009–2014) yielded two results: the visa-free regime with the EU and the theft of 1 billion USD (15% of Moldova's current GDP) from state-controlled banks. The coalition also became embroiled in chronic feuds over power, while Vladimir Plahotniuc, who invested in control over the 'reformed' judiciary and the new EU-sponsored anti-corruption bodies, gradually defeated and imprisoned his opponent.

After Vlad Filat's arrest in October 2015, Vlad Plahotniuc rapidly installed a personalist system, run by a narrow inner circle of relatives and trustees. Loyalists were placed in key positions in the government, judiciary and security services. Po-

litical opponents were imprisoned, intimidated or simply corrupted, and key political parties fell under his influence. For instance, the PSM, the main opposition party, cooperates with the Democrats and supports them on key issues. Moreover, the media field, already largely under his ownership, has been further restricted with regard to competition.

Control over all branches of power duly allowed Vlad Plahotniuc to adjust and manipulate the rules to his liking in order to maintain power in a ‘democratic manner’. In 2016, the president was stripped of any power, while in July 2017, the electoral system was transformed from a proportional to a mixed one. The PSM supported and promoted the controversial and highly unfavourable law, even if it consistently polled above 35% compared to the Democratic Party’s rating below the electoral threshold. The Chisinau mayoral election results were annulled in June 2018 due to Facebook agitation on election day.

Despite numerous warning signs, the EU was preoccupied with geopolitical fears of pro-Russian forces possibly coming to power. In 2013, the EU convinced then Prime Minister Vlad Filat not to call snap elections and to keep the Demo-

cratic Party in the coalition. Subsequently, in early 2016, the Western partners intervened to force then President Nicolae Timoftie to end the political crisis on Plahotniuc’s terms.

The EU reacted only in 2018 when, in response to the cancellation of the Chisinau election results, it cut its assistance and EUR 100 million in funds were frozen. These decisions, however, came too late. The EU’s major ally in Moldova, its society, no longer believes in change and a good future for itself in the country. The International Republican Institute (IRI) shows that 80% want radical reforms, yet the outright majority no longer believe in change. Today, only 8% are ready to go to the streets or support an organization with a political agenda within the next few years.

The political disappointment goes hand-in-hand with the ongoing socio-economic degradation, which increasingly pushes Moldovans to seek better lives for themselves elsewhere. The country is already the poorest in Europe, and according to the EBRD’s Life in Transition Survey, life satisfaction in Moldova has dropped to the second lowest rank among 56 transition countries since 2010.

A demographic catastrophe is looming: a quarter of the popula-

tion already live abroad and young Moldovans are very keen to follow. If back in 2009 young people immediately flocked to the streets as soon as the election results were announced, in 2019 they simply did not show up at the polling booths. In 2018, the IRI estimated that only one-fifth of young people envisage a future for themselves in Moldova. As a result, the OECD reports that a third of young Moldovans plan to work abroad within the next few years.

The political and socio-economic damage is hard to undo in Moldova. The EU should not just take a critical stance on the regime, but also finally investigate Vlad Plahotniuc and his entourage’s wrongdoings and dubious assets. In addition, the EU should learn its lessons. Legitimizing local kingpins for geopolitical ends can only bring more trouble. It does not draw countries away from Russia, nor does it accomplish the necessary reforms, but it certainly disillusiones and often jeopardises pro-EU civil society. The popularity of the PSM shows that breaking away from Russia will be a long and painful process, which cannot be achieved by anti-Russian rhetoric and pro-EU slogans alone.