

# FIIA 21/2014 COMMENT

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## **Moldova's European choice is not yet consolidated >**

The results of the parliamentary elections show a country deeply divided

Moldova's parliamentary elections resulted in a victory for the EU-oriented parties, which have governed the country since 2009. However, the strong support for the pro-Russian parties indicates that the country is still deeply divided, despite the recent successes on the road towards European integration.

For a number of years, Moldova has been labelled the best-performing country among the EU's Eastern Partnership countries when it comes to Europeanization and modernization. Since May 2014, Moldovans have been eligible to travel visa-free to the European Union, while on 27 June 2014 the Association Agreement between the EU and Moldova was signed.

The coalition of pro-European, reformist forces consisting of the Liberal Democratic Party, the Liberal Party and the Democratic Party has achieved remarkable results in Moldova's approximation to European Union standards. The parties have, however, had to work in a difficult domestic environment. The coalition came to power in 2009, following serious riots and months of political turmoil, and had to re-structure the coalition after a vote of no confidence in 2013.

Both in Moldova and abroad, the election has been perceived as a choice between West and East, between the European Union and Russia. Many European leaders, such as German Chancellor Angela Merkel and Polish President Bronisław Komorowski, as well as Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko, gave their support to the country's pro-European policy. Moscow, on the

other hand, has reiterated its opposition to the pro-European policy line of the Moldovan government. Since the Moldovan parliament ratified the Association Agreement with the EU in early July 2014, Russia has introduced a wide ban on Moldovan fruits, officially citing phytosanitary reasons. The fruit ban followed a series of other restrictive measures introduced in parallel with Moldova's steps towards the EU.

In a similar manner to Western countries, Russia also demonstrated which political parties it favours. Shortly before the elections, leaders of the pro-Russian Socialist Party visited Moscow, following an earlier visit in June. Another pro-Russian political force, which also received strong political support from Moscow, was the Patria Party, led by prominent businessman Renato Usatii, who reportedly made his fortune through his ties with the Russian State Railway Company.

However, the party was banned from participating in the elections only a few days beforehand by Moldova's Supreme Court, which accused it of receiving funding from abroad, which is illegal according to Moldovan legislation. Earlier, in February 2014, Russia supported a referendum of questionable legitimacy held in the Southern Moldovan

region of Gagauzia, during which a decisive majority of residents voted in favour of joining the Russia-led Customs Union.

The parliamentary elections were conducted in accordance with the law. However, the Moldovan guest workers, who intended to vote in Moscow, faced hardship in casting their ballots. The OSCE issued a statement on 1 December which mentioned "public perceptions that the government sought to discourage voting in the Russian Federation". Taking into account that out of a total of more than 3,000,000 eligible voters (including residents of Transnistria), some 400,000 to 500,000 are living in Russia, their votes certainly had the potential to influence the results.

According to the preliminary results, the elections were won by parties of the ruling pro-European coalition, although the highest share of votes, 20.87%, was received by the openly pro-Russian Socialist Party, which will mean 25 seats in the parliament of 101 MPs. The Liberal Democratic Party received 23 mandates, while the Communist Party, which ruled Moldova between 2001 and 2009, received 21. The Democratic Party received 19 mandates, while the Liberal Party received 13. The Socialist Party

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received many more votes than the pre-election polls forecasted, which indicates that the banned Patria Party voters, opposed to European integration, were ready to cast their ballots for the other pro-Russian force.

Taken together, the three pro-European parties would get a simple majority with 55 mandates. Even if the Communists were ready for a coalition with the Socialist Party, they would only have a minority with their combined 46 mandates. Hence, President Nicolae Timofti will probably call for the three pro-European parties to form a government.

The election results clearly demonstrate how divided Moldovan society still is, despite the numerous administrative, political and economic reforms that have been introduced. The country is still the poorest in Europe, with a GDP (PPP) per capita of 4670 USD, or approximately one ninth of Finland's. Corruption is widespread, and developing the long-depleted infrastructure is likely to take decades.

The victory of the pro-European forces does not mean that Russia's influence over Moldova will decrease. Moscow will retain all the political and economic leverages it has over Chisinau, including Moldova's dependence on Russian energy

resources, Russian ownership of the national gas supplier and the main power plants, the vulnerability originating from the hundreds of thousands of Moldovans working in Russia and, most importantly, the frozen conflict regarding the Russian-oriented breakaway region of Transnistria. Hence, Moldova's struggle to make a geopolitical choice is far from over.