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Moldovans Hold a Key Vote

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A voter in a booth at a polling station in Dorotskaya, Moldova, on Sunday. **Gleb Garanich**

CHISINAU, Moldova — Moldovans voted on Sunday on whether to elect their president directly, a change that Moldova's West-leaning ruling coalition says would bring an end to chronic political paralysis.

Opinion polls suggest that there will be a strong vote in favor of ditching the present system, under which the head of state is elected by parliament, despite a call by the opposition Communists for a boycott of the referendum.

The Communists detected signs of a low turnout below the 33 percent required for the poll to be valid and claimed that the boycott call by Communist leader Vladimir Voronin had had an effect. But the Central Election Commission said just over 17 percent of the electorate had voted by 3 p.m. and that the turnout threshold was still easily within reach.

Moldova has had no full-time president for 18 months, with its ruling four-party Alliance for European Integration unable to muster enough parliamentary votes to install a head of state, despite ousting the Communists from power in July 2009.

The alliance says this has held up reforms that are urgently needed to bring the country into the mainstream. It promises direct elections for the president and parliament on Nov. 14 if the referendum succeeds.

Moldova, a country of 3.5 million people tucked between Romania and Ukraine, has an unresolved 20-year-old standoff with separatists on part of its territory, and is on poor terms with Russia, which supplies most of its oil and gas.

The average income is about $270 per month, and more than 430,000 Moldovans work abroad to support families back home.

Corruption is rampant; the judiciary, state security and police are politicized; and the media tend to toe the line of whomever is in power.

Parliament speaker Mihai Ghimpu, one of the alliance's leading lights, has served as acting president. If the referendum succeeds, Prime Minister Vlad Filat and charismatic center-left politician Marian Lupu would be among the favorites to win election as president.

After casting his vote on Sunday, Filat told journalists, "Today, we are giving back to our citizens their justifiable right to elect a president." Voronin's call for a boycott was "doomed to failure," he said.

Ghimpu, a fierce critic of Russia who supports Moldova's union with Romania, also expressed confidence. "The Communists are about to suffer a crushing defeat," he said after voting.

In the village of Cosnita, a half-hour's drive from Chisinau, people appeared divided. Vera Isayko, a woman in her 60s selling fruit and vegetables from a roadside stall, backed Voronin and his boycott call.

"I'll not be turning out for the vote," she said Saturday. "If that Ghimpu comes here, I'll bust one of these watermelons over his head."

In the same village, Gennady Glog, gathering cobs of corn in his garden, said: "I'll be voting because the future of my children hangs on it, and I will vote for direct elections. I have two small daughters. We need to change."

On the border with the breakaway territory of Transdnestr, voters in the village of Corjova were blocked from entering the polling stations by a cordon of people, denouncing the referendum as illegal. Local authorities said the protesters backed the secessionist Transdnestr authorities.

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