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Biden Urges Moldova to Fight Graft

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Vice President Biden greeting a crowd of about 3,000 cheering Moldovans in Chisinau's Opera Square on Friday. **Victor Dimitrov**

CHISINAU, Moldova — U.S. Vice President Joe Biden urged Moldova to fight corruption and implement pro-Western democratic reforms, saying Washington would offer support to Europe's poorest country as it seeks to move closer to the EU.

Biden is the most senior U.S. official to visit the Eastern European nation since it proclaimed independence in August 1991 in the wake of the Soviet breakup. Thousands of people waving Moldovan and U.S. flags lined the streets for Biden's seven-hour visit Friday.

"We strongly support political and economic reforms," he told about 3,000 cheering Moldovans, gathered in Opera Square, the scene of April 2009 pro-democracy protests where three people died and more than 100 were injured as Communists tried to cling to power after losing elections.

"There can be no democracy without a transparent legal system ... and commitment to fight corruption," he said. "The people of Moldova deserve the best."

"If you continue on this journey, I promise you America will be your partner. ... We will work with the Moldovan government."

Moldova has moved closer to the United States and Western Europe since the Communists lost the elections and reformers came to power.

Biden's 15-minute speech also touched on Belarus, target of international criticism for widespread human rights' abuses.

"We have condemned the government of Belarus. The European Union is imposing sanctions against that government. We call for the immediate release of all political prisoners," Biden said.

Seven Belarussian presidential candidates were among more than 700 people arrested after protests against fraud in the Dec. 19 vote, in which authoritarian President Alexander Lukashenko was re-elected. International observers said the vote was rigged. More than 30 of those detained, including two presidential candidates — Andrei Sannikov and Nikolai Statkevich — have remained in custody.

Biden also said Moldova's neighbor Ukraine is looking for a future "that is democratic and European. ... They are demanding freedoms."

Speaking of a festering 20-year dispute in the breakaway region of Transdnestr, Biden said, "the future of Transdnestr is in Moldova, and the future of Moldova is in Europe." Russia has about 1,500 troops stationed in the separatist region, which is not recognized internationally.

Biden arrived in Moldova from Russia after a two-day visit focused on efforts to improve relations.

Biden was welcomed to Moldova by Prime Minister Vlad Filat and his wife at the airport with the traditional greeting of bread and salt, and later held talks with the 41-year-old prime minister.

Biden's wife, Jill, later visited the famed Cricova wine cellars, made up of 130 kilometers of tunnels and which hosted a 50th birthday party for Prime Minister Vladimir Putin. Jill Biden received four bottles of wine, one a vintage from 1968.

Emerging from one-hour talks with Filat, Joe Biden said, "We believe Moldova is a European state" that should integrate into the EU. He said the United States supported Moldova's European path and urged it to implement democratic reforms.

Moldova has remained mired in political deadlock. In November elections, Filat's Liberal Democrats and his pro-European coalition partners won a combined 59 seats, compared with 42 for the Communists. However, the coalition is short of the 61 seats needed to elect a president under Moldovan law.

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