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Moldova's Woes Make It Fair Game for Russia

By William H. Hill

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On the surface, Moldova's Nov. 30 parliamentary election provided a victory for the country's "pro-European" parties and affirmation of their policy of European integration. The three pro-Western parties — the center-right Liberal Democrats, center-left Democrats and rightist Liberals — received about 45 percent of the popular vote and likely 55 seats in the 101-seat legislature.

This should allow formation of a coalition government similar to those that followed the July 2009 and November 2010 elections and launched Moldova on its current direction of closer association with the European Union. However, the Moldovan election also produced significant surprises. The greatest was the stunning performance of the newly formed Party of Socialists, led by Igor Dodon — a former top official of the Communist Party — which gathered the largest number of votes, gaining some 10 percentage points more than shown in pre-election polls.

Former President Vladimir Voronin and his Communist Party fell from their 15-year perch as

the most popular party in Moldova, dropping from 30 percent to only 17 percent. Voronin's turn from a pro-Moscow to pro-Europe stance in mid-campaign and Russian President Vladimir Putin's endorsement of Dodon indubitably assisted the rise of the Socialists and decline of the Communists.

International observers found this campaign and balloting on Nov. 30 to be generally well-administered, offering voters a choice not only of candidates but also geopolitical orientation. Indeed this election typifies the paradox of this small former Soviet republic: With perhaps the best record (outside of the Baltics) of holding free elections of any of the post-Soviet states, politicians have consistently and grievously failed their electorate.

Democracy has apparently taken root in Moldova, but has failed to produce concomitant economic and social improvement. Despite the victory for the parties of the pro-European course, Moldova's population is angry, disillusioned and divided.

In a number of independent polls conducted throughout Moldova during 2014, respondents showed almost equal preference for association with the European Union and Putin's Eurasian Economic Union, with the latter receiving the edge in a number of polls. Moldovans also expressed roughly equal preferences for pro-Moscow or pro-Western directions; large majorities in all polls thought the country was going in the wrong direction.

Extremely large majorities thought poverty, unemployment, and other economic and social issues were the most important for them. Despite large amounts of assistance from the European Union and the United States since the 2009 installation of a pro-Western coalition, Moldova has not yet turned the economic corner. The country has experienced steady growth in GDP, except during a record drought in 2012, but per capita income still remains exceptionally low for a European state.

Hundreds of thousands of Moldovans work abroad; estimates range from more than 500,000 — out of a population of some 4 million — but no one really knows for sure how many. The country survives on remittances, which have supplied almost 30 percent of GDP over the past 15 years. Much of this comes from Russia, where at least 200,000 to 300,000 Moldovans work.

The conflict in the self-proclaimed republic of Transdnestr played a relatively small role in the electoral campaign. However, Moldova's relations with Russia were nonetheless a major, ongoing issue. As with Ukraine, Moscow has been increasingly concerned by Moldova's pro-European direction, and has taken ever harsher measures to reverse it.

First technical and sanitary reasons arose to ban the import of Moldovan wines into Russia. This year, embargoes on Moldovan fruits, vegetables, and meat followed. Lastly, Russian authorities hinted that visas might be required for Moldovans to work in Russia.

Moldovan Prime Minister Iurie Leanca and his government charted a deft course between Moscow and Brussels, moving steadily toward the latter while avoiding offense to the former. Nonetheless, the effects of Moscow's pressure were felt by the population, producing bitterness and polarization.

In addition to the pressure from Russia, the governing coalition managed to shoot itself in the

foot several times, with divisive personal rivalries and frequent charges of corruption. The "forest" scandal of December 2012, involving the cover-up of the accidental shooting of a guide on an illegal hunt in a state preserve by government higher-ups, ended in the simultaneous removal of Prime Minister Vlad Filat and Deputy Speaker Vlad Plahotniuc.

Although a new coalition was formed by the same parties, this scandal revealed just the tip of the iceberg of corruption that continues to erode popular confidence. The voting public clearly thirsts for new blood in Moldova's political leadership, but the country's dire economic situation and poor job prospects continue to drive the best and brightest abroad.

The new blood in Moldovan politics is not always healthy. In this year's election campaign a new party appeared, Patria, led by Renato Usatii, a young Russian businessman of Moldovan extraction. Usatii took a populist, pro-Moscow line, and his remarkable success in attracting support put him around 10 percent just before the election.

His ties to the Russian Railways, run by Putin associate Vladimir Yakunin, led most observers to brand him as a Kremlin project. His party was disqualified four days before the election on grounds of foreign financing; even if the charges are true, the timing prompted suspicion of political motivation.

However, there are already troubled waters in Moldova where the Kremlin can fish. Romania's increased involvement in Moldova, while often welcome, at times also exacerbates longstanding national minority problems. Bucharest provides Chisinau considerable assistance, in cash and expertise, but some Romanian politicians also talk about reunification of the "two Romanian peoples" on opposite sides of the Prut River.

Such assertions are anathema to Moldova's non-Romanian speakers — 20 percent or more of the population — such as the Orthodox Christian Turks in the Gagauz autonomous region in the south. Gagauz officials conducted a disputed referendum on independence early this year, and Gagauz voters gave the pro-Kremlin Party of Socialists an absolute majority, a bad sign for the incoming government.

Moldova's most recent election may keep the country on its course of European integration, assuming the fractious pro-Western parties can form a coalition. However, popular bitterness over continuing economic hardship and widespread corruption, and deep divisions over the country's geopolitical orientation suggest that the election results are not as decisive as they might seem.

Moldova still desperately needs a judiciary committed to rule of law and protection of property rights, in order to attract investment for jobs that can bring Moldovan workers back home. Even more, Moldovan political leaders and foreign donors alike need to do a far better job in demonstrating to average Moldovan citizens the everyday benefits for them of European integration. Otherwise, as this vote shows, Moldovan voters could still easily go the other way.

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