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Moldova Is the One Thing Russia and the West Agree On

Europe has its own Venezuela now: Its poorest or second poorest nation, depending on how you count, has two governments.

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Europe has its own Venezuela now: Its poorest or second poorest nation, depending on how you count, has two governments. The main difference: Russia and the West prefer the same one, because the alternative is worse — blatant state capture by an oligarch who is only in this for himself.

In February, Moldova, a country of 3.5 million squeezed between Ukraine and Romania, held an inconclusive parliamentary election. Three parties — the pro-Russian Socialist Party, the pro-European Union ACUM and the Democratic Party, led by oligarch Vladimir Plahotniuc — each got more than 20 percent of the vote. Coalition talks promised to be difficult: Neither of

the other two political forces wanted to work with Plahotniuc. While the coalition negotiations dragged on, the Democratic Party's Pavel Filip continued running the government, just as he had before the election.

On June 8, former World Bank executive Maia Sandu, a co-leader of ACUM, announced the formation of a coalition with the Socialists. But Moldova's Constitutional Court, packed with Plahotniuc loyalists, immediately ruled that Sandu's coalition was unconstitutional because it was formed more than 90 days after the election. On June 9, it also deposed Moldova's president, Socialist Igor Dodon, and handed over his powers to Filip, who promptly called a new election for September.

Both Moldovan governments are refusing to leave (and so is Dodon, who was popularly elected), and both are issuing orders — almost like in Venezuela, where Russian-backed President Nicolas Maduro and his rival Juan Guaido, recognized by the U.S. and a number of other Western nations, are locked in a stand-off. In Moldova, though, Russian and Western interests appear to overlap — perhaps for the first time since Russia occupied Crimea in 2014.

Russia recognized Sandu's government on June 10. Though most of the important ministerial posts in it went to ACUM politicians, the Socialists' presence makes it acceptable for the Kremlin. Official Moscow has no illusions about regaining its full Soviet-era influence in Moldova, a country where Romania has distributed about a million of its passports, allowing Moldovans to integrate into the EU before their country has.

Russia, however, has an interest in maintaining a healthy relationship with the post-Soviet country while keeping control over Moldova's unrecognized breakaway region of Transnistria, a Russian-speaking enclave where 1,500 Russian troops are stationed in the kind of buffer arrangement the Kremlin likes to maintain near Russian borders.

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On Tuesday, Russian Deputy Prime Minister Dmitri Kozak, responsible for relations with Moldova, said Plahotniuc had offered to reorient his country toward Russia and turn it into a federation, with Transnistria retaining its ties to Russia. But Plahotniuc, who earlier held to a tough anti-Russian line, isn't trusted in Moscow, where he's wanted for allegedly putting a contract out on pro-Russian Moldovan businessman and politician Renato Usatii. The Socialists' participation in government provides a stronger guarantee for Russia than mercurial, self-serving Plahotniuc ever could.

Germany, France, the U.K., Poland and Sweden have come out in support of the Moldovan parliament, which has backed the Sandu government. Sandu's anti-corruption party is the country's best chance to progress from being an unqualified failure of the EU's European Neighborhood project — an effort to engage neighboring countries that are not immediate candidates for membership.

The country can't get anywhere with Plahotniuc effectively owning everything in it, from four out of five national television stations to the Constitutional Court. Late last year, the European Parliament even passed a resolution declaring Moldova "a state captured by oligarchic interests."

The confluence of Russian and European interests, backed by the U.S., is almost incredible in the current geopolitical climate. It shows Russia doesn't have to be the West's adversary and a corruption exporter banking on chaos and decay in neighboring countries. Even though its ulterior motives are expressly not the same as those of Western countries, it's equally interested in stability in its immediate neighborhood — and in making sure political forces sympathetic to it have some say in governing the region.

Like Plahotniuc, the parliament wants an early election — but under different rules. It has voted to roll back a Plahotniuc-backed election reform, under which a majority of legislators are elected in constituencies, not on party lists. Party list voting should be deadly to the Democratic Party's influence.

If sustained international pressure helps Sandu and the parliament prevail, ACUM and the Socialists are likely to end up as the biggest forces, and they should work on a solid coalition to keep the West interested in helping Moldova build stronger institutions and Russia happy enough not to interfere. A successful experience of this kind eventually could be used in resolving the Ukraine conflict without letting Ukraine swerve from its European path.

For now, though, it's important to prevent violence. Russia and the West must combine their efforts to force Plahotniuc to stand down. Europe doesn't really need a Venezuela of its own.

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