

Regional implications of the elections in Moldova and Georgia

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The outcomes of the recent elections in Moldova and Georgia do not necessarily indicate a drastic change of the countries' foreign policy directions, but may have regional implications. The victories for Socialist Party leader Igor Dodon in the presidential elections in Moldova and for the Georgian Dream party in Georgia's parliamentary elections do, however, strengthen the respective internal oligarchic systems – something that does not bode well for continued reforms and deeper integration with the West. Furthermore, Moscow will exploit the existing disappointment over lack of reforms, corruption and falling standards of living in these countries in a similar way as in neighbouring Ukraine.

The presidential election in Moldova, in particular, was framed as a choice between pro-Russian candidate Dodon and the pro-European candidate, Maia Sandu. In the election's second round, on 13 November, Dodon received 52.1 per cent of the vote as against 47.8 per cent for Sandu. The latter, with a background as minister of education and as a World Bank expert, conducted a grassroots campaign on social media, attracting Moldovan youth with its anti-corruption theme. Dodon's victory can be seen as a protest vote against the discredited "pro-European" political elite, which has ruled in the country since 2009. Dodon's support came largely from rural, older, Russian and Gagauz minority voters, who look to Russia as way out of Moldova's economic crisis.

During his election campaign, Dodon pledged to restore fully-fledged economic relations with Moscow, to have the Association Agreement with the EU cancelled through a referendum, and to defend the Orthodox faith and traditional values. He also proposed solving the Transnistrian conflict by the federalization of Moldova in a way that Russia has long favoured. When Dodon stated that Crimea belonged to Russia, Ukraine recalled its ambassador in Moldova to Kyiv for consultations.

In reality, Dodon's power will be rather limited as Moldova is a parliamentary republic. The president cannot dissolve the parliament or appoint ministers independently.

However, under the constitution he does have the right to initiate referendums. In the future, Dodon's victory may boost the ratings for his party and its chances in the parliamentary election in 2018. Even then, however, redirecting the country's foreign policy towards Russia will be easier said than done. To join Moscow's Eurasian Economic Union, for instance, Moldova would first have to repeal the Association Agreement with the EU. This would reduce Moldova's access to its biggest market and possibly mean the country losing its visa-free regime with the EU. In addition, funding from the EU and the IMF could be affected. Furthermore, experience from other post-Soviet countries – such as Belarus and Armenia – suggests that allying with Russia may not necessarily help the country's economy and may have potential implications for national sovereignty.

In Georgia, the second round of elections was held on 30 October – the same day as the first round in Moldova. The incumbent party, the Georgian Dream (GD), won 115 of the 150 seats in parliament. In the previous 2012 parliamentary elections, the GD party was part of a six-party coalition that won 85 seats. Now it achieved a constitutional majority on its own. The former ruling party, ex-President Mikheil Saakashvili's United National Movement (UNM), received only 27 seats, down from 65 in 2012. The GD has more or less continued the UNM's pro-Western policy with membership of the EU and NATO as goals. But, as in Moldova, there is also a wish to normalize relations with Russia in order to strengthen the economy.

As a result of the elections in both Moldova and Georgia the shadow oligarchic systems became stronger. Power has been gradually monopolized by Vlad Plahotniuc in Moldova and in Georgia by Bidzina Ivanishvili. Neither has a formal official position in the political system, but they act from behind as informal leaders. In Moldova, Plahotniuc controls the government, the parliament, and the judicial system (including law enforcement agencies) through his associates as well as the media through ownership (see

more in RUFBS Briefing No. 33). He is widely disliked by the population, but his skill in manipulating the political system seems almost infinite. In Georgia, GD's crushing victory strengthens Ivanishvili's power. Although Georgia's richest man officially retired from politics in 2013, he has continued to have influence on Georgian Dream.

This threatens reforms and anti-corruption in these countries. In Georgia, particularly, there has also been a tendency towards one-party rule ever since 1991. In Moldova, the corrupt system under the "pro-European" parties has discredited the whole idea of European integration. The West has tended to support these parties, no matter how corrupt they are, because the alternative is a pro-Russia government. Hardly surprising, support for the EU fell in Moldova from 63 per cent to 32 per cent between 2009 and 2015 and has stabilized at under 40 per cent. For several months during 2015 there were large anti-government demonstrations in central Chisinau.

In both Moldova and Georgia – as well as in neighbouring Ukraine – there is growing discontent with poor living standards, massive corruption and unfulfilled promises by the "pro-European" politicians and, by implication, Brussels. In addition, Georgian politicians were disappointed when there was no signal from NATO pointing to future membership for Georgia at the alliance's summit in Warsaw in July 2016. Despite the promises given in the Association Agreement, both Ukrainians and Georgians are still waiting for visa-free travel to the EU for those with biometric passports.. This process has been stalled by Germany and France, fearing an influx of migrants and organized crime, which could further stoke anti-migrant feelings.

Recently, Ukraine in particular has seen large demonstrations in Kyiv against falling living standards. For most Ukrainians, the hopes tied to the Revolution of Dignity, as the Euromaidan protests were later branded, have remained unfulfilled. Instead they see rampant corruption, an un-reformed judicial system and declining living standards. Furthermore, Russia's annexation of Crimea and fomenting of militant separatism in eastern Ukraine have killed more than 9 600 people and forced 1.7 million people to flee their homes. The public is also dissatisfied with the lack of investigation into the mass killings during the Euromaidan protests and the failure to prosecute corrupt former and current top officials. According to a recent survey by the Kyiv-based Sofiya

social research centre, 80 per cent of respondents said life in Ukraine has actually got worse after the revolution. Another 60 per cent expressed willingness to take to the streets to protest against rising prices.

Former Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili, who resigned as governor in Ukraine's Odesa region on 7 November, accused President Petro Poroshenko and his administration of blocking his reform efforts in Odesa. Saakashvili, who also recently launched his opposition political party, warned that early elections are needed in order to stop Ukraine drifting towards an overthrow of power. The situation is desperate and the protest potential significant, but a restraining factor is the fear of repeating a failed Maidan, which could potentially be manipulated by Russia.

Indeed, recent events in the West may tempt Russia to seek a change in the current leadership of Ukraine, or to increase its influence in countries such as Moldova and Georgia. For example, the EU is in an identity crisis following the Brexit referendum in the U.K. and the transatlantic link is in question after Donald Trump's victory in the US presidential elections. Trump describing NATO as "obsolete" sent shock waves across the region, including in non-member countries as Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova. If Western powers neglect developments in these countries, it may be taken as indirect approval of the Kremlin's action. In fact, the West's future approach towards its Eastern neighbourhood could prove more important for the stability in the region than developments in the countries themselves.

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