



## What Comes Next after Moldova's Troubled Election?

*By Jonathan Katz and Stela Leuca*

Last month, Moldovans voted for a new parliament in what ended up being the elections with the **lowest turnout since independence in 1991**. As expected before the polls, the results mean the political status quo in the country will continue. This deepens concerns about the democratic trajectory of Moldova, which was once hailed as a rising democracy in the EU's Eastern Partnership but is now turning sharply away from its Euro-Atlantic partners.

The growing perception in the United States and the European Union is that Moldova's ruling elite is neither pro-West nor pro-Russia, but rather non-ideological and self-interested. It oversees a captured state, controlled by oligarch Vladimir Plahotniuc, and uses elections as democratic window-dressing while pursuing authoritarian political goals and personal enrichment at the expense of Moldovans. Last summer, for example, a politically influenced court nullified the results of the Chisinau mayoral election, which had been won by Andrei Nastase, an advocate for Euro-Atlantic alignment and pro-democracy reforms.

Notwithstanding **statements** from international observer missions indicating that the elections were procedurally correct and generally democratic, a closer look at the **pre-election period** and **election-day violations** reveal a darker picture. The mixed electoral system that was established in 2017 has been highly criticized by the Venice Commission and the OSCE, and it is little understood by people. Civil society organizations reported misuse of administrative resources by the ruling parties, voter intimidation and offers of electoral gifts, hate speech, incitement, and discrimination throughout the campaign. They also called out technical errors in vote-count tabulation, and called the elections **unfair and only partially free**.

The **United States** has aligned itself with the OSCE election assessment, which has been partly critical and called for investigating the claims of voter bribing and abuse of administrative resources before and on election day. But, given the poor state of rule of law in Moldova, it is unlikely anyone will be held accountable for these violations.



## Next Government and Coalition Building

Against the backdrop of these serious allegations, the makeup of the next government is not certain. The pro-Russia Party of Socialists (PSRM) led by President Igor Dodon won 35 seats. The Democratic Party, led by Plahotniuc, secured 30 seats (benefiting the most from the mixed system that it put in place, with 17 wins in single-member districts). The ACUM alliance led by Nastase and Maia Sandu won 26 seats, and the party of Ilan Shor gained 7 seats while 3 seats were secured by independents. Shor's post-election role is particularly problematic given he has been convicted in Moldovan courts for his [involvement in a \\$1 billion banking scandal](#).

A minority government of the Democratic Party and Shor's party, supported by independents, is possible. Under this scenario, Moldova would see a continuation of state capture by the same political elite and little progress on democratic and anti-corruption reforms. Another alternative, which is less likely, is a coalition between the Democratic and Socialist parties. Such a government could draw Moldova closer to Russia and leave its EU aspirations in limbo. Finally, there is also talk in Chisinau about a short-term deal between ACUM and the Socialists to form a non-coalition technocratic government. Given that ACUM announced that it will not join a government with the two largest parties in the next parliament, this seems unlikely.

## U.S. and Western Interests

In any of these scenarios, the positions and responses of the United States, the EU and other international partners of Moldova will be extremely important and, depending on the outcome, likely lead to weakened relations. [The United States has urged the country's](#) leaders to move quickly to form a new government that will "fight corruption, promote judiciary reforms, and secure Moldova's progress on its democratic trajectory." [The EU's post-election](#) statements have also focused on encouraging those who support the reform process, fight corruption and

work to ensure the independence of the judiciary.

With Plahotniuc's Democratic Party again poised to control the parliament and further strengthen its grip on state institutions, it is hard to see the EU reversing its decision of last November to scale down assistance and suspend macro-financial support to Moldova, which it took in response to a breakdown in the rule of law and to democratic backsliding.

It is critical for the United States and the EU to speak with one voice regarding relations with Moldova at this critical juncture. However, given the current state of affairs and the likely outcome of coalition discussions, it is unlikely that there will be a reliable partner for the West. If there is a government moving in the opposite direction of transatlantic values, and closer to Russia, Washington and Brussels will need to adjust their policies and engagement. One thing they should not do is give up on the Moldovan people. Instead, they should reaffirm support for a democratic Moldova.

This support, however, should come with an even stronger and more focused conditionality, encouraging Moldova's commitment towards combating corruption and advancing democratic values—including maintaining freedom of speech, an independent judiciary, and ensuring space for active civil society voices. If the United States and the EU stand together to deliver these strong political messages, backed by conditionality, in the coming weeks it may go a long way toward strengthening this frail democracy. It will also signal a strong commitment to the Moldovan people's future in the Euro-Atlantic community. If this does not occur, and the self-interest of the country's elite trumps democratic progress, the next government risks drifting permanently from the West and raising more alarm about the country's reliability as a partner.

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1744 R Street NW  
Washington, DC 20009  
T 1 202 683 2650 | F 1 202 265 1662 | E [info@gmfus.org](mailto:info@gmfus.org)  
<http://www.gmfus.org/>