

Again at the crossroads: a test-case for Moldova

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Moldova is again at a critical crossroads in its development as an independent state. It is confronted with choices which will determine the future of the state and impact upon the security and stability of the region. Two events have painted these dichotomic options in the stark relief: the federalization plans lobbied insistently by Russia, with tacit acknowledgement of OSCE, and the second, admission of Moldova's close neighbours Romania and Bulgaria into NATO. The recent trends of leaving the country under full discretion of Russian tutelage with dear guarantees served as a useful reminder of Moldova's vulnerability as a small nation with unregulated conflicts. Until recently, the issues related to the vulnerability of the country were mostly explained by economic decline, energy dependence, volatility of exports. The issue of the political and security vulnerability was more or less hidden under official declarations of the need to keep balancing, to maintain neutrality, to serve as a bridge between the West and Russia and to seek harmonious and closer contacts in both directions. The debate over Moldova's strategic options relies on a profound struggle within the Moldovan society to identify its place in the world, which it only feebly comprehends. The real question is whether it will be able to pursue a course of institutional integration into the EU like Romania, Bulgaria, Poland did, or it will follow a Belarus-like model of a murky pan-Slavic union led by economically crippled and chaotic Russia.

If one would ask us to define what the state of democracy today in Moldova is, the answer will be probably that it depends very much on whom we ask, and on which standards of comparison are being used. If we are comparing the existing institutional format with that of the USSR, Moldova has made great progress, but if we are comparing what are citizens' expectations in this country, willing to see Moldova integrated into the EU and NATO, we must define exactly what are the conditions which are to be achieved and, moreover, what are the main incentives towards the accomplishment of this task. I believe that decline in popularity of democratic changes is deeply rooted in the inability of post-soviet elites to deliver economic and social goods. A feeling of being cheated and manipulated, mirroring blatant inertia of the population, nurtured from the most cynical behaviour of the politicians in Moldova (most of them being the real 'successors' of the party nomenclature of the ex-USSR) remained largely prevalent among wide segments of the population. In addition, most people underestimated the inherent problems of transition and overestimated Western extent of help.

Searching for a 'third specific way' was therefore a response of the authoritarian leaders, such as Kuchma and Voronin, which is a combination of capitalism and collectivist ideologies, blending together state protectionism and unjustified social expectations. The noble effort of easing up the transition is coupled therefore with the stagnation in the democratization process that creates an authoritarian, corporatist system that is neither communist nor capitalist and democratic. The country got instead the intimidation, poorly functioning of legislatures with partial power, partial freedom of mass media, control over judiciary, over-regulation of the economy. Governmental harassment -- physical, financial and otherwise -- of independent journalists and media outlets does not fit into our shared vision of Moldova integrated into Euro-Atlantic and EU structures. Freedom House just released a report in May 2004 outlining the decline in the freedom of expression, thus the country being shifted from partial free to un-free press. The largest broadcasting State TV still remains unreformed and undemocratic. The obvious decline in the quality of governance can be depicted in the very heart of a soviet legacy in Moldova. A defining characteristic of post-soviet society is the continued depth and breadth of power exercised by the state over almost every aspect of citizen's life. Moldova's political leaders have sometimes acted as if they could achieve integration by declaration, or simply by joining international organizations and political clubs rather than by undertaking concrete structural changes.

Weak state and institutions that can be more visible from their negative effects than from the legal norms entrenched resembles what we all call it 'façade democracy'. The President of Moldova is the key-actor in the current parliamentary republic, the party-control over the public mass media could not be curbed despite protests of the opposition and notes from the PACE. Moldova's political regime combines different elements of democracy, authoritarianism, anarchy and oligarchy. The nomenclature continues to exercise a virtual monopoly over the state power; its decisions are immune from the public scrutiny. Constitutionally proclaimed rights have very little in common with the reality. The mass media is leaving through a permanent siege of the ruling party; judicial prosecution became a routine, while some

journalists practice self-censorship. Owing to the alleged misuse of state resources, the observed imbalances in the state media's coverage and other signs the last local elections offered of deterioration in Moldova's electoral process, the country's rating has worsened significantly. There is limited accountability and responsibility because only a very thin stratum of the population has in fact access to political power, while the largest part of the population are in fact alienated. The regime also includes intolerance, instability, dogmatism and a primitive political culture. The largest part of the society is cut off from the authorities, having little interest that is in power and rules the country, although some categories are highly dependent on social benefits. Individuals lack enforceable rights vis-à-vis officials, while the economy is now divided among competing clans.

Under certain historic and political circumstances, preferences were given to a „hybrid state” that mostly reassembles Soviet state combined with the market economy. The governing party shares little commitment excepting power and control over strategic decisions. Domestic crisis only increased in Moldova in the recent years as Moldova unlike Poland or other CE states does not have a tradition of reaching compromise. Trust in institutions and pro-executive politicians is low. The self-enforced isolation of the Communist party from the existing democratic standards and European values proved to be extremely unproductive for the country as a whole in promoting its chances with the EU in 2003-04. Moldova's inability to prove its commitment towards the EU plays to the benefit of Russia. Voronin simply describes this way as ‚With Russia to Europe’, which in fact means the opposite message, such as, ‚never with Europe!’ As Moldova is approaching to its forthcoming general elections in 2005, it faces a choice between two visions: (1) Baltic-style revolution, with gradual strengthening of internal reforms supporting the foreign goal of joining Europe, and (2) Voronin way of ‚feudalization’ of the society, dividing it between loyalist and non-loyalist, meaning enemies. Its way represent in fact a hybrid conglomeration of ‚old-staffed’ ideologies with a jargon-understanding of the geopolitical constraints facing Moldova bordered today by the NATO, and in less than 2 years, by the EU, with virtual campaigns against corruption, but in fact increasing dependence on Russia's policies of patronage.

By the summer of 2004, the gap between the desire to integrate and failure to implement the ‘entry level’ Partnership and Co-operation Agreement has deepened. Moldova could not manage so far to accelerate the domestic transformation in order to show credibility of its ‘European aspirations’ policy. The Communist Party did not and could not deliver such policies. Therefore, the most important incentive for these reforms and transformation will be clearly associated with the next general elections in Moldova. Therefore, only a leadership change in Moldova would be able to lead the country to become a member of the European family of nations. It is up to the civil society to keep the pressure on, to ensure that reform momentum does not become bogged down by the bureaucracy or become sacrificed to the short-term gain. Due to these concerns, we have decided to place a special emphasis on promoting the forces of democratic change in Moldova.

A Coalition for free and democratic elections has been created in April 2004. It combines dozens of leading NGOs and think tanks. All members of the Coalition signed a Chart of Conduct, and displayed their willingness to ensure that the forthcoming elections in 2005 will be free and fair. Civil society groups, particularly those involved in voter education and election monitoring, have committed themselves with a systematic monitoring of the election process, but also with important incentives for public awareness and civic education. It is expected that their efforts will advocate for equal rights in elections. Research institutes and think tanks will be involved to investigate election dynamics and discourage abuses. Media coverage should be balanced and comprehensive, allowing all presidential candidates to have their say. Voters should be allowed to choose freely, and not be subjected to threats or manipulation. Judicial decisions concerning candidates should not be arbitrary, nor allowed to be influenced by the politicians in power. Each of these elements represent fundamentals of a democratic society and shall be fully and effectively employed by the civil society in Moldova to ensure that steps along the path of democracy building and the development of a vibrant and modern European society will be certainly made and not forgotten. It is obvious that in the coming months our coalition will be tested fully, particularly on the lessons learned and capacities built in voters education, election monitoring. And as expected, there will be many other impulses for reform that extend far beyond the election.

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