

## Riots in Moldova: The next generation revolution?

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»» Riots broke out in Moldova's capital Chisinau after the parliamentary elections held on Sunday, 5 April handed victory to the Communists for a third time in a row. It remains to be seen whether riots will move towards broader peaceful protests or the country will return to business as usual. The opposition dissociates itself from the radical groups of protestors and attributes riots to what they consider illegitimate election results. Electoral fraud was widespread, but such a response came unexpected.

Western institutions have been cautiously supporting the Communists for the sake of stability, as has Russia. But recent weeks' developments concerning Transnistria have complicated matters. The new declaration signed by President Voronin and Transnistrian leader Smirnov in Moscow triggered reactions from the nationalist-patriotic youth, many of whom are pro-Romanian and pro-European. Albeit the Transnistrian conflict has no ethnic roots, Moldova is increasingly torn between those that feel connected to Romania and envisage a European future for the country, and Russian and Ukrainian minorities who lean towards the 'Russian world'. The strongest contrast, however, is between older Communist-oriented Moldovans and their (grand) children that look Westward.

Is Moldova heading towards another colour revolution or are we witnessing the first 'electronically' spurred revolution attempt through the increased communication possibilities offered by internet forums such as blogs and twitter? President Voronin has accused Romania of being behind the violent protests and the Romanian Ambassador has been expelled from Moldova. On the other extreme, there have been accusations of a Communist plot, staging

### HIGHLIGHTS

- Post-election protests in Moldova were primarily initiated by young pro-European Moldovans, not by the opposition, civil society or outside forces. Rioters exploited the protests that turned violent.
- The former Soviet space is unstable. After several 'democratic' revolutions in 2003-05 and the Georgia-Russia war of last summer, the populations of East European, Caucasus and Central Asian states remain restless. The economic crisis will have further impact on public sentiments towards the ruling elites.
- The current crisis in Moldova is a missed opportunity for Russia and the EU jointly to work towards the country's stabilisation. The crisis could further worsen geopolitical strife, including over the breakaway republic of Transnistria and in other countries in the region.

»»»»» the riots in order to suppress them while strengthening their grip on power. Both accusations are unlikely to hold true. It is a new generation that has sent a message. Current events might have implications for Moldova and other former Soviet republics. Are the European Union (EU) and Russia ready to deal with further instability? And if so, are there any signs of rapprochement between both actors?

### **FORGOTTEN MOLDOVA IN THE SPOTLIGHT**

Moldova has only mildly progressed towards an economically viable and democratic state. Poverty is widespread and the country's leadership has failed to make headway in solving the internal separatist Transnistrian conflict. The Georgia-Russia war over South-Ossetia and the much-contested independence of Kosovo notwithstanding, international attention towards Moldova and the Transnistrian issue has dwindled; both the EU and the US are silent on the issue and Moscow sees it as a self-aggrandisement opportunity to prove itself as a unilateral conflict settler.

In 2001, the Communist Party of Moldova came back to power after having been outlawed. At that time, many Moldovans were disappointed with the new democratic parties that turned out corrupt and inefficient. After its renewed rise to power, the Communist Party went through a transition. At first the Communists turned to Russia, but were confronted by tens of thousands of protesters concerned about Moldova's renewed ties with Moscow and the reversal from a pro-Romanian heritage outlook to increased pro-Russian laws. The Party then turned around to embrace European integration and a strong line on Transnistria, which needed to be reintegrated instead of brokered in a quick deal with Russia. After two four-year terms, President Voronin was constitutionally bound to leave office. In Moldova, parliament appoints the president and thus last Sunday's parliamentary elections held the key to Moldova's future:

either a new Communist president would be selected (operating in a Russian construction with Voronin as Prime Minister) or a representative from moderate opposition circles would be able to gather consensus in a new parliament.

Moldova's opposition remains weak, ill-organised and ill-defined (pro-Russian, pro-Romanian etc). The violent protests and riots in Chisinau were not directly initiated by main opposition forces or by civil society organisations, which are united though weak in number. Although the actions had no "official" organisers, the riots were not void of clear grounds. Over a quarter of Moldova's workforce has been working outside the country and the most talented youth has also left. The country has so far been unable to exploit Romania's accession to the European Union in 2007. Moldovans have been hit hard by the economic crisis, which has led to evaporating remittances from the immigrant labour force that is now returning home unemployed from Europe and Russia. The population has been disillusioned with politics for years – Communists and opposition forces alike. It remains to be seen whether the current riots are a one-off explosion of anger or will they turn into substantial protests with concrete demands for change.

In response to the protests, President Voronin has proposed a vote recount, which received the Constitutional Court's blessing. However, given the many reports on multiple votes per person and lists including deceased people, the awakened opposition and civil society might eventually oppose a recount and new elections might be demanded if the procedure remains blurred. Communist rulers might thus face further challenges, mostly from young leaders such as Chisinau mayor Dorin Chirtoaca, a politician who might be able to persuade the conservative older generations that Moldova's future is better assured in the hands of liberal opposition leaders. However, Moldova cannot yet boast from a high number of young professionals with political experience and grand political ambition.

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## THE REGIONAL CONTEXT

According to the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and other election observers, Moldovan parliamentary elections met most international standards. In other cases of post-election public unrest (Georgia in 2003, Ukraine in 2004 and Kyrgyzstan in 2005), international monitors had expressed severe criticism concerning the electoral process. Russia has on several occasions accused the OSCE, and more directly the Office for

Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) – the OSCE agency responsible for election monitoring and democratisation – of triggering revolutions. In the case of Moldova, international organisations that sent observers including the EU, Council of Europe and Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) either have

overlooked inconsistencies or have been fooled by Moldovan ruling elites. Although this raises questions about election-monitoring processes, it also pleads them free from having instigated these particular protests.

The Moldovan protests and riots might spill over to other countries in the region that deal with similar (though not identical) problems. Neighbouring Ukraine has had to live with a paralysed political landscape for years and is still in dispute with Russia over energy transport. In the Caucasus, tensions remain between Russia and Georgia while the latter's government is also confronted by an opposition that is unhappy with Georgia's democratic credentials and ruling elite. Meanwhile, Central Asian republics are also far from stable. Recently, in Kyrgyzstan people went onto the streets to

protest against government policy. Although belief in rapid democratic change has mostly disappeared after the earlier 'colour revolutions' and last year's violent outbreaks in Armenia, people are still willing to go out on the streets and demand either election rectification or change of their country's course.

Several factors make most former Soviet republics prone to public protest and political instability:

All former Soviet republics have slowly strengthened their independence, developed a national identity and established a foreign policy. Russia has less control over these countries and the local elites have only partially filled the power vacuum, which increases the risk of instability. Despite the republics' leaders awareness that ties with Moscow are inevitable and even desirable (with the exception of Georgia), their dependence, to different degrees, on Russian energy, and the fact that all harbour Russian speaking populations within their borders, they do not want Russia to shape their futures. Kazakhstan has become an economic giant with regional leadership ambitions while one of Moscow's strongest allies, Armenia, is also seeking a balanced foreign policy. Nowadays, Russian bullying over energy imports from Central Asia and exports through the Caucasus and Eastern Europe is countered. Also none of the CIS countries followed suit when Moscow recognised Abkhazia and South-Ossetia. Russia's neighbours have become more confident and so have their people in demanding both rights and development. Increased self-awareness and independence are accompanied by risks of instability if the republics' elites fail to meet people's expectations.

Secondly, fifteen years of slow democratisation efforts by Western-orientated international organisations, the EU, US and numerous civil society organisations might not have had much influence on the ruling elites of countries like Azerbaijan, Tajikistan or even Ukraine, but they did have some impact on people's democratic awareness and public servants' expertise. Most

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»»»»» countries have a civil society that is critical, though not always free, and external capacity building efforts of institutions such as the armed forces and the judiciary have born some fruit. Fifteen years of democratisation efforts have helped to build a critical mass. People are ready to demand change when the opportunity arises.

In the third place, the opportunity to vote for capable political leaders with a clear message does not yet often present itself in former Soviet republics. The Soviet nomenclature is still in charge and carefully guards the business of politics by only allowing likeminded bureaucrats or businessmen interested in the status quo. The young generation that has not left the country to find a future elsewhere might be out of politics, but it stands at the core of society and is able to use modern means of communication to exert influence as we saw in Moldova. This generation that feels excluded by the ruling elites is a source of instability, but it also represents the future of these countries.

Lastly, the current economic crisis creates instability both in energy-rich countries that see their revenues decline – Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan – as well as in the main energy transit countries – Georgia and Ukraine. The republics with little economic means – Armenia, Moldova, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan – do not have state funds to pay the bills and keep investing, while their immigrant labour forces return from Russia and Europe, diminishing the volume of remittances. Public anger over mismanagement might be the foremost instigator of pending unrest in several former Soviet republics. The harshest dictatorships – Belarus, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan – had until now been less affected by the financial crisis because their economies are less connected to the global system. However, the effects of the current economic crisis are already being felt, mainly due to their connection and dependence on the Russian economy, which has suffered a major blow. Whereas the chances of public unrest are smaller in these republics, the risk of violence is substantially bigger should their leaders be confronted by the population.

#### **RAPPROCHEMENT OR GEOPOLITICS?**

The current crisis in Moldova is a missed opportunity for Russia and the EU jointly to push the reset button and work towards the country's stabilisation. Unfortunately, this crisis is likely to worsen geopolitical strife over former Soviet republics. The remarks of President Voronin blaming Romania for the riots have been especially worrisome in this sense. The fact that several rioters carried Romanian flags has been used by the Communist leadership to allege a Romanian underpinning, while Russian legislators and media have hinted at Western plots. Moscow's official line, however, has been more cautious, expressing concern with the riots that threaten stability.

The EU and the US have been embarrassingly silent on the matter. The US government regards unrest in Moldova as an issue that should be taken up by the EU due to the latter's engagement through the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP). But it also wants to avoid confrontation with Russia. Meanwhile, the EU has only made two short statements of concern through High Representative Solana and the EU Presidency Trio (France, Czech Republic and Spain). Brussels should be careful not to give praise to the Moldovan authorities in handling this small crisis that still has potential to turn into a larger protest. Reasonably positive readings by the OSCE, Council of Europe and EU observers notwithstanding, Moldovan elections were clearly fraudulent. While Brussels steps up its engagement with Chisinau through the Eastern Partnership, it should make clear that the vote recount should be monitored (by an embarrassed international community), that reform of the electoral system should be taken up urgently and that blaming outside actors (Romania) for staging protests without hard proof is unacceptable.

**The time has hopefully come for rapprochement and cooperation.**

Both the EU and Russia are weary of another crisis in their near abroad. Moscow and Brussels have kept silent in the hope that this 'twitter revolution' blows over. Ignoring the sentiments expressed during last week's events will only postpone a clash of interests between the powers and reform minded forces. Brussels will need to step up its engagement in Moldova. It has done so in 2005 by setting up a Commission Delegation in Chisinau, starting the EUBAM border control mission and becoming involved in the Transnistria talks. But more is needed since the ENP has little to show and reintegration of Transnistria seems further away than ever.

The EU should in the first place help to make Moldova sustainable. This is a great economic challenge that needs to be accompanied by governance initiatives. Secondly, the EU should be more visible in finding an acceptable joint solution with Russia for Transnistria's status. At this point, Tiraspol is unlikely to come to an agreement with an impoverished and internally divided Moldova. EU attention is warranted since the Moldovan leadership has proven to be an unreliable factor – sometimes urging for EU integration, while at others signing agreements with Russia on Transnistria outside the established negotiation format. The latest example of this is the mid-March meeting between Voronin, Smirnov and Medvedev, where the three leaders signed a statement that included a provision for an OSCE peace mission upon settlement of the Transnistrian issue. Since such a settlement might never take place, the current contested Russian troops could stay endlessly on Moldovan territory.

## ENDNOTE

Last week's unrest in Chisinau is no new 'democratic' revolution yet but it has the potential to grow into one, pending the vote recount procedure and international responses. The Moldovan government should be transparent towards the public and cooperative in the recount of votes in

order to sustain some level of trust. Also, it needs to grab the opportunity to make a fresh start by involving the younger generation that feels excluded; it will need 'fresh blood' if it wants to stay in business anyway.

The EU will have to act in any case, preferably in some reasonable consultation with Moscow, which slowly loses influence in its near abroad. The last thing that Moldova needs is a row between Moscow and Brussels (including Bucharest) over its internal situation and eventually Transnistria's status. This might leave room for a concerted approach by these actors in taking the situation in Chisinau seriously and refraining from accusing each other of playing geopolitics or urging regime change. The time has hopefully come for rapprochement and cooperation.

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