

What to expect from the new president of Moldova

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On 30 October and 13 November 2016, for the first time in the last twenty years, the Moldovans directly elected their president, choosing Igor Dodon, the leader of the pro-Russian Party of Socialists, as their new head of state. The pro-European candidate, Maia Sandu, a Harvard-educated economist and former education minister, finished second. While the powers of the Moldovan president are limited, the victory of the unapologetically pro-Russian Dodon is more than symbolic. The EU should not underestimate the consequences of his election, nor his capacity to damage EU interests and weaken EU-Moldova relations.

The return to the direct popular election of the president was the result of a controversial decision of the Constitutional Court. Despite its questionable legal motivation, the decision is supported by the population, frustrated with the political class. The Constitutional Court decision was adopted under the influence of popular protests in September 2015-January 2016 against the government controlled by Vlad Plahotniuc, Moldova's most powerful but also most unpopular politician and businessman. The protests were in part fuelled by the outrage caused by the disappearance of 1 billion dollars from the banking system, more than 10% of Moldova's GDP. The Court's decision, not free of political interests, implemented one of the key demands of the protesters but it also deflated the protests and thus decreased the pressure on the government.

The result of the presidential elections is not surprising. Internal infighting, mismanagement and corruption scandals have led to disillusionment with the various pro-European governing coalitions in power since 2009, with many of their voters moving to support either new reformist opposition platforms (the Platform Dignity and Truth or Maia Sandu's Action and Solidarity Party) or several rising pro-Russian parties among which Dodon's Party of Socialists is the most prominent. The theft of 1 billion dollars from the banking system and the banking crisis that followed further sapped Moldovans' enthusiasm for European integration and also led to the EU and the IMF to suspend financial aid, although the IMF recently resumed support. Under these conditions, Igor Dodon's Party of Socialists had already won the first position in the November 2014 parliamentary elections, though subsequently it did not manage to form a governing majority in parliament. Although anti-corruption and the fight against the 'oligarchic establishment', i.e. the system controlled by Vlad Plahotniuc, was a main theme for both candidates, Maia Sandu was weakened by Plahotniuc's offer of support, which she rejected, while Dodon still managed to win despite his lack of credibility on anticorruption issues given his involvement in several dubious enrichment schemes.

While President Dodon will have limited executive powers, he is likely to use his very visible position both to shore up support for his party and to alter the country's foreign policy. The president, besides being the head of state and representing it internationally, has the power to nominate the prime-minister, a role which can be especially influential when a majority is lacking in parliament. Moreover, the president leads the country's Supreme Security Council, is the supreme commander of the armed forces and has the power to nominate judges and soon the prosecutor-general, an influential attribute in a country sapped by corruption and a weak judiciary.

However, as the Party of Socialists is not part of the governing coalition, President Dodon will lack some of the tools needed to achieve his political goals. Though he promised to "run Moldova just the same way Putin runs Russia", this will be difficult to achieve given the president's reduced powers and the lack of a parliamentary majority. Dodon pledged to push for new parliamentary elections after he wins the elections. However, this will not be easy as parliament can only be dissolved in a limited number of cases and, even if the current government is a minority one, Dodon's Party of Socialists is likely to remain short of the majority needed to pass a no-confidence vote. This would force him to cohabit with the executive controlled by Plahotniuc, which might not pose him great challenges given that, though formally political adversaries, Dodon is not free from Plahotniuc's political and economic influence.

Moreover, the president's direct election, while increasing the legitimacy of the office, will also increase the voters' expectations from the incumbent. Lacking the executive tools, Dodon will be able to accuse the government for the lack of results, aiming to strengthen his party in view of the 2018 parliamentary elections. In all this time, the reformist pro-European parties will remain outside the parliament, which means European integration is at risk of continuing to be associated with the nominally pro-European but very unpopular Plahotniuc.

Igor Dodon is also unlikely to achieve results in what concerns the Transnistrian conflict. He has argued that in order to put an end to the conflict and integrate this break-away region, Moldova will have to become a federation, with Transnistria as one of its federal subjects. This position is unpopular in Moldova and is unlikely to receive the necessary political support. Last time a similar proposal was seriously put on the table by Russia (2003), it was rejected even by the moderately pro-Russian Moldovan president Vladimir Voronin.

With respect to foreign policy, one should expect a certain degree of discontinuity. In the past, Dodon was supporting Moldova's signing of an Association Agreement (AA) with the EU, but as Russia-EU relations worsened, he also became more critical of the EU. In recent interviews Dodon stated that one of the main goals of his party will remain to be the cancelation of the EU-Moldova Association Agreement, but also added that as president of the country he will not have the power to do so. While Dodon argues for the maintenance of Moldova's visa-free travel regime with the EU, he rejects what he calls "European values", by which he mainly refers to the anti-discrimination legislation, and especially the provisions regarding sexual orientation, which was one of the requirements for granting Moldova visa-free access to the EU. In this, Dodon, though leading a "Party of Socialists", follows president Putin's brand of conservatism and has found an influential ally in the Moldovan Orthodox Church, which is subordinated to the Russian Orthodox Church. In the run-up to the elections, its head Metropolitan Vladimir praised and endorsed Dodon, while also criticising the anti-discrimination legislation adopted by the Moldovan parliament in 2012.

President Dodon is also likely to damage Moldova's relations with its two neighbours, Ukraine and Romania. Already during the campaign, his statement that Crimea is a part of Russia has led to protests from the Ukrainian government. The likelihood of him damaging Moldova's relations with Romania is even higher. Dodon has called for the banning of the Unionist movement, which calls for the union of Moldova with Romania, has also promised to ban the access of people with double (i.e. Moldovan and Romanian) citizenship to leadership positions and to replace the *History of Romanians* currently taught in Moldovan schools with a *History of Moldova*. Statements or measures on such divisive and sensitive issues are likely to produce both turmoil in Moldova but also aggravate relations with Romania.

The EU should not underestimate the consequences of the election of Igor Dodon as president of Moldova and his capacity to damage EU's interests and EU-Moldova relations. The EU and Moldova's goals to strengthen political association and economic integration and to bring the country closer to the EU will become even more difficult to achieve if the president of the country will actively try to undermine these objectives. While the EU policy of conditionality exemplified by the February 2016 Council Conclusions on Moldova should continue, the EU should also better communicate its red lines, both in private and in public. If Moldova cannot abrogate the non-discrimination legislation and at the same time maintain the visa free-travel regime with the EU, this should be said; if the Association Agreement Moldova signed with the EU is not open to negotiations with Russia as Dodon requests, this should also be said. By not clearly voicing its position, the EU only allows itself to be misused in the internal Moldovan political debate.

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