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## Moldova/Transnistria: Progress and Political Crisis

### *Introduction*

The continuing, steady progress in the OSCE's "results-based" approach to the Transnistrian political settlement process was not the big news from Moldova during the past year. Instead, an upheaval in domestic politics, with an encouraging outcome to date, has dominated the country's news in 2019. The February parliamentary elections produced an inconclusive result, with the legislature divided almost equally between three competing blocs. Most observers expected that early elections would be necessary, but by the deadline, the pro-Russian Party of Socialists (*Partidul Socialiștilor din Republica Moldova*, PSRM) and the pro-Western alliance ACUM<sup>1</sup> reached agreement on a coalition government. The ruling Democratic Party (*Partidul Democrat din Moldova*, PDM), controlled by the oligarch Vladimir Plahotniuc, attempted for a week to hold onto power by manipulating the Constitutional Court and refusing to vacate government buildings.

When the Russian Federation, the European Union, and the United States all weighed in to support the new coalition, the PDM abandoned office; Plahotniuc and several close associates fled the country. In its three months in office (June-September) the unexpected coalition has focused on "de-oligarchization", a programme aimed at reforming the electoral system, judiciary, prosecutor, and police, and fighting corruption. While work has continued in the Transnistrian settlement process, it has been a relatively low priority for the coalition. There are also significant differences between the PSRM and ACUM leadership on how to proceed towards a settlement.

### *The Transnistrian Settlement Process: Continued Progress*

The participants of the Transnistrian settlement process, in particular representatives from Chișinău and Tiraspol, continued to work hard, with tangible results, through to the end of 2018 and into 2019. Internationally recognized Moldovan neutral design license plates for residents of the Transnistrian region were launched on 1 September 2018. Following this, Moldovan and Transnistrian negotiators and thirteen expert working groups continued to meet frequently, both to ensure the steady implementation of the six agree-

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<sup>1</sup> ACUM (English translation: "Now") is an electoral alliance between the Dignity and Truth Platform Party (*Partidul Platforma Demnitate și Adevăr*, PPDA) and the Party of Action and Solidarity (*Partidul Acțiune și Solidaritate*, PAS).

ments reached since November 2017, and to pursue progress on the two remaining issues from the “package of eight” – telecommunications and outstanding criminal cases.<sup>2</sup>

As the Milan OSCE Ministerial Council Meeting approached, working relations between Chişinău and Tiraspol had undergone a remarkable transformation from what they had been only three to four years earlier. Automobile traffic was moving across the Gura Bîcului Bridge, and experts would soon begin investigating whether and how the bridge might handle heavy truck traffic. Eight Latin-script schools were operating in the Transdnestrian region without the usual recurring problems of access for students and teachers. The mechanism for the apostolization of Transdnestrian diplomas by Moldovan authorities was working effectively. Moldovan farmers in the Dubossary region had regained regular, unhindered access to their lands in Transdnestrian-controlled territory. In addition to the issues from the package of eight, working groups began to extend their discussions to areas such as banking, phyto-sanitary questions, civil document certification, and human rights.<sup>3</sup>

The three mediators (Russia, Ukraine, and the OSCE) and two observers (the EU and US) maintained their consensus and effective co-operation during this process, and produced another sweeping statement – for the fourth year in a row – on the Transdnestrian settlement process at the Milan Ministerial Council on 6-7 December 2018.<sup>4</sup> The statement reviewed and welcomed the progress achieved during 2018. The statement also called on the sides not only to work towards implementing all of the agreements reached in the 5+2 meeting held in May 2018 in Rome and the Vienna and Berlin protocols, but to seek progress in all three “baskets” of the agreed agenda for the negotiation process, including political and security issues.

The Milan Ministerial Statement also reflected the longstanding consensus among all OSCE participating States, including Russia, that any settlement must be based on Moldova’s sovereignty and territorial integrity, with a special status for Transdnestria. As in previous years, the Transdnestrian “Foreign Ministry” disputed this point at once, demonstrating the wide gap between Tiraspol and Chişinău (and the international community) on fundamental political and security issues.<sup>5</sup> The Transdnestrian statement also took issue with the Moldovan intervention at Milan, specifically with respect to calls for the

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2 For background, see William H. Hill, *Moldova/Transdnestria: Steps Forward, Stumbles Back*, in: Institute for Peace Research and Security Policy at the University of Hamburg/IFSH (ed.), *OSCE Yearbook 2018*, Baden-Baden 2019, pp. 193-204.

3 Cf. *ibid.*; for a good summary, see also Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), *Annual Report 2018*, Vienna 2019, pp. 68-69, available at: <https://www.osce.org/annual-report/2018>.

4 Cf. Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), Ministerial Council, Milan 2018, Ministerial Statement on the Negotiations on the Transdnestrian Settlement Process in the “5+2” Format, MC.DOC/1/18, 7 December 2018, available at: <https://www.osce.org/chairmanship/405917>.

5 Cf. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Pridnestrovian Moldovan Republic, Comment by Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PMR, 9 December 2018, at: <http://mfa-pmr.org/en/mzv>.

removal or transformation of the Russian peacekeeping force and “questions of security in general”.

While Transdniestria emphasized its traditional position that the purpose of the settlement process was to define and improve the relationship between two equal partners – Chişinău and Tiraspol – Transdniestrian officials continued to participate actively and often constructively in the working groups and other contacts. For the OSCE, the incoming Slovak Chairmanship pushed early on for continued progress in the settlement process. The new Chairperson-in-Office, Minister of Foreign Affairs Miroslav Lajčák visited Moldova on 19 January 2019, only a week after formally assuming his position. Lajčák pledged his and the OSCE’s support, noting that: “We need to keep taking small concrete steps forward. Some of the progress we have seen was almost unimaginable a few years ago. The more we engage in dialogue, the more trust we will build.”<sup>6</sup> In order to ensure the continuity of the process, the Slovak Chairmanship retained former Italian Foreign Minister Franco Frattini as Special Representative for the Transdniestrian Settlement Process.

Despite ominous political clouds gathering over Moldova, the OSCE continued to work productively with Moldovan and Transdniestrian negotiators and officials through the winter of 2018/2019 and spring of 2019. Most of the work was relatively low profile, involving implementation of existing agreements, discussion of details on subjects under negotiation, and increasing identification of other areas where both sides might benefit from practical contacts and co-operation. Head of the OSCE Mission to Moldova, Claus Neukirch, intervened publicly to put out fires, such as tensions caused by the Transdniestrian authorities’ imposition of restrictions on access to the Moldovan-controlled town of Varnita in the Bendery region, and Tiraspol’s opening of a “social-cultural centre” in Moscow.<sup>7</sup> After several months of work on these issues, in early May, Neukirch welcomed Transdniestrian resolution of the issues involving Varnita.<sup>8</sup> At the end of May, Neukirch also welcomed Chişinău’s agreement to certify civil documents for Transdniestrian residents, documenting marriages, divorces, births, and deaths.<sup>9</sup> Special Representative Frattini visited Moldova on 10-11 May, urging continued progress in meetings

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6 Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), OSCE Chairperson-in-Office Lajčák, on official visit to Moldova, says advancing Transdniestrian Settlement Process high on Slovak Chair’s agenda, Chisinau, 19 January 2019, at: <https://www.osce.org/chairmanship/409467>.

7 Cf. Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), OSCE Head of Mission calls on the Sides to the Transdniestrian settlement to keep to the course of constructive interaction and confidence building, Chisinau, 31 January 2019, at: <https://www.osce.org/mission-to-moldova/410564>.

8 Cf. Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), Head of OSCE Mission to Moldova welcomes commitment by leaderships of both Sides to continue constructive dialogue, underpinned by concrete steps, Chisinau, 13 May 2019, at: <https://www.osce.org/mission-to-moldova/419408>.

9 Cf. Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), Head of OSCE Mission praises decision by Moldova’s Government to certify civil status facts of Transdniestrian residents, Chisinau, 29 May 2019, at: <https://www.osce.org/mission-to-moldova/421175>.

with leaders from both sides, and held out the prospect of a formal 5+2 meeting in Bratislava sometime later in the year.<sup>10</sup>

### *Moldova's Parliamentary Elections: The Gathering Storm*

Moldova had been in a state of political turmoil for the past five years, but as the February 2019 parliamentary elections grew closer, the situation grew worse. The 2014 parliamentary elections in Moldova coincided with the so-called “theft of the century” – the disappearance of some one billion dollars from three Moldovan banks through fraudulent, non-performing loans and insider manipulation. The Moldovan economy eventually recovered, but the country's political structures arguably never did. Vladimir Plahotniuc's PDM gradually increased its representation in parliament, until a PDM-dominated coalition government headed by Prime Minister Pavel Filip was installed in January 2016, to the vocal disapproval of large demonstrations from both the left and right.

The Filip government ended the 2014-2015 revolving door of governments and prime ministers, and professed a pro-European orientation. However, the increasingly obvious dominance of Plahotniuc, democratic backsliding, and rampant corruption – epitomized by the failure to identify and punish members of the elite clearly implicated in or responsible for the theft of the century – produced widespread disillusion within Moldova and ruptures with its most important international partners. After PDM-leaning judges annulled the victory of Dignity and Truth Platform Party (PPDA) leader Andrei Năstase in the Chişinău mayoral elections in the summer of 2018, popular indignation with Plahotniuc's “captured state” exploded into mass protests.

Plahotniuc resorted to a wide variety of administrative resources and measures to bolster his finances and boost his support. Controversial money-for-citizenship and capital amnesty laws sought to counter the EU's withdrawal of assistance. Having already modified the electoral system in 2017 over the objections of Moldova's international partners, Plahotniuc held a referendum on reducing the number of deputies in parliament from 101 to 61 alongside the February 2019 election. Meanwhile, the PDM government sought to obtain Washington's support by earmarking the old, decaying Republic Stadium in the centre of Chişinău as the site for a new American embassy.<sup>11</sup>

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10 Cf. Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), Visiting Moldova, OSCE Chair's Special Representative Franco Frattini urges Sides to step up efforts to maintain positive dynamic in settlement process, Chisinau, 11 May 2019, at: <https://www.osce.org/mission-to-moldova/419276>.

11 At least this was a widespread popular view in Chişinău. Cf. Mihai Popşoi, State of Play Ahead of Moldova's Parliamentary Elections, *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, 14 December 2018, at: <https://jamestown.org/program/state-of-play-ahead-of-moldovas-parliamentary-elections/>.

The election campaign was heated, competitive, and marked by what many long-time observers of Moldovan politics considered a higher than usual number of complaints and violations.<sup>12</sup> Plahotniuc's PDM and the allied Shor Party – the vehicle of Ilan Shor, Mayor of Orhei Mayor and fellow oligarch – spent enormous sums on the campaign, in total roughly three times as much as all other parties registered in the campaign taken together.<sup>13</sup> The PDM was widely accused of using government resources, funding for local projects, and pressure to further its campaign. However, the Central Election Commission (CEC), widely believed to be under the influence of the PDM, formally warned the PSRM and Igor Dodon because the president had allegedly violated the non-partisan nature of his office by openly demonstrating his sympathy for the Socialist Party.<sup>14</sup>

The PSRM received clear, strong support from Moscow. President Dodon met frequently with President Putin and emphasized the need for Moldova to have good relations and economic ties with Russia.<sup>15</sup> In a meeting with Dodon on 30 January, Putin agreed to make an exception to current Russian practice and allow Moldovan goods shipped to Russia to transit Ukraine, a clear electoral concession to his Moldovan colleague.<sup>16</sup> In a strange departure from the comity within the 5+2 format, the Russian Foreign Ministry issued a sharp criticism of alleged US interference in Moldova's domestic affairs after US Ambassador Dereck J. Hogan made a rather anodyne, non-partisan call for Moldova to hold free and fair elections.<sup>17</sup>

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- 12 Cf. European Parliament/OSCE ODIHR/OSCE PA/Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, International Election Observation Mission: Republic of Moldova – Parliamentary Elections, 24 February 2019; Statement of Preliminary Findings and Conclusions, available at <https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/moldova/412346>. I also reached this conclusion based upon my experience of following election campaigns and elections in Moldova since 1998.
  - 13 Cf. the Moldovan election website: Alegerile parlamentare din 2019 în Republica Moldova, *alegeri.md*, at: [http://alegeri.md/w/Alegerile\\_parlamentare\\_din\\_2019\\_%C3%AEn\\_Republica\\_Moldova](http://alegeri.md/w/Alegerile_parlamentare_din_2019_%C3%AEn_Republica_Moldova).
  - 14 Cf. European Parliament/OSCE ODIHR/OSCE PA/Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, cited above (Note 12), p. 14; see also Parliamentary Elections 2019: Party of Socialists was sanctioned by CEC with warning, *Publika*, 9 February 2019, at [https://en.publika.md/parliamentary-elections-2019-party-of-socialists-was-sanctioned-by-cec-with-warning\\_2655751.html](https://en.publika.md/parliamentary-elections-2019-party-of-socialists-was-sanctioned-by-cec-with-warning_2655751.html).
  - 15 Cf. Anna Nemtsova, As Elections Approach, Moldova's President Tries to Prove He's Putin's Mini-Me No More, *Daily Beast*, 19 February 2019, updated 15 June 2019, at: <https://www.thedailybeast.com/as-elections-approach-moldovas-president-tries-to-prove-hes-putins-mini-me-no-more>; see also Vadim Ghirda, AP interview: Moldova president says country needs Russia, *AP News*, 21 February 2019, at: <https://www.apnews.com/e69fb771689c47dbbe3561338bfe98a4>.
  - 16 Cf. Dodon, Putin agree on Moldovan goods' supplies to Russia via Ukraine, *Kyiv Post*, 30 January 2019, at: <https://www.kyivpost.com/ukraine-politics/dodon-putin-agree-on-moldovan-goods-supplies-to-russia-via-ukraine.html?cn-reloaded=1>.
  - 17 Cf. U.S. Embassy in Moldova, Ambassador Hogan's speech at FRISPA, MSU: A Crucial Test – Moldova's Parliamentary Elections and Future Relations with the United States, 5 February 2019, at: <https://md.usembassy.gov/ambassador-hogan-delivers-a-speech-at-frishpa-a-crucial-test-moldovas-parliamentary-elections-and-future-relations-with-the-united-states/>; see also Ministerstvo inostrannykh del Rossijskoj Federatsii [The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation], Kommentarij Departamenta informatsii i

In earlier elections, Plahotniuc and the PDM had presented themselves as a pro-Western party, dedicated to European integration. However, in the light of steadily worsening relations with the EU, culminating in a formal condemnation from the European Parliament in 2018 and withdrawal of economic aid, Plahotniuc redefined his part as “pro-Moldovan.” The sizeable segment of the Moldovan population that supported closer relations with the West, in particular the EU, moved to support two new parties growing out of the anti-government demonstrations of the winter of 2016: the Party of Action and Solidarity (PAS), headed by former World Bank official and 2016 presidential candidate Maia Sandu, and the Dignity and Truth Platform Party (PPDA), headed by protest leader and 2018 Chişinău mayoral candidate Andrei Năstase. For the 2019 elections, PAS and PPDA formed the electoral bloc ACUM. Although ACUM was clearly critical of the PSRM’s pro-Russian orientation, the primary focus of the alliance was on “de-oligarchization” of the country, directed especially against Plahotniuc and the PDM.<sup>18</sup>

With the new electoral system comprising 51 single mandate districts, and the other 50 deputies elected from nationwide party lists, most observers predicted that the PDM and PSRM would win most of the single mandate contests and dominate the next parliament. The results proved to be a surprise.

The PSRM took first place in the nationwide polling with 31 per cent of a total vote of slightly more than 1.45 million.<sup>19</sup> The big surprise was the performance of the pro-European electoral bloc ACUM, which beat the PDM to second place by a clear margin, 26.84 per cent to 23.62 per cent. The only other party to make it past the five per cent national barrier was the Shor Party, led by Mayor of Orhei and oligarch Ilan Shor, with 8.2 per cent of the nationwide vote. The results in the single mandate districts were also somewhat surprising. As expected, the PSRM did well, winning 17 out of the 51 seats available. However, the PDM did not meet expectations, winning only 17 of the districts, while ACUM took twelve single mandate seats, all around Chişinău and in the two districts in Western Europe and North America.

The OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission concluded that the “24 February 2019 parliamentary elections were competitive and fundamental rights were generally respected”.<sup>20</sup> However, many long-time observers considered this the dirtiest election – and election day in particular – in the history of independent post-Soviet Moldova. The OSCE/ODIHR report noted: “The

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pechati MID Rossii v svyazi s вовлечennost’yu SShA v predvybornuyu situatsiyu v Moldavii [Comment by the MFA Information and Press Department on US Involvement in the Pre-Election Situation in Moldova], 12 February 2019, at: [http://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign\\_policy/news/-/asset\\_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/3513260](http://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/3513260).

18 Cf. William H. Hill, Moldova’s Upcoming Election: What’s at Stake?, *The Russia File*, Kennan Institute, 14 February 2019, at: <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/moldovas-upcoming-election-whats-stake>.

19 For results of the election, see the Moldovan NGO website: [http://alegeri.md/w/Alegerile\\_parlamentare\\_din\\_2019\\_%C3%AE\\_n\\_Republica\\_Moldova#Rezultatele\\_alegerilor](http://alegeri.md/w/Alegerile_parlamentare_din_2019_%C3%AE_n_Republica_Moldova#Rezultatele_alegerilor); or; and the IFES website: <http://www.electionguide.org/elections/id/3120/>.

20 European Parliament/OSCE ODIHR/OSCE PA/Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, cited above (Note 12), p. 1.

campaign took place against the backdrop of disaffection with public institutions and was tainted by allegations [of] pressure on public employees, strong indications of vote buying and the misuse of state resources.”<sup>21</sup> There were widespread reports and videos uploaded on social media of organized bussing of voters from the Transdnistriean region to the polls. Many of these voters alleged they had been paid as much as 20 euros for their votes. Notwithstanding all of the complaints, the results were accepted relatively quickly by all of the contestants.

The worst fears of the opposition were not realized, as there was neither a clear PDM victory nor a PDM-PSRM dominium. Instead, the distribution of seats pointed towards a hung parliament, in which all parties faced considerable difficulties in putting together a majority coalition:

PSRM	35
PDM	30
ACUM	26
Shor Party	7
Independents	3

Even if the Shor Party and independent deputies could all be counted on to vote with the PDM, Plahotniuc needed to reach an agreement with either the Socialists or the parties in the ACUM bloc in order to form a government.

#### *From Deadlock to Crisis: Forming a Government*

The election results were certified by the CEC on 9 March, and a couple of weeks later the new parliament convened to begin the task of forming a majority within that body, electing its officers, and choosing a new government. In the meantime, Filip remained in office in a caretaker role. Each of the three major actors – the PDM, PSRM, and ACUM – had serious reservations about negotiating or co-operating with the other two, so the process was drawn out and difficult. Of the three, Plahotniuc and the PDM were most ready to make a deal, while ACUM was the most standoffish, unwilling to deal with Plahotniuc at all and extremely wary of the PSRM’s pro-Moscow orientation.

The PSRM leadership consulted frequently with Moscow; at one point all of the PSRM deputies were reported to have visited Moscow for consultations. The Russian leadership pushed for a coalition against Plahotniuc. Russian authorities had filed two new money-laundering cases against the PDM leader during the campaign. Most remarkably, in a weekly news roundup at the end of March, the renowned Russian television news personality Dmitry Kiselev devoted several minutes of his Sunday evening show to warning the

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21 Ibid.

PSRM not to join with Plahotniuc and the PDM, calling such a possible coalition a “poisoned apple”.<sup>22</sup> The PSRM and ACUM warily investigated the possibility of a coalition for several weeks, with the latter stressing a desire to deal primarily, if not exclusively, with “de-oligarchization” of the country.

By the end of May, most Moldovans and outside observers expected the stalemate to continue, and to result in early, “snap” elections sometime in the autumn. But then, events came to a head during the week of 3 June, as the 9 June deadline for forming a government approached. On 3 June, Russian Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Kozak, EU Commissioner for European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations Johannes Hahn, and US State Department Director of the Office of Eastern European Affairs Brad Freden all visited Chişinău and met with representatives of all three parties, the government, and President Dodon. In the wake of their meetings, ACUM and the PSRM began negotiating in earnest, and announced their agreement on a coalition on 8 June.<sup>23</sup>

Plahotniuc and the PDM refused to recognize the new coalition, and the PDM caretaker government refused to vacate the government offices and buildings. While the new ACUM-PSRM ministers held the parliament building, plainclothes toughs surrounded other official buildings, supporting Plahotniuc’s bid to retain power. An obedient, PDM-dominated Constitutional Court conveniently ruled that the coalition agreement had been reached too late, and the president was obligated to dissolve parliament and call new elections. The Moldovan constitution specifies that the president “may” dissolve parliament if a government cannot be formed after a period of three months; the Court ruled that this meant 90 days, not three calendar months.

The international community demonstrated an uncommon unity, as the Russian Federation, European Union, and United States all weighed in to support the PSRM-ACUM coalition, and call on Plahotniuc and the PDM to respect the law and give up power.<sup>24</sup> This took about a week, as on 14-15 June,

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22 A video of Kiselev’s 31 March broadside was published in 1 April on the Moldovan news website *NewsMaker*. See “Otravlennoe yabloko pokatilos’ k Dodonu.” Moskva otkryla ogon’ po “svoim” [“The poisoned apple rolled towards Dodon.” Moscow opened fire on “its own guys”], *NewsMaker*, 1 April 2019, at <https://newsmaker.md/rus/novosti/otravlennoe-yabloko-pokatilos-k-dodonu-moskva-otkryla-ogon-po-svoim-42710>.

23 Cf. Alexander Tanas/Matthias Williams, Moldovan parties agree to form government after months of deadlock, *Reuters*, 8 June 2019, at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-moldova-politics/moldovan-parties-agree-to-form-government-after-months-of-deadlock-idUSKCN1T90MT>.

24 There were numerous statements by governments, international organizations, and press around the globe in support of the ACUM-PSRM coalition and denouncing the PDM’s refusal to transfer power. For example, see: EU External Action Service, Statement by High Representative/Vice President Federica Mogherini and Commissioner Johannes Hahn on the political situation in the Republic of Moldova, Bruxelles, 9 June 2019, at: [https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/63826/statement-high-representativevice-president-federica-mogherini-and-commissioner-johannes-hahn\\_en](https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/63826/statement-high-representativevice-president-federica-mogherini-and-commissioner-johannes-hahn_en); U.S. State Department, Press Statement, Morgan Ortagus, Department Spokesperson Washington, DC, Moldovan Elections, Press Statement, 9 June 2019, at: <https://www.state.gov/moldovan-elections/>; Swiss Cooperation in Moldova, 10 June 2019, at: [https://www.facebook.com/SwissCooperationMoldova/posts/2;The\\_Ministry\\_of\\_Foreign](https://www.facebook.com/SwissCooperationMoldova/posts/2;The_Ministry_of_Foreign)



PDM officials and backers vacated the government buildings and agreed to go into opposition. Plahotniuc, Shor, and a number of their supporters left Chişinău and apparently fled abroad. (In a video sent on Moldova's Independence Day in August, Shor turned up in Israel. Plahotniuc's whereabouts remain officially unknown, although he is active on Facebook and rumoured to be in Florida.<sup>25</sup>)

In the new government, the PSRM took the posts of speaker of parliament, deputy prime minister for reintegration (the portfolio handling the Transnistrian settlement talks), minister of defence, and head of the security and intelligence service (SIS), while ACUM was allotted most of the ministerial posts, including prime minister, and foreign and interior ministers. Several of the ACUM ministers, such as Foreign Minister Nicu Popescu and Finance Minister Natalia Gavrilița, had been working abroad in international posts. Incoming Prime Minister Maia Sandu acknowledged that the PSRM-ACUM coalition was not a "natural partnership", and said the main aim would be to fight corruption, reverse the effects of oligarchic control in the country, and to restore the rule of law.<sup>26</sup> Both ACUM and PSRM leaders noted that the arrangement was temporary (although without any specified term or end date), and undertook to concentrate on domestic reform, while avoiding geopolitical issues which might easily split the two.

It seems too early, at the time of writing, to reach any firm conclusions on the results of and prospects for this unusual East-West, left-right coalition. International support has been forthcoming and enthusiastic from almost all quarters, one of those rare issues on which the EU, US, and Russia appear to remain in continued agreement. The new government has concentrated on a few general issue areas. One of the first priorities was to adopt legislation abolishing the electoral "reform" of 2017 and returning the country to a system of nationwide proportional representation.<sup>27</sup> Personnel remains an important issue that is gradually being addressed. The entire composition of the Constitutional Court has been replaced, and candidates are being screened for the

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Affairs of the Russian Federation, Statement by the Foreign Ministry in connection with the events in the Republic of Moldova, 10 June 2019, at: [https://www.mid.ru/en/web/guest/maps/md/-/asset\\_publisher/dfOotO3QvCij/content/id/3677863](https://www.mid.ru/en/web/guest/maps/md/-/asset_publisher/dfOotO3QvCij/content/id/3677863); Foreign & Commonwealth Office, Press Release, Republic of Moldova: joint statement by the UK, France, Germany, Poland, and Sweden, 10 June 2019, at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/joint-statement-on-the-republic-of-moldova-by-the-uk-france-germany-poland-and-sweden>.

25 For an account of the events of June 2019 in Chişinău, cf. William H. Hill/David J. Kramer, The Fight for the Poorest Country in Europe, in: *The American Interest*, 2 July 2019, at: <https://www.the-american-interest.com/2019/07/02/the-fight-for-the-poorest-country-in-europe/>.

26 Cf. Congressional Research Service, Moldova: An Overview, 11 July 2019, at: <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/IF10894.pdf>.

27 For a brief review of reform measures adopted, see the relatively new series of weekly reports (Moldova Weekly) at [sic.md](http://sic.md), a new Moldovan news and public affairs website with support from the Soros Foundation and the Black Sea Trust. The bulk of the news on the site is in Romanian. The English language weekly series began on 10 August 2017.

procuracy. Various dubious business and government deals from the Plahotniuc era are being unravelled, while the 2014 “theft of the century” is being investigated with greater vigour.

There have been bumps in the road for the coalition. ACUM deputies were indignant when a PSRM appointee was quickly elected head of the new Constitutional Court, apparently because one of the ACUM appointees voted for him in the secret ballot. (With only six judges voting, and the political affiliation of all well known, most expected a negotiation before a head was chosen). Several deputies from both parties have called for the coalition agreement to be further formalised and extended, generally with the expressed wish of making the unprecedented arrangement more stable and lasting. An invitation from President Dodon to Russian Defence Minister Sergej Shoigu to attend the 24 August celebration of the 75th anniversary of the liberation of Chişinău by Soviet forces drew a rebuke from Prime Minister Sandu, who complained that the government had not been consulted, and thus the visit must be personal and not official.<sup>28</sup>

Despite irritants such as these, both the ACUM and PSRM leaders seem dedicated to making the coalition work and continue through the winter. International support for the current government also appears to continue to be strong. President Dodon visited Moscow in early September to hold talks on the price and amounts of gas supplied to Moldova from Russia. Foreign Minister Popescu then held an apparently constructive meeting with his Russian counterpart, which is widely bruited to be in preparation for Prime Minister Sandu’s visit to Moscow. In the meantime, after one delay due to scheduling difficulties from the US side, Sandu is expected to visit Washington in mid-September. The successful left-right collaboration in Chişinău has already ceased to be a novelty, although – given Moldova’s often troubled recent political history – it does continue to be something of a surprise.

#### *The OSCE and the Transdnestrian Settlement Process: What Next?*

The Transdnestrian settlement process is not a top priority for ACUM, nor for Prime Minister Sandu in particular. This is not surprising, given the importance of anti-corruption, anti-oligarch actions for her and her ACUM colleagues. Further, her major experience with the Transdnestria portfolio during her prior service in government as minister of education was primarily dealing with the trouble created by Tiraspol for the eight Latin-script schools on the left bank. The prime minister has been clearly in tune with most in the centre and on the right in Chişinău political circles in opposing “federalization” as a solution to

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28 Cf. Sandu to Analyze Shoigu’s Visit to Moldova, *Regional Trends Analytics*, 27 August 2019, at: <https://regtrends.com/en/2019/08/27/sandu-to-analyze-shoigu-s-visit-to-moldova/>; see also Vladimir Solov’ev, Rossiya dast boj svoim boepripisam [Russia will deploy its ammunition], *Kommersant*, 24 August 2019, at: [https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4072458?from=four\\_mir](https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4072458?from=four_mir).

the conflict, and appears to share rising fears that the renewed involvement of Russian Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Kozak means that Moscow will attempt to revive his Memorandum. In her most recent statements on the Transdniestrian question, the Prime Minister has stressed the need for any settlement to end the corruption supported by smuggling through the Transdniestrian region.<sup>29</sup>

Since June, the Transdniestrian portfolio has been handled by Deputy Prime Minister Vasili Șova, who served in roughly the same post under President Vladimir Voronin, and most recently (since 2017) as an advisor to President Dodon on this issue. Șova is well known by Transdniestrian and Russian negotiators (not always a positive recommendation to representatives of other political parties in Moldova) and has accompanied Dodon to many of his meetings in the Kremlin over the past two years. Șova worked on the Transdniestrian issue in the 1990s and the 2000s, so he comes as close as any Moldovan official to having an institutional memory of the ups and downs of the settlement process.

Șova was reportedly the driving force behind the composition and distribution of the “Comprehensive Package for Moldova” by President Dodon at the 2019 Munich Security Conference. This initiative envisions the creation of a favourable international environment, specifically calling for win-win EU-Russia co-operation, to promote reintegration of the Transdniestrian region into an internationally recognized neutral Moldova.<sup>30</sup> Dodon and Șova have been promoting variants of this general approach for well over a year, but the proposal has yet to find real resonance in Moldova’s population and political circles. The initiative did not attract the attention the Moldovans hoped for at Munich, but it probably remains indicative of the general approach the PSRM is likely to pursue as a partner in the new government.

Meanwhile, the OSCE is continuing with its active, result-based approach to the settlement process. The government crisis in Chișinău slowed, but did not entirely stop work by experts. During the spring, Transdniestrian negotiators expressed frustration to several Western visitors that Moldova was taking so long to form a new administration and get back to work after the elections.<sup>31</sup> Indeed, once the June crisis was resolved, contacts and work resumed relatively quickly. On 12 July, representatives of the mediators, including Special Representative Frattini, and the observers visited Chișinău and Tiraspol, and met with President Dodon, Prime Minister Sandu, Deputy Prime Minister

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29 Cf. Government of Republic of Moldova, OSCE prepared to provide assistance in process of withdrawing ammunition from Transnistria’s Cobasna depot, 11 September 2019, at: <https://gov.md/en/content/osce-prepared-provide-assistance-process-withdrawing-ammunition-transnistrias-cobasna-depot>.

30 Presentation of the Idea of “Comprehensive Package for Moldova”: International Security Conference (Munich, February 2019), was a small book distributed by the Moldovan delegation, headed by President Dodon, to delegates at the Munich Security Conference in February 2019, in Romanian, Russian, English, German, and French. The initiative is referred to most often by its abbreviated Russian title *Bol'shoj Paket*.

31 Statements by Transdniestrian negotiators, OSCE officials to author, April-May, 2019.

Șova, Transnistrian leader Vadim Krasnoselsky, and Transnistrian chief negotiator Vitaly Ignatiev. Șova and Ignatiev agreed to resume “1+1” meetings soon (one was held on 24 July), while all the participants endorsed the possibility of a formal “substantive” 5+2 meeting in Bratislava within the next three months, and a retreat for expert group members in Bavaria, Germany organized by the OSCE Mission in the autumn.<sup>32</sup>

Another development in late summer involving a longstanding security issue somewhat unexpectedly held out the possibility of further progress in the settlement process. A portion of the small detachment of Russian military forces in Moldova’s Transnistrian region has as its sole purpose guarding a depot in the village of Colbasna containing some 22,000 metric tons of Cold War era ammunition. About one half of the original stocks of munitions stored at Colbasna was removed to the Russian Federation with the support of the OSCE Voluntary Fund and assistance of the OSCE Mission. However, the last train of ammunition left Moldova for Russia in March 2004; there have been no further shipments since that time, and no international inspection of the munitions for over a decade. Although the issue has been discussed from time to time in the OSCE and among participants in the Transnistrian settlement process, nothing has come of these discussions.

Then, according to President Dodon, during his 24 August visit to Moldova Russian Defence Minister Shoigu proposed the destruction of the ammunition stored at Colbasna.<sup>33</sup> During a meeting with Foreign Minister Popescu on 11 September, Russian Foreign Minister Sergej Lavrov confirmed that Shoigu had made such a proposal, and noted that both President Dodon and Transnistrian leader Krasnoselsky had welcomed it.<sup>34</sup> According to Lavrov, the Shoigu proposal envisioned the destruction of at least some of the ammunition, as its age and deteriorating condition might make it unsuitable for shipment back to Russia, as had been done in the early 2000s. Neither Lavrov nor Shoigu have publicly specified any details of this Russian proposal. The initiative was welcomed by the OSCE, and Secretary General Thomas Greminger scheduled a visit to Chișinău and Tiraspol on 17-19 September to discuss the

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32 Cf. Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), Joint Statement by the mediators and the observers in the Permanent Conference on Political Issues in the Framework of the Negotiation Process on the Transnistrian Settlement in the 5+2 format following their 12 July 2019 visit to Chisinau and Tiraspol, Chisinau, 12 July 2019, at: <https://www.osce.org/chairmanship/425576>; for a photo of the 1+1 meeting on 24 July 2019, see Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), Conflict prevention and resolution, at: <https://www.osce.org/mission-to-moldova/104529>.

33 Cf. Solov’ev, cited above (Note 28).

34 Cf. Ministerstvo inostrannykh del Rossijskoj Federatsii [The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation], Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’s statement and answers to media questions at a joint news conference following his talks with Minister of Foreign Affairs and European Integration of Moldova Nicu Popescu, Moscow, 11 September 2019, at: [https://www.mid.ru/ru/press\\_service/minister\\_speeches//asset\\_publisher/7OvQR5KJWVmR//content/id/3782852?p\\_p\\_id=101\\_INSTANCE\\_7OvQR5KJWVmR&\\_101\\_INSTANCE\\_7OvQR5KJWVmR\\_languageId=en\\_GB](https://www.mid.ru/ru/press_service/minister_speeches//asset_publisher/7OvQR5KJWVmR//content/id/3782852?p_p_id=101_INSTANCE_7OvQR5KJWVmR&_101_INSTANCE_7OvQR5KJWVmR_languageId=en_GB).

settlement process, and in particular the proposed destruction or removal of the ammunition.<sup>35</sup>

### *Conclusion*

It is clearly too early to presume any results from the Russian Federation's revival of the prospect of removing or eliminating the ammunition stored at Colbasna. However, the possible significance is clear. First, while there has been great progress in the settlement process over the past three to four years, Transdnistriean representatives have steadfastly resisted any discussion of status, and Russian representatives have generally avoided discussing security issues, despite continued, regular calls from Chişinău for the withdrawal of the remaining Russian troops stationed in the Transdnistriean region. Second, the ammunition in Colbasna – the one remaining vestige of the Soviet forces stationed in Cold War Moldova – has been a continuing impediment to withdrawal of the Russian troops, since Moscow insists they need to stay to guard the facility. While one can never assume the success of subsequent negotiations, removal of the ammunition would eliminate one clear, significant obstacle to progress. The OSCE has funds to support the process; what remains to be determined is the extent of political will.

On a more general level, the replacement of the PDM government, the flight of Plahotniuc, and the formation and first steps of Moldova's unusual coalition government engender both optimism and questions. First, one can hope but cannot presume that the coalition and the international consensus behind it will hold together. There is a great opportunity for Moldova to make long needed progress in its fight against corruption and for greater rule of law. Success in these areas will have ripple effects, including in support of the settlement process. But the possibility of failure, backsliding, and renewed or continued crisis also remains great, and international attention will necessarily remain focused on these issues.

Second, for good or ill, one of the factors contributing to recent progress in the settlement process has been co-operation between leaders and/or oligarchs – Moldova's Plahotniuc, Ukraine's Petro Poroshenko, and Transdnistria's head of Sheriff, Viktor Gushan. With both Poroshenko and Plahotniuc now gone, it is not entirely clear how these changes in Kyiv and Chişinău will affect the settlement process.

Third, Russia on the one hand, and the EU and the US on the other, have demonstrated a remarkable degree of agreement both on the resolution of the June political crisis in Chişinău and on the direction of the settlement process and the 5+2 in general. The current state of both East-West and transatlantic

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35 Cf. Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), OSCE Secretary General Thomas Greminger to visit Republic of Moldova from 17 to 19 September, Chişinău, 16 September 2019, at: <https://www.osce.org/mission-to-moldova/429857>.

relations raises unavoidable questions as to whether and for how long such comity might be maintained. This is not meant to contend that agreement among the mediators and observers in the Moldova-Transdnistria political settlement process is doomed, but that in today's OSCE, indeed today's world, it is highly unusual, and should be welcomed and nurtured.

*Shortly after this chapter went to press, in mid-November 2019 the left-right coalition in Moldova collapsed. The proximate cause was a dispute over appointment of a new Procurator General, but the government's fall followed a lengthy dispute within the ruling coalition over reform of the judicial system. The Sandu administration was replaced by a minority "technocratic" government composed largely of senior members of President Dodon's staff and PSRM colleague. The new government was supported in Parliament by the PDM, but Plahotniuc's former colleagues did not formally participate in the government or form a formal parliamentary fraction with the PSRM. The future of this new government remains cloudy, and Moldova's domestic politics deeply divided and troubled.*