

Moldova Looks to the West for Solutions

Author: [Alina Radu](#)

While the communists look likely to romp home in elections this Sunday, this formerly pro-Russian party is now campaigning on a pro-European ticket.

At 26, Tamara Vlas already has two children and recently divorced. Last year, she hoped to find a job in Western Europe but after trying to enter Italy with a fake visa she was arrested and sent home.

After months of search for a job in Chisinau, Moldova's capital, Vlas decided to enrol at university to become a teacher.

"I need a profound change in my life," she said. "We all need to shake off our poverty and despair. But who will help us to turn round our economy? Surely not the present politicians."

Like most people in Europe's poorest country, Vlas said she had little confidence in the ambitious pledges of the main players in upcoming parliamentary elections on March 6.

Voters are expected to hand the governing Communist Party, PCM, a new mandate, though the party is campaigning, ironically, given its Soviet roots, on a pro-Western ticket, including integration with the European Union.

It signals a stark change from the mood in 2001, when the PCM came to power on pledges to move closer to Moscow and join a nebulous union state with Russia and Belarus.

Since then, disillusion with the Russian alliance has set in. Moldova's communists now accuse Moscow of interfering in their affairs by refusing to pull troops out of Transdniestria, a separatist enclave run by Russian-speaking hardliners.

Communist president Vladimir Voronin and the opposition leaders all agree that Moldova must pursue closer ties with Europe to overcome its economic misery.

About one-third of the 4 million population ekes a living from around 30 US dollars a month. The economy remains largely agricultural, with wine and tobacco as the most important products.

There is a wide and growing disparity between incomes in Chisinau and rural areas, where the quality of life is almost uniformly dire, marked by cold houses, empty refrigerators and hand-me-down clothing.

Between independence in 1991 and 2000, Moldova's economic output virtually halved. If recent years have registered a slight improvement, that is mostly a result of remittances sent home by Moldovans working abroad.

Huge numbers have packed up and left. Up to 700,000 people, mainly youngsters, now work outside the country's borders - mostly in the EU, where their often-illegal status leaves them vulnerable to numerous forms of exploitation.

Angered by Russia's refusal to withdraw its troops from Transdniestler, Chisinau now pins its hopes on the EU.

Brussels is reciprocating. It recently signed an accord on relations with Moldova and says it will appoint a special representative to help find a solution to the rebellion in Transdniestler.

"This will contribute greatly to a solution to the problem of the reunification of Moldova, for which we have been waiting for many years," Moldova's foreign minister, Andrei Stratan, said, welcoming the move.

Many local analysts question whether the Moldovan Communist Party's conversion to western values is more than skin-deep.

"They remain a secretive bureaucracy with dubious democratic credentials," said Igor Botan, of the local NGO Association for Participatory Democracy.

"Without embarking on serious reform and democratisation at all political levels, Moldova will not become attractive for Western Europe," he adds.

Later last month, the European parliament passed a resolution on Moldova, highlighting that it would view the conduct and quality of the upcoming elections as vital for the continued development of Moldova-EU relationships.

"We express complete and continued support for the efforts of Moldova's people to establish an entirely functional democracy, supremacy of law and respect for human rights," the resolution said.

The latest polls suggest that the Communists are likely to win handsomely against the pro-Romanian Christian Democrats and the Democratic Moldova bloc, a fractious coalition backed mainly by business interests, each with around 20 per cent support. The Communists currently enjoy the support of around 60 per cent of voters, according to the polls. Two openly pro-Russian parties may fail to win any of the assembly's 101 seats.

Inspired by the recent so-called Orange revolution in next-door Ukraine, the opposition says its activists may pour into the streets if they believe the poll is rigged.

The Christian Democrats, who are most keen to follow Ukraine's path, have made orange their campaign color and have already announced rallies for the day after the vote.

"After March 6, an orange revolution is quite possible here, but only if the opposition unites," said Iurie Emilian, from the Christian Democratic party.

"An outbreak of popular indignation is possible because the Communist authorities have committed too much forgery and fraud during this election campaign."

The Christian Democrats were a major driving force behind 100,000-strong street rallies against the ruling Communists in 2003 and 2004.

While most civic activists doubt Moldova will see a popular revolt comparable to those in Ukraine and Georgia, they hope that people will go to polls in large numbers.

“As the old people and those in need are supposedly going to vote for the past, it is important for youngsters to understand they have to support change,” said Ala Mindicanu who runs a campaign for young electors called Your vote is important.

“Moldova has many young and talented people, the very people who are vital for the country's growth and economic future.”

Despite her own rather poor circumstances, Tamara Vlas takes the same line. “It is important for people to get involved and believe they can succeed in Moldova,” she said. “ If not, this country has no future.”

Alina Radu is editor of Ziarul de Garda newspaper

Location: Stavropol
Russia
North Ossetia
Ingushetia

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