



ASSESSMENT OF PRE-ELECTORAL ENVIRONMENT IN MOLDOVA

In November 2020, Moldova will hold presidential elections, which already heats the general political situation in the country. However, in many terms the pre-electoral political activity had already intensified in 2019. It is interesting to note that the last year has been characterized by drastic changes in the political landscape of the country. One of the most important events in the political life of the country was the departure of Vladimir Plahotniuc, Moldovan tycoon and former chairman of the Democratic Party of Moldova (PDM), from Moldova on June 14, 2019. This came after the resignation of the PDM-led government headed by Prime Minister Pavel Filip who before that had attempted to dismiss President Igor Dodon, assume the presidential authority himself and dissolve the parliament. Filip's decision on the dismissal of Dodon was motivated by a prior corresponding decision of the Constitutional Court of Moldova. However, the refusal of the parliament and the new government headed by Maia Sandu from the Party of Action and Solidarity (PAS) to implement this decision further complicated the situation. This caused a serious political turmoil that was eventually resolved with the involvement of the leading European powers and Russia that supported the Sandu government consisting of the members of the ACUM bloc and the Party of Socialists of the Republic of Moldova (PSRM). However, the new government was dismissed through a motion of censure initiated by socialist parliament members after six months on November 12, 2019.

Despite her dismissal, Maia Sandu did not admit her political defeat, and, shortly after her resignation, she firmly declared that she would run for president and that she would beat Igor Dodon in the 2020 election. During one of his recent speeches on the main state-run television network, President Dodon, in turn, admitted that he would probably participate in the upcoming presidential election if the people of Moldova supported him. As of today, President Dodon and ex-prime minister Sandu are the two most likely candidates for the next presidential term. Thus, in a survey conducted in November 2019, nearly 26% of respondents said that they had the highest confidence in Dodon, while Sandu had almost the same percentage of support (24%). However, in a more recent study of public opinion conducted in January 2020, President Dodon became a politician credited with the highest approval by citizens with 35.6% of support. Although Maia Sandu remains the second most trusted politician in Moldova, her level of support has fallen to 20%. The

rest of the potential candidates, including Pavel Filip, Andrei Năstase and others obtained less than 10% of public approval.

The presidential election in Moldova is scheduled for November 8, 2020, and the electoral campaign will begin two months earlier, on September 8. However, it is clear that preparations by major political forces for the election had begun long before, and the electoral campaign will probably turn into a fierce confrontation between the oriental and occidental political vectors. President Dodon openly declared his political sympathy towards closer ties with Russia and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) before being elected in 2016 and proved it by taking consistent steps since then. A request initiated by him to the Supreme Eurasian Economic Council in March 2017 granted Moldova an observer status to the EAEU in May 2018. Dodon also made two successful deals on natural gas supply with Russia and Ukraine reducing its price by more than 20% for Moldovan households and ensuring its continuous supply. Recently, President Dodon managed to remove restrictions on the transit of Moldovan goods through the territory of Ukraine to the Russian market, which was a good relief for the small Moldovan economy so sensitive to external shocks. Apart from gas price manipulations, the issue of unrecognized Transnistria is another powerful mechanism of influence in the hands of the Kremlin, which Dodon can reap political credits from. His active negotiations on Transnistria with Russia and his statement that the 2020 election should be held on both sides of the Dniester River show his aspiration to resolve the issue before the election and gain additional votes for himself. In case if the election was held in Transnistria, Dodon would most probably ensure his victory since the large population of the unrecognized republic (475,000 people) with the Russian-speaking Slavic majority will certainly vote for the pro-Russian candidate.

Following the heaviest phase of the 2019 political crisis, ex-prime minister Maia Sandu became the brightest figure on the pro-European wing of the Moldovan politics. Despite her removal from the top government position, she remains the leader of the PAS and the ACUM bloc. Various opinion polls show that Sandu is a potent candidate that can compete with the incumbent president. However, the fact that Andrei Năstase, the chairman of the Dignity and Truth Platform Party, the PAS partner in the ACUM bloc, proposed an idea to nominate a single opposition candidate other than Sandu and the failure

of the opposition to put forward strong candidates in recent local elections are clear signals of a lack of cooperation and consent among various oppositional parties.

The main ideological platform that Moldovan oppositional forces stand on is closer cooperation with the EU. Thus, one of recent surveys showed that 59.3% of Moldovans would vote for joining the EU in case of a referendum and only 25.1% would vote against it. In another recent survey, Moldovans were asked which of the regional economic unions Moldova should join, and 48% of respondents supported the idea of joining the EU, while 34% were in favor of the EAEU. Various opinion polls and previous elections show that the pro-European sentiments are more and more popular among youth whereas elderly people and ethnic minorities tend to support integration with Russia. Public opinion on crucially important political questions also differs geographically. Pro-European attitudes are more prevalent in the capital city of Chișinău and urbanized parts of the country, while residents of the country's southern and northern regions tend to be less pro-European and often support the alliance with Russia.

Since recently, the idea of the unification of Moldova and Romania has been popularized in media and public opinion of the two countries. The idea is based on the cultural and linguistic similarity of the Romanian and Moldovan peoples and on the need to "restore historical justice". However, a recent survey showed that only 34% of Moldovans welcome the unification, while 58% prefer to see an independent Moldova in the EU.

One of the factors that bear tremendous importance for Moldova is its external trade, 58% of which is done with the EU. The share of Moldova's trade with Russia is only 10.7%. Over the past two decades, the role of the EU in the country's foreign trade has been continuously increasing, while the shares of Russia and other CIS countries have been declining.

The presidential election in Moldova will probably be one of the most important events of 2020 in Eastern Europe and the post-Soviet space. A relative decline in political activism after the resolution of the political crisis in November 2019 might well be a calm before a storm preceding the electoral campaign. As the election approaches, it becomes more and more apparent that the main electoral standoff will unfold along the regional East-West cleavage. Apart from changes in domestic affairs, the outcome of the election will have a potential to produce significant shifts in the regional political agenda.

Politics, Foreign Affairs, and Security

- The meeting of U.S. Secretary of State Michael Pompeo and foreign ministers of the Central Asian states under the C5+1 format was held in Tashkent. The parties discussed priority areas for developing U.S.-Central Asia relations and focused on enhancing regional cooperation in border security, counterterrorism, economy, trade, investment, energy, transport, logistics, infrastructure, entrepreneurship, and environmental protection (MFA of Kazakhstan, 03.02.2020).
- The United States made public its new Central Asia strategy for 2019-2025. The document identifies six key objectives of the U.S. policy in the region: supporting sovereignty and independence of the Central Asian states; reducing terrorist threats; expanding support for stability in Afghanistan; encouraging connectivity between Central Asia and Afghanistan; promoting rule of law reform; and promoting U.S. investment in the region (U.S. Department of State, 05.02.2020).
- According to the recently published concept of Uzbekistan's chairmanship in the CIS, Tashkent will make efforts to accelerate the adoption of a new edition of the concept of the further development of the CIS. Uzbekistan will pay particular attention to strengthening cooperation between the member states in the military, security, economic, trade, transport, communications, humanitarian and other fields (MFA of Uzbekistan, 04.02.2020).
- The extraordinary meeting of the Council of Foreign Ministers of the Cooperation Council of Turkic Speaking States was held in Baku. The parties exchanged views on efforts to strengthen the organization's position in the international arena, increase cooperation among the member and partner countries, and develop fellow Turkic institutions. In addition, preparations for the 8th summit of the Turkic Council to be held in Turkey in October 2020 were discussed (Turkic Council, 06.02.2020).
- In Ankara, the Turkish and Russian delegations, comprising senior diplomats, military and intelligence officials, discussed the escalating situation in the Syrian province of Idlib, a stronghold of opposition and anti-government armed groups. The parties emphasized the need to ensure peace on the ground and reviewed steps to boost the peaceful political process (Anadolu Agency, 08.02.2020).
- Tajik authorities plan to reduce the duration of the conscription service from two to one and a half years. Relevant legal amendments proposed by the Ministry of Defense and drafted by the Ministry of Justice were sent to the presidential executive office for coordination with other government agencies. One of the aims of the amended law is to end "recruiting raids" conducted each spring and fall to capture people who evade the mandatory military service (Radio Ozodi, 07.02.2020).

Economy, Finance, and Energy

- Chairman of the Board of the Eurasian Economic Commission (EEC) Mikhail Myasnikov met with Secretary General of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Lim Jock Hoi in Moscow. The parties agreed to extend the cooperation program until 2025 and discussed new approaches to mutual collaboration. The EEC chairman proposed to widen investment, scientific, technical and industrial cooperation between the EAEU and ASEAN countries (EEC, 03.02.2020).
- A plant for the production of irrigation systems will be constructed in Almaty. Production facilities will be located in the city's industrial zone. A corresponding agreement was reached during a meeting between mayor of Almaty Bakytzhan Sagintayev and Robert Gilen, vice president of global operations at Valmont Industries, the U.S. manufacturer of irrigation equipment. The value of the investment project is estimated at \$50 million (Forbes, 05.02.2020).
- The UN World Food Program (WFP) purchased wheat from small farmers in Kyrgyzstan for the first time as part of an initiative aimed at stimulating agriculture by connecting poor farmers to markets. Under the Empowering Local Smallholder Farmers pilot project, the WFP supported more than 100 low-income farmers in the Osh region by purchasing wheat at a competitive market price, which allowed them to invest profits to increase production and improve food security (Kabar, 03.02.2020).
- Tajikistan's central bank considers the national currency, somoni, undervalued and sees no grounds for its depreciation, despite reported foreign currency shortages. In January 2020, the IMF encouraged the Tajik authorities to allow greater exchange rate flexibility, implying that they should allow the somoni to weaken. The IMF expects Tajikistan's current account deficit to widen to 5.2% of GDP this year from 4.5% recorded in 2018 (Reuters, 05.02.2020).
- President of Turkmenistan Gurbanguly Berdimukhamedov has reportedly allocated \$1.5 billion to build a new city. According to the presidential decree, the money will be spent on foreign-made equipment and materials needed for construction. The city is expected to become a new administrative center of the Ahal province, the native region of the Berdimukhamedov family, which is located around Ashgabat (The Diplomat, 05.02.2020).
- According to the Ministry of Finance of Uzbekistan, the country implements about 25 projects jointly with the World Bank. The goal of these projects with a total cost of \$5.7 billion is to improve the quality of drinking water, reform the agricultural sector, develop medicine and road infrastructure, and build institutional capacity for improving public finance management (UzA, 04.02.2020).

Society and Culture

- The size of the immigration quota established for ethnic Kazakhs returning to Kazakhstan was reduced from 2,331 people in 2019 to 1,378 people in 2020. Newcomers will be settled in sparsely populated northern and eastern parts of Kazakhstan. Their regional distribution looks as follows: 500 people will be settled in the Pavlodar region, 350 people – in the Kostanay region, 258 people – in the Akmola region, 150 people – in the East Kazakhstan region, and 120 people – in the North Kazakhstan region (Kazinform, 07.02.2020).
- According to the Turkish Ministry of Culture and Tourism, in 2019, over 45 million foreign tourists visited Turkey, which is 14.11% more compared to 2018, with Istanbul and Antalya being the most popular destinations. The number of tourists from Kazakhstan reached 455,724 people, which is 6.75% more in comparison with 2018 (Trend, 07.02.2020).
- During a concert opening the 36th Winter Festival of Sarajevo, opera stars of the Turkic World performed works by Abai Qunanbaiuly, accompanied by the Philharmonic Orchestra of Sarajevo. The performance by soloists from Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Turkey was part of the tour organized by TURKSOY and the Yunus Emre Institute in relation to the poet's 175th anniversary (TURKSOY, 08.02.2020).
- The government of Japan will provide \$370,000 in grants for the implementation of five humanitarian projects in Tajikistan. The projects include the construction of a rehabilitation center for children with disabilities in Khujand and a new building for the department of infectious diseases for children at the central hospital in the Sangvor district, the upgrade of equipment at the infectious diseases hospital in Dushanbe and at the regional center for elderly and disabled people in Istaravshan, as well as the improvement of the drinking water system in Panjakent (Avesta, 04.02.2020).
- Over 530,800 citizens of Tajikistan, including 77,000 women, left the country for seasonal labor migration in 2019, which is 13% more compared to 2018. More than 518,000 of them went to Russia, and about 9,800 to Kazakhstan. At the same time, 419,150 labor migrants, including over 75,000 women, returned to Tajikistan last year, which is 4% more than in 2018 (Avesta, 07.02.2020).
- According to Uzbekistan's Ministry for Development of Information Technologies and Communications, the total number of Internet users in the country increased to 22 million, including 19 million people using mobile Internet. The mobile communications coverage of the population reached 96%, while 70% of Uzbek citizens have broadband access to mobile Internet networks (Profit, 06.02.2020).