

## Russia's pragmatic game in a friendlier Moldova

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The democratic space in Moldova is slowly recovering. However, it is uncertain if the ruling coalition, run by the Socialists and the ACUM bloc, is capable to preserve geopolitical neutrality and instill resilience in the institutions against the oligarchic influence. Following the goal to free the country from 'state capture', the coalition has inherited from its artificial character an inability to set long-term goals and a considerable portion of mutual mistrust. The

survival of the coalition is under permanent questioning, including by the leaders of the coalition. The Prime Minister, Maia Sandu, speaks of 'red lines' (unspecified in public) that will eventually break the coalition once they are crossed by the Socialists ([Unimedia, 31 July 2019](#)). Likewise, acknowledging the geopolitical heterogeneity of the coalition, the President Igor Dodon calls it "very complicated" and unable to survive without the help of moderation and reciprocity ([Socialistii.md, 17 July 2019](#)). To ensure longevity for the coalition, he has even advocated "an ideological and geopolitical moratorium" ([Radio Free Europe, 18 June 2019](#)).

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The Socialists aim to restore entirely the relations with Russia. Concomitantly, the leader of the Socialists, and Speaker of the Parliament, Zinaida Greceanîi, actively sells the idea that the ACUM bloc “promotes a balanced foreign policy” as well ([Ria Novosti, 29 July 2019](#)). The prime interest (albeit not so clearly stated) of the pro-EU Prime Minister, Maia Sandu, is to improve the economic and trade cooperation with Russia, including the conditions for Moldovan migrants. She avoids talking about investing in Russia-Moldova political dialogue. Instead, she agrees that risks from Russia remain, and refuses any sort of ‘federalization scenario’ for solving the Transnistrian conflict ([ZDG, 28 June 2019](#)).

Sandu’s pragmatism toward Russia coincided with a marked openness from Moscow, including the invitation to visit and meet with the Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev already during this coming autumn. The Russian Deputy-Prime Minister, Dmitry Kozak, has supported the PSRM-ACUM coalition through repeated visits on 3 and 24 June ([Gov.md, 24 June 2019](#)) before its formalization. Russian diplomacy at all levels have exhibited unprecedented goodwill, and therefore some suspicions. Vladimir Putin’s promise to offer help ‘to get rid of those who usurped the power’ meant attacking the former oligarchic regime ([Radio Free Europe, 13 June 2019](#)), but he is hardly supporting a truly democratic renaissance in Moldova.

### **Russia-engineered bluff**

Putin dislikes uncontrollable oligarchs, and prefers to have them suppressed or at the service of a strong vertical of power. He has a similar attitude towards foreign oligarchs, including in Moldova. Both Putin and Kozak have been very outspoken against the ‘usurpation of power’ by the oligarchic regime of Plahotniuc. But Putin’s personal disdain against oligarchs who disable the state structures is more relevant for his domestic rather than external interests. Moscow tried deals with the former Ukrainian president, Viktor Yanukovic, prior to the 2014 ‘revolution of dignity’, and offered to Plahotniuc’s government a ‘road map for re-establishment of trade relations’ in July 2016 ([Allmoldova, 16 July 2019](#)). However, his negative view of the Moldovan oligarch prevailed after Plahotniuc amounted political benefits by inflaming the geopolitical contradictions with Russia. Only in 2019, the Russia authorities filed two accusations against Plahotniuc on account of approximately 500 million USD of money laundering charges ([MVD.ru, 22 February 2019](#)) and transnational narcotic smuggling activity entering CIS countries and Russia ([MVD.ru, 26 June 2019](#)). Finally, the Moscow court scheduled in August 2019 to examine an arrest warrant on Plahotniuc ([Mos-gorsud, July 2019](#)).

Little appreciated remains the fact that Vladimir Plahotniuc conducted negotiations with the Moscow-sympathizer President Dodon in the aftermath of the February 2019 parliamentary elections ([3DCFTA, 12 March 2019](#)). Up until 7 June, i.e. just before establishment of Socialists-ACUM coalition on 8 June, President Dodon was holding a dialogue with Plahotniuc ([Radio Free Europe, 18 June 2019](#)). The former admitted that this dialogue lasted for 3 months and could have ended with a deal, were it not for Dodon’s condition to include the ‘federalization’ of the Moldovan state ([Agora, 8 June 2019](#)), presented as a request of Moscow. This would have been politically dangerous to

then ruling Democratic Party, leading to civil protests and deeper external isolation. The next more acceptable option for Plahotniuc, after governing with Socialists, was to trigger early elections.

Both Dodon and Russia were aware of Plahotniuc's limitations. Their real goal was to augment speculation over the negotiations and a possible deal with Plahotniuc in order to break the reluctance of the ACUM leaders - Maia Sandu and Andrei Năstase – to make a coalition with the Socialists. This scenario then materialized. The ACUM bloc approved to partner with the Socialists by lowering their initial request to have control over both the Government and the Parliament. Correspondingly, the Socialist Zinaida Greceanîi became speaker of the legislature, and Maia Sandu became Prime Minister.

### **What does Russia pursue in the post-oligarchic Moldova?**

Russia's gains from the political changes in Moldova has several dimensions:

*Firstly*, Plahotniuc's regime was toppled through Russia-engineered bluff arranged with President Dodon, which succeeded to manipulate the Democratic Party and ACUM together with public opinion at home and abroad. Russia removed the main political obstacle – the oligarch's 'vertical of power' - to upgrade its own influence in Moldova for the first time since the failure of the "Kozak memorandum" in 2003.

*Secondly*, the pro-Russian forces achieved more legitimacy. Projected as the savior of Moldova from the oligarchic rule, President Dodon and his political party received a positive boost in their public image. Dodon thus gets out from his external isolation and can prepare his bid for re-election in 2020. The polls conducted just before the June crisis show that the Socialists were leading public preferences for the upcoming October 2019 local elections (32%). This popularity has chances to grow, absorbing some former voters of the declining Democratic Party. It seems that the Socialists will double the result of the ACUM block consisting of the PAS and Platforma DA, which together may win only about 20% of the votes ([IRI, June 2019](#)). Moreover, the ACUM-Socialist coalition agreed to return to proportional representation and to reduce the threshold for entering parliament from 6% to 5%. This revision of the electoral system can help the Socialists to increase their weight in the legislature from the current 35 seats. Also the recently revised electoral law allows external financing of the political parties, including by Moldovan migrants, from the West, but also from Russia, which may help the Socialists. In addition, Dodon can be further helped by Russia through the signing a social agreement to allow retired Moldovan migrants to obtain pensions from the Russian state ([Tass, 30 July 2019](#)).

*Thirdly*, with the support of ACUM bloc, the state system is being cleaned from Plahotniuc's people and replaced with associates of the Socialists. This is the case of the National Anti-Corruption Centre, whose new director - Ruslan Flocea - has been Dodon's adviser. Though disliking this selection, the ACUM bloc voted for it, and also supported another controversial person, Dumitru Robu, for the position of the new general

prosecutor. A similar fate has had the Constitutional Court, where 4 out of 6 recently appointed judges voted for converting the Socialist Party's ex-member Vlad Turcan in Court's new chief. There are already signs of disloyalty fracture within the executive branch. Controlled by Sociliasts, Defense Minister Pavel Voicu has subordinated to the Presidency rather than the PM Maia Sandu over the visit of Russia's counter-part Sergey Shoygu to the 75 years WW2-related commemorations on 24 August 2019 ([Enews, 21 August 2019](#)). Dodon has also re-established his control over the intelligence service ([Radio Free Europe, 18 June 2019](#)), from which he had been obstructed by the Democratic party after his election in 2016. Such decisions facilitate Russia's access to information on internal Moldovan affairs.

*Fourthly*, the remodeled political situation improves the positioning of the pro-Russian entities, such as Gagauzian autonomy. The executive of the Gagauzian autonomy ('bashkan'), Irina Vlah, re-elected on 30 June, started her new mandate with a demand for more competences for the autonomy's prosecutor relative to the central authorities ([IPN, 30 July 2019](#)). Some local politicians qualify such requests as preparation for a future federalization of Moldova ([Agora, 31 July 2019](#)). The Socialists promised to energize the [2015-created parliamentary Working Group on Gagauzia](#) that could also mean more draft laws empowering the autonomy's independence from Chisinau. The Speaker Greceanii praised Vlah for attracting the investment from the West and East ([Agora, 19 Iulie 2019](#)). In her inauguration speech, the re-elected bashkan emphasized the friendship with Russia and Turkey, and appreciated the role of the EU as donor. She claimed that the construction of a power station and airport for the autonomy of 150.000 population are of high priority ([Privesc.eu, 19 July 2019](#)). Such developments in Gagauzia could further encourage the Transnistrian separatist authorities to endorse the idea of a special status, as a final stage of the conflict resolution.

*Last but not least*, Russia has embraced the goal of normalization of bilateral relations. The resumption of the intergovernmental dialogue on trade can create opportunities for the Russian side to provide constructive inputs, as it has done recently in the politics sphere. This may lead to larger access to the Russian market, addressing unilateral import tariffs and non-tariff restrictions against wine and other agri-food goods introduced in 2014. Restoration of the trade linkages has a strong social component that can pay off in exercising future pressures (Russia's recent banning of flights to Georgia, damaging its tourism sector is a reminder) ([Georgiatoday, 8 July 2019](#)). Finally, the dismantling of Plahotniuc's regime and future privatizations may open up key sectors of the Moldovan economy to Russian business interests. President Dodon brought more than 500 businessmen to the Russia-Moldova economic forum in 2018, and plans to do the same on 19-20 September 2019 ([Presedinte.md, 21 August 2019](#)). A larger presence of Russian business can obtain a political dimension at some point, and is therefore a good longer-term investment.

## Conclusions

Russia needs to have friendly countries in the regions that border with the EU and belong to the Eastern Partnership. This can help Kremlin-linked propaganda overcome the view that Russian influence is (always) toxic, and instead offer a more constructive image. By showing interest in normalization of relations with Moldova, Russia follows various local goals, such as fortifying the pro-Russian actors and re-establishing the leverages of dependencies. More than that, a friendly Moldova can serve Moscow's bigger objective to disturb and confuse Ukraine, and weaken support for Western sanctions against Russia. Such goals don't seem at all unachievable looking at Russia's returning to European Council's PACE and the "green light" to re-join G8.

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