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A roadmap for Moldova

By **Igor Munteanu**

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The crisis in Moldova continues. To help the country, the EU must pay more attention – and sustain its attention.

Moldova's die has been cast. A re-count of votes of the 5 April parliamentary elections has put the Communist Party within one seat of the three-fifths majority it needs in the parliament to elect its chosen candidate as president. But confirmation of the vote and the swearing in of a new parliament on 25 April, should not be seen as resolving a crisis that has so far resulted in three deaths and the torching of the assembly building. Rather, this political crisis is just beginning.

For a start, the presidency, held by Vladimir Voronin since April 2001, is subject to a limit of two four-year terms, but Voronin remains the dominant figure in the Communist Party and is likely to engineer a shift in the seat of power by becoming prime minister or speaker of parliament. The prospect of adapting the constitutional order to centralise power in the hands of one individual is symptomatic of the political crisis facing Moldova.

In the weeks since the election, the political situation in the country has continued to deteriorate. In the wake of the crisis, Moldova needs independent voices to bear witness to and investigate the violence and human rights abuses that followed the elections, but, instead, the government is impeding the work of independent civil society and independent media.

Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and media have come under intense pressure from the ministry of justice to "present their official appraisal of the post-election protest actions of 6-7 April 2009", presumably to demonstrate their political stance towards the authorities. And, on 24 April, the very day Javier Solana, the EU's foreign policy chief, last visited Moldova, there were two worrying developments. Firstly, the authorities pressed three independent media outlets – *Timpul*, *Jurnal de Chisinau* and *Ziarul de Garda* – to release the names of the confidential sources they quoted in their reports. Secondly, the tax authorities summoned at least ten civil society organisations, demanding that they present their sources of funding and warning that they could freeze bank accounts without explanation of their reasons. Among their number was the Viitorul Institute for Development and Social Initiatives, which I head.

Repressive measures

These are repressive measures made by authorities that have sought to convince the general public that, for reasons of national security, they need to crack down on the opposition. Throughout the crisis, Voronin has claimed the protesters wanted a "coup d'état" and has repeatedly referred to the opposition as "fascists" aligned with and paid by Romania, with whom Voronin's



A plain-clothes police officer kicks a protester in central Chisinau, 8 April. REUTERS

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relations have always been fraught, and Serbia, presumably reflecting his fear of a repeat of Serbia's revolution of 2000. Voronin's comments have been broadcast and amplified by the supine but nominally public-service medium, Teleradio-Moldova. The strength of such language and its purpose amount to a concerted campaign of hate speech.

The vote re-count, which was advocated by Voronin, was relatively unimportant as a means of addressing this crisis: after all, no one ever doubted that the Communist Party would have won decisively even in fully free elections (insofar as free elections can exist in a situation where the government controls the principal media outlets). Instead, efforts to end this crisis must begin with an account of the post-election violence, as well as an investigation into the padding of the electoral rolls that the opposition alleged happened before the election. The government has asked the independent media to provide a report of their actions to stop the riots. We too would like to read a report on actions taken to stop the riots, but one written by the authorities. It should be a report in which witnesses would be free to provide accounts without intimidation.

In particular, explanations are needed about the deaths of two young men during this episode (another death occurred in police custody a week later). On 9 April, two days after the violence, Valeriu Boboc died in hospital. The police say he inhaled some unknown gas given off by the flames that consumed the parliament building; doctors say – and photos confirm – that he was badly beaten. Police left the body of Ion Tibuleac outside the doors of the same hospital on 11 April. Again, he had been badly beaten. And there is a need to consider the human-rights abuses that saw many protesters seized in broad daylight by unidentified men in civilian clothing. Dozens were later found in the hospitals, guarded by police officers. The authorities have failed to explain what happened to these people.

So Solana was right to call for an investigative commission comprising members of the government, the opposition and representatives of the international community. But, unfortunately, this crisis has shown that the EU and the US have not been up to the challenge of raising democratic standards. The EU members' governments did little, in part because the Czech Republic, the current holder of the EU's rotating presidency, is hobbling in its final days. The European Commission accepted too hastily the results of the elections and the assessment of the elections made by the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), which said the election was generally free. Its report concentrated on the election day, but elections in former Soviet states are determined less on election day and more in the months before, through influence exercised through the judiciary, media and authorities. As a result, the OSCE's weak 'pass' grade makes Moldovans believe that their concerns are not being heard or heeded by the EU and that it consents to the notion of first- and second-class standards of democracy.

EU influence

The EU must show more impetus at this point. The EU has in the past had an important influence in Moldova:

when, in December 2008, the Communist government attempted to take off the air the independent PRO-TV, a firm call by Benita Ferrero Waldner, the European commissioner for external affairs, had a significant effect, prompting the reversal of the decision of the Broadcasting Council not to automatically extend the station's licence.

But the EU's involvement must be sustained, for two reasons. Firstly, when its eyes are turned, repression returns. Since December, several opposition politicians and several think-tankers – including the author of this article – have been blacklisted and barred from the main television and radio channel, despite these media outlets' public-service charter and the constitutional ban on censorship. Secondly, the political crisis could have been predicted long in advance. Human rights organisations have for many years reported about the severe limitations on, for example, freedom of media, independence of the judiciary and freedom of association in Moldova. The post-election protests reflected anger at the capture of the state and fears for the future.

How could the international community step up its efforts? The international community has formed a special group to try and resolve the status of the breakaway region of Transdnistria; it could form a special group for Moldova as a whole. After investigating the causes and events of this crisis, such a group should mediate talks with the government and opposition to create a roadmap for reform of the media, the police, the judiciary and laws on civil liberties, to create a genuine separation of powers within Moldova. There needs to be a search for genuine consensus – not the 'paper weddings' of the type that, in 2005, secured Voronin a second term with no guarantees of improvements. And when a consensus is reached, implementation of those agreements should be overseen by an international mission with access to all the main bodies of state, including the presidency, parliament and the interior ministry.

In short, the international community should help and oblige both sides to draw up a roadmap – and when that is done, it should stay in the front passenger seat of the car to ensure that it does not veer dangerously off course once again.

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