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Moldova

Country:

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Year:

2015

FIW Status:

PF

PR Rating:

3

CL Rating:

3

Aggregate Score:

63

Combined Freedom Score:

3.0

Overview:

In the months before the November 2014 parliamentary elections, the Moldovan political landscape remained sharply divided over the goal of European integration. The ruling alliance —the Coalition for Pro-European Governance (CEG)—pursued closer ties with the European Union (EU), while the opposition—headed by the Communist Party of the Republic of Moldova (PCRM)—favored accession to a Russia-led customs union. Despite Russian threats and attempts by the opposition to derail the process, Moldova signed an Association Agreement and related free-trade pact with the EU on June 27. In October, the Constitutional Court rejected a PCRM legal challenge claiming that the agreement violated Moldova’s sovereignty. In addition, the EU granted visa-free travel to Moldovans with biometric passports beginning in late April.

The three main pro-European parties won a majority in the November elections, but the Party of Socialists of the Republic of Moldova (PSRM), a hard-line Russophile faction, emerged as the largest single party in the new parliament, displacing the more moderate PCRM. Coalition talks were ongoing at year’s end.

Explanatory Note:

The numerical ratings and status listed above do not reflect conditions in Transnistria, which is examined in a separate report.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties:

Political Rights: 28 / 40 (-1) [Key]

A. Electoral Process: 10 / 12 (-1)

Voters elect the 101-seat unicameral Parliament by proportional representation for four-year terms. Parliament elects the president, who serves up to two four-year terms, with a three-fifths supermajority. Parliament must approve the prime minister, who holds most executive power. Nicolas Timofti was elected president in 2012, filling a post that had been vacant since 2009 due to partisan gridlock.

In the November 2014 parliamentary elections, the PSRM dominated the opposition vote with 25 seats, leaving the PCRM with 21. Among the pro-European parties, the reformist, center-right Liberal Democratic Party of Moldova (PLDM) won 23 seats, the center-left Democratic Party of Moldova (PDM) took 19, and the pro-Romanian Liberal Party (PL) secured 13.

Although observers praised the elections as genuinely competitive and generally well administered, there were some significant deficiencies. The fiercely pro-Russian Patria Party was abruptly disqualified just days before the voting on the grounds that it received campaign funds from abroad, which is illegal. Meanwhile, a party whose name and symbols closely resembled those of the PCRM was allowed to participate, potentially confusing voters. The distribution of overseas polling places favored residents of EU countries over those living in Russia. Nevertheless, the Constitutional Court approved the election results in early December, rejecting challenges by opposition parties.

B. Political Pluralism and Participation: 12 / 16

Moldova's multiparty system features rivalry and diversity within the loosely defined pro-European and pro-Russian camps. In a first for the country, the PDM held primary voting to determine its candidate list in 2014. In response, the PCRM filed a complaint on the grounds that the primary activities, which began in early September, constituted campaigning outside the official campaign period.

Throughout the year, Russia threatened and imposed economic penalties on Moldova for its moves toward European integration, though some of the Russian actions were supposedly taken for health or safety reasons. A Russian ban on imports of Moldovan wine had been in place since 2013, and separate bans on Moldovan fruit and meat imports were announced in July. In September, Russia imposed customs duties on more goods from Moldova. Some analysts argued that the restrictions were designed to affect the November elections by alienating voters who were dependent on the agricultural sector. The EU responded in August by doubling import quotas for Moldovan produce.

Moldovan intelligence officials warned of possible provocations by Russian proxies in Moldova, such as political parties, civic groups, ethnic minority activists, and authorities in the separatist region of Transnistria, ahead of the elections. The November disqualification of the Patria Party was accompanied by police raids on an affiliated "antifascist" movement, the reported seizure of arms and explosives, and the arrest of several members. Patria Party

leader Renato Usatii fled to Moscow. Russian media heavily favored the PSRM during the campaign. In November, the Russian government announced that Moldovan workers who left Russia that month, presumably to vote at home, would be able to return freely regardless of their legal status.

The Gagauz, a Turkic minority concentrated in the country's south, enjoy regional autonomy, but their leaders complain that their interests are not well represented at the national level. They and Moldova's various Slavic minorities tend to look to leftist parties and Russia for political support.

Gagauzia held a referendum in February asking local residents whether they favored EU integration or a customs union with Russia. Amid 70 percent turnout, more than 98 percent backed closer ties with Russia, and nearly 99 percent supported secession if Moldova were to lose its independence—namely through a union with Romania. Moldova's central authorities deemed the vote illegal; a Russian businessman provided funding for it after a court barred the use of public resources.

C. Functioning of Government: 6 / 12

Corruption remains a problem in Moldova, and the country's politicians regularly trade accusations of graft and illegal business activities. In early 2014, a number of Parliament members were reportedly approached with bribes to leave the CEG parties in order to weaken the governing majority. Two suspects accused of involvement in such a scheme were arrested in March with \$250,000 in cash.

The politicization of anticorruption mechanisms became especially apparent during partisan feuding within the ruling coalition in early 2013, with the National Anticorruption Center (CNA), led by a PDM nominee, launching cases against officials linked to the PLDM. In 2014, a parliamentary panel reported that some senior officials at the CNA itself had undeclared income and property.

After steady criticism of a 2013 government decision to partly privatize Banca de Economii, which left a Russian state bank with a major stake, a November 2014 Supreme Court ruling reversed the share issue and effectively restored Moldovan state control. The original sale was deemed necessary because the bank had apparently been weakened by corruption. Moldova was ranked 103 out of 175 countries and territories surveyed in Transparency International's 2014 Corruption Perceptions Index.

Civil Liberties: 35 / 60

D. Freedom of Expression and Belief: 11 / 16

The public broadcaster has grown more impartial since 2009, and the entry of new private outlets has added to the diversity of national news coverage. Internet penetration has increased in recent years to nearly 50 percent of the population, and access is limited only by high costs and underdeveloped infrastructure. Many media outlets are perceived as party affiliates, with wealthy businessman and PDM powerbroker Vladimir Plahotniuc reportedly

controlling four national television stations, among other assets. In 2014, the Audiovisual Coordinating Council (CCA), the broadcast media regulator, repeatedly issued warnings and fines to television channels for violating rules that require pluralism and balance in news coverage. In addition to bias toward various political parties, the council said channels carrying Russian content skewed coverage of the Ukraine crisis. In its harshest action of the year, in July the CCA banned the Russian news channel Rossiya 24 from the airwaves for six months, an interval that included the election period.

In January, major cable services dropped three channels known for critical reporting on the government and for carrying Russian content, allegedly under political pressure. After an outcry from international institutions and local nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), the channels were quickly restored.

Reporters in Moldova sometimes face physical abuse, threats of violence, or selective exclusion from events of public interest. In September, weekly newspaper *Ziarul de Gardă* received threats after publishing investigative reports on the assets and personal life of the leader of Moldova's Orthodox Church.

Although the constitution guarantees religious freedom, Moldovan law recognizes the "special significance and primary role" of the Orthodox Church. Despite some positive steps by the government in recent years, the country's small religious minorities continue to encounter discrimination or hostility from local authorities, Orthodox clergy, and residents in some areas.

Moldovan officials do not restrict academic freedom, though opposition parties have accused the coalition government of seeking to inject pro-Romanian ideology into school curriculums. The Gagauz community has complained of exclusion from the mainstream higher education system, as most Gagauz are more fluent in Russian than Romanian, the language spoken by most Moldovans.

E. Associational and Organizational Rights: 8 / 12

The government upholds freedom of assembly. Opposition parties repeatedly mounted antigovernment or anti-EU protests during 2014. In October, they temporarily blocked the entrance to the Constitutional Court as it prepared to rule on the ratification of the EU Association Agreement, prompting the court chairman to call on law enforcement bodies to ensure the institution's safety. In May, LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) activists held a small pride march, marking the third such event ever carried out in Moldova after two were successfully organized in 2013. Large numbers of police officers protected marchers from counterprotesters, as opposed to past years, when authorities prevented the parades or counterprotesters broke them up.

State relations with civil society groups have improved since 2009, though some leading politicians have displayed wariness or hostility toward NGOs. Enforcement of trade union rights and labor standards is weak, with employers rarely punished for violations. Workers participating in illegal strikes face possible fines or prison time.

F. Rule of Law: 7 / 16

Although the constitution provides for an independent judiciary, judicial and law enforcement officials have a reputation for politicization and corruption. The 2013 political crisis further exposed partisanship in judicial institutions, driven in part by agreements in which key positions are parceled out among the ruling parties. In 2014, lawmakers were considering reforms to the judiciary and the prosecution service, including a less partisan process for appointing the prosecutor general—the post at the center of the 2013 dispute.

Ill-treatment in police custody, excessive pretrial detention, and poor prison conditions persist despite some improvements in recent years. Abuse of military conscripts remains a concern.

Roma suffer discrimination in housing, education, and employment, and have been targets of police violence. LGBT people are subject to harassment. While discrimination based on sexual orientation is not explicitly banned by the main article of the 2012 Law on Ensuring Equality, it is understood to be covered under a reference to “any other similar grounds.” Sexual orientation, though not gender identity, is listed in a section on workplace discrimination. An alliance of opposition parties and Orthodox clergy has criticized the law. In June 2014, an Orthodox bishop was ordered to pay 22,000 lei (\$1,700) in compensation and court costs for public anti-LGBT slurs he made in 2012.

G. Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights: 9 / 16

In the months surrounding the EU decision to grant visa-free travel to Moldovans, more than 100,000 citizens obtained or renewed passports at state expense so as to take advantage of the new privilege. Hundreds of thousands of Moldovans work abroad, and remittances accounted for 25 percent of gross domestic product in 2013. More than two-thirds of remittances reportedly come from workers in Russia, and Moscow’s warnings against EU integration include threats to close the Russian labor market to Moldovan migrant workers or restrict access.

Private business activity is hampered by factors such as corruption and the role of powerful businessmen who use political connections for personal gain.

Women are underrepresented in public life; just 19 were elected to Parliament in 2014. Orders of protection for victims of domestic violence are inadequately enforced. Moldova is a source for women and girls trafficked abroad for forced prostitution.

Scoring Key: X / Y (Z)

X = Score Received

Y = Best Possible Score

Z = Change from Previous Year

Full Methodology

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