

# Between Russia and the West: Moldova's Movement From Below

Saturday 19 March 2016, by [ERNU Vasilie](#), [SPRINCEANA Vitalie](#), [TICHINDELEANU Ovidiu](#) (Date first published: 17 March 2016).

**The protesters in Moldova are more than pawns in a geopolitical game between Russia and the West.**

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An independent republic since 1991, Moldova is today known in the Western media as the “poorest country in Europe.” In the years since the dismantling of the Soviet bloc, poverty became widespread alongside mass migration of the Moldovan labor force. One-fourth of a population that numbers less than four million now works abroad, in both Russia and Western Europe, and as much as 25 percent of the country's GDP comes from personal remittances [1].

Yet there are signs of resistance in the country. Since last autumn, Moldova's capital city of Chişinău has been swept by a wave of popular protest, which crested in January, when demonstrators broke into the parliament building and temporarily occupied it [2].

The crowd of several thousand protesters were attempting to prevent the appointment of the new government lead by the Democratic Party's Pavel Filip [3]. The legislative body was in a rush: at 2 PM the Permanent Bureau of the Parliament (the body responsible for setting the date and structure of elections, among other things) announced that an extraordinary session would begin two hours later, during which the new government — backed by the United States, the European Union, and Romania — would be appointed.

It took less than forty minutes for the eclectic parliamentary majority to approve the administration, having declined to examine its governing program or to hold a traditional question-and-answer session.

By then, the building was flanked on all sides by angry protesters who demanded the annulment of the decision and a return to standard procedures. The protesters managed to break the cordon of policemen defending the building, and occupy a few rooms on the first floor, without any significant violence. Later in the evening, protest leaders asked the people to retreat, and move back outside to the already occupied public square.

The unusual thing about the crowd was that it comprised several distinct cohorts of activists who otherwise find themselves on opposing sides, many of which had long nurtured mutual resentment. The groups could be divided into two broad factions: one favoring the development of closer ties with the EU, the other demanding closer collaboration with Russia. For now, at least, they were

working together.

## **Popular Disillusionment**

The January 20 action was only the climax of a movement that began in September 2015, when more than a hundred tents were erected in the Great National Assembly Square at the heart of Chişinău, located directly in front of the Moldovan government's central building. The protesters demanded the dissolution of the government and the resignation of the president plus a dozen other officials, including the general prosecutor.

They were disillusioned with the ruling center-right Alliance for European Integration (AEI), which, after five cabinet reshufflings since coming to power in 2009, had failed to eliminate corruption, implement justice system reforms, depoliticize the administration of state services, and take decisive steps to improve ties with Europe. The latter point accounted for the presence of EU flags and pro-EU rhetoric throughout the encampment.

These problems have long dogged Moldovan politics, but they climaxed in the so-called "stolen billion scandal" that erupted in April 2015, after the equivalent of one billion dollars (about 15 percent of Moldova's GDP) vanished from local banks. It soon became clear that the money had been taken in a series of transnational banking scams engineered by several Moldovan oligarchs, who exert enormous control over the country's political system.

The National Bank stepped in to bail out the three banks on the verge of collapse, using public reserves. The bailout, in turn, led to a depreciation of the national currency, a rise in prices and tariffs (especially for electricity), and a sharp decline in living standards. The whole scheme, which included British shell companies and Lithuanian banks [\[4\]](#), among other actors, could not have been executed without the complicity of state authorities.

The first major protests that followed were organized by the Civic Platform-Dignity and Truth (CPDT), a group formed in February 2015 by Moldovan lawyers, journalists, and activists. Later that month another group of protesters, organized by the newly formed Party of Socialists (led by Igor Dodon) and Our Party (led by Renato Usatîi, a charismatic and controversial populist oligarch), set up a second tent city in front of the parliament building.

Both groups articulated similar demands: the establishment of a process that would genuinely root out corruption, trials for the officials involved in the billion-dollar fraud, and the elimination of oligarchic influence over the political system. Though these demands were shared by both camps, they were framed by one side in a pro-European rhetoric and an anti-EU and anti-unification (of Moldova and Romania) rhetoric on the other.

Both protest camps remained active throughout the rest of the year, but the relationship between them was by no means collaborative. The two tent cities remained separate. Each group accused the other of covertly representing foreign interests (the United States and the European Union on one side, and Russia on the other) and each claimed to be the only true representative of popular anger.

The situation changed abruptly in October 2015, when the Moldovan parliament voted to strip immunity from Vlad Filat, a major businessman, leader of the ruling alliance, and former prime minister who was one of the two most powerful people in Moldova. In a dramatic scene, Filat was handed to prosecutors and taken into custody on charges of abuse of power and the blackmail of another oligarch.

Filat was taken directly to prison [5], in a move believed by many to have been orchestrated by his archrival, the oligarch Vlad Plahotniuc, whose Democratic Party was a member of the AEI. Filat's arrest changed the terms of discussion, from a deadlock between two big players to a political field dominated only by Plahotniuc.

Plahotniuc's opponents, including Filat, have called him a puppet master. Rich and secretive, Plahotniuc secured his wealth and power through close collaboration with several political parties. From 2007, during the time of his association with the then-ruling Party of Communists, he was monitored up to 2012 by Interpol for alleged ties to the criminal underground and an international money-laundering network with Russian connections.

Plahotniuc is now a prominent partner of the pro-European current. His past business positions have included serving as chief executive for one of Moldova's largest private banks and as vice-president of the country's largest oil-distribution company; today he controls extremely valuable real estate in Chişinău.

He began his political career as a secondary figure in the Party of Communists, which he left in 2009 as they fell from power, suddenly emerging as the vice president of the center-right Democratic Party. Since then the Democratic Party has been a minority member of the governing coalition with the Liberal Party (lead by the nationalist Mihai Ghimpu) and the Liberal-Democratic Party (founded by Filat).

Filat's removal essentially put Plahotniuc at the head of the country's political system. After the suspicious desertion of several MPs from their own parties and into his camp, Plahotniuc attempted to make his status official, and in January was put forward as a candidate for prime minister by an eclectic parliamentary majority.

President Nicolae Timofti twice opposed his installation, however, and Plahotniuc was forced to step down and propose a different candidate from his party, selecting his close, longtime associate Pavel Filip. After the US, EU, and Romania all declared support for Filip, thus endorsing Plahotniuc in the eyes of protesters, the two protest factions joined forces against him.

## **Another Geopolitical Clash?**

In the West, mainstream media outlets have depicted protests against Filip's government as the actions of an unruly mob challenging a "pro-European" government. Some of them went even further: *EUobserver*, for example, described "pro-Russia protesters storming the Moldova parliament."

By the time such reports were filed, firm statements of support for the new government had been issued by Western chancelleries, with officials — including Victoria Nuland of the US State Department, EU foreign minister Federica Mogherini, and Romanian prime minister Dacian Cioloş — declaring their confidence that it would make the reforms necessary to restore stability. Interpretations of the ongoing protests put forward in Western and Romanian media alike hewed closely to the government line.

American and European news outlets have a history of describing every major political battle in Moldova as the expression of an external conflict between Russia and the West. But the portrayal of the protests on these terms simplifies a complex political reality and the actual demands coming from the protesters. The dominant, strictly geopolitical narrative also works to undermine local progressive movements. As Moldovan political blogger Mihai Popşoi argues [6]:

*“A discourse built along these lines has a twofold negative effect: It delegitimizes pro-Russian opposition parties and, thus, provides pro-Western candidates with ‘a competitive edge’ if not a full endorsement to abuse their current position of power. Secondly, it perpetuates and reinforces fears and stereotypes instead of combating them. The net effect of such a discourse is that it undermines the struggling Moldovan democracy.”*

This discourse has dominated political rhetoric in Moldova since its independence, and the chances of fully transcending it in the near future are slim.

As in many other former Soviet countries, including Ukraine and Georgia, political parties in independent Moldova have long sought to build their identities and mobilize constituents on the terms of great-power alliances rather than through the development of distinct ideological platforms.

Moldova’s split from the Soviet Union was led by the Movement of National Renaissance, which emerged at the end of the 1980s and advanced the hope of reunification with Romania, perceived by a large segment of the Moldovan population as a sister country, sharing the same language.

Though the reunification was not pursued, the question of regional and global alliances continues to dominate the political agenda in Moldova, crowding out calls for internal reform.

The Party of Communists played the geopolitical card over its eight years in power, which began in 2001. As poverty increased and living standards declined drastically following the first decade of capitalist transition, PCRM, reconstituted in 1993 by a group dominated by Soviet-era nomenklatura, first proposed that a closer relationship with the Russian Federation, and possibly joining the Union State of Russia and Belarus, would bring much-needed economic recovery.

Four years later, PCRM made a radical reversal of their geopolitical program and ran on pro-European, anti-Russian rhetoric, while embracing “market reforms.” The party’s narrative claims fantastic growth in foreign investments, state income, and National Bank reserves during this period.

“The pro-European vector” was further consolidated through the “Declaration on the Political Partnership to Achieve the Objectives of the European Integration,” a document signed in 2005 by every member of parliament [7], and which proclaimed the commitment of Moldovan authorities to “the consistent and irreversible promotion of the strategic course towards the European integration.”

Yet by 2009, support for PCRM faltered due to political fatigue, the party’s contradictory array of neoliberal reforms and privatizations, and a series of corruption scandals which prompted popular protests. Early parliamentary elections were organized in July 2009, but were dominated by anticommunist rhetoric and centered around the question of who was best qualified to implement European integration. The PCRM was unseated, and the victory went, by a small margin, to a four-party coalition composed of the Liberal-Democratic Party, the Liberal Party, the Democratic Party, and the Our Moldova Alliance.

The ensuing Alliance for European Integration has ruled the country ever since, in spite of the European vector’s ongoing erosion and corruption scandals. PCRM has nearly collapsed, taking only 17.5 percent in the 2014 parliamentary elections. Many of its voters went to the newly established Party of Socialists, which cleverly exploited the noncommittal attitude of the Communists towards both EU and Russia, winning voters with an explicitly pro-Russian platform.

Thus, in the last week leading to the elections, the streets of Chişinău were adorned with large

posters picturing two leaders of the Socialist Party meeting with Vladimir Putin. The pro-Europeans responded with their own slogans about “the Russian danger,” “the hand of Moscow,” and “the European destiny of Moldova,” as well as with posters openly featuring the symbol of NATO.

It has not, then, been surprising to see two factions of protesters camped along the same street, but divided by the geopolitical terms in which they articulate their demands. The overwhelming predominance of geopolitical vocabulary in Moldovan political discourse smothers the process of developing language that speaks directly to the needs of the country’s social classes.

What’s more, the “geopolitical choice” that is debated hardly seems to offer any real choices. In addition to the 2005 declaration, there is now the controversial ruling made by the Constitutional Court in October 2014 that the existing process for European integration is constitutional and that “any other adverse orientation” is by nature unconstitutional.

Both documents represent enormous hurdles to any effort to move Moldova in a different direction. Furthermore, an attempt to build a pro-Russian enclave in the area between Romania, a member country of the EU and NATO, on one side, and Ukraine, a country that is technically at war with Russia, on the other side, appears to be unrealistic in light of the global balance of forces.

Seen from the ground, the popular protests from Moldova have not been about geopolitics, as the use of labels such as “pro-Russian protesters” would suggest. Rather, the ongoing movement is a response to urgent domestic social problems that have been inappropriately cast in the available language of geopolitics.

## **Moldovans United?**

Nevertheless, the protests have not been able to fully escape the Moldovan elites’ preoccupation with geopolitical distinctions. Neither faction has been able to shift to a vision of economic and social reforms. Protesters have spent an impressive amount of time and energy pushing against the existing political class, but there have been few attempts to develop an alternative ideological vision. Neither have they devised a political strategy capable of overturning the oligarchs’ stranglehold over government.

The movement has asked for the resignation of the whole ruling coalition, and snap elections, in the hope that some new political force will emerge from the protests, without identifying any such force. Without something better in line to succeed them, what would the resignation of current officials mean for Moldovans? What effect would it have on the price of electricity or the country’s rampant poverty? As protesters struggle with these questions, the center-right parties that have led Moldova since 2009 have already begun their own process of reconstruction.

That is not to say that the protest movement has neglected all broader political considerations. For its part, the faction led by Civic Platform–Dignity and Truth has begun building a more expansive political coalition that might reconfigure existing divisions. This effort is visible in the CPDT’s shifting internal relationships with the pro-Romanian Unionist movement, and outwardly, with the pro-Russian Party of Socialists.

CPDT made a hard decision, rejecting internal pressures to adopt an exclusive pro-Romanian bent, and managed to reconcile some of the differences that divide the different popular constituencies of the two tent cities. Yet although CPDT deserves credit for listening to and organizing the popular calls for social justice, and for rejecting the pro-Romanian pressures, it has yet to articulate a political ideology beyond the liberal credo of anti-corruption.

They did not extend the struggle against one ruling oligarch to a socialist call for aligning against all capitalist oligarchs. As for the other side of the movement, the protest mounted by the Party of Socialists has limited credibility insofar as it is led by figures who deserted the Party of Communists after 2009, some of whom have been accused of corruption, and whose ideological line seems secondary in relation to the pro-Russian line.

Whatever the movement's flaws, it maintained the occupation of a public square for several months, during a winter in which temperatures dropped below five degrees Fahrenheit. It galvanized protesters' self-organization in the creation of a small subsistence economy within the tent cities. And it mobilized many people previously alienated from the Moldovan political system, tapping a deep well of solidarity that has been expressed in the food, money, clothing, and labor that has poured into the encampments.

Many local and foreign commentators have claimed that the protests mark the birth of a new Moldovan civil society, since the protesters have shifted from the geopolitical talk to a call for national unity along more expansive terms. Indeed, the most recent joint protest action featured only Moldovan flags (and none representing specific parties, the EU, Romania, or Russia) and calls such as "Moldovans united!"

Protesters have come together around one single demand: early elections, as soon as possible. But this only translates the popular anti-systemic feeling into a formal, but not substantive, electoral goal. If this magic moment of unity is to last, protesters need time to build trust across factions, and to establish clearer terms of collaboration between different movement forces, not to mention build popular mobilization outside Chişinău. At the moment, local authorities are moving fast to quash these possibilities, by recruiting and putting their own people in positions of power, and instilling a cynical sense of *fait accompli* that will limit the protests and exacerbate internal divisions.

Still, the recent developments in Moldova warrant significant attention. As discontent continues to rise, rather than seeing the country's demonstrations as merely pawns in a wider geopolitical game, we must recognize their radical potential.

**Vasile Ernu, Vitalie Sprinceana, & Ovidiu Tichindeleanu**

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**P.S.**

\* "Moldova's Movement From Below". Jacobin. 3.17.16:

<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2016/03/moldova-chisinau-protests-russia-eu-ukraine/>

\* Vasile Ernu, Vitalie Sprinceana, & Ovidiu Tichindeleanu are Moldovan activists.

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## Footnotes

[1] <https://research.stlouisfed.org/fred2/series/DDOI11MDA156NWDB>

[2] <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/wires/ap/article-3408584/Moldovas-parliament-approves-new-premier-ending-deadlock.html>

[3] <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-35403563>

[4] <http://www.nakedcapitalism.com/2015/10/the-billion-dollar-moldovan-bank-scam-scottish-limited-partnerships-and-the-uks-anti-money-laundering-mess.html>

[5] <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-34665640>

[6] <http://moldovanpolitics.com/2015/11/01/how-international-media-feeds-political-crisis-in-moldova/>

[7] <http://old.parlament.md/news/25.03.2005/en.html>