

ELECTIONWATCH

MOLDOVA



Moldova Pre-Election Watch: November 2010 Parliamentary Elections

The parliamentary elections in July 2009 dramatically altered the Moldovan political landscape, ending almost a decade of single party rule by the Communist Party. Four parties, the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), Liberal Party (LP), Democratic Party (DP) and Our Moldova Alliance (OMA) formed a coalition – the Alliance for European Integration (AEI). With only a slim parliamentary majority of 53 out of 101 seats, the coalition fell short of the 61 votes needed to elect a president.

Without a president, the parliament is constitutionally required to be dissolved and conduct new elections. Acting President Mihai Ghimpu was forced to dissolve parliament in September and call for new elections. On November 28, Moldovans will return to the polls for the third time in two years to elect a parliament. The outcome of these elections will determine whether the political deadlock of the past two years continues or if the country can finally elect a president and continue on its path of reform and Western integration.

Challenges Facing Moldova

Moldova is in dire need of reform. Described as the poorest country in Europe, Moldova's infrastructure ranks as one of the world's worst, with the Global Competitiveness Index rating it 133rd out of 134 countries in terms of road quality. According to Rethink Moldova, a strategic document outlining the government's development priorities, half of Moldova's population lacks access to safe water and sanitation, and 90 percent of rural Moldovan homes have no water or sewage.

The economic crisis has battered Moldova's fragile economy, which depends heavily on remittances and the volatile agricultural sector. Diversifying Moldova's markets and encouraging business investment and job creation are urgent priorities, but addressing these issues has proven extraordinarily difficult. Rampant corruption, poor infrastructure and red tape repel business investment, and there is only a dwindling pool of skilled workers as Moldovan youth leave in droves to pursue better opportunities elsewhere.

Having inherited a budget deficit and tangled, bloated bureaucracy the government has struggled to provide even basic services to its aging population, and lack the funds to undertake dramatic economic reforms or invest in infrastructure projects. As a result, the government has had to appeal to foreign countries for aid and funding for many of these difficult projects.

The Campaign

The composition of parliament is not expected to look much different after November's elections according to polls. Although a total of 20 parties will compete, most are unlikely to clear the four percent threshold. The current parliament consists of 51 seats for the AEI coalition (LDP 18, LP 15, DP 13, OMA five), 43 seats for the Party of Communists (there is

a parliamentary faction for independent parliamentarians, consisting of seven members), and two seats for the European Action Movement, which counts itself as independent but supportive of the AEI agenda. The LDP, LP and DP have all expanded their organizations in the past year, and are expected to gain seats in November. Their remaining coalition partner, Our Moldova Alliance, hopes to maintain its seats in parliament. Polls released in the weeks before the elections have generally predicted that AEI coalition could gain up to 10 seats. If the coalition manages to win eight seats, this will give them the 61 votes they need to elect a president.

The AEI coalition can point to significant foreign policy successes, having secured more than two billion dollars in funding and aid projects from a diverse array of entities around the world, enabling them to begin investing in Moldova's crumbling infrastructure, improve government services and take steps to fight corruption. AEI has fully committed to its promise to accelerate Moldova's accession to the European Union, and has been actively negotiating an Association Agreement. The government expects to switch to biometric passports by January 2011, a significant step towards visa liberalization for the Moldovan people.

In a tense electoral environment it is crucial that the elections are seen as open and transparent and produce legitimate results. After two parliamentary elections in 2009, the government has had an opportunity to identify and address some of the problems that plagued past elections. Encouragingly, AEI has since introduced several amendments to the Electoral Code that demonstrate a commitment to open, transparent elections. The threshold for parties to enter parliament was lowered from six to four percent and parties are now permitted to run as blocs. This will allow smaller parties a chance to gain a foothold in state power structures.

Additionally, an amendment allowing more foreign countries to open polling stations will increase the opportunities for Moldovans living abroad to vote. The government also overturned burdensome registration regulations that disenfranchised many students in 2009 by preventing them from voting at their universities. Now students may vote at their place of study. Citizens who try to vote multiple times or use false identity papers now face harsher punishment.

There have also been improvements in the media realm that should benefit voters. Biased media coverage has been an enduring problem in Moldova, especially during election cycles. Election coverage in 2009 was infamous for the lack of objectivity in news reporting, selective coverage and failures to fact-check negative or sensational reports on the opposition. Since AEI came to power, two new independent television stations have opened and reports of government harassment of reporters and news stations have declined.

Last year, Reporters without Borders ranked Moldova a dismal 114th in its world press freedom index. This year, Moldova has leaped to a more respectable 75th. Though coverage of these elections has not been entirely without incident, these trends are encouraging and Moldovan voters should be better informed of party positions this November.

These changes should result in elections that are reasonably transparent and open, with limited opportunities for fraud. It is now incumbent upon political parties to boost sluggish voter turnout and effectively inform voters of the stakes in the elections as they head to the polls. Their ability to do this will affect whether Moldova can resume focusing on implementing critical reforms. Should the newly-seated parliament succeed in electing a

president and securing a four-year mandate to rule, the country will be able to devote resources to its future - economic development, government reform and European Union accession. These elections are hopefully the final hurdle for a country with incredible potential to move forward.

IRI in Moldova

IRI has been actively supporting democracy in Moldova since 1998 and opened an office in Chisinau in 2003. IRI program activities assist political parties in developing solution-based messages within the context of their party ideologies; building strong, nationwide structures to better deliver substantive messages to voters; and increasing women's participation in the political process. IRI began a governance program in April 2010 to aid Moldova in addressing the needs of Moldovan citizens, operating efficiently and governing justly.

IRI has conducted message development and door-to-door campaign training programs, quantitative public opinion research, informational election law seminars, training workshops targeted at women's political party activists, political and governance communications training for locally-elected government officials, election monitoring and poll watching training and message-based media training. As a result of IRI's efforts, hundreds of political party activists in Moldova are better equipped to communicate well-developed and substantive solutions to the challenges facing Moldovan citizens.



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