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Moldova: record-breaking support for reunification with Romania

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The percentage of Moldovans in favour of their country's reunification with Romania reached a record 43.9% in the second half of March this year. The data comes from a poll published on April 6 by Moldova's iData company. The same survey also shows a clear drop in support for Moldova's integration into the Eurasian Union promoted by Russia (from 48.1% in January to 40% at present). Meanwhile, the number of supporters of the country's accession to the EU has remained stable during this period, oscillating at around 68%.

Commentary

- The popularity of the idea of reuniting Moldova and Romania (the so-called *unirea*) has been growing consistently in Moldovan society for the past five years. In 2016, the percentage of supporters of this solution wavered around 15-20%. In 2018 it rose to about 25% and in the second half of 2020 it reached 30-35%. This trend mainly results from growing disillusionment with the political situation, pervasive corruption, and the persistently bad economic situation that has translated into a low standard of living for the country's residents. In connection with the persisting political and economic crises, as well as the lack of effective measures taken by the ruling elites to mitigate them, the Moldovan state is increasingly perceived by its citizens not only as largely dysfunctional, but also (even more importantly) as incapable of reforming itself. As a result, a growing part of the electorate that was previously neutral towards the unionist idea (mainly pro-European or at least those not afraid of cooperation with the West) is beginning to perceive reunification as a remedy for the bad economic situation and corruption, and as a way to achieve real integration with the EU or avoid the risk of a pro-Russian turn in Moldova.
- There was a significant jump (by 6.4 points) in the percentage of Moldovans in favour of reunification with Romania between February (when it was 37.5% according to the aforementioned poll) and March this year. This was primarily due to the support that Chișinău had recently received from Bucharest in the fight against the pandemic. On February 27 and March 27, the first two free shipments of AstraZeneca vaccines arrived in Moldova from Romania. In total they make up 72,000 of the 200,000 doses that Romanian President Klaus Iohannis promised Moldova during his December visit to Chișinău. The authorities in Bucharest are also regularly retrofitting Moldovan medical services with the necessary protective equipment. They are also encouraging Moldovans with Romanian citizenship (estimated at around 800,000, or 30% of the population) to get

vaccinated in Romania as part of the ongoing national vaccination program. These actions stand in contrast to the attitude of Russia, which, despite repeated announcements and efforts by Moldovan politicians, has so far failed to deliver the Sputnik V preparation to Moldova, which in turn has translated into a clear decline in support for integration into the Eurasian Union. Meanwhile, the aforementioned deliveries of vaccines and medical equipment to Moldova from the West are carried out under the joint banner of Romania and the EU.

- Bucharest's support in the fight against the pandemic is helping to build a positive image of Romania in the eyes of Moldovans, but for a certain part of the population, it is also evidence of the country's failure in this regard. The vaccination program started only at the beginning of March and was only possible due to free deliveries of vaccines from external partners (in addition to the support from Romania, Moldova also receives preparations under the COVAX program). To date, the authorities have not yet purchased any vaccines on their own (in mid-April there was an announcement of the purchase of 400,000 doses of the Chinese product CoronaVac). The pace of vaccination is slow – by mid-April less than 80,000 people (3% of the population) had received a single dose, which means a daily average of about 1,750 doses. Another indication of the country's weakness is the fact that a number of well-known politicians (many of whom held high state office until recently) have decided to take their vaccines in Romania, including the long-time speaker of parliament, Andrian Candu, and the former Minister of Culture, Monica Babuc.
- The deep political crisis, which has been ongoing for almost four months now and has overlapped with the third wave of the pandemic, has undoubtedly also contributed to the growing support for reunification with Romania. Moldova has been without a stable government since late December, with a resigned cabinet led by acting Prime Minister Aureliu Ciocoi. No new government has been formed so far because of the political struggle between the pro-Western President Maia Sandu and the Party of Action and Solidarity (PAS) which supports her on the one hand and the pro-Russian Party of Socialists of the Republic of Moldova (PSRM) of former President Igor Dodon on the other. Sandu has been consistently pushing for the dissolution of parliament and the calling of early elections, in which PAS can count on record support of up to 40% (the PSRM currently receive 20-30% in opinion polls). The PSRM, fearing a loss of political influence, opposes this idea, arguing that holding elections during the pandemic will endanger the lives and health of citizens. In order to block the possibility of dissolving parliament (and officially under the pretext of fighting COVID-19), the socialists, along with supportive deputies from the Şor Party (and others) pushed through the imposition of a state of emergency for two months starting March 31. However, on April 15, the Constitutional Court allowed Sandu to dismantle the parliament due to its inability to form a new government within three months of the previous one's resignation. This opens the way for early parliamentary elections, which could, however, be held a minimum of two and a maximum of three months after the end of the state of emergency. It is therefore unlikely that a new government will be elected before autumn this year.

- Despite the growing unionist sentiment in Moldova, the possibility of the two countries merging in the foreseeable future is unlikely. A significant part of the Moldovan political elite (including those pro-Romanian) is not interested in dealing away Moldova's statehood. This will be prevented by the unresolved problem of Transnistria, the position of Russia (which is radically opposed to the absorption of Moldova by Romania) and the very negative attitude of the Russian-speaking national and ethnic minorities (which account for 20% of the population) to reunification. Financial issues are a separate problem. It is estimated that in the event of Moldova joining the EU, Romania would have to spend around €35 billion over the first five years alone on a wide range of adaptations (including infrastructure and administration) of the territory of present-day Moldova. Although support for reunification ranges between 70 and 80% in Romania, opinion polls also show an unwillingness to bear its financial costs. Romanian politicians tend to rhetorically support the idea, but do not put forward a specific plan for its implementation.