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Local elections in Moldova: success of the 'pro-European' opposition

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On 5 November, the mayors and members of city, municipal and *raions* (this is a higher-level administrative unit) councils were elected in Moldova. The incumbent mayor of Chisinau, Ion Ceban, the leader of the National Alternative Movement (MAN), which is in opposition to the ruling pro-European Party of Action and Solidarity (PAS), won in the first round (50.62% of the vote). His main rival, Lilian Carp, who is supported by PAS, garnered 28.23%. MAN also achieved the best result in the Chisinau city council elections (33.1%). PAS came second (32.9%), and the third and fourth places were taken by the pro-Russian parties: the Party of Socialists of the Republic of Moldova (9.64%) and the Party of Communists of the Republic of Moldova (4.46%). Bălți, Moldova's second largest city, will have a runoff on 19 November. Alexandr Petkov, representing Our Party led by the populist Renato Usatîi and who is linked to Russia (22.64% of votes in the first round), will compete for mayor of Bălți with Arina Corşicova (22.3%), a formally independent candidate who is in fact supported by the oligarch Ilan Şor, who fled the country in 2019.

PAS managed to receive the largest number of votes in the elections to the councils in 19 out of 32 *raions* (eight more than in 2019), but it failed to win an independent majority in any of them. It did not manage to win the mayoral race in the first round in any of the country's 11 largest cities with municipal status. Runoffs will be held in four of them, but the PAS candidate can only win in Ungheni.

The populist Chance party, associated with Şor, was barred from taking part in the elections on 3 November this year as a result of a report published on the same day by the Security and Intelligence Service of Moldova (SIS, intelligence and counterintelligence) revealing that Şor and his grouping had links, including financial links, with Russia. Chance's leadership have been consistently criticising this decision and have promised to contest it.

Commentary

- Since local governments in Moldova have limited competences, the local elections should be viewed primarily as a measure of the popularity of the main political forces. The government party is generally content with the results; this is particularly important given the upcoming presidential (end of 2024) and parliamentary elections (second half of 2025). This was not a sweeping victory for PAS, nor was it an electoral disaster suggesting the collapse of public support for this party, which had been its main concern due to the growing public dissatisfaction with the government's policy and the economic

situation.

- The electoral success of Ceban and the MAN party which he leads is a serious challenge for the pro-Western government. Ceban originates from pro-Russian groups. For a long time, he was a member of the Communist Party and then the Socialist Party (he was elected mayor of Chisinau in 2019 as part of this latter party). After PAS took power, however, he gradually began to distance himself from these circles, and eventually established a formally pro-European party. Ceban claims that he has changed his views, but still PAS politicians and some experts believe that he may actually represent Russian interests. There is no doubt that the Kremlin was interested in his electoral success. This was one of the reasons why the Socialist Party, the main opposition force, did not put forward a serious rival against him (its representative, Adrian Albu, received only 4.5% of the vote). Although it is obvious that Ceban has presidential ambitions and his goal is to make MAN the main 'pro-European' opposition force to PAS, it is not known whether he will decide to run for the presidency next year. At this moment, Maia Sandu, who has held the position since 2020, seems set to win.
- Control over the local administration makes it easier to conduct an effective election campaign in a given region. In recent years, these structures have been repeatedly used by Şor, who implemented various types of populist projects (such as supplemented pensions and road renovations) financed from his own funds, with the help of local authorities (for example, in Orhei or more recently in Gagauzia). These moves were aimed at boosting his own popularity and that of the political entities he led. In the case of smaller towns and *raions*, where the administration is an important employer, local administration may also put informal pressure on public sector employees to vote for the groups they represent.
- For several months, the pro-Western government in Chisinau has been making efforts to curb the influence of Russian-funded parties on the country's political life. These actions were aimed primarily at PAS's most active opponent, Şor, who fled the country in 2019 and is hiding in Israel (he has Israeli citizenship). In April this year, he was sentenced by the court of second instance to 15 years in prison for involvement in the largest financial scandal in Moldova's history which led to the theft of a total of around $1 billion from the country's banking sector in 2014. In June this year, the Constitutional Court banned the Şor party, finding it unconstitutional (operating against the rule of law and the independence of the state). Furthermore, the government adopted a law prohibiting the leadership of groups deemed unconstitutional from standing in elections for three to five years. Since his party was banned, Şor began to openly support the newly established Chance, which took over a significant part of the staff and assets of the Şor party. Finally, on 3 November, the Commission for Emergency Situations barred Chance candidates from participating in local elections. This commission, based on the SIS report published on the same day, concluded that the party, given its links with Şor and non-transparent financing, partly from Russia, posed a threat to national security. This decision, albeit not groundless, was made arbitrarily, bypassing democratic procedures, and in a way that de facto deprived Chance of the opportunity to effectively contest it before the elections. This will affect the image of the pro-Western government, as it may have to face accusations of the politically motivated suppression of the opposition. There is also no

doubt that Chance representatives will try to contest the commission's decision (and therefore the election results) not only in the national courts, but also at the European level.