

Elections Today

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ELECTION CALENDAR

PRESIDENTIAL

Central African Republic (2nd Round) – May 1, 2005

Mongolia – May 22, 2005

Iran – June 17, 2005

Guinea Bissau – June 19, 2005

Kyrgyzstan – July 10, 2005

Poland (1st Round) – September 25, 2005

PARLIAMENTARY/LEGISLATIVE

Central African Republic (2nd Round) – May 1, 2005

Dominica – May 5, 2005

United Kingdom – May 5, 2005

Cayman Islands – May 11, 2005

Ethiopia – May 15, 2005

Suriname – May 25, 2005

Lebanon – May 29, 2005

Bulgaria – June 25, 2005

Albania – July 3, 2005

Palestinian Territories – July 17, 2005

Norway – September 12, 2005

Afghanistan – September 18, 2005

REFERENDUMS

France (EU Constitution) – May 29, 2005

Netherlands (EU Constitution) – June 1, 2005

Switzerland (Schengen Agreement) – June 5, 2005

Uganda (Constitution) – June 30, 2005

Luxembourg (EU Constitution) – July 10, 2005

Poland (EU Constitution) – September 25, 2005

Switzerland (Freedom of Movement) – September
25, 2005

Denmark (EU Constitution) – September 27, 2005

Parliamentary Elections in Moldova:

Assessing the Results and Their Implications for Democratization

Interviews with John Todd Stewart, Igor Botan and Angela Sirbu

Given the proliferation of civic revolutions in regions of the former Soviet Union in the last two years, elections there command more attention than they once did. However, in Moldova's March parliamentary elections, the Communist Party won in a poll that international observers considered to fairly represent the voters' choices. In April, *Elections Today* spoke with John Todd Stewart—former U.S. Ambassador to Moldova and election observer during the recent elections—and Igor Botan and Angela Sirbu—both of whom are members of Coalition 2005, an association of 150-200 Moldovan NGOs set up to ensure free and fair elections—to find out more.

Was the Communist victory a surprise?

STEWART: Hardly. The Communists had a great deal going for them that the electorate could not ignore. First, they ran on an impressive economic record, at least by Moldovan standards. Moldova's gross domestic product has grown by at least 6% a year since the Communists took over in 2001, the only period of significant growth since independence. Consumer prices had risen more than 30% in both 1999 and 2000, and after the Communists took over, the price increases fell to the low teens or lower. Moldova's 662,000 pensioners now benefit from regular cost-of-living increases and receive their payments in a much more timely fashion. Critics



The Head of the ODIHR Election Observation Mission to Moldova, Ambassador Istvan Gyarmati (center), meets with a polling station official in Chisinau on Election Day.

correctly point out that the country's improved economic circumstances are due in large measure to (1) the economic reforms pushed through by previous governments, (2) the large volume of remittances from Moldovans working abroad and (3) the energy-fed economic boom in Russia, which takes almost 40% of Moldova's exports. However, analogous arguments are often heard in U.S. politics, where they fall equally flat.

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Second, the Communists remain the best-organized political party in Moldova. There were an impressive number of political party observers at the polling places I visited, but I cannot recall one in which there was not at least one Communist representative. Where personal contact is the most important means of political persuasion, a well-oiled machine is crucial. It appeared, moreover, that there was good, disciplined communication in one Russian-speaking village we visited between the Communist Party organization and the leadership in Chisinau. When the Communist mayor, a garrulous sort in his late 50s, heard that I was from the United States, he was quick to note that he stood with President Voronin and America against Russia!

Third, the Communists benefited from the inertia, mixed with nostalgia in many cases, of older Moldovans who are accustomed to voting for the hammer and sickle—the Moldovan equivalent, if you will, of “yellow dog Democrats” in the American South. Both are dying breeds with diminishing political importance, but they still have a lingering effect on electoral outcomes. For example, our fellow observers commented that the returns from mobile ballot boxes, taken to shut-ins unable to come to the polls, had an exceptionally high share of votes cast for the Communists.

Finally, the Communists had the benefit of incumbency, which they used wisely. Good examples were the meetings President Voronin held in the run-up to the election with Presidents Yushchenko of Ukraine, Saakashvili of Georgia, and Basescu of Romania, which were extensively—and properly—reported by the Moldovan media to the benefit of the Communists. However,

vided preferential access to public space for Communist activities. I believe these reports are accurate and represent a regrettable erosion of the standards upheld in the 1998 parliamentary election campaign, which I witnessed while ambassador. Still, I doubt that they materially affected the election results.

However, the main charge leveled by ODIHR in this area concerns preferential access for Communist candidates to the electronic media. The facts provided in the preliminary findings of the International Election Observation Mission, which included several European groups in addition to ODIHR, are too complicated for me to present in detail, but the gist is that restrictive and sometimes ambiguous regulations on campaign coverage limited voters’ access to information and that coverage by Moldova 1, the public television channel, was “clearly biased in favor of the ruling party.” These findings are accurate, I’m sure, but I would argue that the real problem was not so much the election regulations or political influence at Moldova 1 but the generally poor quality of the country’s electronic media.

Moldovan TV viewers watch “First Channel in Moldova,” which rebroadcasts Moscow’s ORT channel plus some local programming, 71% of the time as compared to a mere 8% for Moldova 1. This huge difference is not rooted in Russophilia but rather in the considerably superior production standards of ORT. Unfortunately, “First Channel” elected not to cover the campaign from a journalistic standpoint and did not even accept paid advertisements. Hence, unless voters sought

MOLDOVA

Parliamentary ■ March 6, 2005

Registered Voters	2,430,537	
Votes Cast:	1,576,079	→ 64.84% of Registered Voters
Valid Votes:	1,557,828	→ 98.84% of Votes Cast
Invalid Votes:	18,251	→ 1.16% of Votes Cast

Party	Valid Votes	% Votes	#Seats
Communist Party of the Republic of Moldova (PCRM)	716,336	45.89%	56
Democratic Moldova Bloc (BMD)	444,377	28.53%	34
Christian Democratic Party (PPCD)	141,341	9.07%	11

the gold nugget was the signature of the EU/Moldova Action Plan shortly before the parliamentary elections. This agreement clearly indicates a path to membership in the European Union—provided Moldova complies with its provisions. To any voter interested in the country’s future in Europe, it was evidence that President Voronin could lead them into the promised land.

During the election campaign, did the Communists take unfair advantage of their control of the government to win votes?

STEWART: This is a more complicated matter, and here I must rely on the reports of the ODIHR long-term observers who arrived in time for the campaign, rather than just for the election itself. These observers reported instances in which local government authorities (presumably Communists or allies of the party) prevented the posting of campaign material, interfered with opposition party activists conducting legitimate campaign activities, prevented the lawful assembly of opposition meetings, forced civil servants to attend Communist campaign rallies and pro-

out election programming on Moldova 1, they only received whatever ORT coverage was rebroadcast by “First Channel.” That coverage was an inadequate basis for voters to reach informed judgments.

The final count against the Communists in this area concerns the spurious charge made by their executive secretary, Victor Stepaniuc (endorsed by President Voronin), that the Civic Coalition for Free and Fair Elections—“Coalition 2005”—was supporting an opposition party. The Coalition was, in fact, a grouping of almost 200 civil society organizations that monitored the campaign, especially media reportage, and published findings that were not to the Communists’ liking. Following the Communist broadside, the foreign embassies and missions in Chisinau rallied to the Coalition’s defense and the Communists had the wisdom to back off. Coalition 2005 went on to conduct an extensive observation effort at polling stations, appearing at well over half of those my partner and I visited, a percentage consistent with the country-wide figure reported by the International Election Observation Mission. They made a significant contribution to proper conduct of the voting.

What do the results mean for the future of Moldova?

STEWART: When we talked after the election, former President Lucinschi commented that the remarkable development in Moldovan politics was the reorientation of the Party of Communists toward Europe. I agree. Moldova now has a parliament where all three parties avowedly support the country's Europeanization and have an excellent road map to guide them westward in the form of the Action Plan signed with the European Commission. It should now be possible to reduce the inter-party bickering that frustrated progress in past parliaments and approve the decisive measures necessary to transform Moldova into a truly European state. Two such measures come immediately to mind.

The first is the creation, with adequate financing, of an independent, sophisticated and unbiased public national television service that Moldovans would want to watch. Assuming that the necessary expertise and ethos could be developed, Moldovan television could provide the broad but unbiased political coverage so lacking in the past campaign. Second, there must be a parliamentary consensus on a strategy to end the secession of Transnistria, another issue in which all three parties supposedly agree. The single biggest reason for the continued existence of the secession has been the lack of political will on the part of Moldova's political elites to deal determinedly with the problem. A firm, united stand could also have a positive effect on Russian policy toward Transnistria.

To sum up then, I am encouraged by the Moldovan election results—but only if the winning parties can now pull together in the national interest. If they can, Moldova could become a remarkable example of revolutionary progress without a revolution—and a model for other states in the region.

From the perspective of Moldovan civil society, were the March 6th elections in Moldova free and fair?

BOTAN: The elections were not fair. However, I could say that the elections were partially free, because there were no impediments for Moldovans residing in Moldova to participate in the elections. However, the government did little to ensure Moldovans abroad were able to vote. According to the electoral code, the government is obliged to ensure the right to vote. Their explanation was that they had no money and legislation does not provide very clear directions. We in civil society proposed absentee voting, but their answer was no. The result was that the most educated and active Moldovans (who are working abroad) could not vote. They only opened polling stations in embassies and consulates abroad. This means they had a polling site in the Washington, DC, embassy, which served the United States, Canada and Mexico. The same situation occurred with some European countries, and it's obvious that this impacted the results. For example, in Moldova, Communists have 46% support while Christian Democrats have 9% and the Democratic Moldova Bloc has 30%. Abroad, the Communists generally earn 12% and the Christian Democrats



An elderly voter casts her ballot in Chisinau during parliamentary elections on March 6, 2005.

and Democratic Moldova each receive 44%. So obviously it was not in the Communists' interest to allow significant participation of Moldovans living abroad.

SIRBU: When we talk about elections, we have to make clear that there are different stages. Election Day was fairly smooth, though there were many unanswered questions. But if we talk about the election campaign, there were serious problems. The mistakes observed in the 2003 elections were not corrected, and there was little education for Moldovans about the electoral process. The rules kept changing—in most cases at the last moment—so this created a lot of confusion and people did not understand what their rights were and what they should do to vote legitimately. For example, the Central Election Commission adopted a new rule stating that, after voting, each voter must receive a stamp in his or her passport in order to avoid double voting. But people reacted aggressively to this request because they didn't understand it, and the officials offered very little explanation of how important this is and why it was necessary.

How might the results of these elections change the political landscape in Moldova, particularly the relationship between the Communists and the opposition?

BOTAN: Certainly the results of this election will have an important impact on politics in Moldova. The Communist Party lost 15 seats in this election; they have now 56 versus the 71 they had before. This time, they are unable to pass constitutional change without the support of the other parties. The news is that the Communist faction in parliament is no longer a monolithic bloc; they will have to negotiate with their new partner [the Democratic Moldova bloc], and this has inspired some confidence that the democratic process could get better. It is important, though, to note that all major parties had similar messages during the election campaign: European integration, a sound market economy, establishing social protections in Moldova, increasing salaries and so on. I think that civil society should remain vigilant but there are some good signs.

SIRBU: We can talk about improvements only if we believe that the Communist Party's new orientation is not just an electoral slogan but is actually politically real.

Do you think President Voronin's pro-Western stance is genuinely held?

BOTAN: I think this is the most interesting question. In Moldova, the so-called political elite were educated in Soviet times. The majority of them are former Communists, many of whom, after the transition, just changed their label: Communist to Social Democrat, Liberal, etc. I believe that the great majority of them were relatively sincere. Their main concern was to remain in power so they could participate in the privatization process, the transformation of state property into private property. They formed clans around political parties and competed over said property. In between their struggles, there was some room for democratic development because they needed the support of the mass media, civil society, and so on. This is the essence of transitional progress in Moldova.


The Communists came to power four years ago, and they

promised to re-build socialism and communism but half a year later they realized they could not do it because Moldova is a small country that would be destroyed by "international imperialism" (as they used to call it), which could not stand a communist regime. So they decided to integrate into the European community. But Voronin emphasized that social protection mechanisms were very important to maintaining the electorate. The number of pensioners in Moldova four years ago was some 700,000. The number of voters for the Communist Party was 800,000. When Voronin realized that Russia was not interested in helping him [to solve the Transnistrian conflict, facilitate Russian access to Moldovan goods, etc.], this pragmatic politician switched allegiances.

Why do I mention all this? Voronin changed pro-Russian slogans into pro-Western ones only on a rhetorical level. No laws were adopted that changed anything real. To the Communists, principles are not that valuable. For them, the main principle is to remain in power because remaining in power means their businesses will flourish. However, they understand perfectly that Moldova is a small country that needs international support. When the Communists realized that they wouldn't get that support from Russia but they could get it from the European Union and the United States, they made a strategic choice and launched this idea of European integration.

I will not trust their campaign promise until I see the law adopted by Parliament that obliges the government to undertake measures that orient Moldova towards European integration. Circumstances lead me to encourage the opposition and civil society to maintain a kind of intelligent pressure on the Communists to do what is needed. If the Communists want Moldova to be integrated into the European Union and steer Moldova in this direction, I would welcome it, though I would have to say to them "Okay, you're doing a good thing for the country, but you are destroying yourselves because you cannot remain Communist and promote liberal values."

SIRBU: This [Voronin's genuineness] is the crucial point here because in the last three years what we have seen is a double standard. There are two separate messages: one for the West and one for the people in Moldova. Even before the election, politicians made statements about the importance of becoming a member of the European Union, and at the same time, the government put political and economic pressure on the media. It even attempted to close down the alternative media. In Moldova, there is an imitation of a democracy. The government continues to use state media to discredit representatives of civil society who criticized them. This is reality. The members of the Communist Party in the parliament now are the same as before. Therefore, until we see things changing in reality, I'm skeptical that democratic standards will improve in Moldova.

The most important thing now is to insist that democratic norms be respected in Moldova. This is the main challenge, I think: for civil society and for all people in Moldova to really ask for their rights and their lives to improve. 

John Todd Stewart served as U.S. Ambassador to Moldova between 1995 and 1998 and served as an election observer during the recent elections. He is now retired from the Foreign Service and does not, as a result, speak on behalf of the U.S. Government. Igor Botan is the executive director of the Association for Participatory Democracy "ADEPT" in Moldova and Angela Sirbu is the executive director of the Independent Journalism Center in Moldova. See www.e-democracy.md for an update on recent political events following the March election.