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ACTION

SUPPORTING MOLDOVA'S DEMOCRATIC TRANSITION

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Background

The EU has got used to hearing almost exclusively bad news from the Eastern neighbourhood. Growing authoritarianism, post-electoral unrest, the failing hopes of the ‘coloured revolutions’, gas cut-offs, and even wars, have severely undermined the effectiveness of the EU’s policies in the region. Expectations of the Eastern partnership are today minimal.

Against this background, Moldova has brought good news. Recent elections brought to power a four-party Alliance for European Integration, making Moldova the only post-Soviet state (the Baltics aside) in the last ten years where a transfer of power happened through elections. Even more, Moldova is now the only CIS state where every single transition of power since 1991 took place after contested elections, rather than through staged successions, street protests and coloured revolution or palace coups.

This makes Moldova an opportunity for the EU to re-launch its policies in the east. Moldova is a fragile state, but is also the most amenable to EU influence. When it comes to trade it is one post-Soviet state that is most dependent on the EU, support for European integration is also the highest in the region, it shares a language and a history with Romania (an EU member states) and due to migration flows and its geography has the highest intensity of people-to-people interaction with the EU.

If EU leaders are looking for ways to make the Eastern Partnership successful, there are worse places to start than Moldova.

A new EU Moldova policy

In the following months the EU should move fast to solidify and consolidate the reform process in Moldova. It should show a higher level of political engagement than before, and it should spend the EU assistance on a few visible projects that will gain the EU traction with the population, while having a transformative effect on Moldova. Doing so is likely to have a beneficial effect on conflict-resolution in Transnistria.

1. Increase the political engagement:

- The EU should send a group of high-level policy advisors on reforms, with a special emphasis on reform of the law-enforcement agencies. The EU already deploys an eight-person strong high-level advisory group in Armenia which will be supplemented with another six advisors soon. In the case of Moldova such a mission should comprise some 15–20 EU advisors in the presidential office, parliament, the ministries of interior and justice, the intelligence service, and the ministries of economy and agriculture.
- EU leaders should undertake a series of high level EU visits to Moldova to demonstrate support for reforms and European integration. Potential high-level visitors could

include heads of state, EU officials, or ministers for foreign affairs and/or European affairs from Sweden, UK, France, Germany, Poland, the Baltic states, and Romania. These countries have already demonstrated a political interest in Moldova's future.

2. Support the new, moderate Government.

The EU should offer support in a more public and visible way. In addition to implementing structural reforms with long-term impact, the Moldovan government will need to focus on a few visible projects with quick policy impact that will have broader relevance for the country's modernisation. The idea is to identify sectors that can be reformed relatively quickly and will have visible short-term impact with long-term implications. The following ideas could be considered:

- Help fund and launch Capacity Building for Reform in Periods of Transition program, including through a Trust Fund. Similar programmes have been supported by the international community in Albania, Serbia (after the fall of Milosevic) and Georgia (after the Rose Revolution). As part of a reform process, the fund would provide salary top-ups to officials in priority reform sectors making it possible to attract good specialists to work for the government. Possible donors for such a fund would include the UNDP, USAID, IOM, EU member states, the European Commission and private organisations like OSI.
- Cover the entire country with wireless internet, following Macedonia's US-funded example. Covering the entire country with wireless internet will have positive side effects such as providing access to all the schools, municipalities, improving access to information and strengthening pluralism of the media, and making Moldova potentially more attractive to foreign investors (in conjunction with other measures). The project should be open to Transnistria.
- Liberalise air-travel between the EU and Moldova, hopefully leading to a drastic reduction of air travel fares. Moldova's neighbours Ukraine and Romania have more liberalised air travel markets, which makes the costs of air travel from Moldova to other European capitals up to 2-3 times more expensive than from Kiev or Bucharest. Reducing air travel costs will benefit the Moldovan diaspora and their relatives who would be able to travel more often and cheaper. It could also attract more foreign visitors, be it potential investors or simply tourists.

3. Justice and home affairs

- Support police and judicial reforms by offering to undertake a comprehensive Rule of Law assessment and a strategy for reform of law-enforcement agencies. The possibility of quick-wins, such as the introduction of speed cameras to begin reform of the corrupt and much-mangled traffic police should also be examined.

• Liberalise visas for Moldova. The EU's restrictive visa-policies are the biggest incentive for Moldovans to seek other citizenships. In the short term the EU should consider the abolition of visa fees and extending the provisions of the existing visa-facilitation agreement with Moldova. The EU should also offer Moldova seasonal workers schemes that will encourage seasonal migration, rather than make Moldovans remain trapped illegally inside the EU, or look for the passports of other states. In the mid-term, the EU should offer Moldova a road-map to visa-free travel.

The next two years will be an important window of opportunity for both the EU and the new, pro-EU Moldovan government to set the pace for modernizing reforms, consolidate Moldova's democratic transition and help stabilise the EU's immediate neighbour. In greeting Moldova's new government with a package of supportive measures, European leaders have a chance to make the ENP both more relevant and more powerful.

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