

Moldova's political parties: caught between the EU and Russia

Moldova's political landscape reflects the country's deep split between EU and Russia. The main outcome of the parliamentary elections in November 2014 was a narrow victory for the pro-EU parties. The new minority government, appointed on 18 February, will continue Chisinau's European course, but remains fragile in light of persistent internal problems, the strengthened pro-Russian opposition as well as increasing economic, political and military pressure from Moscow.

Despite steady progress, political divides and looming tensions remain

Moldova's deep [geopolitical](#) split between Europe and Russia dominated the 2014 election campaign and continues to divide the country's 3.5 million inhabitants. Among the Eastern Partnership countries, Moldova has long been the [best example](#) of successful Europeanisation and modernisation. In June 2014, Moldova and the EU signed an [Association Agreement](#) (AA) including a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA). Some provisions, including most of the DCFTA, have applied provisionally since September 2014.

However, ongoing tensions challenge Chisinau's European course. [Disputes](#) between the pro-EU parties have hampered government negotiations and are making the new [minority coalition](#), which has only 42 of 101 seats in Parliament, vulnerable to further internal rifts and external pressure. Against the backdrop of the unfolding ['hybrid war'](#) in neighbouring Ukraine, Moscow has tried to boost [scepticism about the EU](#) in Moldova and strong-arm Chisinau into joining its new [Eurasian Economic Union](#) (EEU). Responding to the AA's signature, Russia imposed [import bans](#) on key agricultural products from Moldova (further undermining the already [vulnerable economy](#)). Russia also stepped up military [exercises](#) in the [pro-Russia](#) breakaway region of Transnistria and [boosted](#) its trade with the enclave, where it has a substantial army presence. In 2014, Moscow supported a ['referendum'](#) in Moldova's southern Gagauzia region, in which 97.2% [voted](#) against EU integration, while 98.4% favoured joining the Russia-led Customs Union, [forerunner](#) of the EEU.

Moldova's political parties mirror the country's geopolitical divisions. The three pro-EU parties – the Liberal Democratic Party (PLDM), the Democratic Party (PDM), and the Liberal Party (PL) – are counterbalanced by the strongly pro-Russia Party of Socialists (PRSM) and the more pragmatic Party of Communists (PRCM).

Pro-European parties – weakened by internal rifts and weary voters

Moldova's pro-European parties have governed the country since civil [unrest](#) prompted a sudden government change in 2009. The three pro-EU parties formed the Alliance for European Integration (AEI), which struggled with [infigting](#), mutual corruption accusations, subsequent government collapses and snap elections, until it fell apart in 2013 over corruption allegations against Prime Minister Vlad Filat, succeeded by Iurie Leanca. After two months of talks following the November 2014 elections, in January 2015 the PLDM and the PDM [formed](#) a minority government without the PL. However, the Parliament rejected the new government led by Leanca, and on 18 February [approved](#) instead Chiril Gaburici, a 38-year old pro-European businessman, as prime minister of a similar coalition. The new government depends on support from the Communists, who, immediately after voting for the new coalition, [called](#) for the AA to be revised. It might buckle under the weight of the challenges awaiting it in 2015-16, including growing pressure from Moscow and the indirect [presidential election](#) in 2016, where a majority of 61 seats in Parliament is needed.

Liberal Democratic Party of Moldova (PLDM): a weakened coalition leader

Founded in 2007 by Vlad Filat, the pro-EU conservative PLDM campaigned under the slogan 'Forward, towards a European future!', but gathered only [20.2%](#) of the votes – down from 29.4% in the last elections in 2010 – reflecting voters' [fatigue](#) with Chisinau's numerous political crises. With [23 seats](#) in Parliament, the

party still dominates the pro-EU coalition, but is now only the second largest in Parliament after the pro-Russian Socialist Party. Filat [dismissed](#) the Socialists' overwhelming election results as a 'stage-directed spectacle ... the result of Russia's Vladimir Putin'. On 26 February, former Prime Minister Iurie Leanca [left](#) the PLDM to start a new political party. In March, two deputy foreign ministers, Iulian Groza and Valeriu Chiveri, resigned to join him. The PLDM is an observer member of the [European People's Party](#).

Democratic Party of Moldova (PDM): steadily gaining strength

Founded in 1997 as the Reform Party, the PDM identifies itself as a social democratic party and has a clear pro-European profile. Party leader Marian Lupu was a prominent member of ex-President Vladimir Voronin's Communist Party and served as the Parliament's speaker from 2005 to 2009, but left the party in 2009, stating that it was impossible to reform the PCRM from within. Shortly thereafter, he was offered the position of party leader in the centrist PDM, which had not then yet passed the [6%](#) electoral threshold. After the PDM [joined](#) the AEI coalition in 2010, Lupu again served as speaker until [2013](#). The PDM campaigned under the slogan 'Grow Moldova' and garnered 15.8% of the votes, or 19 seats in Parliament. The PDM has observer status in the [Party of European Socialists](#).

Liberal Party (PL): a comeback after the 2013 split

The Liberal Party was founded in 1993 as the Party of Reform. It served as a Christian Democratic electoral platform until 2005, when the party renamed itself, adopting a new programme and a centre-right profile. After the AEI collapsed in 2013, the Liberal Reformist Party (PLR) split from the PL, but did not pass the electoral threshold in the 2014 elections. Led by Mihai Ghimpu, PL gained [9.7%](#) of the votes – marginally less than before the split in 2010 – which translates into [13 seats](#) in Parliament. PL is an observer member of the [Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe Party](#).

Opposition benefits from frustration at pro-EU coalition

As opposed to many other former communist countries, Moldova has never gone through the process of ['lustration'](#) or screening of officials for Soviet-era ties or crimes. Most Soviet archives disappeared after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. In the 2014 elections, the two major traditionally pro-Russian opposition parties benefitted from voters' frustration at the pro-EU coalition's infighting and poor results in combating corruption, mixed with nostalgia for the stability associated with the Soviet era and the desire for closer [ties with Russia](#). On the eve of the election, the Supreme Court [banned](#) a third strongly pro-Russian party, [Patria](#), from participating in it.

Party of Socialists of the Republic of Moldova (PRSM): pro-Putin and the strongest party in Parliament

With [20.5%](#) of the votes and [25 seats](#) in Parliament, the PRSM, founded in 1997, benefitted from Patria's sudden ban from the election and is now Moldova's strongest party. In 2011, Igor Dodon from the PRCM joined the party and was elected chairman. The party has strong ties to Moscow and has campaigned in favour of joining the Moscow-led Customs Union/EEU. Dodon – pictured with Putin on the party's [website](#) – [stated](#) his party's demand for 'denunciation of the agreement on association with the EU' and for a national referendum on the country's foreign policy course, adding that the PRSM would press for early elections 'with the aid of all the legitimate methods'. In February 2014, Dodon [declared](#) his party's support for a referendum in the Gagauzian region. The PRSM is not affiliated to any European parties.

Party of Communists of the Republic of Moldova (PRCM): a pragmatic stance on both Russia and the EU

The PRCM came third with [17.5%](#) of the votes and [21 seats](#) in Parliament. It lost over half of its seats compared to 2010, partly to its pro-Russian competitor, the PRSM, and partly to the PDM, whose leader Lupu took many voters with him when he left the PRCM. In 1993, ex-President Vladimir Voronin (2001-09) refounded the Moldavian Communist Party as the PRCM, becoming party leader in 1994. The PRCM changed its previous pro-Kremlin stance while in power; relations with Russia cooled after Voronin [rejected](#) a 2003 proposal to grant autonomy to Transnistria. Now, the party [favours](#) Moldovan integration into the Customs Union and calls for a national referendum on the issue, but has a softer stance on the EU than the PRSM. The PRCM still uses the hammer and sickle as its symbol and is affiliated to the [European Left](#).

In its April 2014 resolution on [Eastern Partnership countries](#) and the destabilisation of eastern Ukraine, the European Parliament expressed 'particular concern over renewed instability in the separatist region of Transnistria in Moldova', pointed out that the Gagauzia referendum was 'illegal', and reiterated its 'full support for Moldova's territorial integrity'. In its [February 2014 resolution on Transnistria](#), the EP called on Moscow to 'immediately stop its support for the self-proclaimed authorities in Transnistria'.