



TRANSITIONS ONLINE: **The Road Not Taken**

by TOL

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As Moldovan parties wheel and deal over the country's future, neighbor Romania watches nervously, thinking of Schengen.

In the aftermath of the Soviet Union's collapse, the relationship between the newly independent Republic of Moldova and the formerly Communist Romania was dominated by the rhetoric of "the bridge of flowers over the river Prut" (the natural border between the two countries). Although the metaphor of brotherhood failed to be translated into geopolitical unity, the facts underlying it (a shared past, culture, religion, and most importantly, a common language, although Moldova begs to differ on the subject) made it inevitable that the fates of the two countries should remain entwined.

Grigore Pop-Eleches, a political scientist at Princeton University, studied how the two nations fared in their transition to democracy and found a number of similarities: in both cases, the rule of reformed ex-Communist parties in the early 1990s was replaced by center-right coalitions, which ended up being "undermined by deep economic crises and political infighting." However, while Romania succeeded in its endeavor of European integration and eventually became a member of the European Union in 2007, Moldova made a radical U-turn by electing the Communist Party to power in 2001.

Given those divergent paths, how should we take the recent statements by Romanian President Traian Basescu (in an interview with the Romanian newspaper *Romania Libera*) that "in the next 25 years Romania and Moldova could be reunited"?

With a pinch of salt, especially in light of Moldova's parliamentary elections last week. Moldova's political life has been mired in a governance deadlock over the past year and a half because of parliament's inability to elect the country's president. A three-fifths majority is needed, and repeated failures to elect a president can trigger new elections, like the one last week to replace the parliament that was dissolved in September.

So far, the vote count indicates that the parties forming the Alliance for European Integration under the lead of Prime Minister Vlad Filat gained 52 percent of the vote, followed by the Communist Party with 39 percent. This would mean that of the 101 seats in the parliament, the alliance would take 59, while the Communists will occupy the remaining 42, leaving no political force able to muster the 61 votes required to elect a president. Barring the formation of a new coalition between the Communists and one of the members of the alliance, the present elections will prove just as much of a harbinger of false hopes as the previous ones held in July 2009, when the Communists won 48 seats and the alliance 53.

Communist Party leader and former President Vladimir Voronin broached the possibility of a coalition with either the Liberal Democratic Party or the Democratic Party, but neither of their leaders, Filat and Dumitru Diacov, accepted the proposition. Such parties would make strange bedfellows: while the Communists still favor maintaining close ties with Russia and former Soviet states such as Belarus and Kazakhstan, the alliance is strongly pro-Western and favors Moldova's accession to the European Union.

Leaving aside the heartwarming prospect of helping one's brothers in need, why is Romania keeping such a close eye on the power struggle over the bridge of flowers? One answer may lie in German Chancellor Angela Merkel's October visit to Bucharest, during which she emphasized that Romania's bid to join the Schengen area in March 2011 depends largely on the country's ability to ensure the security of the EU's eastern border, which happens to be the one on the river Prut.

In this light, the border treaty signed by Romania and Moldova on 8 November becomes more than a long overdue beacon of a neighborly relationship, given that Moldova is the last of the countries sharing a border with Romania to sign such an agreement. The treaty covers technical issues pertaining to the 691-kilometer border, such as surveillance, maintenance, and using common infrastructure and water resources.

More importantly, in European Commission President Jose Manuel Barroso's words, the treaty is "an excellent example of the things that can be achieved when there is mutual interest and [...] proof that Moldova is getting closer to the EU." This may sound like music to the ears of the members of the Alliance for European Integration, which welcomed the treaty not only as an opportunity to bring Moldova's border security up to international standards but also as a way of countering an argument frequently used by the Communist Party to justify its anti-Romania stance. "By signing this treaty, we discourage the obsessive allegations of some political circles in Moldova concerning 'an imaginary irredentist agenda of Romania,'" Romanian Foreign Minister Teodor Baconschi said in a joint statement with Filat.

Yet concerns over a too-close relationship with Romania do exist in Moldova. And if, after a number of steps toward deeper integration into Europe, the Moldovan tide turns again toward the East, that could jeopardize Romania's accession to the Schengen area.

On the other hand, a referendum held two months ago to determine whether the president should be elected by direct vote failed as a result of low turnout, which shows that, ultimately, Moldovans are the masters of their own fate.