THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA WAS ONCE CONSIDERED THE MOST SUCCESSFUL test case of the European Union’s European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP).\(^1\) The ENP is intended for building security and prosperity in the European neighborhood and for cooperation on areas such as democracy, rule of law, and social cohesion between the EU and its partner countries.\(^2\) Today, it has become increasingly clear that the ENP is failing in Moldova through three key channels: failing to reform the judicial system, weakening democratic governance, and diminishing pro-EU sentiment in the country. The EU must reckon with this failure and find better means to achieve meaningful change in its near abroad.

**Case 1: Reform of the Judicial System**

A key reform Moldova pledged to implement under the Association Agenda between Moldova and the EU was reform of the judicial system.\(^3\) This Association Agenda was developed June 26, 2014, to prepare for the Association Agreement that would further integrate Moldova and the EU.\(^4\) Funding for the justice reform project would be granted, were sufficient progress to be made.\(^5\)

The lack of progress on the justice reforms has since been questioned, and the EU suspended one payment to Moldova in 2015, and another in 2017.\(^6\) Already in 2015, EU ambassador to Moldova Pirkka Tapiola highlighted the Moldovan government’s evident lack of motivation in implementing reforms.\(^7\)

This is not surprising given that Moldova suffers from a high level of corruption and state capture, where politically connected actors take a leading role in policymaking that benefits them.\(^8\) Worryingly, the Moldovan government has not responded to the suspension of payments by continuing with reforms, while insisting that progress had been made.\(^9\)

**Case 2: Undemocratic Changes to the Electoral System**

During this same period, structural changes in Moldova have weakened democratic governance. In July 2017, the Moldovan government replaced the proportional electoral system for a mixed one. The Moldovan opposition was staunchly against the reform.\(^10\)
The Venice Commission and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe’s Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (OSCE/ODIHR) voiced concerns regarding these changes. In a joint statement, they criticized the process by which the bill had been debated. They said it had not included enough public debate, with little input from civil society, that the electoral reforms lacked support from other parties, and that the new system could increase corruption. The EU concurred with the statement and advised against the reform. The government of Moldova disregarded this advice and implemented the changes.

Case 3: Diminishing Pro-EU Sentiment

Despite the ruling Democratic Party’s nominal pro-EU orientation, support for the EU has declined. The share of Moldovans who favored EU accession declined from 72 to 40 percent between 2007 and 2015. In March 2017, 42 percent of those polled thought Moldova should join the EU over any other economic union.

Recent electoral results also show weakening support for candidates associated with pro-EU positions. Pro-Russian candidate Igor Dodon was elected president in 2016, defeating the pro-EU Maia Sandu, although there were accusations of election fraud. Polling ahead of the 2018 parliamentary elections shows this trend continuing. The pro-Russian Socialist Party led a recent poll published in March 2017, whereas the pro-EU Democratic Party currently in government only received 4 percent support. Though parliamentary elections will likely hinge on domestic policy issues such as corruption and unemployment that are cited as the most pressing issues, relations with the EU and Russia divide the Democrats and the Socialists, currently the country’s biggest parties.

Focus on Corruption

These cases demonstrate the EU’s failure to achieve its lofty goals in Moldova through the ENP. Stalled judicial reforms show that monetary incentives associated with the ENP have had little to no impact. The EU’s protests to changes to the electoral law prove even these softer forms of pressure ineffective. Meanwhile support for the EU in Moldova has declined.

The ENP has failed to address the core issue plaguing the Moldovan political system, corruption. The EU should emphasize addressing state capture by encouraging more inclusive, process-oriented policymaking. Rather than...
dictating specific policy goals, supporting more inclusive policymaking would both reduce corruption and support future reform efforts.\textsuperscript{20} Moldova hopes to one day become a member of the EU.\textsuperscript{21} However, promising eventual membership carries risks. Not keeping the promise or postponing it repeatedly can weaken support for the EU in Moldova. For the ENP to succeed in Moldova, the EU must orient its policy to tackle the core issue of corruption, while refraining from making unrealistic promises.

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Endnotes


Bad Neighbor? How the European Neighbourhood Policy Has Failed in Moldova


International Republican Institute, “Public Opinion Survey Residents of Moldova, 2017,” 42.

