

Session Report - 'Addressing Polarisation in the Eastern European Neighbourhood'

Case: Moldova

Date: Thursday 7 September 2023

Executive Summary

- A second country case of the 'Addressing Polarisation in the Eastern European Neighbourhood' took place, discussing Moldova.
- Participants described the lack of perspective as the main challenge for Moldova, more than polarization per se. This lack of perspective is a combination of growing poverty and a bad economic outlook, combined with a controversial EU accession process and a war close to the border, all together leading to an ever-growing diaspora.
- Participants disagreed on the level to which increased inclusive dialogue could provide solutions. Even though the majority claims it's important to keep engaging e.g. pro-Russian voices, others warn that we should accept a certain divided status quo in the Moldovan social contract - while upholding a pro-EU majority in Parliament.
- The popular 'neutral' stance is becoming harder and harder to uphold, but there is no popular support to join NATO nor other military alliances.
- The EU lost a lot of credibility in the past decade due to double standards, corruption with funding, everchanging accession processes. Instead of being a pragmatic political player that supports wherever its own interests are met, participants agreed the EU should be independent referee for rule of law and human rights - and e.g. firmly stop funding if rules are broken.
- A risk was identified that Moldovans are quite open to giving up freedoms for security. It is important to prevent abuse of that tendency, through awareness of the value of e.g. freedom of expression (and fighting disinformation) and strong counterbalancing of power.
- An uptake event of the conclusions of these two country case sessions will follow with EU policy makers.

Summary session

Goals

On 7 September 2023, the second country case of the 'Addressing Polarisation in the Eastern European Neighbourhood' trajectory took place. Its goals were to (1) pinpoint the impact the conflict in Ukraine has on polarization in the country, particularly relating to issues of democracy and rule of law, (2) analyze polarization dynamics in Moldova through the lens of the social contract and (3) identify areas of interest for mitigation of polarization for the international community.

Intro: the social contract & recap Georgia case

Just like the Georgia session, this discussion took place within the framework of the KPSRL thematic headline 'Towards Just Social Contracts'. This therefore concerns the roles and responsibilities within a political community, touching on topics like **levels of political participation and government legitimacy**.¹ The conflict in Ukraine influences the current Moldovan status quo and could impact social cohesion in the process of re-establishing a new equilibrium. The same premise was taken for the Georgia country case, of which the report can be found [here](#).

¹ Based on ongoing discussions, KPSRL describes the social contract as "The process by which people in positions of power (or challenging those) make promises to or agreements with society, raising expectations on the exercise of political authority. When these expectations are met, authority is considered to be legitimate, which builds consent and cooperation."

Contribution Inna Şupac

Inna is a fellow at the Academy of International Affairs (AIA-NRW) and former member of Parliament for the Party of Communists. She described a few trends based on independent polls:²

- Support for Moldova to join the EU was overwhelming in 2004, but has declined ever since, currently reaching under 50%. The war in Ukraine did solidify support and at least reduced those strongly against it. It is widely seen as more preferable than a Eurasian multilateral collaboration.
- Neutrality is a popular stance, which has also slightly decreased since the war in Ukraine. However, there's still strong opposition against NATO accession with max. 30% support.
- Regarding Russia, Moldovans are divided 50/50 on whether it should be seen as a threat.

Inna warns of 'labels' for seeing the left as pro-EU and the right as pro-Russia, as this is more nuanced and **political stances are complex and go beyond ethnicities**. Moldovans are pragmatic when it comes to for example negotiating gas prices with Putin, but the EU also lost credibility due to e.g. its double standards, corruption with funding, everchanging accession processes. **She therefore calls for an inclusive dialogue platform**, where this direction towards the EU is discussed with the more conservative parts of the population.

Dorin Chirtoacă

Dorin is the leader of the Liberal Party and ex-mayor Chişinău. In response to Inna, he states that unfortunately, there has been enough talking for 20 years without consensus. One should probably accept that part of the population remains pro-Russian, even after the recent aggressions. **The Moldovan social contract will remain divided in that status quo, where the importance for a path towards stability and economic prospects lies in upholding a pro-EU majority in Parliament.**

Upholding that majority is difficult enough given the terrible economic developments. This provides a Catch-22, as economic development is strongly dependent on EU accession. **Young people flee the country while the EU has lost part of its credibility** - even within the EU there is no clear consensus and significant Euroscepticism.

Dorin describes a similar 'limbo situation' in terms of hard security. **The popular 'neutrality stance' is naïve in Dorin's eyes, with a war at 100 km distance from Moldova's borders.** Ukraine is basically defending Moldova while there is no strong support to join NATO for stability.

Plenary discussion

The challenge: polarization or lack of perspective?

Picking up where Dorin and Inna left, the audience debated whether polarization - the theme of this session - is the right phrasing for the challenges in Moldova. **Polarization is present, but a wider phenomenon and a symptom of the contextual issues in Moldova regarding a lack of (economic) perspective, which links to growing poverty, an ever-growing diaspora and EU hypocrisy.** People don't see a long term vision for themselves or their children.

The Baltic states seemed to have found their way out of this spiral, but other former USSR countries are struggling with providing that perspective. **The war in Ukraine is possibly a new pivotal moment** to spin out of this negative cycle by making tough choices, but it could also lead to further collapse.

² It should be noted that these public opinion polls only cover inhabitants of Moldova proper, not diaspora nor Transnistria.

Finding a shared narrative

In response to Dorin's statement that Moldova will stay divided, several participants noted that **it is still key to keep including less heard or divergent voices in discussions on rule of law and security**, such as pro-Russian parts, the Orthodox Church or areas with minorities like Gagauzia. The idea of a Minister of Interethnic Relations was even mentioned.

However, all agreed that finding a shared narrative is not easy. This is further deteriorated by disinformation from Russia, especially prominent in Transnistria. About 20% of the Moldovans believe Russia is the biggest trade and development partner, while it is neither. The growing unrest around increasing poverty and inflation feed into that negative narrative, presenting collaboration with Russia as the solution.

Political reform and rule of law

In the discussion participants further discussed the controversial role the EU played. Instead of being a pragmatic political player that supports wherever its own interests are met, all agreed **the EU should instead play the role of an independent referee**. This especially means being firm and consistent on questions of rule of law and human rights and to for example stop funding if rules are broken. This is an important basis that supports conditions to restore trust in the currently collapsed political party system and to attract new blood.

In a similar vein, research showed that Moldovans seem quite easily prepared to give up freedom for security. Such **willingness to give up freedom for security can be abused**, which demands awareness on the one hand (and fighting disinformation) and strong counterbalancing of power on the other.

Take aways:

- A new approach to developing a collective narrative is needed to address issues of polarization in Moldova. Dialogue and consensus is the only way to move forward but due to a historical lack of consensus new methods and pathways will have to be explored to make any progress on this front.
- The current government can contribute by being more inclusive, for instance by acknowledging the divides in society, but also by practically ensuring media rights and freedoms.
- The EU must act principally and not only to serve its own interests. It should not turn a blind eye to non-democratic actors and behaviors but act as an arbiter for good governance. This is also in its own long-term interest.
- Providing Moldovans with perspective, a more prosperous vision for the future will be key to their constructive political engagement, this starts with raising the standard of living (and showing how democracy can provide economically).

Follow-up

- The organizers (KPSRL and researcher Amy Eaglestone) will take the conclusions from the Georgia and Moldova country case sessions into a concluding session with EU policymakers, ideally in the fall of 2023. Participants of the country case sessions will be updated on the outcomes.