

Diaspora Lobbying European Future for the Republic of Moldova.

Case Study: Participation of Moldovan Diaspora in the Last Presidential Elections

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Abstract

This article presents an account of the role of the Moldovan Diaspora in the European integration process of the Republic of Moldova. The main focus of this research is on Moldovan Diaspora participation in the presidential elections. The young Moldovan Diaspora is becoming more and more an important factor for the political process of their homeland country, having a positive effect on voter turnout and in supporting the pro- European aspirations of the Republic of Moldova. Diaspora had an important contribution to the last presidential elections held in 13th November 2016, by their mobilization of the Moldovan Diaspora in Western and European countries by showing their high interest for continuing the Europeanization process for their country.

Key-words: *Diaspora, Republic of Moldova, Europeanization, development, European integration, political system, democracy, migration, transnational actors, countries of origin, countries of destination.*

Theoretical Framework

Diaspora communities are already being recognized at international level as important actors of the international relations and factors of influence of the political agenda of the states, by using their connection with the homeland and receiving country but also by their power of lobbying between them. This role is determined by their active participation within civil society communities, having diverse opportunities for influencing the domestic and foreign policy of the both countries. In many cases Diasporas can have greater impact and interact not only on bilateral level with the two countries but also with many other countries and international actors as international organizations, country partners and donor community. This fact strengthens their voice and power of influence in the foreign policy agenda of the countries and their interaction with other international actors.

The success of diaspora communities in reaching their goals are usually interconnected with their close relations and stable contacts with their homeland and residing country. Other factors of success are determined by their level of cooperation, the size and symphony of the activities and actions they can develop together with the Governments in residing and homeland states, also with the civil society actors and international donors and organizations.

Yossi Shain and Barth [1], are considering that diaspora can influence on their homeland foreign policy, mostly by their engagement with the communities from their homeland. This engagement is determined by many factors, as the level of cooperation between state and diaspora, the legal framework that is affecting their life and activities, participation in elections and voting process, and other conditions that can have a greater impact on this engagement.

One of the main tool for diaspora engagement in their homeland politics is considered to be their participation in elections process. This is a traditional form of granting them with possibilities to manifest their political views and to influence the foreign policy agenda of their homeland country. In this sense, many states are trying to reach their nationals leaving abroad and ask their support for the development of their countries.

Due to the increasing migration flows and mobility of the world population, the voting rights of the citizens are crossing the ordinary concepts of citizenship challenging at the same time the basic theoretical concepts we had before.

Introduction

During the last year's Republic of Moldova is facing serious challenges, political instability, corruption and lack of political will that determined the slowdown in economic growth and development. During the transition process of the country to a democratic and European state, it falls down in credibility and lacks in true changes of the governance system, in becoming more transparent, democratic and oriented for the welfare of its citizens. Comparing Republic of Moldova with the club of the former Soviet Baltic republics, that today became true European countries with a well-functioning state institution and the living standards of the citizens that grow significantly, here in Moldova we see that many reforms in certain sectors have failed and the integration into European family is far from coming true.

From the first period of its independence, the large flows of migration generated into small communities of our citizens living abroad, that later started to form the Moldovan Diaspora. Today, according to estimations are about one million Moldova citizens who are working aboard, it is almost 25 percent of its entire population, the current number of population is estimated to 3,5 million. The major destination countries for migrants from Moldova are CIS and EU countries (Italy, Russia, Ukraine, Romania, Portugal, Spain, Turkey, Israel, Great Britain, and Greece) [2].

The Government of the Republic of Moldova aims to foster prosperity for Moldovans living both in and outside the country, by adapting its national legislation and public policies in order to strengthen the ties with its diaspora communities and citizens living abroad, understanding the fact that this communities are increasing to have an impact on country's future and general wellbeing of its citizens.

According to the Decree nr.1322 of the Moldovan Government; diaspora” - is defined as persons originating from Moldova and residing abroad who are united by their ethnicity, roots and common ancestors from the Republic of Moldova and who realize their origin, but given various circumstances happen to be outside of the historical homeland and by that have become representatives of Moldovan

[3]. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) defines Diaspora as members of ethnic and national communities who have left but maintain links with their homelands [4].

In order to fulfill the commitments taken by our country within the Association Agreement with EU, the Moldovan Government took some serious measures in the field of migration and mobility of our citizens.

One of the commitments is to continue the comprehensive, migrant centered approach towards mobility and migration with a focus on circular migration schemes, protection of Moldovan legal migrants in the EU MS, promotion of Moldovan Diaspora and development of migration management at the local level.

In this sense, the National Strategy "Diaspora 2025", was adopted by the Government on 26 February 2016, together with an action plan for 2016-2018 for its enforcement. The strategy's main objective is development of sustainable and comprehensive framework for cooperation between public institutions and the Diaspora. The draft document of the Strategy passed through consultations with Moldovan Diaspora, civil society, scientists, international organizations, donors and country partners [5].

The strategy is having the following goals: 1. Formation and development of a strategic and operational framework on the Diaspora, Migration and Development. 2. Ensuring compliance with fundamental rights and the strengthening of trust. 3. Mobilization, development and recognition of the human potential of the Diaspora. 4. Direct participation of the Diaspora in the sustainable economic development of the Republic of Moldova.

Diaspora Communities in Moldova's Foreign Policy

The Government has its constitutional obligations for engaging with our citizens living or working abroad and ensuring the respect of their rights to vote, to be elected as well as the right for dual citizenship.

In this sense for the sake of our citizens living abroad and for ensuring them with the needed connection with their homeland state, Moldova oriented its foreign policy and international cooperation strategy for having closer relations with states where its citizens are living. Main actions were oriented towards establishing stronger economic and social links, by signing important agreements for granting recognition of their stay in those countries, but also to facilitate their daily activities, as recognition of studies and diplomas, ensuring the basic social assistance and medical care for our citizens who are living in the respective states. This legal framework and diverse policy documents have therefore been developed in order to facilitate a mutually beneficial relationship between Moldova and its Diaspora.

Since the political alliance of pro-EU parties started to promote the European future for the country also taking into account the results of the last parliamentary (2014) and presidential elections (2016), the Moldovan diaspora engagement grow considerable and continues to have a great influence from abroad on the political and foreign agenda of their homeland country.

Exploiting existing opportunities in the context of the Mobility Partnership Moldova - European Union of attracting financial resources and EU experience in promoting policies RM migration and asylum, in particular promoting the diversification of the range of projects implemented in the framework of the Mobility Partnership EU - Moldova, with particular emphasis on projects in the field of legal migration and migration and development.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs and European Integration of the Republic of Moldova (MFAEI) is the main institution at national level that formulates, implements the foreign policy of the country. Thus, MFAEI is also responsible for safeguarding our citizens and Diaspora communities abroad the country, providing them with consular services and in ensuring them with security and political support from their homeland. The MFAEI has an important role in State & Diaspora relationship by providing our citizens abroad with main consular services, through our consular missions. Together with IOM Mission in Moldova was initiated a program for creating a module that gives the possibility of on-line registration for our citizens abroad in order to receive consular services [2]. Through consular services our citizens abroad receive basic administrative assistance and protection of their interests in residing countries. In many countries the Consular service is providing the needed support for the activities of Diaspora associations of Moldovan's residing abroad, keeping an active dialog and between the citizens and their homeland country.

Consular services provided by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for our citizens residing abroad need to be diversified and offer more opportunities for consolidating their link with the political and social life of the homeland. Beside ordinary services of documentation they should provide assets for organizing cultural events, help migrants to integrate in the destination countries, facilitate the educational process for the second generation of the diaspora members, provide and share newsletter and information from the homeland, provide premises for meeting and gatherings and many more diversified services that can build trust and bridges between citizens from abroad and their homeland.

Participation of Moldovan Diaspora in elections and Voting preferences

Many transition countries had pass through democratic reform and transition period to a market economy, including the Republic of Moldova, which faced after 1990's large flows of migration. Later on, the young diaspora communities started to play an active role in their country political agenda and the foreign policy goals.

One of the main traditional connections between this communities and their homeland is the elections process when they can directly decide on the future of their origin country. The current legislation gives the opportunity for Moldovan citizens residing abroad to vote in parliamentary and presidential elections held in the Republic of Moldova.

External voting for Moldova was at the same time was a threat and an opportunity to change its foreign policy and development course towards EU. This situation is due to the fact that Moldovan migrants were separated between Russia, former CIS countries, seeking to have a close ties with them and other part which went to countries from the West, mainly EU member states, determining the future pro-

European agenda of the country. In this sense promoting external voting is controversial because of totally opposite political views of Moldovan Diaspora in East and West.

The vote from the diaspora communities has been a subject of much scrutiny for the last years in Moldovan society. The current electoral system in Moldova is limiting the possibility of the external voting process by not developing new means and possibilities of voting, the only option for external vote is personal voting at diplomatic mission or at additional opened voting stations in the area covered by the diplomatic missions. There are no other options available today, as other countries have implemented voting by using e-voting, postal voting, fax and email voting, or any other options.

Before 2010, only 34 Electoral Bureaus have functioned outside of the Republic of Moldova, allowing for just about 16,000 voters (1.09% of the total number of voters) to vote in elections. In the early parliamentary elections held on November 28th, 2010, for the first time the number of overseas Electoral Bureaus was increased up to 84. More than 64,000 emigrated Moldovans voted outside of the country, representing 3.70% of the total number of voters. More than 84% of the votes expressed for the three parties forming later the Governance of European-oriented Alliance for European Integration [6]. The results indicate that diaspora expressed their total support for the pro-EU parties, together with the great potential of Diaspora to contribute in the final results of the further elections, having its decisive role in determining the foreign policy vector of the country.

The issue of external voting system is one of the most important problems to be solved in due time. The electoral system is not prepared to create the framework for the new created situation where a high number of voters are outside of their homeland.

For the Parliamentary elections in 2014, was introduced online pre-registration for voting in diplomatic missions. This was mainly done in order to have a clear image of how many additional voting stations were needed to be opened besides voting stations opened traditionally within the diplomatic missions.

Since then, Moldovans living abroad showed their disappointment with the pro-european parties and the increasing level of corruption in the country, but mostly after the crisis around the 1 billion US dollars theft from three national banks from Moldova (*Banca de Economii, Banca Sociala and Unibank*), but also related to the case of the former Prime Minister, leader of Liberal Democratic Party, Mr. Vlad Filat, who has been sentenced to nine years in jail for corruption charges [7]. All above mentioned factors contributed to the disengagement of Moldovan Diaspora and was seen in the low interest for registering to participate at the first tour of the presidential elections held on 30 October 2016, only 3570 peoples being registered. At the same time, the foreign participation in presidential elections was impressive, especially during the second round, held on 13 November 2016. For the presidential elections held in 2016 were organized in two rounds 1st on the 30th October and 2nd on the 13th November, Moldovans for the first time during last 16 years had the opportunity to express directly their vote for the future President of the country. Thus, the main battle was between two candidates the pro-European Ms. Maia Sandu and the pro-Russian Mr. Igor Dodon. The elections were won by Mr. Dodon by accumulating 55 % of votes. For the presidential elections Moldovan Diaspora expressed their choice for the Ms. Maia

Sandu, a common candidate of the opposition forces united against the governing parties. According to the results presented by the Central Electoral Commission, she accumulated the majority of votes from Diaspora 86% of votes, compared with 13,8 % of votes for Mr. Igor Dodon.

According to the results announced by the Central Electoral Commission after processing 100% of reports, Mr. Igor Dodon obtained 13,8 % of diaspora votes. Ms. Maia Sandu was absolute in countries like Great Britain, with an average of 97,88% from the votes expressed by the Moldovan citizens, France (94,83%), Germany (94,5%), Spain (91,33%), Italy (90,89%), Portugal (86,08%), Greece (78,84%), Israel (73,92%), USA (93,91%) and Canada (88,01%). The highest percentage, of 98,47%, Igor Dodon obtained in Kursk, in the Russian Federation. On the other side, Maia Sandu registered the most convincing victory at the polling station placed within the Consulate of the Republic of Moldova in Bucharest, where she accumulated 98,19% of votes [7].

The new elected President, Mr. Igor Dodon, the leader of the Socialist Party, which is now in opposition, was not supported by Moldovan Diaspora, mostly by the communities from the western countries. After taking his role as President he started advocating for closer ties for the Republic of Moldova with Russian Federation, arguing that European integration path is not the right choice for the future of the country.

In Moldova the Parliament and the Government are having the main political power, the President is playing a lower role, at the same time he can play a significant role in the foreign policy of the country.

At the same time this rhetoric and political actions of the Moldovan President had a great impact on Moldovan Diaspora by mobilizing them to secure the European future of their homeland country. Several campaigns were already launched in order to unite their efforts and stop the anti-European rhetoric and to show the real benefits of Moldova approximation to EU.

Many social campaigns were launched during 1st and 2nd round of presidential elections organized by Diaspora: „Adopt a Vote” [8] – Moldovan Diaspora Mobilization for supporting the Moldovan citizens from abroad who were unable to reach the polling station by themselves, including students and people who have their residence far from this stations. This campaign aims were also to mobilize all the Moldovan society in supporting the pro-EU candidate. The campaign managed to gather over 25 thousand of members of Moldovan Diaspora who shared rides and accommodation opportunities.

Another campaign was: „*Dodon is not my President*”, this slogans was used in the social media and public banners for showing disagreement with the Mr. Dodon decision to renegotiate the Association Agreement of Moldova with EU.

For the 2nd round of presidential elections, Moldovans from abroad wrote a common petition addressed to the Government asking to be opened more voting stations. But authorities refused to adjust the number of polling stations. This resulted in many scandals organized in within the polling stations were the ballots ended and many Moldovan citizens did not have the opportunity to vote. After the results were announced in public, the pro-European Diaspora communities started to initiate some court cases against the outcome of the elections.

The Constitutional Court of the Republic of Moldova noted that the legal framework of Moldova permits expatriate voting. However, this voting procedure cannot take place under any conditions, but it has to comply with legal provisions. The Court recalled that by its Decision no. 11 of 18 November 2014 on the inadmissibility of the complaint on the control of constitutionality of the Government Decision no. 872 of 20 October 2014 „*On the organization of polling stations abroad*,” the Court mentioned that establishing the number of polling stations abroad is an issue related to the competence of authorities empowered to organize and conduct elections, due to the fact that these bodies have a better understanding in appreciating the possibilities and practical needs in the process of organizing the expatriate vote. The Court noted that, surprisingly, the failure by Central Electoral Commission to resolve this complaint has been challenged in the court of law by only 133 persons [9].

The Court noted that the electoral candidate Maia Sandu failed to appeal the Government Decision, nor the Decision of Central Electoral Commission on the organization of polling stations abroad, and due to this fact this complaint is considered late. Moreover, Mrs. Sandu had failed to appeal the results of the first round of elections which took place under the same conditions as the second round [9].

Some political analysts are arguing that the results could have been different if the elections had been better organized, with more polling stations and more ballots for the diaspora. Even though 138,281 expatriates voted in the runoff – double the turnout in the first round – the figure indicates that only roughly a fourth of adult Moldovans living abroad voted [10].

According to the last surveys the majority of population is in favor of the European integration process but due to the disappointment in the political elite of the pro-EU parties and the banking scandal from the last year related to the stolen 1 billion USD, an eighth of the country’s economic output, marked the dramatic fall of trust in European path for the country with the current corrupt political elite.

Conclusions. Moldova continues to face an increase in the migration level of its citizens and brain drain of its high skilled professionals and youth to other countries, mostly to the European and high developed countries. The Moldovan Government is still unable to keep its heritage, the intellectual and human capital, to create an attractive and positive environment for keeping them here at home and to use their great potential for the development of the country.

External voting needs to be adapted to the current realities and needs in order to offer the possibility of diaspora communities to express their constitutional right to vote. The Republic of Moldova needs electoral arrangements for creating new voting opportunities for the Moldovan Diaspora, including e-voting possibility or the e-mail voting, as many of our citizens from abroad are having difficulties in reaching the diplomatic mission premises. There are not enough additional opened voting stations, the experience of previous election processes shows that they can’t deal with the huge number of citizens in many of the European capitals where our citizens live and work. By making this changes and adjustments to the election law, a higher rate of diaspora participation in elections will be ensured.

Several members of Moldovan Diaspora are keeping their hope to return back home in their homeland country, but only with the condition to have here a stable Government and trustworthy politicians, who

are working for the benefit of the country and its citizens not for their own political agenda. Diaspora has its hopes in that soon or later Moldova will have trustworthy President, Parliament and Government and things will start to be better here in Moldova.

The results of the presidential elections in Moldova and the way it was organized abroad and managed by the Government not only had a mobilizing effect on Diaspora, but it is still a motivation for their active engagement in their homeland political and foreign agenda. Thus, many of social campaigns launched during the election campaign are still working and preparing a platform for interaction between diaspora associations from different European countries. The members of the social group, adopt a "Vote" are organizing new meetings for discussing how to keep Moldova on the EU track, how to promote the needed reforms, to fight against corruption and overall to contribute to the further development of their homeland country.

In the next Parliamentary elections which are planned to be organized after the next two years, the Diaspora will have a greater contribution because they have increased their mobilization and participation in elections. Regarding their political choice it is already obvious, that they are determined to strongly support a pro-European party.

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