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## **Rogozin non grata**



We are witnessing yet another flare-up in relations between Russia and Moldova: Russian Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Rogozin (who is in charge of cooperation with Moldova in fact) has been declared persona non grata by Chisinau. The question is not even why that has happened but whether this strife may lead to other, more serious consequences.

### **Chisinau goes all in**

The Venice Commission of the Council of Europe and the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights have taken a [strong stance against a proposed electoral law](#) in Moldova. The European Union has taken an unprecedented step to [“freeze” the allocation of a financial package of 100 million Euros](#) until the domestic situation is clarified. Nevertheless, the ruling Democratic Party of Moldova and the Party of Socialists of the Republic of Moldova passed these electoral amendments in parliament on July 20, changing the electoral system from a proportional one to a mixed one. Moreover, the entire process was literally completed within just a few minutes, without any serious parliamentary debate. President Igor Dodon [approved the law](#) a few hours later.

The head of the European People’s Party Joseph Daul called it "a disgrace that the majority of the Moldovan

parliament chose authoritarianism over democracy, corruption over transparency, and chaos over rule of law for its citizens today". The leader of the largest party in the European Parliament appealed to the European Commission to [stop financing Moldova](#) and even to revise the association agreement between Moldova and the EU. In an official statement, the US Embassy also [expressed dismay](#) over the changes. The US Embassy used to refer to dialogue with the Moldovan authorities as "strategic". Prime Minister of Romania Mihai Tudose, who was paying a visit to Chisinau at the time, was the only external partner to have [supported the amendments](#) to the electoral code.

In addition to disapproval from abroad, the decision of the Moldovan authorities prompted protests by opposition parties including a [rally of several thousand people](#). Despite the fact that the protests were modest in scale, they caused serious concerns amongst the power elite as evidenced by the propaganda [campaign against Andrei Năstase](#), the leader of the protests, conducted primarily via major Moldovan TV channels.

The Democratic Party of Moldova faces threats of discontinued external financing, a political boycott by the European Union and subsequent political destabilization in the country. Therefore, as with the diplomatic note on the inappropriate treatment of Moldovan officials in Russia and the [expulsion of five Russian diplomats from Chisinau](#), the Moldovan authorities have decided to continue to elaborate on the topic of the "Russian threat" in order to reshape the information agenda.

There was a fine occasion for it, too– the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Russian peace-keeping operation in the Dniester– to be celebrated on July 29 in Tiraspol with the participation of Dmitry Rogozin. From the point of view of political science, the situation was convenient for two reasons: To begin with, there is a popular point of view both in Moldova and the West according to which the Russian military presence and peace-keeping mission in Moldova serves to consolidate the Transnistrian "separatist regime". Secondly, many citizens with right-wing views would like to see Rogozin himself "punished" for his earlier critical statements concerning Moldova and its pro-European aspirations.

The fact that Rogozin would pour oil on the flames in response to every move became clear after Vlad Plahotniuc, the head of the Democratic Party of Moldova, who had previously avoided tackling the Transnistrian issue, suddenly took the floor during the meeting of the Council of the Socialist International in New York on July 11. During his speech, he called for the withdrawal of Russian troops and weapons from Transnistria and the replacement of Russian peacekeepers with an international civilian mission. He also [noted](#) that "as long as irredentism is alive, as long as expansionist ideology is gathering pace, local conflicts may erupt at any moment". Rogozin reacted quite sharply in a [Facebook post](#): "Who knows why the only billionaire in this poor country is calling for a new war in the Dniester?"

As a result, the Moldovan government banned a Russian delegation from flying to Chisinau and Tiraspol on board aircraft of the Air Force of the Russian Federation on July 19, the day prior to the adoption of the amendments to the law on the electoral system. Moreover, the full text of the Moldovan diplomatic note pertaining to the issue was [published](#) in the press. Moldova's Parliament adopted a special declaration which reproduced the content of Vlad Plahotniuc's [speech](#), delivered at the meeting of the Council of the Socialist International on July 21, on the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the signing of agreement on The principles of Peaceful Settlement of the Armed Conflict in the Transnistrian Region of the Republic of Moldova. While signing the declaration, Speaker of the Moldovan Parliament Andrian Candu commented: "Mr Rogozin is sending us greetings on Twitter saying that we should prepare for war. Let me [respond](#): We are in fact a peaceful nation and we know how to defend our interests". When Rogozin attempted to fly to Chisinau as a passenger on board an S7 airline flight on July 28, the plane was [denied access to Romanian air space](#). Bucharest referred to the fact that a person sanctioned by the EU was on board the plane. However, it should be noted that none of Rogozin's earlier flights over the territory of Romania had prompted objections from its government. It is clear that the Democratic Party of Moldova was able to elicit support from the ruling Romanian Social Democratic Party with which it enjoys close political ties.

The Democratic Party of Moldova was seemingly attempting to follow the global trend of imposing anti-Russian sanctions, the contemporary phase of which was initiated by the US Congress. It is no coincidence that Rogozin was declared persona non grata on the day that Trump [signed the law on sanctions against Russia](#).

## Strategic uncertainty

From a tactical point of view, the Democratic Party of Moldova obviously benefits from such a policy. It has managed to favorably [shift the information agenda](#) since attention both in the country and abroad has focused on the plot with Rogozin instead of the changes made to the electoral system or the protests against them. Still, strategically, the ruling party in Moldova could lose out if it does not hold an early parliamentary election which brings about the desired result.

To begin with, the ruling parliamentary majority in Moldova is increasingly discrediting itself in the eyes of those European and American circles which are not inclined to turn a blind eye to anti-democratic initiatives or encourage such use of geopolitical plots by the Moldovan authorities for domestic purposes for fear of possible destabilization in the country. On the other hand, Bucharest and Kiev, increasingly supportive of Chisinau, can hardly provide sufficient support in the long run.

Hence, should the Democratic Party of Moldova relinquish power, it can hardly expect to receive support from the West. Chisinau would be well advised to forget about Brussels' generosity even in the context of the formally adopted package of macro-financial assistance worth 100 million Euros. Since Igor Dodon and the Party of Socialists of the Republic of Moldova took the side of the Democratic Party of Moldova with respect to the issue of the electoral system reform, it will be extremely difficult to present the latter as a combatant against the Russia's fifth column, as exemplified by Dodon himself.

Secondly, if the ruling parliamentary majority in Moldova wants to up the ante, it will either have to maintain fever pitch using new anti-Russian plots or hold an early parliamentary election as soon as possible in order to maintain support within the country. The potential of anti-Kremlin actions will exhaust itself sooner or later: Moscow is not going to withdraw its troops while relations with the West are poised to deteriorate further. Incidentally, an early parliamentary election is the most likely outcome. The Party of Socialists and the Democratic Party may well still win, despite the general instability in domestic and international affairs.

As for Russia, it is in a difficult situation. The policy of normalization of relations between Russia and Moldova, in particular between Putin and Dodon, has reached an impasse. On the other hand, new sanctions against Moldova will have zero effect and will serve to strengthen the position of the Democratic Party of Moldova. Hence, Moscow (and the West, to a large extent) can simply wait and see what the twists and turns of Moldovan politics produce.

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