

Would-Be Moldova Kingmaker Flees to Russia Ahead of Parliamentary Elections

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Renato Usatii

CHISINAU — A would-be kingmaker in elections in Moldova, millionaire dark horse candidate Renato Usatii, said Friday that he had fled to Russia fearing arrest after his party was excluded from the vote in a move likely to embolden pro-European rivals.

Russia, which backs a breakaway territory on Moldova's eastern border with Ukraine, criticized the expulsion of Usatii's party by a court on grounds of electoral violations.

Moldova, a nation of 3.5 million on the southwestern rim of the former Soviet Union, faces a crucial choice in the Nov. 30 parliamentary election, deciding between closer ties with Europe or a return to the orbit of its former master Russia.

February's toppling by mass protests of a pro-Russian Ukrainian president, who fled to Russia, stirred tensions between Moscow and the pro-Western Ukrainian leaders who replaced him. Within two months, Russia had annexed Ukraine's Crimean peninsula and a pro-Russian rebellion broke out in the ex-Soviet country's eastern territories.

Usatii, 36, who has a business in Russia, was little known in his native Moldova before becoming the head of a party called Patria (Motherland) in October.

On Thursday, a court ruled to bar Patria from the polls, citing a number of violations, including receipt of 8,156,000 Moldovan lei (\$453,000) from abroad to help fund its campaign.

Opinion polls indicated Usatii's party could have received between 8 and 14 percent in the election thanks to the support of those disenchanted with the ruling centre-right coalition and deep nostalgia for Soviet-era stability.

The Communist Party, which seeks to revise Moldova's association agreement with the European Union and foster partnership with Russia, is seen as a frontrunner at 24 percent.

The pro-Moscow Socialist Party, which is harshly anti-EU and favors Moldova's membership in a Russia-led Customs Union, is forecast to garner 6 to 8 percent in the polls.

Usatii, who has bankrolled concerts by Russian showbiz celebrities in Moldova, was widely expected to become part of a new ruling coalition in the country's next parliament.

Such an alliance would have shattered the pro-Western aspirations of Moldova's current leadership and created a pro-Moscow ally between EU and NATO member Romania and Ukraine.

Moldova still relies heavily on energy supplies from Russia, although it has moved closer to Europe.

Before Patria was knocked out of the race, opinion polls gave the three pro-European parties between 38 and 43 percent in the future parliament.

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