



Exterior of the Parliament of the Republic of Moldova. Editorial credit: Inspired By Maps / Shutterstock.com

Landslide Victory for Reformists in Moldova

By David Smith

On July 11th, Moldovans went to the polls and voted decisively for change. President Maia Sandu's Party of Action and Solidarity (PAS) won a landslide victory over their pro-Russian rival, the Communist and Socialist Block. PAS netted 63 seats in the nation's 101 seat Parliament, giving them the largest single-party governing majority since 2005.¹ While many commentators abroad frame the election results in terms of "East vs. West" geopolitical implications, the election turned on a very different issue. Sunday's vote demonstrated that in a nation torn between kleptocracy and the rule of law, the citizens of Moldova overwhelmingly voted for a future based on the rule of law.

Origins of an Election—Political and Constitutional Crisis

In June 2019, the oligarch Vladimir Plahotniuc fled Moldova on a private plane after a brief attempt to hold on to his seat in parliament following his loss in the February 2019 parliamentary elections. Prior to that election, Plahotniuc had effectively captured the state, wielding money, blackmail, and other threats to control the legislature, judiciary, and government. While Mr. Plahotniuc was nominally a "pro-European" figure politically, Moldovan citizens saw him differently. They understood that Plahotniuc's main priority was to use

the state to enrich himself and his inner circle. His use of state power for personal gain was particularly noteworthy in the “Theft of the Billion” in 2014, where businessman Ilan Shor, Mr. Plahotniuc, and other shadowy figures orchestrated the theft of one billion dollars from three of Moldova’s banks.

In June 2019, a coalition of last resort formed between Maia Sandu’s PAS party and President Igor Dodon’s Socialist Party, as well as smaller Parliamentary factions. This coalition ousted Plahotniuc’s Democratic Party from power and ruled for six months with Maia Sandu as prime minister. This fragile coalition collapsed when the Socialists refused Prime Minister Sandu’s attempt to install an anti-corruption General Prosecutor. Mr. Dodon, as President, then installed a “technocratic” government led by one of his chief advisors, Ion Chicu, as prime minister.

The Chicu government’s tenure through the pandemic and resulting economic crisis proved to be catastrophic. Moldova was the only country in the region not to put any support measures in place for business and workers and was also the only country to raise taxes on restaurants and front-line businesses in a time of such crisis. President Dodon chose to seek reelection on the slogan “The President is Responsible” at the height of a pandemic and unaddressed economic crisis. This questionable messaging, and the failures of Mr. Dodon’s Chicu government, helped Maia Sandu sweep into victory in the November 2020 presidential elections, where she beat Mr. Dodon 58 percent to 42 percent.²

In her campaign against Mr. Dodon, Maia Sandu stressed some key priorities - fighting corruption, implementing economic reform, pursuing European integration, and making the institutions of the state

work for the people. Since the office of president in Moldova is largely ceremonial and lacking significant power, she pledged to dissolve Parliament and call for new elections to implement her platform. Upon Sandu’s victory, Prime Minister Chicu and his cabinet abruptly resigned, opening the door for the promised elections. Yet while Mr. Dodon also campaigned on a promise to hold elections, his 16 point defeat made him reconsider the wisdom of that plan.

The following spring saw a political fight develop into a constitutional crisis. Mr. Dodon created a de-facto Parliamentary majority built from the Socialist Party and criminal fugitive Ilan Shor’s “Shor Party.” Together, these parties attempted to create a governing coalition in order to prevent parliamentary elections. At the same time, President Sandu repeatedly nominated her own candidates for prime minister that she knew would be unacceptable to the Socialists and their allies—the goal being that two no-confidence votes would automatically trigger elections.³

What resulted was a sort of “battle of wills” between the two political leaders, with multiple failed votes to create a government and failed attempts to force the president to accept candidates from the Parliament. Finally, as the deadline for creating a government expired, the Constitutional Court recognized the president’s right to call elections. In a surprising and unprecedented move, the Socialists, the Shor Party, and the remnants of Mr. Plahotniuc’s parties in Parliament voted to remove the Chief Justice of the Constitutional Court and immediately swore in a Socialist Party loyalist as a successor. They intended to declare a state of emergency and govern with emergency powers in order to avoid an election. Since this move directly violated the Constitution, they needed to control the Constitutional Court.

With two competing Chief Justices named to the Constitutional Court, the Socialists hoped to influence or ignore the decisions of the Court and maintain power through emergency powers. President Sandu called on the police and army “not to follow illegal orders,” and both sides readied for street protests. While the ambassadors from the European Union and the United States, as well as the Venice Commission, strongly protested Parliament’s illegal actions and made statements supporting constitutional order in Moldova, the Russian government remained quiet. They did, however, lend public support to Mr. Dodon, who was in Moscow for “consultations” at the time of the unfolding crisis. When Dodon returned, it was on a Russian Government plane with 71,000 doses of the Sputnik V vaccine accompanied by two members of the Russian Duma. Moscow was again sending a strong signal of support for Mr. Dodon and his attempt to maintain power in Moldova.⁴

The crisis was resolved by overwhelming public sentiment and strong independent action by the Constitutional Court, which ultimately asserted its authority and suspended all illegal laws and decrees of Parliament. The Socialist-appointed Chief Justice got cold feet and “resigned” from the position to which he was never legally appointed. Following these events, President Sandu signed a decree dissolving Parliament and set July 11, 2021 as the date for parliamentary elections.⁵

Parliamentary Elections —a New Kind of Campaign

When campaigning began, most foreign observers expected the campaigns to repeat the messaging of past elections: President Sandu’s PAS Party would

adopt a strong Pro-EU and Pro-Western stance, while the Socialists would stand on a strong Pro-Russian message. Neither campaign followed the standard playbook.

The PAS Party ran on a strong anti-corruption and anti-kleptocracy platform but rarely explicitly wrapped themselves in the EU flag. Instead, their campaign slogan was “Let the good times begin.” They tied ideas of reform to concrete improvements in citizen’s lives. In talking about agricultural policy, they spoke about “good times for farmers.” On economic policy: “good times for entrepreneurs.” On family and education policy: “good times for parents and children.” This overwhelmingly positive campaign focused on concrete outcomes for specific voter blocks, and it proved an extremely new phenomenon in Moldova. Furthermore, there was no explicit anti-Russian messaging. President Sandu and the PAS Party went out of their way to suggest that they were open to working with and collaborating with Moscow on key issues. To further underline this, President Sandu made explicit efforts to speak Russian during speeches, often changing languages in the middle of an address (Romanian to Russian to Romanian) in order to be inclusive of the Russian minority. Similarly, while the campaign was rooted in a European path for Moldova, it did not explicitly promise EU membership by some future date. The campaign focused instead on bread-and-butter issues. It stressed that reform would bring Moldovans closer to Europe: not in a foreign policy sense, but in tangible ways. Reform means roads and trash collection. Reform means bureaucrats behaving like public servants rather than corrupt overlords. Reform means Europe in terms of jobs, services, and professional government. And Europe means holding kleptocrats to account.⁶

While the PAS campaign shied away from geopolitics and focused on a message of hope and change in the lives of Moldovan citizens, the Socialist Party campaign pushed a message of “Moldovan carnage. Mr. Dodon’s first major announcement was that the Socialist Party would form an electoral alliance with their former opponents, the Communist Party. The resulting Block of Communists and Socialists (abbreviated BECS in Romanian) would be led by Mr. Dodon and another former president, Vladimir Voronin. Mr. Voronin had led the Communist Party to electoral victories in the early 2000s until he was ousted from power in a narrow election by the first Pro-European Coalition in 2009. This election victory occurred during a time of violent anti-Communist protests which led to several deaths. Though Voronin relinquished power according to his constitutional obligations, many Moldovans associate this period with allegations of electoral fraud and violent crackdowns by the Communists. Adding Mr. Voronin and his Communists to the team signaled a strong pro-Russian messaging orientation, and the campaign did not fail to deliver on that message.

From the beginning of the campaign, the BECS message was clear: Moldova as an independent state is under threat. NATO is coming, and Moldova will cease to be independent unless the country rejects the European path and allies instead with Russia. The BECS platform painstakingly laid out this message in their party platform, which ran to over 45 pages.⁷ The theme was clear: Everything in Moldova is worse since Voronin fell from power in 2009. Roads are worse, and schools are worse. Not only are there more natural disasters, but the government also does less about them. Everything is worse, and it is all because of the European path.

The document rails against the two disasters that it claims befell Moldova: Firstly, the fall of the Soviet Union. Secondly, the fall of Voronin in 2009.

These themes played out time and again in the campaign. First, Mr. Voronin went on television and stated: “If the pro-EU parties win, NATO will send soldiers to Moldova, and Moldovans will have dark-skinned children, not only white-skinned.” He then asked rhetorically, “Is that what you want?!” Mr. Dodon claimed many times that the PAS Party’s goal was NATO integration and that Moldovan sovereignty was at stake. The campaign also sought to create enemies by highlighting divisive culture war issues such as gay marriage. The BECS Party promised a constitutional amendment preventing gay marriage and preventing gay couples from becoming parents. They promised an anti-gay propaganda law modeled on the Russian law. And they promised to withdraw Moldova from the Istanbul Convention against domestic violence and violence against women, claiming that it “kills family values”—another policy message already implemented in Russia.⁸

From top to bottom, the Communists and Socialists ran a campaign based on geopolitical fearmongering and culture wars. The PAS did not take the bait, and this resulted in wildly different methods and messages in the campaign.

Election Outcomes - Changing the Frame from Geopolitics

The landslide victory of President Sandu’s PAS Party over the Communist and Socialist Block signals a sea change in Moldovan politics. Since 2009, Moldovan parliaments include many parties, and

governments are supported by uneasy coalitions. Not since 2001 has a single party netted 63 seats in the 101-seat legislature and had the combination of a strong political mandate and the power to implement their vision. When looking at the election results and trying to understand how PAS did so well while the Socialists and their allies did so poorly, it is important to consider a few key items.

The overall turnout of these parliamentary elections was surprisingly low, at only 48 percent of the electorate. Compared to the 55 percent turnout in the second round of the presidential elections in November 2020, there was a large drop-off. Dig further into the numbers, and it becomes clear that key Socialist strongholds failed to turn out. For example, around 28,000 voters in the breakaway Transdniestrian region voted in the election, compared to 37,000 in the 2019 parliamentary elections. Similarly, the turnout in the heavily Russian-speaking autonomous region of Gagauzia was only 36 percent, compared to the national turnout of 48 percent. Finally, while the diaspora in Western Europe and North America turned out in droves to vote for PAS, only 6,138 Moldovan voters in Russia showed up to the polls. Mr. Dodon had predicted a huge turnout of his voters, and he was sorely disappointed.⁹

It seems clear that the Communist and Socialist tirades about NATO tanks and European corruption of traditional values simply did not motivate the electorate. Every year more Moldovans travel abroad thanks to visa-free regimes with the EU. This perspective has allowed people to realize that the EU is not some nightmarish hellscape but actually a well-functioning block of countries with good roads and services. Fear and geopolitics simply did not have the resonance that they once did.

A Focus on Kleptocracy

While the Communist and Socialist call to fear the west did not land, it is not because PAS ran a better Pro-EU messaging campaign. The PAS did not talk about joining the European Union as a salve to cure all Moldova's ills. Instead, the PAS talked about concrete ways to solve problems at home. They explicitly did not lean into geopolitical anti-Russian messaging. They did focus their rhetorical fire on kleptocrats.

One of the defining images from the campaign was a video from 2019 of Mr. Dodon accepting a plastic bag from oligarch Vladimir Plahotniuc. This was assumed to be a cash bribe and significantly tarred Mr. Dodon by associating him with Mr. Plahotniuc. Furthermore, the unspoken, but clearly apparent, alliance of the Communists and Socialists with the Shor Party further gave credence to President Sandu's terming them a "coalition of thieves." Ilian Shor remains a fugitive abroad, refusing to stand trial for his role in stealing a billion dollars from Moldova. Other kleptocratic figures, such as Veaceslav Platon, notorious for bank scandals and corporate raider attacks, also played significant roles in the election, attacking President Sandu and the PAS Party and aligning themselves with the Communists and Socialists in a bid to defeat the forces of reform.

The campaign turned on more than a message of pro-EU vs. anti-EU or pro-Russia vs. anti-Russia. The message that broke through was the PAS's messaging of fighting kleptocracy while "starting the good times" for citizens, and it handily defeated the fear-mongering of their opponents.

The Role of Moldova's Diaspora

A final and decisive component of the election was the role of Moldova's massive diaspora in the vote. Around 1 in 5 Moldovans live abroad as temporary economic migrants or have permanently left Moldova for opportunities elsewhere. In this election, the diaspora cast 212,145 votes, setting a record turnout in a parliamentary election. Of this vote, 86 percent went to PAS. This huge block of the vote was inspired by President Sandu's message of fighting corruption and improving economic opportunities at home. Already, newly elected PAS Members of Parliament are calling on members of the diaspora to come home and help rebuild Moldova. The Moldovan diaspora was decisive in the vote and may be decisive in reversing Moldova's brain drain and bringing back professionals with the skills and international perspective needed to change Moldova's direction.

What's Next for Moldova?

In the coming weeks, the election must be officially certified, first by the Central Election Commission and then by the Constitutional Court. Once these formalities are completed, the PAS Party will begin the process of forming a government and implementing its reform agenda in Moldova. Serious challenges remain ahead, and this process will not be smooth. Firstly, the overwhelming victory will mean that PAS will need to staff literally all aspects of the Government—and it remains to be seen if they have the capacity as a party to bring so many professionals to the table. How they recruit outside the party will also be a challenge, as their voters will be quick to call out nominating officials tainted by past administrations to positions of authority.

Further, the party will need to defend itself in Parliament. In the past, it has been a common practice for oligarchs and kleptocrats to “buy” members of Parliament with large bribes to induce them to change parties. Even with such a large and committed block in Parliament, this remains a risk. The PAS will need to be vigilant about their members and look to structural solutions to prevent underhanded actions like this from upsetting their majority.

Even with these challenges, it is likely that Moldova will have an unbroken four years of Government under PAS, something that has not happened in more than a decade. This stability, as well as the promises and reforms that PAS ran on, give the country a fighting chance at implementing the changes necessary to set itself on a truly European path.

How Should the West Engage with Moldova's New Government?

When considering the election outcome in Moldova and trying to understand it from a geopolitical angle, it is critical that Western leaders and policymakers update their frames of reference. For too long, written analysis about Moldova has focused on the East-West confrontation and assumed that the terminology and understandings of the region from the Soviet past are just as relevant today. This has not been true for some time. Mr. Plahotnuic was a “pro-western” oligarch, yet he captured the state, enacted corrupt schemes, and became increasingly autocratic. Despite the geopolitical focus of the BECS campaign, the Transnistrian issue did not really factor in the 2021 campaign. The simple idea that there are two systems, western democratic

capitalism vs. eastern authoritarianism, is itself flawed. Russia's export to Moldova is no longer communism or authoritarianism: It is corruption and kleptocracy. In Moldova, citizens went to the polls and voted explicitly for an anti-kleptocracy program of the government. They chose candidates who have no past history of theft and abuse of power and rejected all of the same faces who have presided over corruption in Moldovan politics for the past 30 years.

When assessing the PAS victory and seeking to engage with the new Moldovan Government, leaders should embrace Brian Whitmore's idea that "Corruption Is the New Communism" and that the

highest aspirations of the Moldovan people are for a rule of law state. The European Union is not a goal in itself, but an expression of the desire for leaders who are more honest, roads that are better paved, public services that work better than they do now, and leaders who steal less than they do now. This election was about corruption and hope. Any future engagement with Moldova should focus on supporting the aspirations of the Moldovan electorate to fight corruption and thereby realize their hopes for a better future.

The opinions expressed in this article are those solely of the author.

Endnotes

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