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Moldova's Parliamentary Elections – A Realistic Chance for Fundamental Reforms?

Abstract

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Moldova's parliamentary election on 11 July 2021 resulted in a landslide victory for the Party of Action and Solidarity (PAS) that was founded by now President Maia Sandu. The election was the final breakthrough for Moldova's reform actors who now control the presidency, the executive branch, and parliament. The article presents the election results and then explains the political circumstance in order to understand what happened in Moldova. It then goes on to discuss whether or not the promises of fundamental reform are likely to be fulfilled. For this, it considers PAS' and Sandu's track-record, the hurdles they had to overcome so far, compares these to past "reformist" actors, and finally outlines obstacles which might impede even well-intentioned measures of reform. It seems that despite all uncertainties that persist, the new government might be the best chance the country has ever had to turn things for the better in its three decades of independence.

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Introduction

On 27 August 2021, the Republic of Moldova celebrated 30 years of independence from the Soviet Union. Like many other former Soviet republics, Moldova has had its share of problems ever since: After a brief civil war, Chişinău still lacks control over the eastern part of the country; a long time of economic decline has led to an exodus from Moldova, leading again to grave economic, political, and social problems; the geopolitical position between Russia and the EU has deprived Moldova of an EU membership perspective, strengthening Moscow's leverage; and unstable coalition governments and state capture by oligarchs have prevented necessary reforms and deprived many people of hope for a future in their country.

Still, today hopes are probably higher than ever in Moldova that the era of decline and hardship could finally come to an end. The reason for this is the sweeping political change in the country that has started on 15 November 2020 when Maia Sandu defeated incumbent Igor Dodon in the second round of the presidential elections with about 57.72 percent of the vote. Sandu's Party of Action and Solidarity (PAS, *Partidul Acţiune şi Solidaritate*) then achieved a landslide victory in the parliamentary elections, with an outright majority of 52.8 percent at the ballot box. This means that for the first time in the country's history, all relevant institutions at the central level are controlled by the same political formation that has at the same time promised to fundamentally change the way the country is run.

The PAS and Sandu have not emerged as a surprise, but rather constantly built up a reputation for integrity and reformist spirit during the past years. They did not get discouraged by a closely failed bid for the presidency in 2016, nor did the party fall apart after being pushed into opposition following a short stint in government in 2019. In contrast, it seems that the steady work and the rejection of shaky compromises which have characterized all parties in Moldova in the past have led to a constant build-up of trust among citizens, leading to support even in voter groups who usually lack interest in pro-EU agendas or high-flying ambitions for rule of law reforms. Still, as the entire constellation and the emergence of devoted reformers at the centre of political power seem so unlikely against the backdrop of past developments, one question looms large: Will reform promises be delivered this time?

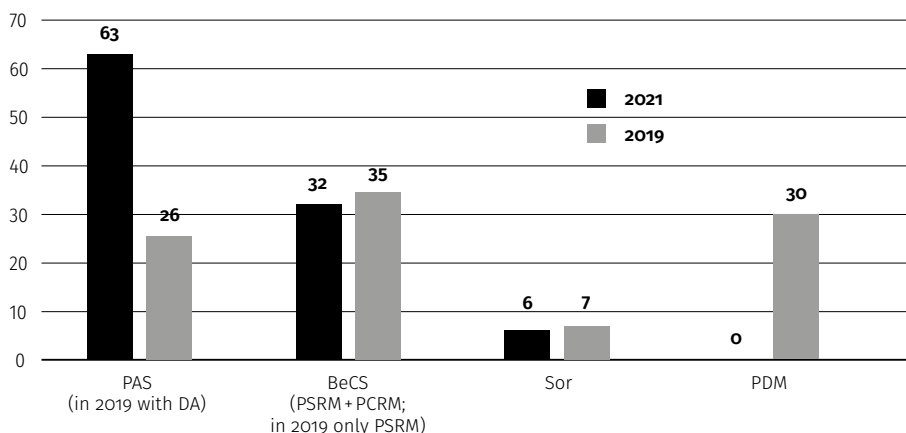
The article explores this question in greater detail. It starts with a brief overview of election results, putting them into the broader context of political developments and struggles of the past years to understand where the impetus of voting for Sandu and the PAS has come from. Then, I will scrutinize what hints exist of whether or not the new rulers in Chişinău might be up to the task of reforming the country and how likely they really stand for the qualitative change in politics they promise, both taking into account people involved as well as the party as such. Another comparison is then made to the most relevant predecessor of today's champions of reforms in Moldova, the so-called "Alliance for European Integration", which started with high hopes for change, none of which could be met. Finally, I will provide a list of potential obstacles to reforms that must be overcome regardless of the earlier discussed good intentions and practical capacities of reform actors. The article concludes with a summary of the results.

Parliamentary Elections on 11 July 2021

Only two years after the last ballot, Moldova held snap elections on 11 July 2021. Formally, parliament was dissolved after the majority of MPs had twice rejected a candidate for

Prime Minister proposed by the President.¹ Politically, however, dissolution of parliament was necessary after the last election had taken place under very unfair conditions stemming from the state capture of oligarch Vlad Plahotniuc.² While President Maia Sandu naturally wanted to use the momentum to repeat her electoral victory from 2020, the other parties and especially the ruling Party of Socialists (PSRM, Partidul Socialiștilor din Republica Moldova) were rightly afraid of losing power and thus tried to avoid the poll by any means (see also below on this). Ultimately, abiding by the constitution and allowing for elections was only possible because of Sandu's insistence and international pressure on the PSRM and the Șor Party.³

Figure 1: **Parliamentary Elections in Moldova 2021 and 2019 (mandates)**



Source: Electoral data base provided by ADEPT (Association for Democratic Participation), http://alegeri.md/w/Pagina_principal%C4%83 (accessed 28.07.2021).

The snap elections resulted in a landslide victory for the PAS of President Maia Sandu. The party received an absolute majority of votes (52.8%) and 63 mandates in Moldova's parliament, up from only 26 mandates it held before together with its partner, the Dignity and Truth Platform Party (Partidul Platforma Demnitate și Adevăr). Apart from PAS, only two further formations passed the electoral threshold: The joint Electoral Block of Communists and Socialists (BeCS, Blocul electoral al Comuniștilor și Socialiștilor) received 27.17 percent of the vote and 32 mandates. Despite of ex-president Igor Dodon's PSRM joining forces with the long-time dominant Communists (PCRM, Partidul Comuniștilor din Republica Moldova) under Vladimir Voronin, their collaboration helped little against the momentum of PAS. Finally, also the Șor Party (PS, Partidul "ȘOR") re-entered parliament with 5.74 percent and six mandates.

- 1 Martin Sieg, Parlamentsauflösung in der Republik Moldau – Präsidentin Sandu setzt Neuwahl durch, Länderbericht der Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, Länderbüro Republik Moldau 2021, www.kas.de/de/laenderberichte/detail/-/content/parlamentsaufloesung-in-der-republik-moldau - p. 3.
- 2 Victor Gotișan, Moldova: Nations in Transit 2020 Country Report, Freedom House 2020, accessed 22 April 2021, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/moldova/nations-transit/2020>
- 3 Sieg, Parlamentsauflösung in der Republik Moldau, op. cit., p. 3.

In comparison to the election in 2019, parliament has changed its face fundamentally. The biggest change came with the steep fall of the long-time ruling Democratic Party of Moldova (PDM, Partidul Democrat din Moldova) which lost all its 30 mandates and scored a mere 1.8 percent (after it had already splintered in parliament before the elections).⁴ The PSRM equally saw its support fading as it managed only in alliance with the PCRM to defend 32 of its former 35 mandates. While the PSRM and the PCRM ran this time together, the reform-camp which had in 2019 campaigned as the NOW Platform DA and PAS (ACUM Platforma DA și PAS) competed this time as separate parties with varying fortunes. While the PAS-part of the former alliance won an absolute majority in parliament, the DA-part received a mere 2.33 percent of the vote and failed the parliamentary threshold. *Figure 1* gives an overview of the election results 2019 and 2021.

PAS immediately used this solid majority to elect a single-party government on 6 August 2021. The government is led by Prime Minister Natalia Gavrilița, a former Minister of Finance from the first Sandu cabinet. A restructuring of ministries resulted in a total of fifteen portfolios, a list of which is provided in *table 1*.

Table 1: **The Government of the Republic of Moldova as of September 2021**

| Position | Name |
|---|---------------------|
| Prime Minister of the Republic of Moldova | Natalia Gavrilița |
| Deputy Prime Minister for Reintegration | Vladislav Kulminski |
| Deputy Prime Minister for Digitization | Iurie Țurcanu |
| Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Infrastructure and Regional Development | Andrei Spînu |
| Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Foreign Affairs and European Integration | Nicu Popescu |
| Minister of Finance | Dumitru Budianschi |
| Minister of Economy | Sergiu Gaibu |
| Minister of Justice | Sergiu Litvinenco |
| Minister of Agriculture and Food Industry | Viorel Gherciu |
| Minister of Health | Ala Nemerenco |
| Minister of Defence | Anatolie Nosatii |
| Minister of Internal Affairs | Ana Revenco |
| Minister of Education and Research | Anatolie Topala |
| Minister of Culture | Sergiu Prodan |
| Minister of the Environment | Iuliana Cantaragiu |
| Minister of Labor and Social Protection | Marcel Spătari |

Source: Government of the Republic of Moldova, <https://gov.md/en/profiles/team> (accessed 08.09.2021).

4 Victor Gotișan, Moldova: Nations in Transit 2021 Country Report, Freedom House 2021, accessed 24 June 2021, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/moldova/nations-transit/2021>

A Fundamental Political Change in Chişinău

The 2021 election campaign was dominated by demands for improving the rule of law and the fight against corruption by PAS. The party argued for its reform agenda using a very positive and optimistic tone, captioning their election programme the “Moldova of Good Times” – *Moldova Vremurilor Bune*.⁵ It is no surprise that these campaign themes resonated well with the electorate, as 78 percent of Moldovans declared in a recent poll that they are not satisfied with the way democracy works in their country.⁶ In contrast, the Block of PSRM and PCRM (BeCS) had difficulties to jump on the bandwagon of promising reforms in a similar way, as their recent history of government as well as of cooperation – with actors related to the country’s largest corruption and fraud cases (PDM, Şor Party) – already told a different story. It therefore comes as no surprise that they again focused mainly on geopolitics, social populism and negative campaigning based on fabricated stories on the opposition and its leaders. These stories included for example alleged plans of the NATO and EU to take away Moldova’s sovereignty and to forcefully apply “liberal values” to the country.⁷ Igor Dodon tried to pose as the Kremlin’s main ally in Moldova, discussing critically the case of Alexei Navalny and visiting the authoritarian President of Belarus Alexander Lukashenko earlier this year.⁸

Still, to argue that PAS simply had the more convincing electoral programme or the more appealing candidates would be too little to understand the situation in Moldova before the elections. It is thus important to consider the political context: During the past 20 years, politics in Moldova and its party system were mostly framed in geopolitical terms, that means as dominated by either “pro-Russian” or “pro-EU” political forces. The framing started with the “pro-Russian” PCRM of Voronin, which in 2009 was eventually replaced by the “pro-EU” “Alliance for European Integration” (AEI) formed by the PDM, the Liberal Party (PL, *Partidul Liberal*) and the Liberal-Democratic Party (PLDM, *Partidul Liberal Democrat din Moldova*). While both the PCRM and the AEI worked rather smoothly with the EU (underlining the limited importance of the “geopolitical battles” in practice),⁹ they eventually both showed a similar appetite for state capture, corruption, and limiting political competition. The situation got out of hand when about one billion dollar vanished from three Moldovan commercial banks via credits to (offshore) firms under the rule of the AEI.¹⁰ The theft and the following arrest of PLDM-leader Vlad Filat (mostly based on a confession by Ilan Şor) cleared the way for PDM-leader Vlad Plahotniuc, Moldova’s richest oligarch, to seek a power-grab under the “pro-EU” banner (albeit with the support of former Communist MPs).¹¹ Also indicted and even convicted in the theft case was businessman Ilan Şor, who was nev-

- 5 PAS, *Moldova Vremurilor Bune* – Program Electoral PAS 2021, Program Electoral, https://vremuribune.md/ro/moldova-vremurilor-bune-program-electoral/?__cf_chl_jschl_tk__=pmd_581e97cfbacb2f1cb412bdb58f4b61aba9aa2ac1-1627544282-o-gqNTZGzNAk2jcnBszQi6
- 6 *Manuchar Mameishvili*, Annual Survey Report: Republic of Moldova: Open Neighbourhood – Communicating for a Stronger Partnership: Connecting with Citizens Across the Eastern Neighbourhood, EU Neighbours: east, Annual Survey Report, Republic of Moldova – 5th Wave (Spring 2020), Ecorys, Birmingham / Brussels 2020, p. 6.
- 7 *Reinhard Veser*, Der Sieg der Präsidentin, in: FAZ, 12 July 2021, accessed 14 July 2021, www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/ausland/moldau-vor-einem-machtwechsel-maia-sandu-mit-eigener-mehrheit-17434538.html
- 8 *Orlando Crowcroft*, In Moldova, a Snap Election Could Help President Maia Sandu Finish What She Started, Euronews, 10 May 2021, accessed 16 July 2021, www.euronews.com/2021/05/10/in-moldova-a-snap-election-could-help-president-maia-sandu-finish-what-she-started
- 9 *Christian Hagemann*, Moldovan Governments in Perspective – with the Alliance Towards European Integration?, in: SOM 2 / 2012.
- 10 *Ion Marandici*, Taming the Oligarchs? Democratization and State Capture: The Case of Moldova, in: *Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization*, March 2021, p. 76–77.
- 11 *Ibid.*, p. 81–82.

ertheless later allowed to create his eponymously named Șor party and run for parliament, using mainly open vote-buying as a strategy to attract support.¹²

Missing reforms, but especially the “theft of the billion” in 2014 which sparked large civic protests eventually led to the formation of the PAS and the DA reform parties, the first of their kind in Moldova without oligarchic backing.¹³ Elections in 2019 resulted in a showdown among the political forces, leading first to the ousting of Plahotniuc’s PDM from government together with his escape from the country.¹⁴ However, the PSRM later teamed up with the remainders of the PDM to obstruct ACUM’s reform agenda, leading to the fall of the Sandu government.¹⁵ The election results of 2020 (presidential elections) and 2021 (parliamentary elections) must thus be seen as a fundamental decision of Moldovan voters against all formations associated with state capture and corruption and for those forces standing most convincingly for reforms.

The election of 2021 was thus a milestone in Moldova’s most recent political history that turned the country’s balance of power ultimately upside down: First, after Plahotniuc’s escape abroad in 2019, the election result means the reduction of his (formal) influence to the Șor party with its meagre presence in parliament. Second, it underlines that Igor Dodon has failed in his attempts to become Moldova’s dominant political figure. Despite of winning the presidency narrowly against Maia Sandu in 2016, his Socialist party never commanded an own majority or a stable coalition in parliament, and Dodon eventually lost the presidency in 2020 to Sandu. The 2021 parliamentary elections therefore put him back to square one in his battle for power, making his future in Moldova’s politics look rather uncertain, as well as his backing from Moscow. Third, the reformist camp has now consolidated under one figurehead (Maia Sandu) and one political formation (PAS).

Despite of available alternatives (e.g., the DA or Renato Usatii Party),¹⁶ voters have given Maia Sandu and the PAS a clear mandate. The PAS is the first party in Moldova since Voronin’s PCRM in 2001 to win an outright majority at the ballot box. It is thus also the first time since 2001 that one political formation controls the presidency, executive branch, and parliament. This could proof a distinct advantage in comparison to past endeavors to fight corruption and improve the rule of law. Finally, the results indicate an end of the “geopolitical battles” which have dominated Moldova’s politics for the better part of the last 20 years and often served as a distraction from poor government performance and lack of reform credentials. For some time, geopolitics even served to convince the EU that it is better to have a non-reforming government in Chișinău than a “pro-Russian” one, with dire consequences for the state of democracy in the country.¹⁷ Moldova has thus again over-

12 Denis Cenușa, Moldova’s Early Elections – Any Chance for a “Yellow Revolution”? Op-Ed 12 (2021).

13 Martin Sieg, Parlamentswahl in der Republik Moldau am 11. Juli: Ausgangslage und Tragweite, Länderbericht der Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, Länderbüro Republik Moldau 2021, www.kas.de/de/laenderberichte/detail/-/content/parlamentswahl-in-der-republik-mol-dau-am-11-juli - p. 2.

14 Mike Eckel / Liliana Barbarosie, Exclusive: Moldova’s Most Notorious Oligarch Has Been in the U.S. Despite Sanctions, Officials Say, RadioFreeEurope / RadioLiberty, 4 March 2020, accessed 8 September 2021, www.rferl.org/a/moldova-most-notorious-oligarch-has-been-in-the-us-despite-sanctions-officials-say/30468719.html

15 Matei Rosca, Moldova’s Coalition Government Falls, in: POLITICO, 12 November 2019, accessed 8 September 2021, www.politico.eu/article/coalition-government-fall-moldova/

16 Denis Cenușa, Moldova’s early elections: any chance for a “yellow revolution”? see: Understanding the EU’s Association Agreements and Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas with Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia, <https://3dcfta.eu/op-eds/moldova%E2%80%99s-early-elections-any-chance-for-a-%E2%80%9Cyellow-revolution%E2%80%9D>

17 Martin Sieg, Moldova in the EU’s Eastern Partnership: Lessons of a Decade, *Deutsche Gesellschaft für Auswärtige Politik* (DGAP), Analysis 6, 2020, <https://dgap.org/en/research/publications/moldova-eus-eastern-partnership> - p. 18.

turned its party system, from PCRM dominance to the different formations of the AEI, to the PAS now.

Are the New Rulers up to the Task of Reforming the Country?

Winning this election shows that Maia Sandu and the PAS are excellent organizers who managed to achieve maximum results with limited resources and under conditions of unfair competition. Electoral victory was always uncertain, as running the 2020 and 2021 electoral campaigns always meant fighting an uphill battle against competitors with superior financial and power resources and willing to do anything to cling to power. Especially PS-PM's and PDM's control of the media sector made it difficult for PAS and other reform actors to get their message to the people.¹⁸ Also, the dominance of Russian TV programmes and newspapers gave the Moscow-backed BeCS a distinct advantage over its competitors, as these simply have the highest outreach in the country, while competitors have a hard time reaching their constituencies and giving BeCS a de facto information monopoly in some areas.¹⁹ PAS thus had to go the extra mile of communicating directly with voters, also collecting most donations in comparison to other parties.²⁰

Furthermore, the share Sandu (2020: 92.94%)²¹ and the PAS (2021: 86.23%)²² received in diaspora votes underlines that the desire for change among Moldovans abroad is huge. However, it also works as a reminder that the most important reform constituencies have often already left the country, leading to a lack of both votes and activists for reformist parties. To make it even more difficult, the PSRM government tried to exploit this situation by limiting the number of polling stations abroad, giving citizens abroad a hard time to cast their vote and thus depriving PAS from important sources of support.²³

When it comes to policy debates, it is also crucial to note that the divisions in the party system offered some difficult aspects to overcome. While the "geopolitical battles" were mostly a means of polarization or distraction, they nevertheless worked to signal indirectly parties' position along an important cleavage in Moldovan politics: On the one hand, those parts of the electorate which are poor and therefore open to actors offering authoritarian social policies; on the other hand, those parts aiming to turn Moldova into a democratic, economically competitive country where they can seek their luck through merit.²⁴ The fact that many voters are rather interested in or simply depend on small gifts from authoritarian patrons and are therefore more difficult to convince with a rather abstract reform agenda means that winning such votes was especially difficult.

18 Ibid, p. 19.

19 *European External Action Service*, Moldova Parliament Elections – How Disinformation Did Not Work, EUvsDisinfo.eu. 15.07.2021, accessed 20 July 2021, <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/moldova-parliament-elections-how-disinformation-did-not-work/?highlight=moldova> sowie *Sieg*, Parlamentswahl in der Republik Moldau am 11. Juli, op. cit., p. 2.

20 *Dionis Cenușa*, Deepening Differentiation Within the Eastern Partnership and the Emergence of the Pan-European "Trio", IPN 2021, www.ipn.md/en/deepening-of-differentiation-within-the-eastern-partnership-and-the-emergence-7978_1081998.html

21 *ADEPT*, Votarea Peste Hotarele Republicii Moldova – Alegeri.Md, accessed 28 July 2021, http://alegeri.md/w/Votarea_pestehotarele_Republicii_Moldova

22 *Comisia Electorală Centrală a Republicii Moldova*, Rezultate Preliminare, 12.07.2021, accessed 28 July 2021, <https://pv.cec.md/parlamentare2021-rezultate.html>

23 *Sieg*, Parlamentswahl in der Republik Moldau am 11. Juli, op. cit., p. 3.

24 *Sieg*, Moldova in the EU's Eastern Partnership, op. cit., p. 10; *Dumitru Minzarari*, Moldovan Presidential Elections Driven by Insecurity Not Geopolitics – President-Elect Sandu May Have Found a Cure Against Populism, SWP Comment 59, Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, Berlin 2020, p. 3.

Finally, even as the Moldovan parliament had a very low legitimacy after the 2019 elections, Dodon and Șor nevertheless tried to avoid snap elections by any means. They used their parliamentary majority not only to declare a state of emergency in the country on 31 March 2021 (that would no longer allow to dissolve parliament), but also to replace the leadership of the constitutional court to tip the balance in their favor.²⁵ This again underlines that Sandu's competitors were always ready to play hardball to stay in power, which makes the electoral victory of the reform forces look even more convincing and thus their organizational capability for running the country.

Beyond capabilities, there are good arguments to give both Maia Sandu's and PAS's integrity a leap of faith. Sandu is a former World Bank economist with a track-record of successful reforms during her brief stint as Minister of Education in the AEI government.²⁶ Also, in the past Sandu showed a very consistent line in situations where she had to decide between more power and sticking to the highest level of integrity. As a minister, she brought the Prime Minister of her own government down by questioning the authenticity of his educational degrees.²⁷ Being offered afterwards to become prime minister herself, she made acceptance contingent on the resignation of the Chief of Moldova's national bank and the state prosecutor,²⁸ renouncing the offer when her demands were not met.²⁹

Also in 2019, she pragmatically accepted cooperation with the PSRM to become prime minister and to end the rule of PDM and Vlad Plahotniuc's grip on the country's judiciary. When President Dodon later tried to again politicize the position of prosecutor general, she rather challenged him and took the risk of losing power (which she did) instead of seeking some way of accommodation with the PSRM that would have watered down reforms.³⁰ Finally, during the presidential race in 2020, Sandu avoided the trap of overpromising in her campaign: A detailed analysis of electoral programs finds that while Dodon proposed policies which were often not even in the competence of the President, let alone covered by the budget, Sandu's proposals were much more modest, at a cost of less than half of her competitor's list.³¹ With this approach, she was much more in line with the constitutional limits of the president's office, while Dodon stuck to the tradition of promising the classical post-Soviet model of a "paternalistic presidential state where absolutely all areas of development of the country depend on the President."³²

When it comes to the PAS, the party is an entirely new formation founded by Maia Sandu, building initially mainly on her reputation of high integrity and track record as a reformer in education policy.³³ First of all, activists in the party accepted potentially large personal disadvantages for engaging in the party before 2019, making their commitment to the party

25 *Sieg*, Parlamentsauflösung in der Republik Moldau, op. cit., p. 3.

26 DW, Ex-World Bank economist set to become prime minister in Moldova, 23.07.2015, accessed 29 July 2021, www.dw.com/en/ex-world-bank-economist-set-to-become-prime-minister-in-moldova/a-18604667

27 *Ibid.*

28 *Alexander Tanas*, Moldova PM Nominee Pushes Tough Demands for Taking Top Job, Reuters Media, 24 July 2015, accessed 21 July 2021, www.reuters.com/article/moldova-premier-idUSL5N10437820150724

29 *Sieg*, Moldova in the EU's Eastern Partnership, op. cit., p. 13.

30 *Ibid.*, p. 14.

31 *Adrian Lupușor / Stas Madan*, Electoral Promises Between Populism and Constitutional Compliance: Analysis of the Socio-Economic Components of the Candidates' Programmes in the 2020 Presidential Elections, Analysis Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung 2020, p. 2.

32 *Ibid.*

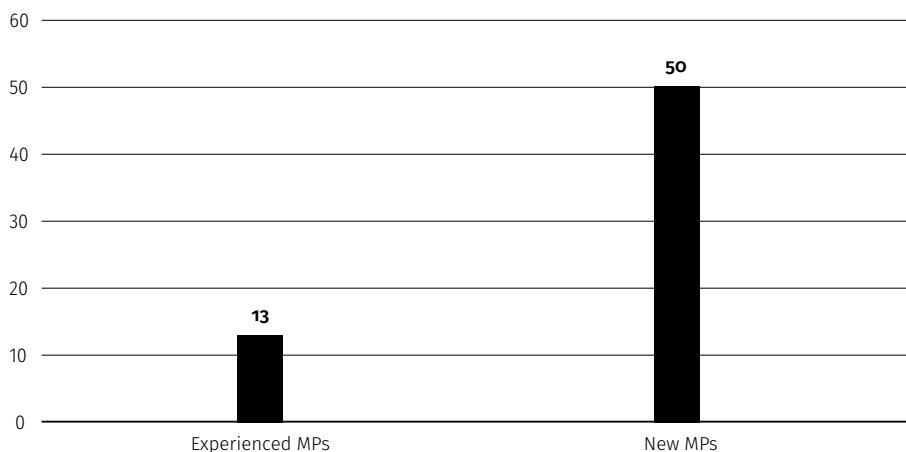
33 *Leonid Litra*, Moldova: Nations in Transit 2016 Country Report, Nations in Transit 2016, Freedom House 2021, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/moldova/nations-transit/2016>

credible; this is even more the case as they could not hope for any direct benefits stemming from an oligarch behind the party.³⁴ This already rather high barrier for entering the party was complemented by a careful screening of future functionaries and members by central party office, for example allowing no people convicted for corruption to become party members.³⁵

Furthermore, by comparing the composition of parliament for all legislatures since 2001, it is possible to determine whether PAS is dominated by older networks from already existing parties as it used to be in the past when party labels changed quickly. The findings are presented in *figure 2*: It shows that the large majority of PAS's 63 MPs are novices to parliament without any prior parliamentary experience. Only 13 people were MPs in the past, eleven of which for ACUM since 2019. Only one MP has a history in the Liberal Party, while another one is listed as having entered parliament in 2019 as an independent deputy. It is thus very clear that PAS is not an older party in disguise, but a genuinely new formation with little to no links to other parties.

Overall, there are good reasons to believe that Maia Sandu and PAS mainly thrive on their reform credentials and have not only a strong impetus to achieve better results than their predecessors, but also high incentives to deliver results in this regard to its electorate. In contrast to other former ruling parties, in the case of PAS party interests seem to be mostly in line with the reform programme instead of opposed to it.

Figure 2: **Experience of PAS Parliamentary Group Members' 2021**



Source: Own compilation of data provided on the website of ADEPT (Asociația pentru Democrație Participativă), <http://www.e-democracy.md/elections/parliamentary/> 10 September 2021.

34 Sieg, Parlamentswahl in der Republik Moldau am 11. Juli, op. cit., p. 2.

35 PAS, Termeni Și Condiții – Partidul Acțiune Și Solidaritate, 08.09.2021, accessed 8 September 2021, <https://unpaspentru.md/termeni-si-conditii/>

“Back to the Future” with the PAS?

While everything seems to look different in the summer of 2021 in Moldova, there are nevertheless things reminiscent of the past. PAS’s focus on an EU reform agenda, making the country more democratic and ultimately leading it to an EU accession bid (as some of PAS’ members suggest), brings to mind the summer of 2009 and the heydays of the “Alliance for European Integration” (AEI), which toppled the PCRM government in the so-called “Twitter revolution”.³⁶ However, the undertaking ended for some members in prison, for some in exile, and for Moldova in a situation of state capture that was eventually worse than the one seen under the Communists until 2009. Is the coming to power of PAS thus just another episode in Moldova’s political playbook where reform vanguards eventually turn into villains? There are good reasons to believe that this time this does not have to be the case. There are several characteristics that make PAS distinct from AEI.

First, AEI was a coalition of three different parties, competing amongst each other with their party leaders all claiming high offices for themselves.³⁷ This office-seeking became a problem when AEI lacked the necessary parliamentary majority to make PDM leader Marian Lupu president, leading to a distracting focus on making this possible, including changing the constitutional way the president is elected.³⁸ This naturally lowered the coalition’s focus on reforms and pointed out where its priorities were. In a similar vein, AEI leaders “carved up control over supposedly independent institutions”³⁹ and threatened each other to team-up with the PCRM⁴⁰ to get an advantage in intra-coalition negotiations. In contrast, PAS never gambled for access to power in a similar way the AEI parties did, making its policy-seeking approach much more credible. It also does not have to deal with the pitfalls of coalitions as it emerged as the country’s single pro-reform force. In several consecutive elections, it received an ever-growing support which gives Maia Sandu and the party leadership a high degree of legitimacy for their agenda. There are for now no contenders left to challenge this position within the reform camp. The only potential challenge would thus be splits within the party, which until now are not yet visible.

Second, the AEI was from the start dominated by actors with poor reform credentials. Its main figures were two oligarchs, Vlad Filat and Vlad Plahotniuc,⁴¹ the latter of which had close ties to the earlier ruling Voronins.⁴² At the same time, PDM party leader and AEI presidential candidate Marian Lupu used to be a Communist MP before joining the “reform” camp. These backgrounds make it more understandable how the focus of AEI leaders would be mostly on splitting up the spoils of the state amongst them, ultimately culminating in the “theft of the billion” and the state capture regime created under the PDM until 2019. Their party interests were despite of different claims not in line with the country’s reform agenda, but rather in contradiction to it.⁴³ In contrast, there were (at least so far) no reports of any strong interest groups behind PAS.

36 It was the period of colored revolutions in Eastern Europe; actually, Voronin’s rule ended because of him lacking a coalition partner after elections (*Hagemann, Moldovan Governments in Perspective*, op. cit.).

37 *Sieg, Moldova in the EU’s Eastern Partnership*, op. cit., p. 6.

38 *Hagemann, Moldovan Governments in Perspective*, op. cit., p. 67.

39 See footnote 37.

40 *Ibid.*

41 *Litra*, op. cit.

42 *Sieg, Moldova in the EU’s Eastern Partnership*, op. cit., p. 5.

43 *Ibid.*, p. 17.

Third, institutional infighting between the President and the government was a typical problem of Moldova's politics in the past. While President Lucinschi lost the battle against parliament which subsequently scrapped direct elections to the office, the following President Voronin only managed through his powers as party leader to install a de facto presidential government.⁴⁴ The AEI long lacked the necessary votes in parliament to elect a president, leading even to a (failed) referendum to re-introduce presidential elections.⁴⁵ In recent years, also the situation between President Dodon and Prime Minister Maia Sandu, as well as President Maia Sandu and the PSRM-led governments was often strained. In contrast, PAS will not have to fight these battles in the coming years as presidency, executive branch and parliament are controlled by the same political formation. This lack of (formal) veto powers blocking reforms gives PAS an unprecedented opportunity to introduce its reform agenda, as well as less excuses for failing to do so.

Fourth, both PCRM and AEI were settled firmly in the framing of geopolitics as the essence of Moldova's political competition. This framing did not only form the basis for Voronin's politics of moving back and forth between the EU and Russia, seeking benefits from both,⁴⁶ but also to the AEI's drive to focus mostly on EU incentives and their granting instead of reforms.⁴⁷ In contrast, Maia Sandu seems so far firmly set to limit the relevance of geopolitics in her agenda, underlining regularly that it is just one topic among many and that other issues are more relevant for the people in the country.⁴⁸ What helps in this regard is also that trade has recently shifted mostly to the EU, reducing Russia to a much smaller partner: While in 2020 66 percent of exports and 46 percent of imports went to and came from the EU, the numbers are only nine percent of exports and 11 percent of imports for Russia.⁴⁹ This makes it harder for the latter to use trade as a weapon of coercion against the government in Chişinău as it was often the case in the past.⁵⁰

Potential Obstacles to the Reform Agenda

The points outlined above underline that the new rulers in Chişinău have created higher expectations for enacting reforms than probably any other government in the past, as they uniquely combine personal credibility with an unprecedented amount of power. Nevertheless, there are other obstacles that might prevent the new government to become a success.

The politics of distraction is far from over, even after the “geopolitical card” was not successful in this election. BeCS still has an interest in fueling this rivalry as it is used to play this tune to its voters successfully for a very long time. By linking it to the issues of NATO-membership (very unpopular in Moldova) and “Unionism” (that is unification with Romania, a scarecrow for the Russophones), the camp could try to discredit the govern-

44 Lucan Ahmad Way, Pluralism by Default in Moldova, *Journal of Democracy* 13, no. 4 / 2002.

45 Hagemann, *Moldovan Governments in Perspective*, op. cit., p. 65.

46 Same, *External Governance on the Terms of the Partner? The EU, Russia and the Republic of Moldova in the European Neighbourhood Policy*, in: *Journal of European Integration* 35, no. 7 / 2013.

47 Sieg, *Moldova in the EU's Eastern Partnership*, op. cit., p. 16.

48 Keno Verseck, *Moldaus Staatspräsidentin Sandu: „Die Menschen hier wurden so oft belogen und enttäuscht“*, in: *DER SPIEGEL*, 15 July 2021, accessed 20 July 2021, www.spiegel.de/ausland/moldaus-staatspraesidentin-sandu-die-menschen-hier-wurden-so-oft-belogen-und-enttaeuscht-a-09c85dao-74de-43ac-9a46-b89e2df9aaa

49 Jörg Radeke / Nikolas Schmidt / Sebastian Staske, *Economic Monitor Moldova*, in: *Berlin Economics*, 2021.

50 Hagemann, *External Governance on the Terms of the Partner?*, op. cit., p. 774.

ment in front of the many centrist voters which have supported it in this election.⁵¹ These voters (a recent survey estimates their size at 29% of the population) are also rather neutral towards the EU.⁵² Beyond geopolitics, there are other topics which were already used and could be exploited to draw attention away from the reform agenda and corruption. One of these is the alleged contradiction between conservative family values and human rights for LGBT people which was brought up several times by Dodon in the election campaign.⁵³ This issue would be especially difficult to handle for the government as BeCS has here the backing of the Moldovan Church, which is still the most trusted institution in the country.⁵⁴ The times of distracting political battles are thus far from over, and the new rulers must be careful to avoid the traps the opposition will prepare for them. The politics of distraction could become a basis for disguising opposition to reforms that will cause headaches to those (informal or invisible veto players) who used to profit from state capture and kickbacks.

Speaking of EU membership might do more harm than good to the government. Another trap is the promise of potential EU membership. A prominent PAS member hinted shortly after the election that the government might be able to start an EU accession process during this term in government.⁵⁵ Making these kinds of unfulfillable promises is not only setting the bar unreasonably high for the new government, but it also means focusing on incentives granted from the EU instead of achieving reforms. The candidate countries from the Western Balkans have already made the experience that the EU will eventually not deliver its promises on time to use them to win elections. Moldova was never promised to become a member of the EU, and it is under the current circumstances of intra-EU discussions on “widening before deepening” less likely than ever that the status of “neighbour with benefits” will be upgraded any time soon. The government should thus rather stick to its strategy to sell its agenda primarily as a Moldovan national endeavor with the goal to benefit the country and its people instead of making it a case of successful external EU governance.

Catering to the interests of poor voters might be as important as successful rule of law reforms. Focusing only on democracy and the rule of law will not necessarily deliver electoral victory in four years, even if most of the reforms turn out to be successful. Against the backdrop of its status as Europe’s poorest country, the government must also work towards economic growth and address both the interests of highly qualified expats who would like to return to their country if decent living conditions were available, as well as to the poor voters who struggle to make a living and were thus far clients of the PCRM and PSRM. Maia Sandu and the PAS seem to be aware of this fact, as the majority of objectives in the presidential programme was dedicated to social and economic policies.⁵⁶ A very good move in this direction was the recent announcement of Prime Minister Gavrilița that the minimum

51 Financial Times, Pro-EU Party Wins Landslide Moldova Election, 12 July 2021, accessed 14 July 2021, www.ft.com/content/42a5f5a3-9492-456c-82f3-5d261730beff

52 Mameishvili, Annual Survey Report: Republic of Moldova, op. cit., p. 6.

53 Madalin Necsutu, Moldovan Ex-President Praises Hungary’s Anti-LGBTQ Law, *BIRN*, 8 July 2021, accessed 14 July 2021, <https://balkaninsight.com/2021/07/08/moldovan-ex-president-praises-hungarys-anti-lgbtq-law/>

54 Same, In Fight for Votes, Moldovan Parties Fail Marginalised Groups, *BIRN*, 7 July 2021, accessed 8 July 2021, <https://balkaninsight.com/2021/07/07/in-fight-for-votes-moldovan-parties-fail-marginalised-groups/>

55 Matei Rosca, Moldova on Pro-EU Course After Elections, in: *POLITICO*, 12 July 2021, accessed 14 July 2021, www.politico.eu/article/moldova-pro-eu-election-center-right-pas-parliament/

56 *Lupușor / Madan*, op. cit., p. 9.

pension will be raised to 2000 Lei, starting already in October 2021.⁵⁷ Furthermore, the government's programme includes many aspects to improve social policies, like increasing tax benefits for families, or creating a "Silver Fund" with direct support for the elderly (home care, hot lunches) that will work in this direction if implemented.⁵⁸ Following this path is important to stabilize government support from poor constituencies, and thus vital for the entire reform agenda.

Low state capacities might prove an impediment to implementing reforms. It is not only Moldova's democratic "software" that needs to be rebooted, but also its "hardware" in the form of administrative capacities and talented people in the public sector. Since its independence, the country has suffered from very low administrative and state capacities. Many talented people have left Moldova for good, and it will be difficult to attract them back considering low salaries in the public sector.⁵⁹ Connected to this is the limited experience of the PAS faction in government, the other side of the coin of having no problematic past. Also the PCRM made this experience when their lack of professionals among its ranks proved a distinct disadvantage for governing the country.⁶⁰ The PAS faction will need a steep learning curve to get reforms going. Also, an effective governance mechanism will have to be created among government, presidency, and parliament. Furthermore, President Sandu has already announced a "cleaning" of the prosecutor's office.⁶¹ While this might be necessary also in other institutions, massive layoffs will not only face potential criticism on the separation of powers but might also lead to problems when it comes to replacing dismissed staff.

Finally, Russia remains present as a potential spoiler. While its trade lever has weakened over the past years and some even argue that Russia appreciates the EU keeping Moldova "financially and economically afloat",⁶² it still controls Moldova's access to energy as the new pipeline from Romania is still not in use (as of September 2021, planned start is October 2021).⁶³ In addition, Russia still holds with its support for the regime in Tiraspol an important card to play when it comes to the country's future. President Sandu has underlined that Chişinău seeks predictable and constructive relations with Moscow.⁶⁴ The first visit of Moldova-veteran Dimitry Kozak, Deputy head of the Russian Presidential Administration,

57 Madalin Necsutu, Moldovan Government to Raise Pensions and Welfare Benefits, *BIRN*, 7 September 2021, accessed 8 September 2021, <https://balkaninsight.com/2021/09/07/moldovan-government-to-raise-pensions-and-welfare-benefits/>

58 PAS, Program de activitate al guvernului "Moldova vremurilor bune" – Partidul Acţiune Şi Solidaritate, 2021, accessed 17 August 2021, https://unpaspentru.md/2021/08/03/program-de-activitate-al-guvernului-moldova-vremurilor-bune/?__cf_chl_jschl_tk__=pmd_6fc1f74057af97610b4ed2b4b05b-6793f24ef77b-1628001975-0-gqNtZGzNAmKjcnBszQbi

59 Anna Zygierewicz / Kamil Catus, Association Agreement Between the EU and the Republic of Moldova: European Implementation Assessment (Update) Study, *European Parliamentary Research Service*, Brussels, p. 76.

60 Madalin Necsutu, How Russia Lost the Parliamentary Election in the Republic of Moldova and the Pro-Europeans' Tribulations of Success, *Veridica*, 16 July 2021, accessed 16 July 2021, www.veridica.ro/en/elections/demagog-chisinau-report-2021/how-russia-lost-the-parliamentary-election-in-the-republic-of-moldova-and-the-pro-europeans-tribulations-of-success

61 Verseck, op. cit.

62 Sieg, Moldova in the EU's Eastern Partnership, op. cit., p. 20.

63 Madalin Necsutu, Moldova Eyes Energy Independence from Russia, *BIRN*, 20 July 2021, accessed 17 August 2021, <https://balkaninsight.com/2021/07/20/moldova-eyes-energy-independence-from-russia/>

64 Verseck, op. cit.

was a first signal that Russia seems open to this approach, at least for the time being, hinting for example to potentially improve market access for Moldovan goods.⁶⁵

Conclusion

Change has come to Chişinău, and chances seem to be unusually high that it might have come to stay this time. The article has explored in detail different aspects of the question whether or not the reforms promised by the new government are likely to happen.

First, there seem to be good arguments that Maia Sandu and the PAS government are well-intentioned reform actors who are organizationally capable of difficult tasks. On the one hand, both have in the past more than once declined power in favour of keeping their high integrity, acting responsibly when in power as well as during election campaigns. The PAS is a genuinely new actor which is not dominated by older networks from other parties, and until now it seems that there are also no oligarchical interests behind the party. On the other hand, it is important to underline that PAS and Maia Sandu had to fight an uphill battle in the most recent elections. Their competitors were not only willing to use overpromising, abuse of power, and misinformation to make the race, but had also superior resources, especially because of media control. Winning elections convincingly under these circumstances shows a good amount of organizational capability despite of limited resources, a very important trait for a government running a poor country.

Second, when looking in detail, PAS looks very different from the AEI which failed its reform promises. It has an easier time governing as it does not depend on coalition partners. This will also make office-seeking ambitions less of a problem, which plagued coalition dynamics of the AEI. In contrast to some actors in the AEI, PAS also has no links to political camps it officially competes with, nor does it have strong oligarchic influences. Also, PAS declines to use the rhetoric of geopolitics that was often dominant in the past and regularly a pretext for distracting from reform failures. At least when taking into account these crucial flaws of the AEI, PAS so far seems to be in a better position to act as a genuine reform actor.

Third, it is nevertheless crucial to look also at reform obstacles which are present despite of the government's good intentions. These are still the state's low administrative and government capacities, the potential of Russia to act as a spoiler, the influence of informal networks whose interests are harmed by the government's reform agenda, and the danger of frustrating voters' expectations, either by overpromising (for example, start of EU accession process) or by not delivering in the area of social policies (that is to the voters most likely to switch sides back to the anti-reformist camp). Only if the influence of these factors can be overcome or at least tamed, ideally with financial and practical support from the EU and its member states, the new government will be successful.

The actors now ruling Moldova have in the past shown unusual levels of perseverance, virtue, and skill. Even though they have now embarked on a difficult journey the success of which is unclear, it might be nevertheless the best chance the country had to turn things for the better in its three decades of independence.

65 Vladimir Socor, *Kremlin Responds to New Moldovan Leadership's Overtures*, Jamestown Foundation, 12 August 2021, accessed 8 September 2021, <https://jamestown.org/program/kremlin-responds-to-new-moldovan-leaderships-overtures/>