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Moldova, a Political System Under Pressure

Between European Aspirations and War in Ukraine



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Florent PARMENTIER

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Ifri

27 rue de la Procession 75740 Paris Cedex 15 – FRANCE

Tel. : +33 (0)1 40 61 60 00 – Fax : +33 (0)1 40 61 60 60

Email: accueil@ifri.org

Website: ifri.org

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Author

Florent Parmentier is a geopolitical specialist and holds a doctorate in political sciences. He has been the Secretary-General of the Centre de recherches politiques (Center for Political Research) at Sciences Po since 2019. He is also a research associate at the HEC Centre de géopolitique (Geopolitics Center) and Jacques Delors Institute. His research focuses on post-Soviet Eastern Europe (Moldova, Ukraine) and its relationships with the European Union; Russian geopolitics; and strategic foresight. He has authored numerous books and articles on these topics, including *When Empire Meets Nationalism: Power Politics in the US and Russia* (with Didier Chaudet and Benoît Pélopidas, Ashgate, 2009) and *La Moldavie à la croisée des mondes* (with Josette Durrieu, Non Lieu, 2019).

Abstract

Maia Sandu, who was elected President of the Republic of Moldova by direct universal suffrage in November 2020, won a large parliamentary majority in the snap parliamentary elections held in July 2021. Her plan for the internal transformation of Moldova is closely linked to her objective of progress toward the European Union. The war in Ukraine has accelerated advancement in this direction, as the Republic of Moldova was granted European Union candidate status at the European Council meeting on June 23, 2022.

A number of obstacles lie in its path, but external observers have so far focused on external factors, in particular the hybrid threats posed by Russia, relations with which have deteriorated considerably. However, Moldova's capacity to transform itself is also affected by the interaction between internal and external factors, particularly in the political domain.

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Introduction

Maia Sandu, who was elected President of the Republic of Moldova by direct universal suffrage in November 2020, won a large parliamentary majority in the snap parliamentary elections held in July 2021. Her plan for the internal transformation of Moldova is closely linked to her objective of progress toward the European Union (EU). The war in Ukraine has accelerated progress in this direction, as the Republic of Moldova was granted EU candidate status at the European Council meeting on June 23, 2022. Sandu has thus enjoyed welcome diplomatic success at a time of growing tensions with Russia and particularly high inflation, which have affected Moldovans' purchasing power and eroded their confidence in the future.

A number of obstacles lie in Moldova's path, but external observers have so far focused on external factors, in particular the hybrid threats posed by Russia, relations with which have deteriorated considerably. However, Moldova's capacity to transform itself is also affected by the interaction between internal and external factors, particularly in the political domain.

Are Sandu and her government capable of carrying out a successful transformation of Moldova, so that it can progress from candidate status to future member of the EU? To what extent might the way Moldova's political system functions, with its dynamics and deficiencies, affect the process of European integration? To answer these questions, we first need to examine the characteristics of Moldova's political system, its origins, format, and dynamics. We must then interpret Sandu's leadership through the twin promises of integrity and competence that are associated with her, with the support of the Party of Action and Solidarity (PAS) (*Partidul Acțiune și Solidaritate*) and the pro-European camp, in the face of the opposition's political and ideological reshuffles. Finally, we suggest three possible scenarios for the ways in which the political system may develop between now and 2025: continuity, disruption, and instability.

The Characteristics of Moldova's Political System

Characterizing a political system means understanding its origins, its format, and the dynamics of the competition between the different political parties and actors. We will also examine the specific case of the autonomous region of Gagauzia, in the south of Moldova.

The Origins of the Party System

The Moldovan party system is the product of the Soviet Union's process of decomposition and of achieving independence in 1991. Unlike neighboring Romania or other central European countries, Moldova had no "historic" political parties that could have reemerged after the decades-long period of Soviet rule.

Hence three different political dividing lines appeared. The first of these was cultural and geopolitical and set those who supported rapprochement with Romania, in the wake of the popular movements that arose under *perestroika*, against those who supported a closer relationship with Russia. This is why the political scientist and politician Oleg Serebrian used the term "geopolitical parties"¹ to describe the political situation in Moldova. In broad terms, the right is favorable toward Romania, while those on the left of the Moldovan political spectrum feel a closer affinity with Russia. In contrast, centrists lay stress on a shared Moldovan identity as being a common asset that is capable of ensuring a balance between the various ethnic and cultural groups.² This does not mean, however, that Moldovans base their voting choices mainly on ethnic criteria; age, heritage, and urbanity must also be taken into account in any analysis.

A second, economic dividing line, sets supporters of more rapid transformation in the direction of a market economy, and a more

1. Cited by Igor Botan, "Partidele și democratizarea Republicii Moldova" [The parties and the democratization of the Republic of Moldova], December 3, 2008, note at the foot of page 10, available at: www.e-democracy.md.

2. According to the independent polling organization iDATA, a survey carried out in March 2023 shows that 33.5% are in favor of a union with Romania, while 59.3% are opposed. When asked "Do you personally feel culturally closer to Romania or to Russia?", 31.4% of the population feel close to Romania, 21.8% to Russia, and 44% to neither of them.

liberal system that is better adapted to the requirements of globalization, against those who favor more active policies of regional and social redistribution, particularly with regard to rural areas and those who are retired. The transition toward a market economy has been particularly challenging in Moldova, with declines in the standard of living and the productive structure and large-scale emigration of the labor force.

A third, post-materialist dividing line opposes supporters of traditional values (traditional family models, law and order) and those who uphold the values of tolerance, equality, and freedom of expression. The former are more numerous³ and can also rely on the Orthodox Church of Moldova, which is subordinate to the Moscow Patriarchate and ranks as the institution most trusted by Moldovans. It calls for traditional values to be defended and generally has close links with pro-Russian parties (the Communist and Socialist Parties).⁴ In contrast, it is notable that no environmentally-oriented party or party prioritizing increased cultural liberalism in Moldova has succeeded in being elected to Parliament.

The party system is not homogeneous across Moldova, however. It should be noted, for example, that the party system in the separatist region of Transnistria developed according to its own logic and quite differently from the rest of Moldova, related to the omnipresent Sheriff business group. Sheriff, owned by the oligarch Victor Gusan, supports the *Obnovlenie* (Renewal) party and owns several media outlets. As we shall see later, the political debates in the Autonomous Territorial Unit of Gagauzia sometimes differ from those in the rest of the Republic of Moldova.

The Format and Dynamics of the Party System

The format of a party system essentially depends on two factors: the number of competing parties and the relative sizes of these parties, in terms of the number of voters and the number of seats in Parliament. Moldova's parliamentary and multi-party political life has gone

3. As an example, a February 2023 survey carried out by iDATA shows that 88.1% of Moldovans are personally against the legalization of same-sex marriage and 92.2% are against the legalization of recreational consumption of cannabis.

4. K. Calus, "The Russian Hybrid Threat Toolbox in Moldova: Economic, Political and Social Dimension", *Hybrid CoE Working Paper*, No. 23, April 2023, available at: www.hybridcoe.fi.

through several different configurations since independence, as well as several different voting systems.⁵

Since July 2021, Sandu's party has held the majority of parliamentary seats, a situation comparable to the period between 2001 and 2009 when the Communist Party held a majority of seats behind President Vladimir Voronin. At other times, notably in the 1990s and 2010s, elections led to coalition governments, which, while they ensured genuine representativeness at the party level, caused problems with the continuity and effectiveness of state action.⁶

Since independence, political parties have been highly volatile. A number of parties have been elected to Parliament and played a key role in various coalitions, then disappeared. The Law on Political Parties, amended in 2020, requires parties wanting to be registered to have at least one thousand members. No fewer than twenty parties, two electoral blocs, and an independent candidate took part in the July 2021 elections. The same applies to the various coalition governments Moldova has experienced, of which there were many between 1990 and 2010. Many political parties emerged after 1991, but few of them won parliamentary seats.⁷

In the thirty years that have elapsed since then, political transitions have taken place peacefully, despite several major crises. In the crisis of April 2009 which followed parliamentary elections, Parliament was burned down, the results were contested, and complaints of electoral fraud were made. However, the crisis was resolved by fresh parliamentary elections which allowed a changeover to go ahead, without vote-buying or a coup d'état. To date, no legal proceedings have been initiated as a result of these events. The same is true of the June 2019 crisis, when for a week Moldova had two governments simultaneously, one led by Pavel Filip under the influence of the Democratic Party of Moldova led by Vladimir Plahotniuc, the other a unique coalition between Igor Dodon's Socialist Party and Sandu's PAS, in which Sandu became prime minister. The political scientist Lucan Way has thus described Moldova as a case of

5. The voting systems have a significant impact on the way the party system is configured. In July 2021, a mixed system in which half the parliamentary seats were allocated on a proportional basis, with a threshold of 6%, and half on a constituency basis, was replaced by a fully proportional voting system.

6. It should be noted that the July 2021 elections gave forty women a seat in Parliament, among the 101 members. The main minorities are represented in Parliament, including a Roma member of the PAS, Radu Marian.

7. In 2010 and 2014, five parties won parliamentary seats; in 2019, it was four; and in 2021, it was three (one bloc and two parties).

“pluralism by default”,⁸ in which weak parties and fragile state institutions (in terms of vulnerability to coercion and economic control) and a divided national identity have contributed to the persistence of political pluralism in the post-Cold War era.

The political system has been deeply affected by many financial scandals involving corruption and abuses by oligarchs. The former prime minister Vlad Filat, a European hopeful in the early 2010s, was forced to resign in 2013 due to charges of corruption. A year later, in the “heist of the century”, or the scandal of the stolen billion euros (the equivalent of 12 percent of Moldova’s GDP), some politicians and oligarchs (former prime ministers Vlad Filat and Iurie Leanca, oligarchs Ilan Shor and Vladimir Plahotniuc) used three banks (Banca de Economii, Unibank, and Banca Socială) to carry out an embezzlement. In 2018, the European Parliament explicitly described Moldova as a “captured state”.⁹ Since then, legal proceedings against the alleged embezzlers have dragged on. Following the 2019 crisis, Plahotniuc and Shor were forced to go into exile, but did not relinquish political involvement. The imposition of sanctions on Plahotniuc and Shor by the United States in October 2022 and then by the United Kingdom in December 2022 and the EU in April 2023 is intended to combat corruption and Russia’s malign influence, which have a destabilizing effect on Moldova.

Gagauzia: a Distinctive Local Dynamic

The Autonomous Territorial Unit of Gagauzia in the south of Moldova has a population of 134,000 (around 5 percent of Moldova’s total population), who are predominantly of Gagauz origin (an Orthodox Turkic-speaking people) but more diverse than it may appear.¹⁰

8. See L. Way, “Pluralism by Default in Moldova”, in *Pluralism by Default: Weak Autocrats and the Rise of Competitive Politics*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016, pp. 92–114.

9. European Parliament resolution of November 14, 2018 on the implementation of the EU Association Agreement with Moldova (2017/2281/INI), available at: www.europarl.europa.eu.

10. The presence of the Gagauz in the region is due to an 1828 population exchange effected by the Russian Tsar Alexander I and the Ottoman Sultan Mahmud II. Along with their mistrust of Romania, this explains why this population, often mingled with Bulgarians, is distinguished by its very positive feelings toward Russia. The territory’s population is 82.3% Gagauz, with 6.2% Bulgarian, 4.5% Russian, 4.4% Moldovan, 2.5% Ukrainian, and 0.5% of other nationalities. Apart from ethnic self-identification, identity is also defined through the language used every day, where Russian can be observed to be gaining territory. At home, 67.8% speak Russian and Gagauz, while 14.7% speak only Russian, and less than 1% speak only Romanian. In terms of belonging, 87.3% identify as Moldovan citizens, 83.3% as Gagauz, 61.1% as being part of the Russian world, 52% with Moldovan culture, and 39% as

Gagauzia had intended to secede in the early 1990s, before reaching a political compromise in 1994 in which central government awarded it autonomy. The authorities in Comrat nevertheless regularly accuse those in Chişinău of attempting to limit their rights.

The electoral campaign for the Bashkan (gubernatorial) elections, which took place on April 30 and May 14, 2023, contributed to a further decline in the relationship between the Moldovan and Russian governments.¹¹ On April 17, Rustam Minnikhanov, head of the Republic of Tatarstan, was refused entry to Moldovan territory, which he wanted to visit at the invitation of the local pro-Russian candidate, Victor Petrov, and the Socialist Party member of Parliament, Alexander Sukhodolsky.¹² The Moldovan authorities denied him entry and asked him not to interfere in the country's internal affairs, which led to a retaliatory ban on certain members of the PAS visiting Russian territory.¹³

The two leading candidates to succeed the former Bashkan (Governor of Gagauzia) Irina Vlah, Grigory Uzun (26.43 percent), backed by former president Dodon's Socialist Party, and Evghenia Guţul (26.41 percent), backed by the Shor Party, are positioning themselves as pro-Russian. Evghenia Guţul was able to invite over the Russian pop stars Philipp Kirkorov and Nikolay Baskov. The other candidates were not to be outdone.¹⁴ The turnout of 57.8 percent was high enough to ensure the validity of the vote.

The second-round victory of Evghenia Guţul, still unknown three months previously, with 52 percent of the vote (on a turnout of

being part of the Turkish world. In contrast, few Gagauz feel an affinity with the EU and Romania. "Analiză etno-lingvistică a populaţiei din UTA Găgăuzia" [Ethno-linguistic analysis of the population of the Autonomous Territorial Unit of Gagauzia], April 28, 2023.

11. Russo-Moldovan relations changed after the invasion of Ukraine on February 22, 2022. Chişinău condemned the actions of the Russian government, froze contacts with Russia at all levels, except the ambassadorial, and also supported the creation of an international tribunal to investigate the actions of the Russian army in Ukraine. See V. Solovyov, "Otnoşenija huže est' kuda" [Relations may grow still worse], *Kommersant*, April 29, 2023, available at: www.kommersant.ru.

12. V. Solovyov, "Neždannno-nevehanno" [Suddenly, unexpectedly], *Kommersant*, April 17, 2023, available at: www.kommersant.ru.

13. "Oazu Nantoi, reacţie la interdicţia de a mai merge în Federaţia Rusă" [Oazu Nantoi, reaction to ban on travel to Russian Federation], *Stiri.md*, April 25, 2023, available at: <https://stiri.md>.

14. Victor Petrov, who finished in third place, campaigned for rapprochement with Moscow and a resumption of gas supplies from Russia, taking a stance against NATO, Romania, and the EU. The former Bashkan Mihail Formuzal and Sergey Cimpoeş supported the 2014 consultative referendum on joining the Eurasian Customs Union (the members of which are Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Armenia, and Kyrgyzstan). Nicolai Dudoglu, who was Mayor of Comrat 2004–2014, refused to admit that Russia was the aggressor in the war in Ukraine. In contrast, Sergey Chernev, the only candidate to advocate openly for a good relationship with the Moldovan authorities and Brussels, finished last, and PAS was unable to offer local support to any of the candidates.

54.6 percent), confirms that local developments in Gagauzia are diverging from the rest of Moldova. Despite an appeal by the government, her election was validated, possibly for fear of destabilizing Gagauzia just a few days before the European Political Community would be welcomed to Moldova.¹⁵ The Anti-Corruption Center's accusations of electoral fraud and corruption could not be documented, making Bashkan Guțul Gagauzia's representative to the Moldovan government. The second round of voting also saw a reshuffle of the Eurosceptic opposition, which is worth examining more closely.

15. Interview with a Moldovan expert working for a Lithuanian and Moldovan think-tank, Chișinău, May 2023.

Sandu's Leadership Tested by the Political System

The Republic of Moldova has a parliamentary system in which the president is elected by universal suffrage for a four-year term. After consulting Parliament, the president appoints the prime minister, who must be approved, along with their government, by a parliamentary confidence vote within two weeks. President Sandu, drawing her legitimacy from her election, must exercise her leadership qualities to meet the multiple challenges and the population's high expectations. Her ability to act relies heavily on a ruling party that is powerful at the national level, in the face of a divided opposition in the process of reshuffling.

Sandu's Leadership: Still Popular but a Divisive Figure

President Sandu, born in 1972, has the career profile of a technocrat: she is an economist by training and has worked for the World Bank. She entered politics in 2012 with Filat's pro-European team and was Minister of Education in his government. She distinguished herself through her determination to fight corruption. In 2016 she created her own political party to promote aspirations for change.

After a first attempt at the presidency in the 2016 elections, where she failed in the second round against Igor Dodon (47.9 percent), she took her revenge four years later by winning 57.7 percent of the vote. She succeeded in winning over public opinion through twin promises of integrity (political responsibility and fighting corruption) and competence (efficiency). She has succeeded in forging a particularly strong bond with right-of-center and centrist voters, as well as part of the left and the increasingly important Moldovan diaspora (93 percent of the 262,000 emigrant voters voted for her in the second round of the election in November 2020).¹⁶ However, even outside Gagauzia, she is

16. The Moldovan diaspora that wanted to get involved in the last round of presidential elections is largely composed of citizens of EU countries, urban dwellers, and holders of Romanian passports. Without the diaspora, Sandu would have had a lead of only twenty-seven thousand voters over her rival. The defeated candidate, Igor Dodon, described the diaspora's vote as a "parallel electorate". See S. Hernandez, "Moldova's Diaspora Flexes Its Political Muscles", *The Atlantic Council*, December 4, 2020, available at: www.atlanticcouncil.org.

encountering growing opposition from the pro-Russian segment of public opinion.

Because of the war in Ukraine, Sandu has been able to create much closer relationships with international leaders, particularly after welcoming Ukrainian refugees in March 2022, which reinforced a trend that had already been noted. She has clearly and unambiguously declared her support for Ukraine, as demonstrated in May 2022 at the European Parliament¹⁷ and during a visit to Bucha in March 2023 to commemorate the first anniversary of the discovery of the massacre.¹⁸ Moldova hosting the meeting of the European Political Community in June 2023 is clearly the result of this diplomatic activism.

On the domestic front, following a speech denouncing the risk of a coup d'état supported and organized by Russia, Sandu replaced her prime minister Natalia Gavrilița, with whom her working relationship had deteriorated, with Dorin Recean.¹⁹ Gavrilița is an economist with a career profile similar to Sandu's, whereas Recean was the president's national defense and security adviser and secretary of Moldova's Supreme Security Council (from February 2022 to February 2023). The appointment of Recean, a former Minister of the Interior in Filat's and Leanca's administrations (2012–2015), demonstrates that priorities have changed. Sandu and Recean have built up a relationship of trust which dates back to their participation in Filat's administration.²⁰ Not being a member of the PAS, Recean has experienced greater difficulty in winning over party members, but his managerial talents are recognized (whereas Sandu is recognized for her political leadership).

Sandu's current challenge is to avoid falling into the "Gorbachev trap" of being popular outside her own borders, with the United States and Europeans, but much more controversial at home. For the moment, she appears to enjoy greater charisma than do her rivals.

17. "We support the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine as we always did. Crimea is Ukraine. Donbas is Ukraine. Kyiv is Ukraine. And they will always be.". See: "Moldova Belongs in the European Union', Says President Maia Sandu", *European Parliament*, May 18, 2022, available at: www.europarl.europa.eu.

18. "Humanity Should Remember Every Ukrainian City, Which Heroism, Resilience Give a Future to All Who Value Life—President on the Occasion of the Anniversary of Bucha De-Occupation", *Presidency of Ukraine*, March 31, 2023, available at: www.president.gov.ua.

19. "Le plan de Poutine pour prendre la Moldavie", *Le Grand Continent*, February 13, 2023, available at: <https://legrandcontinent.eu>.

20. Sandu's political personality has been constructed in opposition to Plahotniuc. Recean (born in 1974) spent some time working in the private sector before returning to an official position in Sandu's administration. He was not involved in the corruption investigations relating to Filat and Plahotniuc.

Strengths and Limitations of the PAS and the Pro-European Camp

The PAS is currently Moldova's biggest party, holding 63 seats out of the total of 101 in the Moldovan Parliament, although its levels of institutionalization remain low. This center-right party was announced by Sandu in December 2015 and set up in May 2016, under the hostile eye of Plahotniuc²¹ and with discreet assistance from the International Republican Institute,²² which held the main levers of power at the time. It rapidly became an associate member of the European People's Party, under the influence of Angela Merkel's CDU. With Sandu as its driving force, the PAS became an effective electoral organization at the national level, winning the presidency in November 2020 and a parliamentary majority in July 2021, but it is less well established at the local level.²³ Igor Grosu, the Speaker of the Moldovan Parliament, is currently the party chair. A look at the voting intention in the presidential elections²⁴ shows that it is Sandu who is the driving force of her party, rather than the converse.

The issue of unity within the ruling party is a critical one if Sandu is to succeed in her process of transforming Moldova. Having a large majority can encourage centrifugal forces within a political movement. While the group was formed around loyalists committed to progress toward Europe and the leadership of Sandu, it has, out of necessity, cautiously grown broader. Some members representing this new party only met each other for the first time in Parliament, after being elected. This lack of experience may explain some occasionally erratic actions that have displayed a distorted perception of the party's democratic functioning. Though factions have not emerged officially, internal divisions nevertheless appear. Such differences can be fluid and not

21. Vladimir Plahotniuc, born in 1966, is a Moldovan politician, businessman, and oligarch. He is a former member of the Moldovan Parliament and was its first Deputy Speaker (2010-2013). He was chairman of the Democratic Party of Moldova between 2016 and 2019. He has been described as the most influential man in the country, as he controlled several key institutions before he was forced to flee Moldova in 2019. Many individuals who worked with him have been dismissed or sacked.

22. J. Repishti, J. Clausen, "IRI Marks 20 Years in Moldova: Part II", *International Republican Institute*, April 5, 2023, available at: www.iri.org.

23. In the municipal elections of October 2019, out of the country's 898 mayors, 191 were from the Democratic Party, 124 from the Socialist Party, 82 from the PAS bloc and the Dignity and Truth Party, 26 from the Liberal-Democratic Party, and 13 from the Shor Party.

24. According to an iDATA survey carried out in March 2023 with a sample of 1,065 people, if the first round of the presidential election had taken place the following Sunday, 29.4% would have voted for Maia Sandu, 17.6% for Igor Dodon, 9.2% for Ilan Shor, 7.2% for Ion Ceban, 5.4% for Ion Chicu, 3.1% for Irina Vlah, 1.7% for Renato Usatii, 0.9% for Vladimir Voronin, and 0.5% for Igor Munteanu. In any event, Sandu has a comfortable lead going into the second round, knowing that these figures do not take the diaspora into account.

necessarily ideological in nature, rather revolving around access to resources and positions of power.

Andrei Spînu is a former Minister of Infrastructure and Regional Development (2021–2023), a post that allows its holder to define policies on invitations to tender. He has caused some controversies due to his name being linked to investments in a number of tax havens.²⁵ The pricing and conclusion procedures of a supply contract with Gazprom are also under investigation. Institutionally, energy issues are now separated from infrastructure issues. When he was unable to return to his post as a member of Parliament for institutional reasons,²⁶ Spînu first became Secretary-General of the PAS (a role which gave him the opportunity to choose candidates) and then Secretary-General to the presidency of the Republic, a key post for ensuring the smooth running of the president's office and coordination of activities. His defenders insist that he has acted as a lightning conductor²⁷ for the majority. He works closely with a group of fifteen to twenty members of Parliament. He therefore cannot oppose the president head-on but has access to a group that is essential to the PAS's stability.

In between the loyalists and the group around Spînu there is a “swamp” (*mlaștină*),²⁸ in which may be found figures like Sergiu Litvinenco, the former Justice Minister (2021–2023), and Olesea Stamate, another former Justice Minister (June to November 2019). Justice is an area in which influences remain powerful²⁹ because of the lack of transparency in the processes for appointing judges. The legal system, the guarantor of a functioning democracy, faces a number of unresolved challenges, despite the expectations of international partners and donors.³⁰ Politically motivated appointments, influences over judicial decisions, corruption, lack of human and financial

25. “Andrei Spînu”, *Rise Moldova*, September 20, 2021, available at: <https://profiles.rise.md>.

26. Article 69 of the Moldovan Constitution stipulates that the term of office of a member of Parliament terminates in the event of a resignation. However, members must resign their seats in order to become ministers, and therefore have no route for returning to Parliament.

27. Interview with a PAS member of the Moldovan Parliament, Chișinău, April 2023.

28. Interview with the head of a Moldovan think tank, Chișinău, April 2023.

29. On the progress and difficulties in reforming justice, see D. Cenusă, “Moldova”, *Nations in Transit 2023*, *Freedom House*, May 2023, available at: <https://freedomhouse.org>.

30. The problems that particularly stand out for international donors include that of wealth acquired by crime, which refers to the situation in which corrupt political leaders or government employees misappropriate public funds or acquire property and assets illegally. To combat this, Moldova needs effective measures for preventing, detecting, and suppressing corruption. This entails strengthening anti-corruption institutions, increasing transparency and responsibility in the management of public funds, and carrying out criminal investigations in cases where wealth has been acquired illegally. Other countries can also assist by freezing and recovering illicit assets held abroad, providing technical assistance, and sharing information about suspicious financial flows.

resources, delays, and a lack of independence and transparency particularly compromise the rule of law, erode public trust, and hamper the efficient operation of the justice sector. Judicial reform involving so-called vetting and pre-vetting measures (processes for evaluating, verifying, and selecting judges and law officers to ensure their integrity, competence, and impartiality)³¹ has therefore been the topic of many debates.

Beyond the PAS, other pro-European parties include the Coalition for Unity and Wellbeing (CUB) (*Coaliția pentru Unitate și Bunăstare*), affiliated to the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE) group. Its leader, the former diplomat and expert Igor Munteanu, offers a more liberal, more unionist alternative of Moldovan integration into the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) than does the PAS.³² For the moment, the CUB, founded in November 2022, is undergoing a structuring process and plans to attract the votes of those who are disappointed with the PAS and of those who favor union with Romania.

In the short and medium terms, Sandu and the PAS, therefore, have no credible competitor outside the party who could match Sandu's level of popularity. The process of state transformation she has set in motion is under way, but political resistance, in particular from political elites and vested interests, and institutional weakness (particularly in expertise and human resources) are impeding her effectiveness. Nevertheless, if votes scatter to the right and the center, that could limit the PAS's ability to secure a comfortable majority.

Head-on Opposition to European Integration

There are two parliamentary groups playing the role of Eurosceptics in the Moldovan Parliament: the socialist and communist bloc and the Shor Party. For parties that have sometimes swung between a multidirectional policy (comparing the advantages of simultaneously developing relationships with the EU and Russia) and a policy that is much more favorable to Russia, the war in Ukraine has shifted their political positions significantly.

The social and communist bloc involves two parties that have long been rivals in the pro-Russian segment of the electorate. They won

31. *Republic of Moldova—Joint opinion of the Venice Commission and the Directorate General of Human Rights and Rule of Law (DGI) of the Council of Europe on the draft law on the Supreme Court of Justice*, Opinion No. 1100/2022, Strasbourg, Venice Commission, October 21, 2022, available at: www.venice.coe.int.

32. Interview with the President of the CUB, Chișinău, April 2023.

thirty-two seats in a distribution of posts that clearly favored the Communist Party. This bloc has not succeeded in increasing its level of support, despite the inflationary environment. Its leader, Igor Dodon,³³ had to step down from the party leadership for a while, before returning, probably against Moscow's wishes, for lack of an alternative leader. Moreover, unlike the period when Dodon was president, the group now has to operate with less funding, no longer receiving the same level of subsidy from the government, Russia, or even Plahotniuc, because it is in opposition. Like its leader, former president Voronin, the Communist Party, which held a majority between 2001 and 2009, is struggling to renew itself. In the (temporary) absence of Igor Dodon, the bloc has lost its energy and vision, and the different factions within it observe each other without being able to clarify their political positions. Confusion among the electorate may therefore lead to a continuing loss of members of Parliament, mayors, or regional executives, with the main beneficiary being the Shor Party.

The Shor Party, with its now five seats in Parliament, is currently viewed as the most dynamic opposition party. For a large section of public opinion, it nevertheless remains toxic because of corruption and suspicions of links with the Russian government. However, this party may become more popular within the Russian-speaking segment of the electorate.³⁴ Ilan Shor, its founder,³⁵ is a controversial businessman and politician who was involved in the scandal of the stolen billion in 2014. Shor was removed from his functions as a member of Parliament in April 2023 as he is in exile in Israel. In 2017 he was sentenced by the lower courts to seven and a half years of imprisonment for money laundering and embezzlement, which was increased to fifteen years by the court of appeal in 2023. The Shor Party, led locally by Marina Tauber, has been involved in organizing protests against the ruling powers (government and president being one and the same, since September 2022) with Russian funding—it is therefore considered a “Kremlin project.” On June 19, the Constitutional Court of the Republic of Moldova declared the Shor Party unconstitutional following a notification from the government asking the court to verify the constitutionality of the Shor Party. Ilan

33. Igor Dodon, born in 1975, was president between 2016 and 2020, after a career involving being a member of Parliament and a minister on several occasions. He started out as a member of the Communist Party before joining the Socialists in 2011. As he did not have a parliamentary majority and was close to Russia, his term of office was marked by several confrontations with Parliament, and he has since been involved in ongoing legal proceedings.

34. Interview with the executive director of a Moldovan think tank, April 2023.

35. Ilan Shor, born in Tel Aviv in 1987, is a Moldovan oligarch. He is married to the Russian singer Jasmin. He was mayor of the Moldovan town of Orhei between 2015 and 2019 and was elected to Parliament in 2019. He is one of the beneficiaries of the 2014 scandal of the stolen billion. He has become an opposition politician, with close links with Russia.

Shor, his supporters and sponsors will probably join the Renaissance Party (*Renastere*): there have already been several defections toward this new structure from the socialists and communists.³⁶ The positioning of this party was unabashedly populist. It used social slogans that targeted the most disadvantaged in society (pensioners, rural dwellers, and so on) and relied on a chain of stores, Merishor, which similarly targets the most disadvantaged.³⁷ The successor party will probably take the same approach.

An Opposition for “Faking European Integration”?

Moldova was governed by pro-European movements between 2009 and 2019. Concrete progress toward the EU was nevertheless limited, in that internal reforms did not match partners’ expectations.

The Democratic Party has been the embodiment of this pro-European positioning: it was part of the various coalitions in power between 2009 and 2019. It is one of the older parties in Moldovan politics, founded in 1997 as the “Movement for a Democratic and Prosperous Moldova” by Dumitru Diacov, who was the Speaker of the Moldovan Parliament between 1997 and 2001. After becoming the Democratic Party of Moldova in 2000, it won thirteen seats in the parliamentary elections of July 2009 and then won seats in all the subsequent parliamentary elections up to 2019. It is a member of the Socialist International and associated with the Party of European Socialists. Plahotniuc became its deputy chair in 2012 and was its chair from 2016 to 2019. The country’s leading oligarch taking over the reins changed the party’s positioning and increased its access to resources. Following the 2019 crisis, the party split in two when an alliance with the Socialist Party emerged: some fifteen members of Parliament decided to remain outside this alliance by creating the Pro-Moldova Party, founded by the former parliamentary speaker Andrian Candu. After Plahotniuc went into exile, the Democratic Party of Moldova was unable to win any seats in the July 2021 parliamentary elections and went into another process of reconstruction, calling itself the *Partidul Social Democrat European*, or the Social-Democratic European Party. Now led by Ion Sula, the party maintains close links with its Romanian counterpart, the Social Democratic Party. This closeness particularly revealed itself when the presidency of the Romanian Cultural Institute

36. To provide examples, the leadership team of Renaissance will include MPs Vasile Bolea, Alexandr Suhodolski, Alexandr Nesterovschi and Irina Lozovan.

37. “While the Government Makes Shows, We Will Help People. Bread at Just Two Lei and Big Discounts in ‘Merisor’ Shops Starting With Monday, Announces Ilan Shor”, *Shor Party official website*, July 21, 2022, available at: <https://partidulsor.md>.

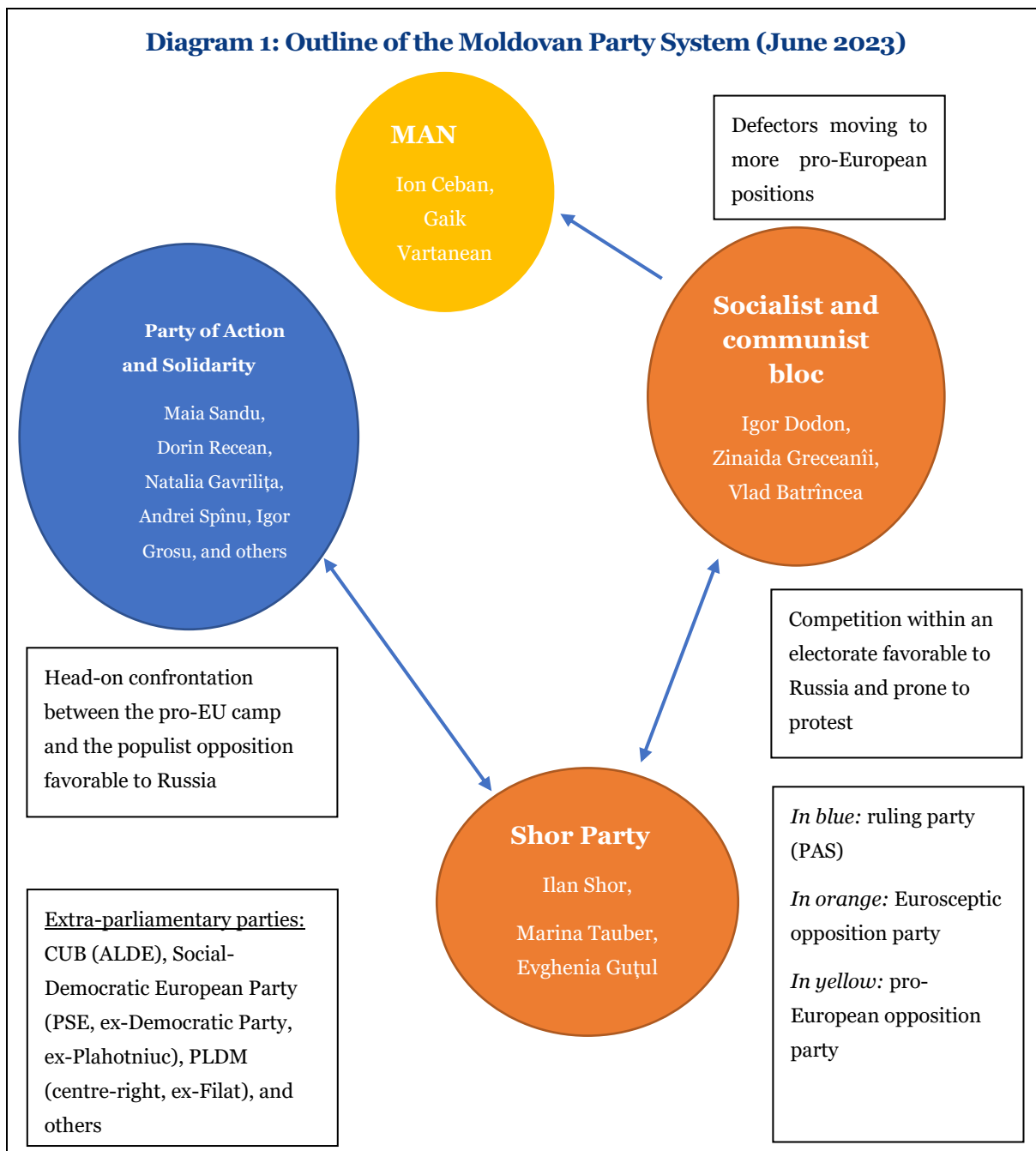
was given to the former party chair and former Minister of Culture, Monica Babuc.

The more recently created National Alternative Movement (MAN) (*Mișcarea Alternativa Națională*) is, in reality, still at the embryonic stage.³⁸ It is centered on the figure of Ion Ceban,³⁹ mayor of Chișinău, who is considered to be a good manager and likely to retain the mayorship of Chișinău in the next round of municipal elections. He was previously a member of the Communist Party and then the Socialist Party, before distancing himself and asserting a more pro-European direction and a center-left positioning. The party's goal is to attract voters who favor progress toward the EU but not necessarily the PAS. In the short term, its success will depend on the possible reelection of Ceban to the Chișinău mayorship in October 2023, and in the medium term, on a rapprochement with other leaders, such as former prime minister Ion Chicu (November 2019–December 2020) or the Bashkan of Gagauzia, Irina Vlah (2015–2023).

38. "Socialist Gaik Vartanean Leaves PSRM. The Party Asks Him to Hand in His Parliamentary Mandate", *Ziarul de Garda*, December 19, 2022, available at: www.zdg.md.

39. Ion Ceban, born in 1980, is a Moldovan politician who has been mayor of Chișinău since 2019. He was deputy speaker of Parliament in 2019.

Diagram 1: Outline of the Moldovan Party System (June 2023)



Forecast: Three Possible Scenarios for the Future Development of Moldova's Political System

Based on the current overview and the different political trends at work, the Moldovan political system may develop in a number of different directions. The scenario method allows us to simulate, in a synthetic overview, a series of events taking a system into a future situation, and provide a map of possible outcomes. The next three elections—the municipal election in fall 2023, the presidential elections in 2024, and the parliamentary elections in 2025—will provide more insight into the country's effective European transformation and the country's level of political confidence.

Continuity: a Second Term for Sandu

Despite numerous internal and external challenges, Moldovan public opinion confirms the decision made in 2020 to follow Sandu. Behind a leader who is uncontested in her camp and with a clear program for the internal transformation of Moldova, the PAS majority can continue to drive rapid structural reform, thanks in particular to the political, technical, and financial support for the government's European goal provided by Western partners. Thanks to an effective “stratcom”, the government has been able to improve its image, its persuasiveness, and its ability to mobilize society.

After a prime minister with a technocrat's career profile in Gavrilița, and a fighting prime minister in Recean, Sandu can opt for a different profile with expertise relevant to the internal reforms to be carried out. One of the challenges of the 2024 campaign is of course the reform of justice, which appears challenging in several respects. Among other priorities, it will probably be necessary to reform territorial governance, moving from the smaller administrative district of the *raion* to the larger one of the *județ*, which will result in regions that take a more active role in carrying out appropriate public policies. The limited size of the thirty-two current *raions*, some of which

represent fewer than five thousand people, is not the most effective design, neither economically or politically.⁴⁰ Successful reform will certainly require overcoming the resistance of local elites and the opposition, taking account of social and financial vulnerabilities, and demonstrating strong coordination and planning skills. These new, more consistent regions will also offer fresh opportunities for decentralized cooperation with European partners.

Disruption: The Overthrow of the Pro-Europeans

While the movement toward Europe driven forward by Sandu remains popular, the consequences of the war in Ukraine, particularly the economic ones, have destroyed the popularity of Sandu and her party. Her movement is rejected in the fall 2023 municipal elections, in which PAS is able to win in very few towns.

The Russian authorities, in conjunction with various oligarchic groups, have spared no effort to derail Sandu's European project. Despite the enactment of a law on information security in June 2022, prohibiting the broadcasting of Russian TV news in Moldova, and the activity of the intelligence and security services against pro-Russian sites, Russian narratives are making headway in public opinion, conveyed mainly by social media (Telegram). Opponents take advantage of inflation and regain the ability to win votes against the ruling party, concluding a divorce between the vote of the diaspora, predominantly supporting Sandu, and the rest of the country. The pro-European camp is more divided. The proven corruption of a prominent member of the PAS helps to undermine the credibility of a team that is one of the most competent and honest in Moldovan history, but is less able than others to get away with making mistakes, because of its initial twin promises of probity and effectiveness. Suspicion has been sustained by Plahotniuc, who keeps *kompromat* (compromising material used for blackmail).⁴¹ Having failed to establish internal checks and balances, the PAS is weakened because it cannot reinvent itself.

40. The prospect of resolving the Transnistrian conflict must be accompanied by a reform of the territory's governance: rather than a homogeneous block, it would be preferable for the territory on the left bank of the River Dniester to be incorporated into two, three, or four *județe*, divided between the north, the south, and the town of Tiraspol. For the time being, Transnistria's final status has not been determined.

41. See the words attributed to Plahotniuc: "It doesn't matter if the devil is black, if the angels' wings aren't pure." Interview with the program director of a Moldovan think tank, Chișinău, April 2023.

While the PAS was able to occupy the whole of this segment in the 2021 parliamentary elections, a more unionist right and a more attractive center-left are tending to deprive the PAS of part of the electorate. In the second round, against a backdrop of increased polarization and tension with Russia and Ukraine (for example, on the issue of the export of Ukrainian grain), a coalition of the discontented obliges Sandu to acknowledge defeat because she has been unable to widen her voter base to the right and center.

Instability: Forced Cohabitation Between Sandu and a Strengthened Opposition

The PAS's political capital, dented by a tough term of office, barely allows it to retain the presidency. Sandu is unable to obtain a parliamentary majority to support her transformation program, but the PAS remains an essential part of any coalition. On some projects, the PAS has to negotiate with the National Alternative Movement (MAN) (*Mișcarea Alternativa Națională*) and the socialist and communist bloc, whereas opposition from the Renaissance Party (formerly Shor Party) is determined and implacable. This situation resembles the short-lived alliance between the PAS and the Socialist Party between June and November 2019.

For the first time in decades, Transnistria becomes one of the deepening fault lines in public opinion. Pro-Europeans emphasize the fact that Transnistria currently does more trade with Europe than with Russia, making a resolution to the conflict a credible prospect. But as in the 2004 Cypriot referendum, a segment of public opinion does not want Transnistria to be integrated into Moldova, considering it to be a burden that will hamper Moldova's progress toward its European goal. The pro-Russians want to avoid any kind of provocation of Moscow and plan to give Tiraspol a more important role so as to maximize Russian influence in Moldova. Managing these contradictory political expectations makes the government's work more difficult, against a backdrop of growing public impatience with the EU, already observed in the Western Balkans.

Reforming activity is therefore largely blocked, particularly on sensitive issues like judicial reform, and the political situation is marked by high levels of instability in governments and in votes in the National Assembly. The energy situation is the subject of much controversy. President Sandu cannot rely on Parliament as she could in her first term, and must simultaneously work on persuading members of Parliament, appeal to her international partners for help, use the threat of dissolution to discipline Parliament, and attempt to achieve reconciliation among the Moldovan people.

Conclusion

Maia Sandu took up the presidency with an agenda for extensive internal reform of the country, but the war in Ukraine upset her plans and caused a political earthquake, the economic consequences of which are far-reaching.

Against this backdrop, the Moldovan government has opted for a clear movement toward Europe, with a degree of diplomatic activity unequalled since independence. The large pro-European demonstration of May 21, 2023, which gathered nearly eighty thousand people in Chişinău, bears witness to the ruling party's ability to mobilize. The dispatch of an EU partnership mission in the Republic of Moldova (EUMP Moldova), announced in April 2023, the adoption of Europe-wide sanctions against Moldovan oligarchs, and the hosting of the European Political Community summit in Chişinău on June 1 and 2, 2023, demonstrate that the EU's interest has also never been keener. At the same time, relations with Russia have deteriorated considerably, at the political level (Russian officials, starting with Putin himself, are banned from entering Moldova) and the institutional level (Moldova has effectively left the Commonwealth of Independent States).

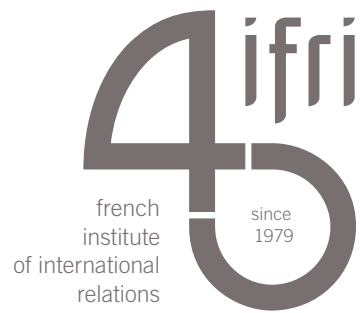
While much emphasis is rightly placed on the geopolitical determinants of Moldova's European transformations, a close examination of internal changes reveals contrasting dynamics.⁴² In the face of internal opposition and hybrid threats, Sandu has definitely set out on her path toward Europe but may still suffer some setbacks, particularly as she has to perform in this political context with a state apparatus that has limited administrative capacity (middle managers in the technology sector and justice, for example). European support is all the more necessary now to prevent this country from falling back into old errors in a considerably more difficult regional context.

42. The iDATA barometer of April 2023 clearly illustrates these internal divisions: While 57.4% of those questioned are favorable to European integration, only 26.1% are favorable to joining NATO. In comparison, 32% are in favor of the re-establishment of the USSR, a figure which has been on an upward trend in recent months.

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27 rue de la Procession 75740 Paris Cedex 15 – France

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