

Foreign Policy Association together with Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung offer you a newsletter on foreign policy and European integration issues of the Republic of Moldova. The newsletter is part of the "Foreign Policy Dialogue" joint Project.

# NEWSLETTER

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## Synthesis and Foreign Policy Debates

The newsletter is developed by Mădălin Necșuțu, editor-coordinator

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### News in Brief



The Constitutional Court confirmed on November 29 the results of the presidential elections of November 3, 2024. The Court validated the election of Maia Sandu as President of Moldova, Constitutional Court President Domnica Manole said. The Court drew attention in its ruling to the unprecedented phenomenon of voter corruption through vote buying, calling for the improvement of legal mechanisms to counter electoral corruption in an effective manner, also in view of the unprecedented manner of corruption cases recorded in this election. The Court noted that according to the Constitution, religious denominations are autonomous and separate from the State. This concept must work in both directions, with state interference in religious activity being prohibited, as well as interference by religious cults in activities related to state power, including electoral processes. The involvement of religious cults in elections violates the rules of democratic electoral competition.



The Republic of Moldova hosted on November 28 a business forum attended by several Romanian and German companies interested in the Moldovan market. The event brought together business leaders and officials from the three countries, promoting regional economic collaboration. The Forum was attended by companies from key sectors such as energy, metalworking, agricultural machinery and technology. Speaking at the event, Deputy Prime Minister Dumitru Alaiba said that investment in the economy means stronger companies offering higher wages. "By investing in Moldova now, you are investing in a future EU member state! It is not just an opportunity, but a strategic chance to benefit from the long-term advantages of a market undergoing an accelerated process of transformation. We are talking about an economic transformation similar to what half of the European continent has gone through in the last 20 years thanks to European integration," the Deputy Prime Minister said.



The gas tariff would be increased by more than 3 MDL per cubic meter, and not 4 MDL as previously requested by Moldovagaz. The National Energy Regulatory Agency examined the company's request and came up with a draft decision. Previously, Moldovagaz had requested to increase the tariff by more than 4 MDL due to the considerable increase in prices on the international market. Currently, the gas tariff is 12.15 MDL/m<sup>3</sup> (excluding VAT). The draft on the tariff increase is expected to be examined at the ANRE meeting on November 29. Moldovagaz had previously submitted to ANRE a request to increase the gas tariff by almost 40%, i.e. by 4 lei more per cubic meter, starting December 1. The application was to be examined on Wednesday, but the agency postponed the meeting to Friday. The institution justified its initiative to urgently adjust natural gas prices by the fact that purchase prices on international markets have increased significantly. ANRE also referred to guaranteeing the viability of the supplier and avoiding financial risks.

## Post-elections Moldova: major changes needed



Deputies in a plenary session of the Moldovan Parliament. Source: Parliament of the Republic of Moldova/facebook

Moldova faces a very delicate moment. After the pro-European government narrowly won a referendum to amend the Constitution for EU membership and Maia Sandu won a second term in office with more nerves and fears than the second-

round score shows, Moldova is facing its biggest test yet. It is the parliamentary elections, which are not looking good for the pro-European PAS. It is hard to believe that a new center-right party can be established in such a short time, or

that it will be able to grow enough in the shadow of PAS to cross the 5% threshold.

Obviously, PAS will no longer take a majority on its own. Under such conditions, one can only imagine a coalition with

► the pro-European center-left parties entering parliament. A new “unorthodox alliance” with the Socialist Party, as in 2019, would be totally out of the question and would lead to certain and quick suicide for PAS as a party. According to the current data, PAS needs to learn to be more pragmatic and more open to dialogue with other political forces.

In all this new political journey, it is essential not to lose sight of the main goal, which is to carry out the reforms promised to the European Union. PAS and Maia Sandu need to look with one eye to the preparations for the parliamentary elections due next

summer and with the other to the reforms underway, in order to ensure a sustained pace in this direction. It will not be easy for PAS to focus on two fronts, and the aggression of malign external actors like Russia could intensify.

Moscow’s goal remains the same - to prevent Moldova from moving closer to the EU, obstructing the European path and closing Chisinau’s window of opportunity in relation to Brussels. Chisinau also needs to navigate smoothly and intelligently through the traps that Russia is preparing for it from the Transnistrian separatist region and the old energy dirty

games, this time in a larger-scale equation that also includes Ukraine.

It is important for the authorities to stay calm in the face of such Russian maneuvers, and for the Western partners to quickly and very diligently help the Republic of Moldova in the face of aggression of whatever kind it is subjected to. Resilience is still at a low level, and Moscow’s threats are very serious. This is why the Republic of Moldova needs to be prepared for any negative scenario involving Russia from the outside with effects on the inside.

*Madalin Nescutu*

## The Moldovan people are definitely pro-European

*Ana Mihailov, director of the Friedrich Ebert Foundation*

**T**he Director of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung in the Republic of Moldova, Ana Mihailov, gave an interview to [IPG Journal](#) in which she talked about the post-electoral prospects of the Republic of Moldova, after the presidential elections and the referendum for accession to the European Union. Russia remains the biggest threat to the security of the Republic of Moldova, and the parliamentary elections scheduled for next summer will be an important test for the European path of the Republic of Moldova. Ana Mihailov also stated that there is a need to reduce polarization in society, but also among the political class, which needs to hold broad and applied discussions between the parties that see the future of Moldova in Europe, without any tendencies to monopolize this national idea by a



single party. We invite you to read the interview in the lines below:

■ On Sunday, Moldovans re-elected President Maia Sandu for a second term. She managed

to defeat a serious competitor, Alexandru Stoianoglo, in a race that went down to the wire. What led her to victory?

■ The incumbent Sandu won the

presidential run-off, defeating her rival Stoianoglo, who was backed by the pro-Russian Socialist Party, with a convincing 55.35 per cent to 44.65 per cent. The race was very tight, with both candidates predicted to win by a narrow margin after the first round of voting. Indeed, Sandu's results within Moldova's borders show that she lost the election by an insignificant margin of 48.8 per cent to Stoianoglo's 51.2 per cent.

This time, as in the previous presidential election, she owes her victory to the diaspora, which mobilised in unprecedented numbers, with a record turnout exceeding that of the 2020 presidential election by some 24 per cent. Diaspora activism in the second round intensified following revelations of electoral fraud in the first round, which came to light through a journalistic investigation into [pro-Russian oligarch Ilan Shor](#). The latter, which reached an emotional climax among voters, the war in neighbouring Ukraine and the geopolitical factor – EU integration versus sliding into Russia's sphere of influence – were decisive for Sandu's victory.

#### ■ What are the main differences between the candidates?

■ Sandu, the incumbent president and the informal leader of the ruling Party of Action and Solidarity (PAS), is a pro-European politician who has contributed to the accelerated Moldovan advancement on the European path. During her term, Moldova obtained EU candidate status in 2022 and began EU accession negotiations last July. Although this success probably wouldn't have been possible without the Russian aggression in Ukraine and

the geopolitical context, credit must be given to Sandu for seizing the momentum and achieving this remarkable result. Sandu enjoys a great deal of support from the international community and has been able to move the country out of the international isolation into which the Plahotniuc regime had dragged it. She condemned the war in Ukraine and joined EU sanctions.

In contrast to Sandu, though he declares himself pro-European and has in the past (as an MP on the ticket of the Democratic Party) contributed to Moldova's Association Agreement and visa liberalisation with the EU, Stoianoglo does not have a strong public European profile. Positioning himself as an independent candidate – but running on behalf of the pro-Russian Socialist Party – has played a trick on him. He did not support the referendum on EU integration, explaining that he was not against the referendum in general, but disagreed with the way it was decided. Stoianoglo also condemned the Russian invasion of Ukraine and is in favour of developing economic relations both with the EU and with Russia, China and other countries in the interests of the country.

#### ■ How did the voting go? What does the record turnout mean? Were there any reports of serious violations?

■ Overall, the voting process can be characterised as calm, although some irregularities were reported, including the photographing of ballots and campaigning near polling stations. There were false bomb alarms at polling stations abroad and in Transdnistria, as

well as at the bridge over the Dniester River.

A completely unforeseen situation was the organised transport of people by air from Russia to vote in Azerbaijan, Turkey and Belarus. There were accusations of Russian interference, which the latter denied, through its proxy, the fugitive oligarch Shor. This is an example of the scale of the electoral fraud that has taken the Moldovan authorities by surprise. However, it should be noted that for security reasons, Moldova opened only two polling stations in Russia, which has the largest number of Moldovan citizens. In a video distributed by the Russian media, Moldovan passengers expressed their anger at being deprived of the right to vote and explained their decision to travel to other countries to do so.

A few weeks before the election, Moldovan police announced that they had uncovered a network of 130 000 people who received money transfers via the Russian banking system to influence the outcome of the referendum. Police claimed that Shor had transferred some \$24 million in October alone.

All of the above, as well as the journalistic investigation into the Shor network, motivated Moldovans overseas to mobilise to vote in an unprecedented manner. The turnout in the second round was 54.34 per cent compared to 51.4 per cent in the first round.

#### ■ Do you think the losing side might initiate some kind of protest?

■ I'm ruling them out for now. Shortly after the results were announced, when it became clear

that the diaspora vote would tip the scale in favour of Sandu, Stoianoglo conceded defeat, saying that democracy means first of all maturity in the face of the results. He urged to put an end to the imposed hatred and division and called on the mass media and NGOs to inform objectively, renouncing manipulation, hysteria and the artificial division of society. Although he mentioned irregularities at the polling stations abroad and in the Transnistrian region, he did not suggest that they might contest the results or organise protests. So, earlier warnings that Shor might try to destabilise the situation through mass unrest did not come true. Nor did the narrow margin of the referendum result trigger any protests.

■ **These elections have highlighted some vulnerabilities in Moldova's pro-European course. Is the country really more divided between pro-European and pro-Russian camps than expected?**

■ I think the election results actually reflect the level of support for European integration among the Moldovan people better than the referendum results. There is also a certain level of support for the EU among Stoianoglo's voters. So, the Moldovan people are definitely pro-European, there is no doubt about that. However, it is true that support for the EU has fluctuated in Moldova, and this is directly linked to the performance of the pro-European parties. An example in this sense is the 2014 bank fraud when support for the EU dropped significantly.

The low EU referendum results can also be explained by how the decision to hold the referendum

was taken and the way in which the whole process was handled. By allowing one party to monopolise the referendum issue and refusing to engage with other pro-European parties, Moldova missed the opportunity to build a broad political and social consensus around European integration as a national idea. This could have helped to strengthen the social cohesion that is so precarious at the moment. All this, together with the xenophobic and hate speech in the run up to the presidential election, has only exacerbated the divisions in society and left a bitter taste.

■ **Last week, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said that the West might lose Moldova in a few years if it continues with its current rhetoric. Do you agree with him?**

■ I think the threat is real. Although Russia did not succeed in destabilising the situation in Moldova with the referendum and the *presidential* election, the latter was only a testing ground for the more important *parliamentary* election due next year. And we have already seen that Russia is always several steps ahead of the Moldovan authorities' ability to anticipate and counteract Russia's hybrid threats. Political stability remains fragile, and in the face of future possible destabilisation by Russia, including through parliamentary elections, Moldova's pro-European political class should learn to cooperate to ensure a sound majority coalition, as a majority for the incumbent ruling Action and Solidarity party is highly unlikely. And then I really don't know what it will take for the EU to reconsider its red lines.

■ **Will the ruling party be able to find common ground with the pro-Russian electorate?**

■ So far, the ruling party has not been able to find common ground even with pro-European parties, let alone with the pro-Russian electorate. This requires a certain flexibility, capacity for dialogue and political maturity. I would say that the Moldovan pro-Russian electorate is not that radical and if the issue is approached skilfully, common ground can be found.

■ **How limited will the president's powers be if a pro-Russian parliament is elected next year?**

■ If a pro-Russian political force comes to power, and this cannot be completely ruled out, such a possibility is real because Moldova is a parliamentary republic and the presidential powers are limited. But such a risk can be avoided through political maturity and the ability to build alliances. And Sandu's PAS should start doing this now. I cannot imagine a coalition with the Socialists – which would be the easiest of all, given their popular support and joint coalitions at local level following last year's local elections – after all, that happened in the presidential election when the Socialists were portrayed by PAS as Russian agents, thieves and Trojan horses. What remains is to start looking for partners in the pro-European camp. Another 'Save Moldova' election campaign may not work in next year's parliamentary election.

*The interview was conducted by Olga Vasylytsova*

## Editorial

# President elect needs to resume the strengthening of social cohesion in Moldovan society

Editorial by Alexei Tulbure,  
political analyst

**The most important lessons from the recent referendum and presidential elections are twofold. The first: There has been a significant accumulation of dissatisfaction within society regarding the results of the PAS government. This is the only party, which in 2021, politically capitalized on the efforts of hundreds of thousands of people who have resisted over several years, and in 2019, liberated the country from the mafia rule. The expectations from PAS, the party that has governed alone since 2021, were correspondingly high. These expectations have largely not been met. Moldovan society has not become fairer, even though justice was what everyone demanded. The justice reform and the fight against corruption, which were supposed to restore justice in the country, have failed. This was even admitted by President Maia Sandu herself.**

The second lesson: In the face of the unprecedented hybrid war launched by Russia against Moldova, it is much more challenging to withstand attacks when your country is divided. In 2020, the presidential candidate Maia Sandu abandoned the geopolitical slogans that had divided the country for many years. By changing her



language and political behaviour, Maia Sandu spoke about the issues affecting everyone in Moldova—corruption, justice reform, poverty, health, the future of children, etc. As a result, alongside her traditional supporters, Maia Sandu received votes from people who had previously supported pro-Russian candidates. In 2020, Maia Sandu achieved a clear victory.

I was convinced that societal consolidation would become the main priority of the new president. Especially since this political behaviour, oriented towards uniting society, had brought victory to Mrs. Sandu. However, I was mistaken. This work has not continued. The war has

exacerbated the situation, painting the world, including Moldova, in black and white. I believe that under the conditions of war, efforts to strengthen societal cohesion should have doubled or even tripled. Stronger social ties within the country would have enhanced not only the capacity for democratic transformation but also the resilience of Moldovans in the face of external threats.

Instead, a different path was taken. The results of the referendum showed the extent to which Moldovan society is divided and how weakened the state is due to this division, unable to efficiently confront non-military external threats. The

situation is worsened by the failed justice reform and the null results in the fight against corruption, as publicly stated by President Maia Sandu.

What comes next? The President is expecting proposals from the government to improve the work of the Anti-Corruption Prosecutor's Office. This is an extremely complicated task: on the one hand, half of the government, including the Minister of Justice (as promised by the President), needs to resign, while on the other hand, reasonable proposals for improving the fight against corruption are expected from the cabinet. For example, I am convinced that there will be no real fight against corruption as long as people who served Plahotniuc's mafia continue to work in the entire prosecution system, including the General Prosecutor's Office, the Anti-Corruption Prosecutor's Office, and the Prosecutor's Office for Special Cases. They are the same people who, under the new conditions, continue to do the same things, benefiting from the chaos.

Calls are being made to take off the white gloves and reform the justice system differently—in the Moldovan style—, as one of the deputies from the ruling party put it.

In connection with these calls, there are several questions. What

does it mean to “take off the white gloves”? Who will implement the reforms differently? The same people who have not done it in the past three years? How can those who are symbols of corruption fight corruption? The appointment of Victor Furtună—a prosecutor with a very bad reputation—as the head of the Prosecutor's Office for Special Cases is a clear example that lessons have not been learned and we should not expect changes.

In light of the above, although I understand the importance of all these issues, I have little hope that plans for radical change in the Moldovan justice system and in the fight against corruption will be realized in the time left until the elections.

Nevertheless, an important task that remains to be solved is the dismantling of Shor's corruption network in Moldova. We need to dismantle it completely, so that it ceases to function. Only in this case can we hope for free and fair parliamentary elections in 2025.

The second task, which needs to be solved at all costs, is to establish a dialogue with the political forces that have a real chance of entering parliament. This dialogue should be established today, so that after the elections, these parties are able to communicate. This will give a chance

to form a functional coalition in the future parliament. A pro-European coalition, which will guarantee the continuation of the country's European course.

This dialogue is an element of European political culture, of the culture of interaction, concessions, and compromises, without which there can be no stable development. Here is a worthy task, a mission, so to say, for the re-elected president—to resume efforts for strengthening social cohesion in Moldovan society.

By the way, this dialogue can begin with two questions, the answers to which will determine the circle of participants: (1) Do the participants in the dialogue agree that political corruption is destroying the country and that it (Shor's network, primarily) needs to be dismantled immediately? (2) Do the participants in the dialogue agree that the EU accession is the only possibility for Moldova to ensure its security, development, and prosperity? In other words, modernization?

A “yes” answer to these questions will provide the premise for the development of dialogue. I am convinced that through our joint efforts, we will succeed in confronting both “Shor's network” and ensuring the dignified continuation of Moldova's course towards European Union accession.

# PAS automatically put everyone in a lower league and simply refused to have a dialogue

**P**olitical analyst Ion Tăbârță said in an interview for FES/APE's foreign policy newsletter that the ruling party has also made a number of mistakes that will most likely be paid for in the upcoming parliamentary elections. The expert analysed some of PAS' actions in recent years and came to the conclusion that one of PAS' biggest shortcomings has been poor communication with citizens. We also discussed about the government reshuffle and the leaving of the party and government by Mr Andrei Spînu, as well as what about the approaches needed in the Transnistrian region and ATU Gagauzia. Read the full interview with expert Ion Tăbârță:

■ What lessons should PAS learn from the latest experience of the presidential elections and the referendum on EU integration? What mistakes should they avoid repeating ahead of next year's parliamentary elections?

■ Perhaps the main lesson for PAS is that elections are not won for life. PAS's problem throughout its time in government, at least in the first two years, is that they have long used one and the same rhetoric, namely the same rhetoric they used until they came to power in July 2021.

Being in power, PAS behaved as if it was in opposition. The narratives promoted and the communication with the society were similar to



the ones PAS had before coming to power.

PAS changed this rhetoric only after the October-November 2023 local elections. Certainly, all things can be debated. But still we have to say that PAS had that pro-European political will as part of the government. At the same time, we need to admit that there have been many achievements in the area of

European integration until the PAS government.

PAS did not realize that it is one thing to be in government and another one to be in opposition. Communication with society is also very important. PAS failed, more often than not, to communicate with society in such a way that their messages reach out to, resonate and feel the pulse of society.

Their messages were not connected to people's problems - although people had more expectations and demands from the government - but were declarative, about the dream of European integration or development partners. PAS failed to connect with the realities of society.

It also completely lacked political dialogue with other pro-European partners.

PAS automatically put everyone in a lower league and simply refused to have a dialogue. They could have started the dialogue from the very beginning, right after the parliamentary elections in 2021, especially since PAS's human resource pool is very scarce.

In that case, if they had co-opted members of other parties into the act of governance, I think that would have added value to governance, but also to the image of PAS. Especially since, when the ACUM bloc was in power, the electorate could not distinguish between PAS and the Justice and Truth Party Platform (PPDA). The difference was rather made between the personal rating of Maia Sandu and that of Andrei Nastase.

### **Fake reshuffles**

■ **President Maia Sandu said between the two voting rounds that she had received the message from society and that there would be reshuffles in the government, but we saw more of a sham about the reshuffles. Were there more serious government reshuffles needed or not?**

■ I think more serious reshuffles were needed. At the same time, we have to look at the context in which these

reshuffles were launched - after the first round, when the referendum was practically on the brink of failure, and there was a risk that President Maia Sandu would lose the elections.

In the first days after the first round, they were analyzing where Sandu could have accumulated more votes and they didn't really see where from. In the end, we saw the mobilization of the diaspora, but also the mobilization of the electorate in Chisinau, which brought victory to the President. However, under the impact of the emotions that the referendum could have failed, that the presidential election could have been lost, PAS and the President understood that some changes were needed.

They came then with the promise that they heard the needs of the citizens and that they would act. The expectations were high in that sense, and people eventually understood that PAS had a weak mandate for government and that certain ministers needed to be changed.

Against the backdrop of this perception in society that change is needed, messages have been coming since the election period. The expectations from PAS were high, but they did not materialize. We have seen insignificant reshuffling. In fact, the main essence of the reshuffles was the departure of Andrei Spînu, Minister of Infrastructure and Regional Development. We don't know whether he left voluntarily or was suggested to leave.

### **Without important pieces**

■ **How much will Andrei Spînu's departure from the government**

**and PAS weigh in the medium term? Spînu was the politician with a considerable political anti-rating and was somehow the negative image of the party, whether or not the accusations against him were justified. Will his departure matter or not?**

■ A lot has been said about Andrei Spînu's political influence within the party. There has also been talk in the past about the fact that if he leaves PAS, a certain number of MPs from PAS may also leave with him.

It remains to be seen whether this will happen, whether those who teamed up with Andrei Spînu will leave at his behest. We shall also see how much Andrei Spînu's managerial qualities mattered to the party. Even President Sandu liked him, saying that he is one of the few people in PAS who has managerial skills and who is not afraid to take decisions.

As for his managerial qualities, I honestly do not know about it. Maybe he played an important role in the organization of the European Political Community summit and of the event last year, called the European Moldova Movement.

At the same time, looking at the way he organizes certain tenders, there have certainly been problems of financial integrity. Even if we assume that these were just suspicions, these scandals were not handled well in public.

There were always problems related to the tenders organized by Andrei Spînu - from the tenders related to the construction of the Isaccea-Vulcănești-Chisinau high-voltage line to the tenders on commercial spaces at the Chisinau Airport.



Therefore, it remains to be seen what Mr. Spînu's influence was within the party, if it was really as important as it is believed to be.

### **Cooperation and flexibility**

■ **In the run-up to the parliamentary elections, PAS needs now to build bridges of dialogue with the centre-left parties for a possible governing alliance since according to the polls, PAS will not be able to repeat the results of the July 2021 parliamentary elections. Or should they wait for the final results of the next year elections and then hold talks with them?**

■ Obviously, bridges should not be burned. I am referring here to the centre-left parties. Of course, there has to be real competition, and certain limits must not be exceeded. This competition, after all, must respect certain rules - there should not be dishonest tricks that burn all bridges, so that talks can be held and alliances built.

The PAS went for the strategy of empowering the electorate on the right and center-right of the political spectrum, but built alliances at the local level with the socialists. Probably they understood that in Moldova, the center political zone cannot be so easily polarized.

If PAS counted that the entire centrist electorate would automatically vote for them, like in the 2021 parliamentary elections, they were wrong. Then, the elections were held

in a different political context, while now certain political alternatives have emerged on the political centre. For example, the main alternative in the center, which replaced the Democratic Party, is the National Alternative Movement of the Chisinau Mayor Ion Ceban.

Thus, if we want to have a pro-European government, even if slightly diluted, we will necessarily have to consider an alliance between PAS, which is a right-wing party, and MAN Party, a centre-left party. In a certain context, even Renato Usatii's party could be considered.

After the upcoming parliamentary elections, PAS should not reject these centrist political actors, who may not be as ardent pro-Europeans as them, but who are in favour of good relationship with the EU and are willing to negotiate. Otherwise, they will push them into an alliance with left-wing parties. We will no longer have one-party governments, and PAS must understand this. PAS is always being told that they can no longer govern by themselves, and the local elections have shown them this.

### **Policies towards Tiraspol**

■ **What policies should the government pursue towards the breakaway Transnistrian region in the current context? Is there a context for a quicker resolution of this conflict or should PAS continue to pursue a policy of small and cautious steps towards Tiraspol?**

■ We need to understand our approach with regard to the Transnistrian region. I do not think that a dramatic change overnight is possible.

Let us admit that tomorrow we would sign a document on a new political status for Transnistria. Fine, but what do we do with this region? Or rather, what do we do with the residents there?

We cannot integrate into our society the ethnic Gagauz who have been in the constitutional field of the Republic of Moldova for more than 30 years. What do we do with them?

In many respects, the people in the Transnistrian region are more loyal to the Republic of Moldova than the Gagauz people. But in any case, there is a critical mass in the Transnistrian region that has lived in a completely different information space. They may not be anti-Europeans, but that does not mean they are not also pro-Russian and do not want a relationship with Russia.

This electorate is not necessarily the most pro-European. If it is pro-European, it is more for practical and pragmatic reasons. These citizens have Moldovan or Romanian passports to work in Europe. The 30% or so of Transnistrians who voted 'yes' in the referendum are the convinced pro-European electorate. Those from the central part of the region voted against the referendum.

■ **Thank you!**

# Imperative strategies and moves for the continuation of the pro-European path of Moldova

*Analysis by Madalin Necsutu, journalist with TVR Moldova and Balkan Insight*

**T**he result of the presidential elections of November 3, won by Maia Sandu with the help of diaspora votes, as well as the close score of the referendum to amend the Constitution in order to introduce a European path for the Republic of Moldova, change the paradigm of political strategy and strongly question the aspirations and European path of the Republic of Moldova.

The pro-European ruling party, Action and Solidarity (PAS), as well as President Maia Sandu, have felt the full effects of the erosion of the government and the effects of the crisis which it has navigated with varying degrees of success, as well as the effects of Russia's hybrid war which they have been unable to counter effectively.

All these aspects inevitably led to a very modest score in the referendum on EU integration and to high emotions in the second round of the presidential elections for Maia Sandu to win a second presidential term, despite a score difference of more than 10% against his opponent Alexandr Stoianoglo.

## **The need to reinvent PAS**

In this regard, PAS and Maia Sandu need to do some deep



introspection within the party and rethink a winning strategy for the parliamentary elections next summer. This type of election is completely different from the presidential elections, and PAS can no longer rely solely on the electoral lifeline coming from the diaspora. What is more, Russia will throw into the fray all the propaganda arsenal and all the hybrid warfare tools at its disposal to stop this pro-European desire of Chisinau.

The landslide result with which PAS won the 2021 parliamentary elections and obtained 63 seats out of a total of 101 has also had the negative effect of making the party opaque in relation to collaboration with other political forces. From the height of this position of having all

the power, PAS has closed any avenue for developing relations with other pro-European political forces.

Instead, PAS has preferred to have a collaborative relationship only with NGOs that have been instrumental in Moldova's European journey, using their expertise and energy, especially in the processes that followed after June 2022, when the EU accepted Moldova's application for EU membership.

PAS gradually transformed itself into the "one against all" party and created major frustrations among other pro-European parties, which became the fiercest opponents of PAS policies, which were not common policies, but more the imposition

of the will of the ruling party and Maia Sandu. In this regard, the most eloquent example is the referendum on European integration, which was not negotiated beforehand, but rather imposed on the pro-European parties, and the results were disastrous, almost a failure.

Although they have all said that they would support it in declaration, the vast majority of them have not de facto done so. Saving the referendum on European integration came mainly thanks to the work of civil society and the press, along with sporadic and limited action by the ruling party.

Also, PAS strategists in charge of the presidential election campaign adopted a weak and safe strategy to ensure Maia Sandu a light electoral campaign, only among her sympathizers and where local PAS leaders in the territory had a great influence.

The feeling from one side was that Maia Sandu was kept in an “ivory tower”, without having much contact with the reality on the grass roots. And this was seen in the presidential tally which reflected the harsh reality that Maia Sandu lost half the battle, thinking of the domestic vote.

Under these circumstances, such strategies need to be avoided for the parliamentary elections, while PAS members need to roll up their sleeves and start actively running door-to-door campaigns in the territory and communicate their plans and what European integration means, in order to expand their electoral base, which is mainly concentrated in the centre of the country.

Clear strategies are needed to change the societal perception built by Russian propaganda that Moldova’s European road is just a ‘Fata

Morgana’ effect and a closed road for the Republic of Moldova. However, there are also good steps made by PAS by dislodging some behind-the-curtain strategists with poor political anti-rating and poor political appeal. This, if it proves to be real, will be a boost for the party but also for PAS voters.

### ***Mistakes and alternatives to governing***

However, PAS has again continued to make mistakes. Although Maia Sandu gave assurances that she had heard the voice of the people and that serious changes would follow through government reshuffles, this process again turned out to be a sham and almost non-existent, with two ministers of the Recean government changing and one minister moving from one portfolio to another.

This shows a poor understanding of the changes people expect from this government. PAS has once again turned out to be rather a closed caste which is unwilling to give freer rein to experts who would come up with a new breath of fresh air in these last hundred meters of the Recean government.

Also, PAS has not yet shown, even if it is still early, that it wants a more involved dialogue with the other pro-European political forces with which it could form a coalition government in the run-up to the parliamentary elections. It is hard to believe that, if it has not succeeded so far, there is still time and political human resources on the pro-European right or centre-right for a junior party with which PAS could form a governing alliance.

Rather, all the calculations of this complicated political equation indicate that PAS needs to go and

find allies in the centre-left camp, where there is an important electoral segment that is trying to avoid the East-West polarization of Moldovan society.

PAS needs to develop a dialogue with Renato Usatii’s Partidul Nostru (Our Party), which came third in the presidential election.

The European Social Democratic Party (PSDE) led by Ion Sula should not be excluded from these calculations. The party will most likely be taken over by former foreign minister Tudor Ulianoschi, who may give the PSDE a new life. PSDE scored well in the November 2023 local elections and still has a vast network on the ground since the days when the Democratic Party, the forerunner of PSDE, was ruled with an iron fist by the now-fugitive oligarch Vladimir Plahotniuc.

Inevitably, PAS will have to find a way to talk to the National Alternative Movement (MAN) party of Chisinau mayor Ion Ceban, who is trying to rebrand himself as pro-European after previously being one of the leaders of the pro-Kremlin Party of Socialists of the Republic of Moldova. A first step in this direction was taken when, between the first and second rounds of the presidential elections, Ion Ceban half-heartedly supported Maia Sandu. In any case, the meeting between the two was a step forward towards thawing, albeit a very self-interested and perhaps insincere one, between PAS and Maia Sandu on the one hand, and MAN and Ion Ceban on the other.

We should not rule out also the Party for Development and Consolidation of Moldova (PDCM), led by former prime minister Ion Chicu, in this sense. Here things are more complicated because of long-standing antipathies, but not impossible.

### **Compromise and political flexibility**

However, the art of compromise, which is inherent in politics, could have certain effects. If all these center-left political parties, with stronger or softer pro-European visions, come together, it will be impossible for PAS to govern without them. However, it would be to PAS's advantage if these parties did not unite so as not to give the center-left a greater weight. PAS would be in a better position if it could negotiate in part with these parties if they pass the 5% threshold.

Through all these petty political calculations, it is necessary for the ruling party to be extremely attentive

to the technical process of European integration and to continue the reforms necessary to move closer to the EU. It is imperative that PAS's attention is primarily focused on this process and only secondarily on the power equation by winning new political allies in a new post-election government configuration in the summer of 2025.

What is certain is that PAS needs to become flexible, ready to use the art of compromise and at times to think Machiavellian in order to maintain power. It is a fine balancing act, and PAS must use the experience it has gained in recent years to stay in power. Crucially, the pro-European power and these ongoing reforms need to be time-framed into two

electoral cycles that will add up to a total of eight years. Obviously, ones that run in parallel with the presidential terms of Maia Sandu, who continues to have by far the greatest imagological traction for the idea of European integration.

Only such a political reality could provide the necessary tools to achieve the ultimate goal of Moldova's EU membership in 2030. It is important for PAS to continue to take the right steps and remain vigilant, otherwise the Republic of Moldova risks again missing a historic chance to join the EU, and a new window of opportunity in this would be almost impossible in the near future for Chisinau in the current extremely turbulent global context.

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