



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

With two competing Chief Justices named to

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

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

The document rails against the two disasters that it claims befell Moldova: Firstly, the fall of the Soviet BDC 0 -1.429 TD

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

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

It seems clear that the Communist and Socialist tirades about NATO tanks and European corruption of traditional values simply did not motivate the

A final and decisive component of the election

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

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

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

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

## Endnotes

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