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The reconfiguration of the parliament in terms of relations between the parliamentary majority and minority Sergiu Lipcean

The dismissal of the Sandu government by PSRM and the PDM has put an end to the extended honeymoon manifested in the collaboration in the parliament between the ACUM bloc and PSRM. In spite of the aligned vote of the Socialists and Democrats, several representatives of both parties have expressed the idea that the common vote does not imply the formation of a government coalition. However, the credibility of such statements is questionable due to the way in which the redistribution leadership positions at the level of parliamentary committees took place, namely by replacing the representatives of the ACUM bloc with the representatives of the two named parties. This reapportionment has profound implications for the reconfiguration of the balance of power both at the level of the standing committees and in relation to the activity of the Parliament in general.

Waiting for the inevitable. In principle, the reconfiguration of parliamentary power balance was a matter of time stemming from the political deal concluded between PSRM and PDM, concerned with the Sandu government's offensive in directions that were too sensitive and disturbing for the peace and political comfort of both parties. Accordingly, the new government coalition has decided to remove the representatives of the ACUM bloc from the majority of the previously held positions, acting in an extreme manner, if not in violation of the Parliament's regulation. Some voices from the opposition have accused the new majority of the violation, at least at the procedural level, of the regulatory provisions in the process of dismissing the former chairmen of the parliamentary committees and nominating the new ones. Some of these chairmen, in anticipation of their forced dismissal, resigned without waiting for the parliamentary vote.

This situation appears quite clear from a mathematical point of view. After the fall of the Sandu government, the revision of the parliamentary majority at the standing committee level occurred by replacing the members of the PAS and PDA factions with the PDM members who allied with the PSRM. This is easily noticeable from figures 1 and 2, which reflect the share of the parliamentary majority and minority for each standing committee before and after the dismissal of the Sandu government. In both cases, we observe the same political logic whereby parliamentary majority has ensured a comfortable control in each parliamentary committee. Since there are more PDM deputies than deputies belonging to the ACUM bloc, securing a PSRM-PDM majority in each the standing committee proved to be a relatively easy task.

Implications for the opposition. However, the analysis of these figures needs to be placed in a broader context, namely by assessing the ability of the parliamentary opposition to become at least heard if not taken into consideration in terms of its capacity to shape the parliamentary agenda. If one looks at the newly created circumstances from this perspective, then it becomes clear that the reconfiguration of the power balance at the standing committee level has left the parliamentary opposition without any effective tool to influence the parliamentary agenda.

After the fall of the Sandu government, the new parliamentary opposition turned out to be marginalized very quickly through the reapportionment of the chairmen positions for the strategic committees between PSRM and PDM. Accordingly, the Committee on Economy, Budget and Finance and the Committee for the Judiciary, Appointments, and Immunities were taken over by the PSRM while the the Committee on National Security, Defense, and Public Order and the Foreign Policy and European Integration Committee were taken over by the PDM. Although it is too early

to estimate the impact of this redistribution on the committees' efficiency in carrying out their activity, it is certain that these readjustments will affect not only the continuity of their daily work but also their agenda through much more careful filtering of the considered policy issues. It is unlikely that those policy issues that proved to be a priority for the former majority will be kept on the parliamentary agenda.

Figure 1. The balance of power between the parliamentary majority (PSRM + ACUM) and the parliamentary minority until the fall of the Sandu government

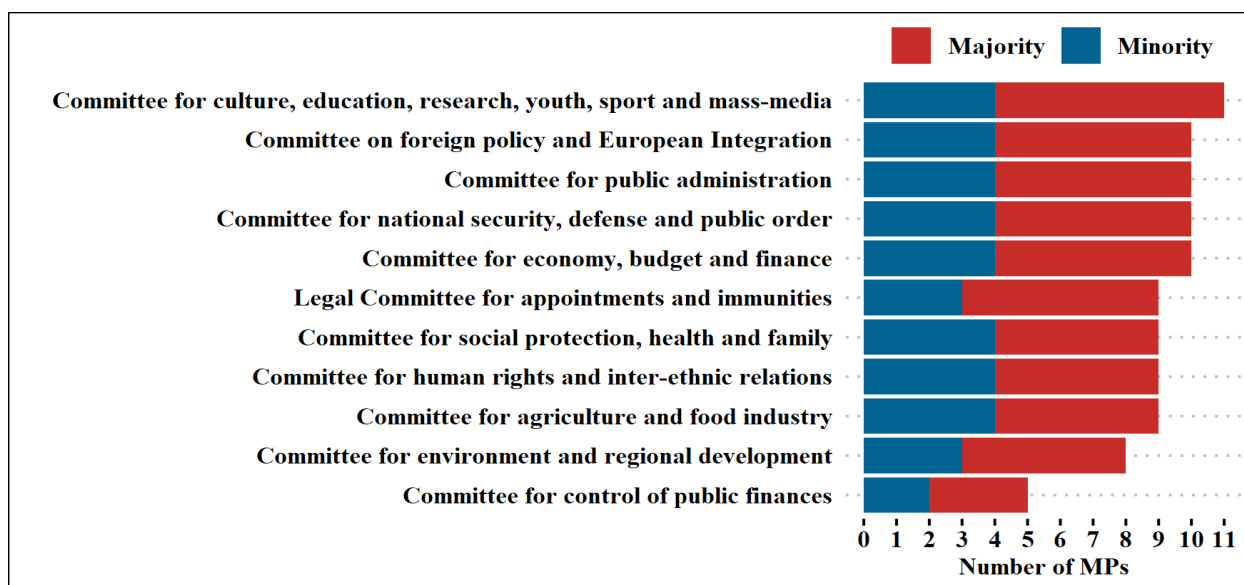
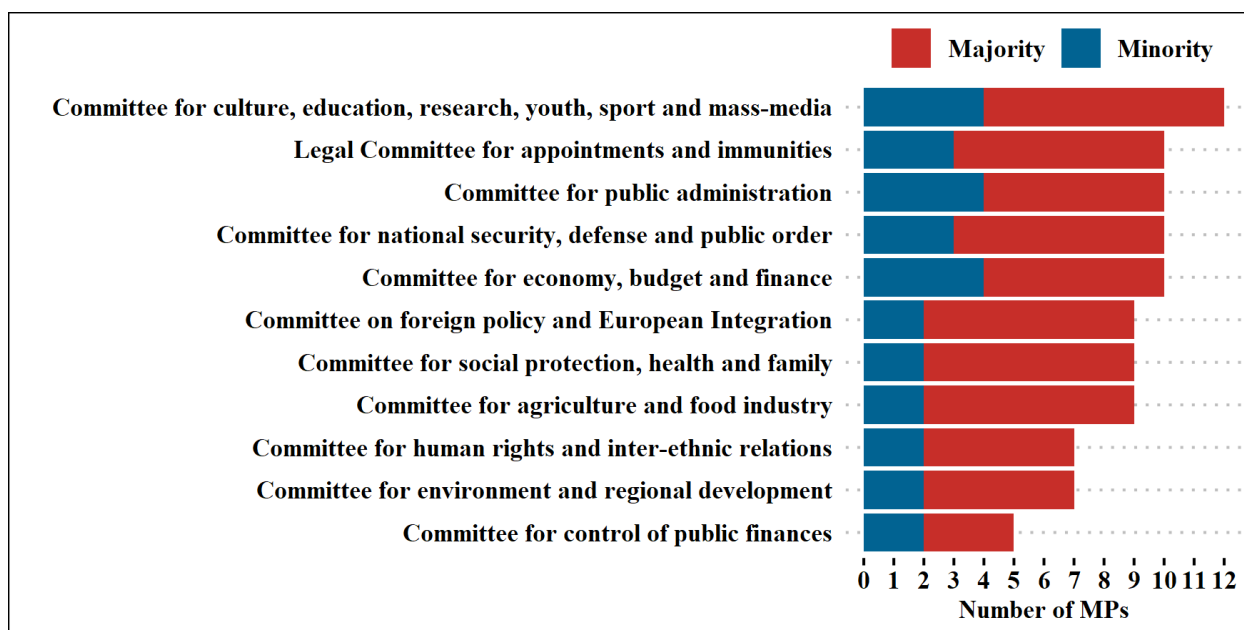


Figure 1. The balance of power between the parliamentary majority (PSRM + PDM) and the parliamentary minority after the fall of the Sandu government



Source: Author's making

The significance of the parliamentary agenda. The relevance of agenda-setting in this context is essential because, regardless of the importance or the topicality of any policy issue for society, it will not be considered as such and properly addressed as long as it is not acknowledged and put on the political agenda. Thus, putting an issue on the parliamentary agenda represents only the first step in recognizing the existence of a problem that needs to be addressed as well as the intention of engaging in a public debate to identify alternative solutions. In this context, the reconfiguration of the committees will have profound implications for the opposition's ability to counterbalance the actions of the new parliamentary majority.

This fact is all the more important because the new parliamentary majority is unlikely to exert pressure on the state institutions to pursue the initiated investigations into the former government's anti-democratic slippages, into the dubious privatizations of the state-owned enterprises and public property or into the theft of the billion. From this

perspective, it is difficult to conceive that the current parliamentary majority, will be consistent in fighting against market monopolies, cartels and oligarchic tendencies and will promote transparency and market competition. Although these actions were initiated by the former parliamentary majority composed at the time by ACUM and PSRM, they were much more forcefully promoted by the ACUM representatives who took the lead in this process.

Given that the representatives of the ACUM bloc have been removed from the leadership positions of the parliamentary committees, positions that proved to be instrumental not only in promoting an anti-corruption message but also in strengthening the integrity of public office through more targeted measures, it is hard to believe that these endeavours will be further backed up by the PDM and PSRM representatives. Considering that the first coalition partner (PDM) is the party accused of state capture and the deployment of state institutions to advance narrow group interests (an accusation advanced even by its current coalition partner), while the second (PSRM) is the party which is more and more frequently charged with using the same subversive tools and practices to seize power, undermine state institutions and use them for party and personal purposes, the odds of a potential collaboration between the parliamentary majority and minority are minimal.

Conclusion and prospects. In light of the above considerations, we arrive at the conclusion that the parliamentary opposition has limited tools to effectively influence decision-making at the standing committee level, where the actual battles take place over the content of the draft laws prior to being submitted for the plenary debate. Even in the case of the two committees where the opposition currently holds the presidency – the Committee on Human Rights and Interethnic Relations, and the Committee for the Control of the Public Finances – the opposition will not be able to prevail in case of dissent on certain issues, as it stands in minority in both these committees. Accordingly, as far as the legislative process is concerned, any opposition initiative can be rejected or blocked by the parliamentary majority at little to no cost. More importantly, the current endowments of the opposition will prevent it to fully exercise even parliamentary control. This tool has started to be effectively used by the legislative both to strengthen the accountability of state institutions and to gain access to more sensitive information of public interest which was kept under lock and key by the former government under various pretexts. In the current situation, there is a high probability of returning to a vicious practice employed by state institutions of providing merely formal answers without much substance to the inquiries of the opposition representatives. Nevertheless, parliamentary interpellations addressed to the state institutions are probably the most effective tool, not only for shaping political (if not parliamentary) agenda by bringing into the epicentre of public debates issues of major political and societal interest but also for counteracting potential antidemocratic slippages.