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**THE THIRD WAVE: THE DEMOCRATIZATION OF THE POST-SOVIET SPACE
AND THE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS IN THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA**

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The results of the presidential elections in the Republic of Moldova, in which Maia Sandu obtain a definite victory over Igor Dodon, can be decisive for the future of the country and must be interpreted in the broader context of democratization of the post-Soviet space. The recent (post) electoral processes in Belarus or Kyrgyzstan, Georgia, or the Republic of Moldova, are all part of a third small wave of democratization that is sweeping the former Soviet republics. Against the background of these regional trends, a series of ex-ante findings are emerging, findings which are related to three dimensions of the local political process: the voters; the political class; and the mandate of the new president.

Big waves and small waves: the democratization of the post-Soviet space

Samuel Huntington's work "The third wave: democratization at the end of the Twentieth Century" was published in the year of the collapse of the USSR, which is why the thesis of "waves of democratization" became very popular around the world. After the consumption of the first two waves (of 1828-1926, and 1943-1962 respectively), the American political scientist described the triggering of a "third wave" of democratization in 1974-1990, during which time more than 30 states in Europe, Latin America or Asia underwent a transition to democracy.

The third wave heralded the democratic transition in the post-Soviet space, although Huntington warned that each wave of democratization was followed by a reverse wave characterized by a returning to authoritarian or dictatorial regimes, as it was in 1922-1942 or during the sixth and seventh decades of the twentieth century. At the same time, in his later publications, he declared Islamic fundamentalism and Asian authoritarianism as the main future threats to democracy. Russia has gradually shifted to the second model – the Asian authoritarianism – and has cultivated the model in the CIS states, while in some Central Asian states authoritarianism has become mixed with Islamic fundamentalism.

Huntington's thesis can be developed by introducing the category of small waves (their magnitude is not global, but geographically limited, while their duration is from 7 to 15 years) within large waves, in order to continue the analogy with the physical geography. In fact, small waves prove that the big waves of democratization are not linear processes, but rather cyclical and that the transition to democracy is gradual and difficult. The democratization of the post-Soviet space is the most obvious expression of the importance of small waves, as a third such democratic attempt is currently starting in the region.

The first such wave was triggered in 1985 in the USSR, along with "Glasnost" and "Perestroika", and has accompanied the transition to democracy and the market economy until the crisis of 1998. The second wave was triggered by the "colored revolutions" of 2003-2005, while the events in Belarus, Kyrgyzstan, Georgia, and the Republic of Moldova, along with the regional democratic outbursts in Russia (the Khabarovsk case), are indicating the start of a "third wave" of democratization in the post-Soviet space. The regional dimension and the short duration of these waves do not diminish their importance for the fate of the post-Soviet space. These "pains of democratic conceivment" demonstrate the unsustainability of the autocratic model of government for the development of states and societies in the region and indicate the natural struggle of citizens for change.

The new normal: the voters and the political class in the Republic of Moldova

The presidential elections have first of all changed the Moldovan political class and the voters. The exemplary mobilization of the diaspora, which translated into over 262 thousand voters in the second round, is the most obvious expression of an informed and determined voter, difficult to manipulate by career "polit-technologies". Also, the general turnout of about 1 million 634 thousand voters, a few tens of thousands more than in the second round of the presidential elections in 2016, and with over 200 thousand more than in the parliamentary elections in 2019, is a civic manifestation worth mentioning, especially in the circumstances of the local demographic realities. Finally, the internal political culture of the society is experiencing a slightly positive dynamic, proof that the general elections can be won with less money.

On the other hand, young people aged 18-25 remain the most passive electorate in the Republic of Moldova, with a share of 8.44% of the turnout in the second round of presidential elections. At the same time, the electorate of the 56+ age, representing a share of about 42% of the turnout in the second round of the presidential election, remains dependent on "electoral handouts" and, as a consequence, vulnerable to manipulation campaigns. Finally, geopolitics and old ethnolinguistic phobias divided society furthermore. If in the first round the discussions were mainly focused on the natural needs of a society devastated by corruption, pandemic, and poverty, then in the second round, the outgoing president, Igor Dodon, felt the need to accentuate existing social cleavages and obstruct the process of consolidating society.

The new balance or "new normality" is even more evident in the case of political parties, although the elections were presidential, and the participation of political parties was re-interpreted by changes in electoral legislation. Thus, on the center-right level, the Action and Solidarity Party (PAS) has consolidated its position as the main pro-European force in the Republic of Moldova and is part of the family of the EPP family. The difficulty for the pro-European parties, but also for the PAS, stems from the fact that Ms. Maia Sandu's party has absorbed most of the pro-European electorate (and much of the unionist one) and, as a result, has been left without potential partners with whom to be able to create pro-European parliamentary majorities. The Political Party "The Dignity and Truth Platform" (PPPDA) is currently in the area of the margin of error, according to polls and the score obtained by Andrei Nastase in the first round of the presidential election. The unionist parties are struggling to consolidate and are yet to be confirmed, while other projects are not very relevant. The paradox is that the pro-European electorate in the Republic of Moldova remains politically under-expressed, although it is more numerous than the one oriented towards the Eurasian vector, which is proof that there are problems in the organization of political parties.

On the center-left side of the spectrum, the Party of Socialists of the Republic of Moldova (PSRM) emerged weakened from these presidential elections but remains the main pro-Russian party. More importantly, in this segment there are two other political parties with great potential to enter the Parliament and, in certain circumstances, to create government majorities with PSRM. The political party Our Party (PN) is strengthened by the performance of its leader, Renato Usatâi, one of the surprises of this election campaign (17% of votes in the first round), while the Șor Party has re-confirmed, by the result obtained by its own presidential candidate that it can easily cross the electoral threshold. Moreover, the scenario in which PN becomes, at least for an electoral cycle, the main center-left party in the Republic of Moldova, and PSRM or another party to be the junior partner, cannot be excluded. Because beyond the personal animosities towards Igor Dodon, Renato Usatâi's behavior in this campaign also aimed for the weakening of

PSRM, and for the return to the situation of 2014. In any case, PN and Șor Party took votes traditionally considered of right-wing orientation and can not be entirely representative for the leftist political spectrum of the Republic of Moldova.

The president's mandate: political constraints and popular expectations

The mandate of the president-elect, Mrs. Maia Sandu, must be understood not only in terms of constitutional powers but especially in terms of the internal political process and in terms of this "third wave" of democratization, which history has reserved for the post-Soviet space and the Republic of Moldova. The reverse waves that do not want change are consolidating concomitantly with those of democratization, as proved by the accession to power of the Agrarian faction in 1994, or by the ever-growing slip towards authoritarianism of President Vladimir Voronin (especially after the failure to win the local election in Chișinău in 2007) and by the subsequent capture of the state, following a last democratic outburst during the "second wave", on April 7, 2009.

This time, the "stability" party, which refuses to change, is regrouping in the Parliament around the PSRM and the new political hybrid formed by the deputies of the Șor Party and "Pro Moldova" defectors. Igor Dodon and his foreign partners are most likely preparing a parliamentary majority and a Government hostile to the new President of the Republic of Moldova. After years of claiming additional powers for President, of wishing for a presidential republic, on November 16, 2020, Igor Dodon reminded the president-elect that the Republic of Moldova is a parliamentary republic. It is not so much the constitutional constraints, as it is this political hostility that will be the major obstacle towards achieving the democratic changes and electoral promises of Maia Sandu.

After all, a "maximalist mandate" that immediately addresses all citizens' expectations is neither feasible nor relevant for the new president. The financial and economic situation, the healthcare realities, or the persistent social problems will necessarily require the involvement of the President, who can negotiate the provision of external technical and financial assistance. Ms. Sandu will also be required to take a position on other sectoral issues that will need attention, and she will have a busy foreign agenda. However, the current president's mandate is (at least in the short and medium-term) to destroy, not to build. The new president is tasked with destroying corruption and smuggling schemes, halting the promotion of corrupt judges and prosecutors, de-secreting information of public interest concerning the captured state, dismantling corrupt majorities in the parliament, and promoting an early parliamentary elections agenda. Most likely, we will witness serious fighting between different state institutions. The Republic of Moldova has a new chance to become the leader of this new wave of democratization in the post-Soviet space, a model to be followed for other ex-Soviet states, but only through wise and consistent management of this enormous credit from citizens. The new president can carry out these steps only with the support of professional teams from pro-European parties and the President's Apparatus, people who understand exactly the mandate with which they were invested. At the same time, civil society, the free press, and society as a whole must support the dismantling of the corrupt regime, but avoid the "political canonization" of the new President and/or of new politicians, so as not to repeat the mistakes after 2009, when they spared from too much criticism the self-proclaimed pro-European alliances. Marcus Aurelius, one of the wisest Roman emperors who embodied Plato's ideal of "philosopher-king", when he went out in public, was accompanied by the most faithful servant who, when the crowds acclaimed and idolized the emperor, constantly whispered to him in the ear: "you are but a man."