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The early parliamentary elections of July 11, 2021: the Republic of Moldova between past and future

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The early parliamentary elections of July 11, 2021, will end a cycle in the evolution of the Moldovan political system (the period of the oligarchic regime) and will establish the beginning of a new stage – of democratization and modernization of the Republic of Moldova according to the European model. The categorical, first of its kind, victory of a pro-European right-wing party, opens new perspectives for the political evolution of the Republic of Moldova. The future evolution or involution of the Moldovan political system will be directly dependent on whether or not the new ruling party will have the capacity, intelligence, and ability to properly manage the chance and the vote of confidence given to it by the Moldovan citizens on July 11, 2021.

The electoral candidates and the electoral campaign

23 candidates, among them 2 blocs, 20 parties, and one independent candidate have registered for participation in the electoral race for the early elections of July 11. The classification of the parties in this campaign can be done based on several criteria.

The first criterion is the traditional, one could even say the classic one, established in the Republic of Moldova: the geopolitical cleavage. The main left and center-left parties registered in this electoral race were: the Electoral Block of Communists and Socialists (BeCS), the “Șor” Party, the “Renato Usatii” Electoral Bloc (Be“RU”), the Common Action Party – the Civic Congress and the Democratic Party of Moldova (PDM). On the right, the most important electoral competitors were: the Action and Solidarity Party (PAS), the Dignity and Truth Platform (DA Platform), the National Unity Party (PUN), the “Democracy at Home” Party, and the Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR).

The second criterion for the classification of the electoral contestants refers to the functionality of political parties, these being split into: active, inactive, and newly created. Although the list of political parties in the Republic of Moldova officially registered with the Public Service Agencies comprises 53 political formations¹, in reality there is a maximum of 20 parties. The parties nominated in the first classification criterion (based on the geopolitical cleavage) are the functional political parties, whether they are older or newer actors in Moldovan politics. The purpose of these electoral contestants was to accumulate as high a score as possible, the score being a weighty factor in the subsequent political activity.

¹ Lista partidelor politice din Republica Moldova. / <http://www.asp.gov.md/ro/node/3664>

As usual, a few inactive parties, which either functioned sporadically or had no activities for years, registered to participate in the elections. These electoral contestants were: the “Speranța-Nădejda” Professional Movement, the “NOI” Party, the Green Ecologist Party, the Law and Justice Party, the Party of Regions of Moldova, the “Patriots of Moldova” Party, the “New Historical Opportunity” Party and the Laborers’ Party. Some of these parties registered in the electoral race in order to play the role of electoral spoilers², their purpose being to create confusion among voters in order to “steal” votes from the main electoral contestants. The role of electoral spoiler was also played by the independent candidate Veaceslav Valico, who was the legal screen of the controversial businessman Veaceslav Platon, so that the latter would have the opportunity to participate in the parliamentary election race on July 11.

Another type of ies registered in the electoral race were the newly created ones: the Party We Build Europe at Home – “PACE”, the Party for the Development and Consolidation of Moldova, the “People’s Power” Party, and the Party of Change. At present, the political perspectives of these parties are not clear – were they created as electoral spoilers especially for this campaign, or are they meant to be real political projects? But it is certain that some of them played the role of electoral spoilers in this campaign.

The campaign was not characterized by debates between the electoral programs and platforms of the electoral contestants. The programmatic electoral promises of the political parties were diluted by the stakes of the parliamentary elections, the disputes between politicians, and the polarization of the electoral competition by the main electoral competitors – BeCS and PAS. BeCS had a campaign focused on geopolitical messages and social populism, and PAS tried to avoid geopolitical issues as much as possible, promoting anti-corruption messages, legal issues, and socio-economic issues, with a strong emphasis on the diaspora. The electoral messages of the other electoral contestants were practically absorbed by BeCS and PAS, being lost into nothingness.

A special role in the election campaign was played by the Central Electoral Commission (CEC), the institution which, in accordance with its legislative responsibilities, is responsible for the smooth running of elections in the Republic of Moldova. But due to the political influence in this institution, the CEC, from the institution that must manage correctly and equidistantly the electoral process, became the main disruptor of the electoral campaign. The main topics on which the decisions taken by the CEC have caused controversy were those concerning voters in the diaspora and those in the Transnistrian region.

CEC’s decisions followed the logic of reducing, contrary to legal provisions, the number of polling stations for the Western diaspora (which votes mainly with right-wing parties) and increasing the number of polling stations for voters in the Transnistrian region. In fulfilling this intention, the CEC, at one point, decided to open 3 polling stations on the territory not controlled by the constitutional authorities, a decision that contradicts the provisions of Article 32, paragraph (3), letter a) of the Electoral Code. The CEC also did nothing to prevent organized transport to polling stations on the left bank of Nistru. Endless lawsuits between the central electoral institution and the electoral contestants distorted the real agenda of the electoral competition and affected negatively the good conduct of the electoral process.

² The Spoiler Effect. / <https://electionscience.org/library/the-spoiler-effect/>

The results of the elections

Following the elections of July 11, 2021, only three electoral contestants gained access to the legislature: PAS – 52.80% (774,753 votes), BeCS – 27.17% (398,675 votes), and “Șor” party – 5.74% (84,187 votes). Converted into mandates, the political picture of the new parliament looks as follows: PAS – 63 mandates, BeCS – 32, “Șor” party – 6. The rest of the electoral contestants accumulated a score below the electoral threshold.

The main finding concerning the July 11 election is that for the first time in the political history of the Republic of Moldova, a right-wing party obtained a parliamentary majority, accumulating the highest percentage so far in a parliamentary election. It should be noted that, in general, the political right has never obtained a sufficient number of votes to form a single parliamentary majority. The right-wing governments of 1998-1999 and 2009-2017 were supported by a center-left party - PDM.

Table no.1. Political parties that have obtained a parliamentary majority

Party	Elections	%	Votes	Mandates
Action and Solidarity Party	2021	52,80	774 753	63
The Communist Part of the Republic of Moldova	2001	50,07	794 808	71
The Communist Party of the Republic of Moldova	2009 (I)	49,48	760 551	60
The Communist Party of the Republic of Moldova	2005	45,98	716 336	56
The Agrarian Democratic Party of Moldova	1994	43,18	766 589	56

Source: *Elaborated by the author*

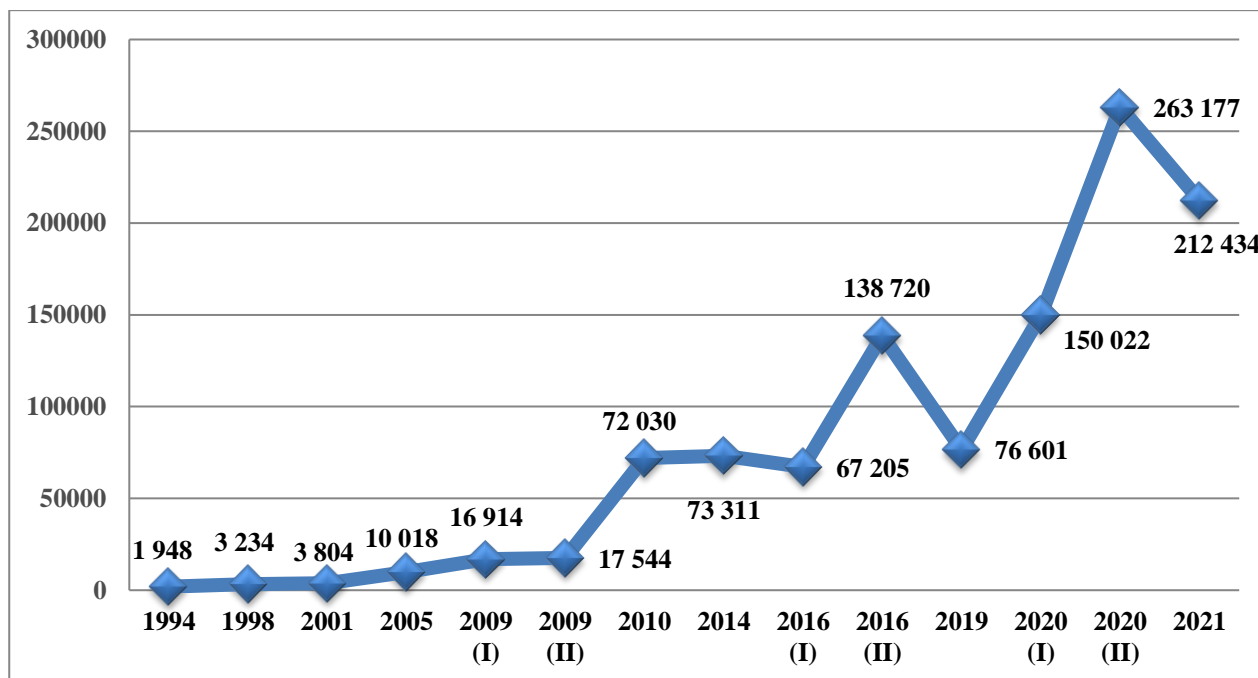
This unprecedented result of a right-wing party in a parliamentary election can be explained by two fundamental, structural factors that emerged after the years 2015-2016:

1. *The partial disappearance of the geopolitical cleavage, caused by the embezzlement of the financial-banking system.* The devaluation of the financial-banking system (the so-called “billion theft”), which took place during the pro-European governments, produced profound changes in the options of the electorate, which, until the 2014 elections, voted mainly according to geopolitical preferences. After 2015, a new main criterion – that of corruption-related matters began to stand out among the Moldovan society;

2. *The emergence of the diaspora as a structural electorate.* The electorate of the Republic of Moldova is not distributed proportionally throughout the Republic of Moldova. Traditionally, voters in the north and south of the country vote mainly for left-wing pro-Russian parties, and those in the center and Chișinău – for pro-European and unionist right-wing parties. Until the 2010 presidential elections, Moldovan voters abroad did not turn out in large numbers at the polls, so the impact of the diaspora vote on the final result

of the elections was insignificant. The mass migration of Moldovan citizens abroad has led to the creation of massive Moldovan communities in several European countries. In the last elections (presidential and parliamentary), the number of voters in the diaspora became significant, their vote increasing in weight and determining the final results of the elections.

Figure no.1. Diaspora participation in electoral elections (1994-2021)



Source: Elaborated by the author

In addition to these 2 fundamental factors, the categorical victory of the PAS is also due to a contextual factor – the so-called “helpful vote”. In 2019 began the process of Moldova’s liberation from the oligarchic regime of Vladimir Plahotniuc. This process accelerated with the November 2020 presidential election, when oligarchic forces (grouped behind the back-then head of state Igor Dodon) suffered a painful defeat in the presidential election against opponents of the oligarchic regime (concentrated around PAS leader Maia Sandu); yet this defeat was not decisive because the forme still had political control over parliament

In order to put an end to the domination of the oligarchic forces over the Moldovan political life, President Maia Sandu provoked the dissolution of the legislature. At the same time, the political context was created in the Republic of Moldova in which the early parliamentary elections of July 11 were organically transformed in a third round of the presidential elections. That is why, in order not to scatter the votes, the right-wing electorate voted in a “helpful” manner for the main pro-European party at present – PAS.

The political actors who accumulated the highest electoral score in the parliamentary elections of July 11, 2021, remained the same as in those of February 24, 2019, but with totally different results, which dramatically changed the representative political picture in the legislature.

Table no.2. The ranking of the first 6 political parties in the 2019 and 2021 parliamentary elections

Parties	Elections	
	2019	2021
Socialists' Party of the Republic of Moldova	441 191	398 675
Communist Party of the Republic of Moldova	53 175	
Action and Solidarity Party (Electoral Block "ACUM")	380 181	774 753
Dignity and Truth Platform (Electoral Block "ACUM")		34 184
The Democrat Party of Moldova	334 539	26 545
The "Șor" Party	117 779	84 187
The Electoral Block "Renato Usatîi" (Our Party)	41 769	60 100

Source: Elaborated by the author

In the table above we see that in the 2021 parliamentary elections, PAS accumulated almost 400 thousand (394 572) more votes than it managed to gather together with the DA Platform in the 2019 elections. In this way, PAS practically absorbed the entire right-wing electorate of the DA Platform, but also the center-left electorate of the PDM (which received 300 thousand (307,994) fewer votes than in 2019). PSRM and PCRM lost over 95 thousand (95 691) votes. This reduction in voters can be explained by the high rate of absenteeism among the left-wing electorate, disappointed by the socialists' performance (led by Igor Dodon) while in government. The "Șor" Party received 30 thousand (33,592) fewer votes, while the "Renato Usatii" Bloc (paradoxically) received over 18 thousand (18,331) more votes compared to the results obtained by Our Party in 2019.

Postelectoral evolutions

The results of the early parliamentary elections of July 11, 2021 suggest the following post-election developments in the Republic of Moldova:

1. *Rapid formation of a government and promotion of reforms.* The fact that this will be a one-party government will substantially facilitate the formation of the new cabinet. The post-2009 practice of coalition governments greatly complicates the negative exercise of electing the cabinet, a practice involving all sorts of behind-the-scenes agreements that subsequently had a impact on the functionality of the executive. At the time of the formation of the government, it would be beneficial to eliminate the gaps that arose due to the central public administration reform carried out by the Filip government in 2017. The nominal competence of the future government team must prevail over the party loyalty criterion in selecting government members. Due to the fact that PAS is a pro-presidential party, it is expected that the presidency and the government will establish a common agenda in the exercise of political power in the Republic of Moldova.

2. *Boosting the pro-European course of the Republic of Moldova.* The success of the ambitious electoral reform program announced by PAS in the election campaign will be interdependent with the return of the Republic of Moldova to its commitment to the implementation of the Association Agreement with the European Union. A boost in the relations of the Republic of Moldova with the EU is to be expected, just as that these relations will reach the level of 2009-2014 period. The successful implementation of the Association Agreement by the Republic of Moldova will depend on two basic criteria: 1) the honesty of intentions of the Chișinău government, and 2) its professionalism. If there are no doubts about the first criterion, at least at these early stages, then deficiencies in the practical application of the Association Agreement may arise due to the second criterion. The EU has already sent a sharp message to the new political power that it will not repeat the mistakes in the relationship with the Republic of Moldova from 2009-2014, stating that it will support the efforts of the Chișinău government to implement the reforms underlying the Association Agreement, but without giving up the policy of strict conditionality governing the EU-Republic of Moldova relationship.

3. *Challenges in the relationship with Russia.* Moldova's relationship with Russia is a complicated issue that will have to be managed by the new political power in Chișinău. The progress of the Republic of Moldova in its relations with the EU will not be "welcomed" by the Kremlin administration. Although some levers of influence of Russia on the Republic of Moldova have consistently decreased in recent years (trade, labor migrants, energy), Moscow still has control over the main lever in relation to Chișinău – the Transnistrian file, with all its attributes. Since Maia Sandu became the President of the Republic of Moldova, Russia has been particularly sensitive to matters pertaining to presence of its troops on the left bank of Nistru. Moscow will want guarantees that the new government in Chișinău will not insist on the withdrawal of Russian troops from the left bank of the Nistru. The Kremlin's position on this issue stems from Russia's geopolitical interests in the region, but it is to the detriment of the national interests of the Republic of Moldova. In order to properly manage this file, the new government in Chișinău will have to develop a cohesive vision regarding the solution of the Transnistrian issue and to advertise it persistently so that it becomes agreed upon internationally.

Conclusions

The fall of the pro-European parties after the "theft of the billion" and the establishment of the oligarchic regime has upset the pro-European political right in the Republic of Moldova, creating a strong disappointment among society. However, Moldovan society has not given up, with its pro-European sector focusing on new political projects in its dispute with the oligarchic regime in the Republic of Moldova. As a result, the oligarchic regime began to erode gradually, being virtually crushed by the citizens' vote in the July 11 parliamentary elections. The result of the parliamentary election shows that the Moldovan society wants to evolve according to the democratic European model of state development. The vote of July 11, 2021 may represent the border between the past and the future of the Republic of Moldova, as "the ball is now on the field" of the new pro-European political class in Chișinău.