

Fire on the Opposite Shore: Moldovan Politics Facing the Russian Army Approaching Odesa

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Among the five post-Soviet secession conflicts (the Karabakh, Abkhazian, South Ossetian, Transnistrian, and Donbas conflicts), only the Transnistrian conflict has not experienced a second war and the status quo established in the early 1990s is still effective. This status quo faced a potential challenge when the Southern Front of the Russo-Ukrainian War was coming closer to the Ukraine-Transnistria border in the spring and summer of 2022. Then, the Russo-Ukrainian front line lay between Mykolaiv and Kherson and, had the Russian Army reached Odesa, Transnistria would have become adjacent to the Russia-controlled area. Many observers thought that this would give Russia an opportunity to annex Transnistria. The Ukrainian army also regarded Russian troops stationed in Transnistria (the Peacekeepers and others) as its own potential enemy. On June 24, the EU accepted Moldova as one of its candidate member countries, when protests against the Maia Sandu administration's mismanagement of the energy crisis and hyperinflation began to cause street protests. The Sandu administration tried to exploit this diplomatic fortune to deflect the population's attention from their economic difficulties to the global geopolitical confrontation. It seemed that Moldova was losing its traditional cautiousness against the geopoliticization of domestic politics, a guarantee having prevented this country from repeating Ukraine's tragedy.

None of these worst-case scenarios has come true. Moldova and Transnistria survived the summer of 2022 without being touched by hostilities. In contrast to Donbas, Transnistria has not become a factor radicalizing Russia's public opinion and decision-making.¹ Despite the Sandu and Biden administrations' joint endeavor to describe the Shor Party, the initiator of the autumn protests in Chisinau, as Russia's spy, if the protest movement did not spread widely, it was because of their anti-oligarch sentiment, but not hatred against Russian spies.

This paper examines why Moldovan politics cannot be geopoliticized to the full, even facing the Russo-Ukrainian War in its neighboring land. First, in contrast to Ukrainian politics, in Moldova, geopolitics cannot become the only dominant issue, while economic, anti-oligarch, and constitutional issues remain relevant. Secondly, Moldova's populist revolution in June 2021 diminished the quality of the Moldovan political class, as was the case with Ukraine in 2019 and Armenia in 2018. Everywhere, young NGO activists without knowledge or experience of economic management and public administration became MPs and vice-ministers. At first, the populist revolutionaries called

¹ After the presidential elections in 2016, Transnistria's political regime became extremely authoritarian and closed. Now the de facto republic looks like a personal domain of a local company called Sheriff. The defeated president, Evgenii Shevchuk, used to enjoy support from Dmitry Rogozin and other Russian leaders, while president after 2016, Vadim Krasnosel'skii, is no more than a local politician. If Russia annexes Transnistria, the Russian government will need to spend much time and energy to establish order (*navesti poryadok*) there, subordinating the local clan to its control. This will be an unaffordable luxury for a government that is too busy to respond even to the voluntary desire of South Ossetia with a much less problematic political regime, to be annexed to Russia.

for civic, anti-oligarch, and general democratic values, yet the worsening socioeconomic situation and diminishing public support induced them to exploit geopolitical appeals (except for Armenia lacking the West's support) and deeply rely upon Western aid and advice. Yet this vicious circle cannot operate in Moldova downright.

Towards the Grand Coalition

The first task of this paper is to examine whether the nested issue structure in Moldovan politics, illustrated in Figure 1, has been preserved after the collapse of the ACUM-Socialists grand coalition in November 2020.

Figure 1. Nested Issue Structure in Moldovan Politics

Parties	DP	PAS, DA	Socialist	Communist	Shor
Right/Left	Left-centrist	Right	Left	Left	Centrist
Oligarchs	Itself an oligarch party	Against	Against	Neutral (human ties with the DP since the USSR)	Neutral (human ties since the USSR)
Geopolitics	Pro-West	Pro-West	Pro-Russia	Tactical	Tactical
Constitution	Semipresidential	Semipresidential	Semipresidential	Parliamentary	Semipresidential

The DP is the Democratic Party of Moldova, led by Vlad Plahotniuc until June 2019.

The PAS is the Party of Action and Solidarity, led by Maia Sandu.

The DA (Dignity and Truth) is another pro-European civic party, led by Andrei Năstase.

The Shor Party is a party led by the millionaire Ilan Shor after 2016.

In 2015, the “robbery of the century” (the embezzlement of 74.8 billion Moldovan leis or about eight percent of Moldova’s annual GDP from the major three banks of Moldova), having been exposed in 2013, and the economic crisis provoked massive protests against the ruling coalition of pro-European oligarchic parties (the Liberal Democratic, Democratic, and Liberal Parties) and its de facto leader, Vlad Plahotniuc. The Socialists and the pro-European liberals (PAS and DA) jointly organized protests. In this year, four cabinets of ministers led by the LDP emerged and collapsed. In the public’s eyes, the LDP was more responsible for the “robbery of the century” than other oligarchic parties because its leader, Vlad Filat, was the prime minister when this crime was disclosed.

In response to the massive street protests, first, Plahotniuc decided to sacrifice Filat. On October 15, the Moldovan parliament deprived him of his deputy immunity and police immediately arrested him in front of TV cameras in the parliamentary building. Secondly, Plahotniuc reinforced the ruling coalition by incorporating defector-deputies from the Communists (fourteen) and the LDP (nine) into the Democrats-led coalition. Blessed with this new parliamentary majority (fifty-six of the hundred MPs), the cabinet of Pavel Filip (Democrats) lasted relatively long until the 2019 political crisis and could improve Moldova’s economy to some extent.

Plahotniuc’s third maneuver was to restore the institution of direct presidential election (or return to a semi-

presidential system) canceled by the constitutional amendment in 2000. Plahotniuc calculated that a direct presidential election would intensify personal and ideological competition between the Socialist leader Igor Dodon and the pro-European Sandu (**the Right-Left and geopolitical cleavages**). Initially, the DA proposed the restoration of semi-presidentialism, while the PAS was skeptical of semi-presidentialism because of its admiration for European parliamentarism. The Communists definitely opposed a return to semi-presidentialism because of their Soviet ideology (**the constitutional cleavage**). Yet the Communists had not participated in the protest movement in 2015 actively, so their objection did not discourage the anti-Plahotniuc movement. There were close personal ties between the Communists and the Democrats, traceable to the CPSU (**the anti- or pro-oligarch cleavage**).

As Plahotniuc anticipated, Dodon and Sandu proceeded to the runoff, as a result of which Dodon won (52.1 percent vs 47.9 percent) in December 2016. A serious flaw for Sandu was that she had served as minister of education of the LDP government. The pro-European oligarchic candidates I. Leanca (prime minister after Filat) and M. Gimpu (acting president in 2009) could not even gain 5 percent together and were defeated in the first round (**the anti-oligarch cleavage**). During the election, Dodon declared that Crimea was Russia² and said that the Ukrainian crisis was caused by oppression of minorities in Ukraine (**the geopolitical cleavage**). This is not necessarily a minority opinion in Moldova.

Though Dodon won, according to the restored 1994 Constitution, a president without parliamentary support was powerless. Moreover, during the forty-five days since Dodon's electoral victory until his inauguration, President Timofeti appointed a new prosecutor general, while parliament amended a series of laws to deprive the new president of his prerogatives to appoint the State Security head, SP head, and prosecutor general. After Dodon's inauguration, the Constitutional Court practically eliminated his constitutional veto power by legitimizing a peculiar parliamentary practice to remove the president for five minutes. According to this practice, if the president vetoed a bill, parliament would remove him for a short time, during which the parliamentary chairman, in place of the president, would sign the bill to make it effective. In this way, a number of laws were adopted despite the president's objection: Russian TV and radio broadcastings were banned, a NATO office was opened in Chisinau, and the site of the former republican stadium was assigned for the construction of a new American embassy.

Paradoxically, the political crisis in 2015 and Dodon's victory in the 2016 elections strengthened Plahotniuc's position. He secured the majority of parliament and controlled the Constitutional Court, the Prosecutor's Office, the police, and electoral committees. He was expanding the DP's influence among municipal leaders elected in the 2015 local elections. The prosecutors fabricated criminal cases for those municipal leaders who declined to become DP members. The number of DP members among the municipal leaders increased from two hundred and twenty in 2015 to more

² YouTube, "Dodon Crimea," at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g4aABFPcIj8>, accessed June 17, 2019.

than seven hundred by 2017.³

Since it had become clear that President Dodon was powerless without a parliamentary majority, the Moldovan public began to see the coming parliamentary elections in February 2019 as decisive for Moldova's future. Towards the parliamentary elections, in July 2017, the Socialists and the DP temporarily allied to change the electoral system from a purely proportional one, functioning in Moldova since 1994, to mixed voting, despite furious protests from the PAS, the Communists, and other parties.

As a result of the Chisinau mayoral election in June 2018, the DP candidate could not even proceed to the runoff, which was contested by Socialist and DA candidates. The DA candidate was its leader, Andrei Năstase, who won the election. Yet the court canceled the result. Moldova had been a favorite of the EU's Eastern Neighborhood Policy and enjoyed the largest sum of financial aid per capita from the EU. Yet the "robbery of the century" and other corruption incidents disappointed the European institutions, and Thorbjørn Jagland, general secretary of the Council of Europe, called Moldova a "seized state."

Facing Moldova's isolation from the European institutions, Plahotniuc began to criticize Russia harshly, prohibited Moldovan officials from visiting Russia, and hindered rotation of Russian soldiers assigned as Peacekeepers of the Joint Control Committee for the Transnistrian conflict. Obviously, he wanted to show himself as a victim of Russian pressure to please European leaders. This tactic proved to be ineffective, but rather offended the Russian leaders. Thus, Plahotniuc caused a diplomatic revolution by restoring the relationship between Russia and the West, which was devastated by the Crimean Crisis in 2014, by their common desire to liberate Moldova from Plahotniuc's rule.

On February 24, 2019, parliamentary elections in Moldova were held. In their electoral campaign, both the Socialists and the ACUM (alliance of the PAS and DA) refrained from Right/Left and geopolitical issues and underscored the idea that the only issue in the coming elections was whether to allow Plahotniuc to keep ruling the country (**the pro- or anti-oligarch cleavage**).

Results of the Parliamentary Elections on February 24, 2019

Party/alliance	National list			Constituency	Total seats	+/-
	Votes	%	Seats	Seats		
Socialists	441,191	31.15	18	17	35	+10
ACUM	380,181	26.84	14	12	26	New

³ My interview with Vasile Bolea, MP from the SP on September 6, 2019, Chisinau.

DP	334,539	23.62	13	17	30	+11
Shor Party	117,779	8.32	5	2	7	+7

Thus, the Socialists, DP, ACUM, and Shor gained thirty-five, thirty, twenty-six, and seven parliamentary seats respectively. Thus, two of the three major parties should coalesce to make a new government. For almost three months, none of the possible pairs agreed to coalesce. According to the Moldovan Constitution, if a new cabinet was not assembled within three months, the parliament should be dissolved.

On June 2, 2019, Russian vice-prime minister Dmitry Kozak and representatives of the EU and the US State Department visited Chisinau. Kozak publicly stated that Russia did not oppose the coalition of the Socialists and the ACUM. On June 7, the Political (Central) Committee of the Socialist Party decided not to coalesce with the DP (in other words, the SP would coalesce with the ACUM or agree to disband the parliament). Exactly when the SP was publicizing this decision, by holding a press conference, did the Constitutional Court announce its decision that the constitutional term for coalition-making was expiring on that very day and therefore the parliament would be disbanded.

The Constitutional Court had intentionally avoided making public when the term for coalition-making would expire. June 9 was the day after three months since the first convening of the new parliament (March 9), but June 9 was a Sunday. Therefore, many Moldovan jurists thought that the term would expire on June 10. Yet the Constitutional Court equated “three months” to “ninety days” and, on June 7, suddenly gave notice that the term was expiring on that day. This was an artificial argument that the Constitutional Court improvised after learning of the Socialists’ refusal to coalesce with the DP.

On June 8 (a Saturday), in the parliamentary building, all sixty-one MPs from the SP and the ACUM signed a series of coalition documents prescribing that Sandu be made prime minister, the parliamentary chair be elected from among the Socialists, a parliamentary committee be established to investigate the “robbery of the century,” etc. Diplomats from the US, Russian, and Romanian embassies observed this procedure. This parliamentary procedure was executed with the help of a power generator and a karaoke machine because Plahotniuc’s government had shut off the power of the parliamentary building. The conclusion of each coalition document was followed by a declaration of its invalidity by the Constitutional Court on TV.

On the next day, June 9, Prime Minister Filip declared that President Dodon had been removed for his violation of the Constitution, qualified himself as acting president, and declared the disbanding of parliament. At the same time,

he promised the US government to provide a site for the US embassy in Chisinau immediately and move Moldova's embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. The DP mobilized sportsmen to block up ministerial and National Bank buildings. The dual power continued until June 14, the day scheduled for the convening of the DP's Central Committee. Immediately before the meeting, the American ambassador visited Plahotniuc and told him to transfer power peacefully. Plahotniuc went directly to the airport, not to the DP building, and left the country.

Not only foreign powers, but also domestic actors had reached the consensus that they needed to do their best to avoid the Ukrainianization of Moldova. For example, both the ACUM and the Socialists could mobilize their supporters to the streets during the dual power, but they consciously did not do so for fear of provoking Plahotniuc's supporters who still held the loyalty of the police.⁴

If we compare the peaceful government change in Moldova in 2019 with the Euromaidan Revolution in Ukraine, we may note the following:

- (1) While the Right/Left cleavage in politics had declined in Ukraine since the beginning of the twenty-first century, in Moldova, this cleavage is still vital.
- (2) In Ukraine, the remaining anti-/pro-oligarch cleavage overlapped with the pro-European/pro-Russian cleavage and society split into two antagonizing parts, while in Moldova the anti-/pro-oligarch cleavage became salient and the pro-European Right and pro-Russian Left formed a grand coalition to overthrow the Plahotniuc regime. Thus, these three cleavages did not overlap each other.
- (3) International elder partners agreed that the imminent task was to remove Plahotniuc and welcomed the grand coalition, in contrast to the Euromaidan Revolution, which polarized the international community.

After the quick collapse of the grand coalition, how were these fortunate conditions sustained or lost?

After the Grand Coalition

As early as November 2019, the grand coalition collapsed because of the disagreement around the appointment of the prosecutor general of Moldova. This position was important for the implementation of anti-corruption and anti-oligarch policy, one of the sales points of the grand coalition. The coalition memorandum of June 8, 2019 prescribed the procedure to appoint the prosecutor general, according to which a commission including foreign experts should be organized to nominate candidates. By November 2019, a Gagauz jurist and politician, Aleksandr Stoianoglo, had proceeded to the last stage of selection. The prosecutor's selection issue was suddenly politicized as a result of the Chisinau mayoral election, whose runoff was held on November 3 and won by Socialist candidate Ion Ceban, who defeated a DA candidate, Andrei Năstase, by a margin of 4 percent (52 vs 48 percent).

⁴ My interview with Mihai Popsoi, MP from the PAS, Voce-Chair of parliament on September 2, 2019, Chisinau.

This was a repetition of the same mayoral election of 2018, in which the runoff was contested by Năstase and Ceban, too. Though Năstase won, the courts controlled by Plahotniuc canceled this result. This scandal delivered the final blow to Plahotniuc's reputation in the West and harbingered his total defeat in 2019. Ceban was not a radical socialist and, in the 2019 election, proposed Năstase to create together a grand coalition on the municipal level. Being confident in his victory, Năstase did not agree. Mayoral elections in Chisinau often forecast the national political trend in the near future and, therefore, the PAS could not be indifferent to Ceban's victory.

Immediately after the Chisinau mayoral election, Minister of Justice Olesia Stamat (from the PAS) questioned the objectivity of the nomination process for the prosecutor general and called it a falsification. Prime Minister Sandu not only objected to Stoianoglo's candidacy, but also proposed a new nomination procedure. She argued for giving herself, the prime minister, a decisive voice in selecting the prosecutor general. This was a violation of the Moldovan Constitution (as the Constitutional Court later resolved so), as well as of the coalition memorandum. Even the DA leader Năstase criticized Sandu for dismissing the memorandum. On November 12, the Socialist MPs proposed a no-confidence vote for Prime Minister Sandu at parliament, which was supported by the majority since the DP had joined the Socialists. Thus, the grand coalition lasted only for five months.

After the collapse of the grand coalition, Stoianoglo could be appointed as prosecutor general, but, in October 2021, after the PAS's victory in the parliamentary elections, he was not only removed from the post, but was also arrested for alleged corruption.⁵

The collapse of the grand coalition was the beginning of a series of misfortunes for the Socialists and Moldova as a whole. Was it impossible to have avoided this? Mihai Popșoi, vice-chairman of the Moldovan parliament from the PAS, says that the Socialists just feared Sandu's rising popularity and the issue of the prosecutor general was a pretext to oust her from power before the coming presidential election of 2020.⁶ Vasile Bolea, a Socialist MP, remarks on the PAS's hypertrophied perception of judicial reform. Sandu argued that the PAS was working hard for judicial reform to improve the people's welfare, but, according to Bolea, this appeal was strange because the judicial system is not an institution that produces commodities or raises the economy (**the anti-oligarch cleavage**).⁷

In hindsight, Bolea says that Dodon should have disbanded parliament, but the Socialists chose an easier way by looking for a new coalition with the DP. This was a dangerous game because the Socialists gained support in the 2019 parliamentary elections for their criticism of Plahotniuc and oligarchy. Until then, however, the DP had declared that they would break ties with Plahotniuc and, for the Socialists, the Left-centrist DP was ideologically closer than the

⁵ "Moldova's prosecutor general detained in corruption investigation – report, " SeeNews, October 6, 2021 (<https://seenews.com/news/moldovas-prosecutor-general-detained-in-corruption-investigation-report-756440>).

⁶ My interview with Mihai Popșoi, vice-chairman of Moldovan parliament on August 29, 2022, Chisinau.

⁷ My interview with Vasile Bolea, a MP on August 29, 2022.

ACUM. The Socialists nominated Ion Chicu, a high official of the Ministry of Economy, as Sandu's successor to create a technocrat cabinet, which the DP supported from outside. Eventually, the Socialists and the DP concluded a memorandum "Social Democratic Program for Moldova" in March 2020 and transformed Chicu's cabinet into a full-fledged coalition government (**the Right/Left cleavage**).

Theoretically, the coalition of the Socialists and the DP had sixty-five of the hundred parliamentary seats. In fact, the DP began to dissolve after the ousting of Plahotniuc. Some party leaders still felt loyalty to him, but others wanted to cooperate with the Socialists. Though the DP received nine ministerial seats in the coalition government, five did not support Dodon in the presidential election in November 2020. Some of them even suggested that local DP activists work for Sandu.⁸ Between the first and final rounds of the presidential election, a group of MPs seceded from the DP and named itself "For Moldova," which would soon become the Socialists' new partner.

Similar to the presidential election of 2016, Sandu and Dodon proceeded to the runoff, as a result of which Sandu defeated Dodon, gaining 57.7 percent of the effective vote against Dodon's 42.3 percent. The reasons for the Socialists' defeat were the economic recession caused by COVID-19 restrictions, ineffective government measures against the pandemic (for example, deficit of vaccines), and disappointment of the people caused by the Socialists' rapprochement with the DP.

Exhausted by the ACUM's assault on Dodon and the Socialists, Prime Minister Chicu resigned on December 23, 2020. Moldova's premier-presidential constitution makes it possible for the losers in the presidential election (in this case, the Socialists) to continue to form the government if they had a parliamentary majority. Even Dodon himself could have become the prime minister, just as the Ukrainian prime minister Yuliia Tymoshenko continued to run the government after being defeated by Yanukovich in the 2010 presidential election as long as she had a parliamentary majority. In this case, a normal cohabitation would have emerged in Moldovan politics. Yet Dodon chose to become a shadowy party leader, trying to put someone else in the post of prime minister. Possibly, he wanted to concentrate on preparation for the parliamentary elections to come after half a year. Yet the Moldovan citizens, suffering from the pandemic and economic recession, yearned for an energetic executive leader to overcome their problems, not an intrigant of parliamentary games. This was Dodon's second mistake (the first being the SP's coalition with DP).

Having established an interim cabinet with the acting prime minister, Aureliu Ciocoi, who had been the foreign minister in Chicu's cabinet, Dodon tried to form a full-fledged government. Since the DP was dissolving and not trustworthy, Dodon tacitly sought a coalition with "For Moldova" and even with the Shor Party. Yet a coalition with the Shor Party, the leader of which having committed the "robbery of the century," could be devastating for the Socialists' reputation, so Dodon did not try to form a formal coalition based on a program, but created a situational majority to nominate a prime minister. In February 2021, the situational majority nominated a candidate for prime minister twice; both were economists, Mariana Durleșteanu and Vladimir Golovatiuc. In both cases, Sandu refused

⁸ My interview with Bolea, August 29, 2022.

to confirm the candidate for the lack of constitutional legitimacy in the situational majority. In the case of Durleșteanu, Dodon explained that he had not anticipated that the Shor Party would support Durleșteanu's candidacy.⁹ This palpable lie made the citizens despise Dodon.

Meanwhile, though the Moldovan Constitution does not allow the president to nominate a candidate for prime minister by its own initiative (without waiting for parliament's initiative), President Sandu nominated Natalia Gavriluța as her premier candidate twice.¹⁰ Gavriluța was an enrollee of Harvard Kennedy School, as was Sandu herself (**the constitutional cleavage**).

On March 25, Sandu nominated another candidate for prime minister, Igor Grosu from the PAS, but the session did not fill the quorum. Sandu asked the Constitutional Court to allow her to disband parliament, which the Constitutional Court, with a small margin between pro and contra judges, granted on April 15, 2021.¹¹ On April 28, Sandu disbanded parliament.

In contrast to the 2019 elections held under parallel voting, the July 11, 2021 elections were held under a pure proportional system. There was a real danger for the Socialists of failing to surmount the threshold of 5 percent, so they decided to create an electoral bloc with the Communists, who had not been able to pass the threshold in 2019. Another purpose of this bloc for the Socialists was to prevent the Communists from criticizing them.

Another difference from the 2019 elections was that the PAS and the DA did not form an electoral bloc. The PAS no longer needed the DA because Sandu had "consumed" Năstase, though the latter pulled the former into the limelight. The foreign patrons of the Euro-Atlantists in Moldova also concentrated their bet on Sandu, as their colleagues did vis-à-vis Zelenskyy in 2019. The DA could not pass the threshold.

Table 2. Parliamentary Elections in Moldova in July 2020

Party	%	Seats	+/-
PAS	52.80	63	+48
CS Bloc	27.17	32	-3
Shor	5.74	6	-1

⁹ Додон: Мы не знали, что партия «ШОР» подпишется в поддержку Дурлештяну // *Nokta*. February 24, 2021 (<https://nokta.md/dodon-my-ne-znali-chto-partiya-shor-podpishetsya-v-podderzhku-durleshtyanu/>).

¹⁰ Майя Санду повторно выдвигает кандидата Наталью Гаврилицэ на пост премьер-министра // *Nokta*. February 11, 2021 (<https://nokta.md/majya-sandu-povtorno-vydvigaet-kandidata-natalju-gavrilitse-na-post-premer-ministra/>).

¹¹ КС Молдовы разрешил роспуск парламента, но мешает пандемия // *DW*. April 15, 2021 (<https://www.dw.com/ru/ks-moldovy-razreshil-raspustit-parlament-no-meshaet-pandemija/a-57218452>).

As a result of this overwhelming victory, Natalia Gavrilă became prime minister. As happened to Armenia under Pashinian and Ukraine under Zelenskyy, the average age of parliamentarians dropped significantly and many of them are NGO activists without any administrative experience.

For a couple of months after the parliamentary elections, the Moldovan economy witnessed a certain recovery due to the subsiding of COVID-19. Yet the situation had worsened by the end of 2021 because Moldova's accumulating debt to Gazprom caused an energy crisis. The situation has become catastrophic since the beginning of the Russo-Ukrainian War. Moldova suffered 33.5 percent inflation during the first seven months of 2022, worse than in Ukraine itself. Energy prices skyrocketed and the state budget deficit reached 20 billion lei. The most serious problem is that Moldova chronologically cannot pay Gazprom for its energy consumption. When I visited Chisinau in August 2022, after a three-year interval caused by COVID-19 measures, I saw street commerce with daily commodities on sheets, organized by ordinary citizens, which reminded me of the 1990s. Streets protests continue under the leadership of the Shor Party.

Facing a sharp decline in popularity, the PAS began to rely upon political repression under the guise of an anti-corruption campaign. A significant number of politicians, including parliamentarians, are held in detention. The PAS majority of parliament does not hesitate to deprive their colleagues of parliamentary immunity and send them to jail. For example, the Prosecutor's Office accused the former Democrat (later "For Moldova") parliamentarian Sergei Sirbu of "illegal enrichment" and detained him from February to June 2022. "Illegal enrichment" is a peculiar legal concept in view of burden of proof. Suspicion of this crime obliges the accused to prove the existence of legal income to cover his/her expenses during a certain period of time, but does not oblige the Prosecutor's Office to prove the existence of illegal income to levy an accusation. During his detention, Sirbu lost his reputation as a lawyer and his health was ruined, while his daughter was harassed at school. Sirbu was one of the most active parliamentarians of Moldova, he has "toured" political parties from the CPRM and the DP to "For Moldova," but he has become so discouraged that he intends to retire from politics.¹²

The Moldovan judiciary controlled by the PAS put the former president Dodon under house arrest and detained Shor parliamentarian Marina Tauber. During her two months of detention, Tauber was rarely interrogated, which suggests that the purpose of her detention was not criminal investigation, but just to damage her. The Sandu government has revealed its incompetence in economic policy and repressive measures against its opponents. A taxi driver in Chisinau told me that the Moldovans lived better and more freely under Plahotniuc than under Sandu.

Vice-Chairman of Parliament Popsoi told me that the PAS continues to hold a firm neutralism (non-participation in NATO) in its program, and therefore gives Russia no pretext for invasion. This situation may change by the PAS's attempt to prohibit the Shor Party. In the autumn of 2022, this party regularly mobilized thousands of protesters to the streets of Chisinau. It seemed that the Shor succeeded in the role previously played by the Socialists, since the

¹² Interviewed by me on August 30, 2022, Chisinau.

latter disappointed the Moldovan public. Though the Socialists' approval rate is also rising due to the catastrophic economic situation and disappointment in the PAS, Dodon is a politician of the past in Moldovans' eyes.

Thus, the Shor Party has become the main criticizer of the PAS government, which accuses the Shor of being a criminal group and an agent of the Russian security organ. On October 26, the US ambassador in Moldova, Kent Logsdon, released the fact that the US had included Ilan Shor and his wife in its sanction list.¹³ The Moldovan government is working to illegalize Shor. Ilan Shor stated that, if the government excludes six Shor MPs from parliament, the PAS will gain sixty-three of the ninety-five seats, very near to two-thirds, which will make it possible for the PAS to change the Constitution. Deleting its neutralist article, Moldova will be able to apply for NATO membership. According to Ilan Shor, this is Sandu's purpose (**the geopolitical cleavage**).¹⁴ We see a contradiction between Ilan Shor's assertion and Popșoi's pledge to neutralism, but first we should know what the Shor Party is.

Shor Party's Social Experiment in Orhei

In 1998, the Shor Party's predecessor, the Party for Equality (Ravnopravie) was founded by Valerii Klimenko, a journalist of Ukrainian origin (b. 1953). In the early 1980s, during his education at the Faculty of Journalism of Lviv University, he began to work as a correspondent of the newspaper *Soviet Moldavia*. After Moldova's independence, Klimenko became chairman of the Congress of Russian Communities in Moldova. The main purpose of the Equality Party was to defend the interests of the non-Moldovan (non-Romanian) population and realize interethnic peace in Moldova. This party ran for the Moldovan parliamentary elections, but before 2019, could not overcome the threshold. In municipal elections, the party had modest successes, one of which made Klimenko a councilor of the Chisinau Municipality. In 2016, Klimenko passed the party leadership to the young politician/businessman Ilan Shor, and became the party's honorary chairman. Ilan Shor changed the party name, borrowing his own surname.¹⁵

In the late 1970s, Ilan's father, Miron, abandoned his job as vice-director of the Russian (Russian-language) Theatre in Chisinau and emigrated to Israel, where he became a successful businessman. In the early 1990s, Miron returned to Moldova with his family, and developed his business dealing in women's dresses and perfumes, as well as duty-free shops. Immediately after his repatriation, Miron Shor organized a fashion show and spot sale of the newest French modes at discount prices in Chisinau, where people at that time were literally starving. Miron explained his intention that he wanted to show the Moldovans that they need not escape to Europe, but should build Europe in Moldova.¹⁶ Miron became influential in Moldova as not only a successful businessman but also a philanthropist. He

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¹⁴ Власти Молдовы хотят запретить оппозиционную партию "Шор" // DW, November 11, 2022 (<https://www.dw.com/ru/vlasti-moldovy-hotat-zapretit-oppozicionnuu-partiu-sor/a-63711100>).

¹⁵ Валерий Клименко // Democracy.md (www.e-democracy.md/ru/elections/chisinau/2015/valerii-klimenco/).

¹⁶ Мирон Шор: Жизнь и судьба: Бизнес-моя профессия, а театр, культура- необходимость моей жизни, моя душа, сфера, где я совершенно счастлив // Aquarelle. January 30, 2014 (www.aquarelle.md/miron-shor-zhizn-i-sudba-69345).

died in 2005.

Miron treated his son Ilan, born in 1987, as if he were an adult when he was in fact an infant. Miron drew his son into business when he was only sixteen years old, lending him start-up capital, exactly as did Fred Trump to his son when his son was twenty years old and was allegedly studying at university. This behavior, at least, does not seem Jewish, since Jews usually hold education dearest of all elements in life. Too-early involvement in business and a lack of solid education seem to induce Ilan to mafia-like behavior. In 2011, for example, he held a grandiose wedding to celebrate his marriage to the Russian pop singer Jasmin, inviting two former and one future Moldovan presidents (Lucinski, Voronin, and Dodon).¹⁷ He was then twenty-four years old.

Ilan's opponents suspect the interpretation that Ilan could behave extravagantly in business and personal life because he had inherited his father's business empire, which, in fact, was not so big. An alternative explanation is that his widening connections with Moldovan oligarchs facilitated his dazzling promotion. In 2014, Prime Minister Vladimir Filat placed Ilan (then twenty-seven years old) in the post of chairman of the Administrative Council of the Bank of Economy, the successor to the Soviet Savings Bank in Moldova (equivalent to Japan's Yucho). This position made Ilan guilty of the final stage of the "robbery of the century." On June 21, 2017, the Chisinau Court sentenced Ilan Shor to seven and a half years' imprisonment. In June 2019, when he was contesting the sentence at an appellate instance, the Plahotniuc regime collapsed and Plahotniuc left Moldova. Ilan fled to Israel, too.

Party-building of the Shor Party at the local level represents another picture, different from the extravagancy described above. In 2015, when Ilan started his political activities, he chose the strategy of concentrating human resources on a region, Orhei, in Central Moldova (about fifty kilometers to the north of Chisinau), conduct a social experiment there, and spread the experience to the whole country. Orhei was founded as a fortress city of medieval Hungary, changed its belonging to the Moldovan Principality under the Ottoman Empire's suzerainty, and was passed to the Russian Empire together with other parts of Bessarabia in 1813. Its population in 1920 was estimated to be twenty-five thousand, among whom two-thirds were Jewish. Some think that the Shor family also derived from Orhei and this is why Ilan chose this city as the starting point of his political movement.

When Ilan gathered cadres, his father's connections and reputation helped him greatly, though Miron had died ten years before. For example, vice-mayor of Orhei City, Valerian Cristea (b. 1950), was the former Moldovan ambassador at Prague sent by the Communist president Voronin. He decided to dedicate his second professional life to the Shor movement because of his friendship with late Miron Shor. Dinu Țurcanu (b. 1980), a jurist chairing the Orhei County Assembly after 2019, belongs to a different generation of Moldovan politicians. Having been discovered by Vlad Căbreacov, a leader of the Christian Democratic Popular Party, he became a consultant to the party's top leader, Yuri Roshka, in 2005, and later the party's general secretary.¹⁸ Unfortunately, this was the time

¹⁷ Свидетель Молдовы: как Илан Шор стал Иланом Шором // NewsMaker. n/d.
(<https://newsmaker.md/rus/novosti/svidetel-moldovy-kak-ilan-shor-stal-ilanom-shorom-39573/>).

¹⁸ Дину Циркану // *People of Interest*. July 24, 2021

when the party irreversibly declined. In 2014, the party decided to liquidate itself. Exactly at that point did Shor ask Roshka to introduce him to a young and able activist for his new political movement. Roshka recommended Țurcanu.¹⁹

Orhei mayor, Pavel Verejanu (b. 1973), says that the Shor is not a geopolitical, but a socially oriented party.²⁰ Indeed, the leaders I met in Orhei represent various generations, ideologies (Right or Left), and geopolitical orientations. They are unified by their conviction in the social experiment they had conducted in Orhei for the past seven years and loyalty to Ilan Shor. Though the PAS government criticizes them for being Russia's spies, it is difficult to explain their behavior by their alleged pro-Russianness. How could Țurcanu, former pan-Romanian nationalist, be arrested twice for his role in the protest movement in the autumn of 2022, if the purpose of the movement was to serve Russia's diplomatic purposes?

Orhei County has a population of about a hundred thousand scattered in 74 settlements. These settlements are integrated into 38 municipalities, the largest one of which is Orhei City with a population of about twenty-one thousand. 38 municipalities are integrated into 27 local electoral districts, each of which sends one councilor to the County Assembly. Before 2015, Orhei was a bastion of the DP, which monopolized leading offices of the county, including the local prosecutor. Local notables had their own village shops and practically appointed school principals. Young and energetic people had left the county and those who stayed "sold" their votes for a sack of grain. Few believed that rural politics could change.

In 2015, a few tens of Shor activists began to operate in the county. Since Orhei is within commutable distance from Chisinau, even now, let alone then, about a half of Shor mayors have not moved to Orhei, but continue to live in Chisinau. In the 2016 municipal elections, only Ilan Shor won the mayoral election of Orhei, so, in the years from 2016 to 2019, Shor activists struggled against local DP notables over the county.

Using Orhei City as a model for the whole county, the Shor Party demonstrated a new method of management. Moldovan state and municipal budgets do not foresee normal salaries for their servants. Instead, when some public facility needs to be built, the municipal or county construction bureau submits a quote twice the real need. For example, when a million leis are needed to restore a school building, the bureau estimates the necessary expense as two million leis, and the municipality actually spends 700,000 leis. Local officials, from mayor to policemen, make a living based on this margin of 1,300,000 leis. This scheme is common for Ukraine. The Shor activists in Orhei broke this scheme and requested that the local construction bureau submit a quote of a million leis (more desirably 900,000 leis) when a million leis were needed. Instead, they raised local taxes and salaries for public servants to some extent. Thus, hidden money flow began to become public and legalized. Roads and street lamps began to be built and restored. The central park of Orhei, which had been dirty, dark, and dangerous, was beautifully improved.

(<https://profiles.rise.md/profile.php?id=210724205353&lang=rus>).

¹⁹ My interview with Țurcanu on August 31, 2022, Orhei City.

²⁰ Interviewed by me on August 31, 2022, Orhei City.

By the initiative of Orhei City, the largest amusement park in Moldova, OrheiLand with water pools around a natural lake, was built, and it attracts between fifty and a hundred thousand people a day. In 2017, a German-based car parts factory, Sumitomo Electric Bordnetze (SEBN), accepted the city's invitation, which brought four thousand workplaces to this small city. In July 2022, Moldova's anti-monopoly organ alleged that the investment contract illegally waived the rent payment. SEBN declared its readiness to sue for its own defense from Moldova's anti-monopoly authorities.²¹ I do not see any reason to allude to the contract concluded five years ago except that it was an achievement by Pavel Filip's DP government and that the accepted factory invitation by Orhei City is a good advertisement for the Shor Party. Thus, the PAS government demonstrated itself as not only unable to secure foreign investment and create new workplaces, but also as ardent in destroying existing ones in its struggle against its enemies.

By 2019, the Orhei population began to believe that Orhei could change, depending on its leaders. The 2019 local elections wiped out local DP notables. The Shor Party won 30 of the 38 mayoral elections and gained 27 of the 35 councilor seats. After this victory, the Shor leaders continue to implement various projects. For example, Vice-Mayor Cristea, using his connection as the former Moldovan ambassador to the Czech Republic, agreed with the Brno Filial of Charles University to open a branch in Orhei to prevent the outflow of the young population from the city.

Having achieved spectacular results, Ilan Shor's strategy of social experiment at the local level exposed problems, too. It has cultivated an invincible but limited geographical basis for support. The party did not experience significant seat retreat even in the 2021 parliamentary elections, after Ilan's escape to Israel and the intensifying attack against it because of its tacit alliance with the Socialists. Yet the Shor Party's electoral basis has been limited to only two regions: Orhei (36.98 percent of the eligible vote from the county) and Taraclia (28.24 percent), a Bulgarian-populated county in South Moldova. Shor's social experiment consumes human resources to such an extent that the party cannot dispatch activists widely to the country.

Conclusions

The collapse of the grand coalition in November 2019 fundamentally changed Moldova's political constellation. The Socialists began to seek a coalition with the DP and even the Shor Party, underscoring the Right/Left cleavage. Perhaps, many Moldovan voters felt that the Socialists had betrayed them. Possibly, the decline of their influence could be limited if they explained the need for a new political constellation to the public. First, they could dissolve the parliament immediately after the grand coalition collapsed. Secondly, they could endeavor to create a normal cohabitation after their defeat in the presidential election in November 2020, by proposing Dodon as a candidate for prime minister. Yet Dodon and the Socialists chose to play scheming parliamentary games, which perhaps produced an impression that Plahotniuc's oligarchic politics was reviving.

²¹ "Moldova's anti-trust body says 13.8 mln euro aid to SEBN is illegal," *SeeNews: Business Intelligence for Southeast Europe*, July 12, 2022.

When the grand coalition collapsed, Sandu criticized the Socialists for their lack of enthusiasm for judicial reform and appeasement to oligarchs, but did not refer to Moldova's geopolitical choice. During the twenty months of harsh struggles against the Socialists and their allies, however, Sandu's anti-oligarchic rhetoric merged with her geopolitical discourse. This merge is dangerous, as we have observed in Euromaidan Ukraine and after. She now states that the PAS government's purpose is not to improve Moldova's present situation but to make its pro-European choice irreversible. Having defeated the Socialists, the PAS's incompetence in economic policy and public administration was exposed, and solutions possible for them are to geopoliticize public discourse, repress opponents, and deepen dependence on foreign advice and aid. Yet Moldova cannot go to the lengths that Ukraine has done. The opposition, be it the Left or the Shor, inevitably asks why Moldova needs to reject Transnistrian power yet buy Romanian power, when the former is half the cost of the latter, a simple question that could not be asked in Ukraine before it was too late.

Having experienced two fragile ruling parties (the Socialists and PAS), we may revisit the Plahotniuc regime with a new perspective: how it overcame the crisis of 2015 and realized stable economic growth in 2016-2019. How can government capacity be improved? Perhaps, the Shor Party is trying to answer this question by its social experiment. For better or worse, Ilan Shor is a successor to Plahotniuc. Unfortunately, the geographic scope of the Shor Party's activities has been small and the Moldovans' resentment of the "robbery of the century" is too ingrained to nationalize the Shor's influence.