

THE STATE OF DEMOCRACY, REFORMS AND THE ROAD AHEAD

UKRAINE AND MOLDOVA
AFTER THE 2020 LOCAL AND
PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS

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About the Authors

Mariia Kravchenko

Mariia Kravchenko is an independent political advisor and SEO enthusiast. In 2018, she earned her Master's degree with honors in International Relations from Oles Honchar Dnipro National University. For over 7 years, she has been a noteworthy leader in the public space, participating in election campaigns as the Chief of the Polling station, observer, and political advisor. Mariia is an alumnus of the European Parliament Internship Program and an author of academic articles on EU-related topics.

Angela Grămadă, Ph.D.

Angela Grămadă, Ph.D., is the President of the Experts for Security and Foreign Affairs Association and Research Associate at the Romanian NDGO Platform – FOND. In 2011 she was part of a research team in the 'European Values Across the Black Sea Region' program, funded by the Soros Foundation Romania, from May 2011 to October 2011. The result of this project was the publication of a volume entitled "South Caucasus 20 Years After: Political Regimes, Security, and Energy// P.H. Curtea Veche, Bucharest, 2012", where to Angela Grămadă contributed as a co-author.

Introduction

Both Ukraine and Moldova held important elections in late 2020 with local councils all over Ukraine and the presidential office in Chisinau in play. At the same time, the two countries are facing major common challenges in their political and economic systems, struggling with difficult reforms, corruption polarized societies and more or less frozen conflicts on their territories.

This paper seeks to analyze the election campaigns, the vote itself and its consequences for the outlook in both countries, drawing upon the substantial expertise of two analysts, Mariia Kravchenko and Angela Grămadă. A final chapter will then attempt to identify commonalities and highlight divergences.

Ukraine

Written by Mariia Kravchenko

On October 25, 2020, the full electoral cycle ended in Ukraine with the local elections: now, the country has got a new President, Parliament and local councils. After 1,5 years of work of President Volodymyr Zelenskyi and the first Parliament in Ukrainian history with the so-called “mono-majority”, in these elections, voters gave their preference to the acting mayors and regional political parties. Despite low voter turnout (36,88%), regional parties [received relatively high support](#), even though the governing party "Servant of the People" won the largest number of seats countrywide. For example, the following [regional political parties](#) received higher support locally than any national parties represented in the Parliament:

- “Groysman’s Ukrainian Strategy” political party – 62,96% (Vinnytsia City Council);
- “Kernes Bloc - Successful Kharkiv!” political party – 40,48% (Kharkiv City Council);
- “Proposition” political party – 34,38% (Dnipro City Council);
- “Trust Actions” political party– 31,25% (Odesa City Council);
- “Ihor Kolykhaiev Party - We Live Here!” – 31,48% (Kherson City Council);
- “Volodymyr Buriak’s Party - Unity” – 25% (Zaporizhzhia City Council), etc.

Meanwhile, these elections to the local councils have historical importance. It applies to both the election process and its consequences for each specific region of the country. These local elections will finish the decentralization process that has been going on for 5 years. After the implementation of the Decentralization reform, [most taxes](#) are concentrated on the local level, so the value of the city or regional council deputy’s mandate will increase significantly.

The 2020 elections are the first to take place in the new united territorial communities with new powers. First of all, the emphasis should be made on the local budgets. Most of the taxes collected from both citizens and businesses will be used by local communities to implement new programs and projects in their areas. These are the funds that could be spent on infrastructure, education, health care, and so on. Before the launch of the reform, most taxes were accumulated by the national authorities and then returned to the local level in much smaller amounts at the end of the budget process. Now, the value of a local representative mandate increases compared to 2015.

The principal innovations were introduced in the election process by the new Electoral Code adopted in December 2019. In particular, all the candidates to the councils except those communities with less than 10 thousand citizens should be delegated by political parties. Also, the introduction of a gender quota can be also considered as a progressive innovation, according to which two out of five candidates in the party lists at any level - community, district or region - must be of the other gender. Thus, there were 4-6 women in each dozen. "These are the first elections in 30 years of independence when women have the same access to local politics as men," [stated](#) Olha Aivazovska, the Chairwoman of the civil network "OPORA".

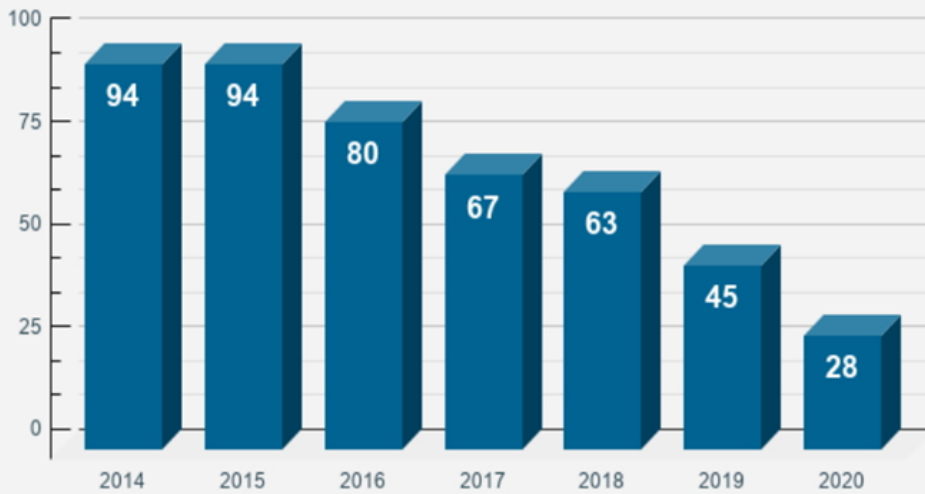
Finally, the local elections of 2020 will go down in history with extremely low turnout, strict anti-epidemic measures, and the consolidation of powers in the hands of incumbent mayors. Politically, this is a stress-test for the governing party "Servant of the People." which is continuing to lose support since its heyday in 2019 when over 40% of voters supported the party in that year's parliamentary elections. Even though they are disappointed with the results, they clearly understand that the growth or decline in the electoral support depends on the rating of Volodymyr Zelenskyi.

European Integration

The implementation of the Association Agreement, including a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) between the EU and Ukraine, provided the necessary impetus for reforms of Ukraine's economic and political spheres. In recent years, Ukrainians received a lot from such intense cooperation: visa liberalization, wider access to the European educational programs for students, affordable loans for the entrepreneurs, etc. Bilateral relations between Ukraine and the EU have reached a new level, not only in terms of cooperation but also partnership, the purpose of which is to prepare Ukraine for full integration with the EU.

Since the inauguration of President Volodymyr Zelenskyi, four Deputy Prime Ministers for European and Euro-Atlantic Integration have been changed in Ukraine. The energy and enthusiasm of adopting new laws shown by the Parliament in mid and late 2019 did not apply to the quick pace of the Association Agreement implementation. On the contrary, the overall progress for 2019 was 45%, while in 2020 this dynamic has worsened to 28% (November 2020, [Pulse of the Agreement](#)). Let's take a look at the diagram to check the progress by years:

Overall Progress of the Implementation of the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement (in percent, %)



Source: Pulse of the Agreement: <https://pulse.eu-ua.org>

On June 4, 2020, the Ukrainian Parliament appointed Olga Stefanyshyna to the position of Deputy Prime Minister for European and Euro-Atlantic Integration. Despite the negative trends in the sphere of the Association Agreement implementation, the new Deputy Prime Minister inspires confidence in the further success of Ukraine in the European track. First of all, she came to the office with the ambitious vision of reviewing the Association Agreement.

Ukraine seeks to increase the share of its import in the European market because such measures increase the possibilities of gaining a decent level of economic development and well-being. In practice, it will have the following effect: the more Ukrainian companies have access to the European market, the faster they will want to work under European transparent rules in Ukraine,

especially at the local level. The upcoming review of the Association Agreement is an important part of this process, which will help to balance the economic asymmetry of bilateral relations.

“We have already gone far out of the volumes of trade in the EU markets, which were indicated in the Agreement. We are constantly in dialogue with business representatives, who support our position. Our ambitions lay the possibility of revising the Agreement on all types of goods and services, as well as expanding their list and including new positions on which have not been negotiated before,” Deputy Prime Minister Stefanyshyna [stated](#).

Besides, the Government is considering the so-called “Norwegian track” for Ukraine, when the Association Agreement may contain a goal to reach full liberalization of all “four freedoms”

- free movement of goods, services, labour and capital while not yet attaining full membership. The European Union is positive about Kyiv's proposals to update the Association Agreement. In early 2021, Ukraine and the European Union started negotiations on renewing the document and consider the possibility to revise the list of goods and services, as well as their volumes supplied to the European market. Ukraine has already done [a good job in this sphere](#), so European standards are already in force in many areas.

Finally, the Ukrainian Government [announced](#) that Ukraine is ready to sign the Common Aviation Area Agreement with the EU, which will increase the number of flights and passenger traffic to Europe. In turn, this will also have a positive impact on the tourism industry, doing business and interpersonal relationships.

Reforms

After the election of a new President Volodymyr Zelenskyi in April 2019, there was a strong expectation among the electorate that he will take actions to fight corruption and eliminate the influence of oligarchs in Ukrainian politics. His first months in the Office were characterized by a "turbo regime" in the Parliament when the MPs quickly adopted new laws to support reforms. However, [according to many observers](#), the

pace of reforms has recently slowed down.

Nevertheless, President Zelenskyi remains a source of hope for many Ukrainians that still expect him to fulfil his promises, which he declared during the election campaign. In particular, the [research](#) made by the Democratic Initiatives Foundation showed that 60.1% of respondents consider the President to be a driving force of reforms. In May 2020, he demonstrated leadership in advocating two important and complex reforms:

1) The Introduction of the Land Market: new legislation removes restrictions on buying agricultural lands and introduces Ukraine to the list of states, where the purchase and sale of agricultural lands is a legal act;

2) The Regulation of Banking Activities: this law guarantees the inevitability of banks' liquidation. If the court considers the decision of the National Bank to withdraw a certain financial institution from the market illegal, the insolvency or liquidation procedures are not terminated.

Among the key victories of the President's team is the introduction of the large-scale digitization. At his presentation on Diia Summit, President Zelenskyi [announced](#) that 2021 will be the year of introducing the "paperless mode" in public

administration. It means that no state institution will be able to request from Ukrainians any certificates, extracts or other documents in paper form to receive certain state services. Meanwhile, any Ukrainian can use the possibilities of the online app “Diia” to register the legal entity in 15 minutes, use a digital driver license or passport for traveling, register a child in “E-baby” service, or open a bank account online. All these examples allow us to say that Ukraine is making good progress in the reformation of State institutions.

“Ukrainian centrism” – with this term the governing party Servant of the People describes its ideology. At the latest party conference in February 2020, the leader of “Servants” Oleksandr Kornienko [said](#), “We are patriots and even nationalists when it comes to defending our State. We are humanists when it comes to protecting human rights. We are libertarians when we launch the land market. At the same time, we are statesmen when it comes to the tax discipline or eliminating corruption schemes. We are liberals when we defend human economic freedoms. Finally, we are socialists when it comes to protecting people in need.”

Such ideological confusion determines the degree of the Servants’ involvement in the national political discourse. 246 out of 423 MPs in the Ukrainian

Parliament joined the fraction Servant of the People. With the government unified as both the President and Government belong to the same party, there is a unique opportunity to implement reforms, adopt necessary laws by simple majority voting. However, such a unification also laid almost full responsibility for political decisions on their shoulders. Therefore, when it comes to success it is mostly associated with President Volodymyr Zelenskyi, while all the negative decisions are articulated as the failures of the Government, MPs, former authorities, etc.

Unlike other political parties represented in the Parliament, Servants are forced to participate in every discourse or public discussion, since their position defines the outcome of it. Meanwhile, the voice of opposition is usually considered only in those political issues that require constitutional changes and 300 votes accordingly. However, some decisions split even the governing party. In such situations, Servants build situational coalitions with those political forces that are ready to share responsibility with them. For instance, when the Parliament got close to the introduction of the Land Market, Servants with their 206 votes in favour were forced to seek the support of the opposition, and get additional votes from the following fractions:

- European Solidarity – 23;
- Voice – 13;

- Trust – 12;
- Unaffiliated – 5.

Despite the efforts of such political parties as Fatherland and Opposition Platform - For Life, trying to hinder the project through a myriad of amendments, the law was successfully adopted. However, the toughest battles of narratives are usually happening when it comes to peace-related issues. Before the first meeting of Volodymyr Zelenskyi in the Normandy Quartet on 9th December 2019, there were many talks about the initiative to incorporate the “Steinmeier Formula” into Ukrainian legislation, which will define the special status of Donbas during the local elections. Immediately after the fact of signing was confirmed by the President of Ukraine, hot debates took place in mass media whether this step reflected the interests of Ukraine and whether it gave a chance to end the conflict in Donbas.

In turn, the position of the Ukrainian authorities was criticized by the parliamentary fractions European Solidarity, Voice and Fatherland. Before the scheduled meeting in Paris, they took many efforts to articulate all the risks of such a decision on national channels and draw the “red lines” for President Zelenskyi. After the end of the Summit, it was already clear that these red lines have not been crossed.

Polarization

Authors of the popular publication “How Democracies Die” Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt [noted](#) that mutual toleration (the understanding that competing parties accept each other as legitimate rivals) is one of the vital ingredients of democracy. The temptation to use a temporary control of institutions to maximize partisan advantage should be avoided, otherwise, it can lead to the erosion of democratic norms and threaten the institutions that maintain the balance of powers.

Even though oppositional parties accepted their loss in the 2019 Parliamentary election and acknowledged Servant of the People as a new legitimate power, extreme partisan polarization that extends beyond policy differences makes it almost impossible to build a strong inter-party discourse in Ukraine now. Such a situation occurs due to several reasons:

- 1) Old elites represented by such oppositional parties as Fatherland, Opposition Platform - For Life, and European Solidarity, perceive Servants as inexperienced amateurs unable to deliver life-changing political decisions;
- 2) New elites majorly represented by Servant of the People are trying to establish themselves in power, and exercise a new way of making politics while ignoring the

experience of old elites in public governing;

3) Deep partisan polarization after the 2014 Maidan revolution makes it impossible for parties with pro-Russian and pro-European visions to cooperate. This also makes it impossible to build a united opposition.

These are political projects that are focused on representing the interests of certain oligarchs or business groups. They usually make the same path: people interested in creating a political project buy the party, change its title, and hire political consultants to launch a bright and expensive campaign. Meanwhile, the attempts to remain in power or retain political influence make many parties fail in the next elections.

A certain level of the inter-party discourse was characterized by the emergence of political blocs that appeared as a result of the merge of smaller parties with similar visions and values. For example, in 2001 the Yulia Tymoshenko's Bloc was created, in 2006 – Lytvyn's Bloc, in 2014 - Opposition Bloc and Petro Poroshenko's Bloc "Solidarity", etc. In fact, such political cooperation allowed the parties to increase their chances before the elections and unite people with different backgrounds but the same values. Almost no one of these blocs survived, but they gave a good start for the

alternative political projects and parties.

However, there are still some positive examples of the inter-party cooperation that took place before the 2020 local election. Since many mayoral elections in Ukraine were held in 2 rounds, it stimulated political parties to support the candidates from other parties in the second tour. For example, European Solidarity didn't nominate their candidate to the mayor's position in Kyiv but supported in the race the current mayor and leader of UDAR party Vitaliy Klychko. Meanwhile, the political party Voice supported the candidacy of Oleksandr Tretiak from European Solidarity to the mayor's position in Rivne in the second round. In Ivano-Frankivsk, the political party Fatherland gave their support to the current mayor and the candidate from the political party Freedom - Ruslan Martsinkiv. In Kryvyi Rih, the leader of the first tour and the acting mayor Yurii Vilkul left the race due to health problems and supported the candidate from Opposition Platform – For Life, Kostiantyn Pavlov, who took third place in the first round.

All these examples show that both national and local political parties can cooperate with contenders and even express the support to their candidates during the election campaigns. This is due to the fact that on the national level parties

tend to clash because of their competitive visions of the country's development vector, while on the local level parties are more flexible because they need to solve completely other problems that require a compromise.

The Role of Civil Society

Civil society plays an extremely important role in the social development of Ukraine. Since the Euromaidan, it has become a powerful source of political changes, because CS actively participates in the electoral processes, supervises the implementation of the reforms, and contributes to it with its own proposals. The number of NGOs in Ukraine continues to increase, including those that participate in the political processes.

NGOs play an important role in combating corruption. First of all, they promote the transparency of governing institutions and create favourable conditions for preventing corruption, revealing the facts of such violations and bringing the responsible people to justice. In this regard, Zero-Corruption Group is one of the most noticeable non-governmental actors in Ukraine, that unites NGOs with the same aim. For instance, the [Anti-Corruption Action Center](#), which is the founder of this group, reports on the following results:

- 4.8 bln UAH were saved for the

State due to the public procurement monitoring and appealing violations;

- 35 anti-corruption laws have been advocated;
- 986 cases are investigated by the National Anti-Corruption Bureau;
- 4 mln e-declarations were submitted by officials of all-levels that are in public access.

Thanks to the constant pressure and expert support of non-governmental organizations, many new institutions and initiatives that aim to counter corruption appeared in recent years: National Anti-Corruption Bureau (2015), Specialized Anti-Corruption Prosecutor's Office (2015), High Anti-Corruption Court (2019), Asset Recovery and Management Agency (2016), Unified State Register of Declarations (2016), etc.

NGOs are actively participating in advocating reforms. For instance, there is a public association of 26 leading non-governmental organizations and experts from all over Ukraine called [Reanimation Package of Reforms](#) that have pooled their efforts to facilitate and implement changes. They have contributed to almost all spheres of state activities, by accelerating reforms in economic, energy efficiency, health care, education, e-democracy, public administration, election, etc.

There is also a highly-respected civil

network [OPORA](#), that provides public control and advocacy in the field of elections, parliamentarism, and local self-government. Since 2007, no elections in Ukraine have been held without the observation of OPORA members. This organization created an electronic map of violations verified by its observers. It regularly recruits and trains observers for the presidential, parliamentary, and local elections, as well as organizes live broadcasting from electoral commissions sessions. All these contributions make OPORA an influential actor in public politics.

These are only a few examples of how civil society changes the political environment of Ukraine. Most of these respected organizations are affiliated with neither government nor opposition. Such independence is achieved thanks to the charitable donations, membership fees, grants of international foundations from the EU, US and Canada. It also frequently happens that social activists try their chances on the elections and receive the support of the voters or serve directly in the executive.

Unlike NGOs, all the popular national TV-channels are sponsored by oligarchs or business groups, which makes unbiased broadcasting almost impossible. More or less these channels are limited by their editorial censorship, which often makes

their materials quite predictable. However, there is an emerging generation of independent journalists that conduct investigations of law violations by state authorities, politicians, oligarchs, representatives of business, etc. Finally, we can declare the existence of a fragile balance of opinions. Even though there are still some pieces of evidence showing the lack of freedom of speech, the general movement towards democratic standards prevails.

Moldova

Written by Angela Grămadă

For the first time in the history of the Republic of Moldova, a woman was elected president. According to the data presented by the [Central Electoral Commission](#) immediately after the elections of November 15, 2020, Maia Sandu obtained 943,006 votes (57.72%), and her opponent, Igor Dodon, was supported by 690,615 (42.28%) citizens of the Republic of Moldova. The turnout in the second round of the presidential election was 52.78%.

This analysis aims to identify the most relevant elements of the presidential election campaign promoted by political actors in the Republic of Moldova, as well as highlighting their impact on political life, respectively the processes of European integration. Specific objectives also include presenting current trends in political life, discussions within the ruling coalition and opposition parties, as well as headlining the role of civil society during the election campaign to continue the country's democratization processes.

State of Play: the Importance of the Presidential Elections

The Republic of Moldova has a regime of [parliamentary governance](#), and the most decisive

electoral event is the parliamentary elections. However, presidential elections remain highly relevant. The "paternalistic" vision still predominates. The citizens consider that the head of state must give the signal where society is heading. The presidents who were elected by the citizens or by the deputies from different legislatures have supported over time this role for the head of state. In this context, presidential election campaigns, as well as the status of the head of state, are very important. In addition, the person who wins this election can contribute to the transfer of popularity for the party that supported him during the presidential race.

The 2020 presidential elections continued in a similar manner as previous electoral processes: verbal aggression, misinformation, harsh accusations, attempts to intimidate or elections fraud. This time, however, the political actor who accumulated the most negative rating, despite the somewhat stable support offered by his electorate, was the incumbent president Igor Dodon. After the removal of the oligarch Vladimir Plahotniuc from the de facto leader status of the country ([June 2019](#)), the head of state managed to concentrate a lot of power, even initiating a

commission to revise the Constitution. With the help of the commission, he intended to strengthen the institution of the president, being convinced that he would be able to remain in charge of the country for another four years. The election results changed the context of domestic policy, with Igor Dodon's Socialist Party being forced to think of several action plans in order not to lose control over the government.

Contrary to the expectations of external partners, these presidential elections were not about European aspirations or advancing European integration processes. The priorities were different, and the central themes of the election campaign were the following: the need to remove Igor Dodon from the country's leadership - an objective mentioned in the speeches of all his opponents (except Violeta Ivanov, Shor Party candidate) - the fight against corruption, quest for fair and equitable justice, inability of the government supported by a coalition of Socialists and the Democratic Party of Moldova (PDM) to manage the negative impact of the pandemic and the worsening of the socio-economic situation in the country, to neutralize the "[balanced foreign policy](#)" (good relationship with the Russian Federation, while implementing the Association Agreement), promoted by Igor Dodon against national interests, by those in charge of the state

resources.

The concern for ensuring free and fair elections was one of the most important topics of electoral discussion of those who monitored this electoral race. Most of the contestants were firmly convinced that there would be such attempts, especially since the government authorities encouraged the vote of the inhabitants of the separatist, rather pro-Russian Transnistrian region, but without ensuring that all presidential candidates will be able to promote their electoral goals among these citizens entitled with the right to vote.

What concerns European integration, this priority has been somewhat secondary in electoral strategies, being mentioned more amongst foreign policy objectives. The European Union has been presented more as a source of financial assistance than as a normative power or source to promote qualitative reforms and transformations. The narrative of the domestic electorate has changed given the background of the pandemic and associated risks, large scale return of Moldovan citizens, who temporarily emigrated for seasonal work, as well as the medical and humanitarian aid supplied by the EU, with this being the reason for the support of a pro-European candidate in the Republic of Moldova.

According to the elected president,

[Maia Sandu](#), the citizens of the Republic of Moldova voted for a better country, a fair country, for a state that does not steal from the citizens, for Moldova to approach European standards. European integration remains on the foreign policy agenda, but the order of priorities for the political actors is changing, including the impact of the presidential elections outcome.

Thus, following the declaration of the final results, the public debates extend in several directions: will or will not there be early parliamentary elections and what changes will take place within the Party of Socialists of the Republic of Moldova?

Several political actors mentioned the need to hold early parliamentary elections. They proposed to hold parliamentary elections according to a non-mixed electoral system (the mixed system was used for electing the legislature on February 24, 2019, then still under the de-facto rule of oligarch Vladimir Plahotniuc). In the opinion of some representatives of the opposition parties, the current parliament lacks legitimacy precisely for this reason. Another argument refers to how the governing coalition was formed in November 2019 and how the current government, the one led by [Ion Chicu](#), was voted in. One of the sources of votes was the PDM deputies, who thus ensured not only the parliamentary coalition,

but also the stability of the executive. Another argument for which this parliament would be lacking in legitimacy is the dubious trajectory of the deputies who either changed their party affiliation or formed new political forces, without taking the national objectives and interests into account.

Maia Sandu took over the presidency on December 24, 2020. It appears from her statements that as a new head of state she will insist on forming a new government because the vote for a new president means a profound change, also for those who have lost their legitimacy as parliamentarians. Thus, in the next period, the debate over early elections will influence the political trajectory in the Republic of Moldova. But for this to become possible, some legal conditions need to be met.

First of all, the current government must be dismissed, either by a vote of no confidence in the parliament or by the resignation of the prime minister. Given that the Socialists rushed the presidential elections to resume the plenary sessions, then it becomes clear that the Socialists insist on early parliamentary elections only at the declarative level. The second factor to consider is the role that incumbent President Igor Dodon will play in Moldovan political life. He acknowledged that he is the informal leader of the

Socialist Party of the Republic of Moldova, even when the position of the head of state requires giving up one's party membership. The Socialist Party of the Republic of Moldova, even when the position of the head of state requires giving up one's party membership. The Congress of Socialists took place at the end of December, 2020, whereby Igor Dodon was elected party president. Immediately after the presidential elections in November, a scenario was promoted [in the media by Renato Usatîi](#), through which Ion Chicu resigns from the position of the prime minister, and the speaker of the parliament, Zinaida Greceanii, submits Igor Dodon candidacy for the post of prime minister. This scenario requires support either from the formal or informal coalition in the parliament.

Taking other parliamentary factions in consideration, such a scenario was only possible until Maia Sandu took the oath and required securing support of the deputies from the Shor Party or those who recently left the "Pro Moldova" Party and formed the parliamentary faction "For Moldova". Some important laws have already been voted by the representatives of the three parties: [the fiscal code and the budget law for 2021](#).

Meanwhile, pro-European-oriented parliamentary and extra-parliamentary formations insist on

the need for early parliamentary elections. A new president needs parliamentary support and a new government. Only this way will Maia Sandu be able to honour the promises to her voters.

What regards the provisions of the domestic legislation, the power of the president is quite limited in terms of advancing reforms. However, the head of state has the sufficient constitutional status to ensure an active role in country's political life. The president is the one who establishes the foreign policy priorities, defines the upcoming tendencies in the public environment and represents the interests of the country abroad. The president is also the mediator between various state branches. The most important mission of the elected president, however, lies in uniting society.

Incumbent Narratives and Why the Voters Adopted a Pragmatic Approach on Elections

That is not to say that currently in the Republic of Moldova there is any single political force or a governing coalition to manage the internal and external affairs of the state, even if there are tendencies in this respect. Over the last few years, the political life of the Republic of Moldova was very dynamic and was characterized by increased instability. This situation is due both to the internal context, where new political parties appear

On the political scene and experienced political actors try to gain exclusive control over state resources, and external context, where politicians do not understand the concept of promoting the national interests of the country, looking for the ways to promote their own patrimonial interest abroad.

After oligarch Vladimir Plahotniuc, who was the leader of the Democratic Party of Moldova, disappeared from the political arena, some political forces managed to consolidate and – although with great difficulty - change their status to become parliamentary actors. Although the Party of Socialists of the Republic of Moldova determined the composition of the governing coalition last year (November 2019 - November 2020), the party leaders face reputation problems.

To wit, they encountered difficulties in convincing the electorate that they will be able to avoid a coalition with members of the Shor Party, former members of the Pro Moldova Party [1], or articulating whether they support early parliamentary elections. The latest presidential election further ignited the political instability in

Moldova. Igor Dodon, who lost the race for the president position, is in the process of identifying his new status and role, not only within the Socialist Party but in Moldovan politics in general.

The recent historical record of the Republic of Moldova is peppered with examples of opposition parties have uniting forces to support a single candidate in the presidential election. The case of the 2016 presidential elections is very relevant in this context. Eight people ran in the 2020 presidential elections, five of whom addressed the pro-European electorate. Thus, among the pro-European candidates, the competition was more dynamic, even if the election campaign was anaemic, due to the pandemic context.

Attempts to come up with a single pro-European candidate were unsuccessful, and there were many reasons for this. First, some political actors felt that they had been offended in previous campaigns and demanded political debts to be settled; i.e. unconditional support from former dialogue partners. Thus, the candidate Andrei Năstase, the leader of the Justice of the Truth Political Party, asked Maia Sandu to

[1] In June, 2019, after the coalition between PSRM and the Political Bloc ACUM (PAS and PPDA) was formed, an important part of the voters of the pro-european parties were dissatisfied with the decision of Maia Sandu and Andrei Năstase to create the "PSRM - ACUM" coalition. Now they will have to convince the voters that they are able to avoid coalitions with Shor Party and For Moldova, which are still considered to be controlled by Vladimir Plahotniuc, in order to fight against Igor Dodon.

support him in the election campaign and to withdraw her candidacy in 2020. Other political parties approached the election campaign pragmatically. For them, the election was not only an opportunity to try to profit electorally by supporting a popular candidate but also an efficient tool to measure the electoral potential for parliamentary elections, including early elections.

In the first part of the election campaign (first round) the pro-European candidates, in opposition to the socialist government, brought forward mutual accusations. Only a few messages from their election campaign referred to projects and positive messages, most exposing the mistakes of the government led by Ion Chicu when it comes to responding to the pandemic, but also the problems of the [justice sector](#). It was not a competition of ideas. The strategies focused on highlighting some previously addressed issues and on the fight against Igor Dodon- who, in the eyes of many on the pro-European side, had replaced Vladimir Plahotniuc as their main opponent.

There also were several attempts

by right-wing candidates to explore the potential of attracting the left-wing electorate, namely, the segment that could vote for a left-wing candidate, not for reasons of political ideology, but rather for reasons of political conservatism and traditionalism. [2]

Thus, it was the very same Andrei Năstase who used messages with a religious underpinning in his speech in order to extend the electoral supporters circle. This strategy did not lead to positive results. Andrei Năstase tried to address religion as a way to approach the electorate that supports Igor Dodon not for political beliefs, but for his declared moral values. The lack of support from the Orthodox Church could be attributed to the avoidance of direct dialogue with the church representatives, first and foremost the priests. Andrei Năstase preferred to address the Orthodox Church followers, not to the Church leaders. However, the political messages articulated by the priests enjoy a greater receptivity among the Church followers.

However, to understand why a significant part of electorate voted for the candidate Maia Sandu, it is

[2] In the Republic of Moldova, what is declared to be the political party ideology, does not necessarily coincide with de facto ideological beliefs. Even if Igor Dodon is a declared socialist, he is supported extensively by the Church. Together they are fighting against the LGBT community, considering their opinions as inappropriate to the traditional values. Also, they actively promote marriage between a man and a woman, the Church as a pillar of society, and Europe as a danger for these values. This is the traditional Russian approach towards European democracy and ideology as the decay of moral values.

relevant to mention opinion polls as efficient tools used by political actors to influence public opinion, and thereby the behaviour of the electorate.

Thus, in the context where several polls showed the increased competition between potential candidates ranked 2nd and 3rd - Maia Sandu and Renato Usatii, the electorate pragmatically approached the first round of elections, with many voters opting for the alternative politician, rather than the one they would vote for in a different political context. Cohesion around Maia Sandu as a candidate was pragmatic, not emotional. In the second round, pro-European candidates, as well as Renato Usatii, a controversial politician with several criminal cases filed against him both in Moldova and Russia, officially announced that they support for Maia Sandu. These public political statements significantly stimulated the voter cohesion, which complicated Igor Dodon's mission to obtain a second presidential term.

Polarization of Political Options

Since 2015, several forces, both within the civil society and political parties, unified their efforts around the idea of removing Vladimir Plahotniuc's Democratic Party of Moldova from the country's leadership. The political crisis, however, began in January 2013,

when details about the the notorious death of a participant in the [Padurea Domneasca](#) hunt appeared in the press. The intentional concealment of the information on this murder led to the [fall of the government led by Vlad Filat](#). What followed was a de facto struggle between Vladimir Plahotniuc and Vlad Filat for control of state power.

After the parliamentary elections in November 2014, details appeared in the press about the biggest financial scandal in the country's history and the embezzlement of about 1 billion USD from the banking system. In October 2015, Vlad Filat was arrested for the involvement in this scandal, being released only towards the end of 2019. His lawyers appealed to the issues of the justice system and the violation of the right to a fair trial.

After the [arrest of Vlad Filat](#) (a parliamentary deputy at the time, whose immunity was withdrawn shortly before his arrest), the control of the government was taken over by the Democratic Party of Moldova and the leader of this political party, Vladimir Plahotniuc. The balance of political forces in the parliament was severely affected by the deputies from the Party of Communists of the Republic of Moldova switching to the Democratic Party of Moldova and politically unaffiliated deputies (easy to be influenced by the governing party).

Although mass protests had been taking place since the spring of 2015, only in the second half of the year, civil society representatives realized the importance of bringing new political forces to heal the political system. Thus, the Dignity and Truth Platform Political Party was born, and later the Action and Solidarity Party. Other pro-European, unionist or pro-Russian political forces appeared on the political scene as well.

Whereas the pro-Russian political formations seemed to be more consolidated around the idea of a strategic partnership with Russia and the aspirations of Eurasian integration, the pro-European forces united on the need to fight Vladimir Plahotniuc, who succeeded to extend his influence on the internal affairs of the state, but also other relevant political forces, such as the Party of Socialists.

In the 2016 presidential election, Igor Dodon was able to win with the help of votes coming from the Transnistrian region, but also by the timely withdrawal of Renato Usatii from the electoral race. The latter was accused of serious violations of electoral provisions and external financing of his campaign. For PDM and the leader of this party, was important to avoid that Maia Sandu or Andrei Năstase to join the country's leadership. These two political leaders insistently promoted the

reform of the judiciary and fight against corruption. However, fighting against corruption or healing the political system, as objectives, were not in the interest of the governing party at the time.

In 2018, Andrei Năstase's [victory in Chisinau's mayoral elections](#) was overruled by a court decision. In more than a year, another court acknowledged that Andrei Năstase's [victory was illegally invalidated](#), being already too late to remedy the situation (in the local elections, autumn 2019, the candidate from PSRM Ivan Ceban became the mayor of Chisinau). After the elections of February 24, 2019, organized under a mixed electoral system, the opposition political forces held negotiations with the Socialists for several months. The aim was to explore the potential of a parliamentary coalition to remove PDM from the leadership. The coalition between socialists and pro-European parties became possible in June 2019, but only after the mediation of European and Russian officials, who "brokered" a situational coalition, which in a different context would not have been possible.

The 2020 presidential election was a new opportunity for the pro-European opposition in the Republic of Moldova to demonstrate unity around the idea of fighting corruption, as well as securing the country's European path and economic reforms.

However, the political narrative was traditionally centered around the "common enemy", this time in the person of Igor Dodon. The coalition against the candidate Igor Dodon was based on well-founded arguments, such as the failure to control the spread of the pandemic, the rollback of justice reform or consolidation of the presidential institution. The only peculiarity that needs to be emphasized in this context is the decision of the candidates to pledge their support for the pro-European candidate in the second round, whoever that might be. For most, it was clear that Igor Dodon would advance to the second round, but no precise predictions could be made regarding the candidate ranked second.

Role for Civil Society in the Electoral Context

Civil society continues to play a relevant role in the democratization of the Republic of Moldova. Many non-governmental organizations are actively involved in the process of monitoring and implementation of the Association Agreement between the European Union and the Republic of Moldova. The role of civil society is to monitor, inform and

communicate priorities in the reforms, but also to contribute with expertise, know-how and experience to achieve national objectives and interests in implementing the provisions of the Association Agreement.

During the pandemic, the role of the civil society sector expanded considerably in terms of mobilizing resources and volunteers to provide the necessary services to vulnerable populations or in areas where government authorities failed to meet the challenges. Thus, civil society is one of the constant partners of public authorities not only in terms of European integration, but also in facing new risks. However, this role is sometimes intentionally underestimated or sabotaged, depending on the interests of political actors.

In 2020, civil society faced several challenges. It brought up shortcomings in a number of areas but mostly focused on two main aspects, both of which are connected to the [electoral context](#):

- Direct attacks on civil society and censorship in the context of the pandemic [3]
- The electoral context - financial

[3] The adoption of the new regulatory framework for the activity of non-profit organizations and direct attacks, [managed by political actors](#), and representatives of the ruling political party; the adoption of NGO law and attempt to impose institutionalized censorship on the press (Examples: Audiovisual and Coordination Council decision and the attacks of the socialist deputy, Bogdan Țârdea, on NGOs controlling the public institutions system).

sanctions for several independent television channels.

In the first case, that of the attacks on civil society, some parliamentarians tried to promote amendments to the Law on Non-Profit Organizations in order to reduce the role of NGOs in political life. Their intention was to silence the experts who monitor electoral processes or those who promote projects related to political processes. The pretext used by the [socialist deputies](#) aimed to diminish the involvement of NGOs in the country's political life.

As a result, civil society managed to highlight how the government authorities tried to limit the freedom of association. If the proposals of the Socialists had been approved, then a significant number of non-governmental organizations would have been affected. The attempts of the socialist deputies to limit the involvement of the civil society in monitoring electoral processes, as well as to limit their financing potential, [4] served as a cohesion factor for the representatives of the civil society sector and opposition parties, which were not able to monitor electoral processes without the civic activists.

During the pandemic, the Audiovisual Coordinating Council

(CCA) adopted a range of decisions that involved censorship of the materials presented by the independent press on the spread of COVID-19 and government approach to cope with these crises.

In this regard, it is also important to consider the difference civil society assessment on how the media reflected the election campaign. Thus, [the Civic Coalition for Free and Fair Elections](#) (CALC) claims that only a few publications presented a balanced electoral discourse, with online press being the most involved in covering the interests of particular electoral candidates. The difference between the position of the CCA and that of the CALC is that the monitoring reports of the latter highlighted the media attempts to favour the incumbent President, Igor Dodon, while the CCA avoids making explicit remarks on this.

Both in the course of the pre-election and election period, the civil society and the press in the Republic of Moldova were subjected to several attacks. The goal of those who generated these conflicts was to diminish the role of an independent society in democratization processes. The political actors also tried to discredit critical voices. The result, however, turned to have a positive impact, because in the end even more cohesion between different

[4] *The aim was to limit the options for NGOs to provide consultancy services to the political actors, this proposal if accepted affects the freedom of association.*

types of civil society actors could be observed, as they continued to mobilize resources to monitor the election campaign and to increase the transparency of political decisions, particularly public procurement, associated with the fight against the spread of COVID-19.

Conclusions

The results of the 2020 presidential elections will have a medium-term impact on the political life in the Republic of Moldova. A complicated period follows, in which parliamentary and extra-parliamentary political forces will decide how to approach the issue of the legitimacy of the current parliament, whether they will find the political will to trigger early elections or involve their resources to find new government coalitions. Regardless of the decision taken, it becomes obvious in the context of the election results that there is a need for change when it comes to strategies and tactics or even political rebranding.

Some political actors also need to decide on their role and status in the political formations they represent or lead. The composition of the political scene is also changing. New actors managed to

establish themselves and generate new debates, yet not necessarily more qualitative ones. Populism will be one of the elements that will set the tone for future elections.

At the same time, these elections demonstrated that there is a shift in the structure of the electorate and the way the voters reflect on their decision to support one candidate. The electoral behaviour has changed, and the trend can be examined in the next parliamentary elections, whether they take place on schedule or earlier. Thus, the 2020 election campaign will lead to new approaches and new communication strategies as they must be adopted by the political actors in the Republic of Moldova as soon as possible. Otherwise, the voters will sanction them in the future democratic exercises.

Trends & Conclusions

Despite the differences in the type of elections and the local circumstances in Ukraine and Moldova, a number of joint trends and analytical points stand out in the chapters above.

First of all, the overall importance of the elections in both countries speaks to their rather pluralistic and diversified power structures. With Ukraine's politics functioning under a semi-presidential system, real power was still at stake in the local elections, particularly after comprehensive decentralization reforms in the past years had expanded municipal budgets. And despite Moldova's parliamentary system and the comparatively limited formal role of the President, the vote was widely seen as having far-reaching national and even international importance.

A common issue for both countries is the election participation of citizens living in national territories outside the central government's control. While local elections under Ukrainian legislation in the separatist regions of the Donbas are as of today not taking place but remain an integral part of the ongoing international negotiation and mediation efforts, Moldovan citizens in Transnistria turned out in strong numbers to support the

then-incumbent President Igor Dodon – a paradox of sorts given that Chisinau is exercising basically no control over these voters' communities. For both countries, the question of how to organize the political participation of citizens in separatist territories is fraught with difficult choices. Some will argue that allowing participation in national, regional and local politics is sending a strong signal of unity, upholds and strengthens bonds with the citizens in separatist territories and allows them to have a real stake in the processes of the state. Others will certainly object and argue that the votes of citizens in separatist territories can be used by local or geopolitical actors with dubious agendas to improperly influence national politics in Ukraine and Moldova. With no apparent solution to this kind of dilemma on the horizon, both countries will have to intensify dialogue within and between each other in order to formulate well-crafted policies.

Both election campaigns took place in generally very polarized polities.

In Ukraine, localized discourses and a diminished footprint of the national political forces, as well as the ability of often quite popular local incumbents to dominate the

narrative, moderated the overall campaign climate to an extent. An attempt by President Zelensky to redefine the discourse by organising an unofficial referendum around five questions, in the end, did not create momentum or generate significant controversy. In Moldova, on the other hand, strong polarization was not only driven by the substantial policy differences between the camps around Igor Dodon and Maia Sandu but also through highly contentious maneuvering within the “pro-European camp” before eventually uniting behind Sandu for the second round.

Civil Society which remains a key reform driver has fulfilled crucial functions in monitoring and further legitimizing the elections in both Ukraine and Moldova. Yet, in the near to mid-term, challenges differ: Ukrainian Civil Society will have to expand their regional structures in order to effectively monitor more powerful and well-funded local state structures while pushing for good governance reforms and fending off continuing attacks on the country's anti-corruption infrastructure. Their counterparts in Moldova will likely have to strengthen their defenses against possible further encroachments on Civil Society's organizational and financial foundations; as laid out in the country chapter above, a legislative initiative before the elections would have substantially impacted NGOs in this regard but

was finally defeated. At the same time, good governance, monitoring, and supporting the state and society with pandemic relief will remain pertinent challenges.

Finally, despite the fact that the elections were well-monitored and the results largely uncontested, legitimacy issues are arising in the political systems of both countries. In Ukraine, some local leaders with strong constituencies have been more or less openly defying some of the central government's measures to counteract the pandemic's spread, particularly lockdowns. After the local elections, these leaders might see themselves vindicated and strengthened through a popular mandate to continue on this path. While the central government is certainly not on the verge of losing control over the country, an increase in friction between the governance levels is rather more likely.

In Moldova, on the other hand, there is a much more tangible legitimacy crisis, particularly when it comes to the central political institution – Parliament. President Maia Sandu's supporters will argue that her decisive victory equals a popular mandate to strongly push for reforms. Following this argumentation, fresh parliamentary elections are required, particularly given the tumultuous constitutional crisis that followed the last vote for the legislature in 2019.

The local elections in Ukraine and presidential elections in Moldova in 2020 were key political events highlighting a number trend lines in both political systems. Despite substantial challenges for both countries in the short and medium-term, the elections have demonstrated the pluralism and vitality of the political scene as well as the strength of Civil Society in both Ukraine and Moldova – both of which are vital foundations for the long and difficult path towards a better future.