

Opinion – The Duality of Maia Sandu

Written by Stanislav Pavlovschi

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2024/08/28/opinion-the-duality-of-maia-sandu/>

STANISLAV PAVLOVSCHI, AUG 28 2024

Since assuming office in 2020, Moldovan President Maia Sandu has been lauded in Brussels as the poster child of liberalism in an increasingly fragile post-Soviet Europe. Sandu has carefully crafted her image to embody European progressivism, going as far as to schedule Moldova's historic EU membership referendum on the day of her bid for re-election. Sandu's track record, however, as both a liberal and a President, is one of repeated failure. Moldova's institutions have grown weaker under her care, not stronger. The growing gulf between rhetoric and action has left a trail of broken promises in her wake, as well as a tendency toward authoritarianism, particularly with the media. It wasn't meant to be this way.

Sandu's rise to power was marked by promises of sweeping reforms in a pro-European, anti-corruption platform that endeared her to voters. But Moldovan institutions remain either corrupt or unfit for purpose. They are simply not ready for European prime time. Despite this lack of action, her leadership is still celebrated by Western allies who see her as a bulwark against Russian influence. The European Union granted Moldova candidate status under her watch, and she has maintained high public support for EU membership. Yet, this cover of European approval masks a series of deeply undemocratic actions that undermine the very values Sandu purports to champion.

You won't read much about this in the western press, but Sandu's government has systematically suppressed political opposition, media freedom, and civil liberties. Just a few months into her presidency, she caused a constitutional crisis by repeatedly nominating her close ally as Prime Minister, despite a parliamentary majority supporting a rival candidate. Contrary to all existing conventions, Sandu refused to listen to Parliament, leaving the government in gridlock and paving the way for a snap election which her party duly won.

Under the guise of combating corruption and Russian influence, her administration has implemented measures that echo the actions of authoritarian regimes. One prominent example is the introduction of an anti-treason law, heavily criticised by Amnesty International for its potential misuse to silence dissent. This law not only stifles and criminalises basic political discourse that should be protected under international law, but directly allows for the censure of media outlets and political opponents without due process.

The banning of the Chance Party and subsequent legal battles reveal a troubling trend of using judicial power to eliminate political adversaries. This approach not only stifles discourse but also raises questions about the legitimacy of Sandu's commitment to democratic principles. Do the Moldovan people who support a different way forward to reforming institutions not merit a say?

Despite her pro-European stance, Sandu's tenure has been marred by significant failures when it comes to countering Russian influence or dependence. Amidst all of her posturing against Putin, Moldova continues to receive 80% of its electric energy from a Russian-owned power plant in Transnistria, at heavily subsidised prices. If Sandu is to follow up on her promises of transforming Moldova into an independent, forward-looking country, actions must follow words.

The human side of this political drama must not be ignored. The Moldovan people are already cynical and mistrustful of those in power, whatever their political affiliation. They are the people who remain at risk of being made pawns in the name of geopolitical strategies. The validation of Sandu's government by the EU, without addressing the

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country's democratic deficits, deficits which have worsened under Sandu, would only embolden her administration's authoritarian tendencies.

Sandu's duality as a champion of liberalism and an enforcer of authoritarian policies presents a troubling narrative. Her actions have continuously contradicted her professed ideals, revealing a leader willing to compromise democratic values for political capital. The European Union must heed the lessons of past enlargements and ensure that Moldova's accession is contingent on genuine, tangible reforms. Without this, both Europe and the Moldovan people stand to lose, trapped in a cycle of suppression masked as progress. The true test of Sandu's leadership lies not in her alignment with Western values but in her adherence to them in practice.

About the author:

Stanislav Pavlovschi is a former Justice Minister of Moldova, a former judge on the European Court of Human Rights (2001–08) and former Vice President of the Dignity and Truth Platform political party (2016–2019). He is the founder of The International Center for the Protection of Human Rights and Democracy.