

## Article

# Populism in Moldova's Informal Political System

**Gian Marco Moisé**

*Dublin City University*

## Abstract

The 2020 presidential and 2021 parliamentary elections in the Republic of Moldova saw a clear victory of the populist Party of Action and Solidarity (PAS) of the newly elected president Maia Sandu over the pro-Russian coalition led by former presidents Igor Dodon and Vladimir Voronin. These results testify the citizens' will to change a country with an ever-widening gap between politicians and populace. Since 2015, the political debate is centred on corruption, but the cases described draw the picture of a political landscape where practices go beyond the traditional understanding of the term. In fact, their analysis demonstrates the existence of a system of Soviet political culture which relies on informal practices of the elite, arguing that some of these practices have clear Soviet roots while others are an adaptation of the Soviet mentality to the new liberal democratic setting. The paper also highlights differences between the populist parties born either as a reaction to the system or as an adaptation of the elite response to perceived expectations of the electorate. This research took place between 2020 and 2021 utilising participant observation and semi-structured interviews with Moldovan political experts. The paper concludes that future research on Moldovan politics should incorporate analysis of this informal dimension to state politics which is core to public debate on corruption and the integrity of state institutions in Moldova.

## Keywords

corruption, informality, informal politics, populism, Republic of Moldova

## Introduction: Informality in Moldova

During her inauguration speech on December 24, 2020, the new Moldovan President Maia Sandu proved herself to be a populist, and to believe that Moldovan politicians are corrupt, not only from an economic but also from a moral standpoint. This accusation goes far beyond kickbacks and bribes; it implies the existence of a political culture relying on informal practices to wield power. The accusation was targeted at the Party of Socialists of the Republic of Moldova (PSRM) and the Democratic Party of Moldova (DPM), as well as the Şor Party. Indeed, from 2010 to 2015 the leaders of these parties did engage in financial

schemes and bribery. Yet, justice has been selective, and investigations often did not lead to indictments.

The years following the demise of Vladimir Voronin’s regime in 2009 have been presented by Tudoroiu (2015), Nizhnikau (2017), and Popescu (2012) as ‘state capture’, a condition in which a group of oligarchs had taken direct control of the Moldovan state to illegitimately promote their own economic interests (Tudoroiu 2015, 657). As Ledeneva (2006) noted, these expressions emerge from dissatisfaction with the term ‘informal’. Yet, there is still value in the conceptualization of informality (Ledeneva 2006, 18–19), a field of inquiry focusing on the role of socio-economic context in determining formal responses. In this sense, informal politics should be understood as a complementary explanation to make sense of atypical formal behaviours. Even if the topic is increasingly popular in the study of the former Soviet space (Isaacs 2013; 2011), Moldova has been only superficially touched by this type of analysis (Hale 2014; Aliyev 2017).

This work is innovative because it analyses Moldova through the lens of informal politics. The examples discussed will be categorised relying on the taxonomies of informal practices of Ledeneva in Russia (2006; 2013) and the numerous authors of the *Global Encyclopaedia of Informality* (Ledeneva et al. 2018a; 2018b). The first objective of the paper is to show the persistence of a political system based on informal behaviours. In fact, in describing to me the institutional and political reality of their country, Moldovan political experts unknowingly echoed Ledeneva’s concept of *systema* (2013). This led me to recollect some of Moldova’s most significant political events of the past decade, this time employing terminology typically used to describe Russia. The second aim of the paper is to analyse and compare Moldovan populist movements, born either as a reaction to the system or as its adaptation to the expectations of the electorate.

Data for the paper was retrieved in 2020 and 2021 through participant observation of activists of the Party of Action and Solidarity (PAS) of President Maia Sandu throughout their campaigns, as well as strongly opinionated non-affiliated voters. Chişinău has a vibrant political life when compared to the rather apolitical cities of the country’s periphery. In the last weeks of June 2021, almost every day it was possible to encounter sit-ins, protests, or campaigning of the different political parties throughout the streets of the capital. In the spring of 2021, I conducted three relevant semi-structured interviews with Moldovan political experts on the role of informality in the country. Interviews lasted approximately two hours each and covered discussions on politics, the judiciary, and law enforcement. The next section will explain the methodology used to retrieve the literature for this study.

## The Prevalence of Formality in Literature

This paper benefited from a systematic review of the literature conducted in April and May 2021 through a search on the Scopus and Web of Science (WoS) databases of the Institute of Scientific Information employing the keyword ‘Moldova’. The prime limitation of this search was that only studies in the field of political science were to be included. Following this parameter, the initial screening revealed 587 results on Scopus and 255 on WoS. To further whittle down this list, a further parameter limited the search to only those works of pure political science, on topics such as institutional design, political competition, and communication. In this way, papers discussing for instance economic or educational policies were excluded from the discussion. Following these parameters, the review was narrowed down to 108 studies.

Most of these papers have been used to form the narrative flow for this article, as only a few of them referred specifically to informality or populism. A search for ‘populism’ in ‘Moldova’ through Scopus and WoS produces only 5 and 11 results respectively, and even most of these did not focus explicitly on Moldova nor populism. The most notable exceptions are Gherghina and Soare (2019), which analysed the populist communication strategies of PSRM between 2012 and 2015, Mandarici (2021), which addressed the topic in reference to PSRM and Party of the Communists of the Republic of Moldova (PCRM) in his study on the effects of nostalgia in influencing voting patterns, and Velikaya and Tatarov (2021) with their account of the country’s July 2021 elections. Yet, this last paper did not elaborate much on the topic, while attributing a populist dimension to all Moldovan parties. Furthermore, unlike Mandarici (2021, 4), the authors did not acknowledge the impact of anger around the 2015 \$1 billion theft in determining citizens’ support of populist forces.

Similarly, only two publications used the framework of informality to analyse Moldovan politics: Hale 2014 and Aliyev 2017.<sup>1</sup> On the one hand, Hale focused on the effects of patronal politics on formal Constitutions, exemplified through Voronin’s informal use of the Moldovan parliamentary government as a presidential system. On the other, Aliyev provided a rather general account of the political events of Moldova. Relying on survey data, the author focused on the degree of formalisation<sup>2</sup> of institutions and the use of informal means by everyday citizens. Aliyev centred his argumentation on the role of *blat* (‘getting things done’) and *krysha* (‘roof’, colloquially used to refer to political protection) as features of Soviet Moldovan politics already under Brezhnev (Aliyev 2017, 124). In his overall account, the author used the general expression ‘informality’ but referred

---

<sup>1</sup> ‘Informality’ in ‘Moldova’ produced only one result on Scopus (Aliyev 2017); it produced three on WoS, but papers did not analyse the country in-depth. By contrast, ‘informal Moldova’ produced many more results (81 on WoS and 28 on Scopus), but none of them targeted politics.

<sup>2</sup> For instance, on page 130 ‘Moldova experienced its highest level of institutional deformalisation during Voronin’s tenure’ (Aliyev 2017, 130). This statement is rather hard to prove, particularly considering the evidence shown in this paper.

especially to petty corruption and the informal economy. By contrast, this paper intends to address the informal strategies employed by Moldovan political actors. Still, I concur with Aliyev in his assessment of the informality of post-Soviet countries other than Russia as ‘undertheorised’ (Aliyev 2017, 4).

This paper will provide an in-depth exploration of the conflict between corruption and populism in a political environment revolving around the use of informal practices. The next section will discuss the goals of the Moldovan political system, its characteristics, and how it has been passed down from one generation of politicians to the next.

## The Moldovan System

Plahotniuc was the great beneficiary of a *system* [emphasis added by the author]. [...] It is not about oligarchs, not simply corruption. [...] It is like a *casta* system of impunity where they feel compelled to cover each other. For example, a judge killed his wife and was never prosecuted.

Vadim Pistrinciuc, former MP of the Liberal-Democratic Party of Moldova (LDPM) and executive director of the Institute for Strategic Initiative<sup>3</sup> is close to PAS, but his ideas indicate a fundamental ideological distance from the rhetoric of the president. Firstly, the web of informal practices taking place in Moldovan politics is so complex that it can be understood as a system that is not limited to simple corruption. Corruption, often defined as ‘abuse of entrusted power for private gain’,<sup>4</sup> is a rather limiting concept that does not grasp the extent and variation of informal practices proper of Moldovan politics. In *Can Russia Modernise?* (2013), Ledeneva wrote that in *systema* anybody can be found or framed in violation of rules, law enforcement is not impartial, and legality is distinct from justice (Ledeneva 2013, 14–15). Secondly, members of the system cover for each other to ensure their reciprocal impunity. This concept has been identified as *krugovaya poruka* (‘collective responsibility’) in Russia (Ledeneva 2006, 91; 2013, 159).

This system based on informal practices has roots deep in Soviet history. In fact, despite the obvious democratic and market changes of the past three decades, Moldova retains a strong Soviet legacy. The Republic of Moldova became an independent state on the 27<sup>th</sup> of August 1991 with the declaration of independence of its newly elected Parliament. While the 1994 Constitution seemed like a turning point that could allow the country to transition from an authoritarian regime to liberal democracy, the lack of lustration laws favoured the persistence of power of the former communists. As a reference, Crowther (2007)

---

<sup>3</sup> Check his profile here: <https://www.ipis.md/en/team/vadim-pistrinciuc/>

<sup>4</sup> For example, by Transparency International: <https://www.transparency.org/en/what-is-corruption>

noted how the 1990-1994 legislature consisted of 87.4% former Communist Party members. Furthermore, every president of the country up to 2009 had been part of the Soviet elite.<sup>5</sup>



‘1990-1994 The Parliament of Independence’. Ethnographic museum of Hîncești, Republic of Moldova. Source: author.

In 2001, Vladimir Voronin came to power. The combination of his personality and almost absolute control over the PCRM made him the head of a presidential system, despite having formally all the features of a parliamentary one (March 2004). Not satisfied, the communists replaced numerous judges and filled vacancies with their supporters (Quinlan 2004, 488). Similarly, they pressured journalists and filled media outlets with allies. By 2002, when for three months the Christian-Democratic People's Party led by Iurie Roșca demonstrated daily in Chișinău (Quinlan 2004, 488), the Republic of Moldova had become an electoral autocracy (March 2006; 2004; Quinlan 2004; Cassani and Tomini 2020, 1542).

Yet, it was not Voronin himself who was the problem; he was just the temporary head of a corrupt system. He nurtured his own ‘political killers’ (those who determined his departure from active politics for more than ten years), creating the perfect environment for the thriving of informality. The PCRM was, and is, communist in the sense of being culturally Soviet, not from a political-economic standpoint. This of course benefited the informal political network close to the president: his son Oleg was the CEO of FinComBank and a prominent businessman whose fortune was by 2009 estimated at 2 billion US dollars, a third of the country’s GDP (Tudoroiu 2015, 659; 2011, 310; March 2004; Crowther

<sup>5</sup> A similar thing happened also in Ukraine, as testified by Polese (2008).

2011). Other shady businessmen who became wealthy during the early 2000s include Vadim Mişin, Vladimir Plahotniuc,<sup>6</sup> Vladimir (Vlad) Filat, Anatol Stati, and the son of former President Lucinschi, Chiril<sup>7</sup> (Crowther 2011, 224; Hale 2013; 2014; Goşu 2018b). While the trend of enrichment of the informal group close to the president solidified with Voronin, the process started already with the wave of privatisations led under Lucinschi.<sup>8</sup> As a matter of fact, the head of the privatisation process was LDPM leader Filat,<sup>9</sup> who enriched himself through his contacts with the country’s largest corporations (Hale 2013, 490; Senyuva 2010).

The demise of Voronin can be partially attributed to the political machinations of these oligarchs (Hale 2013). The post-2009 context differed substantially from the authoritarian phase led by the communists. While oligarchs had previously had indirect control over institutions, by then they had become politicians. They maintained the façade of liberal democracy in a much more convincing way than Voronin ever did, but a system was in place. This system endorsed the same Soviet political culture promoted under Voronin. Arguably, Plahotniuc was able to remain a relevant political figure for so long because he grew in the system and knew its rules by heart. The Moldovan system had Voronin, Plahotniuc, and Dodon as temporary heads, but it is a much weaker version of its Russian counterpart. The voters of Maia Sandu argue that in the Republic of Moldova ‘elections can change things, and the system started showing its first cracks with the emergence of Năstase and Sandu’.<sup>10</sup>

The Moldovan system is hence a political culture using informal practices to distort competition and manipulate voters to satisfy the ambitions of the elite. As the next sections will show, these practices find their rationale in a Soviet political culture that bears striking similarities with the political cultures of Russia and Ukraine. The repeated use of these strategies over the past thirty years has widened the gap between the elite and everyday citizens, creating the conditions for the emergence of the mass populist movements that today define Moldova’s political landscape.

---

<sup>6</sup> Owner of numerous businesses and five TV channels: Prime, Publika, Canal 2, Canal 3, and Moldova 1 (Hale 2013, 369).

<sup>7</sup> Chiril Lucinschi was a member of the DPM between 2009 and 2012 and of the LDPM between 2012 and 2017. He has been arrested and sentenced to prison following investigations of the ‘theft of the century’ from which one of his companies was said to have benefited. He argued the trial was politically motivated (Radio Free Europe 2018b).

<sup>8</sup> “In the private sector, ‘useful friends’ become ‘appointed millionaires’ and are given opportunities to make fortunes.” (Ledeneva 2013, 96).

<sup>9</sup> Filat, who by 2010 was believed to have accumulated a fortune of 1.2 billion US dollars (Tudoroiu 2015, 662), has been also repeatedly accused of human trafficking while never formally charged (Căţus 2016).

<sup>10</sup> Interview with activists of PAS, July 6, 2021.

## Capital Flight

### The Russian Laundromat and the \$1 Billion Theft

If a system relies on informal behaviours to manipulate voters and distort formal rules, the first task to make it intelligible is to decode its most common practices. This and the next section will describe the most frequent strategies employed by the ruling elite in the past ten years. Following Ledeneva’s classification, the Russian Laundromat and the \$1 billion theft would be catalogued as financial schemes, or peculiar versions of ‘capital flight’ (Ledeneva 2006, 150). Surprisingly, no research focusing on Moldova discussed the political implications of the Russian Laundromat, despite it being an international scandal of immense proportions. Until 2015, journalists and experts remained unaware of the machinations of the political elite, but evidence suggests that their fraudulent schemes started already in 2010. This part of the paper presents cases in which informal practices have been employed by the political elite for its own enrichment.

The pro-European coalition that governed the country between 2010 and 2014, including Plahotniuc’s DPM, Filat’s LDPM, Ghimpu’s Liberal Party (LP),<sup>11</sup> had signed an agreement in December 2010 to share control over the independent supervisory and prosecution institutions (Transparency International 2019, 9). The DPM controlled the National Anticorruption Centre and the General Prosecutor’s Office as well as the National Bank of Moldova. Dorin Drăguțanu, the then-bank governor, and his subordinates were close to Plahotniuc. Furthermore, in 2010 and 2011 the Parliament and the Constitutional Court approved laws that facilitated money laundering schemes (Transparency International 2019, 10). In May 2010, Parliament approved the cancellation of the 3% tax for the examination of debt recovery claims (Parliament 2010). Another bill proposed in June 2010 by Valeriu Guma of the DPM and approved in 2011 was meant to modify the anti-money laundering law to allow the courts to suspend the decisions of the Office for Prevention and Fight against Money Laundering designed to block suspicious transactions (Parliament 2011). In Volume 2 of the Global Encyclopaedia of Informality, Christian Timm identified this practice as *vzyatkoemkost*, ‘the potential of a piece of legislation to create opportunities for bribery’ (2018b, 307).

All these apparently unrelated changes were approved to satisfy the necessary conditions for the creation of what was later called ‘the Russian Laundromat’: a laundering scheme of Russian money from unsecured bank loans, fictitious acquisitions, misappropriation of funds from the Russian treasury, tax evasion, and smuggling that through Moldova reached banks in the European Union (Transparency International 2019). Statistical reports highlighted that cash inflows originating from CIS countries into Moldovan banks between 2010 and 2014

---

<sup>11</sup> Mihai Ghimpu was never really an oligarch, but his party was said to control the real estate development of Chișinău for a number of years, particularly after the election of his nephew, Dorin Chirotață, as mayor (Goșu 2018a, 307).

amounted to 80 billion US dollars and significantly exceeded financial flows from real economic activities (Transparency International 2019, 4). It has been estimated that the total inflow related to suspicious activities in this period was 71 billion US dollars, ten times the annual GDP of Moldova in 2014. Moldovan authorities have never investigated nor prosecuted anyone for the Russian Laundromat scandal. Transparency International and the NGO Watchdog.md stressed how a scheme of these proportions could have never taken place without the knowledge of the ruling political coalition *de facto* controlling them (Transparency International 2019, 9).

On the other hand, several papers referred to the \$1 billion theft (Avram 2017, 35; Goșu 2016; 2018b; 2018a). This crime, sometimes referred to as the ‘theft of the century’ (Goșu 2016, 21), was committed by Ilan Șor, a former banker and current leader of the homonymous party, and Veaceslav Platon, the director of Moldindconbank who, according to Tudoroiu (2015), in 2009 bought a position in politics with the intent of influencing judges and prosecutors, joining the party Our Moldova Alliance of Serafim Uruclean<sup>12</sup> (Tudoroiu 2015, 671). In its report, Transparency International noted how Moldindconbank was one of the key Moldovan banks through which the Russian Laundromat money flowed (Transparency International 2019, 3). The theft consisted of the disappearance of US \$1 billion from Banca de Economii, at the time chaired by Șor, Unibank, and Banca Socială. All these banks subsequently went bankrupt. The complex chain of shell companies created in the UK, Cyprus, and New Zealand for the Russian Laundromat (Transparency International 2019, 2) is probably connected to the disappearance of the money. In its report to the National Bank of Moldova, the corporate investigation firm Kroll stated that Șor ‘was one of, if not the only beneficiary’ of the \$1 billion theft (Radu, Munteanu and Ostanin 2015).

These financial schemes are often referred to as corruption by populist leaders. They are politically even more significant than they appear on first blush, as they are one of the reasons behind the creation of two of the main populist parties of the country, PAS and the Truth and Dignity Platform (TDP). The next section discusses more informal practices taking place in Moldovan politics, those which result not from a coordinated effort of the political elite but are rather aimed at eliminating competition from within.

### **Kompromat, Black PR, and Character Assassination**

What has happened since 2015 can be read only *a posteriori* as an attempt of Plahotniuc to get rid of his allies, turning the heretofore coordinated kleptocratic effort of Moldovan oligarchs into a kleptocratic anarchy.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, this section shows what kinds of practices are employed when insiders challenge the head of

---

<sup>12</sup> The party of the former interim PM and mayor of Chișinău Uruclean did not enter the Parliament in the following elections.

<sup>13</sup> This expression was coined by Vadim Pistrințiu during our interview on the 14th of May 2021.

the system. In the spring of 2015, investigators opened two criminal cases based on evidence surrounding the \$1 billion theft. The investigation benefited from the confession of Ilan Șor, who accused the former PM Vlad Filat (2009-2013) of the extortion of 250 million US dollars (Gotev 2015). Most of Șor’s statements proved false, and the sum that Filat received was never confirmed (Rață and Dodon 2018). Yet, Filat, Șor, and Platon<sup>14</sup> were charged with embezzlement and arrested (Matlack 2015).

While this turned out to be Filat’s political demise, under temporary house arrest Șor started his campaign for the Orhei mayoral election. He won the election and completed his mandate despite the ongoing trial. In fact, over the years he managed to successfully postpone 50 different court hearings by bribing at least one of the judges.<sup>15</sup> He is currently in hiding abroad but remains the head of a party that obtained seven seats in the 2019 elections. Politically, he is aligned with PSRM against PAS. Șor’s behaviours over the years and his role in the ‘theft of the century’ indicate that he was close to the shadow leader of the DPM and part of the Moldovan system.

The political death of Vlad Filat is a typical example of ‘character assassination’ (Samoilenco et al. 2018, 441), defined as the act of damaging irreparably the credibility of an individual. Goșu (2016) noted how Plahotniuc had already interfered in Filat’s political career when he influenced the Constitutional Court’s decision to bar the leader of the LDPM from becoming prime minister (2016, 37). Yet, in 2015 there was a deliberate effort to force him out of politics, firstly with the above-mentioned accusations of Șor and secondly with the leak of *kompromat* (‘compromising material’) (Ledeneva 2006, 58) in the form of the public release of a video showing him having extramarital affair (Gnatcova n.d.).

Many point to Plahotniuc as the person who commissioned the *chernyi piar* (‘black PR’) (Ledeneva 2006, 28), the leaking or fabrication of evidence destined to damage Filat’s reputation. Yet, it was Renato Usatîi, leader of Our Party (OP), who called the attention to the compromising video. It was again Usatîi who released a registered phone call between men whose voices reminded of those of Filat and Șor (Gnatcova n.d.). From where did Usatîi obtain this information? As Ledeneva (2006) noted on Russia, it is not the effort of investigative journalists as much as the work of deviated secret services to provide *kompromat* (Ledeneva 2006,

---

<sup>14</sup> The sum Platon was accused of embezzling is 800 million lei or 42 million dollars (Reuters 2017).

<sup>15</sup> In Agora Moldova video footage, one of Șor’s lawyers is shown passing a bag to one of the judges of the trial. The judge later denied the accusations of corruption, stating that the bag contained only a bottle of gin (Agora 2021).

67). This indicates that while Plahotniuc may have been the temporary head of the Moldovan system (Ledeneva 2013), Usatîi was closer to the elite in power.<sup>16</sup>

Usatîi had always been a controversial candidate: pro-Russian with strange ties to the Russian criminal underworld, he became famous as a sort of ‘gangster politician’ (Nizhnikau 2017, 366; Brett and Knott 2015, 440). Usatîi’s party has been financed by his Russian counterparts<sup>17</sup> for years along with PSRM, but their competition led Dodon to cause judicial problems in Moscow for the former mayor of Bălţi (Minzarari 2021). Since 2015, he presented himself as an anti-corruption candidate (Reuters 2015), but this operation has been read by political analysts as a substantial re-branding in the eyes of the electorate.<sup>18</sup> When he released the *kompromat*, Filat had already been arrested and Usatîi’s actions had the sole effect of concluding a character assassination. In 2016 he likely feared the leak of his own *kompromat* and fled Moldova. He returned only in 2019 with the inauguration of the Sandu government, knowing that Plahotniuc had left (Gascón Barberá 2020).

As documented by Goşu (2018a), the number of enemies of Plahotniuc was greatly reduced with the arrest of the mayor of Chişinău and frontman of the LP Dorin Chirtoacă (IPN 2017). He was detained (though later released) on corruption charges, accused of influence peddling for ‘paid parking spaces in the capital city’ (Goşu 2018a, 296). While the arrest had probably been politically motivated, Chirtoacă was indeed not entirely clean. After his arrest in July, the tribunal suspended him from office. In November, shortly before the referendum organised to decide on his definitive removal, videos of the former mayor in intimate moments with a partner were leaked to journalists and posted on social media. According to Chirtoacă, the videos were from his phone, which was confiscated during his arrest (Gnatcova n.d.). PSRM shared the leaked information on its website before the referendum, which failed due to insufficient voter participation. An investigation into the leak was initiated, but nobody was ever indicted.

The latest character assassination was perpetrated by Gheorghe Cavcaliuc, leader of the Party ‘Let’s Build Europe at Home’ (PACE), which in May 2021 ‘denounced’ Nata Albot, renowned journalist and co-host of the popular web program *Internetu’ Graiaeste*, referring to her as a junkie (Munteanu 2021). On *Cutia Neagră* on TV8, Cavcaliuc reported that in 2016 Nata Albot was stopped at the airport in Chişinău for carrying 0.78 grams of marijuana. The airport police filed

---

<sup>16</sup> During the 2021 parliamentary electoral campaign, new accusations were made against Usatîi. The resurfacing of an old video depicting him out shooting with friends of Plahotniuc would indicate the hypocrisy of his anti-corruption campaign throughout 2015 (Albot and Bolocan 2021b).

<sup>17</sup> Still, he is an ally of the Russian Our Party, of the nationalist Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, not Putin nor Edinaya Rossiya. This shows that there are multiple pro-Russian and pro-European fronts, demonstrating how geopolitical discussions are often oversimplified (Minzarari 2021).

<sup>18</sup> Interview with a political expert, May 6, 2021.

the case, but Albot was never prosecuted nor indicted. Yet, Cavcaliuc, a former police officer, managed to obtain pictures and reports of a file not available to the public. PAS offered Albot the 8<sup>th</sup> place on its list for the 2021 parliamentary elections. She initially accepted the offer but following Cavcaliuc’s *kompromat* leak she withdrew (Albot and Bolocan 2021a). This case is particularly significant as black PR was (successfully) utilised by a relatively new political candidate. The episode boosted the popularity of Cavcaliuc, who was previously unknown to the public.<sup>19</sup> An investigation of RISE Moldova has shown that Cavcaliuc had been close to Dodon since 2017 (RISE Moldova 2021). Moreover, a former colleague accused him of having been the contact of the ruling elite when they needed to fabricate criminal files against their political enemies. This allegedly helped him to progress in his career (Albot and Bolocan 2021c).



‘PACE electoral campaign tent at the 2021 elections’. Ștefan cel Mare Boulevard, Chișinău, Republic of Moldova. Source: author.

Those shown in this section were examples of informal politics taking place when members of the elite compete with one another. Black PR and character assassination are extremely common in the Moldovan political landscape. The objective is to force opponents out of competition instead of winning on the

---

<sup>19</sup> PACE activists had already made the headlines in April 2021 when they poured green paint on the vice-president of the region of Sângerei, guilty of having received a Covid-19 vaccination when vaccines were still limited to health sector workers (Jurnal.md 2021).

merits of their ideas. The next section introduces the populist forces that originated as a reaction to corruption and the abuse of informal practices.

## **Populist vs Corrupt Differences among Moldovan Populist Parties**

In *Populism: A Very Short Introduction*, Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2017) defined populism as a thin-centred ideology considering society as divided between two antagonistic groups, the ‘pure people’ and the ‘corrupt elite’, and in which politics should be the expression of the ‘general will’ as intended by Jean-Jacques Rousseau (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017, 6). As such, populism can be employed, although only temporarily, by left and right-wing forces alike. Four of the major political actors in Moldovan politics can be accurately considered ‘populist’: Igor Dodon (PSRM), Maia Sandu (PAS), Andrei Năstase (TDP), and Renato Usatîi (OP). The popularity of their parties grew after 2015, when the public became aware of the effects of the \$1 billion theft scandal. Except for Sandu, who in 2015 had no party, they all marched through the streets of Chişinău against the ‘corrupt elite’.



‘Electoral campaign poster of the coalition PSRM – PCRM during the 2021 elections’. Grigore Vieru Boulevard, Chişinău, Republic of Moldova. Source: author.

Igor Dodon was described as a populist leader already by Gherghina and Soare (2019), and their analysis, limited to the period between 2012 and 2015, possibly constituted the period of maximum expression of PSRM populism. Then, Dodon criticised the corrupt political elite represented by Plahotniuc and Filat while exalting the period of communist rule.<sup>20</sup> As noted by Mandarici (2021), Dodon’s political rhetoric is based on nostalgia. After being elected president, Dodon could

<sup>20</sup> Dodon was in fact Vice Minister of Trade and Economics (2005), Minister of Trade and Economics (2006-2009), and Deputy Prime Minister (2008-2009) (Gherghina and Soare 2019, 6).

not convincingly position himself against an elite he was now part of. Yet, after losing the presidency, he conducted the 2021 parliamentary elections back among the people he claimed to represent, as demonstrated by the slogan of his coalition *pentru oameni, pentru țara* (‘for the people, for the country’).

Similarly, Usatîi hypocritically campaigned against corruption throughout the end of 2020, when he was a candidate for the presidency. In this sense, both Dodon and Usatîi are populist, but both are, to some extent, also part of the system, the ‘corrupt elite’ they claim to fight. Dodon has been part of the Moldovan elite as a member of PCRM with Voronin, while Usatîi has been shown to express the values and political culture of the system.<sup>21</sup> Hence, PSRM and OP are populist from a communication standpoint only.

While the rising star of 2015 was undoubtedly Andrei Năstase, over the years he attracted fewer and fewer votes. According to Vadim Pistrinciuc, voters disliked his temper and TDP’s excessive personalisation of the political fight against Plahotniuc.<sup>22</sup> The oligarch left the country, but the system remained in place<sup>23</sup> and TDP did not adapt. These factors allowed PAS and Maia Sandu to grow by collecting the votes originally destined for the TDP. The poor performance of Năstase in the 2020 presidential elections and his loss in the 2019 Chișinău mayoral race are indicative of the fact that citizens do not like him as much as they disliked Plahotniuc.

On the 27<sup>th</sup> of October 2020, Sandu invited Dodon to a debate at the Digital Park. Dodon did not participate, and the debate, recorded by Privesc.eu, turned soon into a campaign rally. Sandu was left alone on stage criticising the incumbent and the deteriorating state of things in Moldova, proposing a strong fight against corruption if elected (Sandu 2020a). When questioned by journalists on how she intended to lead a fight against corruption with the limited powers of a president she simply replied: ‘A president can do a lot of work if [s/he] is honest, brave, cares about people, can do a lot of work’ (Sandu 2020a).

Besides the slogan of PAS ‘*E vremea oamenilor buni*’ (‘it is the time of good people’), at *Internetu’ Grăiește*, Nata Albot and Andrei Bolocan noted that she made more promises than any other candidate, and that, like Dodon’s, many of these promises could not be achieved through presidential powers (Albot and Bolocan 2020). Her party even produced face masks with the populist slogan *om bun* (‘good person’) (Moisé 2020a). The activists of PAS are convinced of the purity of the people over the corrupt elite, and they think that politics will be different once they will have sufficient power to force their antagonists out of state institutions. This is,

---

<sup>21</sup> As discussed previously, there are some indications he had a direct or indirect connection with the political elite led by Plahotniuc.

<sup>22</sup> Vadim Pistrinciuc, interviewed on the 14<sup>th</sup> of May 2021.

<sup>23</sup> Although the DPM collapsed. Twenty of the 30 MPs elected in 2019 abandoned the party of Plahotniuc, 11 remained independent, 7 created Pro Moldova, and 2 joined the Șor Party.

of course, an overly simplistic view that does not consider the resilience of the Moldovan system, which is not a group of power but rather a way of doing politics in the country.



Picture: 'PAS electoral campaign tent at the 2021 elections: "Let's start good times"'. Ștefan cel Mare Boulevard, Chișinău, Republic of Moldova. Source: author.

Another element distinguishing the four parties is their relative electoral success. As explained by Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2017), populism is a thin-centred ideology that needs to be based on something thicker. In other words, parties need to have an ideology or a solid political program convincing the voters when the 'people versus elite' rhetoric has been exhausted. For Moldovan parties, the main ideology is provided via geopolitical affiliation. PSRM and OP are pro-Russian parties, while PAS and TDP are pro-European. Yet, given that their main feature is populism, voters are presented with a trade-off in which OP and TDP are at a disadvantage. As anticipated, when compared to PAS, TDP suffered from the lack of a convincing leader and a solid political program. Similarly, PSRM has a long-standing relationship with the electorate and a party organisation that OP does not enjoy. During the 2021 parliamentary elections, OP felt compelled to create a coalition with a smaller party to rename the coalition 'Usatîi'. According to the polls, this choice increased the votes obtained by the pro-Russian candidate. The table below highlights the major differences between the four populist forces discussed in this section.

**Table 1: Matrix of Moldovan populist parties**

	Pro-Russian	Pro-European
More successful*	Party of the Socialists of the Republic of Moldova (PSRM)	Party of Action and Solidarity (PAS)
Less successful	Our Party (OP)	Truth and Dignity Platform (TDP)

\* The degree of success is determined by the results of the 2021 parliamentary elections: PAS 52.8%; PSRM 27.17% (in coalition with PCRM); OP 4.1% (in coalition with Patria); TDP 2.33%.

## Can Populism Defeat the System?

By 2015, the use of informal practices intended to ensure the thriving of the elite had widened the gap between the members of that elite and ordinary Moldovan citizens. Such a gap could be filled only by populist forces who would side with the people to defeat the corrupt elite. Yet, there is a difference between those who genuinely believe in the necessity of ending corruption and those who use the argument as a communication strategy to maximise votes. PAS and TDP activists and politicians have often proven the sincerity of their beliefs. For both parties, populism is a political ideology. Even their enemies did not doubt it. In fact, after the parliamentary elections of 2019, when the ACUM (‘now’) coalition comprised of PAS and TDP agreed to form a government with the support of PSRM,<sup>24</sup> both Vladimir Plahotniuc and Ilan Șor fled Moldova on private jets (Necsutu 2019).

On the contrary, both PSRM and OP used populism as a mere communication strategy. Like Renato Usatîi, the leader of PSRM was accused of corruption. In 2020, journalists shared a video of the summer of 2019 depicting Dodon receiving a *kuliok* (‘paper bag’) from Plahotniuc (Ziarul de Gardă 2020). According to speculations, the bag contained a bribe, but the leader of the socialists denied the claim. PAS supporters to this day believe Dodon to be corrupt. In this light, Plahotniuc’s action should be understood as a move to protect his businesses while abroad. He still has a great influence on the Moldovan economy.<sup>25</sup> An investigation into the meeting between Dodon and Plahotniuc was initiated but did not produce any relevant results (Agora 2020). Yet, this is somehow expected in a country where most of the court decisions follow a political rather than a judicial pattern.

According to Ledeneva, *blat* (‘getting things done’) is the means used by system outsiders to enjoy the privileges of insiders (Ledeneva 2013, 108). This implies that when Plahotniuc bribed Dodon, he was no more an insider. Yet, the only thing that changed in 2019 was the equilibrium between the parties in Parliament. This is where the Moldovan system shows its major difference from its Russian

<sup>24</sup> The Sandu Government (June 8 – November 14, 2019).

<sup>25</sup> He earns money from the procurement of a substantial monopoly of contracts in the IT sector as well as from Moldtelecom. Interview with Vadim Pistrinciuc, 14th of May 2021.

counterpart. The centre of power in Moldova is not the presidency, but the Parliament. Dodon was still far from being the head of the system in 2016. Indeed, his continuous suspensions by the Constitutional Court<sup>26</sup> were, on the one hand, due to his violation of formal rules, but on the other, a symptom of pressure exercised by the system. Having the absolute or relative majority in parliament ensures one’s ability to stall the government and forces the president to resort to interim disposable figures. Yet, when the head of the system manages to occupy the presidency, the control becomes absolute, as in the case of Voronin. The election of Maia Sandu to the presidency at the end of 2020 has weakened Dodon’s grip on power, but as of mid-2021, the limited powers of the new president had not produced real changes. Table 2 below shows how the head of the system influences other political institutions.

**Table 2: Head of the system’s influence on other institutions**

Head of the system	Type of parliamentary majority	Prime ministers	Presidency
Voronin (2001-2009)	Absolute	PMs from the party	Voronin
Plahotniuc (2010-2019)	Relative	3 technocratic governments (Leancă, Streleț, Gaburici)	2 interim presidents (Ghimpu, Lupu)*
Dodon (2019-2021)	Relative	1 technocratic and 1 <i>interim</i> government (Chicu, Ciocoi)	Dodon

\* Nicolae Timofti, elected president in 2012, was insultingly labelled *rața mută* (‘the mute duck’) by PSRM because of his unwillingness to interfere in political quarrels (Publika.md 2015). This shows how he was perceived as another technocratic disposable figure.

Only PAS and TDP could challenge the system, but their success is conditional on the satisfaction of two objectives. Firstly, they should characterise their organisations with a strong ideological dimension to guide their policies once populism has exhausted its lifespan. In 2020 and 2021, PAS won both Moldova’s presidential and parliamentary elections. By winning, Sandu’s party has already achieved its only real electoral promise, which was ousting corrupt leaders from state institutions. Fighting corruption is not a sufficient political programme to govern a country. The next months will be fundamental to understand which ‘thicker’ ideology is orienting PAS policies. In the past, PAS has claimed a liberal

<sup>26</sup> By 2018, Dodon had been suspended already five times by the Constitutional Court for his opposition to governmental decisions or refusals to sign laws approved by the Parliament (Radio Free Europe 2018a).

orientation, but recently this has been softened by social policies aimed at reducing poverty, such as increasing pensions and welfare benefits (Necsutu 2021).

Secondly, both parties have been naïve in underestimating the Moldovan system. As discussed extensively in this paper, the system involves a series of informal behaviours that go beyond the classic understanding of corruption. The only way to defeat it is to promote an alternative culture based on the respect of formal rules. In Moldova, as in Russia, it is not the absence of norms that affects the rule of law so much as their scarce implementation. Yet even PAS abused formal rules to oust its rivals. Since December 2020, the Parliament became the theatre of the fight between PAS and PSRM when Prime Minister Chicu announced his resignation. At the end of January, PSRM and Șor proposed Mariana Durleșteanu replace him as prime minister. Sandu ignored their request and nominated Natalia Gavrilița, former Minister of Finance in her government (Banila 2021). Yet, the candidate did not receive a positive vote of confidence in parliament. After a few weeks, Sandu nominated her again, a decision that was deemed unconstitutional by the Supreme Court (Călugăreanu 2021). In March, the president chose Igor Grosu, the new leader of PAS. Despite the protests of PSRM, this time the Court deemed the decision lawful (Radio Free Europe 2021). Still, Grosu also failed to pass his vote of confidence. This was expected. Yet, Sandu’s strategy was not to successfully nominate a prime minister, but rather to fail twice in order to be able to call new elections within 45 days from the first request, as required by Article 85, Paragraph 2 of the Constitution (1994). The newly elected president had played the letter of the rules against their spirit (Ledeneva et al. 2018b, 293).

To defeat the system, populism is not enough. While this ideology can successfully reduce corruption, the system entails a series of informal behaviours affecting the durability of liberal democratic institutions. If populist parties aim to improve the functioning of the state, they should be aware of their role in promoting a political culture based on respect for formal rules.

## **Conclusion: Populism and System Resilience**

The first objective of this research was to show the persistence of the Moldovan system, a political culture relying on informal practices. The paper described cases of consistent use of *kompromat*, black PR, and character assassination by several actors in Moldovan politics in the past ten years, from both the pro-European and pro-Russian camps. Instead of using formal means to defeat their rivals, Moldovan politicians have often tried to discredit them. Yet, until 2015, the cooperation of these actors led to financial schemes that irreparably damaged the country’s already-fragile economy. Since 2015, the political debate in Moldova has revolved around ‘corruption’, but the term, often defined as the abuse of public power for private gain, does not describe effectively a cultural-political system predicated on abusing formal rules to achieve personal objectives.

The constant use of informal practices and the thriving of a self-centred elite widened the gap between this elite and ordinary Moldovan citizens, paving the way for the formation of populist parties. The second objective of the paper was hence to show the differences among these parties, which all rode the wave of indignation over the \$1 billion theft. The comparison of forces at play allowed the distinction of parties with a populist ideology, such as PAS and TDP, from those with mere populist communication strategies, such as PSRM and OP. The latter use populism as a campaign strategy, but do not intend to change the political culture that has characterised the country for decades. Rather, they would exploit such dynamics for personal benefit. On the contrary, PAS and TDP genuinely intend to change the situation, but their simplified comprehension of social dynamics identified the system as a group of corrupt politicians. While temporarily slowing corruption, this personalised fight is not effective in creating a political culture based on the respect of formal rules and the thriving of liberal democratic institutions. Moreover, by overestimating the ‘thickness’ of their political ideology, populist forces may prove unprepared in the eyes of the electorate to rule the country in the long term. This would make the ousting of corrupt political forces just a temporary condition.

In an increasingly post-ideological global political landscape, political parties are becoming progressively more populist. Corruption is the fetish of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Moisé 2020b), and parties use accusations of corruption, genuinely or instrumentally, to attract the votes of the electorate. Populism is a moral Manichean discourse present in societies regardless of the existence or lack of populist parties within them, but without a major corruption scandal demand for it is not set in motion (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017, 100). Without the \$1 billion theft, Maia Sandu would have not achieved the electoral success that she had. Some of the practices discussed in this paper may be unique to post-Soviet states, but the tension between populism and corruption is a global phenomenon acknowledged from Spain to Italy, from the U.S. to Argentina (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017). Further research should move beyond the post-Soviet framework to explore comparatively the effects of populism in societies with endemic corruption to test the resilience of local systems.

## **Author Bio**

*Gian Marco Moisé* is a PhD candidate at Dublin City University where he researched Kazakhstan’s oil sector. Between 2019-2020 he was a seconded fellow at KIMEP University, Almaty, in the European Commission framework RISE Project ‘New Market’ and he is currently Project Manager at the Global Informality Project at the University College London School of Slavonic and East European Studies.

## Funding

This research was realized as part of the EU Commission Horizon2020 MSCA Research and Innovation Staff Exchange project *SHADOW: An exploration of the nature of informal economies and shadow practices in the former USSR region*, Grant agreement ID: 778188.

## Acknowledgements

The author would like to acknowledge his mentors, Abel Polese and Alena Ledeneva, as well as the journal editors Tereza Østbø Kuldova and Jardar Nuland Østbø, for their comments on earlier versions of the manuscript.

## References

- Agora. 2021. “Avocatul lui Ilan Sor ii transmite o punga unui judecator de la Curtea de Apel Cahul,” [Ilan Sor's lawyer gives a bag to a judge of the Cahul Court of Appeal]. May 5, 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BviJ0P-UdcQ>
- . 2020. “Dodon, Plahotniuc și Iaralov au fost citați de judecătoria Ciocana în dosarul ‘kuliok’,” [Dodon, Plahotniuc and Iaralov are investigated by the Court in Ciocana in the dossier ‘plastic bag’]. September 28, 2020. <https://agora.md/stiri/77596/dodon-plahotniuc-si-iaralov-au-fost-citati-de-judecatoria-ciocana-in-dosarul-kuliok>
- Albot, Nata and Andrei Bolocan. 2020. “Promisiuni Electorale și Ce Cred Oamenii despre Candidați,” [Electoral Promises and What People Believe About Candidates]. *Internetu' Grăiește* on YouTube. October 31, 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZnKZt1MzBbM&t=2277s>
- . 2021a. “Bandițelu s-a Supărat că l-am Trimis în Croația??,” [The bandit was upset that we sent him to Croatia??]. *Internetu' Grăiește* on YouTube. May 21, 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u7CDygaLdNY>
- . 2021b. “Război pentru Diaspora și Corupție în Smart City,” [War over the Diaspora and Corruption in the Smart City]. *Internetu' Grăiește* on YouTube. June 18, 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u7CDygaLdNY>
- . 2021c. “Fabrica de Dosare a lui Cavcaliuc și Minciunile Nu Se Opresc,” [Cavcaliuc's File Factory and Lies Don't Stop]. *Internetu' Grăiește* on YouTube. July 2, 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rQNYuRdWaE8>

- Aliyev, Huseyn. 2017. “Moldova: Informal Reforms of Formal Institutions.” In *When Informal Institutions Change: Institutional Reforms and Informal Practices in the Former Soviet Union*, 121–42. University of Michigan Press.
- Avram, Andrei. 2017. “Fragmentation, Fluidity and Personalization: Remarks on Shifts in the pro-European Party Spectrum in the Republic of Moldova after 2014.” *Online Journal Modelling the New Europe*, no. 23: 31–44. <https://doi.org/10.24193/OJMNE.2017.23.03>
- Banila, Nicoleta. 2021. “Moldova’s president re-nominates Natalia Gavrilita as PM-designate”. *SeeNews*. February 12, 2021. <https://seenews.com/news/moldovas-president-re-nominates-natalia-gavrilita-as-pm-designate-731083>
- Brett, Daniel, and Eleanor Knott. 2015. “Moldova’s Parliamentary Elections of November 2014.” *Electoral Studies* 40: 430–47. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2015.09.002>
- Călugăreanu, Vitalie. 2021. “Curtea Constituțională a anulat decretul Maiei Sandu privind desemnarea premierului,” [The Constitutional Court annulled the decree of Maia Sandu on the premier designation]. DW. February 23, 2021. <https://www.dw.com/ro/curtea-constitu%C8%9Bional%C4%83-a-anulat-decretul-maiei-sandu-privind-desemnarea-premierului/a-56659553>
- Cassani, Andrea, and Luca Tomini. 2020. “Trajectories and Modes of Autocratization in the Early 21st Century.” *Partecipazione e Conflitto* 13 (3): 1539–58. <https://doi.org/10.1285/i20356609v13i3p1539>
- Constitution. 1994. “Article 85”. <https://www.presedinte.md/titul3#9>
- Crowther, William E. 2007. “Development of the Moldovan Parliament One Decade after Independence: Slow Going.” *Journal of Legislative Studies* 13 (1): 99–120. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13572330601165378>
- . 2011. “Semi- Presidentialism and Moldova’s Flawed Transition to Democracy.” In *Semi-Presidentialism and Democracy*, edited by Robert Elgie, Sophia Moestrup, and Yu-Shan Wu, 210–28.
- Gascón Barberá, Marcel. 2020. “Russia to Issue International Arrest Order for Moldovan Mayor.” *Balkan Insight*. July 24, 2020. <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/07/24/russia-to-issue-international-arrest-order-for-moldovan-mayor/>
- Gherghina, Sergiu, and Sorina Soare. 2019. “Electoral Performance beyond Leaders? The Organization of Populist Parties in Postcommunist Europe.” *Party Politics* 27 (1): 58–68. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354068819863629>

- Gnatcova, Olga. "Sexul în politica moldovenească," [Sex in Moldovan Politics]. *NewsMaker*. <https://newsmaker.md/ro/sexul-in-politica-moldoveneasca-cine-si-cum-a-fost-santajat-cu-video-uri-intime-si-de-ce-acestea-funcioneaza/>
- Goșu, Armand. 2016. "Republic of Moldova: The Year 2015 in Politics." *Studia Politica* 16 (1): 21–51.
- . 2018a. "Invalidating the Rightfully Elected Mayor of Chișinău Threatens the Regime of Oligarch Vladimir Plahotniuc." *Studia Politica* 18 (2): 293–314.
- . 2018b. "The Time of the Oligarch. Relations between Romania and the Republic of Moldova (2009-2018)." *Studia Politica* 18 (3): 393–421.
- Gotev, Georgi. 2015. "Wiretaps incriminate Moldovan pro-EU leader". *Euractiv*. October 21, 2015. <https://www.euractiv.com/section/europe-s-east/news/wiretaps-incriminate-moldovan-pro-eu-leader/>
- Hale, Henry E. 2013. "Did the Internet Break the Political Machine? Moldova's 2009 'Twitter Revolution That Wasn't.'" *Demokratizatsiya The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization* 21 (4): 481–506.
- . 2014. "The Informal Politics of Formal Constitutions: Rethinking the Effects of 'Presidentialism' and 'Parliamentarism' in the Cases of Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, and Ukraine." In *Constitutions in Authoritarian Regimes*, edited by Tom Ginsburg and Alberto Simpser, 218–44. Cambridge University Press.
- Isaacs, Rico. 2011. *Party System Formation in Kazakhstan: Between Formal and Informal Politics*. *Central Asian Studies Series*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203826003>
- . 2013. "Nur Otan, Informal Networks and the Countering of Elite Instability in Kazakhstan: Bringing the 'Formal' Back In." *Europe - Asia Studies* 65 (6): 1055–79. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2013.802547>
- IPN. 2017. "Dorin Chirtoaca placed under house arrest for 30 days". May 27, 2017. [https://www.ipn.md/en/dorin-chirtoaca-placed-under-house-arrest-for-30-days-7967\\_1034738.html](https://www.ipn.md/en/dorin-chirtoaca-placed-under-house-arrest-for-30-days-7967_1034738.html)
- Jurnal.md. 2021. "Momentul în care membrii Partidului 'PACE' îl stropesc cu verde de briliant pe vicepreședintele raionului Sângerei," [The moment when the members of the "PACE" Party sprinkle the vice-president of Sangerei district with brilliant green]. April 6, 2021. <https://www.jurnal.md/ro/news/85571c7ecab9195e/momentul-in-care-membrii->

[partidului-pace-il-stropesc-cu-verde-de-briliant-pe-vicepresedintele-raionului-sangerei.html](http://partidului-pace-il-stropesc-cu-verde-de-briliant-pe-vicepresedintele-raionului-sangerei.html)

Ledeneva, Alena V. 2006. *How Russia Really Works: The Informal Practices That Shaped Post-Soviet Politics and Business*. New York, US: Cornell University Press. <https://doi.org/10.7591/9780801461682>

Ledeneva, Alena V. 2013. *Can Russia Modernise?: Sistema, Power Networks and Informal Governance*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511978494>

Ledeneva, Alena, Anna Bailey, Sheelagh Barron, Costanza Curro, and Elizabeth Teague. 2018. *Global Encyclopaedia of Informality, Volume 1*. Edited by Alena Ledeneva, Anna Bailey, Sheelagh Barron, Costanza Curro, and Elizabeth Teague. *Global Encyclopaedia of Informality, Volume 1*. UCL Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt20krxh9>

Ledeneva, Alena, Anna Bailey, Sheelagh Barron, Costanza Curro, and Elizabeth Teague. 2018. *Global Encyclopaedia of Informality, Volume 2*. Edited by Alena Ledeneva, Anna Bailey, Sheelagh Barron, Costanza Curro, and Elizabeth Teague. *Global Encyclopaedia of Informality, Volume 2*. UCL Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt20krxgs>

Mandarici, Ion. 2021. "Nostalgic Voting? Explaining the Electoral Support for the Political Left in Post-Soviet Moldova." *Eurasian Geography and Economics*, DOI: 10.1080/15387216.2021.1918565

March, Luke. 2004. "Socialism with Unclear Characteristics: The Moldovan Communists in Government." *Demokratizatsiya* 12 (4): 507–24. <https://doi.org/10.3200/DEMO.12.4.507-524>

———. 2006. "Power and Opposition in the Former Soviet Union: The Communist Parties of Moldova and Russia." *Party Politics* 12 (3): 341–65. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354068806063085>

Matlack, Carol. 2015. "Did This 28-Year-Old Banker Help Steal \$1 Billion From Moldova?" *Bloomberg*. May 8, 2015. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2015-05-07/did-this-28-year-old-banker-help-steal-1-billion-from-moldova->

Minzarari, Dumitru. 2020. "Moldovan Presidential Elections Driven by Insecurity Not Geopolitics. President-elect Sandu May Have Found a Cure against Populism." *German Institute for International and Security Affairs*. December 2020. <https://www.swp-berlin.org/10.18449/2020C59/>

- Moisé, Gian Marco. 2020a. “East Journal Commenta le Presidenziali in Moldavia” [East Journal Comments Presidential Elections in Moldova], on YouTube. November 15, 2020. <https://youtu.be/MEGi3oIZUh8>
- . 2020b. “Corruption in the Oil Sector: A Systematic Review and Critique of the Literature.” *Extractive Industries and Society* 7 (1): 217–36. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.exis.2020.01.002>.
- Mudde, Cas, and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser. 2017. *Populism: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford University Press (OUP). <https://global.oup.com/academic/product/populism-a-very-short-introduction-9780190234874?cc=md&lang=en&>
- Munteanu, Ion. 2021. “Dezvăluiri șocante! Candidatul PAS, Nata Albot, a fost prinsă în 2016 cu droguri pe Aeroport?,” [Shocking revelations! Was PAS candidate Nata Albot caught in 2016 with drugs at the airport?]. *Sinteza.org*. May 19, 2021. <https://sinteza.org/2021/05/19/video-dezvaluiri-socante-candidatul-pas-nata-albot-a-fost-prinsa-in-2016-cu-droguri-pe-aeroport/>
- Necsutu, Madalin. 2019. “Moldova Faces New Turmoil After ex-Leader Leaves.” *Balkan Insight*. June 17, 2019. <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/06/17/moldova-faces-new-turmoil-after-ex-leader-leaves/>
- . 2021. “Moldovan Government to Raise Pensions and Welfare Benefits.” *Balkan Insight*. September 7, 2021. <https://balkaninsight.com/2021/09/07/moldovan-government-to-raise-pensions-and-welfare-benefits/>
- Nizhnikau, Ryhor. 2017. “Guiding Voice to Exit: Elections of Sitz-Chairman in Moldova, Inc.” *Demokratizatsiya The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization* 25 (4): 361–280.
- Parliament. 2010. “Lege pentru modificarea articolului 3 din Legea nr.1216-XII din 3 decembrie 1992 cu privire la taxa de stat,” [Law amending article 3 of Law no. 1216-XII of December 3, 1992 on the state tax]. <http://old.parlament.md/lawprocess/laws/05.2010/Nr.90.20.05.10/>
- . 2011. “Proiectul de lege cu privire la modificarea și completarea articolului 14 din Legea nr.190-XVI din 26 iulie 2007 cu privire la prevenirea și combaterea spălării banilor și finanțării terorismului,” [Draft law on amending and supplementing Article 14 of Law no. 190-XVI of July 26, 2007 on preventing and combating money laundering and financing of terrorism]. <http://parlament.md/ProcesulLegislativ/Proiectedeactelegislative/tabid/61/LegislativId/535/language/ro-RO/Default.aspx>

- Polese, Abel. 2008. “Ukraine 19912006: Where are all the Communists Gone?” In *Communist Parties in Eastern Europe after 1989* edited by Uwe Backes and Patrick Moreau. V&R: Gottingen.
- Popescu, Nicu. 2012. “Moldova’s Fragile Pluralism.” *Russian Politics and Law* 50 (4): 37–50. <https://doi.org/10.2753/RUP1061-1940500403>
- Publika.md. 2015. “O RAȚĂ MUTĂ pentru președintele Timofti. Ce s-a întâmplat cu pasărea adusă în fața Reședinței de Stat,” [A MUTE DUCK for President Timofti. What happened to the bird brought in front of the State Residence]. November 12, 2015. [https://www.publika.md/o-rata-muta-pentru-presedintele-timofti-ce-s-a-intamplat-cu-pasarea-adusa-in-fata-resedintei-de-stat\\_2447491.html](https://www.publika.md/o-rata-muta-pentru-presedintele-timofti-ce-s-a-intamplat-cu-pasarea-adusa-in-fata-resedintei-de-stat_2447491.html)
- Quinlan, Paul D. 2004. “Back to the Future: An Overview of Moldova under Voronin.” *Demokratizatsiya* 12 (4): 485–504. <https://doi.org/10.3200/DEMO.12.4.485-504>
- Radio Free Europe. 2021. “Moldovan Lawmakers Again Fail To Endorse PM-Designate.” March 25, 2021. <https://www.rferl.org/a/moldovan-lawmakers-again-fail-to-endorse-pm-designate/31169967.html>
- . 2018a. “Moldovan Constitutional Court Suspends President for Fifth Time.” December 18, 2018. <https://www.rferl.org/a/moldova-court-dodon-suspended/29649228.html>
- . 2018b. “Son of Moldovan Ex-President Lucinschi Convicted of Money Laundering, Sentenced To Prison.” April 4, 2018. <https://www.rferl.org/a/moldova-lucinschi-president-son-convicted-money-laundering-prison/29145113.html>
- Radu, Paul, Munteanu, Mihai, and Iggy Ostanin. 2015. “Grand Theft Moldova.” *OCCRP*. July 24, 2015. <https://www.occrp.org/en/laundromat/grand-theft-moldova/>
- Rață, Mariana and Victoria Dodon. 2018. “‘50 shadows’ of the billion dollar theft cases”. *Anticorruption Portal*. January 17, 2018. <https://anticoruptie.md/en/investigations/justice/50-shadows-of-the-billion-dollar-theft-cases>
- Reuters. 2015. “Moldovan opposition leader arrested over wiretapping.” October 23, 2015. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-moldova-corruption-arrest-idUSKCN0SH21920151023>
- . 2017. “Moldovan businessman jailed for role in \$1 billion bank fraud”. April 20, 2017. <https://www.reuters.com/article/moldova-banking-platon-idUSL8N1HS3T0>

- RISE Moldova. 2021. “Chatul Secret: Kremlinovici Gotman,” [Secret Chat: Kremlinovici Gotman]. July 2, 2021. <https://www.rise.md/articol/chat-ul-secret-kremlinovici-gotman/>
- Samoilenko, Sergei, Eric Shiraev, Jennifer Keohane and Martijn Icks. 2018. “Character Assassination.” In *Global Encyclopaedia of Informality, Volume 2* edited by Alena Ledeneva, Anna Bailey, Sheelagh Barron, Costanza Curro, and Elizabeth Teague. UCL Press: 441-445.
- Sandu, Maia. 2020a. “Dezbatere națională Maia Sandu vs. Igor Dodon,” [National debate Maia Sandu vs. Igor Dodon]. *Privesc.eu* on YouTube. October 27, 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MJaHhLoomqE>
- . 2020b. “The Inauguration speech of the President of the Republic of Moldova, Maia Sandu.” *Presidency of the Republic of Moldova*. December 24, 2020. <https://www.presedinte.md/eng/discursuri/discursul-inaugural-al-presedintelui-republicii-moldova-maia-sandu>
- Senyuva, Ozgehan. 2010. “Parliamentary Elections in Moldova, April and July 2009.” *Electoral Studies* 29 (1): 190–95. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2009.12.001>
- Timm, Christian. 2018. “Vzyatkoemkost’.” In *Global Encyclopaedia of Informality, Volume 2* edited by Alena Ledeneva, Anna Bailey, Sheelagh Barron, Costanza Curro, and Elizabeth Teague. UCL Press: 307-308.
- Tudoroiu, Theodor. 2011. “Communism for the Twenty-First Century: The Moldovan Experiment.” *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics* 27 (2): 291–321. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13523279.2011.564101>
- . 2015. “Democracy and State Capture in Moldova.” *Democratization* 22 (4): 655–78. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2013.868438>
- Transparency International Moldova. “The Russian Laundromat – a \$70 billion money-laundering scheme facilitated by Moldovan political elites”. June 18, 2019. <http://www.transparency.md/2019/06/18/the-russian-laundromat-a-70-billion-money-laundering-scheme-facilitated-by-moldovan-political-elites/>
- Velikaya, Natalia and Roman Tatarov. 2021. “Eternal Allies and Non-Permanent Interests: Pendulum of New Populism in Republic of Moldova”. *Современная Европа* [Contemporary Europe] 4: 140–150. <http://dx.doi.org/10.15211/soveurope42021140150>

Ziarul de Gardă. 2020. “Igor Dodon, Vladimir Plahotniuc, Serghei Iaralov și o pungă neagră,” [Igor Dodon, Vladimir Plahotniuc, Serghei Iaralov and a black bag]. YouTube. May 18, 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JhVXnePjth4>