

Opinion – Moldova’s Sandu Seeks Support for a Pro-EU Path

Written by Wilder Alejandro Sánchez

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WILDER ALEJANDRO SÁNCHEZ, APR 18 2023

President Maia Sandu of the Republic of Moldova has asked her citizens to come out on 21 May to show Brussels, Moscow, and the world that the country has a pro-Europe orientation. In addition, the upcoming “European Moldova National Assembly” rally will signal that the Moldovan government and population remain committed to the country’s European Union (EU) membership application. “I call upon everyone — farmers, teachers, students, NGOs, entrepreneurs, doctors, cultural figures, private sector employees, public officials — to come together and support our common dream,” said the Moldovan head of state on 10 April. “Let’s demonstrate that we desire peace. We want the European Union to be at home with us,” she added. “Three small pro-European political parties said they would take part,” announced Balkan Insight. The rally will reportedly take place in Chisinau’s central square.

Sandu and her supporters have over a month to properly organize an event with vast attendance. Additionally, the rally will occur in the Summer, encouraging individuals to come to the streets. Moldova has 2.6 million inhabitants, and monitoring how many rallies occur across the country, apart from Chisinau, will be important better to understand the citizenry’s support for the current president. The Moldovan head of state compared the upcoming rally to “the 1991 Great National Assembly, when Moldova’s Independence was proclaimed and will represent a message to the international community about the Moldovan people’s wish to be part of the European family,” explained the Moldovan news agency IPN.

The Ukraine war has had problematic effects on Moldova, including an influx of hundreds of thousands of Ukrainian refugees. In addition, Moldova’s energy security has been in peril due to gas supply cuts by Gazprom and attacks against the Ukrainian electricity grid, which Moldova also partially depends on. The war also affected Moldova’s economy, as inflation reached 33% last July 2022 (though to be fair, the country had a history of bad economic policies, among other problems, before the war) and trade, including trade with Moscow.

Domestically speaking, President Sandu’s *Party of Action and Solidarity* (Partidul Acțiune și Solidaritate: PAS) has a majority in the Parliament (63 out of 101 seats). In contrast, the other two represented parties are the SOR Party (Partidul ȘOR) and the Bloc of Communists and Socialists (Blocul Comuniștilor și Socialiștilor, BCS), which support Moscow. (SOR’s leader, the oligarch Ilan Sor, was sentenced to 15 years of prison due to financial crimes). Since the war commenced, the two parties have organized protests against President Sandu, calling for her resignation – the Moldovan media has reported how the protesters are paid to go the streets (or camp by the presidential palace and Parliament). For example, several thousand protesters (paid or not) walked along Chisinau streets on 19 February “to protest against President Maia Sandu and the country’s pro-Western government.”

Thus, the “European Moldova National Assembly” is part of Sandu’s strategy to “push back” against ongoing protests and calls for her resignation and show the world that her government and her foreign policy strategy, which is deeply rooted in obtaining EU membership, continues to enjoy widespread support.

Moldova has become more linked to Europe since February 2022. Moldovan apples, a primary agricultural product that, during the pre-war era, were heavily exported to Russia and other Commonwealth of Independent States countries. During the first two months of 2022, the Russian Federation imported up to 92.6% of Moldovan apples

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destined for export; a year later, from January-February 2023, the figure dropped to 40.9%, “These are the direct consequences of the war in Ukraine and the third embargo imposed by Russia in August 2022,” explains AgroTV. Nowadays, “the main alternative markets that Moldova is targeting are the Middle East and the European Union,” according to Moldova Fruct, Moldova’s fruit growers and exporters association. Regarding energy security, an issue this author has covered in a previous commentary for *e-International Relations* (see: “Energy Security: Moldova’s Quest for new Suppliers”), countries like Romania have stepped up to help the landlocked nation through 2022/2023 Winter.

As for defense, the country’s defense budget remains very limited, which means that the armed forces’ fleet of Soviet/Russia-era vehicles will remain operational for the foreseeable future. Valeriu Mija, Secretary of State for Defence Policy and National Army Reform said in mid-April, “in our opinion, 250 million euros are needed for the modernization of the armed forces.” Germany is transferring 19 Mowag Piranha 3H armored personnel carriers to the Moldovan military to replace obsolete vehicles. However, additional platforms will need replacement in the foreseeable future; otherwise, the military’s capabilities will be at risk. On 14 April, the Moldovan Secretary of State for National Defense System Resources, Sergiu Plop, and the Director General of the Center for Defense Investments in Estonia, Magnus-Valdemar Saar, signed a Memorandum of Understanding “regarding commitments in the process of implementing EU [European Peace Platform] assistance projects to support the Armed Forces of the Republic of Moldova in the process of modernizing logistics, mobility, command and control and tactical communications capabilities.” While these types of defense cooperation are common, this MoU highlights the ongoing trend of the Moldovan Ministry of Defense looking towards Europe for partners, training, and equipment.

Finally, regarding foreign policy, on 12–13 April, the defense and foreign affairs ministers of Moldova, Romania, and Ukraine participated in a trilateral conference to discuss the war and common defense and security issues. Defense Minister Anatolie Nosatîi and Foreign Affairs Minister Nicu Popescu participated “in the Conference on Black Sea Security, as part of the Crimea International Platform.”

Moldova achieved candidate status for the European Union last June 2022. However, domestic reforms are needed for Brussels, and all EU member states to accept Moldova as a member will take years. A 3 March analysis in *Radio Europa/ Libera Moldova* explains, “the reform process aimed at bringing the Republic of Moldova closer to the EU is a complicated one and will take time, [said] political analyst Veaceslav Berbeca from the Institute for Development and Social Initiatives Viitorul.” The Moldovan government’s goal is to join the EU by 2030.

The aforementioned examples suggest that Moldova is decisively attempting to increase relations with European states. With that said, it is important to stress that the Moldovan government is not looking to become an enemy of the Russian Federation but rather chart its independent course and destiny. Previous Moldovan governments, either presidents or prime ministers, have occasionally been fairly Moscow-friendly, including Sandu’s immediate predecessor Igor Dodon (2016-2020). Unfortunately, neutrality is problematic due to the war, particularly given Moldova’s geographical location.

Sandu’s announcement of a rally on 21 May is a significant development. After months of protests organized by Moscow-friendly political parties, Sandu is pushing back by organizing to demonstrate that she and her EU-friendly policies have significant public backing. If a sizable segment of Moldovans rally in downtown Chisinau (and potentially organize mini rallies in other towns and cities), this would provide a much-needed popularity boost to Sandu at a critical time.

About the author:

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the book *Separatism and Regionalism in Modern Europe*, while a journal essay on Moldova’s Gagauzia region is scheduled to be published this year.