

## **Gatekeeping in Action: Moldova's Parliament Attempts to Recapture its Government from Oligarchy**

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In their book *How Democracies Die*, Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt note that the responsibility of keeping authoritarians out of power falls on political parties and party leaders, “democracy’s gatekeepers.” They write that “whenever extremists emerge as serious electoral contenders, mainstream parties must forge a united front to defeat them.” Unfortunately, extreme polarization has prevented such bold unions from forming in many of the West’s governments, leading to the electoral and political success of right-wing and authoritarian parties. However, in Moldova, two parties with significant ideological differences have formed a coalition to keep power out of the hands of one of the country’s most powerful oligarchs, setting off a constitutional crisis that could lead to, as one journalist stated, “the world’s first democratic overthrow of a ‘captured state’.”

Moldova’s parliamentary elections in February resulted in a hung legislature with no party in the majority, leaving the parliament in deadlock until a surprise announcement on June 8th that the pro-Russian Socialist party of the country’s president, Igor Dodon, had struck a deal with an alliance of liberal pro-EU parties known as ACUM. A coalition was formed on the basis of keeping the Democratic Party, led by the country’s richest man, Vladimir Plahotniuc, from power and to rid the country of oligarchy. Maia Sandu, a former education minister and World Bank advisor, was chosen as the new Prime Minister, promising sweeping reforms and closer relations with the EU. She also harshly denounced Plahotniuc, saying “this situation in the country will continue as long as the Moldovan oligarch Plahotniuc, who has captured all state institutions, is in Moldova.” Despite an attempt by the Democratic Party to frame the new government as illegitimate that led to a week-long standoff between two rival governments, Sandu’s coalition prevailed.

Throughout the crisis, both the EU and Russia expressed support for Sandu’s government, and seemingly applied enough pressure for the Democratic Party to back down. While it is likely that the coalition will have trouble finding common ground concerning the country’s future and may end up falling apart after their victory, it is important to take a step back and look at the historic nature of this alliance. Two parties with mostly opposing views saw that their only way to take their country back from oligarchs was to join together. Political and ideological squabbles took a back seat to a joint vision of a democracy free from corruption, showing that it is indeed possible for opposing sides to put aside their differences for the good of the country,



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something that seems unimaginable in the US and EU today. It is proof that gatekeeping can be a viable strategy for political parties to preserve democratic institutions and prevent authoritarians from taking power. The fact that the standoff ended peacefully is an even more hopeful sign that gatekeeping is possible without violence or bloodshed.

Sandu's victory could also mark a turning point for Moldova, one of Europe's poorest and most corrupt countries. Both Sandu and Dodon have expressed the pro-Western orientation of the coalition, which could result in closer ties and cooperation with the EU in Moldova's economic and democratic development. Many serious issues remain to be solved, not the least of which is the status of the breakaway region of Transnistria, but if nothing else, the Socialists and ACUM can work together to root out corruption and strengthen democratic institutions, paving the way for a more prosperous future for the country. With a lot of hard work and compromise, Moldova could be the unlikely success story that shows the value of liberal democracy in a time of rising illiberalism.