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2021 Parliamentary elections in the Republic of Moldova – An attempt at post-election analysis

Abstract. This article analyses the parliamentary elections held in the Republic of Moldova in 2021, as a result of which the right-wing party, formerly in opposition, won, and was able to form its own single-party government with a parliamentary majority, which has not happened in Moldova exactly 20 years – since 2001. In this article the basic positions of the “left” and “right” political camps in the Republic of Moldova before the elections are analysed; as well as the mechanics of the electoral campaign and the voting process in different socio-geographical profiles. In 2021 The Republic of Moldova, for the first time in many years, faced the phenomenon of “overturning elections”; understanding the mechanics of which contributes to the development of a much better political and electoral process in general. At the same time, despite the special nature of the 2021 elections, the electoral political process in the Republic of Moldova continues to show several fixed tendencies, such as the geographical polarization of Moldovan voters residing in the EU or Russia, and the overall objective decrease of interest in the electoral process in general, regardless of the degree of the political and social representation of the political parties represented in the elections.

Keywords: parliamentary elections, Republic of Moldova, electoral process, overturning elections, EU, Russia.

Introduction

After the partial resignation of the previous cabinet led by Ion Kiku, which de facto took place on December 31, 2021, the Republic of Moldova “reassembled” the technical cabinet led by the acting foreign minister, Aureliy Ciocoi. Besides the obvious interstate difficulties created by the existence of such a cabinet (inability to sign interstate treaties, to participate in IMF programs, etc.), the existence of a technical cabinet left open the question of the fate of the current parliament. Furthermore, the whole structure of Moldovan state institutions was in an institutional deadlock at that moment, which was provoked by a long internal political crisis based on the confrontation between the newly elected president, Maia Sandu, and the parliamentary majority led by the representatives of the Party of Socialists, represented by Parliament Speaker Zinaida Greceanaya and former Moldovan President Igor Dodon. The latter had lost the election in favour of M. Sandu a little earlier, on November 15, 2022, which was the trigger of a violent internal political confrontation that began to affect the entire institutional system of the country as well (Kandel, 2021: 33).

The main behavioural line of President Maia Sandu was aimed at forcing the resignation of the current parliament through the double non-approval of the new cabinet of ministers (the constitution allow for the dissolving of parliament after two failures to approve a new cabinet of ministers). The parliamentary leadership, which at that time controlled the parliamentary majority consisting of deputies from the Socialist Party, the Shor Party and a group of independent and non-affiliated deputies, in turn, tried to nominate its own candidate for the head of the cabinet, as it had the opportunity to vote in its favour. Thus, starting in January 2021, the President and Parliament of the Republic of Moldova as political actors found themselves in a classic “zero-sum game” (antagonistic game), in which the winning and losing rule for both parties was to get a politically loyal candidate for the new acting Prime Minister (European Affairs, 2021).

The main problem with this situation was that in all possible cases, the personal and managerial qualities of any of the candidates would thus inevitably take second place to considerations of purely political loyalty (both to the presidential administration and the parliamentary leadership). In this respect, any cooperation that would be technically possible (such as the formation of a cabinet of ministers based on political quotas, etc.) was impossible in this confrontation, since both sides acted within the framework of the “dilemma of the prisoner”, that is, they rationalized their actions to the maximum, being in the strict conviction that the other side of the hypothetical deal would always violate this deal. As a result, motivated primarily by the incentive of comprehensive political gain, when the other side loses completely, both sides “raised the stakes” to the maximum, continuing to act strictly in the “or nothing” paradigm. This kind of aggressive political confrontation focused first on

various purely legal aspects of the Moldovan prime minister's candidacy procedure, as well as on the ways to approve or reject the candidacy, lasted 86 days, from January 1 until April 28, 2021.

The end of the confrontation was marked by the decision of the Constitutional Court of the Republic of Moldova of April 28, 2021, which ascertained the existence of circumstances enabling the current parliament to be dissolved by the president of the country (*Constitutional Court of the Republic of Moldova*, Decision #15 from 28.04.2021). In the process of institutional confrontation, the current parliament declared a state of emergency in the country, thus blocking most political procedures – this very provision was declared unconstitutional and annulled, which in fact allowed the president to dissolve the parliament. The official decree concerning the dissolution of parliament was signed on the same day: April 28, 2021, ending the four-month political confrontation of the two powers in Moldova, and in turn resulting in the victory of the presidential side (all the declared goals of the confrontation had now been achieved, while the opposing side had not gained anything). The path to the parliamentary elections in 2021 was thus opened (*Presidency of the Republic of Moldova*, Press-Releases, 2021).

This paper involves testing two consecutive hypotheses. The first is the assumption that the number of political parties officially registered in Moldova does not contribute in any way to an increase in party representation in the parliamentary elections, nor does it contribute to an increase in voter turnout – moreover, the tendency for a decrease in active interest in elections does not depend at all on the “length” of the ballot.

The second hypothesis is that the voting preferences of Moldovan voters outside of the Republic of Moldova is directly connected with the geographic distribution of voters; in particular – Moldovan voters in EU countries tend to vote for “right-wing” and “centre-right” and “right-populist” political parties, while Moldovan citizens in Russia are much more likely to support “left-wing”, “centre-right” and “left-populist” parties.

The party and political system in Moldova in 2001: A retrospective analysis of historical electoral records

The Republic of Moldova in 2021 was a country with an extremely high level of political representation, based on the number of political organizations officially registered in the country. According to the Central Electoral Commission (CEC), 53 parties were admitted to the parliamentary elections; while according to the Moldovan Ministry of Justice there were 68 officially registered political parties in the country at that time, but at the moment of editing this article, that figure was 69 (The Central Election Commission of the

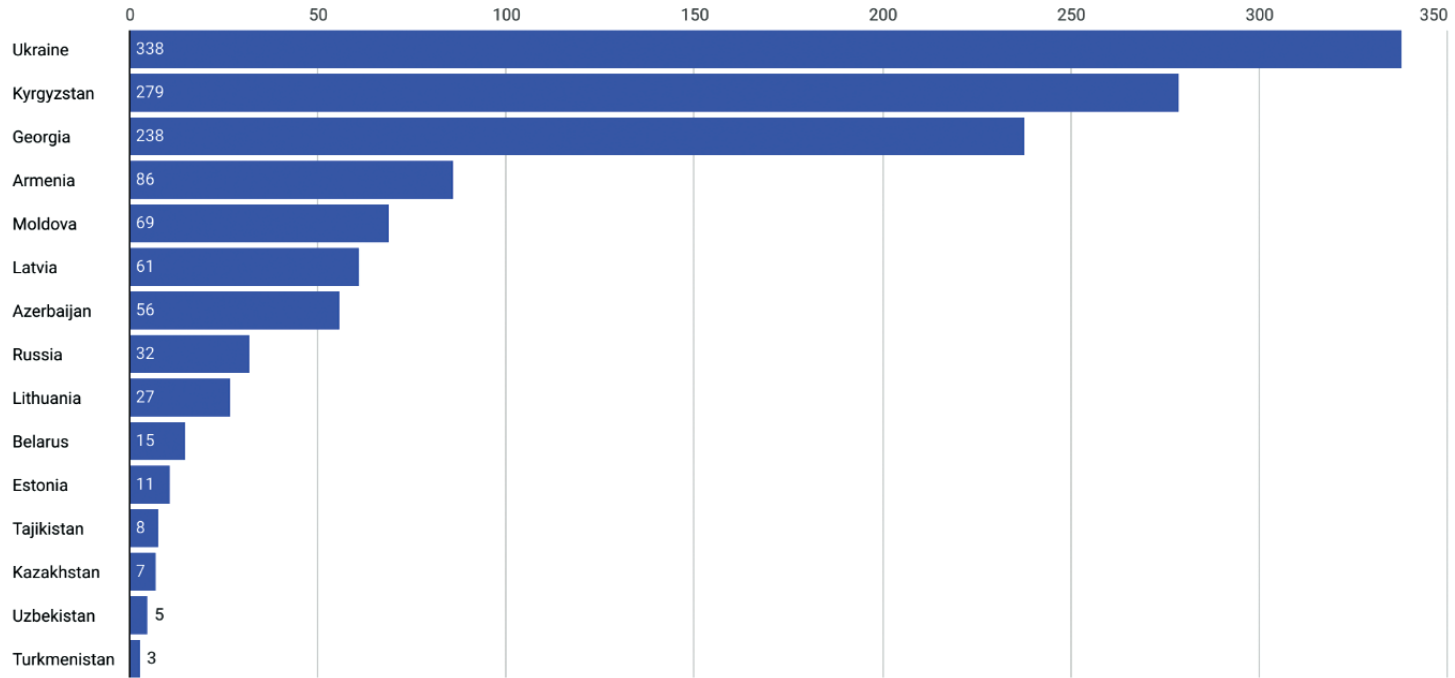


Figure 1. The number of political parties, officially registered in post-soviet countries as of 1.01.2021
Source: Author, based on official statements of the Ministries of Justice in post-Soviet republics.

Republic of Moldova, 2021). Some parties were not formally registered at that time because they did not have the necessary documentation, which had not been submitted to official bodies for several years. And this state of affairs is in many ways typical of elections in post-Soviet countries, excluding countries that can be characterized as “electoral autocracies” or even “authoritarian states” (EIU, Democracy Index 2020, 2021).

Despite the indirect link between the large number of registered political organizations and the level of accessibility and freedom of electoral processes, nevertheless, we can state that most of the political parties in Moldova are formed not on an ideological basis but according to socio-economic (and only partially, linguistic) similarity. Based on this definition, we can explain retrospectively, for example, the phenomenon of the return to power of the Party of Communists of the Republic of Moldova (PCRM) in 2001–2009.

At that time the basis of the socio-economic program and the focus of electoral interests of PCRM was directed to the broad masses of the population who perceived the 1991–1999 period primarily as one of a personal socio-economic collapse (or very big losses). Because of several extremely unsuccessful reforms carried out by the first governments of independent Moldova during that period, a large part of the population automatically fell into this category and naturally put the notion of “socio-economic stability” as their priority. This category also included the old party and political nomenclature, including representatives of the army and police, and large masses of industrial and agricultural workers, who were the largest part of the population at that time; additionally, there was a certain part of the educated layer of the population, which in post-Soviet countries is traditionally very dependent on the state of the public sector of the economy – those are workers in medicine, the social sector, science, and education (Furman, 2007: 97–99). As for the large sector of people directly dependent on the state – beneficiaries of pensions due to age or medical restrictions, PCRM offered a set of symbolic retrospective practices, such as laying flowers at monuments to Soviet political figures, inserting symbolic phrases about the “socialist society”, “capitalist pressure”, etc. into the official rhetoric. This set of electoral benchmarks offered to the diverse Moldovan society, turned out to be close enough to obtain a record result for the PCRM (and even more so today) at the parliamentary elections of February 25, 2001, when they achieved 50.07% of the votes of those who came to the polls, or 794,808 votes counted (*Alegerile parlamentare anticipate în Moldova...*, 2001). This big result, combined with the small number of participants who passed the electoral threshold of 6%, let the PCRM get 71 mandates out of the maximum 101 and become the sole manager of the parliamentary majority for the next four years. Never again in the electoral history of the Republic of Moldova from 1991 to 2021 has any party, including the PCRM itself, been able to obtain such a result.

Party political system in Moldova in 2021: “second electoral record”

However, in 2021 a completely different party stopped just one step away from this historical record. In the July 2021 parliamentary elections, the Action and Solidarity Party (PAS) was able to come as close as possible to this result, winning 52.8% of the votes of those who came to the polls, or 774,753 votes; a mere 20,055 votes short of the historic record, bringing the party 63 deputy mandates out of 101. Here it is worth adding a few important technical details that explain why the quantitative and proportional share of the vote is so drastically different in 2001 and 2021.

Firstly, during the 20 years of the chronological period under consideration, the population of Moldova decreased, according to the official estimates of the National Bureau of Statistics, from 3,635.1 million people (in 2001) to 2,597.1 million people (in 2021). Thus, the weighted average loss of population for 20 years was about 1.038 million people, which naturally had a significant impact on the number of voters as well (Macuhin, 2021: 67–69).

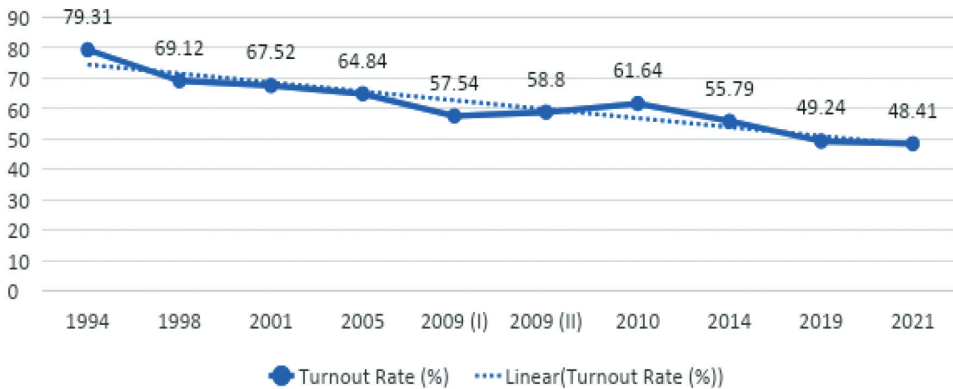


Figure 2. Turnout Rate at Moldavian Parliamentary Elections (1994–2021)

Source: Author, based on data of the Central Election Commission of the Republic of Moldova, 2021.

Secondly, even without considering this serious drop in the population, the average voter turnout in all parliamentary elections in Moldova has traditionally been falling for 20 years, and except for right-wing small surge of interest during the two electoral cycles in 2009, the drop in turnout demonstrates a steady trend that is likely to continue in the future.

Thirdly, such comparisons of results must consider the procedural contexts of the two electoral processes. For example, the cutoff electoral barrier in the 2001 elections was 6%, while in the 2021 elections it was only 5%; if this threshold

had been 5% in 2001, then consequently not only 3, but 5 parties would have entered parliament at that time – the Revival and Consent Party with 5.79% and the Democratic Party with 5.02% of the results. Thus, the distribution of seats in the Parliament in 2001 would have been very different and would not have allowed the PCRM to control 71 MPs, and, therefore, to obtain the constitutional majority. The converse is also true – if the electoral threshold of 6% had been applied in the 2021 elections, the PSRM with 5.74% would not have got into the current parliament and this would have naturally increased the representation of the PAS, the winner of the elections, to 67 seats.

From “action” to “solidarity”, or another “golden action” in Moldovan political history

There is a long-standing historical and political stereotype in the perception of Moldovan elections that are based on the statement that the political system of the country is very clearly divided into right-wing – pro-European and left-wing – pro-Russian parties (Calus, 2020). The development of such a stereotype is also triggered by the belief that the geopolitical vector, in its most simplified form: “Pro-EU” or “Pro-Russia”, is the main motivator of the majority of Moldovan voters. Accordingly, through the prism of this assumption, the post-election analysis of the winning result of the PAS party in Moldova can lead to exactly one conclusion, for example – “the pro-European geopolitical vector has crushingly beaten the pro-Russian geopolitical vector”, and on this, it seems, one can put a firm end.

However, if we move somewhat away from this very popular and actively broadcasted belief, we can notice that the geopolitical rhetoric and argumentation during the 2021 election campaign was conducted primarily by the main opponent of PAS – the electoral bloc of the Socialists and Communists Party (BECS). The most obvious markers of this agenda are the regular verbal acts of “selling threats” from the main list of basic problems and fears of the Moldovan population, namely statements about the high probability of renewal of the frozen conflict around Transnistria, about the imminent breaking of political and most importantly economic relations with Russia, which must directly affect the large market for agricultural products, as well as the large (but steadily decreasing) market for Moldovan citizens’ migration to Russia, etc. BECS also actively proposed, in public statements and topics of discussion in Moldovan society, to “not to allow the registration of same-sex marriages in Moldova”, while no other political force brought up the possibility in public discussion of registering same-sex marriages, given the high level of social penetration of the Orthodox Church in the country (Necsutu, 2021).

However, the most paradoxical characteristic of the past electoral campaign was precisely the behaviour of the future winner. In general, this campaign can be described in several categories – first, it is the almost complete abandonment of debates of public confrontation with any opponents. Second, the introduction into the public political rhetoric of a doctrinally right-wing party (PAS officially identifies its platform as liberal-democratic) despite many social-economic elements traditionally characteristic of social-democratic parties, such as – the promise of raising the minimum pension level, developing medical infrastructure outside the capital, increasing the minimum guaranteed wage, etc. Thirdly, it is a powerful anti-corruption message that included an electoral promise of a total renovation of all the main state governance structures – from the central apparatuses of all ministries and law enforcement bodies to representatives of control and revision structures at all levels, all this to take place against the background of a qualitative deepening of Moldova’s integration into the European political and economic space.

It is this combination of rather simple, mostly socio-economic, rather than geopolitical promises voiced by the representatives of the right-wing of the Moldovan political field that became an extremely important factor that ensured the victory of the PAS party. Thus, the theoretical “formula of success” in the parliamentary elections of 2021 was the formula proposed to the Moldovan voter, a pro-European foreign policy combined with a socially-oriented economy with a minimum of geopolitics. In turn, the main opponent, the electoral bloc BECS, on the contrary, placed their main bet on the formula “maximum geopolitical orientation combined with the market selling fears and threats”, and this proposal was not too popular with Moldovan voters (Răileanu Szeles, 2021).

Table 1. Results of parliamentary elections in the Republic of Moldova in 2021

Party	Elections 2021 Result	Number of elected MP
PAS	52.80% (774,754)	63
BECS electoral block (PCRM+PSRM)	27.17% (398,678)	32 (10 PCRM + 22 PSRM)
Shor party (PPS)	5.74% (84,185)	6
R. Usatyî “Our Party” electoral block	4.10% (60,100)	0
Other 19 parties	10.19%	0

Source: Author, based on data of the Central Election Commission of the Republic of Moldova, 2021.

Political Projects “Shor” and “Our Party” – competition for the title of a third force in the parliament of two political projects with Moldovan specificity

The previously mentioned “Shor” party (hereinafter – PPS), named after its founder and chairman, businessman Ilan Shor, was the only political force, except for the two major parties, which managed to pass the electoral threshold in the 2021 elections. At the same time, the party did not demonstrate any geopolitical or foreign policy platform and, at first glance seems to be a typical political project for many post-Soviet countries, speculating only on the nostalgic feelings of the most vulnerable social strata and the very old population, most of whose life was spent in the conditions of the Soviet reality. For example, in its electoral program, the Shor Party proposed “measures to restore agriculture through the reconstitution of state farms,” as well as “the nationalization of industry”.

Nevertheless, post-electoral analysis shows that this party gained its third place in the country not through any massive, total presence in several regions, but through gaining third place in almost all regions of the country, except for voting outside the Republic of Moldova, where the party has only 0.59%. The party has a clear advantage only in Orhei and Taraclia districts where the district centres are headed by representatives of the Shor party, but even these advantages do not form so-called “electoral strongholds” – the maximum result obtained in any one district is 36% of all voters who came to the polls, with an average of 11%.

However, there is another factor that was very clearly revealed by the results of the post-election analysis. This is a clear overlap between the electorates of the “Shor” party and the leftist-populist “Our Party” of another Moldovan businessman, Renato Usatii. Their biographies are similar even in terms of administrative and political backgrounds; both positioned themselves as strong administrators and managers from the regions, who will go to the level of the central government and “put things in order there”. Thus, for a long time, Ilan Shor was the mayor of Orhei, with his party completely dominating the city council, and Renato Usatii similarly served as the mayor of Balti, also with his party completely dominating the city council.

Paradoxically, the electoral campaigns of the Shor and Our Party during the 2021 elections did not overlap each other – neither at the level of competition, nor the level of open conflict, nor even at the level of mutual black PR – candidates from these two formations did not notice each other, and in general were not perceived as competitors at all, focusing on the confrontation between PAS and BECS. The only factor of similarity during the campaign was the claim to be a third force in the future parliament (however, it is not that these were the only ones to make such claims, but they did it statistically more actively than others).

The post-election statistical analysis shows that the conditional voter in the category of choosing the third force most often chose between “Shor” and “Our Party”, which went to elections as a part of the electoral block under the official acronym BERU. And quantitatively more often this choice was made in favour of “Shor” than “Our Party”. The proportion of votes cast for the third force, in this case, was 1 vote for “Our Party” against 1.4 votes for “Shor”. It was this rather small proportion, resulting in a final difference of only 24,000 votes cast, that determined the entry (and non-entry) into parliament of both parties.

Heatmap: 3rd places by districts

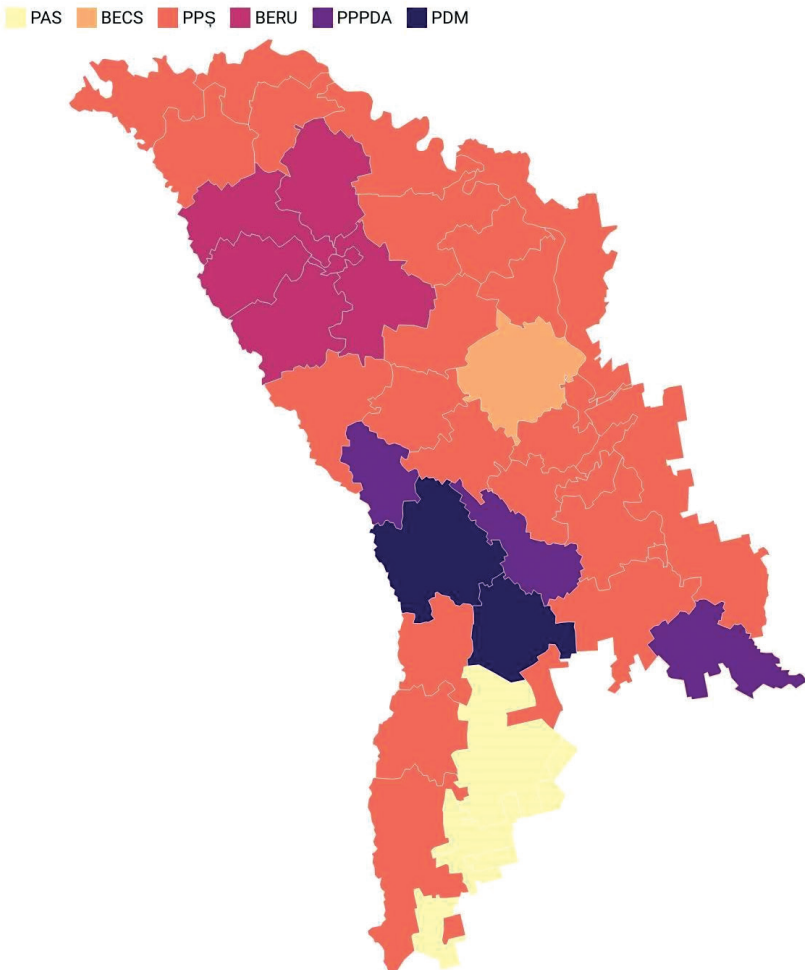


Figure 3. Third places by districts, Republic of Moldova parliamentary elections in 2021

Source: Author, based on data of the Central Election Commission of the Republic of Moldova, 2021.

“Non-European” voting for a European view of the world – separate results of voting by Moldovan citizens outside the European Union

The large loss of the Moldovan population in the form of labour migration determines a specific, but critically important aspect of any Moldovan electoral process – with ex-patriate citizens voting at polling stations abroad. According to the electoral legislation of the Republic of Moldova, voting outside the country is legally possible for anyone who can prove his/her citizenship and age from 18 years old, which ensures a rather high level of voting for Moldovan citizens living (permanently or temporarily) outside the country.

In the case of European Union countries, the dominant trend, over 80% of votes, to vote for the PAS party, positioning itself as a liberal-democratic party and aiming at the integration of Moldova into the European space, was obvious. Among the main reasons are the purely rationalistic expectations of such voters, such as a tighter integration in the field of readmission agreements, joint social security (possibility to get pensions and benefits based on work record), the continuation and extension of a visa-free regime up to an imminent accession of Moldova to the EU in the distant future, which is expected by such voters.

However, in this perspective the results of the voting in the countries, which are not members of the EU, but traditionally attract mass migration of Moldovan citizens, and first is the Russian Federation, also seem to be interesting. According to official data of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Russian Federation, in January – June 2021, 84,264 citizens of the Republic of Moldova entered the territory of Russia and stayed (in different legal statuses, but without conflict with the possibility to vote in Moldovan elections). However, this figure means only those Moldovan citizens who have exclusively Moldovan citizenship while staying in Russia. At the same time, every year, according to statistics of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Russian Federation, about 11–12 thousand Moldovan citizens also acquire citizenship of the Russian Federation, without losing, mostly, their first citizenship, and therefore – potentially also have the possibility and right to vote in Moldovan parliamentary (and presidential) elections (*The Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Russian Federation*, 2021).

Thus, potentially, even the number of Moldovan voters only officially present in Russia exceeds by itself even the minimum required 5% of the electoral threshold. Thus, the quantitative calculation of this threshold for the 2021 elections can be estimated in the range of 65–70 thousand votes, and the lower the final voter turnout will be – the lower, respectively, the “electoral value” of the electoral threshold at the elections. There are also many statistically unsupported stereotypes around this part of the electorate. In practice, the electoral structure of Moldovan citizens’ voting in Russia becomes more and more Eurocentric year by year, on the one hand, and less and less significant in the whole voting process, on

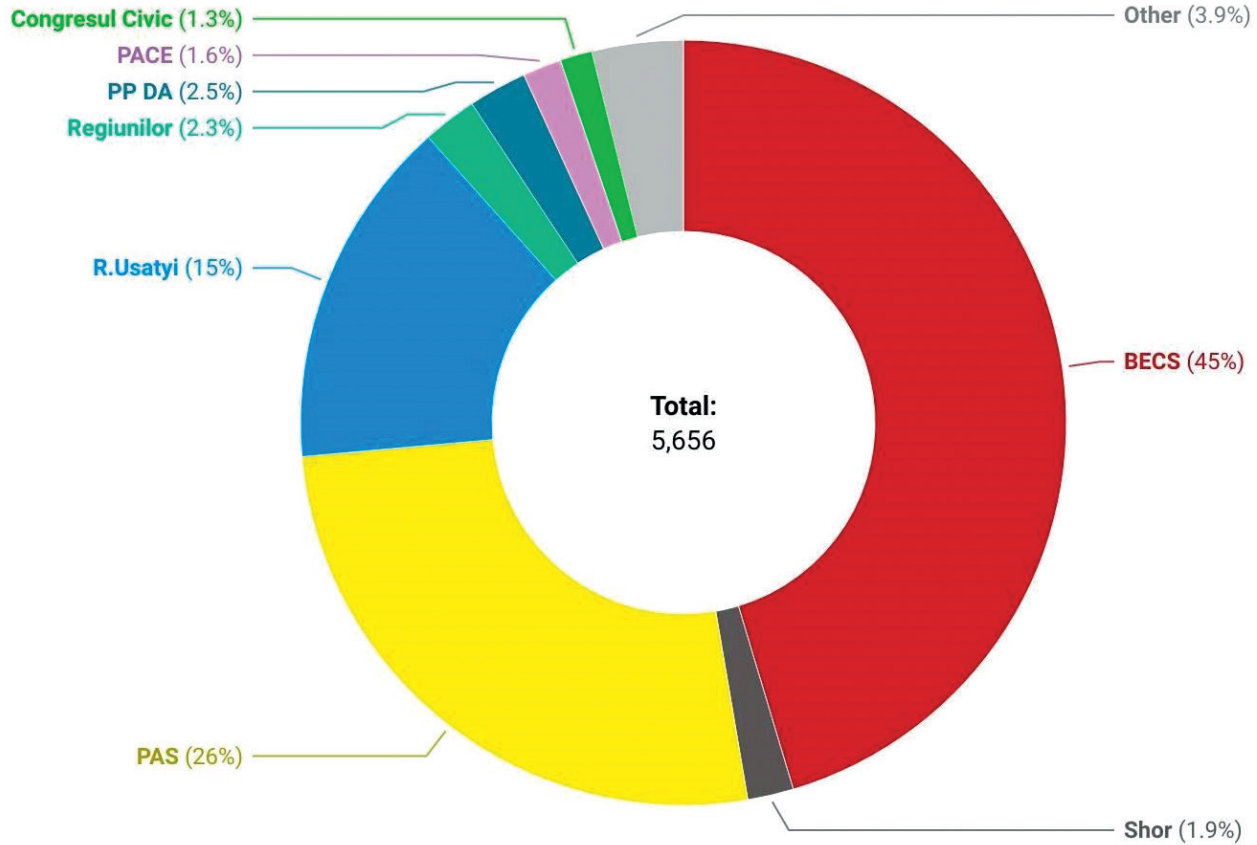


Figure 4. Voting the Moldavian citizens at Russia at the Parliamentary Electionsone-quarter
 Conclusions in the Republic of Moldova in 2021
 Source: Author, based on data of the Central Election Commission of the Republic of Moldova, 2021.

the other hand. So, for example, according to the results of the elections of 2021 at the polling stations opened for Moldovan citizens in Russia slightly more than 5.5 thousand voters or about 7% of all officially residing in Russia people who are citizens of the Republic of Moldova only voted.

The voting structure of Moldovan voters in Russia also differs significantly from both European voters and the voting structure within Moldova. It is still dominated by the conditionally left-wing parties for 2021 – BECS and Our Party attracted 60% of the voters. But at the same time, PAS accounted for one-quarter of the votes, which is more than in any previous parliamentary elections in Moldova. The remaining quarter of the vote represents a highly dispersed distribution among the small parties, both on the left and the right. In many respects, these results of Moldovan voters in Russia reflect several specific trends. First, it is the extremely high level of political escapism characteristic of this region, associated with the integration of Moldovan citizens into the Russian political field, which subsequently dominates the Moldovan political scene. Secondly, a high share of political nihilism is also evident, which is associated with a high level of disappointment in the centre-left and centre-right political spectrum of Moldova and the low quality of its electoral campaign (Borisov, Yushkova-Borisova, 2021).

Conclusions

The positions of Moldovan political parties traditionally differed primarily in socio-economic and ethno-political processes (Zdaniuk, 2014). The main feature of the party system was the inability to significantly limit the electoral potential of the left and right forces, which, until 2016–2017, predetermined the existence of favourable institutional conditions for them: indirect presidential elections and a proportional electoral system. Flank parties were much more stable than centrist parties because voting for them had an ideological character. The atypically high, for the post-Soviet space, level of influence of conditionally “left-wing forces” (PCRM and PSRM, united in the BECS bloc in the 2021 elections) was largely explained by the economic policy aimed at the relatively poor strata of society, as well as appeals to social protection. Right-wing political forces traditionally adhered to the economic model described by the classical formula “the state is a night watchman,” which greatly limited their electoral field. The second such factor of the division was the “national question”, in Moldovan realities its most accurate description is the “linguistic question”, which touched upon the problem of both the name of the state language and interethnic politics, as well as closely related issues of history and ideology.

By 2021, even before the parliamentary elections, as well as during the election campaign, one could observe how the conditional “left” and “right”

political flanks in Moldova had largely swapped places – towards the geopolitical and socio-cultural agenda of the “left” and the dominating socio-economic agenda, without using the national-cultural issues of the “right” parties. In many respects, such a sharp division, along with several accompanying factors, for example, as active support of the EU on the one hand, and the actual self-exclusion of Russia on the other hand (Ejova, Eșanu, 2021).

The first proposed hypothesis that the number of political parties officially registered and participating in parliamentary elections does not affect the turnout was fully confirmed for the case of the 2021 parliamentary elections in the Republic of Moldova. Thus, the participation of 22 political parties and one independent candidate ensured the lowest electoral turnout in the history of parliamentary elections in the Republic of Moldova since 1994, while the number of political parties was also the highest since 1994.

The second proposed hypothesis, that in the case of foreign voting in Moldovan elections, the geographical position of foreign voters directly affects their preferred choice in the voting process, can be considered to be confirmed only partially; as the structural and quantitative analysis of Moldovan citizens’ out-of-country voting in 2021 shows that most of the political parties voted for by Moldovan citizens staying in Russia do belong to the political spectrum of “left-wing”, “centre-left” or “left-populist” parties. Nevertheless, two factors – the second place in the region won by the “right-wing” PAS party, together with the presence of a large “left-wing” electoral bloc of Socialist and Communist parties, which does not allow calculating the exact distribution of votes for each of these parties separately, in general, allow one to conclude only a partial role of the geographical location of voters as a factor in determining electoral choice.

In the end, all these factors described above have equally shaped the “overturning election” effect at the parliamentary elections of 2021 in Moldova and as a consequence – the formation of a mono party cabinet of ministers and a mono party right-wing parliamentary majority for the first time since 2001.

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