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Moldova's pro-European government

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On 6 August, the Moldovan parliament passed a vote of confidence in the majority government formed by the pro-European Party of Action and Solidarity (PAS), which wants to reform the country. 61 out of 101 deputies supported the new government, which will be led by Prime Minister Natalia Gavrilița. Deputies representing PAS voted for the new cabinet. They were opposed by representatives of the pro-Russian Electoral Bloc of Communists and Socialists (formed by the Socialist Party PSRM and the Communist Party PCRM), and deputies from the populist Șor Party.

According to Gavrilița's inaugural address, in the short term the new government will focus on combating the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. The measures the government has promised to take include support for the healthcare service, mass tests of the country's residents, and counteracting disinformation regarding pandemic. Help for entrepreneurs affected by the restrictions introduced in connection with the epidemic situation is also envisaged. The government's second priority is the reform of the judiciary, which PAS has been consistently pushed for, and the adoption of tougher anti-corruption measures. Improving living standards in Moldova is another key issue; Gavrilița repeated the promise made by her party during the election campaign to raise the minimum pension from the present level of approximately 1200 to 2000 Moldovan lei (around €55 and €95 respectively). Last but not least, the prime minister also announced a budget amendment, which is intended not only to ensure a fair distribution of public funds, but also to enable Moldova to sign new loan agreements with the IMF and obtain financial aid from the EU. The new cabinet will consist of thirteen ministers, not nine as before.

Commentary

- Natalia Gavrilița is considered to be one of Maia Sandu's closest and most trusted associates (this is the first time in history that the two top political functions in Moldova have been performed by women). Like her, Gavrilița also studied at Harvard. In 2013–15, she worked as a secretary of state in the Ministry of Education headed by the current president. She also held the position of minister of finance in the Sandu cabinet, which governed from June to November 2019. After the resignation of Prime Minister Ion Chicu (associated with the pro-Russian socialist party PSRM) in December 2020, the president twice entrusted her with the mission of forming a government. However, these nominations were of purely symbolic significance, as the parliament was then dominated by socialists opposing the president. However, the rejection of Gavrilița's candidacy was a step towards calling the snap parliamentary elections, which Sandu had been consistently striving for.

- Gavrilița's cabinet is mostly composed of people from expert circles and non-governmental organisations. This is true particularly of the ministries in charge of economic issues (including agriculture). The overwhelming majority of the newly appointed government's members had never previously run a ministry on their own. The few exceptions are Nicu Popescu, who has been appointed deputy prime minister and foreign minister (he had already headed the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and European Integration in the Sandu government in 2019), and Prime Minister Gavrilița herself. Ana Revenco is the first woman in Moldova's history to be appointed Minister of Internal Affairs; for years she has been involved in combating trafficking in human beings and helping its victims (this phenomenon is a serious problem in Moldova).
- The most difficult task the new government will face is the dismantling of the system created at the turn of the twenty-first century, within which state institutions have been used as an instrument to protect the political and financial interests of the Moldovan elite. The extremely corrupt justice administration is the foundation of this system. Judicial authorities have been used for many years (especially during the *de facto* rule of oligarch Vlad Plahotniuc between 2015 and 2019) to intimidate or eliminate political and business opponents from public life and take away private companies from their initial owners (so-called corporate raiding). To accomplish this task, it will be necessary to conduct a thorough vetting of judges and prosecutors. Keeping its social promises (improving the living standards of the country's residents, increase in salaries, etc.) will also be a serious challenge to the new government, and will require support from international institutions. It's highly likely that the government will need to implement some unpopular reforms in order to obtain the financial aid necessary for this purpose (especially from the IMF). However, staffing issues may hinder the implementation of their ambitious recovery agenda. Although the ministries are headed by competent people of generally good repute (i.e. they are generally considered as honest), it may be difficult to find the right number of the similarly qualified specialists who will be necessary to fill the lower- and middle-ranking positions in individual ministries.
- The appointment of a new cabinet that fully supports the incumbent president will enable Sandu to make changes in the Moldovan diplomatic corps. Hitherto, the ambassadors had not infrequently been nominated with the overriding goal of directly representing the interests (political, and sometimes economic) of the leaders and sponsors of the parties in power, rather than implementing the government's foreign policy. It seems certain that Sandu will decide to appoint a new ambassador to Russia (the current ambassador and former PSRM MP, Vladimir Golovatiuc, was recalled to Chișinău for consultations in July; the Moldovan media speculate that the diplomat is suspected of sexually harassing a co-worker). The ambassadors to other countries, such as Belarus, Ukraine or Germany, will also be replaced in the near future as their terms of office are about to end. The country's representatives to Vienna (including the OSCE), Bucharest and the United Nations are also yet to be appointed.

APPENDIX

Natalia Gavrilița (Prime Minister)

Gavrilița was born on 21 September 1977 in the village of Mălăiești (then the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic, but now in the Transnistria – separatist region of Moldova). In 2000 she received a BA in International Law from the Moldovan State University in Chișinău, and in 2005 she obtained a Masters in Public Policy from Harvard University. In 2007–9 she worked at the Ministry of Economy and Trade of the Republic of Moldova as the head of the Department of Economic Forecasts and Development Programmes and the Directorate for Coordination of External Policy and Aid. From 2013 to 2015, Gavrilița served as Secretary of State and Head of Cabinet at the Ministry of Education, headed by Sandu at the time. She was also the executive director of the World Bank-funded Education Reform Project. Prior to that in 2009–13, she worked at Oxford Policy Management, an international consulting company located in Great Britain, dealing with development issues of low- and middle-income countries. In 2017, she joined the pro-European Action and Solidarity Party (PAS), led by Sandu at the time (in 2020 she was elected the party's vice-president). From June to November 2019 she served as Minister of Finance in the Sandu government. In the snap parliamentary elections held in 2021, Gavrilița won a parliamentary seat on behalf of PAS.

Nicu Popescu (Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Foreign Affairs and European Integration)

He was born on 25 April 1981. In 2002, he graduated from the Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO), and then studied at the Central European University in Budapest, where he obtained a master's degree and then a doctorate in international relations. Between 2005 and 2012, he worked as an analyst and specialist at the Centre for European Policy Studies (Brussels) and at the European Council on Foreign Relations (London). In 2010 and 2012–13, he was an advisor to the Moldovan government on foreign policy and European integration. From 2013 to 2018, he was the main analyst of the EU Institute for Security Studies (EUISS), and from June to November 2019 he headed the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and European Integration in the Sandu government.