

Address by H.E. Maia Sandu, President of the Republic of Moldova

Dear Mr President,

Dear Ms Secretary General of the Council of Europe,

Dear Mr Deputy Secretary General,

Dear Ms Secretary General of PACE,

Dear Members of the Parliamentary Assembly,

Excellencies,

Thank you for the invitation to address you today here at Palais de l'Europe. I am grateful for the opportunity to meet you in person and I also warmly greet the audience and the Parliamentary Assembly's delegates who have joined online. I stand here today to acknowledge the role of the Council of Europe in establishing and upholding the values and standards that define European nations today, in promoting democratic consolidation, stability, and providing a place for dialogue on the continent.

Moldova is a small European nation of kind and hard-working people, who will celebrate 30 years of independence this August. It's a country which has all the ingredients for success. I am honoured to have been elected the President of this country. In truth, recent presidential elections united Moldovans of all ethnicities around a core demand for

an accountable, responsive government, which will pursue national, not personal, interests.

This shared goal created an unprecedented wave of unity and purpose, and this is my key message today - the will to reform the country comes from the Moldovan people. **Moldovans of different ages, of different political preferences came together as one nation to demand far-reaching internal transformations, including a serious fight against corruption, justice sector reforms, and a clean government which works for the people.** And I have this message to all Moldovans - I will do what you have told me to do. You generated the momentum for reforms, and it must now be sustained by real actions. Words and promises, nice documents of which the Moldovans have had so many, will not be enough.

Thirty years ago, Moldova chose the path of building its own democracy. We adopted a Constitution, voted laws and established institutions inspired from the best European and international practices. We did many things right, but a lot remained on paper. Despite prolonged reforms, despite increasingly sophisticated legislation, many of our institutions remain vulnerable to undue influence and are prone to abuse.

State institutions today are often unable to deliver quality public services. The economy suffers from monopolies. Some people lose hope in the day of tomorrow, and choose to leave the country in search of a better future.

People voted for serious change. But what exactly does change mean for Moldovans? It means that Moldovans want justice. We want better standards of living, access to quality education, healthcare and better

infrastructure. We want a country with a real economy, where foreign and domestic investments feel secure, where there are jobs for all. We want our people to choose to return and live in Moldova - not because they have to, but because they want to.

Change means that Moldovans will trust their state. People's vision for a better future is built on several key elements: genuine fight against corruption, functioning laws and an accountable and independent judiciary, a good business climate, a better environment, developed infrastructure and good education and healthcare systems. These are my strategic priorities.

The first priority is to put an end to pervasive corruption. Corruption arrests democracy, erodes the public sector and state-owned enterprises. Public officials are not held accountable for their actions. And those who should stop abuses - judges, prosecutors, law enforcement officials - are in many cases the offenders. As a result, we see growing distrust between the state and society.

According to international assessments, Moldova generates close to 1 billion dollars per year in illicit financial flows through corruption, money laundering and smuggling. This is a huge amount for Moldova. Only a fraction of this money would be enough to double the salaries of teachers, or repair most roads in the country.

Moldovans are hard-working people. The money that Moldovans earn should go to increase the benefits for all, not construct mansions for corrupt officials. Moldova's key challenge today is to create an efficient, democratic state, where everyone would know that their hard work pays off for them personally and contributes to the welfare of all. The people of Moldova elected me their President with a strong mandate to fight

corruption and open the doors to fundamental transformations inside the country, and this is my first and most important priority.

This task cannot be achieved by just one institution, no matter how determined it is. There has to be a common sense of purpose in fighting corruption between the Presidency, the Parliament and the Government. Early parliamentary elections, which will take place in Moldova soon, will open the doors to this change of political personalities who are running the country. The forthcoming elections will give us a unique opportunity to pursue a serious reform agenda, to step again on the path towards democracy and restore trust between the people and the state.

Second, we must improve the justice sector. It is a foundation for increasing investments in Moldova's economy, both local and international, and bolster the efficiency of the public sector. Everybody in Moldova must be treated equally. **For too long, the few have had it all from the state and the many have had very little.** A businessperson who has been constructing a strong business during his or her whole life, only to see it taken away by those from high-level offices because they wanted the profits that the business generates. Courts which adjudicate cases in favour of those with power and money and treat people without connections unfairly, or support a corrupt official who snatches government property through affiliated companies in front of everyone's eyes. Judges who close their eyes on cases of flagrant corruption and absolve high-placed criminals from responsibility.

We must change that. The businessperson is the backbone of Moldova's economic growth, and he or she should have exactly the same treatment as powerful regional and national officials. Everyone in Moldova must know that the state and its justice system will treat them fairly. This is

the goal of our justice sector reforms which will increase citizens' trust in government institutions.

Third, a less corrupt state and an impartial, independent judiciary will create a strong foundation for a functional economy and economic growth. This will, in turn, generate budget revenues to rebuild Moldova's crippling infrastructure. But most importantly, this national revenue that will be taken away from regional criminal networks and corrupt officials will allow a cleaner Moldovan government to do what it should have been doing over these 30 years of independence - invest massively in Moldova's key national asset, its human capital. We must significantly increase our investment in better education and quality healthcare, and we must guarantee decent social support for the Moldovan people.

This is in a few words the vision for the country and the program of reforms which all Moldovans want, no matter whether they speak Romanian, Ukrainian, Russian, Gagauz or Bulgarian. This is the common purpose and the core agenda which has united all Moldovans, as one nation.

Ladies and gentlemen,

This hall has seen many speeches - visionary, inspiring messages of hope, unity, progress and peace. My message today is different. The Moldovan people want the Presidency to join forces with a new parliament and a new government to clean the country of the vices that are holding it back - and they ask for your support in doing so. And this time, Moldovan politicians should not fail the people.

Rebuilding trust between the state and the citizens is no easy task, but it must be accomplished as a fundamental precondition for a happier, more prosperous nation.

While distrust may be a global phenomenon in today's world - worsened by the pandemic and competing narratives - the key to fixing the fabric of Moldovan society is in Moldova. By tackling corruption, reforming the justice system, creating accountability in our public sector and investing in education, healthcare and social protection, we can reconnect our institutions with our people.

The power of institutions doesn't lie only in the words of the law that describe their attributions and competences. Their power lies in the dedication with which their employees choose to do their work every day. It resides in the quality of the services provided to the citizen. In the professionalism of the clerk at the counter. In the clarity of procedures. In the behaviour of the patrol policeman on the road. In the stubbornness with which a prosecutor defends the public good from the actions of an immoral official. In the strength with which a judge chooses not to answer the phone if someone influential is calling to intervene in a case.

Public servants need to know that they are in the service of the people.

What we set out to do requires courage and continued, sustained effort. The drive for reforms must continue to come from the people, no matter what obstacles may block the road. And there are many obstacles. Corrupt forces will fight back, because they stand to lose not only their illicit revenues, but also their freedom. But people are determined to fight for change, and count on the support of Moldova's partners in the Council of Europe.

In the past 26 years, the Council of Europe played a crucial role in helping Moldova transition to a more democratic system of governance. The Council of Europe and its institutions - the Parliamentary Assembly, the Council of Ministers, the Venice Commission, the Congress of Local Authorities, and others - stood beside Moldova in good and bad times.

Thank you for all the support you have given our country in our difficult moments.

I hope we can work together again to re-establish a functional democracy in Moldova.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I put restoring citizens' trust in the state and the fight against corruption at the centre of my address today because they are key to ensuring stability and security in our broader region. Corruption is a security issue, and it does not stop at Moldova's borders. Smuggling, money laundering, hybrid threats are all transnational threats. We see that many countries in Eastern Europe are also struggling with weak rule of law and weak institutions. This increases our collective insecurity in the region.

I understand that there is fatigue in Europe over prolonged democratic transformations.

People in my country are also tired of hearing about never ending reforms and failed attempts at better life for all. Genuine transformations require a strong political will. And this political will to reform is present in Moldova today. If we plant the seeds, we will provide for a better future for our children. And we could focus more on what really matters for our future: strengthening environmental and climate resilience, supporting digital transformation, enhancing connectivity and promoting fair and inclusive society – our common European priorities.

Today, my country needs help. The Moldovan people are determined to bring it back on track and make it work for them. The Moldovan people want to be able to say with pride, again - this is our state.

This may seem difficult to do. But Moldovans, as a people, can do and have done impossible things. We may be a young and fragile democracy, but we've always been a diverse, open, resourceful and fair nation. Despite previous setbacks, we can turn our fate around and make our country prosperous.

Where there is popular will, there is change. Where there is political will, there is genuine reform. It is time for Moldovans to have a decent life, at home. And we will achieve this together - as a nation, as a country. And as a family of nations, united in our desire for democracy and the rule of law here, in this key European fora - the Council of Europe.

Thank you.