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PRESIDENTIAL INSTITUTION IN PARLIAMENTARY REGIMES: BETWEEN CONSTITUTIONAL SYMBOLISM AND POLITICAL INFLUENCE

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Abstract. ***Esența acestui articol este analiza rolului instituției prezidențiale în conturarea traiectoriei politice și a strategiilor de securitate națională ale statelor. Alegerile prezidențiale reprezintă unul dintre cele mai critice momente din viața politică a țării, exercitând o influență profundă asupra direcției pe care o va urma în următorii ani. Într-un context global marcat de instabilitate, conflicte geopolitice și provocări de securitate emergente, fiecare schimbare în conducere are potențialul de a afecta în mod semnificativ atât politicile interne și relațiile externe — cu țările vecine, precum și partenerii de dezvoltare durabilă. Alegerea unui nou președinte devine un punct de cotitură pentru redefinirea strategiilor de securitate națională, cu consecințe directe asupra stabilității economice, sociale și politice. Cazurile Republicii Moldova, României şi Georgiei, în care alegerile prezidenţiale din ultimele decenii au declanşat schimbări majore în domeniul securităţii naţionale s-au reflectat în realinieri geopolitice, ajustări ale politicilor de apărare şi securitate internă, precum şi schimbări în orientarea politică. De exemplu, în Republica Moldova, alegerile din 2020 au marcat o schimbare strategică în relațiile externe și prioritățile de securitate națională, în timp ce în Georgia, influențele externe asupra procesului electoral au ridicat îngrijorări cu privire la suveranitatea statului și au expus vulnerabilități structurale în cadrul instituțiilor de securitate națională.***

Cuvinte cheie: *alegeri, democraţie, autoritate prezidenţială, securitate naţională*

Elections are a fundamental pillar of democracy, being the mechanism through which citizens delegate power to leaders, conferring legitimacy on state authority. Conceptually, elections are defined as institutionalized processes for selecting representatives through voting, based on principles of equality, transparency, competitiveness, and periodicity (Przeworski, 2010). They not only designate leaders, but also strengthen the social contract, reflecting the will of the people and influencing national security by setting strategic priorities. In transitional democracies, elections are crucial for legitimizing institutions, but vulnerable to manipulation, polarization, and external influences, which can destabilize the state. These risks are amplified in tense geopolitical contexts, where elections can become targets of hybrid warfare, including disinformation and external interventions (Kaldor, 2018).

Currently, free elections are considered the foundation of functional democracy, but in transitional democracies, such as the Republic of Moldova, they are exposed to the risks of fraud, disinformation, and external influence. For example, the 2020 presidential elections in Moldova strengthened the pro-European vector but amplified geopolitical divisions, affecting national security through internal tensions and Russian pressure

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(OSCE, 2020). In Georgia, the 2018 election reinforced the pro-NATO orientation but sparked protests over allegations of irregularities (Jones, 2018). In Ukraine, the 2004 elections (Orange Revolution) highlighted the risks of instability when electoral processes are contested, affecting regional security. These examples underscore the role of elections as a strategic mechanism that shapes not only leadership but also state resilience. (Figure 1)

The presidential institution: origin, roles, and dynamics

The presidential institution structures executive power, varying according to the political regime and historical context. Conceptually, the presidency is defined as an institution that performs roles of representation, mediation, and strategic decision-making, influencing national security through foreign policy, defense, and crisis management (Duverger, 1980). Unlike monarchies, which derive their legitimacy from tradition, presidents are elected, which gives them direct accountability to citizens. However, according to Linz, presidential systems can generate instability due to conflicts between the president and the legislature, especially in fragile democracies, where the lack of a clear dispute resolution mechanism can lead to constitutional crises. In contrast, semi-presidential systems, through the cohabitation of the president and prime minister, can offer flexibility, but also risks of „executive duality" in polarized contexts (Making Presidentialism Work, 2008).

The modern origins of the institution appear in the United States, where the 1787 Constitution created a presidential model characterized by the indirect election of the president (through the Electoral College) and extensive executive powers, balanced by the separation of powers. The American president simultaneously fulfills the roles of head of state and head of government, with significant powers in foreign policy and command of the armed forces (Shugart & Carey, 1992). In Europe, France introduced the semi-presidential system through the Constitution of the Fifth Republic (1958), in which the directly elected president has major powers in defense and diplomacy, cohabiting with a prime minister who is accountable to parliament. This model has influenced post-communist states such as Romania and Poland, offering flexibility in volatile political contexts (Protsyk, 2005). However, in states with democracies in transition, semi-presidential systems can generate tensions between the president and parliament, especially when there are ideological or geopolitical divides.

In parliamentary regimes, such as Germany or the Republic of Moldova, the president has a symbolic role, guaranteeing respect for the Constitution, mediating between institutions, and representing national unity. In Moldova, the president has limited powers, such as appointing the prime minister or dissolving parliament, which are subject to constitutional control (Ilie, 2015). However, their symbolic and geopolitical influence can be significant, as in the case of Maia Sandu (2020), who promoted pro-European reforms, influencing national security (Hale, 2017). In contrast, in Latin American presidential systems, presidents have extensive powers but are prone to authoritarian tendencies, especially in the absence of effective control institutions. (Figure 2)

The evolution of the presidential institution has been marked by several factors:

- American constitutionalism: It established the president as the dominant executive leader, a model adopted in Latin American presidential democracies

(Mainwaring, 1993). However, Linz warns that this model can lead to „hyper-presidentialism" in states with weak institutions, generating instability.

- The French semi-presidential model: This provided a balance between the president and parliament, adaptable in democratic transitions (Elgie, 1995). Its advantage lies in its flexibility to balance executive power, but it can create conflicts in cohabitation with a prime minister of a different political orientation.
- The post-communist context: After 1989, states such as Romania, Poland, and Ukraine adopted semi-presidential systems to prevent authoritarianism, but this generated institutional tensions, as in the crisis in Moldova (2019) (Stan, 2013). Direct election of the president in these states enhances legitimacy but can lead to conflicts with parliament (ConstitutionNet, 2019).
- Cultural influence: In states with monarchical traditions (e.g., Germany), the president has taken on symbolic roles, while in new democracies, such as Moldova, his role is more dynamic, influenced by geopolitical divisions (Nodia, 2021).

In transitional democracies, the presidential institution plays a dual role: strategic, through security decisions, and symbolic, by reducing polarization. For example, in Romania, the president coordinates national security through the Supreme Council for National Defense, strengthening NATO partnerships. In Georgia, pro-Western presidents have strengthened security through Euro-Atlantic integration, but have drawn Russian reactions. In Moldova, constitutional limitations are offset by the president's influence in geopolitical orientation, as in the 2020 election.

In Ukraine, the election of Volodymyr Zelensky (2019) demonstrated the presidency's ability to mobilize international support in crisis contexts (Wilson, 2020). However, the risk of authoritarian drift in presidential systems remains high, especially in states with fragile democracies.

Comparative study of the presidential institution in the Republic of Moldova, Romania, and Georgia

The presidential institution plays an essential role in transitional democracies, influencing national security, foreign policy, and political stability. In the Republic of Moldova, Romania, and Georgia, this institution operates in distinct constitutional and political contexts, determined by the type of political regime, the constitutional powers of the president, and the dynamics of relations with other state institutions. This subchapter provides a comparative analysis of the political regime of each state, the powers of the president in key areas (national security, foreign policy, commander-in-chief of the armed forces), the methods of election, the length of the term of office, inter-institutional relations, and the effective role of the president in crisis prevention and ensuring national stability.

Priority is given to the Republic of Moldova, followed by Romania and Georgia, to reflect regional relevance and specific challenges. We note that the Republic of Moldova is classified here as having a parliamentary regime, Romania a semi-presidential regime, and Georgia a parliamentary regime.

Overview of the political regime in each state

The Republic of Moldova functions as a parliamentary republic, according to the 1994 Constitution, with significant changes over time. In this system, Parliament plays the leading role in the legislative process and in forming the Government, and the Prime

Minister exercises dominant executive power. The president has largely symbolic powers, but his direct election, reinstated by a 2016 Constitutional Court decision (after being elected by Parliament between 2000 and 2016), gives him significant legitimacy and an influential role in foreign policy and security.

Moldova's parliamentary system is marked by political instability due to the polarization between pro-Russian and pro-European forces, frequent cohabitation between the president and an opposing parliamentary majority, and oligarchic influence, which limits the effectiveness of institutions. (Constitution of the Republic of Moldova (1994).

Romania operates under a semi-presidential system, according to the 1991 Constitution, revised in 2003. In this system, executive power is divided between the president and the prime minister, and Parliament holds the primary legislative role. The president has significant executive powers in foreign policy, national security, and command of the armed forces, but his domestic influence is limited by Parliament and the Government, which leads to the system being described as a „mitigated" semi-presidentialism. Cohabitation between the president and a parliamentary majority of a different political orientation, as in 2012-2014, can generate tensions, but Romania's membership in NATO and the EU stabilizes the political system, reducing the risk of major crises. (Constitution of Romania (2003).

Georgia functions as a parliamentary republic, according to the 2013 constitutional reform, which was finalized in 2018. In this system, executive power is concentrated in the hands of the prime minister and parliament, and the president has a predominantly ceremonial role, with limited powers in domestic policy, security, and foreign policy. The election of the president has been changed: since 2018, the president is elected by an electoral college, not by popular vote, which reduces his or her direct legitimacy. Georgia's parliamentary system, although designed to prevent the concentration of power, is vulnerable to instability due to political polarization and external influences, particularly from Russia, in the context of the conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. (Constitution of Georgia (2018).

Constitutional powers of the president

National security

Republic of Moldova: According to Article 77 of the Constitution, the president is the guarantor of sovereignty, independence, and national security. He chairs the Supreme Security Council, coordinates defense strategies, and can declare a state of emergency with the approval of Parliament. However, in a parliamentary system, his influence is limited by the power of the prime minister and limited financial resources, and the presence of Russian troops in Transnistria complicates security management.

Romania: The president is the guarantor of independence and territorial integrity, according to Article 80 of the Constitution. He chairs the Supreme Council for National Defense (CSAT), approves the national security strategy, and can mobilize the armed forces with the consent of Parliament. Membership in NATO and the EU amplifies this role, allowing for coordination with international allies, as in the context of the war in Ukraine (2022).

Georgia: In the parliamentary system, the president has a symbolic role in security, according to the 2018 Constitution. He represents the state in defense matters, but strate-

gic decisions are made by the prime minister and Parliament. His influence is minimal, especially in managing the separatist conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

Foreign policy

Republic of Moldova: The president has powers in foreign policy, according to Article 86, representing the state in international relations, negotiating treaties, and appointing ambassadors, with the approval of Parliament. However, in a parliamentary system, his influence is limited, especially when his political views differ from those of the parliamentary majority. One example is Igor Dodon (2016–2020), who promoted close relations with Russia, while Parliament was dominated by pro-European forces.

Romania: The president plays a dominant role in foreign policy (Article 91), representing the state, signing treaties, and appointing ambassadors, in consultation with Parliament. Membership in NATO and the EU reinforces this role, allowing presidents such as Klaus Iohannis to strengthen partnerships with the US and the EU.

Georgia: The president represents the state in foreign relations, but his powers have been symbolic since 2018. The prime minister and Parliament define foreign policy, reducing the president's role to that of a ceremonial representative. However, presidents such as Salome Zourabichvili have symbolically influenced Euro-Atlantic aspirations.

Commander of the armed forces

Republic of Moldova: The president is the supreme commander of the armed forces (Article 87), but decisions on the mobilization or use of the army require parliamentary approval. Limited military capacity and the presence of Russian troops in Transnistria reduce the president's effective influence in this area.

Romania: The president is the supreme commander of the armed forces (Article 92), with powers to mobilize the army and declare a state of emergency, under parliamentary control. Cooperation with NATO strengthens this role, allowing for effective military coordination, as in the Black Sea exercises.

Georgia: The president has a symbolic role in commanding the armed forces, with effective decisions being made by the prime minister and the Ministry of Defense. The 2018 reform reduced the president's military powers, limiting his influence in managing separatist conflicts.

Similarities and differences between the three states

Method of electing the president

Republic of Moldova: The president has been elected by direct popular vote in two rounds since 2016, after being elected by Parliament between 2000 and 2016. This system confers legitimacy but amplifies polarization, as in the 2016 (Igor Dodon) and 2020 (Maia Sandu) elections.

Romania: The president is elected by direct popular vote in two rounds, according to the 1991 Constitution. This system ensures strong legitimacy, as in the case of Klaus Iohannis' elections (2014, 2019), but can generate tensions in cohabitation.

Georgia: Since 2018, the president has been elected by an electoral college of 300 members (parliamentarians, regional and local representatives), not by popular vote. This change, applied to the election of Salome Zourabichvili, reduces the direct legitimacy and influence of the president.

Similarities: Moldova and Romania use direct popular vote, ensuring legitimacy. Georgia differs in its indirect election, aligned with the parliamentary system.

Differences: Direct election in Moldova and Romania contrasts with the indirect system in Georgia, reflecting the symbolic role of the Georgian president.

Term of office

Republic of Moldova: The presidential term is four years, with the possibility of a single consecutive re-election (Article 80). This short term limits continuity but prevents the concentration of power.

Romania: The term of office is five years, with the possibility of a single consecutive re-election (Article 81). The longer term allows for stability, but cohabitation can lead to conflict, as in 2012.

Georgia: The term of office is five years, with no possibility of re-election, since 2018. This limitation reduces the president's long-term influence, aligning with his ceremonial role.

Similarities: All three countries limit terms of office to prevent authoritarianism.

Differences: The shorter term in Moldova (4 years) contrasts with the 5-year terms in Romania and Georgia. Georgia eliminates re-election, unlike the other two.

Relationship between the president and other state institutions

Republic of Moldova: In the parliamentary system, the president plays a secondary role to the parliament and government. However, he or she can dissolve parliament in the event of a deadlock (Article 85), as in 2021, when Maia Sandu dissolved parliament after conflicts with the pro-Russian majority. The Constitutional Court plays a decisive role in arbitration, validating such decisions, but this generates political tensions. Relations are often tense, especially in cohabitation.

Romania: The president works with Parliament and the government, but cohabitation leads to conflicts, like between Traian Băsescu and Prime Minister Victor Ponta (2012-2014). The president appoints the prime minister, but Parliament approves the government (Article 85). The Constitutional Court mediates disputes, ensuring balance, as in the 2012 crisis.

Georgia: The president has limited influence over Parliament and the Government due to the parliamentary system. Relations are less conflictual, but the president has a symbolic role, with limited powers of veto or initiative. The Constitutional Court plays a minor role in interinstitutional relations, with Parliament being dominant.

Similarities: The Constitutional Court mediates inter-institutional conflicts in all three countries. Cohabitation generates tensions in Moldova and Romania.

Differences: The President of Romania has greater executive powers than in Moldova and Georgia, where Parliament dominates. Moldova has a more volatile system, with frequent dissolutions of Parliament.

The effective role of the president in preventing crises and ensuring national stability

In Moldova's parliamentary system, the president plays an important but limited role in preventing crises, due to the legitimacy conferred by direct vote and powers in security and foreign policy. Maia Sandu (2020-present) managed the 2021 energy crisis by negotiating with the EU for financial assistance and diversifying energy sources,

reducing dependence on Russia. In 2021, the dissolution of Parliament ended a political deadlock, allowing the formation of a pro-European government, which stabilized the political scene. However, the influence of oligarchs, corruption, and polarization limit the president's ability to prevent systemic crises. In 2016, Igor Dodon amplified tensions with pro-Russian rhetoric, weakening national cohesion and complicating security, especially in the context of Transnistria.

In Romania's semi-presidential system, the president plays a significant role in ensuring stability, thanks to his influence in security and foreign policy. Klaus Iohannis (2014-present) managed the political crisis of 2015, following the resignation of Prime Minister Victor Ponta, by appointing a technocratic government that stabilized the country. In the context of the war in Ukraine (2022), Iohannis coordinated through CSAT the strengthening of NATO's presence in Romania, consolidating national security. Traian Băsescu (2004-2014) prevented crises by joining NATO and the EU, which provided economic and military stability. However, cohabitation generated conflicts, such as in 2012, when Băsescu's suspension caused temporary instability, which was resolved through the intervention of the Constitutional Court.

In Georgia's parliamentary system, the president's role in crisis prevention is limited to symbolic powers. Salome Zourabichvili (2018-present) has had a symbolic impact, promoting Euro-Atlantic integration and national dialogue to reduce polarization. However, her limited powers have constrained her ability to manage major crises, such as the 2018 post-election protests. In contrast, Mikheil Saakashvili (2004–2013), under the former semi-presidential regime, played an active role, managing reforms and the 2008 crisis, but his aggressive policy contributed to the war with Russia, affecting stability. The Georgian president depends on the prime minister and parliament, which reduces his direct impact.

Similarities: Presidents contribute to stability by representing the state and managing crises, but success depends on legitimacy and the political context. National security is a common priority.

Differences: The Romanian president has a more active role due to the semi-presidential system, while in Moldova and Georgia influence is limited by the parliamentary system. Moldova is more vulnerable to internal crises, Romania benefits from NATO/EU stability, and Georgia depends on the prime minister. (Figure 9)

The presidential institution in the Republic of Moldova, Romania, and Georgia reflects the specifics of democracies in transition, with varied roles determined by the political system. Moldova, with a parliamentary system, gives the president an influential role, but one that is limited by cohabitation and internal vulnerabilities. Romania, under a semi-presidential regime, grants the president extensive executive powers, amplified by NATO and the EU. Georgia, with a parliamentary regime, reduces the president to a symbolic role, dependent on the prime minister. Direct elections in Moldova and Romania enhance legitimacy, unlike the indirect system in Georgia. Interinstitutional relations are tense in Moldova and Romania, but stable in Georgia due to the president's reduced powers. Presidents play a key role in crisis prevention, but their success depends on constitutional powers, institutional support, and the geopolitical context. In a region marked by tensions, the presidential institution remains a decisive factor for national security and stability.

By exploring in depth, the particularities of presidential elections and the role of the presidential institution in transitional democracies, with a focus on the Republic of Moldova, Romania, and Georgia, we have highlighted the influence of these elements on national security. The analysis revealed that the presidential institution, through its constitutional powers, the legitimacy derived from electoral processes, and its ability to respond to internal and external challenges, plays an essential role in shaping political stability, geopolitical orientation, and state resilience. In transitional democracies, where institutions are fragile and the geopolitical context is marked by tensions, presidential elections not only designate a leader but also define the strategic trajectory of the state, influencing national security through a delicate balance between legitimacy, power, and international cooperation. The comparison between the three states offers valuable lessons for strengthening democracy and security, especially for the Republic of Moldova, whose vulnerable position between Russian influences and Euro-Atlantic aspirations amplifies the relevance of this study.

In the Republic of Moldova, the parliamentary system limits the powers of the president, who, according to the Constitution, acts as the guarantor of national sovereignty and security, chairs the Supreme Security Council, and contributes to foreign policy. The restoration of direct elections in 2016 gave the president increased legitimacy, allowing for the mobilization of public support for reforms, as Maia Sandu demonstrated in her handling of the 2021 energy crisis and in attracting financial assistance from the European Union. However, frequent cohabitation between the presidency and parliament, combined with challenges such as systemic corruption, polarization between pro-Russian and pro-European vectors, and the presence of Russian troops in Transnistria, reduces the president's ability to decisively influence national security. These limitations underscore the need for leadership capable of navigating geopolitical tensions and strengthening democratic institutions, drawing inspiration from the experiences of other states. For example, an active civil society that monitors electoral processes and international dialogue, supported by organizations such as the OSCE, have contributed to strengthening electoral transparency, providing Moldova with a basis for reform. In a context marked by the war in Ukraine, which amplifies regional risks, the role of the president as a unifier becomes crucial in reducing polarization and attracting external support.

Romania, with its semi-presidential system, illustrates a more robust approach to the presidential institution in national security, due to its extensive powers and integration into NATO and EU structures. The president, as guarantor of independence and territorial integrity, coordinates defense policies through the Supreme Council for National Defense and represents the state in international relations. Under Klaus Iohannis's mandate, Romania has strengthened its security by allocating 2% of GDP to defense and hosting NATO troops, particularly in the context of the conflict in Ukraine. Membership in international alliances provides a stable framework that compensates for occasional tensions generated by cohabitation, such as those in 2012-2014. The Constitutional Court plays an essential role in mediating inter-institutional conflicts, preventing crises from escalating and providing a model applicable to other democracies in transition. Anti-corruption reforms, supported by institutions such as the National Anti-Corruption Directorate, have strengthened the legitimacy of institutions, reducing internal vulner-

abilities. Romania's experience demonstrates that an active president, supported by international alliances and robust judicial mechanisms, can amplify national resilience, providing Moldova with an example of strategic integration and institutional reform.

In Georgia, the parliamentary regime consolidated by the 2018 reform transformed the presidency into a predominantly symbolic institution with limited influence on national security. President Salome Zourabichvili has promoted Euro-Atlantic aspirations, but major decisions are made by the prime minister and parliament, reducing her ability to manage challenges such as the conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Indirect election by an electoral college diminishes the president's legitimacy, limiting her role in mobilising the public or preventing crises, as seen in the 2018 post-election protests. However, Georgia compensates for these limitations through international support from the EU and the US, which support security and democratic reforms. Georgian civil society, through organizations such as Transparency International, has played a crucial role in countering disinformation and corruption, providing a model for Moldova, where external propaganda amplifies electoral tensions. Georgia's experience highlights the importance of external partnerships and civil society in strengthening security, even in the absence of a president with extensive powers, suggesting that Moldova could adopt similar strategies to counter Russian influences.

The comparative analysis highlights that national security in transitional democracies depends on a balance between electoral legitimacy, the constitutional powers of the president, and the ability to counter challenges such as corruption, disinformation, and external influences. In the Republic of Moldova, direct election increases the president's influence, but the parliamentary system and polarization limit his effectiveness, in contrast to Romania, where NATO and EU membership amplify the president's role in security. Georgia, with a symbolic president, demonstrates that a parliamentary system can ensure stability through institutional balance, but requires external support to compensate for the lack of direct electoral legitimacy. All three states face common threats, but their intensity varies: Moldova is exposed to geopolitical risks due to Transnistria and energy dependence, Georgia manages secessionist conflicts, and Romania benefits from a more stable context due to Euro-Atlantic integration. These differences underscore the need for tailored strategies that combine electoral legitimacy, institutional reforms, and international partnerships to strengthen national security.

For the Republic of Moldova, the comparison with Romania and Georgia offers practical lessons for strengthening the national security system. The direct election of the president, reinstated in 2016, provides an advantage similar to that in Romania, allowing for the mobilization of public support for reforms, but intense polarization requires civic education campaigns inspired by the efforts of Georgian civil society. Romania demonstrates that integration into international structures amplifies the president's influence in security, a model partially applicable to Moldova by intensifying partnerships with the EU, as Georgia has done. Combating corruption and disinformation, effective in Romania through judicial reforms and in Georgia through civic activism, is essential for Moldova, where foreign propaganda influenced the 2016 and 2020 elections. Economic diversification, inspired by Georgia's experience after Russian embargoes, and attracting EU funds, as in the case of the assistance plan for Moldova (2021-2024), can reduce

energy dependence. Managing interinstitutional relations, with the Constitutional Court playing an active role as mediator, as is the practice in Romania, could prevent crises caused by cohabitation in Moldova. In the context of the war in Ukraine, which amplifies regional risks, strengthening the role of the president as a unifier and intensifying international cooperation are priorities for Moldova's resilience.

The presidential institution is a central pillar of national security in transitional democracies, influencing stability through its electoral legitimacy, constitutional powers, and ability to respond to geopolitical challenges. In Moldova, the parliamentary system limits the president's influence, but her direct legitimacy provides opportunities for reform, in contrast to Romania, where a semi-presidential system and international alliances enhance security. Georgia illustrates the limitations of a symbolic president but highlights the role of civil society and external support. The lessons learned—the importance of electoral transparency, anti-corruption reforms, international integration, institutional mediation, and economic diversification—are essential for Moldova, which must navigate a complex geopolitical context. By adopting practices inspired by Romania and Georgia, the Republic of Moldova can strengthen national security, reinforcing democracy and resilience in the face of internal and external threats, especially in the context of current regional uncertainties.

In parliamentary regimes, the presidential institution is often perceived as a decorative or symbolic element, intended to reflect national unity, state continuity, and respect for constitutional norms. This perception stems from the formal distribution of power, in which the Parliament and the Government concentrate political decision-making. However, political reality shows that the constitutional symbolism of the president can take on influential dimensions, especially in the context of democracies in transition, where popular legitimacy, image capital, and the geopolitical context amplify the informal role of the head of state.

In the Republic of Moldova, although the president has limited powers under the Constitution, direct elections, proactive political discourse, and a favorable international context have allowed for the consolidation of informal influence, particularly on the foreign agenda and structural reforms. Maia Sandu is an eloquent example of a „symbolic president with political impact," particularly in crisis management and pro-European orientation.

In Georgia, after the 2018 constitutional reform, the role of the president was deliberately reduced to eliminate competition with the prime minister. However, even in this context, the presidential figure can become a pole of geopolitical symbolism, especially in relation to Western partners, retaining an influence of image and public diplomacy.

In contrast, Romania offers a hybrid example: although it has a semi-presidential regime, tensions between symbolism and influence are evident in periods of cohabitation. The president remains an actor with extensive formal powers, but his degree of effective political influence is conditioned by the parliamentary configuration and the domestic political context.

The comparative study can be extended with examples from other parliamentary regimes: in Austria, the president has a limited constitutional role, but figures such as Thomas Klestil and Alexander Van der Bellen have used the moral authority of the office

to intervene in political crises and protect constitutional democracy. In Israel, the president has a clearly symbolic role, but acts as a mediator in the formation of governments, especially in periods of parliamentary fragmentation. In India, although the president is elected indirectly, his influence increases in times of instability, when he has the power to appoint the prime minister or dissolve parliament on the latter's recommendation.

Thus, the presidential institution in parliamentary regimes is not a mere symbol, but a contextualized strategic actor whose influence varies depending on: the legitimacy conferred by popular vote (or lack thereof), the degree of cohabitation, the ability to articulate a coherent geopolitical discourse, and the support of civil society and international actors.

The analysis presented in the article demonstrates that the presidential institution, even in parliamentary regimes, sometimes goes beyond the limits of constitutional symbolism, becoming an influential political actor in shaping the national agenda, managing crises, and promoting strategic directions. The tension between symbolic function and political influence defines a field of negotiation between constitutional norms and political realities.

In the Republic of Moldova, this dynamic is evident in the gap between the reduced formal powers and the amplified informal role of the directly elected president. In Romania, the semi-presidential model legitimizes the president's extensive influence, but exposes the system to inter-institutional tensions during periods of cohabitation. Georgia, on the other hand, deliberately opts for a symbolic president, but this does not completely eliminate his ability to articulate strategic messages at national and international level.

Austria, India, and Israel confirm the hypothesis that presidential symbolism can coexist with discreet but effective influence in times of crisis or transition. The common lesson is that the power of the president in a parliamentary regime does not derive exclusively from formal powers, but from context, personality, and the ability to build consensus.

This ambivalence between symbolism and influence defines the nature of the presidential institution in parliamentary regimes in Eastern Europe and beyond, offering valuable lessons for constitutional reform, democratic consolidation, and the balance of powers. In particular, the Republic of Moldova can benefit from this theoretical reflection, identifying the legitimate spaces in which the president, without exceeding constitutional limits, can become a vector of stability, modernization, and European integration.

A relevant example in the Republic of Moldova is the post-election period of 2020, when President Maia Sandu was elected with a strong popular mandate, although her formal powers were limited within the parliamentary system. She used the legitimacy gained through direct vote to call for early elections, challenging the deadlock in Parliament and actively contributing to its dissolution. Her actions highlighted how the symbolism of the presidential institution can be transformed into a major factor of political influence in a context of institutional crisis.

In Romania, the suspension of President Traian Băsescu in 2007 and again in 2012 illustrates how the presidential institution can become a pole of power, directly confronting the parliamentary majority. These episodes demonstrated that the president can mobilize public opinion and influence the national political agenda even in the face of impeachment proceedings.

In Georgia, Salome Zurabishvili was involved in the process of pardoning key opposition figures and in speeches of national reconciliation, using the presidential position to mediate political conflicts at a time when tensions between the government and the opposition were acute.

In Austria, President Alexander Van der Bellen played an active role in the 2019 government crisis (the ‚Ibiza affair'), when, after the chancellor's resignation, he contributed decisively to the formation of a transitional government and the preservation of constitutional stability. Although his formal powers were limited, his symbolic authority was transformed into an instrument of political stabilization.

In India, President Abdul Kalam (2002–2007), although in a largely symbolic position, refused to approve a controversial piece of legislation, citing ethical and constitutional reasons. Although he did not definitively block the law, his gesture reignited a major public debate and demonstrated the potential of presidential moral influence.

In Israel in 2021, President Reuven Rivlin played a key role in consultations on the formation of a government after repeated elections without a clear result. Through his decisions on the nomination of the prime minister-designate, he influenced the political balance, despite a role traditionally considered symbolic.

Conclusions

Comparative analysis shows that presidential elections and the presidential institution in transitional democracies play a decisive role in shaping national security, geopolitical orientation, and political stability. In the Republic of Moldova, direct presidential elections, reintroduced in 2016, have strengthened the legitimacy of the office, but have also deepened political polarization. To protect its security, Moldova must prioritize anti-corruption reforms, energy diversification, and European integration. In Romania, the semi-presidential system, combined with membership in NATO and the European Union, provides a solid security framework. Romania's experience shows how international integration and judicial reforms can strengthen the resilience of the state. In Georgia, despite the rather symbolic role of the presidency, civil society activism and strategic partnerships with the EU and the US play a key role in countering Russian influence.

Ultimately, presidential elections are more than just political milestones—they are strategic moments that define a state's security posture, institutional strength, and geopolitical trajectory. For the Republic of Moldova, the lessons learned from Romania's integration model and Georgia's civic mobilization offer valuable strategies for strengthening democracy and national security in a regional context marked by growing instability.

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