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SUSTAINABLE LEADERSHIP IN TIMES OF CRISIS- A CASE OF LEADING ONE’S NATION DURING THE UKRAINIAN WAR

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Abstract. This paper analyzes a unique leader during unique times to determine the applicability of the Cambridge Sustainability Leadership Model of a public servant during wartime in a neighboring country with significant in-country impact. Specifically, public information sources concerning the President of the Republic of Moldova, Maia Sandu, from when she was installed as President on 24 December 2020 until 30 September 2022 have been selected to illustrate the various components of the model, especially since 24 February 2022 when Russia invaded Ukraine. The authors elaborate on the context, both external and internal, in which she governs and guides this developing nation; her leadership traits, styles, skills, and knowledge; and the internal and external actions she has taken. Conclusions regarding how well the Cambridge Model fits this leadership case and suggestions for further research are also made.

Keywords: *Cambridge Sustainability Leadership Model, Characteristics, Leadership Actions, Personality, Maia Sandu, Public Service, Stakeholders, UNDP Sustainability Goals*

JEL Classification: *D72, D73, D74, D 81*

“A sustainability leader is someone who inspires and supports action towards a better world [1].”

As early as 1840 when Carlyle published his Great Man theory [2] researchers have been trying to determine what makes a good leader. Many theories about leadership traits, characteristics, behaviors, and context have been developed since then and have been studied from a variety of viewpoints. These studies were driven primarily by the need for corporations to succeed and to have leaders who will help them do so. As corporations expanded markets, financing, and operations overseas, they began to realize their success was more dependent on the sustainability of the global environment, not just the local one. From a community of nations perspective, the United Nations in 2015 addressed the need for a healthy world by adopting 17 Sustainable Goals of Development (SDGs). It was “a universal call to action to end poverty, protect the planet, and ensure that by 2030 all people enjoy peace and prosperity [3].” Many corporations and governments began to address these goals in their strategic planning and scholars began to study what is sustainable leadership [1,4]. Now the important question is how can we choose or develop sustainable leaders who will succeed when faced with today’s global problems?

The purpose of this paper is to provide some insight into this question by analyzing the elected leader of Moldova, President Maia Sandu, who assumed office on the 24th of December 2020. Soon after her election, she was faced by the COVID-19 global epidemic and 14 months later her country’s neighbor and minor trading partner, the Ukraine, was invaded by Russia on February 24, 2022. Leading a developing country through two crises in two years provides us with the unique opportunity to better understand the complex nature of sustainable leadership; the war period is the primary focus of the analysis.

Study Framework. The Cambridge Sustainability Model (Figure 1) designed by Visser and Courtice [1] using both leadership theory and practices of sustainability by leaders, primarily CEOs, provides the framework for this study. The primary differences in this study as opposed to the original formulation are:

- The leader is a single case study
- The leader is a government official

- The time frame is limited: February 24 to October 24, 2022
- Press releases of the Moldovan government [5] and Maia Sandu’s Facebook [6] page serve as primary data sources rather than CEO interviews

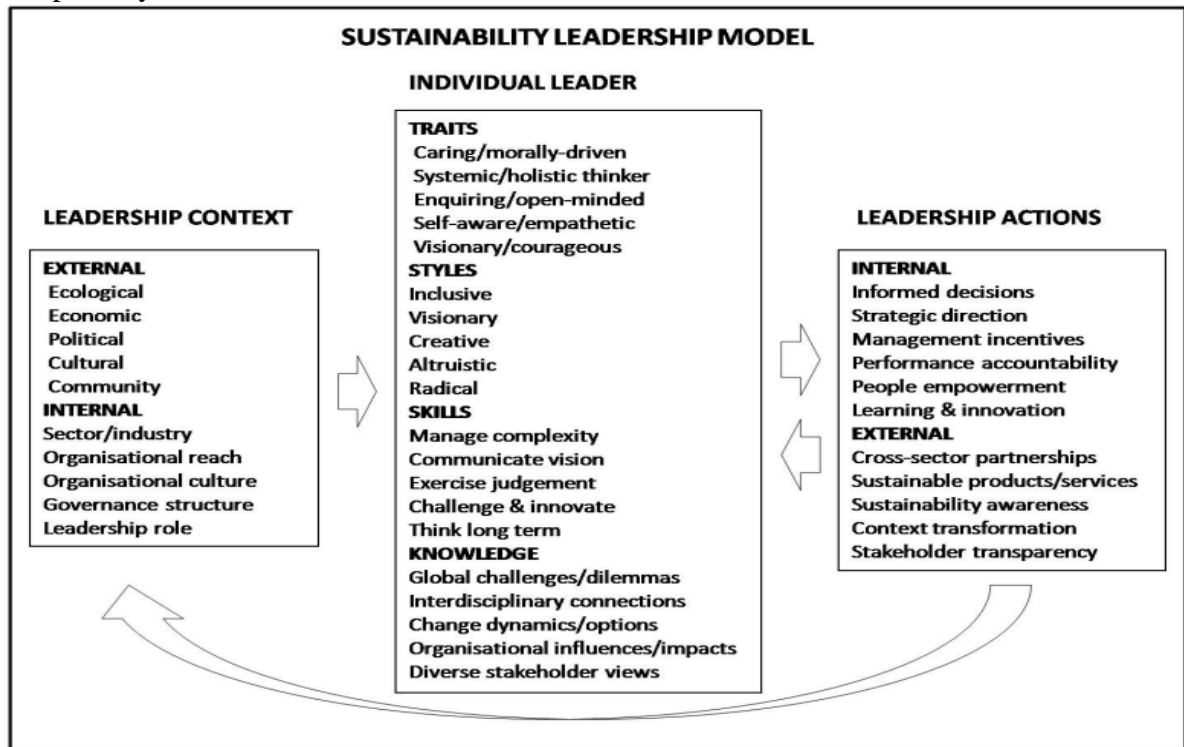


Figure 1: The Cambridge Sustainability Leadership Model [1]

Leadership Context. Prior to the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the Republic of Moldova was that of a developing nation, the second poorest in Europe based on GDP per capita. It is a small country both in physical size (33,851 km²) and in 2021 a population of 2,604,000 [7]. It is a former Soviet country that gained its independence in 1991 and includes a self-proclaimed state on the Ukrainian border, Transnistria, that is currently occupied by Russian troops. It is bordered on three sides by Ukraine and by Romania on the fourth. Its culture is primarily Romanian based and Orthodox Christian is its major religion.

Moldova is governed as a unicameral parliamentary republic with two females in leadership positions: President Maia Sandu as head of state and Natalia Gavrilița serving as Prime Minister. Both of these women are pro-Western and members of the same party, the Party of Action and Solidarity (PAS) founded by Madame Sandu in 2016. The parliament has 101 seats and members are elected every four years by popular vote from various parties.

Moldova is a member of the United Nations, World Trade Organization, and various other regional and international organizations. It receives financial aid from several different countries and development organizations and over 16.1% of their GDP are attributed to remittances from Moldovans working abroad.

Analysis. It is the shift in Leadership Context that provides the uniqueness to this situation. From the Ukraine invasion to now, there has been a dramatic shift in almost every External Context aspect; for example:

Ecological: Sense of security is threatened by noises of war and increased refugee population. Speaking at the United Nations on September 21, 2022, President Sandu said, “At the peak of the influx, our country’s population grew by 4 per cent. About 80,000 [of those] refugees have chosen to stay with us. [5]”

Economic: Russia was a significant supplier to and purchaser of goods from Moldova. The most critical of these was its supply of energy, especially gas, which had been threatened previously. Within the country, the primary supplier of electricity was in Transnistria, the Russian-controlled area. Besides the obvious supply disruptions, the transportation of goods to and from different sources

had to be accounted for with new routes and foreign government permissions and special allowances for tariff payments.

Political. New alliances had to be forged and old ones strengthened to provide security and funding for increased burdens. In some ways, Moldova, a non-NATO country, became a country of great interest to many Western nations. President Sandu met with many, if not all, presidents, development heads, and foreign ministers of Europe, the US, and Canada during the last seven months, including Zelensky, the President of Ukraine. Along with the Ukraine, the European Union awarded both nations Candidate Status on June 23, 2022 [5].

Cultural. While little changed in this dimension except for accommodating and addressing the refugees' culture, it was Moldova's culture of hospitality [8] that seemed to increase the respect of other nations as it struggled with the dramatic influx of over 450,000 refugees crossing its borders [9] or about one refugee for every 5.79 Moldovan citizens. From the beginning new social enterprises were established to help Ukrainians meet their basic needs and help them succeed in their new homes.

Communities. With the influx of refugees even the rural communities began to feel the effect. They could see the aid and assistance that was coming to the Ukrainians, but they were in need also. President Sandu started conducting community hall meetings and visiting various towns to assure her citizenry that they were not being forgotten either then or in the long run. Funding and essential supplies, such as food, medicine, hygiene products, clothing, and even toys for the refugee children came from other countries and NGOs. President Sandu made sure that the distribution of these supplies was handled in an orderly fashion and supplied to all parts of Moldova, not just Chisinau. Other communities in educational, social, and cultural institutions were recognized and thanked by President Sandu for their contributions in assisting the refugees. Some of these organizations were newly formed or refocused their activities to assist the new challenges.

Individual Leader. The dimensions of leadership traits, styles, skills, and knowledge can be observed through behavior, press statements, public speaking engagements, social media, and biographical material. The interaction among these items and their relationship and consistency with their actions is complex. The discussion below are a few examples that illustrate who the authors think Madam President is; the discussion in the following section "Leadership Actions" illustrates how she behaves. This is arbitrary on our part, but it is like saying, "She talks the talk, but does she walk the walk?"

Analysis. The authors, both professors of management, have been significantly impressed by the leadership shown by Madam President. Examples per model categories include:

Traits. Maia Sandu appears to be a compassionate and caring individual as is shown in pictures of her greeting children, elders, refugees, and veterans, often with a hug or a bunch of flowers and a smile. Foremost seems to be her love and pride for her country and her vision that Moldova can overcome corruptive practices of the past and embrace its role as a developed nation in Europe. She is 50 years old, slim, and only 5ft 2in (157 cm) with a very strong character and determined to accomplish her goals. For example, she gained her presidency when she won a difficult election and was supported by many of the citizens of Moldova to become the first female president of the country. Her opponent was pro-Russian candidate Dodon who had tremendous support from the Russian intelligence service.

Her conduct at town hall meetings indicates that she truly wants to know what her citizens need and how they view their future. These personal traits are often appreciated as shown by comments following her posts. She is also very energetic and can be seen attending a community event(s) and meeting with foreign dignitaries and the press all on the same day. One post was about her meeting on August 15 with the famous Moldovan composer Eugene Doga and their discussion of the state of culture in the nation and the possibility of creating a center to inspire young artists in his name. There were over 650 comments and 348 shares. One comment from Carmen Casbai was "Does your day have 48 hours? You are everywhere, close to people... energy, mind, soul. All the admiration!"

Styles. Her leadership style might be considered visionary and inclusive, which seems to provide her with a sort of charismatic style. Her message is always that we can do better for our

country when aligned with the developed nations of Europe and follow the UNDP sustainability goals. Her citizens seem to appreciate that she is consistent in her messages, is respected by foreign dignitaries, and seems to treat all citizens as worthy of her attention.

Skills. President Sandu seems to possess the skills to manage the day-to-day demands of leading a nation while taking and making opportunities to push forward her agenda of joining the European Union and gradually raising the economic realities of her nation. She is very skilled in making high risk-decisions often within a very short time and with complex challenges. Her press releases show that she is able to negotiate with and gain support for her country, especially since the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Knowledge. She brings good academic credentials and past experiences in banking and public office to her role as President [10]. Her degrees include a bachelor’s degree in Management from the Academy of Economic Studies of Moldova, a Master’s degree in International Relations from the Academy of Public Administration in Chisinau, and a Master of Public Policy from the Kennedy School of Public Administration at Harvard University (USA). For two years she was employed as an Adviser to the Executive Director of the World Bank in Washington DC (USA) leaving when she was asked to become the Minister of Education for the Republic of Moldova in July of 2012. Prior to becoming President, she was a member of the Moldovan Parliament and served briefly as Prime Minister.

Leadership Actions. For this dimension, the analysis used the “Internal” designation to mean actions directly related to the citizens of Moldova and “External” to mean related to those beyond its borders. Example of such actions were taken from Madam President’s Facebook page and Press Releases from the Moldova Government website.

Internal. President Sandu actions: 1) Provide incentive through recognition of citizen accomplishments, such as honoring cultural figures, recognizing sports and academic achievements, and appreciating contributions made by local organizations who helped Ukrainians make the transition to new homes either in Moldova or elsewhere. 2) Empower people by working alongside them to accomplish national goals, such as planting trees and collecting acorns to assist in the reforestation objective. 3) Emphasize the importance of learning by making it one of the top national goals and recognizing academic achievement. 4) Contribute to strengthen the communities so that they can better face all the challenges threats to a peaceful and fruitful life under the mega crises of war and a global pandemic, and 5) Continue to stress the future direction or vision of the country through tv interviews, twitter, and Facebook accounts.

External. An example of Maia Sandu’s external action begins with the onset of the Russian invasion, when she quickly tweeted a statement shown in Figure 2. In two sentences, she clearly communicated the country’s position, why she condemns such action, and then commits her country’s neutrality and support. From that period forward she began working with various foreign decision-makers who would help Moldova accomplish those goals.



Figure 2. Maia Sandu’s Tweet at the onset of the Ukrainian invasion [11]

For example, later that day, she spoke with the President of the European Commission European to get agreement on the actions that would be taken to ensure the security of the citizens of

Moldova and help in managing the flow of refugees from Ukraine [10]. In the next seven days, she spoke or met with five presidents, the US Secretary of State, two prime ministers, the European Commissioner for Neighborhood and Enlargement, the Secretary General of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), and the UN Resident Coordinator for Moldova to ensure support for the country. As the refugee situation worsened, the focus changed more to garnering refugee support, and on March 4th, President Sandu talked with two additional prime ministers, another president, the French Prime Minister for Europe and Foreign Affairs, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, and the President of the European Parliament. When the opportunity arose to petition the European Union for Candidacy status her interaction with current members increased; once it was granted, she has continued meeting with foreign dignitaries and hosting them in Moldova.

Her success in building and maintaining partnerships is evident in her ability to get agreement for Moldova to be the host nation for the second summit of the newly formed European Political Community next spring. Approximately 44 leaders of European states and regions will meet to discuss mutual areas of interest.

Conclusions. Maia Sandu, the current President of Moldova, has shown many of the positive aspects of leadership pertinent to both the sustainability of her country and the world at large. Her strong character and persistent efforts show the citizens of Moldova that her vision can be their vision and they and other nations respond accordingly.

She has shown that 1) compassion, resoluteness, and acceptance of others coupled with 2) appropriate education, experience, and trust in others' opinions, 3) demonstrated through personal and collective action, and 4) establishing and promoting a vision of the future can make a country sustainable under times of hardship in the short-term. Only time will tell how successful her leadership is.

The Cambridge Sustainability Leadership Model provided a useful research tool by including a list of aspects to consider when analyzing a leader. It has underscored the complexity of the leadership task, especially when observing a leader during times of crisis. One of the aspects missing in this list and most leadership discussions, but very evident in Madam Sandu, is her energy level. Perhaps, an item that would encompass this aspect should be added under “Traits.” Also, the authors recommend that the Model be modified and elaborated upon for sustainable government leadership. For example, “Sustainable products/services” might be more appropriately listed as “Sustainable policies/infrastructure.”

The analysis of a sustainable leader in real time could not have been done without the mandate for transparency in government actions nor the media that assists in such exposure. Such a mandate is not common among corporate entities, and perhaps therefore, examining government leaders would allow for different insights.

Future Research. This study is primarily exploratory and further research is needed. President Sandu's speeches and social media posts could be analyzed as to frequency and chronology for many Individual Leader aspects and Leadership Actions. This might better illustrate the cause of the action and the personal aspects brought into solving the problem. Longitudinal studies would also be valuable beginning with her actions when she became Minister of Education in 2012 and continuing at regular intervals. Furthermore, similar studies could be conducted with other Presidents and Prime Ministers handling similar crises.

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