

## Moldova's Thirty-Year Search for Independence

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“Moldovans themselves will have to break the vicious cycle of underdevelopment by building horizontal structures of social cohesion with genuine forms of solidarity, trust, and participation.”

## Moldova’s Thirty-Year Search for Independence

PETRU NEGURĂ

August 27, 2021, marked the thirtieth anniversary of the Republic of Moldova’s independence since its secession from the Soviet Union. On such jubilee occasions, Moldovans wonder about the path their state has taken and where it is heading. Most believe that their country is going in the wrong direction, and trust in the judiciary and state institutions is low. Against this backdrop of dissatisfaction with the capacity and quality of government, citizens are more willing than ever to relinquish their nation’s sovereignty by joining it with another state or a federal structure: an increasing number of Moldovans say they would vote in a referendum for unification with Romania. (Between its incorporation in the Russian Empire and the USSR, what is now Moldova was part of Romania from 1918 to 1940.)

Nonetheless, every four years, even those who have spent many years living and working abroad show up at the polls and vote. Each time, voters are faced with a sharply defined choice: between East and West, between authoritarianism and democracy, between corruption and good governance. Despite peaceful alternations between left- and right-wing governments, things never seem to turn in the right direction. Yet the overwhelming victory of the pro-Western Action and Solidarity Party (PAS) in parliamentary elections on July 11, 2021, symbolizes the hopes of Moldovans for a better-governed, corruption-free state.

In December 2020, former Prime Minister Maia Sandu won the presidency in a runoff against incumbent Igor Dodon. Then Sandu’s PAS won the

July elections with 53 percent of the vote, far ahead of its main competitor, the Bloc of Socialists and Communists (27 percent), and the Shor Political Party (6 percent), taking 63 of 101 seats. It was the first time in the history of Moldova that a right-wing or center-right party had won a parliamentary majority on its own. Sandu had initiated these early elections in hopes of gaining a majority of “honest people” to take back parliament from Dodon’s Socialist Party of Moldova (PSRM), which had controlled the legislature in collaboration with the party created by controversial oligarch Ilan Shor.

This election campaign featured apocalyptic messages. With the Party of Communists, until recently their rivals, the Socialists formed an electoral bloc to fight against “fascism” and “union with Romania,” even though there was no mention of unionism in the PAS program. For the most part, though, the Socialists focused on waging cultural battles, advocating for the “traditional” role of women in the family and railing against gay rights. Sandu, along with PAS and other right-wing and center-right parties, called on the electorate to prevent “thieves” and the “corrupt” from returning to power.

Both camps seemed to have forgotten the short-lived cohabitation in June–October 2019 between PAS, the Dignity and Truth Platform, and the Socialists. They had formed a coalition government, headed by Sandu, to oust the Democratic Party of oligarch Vlad Plahotniuc, who was accused of “capturing the state.” This cohabitation ended abruptly amid mutual mistrust.

From the beginnings of the post-Soviet transition to the present, the question of social trust helps explain Moldova’s difficult political evolution, as well as the public response to government policies such as the recent measures taken to

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address the COVID-19 pandemic. A comparison with some other ex-Soviet states will throw further light on Moldova's distinct trajectory.

## A FRAGILE COMPROMISE

In Moldavia and other republics of the USSR, the late-Soviet *perestroika* reforms launched by Mikhail Gorbachev opened the way for political pluralism and (inadvertently) "national liberation" movements. The new political organizations had a strong ethnic component and predominantly nationalist agendas. Despite ideological components borrowed from Western political doctrines, Moldovan parties continued to invoke nationalist principles after the proclamation of independence in August 1991.

In March 1991, Moldovan authorities sabotaged the organization of a referendum on whether the republic should remain in the Soviet Union or separate from it. Unlike in the Baltic republics, the decision to declare independence in Moldova was made mostly by political elites under pressure from regional developments and street movements, but without a real popular mandate.

The emerging political pluralism hid a split among elites over which development path the young state should follow. Most members of parliament, despite quite divergent beliefs and backgrounds, were driven to vote for independence by the immediate political circumstances of the failed putsch in Moscow in August 1991, along with the broader context of national movements and the fall of communism in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union.

After independence, the "conservative" wing, comprising former Communist Party members, held a majority in parliament, forming a common front against the "reformist" and nationalist wing composed of the Popular Front and its ally, another faction of ex-Communists. Just three years after the new state was formed, a new Party of Communists, built on the debris of the Communist Party of the USSR, appeared on the political scene to launch a "velvet restoration," as the Polish public intellectual Adam Michnik dubbed a wider trend in the region of former Communists returning to power.

The few surveys taken from 1989 to 1991 revealed a population divided over Moldova's future. In a poll conducted in January 1991, 43 percent of

respondents envisioned it as part of the USSR, 42 percent as an independent state, and 3 percent as part of Romania. The outcome varied from one ethnic and linguistic group to the next. While 55 percent of respondents who considered themselves ethnic Moldovans favored independence, only 9 percent of Russians, 8 percent of Ukrainians, 12 percent of Bulgarians, and 26 percent of other nationalities were pro-independence.

However, in a consultative referendum on March 6, 1994, in mainland Moldova (without Transnistria), 95 percent of participants voted for independence. Supporters of independence later brandished this result to counter demands for unification with Romania. The context in which the 1994 referendum took place was completely different from the mood just a few years earlier. By 1994, independence seemed to most Moldovans the only possible format of statehood, given that all other former Soviet republics, including Russia, had proclaimed independence. The only latent opponents of independence were the supporters of a union with Romania.

Moldovan authorities subsequently granted citizenship to all residents living in the republic at the time of the proclamation of independence, whereas the Baltic states denied their Slavic minorities the right to citizenship.

Moldova's policy was regarded as a model of peaceful and democratic integration of ethnic and linguistic minorities. But interethnic controversies regularly surfaced in the public space.

The most ardent opponents of independence barricaded themselves in the Transnistrian region, a strip of territory east of the Dniester River, proclaiming it a separate republic. An armed conflict from September 1990 to July 1992 resulted in over 1,000 deaths. Albeit unrecognized by the international community, Transnistria had Russia's unofficial support. It became a haven for illicit trafficking.

## A CAPTURED STATE

Compared with the former socialist countries of Eastern Europe, the ex-Soviet republics went through a deeper economic crisis because of their integration into the industrial and energy complexes of the USSR. Dependence on Russian resources continued after 1991. The Soviet industrial legacy in Moldova, one-third of which

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*While the Baltic states focused on implementing reforms, Moldova was wasting energy on war.*

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was based in Transnistria, proved obsolete after the fall of the USSR.

Once the country gained international recognition, Moldovan authorities, like the leaders of other former socialist countries, started a radical economic and social “transition” to a market economy. It was undertaken with assistance from global financial institutions, primarily the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank. “Liberalization, stabilization, and privatization” became the watchwords of this new liberal revolution.

Price liberalization implemented in early 1992 fueled hyperinflation, which severely devalued savings and impoverished most Moldovan citizens. The authorities curbed inflation by the end of 1993 by creating a new national currency, the Moldovan leu, with the support of the IMF. Subsequent Moldovan governments continued to diligently apply liberalization and monetary stability policies, drawing international praise. In 1995, the *Economist* hailed Moldova as “a model of correct reform.” But this momentary success had a high price. By 1997, Moldova had become one of the most indebted countries in the region in per capita terms, relative to gross domestic product.

Another external factor shook this precarious stability: the economic and financial crisis that began in Russia in August 1998. Buffeted by a financial crisis in Southeast Asia and an extreme drop in prices for its crude oil exports, Russia defaulted on its debts. Since Moldova had maintained excessively close trade relations with Russia, its fragile economy was dragged into a recession that brought the nation to the brink of insolvency. To overcome the crisis, the government applied austerity reforms and pressed ahead with the privatization program.

The privatization of state enterprises and collective farms was officially intended to clear the way for the development of a real estate market, the restructuring of industries, and the establishment of corporate governance mechanisms. In reality, according to independent observers and the Court of Auditors, the sales of state enterprises lacked transparency and the Ministry of Privatization committed serious violations of the rules. Interests close to the government bought up profitable companies at prices much lower than their actual values.

For ordinary people, a positive aspect of privatization was the virtually “free” acquisition of apartments and houses by their inhabitants. But fraud schemes resulted in many vulnerable people losing their homes.

The privatization of public holdings continued in the decades that followed as a form of colonization of the state by vested interests at the expense of the public. These distorted economic policies created a fragile business environment, characterized by corrupt practices and clientelistic relations between private operators and government officials, fueling people’s distrust of the new state structures.

Meanwhile, despite the efforts of the early governments to provide state support in the social sphere (education, health, and welfare), public services suffered a profound crisis in the late 1990s due to reduced funding and the regional financial crisis. Some 70 percent of the population fell below the absolute poverty line, with 50 percent under the threshold for extreme poverty.

In light of drastic budget cuts and chronic nonpayment of civil servants’ wages (which were already less than the average wage), the emergence of petty corruption in the public sector was justified in the eyes of many Moldovans.

The massive outflow of civil servants and other workers from public institutions and the agricultural sector produced a chain reaction of survival strategies, particularly informal trade, small-scale cross-border trafficking, and labor emigration. Distrust of state institutions, coupled with falling incomes and living standards, led to an unprecedented rise in anomalous behaviors such as violence, alcoholism, drug addiction, and crime.

Amid massive pauperization and lack of public trust, a massive protest vote—and “restorative nostalgia,” to use the late scholar Svetlana Boym’s expression—facilitated the coming to power of the Party of Communists in 2001. Against expectations, the communist authorities continued the program of liberal reforms that was already underway. But despite some success in improving the business environment, corruption did not diminish in the 2000s. Under the communists, state capture by private interests continued to flourish, as it would under succeeding governments.

In 2003, the European Union announced its European Neighborhood Policy to provide

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*Political elites and society in  
Moldova were hesitant about  
independence.*

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increased assistance to countries on the EU's periphery. Moldova's communist government restarted cooperation with international financial institutions and officially declared that European integration was a state priority. In 2004, relations with Moscow grew colder when President Vladimir Voronin refused to sign a federalization plan proposed by Russian authorities. This "Kozak Memorandum" stipulated the creation of an asymmetric federal state, according equal status and veto power to Moldova and Transnistria.

## THEFT OF THE CENTURY

In April 2009, the Party of Communists' victory in disputed parliamentary elections set off street demonstrations that culminated in violent clashes with the police and the devastation of the parliament and presidential office buildings. The self-proclaimed liberal and democratic parties of the opposition successfully exploited these events. Fresh elections held in June 2009 brought them to power in a coalition that was welcomed by Western states and international organizations.

The new government pursued a series of liberal reforms, assisted by international financial institutions and an increase in foreign investment and remittances. On June 27, 2014, in Brussels, Moldovan and EU leaders signed an Association Agreement, including a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement. Starting that April, Moldovan citizens traveling to Europe's borderless Schengen area began to enjoy the benefits of a liberalized visa regime.

But growing tensions among factions within the government and high-level corruption scandals cast a shadow over the economic growth and achievements of the democratic coalition. The embezzlement of \$1 billion from three banks in November 2014, called "the theft of the century," was carried out with the presumed involvement of figures in the highest government circles. It epitomized the failure of the rule of law and the dire extent of state capture in Moldova.

The "theft of the century" and other scandals further depleted the trust of Moldovans in state institutions. The percentage of Moldovans saying they had trust in the government plummeted from an already low 23 percent in 2012 to 7 percent in 2015.

The crisis also contributed to the reconfiguration of national politics. In 2015, in the wake of antigovernment protests, two new political forces emerged: the Dignity and Truth Platform (PDA),

a self-proclaimed civic movement that later became a political party, and the Action and Solidarity Party (PAS). Both were structurally different from the traditional parties.

Created as a result of a bottom-up mobilization, PDA and PAS owed their existence to their supporters, not to opaque funding. Both parties avoided debates over national identity and geopolitics. Instead, they focused on fighting high-level corruption, ending state capture, and establishing the rule of law. In the July 2021 elections, the PAS capitalized on Moldovans' hopes for reforms and a real fight against corruption.

## FALLING BEHIND THE BALTICS

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the international media regularly compared Moldova with the Baltic states. Moldova resembled them by more than a few criteria: surface area, the ethnic composition of the population, and their geopolitical location between Russia and Europe. However, the evolution of the Baltic countries during the 1990s and 2000s, and their status as EU members after 2004, made them completely different from Moldova.

Latvia's nominal per capita gross domestic product in 2019 (\$20,291) was nearly 10 times higher than Moldova's (\$2,232). In terms of quality of life, as measured by the United Nations Human Development Index, Latvia had a rating of 0.866 in 2019 and was listed among countries such as Slovakia and Portugal with a "very high" score. Moldova had a rating of 0.663, putting it among countries with a "high" score but below the average of 0.791 for countries in Europe and Central Asia.

Moldova and the Baltic states had different starting points in the transition race. The Baltic populations and elites early on demonstrated strong political will for leaving the Soviet Union and the Eurasian space. Referenda organized in 1989 and 1990 in each of the Baltic republics conferred legitimacy on this path. Starting with their declarations of independence and particularly after the failed putsch in Moscow, the Baltic states enjoyed considerable political and economic support from Western countries and international organizations.

Estonia, Latvia, and to some extent Lithuania were already highly industrialized. Agriculture contributed a minor share of the national income in these former Soviet republics, ranging from 10 to 15 percent in 1992, compared with 35 percent

in Soviet Moldavia. Following a decline in the early 1990s, the economies of the Baltic states have grown continuously since 2000. Besides external financial and technical assistance, higher-quality governance and consistent implementation of economic reforms aided the development of these countries.

In contrast with the Baltic states, Moldova's political elites and society were hesitant about independence. Although it enjoyed popular support at the end of the 1980s, the nationalist and pro-independence movement was largely limited to the pro-Romanian population and elites. Also, Moldova was slower to receive international support, primarily because the populations of the Baltic republics demonstrated their support for independence earlier, jointly, and in a determined way. (Also, all three Baltic nations had been independent states before their annexation by the Soviet Union in 1940.)

Moldova's economy had been mainly agrarian, with a limited industrial output. In the first few years after independence, from 1991 to 1998, authorities (representing the former elite) reluctantly implemented economic and political reforms. Public opinion perceived the economic changes, especially the privatization of enterprises, as fraudulent and disruptive, undermining citizens' trust in the ruling elites and the social contract.

The conflict in Transnistria had a disastrous economic impact on both banks of the Dniester River. The fighting itself, and the deployment of Russian troops in Transnistria, marked Moldova as a potential zone of instability within Russia's sphere of influence. In a period when the Baltic states focused on implementing reforms, Moldova was wasting energy on war.

Yet Moldova's relationship with Transnistria has now reached a relatively peaceful status quo, unlike the conflicts in Ukraine and the Caucasus. Today, 30 years after independence and the outbreak of the conflict, the scarecrow that repels foreign investment is more the chronic instability and the captive states on both banks of the Dniester than the conflict itself.

## VIRAL SKEPTICISM

The COVID-19 pandemic has shown how important institutional trust is for the successful management of a crisis. As in neighboring countries such as Ukraine and Russia, low confidence in public institutions in Moldova fueled

widespread skepticism about the danger posed by the coronavirus and the government's response. It also led to ready acceptance of conspiracy scenarios, especially during the first phase of the pandemic.

According to a poll conducted in May 2020 by civil society group WatchDog.md, half of the respondents agreed that the virus "is no more dangerous than the common flu" and that steps taken to control it were "done intentionally to destroy the economy." Dodon, the president, himself downplayed the severity of the coronavirus in a program posted on YouTube in the period leading up to the November election.

A survey conducted in July 2020 found a high degree of socioeconomic insecurity among respondents: 63 percent said they were either afraid or very afraid that they would not be able to provide their family with necessities because of the pandemic. People with lower socioeconomic status expressed the highest levels of anxiety that they would be unable to cope with socioeconomic hardships, which have been compounded by the pandemic.

These fears are not unreasonable. According to official estimates, the income of the general population decreased during 2020 by 4.8 percent, especially in cities. Vulnerable groups—namely poor households (especially women), returned migrants, the self-employed, and young people who are not in employment, education, or training—have felt the sharpest declines in income during the pandemic, according to research commissioned by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP).

On April 1, 2020, two weeks after instituting a lockdown, the government announced a series of "pro-business and pro-citizen" measures. One measure provided for tripling the unemployment fund. Anyone dismissed during the state of emergency was entitled to receive monthly unemployment benefits equivalent to the minimum wage (2,775 Moldovan lei, equivalent at the time to \$153).

Yet the support measures announced by the government for businesses and employees amounted to just 1.2 percent of GDP. That was extremely low compared with the aid provided to enterprises in Western countries (28.5 percent of GDP in Germany), other countries in Central and Eastern Europe (6.2 percent in Poland), and even the Eastern Partnership countries (6.9 percent in Georgia). According to the UNDP, 91 percent of Moldovan enterprises that participated in the survey did not receive any aid from the state,

and only 3.6 percent benefited from some support measures during the pandemic.

The anemic and inconsistent actions taken by the Moldovan authorities to counter the virus and its socioeconomic effects have only further weakened trust in government and other state institutions. The most vulnerable people, who felt the lack of support from the government most acutely, have the least confidence in the state. Young people and others with lower socioeconomic status, less education, and diminished confidence in institutions are most likely to deny the severity of the pandemic and express disagreement with the measures taken by the state to mitigate its effects.

## BREAKING THE CYCLE

The Canadian political scientist Lucan Way has characterized Moldova (along with Ukraine and Russia) with the unflattering concept of “pluralism by default.” According to Way, pluralism—not full democracy, which is still nonexistent in Moldova—was a side effect of the weak state. Captured by vested interests, state institutions were incapable of pursuing a coherent modernizing agenda. A viable democracy and the rule of law would require a “powerful state” with competent and independent institutions, unaffected by private interests and geopolitical influences. Other factors leading to “pluralism by default” and “weak authoritarianism,” according to Way, are a weak civil society and divides over national identity and geopolitics among the country’s elites.

The way to escape the current political and societal crisis thus lies in breaking the cycle of “pluralism by default” by strengthening state institutions and civil society. Before there can be a renewal of political elites and real institutional reform, Moldovans themselves will have to break the vicious cycle of underdevelopment by building horizontal structures of social cohesion with genuine forms of solidarity, trust, and participation. A strong civil society, organized from the bottom up, would put pressure on elites and decision makers

to undertake effective reforms for the benefit of the country.

A strong civil society could also help tackle crises, compensating for the low capacity of state institutions. As the sociologist Zeynep Tufekci has shown, Hong Kong’s success in limiting the spread of COVID-19 in its early phase was due not to an effective government response but to civil society’s grass-roots mobilization to distribute sanitary masks, disinfectants, and other basic necessities, drawing on civic infrastructure and organizational capacity developed during protest movements in previous years.

Cultural and identity differences could become a basis for Moldova’s enrichment rather than division if people could overcome the discord provoked by politicians eager to hide their incompetence and iniquities. Studies suggest that Moldovan society has a fairly high degree of interethnic cohesion. Daily relations among people of different ethnicities and affiliations are peaceful.

Likewise, relations with Moldovan citizens in Transnistria are quiet and cooperative, despite provocations from politicians on either side of the Dniester. This is a big difference from conflicts in the Caucasus and in Ukraine, where relations between citizens in the territories involved are poisoned by deep resentment and mistrust.

Given these peaceful interactions among the country’s various ethnic and social groups and with the people of Transnistria, Moldova has real potential to build a truly pluralistic society. Toward this end, the new government should work to strengthen social cohesion instead of sowing discord. There is a need for bottom-up engagement that makes reform and renewal a collaborative project of both state and society. In the absence of such a “country project,” as Moldovans call it, even an honest government with good intentions risks consuming itself in honorable but futile attempts. ■

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*Corrupt privatization processes  
fueled people’s distrust in the new  
state structures.*

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