

FREEDOM IN THE WORLD

Moldova

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OVERVIEW:

The ruling Alliance for European Integration (AIE) remained unable to elect a president during 2011, raising the possibility of a fourth round of parliamentary elections since 2009. While crucial defections from the opposition Communist Party in early November potentially gave the AIE the three-fifths parliamentary majority needed to elect a president, the factions involved were unable to immediately agree on a candidate, forcing the cancellation of a planned election bid in mid-November. After a vote held in December failed to reach the required threshold, another attempt was scheduled for January 2012. Also during the year, the Justice Ministry officially registered a Muslim religious organization for the first time despite strong objections from the Orthodox Church, and the government was forced to withdraw an antidiscrimination bill after Orthodox and other opponents decried its protection of homosexuals.

Moldova gained independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, and free and fair elections followed in 1994. Centrist parties governed until 2001, when the Party of Communists of the Republic of Moldova (PCRM) won a landslide victory, promising a return to Soviet-era living standards. Communist leader Vladimir Voronin was elected president by Parliament.

The PCRM took 56 of 101 seats in the 2005 parliamentary elections and built a coalition to obtain the 61 votes needed to reelect Voronin. Election monitors noted police harassment of the opposition, manipulation of the state media, and abuse of state funds by the PCRM, among other flaws.

After charting a foreign policy course away from Russia and toward the European Union (EU) in the period surrounding the elections, Voronin steered the country back toward Russia in 2007 and 2008. The Kremlin's cooperation was seen as essential in resolving the status of Transnistria, a separatist region that has maintained de facto independence from Moldova since 1992.

The PCRM won 60 seats in April 2009 parliamentary elections, though international monitors documented problems including flaws in the voter lists, intimidation and harassment of opposition parties, and media bias. Three opposition parties won the remainder. The results triggered youth-led protests in Chisinau, and the demonstrations turned violent on the second day, with some protesters ransacking government buildings. Police responded with beatings, hundreds of arrests, and serious abuse of detainees in custody.

The PCRM failed twice to elect its choice to replace the term-limited Voronin as president, triggering fresh parliamentary elections in July. Although similar electoral flaws were reported by observers, the defection of former PCRM Parliament speaker Marian Lupu to the opposition Democratic Party (PD) helped it and three other opposition parties to secure a simple majority. The new coalition, called the Alliance for European Integration (AIE), elected Liberal Democratic Party (PLD) leader Vlad Filat as prime minister, and Liberal

2012 SCORES

STATUS

Partly Free

FREEDOM RATING

3.0

CIVIL LIBERTIES

3

POLITICAL RIGHTS

3

Party (PL) leader Mihai Ghimpu as Parliament speaker and acting president. With just 53 seats, the coalition failed twice—in November and December—to secure Lupu's election as president.

A third round of parliamentary elections was held in November 2010, after a PCRM boycott helped to thwart a September constitutional referendum that would have introduced direct presidential elections. The new balloting, which was praised by observers, strengthened the AIE parties' position overall, though they still lacked the supermajority needed to elect a president. The PCRM took 42 seats, followed by the PLD with 32, the PD with 15, and the PL with 12. Lupu was elected Parliament speaker and acting president in late December, and Filat resumed his role as prime minister in January 2011.

Internal AIE feuding intensified during 2011, but further factional rifts within the PCRM also emerged. Three key Parliament members—including former prime minister and presidential candidate Zinaida Greceanii and Chisinau mayoral candidate Igor Dodon—defected from the PCRM caucus in early November, potentially giving the AIE the three-fifths majority needed to elect a president. However, with negotiations on a candidate ongoing, none registered for a planned November 18 vote, and it was consequently canceled. Lupu was the sole candidate in a presidential vote held on December 16, but he secured only 58 ballots, with the three PCRM defectors voting against him and one ballot declared void. A second attempt was scheduled for January 2012.

POLITICAL RIGHTS AND CIVIL LIBERTIES:

Moldova is an electoral democracy. Voters elect the 101-seat unicameral Parliament by proportional representation for four-year terms. Since 2000, Parliament has elected the president, who serves up to two four-year terms. The prime minister, who holds most executive power, must be approved by Parliament.

Domestic and international observers hailed the November 2010 parliamentary elections as a substantial improvement over the 2009 balloting, citing a more open and diverse media environment, impartial and transparent administration by the Central Election Commission, and a lack of restrictions on campaign activities. Some problems were reported, including flaws in the voter list, unbalanced distribution of overseas polling sites, and isolated cases of intimidation. Local elections in June 2011, in which AIE parties won a majority of positions, were also assessed positively, though observers called for improvements in voter registration and campaign finance regulation.

Corruption remains a major problem. In 2011, Prime Minister Vlad Filat of the PLD repeatedly alleged that the prosecutor general's office and other key institutions were under the control of the PD and its financial backers, leading to politicized decisions in corruption cases. Filat himself has been accused of corruption by his opponents. A number of corruption and fraud allegations were pursued during the year, but convictions in major cases have been lacking. In July, Parliament passed legislation to establish an independent commission tasked with auditing public officials' annual income and asset declarations, which would be published online, though the law had not entered into force by year's end. Moldova was ranked 112 out of 183 countries surveyed in Transparency International's 2011 Corruption Perceptions Index.

The media environment improved following the 2009 change in government. In 2010, the public broadcaster, Teleradio-Moldova, grew more impartial under new management, and two new private satellite television channels added to the diversity of national news coverage. However, several media outlets are perceived as party affiliates; PCRM-allied television and print outlets have been cited by nongovernmental observers and regulators for having an especially strong bias. Reporters sometimes face physical abuse or selective exclusion from events of public interest. In June 2011, Russian blogger Eduard Bagirov was arrested for his alleged role in fomenting the April 2009 violence, with prosecutors accusing him of participating in attacks on government buildings in order to discredit the opposition and justify a crackdown. Bagirov, who maintained that the case against him was politically motivated, fled to Russia

after being placed under house arrest in October. In August 2011, a court imposed a roughly \$40,000 fine on the weekly *Ziarul de Garda* after two prosecutors sued it for reporting on corruption claims against them. An appellate court later reduced the fine to about \$1,700, and a further appeal was pending at year's end.

Although the constitution guarantees religious freedom, a 2007 law banned "abusive proselytism" and acknowledged the "special significance and primary role" of the Orthodox Church. The AIE government has moved away from the PCRM's clear support for the Russian-backed Moldovan Orthodox Church over the smaller, Romanian-backed Bessarabian Orthodox Church. In March 2011, the government for the first time accepted the registration of a religious organization from Moldova's tiny Muslim population, prompting vocal denunciations and protests by the Moldovan Orthodox Church. Senior officials nevertheless spoke out in defense of the move. While other minority groups have also had difficulty registering and in some cases face harassment, foreign missionaries have reported less bureaucratic obstruction in recent years. Moldovan officials do not restrict academic freedom, though the PCRM claimed that university students were pressured to support the AIE parties ahead of the November 2010 elections.

Organizers of demonstrations must only give notice rather than seek permission from authorities, and the current government has generally upheld freedom of assembly in practice. However, a gay pride parade in the capital was canceled for the third straight year in 2011 due to concerns about violent counterprotesters. State relations with civil society groups have improved under the AIE, though some leading politicians have displayed wariness or hostility toward nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). Domestic NGOs actively monitored the 2010 and 2011 election campaigns. Enforcement of union rights and labor standards is weak, with employers rarely punished for violations. Workers in illegal strikes face possible fines or prison time.

Although the constitution provides for an independent judiciary, reform efforts suffer from lack of funds, and there has been evidence of bribery and political influence among judicial and law enforcement officials. Long-standing concerns about abuse and ill-treatment in police custody were renewed in the aftermath of the April 2009 protests; a small number of officers have received probation and suspended prison sentences for their role in the 2009 abuses. Prison conditions in general are exceptionally poor. Quasi-disciplinary violence in the military remains a problem, with several suspicious deaths reported during 2011. Such incidents were cited as part of the justification for the September dismissal of the chief of the armed forces.

Roma suffer the harshest treatment of the various minority groups in Moldova. They face discrimination in housing and employment, and are targets of police violence. Gay men are also reportedly subject to police harassment. The government was forced to withdraw an EU-backed antidiscrimination bill in March 2011 due to objections by the Orthodox Church and others over its protection of homosexuals.

Women are underrepresented in public life. Nineteen women were elected to Parliament in November 2010. Moldova is a significant source for women and girls trafficked abroad for forced prostitution. The U.S. State Department reported in 2011 that although victims' services and government cooperation with NGOs had improved in the past year, law enforcement efforts declined and alleged complicity by officials remained largely unchecked. Some cases of forced agricultural labor have been reported.

EXPLANATORY NOTE:

The numerical ratings and status listed above do not reflect conditions in Transnistria, which is examined in a separate report.

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