

## Moldova Overview

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### Environment

The Republic of Moldova, formerly the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic, is situated between Ukraine to the north, east and south, and Romania to the west. Since independence in 1991 the country has faced a secessionist challenge in its eastern region, Transnistria (also known as Transdniestria or the 'Predniestrovian Moldovan Republic'), lying on the eastern side of the Dniester river.

### Peoples

Main languages: Moldovan/Romanian, Russian.

Main religions: Eastern Orthodox Christianity.

According to the 2004 census, main minority groups include Ukrainians (8.4%), Russians (5.9%), Gagauz (4.4%), Romanians (2.2%) and Bulgarians (1.9%).

### History

At the heart of contemporary minority problems are the different relationships that developed between Moldova's ethnic groups under the various empires that have controlled the region - the Ottoman Empire, the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union. The legacy of external control for Moldova is a society arranged around a complex series of loosely interconnected socioeconomic, political and ethno-territorial subsystems often organized on the basis of divergent sets of interests. Of central importance is the different imperial history experienced by the peoples living in the Moldovan territories east of the Dniester river and those to the west.

Prior to the collapse of the Soviet Union, the left bank of the Dniester river had enjoyed almost uninterrupted links to Moscow for nearly 200 years and the region had only intermittently experienced Romanian rule. In 1791 (Treaty of Jassy), the eastern lands were absorbed into the Russian Empire. After a brief period of autonomy following the Russian Revolution, the left bank territories were joined to the Soviet Union in 1922, and on 12 October 1924 the Ukrainian Government established the Moldavian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (MASSR) in the area between the left bank of the river Dniester and the southern Bug river, known as the Transnistria region. Tiraspol became the capital of this new political entity, which then formed the border between the Soviet Union and Romania.

The western lands of Moldova have enjoyed a very different relationship to Moscow. Only in 1812 was Bessarabia - the historical territory located between the rivers Dniester, Prut and Danube - annexed to Russia. The absorption of Bessarabia led to a flood of Slavic migrants to the region, as well as Romanian-speakers from beyond the Prut, Gagauz and Bulgarians. The region remained part of the Russian Empire for over 100 years but after 1918 Bessarabia was joined to Romania and remained under Bucharest's rule until 1940.

In the summer of 1940, the Soviet Union annexed Bessarabia. Subsequently overrun by Axis forces, in 1944 the area was reconquered by the Red Army. The bulk of Bessarabia was united with the territories of the MASSR (the Bukovina region in the north and Budjak in the south were given to Ukraine) to form the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic. Chisinau (Kishinev in Russian) became the capital. The lack of indigenous communists in Bessarabia, especially in rural areas, meant that the extension of Soviet power in the region had to rely upon personnel from the former MASSR. Thus, the post-war order in Moldavia was constructed on a system of institutionalized advantage for the Moscow-oriented east bank territories.

In the 1950s and 1960s, rapid industrialization brought a steady flow of Sovietized Slavs to the region. The new settlers were concentrated in the industrial centres, particularly the Transnistria region. By 1989, ethnic Russians constituted 27 per cent of the republic's urban population and only 4 per cent of rural dwellers.

During the Soviet period, strenuous efforts were made to foster a local identity, separate from a Romanian one, among the Bessarabians. The indigenous population was required to identify itself as Moldavian and a Cyrillic script was introduced in 1940 to distinguish the Moldavian language from Romanian. The issue of Romanian/Moldovan identity, especially the language question, became the initial focus of protest groups in the late 1980s.

### **The perestroika period**

The Popular Front of Moldova (PFM) campaigned for independence and a shift to the promotion of Romanian/Moldovan culture and language. As the drive for independence accelerated, a radical pan-Romanian movement of largely ethnically Moldovan organizations took control of the PFM. Its aim was the 'restitution of the unitary Romanian state'. Unification with Romania rapidly became the leitmotif of the Popular Front.

Moves to raise the numbers of ethnic Moldovans in the state apparatus and expand the use of the Romanian/Moldovan language intensified. The new language law (31 August 1989) downgraded Russian to 'the language of inter-ethnic communication' and Moldovan became the state language. At the same time, plans were announced to replace the Cyrillic script with a Latin one. The position of the radicals was strengthened by success in the February-March 1990 parliamentary elections.

These changes, particularly those involving language, caused alarm among Russian-speakers, especially those in the Transnistria region. The language law provided the catalyst for the creation of opposition organizations among the non-Moldovans, of which the leading ones were: the Unity Internationalist Movement in Defence of Perestroika (Interfront) in Chisinau, the United Council of Work Collectives (OSTK) in towns in eastern Moldova, and the Gagauz Halki in Gagauzia.

### **Independence and civil war**

After independence in August 1991, the Moldovan Communist Party was banned, permitting radical

elements in the PFM to dominate republican politics. Efforts at Romanianization and the campaign for unification with Romania were intensified. Following Chisinau's declaration of independence, the authorities in Tiraspol announced independence for the east bank region of the Dniester (originally termed the Transnistria Moldovan Soviet Socialist Republic, and since October 1991 the Transnistria Moldovan Republic or PMR), and the Gagauz authorities also established their own republic.

Skirmishes between paramilitary groups from these two regions and Moldovan security forces escalated in 1992 and eventually led to conflict in the summer between the forces loyal to Chisinau and to Tiraspol. Several hundred people were killed. Fighting halted with the intervention of the Russian Fourteenth Army, which was permanently based in the region. The ceasefire negotiated in August 1992 established Russian peacekeeping forces in the region. Negotiations have continued intermittently since that time, sponsored by the OSCE, yet no progress has been achieved towards a final settlement of Transnistria's future status.

## **Governance**

The fighting in Transnistria in 1992 led to important political changes in Moldova. The coalition government that assumed power in July 1992 presented itself as a government of national consensus. The drive for unification with Romania was halted and efforts to Romanianize society slowed. The triumph of the Agrarian Democratic Party (ADP) in the parliamentary elections of early 1994 reinforced the movement to develop a Moldova separate from Romania. The new constitution (1994) implicitly defined Moldovans as a people distinct from Romanians and Moldova as a multi-ethnic society.

The new correlation of political forces within Moldova following the fighting in 1992 allowed the ethno-political problems of the Gagauz region and the PMR to be addressed. Talks on autonomy for the Gagauz gathered pace from 1994 and led to the creation of a self-governing Gagauz region in early 1995. The complex ethnic mix of the PMR prevented a similar ethno-territorially defined autonomy being offered to the area, although various forms of regional autonomy were put forward by the Moldovan authorities. The continuing presence of the Russian army in the region provided a barrier to reintegrating the PMR into Moldova.

After the conflict of 1992, the Moldovan Government sought to ensure the well-being of minorities. Even before the fighting, Moldova had adopted a liberal Citizenship Law (5 June 1991) granting automatic citizenship to those who had held it before 28 June 1940 and to all residents registered before 23 June 1990. Following the fighting of 1992, the Chisinau authorities developed the twin-track strategy of granting cultural autonomy to all minorities (a law on minorities was passed in 1994) and offering territorial autonomy to special-status regions. Underlying these policies is the belief that accommodation can win the loyalty of non-ethnic Moldovan citizens and thereby reinforce the state's territorial integrity.

Although powerful political forces emerged after 1992 in support of the development of an ethnically inclusive non-Romanian identity, the nature of the Moldovan nation remains contested and subject to political manipulation. In March 1995, large student demonstrations occurred following a decision to teach 'Moldovan' rather than 'Romanian' national history and to call for the state language to be renamed Romanian instead of Moldovan. In summer 1995, President Snegur repudiated many elements of the distinct Moldovan identity and sought to reintroduce a Romanian definition of Moldova's language and people.

Through the late 1990s some progress was achieved in Moldova towards genuinely contested elections, political pluralism, legitimate rotations of governments and media freedom. However, Moldovan politics remained highly volatile, with eight governments in power between 1991 and 2001. Desires for stability

contributed to the return of the Party of Moldovan Communists (PMC) to power in 2001, after which Moldovan politics shifted towards a mild form of authoritarianism. The 2003 local elections were considered the worst since Moldovan independence; media freedoms were also increasingly curtailed. While an independent press could be said to have emerged, the Moldovan authorities used regulatory and inspection powers, as well as defamation suits and extra-legal pressures to restrict broadcast media, particularly during politically sensitive periods such as election campaigns. Two leading media outlets, Euro TV and Radio Antena C, had their broadcasting licenses suspended in 2004 for two months after voicing criticism of the government. Tensions also accompanied the creation of a public broadcasting company, with many of the most independent and critical journalists losing their posts in the process. In 2004 Transparency International conducted an experiment to test Moldova's Law on Access to Information (2000), with the result that some 26 major governmental institutions refused to grant access to public information. In a new development in June 2004 an independent journalist was beaten, reportedly because of her professional activities.

Although officially a parliamentary republic, Moldovan politics is dominated by President Vladimir Voronin, also leader of the PMC, the majority party in Parliament. In the view of some analysts, democracy has endured in Moldova not because of acceptance of democratic values and procedures or the strength of civil society, but because of the polarization of political leaders and the inherent weakness of the Moldovan state. Since President Voronin's accession to power government relations with civil society groups have deteriorated, although the picture is a mixed one of cooperation on some issues, such as foreign policy priorities and resolution of the Transnistria problem, and conflict on others, such as internal governance and democratization issues. Political discontent at the shift towards authoritarianism has been tempered by astute social policy, including regular increases in welfare payments and initiatives to compensate citizens for savings lost as a result of post-Soviet monetary devaluation.

The political course charted by the PMC also evolved over time. The party increasingly - and paradoxically - aligned itself with pro-Western administrations in the region and distanced itself from Moscow, seen as a sponsor of Transnistrian separatism. The PMC has therefore sought to combine mild authoritarianism at home with an overtly pro-Western foreign policy, particularly during electoral campaigns. In doing so it seeks to capitalize on the two issues on which consensus exists in Moldovan society: future integration with and membership of the European Union, and the resolution of the Transnistria conflict within a framework of Moldovan statehood and territorial integrity.

Women remain significantly under-represented in Moldovan government institutions, comprising only 10-16 per cent of public officials according to reports.

In 1999 national minority issues were raised as a result of the abolition of Moldova's Soviet-era administrative boundaries (the *raion* system) and their consolidation into eight new counties. Bulgarians in the Taraclia district organized an illegal referendum to protest the changes, in which they were joined by local Moldovans, and successfully resisted the appending of their district to a larger neighbouring one.

## **Current state of minorities and indigenous peoples**

Moldova is considered to provide an adequate legislative framework for the protection of ethnic minorities and their participation in electoral processes. Building on its Law on National Minorities of 2001, Moldova has been commended by the Council of Europe for its efforts to ensure dialogue with representatives of national minorities, particularly with regard to changes in Moldovan legislation. For example, legislation on elections guarantees the printing of campaign materials in ethnic minority languages, although the 6% threshold for representation in parliament (the highest in Europe after

Turkey) precludes the representation of minority parties. According to the Council of Europe, the principal problems remain implementation of legal guarantees due to the absence of adequate monitoring mechanisms, a lack of resources and in some cases, a lack of political will at the local level. Moldova also faced from the Council of Europe in February 2006 for encroachment on media freedoms.

On 1 September 2004 the Moldovan Parliament adopted the Law on Languages in the Territory of the Republic of Moldova, which acknowledged the use of a number of minority languages in the republic. Also in 2004 the 'Concept of the National Policy of the Moldovan Republic' was published, which explicitly defined a number of minority groups as constituent elements of the Moldovan nation.

The ruling Party of Moldovan Communists won a renewed but reduced majority in parliamentary elections held in March 2005, with 46.1 per cent of the vote and 56 of 101 seats. International observers and the oppositional, pro-Russian Democratic Moldova Bloc (which won 34 seats) criticized tight state control of the media during the electoral campaign, but both the constitutional court and the OSCE upheld the final result.