



## **Romanian Nationalism in the Republic of Moldova**

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*The Romanians in Moldova woke up  
in the late eighties, but forgot to get  
out of their beds.  
(Druta 1991: 1)*

### **Introduction**

Nationalism had an evolution of its own in the Republic of Moldova while simultaneously being a notion that became *en vogue* in contemporary political circles. Yet as a young state that gained independence on 27 August 1991, Moldova remains a classic study of nationalism as a power-tool used by the elite to achieve collective and personal political goals.

In the late 1980's, Mikhail Gorbachev's *perestroika* was accompanied by major political changes in most of the Soviet republics. One of the few republics that remained a relative backwater was the Moldovan Soviet Socialist Republic (MSSR) under the First Secretary of the local branch of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU), Semion Grossu, the first ever Moldovan-born head of the republic. He skillfully dodged the numerous warnings from Moscow throughout the 1980's concerning political and economic corruption and denounced any expression of discontent as 'local nationalism'. This way, Grossu became the first Soviet Union official to admit the significance of nationalism on the territory that would soon become the Republic of Moldova.

This paper analyses the events that took place in the political arena on the Moldovan territory (first as the MSSR and later as an independent state) from the late-1980s to the present, focusing on the development of a national political identity and its polarization. The first part of the paper presents a short history of the national movement for Moldovan independence, starting with the creation of various underground structures in the late-1980s. The second part examines the causes, the driving forces and the results of the three major outbursts of communal nationalism in 1989, 1995 and 2002. The last part of the paper assesses the opportunities of further development and the political options available to the now independent Moldovan state.

### **The Birth of the Moldovan State**

Building a Moldovan nation should have been a relatively easy undertaking. The Eastern Moldovan lands, both before and after the annexation of Bessarabia,<sup>1</sup> were populated to a great extent by illiterate peasants with few ties to the cosmopolitan cities. Having been politically separate from the closest co-ethnic group – the Romanians – for the past two centuries, these people were absent from most of the historical turning points in the formation of Romanian national consciousness. The Moldovans were the subjects of a variety of contradictory cultural policies: Russification under the Russian Empire, Romanization during the interwar period, erratic Moldovenization while Moldova was an autonomous republic, and Sovietization during the entire Soviet period. Nation-building was also accompanied by broader processes of urbanization and industrialization, which linked the rhetoric of national identity with other powerful themes of enlightenment and modernity. All this took place against the background of a population that, even before the Soviet Union, referred to itself as 'Moldovan'. In addition, the authoritarian political system of the Soviet era put a premium on Moldovan national affiliation and often spared no expense in the effort to engineer one. One can think of many modern nations in the Eastern European region that have been built under far less favorable conditions.

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<sup>1</sup> Moldova is composed of two parts: Bessarabia which is the area between the rivers Prut and Nistru and Transnistria – the area to the east of the river Nistru.

The first time that the question of a Moldovan identity together with the status of interethnic relations on the territory of the MSSR received special attention was in early 1988. At the 20<sup>th</sup> Congress of the Communist Party of Moldova, the ethnic 'problem' was one of the most hotly debated issues on the agenda. Delegates admitted that 'Moldova, in addition to the representatives of the indigenous nationality, is inhabited by tens of thousands of Bulgarians, Gagauz, Germans and Gypsies who are a long way from living in a cohesive and friendly family' (*Sotsialisticheskaia Maldavia*, 12 January 1988, 12-13). The most serious issue addressed in this context was the poor state of Moldovan language instruction, while attempts to discuss other pressing topics 'generated no particular enthusiasm in the auditorium' (ibid.).

The recognition by the pro-union forces of the ethnic question as a legitimate subject for a discussion gave impetus to various Moldovan 'informal organizations' that emerged in the summer of 1988. Perhaps the most important among them was the Alexei Mateevici Literary-Musical Club, named after the author of the '*Limba Noastra*' (Our Language) poem – a pillar of Bessarabian culture in the early twentieth century. The 'informals' included prominent writers, journalists, educators and artists who called on the local party to increase resources for Moldovan language training and openly address previously forbidden questions regarding Bessarabian history.

Although these societies could not organize as political parties because of the official one-party system of the Soviet Union, they nevertheless constituted the first significant political opposition to the Moldovan branch of the CPSU. Moreover, these movements, having emerged throughout the Soviet republics, were encouraged by Mikhail Gorbachev as clear indicators of *glasnost* and *perestroika*, and in turn regarded Gorbachev's reform as a positive change away from local conservatism. By addressing Moscow directly and by introducing themselves as leaders of the local reform-minded elite, they hoped to bypass the local party leadership and trigger the rebirth of the national culture within a framework of political and economic reforms.

These informal movements initially focused on a series of political and economic demands, including the transformation of the Soviet Union into a true confederation of sovereign states, the introduction of a market economy and appropriate new property laws, and the guarantee of fundamental human rights. However, by the second half of the year all these movements reformulated their priorities, coming up with a joint three-pronged demand that the central authority recognize the shared identity of the Romanian and the Moldovan languages, that Moldovan be declared the state language of the MSSR, and that the Latin alphabet be adopted. The Cyrillic alphabet, these movements asserted, led to a butchering and disintegration of certain aspects of the native language and thus was slowly destroying the republic's cultural identity. As a response, local party conservatives attempted to denounce the actions of the 'informals' as threats to the public order caused by 'nationalists' and 'kulaks'. However, increasing public support for these illegal demonstrations held by the 'informals' in the center of the capital city Chisinau pressed Gossu's party for an official response.

As these demands were receiving greater attention, the Moldova communists issued a set of guidelines for implementing *perestroika* in the republic, entitled 'Let Us Affirm Restructuring through Concrete Actions' (*Moldova Socialista*, 11 November 1988, 1-3). The text acknowledged the mistakes made between the 1960s and the 1980s, many of which had resulted in environmental degradation, agricultural failures, enforced atheism and social demoralization. However, the position of the party on the important language issue remained unchanged. The official party line remained that any development of the Moldovan language be seen in the context of Leninist policy on nationalities, i.e., no single language could have a privileged official status. Secondly, however, some serious concrete steps were to be taken in order to promote Moldovan-Russian bilingualism.



Since Russian was the only common language of communication for people of various ethnic backgrounds throughout the Soviet Union, the transition to a Latin script would not only impose high costs, but could also immediately render most of the republic's population illiterate and could negatively affect the cultural development of the nation.

In December 1988, under the pressure originating from all levels of Moldovan society, Grossu was forced to accept the change of alphabet, while remaining firm in his belief that the Moldovan people and their language were unique and that there was a need to balance the use of both Moldovan and Russian (Grossu 1989: 71). This way, however, the position of the ruling party on the language issue became unsustainable in less than a year, remaining a continuous source of embarrassment for party officials. By accepting one of the three demands, Grossu put himself in an almost impossible position *vis-à-vis* the other two. Once the language started to be written in Latin script, one could no longer distinguish Moldovan from Romanian. Under these circumstances, the allegedly 'nationalistic kulaks' persuaded large sections of the citizenry to vote for them in the elections to the Soviet Union's Congress of People's Deputies. By winning ten of the sixteen constituencies in which they were allowed to stand, the 'informals' proved that they had become a serious threat to the CPM (Socor 1989: 17-20).

However, one should not conclude that the nationalistic approach adopted by the 'informals' worked entirely in their favor. Once the plans for major cultural changes in Moldova were made public, tensions rose between the ethnic majority and minority populations, particularly the Slavs and Gagauz, who felt threatened by the prospects of removing Russian as the *de facto* official language. The tensions escalated during the summer of 1989 when the Moldovans, the Slavs and the Gagauz, all created their own unified fronts. The members of the Mateevici Club, together with other informal movements, created the Popular Front of Moldova; the Gagauz formed *Gagauz Halki* (Gagauz People) and the Slavic population established *Yedinstvo* (Unity). The former grew out of a Gagauz cultural club in the Southern city of Comrat and had vaguely articulated a few political goals. A much more militant group, *Yedinstvo* emerged from the all-union Interfront movement that united the minority population and other opponents of cultural reforms. Interfront had begun its activities elsewhere, outside of Moldova, and especially in the Baltic republics. Receiving support from important Soviet Congress deputies, *Yedinstvo* pressed that equal linguistic status be given to both Russian and Moldovan (Kazutin 1989: 8).

The summer of 1989 was supposed to culminate with the Moldovan Supreme Soviet session in late August. During this session, which lasted four days instead of two as originally planned, the delegates mainly debated the language issue. While the debates were held inside the Supreme Soviet building, the Popular Front of Moldova called a Grand National Assembly (*Marea Adunare Nationala*)—a mass rally meant to represent the will of the Moldovan people. Inspired by the nationalistic acclamations of the Front, the demonstration was attended by 500,000 people carrying Romanian flags and placards written with Latin letters and denouncing the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, the Soviet annexation of Bessarabia and the decline of Moldovan culture over the past five decades ('Manifestare de amploare' 1989: 4). The assembly was the first major event where linguistic and cultural reforms began to receive consideration on an equal basis with other important demands. The Assembly pressed for complete sovereignty and demanded immediate withdrawal of the Soviet army (the 'army of occupation') from the territory of Moldova (*ibid.*; Lupusor et al. 1989: 2). Numerous speakers, some of whom were from Romania and the Baltic states, referred to the illegal annexation of the territory in 1940 and appealed to the Soviet authorities to recognize the existence of the secret protocol 'on the cession of Bessarabia to the Soviet Union' in the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact of 1939.

The final document adopted by the Assembly was titled 'On State Sovereignty and Our Right to the Future' (ibid.). The manifesto outlined the history of the region, the partition of historic Moldova as a result of Russian imperial policy, the unification with Romania in 1918 and the subsequent Soviet annexation of Bessarabia. The most important demands made in the document were for full national sovereignty, veto power over union laws that contravened the laws of the republic, republican control over the relations with foreign powers, a law on citizenship and the right to secession from the Soviet Union. In the context of these grand ambitions, the language issue became rather unimportant in the list of demands.

Developments in post-Soviet Moldovan society have clear parallels in the national movement of the late-1980s. For some, the movement meant the rediscovery of the Moldovans' 'true' Romanian identity after decades of official Soviet slavery. Others saw the nationalistic manifestations as the assertion of the Moldovan local sovereignty over imperial interests. Finally, there were some that perceived the changes as a defeat of Soviet 'internationalism' at the hands of a narrow-minded ethnic chauvinism. By the 1990s, the Moldovans were still a nation divided over their common 'national' identity. For some, they were simply Romanians who, due to the treachery of the Soviets, had not been allowed to express their national identity openly. For others, they were an independent historical nation, related to, but distinct from the Romanians to the west. Still for others, they were something in-between, part of a general Romanian cultural space, yet existing as a discrete and sovereign people with individual traditions, aspirations, and their own communal identity.

### ***Identity Politics and the Three Waves of Nationalism***

To define Moldovan identity has never been straightforward. Most of the time, in fact, the various projects for cultivating a sense of nationhood turned out rather differently from the way its instigators had planned. As in all ethnic disputes, however, the self-expression of ethnic identity is only part of the picture. Street demonstrations, Romanian flags and nationalistic slogans involved three distinct social groups, for whom questions of identity and language served distinct aims.

The young Moldovan elite from Bessarabia found the language issue to be a useful lever against the older, Russified and traditionally Transnistrian leadership (note that before Semion Grossu, all First Secretaries of the Communist Party of Moldova and the majority of the *nomenklatura* were either from Russia or from Transnistria). On the language issue, this elite had the support of academic circles that had long argued indirectly for the revival of local Moldovan national culture, which was seen as identical with the Romanian one. Without these academics, the reform would have likely displayed something other than a national character.

One must clearly acknowledge though that Moldovenization was not only an affair of the elite, but that it also found support from a ready audience outside the political bodies. The 'informals' of the Popular Front were able to cultivate relations with young urban Moldovans. Recently arrived from villages, they saw the national movement as a chance to augment their positions in the Russian-dominated political, economic, and cultural elite. The prospects of raising the official status of the Moldovan language, thus privileging the linguistic skills that the urban Moldovans had retained during the migration from villages, held the promise of a competitive advantage over the urban Russians and other ethnic groups. Thus, the power of the language issue lay in its serving to obscure the boundaries between these various interest groups and to unite them behind the movement for cultural reform.

The decline of this first manifestation of nationalism came almost as rapidly as its onset. Despite all their achievements in 1988 and 1989, the early Moldovan 'informals' and the



Popular Front made one great strategic error. The leaders increasingly misread the reasons for their success. They perceived the great wave of public demonstrations in 1988 and 1989 as evidence of a national pan-Romanian awakening. Once the Front leaders began to stress only the exclusionary aspect of the movement – by interpreting the language question as a first step towards the reintegration of the Romanian nation and the rejection of Russian oppression – the multiethnic alliance in support of the restructuring became an inevitable casualty.

Most important was the fact that the Soviet project of building a distinct Moldovan nation had yielded a rather ambiguous result. Local political leaders of other national republics came to power in the late-1980s by defending an independent historical and cultural identity, while those in Moldova succeeded by denying theirs. An independent Moldovan state emerged with the breakup of the Soviet Union, but the idea of an independent Moldovan nation seemed to fade together with the remnants of Soviet-style communism. Since then, the legacy of Soviet-era nation-building processes and the controversial question of the 'true' national identity of the Moldovans have remained at the core of political life.

Having served as an important mobilization resource for a short time, the cultural fever proved incapable of keeping the unity of the republic's various interest groups once other ethnic/communal-based interest structures emerged. Already by mid-1989, the Transnistrians and the Gagauz defected from the previously unified movement for reform. The former were exasperated at the rise of the Bessarabian elite as the patrons of the Popular Front, while the latter were convinced that the new laws on language would lead to their forced assimilation into Romanian culture. Among Moldovans themselves, new fault lines were appearing. The most radical members of the Popular Front pushed for the destruction of the Soviet empire and for a pan-Romanian union, while at the opposite end of the spectrum enhanced local control over the cultural and economic resources within a refashioned Soviet federation was considered satisfactory. A Moldovan identity, the issue that had brought all the Moldovans together not so long before, would become one of the primary areas of contention among the same people in the newly independent republic.

Unsurprisingly, the nationalist Popular Front won the parliamentary elections in the MSSR in the spring of 1990, completely dominating Moldovan politics for a while, while *Yedinstvo*, representing the non-titular population on both sides of the river Nistru, was defeated. However, as in 1918, events outside of Moldova ultimately determined the region's fate. In the spring of 1991, the Moldovan leadership had already signaled its desire to break with the Soviet Union. The newly elected officials of the republic decreed that the country would not participate in Gorbachev's referendum regarding the future of the federation, and pleaded for the removal of the 'Soviet' and 'Socialist' labels from the republic's name in May 1991 (*Moldova Suverana*, 14 March 1991: 1 and 24 May 1991: 1). On 27 August 1991, following the attempted coup in Moscow of the same month, the Moldovan parliament declared the full independence of the Republic of Moldova. One of the clauses of the declaration of independence called for the 'liquidation of the political and legal consequences' of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, a clause that seemed to point toward the reunion with Romania (*România Libera* 28 August 1991: 8). Although nothing in the declaration specifically mentioned Romania or the Romanian identity of Moldova's ethnic majority, the issue would become the main fault line within the new political system. Meanwhile, Mircea Snegur was elected as the first president of the country in December 1991, running as the only candidate and with the support of the Popular Front.

The disappointment that many intellectuals felt with the outcome of the national movement was part of a long history of disillusionment experienced by generations of nation-builders. Moldova usually turned out to be something else than what most people had either hoped or expected. Although the MSSR was one of the most Sovietized of all Soviet republics, with high rates of linguistic assimilation towards Russian and high levels of intermarriage, it still witnessed a divisive and violent conflict between the forces supporting independence and those intent on maintaining the unity of the Soviet state. Moldova was a republic that had no clear historical antecedents. Nevertheless, the country produced a strong movement of national renaissance and eventually gained independence. Finally, since 1991 public sentiment has remained rather cool concerning the idea of reunification of the Republic of Moldova with Romania. This happened in spite of the fact that it was a country that, as Western writers frequently observed, was artificial and one of the legacies from Stalin's redefinition of Eastern European borders during the Second World War, and would thus surely seek to reunite with Romania.

One theory about the reasons for the failure of the Soviets to create a distinct and durable Moldovan nation is that the entire project had an artificial character from the very beginning. Before accepting such a position, however, one has to keep in mind a number of facts. To start with, the cultural policies in the MSSR were no more artificial than similar efforts in other republics of the Soviet Union. Building a distinct 'national' culture in Moldova failed for a far simpler reason – after the Second World War, no serious attempt to accomplish such a goal in a proper way was made. The rhetoric of a national distinctiveness was still there, of course, and was reiterated at party congresses, yet the efforts at cultivating a truly separate culture had effectively ended with Stalin's annexation of Bessarabia. What is more perhaps even more important in understanding the national revival of 1991 is that prior to the unsuccessful nation-building project in the Soviet Union, similar attempts in Romania had equally failed. Despite a consistent state-led effort in the interwar years to convince the inhabitants of Bessarabia of their Romanian origins, many remained ambivalent about their relationship to the Romanian state. Given this legacy of ambivalence, the real surprise of 1991 was not the reluctance of the Moldovans to rush into a union with Romania, but the expectations of so many Western observers that the Moldovans would actually do so.

However, Western observers were not the only ones to get it wrong. After having rallied under the banner of national independence during *perestroika*, the Popular Front switched to a program of reunification with Romania shortly after independence had been achieved. To its immense surprise, however, the Front soon realized that such a program was out of step with the population at large, as well as with significant sections of the Moldovan elite. Not only ethnic minorities but also most Moldovans had quickly realized that Romania was by far no social or economic paradise. Additionally, bleak memories of hard times under Romanian rule in the interwar period resurfaced. The militancy of the Popular Front triggered other Moldovan political figures to make their desire for the continued existence of a separate state more public. Snegur, foreseeing the failure of the Popular Front, left the party to become the main spokesperson of the pro-Moldovan camp. He joined with the Moldovan independence-oriented Agrarian Party, which emerged from the old agricultural and Communist party elite and which now defended Moldova's sovereignty.

During a trip to Bucharest in February 1992, Snegur addressed a joint session of the Romanian parliament and spoke favorably of 'our sister country – Romania', while at the same time carefully emphasizing the sovereignty of Moldova. In fact, his indirect reference to the historical borders of Moldova – including areas in Romania and Ukraine – pointed toward the birth of a 'Greater Moldova' nationalism, allegedly to fend off the calls for a Greater Romania coming from Bucharest (*Moldova Suverana*, 15 February



1992: 1-2). By the spring of 1992, Snegur and most of the Moldovan political elite had settled for a 'two states' doctrine: continuously defending Moldovan independence while maintaining strong cultural ties with Bucharest. This proved extremely effective only three years later, when a referendum held on 6 March 1995 showed that 95% of participants supported the independence of the Moldovan state.

The Popular Front stuck to its pro-unification agenda, and became politically marginalized as a result. After the cultural triumph of the *perestroika* period, the Front quickly became a victim of its own success. Once its goals had been reached – bringing back to life the Romanian culture in the Republic of Moldova, eradicating the notion of an independent Moldovan cultural identity and finally engineering independence – serious questions about the organization's future inevitably emerged. For the radical pan-Romanians, the logical culmination of the Front's activities was supposed to be not only to avoid the creation of a separate Moldovan identity, but also that of a separate Moldovan state. For the more moderate, however, the organization's aim was to encourage cultural and economic links with Romania while proceeding at a slower pace towards a political reunion. At its third congress in February 1992, when the Front reorganized itself from a mass movement into a political party, the Christian Democratic Popular Front (FPCD), an explicit commitment to a Moldovan-Romanian reunion was included in the statutes: 'The Christian Democratic Popular Front maintains its status as a national, unionist movement, whose major objective is the reintegration in the Unitary Romanian State.' (*Programul Frontului Popular Crestin Democrat* 1992: 8) The radicalization of the Popular Front seriously weakened the numerical strength of the organization. The Front was able to attract hundreds of thousands of Moldovans to the Grand National Assembly in 1989, but only a few hundred supporters turned out for similar rallies in the summer of 1993.

Many Moldovans remain uncertain about their national identity. The Constitution of 1994 stipulates that the official language of the republic is 'Moldovan', and that Moldova shall also 'maintain, develop and express an ethnic and linguistic identity'. In the campaign leading up to the 1994 elections, several newly formed parties attempted to play down the identity issue and to focus the electorate's attention on the poor economic situation in the country, on the land distribution issue and on the need for constitutional reform. However, the campaign was significantly shaped by the effort of a government-sponsored special congress on national identity. The congress, called 'Our Home – The Republic of Moldova', was held in Chisinau under the aegis of the Moldovan Civic Alliance, an organization consisting of forces opposing the ideals of pan-Romanianism. The discussions at the congress rejected the notion of unity with Romania and underscored the need for consolidating independence and territorial integrity (Shatokhina 1994: 3).

The reason for the government's change of heart regarding the question of identity was clear. By embracing an indigenous Moldovan nationalism and resurrecting the notion of an independent Moldovan language, Snegur attempted to portray himself and his government as guarantors of independence and territorial integrity, a line which played well in the countryside. The strategy generated its first results during the parliamentary elections in 1994 where the Agrarian Democratic Party (ADP) won (with 43.2% of the vote) 54 out of 101 seats in the Moldovan Parliament. In the 1995 local government elections, the ADP increased its share in the vote to 47.1%.

The new parliament started reversing many of the reforms introduced under the Popular Front in the early 1990s. The national anthem was changed from 'Desteapta-te, Române!' (Romanian, Beware!) – the same anthem as in Romania – to 'Limba Noastra' (Our Language), a song that reflects both 'the independence of the state and the



aspiration of people to prosperity' (*Nezavisimaia Moldova*, 9 June 1994: 1). Paradoxically, the new hymn never mentions whether 'our language' was 'Romanian' or 'Moldovan'. An amendment to the constitution made in July 1994 stated that 'the state language of the Republic of Moldova is the Moldovan language [*limba moldovenească*] and functions on the basis of the Latin script', containing no reference to the relationship between the Moldovan and Romanian languages (*Constitutia Republicii Moldova* 1994: 7).

A second peak of nationalism occurred in 1995. Although considerably less intense than in the early 1990s, the events of 1995 had a significant impact on Moldova's image in Europe. To recall, 1995 was the second year of Snegur's pan-Moldovan rhetoric. During the first months of the year, the government was planning a reform of the country's education system, changing two subjects in the curriculum: 'Romanian' language and 'Romanian' history were to become 'Moldovan' language and 'Moldovan' history. However, public reactions to this plan were unexpectedly hostile. Enjoying uncontested supremacy in the political arena of Moldova, the ADP committed the same error as its predecessor, the Popular Front, by not correctly assessing the significance of identity politics in the Moldovan society. Huge waves of demonstrations were launched immediately throughout the country. In Chisinau, tens of thousands of high school and university students were picketing both the Parliament and the Presidency for weeks in a row on a daily basis, demanding the immediate annulment of the 'shameful law'.

Most of the leaders of this new identity movement were high school and university professors and representatives of the Moldovan intelligentsia. These highly respected intellectuals hurried to create a party to run in the presidential elections in fall 1996. Despite a being a classical single-issue party focusing solely on the restoration of a pro-Romanian cultural policy, these intellectuals enjoyed enormous popularity and soon became the leaders of the anti-government movement.

The sequence of events that led to Moldova's exit from the Soviet Union created a political system in a perpetual campaign mode. Presidency, parliament and local government were all created at different times between 1989 and 1991, and new elections for the various levels of national and local government were never coordinated. Moldova had a major election almost every year after its independence: presidential elections in 1991, parliamentary elections in 1994, local elections in 1995, presidential elections in 1996, parliamentary elections in 1998, local elections in 1999, presidential elections in 2000, and parliamentary elections in 2001. Therefore, important political and economic problems remained largely unaddressed since few political figures were willing to make bold moves that could ironically be used against them or their parties in the next elections. A decade after the demise of Soviet totalitarianism, the political parties of the Republic of Moldova thus continued to form a spectrum ranging from those supporting some form of political union with Romania, those in favor of independence, to those desiring some degree of reintegration with Russia and the former Soviet republics.

Although the peak of identity politics seemed to have passed, the feebleness of party ideologies meant that the identity question remained an important determinant of political affiliation. Under pressure from the masses, the parliament dominated by Agrarians seemed to have lost the capacity for effective decision-making. Following a short period of siege inactivity, officials managed to produce a policy that annulled the contested curriculum reform. Snegur, attempting to recapture popular support, called on the Agrarian-dominated parliament to modify the constitution, declaring Romanian the official language. This move proved fatal for his political career. In the 1996 presidential elections he was defeated by Petru Lucinschi who won 54% of the vote after a campaign dominated by nationalistic rhetoric and almost completely screening out the





economic and social problems of the country. Lucinschi had had an illustrious career in Moldovan politics, serving as the penultimate first secretary of the Communist Party, then as the ambassador to Moscow, and finally as the speaker of the parliament. There was little difference between him and Snegur, except for his conviction that Moldova would be much better off if the country repaired its ties with the Russian Federation. However, after the new president came to office, Moldova's foreign policy remained unchanged. Having been at the center of Moldovan political life since late 1980s, Lucinschi's election to the presidential post represented little more than a continuation of the course of moderate reform that the country had pursued since its independence. Lucinschi's first trip abroad was to Bucharest, where he warmed relations with Romania by denouncing the history that separated the two brother states. Nevertheless, the trip to Romania was quickly followed by trips to former Soviet republics, including Russia.

The 1998 parliamentary elections, however, did signal an important change. The resurrected Party of Communists secured 30% of the vote and the largest number of seats in the parliament. The party was headed by Vladimir Voronin and constituted one of the several successors to the old Communist Party of Moldova, banned with the collapse of the Soviet Union. The law prohibited the use of the old name – the 'Communist Party of Moldova', hence the unusual 'Party of Communists'. From that point on and until the parliamentary elections of 2001, the dominant (and competing) trends in Moldovan politics were, on the one hand, the general attempt of containment of communism and the steady development of a strong network of influence by the communist party, on the other. All political alliances during these years were built with the sole reason of forming a parliamentary majority and of blocking legislation introduced (or supported) by the communists.

Against the background of these domestic political difficulties, the country's relationship with Romania remained an important foreign and domestic policy issue. In a speech before a joint session of the United States Congress in July 1998, Emil Constantinescu, then President of Romania, declared that the 'sensitive issues' that had existed between Romania and Moldova had been 'resolved without tension' (Constantinescu 1998). Despite this optimistic assessment, relations between Chisinau and Bucharest ran hot and cold throughout the 1990s, and continue to do so at the beginning of the new century. Following the anti-communist revolution in Romania and the Moldovan declaration of independence, there was significant support for closer ties in both capitals. The August coup in Moscow was read both in Chisinau and especially in Bucharest as a parallel to the Bolshevik seizure of power in 1917 – and as creating the political momentum that would finally bring Bessarabia back to the Romanian motherland. Appeals to Moldovans for unity and solidarity at the time of the coup were a typical fixture of the Romanian media. The then governing National Salvation Front of Romania called Moldovan independence the first step towards rectifying the 'territorial amputation of 1940'.

Despite the special ties that developed between Romania and Moldova in the spheres of education and culture, relations between the political elites of the two countries oscillated from avowals of pan-Romanian brotherhood to harsh, mutual denunciations. The most important reason for this was the fact that the 'Bessarabian question' simply never became a major factor in Romanian domestic politics, hence giving politicians there little incentive to push the issue onto Romania's foreign policy agenda. All parties in Bucharest agreed that the annexation in 1940 was illegal, that there was no question about the true Romanian identity of the Moldovans (even if some Moldovans refused to recognize this), and that in an ideal world the two states would certainly be joined into a reconstituted Greater Romania. Since all parties and the overwhelming part of

Romanian society accepted these basic tenets, no political grouping could use Moldova as a wedge issue. In the three presidential elections that were held in Romania since 1991, only once did a candidate make the Moldovan-Romanian union a key part of his platform. The candidate, however, who was also the former Prime Minister of Moldova (Mircea Druc), finished last in the race. In the 1996 and 2000 presidential elections, no candidate raised the Moldovan question at all. The coming to power of moderates in both capitals allowed the relationship to mature beyond the national euphoria of 1991 and the sniping of 1994.

Romania was the first state to recognize the independent Republic of Moldova – only a few hours, in fact, after the declaration of independence was issued by the Moldovan parliament. Within a few days accords were signed on the establishment of embassies and consulates. Within a few weeks, visa and passport-free border regimes were established, allowing Romanian and Moldovan citizens to travel from one country to the other with identity cards only. Already in 1991, Romania started to grant textbooks to Moldovan schools and libraries and began to offer scholarships to Moldovan students for studying at Romanian high schools and universities (Bula 1991: 4). In 1993, the Romanian parliament issued a law that stipulated a mandatory special fund in the annual state budget for the development and improvement of relations with Moldova. After starting to supply electric power to Moldova in 1998, Romania consolidated its position as Moldova's largest trading partner outside the former Soviet republics. Nevertheless, Chisinau's continuous orientation towards the East ensured that the position of its western neighbor as such would not augment: in 1998, about 11.5% of the total value of Moldova's imports came from Romania and 6.8% of the country's exports were directed to Romania (*Logos Press Ekonomicheskoe Obozrenie*, 10 September 1998: 25).

The independent Moldovan state is now an acknowledged fact in European politics. Arguments for a Moldovan-Romanian union have largely fallen on deaf ears on both sides of the River Prut. For Moldovans, the promise of a union with an economically desperate Romania held few advantages. For the Romanians, welcoming the reckless brothers back into the pan-Romanian fold, together with significant numbers of Ukrainians and Russians, was hardly an appealing proposition. Even if all Moldovans were convinced of their Romanian heritage, the strong economic disincentives for the union with Romania would remain a brake for pan-Romanian unification. Moreover, as Moldova continues to develop structures of independent statehood and produce new generations of leaders with loyalty to the Moldovan state, independence is likely to become even more attractive. As time passes, the dominant logic becomes that one will be better off as the president of Moldova than the mayor of Chisinau.

### ***The Transnistrian Question***

Unfortunately, the same argument can be made about Transnistria. One should not be surprised by the fact that the strongest opposition to the 1988 national movement came from Transnistria. In those years, the issue that received the greatest attention was the proposal to adopt Moldovan as the republic's official language and to transfer to the Latin script. For the not ethnically Moldovan sections of society, the proposed language laws were clear evidence not only of the anti-Soviet and anti-Party views of the Moldovan 'informals', but also of the shifting balance of power towards the Moldovan majority and away from those groups that had traditionally exercised authority. The language laws and the rise of a new generation of largely Bessarabian politicians threatened the position of Transnistrians within the political and social hierarchy. From this perspective, the reaction to the national movement cannot be read as a revolt by 'endangered minorities', but as a revolt by a displaced elite against those that threatened to displace it.



From August 1989, when the language laws were introduced, to the end of fall of 1991 the Transnistrian leadership consolidated its hold on the region on the eastern bank of the Nistru. Moreover, in a short violent escalation in the spring of 1991, the Transnistrians gained control over certain portions of the western bank, especially the important city of Bender. By September 1991, Moldova was virtually secluded from the rest of the Soviet Union since the major rail and road links to Ukraine and beyond ran through the eastern-bank cities of Ribnita, Bubasari and Tiraspol, all loyal to the newly proclaimed Transnistrian republic.

A relevant point that one should keep in mind is the reaction of the Transnistrians to the Moscow coup which was completely opposite to the one the officials in Chisinau formulated. The Ukrainian-born leader of the opposition movement and later Transnistria's separatist president, Igor Smirnov, publicly praised the leaders of the Moscow coup as saviors of the Soviet Union and promised military assistance to support the state of emergency. The moment they found out that the coup had failed, putting an end to the Soviet Union rather than saving the empire, the Transnistrians rushed to shore up their own state. In cooperation with the Gagauz, the Transnistrians suggested the establishment of a tripartite federation with Moldova. The Moldovan parliament rejected the proposal and instead used the opportunity of the Transnistrian coup attempt to target the leaders of the separatist movement.

At that point, the Chisinau authorities committed two disastrous mistakes. The first one was to capture Smirnov and several local Transnistrian officials and charge them with supporting the illegal coup. This can only be considered a serious misjudgment, as its immediate consequence was an increase in the popularity of, and support for, Smirnov on the eastern bank, as well as instant threats to cut off gas and electricity supplies to the rest of Moldova (87.5% of the electric energy production is located on the eastern bank). The second mistake was that the central authorities eventually capitulated and released the leaders, the incident thus serving only to convince the Transnistrians that compromise with Chisinau was unnecessary. These two mistakes led to the proclamation of the Dnestr<sup>2</sup> Moldovan Republic (DMR) on 2 September 1990.

In the early stages of the Transnistrian conflict, the Soviet Fourteenth Army played a key role. In March 1991, the Chisinau authorities issued notes of protest to the Moscow central authority and the Soviet defense ministry complaining of the army's assistance to the Transnistrians (*Moldova Suverana*, 20 March 1991: 1). The arms wielded by the DMR's newly established security forces originally came from poorly guarded Fourteenth Army military stores. The central command of the Transnistrian forces also came from the Fourteenth Army officer corps. Thus, Lieutenant-General Ghenadii Iakovlev, the army's commander, defected in early 1992 to head up the DMR's armed forces, and colonel Stefan Chitac, the army's former chief of staff became Transnistria's first defense minister (Socor 1992: 44). The move from Soviet to Transnistrian allegiance was a breach of military discipline that would have had to be court-martialed by a Soviet Army Military Tribunal. However, in the existing situation when soldiers lost the state to which they had pledged their lives, it seems logical that the officers switched their loyalty to Transnistria, which they considered their homeland, rather than to Russia. The Russian Federation asserted formal control over the Fourteenth Army only in the spring of 1992, and by that time, the flow of men and material to the Transnistrians had already been substantial.

The arms race continued throughout the fall of 1991 and the beginning of 1992. On the one hand, further defections occurred from the Fourteenth Army into the DMR forces,

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<sup>2</sup> Dnestr is the Russian translation of Nistru.

while simultaneously Cossacks from Russia and Ukraine arrived to assist the Transnistrians. On the other hand, the Moldovans introduced conscription and armed with resources that came from Soviet military and interior ministry stores over which the Moldovans had asserted control, although both General Alexander Lebed, the new commander of the Fourteenth Army and the Russian defense minister, Pavel Grachev, would later allege that Romanian military advisors and pilots were active in Moldova (*Sovetskaia Rossiia*, 7 July 1992: 1). The first serious hostilities between the two sides occurred on 13 December 1991, when Moldovan police officers tried to disarm the Transnistrian irregulars around Dubasari (Socor 1992: 8-13). Tensions escalated over the spring and summer, and over a hundred people were killed in battles along the river. Bridges across the Nistru were mined or destroyed by the Transnistrians. The extensive military operations west of the Nistru by DMR forces, prompted President Snegur to announce a state of emergency effective over the entire republic at the end of March. By May, the Fourteenth Army units had also become involved in the fighting, with the apparent goal of pacifying the conflict, but more often than not openly assisting the Transnistrians.

On 19 June 1992 one of the most important events of the entire Transnistrian conflict occurred. Transnistrian forces stormed the last remaining police station in Bender, still loyal to the Chisinau government. Moldovan forces from the surrounding area attempted to fight their way into Bender and succeeded in retaking most of the city. The population was largely Russian, but ethnicity had little to do with the aims of either side. Bender was a major arms depot and the only remaining major road and rail artery still linking Chisinau to the rest of the former Soviet republics. Bender was thus economically vital to the future of the Moldovan state and the government's military actions were an attempt to gain back a strategically important piece of territory. After a day of fighting though, the Fourteenth Army intervened in the conflict and on the night of 20-21 June fought alongside the DMR troops to drive the government forces from the city.

The longer-term effects of the battle were profound. As Russian Federation Vice President Alexander Rutskoi would later declare, the intervention was spurred by the Moldovans, who had committed 'a bloody massacre' against local Russians when they entered the city (*România libera*, 23 June 1992: 1). This secured official Russian involvement in the dispute. The escalation of the conflict posed a threat both to Russian interests in the region and above all to the Transnistrians, whom the Russian press and Duma had long portrayed as an embattled Russian minority fighting against chauvinistic Moldovan nationalism.

The actual decision to intervene was probably taken by the Fourteenth Army commander, Lieutenant-General Iurii Netkachev, rather than by the Moscow leadership. By summer 1992, the lines of communication between the Fourteenth Army headquarters and Moscow had largely broken down. The Russian defense ministry never publicly claimed responsibility for ordering the intervention. Thus, Netkachev's intervention illustrated the degree to which Russian commanders on the ground were acting without the full control of Moscow. Therefore, one should not be surprised that within days of the Bender battle, the commander lost his post to Major-General Alexander Lebed', the young airborne officer and personal ally of the recently appointed Russian defense minister, Pavel Grachev.

Finally, just as the war helped consolidate the position of the Transnistrians, so did the violence in many ways set the worldview of the Moldovans. Chisinau had long been less than enthusiastic about cooperation with Russia and the Commonwealth of Independent States, but the intervention of Russian troops and the continued pro-DMR rhetoric from the Russian Duma convinced many leaders that the Russian Federation was intent on



using the Transnistrian crisis as a way of exercising control over Moldovan domestic affairs. So long as Moldova remained divided, Russia's security and political aims in the region could be achieved. The violence also had a legitimizing effect on the newly independent Moldovan leadership, who took on the mantle of defender of the territorial integrity of the young state. Since the war was clearly lost by the Moldovans, however, monuments to the heroes of the conflict in Chisinau were more modest than those in Tiraspol.

By the beginning of the new millennium Moldova had become a divided state. The country has two legislatures, two tax systems, two flags, three state languages (in Transnistria, Russian and Ukrainian are also state languages alongside with Moldovan), two state coins and, by far not the least important, two opposing armies. Repeated rounds of unsuccessful negotiations have allowed Tiraspol to develop all the attributes of statehood. In its present form, the situation could hardly be changed without a major fundamental restructuring of the Moldovan state. From the earliest days of the conflict, Chisinau promised to grant a special territorial status to Transnistria and the creation of the Gagauz autonomous territorial entity in 1995 provided a template ready to be applied. However, as long as Tiraspol continues to be supported by influential old-style hardliners in the Russian Duma, Transnistrian leaders have little incentive to accept anything short of a loose confederation if not complete independence.

A question that remains unanswered is that of the Moldovan identity in the context of the two existing 'Eastern Latin' states. By the end of the Nineties, the importance of linguistic and cultural culture issues among Moldovans had already declined considerably. Moldova still has an official 'language day' – the *Limba Noastra* (Our Language) holiday held on 31 August – but celebrations receive little support from both the state and the public at large. The cultural fever, including the vast array of books and articles that celebrated the mystical link between language and the spiritual essence of the nation, has abated.

#### ***Perspectives: Quo Vadis Moldova?***

February 2001 marked the beginning of a new era in the political life of the Moldovan state. When the political elites of the republic seemed reluctant to mature beyond the politics of language and tackle long-overdue political and economic reforms, it was only a question of time until people would refuse to support them any longer. This led to the victory in February 2001 of the Party of Communists, with a constitutional, yet largely Russian-only speaking majority in parliament. A rapid amendment to the constitution suddenly transformed the country into a parliamentary democracy. Elected by the parliament, the third president of the Republic of Moldova unsurprisingly became Vladimir Voronin, the head of the party.

Again unsurprising was the reaction of the FPCD and its leader – Iurie Rosca. In a frontist style, the leaders of the party called for the third time in a decade for a national assembly. The 1991 assembly was a complete success, gathering hundreds of thousands of citizens from throughout the country. The one in 1995 was a good demonstration of public opinion, where all those that felt the need, found a means to make themselves heard. In 2002, throughout the entire month of January and most of spring, a tent village was created in the center of Chisinau. Populated mainly by university students, the event was a continuous manifestation of the discontent felt by large numbers of people with the political elite. The low turnout of the FPCD-sponsored National Assembly in late February, which hardly attracted 50,000 supporters, most of whom were anti-Communist rather than FPCD supporters, served as a final indicator that Moldovan society had moved on.

The communist-dominated parliament and government decided to change the image of the country completely from what has been created in the past ten years. The aforementioned special relationship in the education and culture spheres between the Republic of Moldova and Romania was almost completely abandoned in less than nine months. First, a law was passed that changed the country from the Romanian-style historical administrative division back to a Soviet-style one. In March 2002, a Romanian diplomat, the military attaché Ion Ungureanu, was declared *persona non grata* on the territory of Moldova. At the same time, the Ministry of External Affairs of Moldova did not even bother to offer a valid justification for the declaration, claiming in a short official letter that the diplomat broke international conventions after being seen to pass through the main square of Chisinau during the spring protests. Later, the Minister of Education, Gheorghe Sima, himself a member of the communist party, shocked the entire population of Moldova and Romania when he declared in July 2002 that he was considering to reject the annual two thousand scholarships offered by the Romanian government to students from the Republic of Moldova (Marinoi 2002: 1-3). The only explanation given was that in 2002 the number of prospective students in Moldova is smaller than the number of scholarship proposals the Ministry received from abroad. No need to mention that every year more than 75,000 students graduate from high schools throughout the country, thus becoming potential candidates for those scholarships.

The most contentious issue on the domestic agenda is the proposal to transform the Republic of Moldova into a federation. Initially sponsored by the OSCE and the Russian Federation, the proposal is supported in the parliament by a group of Russian-speaking members of the communist party. According to the project, the new constitution of Moldova would be identical to the constitution of the Russian Federation. The irony of the entire situation is that such a project has *de facto* only the support of less than 25% of Moldovan society, has a considerable chance to become law in the near future. In this context, one should also keep in mind that plans to introduce mandatory Russian language studies in primary schools enjoyed considerably less public attention, attracting only about 50,000 protesters to a demonstration in the central square of Chisinau. The years until the next parliamentary elections in 2005 will continue to be marked by a decision-making process that will often be full of unpleasant surprises for ordinary Moldovans. The only alternative to the present communist dominance of Moldovan politics would be for the centre of the Moldovan political spectrum to stop playing personality-oriented games and to develop a comprehensive reform agenda that could win sufficient public support.

In conclusion then, the Moldovan story since independence (and arguably before then as well) is fundamentally one of troubled relationships between the political elite and the people they claim to represent, between nation-builders and the nations they aim to build. In the past, a deep chasm separated these groups. Cultural engineers, whether Russian, Romanian, or Soviet, went about their task with little regard for existing cultural practices or political aspirations of their 'target' populations. 'The people' have been both the source and the object of competing visions of the nation that were promoted over the past two centuries. At the same time, what the people themselves desired rarely figured in the various schemes devised for their enlightenment. However, by the late 1980s this gap began to close. For the first time in the region's history, the people of Moldova were allowed a say in their own political, economic, social and cultural future. However, one then should not find it surprising that they speak with many voices.

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