

Moldova's First Quarter Century: Flawed Transition and Failed Democracy

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Abstract

This article assesses Moldova's political evolution during its first 25 years of independence. It argues that while the country has gone through 3 very distinct periods of governance during that time, the underlying conditions that have hobbled efforts to establish a stable democratic regime remained consistent. These included the country's precarious location in the international system, weak institutions and the rule of law, and a deep cleavage regarding national identity. Consequently, the country settled into a pattern of systemic corruption and, at best, a deeply flawed form of democracy. By the end of this period, Moldovans faced the task of mounting a renewed effort to regain control over their political institutions.

Keywords: comparative politics; democratization; postcommunism

Introduction

On becoming independent in 1991, the Republic of Moldova faced the daunting task of simultaneously implementing economic reforms, developing new democratic political institutions and formulating a coherent national identity. Complicating these tasks, its highly diverse population was torn culturally in different directions. While progress has been made in some of these areas by fits and starts over the course of its first quarter century of independence, during that time Moldova failed to establish either a stable democratic polity or a functional market-capitalist economy. Rather, it settled within the category of stabilized hybrid or partly-democratic regimes that emerged in several postcommunist cases. Despite intensive support from the European Union and other Western actors and periods of optimism, after 20 years of independence, the country appeared to be regressing, its institutions succumbed to state capture, its economic prospects were limited, and by the end of the period under consideration, its identity was as challenged as ever. The flaws in Moldova's postcommunist transition are well recognized. Lucan Way termed Moldova's experience as "pluralism by default," suggesting that elite factions held each other in check in the absence of a strong state but that they never became democratically accountable to the broader population (Way 2002). Eleanor Knott (2018) suggests that this pattern of "democratic backsliding" in Moldova is the consequence a shifting balance of factors that support democratic progress and those which favor authoritarian consolidation.

This study argues that, while Moldova experienced 3 distinct periods of political development in 25 years of postcommunism, a consistent set of problems has shaped its evolution throughout. The first is the lack of institutions through which political leaders can effectively be held accountable to their constituents. In the absence of such institutions, political parties became clientelist vehicles of individual leaders. Second, the Transnistrian separatist crises that emerged on independence

remained (and remains) unresolved, leaving the country suspended on the margin of the European integration process, with identity issues continuing to fracture the population (Mungiu-Pippidi 2007). Finally, the weak rule of law engendered an environment in which judicial proceedings became weapons through which elite factional disputes were fought out. The corruption that pervades the political class developed into a fundamental element of the Moldovan political system.

Transition, Deadlock, and the Failed Politics of the 1990s

Throughout history, the territory that comprises the current Republic of Moldova has been shaped by its status as a contested borderland. While a short-lived independent principality, including the territory of the present republic, was established in the mid-14th century, it re-emerged as a sovereign state only in the 20th century. The bulk of the current Moldova, Bessarabia, was annexed by Russia following the Russo-Turkish War of 1806–1812. During the late-19th and early 20th centuries, Imperial Russia and Romania each sought to impose competing visions of the region and exercise control over Bessarabia (Andrei Cusco 2017). When Bessarabia was reunited with Romania as a consequence of the First World War and Russian revolution, the new Soviet regime established an alternative political entity, the Moldovan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic, on the left bank of the Dniester River. Bessarabia changed hands again in 1940, being forcibly annexed and joined with the Moldovan ASSR to form the Soviet Socialist Republic of Moldova. The influx of immigrants from other parts of the Soviet Union substantially altered the character of the republic's population, increasing the number of ethnic Russians, particularly in urban areas (King 2000, 114–119). As it approached independence, Moldova's population comprised approximately 65% ethnic Romanians (some identifying as Romanian and others as Moldovan), 14% Ukrainians, 13% Russians, and several smaller minority groups (Moldova Country Study 1995). Russian speakers collectively made up approximately 1/3 of the population, with Russians being concentrated in the cities and the Gagauz (an Orthodox Christian Turkic ethnic group) and Bulgarian minorities located largely in the south.

As the transition from communism began in the late 1980s, Moldova suffered from a series of woes, including growing ethnic divisions, a stagnating economy, and popular alienation from the Soviet political elite. Encouraged by Mikhail Gorbachev's democratization efforts in Moscow, Moldovan opposition leaders organized themselves as the Popular Front of Moldova and pressed for reform on both political and national issues. Their demands included a highly charged call for liberalizing laws governing the use of the Romanian language. The Popular Front activists' focus on the language issue helped to mobilize Romanian speakers, but at the cost of increasing tension with the already anxious Russophone population. Many Russian speakers gravitated toward the pro-communist Interfront movement (later rechristened as *Edinstvo*). With its strongest base of support in the industrial cities on the east bank of the Dniester River, *Edinstvo* became the focal point for a backlash among Russian-speaking minorities (Crowther 1997, 42–45).

A transitional legislative election in 1990 transferred power to a combination of Popular Front members and reform-minded Communists. Mircea Snegur, a reformist member of the political establishment, was elected president of the republican Supreme Soviet, while Mircea Druc, an avowedly pro-Romanian opposition leader, was appointed Prime Minister. Supported by an increasingly militant nationalist faction within the Popular Front, Druc introduced a series of extremely divisive legislative measures, further fueling the backlash by Russian-speaking minorities (King 2000, 151–152). Once underway, inter-ethnic hostility took on a life of its own. In the southern districts, the Gagauz announced the formation of their own independent republic. Leaders in pro-Russian cities along the Dniester declared the formation of the Pridnestrovian Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic (otherwise Transnistria). While the Gagauz issue was settled through negotiation of an autonomy agreement, Transnistria's leaders successfully asserted their independence from Moldova. A relatively brief civil war between November 1991 and July 1992 established Transnistria as an unrecognized but de facto independent state. When Moldovan forces threatened

to gain the upper hand in fighting, the Russian 14th Army forces intervened to ensure Transnistria's survival (King 1994).

From mid-1991 onward, the unresolved Transnistrian separatist issue, traversing the boundary between domestic and international politics, was among the most significant factors shaping Moldova's political evolution (Mungiu-Pippidi 2007). Moscow's military guarantee defines the parameters of effective diplomatic action, creating the "frozen conflict" that has continually impacted both Chişinău's internal and foreign policies. The pro-Russian separatist state provides the Kremlin with leverage that can be used to prod Moldova in the direction of favorable political and security arrangements, or at least to retard its Westward drift. With the separatist issue unresolved, the prospect for Moldova's reunification with Romania or integration into the EU was effectively blocked, leaving the country suspended between cultural and political zones.

From the outset of independence, Moldova's political elite was both deeply fragmented and only partly accountable to its own population (Calus 2016, 19-21). As Soviet era institutions broke down, politics became increasingly disordered. New civic institutions that could have provided citizens with channels of influence were slow to take shape. Power struggles within the leadership hindered the policymaking process, adding to the confusion. Conservatives sought to slow reforms and preserve Soviet era social and economic structures, while liberals pushed for privatization and marketization. More extreme elements within the Moldovan Popular Front implicitly or explicitly favored Romanian identity and reunification with Bucharest. Ethnic moderates favored Moldovan identity and independence and sought to construct a consensus between the majority and minority communities. This early fragmentation of Moldova's elite retarded the policymaking process and formation of a coherent state administration. Pluralistic competition among political factions may also, as Lucan Way suggests, have played a role in avoiding a path into authoritarian consolidation (Way 2003, 469-474).

After months of infighting, Mircea Snegur, the key figure in the Moldovan moderate and reformist camp, succeeded in displacing the most militantly pro-Romanian elements from government leadership. However, he was unable to consolidate his hold on power. His leadership was challenged by other powerful elite factions, including the former Moldovan Communist Party First Secretary Petru Lucinschi, who assumed the leadership of parliament in 1993. The legislative elections called in early 1994 failed to resolve the underlying divisions. The most significant outcome of the election was the marginalization of Romanian nationalist parties in favor of those supporting Moldovan identity and ethnic accommodation. An ethnically inclusive constitution was ratified in July 1994, establishing Moldova as a democratic republic with a semi-presidential system that guaranteed basic human rights. An ambitious privatization program was initiated with the support of the World Bank and Western governments. On the surface, therefore, Moldova appeared to be on a positive trajectory and was widely considered to be among the more reformist of post-Soviet states. However, several factors undermined this progress. The most problematic issue was the ongoing struggle for political dominance. Leaders struggled over the pace of reform, the country's foreign policy alignment, and not least, over control of state resources. In the absence of a strong constitutional tradition, ambitious leaders were emboldened to challenge the rules of the political game.

The 1996 presidential elections saw President Snegur replaced by Petru Lucinschi (International Foundation for Electoral Systems 1996, 3-7). Lucinschi's supporters included Moldovans who were less inclined toward Romania and less supportive of rapid reform, as well as moderate Russian speakers. He also benefited from the general perception that, as a former Communist Party First Secretary with strong ties to Moscow, he was better positioned to resolve the Transnistrian issue. Like his predecessors, and despite initial optimism following his election, President Lucinschi was unable to break Moldova's political deadlock or resolve the Transnistrian separatist dispute. Any Transnistrian settlement would have required a major shift in Russia's position, and this did not materialize. Moscow continued to argue for a federal or confederal solution to the dispute, which was unacceptable in Moldova. Despite some wavering, the Kremlin held to the position that Russian

troop withdrawal would occur only after a political resolution was reached between Chişinău and Tiraspol.

Reform progress was further hindered by mounting fragmentation within the elite and an ongoing dispute between President Lucinschi and anti-reform MPs within parliament. With development efforts mired by Chişinău's factional disputes, the Moldovan economy deteriorated. By 1997, Moldova was poorer than any country in Central Europe and poorer than all but 2 former Soviet republics, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan (The World Bank 2002, 4). By the late 1990s, official corruption had grown to near-epidemic proportions and rose to the forefront of public attacks among party leaders (Quinlan 2002, 97). It became increasingly evident to observers that, for many members of the elite, opposition to reform was not driven by ideological considerations, but by economic self-interest. Members of the government engaged in privatization for personal gain, bribery, and self-dealing (Negură 2016, 554). By 2000, the World Bank ranked Moldova among the transition countries with the highest levels of state capture and administrative corruption (World Bank 2000, 15).

As Ion Marandici points out, support for the ruling parties of the 1990s was eroded by “[b]locked reforms, corrupt privatisation, poverty, unemployment, and hyperinflation.” (Marandici 2021, 75). Widespread popular disillusionment with the democratic politicians was manifest in expanding support of the country's successor communist party, the Communist Party of the Republic of Moldova (PCRM), under the leadership of Vladimir Voronin. Following its legalization in 1994, the PCRM emerged as the main focus for those suffering from the failing economy. As the 1998 legislative elections approached, the Communists clearly presented a significant challenge to President Lucinschi, who relied on the same left-wing constituency as the Communists. The PCRM outperformed all other parties in the election, taking 30.1% of the votes and 40 of the available parliamentary seats. The center-right Democratic Convention, an alliance between Mircea Snegur's supporters and the Romanian nationalist Christian Democratic Peoples' Party (CCPD), won 20 seats, President Lucinschi's supporters, organized as the Bloc for a Democratic and Prosperous Moldova followed closely with 24 seats and the center-right Party of Democratic Forces took the final 11 seats (Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe 1998, 7-8). Despite their substantial personal and ideological differences, the leaders of the non-Communist parties united to block the PCRM from coming to power. Bringing together as it did pro-reform and anti-reform, nationalist, and anti-nationalist factions, this anti-Communist coalition did nothing to resolve the divisions that had plagued earlier governments.

As the 1990s drew to a close, President Lucinschi attempted to break the political impasse by instituting a presidential form of government through a referendum. His effort predictably roused sharp resistance from his parliamentary opponents who viewed it as an attempt to marginalize them. The PCRM contended that the initiative was contrary to the democratic principles. The Democratic Convention and the Party of Democratic Forces both argued that Lucinschi's proposal was an effort to introduce an authoritarian “Super Presidency” on the Russian model. Uniting against their common foe, legislators struck back with a counter-proposal to transform Moldova into a more parliamentary system. In September 2000, they passed legislation abandoning the president's direct election in favor of a system in which a parliament selects the president by the vote of three-fifths of the deputies (Roper 2008, 122). By enacting this change, legislators sought to block Lucinschi from winning a second term and to place his successor more firmly under their control. While the effort to check Lucinschi succeeded, the new electoral procedure unexpectedly brought the Communists to power. Furthermore, putting into place a presidential electoral mechanism that required a super majority in Moldova's highly fragmented and polarized parliament generated recurrent institutional crises for more than a decade. In the system's first use in December 2000, no candidate could gain the 61 votes necessary to be chosen president. The failure to elect a president precipitated the dissolution of the parliament in January 2000 (Roper 2008, 122). Early elections were called for the next month, bringing to an end the chaotic first period of the country's postcommunist development.

Moldova's early postcommunist efforts to consolidate a democratic political system were undermined by complex ethnic, national identity, and ideological divisions within the population and among the political elites. While Russophone minorities were unsure of their place within the emerging state, Romanian-speakers divided between a majority that identified as "Moldovan," and an intense minority preferring unification with Romania. Within this context, no cohesive majority emerged, and factional politics became the norm. The Transnistrian separatist dispute further complicated matters, as did a weak institutional structure that encouraged political leaders to act outside legal limits. Lacking sufficient accountability or legal constraints, elites engaged in the formation of extensive clientelist networks and corruption became progressively more embedded in the political system. Moldova's tumultuous early transition thus came to a close amid institutional instability, stalled reform, and growing popular disaffection from the political process.

Vladimir Voronin and the PCRM Decade

Legislators' intentions in 2000 were clearly to bolster a parliamentary form of government, retain the status quo of distributed power among political factions, and avoid ceding control to the president. Ironically, however, the result of these efforts was to usher in nearly a decade of single-party hegemony and defacto presidential rule. The outcome of the parliamentary election in February 2001 was a stunning rejection of the leadership of the preceding decade. The formerly marginalized PCRM won 50% of the vote and 71 out of 101 legislative seats, while support for the governing parties plummeted (OSCE 2001, 13). Having gained a level of political control that was unprecedented in Moldova since independence, the Communists elected their leader, Vladimir Voronin, President of the Republic and set out to reverse the post-Soviet reforms that they found most objectionable. Their agenda called for halting agricultural de-collectivization, limited re-nationalization, and strengthening Moldova's economic relationship with the Russian Federation. The PCRM government almost immediately implemented a plan calling for the reversion of local administrative districts to the Soviet pattern of raions, reversing a major Western-sponsored local government reform effort. Moldova's Parliament ratified a bilateral treaty with the Russian Federation, named Russia as the guarantor of the Transnistrian peace settlement, and recognized the special status of the Russian language. Alarming, the Voronin government also acted quickly to consolidate its hold on power, establish control over the judiciary, limit press freedom, and extend central control over local authorities (Quinlan 2004, 487-488).

Growing concerns among Moldovans about perceived Russification and a return to authoritarian Soviet era practices touched off a growing popular protest movement headed by the Romanian nationalist Christian Democratic People's Party (PPCD). Moldovan politics polarized, pitting supporters of President Voronin and the PCRM against a militant minority that gravitated toward pro-Romanian nationalists. Unwilling to back down, the PCRM government used ever more heavy-handed tactics in an effort to silence its critics. While the Communists' backing remained strong and the party was able to contain its opponents, the domestic political cost of its confrontational approach as well as international pressure ultimately persuaded President Voronin to moderate his course. He agreed to international mediation to end the protests and resumed Western-sponsored economic reforms to regain access to international credit (The Jamestown Foundation 2002). Further brightening the general outlook, Moldova finally began to benefit from reforms introduced during the late 1990s, and from improvement in the Russian economy, which redounded to Moldova's benefit (Negură 2016, 557-558; Quinlan 2004, 498).

Throughout its first legislative term, the PCRM's public standing profited from economic recovery and the widespread perception that improved governance had resulted from its control over both parliament and the presidency. Support for the Communists increased among nearly all demographic groups. However, as new legislative elections approached in 2005, an increasingly coherent opposition began to take shape. Parties ranging from the center-left to the center-right

joined together to form the “Democratic Moldova Bloc” in opposition to the Communists. These forces, along with Iurie Roșca’s right-wing PPCD, attacked the Voronin regime as pro-Russian and anti-democratic. Recognizing its growing vulnerability, the PCRM shifted to a markedly more pro-Western position regarding both domestic and foreign policies. The change in direction came not only in response to its domestic competition but also a sharp deterioration in relations with the Russian Federation. Like Lucinschi before him, President Voronin came to power, assuming that the Transnistrian dispute could be resolved based on a positive relationship between himself and the Kremlin. A solution with Transnistria would have both benefited economic development and enhanced the standing of the PCRM. However, Moscow’s terms for an agreement were widely held as unacceptable in Moldova. In a highly unexpected move in 2003, President Voronin baulked from signing a Russian peace initiative, the so-called “Kozak Memorandum,” leading to the last-minute cancellation of a planned trip by President Putin to Chișinău and an immediate chill in Voronin’s relations with the Kremlin (Smith 2005, 8).

Leaving no doubt regarding their attitudes toward the Chișinău government, Kremlin leaders sought through a variety of methods to bolster Voronin’s domestic political opponents and their separatist clients in Tiraspol. Amid growing hostility and charges of external interference, Voronin recast himself as a stalwart defender of Moldovan national interests in the face of Russian interference. Having thus unexpectedly burned its bridges in Moscow, the PCRM shifted course in the direction of “Europeanization,” and improved relations with Romania. In February 2005, Moldova ratified the EU-Moldova Action Plan, considerably strengthened the government’s relationship with the European Union, and reassured Western-oriented members of the population.

On March 6, 2005, parliamentary elections produced a second clear victory for the PCRM, which won a reduced but substantial legislative majority with 56 seats in parliament. Because the Communists lacked a 3/5ths majority, the opposition parties were in a position to block Vladimir Voronin’s re-election as president and could have thereby forced new legislative elections. However, in a turnaround characteristic of the personalistic nature of Moldovan politics, the PCRM’s harshest critic, the PPCD, broke ranks with its former allies and supported Voronin’s candidacy, ensuring another 5 years of Communist Party hegemony. For his part, PPCD leader, Iurie Roșca was named the Vice President of parliament (March 2007, 614).

The PCRM’s strategic shift in 2005 set Moldova on a less confrontational and more pro-European course. President Voronin came to terms with opposition leaders in parliament on a more positive agenda for his second term. But beneath the surface, severe problems, including lack of accountability, inadequate rule of law, and growing corruption, remained unaddressed. The Voronin leadership was firmly committed to retaining its grip on power and repeatedly infringed upon democratic norms to do so. Moldova made some progress in reducing poverty rates, yet it remained the most impoverished nation in Europe. Lacking opportunities at home, young Moldovans continued to migrate to Western Europe, Ukraine, and the Russian Federation in search of employment opportunities. Foreign direct investment essential to improved domestic production remained low because of concerns regarding high levels of corruption.

Staunch critics of corruption in opposition, once in office, the Moldovan Communist Party leaders showed themselves to be no less prone to exploitation than their predecessors (Quinlan 2004, 493). For the PCRM leaders, as for their predecessors, the primary objective of winning elections appears to have been gaining control over the state to exploit it for private gain. As part of their commitment to reform, the PCRM promised additional privatization in support of free market development. However, as in similar postcommunist cases, a central purpose of privatization in Moldova was the transfer of wealth to the ruling politicians and their allies. Under Voronin, as in the previous periods, valuable assets ended up in the hands of individuals closely affiliated with the ruling party. Because of the state’s regulatory power and political control of the judiciary, access to leading politicians was critical for anyone carrying on high-level business activities. In this environment, President Voronin’s son Oleg emerged as a dominant economic player, as did Vlad

Plahotniuc, future Democratic Party leader, and oligarch, who rose to prominence as a central figure in Voronin's financial network (Marandici 2021, 75).

Despite the PCRM's grip on state institutions, several civil society organizations supported by Western donors remained relatively robust throughout the 2000s, providing the basis for a democratic resurgence in 2009 (Spanu, 2010). Antagonism toward the government was amplified by the fact that the Communist Party's early economic success was not sustained. Not only did President Voronin fail to resolve the Transnistrian conflict, but his clash with the Putin leadership also imposed substantial costs on the country. Finally, uncontrolled corruption re-emerged as a dominant public concern, as it had been in the late 1990s. Over time, fraud and extravagance among Communist leaders became increasingly evident, causing public confidence in the PCRM to plummet, especially among better-educated urban voters. Taking their cue from the earlier successes of the color revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine, Moldovan activists undertook a massive mobilization effort before the April 2009 legislative elections, pressing for full democracy, European integration, and an end to Communist rule. The election, which became the central focus of popular mobilization, was hotly disputed and accompanied by widespread charges of fraud. A narrow victory by the PCRM, which took 49.5% of votes and 60 legislative seats (OSCE 2009a, 34) touched off the so-called "twitter revolution," Moldova's most serious civil unrest since the early 1990s civil war. Arrests and injuries were widespread; 3 deaths occurred, and the authorities faced widespread charges of abuse and torture (Mungiu-Pippidi and Munteanu 2009, 139).

In this highly charged environment, none of the 3 opposition parties that entered parliament—the Liberal Party (PL) with 15 MPs, the Liberal Democratic Party of Moldova (PLDM) with 15 MPs, and Our Moldova Alliance (AMN) which won 11 seats—would cooperate with the PCRM to secure a third term for Voronin (OSCE 2009a, 34). The PCRM was, therefore, unable to elect a president, parliament was dissolved, and a new election was scheduled. Meanwhile, popular outrage over the April election and the government's heavy-handed response to protests fueled support for the opposition parties. Snap elections held on July 29, 2009, saw the PCRM's legislative delegation reduced to 48 seats (an additional 5 members immediately abandoned the party once it became clear that the PCRM would be in opposition). Four Anti-Communist parties controlling 53 legislative seats joined to form the Alliance for European Integration (AIE) coalition. The largest these, the Liberal Democratic Party, won 18 seats. The Liberal Democrats (PL) and the Democratic Party of Moldova (PDM) followed closely, with 15 seats and 13 seats, while the Our Moldova Alliance won 7 seats (OSCE 2009b, 21). The coalition parties formed a new government in September 2009, ending nearly a decade of PCRM hegemony amid high hope that Moldova was entering a new period of stable democratic governance and economic development.

From Factional Conflict to Hegemonic State Capture

Moldovans' success in ending a decade of PCRM rule through popular mobilization and opposition organizing raised expectations that the country was finally on course and entering a new era of democratic progress. Hopes ran high that a new generation of Western-oriented leaders would introduce genuine democratic reforms and promote economic progress. Rather, it ushered in a period of state capture, characterized by intense competition between competing oligarchic factions. From its inception, the AEI coalition was riven by internal divisions. The dysfunction that plagued coalition governments in the 1990s quickly reappeared within the new grouping. Rivalry for governmental positions and resources between coalition leaders, each of whom sat atop an extensive clientelist network, was intense. Democratic Party leader Marian Lupu (who had only resigned from the PCRM to join the Democrats in June 2009), PLDM chief Vlad Filat, and Liberal Party leader Mihai Ghimpu all clearly aspired to the role of *primus inter pares*. Following prolonged negotiations, top government posts were divided among the party leaders. Vlad Filat became prime minister, while PDM leader Marian Lupu was named the coalition's candidate for president. Mihai Ghimpu became president of parliament, and then the acting-president of Moldova. Lower-level

positions were similarly apportioned based on party loyalty. Dividing top positions among rival leaders and placing ministries under the control of competing political parties immediately instigated infighting and hamstrung the coalition's capacity to govern. The widely held perception that early elections were inevitable created further incentives for each of the party leaders to seek immediate advantage and stir controversy to shore up support from potential voters.

Once again, Moldova's 2000 presidential election law compounded the confusion. Following a failed referendum to amend the procedure for electing the president in June 2010, the Constitutional Court ruled that early elections must be held, which they duly were, on November 28th. Prime Minister Filat's PLDM emerged as the strongest among the governing parties, with 32 seats, followed by the PDM with 15 seats, and finally, the Liberal Party which won 12 seats (International Foundation for Electoral Systems 2010). The non-communist parties entered into a new 3-party coalition, the Alliance for European Integration II (AEI-II), forming a government with Vlad Filat returning as prime minister and PDM leader Marian Lupu as president of the parliament and acting president of the country (Cantir 2011, 882). Even in opposition, the PCRM remained the single strongest party in Moldova, largely based on its strength among rural and minority voters, winning a plurality of the vote and 42 legislative seats. Because neither the AEI coalition nor its PCRM opponents commanded the votes necessary to elect a new president or to amend the constitution, Moldova was again thrust into political limbo, as governance took a back seat to partisan maneuvering. The coalition partners argued that a third legislative election in such a quick succession would further destabilize the country. The opposition Communists challenged the basic legitimacy of the government, insisting that presidential elections must be held, and that if no victor emerged, another early parliamentary contest was required. A modicum of stability was not restored until March 2012, when, after repeated attempts, the AEI leaders marshalled enough votes with the support of 3 defecting Communist MPs to elect Nicolae Timofti president (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty 2012). As an independent without a personal political power base, Timofti was acceptable to the competing party factions. However, his long career in a judicial system known for widespread corruption and his lack of experience justifiably raised concerns regarding his ability to exercise authority over the party leaders.

From its foundation, the AEI coalition publicly made commitment to Western integration and reform the centerpiece of its agenda. The EU encouraged Moldova's pro-European direction and supported reform across multiple sectors. In its early years, the post-Voronin government was considered solidly pro-democratic and the strongest regional performer in the context of the EU integration process (Morari 2016, 415). As a consequence, Chişinău benefitted from several EU programs designed to advance Western integration. An action plan on visa liberalization that would allow Moldovan passport holders to travel into the Schengen zone countries visa free began in 2011. The EU Commission found all requirements to be met and implemented visa liberalization for Moldova in April 2014. In June of the same year, Moldova signed an Association Agreement with the European Union in the face of intense pressure emanating from the Kremlin.

Despite formal adherence to Western sponsored reform programs, however, little real progress was made in achieving accountability. Unfortunately, AEI leaders proved to be at least as disposed to criminality as their predecessors. Rather than representing their constituents, the ruling parties served the interests of powerful oligarchs, who took control of broad swaths of the Moldovan economy. With the PCRM marginalized, the principal axis of political competition pitted the PLDM and its leader, Prime Minister Filat, against the Democratic Party under the de facto control of Vlad Plahotniuc. Prime Minister Filat had served as minister of privatization during the Lucinschi presidency and was widely believed to have gained control over his extensive business holdings in that capacity. Vlad Plahotniuc, who left the Communists in 2009 along with Marian Lupu, was known to be in actual control of the PDM long before he assumed official leadership of the party in 2016. Like Prime Minister Filat, Plahotniuc amassed a large fortune well before the AEI coalition came to power. Documentation is difficult to obtain, but Filat and Plahotniuc are both believed to have accumulated fortunes ranging into the hundreds of millions of dollars (Calus

2015a, 3). While these top leaders overshadowed the rest of the Moldovan politic class, a much broader system of clientelist relationships and informal alliances permeated the entire top level of the society, linking networks of interest across the private and public sectors (Ciurea 2017). Appointments to public offices, including the judiciary and police agencies, election supervision, and financial oversight and banking were made through private agreements among the party leaders (Turcanu 2011).

The corruption problem, already widely recognized by the population, was made painfully evident through a series of highly public scandals that began shortly after the AEI came to power. These included a series of so called “raider attacks” through which the ownership of several of Moldova’s most important financial institutions, including Banca de Economii Moldova, Moldovan Agroindbank, and Victoriabank, was misappropriated (Ziarul de Gardă, 2011; Stack 2013). The raider attacks clearly required the complicity of public authorities, as did the large-scale money laundering that was carried out through Moldova in collaboration with Russian organized crime groups (Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project 2014). Finally, and most alarming, was the monumental 2014 theft of nearly 1/5th of Moldova’s GDP from 3 banks through a series of fraudulent transfers in a matter of days (Coalson and Barbarosie 2015). The so called “billion-dollar theft,” left taxpayers in the already impoverished country responsible for the missing bank funds to avoid the banks’ default (The Economist 2015). The theft, which necessarily involved leading politicians (and ultimately led to the conviction of Prime Minister Filat), touched off months of protests in Chişinău and other major cities by both pro-reform activists and pro-Russian opposition parties. Moldovans rebelled against the decision that the national government would assume the losses of the affected banks and demanded accountability. Thousands of people took to the streets in demonstrations that were larger than those at the time of the 2009 Twitter Revolution (Brett et al. 2015). The protests became the foundation for 2 new civic and political organizations, the Civic Platform for the Dignity and Truth Platform, led by Andrei Năstase, and former education minister Maia Sandu’s Action and Solidarity Party (PAS).

Alarming, Western institutions and governments, having committed to the AEI leaders, were initially reluctant to hold them publicly accountable, despite the obvious signs of systemic corruption at the highest levels. Less than 2 years after the AEI came to power, a report by the Expert Grup, a prominent Moldovan NGO, concluded that “[i]n Moldova power mostly lies not with public institutions, but with obscure special interests which have undermined and abused these institutions” (Expert Grup 2011). Foreign monitors, including Freedom House, also reported a lack of progress in nearly every area of democratic governance under the AEI coalitions. Despite this fact, the EU recurrently reported general progress on the Alliance’s main commitments, with occasional admonitions regarding ongoing corruption and program implementation in some areas (European Commission 2015). Under pressure to maintain the appearance of complying with their Western sponsors, the AEI leaders passed a series of reform programs, but implementation failed to live up to Chişinău’s commitments (European Court of Auditors 2016).

Within 2 years after the AEI coalition achieved power, domination by the oligarchs and public corruption overshadowed all else in politics. Moldovan civil society became nearly entirely alienated from and antagonistic toward the governing parties. Trust in the country’s primary political institutions plummeted to levels unseen even at the low point of the PCRM regime. Confidence in the established political parties, communist and non-communist alike, declined by 50% or more. In the months leading up to the November 2014 legislative elections, a near-complete restructuring of the electoral landscape occurred as voters fled toward anti-establishment alternatives. Along with corruption, foreign policy orientation reemerged as a polarizing issue in Moldovan politics. Left-leaning parties supported by the Kremlin espoused a pro-Eurasian orientation or neutrality, while center-right parties supported more or less exclusive versions of EU affiliation. Encouraged by Moscow, several leaders of the PCRM abandoned the party to launch a more pro-Russian alternative. The defectors included former Prime Minister Ziniadia Grecianî and Igor Dodon. Dodon, who took over the leadership of the Party of Socialists of the Republic of Moldova (PSRM)

in 2013, painted former president Voronin as part of the corrupt entrenched establishment, insisting that Moldova renounced its Association Agreement with the EU and emerged as the clear favorite of the Russian media and the Putin leadership.

In this volatile environment, Moldova's electorate fragmented. Five parties surpassed the 6% threshold for entering parliament in 2015. Igor Dodon's PSRM won 25 seats to become the largest party in the parliament. The PCRM was relegated to second place on the left, with 21 MPs. On the right, the PLDM suffered a 10% decline in support from 2010 and entered Parliament with 23 seats. The PDM won 19 seats, and the Liberal Party took 13 seats (OSCE 2015, 28). Despite representing a potential 55 seat majority, the 3 AEI parties were unable to renew their coalition. Liberal Party leader Mihai Ghimpu could not come to terms with his former partners and entered opposition. Regardless of their bitter dispute, former Prime Minister Filat and PDM leader Vlad Plahotniuc agreed to a minority coalition, the Alliance for a European Moldova (AEM), relying on parliamentary support from the Communist Party to sustain their government. Moldova's 2 top oligarchs thus narrowly retained their grip on the state and blocked Dodon's Socialists from coming to power. However, this outcome did not promise a smooth road ahead, given popular disaffection and the ongoing rivalry between the coalition party leaders. The immediate public source instability was the government's mishandling of the banking scandal; however, the underlying issue continued to be the bitter power struggle between Moldova's leading oligarchs (Marandici 2021, 79-82). As public pressure on the government grew and the protests gained in both coherence and international support, conflict between the AEM parties drew to a head. On October 15, 2015 former Prime Minister Filat was stripped of his legislative immunity in a vote which passed with the support of 79 of the 101-member parliament. He was then detained, charged, and later convicted of receiving bribes amounting to more than \$250 million in relation to the banking theft (Socor, 2015). Days after Filat's arrest, PLDM Prime Minister Streleț's government was brought down in a vote of no confidence as well, on the charge that Streleț was complicit in shielding Filat.

Prime Minister Filat's arrest marked Vlad Plahotniuc's victory in the oligarchs' battle for political dominance in Moldova (Chayes 2016, 6). But dismissing the Streleț government and upturning the PDM/PLDM alliance left Moldova in a highly tenuous situation. Failure to form a new government would require early elections and the prospect of defeat for now thoroughly compromised pro-EU politicians. Polling showed Igor Dodon's Socialists leading the strongest of the 3 former AEI partners in 2009 by margins of more than 3 to 1, while support for the PCRM dropped to less than 3% (Institute for Public Policy 2016). An initial effort to form a government under Plahotniuc himself generated an immediate popular backlash from across civil society. Making use of its patronage resources, the PDM marshalled sufficient legislative votes in January 2016 to form a government under Pavel Filip, a close Plahotniuc lieutenant. With the Filip cabinet in place, conditions in parliament continued to move inexorably in Plahotniuc's favor. Several Liberal Democratic MPs renounced their membership to become independents, while others shifted their allegiance directly to the victorious PDM. On the left, the PCRM suffered a similar level of diminution, seeing its legislative faction decline by 2/3, from 21 to 7 MPs.

The dramatic shift in the political landscape became further evident in the course of the October 2016 presidential election. Direct election of the president was reinstated through a March 2016 Constitutional Court decision (Curtea Constituțională 2016). While the established parties retained power in parliament, popular support for their presidential candidates evaporated almost entirely. With all of the formerly dominant parties in disarray, campaigning pitted pro-Russian forces against pro-EU anti-corruption parties. In first-round polling, reform candidate Maia Sandu (since successfully elected President in December 2020), running on the platform of the Action and Solidarity Party, won 38.7% of the vote, while pro-Kremlin Igor Dodon took 48%. In sharp contrast, the most successful of the establishment politicians, former Prime Minister Iurie Leancă, was able to garner only 3%. The second-round match, 2 weeks later, put Dodon over the top with a little over 52% of the vote to become Moldova's president (International Foundation for Electoral Systems 2016).

Igor Dodon's election to the presidency demonstrated the depth of Moldovans' disenchantment with the former establishment politicians. Voters fled toward either the pro-Russian PSRM or toward leaders like Maia Sandu, who they perceived as genuinely reformist alternatives, hollowing out the previous party system. However, the government remained tightly controlled by an increasingly hegemonic PDM and Vlad Plahotniuc. This configuration presented Moldova and its Western supporters with a fundamental dilemma. Dodon used Moldova's presidency, largely a symbolic office with weak formal powers, to attack his domestic opponents as corrupt, and Western institutions for enabling them. Breaking with past governments, he tilted heavily toward Moscow, arguing that Moldova had not benefitted from its association with the EU (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty 2017).

Meanwhile, Vlad Plahotniuc contended that his PDM was the only viable counterweight to Dodon and the Socialists (Plahotniuc 2016). He portrayed himself as an effective pro-Western leader who could be counted on to maintain stability (Calus and Konończuk 2017). Unpalatable as it was, the alternative of continuing to support PDM government despite its control by an incontrovertibly corrupt oligarch, was not excluded by Moldova's Western partners. Western diplomats continue to welcome the PDM's declarations of "pro-democratic" commitment, causing consternation among civil society activists (Higgins 2016). The public perception of Western institutions' affiliation with Moldova's disreputable political establishment had a corrosive effect on support for the country's European course, which fell to the lowest point since independence.

Rather than renewed democratization, the period following the Party of Communists' removal from power in 2009 was thus distinguished by an internecine battle between competing oligarchs who employed clientelist parties to achieve control over the state for private economic purposes. Calus (2015b) and Ciurea (2017), among others, characterize the situation as one of "state capture" by the victorious PDM. Consequently, support for the former ruling parties and their leaders evaporated nearly entirely. Meanwhile, opponents of the oligarchs polarized into mutually hostile ethno-cultural blocks, undermining resistance to their rule. The depth of political divisions as the country as its first 25 years of independence drew to a close was evident in both domestic and foreign policy. Public opinion surveys by the Institute of Public Policy in April 2017 showed support for the Socialist Party to be only 25% among respondents identifying as Moldovan or Romanian, while it ranged from 67% among Ukrainians, 70% for Russians, and 90% for Gagauz (Institute for Public Policy 2017). Similarly, confidence in PSRM leader Igor Dodon ran at between 86% and 93% among minorities, and only 44% among Moldovans. Conversely, support for pro-EU reform leader Maia Sandu was registered at 44% among Moldovans, but only 2% for Russians, 4% for Gagauz, and 11% for Ukrainians. Moldovans of all stripes were widely aware of their loss of control over their own national institutions but found themselves increasingly divided over what course to pursue in response.

Conclusion

Over the course of a quarter-century of independence, Moldova struggled unsuccessfully to develop a workable path to democratic governance and sustainable economic growth. From the early postcommunist transition onward, discernible patterns of dysfunctional behavior appear to have been "baked in" to the political system. Its first decade as a sovereign state was marked by sharp divisions over both national identity and economic policy, which inhibited the development of a cohesive government unified in the pursuit of a coherent national policy. This outcome was also a consequence of an enabling international environment. The civil war, Russian intervention, and ensuing "frozen conflict" with Transnistria left Moldova stalled at the periphery of the European integration process. Its leaders were, therefore, less subject to conditionality than those of states that entered the EU ascension process. These conditions contributed to a culture of corruption among the Moldovan political elites. Weak state institutions, an enabling political culture, and the absence

of external constraints engendered a political class that thrived on clientelism and personal enrichment.

The subsequent decade of rule by the Communist Party of the Republic of Moldova did not alter this pattern. The Voronin regime initially pushed Moldova in a more authoritarian direction, limiting expression, and seeking to impose a more hegemonic form of governance. When President Voronin's effort to break the separatist stalemate and reintegrate Transnistria proved fruitless, relations with Moscow deteriorated and his "neo-Soviet" course became nonviable. Ultimately, the Moldovan Communists conformed with the incentives at hand, preferring co-optation to outright repression and doling out economic rewards to their leaders and supporters at public expense. Rather than extinguishing the prevailing culture of corruption, the PCRM extended it.

On ceding power in 2009, the PCRM relied on an understanding that their successors would stop short of prosecuting them for their financial transgressions. Indeed, the AEI leaders very quickly turned to dividing up the spoils afforded by their control over the state among themselves. All of the AEI parties were, in essence, organized as clientelist organizations that distributed compensation to loyalists in exchange for support. Their successive governments proved adept at using the rhetorical support of democracy and feigning compliance with EU good governance initiatives, but their leaders showed no inclination to accept actual public accountability. Rather, competing factions within the governing coalition used their control over public offices to shield themselves from jeopardy and to hold their rivals in check (Caşu 2016, 25-26). Increasingly flagrant corruption under the "pro-European" parties paralleled the pattern of the 2 previous periods. Rather than an aberration or a flaw in an otherwise workable political system, corruption had become one of the dominant systemic features of Moldova's political life. Despite decades of effort, public accountability was not achieved, and actual power was not located in public institutions, but within the informal networks controlled by the oligarchs. With the destruction of the PLDM and marginalization of the Liberal Party, the reality of that fact became evident. Therefore, at the end of their first quarter century of independence, Moldovans were left questioning the viability of their own political institutions and once again facing the necessity of a renewed struggle to establish a more genuine democracy.

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