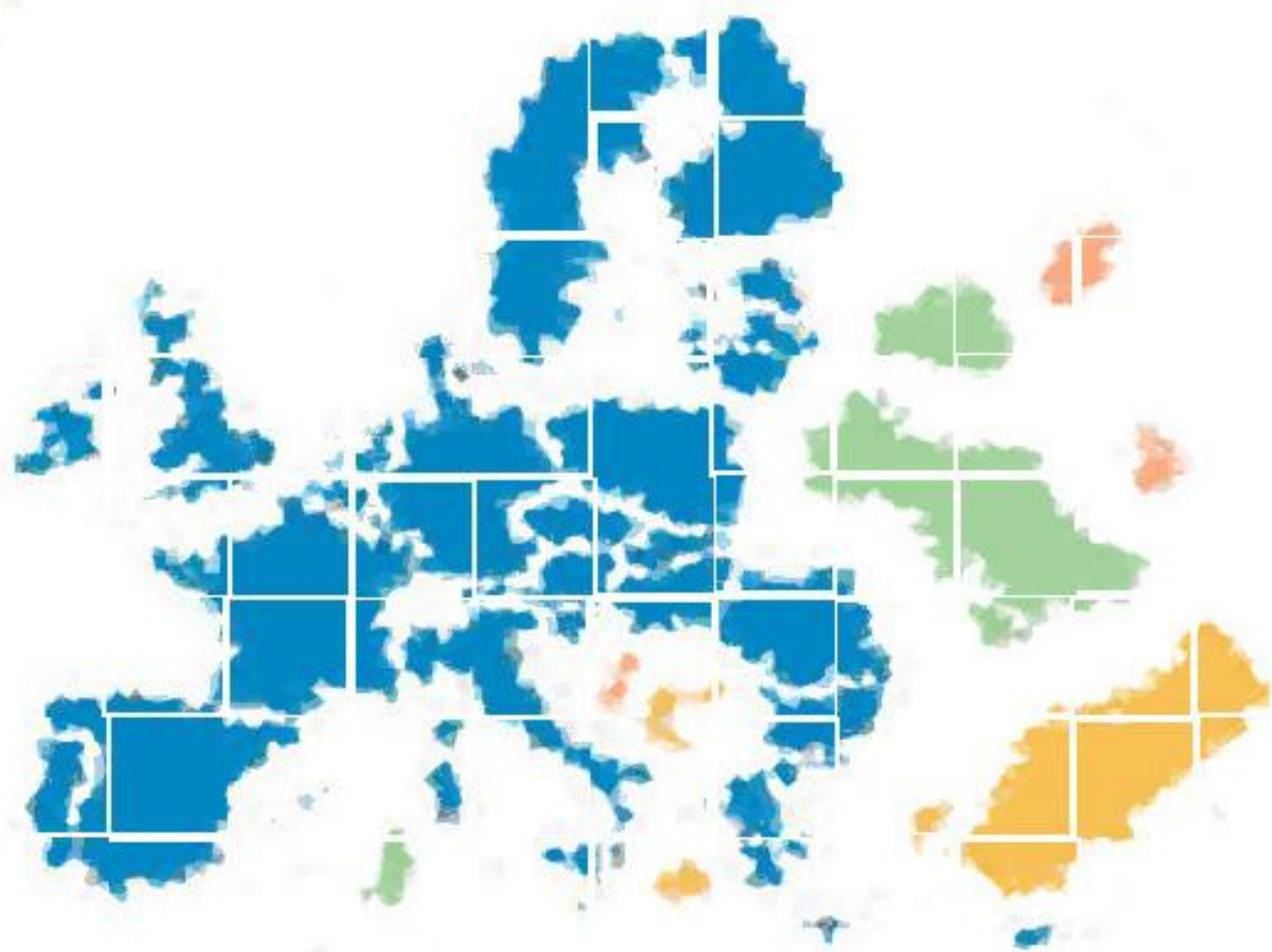


Frontiers of Democracy

The Democratic Transition and Europeanization Process in the Republic of Moldova

Alexandru Baltag



2016

Center for European Neighborhood Studies

The Center for European Neighborhood Studies (CENS) is an independent research center of the Central European University (CEU) located in Budapest, Hungary. Its main goal is to contribute to an informed international dialogue about the future of the European Union in the world, while capitalizing on its Central European perspective and regional embeddedness.

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Frontiers of Democracy

Embedding Democratic Values in Moldova and Ukraine

Moldova and Ukraine, countries of the European Union's Eastern Partnership program, are undergoing complex processes of democratic transformation, but with weak embeddedness of democratic values and principles drawbacks can occur. It is embeddedness that helps to overcome the challenges of transformation and pushes countries beyond mere frontiers of democracy towards becoming strongly committed democratic communities. The goal of the [“Frontiers of Democracy: Embedding Democratic Values in Moldova and Ukraine”](#) project of the CEU Center for European Neighborhood Studies is to facilitate embedding democratic values in the societal ethos in Moldova and Ukraine by providing a forum for discussion of the difficulties of such a complex process and by drawing on the transition experience of the Visegrad countries (the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia).



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The opinions expressed here are those of the author.

About the author

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Alexandru Baltag is Doctor in International Relations and European Studies, obtaining the PhD at the University “Babes-Bolyai” from Cluj-Napoca, Romania in 2012. Between 2011 and 2015 he worked as Senior Consultant on foreign policy and reintegration (on the Transnistrian conflict settlement) to the Administration of the President of the Republic of Moldova. Currently, he is adviser to the Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Economy of Moldova on the international economic cooperation domain. From 2010 to present is an associated expert at the Foreign Policy Association of Moldova. He is the author of several analytical articles on international relations, European integration, the Transnistrian conflict, energy and geopolitical issue, published in France, Germany, Romania, Lithuania, Russia, Turkey and Moldova.

The Democratic Transition and Europeanization Process in the Republic of Moldova

In this paper, we aim to analyze some aspects of democratic transition in Moldova. We employ various analytical models and structure the argument along three distinct lines. The first represents a brief excursion into the history, geography and geopolitics of the Republic of Moldova. The second direction looks into the interconnectedness of politics, state institutions and society during the country's independence. The third direction reflects on the present situation, especially Moldova's European integration process, and discusses how this process influences the strengthening of the democratic values and principles at the political and social level.

The history, geography and geopolitics of Moldova

Thus, in the beginning we explore the historical–geographical factor to understand some particularities of the Moldovan transition, focusing mostly on the causes of cumbersome and slow democratic progress. The relatively young Moldovan state appeared after a “global geopolitical cataclysm” in the early 1990s, and, as such, the communist past is still influencing the pace and nature of democratic transformation.

If we analyze the territorial factor and statehood of the Republic of Moldova, it is necessary to mention that this country did not exist as an independent state until 1991. This territory was part of various empires and states throughout its history, starting with the Ottoman Empire, then it was annexed by the Tsarist Empire, and after the First World War the territory was united with Romania. Afterwards, as a result of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact and its secret annex this territory was annexed by the Russians again. Therefore, the lack of state-building experience, as well the sinusoidal historical course of this territory determined that, in 1991 the state-building process of the Republic of Moldova faced significant hardships.

One of the major factors that influenced both statehood and democratic transition is the current configuration of Moldovan borders, which were established during the Stalinist period, when an "exchange" of territories between Moldova and Ukraine took place. Consequently, the newly founded Moldovan state faced the conflicts, caused by the separatist movements of Transnistria and Gagauzia, early during its democratic transition. These conflicts further complicated an already tense geopolitical crisis.

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Another internal factor influencing Moldovan democratic transition is the legacy of inefficient and weak bureaucratic institutions, formed during the Soviet period, coupled with the absence of educated political elite and with reformist spirit. Indeed, ethnic homogeneity seems to have facilitated democratic transition, as the cases of Poland or Hungary aptly show. In the case of Moldova and other post-Soviet countries we see a more specific situation, in which different social groups share different ethnic identities, as well the contentious issue of the name of language and the direction of state foreign policy.

The ethnic and identity issues extant in Moldova now have deeply set roots, some of them specific to the Soviet era. A brief discussion of the causes of ethnic issues in Moldova is offered below:

- At the end of the Second World War, the population was arbitrarily divided into two groups: Romanians and Moldovans. This division aimed to create an identity differentiation inside the majority ethnic group – Romanians – in order to justify the annexation of Bessarabia to Russia, according the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. Moreover, the Soviets constructed a different identity – Moldovan identity, which was presented as different from the Romanian one; this type of Soviet politics had certain geopolitical goals, with repercussions even today.
- In order to divide the population, the Soviet leadership created an artificial difference between the Romanian and Moldovan people and their respective languages, and promoted Moldovan identity in contrast with the stigmatization of Romanian identity. As a result of these political pressures, the population became divided into Romanians and Moldovans. Some considered this division into two separate ethnic identities and two separate languages as a defining feature of Moldovan society, while other claimed that, in fact, the two identities and languages are one and the same, namely Romanian. These situations create confusion and difficulties regarding the construction of a common national identity.
- The process of Russification performed by Russian leadership during the Tsarist and Soviet periods marked the consciousness, mentality and identity of the Moldovan people. In conclusion, we can see that both external and internal factors influenced the historical development of the RM and the evolution of domestic processes. Consequently, we have three most important factors:
 1. *The Russian factor* – which fully dominated this territory during a century and a half (1812 – 1918 and 1945 - 1991)
 2. *The European factor* – which lacked before 1991 and which until recently had limited influence. Hence, this factor is not accepted and fully understood by a big part of the population, especially the elder people and the Russian speaking population.
 3. *The Romanian factor* – appeared once with the collapse of the USSR and is perceived in a speculative manner as an alternative to

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statehood, namely promoting the creation of a unified state, similar to the one in 1918.

The interconnectedness of politics, state institutions and society

All the historical factors mentioned above help us understand the transition process of Moldova, as well as the interconnectedness of politics, state and society during the country's independence, which represents the second direction of our analysis.

Concerning *the political dimension of the Moldovan transition*, it is necessary to note that immediately after the proclamation of Moldova's independence, early parliamentary elections were not organized, thus allowing the old politicians (Soviet politicians) to keep their power and adapt quickly to new political realities. Therefore a lot of former party apparatchiks and communist civil servants became leaders and decision makers' in the newly established democratic political parties. This context slowed down democratic transition because the management of these parties has been done according to pre-existing communist rules and principles. The absence of reformist political elite with a clear attachment to democratic values led to a fragmented political spectrum and weak party institutionalization.

Thus, it is important to underline that during the first years after the proclamation of independence, as well as today, the political parties seem to put their own interests above national interest, a situation that led to distancing between politicians and the population, with the latter feeling that the political elite is not legitimate in their actions. In consequence, all polls show distrust in political parties, and other political institutions.

Another factor that suggests weak democratization of political parties is that they are built around the leader. As such, some political parties are short lived, and the party system does not seem to be sustainable.

Regarding *the institutional dimension of the Moldovan transition*, it is important to mention that the country had several forms of government since its independence:

- *Presidential* – from December 1991 to July 29th, 1994;
- *Semi-presidential* – from July 29th, 1994 to July 5th, 2000;
- *Parliamentary* - from July 5th, 2000 until present.

All these factors demonstrate the instability of the political system. Another important aspect regarding the institutional dimension of the Moldovan transition is the excessive politicization of state institutions, which has led to incomplete reforms in the fields of justice and anticorruption, low confidence in state institutions, and diminished effectiveness of decision making processes.

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However, we must to recognize that the institutional transition, as it was first introduced, included some reforms in the following sectors: economy, taxation, monetary policy, education, healthcare, defense, environmental protection, social protection.

When turning to *the social and moral dimension of the Moldovan transition*, we can identify two main problems. First, there is no common, consensually adopted identity. Second, Moldova is not firmly engaged to build its European collective identity.

Regarding the first problem, it is important to remark that the internal debates on identity issues, stereotypes, myths and doctrinal thinking combined with the romantic melancholy from the Soviet period prevent the reaching of an adequate solution for this. These debates lead to different confrontations within Moldovan society:

- between generations (young people vs. old people), which share different values (European vs. Soviet);
- linguistic cleavage (Moldovan language vs. Romanian language);
- geopolitical cleavage (pro-Romanians/pro-Europeans vs. pro-Russians), which has led to voting according to geopolitical priorities. Thus, Moldovan parties are not divided on matters of doctrine, but rather according to linguistic and geopolitical factors (pro-Russian, pro-Romanian, or pro-European).

Moreover there is a lack of unity among political leaders, civil society and academics on the development strategy of the country. At the same time, it's important to mention that Moldova has had insufficient international support during the first decade of its independence, especially aimed to strengthening statehood.

Another factor which influences Moldovan transition along the social dimension is the informational space, where Russian media actors dominate. It is especially felt in the Transnistrian region, which is fully covered by Russian informational media. However, this fact has an inevitable impact on the right bank of the Nistru River, as well.

Consequently, the Moldovan experience has shown us that the promise of prosperity during early post-communist transition has been disqualified by reality, through constant uncertainty, repeated economic, financial and monetary crises, bankruptcies, unemployment and problematic privatization. In this respect, we identified some paradoxes regarding the transition process of Moldova, which could show us the some perception of the population concerning the democracy and their life into this system:

- *The paradox of the state* – in the process of building a new state, the communist system did not collapse completely, which led to the imperfect nature of the new political institutions. Thus, the initial weakness of the institutions and the system, which have not eliminated completely elements of communist ideology, has affected

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negatively the democratic functioning of the State, sometimes manipulated for the benefit of private interests.

- *The paradox of elites* – the “new elite” includes old communist cadres and komsomolists, who capitalized on their advantageous positions in the old networks of the communist power and preserved access to state resources.
- *The paradox of the living standard and social security* – unfortunately, during the disintegration of the old social-economic system and the creation of the new democratic one, the population experienced substantial deterioration in standards of living.
- *The paradoxes of democracy* – the achieved socio-economic progress was insufficient, which, in turn, led to lack of legitimacy for the newly formed political institutions.
- *The paradox of time* – any change takes time, but people cannot wait indefinitely the results of harsh reforms. They don't believe in a “bright future” like they did during the Soviet times.
- *The paradox of morality* – people expected more justice and equity after the transition to democracy was completed, which did not materialize since many politicians and civil servants became richer, while the majority of the population became poorer.

Moldova's present

It is difficult to anticipate the future of democratic transition in Moldova. However, we argue that, at the level of collective consciousness, the transition will end when people will not talk about it any longer. Also, due to the geopolitical situation in the region and the pressure put by the young generation which is mostly pro-European, the transition process towards democratic and European values is becoming irreversible and the systemic transformations will produce later its desired effects.

One such example is that, starting with 2005, the Republic of Moldova officially declared the European integration process as a main priority of foreign policy. During this period, Chisinau and Brussels signed several documents which define the political relations between the European Union and Moldova. These documents are:

- EU–Moldova Action Plan and Autonomous Trade Preferences signed in 2005;
- EU–Moldova Association Agreement and DCFTA signed in 2014;
- Visa-free regime for Moldova obtained in 2014.

All these documents aim to deepen political and economic relations between Moldova and the EU, and to gradually integrate Moldova into the EU Internal Market. In this context, it is important to underline that the EU –

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Moldova Association Agreement and DCFTA were ratified by all EU member states and, beginning with 2016, they is fully implemented. The agreement constitutes a reform agenda for Moldova, based around a comprehensive program of Moldova's approximation of its legislation to EU norms:

- Institutional reforms (mainly reforms on the judiciary sector);
- Economical and financial reforms;
- Reforms on the education, social and pension fields
- Transnistrian settlement process (*from 2016 to implement DCFTA within the Transnistrian region*)

Consequently, one year after the implementation of the Associated Agreement and DCFTA by the Moldovan Government, there is a situation in which 62% of the Moldovan exports are oriented towards the EU and 50% of the Moldovan imports originate in the EU. Moreover, the biggest investors within Moldovan economy are coming from the EU countries, mainly from Germany, Italy, Netherlands, and Romania.

Moreover, if we speak about the divide between European values and Traditional Moldovan values, one cannot but notice that the Moldovan nation is European, from a historical point of view, because we speak a Latin language, we have Christian religion, Moldovan culture and traditions are similar with Romanian and Europeans ones. Therefore, the vast majority of the Moldovan population support the principles on which is EU is constructed:

- Rule of law and strong democratic institutions;
- Human rights and non-discrimination;
- Elimination of corruption;
- Market economy and loyal competition;
- Social protection and solidarity.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we argue that the Moldovan transition is mostly seen as a historical reparation process, connected to claims of sovereignty over territory, which was occupied by Tsarist Empire in 1812 and the Soviet Union in 1944. Many people are convinced that during the last 25 years, Moldova was caught up in a process of transition from communism to democracy, from centralized economy to market economy. We cannot identify true and profound social change in the country, however, because transition practices often reflect the old communist behavior. Transition in Moldova is still far from completion. We are only at the beginning of the second phase of the transition, because in Moldova the institutions are not yet stable and predictable, and incapable to create true economic and political

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transformation. Nevertheless, the Republic of Moldova is engaged in an irreversible process of economic and social integration within the great European family. Historical, geopolitical, and both internal and external pressures seem to indicate that democracy is well under way.

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