

POLITICS IN MOLDOVA: THE EARLY 1990s MOVEMENT FOR NATIONAL REVIVAL

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In this article we will present a short account of the political scene in Moldova during the dissolution of the Soviet Empire, and in its aftermath. We are tracing the growth of the Democratic Movement of Moldova, and its metamorphosis into a well-organized political group which managed to get its own Prime-Minister in power, and to restore pluralism inside the Moldavian parliament. The completion of our journey will be the frozen conflict of Transnistria, which drew a yet unsettled line of contention between right-bank and left-bank Moldova.

The Rebirth of Pluralism

Starting from 1988, Moldova's political scene saw diversity for the first time after an epoch of Communist dominion. The opposition's protagonist held different names throughout its lifespan as it evolved from merely a movement, to an organized popular front, to a comprehensive national alliance, to a group affiliated to the Christian-Democrats, to a Christian alliance, and eventually to a self-standing party in our days.

I am referring here of course to the Democratic Movement of Moldova (1988) which came to be the Popular Front of Moldova (PFM) one year later. Among the main aims of this structure was to make Romanian an official language of Moldova, to reintroduce the Latin alphabet, to promote political and civil rights, to dismantle the centralized administration and economy, and not less importantly to compete against the Communist Party of the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic (MSSR).

The PFM managed to obtain a third of the legislative seats (as independent mandates) in the MSSR notwithstanding the lack of an official electoral competition. One of the most celebrated events organized by the movement in conjunction with the Bucharest-Chisinau Association in 1990 was the Bridge of Flowers. It was meant to symbolize both the unity between Romania and Moldova, and the awkwardness of having an outer European border between the two countries in spite of the presence of Romanians on the two sides of the Prut River. It was the first time after almost 50 years that more than 1 million Romanians crossed the so-called 'watery Berlin Wall' into Moldova to meet their fellow nationals. A year later, the second Bridge of Flowers took place. On this occasion it was the Moldavian's turn to disregard the Soviet authorities.

On the 25th May 1990, Mircea Druc was elected as Prime-Minister of MSSR by the Republic's Supreme Soviet. He had been supported largely by the PFM, and he would eventually assume the group's leadership.

Towards National Independence

At the end of 1990 this organization enlarged by incorporating other political, professional, and cultural groups into the National Alliance for Independence (NAI). One of the first demands of this new alliance was for the country's leaders to put an end to the enrolment of the Moldavian citizens into the Soviet Army. Instead, the Republic was supposed to build up its own military resources. Moreover, it called on the population not to take part in Moscow's referendum on the future of the Soviet Republics. Despite the results being in favour of the continuation of the Soviet Union (80% turn-out; 76% in favour), this legal attempt to legitimize the USSR did not limit the process of constructing sovereignty in Moldova.

The Treaty of collaboration, good neighbourliness, and friendship signed between Romania and the USSR also received the critique of the Popular Front for being insensitive to the aspiration of self-determination of the USSR Republics. This Treaty was restating the inviolability of national frontiers among the two states, which in practice meant keeping the Soviet Republics confined inside the Empire.

Finally, emblematic for the international recognition of Moldova as an autonomous country is the proposal for a resolution recognizing the state's self-determination and its intentions to re-unify with Romania by two members of the Foreign Affairs Committee in the US Senate, republican senators Jesse Helms and Larry Prester.

The Demise of the Empire

The context in which the changes in Moldova were occurring is one characterized by the last breath of the USSR. In 1991 Georgia, Estonia, Ukraine, Uzbekistan and Kirghizstan, Tajikistan, Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, and Kazakhstan declare their unilateral independence from the Soviet Union which is replaced by the Russian Federation as a successor. On the 25th of December Gorbachev resigns from the Presidency. As a matter of fact, the Belavezha Accords of December 9 declared the Soviet Union effectively dissolved, and established the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) in its place. Furthermore, Gorbachev's monopoly on power had been previously shattered by the failed August Coup attempts.

Under such conditions, on the 27th August PFM deputies along with the NAI imposed to the Parliament nominal voting for the Declaration of Independence, and for the adoption of the Romanian national anthem as Moldova's. This anthem was replaced in 1994 by 'Our Language'. Regardless of its short life, by adopting the Romanian anthem as their own Moldavians seem to have been strongly motivated by pro-Romania sentiments, at least in the incipient stage of national revival. Regarding the creation of the CSI, the PFM expressed opposition as it had been perceived as a path towards maintaining Moldova in USSR sphere of influence.

The first round of presidential elections in the newly-liberated country was won by Snegur with 98% of votes in favour, an outcome that could be seen as a failure for the nationalist idea pushed forward by the PFM who had previously demanded a boycott from the citizens. Moderation triumphed on the 8th of December in Chisinau.

After Independence, Civil War

The New Year had brought the movement for national revival closer to its present day form. Its third Congress of 15-16th February 1992 set the agenda for the period to follow. Aside from selecting to remain in opposition, the PFM embraced a unionist line in addition to adhering to the doctrine of Christian Democracy. From this moment on, the movement took the name of Christian Democrat Popular Front (CDPF). Lastly, the Congress stated the right of the Romanian people of Moldova to participate in the elections of Romania. This turned significant around half a year ahead when the leadership of the CDPF agreed to recommend their number one representative Mircea Druc as candidate for the Romanian presidential run-off. He ran as independent but lost to Ion Iliescu (61%).

The year 1992 has marked the contemporary history of Moldova until this very day. In March-July the conflict with the separatists of Transnistria escalated, culminating with the bloodshed of Bender, where the confrontation between the Moldavian military forces and Transnistrian guardsmen alongside Cossacks led to the death of 20 Moldavian, and 300 men from the side of the Russophobes. On the 21st August, the Moscow Agreement was signed. This envisioned the establishment of a line of separation in left-bank Moldova between the opposing parties, which was to be supervised by military observers from Russia, Moldova, and Trans-Dniester. This is the status quo even today.

The violence was however only the tip of the iceberg. The tensions had begun already in 1988/9 with the ascent of PMF, and of its equivalent Popular Front of Gagauzia (PFG). The later one aimed at achieving national and territorial autonomy for a number of Southern Moldova districts in which the Gagauz people had been living. In response to the two groups a pro-Communist movement of the Russophones of left-bank Moldova was mobilized. A chief source of bad blood between the Moldavians and the Russian-speaking nationals was the agenda of the PMF regarding the recognition of Romanian/Moldavian as official language, and the replacement of the Cyrillic writing system. Multiculturalism was perceived as a threat by the former privileged Russophones, while for the advocates of Moldavian emancipation the cultural status quo was associated with oppression under the Soviet Empire.

Today, the dividing line between Transnistria and Moldova is still present without a real resolution in sight. The political scene of Moldova has diversified as a natural side-effect of the slow but steady liberalization and democratization of the country. Having signed the Association Agreement with the EU, and being a member of NATO's Partnership for Peace, Moldova's future appears to gravitate towards Euro-Atlanticism. Regarding our main actor, the Christian Democrat Popular Front has turned into the fully-fledged Christian Democrat Popular Party by the end of 1999. Today, it promotes a doctrine of traditionalism, conservatism, neutrality, faith, and patriotism. Moldavian nationalism has replaced the unionist sentiment. According to its platform, Moldova ought not to participate in any military bloc, it should develop good relations with both Romania and Russia, and it must affirm its own identity and independence.

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