

MOLDOVA'S “TWITTER REVOLUTION”

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Angry young men stoning police in a European capital over the Easter break does not make a promising opening scene for a democratic revolution. Few Europeans had heard of Moldova, a tiny state on the EU's eastern flank, before seeing images of the strife that broke out there in early April 2009 after the Communist Party (PCRM) won reelection in a landslide. The rioting that broke out in Chişinău alongside a peaceful demonstration found Europe unprepared for another “color revolution.” By the time diplomats and EU bureaucrats got back from their holidays, harsh official repression and a lack of Western support had ended the unrest. Questions of what had happened and what it meant lingered, however.

Except for their international context, the events in Moldova did not differ substantially from those that sparked the color revolutions earlier this decade in Serbia, Georgia, and Ukraine, but this difference in context led to a different outcome. Moreover, both electoral preferences and electoral outcomes in Moldova have been shaped to a large extent by the country's geopolitical situation.¹

Moldova, which was once a province of Romania, gained its independence from the Soviet Union in August 1991. Almost immediately, it lost control of its eastern province of Transnistria to pro-Soviet separatists acting with the support of locally based troops from the Soviet Fourteenth Army. Moldova quickly began establishing in the rest of the country a democratic system of government based on fundamental rights and freedoms, including automatic citizenship for members of its

Russian-speaking minority. (Most of the 3.6 million Moldovans—a figure that does not include the half-million or so people living in Transnistria—speak Romanian, or, as it is called locally, “Moldovan.”) A new constitution was adopted in July 1994 along with structural economic reforms that drew praise from international financial institutions. Also in 1994 came the first free and fair popular elections; the Organization of Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) has described subsequent ballotings (in 1998, 2001, and 2005) as “fair and free.”

Despite these repeated rounds of free elections and successful transfers of power, however, Moldova’s Freedom House (FH) scores have deteriorated significantly since 1997: The country is now rated by FH’s *Nations in Transit* as a “semi-consolidated authoritarian” regime and ranks as Not Free in the FH press-freedom rankings. Russia’s 1998 financial collapse dramatically harmed the economic standing of Moldova, which exported more than 80 percent of its domestic production to other parts of what had once been the USSR. Pro-Russian forces in Moldova, which had been on the defensive since 1990, suddenly regained the upper hand. In 2001, the PCRM managed to return to power with an impressive majority in Parliament, and it has remained in office ever since.

The Heavy Hand of Identity Politics

Throughout Moldova’s short life as a democracy, identity politics has dominated: The country’s elite is split between wanting to rejoin Romania or to remain independent. The public has largely endorsed the status quo, a stance prompted in part by Transnistria’s threat of full separation should Moldova rejoin Romania. Moldova is completely dependent on Russia for energy and has long had to pay high prices for Russian gas. Transit pipelines and energy plants are located in Transnistria, giving the break-away province considerable economic leverage. The PCRM government signed a treaty with Russia in November 2001, but this has not deterred Russia from backing Transnistria while pressuring Chișinău to reorganize the state in keeping with Transnistrian demands.

On 1 January 2007, Romania joined the EU, imposing—in line with EU policy—a restricted visa regime for Moldova and thus greatly affecting the free circulation of citizens between the two countries. Romanian law entitles any Romanian speaker whose parents were born in Romania to request citizenship—and hence access to the EU labor market. In just the first few weeks after the introduction of visas, Romanian authorities fielded 600,000 citizenship requests from Moldovans, but out of respect for EU policy the Romanians have been very restrained in approving such applications.

On 5 April 2009, Moldova held general elections. The ruling Communist Party, led by outgoing President Vladimir Voronin, faced an op-

position divided less by ideology than by petty interests. It consisted of the Our Moldova Alliance (AMN), led by Serafim Urechean; the Liberal Party (PL), which in 2007 had managed to get its charismatic young leader Dorin Chirtoacă elected the mayor of Chișinău; and the new Liberal Democratic Party (PLDM), led by Vladimir Filat. The three parties share a pro-European orientation, with the Liberals the only vocally pro-Romanian group among them. The opposition had done well in the 2007 local elections, winning in Chișinău and gaining control of 21 out of 32 subnational governments (*raioane*). It was due to this setback that the PCRM decided in 2008 to amend the Election Code, increasing the parliamentary threshold from 4 to 6 percent and banning the creation of electoral coalitions.

During the 2009 campaign, opinion polls consistently showed the Communists with around 35 percent support, while the opposition parties combined came close to the same figure. When the Central Election Commission (CEC) announced that 50 percent of the vote—and 60 out of 101 seats—had gone to the Communists, the result differed strikingly from previous polls, including a national exit poll taken by the Soros Foundation–funded Institute for Public Policy on election night. The opposition attributed the discrepancy to fraud.

Crowds, Courtesy of the Internet

On Monday, April 6, some NGOs called for a protest rally, even as OSCE observers on the scene produced a document giving the elections a clean bill of health. On April 7, the protestors were joined by some of the opposition leaders in front of government offices in the heart of the capital. The demonstrators' numbers had grown from 10,000 the day before to nearly 30,000, in a metropolitan area of about 900,000. Word had been spreading rapidly via Twitter and other online networking services. The official media carried no coverage, but accounts, pictures, and video of the rally were appearing in real time on Twitter and YouTube. As the authorities denied the organizers access to microphones and electronic speakers, the loosely organized crowd split into segments. One moved toward the Parliament building and the nearby presidential offices. Some protesters responded angrily to the massive presence of the police, whose use of a water cannon ignited the crowd's fury. A hail of stones forced the police to withdraw. The flags of Romania and the EU were raised—first over the presidential office building and then over Parliament, which was also looted and set on fire. The government and the opposition would later accuse each other of having sent provocateurs to incite the crowds.

The police regained control of the city center only on April 8, after hundreds of arrests. Peaceful demonstrations in the central square continued for the remainder of the week, while the Moldovan authorities

alleged that the election dispute and the ensuing demonstrations were a cover for a coup attempt planned by Romania and carried out by the opposition parties. President Voronin also accused ten activists from Serbia of having taken part in the riots, and he expelled the Latvian-born director of the Washington-based National Democratic Institute's local office, Alex Grigorievs.

A recount of the votes brought no change in the results. The opposition had claimed from the beginning that the voter rolls were the major source of fraud. The CEC had used new voter lists that contained almost 400,000 more names than the rolls used for the 2007 local elections—this despite Moldova's negative natural population growth and its high level of outmigration. Given that there is no regular voting card (voters are allowed to use various forms of identification) and that no preregistration is required, the opposition suspected—and claimed—that many votes were added after the polls closed. Local electoral commissions, particularly in the countryside, were dominated by Communists, and observers visited only a handful of polling stations, nowhere staying the night.

The OSCE observer mission issued a preliminary report declaring the elections generally free and fair and describing Moldova as “meeting many of the OSCE and Council of Europe commitments.”² However, one observer, EU parliamentarian Emma Nicholson, suggested that Russians in the OSCE delegation had heavily influenced this report, while Miklós Haraszti, the OSCE representative on freedom of the media, deplored the lack of press freedom.³

Following April 7, the Moldovan police not only arrested rioters but also unleashed a massive campaign of repression against dissent in general, detaining and abusing more than a thousand people. Teenagers, civil society organizations, and the media were special targets. Journalists who had taken no part in the protests were arrested along with violent and peaceful protesters alike. Students were picked up from high-school and college classrooms. Reports of torture and mistreatment in police custody were documented by human-rights advocates, including UN human-rights advisor Edwin Berry, who managed to visit some of the penitentiaries where the arrested young people were held.⁴ Three deaths due to police abuse have been documented.⁵ Several Western television crews, as well as journalists from Romania, were asked to leave the country, and restrictions on access to the Romanian media were tightened.

In Moldova, the president is chosen by the new Parliament and must receive 61 of 101 votes to be elected. If the parliament fails in two attempts to select a president, new parliamentary elections must be held. With the Communists having only 60 seats and the three opposition parties together controlling 41 seats (AMN, 11; PL, 15; and PLDM, 15), the opposition was able to prevent the selection of a president by closing ranks and twice refusing to endorse the Communist candidate, former prime minister Zinaida Greceanu. As of this writing in early June 2009,

it appears that new parliamentary elections will take place in late summer or early fall.

Moldova's Twitter Revolution had some elements of an aborted "color revolution." The most renowned electoral revolutions in recent years—Serbia's, Georgia's, and Ukraine's—all shared some basic features. Each took place in a managed semidemocracy based on keeping the media and the opposition under control. Each took on a ruling party strongly embedded in state structures. And each was driven by widespread fears of election-rigging, by coalitions of civil society groups that favored change, and by a mostly urban opposition that was particularly strong in the capital.

What was missing in Moldova? The short answer is a unified opposition that could put itself in the driver's seat. Moldova did have elections that many feared would be rigged, charges of fraud, and resulting public anger. But no one had expected the balloting to be a "watershed election," and unlike the oppositions in Serbia, Georgia, and Ukraine, the Moldovan liberal parties lost control of events. Fear of government repression and the loss of international support caused these parties quickly to dissociate themselves from the most radical protesters. An early statement by Javier Solana, the EU's chief foreign-policy officer, condemned the violence and endorsed the election results, citing the OSCE report. This was seen as a sign that the protesters lacked Western support. Demoralized and harassed by the police, their daily rallies became thinner until they disappeared altogether.

Despite the alleged fraud, the PCRM remains the backbone of Moldova's party system, and it has gained enough influence in recent years to move from "pluralism by default" to full-fledged authoritarianism.⁶ Since 2001, the Communist Party has consolidated its power, while pro-Romanian parties, unable to get a majority, have gradually lost theirs. A third, nonaffiliated "centrist" alternative (leaning toward neither Russia nor Romania) has always existed, but has never gained decisive influence.

What explains the resilience of Moldova's Communist Party and the defective nature of Moldova's democracy? Moldova is the poorest country in Europe, with a PPP per capita half that of Europe's second poorest, Albania. Transparency International ranks Moldova 113th out of 180 countries in transparency, while the World Bank's *Anticorruption in Transition* ranks Moldova second worst on "state capture" out of the fifteen states of the former Soviet Union. Yet the lack of basic preconditions for democracy did not stop Moldovans from fighting for freedom in 1989–90, when they managed to restore their Romanian language to official status, abandon the Cyrillic in favor of the Roman alphabet, and finally gain their independence from the USSR. Historically a Romanian province, Moldova does not differ in culture and social structure from eastern Romania. Yet Romania has managed, despite similarly unpromising preconditions (poverty, many rural dwellers, absence of a demo-

cratic culture), to become a consolidated democracy, while Moldova is merely a defective one. Could the difference be that Romania has been influenced by the EU over the last two decades, while the most potent outside force acting on Moldova has been Russia? In the early 1990s, electoral and opinion-survey results were similar in the two countries. That is no longer true today.

Moscow versus Brussels

This leads us to a second category of factors—those that have to do with nation- and state-building. Moldova has not managed to create a political nation, and the cultural nation is also under constant dispute. Despite the many concessions that have been offered to them, Transnistrians have refused to join in political community with the rest of Moldova. Moldova's pro-Romanian minority, meanwhile, is committed to unification, not independence. Supporters of an independent Moldova are the majority, and they have controlled most of Moldova's transition, but they have also failed to reunite the country with Transnistria.

The Transnistrian issue weighs heavily on Moldova's prospects for state consolidation. Transnistria is better armed than the national Moldovan army and receives economic support from Moscow. Vladimir Putin made clear in his 2008 annual address that the precedent of Kosovo opens the door to Russia's recognition of Transnistria as an independent state. Efforts to solve the frozen conflict through the OSCE have repeatedly run up against Russia's determination not to withdraw its troops. Whatever their intentions, OSCE mediators, by stressing that federalization along the lines of the current internal borders is the preferred political solution for the West as well as Russia, have further weakened the already feeble Moldovan state. In 1991, Romania promptly acknowledged Moldova's independence, but has since proved wary about becoming involved in Moldovan politics and has yet to sign a bilateral treaty with Chișinău.

Europe's influence has been weak so far.⁷ The presence of the Council of Europe has empowered the democratic minority in Moldova, allowing it to prevent the total degradation of the country's fledgling democracy. Starting with the EU-Moldova action plan adopted in 2004, Moldova was accepted as a potential EU candidate, but the EU's interest has remained weak. Brussels endorses an embargo against Transnistria and has put some pressure on Ukraine to comply with it, but mostly the EU has tried to work through the OSCE—an ineffectual strategy thanks to Russia's veto rights as a member of that organization.

Survey results confirm the importance of the national and geopolitical factors. The use of the Russian language and the belief that Russia should be Moldova's strategic partner are strong determinants of electoral preference for the Communists. The other determinants include residence in

rural areas, low income, and low educational levels. People under thirty are significantly less likely to vote for Communist candidates.

The Moldovan case underlines the lesson that democratization cannot make progress in strongly unfavorable external environments. Color revolutions are constrained by geopolitical limits. Unlike authoritarian Belarus, the Russian Federation, or the despotic post-Soviet regimes in Central Asia, Moldova regularly holds competitive elections but finds itself no better off when it comes to democracy. Successful democratizations are said to be driven by “demonstration effects” when people emulate an example from beyond their borders. The problem in Moldova is that there are two competing “demonstration effects.” The young, seeking solutions to joblessness, look to Romania or to Ukraine’s Orange Revolution for inspiration. The old, however, know better.

Since 1990, Moldova’s attempt to build an independent state has been checked by gas and electricity cuts, a Russian embargo, and a lost war with Russian-backed Transnistria. Russia has shown that it is stronger and more committed than the EU where Moldova is concerned. The behavior of European leaders during April 2009 only confirmed this. Unless the EU shows a stronger commitment to the cause of democracy in Moldova, the country will remain a black hole in Europe’s democratic landscape.

NOTES

1. See Alina Mungiu-Pippidi, “Disputed Identity as Unescapable Pluralism: Moldova’s Ambiguous Transition,” *Romanian Journal of Political Sciences* 7 (February 2007): 85–102.

2. The OSCE’s “Statement of Preliminary Findings and Conclusions” is available at www.osce.org/documents/html/pdf/html/37142_en.pdf.html.

3. Nicholson’s comments may be found at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/7989360.stm>. Haraszi expressed his worries about press freedom in a letter to the Moldovan foreign minister, which is quoted at <http://training.journalismnetwork.eu/profiles/blogs/osce-media-freedom-1>.

4. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2009_Moldova_civil_unrest.

5. Appeal of human-rights community of Moldova, 13 April 2009, available at www.credo.md/pagini/stiri.php?limba=eng&id=375.

6. On pluralism by default, see Lucan Way, “Pluralism by Default in Moldova,” *Journal of Democracy* 13 (October 2002): 127–41.

7. On the EU’s limited influence, see also Dov Lynch, “The Russia-EU Partnership and the Shared Neighborhood,” EU Institute for Security Studies, July 2004; available at www.iss.europa.eu; and Nicu Popescu, “The EU in Moldova—Settling Conflicts in the Neighbourhood,” Occasional Paper 60, October 2005, EU Institute for Security Studies, available at www.iss.europa.eu/uploads/media/oc60.pdf.