

The Evolution of Multi-Party System in Moldova

in the Post-Soviet Period

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2010

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By Leonid Litra¹

*We do not have political parties,
we have geopolitical parties.
(Oleg Serebrian)*

Introduction

The political parties development in the Republic of Moldova (hereafter referred to as Moldova) had a slow but positive dynamic. Like the majority of post-Soviet states, Moldova passes a transition period and attempts to create a democracy similar to the western model. To this extent, Moldova represents an example of moderate successful democracy in the post-Soviet area (Protsyk/Osoian, 2008; Cernencu/Botan, 2009; Popescu, 2009).

The proposed research is primarily concerned to explain the current multi-party system in Moldova. It starts by answering at the question of “*how*” for creating the premises to answer the question of “*why*” Moldova has the existing party-system?

The case of Moldova represents an interesting example due to the fact that after the collapse of the Soviet Union all new independent countries were almost in the same situation, while today we have different circumstances in the whole post-Soviet area (McFaul 2002). On one hand, there are the Baltic States that were committed to reforms, to join the EU and NATO and were anchored by western powers in achieving this. On the other hand, there are the rest of the post-Soviet countries that were classified as hybrid regimes or authoritarian regimes (Democracy Index).² In between these, are positioned Moldova and Ukraine, both

¹ The author gratefully acknowledges the support provided by Yale University and Carnegie Research Fellowship Program of the Carnegie Corporation of New York. Also, the author would like to thank those who have shared their expertise and given their input in the course of preparing this research: Keith Darden, Mihai Cernencu, Leonid Peisakin, Igor Botan and Cornel Ciurea.

² The Democracy Index is compiled by “The Economist” and reflects the democracy situation in 167 countries based on questioning on the following categories: free and fair elections, civil liberties, functioning of government, political participation and political culture.

considered the most successful democracies from the Commonwealth of Independent States.

Why doing a research on Moldova and not on Ukraine? Unlike in Ukraine, political parties in Moldova played a more important role in politics and are often of bigger importance than their leaders (Protsyk/Osoian 2008). In addition to this, Moldova is the single country in the post-Soviet space since its independence that assured legal and constitutional transfer of power through democratic elections at all times (Popescu 2009). As examples could serve, the authoritarian regimes like Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan and Belarus, the hybrid regimes like Kyrgyzstan, the “successor” democracy like Russia, Azerbaijan or Armenia, and democracies achieved through revolutions like Georgia and Ukraine.

Taking into consideration the above-mentioned facts, this paper intends to determine the causes of the current party-system in Moldova, which will include both, formal and informal rules that made possible the establishment of multiparty system in Moldova.

Dependent variable

A condition of a democracy is the presence of multi-party system (Hale, 2006). But the simple existence of a multiparty system does not necessarily guarantee a genuine democracy (Cernencu/Botan, 2009). In this context, a party-system must have certain characteristics and conditions in order to create a real democracy.

The example of post-Soviet states is very relevant in this case. At the moment of achieving the independence, all the states were almost in the same situation: no multiparty system, no democratic institutions, and no democratic experience with the exception of some historical legacies. Nowadays, it is observed that the states that had statehood experience before being incorporated in the Soviet Union, found themselves in a “pole position” on the way of establishing democratic governance at the beginning of 1990s. Today, the party-systems are different in these countries.

They were influenced by crucial development factors like electoral system, party-financing modalities, laws on functioning of political parties, constitutional limitations for president, preparedness of political elites and the political culture of society.

At the beginning of 1990's, Moldova started a very promising transition to democracy. In charge of the transition were the National Liberation Movement that was mainly constituted by cultural intelligentsia and the creation of an efficient multiparty system were endangered for the reason that there were too many requirements of cultural changes accompanied by few political reforms. In this context, after the achievement of a decent cultural transition, meaning shifting to Latin alphabet, renaming the streets, etc, not too much was done in terms of political reforms, e.g. there was no removal of communist leaders from the central administration of the main state institutions, contrary to the example of Baltic states. In these circumstances, after the disappearance of the independence enthusiasm, the political leaders and the society observed that the political elite is not prepared to manage independently state affairs and the society does not have the necessary political culture to face the challenges of an independent and "free" state. This situation, accompanied by a soviet nostalgia resulted in an "imitative democracy" (Cernencu/Botan 2009), which is a democracy with western form and local content, or as Collier and Levitsky calls it a "democracy with adjectives" (Collier/Levitsky 1997). There are plenty of examples of such democracies: sovereign democracy, flawed democracy, partial democracy, basic democracy, etc.

The imperfections of Moldova's democracy led to permanent changes in political situation. According to Cernencu and Botan, Moldova passed through several distinct stages:

- *Romantic*; characterized through enthusiasm of independence and achievement of national symbols
- *Pragmatic*; distinguished through adoption of Constitution and laws, and through privatization
- *Pseudo-restoration*; illustrated by the empowerment of the Communist party and return to socialism building

- *National consensus*; when all parties from parliament agreed to promote by all legal means the European integration and to support the Communist party in doing this
- *Political polarization and the division of society*; characterized through excessive propaganda and non-conciliation attitudes

The permanent changes of political situation strengthened the party-system in Moldova. Due to the constitution and other laws concerning the political party system, the political parties in Moldova were trying to oppose all the time to a powerful presidential institution in order to avoid a situation like in Russia or most of the post-Soviet states. In some states, like Georgia, the “rose revolution” that was supposed to bring more democracy, brought more authoritarianism, or as Hale would put it, “the colored revolutions represents more continuity than change in these countries’ politics” (Hale 2006). Moldova experienced a short period of powerful presidency after the Communist party has won elections, which later resulted in creation of formal (elections 2005) and informal (elections 2009) electoral coalitions of opposition parties. What kept the multiparty system in Moldova and why the attempts to get full control over the system are failing?

Possible explanations

At the beginning of the independence the process of establishing the political institutions in Moldova was merely chaotic than managed. Even if there were no major differences between the old elite and the reformists in terms of determining the projection of the future state institutions, both parties “pacted” (McFaul 2002) on some issues and never did on other. On most of the issues the parties got an agreement on future strategy of development while never got full consensus on issues related to ethnic and cultural dimensions (the name of the language, lustration law, etc), even if the Communist Party was out of law for few years, however. There were several reasons that made possible the pact. First of all, soft-

liners who had a more opportunistic than ideological drive represented most of the old elite. Secondly, the soft-liners old elite turned into democrats overnight and they could not oppose to the “wave” calling for change because they would compromise themselves. Last but not least, both sides did not know about the amount of their real support within the society, which was causing a degree of uncertainty and was keeping them partly cooperative.

Having the above-described political environment, Moldova develops a party-system that meets the basic principles of democracy and the principles of an electoral democracy. The institutional design, as described by Protsyk and Osoian, is generally considered as being “party-friendly”. They argue that the institutionalization of the party-system was crucial for the party development and parties played a significantly more important role in the politics than their counterparts in other CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States) members. Botan and Cernencu endorse this argument by highlighting that there were assured equal conditions and accessible criteria for establishing new parties. It is noteworthy that the evolution of political parties was quite disordered. A process that is considered normal due to the fact that new democracies habitually pass through a period of “organizational fragmentation” (Zielinski). This process was encouraged by the paucity of the legislation requirements, that allowed easy and fast to formally establish a political party. An aspect that generated a sort of party inflation, having created in the first 5 years of independence about 60 political parties. These parties were minor and many of them never participated in elections. The same process was reported to be taking place in other former Soviet states. Some of them called these parties “the sofa parties”, meaning that all members of such a party can fit on a single sofa (Terry).

Nevertheless, one of the most important reasons for creating a strong party-oriented system hinges in the choice of electoral system. The abrogation of majoritarian system and adoption of the proportional system was driven by Transnistrian conflict. The proportional system with a single national district sought to give the leeway for citizens living in Transnistria to vote, as long as Moldova was not exercising its authority over the Transnistrian region, but providing everyone

the right to choose was paramount. The electoral formula was to open polling stations in the perimeter of so called “border”, set by the breakaway authorities, which would give the possibility for citizens from the Transnistrian region to participate in elections organized by the central government. Along with Transnistrian issue, some scholars emphasize another reason. After the Supreme Soviet’s 1990 elections, first deployed in conditions of political competition, many MPs left the parties that brought them in, on the grounds that they represent the people’s interests. As a consequence, due to the fragmentation, the parliament was not functioning well and the majoritarian electoral system was blamed to be the cause (Botan/Cernencu 2009). Moreover, the proportional system evidently biased against independent candidates, who had to receive 3% of the votes, while parties had to receive 4%.

The following provisions have further strengthened the multiparty system. The electoral code of 1997 and the law on financing political parties consolidated the multiparty system, even if the parties in Moldova are still unstable (Protsyk/Osoian). In the process of reforming the political parties in Moldova, there has been a qualitative change as well. All the major parties have membership or observer status in the European party families that brought closer to the European values and slightly changed their vision on how a party should like.

Lucan Way presents another theory that attempts to explain the partial democracy in Moldova. He argues that the democratic development was possible due to “the inability of incumbents to maintain power or concentrate political control”, that he calls “pluralism by default” (Way 2005). In addition to this, Way is writing about the “anti-incumbent national identity” and “opportunism among allies”, which makes his paper ambiguous in the context of Moldova circumstances, due to the fact that the anti-incumbent national identity groups are rather intransigent than loyal to the incumbent political forces, thus, the presence of anti-incumbent forces are excluding from the very beginning the so called “opportunism”, otherwise, these groups would not be “anti”-incumbent national identity groups. The short political history of Moldova offers a brilliant example

when voters punished the national identity political groups that cooperated with the incumbent forces, especially during 1999-2009. After the 2005 parliamentary elections, the leading party (Communist) had 56 seats of the 61 needed to elect the president.³ The parties that voted for the Communist candidate, Vladimir Voronin, conditioned the voting with ten conditions (most of them were never implemented) that would improve the political, media and judiciary environment. However, none of these parties (Social-Liberal, Christian-Democratic and Democratic Party) did enter in the parliament after the April 2009 parliamentary elections. Moreover, after the April 2009 parliamentary elections, the Communist party was lacking 1 vote to have 61 and to elect the president. The 2 attempts to elect the president failed because none of the opposition parties were willing to cooperate with the communists due to the previous experience, because they knew they would be punished again by the voters. The “pluralism by default” is explained in an earlier paper of Way (2002) that underlines that democracy in Moldova was possible due to the failure of authoritarianism rather than the commitment of the political forces to build pluralistic institutions. McFaul, who defines this situation as “democracy without democrats” supports this idea, as well as it is supported by Botan, both arguing that the struggle of political groups to get control over the state resulted in sort of democracy.

Even if Moldova is considered, aside the Baltic countries, as one of the most successful case of the democracy development in the post-soviet area, its economic growth record is by far very modest (Way 2005, McFaul, Botan/Cernencu 2009, Protsyk/Osoian 2008, Popescu 2009, Mungiu-Pipidi/Munteanu 2009, Mungiu-Pippidi 2007). One would say that democracy is by default assuring constant economic development (Mungiu-Pippidi 2007). As we see in the paper of Przeworski and Limongi (1993), the authors argue that this is not the case, because: “democracy generates an explosion of demands for current consumption. These demands, in turn, threaten profits, hence they reduce investments and retard

³ In Moldova the President is elected with 3/5 (61 out of 101) of the Parliament.

growth. Democracy is thus inimical to economic development". In addition to this, the China example of relevant economic growth without democracy is raising many questions and some countries in the post-soviet area, like Belarus, are very determined to follow the Chinese model which is increasingly undermining the western democracy model image. Carles Boix (2003), an exponent that explains the connection between democracy and economic development is considering that there are three important economic aspects that are influencing the democracy: a) domestic distribution of economic assets, which means the degree of economic equality; b) the nature of those economic assets, which means their mobility; and c) the distribution of political resources among individuals, which means balanced distribution. These three factors are highly influencing the politics. But let's take them one by one in the context of Moldova.

When it comes to Moldova's industry, it is often difficult to write more than one page. Certainly, Moldova has few factories that could be considered as industry, nevertheless, these factories, (most of them became obsolete over time) are located in the breakaway region of Transnistria that is not under the control of the constitutional authorities of Moldova. In the case of Moldova there are no high stakes. This can be observed by only looking at Moldova's stock exchange. The difference between the distribution of economic assets in Moldova or other former soviet countries is very big. The example of Ukraine, Russia, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan is very obvious. As it is in the case of the nature of economic assets. While Moldova has limited economic assets and even these assets are quite mobile, in the case of Russia, Ukraine or Kazakhstan, etc, the situation is very different taking into account the nature of these assets. A big part of these assets represent the natural resources that are not mobile, thus, the dominance of highly immobile types of capital "exacerbates the authoritarian solution" (Boix 2003). The last aspect, related to the distribution of political resources is not relevant in the case of Moldova due to the fact that the opposition usually exerts high pressure on the government. The Boix's theory of resources dispersion is not fully explaining the Moldova's case.

For a complete puzzle, the transition theory should not be overlooked. While the debate in the literature was whether the transition evaluation models from the Latin America are valid for the post-Communist countries. Transitologists suggest that the case of former Soviet countries is different (Roper/Fesnic, Terry 1993). As described by McFaul, successful transition to democracy should be “assured by signing a pact”, however, the fear that arises in the case of “pacted” transitions is the rigid reform agenda and program that may “lock into place specific nondemocratic practices” (McFaul).

Although is generally accepted that democracy depends on the type of the transition and that transition is taking place easier where the economic and industrial development is low, in Moldova this did not happen. At the beginning of 1990s Moldova undergone through “shock-therapy” model that resulted in shock without therapy. A possible explanation would be that structural reforms influence the model of governance but ultimately the human action is decisive (McFaul).

What is interesting in comparing Moldova with other former communist countries is that in countries where the privatization took place partly and slower, like in Belarus, it was easier to maintain the control over power, while in the case of Moldova or Ukraine, due to the high degree of privatization that caused fragmentation, made possible the appearance of more political groups. Even though most of these groups were not democratic, especially when speaking about internal democracy, the political system faced a real competition among the parties that is actually good for democratization, as Rustow puts it “democratization requires a prolonged and inconclusive struggle” (Rustow).

In the last long, a transition is not likely to succeed if it is no consensus or if it is not agreed, and Moldova is probably the single example of such a transition that resulted from a sort of equal distribution of power between old and new elite. However, we consider that the socio-economic considerations are only slightly influential in explaining democratization patterns, especially taking into account that the transition was taking place after the disintegration of the Soviet Union and there was an ethnic complexity, territorial disputes and national and anti-national movements, that is why the historical legacies are explaining pretty much all the

challenges and arrangements of the post-Soviet transition and party development process.

Favored explanation

Even though Przeworski argues that all democratizing countries are determined by a common destination, not by different points of departure, in the case of Moldova, for explaining the emergence of the multi-party system the point of departure is more important. Before 1812 Moldova was a part of Romania, and since then, up to 1918 a part of Russian Empire. In 1918 Moldova joined Romania and formed Great Romania up to the World War II, after that being occupied by the soviet army and transformed into a soviet socialist republic up to the 1991, when Moldova finally got independence. As you noticed, the last 300 years Moldova was a “ping-pong ball” between Romania and Russia and that is why the political behaviour in Moldova is largely determined by identity politics and “both electoral preferences and electoral outcomes in Moldova have been shaped to a large extent by the country’s geopolitical situation” (Mungiu-Pippidi 2007).

The statement that the parties in Moldova are geopolitical fits well the hypothesis that identity politics is drawing the lines of the development of political parties. Almost every electoral campaign in Moldova raises many issues, while it is very difficult to assess the differences between these parties in terms of policies, that is why usually the aspect that makes the difference among them could be summed up to the following statement: are you supporting the idea of joining the EU or even NATO, of maintaining an independent development path or of supporting a rapprochement with Russia. Even though the European integration became “the only game in town” (Dungaciu) in last years, the electorate in Moldova starts to make a difference among pro-European parties, as today, if a party is not, at least at the level of declaration, pro-European, then is doomed to fail in elections. Also, it is important to mention that many promote the reunification with Romania under the EU integration message, idea which is becoming popular from time to time,

however, it never got enough support in order to be put seriously onto the political agenda.

The interesting phenomenon about the political duality of Romania / Russia “battle” in Moldova is that this process, besides the party system, was replicated at the society level. About 1 million citizens, out of 3.6 million, requested Romanian citizenship, and some 120.000 people already received it. Also about 100.000 people, mainly in Transnistria, received Russian citizenship, besides other about 200.000 people who hold Russian citizenship. Both, the new Romanian and Russian citizens are thinking about economic benefits while applying for other state citizenship, while these states, mainly Romania and Russia are thinking about gaining leverage in this region. The same process is taking place with the Church in Moldova. The Metropolitan Church of Moldova is subjected to Russian Orthodox Church while the Metropolitan Church of Bessarabia is subjected to Romanian Orthodox Church. Examples of such divisions could be found in veterans associations (those who fought for Romanian army and those who fought for Russian army), trade unions, media and even the banal example of the Eurovision Song Contest that shows, no matter who sang what, the political preferences, because 12 points and 10 points either goes to Romania either to Russia. The example with society division illustrates the formation of the party system that was built on identity clashes.

Even though today the accountability of the political parties is higher than it was before, the development of policy-oriented parties is taking place very slow. The causes of such a slow process is the habitual non-involvement of the citizens that was generated by soviet tradition. Also, the low education and information level and poverty, especially in the rural areas, are not allowing the citizens to understand the political process and the importance of strong party based system. However, the people are very sensitive to identity politics. The latest example is the referendum organized by Moldova on September 5, 2010, that asked people to vote in favour of direct elections of the president and which failed because of the turnout, which was less than needed (33,3%) and the little turnout might be also explained as a result that the question on the referendum was not touching upon identity issue. For

example, many Moldovan political analysts consider that if at the referendum the question were about the language name⁴, the participation would be at least twice higher.

Conclusions

The events that took place in the last 20 years in Moldova proved that the politics has a strong “geographical” dimension. The historical legacies are creating the environment of a permanent struggle between the pro-western and pro-russian forces that generates a sort of democracy that lacks consensus. At the same time, the democracy generated by the “identity” mechanism is locking into place the development of policy oriented parties and causes a deficit of critical thinking. Moreover, the external actors that tacitly dispute Moldova maintain the problem of Moldova identity politics though financing the political parties and media trusts.

Reformation of political system and political parties should be seen through finding a large consensus over the main foreign policy direction. This consensus might the European Union, which was capable to alleviate the post-WWII ethnic conflicts and to put the economies on a fast-track rehabilitation. Even though there is a consensus in the opinion polls to move towards the EU, this consensus is still largely determined by economic benefit that a potential member state could receive, while the political elite, and the society as well, needs a de facto acknowledgement of the European Union values.

⁴ Currently the official language in Moldova is Moldovan, however, there is no difference between Romanian and Moldovan. Most of the intellectuals consider that Moldovan language was invented by Soviet Union that wanted to show that Moldova has no connection to Romania.

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