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The Politics of Moldova

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Introduction

Moldova stands as one of Eastern Europe's most intriguing and complex states, a nation at the crossroads of historical empires and contemporary geopolitical struggles. Since its declaration of independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, Moldova has been navigating a challenging transition toward democracy, state-building, and national identity formation. Sandwiched between Romania and Ukraine, and historically influenced by Russian, Ottoman, and Romanian polities, Moldova's story is one marked by political fluctuation, cultural diversity, and unresolved conflicts.

In the three decades since independence, Moldova has established a parliamentary representative democratic republic informed by its 1994 Constitution. The architecture of government, defined by a delicate balance among legislative, executive, and judicial powers, reflects Moldova's efforts to adapt European democratic principles to its own context. Yet, the journey has not been straightforward. Amendments to the constitution, shifting electoral systems, and fluid party alliances are testament to the nation's evolving political experiment.

The political landscape is further complicated by Moldova's diverse ethnic makeup and competing notions of national identity. Questions concerning language, history, and foreign alignment have fueled debates not only in parliament but also within society at large. The presence of autonomous regions like Gagauzia and the breakaway territory of Transnistria have given rise to complex governance challenges, with outside actors—primarily Russia and the European Union—keenly involved in shaping the country's trajectory.

Politics in Moldova has been characterized by instability and persistent issues of corruption and oligarchic influence, leading to widespread public skepticism and calls for genuine reform. Despite these obstacles, Moldovan society remains vibrant and engaged, with civil society organizations and a free press constantly striving to hold leaders accountable and advance the democratic project.

This book aims to provide a comprehensive and accessible guide to Moldovan politics and its political system. It is intended for students, researchers, policy professionals, and any reader seeking to understand both the formal workings of Moldova's government and the deeper political undercurrents shaping its path. Through an exploration of constitutional structures, branches of government, regional dynamics, key policy debates, and recent developments, this guide endeavors to demystify Moldova's politics for a global audience.

As Moldova moves forward—caught between the lure of European integration and the

pull of old alliances—the questions it faces resonate beyond its borders. The country's struggle with identity, sovereignty, and governance encapsulate the broader dilemmas of post-Soviet space. Understanding the politics of Moldova, therefore, is not only about grasping the workings of a small Eastern European state, but also about appreciating the forces shaping an entire region in flux.

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CHAPTER ONE: Moldova: Geography, People, and Historical Context

Moldova is a small, landlocked country nestled in Eastern Europe, bordered by Romania to the west and Ukraine to the north, east, and south. It occupies an area of approximately 33,851 square kilometers, making it roughly the size of the state of Maryland in the United States or slightly larger than Belgium. Most of its territory lies in the historical region of Bessarabia, situated between two major rivers: the Prut River to the west, which forms the border with Romania, and the Dniester (Nistru) River to the east. The Dniester also forms a segment of Moldova's northeastern and southeastern border with Ukraine and flows through the eastern part of the country, effectively separating Bessarabia from Transnistria, the breakaway region. While largely landlocked, Moldova does touch the Danube River at its southernmost tip, with a tiny 200-meter stretch forming a border.

The landscape of Moldova is primarily a hilly plain, gently sloping from the northwest down to the southeast. The average elevation is around 147 meters above sea level. The central part of the country is characterized by the Codri hills, a more elevated and heavily forested area with the highest point reaching 429.5 meters at Hill Balanesti. This region is marked by valleys and dales, carved by erosion and geological activity, creating amphitheater-like formations locally known as *hartops*. Many rural settlements are tucked away in these natural hollows. The northern part of Moldova features the level plain of the Bălți steppe, with elevations between 150 and 200 meters, and northern uplands that are about twice as high. The southern landscape includes the Bugeac Plain, an extensive area broken up by numerous ravines and gullies.

Moldova's climate is moderately continental, offering warm, long summers and relatively mild, dry winters. Average summer temperatures hover around 20°C (68°F), while January temperatures average a cooler -2°C (28°F). Rainfall varies across the country, generally decreasing from around 600-650 millimeters in the north and center to 500-550 millimeters in the south. While rainfall can be inconsistent, leading to occasional dry spells in the south, the heaviest precipitation typically occurs in early summer and again in October, often accompanied by heavy showers and thunderstorms.

The country's soils are predominantly fertile, with rich black earth, known as chernozem, covering a significant portion of the land, particularly in the north and central regions. These soils are ideal for cultivating grains, tobacco, and sugar beets. While soil quality might decrease in the south, the land still supports vineyards and

sunflower fields. The uplands, especially those covered by forests, feature brown and gray forest soils. Agriculture has historically been a cornerstone of the Moldovan economy, benefiting from these fertile lands and favorable climate.

Moldova's population is approximately 2.42 million people, according to some estimates, though other figures suggest closer to 3 million when including areas not under central government control. The capital and largest city is Chişinău, located in the south-central part of the country, with a population of around 695,400. Bălţi is the second largest city under constitutional control, with a population of around 102,457 to 146,900 depending on the source and whether surrounding areas are included. The majority of Moldova's population resides in rural areas, often in villages that developed around former state farms during the Soviet era. However, urbanization has increased, with a significant portion of the population now living in urban centers.

The demographic makeup of Moldova is diverse. The majority of the population identifies as ethnic Moldovan, accounting for about three-fourths of the total. The next largest groups are Ukrainians and Russians, followed by Gagauz, a Turkic-speaking Christian minority, Bulgarians, and Roma. The distribution of these ethnic groups varies across the country. While most ethnic Moldovans live in rural areas in the central and northern regions, a large portion of Ukrainians reside in urban centers, and a significant number of both Ukrainians and Russians live in the Transnistria region. Gagauz primarily inhabit the Bugeac Plain in the south.

The official language of Moldova is Romanian. While the constitution initially referred to it as Moldovan, a 2013 Constitutional Court ruling affirmed Romanian as the state language, aligning with the Declaration of Independence. Russian is also widely spoken and recognized as a minority language, along with Ukrainian, Gagauz, and Bulgarian. This linguistic diversity reflects the country's historical ties and influences from both Romania and Russia.

The dominant religion in Moldova is Eastern Orthodox Christianity, to which the overwhelming majority of ethnic Moldovans, Russians, Gagauz, and Ukrainians adhere. Other Christian denominations, as well as smaller Muslim and Jewish communities, are also present. While the influence of the church was limited during the Soviet period, it has experienced a revival since independence and plays a role in community life.

The history of the land that is now Moldova is long and complex, marked by various empires and shifting borders. Evidence of human habitation dates back hundreds of thousands of years. In antiquity, the region was a crossroads for migrating tribes and experienced periods of Roman and Byzantine influence. The medieval Principality of Moldavia emerged in the 14th century, encompassing a larger territory that included parts of present-day Romania and Ukraine. This principality became a vassal state of the Ottoman Empire in the 16th century.

In 1812, following a Russo-Turkish war, the eastern half of the principality, known as Bessarabia, was annexed by the Russian Empire, marking the beginning of significant Russian influence. Bessarabia remained under Russian control until the aftermath of World War I. In 1918, Bessarabia briefly declared independence as the Moldavian Democratic Republic and then united with Romania. This union lasted until 1940 when, as a consequence of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, the Soviet Union annexed Bessarabia, forming the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic.

During the Soviet era, the region underwent significant economic and social changes, including industrialization and collectivization of agriculture. Policies of Russification were also implemented. As the Soviet Union weakened in the late 1980s, Moldovan national identity and political movements gained momentum. On August 27, 1991, as the Soviet Union dissolved, the Moldavian SSR declared its independence, taking the name Republic of Moldova. However, this transition was not without conflict, leading to the emergence of the self-declared republic of Transnistria on the east bank of the Dniester, which remains outside the control of the central government. This historical backdrop of shifting allegiances, diverse populations, and unresolved territorial issues provides the foundation for understanding Moldova's contemporary political landscape.

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