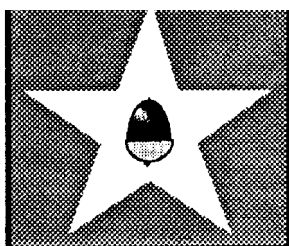


# **Conflict Studies Research Centre**

**Dr Trevor Waters**

**The "Moldovan Syndrome" &  
The Re-Russification of Moldova  
Forward into the Past!**

**February 2002**



**G105**

# **The "Moldovan Syndrome" & the Re-Russification of Moldova Forward into the Past!**

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*The widespread and large-scale protests against the Moldovan government's plan to introduce the Russian language as a compulsory subject in primary schools have forced the government to delay its proposals for re-russification. Language and politics are inextricably linked in Moldova, and the issue is far from resolved.*

## **Politics in Moldova**

A spectre stalks the land between the Nistru and the Prut. The "Moldovan Syndrome", as *Novoye Vremya*, the Chişinău Russian-language Democratic Party newspaper called it at the time, is this: Moldova is the only CIS country to have returned the Communist Party to power.<sup>1</sup> Significantly, the 25 February 2001 Parliamentary elections conformed to international standards for democratic elections. With a 69% voter turnout, the Party of Communists of the Republic of Moldova (PCRM) secured 71 seats in the 101-member legislature. As Moldova is a parliamentary republic, such a landslide victory did indeed mark a spectacular return of the communists to power. It was the first time this had happened in post-Soviet history. With such a massive majority, Moldova's communists not only became the governing party, but were able to elect their leader, Vladimir Voronin, as President of the Republic and Head of State, and also have a majority large enough to make changes to the constitution.<sup>2</sup>

### **Vladimir Voronin - President of the Republic of Moldova**

One of the leaders of the Interfront movement in the late 1980's, Vladimir Voronin comes from Transnistria where he was born in 1941. He was First Secretary of the Tighina City Executive Committee from 1985-89 and served as Minister of Internal Affairs (in the rank of Major-General) from 1989-90. Voronin was the founder and First Secretary of the Central Committee of the resurrected Party of Communists of the Republic of Moldova. He was a candidate for the presidency of Moldova in the 1996 elections and gained 10.2% of the vote. He was elected to parliament in 1998 as leader of the PCRM, the strongest faction in the legislature. Parliament elected Voronin as the third president of Moldova on 4 April 2001. "Russia will occupy the highest position in the important task of resolving Moldova's aspirations and strategic problems," vowed the newly elected President, "Russia was, is and will remain a strategic ally for Moldova in all respects".

Left-wing parties have dominated political developments in Moldova since independence in August 1991 (see Annex A). Such parties have their roots either in the former Communist Party of the Moldovan Soviet Socialist Republic, or in the Unitatea/Yedinstvo (Unity) movement that emerged in 1989, mainly among Russian speakers who wished to preserve Moldova's relationship with the Soviet Union, and as a reaction to the pro-Romanian and right-wing Popular Front. (Yedinstvo was, in fact, the Moldovan branch of the all-Union Interfront movement that united political forces inimical to the cultural and linguistic reforms of the late Soviet period).

The centre-right wing of the political spectrum (the successor parties of the Popular Front Movement) has suffered especially from continuous splits, coalition reshuffles, shifting alliances and is, in general, characterised by a high degree of fragmentation. Of the seventeen parties/electoral blocs participating in the 2001 elections, fourteen (of which 10 had a centre-right political orientation) failed to clear the (new and high) 6% threshold for parliamentary representation. Some 28% of voters are not represented in parliament and the centre-right electorate effectively made a gift to the communists of some 20 parliamentary seats.

Moldova is the poorest country in Europe.<sup>3</sup> GDP has fallen to 30% of the pre-independence level. The average wage is about one dollar a day. Some 800,000 pensioners try to subsist on the average pension of about seven dollars per month, though the state has long since been unable to pay pensions and salaries on time. Malnutrition, tuberculosis and hepatitis are on the rise; life expectancy has been reduced. 700,000 Moldovans (about one third of people of working age and one sixth of the total population) seeking work abroad have in many cases abandoned their children who become "economic orphans". Life in general in Moldova, especially in rural areas, is harsh. Such was the background to the February 2001 elections.

Appealing to Soviet nostalgia ("Communists in power - order in the country - welfare in families!"), the PCR<sup>4</sup> campaigned vigorously for a populist, state-oriented social and economic programme, calling for price controls, broader social guarantees, and for a bigger role for the state in the economy. Granting Russian the status of second state language and considering taking Moldova into the Russian-Belorussian Union were also important planks in the PCR's electoral platform. It seems clear, however, that the communists were swept back into power in a powerful protest vote by an electorate that was frustrated with extreme poverty and with government inaction and lack of reform.

## **Background to the Language Issue**

Moldova's population of just under 4.5 million includes several ethnic groups but is split largely into Russian and Moldovan/Romanian speakers (see Annex B). Under Gorbachev *demokratizatsiya* led to demands outside RSFSR for de-russification and thus to strengthening the official role and status of the titular republican language. This manifestly challenged the privileged position of local Russians and Russophones in those republics (who were often regarded anyway as occupiers, colonisers, or tools of Moscow). There was a backlash among Russophones, especially where jobs were threatened. The ensuing conflict was exploited both by republican nationalists and by communist opponents of reform, thus politicising the language issue. When republics became independent, enshrining the titular language as the official language was closely bound up with the idea of establishing and maintaining full independence. By this time, however, Russian and

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Russophone minorities had become identified with opposition to democracy and independence. Finding themselves treated as second-class (and probably disloyal) citizens, they turned to Moscow for help. This only served to confirm the suspicion and mistrust of the newly independent states. Issues of language and national identity fuelled the series of conflicts which led to the break-up of the USSR.

On 31 August 1989, in a highly charged atmosphere of rallies, strikes and demos, Moldova followed the example of the Baltic republics and passed a law that declared the language of the titular nation to be the official language of the republic. The new language laws also implicitly recognised the identity of Moldovan and Romanian, and restored the Latin alphabet. (Following their annexation of Moldova in 1940, the Soviets insisted that Moldovan, written in Cyrillic script, was a different language from Romanian in order to promote the idea that Moldovans and Romanians are separate nations). So important was the adoption of the Language Laws within the context of the flowering of the non-Soviet, Moldovan national identity, that 31 August, *Limba Noastra* ("Our Language"(Day)), was subsequently declared a national holiday. It is the second most important secular holiday after Independence Day. 31 August Street, moreover, is one of the main thoroughfares in Chişinău, the Moldovan capital.

Despite the fact that the law provided for Russian to be the language of interethnic communication within Soviet Moldova, 100,000 ethnic Russians went on strike in support of retaining only Russian as the official language. The language reform was also unpopular with the Ukrainians and Gagauzi, who now had to study a third language, Moldovan/Romanian. Indeed, language was the trigger for secession in Transnistria and Gagauzia. Questions of language and national identity remained highly divisive into the mid-1990s. The issue of what to call the language (glottonym) was hotly debated prior to the adoption of Moldova's new, post-Soviet Constitution (1994), which defines the state language as 'Moldovan', rather than 'Moldovan (Romanian)' or 'Moldovan which is identical to Romanian', the other options considered. In March and April 1995, thousands of students took to the streets chanting 'Romanian is the official language'.

## **Russification & the Present Political Crisis**

On 9 January 2002, several thousand people mounted a demonstration in front of Government House in Chişinău in order to protest against the communist regime's introduction of compulsory Russian language study in grade two of primary schools. The protest was organised by the opposition Christian Democratic People's Party (PPCD) (see Box), whose leader Iurie Roşca called on the demonstrators to oppose the government's enforced "re-Russification"<sup>5</sup> and hailed the protest as a "wave of national revival". "We are Romanians," "Down with the Bolsheviks!" and "Don't shove the Russian language down our throats!" changed the demonstrators who were mostly younger people and included teachers, parents and students, as well as party political activists.

The anti-Russification protests continued throughout January. Up to forty thousand people (and more when the students returned from vacation) demonstrated in downtown Chişinău on Grand National Assembly Square blocking traffic on Ştefan cel Mare Boulevard, the main thoroughfare in the capital. 46,000 signatures against the introduction of compulsory Russian were presented to the Ministry of Education. PPCD vice-president Vlad Cubreacov declared that "the communist regime is a totalitarian one, which serves a linguistic minority, a regime

that is no different from the separatist one in Tiraspol".<sup>6</sup> Students' Unions, Teachers' Associations and NGOs in other parts of Moldova and, highly significantly, in neighbouring Romania, declared solidarity with the anti-Russification cause. Tensions mounted. The government declared the protests illegal and on 21 January the Minister of Justice, Ion Morei, banned temporarily the activities of the PPCD, which Council of Europe President Peter Schieder condemned as "threatening the normal functioning of democracy".<sup>7</sup> Chişinău subsequently cancelled the suspension of the activities of the PPCD after the Council of Europe had requested an explanation from Moldova about the decision, which was contrary to basic Articles of the European Convention on Human Rights, and of special concern in view of the forthcoming local elections in Moldova in April.<sup>8</sup>

### **Christian Democratic People's Party (PPCD)**

The radical offspring of the late 1980s Popular Front Movement, the right-wing PPCD (formerly the Christian Democratic Popular Front) has a pronounced pro-Romanian orientation, and seeks to downgrade the use of Russian in Moldova by giving it the status of a foreign language. A party of "law and order", the PPCD also promises to extend the influence of the Orthodox Church in society. The party's economic programme advocates privatisation, competition and support for small and medium sized enterprises, especially in the agricultural sector, while state intervention in the economy should be strictly limited. The PPCD's electoral symbol is Moldova's national hero Ştefan cel Mare (the Great, 1457-1504) encircled with stars in a heart; its slogans included "Listen to your heart", "A government with clean hands: we don't divide the thieves into theirs and ours!" The PPCD is supported by two Romanian-language newspapers: the privately owned and widely read *Flux* and the party print *Țara*. Former radical Popular Front leader and journalist Iurie Roşca (born in 1961) is leader of the PPCD.

The government decided, on 13 February, to replace curricular texts on Romanian history with a new book on Moldovan history, which reignited the general protests against Russification. Although the demonstrations remained peaceful, the protesters now sought the resignation of the government, the parliament and the president, and called for early parliamentary elections. On 15 February, 30 Moldovan NGOs issued a joint statement entitled "Civic Society Says No" condemning the "irresponsible actions of the communist authorities, which are aimed at the destruction of the democratic mechanisms on which society is based".<sup>9</sup> On 17 February, the PPCD called for an anti-government general strike.<sup>10</sup>

The government imposed a moratorium on 21 February on the implementation of the decisions to introduce the Russian language and Moldovan history in school curricula until the end of the academic year.<sup>11</sup> On 22 February, parliament backed down on Russification and voted to cancel the introduction of Russian as a compulsory subject and to delay the scrapping of Romanian history from the school curriculum.<sup>12</sup> In an address to the nation on State Television on 23 February, after yet another day of protests against the government's policy of Russification, President Voronin accused the PPCD leaders, whom he called "terrorists", of plotting a bloody coup and spreading "the virus of nationalism".<sup>13</sup>

On 24 February, an 80,000 strong rally adopted a resolution accusing the communists of suppressing human rights and stifling dissent and calling for civil

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disobedience. The resolution also called for a complete withdrawal of the Russian military presence from Moldova.<sup>14</sup>

Education Minister Ilie Vancea publicly apologised to protesters on 25 February: "I've made a mistake. I should have been firmer on issues which are sacred to us: our language and history."<sup>15</sup> President Voronin dismissed Ilie Vancea as Education Minister on 26 February.<sup>16</sup>

Protests in Chişinău resumed on 26 February despite the latest ruling by the Supreme Court to outlaw the anti-Communist demonstrations and rallies. A group of some 50 State Television and Radio Moldova journalists issued a statement of protest against the Communist Party's "reinstatement of Soviet censorship on National Television and Radio". The journalists also expressed solidarity with the "popular protests that oppose Russification by force and the deliberate demolition of the democratic system in Moldova".<sup>17</sup>

True it is, indeed, that a spectre stalks the land between the Nistru and the Prut. The 2001 elections may have been democratic, but politics in Moldova are far from consensual. How long the demonstrations continue, and what their outcome will be, remains, as yet, unclear.

## Parliamentary Election Results

**27 February 1994**

<b>Party/Electoral Bloc</b>	<b>% of Vote</b>	<b>Number of Seats in Parliament</b>
Agrarian Democratic Party of Moldova	43.2	54
Socialist/Unitatea-Yedinstvo bloc	22.0	27
Bloc of Peasants and Intellectuals <sup>1</sup>	9.2	11
Christian Democratic Popular Front Bloc <sup>2</sup>	7.5	9
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>101</b>

<sup>(1)</sup> The electoral alliance of the Congress of the Intelligentsia, a moderate pan-Romanian organisation, and smaller moderate pan-Romanian groups

<sup>(2)</sup> The electoral bloc of the radical pan-Romanian Christian Democratic Popular Front and smaller pan-Romanian groups

Number of registered voters: 2,356,614  
 Voter turnout (%): 79.31  
 Electoral threshold (%): 4

Total left-wing vote (ie Agrarian Democratic Party of Moldova and Socialist/Unitatea-Yedinstvo bloc): 65.2%

**22 March 1998**

<b>Party/Electoral Bloc</b>	<b>% of Vote</b>	<b>Number of Seats in Parliament</b>
Party of Communists of the Republic of Moldova	30.01	40
Democratic Convention of Moldova	19.42	26
Bloc for a Democratic and Prosperous Moldova	18.16	24
Party of Democratic Forces	8.84	11
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>101</b>

Number of registered voters: 2,431,218  
 Voter turnout (%): 69.12  
 Electoral threshold (%): 4

Total left-wing vote (ie Party of Communists of the Republic of Moldova and Bloc for a Democratic and Prosperous Moldova): 48.17%

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25 February 2001

<b>Party/Electoral Bloc</b>	<b>% of Vote</b>	<b>Number of Seats in Parliament</b>
<b>Christian Democratic People's Party (PPCD)</b>	<b>8.18</b>	<b>11</b>
Electoral Bloc "Faith and Justice"	0.68	0
<b>Party of Communists of the Republic of Moldova (PCRM)</b>	<b>50.20</b>	<b>71</b>
National Liberal Party (PNL)	2.82	0
Social-Political Movement for "Order and Justice" (MOD)	1.45	0
Party of Rebirth and Conciliation (PRCM)	5.63	0
Democratic Party (PD)	4.97	0
Peasants' Christian Democratic Party (PTCD)	0.27	0
Alliance of Lawyers and Economists (AJE)	0.93	0
Electoral Bloc Unity (Unitatea/Yedindstvo)	0.46	0
Social-Political Movement "Equal Rights" (Ravnopraviye)	0.46	0
National Peasants' Christian Democratic Party (PNTCD)	1.74	0
Party of Democratic Forces (PFD)	1.21	0
Agrarian Democratic Party of Moldova (PDAM)	1.13	0
<b>Electoral Bloc "Alliance for Braghis"</b>	<b>13.45</b>	<b>19</b>
Electoral Bloc "Motherland" (Plai Natal)	1.61	0
Social Democratic Party of Moldova (PSDM)	2.49	0
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>101</b>

Number of registered voters: 2,371,345  
 Voter turnout (%): 69.96  
 Electoral threshold (%): 6 for political parties and electoral blocs;  
 3 for independent candidates

None of the ten independent candidates who contested the elections was able to overcome the 3% threshold.

Total left-wing vote (ie Party of Communists of the Republic of Moldova and Electoral Bloc "Alliance for Braghis"): 63.65%

**Population of the Republic of Moldova (1989 Census)**

<b>Ethnic Group</b>	<b>Population</b>	<b>%</b>
Total	4,335,360	100.0
Moldovans	2,794,749	64.5
Ukrainians	600,366	13.8
Russians	562,069	13.0
Gagauzi	153,458	3.5
Bulgarians	88,419	2.0
Jews	65,672	1.5
Roma	11,571	0.3

## NOTES

(1) The most recent (Soviet) 1989 Census still provides the most reliable figures available. There were hopes of conducting a census in 2001 that remained unfulfilled because of lack of funds.

(2) It is worth noting that the Russians are not (albeit by a very small margin) the largest minority in Moldova. However, the Ukrainians, like the other minorities, including the Turkic Gagauzi, are heavily Russified.

**ENDNOTES**

<sup>1</sup> Novoye Vremya (Chişinău), 27 February 2001.

<sup>2</sup> Following the 5 July 2000 constitutional reform, the president was no longer to be elected by popular vote, but through a vote of parliament with a three-fifths majority of 61 mandates required. The former legislature failed to elect a new president in December 2000, as successor to outgoing Petru Lucinschi, who accordingly dissolved parliament and set the date for early elections on 25 February 2001. On 4 April 2001, parliament elected Vladimir Voronin, leader of the PCRM, as the third president of Moldova. Voronin secured 71 votes, his two rivals 15 and 3 votes, with 89 of the 101 deputies taking part in the vote. With 71 seats in parliament, Moldova's communists also enjoy a so-called constitutional majority: 68 mandates are required to amend the Constitution.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, "Poverty in Eastern Europe: The Land that Time Forgot", The Economist, 23 September 2000; "A New Misery Curtain", The Economist, 2 June 2001.

<sup>4</sup> The Soviet-era Communist Party of Moldova was banned with the collapse of the Soviet Union. The Party of Communists of the Republic of Moldova was established in 1995. The resurrected communist party was prevented by law from using the designation "Communist Party of Moldova", hence the rather strange name "Party of Communists of the Republic of Moldova".

<sup>5</sup> RFE/RL Balkan Report, Vol 6, No 3, 11 January 2002.

<sup>6</sup> AP FLUX, Chişinău, 21 January 2002.

<sup>7</sup> ITAR-TASS, Moscow, 2 February 2002.

<sup>8</sup> Basapress, Chişinău, 8 February 2002.

<sup>9</sup> Basapress, Chişinău, 15 February 2002.

<sup>10</sup> Interfax, Moscow, 17 February 2002.

<sup>11</sup> Interfax, Moscow, 21 February 2002.

<sup>12</sup> Moldovan Radio, Chişinău, 22 February 2002.

<sup>13</sup> Interfax, Moscow, 23 February 2002.

<sup>14</sup> Basapress, Chişinău, 24 February 2002.

<sup>15</sup> Basapress, Chişinău, 25 February 2002.

<sup>16</sup> Basapress, Chişinău, 26 February 2002.

<sup>17</sup> Basapress, Chişinău, 26 February 2002.

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ISBN 1-903584-65-5

**Published By:**

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Centre**

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**ISBN 1-903584-65-5**