Disillusionment with Democracy: Notes from the Field in Moldova

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Moldova shares a history with both Russia and Western Europe, which creates a dual and often conflicting identity as reflected in the country's difficult transition from communism to democracy. At the formation of the Republic of Moldova in 1991, the citizens modeled their flag after the image of the Romanian flag, declared Romanian to be the national language, and emphasized Romanian heroes in state history books. However, in February of 2001, ten years after independence from the Soviet Union, Moldova democratically elected the Communist party to government; they won 71 out of 101 seats in parliament.[1] This new government has turned away from Western influenced democracy and reforms by renewing ties with Russia, reestablishing Russian as a national language, and attempting to reverse many hard won land and economic reforms. This election represents a profound disillusionment with democracy, as perceived by Moldovans. Also, it is symbolic of a change in Moldovan identity because the country is slowly turning away from the West to look towards Russia. This disillusionment with democracy and move away from Romanian identification may be traced to the Russian Financial crisis in the summer of 1998; the collapse of the ruble devastated Moldova's struggling economy. Drawing on ethnographic data collected from

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[1] Peter Baker, "Ex-Soviet Republic of Moldova Returns to Communists to Power," *The Washington Post* 27 February 2001, A17.

1997 to 1999,[2] this paper demonstrates that the financial crisis had significant impact on Moldova's fragile democracy and identity.

During this time, I lived and worked as a teacher in central Moldova where I personally witnessed teachers' salaries being reduced to a minuscule wage that the government rarely paid, and vital necessities, such as water and gas, being cut back dramatically. More important, however, was the profound shift in attitudes. Among many Moldovans, there was a pronounced Moldovan-Romanian nationalism when I arrived in 1997 but much of this sentiment had waned by 1999. Based on my observations and conversations with community members, fellow teachers, and friends, I analyze the changes and argue that the catalyst of these changes was the financial crisis. This paper will illustrate that many Moldovans conflated democracy with economic prosperity and were greatly disillusioned when this prosperity was not realized immediately. The result of this disillusionment may have been the reinstatement of the Communist party in 2001.

Moldova – Background History and Identity

Explaining who is a Moldovan is not a simple task. It may be assumed that Moldovans essentially are Romanians because the countries are historically linked; legend has it that a Romanian prince founded the region of Moldova in the early fourteenth century.[3] Also, the countries share a border, similar cultural traditions, and a common language. However, Moldova, unlike Romania, has not traditionally been an independent state; it was once part of the Ottoman Empire, the Russian Empire, and the kingdom of Romania. These powers brought different languages, immigrants, and culture to the region. Moldovan history, to a great extent, is the story of these empires, which controlled and fought over the region and therefore the ambiguity of Moldovan identity is rooted in this complex narrative. Romanian Studies professor Charles King writes "Moldova [remains], even a decade after independence, the only country in Eastern Europe in which major disputes existed among political and cultural elites over the fundamentals of national identity."[4]

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[2] Over the course of two years, I kept several personal journals, which included observations of daily life, recorded verbatim and paraphrased conversations, newspaper clippings, and detailed descriptions of Moldovan culture and traditions.

King further argues that national Moldovan identity is not a concept that arose naturally among the region's inhabitants but it was an artificial idea that was imposed by the Soviet Union. King explains that prior to the 1920s, scholars considered the inhabitants of Moldova to be nothing "more than an eastern offshoot of the Romanians" because their spoken dialect shared its origins with that Romanian. He explains that a distinct Moldovan identity emerged in 1924 when the Soviet Union created The Moldovan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (MASSR) along the Western boarders of Ukraine whose language and customs were similar to those inhabitants of the Bessarabia (a former Romanian province, now part of modern day Moldova).[5] Soviet officials created this new nationality by declaring that Moldovans had a distinct heritage and culture from their neighbors in Romania proper. In 1940, the Province of Bessarabia was joined with the MASSR, the borders were redrawn and the region became Soviet Moldavia. Building on the premise that Moldovans were distinctly different from their Romanian cousins, the Soviets took measures to separate the regions. For example, Soviet linguists created the Moldovan language by converting their current Romanian dialect (essentially Romanian with a Slavic influence) from the Latin alphabet to the Cyrillic. The Soviets did this intentionally to control the region and prevent its citizens from fraternizing with their Romanian neighbors.

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[3] Charles King. *The Moldovans: Romania, Russian, and the Politics of Culture.* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 2000), 12. The following section borrows heavily from Professor King as he is alone in the field of current Moldovan scholarship.

[4] Ibid., 229.

One of the first steps away from the USSR occurred during Perestroika, when, in 1989, the Soviet Moldavian government ruled that the national language would be Romanian and it would be written in the Latin alphabet. King argues that this ruling signifies a public acknowledgment that Moldova shares an identity with Romania.[6] With the fall of the Soviet Union, Moldavia gained independence in 1991 and was born again as Moldova. Once independent, Moldovan intellectuals, unlike their counterparts in other Eastern European countries, lacked a shared vision for the future of the nation. Some viewed independence as a step towards ultimate reunification with Romania, while others maintained "a version of the former Soviet view that Moldovans are ethnically separate from Romanians."[7] In fact, Moldova is a multiethnic country whose inhabitants include Moldovans as well as a substantial population of Russians, Ukrainians, and Bulgarians; and smaller populations of Roma and Gagauz. King believes that this

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[5] Ibid., 230 and 2.
[6] Ibid., 142.
[7] Graham Smith ed., *The Nationalities Question in the Post-Soviet States* (New York: Longman, 1996), 227.

distinct multiethnic characteristic makes Moldovan a distinct nationality from Romanian.[8]

This multiethnic character, however, has brought tension and war to Moldova. In 1992, a group of Russian Nationalists declared the Transnistria Region (the small sliver of land between Moldova and Ukraine which was part of Soviet Moldavia) to be an independent republic. A civil war ensued which has yet to be resolved completely. Currently, Transnistria is not recognized as an independent nation by any official organization, such as the UN. Yet, this tiny renegade region prints its own currency, broadcasts its own TV and radio, and maintains Soviet emblems and customs.[9]

In addition to the Transnistria conflict, in 1993 a small group of Orthodox Christian Turks, the Gagauz, negotiated with the Moldovan parliament to create a culturally and administrative autonomous region for themselves in exchange for recognizing that Chisinau, Moldova's capital, was the ultimate political authority.[10] The Gagauz speak and maintain schools in their own language, also called Gagauz.

Moldova's multiethnic character does not lend itself easily to forming a strong and cohesive national identity, which would be more stable during periods of social unrest, such as an economic crisis. Benedict Anderson explains that a nation is an "imagined community" of "deep horizontal comradeship" and "ultimately it is this fraternity that makes it possible, over the past two centuries, for some any millions of people, not so much to kill, as willing to die for such limited imaginings."[11] In our own country, the visible nation-wide support after September 11th exemplifies this sort of nationalism.

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[8] King, *The Moldovans: Romania, Russian, and the Politics of Culture*, 170.

[9] Michael Wines, "Trans-Dniester Nation Resents Shady Reputation," *New York Times*, 5 March 2002, A3.

[10] Charles King, "Moldovan Identity and the Politics of Pan Romanianism," *Slavic Review* 53/2 (Summer 1994): 361.

[11] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1991), 7.

King argues that Moldovans have an "imagined community." He writes, "there is no distinct literature, no separate language…yet, most Moldovans feel themselves to be something other than simply Romanians."[12] However, I observed that Moldovans did not necessarily "feel themselves to be something other than simply Romanians." They categorized themselves not according to the nation in which they lived, but rather by their ethnicity. They had a plethora of "imagined communities" or nationalities, which confused me during my time in the country because of my own American perceptions. For example, a doctor who treated many Americans was born in Moldova, but his parents were born in Ukraine, he grew up speaking Ukrainian, and still calls himself "Ukrainian." My neighbors, Oxana and Lilia,[13] a mother and daughter, were born in Moldova but had Russian ancestry, went to Russian schools, and considered themselves to be "Russian." In contrast, the family with whom I lived for three months had Romanian ancestry, spoke Romanian, and considered themselves to be "Romanian" or "Moldovan" – terms that they used interchangeably. From these examples, it is clear that Moldovans have a firm sense of individual identity. However, this multiplicity of identities makes the national "imagined community" fluid and ambiguous.

Moldova – 1997

As a Peace Corps volunteer, I arrived in Moldova in June of 1997. At this time, the economy was on a downward slide. *Transitions Online*, a NGO that monitors the region, reported that since its independence in 1991, the country's national debt had been slowly growing while its gross national product was declining. Another problem was the accumulation of state salaries and pensions. The government was less and less able to support the large number of tenured state employees, which included teachers and doctors. *Transitions Online* also reported that the average monthly salary was around $50, which placed Moldova among the poorest of European nations. Additionally, when surveyed, 49 percent of the population considered 1997 "as a more difficult year than the previous one."[14] At the time, the Moldovan currency, the lei, was 4.6 to one US dollar.[15] To help form a visual picture of Moldova, when I arrived, I encountered what I considered to be surprising material contradictions. Outside of the capital city, horse drawn carriages drove along side imported cars and people collected water from wells but had televisions sets. The World Bank reported that, in 1997, only 17% of the poor and 35% of the non-poor had indoor plumbing and the statistics for central heat, gas, and phone lines were nearly identical.[16]

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[12] King, *The Moldovans: Romania, Russian, and the Politics of Culture*, 7.

[13] All proper names have been changed.

For three months, I had intensive Romanian language training in Chisinau, the capital city. At that time, Romanian was the official and only national language and the Peace Corps taught Romanian.[17] I had my first taste of the fluidity of Moldovan "identity" in Chisinau. Although Romanian was the state language, everyone spoke Russian (as a result of Soviet schooling) and, from my observations, many people spoke only Russian. I found this confusing, as I naively assumed that the national language would be one that everyone spoke. Shopkeepers consistently addressed me in Russian, so much so that I assumed that many Russian words were Romanian. It took a great deal of backtracking by my Romanian language instructors to set me straight.

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[14] Dan Ionescu, "Moldova 1997: In Search of Stability," *Transitions Online*, 28 January 1998 [journal on-line]; available from <<http://knoweldgenet.tol.cz>>; accessed 3 January 2003.

[15] IMF, "Republic of Moldova: Recent Economic Developments," *IMF Country Report No. 01/22*. (Washington D.C.: IMF, 2001), 36.

[16] The World Bank, *Moldova: Poverty Assessment*. (Washington DC: The World Bank, 1999), 16.

[17] Russian instruction was available to some volunteers who were going to predominately Russian speaking regions.

At the end of my training period, I moved to Orhei, a medium sized city located approximately 40 miles north of Chisinau. I moved in with the Pisacaru family, who were ethnically Romanian and considered themselves to be "Moldovan." Nic, the father, managed a large collective pig farm in the region. Elena, the mother, owned a tailor's shop in town. The Pisacaru family benefited greatly from Moldovan independence. Prior to 1991, they lived in a small apartment and Elena was a teacher at a local school. By my arrival, they had moved into a two-level house with gas heat, indoor plumbing, and a separate kitchen and garage; and they had a car.

During my first month with the Pisacaru family, we traveled to Iasi, Romania. This city located close to Moldova's western border, only a four-hour drive from Orhei, and this proximity makes it a desirable travel destination. Several of the Pisacaru's friends had moved to Iasi since the early 1990s. Elena explained to me in the car that she wanted to move to Iasi because life in Romania was "nicer and more refined" than in Moldova. At the time, I noted that this was reflective of Elena's optimism about her future – she believed in upward mobility, continuing her climb up a social and economic ladder.

Elena's optimism was not unique. I frequently asked Moldovans whether they thought life was better now than under communism. Victor, a school colleague told me that "in communist days, we had lots of money but nothing to buy and now we have no money and everything to buy." Victor was referring to the influx of imported goods that are too expensive for most Moldovans. However, he continued that it was "more difficult now but it is better to be free." Elena also used the word "free" in describing why the current environment was better than the communist past: "we are free to do as we wish and say as we wish." In Elena's case, this was in fact true; after communism she took advantage of this freedom to open a successful small business.

Another neighbor, Sveta, also benefited from Moldovan independence. Although born in Moldova, Sveta considered herself to be "Russian." Alex, her husband, worked in an import /export business and he traveled by car to Ukraine frequently as it had become easier to travel between the two countries since the fall of communism. Sveta's mother ran a small shop that sold vodka, cigarettes, and candy. This shop, like Elena's business, was one of the many small enterprises in Orhei.

Elena was proud of the Romanian that I had learned over the summer. My first week there, she introduced me to her friends as "my American friend who speaks *our* language" – i.e. Romanian. Throughout my two-year stay, I frequently heard people, like Elena, refer to Romanian as "limba noastra" or "our language." Whereas the "Russian" Moldovans with whom I had contact called this language "Moldovan," the "Romanian" Moldovans called it "Romanian." The "Romanian" reference to language echoes King's earlier premise that the official state language acknowledges the country's connection to Romania. By saying that I spoke "Moldovan" rather than "Romanian," the "Russian" Moldovans were asserting their underlying belief that Moldova was a separate country from Romania with a distinct language and culture.

Sveta's husband, Alex, spoke only Russian. However, she told me that their two-year old daughter, Katia, would learn to speak English because that was "the language of the world." Elena and Nic's son, Yuri, a ninth grader, also wanted to learn English because he wanted to be a "rich businessman." Many of my students, who were much less economically advantaged than Yuri, also wanted to learn English for this reason. The desire to learn English reflective of a larger optimism or hope about the future - these young people believed that they could become financially successful by studying and working hard.

The Russian Financial Crisis

In the midst failing Asian markets, the Russian government experienced severe cash shortages beginning in 1997. This was due in part to domestic companies who paid taxes in kind rather than in cash; the fall of international oil prices; and the withdraw of Asian investors.[18] To ameliorate the situation, the Russian government borrowed heavily from the international bond market and issued short-term treasury bills, called GKOs. By the summer of 1998, however, both foreign and domestic investors became nervous about the government's ability to repay the GKOs, and thus stopping purchasing the bills. As investors' confidence waned, the stock market began to plummet, losing 50% of its value between January and July. The IMF soon came to the rescue, or so it thought. In July, in cooperation with the World Bank and the Japanese government, the IMF offered Russia loans amounting to $17.1 billion. The IMF tried with little success to get the Russian government to commit to reform.[19]

Unfortunately, the bailout package failed. The first $5 billion was lost as investors converted their rubles into dollars to get their money out of the country, putting even more strain on the ruble. To the world's surprise, on August 17 the Russian government both defaulted on its loans and devalued its currency. Additionally, the government called a 90-day freeze on all repayments of hard currency loans to western banks. On September 2, the Russian government floated the ruble, which had been previously fixed to the dollar. These measures had little positive impact on the economy, and the ruble continued to fall, the stock market sank, banks refused withdrawals and began to close; and prices greatly increased.[20]

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[18] Michael McFaul, "Russia's Summer of Discontent," *Current History,* 97: 621 (October 1998): 308.

The Economic Crisis in Moldova 1998 and 1999

Almost immediately following the devaluation of the ruble, Moldova's currency, the lei, also plummeted. The BBC newswire reported that many Moldovans panicked and traded their lei for dollars, creating a surge in the dollar demand. This forced many banks to suspended trading on September 3, which in turn boosted black market trading. The BBC also reported that foreigner investors, alarmed by the events in Russia, also began to pull out of the Moldovan market.[21] By December of 1998, the lei had dropped to 8.5 lei to the dollar, and the year average for 1999 was 10.5 lei to the dollar. The IMF reported that output declined and inflation shot up, peaking at 54% in October 1999, one year after the crisis.[22]

Rising inflation had devastating effects on the everyday life in Moldova. Moldovans had to rely increasing on imported goods while not being able to produce

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[19] Homi Khara, Brian Pinto, and Sergei Ulatov, "An Analysis of Russia's 1998 Meltdown: Fundamentals and Market Signals," *Brookings Papers on Economic Activity* no. 1 (2001): 49.

[20] McFaul, "Russia's Summer of Discontent," 308.

[21] "Moldovan Leu follows Russian Rouble in Downward Spiral," *BBC Monitoring Former Soviet Union – Economic*. London; 4 September 1998: 1.

[22] IMF, "Republic of Moldova: Recent Economic Developments," 36 and 6.

adequately to counterbalance the imports. As the lei fell, imports became more and more expensive. Additionally, Moldova lost its most important trading partner, as Russia had accounted for more than half of Moldova's export revenues.[23]

The goods in local shops became more expensive, but Moldovans were earning less and less. This was due in part to the fact that the government could not pay its employees. The large number of state employees is a remnant of Moldova's Soviet past. At the time of the financial crisis in August and September of 1998, the teachers in my region had not been paid for at least four months because the government did not have cash to pay them; many of the taxes the Moldovan government collected from industries were paid in kind. For example, teachers in the northern region of Telenesti were paid in prunes and sugar and the doctors were paid in fresh fish, in lieu of their autumn wages. In the midst of this financial crisis, the teachers of my region went on strike for one week during the first week of school because they had not been paid for the last several months. Other state workers followed suit. Many Peace Corps volunteers reported that their regions were also on strike and for longer than one week. By December 1998, Peace Corps headquarters had sent out a special memo to all volunteers instructing them to continue working while the Moldovan teachers were on strike. *Transitions Online* reported that the falling lei had caused monthly salaries to fall to $32 a month and that 80% of Moldovans were believed to live below the poverty threshold. The government still could not pay salaries or pensions and, in December 1998, 20,000 to 40,000 workers protested in Chisinau.[24] Strikes continued into 1999. On June 23, protestors in Chisinau violently clashed with police, leading to injuries and arrests.[25]

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[23] Paul D. Quinlan, "Moldova 1999: Hard Times Continue" *Transitions Online*, 17 January 2000 [journal on-line]; available from <<http://knowledgenet.tol.cz> accessed 3 January 2003.

The government was also unable to pay Russia or Ukraine for electricity, gas, and water. As a result, these countries severely cut back on their utility exports to Moldova making life inconvenient and difficult for all Moldovans. In my neighborhood in Orhei, nearly everyone lived in large apartment blocks with an average of five floors. The flats were designed to operate with running water and a centralized heating system. However, they could only have water for two to four hours a day. People would fill up their bathtubs, buckets, and pots to make do while the water was turned off. This was manageable, but for nearly two weeks in February of 1999, water was turned off completely. All of the neighborhood residents had to walk to the local well and then carry buckets up to their flats. Other inconveniences included the heat being cut off for an entire month from November to December 1999 because not everyone in the neighborhood could pay their bills. People used gas stoves to heat their apartments or left their flats and stayed with family who had wood or coal burning furnaces in their homes (usually in outlying villages). Additionally, schools routinely closed because there was not enough money to buy coal for the furnaces. My school, for example, closed from November 24 to December 3, 1999. Prior to closing, students wore hats and mittens to class and one could see their breath while they were talking.

Apart from the hardship of living in modern flats with no heat or water, Moldovans had to endure another difficulty after the fall of the lei - the Central Bank's control of cash. The state limited the availability of cash so people could not withdraw their money in an attempt to limit the amount of money that people could convert to dollars. Throughout January 1999, a line of pensioners spilled out of the regional bank every day. These elderly citizens were waiting for their small state pensions to pay utility bills. I also could not withdraw my Peace Corps stipend from the bank; I was finally able to get my money out after a long process of negotiation, by agreeing to withdraw only a quarter of my balance at a time. The decline of the national currency and the bank's subsequent refusal to distribute cash was both frustrating and humiliating for many. This frustration could have only magnified an individual's impatience towards reform and development.

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[24] Ionescu, "Moldova 1997: In Search of Stability," 7.
[25] Quinlan, "Moldova 1999: Hard Times Continue," 2.

Disillusionment with Democracy

Far more significant than the physical hardships brought on by the financial crisis, was the profound change in attitude among many Moldovans. I noticed the change among the elderly first. Mosha was in her in sixties, a former teacher and organizer of the local Young Pioneer chapter, a youth organization that celebrated the Soviet history and nationalism. Although Mosha lived in a remote village, her daughter lived in my town (and she and I became good friends). I first met Mosha in the summer of 1998 and she was delighted that I, a young American, had traveled to her country to teach. I went to visit her again for Easter in April1999. At that time she told me, "I worked all of my life and have nothing now – no pension, no money. We can now travel but have no money to go anywhere." Mosha insisted that life had been better under the communist rule for many reasons, especially because they electricity all the time. Easter of 1999 was also a difficult time for Elena Pisacaru. This should have been a busy time for her seamstress shop, but business was considerably slower than usual because no one had cash to buy hand-tailored clothes. Elena told me that life now was "very bad" and "everything had been better before 1991."

It is important to note that life was not necessarily objectively better under the Soviet regime. For example, Soviet Moldavia had the highest infant morality rate in the Western Soviet Union, life expectancy remained low at 65.5 years for men and 72.3 for women, and the Chernobyl accident in 1986 had led to ill health and many birth defects.[26] Despite these facts, Moldovans reminisce warmly about the Soviet era. The immediate physical surroundings in Soviet Moldavia may have been better. For example, they always had electricity; the hospitals were well stocked with medicines; and teacher, doctors, and pensioners received their salary. In Mosha and Elena's recollection, it was these immediate and tangible qualities of life that made a time "good" or "bad." It becomes clear as to why life before 1991, with heat and salaries yet without democracy and freedom, was "better."

In 1999, many Moldovans yearned for past days; others simply left the country. My neighbors across the hall were both doctors, and after months without pay, the husband left for Romania to find work. He was successful and his wife and family joined him in 2000. Sveta's mother closed her small shop and illegally immigrated to Italy, where she cleaned houses. She sent Sveta money and packages of baby clothes every month. Lastly, Nic went to Moscow in April 1999. Nic's collective pig farm had been on the brink of bankruptcy, and when a group promising Italian investors failed to buy the farm, it closed. Nic's move was particularly difficult for Elena, who had never been separated from her husband since their marriage. It was unclear as to why Nic chose to go to Moscow, where the economy was nearly as bleak as in Moldova. However, Elena assured me that it was better there, and that he would find work.

The teachers fared no better during the crisis and voiced their discontent in the teacher's lounge. Many of their strikes had failed, as the government paid only part of their wages or paid only in kind. Throughout my time in Moldova, teachers had supplemented their salaries with private tutorial lessons. However, students and their parents had less cash to pay for private lessons, and teachers were forced to resort to other means of support. Victor bought two goats so that his children could have fresh goat milk instead of having to buy it at the market. Vasily, one of the French teachers and a veteran of the war in Afghanistan, moved with his family from his city flat to his parents' house in the village where they had wood burning stove and heat.

Although, one would like to think that these actions represent creativity and ingenuity on the part of many Moldovans, the downcast attitudes of Victor and Vasily betrayed a less positive sentiment. My downstairs neighbor was especially demoralized. She and her husband were both teachers; she taught French and he taught mathematics. To earn extra income, they sold dried beans at the market. However, this was not enough to cover their daughter's university tuition bills and this was a continual source of anxiety for her. In the spring of 1999, she offered me her life savings of 350 lei (about $30 at that time) to find her daughter a job even though I was not in the position to offer her any aid. It was significant, however, that she was willing to offer this much money to find her daughter a job. Happily, by the end of the summer, her daughter had found a job and was able to pay her tuition bills.

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[26] King, *The Moldovans: Romania, Russian, and the Politics of Culture,* 103.

Lastly, Elena, who had been genuinely optimistic upon my arrival in 1997, was almost an entirely different person upon my departure from Moldova. In the two years that I had been there, she lost her father to cancer, her husband had to leave to the country to find work, and her small business declined. During her father's illness, she brought daily medicine and meals to the hospital, in addition to sheets and blankets (the hospital lacked the funds to provide such necessities). She asked me if we had treatments for cancer, or if all cancer patients died in the United States. I reluctantly told her that "no, not all patients die, and yes we did have specialized treatments." These incidents had a heavy impact on Elena's optimism and feelings about Moldova. In my last month there, she told me "the world thinks that we are stupid but we are not. We are just like Americans but we have been given this unfortunate situation." Her statement is profound because it reveals two points. First, she is clearly demoralized because she assumes that the world thinks that Moldovans are "stupid." Second, Elena says that there is no difference between Moldovans and Americans. A fellow Peace Corps volunteer reported that his colleague said a similar thing to him: "that there is no difference between American and Moldovans except where we were born." On one level, there is no difference because we are all part of the human race yet, on another level, it is profound that they saw no difference between the nationalities. For example, a Frenchman may argue that he is different from an American precisely because he is *French* and not *American*. The Moldovan lack of a national "imagined community" may contribute to this lack of differentiation.

The ambiguity of Moldovan national identity was apparent throughout the financial crisis. The Moldovans do not posses Anderson's concept of a "horizontal comradeship" that would have solidified a nation in crisis. This is exemplified in their physical abandonment of their country, and also in their reversal of opinion about Moldovan Independence. Elena was happy to be "free" in 1997, but was doubtful of this independence in 1999. In 1997, Elena had wished to immigrate to the West, but by 1999, her husband has left for Russia. Significantly, Elena's, Victor's, and others' disillusionment was not with democratic rights or the democratic processes. As mentioned earlier, Moldovans *democratically* elected a communist party to power in 2001. Rather, this disillusionment is linked to a conflation of democracy with economic prosperity from capitalism. Moldovans assumed that economic prosperity went hand in hand with free elections. This association is not surprising; I observed that many American celebrities, movies, and television programs were popular in Moldova. For the most part, these images portrayed wealthy Americans and conveyed the idea that democracy and financial success were intrinsically linked. Moldovans frequently asked me if there were poor people in the United States and often did not believe me when I answered yes. National independence brought a popularly elected government, independent press, and freedom of expression. Moldovans assumed that it would also bring upward mobility, economic prosperity, and a better quality of life. When Moldovans attained democratic rights without economic rewards, they became profoundly dispirited.

Moldova Today

Since 1991, Moldova has had three presidents; Mircea Snegur, Petru Lucinschi, and Vladimir Voronin. The former two were moderate leaders, both "dedicated to strengthening Moldovan independence within the CIS."[27] However, during the last election in February 2001, Moldova elected a communist government. The financial crisis of 1998 may have significantly contributed to this election. As exemplified above, Elena and others believed life to better before independence and perhaps by electing the former ruling party, they hoped to return to this time. Again, the point becomes salient that life under communism was not necessarily better although the physical reality of life was significantly better.

Yet, despite the elections promises, little seems to have changed under the Communist leadership. The new communist parliament has hindered freedom of the press by suppressing some independent newspapers, and has reversed decentralization by tightening central control over the country's regional mayors, who will no longer be elected by popular vote but by local councils.[28] *Transitions Online* reported at the end of 2001, "the poor voters who cast their ballots for cheaper bread and salami remained as poor as before the elections, the media started feeling less comfortable in their expression, and Moldova's image with foreign investors and international funding organizations has taken a decisive dip."[29]

In February of 2002, the parliament made Russian a mandatory subject to be taught in schools. Many saw this as a form of renewed "Russification."[30] The government also issued new history books that emphasized Russian over Romanian history. Tens of thousands of protesters took to the streets of the capital street to protest this pro-Russian move.[31] The protest over the textbooks is an interesting development in the question of Moldovan identity. Yet, the answer to this question remains evasive.

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[27] Charles King, *Post-Soviet Moldova*. (Iasi, Romania: The Center for Romanian Studies, 1997), 8.
[28] Iulian Robu, "Moldova 2001: Back in Time" *Transitions Online*, 27 January 2002 [journal on-line]; available from <<http://knowledgenet.tol.cz> accessed 10 January 2003..3
[29] Ibid. p4.
[30] Ibid., p.3

The case of Moldova is unique because of the country's dual history, which is both of European and Russian. Yet the lessons learned and the lessons to be learned from Moldova may be applicable to many newly forming democracies. By exploring the fragility of democracies in transition, we may be able to bolster democratic consolidation and be prepared for future challenges.

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[31] Michael Wines, "History Course Ignites a Volatile Tug of War in Moldova, *New York Times*, 25 February 2002. [Newspaper on-line] available from <<www.nytimes.com/2002/02/25/international/europe/25MOLD.html/>> accessed 8 May 2002.