

# Socialism with Unclear Characteristics: The Moldovan Communists in Government

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**“B**ack to the USSR.”<sup>1</sup> So ran a typical headline after the overwhelming victory of the Communist Party of the Republic of Moldova (PCRM) in the parliamentary elections of February 2001. By winning 50 percent of the vote and seventy-one of the one hundred one parliamentary seats, the PCRM had been able to form the kernel of the government and successfully nominate its first secretary, Vladimir Voronin, for the indirectly elected presidency.

But this party was somewhat of an unknown quantity on coming to power, not covered at all by the voluminous literature on former Communist ruling parties in Eastern Europe.<sup>2</sup> All the same, many analysts and Moldovan politicians were quick to identify its political profile: This was a completely undemocratic force, “one of the most backward and certainly most Red group[s] in power anywhere in the post-Soviet world,”<sup>3</sup> which aimed to transform Moldova into a pro-Russian “Re-Sovietised” backwater and would involve “redrawing the regional map.”<sup>4</sup> Some of the new Communist government’s key policies (such as the proposed upgrade of Russian to a second state language and the re-introduction of Soviet-era administrative districts) have caused internal tension and international consternation and initially do appear to be an incontrovertible confirmation of incipient authoritarianism.

On closer inspection, the party’s profile appears far more enigmatic; far from turning East, on several occasions President Voronin has declared European integration the primary aim of Moldova’s foreign policy and initiated a federalization project that has had the support of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and the U.S. State Department. Domestically, the party has presided over economic growth and sporadic privatization, while its most controversial policy proposals (for example, to join the Russian-Belarus Union) remain unimplemented.

Consequently, my aim here is to unravel the enigma of the PCRM by focusing on the party’s aims and achievements as it ends its first term in office. To do so,

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I first analyze what the party stands for, account for its return to power in 2001, and then assess its policy performance and wider role in democratization and socioeconomic transformation. Seeing the party as “unreconstructed” and unconditionally authoritarian clearly is very simplistic. The party is far more pragmatic than prevailing views contend, yet its transformation into a post-Soviet democratic party remains incomplete, and in government it has provided a stern test of Moldova’s fragile post-Soviet pluralism.

### **Policy Profile: Principle, Pragmatism, Eclecticism**

On its surface, the PCRM certainly looks like the “completely unreconstructed” organization it claims to be.<sup>5</sup> After all, the party flies the red flag, flaunts the Communist name and hammer and sickle symbol, and openly celebrates revolutionary holidays. Its party program, traditionally an “objective” statement of the party’s long-term aims, is a clear statement of orthodox Marxism-Leninism, with claims about the ultimate goal of communism, internationalism, the temporary victory of capitalism, and the class basis of the party’s support coexisting with commitments to free welfare, state control over banks, at least partial recollectivization, working class participation in public administration, and a “voluntary and renovated” union of republics. The party unapologetically claims that it is the heir to the ideas and traditions of the Soviet-era Communist Party of Moldavia (KPM) and remains a member of the umbrella post-Soviet forum for Communist parties, the Union of Communist Parties–Communist Party of the Soviet Union (SKP–KPSS).<sup>6</sup>

However, even in the party program there are signs of a more pragmatic, eclectic, and contradictory policy stance. Although there is no explicit commitment to democracy, there is rejection of dogmatism, totalitarianism, ideological monopoly, and the Stalinist cult of personality, with commitments to reformed socialism, political rights and freedoms, and entrepreneurship, except in the strategic branches of industry.<sup>7</sup> The party has attempted to broaden its appeal beyond the Russian-speaking ethnic minorities (the core support of the KPM), as well as left-wing predecessors in the early 1990s, such as the Socialist Party and *Unitate-Yedinstvo* (Unity) movement. It has espoused a Moldovanist stance similar to that of Moldova’s first two presidents, Snegur and Lucinschi; in its 2001 electoral platform, for example, the party promised to defend the right of the Moldovan people to use the name *Moldoveni* and language of *limba moldoveneasca*.<sup>8</sup> From its refoundation in 1994, the party has claimed to respect all Moldovan languages, cultures, and confessions and to be the “party of Moldovan statehood and patriotism.”<sup>9</sup> Although sympathetic to the plight of the people of the secessionist Dnestr Moldovan Republic (PMR or Transnistria), the party has long supported the “independence and integrity” of Moldova within the boundaries of the former Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic (MSSR). Indeed, its slogan was “Republic, Popular Power, and Socialism.”<sup>10</sup>

Overall, the party program is vague enough to provide the leadership room to maneuver. For instance, it envisions a two-stage transition to a Communist classless society. During the first general democratic stage, the PCRM promised to

work with progressive forces and preserve the multilayered economy. The second stage promised the preponderance of the socialist structure in the economy and its orientation to maximally satisfying working class needs while saying nothing about democracy. Such promises could be read in two ways: Either the market and democracy were a temporary phase before the onset of full socialism, or socialism was a goal for the very distant future, possibly even just a rhetorical device.

A certain amount of the party's eclecticism appears to be prompted by internal divisions. The de facto secession of Transnistria in 1991–1992 removed the most nostalgic elements of the KPM, who gravitated toward the neo-Soviet Smirnov regime. Although the PCRM (unlike Communist parties in Russia and Ukraine) is relatively unencumbered by large numbers of restorationists and militants within its ranks, it clearly does have an influential hard-line wing, especially at the local level, represented in its leadership by people such as Victor Stepaniuc (party deputy chairman and faction leader) and Vadim Mişin (deputy chair of parliament). This tendency is more openly nostalgic toward the USSR, reverent toward the Marxist-Leninist heritage, supportive of Russia, and critical of aspects of the market. In contrast, more moderate party leaders like Andrei Neaguța and Iurie Stoicov have a more Euro Communist slant. Stoicov, the party's official ideologist (although in practice this role is shared with Stepaniuc and Voronin), has even claimed to see more socialism in the West than in the USSR.<sup>11</sup>

Nevertheless, as in the Soviet era, declared ideology is only part of the overall picture. Indeed, with some justification, critics increasingly assert that neither Voronin nor the party are real Communists and that their ideology is merely a slogan or brand name designed to mobilize a nostalgic electorate, with several sources suggesting that Voronin no longer believes in communism, if, indeed, he ever did.<sup>12</sup> The political culture of the PCRM demonstrates both an authoritarianism that belies its declared democratic elements and a pragmatic relationship with the Moldovan political elite that belies the party's outsider stance and criticism of the regime. This is altogether unsurprising: The Soviet nomenklatura from which both the party elite and many of its opponents descend (both presidents Snegur and Lucinschi, as well as Moldova Noastră leader Dumitru Braghîș) was notorious for its opportunism, elitism, and clientelism, especially in Soviet Moldavia, which became a personal fiefdom for Brezhnev's clients, such as Ivan Bodyul and Semen Grossu.<sup>13</sup>

For example, Voronin's personal hold over the PCRM has appeared near absolute. Voronin is credited by party supporters with bravery and exceptional leadership in refounding the party almost single-handedly when other former leaders were unwilling to do so.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, he first gained wide notoriety and support as a head of the Moldavian Interior Ministry who refused to fire on demonstrating crowds in 1989. He has maintained a quasicharismatic *khozyaistvennik* (boss) appeal that extends beyond the party organization.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, despite internal differences that have increased in office, the PCRM has remained remarkably unified and centralized, with only one serious split (in 1996, over whether Voronin should stand as PCBM presidential candidate). The unity is maintained not only through traditional Communist discipline and democratic

centralism (the Communist parliamentary fraction in 1998–2001 suffered no defections during a period of extreme political instability, and the party made much of this) but also through the personal loyalty to Voronin of most of the main leaders (such as Stepaniuc, Parliamentary speaker Eugenia Ostapciuc, and Prime Minister Vasile Tarlev). None of these are charismatic leaders with a public profile to match the Communist president's.

The party's close relationship with some members of the political elite was shown by the alleged influence of (then parliamentary speaker) Lucinschi on the decision to legalize the party.<sup>16</sup> Later, Voronin supported Lucinschi in the second round of the presidential elections of 1996 after he himself had been eliminated. Like Communists elsewhere who have managed to turn *Kapital* into capital, the PCRМ appears not to oppose private property when it can be the beneficiary. Moderate Communists are openly supportive of the market economy.<sup>17</sup> Certainly the party has developed a cooperative, clientelistic relationship with business and was said to be well funded even prior to its electoral victory, with particular interests in the wine and tobacco sectors. Indeed, Voronin's son Oleg, CEO of FinComBank one of the country's most prominent businessmen.<sup>18</sup> Although "red businessmen" are not novel elsewhere (for instance, Gennady Semigin, one of the Russian Communist Party's former sponsors), the PCRМ's liaison with market economics seems to go much further, perhaps because, unlike in Russia and Ukraine, the period of mass privatization (1993–95) and land reform (1996–98) occurred when the party was a relatively minor force and its opposition was ineffective.

Although the party's opponents are quick to brand the Communist party as authoritarian or even totalitarian, the picture clearly is more complex.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, there are strong grounds for categorizing the PCRМ as already a semiloyal party prior to winning power, rather than a thoroughly antidemocratic disloyal or anti-system party. The concept of semiloyalty is very difficult to isolate because it is often a transient stage toward greater radicalism or fuller democratic commitments. Nevertheless, a semiloyal party might be defined as a party that possesses many elements of a democratic pro-system orientation (in terms of commitment to constitutionalism, electoral procedure, and nonviolence), but one that is made ambiguous through other commitments and practices (such as a dichotomy between public democratic commitments and covert practices and an aspiration for nondemocratic long-term goals that subvert short-term commitments).<sup>20</sup>

In the PCRМ's case, the ostensible democratic commitments can be seen both in the aforementioned moderate rhetoric of the party program, its commitment to the parliamentary republic as most answering the needs of popular power,<sup>21</sup> and the leading role within it of relative moderates who were increasingly becoming an organic opposition—that is, those tied by personal and financial links to the maintenance of the post-Soviet regime.<sup>22</sup> The Communists' parliamentary practice was more ambiguous: The party often was willing to compromise and negotiate (for instance, contributing three ministers and its parliamentary support to the Braghîş government of December 1999–January 2001), but its rhetoric and style often were less than consensual, as it sought to portray itself as an outsider to the political elite and protector of the people.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, as long as the party

program retained the building of socialism as a long-term goal, its opponents could assert that the party's ends remained undemocratic and that its public respectability was a lie.

### Electoral Victory

Clearly, the backdrop to the Communists' momentous 2001 victory is a disastrous socioeconomic situation that has left Moldova the poorest state in Europe and one of the poorest in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), with 60–70 percent of its population living below the poverty line and marked social stratification.<sup>24</sup> It is no surprise that there is a welfare value system, coexisting with strong nostalgia for the economic securities of the Soviet era.<sup>25</sup> So, to a large degree, Moldova did vote backwards in 2001.<sup>26</sup> In addition, the departure of between 600,000 and 800,000 Moldovans to work abroad in Russia or Western Europe (some 15 percent of the total population) has left an electorate of which perhaps one-third are pensioners—habitually the poorest, most nostalgic, most electorally disciplined, and most pro-Communist of all post-Soviet strata.

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The Communists would never have had the chance to exploit this cataclysmic situation had it not been for the complete meltdown of their political opponents. Lucan Way's description of Moldova as a case of pluralism by default is perhaps a harsh judgment given the pro-European orientation of most of the political elite, but it certainly captures the low level of civil responsibility and legal and moral anomie of politicians whose democratic credentials often went skin deep.<sup>27</sup> The decline of the principal center-left force, the Agrarian Democratic Party of the Republic of Moldova (ADPM) caused in large part by leadership disputes as it oversaw the privatization process (with both Snegur and Lucinschi leaving in 1995), opened up the political space for the Communists to expand. The instability of Moldova's governments, with eight from 1991–2001 and three in the four years before the Communists' victory in 2001, contributed to the air of palpable crisis. Moreover, a whole host of short-term opposition decisions played into the Communists' hands. Among the most important was the decision to unban the party, which some participants at the time note was prompted largely by short-term considerations and an underestimation of the Communists' possible potential.<sup>28</sup> As in Russia and Ukraine, this allowed the party to re-emerge with a sense of grievance and momentum. Moreover, that the party did not contest a national election until 1998 meant that they could position themselves as outsiders to the political elite with clean hands, a stance they made much of in 2001, when politicians' integrity was the dominant theme.<sup>29</sup> As Voronin acknowledged, many peo-

ple voted for the Communists as a protest vote rather than for its program, arguably because all other viable alternatives were exhausted.<sup>30</sup>

Another short-term factor that clearly affected the Communists' success was the decision to move to a parliamentary republic on July 5, 2000, far less a principled decision than a short-term "vote by the political class against Mr. Lucinschi."<sup>31</sup> Moreover, the increase in the electoral barrier in 2000 from 4 percent to 6 percent excluded two smaller centrist parties getting more than 4 percent (the Party of Rebirth and Conciliation and the Democratic Party). This meant that only two opposition parties entered parliament, essentially magnifying the Communists' margin of victory and contributing to a seventy-one-seat majority that could form a government (fifty-two seats), elect a president (sixty-one seats), and change the constitution (sixty-eight seats). Finally, the calling of early elections in 2001 was caused by the center and center-right's boycott of a third parliamentary vote for president on December 21, 2000, because of their unwillingness to countenance Voronin's probable election. Ironically, if he had won then, he would have been dependent on a parliament lacking a Communist majority.

Of course, the parliamentary system itself has been blamed for the Communist victory.<sup>32</sup> This is true inasmuch as a stronger presidential system (as in Russia or Ukraine) has prevented Communist dominance in parliament from translating into real legislative or executive power. Moldova's 1994 constitution, although formally semipresidential, was one of the more parliamentary in the Soviet bloc, with a strong constitutional court partially selected by parliament and parliamentary oversight over government combining with the presidential right of issuing decrees and dissolving the legislature if it were gridlocked. President Lucinschi had lamented that the 1994 constitution was simply too democratic to be effective.<sup>33</sup> Certainly, because leading politicians were clearly connected to parties, unlike in more purely presidential systems, a decline in the popularity of either contributed to parliamentary volatility, gridlock, and the turnover of governments while giving the Communist faction power and visibility through such mechanisms as its (failed) vote of no confidence in the Ciubuc government in November 1998 and the successful vote against the Sturza government a year later.

Nevertheless, it was the particular form of parliamentarism, not the parliamentary system per se, that contributed to the Communists' electoral victory. For example, the 1994 electoral system, a proportional representation system based on a single national electoral district, gave parties little incentive to form connections with local voters through constituencies. Notably, in 2002, 70 percent of parliamentary deputies were from the capital.<sup>34</sup> The Communists, as the only party with a stable nationwide local organizational network, turned this into a virtue in 1998 and 2001, concentrating on the "home-to-home, eye-to-eye" activity that other parties generally ignored.<sup>35</sup> Their four thousand activists distributed press free of charge.<sup>36</sup> Having long aimed to put a party organization in every district, they had party workers in 1,000 of the country's 1,004 villages and claimed to have met virtually every voter during the campaign.<sup>37</sup>

The Communists' campaign maximized their own opportunities. They concentrated on simple, direct promises to voters, while the other parties squabbled

over more esoteric issues like EU expansion. They articulated a strongly populist appeal that played directly on nostalgia for the Soviet system and protest against the post-Soviet political system. For instance, their slogans were direct (“Order in the Country, Welfare in the Family”), and their promises were both simple (strengthening Moldova’s sovereignty and statehood, ending corruption, realizing a new economic course) and neo-Soviet (price controls, increased social guarantees, and a greater role for the state in the economy), while their supporters distributed free provisions to voters.<sup>38</sup> They relied heavily on the personal appeal of Vladimir Voronin, who was head and shoulders in front of other presidential contenders by 2001. Consequently, during the elections, the Party of Communists had managed to broaden its electoral constituency, not just quantitatively but qualitatively, as economic concerns became predominant. It drew not only on former Socialist, Unity, and Agrarian party votes but also on disgruntled service sector workers and industrial workers who had previously voted for the center and moderate right.<sup>39</sup> Certainly, party membership figures suggested that, although the party still overrepresented the Russian-speaking minorities, ethnic Moldovans increasingly supported it.<sup>40</sup> In an election that was regarded as free and fair by international observers and that had a large turnout (see Table 1), the victory of the Party of Communists was clearly the “free will of the Moldovan people.”<sup>41</sup>

### The Party in Power: Pragmatism and Populism

The PCRM’s victory deepened the ambiguity over its democratic commitments. In their election campaign, the Communists had made increasingly moderate noises, promising a technocratic rule respecting all forms of ownership, that “all who are not against us, are with us,” and, ultimately, putting civil and human rights as the priorities of a modern socialist ideology. Even so, such a large vote for the Communists indicated at least a deep disenchantment with the political process and at worst a disaffection with democracy and an inclination toward authoritarianism.<sup>42</sup>

**TABLE 1. PCRM Election Performance**

	Vote Share (%)	Seats (%)	Turnout
1995 (municipal, raion)	16.32	206 mandates	60.02
1996 (presidential round one, Voronin)	10.23	n/a	68.13
1998 (parliamentary)	30.01	40	69.12
1999 (county councils and Chişinău municipal council)	37.82	118 mandates*	58.45
2001 (parliamentary)	50.07	71	67.52
2003 (district and municipal councils)	48.07	615 mandates	58.66

\*As part of the “Communists, Agrarians and Socialists” bloc with ADPM and Party of Socialists of Moldova. Source: ADEPT Web site, <http://www.parties.e-democracy.md/> (accessed on April 7, 2003).

Once in office, the party inherited conflicting incentives. Although the presidency had been weakened by constitutional reform, the fact that its holder was a member of an overwhelmingly dominant parliamentary party structured on the basis of strict internal discipline made Voronin a potentially powerful president, able to put his program into action. Indeed, he relied on the largest governmental majority in Moldova to date. On the other hand, the party faced a potential problem of political inexperience, with most of its deputies only having served one term in parliamentary opposition and with a mere thirty out of seventy-one having served in the previous parliament. Critics argued that the party had clearly not expected to win the elections by such a huge majority and, therefore, many of its personnel were inadequately prepared for governing.<sup>43</sup> Moreover, the party faced limited pressure to further develop democracy: Parliamentary opposition had been routed (with a mere thirty seats between them), Moldovan civil society was notoriously weak, and solving acute socioeconomic problems and achieving the unity of the state appeared to be the highest priorities in the party's platform—necessary, but not sufficient for furthering democracy.

As the first term of the Communist government evolved, its policy became remarkably contradictory, with a number of U-turns, non sequiturs, and unfulfilled policy commitments given its ostensible executive strength, which we can summarize only briefly here.<sup>44</sup>

In domestic politics, zigzags were apparent within an overall trend toward greater centralization, paternalism, and political tension. The government moved swiftly to implement key planks of the Communist electoral platform. The two most controversial involved making Russian the second state language (as opposed to its official status as “the language of interethnic communication”) and the proposal to replace the textbook *History of the Romanians* with *History of Moldova* in schools. Combined, these proposals provoked the biggest and longest demonstrations (allegedly up to 40,000 people) since independence in the Moldovan capital in January–April 2002, to which the Communists responded by suspending the Christian Democratic People's Party (PPCD), the chief instigator of the protests. Both the two proposals and the ban were rescinded after the intervention of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE), which instituted a Permanent Round Table to promote regime-opposition dialogue, an initiative eventually largely ignored by the governing party.<sup>45</sup>

Criticism of these policy proposals tends to ignore that these were Communist election pledges that a democratically elected government would feel obliged to fulfill and that they did have some public support (although less among the less Sovietized younger generation).<sup>46</sup> On the face of it, the proposal to teach the *History of Moldova* is eminently sensible: *History of the Romanians* is the history of a neighboring state, which has furthermore been criticized as being ethnocentric and ignoring both substantive differences between Romanian and Moldovan languages and cultures and the sensitivities of the 35 percent ethnic minorities in Moldova.<sup>47</sup> Each country has a right to its own history, and on this basis this proposal received some support from the Council of Europe.

Nevertheless, the introduction of such policies in the very first year of Communist government suggested an insensitive and divisive style, a populist demagoguery, and an inability to overcome the reflexes of a protest party. For example, both the PPCD and the Communists were viewed by domestic analysts as radical antisystem parties whose mutual antipathy maintained an atmosphere on which both thrived.<sup>48</sup> Despite the movement toward semiloyalty noted above and Voronin's insistence that the party discard "the syndrome of opposition-ness" on his election, it continued to attack the PPCD with intemperate language, as being terrorists or agents of Romania, with insistent regularity.<sup>49</sup> Although the Romanian government's paternalism toward Moldova, most evident in its rhetoric of two Romanian states and the declared unionism of the PPCD, provided some comprehensible grounds for Moldovan sensitivity, the PCR's often disproportionate response indicated a reliance on Romanophobic instincts and Soviet-style artificial nation-building and cultural policy.

One key instance was the controversial Moldovan–Romanian dictionary published in 2003 by historian Vasile Stati. Although one might concede that Moldovans can call their language (a dialect of Romanian also spoken in regions of Romania) what they wish, the dictionary failed to prove the existence of a separate Moldovan language, reliant as it was on archaisms, regionalisms, and many words also present in standard Romanian.<sup>50</sup> Stati's *History of Moldova* (presumably intended as a contribution to discussions over the new school curriculum) was as contentious as the *History of the Romanians* it might replace.<sup>51</sup> Party deputy chair Stepaniuc and the party paper *Comunistul* referred approvingly to the work of Stati. The government's hypersensitivity toward Romania was further shown by its refusal to register the minority pro-Romanian Bessarabian Orthodox Church until the latter's successful appeal to the European Court of Human Rights in October 2001.<sup>52</sup>

One of the PCR's more successful policies was administrative-territorial reform, replacing the thirteen large *județe* (counties) introduced in 1998 with the Soviet system of thirty-two smaller *raioane* (districts) that had existed hitherto. These reforms incurred widespread condemnation, particularly from the Council of Europe (which had helped finance the original reform), for limiting local autonomy and introducing a "rigid vertical power mechanism."<sup>53</sup> Yet, these reforms were again an election promise and appeared popular, as they were justified on the basis of bringing government closer to the people and cutting administrative burdens.

There was certainly evidence of repeated pressure on the free media, with closures of critical outlets and noted intimidation against critical journalists in the state-run television and radio company, Teleradio-Moldova. Industrial action by Teleradio-Moldova staff was only temporarily resolved by government commitments to transform the company into an independent public organization—commitments that were repeatedly postponed. The government's control over the electronic media was particularly evident in the local elections of 2003, when state-run media were openly biased in favor of PCR candidates, in violation of the electoral code. At the same time, the government paid far less attention to print media, with its markedly smaller circulation.<sup>54</sup> Some more independent journalists claimed that such pressure had previously existed and that little had changed.<sup>55</sup>

The most evident infringement on democracy with the most long-term dangers was in the judicial sphere. Voronin increased his powers of appointment over new judges while there was widespread purging of the law enforcement sectors. Ostensibly this was to root out corruption, but, according to several commentators, it now allowed Voronin to “assume the prerogatives of a prosecutor or even a judge.”<sup>56</sup> With the dismissal of the human rights ombudsman and attempts to limit the powers of the constitutional court, it appeared that the “principle of the rule of law was under challenge.”<sup>57</sup>

In the economic sphere, there were similar conflicting impulses. Rather strangely for a Communist party, the party fraction ratified joining the World Trade Organization (WTO) in May 2001

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after heavy criticism of the organization beforehand from leading Communists like Stepaniuc, and actually oversaw limited privatization of the wine and tobacco sectors, although privatization of the larger state enterprises (such as Moldtelecom) was delayed. At the same time, there was also sporadic renationalization (such as of the

Belgian-owned Hotel Dacia in 2003 and the pharmaceutical company Farmaco in 2002), while court cases investigated the legality of sales to Moldova’s largest foreign investors (for example, the Spanish-owned electricity company Unión Fenosa) and there were rumors of plans afoot to reverse the farm decollectivization of the 1990s.<sup>58</sup> Having earlier decried the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank as “instruments of American imperialism,” the government engaged in dialogue with them, although it ultimately failed to reach an agreement over the renewal of disbursements in 2002–03.<sup>59</sup> Despite the overhanging threat of debt default and the decline in foreign direct investment, the economy continued to be bullish, and the party’s relative success in paying off wage arrears and raising public sector salaries would insulate its constituency from economic shocks in the shorter term.

The contradictions in foreign affairs were perhaps strongest. Having come to power promising to make Russia Moldova’s strategic partner (with a deliberately vague promise to examine the question of joining the Russia-Belarus Union), the party had all the credentials of an anti-Western party. It had dissented from the mainstream consensus of support for joining the EU and was openly scornful of several international institutions on coming to power.<sup>60</sup> In April 2001, Voronin had threatened to turn Moldova into “Europe’s Cuba” if there was a threat to Communist rule, while party leaders had been very critical of NATO’s Stability Pact.<sup>61</sup> Relations with Moscow remained cordial up until the Kozak Memorandum of November 2003, and the government appeared to seek greater involvement in CIS structures, for instance, by attaining observer status on the Eurasian Economic Community (EEC) in May 2002. However, within two years of coming to power,

Voronin had started to declare that EU integration was the country's main strategic direction, and Moldova had even sent demining personnel (albeit only fifty) to Iraq in support of the U.S.-led coalition, in defiance of both public opinion and the party's previous statements.

What, then, was going on? If a consistent strategy can be discerned at all, it was Voronin's wish, in a manner very reminiscent of Putin, whom he has verbally echoed in his wish for a dictatorship of law,<sup>62</sup> to provide consolidation for a very divided society as a first step to resolving Moldova's broader problems, both by administrative fiat and by ensuring social consensus. Hence the need to resolve very complex questions of identity and history and the overriding aim of reintegrating Transnistria within the Moldovan state. Support for the EU arguably gives the party and government an overriding teleology it has hitherto lacked while being simultaneously potentially economically beneficial and a project popular with the young. It is, however, barely a realistic project for at least the medium future and, as many commentators have noted, somewhat in contradiction to the party's domestic political direction.<sup>63</sup> To date, it remains a populist claim, as the party appears to adopt any idea with wide resonance with the Moldovan public (even espousing Orthodox Christian values) irrespective of ideological principle.<sup>64</sup>

The policy inconsistencies are clearly exacerbated by the party "blinking" in office and needing to correct its expectations—previously a radical opposition party with just one term in a post-Soviet parliament, the PCRM was forced to adapt more in its first few months in government than in its entire history hitherto. Particularly indicative was the party's approach to the Transnistrian conundrum. As a native Transnistrian with a personal stake in Moldovan integration (Voronin's mother is a resident of Corjova, Dubăsari, in Transnistria) heading a traditionally pro-Russian party (indeed one supported by Putin in 2001), Voronin might have hoped to have some effect on Russian and Transnistrian attitudes and had promised this as one of the party's overriding aims.

Instead, a renewed "cold peace" has ensued since late 2001 between Voronin and PMR leader Igor Smirnov. This is at least partly personal, but it also reflects the lack of PMR and Russian interest in reaching a rapid solution. Voronin's overtures to the EU may have been partly a response to practical action by the EU: the EU's pressure on Ukraine to tighten customs controls on the Transnistrian border and its travel ban on top Transnistrian officials perhaps offered more hope of breaking the deadlock than countless Russian disarmament guarantees. Elsewhere, government rhetoric was laden with talk about the limits of the possible. Voronin included several non-Communists among the government and presidential staff. This aimed to substantiate his promises of a technocratic non-Communist administration, but was perhaps equally driven by the absence of qualified Communist personnel and the need to consolidate his personal control.

Understandably, the party faced increasing external criticism over its direction, with opponents asserting that there was a crisis of ideas at the heart of the government and pointing to the number of electoral promises the party allegedly had failed to fulfill, from solving the Transnistrian conflict to battling corruption.<sup>65</sup> Internal criticism of the leadership and calls for party discipline also increased,

with some critics claiming fraud and calling for a new true Leninist party.<sup>66</sup> Other party members criticized their leaders' alleged lack of attention to the PCRМ's program and warned the party to beware of appeasers now that it was in office.<sup>67</sup> Nevertheless, in May–June 2002, Voronin initiated the search for a new direction for the party, and revisions to the party program were promised for a congress in December 2004. The details of this new direction were not widely publicized, but Voronin increasingly held up Chinese communism as the authentic model of combining communism with capitalist characteristics in government, and the Chinese Communist Party remained one of the PCRМ's key partners, eclipsing even the Russian Communist Party. In contradiction to this, key party leaders (including Victor Stepaniuc, Andrei Nequța, and Ivan Grec) allegedly talked positively about social democracy, only later to qualify their statements by saying that the party's strategic direction was unchanged.<sup>68</sup>

### The PCRМ and Democracy

Overall, one of the PCRМ's main achievements was undeniable "democracy deterioration."<sup>69</sup> The dynamic in domestic politics hardly amounted to an outright reversal of democratic freedoms, but nor were such freedoms further consolidated. One of the most evident issues was the authoritarian and opaque political style of the party and president. It is a great irony that a parliamentary system with a dominant and centralized party has produced an extremely presidential form of rule. For example, government personnel were fired with regularity and without explanation. Only seven of the original seventeen government ministers remained by April 2003, perhaps scapegoated for policy failures. In one widely reported case, former influential presidential aide Victor Doraș was dismissed for actions "incompatible with the status of a presidential adviser" without any further details. Appointment policies showed an echo of the Brezhnevite policy of "cadres decide all." After all, one motivation for the administrative reform apparently was to provide more jobs for party loyalists. Some 30 percent of the local administration was replaced in the process, and the reintroduced Soviet-era administrative system conveniently reflected how the party's regional organizations were structured. The increased number of party appointees in the judicial system would mean little progress against corruption and, perhaps not coincidentally, Moldova's reduction of corruption deteriorated markedly in 2001–03. According to critics, personal loyalty to Voronin was the main criterion for government and party service (with *kompromat*, easy to obtain for a former policeman like Voronin, allegedly used to enforce this).<sup>70</sup>

The archetypal example of authoritarian and unaccountable government was undoubtedly the crisis over the Kozak Memorandum. A document that proposed to radically reconfigure the whole nature of the Moldovan state, and which opponents justifiably asserted could mean the de facto end of Moldova's sovereignty, was proposed after months of secretive shuttle diplomacy and nonexistent public debate and aborted just as abruptly and mysteriously.<sup>71</sup> This was hardly the only occasion—public support for the federalization process in general was hardly increased by the overall lack of consultation with the public and civil society.

Even if not consistently authoritarian, government by such an unconsolidated semiloyal party is highly risky. Linz notes how semiloyal parties may themselves provoke reciprocal distrust and polarization as often as completely disloyal parties, and this was clearly the case in the PCRM's first period in office.<sup>72</sup> The Communist nature of the party was a potentially polarizing issue: Its commitments to a Communist identity and organization were only partially offset by relatively pragmatic, moderate elements in tactics and ideology. This provoked distrust of the totalitarian party (even when it carried out policies professed by previous governments) and left it hostage to a maximalist party program that it only selectively attempted to fulfill, thereby provoking still more distrust.

At the very least, incoherent policymaking and infringements on democracy threatened to squander the benefits of a government with such a strong mandate and executive power; as a former Moldovan ambassador to the United States said, "we will lose another 5–10 years."<sup>73</sup> It was a severe indictment of the robustness of Moldovan democracy and the strength of political opposition, except on Chișinău's streets, that at times only foreign pressure (for instance, from the OSCE or Council of Europe) appeared to prevent the government from further incursions on democracy. In the worst-case future scenario, policy failure, economic downturn, foreign indifference, and the continuing weakness of opposition might lead to a more determined reassertion of authoritarianism.

There are more optimistic prognoses possible. However opportunistic and idealistic the Communists' increasingly fervent espousal of EU integration, it potentially offers a basis for national consolidation now that this idea is shared across the political spectrum.<sup>74</sup> Moreover, engagement with the EU as a serious partner clearly offers the potential of greater permeation of democratic values into Moldovan society.

What is more, despite the hazards of Communist government, it is arguably more constructive for long-term democratic consolidation for the Communists to hold office than to remain as a blocked opposition, as in Russia and Ukraine. There, presidents have justified highly undemocratic policies on the basis of avoiding the Communist threat, while ghettoization and permanent opposition give the parties neither much positive experience of democratic politics nor any real incentive to socialize their electorate in its norms (one of the most significant roles normally attributed to the postcommunist successor parties). Moreover, the main impulses for change are internal, rather than the significantly more unpredictable external challenges of governing. At least with the PCRM in government, impoverished constituencies achieved representation and possible policy-related benefits, and the party was forced to adapt its ideology to practice. Nevertheless, the maintenance of the party's policy/program dichotomy would continue to cause suspicion and risk further disillusioning the electorate. Despite top leaders' apparent willingness to admit programmatic weaknesses, there appeared little chance of resolving the dichotomy while in power: First, a party split remained extremely unlikely while Voronin remained electorally popular and the party leadership so apparently consolidated; and second, to open up such thorny questions to wider discussion would risk the party and parliamentary unity that remained one of the Communist party's

strongest assets. Perhaps only a future period in opposition could complete the intra-party transition begun in office, and only when the party left office voluntarily could its commitment to democracy be put beyond reasonable doubt.

### **Conclusion**

The return of the Moldovan Communists to power in a landslide victory in 2001 hardly meant that Moldova had voted for communism, although it certainly indicated deep despair with the direction of post-Soviet change. Nor were the most alarmist predictions of re-Sovietisation borne out, despite a sympathetic line toward Russia and antagonism toward Romania being constants in the new government's foreign policy. Western observers' concerns about the party's lack of democratic credentials had a strong basis, particularly in the party's personnel policy, attitude toward the media, and political style, although it proved grudgingly receptive to Western pressure and approval, and was less prone to infringe freedoms in the economic sphere, and its foreign policy gradually prioritized the European direction, albeit in contradiction to much of its domestic policy. Although the Communist party was on the face of it an intrinsically undemocratic organization, members of the PCRM's top leadership were not outright reactionaries and had close ties with the former party elite in Chişinău, meaning that their practice was always likely to be more pragmatic than their policies suggested. Moreover, the period of government clearly increased the pressure to be pragmatic.

What is more, as the 2005 elections approach, the PCRM remains a relatively popular government with a reasonable chance of emulating its 2001 victory. Whether this would be largely by fair means (economic growth, welfare improvements, and relative political stability) or foul (media manipulation and the marginalization of the opposition) remains unclear.

Paradoxically, the return of Communists to power by democratic means offered some prospects for long-term democratic consolidation, not just by entrenching the power of electoral turnover and providing for a strengthening of executive power, but quickening the impulse toward party policy and programmatic transformation and integrating disaffected constituencies into support for the regime. However, with an intractable array of socioeconomic problems to face, weakened political pressure from the opposition to adapt, and a disaffected electorate to appease, the PCRM's ability to realize any of these opportunities remains unclear, and its lack of convinced and convincing democratic intentions casts still more doubt on its resolve to do so without constant international observation and support.

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## NOTES

1. Taras Kuzio, "Back to the USSR; Russia Helps Moldova Follow Belarus' Lead," *Jamestown Foundation Prism* 8, no. 3 (March 31, 2002).

2. For example, Jane Leftwich Curry and Joan Barth Urban, *The Left Transformed in Post-Communist Societies* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003); András Bozóki and John T. Ishiyama, eds., *The Communist Successor Parties of Central and Eastern Europe* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 2002); John T. Ishiyama, *Communist Successor Parties in Post-Communist Politics* (Huntington, NY: Nova Science Publishers, 1999).

3. *Jamestown Foundation Monitor* 8, no. 67 (April 5, 2002).

4. For example, Kuzio, "Back to the USSR"; Michael Shafir, "Moldova's Elections: Redrawing the regional map?" *RFE/RL Newsline* 5, no. 45, part 2 (March 2001).

5. Claus Neukirch, "Moldovan Headaches: The Republic of Moldova 120 days after the 2001 parliamentary elections" (Centre for OSCE Research, working paper, Hamburg, University of Hamburg); Lucan A. Way, "Pluralism by Default in Moldova," *Journal of Democracy* 13 (4): 127–41.

6. *Programma i ustav Partii Kommunistov Respubliki Moldova* (Chişinău: Partiya Kommunistov Respubliki Moldova, Tsentralnyi Komitet, 2001).

7. *Ibid.*

8. *Vladimir Voronin: Vasha sudba-v vashikh rukakh* (Chişinău: PCRM, 2001).

9. "Moldovan Leader Says Communists Pledged to Democracy, Independence," *Info-tag*, October 27, 2003.

10. "Dokumenty pervykh let," *Kommunist*, nos. 30–31 (September 12, 2003).

11. Iurie Stoicov (PCRM CC Secretary for Ideology) interview, September 29, 2003.

12. "Chto dalshe?" *Vremya*, (October 23, 2003); "Veterany KPSS: Net, Voronin, tyi ne kommunist," *Moldavskie vedomosti* (October 4, 2003): 1–3.

13. Charles King, *The Moldovans: Romania, Russia, and the Politics of Culture* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 2000).

14. Stoicov interview.

15. Various respondents described him as crafty, capricious, brash "like a bulldozer," someone "who thinks like a policeman," a "vozhd" (chief), and tsar, who is apparently called "papa" by his subordinates.

16. This may have been because Lucinschi saw the revived Communist party as a force that would drain away extreme left members of the Agrarian Democratic Party but would stay too small to supplant it. Information from Julianne Paunescu.

17. Victor Ciobanu (PCRM fraction parliamentary deputy, deputy chair of parliamentary committee on the economy) and Vladimir Doronin (PCRM parliamentary deputy and PCRM Central Committee secretary), September 3, 2003. Interviews with the author.

18. "Voronin-samyi avtoritetny biznesmen," *Moldavskie vedomosti*, <http://www.vedomosti.md> (accessed October 5, 2002).

19. Dumitru Braghîş (leader of party Moldova Noastra), interview with the author, September 30, 2003; Ambassador Cezlav Ciobanu, interview with the author, December 1, 2003.

20. Juan J. Linz and Alfred C. Stepan, *The Breakdown of Democratic Regimes* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978).

21. For example, *Politicheskii ochet TsK PKRM chetvertomu (XXI) sezdu* (2001), <http://www.pcrm.md/>.

22. Richard Sakwa, "The Russian KPRF: The Powerlessness of the Powerful," in *The Communist Successor Parties of Central and Eastern Europe*, ed. András Bozóki and John T. Ishiyama (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 2002), 240–67.

23. For instance, by regularly voting against "anti-social" budgets, see D. Ionescu, "From Left to Right, But Not Quite," *Transitions Online*, January 8, 1999.

24. *Towards a Culture of Peace: National Human Development Report, Republic of Moldova* (Chişinău: United Nations Development Fund, 2000).

25. Stephen White's February 2000 survey shows indicative figures, such as a mere 6 percent exhibiting clear preference for the post-Soviet economic system, 58 percent support for state ownership, and 40 percent saying "job security" was the best feature of the Soviet system. See Stephen White, *Public Opinion in Moldova* (Glasgow: University of Strathclyde Centre for the Study of Public Policy, 2000).

26. Ronald J. Hill, "Moldova Votes Backwards: The 2001 Parliamentary Election," *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics* 17, no. 4 (2001): 130–39.

27. Way, "Pluralism by Default in Moldova"; *Towards a Culture of Peace*.

28. For example, the need to demonstrate Moldova's democratic commitments before the international community may have motivated members of the parliamentary presidium to revoke the ban on the Communist party (see also note 16). Information from Julianne Paunescu.

29. Hill, "Moldova Votes Backwards."

30. *PKRM: dva goda u vlasti* (2003), <http://www.pcrm.md/> (accessed July 14, 2003); "Voronin Re-elected Moldovan Communist Leader," *RFE/RL Newline* 5, no. 78, part 2, (April 23, 2001).

31. *Economist Intelligence Unit Country Report: Moldova* (August 2000): 35.

32. Way, "Pluralism by Default in Moldova."

33. Igor Boțan, "Respublika Moldova mezhdu tranformatsiei i status quo—analys desyati let nezavisimosti (politicheskii aspekt)," in *Respublika Moldova v Evropeiskom kontekste i v aspekte bezopasnosti*, ed. Kurt Gelmut and Vasilii Andreiko. (Berlin: Friedrich-Ebert Stiftung, 2001): 8–16.

34. "Referendum on the modification of the electoral system," Association for Participatory Democracy, April 29, 2002, <http://www.e-democracy.md/>.

35. "Vlast—eto otvetstvennost," *Kommunist* 74 (2002), <http://www.pcrm.md/>.

36. Hill, "Moldova Votes Backwards."

37. *Moldova 2001: Parliamentary elections* (2001). Report of the British Helsinki Human Rights Group, <http://www.bhhrg.org/>.

38. The party election manifesto was *Vladimir Voronin: Vasha sudba-v vashikh rukakh*, (PCRM, 2001).

39. Neukirch, *Moldovan Headaches*, 9.

40. In January 2001, its membership composition was as follows: 52 percent Moldovan, 20 percent Ukrainian, 16 percent Russian, 4 percent Gagauz, 3 percent Bulgarian, and 5 percent other. This compares with 1989 figures of 47.8 percent Moldovan, 20.7 percent Ukrainian, 22.2 percent Russian, and 2.5 percent Jewish. See *Natsionalnyi sostav Partii Kommunistov Respubliki Moldova (na 1 yanvarya 2001 goda)*, <http://www.pcrm.md/>; and King, *The Moldovans*, 99.

41. Neukirch, *Moldovan Headaches*, 5.

42. The survey evidence shows an apparent decline in democratic values. For example, White's February 2000 survey showed majority support for democracy as an ideal system, and supporters and opponents of restoring the Communist system at 39 versus 55 percent. However, some 59 percent supported having a strong leader and getting rid of parliament (White, *Public Opinion in Moldova*). In April 2002, an Institute of Public Policies survey found that 54 percent felt that Moldova needed a one-party system, and only 10 percent a multiparty system (*Jamestown Foundation Monitor* 8, no. 79 [April 23, 2002]).

43. *Nations in Transit 2002: Moldova*, <http://www.freedomhouse.org/>. Rumor has it that Voronin's driver was named on the party list as an "engineer."

44. A relatively upbeat analysis has been given by the *Economist Intelligence Unit* country report in 2001–03. Freedom House's annual *Nations in Transit* report is somewhat more critical of Moldova's democratic development.

45. "2003 Electoral Year," January 9, 2003, <http://www.e-democracy.md/>.

46. For example, 28 percent of adults supported the obligatory study of Russian in elementary and secondary schools (with 65 percent wanting this to be optional). Granting Russian official status was a very divisive question, supported and opposed by 46 percent

equally (*Jamestown Foundation Monitor* 8, no. 79 [April 23, 2002]).

47. For example, the text envisages the defining characteristic of Romanians in both Romania and Moldova as the aspiration toward national unification, with no mention of the Holocaust of the Jews and Roma under the Antonescu regime. See Vladimir Solonari, "Narrative, Identity, State: History Teaching in Moldova," *East European Politics and Societies* 16, (2):414–45.

48. Interview with Valeriu Moşneaga, head of the department of Political Science, Moldovan State University, Chişinău, September 7, 2003.

49. *Politicheskii otchet*, part 2, *RFE/RL Newslines* 6, no. 36 (February 25, 2002).

50. R. Amariei, "Romania, Moldova Tongue-Tied Over Treaty," *Transitions Online* (August 12, 2003).

51. For example, by stating that the population of interwar Bessarabia did not "for a minute" acquiesce in their "annexation" by Romania, while seeing the years 1960–90 as the "zenith" of the Moldovan republic. See Vasile Stati, *Istoriya Moldovy*, (Chişinău Tipogr Central, 2003): 348, 385.

52. While opposing this group's registration on the grounds that it was a splinter organization, Chişinău recognized other splinter groups such as the Orthodox Eparchy of the old Christian Liturgy of Chişinău in 1995. See L. Turcescu and L. Stan, "Church-state Conflict in Moldova: The Bessarabian Metropolitanate," *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 36 (2003): 443–65.

53. *Nations in Transit 2003* (New York: Freedom House, 2003).

54. Dmitry Chubashenko, "Shagrenevaya kozha Vladimira Voronina," *Moldavskie vedomosti*, September 10, 2003, 1–2.

55. Author's interviews with Alexander Tanaş, Chief Editor, Infotag News Agency and Oksana Nestorova, correspondent for *Kishinevsky obozrevatel*, Chişinău, September 4, 2003.

56. "2003 Electoral Year."

57. *Nations in Transit 2003*.

58. "Communists for restoring collective ownership in agriculture," *Moldova Azi*, <http://www.azi.md/> (accessed November 13, 2001).

59. "Moldovan Politics Labyrinth." Association for Participatory Democracy, November 18, 2002, <http://www.e-democracy.md/>.

60. Symptomatically, the PCRM did not sign a June 2000 document endorsing Moldova's aspiration to join the EU, signed by twenty-three parties and movements.

61. "Modernization of the Governing Party," Association for Participatory Democracy, June 20, 2003, <http://www.e-democracy.md/>.

62. "Golodnoi chelovek ne mozhet byt svobodnym" (speech of Vladimir Voronin to Moldovan Parliament, December 1, 2000), <http://www.pcrm.md/>.

63. Irina Severin, "Peter Passek: 'Vybor dolzhen byt sdelan Moldovoi,'" *Moldavskie vedomosti*, October 15, 2003, 2.

64. Igor Boţan "Political Style," ADEPT no. 8 (June 5, 2003), <http://www.e-democracy.md/>.

65. Chubashenko, "Shagrenevaya kozha"; Vladimir Sorokin, "Voronin ne skazal, bral li Gurbulya vzyatki," *Moldavskie vedomosti*, September 27, 2003 2.

66. "Glasno i vserez," *Kommunist*, no. 34 (September 2001), <http://www.pcrm.md/>. See also *Pravda*, no. 1 (August 2003), produced in Chişinău.

67. M. Chekan, "Slovo v zashchitu pravdy sovetsoi istorii," *Moldavskie vedomosti*, September 6, 2003.

68. *Moldova Country Report* (February 2003). London: Economist Intelligence Unit, 13.

69. U.S. NATO Committee Chairman Bruce Jackson, quoted in "U.S. NATO Committee Chairman on Moldova," *RFE/RL Newslines* parts 2, 6, no. 38 (February 27, 2002).

70. Several interviewees mentioned this, particularly in the case of Prime Minister Tarlev, who allegedly took kickbacks while boss of the Bucuria sweet factory, and is "vulnerable" to *kompromat*.

71. Various reasons are possible for Voronin's initial support: the urgent need to break the Transnistrian deadlock prior to new elections, pressure from Moscow, or Voronin's belief that Russia might remove Smirnov or that OSCE-monitored elections would have to take place if Transnistria could secure new elections. The reasons for aborting the signing could be fear of a Georgian scenario or pressure from the EU and the United States (see John Löwenhardt, "The OSCE, Moldova and Russian Diplomacy in 2003," *Euro-journal.org*, April 2004). Voronin himself claimed that he refused to sign the Memorandum because he objected to the phrase PMR, which implied recognition of the Dnestr Moldovan Republic (hardly relevant given that the Memorandum would enshrine Transnistria's hold over the rest of Russia ("Peisazh posle bitvy, ili Vaterloo Vladimira Voronina," *Kishinevskii obozrevbatel*, December 4, 2003).

72. Linz and Stepan, *The Breakdown of Democratic Regimes*.

73. Ceslav Ciobanu, interview with the author, December 1, 2003.

74. Igor Boţan (executive director, Association of Participatory Democracy), interview with the author, September 4, 2003.

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