

Moldova

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Moldova in transition: from survival to rebirth

I agree with those who say that living through a period of change is more of a punishment than a blessing. For my family at any rate, Moldova's independence, declared in 1991, became a true challenge. I think that most other people were also unprepared for the drastic changes – and certainly not for changes for the worse – which began as soon as independence was declared.

Both my husband and I were over 40 when our life and the lives of the 4.5 million people living in Moldova entered a new era – the era of survival. Moldovan industry slowed to half speed. Salaries were paid in kind: I brought home some bed linen, my upstairs neighbour Wellington boots, and my downstairs neighbour nails. You had to acquire new skills fast, learn how to trade and barter to get rid of such things and use the money to buy essentials for the family. These skills proved useful later on when many of Moldova's enterprises and organisations declared large-scale redundancies. Chisinau, the capital of Moldova, became a vast open-air market. Unemployed engineers, scientists, doctors and teachers stood in the street side by side in the cold, sunshine or rain, trying to sell anything that could be exchanged for money. Papers and poster pillars were full of advertisements offering to exchange everything under the sun: "Will exchange almost new two-man tent for a new wedding dress" or "Will exchange folding bed in good condition for gardening tools". The word "barter" began to sound like an SOS. Taking a leaf out of our former colleagues' book, my husband and I started going to Turkey to buy things. At first we bought only what we needed for ourselves and enough to sell to cover our travel costs. Later, we started to specialise in leather goods. By the 10th anniversary of Moldova's independence, the business had become the main source of income for our family. By then, we had two stands in Chisinau's largest market and had hired assistants to sell

leather jackets. The key words in our family became “wholesale”, “currency” and “market”. They had replaced such words as “poetry”, “performance” and “concert hall”.

Independence proved a challenge for children and young people alike. Lots of parents left their small children in the care of relatives or friends, and sometimes they simply left them to fend for themselves. Our neighbour, a middle-aged woman, did exactly that. She went to find work in Italy and left her two daughters, aged three and five, for the husband to look after. The last time I asked the girls about their mother, last seen a couple of years earlier, the younger girl said she couldn't remember what mummy looked like and recognised only her voice because every so often she would phone from abroad. My own sons, who graduated from university in the first years of independence (one as a doctor and the other as a teacher), but were unable to find decently paid jobs at home, decided not to wait for their country to become a corner of paradise. Instead, they followed in the footsteps of many of their friends, left Moldova and settled abroad. We now see them only on special occasions when they come to visit from Israel. Or rather, whenever they come to visit, that is a special occasion.

Independence proved even more of a challenge for the older generation, my own parents included. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Moldova's pensioners had to survive on pensions which were barely enough to pay their rent and utility bills. They always paid very promptly, although to pay their rent they had to save on food and this, needless to say, affected their health.

Moldova's governments changed very frequently and each one brought with it its own promises of bread and circuses. Tired of the chaos of the government's “new order”, which continued for around 10 years, Moldovans decided to bring back the “good old days”, and in the parliamentary elections of 2001 the communists won the majority of seats. Sadly, this did not make

street lighting brighter or houses warmer. You got hot water on the eve of national holidays, just as before, and nominal heating just as you got used to wearing felt boots and several jumpers indoors. I especially hated November and March, when it was cold outside but the central heating was either not yet on or already off. The electric heater got shunted from room to room but couldn't heat the house. In those months it was hard to breathe indoors, there was so much carbon dioxide from having to turn on all the rings on the gas hob as well the oven to get a little heat into the house (or at least into the kitchen, where the whole family gathered to get warm). In spite of this, in the parliamentary elections of 2005 the communists won again, though this time with a more modest majority.

As I look back at the last 16 years, I can safely say that during its time of independence Moldova has become a country of paradoxes. On the one hand it is the poorest country in Europe (this is the label Moldova earned during the transition period), but on the other hand it has a huge number of upmarket detached houses, expensive cars and luxury products. Each year, Moldova celebrates a Language Day, but in all its years of independence it has been unable to decide which language that ought to be – Moldovan or Romanian – and so in official documents the language celebrated on this day is referred to as the “national language”. During the Soviet era Moldova supplied fruit and vegetables to many of the Soviet republics, but having gained independence (and having remained predominantly an agricultural country) it started to import the very same fruit and vegetables from Turkey, Poland and elsewhere. The retirement age has been raised but average life expectancy has fallen, so pensioners no longer live to enjoy their pensions. Moldova longs for tourists but many buildings in its historical centre have fallen into disrepair and have been bulldozed, while museums have remained closed for over 10 years.

No narrative of Moldova's recent past can ignore Transnistria, which broke away from Moldova on the eve of independence, forming its own separate state, recognised by no one. The separation led to a bloody war and since then Transnistria has been a constant topic of conversation, both in Moldova and abroad. The conflict has been put on ice but continues to attract the attention of politicians, smugglers and journalists. Our family's dealings with the area have mainly involved travelling to Ukraine to visit relatives, while some of our friends wanted to buy cheap brandy or go to a football match at the Sheriff Stadium.

Since its independence, Moldova has carried out many semi-reforms, pseudo-reforms and anti-reforms. They include introducing new administrative divisions by combining districts into regions, and then shortly afterwards separating them into districts again. Another example was the mass privatisation of state enterprises in exchange for "national wealth bonds". Such short-sighted experiments did Moldova no good. Many opportunities for improving the country's lot were missed and most importantly, time and human potential were lost. But I sincerely hope that Moldova still has the chance to overcome the difficulties of the survival era and enter an age of rebirth.