

Country Profile: Moldova

Monday 6 March 2023, by [LANDIN Conrad](#) (Date first published: 28 February 2023).

Moldova is one of the poorest countries in Europe, but wealth is far more evenly distributed than in most. Conrad Landin takes a look at the country and its tormented past.

In the crowded basement of Chişinău's National Museum of Fine [Arts](#), Soviet-era bronze and aluminium castings by Claudia Cobizev depict heroic workers and protest against Western foreign policy. Born in the city in 1905, when Moldova was part of the Russian Empire, Cobizev's life encapsulates Moldova's history.

When she was 12, Moldova declared independence from Russia, and integrated instead into Romania. She attended art schools in Brussels and Bucharest in the 1920s and 30s, returning to Moldova to witness, aged 35, the region being ceded to the Soviet-Union following the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact.

The following year, Romanian and German forces re-captured Moldova, deporting and massacring hundreds of thousands of Jews and Roma. Cobizev entered her fourth decade as the Soviets recaptured the territory. Her artistic career flourished under the four and a half subsequent decades of Communist governance, but her style incorporated Moldovan national identity as well as the socialist realism favoured by the [Kremlin](#).



She died aged 90 in 1995, shortly after the newly-independent Republic of Moldova had ratified its constitution. The consignment of her work to the museum's basement is a testament to her uneasy place in the history of a divided country, and to the unresolved – arguably more so than any other post-Soviet country – nature of Moldova's reckoning with its past.

Moldova, after all, in 2001 became the first former member of the Soviet Union to democratically elect a Communist government – albeit a socially-conservative one which initially sought cordial relations with the West. Its uneasy accord with liberal opposition parties and foreign governments broke down in 2009, when the Communists' victory in parliamentary elections prompted allegations of fraud and widespread protests in which participants shared assembly points and news via a new

social network: Twitter.

Fresh elections later that year following a crackdown on protests saw the Communists fall short of a presidential majority, and the party has remained isolated in opposition ever since. Politics, media and public opinion remains divided between pro-Russian and pro-Western camps, with the latter now in government.

Transnistria, a predominantly Russian-speaking region on the country's eastern border with [Ukraine](#), broke away during the dissolution of the Soviet Union, prompting an armed conflict in 1992. A ceasefire that year has left the region a 'frozen conflict' zone ever since, effectively independent but with Moldovan and Russian military supervision at the border. The war in nearby Ukraine, meanwhile, has led to a significant influx of refugees and fears that Russia may extend its renewed imperialist sights.

Much of the national infrastructure is in poor shape, and the country has one of the highest rates of emigration in [Europe](#). The pace of recent price rises is illustrated by the fact that when tripling trolleybus fares in Chişinău, authorities opted to issue strips of three tickets at once rather than printing new ones.

Moldova's rich culture, warm climate and low-priced economy are likely to prompt an influx of tourists if its new fast-track to EU membership is not obstructed. The country's wine once vied with Georgia for the status of the best in the Soviet Union, and its musical and artistic scenes show the benefits, as well as the dangers, of standing on the frontier of East and West.

Some Moldovans still crave unification with Romania, but others are sceptical. 'I don't know,' a young, largely pro-Western Moldovan woman told me on the overnight train from Bucharest to Chişinău. 'We don't understand Romanian jokes, but we do understand Russian jokes'.

AT A GLANCE

LEADER: President Maia Sandu.

ECONOMY: GNI per capita \$5,460 in 2021 (Romania \$14,170). Moldova saw huge inflation in the 1990s following market liberalization. Its economy has experienced significant growth in the past two decades, but it remains heavily dependent on remittances from abroad, which account for almost 15 per cent of the national income.

Monetary unit: Leu (1 MDL = \$0.051).

Main exports: insulated wiring, sunflower seeds, wine, corn, seats.

POPULATION: 3.3 million. Annual population growth: -1.12%. People per square kilometre 123 (Japan 84).

HEALTH: Under-5 mortality rate: 11.6 deaths per 1,000 live births (Romania 5.4). Maternal mortality rate per 1,000 live births: 19 (Romania 19). Compulsory health insurance system provides everyone with cover, but healthcare provision is marred by low standards and corruption.

ENVIRONMENT: Temperate climate with moderate winters and warm summers. Heavy use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides has contaminated the country's soil and groundwater.

CULTURE: Much of Moldova's national identity and history is tied up with that of Romania, and the existence of Moldovans as a distinct ethnic group is controversial – but many describe themselves as

such. Cuisine draws from Romanian and Slavic influences.

Ethnic groups: Moldovan 75.1%, Romanian 7%, Ukrainian 6.6%, Gagauz 4.6%, Russian 4.1%, Bulgarian 1.9%, other 0.8% (2014 est.)

RELIGION: Eastern Orthodox 81.9%, Protestant 6.4%, Roman Catholic 4.3%, other (including Muslim) 0.9%, none or atheist 0.2%, unspecified 6.3%

LANGUAGE: Moldovan/Romanian 80.2% (official), Russian 9.7% (though more speak it on a daily basis), Gagauz 4.2% (a Turkic language spoken in an autonomous territory in the country's south), Ukrainian 3.9%, Bulgarian 1.5%, Romani 0.3%, other 0.2% (2014 est.). Data represents mother tongues, many being bi- or trilingual.

HUMAN DEVELOPMENT INDEX: 0.767 (Romania 0.821), joint 80th (with Dominican Republic and Palau) out of 191 countries.

STAR RATINGS

INCOME DISTRIBUTION

Moldova is one of the poorest countries in Europe, but wealth is far more evenly distributed than in most. Insufficient welfare support has left many retirees dependent on the informal economy, while recent price rises have increased the cost of living.

LITERACY

Illiteracy was largely eradicated during the Soviet period, and the literacy rate now stands at 99%.

LIFE EXPECTANCY

Life expectancy in Moldova stands at 72.44 years, being considerably higher for women (76.52) than for men (68.6).

POSITION OF WOMEN

Employment rates are high for Moldovan women, but many are exploited and earn considerably less than men. Some women are not covered by the pensions system.

FREEDOM

Moldova's media is heavily influenced by oligarchs and political leaders, and is divided into pro-Russian and pro-Western camps. There is legal protection for freedom of expression but this is undermined by corruption. Poverty has led to a huge exodus of Moldovans abroad.

SEXUAL MINORITIES

Same-sex sexual activity has been legal since 1995, and anti-gay discrimination in the workplace is banned. But same-sex couple households are not eligible for the same support as heterosexual couples. Public opinion towards LGBTQI+ people is hostile, and pride events have faced attacks and intimidation.

POLITICS

The corruption of state officials has been a constant barrier to good governance, and Transnistria

remains in 'frozen conflict'. The liberal government is intent on joining the EU - which is likely to bring more investment to the country but also exacerbate inequality - and strengthen ties with Nato.

★★★★ Excellent

★★★★ Good

★★★ Fair

★★ Poor

★ Appalling

Conrad Landin is a co-editor at *New Internationalist*. Based in Glasgow, he was formerly head of communications for Scottish Labour, and Scotland editor of the Morning Star. His work has also appeared in the *Daily Mirror*, *Tribune*, *The Guardian*, *the Times Literary Supplement*, *the London Review of Books*, *the Evening Standard*, *the i newspaper*, *The Scotsman*, *The Times* and *RAIL magazine*.

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