HUMAN RIGHTS AND POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS IN MOLDOVA

Igor A. Kotler

The 2021 parliamentary elections reaffirmed the deep divide within Moldovan politics, as both nationalist and neo-communist factions continued to dominate the political landscape. With over 40% of votes counted, the center-right Action and Solidarity Party (PAS), led by pro-European President Maia Sandu, secured 52.8% of the vote. Meanwhile, the coalition of socialists and communists, led by former Kremlin-backed President Igor Dodon and former President Vladimir Voronin, received 27.17%. Another key player, the Șor Party, known for its extensive corruption, obtained 5.74%. In essence, at least 86% of the electorate supported either nationalist or neo-communist ideologies, highlighting the absence of a strong, centrist alternative.

Political scientist Ian Lisnevschi noted at a September 22, 2021, conference on Moldova's political trajectory that President Sandu was consolidating more power under the guise of strengthening democracy. This pattern, he argued, was familiar in Moldova, where successive leaders have justified increasing their authority by claiming to defend democratic values—while simultaneously suppressing opposition. On May 24, 2022, Igor Dodon was arrested on charges of corruption and treason. He dismissed the case as a political vendetta orchestrated by the pro-European PAS government. After his 72-hour detention, Dodon insisted that an impartial and politically independent court would ultimately clear him of wrongdoing. He was released in November 2022, but his supporters continued to rally against Sandu's government, accusing her of authoritarianism.

Moldova witnessed further political turmoil in early 2023 when the government resigned amid mounting dissatisfaction with Sandu's leadership. The administration had failed to deliver significant political or economic improvements, fueling mass anti-government demonstrations. Protesters demanded full subsidies for winter energy costs and denounced Moldova's involvement in geopolitical conflicts. Crowds filled the streets, waving Moldovan flags and chanting, "Down with Maia Sandu!" and "Down with the dictatorship!" By March 2023, authorities had detained over 54 protesters, deepening concerns about Moldova's democratic backsliding.

The erosion of press freedom remained a pressing issue. Moldova's media landscape was dominated by outlets linked to political parties and oligarchs, limiting independent journalism. Reporters often struggled to obtain information on matters of public interest and faced legal threats from politicians. In July 2022, Jurnal TV founder Val Butnaru was fined and temporarily banned from holding leadership positions at any broadcast media company after a court found him guilty of defamation. The case stemmed from his reporting on police involvement in smuggling operations. In a concerning move, the Intelligence and Security Service (SIS) invoked emergency powers to block two websites in 2022, citing allegations of spreading disinformation and inciting hostility. Later that year, the Commission for Exceptional Situations (CSE) suspended the broadcasting licenses of six television channels linked to fugitive oligarch Ilan Șor, claiming they spread pro-Russian propaganda. These actions underscored growing restrictions on press freedom and government efforts to control the media narrative.

Another pressing issue is the treatment of minority communities. Hate crime statistics in Moldova remained unreliable, casting doubt on the government's commitment to addressing discrimination. Official data suggested a surprisingly low number of recorded hate crimes:

Year	Hate Crimes Recorded by Police	Prosecuted	Sentenced
2022	7	6	3
2021	8	1	7
2020	8	2	2
2018	10	5	41

In contrast, Finland's hate crime statistics dwarfed Moldova's, suggesting severe underreporting or suppression of data in Moldova:

Year	Hate Crimes Recorded by Police	Prosecuted	Sentenced
2022	1,094	121	27
2021	1,390	44	30
2020	1,177	48	42
2018	880	55	21

The stark contrast suggests that Moldova's official figures fail to reflect the actual prevalence of hate crimes, particularly against ethnic and religious minorities. No data is available for Transnistria, but it is widely believed that nationalist sentiments there are even stronger than in the rest of Moldova.

At a 2021 conference on sustainable development and security in Moldova, I remarked on the country's deep-seated ethnic and political divisions. Approximately 60% of Moldovan speakers identified as Moldovan, 30% as Romanian, and 10% remained undecided. The shrinking number of unionists—those advocating for unification with Romania—highlighted

shifting national identities. The unresolved Transnistrian conflict continued to pose a major challenge to Moldova's democratic aspirations. Additionally, tensions persisted with the Gagauz minority, who were often portrayed as separatists. Discrimination against Roma, Azeris, and Tajiks further contributed to instability. Russophobia and Romanophobia risked igniting public unrest.

Nationalism, deeply rooted in Moldova's complex history, remained a dominant force in its political landscape. Censorship and state control permeated media, governance, and societal structures, stifling democratic debate.

By 2024 and 2025, Moldova's democratic system faced increasing strain, raising concerns about the credibility of its political institutions. The presidential election on October 20, 2024, saw President Maia Sandu seek re-election as a staunch advocate for European Union integration. Her main rival, Alexandr Stoianoglo, was widely regarded as favoring closer ties with Russia. The election was marred by allegations of foreign interference, particularly from Russia, which reportedly sought to manipulate the outcome in favor of pro-Kremlin candidates. Simultaneously, Moldova held a constitutional referendum to formally declare its aspiration for EU membership. The results were alarmingly close, with only 50.39% of voters supporting the amendment. This narrow margin revealed stark societal divisions and cast doubt on the resilience of Moldova's democratic institutions. Reports of vote-buying schemes, allegedly orchestrated by pro-Russian factions, further undermined the referendum's legitimacy.

In the months leading up to these elections, concerns over electoral integrity intensified. Authorities uncovered attempts to funnel large sums of money into voter manipulation and disinformation campaigns. These covert operations were seen as direct threats to Moldova's

national sovereignty and democratic framework, aiming to derail the country's pro-European trajectory.

Looking ahead to the 2025 parliamentary elections, fears persist over continued foreign meddling and domestic instability. The slim pro-EU majority and the contentious presidential race have exposed deep-seated divisions within Moldovan society. Protecting the credibility of upcoming elections will be crucial in maintaining the country's democratic stability and advancing its European integration goals.

Between 2021 and 2025, Moldova grappled with severe human rights challenges, shaped by internal struggles and external pressures. Freedom House's 2023 report classified Moldova as "partly free," citing pervasive corruption, entrenched connections between political elites and economic interests, and significant flaws in the judiciary and rule of law. Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index recorded a modest rise from 34 points in 2020 to 39 in 2022, reflecting limited progress in combating corruption.

The period was also marked by political unrest, particularly the 2022–2023 protests against the pro-European government. The pro-Russian Șor Party played a central role in organizing these demonstrations, capitalizing on economic hardships exacerbated by Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Reports indicated that the party, led by fugitive oligarch Ilan Șor, incentivized attendance through financial payments and arranged transport for protesters. In response, authorities revoked the broadcasting licenses of six Șor-affiliated television channels, citing concerns over pro-Russian propaganda.

In conclusion, Moldova's human rights trajectory from 2021 to 2025 was shaped by efforts to tackle corruption, manage political instability, and navigate external pressures. Critical challenges persisted in ensuring religious freedom, safeguarding minority rights, and preserving

democratic institutions. The country's future depends on its ability to reinforce democratic governance and resist both internal and external threats to its sovereignty. The persistent instability of the Moldovan government fosters continued turmoil, deepening issues of lawlessness and systemic injustice. Moldova's complex historical, cultural, and geopolitical ties to Russia further exacerbate societal divisions, ensuring that the struggle for true democracy remains an ongoing battle.