Introduction

In 2001 the Communist Party of the Republic of Moldova (PCRM) became the first orthodox communist party to be elected back into power since the fall of the former Soviet Union. The Moldovan communists assumed control over a country that had been impoverished in the course of a failed economic transition and ravaged by a decade of nearly continuous political infighting, unchecked corruption, and maladministration. In addition to these domestic challenges, a decade after independence Moldova continued to be plagued by its unresolved territorial dispute with the unrecognized separatist regime in neighboring Transnistria.

PCRM leader Vladimir Voronin began his first term committed to reversing many of the reforms introduced by his predecessors; recollectivizing key elements of the economy, strengthening relations with the Russian Federation, and reintegrating Transnistria into Moldova with Russian support. However, as Andrew Janos noted early in the post-communist period, the Central European states act under severe international constraints. In the course of the next four years nearly every element of the communists’ political design was abandoned or sharply curtailed. Despite the PCRM’s ideological predispositions, reversing the reform process wholesale was infeasible. The new leadership’s pro-Kremlin credentials notwithstanding, the Transnistrian dispute proved as intractable for President Voronin as it had for previous administrations, and relations with Moscow all too quickly degenerated to open hostility. Beginning a second term in 2005, the PCRM committed itself to a program of cooperation with its domestic opponents focused on “Europeanization.” It promised domestic liberalization, and introduced a new strategy for resolving the Transnistrian dispute based on increased reliance on Western actors in the negotiation process.

How did this transformation come about? Does it indicate a deep-seated change in the character of the regime, or rather a superficial policy shift assumed to gain tactical advantage. This paper first reviews the con-
ditions that gave rise to the Moldovan Communists' return to power, then focuses on their performance in office. It examines both the domestic and foreign policy trends that emerged since 2001. It argues that whatever the PCRM's initial ideological proclivities may have been, the Voronin government has responded pragmatically, as a realist model would predict, reshaping its policies to conform to the external and domestic constraints facing it.

Moldova and the Failed Politics of the 1990s

Moldova began its transition from communism suffering from poor economic development, serious ethnic divisions, and a very wide gap separating the population as a whole and the entrenched Soviet era political elite. Furthermore, unlike the Central European states emerging from Soviet dominion, Moldova had no history of independent national government to fall back on. Its inter-war experience of rule from Bucharest provided little useful guidance in developing sovereign institutions. At the end of the Soviet period, Moldova was ethnically very diverse. The Romanian speaking majority comprised 64.5% of the Republic of Moldova's inhabitants. The main minority groups, Ukrainian (13.8%), Russian (13%), Gagauz (5.2%) and Bulgarian (2%), were largely Russophone or bilingual in Russian and their native language. Identity politics in the region were complex, with some of the majority speaking population identifying as members Romanian, but many others opting for "Moldovan" nationality.

Like many republics of the former USSR, Moldova's initial experience with democratic politics came in the form of a semi-democratic transition government formed during the Soviet period. Serious opposition to Soviet rule emerged quite late, in the form of the Popular Front of Moldova, which championed the interests of the Romanian-speaking majority. The Popular Front seized the political initiative early in the post-communist transition, gaining a majority in the republican Supreme Soviet, but was unable to consolidate its hold on power. By the fall of 1989, governmental authority was already breaking down in Soviet Moldova, and ethnic mobilization was in full swing. Reacting to increased militancy among the majority population, the authorities in regions where Russian speakers held a local majority began to establish autonomous political institutions. In August 1990 the Gagauz minority declared the formation of an independent republic in the southern region.
Local Communist Party leaders on the east bank of the Dnistr river (Transnistria) followed suit, forming the Transnistrian Moldovan Republic.

Two critical problems hampered the activities of the first post-communist government. The first of these centered on institutional conflict between the President of the Republic, Mircea Snegur, and the legislative branch. Second, the Moldovan Parliament became the primary arena for the political conflict generated by Transnistrian and Gagauz separatism. Little progress was made on reform, or efforts to stem the ongoing economic deterioration. After four years of nearly continual dissension, Moldova’s political leaders concluded that the existing arrangement was no longer viable, and voted to dissolve the transition legislature and hold early elections on February 27, 1994.

The single most significant outcome of the 1994 election was rejection of pro-Romanian parties in favor of those supporting Moldovan identity and ethnic accommodation. The Agrarian Democrats won 43.2 percent of the vote and fifty-six of the new 104 seat parliament. The Socialist Bloc (the Socialist Party and Edinstvo) captured 22 percent of the vote and twenty-eight seats. The Bloc of Peasants and Intellectuals (the electoral vehicle of the centrist Congress of Intellectuals) took 9.2 percent of the vote and eleven seats. The formerly dominant Popular Front won only 7.5 percent of the vote and was reduced to nine seats in parliament.5

The establishment of a solid Agrarian majority in parliament should have put Moldova on a sound footing to achieve political stabilization. But for a second time, the unremitting struggle for dominance among the highest-ranking members of political elite undermined progress. Leadership discord was exacerbated by the country’s semi-presidential system, which left lines of authority unclear, creating a situation in which no actor was able to impose definitive decisions. An open struggle for leadership broke out during run-up to the 1996 presidential Election. Incumbent President Mircea Snegur made his confrontation with the parliament the centerpiece of his campaign, and proposed that Moldova be transformed into a "Presidential Republic." The outcome of the elections reflected popular skepticism concerning this course. Left-wing groups united behind former Communist Party First Secretary Petru Lucinschi, who was elected President with 54 percent of the vote.6
Despite his political experience and popular majority, Petru Lucinschi was not able to bring to an end the infighting and institutional deadlock plagued Moldova following independence. A new formed government under Prime Minister Ion Ciubuc and backed by President Lucinschi proved largely indecisive. Furthermore, far from bringing corruption under control, Lucinschi and his supporters became a new focus of concern regarding the abuse of office for the purpose of personal enrichment. Reform was also hindered by the Parliament, due both to the continued presence of many anti-reform MPs, the growing political fragmentation of the membership and infighting among party leaders.

Electoral promises notwithstanding, the economy continued to deteriorate. The specifics of Moldova’s circumstances made the republic even more vulnerable than a number of other transition countries. First, Moldova is virtually entirely energy dependent, having no hydrocarbons and almost no other sources of power. Second, within the context of the former Soviet Union, Moldova was a large-scale producer of agricultural commodities. With the break-up of the USSR and the decline of Russia’s economy, Moldova’s agricultural exports were devastated. Agrarian reform efforts were at best ineffective, or at worst fundamentally misguided. The balance of trade became negative almost immediately, and Moldova began to accrue enormous debts, particularly in the energy sector. Finally, as in both neighbouring Romania and Ukraine, official corruption grew to epidemic proportions, hindering efforts to attract foreign investment. Members of the former nomenklatura took advantage of their positions to sell access to the state, and to engage in arbitrage between the planned and market economies. Lucan A. Way has focused on this characteristic of Moldovan politics, terming it “rapacious individualism” and arguing that it is central to the country’s post communist development.

According to World Bank figures, real GDP fell at an average of 10 per cent per year through the 1990s (more than 30 per cent in 1994 alone). By 1997, Moldova was poorer than any country in Central Europe, and poorer than any former Soviet republic except Tajikistan and Uzbekistan with a per capita GDP of $527 in 1997. Compounding the situation, the Russian economic crisis of 1998 delivered a further blow to the economy. While unemployment levels were kept relatively under control, the impact of the continuous degeneration on the standard of living was disastrous.

The impact of popular frustration with these conditions and an increasing perception of social crisis was unmistakable in the 1998 parlia-
mentary contest. Of the 15 parties and electoral blocs that campaigned, only one had as much as 15 per cent of popular support in the months leading up to the election. This was Vladimir Voronin’s Communist Party of the Republic of Moldova, which became the primary outlet for those opposed to reform. As in other post-Soviet states, the Communists’ core constituency included pensioners (who were dependent on the state), and older people in general, who were badly placed to weather the transition and nostalgic for the previous regime. The PCRM also enjoyed disproportionate support from the Russian-speaking population broadly, and in particular Russian-speaking industrial workers. In the months leading up to the elections the Communists campaigned for better social protection, closer future integration into the CIS, and for joining to the Russian-Belarus Union.

The Communist recovery under Voronin presented a significant challenge to President Lucinschi, who established the Movement for a Democratic and Prosperous Moldova (MDPM) as an electoral vehicle to counter the Communists influence in Parliament. The MDPM made strengthening the position of the President a central focus of its campaign, arguing that doing so would resolve the republic’s policy deadlock and allow reform to proceed. Following his break with the Agrarian Democrats in August 1995, former President Snegur also established a political party, the Party for Revival and Conciliation in Moldova (PRCM). In 1998 the PRCM campaigned in an electoral alliance, the Democratic Convention of Moldova. This grouping reunited Snegur in an uneasy partnership with his former Popular Front allies, the right-wing Christian Democratic Peoples Party (CDPP).

Four parties surpassed the electoral threshold: the Communists, the Democratic Convention, Lucinschi’s MDPM and the center-right Party of Democratic Forces. This outcome gave the main left-wing parties a potential majority, with 64 seats. But despite their substantial differences, the leaders of all of the non-Communist parties, right and left, united in a new umbrella organization, the Alliance for Democracy and Reform (ADR), in order to block the Communists from forming a government. The MDPM’s legislative leader (and Lucinschi lieutenant) Dumitru Diacov was named as Parliamentary Chairman, with the Valeriu Matei and Iurie Roșca as his deputies. While not in the parliamentary leadership, the Democratic Convention’s second leader, Mircea Snegur, was named president of the ADR.
In the wake of the inconclusive 1998 legislative contest President Lucinschi ever more openly questioned the existing constitutional order, arguing that it was impossible to govern effectively because of the ongoing institutional deadlock. Lucinschi pressed successfully for a consultative referendum, which indicated that a narrow majority of the population supported introduction of a presidential form of government. But outside of the Lucinschi camp, Moldovan political elites vehemently opposed this option. Overcoming their internal rivalries, legislative leaders passed legislation on September 22, 2000 according to which the Moldovan president is elected by a 3/5ths vote of the members of parliament. If on a third ballot attempt the parliament fails to elect a new President, then the incumbent President must dissolve the Parliament and establish the date of parliamentary elections.

By enacting this change legislators sought place the selection of the president in their own hands in order to prevent Lucinschi from winning a second term, and to place his successor more firmly under parliamentary control. Instead, the new electoral procedure precipitated the dissolution of parliament. No candidate was able to accumulate the necessary support in successive parliamentary ballots in December 2000. Lucinschi dissolved the legislature in mid-January, and set early elections for 25 February 2001.

**The Renaissance of the Moldovan Communists**

The 2001 parliamentary election fundamentally reversed the prevailing political order in Moldova. The overwhelming victor in contest was the PCRM, which took 50.7 per cent of the vote and 71 of 101 seats in Parliament. The center-left Braghis Alliance came in a distant second, with 13.36 per cent of votes and 19 parliamentary seats. Only one other party, the CDPP, surpassed the 6 percent threshold, gaining 8.24 percent of the vote and 11 seats.

The determinants of this electoral outcome were clear. As a consequence of the collapse of Moldovan economy and continual infighting among the parties and leaders associated with the government, support for alternatives to the Communists plummeted in the months leading up to the election. The PCRM had more support than any other single party in virtually every social category. It enjoyed disproportionate support among the less educated, the older population, and among non-Moldovans. The PCRM benefited strongly from a growing perception
within the population that the country was headed in the wrong direction. Those dissatisfied with the performance of political parties in general, and those who were reported themselves to be most at risk economically were significantly more likely to support the Communists, as were proponents of a pro-Russian international orientation. Finally, in addition to its advantages in regard to public opinion, the PCRM was able to maintain a greater level of organizational cohesion than its competitors.

Marginalized during most of the transition, the Communists were now the dominant political force in Moldova’s parliament. With their 71 seats, the PCRM could not only choose the country’s next president but also amend the constitution at will. Vladimir Voronin was immediately elected President of Moldova with the support of all of the Communist deputies. On April 20th a new government was formed under Prime Minister Vasile Tarlev. The appointment of Tarlev, a successful business manager, and the retention of eleven members of the previous technocratic cabinet were seen as concessions the Western diplomatic community, and as an indication of the Communists’ openness to a flexible approach to governing. But at the same time, having gained a level of political control in Moldova that was unprecedented since the beginning of the post-Soviet transition, the Communists laid out an agenda designed to reverse those reforms that they found most objectionable. The country’s new leaders expressed the intention of halting agricultural decollectivization, re-establishing the state’s taxing authority, re-nationalizing those privatized enterprises that went into default, and strengthening Moldova’s economic relationship with the Russian Federation. Less controversially, Voronin committed himself to attacking the problem of corruption, and to paying the arrears in state employees’ wages and pensions. To the dismay of liberals, the symbolism and rhetoric of the Soviet regime also began to reappear in public life.

Many elements of the PCRM program enjoyed widespread popular endorsement, as did the performance of the Tarlev government. Confidence in the Party and its leadership rose dramatically. According to public opinion surveys, support for the PCRM increased from 35% in August 2000 to 66% by November 2002, while Confidence in President Voronin rose from 18% to 72% in the course of the same period. Other Communist proposals, such as revision of the language laws and the intention to join the Russia-Belarus Union, while highly popular with the
more militant PCRM members, proved more controversial. In early June a plan was announced calling for the reversion of local administration to the Soviet pattern of *raions*. This move would reverse a major administrative reform carried out under Lucinschi with the support of the European Union and World Bank that had reduced the number of local administrative units from 40 *raions* to 12 larger *judets*. The Communists objected to this reorganization not only on substantive grounds, but also on account of its symbolic character (*județ* being the traditional Romanian unit of sub-national administration). Further raising concerns of Russification among nationalist elements of the Romanian-speaking population, President Voronin concluded and Moldova’s Parliament ratified a bilateral treaty with the Russian Federation. This agreement named Russia as the guarantor of the Transnistrian peace settlement and recognized the special status of Russian language.\(^{16}\) Equally controversial, the PCRM initiated actions to make Russian language instruction mandatory in early grades and introduced a new history text into the national curriculum written by scholars widely associated with the Soviet regime.

Even moderates in the Romanian speaking majority population took these initiatives as a direct assault on reforms that were seen as central gains of the national independence movement. In late 2001 the Christian Democratic People’s Party, which had been vainly opposing President Voronin for months, became the focal point of a growing popular protest movement. Unable to make any headway in parliament against the Communist legislative majority, Iurie Roșca and other PPCD leaders organized a series of demonstrations in Chișinău’s National Assembly square. Led by the PPCD Deputies, demonstrators denounced the return to Soviet Communism and called for mass action to save the democracy. As the protests escalated through February and March, isolated incidents of violence occurred and rumours circulated that the regime was preparing to declare a state of emergency and deploy its armed forces against the protestors.

Thus the dogmatic aspect of the Communist leadership came increasingly to the fore in the course of 2001. Unwilling to accept compromise in the face of popular opposition, the ruling party employed progressively more heavy-handed tactics in an effort to silence or marginalize its critics. The state controlled media was subjected to heightened levels of political direction and judicial pressure was brought
to bear on the regime’s more outspoken critics. In January of 2002, Justice Minister Ion Morei banned the PPCC for a period of 30 days while threatening yet harsher sanctions against the party’s leaders should they continue their protest activities. Similarly, teachers and administrators from educational institutions whose students participated in the demonstrations were threatened with dismissal. Moldovan politics polarized, pitting supporters of President Voronin and the PCRM against an increasingly militant and growing minority that gravitated toward the Christian-Democratic People’s Party. While the Communists’ backing remained strong and the Party was easily able to contain its opponents, the political cost of its confrontational approach to governance rose dramatically over time.

PCRM program generated equally negative fall-out in the international arena. Even prior to the beginning of the protest movement plans to reverse the territorial-administrative reform roused a universally negative response from Western entities, including the European Union. Moldova’s relationship with multi-lateral financial institutions deteriorated sharply in response to the government’s retreat from economic reform. Finally, perception that the protests threatened to spiral out of control, as well as concern regarding the regime’s heavy-handed tactics in dealing with its opponents, generated a high level of concern within the diplomatic community. Representatives of the Council of Europe lodged a series of protests against the regime’s actions. Disconcerted with the rise of ethnic tension (and accusations that Bucharest was encouraging extremists), the Romanian government issued a communiqué accusing Chișinău of anti-Romanian rhetoric. Collectively, these reactions raised the very real possibility of diplomatic isolation; an extremely unpalatable prospect given Moldova’s debt and economic dependence.

Faced with growing domestic opposition and international pressure, and with no viable prospect for dealing with either, the Communists relented, backing off from their counter-reform course in early 2002. Plans to make the study of the Russian language mandatory were dropped, as was the intention to introduce a new history text. Even more striking, Minister of Education Ilie Vancea, the official most directly connected with the language and history curriculum issues, publicly apologized to protestors for his mistakes, and was then dismissed by President. These moves rapidly diffused support for anti-Communist demonstrations by removing the most incendiary issues from public discourse. Relations
with the international community were similarly smoothed over. While not dropped all together, the plan for territorial-administrative reform was placed on hold. In order to regain access to international credits the Tarlev government agreed to maintain its budget within limits established by the IMF and to conform to IMF recommendations regarding. Finally, President Voronin and the Communist leadership agreed to participate in an effort by the Council of Europe to mediate in the confrontation with the PPCD led opposition. This initiative, which brought the competing parties together in Strasbourg in mid-April marked the end of the mass demonstrations in Chișinău and a clear turning-point in the re-engagement between the Moldovan government and the Western diplomatic community.17

By mid-2002 the Moldovan Communists thus clearly recognized the constraints imposed by the international environment and their own economic vulnerability. While remaining committed to their general direction, party leaders pulled back from the most provocative of their early initiatives, and responded to requirements put to them by the international financial community. After months of difficult negotiations, the World Bank approved resumption of SAC-III funding to Moldova. This decision was absolutely critical to the Tarlev government, which was by that point facing default on 75 million dollars of Eurobond debt. With conditional support from the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, Moldova was able to negotiate debt restructuring with its main Western creditors in early August 2002. The country was thus able to stave off the financial disaster that would have followed default and to stave up its foreign exchange position.

Further brightening the general outlook, even while political conflict escalated in the months following the 2001 legislative elections, Moldova’s economy showed steady improvement, growing by 6.2 per cent in 2001 and approximately 7 per cent in 2002. In part this dramatic recovery was attributable to the turn-around in the Russian economy following the economic collapse of 1998. Moldova’s economic growth also resulted from the positive effects of reforms that were undertaken during the late 1990s, and improvement of fiscal policy following 1998.18

Whatever the source of the recovery, the PCRM’s public standing benefited both from the economic upturn, and from the improvement in governance that resulted from its control over both parliament and the
presidency. As public perception of conditions improved following the legislative and presidential elections, support for the Communist Party and its leader increased as well. In the period following the elections support for the Communists increased among nearly all demographic categories. Most striking was the inroad that the PCRM made among ethnic Moldovans. Asked if they would vote for the Communists in early 2001, 23.5 per cent of Moldovans answered in the affirmative, as compared to 44.4 per cent of Russians. By April of the following year 47.7% per cent of Moldovan respondents expressed support for the PCRM, while support from the Russian minority had risen to 59.1 per cent. As the government moved to repay pension arrears and reverse the drop in living standards in Moldovan villages, support of the rural population shifted further in the Communists’ direction.

Yet as the 2005 parliamentary contest approached, the PCRM faced an increasingly coherent electoral opposition. Recognizing their inability to counter the ruling party individually, disparate opposition parties ranging from the center-left to the right joined together to form the “Democratic Moldova Bloc” electoral alliance. This included the Social Liberal Party, Dumitru Diacov’s Democratic Party, and the “Our Moldova” Alliance, (made up of four political parties, and headed by Chişinău’s popular Mayor, Serafim Urechean. These forces, which clearly enjoyed encouragement from Western governments, along with the Christian Democrats, painted the PCRM controlled government as pro-Russian, Soviet in style, and anti-Democratic. This more unified opposition presented a substantial challenge. Serafim Urechean, in particular stood out as a credible alternative to President Voronin. As the Mayor of the capitol, he controlled substantial resources. Urechean was at the center of an extended patronage network, had access to national mass media, and could claim credit for the capitol’s economic success relative to the rest of the country.

The Communists, for their part, entered the campaign with substantial advantages. President Voronin was by far the most trusted politician in the country. Moldova’s economy showed steady improvement during their term in office, growing steadily since 2001, and the Communists were generally credited responsibility for the economic upturn. Furthermore, recognizing the electoral salience of the “Europe issue,” and its own vulnerability, the PCRM conspicuously turned to the West. The shift in direction dates at least to late 2003, and was related inti-
mately to President Voronin’s inability to come to terms with the Kremlin on resolution of the Transnistrian dispute. Following weeks of behind the scenes negotiating on this issue, in November 2003 President Voronin at the last minute balked at signing the “Kozak Memorandum,” which outlined Moscow’s blueprint for a Transnistrian settlement. Voronin’s eleventh-hour resistance aborted a planned trip by President Putin to Chișinău, touching off sharp deterioration in relations between Moldova and the Kremlin.

The Kozak Memorandum debacle appears to have convinced Voronin that no further progress was possible on Transnistria was possible in partnership with Russia. It also freed the Moldovan leaders from their previous apprehension regarding causing objections in Moscow, thus removing a major obstacle to foreign policy reorientation. Having burned their bridges in the East, at least in the near term, the Moldovans called for a policy of “Europeanization,” and curried improved relations with Romania. Initiatives in that direction were eased by formation on a new government in Bucharest. Almost immediately following his election in December 2004 Romanian President Traian Basescu pledged to make Moldova a foreign policy priority for his country, while on a state visit to Chișinău. In February 2005 Moldova ratified the EU-Moldova Action plan, which considerably strengthened the government’s relationship with the European Union, while reassuring western oriented members of the opposition.

In what can only be considered a deliberate strategy, the Voronin leadership provoked an escalation in its public confrontation with the Kremlin in the months leading up to the 2005 legislative election. Leaving no doubts regarding their attitudes toward the Voronin and his allies, Russian leaders sought through a variety of methods to bolster the PCRM’s opponents. But far from attempting to placate the Kremlin, Voronin incited open conflict. Amid growing hostility and charges of external interference, Russian election monitors dispatched to the republic were met by Moldovan security forces, barred from leaving their train, and deported. Russian citizens suspected of funneling cash to its opponents were arrested. These actions, predictably, precipitated an extremely sharp reaction from Moscow, including calls in the Russian State Duma for the imposition of economic sanctions. This confrontation, coming in the midst of the parliamentary campaign allowed
President Voronin to recast himself as a stalwart defender of Moldovan national interests in the face of Russian intervention.

If it was indeed undertaken by design as seems likely, this "nationalism redux" gambit succeeded in its intended purpose of shifting the Communists’ competitive position in relation to the pro-Western opposition parties. The March 6, 2005 parliamentary election produced a clear victory for the PCRM, which won 46% of the popular vote, and 56 seats in Parliament. The Communists’ strongest opponent, the Democratic Moldova Bloc, captured 28.5% of the vote and 34 seats, while the PPCD followed with 5% of the vote and 11 legislative mandates.

Their reduced majority left the Communists with fewer votes than required to elect the President or amend the constitution, but with a clear governing majority in Parliament, thus making it the first party to retain control of Moldova’s government for two consecutive terms. Marian Lupu, an independent who ran on the PCRM electoral slate, was elected President of the XVI Parliament, which held its first session on March 24, 2005. Since the Communists’ lacked a 3/5ths majority, in theory the Democratic Moldova Bloc was in a position to block Voronin’s reelection as President. But following the election, consensus within the coalition rapidly broke down. In a startling turn around, the PCRM’s harshest parliamentary critic during the preceding four years, Christian Democratic leader Iuri Roșca, along with the Democratic Party and the Social-Liberals, supported Voronin’s reelection to the Presidency on April 6, 2005. In exchange for their support the opposition MPs extracted an agreement that the PCRM would undertake a series of reforms. Roșca, who came under intense domestic criticism for his support of the Communists, argued that he had acted on the advice of foreign supporters of democracy, including the Presidents of Ukraine and Georgia, and with the intent of supporting Voronin’s opposition to Moscow.

**Voronin’s Second Term: The Domestic Political Environment**

The strategic shift undertaken by the PCRM in the context of the 2005 elections reshaped Moldova’s political environment. By moving away from Moscow and committing itself to a pro-European course, the PCRM effectively realigned its base of its popular support. Adding credibility to the regime’s rhetoric, the Voronin leadership came to terms with leaders of the “constructive opposition” in Parliament on a more positive agenda for the second term. This included elevation of the less
confrontational Marian Lupu to head the Parliament in place of party stalwart Eugenia Ostapciuc, as well as naming Iuri Roșca to the position of Deputy Speaker. Much of the reform agenda agreed upon prior to the presidential vote was enacted in the course of 2005. Relations with both Romania and Ukraine warmed, and improving relations with The EU emerged as a central priority of the government.

Tactically this redirection was immanently sensible, given the ongoing decrease in the proportion of Russophones in the Moldovan population, and Voronin’s inability to extract significant concessions from the Russian Federation. For the first time since the communists came to power, support for President Voronin became greater among ethnic Romanians (56%) than among Russians (48%). Popular support for the PCRM remained as strong and widespread as ever in the wake of the elections. Any loss of enthusiasm among members of the Russian minority was counterbalanced by increased support from Romanian speakers. The party continues to rely upon an established advantage among rural voters, the elderly and affluent (Figure 1).

In part, continued popular support for the President Voronin and the PCRM government is the result of the ongoing improvement of the economy since 2001. After a decade of nearly constant decline, GDP has increased at well more than five percent annually each year since the Communists came to power. During 2005 the country achieved an overall growth rate of approximately 7%, which allowed the Tarlev government to undertake a series of increases in pension rates, while bringing up the minimum wage and salaries for public employees. While Moldova remained the most impoverished nation in Europe, with a per capita income of approximately $860 in 2005, it has been able to reduce poverty rates from above 70% of the population in 1999 to approximately 27% in 2004, according to the IMF.

Very close beneath the positive surface of economic growth, however, lies a reality of serious structural difficulty. Faced with lack of opportunity inside the republic large numbers of young Moldovans have migrated, either into Western Europe or the Russian Federation. Approximately of one in five working age Moldovans are employed outside the country, either legally or illegally. Their remittances currently make up approximately 27-30% of the county’s total GDP. This inflow of cash has been the primary factor responsible for fueling domestic demand. However, there has been little improvement on the production
side of the equation, which would provide a stable basis for long term growth. As a secondary effect of these conditions, inflationary pressure has grown, generating an annual inflation rate of approximately 12% in the consumer sector. High interest rates, over 20% to small businesses for loans in Moldovan lei, continue to retard private sector development. Foreign Investment in the Moldovan economy remains sluggish, primarily as a consequence of continued concerns regarding corruption and transparency.

While President Voronin appears to have effectively reoriented his policies in light of changes in the political environment, and to have consolidated his position, the opposition has once again fallen into disarray. Despite the hopes of many that a more coherent liberal democratic bloc was taking shape, leaders of the non-communist parties fell out immediately in the wake of parliamentary elections. Christian Democratic leader Jurie Roșca’s decision to cooperate with the PCRM after repeated pledges to the contrary, coupled with his acceptance of a position of leadership in the parliament, severely undermined his credibility, even among his core supporters. Serafim Urechean’s reputation suffered when he emerged during the legislative campaign as the Kremlin’s preferred alternative to President Voronin. Far from improving Urechean’s post electoral prospects, the positive attention from Russia appears to have produced a backlash from a public that was increasingly resentful of interference from Moscow. Urechean’s problems were compounded when he abandoned post as Mayor of Chișinău in order to become a member of parliament (retaining both posts simultaneously is banned by the Moldovan constitution). In doing so, he both lost control of a highly potent patronage network, and lost media visibility. Furthermore, when the Democratic Moldova Bloc broke down, Urechean was unable to capitalize on his position in the national legislature. In the months following the election he slipped into the second ranks of parliamentary leadership. Finally, the former Mayor has been plagued by charges of corruption while in office. Though not new, these allegations are in all probability more difficult to fend off out of office. Following the April 2006 sentencing of another former high official, Defense Minister Valeriu Pasat, on corruption charges, Urechean’s situation took on a much more serious caste.

The impact of these factors is clearly reflected in Moldovan public opinion toward the country’s leaders and political parties. As has been
the case since the beginning of his first term in office, Vladimir Voronin enjoys more public support than any other political figure; more than twice that of his nearest competitor. The three leading figures, each with more than 30% positive support, are President Voronin, Prime-Minister Vasile Tarlev, and President of the Parliament Marian Lupu, who also hold the three leading positions in the regime. Support for the most prominent of the opposition politicians (Urechean, Roșca and Diacov), on the other hand, weakened in the months following the elections. Even the most popular figure among them, Serafim Urechean, has less than half the level of positive evaluation as that enjoyed by President Voronin (21% as opposed to 56%).

Attitudes toward political parties are equally stark. The Communists currently utterly dominate the political scene, with 34% of those expressing an opinion supporting them, and none of the opposition parties even able to breach the 5% mark. All of the opposition parties collectively account for only 17% of popular support, approximately one half level of backing for the PCRM. Other public opinion data bear out this general picture. Asked which party could improve condition in the country, 32% of respondents name the Communists, while 3.9% name their closest contender; the Christian Democrats.

On the level of public opinion, then, clear differences distinguish Moldova from the "color revolution" cases of Georgia and neighboring Ukraine with which it is often compared. In contrast to the conditions found in the latter countries prior to radical change, President Voronin and the PCRM enjoy a stable plurality of support. This remains strongest in rural areas and in older and less educated elements of the population, but stretches across demographic categories. While initially dependent on their very strong majority within the Russian speaking minorities, the Communists have successfully shifted their base to the Romanian speaking majority. By successfully distancing itself from Moscow and embracing Europeanization the PCRM appropriated what was potentially their opponents' most compelling issue. Rather than allowing itself to be identified with Russia and the opposition collation with the West, the Voronin government placed itself squarely in line with the majority of public opinion, standing for an independent course on security issues, and for deepening economic and cultural relations to the extent possible, with the European Union (Figure 2). The opposition parties and leaders have been largely "de-legitimated." Divided among themselves, associ-
ated with corruption, and compromised by the past political maneuvering none is currently well positioned to assume leadership of the country.

"Soft Authoritarianism" as a Response to External Constraints

Since coming to power in 2001, the Moldovan government has modified its domestic agenda and its foreign policy course in reaction to the combination of external pressure and incentives. But despite its turn to the West and electoral realignment, questions remain regarding the Voronin administration’s political intentions and long term outlook. On the positive side, as suggested above, since the redirection that began to take shape under international pressure in mid-2002, the Moldovan government has addressed many of the complaints directed to it by Western governments and international organizations. Conditions surrounding to 2005 parliamentary election acted to consolidate this trend. On the surface, progress has been made in the area of market reforms. New initiatives were undertaken to reduce bureaucratic regulation, and there has been an increased public commitment to curtailing corruption. Furthermore, President Voronin was quick to support democratic initiatives in Georgia and Ukraine, and has established a good working relationship with the leaders in both of those countries, as well as Romanian President Traian Băsescu. It is clearly his intention that Moldova should be associated with the democratic expansion in the region.

On the other hand, clear signs suggest that the current leadership remains firmly committed to retaining its hold on the levers of power. Authority has been concentrated in the institution of the Presidency. Most accounts suggest that President Voronin does not take well to competition, and has acted consistently to marginalize potential bases of opposition. To a certain extent, this centralizing tendency extends to the undermining of the central role previously played by the PCRM in favor of the executive office of the Presidency. Certainly in the post election environment, prominent second rank leaders (notably Vadim Mişin and Victor Stepaniuc), have been marginalized. Voronin has promoted a system of governance that Moldovans characterize as "vertical power," according to which institutional autonomy is eroded in favor of control from above. Parallels with Vladimir Putin’s recentralization of power in the Russian Federation are obvious. In Moldova’s case, however, this
tendency is more muted, and has been undertaken in the context of an ongoing pro-European and pro-democratic public political discourse.

Only limited progress has been made in the depoliticization of the judiciary. The conviction of former Defense Minister Valeriu Pasat was emblematic of political use of the justice system. While Pasat may well have been involved in dubious financial practices, like many members of the Moldovan political insiders, his guilt in the particular instance with which he was charged is questionable. Malfeasance in the sale of 21 MiG aircraft to the United States, with which he is charged, occurred during the tenure in office of Petru Lucinschi, and served as a clear signal that others who made their fortunes during that period might find themselves at risk as well. Furthermore, the former Minister Pasat has more recently been known as a business associate of Kremlin insider Anatoly Chubias, and has clearly been perceived by President Voronin and his allies as a local agent of the Putin administration. Actually imprisoning rather than merely threatening Pasat, like Vladimir Putin’s incarceration of Mikhail Khordorkovskii, presented a clear warning to adversaries of the current leadership that overstepping the bounds of acceptable opposition will incur sever risk.

Despite nearly continuous calls for more decisive action, reform of local administration has also been sluggish. This is unsurprising, given the importance of control over local government to the PCRM’s ability to retain its political hegemony. In Moldova, there is an imbedded clientellist network build on the framework of local administration. Following the 2003 local elections, 41% of mayors were members of the PCRM (double the number of its closest competitor). 50% of village and town council members were Communist, as were 54% of representatives at the district and municipality level. This explains, at least in part, the Voronin administration’s disproportionate share of the rural vote. The Communist Party’s dominance on the local level is crucial to its continued success in national electoral contests. Changes that might undermine the PCRM’s hold on the localities have thus been resisted with good cause.

A similar picture has emerged with regard to control over the mass media. Partisan abuse of the media was at the core of opposition complaints at the beginning of the Communists’ first term. As in other areas, the government has responded to external pressure (particularly regarding its actions during the 2003 local elections) by promising reform. Its
actual performance, however, has left a great deal to be desired. While a
draft audiovisual law circulated in late March 2006 may improve condi-
tions, cause for concern remains. According to the draft all members of
the committee that will oversee mass media will be nominated and
appointed by parliament. The committee will operate on the basis of
majority vote, and will have broad latitude to manage public media and
grant (and revoke) licenses to private broadcasters. Given the PCRM’s
parliamentary majority, the opportunity for partisan advantage is
obvious.

Finally, while progress has been made in the domain of market
reform, all may not be as positive as it first seems. The role of the state
in the economy continues to be substantial, and therefore of maintaining
good relations with leading politicians, remains critical to carrying on
high level business activities. Financial transparency is limited, and
corruption persists as a massive and unresolved problem. Substantial
privatization has occurred, but as in many post Soviet countries, the
issue in Moldova is not simply “privatization,” but “privatization to
whom.” Some large scale enterprises, particularly in the wine, tobacco,
and energy sectors, have remained under state control. Other assets have
ended up in the hands of individuals closely affiliated with the regime.
President Voronin’s son Oleg plays a prominent role in Moldova busi-
ness, as does party stalwart Vadim Mișin, to provide only two examples
associated with the current ruling clique.

Transnistria and Moldova’s Evolving Foreign Policy

The confrontation with Transnistria’s separatist government has
been at the nexus of Moldova’s domestic and international politics since
the 1992 war that established the Transnistrian Moldovan Republic’s
(DMR) de facto independence. With control of critical industrial
capacity on independence, Transnistria’s economic importance far out-
weighed its geographic size. Furthermore, the criminalized character of
DMR President Igor Smirnov’s Tiraspol government has presented an
ongoing obstacle to the effective economic management of Moldova.
The lack of effective border controls in the period from 1992 through
2005 provided an opportunity for large scale smuggling operations to be
conducted between Moldova, Transnistria and Ukraine. The scale of
these activities was sufficient to fundamentally undermine the Moldovan
customs regime. According to many accounts, the DMR also became the site of arms and narcotics trafficking.

Despite ongoing efforts on the part of the OSCE, negotiations dating from the end of the civil war have failed to produce positive results. As Berg and Van Meurs have pointed out, the continual failure of international efforts to resolve the conflict was virtually inevitable, given the configuration of forces in the region. Like his predecessor in office, Petru Lucinschi, President Voronin began his first term in office assuming that good personal relations with Moscow were the key that would allow him to resolve the separatist issue. Like Lucinschi, he was disappointed in this belief. While President Voronin apparently remains committed to working on the separatist problem, he has become increasingly convinced that nothing further can be accomplished under the old negotiating formula.

The current phase of diplomatic activity regarding that status of Transnistria began in November 2003 when President Voronin refused to sign the Kozak Memorandum. While other stipulations caused concern, the “deal breaker” in the Russian proposal consisted of provisions that would have left Russian troops in place and would have made Russia the guarantor of peace in the reconstituted Republic of Moldova. Following Voronin’s dénouement regarding the agreement, there were a series of sharp exchanges between Moldova and the Russian Federation. Clashes also occurred between Chișinău and the DMR, notably over the status of Romanian language schools in the city of Tighina (Bender). President Voronin then announced that talks concerning the conflict would be suspended, and called for a new negotiating format.

This incident (in particular its effect of aborting President Putin Chișinău only one day before the event was to occur) visibly soured relations with the Kremlin. Russian commentary in the following months turned increasingly hostile toward the Voronin government. It is within this context that one must understand the bitterness of the confrontation over Moldova’s 2005 parliamentary elections. The Kremlin’s blunt intervention in the contest provoked an open test of will. In mid-April, the Russian Federation indefinitely halted importation of meat products from Moldova, arguing that it had concerns regarding re-exportation from third countries. On May 16, Russian sanitary services banned the import of Moldovan fruits and vegetables on “health grounds.” Both unexpected and coming at the beginning of harvest
season, the decision was taken by the Moldovan side to have been intended to exact maximum damage to their economy.

Two trends developed in the wake of the Kozak Memorandum. First, Moldova moved to “Westernize” the issue, arguing that the EU and the United States should be brought into the talks. With Romania slated for inclusion in the EU in 2007 and a more democratically oriented administration in office in Bucharest, the time was right for this initiative. EU interest in Moldovan affairs visibly increased. In February 23, 2005, an EU/Moldova Action Plan was signed, and an EU Special Representative was appointed to Moldova in July. The EU committed itself to working toward resolution of the Transnistrian conflict in cooperation with the OSCE. Second, a much more active role was taken by Ukraine under newly elected President, Victor Yushchenko. On April 22, 2005 Yushchenko unveiled a seven point proposal at a meeting of the GUUAM (Georgia, Ukraine, Uzbekistan Azerbaijan and Moldova) heads of state. His proposal, further elaborated as the “Vinnitsa Plan” in May, was approved by Russia, Ukraine, Transnistria and Moldova. Moldova’s parliament endorsed the plan in June, and passed legislation recognizing Transnistria’s autonomy on July 22.38 Among other provisions, the plan called for maintenance of Moldovan territorial integrity, Transnistria’s right (like the Gagauz Autonomy) to withdraw from the federation should Moldova join with another state, and the conduct of “free, fair and transparent parent elections” to the Transnistrian Supreme Council under international monitoring.

While controversial, the Vinnitsa agreement did serve to break the previous deadlock. The positive engagement of Ukraine and the EU led to a fundamental change in the border situation. On October 7, 2005, the European Union signed an agreement calling for the deployment in December of a border support mission on the Ukrainian side of the Transnistrian border to enhance customs control.39 With EU support, on March 3, 2006 a new customs regime went into effect, according to which Ukraine would only allow transit to goods with authentic Moldovan customs stamps, in essence closing the border to unregistered Transnistrian commerce for the first time. The impact of this decision was immediate. Tiraspol closed its customs posts, and declared itself to be under “economic Blockade.” Estimates of the border restrictions’ impact vary, but it is clear that Ukraine’s actions imposed severe economic costs on Transnistria. Arguing that that the new regulations were
designed to bring unilateral pressure on the DMR in its negotiations with Moldova, President Smirnov claimed that a humanitarian crisis had been caused by the disruption of trade, and called on the Russian Federation to provide emergency assistance. While the Transnistrian regime has organized demonstrations, launched a series of diplomatic efforts, and staged at least one serious provocation against Chișinău, Ukraine’s resolve has thus far remained firm.

Changes in the external environment are beginning to have an impact on politics inside Transnistria as well. Throughout the 1990s the Tiraspol regime was tightly controlled from the top by forces closely allied with President Igor Smirnov. These prominently included Smirnov’s sons Vladimir and Oleg, former legislative leader Grigori Maracula, and Minister of State Security Vladimir Antiufeev. More recently, however, a faction has emerged in Transnistrian domestic politics that favors a less repressive internal policy and perhaps a more moderate approach to Chișinău. This tendency appears to be most evident among business leaders outside of the inner circle, who may have concluded that their interests would be better served by a policy of reconciliation or at least increased cooperation with Chișinău. Organized as the Renewal Party, reformers challenged President Smirnov’s Republic Party supporters and won a plurality of votes in March 2005 local elections. In April and May 2005 reform oriented members of the legislature introduced constitutional amendments that would have limited the authority of the president and increased the independence of the judiciary.

Renewal Party and its leader Yevgeni Shevchuk, decided to take advantage of elections slated for December 2005 to challenge the Smirnov faction for control of the DMR legislature. Despite western reservations regarding the possibility of holding democratic elections in the region, Renewal unexpectedly dominated the contest, winning 23 out of 43 seats. Shevchuk gained the support of an additional 6 deputies, and was named speaker with a majority of 29 MPs, displacing regime stalwart Grigori Maracula from that position.

The political environment within the DMR has therefore become much more dynamic in the course of the past year. It is also the case that, like President Smirnov, the reform faction retains close ties with both the Russian Federation and with political elites in Ukraine. It is at least plausible that Kremlin policymakers have supported Renewal’s political ascent in order to provide themselves with leverage against and often
recalcitrant President Smirnov. But whatever their external relations may be, Renewal’s leaders’ approach is more flexible and pragmatic than that of the longstanding Smirnov regime. They might well entertain new initiatives arising from the Vinnitsa plan, if these promise to both assure regional autonomy and at the same time improve stability and the long term economic outlook.

Regardless of electoral results the latitude for policy innovation available to the reformers remains limited. Russia continues to exercise considerable economic and political influence in Transnistria, and is ultimately the determinative factor. President Smirnov and Security Minister Antiufeev continue to control the substantial DMR’s coercive apparatus. As long as they retain the support of the Russian Federation, it would be extremely difficult for reformers to remove them from power. Conversely, if the Renewal does gain complete control in Tiraspol, this would indicate that the Putin administration had abandoned Smirnov in the Renewal faction’s favor.

In the absence of any change of approach on the part of Moscow, much ultimately depends on circumstances in Ukraine. The success of the Orange Revolution in November 2004 very quickly altered the structure of international forces surrounding the Transnistrian conflict. One key component of that structure throughout the 1990s was the willingness of Ukraine’s government to follow Russia’s lead in dealing with Tiraspol. For as long as Ukraine’s security interests were aligned with those of the Russian Federation, the cost of doing so was low. Furthermore, business interests in the southern Ukraine profited greatly from the status quo in Transnistria (as did influential economic actors in Moldova and Russia). The advent of Viktor Yushchenko to the Ukrainian Presidency, however, altered this calculus. Russia’s presence in Transnistria provides the Kremlin with potential leverage that cannot be entirely welcome by the new leadership in Kiev. Furthermore, Moldova’s government immediately signaled its desire to improve relations with progressives in Ukraine. President Yushchenko, for his part, took an active interest in the situation. Petro Poroshenko, Secretary of the National Security and Defense Council and a close ally of the President, was placed in charge of negotiations. Poroshenko, a prominent figure in the business elite, was known to have economic interests in Transnistria. The Ukrainian government, under Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko, undertook and active anti-smuggling initiative. With the introduction of
its own seven step settlement plan, Ukraine moved itself to the forefront of the negotiating process. Doing so validated Yushchenko's profile in the West as a pro-reform leader. It may well also have been intended to increase Ukraine's influence in Tiraspol at the expense of the Russian Federation.

Agreeing to cooperate with the European Union by allowing the EU's border assistance mission to be deployed on its territory similarly enhanced Ukraine's Westward-facing strategy. In this instance, however, the cost of challenging Moscow's interests may well be high. Already at odds over their energy price dispute, Russian rhetoric regarding their neighbors' change of policy has been harsh. Thus far Kiev's position has remained firm. However, this could easily change as a consequence of Ukraine's shifting domestic political environment. Inconclusive March 2006 elections left the Orange coalition in disarray. Viktor Yanukovich's return to the center of power as Prime Minister after several weeks of political haggling at least increases the likelihood of the border regime being eroded, either formally or informally.

The scenario of Moldovan initiative followed by Russian reaction was played out once again in 2006, this time in the context the enhancement of customs control on the DMR-Ukraine border. First, like other regional governments in disfavor with the Putin administration, Moldova was subjected to a process of extremely hard bargaining regarding its energy supply from Gazprom in early 2006. Ultimately the parties agreed on a short term price increase from $80 per 1,000 cubic meters to $110 through mid-year. The price may well increase again to as high as $160 starting in the third quarter, depending on the outcome of negotiations to increase Gazprom's holdings in Moldovagaz. In a further move in late March, Russia banned Moldovan (along with Georgian) wine imports. The potential economic impact of the wine ban was much more severe that that of Russia's earlier actions. Wine exports comprise 80% of Moldova's exports to Russia, and for 30% of GDP. The potential domestic economic impact of the ban is therefore substantial, given the absence of viable alternative markets. Moldovan government sources estimated that a potential 150,000 workers may ultimately be laid off in the wine sector.

While the Kremlin held to the position that its action was unrelated to its political dispute with Chișinău, few outside observers share this view, the context within which the ban occurred. Public statements of
displeasure with Voronin, from multiple sources, have been unambigu-
ous. When Tiraspol declared a “humanitarian emergency” in response to
the customs restrictions imposed on it, Russia immediately announced
its willingness to provide financial support to the DMR. Finally in early
May 2006 the Russian Federation received a high level delegation from
Tiraspol, including President Smirnov, Security Minister Antiufeev and
Foreign Minister Litskaia. Following his meetings with Russian Foreign
Minister Lavrov, Smirnov was referred to for the first time as “Presi-
dent” of the Dniestr region.45

Moscow’s punitive policy in Moldova may be a short term response
designed to illustrate to Chișinău the potential costs of its pro-EU course.
This possibility, however, seems increasingly less likely. In the months
following the initial confrontation with the President Voronin, the
Russian leadership has shown little interest in negotiation. Rather than
signaling readiness to compromise, the Kremlin has hardened its rhetoric
toward Moldova, while bolstering its support for President Smirnov and
the more hard line elements in Transnistria.

Russian pressure may be intended to disrupt the current domestic
political configuration in Moldova. If so, such a strategy would ultim-
ately be contra-productive. The size of the Russian speaking minority
in Moldova is continually shrinking. Pursuing a policy that consolidates
the support of this constituency could be accomplished only at the
expense of alienating the Romanian speaking majority. Forcing a split in
the PCRM, by heightening tensions between pro-Moscow and pro-
European elements of the party would be equally damaging. If President
Voronin is unable to maintain the integrity of the Communist party, the
most likely outcome would be construction of a new center-left group-
ing, including PCRM progressives and either the Democratic Party or
Dumitru Braghiș ’ Party of Social Democracy. In either case, the rump
hard liners from the PCRM would find themselves weakened and
marginalized, thereby reducing Moscow’s influence.

Kremlin decision-makers at this point may have entirely abandoned
the possibility of reaching a positive arrangement with the current
Moldovan political elites, and are simply engaged in a policy of punish-
ing the Voronin leadership for “offences” against the Kremlin while
strengthening Russia’s defensive position in the DMR in order to main-
tain leverage in the region. It is clear that powerful actors in Russia were
genuinely angered by the Voronin government’s increasingly independ-
ent actions. The cancellation of President Putin’s 2003 visit appears to have been taken as a personal affront. More recently, the prosecution and incarceration of former Moldovan Minister of Defense Valeriu Pasat on corruption charges, despite his current connections with Anatoly Chubais, CEO of the Kremlin backed energy giant, United Energy Systems, touched off another direct confrontation. Chubais, on that occasion, ominously remarked publicly that “President Voronin should not be surprised if he faced very serious problems in the nearest future.”

The rational for such a punitive strategy could only be based on a calculus external to Moldova itself, as it cannot be expected to produce any positive benefit inside the republic. It could, however, serve to satisfy the demands of nationalist elements in the State Duma, such as Deputy Speaker Serghei Baburin, for whom the fate of the region’s Slavic minorities has become a cause célèbre. Imposing severe damage on Moldova could also serve to caution other actors in the region that challenging Moscow, even successfully, comes at a high price. It may also well be that the rational for the policy has less to do with Moldova directly than with a larger strategy directed at the United States and the EU. Tension has clearly been heightened by increased U.S. presence in Central Asia and the Caucasus, EU and NATO expansion, and the “color revolutions.” With presidential elections approaching in the Russian Federation, the Putin government has embarked upon a series of actions with the apparent intent of insulating itself from external influence. This has included not just domestic initiatives such as changes in the NGO law, but also a generally more assertive foreign policy stance. In this context, Moldova may well be in large part merely a casualty in Russia’s pursuit of its broader interests.

**Conclusion**

Since coming to power in 2001, the initially quite dogmatic Moldova Communist leadership has exhibited increasing pragmatism in responding to the constraints that it encountered. The disintegration in relations between the Russian Federation and Moldova’s Communist-led government since 2001 has been as unambiguous as it was unforeseen. But it its wake, the PCRM has transformed both its domestic and foreign policy positions. The party leadership’s willingness to undertake a radical change in political direction and its capacity to manage the process became most evident in the context of the 2005 parliamentary
elections. President Voronin committed to a "European" strategy in an increasingly tangible sense, introduced a series of EU promoted reforms, and entered into a political compact with the Christian Democrats, formerly his most strident critics. By doing so, the PCRM was able to reconfigure its base of domestic political support, aligning itself with the EU oriented Moldovan ethnic majority.

The Transnistrian problem is central to understanding the current evolution Moldovan domestic and foreign policy, as it has been since the early 1990s. On taking office in his first term, President Voronin (like his immediate predecessor) appears to have been firm in his conviction that Communist Party credentials dating to the Soviet period and a solid pro-Russian record would ensure Moscow's support in negotiating an end to the separatist dispute, as it would in other issues. In practice, however, the two countries' interests dictated otherwise. Russia, it now seems clear, remained uninterested in resolving the dispute on terms that would have been politically viable in Moldova. One can hypothesize that doing so would have traded away what the Kremlin considers to be stable and long term control over the separatist regime in Tiraspol, in exchange for less stable support from a reunited Republic of an uncertain duration. Consequently Vladimir Voronin, like his predecessors, proved unable to break the separatist deadlock. By 2004 leaders in Chișinău clearly recognized the untenable nature of their position, and moved purposefully to distance themselves from the Kremlin, and employed the confrontation that followed to promote a new, more nationalist, domestic political image.

While the Moscow's position on Transnistria predictably hardened in response to President Voronin's volte-face, conditions in the DMR since 2004 appear to provide more, if still limited, room for maneuver. In addition to leadership changes in Ukraine, the increasing weight of Yevgeni Shevchuk and the Renewal Party may provide a vehicle for broadening policy discourse in the region. The external incentive structure for Transnistrian elites has been changed by the combination of Ukrainian cooperation on border tightening initiatives, and Moldova's increasing engagement with the EU. There is no reason to assume that, given the ability the express themselves, some elements in Transnistrian society will not respond to opting for rapprochement with Chișinău. Such expression, however, can only proceed to the extent allowed by
Tiraspol’s security apparatus, which remains under the control of leaders who are firmly tied to Moscow.

The current Moldovan situation presents U.S. and European policymakers with limited but real possibilities. Obvious “democratic deficits” remain to be addressed, particularly in the areas of corruption, the politicization of the justice system, media openness, and maintaining an “administrative hegemony.” A major impediment to additional progress is the lack of any credible opposition to the current leadership. No obvious personality stands out among the non-Communist political elites who could provide a viable and positive alternative to President Voronin at the moment. The most visible and influential leaders of the opposition are each themselves compromised in a variety of ways. None of the secondary leaders yet has the stature or following to mount a successful challenge to the PCRM. Within the ruling party, President Voronin has thus far successfully suppressed opposition and marginalized potential rivals, making it unlikely that any alternative will soon displace him from power.

Thus while one might wish for a more thoroughgoing democratic leadership in Chişinău, there is no coherent alternative on the scene at present. The most productive course for Western governments would be to press the Voronin administration to continue with reform. If the current domestic policy direction is maintained, alternate elites will be provided with space to maneuver and time to mature. A similar logic pertains with regard to the DMR. Under current conditions there is little that outside actors can do to compel the Russian Federation to shift its stance in the region. This being the case, an immediate resolution of the issue on Western terms cannot be easily forced. In light of that fact, Western policy should focus on making reconciliation with Chişinău as positive as possible an alternative to Transnistrian elites outside of the current regime’s inner circle. In the longer term this can best be accomplished by promoting economic development and ethnic moderation in the Republic of Moldova, while at the same time continuing to support the tightening of customs control at the border. Whether this approach will produce any positive near term results depends upon the balance of forces in the DMR and the intensity of the Russian Federation’s commitment to preserving the Tiraspol regime.
Figure 1: Demographics of Support for the PCRM, March-April 2006

Local Age

Ethnicity Social Status

Figure 2: International Orientation by Ethnicity (March-April 2006)

Preferred Security Orientation

Support for Entering the EU
Notes


4. A total of 90 (24.4%) Supreme Soviet legislators were selected from the list supported by the Popular Front of Moldova. With the added votes of supporters among reform oriented Communist deputies, the Popular Front was able to command more than half of the votes in the new legislature and gain control of the government. William Crowther, “The Politics of Democratization in Post-communist Moldova,” in Karen Dawisha and Bruce Parrott, eds., *Democratic changes and authoritarian reactions in Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, and Moldova* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 294.


11. The Communists took 30.01 percent of the vote (40 seats). The Democratic Convention placed second with 19.42 percent (20 seats). The Bloc for a Democratic and Prosperous Moldova (MDPM) garnered 18.16 percent (24 seats), while Valeriu Matei’s Party of Democratic Forces (PDF) won 8.84 percent of the vote and 11 seats. The electoral threshold was set at four percent.

12. In preparation for December 2000 presidential elections, the PCRM deputies nominated their leader, Vladimir Voronin, while the Democratic Convention and the Party of Democratic Forces jointly put forward Pavel Barbalat. Neither candidate gained the necessary three-fifths majority in first round balloting. The same result was repeated in the mandated second round. On 21 December, the day designated for the third ballot, the centerright factions boycotted the session in an attempt to avoid the election of a Communist, and only the forty PCRM MPs and eight independents appeared in parliament. After obtaining a ruling from the Constitutional Court on 26 December that under these circumstances the third ballot could be considered to have failed,
The Braghiş Alliance was composed of members of the Braghiş government and eleven formerly independent Members of Parliament who supported Lucinschi.


*Moldovan Eurobarometers*, Institute for Public Policy, Chişinău (January/February 2001, April 2002). The most recent surveys were made available through the courtesy of Dr. Viorel Cibotaru.

In part the economic turn-around was attributable to Russia's recovery following the economic collapse of 1998. Moldovan economic growth also resulted from the positive effects of reforms undertaken during the late 1990s and improvements in fiscal policy following 1998.


Agence France Presse, February 15, 2005


The most significant of these were: (1) ensuring media's independence; (2) ensuring independence of the judiciary; (3) reforming and decentralizing local government; (4) reforming the electoral Code to depoliticize the Central Electoral Commission; (5) reforming the law on national security; (6) depoliticizing the justice system.

*Moldovan Eurobarometer*, Institute for Public Policy, Chişinău (March/April 2006).


For a survey of conditions through 2004, see Milan Cuc, Erik Lundbäck, and Edgardo Ruggiero, "Building a better future at home: remittances in Moldova," *IMF Survey* 35, Number 3 (February 6, 2006), p. 40.

Urechean became the focus of President Voronin's ire in 2004 when he made a "private" visit to the Russian Federation to meet with Moscow Mayor Yuri Luzhkov. During the course of the 2005 election campaign, Urechean became the object of much positive coverage in the Russian mass media. Moldova Noastra was supported in the elections by the Russian-based "Congress of Moldovans in Working Abroad," and benefited from positive press reporting from Moscow as well.

*Moldovan Eurobarometer*, Institute for Public Policy, Chişinău (March/April 2006).

Ibid.


41. On April 21, 2006 Transnistrian militia forces seized a Dniestr river port at the village of Varnita.

42. Questioned regarding the policy on the occasion of delivery of that the first installment of fifty million dollars of at committed by the Russian Federation to support the DMR had been delivered, Ukrainian Foreign Minister Borys Tarasyuk commented bluntly "It is our joint decision [with Moldova], and we are not going to reconsider it," RIA-Novosti, April 28, 2006.

43. INFOTAG, April 3, 1006.

44. Associated Press, April 5, 2006


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