

In parliamentary elections held in Moldova on 25th February 2001 the Communist Party won an overwhelming victory. BHHRG monitored the poll. This report examines its conduct and looks at the implications for Europe's poorest country

MOLDOVA 2001: PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS

On 25th February 2001 the republic of Moldova held elections to its parliament, the third since independence. The poll took place year early and was called by President Lucinschi after a constitutional crisis occurred at the end of December, 2000 when the previous parliament failed to elect a new president. BHHRG sent 5 observers to monitor the poll. While in Moldova they met with representatives of political parties, academics and attended political meetings. They observed voting in Peresecino, Orhei, Ustia, the Gagauz region, including the capital Comrat, Bozieni, Cimislia, Mikailovka, Ialoveni, Hincesti, Rezina, and the capital, Chisinau.

Background to the election

Pre-election composition of Parliament

Despite the government's pro-Western reputation under prime minister Dumitru Braghis and President Petru Lucinschi, the political situation in Moldova has resembled nothing better than a bear garden in recent years. During the year 2000 the parliament in Chisinau continued its slide into squabbling factionalism as this description of the way different parties and blocs shifted their composition and allegiances shows:

- Before the 25th February poll there were 4 factions or blocs in Parliament. The largest faction being the Communists (PCRM), with 40 out of 101 seats under the party's leader, Vladimir Voronin.
- The next largest bloc was the Democratic Convention of Moldova (CDM) led by former President Mircea Snegur, Chairman of the Party of Rebirth and Reconciliation (PRCM) not to be confused with the Communists (PCRM). The faction consisted of 26 MPs, including 8 members of the Christian Democratic Popular Front (formerly the Moldovan Popular Front), 8 from the PRCM, and a number from smaller parties.
- The Democratic and Prosperous Moldova Bloc (BFDPM) of Speaker of Parliament Dumitru Djakov had 24 MPs, 20 of whom belong to Djakov's Movement for a Democratic and Prosperous Moldova Party.
- The smallest bloc was the Party of Democratic Forces Faction with 11 MPs.
- In April 1998, the CDM, BFDPM and the Party of Democratic Forces ("Swallow") joined forces in the anti-Communist "Alliance for Democracy and Reforms" (ADR). Mircea Snegur led the ADR until February 1999, when 9 MPs from the BFDPM split off from the faction. In June 1999, Swallow Chairman Alexandru Mosanu became leader of the ADR.
- In April 2000, the Centrist Union of Moldova (CUM) was established. The members of CUM had defected from "Swallow" in protest against Djakov. Valeriu Matei – a critic of the government – now chairs Swallow, and the anti-Communist alliance is effectively defunct. In early October, MPs from the CDM said they "did not see much use" in forming an anti-Communist parliamentary alliance, as Speaker Djakov's BFDPM faction was not in effective opposition to the Communists.
- The Christian Democratic Popular Front (former Moldovan Popular Front), is described as "rightist." It has publicly mocked the Party of Democratic Forces in its

newspaper, *Tara*, for its ineffective, disingenuous opposition to the Communists. The "Frontists" – as they are known – recently said that Moldova's union with Romania was "inevitable." However, people point out that, they themselves are KGB agents as they have collaborated with the Communists in the parliament.

Vladimir Voronin

Voronin has been an outspoken critic of the post-Soviet Moldovan state. He has repeatedly described the blue, yellow and red flag of Moldova as a "fascist flag," which led to an official statement of disapproval from the Romanian Foreign Ministry. The Moldovan Foreign Ministry has apparently refused to comment in return, suggesting that the Government is reluctant to oppose Voronin too vocally. A Romanian-language newspaper, *Jurnalul de Chisinau*, reported that although Voronin deserved to "spend several years behind bars," it would never happen because a majority of MPs would not vote to prosecute him.

Voronin has also consistently opposed the Government's privatization plans. In the newspaper *Comunistul*, Voronin's speech to the second congress of the Moldovan Komsomol was published, in which the Communist leader was quoted as saying: "It was hard to imagine ten years ago that the great Soviet Union would be destroyed and the people of that state would begin bloody wars, that millions of people would go jobless and would abandon their parents' homes to spread all over the world, and that the remainder would become poor and deprived of their rights... This genocide... [and] idiocy cannot continue any longer. Either the people sweep them away, or Moldova – which just appeared on the world's political map – disappears."

Several attempts were made to elect a president according to the new law in December 2000. Although Mr. Voronin regularly topped the parliamentary poll, he failed to gain the 2/3 majority to be elected. It is likely, that with the Communist victory in the parliamentary elections Voronin will now be elected to that post. The future of Petru Lucinschi is now uncertain.

Public Protests

The capital, Chisinau, witnessed several demonstrations last year, including student rallies against the Government that turned violent, and demonstrations by Afghan war veterans. According to reports, over 4,000 farmers and villagers staged a protest rally in front of the government building organized by the National Farmers Association and the Christian Democratic Tarantist Party in late October. The protesters demanded the establishment of a state fund for support of agriculture, a legal regime ensuring fair dealing between producers and processing enterprises, fairer terms for leasing agricultural machinery, relief from certain taxes for farmers, and de-monopolization of the fuel market. 120 buses transported the demonstrators to the central square, and the protesters organized their own "discipline squads" to make sure the farmers did not cause violence.

Vasile Marzenko, Chairman of the National Federation of Farmers (FNF), had earlier criticized the government for its "empty promises," and said it "should be ashamed of its actions" in trying to hoodwink the public. The authorities had earlier called on the demonstrators to give up their rally so as "not to harm the negotiations with the IMF." Marzenko said after the demonstration that the FNF reserved the right to resort to more active measures in the future, such as blockading highways and main railroads as well as customs offices on the republic's borders. The FNF began negotiations with the government a few days later, but Marzenko expressed dissatisfaction with the results.

Also in late October, transport and road workers held a protest march against government indifference toward their sector's problems. Over a hundred trucks, buses, taxis, tractors and construction vehicles paralysed traffic in central Chisinau for about an hour. They demanded that the government pay many months of salary arrears, lower the retirement age for drivers and road workers, reduce the price of petrol and diesel fuel, and provide more financing for road maintenance. At the end of the march, the trade union leaders entered the government building to begin negotiations with the cabinet.

Privatization and relations with the IMF and World Bank

Premier Braghis repeatedly stressed the importance of cooperation with the IMF and World Bank, and the need to meet these financial organizations' demands. He pleaded with Parliament not to withdraw its support for the government lest the IMF and World Bank refuse to restructure Moldova's foreign debt. He also urged that privatization of the principal wine and tobacco enterprises in the country must go through if Moldova is to receive \$35 million worth of foreign credits.

The IMF and World Bank have repeatedly drawn the attention of Moldova's government to the wine and tobacco industries. However, a closer look at Moldova's main enterprises indicates that this initiative may be something of a smokescreen obscuring the real "crown jewels" in the Moldovan economy: telecommunications and electricity.

According to Braghis, the IMF and World Bank were considering forgiving Moldova's debts of \$200 million on condition that the money to be repaid was invested in "joint projects" in the Republic. The government has already submitted bills to Parliament on privatizing the wine and tobacco industries in accordance with the wishes of the international financial organizations. However, the Communists have repeatedly refused to consider such privatization, which would involve the sale of 80% of Moldovan wineries and tobacco enterprises. The government has considered taking charge of the enterprises unilaterally and assuming full responsibility for the results of privatization, but has been warned by Parliament that it will be fired if it tries such a move.

Why are Western lenders so concerned about Moldovan wine and tobacco? Right-wing MPs have said on a few occasions that the Communists oppose privatization of the wine and tobacco enterprises – particularly the enterprise called, simply, "Tobacco Company" – because they control them and reap huge profits. The Communists have countered that the enterprises bring much-needed revenues to the state budget. If the Communists do substantially control the wine and tobacco sectors, these enterprises constitute a power base that could be inconvenient for Western plans for the country and the region. The enterprises are probably still viable domestically and provide jobs and income. Privatization of these enterprises – meaning sale to foreigners – would perhaps break up the Communists' financial and political base in the country and clear the way for stripping power from officials not on the payroll of the West.

Braghis has regularly raised the spectre of "instability" and "crisis" and jeopardizing Moldova's chances to win loans. Comparing the size of the loans and credits mentioned – \$15 million, \$35 million, \$50 million – with the sums thrown around in other countries of comparable size (Georgia springs to mind), the situation looks rather pathetic.

The activities in the electricity and telecom sectors look far more significant from a "geo-strategic" perspective. The government made plans to privatize the 5 largest energy enterprises and all of these are plants that either generate or distribute electricity. Two thermo-electric power plants in Chisinau (CET-1 and CET-2), a thermo-electric power plant in Balti (CET-Nord), and two electricity distribution plants (RED-Nord and RED-Nord-Vest) are all due for privatization.

The National Union of Energy Sector Workers in Moldova has addressed the Chamber of Appeal for Justice about the plans, insisting on retaining 20% of the shares. The lawyer retained by the Union – Gennady Tatar, Chairman of the Moldovan Association of Independent Lawyers – stated that Government spokesmen have denied the workers' rights to these shares, and have claimed that all state-held shares in the enterprises are to be sold to foreign investors "in one parcel." Tatar said that the lawyers for the Union had requested that privatisation be suspended until the conflict is resolved. "Otherwise," he said, "the workers will be deprived of the right to hold, use and manage a part of the property of the enterprises in which they work, as happened in the case of the three REDs already sold to Union Fenosa of Spain."

The government has described the Union Fenosa privatizations as among “the most successful privatizations in Moldova.” However, the downside of selling utilities to foreign buyers is beginning to show as it has done in other places. The debts owed to Union Fenosa by the Chisinau power plants have caused the authorities to turn off heating in the capital six weeks earlier than the normal cessation in mid-April. The official reason is that it has been an unseasonably mild winter but the weather can still turn very cold in this part of Europe well into the Spring.

According to the Moldovan government, both Chisinau CETs are in debt because consumers continue to “neglect to pay their bills. If the situation continues to deteriorate these facilities will have to close. An additional 22 million lei (\$1.78 million) was needed to pay part of CET-2’s gas supply debt to Moldova-Gaz. Moldova-Gaz was partially privatized in 1996 and formed a joint venture with Russia’s natural gas monopoly, Gazprom. The government has said that private households now owe a total of 192 million lei to heat provider Termocom, while CET-2 – once part of Termocom – has accrued debts of 70 million lei.

USAID has made funds available to finance an open tender for privatization of Moldtelecom, turning 51% of it into “Moldtelecom S.A.” Moldtelecom is the only enterprise in Moldova that provides fixed line telecommunications services, and is therefore a monopoly of sorts. A USAID contractor – “International Business & Technical Consultants, Inc.” – is providing “technical assistance” for the tender.

In the oil sector, Romanian oil company “RAFO-Onesti” plans to export enough oil to Moldova to cover 35% of the Republic’s oil consumption. This would partially displace the Russian Lukoil-Moldova, which currently provides 90% of oil consumed in Moldova. The Moldovan Government has said this investment is part of a larger investment program by Romanian monopoly SNP Petrom, which extends as far as the Caspian states.

European Union

The Communist Faction was the only bloc of the four in Parliament that was not a signatory to the Moldovan declaration of intent to join the European Union. The previous government had warned that the EU could become “hesitant” about Moldova’s candidacy if the Republic did not improve its domestic political conduct. The director of the European Commission Office in Chisinau, Ivan Borislavlevici, said that Moldova could be transformed into a “less attractive nation in the eyes of the West” in the event of a Communist rise to power. However, he added that in such an event the EU would not “withdraw assistance” to Moldova, but would merely become “more hesitant,” and used Belarus as an example. Borislavlevici also discussed the complications involved in Moldova’s adoption of a pro-Western stance while a member of the CIS.

The chief political unknown in Moldova proper at the moment is how the Communists will relate with the West. The latter could try to strip this bloc of the last vestiges of its power by buying up – and probably mostly shutting down – the old wine and tobacco factories. This will put the bona fides of the Communists as supporters of the people to the test. But, it may turn out that they, like many another politician in the former Soviet Bloc, can be bought for a song.

The parties contesting the election

17 parties and 10 independent candidates competed in the election, 4 more parties (but 10 less independents) than in 1994 and 2 more parties than in 1998. In a country with only 21/4 m. registered voters this profusion seemed both unnecessary and absurd. A party had to have 5000 members to participate in the election and a 6% barrier for entry into the parliament had been introduced to encourage larger party formation. However, these changes and attempts by Western election education bodies, like the International Foundation of Electoral Systems (IFES), to explain the need for parties to coalesce into larger formations had, again, fallen on deaf ears.

Money could not have been an incentive to set up a party. The election law forbids state funding of political parties although it does allow for the provision of interest free loans amounting to 30,000 Moldovan lei for parties and 5000 lei for independents (Article 37) – 12 lei = \$1. However, parties that fail to reach the 6% threshold for representation in parliament are obliged by law to pay these loans back within two months of election day. As 14 of the parties failed to get into parliament pay back time has arrived – assuming that this provision of the law is respected.

It was particularly absurd for there to be so many parties on this occasion as all opinion polls indicated that the Communist Party had an overwhelming lead in the opinion polls. Spokesmen for many smaller parties regularly regaled BHHRG with scary tales of what a Communist victory would mean to Moldova without showing any understanding of their own contribution to the Communists' likely runaway victory.

The accusation was regularly made that many of these parties were merely 'fronts' set up by the Russian KGB to confuse the voters. For example, there were three Christian Democratic parties: The Christian Democratic Popular Party, the Peasants Christian Democratic Party and the National Peasants Christian Democratic Party, the first named being the only one with any kind of proper structure. The Moldovan Helsinki Committee noted that there had been confusion over counting votes for these parties.

BHHRG visited several of the parties both before and after the election, including the Christian Democratic Popular Party, CDPP, (the successor party to the Popular Front movement that helped remove the Communists from power in 1990), the Democratic Party, (DP) Rebirth and Conciliation of Moldova, (PRCM) the Party of Democratic Forces (PDF) and the Communist Party. Apart from the Communists, most of these formations seemed to be vehicles for their respective leaders who had been in government at one time or another and who had shifted from one party and bloc to another in the parliament over the years. The Braghis Alliance, the 'party of power' was no different. In fact, it was not a party at all but a melange of smaller parties and movements grouped around the prime minister, Dmtru Braghis and other government officials.

Despite the disastrous economic situation in the country none of the parties of the centre right put domestic matters at the top of the agenda. It took BHHRG nearly an hour to get Valeriu Matei of the Party of Democratic Forces to put aside his list of foreign contacts and talk of support for European integration and address the country's woes. Eventually, he admitted that whatever the long-term attractions of 'Euro-Atlantic structures' they were not, at present, at the top of the list of priorities for a poor peasant in the Moldovan countryside. Chisinau is full of international organizations and Moldova has begun to cooperate with the EU with a view to future entry. Many local politicians can now look forward to agreeable trips to European capitals - some have even made partnership agreements with Western European parties, Valeri Matei lists the British Conservative party among his party's partners.

While some politicians like Dr. Mihai Morosanu of the PRCM pay lip service to the downside of economic reforms as dictated by bodies like the IMF, they are quick to point out that they do not want to join the Russian-Belarusian Union. However, as a small country whose markets collapsed with the fall of the Soviet Union Moldova must orientate itself somewhere. While the Christian Democrats still favour a future *Anschluss* with Romania, other parties seem incapable of saying which model of development they ultimately support. Even though the Communists are keen to join the Russian-Belarus Union they are also anticipate seeking future loans from the IMF and membership of the South-East Europe Stability Pact.

The Communists could, no doubt, correctly claim to have the best organization in the country. They had won 37% of the vote in local elections held in 1999 and claimed to have doubled their membership in the last few months. They had party workers in 1000 of the country's 1004 villages and representatives on local and district commissions. They also said that they would have observers in all the polling stations and that they would conduct a parallel count of the vote. They expected cheating on the part of the ruling party (the Braghis Alliance) – they anticipated that the CEC would falsify the results, mainly by invalidating ballots. However, they thought the measures they had in place would counteract any serious attempt at fraud.

The campaign

As the election had been called somewhat hastily the campaign lasted for 45 days instead of the normal 90, quite long enough for people in countries like Great Britain, but a subject of bitter complaint in Moldova. There were no large election posters or billboards in Chisinau and other parts of the country. Small flyers were occasionally to be seen stuck on to a tree trunk or lamp post. BHHRG has rarely seen such low levels of public display of election materials. However, it was indicative of the poverty stricken nature of the country that no funds were available for this kind of thing. It also probably reflected the generally held belief that the Communists were going to win anyway.

Public meetings had been held but when we inquired further we often found that these consisted of a rock concert in the town square with a fleeting visit by this or that politician. There was a large, obviously well-funded rock concert on the night of 24th February in the centre of Chisinau.

BHHRG attended a meeting addressed by the prime minister, Dumitru Braghis, at Chisinau's independently funded International University. It was said that students had been ordered to attend the meeting, which was dull – the ones who did attend were obviously disengaged and bored. However, the rector of the university publicly endorsed Mr. Braghis's party before bringing the meeting to an abrupt end after receiving a critical question from the audience about corruption allegations.

All the parties visited complained about difficulties with campaigning. Arkady Pasecinic, Secretary of the Communist Party's parliamentary party, said that the Braghis Alliance would use its control over the state apparatus as well as connections in local administrations and enterprises to win. These views were also voiced by Ion Neagu of the Christian Democrats. Mr. Neagu said that the Alliance had placed short, 'brainwashing', advertisements on TV but no member of the public mentioned this to BHHRG observers nor were we made aware of any serious manipulation by voters on election day itself.

The TV seemed to offer the parties and candidates their legally allotted slots - 30 minutes free time for a party and 5 minutes for independent candidates on state media. Private media could organize three debates of 2 hours each for all the contestants, although these were used in a depressingly unimaginative way. Of course, the main problem was that with so many parties/candidates it was never possible to fully explore their platforms. In fact, during one late night show a representative from each party was allowed 2 minutes to present his programme before the shrill ring of a bell cut him off. There were none of the phone ins and audience participation programmes so common in the West and increasingly popular in Russia, among other post-Communist states.

However, Russia's ORT Moldovan channel regularly screened advertisements for Mr. Braghis and his party. These advertisements were much more professional than anything that appeared on home-grown Moldovan TV and seemed to indicate that Mr. Braghis had the support of the Russian government. This view was further supported when Sergei Shoygu, the Russian Minister of Emergencies paid a lightning visit to Chisinau on 21st February and endorsed the Braghis Alliance in an Interview with Radio Free Europe.

Mr. Pasecinic of the Communist Party suggested that Mr. Braghis and his supporters had somehow hacked into Russian television to broadcast their advertisements. However, this must be wishful thinking. The Braghis Alliance is the kind of entity that would receive support from the present-day Kremlin. This does not mean that Russia could not work with a Communist government in Moldova, particularly if it was helpful in getting a settlement of the Transnistria issue.

It should be noted that there was very little post-election coverage and analysis on Moldovan Television and, as it was a Monday, no national newspapers appeared, something impossible to imagine in a Western country.

The Election

The turnout was relatively high - 67 % - reflecting the desire of ordinary Moldovans for some kind of improvement in their situation. For the purpose of the election the country was treated as one constituency to deal with the vexed question of Transnistria. A proportional voting system was in place for the 101 parliamentary seats with the d'Hondt variant for sharing out the votes given to parties that fell below the 6% barrier. Polling stations were properly organized and there were sufficient voting booths. Commissions were non-party, usually made up of local employees.

Inevitably, with so many parties and candidates the ballot paper was somewhat unwieldy being 75 cm. long. It contained not only the party name but also the rather third-world innovation of a symbol – the PRCM's choice of a clock with the hands pointing to five minutes past midnight was not very reassuring. A voter took the ballot paper and a stamp provided by the commission which was used instead of a pen for voting. Afterwards the commission chairman or another official stamped the ballot paper before it was put in the box. This is not a desirable state of affairs. People were often to be seen waving their ballot papers about and, should such an official have wanted to, it wasn't difficult to see through the paper as to how the person had voted. Apart from this stamp, ballot papers were neither numbered nor signed by commission members, added to which the voters' passports/identity documents were not stamped after they had voted either.

Voter registration

Inaccurate voter registers have plagued previous Moldovan elections and 2001 was no different. Registers had to be compiled by 9th February but many were not ready by the deadline. Apparently, local officials called at the voters' places of residence and, if the person living there was out, they failed to be included in the register. But, accurate registers were always going to be difficult to compile due to the fact that many Moldovan citizens are abroad. No one really knows how many people have left the country – the figure of 600,000 is produced based on the number of passports issued. But it is no secret that many have probably left without proper documentation and work abroad illegally. 16,550 ballot papers were sent to embassies abroad for Moldovan citizens to vote there. Despite objections from the Communists, the CEC announced that those abroad illegally would be allowed to vote.

As the registers had, somehow or other, been printed on both sides of the paper it proved impossible to display them publicly making it even more difficult for people to know whether or not they were included. Those who were left off could obtain an official certificate which permitted them to vote. Others who were not on the lists were added to a supplementary voters' list in the polling station on election day itself provided they produced identity cards or other evidence proving their place of residence.

BHHRG saw widespread use of these additional lists everywhere they went. At Rezina No.21, 212 people were on the list by 2.30 pm (BHHRG watched 20 people being added during their visit). In Comrat No. 20/2, 139 out of a total of 700 people were registered on the supplementary list. Everyone seemed to produce the necessary documentation (very rarely the certificate to vote away from home) but the system is obviously open to abuse.

Observers

There were party observers in all the polling stations visited. In some cases, so many that they helped to create confusion. A domestic election observer team, LADOM, had sent representatives to 10% of polling stations. However, BHHRG saw only one of its representatives, in Peresecino; like domestic observers in other elections monitored by BHHRG she seemed very much at home in this polling station, helping to organize the voters rather than sit meekly on the sidelines like the party observers none of whom made any complaints about the election at the times of our visits.

Results

The Communist Party was the overwhelming victor in the election with 50.07% of the vote. Only two other parties surmounted the 6% threshold, the Braghis Alliance with 13.36% and the Christian Democrats 8.24%. [see **Appendix** for results] Had the centre right parties cooperated, including the Braghis Alliance, they would have ensured their entry into parliament and probably prevented the Communists' winning an overall majority. With a high threshold for representation it was political suicide for them not to do so. The conclusion must be that many of these parties cannot have been serious in either their desire to enter parliament or to counter the Communist "threat", which they regularly highlighted to BHHRG's observers. The main observer missions to the Moldovan election – the OSCE and EU – have not made any mention of this anomaly or criticized the parties in Moldova for failing in their democratic duty by splintering in this way and squandering almost 30% of the vote..

The PMR (Transnistria) factor

Although unrecognised by the international community the Prinistrovian Moldovan Republic (PMR), more commonly known as Transnistria, considers itself to be an independent country. The PMR held its own parliamentary election on 10th December 2000 which BHHRG observed.

On the other hand, the republic of Moldova regards the PMR as being part of its state territory which, de jure if not de facto, is the case. In parliamentary elections, polling stations on the right bank of the River Dniestr (which separates the two entities) provide for voters from the PMR to vote in Moldova proper. Attempts to persuade the PMR authorities to allow voting on its territory have proved unsuccessful. At the same time, the government in Tiraspol has always claimed that it will not hinder people going over the river to vote should they want to.

Comments made both before and after the February poll leave little doubt that the international community was more interested in whether or not people living in PMR would vote rather than in the conduct of the poll in Moldova proper. On 1st February the head of the OSCE observer mission, Charles Magee, said that monitoring the participation of voters from Transnistria was a *priority* and that the 80 short-term OSCE observers would be placed, *in particular*, at the 8 special polling stations organized for voters from PMR. Similarly, the organization's post-election remarks made on 26th February in Chisinau dwelt on the OSCE's assessment of voting conditions for PMR residents – the Moldovan authorities compliance with international electoral standards was hastily dealt with, even though Chisinau was responsible for organizing the election and there are five times as many voters there as in the PMR. The EU's observers followed suit. In the last parliamentary election in 1998 few Transnistrians took up the opportunity to vote on the right bank – some polling stations had only 5 or 6 voters. Again, in 2001 there was a less than enthusiastic turnout from the PMR.

BHHRG visited one such polling station in Rezina in northern Moldova situated on the right bank of the River Dniestr. On the other side of the river lies Ribnitsa a prosperous town in local terms due to its big steel mill. In polling station No.21 there were special registration facilities for voters from the left bank – a feature in all the polling stations designated for PMR voters. As it had been impossible to compile registers there, each voter was registered on the spot on a special list and his/her votes were put into a separate ballot box. Voter information was prominently displayed in both Russian and Romanian. At the time of BHHRG's visit (14.30) c. 300 people from Transnistria had voted at this polling station.

There were two buses outside provided by the Moldovan authorities to ferry would-be voters to and fro over the river. The drivers claimed that few had taken the benefit of the facility but there were no allegations that the buses had been impeded in any way from making their journeys.

Voters in this polling station were particularly disgruntled with their lot – and understandably so as Rezina appeared to be utterly destitute. Two BHHRG observers that day had also

monitored the election in neighbouring Ribnitsa in December 2000's PMR election. They had been taken aback by the town's prosperity which contrasted sharply with the situation in Moldova proper. This was confirmed by voters on 25th February who said that many people in Rezina went over the river to work in Ribnitsa's steel mill, the main source of employment in the region. It is to be hoped that this prosperity is not doomed. A law suit is currently under way in Washington dealing with accusations that the Ribnitsa steel mill engages in illegal dumping of its products on world markets.

Other differences between the two entities became apparent as the day wore on. BHHRG observers took the PMR route back to Chisinau as it promised to be quicker in the wintery conditions. As it turned out, the main road to Dubossari (unlike its equivalent in Moldova) had been properly salted and was completely clear of snow and ice. There were other examples of the superior quality of life on the left bank. For example, a serious storm in December, 2000 had caused power lines to collapse and trees to be crushed in northern Moldova. However, little action seemed to have been taken in Moldova proper to clear up the mess. Over the river in Transnistria things were different: fruit trees by the side of the roads had been pruned and pollarded, the dead wood neatly stacked for disposal.

BHHRG considers that such discrepancies go much further towards explaining why people in Transnistria don't vote in Moldovan elections than allegations that they are too 'afraid' and, even worse, are prevented by the authorities from doing so. The idea that there is a serious system of apartheid in place is also inaccurate. Residents of both entities travel to and fro without any difficulty, visiting families and friends and even engaging in some business activities. No effort would have been made to prevent OSCE observers going over the river either as BHHRG was identified (incorrectly) as such at the border crossings.

The West's concern about the strategic and military impasse over the PMR should not blur people's judgment completely about the situation in the region. BHHRG found the organization of the parliamentary election in PMR superior to that in Moldova. For one thing, the registers had been properly prepared – and typed out, There were few names on the supplementary list of voters. Far from finding a cowed and demoralized population the Group's monitors found local people relaxed and friendly. Those interviewed were well aware that they were better off economically than their compatriots on the other side of the Dniestr. Due to its existence in international limbo the PMR has not had the benefit of 'reform' in the form of IMF loans and World Bank projects. Agricultural land has not been privatized or factories randomly shut. Far from shunning the PMR, people from the West could learn much from a place that has been by-passed by 'reform' and which has opted for a slower pace of change.

Conclusion

- The victory of the Communist Party in the 25th February 2001 Moldovan parliamentary election expressed the will of the people although not as overwhelmingly as originally presented. Despite its overall majority in the future parliament nearly as many people voted against the Communists than for them. If those opposition parties with indistinguishable platforms had joined forces to fight the election that overall majority could have been avoided. It is pointless for Moldovan politicians of the right and centre to simulate fears of a Communist 'takeover' when they have done much to bring it about. The conclusion has to be that after ten years of independence and much attention from bodies like IFES, the political culture is still hopelessly under-developed.
- The dismal state of political party formation is not helped by the fact that the country is treated as one constituency which means that there is no connection between an MP and a particular place that will hold him/her to account.
- Organizational shortcomings, like the shambolic voter registers, have been present for years, despite repeated criticisms from bodies like IFES. Ballot paper security is inadequate - they are neither stamped nor signed by members of electoral commissions before being handed out. The system whereby an official stamps the ballot papers after a

person has voted could, in a less relaxed atmosphere, be prejudicial. The ballot papers are printed on thin paper and the way a person had voted can easily be detected.

- The proliferation of parties, many with barely distinguishable names led to 40,817 votes being declared invalid. The Moldovan Helsinki Committee noted that some commission members miscounted votes due to the confusion. 13,000 of these votes were reinstated after recounts were conducted several days later. Although this did not affect the outcome of the election it did demonstrate the haphazard nature of the system.
- There is little serious campaigning in elections in Moldova and the level of both press and TV coverage is amateurish and uninformative. Again, this reflects the difficulty of giving each of the 27 election competitors equal access to the media.
- The international community's desire to solve the problem of the status of Transnistria has meant that foreign election observers concentrate almost exclusively on the voting arrangements for people from that region. A Moldovan election becomes a propaganda tool to beat Tiraspol with instead of a serious assessment of voting conditions in Moldova itself. Western commentators constantly harp on the country's economic woes and its position as Europe's 'basket case', yet they express surprise when people living beyond its borders do not turn up to vote in its elections. It is not only Transnistria. Hundreds of thousands of people have left Moldova in the past 10 years. Their devotion to their homeland is perhaps best illustrated by the fact that only 1670 of them in Romania and 800 in Russia voted in the February 2001 election.

The Communist Victory in Moldova's Elections: Future Implications

A few misunderstandings surrounding the overwhelming victory by the Communists need to be cleared up.

The Moldovan Communist Party was banned in 1991. A Party of Communists was registered for the 1994 election but it was only in 1997 that Vladimir Voronin established the present-day Moldovan Communist Party. In the period 1991-1997 Communists formed new parties or banded together in the Agrarian Party which was, to all intents and purposes, the Communist Party by another name. In other words, the Communists have been in power in Moldova since the collapse of the Soviet Union. It was also the party with the largest number of seats in the last parliament (40) although without the overall majority it now possesses.

In other words, Moldova has had a lot of experience with post-communist Communist rule. Despite, the overwhelming faith put in it by the voters, those who say the Party will be unable to change anything speak from some experience. After all, despite its leftist credentials the Agrarians/Communists privatized agriculture in a ham-fisted way and continued with the debilitating arrangements with the international financial institutions the debts from which haunt the country today.

The international community, including Russia, may have been more comfortable with a government led by former prime-minister Braghis but the seeming insouciance which has greeted the Communist victory may not be accidental. Some people think that the Communists will cosy up to the government in Tiraspol and so further delay a solution to the Transnistrian 'problem'. However, the Moldovan Communist Party is committed to reintegrating the PMR and has cool relations with Tiraspol. There was no enthusiasm for the party's victory there – one Transnistrian even remarked that the party wasn't a "proper Communist Party". Voronin has pledged to hold a referendum some time soon on the question of Moldova's joining the Russian-Belarusian Union. It could be that the authorities in Chisinau will be able to inveigle the PMR into taking part in such a referendum which would, by stealth, serve to begin its return to the Moldovan body politic.

Appendix: Results

Number of registered voters	2,379,491
Number of participating registered voters	1,606,703
Percent of participating registered voters	67.52%
Number of valid votes cast	1,587,257

Electoral Contestants	Number of votes	%	Number of mandates
Christian Democratic People's Party (CDPP)	130,810	8.24%	11
Electoral Bloc "Faith and Justice" (EBFJ)	10,686	0.67%	0
Communist Party (CP)	794,808	50.07%	71
National Liberal Party (NLP)	44,548	2.81%	0
Social-political Movement "For Order and Justice" (SPMFOJ)	23,099	1.46%	0
Party for Rebirth and Conciliation (PRC)	91,894	5.79%	0
Democratic Party (DP)	79,757	5.02%	0
Peasant's Christian Democratic Party (PCDP)	4,288	0.27%	0
Electoral Bloc "Lawyers and Economists' Alliance" (EBLEA)	14,810	0.93%	0
Electoral Bloc "Edinstvo" (EBE)	7,277	0.46%	0
Valeriu Ghiletschi (independent candidate)	27,511	1.73%	0
"RAVNOPRAVIE" Republican Socio-Political Movement (RRSPM)	7,023	0.44%	0
National Peasants Christian Democratic Party (NPCDP)	27,575	1.74%	0
Party for Democratic Forces (PDF)	19,405	1.22%	0
Agrarian Democratic Party (ADP)	18,473	1.16%	0
Electoral Bloc "Braghis Alliance" (EBBA)	212,071	13.36%	19
Electoral Bloc "Plai Natal" (EBPN)	25,009	1.58%	0
Iacob Mogoreanu (independent candidate)	971	0.06%	0
Ilie Donica (independent candidate)	1,475	0.09%	0
Social Democratic Party of Moldova (SDPM)	39,247	2.47%	0
Ion Pomana (independent candidate)	582	0.04%	0
Ana Golubenco (independent candidate)	1,053	0.07%	0
Valeriu Lapinschi (independent candidate)	1,332	0.08%	0

Vasile Severin (independent candidate)	1,025	0.06%	0
Dumitru Solomon (independent candidate)	478	0.03%	0
Vasile Trofim (independent candidate)	975	0.06%	0
Mihail Kulev (independent candidate)	1,075	0.07%	0

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