



Boundary representations are not necessarily authoritative.

BACKGROUND

Land and Climate

Moldova is the second smallest former Soviet republic (after Armenia). It covers 13,070 square miles (33,851 square kilometers) in southeastern Europe and is slightly larger than Maryland. The country's two largest rivers are the Nistru and the Prut. The Prut defines Moldova's border with Romania, and the Nistru (also known as Dniester) forms the border with the region of Trans-Dniester in the east. Both rivers drain into the Black Sea; however, Moldova is landlocked and has no direct access to the sea.

Moldova's rolling plains and rich black soil allow for abundant agriculture. There are few forests; ancient woodlands were plowed under for farming. Moldova faces significant environmental problems. The heavy use of agricultural chemicals, particularly during the Soviet era, caused soil and groundwater contamination.

Moldova's climate is characterized by cold winters and warm summers. Average winter temperatures hover around freezing, while summers average between 70 and 80°F (21–26°C). The country's humidity intensifies both cold and warm temperatures. The south is slightly warmer than the north. Rainfall is variable but can be heavy in the summer. Precipitation tends to be lighter in the south. Dry spells are not uncommon, and crop irrigation is necessary in some areas.

History

Known in centuries past as Basarabia, the main area now

occupied by Moldova has had a long, troubled history of shifting borders and foreign domination. In 1359, it was incorporated into a principality called Moldavia. Basarabia became a tributary state to the Ottoman Empire in the 15th century. In 1792, Turkey ceded land on the Nistru River's east bank (now called Trans-Dniester) to Russia. Then, following the Russo-Turkish War (1806–12), Russia annexed Basarabia as well.

With the exception of small territorial shifts in 1859 and 1878, the region remained the same until Russia's Bolshevik Revolution in 1917. In March 1918, Basarabia's ethnic Romanian majority (between the Prut and Nistru rivers) voted to unite with Romania, with which they shared cultural and historical (pre-Turkish) roots. The new Soviet government opposed such a union and established, in 1924, the Moldavian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic in Trans-Dniester.

Basarabia was annexed by the Soviet Union in 1940, reoccupied by Romania until 1944, and later fully incorporated into the Soviet Empire as the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic. Some districts were transferred to Ukraine.

Freedoms introduced in the late 1980s by Soviet president Mikhail Gorbachev allowed Moldavia to join other republics in a quest for independence. Elections in 1990 brought the Moldovan Popular Front to power, forcing out the communists and leading to Moldavia's 1991 declaration of independence as the Republic of Moldova. The new country was immediately beset with ethnic divisions, economic chaos, and extremist political tendencies. Prior to independence, the Popular Front introduced legislation that marginalized minorities, alienating ethnic Russians in Trans-Dniester and

ethnic Gagauzi, a Turkic people of Orthodox faith, in the south. The two minorities declared their independence. In Trans-Dniester (called Dnestr by ethnic Russians), the situation erupted into open civil war in 1992. Russian troops joined the fighting before helping to establish a cease-fire. The Popular Front and political parties grew farther and farther apart, leading to parliamentary gridlock. A 1993 vote disbanded parliament.

In February 1994, a new, smaller parliament was elected. Several parties posted candidates, but it was moderate groups (primarily the Agrarian and Socialist Parties) that defeated those (such as the Popular Front) who strongly advocated unification with Romania or suppression of ethnic minorities. The parliament quickly ratified a new constitution that proclaimed Moldovan neutrality and guaranteed minorities their rights. Additional political, constitutional, and economic reforms were implemented.

In 1994, the government signed an agreement with Russia concerning the eventual withdrawal of its troops from Trans-Dniester. Moldova's moderate leaders extended greater autonomy to both separatist regions while maintaining sovereignty. A "republic within Moldova" status was accepted in 1996 by Trans-Dniester leaders and Russia. Moldovan leaders have since continued efforts to normalize relations with Trans-Dniester. However, in 2006, inhabitants of the region approved a referendum (that was not recognized internationally) calling for independence from Moldova and eventual union with Russia. Moldova's president Vladimir Voronin and Trans-Dniester leader Igor Smirnov agreed in 2008 to reopen peace talks in the future. Voronin's Communist Party won elections in 2009 amidst rumors of election fraud. Voronin was constitutionally prohibited from running for a third term as president; he resigned in September 2009. Mihai Ghimpu, the Speaker of Parliament, serves as acting president until elections can successfully elect a new president.

THE PEOPLE

Population

Moldova's population of 4.3 million is decreasing slightly at a rate of 0.07 percent annually. Roughly 78 percent of the people are ethnic Moldovans (of Romanian descent). Ukrainians (8.4 percent) and Russians (5.8 percent) are the largest minorities. They tend to live in cities and in Trans-Dniester. The Gagauzi (4.4 percent) inhabit southern Moldova. Moldova is also home to some ethnic Bulgarians (1.9 percent) and smaller groups. The capital, Chisinau, is the most populated city in the country. Other major cities include Tiraspol (the "capital" of Trans-Dniester), Balti, and Tighina. Up to a quarter of the official population actually lives and works elsewhere in Europe.

Language

During the Soviet era, Russian was the official state language; Romanian, the language of ethnic Moldovans, had to be written in the Cyrillic alphabet. In 1994, Romanian (called *Moldovan* inside Moldova) was declared the sole official

language, and efforts were implemented to help the government, businesses, and schools shift to using Romanian and the Latin alphabet. The transition has been slow and costly. Russian is still heavily used in urban areas, especially among minorities. By law, non-Romanian speakers have six years to learn Romanian as a condition of their continued employment. Flexibility exists if the six-year target is unreachable. Ethnic minorities may continue to speak their own languages. Bulgarians and Gagauzi also generally speak Russian.

Religion

Roughly 98 percent of Moldovans are Eastern Orthodox Christians. There are small populations of Jews (1.5 percent), Evangelical Protestants, and Roman Catholics. The practice of religion was repressed during the Soviet era, but people are now rebuilding their churches, attending services, and celebrating religious holidays. Religious devotion is rising, and religion is expected to play a greater role in the society's future.

General Attitudes

Moldovans value strong personal relationships with friends and relatives. Educated people are respected above others, including the wealthy. Material possessions are increasingly desired, which has given rise to greater corruption but also has encouraged private enterprise. Residents appreciate their agricultural heritage and tend to be politically and socially conservative. They are cautious toward people they do not know but warm and trusting with good friends. Moldovans tend to be pessimistic about their individual circumstances; even if they are inwardly optimistic, they more readily express doubts than hopes. As in many newly created countries, Moldova has faced numerous hardships and social upheavals. Those who initially favored unification with Romania were disappointed by the feeling in Romania that Moldovans had lost their Romanian cultural identity and that Russian influence in Moldova remains strong. In 1992, however, the presidents of both Moldova and Romania agreed to pursue a balanced policy between their countries. Many Moldovans have been disheartened by the economic hardships of transition. People's perceptions are strongly influenced by political and economic trends, both of which change regularly.

Personal Appearance

Moldovans are sure to wear their best clothing when leaving the house. Women wear dresses or skirts and high heels. Young women prefer flashy name-brand outfits, jewelry, and considerable makeup. Young people in cities favor jeans and T-shirts. Urban professional men wear suits with ties. Urban men otherwise wear sweat suits and tennis shoes; jewelry indicates their social status. Rural men often wear older suit coats with sweaters. Older rural women (*batrana*) wear scarves on their heads, a practice that originally denoted one's marital status (unmarried women did not wear scarves). Men often wear fur hats in colder weather.

CUSTOMS AND COURTESIES

Greetings

Moldovan men generally shake hands when they greet; most Moldovan women do not shake hands but kiss on the cheeks. Good friends and relatives may hug. Some rural and ethnic Moldovan men may greet a woman by kissing her on the hand and saying *Sarut mâna* (I kiss your hand). Other verbal greetings include *Bună ziua* (Good day), *Ce mai faceți* (How do you do?), *Noroc* (“Cheers,” meaning “Hi”), and the Russian *Privet* (Hi) or *Zdravstvuite* (Hello). “Good-bye” is *La revedere*.

Young people tend to address others by first names. Adults use titles (*Domnul* for “Mr.,” *Doamna* for “Mrs.,” *Dominsoara* for “Miss”) with the family name for all people but close friends and relatives. Some adults introduce themselves by first name and patronymic (e.g., Ion Petru), often preceded by the family name (e.g., Ciorbu Ion Petru). A patronymic is formed by the possessive of the father’s first name. Use of this Russian custom is decreasing. City dwellers do not greet those they do not know and rarely smile at strangers. Rural people are more likely to greet strangers. A young woman is called a “girl,” since the term “woman” is considered an insult that implies the person is old or married.

Gestures

Moldovans generally do not point with the index finger; they prefer using the open hand. It is impolite to put feet on furniture, cross legs in front of elders, or chew gum while speaking. Eating while walking in public is rude, unless one is eating ice cream or *pirozhenki* (a stuffed pastry). Society generally frowns on public displays of affection. Moldovan men usually remove their hats when entering a building or home. It is rude for men not to open doors for women or to neglect other such chivalrous acts.

Visiting

Moldovans usually socialize within each other’s homes. Visitors remove their shoes at the door before entering. People sit in the kitchen or living room to chat for hours. Hosts generally provide guests with something to drink (coffee, wine, or vodka). On special occasions, guests are treated to large meals. Hosts show honor for the guest by offering food and drink; refusing is impolite. Close friends and family feel comfortable visiting without prior arrangement, but a telephone call among those with phones usually is appreciated. If visitors plan to stay only a few minutes, they indicate this upon arrival so as not to make the hosts feel their quick departure indicates they did not like something.

Guests often take small gifts such as flowers or chocolates. It is impolite not to take at least flowers to people on special occasions or holidays. Hosts, especially in rural areas, usually reciprocate with a small gift (cake or wine). Foreign visitors, especially people from the United States, are considered honored guests and are treated to the family’s best.

Eating

The urban breakfast is usually light, consisting of open sandwiches with sausage or cheese, coffee or tea, and fruit preserves. Rural people often eat more substantial meals of *kasha* (hot porridge), potatoes, bread, and sheep cheese. Indeed, breakfast can be the main meal, as the rest of the day is spent farming. Lunch and dinner are light. On weekends, however, lunch is the main meal. In cities, lunch is generally the main meal and consists of soup, salad, and an entrée. For dinner, only an entrée is eaten, though it is not necessarily light. Children at elementary schools usually have an afternoon “tea” (juice and a sweet roll). Coffee and juice are common beverages among urban people, while rural people drink wine, tea, milk, or a stewed fruit drink. Ice is almost never served with drinks, as cold drinks are considered unhealthy.

Meals are prepared by women; it is considered embarrassing for a man to admit he cooks. Food is served from the middle of the table; each person takes his or her portion from serving dishes. Urban Moldovans eat with the fork in the left hand and the knife in the right hand. They keep their hands and forearms above the table throughout the meal. Hosts offer guests additional helpings at least three or four times. Initially declined, the food should then be accepted. One is expected to eat everything on the plate; the presence of leftovers is considered a sign that guests did not like the food.

Moldovans rarely eat at restaurants, which are expensive, except during vacations and for business functions. Families go out for ice cream, coffee, or dessert. When one does dine out, the host pays the bill; tips may be given.

LIFESTYLE

Family

Moldovans value their families. They often marry early in life because of a rural lifestyle or because they want to be treated as adults. Urban families usually have only one or two children, while rural families may have three or more. Children remain close to their parents throughout life. Young urban couples often have difficulty finding housing, so they usually move in with one of the couple’s parents. Gender roles are clearly defined, especially in the countryside. Men lead the family, work the fields and raise livestock, or have a wage-earning job. Women are responsible for all household chores and child care as well as farm work, if applicable. A successful career is less important for a woman than being a good cook and housekeeper, but more women are becoming merchants, selling at outdoor markets goods they produce or buy in Romania and other countries.

Housing

In the capital and larger cities, Moldovans typically live in old, Soviet-style apartment blocks. In their apartments, Moldovan families tend to still have Soviet-era furniture. Many decorate their walls with hanging rugs, calendars, and family photographs. Houses in villages and rural areas are traditionally built by hand, using limestone, straw, and mud. As soon as two people get married, they are expected to start

work on their new home. It is always a family effort, and it takes significant resources, labor, and time (often several years). If budget and space permit, some families build an extra structure on their property, which they use as a second kitchen or a storage shed. Rural properties are typically enclosed by a fence, many of them with a decorative gate that is a sign of social status.

Dating and Marriage

Young people date with the goal of getting married. They go for walks in the park, watch videos, and dance at gatherings in the local cultural hall or at birthday parties. Couples still marry at a “wedding palace,” the Soviet-era office where legal weddings were held. However, now many get married in a church first and then go to the “wedding palace” for the civil ceremony (other community events also take place there). Fall is the most popular time for a wedding because it is the season of new wine. After the ceremony, the bride takes off her veil and puts on a scarf to indicate she is now a wife and a mature woman. The veil is given to the maid of honor, who is expected to marry next. Wedding guests usually stay through the morning and sometimes for an entire weekend. Divorce is common, but second marriages are not. Women with children find it hard to remarry.

Life Cycle

Within a month of their birth, most Moldovan children are baptized in a ceremony that also honors their *cumetrii* (grandparents). At age 10, particularly in rural areas, children are expected to help out at home. Because pensions no longer cover basic expenses, most Moldovans now work beyond 60. After a death, it is customary for the body to lie in the house for three days while relatives and friends pay their respects and offer prayers. After the third day, a priest comes to the house and prays for the deceased and the grieving family. Mourners then follow the coffin to the cemetery. A short graveside service is followed by a large wake, which is attended by many people and includes much food and drink.

Diet

Romanian, Russian, Ukrainian, and Bulgarian cuisine are all part of the Moldovan diet. The most common soup eaten at lunch is *borscht* (made of tomato juice and beets). *Borscht* may also refer to other types of soup. Meat, bread, potatoes, and vegetables are staples for the main meal. Bread is served with most meals; wine is served with lunch and dinner. Traditional Moldovan dishes include *mamaliga* (cornmeal mush that resembles pudding) with *brânza* (cow, sheep, or goat cheese), *mititei* (grilled meat sausages), fried onions with sour cream, and *placinte* (flaky stuffed pastry). Garlic, onions, and herbs are used in cooking many foods. Fruits (apples, grapes, plums, cherries, strawberries, watermelon, and tomatoes) are eaten in season. Typical vegetables are eggplant, peppers, cabbage, and potatoes. Many urban families have gardens on the outskirts of town, and almost all rural families keep gardens as well as animals for food. All meats are popular but expensive; chicken is the most affordable.

Recreation

In their leisure time, Moldovans visit or read. Although movies are popular, they are too expensive for many people. Soccer is the most popular sport. Chess is also a favorite pastime. Some enjoy basketball. A small number of urban adults jog or exercise. Public exercise and swimming facilities are available but need repair.

The Arts

Moldovans love music and art. Folk music is popular at national festivals. Common instruments include the violin, flute, accordion, and *cembalo* (harpichord). The *Miorita* is a well-known ballad. Moldova is home to several professional theaters, including the Licurici Republic Puppet Theater. Ceramics, carpet making, woodcarving, basketwork, and weaving are common crafts. During the Soviet period, the government controlled the arts. Artists were pressured to produce works that glorified communism. In more recent years, artists have had more freedom to express themselves and have been experimenting with new materials, techniques, and styles.

Holidays

Because some of the nonreligious aspects of Christmas were transferred to New Year's by the Soviets, New Year's Day is the biggest holiday of the year. On New Year's Eve, adults enjoy parties with family and friends. At the beginning of the new year, people say *La multi ani* (Happy New Year). Children go to parties with *Mos Craciun* (Santa Claus) and *Alba-ca-Zapada* (his granddaughter, Snow White). Christmas (7 Jan.) is being revived after a ban under the Soviets. People are rediscovering a rich tradition of caroling, folklore, trees, ornaments, and gifts.

For non-Orthodox Christians and in urban areas, Christmas is 25 December, and 7 January is St. John's Day. For all Christians, Christmas and Easter (Saturday–Monday) are the most important religious holidays. An all-night ceremony ends with a dawn feast on Easter morning, followed later by visits. Two weeks later, Moldovans celebrate another holiday called Memorial Easter, during which they visit cemeteries and honor the dead. National holidays include International Women's Day (8 Mar.), Independence Day (27 Aug.), and *Limba Noastra* (31 August, to celebrate the proclamation of Romanian as the official language). For *Hram*, each village and city celebrates its birth or the birth of its patron saint. People go from house to house and eat; they also participate in community activities ranging from concerts and dancing to wrestling.

SOCIETY

Government

The Republic of Moldova has a president as head of state. The president (currently Acting President Mihai Ghimpu) is chosen by members of the parliament according to a constitutional amendment passed in July 2000. Prior to this amendment, the president was elected by popular vote. The prime minister (currently Vlad Filat) serves as head of

government. The 101-member parliament is directly elected. Citizenship is granted to ethnic Moldovans and others who meet certain residency and ancestry requirements. The voting age is 18.

Economy

Moldova is one of the poorest countries in Europe. It is mostly an agrarian nation, with an economy based on its fertile land. Agriculture employs about 40 percent of the workforce. Around 14 percent of the working population is involved in food processing and related industries. Chief products include fruits, vegetables, grains, wine, sunflower seeds, tobacco, and dairy items. Most exports go to neighboring countries. Moldova also exports small appliances, textiles, leather goods, and tools. Fuel and energy are imported; electricity and gas are in short supply, and sometimes Chisinau goes days without hot water. Consumer items may also be imported. The national currency is the *leu* (MDL).

Moldova is struggling to make the difficult transition to a capitalist economic system. The government has sought to privatize firms, transfer ownership of state farms to peasant joint-stock associations, and reform laws related to investment and the free market. However, actual implementation has been slow. The Moldovan economy shrank in 1998 in the wake of Russia's severe financial depression and has continued to struggle since then. Black market activity is an ongoing problem. The exodus of many Moldovans emigrating to Europe is another problem, but the money they send home makes up a large portion of the economy. The value of remittances, however, may decrease as a result of the 2008 global financial crisis. Life is difficult for many, and it will take time before the benefits of an open market reach the average person, especially in rural areas.

Transportation and Communications

City dwellers benefit from an extensive public transport system of buses, trolleys, and minivans. Commuter buses and trains travel between cities. In rural villages, people may still use horse-drawn carts (*karutsa*). Some Moldovans own cars, but many cannot afford them. Fuel and spare parts are expensive, and road conditions are poor. Many people have cell phones, and social networking on the internet is becoming more common. The influence of newspapers is minimal. Television and radio facilities are state-owned.

Education

Moldova's basic education system consists of primary schools and high schools. Children begin attending at age six or seven and finish high school 12 years later. Students who do not attend high school or who fail to complete it may learn a trade by attending a vocational school. Even in high school, students may learn one of several trades by going to a professional education center one day a week. Successful students receive a professional license in the given trade upon graduation from high school. Students often gain hands-on experience in their chosen trade during summer vacations. Moldovans value higher education, and many compete for the limited number of available university spots. An increasing

number are studying abroad.

Health

Moldova's healthcare system lacks modern facilities, skilled staff, and supplies. Doctors are poorly paid and hospitals may lack even basic necessities such as running water. Limited health insurance is available for free to students and government workers. Private insurance is expensive for many families. Preventive and maternal care are especially lacking, which contributes to high infant mortality and low life expectancy rates.

AT A GLANCE

Contact Information

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POPULATION & AREA

Population	4,317,483 (rank=124)
Area, sq. mi.	13,070 (rank=137)
Area, sq. km.	33,851

DEVELOPMENT DATA

Human Dev. Index* rank	99 of 182 countries
Gender inequality rank	40 of 155 countries
Real GDP per capita	\$2,300
Adult literacy rate	100% (male); 99% (female)
Infant mortality rate	13 per 1,000 births
Life expectancy	67 (male); 75 (female)

*UN Development Programme, Human Development Report 2010 (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).