

## Moldova

**Country:**Moldova**Year:**

2016

**Freedom Status:**

Partly Free

**Political Rights:**

3

**Civil Liberties:**

3

**Aggregate Score:**

60

**Freedom Rating:**

3.0

**Overview:**

Moldova experienced a significant political crisis in 2015, as the aftershock of a banking scandal and discord among parliamentary parties and prominent officials caused deep government dysfunction and stalled ongoing reform efforts. Details about a major fraud scheme involving three Moldovan banks continued to emerge during the year, implicating high-ranking public figures and leading to mass protests. The tense climate complicated the process of government formation, contributing to disagreements among the parties that had won seats in the November 2014 parliamentary elections. After multiple transfers of power, the year ended in a political impasse, with parties unable to form a new governing coalition.

**Trend Arrow:**

↓

**Explanatory Note:**

The numerical ratings and status listed above do not reflect conditions in Transnistria, which is examined in a separate report.

**Political Rights and Civil Liberties:****Political Rights: 25 / 40 (-3) [Key]****A. Electoral Process: 10 / 12**

Voters elect the 101-seat unicameral parliament by proportional representation for four-year terms. Parliament elects the president, who serves up to two four-year terms, with a three-fifths supermajority. Parliament must approve the prime minister, who holds most of the executive power. Nicolae Timofti was elected president in 2012, filling a post that had been vacant since 2009 due to partisan gridlock. The next presidential election is scheduled for 2016.

In the 2014 parliamentary elections, the Party of Socialists of the Republic of Moldova (PSRM), a hard-line Russophile faction, emerged as the largest single parliamentary party with 25 seats, while the more moderate Party of Communists of the Republic of Moldova (PCRM) took 21. Among the pro-European parties, the reformist and center-right Liberal Democratic Party of Moldova (PLDM) won 23 seats, the center-left Democratic Party of Moldova (PDM) took 19, and the pro-Romanian Liberal Party (PL) secured 13.

Although observers praised the 2014 elections as genuinely competitive and generally well administered, there were some significant deficiencies. The pro-Russian Patria Party was disqualified days before the vote on the grounds that it received campaign funds from abroad. Meanwhile, a party whose name and symbols closely resembled those of the PCRM was allowed to participate, potentially confusing voters. The distribution of overseas polling places favored residents of European Union (EU) countries over those living in Russia. Nevertheless, the Constitutional Court approved the election results, rejecting challenges by opposition parties.

Post-election complications, including disagreement among parties and the repercussions of the banking scandal, led to multiple changes of government in 2015. In February, following lengthy negotiations, the PLDM and the PDM formed a minority government, with PLDM candidate Chiril Gaburici as prime minister. The coalition parties were unable to reach an agreement with the PL, their former ally, relying instead on support from the PCRM to reach a majority. Gaburici resigned in June amid accusations that he had falsified his academic records. The PLDM, PDM, and PL agreed to form a new coalition in July, and Valeriu Streleț of the PLDM took the office of the prime minister. In October, as the fraud scandal deepened and led to the arrest of PLDM leader and former prime minister Vlad Filat for alleged involvement, parliament supported a no-confidence motion against Streleț. Parliamentary parties failed to agree on a new candidate after the dissolution of the government, leading President Timofti to nominate businessman and former prime minister Ion Sturza in December. Sturza faced significant opposition from legislators, and no government had been formed at year's end.

Local elections took place in June 2015, days after Gaburici's resignation. According to the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), they were "efficiently administered and offered the electorate a diverse choice." Pro-European parties secured a majority in most municipalities, including Chișinău. Controversial businessman Renato Usatîi's pro-Russian Our Party won in Moldova's second-largest city, Bălți. Business magnate Ilan Shor, who was among those embroiled in the banking scandal, was elected mayor of Orhei, a town north of Chișinău.

Elections for *bashkan* (governor) of the Autonomous Territorial Unit of Gagauzia, the principal home of the country's ethnic Gagauz minority, took place in March. Independent candidate Irina Vlah, backed by the PSRM and running on a platform of closer ties with Russia, won the position.

## **B. Political Pluralism and Participation: 11 / 16 (-1)**

Moldova's multiparty system features rivalry and diversity within the loosely defined pro-European camp, which advocates for integration into the EU, and the pro-Russian camp, which favors closer ties with Russia. The crisis in neighboring Ukraine has exacerbated this division, and the deepening of the banking scandal in 2015 facilitated further discord among parties. In December, 14 PCRM parliamentarians announced that they would defect to form a separate platform, ostensibly to end

the deadlock by supporting the PDM. Dignity and Truth, a civic movement that emerged in February as a platform for demanding government accountability, submitted a request to register as a political party in December.

Russia periodically threatens and imposes economic penalties on Moldova for its moves toward European integration, although according to Moscow, these actions were taken for health or safety reasons. A Russian ban on imports of Moldovan wine has been in place since 2013, and separate bans on Moldovan fruit and meat imports were announced in 2014. In 2015, Russia selectively lifted sanctions against some enterprises, mainly from Gagauzia.

In a landmark event, two Roma women who ran in the June local elections were elected to municipal councils. The Gagauz, a Turkic minority concentrated in the country's south, enjoy regional autonomy, but their leaders allege that their interests are not well represented at the national level. They and Moldova's various Slavic minorities tend to look to leftist parties and Russia for political support, mainly due to the lack of an integration strategy for minorities. In April 2015, the government submitted a draft strategy for the integration of minorities for public consultation.

### **C. Functioning of Government: 4 / 12 (-2)**

The banking scandal, multiple changes of government, disagreement among parties, and friction among Moldova's politically connected business magnates, or oligarchs, led to government dysfunction and deadlock, causing several reform efforts to stall. The banking scandal in particular emphasized the depth of influence wielded by the country's business elites on the political process, and underlined the extent of corruption at all levels of government. The scandal first emerged in late 2014, after the Moldovan Central Bank took control of three troubled financial institutions, including Banca de Economii. An initial investigation by the private consulting firm Kroll concluded that \$1 billion had disappeared from the banks in a fraudulent borrowing scheme. The audit report, produced in April 2015 and leaked by the parliamentary speaker in May, suggested that many of the entities involved in the scheme were linked to Shor, who had bought into the ownership of Banca de Economii in 2013. In October, after Shor publicly accused Filat of involvement in the affair, Parliament stripped the PLDM leader of his parliamentary immunity. Filat was arrested on the same day on charges of bribery and abuse of power; he later claimed that his arrest was a politically motivated ouster orchestrated by PDM power broker and business tycoon Vlad Plahotniuc. Shor was placed under temporary house arrest in May. Subsequent investigations into the exact sum and perpetrators involved in the coordinated theft were ongoing at year's end.

The scandal had serious financial consequences for the country, contributing to the devaluation of the leu, inflation, and the suspension of assistance from the International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank, and EU. Moldova was ranked 103 out of 168 countries and territories surveyed in Transparency International's 2015 Corruption Perceptions Index.

### **Civil Liberties: 35 / 60**

#### **D. Freedom of Expression and Belief: 11 / 16**

The overall media landscape remains polarized, with outlets often used to advance the political or commercial interests of their owners or affiliates. A number of legislative problems hinder the development of press freedom, including weak enforcement of protections for journalists and a regulatory framework that is open to government influence. In 2015, media watchdogs voiced concern about increasing government attempts to limit journalistic access to public information and

events of public interest, including legislative proceedings. On several occasions during the year, the authorities denied entry to journalists from Russian news outlets.

Internet penetration has reached almost 50 percent of the population, and the government does not censor online content. Some new private broadcast and online outlets have entered the market in recent years, adding to the diversity of news coverage. In a positive step, in March 2015, the parliament amended the broadcasting code to require media outlets to disclose information about their owners. Longstanding assumptions about the concentration of media ownership in the hands of a few politicians and business leaders were verified after the measure took effect in November; Plahotniuc, for example, was shown to own four of the country's five national television outlets. Critics noted that the law did not require disclosure of information about beneficiaries registered offshore.

Although the constitution guarantees religious freedom, Moldovan law recognizes the "special significance and primary role" of the Orthodox Church. The country's small religious minorities continue to encounter discrimination and hostility from local authorities, Orthodox clergy, and residents in some areas.

Moldovan officials do not restrict academic freedom, although the Gagauz community has complained of exclusion from the mainstream higher education system, as most Gagauz are more fluent in Russian than in Romanian, the official language in Moldova. The freedom to engage in private discussions is generally unhindered, and the government is not known to engage in extralegal surveillance of private communications.

#### **E. Associational and Organizational Rights: 8 / 12**

The government upholds freedom of assembly. Opposition parties and civic groups, particularly the Dignity and Truth platform, organized several antigovernment and anticorruption protests during 2015 without obstruction from the authorities. In May, a group of activists held a march in Chişinău for the rights of LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) people; although some counterdemonstrators harassed participants, the event concluded without reports of significant violence.

The constitution provides for freedom of association, and state relations with civil society groups have improved since 2009, despite some wariness or hostility toward nongovernmental organization (NGOs) from leading politicians. Civil society organizations and leaders played a central role in mobilizing public reactions to the banking scandal in 2015.

Enforcement of trade union rights and labor standards is weak, with employers rarely punished for violations. The authorities do not always uphold collective bargaining rights.

#### **F. Rule of Law: 7 / 16**

Although the constitution provides for an independent judiciary, judicial and law enforcement officials have a reputation for being corrupt and under the influence of ruling officials. Key positions are parceled out among the ruling parties, and appointment processes lack transparency. Lawmakers have been considering reforms in these sectors for several years. In May 2015, a proposal for prosecutorial reform—aiming, among other things, to limit prosecutorial power and implement a less partisan process for appointing the prosecutor general—passed in first reading; the legislation was pending full parliamentary approval at year's end.

Ill-treatment in police custody, extended pretrial detention, and poor prison conditions persist despite some improvements in recent years. Abuse of military conscripts remains a concern.

Although legislators advanced a draft proposal for the integration of national minorities in 2015, no definitive policy or action plan were adopted by year's end. Roma face discrimination in housing, education, and employment, and have been targets of police violence. LGBT people are subject to harassment. While discrimination based on sexual orientation is not explicitly banned by the main article of the 2012 Law on Ensuring Equality, it is understood to be covered under a reference to discrimination on "any other similar grounds." The law prohibits discrimination in employment on the basis of sexual orientation, though not gender identity.

## **G. Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights: 9 / 16**

The law protects freedom of internal movement and foreign travel, and the government generally respects these rights. There are no formal restrictions on the right to choose one's place of employment or education, but bribery is not uncommon in educational institutions. Private business activity is hampered by factors such as corruption and the role of powerful businessmen who use political connections for personal gain.

Women are underrepresented in public life; just 19 were elected to parliament in 2014. Orders of protection for victims of domestic violence are inadequately enforced. Moldova is a source for women and girls trafficked abroad for forced prostitution.

Hundreds of thousands of Moldovans work abroad, and remittances accounted for approximately 25 percent of gross domestic product in 2015. More than two-thirds of remittances reportedly come from workers in Russia, and Moscow's warnings against EU integration include threats to close the Russian labor market to Moldovan migrant workers or restrict access.

### **Scoring Key: X / Y (Z)**

**X = Score Received**

**Y = Best Possible Score**

**Z = Change from Previous Year**

### **Full Methodology**

**Source URL:** <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2016/moldova>