

# THE EVOLUTION OF CIVIL SOCIETY IN THE POST-COMMUNIST REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA\*

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## Introduction

Democratic societies thrive on a foundation of fundamental freedoms. These include, first of all, the freedom of expression, allowing citizens to openly share and debate ideas. Freedom of association enables individuals to join forces with likeminded people, forming groups that advocate for specific causes or interests. Finally, the right to participate in public life empowers citizens to be active contributors to their communities and government. These freedoms aren't merely abstract concepts; they have a profound impact on a society's wellbeing. The open exchange of ideas fostered by free expression fuels innovation and critical thinking, while a society where dissent is stifled and independent thought is discouraged, stagnates. By banding together through associations, citizens can amplify their voices and hold those in power accountable. Public participation allows for the creation of policies that truly reflect the needs and aspirations of the people.

Conversely, restricting these freedoms has a chilling effect on progress. Without the ability to organize and advocate for change, important social and economic issues fester. When citizens are excluded from public life, decisionmaking becomes centralized and potentially unresponsive to the needs of the people. The pre-1991 Communist dictatorship in Moldova serves as a stark example of the dangers of suppressing civil society. By controlling all aspects of public life, the regime aimed to eliminate any potential challenge to its authority. Independent organizations and public dissent were viewed as threats and ruthlessly suppressed. The collapse of the communist regime ushered in a remarkable era of transformation. One of the most significant developments was the emergence and subsequent strengthening



of a vibrant civil sphere. Independent organizations were formed, addressing a wide range of issues from environmental protection to human rights. Citizens actively engaged in public discourse and political life, breathing new life into Moldovan democracy.

Civil society in the Republic of Moldova has undergone significant development since the country gained independence in 1991. From its initial stages of being dominated by a small group of NGOs, Moldovan civil society has grown to encompass a diverse range of organizations working on a wide array of issues. In the early 1990s, civil society in Moldova was nascent and largely focused on humanitarian assistance and human rights issues. The country's transition to a market economy and democracy created a need for independent organizations to provide social services and advocate for the rights of citizens. Throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, Moldovan civil society experienced rapid growth and diversification. New organizations emerged to address a variety of issues, including environmental protection, education, healthcare, and anticorruption. These organizations played an increasingly important role in shaping public policy and holding the government accountable. In recent years, Moldovan civil society has continued to evolve and adapt to the changing political and social landscape.

Our writing is synthetic and multidisciplinary. We will try to outline the role played by the Moldovan civil sphere in obtaining state independence and the path followed afterward, showing how this path was formed and what factors had an impact on it, both positively and negatively.

## The dawn of democracy

The transition from a totalitarian state to a democracy represents a massive shift in the relationship between the state and its citizens. Under a totalitarian regime, citizens are subjects with limited rights and freedoms. Decisions are made for them, not by them. A democratic state, in stark contrast, transforms the citizen into an active participant in public life. They gain the power to shape their future through participation in multiparty elections, electing representatives who enact laws reflecting their will, and holding those representatives accountable through the peaceful transfer of power. However, this transition from passive subject to active citizen is not simply a matter of flipping a switch. Building a healthy democracy requires a robust foundation of institutions and values, which include:

- A multiparty system: this ensures a diversity of voices and perspectives are represented in government, preventing any single group from holding absolute power.
- Elected legislatures: citizens choose their representatives, who have the responsibility of creating and enacting laws.
- Alternation of government: the peaceful transfer of power ensures that no single party remains in control indefinitely, promoting accountability and responsiveness to the people's needs.



But these institutions alone are not sufficient for a thriving democracy. They are further bolstered by a strong civil society and a welldeveloped civic culture. A vibrant civil society is comprised of independent organizations that advocate for different interests and causes. These organizations play a crucial role in holding the government accountable, promoting public discourse, and fostering social change. A strong civic culture refers to the shared values and norms that underpin a democracy. These include respect for the rule of law, tolerance for diverse viewpoints, and a willingness to participate actively in civic life.

From 1812, when the peace treaties from Bucharest assigned the entire territory between the Prut and the Dniester to the Russian Empire, and until the end of the period of Soviet development in 1989, Bessarabia remained a peripheral region, within the Russian Empire as well as in the case of Romania and of the USSR. This status of the territory directly influenced its path after the dissolution of the USSR, in all respects: political, economic, and social.

The challenge for post-totalitarian states is particularly acute. Decades of communist dictatorship usually leave behind a legacy of weak civil society and a citizenry unaccustomed to taking an active role in shaping their society. In Moldova's case, the communist regime effectively dismantled existing civil society structures, leaving a void that needed to be filled. This highlights the remarkable achievement of the postcommunist transformation in the country. The construction of democratic institutions, a vibrant civil society, and a nascent civic culture all had to be built practically from scratch. This ongoing process requires sustained effort from citizens, civil society organizations, and the government to ensure that democracy will continue to develop.

The problems faced by the states of Central and Eastern Europe during the postcommunist transition were related to the lack of experience in this type of process, the nonexistence of reference models, and a theory verified in practice for the transition from a dictatorial regime to a democratic one. Under such auspices, the positive trend of political, economic, and social development established after several years of reforms, was largely based on the support of the West, bringing capital and knowhow for development. In the 90s, some ex-socialist states made considerable progress on the path of reforms, but as Ionel Nicu Sava also emphasized: "Practically, the more you move east on the westeast axis, the intensity and performance of the reforms decrease, inflation and unemployment increase, and the positive effects of the reforms begin to disappear." (Sava, 2000, p. 10)

Within the postsocialist states, the group of former Soviet republics stands out. During the 1989/1991 period they went through a process of accentuating the nationalist demands, which were related to obtaining greater independence from the center. The aspect that differentiates the exSoviet republics from those in Central and Eastern Europe is related to the building of their statehood. Unlike these countries, the former Soviet republics, except the Baltic ones, had much weaker traditions of statehood. In the case of the CEE countries, the existence of a national state with stable and undisputed sovereignty over its territory and a



relatively high degree of ethnic homogeneity guaranteed the existence of a solid citizen political community. In such circumstances, the approach of the postcommunist transition could focus on the development of the economy, the guarantee of civil rights and freedoms, and the building of a democratic society. What made the difference between this group of states and the group of former Soviet republics was the *national problem*.

The seeds of change in the former Soviet republics were sown in the late 1980s under Mikhail S. Gorbachev's leadership. This period, marked by reforms like *perestroika* (economic restructuring) and *glasnost* (openness), saw a shift in the political landscape. During the 1989 Congress of People's Deputies, held amidst these reforms, the Soviet republics began to assert themselves. They demanded an end to their subordinate status within the USSR. They called for respect for their constitutional rights, greater national sovereignty, and the official recognition of their national languages. Democratization and increased freedom of expression brought a previously suppressed issue to the forefront: *nationalism*. The idea that the "national problem" had been solved under Soviet rule was challenged. The following years saw a surge in national identity within the republics, leading to declarations of sovereignty by 1990. These declarations marked a significant step towards greater autonomy and ultimately, the breakup of the Soviet Union.

While the postSoviet states embarked on transition processes alongside Central and Eastern Europe, their priorities differed. Their primary focus was on forging functional nationstates. This meant on the one hand consolidation of power by local elites, which sought to solidify their control over political systems and economies. On the other hand, it meant securing independence by establishing true autonomy from Moscow, which still exerted influence through economic and military ties. In the Moldovan SSR, this period, characterized by the emergence of political pluralism and the adoption of the first economic reforms, was known as the "national liberation".

By prioritizing national consolidation over immediate economic and social reforms, the postSoviet states faced a more challenging path to a stable and prosperous future than their European counterparts. However, this initial focus came at a cost. Several factors hindered the development of a stable economic and social order, such as:

- Limited foreign investment: insufficient foreign capital inflow hampered economic growth.
- Political instability: frequent political changes created an uncertain environment for businesses and citizens.
- Ethnopolitical conflicts: wars and tensions rooted in ethnic or national identity further weakened these new states.

The difficulties of the transition were, often deliberately, exacerbated by Russia, a weak state, unable to control its entire territory, with ineffective institutions. Present on the national territory of some postSoviet states, even with military



forces, it used political power as a cover for illegal business, making use of the paternalistic social relations that influenced the economic sphere. The insufficiency of the rule of law caused by ineffective and politically controlled justice or paternalistic social relations frequently obstructed the transition process and inhibited development.

Despite all these difficulties, on August 27th, 1991, the Moldovan Soviet Socialist Republic declared its independence, shaking off six decades of communist rule. For Moldovans, it was a day of immense hope. They dreamt of freedom, reclaiming their native language, and building a brighter future. However, the path to their dreams proved to be far more turbulent than anticipated. The young nation was soon embroiled in an armed conflict on the Dniester River, political instability and economic crises plagued the fledgling democracy, and disillusionment set in, leading to mass emigration. The Moldova that emerged from the shadow of the USSR bore little resemblance to the one envisioned in those hopeful early days.

## Grassroots movements and the genesis of Moldovan civil society

Moldovan civil society made its voice heard for the first time at the end of the '80s, in the general atmosphere marked by the democratization process of perestroika and glasnost. The first demands aimed at obtaining a primary status for the Romanian language in public life, which would correspond to the numerical increase of the Moldovan population in the cities and the formation of a new national *intelligentsia*. The desire to affirm the identity of the Moldovan language with the Romanian one and the return of Moldovan writing to the Latin alphabet marked the Moldovan civil confrontations from 1987–1989. It seems that the militancy at the social campaign level was initiated by the publication of the essay "Veșmântul ființei noastre" ("The Clothing of Our Being"), by the linguist Valentin Mândâcanu (Mândâcanu 2023), in the April 1988 issue of the "Nistru" ("Dniester") magazine, the publication of the Writers' Union of the RSSM, led at the time by the just appointed editor-in-chief, Dumitru Matcovschi. (Tanchiștii invizibili n.d.)

In the middle of 1988, the reformist tendencies coagulated in a formation named "Democratic Movement in Support of Restructuring", which from the beginning of its activity, was marginalized by the officials from the Communist Party. The leadership of the Moldovan Communist Party was, for a long time, very conservative and antireformist compared to other republican parties.

Another spark that ignited the flame of the national renaissance, simultaneously with the prodemocracy claims of the Democratic Movement, was lit by the Alexe Mateevici Literary Circle, led by Anatol Șalaru. The movement was born in January 1988, on the birthday of the national poet, Mihai Eminescu. This primarily formulated requests of a cultural-national type, as was stated by Anatol Șalaru himself: "the reintroduction of the Romanian language and the Latin alphabet in the space between the Prut and the Dniester". (TVR Moldova, n.d.)



At the end of 1988, the Democratic Movement takes over and supports the demands of the literary circle, which almost instantly gives it a higher degree of popular adhesion. (Crowther, 1991, p. 191) As a result, the party's position towards the linguistic issue changes, at least partially, and it steps on the path of dialogue with the Union of Writers and the leadership of the Democratic Movement. (King, 1999, pp. 120–144) Conferences were organized but these focused primarily on national issues, sidestepping calls for broader democratization or regime change. This wasn't accidental. Many movement leaders were dissidents within the existing communist system, who generally supported Gorbachev's reformist agenda within the Soviet Union. The new party elite from the end of the 80s was mainly formed by ethnic Romanians born on the right bank of the Dniester, in Bessarabia. They were opposing the hardliners in the party, but this wasn't the same as advocating for a complete break from the communist structure.

This primacy given to the national issue over that of democratization left its long term marks on the civic movements in the republic. In the spirit of ascending nationalism, in the spring and summer of 1989, the Moldovan language was proclaimed the state language, and the Latin script was adopted. In response, a reactive nationalism appeared among the minorities and materialized through the movements "Edinstvo" (Unity) and "Gagauz halkî" (Gagauz People). (Crowther, 1991, p. 194) The nonacceptance of the claim of the Russophones of "Edinstvo" that the Russian language should be declared also state language, led to the triggering of some antinationalist strikes (King, 1999, pp. 120–144), and later armed clashes that culminated in the declaration of independence of the, still not recognized, Pridnestrovian Moldovan Republic (Transnistria).

Some authors, such as Bogdan Țîrdea, consider the described period the *embryonic stage* of civil society, characterized by the appearance of some primary nuclei of civil society, the next one being the *mobilization phase*, which is characterized by a series of confrontations between civil society and the authoritarian state, through the polarization of positions, the intensification of strikes, protest rallies, the crystallization of pluripartyism. In the RSSM, the mentioned stage starts with the establishment Congress of the Popular Front on May 20, 1989, which was attended by delegates from thirty districts and cities of the republic. The Front was joined by the Democratic Movement for Support of Restructuring, the "Alexei Mateevici" Literary Circle, the Society of Historians, the Ecologist Movement "Green Action", the weekly "Literature and Art", the publication "Glasul", and more than 50 artistic circles. The importance of the moment cannot be overestimated. As the author points out: "The appearance of the Popular Front marks the genesis of civil society in Moldova in the position of an antitotalitarian movement, autonomous collective action, independent of the state, even directed against it". (Țîrdea 2008)

The Popular Front was not only characteristic of the Moldovan Republic; such formations were also present in other postSoviet republics, mainly in the three Baltic ones. It also constitutes a typical example that illustrates the way a social movement could have developed into a political party, in the postcommunist



world. On June 3, 1988, at the headquarters of the Writers' Union in Chişinău, during an Assembly of creative and technical intellectuals, the Democratic Movement's Initiative Group for the Support of Restructuring was established. For almost a year, the Democratic Movement operated without being officially recognized. On May 20, 1989, in the Great Hall of the Writers' Union of Moldova, the Initiative Group convened the founding congress of the Democratic Movement, which adopted the decision to create the Popular Front of Moldova. The 3<sup>rd</sup> Congress of the Popular Front, from February 15–16, 1992, supported the change of the formation's name from "Popular Front of Moldova" to "Christian Democratic Popular Front". Following the parliamentary elections of March 22, 1998, the Popular Christian Democratic Front entered the Parliament on the list of the Electoral Bloc "Democratic Convention of Moldova" which together with the Electoral Bloc "For a Democratic and Prosperous Moldova" and the Democratic Forces Party created the Alliance for Democracy and Reforms. The delegates to the Congress adopted the new program of the formation and decided by a unanimous vote to change the name of the formation from the Christian Democratic People's Front to the Christian Democratic People's Party. In the period 2005–2012, the party even became a member of the European People's Party. Despite these successes, since 2011 the party no longer actively participates in political life, and in the parliamentary elections of November 2014, the formation did not pass the electoral threshold. (PPCD n.d.)

## Constitutional foundations

A vibrant civil society is the cornerstone of a healthy democracy. It allows citizens to gather, advocate for their interests, and hold their government accountable. However, for civil society to flourish, certain fundamental rights and freedoms must be guaranteed. But these rights don't exist in a vacuum. They must be enshrined in the highest law of the land: the constitution. The essential rights include:

- Cultural and educational rights: these empower citizens to explore their heritage, develop their talents, and participate meaningfully in society.
- Freedom of ethnic and religious affiliation: this right guarantees individuals the freedom to practice their culture and religion without discrimination.
- Freedom of association and formation: this allows citizens to form groups and organizations that represent their shared interests, fostering collective action and social change.

As Moldova shed the shackles of communist rule and embraced multiparty politics, a fundamental shift was necessary: a new constitution. The old document, reflecting the rigid oneparty state, had become obsolete. The new constitution had to serve two critical purposes:

- To reflect the new reality: it needed to accurately reflect the transformed political landscape, characterized by multiple parties competing for power.



- To secure democratic values: more importantly, it needed to establish the essential rights and freedoms that underpin a democratic society.

The foundations of the development of constitutionalism in the Republic of Moldova were laid starting with the adoption of some acts with a significant historical value. Parts of “the constitutional block” (Arseni 2021: 2122), sometimes called, “the three pillars of constitutionalism” in the republic (Zaporojan–Crigan 2019: 76) are, as follows:

- The Declaration on Sovereignty of June 23<sup>rd</sup> 1990, which stated that the Republic of Moldova is a sovereign state, this being the natural and necessary condition for the existence of Moldovan statehood, the source and bearer of which is the people. (Sovietul Suprem al R.S.S. Moldova 2024) [The Supreme Soviet of the SSR]
- The Decree on State Power of July 27, 1990, stated that the supremacy of the Constitution and the laws are ensured in the republic, and the separation of state power into legislative, executive, and judicial powers was carried out.
- The Declaration of Independence of August 27, 1991, by which the Republic of Moldova declared itself as a sovereign, independent, and democratic state. (Parlamentul Republicii Moldova 2024) [Parliament of the Republic of Moldova]

The current Constitution was adopted on 29 July 1994 by the Moldovan Parliament, within three days it was promulgated by the president of the republic, and came into force on 27 August, the same year. Although this new constitution was declared a cornerstone of Moldova's democratic transformation, it has been corrected 2 times and amended 9 times until now. (Parlamentul Republicii Moldova, 2024) [Parliament of the Republic of Moldova]

Despite the shade of modernity it displays and its democratic character, the constitution only refers to civil society once, namely in article 125, paragraph (2), about the composition of the Superior Council of Prosecutors:

*(2) The Superior Council of Prosecutors is constituted, by the law, of prosecutors elected from all levels of prosecutors' offices and representatives of other authorities, public institutions, or civil society. Prosecutors within the Superior Council of Prosecutors constitute an important part.*

With all these gaps, throughout its course, the Constitution contains articles that influence the formation and functioning of a civil society. So, in Title I, Article 4, regarding human rights and freedoms, the constitution stipulates that:

*(1) The constitutional provisions regarding human rights and freedoms are interpreted and applied by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the pacts, and other treaties to which the Republic of Moldova is a party.*

*(2) If there are inconsistencies between the pacts and treaties regarding fundamental human rights to which the Republic of Moldova is a party and its internal laws, international regulations take precedence.*

This means that according to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations, n.d.) every Moldovan citizen “is entitled to all the rights and freedoms





outlined in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, color, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status." (Art. 2), including "the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion" (Art. 18) and "the right to freedom of opinion and expression" (Art. 19). But more important, from the point of view of the civil society, is Art. 20:

- 1. Everyone has the right to freedom of peaceful assembly and association.*
- 2. No one may be compelled to belong to an association.*

Chapter II of Title II of the Constitution, regarding the fundamental rights and freedoms of citizens, contains several articles with direct or indirect implications for civil society. Thus, paragraph (1) of Article 25 guarantees that:

*(1) Individual freedom and personal safety are inviolable.*

And Article 28 stipulates that:

*The state respects and protects intimate, family, and private life.*

By enshrining these fundamental rights and freedoms in the new constitution, Moldova took a crucial step towards a more just and democratic society.

Although it focuses on religious cults, Article 31 provides a general basis for the guarantee of freedom of conscience:

- (1) Freedom of conscience is guaranteed. It must manifest itself in a spirit of tolerance and mutual respect.*
- (2) Religious cults are free and are organized according to their statutes, under the conditions of the law. [...]*
- (4) Religious cults are autonomous, separate from the state, and enjoy its support [...].*

Of equal importance is the following, Article 32, on freedom of opinion and expression:

- (1) Every citizen is guaranteed freedom of thought, and opinion, as well as freedom of expression in public by word, image, or by any other possible means.*
- (2) Freedom of expression cannot prejudice another person's honor, dignity, or right to their own opinion.*

For the existence and functioning of civil society in good conditions, Article 40, regarding freedom of assembly, is of particular importance: Rallies, demonstrations, processions, or any other gatherings are free and can be organized and carried out only peacefully, without any kind of weapons.

Although it does not specifically refer to civil society organizations, but only vaguely to parties and other socio-political organizations, Article 41 provides that:

*(1) Citizens may freely associate themselves with parties and other social-political organizations. They contribute to defining and expressing the political will of citizens and, under the law, participate in elections.*



*(2) Parties and other socialpolitical organizations are equal before the law.*

*(3) The state ensures respect for the legitimate rights and interests of parties and other socialpolitical organizations.*

*(4) Parties and other socialpolitical organizations that, through their goals or activity, militate against political pluralism, the principles of the rule of law, sovereignty and independence, and territorial integrity of the Republic of Moldova are unconstitutional.*

The affirmation of citizen initiative is guaranteed by Article 52. regarding the right to petition:

*(1) Citizens have the right to address public authorities through petitions formulated only in the name of the signatories.*

*(2) Legally established organizations have the right to address petitions exclusively on behalf of the collectives they represent.*

From the above, we can see that, although it does not explicitly refer to its actors, the new Constitution of Moldova lays the foundations for civil society. This document provides the necessary framework for citizens to participate actively in public life and let their voices be heard.

## Legal and institutional framework

Strong support for the foundation and functioning of civil society can be found in the law No. 125 of 11052007 regarding freedom of conscience, thought, and religion, which stipulates in Article 4, about freedom of conscience, thought and religion, that (Parlamentul Republicii Moldova, 2024) [Parliament of the Republic of Moldova]:

*(1) Every person has the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion. This right must be exercised in a spirit of tolerance and mutual respect and includes the freedom to belong or not to a certain religion, to have or not to have certain beliefs, to change one's religion or beliefs, to practice one's religion or beliefs individually or in common, in public or in private, through teaching, religious practices, worship and the performance of rites. Every person and religious community can freely join any religious cult.*

It took five years for two modern laws to appear, which would regulate the status of civil society organizations. The Parliament of the Republic of Moldova adopted Law No. 837 regarding public associations on May 17, 1996, published on January 23, 1997 (Parlamentul Republicii Moldova, 2024) [Parliament of the Republic of Moldova] and Law No. 581 on foundations, on July 30, 1999, published on October 28, 1999 (Parlamentul Republicii Moldova, 2024)[Parliament of the Republic of Moldova]. Both laws were repealed by Law No. 86 of June 11, 2020, regarding noncommercial organizations, and entered into force on August 27, 2020. (Parlamentul Republicii Moldova, 2024)[Parliament of the Republic of Moldova]



Article 1, paragraph (3) defines the regulatory object of the law:

*(3) For this law, a noncommercial organization is a legal entity whose main purpose is other than obtaining income. For this law, noncommercial organizations are public associations, foundations, and private institutions.*

The following article defines the three categories of non-commercial organizations. The definitions are modern and consistent with those used in Western countries.

*Article 2. Notions of public associations, foundations, and private institutions*

*(1) A public association is a non-commercial organization voluntarily established by the founders to achieve the non-commercial purposes for which it was established.*

*(2) A foundation is a non-commercial organization, without members, constituted by one or more persons, endowed with patrimony distinct and separate from that of the founders, intended to achieve the non-commercial purposes provided for in the act of incorporation.*

*(3) A private institution is a non-commercial organization established by a single person for the achievement of non-commercial purposes, partially or fully financed by it.*

The constitution and operation of non-commercial organizations are regulated on a democratic and liberal basis, according to the Western model, the fundamental principles being volunteerism, respectively functional and material autonomy.

*Article 3. Principles of constitution and operation*

*(1) The non-commercial organization is established voluntarily. [...]*

*(2) The non-commercial organization is free to establish its internal structure, goals, and activities, by the law.*

*(3) The non-commercial organization is free to request, receive, and use financial and material means, from the country or abroad, to achieve the statutory goals.*

Of particular importance is Article 5, which regulates the relations between the state and non-commercial organizations and does so in a way that is as democratic and beneficial to the organizations as possible.

*(1) The state respects, protects, and ensures freedom of association.*

*(2) Public authorities treat non-commercial organizations equally and do not discriminate.*

*(3) The state ensures the right of taxpayers to direct percentage designations for the benefit of non-commercial organizations that carry out activities of public utility.*

*(4) The state grants financial and material support to non-commercial organizations for their organizational development and the implementation of projects according to the priorities established for each field of development. [...]*



The article describes in detail the financing mechanisms of non-commercial organizations from the state budget and from the budgets of administrative-territorial units through public tender. The law also dedicates an entire chapter (Chapter V) to the public utility statute of a non-commercial organization.

Like many countries in Central and Eastern Europe, the Republic of Moldova has also introduced mechanisms that allow citizens to direct 1% or 2% of their income tax to the nongovernmental sector, through a mechanism called *percentage designation*. "The percentage designation is the process in which natural persons paying taxes direct 2% of the amount of income tax obtained in the previous year, to nongovernmental organizations that act in the public interest and to religious organizations. The percentage designation process is also called the 2% mechanism." (Macrinici-Chirtoacă 2017: 7) In practice, the acquisition of the right to benefit from the percentage designation mechanism by a non-commercial organization requires the cumulative meeting of certain conditions and is far from simple (Chapter II, Article 9).

The real number of non-commercial organizations in Moldova is rather difficult to assess, and the active ones are even more difficult. The list of organizations tagged in articles on the informational portal *civic.md* includes 747 organizations, a really impressive number. (CIVIC.MD n.d.)

On the website of the Ministry of Education and Research, we find 127 nongovernmental organizations, grouped by fields of activity, as follows: education 22, culture 11, sport 65, youth 29. (Ministerul Educației și Cercetării 2024) [Ministry of Education and Research 2024]

The Ministry of Environment has a list of 29 environmental NGOs on its website. (Ministerul Mediului, 2024) [The Ministry for the Environment, 2024] On the other hand, on the CapaMol – Green NGOs of Moldova, there are 19 environmental organizations present. (Institute for Environmental Issues, n.d.) Meanwhile, a list of 53 environmental NGOs can be found on the eCircular training and consulting center platform, apparently from 2020. (eCircular, n.d.)

On the list of associations, foundations, and private institutions beneficiary of the percentage designation of the Public Services Agency, as of 15.12.2022, we find 962 organizations. (Agenția Servicii Publice 2023) [Public Services Agency] From here we can draw the particularly cautious conclusion that the total number of functioning organizations, in the country, is over 1000. According to certain opinions, in 2018, in the Republic of Moldova, there were approximately 7950 national public associations registered with the Ministry of Justice. (Zara 2018)

Over the years, the Parliament of Moldova approved three civil society development strategies and the corresponding action plans: for the periods 2008–2011, 2012–2015, and 2018–2020, respectively.



## The tortuous path of the Moldovan civil society

The first ten years of independence can best be characterized by the term instability. Government crises and constitutional crises are indicators of the state's degree of dependence, respectively on its institutions and norms, to satisfy the ambitions of some representatives of the political class. The internal struggles of the postSoviet period prevented the effective concentration of efforts in the formulation of unanimously accepted transitional objectives, thus preventing the achievement of a consensus that would guarantee the implementation of progressive policies. Various interest groups have dominated politics according to their interests. One of the reasons why inconsistency and opportunism were the most significant character traits of political life was the lack of a developed civil society that had levers of influence on political life and effective mechanisms for holding politicians accountable.

The country's European Union accession process has brought new challenges and opportunities for civil society organizations. While the EU has provided significant funding and support for civil society development, there have also been concerns about the influence of foreign donors and the increasing politicization of civil society. Despite the progress made in recent decades, Moldovan civil society still faces several challenges, including limited funding, weak institutional capacity, and limited public participation. Civil society organizations often struggle to engage the public and build broad support for their work. Despite these challenges, Moldovan civil society seems to have a solid future. The country's young and educated population is increasingly engaged in civic life. Civil society organizations are playing a critical role in advocating for democratic reforms, promoting human rights, and protecting the environment.

The Moldovan civil society has gone through a winding path from national citizen movements to adopting a mainly proEuropean position. It seems that the events of recent years have only strengthened this orientation and that it will continue to be one of the main engines of transformations in the future.

In terms of EU integration and policy level action, accelerated efforts have been made and are currently underway for Moldova to be well integrated with the EU, including the values of the Union. The generally accepted idea is that a 'window' of opportunity to accomplish changes and reforms has currently been opened and that joint efforts are needed to accomplish these. In the years before, Civil Society sometimes had several separate EU programs. But now the EU integration and the reforms needed in Moldova to come closer to the EU are seen as integral parts of the general reform process in the country. The EU needs the views not only of their experts but also from the Civil Society as an engaged third party. Civil Society has drawn the same conclusion that EU integration is not a separate issue, but plans to be harmonized with the new development strategy that has been worked out. The civil society organizations now see the EU issues as fully integrated in all of their activities.



Thus, for the EU, the most important tasks that Civil Society can perform in the integrative process are to monitor the implementation of the reforms. The Civil Society in Moldova has been active at the national level to influence government decisions and new laws in line with the EU directives. Noteworthy in this respect is the creation of a consultative body for the Government with the Civil Society the National Participation Council – a government program for four years, of which 30 NGO representatives are a party, many of them wellknown personalities in the society, mainly from Chişinău. To make the work of NPC more efficient, it was decided to create four working groups: Justice and Human Rights, Economic Development, Foreign Policy, Security and Defence Policy, and Social, Educational, and Youth Policies.

At the level of the country, the National NGO Council has been set up, which is a self-formed national NGO body that formulates Civil Society opinions and policies. Both the NPC and the National NGO Council make valuable contributions by giving views on and participating in the preparation of Government policies.

Real and comprehensive reform processes are currently needed to reform society and the think tanks within the NGO sector play an active role in these processes, while the resistance against reforms is strong. According to experts, the task is, now, more to look into the complex set of obstacles and attitudes that impede or slow the reform processes, such as the connections between business interests and the political parties, and not so much mainly related to the oppressive behavior of government agencies and security forces as it used to be before.

Conclusively, the Government and Civil Society now see the EU integration as being part of the general reform efforts that are needed in Moldova. Civil Society contributes through their National NGO Council and the National Participation Council to the reform process, and within their ongoing programs, This is done by the contribution of the think tanks which can do research based on which to communicate solid facts, perform advocacy, start processes and react quickly to antireformist proposals.

One of the most comprehensive documents developed within the framework of the EU in this respect is the *European Union Roadmap for Engagement with Civil Society in the Republic of Moldova for the period 2021–2027*, to have an enhanced and more strategic approach to engaging civil society organizations (Roadmap, 2021), whereby the common EU priorities are identified and concrete steps for engaging and supporting the Civil Society organizations in Moldova are to be taken. Civil society plays a key role in creating a link between the population and policy level to ensure the exchange of information and reduce the gap between these. According to the *2020 USAID CSO sustainability Index*, Moldova had an overall “democracy” score of 3.7 out of 7 which represents an improvement, and as of September 2021, there were 14748 nonprofit organizations. According to *Roadmap, 2021*, a 2019 study (Expert Grup/Konrad Adenauer Stiftung) estimated that 72% of all active CSOs implement activities at the local level, 57% at regional level and 51% are active at national level, there being, nevertheless a significant part



of the citizens who are reluctant to engage in civic actions and initiatives; 73% of Moldovan citizens do not believe that Moldova is being governed taking into account the will of the people, according to the *2021 Public Opinion Barometer*. Civil Society organizations, even well-established ones, have been experiencing capacity problems mainly due to the emigration of skilled staff abroad and/or a general lack of skilled staff, the report shows (Roadmap, 2021). The EU support is channeled through regional, thematic programs and on a bilateral basis, the European Union being the largest funder to civil society in Moldova.

The EU will further develop a strategic partnership with CSOs and its support is comprised in the *Joint Staff Working Document Recovery, resilience and Reform: post 2020 Eastern Partnership priorities*, having as an overall objective to contribute to their development in becoming stronger and independent actors with a prominent role in participating in decision and policymaking.

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