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Weak States and Pluralism: The Case of Moldova

Lucan A. Way*

This article argues that Moldova's weak state, tenuous elite networks, and polarized politics have provided key sources of democracy in the post-Soviet period. In the face of a weak civil society, severe economic decline, civil war, low income per capita, and an absence of a democratic history, Moldovan democracy in the 1990s was stronger than in any other non-Baltic, post-Soviet republic. The country is best understood not as a struggling or unconsolidated democracy but instead as a case of failed authoritarianism or "pluralism by default." In cases of pluralism by default, democratic political competition endures not because civil society is strong or leaders democratic but because politicians are too polarized and the state too feeble to enforce authoritarian rule in a liberal international context. In such cases, the same factors that promote pluralism may also undermine governance and state viability.

Keywords: democratization; Moldova; weak states; post-Soviet politics; elite networks

Nothing is coordinated in this country.

—Petru Lucinschi¹

Moldova represents one of the most puzzling cases of pluralism in the post-communist world. Despite extreme poverty,² lack of

1. *Infotag*, 12 September 1996.

2. In the late 1990s, Moldova had one of the two or three lowest levels of gross national product (GNP) per capita (at purchasing power parity) in the former Soviet Union. Relative to other post-Soviet republics, it also suffered the second worst economic decline in the 1990s (Georgia had a slightly worse drop in production) (World Bank Development Indicators, CD-ROM database).

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democratic history, rural population,³ and low educational attainment,⁴ Moldova was more pluralistic than any other post-Soviet country outside of the Baltic states. In the 1990s, two incumbent presidents left office on the basis of democratic procedures at the same time that executive power was held in check by both the Parliament and the Constitutional Court.

An analysis of the roots of pluralism in Moldova suggests that some countries typically portrayed as emerging or unconsolidated democracies may be better understood as failed authoritarian regimes. Moldova is a case of *pluralism by default* in which the immediate source of political competition is not a robust civil society, strong democratic institutions, or democratic leadership but incumbent incapacity. In cases of pluralism by default, politics remain competitive because the government is too polarized and the state too weak to monopolize political control in an international environment dominated by democratic powers. Leaders are unable to manage their subordinates or maintain sufficient elite cohesion to limit electoral competition, censor the media, control parliament, or rely on military support.

In contrast to many recent discussions of regime change that have focused on the role of contingency, I argue that the regime outcome in Moldova can be traced to relatively long-standing historical factors. Pluralism by default in Moldova arose out of polarization over national identity as well as weak elite networks that have their roots in the Soviet era and are characterized by “rapacious individualism.” In the post-Soviet era, such legacies have contributed to increased pluralism but also significant problems of governance.

3. Moldova’s population has the highest share of rural residents in the former Soviet Union outside of Central Asia.

4. In 1984, Moldova had the lowest proportion of population with a higher education than any other Soviet republic—although its level of literacy is greater than many Central Asian republics. William Crowther, “Moldova: Caught between Nation and Empire,” in I. Bremmer and R. Taras, eds., *New States New Politics: Building Post-Soviet Nations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1996), 338.

I. Political competition in Moldova

Among non-Baltic post-Soviet countries, Moldova has had the most dynamic and competitive politics throughout the 1990s. First, elections have been extremely competitive. Over the past ten years, two elected presidential incumbents have lost power according to democratic rules of the game—more than in any other non-Baltic post-Soviet country. In 1996, incumbent President Mircea Snegur lost power to Petru Lucinschi. Then, five years later, Lucinschi stepped aside according to constitutionally prescribed procedures. In addition, parliamentary elections in 1994, 1998, and 2001 all witnessed important shifts in party makeup.

Second, the Constitutional Court in Moldova has been influential in shaping the balance of power between different branches of government.⁵ Third, the media in Moldova since early 1990⁶ has often been openly critical of the government. Finally, throughout the 1990s, Parliament demonstrated the regular capacity to limit executive powers. When President Lucinschi attempted to strengthen presidential rule, Parliament reacted by creating one of the only post-Soviet parliamentary regimes.

Yet there are recent signs of creeping authoritarianism in Moldova. In 2001, the Communist Party of Moldova won an overwhelming 70 percent of seats in Parliament—benefiting from a 6 percent electoral threshold for parties that resulted in the elimination of a number of long-time parties and parliamentarians. The Communists immediately made efforts to translate parliamentary power into greater control over the press by firing the previous directors of state radio and television, the major source of news about Moldovan politics in much of the country.⁷ In early

5. In 1996, the court ruled against an effort by President Snegur to fire a general without parliamentary approval. In 2002, the court ruled against an effort by the Communists to subordinate local governments to central control.

6. Following the downfall of Moldovan Party Secretary Semion Grossu in November to December 1989 at the hands of Gorbachev, *Glavlit*, the government censorship agency, more or less ceased to function (2002 author interview with Nicolae Negru, independent journalist, member of Writer's Union in late 1980s [all author interviews took place between 31 January and 15 February 2002]).

7. *Infotag*, 27 April 2001. According to the National Committee for the Freedom of the Press, approximately one-third of journalists working for National Radio and Television were fired after the Communist victory.

2002, journalists unsuccessfully struck against perceived censorship in the state media. An anchorman who publicized the demands of the strikers was subsequently let go. In late 2001, the government attempted to shut down the oppositionist weekly *Kommersant Moldova*. The Communists also tried to prohibit a political party after it protested Russian language laws in January. Finally, the Communists have also made efforts to put the courts under unilateral parliamentary control. By February 2002, more than two-thirds of judges had been replaced.

In sum, post-Soviet Moldovan development presents us with two different puzzles. First, why was Moldova more democratic than most of its post-Soviet counterparts? Second, why more recently have Moldovan democratic institutions, like those of the country's post-Soviet neighbors, come under increasing threat?

II. Understanding the puzzle of post-Soviet competitive politics

The emergence of pluralism in parts of the world previously considered structurally impervious to democracy led most analysts of regime change in the 1990s to focus on relatively contingent factors such as leadership, institutional design, and institutional choice.⁸ While such "possibilistic" accounts have yielded important insights into transitional politics, they do not adequately account for the emergence or persistence of pluralism in the former Soviet Union. First, formal institutional design, as in the case of presidential versus parliamentary systems, provides an inadequate understanding of divergent regime trajectories in the area. Especially among weakly institutionalized regimes prevalent in the former Soviet Union, institutional design is extremely fluid and very often a direct product of choices determined by incumbent constraints and capacities rather than the other way around.⁹ After all, Gorbachev installed parliaments without popularly elected presidents in every soon-to-be post-Soviet country in

8. For example, Robert Moser, summarizing a recent volume on the Russian transition, argues that problems with Russian democracy "arose primarily from poor elite decisions and institutional design." See Moser, "Introduction," in Z. Barany and R. Moser, eds., *Russian Politics: Challenges of Democratization* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 10.

9. Easter Gerald, "Preference for Presidentialism," *World Politics* 49 (1997): 2.

1990. Yet most republics created popularly elected presidencies within a year. Belarus, one of the few post-Soviet parliamentary regimes in the early 1990s, became the most autocratic presidential regime in Europe by the mid-1990s. Finally, Moldova became more autocratic *after* becoming parliamentary in 2001.

Pluralism in Moldova also cannot be traced to leadership commitment to democratic values. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Moldova has been governed by former high members of the Communist-era elite. Leaders have regularly taken advantage of opportunities to restrict political competition when the chance has arisen¹⁰—suggesting that democratic values may not be extremely deep or important in explaining competitive politics.

Most problematically, “possiblistic” accounts that have dominated the literature on regime change often do not sufficiently account for how elite decision making or institutional design can overcome the very real structural obstacles to democratic development in weak states such as Moldova. Such obstacles often are either totally ignored or summarily discounted after noting the presence of competitive politics in areas not predicted by standard structuralist accounts. Yet Soviet and pre-Soviet legacies have weighed heavily on the growth of democracy in the area—even in places where pluralism has persisted. Any account of political competition therefore needs to explain how such obstacles have been overcome.

There is little in Moldova’s history that would give democrats much optimism. The area had almost no experience as either an independent or democratic state prior to the 1990s. “Moldova” existed as an independent principality in the mid-fourteenth century and was incorporated into the Ottoman Empire in the mid-fifteenth century. Most of the present-day Moldova (known then as Bessarabia) was annexed by Russia after the 1806 to 1812 Russo-Turkish war. In the midst of World War I, Bessarabian

10. For example, Snegur supporters manipulated election laws in 1991 in such a way that eliminated his most serious opponent and made him the only candidate in 1991. A law passed in January 1992 dictated a steep fine and up to two years in a corrective labor camp for slandering the president or chairman of parliament.¹¹ Similarly, a 1995 press law, changed in 1999, included provisions that bans stories that “damage a person’s honor and dignity.” Simultaneously, the Moldovan Constitution forbids “disputing or defaming the State and the people.” It is unclear why, if leaders were so committed to democracy, they would have pushed through such legal provisions.

political leaders declared independence and within two months voted to become part of Romania, which throughout the 1920s and 1930s was ruled by autocratic or at best competitive authoritarian governments.¹¹ In 1939, as part of the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact, Moldova was incorporated into the Soviet Union. In sum, while the area had less experience with Soviet rule than most other Soviet republics, its previous history offered legacies barely more democratic than the Soviet one.

Two aspects of Moldova's pre-1991 institutional heritage have created important obstacles to democratization. First, a weak rule of law inherited from the Soviet period has made it easier for incumbents to use legally nonpartisan state institutions—such as the tax administration¹² and security agencies—to weaken political opposition. The Soviet legacy has facilitated the widespread use of security agencies to undermine potential government opposition. While many ethnic Russian KGB officers fled Moldova after the collapse of the Soviet Union, an infrastructure of listening devices and agents remained that was soon revived to collect compromising material (*kompromat*) on enemies for use in political battles. What distinguishes the widespread mudslinging in post-Soviet Moldova from scandal in most democratic countries has been the active role played by government security organs in collecting and distributing this material. Against government outsiders, *kompromat* has been released and publicized in government-controlled media to discredit certain politicians. Against other competitors *within* the government, *kompromat* seems to have been used to neutralize material collected by others.¹³

11. Hugh Seton Watson, *Eastern Europe between the Wars, 1918-1941* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1986), 196-216.

12. As in Ukraine, tax audits and fines have been used by incumbents to intimidate and discredit potential sources of opposition (2002 author interviews with Anatol Golea, Infotag News Agency, former press secretary for President Lucinschi; Vasile Nedelciuc, parliamentary deputy 1990 to 2001; Viorel Ciubotaru, former official in Moldovan Popular Front, former advisor to President Snegur). On Ukraine, see Keith Darden, "Blackmail as a Tool of State Domination: Ukraine under Kuchma," *East European Constitutional Review* 10 (Spring/Summer 2001): 67-71.

13. In the 1996 presidential elections, which pitted the incumbent president against the head of Parliament against the prime minister, all sides allegedly met, showed each other what they had on one another, and agreed to a "cease fire." (2002 author interview with Ala Mindicanu, leader, Women's Christian Democratic League.)

Many observers feel that Petru Lucinschi utilized security organs extensively. When he became president, he proposed the creation of a Department for Organized Crime and Corruption Prevention directly subordinate to the president to carry out “preliminary” investigation work. The department would have the power of search and seizure.¹⁴ This move was strongly opposed by Parliament as an usurpation of parliamentary authority and an effort to create an agency to collect kompromat on Lucinschi’s enemies.¹⁵ The dispute was taken to the Constitutional Court, which ruled that such an agency could only be created under the subordination of existing government agencies, over which some parliamentary oversight existed.¹⁶ While Lucinschi relented and created the department within the Ministry of Interior, he was still able to appoint his original choice, Nicolae Alexei, as department head. Despite the lack of direct formal presidential control over the department and frequent presidential denial, there was widespread feeling that Lucinschi was able to informally dictate the activities of the department.¹⁷ Alexei apparently became very active in publicly accusing and sometimes harassing a number of politicians who had disagreements with the president.¹⁸ In almost all cases, Lucinschi denied a role in bringing accusations. However, the president’s close association with Alexei and the choice of targets makes his involvement highly plausible.

14. *Infotag*, 10 April 1998.

15. 2002 author interviews with Alexandru Mosanu, former head of Parliament; Ion Safronie, press secretary for the Constitutional Court.

16. See *Postanovlenie o konstitutsionnsosti ukazov Prezidenta Respubliki Moldova No. 116-II i 117-II ot 7 Aprelia 1997 goda*. According to the Constitutional Court press secretary, judges agreed that the creation of the Anti-Corruption Department was an effort by Lucinschi to create his own political police. “But here in Moldova, this is not some jungle” (Safronie interview).

17. 2002 author interviews with Safronie; Veaceslav P. Untila, former head of Road Police; Valeriu Matei, parliamentary deputy 1990 to 2001. See also *Basapres*, 2 November 1999.

18. See Alexei’s *Chernaia Kniga Korruptsii* (Black Book of Corruption). In mid-1999, following a political battle between the nationalist deputy Valeriu Matei and Lucinschi, Alexei publicly accused Matei of providing cover for firms that supposedly had stolen money from the government. A court later ruled the accusations unjustified. (“Hotarire în numele Legii,” 24 September, 1999. Court decision of the Buiucani district municipal court.) It also appears that Alexei was able to use Lucinschi’s connections to Russian media to publicize various accusations. Alexei brought charges publicized in a TV show broadcast by NTV against the head of Parliament, who had begun opposing Lucinschi’s efforts to strengthen the presidency. (*Basapres*, 2 November 1999).

The case of Valeriu Matei, a center-right deputy who opposed Lucinschi, provides a potentially telling view into the mechanism of blackmail and kompromat that Keith Darden¹⁹ has argued is a critical element in post-Soviet politics. According to several separate accounts, Lucinschi set blackmail traps for potential political enemies. Prior to the 1998 elections, Lucinschi reportedly helped to facilitate a meeting between Matei and the owner of a hotel, who reportedly gave Matei two cars for use in the 1998 political campaign as well as some extra funds. Lucinschi appears to have used this association when Matei began challenging the president's power. Following a political battle between Matei and Lucinschi over the selection of a new prime minister in early 1999, security officials armed with automatic weapons and apparently tied to Alexei stormed and searched the hotel where Matei's party office was located. Matei was called and came to the hotel to confront the security officials. Shortly afterwards, video clips, seemingly showing Matei defending certain suspicious figures from the security guards at the hotel, were broadcast on television. Matei claims that the videos were composites.²⁰ The central point of this story, if it is true, is not that mudslinging was widespread (although it was indeed widespread) but rather that nominally nonpartisan government agencies controlled by the executive played a central role in digging up and distributing this material—a fact that, in turn, put outside challengers at a distinct disadvantage.

The weakness of civil society and autonomous interest groups, another legacy of Soviet communism, has also undermined democratic development.²¹ Today, there are relatively few nongovernmental organizations that could survive in the absence of Western funding.²² Parties are also extraordinarily weak. Over the past ten years, the party system has been racked by the same high degree of fragmentation seen in other post-Soviet countries—with numerous parties (be they left-wing, right-wing, or “cen-

19. Darden, “Blackmail.”

20. This account is taken from interviews with Nedelciuc, Mindicanu, and Matei.

21. Marc Morjé Howard, “Free Not to Participate: The Weakness of Civil Society in Post-Communist Europe,” *Studies in Public Policy* 325 (2000).

22. See “Moldova,” in A. Karatnycky, A. Motyl, and A. Schnitzer, eds., *Nations in Transit 2001* (Washington, DC: Freedom House, 2001).

trist”) that have virtually identical ideologies but highly incompatible personalities. With the notable exception of the Communist Party (discussed below), larger parties that *have* emerged have been loosely institutionalized negative coalitions (first anti-Soviet and then antinationalist) that quickly fell apart after the election that brought them to power. Thus, while many politicians initially clustered around the Popular Front of Moldova in the heady anti-Communist days after the 1990 parliamentary elections, the Front’s membership declined by about 75 percent by the end of 1991. A similar fate awaited the Agrarian Democratic Party, which was formed as a reaction against the nationalists and gained a majority of seats in Parliament in 1994. Within just over a year, the party began to fragment, and in 1998, it was not even able to cross the 4 percent threshold.

The weakly developed market, insubstantial civil society, and widespread use of public tax and security agencies to harass potential opposition have all presented real obstacles to democratic development. While not totally determinative, such structural constraints cannot simply be ignored when accounting for competitive politics in the former Soviet Union. At the same time, most existing structuralist accounts, while pointing to very real obstacles to democratic development, fail to account for the extremely real degree of political competition that existed in the 1990s.

In the face of such inhospitable conditions for democracy, the international context has been essential in promoting pluralistic development. The dominance of liberal powers in the 1990s created what Andrew Janos has called a “web of constraints” on would-be nondemocratic governments seeking to avoid international isolation.²³ It is hard to imagine that Moldova would have democratized in the first place absent the worldwide spread of pluralism. After the initial democratization, international factors continued to play a role. Moldova was one of the first post-Soviet countries to join the Council of Europe, and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) has been very

23. Andrew Janos, *East Central Europe in the Modern World: The Politics of Borderlands from Pre- to Post-Communism* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000).

engaged in the country.²⁴ But while the international environment is clearly a necessary part of any explanation of democratization in the 1990s, it is not nearly sufficient. The funds given for democratization in post-communist countries have been minimal²⁵ compared to the billions provided for economic restructuring. By and large, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank have shown extremely little interest in democratic reform and have instead focused more on strictly economic issues. It is not clear why international pressure backed up by so little muscle would have such an impact on the issue of turnover, which touches so intimately on the immediate interests of political actors.

III. Pluralism by default

A major reason why so many standard structural approaches to democratization do not seem to work in the post-Soviet context is that the type of political competition that emerged is qualitatively different from that in many Western countries. Standard structural variables used to explain democratization such as wealth, urbanization, and education all presuppose a form of political competition resulting primarily from pressures by an organized and activated society. However, *pluralism by default* describes a situation in which competitive politics is primarily the outgrowth, not of an institutionalized civil society or strong opposition, but rather of a fragmented and polarized elite and weak state unable to monopolize political control.²⁶ To understand the dynamics of pluralism by default, it is best to approach

24. In particular, Western influence may be behind the country's relatively liberal citizenship law (2002 author interview with Arcadie Barbarosie, Institute for Public Policy). In addition, the government in Moldova made moves to eliminate the death penalty in response to OSCE pressures. See AFP, 6 July 2000.

25. Between 1990 and 1998, the total amount of democratic assistance given to *all* post-Soviet countries combined was roughly \$400 million. Thomas A. Carothers, *Aiding Democracy Abroad: The Learning Curve* (Washington DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1999), 41.

26. The importance of elite cohesion in the preservation of authoritarian rule was noted in Guillermo O'Donnell and Philippe Schmitter's *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: Tentative Conclusions about Uncertain Democracies* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986). See also Easter, "Preference for Presidentialism," and Philip Roeder, "Obstacles to Authoritarianism," in R. Anderson et al., eds., *Postcommunism and the Theory of Democracy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002).

the cases, at least partially, as failed authoritarian regimes rather than as struggling democracies.²⁷

Perceived Western dominance in the late 1980s and liberal international hegemony in the 1990s contributed to the creation of formal democratic institutions including parliaments and elections. While the Soviet legacies discussed above facilitated incumbent efforts to undermine democratic rules, many governments have still had a remarkably difficult time reducing these institutions to façade status. In particular, incumbents have confronted five different challenges: (1) limiting defection by high-level members of the government, (2) managing the electoral process, (3) controlling Parliament, (4) preventing criticism in the press, and (5) achieving unilateral control over the military. Below, I describe the character of these different challenges and the ways in which various leaders in Moldova fell short—resulting in pluralism by default.

1. Limiting defection by high-level officials

A central challenge in cases of pluralism by default—as in many authoritarian countries—has been for the executive to prevent the defection of subordinate high-level officials who also benefit from easy access to media as well as other resources to build up patronage networks. Such second-in-command figures have often found existing democratic institutions to be an attractive mechanism to challenge the incumbent president. Thus, in most countries of the former Soviet Union, including Ukraine and Russia, a central source of opposition to incumbents has come from former prime ministers, heads of Parliament, or prominent cabinet members.²⁸ In 1996, the two main presidential contenders facing Mircea Snegur were the head of Parliament (Lucinschi) and the prime minister (Sangheli). Simultaneously, a lot of presidential behavior in the former Soviet Union can be understood in

27. In this sense, my analysis is consistent with the approach of Philip Roeder, "Obstacles to Authoritarianism," in R. Anderson et al., eds., *Postcommunism and the Theory of Democracy*.

28. In Russia, Yeltsin was succeeded by his former prime minister. The most serious challenge to Yeltsin's rule came in the early 1990s from the head of the Russian parliament and his vice president.

terms of efforts by the incumbent to undermine potential challenges from the elite staff. In late 1999, President Petru Lucinschi apparently helped to overthrow Prime Minister Ion Sturza—a move that was widely interpreted as a response to the prime minister's relative effectiveness and growing popularity. The potential threat created by a successful prime minister or cabinet member may explain why post-Soviet presidents in the 1990s often seemed intent on undermining government programs. Thus, Presidents Snegur, Lucinschi, Kravchuk, Yeltsin, and Kuchma have all exhibited periods in which they failed to back up their prime ministers. In part, such passivity may have arisen from the fact that policy *success* may have been more dangerous than failure insofar as it may have empowered a future challenger.

2. Controlling the electoral process

Administrative capacity and elite coordination are also necessary to manipulate elections. Leaders have had to enforce obedience and to thwart opposition efforts across the country and among local administrators from thousands of districts. In 1994, the Agrarian Party was able effectively to limit electoral competition in many rural areas.²⁹ However, in the 1996 presidential elections, competition between the prime minister, parliamentary head, and incumbent president undermined efforts to bias press coverage and to enlist local governments in an effort to manipulate voting in anyone's favor. Many predicted that Prime Minister Sangheli would use his power over local governments to utilize "administrative" measures that seem to have been successful in 1994.³⁰ Yet this proved difficult in practice. While local leaders often promised "100 percent support" for Sangheli, one person

29. Cibotaru, close to Snegur at the time, feels that the election was only free in certain select parts of the country. (2002 author interview with Viorel Cibotaru, former Ministry of Defense official.)

30. He was accused of purging the government administration of anyone opposed to the Agrarian Party (*Basapress*, 6 December 1995; *Infotag*, 12 September 1996). Many worried that his administrative resources would give Sangheli's supporters greater opportunity to steal votes (*Basapress*, 18 November 1996; *Infotag*, 8 November 1996; *Infotag*, 26 June 1996; *Infotag*, 1 December 1996). Accordingly, a large number of parliamentarians attempted to block local nongovernmental organizations from acting as observers on election day—a move that was interpreted as an effort to facilitate election falsification by local authorities (*Basapress*, 29 October 1996).

working with the prime minister reported that “it was very difficult to follow up on such promises and to know if they would keep their word.”³¹ The results, which gave Sangheli just 9 percent of the vote, clearly suggest a low level of cooperation. At the same time, the high positions enjoyed by all competitors in the election facilitated widespread access to media. As a result, the elections were relatively free and fair.

3. Limiting free expression

Moldovan leaders have also faced difficulties controlling the media. While a number of laws formally limit freedom of expression,³² most have not been implemented in practice. In many cases, such de facto media freedom was a direct result of incumbent weakness. First, elite-level conflict and fragmentation undermined efforts by any single group to monopolize the state-run media. While Snegur was able to appoint “his” people to key positions in the state radio, television, and press, others were able to poach Snegur’s appointees. For example, the head of television and radio who owed his job to Snegur nevertheless openly supported the president’s opponent in the 1996 elections. Control over state television was a particularly essential resource because Teleradio-Moldova was the only station to reach many rural areas. A second factor preventing unilateral control over the media in the early years was the heavy presence of often-radicalized pro-Romanian intelligentsia in government media outlets. This meant that much of the media took on a distinctly pro-Romanian and often anti-Snegur slant in the early 1990s despite the fact that the state continued to formally control media sources and the fact that the government was opposed to unification with Romania.³³

Third, Moldova’s small and weak government has also had a particularly hard time limiting control over the myriad foreign

31. 2002 author interview with anonymous Sangheli official.

32. Snegur and other members of the elite were highly sensitive to criticism (Cibotaru interview). A law passed in January 1992 and suspended in 1996 dictated a steep fine and up to two years in a corrective labor camp for slandering the president or chairman of Parliament. Similarly, a 1995 press law, changed in 1999, included provisions that bans stories that “damage a person’s honor and dignity.” Simultaneously, the Moldovan Constitution forbids “disputing or defaming the State and the people.”

33. Vladimir Socor, “Moldova,” *RFE/RL Research Report*, 2 October 1992.

financed press. Despite apparent efforts,³⁴ the Moldovan government was unable to limit access to anti-Moldovan Russian press during the civil war in Transnistria. Similarly, in late November 2001, the government failed to successfully stop *Kommersant Moldovy*, a stridently antigovernment weekly financed by Transnistria leaders that was shut down by order of the Moldovan court for opposing “Moldovan territorial integrity.”³⁵ The journal reopened within a couple of weeks under a slightly new name (*Kommersant Plus*) and a new registration.

4. Controlling Parliament

Conflicts between president and Parliament have also presented important obstacles to the concentration of executive authority. In the early and mid-1990s in Russia and Ukraine, oppositionist Communist-dominated parliaments presented one of the few serious checks on executive authority in these countries. In Moldova, the parliament blocked the concentration of executive authority at two critical moments. First in 1994, Snegur was seemingly powerless in the face of efforts by Parliament to create a semipresidential system—even though the parliament was controlled by a party (the Agrarian Democrats) of which he was a leading figure. Five years later, Petru Lucinschi, who as parliamentary leader led efforts to weaken the presidency, was equally frustrated by Parliament when he tried to strengthen the executive after becoming president himself. Beginning in February 1999, Lucinschi attempted to institute constitutional amendments to strengthen presidential rule that the Venice Commission deemed “contrary to European democratic principles.”³⁶ In reaction, Diacov, head of Parliament (1998 to 2001) and former close Lucinschi ally, successfully rallied Parliament to eliminate the directly elected presidency altogether and to create a parliamentary regime in the summer of 2000.

34. ITAR-Tass, 2 September, 1992; *Krasnaya zvezda*, 9 September 1992.

35. *Kommersant Moldovy*, 7 December 2001.

36. *RFE/RL Newslines*, vol. 3, no. 243, 16 December 1999.

5. Control over the military

Finally, the failure of any single force to control the military has also discouraged efforts to impose autocratic rule. The inability of Parliament, prime minister, or president to unilaterally dictate military policy may have prevented the military from playing a proactive role in a fierce dispute between the president and Parliament in the mid-1990s. As the presidential election approached in 1996, relations between Prime Minister Sangheli, backed by Parliament, and President Snegur became extremely tense. Snegur was increasingly concerned that the leader of the military, General Pavel Creanga, was getting too close to Sangheli (even though Snegur had appointed Creanga).³⁷ Two former officials close to events claim that Snegur wanted to make sure that the military was under his control “just in case he needed [it] in political battle.”³⁸ Snegur issued an order firing Creanga. However, Creanga refused to comply when Parliament resisted the order. The conflict went to the Constitutional Court, which ruled that the president could not unilaterally dismiss the defense minister.³⁹ Yet prime minister and Parliament were also unable to dictate military policy. Three years earlier, the military refused to comply with an order from the prime minister until the president agreed.⁴⁰ In such a context, where no one has definite unilateral control over the military and where the military itself is weak and demoralized, the chances of a successful or even attempted military coup would seem to be significantly less.

The central point here is that elite cohesion and organizational capacity are key to establishing a fully authoritarian regime—especially in the 1990s, when liberal international hegemony strongly encouraged the establishment of at least nominal democratic institutions. This approach contradicts standard treatments of nondemocratic rule that—with a few notable exceptions⁴¹—

37. Cibotaru interview.

38. 2002 author interview with anonymous Snegur official; Cibotaru interview.

39. Chisinau, Moldova, *Basapress*, 28 June 1996.

40. In September 1993, the vice head of the military refused to step down when the prime minister fired him (Chisinau, Moldova, *Basapress*, 21 September, 1993) and only complied when the president seconded the measure (Chisinau, Moldova, *Basapress*, 28 September 1993).

41. Roeder, “Obstacles to Authoritarianism.”

have treated authoritarianism as a residual outcome. This perspective also contradicts most discussions that have emphasized the positive relationship between state or institution building and democratic consolidation.⁴² If “state building” is narrowly understood to mean creating a rule of law, then such a claim is certainly correct. However, if it refers more broadly to the process of establishing an effective state hierarchy, control over borders, and an institutionalized set of rules governing state action, then the relationship between state building and democratization is fundamentally open to question. Perspectives that focus on a positive relationship between state building and democratization frequently assume a type of state building that is *simply not taking place* in many parts of the former Soviet Union.⁴³ In the post-Soviet context, leaders who gain the capacity to control lower-level elites and to govern in a unified and effective manner may also obtain greater capacity to steal votes and to manipulate elections.

IV. Domestic structural roots of pluralism by default

Pluralism by default has been the outgrowth of two sets of competing domestic structural factors in the context of liberal international hegemony: historical institutional factors (lack of civil society and weak rule of law) that make it easier for state leaders to limit challenges to state power on the one side and elite polarization and weak elite networks that undermine the capacity to impose authoritarianism on the other. Fundamental conflicts over core national issues (such as state borders and the power of different branches of government) in the governing organs are an important source of elite fragmentation, which creates the basis for pluralism by default.

In weak states where leaders face relatively little competition from an institutionalized civil society, the central obstacle to creating more secure tenure is generating agreement about the distribution of power among governing elites. In the Moldovan con-

42. See Moser, “Introduction”; and Guillermo O’Donnell, *Counterpoints* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 1999).

43. Darden, “Blackmail,” makes a similar point.

text, two central factors inhibiting such a consensus have been polarization over the national composition of the state and weak informal elite networks. Polarization undercuts elite unity and may facilitate sporadic but large mass actions, undermining the capacity of the government to rule unilaterally. Simultaneously, weak informal networks have hampered efforts by ruling elites to cooperate in establishing a cohesive ruling coalition as occurred in central Asia.

1. Polarization

Many authors have argued that elite fragmentation is key to democratization.⁴⁴ But such arguments have failed to account for key problems frequently associated with fragmentation in the context of developing countries lacking a strong rule of law, democratic history, or dynamic civil society. Namely, one of the most robust sources of elite fragmentation is polarization about ethnic and national identity. In Moldova, conflicts over national identity have been so acute that they have prevented any single group from consolidating authoritarian control. Alternative national conceptions have offered ready-made “viable alternatives” that can be critical to undermining support for an authoritarian regime.⁴⁵ Yet such polarization, as Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan rightly note,⁴⁶ may undercut democratic consolidation.

The trajectory of Moldovan politics in the 1990s was profoundly shaped by the type of national divisions that emerged out of the country’s formation as a republic in the Soviet Union. Competing claims over Moldovan territory created a situation in which leaders found it difficult to consolidate *either a democratic or an authoritarian regime*.

In the interwar period, a Soviet Moldovan Autonomous Republic heavily populated by non-Moldovans was established

44. See O’Donnell and Schmitter, *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule*; Easter, “Preference for Presidentialism”; Roeder, “Obstacles to Authoritarianism.”

45. Adam Przeworski, “Some Problems in the Study of the Transition to Democracy,” in O’Donnell and Schmitter, eds., *Transition from Authoritarian Rule*, pt. 3, 47-63.

46. Juan J. Linz and Alfred Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation: Southern Europe, South America, and Post-Communist Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996).

on the border with the Bessarabian/Moldovan province of Romania. In 1939, as part of the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact, the Soviet government annexed the territory and created the Moldovan Union Republic, consisting of formerly Romanian Bessarabia and most of the Soviet Moldovan Autonomous Republic. As a result, Moldova became divided between a heavily Slavic east and a more Moldovan west.

During *Perestroika*, ethnic and language issues, as in other republics, became central in the demands of the emerging anti-Soviet national movement. There was widespread feeling among nationalists that Romanians had been discriminated against in educational institutions and in the workplace. The central demand of the movement, which became the Popular Front of Moldova in 1989, was to make Romanian the official language and to replace the Cyrillic alphabet with Latin script. In early November, Gorbachev replaced Semion Grossu with Petru Lucinschi as Moldovan first party secretary after fighting broke out on the street between members of the Front and the police. Taking advantage of relatively open elections to the Moldovan Supreme Soviet in 1990,⁴⁷ the Front captured 27 percent of seats in the Supreme Soviet. Snegur established an alliance with the Front promising to support a Front prime minister in exchange for the Front's backing of Snegur's efforts to beat out Lucinschi as head of the new parliament.⁴⁸

Emboldened by its quick successes and faced with an old communist guard stunned into inaction by the rapid events in Moscow, the Front was very vocal in its support of Moldovan ethnic rights as well as unification with Romania. Tensions over national identity increased during and after the republican legislative campaign in March 1990. Nationalists explicitly argued for restrictions on Russian migration into the territory and for increased employment opportunities for Moldovans. After Mircea Druc, a Front leader, became prime minister, he began to institute a

47. Multiple independent candidates were allowed to run in 373 of 380 electoral districts. Charles King, *The Moldovans: Romania, Russia, and the Politics of Culture* (Palo Alto, CA: Hoover, 2000), 146.

48. Ciubotaru interview.

purge of non-Moldovans from cultural institutions.⁴⁹ Leaders of the Popular Front, feeling that they should take advantage of their dominance in the legislature, began to press for unification with Romania. Valeriu Matei, a leader of the Front who wrote Moldova's declaration of independence after the failed Soviet coup, made every effort to draft the declaration in such a way as to pave the way for unification.⁵⁰ The Front's increasingly radical position alienated many of its earlier supporters, and its membership in parliament dwindled from just over 100 to 120 to just about 30.

Such a stridently pro-unification and ethnically oriented policy helped polarized political conflict and may have promoted a radical opposition among Russian and Gagauz minorities.⁵¹ By 1991, a large number of deputies from these eastern regions began boycotting Parliament. The Transnistrians and Gagauz declared their regions autonomous in September and August 1990. Armed conflict began between the Moldovan government and separatist armed forces. In early 1991, Druc helped to lead about twenty thousand volunteers, some armed with farm implements, to Gagauzia to prevent secession.⁵² Only after apparent intervention by Snegur and the Beograd division of the Soviet army was fighting avoided.⁵³

The intense degree of polarization in Moldova put Snegur in an extremely difficult position. Throughout the late 1980s and early 1990s, he shifted back and forth between a more pro-Romanian nationalist stance on one side and a more pro-Russian posi-

49. King, *The Moldovans*, 151. Ethnic Moldovans controlled all of the leading positions in parliament and eighteen of twenty positions in the new government. William Crowther, "Nationalism and Political Transformation in Moldova," in D. Dyer, ed., *Studies in Moldovan: The History, Culture, Language and Contemporary Politics of the People of Moldova* (Boulder, CO: East European Monographs, 1996).

50. Matei interview. The declaration called for the "liquidation of the political and legal consequences" of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact as well as other language that left Moldova's ultimate status as an independent country open to review. When I asked him why more centrists parliamentarians did not oppose such language, he claimed that, "No one noticed. . . . Does everyone understand Joyce?"

51. Crowther, "The Moldovan National Movement," 36-37.

52. Cibotaru interview; 2002 author interview with Nicolae Chirtoaca, former national security advisor to Snegur.

53. Cibotaru interview; 2002 author interview with Mircea Snegur, president of Moldova 1991 to 96.

tion on the other. Thus, in 1989, he came out in favor of language reform and later supported the breakup of the Soviet Union. At the same time, he made clear his support for Moldovan independence rather than unification with Romania. As a result, the Front abandoned him and called for a boycott of the 1991 presidential elections. Yet in the spring of 1992, he acceded to calls by nationalists and others to resist the activities of the Russian 14th Army in Transnistria; the president announced a state of emergency across the republic. This led to a full-scale civil war when the 14th Army released weapons to the Transnistrians. More than three hundred people had died and more than one thousand had been wounded by the time the conflict receded toward the end of the summer.⁵⁴ Negative reaction to the failed conflict put both Snegur and the nationalists in a relatively weak position by the early and mid 1990s. At the end of 1992, Snegur made a move against the pro-Romanian nationalists by calling for a referendum on Moldovan independence—which the nationalists knew they would lose. Later he called for a vote on Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) membership, which led to a parliamentary deadlock and new parliamentary elections.

These events and the extreme elite polarization that resulted help us to understand the difficulty Snegur had in imposing *any* kind of order—authoritarian or otherwise. During this time, as noted above, a plurality of views was in part maintained because pro-Romanian intellectuals continued to dominate the government press despite the government's official antiunification policy.⁵⁵ At the same time, Snegur's association with the destruction of the Soviet Union and, even more important, his link to the disastrous Transnistrian events, alienated him from a large portion of the pro-Russian leadership and population. Such events had helped to create a strong anti-Snegur consensus among the left and pro-Russian elite.⁵⁶

54. Crowther, "The Moldovan National Movement," 37.

55. Socor, "Moldova."

56. 2002 author interviews with Alexandru Muravschi, parliamentary deputy 1994 to 2001, deputy minister of economy under Sturza government February to November 1999; Ion Gutu, parliamentary deputy, 1990-, minister of economy under Sangheli.

Relative to their counterparts in Ukraine,⁵⁷ Moldovan nationalists have given extremely weak support to the Moldovan leadership. Partly as a result, Moldovan presidents have been relatively isolated in their battles with Parliament for greater power. In 1994 during the debate over the Moldovan constitution, Snegur was not able to rely on the bulk of center-right nationalists in his fight for greater presidential power. Instead, the nationalists organized to promote ethnic issues.⁵⁸ President Lucinschi was similarly isolated in his effort to increase his power in the late 1990s. Nationalists such as Iurie Rosca were willing to work with Lucinschi on specific issues, but simultaneously helped to lead the assault on presidential rule.

More recently, polarization over cultural issues has undermined the capacity of the ruling Communist Party to unilaterally dictate public policy. In January 2002, the nationalist Iurie Rosca mobilized thousands of protestors on the streets to fight a Communist decision to expand Russian-language teaching in the schools and to create a more pro-Russian textbook. As a result, the Communists appear to have backed down from efforts to impose these policies.

2. "Rapacious individualism," weak elite networks, and political competition

At the same time, polarized ideological combat can only account for part of the elite fragmentation and lack of administrative capacity. As we have seen, leaders in Moldova have had problems not simply controlling those who are opposed to them but their own erstwhile allies. Thus, Snegur had to do political battle with a prime minister (Sangheli) and the head of TV and radio whom Snegur had appointed. Similarly, Lucinschi lost his battle with Parliament at the hands of Diacov, who just two years earlier had led the fight for Lucinschi within Parliament.

57. See Lucan Way, "Pluralism by Default: The Challenges of Authoritarian State Building in Belarus, Moldova, and Ukraine," *Studies in Public Policy* 375 (2003).

58. 2002 author interview with Nicolae Andronic, parliamentary deputy 1990 to 2001; *Nezavisimaia Moldova*, 12 July 1994.

Alongside ideological battles, another form of political competition, “*rapacious individualism*,” also was important in Moldova in the 1990s. Rapacious individualism—a term used by Martin Shefter to portray pre-Machine New York city politics—describes a situation in which politics is dominated by a nonideological, unstructured, and highly individuated competition for power and rents.⁵⁹ In such a situation, there is an absence of institutionalized ties of trust—either in the form of a party or strong informal network—that can structure politics and create the basis for stable coalitions.

The case of Lucinschi’s failed effort to strengthen the presidency in 1999 and 2000, which led to the creation of a parliamentary regime, highlights the ways in which rapacious individualism in Moldova severely hampered the concentration of power. On the face of it, Lucinschi would seem to have been in a very good position to strengthen the presidency after 1998, when a close ally, Dumitri Diacov became Speaker of Parliament. However, the weakness of any pro-presidential bloc, engendered in part by Lucinschi’s strategy of divide and rule, ultimately hindered his efforts to concentrate authority. Throughout the late 1990s, fearing the rise of a competitor, Lucinschi focused his efforts on inhibiting the institutionalization of any political faction. He was constantly dispersing support across a wide range of political organizations while preventing the concentration of power in any single group.⁶⁰ Such a strategy of encouraging rapacious individualism may have prevented the concentration of any antipresidential political power—but it also set many allies

59. Martin Shefter, “The Emergence of the Political Machine: An Alternate View,” in Willis D. Hawley et al., eds., *Theoretical Perspectives on Urban Politics* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1976). The types of rents mentioned in Moldova by observers and politicians include bribes from foreign companies doing business in the country, arms sales, the sale of confiscated material obtained at customs, the illegal export of cigarettes and wine, assistance in the export of metals from Transnistria, and the sale of legal amnesty to businessmen. See Victor Popa et al., *Corupția Politică: Context și semnificații* (Chișinău, Moldova: Cartier administrativ, 2001).

60. 2002 author interviews with Mosanu; Golea; Dumitru Diacov, parliamentarian 1994 to 2001, head of Parliament 1998 to 2001. For example, in the 1998 election, he actively promoted a number of independent candidates and threw his support behind a wide range of blocks, including Furnica and Speranda, in addition to the Bloc for Democratic and Prosperous Moldova, which had been specifically created as a pro-presidential party (Diacov interview).

against him.⁶¹ Thus, Diacov, who in 1997 and 1998 had essentially managed parliamentary support for the president, Lucinschi, felt betrayed because of Lucinschi's unreliable support.⁶² Widespread distrust in Lucinschi as an unreliable ally apparently contributed heavily to the large negative coalition that Diacov was able to coalesce against the president. On 5 July 2000, 90 percent of parliamentarians voted in favor of a parliamentary system.⁶³

Within Moldova, commentators have typically attributed failures to concentrate presidential authority to bad leadership. This explanation seems less plausible when we consider the fate of President Lucinschi, whom most considered a master of behind-the-scenes politics and who was the only Moldovan ever to have become a Soviet Politburo member. We might also attribute Lucinschi's failure to his particular antipathy toward party building. However, such a strategy has been prevalent in surrounding countries such as Ukraine and Russia and would seem to be more of a response to the particular political and institutional environment rather than Lucinschi's peculiar views.

The failure to invest in the creation of a strong pro-presidential party may be best explained by the initial weakness of parties in the early 1990s. The weakness and fragmentation of parties to begin with has made it very risky (and seemingly senseless) for the president to openly support any single party for fear that his fate would be tied to a sinking ship. If the party does poorly in elections, party vote could be interpreted as a vote of no-confidence in the president and weaken his position. In the short run, then, it makes sense for the president to throw his support behind a wide variety of political forces and rely on his personal authority to get elected.⁶⁴ However, the failure to invest in party building by the president weakens the ruling party and makes it

61. Interviews with Diacov; Golea; Muravschi.

62. Diacov interview.

63. Clearly, anti-institutional divide-and-rule strategies do not by themselves undermine authoritarian rule and have been a core strategy of autocrats since time immemorial. However, the Moldovan case highlights the difficulties that such a strategy presents when autocrats try to *build* authoritarian institutions without a core base of loyal supporters.

64. For this interpretation of the resistance to party building by Lucinschi, see *Moldavske vedemosti*, 7 February 1998, 1, 2.

harder to build a stable base of support that could facilitate long term political control.

A reason why leaders in countries such as Moldova, Russia, and Ukraine resisted or failed to create effective ruling organizations (be they parties or the state itself) while leaders in countries such as Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan did so early on may be the different character of the elite networks that survived from the Soviet era. While informal networks, of course, pervaded elite politics throughout the Soviet Union,⁶⁵ there seems to have been striking differences in the strength of these networks in different parts of the country.

At one end of the spectrum, there have been networks based on strong and self-conscious group identity. Here, loyalty to the informal network allows elites to resolve important coordination problems. In the central Asian context, Jones Luong⁶⁶ has argued that strong regional identities and networks were important in helping to resolve coordination problems and facilitated elite pacts that were important in the creation of authoritarian regimes in the region. Others⁶⁷ have argued that kinship-based “clan” networks served this purpose.

At the other end of the spectrum, there have been much less extensive networks of ties restricted to short-term instrumental exchange involving relatively low levels of loyalty and group identity. In such conditions, cooperation has often been context-specific, based on a set of narrow and short-term mutually beneficial arrangements prone to shift significantly in different situations. In addition, networks that do not have a broader corporate notion (such as region or “fictive kin”) outside of attachment to an individual would seem to be weaker and more vulnerable to disintegration. These are the kinds of networks that create rapacious individualism and that are likely to be highly unstable.

Many of the elite patronage networks in the European part of the Soviet Union appear to have been closer to this latter, weaker

65. See John P. Willerton, *Patronage and Politics in the USSR* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

66. Pauline Jones Luong, *Institutional Change and Political Continuity in Post-Soviet Central Asia: Power, Perceptions, and Pacts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

67. Kathleen Collins, “Clans, Pacts, and Politics: Understanding Transition in Central Asia.” Ph.D. diss., Department of Political Science, Stanford University, Stanford, CA, 1999.

model of informal ties. Such networks have often been associated more with a particular leader rather than any broader corporate notion of “fictive kin,” ethnicity, or even territory—suggesting the weakness of any group notion. Thus, while Snegur clearly considered himself as being tied to former Moldovan first secretary Grossu,⁶⁸ there does not seem to have been any larger corporate feeling outside of that particular dyadic relationship. More generally, while a convincing case has been made that patron-client networks strongly affected leadership selection in the Soviet Union as a whole, attempts to demonstrate the impact of such connections on decision making outside of personnel policy have yielded remarkably meager results.⁶⁹ Similarly, I was unable to find a relationship between elite networks and budgetary distribution in Soviet Ukraine.⁷⁰

In post-Soviet Moldova, such weak personal connections seem to be important and their use widespread. As noted above, leaders in Moldova have typically tried to assert control over different organizations—such as the government, the media, army, and the security services—by informally placing “their” people in key positions.⁷¹ It seems that leaders have expected a certain amount of informal reciprocity—Snegur felt particularly betrayed by the fact that Sangheli ran against him for president even though Snegur had appointed him prime minister.⁷² At the same time, such ties by all accounts tended to be small and to lack any corporate notion of group identity. The weakness of informal institutions is evident in the frequent defection of presidential subordinates described above. Ties connecting the presidency to Parliament, the press, and the government have all been very weak and open to poaching by other political leaders.

68. Thus, Snegur resisted any implication of criticism of Grossu in my interview with the former president.

69. Willerton, *Patronage and Politics*, 116–17.

70. Lucan Way, “Bureaucracy by Default: Budgetary Politics and the Public Dimension of the State in Post-Soviet Ukraine,” chap 2. Ph.D. diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2001.

71. This is apparently how competing leaders in parliament and government utilized security services to collect *kompromat* on one another (Chirtoaca interview). As noted above, Lucinschi seems to have made particular use of “his person,” Alexei, to orchestrate his use of *kompromat* against political enemies. Similarly, when trying to oust the head of the military, Snegur was able to remove General Creanga from his office using “his” people in the army (Chirtoaca interview).

72. Snegur interview.

More recently, such obstacles have been partially overcome by the Moldovan Communist Party, which, in stark contrast to other parties, has focused extensively on the formation of a highly institutionalized and disciplined grassroots organization. The Communist Party in Moldova is one of the only parties that can convincingly document its membership. Organizationally, it has benefited immensely from skills directly inherited from the Soviet period. Thus, nine of forty-four secretaries of party-run organizations graduated from the Higher Party School in the Soviet period.⁷³ Such organization has facilitated an extremely disciplined set of representatives in Parliament and allowed for easy passage of laws. Thus, the move toward authoritarianism described above would seem to have less to do with a shift in ideology. After all, Lucinschi, a pro-Russian former first party secretary, barely has more democratic credentials than the current president. What mainly distinguishes the Communists from him is their strong organizational base. A weak civil society and weakly autonomous state leaves opportunities for *any* organized elite that dislikes criticism or does not want to be thrown out of office to limit political competition. Along similar lines, presidents in Russia and Ukraine have learned a similar lesson and also begun to create their own parties.

Conclusion: Democracy and governance in weak states

This article has explored the sources and dynamics of competitive democratic politics in weak states characterized by an underdeveloped civil society and weak rule of law. In such contexts, the sources of democratic efficacy have been factors not typically associated with democratic politics: polarization, state incapacity, and weak parties. Yet the approach laid out here does a much better job of accounting for the trajectory of democratic institutions in most of the former Soviet Union than do standard civil society approaches. Civil society approaches would tend to predict greater democracy over time. If democratization were driven

73. 2002 author interview with Valerii Garev, secretary of the Communist Party of Moldova.

primarily by civil society, one would expect the levels of democracy to increase over time as groups grow and become more institutionalized after years of greater openness and relative political freedom. Democracy should also become more consolidated or institutionalized over time with the experience of more and more elections. By contrast, an approach to democratization focusing on state collapse and elite fragmentation would predict the opposite. Thus, as the institutional shock of Soviet state collapse subsides, central governments institutionalize more effective control over regions and borders, and elites adapt to the new postcollapse environment, one would expect leaders to become gradually more effective at manipulating the political environment.

This approach seems to account for the general decline in democratic politics across almost all post-Soviet states. For example, in Russia and Ukraine, as polarization over state borders and the communist system have become less acute, regional and communist opposition to the governments have weakened—facilitating efforts to monopolize political control. Over the years, a state leadership, which was stunned into inaction in the very early years of the transition, has with more elections become more adept at controlling the political environment. In Moldova, polarization was more extreme, and as a result, competitive politics survived for a longer time. Nevertheless, the organization of a cohesive ruling party may threaten democratic development.

The correlation between pluralism on one side and elite fragmentation and state incapacity on the other may also have potentially important implications for how we view the relationship between pluralism and effective governance in weak states. Democracy has often been seen as problematic because it gives opportunities for societal actors to thwart needed reforms. The type of conflict between pluralism and governance argued for in this article is fundamentally different from this classic participation dilemma described by Przeworski.⁷⁴ It is not that democratic participation undermines governance but rather that elite polar-

74. Adam Przeworski, *Democracy and the Market* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

ization and state incapacity may simultaneously promote pluralism while undercutting governance.

Pluralism by default weakens governance in several important ways. First, pluralism by default has often been sustained by highly polarized conflicts that numerous theorists have argued undermine democratic consolidation. Thus, heightened polarization over fundamental issues of state territory and economic system has generated prolonged elite fragmentation (and thus political competition) in countries such as Russia, Moldova, and Ukraine. Yet such conflicts also threaten democratic consolidation.⁷⁵

Second, polarization and fragmentation have directly undermined economic policy making. Timothy Frye, for example, has argued that polarization reduces growth.⁷⁶ He argues that polarization undercuts efforts at a coherent response to economic crisis. The coherence of Moldovan economic policy has, to a large extent, reflected the extent to which Moldovan politics were unified. Thus, Agrarian dominance of the government coincided with Moldova's early and strong commitment to stabilization and liberalization from 1993 to 1995—when the government was considered a leading reformer among CIS countries. Later, government policy making was characterized by stop-and-go efforts at restructuring. Key assets such as tobacco and wine remained in a kind of property no man's land as the government debated for many years about their privatization. Lucinschi complained that economic performance was being undermined by the failure of parliament to pass a law permitting privatization of land.⁷⁷

Third, weak elite coherence associated with pluralism by default has often motivated presidents to thwart prime ministers who are perceived as being too good at their jobs and thus potential threats to the executive.⁷⁸ Such ambivalence from the presi-

75. Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transitions and Consolidation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 16.

76. Timothy Frye, "The Perils of Polarization: Economic Performance in the Post-Communist World" (Paper prepared for delivery at the 2001 Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, San Francisco, 30 August to 2 September), 2.

77. *Trud*, 6 May 1997.

78. In Moldova, President Lucinschi reportedly convinced eight independent deputies in parliament to pull support from Prime Minister Sturza in part because he was perceived as getting too popular. In a similar vein, President Kuchma in Ukraine fired Prime Minister Viktor Yushchenko in part because the prime minister was gaining in popularity for having managed the country's first period of growth in ten years.

dent about the success of his own administration obviously does little to promote more effective policy making and governance. Finally, pluralism by default results from uncertain central control over the army and other state agencies. Such weakness has created opportunities for figures like General Creanga to play off Parliament against the president.

While such conflicts may create certain problems for governance, their resolution undermines pluralism. The end of fundamental disagreements in countries such as Russia and Ukraine has meant the end of an important source of pluralism in these societies—paving the way for a reassertion of much more authoritarian forms of rule.

In sum, this article has argued that the persistence of democratic institutions in weak states is often a product of failed efforts to control the political environment in the context of international liberal hegemony rather than of any endeavor to build democracy. In such a context, elite consensus, state building, and political parties—all factors often seen as necessary for democratic consolidation—may in fact undermine competitive political institutions.