

## Preparing the Ground for the Seeds of Democracy

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### **Rezumat**

*Acest articol este dedicat cercetării problemei progresului în educația democratică și cauzele stagnării unui sistem educațional democratic. Ia fel sunt propuse și câțiva pași posibili de soluționare și integrare a valorilor democratice în sistemul educațional.*

“People in Moldova seem to know the definition of democracy but they don’t have the spirit of democracy”. These words spoken by a Moldovan friend stayed in my mind for several days. I had come to Chisinau as a Fulbright scholar to research the progress of democratic education in the nation’s schools. Instead, everything I was hearing from my students and others I met seemed to indicate that little progress has been made in the nearly 24 years since declaring its independence from the former Soviet Union and, in fact, there seemed to be little hope that progress would be made any time in the near future.

### **Democratic Progress or Regress?**

In a 2008 briefing of the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, it was noted that at the beginning of its independence in August of 1991, Moldova was “admirable by regional standards but at the time of the briefing it could no longer be considered a leader and did not meet democratic criteria. According to another recent report, the country’s democratic institutions made substantial progress between 2005 and 2007 but then after March 2007, that progress slowed down, “came to a dead end” or, in the case of areas such as freedom of the media, “they even retrograded”. (1) That same report noted “severe deficiencies” in the areas of human rights and fundamental freedoms and the judiciary system. (2) Of special concern was opinion polls reporting that only 20-30% of the population had trust in the judiciary system.

The commitment to democratic schools also seems to be mixed. In reports issued by the Moldovan government in the late 1990s and middle of the last decade, there was a clear commitment to moving the schools in the direction of democratic reforms, student-centered education and progressive methods of teaching and assessment. (3) More recent reform efforts, as shared during a recent interview with an official from the Ministry of Education, seem more focused on matters of economic efficiency, teacher accountability, and corruption in the examination process. While the Ministry of Education describes these changes as being done in collaboration with teachers, many teachers I have interviewed for this study, while not necessarily disagreeing with the proposed changes, described the process as anything but participatory and democratic. This is not unlike the present direction of school reform in the United States which is being led by non-educators, is mostly of a “top-down” nature and is concerned more with economic and academic accountability than with democratic participation of teachers and the well-being of students. (4)

With these things in mind, I began to change the focus of my research from examining the progress of democratic reform in the schools to looking more closely at what seem to be the barriers to that reform and how the cultural ground might be made more fertile for the seeds of democratic change. To return to my friend’s comment that opened this article, I decided to ask whether the “spirit” of democracy is anywhere in Moldova’s near future. Since this work is still in progress, what I am sharing here is more of a status report of what I have heard so far and some of the implications of those comments. The results so far have been drawn primarily from teachers and students in and near Chisinau. Eventually, however, the research will include

participants from other areas of the country. This is especially important because conditions in rural areas of Moldova are so different from those in its major city.

### **Barriers to a Democratic Spirit**

When I ask the young people I have interviewed about the potential for a healthy democracy in Moldova, the most common response I get is, “There is no hope for democracy in Moldova”. In their minds, there can be no real democracy as long as so many people are nostalgic for the Soviet era, Soviet educational methods are embedded in the schools, corruption runs through every level of the economy and government, and, as they see it, there is no real commitment for a truly participatory democracy on the part of the government.

Those whom I have interviewed also see what they describe as a skewed notion of democratic living (my term, not theirs). Moldovans seem to have an understanding of democracy that emphasizes only the rights and privileges that come with it and not the responsibilities. For example, those who have become wealthy under the present system appear to feel no sense of civic pride or the need to give back to the country and its culture and people. A number of participants also shared a humorous traditional story in which a Moldovan is granted three wishes, knowing that whatever he requests, his neighbor will get twice as much. So after wishing for and receiving wealth and a large house — and seeing his neighbor get twice as much of each — the Moldovan wishes for one of his eyes to be taken out, knowing that his neighbor will lose both eyes.

In a related response, other participants have stressed a traditional need for safety that grew out of years of occupation by various nations, but especially during the Soviet era. That need means that one first looks out for oneself and his or her family. You might also help close friends or neighbors. Beyond that, however, one has to be very guarded with what is said or done for lack of trust and security.

A third barrier that is becoming apparent in the research is a need for personal empowerment. Participants have expressed what they see as a general feeling of powerlessness. They believe that the average citizen has very little say over what the government or economic leaders will do. As one student put it, “Democracy means that we now get to choose which corrupt leader we will get.” Another common belief was that most political leaders seek office solely to increase wealth and that they see little commitment to the welfare of the nation. Other signs of the feeling of powerlessness were evident in the belief of young people that leaving the country will be their only way to make a better economic life and have new opportunities and that even outside help means only that it will be the EU or the World Bank calling the shots, not the Moldovan people.

One other factor that seems to be a barrier to a healthy democracy is what I will call a lack of democratic imagination. The images of democracy that most young people have received are ones involving voting, new personal freedoms, and a thriving economy. Many have been given the impression that it is a democratic government that has provided these benefits. What they have not seen as often is the powerful role that grass roots organizing, the influence of a democratic teaching process, and individual use of the courts has played in bringing an active democracy to fruition. Governments like those in the U.S. have seldom granted certain liberties and protections out of a moral commitment or a sense of generosity and public spirit. It has often been “dragged kicking and screaming” into those decisions by court-enforced decisions and the work of powerful citizen groups. As a result, it seems as though many Moldovan citizens have felt limited by (or willing to settle for) what the government is doing for them and have not seen the options and power they hold as citizens.

### **Some Possible Next Steps**

It is early in this research and I am hesitant to announce these findings as conclusive. Many voices remain to be heard. Not the least of which are those of more formal government officials. Still, I believe at this point it is possible to suggest some implications for democratic change based on what has been found so far.

First, I believe efforts at integrating more democratic teaching methods in the formal education system should continue. New and existing teachers should be introduced to methods that encourage student choice, collaboration and creativity. One especially effective way to do that might be to use grants to increase the opportunities for teachers to visit, or at least observe via Skype and other distance technologies, democratic classrooms in action in other nations. Only when very young children grow up with the expectation of democratic participation and a knowledge of how to live and act democratically will they bring those assumptions to positions of leadership later in life. However, a more democratic approach to teaching would also require increased trust in and empowerment of teachers. They must be allowed to be an active part of school reform and not passive recipients of it.

Second, it is important to develop a combination of university and school experiences and innovative approaches to community-based education (e.g. the Highlander School, Paulo Freire's culture circles, Great Britain's Open University, and so on) to promote greater awareness among average Moldovan citizens. (5) Through those efforts, as well as those of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), the Peace Corps and others, Moldovans can become more aware of the power they have as activists for their own interests and shapers of their own futures. Programs like this already exist in the country. One example that recently came to my attention is Activ-eco — a Moldovan-based and Moldovan-created group for environmental activism. (6) Young people, especially, need to be made aware of the power they have so they do not feel that escape is the only hope that exists for them.

It is not only young people, however, that need to be considered when discussing democratic education. It is dangerous if younger people see the older members of their society only as barriers to democracy. Effective democratic education brings all citizens into the hard work of democracy. Reform does not rest only on those who are seen as young and energetic. Bringing about a healthy democracy also requires the wisdom, cultural knowledge and connections within the community that comes with age and experience. Activism is difficult in the context of a life filled with hard work, economic struggle and a legacy of mistrust. However, it has been done and lessons can be learned from the grassroots activism of African-Americans and Appalachian miners in the United States and from the liberation movements of the peasants of South and Central America. Those groups also lived very difficult lives and struggled against inconceivable odds but did bring about social change. The same can happen in Moldova if education for democracy is redirected at those beliefs and barriers that would limit democracy to a definition rather than a spirit.

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