

A NORMATIVE CONSENSUS

by Igor Boțan



After the clear victory of communists in Moldova's early parliamentary elections of February 25, 2001, the press concluded that it was the first case in history when communists came to power in a democratic way, through free and fair elections. They explained this phenomenon by citing the lack of civil society in Moldova, but did not delve to the root of the problem. Civil society is based on certain values shared by citizens, such as

free markets and pluralism of ideas. In fact, such a normative consensus is a precondition for the existence of a civil society. Could a normative consensus exist in the Republic of Moldova?

Six months after the victory, when the communists realized they could not keep up their electoral promises of improving standards of living, they started blaming their predecessors in the previous governments for the crisis the country was undergoing. However, they had to admit that for the last 10 years, the government was composed exclusively of the former communist "nomenklatura," or high-level government administrators, since these were the only officials who possessed administrative and management skills. These former communist officials had given up communist ideals and embraced democratic rhetoric. They took part in the transformation of Moldovan society, starting with the privatization of state property. Corruption and illegal privatization of property were some of the difficulties the "true communists" claimed to have inherited from their comrades in the former governments.

Political analysts wondered why Moldovan citizens who participated in elections—elections whose credibility was partially ensured by the OSCE and IFES observation missions—failed to find an alternative to the former and current communists, who had so discredited the notions of democracy and market economics. The answer is that the mentality of citizens educated in a paternalistic state cannot be so rapidly changed as to keep up with the pace of change over the past 15 years. People are slow to realize that there is no freedom when individuals do not assume the responsibility of adopting and implementing their own decisions. This is what it means to be a citizen. However, the decisions should be well informed. In the absence of

such knowledge and responsibility, the Moldovans sought refuge in voting for the illusion that the former and current communists could ensure the minimum living standard they used to have.

Another question is why the intelligentsia, which played a major role in demolishing the Soviet communist empire at the end of 1980s, allowed the democratic movement to slide into nationalism, a trend that scared away a lot of voters and turned them again to communism. Here, again, the answer is obvious. When some values or pseudo-values—such as communism—are demolished, the great majority of the intelligentsia plead for a "return to the roots." Thus, democratic values are frequently replaced with nationalistic values. In Moldova, as in the region as a whole, people generally vote for political parties that promote communist or nationalist messages. However, there is an alternative to these poles, as described 200 years ago by the German philosopher Fichte, who offered an evolutionary method of building a modern state by educating citizens in contrast to the violent method exemplified by the French Revolution.

Given that sovereignty starts with citizens, the state will be stable only if its citizens are active and engaged in public issues—in other words, only if it possesses a truly active civil society. In the 1930s, Germany and the USSR showed the entire world what a state could become when based on nationalism or mock internationalism, where civil society was eliminated and citizens were turned into obedient subjects. Currently, some long-held political concepts are under scrutiny: the role of the state and the perception of sovereignty, for example.

In this vein, many people think that civil society should play a more prominent role in a modern state. In post-communist states, a participatory democracy could act as a restraint preventing society from slipping into the above-mentioned poles. The goal of such a democracy is to disseminate democratic values through educational programs and civic initiatives. In this respect, participatory democracy can be seen as a way of creating a normative consensus—the first stage and precondition for the existence of a true civil society. Nevertheless, one must recognize that in countries like the Republic of Moldova, achieving participatory democracy is a very arduous, though not impossible task due to its high costs and the burden of a poorly educated population.

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