The “National Question” revisited

Moldova and the crisis of the modern liberal state

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Important historical milestones are not clearly visible until the passage of time allows us to see them with a broad lens.

Abstract

Moldova is a borderland, lying geographically between Slavic Russia and the modern, liberal states of the European Union. Historically, it took shape after the rise of a multicultural Ottoman Empire to its south and the disintegrating remains of the old Holy Roman Empire to its west. These influences remain, but long before modern history it was on the invasion path between Eastern and Western Eurasia, which itself was divided between Orthodox Christianity and Roman Catholicism. Centuries of wars and occupation left a deep ethnic mark on Moldova, consisting of Dacian, Tartar, Roman, Greek, Ottoman, Russian, Magyar, and Jewish cultures. They all left their mark on Moldovan national identity, which was acquired by accommodating a cultural mix that required negotiation and tolerance which remains part of the Moldovan national identity today. This article looks at the “national question” around the example of Moldova.

Keywords: Moldova, Eurasia, nation, liberal state, culture

Moldova is a borderland, lying geographically between Slavic Russia and the modern, liberal states of the European Union. Historically, it took shape after the rise of a multicultural Ottoman Empire to its south and the disintegrating remains of the old Holy Roman Empire to its west. These influences remain, but long before modern history it was on the invasion path between eastern and western Eurasia, which itself was divided between Orthodox Christianity and Roman Catholicism.

So, what then is Moldova, a state or a nation? What does it mean to be Moldovan, and how does that identity authorize governance? These questions are of importance not...
just for Moldova and Moldovans, but for most, if not all, of the countries of the former Soviet
Union and beyond, including countries that are liberating themselves from the empires
whether Western or Eastern.

The National Question emerged within Marxism in the 19th-century debates about
the trajectory of politics in western Eurasia, and particularly western Europe. But these
eye debates were indefinite and contradictory, leaving the National Question without
firm definitions, boundaries, and contexts. Attempting to clarify these 19th-century
debates, in 1913 Joseph Stalin attempted to give more definition to the National Question.
But when he became leader of the new Soviet Union in the late 1920s, his thinking about
the National Question took a turn as organizing governance in an emerging state-struct-
tured history which refocused attention on practical, not just theoretical issues. At that
point, Stalin’s views of the National Question were marginalized both within Marxism and
by history as they became captive of narratives of state power illuminated by collapsing
colonial empires and rising state-centered fascism, Nazism, and Leninism, all of which
promoted the role of states as essential to the organization of power in modern, industrial
societies.

The National Question now has re-emerged, both among Marxists and liberal political
theorists who are trying to understand the meaning of separatist and national autonomy
movements within the modern liberal states of the European Union. This largely behind-
the-curtain discussion is floundering between trying to reconcile these developments with
existing governance in the modern, liberal states of western Eurasia, pushed by rapid tech-
nological change, and particularly by communication systems which blur the boundaries of
states and threaten their monopoly on political and economic power.

This discussion will revisit the National Question, arguing it is re-emerging because it
has always been in the background, obscured by the evolution of the modern state in
western Europe as ideological as well as institutional reconstructions governance strongly
influenced by humanism and the French Enlightenment. These twin, interrelated historical
developments displaced feudal constructions of governance in western Eurasia by redefin-
ing governance as purely secular, rational, and economic, creating tension between modern
liberal states and traditional forms of governance rooted in culture and social history, which
is a basic definition of national governance. Thus, the discussion is organized around four
central questions: 1) How do states and nations compare as forms of governance? 2) Are
states and nations exclusive, competing forms of governance, or can they be reconciled? 3)
Is Moldova, as representative of central Eurasia, governed as a state, a nation, or both? 4) Is
the problem of governance in modern, liberal states, curable?

How do states and nations compare as forms of governance?

States are a relatively new form of political governance that took shape in western Eurasia in
the 16th century. While nations pre-existed states, they are historically related to the develop-
ment of “civilizations” – governing entities which were often multiethnic and multicultural
with feudal characteristics. Comparing the two as forms of governance is important, because
it offers definitions of what it means to be “modern”, but also problematic because nations by
their character are elusive as institutional forms of governance. Here, I will use the western
Eurasian European Union as a proxy for modern, liberal states, and their feudal antecedents
as proxies for those nations in central Eurasia which preexist those of the European Union
that are now experiencing fragmentation as states.

The emergence of the modern liberal states which now constitute the European
Union had two transformational predicates: 1) the re-emergence of Greek political thinking
in Europe, which began in the 10th and 11th centuries; and 2) the reshaping of national gov-
ernance in 1848 by the Peace of Westphalia. The first predicate energized popular
governance, while the second predicate gave popular governance its structure as an essential factor in the creation of modern, liberal states.

Prior to the return of Greek political thinking, the dominant form of governance in western Eurasia was feudal, which authorized the power of monarchs and aristocrats who controlled the ownership of land. This system was ideologically legitimated by deeply held beliefs about the legitimacy of inherited land ownership, and by the benefits it provided to those who consented to feudal governance. These beliefs developed were part of cultural systems that created identities and implied security for both feudal rulers and subjects. Thus, political power within feudalism could be challenged only by challenging feudalism itself, or by catastrophic incidents, such as plagues, which uprooted cultural beliefs that promoted the legitimacy of feudal governance.

Once Greek thinking about governance, represented in Plato’s *Republic*, re-emerged in Europe with the *Magna Carta* in 1215, the ideological foundations supporting feudalism began to crumble. Importantly, the French Enlightenment ridiculed feudalism, leading to a revolution in thinking about governance based on feudal absolute monarchies and aristocratic oligarchs to more popular forms of governance as evidenced by the American Constitutional Republic in 1789, which was the first true liberal, democratic state in the collective West.

The principal force pushing this political revolution in governance was economics, as each evolutionary step favored more efficient systems of production, distribution, and control by the favored political class. This, in fact, is the history of a capitalist order rising from the decaying ruins of feudalism. Then in 1648, the Treaty of Westphalia gave this political revolution an important structural boost by providing modern European states with boundaries and secular authority over the lands within those boundaries, all to the benefit of the rising merchant class, which then gained a central role in the governance of those states.

While the Treaty of Westphalia itself was agreed to end an 80-year war between Spain and the Dutch, it also created new concepts of political governance, such as the sovereignty of states and their control over territory defined by Treaty agreements. Arguably, these concepts were included in the Treaty as a way of weakening the power of feudal players – both the monarchies and feudal oligarchs, but also the role of the Roman Catholic Church, in the development of commercial interests. Once they appeared, these new ideas about governance redefined who governed and for what purpose.

As these new modern, liberal states applied modern science to their economic development as the “industrial revolution”, they also began to develop a “political science” of government itself. Sociology then developed as a “social science” to explain and further legitimize the organization of these states into structured organizations that managed state affairs, which German theoretical sociologist Max Weber described as organizational entities rooted in cultural assumptions and values, and that those who acted to administer states, held an ownership interest in that state.

American sociologist, Talcott Parsons, then interpreted bureaucracies in liberal, modern states as functioning within an “iron cage” of laws, rules, and regulations that would constrain their exercise of power to serve state interests. These were deeply secular concepts that abstracted state power away from any notion it might be connected to culture and values independent of the structures of its governance, giving it a gloss of humanist-rationalism borrowed from modern science.

**Are states and nations exclusive, competing forms of governance?**

This question arises from the current crises of the modern liberal states in the collective West – the European Union and its associates in North America, Australia, and New Zealand. It is here the re-emergence of the *National Question* began as independence movements in these
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states. That will for independence has persisted and taken on more definition, offering a serious threat to the established state systems of governance. As discussed above, these systems of shared forms of governance are characterized by large bureaucracies with established systems of laws, rules, and regulations, which define the modern, liberal states in the collective West.

However, these modern, liberal states were all preceded by assumptions of power and deeply embedded cultures of nations, often small and geographically isolated areas made part of these modern, liberal states by powerful central authorities, as were nations constructed during feudal times. Thus, the re-emergence of national identities with their challenges to the governance of modern, liberal states was predictable as the authority of modern, liberal states declined under pressures from technological and political change.

One of the crises of these modern, liberal states comes from the organization of their power around centralized state bureaucracies. Notwithstanding Max Weber and Talcott Parsons, a deeper investigation into the functioning of these bureaucracies offers little evidence they are constrained by laws, rules, and regulations. Rather, in the modern era they have formed their own identities that project their organizational power and independent interests through the managerial class that manages them. Once that power is operationalized and directed, which can be accomplished from within or from outside the bureaucracy, it develops its own culture of governance that undermines claims about the identity of the state as representative of the people who make up that state.

What the functional reality of the bureaucracy of modern, liberal states implies is that governance is never organized and regulated by states alone, but by cultures within states, whether they be directly connected to states as are state bureaucracies, or independent of states, as are national interest groups. This fact then fundamentally challenges the underlying foundation of rational-humanism of modern, liberal states, suggesting that their objectives are not ideological, but merely iterations of the historical function of governance to impose choices and actions that serve a governing political class. In the case of this crisis in modern liberal states, we must ask, what is this governing class.

We can find the answer to this question by revisiting the Treaty of Westphalia and reflecting on another work by Max Weber. Those who organized and adopted the form of the modern liberal state in western Eurasia were the merchant class whose interest lay in facilitating trade and protecting concentrations of their capital. Or, to put a finer point on it, they were Protestant capitalists who were interested in consolidating state power for themselves. Thus ironically, even though advocates of the modern, liberal state claim it is rooted in rational-humanism, Weber makes a direct connection to the cultural politics of feudalism, except to substitute Protestantism for Roman Catholicism. This intellectual sleight of hand was facilitated by the evolution of capitalism from small “c” capitalism, supposedly restrained by “free market” competition, to “monopoly capitalism” serving a re-invented class of financial and industrial oligarchs, to partnerships between the state and a capitalist elite, as was the case with two totalitarian political systems glorifying state governance – Fascism and Nazism.

The appearance of these two totalitarian systems in the 20th century within the context of the modern liberal state raises questions about how these liberal states could devolve into totalitarian forms. I argue the answer here is the same as the question of how governance is formed within the modern, liberal state. If capitalism evolved from an inclusive free market form to monopoly capital, then to state capitalism, it was predictable it would advance to totalitarian forms. not unlike its feudal predecessors who functioned with monarchies and aristocratic political elites. If you look around the collective West, this is an identifiable pattern where the basic form of governance hasn’t changed, but only the means used to govern.

The humanist-rationalism which cloaks modern, liberal states, is little more than an illusion of “progressive” democracy, evidence for which we can find in the recent
management of the COVID-19 virus by the states of the collective West. Almost imme-
diately, the political elites of these states reacted with authoritarian bureaucracies assuming
enforcement powers over policies that had little legitimacy in scientific, political, social, or
cultural contexts, but rather constrained the influence of independent science, culture,
social norms, and tradition over governing choices. In contrast, states with deeply embed-
ded “national” cultures and social values, including some states within the collective West,
statistically fared much better. Now, after their policies and actions have been discredited,
the authoritarian states of the collective West search for legitimacy from global institutions
largely under their economic and political control, rather than from their own citizens.

Does this necessarily mean states, including the states of the collective West, are
exclusive, competing forms of governance that don’t tolerate competition from nations, as
defined by their preference for social and cultural governance? Surprisingly, no. But what it
does mean is modern, liberal states have varying tolerances for competitive forms of govern-
ance, depending on the way they construct their state governance, either as inclusive or
exclusive, within their institutional culture.

For example, the framers of the US constitutional republican form of government
were not only interested in promoting free market capitalism, but also in preserving unity
among its 13 colonies. Thus, they adopted a constitution with a “Bill of Rights” limiting the
exercise of power by a federal government, these ten amendments proscribed attacks on
what were regarded as “natural rights”, as well as protecting citizens from arbitrary actions
by the federal government and limiting the reach of federal power to that provided by the
Constitution itself. This Constitution is not the product of rational-humanism, as a reading
of contemporaneous writings associated with the Constitution reflects. Instead, it reflects
the deep faith held by most, if not all, those who participated in writing it. This distinguishes
the American Constitution from many of the constitutions that later were created for other
states of the collective West, which were written under the influence of rational-humanism,
because it acknowledged the existence of competing cultural differences within the US as a
nation and assumed these differences would be accommodated by limiting the power of a
liberal, institutional system of governance.

Sadly, these assumptions of “natural law” did not anticipate the US would evolve
away from its foundation of small “c” capitalism, accompanied by social and cultural differ-
ences, into a powerful federal bursting the boundaries of its “iron cage” of laws, rules, and
regulations to become an authoritarian, and in some cases, a totalitarian corporatist state.

Is Moldova, as a representative of central Eurasia, a state, a nation, or both?

This question acknowledges a country can be both a state and a nation, if it is organized with
an institutional government that accommodates cultural politics. So, the easy answer is
Moldova is both a state and a nation, with the unanswered question being to what extent is it
representative of countries in central Eurasia.

Let’s begin with a concrete description of Moldova. It’s recognized as a state, with a
formal constitution and institutional form of governance. It appears on maps as a state with
identifiable borders and has international relations with other states involving regulation of
economic and political activities of common interest. It has formal laws, rules, and regula-
tions, and courts that interpret them, acting as a governing body. It has a flag, an executive
(President), and parliament which are regularly elected by a vote of the people, a police
force and an army, as well as border posts that regulate entry and exit to and from the coun-
try. All these are evidence of its statehood.

But Moldova also has identifiable characteristics as a nation which, arguably, are
stronger than its character as a state. It has two national languages – Romanian and Russian,
with multiple other languages that have a regional importance, such as Gagauzian, a
Turkic-influenced Russian, spoken in southern Moldova, Hungarian, which is spoken in parts of the north of Moldova, Roma, which is spoken in Soroca, the international capital of the Roma people lying on the border with Ukraine, and Ukrainian, which is commonly spoken in these border regions on the east of Moldova. But, in the Moldova urban areas, you can also find English, German, French, Italian, Greek and even Chinese spoken. Does this multitude of languages make Moldova more or less a nation? Whether or not they do, they enhance the importance of language as a form of governance, with multi-linguicism being essential to acts of governance, which clearly identifies Moldova as a nation.

But Moldova is even more multinational in its ethnic and historical context. Centuries of wars and occupation left a deep ethnic mark on Moldova, consisting of Dacian, Tartar, Roman, Greek, Ottoman, Russian, Magyar, and Jewish cultures: there were more than 230,000 Jews in Moldova a hundred years ago, with half the population living in the capital, Chisinau, being Jewish. They all left their mark on Moldovan national identity, which was acquired by accommodating a cultural mix that required negotiation and tolerance which remains part of the Moldovan national identity today. Arguably this also enhanced the strength of Moldovan cultural politics, leaving state governance limited by subjecting it to respecting this national diversity.

But, with the exception of Russia, this national cultural diversity and politics may be unique to Moldova as a central Eurasia country, because most other countries in this region have strong national identities that lack this diversity. This mono-nationalism has been on display over the last 100 years in western Ukraine, where open discrimination against non-Ukrainians is common, and in Poland and the Baltic countries, which have strong anti-Slavic identities that don’t exist in Moldova, and in Romania where ethnic Magyars and Bulgars have complained about Romanian discrimination since Romania was created out of the ruins of World War I.

Perhaps the most important influence advancing cultural politics in Moldova and in the Slavic people of central Eurasia has been religion. Orthodox Christianity emerged as the dominant cultural force more than 1,000 years ago, as is evident not only in the visible dominant presence of Orthodox churches but also in the role the Orthodox church plays in the politics of the region. For example, in Russia, Orthodox Patriarch Krill sits in the Russian Duma as representative of the church, offering support for or opposing secular decisions of the deputies to the Duma. While this is a role created by the Russian government and the Orthodox church in 1906, it reflects the very long tradition of the Orthodox Church as an intermediary between secular and spiritual authority that is common to all Eastern Orthodox churches, including Moldova.

The Orthodox of central Eurasia are aware of and wary of the purely secular nature of political authority which has appeared in the modern, liberal states of the collective West. This also is true in Moldova, which currently is being courted, thus far unsuccessfully, to become part of the EU. The Orthodox see this strongly secular authority as evidence of the moral decay in the collective West, reflected in the decline of Christianity and observed religion in those countries. This marks a dividing line between the collective West and most other states in the non-Western world that is likely not to be breached any time soon, because it represents the sharp divide in values between the Orthodox East and the Secular West. However, in this era of rapidly evolving popular communication systems there may be surprising evolutionary changes as the modern, liberal states of the collective West contend with the reintroduction of faith-based groups into their countries.

In this respect, Moldova has been and is likely to remain within the Orthodox tradition of a spiritual restraint on secular authority. Its recent experience with a pro-EU government has challenged this tradition, which is likely to provoke a reaction against it, even if it succeeds in securing a formal association agreement with the Moldovan government. More likely, this is an existential gap that cannot be papered over, which will lead Moldova back
toward a closer relationship with the Orthodox Slavic world as the incompatibility of Western secularism comes into sharper relief.

**Is the problem of governance in modern, liberal states curable?**

As the preceding argues, the problem of governance in modern, liberal states of the collective West has been evolutionary and not essential to their identities and structures. Any state can adopt a functional bureaucratic structure that accommodates culture politics within that state. The limiting factor is the extent to which governing elites allow it. If they are heavily invested in laws, rules, and regulations for governance, they must recognize and accommodate the role of cultural politics, both in its social and institutional forms in governance, and not merely assume the mere presence of laws, rules and regulation will be an “iron cage” containing encroachments on their power.

Similarly, nothing can be assumed about the underlying economic culture of a state. As the authors of the American Federalist Papers observed, auxiliary actions must be taken to prevent economic power from corrupting the political legitimacy of the state. How this is done remains for those who value the sustainability of state governance in the presence of pressures to permit the growth of concentrations of power to accomplish preferred policy outcomes. This is not a singular task, but rather it requires constant attention to how state governments evolve within the larger culture of their nation. Thus, it’s not purely a task for political management, but an ongoing awareness of the cause-and-effect relationship between formal state governance and the authorization of that governance by the underlying cultural politics. In some cases, in the collective West, this may require a substantial reform of their educational system to itself become a part of the process of adaptation.

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**Notes**


8. See, e.g., Matthew Flax (2023) “5 Factors that Contributed to the Decline of Feudalism in England”, *Owlcation*. Available at: https://owlcation.com/humanities/decline-of-feudalism (accessed 12 February 2024). (The author acknowledges that different factors contributed to feudalisms decline elsewhere.)


See, Q. Chengdan, supra, at pp. 6686–6687.


Defined by the American Humanist Association, “**Humanism** is a progressive philosophy of life that, without theism or other supernatural beliefs, affirms our ability and responsibility to lead ethical lives of personal fulfillment that aspire to the greater good ... It advocates the extension of participatory democracy and the expansion of the open society, standing for human rights and social justice. Free of supernaturalism, it recognizes human beings as a part of nature and holds that values – be they religious, ethical, social, or political – have their source in human experience and culture”.

Available at https://americanhumanist.org/what-is-humanism/definition-of-humanism#:~:text=Humanism%20is%20a%20rational%20philosophy,with%2osocial%20and%2oplanetary%2oresponsibility (accessed 12 February 2024).


“Natural rights” are those human rights given by God, which the rights of uncensored speech, the press, association, and petitioning the government for redress of grievances that prompted the signing of the *Magna Carta*. They contrast with “secular rights”, defined by rational-humanism as those rights human's have evolved over centuries through their own experience and reasoning.

*Federalist Paper*, 51. Available at https://guides.loc.gov/federalist-papers/text-51-60 (accessed 17 February 2024) “If angels were to govern men, neither external nor internal controls on government would be necessary. In framing a government which is to be administered by men over men, the great difficulty lies in this: you must first enable the government to control the governed; and in the next place oblige it to control itself. A dependence on the people is, no doubt, the primary control on the government; but experience has taught mankind the necessity of auxiliary precautions”.

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