

Reaching the Nations International Church Growth Almanac

Country reports on the LDS Church around the world from a landmark almanac. Includes detailedanalysis of history, context, culture, needs, challenges and opportunities for church growth.



Moldova

Population: 3.58 millions (#132 out of countries)

By David Stewart and Matt Martinich

Geography

Area: 33,851 square km. Landlocked in Eastern Europe, Moldova borders Ukraine and Romania. Two large rivers, the Dneister and Prut, run along or near the borders. The narrow stretch of land between the Ukrainian border and the Dneister River is named Transnistria. The majority of the land is arable and is low-laying plains or small hills. The temperate climate receives influence from the nearby Black Sea, which helps moderate temperatures despite its continental location. Uncultivated land consists of forest or forest interspersed with grassland. The legacy of heavy fertilizer and pesticide use from the Soviet Union is the greatest environmental concern. Landslides are a natural hazard. Moldova is divided into thirty-two raions, three municipalities, one autonomous territorial unit, and one territorial unit.

Peoples

Moldovan: 75.1%

Romanian: 7.0%

Ukrainian: 6.6%

Gagauz: 4.6%

Russian: 4.1%

Bulgarian: 1.9%

Other: 0.7%

Controversy continues on whether Moldovans and Romanians are two separate ethnic groups or the same ethnic group. Many Ukrainians and Russians reside in Transnistria. The Gaguaz are a Turkic people who mainly reside in southern areas in the autonomous territory of Gagauzia. Bulgarians mainly live in southern Moldova. Over 500,000 populate the disputed Transnistria region.

Population: 3,437,720 (July 2018)

Annual Growth Rate: -1.06% (2018)

Fertility Rate: 1.57 children born per woman (2018)

Life Expectancy: 67.4 male, 75.4 female (2018)

Languages: Romanian (80.2%), Russian (9.7%), Gagauz (4.2%), Ukrainian (3.9%), Bulgarian (1.5%), Romani (0.3%), other (0.2%). Romanian is the official language. Russian is spoken by half of the population as a first or second language. Only Romanian has over one million native speakers (3.4 million).

Literacy: 99.4% (2015)

History

The Dacians were the first powerful force to occupy Moldova before the birth of Christ. The territory partially fell into Roman control in the first century. The Roman Empire and later Byzantine Empire maintained portions of Moldova until the seventh century. Several different groups ruled the area for the following centuries including the Goths, Tatars, Mongols, and Huns. Moldova was absorbed into the Ottoman Empire in the sixteenth century as Moldavia and maintained some autonomy. The Ottoman and Russian Empires exchanged several regions of Moldova during the nineteenth century with the majority of Moldova included in the Kingdom of Romania in the late nineteenth century. Russia regained Moldova following World War II and sought to sever ties to Romania through rewriting the Romanian language in the Cyrillic alphabet and claiming that Moldovan was a separate language. In the late 1980s, an independence movement began taking shape and resulted in independence from the Soviet Union in August 1991. The narrow strip of land between the Dneister River and the Ukrainian border named Transnistria broke away from Moldova due to demographic differences with the rest of Moldova, which resulted in a civil war in 1992. Transnistria has maintained de facto control of the territory since a cease fire in 1992 and has an established independent government, military, and civil institutions.

Following the end of civil war, Moldova experienced economic catastrophe until the 2000s from inflation and transitioning to a free-market economy. During the 1990s, most Moldovans lived below the poverty line. The Communist Party continues to have strong control. Moldova became the first former Soviet republic to vote a communist as president in 2001. Economic growth began in the early 2000s and has continued. Civil disorder and weak government have continued since independence. In 2009, riots occurred following demonstrations supporting ties with Romania. Noncommunist political parties joined together in 2009 to try to strengthen ties with Western Europe and overpower the communist influence on politics. In the 2010s, Moldovan government officials generally sought stronger ties with Europe, including European Union membership, although political infighting and turmoil has been a challenge.

No nations recognize Transnistria as a sovereign state, and its ultimate relationship with Moldova and the international community has yet to be determined.

Culture

Moldovan culture draws upon Soviet and Romanian influences. The Soviets vigorously attempted to eradicate Romanian culture and develop a sense of Moldovan culture. The Moldovan Orthodox Church strongly influences culture and society. A rich literary history has continued for the past couple hundred years. Suppressed Romanian folk culture reemerged following independence. Relations continue to grow closer to Romania and Central Europe and have been strained with Russia. Moldova experiences one of the highest tobacco cigarette and alcohol consumption rates worldwide. There are also a large number of orphaned children.

Economy

GDP per capita: $6,700 (2017) [11.2% of U.S.]

Human Development Index: 0.700 (2017)

Corruption Index: 31 (2017)

Moldova has experienced little economic growth and remains one of the poorest nations in Europe. Inflation crippled the economy in the 1990s, and growth did not occur until the past 15 years. Moldova’s landlocked location, poor economic infrastructure, and the uncertainty of the destined state of Transnistria limit foreign investment and trade. Approximately 10% of Moldovans live below the poverty line. The large amount of productive agricultural land provides great strength for the small economy. Agriculture employs 32.3% of the workforce and produces 17.7% of the GDP. Services constitute 62.0% of the GDP

and account for 55.7% of the workforce. Primary agricultural products include vegetables, fruits and wines. Almost all industry relates to the processing and storing of food products. No significant mineral resources besides gypsum and limestone challenge economic growth and diversification. Primary trade partners include Romania, Russia, and Ukraine. Moldova experiences competing influences from Russia and Western Europe, with the former punishing Moldova with higher fuel and power prices for not complying with their demands. Integration into the EU has ben the eventual goal of many Moldovans.

Corruption ranks among the worst in Europe. Only Ukraine and Russia were ranked as more corrupt by Transparency International in 2017. Corruption seriously deters foreign investment. Transnistria has likely continued to distance itself from Moldova due to its corruption issues. Drug trafficking and other illegal activity often enters Central Europe through Moldova or Transnistria. There is widespread crime and illegal economic activity.

Faiths

Christian: 93%

Other/none: 7%

Christians

Denominations – Members – Congregations

Moldovan Orthodox – 2,785,000

Bessarabian Orthodox – 309,000

Evangelicals – 132,471

Jehovah's Witnesses – 19,553 – 233

Catholic – less than 10,000

Seventh Day Adventists – 9,066 – 238

Latter-day Saints – 416 – 4

Religion

Over 90% of the population actively or nominally adheres to the Moldovan Orthodox or Bessarabian Orthodox Churches.[1] The Jewish population has dropped in the past century due to war, the Holocaust and immigration to Israel. Remaining Jews primary reside in northern Moldova. Protestant churches have seen limited growth.

Religious Freedom

The constitution allows religious freedom, which is typically upheld by the government. The Moldovan Orthodox Church is viewed as a cultural legacy to Moldova and its citizens. Registration provides religious groups the right to hold property, have bank accounts, publish and import religious literature, and invite foreign missionaries to serve in the country. Foreign religious workers must obtain a temporary residency permit by confirming the registration status of the religious group they represent, paperwork that confirms their residency in the country, and proof of local health insurance. The government is secular but shows favoritism toward the Moldovan Orthodox Church. Religious classes may be taught in schools but depend on parents' approval and school budgets. Jehovah's Witnesses receive the greatest persecution among the more recently arrived religious groups, much of which comes from Orthodox churches.

Transnistria has experienced a significant decline in religious freedom since the late 2000s. In the 2000s, Transnistria enjoyed religious freedom but the government was able to place restrictions on religious groups' activities to maintain peace and stability. Registration was not required for religious groups to meet and operate in the country, but in order to receive legal registration religious groups must have had at least ten members over the age of eighteen, have existed in Transnistria for ten years, and provide documentation indicating that both these terms have been met. Registration was also required for foreign missionaries to openly proselyte.[2] In the late 2010s, a new law went into effect which prohibited proselytism in private homes and stipulated that distribution of religious literature may only occur in houses of worship and special locations specifically

identified by the government. Registration requirements with the Transnistrian government remained unchanged in the late 2010s. Foreign religious groups are not permitted to register with the government or engage in religious activities. Foreigners are only permitted to worship individually and cannot be among the founding members of a prospective religious group.[3]

Largest Cities

Urban: 42.6% (2018)

Chisinau, **Tiraspol,'** Balti**, Tighina, Rabnita, Cahul, Soroca, Ungheni, Dubasari,** Orhei**.**

Cities in **bold** do not have a congregation of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Three of the ten largest cities have a Church congregation. Twenty-nine percent (29%) of the national population lives in the ten largest cities.

Church History

The first Moldovans joined the Church in the mid-1990s in Russia, Ukraine, and the United States. Four American members arrived in Moldova for work in the mid-1990s and held meetings on Sundays. Elder Charles A. Didier and the Romania Bucharest Mission president visited in September 1997 with American and Moldovan members.[4] In the fall of 1997, it was announced that a branch would soon be organized and missionaries from the Romania Bucharest Mission would began serving in the country. The Church assigned missionaries to Chisinau. Missionary work was conducted through member referrals. Missionaries did not wear name tags and were not permitted to openly proselyte. The Chisinau Branch was created in November 1997.[5] The institute and seminary programs began in 1998.[6] Elder M. Russell Ballard dedicated Moldova for missionary work in 2001.[7] Missionaries were withdrawn from Moldova in late 2004 due to the Church being unable to receive recognition from government and opposition from other religious groups. Missionaries returned to Moldova in early 2007 following official recognition in late 2006. The Romania/Moldova Mission closed in mid-2018 and Moldova was reassigned to the Ukraine Kyiv Mission, which was renamed the Ukraine Kyiv/Moldova Mission.

Membership Growth

LDS Membership: 416 (2017)

At the end of 2000 there were seventy-five members. In January 2001, Moldovans were among those who attended a young single adult conference for members in the Romania Bucharest Mission. A special fast was held for government recognition of the Church in Moldova.[8] Elder M. Russell Ballard dedicated Moldova for missionary work in May 2001.[9]

The greatest membership growth occurred between 2000 and 2005. Membership increased to 137 in 2001 and to 200 in 2002. In 2004, membership reached 254. Growth slowed dramatically during the years missionaries did not serve in Moldova as membership only increased by two between the end of 2004 and the end of 2006. Membership has experienced greater increases recently, numbering 264 in 2007 and 285 in 2008. Membership totaled 364 in 2012, 375 in 2005, and 416 in 2017. Annual membership growth rates generally ranged from 4-6% during the past decade. The majority of Moldovan members belong to the Chisinau Branch.

In 2017, one in 8,351 was a Latter-day Saint.

Congregational Growth

Branches: 4 (2018)

In 2000, Moldova belonged to the Europe Central Area. The following year one branch and two groups functioned, and fourteen missionaries were serving.[10] Groups were likely located in Orhei and Balti. Missionaries briefly served in Balti. Senior missionary couples have served since at least the late 1990s. The Church created its second branch in Moldova in Orhei in 2002.

The mission created the first district in Moldova in January 2009. The Chisinau Moldova District included three branches that operated in Chisinau, Orhei and across the Romanian border in Iasi. The city of Balti was reopened to missionary work in August 2009. The Balti Group became a branch in 2012. In 2014, a separate branch for Russian speakers was organized in Chisinau.

Activity and Retention

At the end of 2008 there were eighty active members in Chisinau. Although the bulk of total and active membership resides in Chisinau, missionaries reported in late 2008 that the Chisinau Branch was not strong enough to divide into two branches for Romanian and Russian speakers. The Orhei Branch had likely twenty or fewer active members. A few active members reside in Balti. Forty were enrolled in seminary or institute during the 2007–2008 school year.

A senior missionary reported that approximately eighty people attended a district conference in 2017. In the late 2010s, returned missionaries reported approximately 50-75 active members in Chisinau in the two branches combined. In mid-2018, approximately twenty attended the Balti Branch. Church attendance for the Orhei Branch was approximately twenty in late 2018. In the late 2010s, returned missionaries estimated that 50-70% of recent converts remained active one year after baptism.

There appear to be approximately one hundred active members, or 25% of total membership.

Language Materials

Languages with Latter-day Saint Scripture: Romanian, Russian, Ukrainian, Bulgarian.

All Latter-day Saint scriptures are available in Romanian, Russian, Ukrainian, and Bulgarian. Romanian translations of some family history, missionary, primary, young men, priesthood, relief society, Sunday School, unit, and temple materials are available. A greater number of materials for these organizations are available in Russian and Ukrainian. The Liahona has four issues a year in Romanian and Bulgarian and twelve in Russian and Ukrainian. Bulgarian, Russian and Ukrainian have several audio/visual materials and CES student manuals translated.

Meetinghouses

Branches appear to meet in rented spaces or renovated buildings.

Humanitarian and Development Work

The Church has engaged in significant humanitarian and development work in Moldova, with 295 projects completed since 1985 and 18 projects finished in 2017.[11] In 2002, Church members donated 1,000 quilts to the needy in Moldova and Albania.[12] In July 2004, the Church donated 500 wheelchairs.[13] The Church sponsored clean water projects in 2008. In the late 2000s, the Church continued to donate wheelchairs and also participated in hygiene kit assembly and distribution, refurbish public schools, and provide service in orphanages. Humanitarian missionary couples were serving in the late 2000s. Local members have assisted at orphanages for service projects.

Opportunities, Challenges, and Prospects

Religious Freedom

The Church has faced many setbacks obtaining official recognition, assigning missionaries, and establishing congregations over the past two decades due to government legislation and persecution from other religious sects. By the late 2000s, these challenges had been overcome, but the intolerant religious and political atmosphere of foreign missionaries and churches may threaten continued Church outreach with full-time missionaries, especially if legislation governing religious freedom is altered.

Cultural Issues

Cultural differences between primarily American missionaries and Eastern Orthodox culture may have contributed to the slow growth experienced over the past decade. The prominence of the Moldovan Orthodox Church in native culture has delayed the Church's establishment and foreign missionary outreach. Returned missionaries identify the strong influence of Orthodox culture on society as the primary barrier for proselytism success and church growth. High cigarette and alcohol consumption challenge the Church's teachings and likely pose challenges for investigators to consider baptism. Investigators involved in corruption may face challenges in changing professions and lifestyle in order to join the Church. Addiction outreach groups and supportive local members and missionaries are vital to overcoming these cultural obstacles.

National Outreach

Moldova has suffered many setbacks over the years for national outreach resulting in the nation ranking among the least

reached by the Church in Eastern Europe. When missionaries returned to Moldova in early 2007, there were seventeen missionaries destined to the Romania Bucharest Mission receiving training in the Missionary Training Center. Half of the missionaries were receiving Russian language training, which was excitedly received by the mission in anticipation of missionary outreach in Moldova. All the missionaries called during this time returned from their missions in 2009, yet membership only increased by twenty-nine during the two-year period.

Due to postponed government recognition and a delayed Church establishment, Moldova continues to have little mission outreach. Outreach centers in Chisinau, Orhei and Balti at most reach only one-fifth of the nation population. Missionary work efforts in areas without outreach centers, such as Gagauzia, are difficult, as mission headquarters are in Ukraine, most have no members, and intolerance towards foreign religions is high. The greatest opportunities for outreach in the near future are in lesser-reached areas of Chisinau and surrounding communities, as these areas have both active and less active members. Moreover, Internet-based proselytism efforts also have potential, especially since the Church maintains a version of Mormon.org and other Church websites in both Russian and Romanian.

Transnistria has had no mission outreach, very few if any members, and several obstacles preventing the establishment of the Church. Transnistrian law requires at least ten members over age eighteen and a presence for at least ten years. Once there are at least ten members who meet for Church services, the Church must await ten years to receive government recognition. The Church has missed the previous opportunity to proselyte in the region after the passage of a new law in the late 2010s that prohibits such activities outside of houses of worship or locations predesignated by government authorities. The greatest opportunity for the Church to reach Transnistria will be through the Russian and Ukrainian converts in Moldova and Ukraine sharing the Church's teachings with their family and friends who reside in Transnistria.

Member Activity and Convert Retention

Moldova used to experience some of the highest member activity rates in Eastern Europe. No other European country had a higher percentage of members enrolled in seminary or institute (14%) during the late 2000s. The isolation from foreign missionaries likely contributed to the resilience of local membership during this time, as they have been forced to become self-sustaining in leadership. However, during the 2010s there was an increase of approximately one hundred members to Church records, yet there appeared to be no noticeable increase in the number of active members in the country. This suggests that the influence of foreign missionaries serving in the country has likely eroded self-sufficiency and member involvement in proselytism activities. Nevertheless, the strength of local leadership is manifest with the creation of the first district in 2009 despite membership in Moldova totaling fewer than 300. Some full member families belong to the Chisinau Branch and provide a valuable resource for long-term growth. Furthermore, the organization of a Russian-speaking branch in Chisinau in 2014 provides greater opportunities for specialized outreach and church activity among Russian speakers. However, few active members in the country as a whole poses difficulties for building from centers of strength and member support in reactivation and convert retention efforts.

Ethnic Issues and Integration

A great challenge the Church experiences is with accommodating both Romanian and Russian speakers within the same congregations outside of Chisinau. The tension that exists between Romanians and Russians/Ukrainians appears to have not stunted membership growth and activity in Chisinau. The Gagauz will likely not face integration issues, as they are localized in Gagauzia and have yet to be reached by mission efforts.

Language Issues

The Church benefits from all commonly spoken languages already having all Church scriptures and many materials available with the exception of Gagauz and Romani. Members use both Romanian and Russian in Church settings. Separate language congregations operate only in Chisinau. Outreach to the Gagauz will be challenging, as no Church materials are available in Gagauz, and the group is isolated from the rest of the country in their own autonomous region.

Missionary Service

In 2017, there were twenty-two young full-time missionaries assigned to serve in Moldova: sixteen in Chisinau, four in Balti, and two in Orhei. The Church in Moldova is dependent on foreign missionaries to meet its proselytism needs.

Leadership

Leadership has been limited due to the small Church membership but has seen positive development. President Verlan served as the branch president of the Chisinau Branch for over ten years. Both branches were led by local members in early 2010. The strength of local leadership is indicated by the organization of the first district in early 2009 despite fewer than 300 members in Moldova. In 2018, all four branches were led by native branch presidents. The Church has a foundation of seasoned leaders who can assist in leading the Church and maintaining doctrinal integrity. Most leaders likely joined the Church a decade ago and as in other Eastern European nations, leaders in Moldova may struggle to bring more converts into the Church. Unlike many

Eastern European countries, Moldova also does not appear to struggle with retaining native Church leaders after they are released from their callings.

Temple

Moldova pertains to the Kyiv Ukraine Temple district. Temple excursions have occurred with members from other nearby nations. Several Moldovan members attended the temple when fifty-nine members from Romania, Bulgaria, and Moldova participated in temple work for five days in October 2007.[14]

Comparative Growth

Moldova is one of the most recently opened countries for missionary work in Eastern Europe. Membership growth rates have been higher than most other nations although the number of members in Moldova numbers among the lowest in Europe. Member activity rates are comparable to other nations in the region, whereas the extent of national outreach is less than most Eastern European nations.

Other Christian denominations have historically experienced a much more reaching and rapid growth than the Church although these groups currently report stagant growth or decline. Jehovah's Witnesses have been especially successful, with over 19,000 active members in over 200 congregations in 2017, although Witnesses have reported a decrease of 800 active members and eleven congregations since 2010. Seventh-Day Adventists have experienced similar trends as the number of Adventists has decreased by more than 1,500 albeit the number of congregations has remained stable. Both Jehovah's Witnesses and Seventh-Day Adventists have a presence in Transnistria. These denominations have opened congregations in most cities and utilized members in proselytism. Protestant groups report challenges for growth due to opposition from orthodox churches.

Future Prospects

The outlook for future growth appears unfavorable for the foreseeable future given low receptivity due to the strong influence of the Moldovan Orthodox Church on society and culture, few active members to assist in fellowshipping, a lack of success with local members bringing new converts into the Church without full-time missionary assistance, and no progress with the expansion of the Church into additional cities during the 2010s. Although legal challenges have been overcome and local leadership has been developed and sustained, the Church has experienced no increase in the number of active members in the past decade notwithstanding consistent proselytism efforts by approximately two dozen full-time missionaries. The reassignment of Moldova to the Ukraine Kyiv Mission also indicates fewer mission resources available to Moldova given significantly more members and congregations in the mission compared to the defunct Romania/Moldova Mission. Although convert retention rates have appeared as high as 50-70% one year after baptism in the late 2010s, it is unclear whether many of these converts will remain active for many years or decades after joining the Church. Future EU membership may further dampen prospects for growth. The Church has experienced stagnant membership growth in nearby Eastern European nations once EU membership is secured as active members emigrate to Central or Western Europe, and secularism spreads and further reduces receptivity. Elder Ballard predicted concerning future congregation growth, stating, "Some of you will live to see the Church expand and grow into districts and stakes. We probably will not, but you young missionaries may."[15] At present, this prediction appears unlikely to be realized for many decades, if ever, given recent growth trends in Moldova and surrounding countries.

[1] “Moldova,” International Religious Freedom Report 2009, 26 October 2009. http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2009/127325.htm

[2] “Moldova,” International Religious Freedom Report 2009, 26 October 2009. http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2009/127325.htm

[3] “Moldova,” International Religious Freedom Report for 2017, Accessed 22 December 2018. https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2017&dlid=280936#wrapper

[4] “Moldova,” LDS Newsroom, retrieved 11 February 2010. http://newsroom.lds.org/ldsnewsroom/eng/contact-us/moldova

[5] “Moldova,” LDS Newsroom, retrieved 11 February 2010. http://newsroom.lds.org/ldsnewsroom/eng/contact-us/moldova

[6] Weaver, Sarah Jane. “Finding hope in gospel message,” LDS Church News, 16 January 1999. http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/35078/Finding-hope-in-gospel-message.html

[7] “Moldova is dedicated in picturesque setting,” LDS Church News, 9 June 2001. http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/40019/Moldova-is-dedicated-in-picturesque-setting.html

[8] “Conference is ‘ray of light’ in Bucharest,” LDS Church News, 10 February 2001. http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/39310/Conference-is-ray-of-light-in-Bucharest.html

[9] “Moldova is dedicated in picturesque setting,” LDS Church News, 9 June 2001. http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/40019/Moldova-is-dedicated-in-picturesque-setting.html

[10] “Moldova is dedicated in picturesque setting,” LDS Church News, 9 June 2001. http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/40019/Moldova-is-dedicated-in-picturesque-setting.html

[11] “Where We Work,” LDS Charities. Accessed 22 December 2018. https://www.ldscharities.org/where-we-work

[12] Mary Ellen W. Smoot, “Developing Inner Strength,” Ensign, May 2002, 13.

[13] “Church donates 500 wheelchairs,” LDS Church News, 17 July 2004. http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/45846/Church-donates-500-wheelchairs.html

[14] “Attended Freiberg temple,” LDS Church News, 13 January 2007. http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/50016/Attend-Freiberg-temple.html

[15] “Moldova is dedicated in picturesque setting,” LDS Church News, 9 June 2001. http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/40019/Moldova-is-dedicated-in-picturesque-setting.html