

# JUSTICE FIRST

Mobilizing Civil Society to Support Judicial Integrity in the Republic of Moldova

[ #3 ] SEPTEMBER 2021

## DEVELOPING HOLISTIC LEGAL EDUCATION AT MOLDOVAN UNIVERSITIES

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One of the key barriers to creating an independent and effective legal profession in Moldova is the poor standard of legal education at universities. As in much of the post-Soviet space, legal higher education has maintained the Soviet tradition of legal positivism and an emphasis on purist legal scholarship.<sup>1</sup> This has serious consequences for the legal profession, as judges and lawyers possess an overly formalistic understanding of laws and procedures that leads to poor legal reasoning.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, this legal purism insufficiently prepares students for the realities of the legal profession and the challenges they are likely to face in the course of their work, including practices of selective justice, corruption and political pressure. This brief offers recommendations to various stakeholders to improve legal education by strengthening both the legal framework and teaching standards and objectives at the university level.

### THE STATE OF MOLDOVAN LEGAL EDUCATION

The very rigid and formalistic nature of legal education in Moldova has several causes. First, the Soviet legal tradition, which established a “dictatorship of the law” as the expression of the will of the Communist Party, favored legal positivism — the focus on the letter of the law rather than its spirit.<sup>3</sup> As a result, legal education did not even intend to produce lawyers with high standards of integrity and critical thinking. Instead, the Soviet legal system acted as an executor and enforcer of the will of the executive, whether or not the effects of such enforcement created just or desirable outcomes. This stands in contrast to the standard in modern democracies, where lawyers and judges must make decisions based on the holistic intent (“spirit”) of the laws, namely to ensure justice and the protection of human rights.

Secondly, Soviet higher education in general strongly resembled the French system, with rigid curricula, teacher-centered learning and a very high number of teaching hours. Since independence, only limited steps have been made to shift Moldovan education towards the Humboldtian model of higher education common in Germany, Scandinavia and the Anglo-American world, which focuses on freedom of study, student-centered teaching, building specific competencies, university autonomy, and the unity of teaching and research.<sup>4</sup> This is in spite of formal commitments to this education model in strategic documents such as the Education Development Strategy 2014–2020 and the National Qualification Framework for Higher Education in the Field of Law.<sup>5, 6</sup>



Thirdly, structural problems in the post-independence higher education system make it very challenging to reform the system.<sup>7</sup> University funding (and hence academic salaries) are very low. This encourages widespread corruption and leaves universities and teachers with extremely little time and resources to reform the system. Centralized government regulation exacerbates this problem. In Moldova, the new Education Code of 2014 and the Sectoral Education Development Strategy made significant progress in establishing the principle of university autonomy and reducing government regulation of curricula.<sup>8</sup> However, in practice, while autonomy exists in terms of academic freedom, there is extremely limited financial independence for universities to make decisions on staffing, budgetary organization and strategic development. Academic salaries and department budgets are determined by the number of teaching hours. As a result, departments compete to teach as many courses as possible, overburdening students in the process. According to regulations from the Ministry of Education, the “working time norms” include five to seven teaching hours per week for full professors and 12–15 hours per week for assistants (the lowest rank for Moldovan university teachers), alongside preparation, evaluation, scientific activities and administration.<sup>9</sup> By contrast, many adjuncts in Western Europe will teach only one or two classes per semester. The author has never encountered a lecturer in Germany or the United Kingdom teaching as many hours as the regulatory norm in Moldova. These norms contribute to the overburdening of both faculty members and students.

Moreover, only a small proportion of students are provided scholarships funded by the state budget, the allocation of which is decided by the Ministry of Education. As a result, universities are dependent on fee-paying students to finance their activities.<sup>10</sup> Given that the state caps tuition fees at public universities, the university is incentivized to admit a high number of students.

Finally, there is a lack of internationalization in Moldovan higher education — i.e. collaboration with academics and universities in other countries through partnerships and exposure to alternative approaches to teaching and research.<sup>11</sup> As a result, many university administrators and faculty are insufficiently familiar with modern concepts of university organization, curricula design and pedagogy, and remain within the mental world of Soviet higher education. Since the 2014 Education Code, universities are required to establish doctoral schools to provide methodological and pedagogical training to candidates, replacing the Soviet model where doctoral students interacted almost exclusively with their supervisor.<sup>12</sup> This is an important step, but significant improvements are still needed in the quality of methodological training, since many professors who teach these courses are unfamiliar with modern research and teaching methodologies.<sup>13</sup>

### Real-World Impacts of Positivist Legal Education

As a result of this education model, Moldovan law graduates are insufficiently prepared for the modern legal profession. Rigid curricula and excessive classroom teaching and assessments do not enable students to develop critical thinking or research abilities, and other valuable professional skills such as legal writing and public speaking. Moreover, legal education largely fails to inculcate values of legal professionalism and integrity.

These flawed educational standards are reflected in the moral ambiguity that defines the behavior of a significant proportion of Moldovan lawyers, prosecutors and judges. Freedom House and other international watchdogs have highlighted the prevalence of corruption in the Moldovan judiciary, including as it relates to the practice of selective justice, or the inconsistent application of legal due process.<sup>14</sup> Due to the excessive number and complexity of regulations in many spheres in Moldova, lawyers and judges are well-placed to use a selective interpretation of the letter of the law to benefit private parties, and/or single out specific individuals or businesses for punishment. Among other manifestations, this is seen in the widespread practice of “corporate raiding,” whereby dubiously justified judicial decisions are used to confiscate property and transfer it to a new owner.<sup>15</sup>

Moreover, numerous reports have noted that judicial decisions in Moldova are often of very poor quality, or simply lack sufficient motivation<sup>16</sup> to explain the reasoning behind the decision.<sup>17, 18</sup> This is a result of a combination of low integrity standards and underdeveloped judicial reasoning starting at the university level.

Finally, positivist legal education also creates problems for legal certainty, as strict adherence to the letter of the law combined with excessive and complex legislation often leads to widely divergent rulings on similar cases. Largely as a result of these problems, from 1995 to 2020 the European Court of Human Rights has ruled that individuals’ right to a fair trial has been violated in 162 cases, and the right to effective remedy in 60 cases.<sup>19</sup>

### OVERBURDENED STUDENTS AND POOR OUTCOMES

The overburdening of Moldovan students with excessive workloads is a major contributor to poor educational outcomes. A Bachelor student of law at Moldova State University must attend classes for 29 hours per week, with 32 hours of individual study for a total of 61 hours per week.<sup>20</sup> By contrast, a first-year law student at the Free University of Berlin will have an average of 13.5 contact hours and 22.5 individual study hours per week (36 hours in total).<sup>21</sup> Meanwhile at the University of Oxford, law students have an average of only four to

five contact hours per week but are expected to work 45 hours in total.<sup>22</sup> The overburdening of Moldovan university students continues to the Master's level, greatly hindering students' ability to develop specialized knowledge.<sup>23</sup>

Professors worsen this clear overburdening by inundating students with assessments, term papers and mini-assignments during the semester.<sup>24</sup> As a result, it is practically impossible for students to produce high quality work, resulting in low standards of assessment across the board. This problem is by no means unique to Moldova, but endemic in post-Soviet higher education. In the author's experience as a student and a lecturer in Armenia, Georgia and Ukraine, students were "unproductively overburdened" with impractical assignments that had little impact on their professional growth. Many students complained that the prevalence of plagiarism was not a result of a lack of "academic integrity," but an obvious consequence of being expected to turn in numerous small assessments for a large number of courses, with very low quality standards.<sup>25</sup> This leads to similar problems in the legal profession, where overworked lawyers and judges produce poor quality case work or judicial decisions due to lack of time and necessary competencies.

The high volume of contact hours and assessments at Moldovan universities leaves students no time for arguably the most important facets of legal training: reading academic texts from experts in the field and reviewing judicial decisions to become familiar with standards of judicial reasoning. Several Moldovan law students reported that they never had to read a judicial decision throughout their entire Bachelor's degree.<sup>26</sup> This packed schedule also leaves no time for extracurricular activities relating to the legal field, such as moot courts, conferences, public speaking and writing competitions, all of which provide essential skills for the courtroom or wider legal practice.

Although the high volume of courses and teaching hours is not legally prescribed, the National Qualification Framework for higher education in the Field of Law includes an extensive table of disciplines to be taught during each educational cycle.<sup>27</sup> University law curricula mirror this table, suggesting that it has an influence on curriculum design.<sup>28</sup> While the university is legally autonomous, it is possible that administrators and faculty members feel obliged to teach the high number of courses set out in the Framework in fear of poor assessment or even a refusal of accreditation by the National Agency for Quality Assurance in Education and Research.<sup>29</sup>

## BENEFITS OF REFORM

Since 2014, several strategic documents have addressed legal education reform. The Education Code of 2014, the Education Development Strategy 2014-2020, and the National Qualification Framework for higher education in the Field of Law have all enshrined the principle of university autonomy, student-centered learning and competency-based education. However, this has not yet led to clear changes in the practice of university administration and teaching.<sup>30</sup> As mentioned, financial regulations and framework documents still encourage excessive teacher-focused learning. While some universities have introduced courses based on specific competencies and vocational skills such as legal writing, public speaking and integrity, the insertion of these courses into an already overloaded curriculum reduces the likelihood that students will develop these professional skills and values.

Effective reform that gives students more time and opportunity for guided independent study would have several positive side effects for the higher education sector. Firstly, by lowering the teaching burden on faculty, reforms would yield more time to faculty to engage in research activities. At present, a high teaching burden, low salaries, and the linking of salaries to teaching hours give faculty very little time for research. This leads to very poor research quality, as faculty must meet publication quotas and write dissertations required for promotion without adequate resources.<sup>31</sup> Lack of applied legal research may also contribute to a lack of synergy between legal academics and the Moldovan government or international organizations.

In some cases, Moldovan universities have opted to meet research quotas by hiring full-time researchers, meaning that teaching faculty become full-time teachers.<sup>32</sup> Reforming curricula to give teachers more time for research could therefore have further positive effects on teaching. Rather than essentially acting as advanced high school teachers giving generalist lectures on areas of law, faculty will be more able to offer specialized and in-depth teaching on their research area. In terms of developing core competencies for the legal profession, the ability to offer in-depth courses in a student's desired professional area is more attractive than offering surface level knowledge across a very wide range of disciplines.

Secondly, curricula reform would not be costly to implement. One of the biggest barriers to higher education reform in post-Soviet countries is chronic underfunding and low salaries, usually due to a lack of political will linked to the dire state of public finances. Curriculum reform is advantageous, because it does not demand high costs for the institution. Shifting from a high contact hour model to fewer contact hours and more research would actually reduce the burden on

faculty and administrators. This makes the reform cheaper than other necessary reforms of Moldovan higher education, such as the aforementioned reform of doctoral education and the development of Moldova's relatively new National Agency for Quality Assurance in Education and Research.<sup>33</sup> By offering to reduce teaching burdens on the universities without reducing salaries or the number of staff, curricula reform can more easily overcome skepticism and suspicion from university administrators and faculty who often see reforms as merely an additional millstone around their neck.

Thirdly, fewer contact hours will allow universities to offer smaller class sizes for seminars, facilitating increased discussion and interaction between students and faculty. This will significantly facilitate the transition to student-centered learning.

These improvements in legal education would have various positive effects for the wider legal profession. Lawyers would be better equipped with key practical skills and core competences, including reading judicial decisions, preparing case work, legal writing, and public speaking. This would also familiarize them with modern standards of legal reasoning, enabling them to craft more just decisions and make arguments in court based on legal certainty and the spirit of the laws.

Additionally, lawyers would have a better understanding of professional integrity, encouraging them to refrain from, identify and report improper conduct. There is of course no guarantee that improved education will prevent lawyers from behaving corruptly or without integrity. However, developing skills and integrity at the university level would enable lawyers to better identify, appeal against and contest selective justice and unethical behavior by other lawyers and judges. This would disincentivize and reduce the impunity of lawyers and judges by raising the costs of misconduct.

Finally, curricula reform opens up the prospect for greater synergy between formal and non-formal legal education. There are already several projects in Moldova focused on improving the capacity of legal students and young professionals through non-formal education, such as INVENTO's "Action for Justice" program, which provides training on many of the soft and vocational skills mentioned above, alongside mentorship programs and sub-grants for student initiatives.<sup>34</sup> NGOs focusing on non-formal education can also advance the reforms outlined in this brief and other best practices by training multipliers within higher education to implement vocational and student-centered classes and other formats.<sup>35</sup> It is not realistic to expect that university staff will adapt to student-centered teaching immediately after legislative and curricula reform. Thus, NGOs and non-formal education have an essential role to play in filling the gaps left by higher education and helping to improve its performance.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

There is a clear need to shift away from the current positivist, teacher-centered approach to legal education at Moldovan universities, which overburdens administrators, faculty members and students. The existing system produces lawyers with a low understanding of professional integrity, poor skills in legal reasoning and an inability to apply the law in a just manner. Consequently, the legal system remains rife with corruption, selective justice and poor judicial decisions.

Prioritizing a student-centered approach would not only benefit future lawyers and the Moldovan legal system at large, but also stimulate generational change within Moldovan law faculties and legal academia. Student-centered learning would help to naturally move Moldova away from the Soviet legal system which was driven by corruption and a dictatorship of the law with little concern for individual rights or a sense of justice beyond the letter of the law. Students will be exposed to modern concepts of legal reasoning, and be able to develop competencies and integrity essential for the modern legal profession.

To achieve these changes, this brief recommends the following specific actions:

### For Universities

- Law faculties should reform their curricula to reduce the number of teaching hours and transition toward student-centered learning.
- Universities should decrease class sizes for seminars, which would be facilitated by the reduction in teaching hours per student.
- Universities should cap the number of assignments which faculty can set per course at a manageable level for students.
- Universities should not use reduced teaching hours as a pretext to reduce the number of teaching staff, but instead to reduce class sizes and offer a wider range of specialized elective courses. These should include analyzing court decisions, legal writing, public speaking, professional integrity, judicial politics<sup>36</sup> and legal reasoning.

### For the Government

- Lawmakers should amend the National Qualification Framework for higher education to highlight the benefits of a student-centered learning approach with fewer teaching hours. In particular, education experts should amend the tables with recommended course distributions to include only essential disciplines.
- The government should transfer regulation of university salary structures from the Ministry of Education to universities. Faculty salaries and

departmental budgets should not be based primarily on teaching hours, as the current system promotes over-teaching. Officials should offer salary and budgetary incentives to faculty members to combine research and teaching rather than encouraging universities to hire specialized researchers. To this end, Parliament should change the legislative framework (Law No. 158 of 4.07.2008 on State Functions and the Status of Public Servants and the Education Code).

#### For NGOs and International Organizations

- International donors should focus support on assisting universities with curricula reform to prioritize student-centered learning and training for university teachers to adapt to this model.
- NGOs focusing on non-formal legal education should synergize with universities attempting to reform their curriculum by offering guidance and expertise based on their activities and by creating multipliers within higher education.

*I express my gratitude to Dr. Mihaela Vidaicu and Ana Indoitu for providing valuable insights into the Moldovan legal education system, and to Dr. Anna Khvorostiankina, who has been my guide to understanding legal education in the post-Soviet states.*

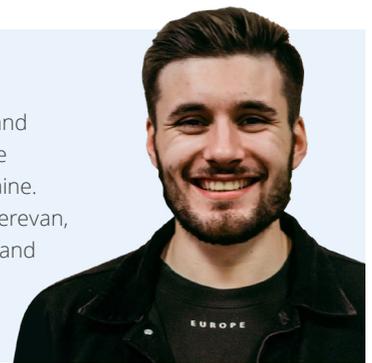
## ENDNOTES

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- 10 These financial pressures reduce the amount of professional development time for students. For example, while a student reading for a Bachelor’s degree in Law at the University of Oxford will take a total of 13 courses throughout their degree, of which 2 are elective, a Bachelor’s student at Moldova State University will take approximately 45 courses, of which 7 are optional.
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The Justice First policy brief series is a gift of the United States Government, funded by the U.S. State Department Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs under the project “Mobilizing Civil Society to Support Judicial Integrity in the Republic of Moldova” and implemented by Freedom House. The opinions, findings and conclusions stated herein are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the US Government or Freedom House.



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