Known in centuries past as Basarabia, the main area now occupied by Moldova has had a long, troubled history of shifting borders and foreign domination. In 1359, it was incorporated into a principality called Moldavia. Basarabia became a tributary state to the Ottoman Empire in the 15th century. In 1792, Turkey ceded land on the Nistru River’s east bank (now called Trans-Dniester) to Russia. Then, following the Russo-Turkish War (1806–12), Russia annexed Basarabia as well.

With the exception of small territorial shifts in 1859 and 1878, the region remained the same until Russia’s Bolshevik Revolution in 1917. In March 1918, Basarabia’s ethnic Romanian majority (between the Prut and Nistru rivers) voted to unite with Romania, with which they shared cultural and historical (pre-Turkish) roots. The new Soviet government opposed such a union and established, in 1924, the Moldavian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic in Trans-Dniester.

Basarabia was annexed by the Soviet Union in 1940, reoccupied by Romania until 1944, and later fully incorporated into the Soviet Empire as the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic. Some districts were transferred to Ukraine.

 Freedoms introduced in the late 1980s by Soviet president Mikhail Gorbachev allowed Moldavia to join other republics in a quest for independence. Elections in 1990 brought the Moldovan Popular Front to power, forcing out the communists and leading to Moldavia’s 1991 declaration of independence as the Republic of Moldova. The new country was immediately beset with ethnic divisions, economic chaos, and extremist political tendencies. Prior to independence, the Popular Front introduced legislation that marginalized minorities, alienating ethnic Russians in Trans-Dniester and ethnic Gagauzi, a Turkic people of Orthodox faith, in the south. The two minorities declared their independence. In Trans-Dniester (called Dnestr by ethnic Russians), the situation erupted into open civil war in 1992. Russian troops joined the fighting before helping to establish a cease-fire. The Popular Front and political parties grew farther and farther apart, leading to parliamentary gridlock. A 1993 vote disbanded parliament.

In February 1994, a new, smaller parliament was elected. Several parties posted candidates, but it was moderate groups (primarily the Agrarian and Socialist parties) that were able to defeat those (such as the Popular Front) that strongly advocated unification with Romania or suppression of ethnic minorities. The new parliament quickly ratified a
new constitution that proclaimed Moldovan neutrality and guaranteed minorities their rights. Additional political, constitutional, and economic reforms were implemented.

In 1994, the government signed an agreement with Russia concerning the eventual withdrawal of its troops from Trans-Dniester. Moldova’s moderate leaders extended greater autonomy to both separatist regions while maintaining Moldovan sovereignty. A “republic within Moldova” status was accepted in 1996 by Trans-Dniester leaders and Russia. Moldovan leaders have since continued efforts to normalize Moldovan relations with Trans-Dniester. However, 2006 saw inhabitants of Trans-Dniester approve a referendum calling for independence from Moldova and eventual union with Russia, though the referendum was not recognized internationally. Russian troops have never fully left the area, and peace there is fragile.

References: