

WHAT IS IDENTITY? REFLECTIONS ON THE MOLDOVAN/BESSARABIAN IDENTITY(IES) BETWEEN 1812 AND THE PRESENT DAY

VALERIA CHELARU*

Abstract This article re-evaluates the Republic of Moldova's identity from its inclusion in the Russian Empire (the territory of Bessarabia) in 1812 and up to the present. Since identity has a volatile nature, both as a concept and a category of practice, in this paper I will approach it in its relationship with ethnicity and nationalism. Drawing on the existing literature in the field, the country's socio-political realities are scrutinised based on the political culture theory, which points out the interdependence between state identification and individuals' normative orientations when making their choices – such as historical foci of loyalty and identification shared by members of communities. At the same time, Moldova's tumultuous evolution represents an opportunity to analyse nationalism “from below” and to consider the “assumptions, hopes, needs, longings and interests of ordinary people.” Such perspective underlines on the one hand the ordinary people's dynamics and manifestations regarding nationalism; on the other hand, it shows how political culture's various practices can influence these manifestations. With the ongoing war in Ukraine, Moldova's identity and its multiethnic society risk new challenges.

Keywords Republic of Moldova, Bessarabia, Identity, nationalism, war in Ukraine.

Introduction

In the wake of the Soviet Union's dismemberment, the Republic of Moldova became an independent state for the first time in its history. Ever since, national identity has remained a highly debated discourse and one of the country's most intricate issues. Scholars have stressed

* *Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca. valeria.a.chelaru@gmail.com.*

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4845-8881>.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.26424/philobib.2024.29.2.04>.

that Moldova represents an artificial state¹ and it was the only Soviet republic wishing to join another state, instead of striving for its political future.² Such reality stems from the fact that history and geography intermingled when shaping the territory between rivers Prut and Dniester. Since the country's national borders are the result of various processes of nation and state-building, Moldova's approach to borders and territory is intrinsically linked with its competing view on national and state identity.³ Indeed, the Moldovan state's consequential profile is intimately entwined with the medieval Moldovan state and the Romanian Principalities, the Ottoman, Habsburg, and Russian Empires, as well as with Greater Romania and the Soviet Union's nationality policies. That is why, scholars underlined the need to reconsider the development of a Moldovan national identity from a long-term historical perspective, and not as a mere consequence of recent decades.⁴

In this paper, I reassess Moldova's identity since the incorporation of Bessarabia⁵ into the Russian Empire, and up to the present. Given that identity is a volatile concept, I will approach it in its relationship with ethnicity and nationalism. As most social analysts now agree, nations and ethnic groups do not represent static forms of human collectivity and are not primordially given. Moreover, ethnicity and nationhood do not derive from the individual's need to belong, which means that identity is highly related to politics and has little to do with culture. Such a perspective views ethnicity and nationhood as more than a specific set of cultural demands, and rather as politically motivated forms of social actions.⁶ The political culture theory underlines the interdependence between state identification and individuals' normative orientations when making their choices – such as historical foci of loyalty and identification shared by members of communities.⁷

Nevertheless, this paper combines the political culture theory and the nationalism “from below.” While analyzing the ordinary people's own dynamics and manifestations

¹ Oazu Nantoi, “Истоки и перспективы разрешения Приднестровского конфликта.” In *Молдова–Приднестровье: Общими усилиями – к успешному будущему. Переговорный процесс* edited by Denis Matveev, Galina Şelari, Elena Bobkova, Bianca Ceche, (Chişinău: Cu drag, 2009).

² Kamil Calus, “The Unfinished State. 25 years of independent Moldova,” *OSW Studies* no. 59 (2016): 10.

³ Octavian Țicu, “Borders and Nation-Building in Post Soviet Space: A Glance from the Republic of Moldova,” in *Borders, Migration and Regional Stability in the EU's Eastern Neighbourhood*, 53-68, edited by Ilkka Liikanen, James W. Scott and Tiina Sotkasiira (Karelian Institute of the University of Eastern Finland), 53.

⁴ Rebecca Haynes, *Moldova: A History* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2023), 5-6.

⁵ After a war between the Russian and Ottoman Empires (1806-1812), the eastern part of the Principality of Moldova, called Bessarabia, was ceded to Russia. Currently, roughly two thirds of Bessarabia lies within modern-day Republic of Moldova, between rivers Prut and Dniester.

⁶ Siniša Malešević, *Identity as Ideology Understanding Ethnicity and Nationalism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 157.

⁷ Stephen Whitefield, “Culture, Experience, and State Identity: A Survey-Based Analysis of Russians, 1995-2003,” in *Political Culture and Post-Communism*, edited by Stephen Whitefield (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 125.

regarding nationalism, I will try to clarify how political culture's various practices influenced these manifestations. Much in line with Peter Judson's reassessment of political nationalism independently of the transhistorical manifestation of the empire's ethnic groups, such theory stresses the role of imperial different policies in accommodating people into a public space characterized by its response to cultural institutions.⁸ In its essence, the article's theoretical underpinning builds on Eric Hobsbawm's proposition that nationalism is constructed from above, however, it can be understood only if it is analyzed from below.⁹ Moldova's intricate history and its entangled processes of identity development can be comprehended only through a fully encompassing theoretical approach.

The article is structured in four parts. After the theoretical introduction, I discuss Bessarabia's identity in the period of its belonging to the Russian Empire (1812-1918). Then I analyze how Bessarabia was accommodated inside Greater Romania after 1918, and consequently, how its identity evolved. The establishment of the Moldovan Soviet Socialist Republic (MSSR), in the wake of the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact, is tackled in the article's next chapter. Further, I will examine how Moldova's identity has evolved since country seceded from the Soviet Union and up to the present day. Conclusions will be drawn in light of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

The Russian Bessarabia

Before being annexed by the Russian Empire, the region between the rivers Prut and Dniester constituted an integral part of the Moldovan Principality. In the 14th century, two sizeable territorial entities existed in the area beyond the Carpathian crescent: the principality of Moldova to the east, and Wallachia (Țara Românească) to the south. Since they were connecting the Hanseatic states with the Genoese and Byzantine settlements along the Dniester and Black Sea, the principalities became significant forces in Southeastern Europe.¹⁰

The Moldovan principality's golden age was reached under the reign of Ștefan cel Mare (1457-1505). Due to a series of political alliances, he managed to overcome the encroachments of the Ottoman Turks to the south, Hungarians to the west, Tatars to the east, and Poles to the north. However, after his death, the Ottomans defeated the Moldovan army in 1538 and occupied Suceava, the principality's capital. Along with Wallachia, Moldova became a vassal state of the Ottoman Porte. Compared with the regions south of the river Danube, the Romanian principalities did not experience direct Muslim rule. In exchange for annual tribute and other taxes, they were ruled by native princes (recognized as *domni*) for most of the period after 1530s. Intermittently, the Moldovan leaders, often helped by the

⁸ Pieter M. Judson, *The Habsburg Empire: a new history* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2018), 8.

⁹ Eric Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 10-11.

¹⁰ Charles King, *The Moldovans: Romania, Russia, and the Politics of Culture* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 2000), 14.

Hungarian or Russian forces, defied the Ottoman authority. By and large, the relationship between the Porte and Moldovan *domni* was one of suzerainty rather than full domination.¹¹

Having emerged as a significant European power in the 17th century, Russia's following expansion had a profound effect on the Moldovan principality. In 1812, after a Russo-Ottoman war, the Moldovan lands between the rivers Prut and Dniester, renamed Bessarabia, became Russian territory. The ceded area was larger than the remaining truncated principality of Moldova and included all the Turkish *raia*-s¹²: Hotin, Bender, Akkerman, Chilia, Ismail, Reni, and the steppes of Bugeac.¹³ Bessarabia's population was approximated to be 200.000-240.000 (43.160-55.000 families),¹⁴ or 482.630 people.¹⁵ Except for the Moldovans (the Romanian speakers), the area included some 30,000 Ukrainians and smaller communities of Jews,¹⁶ Greeks, Armenians, Gypsies, Bulgarians, and a few thousand Russian Old Believers.¹⁷

The peasantry constituted the region's major population, and it displayed a deficient social structure compared with the territories west of the river Prut. Having their landed properties in Bessarabia, few if any Moldovan boyars lived there. Before 1812, the districts of eastern Moldova were the least urbanized and the area's twelve townlets were owned by boyars or monasteries. Additionally, the western districts of Moldova were headed by the modern "ministries of interiors" (*vornici*), while the eastern lands were subordinated to special governors (*serdari*), directly responsible to the Moldovan *hospodar*.¹⁸

Scholars stressed that Bessarabia's case study reveals the dimension of the imperial space.¹⁹ It also shows how the imperial conquest resulted in the symbolic and administrative construction of new territories that were previously weakly connected.²⁰ Transformed into the empire's borderland, Bessarabia became home to displaced people and state-sponsored colonists. Both the region's landowners and free colonists turned into social subjects.²¹ While giving land and home to various ethnic groups in Bessarabia, the imperial authorities gained

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² In the Ottoman Empire, the Raia was a Christian fortress, with its adjacent territories, ruled directly by the military Turks according to the Ottoman law.

¹³ Haynes, *Moldova*, 75.

¹⁴ Nicolae Ciachir, *Basarabia sub stăpânire țaristă (1812-1917)* (Bucharest: Editura didactică și pedagogică, 1992), 26.

¹⁵ Ion Nistor, *Istoria Basarabiei* (Bucharest: Humanitas, 2017), 194.

¹⁶ Estimated to 20,000 in 1812. See: https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/bessarabia?utm_content=cmp-true (accessed on 27 April 2024).

¹⁷ Haynes, 86.

¹⁸ Victor Taki, "1812 and the Emergence of the Bessarabian Region: Province-Building under Russian Imperial Rule," in *Moldova: A Borderland's Fluid History, Euxeinos: Governance & Culture in the Black Sea Region*, no. 15/16 (2014): 9-19.

¹⁹ Andrei Cușco, Oleg Grom, Viktor Taki, *Bessarabia v sostave Rossiiskoy Imperii (1812-1917)* (Moskva: Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie, 2012), 150

²⁰ Taki, "1812 and the Emergence of the Bessarabian Region," 9.

²¹ Cușco, Grom, Taki, 150.

new peoples. Through such interdependence, the landowners and colonists could manipulate in return the empire's various instances.²²

Administered initially by the pro-Russian Moldovan families, Bessarabia became subject to administrative centralization and cultural Russification in 1829. The region's state-sponsored colonization was linked with the empire's interest in the Romanian principalities and the Balkans. Firstly, Russia pretended to protect the Orthodox peoples within the Ottoman Empire; a well-off and densely-populated Bessarabia could promote the perks of being a Russian subject.²³ Secondly, a Russian-Ottoman conflict could spark at any time. As the empire's frontier zone with the Turks, Bessarabia could serve as a place for launching military actions. Its rehabilitation, agriculturally and economically had strategic considerations. Thirdly, by altering the region's ethnic balance, the imperial authorities gained more loyal groups against the indigenous Moldovans. The fact that the latter were not allowed to migrate to the south of the region stands as an argument. Since the Black Sea coast and the Danube River had considerable economic and strategic importance, the Bessarabia's south had to be placed in more reliable hands.²⁴

By 1913, Bessarabia's population increased fivefold due to massive immigration. The new settlements and urban areas flourished to the detriment of local villages and peasants. In 1897, 84 percent of the region's dwellers lived in rural areas, against 15 percent who lived in towns. Their number declined to 14.7 percent in 1912.²⁵ Native Moldovans along with Ukrainians dominated the rural population, while Russians and Jews were the main town dwellers.²⁶ The urban-rural discrepancy and striking demographic imbalances defined Bessarabia's new character. Confined to rural areas, the Moldovans declined in number and other ethnic groups became part of the region's social fabric. In 1897, Moldovans represented 47.58 percent of the total population. The rest of the ethnic groups included Ukrainians (19.75 percent), Jews (11.79 percent), Russians (8.05 percent), Bulgarians (5.33 percent) Germans (3.11 percent), Gagauz (2.9 percent), along with Gypsies, Poles, Armenians, and Greeks, which made together 1.49 percent.²⁷

Separated from its kin, and subject to intense Russification and colonization, Bessarabia underwent a non-Romanian development inside the Tsarist Empire. Meanwhile, the Romanian provinces experienced a series of events that enhanced modernization and national

²² Ibid.

²³ Pavel Chichagov (the Minister of Navy under Alexander I, and the commander-in-chief of the Danubian Army) instructed Scarlat Sturdza, Bessarabia's first governor, to "skilfully draw the attention of the neighboring peoples to this region." Bessarabia's governor main task was to "preserve the attachment of these peoples to Russia and protect them from the influence of our enemies." See: Taki, "1812 and the Emergence of the Bessarabian Region," 14-5.

²⁴ Haynes, 87.

²⁵ Keith Hitchins, *România 1866-1947* (Bucharest: Humanitas, 2017), 245.

²⁶ Irina Livezeanu, *Cultură și naționalism în România Mare 1918-1930* (Bucharest: Humanitas, 1998), 111-12.

²⁷ Alberto Basciani, *Dificila unire: Basarabia și România Mare 1918-1940*, transl. by George Voicu Ivan, Maria Voicu (Chișinău: Editura Cartier, 2018), 53.

consciousness. Already a backward region, Bessarabia missed out on the reformation of the Romanian language and alphabet, as it missed out on the union of Moldova and Wallachia into a Romanian state in 1859.²⁸ Confined to its isolated universe, Bessarabia displayed a distinct profile. Its population was generally divided between a highly Russified, but small urban elite, and a numerous backward peasantry. The latter's traits presented an additional issue. Among the empire's numerous subjects, the rural population of Bessarabia was perceived as politically loyal and the least turbulent.²⁹ With the introduction of the *zemstvos*, a system of elected councils to increase local participation in civil matters, Bessarabia's imperial attachment strengthened.³⁰ Hidebound and indolent, the peasantry's reality was rather pragmatic. Any abstract form of novelty and modernization, such as national identity, made them reluctant and passive. Their religious affiliation and loyalty to the tsar could have had a greater impact on Bessarabian peasants' mood compared to any other incentives based on ethnic solidarity with the fatherland across the Prut.³¹ In Bessarabia, pragmatism was often chosen to the detriment of an original and indigenous nationalistic message.³²

Regardless of ethnicity, the Bessarabians did not oppose firmly the Russification campaign (1860-1880). By the 1870s, the region's native language was removed from education and church service. Hence, not only the ethnic groups (44 percent in 1930), but also the Romanian speakers considered themselves "Moldovans." Unlike Romania's other historical provinces, where the Romanian identity preceded the formation of Greater Romania, Bessarabia's typical identification was Moldovan.³³

The fuzzy character of the local identity, the region's demographic alteration, and the stance of many local intellectuals contributed to the belief that Bessarabia belonged to the great family of the Russian state. Moreover, the peasants' spiritual features, – their traditionalism, submissiveness, backwardness – and the orthodoxy, fixed this idea of identity.

²⁸ In 1866, Romania gained its own German Prince, to become later the King Carol I, and established its dynastic house in 1881.

²⁹ Oleg Grom, "«Молдавский вопрос» в Бессарабии в конце XIX – начале XX века: сравнительный аспект," *Rossya XXI*, no. 4 (2014): 44-71, 46.

³⁰ The *zemstvos* were normally headed by the representatives of Bessarabia's ethnic minorities; their interests and cultural traits were compatible with those of the empire.

³¹ Andrei Cușco, "Scenariile alternative ale identității basarabene la începutul secolului al XX-lea: mobilizare etnică, românitare incertă și construcție națională într-o provincie de frontieră," *Plural: istorie, cultură, societate*, no. 1 (2008): 48.

³² Oleg Grom, "Алфавит, язык и идентичность в Бессарабии второй половины XIX-начала XX вв" *Plural: Journal of the History and Geography Department, Ion Creangă Pedagogical State University*, no. 1-2 (2014): 5-24, 24; When a school reform in 1911 proposed the introduction of Romanian language in Bessarabia's rural schools, it was the peasants who rejected the idea. Since the latter had the right to express themselves through voting in the local *zemstvos*, the project handed to Imperial Duma was not implemented. See: Igor Cașu, *Politica națională în Moldova Sovietică, 1944-1989* (Chișinău: Editura Cartdidact, 2000), 120.

³³ Livezeanu, 114.

An important link between ethnicity and imperial identity was orthodoxy, as it ensured the access to empire's cultural hierarchies. It is important to bear in mind that "Russianness" (*русскость*) represented the core of the Russian nation, and it derived from cultural affinities rather than ethnic belonging. The common religion with Russia made the Moldovans a privileged people compared to the empire's other nations. Not only were the former allowed to join the Russian various organizations (monarchist or nationalistic), but they were also encouraged. While for many imperial nations (the so-called *inovertsy/ иноверцы* and *inorodtsy/ инородцы*) it was almost impossible to become members of the Union of the Russian people, the far-right political party, the process was simple for ethnic Moldovans. Every ethnic Moldovan could have considered himself Russian, had he spoken the Russian language.³⁴ From this perspective, Bessarabia was "a product of the ways agents of the empire categorized its diverse peoples in order to govern them more effectively."³⁵ Contrary to the national state's tendency to level differences, the empire had used its modern institutions and practices to deal with them.³⁶

The empire's political effervescence spread to Bessarabia at the end of the 19th century. Nationalism was debated among other issues by various students or members of the local intelligentsia. However, such manifestations were rather unusual. Bessarabia's nationalism and its Romanian population were non-existent when compared, for example, to Transylvania.³⁷ Even if alternative forms of local identities occurred sparingly, initially they were characterised by a regional stance against the Romanian model. Young intellectuals, such as Alexei Mateevici and Gheorghe Stîrcea, opposed the Romanian national discourse, particularly for its modern undertones. They had never produced a clear-cut local model though, as they did not oppose later the pan-Romanian nationalistic project. The meekness of the region was typical of most social strata – along with the passive peasantry, the intellectuals had no assertiveness in building a local vision inside the empire. Deprived of any theoretical underpinning, the Bessarabian nationalism was poor even compared to similar manifestations in the empire.³⁸ Moreover, the weakness of the local institutions, and the lack of social framework, produced a late and feeble public sphere. In the absence of any regional voices, the official discourse was easily imposed.

Additionally, the Romanian political consciousness in Bessarabia was shaped outside its borders. Until 1905, the region's Romanian speakers were attracted by politics in general, as their particular interest in populism seems to demonstrate. Since most Bessarabians studied in

³⁴ Grom, "Молдавский вопрос", 53-4.

³⁵ Judson, *The Habsburg Empire*, 8.

³⁶ Cuşco et al, 150.

³⁷ Basciani, 58-9; Onisifor Ghibu, *Pe baricadele vieţii: în Basarabia revoluţionară (1917-1918)*. Amintiri, (Chişinău: Civitas, 1992); Idem, *De la Basarabia rusească la Basarabia românească* (Bucharest: Semne, 1997); Ioan Scurtu, D. Almaş, A. Goşu, I. Pavelescu, G. I. Ioniţă, *Istoria Basarabiei de la începuturi până în 1994*, (Bucureşti: Europa Nova&Tempus, 1994).

³⁸ Oleg Grom, "The language, History, and Nation in the Visions of Bessarabian Moldovan Intellectuals in the Early 20th Century," *Russkii Arkhiv*, 9(3), 2015: 177-192, 180.

Russian universities,³⁹ they imported the socialist ideas popular among students.⁴⁰ Bessarabia and its capital were strongly connected to the prosperous, yet alternative Russian cities such as Odessa and Kiev, where terrorist and nihilistic movements were taking their toll on Russia's political life. The populist groups strongly promoted national equality. For instance, the members of the terrorist movement *Zemlya I volya*, paid particular attention to Russia's attitude towards its European nationalities. No wonder that the populist and revolutionary ideas had seduced the future Bessarabia's national advocates such as Ion Pelivan, Petre Cazacu, Constantin Stere, and Zamfir Ralli-Arbore.⁴¹

Due to intense Russification, the Romanian was no longer the native tongue of most local nationalists. As Theodor Inculeț noted: "We wrote with difficulty [in Romanian] because we were thinking in Russian."⁴² Alexis Nour, the editor of *Viața Basarabiei* (1903-1918), learned Romanian as an adult. When Sergiu Cujbă arrived from Romania to help edit *Basarabia*,⁴³ the language he spoke was different from the local one. According to Inculeț: "Cujbă had to learn to write in Moldovan [language], otherwise the Moldovans would have not understood him."⁴⁴

Before the empire's disintegration, nationalism or identity politics in Bessarabia had been fairly modest. The Russian Revolution impacted most profoundly Bessarabia's socio-political realities compared to any form of local or imported nationalism. Its consequences, and the war's catastrophic dimension, made Bessarabia's leadership reconsider the union with Romania as a post-imperial option to avoid the chaos of Bolshevism.⁴⁵

From the empire to the national state: Bessarabia within Greater Romania

Despite its origins and the general belief in its Romanian character, Bessarabia was alien to Romania in 1918. The Bessarabian elites regarded skeptically the idea of a single Romanian nation. Their identity was derived from a set of values and affiliations intrinsically linked with

³⁹ One of the most active and subversive in this sense was the University of Dorpat (Tartu) in contemporary Estonia. However, the universities in Kiev, Moscow, and Sankt Petersburg were also attended by Bessarabian students. There they not only interacted with subversive writings, but also with many nationalities with strong national identities. See: Cașu, *Politica națională*, 120.

⁴⁰ Ion Inculeț, Vasile Bârcă, Pantelimon Erhan, Zamfir Arbore-Ralli, Pantelimon Halippa, among many other Bessarabian political figures, had been the product of the Russia's imperial universities.

⁴¹ Basciani, 60.

⁴² Grom, "Алфавит, язык и идентичность," 17.

⁴³ "Basarabia" was the first publication in the Romanian language printed in Cyrillic script.

⁴⁴ Grom, "Алфавит, язык и идентичность," 17-18.

⁴⁵ Valeria Chelaru, "Regionalism or Otherness in Greater Romania: Bessarabia's Response to Cultural Nationalism in the First Years after Unification (1918-1930)," *Journal of Romanian Studies*, no.1 (2022): 66-72.

the former imperial space.⁴⁶ Except for a group inside the nationalist camp, Bessarabia's socio-economic elites were reticent about the ethno-national arguments. A sense of independence and the possibility to arrange the region's fate freely defined their mood. Founded in the wake of imperial disintegration, Bessarabia's leftist parliament, Sfatul Țării,⁴⁷ boasted a large democratic base. Overall, Bessarabia's newly gained autonomy contrasted with the image of the Romanian Kingdom, which was undemocratic, culturally foreign, and deeply corrupt, yet posing as a modern state.

However, the region's socio-political urgencies⁴⁸ demanded prompt actions. To ensure Bessarabia's political survival, its leaders had to put up with military help from Romania.⁴⁹ Nevertheless, once the Romanian administration was established in the region, a return to Bessarabia's previous status quo became unrealistic. Termed "military occupation," the regime behaved accordingly, and not only the Romanian military administration, but also the Romanian government and its political classes perceived Sfatul Țării, and the government, as revolutionary bodies. The peasantry was similarly perceived as having leftist sympathies in light of its interest in agrarian reform. Since the Bolsheviks were gathering momentum in Ukraine, the peasants of Bessarabia were seen as their potential allies.

With the abolition of Bessarabia's autonomy, in November 1918, all Bessarabian elites embraced the idea of a common future with Russia.⁵⁰ Leaders such as Vladimir Tsyganko and Ion Păscăluță joined "the anti-unionist movement," the Odessa Committee for Saving

⁴⁶ Svetlana Suveică, "Between the Empire and the Nation-State: Metamorphoses of the Bessarabian Elite (1918)," in *Moldova: A Borderland's Fluid History*, *Euxeinos*, no. 15/16 (2014): 33-45, edited by Diana Dumitru, Petru Negură, 42.

⁴⁷ Until the union, Sfatul Țării was a revolutionary institution with socialist views. Its three declarations, reflected the body's aim to radically alter the Bessarabian society. The declarations took place on 2 December 1917 (the former Bessarabian Governorate became an autonomous Moldavian Democratic Republic as part of the Russian Federative Republic), on 24 January 1918 (the independence of MDR and the formation of the second government led by D. Ciugureanu), and on 27 March 1918 (the union of Bessarabia with the Romanian Kingdom). See: Ion Țurcanu, *Sfatul Țării. Istoria zbuciumată a unei importante instituții politice basarabene din 1917-1918* (Chișinău: Editura Arc, 2018), 45.

⁴⁸ In the spring of 1917, the Ukrainian leadership made territorial claim on Bessarabia based on region's allegedly high number of ethnic Ukrainians. Another threat was the conquest of the Bolshevik forces of Bessarabia's capital in January 1918.

⁴⁹ The chaos produced by the Russian Empire's disintegration, and the menace of Bolshevism, forced leaders in Chișinău to find practical solutions. They addressed the authorities in Iași (the general headquarters of the Romania Front along with the diplomatic missions of the Allies), a move suitable not only for the Bessarabian elites but also for the anti-Bolshevik Russian forces, and even for the German units controlling the Eastern Front. Romania's position in the war was defined by its geopolitical interests and the "national ideal."

⁵⁰ Suveica, "Between the Empire and the Nation-State," 43; Valeria Chelaru, "The Bessarabian Nationalism and the Union with Greater Romania: a Realistic Approach to Identity," in *Territorial Identities in Action*, edited by Oana-Ramona Ilovan (Cluj-Napoca: Presa Universitară Clujeană, 2021), 41-76.

Bessarabia,⁵¹ led by Alexander N. Krupenskii. Head of the Bessarabian “delegation” at the Paris Peace Conference,⁵² Krupenskii, together with other Bessarabians and Russian émigrés, struggled to restore Greater Russia and return Bessarabia under its protection.⁵³

At the same time, Romania’s leaders at the conference in Paris would point out their country’s role in keeping Bolshevism at bay. Not only the border with revolutionary Russia, but also Bessarabia’s profile represented the core arguments. The latter’s ethnic heterogeneity, and reluctance to accept the Romanian administration, deepened the entrenched stereotypes of most Romanians. Many foreign reports repeatedly stressed the Romanian authorities’ arrogance and hostility towards the Bessarabians.⁵⁴ The local population was subject to extortion, exploitation, and vicious treatment.⁵⁵

Bessarabia’s post-imperial traits conflicted with Bucharest’s nationalizing plans – full integration without any form of autonomy or gradual homogenization. After unification, the National Liberal Party (NLP) dominated Greater Romania’s political life. The party’s origin and ideology played a tremendous role in promoting the nationalistic ideal. Associated with the Romanian Old Kingdom and the interests of the center as opposed to the local ones, the national liberals chose to govern in an authoritarian and old-fashioned manner.⁵⁶ Their representatives had no understanding of the local realities and brutally neglected them. Highly unpopular in the newly acquired provinces, their mandate in Bessarabia unleashed a savage atmosphere against the non-Romanians.⁵⁷

⁵¹ The Odessa Committee for Saving Bessarabia was founded in February 1919 to fight against the Romanian annexation of Bessarabia. See Svetlana Suveica, “For the ‘Bessarabian Cause’: The Activity of Odessa Committee for Saving Bessarabia (1918-1920),” *Archiva Moldaviae*, vol. VI. (2014): 139-69.

⁵² After WWI, the main leaders of the great powers and others converged on Paris to redraw the borders of the Russian, Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman empires, which disintegrated partly as a result of nationalism among its many ethnic groups. Despite the conference having been officially held between 1919 and 1920, the most important decisions about the post-war order were taken between January and July 1919.

⁵³ Svetlana Suveica, “Against the ‘Imposition of the Foreign Yoke’: the Bessarabians Write to Wilson (1919),” *Journal of Romanian Studies*, special issue “Romania and the Paris Peace Conference 1919. Actors, Scenarios, Circulation of Knowledge,” edited by Svetlana Suveica, no. 2 (2019): 89-113, 89-90.

⁵⁴ Livezeanu, *Cultură și naționalism*, 122-3.

⁵⁵ Livezeanu, 122.

⁵⁶ Hitchins, *Romania*, 414.

⁵⁷ It is important to bear in mind that after unification, Romania implemented three major reforms: the universal male suffrage, the agrarian reform, and the emancipation of its Jewish population. Despite their democratic character, all these changes also had destabilizing effects. Having satisfied the peasantry’s craving for land, the social problems were replaced by the national ones. Irina Livezeanu remarks that “in Greater Romania, the territorial expansion and the post-war reforms contributed to the emergence of nationalism with a nuance of anti-Semitism, like in the nineteenth century, but having taken place in a newly radicalized context – that of a stronger Romanian state and, relatively speaking, new and weaker Romanian elites.” Livezeanu, 21.

Since Bessarabia's autochthonous language had been marginalised during the Russian Empire, it became a local vernacular compared with literary Romanian. When the empire collapsed, most educated Bessarabians were hardly familiarised with the Romanian language. Even the teachers wrote in Cyrillic script and stressed that they spoke Moldovan, not Romanian.⁵⁸ For most Bessarabians, the Russian language remained the tongue of educated classes, while the Romanian language and culture were perceived as uncivilized. Onisifor Ghibu remarked that the provinces's local teachers, regardless of ethnicity, had no national conscience: the lack of Romanian culture intermingled with complete ignorance concerning the Latin script. Moreover, the Romanian courses in Bessarabia were met with protest by the Russian speakers, while ethnic Moldovans took an unengaged position.⁵⁹ In their attempt to Romanianise the province, the Romanian officials relied mostly on public employees from the Old Kingdom. Their contribution rather discredited the Romanian administration in Bessarabia. Generally, the Romanianization and nationalization⁶⁰ of Bessarabia's schools were seen as radical and met with hostility.⁶¹ Instead of teaching their pupils to read and write, the Romanian teachers in Bessarabia concentrated on cultivating the Romanian national culture. The local population dismissed them as strangers and did not trust them. Usually, the Romanian teachers and authorities behaved loftily and used an offensive vocabulary.⁶²

Moreover, the nationalization and Romanianization campaigns were forcibly implemented to the detriment of ethnic groups. Any request from the latter regarding schooling in their native tongue, or Russian, would be perceived as proof of anti-Romanian hostility.⁶³ Reports from all the nine Bessarabian counties depicted an overall miserable situation, rampant poverty along with inadequate and abusive administration. In 1921, enrollment in primary schools was lower than in 1906, when Bessarabia was a Russian *gubernia* and primary education flourished throughout the Empire despite not being compulsory.⁶⁴ In 1922, an official inspection in Chişinău, Orhei and Tighina counties, reported that only 38,250 children (aged between 7 and 16 years) out of 171,725, were attending schools. Many children, including ethnic Romanians, attended the schools of various ethnic groups whose methods and schooling fees were considered to conflict with national interests.⁶⁵

⁵⁸ Livezeanu, *Cultură și naționalism*, 123-4.

⁵⁹ Ghibu, *Pe baricadele vieții*, 244-5.

⁶⁰ Based on wrong demographic data, the "nationalization" aimed to transform the Russian schools into Romanian schools, or, to a lesser degree, in schools where ethnic minorities' languages were taught. See: Petru Negură, "Ce lecții tragem din școlarizarea minorităților din Basarabia interbelică?" in *Un centenar și mai multe teme pentru acasă. Ce au învățat și ce nu au învățat românii din ultimul secol de istorie*, edited by Adrian Cioroianu (Iași: Polirom, 2018), 107.

⁶¹ Basciani, *Dificila unire*, 188-90.

⁶² Livezeanu, *Cultură și naționalism*, 138.

⁶³ Negură, "Ce lecții tragem din școlarizarea minorităților," 110.

⁶⁴ Petru Negură, "Compulsory Primary Education and State Building in Rural Bessarabia (1918–1940)," *Journal of Romanian Studies*, no. 1 (2020): 35-58, 43.

⁶⁵ Basciani, *Dificila unire*, 191.

However, in the 1920s, the Bessarabians' interest in schooling soared unprecedentedly. The rural population expressed its need for secondary schools and set up committees to collect money, build schools, and support socially disadvantaged pupils. Romania's efforts to integrate Bessarabia brought about cultural policies that generated nationalistic rhetoric, creating rural solidarity to the detriment of urban areas and their majority inhabitants, mainly the Jews. Most importantly, mass primary education acted as a transmission belt through which the villagers became more than the state's subjects. By communicating and negotiating with the school agents of the state, the rural population asserted its rights, freedoms, and decision-making capacity, which produced conscious citizens.⁶⁶ The gradual increase in rural schools meant the proliferation of Romanian educational institutions and the decrease of Russian ones. Also, the Romanian language was finally accepted in the Bessarabian schools.

In February 1923, the Russian language was banned in the region's schools. Its use, even during the break time, would be "severely punished". Accordingly, the teachers had to prove their proficiency in the Romanian language in a process that produced animosity and distrust, offending Bessarabian teachers of all ethnicities. Moreover, it consolidated the sentiment of Bessarabia's regionalism against the "true Romanians" of the Old Kingdom. The local teachers denounced the "embarrassing" language exams, which they felt undermined their previous rights.⁶⁷ As Lucian Boia remarked, a similar policy applied to Transylvania would have been inconceivable.⁶⁸

Six years after the unification, a group of Bessarabian politicians led by Pan Halippa protested against the "desperate situation of the province." While denouncing the Romanian administration's abuses, they emphasized that "for six years, Bessarabia has been ruled in a way that even the black colonies in Africa cannot be ruled today."⁶⁹ The union with the kin across the Prut was desired by most of Bessarabia's enlightened minds. However, those romantic leaders did not expect that after unification their achievements gained when the empire collapsed would be annihilated. On the opposite, they hoped that the reforms would be continued in a more favorable climate, based on social order and fruitful collaboration with the state authorities.⁷⁰ No plebiscite was held in the region to consult the popular feelings regarding unification. The historical rights over Bessarabia outweighed any socio-political realities settled over a hundred years.⁷¹

Despite the evident development of Bessarabia's national consciousness, frequent reports reminded that the Romanian language, along with other symbols of Romanian nationalism, were still guests in Bessarabia. In 1925 in Tighina county, portraits of the former

⁶⁶ Negură, *Compulsory Primary Education*, 38.

⁶⁷ Livezeanu, *Cultură și naționalism*, 146-7.

⁶⁸ Lucian Boia, *Cum s-a românizat România* (Bucharest: Humanitas, 2018), 71-2.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 79-80.

⁷⁰ Țurcanu, *Sfatul Țării*, 248.

⁷¹ Haynes, *Moldova: A History*, 110.

Russian imperial family hung on the walls of a peasant's house. Similarly, in Soroca county where all the teachers spoke Romanian in the 243 Romanian, nine Jewish, five Ukrainian, and three Russian schools, and where ethnic minorities registered a gradual Romanianization, "the great majority of teachers [...], at the official meetings and at home, spoke only Russian."⁷² Contrary to all its nationalizing efforts, Greater Romania appears to have failed in its nationalization efforts due to Bessarabia's reluctance to reconfigure its identity.

Identity in Soviet Socialist Moldova

The Moldovan Soviet Socialist Republic (MSSR) was formally established on 2 August 1940 as a consequence of the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact. It comprised six Bessarabia's counties and six *raions* (districts) of the MASSR (Moldovan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic), a political unit on the territory of current Transnistria, which Soviet Russia established in 1924 with strategic purpose.⁷³

When the country's borders were settled in November 1940, the Soviet Ukraine received Northern Bukovina, the remnants of Transnistria along with former Bessarabia's territories: the Hotin, Akkerman, and Ismail counties. The strip of land east of Dniester added to MSSR had never been part of historical Bessarabia. However, it would play a crucial role in Sovietizing and remodelling Bessarabia's new identity. The redrawing of Soviet Moldova's borders was based on certain demographic realities. Despite the fact that approximately 337,000 Moldovans lived in the areas ceded to Ukraine, the territories were also Bessarabia's most ethnically heterogeneous and most Slavic lands.⁷⁴ Similarly, 49 percent of the population in the strip along Dniester were ethnic Moldovans. It represented the most Moldovan part of the former MASSR, in which the total number of Moldovans accounted for 32 percent. Most importantly, the administrative changes were based on strategic considerations. Similar to the former empire's approach to the area, the Soviet policymakers made sure that Bessarabia's Danube and Black Sea borderlands were dominated by a reliable subject. Moldova's political and ideological profile, along with Romania's potential irredentism demanded particular vigilance in those regions. The engineering of the Soviet Moldova was meant to counteract Bucharest's eventual territorial claim over Bessarabia.⁷⁵

Nevertheless, distrust of the ethnic Moldovans, due to their Romanian and "bourgeois-capitalist" past, defined Moscow's policies in the Soviet Republic. After annexation,

⁷² Ibid., 147.

⁷³ See: Valeria Chelaru, "Borders and Territorial Identity in Moldovan ASSR: Transnistria and the "Bessarabian Question" between 1918 and 1940," *Territorial Identity and Development*, no. 2, (2020); Alexandr Voronovici, "Justifying Separatism: the Year 1924, the Establishment of the Moldovan ASSR and History Politics in the Transnistrian Moldovan Republic," in *Moldova: A Borderland's Fluid History*, edited by Diana Dumitru and Petru Negură, (2014).

⁷⁴ Charles King, *The Moldovans: Romania, Russia, and the Politics of Culture* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1999), 94.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 95.

the Soviet leaders embarked on a campaign of “diluting” the indigenous population by encouraging the immigration of the Russian and Ukrainian population into the MSSR. Sent as political and administrative workers, their number was estimated to be 200,000-300,000 between 1944 and 1959, and some 10,000 annually in the next years. Owing to the region’s history of multiethnicity and Russia’s dominance there, accommodation in Bessarabia was easier compared to the Soviet Union’s other areas. Even the establishment of the MASSR was less cumbersome than the integration of other regions (such as the Baltic states and western Ukraine) annexed by the Soviets after 1940. As time passed, the MSSR became less Moldovan. Deportations⁷⁶ and out-migration changed the demographic fabric of the Soviet republic. The number of ethnic Russians almost doubled between 1941 and 1979 (from 6.7 to 13 percent).⁷⁷ However, the Moldovans still represented 64.5 percent of the total population in 1989, due to a higher rate of birth.⁷⁸ At the same time, 16.5 percent of Moldovans were in ethnically-mixed marriages in 1970, one of the highest rates among non-Slavic nationalities.⁷⁹

Ethnic Moldovans were also the Soviet Union’s least politically represented nationality. Their number in the party apparatus remained under 50 percent until the 1980s, while Ukrainians and Russians dominated. The few Moldovans holding high positions on the local and center levels came from the former MASSR. Unlike Bessarabia, which after annexation had to catch up with collectivization and Sovietization, the MASSR was completely attuned to the Soviet Union’s realities. The autonomous republic within Soviet Ukraine was founded after Bessarabia’s unification with Romania to disseminate communism outside the Soviet Union and to help regain Bessarabia. Nevertheless, the nation-building in the region was not a mere consequence of Moscow’s expansionist aim. It rather derived from the center’s foreign-policy goals, the existing forms of local identity, and the local elites’ agendas.⁸⁰ That is why all the cultural policies had been erratically implemented while having been intense and conflicting at the same time. During a short period, attempts to engineer the MASSR’s identity switched from Moldovanization, based on the Cyrillic script and a distinct Moldovan identity, to the Latinization campaign that imposed the Latin alphabet. Despite both campaigns’ correspondence to similar policies across the Soviet Union, – the indigenization (*korenizatsia*)⁸¹

⁷⁶ After its incorporation into the Soviet Union, Bessarabia (Soviet Moldova) underwent three major waves of deportation as political repression against the local population. The “First Wave” took place on 12-13 June 1941. The second followed on 5-6 July 1949, and the third one, between 31 March and 1 April 1951. Although, no logic can explain the cause of these brutal events (involving around 36,000 people in 1949 only), they are put down to Stalin’s political whims concerning the numerous nationalities of the Soviet Union.

⁷⁷ King, *The Moldovans*, 100-1.

⁷⁸ Haynes, 142.

⁷⁹ King, *The Moldovans*, 101.

⁸⁰ *Ibidem*, 63.

⁸¹ Paradoxically, the policy of indigenization, known as *korenizatsia*, bolstered nationality by promoting the native language, by bringing out a national intelligentsia and political elites, and by officially introducing ethnicity in the party apparatus. See: Ronald Grigor Suny, “The Revenge of the Past:

and Latinization programs – nation-building in the MASSR sought to implant a communist and Moldovan (as opposed to Romanian) identity into Romanian (Moldovan) speakers. According to the census in 1926, the latter registered 26 percent of the region’s total population.⁸² The process of building a new nation in the MASSR failed not only because it was artificial, but also because the local elites had been ambiguous concerning the culture they meant to introduce.⁸³

In Soviet Moldova, the engineering of the national historical narrative began after the Second World War. According to Moscow’s propaganda, the Moldovan nation⁸⁴ crystallized after the Russian annexation of Bessarabia in 1812. However, to integrate the region into the “Soviet people,” it was necessary for a preliminary stage in which the existing regional identity would be reconfigured. To facilitate the displacement of the native population, to justify the annexation of a territory belonging to another socialist state, Bessarabia’s regional identity was replaced with an ethnonational one.⁸⁵ It derived from a Soviet type “Moldovanness”, which was both ideologically and politically artificial.⁸⁶ Unlike other Western territories annexed by the Soviet Union in 1940, Bessarabia did not have a robust sense of identity. The nation-building process in the MSSR was based on emphasizing the Moldovan “primordialism” as

Nationalism, Revolution, and the Collapse of the Soviet Union,” (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), 101-2; Scholars tend to see the Soviet national project as the Soviet policymakers’ last resort option regarding the empire’s boiling nationalism. The confrontations over the issue sparked in March 1919, at the Eight Party Congress, between the internationalists’ camp (headed by Georgiy Pyatakov and Nikolai Bukharin) and the nation-builders (led by Vladimir Lenin and Iosif Stalin). According to the former group, social identity should have derived from class in the pre-revolutionary era. By contrast, the representative of the second group stressed the numerous nationalities’ unsolved question. Nationalism was to them a historical issue full of distrust, which could have been tackled only through self-determination. Class could become the pillar of social identity only if national identity was treated with respect. See: Terry Martin, “An Affirmative Action Empire.” In *A State of Nations: Empire and Nation-Making in the Age of Lenin and Stalin*, edited by Ronald Grigor Suny and Terry Martin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 68.

⁸² Oleg S. Galushchenko, “Dinamika chislennosti i areal rasselenia moldavan v kontse XIX-nachale XXI vekov,” *Revista de etnologie și culturologie*, no. 3 (2008): 143.

⁸³ Charles King, “The Ambivalence of Authenticity, or How the Moldovan Language was Made,” *Slavic Review*, no. 1 (1999): 119.

⁸⁴ In this paper “nation” and “ethnicity” are approached based on Igor Cașu’s differentiation of the terms. Accordingly, Cașu associates “ethnicity” with “the linguistical, psychological, axiological etc., or the cultural dimension of a human collectivity”. By “nation”, he understands the political dimension, or the radicalized form of ethnicity. Moreover, he argues that what makes ethnicity and nation distinct is the political order. Ethnicity represents a minority politically subordinated to the dominant nation. However, when it separates into a different state, ethnicity gets politicized and imbued with the ideology of nationalisms. In the end, it forges its nationality. See: Cașu, *Politica națională*, 39.

⁸⁵ Cașu, *Politica națională*, 38.

⁸⁶ Octavian Țăcu, “‘Moldovenismul’ sovietic și politicile identitare ale URSS în RASSM și RSSM (1924-1991)”. In *Fără termen de prescripție. Aspecte ale investigației crimelor comunismului în Europa*, edited by Sergiu Musteață, Igor Cașu (Chișinău: Editura Cartier, 2011), 333-4.

opposed to the Romanian one. In its essence, it was a process of denationalization with overlapping policies. It sought to cultivate a Moldovan identity different from the Romanian one, and the “Moldovan” identity would be subject to Russification and Sovietization during the entire Soviet period.⁸⁷ Nevertheless, it has been pointed out that by the 1980s, an autochthonous Moldovan culture was rather stipulated than cultivated.⁸⁸ Except for the Cyrillic alphabet and the loan words from Russian, there was little which would have indicated the difference between the “Moldovan” and Romanian languages.

The linguistic issue in Soviet Moldova was intricate though. In 1989, the republic was the third Russified nationality in the Soviet Union, surpassed only by Ukraine and Belarus.⁸⁹ If in the 1950s, the so-called Moldovan schools (in the Romanian language) registered 69.2 percent attendees, by 1989 their number dropped to 59.2 percent. Particularly in the 1970s, most parents tended to associate their children’s successful future with the knowledge of the Russian language. The preservation of the national identity was overtaken by more practical needs.⁹⁰ Not only Russian was the language of Moldova’s universities, but it also offered easier access to various jobs and even social prestige. In the Soviet Union, belonging to a dominant national group was linked with patronage networks and access to the state’s resources. With the soaring Moldovanization of the republic’s urban centers, the number of the Russian-speaking Moldovans increased dramatically. In 1897, ethnic Moldovans accounted for 14 percent of Bessarabia’s town dwellers. During the Soviet period, their number reached 28 percent in 1959, and 46 percent in 1989.⁹¹

Between 1970 and 1989 most urbanized Moldovans became fluent Russian speakers. At the same time, the number of Moldovans speaking only their mother tongue, or only another non-Russian language, diminished between 1970 and 1979. However, contrary to the Soviet conception of towns as melting pots producing the “Soviet people,” urbanization gave way to an ethnolinguistic identity. Since the competitive environment of the urban jobs market implied cultural solidarity, the role of ethnicity and interethnic relationships intensified. The demographic trend was particularly salient between Bessarabians and Transnistrians, which emphasized that not only ethnicity, but also ties to a particular network of co-ethnics could have ensured upward mobility in the party and access to various state’s resources. The importance of such networks in Moldova, ethnic, regional, or local, would later become paramount.⁹²

As in the other Soviet republics, the disintegration of the Soviet system in Moldova was part of a transitional phase in which the Moldovans became active players. In the wake of Mikhail Gorbachev’s *perestroika*, various social actors expressed themselves regarding the

⁸⁷ Ibid., 336.

⁸⁸ King, *The Moldovans*, 108.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 115.

⁹⁰ Cașu, *Politica națională*, 139.

⁹¹ King, *The Moldovans*, 116.

⁹² Ibid., 119.

need for Moldova's cultural renewal. Contrary to the old party elites, the emerging cultural representatives in Moldova strove for political assertiveness in the Soviet system and society. The conflictual gap between generations defined the political dynamics of the post-Soviet transformations.⁹³

Moreover, *glasnost'* and *perestroika* resulted in the democratization of the public space, which meant that people could freely express themselves, yet also realize their suppressed sentiments. Up to then, the latent frustrations of most Moldovans, who felt discrimination regarding their linguistic rights, were disguised with relatively harmonious interethnic relations. Since Russian was in fact the only official language in Soviet Moldova and the entire USSR, the language laws, adopted on 31 August 1989 bore a sense of equality and social justice.⁹⁴ At the same time, ethnicity turned into a factor of political mobilisation, contradicting the internationalist ideal of the "Soviet people."⁹⁵ By declaring "Moldovan" the state's new language, the laws not only confronted the legitimacy of the Communist Party, but also antagonized the minority groups, particularly in the regions populated by compact ethnolinguistic communities (Russians and Ukrainians in the north and Transnistria, and Gagauz and Bulgarians in the south of the republic).

The establishment of the Popular Front of Moldova in May 1989 out of the two main opposition organizations (the Democratic Movement in Support of Restructuring and the Alexie Mateevici Literary-Musical Club) was initially supported by Moldova's ethnic groups. However, the call for union with Romania and the use of Moldovan as the state language in the Latin script made ethnic minorities leave the Front. The Gagauz minority created the cultural association *Gagauz Halki* (the Gagauz People), which gradually concentrated on their autonomy. At the same time, Moldova's Russians, Ukrainians, and Bulgarians formed *Edinstvo* (Unity) to stand against the Front's reforms and to defend the Russian language.

In February 1990, the Popular Front broke the communist monopoly of power by winning the largest number of seats in the Moldovan Supreme Soviet. The number of ethnic Moldovans accounted for 69 percent of the Soviet's deputies, holding 83 percent of the Soviet's legislative positions. When a hundred of the Russophone deputies fled the Supreme Soviet, the Moldovans remained in full control.⁹⁶ A pan-Romanian narrative prevailed among Moldova's leadership. Having become the republic's first prime minister in May 1990, Mircea Druc initiated a purge of non-Moldovans from cultural institutions and advocated the country's urgent unification with Romania. Moldova's nationalism based on the pan-Romanian discourse estranged the ethnic groups, which comprised 35 percent of the total population. In August 1990, the fear of Romanianization made the Gagauz declare a Gagauz Soviet Socialist Republic out of Moldova's five *raions* (districts). Violence between the Gagauz militants and the

⁹³ Petru Negură and Svetlana Suveică, "Everyday Ethnicity and Popular Responses to Nation-Building Projects in Moldova after 1989", *Comparative Southeast European Studies*, no. 71 (2023): 465-487, 471.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 473.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 472.

⁹⁶ Haynes, 153.

Moldovan leadership was prevented only with the intervention of the Soviet troops.⁹⁷ Similarly, in September 1990, in the left bank region, an autonomous Dniester Soviet Moldovan Republic (DMR) was declared as part of the Soviet Union. By the end of 1990, Moldova announced its sovereignty within the Soviet Union. In August 1991 the commitment to independence was reaffirmed through the rejection of the proposed treaty on union, and by the condemnation of the “August Putsch” in Moscow. Shortly after the failed coup, Moldova proclaimed itself an independent state and in the same year, Mircea Snegur became the first popularly elected president of the country.

In the context of the Soviet Union’s collapse, ethnic minorities of Moldova were the most pessimistic about the country’s future. In January 1991, 83 percent of the participants in a survey considered the decline of interethnic relations an alarming problem. The “worsening economic crisis,” “massive unemployment,” and the “outbreak of interethnic conflicts” were named as the main fears regarding the future.⁹⁸

Post-Soviet Moldova’s intricacies

After independence, Moldova’s most problematic political issues have revolved around identity and ethnicity. The debates do not imply interethnic disputes, but are rather preoccupied with the meaning of the Moldovan identity and nation.⁹⁹ Since the country’s independence was marked by the competing discourses of Moldovanists and pan-Romanians, naming the state’s language (Romanian or Moldovan) and the content of its history (Romanian and Dacian, or Slavic and Soviet) still represent the most challenging aspects.¹⁰⁰

Likewise, Moldova’s society has been divided between the pro-Western and pro-Russian geopolitical orientations. The former sympathies have increased in the last two decades (40 and 60 percent) along with the number of people supporting Moldova’s unification with Romania. Between 2016 and 2021, the share of the latter soared from 19 to 50 percent, while the number of opponents of unification decreased from 55 to 43 percent. These figures derive from people’s disappointment in the Moldovan government along with the project of Moldova as an independent state.¹⁰¹ In a survey in November 2022, an alarming number of respondents (40.3 percent) emphasized the lack of trust in the country’s political figures.¹⁰² Another survey in June 2023 revealed that 53.1 percent of the participants felt that

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 154.

⁹⁸ Negură and Suveică, 474.

⁹⁹ Eleonor Knott, *Kin Majorities: identity and citizenship in Crimea and Moldova* (Montreal: McGill - Queen’s University Press, 2022), 151.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁰¹ Negură and Suveică, 475.

¹⁰² “Prezentarea rezultatelor sondajului sociologic Barometrul Opiniei Publice, noiembrie 2022,” Institutul de Politici Publice and CBS Research (Chișinău, 2022).

<https://ipp.md/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/Prezentarea-rezultatelor-BOP-2022.pdf>, accessed May 13, 2024.

things in the country were going in the wrong direction.¹⁰³

It is interesting to notice that despite the Moldovan state's grinding problems, ranging from civil war to corruption, poverty and mass emigration, people still perceive Moldova as their homeland and pin their hopes on a brighter future. Even the Moldovans who identify as Romanians, and with Romania as a kin-state, embrace the country's hybridity and cultural pluralism, pointing out that Moldova's multicultural realities are more peaceful compared to the divisive political discourses.¹⁰⁴ When stressing the Republic of Moldova's right to its "own statehood," many Moldovans complain about having been ignorantly stereotyped by their Romanian counterparts. Their experiences in Romania have convinced them that while the Romanian state may officially frame the residents of Moldova as brothers, the Romanian society could employ stereotypes that mark the Bessarabians as inferior and others.¹⁰⁵ This explains why the Moldovans who hesitate to identify as wholly Romanian or Moldovan accept that Romanians and Moldovans are relatives, but they should live in different countries. The idea of a "big brother" remains a sensitive subject after Moldova's experiences with Russian domination. Moreover, the Romanians are perceived as being "too ideological" and "nationalist" towards Moldova.¹⁰⁶ Moldova remains their country for many of its inhabitants, while others describe it as a state that "deserves its existence."¹⁰⁷

The Europeanization as a means of geopolitically getting rid of Russia's coercive influence intensified its meaning after February 2022. Since Russia's war against Ukraine, many Moldovans feel that "now everything is at stake for Moldova" and that Putin's top priority is to prevent the country from joining the EU and integrating with the West. By setting up polling stations in Transnistria for its roughly 200,000 residents to vote in the Russian presidential elections in March 2024, the Kremlin reminded of its first stage of absorbing the occupied territories in Crimea and elsewhere in eastern Ukraine into the Russian state.¹⁰⁸ The frozen conflict in Transnistria has hindered Moldova's national development, while Russia gained leverage and constantly meddled with the Moldovan life. This example should give food for thought to anyone urging Ukraine's leadership to consider a deal with Russia.¹⁰⁹

Moldova would cease to exist as an independent country if Ukraine is defeated and

¹⁰³ "Sondaj de opinie: Percepția cetățenilor cu privire la procesul de integrare europeană al Republicii Moldova." Institutul pentru Politici și Reforme Europene (Chișinău, 2023), https://ipre.md/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/PPT_Survey_IPRE_11.07.2023_final.pdf (accessed on 16 May 2024).

¹⁰⁴ Knott, 168-9.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 169.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 174.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 176.

¹⁰⁸ "Ukraine's War is Killing Another Country: How Moldova's Fate has become tightly tied up with its neighbor's, Foreign Policy," 21 March, 2024, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/03/21/moldova-transnistria-ukraine-russia-war-odesa/> (accessed on 16 May 2024).

¹⁰⁹ "My Country Knows What Happens When You Do a Deal With Russia," *New York Times*, 23 April 2024, https://www.nytimes.com/2024/04/23/opinion/moldova-russia-ukraine-war.html?unlocked_article_code=1.sU0.8JXR.2Gj_6QNXb9v_&smid=url-share (accessed on 17 May 2024).

Russia carves out a land corridor to Transnistria. It would also cut short Moldova's struggle for Europeanization while opening a Russian frontier with direct access to an EU member state. Having signed a security cooperation deal with France in March this year, Moldovan President Maia Sandu stressed that "our shared security is at stake. If the aggressor is not stopped, he will keep going, and the front line will keep moving closer. Closer to us, closer to you."¹¹⁰

Since Moldova's independence, the Russian military, intelligence services and allied oligarchs have tried to control the region via Transnistria. Also, as the supplier of energy and buyer of farm produce, Moscow has manipulated Moldova's incomes and inflicted inflation. Most importantly, it funds illegally and cultivates corruption through political agents such as Ilan Shor, Vlad Plahotniuc and former President Igor Dodon, according to U.S. and Moldovan government investigators. Russia spreads also manipulated information and fake material through its state-controlled media and Moldovan proxies (Shor's and his allies' television channels).¹¹¹ Given the constant pressure, poverty and the population's long-lasting distress, the Russian propaganda managed to cultivate pro-Russian sentiments, particularly among the Gagauz ethnic minorities.

However, it has been pointed out that the war against Ukraine dramatically impacted Moldova's socio-political realities. It has broken structurally Bessarabia's ties with Russia more severely than the fall of the USSR.¹¹² Apart from stopping the Moldovan citizens' eastward migration, the war has changed the political parties' discourse. Their dissociation from the image of Vladimir Putin is based on the Moldovan population's reaction against the war. The Moldovans displayed impressive solidarity and empathy towards the Ukrainian refugees. It was not the state, but the population, churches and small NGOs that took care of the huge number of displaced Ukrainians. Putin's admirers could not compete with the population's anti-war reaction. The pro-Russian parties in Moldova have changed their rhetoric because Russia and Putin no longer bring votes.¹¹³

Moldova's future seems to be intrinsically linked with the Russian-Ukrainian war. Regardless of the Kremlin's leverage in Moldova, the latter will move towards Europe if the

¹¹⁰ "Ukraine's War is Killing Another Country..."

¹¹¹ "Russia's War on Moldova will be Political in 2024. And then? As a hybrid war targets Moldova's elections, how to help Moldova avert violence?" United States Institute of Peace, January, 2024, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2024/01/russias-war-moldova-will-be-political-2024-and-then-0> (accessed on 17 May 2024).

¹¹² Vasile Ernu, "33 de ani de independență a Republicii Moldova și războiul din Ucraina. Care ar trebui să fie strategia României?" <https://www.libertatea.ro/opinii/33-de-ani-de-independenta-a-republicii-moldova-si-razboiul-din-ucraina-care-ar-trebui-sa-fie-strategia-romaniei-4998527> (accessed on 3 September 2024).

¹¹³ Vasile Ernu, "Războiul a făcut într-un an ce nu au reușit guvernării moldoveni în 30. Cum s-a apucat să învețe limba română un om de afaceri de la Chișinău, vorbitor de rusă," <https://www.libertatea.ro/opinii/razboiul-a-facut-intr-un-an-ce-nu-au-reusit-guvernanti-moldoveni-in-30-cum-s-a-apucat-sa-invete-limba-romana-un-om-de-afaceri-de-la-chisinau-vorbitor-de-rusa-4643046> (accessed on 3 September 2024).

Ukrainian state project is successful.¹¹⁴ It is worth noting that in Moldova, the war has not only stripped the Russian language of its cultural meaning, but it also given Romanian a pragmatic undertone.¹¹⁵ As a post-imperial legacy, albeit unofficially, Russian is still the *lingua franca* of Moldova's cream of the crop. Since the majority of Moldovans speak Russian, the country's ethnic minorities are not motivated to learn Romanian. With the war against Ukraine, Romanian language is becoming meaningful.

Conclusions

Lia Greenfeld pointed out that "identity is perception. If a particular identity does not mean anything to the population in question, this population does not have this particular identity."¹¹⁶ The idea should inspire the strategy of building a strong Moldovan imagined community, given the war in Ukraine and Russia's aim to divide Moldova's society.

Moldova's situation as a weak state with a weak elite is often connected with the country's identity disputes and the role of the latter in prolonging such reality. Moreover, the pre-existing ethnic loyalties and artificial borders are perceived as preventing the state from generating loyalty to Moldova. The country's struggle for sovereignty is also ascribed to identity. As Eleonor Knott has stressed, "Moldova is framed as a 'paradigmatic example' of a state struggling with identity, with Romanian irredentism deemed responsible for the 'tinderbox' of Moldova's separatist struggles."¹¹⁷

That is why the analysis of Moldova's identity requires complex approaches, both from above and below. Such a frame of reference would help to enhance the lens through which the identification of Moldova's population is perceived. Contrary to the preconceived belief in an acute "identity crisis" of most Moldovans, widespread among the Romanian elites, a quantitative study in 2004 proved that 95 percent of the respondents self-identified ethnically as "Moldovans" and 5 percent as "Romanians."¹¹⁸ Similarly, the ethnic Russians' affiliation with their "external homeland" was disproved by their identification as "Moldovan citizens" (67 percent). The identification of Ukrainians registered 71 percent of the respondents identified with their ethnicity, 42 percent with their locality, and 65 percent as "citizens of the Republic of Moldova." Ethnic identification dominated over civic identification among the respondents of ethnic Gagauz and Bulgarians. Also, the local/regional belonging was more salient than among the Moldovan (Romanian speakers) respondents. Overall, the data showed that ethnic and local identity dominated the civic identification with the Moldovan state.¹¹⁹ However, a survey in 2017, which measured respondents' identification on

¹¹⁴ Armand Goșu, *Rusia, o ecuație complicată* (Iași: Polirom, 2022), 326.

¹¹⁵ Ernu, "Războiul a făcut într-un an..."

¹¹⁶ Lia Greenfeld, *Nationalism: five roads to modernity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 13.

¹¹⁷ Knott, 151.

¹¹⁸ Negură and Suveică, 476.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*

different levels, including ethnolinguistic, local/regional, and civic, suggested that the definition of the “Moldovan” identity shifted from predominantly ethnolinguistic to civic.¹²⁰

Most importantly, Eleonor Knott’s research focused on analysing the meanings of identification among Moldova’s inhabitants and emphasized the contingency, dynamics, and volatility of identification across generations.¹²¹ Much in line with Linda Alcoff’s paradigm, identities proved to be fluid, plural, and multiple.¹²² As David D. Laitin stressed, people are exposed to family, community, and national history; within their wider societies, they may adopt a variety of social categories, local, national, religious, and linguistic.¹²³ Knott’s fieldwork demonstrated that identification formulated in terms of mutually exclusive categories, or mutually exclusive rhetoric of Moldovanism or pan-Romanianism, tends to neglect the nuanced ways in which identification is experienced and it acquires meaning.¹²⁴

Transcending the barrier imposed by the mutually exclusive categories of Moldovan and Romanian, and considering that ethnicity does not generate a unique identity,¹²⁵ it has been argued that the Moldovan populations’ identification with a kin-state should not be understood as particular territorial and political preferences. It rather points out how such identification has transformed from irredentism into support for extra-territorial relations with Romania.¹²⁶ Moreover, the Europeanized relations with Romania seem to be perceived as a means of being closer to Romania, while moving away from Russia and the “Soviet concept.” It is framed as a panacea ensuring a brighter future, reducing the borders, but also eliminating the territorial irredentism, and counter-balancing the controlling geopolitics of past and present.¹²⁷

Only if it cultivates a strong civic identity, as a counter-reaction to the war, will Moldova manage to overcome its current challenges.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Knott, 189.

¹²² Linda Martín Alcoff, “Identities,” in *Race, Class, Gender, and Nationality*, edited by Linda Martín Alcoff, Eduardo Mendieta (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2003), 7.

¹²³ David D. Laitin, *Identity in Formation: the Russian-Speaking Population in the Near Abroad* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), 11.

¹²⁴ Knott, 189.

¹²⁵ Greenfeld, 13.

¹²⁶ Knott, 163.

¹²⁷ Ibid.