



# Republic of Moldova versus Romania: the cold war of national identities

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**Monica Heintz**

**REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA VERSUS ROMANIA:  
THE COLD WAR OF NATIONAL IDENTITIES**

In their project of forging a Moldovan identity that would justify the existence of the economically distressed Republic of Moldova as an independent state, the officials search for the symbols commonly used for forging nationhood. As these symbols are the same or not significantly different from those of the neighbouring Romanian state due to their common history (same official language, though differently labelled, same tricolor, similar coat-of-arms), the Moldovan officials perceive Romania as a threat. My analysis based on anthropological fieldwork pays special attention to the political declarations of the Moldovan government and questions their capacity of strengthening citizenship in a country in which ethnic minorities form more than 30% of the population and which experiences severe economic problems and massive emigration. The analysis draws also attention to the evolution of NATO and EU borders, which have accelerated the identity problems of Moldova, which does not wish to follow 'neither Russian, nor Romanian' ways.



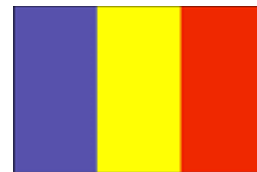
Rep. of Moldova



Romania



Rep. of Moldova



Romania

## The issues at stake in the identity conflict

For understanding the complex relationship between the two neighbouring states of Romania and the Republic of Moldova, one should necessarily go back to the history that unfolded on the physical territory on which these two states are constituted. Two thousand years ago the region was inhabited by Dacians, who were conquered by the Romans in 106 A.C. The population resulting from the mix of Dacians and Romans spoke a distinctive language, of clear Latin influence, which was already recognized towards the 17<sup>th</sup> century as 'Romanian' (first mentioned as 'Romanian' by the Metropolitane Varlaam in 1643, quoted in *Literatura si Arta*, 13.11.2003). Later the wave of migratory people, especially the Slavs, influenced the language and mixed with the local population. From the 14<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the region was politically divided into three main kingdoms: Moldova, Walachia and Transylvania.



(from Treptow, 1996)

The three kingdoms have been under the influence of three empires: the Austro-Hungarian Empire (Transylvania and from the 18<sup>th</sup> century the northern parts of Moldova), the Ottoman Empire (Walachia and Moldova) and the Russian empire (the eastern part of the kingdom of Moldova, baptized by Russians Bessarabia, from the 19<sup>th</sup>

century). In the 19<sup>th</sup> century two of the kingdoms, Moldova, without Bessarabia, and Walachia benefited from favourable geopolitical circumstances to unite under the name of Romania.



(from Treptow, 1996)

After the First World War, due to the politics of nationhood promoted by Wilson and with the support of Western allies, Transylvania and Bessarabia voted for unification with Romania. The ensuing Greater Romania encompassed the current territories of Romania and the Republic of Moldova, and other territories now in Ukraine (Northern Bukovina, Maramures and Southern Bessarabia) and Bulgaria (the Quadrilater).



(from Treptow, 1996)

The German-Russian non aggression pact Ribbentrop-Molotov of 1939 allowed the Soviet Union to claim Bessarabia without the intervention of German forces. On the 28<sup>th</sup> of June 1940, after an ultimatum, the Romanian army and administration retired from Bessarabia and the Soviet army took over. The ‘annexation’ or ‘liberation’ of Bessarabia, depending on whose point of view is expressed, was accompanied by massive movements of people: the Romanian elite (teachers, priests, administration) sought refuge in Romania; those who did not manage to flee were subject to massive deportations in Siberia (Bulat, 2000; Fruntasu, 2003). One year later, in 1941, Romania joined the German forces, now in conflict with the USSR, with the aim of recovering Bessarabia. From 1941 to 1944 the Bessarabian region had a joint German- Romanian administration. On the 17<sup>th</sup> of March 1944, the Soviet troupes crossed the Dniester and incorporated the Bessarabian region and Northern Bukovina in the USSR. Parts of the territory (Northern Bukovina and Southern Bessarabia) were incorporated into Ukraine and the remaining central part was consolidated as a new republic, the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic (MSSR). The frontier between the Socialist Republic of Romania and the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic was reinforced and the history of the two countries was rewritten from a Soviet perspective: in order to justify the new borders, Stalin created a new nation, the Moldovans, an action necessary for respecting the USSR policy of incorporating only nation states in the USSR (Eyal and Smith, 1998). The Moldovans were conceived as a separate ethnic group from Romanians and hold to speak a different language, the Moldovan, which started being written with Cyrillic to further differentiate it from Romanian, written with Latin characters. The story of the birth of the ‘Moldovan’ language has been amply documented by Western social scientists, who found it of particular political interest (see Hegarty, 2001; Eyal and Smith, 1998; King, 2000). To render more complex the picture and prevent future territorial claims, Stalin also redesigned boundaries. He gave some of the Bessarabian territories to the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic and incorporated into the MSSR ‘in exchange’ a long border territory just across the Dniestr, Transnistria, which was existing since its creation by Stalin in 1924 under the name of the ‘Moldovan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic’. This strip of land, which had never belonged to the kingdom of Moldova and had only

40% ethnic Romanians (in the 1989 census), became the main industrial and energy producer of the MSSR (Troebst, 2003). During the whole socialist period, the two socialist republics of Moldova and Romania had few contacts and the circulation of information concerning their common past was prohibited in both states. Maps in Romania would juxtapose the map legend on the MSSR's territory, indicated only as 'USSR'. The Romanian intellectuals in MSSR had been massively deported, as all those who had contacts with the Romanian administration before the war. Moldovans had their own schools, but those wishing further education had to gain proficiency in Russian. Russian specialists were brought in the Republic, mixed marriages were encouraged and the *Homo Sovieticus* was almost born. Meanwhile the Moldovan history and literature had been reduced to those parts of the history exclusively linked to the kingdom of Moldova and to its Russian relations, while in Romania, Romanian history and literature excluded everything linked to the existence and products of the Moldovan territory. Despite this policy, at the end of the 80s, a new formed generation of Moldovan intellectuals started claiming language and national rights. In a few years, facilitated by the Perestroika and the general 1989 movements in Eastern Europe, Moldovans obtained the recognition of their national language as unique official language in the country (31 august 1989), of their ethnic name, of the Romanian national anthem and political rights (Cojocaru, 2001). At the time, the Republic featured a mixed ethnic population, including 64,5% Moldovans (Romanians), 13,8% Ukrainians, 13% Russians, 3,5% Gagaouz and other groups (from 1989 census, the last census available). Two years afterwards, on the 27<sup>th</sup> of August 1991, after the putsch against Gorbachev, the republic declared its independence from the Soviet Union under the name 'Republic of Moldova'.



(CIA World Factbook 2003)



(from the CIA-World Factbook 2003)

Romania was the first state to recognise Moldova's independence, an act often invoked today by Romanian politicians to defend themselves from the accusations of expansionism made by Moldovan officials. Fear of reunification with Romania was invoked by the eastern part of the republic, Transnistria, for justifying its secession, after a short war in 1992. Though technically separated from the Republic of Moldova (frontiers, other currency, own government etc), Transnistria still belongs officially to the Republic of Moldova, not being recognized as an independent state by the international community. For twelve years negotiators seek a solution to this conflict, which often distracts the attention of international press and population from other internal problems

faced by the Republic of Moldova (the most important being emigration and Romanian/Moldovan identity problems). From 1991 onwards the two states of Romania and Moldova have coexisted peacefully and engaged in cultural and economic contacts. But the national rights gained in 1989 are gradually vanishing away due to the desire of Moldovan officials to base the legitimacy of their new state on the uniqueness of their nation. Thus the name of the official language was named 'Moldovan' again, the anthem was changed to a text written by a Romanian born on the Bessarabian territory, Alexe Mateevici, history textbooks are periodically threatened to be changed (in 2004 in the majority of schools the History of Romanians is taught) and the old Stalinist doctrine of the difference between the two ethnic groups is embraced, the officials refusing to consider the Republic of Moldova as a Romanian state within different state borders.

Identities are always defined in two ways: through their intrinsic characteristics and in opposition. Similarities between the national characteristics and symbols of Romania and Moldova render the first option difficult. This is the main reason why the officials had to appeal to the second and develop an identity against the Romanian identity, by denigrating both Romanians and Romania as a state.

### **The anti-Romanian campaign in the Republic of Moldova**

The antipathy of Moldovan officials towards the Romanian state has grown after the 2001 elections in which the Moldovan Communist Party won a vast majority. The Communist officials promised to return to a territorial administration that would differentiate their countries' organization from Romania's organization (in *judete* as opposed to *raioane*), to change history curricula from Romanian History to Moldovan history and to introduce Russian as a second official language in the state. While the first administrative measure mentioned was implemented in 2003<sup>1</sup>, the attempt to change the history and to introduce Russian as official language met with massive demonstrations especially from students. In 2002 a sitting was organized in Chisinau city center, organized by a pro-unionist party and supported by young people, to prevent the rewriting of history and to ask for the recognition of the Bessarabian Metropolitanate, a

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<sup>1</sup> The organisation in *judete* was dating from 1999.



Romanian Orthodox structure that was not authorized to function since its revival in 1992. The rewriting of history was temporally abandoned but a vast campaign is still made in its favour. In 2003 new 'integrated' histories of Moldova started being taught in several schools in the Republic as an experiment and the state supported the publication and promotion of a *Moldovan-Romanian dictionary* (2003), of a *History of Moldova* (2003), written by Vasile Stati, who not only claim that there is a difference between the two ethnic groups, Romanian and Moldovan, but also state that Romania annexed Moldova in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, subjecting it to 'roumanisation' and that the eastern part of the Moldovan kingdom, the actual republic of Moldova, is the only part that survived, preserving its name and language. The books have a map of a 'Greater Moldova' on the cover. The intention to include Romanians as a separate ethnic group in the census planned for 2004 was stated by Victor Stepaniuk, leader of the Communist Parliamentary fraction in October 2003 (*Timpul*, 19.12.2003). The idea was that by getting the majority of people to assert their Moldovan identity, the reason for teaching Romanian literature and history in school will disappear. Also this introduces a division inside the Romanian-Moldovan population (estimated at 70% of the entire population in the Republic of Moldova minus Transnistria), between those who would declare themselves Romanians (mostly the elite) and those who would declare themselves Moldovans- mostly the rural population, whom, in the opinion of Iulian Fruntasu (2003), have never acquired identities larger than their very local identities, which on the one hand helped them preserve their customs and language, but on the other hand hindered the process of integration into the Romanian nation, during the interwar period. This policy of division of the majority group has been actively employed by the officials: an alternative Writers' Union who would promote an anti-Romanian stance was created, as well as an alternative Journalists' union etc

Looking at the external Moldovan-Romanian relations, the year 2003 was marked by the accusation made by the Ambassador of Moldova in Paris to the City Council of Europe that Romania did not revise its history of the Holocaust (the Council of Europe formally replied to assure Moldova that Romania is in the process of revising it with supervision from the Council of Europe), by president Voronin's declaration that

‘Romania is the last empire in Europe’, by a letter to the Commissar for European Enlargement stating that Romania was interfering in the internal affairs of the Republic of Moldova and spending huge amounts of money on its territory without coordinating it with the officials. A practical consequence of this declaration is the fact that since the communists are in power, the educational agreements promoting student exchange and the allocation of scholarships by the Romanian state to Moldovan citizens were suspended and have still not been resumed. Despite this, the Romanian state offers scholarships to Moldovan citizens who apply for, on an individual basis, at Romanian high schools and universities. The Romanian officials defend themselves from the accusations of interference by reminding that the Romanian state was the first to recognize the independence of the Republic of Moldova and by supporting ‘the European destiny of the Republic of Moldova’. Meanwhile, Romanian officials persistently state the ‘special relation’ between the two countries, two Romanian states, a formula strongly resisted by their Moldovan counterparts. The mass media in Romania is generally indifferent to the actions and movements of the neighbouring country. This apparent indifference of Romanian official and press is easily explainable by the fear to compromise Romania’s integration into the European Union, scheduled for the 1<sup>st</sup> of January 2007.

Here is an example of the confrontation of symbols and declarations between the two states and the press in the two countries. The 2nd of July 2004 was the anniversary of 500 years since the death of Saint Stefan the Great, important historical figure of the medieval kingdom of Moldova, canonised saint at the beginning of the 90s. Both Romania and the Republic of Moldova had declared 2004 as the Year Stefan the Great. Saint Stefan the Great was celebrated with great pomp at a gathering of hundred of thousands of people at the Putna Monastery, in Romania, where the king is buried. Moldovan Opposition newspapers announced that the president of Moldova conditioned his presence at Putna in Romania, where he had been invited by the Romanian president, to the recognition of the difference between Romanian and Moldovan language. The Romanian president denied that there has been such a discussion and stated that their relations with the Moldovan president were good. The Romanian press was indifferent to the matter. The Moldovan

president Vladimir Voronin organized a counter celebration of Stefan the Great in Chisinau on the same date. The presidential discourse insisted that history has rewarded Stefan with the preserve of his (Moldovan) state, language and people. His party newspaper, the Communist (2 iulie 2004), published on its front page a poem with clear territorial allusions, supported on the second page by an article entitled 'For a Unique Moldova', thus advocating the incorporation of Romanian Moldova into the Republic of Moldova.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> of July is the Saint Day of Stefan in the Romanian Orthodox Calendar. In his eagerness, the president celebrated Saint Stefan on this day, while the Republic of Moldova uses the old orthodox calendar of the Russian Orthodox Church, thus Saint Stefan's day is 13 days later than in Romania, on the 15<sup>th</sup> of July. While the Moldovan Opposition press considers this with hilarity and contempt, as it also looks down on most of the anti-Romanian manifestations of the communists in power, I would like to argue in this paper for a much more serious consideration of the declarations, symbols and policy lead by the communists. The material that I have collected in my 2003/2004 fieldwork in the Moldovan countryside show that 'moldovenism' has an impact on the Moldovan population. Its impact ranges from confusion towards one's own identity, to competition between Moldovans and Romanians and up to hate towards Romanians.

### **The competition of national identities at local levels**

There are several societal factors that catalyse the positive reception of moldovenism at local levels. The first is the ethnic composition of the country, which has 30% minorities, more than half of them born on the Moldovan territory, many of them better educated than Moldovans (Skvortsova:169) and often in leading economic positions. The russophones minorities have constantly supported a policy closer to Russia and the CIS and feared policies bringing nearer Romania. For maintaining good relations with minorities who speak poor Romanian (there had been initially an obligation for administrative staff to learn the official language of the country, but this was finally not reinforced), Moldovans continue using Russian in public spaces, as during the Soviet period. If they complain later in their personal environments about themselves being the

only bilingual citizens (Romanian/Russian) in the republic, this is seldom echoed in other places than independent newspapers and among Moldovan/Romanian intellectuals (who are actually also the most proficient in Russian). Mixed marriages are frequent; constituting 21% of all marriages in rural areas and 36% in urban areas (the statistics from the socialist period includes Transnistria, where the rates are higher, Skvortsova, 2002:172). Children from mixed marriages are often sent to school in Russian schools- as many of them told me in a broken Romanian, the reason being that "the (Russian) mother wanted me to speak Russian and the (Moldovan) father was indifferent". Language is the main distinctive feature between ethnic groups in Moldova, who otherwise have the same religion (Orthodoxy). Given that most of the labour migration from Moldova has Russia as a destination (Western Europe is more inaccessible due to visa regulations), children are encouraged to learn Russian as their perspective of future employment are linked to it. Russia is the country that offers employment to large parts of the Moldovan population, especially those leaving in the eastern parts of the Republic. Discrepancies in wealth, economic opportunities and Romanian or Russian sympathies could be seen between the western parts of Moldova, more Romania- oriented and the eastern part, more former Soviet Union- oriented.

The second factor is the perception of the 1989 national revival movement in the light of the present economic distress of the Republic of Moldova. Moldova is an agricultural country with no energetic resources, with 40% of its industry today in the secessionist Transnistria. When USSR collapsed, it was the end of the 'good old times', *bolshevita*- the communist voting in the 2001 election is an expression of communist nostalgia and trust in a communist regime. Or many communist voters in the countryside believe their national aspirations to be the cause of the failure of the USSR and thus the cause of their present economic distress. In their despair face to the economic situation in the country, they regret the national movements and blame their current economic problems on their elites and on Romanians in general (the Moldovan/Romanian elites claim to be Romanian).

A third related factor comes from the ideologisation that took place during the socialist period. Moldovans learnt in school that the Soviets had liberated them from fascist Romanians (during the war from 1941 to 1944 Romania was allied with nazi

Germany), from bourgeois Romanians (some educated people in the village in which I worked ignored even the fact that Romania was a socialist country). The Soviet past with the series of deportations from the 40s did not come under public criticism as in the Baltic States. After 1989, when due to the mobilisation of urban elites in a series of demonstrations for national language and national symbols, Romanian was recognised as an official language in schools and history books became Romanian history books (on the recommendation of the Council of Europe), parts of the population saw this as a form of Romanian invasion. The policy of the Communist Party in power, 'neither with Russians, nor with Romanians', makes Moldovans see in equal terms their national relation with Russians and their relation with Romanians. This is mainly due to lack of information: isolated from the 1989 demonstrations and uninformed due to the lack of alternative non-governmental television and radio stations that would reach the countryside (the journals are quite elite oriented and difficult to read by people who had to switch from Cyrillic to Latin characters at an adult age). Thus many rural people do not know that their Romanian national revival took place independently from the country with the same name, Romania, which at the time was under the personal dictatorship of Ceausescu. Also they do not seem to know that later movements of self declared 'Romanians' in the republic were not led by Romania as a country or by Romanians born in Romania.

To mix things up further, a new type of Romanians appeared in the Republic of Moldova. These are Moldovans (and not only of Romanian ethnic origin) who obtained Romanian citizenship in the past ten years. Given Romania's perspective for EU integration, the possibility to obtain Romanian citizenship is more and more appealing to Moldovans, who have tremendous difficulties to travel abroad and who are in their great majority seeking work abroad (official statistics count that 650 000 people, i.e. 17% of the total population, work abroad). The minister of External Affairs of the Republic of Moldova drew the attention of EU authorities to the danger that "more and more citizens of the Republic of Moldova will be tempted to acquire Romanian citizenship for travelling in the Schengen space and thus the Republic of Moldova risks becoming a state with more and more Romanian citizens" (Jurnal, 23.01.2004). Romania, which is otherwise extremely shy in fraternity declarations towards the neighbouring Moldova (and this holds for the parties in power and in the opposition, except for the

ultranationalists of 'Greater Romania Party', 8% of the electoral options in the June 2004 elections), has a very special citizenship policy that allows ex-Romanian citizens and their descendents to re-obtain Romanian citizenship without having to comply with residence requirements. Interestingly, this citizenship offer is what bothers less the moldovenists I have met, who in their great majority were seeking means to obtain Romanian citizenship while simultaneously blaming Romanians for stealing them their songs, authors, historical figures etc. (The story told by Ilascu, a former prisoner in Transnistria now senator in the Romania, in the Opposition press is that the promoter of moldovenism and of Greater Moldova, Vasile Stancu, has also solicited to become 'Romanian with the right papers'.)

At local levels, the confusion regarding national and ethnic identity fosters negative feelings towards Romanians, who are known to live in a more prosperous country and thus thought to afford taking over everything: Moldovan national poets, the tomb of Saint Stefan the Great and all the churches he built, the literary figures of Eminescu, Creanga, Alecsandri (it so happens that an impressive number of Romanian literature classics come from the Romanian part of Moldova, so they have been recognised also as Moldovan authors, even during the Soviet period, but being born in Romanian Moldova, are indisputably Romanian). The strongest promoters of these negative feelings are people more aware than the average of their ethnic identity and proud of their Moldovan identity, as opposed to Russian and Ukrainian identity. Imagine their disappointment face to an ethnic Romanian from Romania (such as myself) who would use the same Romanian sayings, know the same popular songs and recite the same poems, probably even better than the Moldovans, because of her/him being socialised uniquely in the Romanian culture (and knowledge of the folklore is promoted as major marker of ethnic identity, see Cash 2002). My host in Moldova, a Romanian/Moldovan pro-communist, told me one day when the TV cable was installed to catch Romanian State Television in the village, that one Romanian program was even too much! Until then, one could watch around five Ukrainian TV programs, and only with difficulty the Moldova State program (who runs for a few hours per day, in Romanian)- while there were no Ukrainian speakers in the village and there are quite a few arguments about how similar Russian (that villagers understand) and Ukrainian languages are... Clearly the

unique Romanian program was seen as a danger, because it would risk becoming the unique source of information for the Moldovans in the village (the Romanian Radio is already the most listened to radio and my pro-communist host won't actually listen to anything else. One day he caught a different program, he claimed to be a Chisinau program, because of the slight Moldovan accent and music transmitted, to discover later that it was Radio Iasi, Iasi being the capital of Romanian Moldova. He did not appreciate my witnessing of his confusion).

### **Conclusion**

In this paper I wanted to show some of the difficulties of legitimising a country on exclusively national bases. The Republic of Moldova is a multiethnic country, born out of USSR collapse in 1991, which tries to found its independence and legitimacy on the national identity of its majority, the Moldovans (Romanians). As this majority shares the same ethnic belonging, language and history as the majority of the neighbouring country, Romania, due to its springing from the same core, the only available policy for Moldovan identity creators appeared to be an aggressive denial of the common features, which was accompanied by accusatory political declarations towards the neighbouring state. While this policy appears absurd to the Romanian elites of the Republic of Moldova and to the Romanian leaders and press, it does not go without consequences at the local levels. The doctrine of 'moldovenism' is embraced by uninformed, confused sympathisers of the Communist Party, who become hostile to Romania and Romanians due to it. The cold war of declarations could thus generate more far-reaching animosities than would be expected.

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