

WHEN THE FLIGHT FROM REALITY BECOMES AN ASSUMPTION OF THE LOSS OF IDENTITY - AN ANALYSIS OF THE CURRENT GEOPOLITICAL POSITION OF THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF NATIONAL IDENTITY

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Abstract. *The 2016-2021 electoral cycles in the Republic of Moldova brought as a novelty the disappearance of political parties that assumed and promoted the Romanian national identity. At the same time, in the public discourse in Chişinău, a rejection of the geopolitical approach to the problems of the Republic of Moldova was noted. The promotion of a Moldovan civic nation at the expense of the Romanian national identity is another component of the political developments in Chişinău during the same period. In the following lines we try to analyze the causes and effects of this renunciation of the Romanian national identity in the public space of Chişinău, starting from the forms of manifestation of this renunciation. We also analyze the theoretical and argumentative sources of the promotion of the Moldovan civic nation starting from two policy papers published in Chişinău in 2012 and 2017 that constitute the foundations of these significant changes in public discourse in the Republic of Moldova.*

Keywords: Republic of Moldova, Moldovan civic nation, national identity, Moldovan language, Bessarabia

On May 1, 2019, Republic of Moldova state television broadcasted the documentary film „Moldova 89-91” by director Eugeniu Damaschin (Preaşcă, 2019). The film presents the events that led to the exit of the current Republic of Moldova from the Soviet Union, using contemporary footage and interviews with survivors of the events made 30 years after they occurred. The montage of these interviews is designed to show that the assumption of the Romanian national identity in the public space in Chişinău in the years before the dissolution of the Soviet Union would be the main cause of the political and economic problems facing the Republic of Moldova today. The insinuation of this idea is a subtle one, testimony to the director's skill, and the film we are talking about is part of a wider effort to remove the issue of Romanian ethnic identity in the Republic of Moldova from the public space. In the following lines we will analyze the programmatic documents of this mutation promoted in Chişinău in the public and political space, a mutation that has forms of manifestation also in Romanian mass-media.

National identity and its forms of manifestation among the countrymen abroad are considered fundamental elements in the grid of geopolitical analysis proposed by Anton Golopenţia, Ion Conea and M. Popa-Vereş (Golopenţia, Conea and Popa-Vereş, 1939). Anton Golopenţia pointed out that the nation does not stop at the borders of the state, but also exists beyond them, naturally constituting an area of interest for relations between states (Golopenţia, Conea and Popa-Vereş, 1939, p. 109-110). According to Golopenţia, the object of geopolitical research is the potential of states; potential being the result of the constituent factors: territory, nation, population, economy, social structure, culture, mode of government, political environment; thus geopolitical research is not only geographical or only economic or only political, but is simultaneously geographical, demographic, economic, social, cultural, political. From the point of view of M. Popa-Vereş it is an obligation for the state to use all means to maintain the cultural cohesion of those parts of its nation that are not contained within its own

borders, geopolitical research being aimed at providing arguments to support such action (Golopenția, Conea and Popa-Vereș, 1939, p. 123-124). Maintaining national identity in the historical Romanian province of Bessarabia, a large part of which has now become the Republic of Moldova, is thus an area of geopolitical interest.

The issue of national identity in Bessarabia has a history spanning more than two centuries, beginning with the annexation to the Russian Empire in 1812, when local institutions and the Romanian language were removed from the public sphere and gradually replaced by imperial institutions and the Russian language (Jewsbury, 2003). The union of Bessarabia with Romania in 1918 triggered a process of creation of a Moldovan national identity separate from the Romanian one on the left bank of the Dniester River (King, 2002) in parallel with a state construction subordinated to the Soviet Union, namely the Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic of Moldova (Cojocaru, 2009). In the post-1944 Soviet period, the Soviet authorities de facto abandoned the project of creating a Moldovan language separate from Romanian, although they maintained the Cyrillic alphabet script, continued the steps of Russification of the Romanian language spoken between the Prut and Dniester rivers (Bruchis, 1984) and continued the project of building a Moldovan national identity separate from Romanian (Cașu, 2000).

The main demands of the population of Soviet Moldova between 1988-1989 were the return to the Latin alphabet and the official name of Romanian language as steps to recover national identity, the anti-Soviet uprising in Chișinău having an identity essence (Ghimpu, 2002). The presence in the public space in Chișinău of promoters of a Moldovan national identity different from the Romanian one remained a constant after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. The argument crystallized during the Soviet period became a constitutive element of the ideology of the pro-Russian political parties in the Republic of Moldova, preserving the main theses according to which the Moldovan language is different from the Romanian language, the ethnogenesis of Moldovans was a historical process separate from the ethnogenesis of Romanians, and as a consequence there is a Moldovan national identity different from the Romanian one (Eremia, 2018). One of the adjacent theses, also taken over from the Soviet period, is that the population of the Republic of Moldova is multi-ethnic, in which the majority of a certain ethnicity would be a relative one - this despite censuses showing a clear majority of Romanian speakers (even if the name „Moldovan language” is often used following decades of Soviet propaganda in this regard).

Essentially after 1989 the political scene in Chișinău was divided into two camps: pro-Romanian and pro-Russian, each of the two sides adopting one of the Romanian or Moldovan national identities. The pro-Romanian line of argument in Moldova also made the case for accession to the European Union, but over time the subject of Chișinău's rapprochement to the European Union became dominant over the subject of national identity. This led to articles that considered the „Flower Bridges” of 1990-1991 as events that should remain in the past, as they have no place today, the subtext being that the promotion of Romanian national identity in the Republic of Moldova would be a matter of the past, with no use today (Necșuțu, 2021). The association European Union - Romanianism versus Russia - Moldovanism has induced in the public space of the Republic of Moldova the idea that the essence of the confrontation on the internal political scene is geopolitical - the confrontation between the West and the Russian world (Varzari, 2020).

The superimposition of the pro-Western orientation over the Romanian national identity in the political discourse gradually led to the elimination of the identity issue. The differentiation between the „geopolitical vote” (understood as a choice between the Western world and Russia) and the „anti-corruption vote” started to be made during the 2016 presidential election campaign (Călugăreanu, 2016). This was the starting point for the rejection of the „geopolitical vote” - which resulted in the removal of the issue of Romanian national identity in the Republic of Moldova from the public space, Romanian national identity being linked to the pro-Western orientation. Romanian national identity began to be seen as an

obstacle to solving the problems faced by the Republic of Moldova: „One of the remarkable phenomena of Moldovan politics is the pendulum swing between East and West. The identity problem, ethnic structure, separatist conflicts, imitative democracy, precarious economic situation, predominantly parochial political culture underlie the pendulum phenomenon” (Boțan, 2016).

The campaign against „geopolitical voting” returned to Chișinău on the occasion of the 2020 presidential elections, when the positioning of the main candidates Maia Sandu and Igor Dodon were analyzed from this point of view (Cenușă, 2020). Already in the 2021 parliamentary elections, it was noted that geopolitical disputes, i.e. the pro-Western or pro-Russian orientation of the Republic of Moldova, were removed from the public debate: „A large part of Moldovan citizens no longer perceive pro-Russian or pro-European messages in geopolitical terms. Instead, they look at foreign relations through the prism of how foreign cooperation with the West or the East helps to solve the country's challenges” (Fedoseev, 2021). Significantly, the removal of the issue of national identity from the public and political space between 2016-2020 led to the effective disappearance from the political scene of parties that supported the Romanian national identity, and these were replaced by parties with a discourse focused exclusively on eliminating geopolitical choice and solving economic and administrative problems. At the same time, the pro-Russian parties in Chișinău have maintained and further promoted their discourse supporting the Moldovan national identity separate from the Romanian one.

This evolution of the political discourse in the Republic of Moldova, which had the effect of removing almost completely from the public space the Romanian identity discourse, is a novelty; the preservation of the Romanian national identity was alive even during the Soviet domination in Chișinău and the main way of resistance against the processes of denationalization and ethnic assimilation set in motion by the Soviet Union (Cașu, 2014). The phenomenon described above, with political effects and at the level of national consciousness in the Republic of Moldova is based on two policy papers: „ *Integrarea grupurilor etnice și consolidarea națiunii civice în Republica Moldova*”, Institute for Public Policy, Chișinău, 2012 by Oazu Nantoi, Igor Botan and Andrei Iovu with the support of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands and „*Consolidarea coeziunii sociale și a unei identități comune în Republica Moldova. Probleme cheie și recomandări practice*”, Institute for European Policies and Reforms, Chișinău, 2017 by Vladislav Kulminski, Vadim Pistrinciuc and Andrei Popov with funding from the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs. We will try in the following lines to analyze these documents, the premises from which they start and the conclusions they reach.

The 2012 study launched and justified in the public space the idea of a Moldovan civic nation (Nantoi, Botan, Iovu et al, 2012). The essence of the argument in this study is that the conflicting identity approaches in the Republic of Moldova - Romanian and Moldovan - are irreconcilable and neither of them would be able to impose itself, therefore another way of defining the identity of the citizens of the Republic of Moldova must be sought, namely the adoption of a civic identity. The study proposes a consistent summary of the theoretical discussions around the concepts of ethnicity, nation and nationalism. The three major currents are mainly presented: the primordialist theory, which argues that ethnicity is attributed at birth as the basis of identity; the instrumentalist theory, which argues that ethnicity is a phenomenon that can be modified and manipulated by an elite for political purposes; and the constructivist theory, according to which ethnicity is a phenomenon in permanent change. The authors of the cited study tacitly argue against a primordialist approach to national identity and imply that they support the latter two theories. A cursory exploration of nation-building in the rest of the world favours from the outset of the study countries where civic nations have been built, where ethnic identity is secondary. Unfortunately, this quick approach to historical phenomena spanning hundreds of years ignores the fact that in most cases civic nations were the result of often extremely aggressive assimilationist policies. The overall conclusion of the theoretical

apparatus in the study is that civic nations have succeeded in eliminating the problem of identity conflict - a conclusion that is at least exaggerated given current developments.

The main pillar of the historical argument is the idea that the Romanian nation was created in the 19th century and that the territory of Bessarabia, annexed in 1812 to the Tsarist Empire, did not participate in this process of nation-building. The key events for the identity construction of the population in the region are then listed, events whose interpretation would constitute points of conflict in the antagonistic Romanian-Moldovan relationship: the union of Bessarabia with Romania in 1918, the Soviet ultimatum and the annexation of Bessarabia in 1940, Romania's participation alongside Nazi Germany in the war against the Soviet Union, the annexation of Bessarabia to the Soviet Union in 1944. This study argues that the views on these events are irreconcilable and likely to remain permanently conflicting.

The climax of this state of confrontation is presented as the period 1988-1992, when the reaffirmation of the national identity of the Romanians in Bessarabia through demands for recognition of the Latin alphabet and the Romanian language led to the outbreak of inter-ethnic conflicts that culminated in the autonomy of Gagauzia and Transnistrian separatism. The primordialist approach to identity-building and the attempt to build an ethnic state around the Romanian ethnic group - which has triggered violent contestation from other ethnic groups - is to blame for these developments that hinder Moldova's development to this day.

The last episode of this evolution is presented in the form of the attempt of the Party of Communists and President Vladimir Voronin to build a Moldovan ethnic identity during the years 2001-2009, an attempt that was fiercely contested and eventually failed.

According to the 2012 study, attempts to build a national identity based on ethnicity - Romanian or Moldovan - are doomed to failure in Moldova, the only solution being a new approach: civic nationhood.

What would such a civic nation look like? The cited study states that „The principles of a civic nation are: supremacy of law, right to free choice, rational attachment to state institutions, unity of citizens based on their consent to live together, pluralism, democracy, freedom, and respect for individual rights” (Nantoi, Boțan, Iovu et al, 2012, p. 42). Such a project should be approved by all political forces, so that there is continuity in the event of changes generated by elections. In addition, a number of mechanisms are envisaged, mainly aimed at promoting and imposing this identity model among the population. The essential confusion in this definition is the false dichotomy between citizenship rights and freedoms and national identity, the two being not opposed but complementary. Citizens' rights and freedoms are thus wrongly instrumentalised in order to eliminate Romanian national identity from the public space in Chișinău.

The ideas presented above were repeated in 2017 (Kulminski, Pistrinciuc, Popov et alii, 2017), on the same structure of the argument and with the same conclusions. In the study mentioned here, the multi-ethnic character of the population of the Republic of Moldova is underlined, this despite the realities attested by the census history which indicates a clear Romanian/Moldovan majority. It also tries to give credence to the idea that the Russian language should be maintained as a language of inter-ethnic communication, to the detriment of the mother tongue of the majority of the population. The argument continues with the idea that the adoption of the Romanian identity was likely to cause a rift between the citizens of the Republic of Moldova after the break-up of the Soviet Union, which in turn generated the conflicts that culminated in Transnistrian separatism. The solution proposed in the 2017 study is to abandon ethnic identification and adopt a civic identity.

The last censuses in the Republic of Moldova - in 2004 and 2014 - were contested, there were valid allegations of data falsification and manipulation. Yet the figures from these censuses continue to inform public policy proposals. On a historical scale, censuses in the current Republic of Moldova show a tendency to increase the number of settlers during the imperial periods, and nowadays the highest degree of ethnic homogeneity in the region's

history, with 82% Moldovan/Romanian. The „multi-ethnic Moldovan people” thesis is simply no longer supported by statistics.

The two studies mentioned above do nothing but bring the project of the Soviet nation back to the present, while preserving its main characteristics: the Russian language as a language of interethnic communication, the ethnic identity confusion Romanian/Moldovan. The historical analysis of the evolution of national identity in the Republic of Moldova starts from the false assumption that the national consciousness of Romanians developed in the 19th century, an assumption contradicted by in-depth studies on Romanian national identity before this period (Armbruster, 1972 and Pop, 1998). The thesis that the population between Prut and Nistru did not participate in the historical process of Romanian national identity formation is also false and has been rejected (Ghimpu, 2002). A correct historical view cannot fail to notice that the Romanian identity construction on the left side of Prut was stopped at the beginning of the 19th century by the Russian imperial project, resumed in the interwar period, stopped again and hijacked by the Soviet imperial project.

Supporters of „Moldovan civic identity” promote the false idea of „peaceful coexistence of ethnic groups in Moldova”. A blatant untruth, from 1812 until the disappearance of the Soviet Union the history of the region was one of ethnic cleansing and constant discrimination against Romanians. During the Tsarist period the Romanian nobility was assimilated into the Russian nobility and removed from the leadership of the province (Jewsbury, 2003). This was compounded by successive waves of colonisation that changed the ethnic picture of the region. At the beginning of the 20th century, Chişinău shocked the whole world with the savagery of anti-Jewish pogroms, so that one can hardly speak of „peaceful coexistence”. The Soviet Union completed the picture of ethnic cleansing with mass deportations, the organization of a starvation of the population on the same level as in Ukraine and the resumption of colonizations (Caşu, 2014). The „peaceful coexistence” of ethnic groups in the Republic of Moldova used to argue civic identity is a myth, in reality we have a long history of ethnic cleansing instrumented by the imperial power in Moscow.

All this theoretical construction of the Moldovan civic nation has had political effects, the structure of this discourse being taken up by the current President of the Republic of Moldova Maia Sandu in most of her public interventions in which she has positioned herself on the side of the need to overcome the geopolitical divide (Radu, 2017). The renunciation of the geopolitical approach to the problems of the Republic of Moldova and implicitly to the promotion of the Romanian national identity has been presented as an obligation even in the Romanian media (Ghincea, 2021).

This theoretical construction of the geopolitical divide approach and the abandonment of geopolitical analysis in the public discourse in the Republic of Moldova were forgotten after the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. On 3 March 2022, the Republic of Moldova applied for membership of the European Union and the public discourse split again into two camps: pro-Western and pro-Russian. At the same time, there has been a reserve in the public assumption of Romanian identity, a significant example being President Maia Sandu's speech in the European Parliament when she stated that „We are a European country, with a European language, a European history and a European political system. At least 1/3 of us are already EU citizens” (Sandu, 2022). The President of the Republic of Moldova avoided any reference to the Romanian national identity of the population of the Republic of Moldova, and when she referred to the fact that one third of the citizens of the Republic of Moldova are European citizens, she hid the fact that there are about 1,000,000 citizens of the Republic of Moldova who have taken back Romanian citizenship.

Essentially, public discourse in the Republic of Moldova has returned to the starting point: geopolitical options are as real as can be and there can be no question of artificial constructions. With the war in Ukraine, the political class in Chişinău was forced to make a clear choice and suddenly abandon the discourse that abandoned geopolitical themes. The energy

crisis triggered by the bombing of Ukraine's electricity grids quickly re-oriented Moldova towards Romania for electricity supply (Hotnews, 2022).

The question of the assumption of the Romanian national identity by the political class in the Republic of Moldova remains under question, as seen in President Maia Sandu's speech to the European Parliament, but also in other public interventions. This is most likely due to the attempt to maintain as much as possible the approach to this topic during the electoral campaigns of previous years, dominated by the set of ideas supported by the two programmatic documents presented in this article. Apart from the energy crisis, the Moldovan government is facing a series of protests supported by pro-Russian parties that are allegedly aimed at destabilising the country in the context of the war in Ukraine (Călugăreanu, 2022).

A quantitative and qualitative analysis of the media in Moldova and Romania could reveal more effects of public discourse in support of the Moldovan civic nation, its ways and means of dissemination. Most of the forms of manifestation of this type of discourse, however, were expressed through social networks, which unfortunately do not allow the preservation for future reference of the various interventions. Something specific to the discourse in support of the Moldovan civic nation has been its predominance in the space of social networks, with very few supporters who support it through traditional written media (newspapers, magazines, scientific journals).

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