

COMPETING IDENTITIES IN THE EX-SOVIET SPACE: THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA'S IDENTITY CRISIS IN LIGHT OF ITS FROZEN CONFLICT IN TRANSNISTRIA*

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Abstract: *This paper tackles the frozen conflict in Transnistria through the lens of the competing identities between the Republic of Moldova and its breakaway region. Based on the fact that most specialists on the above-mentioned frozen conflict stress the responsibility of the Moldovan leadership for exploiting and manipulating the interethnic animosities in the wake of the Soviet dissolution, the author will reassess the historical background of the country in order to point out its identity crisis from which the political inconsistency stems. The politics of pan-Romanianism on which Chişinău embarked in the late years of perestroika and the first years of Moldova's independence will be discussed in conjunction with the war in Transnistria in March 1992 and the latter's newly emerging identity as a consequence. Finally, the clashing identities between Tiraspol and Chişinău will be analysed as an increasingly insurmountable barrier to effective resolution of the conflict.*

Keywords: Transnistria, the Republic of Moldova, competing identities, frozen conflict, indigenization

Introduction

The frozen conflict in Transnistria represents a political deadlock between the Republic of Moldova and its left bank region, which seceded from the latter in light of the Soviet Union's dismemberment. Terms such as Transnistria, or Transnistrian people had not existed before the bloody war, which erupted between Tiraspol and Chişinău in March 1992. It has been argued that the very name the "Transnistrian conflict" stresses only its geographical position, but does not say anything about its essence. Erroneous stereotypes of perception have been artificially imposed and

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doomed the resolution of the conflict to failure¹. Moreover, chances for the resolution in the sense of the reintegration are increasingly lessened due to the emergence of a “Transnistrian” identity². Currently, Transnistria ranks among the so-called *de facto* states in the ex-Soviet space – the internationally unrecognized states, such as South Ossetia, Abkhazia, and the Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh – and represents 12% of the total territory of the Republic of Moldova³.

Given the fact that the Transnistria’s case stands out among the other frozen conflicts due to the absence of any interethnic animosities prior to *perestroika*⁴, and that the conflict erupted owing to the mismanagement and political amateurism on the part of the Moldovan leadership⁵, examining Moldova’s identity and political profile will cast new light on this complex issue. Moldova (read: the Republic of Moldova) is not only an artificial state⁶, but also the only Soviet republic to declare its independence in order to become part of another state (Romania), instead of fighting for its own political future⁷. Never before 1991 had the contemporary Republic of Moldova constituted an independent political entity. Its national borders are the result of various processes of nation and state-building, ranging from the medieval Moldovan state and the Romanian Principalities, the Ottoman, Habsburg, and Russian Empires, to

¹ Oazu Nantoi, *Istoki i perspektivy razresheniya Pridnestrovskogo konflikta*, „Молдова–Приднестровье: Общими усилиями – к успешному будущему. Переговорный процесс”, [„Moldova – Transdnistria: Working Together for a Prosperous Future. Negotiation Process”], Chişinău, Cu drag, 2009;

² Natalia Cojocaru, *Nationalism and identity in Transnistria*, “Innovation”, Vol. 19, No. 3/4, 2006, pp. 261-272, p. 262.

³ Mihai Grecu and Anatol Țăranu, *The policy of linguistic cleansing in Transnistria*, Cluj-Napoca, Napoca Star, 2005, p. 11.

⁴ John O’Loughlin, Vladimir Kolossov, and Andrei Tchepalyga, *National Construction, Territorial Separatism and Post-Soviet Geopolitics: The Example of the Transdnister Moldovan Republic*, „Post-Soviet Geography and Economics”, [On-line]: <https://ibs.colorado.edu/john/pub/PsgeTMR.pdf>, (accessed on: 30.III.2020).

⁵ See: Alexander Burian, *The Transnistrian Conflict – the prospects of its resolution: a view from Kishinev*, „Revista Moldovenească de Drept Internațional și Relații Internaționale”, Vol. 21, Issue 3, 2011; Andrei Deveatkov, *Conflictul transnistrean: situația actuală și perspectivele de soluționare*, [The Transnistrian conflict: current situation and prospects for resolution], in: Petru Negură, Vitalie Sprinceană, Vasile Ernu, *Republica Moldova la 25 de ani*, Chişinău, Cartier, 2016 p. 102; Oazu Nantoi, *Istoki i perspektivy razresheniya Pridnestrovskogo konflikta*.

⁶ Oazu Nantoi, *The east zone conflict in the Republic of Moldova – A new approach*, Institute for Public Policy, online: <http://miris.eurac.edu/mugs2/do/blob.pdf?type=pdf&serial=1035994370893>, (accessed on 25.VIII.2020).

⁷ Kamil Całus, *The Unfinished State. 25 years of independent Moldova*, „OSW Studies”, No. 59, Warsaw, 2016, p. 10.

Greater Romania and the affirmative nationality policies of the Soviet Union. That is why the country's perspective on borders and territory is organically linked with its colliding perception of national and state identity⁸. The engineering of the new national identities in the ex-Soviet space represented a common, and to a certain degree natural, phenomenon of the political life in the successor states. Nevertheless, Moldova's stress on identity politics has become particularly conspicuous and important. The lack of any antecedent to statehood and a nation permeated with an acute identity crisis made for the new country's leadership to embark on a difficult and inconsistent mission in an attempt to reconfigure Moldova's national profile. What is more, the immaturity and antagonism of the political elites greatly impacted on the interethnic relations, which in the context of the new socio-political changes grew bitterly hostile. As it has been argued, when having tried to tackle the ethnic issue, Moldovan leadership used the identity discourse in a manner which highlighted the tension between the ethnic and the civic conceptions of the "Moldovanness". Moreover, debates about national identity and national statehood became the key component of the political process.⁹ With such a situation, the country not only set off on the war with its breakaway region, but also determined the emergence of the latter's new identity. The mechanism plays a tremendous role in the current frozen conflict and will be the subject of debate in this article. In order to analyze and explain Moldova's current identity, the paper will start with a historical background of the country, and then will discuss its trajectory after the independence. The frozen conflict with Transnistria will be reassessed in light of Chişinău's new political discourse related to the politics of Pan-Romanianism. It will finally stress the competing identities of the Republic of Moldova and Transnistria, and the increasingly insurmountable barrier to defrosting the conflict as a consequence.

The Republic of Moldova's split identity

On 27 August 1991 the Republic of Moldova declared its independence from the Soviet Union and a year later entered the United Nations. The future orientation of the country was a heated debate for its political actors who were vacillating between closer ties with the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and reunification with

⁸ Octavian Țicu, *Borders and Nation-Building in Post Soviet Space: A Glance from the Republic of Moldova*, in Ilkka Liikanen, James W. Scott and Tiina Sotkasiira, *Borders, Migration and Regional Stability in the EU's Eastern Neighbourhood*, Karelian Institute of the University of Eastern Finland, pp. 53-68.

⁹ Charles King, *Moldovan identity and the politics of Pan-Romanianism*, „Slavic Review”, Vol. 53, No. 2, 1994, pp. 345-368, Cambridge University Press, pp. 366-367.

Romania. Along with the unionists or “pan-Romanianists” and the devotee of the Soviet Moldova, a third group, the “Moldovanists”, represented the partisans of an independent state. As Moldovan identity issue came to the fore, for the unionists – mainly represented by the writers and other intellectuals – the term “Moldovan” and its derivatives were seen as a regional form of identity; the Moldovan independence, from their perspective, was no more than a preliminary step in rejoining the Romanian state. Likewise, the most radical supporters of the “Moldovanness” were defending the idea of an independent state within the CIS, while totally rejecting the ethnonym “Romanian”. To a certain degree, all these attitudes and political positions boiled down to the historical background of the region.

The territory of the contemporary Republic of Moldova was part of the historical province of Moldova (currently, the eastern region of Romania). In the context of the numerous geopolitical wars between Russia and the Ottoman Empire in the 18th and 19th centuries, in 1812 the Tsarist Empire acquired the region between the Rivers Prut and Dnestr, known as Bessarabia. The annexation of Bessarabia to the Russian Empire and its later transformation into a Russian governorate (*gubernia*) played a tremendous role not only in shaping the cultural profile of the Moldovans, but also in instilling an acute sense of identity crisis intermittently exploited by the political elites. In light of the Soviet *perestroika* and the following dissolution of the USSR – in search for a new political reconfiguration and due to the lack of alternatives – local elites in Chişinău would denounce the event of 1812, call for the reunion with Moldova’s historical lands, and intensify the war with the left bank Moldova (Transnistria).

Throughout one century inside the Russian Empire Bessarabia did not take part in the process in which its historical sisters, Wallachia and Moldova, had developed their common Romanian national consciousness: the rebellion against the Ottomans in 1821, the standardization and Latinization of the Romanian language and script in the 1840s and 1850s, the unification of Wallachia and Moldova into a Romanian state in 1859, the establishment of Romanian dynastic house in 1866 and 1881, and the liberation from the Porte in 1878¹⁰. Moreover, after the fall of the Russian Empire, when Bessarabia reunited with its historical land and formed together the Greater Romania in 1918, the project was reluctantly embraced by the great majority of Bessarabia’s peasant population. Romania’s strategy to consolidate a “nationalising state”¹¹, after its overwhelming territorial and ethnic minorities gain, collided with the

¹⁰ Charles King, *The Moldovans. Romania, Russia, and the Politics of Culture*, Stanford, Hoover Institute Press, 2000, p. 49.

¹¹ Wim van Meurs, *Moldova: nested cases of belated nation-building*, “Revue [d’études comparatives Est-Ouest](#)”, 2015, 1, (No. 46), pp. 185-209.

alienated local dwellers to which the Romanian ideal was an abstract notion frozen in time since 1812¹².

In August 1940, as a consequence of the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact, Bessarabia became part of the USSR, having undergone an intense process of Sovietisation. In addition, the foundation of the new Moldovan Republic was a controversial act, in which Stalin's arbitrariness and strategy went hand in hand. The loss of Bessarabia after the Russian Revolutions of 1917 had provoked a long dispute between Moscow and Bucharest. Inspired by a group of Romanian and Bessarabian communists¹³, in October 1924 the Moldovan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (MASSR) was established inside Ukraine, – on the approximate territory of the contemporary Transnistria – with the main purpose to restore Bessarabia to the Soviet Union¹⁴ and to spread communism outside the Soviet borders¹⁵.

Nowadays, it would be difficult to gauge the degree to which the MASSR was constituted due to an initiative from below or derived from Moscow's expansionistic rationale. Likewise, it would be difficult to demonstrate to what extent the policies carried out in the region had been part of the general trend of the USSR, or had been implemented as a specific strategy based on the MASSR's political profile as Romanian borderland. However, nation-building policies had not been only intense and short-lived¹⁶, but also erratic and contradictory. The process of the political culture switched from the Moldovanization campaign, based on the Cyrillic script and a distinct Moldovan identity, to the Latinization programme which promoted the Latin alphabet. Despite the fact that both campaigns corresponded to similar policies carried out across the Soviet Union, – the indigenization and Latinization programmes – the

¹² Charles King, *The Moldovans: Romania, Russia, and the Politics of Culture*, p. 49.

¹³ The idea of MASSR was a project proposed by a group of political immigrants from Bessarabia and Romania: the representatives of the illegal communist movement in Bessarabia, members of the Comintern and the Romanian Communist Party (G. Kotovskii, Al. Bădulescu, P. Tkachenko, Sol. Thinkelman, A. Nicolau, I. Dic. Dicescu, T. Diamandescu, etc). In a letter addressed to the CC of the Soviet Union's CP(b), the proposed republic was depicted as a political-propagandistic tool resembling the Soviet Belorussian Republic's policy towards Poland, or the Karelian Republic's strategy towards Finland. In addition, it was argued that the new political entity could attract the sympathy of the local people and act as a bridgehead for regaining Bessarabia. See: Argentina Gribincea, Mihai Gribincea, Ion Șișcanu, *Politica de moldovenizare în R.A.S.S. Moldovenească: culegere de documente și materiale*, Chișinău, Civitas, 2004.

¹⁴ M. Y. Medinets, *Румыны за Днестром: Молдавская АССР в Румынской историографии*, [The Romanians beyond the Nistru: Moldovan ASSR in the Romanian historiography], „Uchenye zapiski Kazanskogo Universiteta”, pp. 1533–1540, Kazan` 2016, p. 1534; Ruslan Shevchenko *Konflikty v Pridnestrov'e i Nagornom Karabakhe: istoriya i puti uregulirovaniya* [The Conflicts in Transnistria and Nagorno Karabakh: history and prospects of settlement], Chișinău, Arc, 2019, p. 68;

¹⁵ Oazu Nantoi, *Istoki i perspektivy razresheniya Pridnestrovskogo konflikta*, p. 58.

¹⁶ Wim van Meurs, *Moldova: nested cases of belated nation-building*, p. 187.

nation-building in the MASSR particularly aimed to implant a communist and Moldovan (as opposed to Romanian) identity into Romanian (Moldovan) speakers¹⁷, which according to the 1926 census accounted for 26% of the whole population¹⁸. In the end, the project of building a new nation in the region, failed not only due to its artificiality, but also because of the ambivalence of the elites towards the culture that they wished to create¹⁹.

On the entire area of the MASSR²⁰ the Moldovans were concentrated mainly in the 6 *raions* and constituted the absolute majority in Dubossarskiy and Slobodzeiski *raions*²¹. When Bessarabia was annexed after the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact in 1940, the 6 *raions* from the MASSR along the Nistru River were added to it in order to constitute the Moldovan Union Republic. Stalin's new administrative unit was founded on ethnic criteria and the rest of the 11 *raions*, with mainly Ukrainian and Russian populations, remained under Kiev's jurisdiction. Its creation was also explained by Stalin's intention to compensate the new Moldovan Republic for the loss of its southern and northern areas, which became parts of Odessa and Chernivtsy *oblasti* respectively²².

The engineering of the communist national historical narrative in the Soviet Moldova was initiated after the Second World War. Accordingly, Moldova's emergence as a definite nation was associated with its secession from the Romanian province in 1812, or owing to more Slavic influence much earlier. The Soviet policies carried out in the region aimed to build solid cultural barriers between the Moldovans and the Romanians. In its most devastating period inside the USSR, the former

¹⁷ *Ibidem*.

¹⁸ Oleg S. Galuschchenko *Динамика численности и ареал расселения молдаван в конце XIX – начале XXI веков* [*The dynamics of the number and range of resettlement of Moldavians in the late XIX – early XXI centuries*], „Revista de etnologie și culturologie”, No. 3, 2008, p. 143, online: https://ibn.idsi.md/sites/default/files/imag_file/Dinamica%20cisenosti.pdf, (accessed on: 20.VII.2020).

¹⁹ Charles King, *The Ambivalence of Authenticity, or How the Moldovan Language Was Made*, „Slavic Review”, Vol. 58, No. 1, 1999, pp. 117-142, p. 119.

²⁰ The territory of MASSR, – with its first capital in Balta, comprised the almost entire Balta district (*okrug*), part of Odessa district in Odessa Governorate (*gubernia*), and part of the Tulchin district in the Podolia Governorate – was much larger than the nowadays Transnistria. See: Старые карты Европы: Исторические карты России и стран Европы, online: <https://q-map.ru/%D0%BA%D0%B0%D1%80%D1%82%D0%B0-%D0%BC%D0%BE%D0%BB%D0%B4%D0%B0%D0%B2%D1%81%D0%BA%D0%BE%D0%B9-%D1%81%D1%81%D1%80-1928-%D0%B3/>, (accessed on 8.VII.2010).

²¹ Oleg S. Galuschchenko, *Динамика численности и ареал расселения молдаван в конце XIX – начале XXI веков...*, p. 143.

²² John O'Loughlin, Vladimir Kolossov, and Andrei Tchepalyga, *op. cit.*

Bessarabia faced famines, exterminations and deportations²³ along with massive waves of in-migration of ethnic Russians and Ukrainians. Combined with the Sovietizing campaigns and the already existing identity crisis, the region became much more Soviet than Romanian. Despite Romania having become also a communist state, the rift between the Romanians and the Moldovans concerning language, history, and national identity remained a highly politicized issue²⁴. Similarly, in the Republic of Moldova the antagonistic views on history and identity disputed the same events, (1812, 1918, and 1940) in order to interpret differently the turning points of the country. Through their association with other nations, such as Russia, these dates have highlighted the competing perspectives on national identity by the Romanianists and the Moldovanists²⁵.

The language laws: identity and ethnic issues

In the context of the Soviet dissolution, Moldova's first steps towards its independence were represented by the language laws adopted on 31 August 1989. Accordingly, they declared the Moldovan the state's language and not only confronted the legitimacy of the Communist Party, but also antagonized the minority ethnic groups, – the Russians and the Gagauz²⁶ – having marked the defining point in the following frozen conflict. By the end of 1990 the country 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.

²³ See: *Moldovenii sub teroarea bolșevică: Sinteze elaborate în baza materialelor Comisiei pentru studierea și aprecierea regimului comunist totalitar din Republica Moldova*, [The Moldovans under the Bolshevik terror: Summaries elaborated based on the materials of the Commission for the study and evaluation of the totalitarian, communist regime in the Republic of Moldova], Chișinău, Serebia, 2010; Igor Cașu, *Dușmanul de clasă: represiuni politice, violență și rezistență în R(A) SS Moldovenească, 1924-1956* [The class enemy: political repression, violence and resistance in the Moldovan (A)SSR, 1924-1956], Chișinău, Cartier, 2015.

²⁴ Wim van Meurs, *Moldova: nested cases of belated nation-building*, p. 187.

²⁵ Vladimír Baar, Daniel Jakubek, *Divided National Identity in Moldova* „Journal of Nationalism, Memory & Language Politics”, Vol. 11, Issue 1, 2017, pp. 58-92, p. 62.

²⁶ There are many theories related to the origins of the Gagauz, but according to the most common one, they represent a Turkic people and are Eastern Orthodox Christians. On the territory of nowadays Republic of Moldova the Gagauz inhabit the southwestern part of the country; Comrat is officially the capital of the autonomous region of Gagauzia.

The language laws disaffected also the Moldovan political leadership, having radicalized the most prominent representatives of the pan-Romanianism, – the Popular Front, or Moldova’s national movement. Since the laws had been seen as a historical manifestation of the “true identity” of the country’s ethnic majority, the government lethargy to march determinedly towards the independence, moved the Popular Front into the opposition. In February 1992 the Front became a real party – the Christian Democratic Popular Front – with the clear allegiance to the Moldovan-Romanian unification. Consequently, the new discourse provoked an irrevocable schism between the most ardent pan-Romanianists (the Christian Democratic Popular Front) and the Congress of the Intelligensia, formed in April 1993 – the milder unionists who promoted “gradual economic and spiritual integration with Romania” rather than immediate political union²⁷. The radicalization against the backdrop of the language laws had similar effects among the partisans of an independent Moldova. The most extreme voices inside the Agrarian Democratic Party, – the most prominent among these groups – formed of the-ex *apparatchiki*, were even rejecting the term “Romanian” to the detriment of the “Moldovan”, while having referred to the major ethnic group of the country. As it has been argued, the stress on such distinctiveness had been nothing but a strategy for guarding the most powerful posts in Moldova’s mainly agrarian economy. The closer moves towards Romania could have endangered not only their domestic positions, but also the agricultural and trade ties with the former Soviet states²⁸. Most importantly, the language laws underscored the ethnic component of the language issue and initiated a new debate over identity. Ever since the formation of Moldova’s popular front, the rebirth of the Moldovan people was seen possible merely “at the expense of those who had long oppressed them”²⁹.

Furthermore, the leadership of the national movement contained the first generation of the educated Moldovans who owing to the process of the indigenization in the 1960s³⁰, had grown to confront and challenge the older academics. Similar to their counterparts in the politics or other professional fields in the aftermath of the national revival, they perceived the language question as an opportunity to advance on

²⁷ Charles King *Moldovan identity and the politics of Pan-Romanianism*, p. 351.

²⁸ *Ibidem*, pp. 351-352.

²⁹ Charles King, *The Moldovans. Romania, Russia, and the Politics of Culture*, p. 138.

³⁰ In the late 1960s, during Leonid Brezhnev’s mandate, in order to counteract the economic and political corruption, as well as to reinvigorate the economy and promote new elites able to carry out the policies of the Communist Party, and indigenization campaign based on local nationalism was initiated in the Soviet Moldova. See: Octavian D. Țicu, *The Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact and the Emergence of the Moldovan ‘Nation’: Reflection after 70 years*, the article presented during the conference “The Baltic Way – Way to Freedom”, p. 20, online: https://www.vdu.lt/cris/bitstream/20.500.12259/32018/1/2335-7185_2010_V_7.PG_7_33.pdf, accessed on 1.IX.2020.

their careers, but at the same time, to support the idea of the national language, which had been discreetly promoted since the 1960's. All these Moldovan cultural entrepreneurs, born mainly in the 1940s, articulated new ethno-political identities.

With the initial publication of the draft laws in the summer of 1989, a series of protests among the Russian-speaking minorities unleashed particularly loud and organized in the left-bank Moldova. In the summer of 1989 the Slavs and the Gagauz formed their own unified fronts – they called both for the Russian and the Moldovan to be declared the state languages rather than reduce the Russian to the ranks of the interethnic communication. While some members of the Gagauz population had begun to claim regional autonomy, the leaders of the Slavic-dominated organization *Edinstvo* pressed for equal linguistic status for both the Russian and the Moldovan. Also, in the industrialized area of current Transnistria frequent strikes in enterprises were held as public protests against the language laws. Despite the growing interethnic tension in the country, the status of the Moldovan as the state language was decided on 31 August 1989, and the Supreme Soviet not only had neglected the reaction of the Russian speaking minorities, but also intensified the belligerent mood and provoked a new series of strikes. The main failures of the Moldovan political leadership derived from their inability to communicate with both the population and the political opponents; not to mention their carelessness about appeasing the antagonized ethnic groups. Oazu Nantoi pointed out that the Transnistrian industrial representatives at the beginning of 1990 were rather confused and properly uninformed by Chişinău, and that evident hostility against the right-bank Moldova was missing³¹.

The rift between the radicals and the moderates widened during Mircea Druc's mandate as prime minister. As one of the most prominent leaders of the popular front, he carried out a virtual purge of the non-Moldovans from the cultural institutions and this evident shift in the educational policy menaced the ethnic minorities into believing that they would be incorporated into a new Greater Romania. Owing to his position inside an overwhelmingly ethnic Moldovan/Romanian government, the prime minister overtly had appealed to the volunteers to take up arms in order to protect the territorial integrity of the country. Meanwhile, in the left bank region where the Russian-speakers constituted the majority, the language laws were rejected as "Draconian measures aimed at undermining the "internationalist" message of the Communist party and sowing discord among Moldova's various nationalities"³². The introduction of the

³¹ Oazu Nantoi met the members of Tolchmash factory as vice-president of the Soviet of the Popular Front in February 1990. See: Oazu Nantoi, *Istoki i perspektivy razresheniya Pridnestrovskogo konflikta...*

³² Charles King, *Eurasia latter: Moldova with a Russian face*, „Foreign Policy”, No. 97, pp. 106-120, p. 110.

Romanian language as compulsory was hitting hard on the pre-existing and well-established socio-political hierarchy in which the Russian speaking population had been on top. From the very inception of the political confrontation in the Moldova SSR, Transnistrian's phobia about Romania had been constantly exploited in order to threaten and mobilize the population. In the industrial centres of Transnistria it took a particularly exaggerated form having been constantly fostered by both unofficial publications and the communist nomenclature. The prospect of Moldova's reunion with Romania was not only nonsensical in the left-bank area, as the region had never been part of Romania, but constituted a horrible scenario considering Transnistria's fate in the Second World War³³. The animosities with the Gagauz and the Transnistrians escalated during Mircea Druc's tenure and culminated in the establishment of the Republic of Gagauzia and the self-proclaimed DMR. Moreover, the evolution of the political process in the Republic of Moldova marked an important shift in the president's approach towards Moldova's national identity. On 5 February 1994, during the Congress "Our Home – the Republic of Moldova", Mircea Snegur condemned the Moldovan writers and historians for questioning "the legitimacy and historical foundation of our right to be a state"³⁴. Much in tone with his communist predecessors, the president stressed the existence of a distinct Moldovan nation as the foundation of the state, as well as a separate national language. Such an outspoken discourse on identity issue constituted a political strategy in the context of the following parliamentary elections. Snegur's reliance on the autochthonous Moldovan nationalism was drawing favourable attention to the electoral masses in the countryside, where the Moldovans accounted for two-thirds of the entire ethnic group and 80% of the rural dwellers. According to a survey carried out in 1992, less than 10% of the ethnic Moldovans supported the union with Romania; in the same way, 87% of the population chose the Moldovan as opposed to Romanian as their native tongue. Shortly after the elections, a government-sponsored referendum showed that 90% of its participants voted for an independent state within the post-Soviet borders³⁵.

³³ During Romania's alliance with Nazi Germany in the Second World War, between August 1941 and January 1944 Transnistria was occupied and transformed into Transnistria Governorate. The issue remains particularly sensitive due to its role in the Holocaust and the inhumane atrocities against the victims of Antonescu-Hitler regimes. According to Charles King, the novelty of this episode in the history of the Holocaust derives from the fact that it took place outside the territories under the German administration; hence all the responsibility for the atrocities committed in Transnistria lies with Romania. See: Charles King, *Odessa: geniu și moarte într-un oraș al visurilor* [*Odessa: Genius and Death in a City of Dreams*], Chișinău, Cartier, 2019, p. 167.

³⁴ Charles King, *The Moldovans: Romania, Russia, and the Politics of Culture*, p. 155.

³⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 159.

The intermittent skirmishes with the Gagauz and the bloody war with the Transnistrians in 1992 were now assuaged by the leadership stress on Moldova's non-ethnic and citizenship-based character. Moreover, the country's multiethnic nature was underscored by the special portfolios reserved for the separatist regions in the newly formed Sangheli government. The pan-Romanianists final fall from grace was signalled by the replacement of the ministers of defence and state security in July 1992 for their uncompromising attitude during the Transnistrian crisis³⁶. While at the beginning the unionists had taken advantage of the Soviet Union's demise and occupied the leading positions in the sovereign state, their following inability to adopt a milder discourse and deal more wisely with the ethnic minorities caused their political bankruptcy and paved the way for their most fierce opponents – the former communists (the Agrarian Party). Also, their incompetence to come to terms with the ethnic issue, which culminated in the Transnistrian war, antagonized the left bank and strikingly contrasted with Snegur's strategy of multiethnicity. The pressure from the intellectuals in Chişinău, combined with the irredentist voices in Bucharest, had forced Snegur and the Agrarians to adopt their stance on the distinct Moldovan identity as the base for the current state. Likewise, having feared separatism, Snegur highlighted the concept of Moldovan citizenship – derived from an evaluation of the ethnic complexity of the region – as the foundation of the Moldovan statehood³⁷. Considering the developing stage of the frozen conflict, the competing nature of the ethnic and civic conceptions of Moldova's national identity only added to the already intricate historical legacies of both Moldova and Transnistria.

Instead of conclusions: competing identities and the frozen conflict

The new political discourse in the disintegrating Soviet Moldova was part of the general pursuit for freedom from the Moscow-tied elites, which had taken place among the non-Russian groups inside the USSR. Consequently, when Moldova proclaimed its independence, its most Russified and industrialised area across the Dnestr River, declared its own independence. Moldova's strategy of mobilizing the national feelings as the easiest way to consolidate power and make political claims was very typical of a rudimentary political elite heading a rural and agrarian region. What is more, the new forms of identity which gave impetus to the local nationalism had resembled a suitable discourse for various elites to preserve the political resources rather than deep national feelings of Romanian patriotism. The last years of the USSR represented a great opportunity for the communist *apparatchiki* to apply their ideas of power related to the

³⁶ Charles King, *Moldovan identity and the politics of Pan-Romanianism*, pp. 358-359.

³⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 365.

state structures and redistribution of resources. Moreover, as the trends succeeding the war with Transnistria pointed out, the vacillation of Moldova's fondness for its Romanian identity has been highly determined by the former's internal socio-political context: the rampant corruption which have permeated all spheres of life, the political instability and selective justice. Once again, they stress Moldova's identity crisis and the immaturity of its politicians, yet at the same time, they reflect the true incentives of the Moldova's leadership to solve the frozen conflict with Transnistria. As Oazu Nantoi has rightly noticed, there ought to be a clear-cut formula in order to define the meaning of the Transnistrian conflict insofar that its animosities nowadays stem from other type of sources: the attempt of the Moldovan state to consolidate its position within its internationally recognized borders collides with both the geopolitical interests of the Russian Federation and the interests of the network of organized crime, in which the Moldovan politicians are implied³⁸.

Social and political crisis in Moldova are highly related to the country's fluctuating identity. In March 2016, 59% of the country's population stated that the dismemberment of the USSR had been a bad thing. Their number stood in sharp contrast not only to the rest of 29% of Moldova's inhabitants who believed the opposite, but also to the Russian people, which registered the same negative answer among 56% of Russia's population. The most outstanding evidence of the Soviet nostalgia of the younger generations was registered among respondents aged 18-24. Nearly 70% of them were convinced that life had been better in the Soviet Union than in the contemporary Moldova. This result is unprecedented on the entire post-Soviet territory³⁹. However, the pro-Romanian rhetoric is recurrently reenacted in the Republic of Moldova due to factors such as dishonest leadership, poor economy and the lack of well-defined prospects for a certain future of the country.

Moldova's process of nation and state building has not been accomplished so far and this situation particularly affects the dialogue with Transnistria and lessens the chances of the conflict to get solved. Apart from the radical views of the opposing camps, (the unionists and the Moldovanists) the core issue derives from the very essence of this ideological rift – the absence of a common vision concerning the country's future. Nevertheless, on the whole picture of Chişinău's tackling the Transnistrian issue, the chief hindrance does not stem from the ideological differences of the politicians, yet from their struggle for power. Hence the ideological problems –

³⁸ Oazu Nantoi, *Conflictul nu este intern. Pacificatorii ruşi au menirea de a nu admite rezolvarea acestui conflict* [*The conflict is not internal. The Russian peacekeepers are meant not to admit to solving this conflict*], „Europa Liberă”, 1.03.2020, online: <https://moldova.europalibera.org/a/oazu-nantoi-conflictul-nu-este-intern-pacificatorii-ru%C8%99i-au-menirea-de-a-nu-admite-rezolvarea-acestui-conflict-/30462562.html>, (accessed on 8.09.2020).

³⁹ Kamil Calus, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

such as attitudes towards the Soviet legacy, Romania or Russia, etc., – occur⁴⁰. Moldova's principle of the unitary state concerning the country's approach to the frozen conflict makes the situation even more difficult. Its unpopular leadership, combined with its fragile democracy determines the authorities in Tiraspol to look down on any project dealing with Transnistria's autonomy within the Moldovan state. Not to mention that Moldova's inconsistency related to its own identity does not inspire much confidence. In Transnistria, the idea of a common future with Romania still remains an appalling scenario.

It has been argued that Moldova's de facto separation into two distinct entities has created a Transnistrian identity and that the outbreak of the conflict between Chişinău and Tiraspol had not been determined by a certain identity⁴¹. However, there is clear evidence that Transnistria's ethno-political profile has emerged and evolved while Moldova was consolidating its totally new and different identity. Also, Transnistria's secession⁴² was initially an attempt at preservation in the sense that its residents meant to save the Soviet Union by reinvigorating its federal structures⁴³. Since the early phase of the transition period, in the context of the increasing influence of the Popular Front, its most vehement members were arguing that the Front's majority in the parliament must be used in order to hasten the independence from the Russian domination, to end migration into the republic, and to achieve improved status for the Romanians (Moldova's biggest ethnic group). At the same time, "Edinstvo" and "Gagauz Halki," – the major representative of the Gagauz population – along with other minority organisations, were opposing the independence from the Soviet Union and the implementation of the Law on State Language, while demanding autonomy for the minority areas⁴⁴. Throughout the active period of the conflict, Transnistria's statehood had been conceived as a protective tool against the ethnocentric policies and latent "Romanianisation" coming from Chişinău⁴⁵. Moreover, having been constructed in opposition to the Moldovan „enemy”⁴⁶, Transnistria's identity can be described as rather territorial than national. According to its most prominent historian, Nicolae

⁴⁰ Andrei Deveatkov, *op. cit.*, p. 103.

⁴¹ Natalia Cojocaru, *Nationalism and Identity in Transnistria...*

⁴² Transnistria proclaimed its separation on 2 September 1990 when Pridnestrovian Moldovan SSR was also proclaimed by an ad-hoc assembly. However, it was annulled by Mikhail Gorbachev on 22 December 1990 as an illegal act.

⁴³ Michael S. Bobick, *Separatism redux: Crimea, Transnistria and Eurasia's de facto states*, „Anthropology today”, Vol. 30, No 3, June 2014. p. 4.

⁴⁴ William Crowther, *The Politics of Ethnic Confrontation in Moldova*, the report for the National Council for Soviet and East European Research, September 1993, p. 5, online: <https://www.ucis.pitt.edu/nceeer/1993-806-20-2-Crowther.pdf>, (accessed on 9.IX.2020).

⁴⁵ Andrei Deveatkov, *op. cit.*, p. 97.

Babilunga, only 44% of the local population can be certain about the meaning of the Transnistrian identity⁴⁷. Despite the fact that Transnistrian identity nowadays is permeated with ethnic elements, ethnic Moldovans in the left-bank area do not pay much attention to their identity compared to other ethnic groups⁴⁸. According to a OSCE report from 1993 Transnistria was developing a feeling of specific identity derived from its need to face the uncertain future inside the borders of the Moldovan state; language and history were the main pillars of this process⁴⁹. Scholars have pointed out that „people negotiate relationships with a particular nation by constructing narratives that define their boundaries, separating `them` from `others`”⁵⁰. The Transnistrian state was symbolically constituted through a narrative which underlined the calamitous role of the Moldovan state during the 1992 war⁵¹. This war became a vital detail for the Transnistrian state as it took the form of a collective trauma internalized by its residents; for Tiraspol it is analogous to the Great Patriotic War and represents a core event on which the state bases its legitimacy⁵².

In the atmosphere of the increasing politicization of identities on both banks of Dnestr, there is little hope for a viable internal dialogue between Tiraspol and Chişinău. Moldova is still a society created by the Soviet Union and the latter's legacy is to be found not only in its bygone nation building policy, which resulted in Moldova's physical foundation, in the political status, or even in the ethnic identity of the country; but also, in its political traditions when it comes to most of its leadership. So is the case with Transnistria, whose situation is even graver, considering its general isolation and limited options, as well as the scant regard for better life of future generations.

⁴⁶ Magdalena Dembinska, Julien Danero Iglesias, *The Making of an Empty Moldovan Category within a Multiethnic Transnistrian Nation*, „East European Politics and Societies and Cultures”, Vol. XX, N. X, SAGE Publications, 2013.

⁴⁷ Andrei Deveatkov, *op. cit.*, p. 97.

⁴⁸ Magdalena Dembinska, Julien Danero Iglesias, *The Making of an Empty Moldovan Category within a Multiethnic Transnistrian Nation...*

⁴⁹ Andrei Deveatkov, *op. cit.*, p. 97.

⁵⁰ John O'Loughlin & Vladimir Kolosov *Building identities in post-Soviet “de facto states”:* *cultural and political icons in Nagorno-Karabakh, South Ossetia, Transnistria, and Abkhazia*, „Eurasian Geography and Economics”, Vol. 58, No. 6 (2017), pp. 691-715.

⁵¹ Elizabeth Cullen Dunn, Michael S. Bobick, *The Empire strikes back: war without war and occupation without occupation in the Russian sphere of influence* “American Ethnologist”, Vol. 41, No. 3. pp. 405–413.

⁵² Michael S. Bobick, *Separatism redux. Crimea, Transnistria and Eurasia's de facto states*, p. 6.