

Within the media earshot: national ideas in the Republic of Moldova prior to the 2016 election

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Abstract

A decade-old war of words is raging in the Moldovan media, amid renewed calls for the country to denounce the association agreement with the EU. Igor Dodon's win in the runoff of the presidential election on 13 November 2016 fuelled the dispute about whether the country should remain on its European course or not. As always, propaganda wars and the ethnic background of those involved in the debate never fail to capture the imagination of foreign media. However, local audiences make choices that fall outside the modes of expression perceived as being popular with the major players in the information market of the RM: the Russian Federation, Romania, the Chisinau elites and the EU. The media-related communication of the Moldovans shows that their beliefs about nationalism are not necessarily shaped by the reception of Romanian or Russian-language media. Instead, their responses to media exposure point to poor national mobilisation.

Keywords: the Republic of Moldova, Moldovan media, regional self-definition

1. Moldova's meltdown under the watch of pro-EU parties

Within the earshot of the media, the Moldovans debate on the gap between the nationalist fervour of mainstream media and the month-to-month challenges of making ends meet. Against a backdrop of financial woes, the idea of the nation is played out on the media stage. The reproduction of nationalism is the everyday background for embedding ethnolinguistic identifications into the news stories of Russian and Romanian-language media in the Republic of Moldova (RM).

Current approaches to media communication research refer to "the increasing everyday relevance of communication mediated by the media" (Hepp and Krotz, 2014, pp. 1-2). My qualitative approach to the communication of on-screen and online Moldovans suggests that their perceptions and beliefs about nationalism are not necessarily shaped by the reception of the partisan cultures that shape the media landscape of the former Soviet republic. On a daily basis, the

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way Moldovans speak and write on and off the record challenges traditional views on the propaganda wars currently being waged in the RM. Their spoken discourse on commercial TV channels, the comments sections of online news and the social media give insight into how they “refer to questions, emotions, experiences, knowledge and so on which have already been generated or influenced by the use of media” (Krotz, 2014, p. 74). Namely, watching and reading such authentic materials, one comes to realize that their everyday language can be construed as expressing a sense of disengagement with “the belated nation-building” (Van Meurs, 2015) process that the citizens of the RM have been going through for a long time now.

I argue that the average Moldovans select identity markers in ways that fall outside the modes of expression perceived as popular with those who have a stake in the refashioning of national identities across the Eastern half of the former medieval principality of Moldavia, i.e. the present day RM. These stakeholders, originally Russia and Romania, and, lately, the Chisinau elites and the EU, are currently major players in the information market of the RM. Conveying the reality of living in a low-income country conflicts with the expectations of the local audiences who have intimate knowledge of working abroad. Conflicting media images about close and distant neighbours, as well as the bilingual public and news services of the RM, result in poor national mobilisation at home. It feels safe to say that forms of everyday Russian, Romanian or, for that matter, Gagauz nationalism, go against the official narrative of Moldovan statehood. They feed off the economic meltdown of the country under the watch of pro-EU parties.

Throughout the last two years, street protests threatened to erupt into full-scale violence. From early 2015 to the summer of 2016, insecurity has reigned in the RM. A billion dollars missing from Moldovan banks spelled disaster for the country, although major incidents have not taken place. Still, many of its people struggle with money worries. The current troubles of the Russian economy sent back home more people than ever before in the long history of the RM as a source of cheap labour. They look to the West now, yet, the support for the EU is crumbling mostly because the “Moldovans associated the EU with their home-grown crooked politicians” (Kostanyan, 2016).

My analysis of banal forms of everyday nationalism in the Moldovan media focuses on news and opinion pieces published/aired throughout 2016. For reasons I will explain below, I do not rely on a quantitative yardstick to decide which media reports are worthwhile mentioning. The volatile media market and the highly polarised public debate over who-is-to-blame are a challenge to scientific rigour. In other words, an objective sampling of media discourses in quantitative terms is somewhat unlikely. In addition, exceptional events such as the street protests of 2016 are in themselves tough to cover in a manner fair to all, which adds to the difficulty. Any choice of primary sources is dependent on the beliefs and motivations that can be traced to one particular group or another.

Nevertheless, mine should at least make clear the type of rhetoric commonly used by the Moldovans who happen to let slip that they do not obsess about the “hot nationalism” (Hutchinson, 2006) performed on the lavish scale of state ceremonies. Instead, they are concerned with making a better life for themselves. Such expectations entail the very same kind of banal nationalism first documented in Western nations. That being said, there is no doubt that banal forms of nationalism reproduce the multi¹ and supra-national² identities of Moldovan nationals in ways that the “overt, articulated and often fiercely expressed nationalism” (Billig, 1995, p. 16) cannot.

2. Tip-toeing around each other: on-screen and online Moldovans

Regardless of the wide interest in the ethnic conflict that runs deep in the life of the RM, little research tackles the use the media make of ethnicity and nationalism in the everyday life of the country. Irrespectively, the varying of national self-perception is a matter of fact in Moldovan media. On-screen and online, informal language plays down notions of identity and belonging. Effectively, banal forms of nationalism reinforce a sense of being left behind by one’s nation.

Throughout modern history, both the Russian and the Romanian-speaking communities have gained a sense of living among strangers. Presently, their media-related communication shows the extent of the chasm between the two sides. Public narratives hinge on the rhetorical commonplaces of the accession to the EU or to the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU). In the background, the images of Romania and of the Russian Federation are framed to serve the interests of two political blocs. The response of the media industry to their expectations may be regarded as the litmus test of Russian, Romanian or Moldovan views on themselves and others. The media reporting on the former Soviet republic is exemplary of socio-political developments that reproduce, on a daily basis, the many national ideas at play in the making of a 21st century Moldovan state. “This is talking the nation: the discursive construction of the nation through routine talk in interaction” (Fox and Miller-Idriss, 2008, p. 537). The editorial policy of commercial TV and online news are “nation building tools” (Isaacs and Polese, 2016, p. 3) wielded by media trusts. Moreover, the social media, the comments sections of online news, and the spoken language on TV show that the public actively engages with the messages of state-sponsored media. Online Moldovans are proof that “media texts and products [...] empower as well as, if not more so than, exert power over consumers” (Laughey, 2007, p. 169).

¹ Russian, Romanian, Ukrainian, Gagauz.

² The European Union and the Eurasian Economic Union.

Watching TV and surfing the web are meaningful sites for understanding the national in Moldovan everyday life. Explicitly, they show the way the political and cultural elites relate the audiences to processes of identity formation, both at the top and bottom level of the RM. This redefinition of banal national identity is “significant, either as a mechanism of social reproduction or as [...] ideological challenges” (Karner, 2007, p. 38).

It is most likely that the audiences of the RM have long ceased to be satisfied with the arguments of both mainstream media and politicians. Their response has everything to do with the imperialist nature of politics in the RM. News stories are rife with clues about the imperialist policy carried out by the Russian Federation and Romania towards the now independent republic. The proximity of the two countries has always triggered anxieties associated with the notion of “kin majorities, defined [...] as a community claimed as co-ethnic by a kin-state” (Knott, 2015, p. 830).

Although much maligned in recent years, a working system of self-regulation, by which the greater good of the Moldovans is expected to be served, is already in place. Media providers help foster the belief that a strong relationship between citizens and political representatives is to be expected in order to raise democratic standards. They increasingly endow audiences with a shared public arena for their everyday expectations, as opposed to the foreign-made content that raises awareness of kin majorities. Alongside a growing number of national categorisations, the backbone of media campaigns is the people’s dashed hopes about the future³. Nationalisms of all kinds go unnoticed, as the debate on the failure of the state becomes centred on political figureheads. The government parties are blamed for the unfortunate turn of events ever since 2009, when the pro-European side put an end to eight years of communist rule. While the concern for the issue of national sentiments is entirely overlooked, people vent their frustration with corrupt officials. Much like national flags in Western democracies, the Romanian, the Russian and the Moldovan symbols are caught in daily rounds of routine events, now more than before. They accompanied unsuccessful protest rallies, and possibly helped the parties behind the financial fraud and suspected Russian money laundering (Sputniknews, 2013) stay in power

³ Moldovan commercial media is well-versed in the language of nation building and identity formation. On the one hand, there is the pro-Western stance of Romanian language media (JurnalTV, www.jurnal.md, TV7, PublikaTV, Canal3, www.timput.md, www.independent.md, www.jc.md, etc). On the other hand, Pro-Russian online media outlets (www.sputnik.md, www.kp.md, <http://aif.md>, www.vedomosti.md, <http://km.press.md>, etc) and TV stations (NTV.md, Prime, TV7, RTR Moldova), which re-broadcast Russian content (i.e. Perviy Kanal, HTB, etc.), argue on behalf of ordinary Moldovans, whose commitment to the so-called Russian World (Russkiy Mir) is well-known. Conclusively, it is hard not to find instances of how official discourses of national categorisations traverse the narratives of Moldovan media with incredible ease.

against all odds. The media coverage of the hybrid war in Ukraine and, more than anything else, the disenfranchisement with the political elite, impacted on the language of nationalism in the RM. Essentially, nationalism has “become symbolically banalized” (Billig, 1995, p. 42), a side effect of the struggle for a better life at home rather than abroad.

The “different [...] versions of the nation [...] articulated and negotiated during heightened, and identifiable, periods of time” (Skey, 2011, p. 96) show how the nationalist rhetoric essentially backfired. Throughout the last two years, the mainstream media has debated on the need to rally the whole society around new political parties. This is what brought together the pro-Russian and the pro-EU opposition parties in the early months of the 2016 street protests. The Socialist Party of Igor Dodon and Our Party of Renato Usatii joined the Platform Dignity and Truth of Andrei Năstase, at the time, the non-governmental organisation behind the mass protest, now a fully-fledged political party. They all attempted to bring down the self-avowed, pro-European government (Racheru, 2016). Except for who is responsible for “the great Moldovan bank robbery” (BBC News, 2015)⁴, a number of particularly contentious questions were on the lips of a growing number of people. On 4th of August 2016, specific threats to some of the most vocal journalists (i.e. Constantin Cheianu and Natalia Morari) who question the commitment of the ruling coalition to democratic practices were discussed on the TV programme *The Shadow Cabinet* (*Cabinetul din umbră*)⁵. Time after time, menacing messages, trials and possible jail sentences were spelled out as being the policy of the government in Chisinau, in ways that preclude ethnic characterisations of Moldovan citizens.⁶

Conclusively, the political elites of the Russian and the Romanian-speaking Moldovans tiptoe around each other on-screen and online, as neither of them seems to want a big row. One of the reasons is that it would play out badly in the media of their political archenemy, the chairman of the Democratic Party (PD), Vladimir Plahotniuc, who also happens to be the media mogul of the RM.

⁴“The great Moldovan bank robbery”, BBC News, 18 June 2015, retrieved from <http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-33166383>.

⁵*Cabinetul din umbră* (2016), retrieved from <http://jurnaltv.md/ro/news/2016/8/4/amenintari-la-adresa-jurnalistilor-10233952/#1>.

⁶*Agerpres* (2016), “Forumul civic din Republica Moldova, reprezentând majoritatea protestatarilor, a prezentat guvernului o nouă listă de revendicări”, retrieved from <http://www.agerpres.ro/externe/2016/02/04/forumul-civic-din-republica-moldova-reprezentand-majoritatea-protestatarilor-a-prezentat-guvernului-o-noua-lista-de-revendicari-13-56-15>

3. Politics and cross-ownership in the Moldovan media market

Throughout 2016, the symbolic and the actual ownership of Moldovan news outlets came under scrutiny as a cause for concern or satisfaction in the media of the RM. Public outcry or joyous celebrations had everything to do with the resources poured by foreign trusts into the local media.

Taking ownership of one media body or another is valued as a tool for success by opinion-makers and media pundits. Consequently, competing private TV stations and news outlets change hands, go bankrupt or lose their license, while the government-appointed media regulators seem to take sides. For example, back in 2015, the Moldovan media watchdog targeted commercial re-broadcasters of Russian TV news programmes, which sided with the Kremlin's view on the war in Ukraine⁷. In the process, the editorial commitments shift from the EU to the EEU, or the other way around. The media elites set the agenda on issues that are prone to attract the attention of major ethnonational communities.

The nature of ownership determines the language of choice and the re-broadcast policy. Paradoxically, the national flagging of identity goes unnoticed as the broadcast journalists are keen to show behind which party their TV station throws its weight.

There is only that much money the Russian Federation and Romania can give away. Everybody seems to know how independent most media reports on the state of affairs in the RM can be. The public is so accustomed to nationalisms of all stripes that patriotic fervour is rarely a matter worth looking into for daily news programmes. Despite everything, the use value of the overt flagging of nationalism is never actually questioned. One notable exception is that of "...și punctum" [...and punctum], a talk show aired by JurnalTV, a major provider of Romanian language news in the RM. The host, Val Butnaru, openly advocates the re-union of the RM and Romania, as suggested by the very name of the show, which is a quotation from the national poet of Romania, Mihai Eminescu, who famously stated: we are Romanians and punctum (that's the end of it).

The economic failure of the state encourages the affinity between the Moldovans and the kin-states. The Romanian-speaking Moldovans are told that, in exchange for democratic reforms, Romania promised a bridge loan to the self-professed pro-EU government. Similarly, the Russian Federation lifted bans on Moldovan fruits and wine only for the companies located in Russian-friendly areas.

Currently, next to Romania and the Russian Federation, the General Media Group (GMG) is one of the most influential media players. Its focus is on the positive record of the Filip government. The GMG's news outlets cover the spectrum of media platforms available in the republic. The TV and radio stations

⁷IntelliNews, 2016

broadcast in both Russian and Romanian; online news is delivered in English as well. The media trust advances the agenda of the Democrats, the main government party, i.e. of Vladimir Plahotniuc (Opendemocracy, 2016). His media holding operates the grand total of six national TV and three radio stations, alongside most online and print media outlets now active. Two other TV stations, the public broadcaster, Moldova1, and RealitateaTV, closely follow the editorial lines established by the GMG. The media empire instrumentalizes the nationalist debate by dictating its outcome: Plahotniuc's stay in power. Essentially, his TV and radio stations allow him to play the Russian and the Romanian sides off against each other. A large part of the experience of watching TV in the RM is talking about the hidden agenda of competing media holdings. To cut a long story short, the Russian-language TV stations of the GMG are said to come up with locally-made content meant to upset the Moldovans who self-identify as Romanians. They take turns with the GMG's Romanian-language TV stations in trying to do the same for the Russian-speaking community⁸. Plahotniuc's politics transcends language barriers: most of the times, the message of the news programmes aired by the GMG is not tailored to one ethnonational community or the other. All news outlets share the same home-made content, irrespective of the public they target. No matter the language of choice, it appears that the words used to address national definition are rather devoid of substance. As long as they advocate the cause of "Vlad Plahotniuc, [the] media heavyweight" of the RM, everything makes sense in political terms.

If one is to trust the words that Maia Sandu refused to say on the campaign trail, many Moldovans understand nationalist fervour as empty rhetoric, appropriate to circumstances that pertain to formal and civic participation. Sandu ran on a promise of making Plahotniuc accountable to the Moldovan people. The focus was on the rule of law and anti-corruption, while the East-West divide went mostly unmentioned⁹. Effectively, she tried to let aside the EU-EEU dilemma in the attempt to bring down the Filip cabinet, labelled as Plahotniuc's government¹⁰. This comes as little surprise: half of the electorate disregarded the Moldovan patriotic pageantry much favoured by Igor Dodon, who won by a margin of 52% to 48%. Obviously, there is a rift between the relative reinforcement of state structures and the lack of popular mobilisation for a Moldovan language and, by

⁸ Ora de Ras (2016), 14 February, retrieved from <http://www.jurnaltv.md/ro/news/2016/2/14/ora-de-ras-14-februarie-10192174/>.

⁹ Barbăroșie L. (2016), Cum poate Maia Sandu să învingă în turul al doilea (Arcadie Barbăroșie, Veaceslav Berbeca/Moldnova), Radio Europa Liberă, retrieved from <https://www.europalibera.org/a/28087839.html>.

¹⁰ See Vladimir Socor's compelling analysis of the Romanian-Moldovan relations: "Romania Bidding for Influence in Moldova (Part Three)".

association, for the national self-identification that comes with the territory of language engineering in the RM¹¹.

The pro-western stance of the Romanian language media helped break through the former monopoly of the Russian media¹². Yet, the pro-Russian online media outlets¹³ and TV stations, which re-broadcast Russian content¹⁴, are still much appreciated. Hollywood films, dubbed in Russian, and Russian TV entertainment are big audience pullers for the Kremlin's propaganda aired by Russian-speaking TV in the former Soviet republic.

Even if the current media landscape recalls the information monopoly of the Soviet regime, a lot has changed in the twenty-five years of independence. In the wake of the 1991 independence, the Russian-language media of Moldova inherited the values as well as some of the resources of the Moldovan Soviet Socialist Republic. At the time, reliance on communist press ethics was the staple of Moldovan media. Romanian-language print and broadcast media gradually broke their monopoly and, later, that of Russian-owned commercial TV stations and print news. Up to the time the Communist Party's government was forced to step down in 2009, the public sphere of Moldova extensively featured a Russian-made view on the world, as well as on the republic itself.

Surprisingly, the Russian and the Romanian news discourses are interchangeable inasmuch as they leave out a Moldovan angle on the story. Explicitly, the re-broadcasts of Russian and, lately, of Romanian news bulletins are not conducive to the making of a self-sufficient Moldovan society. Irrespective of the clout that foreign cultures carry in the RM, the everyday practice of Moldovan citizenship pushed the media industry to change. As a result, the local TV stations are expected to air progressively more locally-made content. The print and TV news, not to mention the online media, have come to filter local and international affairs through the lens of a Chisinau-based audience.

Over the last 25 years of independence, the Moldovan media has made a full circle. Media cross-ownership brings the country close to having a highly controlled information market. There is an inexorable move towards a media empire run by Vlad Plahotniuc. Right now, the move is gaining momentum to the extent to which the press freedom in the RM might become a thing of the past. According to some estimates, the GMG owns as much as two thirds of the media infrastructure. In 2014, the state run cable network Moldtelecom caused an uproar changing "channels position". The first four TV stations belonged to the GMG;

¹¹Europalibera (2016), "Există sau nu limba moldovenească?", retrieved from <http://www.europalibera.org/a/27888916.html>

¹² I have in mind JurnalTV, www.jurnal.md, TV7, PublikaTV, Canal3, www.timpul.md, www.independent.md, www.jc.md.

¹³Such as www.sputnik.md, www.kp.md, <http://aif.md>, www.vedomosti.md, <http://km.press.md>.

¹⁴ For example, PrimeTV, TV7, RTR Moldova, Perviy Kanal, HTB.

the latest additions to the media empire are CTC Mega and Super TV. Meanwhile, there was yet another reshuffle, as only one TV station outside the influence of Vlad Plahotniuc, i.e. JurnalTV, survived among the top ten. Currently, these coveted positions are filled by “1. Prime; 2. Canal 2; 3. Canal 3; 4. PublikaTV; 5. Moldova1; 6. JurnalTV; 7. CTC Mega; 8. Super TV; 9. NTV; 10. RealitateaTV”.¹⁵

The multi-layered identity of most Moldovans, who have a pragmatic approach to national self-identification, is plain to see on social media¹⁶. The use made of such opportunities¹⁷ alleviates some of the pressure that the Moldovan democracy is under, despite the consensus that “Moldova is beginning to resemble the pro-western autocracies of the Middle East” (Oleksy, 2016).

The re-alignment of the media market means that the popular demand for change will be addressed in the near future. The holding of Vlad Plahotniuc is likely to tighten its grip on the media of the RM. However, a splinter from the pro-EU media and politics is a worthy contender, i.e. Jurnal Trust Media (JTM) and Analitic Media Grup, the owner of the commercial TV station TV7. Analitic Media Grup is owned by the former MP, Chiril Lucinschi (PLDM); JTM is backed by the business men Victor and Viorel Topa, now living in Germany, despite being convicted for blackmail and fraud in the RM. The hosts of JurnalTV’s popular shows were the celebrity voice of the street protests in Chisinau throughout 2016. Although commonly associated with The Platform Dignity and Truth Party (PPDA), the TV station of JTM, JurnalTV, shows support to the Action and Solidarity Party (PAS) as well. The rise of brand new, pro-EU parties proves that Romanian-language media effectively changed policy making at a national level.

The deliberate likening of the Romanians to the Russians (or the other way around) is of particular interest in the history of nation building by the Russian and the Romanian modern states in the area. Their conflicting narratives are

¹⁵See Infotag (2016), “Moldtelecom Cable TV Network Changes Channels Position”, retrieved from <http://www.infotag.md/populis-en/192394/>.

¹⁶Irina Tarasiuc, a Moldovan singer who successfully applied for Romanian citizenship, is a case in point of the Moldovan approach to national self-identification. Once she was granted citizenship, Tarasiuc posted comments on her Facebook page that triggered a war of words between the Moldovans who feel strongly about their Romanian identity and the Romanian Authority for Citizenship. Essentially, her words were construed as speaking ill of Romania: she confessed that the Romanian passport was her ticket to Europe, which sparked protest in the social media to such an extent that a FB group “Irina Tarasiuc fără viză!” [Irina Tarasiuc without visa] was set up. See <https://www.facebook.com/groups/826998017324655/files>

¹⁷For example, Krujca Mednaea, “a popular Moldovan YouTube channel and Facebook page’ exposes the people’s despair at theft of the century” much to the delight of the average Moldovan (BBC, “Moldovans despair at theft of the century” retrieved from <http://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-trending-36104138>).

instrumental to the understanding of banal flagging of nationalism in the RM. Particularly, commercial TVs and online news lead the way for further investigation into the everyday referencing of national ideas. The public response to such media reports blurred some of the boundaries between Moldovans, opening the door to multi-ethnic, mass political movements. This is probably why Vlad Plahotniuc wants to wipe out media diversity. The ownership patterns in the Moldovan media are anecdotal proof that the management of public opinion is conducive to a European Moldova or, on the contrary, to the Eurasian course of the country. Winning over the public opinion is worthwhile to both the political establishment and to the kin-states. The former is on the brink of dramatic change: the old pro-EU parties, i.e. PD, the Liberal Democrat Party (PLDM), and the Liberal Party (PL), alongside the communists of Voronin, enter all future election races as likely losers. The latter are more present than ever in the local media industry. Next to the Russian Federation and Romania, Ukraine is yet another kin state worthwhile mentioning, although the Ukrainians seem the bulk of those targeted by Russian propaganda: according to the latest census results, in 2014, 6.4% Moldovans self-identified as Ukrainians and only 4% as Russians¹⁸).

However, the silence of media texts suggests that the national in everyday life is a less divisive issue than expected. So far, the official identity narrative of the independent state has failed to bring into the fold of the nation those who self-identify as Russians or Romanians. Yet, the multicultural Moldova is alive and kicking on-screen and online: the news coverage of events is highly successful in flagging the ethnolinguistic identity of the Moldovans.

4. Keeping it real: informal patterns of ethnic definition

The Moldovan ethnic tradition, in the making for centuries now (Nantoi, 2013), gives fresh insight into the dichotomy between hot and banal forms of everyday nationalism. The Moldovan media provide plenty of opportunity to back up my claims with actual quotations; however, except for the inherently difficult part to choose and pick, anecdotal evidence of political intent is difficult to quantify. Lengthy quotations would serve the purpose, yet their English version is likely to spin the widely acknowledged ethnic-rift-narrative of the post-socialist RM, which would suit the agenda of those who have built the polarised media landscape in the first place. The “concept of the Russian World (Russkiy Mir) as a geopolitical tool” (Lutsevych, 2016, p. 2) versus the “pro-European Romanianist identities” (Way, 2015, p. 93) shed light on the distinction between the many

¹⁸ Data from Statistica Moldovei (2017), retrieved from <http://www.statistica.md/print.php?l=ro&idc=479&id=4162>.

nations of Moldova. These nation-party alignments are here to stay, even if new comers¹⁹ are currently replacing the old guard²⁰.

The success of Igor Dodon in the run-off of the 2016 presidential election, at the expense of Maia Sandu (backed by Andrei Năstase), is further proof that the election played out along ethnic lines. Despite Sandu's choice not to play the political game of the East-West divide, the camp of Dodon pledged allegiance to the Kremlin and won. However, at the heart of the debate was whether the modern Moldovan state has already fallen short of the people's expectations. The failure comes across as an opportunity to chart a conflicting future. The claim that the Romanian nationalists seek the return of the RM to Romania comes across as a major threat in the Russian-language media. Likewise, the Romanian-language media vilifies the EEU as a byword for Russian imperialism.

There is more to the story of the oppositional distinction between the Moldovan, Romanian and Russian speakers. On screen and online, banal practices that relate to national self-identification patterns can do entirely without the so-called "various geopolitical vectors" (Prisac, 2015, p. 100).

The identity politics of the Moldovan media pundits is never carried to extremes. They seem perfectly comfortable with code switching between Romanian and Russian, or openly ask the public to disregard the East-West clash and focus on graft and corruption (Nantoi, 2016). The media landscape, rather than national self-identification, is a bone of contention for the people and the political establishment.

Despite propaganda wars, the perception of national belonging by ordinary people seems to be lagging behind the reality of the polls, not to mention the Romanian and Russian-language broadcasts. Some of the most influential narratives of nationhood emerge outside state-sponsored media. The response of the many local audiences to the nationalist fervour suggests that the academic literature on Moldova would be better off without the customary ethnonational focus. Although it is working fine, such a reading blurs the boundaries between the situational identity of most Moldovans and their national self-definition. As often the case with "modes of ethnolinguistic vitality", most Moldovans tend to "develop more than one type of strategy in intergroup settings" (Yagmur and Ehala, 2011, p. 104).

The Moldovan media is highly effective in reproducing a self-centred sense of being within or outside the walls of one's own community. Irrespective of the possibly failed attempt to forge a Moldovan nation, the RM definitely boasts a sense of Moldovan pride. The experiences of watching commercial TV and

¹⁹ Namely, Igor Dodon's Socialist Party, Maia Sandu's PAS or Andrei Năstase's Platform Dignity and Truth.

²⁰ I have in mind the Communist Party of Vladimir Voronin or Mihai Ghimpu's Liberal Party.

surfing the web are informative of the banal reproduction of identity in the post-socialist republic²¹. The top-down management of cultural politics has been a concern of immigrant elites, ever since the Russian Empire dismembered the principality of Moldova in 1812.

I find that what is taken for granted in the media coverage of the daily life points to a rhetoric that is far more complex than the grand statements of allegiance to one nation or another. Namely, language in informal use uncovers evidence of situational self-identification patterns that are highly influential in the RM, yet under-researched. Explicitly, the social media, the spoken discourse on commercial TV and the comments sections of the online news occasionally reveal what the official discourse of all concerned parties would rather forget about. They record the use-value of rhetorical commonplaces like “the Russian tanks/the hand of Moscow”, “the re-unification with Romania/the Romanian fascists” or “the Moldovan theft of the century”. The above-mentioned examples give some insight into the everyday talk going on in the RM, behind the public façade of politics. Such rhetorical commonplaces, regularly encountered by most Moldovan citizens, find their way in most public narratives. They are the stock themes of virtually all locally made news. It appears that these and other culture-bound expressions are everyday sayings, often slightly referred to when born and bred Moldovans discuss politics among themselves. All of the primary sources I mention gloss over the rhetorical commonplace under scrutiny, while pointing up the issues of the day. The images of the Russian colonizer and of the Romanian policeman²² are classics in their own kind.

On the one hand, the intense banality of such matters severely limits the use of already established self-identification patterns, as these concepts of statehood and national definition are commonly revealed by the organization of the country’s public space. The media representation of the nation obviously oversimplifies the perception of everyday nationalism, even if it helps with exploring the nuances of informal communication. On the other hand, the intrinsically bilingual Moldovan landscape and a more market-driven ethos of the nation than in the Soviet past are of great consequence to a fascinating reproduction of nationalism in the media. They enrich the understanding of loyalty to one’s nation by the means that the language of the ethnic other provides to all Moldovans. At the same time, the use of more than one language in everyday life

²¹ Following in the footsteps of Kathryn Cramer (2000), I find that the 21st century Moldovan media corroborates her findings; i.e. the banal (re)production of Catalan identity in Spain highlights the same national versus regional dilemma, this time in the RM.

²² I have in mind the so-called “jandarmul Român”, the member of the Romanian militarized constabulary, in charge of public order. Once the RM was briefly returned to the inter-war Romania, the police is said to have abused the Moldovan peasantry for no apparent reason.

hinders the willingness of the two communities to take political risks and fully engage with one another. The intertwining of the languages spoken in the public arena of the RM filters meanings to the extent that a barrier between the Moldovans and the outside world can be created. The standard variety of Romanian gained ground in the RM: it takes a proficient speaker to recognize the peculiarities of the Moldovan pronunciation, which is the same in the Romanian half of historical Moldavia. Among the many other commitments readily available to the Moldovan citizenry, such as the supra-national or the religious one, the national self-definition does not necessarily have to come first.

The “politicisation of culture” (Ozkirimli, 2005, p. 21), and of popular culture, in particular, undercuts the state-led nationalism, traditionally fuelled by the Russian Federation and Romania. The commercially-oriented function of the post-socialist media industry is changing the discursive construction of the Russian and the Romanian identities. Simultaneously, it bolsters a functional kind of Moldovenism. In their informal use, the Romanian and Russian convey geographical and political identities that equally hinge on politicizing cultural distinctiveness.

The use of one’s own mother tongue is a matter of national pride in the media. The ethnic narrative broadens out to include daily news and opinion pieces. The public sphere of the RM comes across as a game of give and take between the Russian-speaking Moldovans and the Romance-speaking indigenous population, whose members think of themselves as being either Moldovans or Romanians. There is a struggle to show off “the relationship between ethnolinguistic identification and choice of ingroup language television viewing” (Harwood and Vincze, 2015, p. 73). They all want to access a consistent choice of ingroup language programming across genres, such as feature films, news and current affairs, etc. The consumption of the Russian or of the Romanian-made content proves that the everyday “contains enduring consistencies through which identity is grounded” (Edensor, 2002, p. 18). The audience chooses to reinforce its own national self-awareness by means of news and talk shows that work as the mouthpiece of the ethnic group, not as the watchdog of Moldovan democracy. Consequently, the two most influential kin majorities of the RM are depicted as remote outposts of the nation back home. It follows that the nation watches over them in order to secure their future. However, so deeply embedded has the idea of the ethnic community become, that the message of the Russian/Romanian-language media might be construed in much the same way as a call to arms, which obviously does not make sense, not even to the few politically-engaged Moldovans. For example, in hindsight, it seems that the Moldovans emerged from the massive street protest in the spring of 2016 only to enjoy the summer break of 2016 and wait patiently for the autumn presidential elections.

Even the well-known debate on the centrifugal forces within the RM has lost its geopolitical meanings. Explicitly, it has reached a point when the Trans-

Dniester is labelled as yet another opportunity for corrupt officials to make money²³.

The inexorable fall of the Communist Party meant a reshuffle of the key players on the left of Moldovan politics. The old-school communist leader, Vladimir Voronin, and his party have lost favour with younger voters. They turned to the Socialists of Igor Dodon, a former communist and close associate of Voronin, and to Renato Usatii's Our Party. Some of the pro-European parties, whose leading members publicly acknowledge their Romanian roots, openly call for the reunification with Romania, i.e. PL. All other pro-EU parties, both old and new, envisage the union between Moldova and Romania within the EU. The older ones, commonly blamed for corruption and the banking fraud, i.e. PD, PLDM, and PL, have been at the helm of the republic ever since 2009. PPDA and PAS are the alternative to the above-mentioned pro-EU parties.

The assumption of grass-roots nationalist movements that stand behind political parties does not make much sense. Instead, the stock themes in common use throughout the media suggest that the RM is a country whose present was largely, if not entirely, built on multiculturalism. The divisive ideologies of politics do not seem to find their proponents among public intellectuals, and even less so among the average Moldovan. Customarily, the otherwise outspoken media pundits and broadcast journalists of the commercial TV stations choose not to approach nationalist concerns head on. The polarizing effect of the Moldovan politics seems to go wasted on the people in front of the camera. The audiences are themselves somewhat reluctant to engage with the overt nationalism of kin-states propaganda. They are perfectly able and willing to suppress nationalist emotions, which allegedly should come natural to the people. The statements made on the record by the Moldovans conjure up images of a formal-informal continuum of national self-definition. Within the media earshot, most informal

²³ Two decades ago, the Moscow-backed leaders of the breakaway republic and the Moldovan elites of all stripes seem to have frozen the Trans-Dniester conflict for their own benefit too. According to Moldovan energy pundits (Sergiu Tofilat and Victor Parlicov), it is the choice of Chisinau to buy energy from electrical generation facilities located in the Trans-Dniester, rather than from Ukraine or Romania, whose energy sectors would cut a better deal for the Moldovan consumer. In cahoots with the local establishment of the so-called Pridnestrovian Republic, the Moldovan Ministry of Economy agreed to buy electricity from Tiraspol. The utility plant of Cuciurgan, located in the Trans-Dniester town of Dnestrovsc, powers the electric grid of Moldova. The plant uses Russian gas to generate electricity, gas paid by the RM. Allegedly, the proceeds are split between Yevgeny Shevchuk, the president of the Trans-Dniester republic and Vlad Plahotniuc, the informal leader of the government coalition parties (Anticoruptie.md (2016), "R. Moldova a suportat un prejudiciu de un sfert de miliard de dolari în schema de procurare a energiei electrice", retrieved from <http://anticoruptie.md/ro/stiri/experti-r-moldova-a-suportat-un-prejudiciu-de-un-sfert-de-miliard-de-dolari-in-schema-de-procurare-a-energiei-electrice>).

processes of self-definition elude the nationally-minded politicians of the country, always too eager to debate on ethnic divisions. The movement through such contexts is integral to how the Romanian, the Russian and, lately, the English language help little people word big questions about their and somebody else's nation.

Informal self-identification occurs as a result of the interactive ways of the digital media. The social media, the comments section of online news and the spoken language on TV are among the most explicit instances of language in informal use. The online medium incidentally reveals that most citizens fail to share in the fantasy life of the Moldovan community. If anything, the patriotic pageantry of the prestige kin-states captures their imagination.

When the mainstream media reveals snippets of daily conversations, an informal continuum of behaviours and actions briefly surfaces. The public overhears off-camera and offline exchanges, which make their way into political talk shows and into the conversational mode of online comments sections. They are authentic materials that add to the message of formal communication. There is no doubt that the official discourse of the RM cannot possibly accommodate inherently political statements of allegiance to the kin states. It follows that the accession to the EU or to the EEU is the only acceptable manner to phrase the request of the people to return into the fold of the kin-state.

Most academic inquiries into the Moldovan identity narrative went along with the melodrama of the politics in the media. They disregard hard evidence and anecdotal proof that identity is situational rather than ethnonational for most Moldovans and that the support for the EU or the EEU has everything to do with emigration. Considering that "every sixth adult in the country migrates abroad in search of work" (Sunvisson, 2015), the Moldovan émigré shapes public opinion back home, particularly when it comes to geopolitical choices. The nation building processes in the RM traditionally framed the dynamic of the social intercourse between ethnic groups by means of "ecstatic forms of nationhood" (Skey, 2006). It turns out that the story failed to enthrall the target public. The local audiences challenge the media accounts they come across, instead of buying into them. The self-serving rhetoric of the politicians and the media's unrelenting attention to ethnolinguistic identification go unnoticed by the public. The incontrovertible logic of foreign nationalisms in the RM does not stand to critical scrutiny. For example, the growing support for the union with Romania in times of financial turmoil proves exactly what the disillusionment with the pro-EU politicians demonstrated as well. Namely, the ideological commitments of the people are contingent on the political and economic circumstances they find themselves in, rather than on patriotic ideals.

The native Romanian speakers of the RM have never been closer to patriotic defiance than now, when they are mocking at the “Russian tanks”²⁴. The military hardware stationed in the Trans-Dniester region is the most overt symbol of the Russian Federation’s official discourse in the RM. Dmitri Rogozin, the deputy Prime Minister of the Russian Federation, is famous for his infatuation with Russian armoured vehicles. He repeatedly threatened to send them marching into the RM and, in the wake of the Crimea-related sanctions against Russian officials, he envisaged a similar scenario in order to settle scores with Brussels too (ria.ru, 2016). Importantly, most Moldovans in the news do not seem to associate their defiance with Romanian nationalism.

Across media discourses, Romania and the Russian Federation, as well as the EU or the EEU, are functionally the same. They stand for the promise of a better life dressed up in the colours of national flags. The flags are mostly un-waved; they hang unnoticed somewhere in the background of media representations.

The Moldovans are bilingual and comfortable with switching between Russian and Romanian while in TV studios. The local media professionals grew up in a multilingual environment that is now being enhanced by the bilingual media. The major media players in the RM publish online content in Russian, Romanian and English, something which helps make editorial commitments crystal-clear, both at home and abroad. Furthermore, there are broadcast journalists who produce TV shows in both Russian and Romanian, i.e. Natalia Morari’s *Interpol* and *Politica*. The public is able to sample literary quotes, sayings and media reports in their original version. The very mind-set of the people is shaped by such first-hand insights into the Russian and the Romanian civilization.

Conclusions

To sum up the story of what falls within the media earshot, it feels safe to say that informal language-use discloses facts that go unmentioned, for the sake of both the Moldovan nation-building and the kin-states propaganda. The spoken discourse on commercial TVs and the comments sections of online news give a glimpse into the everyday talk of the people. In fact, social media proves that the people’s concerns are miles away from the drama going on in the mainstream

²⁴ The close proximity of the Russian 14th Army, stationed in Trans-Dniester, means that the capital city, Chisinau, is within a couple of hours drive from yet another Russian invasion. The Russian military hardware is a familiar sight in the RM, so much so that corrupt government officials claim that their commitment to the West keeps the country safe from the infamous “Russian tanks”. Defiantly, the Romanian-speaking people of Chisinau report that “both the Americans and Plahotniuc’s officials frighten people with [the threat of] Russian tanks, but nobody in Moldova is afraid of Russian tanks” (Nemtsova, 2016).

media. The news stories make the idea of a “necessary nation” (Jusdanis, 2001, p. 139) so abundantly clear that most audiences seem prone to overlook the issue. Yet, they resonate to the banal nationalism that imbues the narrative quest for a better life.

Notions of ethnicity and nationalism in mainstream media suggest that the Moldovans feel they are called to act as go-betweens for the EU and/or the EEU, rather than to fashion a national consensus out of conflicting past. The media expose both the noise and the silence in the language of Moldovan politics. Although “absorbed into the environment of the established homeland” (Billig, 1995, p. 41), the many Moldovan identities have gained currency mostly as informal patterns of regional self-definition.

The locally-made content explores the dynamic between the Russians and the Romanian-speaking Moldovans. Peering behind the scenes of the media, one finds out that a distinctly Moldovan expression of nationhood is hard to find. Those who self-identify as Moldovans are always there, in the background, but do not have the solution to make themselves heard on their own and not as stand-ins for the Russian interests in the RM. However, the mismatch between the discursive and the practical performance of national identity shows that hot nationalism works best when drawing on informal self-identification patterns. If need be, the Russian tanks and the Romanian fascists trigger heated debates in the mainstream of Moldovan life.

All in all, the East-West clash is a convenient media narrative, expected to complement the allegedly factional private space of the RM. The view that the country itself is factionalized beyond repair sells both at home and abroad. With the increase in numbers of Moldovan-owned media outlets, the banal flagging of the local identity is bound to gain more visibility. The Moldovan self-identification is already effective inasmuch as the media provides the people with the opportunity to situate themselves at the very centre of public life. Far from losing ground under the media pressure from kin-states, Moldovenism develops at the expense of Russian and Romanian nationalism. Language in its informal use suggests that there is no reason to decry the nationalist fervour of the media. Instead, there are plenty of reasons to celebrate a resilient sense of Moldovan distinctiveness, shared by all ethnic communities of the country. The local media industry shows that Moldovan audiences think about themselves in more elastic terms than foreign observers are tempted to assume.

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