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## **CULTURAL IDENTITY REFLECTED IN THE MOLDOVAN MEDIA: POLEMICS AND DEBATES**

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### **Abstract**

The article examines how the media defines the cultural identity of the Moldovan population. Pro-Kremlin media narratives include anti-European and anti-American messages. The "Moldovanist" current includes ideas about the cultural and historical specificity of Moldova. European media criticizes the messages of Russian imperialism and argues for a European identity, which includes the Romanian idea. The media discourse on the identity issue is politicized and confrontational. The current situation calls for new approaches and solutions to create human solidarity.

**Keywords:** message, narrative, press, Moldovanism, identity, community

### **INTRODUCTION**

In a modern information society, a person's life and sociocultural experience are mediated by the media. All the most important values that create the image of society and modern culture are constructed, shaped, and replicated in a space built by the means of mass communication. Media, being a cultural form, has its own logic and rules that structure ways of thinking and feeling. All this is reflected in the media and influences society.

The press also has information spreading as a function. By consuming the products of the media thousands of people turn out to be bound by countless invisible threads. People come to share common values and to think through information, ideas, and symbols. The media can unite contemporary society, but it can also divide it.

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National identity expresses collective attitudes, mentalities, and behaviours resulting from individuals belonging to a nation-state. We can say that national identity is defined by a nation's own unique characteristics, such as language, culture, and religion, but also by its respect for the customs, traditions, and traditions specific to the community. Identity is an analytical, ambiguous concept with many contradictory meanings. It is fluid and constantly renegotiated [1]. For individuals, identities become crucial elements of democratic life. One of the many methods of influencing identity is mass media. Media institutions influence the tone and intensity of the approach to a topical issue, they bring out the spotlight on certain topics/issues they consider to be of public interest.

This article will explore aspects of political discourse on identity. Research methods included qualitative analysis of media narratives, quantitative analysis of articles on the issues, and synthesis of results.

## **THE EVOLUTION OF NARRATIVES AND MESSAGES IN MEDIA DISCOURSE**

The issue of Moldovan identity began to be intensively debated in the media of the Republic in the 1990s. Here are just a few authors and columns from the “Perestroika” section of the literary and social-political magazine of the Union of Writers of the Moldovan SSR “Nistru” and then “Basarabia”: “The Price of the Manchurt Caftan” referred to the kindergartens in which Russian was spoken exclusively, even by non-Russian ethnics, which constituted a hindrance to identity-oriented education [2]. “The Hour of Hard Memories” is about the establishment of Moldovan newspapers in Bessarabia. It played a role in awakening the national consciousness. Articles under the heading “Ecology of the Spirit” debated the issue of identity. The author mentioned: “The chauvinist mafia continues its tactics without care” [3]. The preservation of historical heritage as a substantial element of national identity has been analysed by writers who wrote about “Trajan’s Wall” and “The Fate of the National Book” [4].

Along the way, the harsh accents evolved. The Moldovan press has defined itself in several currents dealing with the identity issue. The newspapers conventionally called pro-Russian have used media constructions that include pro-Soviet, pro-Russian, anti-Romanian, and anti-American narratives.

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As a result of the study of the materials published in the newspapers Puls, Communist, Sputnik.md. and Noi.md (years 2019-2021) we summarize the following narratives:

- the Moldovan SSR was a sunny Soviet republic located in southeastern Europe, on the border with Romania, known for its warm climate with long summers compared to most regions of Russia.
- the period of the Soviet Union is a golden age, a flourishing time of the Republic. Without the Great War for the Defense of the Fatherland, the Moldovan people would not have existed,
- Moldova's future is only with Russia and Moldovan identity is only with Russia.
- Moldova is a multinational state in the "Russian World".

In this context, there are also theses on large nations. Here is a telling example: author Tudor Zodua (former member of the Party of Socialists of the Republic of Moldova).

The Russian nation is an imperial one, along with the British, the French, the Spanish, the Americans, and soon the Chinese. Not many nations in the world have such an honour. An Empire, or in other words, a great nation, is a powerful nation with a culture and civilization. Empires are a kind of nation-state. By virtue of their economic, political, cultural, and military development, they are ahead of other nations and spread their influence in the world. You must be proud of them, especially since their merits and achievements in the world far outweigh their errors, failures, and shortcomings. The Russian Empire and the Soviet Union gave the world a unique experience of peaceful coexistence and prosperity of different nations in one state. The experience was not always positive and enlightening, but that does not make it any less useful. The Soviet Union developed Moldova, especially in the 50s and 70s of the 20th century, when Soviet Moldova, along with other republics, experienced real economic and cultural growth. Moscow, along with London, Washington, and Beijing, is still one of the most important centers of influence in the world. This memory of Soviet identity must be preserved [5].

Anti-Romanian messages: "The public TV channel Moldova 1 broadcasts the Russian-language propaganda channel "Nastoyashee vremya", the founder of which is "Voice of America". Moldova 1 today is one of the exponents of the Romanian ideology, this is obvious... Ideology is paid, and media channels are paid" (Ostalep) [6].

Such theses are propagated in interviews, reports, and sketches: "Romania occupied and annexed Bessarabia, denationalized Moldovans. In the Government, they are all Moldovans with Romanian passports, in the Parliament they are of the same species."

Identity ideas are used in election marketing.

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- Unionists are the enemies of the other citizens of the Republic of Moldova, the latter forming an overwhelming majority.
- Igor Dodon is the only guarantor of Moldovan statehood.
- The Republic of Moldova is a multinational state that is part of the 'Russian World'.
- Romanians are one of the minority ethnic groups in the Republic of Moldova.
- Moldova is a multinational state of the "Russian World" that Maia Sandu wants to destroy with unionist marches [7].

Another opinion that aims to shape the national identity of the population of the Republic is the current "Moldovanism", mediated by the press affiliated with the Socialist Party of the Republic of Moldova. Existing and known narratives are nuanced with new propagandistic details. Thus, at the conference "Evolution of the national and state political identity of the Republic of Moldova" it was mentioned "...Battles over national identity have proven to be terrible economic losses for Moldova, if not economic collapse" [8].

Historian Vasile Stați recalled that the first chronicle, which refers to the "History of Moldova", dates to 1407, and the ethnonym "Moldovans" has been used for centuries. "You can't deny the multiplication table, just as you can't deny your own identity," he said - What kind of history is taught in our schools - "History of Romanians". And they, the Romanians, had no history as such. There was a history of the Vlachs. Every nation must assert itself, and the Moldovans cannot avoid this fate [9].

After centuries, the concept of "Moldovan language" has been erased from our life, the history of the neighbouring country is taught in schools, and the necessary decisions are prepared in the Constitutional Court by a group of people, five or six of whom have Romanian citizenship. All this testifies to the systematic destruction of Moldovan statehood. The current authorities fully support these processes and are responsible for their consequences." Dodon called the idea of total Romanianism, which is being imposed on young people, destructive because it destroys Moldova's future: "Double standards are applicable in history. We are Moldovans, our language is Moldovan.

Socialists plan to popularize Moldovan identity. The Party of Socialists has launched a national campaign to promote the Moldovan identity "I love Moldova".

Here are a few websites and news portals promoting Moldovanist theories with anti-Romanian positions (affiliated to Moldovanist and pro-Russian movements): NOI.MD, Salvammoldova.org, Patriotism Moldova, Basarabia.md, etc. Various pundits/political analysts/journalists in

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conservative-orthodox and anti-Western circles speak out, blaming “Romanian nationalists” for intolerance towards the Russian-speaking population of the Republic, and unionists for “attacking the sovereignty” of Moldova and destabilizing the internal situation and attacking the decisions to increase/develop relations with NATO.

## **ROMANIAN IDENTITY AND ITS VOICE IN THE INFORMATION SPACE**

Among the publicists who write about political and national identity in the newspapers, one can mention: Georghe Damian, Alecu Reniță A., Nelly Gâștemulte, Svetlana Corobceanu, Mircea V.Ciobanu, Adrian Ciubotaru, Nina Negru, and others.

Their articles plead for Romanian identity, for the need to strengthen the sense of identity, criticize the duplicity of the clergy representatives, who propagate Russian church culture, and clarify the methods of civic education [10]. The [europalibera.org](http://europalibera.org) website describes the imperial ambitions of Russian identity:

Putin’s ideology is completely devoid of positive content, has no positive goals, and does not even offer an image of a desirable future. The very foundation of Putin's identity is negative, which is why militarism is an important component of it.[11].

The European-oriented press unmasks Russia's aggressive messages and calls for a European political identity.

Publicist Vitalie Ciobanu of Free Europe believes that the European identity is far superior to the Russian imperial one:

The government in Chisinau declares that European integration is the “country project” of the current generation, the idea that can unite Moldovan society. In her speech on 27 August, on the National Day of the Republic of Moldova, President Maia Sandu went further, insisting on freedom as the supreme value and independence as the chance to choose one's destiny without fear that someone, a foreign, coercive power, will impose its will, as it has been so many times in the history of this afflicted country. The Republic of Moldova needs an extensive education process, which should start as early as tomorrow, 1 September, and not just for schoolchildren. The whole nation should be put in a classroom, where they can re-learn the (Latin) alphabet of dignity and true national and European identity” [12].

It must be said that European identity does not negate local identity.

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In the interviews in the newspaper *Timpul*, methods of reaffirming national and political identities are also mentioned. Thus Galina Martea, PhD in Economics, writer, Netherlands, says:

Both national identity and national unity are expressions that represent the national feeling of a people, of a nation, of a man. They are notions of identity processes, including in themselves the spoken language of communication, national traditions, and culture, authentic values. It is very important for a nation to know how to recognize its origins of nation, nationality, and identity. In the case of our country, there is an urgent need to initiate collective meetings based on promoting the correct policy of orientation and awareness of the events taking place in society and the causes of this disorientation in social, economic, and political life. And the main weapon would be the feeling and belief in the values [13].

In our context, cultural identity is a symbolic universe in the horizon of which people live in common; it explains the solidarity between society members, as well as their willingness to live together.

Such an approach can be found in the newspaper *Gazeta de Chisinau*:

For me, the primary cause of all our vices and failures is the quasi-total absence of community spirit, of the feeling that we belong to a community that extends far beyond the time and place in which we actually live and to which we have obligations, first and foremost moral obligations [14].

Examples of such articles are, nonetheless, rare.

Mass media is an instrument meant to ensure an intercultural dialogue, a dialogue between different ethnic groups and minorities, that can lead to the strengthening of society and that offers the possibility to take actions aimed at harmonizing interethnic relations. This task is partially and with difficulty fulfilled by the mass media in Chisinau.

## CONCLUSIONS

The identity crisis of the Moldovan population is treated in a geopolitical context: the press shows that the Moldovan population is caught between its Romanian roots and its Soviet past, has not developed an independent national identity, and is divided into antagonistic currents. A. Țăranu is right when he says:

The failure of the Republic of Moldova's identity policies is suffocating Moldovan society with pro-Soviet nostalgia, keeping a considerable part of society dependent

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on the returning empire. Identity shortcomings are a permanent obstacle to the European integration of the Moldovan state [15].

There is no constructive exchange of views on identities in the Moldovan press. The Moldovan media dealing with Russian-speaking political identity is part of the hybrid war and is a propaganda press for Kremlin ideas. To overcome these vulnerabilities, it is necessary to modernize society and create mechanisms to produce democratic values that will encompass cultural identities and civic identities.

Identity is a sense of individuals' participation in shared cultural and political practices. Identity implies positive attitudes towards the state, pride, and feelings of protection determined by belonging to a state. The media must cultivate these attitudes and propagate good practices. Now, the goals are not being achieved.

One of the characteristics of the press is that it is a powerful instrument for ensuring intercultural dialogue between different ethnic groups and minorities, which can lead to the consolidation of society and gives scope to actions aimed at harmonizing inter-ethnic relations. This task is carried out with difficulty in the Chisinau press.

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