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The Moldovan Identity Crisis: A Young State, an Old Nation, and the Search for a National Identity

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The Moldovan Identity Crisis:
A Young State, an Old Nation, and the Search for a National Identity

An Honors Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Honors in
The Center for International Studies.

By
Joshua David Rogers

(Under the mentorship of Darin H. Van Tassell)

ABSTRACT

The question of national identity in modern states is one that is both elusive and ever-changing; however, the fate of a young state could very well depend on grasping this concept. This study focuses on defining national identity, and solving the dilemma of an absent, or otherwise unarticulated national identity in the Republic of Moldova. Moldova, a former member of the Soviet Union and independent since 1991, has already been through a civil war due to their lack of cohesion. The country's history of numerous invaders, conquerors, and acquisitions starting in the 14th century has led to an eclectic population who aligns themselves with Russian culture, Romanian culture, or that of various native groups. After more than 20 years of independence, people around the world still struggle with identifying the small state, and Moldovans struggle with defining their relationship to their country and fellow citizens. Through archival research, field research, and interviews with Moldovan emigrants, intellectuals, and officials, this study recognizes the need for a national identity in creating unity and a sense of nationalism in Moldovan citizens.

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Dedication

All of the hours put into completing this project are dedicated to Maxim, pictured below. Although I do not know his last name, the name of his village, or if we will ever cross paths again, he represents the heartbeat of the work I have done. Hopefully, this work will be used to teach and to inspire someone to enact positive change that will foster an environment for where someone like Maxim can grow up knowing who they are and knowing that they can lead a successful life.



Maxim

Photo by Josh Rogers, 2013

What does it mean to you,
to be Moldovan.....?

“This is quite a magnificent question to ask when you belong to this identity and you know that in your veins run and flow the blood melted with love, desire, turbulence, rebellion and dignity. The absence of pride is also a characteristic that is drawn from the root of our history but enhances the desire to be what we want to be. Our nation was formed and built in the most bizarre and terrific way, through generations we were taken by different invaders that took much from us but also put a lot in us: different food, different ways of thinking, different dances, different family values and stereotypes. Sometimes it is difficult to imagine that in such a small country anyone can see and be impressed by so much.”

~ Tatiana Avricenco,
Graduate Student,
Bălți Moldova

“Oh my gosh! I love your accent! Are you from Russia?!” It was the question Cristina had been asked every day since landing in the Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International airport in 2009. After about two weeks in Perry, Georgia, this exchange student from Moldova realized that it would be easier just to say yes and to claim the identity of the country that oppressed her parents for so many years than it was to answer all of the follow-up questions about her home country. Most people from this small town had never heard of Moldova, and all they knew of Eastern Europe was what they learned in James Bond movies. She was a 16 year old student in a strange new country with no way to communicate about her home. Thousands of Moldovans face this dilemma every day. I have come across Moldovan students, hair dressers, and even professors who simply claim to be from Russia, Romania, or “just somewhere in Europe.” The questions of who they are and where they are from may seem trivial to some, but to those who are in this crisis, these questions are of the utmost importance. This young country is in the middle of a great identity crisis, and there is little consensus on how to solve it.

In this paper, the definition of national identity will be examined and how this identity can be constructed. Next, the barriers to such a formation in Moldova will be observed. Lastly, specific ways in which Moldova can develop a thriving identity through language, sport, and policy will be determined. To understand the current situation in Moldova, it is necessary to look back a few hundred years and learn the history behind the nation and the State.

A Brief History

A Moldovan professor once told my class her story of growing up in Moldova just after its independence. She spent her childhood just ten miles from the Transnistrian border, and would go to sleep at night to the sounds of canon fire. This story seemed highly unusual to many. Students could not comprehend the idea of a civil war being fought in a country not even five years old. Even more perplexing, is the fact that this war was fought over the seemingly simple concept of identity. Moldovan history offers insight into how a state was formed where something like this would occur. The history of the Moldavian people is characterized by numerous annexations, acquisitions, and invasions. This dates back to the mid-fourteenth century with the founding of the Principality of Moldavia.

The boundaries of this territory slowly grew larger and larger, causing conflict with Hungary, Poland, and Turkey. Faced with advances from Russia in 1711, Moldavia was able to fight off Peter the Great and form a treaty, only to be invaded and controlled by Turkey later within the same year.¹ The late 1700s saw land acquisitions in the North by Austria followed by offensive acquisitions by Russia into the Romanian and Moldavian territories. In 1812, Russia annexed the central portion of the two principalities and named it Bessarabia in order to maintain a military presence in the region. Bessarabia was the richest part of the land of Moldavia, but as it became more and more a part of Russia, many people

¹ Dima, Nicholas. *Moldova and the Transdnester Republic*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2001.

left the region for the poorer areas of the principalities under Turkey.² This migration only lasted until 1856 when Russia was forced to leave the region, which in turn, joined with Wallachia to create the basis for what we know as modern day Romania. Romania helped Russia in the fight against Turkey, but at the end of the war, Russia did not include Romania in peace negotiations. Without their knowing, Bessarabia was re-annexed. After years of the Russians destroying the land and the people of Bessarabia, Bessarabia declared autonomy and soon reunited with Romania.³ This Romanian union survived until the end of World War I when the Soviet Union reached into Eastern Europe and began to claim the Moldavian regions. In 1940 the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic was officially formed.⁴

The period of Soviet rule that lasted until the end of World War II was the time period which had the most drastic effect on the Moldavian identity. The Soviets began to deport Romanian nationalists to the far ends of the Soviet empire as part of their denationalization philosophy. Many nationalistic Romanian citizens were killed or sent to regions so harsh that death was certain.⁵ The major government positions in academic or political fields were given to non-Romanian minorities in order to suppress the nationalistic ideals of the Romanian majority.⁶ This time period was the first time that sport was truly

² Dima, Nicholas. *Moldova and the Transdnester Republic*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2001.

³ Dima, Nicholas. *Moldova and the Transdnester Republic*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2001.

⁴ Dima, Nicholas. *Moldova and the Transdnester Republic*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2001.

⁵ Riordan, James. *Sport in Soviet Society: Development of Sport and Physical Education in Russia and the USSR*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1977. Print

⁶ Riordan, James. *Sport in Soviet Society: Development of Sport and Physical Education in Russia and the USSR*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1977. Print

seen as a political tactic and sign of power. For example, the Soviet Union sent athletic scouts into all of the regions of Soviet power, and they found children who showed potential, particularly in hockey or gymnastics. Children were forced to practice long hours, and forget about home, family, or friends, all for the good of the country.⁷ By requiring schools to train children to achieve high levels of athleticism, the government was building a stronger, healthier population and keep children off of the streets during the day.⁸ While the USSR initially saw international sporting events as Western and capitalistic, they soon began to train their citizens to go into competitive sports arenas and prove Soviet dominance. In 1991, with the dissolution of the Soviet Union, most of the original Bessarabian province gained autonomy and independence and became known as the Republic of Moldova, including what is known as the Transnistria Region.⁹ This region lies east of the Dniester River bordering Ukraine, and the people there consider themselves to be independent of Moldova and supporters of the former USSR and Russia. A war for independence was fought in 1992 but ended in a draw. Today the region functions almost independently, but is not internationally recognized as such.¹⁰ Being passed back and forth from government to government has stripped the Moldovan people of any collective identity that they once had. Through accidental and intentional efforts, this brief background shows how the countries surrounding Moldova have contributed to the identity

⁷ Riordan, James. *Sport in Soviet Society: Development of Sport and Physical Education in Russia and the USSR*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1977. Print.

⁸ Riordan, James. *Sport in Soviet Society: Development of Sport and Physical Education in Russia and the USSR*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1977. Print.

⁹ Dima, Nicholas. *Moldova and the Transdnester Republic*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2001.

¹⁰ Dima, Nicholas. *Moldova and the Transdnester Republic*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2001.

crisis found in the region today. In order to address this great concern, we must first reach a consensus on what national identity truly is.

(An Attempt at) Defining National Identity

How would you feel if your identity were stripped from you? What if your name, physical appearance, and personality were all removed and you were left with no remnant of your former self? You would be forced to start from scratch and form a new identity for yourself. You would have to find traits that make you unique, important, and recognizable. That dilemma is often the dire situation in which many emerging societies such as Moldova find themselves. After years of being forced to assimilate to the Soviet identity, Moldova was suddenly independent and lost in a world with no way to stand out.

According to the work of Hans Kohn, there are several methods by which both states and nations form their identities. Some use distinctive political systems. Others use art, religion, food, or even sports. Kohn sets the stage for identity studies by saying that “nationalism is first and foremost a state of mind, an act of consciousness.”¹¹ He goes on to say that the idea of nationalism is constantly shifting and changing so it is nearly impossible to control or define. Over time, the practical implications of nationalism have shifted toward the modern nation-state, but the one thing that has remained constant is that the

¹¹ Kohn, Hans. *The idea of nationalism, a study in its origins and background*. New York: Macmillan, 1967.

foundation for this nationalism is simply a state of mind.¹² If this concept is only formulated in people's minds, then how can anyone control it?

Francis Fukuyama and Jill E. Hickson offer insight to this dilemma. Fukuyama asserts that the first rule we must recognize is that identity cannot be imposed from external sources, it must be forged from within.¹³ This rule is evidenced throughout history during the fall of the age of colonialism. One by one, colonies began to reject the identity of their colonizers and claim independence. Fukuyama points out Afghanistan as an example of a case where outside forces attempted to form a state that did not match up with cultural or national boundaries.¹⁴ This led to violence throughout the history of the state. The justification for this argument is that identity is formed upon shared elements of a population, which one cannot create or impose. Hickson further delineates these shared elements as being made up of common land, shared institutions, cultural values, a common past, linguistic ties, and a conception of equality.¹⁵ While some state's citizens may hold a few of these traits in common, if at least one is obviously absent, then having a common identity is nearly impossible. The solution to this problem lies in the fabrication of these qualities. According to Hickson, when one is missing, it is the role of the government to use their resources to create the illusion of its presence.

¹² Kohn, Hans. *The idea of nationalism, a study in its origins and background*. New York: Macmillan, 1967.

¹³ Fukuyama, Francis. "How to Build a Nation." *Harvard Gazette*, December 10, 2012.

¹⁴ Fukuyama, Francis. "How to Build a Nation." *Harvard Gazette*, December 10, 2012.

¹⁵ Hickson, Jill E. "Using Law to Create National Identity: The Course to Democracy in Tajikistan." *Texas International Law Journal* 38 (2003): 348-380.



Transportation in one Moldovan Village

Josh Rogers, 2013

Why Does Any of This Matter?

Before exploring specific methods, it is important to establish the urgency associated with this arduous task. We have already seen how a lack of a common identity has led to violence between Moldova and Transnistria. However if it is not resolved, more violence could be looming around the corner. Examples of Afghanistan, Sudan, and Rwanda come to mind as places where great violence has broken out over the very same issues. At the end of the war, both Moldova and Transnistria agreed to a ceasefire, but since no treaty was signed, one spark could reignite full out war, making Moldova another name

synonymous with violence.¹⁶ The other great threat facing the state if identity indifference continues is the chance of reverting back to a Soviet style government. While returning to a government that controlled the Soviet States may seem far-fetched, Moldovans would not be the first group of people in history to think in such a manner.

If you own or ever have owned a Bible, a Torah, or one of the 26 Bible apps free for download on iPhone and Android, then chances are you know a thing or two about the ancient Israelites. If not, you can find the story of their captivity, the life of Moses, and their emancipation in the book of Exodus chapters 1-12. Biblical tradition holds that the Israelites, after being enslaved in Egypt for approximately 400 years, were freed from Pharaoh's control by Moses. However, after being freed they were forced to wander around the wilderness for 40 years. Even though this was a mere tenth of the time spent in Egypt, eventually they grew tired of the wandering and began to gripe and complain.

Exodus 16:2-3 says:

“And the whole congregation of the children of Israel murmured against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness: And the children of Israel said unto them, Would to God we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the flesh pots, *and* when we did eat bread to the full; for ye have brought us forth into this wilderness, to kill this whole assembly with hunger.”¹⁷

This grumbling continued to grow to the point of some even calling for Moses and Aaron to be stoned. When you stop to think about it, this perspective is fascinating and holds strong parallels to the political identity of Moldova. The

¹⁶ Dima, Nicholas. *Moldova and the Transdnester Republic*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2001.

¹⁷ *The English Standard Version Bible*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004. Print.

Israelites were treated harshly in Egypt. Despite all of the forced labor and punishment, what they remember just a couple of years later is not the harsh reality of their former situation, but it is the fact that they had food to eat. Instead of thinking back to Egypt and remembering how miserable they were and how they begged and cried to be released, they consciously or sub-consciously choose to remember the good. In psychology, this is referred to as positivity bias, or the Pollyanna Principle.¹⁸

The Pollyanna Principle states that the human mind is selective in its memory and sub-consciously chooses to respond to positive stimuli with more clarity than negative stimuli.¹⁹ Margaret Matlin and David Stang take this further in his research by proving that the greater amount of time there is between memory and recall, the more selective the brain becomes. This basically means that as time passes our memories become more happily oriented. This correlates to a term Fukuyama refers to as “historical amnesia” where a State as a whole either consciously or sub-consciously forgets their past if it is rooted in violence.²⁰ When looking at the Israelites, over time they sub-consciously began to only remember the good they experienced under oppression. There is a direct correlation to present day Moldovans and their perception of the period of Soviet rule.

¹⁸ Matlin, Margaret. *The Pollyanna principle: selectivity in language, memory, and thought*. Cambridge, MA: Schenkman Pub. Co

¹⁹ Matlin, Margaret. *The Pollyanna principle: selectivity in language, memory, and thought*. Cambridge, MA: Schenkman Pub. Co

²⁰ Fukuyama, Francis. "How to Build a Nation." *Harvard Gazette*, December 10, 2012.

Although the Soviet Union has only been dissolved for a little over 20 years, recent history has seen Moldovans reverting back to voting for leaders within the Communist party despite the connection many make to the Soviet Communist rule. In 1993, not long after gaining independence, the Party of Communists of the Republic of Moldova (PCRM) was formed. This party gained a majority share of seats in parliament in 1994 and have continued strong ever since. PCRM made history by being the only communist political party to gain a majority power in all of post-Soviet Eastern Europe, followed by the first Communist President since the fall of the USSR.²¹ More recently in 2012, a second communist party was founded: the Communist Party of Moldova (CPM). The CPM claims that if anything, the PCRM has not been communist enough and have become a Western oriented bourgeoisie party. Support for this party has grown due to several grassroots movements amongst the lower classes and rural areas of Moldova.²² When I spoke with one professor in Moldova, she stated that the citizens are tired of living in a country ridden with poverty and they look back to the time of Soviet control and see it as a time where there was never a shortage of food or money. Although this seemingly grand time period was in response to forced labor and harsh working conditions to increase efficiency, retrospect has forgotten the cruelty they experienced.

Very few Moldovans who are old enough to have been affected recall the time as vividly as the woman pictured below. On my most recent trip I met the woman pictured below who told us that she was not able to stand up or walk

²¹ RT. "“Real Communists” emerge in Moldova." <http://rt.com/politics/moldova-real-communists-party/>.

²² RT. "“Real Communists” emerge in Moldova." <http://rt.com/politics/moldova-real-communists-party/>.

anymore. She cannot work in her garden or make any kind of income to buy or trade for groceries. She is practically bed-ridden and places the blame on her former rulers. She told us that when she was younger, the Soviets saw Moldova as a great fertile bread basket of the USSR, so Moldovans were assigned the task of working night and day in the fields to secure bread. She claims that this strenuous workload has caused her practical paralysis today. Yet, people are giving more and more support back to this Communist Party. A political trend has developed in Moldova that could have very dangerous repercussions.



Elderly Woman Recounting the Soviet Union

Josh Rogers, 2013

So, What's Stopping Them?

In order to secure a safer future, Moldova must have a strong Identity. This establishment needs to happen sooner rather than later, so the question becomes: what is standing in the way? There are four barriers between Moldova and a sense of national identity: Economic reality, lack of political will, corruption, and remnants of a Soviet past.^{23 24} The most obvious thing standing between Moldova and serious reform is the state of their economy. Being the poorest country in Europe, both the government and the private sector lack the necessary resources to accomplish anything substantive.²⁵ While officials may recognize a need for a nationalistic curriculum, the government cannot afford to publish and supply textbooks when schools are hardly staffed in the first place. The other side of this economic reality is the lack of personal wealth in the country. Hickson asserts that traditionally, it is the role of the upper class to enact identification reforms.²⁶ However in Moldova, this class is practically non-existent. Recent estimates show that there are approximately 190 millionaires in Moldova.²⁷ At first this number sounds relatively high for such a small

²³ Hickson, Jill E. "Using Law to Create National Identity: The Course to Democracy in Tajikistan." *Texas International Law Journal* 38 (2003): 348-380.

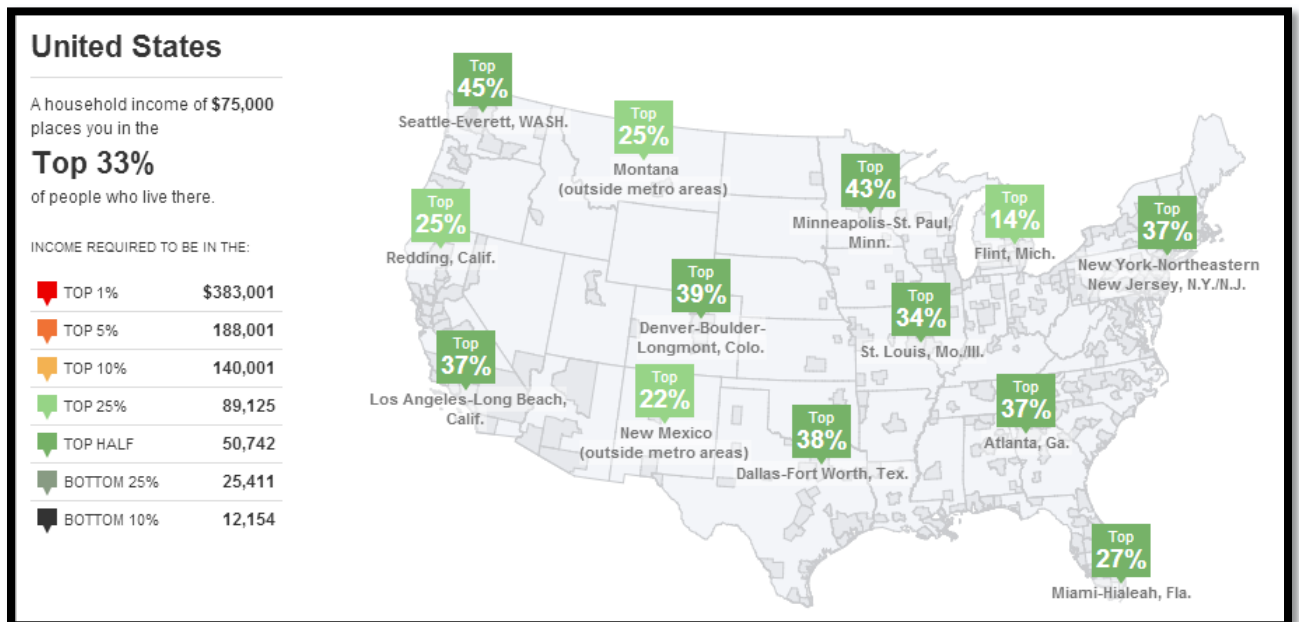
²⁴ Harrison, Frances W. "Reviving Heritage in Post-Soviet Eastern Europe: A Visual Approach To National Identity." *Totem: The University of Western Ontario Journal of Anthropology* 20, no. 1 (July 1, 2012).

²⁵ "Report for Selected Countries and Subjects." *International Monetary Fund*. IMF, 2010. Web. 2014. <<http://www.imf.org/external/pubs/>>

²⁶ Hickson, Jill E. "Using Law to Create National Identity: The Course to Democracy in Tajikistan." *Texas International Law Journal* 38 (2003): 348-380.

²⁷ "Over 190 Millionaires Registered In Moldova In 2012." *InfoTag News Agency*. N.p., 13 May 2014. Web. 2014. <<http://www.infotag.md/news-en/740830/>>.

population, however this is based off of a million Moldovan lei rather than US dollars. One million lei is equivalent to around \$75,000. A *New York Times* wealth distribution map pictured below shows that 33% of US households make this amount annually²⁸ and only 190 Moldovans (.005% of the population) have amassed this much wealth. Many of those Moldovans, who do make considerable wages, often spend their time and money in Western Europe instead of putting it back into the Moldovan economy. With an absent or passive upper class, there is no one pushing economic growth and national reform.



Income Distribution for \$75,000 Annually In the United States

²⁸ White, Jeremy. "What Percent Are You?." *The New York Times*.
http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2012/01/15/business/one-percent-map.html?_r=2&.

The second economic barrier according to Hickson is lack of political will. There is a noticeable lack of national dialogue or governmental action on this issue. Perhaps it is because the urgency present is not being communicated. Or perhaps it is because the country feels that other problems at hand are more important. But in any regard, the government must create and maintain an active role first, and by doing so give the people a reason to support nationalistic ideals. Along with these changes, the government must also fight internal corruption to gain the trust of their people. Currently Transparency International ranks Moldova as number 102 in the world on a corruption scale with 1 being the least corrupt government and 177 being the most corrupt.²⁹ They received a score of 35 in 2013 which is one point lower than their score in 2012 where a higher score is better. No citizen of any country would want to be associated with or be proud of a government with corruption numbers as high as these.

I was able to experience this corruption firsthand. Upon arriving at the airport in Chisinau last summer, my group was quickly greeted by an airport security team who informed us that as Americans we were not to enter the country with more than one piece of luggage per person. However, they were kind enough to be willing to reconsider this policy at \$50 per bag. This bribery is just one small example of the kind of corruption that has become commonplace amongst government officials.

²⁹ "Corruption Perceptions Index 2013." *Transparency International*. N.p., n.d. Web. 2014. <<http://www.transparency.org/cpi2013/results>>.

The last major barrier to Identity reform is the remnants left from the Soviet past. Stalin was one of the most successful leaders in recent history when it came to forming identity. The Soviet Union covered a vast array of different countries, governments, and cultures; however they all became quickly unified under the Soviet Union. One explanation given for this phenomenon is Frances W Harrison's visual approach to national identity, which is most evident in Moldova through architecture and Soviet monuments.³⁰ The Soviet government realized that to create unity, there must be a perception of equality, so architecture became very homogenous with no one structure presumably any better than another.³¹ This forced equality is evident in the picture on the next page of a Soviet-era apartment building. You will notice how bland the structure is, but more importantly it looks exactly like similar buildings across all of Eastern Europe. To this day, individuals may own the rooms inside, but the government owns the exterior of the building in order to maintain the Soviet heritage behind it. In the second photograph, there is a memorial which is located in the center of the city in Bălți. This memorial of a Soviet tank, similar to the ones that came in to capture the city, is still displayed prominently for all of the citizens to see. Relics like this appear all over cities across the country. If the people of Moldova are ever to move on with their own unique identity, they must demolish these leftover symbols.

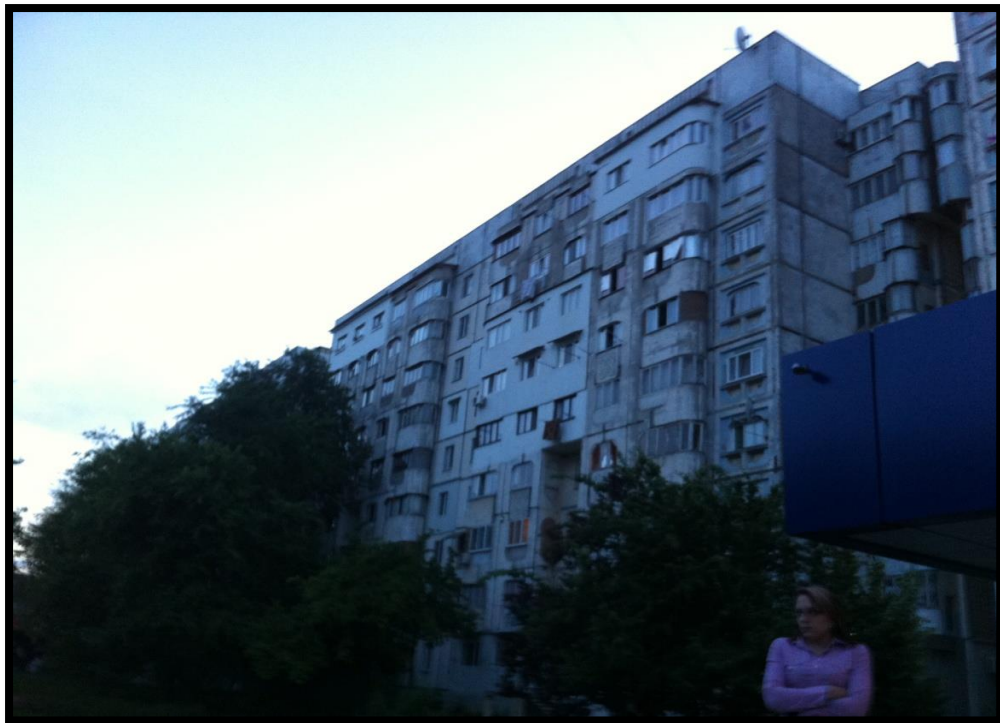
³⁰ Harrison, Frances W. "Reviving Heritage in Post-Soviet Eastern Europe: A Visual Approach To National Identity." *Totem: The University of Western Ontario Journal of Anthropology* 20, no. 1 (July 1, 2012).

³¹ Harrison, Frances W. "Reviving Heritage in Post-Soviet Eastern Europe: A Visual Approach To National Identity." *Totem: The University of Western Ontario Journal of Anthropology* 20, no. 1 (July 1, 2012).



World War II, Soviet Tank

Josh Rogers, 2013



Soviet-Era Apartment Building

Josh Rogers, 2013

Română or Русский, or does it matter?

Another way that Stalinism proved successful was in unifying the people through language. Fukuyama recognizes the power behind language as a unifying agent, and cites Indonesia and Tanzania as examples where forcing a common language proved to be very successful.³² This began in the Soviet Union by introducing Russian into the new States, and in Moldova creating an entirely new alphabet. In order to decrease Western ties, the Soviet leadership forced all Romanian to be written in the Cyrillic alphabet (similar to the alphabet basis for Russian.) The Moldovan Cyrillic alphabet was in effect throughout the occupation, and is still the official language of Transnistria.³³ Russian was taught in all schools at the time, and Russian became the operating language for all government and business proceedings. After independence, a divide still existed in Moldova between ethnic Russians and ethnic Romanians. Although Moldova was the first post-Soviet state to declare their own official language other than Russian, it was not entirely effective.³⁴ At this point, ethnic Russians had lived for so long in a world where their language was required, that Romanian acclimation became a major problem. Initially the declared language was Romanian, but in an attempt to create a feeling of nationalism, the official name

³² Fukuyama, Francis. "How to Build a Nation." *Harvard Gazette*, December 10, 2012.

³³ Chinn, Jeffrey. "The Politics of Language in Moldova." George Washington University.
https://www.gwu.edu/~ieresgwu/assets/docs/demokratizatsiya%20archive/02-2_Chinn.pdf.

³⁴ Chinn, Jeffrey. "The Politics of Language in Moldova." George Washington University.
https://www.gwu.edu/~ieresgwu/assets/docs/demokratizatsiya%20archive/02-2_Chinn.pdf.

of the language was changed to Moldovan.³⁵ Moldovan in essence is almost exactly the same as Romanian, and many critics argue that there is absolutely no difference. There has only been one strong movement to enact policy requiring the entire nation to revert back to speaking Russian. In 2001, President Vladimir Voronon attempted to make learning Russian compulsory alongside Romanian. The public was outraged and took to the streets in protest, and eventually the motion was withdrawn.³⁶ Today, there is still a major divide. As you drive through Moldova you will pass businesses, schools, and billboards which constantly switch back and forth between Russian, Romanian, and Cyrillic Moldovan. Language may be one of the most obvious unifying (or dividing) traits of a country, but one trait can bring people together better than any other. Only one trait can force two people who may be polar opposites to stand, cheer, scream, or cry in perfect unison. That trait is a nation's sport.

Sport and identity

A nation's sports often reveal a lot about the people, government, and culture. Can Moldova use sport as a building block for a unique identity? Should it be based on the traditional sports of their ancestors or the popular sports of today? Is it the role of the government to establish this or should the people's voice be heard?

³⁵ Chinn, Jeffrey. "The Politics of Language in Moldova." George Washington University. https://www.gwu.edu/~ieresgwu/assets/docs/demokratizatsiya%20archive/02-2_Chinn.pdf.

³⁶ Chinn, Jeffrey. "The Politics of Language in Moldova." George Washington University. https://www.gwu.edu/~ieresgwu/assets/docs/demokratizatsiya%20archive/02-2_Chinn.pdf.

My awareness of the severity of sport in Moldova began when I was 14 in a crowded taxi. I was squeezed in the backseat with three of my friends as we bounced down the dirt road toward a crowded soccer field. We were in a small Moldovan village about 10 miles outside of Chisinau. We had sent ahead word that we were coming and bringing soccer supplies so the children of the village could have an opportunity to play. But when we turned the final corner, we realized the depth of what we had done. The entire village was in attendance. The sidelines were packed with families, dogs, and picnic baskets. Everyone came out to see their hometown club play a match against the great American soccer team. Surprisingly, they were not too terribly upset when a group of teenagers and overweight middle aged men and women exited the taxis. Our translators rushed to our aid trying to discover where the failure in communication had occurred. We eventually split their team in half and played a light hearted scrimmage.

This story is more than just a nice dinner party vignette; it is an example of how passionate Moldovans are about sport. This village firmly believed that this was their chance. It was going to be their chance to show the rest of the world just how great they were. Everyone came out in full force, whether it meant practicing penalty kicks, mowing the grass on the field, or sewing uniforms for the players, for the chance to make a statement that this landlocked, poor, underdeveloped country had something to be proud of. This sense of pride and the need to express it to the world underlies every nation's struggle to form an identity.



Soccer Stadium in Bălți

Josh Rogers, 2013

Modern Sport

Today, Moldova can compete at the international level with many sports; however two sports truly stand out as helping to build a national identity. These two are the national sport and the country's most popular sport: tranta (a Moldovan form of wrestling) and soccer. While the Soviets attempted to transform completely Moldovan sport, tranta was one athletic tradition that survived the occupation. Tranta is officially the national sport of Moldova.³⁷ Part of this success in Moldova is due to the fact that this sport does not require any equipment. With Moldova's economic status, tranta is extremely important because it can be played in villages where materials and fields for other sports

³⁷ USSR Wrestling. "THE TRADITIONAL SPORTS OF MOLDOVA."
"http://ussrwrestling.narod.ru/mol_en.htm."

are scarce.³⁸ Another reason for its popularity is its uniqueness. It is a style of wrestling that focuses on peace and cooperation and has roots dating back to ancient Egypt, where it was used as a form of conflict resolution.³⁹ Dr. Serghei Busuioc explains in an interview with Info-prim Neo, that the mat the athletes compete on is always circular and yellow with a red center in order to honor Horus the Egyptian sun god. Busuioc goes on to say that tranta combines these Egyptian traditions with Biblical principles such as not beating a man after he has fallen down, a ritualistic crossing of hands before each match, and the use of three rounds and three referees to represent the Trinity.⁴⁰ The entire match is set around friendship and camaraderie. Before the match competitors meet each other and shake hands, and then after it is over, it is normal for the fighters to all celebrate together, often sharing a glass of Moldovan wine. Even the fighting itself is focused on peace. The winner is decided by who can force the other's shoulder blades onto the mat. While other larger countries have forms of fighting focused on injuring or killing their opponent, Busuioc notes that since Moldova is such a small nation, they all need each other desperately so it is seen as hurting the nation to injure or kill your fellow Moldovan.⁴¹ Then there are traditions of the game that are uniquely Moldovan, one being the prize system. Although in official arenas it is becoming more common to give out medals or trophies, in

³⁸ USSR Wrestling. "THE TRADITIONAL SPORTS OF MOLDOVA."
http://ussrwrestling.narod.ru/mol_en.htm.

³⁹ Busuioc, Serghei. "WHAT MOLDOVAN WRESTLING AND INTERNET HAVE IN COMMON."
<http://trinta.md/2011/02/what-moldovan-wrestling-and-internet-have-in-common/>.

⁴⁰ Busuioc, Serghei. "WHAT MOLDOVAN WRESTLING AND INTERNET HAVE IN COMMON."
<http://trinta.md/2011/02/what-moldovan-wrestling-and-internet-have-in-common/>.

⁴¹ Busuioc, Serghei. "WHAT MOLDOVAN WRESTLING AND INTERNET HAVE IN COMMON."
<http://trinta.md/2011/02/what-moldovan-wrestling-and-internet-have-in-common/>.

several small village set-ups where tranta is often played on the dirt or maybe a large blanket at the most, the traditional prizes are still used. If there are two divisions, the younger winner will receive a rooster and the older victor will receive a ram. If there are three divisions, then the winner of the middle division receives a rabbit.⁴² These awards are highly sought after across most of the country, and are a great testament to strength and power. Today tranta is gaining prestige as a military training device and is becoming known worldwide because of the website Busuioc created. When asked why he wanted to use the internet to spread information about tranta, Busuioc replied:

One needs to keep his past and his nation's past if he wants to be safe in future. Otherwise, you're like a leaf in the wind and you'll end up like it. Our Moldovan wrestling, as an old sport, represents us. It shows who we are and who we should be. I thought to use Internet, one of the most important means of globalization, as a tool to promote our traditional wrestling and our nation as a whole. My site will focus on both sportive and spiritual aspects of our people. They are interlaced and it can't be otherwise. Yes, I decided to use a globalization tool to keep and promote our identity.⁴³

So tranta is more than just a game. It is more than just a way to settle petty disputes or decide who the strongest man in the village is. It truly acts as a way Moldovans view themselves, combining their ancient historical roots, their religious practices, and their own traditions and customs. Recently tranta has acted as a way to deter violence and restore relations with Transnistria. In 2010, what started as a small tournament for youth wrestlers in Transnistria quickly

⁴² USSR Wrestling. "THE TRADITIONAL SPORTS OF MOLDOVA."
http://ussrwrestling.narod.ru/mol_en.htm.

⁴³ Busuioc, Serghei. "WHAT MOLDOVAN WRESTLING AND INTERNET HAVE IN COMMON."
<http://trinta.md/2011/02/what-moldovan-wrestling-and-internet-have-in-common/>.

grew and became a national event.⁴⁴ Young athletes from all over the country came together to compete with each other in an act of unity that has not been seen before between the two regions. In recent years, this sport has started to gain a certain amount of international recognition. At a martial arts festival in Korea, Moldova was ranked near the top of the 35 states that were all present.⁴⁵ But what does this international recognition mean for tranta and for Moldova? Official regulated tranta will continue to grow and be supported by the government. It will be seen as a way for the international community to view this state that is struggling to find an identity. The only roadblock on the path to tranta's fame is another sport that is quickly taking the place of tranta as number one in Moldova. Soccer is growing faster and faster every day in Moldova, slowly blocking any chance of glory and recognition for tranta.

This peace-keeping function has been evident in the conflict with the Transnistria region. The region, though diminutive, has its own soccer club, F.C. Sheriff. Because the region only has one team, there is a consensus on support for the team.⁴⁶ Everyone in Transnistria roots for the same club and all of the funding in the region goes towards this one team. This money has created a lot

⁴⁴ Hawks, Tony. *Playing the Moldovans at Tennis*. DVD. 2012. Gonzo Multimedia.
IREX. "Wrestling Competition Unites Moldovan Youth." <http://www.irex.org/news/wrestling-competition-unites-moldovan-youth>.

⁴⁵ Busuioc, Serghei. "WHAT MOLDOVAN WRESTLING AND INTERNET HAVE IN COMMON."
<http://trinta.md/2011/02/what-moldovan-wrestling-and-internet-have-in-common/>

⁴⁶ Montague, James. "In Sliver of Old U.S.S.R., Hot Soccer Team Is Virtual State Secret." *The New York Times*, August 19, 2012, sec. Soccer.
http://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/20/sports/soccer/soccer-team-of-post-soviet-transnistria-dominates-moldovan-league.html?pagewanted=all&_r=2&.

of opportunity for the team. They have what is considered to be one of the best stadiums and facilities in all of Eastern Europe, and they are able to recruit players from all over the world that the other Moldovan teams are unable to reach.⁴⁷ However, because there is only one club, they must play in the Moldovan league with the rest of the country that they do not associate with. Here is where money provides the biggest advantage. Because they have such better players and training facilities, Sheriff has claimed the Moldovan National title in 11 out of the past 12 years.⁴⁸ This rivalry only increases the divisions amongst Moldovans. Sheriff fans rally around the stadium singing Russian anthems and taunting their fellow countrymen.

There is one player who has used his athletic skills to help unify the country. Alexandru Epureanu has been called the most valuable Moldovan player. He has had an incredible career as a defender. He was born in the capitol city of Chisinau where he learned to play.⁴⁹ After playing for a couple of different smaller Moldovan teams his career took off when he went to play for Sheriff. He showed everyone that it is possible to coexist with the people of Transnistria, and he tried to make peace between the two groups. Now he has taken on an even more challenging role by playing for A Russian team out of

⁴⁷ Montague, James. "In Sliver of Old U.S.S.R., Hot Soccer Team Is Virtual State Secret." *The New York Times*, August 19, 2012, sec. Soccer.
http://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/20/sports/soccer/soccer-team-of-post-soviet-transnistria-dominates-moldovan-league.html?pagewanted=all&_r=2&.

⁴⁸ Montague, James. "In Sliver of Old U.S.S.R., Hot Soccer Team Is Virtual State Secret." *The New York Times*, August 19, 2012, sec. Soccer.
http://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/20/sports/soccer/soccer-team-of-post-soviet-transnistria-dominates-moldovan-league.html?pagewanted=all&_r=2&.

⁴⁹ TransferMarkt. "Alexandru Epureanu." http://www.transfermarkt.co.uk/en/alexandru-epureanu/profil/spieler_45340.html.

Moscow. Moldovans love Alexandru and are learning that they can root for their hometown hero while realizing that in a globalizing world, there must be cooperation between rivals and enemies.

What Can Be Done Now?

The last role to examine is the role of creating actual policy regarding national identity. Moldova has taken some minimal steps in this process but there is still much work to be done. The largest piece of legislation to be passed so far is the Law on the Concept of National Policy of the Republic of Moldova in 2004.⁵⁰ This document begins by establishing a need of unity and tolerance in order to ensure the safety and sovereignty of the republic. It continues to call for the inclusion and support of both ethnic and linguistic minorities into Moldovan culture. It provides a thorough list of minority populations in the state and recognizes that there are many others not listed as well. This policy recognizes Moldovan as the official language of the state, but further recognizes the prominent role Russian has had in history. While it supports bi-lingualism, it does admit the narrowing role Russian plays in the country. In conclusion, the document describes Moldova as a modern and democratic European nation and encourages the rest of the world to view them as such. As far as the future of policy goes, Hickson points out that there are three methods of using law in

⁵⁰ Moldova Department of Interethnic Relations. *Law on the Concept of National Policy of the Republic of Moldova*. Chisinau Moldova: 2004.

identity: 1) controlling the media, 2) rewriting the law, and 3) reforming education.⁵¹ In Moldova specifically this can transfer easily into tangible actions.

Instead of controlling the media, it is vital that the government take a role in media coverage. Although funding is an obvious and major concern for the Moldovan government, they must find funding for programming that focuses on the proud history of the country. Offering this public programming to citizens could create a large impact on citizen's ideas of the State. This cannot be limited to television. With so many citizens falling under the poverty line, only a slim minority have television sets in their homes. Government radio broadcasts can reach these rural areas, and inform the citizens, while making them feel connected to their fellow countrymen across the state.

They can also continue to rewrite law, such as the Law on the Concept of National Policy of the Republic of Moldova. New laws can be created and old laws can be re-visited to ensure the view of Moldova as a modern, culturally thriving state. Currently the country views women in an archaic fashion. Women are not able to hold the same jobs, much less earn the same wages as their male counterparts. While this seems to be improving, national legislation could make this dream a reality. Even though perceptions are changing in the cities, so many of the villages are out of touch and are not keeping up with their urban neighbors. Many people in these villages have spent their entire lives in the confines of the village and have never seen a modern thriving city. In order to move forward with the goal of being a modern thriving state, laws must be

⁵¹ Hickson, Jill E. "Using Law to Create National Identity: The Course to Democracy in Tajikistan." *Texas International Law Journal* 38 (2003): 348-380.

enacted to increase the role of women in society, bring technology and education to the farthest villages, and boost an economy that has been lying dormant for years.

The last process is education reform. Many schools in Moldova are struggling to maintain teachers in classrooms and provide basic school items for the children, but a government funded initiative to send representatives to schools around the country and teach children what it means to be Moldovan could have massive payoffs. It is the duty of the government, when they cannot do it on their own, to reach out to NGO's for support. Children across the country are receiving the bare minimum education necessary for survival. The idea of any secondary or post-secondary education for children in the villages is a remote and sometimes absurd possibility. The children who do make it through the system and receive an education often times leave the country to find employment or larger universities and they never return. It is necessary to develop a curriculum that expands children's knowledge and teaches them to be proud of their heritage. The more pride you instill in children, the more likely they are to remain in Moldova after completing their education.



Moldovan Students Wishing Us Farewell

Josh Rogers, 2013

Conclusion

Throughout the course of my research something surprising emerged. Throughout, my assumption had been that the Republic of Moldova had no National Identity, but interviews with Moldovans consisted of one simple question: "What does it mean to you, to be Moldovan?" The answers are nothing short of astounding and some of them are as follows:

- It means to have a heart that beats first for others and then for yourself.
- The one thing that nobody can forget about our country is the magnificent food, and the heart we put in it.
- Our explored history from the very beginning to the very end of this day proves that we have not been made of superficiality and pride.
- Our land is the same land that was kneaded with the blood of those who fought for our freedom
- To have a Moldovan heart and mind means to fight for your family and nation always and anywhere.
- The hospitality and goodwill will make anyone long for a new visit to our country.
- To be Moldovan means to live your single heart beat with the one and only thought: longing for your motherland.



Preparing For Dinner

Josh Rogers, 2013

No one responded by saying they did not know, or that it was not important. No one answered by saying it means to be poor and weak. In fact, I was presented with a magnitude of self-pride. It is true that for safety and legitimacy, Moldova must work to create an international recognition and a united front, whether it be through removing barriers to identity, focuses on national spotlights through sports, compromising on languages, or drafting new policies. However, to say that they have no identity at all is erroneous.

It is not immediately clear what the future holds for this country. At this time, the world's attention is focused on Eastern Europe with protests, occupations, and sanctions crowding the news. The future of states such as Moldova could be at risk. But if Moldova can transfer their strong sense of national pride to an international platform, then they will never be forgotten.



Josh Rogers, 2013

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