

**NININS 2020****International Scientific Forum «National Interest, National Identity and National Security»****THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA: RELIGIOUS AND REGIONAL IDENTITY PATTERNS, STATE AND PROSPECTS**

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**Abstract**

The article deals with defining the role of the religious factor in the genesis of different variants of regional identity in the Republic of Moldova. The period looked upon begins with the formation of independent statehood after the collapse of the USSR in 1991, through the conflict between the Republic of Moldova and the unrecognized Transnistrian Moldavian Republic and its current transfer to the “frozen” phase. According to official statistics, the population of Moldova demonstrates a high level of orthodoxy estimated at 96.8 % and deep traditional ethnic religiosity. The latter is expressed in constant participation in parish activities and their financial support as well as the incontestable authority of the clergy. At the same time, Orthodox parishioners do not show adherence to religious and political units but tend to eclectic stability and traditionalism. This ideology of the multi-ethnic Orthodox electorate ensures overcoming the extremes of regional identities in the form of Moldovan-nationalism (unionism) and accelerating the establishment of a more stable Moldovenism identity as a national-state concept.

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## **1. Introduction**

Before tackling the influence of regionalism on the religious situation in the Moldavian state, and on the religious factor in the country's socio-political life, it is necessary to clarify the meaning of a few terms. The article refers to Moldavia as the geographical territory encircled by the borders of Romania and Ukraine. The state proclaimed on this territory in 1991, will be called the Republic of Moldova. The international legal sphere does not recognize the notion of "Moldavia" (unless the historical concept is meant). It is Moldova, the entire territory between Romania and Ukraine, which is looked upon as a subject of international law. On the other hand, discussion of the regional identity patterns on the territory of Moldavia involves opposition between Moldova (in the part of the Prut-Dniester territory) and Transnistria or the Transnistrian Moldavian Republic. The latter constitutes an unrecognized but real-life agent of regional and international political processes. Over the past three decades, state-confessional relations and a certain religious landscape have taken shape both in Moldova and the Transnistrian Moldavian Republic. The religious situation is defined as the state of society / region, characterized by the presence, certain nature and intensity of religious manifestations, the dynamics and direction of their changes, the nature and degree of their impact on society (Lopatkin, 2002). Evaluation of the religious situation presupposes taking into account the presence of various religious trends, their quantitative and state relations, their historical fit into society and its ethnic structure. The religious situation is being examined at the moment. However, it is vitally important to consider the past, which affects the direction and features of its modification, for understanding the trends of its development. The religious factor, in turn, implies the manifestation of religious meanings in a wide variety of socio-political processes and phenomena (Smirnov, 2017).

## **2. Problem Statement**

The topic of regionalism and its aspects is the subject of attention, both in the academic environment and practical politics. The main source of this interest is the European Union, integration and regionalization within it. Upon the collapse of the USSR, regionalism "migrated" to the east and became one of the most important factors in the socio-political life of post-Soviet states. In contrast to the European Union, regional processes in the post-Soviet space are affected by the religious factor, which often shows a decisive potential in the search and assertion of a particular regional identity. Due to its relatively limited experience of statehood, Moldova is, in some way, a platform for political experiments initiated by various forces inside and outside the country. The study of the religious factor in determining the regional patterns in Moldova is critical for the development of everyday political practice, the formation of a medium-term political strategy and, most importantly, shaping Moldavian identity.

## **3. Research Questions**

The article aims at identifying the role of the religious factor in the design of regional identity patterns in Moldova at the moment and in the medium term. It also dwells on understanding the

consolidating potential of the traditional Orthodox y for Moldova in the issue of overcoming the conflict of regional identities within the country.

#### **4. Purpose of the Study**

The analysis of the influence of the religious factor on the patterns of regional identity is based on the methodology of civilizational analysis. It highlights the importance of system-forming valuable basis in the political and economic life of states and peoples. Civilization theory is capable of explaining the mechanism and dynamics of the regional identities formation in the framework of interregional and region-centre relations as a value basis for shaping a state (Schmid, 2020). Its identity is formed in the process of active interaction with geographical neighbours and global power centres, partners and antagonists. The authors turn to the paradigm of social constructivism, which studies domestic and international processes and phenomena through the prism of existing or developed institutions and rules of the game / behaviour patterns. In addition, the present research resorts to analytical methods, such as discourse analysis, and synthetic methods, including sociological interviewing, a synthesis of facts, statistical calculations and data.

#### **5. Research Methods**

Moldova's independence from the USSR was formally proclaimed on August, 27, 1991, but a year before (in September, 1990), Transnistria declared its sovereignty from the Moldavian SSR (back in the day). Hence the centrifugal tendencies in the yet unformed state turned out to be so strong that the separatist impulse from the Transnistrian Moldavian Republic instigated rapid regionalization. Since the appearance of the Republic of Moldova on the political map, the main agents of regionalization have chosen highly conflictive separatism, softened by neither the religious community nor the common Soviet past.

Significant is that according to the 1989 census, among the sum total of 3,657,665 people inhabiting the Moldavian SSR, 1.5 million were Russians, Ukrainians, Bulgarians, Gagauzians. Their share in the population of Moldova for that period exceeded 35 % (Ukrainians – 13.8 %, Russians – 13 %, Gagauzians – 3.5 %, Bulgarians – 2.0 %, Jews – 1.5 %, other nationalities – 1.7 %). The Russian language was the mother tongue or a second language for 68.5 % of the representatives of these nationalities. The results of the 2004 census show that among the 3,383,332 residents of the republic, only 1,988,540 people (58.7 % of the total population) spoke Moldavian (Stepanov, 2015, p. 16). The 2014 census testifies to the fact that the Republic of Moldova remains a multi-ethnic state with the majority predominance of the Moldavian ethnic group. According to the official data, 2,754,719 people live in the republic. The following percentage groups shape the population ethnic structure: Moldavians – 75.1 %, Romanians – 7 %, Ukrainians 6.6 %, Russians – 4.1 %, Gagauzians – 4,6 %, Bulgarians – 1.9 %, Roma – 0.3 %, others – 0.5 %. Multi-ethnicity, acuteness of the linguistic issue and ethnocultural self-determination pose as the objective basis for the emergence of diversity and conflict of regional identities in the Republic of Moldova.

It can be said that over the past three decades, the line of civilizational clash has fallen along the Dniester. The Republic of Moldova has chosen integration into European and Euro-Atlantic institutions and Europe as a priority for development, while the Transnistrian Moldavian Republic has chosen to adhere to Russia. The Republic of Moldova has embarked on the path of Moldovan-nationalism (unionism) and Moldovanism (upholding the unique identity of the Moldavian ethnos, language and culture in the context of regionalization). It has partly come to the negation of the uniqueness and originality of the Moldavian language, advocating the position of unionism and its perception as a variant of Romanian. This tendency has also been supported in the political elites of Bucharest. E.g., the chairman of the Romanian Senate Foreign Policy Commission, Mircea Joane, announced that Romania's attitude towards Moldova should resemble Greece's attitude towards Macedonia, and that Romania must prevent Moldovan identity from being established as the basis for any kind of identity (Yazkova, 2007). Throughout the years of Moldavian independence, Moldovanism has been interpreted by many Chisinau intellectuals, supporters of the Great Romanian idea, as a primitive, dead-end direction, a product of trivial peasant consciousness. Romanian unionism is believed to be promising, as it provides the opportunity to obtain Romanian citizenship with further integration into European society. As a result, an inferiority complex triggered off by the powerful influence of the pro-Romanian ideology began developing in the Moldavian community. The process was facilitated by the weakening of Russian influence on the area backing Moldova as a regional idea. In turn, supporters of the Romanian vector of development consider Moldovanism only as a regional feature of the complex Romanian nation (Stepanov, 2015). Consequently, in the 90s, replacements took place in the elite (Konenko, 2010). Non-Moldavians were removed, the flag of Romania was used as a basis for the national flag, the history of Moldavians in the course of secondary education was supplanted by the history of Romanians, the Moldavian language began to be denied as an independent phenomenon and was interpreted as a variant of Romanian, and translated into Latin script. At the beginning of the Moldavian independence establishment, Moldovanism and Romanianism differed little in their negative perception of the Russian language and culture, seeking to oust it from day-to-day experience. With the course of time, though, proponents of Moldovanism turned to the Russian cultural world as an alternative to being absorbed by the Romanian world.

Among Moldovanists, a group of statesmen, who are fighting for independent and multi-ethnic Moldova, is emerging. Individual researches (Stati, Stepaniuc) and even entire party trends, such as the Party of Socialists led by Dodon or the Party of Regions of Moldova headed by Formuzal, advocate this viewpoint. Russia continues to rely on Moldovanists because it gives some guarantee of maintaining influence over the whole of Moldova (as Russia does not officially separate the Transnistrian Moldavian Republic from the Republic of Moldova) and gaining support from compatriots. To prove this philosophy, it must be mentioned that two authoritative Moldavian historians Nazaria and Shornikov, known for their anti-Romanian and Moldovanist ideas, have been awarded the Russian Orders of Friendship of Peoples (Nazaria & Shornikov, 2020).

It is also important to note that Transnistria, populated by Moldovans, Russians and Ukrainians in approximately equal shares, could not have taken the pro-Romanian course. Moreover, it was unacceptable for the unrecognized Transnistrian Moldavian Republic to break off its ties with Russia, its

border guarantor (Kolosov, 2004). In addition, today, the Republic of Moldova and the Transnistrian Moldavian Republic exhibit significant diversion in terms of their political culture. The Republic of Moldova has become a parliamentary republic, while Transnistria has turned into a (super) presidential republic, where the head of the state has considerable power and authority and, simultaneously, serious economic interests. The ‘pendulum’ of Moldavian regionalism continues to swing under the influence of domestic and foreign policy events. What is its impact on the religious situation in the country, and how does the religious factor influence the regional political context?

## 6. Findings

The Republic of Moldova, similar to other post-Soviet transit countries, was “sculptured” during the construction of the Soviet Union. Upon its collapse, Moldova got reacquainted with its former regional problems related to self-identity, language, religion – the whole set of unstable identities that could either transform into new qualities (for example, the existing Gagauz autonomy or developing Transnistrian statehood), or get mothballed. According to the researcher of ethno-political processes in the Republic of Moldova Stepanov, “local nationalism, whether Romanian, Moldavian, or Ukrainian, is very convenient for misleading and confusing the masses, redrawing geopolitical geography” (Stepanov, 2015). Therefore, when the influence of the Russian cultural space is narrowed, it inevitably tells on the problem of dynamics in ethnocultural identities not only in the Republic of Moldova but throughout the post-Soviet space.

As for the ethnic group of Moldavians, they are connected with the prevailing part of the Ukrainian, Russian, Gagauz, Bulgarian and other population not only by the territory of residence, economic relations, the Russian language as the language of interethnic communication, but also by a common religion and adherence to Orthodoxy. According to the 2014 census, the National Bureau of Statistics provides the following indicators of attitude towards freedom of conscience and religious affiliation among the citizens of the Republic of Moldova: out of 2 804 801 people participating in the census, 2 611 759 willingly threw light upon their confessional worldview while 193 000 (6,9 % of the country’s population) did not consider it necessary to answer this question; 427 people traced themselves as agnostics, 5515 people as atheists. 2,528,152 or 96.8 % of the population were Orthodox, 2535 were representatives of the Old Christian rite (the Old Believers are assigned to them), 2745 were Catholics, 2291 were evangelical Christians, 25 380 were evangelical Christians-Baptists, 4812 were Christians of the evangelical faith, 9063 were Adventists of the seventh day, 4393 were Pentecostals, 17 341 were Jehovah’s Witnesses, 584 were representatives of Judaism, 2009 were Muslims, 856 belonged to other religious groups (NBS of the Republic of Moldova, 2014; Shimanskaya, 2019). Official statistics point out that the number of Orthodox Christians has increased by 1.3 times over the past ten years, compared with the 2004 census. Moldova continues to be one of the most religious countries in the world and is among the six countries (alongside with Macedonia, Serbia, Romania, Pakistan and Malaysia) where the level of religiosity of the population is growing steadily (Sinelina, 2013). 92 % of the population practice Orthodoxy, 13 % among them attend church weekly (cf.: 6 % in Russia). 63 % are convinced that it is vitally important for them to be Orthodox in order to realize their national identity (Shimanskaya, 2019), which is proved by the recent 2017 large-scale research carried out by The Pew Research Centre.

Moreover, the Republic of Moldova is the only country in the post-Soviet space where 10 % of the respondents believe that in the 70–80s of the XX century, in the era of official atheism, people were yet more religious than nowadays. 50 % of the respondents tend to associate Orthodoxy with national culture, a sense of national pride. They show an urgent need for building connections between the national church and the state (PewResearch, 2017). The role of religion in the socio-political and cultural life of the Republic of Moldova is undeniably significant, since, according to Prof. Babenko, head of the Interethnic Relations Bureau of the Republic of Moldova (2015 – August, 2019), D. Sc. (Philosophy), Rector of the Slavic University, the high quantitative index of the religious population is complemented by the traditional informal religiosity of the population. People constantly attend Sunday services and follow the life of their parishes, know prayers, participate in the annual liturgical cycle of holidays, fasts, respect and support the clergy (The Author's archive. Interview with Babenko, Chisinau, August, 11, 2019 (Shimanskaya, 2019). This is because most of Moldova was annexed to the USSR in 1940 and avoided severe anti-religious persecution. The population maintained a high level of traditional religious culture.

The largest (compared to other European states) Orthodox congregation is split between two church jurisdictions (in terms of the arrangement). The first is the Orthodox Church of Moldova (Moldovan-Chisinau Metropolis), a self-governing part of the Russian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate since 1992. Vladimir (Kantaryan), Metropolitan of Chisinau and All Moldova, a permanent member of the Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church, heads it. The second branch is the Bessarabian Metropolis of the Romanian Orthodox Church under the leadership of Metropolitan Peter (Paduraru). It dates back to the interwar period. The official registration took place in the Republic of Moldova in 2002. Orthodox parishes do not quantify the parishioners. However, most analysts consider Orthodox Moldovans to be part of the Orthodox Church of Moldova, the jurisdiction of the Moscow Patriarchate – about 86 % of the believers. The Bessarabian Metropolis, as part of the Romanian Orthodox Church, is a consolidating unit for about 11 % of the believers (Sprynchane, 2013). The priority of choosing this or that church for Moldavian believers is not a matter of formality. It determines the socio-political positions of the communities, the views and value orientations of the people within them. It is about choosing the country's future development, its geopolitical self-determination between the largest regional centres of gravity – Europe and Russia. The Moldavian Orthodox Church is part of the canonical space of the Russian Orthodox Church and is an autonomous part of it, which traces its clergy and believers to the culture and traditions of the “Russian world”. The Bessarabian metropolis has an obvious pro-Romanian orientation going as far as the unification of Moldova and Romania (Shimanskaya, 2019).

According to 61 % of the republic's population, Russia functions as the guarantor of preserving its national and religious identity, counterweighing the West. The current head of the state supports this ideology of the citizens. Immediately after the election in 2017, President of the Republic of Moldova Igor Dodon made the following announcement at a meeting with Patriarch Cyril, “I believe that without the Orthodox faith, without our traditions, Moldova has no future. Moldova needs partnership with Russia; Moldova certainly needs to maintain and strengthen our Orthodox Church” (Dodon, 2017). The unity of the Orthodox Church will facilitate the dialogue with Transnistria and restore the country's unity since Orthodoxy is the meaningful core of the Moldavian ethnic group, its culture and political values.

It is, therefore, vital to understand what values remain common for Moldova, despite the shift in the political regimes and dominance of certain states on the territory of historical Moldavia. It is common knowledge that the policy of tsarist Russia was characterized by Orthodoxy and autocracy, dominance of Russian cultural values and the Russian language in the multi-ethnic suburbs. Its preservation and support was a distinctive feature of the Russian Empire. Romanian ideology was based on the dissemination of Romanian political values, the Romanian language, and Orthodox religion. The Soviet government created a new community – the Soviet people, based on the international ideas of Marxism-Leninism and the values of Russian culture, including the Russian language, official atheism, and recognition of national cultures and languages of all republics and autonomies. This striking diversity constitutes the dynamic scope of values over as limited a period like the past one and a half centuries. It explains the frequent shift in the mood of Moldovan intelligentsia to a certain extent. The lack of stable traditions and elitism of the local intelligentsia makes it vulnerable to Romania and Russia. Moreover, according to Stepanov's observation, the old political and ideological elite, as a rule, leaves and follows its old ideological patron, or becomes its agent of influence, with the advent of a new force (Stepanov, 2010).

The attitude towards the Romanians during the era of the Soviet power was twofold: officially, it is a fraternal socialist country, but the Moldovan people retained a negative recollection of the interwar period and the Romanian regime. In the post-Soviet period, part of the population (including intelligentsia) identified themselves with the Romanians, while the other one was deeply opposed to the idea. However, neither the supporters of the Romanian national idea nor the adherents of a peculiar Moldavian identity have developed a value system that can consolidate the majority of the republic's population. Russia, on its part, offers the value constants of the "Russian world". Nevertheless, according to Vera Petukhov, Deputy Head of the Interethnic Relations Bureau, it does little in practice. It even fails to support the Russian diaspora with cultural initiatives within the course of the National Culture Days (Shimanskaya, 2019).

## 7. Conclusion

What will contribute to overcoming the conflict of regional identities in the Republic of Moldova and strengthen its sovereign statehood? What values can develop the ideas of Moldavian identity or Moldovanism? Among the latter there are:

- territorial and economic factors, the duration of the residence of multi-ethnic population on this territory, and the established economic ties, both within the country and abroad;
- preservation and strengthening of sovereign Moldavian statehood;
- supporting multilingualism, study and dissemination of the Russian language as a language of interethnic communication with the prospect of obtaining the status of a second state language (national minorities have most actively supported the idea of Moldovanism as a guarantee of non-assimilation);
- confessional factor, unifying more than 90 % of the Orthodox population.

Nonetheless, tackling the religious factor in the context of multiple regionalism varieties in the Republic of Moldova, one should certainly take into account its ambivalent nature. It can also help to deal with the conflict of regional identities, but at the same time provoke their exacerbation and clash. The

return of religion to public space, interest in diverse institutional forms (for example, Orthodoxy in the Republic of Moldova, which led first to gaining autonomy from the Moscow Patriarchate of the Moldavian Russian Orthodox Church, and then the emergence of parallel jurisdiction of the Bessarabian Orthodox Church (which is part of the Romanian Orthodox Church), has largely been caused by external players. However, the problematic burden of different projections within Moldova's religious factor, the attempt to split the Orthodox flock in Moldova has so far failed due to its religious and ethical traditionalism, which refers not so much to the dynamics of socio-political changes, conflicts of interest, but to traditional folk religiosity, described vividly in the famous medieval Moldavian ballad "Miorica" (Miorica, 2019). It calls for non-resistance, idolizes universal Christian love, where there is no place for controversy or division due to its encapsulating and balancing nature. That is, the religious factor rooted in popular religiosity, in our opinion, will contribute to the preservation of the Moldovan regional identity and the reconciliation and attenuation of the identities conflict in the Republic of Moldova, despite the existence of different religious trends in the country, including various jurisdictions of Orthodoxy.

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