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**CONSTRUCTING IDENTITIES IN STATE-BUILDING OF TRANSNISTRIA:
HERITAGE OF THE PAST AND ITS REPERCUSSION IN THE PRESENT**

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Constructing Identities in State-building of Transnistria: Heritage of the Past and its Repercussion in the Present

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Abstract

Group political and territorial identities are realities in the contemporary world; the case of Moldova is not an exception. The elements and processes involved in recognizing such territoriality bound identities are discussed, with an emphasis on the questions of scale and perception. The legitimacy of a group identity depends on the abstraction scale and the definer's perspective. Some problems related to group allegiances and orientations are identified. The ethnically mixed population of the left bank of the Republic of Moldova set them apart from those established on the right bank. This contradiction between the two banks of the Dniester River should be regarded not as an ethnic separation but as a politicized regionalism. Transnistrian movement is a complex combination of various cross-cutting and interactive driving forces, among which is the heritage of Soviet patriotism, ideologically driven actors, and economic and political motivations. A state-driven identity building project is aimed at fostering a new regionalist pattern of collective identity as a step towards the creation of a "Transnistrian people". I choose Ribnita (approximately 110 kilometers away from Tiraspol), a less known city, to test how PMR (also TMR) statehood is perceived and how citizenship belonging is set up away from the charismatic Transnistria capital, Tiraspol.

Introduction

Located to the east of the Republic of Moldova, between the Dniester River and Ukraine, Pridnestrovskaia Moldavskaia Respublica (PMR; I will use the name Transdnistrian region in this paper) covers a territory of 4,163 sq km with a total of 816 km of defined, demarcated borders. The Transnistrian region declared its independence on 2 September 1990, nearly one year before the independence declarations of Moldova, and strengthened all the institutions from its statehood during the seventeen years-period of its independent existence. The main premise for separation of this region was the fear of

cultural “romanization” and the unwelcome possibility of Moldovan unification with Romania. Such fear and the 1992 civil war were formative features of the state-making process of the Transnistrian region. It was a driving force of self-determination providing examples of mass insurgency, popular chauvinism, and elite conspiracy, and a great support from Moscow. Referring to such civil wars, Donald Horowitz (1985, p. 215) showed that the emotional heat comes from a fear of group enlargement, which is usually ‘anxiety-laden’ or exaggerated by emotion. This fear turns stereotypes into antipathies, making people feel hostile enough to risk their lives to secure and defend themselves. In the Transnistrian region, where Moldovans make up about 33 %, Ukrainians 29 %, and Russians 25% of the regionals total population (ГРЫЗЛОВ В.Ф., 1999, p. 28), the majority of the Russian speaking population with ‘mixed’ identity and regional diversity, was lead by regional separatist tendencies with the support of the state authorities. They hoped to incline national devotion and a distinctive, homogeneous culture, under the influence of nationalist ideals of cultural authenticity and unity, providing repertoires of shared values, symbols and traditions (Smith A.D., 1991, p. 4). There exist certain common beliefs about what a nation is - territorially bounded units of population, having their own homeland; the members share a common mass culture and common historical myths and memories; the members have reciprocal legal rights and duties under a common legal system; and the nations possess a common labor division and production system with territorial mobility for its members. These are assumptions, and demands specific to all nationalists (Kaufman S.J, 1996, p. 108). Groups or the entire society is based on representations and images, myths and values recognized or tolerated by them. What defines the boundaries of the group, of the oppositional, immigrant and symbolic identities? Why does the Transnistrian population have such a keen sense of a regional identity and an attachment to the Dniester-Soviet values, which in their own eyes, set them apart from the right bank population? By the use of symbols – flag, money, anthems, ceremonies – members remember their common heritage and cultural kinship and feel strengthened and exalted by their sense of common identity and belonging.

Identity and State-Building Processes

Identity processes, the maintenance of group boundaries are very much ongoing processes. Both are inherently social phenomena, within which the identity setting-up and self/other relations are best explained in terms of different discourse practices. Each group, or more precisely, the ethnic entrepreneurs who claim to speak for the group, operates

within a given field of discourse in which a variety of different elements are combined, but where there is also a characteristic core of ethnic and political concepts which try to define the supposed essence of both the 'self' and the 'other' (Neumann I.B., 1996, p.162). Moreover, the structure of intra-group discourse helps to determine the status claims set up by each group for itself and, correspondingly, the status it would apply to others. Nations first, define a social space within which members must live and work and demarcate a historic territory. The most important political function of the national identity is the legitimation of common legal rights and duties of legal institutions, which define the particular values and character of the nation and reflect the age-old customs of people. The main attributes of ethnic community are: (Smith A.D., 1991, p. 20)

- collective proper name
- myth of common ancestry
- shared historical memories
- one or more differentiating elements of common culture
- an association with a specific “homeland”
- a sense of solidarity for significant sectors of the population.

This paper examines the nation-building process in the Transnistrian region; the official discourse of Transnistrian auto-proclaimed institutions, their ideological messages and how these messages correlate with the public opinion of ordinary people, their consciousness and myths that ensure the consolidation and unity of society, with characteristics of its homogeneity on the one side and their differentiation on the other.

The Transnistrian movement clearly differs not too much from other Russian-speaking groups in the former Soviet Union, the only exception consisting in the absence of ethnic conflict against the Russians living in the union republics; Transnistria is the case of an attempt of the “beached” Russian minority outside the Russian Federation to form their own state; and finally, Transnistria did not figure in any scenario of the late-Soviet or post-Soviet ethnic and political conflict (Laitin D., 1996, p. 6). The main pillars of the Transnistrian strive for state-building are: (1) the unusually united political will of the regional elite; (2) the economic potential of the region; (3) the power provided by the Russian military presence, as well as the political support of Moscow; (4) and the normative force of the Transnistrian factual existence with an impact on the everyday life of its inhabitants (Troebst S., 1998, p. 2)

Within any society, the political elite create, modify, and extend the national discourses of identity. In Transnistria, the setting up of a nation is a “cultural construct projected by the political elite to satisfy their own interests and needs” (ТОЩЕНКО Ж., 1997, p. 32). The elite need to strengthen their own power on the basis of the national consolidation ideology, providing loyalty to the state and identification with this state. In this sense, mass media is one of the more efficient means of communicating concepts of elite ideology, and identifying the boundaries of “we” group. According to the official discourse, the Transnistrian state was set up on the basis of the people’s will by organizing referendums. Local historians explain the premise of the Transnistria state-building process as being in 1924, when Moldova gained its autonomy as a part of Ukraine, with the capital Balta, today – Tiraspol. In 1940, according to the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, the USSR gained Bessarabia and Transnistria, and thereby the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic – MSSR was set up (Dima N., 1991, p. 24). Denunciation by the Moldovan parliament of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact in 1990 is explained by Transnistrian leaders as a premise for separation and independence. Society consolidation was based on the negative “other” – the Moldovan nation and on the basis of the positive consolidation through an appeal to the glorious past and glorious future (as independence and future union with Russia-Belarus). In all of these cases, the category of the “they” group is the basic element of oppositional, immigrant and symbolic identity construction.

Currently, the message of “we have always been different from the others” (БАБИЛУНГА Н., 1999, p. 13) is being refined by Babilunga and his colleagues into a new and genuinely Transnistrian historical master narrative. In doing so, they apply methods of professional historiography, yet the final result – the ultimate proof for the existence of a “Transnistrian people” – is predetermined by political factors. Accordingly, the new master narrative is only partly disseminated in the customary form of academic products like the two-volume *History of Transnistria*.

Stateness through Mass Media and Discourse on Holiday

Even more significant for transmitting Transnistrian identification, are mass media and holidays. Anniversaries like the Victory Day in the Great Patriotic War, or the new “Day of the Republic” on 2 September, and other dates linked with the dramatic years of 1990 to 1992. By analyzing the mass media in Transnistria, in general, and in Ribnita, in particular, I examine the sources, the premises of local nationalism, the factors of self-

representation and myths of regional separation, and identify the subjects of conflict memory in the Transnistrian region's mass media after 1991. Authorities say "we have all the attributes of a normal state" and possess a distinct Transnistrian identity and citizen spirit. "...there is a distinct feeling of 'Transnistrian' identity going beyond the ethnic lines, justifying a special status for the area" (Чубаличенко Д, 2007, p.3). There are a lot of articles about the Soviet times, about people who fought for the "Transnistrians" published within the rubric "Your people, Transnistria" (Pravda Pridnestrovia). There is an image that Transnistrian region is a fragment of the USSR. Up until now, people in this region still celebrate the 1st of May - the Day of Labour Solidarity. How does this event reflect nationalistic tendencies, national feelings of people? Will these feelings represent the solidarity, aspirations for freedom and unity of the Transnistrian people? I attended this official holiday in Ribnita, where a meeting of some trade unions representatives and pensioners was held. It is interesting to observe how the favourite holiday becomes a meeting of the unemployed.

"It was our favourite holiday which evoked our hopes, we were proud of our work and of our young country. But now it is not the labour, but the unemployment day, the day when we tell our government about non-paid pensions and salaries." (Anatolyi Borisovici, sixty years)

"I remember my childhood when parents took me on the demonstration, it was fun and interesting. Now we are going with our grandchildren, but the meaning of this date doesn't change for me, for me, it is the day of workers" (Mihail Sergheevici, fifty-five years)

A demonstration with slogans such as "together we have power", "Peace, Labour, and May", etc. was shown on the local television, TV PMR. May 1, as it was in the Soviet period, symbolises the historical continuity of workers, fighting for their rights, the president, I. Smirnov's thanks for strengthening the friendship relationship between the nations, the position of Transnistria in the international arena, and good relations held with the Russian Federation.

The fact that memory of population in the Transnistrian region didn't change also approves the Victory Day, May 9. For instance, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Litskai, answered a question concerning the role of the Soviet legacy in the following way: "Our history and our culture are closely related to the Soviet period. Industrialization in our region was Soviet in its nature. We cannot dissociate ourselves from the Soviet culture..."

Maybe the Soviet culture is not a good one, but we don't have another one. We do not think that it is a hundred-percent bad one" (Чубашенко Д., 2007, p.2). Different narratives and rituals of the Victory Day play an important role, symbolizing a glorious event of the past and the new generation's attitude towards it. "This day belongs to humanity, to the successors of the glorious Soviet people. We must talk about the glorious victory to our young generation. We must respect our parents and grandparents who, regardless of their health, saved our Motherland" (Светличная Н, 2007, p.2).

Power symbols and holidays in the Transnistrian region represent the discourse of self-representation and the elite's manipulative strategies. The meaning of the Second World War is connected with the war of 1992 with Moldova. The Soviet Union's victory over fascism is parallel to the war with Moldova. The military parade regained its triumphant tone - it is the image of "the state" and a formative feature of the state-building process in Transnistria. Behind all the rhetoric of sovereignty, self-determination, and justice are calculations of power that have led the authorities to seek security based on force. Since the cease-fire, Transnistria has moved to create genuine military structures. The Transnistrian Minister of Security, Vladimir Antufeev, inflates the nature of the Moldovan threat to Transnistria. The Ministry of Security conflates this imaginary Moldovan threat with the intentions of the so-called aggressive Western alliance and the revanchist fascist regime in Romania (Lynch D., 2004, p. 85). Anna Volcova, in her book "Everething can repeat itself again", compares fascist Germany from 1941-1945 with the present regime in Moldova and the 1992 war as a small patriotic war of Transnistria. Alena Arshinova, the leader of the Democratic Popular Party, noted: "This day - the Memory Day of the Bender Tragedy victims, is an eternal reminder to our people about the crimes of the nationalistic Moldovan regime in the Transnistrian land. Genocide of the occupation authorities against the Bender citizens showed the real purpose of the "peaceful" official Chisinau promises" (www.proriv.org).

The Day of Russia, June 12, also proved the oppositional identity of people living in Transnistria. According to the Transnistrian administration, about ten percent of the population now hold Russian citizenship. Ceremonial concerts and meetings dedicated to the Day of Russia represented more evidence of the Transnistrian and Russian people's solidarity, their common national and cultural roots, and geopolitical interests. For Transnistria, the Day of Russia symbolizes indestructibility of its unity with Russia, indivisibility and rebelliousness of the Russian spirit. Even ethnic Moldovans, who live in

Transnistria, have a distinct feeling of Transnistria identity going beyond the ethnic lines. They prefer being governed by Transnistria rather than Moldova.

So, be it ethnic or cultural integrity and uniqueness, the endeavour for national freedom, the natural right to independence through self-determination – these are the terms used by regional ethnic group elites, as they define the separatist political ideologies, which are often rooted in a variety of emotional, historical, and political and economic realities, as perceived and understood by the regional group itself. Anthony Smith (1979, p. 22) held that ethnic separatist groups seek for “the restoration of a degraded community to its rightful status and dignity”, by means of separation from the existent states, yet the respective groups also seek for the status of separate political existence, trying to attain the goal of the restoration and the social embodiment of that dignity.

Stateness in Personal Narrative

It is important to perform not simply a top-down analysis of the Transnistrian state building process, but to set up a bottom-up view of people’s engagement with the Transnistrian state.

The Ribnita Steel Mill (MMZ) was one of the Soviet Union’s most important producers of high-quality rolled steel, especially for ammunition. Originally built in 1984, based on German technology, the plant remains the best one in the former Soviet Union, and companies established in Western Europe continue to sign contracts with the plant (ГРЫЗЛОВ В.Ф., ГУБОГЛО М. Н, 1999, p. 28). The plant’s profits provide roughly half the revenue for Transnistria’s state budget and it was namely the employers of this mill who were active adherents of the principle of Transnistria’s independence from Moldova. For MMZ employees, an independent state symbolized the preservation of Russian language rights and continuity with a Soviet-style way of life. It is not surprising that in the course of my meetings with Russian and Ukrainian industrial workers, I found out that they, as well as their kin, most frequently refer to “our state and our Transnistrian people”. Seizable hopes to change their own position refer to the support of Russia. In general, people in Transnistria, about ninety-five percent, consider that Russia must defend their compatriots, and fifty-eight percent consider that Russia’s support is not enough (ШОРНИКОВ П. М, 1997, p. 43). For mill employers, the Transnistrian state is a real, tangible entity embodied in visible roads and welfare checks, as well as a powerful, regulating authority – to which they attribute a better quality of life.

However, not all urban representatives feel the same. Even within families there exist different opinions about Transnistria. They call the state “lawless” and “not organized.” They angrily talk about the necessity to go to Russia or to other countries where they have to work as migrants:

“Look what has happened to our republic! It was a prosperous land, and now it is a backward province. People here were satisfied and happy; now they have to go to other countries to earn their living. Only financial corporations live in freedom because they have privatized everything that provides benefits.”⁹ (Alexandr Radcenko, social democratic party)

Many citizens of Ribnita, to whom I talked, do not think they live in better conditions than people in Moldova.

“Our economy is very unstable. The economy of the republic was brought to ruin, industry and agriculture were destroyed. Enterprises were sold at very low prices. And these enterprises must work for our economy and provide economic security. Our villages are dying. Today the situation in the villages is worse than it was in the period of the Secod World War. ” (Natalia Pavlovan, forty-five years)

The Transnistrian population tries to keep itself as an independent, supranational, Russian-speaking community. The regional identity of the population is based on the memories of a prosperous region during the Soviet period and today they still appeal to Soviet time as a time of peace and harmony, which maintained the soviet symbols and ideology.

Deconstructing Boundaries: Alternative Narratives of Identity

What is in fact the Transnistrian nation? Neither the word “pridnestrovie”, nor the nation itself existed before the 1990 rebellion. From the very beginning, this political project was an attempt to save territoriality, which could not be imposed on the changing Moldova. Will it soon be one political nation? In the PMR, the visible signs of a new national construction are evident and in less than a decade, a new identity took shape. So it seems that, after the successful state-building of the early 1990s, the PMR leadership succeeded also in laying the foundations for a successive nation-building process, thereby

proving Miroslav Hroch's view that while nations are invented by political entrepreneurs without a hard core of previously existing allegiances – be they language, region, faith, class, or other – it does not work (Hroch M., 1985, p. 134). I do not think the category "Transnistrian" can pretend to exist. I do not think the referendum results necessarily substantiate the existence of a separate "Transnistrian people," but rather illustrate people's increasing anxiety over their ambiguous identities (e.g., Russian? Transnistrian?), and anxiety over their future lives in an unrecognized state. In Ribnita I met with people and asked them for their opinions about their children marrying outside their own cultural group; whether they speak the titular language; their views concerning the titular language being the sole medium of instruction in state schools; and their views as to whether the titular language should become a required subject in the schools. Here the data are quite surprising. Even the Russians living in Transnistria, who survived several years of open warfare with the Moldovan state, accept assimilation with the Moldovan society. The answers to the question - Do the Transnistrian people exist? - is that their identity is ambiguous:

If PMR exists, it means that the Transnistrian people also exist. (Interviewee, twenty-two years)

People on two banks of the river don't differ, we don't see Moldova as a boundary from the psychological point of view, but for our children such boundaries will exist (Interviewee, twenty years).

By analyzing these opinions, we can discern the symbolic boundaries that form the contours of a common Transnistrian identity. Patriotic ideas, especially the idea of state independence, and a variety of national feelings are expressed through culture, history and holidays. The national identification process is going through three phases: 1. phase of ethno differentiation, where the consciousness of differentiating „we” from „they” appeared, and the myth of the past was created; 2. drawing up auto and heterostereotypes, the appearance of images about the national character, ethno individuality; 3. formulation of national ideals – setting up not only one's own nation, but setting up the consciousness of their importance and value orientations, which are specific features of the Transnistrian community.

Conclusions

The majority of the Transnistrian population have a keen sense of a regional identity and an attachment to Dniester-Soviet values that, in their own eyes, set them apart from the right bank population. The Transnistrian regional elite of all ethnic backgrounds were distinctly “all-unionist” in a twofold sense of the word: they identified with the empire’s center of power, and the overwhelming majority of them had recently immigrated to the region from other parts of the Soviet Union. The Transnistrian regime has embarked on a state-driven identity building project aimed at fostering a new regionalist pattern of collective identity as the first step towards the creation of a “Transnistrian people”. The majority of the Russian-speakers came to Transdnistria as skilled workers, engineers, and teachers, and are descendants of Soviet immigrants. The immigrant population with the memory of their native homeland and with different cultures, is ideologically driven by official power. Among these manipulations is the nationalism of the local groups residing in Transdnistria, Soviet patriotism, the regionalist movement, and economic and political motivations of the old and new elite.

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Appendix:



Newspaper „Pridnestrovie”, no. 78, 2007.

The federation of Transnistria trade unions and other public organizations celebrate May 1 – The Working International Day of Solidarity in the center of Ribnita with the slogans: „Our labour is for the welfare of Transnistria”, „Trade union is a servant of the nation”, „Peace, Labour, May. Overhead is a citation of V.I. Lenin „Ideas became a power when they control the masses”.



Popular Democratic Party „Proriv” – „The Breach”, June 12, 2007, Tiraspol, 5 p.m.
International Youth Organization became a serious regional political power. Being a very popular on June 1, 2006 it became the Popular Democratic Party „ The Breach”. In the charter of the party is written that scopes of the party are the principles of democracy and patriotism, Motherland protection, fight for Transnistria recognition, fight for youth interests and unprotected members of the society. On the right the hero of this party Che-ghevara.



June 12, 2007, The Day of Russia, Tiraspol, 4.00 p.m.
Slogan „Russia and Transnistria indivisible!”.



The Victory Day - May 9, 2007, 9.00 a.m, Ribnita, placing flowers on the Monument of Died Soldiers of Ribnita in the Second World War. Young pioneers of Transnistria, pioneer tie is identical to colour of the Transnistria flag. This girl is named herself as moldo-transnistrian pioneer.