

## **Oppositional, immigrant and symbolic identities in the Moldova-Transdnistria conflict**

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The problem of ethnic minorities became the actual issue with the geopolitical transformations of 1989 which affected majoritarian ethnoses and their concept of nation, affirmed in Europe as a counterbalance to central power, to imperial structures. The process of the (re)defining identity has a specific context in which inter-ethnic violence erupts. The difficult process of state-building in the case of the Republic of Moldova after the collapse of the Soviet Union is providing both motivation and opportunity for ethnic groups to mobilize as political actors.

The project seeks to investigate regional diversity which defines separatist tendencies in the Republic of Moldova and has been the predominant feature of Moldova's transition, state- and nation building, self identification practices and interpretations of Russian speaking population's consciousness in the process of the Moldovan society consolidation. Geographically, Russian-speaking population is living mostly in the Eastern part of Moldova, the bulk of which constituted the Moldovan Autonomous SSR in the Ukrainian SSR during the interwar period. From the beginning of the military conflict in this region (1992), the Moldovan official discourse called this region "so-called 'transdnistria moldavian republic' (tmr)". I will use the name of Transdnistrian region.

**The main aim** of this project is to study the official (power) discourse of Transdnistrian region's auto-proclaimed structures and its ideological messages and to compare it with the public opinion of ordinary people in order to understand the impact of the nation-building discourse both Moldavian and Transdnistrian in the conscience of ordinary people population from this region.

**The main fieldwork** will be developed in Ribnita - one of the industrial urban places of Transdnistria, situated at the geographical periphery of both Moldovan and Transdnistrian region power centers and thus, between the influences of these two power discourse. During the project research I will pay attention to analyze and understand what is happened in ethno-national sphere in this region, what is the dynamic of discourse concerning collective identity and to show how negative stereotyping plays a powerful role in the self-identification of the group; in this project this is the case of Russian-speaking population from Ribnita.

**The fieldwork interviews and questionnaires** will build on two main questions:

- *Who is us? What people belong to the in-group and what defines the boundaries of the group, of the oppositional, immigrant and symbolic identities.*
- *Who are we? What attributes, symbols and values describe the prototypical member of the group and why they continue to be such oppositional, immigrant and symbolic identities.*

The *starting point* of my research is the idea that ethnicity is a dynamic concept which has acquired a new and important historical significance. The supra-national ideology of the communist regime supported by coercion and control was one of the main pillars of the Soviet multiethnic state. Traditional relations and alliances between nations, ethnic groups,

communities and families were systematically weakened or destroyed. This resulted in major barriers between Russians and non-Russians as well as between non-Russians themselves. The armed conflict from Transdnestrian region was complicated by the existence of two *ideologem-s* in the collective conscience: *Imperial* and *National*. The disagreements between these two perspectives concerning collective identity aggravated the conflict and introduced a new split in the frame of Moldovan society.

In this regard, at the first level of my project, I will examine the promotion and perception of these two discourses represented both at the level of collective conscience and at the ideological level through (1) the collection of oral history materials, interviews, questionnaires, and participant observation VS (2) the analyzing of the official documents, sources of mass media, speeches of leaders and representations of public opinion in Transdnestrian region. Through analyze of mass media in Transdnestria, in general, and in Ribnita, in particular, I seek to find the sources, premises of local nationalism and to point in which conditions has developed a separate and common identity of the Transdnestrian region's population ideology, the factors of self-representation and myth concerning the separation process/tendencies of this region from Moldova; to identify the subjects of conflict memory in Transdnestrian region's mass media.

The controversy between the right and left banks in Moldova should be regarded not as an ethnic conflict but as one of politicized regionalism. Mobilization that includes Russians occurred in the Transdnestrian region of the Republic of Moldova was not ethnic Russians, but an amalgam of Russian-speaking, Soviet and pan Eastern Slavic ideology. Examining them, I attested a lot of events which contributed to rapid change of ethno-political situation in the country and, accordingly, the influence on the politics of elite and behavior of the population. The discourse of self-representation and the manipulative strategies will be supported by analyzing the power symbols and celebrations in the Transdnestrian region - *Martisor*, *Independence day* - as symbolic representation of power in the Transdnestrian region; ideology, emotions, symbols, communicational stratagems in mediatization of Transdnestrian conflict - mobilization words, positive characteristics the representation of Transdnestrian power; to compare in the region of Transdnestria the official (political) and unofficial (collective) discourse of interethnic relations; participation of young population in the integration process, in national consolidation of Transdnestrian society; national ideology and creation a new nation-building strategy.

This level of my project employs a variety of methods for measuring identity including the analysis of discourse in interview with ordinary people, analyzing the mass media resources in Transdnestria region, namely in Ribnita; method of collective imagination, method of history which examine the process of national minorities factors determines link between past and present of interethnic relations; method of system analyses examining national minorities as subsystem and their impact on the society; methods of synthesis, observation and comparison. Using the method of interview I intend to analyze the ethnic consciousness of Russian speaking population through the prism of the previous generations' experience of national construction, witnesses' experience of territorial separatism and actual experience of the last years; local ethnic process and the same time national consolidation; the dialectics of exclusion and inclusion of Russian speaking population; their tendencies to migration or adaptation to created conditions.

Through the analyzing the problem of identities in the Moldova-Transdnestria conflict I will try to find answers and arguments: *Why the Transdnestrian 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 of population? How various forms of stereotypes affect interethnic*

*hostility and into what affect the stereotypes?* This set of questions goes to the heart of theoretical formulations in research on interethnic relations and conflict in the Republic of Moldova, the case of the Transdnistrian region.

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