

# Everyday life on the eastern border of the EU – between Romanianism and Moldovanism in the border area of the Republic of Moldova and Romania<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

This article details a research project undertaken in the border region between Romania and the Republic of Moldova, involving interviews with residents in towns on either side of the border. The study sought to deal with the question as to how the lives and circumstances of border residents had been affected by Romania's accession to the EU from 1 January 2007 and, in so doing, to analyse the current status of the nation-building project amongst Moldovans and their perceptions of national identity. The author analyses data on border crossings, and the views of project interviewees, against the tricky backdrop of changing passport and visa requirements, and discusses what Romanian passport and citizenship applications means for the national identity of Moldovans. The article goes on to explore language and other issues explored in the research concerning national identity, concluding that the results are somewhat ambiguous and reflective of a more pragmatic than emotional approach amongst the interviewees to the issue of national identity.

**Keywords:** EU accession, nation building, national identity, citizenship, border regulations, cross-border activities, language and identity, football and national sympathies, relevancy of national question.

## External border of the EU – Romania/Republic of Moldova

When Romania joined the European Union on 1 January 2007, the outlines of the European Union changed once again. One of the EU's new neighbours, via its border with Romania, is the Republic of Moldova (including Transnistria) counting approximately 4.2m inhabitants. As is well-known, the border between Romania and the Republic of Moldova along the River Prut not only divides two sovereign states but also forms the current external border of the EU. Hence, the River Prut gains a special

1 The data presented in this article are taken from the ongoing project *Everyday Life on the Eastern Border of the EU – Appropriation of Space by the Population in the Border Area between the Republic of Moldova and Romania* supported by the Volkswagen Foundation and conducted by Mihaela Arambaşa. The project supervisor is Prof. Wilfried Heller from the University of Potsdam. This article appeared in a similar version in the following publication: B. Belina and M. N. Arambaşa (2008) 'Alltägliche Identitätskonstruktionen in der Republik Moldau zwischen Rumänismus und Moldovenismus' *Europa Regional* Leipzig.

significance: it divides the 'west' (Romania) from the 'east' (Republic of Moldova); and, furthermore, the Romanian region of Moldova from the Republic of Moldova. Consequently, the border is geopolitically very important and has a high potential for conflict.

The Republic of Moldova has existed as an independent, autonomous state since 1991. About two-thirds of the population are Romanian-speaking Moldovans, a good quarter Ukrainians and Russians, and less than one-tenth Gagauz, Bulgarians, Jews and others (Grimm and Ungureanu, 1995: 16, as quoted in Heller, 2009).

At the border between Romania and the Republic of Moldova, wealth differences vary significantly. Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita gives a statistical clue to these wealth differences. In Romania, it amounted to \$5 647 in 2006, compared to just \$876 in the Republic of Moldova, i.e. merely one-sixth of the Romanian value. Hence, the Republic of Moldova counts as Europe's poorest country (United Nations Statistics Division, 2007).

Other statistical features show the same picture. The Human Development Index, for example, expresses the socio-economic state of development of a state by means of linked indexes for GDP purchasing power parity per capita, life expectancy and educational background (literacy of adults, school enrolment rates). According to this index, the Republic of Moldova occupied 111<sup>th</sup> position among the 177 UN member states in 2005 (with a value of 0.708) while Romania was 60<sup>th</sup> (0.813). Without the remittances of the approximately 350 000 to 700 000 work emigrants, the Republic of Moldova would be economically unviable. Their bank transfers from abroad alone are estimated at 35 % of GDP, according to the German Office for Foreign Trade (according to the UN, it is 27 % of GDP).

Figure 1 – Researched settlements



For the population settled on the border of the Republic of Moldova, commuting into nearby Romania offers a chance to improve their economic situation. This was made possible as a result of the relatively high permeability of the border between 1991 and 2001, and the more restricted permeability from then until 2006. These possibilities have, however, diminished since 2001 when Romania started restricting border crossings in order to prepare for EU accession and the Schengen Agreement. Following Romania's EU accession, crossing the border requires great effort.

### Aim of the project

The research project sought to answer the following pivotal question: how has the everyday life of Moldovans and Romanians living on the border been affected during the period from the EU accession of Romania until today? This question shall be treated by analysing the relations between the Moldovan population and the Romanian population in border areas.

We shall assess, on the one hand, the everyday appropriations of space in the border regions in the aftermath of geopolitical and economic changes and, on the other, the separation of the Moldovan nation from the Romanian and its emerging independence (understood as a form of 'nation building'). This article is thus focused on aspects of the identity of Moldovans.

## Methodology and researched villages

The empirical study was planned as a panel survey. The first stage was conducted in November 2006 near border crossings in four rural settlements: Victoria and Sculeni, as well as Oancea and Colibaşi. With the aid of Moldovan and Romanian students, 560 standardised questionnaires were filled out on the doorsteps of private households.

The second stage began in May 2008. In addition to the four rural settlements studied in 2006, surveys were conducted in two other rural settlements, namely in Răzeni in the Republic of Moldova and Tupilaţi in Romania. These lie about 55kms and 75kms respectively (linear distance) from the border. In all, 840 interviews were to be carried out.

The inclusion of the two rural settlements at a relatively long distance from the border has the aim of functioning as a control for the survey results. In other words, these distant settlements will attest as to whether vicinity to the border and frequent journeys across it indeed influence attitudes towards the other country, as well as towards the border itself and the awareness of a common Romanian nation or of two different nations.

Additionally, problem-centred, structured interviews were conducted with the so-called 'local elite' in the two villages distant from the border. Among them number the mayor, the school director and the priest. The 'local elite', hence, consists of people who hold important positions in the village and, therefore, know much about the structures and occurrences of village life and who count as 'opinion leaders'. This approach of holding structured interviews was also continued in the second stage.

In the project's second stage, we conducted qualitative interviews with the inhabitants of the villages because it is:

Clearly illegitimate to extrapolate from the elite to the masses. (Hobsbawm, 1990: 48)

It has to be assumed that the so-called 'populace' articulates itself differently from the village elite.

## Border regulations, 1991-2008

After the border was opened between the Republic of Moldova and Romania (it had been largely closed until 1991), an identity card sufficed for citizens of the Republic of Moldova and Romania to cross it during the course of the next ten years. In 2001, a passport obligation was introduced in respect of visitors from the Republic of Moldova in order to prepare for Romania's EU accession and, after 1 January 2007, citizens of the Republic of Moldova are also required to obtain a visa to enter Romania. For Romanian citizens, however, the old regulation still stands: a passport is sufficient to enter the Republic of Moldova. Due to the mobility restrictions in place since 1 January, the European Commission has had to ask itself: how could it succeed in transforming this border into an EU external border while, at the same time, avoiding the creation of new dividing lines on the border of the enlarged European Union (Commission of the European Community, 2004: 17)?

Moldovans view the new border regulations as a modern version of the ‘iron curtain’, as was remarked during our interviews (interview, Sculeni 2008). The introduction of the visa requirement is seen as a restraint by the experts interviewed on the Moldovan side and even called ‘a loss of trust in tomorrow’ (interview 4, Colibași).<sup>2</sup> The idea of overcoming bureaucratic barriers in order to obtain a visa produces uncertainty, the feeling of a lack of freedom and of isolation. ‘We will just be an inhabited island.’ (*ibid.*)

There are alternatives for Moldovans which avoid the new border regulations: acquiring Romanian or Bulgarian citizenship; working semi-legally abroad; or invitation from EU citizens. Information on the numbers of acquired Romanian citizenships varies considerably. Some assume that more than 800 000 out of the approximately 3.6m inhabitants of the Republic of Moldova (excluding Transnistria) have applied for Romanian citizenship (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2007). According to Tomescu-Hatto (2007: 266), drawing on 2005 data from the Romanian Ministry of Justice, 100 000 Moldovans received Romanian citizenship as a second citizenship between 1991 and 2005. Furthermore, approximately 25 000 applications were submitted in this period. The press talk of approximately 200 000 applications being filed in 2004.<sup>3</sup> According to further press reports, nearly 150 000 Moldovans are estimated to have Bulgarian citizenship.<sup>4</sup>

Many Moldovans, especially young people, are looking for opportunities to earn money abroad in terms of temporary work migrations. On the one hand, these migrations generate substantial remittances. On the other hand, it involves a ‘brain drain’ which entails disadvantages for the future development of the Republic of Moldova.

Many of those interviewed hope that the agreement on petty trade (*acordul bilateral privind micul trafic de frontiera*) between Romania and the Republic of Moldova is soon ratified because many Moldovans living near the border earn their living from petty trade. Once the agreement comes into effect, they would be able to obtain a local cross-border permit for petty trade (*permis local de mic trafic frontalier*), allowing them free mobility on the Romanian side in a ‘free zone’ up to a distance of 30km from the national border.

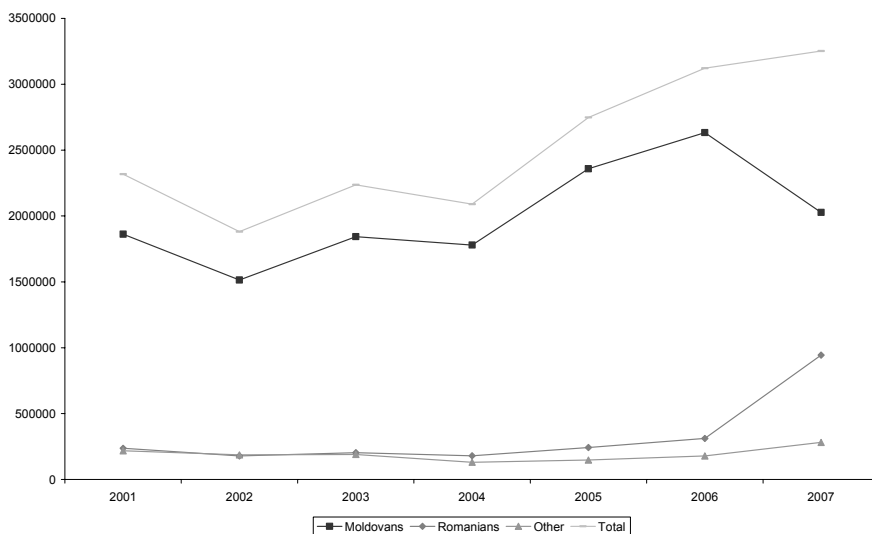
Statistical data from the border police alone shows how important the border is to Moldovans. In the period from 2001 to 2007, more than 80 % of people crossing the border in both directions were Moldovans. As we have already assumed: the number of border crossings by Moldovans decreased by 20 % after Romania’s EU accession on 1 January 2007.

2 The names and occupations of those interviewed have been anonymised in order to protect personal rights.

3 [http://www.bbc.co.uk/romanian/news/story/2004/11/041125\\_moldova\\_alegeri.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/romanian/news/story/2004/11/041125_moldova_alegeri.shtml).

4 [http://www.gardianul.ro/2007/08/22/externe-c3/dosarul\\_vizelor\\_diplomatul\\_roman\\_de\\_la\\_chisinau\\_risca\\_expulzarea-s99863.html](http://www.gardianul.ro/2007/08/22/externe-c3/dosarul_vizelor_diplomatul_roman_de_la_chisinau_risca_expulzarea-s99863.html).

Figure 2 – Border crossings from 2001 to 2008



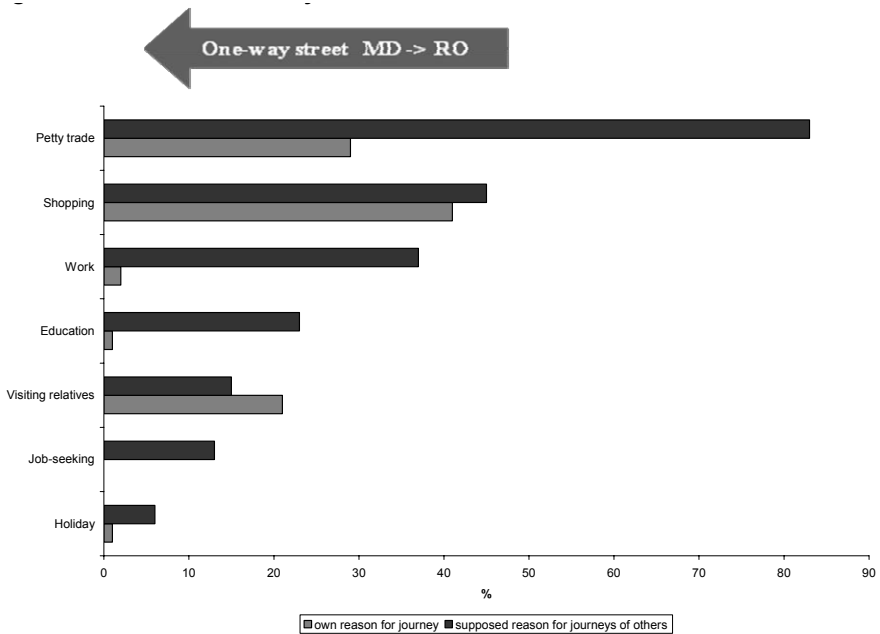
Source: Statistical data from the border police in Iaşi (DPF, Iaşi)

In the same period (after January 2007), the number of border crossings from Romania has increased with exactly the same percentage figure (from 10 % to 30 %). One can assume the reason for this being the lower prices for spirits, cigarettes, food and agricultural products in the Republic of Moldova. Another explanation could be that the number of border crossings of the 200 000 Moldovans who are estimated to have Romanian citizenship has increased since Romania's accession to the European Union.

### Cross-border activities

The quantitative outcomes of our first empirical survey stage (in November 2006) show almost the same picture as the border police's statistical data. At that time, border crossing mobility was a 'one-way street' from the Republic of Moldova to Romania. Thus, the analysis of the questionnaires showed altogether 3 505 visits from Moldovans to Romania in the period from November 2005 to November 2006. In contrast, only 36 visits from Romanians to the Republic of Moldova took place during these twelve months ( $n=290$  in both cases). On the Moldovan side, the border is viewed as a 'door', as an access to variety and perspectives for life planning as well as to relatives and, in some cases, even as an opportunity to survive or to make a living for those who are involved in petty trade.

Figure 3 – Main reasons why Moldovans travel to Romania



About 60 % of the Moldovans interviewed (i.e. 169) had crossed the border in this period. Their main reasons were for shopping (41 %), petty trade (31 %) and visiting relatives (21 %). Asked for the reason that their fellow citizens cross the border, 83 % stated petty trade as the main activity, followed by shopping, work and study. Petty trade is carried out as a semi-legal and informal activity (Figure 3).

The border’s vicinity plays an important role in the everyday life of the border population. Thus, 75 % of those interviewed in the Republic of Moldova stated that they had benefited from the nearby border area in 2006 and also in the 1990s. In contrast, the times before 1990 were seen as rather irrelevant (35 %) or even as disadvantageous (40 %). On the Romanian side, the nearby border is much less relevant in 2006 (advantageous only for 25 %) as well as in the 1990s (advantageous for 42 %). This data shows that, until 2006, the border was more important as a resource for Moldovans than it was for Romanians.

### On national identity

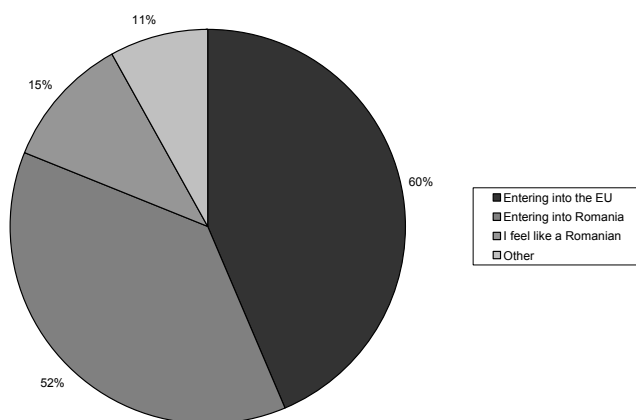
Why do Moldovans want a Romanian passport?

Two questions result from cross-border activities being important to Moldovans. Firstly, what does Romanian citizenship, and hence a Romanian passport, mean to Moldovans? And secondly, what is the attitude of Moldovans towards their own national identity?

Analysis of household surveys at the local level reveal the following: only three of those people interviewed (thus, only about 1 %) had a Romanian passport in November 2006, but 42 % stated that they had applied for one. And 72 % expressed the wish to have a Romanian passport. However, given that only three of the villages' inhabitants really did have Romanian passports (since 1993, 2000 and 2001 respectively), this underlines the strategic convenience of the desire for a Romanian passport as regards everyday life. In other words: only now has a Romanian passport become interesting, i.e. after Romania's EU accession, when crossing the border requires a visa. The village elite explained this attitude as a 'lack of perspective on the Republic of Moldova' (interview 4, Colibaşi).

Economic reasons were mentioned in particular because a Romanian passport offers great advantages because 'one can move freely in the EU' in order to find work. Sixty per cent of those wishing to own a Romanian passport (i.e. 72 % of the 290 people interviewed) stated that entering the EU would be the reason, while 52 % said entering Romania (multiple answers were permitted). Only 15 % wanted a Romanian passport because they felt like Romanians.

**Figure 4 – Why do Moldovans want a Romanian passport? (n= 228)**



It seems that the question of national identity is less important as soon as specific and relevant aspects of everyday life come to the fore. Whether this interpretation can be supported shall be ascertained during further research, especially via qualitative interviews.

### Language

Article 13, Section 1 of the Moldovan Constitution of 1994 maintains:

The official language of the Republic of Moldova is the Moldovan language [*limba moldovenească*] used in Latin font (quoted in Tontsch, 2004:43).



The regulation regarding the font is important because the Cyrillic font was stipulated during the times of the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic (1940-1989), whereas the Latin font has been used in Romania since the foundation of the national state in 1863.

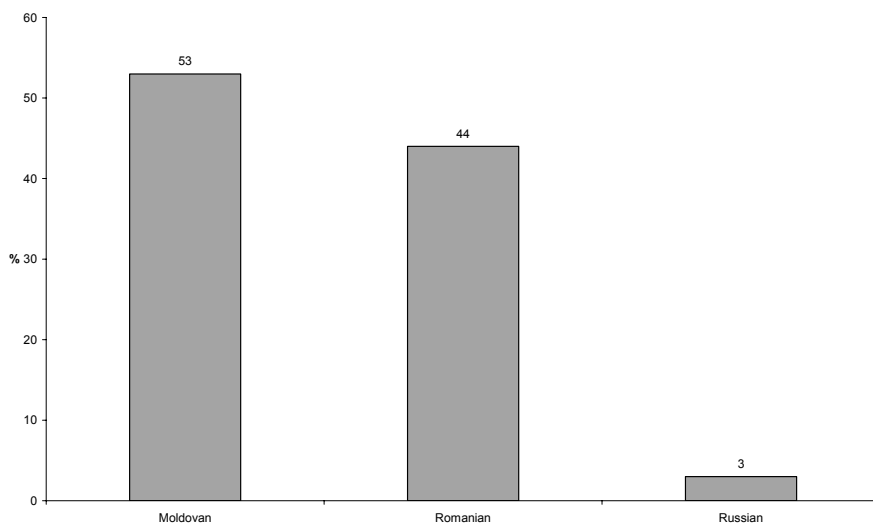
The largest problem of Moldovan national ideology is posed amongst Moldovenists by the language being called Moldovan, not Romanian (on the language problem in Moldova generally, cf. Dumbravă, 2006; Hornbacher, 2002). The linguistic argument according to which Moldovan (*limba moldovenească*) is a language on its own, and not a Romanian dialect (*graiul moldovenesc*) spoken in that part of Romania also called Moldova, had already been established in the times of the Soviet Union. This argument is not taken seriously by the great majority of Moldovenists (Roper, 2005: 505). Hence, they face the problem: 'How can the significance of learning the Moldovan language be established without implicating a Romanian identity?' (*ibid.*)

The non-negligible relevance of the Russian language for the everyday life of Moldovans distinguishes them, on the issue of language, from the population behind the border.

Russian has become increasingly important since 1994, even though this is not as relevant in the west of the country as in the capital Chişinău or in Transnistria, where Romanian is written using Cyrillic letters (Hornbacher, 2002: 46). Eighty six per cent of the population of the villages state that they speak Russian. Fifty seven per cent of the people claim to use Moldovan at home, whereas 41 % say that they use Romanian and as much as 20 % state that they use Russian. Moldovan and Romanian are referred to as the main languages in everyday life outside the home, but 52 % claim that they use Russian. On being asked which language was their mother tongue in the survey, 52 % stated Moldovan and 45 % Romanian (see Figure 5).

This ambivalence can be contrasted with the interviewed village elite who all referred to their mother tongue as being Romanian. In their view, Romanian and Moldovan is the same language. One interviewee in Colibaşi said, however, that the Romanian language was disregarded in the Republic of Moldova for a long period in the times of the Soviet Union. Due to this, one does not always understand all of the language's subtleties and would make mistakes (interview 4, Colibaşi). In reality, one can notice that many Moldovans find it difficult to read the Latin font, for example when Romanian TV stations show foreign films with Romanian subtitles, because the Cyrillic font was prescribed for the Moldovan/Romanian language at the time of the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic (1940-1989) (cf. Menn, 2008).

Hence, in researching further the role of language in national identity, one has to ask how important the different skills of the written form of the Romanian language are on both sides of the national border between the Republic of Moldova and Romania, and what role is played by so-called subtle distinctions between the languages (for example, in the Republic of Moldova many technical terms and other words have been borrowed from Russian).

**Figure 5 – Mother tongue of Moldovans (n= 293)**

#### Further results on national identity

Even by avoiding the issue, the qualitative interviews showed how difficult it is to characterise one's attitude towards one's own national identity. Thus, the interviewed employee of the Ministry of European Integration in Chişinău stated that 'talking about Romanians and Moldovans wouldn't make any sense' (interview 3, Chişinău). A representative of the village elite 'Had never thought about which nationality' he had: he saw himself as an 'inhabitant of Moldova' (interview 5, Colibaşi).

This ambiguity in the feeling of being Moldovan, Romanian, or Moldovan and Romanian is also reflected in the answers of the village inhabitants. Sixty five per cent felt themselves to be Moldovan, 16 % Romanian, 13 % Moldovan and Romanian, and 1 % Moldovan and Russian (participants were not provided with any suggested responses) (see Figure 6).

The answers illustrated above may indicate a tendency towards identification with the Moldovenist side, whereas the assessment of the relationship towards Romania goes in the other direction (see Figure 7). Here, Romanianist positions experience high rates of agreement (even though one in every five interviewees wants unification with Russia).

Figure 6 – Attitude towards own national identity (n= 292)

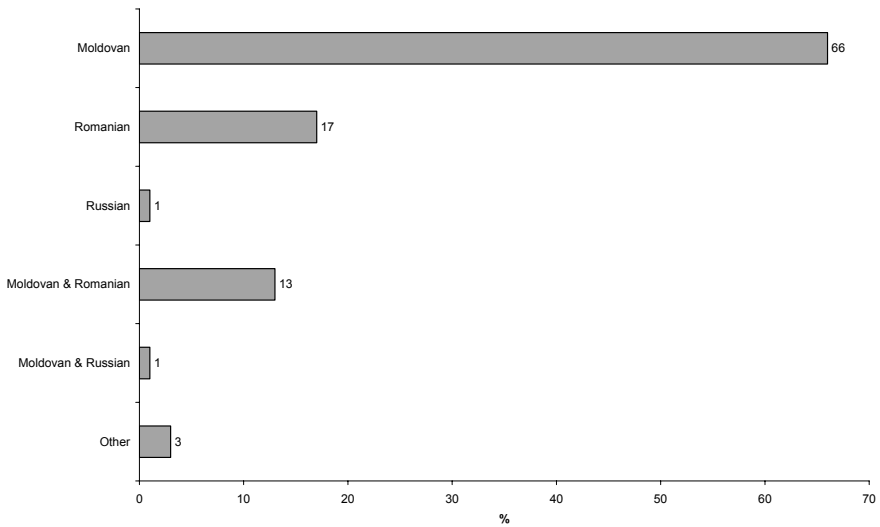
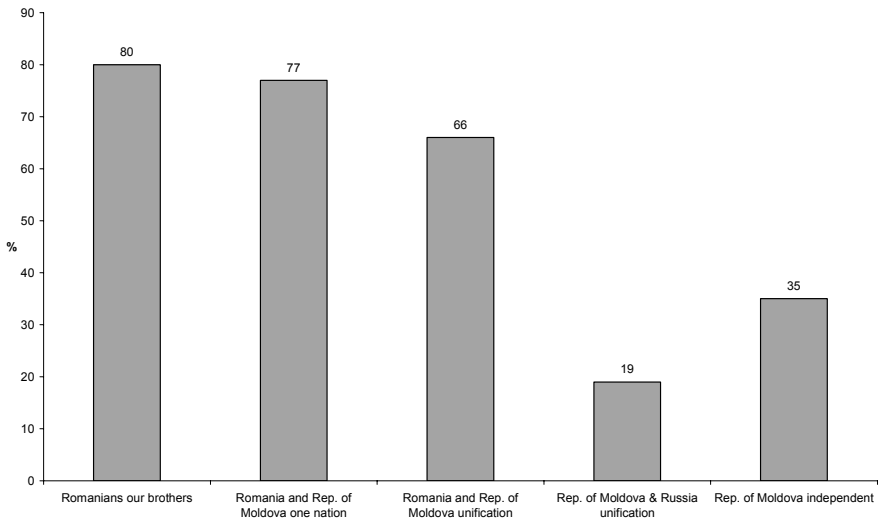


Figure 7 – Agreement with the following statements (n varies from 267-287)

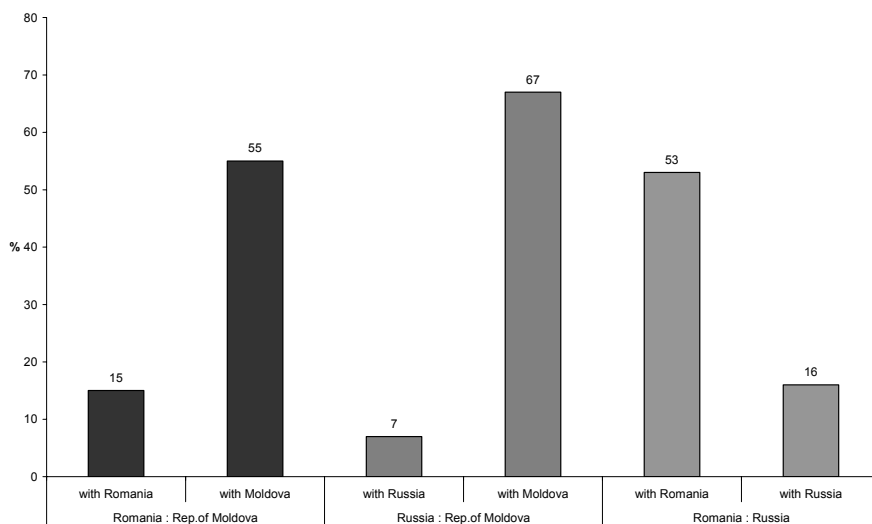


Similar opinions are advanced by the village elite, for whom Romanians and Moldovans represent one nation and for whom Romanians univocally are the ‘brothers across the Prut’ (the river marking the border between Romania and the Republic of Moldova).

Totally Romanianist, they account for this with the shared history and language and the identical traditions. However, the evaluation of the independence of the Republic of Moldova is a little more cautious on the part of the Moldovan elite. On its part, the opportunity of unification with Romania was ‘missed’, as one interviewee put it, as was the chance for a conjoint EU accession later on. The latter had never been a realistic option, even though it had been ‘offered’ to Moldovan President Vladimir Voronin in July 2006 by Traian Băsescu (President of Romania) and was thereafter debated extensively by the Moldovan media and public. In the interviewee’s opinion, the Republic of Moldova has to find its own independent and sovereign way – i.e. a Moldovenist position.

We asked the Moldovan interviewees where their sympathies lay regarding football games, especially when it came to a possible match between the national teams of the Republic of Moldova and Romania. The great majority – as expected – would support the Moldovan team if it played against Romania. If the Republic of Moldova played against Russia, the sympathies would be even stronger. Thus, it is comprehensible that, in a match between Romania and Russia, they would support the Romanian team.

**Figure 8 – Sympathies of the Moldovans regarding football (n= 292)**



Apart from the answers concerning the division of sympathies, another point seemed interesting to us during our own interview activities and through the feedback of the interviewees. Before the question on their sympathies regarding football was answered, the participants sometimes alluded to the strength of the Romanian team. Firstly, this puts into perspective the sympathies for Romania in the case of a match against the Republic of Moldova. It could be that the 15 % of Moldovans expressing sympathies for Romania see their own team tactically as a ‘point supplier’, because the Moldovan team never gets past the qualifying round, especially for major tournaments. Secondly,

the allusion on the weakness of their own team (along with the 27 % to 30 % of interview subjects who did not make any statement at all on the three polled combinations) can be interpreted as a general tendency not to attach any greater importance to their own national team, since real nationalists would, beyond all question, have a clear preference for their own country in international football matches. This interpretation is going to be controlled in the qualitative phase of the research.

Regarding the question of whether the attitude of border area residents towards the nation to which they feel that they belong can be deduced from Moldovans' cross-border activities, as well as economic and political developments in the Republic of Moldova, the research material has still to be analysed. This question shall be pursued in future research and analyses.

### **'Nation building' – Moldovanism vs. Romanianism**

Thus, from the explanations above emerge two competing ideological propositions for post-soviet 'nation building' in the Republic of Moldova: Romanianism and Moldovanism. The Republic of Moldova is, or should be, a part of Greater Romania according to the view of Romanianists, whereas Moldovenists underline national independence. The struggle between these two currents has left its mark on the reality of the past seventeen years. According to the Moldovan Constitution of summer 1994, 'Moldovan' is the official language. In this regard, Vasile Stati, a supporter of 'Moldovanism', published a Moldovan-Romanian dictionary in 2003. His aim was to prove that different languages are spoken in the two countries. However, students learn from books the titles of which contain 'the Romanian language'. Another example is that, in the period from 1990 to 2006, pupils studied from history books titled 'History of the Romanians'. Subsequently, the titles have been changed to 'Integrated History' and this different title has led to changes in the content of the schoolbooks in some aspects.

What conclusions can be drawn based on these results regarding the status of nation-building and the struggle for the evolution of national identity in Sculeni and Colibași? Considering the single answers independently, several different trends emerge. The majority of interviewees explicitly feel that they are Moldovans, which is in line with a Moldovenist view, but, at the same time, a majority consider Romanians and Moldovans to be 'brothers and sisters' and as one nation. The latter position would be in line with a Romanianist view. Interviewees wanted a Romanian passport – but this was mainly because of the practical benefits it offers. The 'conjoint nation' does not play any important role there. As for their own language, Moldovans seem 'undecided' between Romanian and Moldovan. And the question of the sympathies regarding football matches suggests that their own national identity is not seen as too important.

Against this background, the results could only be interpreted reasonably if national identity is understood as a:

Fluid and contested process that only has meaning in concrete contexts. (Megoran, 2007: 255)

And in the most concrete situation questioned, the wish for a Romanian passport, identity as citizens of the Republic of Moldova simply does not play any great role (the same regarding the football question).

## Summary

The questions on national identity do not provide a clear result. The ambiguity of the results is contrary to:

The view of many foreign scholars [...] that a true identity of the Moldovan population exists. (Ihrig, 2008: 26)

These kinds of ambiguities emerge when surveys assume that national identities exist and are relevant, i.e. when a so-called essentialist or objectivist perspective is taken. Then it counts:

If one goes out to look for ethnicity, one will 'find' it and thereby contribute to constructing it. (Eriksen, 1993: 161, as quoted in Megoran, 2007: 259)

The research survey so far can be summarised to the effect that the process of nation-building amongst border area residents in the current political borderline situation is, first of all, about economic living and survival opportunities. Thereby, it is less relevant if the population of the Republic of Moldova is understood as an independent nation or as a part of the Romanian nation. The question for national belonging or identity, hence, might be answered in a flexible, contradictory or even exploitative way by interviewees depending on the concrete discourses and specific situations applying on both sides of the border in a fluid process. We will have to deal with this question further in the continuing progress of the research project.

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