

# THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA IN ANGLOPHONE HISTORIOGRAPHY: ETHNOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

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**Summary.** The article is a brief overview of the main research directions of Anglophone historiography regarding the Republic of Moldova. The author touches upon the issues of ethnic identity, analyzes views on nations formation, national peculiarities in Gagauzia and Transnistria.

**Keywords:** nation, ethnic identity, language, Moldovans, Anglophone historiography.

**Rezumat.** Articolul prezintă analiza succintă a direcțiilor principale de cercetare în istoriografia anglofonă dedicată Republicii Moldova. Autorul abordează probleme de identitate etnică, analizează opiniile cercetătorilor anglofoni cu privire la formarea națiunilor și particularitățile naționale în Gagauzia și Transnistria.

**Cuvinte-cheie:** națiune, identitate etnică, limba, moldoveni, istoriografie anglofonă.

The image of the Republic of Moldova in the world scientific community is especially significant in the context of globalization and orientation of our country towards European integration. Publications of western experts devoted to ethnic issues in the Republic of Moldova do not only contain theoretical analysis of topical scientific problems, but also provide practical recommendations regarding harmonization of social relations and at the same time represent the views from outside the country on the problems of Moldovan society.

The aim of this article is to outline the main directions of occidental scholars' research interest concerning ethnic issues as well as nation-building in the Republic of Moldova. It is a well-covered topic in the Anglophone scientific literature on Moldova, reflected in the articles and monographs written by western historians, anthropologists, political scientists, such as Ch. King, W. Crowther, W. Van Meurs, K. Hitchins, J. Cash, O. Protsyk, M. Ciscel, H. Demirdirek, P. Kolsto, J. Chinn, S. Roper, M. Dembinska, J. D. Iglesias, S. Troebst, D. Zabarah and others.

When analyzing the situation in the Republic of Moldova, scholars often dwell on the issue of uncertain ethnic identity of the titular population, relations between ethnic majority and minorities, crisis of identity of the Russian-speaking population, nation-building as well as participation of different ethnic groups in this process, contradicting views on nation in the Republic of Moldova characteristic of different ethnic groups. Transnistrian conflict and the situation of Gagauz Yeri are also of great interest to Anglophone experts.

The dissolution of the Soviet Union did not lead to the formation of absolutely new borders: the borders of federal republics became state ones. Due to this situation, many East European peoples have gained the name of "delayed nations" in the Anglophone discourse, as in their cases ethnic relations were complicated by the discrepancy of national and ethnocultural borders, unsettled territorial disputes, social and economic difficulties, practice of manipulating minorities [1].

Having appeared after the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the Republic of Moldova demonstrated that «independence was only a starting point for new debates about national identity and nation-building programs» [2].

The American professor Ch. King, a famous researcher of ethnic relations in post-Soviet Moldova, has written the monograph "The Moldovans: Romania, Russia, and the politics of culture" [3]. In the beginning the author prepares the reader for the book that "focuses on a Soviet nation-building project that failed, but one that failed in a rather peculiar and ambiguous way" [4].

The scholar considers the main historical milestones regarding the formation of Moldovan nation. He notes that Romanians and Moldovans were seen as one pan-Romanian nation till 1920s. However, in 1924 Moldovan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (MASSR) was formed, and Moldovan textbooks, history, grammar, newspapers "were hailed by the Soviet authorities as the first fruits of a Moldovan nation in the making" [5]. Everything ended in the same unexpected way. In August, 1989, Moldovans refused from using Russian alphabet – their main distinction from Romanians.

At this point Ch. King draws a parallel: when “Tallinn, Vilnius, Riga, and other Soviet capitals celebrated the revival of indigenous cultures and identities in the late 1980s, crowds in the Moldovan capital of Chişinău (Kishinev) seemed to do exactly the opposite, rejecting the existence of a separate Moldovan nation and adopting the tricolor, national anthem, and official language of another country, Romania” [6]. So the professor concludes that Moldova is an independent state, but it failed in making an independent nation [7].

According to Ch. King, culture, language and traditions of Moldovans and Romanians have the same roots. There are two culturally Romanian states; however, the Moldovans have separate sense of identity [8]. Thinking of the Moldovan identity, professor Ch. King mentions that “Moldovans were absent during the crucial period of Romanian national awakening and the formation of an independent Romanian state in the nineteenth century” [9].

There is no dispute among English-speaking researchers over the fact that a state, nation and identity are in the center of post-communist development of Eastern Europe. History of interethnic relations, collective memory, ideology and policy regimes, etc. affected and still influence the process of nation-building [10]. After the collapse of the Soviet Union interaction between nationalizing states, national minorities and external homeland (classical triangle of R. Brubaker) played an important role in the political space of Eastern Europe. E. Berg and W. van Meurs add to these three factors the fourth one: European factor, which means the role of the EU, its relationship with the states that are in the process of nation-building.

As for the Republic of Moldova, E. Berg and W. van Meurs call this country a boundary region, the population of which is characterized by “contested ethnic belonging and ‘unclear’ political (civic) affiliation” [11]; they also speak about “the anomaly of the Romanian-speaking Moldovans, who fit perfectly into the Romanian national idea yet prefer to build a Moldovan state of their own” [12]. It’s worth mentioning that in this case scholars don’t consider the role of non-titular population of the Republic of Moldova in nation-building.

Another expert on nation building in Eastern Europe, O. Protsyk, analyses two competing visions of the majority’s ethnic identity – Moldovanism and Romanianism. These visions include elaborated sets of values and beliefs. The scholar highlights that a society with uncertain identity of ethnic majority has different political preferences associated with the ethnic factor. Therefore there are different views on foreign policy vector: Moldovanism and eastern orientation, Roma-

nianism and western orientation [13]. However, the German researcher D. Zabarrah finds this conception as well as the distinction between the two ideological currents to be oversimplifying. He distinguishes three instead of two ideological currents: Romanian nationalism, Moldovan nationalism and Moldovan multinationalism, the ideas being based on different approaches to understanding the concept of “nation” [14].

S. Yekelchik came to conclusion that the vector of present-day Moldova is still being formed and determined by the legacy of nation-building in multinational empires [15]. The scholar pointed out that Moldova as well as Belarus and Ukraine defined national identity “by intermittently stressing their separateness from Russia and their common past with Russia <...> local identities continue to be defined in their relation to the Russian imperial and Soviet nationalizing projects” [16].

The overestimated role of the language issue is another distinctive feature of the Moldovan reality, also reflected in the Anglophone historiography (Ch. King, D. Dyer, W. Crowther, N. Dima, W. van Meurs, etc.). Professor D. Dyer speaks of three levels on which one might argue the status of the language: socio-political, historical-cultural and linguistic. He concludes that the independence the Moldavian language is difficult to refute on the socio-political, historical and cultural levels, but there is not enough linguistic evidence proving its separateness [17]. Ch. King also spoke about the weakness of arguments in favour of the existence of two separate Eastern Romance languages (Moldavian and Romanian). The scholar emphasized that in comparison with the language Moldovan identity presented a much greater difficulty [18].

A number of western experts stick to the point that the Moldavian language as well as the Moldavian ethnicity is nothing more than a fiction. Hence the researchers write that “the Moldavians are actually Romanians”, they are “the same people and speak the same language [19]; “ethnically, Moldavians are members of the Romanian nation” [20]; “efforts to construct a Moldavian identity are first and foremost efforts to carve a Moldavian part out of Romanian history”; as for Moldavian nation, it is called “a mystery and a miracle in history” [21].

Jennifer Cash states that the policy of nation-building in Moldova failed at least twice. It happened for the first time in the interwar period when they failed to create Romanian nation in Bessarabia; the second time it was the Soviet authorities that didn’t manage to create Moldovan nation. In both cases suggested national identity did not correspond with local identities as well as value systems. «Both terms – Moldovan and Romanian – are attached to more complex

associations, values, and memories based on the relations between state and local forms of power, rural and urban experiences, and the opportunities that come with each (e.g., education)» [22]. Therefore the researcher suggests focusing on the roles of non-ethnic and non-national forms of collective identity [23].

Western historiography concerning the issues of ethnic identity in the Republic of Moldova is not limited to the analysis of the situation regarding titular population. The interest of the researchers is also focused on the Russians of Moldova as “formerly members of the dominant nationality of a multinational state”. After the disintegration of the Soviet Union they have turned into “a new Russian diaspora” [24]. The issue of the ethnic identity transformation among Russians was reflected in the researches of D. Laitin, P. Kolsto, N. Melvin, etc.

In the context of current events there becomes topical Moldovan elite’s attitude to such a form of collective identity as European identity. Oliver Schmidtke and Konstantin Chira-Pascanut argue that the public debate on the country’s belonging to Europe, the attitude to the European identity began to play a significant role in the life of the Moldovan society. Collective identity and belonging can easily become both polarizing and mobilizing political power: the decision of who Moldova is closer to (Eastern Europe driven by Moscow or the European Union represented by Western Europe) leads to political debates again and again [25]. However, the authors emphasize that “the public debate over forms of belonging and loyalty to these competing models is often framed as rooted in historical experience and (revived) collective memory” [26].

The researchers speak about political elite of Moldova, but due to disunity and different orientation it would be more accurate to talk about elites. Nevertheless O. Schmidtke and K. Chira-Pascanut state that political elite admits the attractiveness of European identity in determining the political future of Moldova. At the same time the authors see deep ambivalence and the fact that Moldovans are torn between two worlds in political rhetoric. Based on this, the researchers offer a way to reconciliation of competing models of loyalty to East and West: “One way of reconciling competing loyalties to the West and the East is to depict Moldova as a country in the center of Europe, as a kind of bridge between the two worlds” [27].

Another challenge for nation-building in the Republic of Moldova regards the peculiarities of this process in Gagauzia and Transnistria (Ch. King, W. van Meurs, J. Chinn, S. Roper, H. Demirdirek, P. Jarve, I. Katchanovski, C. Neukirch, O. Protsyk, S. Wober, J. A. Webster, P. Thompson, D. Zabarrah).

In western historiography Gagauzia is presented as a successful example of a settled ethno-territorial conflict on the post-Soviet space. Experts agree that political mobilization in Gagauzia was catalyzed by the issue of unification of Moldova and Romania in late 1980s. However, J. A. Webster, the author of the thesis written at Oxford University on Gagauz autonomy in Moldova, emphasized that “the Gagauz elite had clearly articulated their goals prior to the exclusive Moldovan nationalist mobilization” [28].

Social anthropologist H. Demirdirek is rather convincing in considering territory and language to be the main symbols of the Gagauz statehood [29]. As they share religion with other ethnic groups (Bulgarians, Moldovans, Russians, Ukrainians, etc.), it is the language that gives the Gagauz sense of distinctiveness. In the Anglophone historiography the Gagauz are called *nation-in-the-making*. Local elites were striving for recognition as a nation, although Gagauzia was situated within the territory of another nation-state [30]. One of the reasons for Gagauz struggle for recognition as a nation was their aspiration to drop the status of a national minority.

The settlement of the conflict in Gagauzia differs from other territorial conflicts of Eurasia, first of all, because of the lack of bloodshed. Comparing Gagauz conflict with the Transnistrian one, J. Chinn and S. Roper prove that “the biggest difference between the Gagauz and the Transnistrian secessions has been Moscow’s relative absence in the Gagauz situation” [31]. The researchers suppose that Gagauzia wouldn’t have been given the status of autonomy if Transnistrian conflict didn’t take place at the same time: “an agreement granting “special status” to Gagauzia not only removed a major challenge to the new Moldovan state, but also created at least the foundation for the discussion of a similar settlement with Tiraspol” [32].

The processes of nation-building in Gagauzia and Transnistria are tightly connected with the Soviet system, only Soviet heritage was differently used. In Gagauzia existing minority used the situation of the dissolution of the Soviet Union to create a new national unit. As for Transnistria, local elites managed to mobilize “an ethnically mixed population by embracing Soviet internationalism in order to create a regional identity not based on ethnicity” [33].

This non-ethnically based common identity constructed in Transnistria is considered by western scholars either as a regional identity within Moldova (P. Kolsto) or as a separate nation (M. Dembinska). P. Kolsto and A. Malgin write about “a vague, but nevertheless tangible common identity” of most of the population of Transnistria [34]. The researchers find it

curious that Chisinau acknowledges separate identity of the left bankers. The Transnistrian identity is much stronger in cities than in villages where traditional ethnic values are still more important [35]. As for the dominant or major ethnic group, it has not been formed here.

There are a lot of researches on the nature, reasons and history of the Transnistrian conflict (Ch. King, S. Troebst, P. Kolsto, A. Malgin, S. Kaufman, S. Wolff, W. Van Meurs, etc.). Scholars do not agree on the reasons for the conflict: some of them consider ethnic factor to be the most important, others – elite competition or territorial disputes, a number of experts see a complex of issues. However, it is a very complicated topic that needs separate consideration.

To conclude, the Republic of Moldova is represented in the Anglophone historiography as a state with an uncertain national idea, a keen perception of the language issue, competing models of ethnic identity of the titular population, with ethno-territorial conflicts (successfully settled in Gagauzia and ongoing in Transnistria). Considering these serious unresolved problems, English-speaking experts often acknowledge with surprise the “persistence” of “the Moldovan people” construct, at the same time paying attention to the fact that Moldovan nation has not still been formed. In the Transnistrian Moldovan Republic they achieved better results in constructing a supra-ethnic category that contributes to the consolidation of the population than they did on the right bank of the Dniester.

At the same time it is important to keep in mind that experts from outside the country distance themselves from the issues, topical for Moldova. On the one hand, it can be considered an advantage, as they provide more objective views of the situation in comparison with a number of local scholars. On the other hand, it sometimes leads to misunderstanding and misinterpretation of local specificity. In my opinion, the results of the researches would be much more efficient in case western experts collaborated with local ones.

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