

IDENTITY AND SOCIETAL SECURITY IN THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA. CIVIL SOCIETY PERCEPTIONS AND ENGAGEMENT*

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Introduction and methodology

Our analysis aims to consider the establishment of a link between civil society and various forms of borders/identity cleavages in the Republic of Moldova. In particular, we are interested in identifying and analyzing the possible role that various civil society actors play in developing and maintaining these community cleavages. There is a link between the identification of community borders (possibly understood as identity cleavages) and the identity realities present in the space of the Republic of Moldova. Without aiming to analyze the entire identity spectrum in the Republic of Moldova, throughout this study, we want to identify *possible identity cleavages* that take the form of identity borders (Brie 2021: 5–6).

The focus of our analysis falls primarily on the identification, with the role of exemplification and explanation, of some parts of civil society involved in the disputes regarding the identity borders that arise from the ethno-religious or cultural specificity, but also on the nature of specific mentalities of this field. The conceptual perspective gives a clear demarcation and establishment of policy analysis, just to make the operationalization of concepts easier and more useful in terms of achieving the purpose of our research.

Methodologically, the analysis focuses on some aspects of the civil society dimension that fuel identity cleavages in the Republic of Moldova at the current stage, namely: the ethno-national dimension, the linguistic dimension, religion, and geopolitical affiliation. The role of civil society in overcoming crises and conflicts that may arise on these sensitive topics is very important.



The *purpose* of the research is to identify and analyze the observable indicators and dimensions of civil society involvement in the direction of developing and maintaining identity cleavages, respectively the civil society engagement and perceptions of identity fragmentation. Our objectives are to analyze the possible engagement of the civil society in the process of developing identity realities that can generate, at the societal level, certain cleavages that take the form of identity boundaries. Therefore, our debate is oriented toward the identification of these borders, to discuss them in terms of the possible cleavage they produce. A secondary objective is to identify some examples of NGOs involved in identity disputes and analyze their actions.

The main expected *results* of this study will allow the identification of civil society's independence level, the understanding of perceptions, and the possible mechanisms of civil society involvement in identity disputes. We will have a clearer picture of the maturity of civil society in the Republic of Moldova, the positive or negative contribution to the development of society, in general, and the relationship between political context and civil society. Thus, concepts such as *bad civil society* or *uncivil society* can come to our attention. Some parts of civil society are thus enslaved to interest groups that often control communities, but also possibly to foreign interests in maintaining societal insecurity. On the other hand, there is a high interest in the practices accumulated by civil society organizations in overcoming identity confrontations by establishing a civilized intercultural dialogue and promoting a participatory political culture.

The main *hypothesis* is that an important part of civil society in the Republic of Moldova acts and is used (in the absence of independence) to maintain and develop the existing identity cleavages (H1). Civil society is often divided by identity and geopolitics and from this perspective keeps public discourse strained in society and politically partisan. The second hypothesis is built starting from the perception that in the space of this country, there are realities that converge towards the daily expression of community-identity borders, a reality in which civil society has a limited role (H2). These boundaries can be identified both in terms of ethno-national and linguistic identity.

The main *research questions* raised are Q1. What is the image of civil society in the Republic of Moldova reflected in the existence and development of identity cleavages? Q2. Does civil society have a role in promoting societal insecurity generated by the development of identity cleavages? Q3. What is the population's perception of civil society from the perspective of analysis of the identity disputes that influence societal security?

The main *levels and directions of analysis* that we propose are the following: a. analysis of perceptions and identity cleavages/identity as a border in the historical and geopolitical context – throughout this extensive analysis, we propose a *general debate on identity issues*, often of great sensitivity in the space of the Republic of Moldova; b. conceptualization and analysis of civil society involvement in the societal security management process: analysis of perceptions and engagement.



Literature review and conceptual framework

A conceptual analysis that has at the center of debate various forms of identity requires special attention to the societal dimension, including from the perspective of societal balance, and societal security through the involvement of civil society. The analysis includes the concepts associated with sources of security and insecurity, fragmentation, and the process of identity homogenization.

For civil society to become an important actor in the field of ensuring societal security, this civil society needs to develop, become independent, represent, and act in the public interest of society. Also, the state, and society in general, must become resilient. The concept of resilience opens the debate regarding the monopoly that states tend to have over security matters, including societal security. The state cannot be the only one that responds (Fjäder 2014). Resilience refers to the „strong social compact between the state and society on their respective and mutual roles and responsibilities“ (Metre 2016: 1).

Beyond the many facets of the identity, the one perspective of the identity cleavage in the Republic of Moldova often appears to be very real and proven time and time again by more or less recent historical realities. Identity, be it that of an individual, of a group, or a community can generate both convergence and divergence in a rapport with the other. The other one, a true dichotomy, becomes the expression of the “one beyond” - beyond what is specific to me, to my identity. A border, be it symbolic or ideological, can thus be identified around such identity constructions. The Republic of Moldova is no exception to this rule, but in our assertion, it is the state that requires perhaps the most among all European states such identity frontiers (along with the states of the Balkan space) (Brie 2016: 359).

In Central and Eastern Europe, especially in the ex-Soviet space, in the post-communist period, a process of identity, national-ethnic construction, but also national-civic one, was noted, which faced a phenomenon of identity resistance of the particular. Expressions of this resistance took the form of various identity cleavages that we called identity borders (Brie–Horga 2014: 202-216), but also tensions or even identity conflicts. These could be simple divergent positions expressed in the space of society, including civil society, but also real identity, inter-ethnic, inter-religious conflicts, or conflicts between the various linguistic communities. The role of civil society, but also European conflict management and negotiation tools, have proven to be useful in this process of mediating disputes and identity conflicts. On this note, important steps were taken to resolve identity conflicts in the Western Balkans area (see in this regard the works of Corpădean 2023; Herța 2023a; Brie–Jusufi–Polgár 2023; Jusufi–Polgár 2023; Herța 2023b; Brie–Jusufi–Polgár 2022).

The ex-Soviet space, despite the similarities and similar challenges, proved to be different in expression through the prism of management of the identity tensions and conflicts (Mureșan 2023; Brie–Costea–Petřila 2023; Brie 2017). Specific notes are given to the expression of cleavages and identity borders (Brie 2016; Brie 2021; Brie 2023), the role played by civil society (Corpădean–Pop–Flanța 2023;



Costea–Melenciuc-Ioan 2023; Polgár 2023; Brie–Putină 2023), the involvement of civil society in the democratization process (Putină–Brie 2023; Popescu–Petrila, 2022) and the need to stimulate cooperation (Şoproni 2023; Brie–Mărcuţ–Polgár 2022).

The Republic of Moldova is forced to face challenges similar to those in Ukraine or Georgia, such as the hybrid war, and the information war (Putină 2022; Dolghi 2019), but also some specific ones, born from its demographic and political realities. An important role in the management and development of a society in transition, such as that of the Republic of Moldova, belongs to civic education (Solcan 2010) and the development of a democratic model of political organization and modernization of society (Solcan 2013; Solcan 2015). The management of identity disputes can be done by stimulating active citizenship initiatives, including at the community-identity level (Şipoş–Patca–Blajec–Bârza 2023), but also by combating manipulation, misinformation, extremism, and political populism (Pantea 2023).

Society is fragmented and civil society in states like the Republic of Moldova becomes a political tool for promoting identity disputes. Not only populism is gaining ground, but also the xenophobic, tribal debate of fear and danger painted in the image of the other. Civil society is often involved in this process.

The idea of nationality is perceived differently in Western and Central-Eastern Europe. In most Western countries, national identity has been built mainly around the identity of citizens, and the state's territory has consequently become the fundamental term of reference for "national territory" – *the civic dimension of national identity*. Eastern Europe had a different path of development, where ethnicity and *ethnic belonging* played a fundamental role in the construction of national identity – *the ethnic dimension of national identity* (Gábor 2011: 116). Thus, the Western model of the nation emphasizes the centrality of the nation's national territory or homeland, while the Eastern model is concerned with ethnic origin and cultural ties. A fundamental characteristic of the state constructions of the nation-state type in Eastern Europe is their permanent lack of legitimacy or, rather, their incomplete *legitimacy*. By identifying the state with a single national identity, the other national communities inevitably found themselves outside of this legitimization process, which constituted *a fundamental source of inter-ethnic tension*. This reality led to the sacralization of state territory considered *national territory* (Gábor 2011: 118–128).

In this framework, civil society organizations (CSOs) become essential actors in the democratization process of a state and ensuring societal security, as they are the main partners of the public authorities (Mărcuţ–Chiriac 2023: 264; Polgár 2023). In the debate about identity cleavages, the image of civil society is often that of organizations that promote particular interests and support political and geopolitical positions. Without an active and independent civil society, we cannot have a democracy (Popovenciu 2022: 26; Brie–Putină 2023: 172–174). Civil society should be involved in all levels of activities, from local to regional, national, and



international levels (Zakota–Nemeth 2022), including the management of conflicts (Brie–Horga 2014: 207–211) and international cooperation (Brie 2021: 10–16; Brie–Jusufi–Polgár 2022: 186–192). The specificity of civil society in the Republic of Moldova consists in what it is the establishment taking place in the conditions of ongoing political modernization (Putină–Brie 2023).

Civil society plays a key role in promoting fundamental rights and democratic values (Macrinici 2020: 4). At the same time, the level of knowledge of civil society in the Republic of Moldova is quite low. At the level of 2019, less than 20% of the population had good knowledge about this field, while 34.3% did not know what civil society means. Only 12.5% know to some extent about the activities of various non-governmental organizations and only 11.6% of the total have interacted with an NGO in the last 3 years (Institute for Public Policy 2019).

Identity as a border in the Republic of Moldova. Challenges for Societal Security

To clarify the intentions, but also the limits, of the present analysis, we mention the fact that we do not aim to find truths or answers, but only to identify and analyze possible identity borders. We do not want to position ourselves on one side or the other of the debates (the existence of identity borders presupposes the presence of at least two identity constructions that meet, often located on divergent positions!). Each of the general themes identified as generators of identity borders constituted and can constitute in themselves fundamental theses that require complex analyses both qualitatively and quantitatively. In this case, we propose the academic environment topics for reflection and analytical perspectives on some topics of particular sensitivity in our European societies. We hypothesize that in the space of the Republic of Moldova there are realities that converge towards the daily expression of community-identity borders. These borders can be identified both in terms of ethno-national identity. In both situations, the political and geopolitical connotations and implications are very important and acquire the value of decisive factors in identity development (Brie 2021).

a. Moldovanism as ethnonational identity

Moldovanism, as an identity construct, gave birth to many polemics and controversies regardless of where it was viewed and analyzed. But it was used every time for political or geopolitical purposes. The controversy is not clarified even at home, without extending the debate to other geographical spaces whose geopolitical interests do not converge towards the same objectives. The Moldovanism versus Romanianism debate has often ignited spirits east of the Prut River, fueled more or less from the west and east. The two perspectives seem opposed. The Romanian perspective includes the Moldovans, along with Transylvanians, Oltenians,



and Muntenians, among Romanians (being Moldovan is not an ethno-national-linguistic identity, but a regional-geographical one, and represents a sub-national dimension!). The perspective of Moldovanism excludes from the start the common identity, of race and language or an overlapping identity such as Bavarians are Germans, and Germans are Europeans (being Moldovan de facto means not being Romanian and vice versa in the logic of level of the national identity which can only be one!) (Brie 2016). Without having too much importance the fact that Moldovanism was created and fueled disproportionately by the tsarists or the Soviets, it massively served the political interests of the rulers of Chisinau after the proclamation of independence (Brie 2023).

In the first phase after gaining independence, an attempt was made to create a nation-state in which the Romanian language was recognized as the official language, and the doctrine of "one people, two states" was officially accepted by both sides of the Prut River. The "imaginary dangers" of the union of the young Moldovan state with Romania and discrimination according to ethnic or linguistic criteria generated the beginning of a double secessionist process, in the east and the south of the republic, a process that culminated in the outbreak of an armed conflict on the left bank of the Dniester River (Coal 2010). Moldovan President Mircea Snegur officially renounced this doctrine on July 29, 1994, with the adoption of the new Constitution (Constitution 1994). The thesis regarding the Moldovan identity, different from the Romanian one, is repeated and amplified. Used by the tsarists and the Soviets to justify the separation from the Romanian state, now it is used by some political interests that speak of the national interest, namely the preservation of Moldovan statehood that would be threatened. Moldovanism, as an identity construct, is used in the sense of developing a national identity related to civic, citizenship membership. The new identity aims to bring together all the citizens of the Republic of Moldova regardless of their ethnic or linguistic options.

Even though the new authorities that took power from the communists after 2008 have changed the logic of identity argumentation, Moldovanism remains a factor that gives rise to controversies. While some Moldovan citizens proclaim their Romanian ethno-national and linguistic identity, others, along with the minorities present in this space, support Moldovanism, as an identity distinct from the Romanian one, which they see as a danger of undermining the statehood of the Republic of Moldova. Therefore, in the Republic of Moldova, we speak of Romanian Moldovans and Moldovan Moldavans (Brie 2017).

Examples of civil society organizations that promote Moldovanism in the Republic of Moldova are the „Voievod Movement" and „Moldavan Shield" associations whose founder is Nicolae Pascaru, the president of the „Voievod" Wrestling Federation. He is also the founder of the website moldovenii. Md. The authors of Moldovenii. Md portal aims to „study, understand and promote the true history and values of the culture and civilization of Moldova." (moldovenii. md 2011). In the „Development Strategy of Moldova until 2025", the authors identify „a whole



complex of contradictions, the non-resolution of which limits Moldova's possibilities to step on the path of development, which can bring prosperity to the Moldovan people", among them is the contradiction „between the urgent need to study the truthful history, to develop the national identity, patriotism of Moldovans and the interests of a neighboring state, which, taking advantage of the lack of such knowledge among the citizens of the Republic of Moldova, imposes its versions regarding the origin and history of Moldovan people, as well as conscious and unconscious supporting of outside interests by the elite" (moldovenii. md 2011).

On diametrically opposite positions is the public association „UNIREA–ODIP", which formulates the following primary goal: "UNIFICATION of the two Romanian states by promoting Romanian national values, patriotism and devotion to the COUNTRY, involving young people through activities that educate them and cultivates their spirit of patriotism and love for the nation." (UNIREA–ODIP 2017).

b. The Romanian language versus the Moldovan language

According to two CSOs from the Republic of Moldova, "It is important to depoliticize linguistic policies. The language should not be used as a political argument. Building Moldova's civic identity should not come from the politicians, but from the grass-roots community level, respectable civil society activists and organizations that would be trusted by representatives of competing views" (ISI – IEP – IEP 2018: 44).

This controversy is related to the promotion of Moldovanism as an identity. The Moldovan language, as a language distinct from the Romanian language, serves the same interests and political or geopolitical objectives. Regardless of the origin of this dispute, the society in the Republic of Moldova is linguistically divided not only in relation to national minorities but also about the language options of the ethno-national group that forms a majority.

The process of Russification in the Tsarist and Soviet periods served to implement the doctrine of the two different languages: "Romanian" and "Moldovan". Multinational imperial states in turn accused the Romanian "imperialism" upon another people: the Moldovan one, speaking another language: Moldovan language (Brie 2021).

The Declaration of Independence of the Republic of Moldova (1991) (to be seen in the text of 1991 Law) makes clear reference to the "deciding by decree the Romanian language as a state language", a language that Moldovans used and considered identical to their own. The promotion of *Moldovanism* became again the official politics of the Chisinau authorities after 1994, deepening confusion and controversy. The official language of the Republic of Moldova is, according to the new constitution, the "Moldovan language" with Latin spelling (Constitution 1994, art. 13).



The contradiction continued despite the attempts made by the new persons governing (after 2008) to restore the Romanian language to its rights as an official language of the state. It was as late as December 5th, 2013, that the Constitutional Court of the Republic of Moldova solved this dilemma and the interminable dispute concerning the official language of the state. The judges, considering the text of the Declaration of Independence and the text of the Constitution decided that the text of the first document prevails over the Constitution, and “the state language of the Republic of Moldova is Romanian”. “The Declaration of Independence constitutes the legal and political basis of the Constitution so that no provision of the latter can go beyond the scope of the Declaration of Independence. Thus, the Court concluded that, in case of a divergence existent between the text of the Declaration of Independence and the text of the Constitution, the primary constitutional text of the Declaration of Independence prevails. The decision shall be final and shall not be subject to any appeal” according to the president of the Constitutional Court, Alexandru Tănase (The Constitutional Court 2014). Apart from the intervention of the Constitutional Court, the controversy and disputes with regard to the identity of the Moldovan language are meant to perpetuate this symbolic frontier, often used for ideological purposes (Brie 2021).

Civil society role, perceptions, and engagement

In 2021, a complex study on civil society in the Republic of Moldova was published: „Civil Society Actors: Thorough Analysis of Established and Emerging Organizations and Groups in Civic Space of the Republic of Moldova” (Komm–Terzi–Zamejc 2021). This evaluation was carried out by the *People in Need* organization through an EU-funded project („Civil Society Actors – Promoters of Change in Countries of South Caucasus and the Republic of Moldova”). The project aims to strengthen the role of civil society organizations (CSOs) as legitimate, inclusive, and reliable actors promoting good governance and democratic processes in the targeted countries. The study is based both on the documentary analysis of already existing research and on approximately one hundred semi-structured interviews/consultations with representatives of established CSOs, leading local experts and researchers in the field, as well as representatives of new and emerging CSOs, as well as initiatives from the local level in the targeted countries. The image of civil society organizations is conferred by its dependence and underdevelopment.

The image of civil society reflected in the report is given by formulations such as: „built on suspicions”; „certain representatives of civil society entered government institutions”; „a large part of society began to perceive CSOs as part of political games”; „the parties also started to create satellite NGOs, which repeated their narratives”; „four political parties use affiliated charitable foundations to improve their image... „satellite NGOs”... which sometimes claim to represent civil society”;



„The established NGOs in the Republic of Moldova face, rather, the image of being „players on someone’s side” in this whole game rather than an independent force promoting change” (Komm–Terzi–Zamejc 2021).

The cleavage of a fault expressed about cultural-identity values appears in the image: liberal versus illiberal. There is a part of civil society that promotes equality, universal values, and non-discrimination, and an „illiberal civil society” that supports an agenda of „traditional values”, with deep local roots on both dimensions of Moldovan identity. The latter is exploited by Russia „through its political, religious and media institutions” (Komm–Terzi–Zamejc 2021: 6).

The issue of identity makes the Republic of Moldova different from the other countries covered in this report (Armenia and Georgia). It neither experienced the processes of nation formation in the 19th century nor has it yet managed to develop a supranational civic identity. The past of the Republic of Moldova was marked by centuries of dependence on the Turkish Empire (from the 16th century until 1812), the Russian Empire (1812–1918), and the Soviet Union (1940–1991), with a break of 22 years, when it was part of the Romanian state. While its lands, except Transnistria, were historically part of the Principality of Moldavia, the population did not fully experience the processes of state and nation formation that shaped today’s Romania. With the achievement of independence, the people of the Republic of Moldova remain divided between the Romanian identity (problematic for the ethnic minorities of the Republic of Moldova, which constitute almost 20% of the population) and the idea of Moldovanism (which was promoted by the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union and continues to be used by Moscow to justify its influence in the country) (Komm–Terzi–Zamejc 2021: 6; Cașuș 2016).

Two organizations from the Republic of Moldova (*Institute for European Policies and Reforms* and *Institute for Strategic Initiatives*) in partnership with the Institut für Europäische Politik from Berlin have developed a *Key Issues and Practical Recommendations* entitled *Strengthening Social Cohesion and a Common Identity in the Republic of Moldova* which captures at a very complex level the reality of identity cleavages in this state. “Moldova does not have a clear definition of a titular nation or a „majority ethnicity” - Moldovan or Romanian - and this topic continues to stir up intemperate debates among both Moldova’s elites and the public” (ISI - IEP - IEP 2018). Modern civic identity, based on citizenship rather than ethnicity, has not yet taken root. The problem of identity is a contributing factor to the lack of cohesion in society in general. „Politicians from all sides of the political spectrum do not address the existing ambiguities; instead, they exploit latent misunderstandings, conflicting worldviews and divergent aspirations of different ethnic communities” (ISI–IEP–IEP 2018: 5). „Identity entrepreneurs” use ethnic divisions to advance their political goals by stoking people’s fears and feeding on their stereotypes.

Within the Project "Consolidation of National Identity in the Republic of Moldova in Context of Association with the European Union" (MIDEU), supported by the Federal Office for Foreign Affairs of Germany, the Institute of European Policies and Reforms, a non-governmental organization from the Republic of Moldova,



specializing in issues of European integration, foreign policy and good governance, developed the study *Consolidation of Social Cohesion and Common Identity in the Republic of Moldova* (see <https://ipre.md>). It captures the need for a civil society to support an identity construct that contributes to the cohesion of society at all levels. „Yet people remain divided and a certain potential for interethnic tensions exists due to the lack of knowledge about different ethnic communities, an intemperate political discourse which frequently portrays other ethnic groups as a threat, as well as the lack of effective practical policies to address main challenges“ (ISI - IEP - IEP 2018: 6).

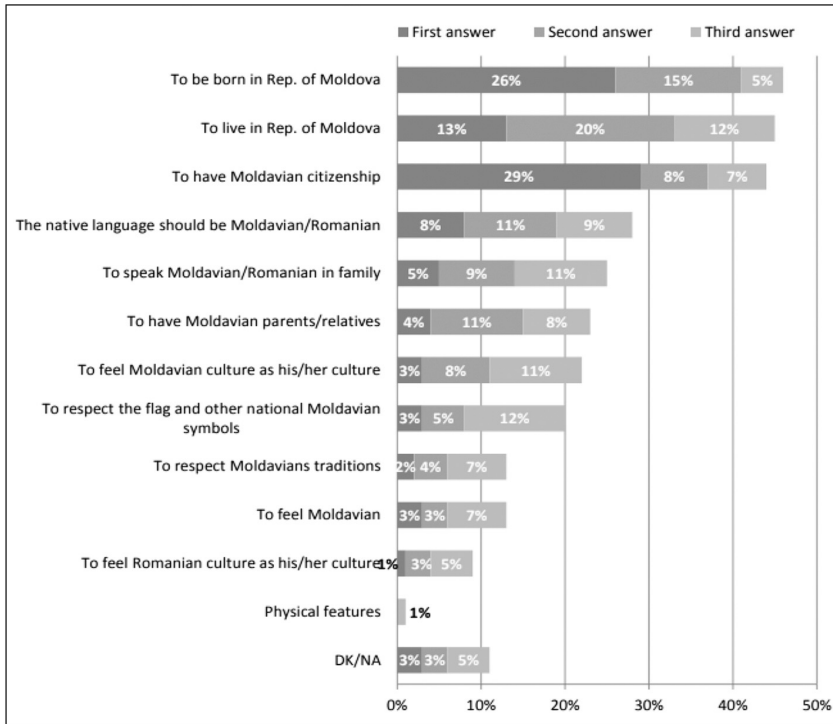
The involvement of civil society in the Republic of Moldova in activities that have an impact on security, in particular on societal security, was analyzed within the project „Supervision of Security Sector by Civil Society in the Republic of Moldova“, with the financial support of the *Konrad Adenauer Foundation Representation* in the Republic Moldova, having carried out the study „Mapping Civil Society in National Security Sector of the Republic of Moldova“ (launched on August 23, 2021). The authors set themselves the goal „to map (i.e. identify, establish) non-governmental organizations (private, public institutions), groups/modules/expertise entities in the security sector, presenting the concept of civil society and how this contributes to the good governance of the field of defense and security.“ (Marzac-Sandu 2021). At the same time, as the authors mention, the work aimed to „evaluate civil society organizations that are registered as public associations and have activities or projects within the security sector“ (Marzac-Sandu 2021: 10).

Civil society, in general, „has registered important developments in its ability to get involved in governance processes“, the authors also note certain challenges that civil society faces in this process, especially when it comes to topics related to national security. “On the one hand, there is a history of mutual suspicion/distrust between the government/security institutions and civil society, which leads to a reluctance of civil society to engage in dialogue with the security sector. On the other hand, there is a lack of a platform to strengthen civil society to increase the ability to influence the governance process of the security sector“ (Marzac-Sandu 2021: 16).

To understand the societal perceptions and identity realities in the Republic of Moldova, we call on various public opinion survey analyses. The data of a sociological survey carried out by the well-known survey company *IMAS*, launched under the generic name “The freedom of being free. Conclusions after 25 years“, carried out in August 2016 on a sample of 1144 respondents. To the question “In your opinion, what are the three most important things for someone to be considered Moldovan?”, placed in the “social identity” chapter.



Figure 1. Most Important Things for Someone to Be Considered Moldovan



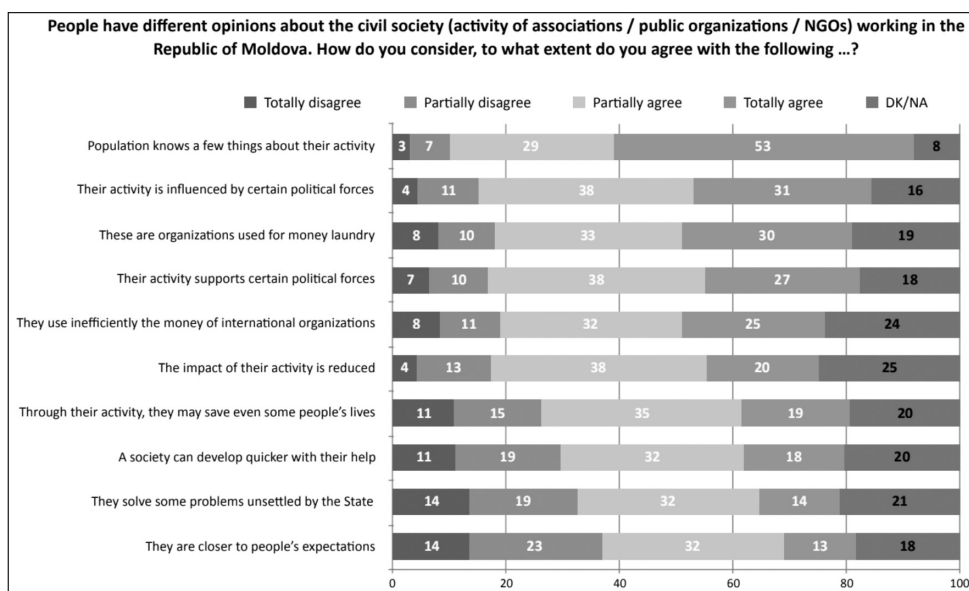
Source: Petruți-Legcobot 2016: 4

As we can see, for defining their own identity, the respondents preferred objective criteria, which do not depend on individual decision or subjectivity: the territorial criterion (being born in Moldova and living in Moldova) and the legal criterion (having Moldovan citizenship). The criteria at the intersection of the cultural sphere with that of the subjective valorization of symbols and practices are placed in the second part of the options ranking. The conclusion that emerges also leads us to the efforts made for the society in the Republic of Moldova to reduce its identity cleavages. Thus, a form of national identity related to the native (national) space is reflected or a national identity built around the citizenship identity according to the French or American model that we have offered on other occasions (Brie 2017; Brie 2016; Brie 2021). Efforts can lead to the reduction of inter-ethnic or inter-religious tensions, based on a consolidation of some solidarity of the consciousness of belonging to space and state (through citizenship). Trying to analyze evolution, we find that compared to 2005, in 2016 respondents pay more attention to the status of a citizen at the expense of ethnic identity. At the same time, 61% of respondents consider "Conflicts, tensions between ethnic groups" as a serious and very serious problem facing the Republic of Moldova (Petruți 2016: 6). This reality can only reinforce the idea of a solid identity born from ethnicity and that

the identity linked to space and citizenship rather takes the form of a desire, an aspiration of the population, society, civil society in particular. It also reflects an intercultural education, a desire for dialogue beyond identity cleavages (recognized by existing ethnic tensions).

Citizens' perception of the activity of civil society institutions is not very good in the Republic of Moldova. The socio-political barometer, carried out by IMAS in July 2017 on a sample of 1111 respondents, directly asks the question: "How much or little trust do you have for the civil society in the Republic of Moldova? (activity of associations/public organizations/NGOs)". The answers were disappointing, only 2% of respondents expressed very much 15% a lot of trust, 50% - little trust, and 24% not at all or very little (Petruți-Bejenari 2017a: 23). The socio-political barometer, carried out by IMAS in December 2017, gave almost similar results: much and very much trust in civil society institutions were shown by 18% of the respondents, while 73% have little and no/very little trust (Petruți- Bejenari 2017b: 18).

Figure 2. Perceptions About Civil Society



Source: Petruți- Bejenari 2017b: 24

The publication of the results of this survey generated a controversy in the public space, representatives of some civil society institutions cited the fact that the IMAS survey "contains biased questions, to negatively influence the respondents' opinion regarding the activity of civil society organizations" (Jurnal. MD 2017). The representatives of 39 non-governmental organizations signed a press statement accusing the authors of the survey of manipulating public opinion citing that



“some questions in the latest IMAS survey are designed to lead to disparaging conclusions about the activity of the associative sector.” In response, the leadership of the IMAS sociological research campaign signaled that they are facing pressure and blackmail from some politicians and representatives of NGOs, disturbed by the results of the sociological research (24h.md 2017). After that, the topics directly related to the activity of civil society institutions were no longer included in the IMAS surveys.

The socio-political barometer, carried out by IMAS in November 2021, shows that the level of trust in the institutions of civil society remained almost the same, around 19%, and precisely 21% of the respondents declared that they did not know or refused to answer (Petruți 2021: 37). In the surveys carried out by IMAS, we notice that the percentage of those who do not know or did not answer the question “How much do you trust NGOs?” is the highest in relation to the other analyzed institutions.

The analysis of societal perceptions and identity analysis in the space inhabited by the Gagauz community is interesting. The Public Policy Institute has been conducting opinion polls focused on the residents of *the Gagauzia Autonomous Territorial Unit* and the Taraclia district since 2011. The first two polls were conducted in 2011 and 2015. According to the results (2015), 77.3% of the respondents from ATU Gagauzia and 69.7% from the Taraclia district perceive themselves as part of the society of the Republic of Moldova, and 71.4% of the respondents from both territorial formations consider themselves integrated into the society of Republic of Moldova (Nantoi 2016: 16). At the same time, 64.6% of respondents consider that the Republic of Moldova is part of the Russian world, for 15.4% of respondents, Moldovan culture is closer, and for 36.1% - Russian culture (Nantoi 2016: 18, 24). Next, 34% of those questioned see the future of the Republic of Moldova as part of Russia, 31.8% – within a federal state and 18.9% – within an independent unitary state (Nantoi 2016: 27). According to the answers obtained, 97.1% of the respondents know the Russian language and only 16.8% – the Moldovan/Romanian language, which is actually the state language of the Republic of Moldova (Nantoi 2016: 19). However, 71.4% of respondents consider interethnic relations in the Republic of Moldova as very friendly, friendly and peaceful, only 17.4% consider interethnic relations “rather tense” and only 2.3% – “very tense”. When asked if they could choose in which country or union of states they would like to live, 68.4% were in the Eurasian Union, 12.7 - in a union of former Soviet republics (USSR), 7.2% – in their own country outside any union of states and only 2.3% – in the European Union (Nantoi 2016: 35).

This study is relevant in that it analyzes the perceptions of the population in the territories of the Republic of Moldova, where ethnic minorities live compactly. We find that although the vast majority of respondents identify themselves as part of the society of the Republic of Moldova, a good part considers the Republic of Moldova as part of the Russian world, almost all those questioned declared that they know the Russian language and only less than 17% know the state language.



Although more than 2/3 consider interethnic relations to be friendly and peaceful, about the same percentage of respondents would prefer to live in the Eurasian Union, and 78.2% of those surveyed would prefer their children to emigrate to Russia.

The 2021 survey within the project *"Moldova Between East and West: Visions from Gagauzia and Taraclia"* was carried out as part of a project financed by the Black Sea Trust for Regional Cooperation, a project of the German Marshall Fund (USA). Some conclusions reached by the authors after processing the obtained data: the primary identity of the residents of ATU Găgăuzia and Taraclia district is uncertain, three primary identities are taking shape at the same time – civic, regional, and local community, none of which is dominant; cultural identity in the researched regions is diffuse, bidirectional, respondents feeling belonging both to the culture of their ethnicity and Russian culture. Despite a fragmented identity and the lack of a dominant civic identity, civic duties are mostly accepted, however, the obligation to know the state language by the residents of ATU Gagauzia and Taraclia district is a less accepted civic duty (Institute for Public Policy 2021). In comparison with the surveys carried out in 2011 and 2015, the authors note the following: since the 2011 survey, the share of those who know the state language has increased. Thus, the share of those who say they speak fluent Moldovan* has doubled (from 11.6%, in the 2011 survey, to 23.4% in 2021), and the share of those who say they speak Romanian fluently has increased from 9.7% in 2011 to 16.8% in 2021; linguistic realities also determine the consumption of media products in the researched regions, dominated by media production from the Russian Federation, and the specifics of the informational space, in turn, determine the political and geopolitical perceptions in ATU Gagauzia and Taraclia district, where even if a good part of the respondents anticipates a future in which the Republic of Moldova remains an independent state, in the researched regions, according to surveys from 2015 and 2021, expectations of a joint state construction with the Russian Federation persist (Institute for Public Policy 2021).

NGOs enjoy relative trust in the Republic of Moldova. In February 2021 they expressed a lot of confidence - 0.9% and some confidence – 21.5%. In November 2022: very much trust – 3%, some trust – 20.8%, and in August 2023 2.8% – “much trust”, and 22.6% – “some trust” (Institute for Public Policy 2023).

Conclusions

A debate regarding identity in its various forms and the role, perceptions, and commitments of civil society, of Moldovan society in general, is extremely useful for understanding the inter-community mechanisms in the Republic of Moldova. It is not enough to note the various faults/identity borders. Conceptually and through the identity substratum, but also geo-culturally, the Moldovan society turns out to be a very complex one. An appeal is made to the various forms of relationship and reporting to the specific identity resulting from the many forms of solidarity.



Civil society is also a reflection of this reality. It takes the shape of society by reflecting identity groups, but also involves itself through specific role-playing. Thus, civil society often wears these identity nuances, expressing perceptions and demonstrating commitments, sometimes passionate, in support of the identity solidarity of the groups they represent.

In this sense, during the last decades, we notice a reflection of the image of civil society, of Moldovan society in general, about the trends (including the geopolitical positioning of the Republic of Moldova) and identity crises. All of them proved to be necessary in the context of the identity consolidation process after the independence of the Republic of Moldova.

Our hypotheses are confirmed. The civil society in the Republic of Moldova, in the absence of independence, contributes to the mitigation of identity cleavages (H1). On the other hand, some realities converge towards the daily expression of some community-identity borders (H2). These boundaries can be identified both in terms of ethno-national and linguistic identity.

In the Republic of Moldova, there is a society divided by identity, which expresses itself geopolitically by choosing between the „pro-Russian” and the „pro-European” path. Even if the dividing lines in Moldovan society are real and significant, the narrative of geopolitical choices is not so clear. It is also often exaggerated, and political elites on both sides use this controversy to maintain the political system through which they concentrate all their power and access to resources.

Moldova’s society remains divided along ethnic and linguistic lines. The lack of cogent policies to open social doors to representatives of ethno-cultural communities impedes social mobility for ethnic minorities; as a result, Moldova misses out on development opportunities because of their untapped potential. Moldova’s elites exploit and deepen the divide and frequently portray other ethnic groups as a threat. Educational and language policies have not been effective in integrating ethnic communities into mainstream social, political and economic life.

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