

The Politics of Language in Moldova

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Five years after the passage of legislation making Romanian the state language of Moldova, language remains the most difficult issue between Russians and Romanians on Moldova's Right Bank.¹ Some Russians are learning Romanian, but most have made little effort to acquire even a rudimentary knowledge of the official language. This situation continues to frustrate the majority Romanians, especially those Moldovan political leaders who from the early days of the independence movement advocated the inclusion of the Russians and other minorities in the political, social and economic fabric of the new state.

Moldova was the first of the former Soviet republics to pass a law making the language of the indigenous population the state language. This law, approved in August 1989, required those working in public services and enterprises to gain facility in both Russian and Romanian by 1994. Russians and Romanians agree that few initially took the law very seriously—1994 was perceived to be far off. Now that the deadline has arrived, many Russians continue to make excuses (inadequate books, teachers, not enough time), while the Romanian population, itself almost entirely bilingual, is becoming increasingly frustrated with its inability to use its own language for everyday activities such as calling a taxi or making a purchase in a store. Russian school-age children are making the shift, thereby providing optimism for the future, but many of their parents are resisting any accommodation to the new situation.

Among Moldova's adult Russian population, language acquisition is unlikely to occur without a conscious effort to study and use Romanian. Russians typically interact with other Russians or expect Romanians (almost all of whom can communicate in Russian) to use Russian for inter-ethnic communication. Some Romanians find this expectation troubling. As one Romanian educator reported: "In the 1940s when the Soviet Union annexed Moldova, the Russians just pointed a gun at our heads and said to learn Russian. We did. Now, even after four years, the Russians say they can't learn Romanian. What's wrong with them?"²

Some Background

Moldova's initial steps toward local autonomy under the Soviet umbrella soon resulted in calls for complete independence. Moldovans, led by the Popular Front, first formed groups in support of restructuring. These organizations seized the opportunity provided by Gorbachev's policies of perestroika and glasnost to open the door for the development of a nationalist movement. Indeed, the 1989 Moldovan Supreme Soviet debate on the language law brought Gorbachev himself into the local confrontation as he lobbied for maintaining Russian as the state language; at

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the same time, this debate propelled Mircea Snegur, then chairman of the Moldovan Supreme Soviet and currently president, into the limelight for publicly opposing Gorbachev's position.

One of the steps that mobilized Moldova's indigenous population was the passage of legislation in 1989 making Romanian the state language and returning to the Latin script for its transcription. When the Soviet Union annexed Romanian territories in 1940 and re-occupied them in 1944, the Latin alphabet, which had been used in Moldova to write the Romanian language, was replaced by the Cyrillic, and Russian increasingly became the language of education and public life. With the 1989 language law, Romanian again became the state language; Latin letters replaced Cyrillic for transcription of Romanian, and Russified names were returned to their previous designations. This process proceeded rapidly and relatively smoothly on the Right Bank of the Dniester River, although it became a primary point of controversy in the area controlled by the Russian minority on the Left Bank (Transdnistria) and in the Gagauz region to the south, which is inhabited by a Turkic nationality.

Unlike in the Baltic states where the national language continued to be used after the states' incorporation into the Soviet Union, the Romanian language was excluded from almost all aspects of public life in Moldova during the period of Communist rule. Under both tsarist and Soviet rule, Russian was the language of the educated classes and dominated city life; Romanian was used in the villages by the peasantry. Much of the education in Moldova was conducted in Russian, including practically all beyond the primary level. Just under half of the population of the capital, Chişinău, was Romanian in 1989. Of this group, 12 percent claimed Russian as their native language, and 75 percent claimed to speak Russian. In contrast, only 11 percent of the Russians in Chişinău claimed competence in Romanian.³

When the political control loosened under Gorbachev, language became the first and most important point of contention, on the one hand mobilizing the Romanians and making them more cohesive, and on the other hand triggering the Russian backlash. Because language was initially characterized as a cultural issue, it provided a safer vehicle for national expression than an outright move for political independence. Russians in Moldova felt that giving Romanian superior (or even equal) status to Russian was just the first step toward union with Romania. Fear of such a union resulted in a strong Russian reaction.

Making Romanian the state language and changing from the Cyrillic to the Latin script were the key issues of the national movement in 1988 and 1989. The question of alphabet was especially symbolic and was used by nationalists to provide an example of Russian cultural dominance. Symbolism and history, however, are not always congruent; nationalists often reconstruct the past to serve the political needs of the present:

It is hard for Moldavian nationalists then and now to remember that the Cyrillic alphabet was not initially imposed on Romanians by an alien imperialist government. The Cyrillic script was used in Romanian until the middle of the nineteenth century. While linguistically it might make more sense to write Romanian with Latin letters, the logic of Latinity did not make itself felt until the 1840s. The first language of the Orthodox church, the princely courts, and high culture in the two principalities had been Old Church Slavonic since the tenth century. For its historic value the Cyrillic alphabet even had

supporters among some Moldavian nationalists. In spite of the present importance of the Latin alphabet in Moldavia, there was historically no necessary contradiction between patriotism and a lack of enmity for the Slavonic and Cyrillic influence on Romanian/Moldavian.⁴

Nonetheless, nationalists insisted that 1) Romanian become the state language and the vehicle for inter-ethnic communication, 2) that the Latin alphabet be adopted and 3) that the identity of Moldovan and Romanian be acknowledged. In contrast, during Soviet times, the affirmation of the view that “Moldavian” was a different language from “Romanian” and best understood by using the Cyrillic script was “a litmus test of one’s acceptance of the legitimacy of Soviet rule.”⁵

As momentum gathered to change from Russian to Romanian, so did the fear on the part of the Russian-speaking population. The Popular Front organized rallies and collected over a million signatures in support of the language legislation. Russians felt threatened by the Romanian movement. Gagauzi, Ukrainians and other ethnic groups living in Moldova feared that they would have to learn two languages—Russian and Romanian—in addition to their native language.⁶ On the Right Bank, in spite of the statements by political leaders to the contrary, a strong anti-Russian sentiment was evident in the early days of Moldova’s move toward independence:

Moldavia’s politicians are moving as fast as they can to divest themselves of all things Russian. The old Bessarabian part of Moldavia is fast becoming a de facto little Romania and Russian-speakers, the “uninvited guests” as officials call them, are being shown the door. Virtually all non-Romanian-speakers will have to pass language tests by 1995 or lose their jobs. In several firms, testing has already begun. Skilled Russians, Ukrainians and others are leaving.⁷

The leadership of the Popular Front indeed was pro-Romanian (including support for unification) and anti-Russian. The anti-Russian rhetoric soon moderated as the unification movement lost support and as both the government and the Parliament supported legislation to accommodate the linguistic and cultural interests of all the minority populations. However, the damage done by the initial nationalist rhetoric was hard to undo. The 1989 language law, though ultimately containing a compromise making both Romanian and Russian languages of inter-ethnic communication, provided the catalyst for the independence movements on the Left Bank and the Gagauz territory in the south. Crowther appropriately labels these independence movements “reactive nationalism.”

Threatened by efforts of the majority ethnic group to destabilize the status quo in its own favor, members of the other minorities themselves entered into an independent political movement in order to increase the cost to the state of concessions to the Moldavians [Romanians]. The minorities also appealed to the national-level political leaders [Moscow] either 1) to defend the status quo, 2) to guarantee that any concessions to the Moldavian majority do not damage the position of minorities in the republic, or 3) if all else fails, to permit the other minorities to detach themselves from the present political unit and form a political entity of their own, one that would be directly responsible to the national-level government.⁸

What Has Changed?

While the passage of five years has not resulted in the majority of Russians learning or even attempting to learn Romanian, it has brought a significant change of attitude. Even the director of the Russian Cultural Center in Chişinău, Alexander Belopotapov, now refers to Romanian as the “state” language. In a recent interview he accepted the need for Russians to learn Romanian and talked more of the inadequate resources available to learn the language (meaning classes, books, and teachers) and the short time allowed by the law than about any fundamental opposition to becoming bilingual.⁹ On the Right Bank, Russians, Romanians and Gagauzi now refer to the “Romanian” rather than the “Moldovan” language; in fact, people of all three nationalities corrected the author's references to the “Moldovan language” or the “Moldovan people.” Yet in the heat of the February 1994 parliamentary campaign, President Snegur himself articulated the position that Romanians and Moldovans are distinct peoples who share a common language.¹⁰ Only in Transdnistria does anyone still argue that Moldovan is a different language from Romanian; schools in Transdnistria continue to teach almost exclusively in Russian and the Romanian language continues to be written in the Cyrillic alphabet.

The Russification of the educational system was at the root of the status distinction during Soviet times. In Chişinău in 1989, with Romanians making up approximately half of the population, only about ten percent of the kindergartens used Romanian as the primary language. No Romanian schools existed in Tiraspol for a Romanian population of 25,000. In the Chişinău Polytechnical University, Romanian was treated as a “foreign” language like French and English.¹¹ Because instruction in specialized and higher education was conducted almost entirely in Russian, fluency in Russian was required for skilled and administrative jobs, thus underlining the status distinction between the languages.

This situation has changed significantly since 1989, but many problems still exist. Romanian families as well as many mixed families (one-fifth of all marriages are mixed in Moldova) are sending their children to Romanian-language schools. Because of the large shift to the Romanian schools, they are often overcrowded, with instructional personnel in short supply. Russian families continue to send their children to Russian schools (though there are now exceptions), but the quality of the Romanian language instruction in these schools and student seriousness about learning Romanian have increased.

Russians now complain about the closing of many Russian kindergartens and the shortage of Romanian language teachers and materials. Their most serious complaints involve specialized secondary and higher education, where Moldovan governmental policies have had the greatest negative impact on the Russians. Specialized technical education provided in Russian has been severely reduced. Thus, many young people not pursuing higher education and wishing to develop a skill must study in Romanian or pursue their training out of the republic. Likewise, those who wish to pursue higher education in the Russian language have limited options within Moldova, and thus face increased competition for the available slots. Increasing numbers of Russian young people are reportedly seeking further education in Russia, with the Russian Cultural Center in Chişinău playing an active role in evaluating students' records and assisting them with placement in Russian

universities.¹²

Romanians also have concerns about education. While being pleased with the availability of instruction in their native language, they complain about the overcrowding of the Romanian schools and have little confidence in the quality of instruction being provided by the hastily recruited teachers. They also wonder about the excess space now available in the Russian schools, given the crowded conditions of their own facilities. The possibility of the Russians and Romanians having separate programs but sharing facilities has been discussed; however, because of Russian resistance, this option is unlikely to be pursued.

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Future Prospects

Article Seven of the language law, requiring that heads of institutions and people employed in public services speak both Romanian and Russian, took effect on 1 January 1994. Many Russians in such positions are unable to meet the requirements, but few expect the law to be harshly enforced. The State Department for Languages, created in 1992, is charged with the law's implementation, and regularly carries out spot checks to determine compliance. According to its director general, Ion Ciocanu, “the Russian-speaking masses have not yet developed a desire to master the language of the sovereign Moldovan state in which they live.” He further reports that the number of Russians taking language courses has been declining.¹³

Some Romanians seem to be losing their patience. As Presidential Counselor Viktor Grebenshchikov (himself Russian) stated:

Romanians are very tolerant. But as long as Russians in Moldova do not learn Romanian, there will continue to be tension. More and more Romanians are coming to wonder about having to use a foreign language in their own country. Speaking the language of the state of which you are a member is in no way discrimination. Language is of primary importance, making it possible to integrate into Moldovan society. The Russians here must face the fact that the Republic of Moldova is no longer the Russian gubernia of Bessarabia, or the Soviet Socialist Republic of Moldavia, but the independent Republic of Moldova.¹⁴

Until 1989, Russians felt very comfortable in Moldova. They had their own schools and cultural institutions and expected non-Russians to speak to them in Russian. Even with the declaration of independence, the Moldovan political leaders took rather moderate positions vis-à-vis the Russians and other minorities. The Parliament adopted an accommodative position on citizenship (the zero-option approach, where all people currently resident in Moldova could become citizens if they wished) and imposed the language requirement only on those in leadership positions or in regular contact with the public. But, according to Valeriu Matei, member of Parliament and vice-chairman of the Congress of Intellectuals, the accommodative approach thus far has failed:

When I think that between 1989 and 1993 people didn't learn ten words of Romanian—

how to say “hello,” “good evening,” “how are you”—I can only react with sadness and disappointment. If people want to live here, they should at least make an effort to learn the language.¹⁵

Matei, however, remains an optimist, citing what he called a “new mentality” gaining ground among the young Russians and Ukrainians growing up under independence. He also pointed to the recent creation of the Russian Cultural Center by Chişinău's Russian intellectuals as evidence of progress. This group will bring “intelligence and reason” to the issues, rather than merely resorting to brute force. As rector of the Moldovan Academy of Music and former deputy minister of Culture Constantin Rusnac reports, “Relations [with other groups] are not as nationalistic as in the Baltic states or in Georgia.”¹⁶ Because interpersonal relations are good and economic conditions are perceived to be better in Moldova than in Russia, few Russians are emigrating.¹⁷

The positive nature of inter-ethnic relations on Moldova's Right Bank provides the best prediction for the immediate future. No inter-ethnic clashes have occurred; even during the 1992 military conflict in Transdnistria, Russians on the Right Bank did not give over support to the breakaway Slavs in Transdnistria. One of the main aims of the Moldovan government has been to bring the Romanians and the Russians closer—to create the conditions so that the Russians and the other minorities do not feel compelled to leave.¹⁸ To this end, each ethnic group has its own state-supported schools and cultural institutions. Romanians, while sometimes frustrated at the necessity of having to use Russian, have not forced the language issue, preferring instead to let the younger generations come to terms with the reality of Moldovan independence and assuming that time is on the side of the new state.

Notes

¹ This article focuses on the language situation on the Right Bank of the Dniester and examines the interaction between Russians and Romanians on this issue since independence. Language is also an important issue in Transdnistria, having been one of the motivations for the secession of the region and the ensuing conflicts. Chişinău and Tiraspol have discussed options to the current language law, and one proposed compromise would delay the implementation of the law making Romanian the state language in Transdnistria until 2005. Because the Transdnistrian situation involves many complex issues, the author has restricted this discussion to the Right Bank.

² Constantin Rusnac, rector of the Academy of Music and former deputy minister of Culture, personal interview, January 1994.

³ Mikhail Guboglo, “Demography and Language in the Capitals of the Union Republics,” *Journal of Soviet Nationalities*, Vol. 1, No. 4 (Winter 1990-1991), pp. 20 and 40.

⁴ Irina Livezeanu, “Moldavia, 1917-1990: Nationalism and Internationalism Then and Now,” *Armenian Review*, Vol. 43, No. 2-3/170-171 (Summer/Fall 1990), p. 157.

⁵ William Crowther, “The Politics of Ethno-National Mobilization: Nationalism and Reform in Soviet Moldavia,” *Russian Review*, Vol. 50, April 1991, p. 189

⁶ Livezeanu, p. 179.

⁷ “The Bessarabians,” *The Economist*, 6 April 1991, p. 49.

⁸ Crowther, p. 195.

⁹ Alexander Belopotapov, director general of the Russian Cultural Center, personal interview, Chişinău, September 1993.

¹⁰ *RFE/RL Daily Report*, No. 26, 8 February 1994.

¹¹ Dan Ionescu, "Soviet Moldavia: The State Language Issue," *Radio Liberty Report on the USSR*, 2 June 1989, p. 20.

¹² Alexander Belopotapov, personal interview, Chişinău, September 1993.

¹³ Natalia Prikhodko, "Russians Aren't Eager to Study the State Language," *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 15 July 1993, p. 3, cited in *The Current Digest of the Post-Soviet Press*, Vol. XLV, No. 28, 1993, pp. 26-27.

¹⁴ Viktor Grebenshchikov, counselor to President Snegur, personal interview, Chişinău, September 1993.

¹⁵ Valeriu Matei, member of Parliament, personal interview, Chişinău, September 1993.

¹⁶ Constantin Rusnac, personal interview, January 1994.

¹⁷ Nicolae Tau, Moldovan foreign minister (1990-1993) and current ambassador to the United States, personal interview, January 1994.

¹⁸ Stefan Bozbei, director general of the Moldovan State Department for National Relations, personal interview, September 1993.