

What Defines Moldova's Culture?

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Situated on a narrow stretch between the Ukraine and Romania, the Republic of Moldova is a living symbol of divergence, a dichotomy crucified between East and West, between the past and the future, between progress and stagnation, and between democratic aspirations and a strikingly persistent dictatorial legacy. Moldova took its first moves toward independence in 1989. Two decades after the historical and triumphant separation from its colonial past, Moldova is still in search of its true self, while Europe and the rest of the world are still discovering this Eastern-European nation. Why is this process so painful and the transition so excruciatingly long for this small and picturesque country?

One of the possible answers is the geopolitical position of Moldova. In an era of globalization and new emerging cultural paradigms, the struggle for the true cultural identity is still valid and raising many questions in small post-

totalitarian countries, and Republic of Moldova is no exception. For the last 20 years, in a hot pursuit of its genuine identity, Moldovan culture has been trying to redefine itself. Perhaps the answer to the above questions should be also sought in the realm of Moldova's identity controversy, first and foremost in its cultural and anthropological ancestry. It is difficult, if not outright impossible, to discuss Moldovan cultural dimension without considering it in a broader political context. The Republic of Moldova has been greatly affected by the geopolitical transformations at the end of last century. In fact, its very existence as an independent state is a direct consequence of those important metamorphoses. It emerged after 1989 "bereft of a strong civil society, an established rule of law, and any previous democratic experience" (Way, 127), but with a great appetite for political independence and cultural affirmation. Its cultural identity, as defined by values, beliefs, rituals, customs,



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traditions, and institutional procedures that operate in a society to the benefit of the cultural subjects, constitutes the object of a broad debate in contemporary Moldova. Unlike many western cultures, the Moldovan cultural pattern is distinctively ethnocentric: it revolves predominantly around the ethnic population of Romanian extraction. At the same time, again distinctly from other cultural entities, Moldovan culture, as a social and individual construction, is strikingly eclectic. The country's cultural profile is determined by an amalgamated population structure. According to the latest census of 2004, the Moldovan (Romanian) population accounts for 78.0%, Ukrainians 8.3%, Russians 5.9%, Gagauz 4.4%, and other nationalities and ethnicities 1.9%. The titular ethnicity shows tolerance and acceptance of ethnic minorities and their cultural heritage expressed in language, tradition, arts, etc.

In order to understand cultural phenomena and developments in the Republic of Moldova following the achievement of political independence, one needs to assess it in a double historical-societal context. A devastating cultural drama has become a distinctive characteristic of Moldovan cultural ideals and values. Like all post-Soviet societies, Moldova faced a "cultural trauma as a consequence of the rapid, comprehensive, unexpected, and radical/fundamental change." (Sztompka, 443). During the domination of the Soviet totalitarian regime in Moldova, ideological interference with culture and artistic creation was overwhelming. Great pressure was applied on artists by the Communist party moguls, resulting in alienation and labeling as "nationalists", "decadent" or "bearers of patriarchal and petty-bourgeois mentality" being stuck on free thinkers and rebellious artists.

Historical factors constitute and reconstitute the cultural identity of the nation and the institutional context in which the culture takes shape. Moldova's culture has illustrated a dichotomy with deep roots in a highly polarized ethnic and political atmosphere. This validates the idea of a double vector (East-West, Russia-Romania, conservative-liberal opposition) followed in political and, consequently, ethno-cultural evolution. A central point of tension in the building of a new cultural paradigm is language and education policy. Language is a particularly sensitive issue for the Moldovans who consider themselves of Romanian ethnicity, as losing their language can be compared with a departure from their cultural identity. Whether the language is Romanian or Moldovan amounts to a watershed issue. Even though the General Meeting of the Academy of Sciences of Moldova decided that the correct name of the official language in the Republic of Moldova is Romanian, confirming the view of various domestic and foreign scientists, the Constitution states that the language is Moldovan, thus letting political considerations decide on cultural issues. The unresolved linguistic contradictions are affecting the entire society, not just its cultural institutions. Unlike other cultural models, where language is considered a primary means of communication and instrument of cultural exchange, in Moldova it has taken on exacerbated political functions, with great divisive potential, fueling the disunity over the national and cultural identity.

Another source of cultural contradictions is determined by the divide on the rural-urban axis in the Moldovan model of ethno-cultural pluralism. The disproportionate concentration of cultural institutions in the capital city of Moldova, Chisinau, creates the distorted centralization of cultural elites in the main





Mihai Grecu,*
Portile Orheiului Vechi
(The Gates of Old Orhei).

Image courtesy of:
<http://www.arta.neonet.md/pictura/mgrecu/en/portileorheiului.html>



Igor Vieru,*
Moara veche
(The Old Mill).

Image courtesy of:
<http://www.artmuseum.md/images/pn8.jpg>





urban center of the country. Meanwhile, the rural area, which encompasses the majority of Moldova's territory and population, is in constant deprivation of cultural attention.

The sense of belonging to the European identity and aspirations for closer links with the political and cultural institutions of Europe and the rest of the world are recent developments in Moldovan cultural and societal movement, while lingering in the pro-Eastern orbit is consistently remains a permanent presence in Moldovan mentality. Traditionally, the former is associated with liberal thought, and the latter aligned with the conservative mindset. Political classes capitalized on the issue of cultural identity, gaining

capital from promises to take Moldova to Europe on the democratization horse. In the end, cultural struggle turns out to add to the political struggle for power. Negotiating Moldova's future in the world has been aligned along the same East-West and liberal-conservative axis.

Currently a reassessment of Soviet cultural heritage is taking place. The truly valuable cultural manifestations survive and are entering the European cultural circuit. Due to the recently opened means of communication, artists formed after Moldova attained independence fit naturally in the international cultural flow, becoming part of the European and world wide cultural patrimony.

* **Mihai Greuc** (1916-1998), famous Moldovan painter; during the Soviet period professed a nonconformist approach to art; experimented with the chromatic register.

* **Igor Vieru** (1923-1988) remarkable personality in the Fine Arts World of Moldova; utilized symbols, metaphors, and national motives, which triggered severe criticism of his works by the dominant party during the Soviet era.

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