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Hostile Narratives in the Moldovan Solitary Courtyard

Decompressing the main Russian narratives in Moldova

Narrative 1: Russkiy Mir, spirituality and Russian language as tools of imperial cohesion

The ideology of the 'Russkiy Mir' is built on the linear assumption that those who speak Russian think as Russians do and may act as Russians. Thus, spreading Russian culture is a policy tool appealing to any nominal power-holder in Moscow, who is applauded by domestic constituencies in Russia for 'collecting the aches of the Russian people and reuniting them into a new form of re-shaped union with recognized global ambitions'. It is obvious that care for compatriots abroad is not just a futile duty but a way to assert the size and intensity of power of the modern Russian state, which invests more than any other state in global PR. Wedged between Romania and Ukraine, Moldova – much like its neighbors – finds itself caught in the cross-hairs of a struggle for influence that pits Russia against the West. Many in Russia have a deep sense of entitlement to interfere in the post-Soviet states, as was the case with the Soviet Union intervening in the affairs of the Warsaw Pact, and thus feel 'humiliated' when states like Moldova ban media or politicians that are considered to be spreading propaganda from entering. In fact, their cognitive dissonance is not related to individual myopia, as revealed once by Putin's casual remark that the Soviet Union was in essence "Russia, but just under a different name."¹ Since Putin believes that the dissolution of the USSR was a historic accident, almost naturally all former Soviet states are not real states but building blocks for a re-emerging post-Soviet state. President Putin publicly admitted that Ukraine is not a state, and that a gigantic state-building project in Russia's vital sphere is yet to come. Some of his gigantesque ideas were earlier vociferated by Major

¹ Interview given by Vladimir Putin on the three federal TV channels, 18 November 2011. Source: <http://www.vg-news.ru/news-intervyu-putina-trem-federalnym-kanalam-polnyi-tekst>.

Gral L. Shershnev, who stated that Russia will campaign as a national project for the “re-collection of the Russian people.”²

Sergei Pantelev, Director of the Institute of Russians Abroad, made this point more boldly when affirming that, “until the tragic events in Ukraine, the concept of Russkiy Mir was to some extent quite academic, in reference to various non-political writings, far from public diplomacy, culture, or soft-power goals, conducted through the mobilization of compatriots abroad.”³ The ‘Russkiy Mir’ doctrine represents a synthetic product of this political ideology, exploiting cultural stereotypes, historical enmities and symbols, of linguistic or nationalistic origins, only to prop up a larger project that it wants to achieve. A web of pro-Russia parties, NGOs, centers and Orthodox parishes often follow the ideology predicated by the ‘Russkiy Mir’ doctrine intuitively or under certain rationales, playing their part of the game when joining the existing or ad hoc created networks or coalitions to advocate conditions favorable to Russian interests and ambitions. It was no surprise in 2011–2013 to see priests of the Christian Orthodox Church Mitropoly of Moldova – a tributary of the Russian Christian Orthodox Church – joining ranks with the Communist Party in political rallies against the European Union and the Moldovan government, attempting to block the adoption of the anti-discrimination laws, which was one of the major preconditions for signing the Association Agreement with Moldova. Later on, the same Church sided with the Socialist Party in celebrating the victory in World War II ‘against historical adversaries’ under the symbol of the Ribbon of St. George (Georgievskaja lenta), which is definitely a landmark of the Moscow ideological campaign to showcase its opposition to the West. The St. George Ribbon is one of the many geo-cultural markers unifying the ‘Russian World’. It has recently migrated into the political realms of the Republic of Moldova, as a response to the ‘color shifts’ in Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova. Thus, any organization willing to rely on Moscow’s favors must associate itself with the Ribbon as a sign of loyalty to the Kremlin’s narrative on ‘winners and losers’ of World War II, accepting exploitation of the war memories by Russia for political goals. In turn, political groups not affiliated to Russia are generally dismissive of the Russian narrative on anti-Nazi victories, claiming that it carries imperial meanings subversive to the idea of all-European efforts and that Russia is in fact aiming at privatization of the anti-Nazi discourse everywhere in the former Soviet space.

This creates a parallel world between two (or even more) political interpretations of the post-world realms. Analysts say that due to existing rifts in linguistic, cultural

2 Obščestvennyj fond „Russkie” Sootečestvenniki za rubežom polučat „kartu russkogo” [Public Fund „Russians, Our Compatriots abroad will get the „card of Russian”], online at: <http://www.kp.md/daily/article/516850/?cp=6>

3 <http://krorm.ru/news/sootechestvenniki/765-russkiy-mir-kultura-i-civilizaciya.html>

or political preferences, all elections in Moldova are geopolitical, with political actors casting polarized votes even in local elections. Pro-Western parties long bemoaned former President Voronin, leader of the pro-Russian Communist Party, who ruled as a leading majority force in 2001–2009 with smaller but vocal opposition parties, such as the Liberals, Liberal Democrats and Democrats. When the Communists lost their grip on power in the 2009 elections, they were outstripped by even stauncher pro-Russian parties (socialists) and *Nasha Partia* (populists), turning Moldova into the focus of the ‘Orthodox Mission’ by offering the Customs Union as balance against the EU. Since right-wing parties in Moldova are liberal, pro-European parties open to EU integration, the left is thereby reserved for pro-Russian groups and parties, funds, outlets and other institutions fed by Moscow. All put together, this creates a parallel universe in which parties opposing the EU are presented as saviors of Moldovans’ genuine soul, defenders of the century-old traditions, backed by Russia rather than the country that invaded Moldova and is still sponsoring the separatist regime on its own soil (Transnistria). The participation of Moldovan soldiers in the peacekeeping operation in Kosovo (KFOR) sparked protests by the pro-Russian parties, whereas dozens of civil activists protested in March 2016 in front of the Russian Embassy, demanding the release of Nadejda Savcenko.⁴ A Coordinational Council of Russian Compatriots has gathered almost 140 clubs, associations, media outlets and business groups.⁵

With the war in Ukraine, Russian language media outlets became intensively connected to Moscow’s views on the ‘civil war’ (ignited by the nationalists of Ukraine) and on the ‘logical reintegration of Crimea into the motherland of all Russians’. Most Russian TV is highly popular in Moldova, thus the Moscow channels are widely re-broadcast in its networks. Almost 70% of TV consumers prefer watching Russian channels instead of or equal to local TV and radio. In addition, pro-separatist media openly broadcast via cable TV, poorly monitored by the National Broadcasting Council (NBC). Nowadays, *Russkiy Mir* is received through the geopolitical processes of the modern world, which includes Russia. If, it states, “before the civil war in Donbass, the expression ‘values of the Russian world’ carried a sort of speculative tone, then now, these values can mobilize people to accept the highest sacrifices”. With almost 30m people of Russian ethnicity abroad (*Obščestvennyj fond “Russkie”*), Moscow employs several policies. First it attempts to define and recruit new citizens, employing easy procedures to grant citizenship to all Russian speakers, descendants of and former citizens of the USSR, who are eligible for facilitated citizenship of Russia. Particularly,

4 Protest in fata Ambasadei ruse la Chisinau pt eliberarea Nadejdei Savcenko [Rally in Front of the Embassy of the Russian Federation with the aim to demand releasing of Nadja Savcenko from detention], in: RFERL, 09.03.2016.

5 <http://russkie.md/>

'passportizatsia' is used in the conflict-prone regions or borderland states, where direct subsidies, fees and other forms of financial benefits add a strong material incentive to obtain Russian citizenship. Second, Moscow is widely using the situation of Russian communities to correlate bilateral relations with every independent CIS under scrutiny and "dependent on the level of comfort of its compatriots therein". It also attempted to relocate some people of Russian ethnicity to various declining regions (Smolenschina)⁶, but lack of attractiveness and traditional waste of resources due to corruption have affected the program. Instead, the Russian narrative on compatriots is more widely known as the Russian state responsibility to protect (RtP), which is an essential toolkit of foreign, security and military policies. In fact, this narrative has 'fingerprints' in language, education and culture, citizenship and Orthodoxy.

The largest Russian agency providing resources for the compatriot policy is Rossotrudnicestvo⁷, which conducts significant networking with dozens and hundreds of grantees abroad. It shares budgetary resources and coordinates its priorities with Russia's diplomatic missions. For years, pro-Russian activists demanded from Moldovan authorities to recognize Russian as a second official language of the state, claiming that the Russian language would otherwise be limited in use. Thus equating Russian and Moldovan as state languages is the birth-mark of any genuine pro-Russian party in Moldova. A second tenet of defining pro-Russian parties is their adversarial position to the idea of Moldovans' ethnic identification with Romanians. Pro-Russian parties astutely combat the fact that Moldovan and Romanian basically are the same language. They claim that if one were to accept this notion, then separate statehood would immediately lose its necessity and Moldova's sovereignty would be lost. Thus, accepting the Romanization of the Moldovan language is in fact dangerous and unacceptable, requiring all mature political forces to combat Romanian cultural expansion in Moldova.

Some of them admit, however, that the idea of close identities of Moldovans and Romanians is gaining popularity.⁸ Based on this assumption, keeping the Moldovan language in Cyrillic script in Transnistria is a deliberate political act to preserve the separate character of Moldovan, as reintegration of the split region will be impossible unless Romanization is stopped. Some pro-Russian groups view unification with

6 On October 11, in Chisinau V. V. Polonikova held a presentation of the Program on supporting voluntary re-deployment of the Russian compatriots in Russia for 2010–2012. The presentation was conducted in the Russian Center for Science and Culture, supported by the Official Representation of „Rossotrudnicestvo” in the Republic of Moldova and Representatives of the Federal Migration Service of the Russian Federation.

7 Personal Blog: I.Rosca. <http://iuriosca.md/opinii/evropeyskaya-integraciya-kak-gosudarstvennaya-ideologiya-i-socialnaya-bolezn.html/>

8 Gazeta.md. <http://gzt.md/article/%D0%BE%D0%B1%D1%89%D0%B5%D1%81%D1%82%D0%B2%D0%BE/9862/>.

Romania as a catastrophic scenario with major effects on minority groups (Gagauz, Russian). The Russian Embassy plays the role of political coagulator for a large network of clientele entities, based on funding, coaching, and management. It is not surprising that Russian diplomats publicly claim that dangers coming from Romanian cultural expansionism must be stopped in Moldova, and that all evil comes from the pro-Romanian elites. For instance, Russian Ambassador Muhametshin has stated that separatism in Moldova was a natural reaction by Russian compatriots at the time of the Soviet dissolution, and a defensive stance against pro-Romanian groups.⁹ He blames Moldova for setting up a discriminatory linguistic situation for Russians after 1989, which he claims led to mass resignation of those who did not speak Moldovan, and therefore the territorial splits in Gagauzia and Transnistria were provoked by Chisinau. However, he never blamed the Russian military, which armed separatist militias and directly intervened when it sided with separatist militias fighting the constitutional bodies of the Republic of Moldova. Also, Russian talking heads never mention the military and financial backup provided by the last Soviet leaders to the separatist movement in Tiraspol as soon as Moldovans declared their independent statehood. They also skip any reference to the fact that Moldova actually adopted one of the most liberal examples of citizenship legislation, providing citizenship rights to all inhabitants of Moldova at the moment of independence (August 27, 1991).

The Russian narrative on Moldovan independence is shaped by the assumption that it was an ‘accident’. Even now, claims the highest Russian diplomat in Moldova, the Government of Moldova is squeezing Russian from public use, restricting advertising in other languages (Russian), limiting petitioning of public authorities, with the aim of creating dominance of the Romanian language. On April 23, 2015, Ambassador Muhametshin met with OSCE Commissionaire Astrid Tors on the situation of the Russian-speaking population in Moldova, voicing criticism of the integration strategy for national minorities elaborated with the support of the HCNM of the OSCE in The Hague. Since Moldovan legislation (1989) recognizes only one official language, i.e. Moldovan (identical with Romanian), activists of the above groups usually contest the function of Russian as language of interpersonal communication and demand that instead it holds official status (*gossudarstvennyi iazik*).¹⁰ In their view, art. 20 of the Treaty on Friendship and Cooperation (Moldova-Russia) of November 19, 2001, includes guarantees to protect Russian, while violating the constitutional right of individuals to choose the language of education.¹¹ Of high sensitivity is the absence

⁹ Euronews, online at: <http://enews.md/articles/view/4547/>

¹⁰ Regnum.ru., online at: <http://regnum.ru/news/polit/882693.html>

¹¹ The study “Moldovan laws and compliance with the Council of Europe recommendations in regard to the protection of national minorities” addresses the practice of applying recommendations to persons belonging

of patronyms in the national registration system of passportization in Moldova, since all applications are filled out in the official language. Usually, Russian activists try to mobilize other ethnicities as well; in Moldova, these include the Gagauzian, Bulgarian, Belarusian, Ukrainian, and other communities. Since funding is a big problem in boosting their activities, communities usually join these claims, taking sides. Thus, Russian diplomats are keen to keep up a permanent clientele of actors willing to cooperate when funds are generously supplied by Moscow to the friendly ethnic clubs, sharing incentives to keep them motivated, but also making sure they are doing the right things, by planting the accents, assisting them with personalities that do not hide their intelligence background. The pro-Russian Socialist Party has declared that banning Russian journalists (D. Kiseliyov and A. Kondrashov) of *Rossia-1*, confirms the “authoritarian character of the current regime”¹², and that it does not understand the “high level of tolerance in the case of Romanian and American officials interfering with Moldovan politics.”

Narrative 2: Responsibility to Protect (RtP) ‘à la Russe’

The Russian narrative on protecting compatriots abroad traces the roots of separatism in Transnistria not to the military intervention of the Russian 14th Army, which backed separatist forces in 1992, but to the actions of nationalistic elites aiming at unification with Romania. From the onset, Russian propagandists have preferred being silent about Moscow’s role in arming separatist forces, funding and mobilizing reservists and Cossacks from Russia, in supplying guns, tanks, and training, and in equipping thousands of volunteers and regular soldiers as well as other mercenaries loyal to the USSR with the purpose – similar to the on-going combat operations in Donbass (2014/2016) – to help defend the ‘young Transnistrian republic’. Instead, they portray those contesting Soviet rule as nationalists, whereas those who opposed independence are labeled ‘internationalists’. The same logic prevailed in 1990/1991, when Soviet leaders and KGB inspired the creation of so-called interfronts against

to the national minorities, their legal status, and conclusions of the foreign experts, recommendations of the Council of Europe, concluding that the state administration does not sufficiently consider the issues related to the norms and standards of protecting national minorities.

12 In fact, SIS banned several Russian TV groups and propagandists from entering Moldova. In May 2014, Johan Beckman, leader of the Antifa Committee (Finland) was banned from entering Chisinau Airport. Also, Vice-PM of Russia D. Rogozin’s plane was checked by SIS operatives, which resulted in the confiscation of all boxes with signatures collected in Transnistria to join Russia. In October 2014, senior RISI researcher V. Kashirin was banned when he publicly called upon the Gagauz population to rebel against the Moldovan authorities. Source: <http://actualitati.md/ru/vnutrennyaya-politika/batrynya-v-respublike-moldova-realizuyutsya-dvoynye-standarty-v-oblasti>

the popular fronts, attempting thus to block dissolution of the Soviet Union.¹³ TASS News Agency affirms that the war in 1990 broke out in response to calls to unify with Romania, and that bloodshed was avoided only because of the heroic intervention by the Soviet troops. Later on, the war in Transnistria was only stopped due to the Russian Peacekeeping Operation.¹⁴ It also adds Ukrainians and Bulgarians to Russians to conclude that the majority of the region is Slavic and thus entitled to separate from the rest of Moldova by establishing a republic of their own (PMR).

Reminiscent of the Soviet concept of internationalist fighters – those fighting for Soviet interests abroad if the party decides so – such tricks were rather effective in a widely industrialized region with large plants of all-union subordination, and the Soviet model of administration was deeply ingrained in the mentality of the population. It does not matter that the PMR is unrecognized, that Moldovans represent 40% of the regional multi-ethnic population, and that the PMR was in fact created by the 14th Russian Army with vast networks of intelligence and counterinformation operatives. Almost three decades after the Soviet collapse, Russia still keeps up the narrative of RtP in Moldova. In 2012, D. Rogozin was appointed by President Putin as his personal Official Representative for Transnistria and Chairman of the Russia-Moldova interstate cooperation committee, which reflects Moscow's absolute prioritization of the 'frozen conflict' in Moldova. His contributions to the RtP narrative were impressive, warning Romania of the threat to be bombed by Russia as well as talking tough with Moldova on debt issues of debt federalization – \$5bn of the secessionist PMR, trivially assumed to be the state debt of Moldova. In Rogozin's view, 'if Moldova does not recognize Transnistria, it will be obligated to pay its debts'. By this logic, Moldova would assume responsibility for a system that Russia created despite its objections. As part of its narrative, Moscow advocates a federalized state in Moldova as the only way to incorporate the distinct interests of the people of Transnistria, but also infuses sentiments of nationalism among other national minorities, such as people of Gagauzian ethnicity.¹⁵

To justify its claims to be protecting its loyal citizens, Russia uses a plethora of instruments and narratives. Among them, granting citizenship to every former USSR citizen and their descendants clearly is a privileged tool of influence, which some

13 The unrecognized Republic of Transnistria came into existence in 1990, following a war of secession with Moldova. It has a population of over 500,000, most of them ethnic Russians and speakers of Russian. Russia currently has a peacekeeping force of about 1,000 soldiers stationed in the republic's capital Tiraspol to ensure security and stability in the region.

14 ZDG, Stop fake 16 (565), 28.04.2016, 14, online at: www.zdg.md

15 Panorama, Čubašenko: V slučae "uniri" gagauzy rasproščajutsja so svoej avtonomiej [In case of "unification", Gagauzians shall forget about their territorial autonomy], online at: <http://gagauzinfo.md/index.php?newsid=24131>

authors have called ‘annexation by passport’. In all ‘frozen conflict’ territories, Russia is using passportization to create ‘loyalty belts’, encouraging people to claim social benefits (health, pensions, stipends), then distinguishing them from the rest of the mass population based on instrumental use of its foreign policy goals abroad. Prior to the war in Georgia, Russia began to multiply its passports in Transnistria, despite risking conflict with the Moldovan MFA, in order to open up a full-fledged diplomatic mission in Tiraspol. Since the MFA never accepted this, Russia instead used mobile consular services in the region but also established Russian political parties (branches) in Transnistria, using them as consular bodies where newly confirmed citizens of Russia often received guidance on various issues. Similar to its policy in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, where some observers humorously noted that ‘there did not remain in these places anyone who had not received this passport’, social benefits, pensions and a symbolic feeling of security clearly were behind numerous individual decisions to apply for a passport, thus allowing Russia to claim that it had 200,000 citizens in Transnistria. Once a significant number of citizens had received their passports, Moscow established an RTP (right to protect) doctrine, revising its laws to encompass the obligation of the state to intervene in a foreign country in case Russian citizens are being persecuted. Moscow’s use of passports aims to keep the separatist enclave of Transnistria out of reach for the national government of Moldova. As part of the Peacekeeping Operation, it halted the full withdrawal of its military from this region, complemented with solid military backup provided to the separatist army. In the 1999 OSCE Summit Declaration, Russia committed to withdrawing its troops from Moldova, but with Putin’s emergence, old commitments were ignored. Since 2000, it has stuck to the idea of synchronizing the military withdrawal of its troops, which according to Moldovan authorities are stationed there without any legal status, with full political settlement of the conflict ‘between equal parts’.

In 2014, Russia started printing and disseminating the so-called ‘cards of Russians’ (“karty russkogo”) showing where large communities of Russian ethnicity were living, which made them priorities of foreign policy (Ukraine, Kazakhstan, Moldova and Baltic States). Benefits provided to the owners of these cards included long-term visas, automatic labor permits, entrepreneurship rights equal to those of real Russian citizens, social benefits to the third, fourth and fifth child of the applicant family, free medical insurance, free education in Russia (normal schools as well as state colleges). The authors of the concept state that those are eligible to receive such cards who identify as Russians by mentality, beyond the narrow *ius sanguinis*, including persons “who share the basics of Russian culture, its spiritual power and language, who relate their destiny to that of Russian civilization and who regard Russia as the center of the Russian

world.”¹⁶ Applicants shall officially confirm that they regard themselves as Russian and also meet other requirements – such as speaking Russian, considering themselves part of this nation, sharing Russian customs and traditions, respecting Orthodox faith, actively participating in various organizations, defending Russian language, education and culture as well as the history of the Russian state, receiving awards, and being knowledgeable about Russian organization. In addition, card owners can apply for protection to the diplomatic and consular authorities, whose obligation is to respond to visible signs of Russophobia, assimilation or other actions violating their rights.

RIA and Regnum share a common policy of concluding every story about Transnistria with the following background: “Transnistria, 60 % of whose inhabitants are Russians and Ukrainians, sought to leave Moldova before the demise of the USSR, fearing that Moldova would unify with Romania. In 1992, after a failed attempt of Moldovan authorities to settle the conflict by force, Transnistria de facto became a territory outside Chisinau’s control.” Sputnik claims it will introduce an alternative view to the relationship between Russia and Moldova with similar geopolitical interests, providing citizens with recent news. Beyond existing stereotypes, Sputnik will report on real facts and lives, not in the manner of the mass media in Bucharest or Chisinau, states V. Novosadiuk. As an example, Sputnik’s manager finds it revealing that the citizens of Moldova are intimidated by the project of unification with Romania since it has been synchronized with a visit of the American generals to Chisinau. Russian media outlets are firm in accusing NATO and the West of evil intentions in Moldova. The following short ‘news’ item may serve as an example of propaganda: “American instructors teach Moldovan soldiers to kill”, says the text under the headline “NATO – yes, Russia – nyet.”¹⁷ The author accuses NATO that “keeping its army in Afghanistan and Iraq is cumbersome for the U.S., therefore it is much cheaper for the U.S. to employ unenlightened nations, like Georgia or Latvia, and perhaps include Moldova in this process in the future.” In other Russian media outlets, journalists report about Romanian army plans to invade Moldova, allegedly under pretense of some instability situation. “And this will be the end of independence for Moldova forever,” states 1 Kanal, for instance, broadcast in Moldova (12 March 2016). Reporting on anti-corruption protests, the journalist says that although many call it peaceful, “there are signs that if the chaos prevails then the Romanian army is ready to invade Moldova and install a Romanian administration, as was the case in the past.”¹⁸ 1 Kanal is broadcast in Moldova by Prime TV, which belongs to Mr. P., who purged the news item from the

16 Odnarodnya, online at: <http://m.odnarodyna.org/content/karta-russkogo>

17 Moskovskii Komsomoletz, Moldova. In: *World Weekly*, 10–16 March 2016, p. 3.

18 B1 TV, online at: <http://www.b1.ro/stiri/externe/propaganda-rusa-in-functiune-in-moldova-va-intra-armata-romana-va-fi-sfarsitul-independentei-moldovei-pentru-totdeauna-video-138525.html>

informational band. But on January 25, 2016, Tiras.ru again repeated this news item, stating that “Romania is ready at every moment to send its carabinieri to Moldova”, they only need a reason.

As a result, Moldovan authorities banned *Rossia-24* and fined Prime, TV7, REN-TV and RTR-Rossia for their independent news (in fact, anti-Ukrainian propaganda conducted by Russian war correspondents from the Donbass separatist battlefields). In October 2014, a human rights center of the Coordinational Council of Russian Compatriots contested the bans imposed on some Russian media, accusing the media regulator of ideological bias and Russophobia. Afterwards, the same body issued an analytical note on the fate of 250 schools endangered by the Education Code adopted in Moldova. On September 4, 2014, the same group of pro-Russian watchdogs called the attention of speakers of Moldovan to the fact that Russians do not hold top positions in the power structures of Moldova, including the judiciary. In 2014 alone, the Council held 20 seminars and dozens of roundtables on human rights and the protection of minority rights with the specific aim to identify cases of violations affecting speakers of Russian.¹⁹ All in all, the pro-Russian groups are designed to keep Moldovan authorities under constant pressure, contesting the national character of the Moldovan state and promoting the idea of equal nations living in Moldova, the imperative demands of bilingualism and being recognized in the Constitution, and the leading mission of the Russian compatriot organizations to represent other ethnic groups.²⁰

Narrative 3: “The European Union is bad, the Customs Union is what you need!”

With the Eastern Partnership Policy (May 2008), EU integration gained popularity throughout the region, including Moldova. When political forces overthrew Voronin’s quasi-autocratic regime in Moldova (2009), Moscow was caught by surprise. As a sign of confusion, the Russian Ambassador in the EU stated that all these post-election protests got their inspiration from abroad. Then, President Voronin decided to expel the Romanian Ambassador from Chisinau and warned it would arrest NDI Director A. Grigoryevs for being the “culprit of a twitter revolution”. Later on, with new political forces in power in Moldova (2009), the Russian policy remained somehow distant from the power-holders, but it changed and re-focused on supporting ‘gradual

19 Human Rights Center. Michail Sidorov, Chair of the human rights and analysis center. More information about the activities performed by this center can be found on the web-site Pravotentr.ru

20 Russians represent 5 % of the population in Moldova; the largest national minority are the Ukrainians with 8.6 %, Gagauzians 4.5 %, Bulgarians 2.1 %; the titular group (Moldovans) make up 76 %.

erosion of EU credibility through its enrolled formal and informal networks. Rather than accepting its failure²¹, the Russian narrative was re-grouped to dispel public trust that the EU was serious about Moldova, calling it superficial, aiming for geopolitical gains while failing to reach out to the economic needs of the population. If until 2013, the EaP had been seen as an auxiliary offspring with no impact on the Russia-EU bilateral dialogue, suddenly, on the eve of the November 2013 Summit in Vilnius, Moscow realized that something important was happening in its neighborhood, with countries negotiating trade deals with the EU surpassing the most optimistic forecasts in this regard. And then the Russian shift in narratives swiftly followed the political urgencies. After 1991–2000, NATO had been seen as the main opponent of Russia in the near abroad, but after 2009, it soon changed its tone. In fact, the EU replaced NATO as a threat to Russian interests and was invoked as a challenge to the Russian integration project. As soon as the idea of bringing the most willing among the six states of the EaP closer to the EU took form, this triggered a violent response. Prior to the Vilnius Summit (November 2013), Russian officials openly declared that by signing the Association Agreement with the EU, these countries were voting for enslaving themselves and that the West was encircling Russia through the EaP. Accordingly, by Moscow accounts, the political elites in Tbilisi and Kiev were simply puppet regimes playing a strictly subservient role to the EU policies in Eastern Europe, which were aiming at squeezing Russian influence from a space vital to Moscow. Top-level Russian officials did everything to keep up this accusatory discourse and high tonality in their statements.

For instance, Deputy PM Rogozin accused Moldovan leaders of being under full control of the Western powers. He also accused both the EU and Moldova of “violating the basic rights of the Russian people in Transnistria by signing a trade deal that does not take into account Russian interests”, pledging his personal support to maintain the same level of financial assistance to the separatist regime backed by loyal Russian compatriots.²² The same Rogozin accused Romanian President Basescu of planning Moldova’s ‘anschluss’, using European Integration as a smoke screen by helping the EU to expand its presence in Moldova only to unify it later with Romania. Rogozin frequently makes explicit references to Nazi Germany’s annexation deals (1938–1949), but accepts no criticism of the early 2014 annexation of Crimea by subversion, or

21 Bogdan Tirdea, S prichodom k vlasti 29 ijulja 2009 goda pravjaščego Al’jansa za evropejskuju integraciju (AEI) process raz’edanija moldavskoj gosudarstvennosti prinjal opasny charakter [Starting with the emergence of the Alliance for European Integration in Moldova of July 29, 2009, the process of disintegration of the Moldovan statehood has become a systematic phenomena], online at: <http://pan.md/mneniya/Razrushenie-Moldovi>

22 Russia Today, Russian Deputy PM pledges support to Moldova’s breakaway region <https://www.rt.com/politics/169928-rogozin-moldova-transdnister-russia/>

the instigation of war in Donbass. Since EU attraction is quite difficult to resist, the Russian ideological narrative employs a tactical detour, claiming that “neither form of integration is ideal and therefore both ways of integration (EU, Eurasian) shall be equally accessible to the interested sides (states)”, requesting EU officials to include Moscow in tri-lateral negotiations if any talks are conducted with the countries in Eastern Europe. Russian diplomats have pointed to the need to propose joint membership in both the Euro-Asian Union (EAO) and the European Union (EU) for countries of the former Soviet Union, ignoring the fact that at the time the EAO was still inexistent or revealed as a concept on paper.²³ This policy change triggered changes in Moldova. Although the Communists were on EU track after 2005, now their ideological position is that the EU pursues Russophobic policies.

One of the former advisors to President Voronin, Mark Tkaciuc, stated that “the EU has changed its priorities; it has transformed itself from a generator of values of ‘development, solidarity and civic liberties’ into a geographic union.” In 2009, Communists launched their campaign with the slogan: “We build up a European Moldova!”, but in 2014, he said that “it will be a shame to flag European slogans now, we must articulate only pro-Eurasian slogans today and join the Customs Union.” He concluded that, with the 2009 election of the European Parliament, the Union stopped being a generator of values, on development, solidarity, civic freedoms, and became stuck in a primitive geographic denomination. If earlier European values meant everything that was superior to us, as benchmarks to progress, then today, Tkaciuc says, “they clearly mean only what the West predicates to us. It pays no attention to diversity, since its only logic is the Western model, which copy-pastes the Byzantium political experience.” As part of his harsh criticism of the EU, Tkaciuc says that “the EU is dishonest with the EaP states, since it bans them from keeping an integration track with Russia (Customs Union), offering no real chance to become a member of the EU.” In support of his thesis, Tkaciuc states that “first they incur high costs to adapt their economies and politics, give up some shares of sovereignty, of traditional ties with other post-Soviet states, but see no reason to go beyond some simple examples of consumer goods (mobility, trade), thus defining a model of ‘vassality’ that is only accepted by the West.” Second, choosing the EU, every EaP government receives not a list of priority reforms, but a presumption of innocence in crimes against civic liberties, if you are the ruling elite. This is proven by the bloodshed in Odessa, he says, “where Ukrainian Berkut attacked (peaceful) pro-Russian protesters when they attempted to save their leaders from being arrested for opposition to the EU.” The

23 Chaillot Papers, Nicu Popescu, Eurasian Union: the real, the imaginary and the likely, September 2014 http://www.iss.europa.eu/uploads/media/CP_132.pdf

former Communist advisor's sudden change of mindset does not stand alone, though. After 2013, the left-wing parties in Moldova suddenly accelerated their pledge to the Customs Union (CU), opposing the Association Agreement with the EU, aligning themselves with Moscow.

In 2015/16, the Russian anti-EU narrative intensified, capitalizing on the mistakes of the pro-EU forces, bank fraud, but also on the worsening atmosphere inside Europe (refugee crisis, economic decline). Some pro-Moscow authors are triumphant, claiming that “the EU is over” and is getting what the USSR got in the 90s.²⁴ In support of his judgments, the former Vice-Minister of the MFA, for example, lists the waste of resources on goals that are different from the EU's proper nations', “resulting in almost full control of the criminal and economic situation at home.” Thus, the terrorist acts in Cologne and Brussels become testimonies that the EU is incapable of ending the security threats. In conclusion, he claims that the EU will be over if nationalistic parties gain even more power in Europe, as this will bury the Schengen area and force some of its members to leave the union (UK). All these imminent changes will not affect Moldova, however, since its ties with the EU are weak, nothing will change for regular citizens. To fight Western orientation, the Russian tactic is to sow doubt in the EU's intentions while rounding up the argument of a balanced policy between East and West, or ‘ravnoudaly onnosty’. One of Moscow's ‘agents of influence’, Iurie Iakubov, who financed the 2014 referendum declared illegal by several Moldovan Courts²⁵, promotes the idea that “Moldova shall not rush for the West, nor for the East, but stand alone in the center.”²⁶ In 2013, Iakubov was appointed as foreign business advisor to the former governor in Comrat (Gagauzian region), playing a key role in keeping local (Gagauzian) producers connected to the Russian market. As he openly stated, “my goal is to contribute to the maximal integration of Moldovan economics in Russia, since

24 Valerij Ostalep, Evrosojuz zakončilsja [The life of the EU is over], in: *Moldavskie Vedomosti* 21, 25.03.2016.

25 On 2 February 2014, Gagauzian authorities called the local population to vote in a referendum on two issues: to declare their support for the country's integration either in the EU or in the Moscow-led Customs Union (CU), and to declare their opinion on the draft law “On the deferred status of the Autonomous Region of Gagauzia” considered illegal by the constitutional authorities. Under the proposed legislation, if Moldova were to lose its sovereignty (for example, through the unification of Moldova and Romania, or even – as some politicians have argued – through Moldova's further integration in the EU), the autonomous region would automatically become the independent Republic of Gagauzia. As expected, the outcome of the vote showed overwhelming support for both the CU and the draft law. According to the figures released by Gagauzia's Central Electoral Commission, 98.5 % of voters supported Moldova's integration in the Customs Union, while 98% voted in favor of the ‘deferred independence’ bill. Support for closer integration in the EU was marginal, reaching just over 2 %. <http://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2014-03-10/gagauzia-growing-separatism-moldova>

26 Jurij Jakubov: Moldova ne dolžna rvat'sja ni na Zapad, ni na Vostok, a ostavat'sja po centru [Moldova should not rush for the West, nor for the East, but remain straight in between the two], in: *Gagauzinfo*, online at: <http://gagauzinfo.md/index.php?newsid=23485>

there is no politics without economic integration. I am happy to facilitate Russian investments in Moldova, but with a certain degree of loyalty, openness, correctness of power. There is no trust today in Moldova's authorities; therefore, this hinders the resolution of important problems for its citizens."

By spring 2014, radical PCRM and PSRM activists launched a Social Forum Platform, rallying for the Customs Union and picketing EU Embassies and Parliament to deplore the humiliating conditions imposed on local producers by the embargo, but blaming the EU and not Russia for imposing it.²⁷ The protests were joined by farmers who called upon all left and progressive politicians not to create future coalitions with the bankrupted pro-European parties. Using the local farmers' objective protests against the market blockade, the pro-Russian parties suddenly announced their fight against neoliberal globalization, poverty and inequality, fascism and nationalism, and insisted that "parties which associated with the EU were responsible for all faults of globalization." Acclaiming Russian sanctions on Moldova, in 2014 some vocal supporters created a political party, the Popular Movement for the Customs Union, which in February 2016 transformed itself into the Russian-Slavic Party of Moldova.²⁸ The leitmotif of Russian policy is that Moldova's orientation to the EU is a mistake, and that in response, Russia has the right to punish this policy. The Socialist party leader I. Dodon, MP and one of the candidates for the 2016 presidential runoff, stated that he would cancel the EU Association Agreement as soon as he got into power.²⁹ One of the infamous statements made by Russian Deputy PM Rogozin was warning that Moldova would lose Transnistria, if it continued moving toward the EU, metaphorically speaking, "Moldova's train en route to Europe would lose its wagons in Transnistria." On the same topic, Rogozin added, alluding to the unsettled situation with the Gazprom-Moldovagaz supply contract, that "energy is important, the cold season is near, winter is on its way. We hope that you will not freeze this winter."

Rogozin also attacked Moldova's "pro-European elites" for disregarding their own people and neglecting the genuine interests of the people in Transnistria, claiming that they had never asked Tiraspol's view during their political talks with the EU on the Association Agreement. Of course, he was lying since Moldovan negotiators had invited Tiraspol to be part of the delegation and had included one representative from Transnistria in every meeting, but Tiraspol had decided to downsize its level of

27 Grenada, Social'nyj forum Moldovy peredal svoe obraščenie rjadu levych partij strany [Moldovan Social Forum has submitted a Statement signed up by several left-wing political parties], online at: http://www.grenada.md/post/socforum_prizyv_levym_partiam

28 Online at: http://vybor.md/stala-yasna-tsel-peredvizheniya-nato-vskoy-tehniki-v-negreshtyi/?_utl_t=fb

29 Panorama, online at: <http://www.pan.md/replika/Igori-Dodon-Dogovor-ob-assotsiatsii-s-ES-budet-otmenen>

involvement.³⁰ Based on such statements, Russian state media outlets took the lead in discrediting Moldovan EU orientation. As a common thread, Russian media promoted the idea that, “since Moldova is a small state, it should be part of a larger integrated union, be it the EU or the EAU, but the problem is that no one expects us in the EU, whereas the doors to the friendly EAU are wide open.”³¹ For the talking heads of the state-financed Russian media, “Moldova is not a sustainable partner, but it shall make a choice – towards the EU, which is ruining itself and is close to dissolution, or to the EAU, in partnership with Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan as the emerging pillars of the future Eurasian Union.” Thus, pro-Moscow opinion makers are saying that “if the West is not willing to accept Russia’s leadership in a parallel integration project, attempting to fish in troubling waters by means of proposing various ‘neighborhood pacts’, grants and loans, it will condemn the applicants to the EU to obvious underdevelopment.” Everybody knows that the EAU is a strong competitor, with huge resources and unlimited markets, and this is why the EU has projected to the ruling coalition a mission to fight against the EAU. If the EAU is an economic project, then the EU is a political-economic one. Later on, the EAU will be proposing a confederative agreement of states within a political, economic, military, customary, humanitarian, and cultural space, conducting close integration for the willing states, based on EVRAES, EAP, ODKB. Many statements by the EU would suggest that Moldova cannot be invited to become a member of the EU, not in the near term. And who is to wonder: Who can be interested in the poorest country of the region, in corrupted and divided elites, with a broken country and a conflict region? Why shall somebody be interested in our tomatoes and wines, when they need to protect what they have instead. One can understand from this situation that the elites are in fact dependent on grants, 20% of the annual budget of Moldova come from foreign support. Israel, Palestine and Lebanon have also signed AAs, but they simply have no chance to join.

As a result of the embargo imposed by Moscow in October 2014 in response to the EU course and signing of the Association Agreement, Moldova has suffered big losses.³² When the EU lifted its financial support to Moldova due to the banking crisis (2015), Moldova tried to free its hands by negotiating a return to the Russian

30 The Jamestown Foundation, Rogozin Threatens Moldova with Sanctions over Association Agreement with the European Union, in: *Eurasia Daily Monitor* Volume 10 (2013) 155.

31 Boris Šapovalov, Why Moldova will never be part of the EU, online at: <http://moldinfo.ru/arhiv/4992-evraz.html>.

32 In September 2013, Russian officials announced freezing imports of Moldovan wine (30% of overall wine imports to Russia). Although Russia justified the 2013 decision on questionable grounds of sanitary concerns, the move was perceived as retaliation for Moldova’s decision to sign the Association Agreement with the EU, thus using its alcohol market as a weapon to divide and rule political preferences following other embargoes in 2006 and 2013.

markets. Recently, the Minister of Economy of Moldova O. Calmîc stated he expects Russia to reconsider its embargo on 19 types of exports at the Moscow economic forum “25 years together in CIS”³³, to relaunch bilateral economic relations, bringing new Russian investments to the energy sector of Moldova. While the Minister of Economy is optimistic about normalizing trade with Russia, Nikita Issaev, Director of the Institute of Current Economy, says openly that the only stone blocking the road between Moldova and Russia is the Association Agreement with the EU as “it is practically impossible to conciliate two different trade zones. Thus, Moldova shall decide with whom she must stand, the CIS or the EU.”³⁴

Another instrument of contesting the EU in Moldova is to question its ‘liberal ideas’, which, however, requires a more robust level of analysis. Thus, its authors usually are long-standing Russian academics or local ideological cronies. One of Sputnik’s directors, I. Rosca (formerly a leader of the opposition Christian Democratic Party), is known for his overt anti-liberal ideology, calling “liberal ideas a virus.”³⁵ He states that the EU course “has condemned the country to repeated failures in all fields”, with the IMF and WB promoting their own agendas, and that the oversaturation of the media with EU discourse aims at “demonizing Russia while sacralizing the West.” Moreover, Rosca states, the “West launched the first non-military wars in Moldova by using a propaganda machinery and mass culture, inoculating consumerism, paralyzing critical thinking and brainwashing society, much worse than in the Communist regime.”

He affirms that the West applies EU slogans in the same way as earlier communist leaders prayed to Lenin and Marx, peddling laicism or anticlericalism, showing hostile attitudes to Church, while in economy a liberal paradigm copped from the Chicago School of Economics (deregulation, small government, free trade) aims to destroy the state, convert it into an object of globalist players and subordinate it to the directives of the IMF. Thus, the West links ideology with economics, and in the author’s view, “tries to eliminate true patriots, who care about history and national culture, bypassing economic sovereignty, paving the way for speculative capitalists and colonialism.” Since President Putin called Russia a ‘champion of conservative thought’, it is clear that Sputnik plays the cards that have been blessed in the Kremlin. The narrative that often

33 Stabil'naja nestabil'nost' v moldavsko-rossijskich otnošenijach [Stable instability in Moldo-Russian relations], in: *Ekonomičeskoe obozrenie* (25.03.2016) 11.

34 Ibid. Only 12 % of total exports from Moldova go to Russia, 25.3 % to CIS, while 62.1 % go to the EU (Romania 23 %, Italy 10 %). Before the AA, almost 39.5 % of exports from Moldova had gone to Russia and 45.2 % to the EU. By contrast, 80 % of imports from Russia are minerals and energy. When Russia decided to block Turkish exports in 2015 after the crash of its bomber in Syria, Russia needed to find alternative suppliers for food products hitherto imported from Turkey and Europe.

35 Iurie Rosca, European integration as a state ideology and social malady, online at: <http://iurierosca.md/opinii/european-integration-as-state-ideology-and-social-malady.html/>

calls on people to unite for Russia (and behind Putin) is certainly built on traditional values, as coined by Moscow in derisory contempt of the West's 'genderless and infertile liberalism'. So, keeping the arms open for conservatives, the Russian media cater to followers who favor family values over feminism and gay rights, prefer nation-based states rather than multicultural melting pots, and perhaps, like their iconic TV personality Kiselyov (Rossia Segodnia), are ready to burn gays and lesbians. Of course, this is often used in derisive context against the West, but the Russkiy Mir ideologues know well that there are even higher stakes, as they hope that Eurasian integration "could destroy the global dominance of the West and put an end to US hegemony."³⁶

Narrative 4: The West intends to destroy Russia

The most popular narrative of Russian propagandists is that Russia, wanting to rise from its knees, is being punished by the West, which would prefer to enslave it and rob its people of their resources and past. One of the pro-Russian activists openly states that 'all rational persons can see what kind of pressure is today put on Russia, from the first day of the so-called annexation of Crimea in the post-Maidan events, to the first days when Russia intervened in the battles in Syria. The self-perception as 'besieged fortress' is a key leitmotif in the Russian media; it is also exploited in Transnistria to describe the region as a unique 'military outpost', serving the national interests of Russia on the way to the Balkans. NTV calls the separatist statelet PMR a 'proud independent state' that is a hostage of the unregulated conflict between Moldova and Ukraine, with no reference to Russia. Thus, Russian media claim that PMR is pressured by Moldova, "which wants to deprive it of its de facto independence and wants to subordinate its citizens, who share affinities with the Russkiy Mir, to the foreign state of Moldova, so all hope rests only on Russia, which can respond to aggressive claims from the West and its acolytes." Since mid-2012, the Russian media have broadly accused Romania of preparing a ground invasion of Transnistria, referring to a bilateral cooperation agreement in case of disaster or technological incidents. Among them, the military channel Zvezda TV, broadcast by the majority of cable television stations, was citing its analysts saying that "a ground invasion of Moldova and liquidation of Transnistria is seriously discussed in Romania, and only President Johannis could stop this scenario."

In turn, I. Dodon, President of the Socialist Party (SPM), commented the Zvezda allegations by stating that any attempt at unifying two states could erupt into a new hotspot in the region, and that the military conflict of 1992 could repeat itself. He also

³⁶ Elena Ponomareva, Lubov Shishilina, *Krah Operacii Vostočnoe Partnerstvo* [The Defeat of the Eastern Partnership Operations], 18 June 2014, online at: http://zerkalokryma.ru/specialproject/novorossiya/predsedatelstvo_latvi_v_es2015_vostochnoe_partnerstvo_vmesto_ili_vmeste_s_rossiej/

quoted the alleged misdoings of the Moldovan authorities: closing Russian-language schools, consolidating the army, which may want to take back PMR by force, etc.³⁷ Moscow ideologues claim that Romania is not capable of acting alone when uniting with Moldova, so such an attempt can be considered the result of a U.S. project. Moldova may wake up in the EU and NATO, but “will have to pay for this by losing its national identity (Moscow keeps on saying that Moldovans are ethnically distinct from Romanians!) and own statehood, and perhaps by being confronted with another military conflict.” The unification project (Unirea 2018) will not need elections, therefore, Washington and Brussels will coordinate their policies to keep Moldova anchored in the Western world, with some minor differences.³⁸ While Brussels sees Moldova as part of the buffer zone between the EU and Russia, which can be seen in the Association Agreements and FTA regulatory deals as well as cooperation in the fields of defense and security, the U.S. clearly welcomes the implosion of the Moldovan state by Romania helping Moldova to modernize its military forces and intelligence, signaling that it (the U.S.) wants to maintain the conflict spots along the frontiers of Eastern Europe in order to involve Russia and legitimize American military presence.

A key point of this narrative is how the war in Ukraine is presented. Russia does not accept being called aggressor in the war with Ukraine, which in its interpretation is a civil war in which the peaceful population was forced to arm itself in order to defend its territory and land against the aggressive Ukrainian army. As for the annexation of Crimea, propagandists of Russia keep saying that “people voted in a free referendum, and only the will of the population to see its future in union with the Russian state created the legitimacy for transferring the peninsula from Ukraine to Russia.” In Moldova, pro-Russian politicians are regularly accompanied by pop stars from Moscow (Stas Mihalov, Grigori Leps, Blestjašćie)³⁹, which is typically not reported to the CEC or Ministry of Justice. As a result, they receive free popularity, with all bills being paid by Moscow, for which later on these politicians become subservient. Since it is uncommon for election authorities to question sources of funding, practices of lavish over-spending or of luxurious charity concerts aimed at charming the voters with outstanding musical performances are widespread. Never have election bodies been able not only to question but even impose penalties for illegal overspending. In Gagauzia, elections were won by a candidate who for more than two months was escorted by crowds of Russian Duma MPs, received generous media coverage in Moscow outlets and had first-class singers from Russia around him. At the highest level, Moscow got

37 Panorama, online at: <http://pan.md/poslednie-novosti/dodon-unirea---eto-grajdanskaya-voyna>

38 Panorama, online at: <http://pan.md/mneniya/chubashenko-proekt-unirea-2018-made-in-usa>

39 Pro-TV, online at: <http://prov.md/stiri/entertainment/concert-grandios-in-centrul-capitalei-stas-mihailov-cucereste---713861.html>

involved in the runoff in symbolic but also substantial ways. Apart from showing formal support to the minority representatives traveling more often to Moscow than to Chisinau, Russia excluded Gagauz winemakers from the embargo against Moldovan producers, thus creating incentives to further demonize the Moldovan authors of the signing of the Association Agreement.⁴⁰ Media networks funded by Russia (Sputnik, TASS, NTV, etc.) claim that Russia is the main target of the Western war⁴¹ and that “the U.S. is trying to impose profound geopolitical control over the states emerging from the USSR, aiming to bring others to the norms set by its political model defined by secular, mercantile, consumerist, hedonist civilization”, which strikingly conflict with traditional values. Beyond the race for resources, the “West attempts to take control over spiritual, metaphysical, and religious resources of other nations.” One of the Sputnik talking heads, I. Rosca, states that “the crisis that erupted in Ukraine can easily also break out in Moldova, since the Western obsession with expanding its frontiers to the East is based on geopolitical ambitions led by Washington and Brussels, with whom our countries (i.e. Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova) signed Association Agreements in 2014 despite being confronted by Russian threats.”

The propagandists claim that under these circumstances Russia can of course not be absent, and that the imminent risk is defreezing the frozen conflict in Transnistria, which would lead to a total war in which economic, political or diplomatic interaction will not be enough. Being asked about how Azerbaijan and Moldova shall deal with their ‘conflicts’, the author states that “we shall be able to learn how to make agreements with Russia, which does not mean betting on concessions but being less concerned with the active games played by the West in our regions.” The annexation of Crimea preceding the war in Ukraine fomented concerns in Moldova, which also boosted Russian propagandists’ claim that “Ukraine has unleashed a civil war and the government in Kiev is not legitimate.” The leaders of pro-Russian organizations backed up Russia’s position, protesting in front of the Ukrainian Embassy, but also creating a front of support for the annexation of Crimea. Letters of accusation were sent from the Congress of Russian Communities to the President of Ukraine, in which the former was blamed for supporting violent groups, Pravyi Sektor, which was killing peaceful citizens, including Russians. Thus, the Congress informed the President of Ukraine that “it is going to mobilize volunteers from Moldova ready to defend Russian compatriots in Ukraine and, as long as Ukraine continues military hostilities against civil society,

40 Aljazeera, online at: <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2015/07/kremlins-alcohol-diplomacy-divides-moldova-150701105943120.html>

41 Novosti Azerbajdžan, GUAM, kak “sanitarnyj kordon” vokrug Rossii, možet nanesti vred ego učastnikam [Azernews, GUAM as a “sanitary belt” around Russian can jeopardize the interests of all and every Member], online at: <http://iuriosca.md/rusa>

the Congress can send more than 4,000 well-trained fighters to chill the heads of the radical nationalists.”⁴² Prominent authors of the Russian outlets in Moldova call the war in Ukraine a civil war based on a new cold war between the U.S./NATO and Russia. If Russia provides support to the rebel groups, this is done only because the U.S. is openly financing the militarization of the Ukrainian army, and this is confirmed even by some American authors (reference is made to Steven Cohen).⁴³

Since the war has already been proved, the author concludes that “Moldova is ready for war, keeping the Russian PKO blocked, promoting Russophobia and Russia’s enemy image, which are steps to imminent escalation that could provoke a new war with Transnistria.” On its ideological path to combat the influence of the West in Moldova, Russia is mobilizing several of its loyal local partners, including parties but also civic platforms, forums, or event fronts. In 2013, the emerging radical wings Antifa and Krasnyi Front (similar to the Komintern Rotfront) released a series of harsh critiques of Moldova’s pro-EU orientation, stating that the “Moldovan government is promoting a militaristic policy, breaking the Constitution (neutrality), and playing into the hands of NATO.”⁴⁴ According to its authors, “only because of Western militaristic views is the region becoming a hotbed of instability, and the Pentagon’s risky initiatives could easily ignite fire in Moldova through a new civil war inside our country.” Commenting Moldova’s NATO cooperation plans in 2016, I. Dodon, leader of the Socialists, stated that “inviting NATO military officers for Victory Day (9 May) on the central square of Chisinau is a rough slap in the face, [an] insult to the Constitution after parliament’s declaration of permanent sovereignty and neutrality.”⁴⁵

On his FB page, the same politician (#1 in the IPP BOP Survey in May 2016) sees NATO joint exercises with the national army of Moldova as a military occupation, adding that “Russian peacekeepers, operating under UN and Moldovan laws, never showed such arrogance, rudeness and impudence, which means that the Government of Moldova, which allowed such actions, perform an act of national betrayal and shall be dismissed.”⁴⁶ One can see obvious flaws in this argumentation, since Russian PKO

42 Statement made by the Chairman of the Congress of Russian Communities of Moldova, leader of the social-political Movement “Equality” Valerii Klimenko, Central news agency Novorossija, online at: <http://www.e-news.su/news/10438-russkaya-obschina-moldovy-turchinovu-ostanovite-boynnyu-ili-my-dvinem-sya-na-vostok.html>

43 M. Lupaško: *Vojna stučit v našu dver’* [The war is knocking at our door], in: Moldnews, online at: <http://www.moldnews.md/rus/news/75062>, 11.03.2016.

44 Grenada. Deklaracija i-go S’ezda političeskoj partii “Krasnyj Blok” (Naš dom – Moldova) [Declaration of the 1st Congress of the Political Party “Red Block” (Our house – Moldova)], online at: http://www.grenada.md/post/net_voine_net_nato_militarizmu

45 Blocknot, online at: <http://bloknot-moldova.md/news/dodon-ne-dopustim-chtoby-na-moldavskoy-zemlegospo-738582>

46 I. Dodon: Socialist Party of Moldova intends to launch massive protest rallies against brutal infringement of the neutrality of Moldova. On May 9 we all shall rally on the March of Victory and conduct the street action

in Moldova do not meet any standards of international peacekeeping operations nor act under any legal UN Charter Agreement, while Moldovan authorities continue calling for a substitution of the Russian PKO with a civilian mission. Nevertheless, the Socialists receive wide media backing when they organize their actions, thus building solid popularity in the main Russian media outlets, where they are seen as the most preferred in Moscow. On April 16, TASS Agency commented the protest actions in Chisinau by concluding that “we know the nationalists provoked the war with Pridnestrovje in 1992.” As ICJ has reported, TASS misinformed the public, presenting the Socialists’ actions from a single point of view, positioning the Socialists as the core political force defending Moldova against the unionists and Romania. Independent media (ZDG) also noted that the quick rise of the issue of NATO cooperation with Moldova is aimed at creating new manipulation leverage that the Socialists will employ on May 9 and afterwards with the newborn political project ‘The Immortal Regiment’, a PR action recently launched by Moscow via its networking partners in several other former Soviet states.

President Putin’s ambition was to authorize an alternative integration project under Russian guidance. The Eurasian Union emerged not only as counterpart to the EU, but also to boost a new round of reintegration in the former Soviet space. In his own terms, Vladimir Putin is aiming to turn the EAU into a ‘building block’ of the *Russkiy Mir*, which should be elevated to international status ‘similar to the EU, NAFTA, APEC, or ASEAN’, thus crowning Putin’s mandate. Putin repeatedly announced that he wants to reshape the post-Soviet space into an area of exclusive Russian responsibility.⁴⁷ Once this has been achieved, Russia will “be able to stand up from its knees” in a multipolar world. The narrative of Russia’s justified claim to propose its own integration project against the Association Agreements signed by the EU with willing former Soviet states originates from the conspiracy theories mushrooming in the Kremlin about the West cornering Russia. Thus, the Euro-Asian Union has suddenly become the centerpiece of almost every bilateral talk between Russia and other former Soviet states in almost every relevant area (economic, political, military, security, cultural), with Russia demanding full mobilization of resources to block the EU (and the West) but also needing to engage pro-Kremlin political satellites abroad in supporting this activity.

„The Immortal Regiment of the Victorious Soldiers”, carrying out the pictures of our fathers, uncles, who defeated fascism in the II World War. We shall be able to defend the neutrality and statehood of Moldova by all legal actions and will noth accept that on our Moldovan soil reign NATO forces and Romanian Police, online at: <https://www.facebook.com/dodon.igor?fref=ts>

47 Vladimir Putin: *Novyi Intergrationnyi Proekt dlia Evrazii* [The new integrationist project for the Eurasia], in: *Izvestia*, 3 October 2011, online at: <http://izvestia.ru/news/502761>

Russian mass media censors are increasingly vigilant to sanction any analogy between the annexation of Crimea with other territorial occupations in the past and also do not allow any parallel between Nazi Germany and the USSR, which some would believe to be assigning equal blame for the crimes committed. Attempts to equate these crimes are labeled as falsifications or prosecuted as attempts to deny the widely accepted truth by Moscow. On May 15, 2009, President Medvedev set up a special committee on historical falsifications to combat sources undermining the interests of Russia. Needless to say that prior to Medvedev's Presidential Decree, an OSCE Parliamentary Assembly Resolution had condemned all crimes against humanity⁴⁸, assigning the same level of responsibility to the Hitler and Stalin regimes, while recommending to Russia as OSCE member that it dismantle state structures aimed at "reinventing or cleaning its history of unpleasant memories." However, what had been started by Medvedev in 2009, soon became a cornerstone of Russian historical policy when President Putin returned to the Kremlin as President. For Moscow, it is not enough to defend historical truth, but the state authorities shall create it, enriching the current modern state of Russia with its "well-deserved legitimate past", the only resource to guarantee people's support. In fact, mystification of the war crimes committed by Russian troops in the "liberated territories" of Moldova, as well as in the Baltic states, provides Russia with an impressive toolkit of propaganda resources. Along with this political goal, Russian diplomatic missions abroad should play an essential role in mobilizing favorable networks and the public with support of the Russian World Fund, Rossotrudnicestvo.

Conclusions

The growing confrontation between Russia and the West is based on diverging fundamental principles and interests. Due to complicity between oligarchic groups interested only in the preservation of their grip on economic and political power and affluent foreign actors feeding this complicity with attractive benefits, as leading media analysts remark, the post-Soviet states are very open to this sort of influence. Strengthening and institutionalizing Russian communities is part of the wider policy to assist compatriots abroad. Through various forms of direct grants, several funds provide regular financial flows to a number of pro-Russian associations: clubs, congresses, centers, coordination councils, schools, etc. Typically, these are funded for monitoring the protection of national minorities, reporting, and maintaining the

⁴⁸ Parlamenstskaja assambleja OBSE priravnjala sovetkij režim k nacistkomu [The Parliamentary Assembly of the OSCE has equated the Soviet regime with the Nazi], in: Vesti.ru, 03.07.2009.

Russian language. Russkiy Mir narratives aim to legitimize a political ideology defined by the Russian state in terms of Christian-Orthodox-Conservative values that is seen as balancing the “decaying Western order”, thus spurring criticism but also employing various voices and political reactions abroad involving thousands of networks that are connected to the new post-cold war fabric of geopolitical realities. Russia posits itself as a global power and attempts to play a bigger role in a fearful world shattered by challenges. The narratives go down well with certain groups, persons, national or linguistic minorities, or religious groups belonging to the Russian Patriarchy, who can be captured by the simplicity of this project that is defined in familiar terms.