

# On the Issue of Symbolic Politics in Modern Moldova (1989–2023)

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**Abstract.** The article examines the evolution of narratives of symbolic politics in modern Moldova (1989–2023), including among the political “rights”. The analysis of documents and political discourse allowed the author to identify three key narratives: Russia as a threat, European integration as a national idea, the myth of the identity of the Romanian and Moldovan languages (language narrative). Particular attention in the article is paid to the dynamics of political narratives, their coherence. The current policy of Moldova in constructing the Romanian identity among Moldovans, reflecting the interests of ethnic minorities (“unionist Romanians”), provokes social disunity, which is confirmed by the growth in the number of opposition forces and protests, and in recent years – in a decrease in trust in the foreign policy vector of the republic (European integration). However, the nationalist ideological trend, in general, is developing, overcoming “multi-vectorality” and neutrality.

**Keywords:** symbolic politics, narratives, state identity, state nationalism, Republic of Moldova, European integration

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## Introduction

The normativization of ideological narratives in concepts, doctrines, programs, strategies allows for their legal categorization, giving political ideas an official, mandatory (and in some cases, binding) status. Of course, the state occupies a special position in the sphere of symbolic politics, since it has the ability to impose the methods of interpreting social reality that it supports through the power distribution of resources [3:11]. A feature of normative legal acts as a channel for representing ideas is their time limitation. In this regard, acts of “long-term use” have a prolonged effect – conceptual, strategic ones, which, after

coming into force, create the basis for subsequent rule-making in a strictly legal sense, and are the basis for subsequent ideological policy. Another feature of the narratives contained in basic documents is the a priori expectation of their legitimacy, in other words, legality allows for their presence in the political space, even in the absence of legitimacy. This idea is presented in a veiled form in the words of the theorist of symbolic politics Edelman, who argued that the optics of this paradigm significantly distort real political connections, since in practice, government actions do not so much satisfy or fail to satisfy the needs of citizens as they influence their perception of reality, changing their needs and expectations [3:6].

In other words, symbolic policy reflected in normative legal acts is a one-sided activity of the state, directly related to the tasks of ideology – to unite, mobilize citizens to move in the direction determined by the political establishment; it may or may not correspond to socio-political expectations, traditions, mass political consciousness. Of course, normative legal acts as sources of political ideas do not create socio-political reality at one moment, but are rather peaks containing their “peak values”, or external forms – formulations. The study of these formulations allows us to trace the dynamics and vector of movement of the socio-political thought of the country.

## Materials and Methods

Aspects of the symbolic policy of modern Moldova have often become the object of analysis, most often they are considered in the context of disputes about identity and ethno-civil construction [6–7], including in connection with the problem of Gagauzia and Transnistria [2, 5], competition of integration projects [4, 9, 10], the European integration course of Moldova [1]. In recent years, fundamental works of Moldovan historians V.P.Stepanov, P.M.Shornikov have been published, studying the symbolic field of Moldova in the context of ethno-political construction [7] and state ideology [11]. This study is based on the works of these authors. At the same time, it introduces into scientific circulation and interprets in a new way a number of provisions of key legal acts of Moldova.

The relevance of considering Moldova's symbolic policy is due to the deterioration of Moldovan-Russian communications, which affected various interaction tracks in 2021–2023 – both political-diplomatic, cultural-informational, and economic. A kind of apogee of the anti-Russian course being pursued was the approval of amendments to the National Security Strategy in 2023, in which Russia is named as one of the key threats<sup>1</sup>. However, the idea of Russia as a threat is not new and is actually based on a long-existing political and linguistic base. This idea is closely linked to the idea of Moldova's European integration. Another key narrative is the idea of the absence of the Moldovan language, its artificial construction, which can easily be transformed into a narrative about the artificiality of the

<sup>1</sup> At the invitation of experts in the field of Russian-Moldovan relations, Valentina Komleva took part in a discussion on the communication regime of Moldova. NIIRK. Available from: <https://nicrus.ru/events/valentina-komleva-prinyala-uchastiye-v-diskussii-o-kommunikatsionnom-rezhime-moldovy/>.

Moldovan ethnic group. All three key narratives are aimed at forming a model of a nation-state in Moldova that is hostile to all ethnic groups, including the titular one – Moldovan. Let's consider the evolution of each of them.

## Results

### Language narrative (the myth of the identity of the Moldovan and Romanian languages; the myth of the artificiality of the Moldovan language)

In 1989, the Moldavian SSR adopted the law “On the Functioning of Languages on the Territory of the Republic of Moldova” No. 3465-XI<sup>2</sup>, which transferred the Moldavian language to the Latin script, that caused misunderstanding among the population. At the same time, the Russian language was deprived of its status as the state language in the Republic. According to T.P.Mlechko, only 68% of the population spoke Moldavian<sup>3</sup>, thus, a significant part of the population, namely Russian-speaking citizens, were deprived of their rights.

The language issue became one of the reasons for the conflict with Transnistria and Gagauzia in the early 1990s. The Declaration of Independence of Moldova, adopted on August 27, 1991, stated that the proclamation of the Romanian language as the state language and the return of the Latin alphabet to it are an expression of the democratic movement for the national liberation of the population of the Republic of Moldova. Along with the language law, an important role was played by the final documents of the Great National Assemblies held in Chisinau in 1989–1991, as well as the laws of the Parliament of the Republic of Moldova on the State Flag of April 27, 1990, on the State Coat of Arms of November 3, 1990 and on the change of the official name of the state of May 23, 1991.

In reality, it was not so much a movement for liberation as a desire to unite ideologically and politically with Romania – after all, Moldova actually adopted Romanian national symbols – the flag and coat of arms of the country, and approved the translation of the language into the Latin alphabet. Xia standards of the Romanian language began to prevail in the media and the education system of Moldova back in the 60s of the 20th century. [11:15], it is the Law on the Functioning of Languages that should be considered as the starting symbolic event from which the formal-legal life of the narrative about the artificiality of the Moldovan language should be counted.

The Declaration of Independence contained words about the “ethnic space of the formation of a national state” – the national factor was emphasized twice, which is a contrast to the Soviet (multinational) model and indicates the intention to build a nation-state model.

<sup>2</sup> On the functioning of languages on the territory of the Moldavian SSR: Law No. 3465 of 01.09.1989. Available from: [https://ru.wikisource.org/wiki/Закон\\_от\\_01.09.1989\\_№\\_3465\\_«О\\_функционировании\\_языков\\_на\\_территории\\_Молдавской\\_ССР»](https://ru.wikisource.org/wiki/Закон_от_01.09.1989_№_3465_«О_функционировании_языков_на_территории_Молдавской_ССР»).

<sup>3</sup> Mlechko T.P. Russians and Russian-speaking space of the Republic of Moldova: trends and results of transformation processes. Available from: <https://ru.mapryal.org/filecache/upload/files/7-russkie-i-russkoyazychnoe-prostranstvo-moldovy.pdf>.

On July 29, 1994, the current Constitution of the Republic of Moldova was adopted, where the state language is defined as Moldovan, functioning on the basis of the Latin script.

In the future, not only the language will be subject to Latinization (in all educational institutions of Moldova since 1992, only Romanian began to be taught, the original Moldovan language in the Cyrillic script has been preserved only in Transnistria<sup>4</sup>), but also the entire cultural and ideological field: Moldavian literature, Moldavian history will be absorbed by Romanian ones. Writers who wrote in Moldavian, the rulers of medieval Moldavia, will be declared Romanians, despite the fact that the Romanian state was formed only in the second half of the 19th century, and the Moldavian Principality has existed since the middle of the 14th century.

It is surprising that those Romanian figures who suppressed the Moldavians during the years of fascist occupation will enter the pantheon of glory, and it will turn out that they came with Hitler to liberate their lands... The policy of imposing Romanian identity will begin to lead to the expected results: a gradual decrease in the number of people who consider Moldavian and Russian languages to be their native languages is observed, the number of those who call themselves Romanians or consider Romanian to be their native language is increasing (table 1).

**Table 1.** Some information about the self-identification of the Moldovan population (1989–2014)

Census year	Number of people who called themselves Romanians	Number of people who called Romanian their native language	Number of people who called themselves Moldovans	Number of people who called Moldovan their native language	Number of people who called themselves Russians	Number of people who called Russian their native language
1989 (Moldavian SSR) <sup>5</sup>	0,06%	No data <sup>6</sup>	64,5%	62%	13%	23%
2004 (Republic of Moldova without the Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic) <sup>7</sup>	2,17%	16,5%	75,8%	60%	5,9%	11,3%
2014 <sup>8</sup> (Republic of Moldova without the Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic)	7%	22,8%	73,7%	55%	4%	9,4%

Source: Compiled by the author based on public statistical data.

<sup>4</sup> The history of the naming of the state language in Moldova. TASS. Available from: <https://tass.ru/info/17287309>.

<sup>5</sup> The data are calculated on the basis of the All-Union Population Census of 1989 “Distribution of the Population of the Moldavian SSR by the Most Numerous Nationalities and Language”. Available from: [https://www.demoscope.ru/weekly/ssp/sng\\_nac\\_lan\\_89\\_mo.php](https://www.demoscope.ru/weekly/ssp/sng_nac_lan_89_mo.php)

<sup>6</sup> In 1989, 32% of Romanians considered Romanian their native language.

<sup>7</sup> Results of the 2004 population census. Demographic, national, linguistic, cultural characteristics. Available from: <https://web.archive.org/web/20151114001813/http://www.statistica.md/newsview.php?l=ru&idc=168&id=2358>; Mlechko T.P. Russians and Russian-speaking space of the Republic of Moldova: trends and results of transformation processes. Available from: <https://ru.mapryal.org/filecache/upload/files/7-russkie-i-russkoyazychnoe-prostranstvo-moldovy.pdf>; Some results of the 2004 census in Moldova. Available from: <https://www.demoscope.ru/weekly/2006/0249/analit08.php>.

<sup>8</sup> Characteristics – Population1 (population by district, gender, age, ethnicity, native language) // Population and Housing Census in the Republic of Moldova, 12–25 May 2014. Available from: <https://statistica.gov.md/ru/perepis-naseleniya-i-zilishh-2014-122.html>.

In 1995, when joining the Council of Europe, one of Moldova’s obligations was to join the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities. The Convention stipulated that countries that had acceded to it would periodically inform the Council of Europe about the implementation of the Convention, on the basis of which the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe would issue resolutions containing recommendations to the country, including for the adoption of urgent measures<sup>9</sup>.

The said committee published reports in which it gave an unambiguous assessment of the shortcomings of the ethnic policy, which did not improve over the years, and Moldova simply did not fulfill many of its promises.

The Law on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National Minorities and the Legal Status of Their Organizations of 2001 guaranteed pre-school education, primary, secondary, higher and post-university education in the Moldovan and Russian languages and the creation of conditions for the implementation of the rights to education and training in the native language (Ukrainian, Gagauz, Bulgarian, Hebrew, Yiddish, etc.). The law enshrines an important provision that persons belonging to national minorities have the right to participate in the management of public affairs<sup>10</sup>. However, according to historian P.M.Shornikov, who compared the Law to a set of “declarations of good wishes,” the legislative framework for the formation of a nation-state has not changed [11:137].

In the Concept of National Policy of the Republic of Moldova<sup>11</sup>, adopted in December 2003, recognized the independence of the two languages. The document stated: “Linked by a common origin, having a common basic lexical fund, the Moldovan national language and the Romanian national language each retain their linguonym / glottonym as an identifying feature of each nation – Moldovan and Romanian.” In accordance with the document, Moldovans are recognized as a state-forming nationality and “together with representatives of other ethnic groups: Ukrainians, Russians, Gagauz, Bulgarians, Jews, Romanians, Belarusians, Gypsies (Roma), Poles and others – make up the people of Moldova, for whom the Republic of Moldova is a common homeland.”

It goes on to talk about the need to teach the Moldovan language as a national priority for Moldova, and notes the status of the Russian language in accordance with current legislation – as a language of interethnic communication used in various areas of state and social life, and notes the Moldovan-Russian bilingualism characteristic of Moldova. The concept postulates the goals of national policy, including the development of all ethnic and linguistic communities, the development of traditionally correct interethnic relations, and overcoming the consequences of the civil conflict of the late 80s – early 90s 20th century, which deformed interethnic relations in Moldova, neutralization in accordance with human

<sup>9</sup> Council of Europe on the implementation by the Republic of Moldova of the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities: conclusions and recommendations (Information note). Available from: <https://ksrs.md/2022/10/27/совет-европы-об-исполнении-республик/>.

<sup>10</sup> The Law “On the Rights of Persons Belonging to National Minorities and the Legal Status of Their Organizations”: 20 years since its adoption and implementation issues. Available from: <https://ksrs.md/2021/11/30/закон-о-правах-лиц-принадлежащих-к-на>.

<sup>11</sup> On approval of the Concept of National Policy of the Republic of Moldova: Law No. 546 of 19.12.2003. Available from: <http://lex.justice.md/index.php?action=view&view=doc&lang=2&id=312846>.

rights legislation and the requirements of the Constitution of the incessant attempts at de-Moldovanization, denial of the existence of the Moldovan nation and Moldovan statehood, discrediting of Moldovan history, ignoring the ethnonym “Moldovans” and the glottonym “Moldovan language”, immediate creation of the necessary conditions for mastering the Moldovan language by persons who do not speak it, the inadmissibility of narrowing the scope of use of the Russian language in various areas of the life of the state and society<sup>12</sup>. According to P.M.Shornikov, the adoption of the Concept allowed for a step away from the course of forming a nation-state to the project of a nation-state [11:172]. However, further events will show that subsequent steps logically following from the text of the Concept were not taken.

On December 5, 2013, the Constitutional Court of the Republic of Moldova recognized the Declaration of Independence of 1991 as part of the country's constitution and the supremacy of the Declaration over the Basic Law. The decision to adopt the relevant amendments to the Constitution was blocked by the parliamentary opposition<sup>13</sup>. During the presidency of I.N.Dodon, the Law “On Normative Acts” (2017) was adopted, which prescribed the development of texts of all legal acts of the republic in Romanian as the state language, and the Government was instructed to bring the documents into compliance with the requirements of this law within six months, but this decision was not implemented<sup>14</sup>, since I.N.Dodon did not support the nationalist course of the parliament.

The new Education Code adopted in 2014 repealed a similar law in force since 1995 and radically changed the opportunity to receive education in Moldovan and Russian languages that had existed for the past two decades: from now on, the state provides the educational process only in Romanian. Russian is not even mentioned as a language of instruction in the code<sup>15</sup>.

In December 2016, the Government approved the Strategy for Strengthening Interethnic Relations in the Republic of Moldova for 2017–2027<sup>16</sup>, developed with the support of the Office of the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities<sup>17</sup>. As follows from an analytical review carried out by a group of Moldovan experts<sup>18</sup>, The strategy does not aim

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> History of the issue of naming the state language in Moldova. TASS. Available from: <https://tass.ru/info/17287309>.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Sidorov M. National minorities in Moldova: legal protection and real situation in society / Foundation for the support and protection of the rights of compatriots living abroad. Available from: [https://pravfond.ru/press-tsentr/stati/natsionalnye\\_menshinstva\\_v\\_moldove\\_pravovaya\\_zashchita\\_i\\_realnoe\\_polozhenie\\_v\\_obshchestve\\_2267/](https://pravfond.ru/press-tsentr/stati/natsionalnye_menshinstva_v_moldove_pravovaya_zashchita_i_realnoe_polozhenie_v_obshchestve_2267/).

<sup>16</sup> On approval of the Strategy for Strengthening Interethnic Relations in the Republic of Moldova for 2017–2027: Resolution of the Government of the Republic of Moldova No. 1464 of 30.12.2016. Available from: <http://lex.justice.md/index.php?action=view&view=doc&lang=2&id=369024>.

<sup>17</sup> Sidorov M. National minorities in Moldova: legal protection and real situation in society / Foundation for the support and protection of the rights of compatriots living abroad. Available from: [https://pravfond.ru/press-tsentr/stati/natsionalnye\\_menshinstva\\_v\\_moldove\\_pravovaya\\_zashchita\\_i\\_realnoe\\_polozhenie\\_v\\_obshchestve\\_2267/](https://pravfond.ru/press-tsentr/stati/natsionalnye_menshinstva_v_moldove_pravovaya_zashchita_i_realnoe_polozhenie_v_obshchestve_2267/).

<sup>18</sup> The tone and conclusions of the document are clearly pro-Romanian, as they effectively impose the idea of demoldovenization: “Since the term “Moldovanism” has been discredited from the point of view of important political players and activists, it seems that the use of the concept of “Moldovan civic identity” should be avoided, and instead the concept of “civic identity of the Republic of Moldova” should be encouraged.”

to address key issues, concerns and questions such as the integration of ethnocultural communities, language learning, representation of minorities at the political and state level, and there are no mechanisms for its implementation or benchmarks for regular assessment.<sup>19</sup>

Also, in 2017, the head of state attempted to hold a referendum, one of the issues of which was the teaching of the subject “History of the Republic of Moldova” in educational institutions of the country instead of “History of the Romanians”, but the Constitutional Court of the Republic of Moldova prohibited the referendum<sup>20</sup>. In 2020, the Law on the Functioning of Languages on the Territory of the Republic of Moldova will be adopted, which will retain the provision on multilingualism (Russian as a language of interethnic communication can be used along with Moldovan in various areas of state activity), but the Constitutional Court recognizes its contradiction with the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, including because it gives Russian-speaking residents a privileged position. The Constitutional Court also noted that “the legislator, having enshrined Russian as a language of interethnic communication, gave it a status that is not provided for by the Constitution”, “the priority of the Russian language, which is the language of one of the national minorities, puts it on the same level as the state language and infringes on the languages of other ethnic communities living in the republic”<sup>21</sup>.

In March 2023, during the presidency of M.Sandu, the Parliament of Moldova approved the renaming of the state language from Moldovan to Romanian. According to the amendment, the words “Moldovan language” in all legislative acts are replaced by the words “Romanian language”. This also applies to the words “state”, “official” and “native” language. In addition, the text “functioning on the basis of the Latin script” is excluded from the Constitution, which is considered obsolete<sup>22</sup>.

### European narrative (Moldova's belonging to the European family of states)

Already in the Declaration of Independence of 1991, Moldova, recognizing the irreversibility of the democratization processes taking place in Europe and in the world, declared its desire to establish political, economic, cultural and other ties, primarily with European states and with countries around the world.

<sup>19</sup> Groza Yu. Strengthening social cohesion and common identity in the Republic of Moldova. Key issues and practical recommendations / Yu.Groza, M.Jopp, V.Kulminsky. Chisinau, 2017:19. Available from: <https://www.ipis.md/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Social-Cohesion-and-Common-Identity-RU.pdf>.

<sup>20</sup> Romanian citizens have banned Moldovan citizens from expressing their opinion in a referendum. Available from: <http://www.evedomosti.md/news/grazhdane-rumynii-zapretili-grazhdanam-moldovy-vyrazhat-svoe>.

<sup>21</sup> The Law “On the Rights of Persons Belonging to National Minorities and the Legal Status of Their Organizations”: 20 years since its adoption and implementation issues. Available from: <https://ksrs.md/2021/11/30/закон-о-правах-лиц-принадлежащих-к-на/>.

<sup>22</sup> The Moldovan Parliament approved the renaming of the state language to Romanian. TASS. Available from: <https://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/17287143>.



A significant shift in the process of rapprochement and deepening of cooperation between the Republic of Moldova and the European Union was the first fundamental document – the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement, which laid the foundation for the process of European integration of the Republic of Moldova. The Agreement, which entered into force in 1998, four years after its signing in 1994, granted Moldova the status of an EU partner for conducting a full-fledged political dialogue and strengthening legal and economic cooperation. In the Foreign Policy Concept of 1995, this agreement was considered as the first step towards gradual entry into the European Union – a long-term goal of the foreign policy of the Republic of Moldova [9:9]. The integration of the Republic of Moldova into the European Union became the “strategic objective of foreign policy” of Moldova in the Programme of Activities of the Government of I.Sturza for 1999–2002: “The rule of law, economic revitalization, integration into European structures” [9:9].

The idea of rapprochement with Europe in Moldova was inextricably linked with the need to resolve the Transnistrian conflict – after all, a country that has failed to implement European principles and ideals cannot join the EU. In practice, this was expressed in attempts to literally “over the knee” to solve the problem – since 2001, Transnistria has been under a blockade by Moldova. The Transnistrian case is truly a bone in the throat of European integrationists, because by the very fact of its existence it demonstrates the absolute distance of Moldova from the principles of the European community. Only in 2023, European integrationists changed their rhetoric, indicating the possibility of Moldova joining the EU without Transnistria, i.e. with an unresolved territorial conflict, which once again demonstrates double standards and exposes their true intentions.

The strategic course of Chisinau demonstrates the consistent implementation of the course towards European integration of Moldova: the EU-Moldova Action Plan (2004), entry into the Eastern Partnership program (2009), signing of the Association Agreement with the EU (2014). The Association Agreement became a legal reflection of the strategic nature of Moldova’s relations with the EU, the goals of which are political association and economic integration. However, this nature of strategic relations was not reflected in the Foreign Policy Concept of the Republic of Moldova [9:17].

From cooperation through the geopolitical direction, the idea of the EU is transformed into an ideal image: a modern European democratic state is formulated as an ideal for Moldova. And if earlier it was about establishing ties with such states, now it is about identifying with them, becoming one with them. Literally, the National Security Strategy of Moldova for 2023 states: Moldova should behave as a de facto member of the European Union<sup>23</sup>.

The Strategy sets out the need for careful preparation of the country for accession to the European Union by approximately 2030; in the future, Moldova sees itself as a member state of the European Union, contributing to the development of the European

<sup>23</sup> On approval of the National Security Strategy of the Republic of Moldova: Resolution of the Parliament of the Republic of Moldova No. HP391/2023 of 15.12.2023. Președinția Republicii Moldova. Available from: [https://presedinte.md/app/webroot/uploaded/Proiect%20SSN\\_2023\\_Ru.pdf](https://presedinte.md/app/webroot/uploaded/Proiect%20SSN_2023_Ru.pdf).

project, fully controlling its territory; accession to the EU is a national security goal (in this regard, the binary thesis is actively promoted in the media: Russia – aggression, war; Europe, EU – peace). The goal of the Strategy is to gradually bring the Republic of Moldova into line with the provisions of the Strategic Compass for Strengthening the Security and Defense of the European Union in the Next Decade, which was adopted on 21 March 2022. Russia is called the main and long-term threat to the European Union; In addition to condemning the annexation of Crimea and the special operation in Ukraine, the EU accuses Russia of seeking to establish spheres of influence, pointing to the armed attack on Georgia, de facto control over Belarus, the presence of Russian troops in protracted conflicts, such as in Transnistria, and also talks about Russian armed “aggression” against Ukraine<sup>24</sup>. In 2020, the thesis about the threat to Romania from Russia’s actions (especially in the Black Sea region) was included in the text of the National Security Strategy of Romania (Articles 119, 121)<sup>25</sup>.

According to the Moldovan strategy, the European Union and other strategic partners should be actively involved in resolving the Moldovan-Transnistrian conflict.

Thus, we see that over the years, the European narrative has become firmly associated with Russian “aggression” in the public legal space. Let us consider its evolution in more detail.

### Anti-Russian discourse

The Basic Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation between the Republic of Moldova and the Russian Federation (2001) defined relations with Russia as a strategic partnership. It was signed by the leader of the communists V.Voronin, and at that time the communists received an absolute majority of mandates in the Parliament of Moldova. This was associated with great hopes for an improvement in bilateral relations, especially since the head of state promised to solve the problem of the Russian language and even considered the initiative of Moldova joining the Union of Russia and Belarus. However, the head of state soon reneged on his promises, and after 2003, when Moscow failed to implement the plan for the reintegration of the country according to the so-called “Kozak Memorandum” (a plan for the “federalization” of Moldova, since Transnistria was granted broad autonomy), a deterioration in relations between the two sides began, which lasted until the presidency of I.N.Dodon. At that time, the country’s president V.Voronin explained the refusal to sign the document by the fact that “the process of developing the Memorandum should have been implemented with the active diplomatic participation of European institutions (OSCE, EU, NATO, European Commission) and other European structures.” V.Voronin also noted that “having designated

<sup>24</sup> Aleshin A.A. The European Union has developed its first defense strategy. Available from: <https://www.imemo.ru/news/events/text/evrosoyuz-razrabotal-svoyu-pervuyu-oboronnuyu-strategiyu>.

<sup>25</sup> The National Defense Strategy for the period 2020-2024 was approved by Decision no. 22 of the joint meeting of the Senate and the Chamber of Deputies of June 30, 2020, which was published in the Official Gazette, Part I, no. 574 of July 1, 2020. Available from: [https://www.presidency.ro/files/userfiles/Documente/Strategia\\_Nationala\\_de\\_Aparare\\_a\\_Tarii\\_2020\\_2024.pdf](https://www.presidency.ro/files/userfiles/Documente/Strategia_Nationala_de_Aparare_a_Tarii_2020_2024.pdf).

the priority of the European vector of Moldova's development and pursuing a course towards European integration, resolving the Transnistrian issue behind Europe's back would be incomprehensible to European institutions and unpromising for Moldova."<sup>26</sup>

The disagreements between Russia and Europe in the 2000s, as well as the irreconcilable position of European democratic structures regarding the political and legal order in Russia, have played a significant role in the formation of the anti-Russian discourse. In this regard, the ECHR decision No. 349 of 2004, which recognized Russia as an "aggressor" in the "Russian-Moldovan war of 1992" and "occupier of the eastern part of the Republic of Moldova" [11:148], is not surprising. Further Moldovan discourse regarding Russia will be associated with the development of a pro-European direction<sup>27</sup>. Thus, the Government Activity Program for 2005–2009 will no longer consider cooperation with the Russian Federation, but will instead emphasize the need for cooperation with partner countries within the CIS [9:12]. During the period of acting President Marian Lupu's tenure, progress was made in developing bilateral relations, and the discourse regarding Russia was characterized by moderation. M. Lupu stated that "Moldova's European integration cannot happen at the expense of... friendly relations with Russia," which are part of Moldovan identity<sup>28</sup>. In 2011, the Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation was extended, preserving the role of the Russian Federation as a strategic partner. Also in 2011, the CIS Free Trade Zone Agreement was signed [9:16]. The 2011 National Security Strategy affirmed the idea of integrating the country into the European Union, as well as a close strategic partnership with the United States of America. Russia is still listed as a country with which a strategic partnership will be conducted. Thus, by deepening and forming cooperation with the West during this period of time, at the turn of the 2010s, Moldova does not consider Russia a threat, despite the fact that the idea of withdrawing Russian troops from Transnistria is already being repeated constantly.

Moldovan President Nicolae Timofti (2012–2016), a lawyer, expressed regret after the end of his presidential term that he "failed to ban Soviet symbols, as well as the Communist Party, during his two-year rule," calling this his main failure. In 2012, the ruling alliance's deputies adopted a resolution "On condemnation of the totalitarian communist regime" and a law banning the hammer and sickle symbol, which was protested by the communists. Following the negative verdict of the Venice Commission regarding the Moldovan authorities' ban on communist symbols, the Constitutional Court declared this resolution unconstitutional<sup>29</sup>.

<sup>26</sup> Russian settlement plan rejected in agreement with Putin? REGNUM news agency. Available from: <https://regnum.ru/news/188193.html>.

<sup>27</sup> Let us recall that in 2004, Moldova and the EU moved to integration programming by adopting the EU-Moldova Plan, and the EU Neighbourhood Policy programme was launched.

<sup>28</sup> The End of the Alliance for European Integration. International Life. Available from: <https://interaffairs.ru/news/printable/388>.

<sup>29</sup> News of the Party of Communists of the Republic of Moldova. Timofti called his inability to ban communist symbols his main failure. Union of Communist Parties – CPSU. Available from: <http://skpkpss.ru/19-03-2014-novosti-pkrm-glavnoj-svoej-neudachej-timofti-nazval-svoyu-nesposobnost-zapretit-simvoliku-kommunistov/>.

The presidency of I.N. Dodon, from the point of view of political and legal regulation of discourse, was marked by the failure of the initiative to hold a referendum on four issues, including the return of the subject "History of Moldova" in 2017<sup>30</sup>. In the future, President Dodon will adjust some of his ideas – calls for the cancellation of the Association Agreement with the European Union, sharp attacks on Euro-Atlantic integration and the need for the rapid closure of NATO institutions in Chisinau will disappear from his rhetoric<sup>31</sup>. The idea of a referendum on foreign policy vector will give way to the concept of a "balanced foreign policy" and neutral status<sup>32</sup>. Under the "pro-Moldovan" President I.N. Dodon, a Memorandum of Cooperation between Moldova and the Eurasian Economic Union was signed, after which the republic received observer status in the organization<sup>33</sup>. However, according to some political scientists, Dodon's problem was that "he is guided in his foreign policy by the Association Agreement with the European Union, which Moldova signed in 2014," which excludes the participation of the Republic of Moldova in the Eurasian integration project led by Russia<sup>34</sup>.

A sharp degradation of relations and, as a consequence, discourse regarding Russia will occur during the presidency of M. Sandu<sup>35</sup>, under which Moldova will withdraw from dozens of cooperation agreements with the Russian Federation and the CIS. The celebration of May 9 will be canceled, and the wearing of the St. George ribbon will be prohibited. In the National Security Strategy of Moldova for 2023, the position towards Russia will be completely tough and categorical. Of the 6 main risks to the national security of Moldova, 3 will be related to the Russia. In particular, the document states that "the threats to national security for Moldova are: 1) the military aggression of the Russian Federation against Ukraine and the ambitions of the Russian government to create a land corridor to the Republic of Moldova by military means, which creates conditions for the violent change of the constitutional order of our country and the liquidation of its statehood; 2) hybrid operations carried out by the Russian Federation against the Republic of Moldova in the political, economic, energy, social, information, cyber and other areas, aimed at undermining the constitutional order, disrupting the country's European course and / or disintegration of the state; 3) the illegal military presence of the Russian Federation in the Transnistrian region and the exercise of control over the separatist entity."

<sup>30</sup> Albu S. What will Igor Dodon's presidency 2016–2020 be remembered for? Available from: <https://regtrends.com/2020/10/30/chem-zapomnitsya-prezidentstvo-igorya-dodona-2016-2020/>.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> "I am not a pro-Russian, but a pro-Moldovan politician." The political path of Igor Dodon. TASS. Available from: <https://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/9988413>.

<sup>34</sup> Results of Igor Dodon's presidency – a view from Transnistria. PolitNavigator. Available from: <https://www.politnavigator.net/itogi-prezidentstva-igorya-dodona-vzglyad-iz-pridnestrovyia.html>.

<sup>35</sup> Commentary by the official representative of the Russian MFA M.V. Zakharova in connection with the anti-Russian statements of the Moldovan leadership 02.14.2023. Russian MFA. Available from: [https://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign\\_policy/news/1853931/](https://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/1853931/); Commentary by the official representative of the Russian Foreign Ministry M.V. Zakharova on the situation in Moldova 08.25.2023. Russian Foreign Ministry. Available from: [https://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign\\_policy/news/1901666/](https://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/1901666/).

## Conclusions

The legal framework for symbolic politics in modern Moldova (1989–2023) demonstrates a move away from Russia. Despite the initiatives of individual politicians and the vivid rhetoric regarding multi-vector or dual-vector policies, Moldova is generally moving in a Euro-Atlantic direction. Russia's relations with the West have a significant impact on this process, but they should not be seen as a reason, but as a convenient pretext – an external circumstance that has allowed Moldova to implement the “nation-state” project for three decades. Each time, the Moldovanist (or pro-Russian) forces find convincing (and not so convincing) reasons to justify the ineffectiveness of the fight against this process.

Let us cautiously assume that there is only one convincing justification for the success of the former and the failure of the latter – an unspoken social contract that allows local residents to agree and not resist the process taking place before their eyes – so latent that even sociological surveys regularly conducted in Moldova cannot reveal it. Proof or refutation of this hypothesis can be found in the course of further in-depth study of the national identity of Moldovans.

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