

NARRATIVES ABOUT ROMANIA AND ROMANIANS IN UKRAINE: BETWEEN SOVIET REMINISCENCES AND THE DONBASS “WOUNDS”

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Abstract: *Ukraine seems to have firmly assumed its European course – and discourse – after the 2013-2014 “Euromaidan” and the signing of the Association Agreement with the EU, in 2016. However, the rhetoric of the press and the political class is still imbued with narratives of Soviet origin. A typical example is related to the dominant discursive line regarding Romania as a state, the Romanian people, the history of Romanians and the Romanian community in Ukraine.*

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The Soviet Point of View

The subject recently returned to the present, when a video about the Fântâna Albă massacre was published on the Facebook page of the Czernowitz Regional State Administration, in which history is grossly mystified. Thousands of Romanians trying to flee to the Kingdom of Romania, after USSR annexed Bessarabia and Northern Bukovina, were killed by the NKVD, but the film posted by the Czernowitz Regional Administration says there were only 50 victims, it skips the fact that we were talking about Romanian ethnics and categorizes the act as a challenge “consciously planned and organized by the Romanian special services against the inhabitants of Bukovina”. The Romanian community reacted promptly on social networks and in the press, and the Romanian Embassy in Kiev mentioned that it is mandatory to “observe the historical truth in any attempt to portray the massacre that took place at Fântâna Albă.”

The Soviet mystification of the tragedy pursued two main objectives: firstly, to hide the details of this massacre and, secondly, to present it as an action of the Romanian and German agents, the aim being to exonerate the Soviet regime.

For example, in *Timp nou* newspaper from April 2nd, 1991, quoted by *Monitorul Bucovinean*, the Communist Party reported that “during March 1941, under the influence of the rumours spread by special service agents from fascist Germany and royal Romania about forced collectivization and the seizure of property, the deportation to Siberia of those who do not want to enter the kolkhoz, the attempts of the Romanian nationality citizens from most districts of the Czernowitz region to cross into Romania have intensified.” At one point, on April 1st, 1941, according to communist ideologues, the crowd began firing at the soldiers, and Red Army subunits were shot. “As a result of the response shots, 24 people died, 43 were injured. A weapon with 10 battle cartridges, 2 revolvers, 4 daggers were taken from them. All wounded received medical help,” writes the newspaper in the year in which the USSR collapsed.

Therefore, the new narrative of the regional authorities in Czernowitz is a continuation of the Soviet ideological line, a *softer* one indeed, while at the constitutional and declarative level, Ukraine embraces the projects of European and Euro-Atlantic integration and abandons the neo-Soviet ones! In the case of covering the events regarding the Fântâna Albă massacre, it is not yet clear whether the video represents the point of view of the management of the Czernowitz Regional State Administration, of Ukraine as a state or was a mistake of the directors of this video! The governor of the region was asked by the National Council of Romanians in Ukraine to officially deny the allegations.

It should be noted, however, that the politics of history has always been a reason for misunderstandings between Bucharest and Kiev. We can remember here the statement of President Zelenski about the fact that Bukovina was occupied in 1918 by Romania, a finding also present in history textbooks, from which millions of students in Ukraine learn.

Kiev backs Soviet thesis on “Moldovans” and “Moldovan language”

Another Soviet or even tsarist legacy is the concept of “Moldovanism”, which artificially divides the Romanian community in Ukraine into Romanians and “Moldovans”. In Ukraine, there are schools with teaching in the “Moldovan language”, there was a newspaper of the “Moldovans” and even a TV and radio station for the “Moldovan community”, presented as a distinct from the Romanian one and concentrated, according to Kiev, near the mouth of the Danube, where they were, in interwar period, the three counties in southern Bessarabia. “Moldovanism”, as a topic of geopolitical, sociological and psychological reflection, is current in an absolutely specific form in Ukraine. According to the 2001 census, 150,989 Romanians (0.31% of the population) and 258,619 Moldovans (0.54%) live in Ukraine. The census preserves the old division into Romanians and Moldovans, and these figures are still used in the reports of the central, regional and district authorities.

Public television in Ukraine recently broadcast a show in which an expert teaches the “Moldovan language” live, stating that “Moldovan belongs to the family of the Romance language group, which includes Italian, Spanish, French, Portuguese, Romanian. That is why it resembles these languages”. It is relevant the fact that the Romanian language is mentioned in the end. Some Ukrainian historians, copying the Soviet narratives and even those of the Russian Federation, write that Moldova existed as a state before Romania, that the Romanian language is newer than the “Moldovan language” and so on. The attitude of Ukrainian and Kiev experts on this situation demonstrates a domestic political duplication, a dangerous cleavage: a desire to move away from the “Russian world”, which threatens the independence of the state and to get closer to the European world, but at the same time, an enormous fear of giving up some Soviet narratives.

Kiev has failed to construct other political myths to replace the Soviet ones, which still cement its civic identity. For example, we read in the weekly *The Ukrainian Week* that “Ukraine is not objectively interested in the unification of Moldova with Romania, as this will strengthen the chauvinist circles of Romanian geopolitical revenges and, especially, Romanian-imperial organizations, such as România Mare și Vatra Românească, which dream of Romanian lands up to the Ukrainian city of Nicolaev... It should be mentioned that in the Czernowitz region alone at least 40,000 Romanian

passports were issued to our citizens. So, long live independent Moldova!” Such narratives are not very common in the Ukrainian press, but in the absence of other information and analysis on this topic, this information is still part of the Ukrainian public opinion. In addition, for Kiev, maintaining two minorities, whose specific issues are discussed separately with Romania and the Republic of Moldova, makes sense from a geopolitical point of view.

It should also be noted that after centuries of occupation (tsarist and Soviet) and decades of propaganda, some ethnic Romanians identify as Moldovans, just like in the Republic of Moldova.

The enemy of Ukraine, the Romanian passports and *soft power policy*

Ukraine had relatively little time to change its perspective on Romania, given that until 2014 the public agenda in Kiev was linked to that of the “older brother” in Moscow. Defence and security policy was deeply influenced by politicians with Russian citizenship, who in the meantime took refuge in Crimea or Moscow. For a long time, the Ukrainian military exercises had Romania as a possible enemy as a NATO member, while Russia was the basic ally of the Ukrainian army.

Romania has been the target of Soviet propaganda since the early years of the USSR, when the first fundamental myth was promoted, which would be perpetuated in the collective mind over the decades: that of the bourgeois-landlord state. Romania’s association with fascist regimes followed, due to its alliance with Nazi Germany and its participation in the WWII as their ally. NATO membership added a new dimension, given that the North Atlantic Alliance was also the target of Soviet and, later, Russian propaganda.

Moreover, as in the case of the conception of Moldovanism, Romania’s image as an enemy state is still built by the Ukrainian nationalist forces, which by sowing frustration and fears towards their neighbours hope to reap immediate electoral results.

Romania reappears from time to time in the pages of the Ukrainian press as a scarecrow when it comes to the fate of Bukovina and the recovery of Romanian citizenship. For example, in the context of the MFA talks in Kiev, on the need to recognize dual citizenship at the legislative level, some journalists and politicians have begun to warn the public that an autonomous republic will emerge in Northern Bukovina, where everyone will

have Romanian citizenship, “being known that the whole of Bukovina is considered by Romania as its territory”. According to the press, Romania would have hidden territorial claims against Ukraine, therefore, dual citizenship would allow the organization of separation referendums, following the model of Crimea.

We notice more and more often that, in the Ukrainian society, there is another great fear – that of betrayal by the neighbour, meaning Russia. Often, some good initiatives of the Romanian authorities are seen with suspicion, through “the historical lenses of Donbass and Crimea”, as if everyone around, including EU states, want to seize Ukrainian territories. Romania’s diplomatic actions to support Ukraine in the war with Russia, to provide systematic assurances that Bucharest respects the territorial integrity of the Ukrainian state, to provide humanitarian and financial assistance to Kiev have had the effect of substantially changing the attitude of experts towards Romania, *which we do not notice in the case of the press and society in general.*

The cleavage between European aspirations and the Soviet past

The Soviet reminiscences of the Ukrainian collective and political mentality about Romania, identified primarily in various public narratives, are a demonstration of the existence of a cleavage within Ukraine. On the one hand, the state wants to break away from the Russian world and the Soviet past (a law on decommunization has also been adopted), on the other hand, often the political class cannot get rid of a series of myths from the communist period, which still form a certain substratum of civic identity. Soviet myths, adapted to the realities of the 21st century, spelled in other words, but essentially the same, offer, for the time being, simple answers to a series of existential questions for Ukraine, while the Europeanization of society should mean an acceptance of reality, a renunciation to historical falsehoods, to the artificial division of national or linguistic communities, a gradual abandonment of all historical frustrations and resentments regarding neighbours.

According to the Constitution of Ukraine, the strategic course towards the EU and NATO is irreversible, which means that, in the future, Romania and the other states in western Ukraine will be allies,

and the borders that separate them will become more formal. And this requires getting out of the vicious circle of Soviet myths, which even today are dressed as some parade clothes by politicians to stay in power.

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