

VICTORY DAY OR EUROPE DAY? THE POLITICS OF MEMORY IN MOLDOVA IN THE SHADOW OF RUSSIA'S WAR IN UKRAINE

KATEŘINA FUKSOVÁ*
(Charles University)

Abstract. The Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 had a profound impact on the Republic of Moldova. The aftermath witnessed an unprecedented influx of Ukrainian refugees, a significant rise in inflation, a decline in political stability, and a deepening energy crisis. The root causes of political instability in Moldova are diverse, with issues of identity and memory playing a central role in the nation-building process since the Soviet Union's collapse. Moldova, situated between its Romanian roots and Russian-Soviet heritage, confronts numerous challenges in reconciling its past and navigating its future. The Russian occupation of its neighboring country has accentuated these challenges, serving as a crucial test for Moldova's European-oriented government. The response to this new geopolitical reality, however, has led to some measures that intensified ideological divisions within the population, particularly regarding matters of memory and identity. The contested memorial heritage in Moldova was notably evident during the May 9 celebrations, coinciding with Europe Day and Victory Day. While many European Union countries consider Europe Day a peripheral holiday promoting European values, Moldovan politicians and the public are increasingly giving it attention, with a growing belief that it should replace the Soviet-style Victory Day. Using the "struggle" over the significance of May 9 as a case study, this article explores contemporary Moldovan memory politics influenced by the realities of war.

Keywords: Moldova, memory politics, identity, Victory Day, Europe Day.

* Kateřina Fuksová is a PhD candidate in Modern History at the Faculty of Social Sciences of Charles University, Institute of International Studies, Department of Russian and East European Studies (katerina.fuksova@fsv.cuni.cz).

Introduction

The Republic of Moldova, an Eastern European country located between Romania and Ukraine, offers a remarkable example of European borderlands. Moldova's identity and memorial landscape are dynamic and fluid, reflecting the intricacies of life in a region where diverse cultural and political influences converge. This article explores the evolving nature of Moldovan memory politics, a concept that relates to how groups, collectives, and nations construct and connect with specific narratives regarding historical periods or events. Memory politics emphasize a shared past and destiny, seeking to establish social cohesion, legitimize authority, and socialize society through constructed versions of history disseminated to the broader public through public commemorations, the educational system, mass media, and popular culture.¹

On February 24, 2022, Moldova awoke to a new reality shaped by the initiation of the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The occupation of Moldova's neighboring country prompted Moldovan politicians to re-evaluate their positions and adapt to the new wartime reality in Eastern Europe. This article delves into the shifts in Moldova's memory politics triggered by the Russian military aggression. The analysis focuses on two concurrent celebrations, markedly distinct despite occurring on the same day. Victory Day, initially a commemoration of World War II that has evolved especially in Russia into a propagandist event glorifying Soviet and Russian mythologized past, now faces challenges from Europe Day, a holiday that promotes European values and serves as part of the EU's soft power strategies. Through them, the EU tries to build relationships, influence global affairs, and project a positive image of the European project on the international stage, especially in the Eastern Partnership countries.² To this end, Europe Day is one of the events that help to convey the EU's message to a broader public.

¹ Katherine Hite, *Politics and the Art of Commemoration: Memorials to Struggle in Latin America and Spain* (London, United Kingdom: Routledge, 2012).

² The Eastern Partnership is a specific Eastern dimension to the ENP that was launched in 2009. The aim of the partnership is to strengthen and deepen the political and economic relations between the European Union, its Member States and six Eastern European and South Caucasus partner countries: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia,

The article is organized into five sections, commencing with an exploration of the modern history of Moldova and its intricate terrain of contested identities and memorial heritage. Subsequently, a chapter delves into the historical shifts within Moldovan memory politics prior to the Russian invasion. The following chapters examine the consequences of Russia's war in Ukraine, explain changes in the politics of memory, and assess Moldova's response to the war's dynamics. Additionally, the article scrutinizes Victory Day and Europe Day celebrations, unravelling their significance and evolving dynamics within the changing socio-political landscape of Moldova.

The article draws upon ethnographic fieldwork in Moldova from February 2022 to July 2022, with additional observations made in May 2023. The primary data collection methods involved participant observation during both the 2022 and 2023 celebrations. Additionally, the author worked as a humanitarian coordinator in the refugee crisis response team during the initial months of the Russian full-scale invasion, providing valuable insights into the evolving situation. Other data collection methods included media content analysis to scrutinize the events' portrayal in various media outlets, and politicians' public releases and statements to discern their stances and responses to the changing geopolitical landscape.

Moldova as a Mnemonic Field

In-betweenness is frequently associated with Moldova and its historical context. Moldova's geographical position at the crossroads of multiple empires and influential regional entities has led to a continuous amalgamation of varied cultures, languages, ethnicities, religions, and powers. Historically, from the Middle Ages until 1812, the territory of the Republic of Moldova was part of the Principality of Moldova, experiencing varying degrees of influence from the Ottoman Empire. In

Moldova, and Ukraine. "Eastern Partnership," European Commission, accessed May 29, 2023, https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/european-neighbourhood-policy/eastern-partnership_en.

1812, the Russian Empire annexed the eastern portion of the Principality of Moldova, corresponding primarily to the contemporary territory of the Republic of Moldova, and named it Bessarabia. After the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia in 1917, Bessarabia declared short-lived independence, only to give it up soon afterwards and become part of the Kingdom of Romania in 1918. In 1940, Bessarabia was ceded to the Soviet Union after the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. In 1941, the allied armies of Romania and Nazi Germany regained control of the territory, but in 1944 they were pushed back by the Red Army, and Bessarabia was definitively annexed to the Soviet Union.

It is evident that throughout its history, Moldova has been a subject of interest for more influential players in regional geopolitics. Each ruling power, with its distinct cultural, social, economic, and political perspectives, has imposed its visions, standards, and expectations upon the Moldovan inhabitants. This dynamic has inevitably influenced the process of Moldova's identity formation, self-determination, and, consequently, its collective self-esteem. Much like other nations speaking from subaltern positions, Moldovans have seldom been afforded the opportunity to determine their fate independently, with their agency in the process of self-determination significantly restricted.³ The frequent change of rulers and their corresponding ideologies, together with the multicultural and multi-ethnic nature of the territory, prevented the Moldovan population from completing a process of building a common shared identity.

³ I draw here on the scholarship produced by the Subaltern Studies Group, a collective of South Asian scholars who sought to critically engage with existing historiography that they found neglecting the experiences and perspectives of marginalised communities. The concept of "subaltern" refers to having "insufficient access to modes of representation," the one whose agency is limited by the existing social order – "a structured place from which the capacity to access power is radically obstructed." Swati Chattopadhyay and Bhaskar Sarkar, "Introduction: The subaltern and the popular," *Postcolonial Studies* 8, no. 4 (2005): 357-363, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13688790500375066>; Rosalind C. Morris, *Can the Subaltern Speak? Reflections on the History of an Idea* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010); Viacheslav Morozov, *Russia's Postcolonial Identity: A Subaltern Empire in a Eurocentric World* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015); Madina Tlostanova, "Can the Post-Soviet Think? On Coloniality of Knowledge, External Imperial and Double Colonial Difference," *Intersections. East European Journal of Society and Politics* 1, no. 2 (2015): 38-58.

Numerous scholars have highlighted the challenges and complexities associated with the “failed” project of Moldovan nation-building, pointing to the belated nationhood development that has impacted subsequent societal development.⁴

Within the complex landscape of Moldovan identity, a notable divide emerges between two predominant ideological and identity groups: the pan-Romanianists and the Moldovanists. In short, pan-Romanianists contend that Moldovans share an ethnic, cultural, and historical background with Romanians. They argue that Russian and subsequent Soviet political interventions have artificially created any perceived differences between the two groups. Conversely, Moldovanists acknowledge the close relationship between Moldovans and Romanians, but maintain that each group possesses distinct identities with unique histories, languages, and cultures. In their perspective, Moldovans and Romanians, while connected, remain separate nations.⁵

These two ideological factions harbor significantly different interpretations of the recent past, shaping their respective visions of the present and the future in ways that often stand in stark contrast to one another. Pan-Romanianists underscore the shared origins of Moldovans and Romanians. Among the more radical proponents, there is an assertion that the Republic of Moldova, as an independent state, should not exist, advocating for reunification with Romania as the only path to “historical justice.” This narrative highlights the perceived injustice imposed by the

⁴ Charles King, “Moldovan Identity and the Politics of Pan-Romanianism,” *Slavic Review* 53, no. 2 (1994): 345–68; Luke March, “From Moldovanism to Europeanization? Moldova’s Communists and Nation Building,” *Nationalities Papers* 35, no. 4 (2007): 601–25; Cristina Petrescu, “Contrasting/Conflicting Identities: Bessarabians, Romanians, Moldovans,” in *Nation-Building and Contested Identities: Romanian and Hungarian Case Studies*, ed. Balazs Trencsenyi (Iași: Editura Polirom, 2001), 153–78; Petru Negura, “The Republic of Moldova’s Transition between a Failed Communism and an Un-Commenced Capitalism?,” *Studia Politica. Romanian Political Science Review* 16, no. 1 (2016): 541–68; Wim Meurs, “Moldova: Nested Cases of Belated Nation-Building,” *Revue d’études Comparatives Est-Ouest* 46 (2015): 185–209, <https://doi.org/10.4074/S0338059915001084>.

⁵ Alexandr Voronovici, “A Tangle of Memory: The Eternitate Memorial Complex in Chisinau and History Politics in Moldova,” *Journal of Soviet and Post-Soviet Politics and Society* 5, no. 2 (2019): 225–60.

Soviets and romanticizes a purported “Golden Age” during the Romanian Kingdom. Notably, pan-Romanianists frequently omit the controversial aspects of Romanian history, such as the fascist tendencies in the 1930s, the notorious rule of the inter-war dictator Ion Antonescu, and the Romanian-perpetrated Holocaust in regions of Bessarabia and Bucovina.⁶ In their vision for Moldova, pan-Romanianists aspire for political, economic, and cultural alignment with Romania and the European Union. It is no surprise that this ideological wing is predominantly composed of Romanian speakers.⁷

In contrast, Moldovanists acknowledge the similarities between Moldova and Romania, yet they contend that distinctive differences exist, justifying the recognition of Moldovans as an independent nation. It is important to note that Moldovanists possess diverse perspectives, and their conceptualization of Moldovan identity can vary significantly. The umbrella term of *Moldovanism* bounds a range of approaches, spanning from those who embrace a Soviet-influenced Moldovan identity to others who perceive Moldovanism as a civic concept encompassing the multi-ethnic population of Moldova.⁸ Those informed by Soviet identity politics tend to view the Soviet period positively, attributing responsibility for historical wrongs to Romanians and German Nazis, amalgamated under the label of “fascists.” Consequently, this faction often exhibits a greater fondness towards Russia than the European Union, which they equate with Romania. Notably, this group vehemently rejects the prospect of reunification with Romania, viewing it as a form of cultural and political Romanization that threatens the preservation of Moldovan identity. The Moldovanist side encompasses Romanian/Moldovan and most Russian

⁶ Svetlana Suveica, “From Heroisation to Competing Victimhoods. History Writing on the Second World War in Moldova,” *Südosteuropa* 65, no. 2 (2017): 388-411, <https://doi.org/doi:10.1515/soeu-2017-0023>.

⁷ Charles King, “Moldovan Identity and the Politics of Pan-Romanianism,” *Slavic Review* 53, no. 2 (1994): 345-368, doi:10.2307/2501297; Piotr Oleksy, “Discourse on National Identity in Moldovan Politics after 2009,” *Przegląd Strategiczny*, no. 2 (2012): 127-35.; Alexandr Voronovici, “A Tangle of Memory: The Eternitate Memorial Complex in Chisinau and History Politics in Moldova,” *Journal of Soviet and Post-Soviet Politics and Society* 5, no. 2 (2019): 225-60.

⁸ Piotr Oleksy, “Discourse on National Identity in Moldovan Politics after 2009,” *Przegląd Strategiczny* 2 (2012): 127-35, <https://doi.org/10.14746/ps.2012.2.10>.

speakers, including various ethnic minorities like Gagauz, Bulgarians, and Ukrainians.⁹

As evident, the construction of Moldovan identity has been profoundly shaped by the collective memory and historical narratives surrounding World War II and the subsequent Soviet period. Moldova experienced the so-called “double occupation,” involving sequential occupations by the Red Army and a joint Romanian-Nazi army. The inhabitants of Moldova went through forced Soviet deportations, political persecutions, Romanian-perpetrated pogroms, and the mass killing of Bessarabian Jews, as well as alleged Communists and Socialists, resulting in a significant loss of life and pervasive silence.

Therefore, establishing a unified narrative that comprehensively explains these events and provides guidance for addressing this uneasy recent past has proven to be challenging. As a result, Moldovan society remains fragmented, with contested historical perspectives and competing narratives. Pan-Romanians tend to omit the memory of Romanian and Nazi atrocities, often remaining silent or ignorant about the extensive Romanian forces’ role in the Holocaust of Bessarabian Jews. In contrast, Moldovanists often play the “fascist card” to undermine the positive image of Romania and, by extension, the European Union. This narrative perpetuates the fear of an alleged coercive Romanization that they associate with European Union integration.¹⁰

The “mnemonic wars” culminate on May 9, traditionally marked in this region with the celebrations of Victory Day over fascism. However, on the same date, Europe Day, which is dedicated to the European Union and European integration, is also celebrated. On May 9, the Moldovanists gather to celebrate victory in World War II, while the pro-European Moldovans meet to celebrate Europe Day. The way of celebrating both events has changed significantly over the years, but since the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, these two events have become adversary celebrations. The full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 marked an entirely new chapter in Moldova’s memory politics and hastened some processes that were previously considered too radical.

⁹ Oleksy, “Discourse on National Identity in Moldovan Politics after 2009,” 129.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 134.

Memory Politics in Moldova Before the Full-scale Russian Invasion

As already mentioned, the memory policy aims to unite certain communities and manifest their common values through shared versions of the past. These serve as social representations of the past that seek to explain how things are and how they should be and to connect individuals to the collective.¹¹ Memory scholars, Katharine Hodgkin and Susannah Radstone, argue:

“Our understanding of the past has strategic, political, and ethical consequences. Contests over the meaning of the past are also contests over the meaning of the present and over ways of taking the past forward.”¹²

Peter J. Verovšek notes: “Politicians frequently make use of mythologized understandings of the past to mobilize memory as an instrument of politics in the present.”¹³ Thus, memory politics have the power to bring certain events into the national consciousness, silence or forget others, interpret and reinterpret the past and offer visions of the present and future through these interpretations.

To understand the complexities of Moldova’s memory politics, a brief historical overview of its discursive shifts is necessary. In the 1990s, outspoken pan-Romanianist politicians advocated for the reunification of Moldova with Romania and a revival of what they considered the “authentic” Romanian culture. However, these efforts proved unsuccessful in fostering closer integration between Moldova and Romania. Instead, the economic reforms initiated after gaining independence in 1991 plunged Moldova into a severe financial crisis, resulting in a decline in living standards and a substantial emigration of skilled individuals.¹⁴

¹¹ James Liu and János László, “A Narrative Theory of History and Identity,” in *Social Representation and Identity*, eds. Gail Moloney and Iain Walker (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 85–107, https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230609181_6.

¹² Katharine Hodgkin and Susannah Radstone, *Contested Pasts: The Politics of Memory* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 18.

¹³ Peter J. Verovšek, “Collective Memory, Politics, and the Influence of the Past: The Politics of Memory as a Research Paradigm,” *Politics, Groups, and Identities* 4, no. 3 (2016): 529, DOI: 10.1080/21565503.2016.1167094.

¹⁴ Nina Orlova and Per Ronnas, “The Crippling Cost of an Incomplete Transformation:

The dismal performance of the Moldovan economy left the population disillusioned, prompting many to reminisce about the purportedly “better” and “easier” times during the Soviet Union era.

In response to widespread dissatisfaction, the parliamentary election of 2001 saw the emergence of the Party of Communists of the Republic of Moldova (PCRM) as a dominant force. This party, openly embracing Moldovanist and Soviet nostalgic sentiments, secured victory and subsequently formed a new government. Among its priorities was the reform of memory politics in alignment with Moldovanist perspectives. The PCRM actively promoted the Soviet heritage and adopted a favorable stance towards the Soviet past. Their initiatives included reinstating compulsory Russian language instruction in schools and revising history textbooks published after the Soviet Union’s collapse. These changes aimed to highlight the Moldovan identity as distinct from the Romanian one. However, such endeavors faced significant criticism and widespread protests from those who perceived them as an ideological return to a Soviet-style interpretation of Moldovan history and identity. Critics argued that these measures, rooted in the Soviet concept of self-determination, contributed to an effort to re-Russify Moldova.¹⁵

In the election year 2009, the Party of Communists of the Republic of Moldova (PCRM) secured victory once again, but allegations of election fraud by the opposition triggered popular protests. In response to the unrest, a snap election was conducted, resulting in a new government led by a coalition of pro-European parties known as the Alliance for European Integration. The Alliance, openly advocating pan-Romanianist views, adopted an anti-Communist and anti-Soviet discourse while emphasizing historical events and figures associated with Romanian identity. Taking cues from other former Eastern Bloc countries, the new government established academic bodies focused on examining Soviet and Communist regime repressions. Notable examples include *The Commission for the Study and Evaluation of the Communist*

The Case of Moldova,” *Post-Communist Economies* 11, no. 3 (1 September 1999): 373-97, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14631379995931>.

¹⁵ Sergiu Musteață, *About Us and Our Neighbours: History Textbooks in the Republic of Moldova, Romania and Ukraine* (Eckert. Dossiers 7: Georg Eckert Institute for International Textbook Research, 2017).

Totalitarian Regime of the Republic of Moldova and the Centre for the Study of *Totalitarian Regimes & Cold War*. As part of their initiatives, history textbooks underwent revisions, with students now being taught the *History of Romanians* and *World History*.¹⁶ This shift framed the recent past as a struggle between the periods of unfreedom and repression under Soviet rule versus the perceived “Golden Age” within the Romanian Kingdom. The reinterpretation of history reflected the broader ideological orientation of the new government towards European integration and a rejection of the Communist and Soviet legacy.

In the 2014 elections, the Socialist Party won but was unable to establish a government. The strongest of the “pro-European” parties was the Democratic Party of Moldova (PDM). The PDM was best known for its chairman, a notorious oligarch Vlad Plahotniuc, whose governing strategy was relatively simple; he was formally very pro-European and pro-Romanian, but these tendencies were only a smokescreen for diverting money from European funds. At the same time, he was very open to Soviet nostalgia and pro-Russian attitudes. As a result, his government organized events commemorating victims of Soviet crimes and, at the same time, promoted celebrations linked to a positive image of the Soviet period.

The 2019 elections led to a diverse government coalition consisting of the Socialist Party (PSRM) and the ACUM electoral alliance. ACUM comprised pro-European liberal parties, the Action and Solidarity (PAS), and the Dignity and Truth (DA) platform political party, with Maia Sandu and Andrei Năstase as respective leaders. The primary motivation for these ideologically distinct parties to collaborate was a shared objective: to remove Vlad Plahotniuc from power and eliminate his substantial influence. However, this coalition government faced internal challenges and dissolved only six months after its establishment. The dissolution was primarily attributed to ideological clashes, particularly concerning the approach to memory politics. Despite their initial alignment against Plahotniuc, the inherent ideological differences within the coalition contributed to its eventual breakdown.¹⁷

¹⁶ Sergiu Musteață, *About Us and Our Neighbours*: 22.

¹⁷ Madalin Necsutu, “PM’s Plan to Commemorate Victims of Totalitarianism Divides Moldova,”

In 2020, Maia Sandu returned to a prominent state position by winning the presidential election defeating the incumbent President Igor Dodon from the Socialist Party. The subsequent year saw her PAS party secure a majority in snap parliamentary elections, getting fifty-three per cent of the vote. Sandu and PAS adopted a center-right, pro-European stance and a nuanced approach that rejected a simplistic black-and-white understanding of Moldovan politics. They were committed to European integration while recognizing the importance of maintaining positive relations with Russia.¹⁸

However, this approach underwent a dramatic shift following the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Moldova's previous pragmatic stance toward Russia transformed into open criticism and vocal condemnation of Russia's war and foreign policy. The ruling party and President Sandu took an unequivocal stance against the conflict in the neighboring country. In response to Russian threats and blackmail, Moldova shifted its economic, political, and cultural allegiances almost exclusively towards the European Union. This shift also extended to the politics of memory, particularly evident in the heightened controversy surrounding Victory Day and the increased emphasis on EU-related celebrations, specifically Europe Day. The changing geopolitical landscape prompted Moldova to re-evaluate its alliances and priorities, significantly departing from its prior diplomatic posture.

The Russian Full-scale Invasion of Ukraine and the Moldovan Response

The conflict between Russia and Ukraine has had a profound impact on the Republic of Moldova. Moldova unexpectedly found itself at the forefront of a Ukrainian refugee crisis, as people escaping the Russian war, especially from Southern Ukraine, flooded across the Ukrainian-Moldovan borders. From February 24 to May 9, 2022, over 400,000

Balkan Insight, August 15, 2019, accessed May 29, 2023, <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/08/15/pms-plan-to-commemorate-victims-of-totalitarianism-divides-moldova/>.

¹⁸ Mikhail Polianskii and Rebecca Wagner, "Breaking the Vicious Circle: Can the New Moldovan President Sandu Succeed in Balancing Relations with the EU and Russia?," *Peace Research Institute Frankfurt* 19 (2020), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep28582>.

individuals passed through Moldova, with approximately 90,000 opting to stay, making Moldova host the largest number of Ukrainian refugees per capita at one point.¹⁹

The refugee crisis presented a significant challenge for Moldova on multiple fronts. Firstly, no predefined crisis scenario was available to navigate the country through the initial chaos. Moldova, with its decentralized structure, responded awkwardly to the influx of war refugees. In the initial weeks, the bulk of assistance relied on the spontaneous solidarity and commitment of local individuals who independently went to the border, offering aid to Ukrainians in the form of warm meals, clothing, transportation, and accommodation. The non-profit and civil society sector, despite being severely underfunded, stepped in on the brink and effectively filled the void until the state authorities and international organizations like the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNCHR) and the World Food Programme (WFP) organized and systematic aid. Among others, *The Moldova pentru Pace* (Moldova for Peace) movement, a non-hierarchical collaborative effort involving activists, NGO workers, and public figures, were pivotal in establishing an organization to assist refugees in various domains, such as accommodation, transportation or legal services.²⁰

The first wave of Ukrainian refugees comprised mainly people with means and connections abroad. However, subsequent waves included people who were reluctant to leave but compelled to do so by Russian violence, predominantly the elderly and those with limited financial, cultural, and social capital. These individuals arrived in Moldova without a clear plan for their future, prompting Moldova to develop a crisis management system to address their immediate needs and later facilitate integration. This meant unexpected expenses for the state coffers (although international NGOs and humanitarian organizations provided the vast majority of monetary assistance to refugees and host households), but also the need to focus its attention on solving the crisis and postpone some important projects.

¹⁹ "Situation Ukraine Refugee Situation," Unhcr.org., accessed May 29, 2023, <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/ukraine/location/10784>.

²⁰ "Moldova for Peace," accessed May 29, 2023, <https://moldovapentrupeace.md/en/>.

The food crisis has become a concomitant of the war in Ukraine for Moldova. Moldova is currently not self-sufficient in food and must import most of it. Before the war, Moldova's biggest importer was Ukraine, from which it mainly imported food and household goods. The war and the disruption of trade routes from Ukraine have put Moldova in a very problematic situation. It had to start importing many products from the European Union and Turkey, significantly increasing prices. It also took several weeks for new trade links to be established. In the weeks after the war began, even something as common as buckwheat or salt was not easily available in Moldova. The regions directly adjacent to Ukraine were the worst affected. Unfortunately, these regions often correspond to Moldova's poorest regions. Due to the underdeveloped infrastructure, importing goods (not only) to regions far from the border with the European Union is costly.

Initially, on the political level, Moldova took a neutral stance on the war, condemning it but refraining from joining Western sanctions. Instead, it has increased exports of agricultural products to Russia, taking advantage of newly accessible markets that were previously unavailable due to Russian sanctions following the signing of the Association Agreement with the EU. Moldova's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Nicu Popescu, emphasized the country's constitutional neutrality, citing economic dependence on Russia as a factor:

"Moldova is a neutral state. We will not take any side in the conflict. Moldova will not join any sanctions either [...] The Moldovan economy is too integrated and dependent on Russia. The decision to impose sanctions on Russia is not easy; this is a very hard decision that could be made by stronger and more prosperous countries than Moldova. It was decided after the annexation of Crimea in 2014 that Moldova would not join the sanctions imposed on Russia by the European Union or the US, and we adhere to this course. The decision was made based on economic considerations, as the Moldovan economy is too dependent on relations with Russia."²¹

However, Moldova's neutral position faced challenges under Russian pressure, particularly during an impending energy crisis. Russia, the primary

²¹ Mamuka Komakhia, "Review of Russia's Policy in the Post-Soviet Space/ Russian Aggression in Ukraine: Response of Moldova and Its Refusal to Impose Sanctions," Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies, accessed May 29, 2023, <https://www.gfsis.org.ge/russian-monitor/view/3179>.

gas supplier, openly blackmailed Moldova, threatening energy disruptions unless its political stance changed.²² Therefore, the Moldovan government had to try to find a way out of the crisis in various ways. In June 2022, Moldova was granted EU candidate status, from which the government expected economic aid and new political alliances. Already in 2021, 61% of Moldova's exports were with EU countries, which is likely to increase since its acceptance as a candidate country. Similarly, Moldova has been promised significant investment in five priority pillars: rule of law, good governance, sustainability, competitiveness, and regional cooperation.

Realizing the limited benefits and guarantees of maintaining positive relations with Russia, Moldova gradually shifted towards a pro-European course. The country condemned Russian aggression in Ukraine more strongly, moving away from the influence of "Russkiy mir" and prioritizing European integration, a shift echoed by President Maia Sandu and the PAS government.

Anti-propaganda Measures

In April 2022, the Moldovan government implemented measures to counter pro-Russian and pro-war propaganda. These initiatives included enacting a law to revoke the licenses of several pro-Russian media outlets and prohibiting certain Russian TV channels. A strong stance against Russian propaganda was taken by banning the Saint George's ribbon along with the letters Z and V. According to the new legislation, individuals found making, wearing, or displaying the striped ribbon could face a minimum fine of 900 lei (\$49) or 69 hours of community service. Lilian Carp, a PAS MP and the Chair of the Parliamentary Standing Committee for National Security, Defense, and Public Order, affirmed this legislative move:

²² Daria Alekseeva, "Какой смысл нам поддерживать прозападный курс Молдовы». Пушков о поставках российского газа" ["What's the Point Supporting Moldova's pro-Western Direction? Pushkov about Russian Gas Supplies to Moldova"], NewsMaker, accessed May 29, 2023, <https://newsmaker.md/rus/novosti/kakoy-smysl-nam-podderzhivat-prozapadnyy-kurs-moldovy-pushkov-o-postavkah-rossiyskogo-gaza/?fbclid=IwAR3mnqvzVZWSTpq0J06RL88fy90ZacGbATPB2fhXq5l598epjdyXyEeqw8>.

“The amendments were adopted in the context of the war in Ukraine. These symbols, used in Russia’s military aggression in Ukraine, shall be banned in the Republic of Moldova territory as they justify the military aggression against Ukraine. We considered it necessary to amend the Code of Offenses in order to prevent propaganda of war in the territory of our country.”²³

Objections from the Communist and Socialist parties led their representatives to leave the chamber in protest during the passage of the bill. However, the most vocal critics of the St. George’s ribbon ban were from Gagauzia, an autonomous territorial unit in southern Moldova. Gagauz politicians even voted in their parliament that the ban does not apply to the territory of ATO Gagauzia, allowing the ribbon to continue being worn in that region. The bill’s sponsor, Sergei Cimpoș, labelled the ban a “mistake” by the Moldovan parliament, citing discontent among the Gagauz population and asserting that: “You cannot sell or buy remembrance.”²⁴

The St. George’s ribbon has a complex history, dating back to the time of Russian Tsarina Catherine II. Originating as an addition to the Order of St. George in 1769 during the Russo-Turkish War, the ribbon gained prominence during World War II when the Soviet army reintroduced it. In 2000, the Russian Federation elevated the Order of St. George to its highest decoration. Since 2005, the ribbon has symbolized victory over Germany and fascism, holding a privileged position in Victory Day celebrations on May 9. A significant resurgence of the ribbon occurred in 2014 during Euromaidan and the Revolution of Dignity, with pro-Russian and pro-Yanukovych supporters using it as a symbol against what they perceived as neo-Nazi and fascist forces in Ukraine. Viewing Euromaidan as a coup by new-generation fascists, they positioned themselves as anti-fascist fighters. Since 2014, the St. George’s ribbon has also symbolized opposition to the pro-European direction and a desire for closer ties with Russia.²⁵

²³ “Parliament Prohibits Saint George’s Ribbon and Symbols z and v, Which Russian Troops Use in Ukraine,” Infotag.Md., April 8, 2022, accessed May 29, 2023, <https://www.infotag.md/politics-en/298584/>.

²⁴ “St. George’s Ribbon “Permitted’ in Gagauzia in Defiance of National Ban,” IPN, April 29, 2022, accessed May 29, 2023, https://www.ipn.md/en/st-georges-ribbon-permitted-in-gagauzia-in-defiance-of-7965_1089479.html.

²⁵ James Hudzik, “The St George Ribbon and Why Are They Wearing It?,” *Euromaidan Press*, 2014, accessed May 29, 2023, <https://euromaidanpress.com/2014/02/09/the-st-george-ribbon-and-why-are-they-wearing-it/>.

Regarding the media ban, six TV channels broadcasting in Romanian and Russian languages were prohibited. The channels had their licenses revoked “for disseminating incorrect information when covering events in Moldova and the war in Ukraine.”²⁶ Then Prime Minister Natalia Gavrilița offered comments on the ban:

“After almost 300 days of the war in Ukraine, the propaganda in the Republic of Moldova has not stopped; in fact, it has intensified. [...] In the situation where not only an energy war is being waged against our country, but also an information war, we have the responsibility and even the obligation to protect our citizens and the country.”²⁷

Interestingly, all six TV channels were linked to Moldovan oligarch and businessman Ilan Șor, who is currently in exile in Israel due to a corruption warrant. Șor is a prominent figure in the political party ȘOR, which is openly antigovernmental and pro-Russian. Șor personally owns three of the banned TV channels, two are owned by his close associates, and the sixth sympathizes with him.

These measures sparked various reactions. In Balti, Moldova’s second-largest city known for its significant Russian-speaking minority, protests against the president and government occurred in the main square. Opponents of the new law gathered at a World War II memorial featuring a tank on a pedestal with an eternal flame, chanting anti-government slogans and singing patriotic military songs. Similar protests occurred in the Gagauz capital, Comrat, and other cities across Moldova. Moscow took notice of these actions, and Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokeswoman Maria Zakharova issued repeated warnings to Chisinau, urging it to reconsider such decrees. Zakharova said:

²⁶ Alexander Tanas, “Moldova to temporarily ban six TV channels over broadcasts about war,” *Reuters* (online), December 16, 2022, accessed January 20, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/business/media-telecom/moldova-temporarily-ban-six-tv-channels-over-broadcasts-about-war-2022-12-16/>.

²⁷ “Moldovan Government Suspends Licenses of Six TV Stations to «Eliminate Propaganda,»” *Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty*, December 17, 2022, accessed January 20, 2024, <https://www.rferl.org/a/moldova-ilan-shor-tv-stations-licenses-suspended-russia-war/32180842.html>.

“We consider this ban as an unprecedented act of political censorship, as an abuse of the principle of media pluralism and a flagrant violation of the right to freedom of access to information, to which the political leadership of the Republic regularly declares its adherence.” She added: “In light of the unprecedented consequences of its implementation for the Russian-speaking part of the country’s population, we also qualify it as a cynical infringement of the rights of national minorities.”²⁸

Other forms of protest were also present. In the Gagauz villages of Копчак and Томай, signs spray-painted on the road read “Роосия (sic!), мы с вами” [Ruusia (sic!), we are with you] and “Гагаузия с Вами!” [Gagauzia is with you].²⁹ Stickers supporting the Russian invasion began to appear on cars.³⁰ At the beginning of the war, the façade of the former National Hotel in Chisinau was painted in the colors of the Ukrainian flag.³¹ After the anti-propaganda bill was passed, someone repainted it in the St. George Ribbon colors (orange and black). Later, it was partially repainted to the Ukrainian colors again.³²

²⁸ “Russia denounces Moldova’s ban of TV channels as ‘political censorship,’” Reuters, December 17, 2022, accessed May 29, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russia-denounces-moldovas-ban-tv-channels-political-censorship-2022-12-17/>.

²⁹ “«Россия, мы с вами». В Копчаке неизвестные нарисовали на асфальте символы Z и V” [‘Russia, We Are with You.’ In the Village of Копчак Unknown People Painted Symbols Z and V], NewsMaker.md, April 15, 2022, accessed May 29, 2023, <https://newsmaker.md/rus/novosti/rossiya-my-s-vami-v-kopchake-neizvestnye-narisovali-na-asfalte-simvol-y-z-i-v/>; “(ФОТО) На асфальте при въезде в Томай в Гагаузии появилась надпись с запрещенными знаками Z, V и георгиевской лентой” [translation in English], Nokta.md, May 4, 2022, accessed May 29, 2023, <https://nokta.md/foto-na-asfalte-pri-vezde-v-tomaj-poyavilas-nadpis-s-zapreshhenny-mi-znakami-z-v-i-georgievskoj-lentoj/>.

³⁰ “Чем рискуют водители, которые наклеивают на свои автомобили букву «Z»?” [What Are Risking Drivers which Put Stickers with Z and V on their Cars?], Noi.md, March 25, 2022, accessed May 29, 2023, <https://noi.md/ru/v-mire/chem-riskuyut-voditeli-kotorye-nakleivayut-na-svoi-avtomobili-bukvu-z?prev=1%D0%A3>.

³¹ “(ФОТО) В Кишиневе гостиницу National покрасили в цвет флага Украины” [Somebody Has Painted the National Hotel in Chisinau in the Colours of the Ukrainian Flag], NewsMaker.md, February 27, 2022, accessed May 29, 2023, <https://newsmaker.md/rus/novosti/foto-v-kishineve-gostinitsu-national-pokrasili-v-tsvet-flaga-ukrainy/>.

³² “(UPD/ФОТО) Здание бывшей гостиницы ‘Националь’ в Кишиневе наполовину окрашено в цвета георгиевской ленты” [The Former National Hotel in Chisinau Has Been Partially Painted in the Colours of the St. George’s Ribbon], Nokta.md, April 20, 2022, accessed May 29, 2023, <https://nokta.md/upd-foto-zdanie-byvshej-gostinitsy-natsional-v-kishineve-napolovinu-okrasheno-v-tsveta-georgievskoj-lenty/>.

In May 2022, IPIS (Institutul pentru Inițiative Strategice) and WatchDog.md released a survey regarding the perspectives of Moldovans on the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The findings revealed some concerns: 20% of Moldovans supported Russia, 31% supported Ukraine, and 30% remained undecided, expressing that they did not find any party in the conflict justified. Regarding responsibility for the war, 25% directly blamed Putin, 19% attributed blame to the United States of America, and 13% held the Ukrainian government accountable. The survey also inquired about opinions on accepting refugees, foreign financial aid, and the ban on the St. George Ribbon. Regarding the ribbon ban, 35% expressed support, 24% disagreed, and 27% strongly disagreed.³³

As noted earlier, the government led by Natalie Gavrilița and Maia Sandu encountered substantial challenges in 2022, as Moldova faced unprecedented inflation and escalating prices, particularly in essential areas such as food, energy, and housing. The sharp increase in rental prices in Chisinau was linked not only to the influx of refugees but also to the growing presence of international organizations requiring accommodation for their personnel. Escalating petrol prices further exacerbated the challenges. In September 2022, protests and demonstrations erupted in Chisinau and other Moldovan cities, with demonstrators calling for the resignation of the pro-Western government, alleging its failure to address soaring prices, and advocating for a normalization of relations with Russia. These protests, orchestrated by the ȘOR Party led by the openly pro-Kremlin politician Ilan Șor, gained significant traction.³⁴ On September 18, approximately 20,000 people participated in a protest in Chisinau, and on September 25, protesters established about a dozen tents in front of the presidential palace. Numerous protests persisted through the autumn of 2022, extending into 2023.³⁵

³³ "Sondaj Socio-Politic MAI 2022" [Socio-Political Survey], Ipn.Md, accessed May 29, 2023, <https://www.ipn.md/storage/ckfinder/files/Sondaj%20la%20comanda%20WatchDog%20si%20IPIS%20Mai%202022.pdf>.

³⁴ Tony Wesolowsky, "Ilan Șor: The Kremlin's New Man in Moldova," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, November 3, 2022, accessed May 29, 2023, <https://www.rferl.org/a/moldova-shor-kremlin-businessman-destabilize/32114352.html>.

³⁵ RFE/RL's Moldovan Service, "Moldovan Anti-Government Protesters Set up Tents Outside President's Residence," RFE/RL, September 25, 2022, accessed May 29, 2023, <https://www.rferl.org/a/moldova-presidency-shor-protests/32051416.html>.

Against this backdrop, concerns arose about the observance of Victory Day on May 9. There were apprehensions that the celebrations might incite violence or even prompt a coup attempt. Speculation about a potential Russian-backed coup had been circulating, creating a tangible fear of a violent takeover. In response to the uncertain situation, some international organizations evacuated their personnel to Iasi, Romania. This underscores the contemporary significance of Victory Day in Russian discourse and the evolving nature of the celebrations.

Victory Day: (Not Only) a Propaganda Tool

Victory Day, commemorating the end of World War II and the triumph over fascism, holds significant historical importance in numerous former Soviet Union countries. While most of Europe observes the holiday on May 8, in post-Soviet republics, including Russia, it is marked on May 9. This deviation is attributed to the timing of the German surrender, which occurred so late at night that by Moscow time, it was already the next day, May 9.

Immediately following the end of World War II, a Moscow parade was organized, laying the foundation for all subsequent May 9 celebrations. Its purpose was to unite Soviet citizens, showcase their strength and military prowess, and assert the superiority of the USSR, which had defeated the technologically advanced Germans. The goal was to instill pride in ordinary citizens for their country and foster belief in the capabilities of its people. The message was that without the USSR, the West would not have emerged victorious, and consequently, they owed a perpetual debt to the Soviets. The triumph in the war justified the hardships of the 1920s and 1930s industrialization and repression era, as it demonstrated that the struggles were worthwhile, enabling the Soviet Union to become a global power. However, regular commemorations did not commence until 1965, when May 9 was proclaimed a public holiday. Initially, these commemorations were characterized by sorrow rather than pride.³⁶

³⁶ Jeanmarie Rouhier-Willoughby, "Victory Day Celebrations: Memory and Validation," *Folklorica. Journal of the Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Folklore Association* 8, no. 2 (2003): 24-34.

Since Vladimir Putin came to power in 2001, he has invested heavily in creating a common Russian identity to cover up the economic problems and increasingly authoritarian policies of the Russian establishment.³⁷ He used the politics of memory and historical narratives to convince people of a certain image of the past, which then justified current policies, including the ongoing genocidal war in Ukraine. May 9 proved to be an ideal occasion for Vladimir Putin, as few other moments could bring together the diverse population of the Russian Federation. Over recent years, Victory Day has evolved into a holiday embodying state ideology centered on militarism, the memory of the heroic struggle against fascism, and the glory of the Soviet Union. It has become a cornerstone of Russian and, to a large extent, post-Soviet identity – a momentous victory in which the inhabitants of the post-Soviet space continue to take pride, creating an aura of exceptionalism. Russia has effectively claimed exclusive ownership of the triumph over Nazi Germany, with its interpretation excluding the acknowledgement of other nations that contributed to defeating Nazism. According to Russian minds and propaganda, Victory Day is a day reserved for Russians and all the “brother nations” who fought alongside the Red Army.³⁸

Victory Day typically comprises three components: a military parade featuring a veterans’ march (now transitioning to the Immortal Regiment due to the scarcity of veterans), a commemoration at the local central memorial to World War II, and a family meal. The primary aim of the parade historically was to showcase Soviet military might and technological advancements. This function persists today, highlighting the “glorious” armed forces of post-Soviet countries, particularly Russia. With only a few living veterans remaining, the Immortal Regiment concept was introduced. It involves participants carrying photographs of relatives or family friends who served in the Red Army during World War II. The movement’s origin dates to May 9, 2012, when residents of Tomsk, Russia, initiated a procession, marching through the city streets with banners adorned with photos of their war veteran relatives. The rally saw over 6,000 participants carrying over 2,000 portraits of wartime participants.³⁹

³⁷ Elizabeth A. Wood, “Performing Memory: Vladimir Putin and the Celebration of World War II in Russia,” *The Soviet and Post-Soviet Review* 38, no. 2 (2011): 172-200, doi.org/10.1163/187633211X591175.

³⁸ Jeanmarie Rouhier-Willoughby, “Victory Day Celebrations,” 31-32.

³⁹ “О движении” [About the Movement], Moypolk.ru, accessed May 29, 2023, <https://www.moypolk.ru/letopis-polka>.

In Moldova, the observance of May 9 has undergone significant transformations, aligning itself more closely with the Russian model. The celebration has evolved from a relatively neutral event to a demonstration of pro-Russian and Soviet nostalgic sentiments, serving as a platform to question Moldova's pro-European orientation. However, concluding solely based on this shift would be overly simplistic. While the celebration undoubtedly acts as a conduit for Russian propaganda, it also highlights the government's challenges in engaging non-Romanian-speaking citizens in broader discussions about Moldova's identity and the country's future trajectory.

May 9 is among the last holidays that link the present with the past. For many people, especially among the Russian-speaking and Moldovanist-minded population, it is one of the few national holidays with which they can identify and, therefore, remains an integral part of their Moldovan identity. Many participants see Victory Day as an opportunity to express their patriotism, national and family pride. This is especially true in a situation when certain pro-Romanian politicians and some sections of the public question the very existence and legitimacy of the Moldovan nation. The loud Victory Day celebrations are supposed to be a warning to these politicians that there exists a significant number of people who would not allow Moldova to unite with Romania and lose its independence. Moreover, for those whose family members or friends fought in the war, Victory Day is a way to honor and pay tribute to the veterans and their heroism. As such, the celebrations often foster a sense of unity; meeting fellow citizens to recall a shared history creates a sense of belonging and solidarity.⁴⁰

In the last few years, there has been a noticeable withdrawal of the state from the celebrations. During Victory Day in 2022 and 2023, the ruling PAS party and the government limited their participation to a modest presence at the Eternitate [Eternity] Memorial, the main World War II memorial in Chisinau.⁴¹ In 2022, Prime Minister Natalia Gavrilița

⁴⁰ Misha Gabowitsch, *Памятник и Праздник: Этнография Дня Победы* [Monument and Celebration: An Ethnography of Victory Day] (Saint Petersburg: Nestor-Istoriia, 2020).

⁴¹ Alexandr Voronovici, "A Tangle of Memory: The Eternitate Memorial Complex in Chisinau and History Politics in Moldova," *Journal of Soviet and Post-Soviet Politics and Society* 5, no. 2 (2019): 225-60.

and Speaker of the House Igor Groșu attended the commemorative event. President Sandu, citing health issues, did not participate, though pro-Russian and Russian media construed this as a symbolic gesture against the celebration.⁴² The government has communicated its decision not to observe Victory Day during an ongoing war in the neighboring country. President Sandu delivered a speech on May 8, proposing the celebration of a Day of Peace instead of Victory Day. She stated:

“We will celebrate peace on May 9, when we honor the fallen of World War II, which took millions of lives. We will celebrate peace on Europe Day, which united to stop wars on the continent and gave Europeans prosperity and progress. Peace begins in the family and the community. We can keep it if we do not fall prey to division. We are different, but we must live together and build a future in our country. In peace, Moldova has a future.”⁴³

Noticeably, she employs the term “World War II” instead of “Great Patriotic War,” which is commonly used in Russia and several post-Soviet nations. This choice reflects a shift toward Western terminology and a departure from the post-Soviet lexicon.

In 2023, the scenario repeated itself, with government officials restricting their participation to a morning visit to Eternitate. They observed a minute of silence and laid wreaths. President Sandu joined the commemorative event, but she had written earlier on her Facebook page:

“Europe has united to prevent wars and ensure the right to life and happiness for all European citizens. Now, Europe unites us – all the people of Moldova – to earn our rightful place among European countries. Moldova will strengthen and enrich the European Union. [...] On May 9, we honor our grandparents and great-grandparents who paid the heavy price of war to defend their family, nation, and dignity. They sacrificed themselves so that life would triumph, and war would never again cross the threshold of their homes. War brings only death, suffering and destruction, and those who start wars value neither the honor of heroes nor human life. No man who loves his family and his country can be on the side of murder.”⁴⁴

⁴² “Президент майя санду не участвовала в мероприятиях по случаю дня победы из-за проблем со здоровьем – пресс-служба президента” [The President Maia Sandu did not Participate in the Victory Day Events Due to Health Issues], Infotag.Md, May 9, 2022, accessed May 29, 2023, <https://www.infotag.md/politics-m9/299171/>.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Vitalie Călugăreanu, “Ziua păcii și dezbinării naționale în Moldova” [Day of peace and national division in Moldova], Deutsche Welle, May 9, 2023, accessed May 29, 2023,

Other Moldovan high officials conveyed a similar message. Minister of Foreign Affairs Nicu Popescu stated:

“May 9 is the day we celebrate peace and unity in Europe – particularly important values in the current regional context. Today, we mark Europe Day and remember the ones fallen during World War II. Sadly, 78 years after the Allies brought peace to the European continent, the Russian Federation brought war back to Europe, defying international law and the memory of those who fought in World War II for peace and the suppression of Nazism. For Moldova, May 9 reflects our European aspirations and a firm commitment to EU values and standards. The future of our country can only be in the great European family, with whom we share aspirations and a common path of development and modernization.”⁴⁵

In their addresses, representatives of the Moldovan government underscored European values, Moldova’s aspirations to join the EU and the prosperity of a united Europe. They referenced World War II (not the Great Patriotic War), framing it within the context of human loss, sorrow, and mourning, connecting fallen soldiers and war heroes to the vision of a united and free Europe, specifically the European Union. Subsequently, on May 25, the ruling PAS party introduced a bill advocating for a shift in the May 9 celebrations from Victory Day to Remembrance Day and proposed moving the commemoration to May 8, ostensibly aligning with EU standards.⁴⁶

Without official state-organized celebrations, the primary commemorative events were orchestrated by two opposition parties – ȘOR and a coalition comprising Communists and Socialists. Both parties capitalized on the void left by the government’s disengagement. ȘOR and the Communists-

<https://www.dw.com/ro/ziua-p%C4%83cii-%C8%99i-dezbin%C4%83rii-na%C8%9Bionale-%C3%AEn-moldova/a-65561259>.

⁴⁵ “Mesajul vicepremierului Nicu Popescu cu ocazia Zilei Europei: «Astăzi marcăm Ziua Europei și ne amintim de cei căzuți în cel de-al Doilea Război Mondial»” [Deputy Prime Minister Nicu Popescu’s message on Europe Day: ‘Today we mark Europe Day and remember those who fell in the Second World War’], TVR Moldova, May 9, 2023, accessed May 29, 2023, <https://tvrmdova.md/article/ff04e03da36219f2/mesajul-vicepremierului-nicu-popescu-cu-ocazia-zilei-europei-astazi-marcam-ziua-europei-si-ne-amintim-de-cei-cazuti-in-cel-de-al-doilea-razboi-mondial.html>.

⁴⁶ “Партия социалистов осудила намерение пас «попирать память о победе в великой отечественной войне» [The Socialist Party condemned PAS’ intention to “trample on the memory of the victory in the Great Patriotic War”], Infotag.Md, May 25, 2023, accessed May 29, 2023, <https://www.infotag.md/politics-m9/307702/>.

Socialists strategically exploited this opportunity, utilizing it to advance their political agendas rooted in discontent with the current administration, Soviet nostalgia, and varying degrees of overt pro-Russian sentiment. Additionally, these parties positioned themselves as stalwarts of the traditional Moldovanist identity, emphasizing ideological affinities with “Russkiy mir” and opposing perceived coerced Romanization linked to closer ties with the EU and Romania.

In 2022, the parade organized by the Communist-Socialists was relatively modest and took place against the backdrop of the recent war in Ukraine and the passage of several anti-propaganda laws, as detailed above. It started in the main square in front of the Government House. The participants gathered for the Immortal Regiment, where they displayed photographs of their deceased relatives who had served in World War II. Many carried red flags and flowers, while some wore outfits reminiscent of Red Army soldiers, with military boots, red stars, and period headgear. Notable was the smaller presence of military equipment compared to previous years. A number of participants waved Moldovan flags, and Russian flags were also present. In response to the ban on the St. George’s ribbon, an alternative ribbon appeared, this time red, with the Moldovan emblem at one end and the image of St. George at the other. In addition, many people dressed in black and orange, the classic color scheme of the St. George’s ribbon. Participants wore orange accessories, including ties, hats, scarves, and jackets, and some wore orange caps with “Victoriei” or “Pobeda” written on them, which the organizers distributed. To chants of “Pobeda” and “Fascism will not win,” the procession, led by a van with megaphone, made its way to the *Eternitate* memorial complex, where flowers were laid.

The parade was relatively peaceful, with a brief verbal confrontation at the statue of Stephen the Great in central Chisinau involving opponents carrying Ukrainian, Romanian, and European Union flags. Some attendees responded to “Glory to Ukraine” chants with “Glory to Russia,” but no major skirmishes occurred. A larger police presence, including police minivans and an anti-conflict team, was noted.

In 2023, the parade witnessed notable differences. A larger and more organized crowd participated, equipped with professional materials such as banners, flags, and dove-shaped pins. The hesitancy observed in 2022

was replaced by a full-scale display of Soviet nostalgia and pro-Russian sentiment. Two parades were held, one organized by ŞOR and the other by the Committee Pobeda, associated with the Russian Cultural Centre in Moldova and supported by Communist and Socialist parties. The "Pobeda" parade convened at the main square in front of the House of Government, featuring participants with banners displaying slogans like "May 9 – Victory Day," "Fascism Will not Succeed," and "Moldova Is a Peaceful Country."

The slogans, asserting that May 9 is Victory Day, served as a signal to the government, which attempted to reschedule the celebrations to May 8. Emphasizing Moldova's status as a peaceful and neutral country aligned with the narrative advocating for diplomatic solutions to the Ukraine war rather than increased military involvement. It lines up with Russian propaganda that attempts to obscure the aggressor in the conflict. The concept of Moldova as a neutral country sought to pressure the government to cease official support for Ukraine and normalize relations with Russia, which are progressively deteriorating. The symbolism of peace was reinforced by the release of white doves by the former president and Chairman of the Socialist Party, Igor Dodon, and the distribution of dove-shaped peace pins to participants.

Europe Day as EU's Soft Power

As mentioned, the current Moldovan government was elected for its pro-European agenda but was also assumed to maintain friendly relations with Russia. However, in response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, this political program has undergone a significant transformation. In the face of pressure and blackmail from Russia, the government changed its position to an openly pro-European and pro-Western course. This shift has been reflected in strong statements by Moldovan leaders who have openly accused Russia of aggression, blackmail, and intimidation.

The full-scale invasion of Ukraine has opened new opportunities for Moldova, particularly in the context of its possible accession to the EU. On 23 June 2022, the European Council granted Moldova candidate status, which was accompanied by liberalizing trade in certain Moldovan

agricultural products and a promise of increased exports to EU countries. The rapprochement with the EU met with approval in certain segments of Moldovan society but also encountered strong opposition. The aforementioned mass protests broke out in Chisinau, organized by supporters of the ȘOR party, led by Ilan Șor, and financially supported by Russia. The protesters demanded the government's resignation, a change of the pro-European course, and normalization of relations with Russia.

Amidst apprehensions of potential Russian aggression, fueled by both hostile statements from senior Russian officials and reports of a possible coup organized by Russia, the Moldovan government sought to align itself with the European Union and demonstrate its commitment to the European project. Raising the visibility of Europe Day, an instrument of the European Union's soft power, was a logical and natural step. Soft power involves influencing others through attraction, culture, and shared values, as opposed to coercion or force. In the EU context, Europe Day serves as a diplomatic and public relations instrument, aiming to promote the EU's values, unity, and positive image among its citizens and in neighboring regions.

This ideological shift had to be demonstrated to the national and international public. To this end, the emphasis on EU-related public holidays increased, and existing holidays began to be reinterpreted with a pro-European perspective. Among these, Europe Day has earned a prominent position. Observed annually on May 9, Europe Day commemorates European peace and unity. This date marks the anniversary of the historic Schuman Declaration, which was presented by the French statesman Robert Schuman. The Declaration outlined Schuman's vision of a new form of political cooperation in Europe, with the ultimate aim of preventing war between European nations. This proposal was seen as the starting point for what later developed into the European Union. Europe Day celebrations in Moldova, especially these days, seek to manifest a commitment to European integration. By commemorating the Schuman Declaration, the Moldovan government is publicly demonstrating a shift towards seeking to deepen its ties with the EU and to integrate into the wider European community.

The first celebration of Europe Day in Moldova took place in 2006. It was a closed event, primarily attended by diplomats and state officials.

Over the years, the celebration gradually became more open to the general public; however, it remained somewhat peripheral compared to Victory Day, which held a firm place on May 9. It is noteworthy that the Europe Day celebrations were scheduled for the closest Saturday after May 9, not the exact date. As the Head of the European Commission Delegation to Moldova, Cesare De Montis said:

“We want Moldovan citizens to know why we, the Delegation of the European Commission, are here, what we are doing and how the population benefits from our work [...] We want to show to wider public what assistance we are offering to the Republic of Moldova, what are the concrete projects funded by the European Union, what is their aim and what are the results that we have achieved together.”⁴⁷

However, the utilization of Europe Day as a manifestation of a pro-European orientation was not invented by the current government. Already in 2010, Europe Day was very useful to the politicians of the Alliance for European Integration. As already mentioned, in April 2009, there was civil unrest in the country following the parliamentary elections, which were labelled as rigged. As a result, the Communist Party lost its majority and a coalition of pro-European parties, known as the Alliance for European Integration, was formed, consisting of the Liberal Democratic Party, the Liberal Party, the Democratic Party and the Our Moldova Alliance, which formed the new government. Although it was vocally pro-European, most of the promised reforms and anti-corruption measures remained on a proclamatory level. The leaders of the alliance, including Vlad Filat, Mihai Ghimpu, Marian Lupu and Seraphim Urechean, were preoccupied with internal power struggles, which prevented the implementation of the proclaimed reforms.⁴⁸

Despite this, the Alliance successfully persuaded EU donors to continue financial aid and secured substantial funding for their oligarchic activities.

⁴⁷ “Europe Day Has Been Celebrated in Moldova since 2006,” IPN Press Agency, April 27, 2012, accessed May 29, 2023, https://www.ipn.md/en/europe-day-has-been-celebrated-in-moldova-since-2006-7967_997370.html.

⁴⁸ Hrant Kostanyan, “Why Moldova’s European Integration Is Failing,” CEPS, March 3, 2016, accessed May 29, 2023, <https://www.ceps.eu/ceps-publications/why-moldovas-european-integration-failing/>.

This situation persisted even when the Alliance was replaced by the “pro-European” Coalition, which included many of the same people. The misuse of European funds, ongoing politicization of the state, and the rise of oligarchic influence continued. In the 2014 parliamentary election, the Democratic Party, closely associated with Vlad Plahotniuc, emerged strongest from the Coalition parties. Plahotniuc, a prominent figure in the new government, faced allegations, along with another oligarch, Ilan Șor, in the “Theft of the Century,” a corruption scandal involving the disappearance of approximately one billion dollars from Moldovan banks. Plahotniuc is currently convicted for corruption and state capture and is living in exile in Turkey. This person, widely known as the most dangerous and powerful oligarch in the region, was very vocally supporting European integration and publicly advocating for the pro-European direction of the country.⁴⁹ It is important to note that Moldovans’ trust issues with the EU were also influenced by the Alliance and Coalition ruling period.

The decision to expand the celebration of Europe Day aligned with the pro-European parties’ approach, serving as a clear signal to both Brussels and Moldova’s pro-EU population that the country was committed to the pro-European path, even if no tangible results were evident. In 2010, the celebration transformed into a rather generous concept of the “European Village,” situated in Cathedral Park. During this event, embassies of European Union countries showcase tourism and business opportunities, host discussions on European topics, and provide programs for children. To engage a larger audience, embassies also offer food and drink specialties from their countries, such as Czech beer, Spanish paella, and Italian tortellini. In recent years, the European Village relocated from the park to the Great National Assembly Square due to its growing popularity, exceeding the park’s capacity.

A notable instance was the 2018 Europe Day celebration when the government chose to commemorate both Europe Day and Victory Day on the same day. Officials and representatives made numerous statements emphasizing the interconnection of Europe Day and Victory Day as

⁴⁹ Ion Marandici, “Taming the Oligarchs? Democratization and State Capture: The Case of Moldova,” *Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization* 29, no. 1 (2021): 63-89.

mutually inseparable. For example, the then Speaker of the Parliament, Andrian Candu, stated:

“Never do the horrors that people went through in World War II must be repeated. I talked to the veterans. I shook hands and thanked them for the sacrifice. Today, we are reminded of the heroes who made the creation of Democratic Europe possible. #EuropeDay and #VictoryDay have reconciled people and united them.”⁵⁰

Vlad Plahotniuc, the then Chairman of the Party, commented:

“From year to year, every day, our people are growing stronger, and finally, May 9 is just a celebration of peace and freedom. With fellow Democrats and friends, we were with people and happy to see them friendly, supportive, and patriotic. This shows us that we are on the right track and that together, we will be able to achieve what we have set out for our country.”⁵¹

Currently, Europe Day in Moldova is celebrated in the main square of Chisinau and various regional centers like Cahul, Leova, Ungheni, etc. The program takes the form of an European village, filling the main square with stalls, stages, and tents hosting various events, performances, and debates. Each EU country has its stand, offering information, selling specific products (mostly food), and providing leaflets and flags. Additionally, there's a dedicated area for various NGOs funded by EU funds to present their activities. The European Commission, representatives of the EU Eastern Partnership, and other EU institutions also have stands. There's a designated area for children to play, and attendees can relax, enjoy refreshments, and more. Europe Day takes on the form of a festival, serving as a showcase for EU projects.

In 2023, Europe Day was celebrated on May 13, the first Saturday after May 9. The opening ceremony, held on and next to the massive stage in front of the Government House, commenced with video calls from other Moldovan cities. Schoolchildren outside their schools waved EU and Moldovan flags, chanting pro-EU slogans. Unfortunately, due to

⁵⁰ Zhala Sultanli, *Commemorations and the Politics of Memory: Narrative Dynamics and the Memory of the Second World War in Moldova* (Dissertation, Fairfax, USA, George Mason University, 2020), 158.

⁵¹ Ibid.

technical issues, some greetings were interrupted. Following regional greetings, a group of young people with blue and yellow umbrellas ran in front of the stage, chanting additional pro-European slogans, ultimately forming the shape of the EU flag with their umbrellas. The ceremony continued with a performance by the police orchestra, which played popular songs and the EU anthem. Finally, three policewomen on horseback gave a horse dressage demonstration. The event climaxed with concerts featuring popular Moldovan bands, including Eurovision veterans Zdob și Zdrub and rapper Satoshi. The stage remained open until night for attendees to enjoy watching the Eurovision finals on a huge screen directly at the main square after the live performances.

Overall, the event was peaceful and family-friendly, contrasting Victory Day's somewhat aggressive rhetoric. The organizers spared no expense, and the stark difference in state officials' engagement between Victory Day and Europe Day illustrates Moldova's shifting landscape of memory politics.

Conclusion

The full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine has significantly changed Moldova's geopolitical anchorage. Moldova, which had previously been strictly neutral and tried to maintain good relations with both the EU and Russia, has shifted significantly towards a pro-European orientation in the face of the war. This change was reflected, among other things, in the official memory politics. Memory politics is a concept that refers to the ways in which official versions of history are shaped to emphasize a collective past and a common destiny. The article focused on the contrasting Victory Day and Europe Day celebrations occurring on the same day, May 9.

Although in recent years, the Victory Day celebrations have largely become a tool of Russian propaganda, for many people, especially among the Russian-speaking and Moldovanist-minded population, it is one of the few national holidays they can identify with, and therefore it remains an integral part of their Moldovan identity. Under Vladimir Putin's leadership, Victory Day has been heavily invested in and has become

Russia's most important national holiday, celebrating a mythologized past, military power, might and technological progress. This narrative aims to create a shared historical identity and inspire national pride. Russia has exported this approach to other post-Soviet countries to promote Russian influence and nostalgia for the Soviet era. The popularity of Victory Day celebrations in Moldova demonstrates the limited ability of the Moldovan government to engage non-Romanian-speaking and Moldovanist-minded people in a broader discussion about the country's present and future.

Europe Day in Moldova, on the other hand, is designed to celebrate the European project and serves as a soft power tool for the European Union to promote its values in Eastern Partnership countries like Moldova. Initially, celebrations in Moldova were modest, starting with a small reception for diplomats in 2006. Since 2010, pro-European governments have opened celebrations to a wider public. Nevertheless, their European ideals have often been perceived as superficial, serving mainly for self-promotion and access to European funds. For instance, Vlad Plahotniuc, a vocal advocate of European integration, was one of the most powerful oligarchs in the country, who basically privatized Moldova for his own profit. His ostentatious support for the European Union served as a smokescreen for corruption; he played a convincing show of support for European integration to domestic and international pro-European audiences while he was capturing the state.

Since the onset of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Moldovan leaders have distanced themselves from Victory Day, limiting their involvement to laying flowers at the Eternitate memorial. Instead, they began to celebrate Europe Day in a spectacular way to prove their aspiration for integration into the European Union and the apparent breaking of friendly relations with Russia. In 2023, President Maia Sandu proposed renaming Victory Day to Remembrance Day and celebrating it on May 8, aligning with the EU model. Therefore, changes in memory policy represent one of the measures the pro-EU government took on its mission for European integration.