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## NATIONAL CELEBRATIONS IN REPRESENTATIONS OF CHISINAU URBANITES

CZU:394.26(478-25)

<https://doi.org/10.52603/rec.2024.35.10>

### Rezumat

#### Sărbătorile naționale în reprezentările chișinăuienilor

Coeziunea socială reprezintă una din strategiile prioritare ale statului modern, pentru care este necesară dezvoltarea unei identități civice supraetnice. Sărbătorile naționale au rolul unui anumit marker al participării și al identității civice. În articol este analizat materialul empiric, care permite să identificăm tendințele în percepția locuitorilor or. Chișinău a două sărbători naționale importante – Ziua Independenței Republicii Moldova și Limba Noastră. Rezultatele arată lipsa unei atitudini consensuale față de aceste sărbători din cauza mesajului de bază controversat. Majoritatea respondenților le percep ca simple zile libere. Ceilalți – diferențiază conținutul lor semantic și formatul desfășurării. Conținutul semantic, conform opiniei respondenților, foarte rar corespunde celui declarat, aceștia mai des vorbesc despre caracterul formal al sărbătorilor. În ceea ce privește formatul evenimentului, momente pozitive sunt numite iarmarocul și posibilitatea de a petrece interesant timpul în centrul orașului. Dezavantajele sunt aglomerația de oameni și zgomotul. O astfel de percepție controversată a sărbătorilor naționale poate caracteriza statele tinere cu o istorie politică modestă și o complexitate cumulativă a perioadei de tranziție. Cu toate acestea, pentru dezvoltarea identității civice sunt necesare narațiuni universale integrate despre trecutul și viitorul țării și un construct comun de identificare, care vor fi reflectate în protocoalele sărbătorilor.

**Cuvinte-cheie:** Chișinău, perioada post-sovietică, Ziua Independenței, Limba Noastră, sărbătoare națională, reprezentările orașenilor.

### Резюме

#### Национальные праздники в представлениях жителей Кишинева

Социальная сплоченность является одной из приоритетных стратегий современного государства, для достижения которой нужно развитие надэтнической гражданской идентичности. Национальные праздники играют роль определенного маркера гражданского участия, гражданской идентичности. В статье приводится анализ эмпирического материала, позволяющего наметить тенденции в восприятии жителями Кишинева двух основных национальных праздников – Дня независимости Республики Молдова и Нашего языка (Limba noastră). Результаты показали отсутствие согласованного отношения к данным праздникам из-за противоречивости их базового послания. Большая часть респондентов воспринимает их как простые выходные дни. Остальные разделяют их смысловое наполнение и формат проведения. Смыс-

ловое наполнение, по мнению респондентов, очень редко соответствует декларируемому, они чаще говорят о формальном характере праздников. Что касается форматов проведения, то положительными моментами называются ярмарка и возможность интересно провести время в центре города. Среди отрицательных – большое скопление людей и шум. Такое противоречивое восприятие национальных праздников может характеризовать молодые государства с небольшой политической историей и совокупной сложностью переходного периода. Тем не менее, для развития гражданской идентичности необходимы интегрирующие общезначимые нарративы о прошлом и будущем страны и общий идентификационный конструкт, которые будут отражены в праздничных протоколах.

**Ключевые слова:** Кишинев, постсоветский период, День независимости, День языка, национальный праздник, представления жителей.

### Summary

#### National celebrations in representations of Chisinau urbanites

Social cohesion is one of the priority strategies of the modern state, which requires development of a supra-ethnic civic identity. National holidays performs a role of a certain marker of civic participation, civil identity. The article analyzes the empirical material that allows us to outline the trends in the perception of Chisinau urbanites of the two main national holidays – Independence Day of the Republic of Moldova and Our Language Day (Limba noastră). The results showed a lack of a coherent attitude towards these holidays due to the contradictory nature of their basic message. The majority of respondents perceive them as simple days off. The rest distinguish between their meaning and format of performance. According to the respondents, the semantic content, in their opinion, very rarely corresponds to the declared one; they more often speak about the formal nature of the holidays. As for the format of the event, the positive aspects are the handicraft fair and the opportunity to spend some interesting time in the city center. Among the negative ones are large crowds of people and noise. This contradictory perception of national holidays may characterize young states with a short political history and the cumulative complexity of the transition period. Nevertheless, the development of civil identity requires presence of shared and integrative narratives about the past and the future of the country and a common identity construct to be reflected in celebration protocols.

**Key words:** Chisinau, post-Soviet period, Independence Day, Our Language Day, national celebration, representations of urbanites

Social cohesion is the most important resource for the development of society in harmony and tolerance. To achieve it, it is important to maintain civil identity, i.e. the existence of supra-ethnic principles of social organization. Civil identity is able to unite heterogeneous groups of citizens from different ethno-cultural, social and economic strata. Civil identity is widely bond with symbolic sphere, as Emile Durkheim wrote: "Because the nation is an abstract notion, we need symbols to make it visible and to give us a concrete object of identification" (Finell, Liebkind 2010: 325). National symbols reflect memory and cultural heritage of a nation. Anyway, its dependence on political system, state and ideology causes its reinterpretation in case of political changes. If symbols fail to reflect reality, the symbolic system loses credibility and activates search for alternative (Mînăscuță 2003: 126).

Few scientific works about democracy in the Republic of Moldova mention national symbols with regard to the identity. Thus, Monica Heintz in her analyzing the phenomenon of modern Moldovan statehood, points out that identity and state symbols represent some of the reasons for the weakness of the Moldovan state (Heintz 2008: 3). An empiric research among students of different ethnic origin showed that there is a significant lack of unifying national symbols (Иванова 2015).

National celebrations are an important part of national symbolic system besides flag, anthem, significant events and prominent personalities. G. Elgenius, the author of a number of works dedicated to national symbols in Europe, represents national day as "one collective image by which nations project and advertise themselves to «insiders» as well as to «outsiders». Its aim is to reinforce and sustain the beliefs of a group and revive group identity" (Elgenius 2011: 78). Analyzing some examples of different national days, she generates criteria of a "successful" one: a holiday especially set aside for the people; an annual reunion of the community; a celebration in honor of a historical/national event, and a symbol of the nation (Elgenius 2011: 72). Taking into consideration heterogeneity of a nation and necessity of transition of symbols from ceremonies into everyday life she identifies the following elements of a successful national celebration: relation to visible "others" and link to golden ages; relation to democratization (for the former Soviet Republics) and development of a platform for the negotiation of internal conflicts; mobilization of inter-generational participation; incorporation into educational curricula; integration of other living symbols to visualize commonality; celebration of diversity – display of local and regional

symbols; non-religious framework for inclusiveness; its declaration as public holiday and televised coverage to develop perception of shared celebration and history; the draining of original meaning to achieve a sacred status (Elgenius 2018: 193-194).

Keeping in mind that Moldova will celebrate 33 years of its independence in August 2024, there are still very few studies held about national symbols and festivities. Although an article from 2013 puts such questions as "How have the new regimes attempted to harness the potentials of festive culture in establishing their legitimacy? What are audience attitudes towards official and non-official celebrations?" (Cojocaru, Cash 2013: 8), little is known on the subject. The abovementioned work from 2015 provides some data about significant holidays among the students from the country, and the national ones dominate in the group of Moldovans (Иванова 2015: 206), but are much less popular with other ethnic groups:

Holidays	Moldovans	Ukrainians	Russians	Gagauz	Bulgarians
Independence Day	40%	16%	7%	13%	13%
Our language Day	24%	2%	4%	2%	9%

In 2021–2023, I carried out a research based on semi-structured interviews among Chisinau urbanites regarding their perception of holidays. Thus it makes sense to apply criteria of a "successful" national festivity to the cases of Limba noastră (Our language) and Independence Day, which form a group of the most important national festivities, carried out at the end of August.

Generally national days include honoring the state symbols – the display of the national flag, recital of the anthem. They usually divide into official ceremony and civil participation, and this is the case for Moldova. The history of national festivities held on 27<sup>th</sup> and 31<sup>th</sup> August starts together with gaining independence after the disintegration of the USSR (1991) and proclaiming Romanian as the state language (1989). Gradually there formed a standard annual ceremony for these public holidays with few differences happening from year to year. The ceremony for Independence Day includes the following elements: the President of the Republic holds a public speech, officials lay flowers at the Stephen the Great Monument, and a big concert is played at the Great National Assembly Square. At the same time Central park is turned into a fair for handmade and handicraft products. Anniversaries of independence are celebrated more grandiosely, for example, military parades have been held in the center of Chisinau.

Concerts are an important part of the celebration, and generally display local folk dance ensembles, orchestras and folk and pop music interpreters. In 2023 there was a new activity organized – “Talking with the citizens”: the prime minister and some ministers were open for a talk with the people. Being closer to the citizens should possibly mean a sign of political transparency and true democracy in the country. Thus, the public participation as a rule is limited to watching the dance show, enjoying music, food and fair market. Our Language Day ceremony differs, for the official part is much shorter and there are many activities for children and grown-ups, organized by the local authorities. Recently there appeared a new tradition of writing “National dictation” to check the knowledge of the state language. Generally, Our Language Day activities are connected with local public institutions, which refer to the subject. For example, in 2023 the Hasdeu library proposed an extensive list of public lectures, poems recitals, round tables and discussions regarding mostly Romanian language and literature.

It is important to mention that the both ceremonies include much of the traditional culture elements – music, costumes, food, and handicraft. Last years the president keeps her speech in a traditional Romanian blouse *ie* which she combines with classic outfit. Music at the central stage continues until midnight: mostly traditional during the daytime and in the evening it gradually changes to pop and dance music. Thus, the commemoration of independence together with Our Language Day verbalizes some messages about what it means to be a part of Moldovan nation. The direct messages from the head of the state proclaim Moldova to be a modern civil nation, part of European family with corresponding values. Whereas the festivities as a whole imply ethnic-centered notion of nation, based on traditional values and culture in a folklore format. At the same time modernity is more linked with honoring Romanian language, based on classical Romanian literature.

Empirical data suggest different attitude towards the national festivities. Among the 30 interviewed urbanites only several provided comments on these holidays, for the most called them simply non-working days. Respondents generally perceive them in conjunction, practically as one holiday and tend to distinguish between their meaning and its realization (the ceremony). Practically none of them showed simultaneous satisfaction with the ceremonies and their meaning. In the existing comments we can identify the following points in the semantic content:

- positive connotation:

*I still hope and want to believe that we are on the right way and we have found our culture. My grandmother did not speak Russian...so Romanian language, yes, it is important for me (Radu, 32, Mold.);*

*Independence from the USSR is a good thing, because as a former economist, I don't see any logical reason for communism to exist (Radu, 32, Mold.);*

*I like to see what people are doing. The fact that people are independent. See how happy they are. I feel good about this holiday. I like Independence Day, Language Day. Although I don't know much Romanian. I have children. We educated them up in such a way that they study in Romanian (Ludmila, 43, Rus.);*

*Independence Day and Our Language Day – it's emotional stuff for me because I was at the Great National Assembly with my dad. And I remember everything that happened there. That is, I remember how Grigore Vieru spoke from the stage, what concerts Ion and Doina Aldea-Teodorovici gave (Dumitru, 36, Mold.).*

These comments being few from the one side, leave an impression of connection between the identity (Romanian language) or personal experience of taking part in historic events and emotional involvement in national festivities. As to Ludmila, she may indicate a trend of integration for the ethnic minorities.

- unsatisfying language politics and state achievements for both ethnic majority and minorities, although with different motifs:

*I didn't think of them. Our Language Day, we shouldn't celebrate it if we don't respect it anyway. They're days of rest, we don't celebrate them (Cezara, 52, Mold.);*

*But it's not my language... If it were a common holiday... Maybe I'm not fully aware of it (Tatiana, 39, Rus.);*

*I don't like Language Day because people behave in such a way that doesn't refer to the holiday. As a child I don't really remember these holidays, independence, etc. Games are more important for a child. I don't like it now either. There should be a rally, not concerts. It's like we are proud of our language, but most people make a cacophony. On Independence day most people don't even realize what independence implies. So a rally, to realize what good things have happened, what still needs to be worked on (Mariana, 31, Mold.);*

*Celebration of independence – I don't consider it a celebration. It's just words (Rimma, 72, Ukr.);*

*These holidays are just on paper, to be honest (Silvia, 65, Mold.);*

*When I was a child, the school forced us to go to the parade on the 1<sup>st</sup> of May, to make matinees on the 8<sup>th</sup> of March, and to sing patriotic songs on the 31<sup>st</sup> of*

*August. But they don't have any spiritual value for me. The instinct of patriotism and nationalism is killed in us. I work in the private sector and we work these days. So there is no big celebration. We can go to a concert with the kids, but they don't understand where or why we're going (Ana, 34, Mold.).*

The last long citation is interesting, because Ana traces connection between the Soviet holidays with their obligatory forms of participation and the new, modern holidays. It raises questions, why the new state holidays still have not find their way to all of the citizens, have not developed a common ceremonial form.

-simple days-off:

*We're excited about the weekend. When I was in school, I thought – well, now the lessons start. We don't celebrate them at all (Cristina, 32, Mold/Gag.);*

*No, I don't celebrate it (Ecaterina, 72, Polish);*

*I don't celebrate 27th and 31st of August. I guess it's great to celebrate Independence Day, but somehow it didn't work out in my cultural code that there is such a holiday. It's just a date (Iuliana, 29, Mold.);*

*27th and 31st of August – no (don't celebrate) (Ecaterina, 31, Mold.);*

*27th and 31st of August – barbeque, nature. No special accents. I may be a patriot, but not just to go on 31st and 27th (Eugen, 37, Mold.);*

*National holidays are just weekends, without any special events (Andrei, 38, Mold.);*

*Significance? Independence Day – no, Limba noastră – no. Katya (daughter) has information going at her kindergarten, she understands the reason for the vacation, but we don't celebrate. It's just a day off. Maybe because we are more Russian than Moldovan. In my heart it is difficult for me to call myself Moldovan (Anna, 36, Rus.);*

*It's a time to spend with the family, go to the park, have a picnic, go out of town (Dumitru, 36, Mold.);*

*I don't celebrate them, it's just some time for having rest (Ina, 30, Mold.);*

*On our free days we celebrate them. We've been downtown. Now we used to meet with our friends too. We celebrate somewhere. I mean, one or two days. It's an occasion for us to meet. And at least once to make a toast to Limba noastră or to independence (Victor, 34, Mold.).*

Most of these respondents perceive the holidays as weekends and opportunity to have rest or meet with their friends. Some of them seem to feel an inner discrepancy between the possible sense of the event and its realization. Mostly these are ethnic minorities or people from ethnically-mixed families, who tend to perceive their ethnic and national identity more expressively.

As to the ceremony, the official part of the celebration is rarely mentioned. The respondents talk only about the handicraft fair (positively) and crowding (negatively):

*I don't go to the center, and I've never been. Yes, I watch the ceremonial part on TV, the president's speech. I like it, but I don't go there (Silvia, 65, Mold.);*

*I liked Our Language Day, when we went for a walk and watched fireworks (Tatiana, 39, Rus.);*

*There were just hand-made things. It is interesting to see who and what produces, what they sell. Something authentic to look for. And now somehow I don't feel like it, precisely because I've stopped liking crowds of people (Alexandra, 30, Ukr.);*

*National holidays, it's good that they exist, but I don't like large crowds of people, and if I have some free time, either I cook something unusual, or we go somewhere (Radu, 32, Mold.);*

*It makes me feel good to think that they exist. It's nice that it's a weekend. We used to go to the square. If possible, we always went out for a walk. I like to see what people from the villages do, they bring some products made with their own hands. I like to buy something interesting. Some candlesticks, clay houses. I like traditional things. I even want to buy myself this Moldovan blouse (Ludmila, 43, Rus.);*

*Yes, again, we can just get together because it's a holiday. It's everybody's day off. Get together at our parents' house. Yeah, we go sometimes (in the Center). We went last year. We really like the fairs that they have. It's fun to go there, all the goodies, nice things. But I can't say we get the whole family together. Last year I was with my wife. They took my mother-in-law, but without my parents. Yeah. It's pretty cool. It's not always a tradition to go. When we have time, when we want to (Leonid, 34, Rus.).*

As we can see, the direct meaning of the holidays – honoring the independence of the country and the state language – is practically not mentioned. Only one respondent spoke about his emotions due to his childhood experience of being present at the Great national assembly. For some of the respondents the festivities would have more meaning if they could be more personally involved – the answers show dissatisfaction and even resentment. It may be caused by both high expectations from the achievements of the state and its cultural policy, in particular the program of the festive events. Perhaps, if the two festivities were separated in terms of the meaning, the Independence Day would receive more support from the citizens speaking other languages. In general, these holidays seem to lack common national character and do not fulfill an integrative role for the community of citizens. If to appeal to the conditions

G. Elgenius identified for a successful national holiday, there seem to be a number of omissions. The positive factors include the status of a public holiday and televised coverage. Anyway, the other conditions are scarcely fulfilled. The intergenerational factor plays a little role during Our Language Day due to the participation of the children, but does not imply intergenerational exchange, which is left for private (family) expression. Local and regional diversity is also not taken into account, even though the regional factor is generally used for political purposes. The protocol and design of celebrations are also not constantly updated to attract new groups of the citizens. The conflicting narratives regarding the past of the state, its Golden age also remain a big problem. The festivities are based on a certain narrative related to liberation from the Eastern influences and acquisition of a national identity and language. Although understanding the nation in ethnic terms excludes minorities from the narrative. Moreover, there seems to be discrepancy between civil identity of many citizens and the lack of the official channels to express it during the national holidays. Thus, these two main public holidays, on the one hand, reveal the problem of an inclusive nation, and on the other hand, demonstrate the need to revise their design in order to align it with the central message.

There is one more important point to discuss: why do national festivities remain unpopular with the majority of Moldovan citizens. If to compare Republic of Moldova with other European countries regarding the importance of national and local holidays, there would be a noticeable correlation between the rich political history and popularity of the state holidays. For example, the mass involvement of citizens in historic holidays on the level of self-organized parades etc. Although, in Eastern Europe and ex-Soviet republics people tend to prefer religious and family celebrations. For example, the research held in Lithuania and Bulgaria showed that traditional celebrations that are usually celebrated within the family are more popular in Vilnius and Sofia compared to modern holidays, which are mostly related to the history of the state and celebrated with friends (Šaknys 2021: 217).

The predominance and preference of traditional holidays in Moldova can be explained by the rural character of national culture. M. Heintz noticed that the lack of civil identity in Moldova is historically linked with 'intractability' of the peasantry. In the Soviet times and before the poor connection between the towns and villages limited peasants from the influences of supra-local myths and ideologies, leaving them instead loyal to their local rural identi-

ties. After 1991 and with the onset of labour migration "by 'skipping' towns, villagers missed an occasion to familiarize themselves with the existence of the Moldovan state and the changes transpiring with the dissolution of the USSR" (Heintz 2008: 12).

J. Cash, an anthropologist who carried out extensive research in Moldova identified some mechanisms of this phenomena. First, she noticed that revival of cultural traditions after 1990s went through the so called "folkloric movement", and as a result cultural and social life in the country has not been retraditionalized (Cash 2016: 93). Folkloric movement gradually "showcase Moldova as a nation of villages, rather than as an ethnically-defined nation" (Cash 2016: 85). In a parallel way, from a bottom-up approach, she revealed that the national calendar is less salient in the rural cycles of work and leisure (Cash 2011: 193). It is also worth noting that J. Cash wrote about the role of the hierarchical and politicized control of cultural activity, remained from the Soviet era: in most villages, culture workers have primary responsibility for organizing public celebrations, but they often do not undertake these responsibilities without the mayor's direction (Cash 2011: 197). This phenomenon drastically reduces involvement of population into public festivities, for traditionally local holidays were self-organized by the community.

Thus, while national symbolism in Western countries forms "a «civic» religion for which self-representation is as crucial as religious symbolism was earlier" (Elgenius 2011: 78), Moldovans adhere to the traditional religious calendar. National days in Europe "constitute an anchor in an ever-changing world", while in Moldova such anchor is attributed to the family and religion. This may be typical for a young state with a short political history of independence and vulnerable economic and social life specific for a transitional period. The coexisting different historical narratives do not produce conflicts due to the general political apathy of population, but at the same time it deprives national festivities its integrational potential.

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