The Margins of European Identity Orthodox Geopolitics in Moldovan Ethnopolitics

Christoffer Stoerup

University of Copenhagen, Copenhagen, Denmark

This article presents the preliminary results of an ongoing Ph.D. project examining the interrelatedness of competing religious, nationalist and geopolitical projects in the Republic of Moldova. By looking at the local churches' public address around key events in recent Moldovan history, it is sought to determine to which degree the local churches are mirroring the positions of the patriarchates and their hosting states. The main hypothesis is that the local churches to a larger extent than recognized in the existing literature are acting independently pursuing their local interests and forming alliances to this end. If this is the case the churches can be expected to phrase the question of national and geopolitical belonging differently from the competing Moldovanist and pan-Romanian narratives as well as the European and Eurasian projects.

Keywords: Orthodox Christianity, canonical jurisdictions, Moldova, national belonging, European identity

Introduction

Changing governments in the Republic of Moldova have fought for a single orthodox church covering the country's believers regardless of their ethnicity. This has been seen as possible by keeping the local churches under the Muscovite patriarchate. The Romanian Orthodox Church has made claims to the jurisdiction in Moldova, thus mirroring Romanian nationalist claims. Moldovan nationalism has been called a "strange beast" as it created a Moldovan state, but not a nation, or a nation divided in the question of its Romanian or Moldovan identity. This has led to the categorization of political parties in Moldova as ethno-political parties. Orthodoxy in Moldova has thus become a dispute over jurisdiction, inside a question of ethnicity, wrapped in competing geopolitical projects. The unwrapping is approached by analyzing how the churches are phrasing the questions of religious, national and geopolitical belonging.

This paper examines the main questions in my ongoing Ph.D. project on the role of the Romanian and Russian Orthodox Church in the questions of national belonging and geopolitical allegiance, as well as the relation between churches and state, in the Republic of Moldova. When the USSR (Union of Soviet Socialist Republics) collapsed in 1991, it marked the beginning of a decade in which ethnicity, religion and language became arguments in conflicts in several successor states. One of the main factors behind the Soviet disintegration had been the rise of national movements. In the Republic of Moldova, a question remained after the initial success of a national movement known as *The Popular Front of Moldova*: What nation was this national movement fighting for? For many of the leaders of the Popular Front the answer was Romania. This

Christoffer Stoerup, Ph.D., student, Institute for Cross-Cultural and Regional Studies, University of Copenhagen.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Rue Glesener 20, L-1630 Luxembourg, Luxembourg zip code: L-1630. E-mail: stoerup@fastmail.fm.

answer did however not resonate well with the majority of the Moldovans at that time, and the Front's initial popular support diminished. Instead a conflict with russophone representatives of workers concentrated around the industrial centers in Transnistria escalated into a Transnistrian separatist movement and, subsequently a civil war ending as a frozen conflict maintained by Russian military presence. Meanwhile, the fall of communism had allowed the patriarchates in Moscow and Bucharest to pursue their interests beyond the borders of their patron states, and in the Republic of Moldova, there was an acute shortage of Romanian speaking clergy. The Muscovite Patriarchate handled this by adopting and meeting local expectations at a time when its hosting state, the Soviet Union, had failed to take the necessary steps to ensure cohesion among the republics and ethnicities. The leaders of the Popular Front of Moldova had first sought to achieve an independent (autocephalous) Moldovan Orthodox Church, but as sufficient support for autocephaly could not be gathered, it was instead decided to try to reopen the Bessarabian Metropolitanate, which functioned under the Romanian Patriarchate between the world wars. Changing Moldovan governments refused to recognize the functioning of the RomOC (Romanian Orthodox Church) through the Bessarabian Metropolitanate, as this might be entailed by further divisions along ethnic lines. It was only after a law suit against the Moldovan state at the European Court of Human Rights, that the Bessarabian Metropolitanate was finally recognized. Twenty years later, much has changed, but many of the questions related to religious, ethnic and geopolitical belonging remain open. A common answer to these questions are found describing Moldova as a nation torn between Russian influence and Romanian roots, a conflict formulated in religious arguments in the claims of Muscovite and Romanian patriarchates to jurisdiction. The patriarchates are thus often perceived as doing little more than foreign policy for their patron states through their local metropolitan sees. While the trans-regional political interests are not to be ignored, it seems fair to assume that local interests exist as well and that local clergy might not always act or speak as it is supposed to. It is the hypothesis of this on-going Ph.D.-project that the local churches while acting within a field of geo- and ethno-political projects and interests, are however not enslaved to them, and political alliances can be made when it fits the agendas of the local churches. These agendas and alliances are expected to follow short term interests, compared to the patriarchates' long term ambitions.

This research process is primarily centered around collecting and analyzing the official statements of the principal religious and nationalistic actors. Both the selection and analysis will take into consideration the emphasis that has been given to certain topics or events during a series of informal interviews carried out during field studies in Moldova, some of which with the informants' permission will be quoted and make an integral part of the material analyzed. It is however not the scope of this study to examine the almost infinite nuances and versions of religious and national belonging which unfolds on an individual level. Instead the public address of the religious institutions will be studied in its immediate context in order to examine the position and strategies of the institutions. An attempt will then be made to clarify the extent to which the local churches in the Republic of Moldova are adopting Moldovanist and pan-Romanianist historical narratives in their public address by looking at the media platforms and statements of the local churches. It will further be examined if the local churches support or lend legitimacy to the same political actors and projects as their patriarchates, and in turn the patron states of the patriarchates. This is expected to be translated into how the local churches phrase the question of ethnic and geopolitical belonging, and zooming in on the public address; which ethnonyms, civic or religious terms the local churches choose when naming the public they are addressing on events of special importance for Moldovan politics generally and especially the discussion of

country's European or Eurasian future.

The Churches' Public Address on the Competing Geopolitical Projects

The signing of an association agreement with the European Union including visa-free travel has been a dominating theme in the Moldovan debate for the last years. It would turn out that one of the most troublesome legislative reforms was the law on anti-discrimination of sexual and religious minorities on the labor market, later to be renamed as the law of equal opportunities. Though the Romanian Orthodox Church previously had fought against comparable reforms in Romania, the church has now embraced a European identity, which has become an essential concept for pro-Romanian actors in Moldova, as well as Romania's official proclamations regarding the possible common future for what is perceived as two Romanian states. On this issue however the Metropolitanate of Bessarabia has not been stressing the European identity, but the religious, national and family values threatened by a law described as "An anti-Christian law which is targeted to undermine the foundation of our society—the family"¹. It is however not the EU demanding this legislative reform which is to blame for this but the local politicians, "Using human rights and the so-called free travel in Europe as pretext, our deputies have attacked our national values and Christian faith..."². When the Metropolitanate of Bessarabia uses the term national values it refers to Romanian values, which are attacked by the Moldovan deputies using the EU, of which Romania is member, as a pretext. The Metropolitanate of Chisinau under the Muscovite Patriarchate could be expected to be closer to Russia than Europe on this matter, and did first actively engage in public manifestations against the law on anti-discrimination. After a couple of weeks of supporting the protests the Moldovan Metropolitan advised the faithful to abstain from political action, but continue their prayers against these reforms "by fasting, prayer and patience all will be revealed to us by God, and then we will realize the dangers to which we have been exposed"³. Later tensions were to grow again and the question was raised whether the politicians who supported the law should be allowed to receive Communion. It was once more the local politicians who were the main target of criticism. Representatives of the Moldovan Orthodox Church claimed that the law on anti-discrimination was promoted because members of the political elite had bought up hotels along the Nistru and now speculated in homosexual sex tourism⁴. The Moldovan Orthodox Church described the country's situation as between "provocations both spiritual and moral, but also geopolitical"⁵. In the same time the Metropolitanate of Chisinau was also making claims to a two thousands years' long Christian tradition similar to that of the Romanian Orthodox Church. "What happens under the pretext of respecting the rights and freedom for the passions of man is nothing but a program of elimination and self-destruction of our identity with its two thousand years of spiritual values."⁶

The Moldovan State and the Churches

The spring 2013 was however also marked by an internal crisis in the governing coalition, the Alliance for European Integration, which started to disintegrate and struggle to reestablish a parliamentary majority. While condemning the government, the Moldovan Orthodox Church in the same time strongly encouraged political

1<http://mitropoliabasarabiei.md/home/2012+05+26>

2<http://mitropoliabasarabiei.md/home/2012+05+26>

3<http://mitropolia.md/mesajul-mitropolitului-vladimir-in-urma-unor-declaratii-denigratoare-la-adresa-bisericii/>

4<http://inprofunzime.md/emisiuni/shows/in-profuzime-cu-lorena-bogza/video/89416/pagina-2.html>

5<http://mitropolia.md/a-avut-loc-sinodul-bisericii-ortodoxe-din-moldova>

6<http://mitropolia.md/a-avut-loc-sinodul-bisericii-ortodoxe-din-moldova>

stability for the sake of country and people. “We consider that in these moments, the phrase ‘political struggle’ should be replaced with ‘collaboration’ to demonstrate for everybody that more important than anything else is the wish and capacity to dedicate one’s work to the country and the people which one represents.”⁷ Both churches are drawing on the widely spread myths of conspiracies, when they explain the driving forces behind the laws on anti-discrimination, which threaten the values and faith of the orthodox believers, who in their turn should mobilize either at street protests or in prayer together with the church. Even if opinion polls are not always as reliable in Moldova as one could wish, the EU (European Union) does seem to enjoy more confidence among the Moldovans than the Moldovan politicians. When the churches are blaming the local politicians for having selfish motives for implementing the law of anti-discrimination, it is likely to resonate well with a population already distrustful towards their politicians. A few years back during one of the most dramatic events in recent Moldovan history, “the Twitter-revolution” which took place in April 2009, similar insinuations to conspiracies were made by the Metropolitanate of Chisinau, when trying to persuade protesters to get off the streets. “...we are capable of controlling ourselves and not be led by others, who have vicious and destructive desires. It is easy to destroy and create chaos, but life needs stability and harmony.”⁸ These appeals to remain calm on the homepage of the Metropolitanate of Chisinau are stressing the Christian unity, which goes beyond and above political divisions and the passions they arouse: “Both those who won and lost the elections are orthodox Christians.”⁹ The questions of ethnic and political belonging are used by those with vicious desires, which at that time meant the liberal opposition, which was to form the nucleus of the Alliance of European Integration after the repeated elections a few months later. The accusations of disrupting the stability and harmony are more or less identical to the rhetoric used against the Metropolitanate of Bessarabia and Romanian Patriarchate who are said to provoke strife within the orthodox family.

The Question of Nationality

However, if we compare these statements with the articles appearing on the homepage of the Metropolitanate of Bessarabia during this dramatic period, we don’t find the current events addressed at all, much less any encouragement to go to the streets or in any other way to stand behind the pro-Romanian liberal parties. The only article published on the official homepage is a longer theological and historical recapitulation of why the Romanian Orthodox Church has the jurisdiction in Moldova due to the fact that the Moldovans are ethnic Romanians¹⁰. While the Metropolitanate continues to address its audience as Romanians, it is also made clear that this is a name that should be deserved and inspire pride. For instance, on the Romanian national day the 1st of December, the believers are encouraged to “show by their actions that they are Romanians”¹¹. One of these actions could be, together with clergy from the Bessarabian Metropolitanate, to use the national day to show thankfulness for “the blessings bestowed upon the Romanian people in 1918, when by divine providence the century long dream of unifying all Romanians in a single national state was realized.”¹² However not all of the citizens of Moldova who consider themselves Romanian will share the century old dream. For the majority of Moldovan citizens who wish to preserve a Moldovan state, it might be provocative to insinuate that God has

7<http://protv.md/stiri/politic/mitropolitul-vladimir-indeamna-clasa-politica-la-conlucrare-razboirea-1.html>

8www.Mitropolia.md > Stiri si festivitati nationale > Arhiva > Aprile 2009

9www.Mitropolia.md > Stiri si festivitati nationale > Arhiva > Aprile 2009

10<http://www.mitropoliabasarabiei.ro/?m=200904>

11<http://www.mitropoliabasarabiei.ro/?p=790>

12<http://www.mitropoliabasarabiei.ro/?p=790>

intervened to ensure Romanian national unity. Thus the Metropolitanate of Bessarabia is hardly reaching out with its rhetoric on the question of nationality, which comes off as less compromising than that of Romanian representatives stressing a common European identity and European future for the peoples of the two (Romanian) states. The Metropolitanate of Chisinau is addressing the citizens in the Republic in several ways, some ethnically neutral such as Christians or simply the people. At other times, however, ethnonyms are used so loosely that it seems a point is made to downplay their significance. In an interview titled *We Do Not Divide Saints According to National Criteria*,¹³ the Metropolitan Vladimir explains that under the category Moldovan saints “exist saints who pleased God glorifying him in Moldova, but who were of Romanian nationality”¹⁴. Likewise when talking about a Moldovan person the Metropolitan refers to “all inhabitants of Moldova, them being Moldovan, Romanian or Bulgarian.”¹⁵ Considering the heated discussion about the Romanian or Moldovan national identity of the titular population in Moldova, and the importance this question is given in Moldovan politics, one can’t help to notice that the Metropolitan isn’t explaining who qualifies as Romanian and who would then be Moldovan. It is tempting to think that this vagueness is a strategy employed by the Moldovan Orthodox Church to reach the segments of the population defining themselves as Romanian speakers, the same people as the Romanians or simply as Romanians. The plasticity of the church’s definitions of ethnic identity is fitting well with its aspiration to take on the role as preserver of Christian unity in Moldova opposed to those who create tensions, who are instruments in a conspiracy against faith and society.

Conclusion

There are thus a number of notable differences in the ways the churches are addressing and phrasing the question of national belonging and the relation to the Moldovan state and its possible European or Eurasian future. The Metropolitanate of Bessarabia is only addressing Romanians in the Republic, but without embracing an official Romanian vision of the two Romanian states in the EU. Nor are references to the European identity of the majority population in Moldova and Romania being made by the Metropolitanate. Its homophobic rhetoric seems closer to that of the Romanian Orthodox Church from before Romanian EU-membership was on the table than how the question is officially addressed today. Instead pan-Romanian unity as it was reached in 1918, is described as the divine plan and dream of the Romanians since even before the name of the nation was coined. Actually neither Metropolitanate is repeating the geopolitical project, a European or Eurasian future envisaged for Moldova, promoted by the patron states of their patriarchates when addressing the public at these politically crucial moments. The Metropolitanate of Chisinau is also condemning the politicians for undermining the country’s Christian values and at times urging the faithful to protest, but in the same time preaching political stability for the good of the Moldovan state and prayer instead of political action as the right way for the Christian population to deal with turbulent times. An attitude that makes it tempting to assume, that the leadership of the Metropolitanate in most cases will ally itself with whoever is in power. The views expressed by the Metropolitanate on the law of anti-discrimination are mirroring those of the Muscovite Patriarchate and its patron state, but in the same time not opposing the European project. The threat

13 <http://mitropolia.md/mitropolitul-vladimir-al-chisinaului-si-al-intregii-moldove-noi-nu-i-impartim-pe-sfinti-dupa-criteriul-nationalitatii/>

14 <http://mitropolia.md/mitropolitul-vladimir-al-chisinaului-si-al-intregii-moldove-noi-nu-i-impartim-pe-sfinti-dupa-criteriul-nationalitatii/>

15 <http://mitropolia.md/mitropolitul-vladimir-al-chisinaului-si-al-intregii-moldove-noi-nu-i-impartim-pe-sfinti-dupa-criteriul-nationalitatii/>

against the country and people are according to the Metropolitanate not coming from the West, but the corrupt Moldovan officials not sharing the values of the people who before anything else is Christian. The question of ethnic belonging is thus assuming a secondary role in the statements of the Metropolitanate of Chisinau, while being of foremost importance for Metropolitanate of Bessarabia adopting a pan-Romanianist narrative without the emphasis on the European identity of other pro-Romanian actors in Moldova or the Patriarchate in Bucharest. The value of Moldovanism for the Metropolitanate of Chisinau is reduced to its contribution to the vagueness in question of ethnic identity in Moldova, upon which the Metropolitanate seeks to position itself as the promoter of Christian unity in the Republic.

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