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Abstract

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Language Policies or Language Politics? The Case of Moldova

The paper will examine Moldova’s language policies, taking into account the pending ratification of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages (ECRML). While Moldova has ratified the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, it limited itself to signing the ECRLM in 2002, and still had to ratify ten years later.

The paper will take into account Moldova’s specificities, particularly its deep divisions along language lines. The main societal polarization is found in the divide among the speakers of Russian and of the state language, Moldovan/Romanian. To the first category also belong national minorities such as Ukrainians, Gagauzians and Bulgarians, who tend to linguistically assimilate to the Russians. Large sections of the population do not speak the state language; and the two main linguistic groups inhabit two largely separate societal spheres, with different media and educational institutions. There is not even consensus as to whether the state language should be referred to as ‘Romanian’ or ‘Moldovan’, and issues of script have led to an escalation of tensions with the break-away region of Transnistria.

The paper will examine to what extent essentialist notions of language and ethnicity, originating from the Soviet nationalities discourse, are at the foundations of current language policies, and have led to their politicisation in the post-Soviet period. Essentialist views are inimical to the development of a multi-layered identity, and an overarching Moldovan consciousness. When combined with other factors, such as economic dependency on Russia, essentialist notions have led to Moldova taking a different route from that of Baltic countries with regard to language policies. It will be argued that essentialist perceptions on linguistic identity are also behind what seems to be a resistance to ECRLM ratification.