

BUILDING A NONVIOLENT IDENTITY WHILE SURROUNDED BY ICONS OF VIOLENCE

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ABSTRACT

This paper mostly analyses the way violence is re-branded through public monuments belonging to a controlled manipulative narrative and how language is aimed to conceal reality, covering past trauma and pain and turning them into glamorous concepts like victory and glory. Art and language subtly translate societal violence and restructure reality.

In many Moldovan cities, monument tanks or communist statues are an important part of the urban scenery. Their significance is deeply rooted in the rhetoric of identity, and they are perceived as symbols of heroism and patriotism, seemingly coexisting with the lights and shadows of the still troubled Moldovan identity.

Following field research and a questionnaire conducted in Taraclia and Comrat, this paper shows that these monuments are forms of structural/cultural violence that connect and feed direct violence. The analysis revealed the extensive use of underhand euphemisms to refer to war and violence, with the purpose of mystifying and misrepresenting the war icons on public display and the use

of physical force towards children and women. Glorified physical aggression makes people believe violence can be used to achieve discipline, to show bravery, and firmness of hand.

These results are associated with the way Moldovans describe themselves as hard-working, hospitable, and kind. By using sociolinguistics, the paper intends to show that, against the background of Russian propaganda about victory, glory, and heroism, a narrative mirrored by tank monuments and communist statues, and given a history of domestic violence concealed by euphemisms, the Moldovan social construct of national identity is trying hard to incorporate non-violent values. Torn between various tools of propaganda, consisting of many cultures and being a pinnacle of multilingualism, the heterogeneous Moldovan people are confusedly building their fragmented identity on the ashes of a tormented history.

Key words: *structural violence, cultural violence, direct violence, euphemism, propaganda*

INTRODUCTION

However disconcerting and distressing it might be, violence is an essential part of our existence. It can take many shapes, and it is eloquently mirrored by culture and language. Related to either physical force, the use of power, or both, resulting in physical harm and/or psychological trauma, this manifest or latent trait of human na-

ture strongly influences how we perceive life and express ourselves. Violence is usually born where there is a “difference between the potential and the actual, between what could have been and what is.” (Galtung 1969: 168).

Following a first-hand experience in South-Eastern Europe, this paper started off as an attempt to understand a rather confusing contradiction observed during recurring visits to the Republic of Moldova, namely the contrast between the mellow-hearted Moldovan personality and the cult for war symbols. It is our experience that most Moldovans are caught between the aspiration towards Occidental values and a strong Soviet Union influence, having suffered the trauma of being cut from their Romanian roots. Consequently, being torn apart by the tidal tendencies of several cultures, the heterogeneous Moldovan people strive to reconcile the contradictions of language (even if the state language is Romanian, there is wide use of Russian, Bulgarian, and Gagauz languages), the Romanian heritage, and the remnants of the Russian mentality.

The key assumption is that the statues reminiscent of communist leaders, the tanks, cannons, or machine guns on public display, which are commonplace in the Republic of Moldova, are deeply rooted in the rhetoric of identity. Moreover, Moldovans’ testimonies illustrate the positive perception of such symbols. There is a far-going contradiction between the poetics of violence and the way Moldovans perceive themselves as a fairly peaceful, hard-working, and hospitable people. To tackle such assumptions, the paper presents the interpretation of a quantitative and

qualitative study conducted in the Republic of Moldova, which combines field research with a questionnaire.

STRUCTURAL VIOLENCE AND CULTURAL VIOLENCE

In order to explain how violence can be expressed through language, art, and other means of expression, we shall start by explaining two key concepts: structural violence and cultural violence, both coined by Johan Galtung. Structural violence (a process), as opposed to personal (behavioural) violence (an event), refers to forms of violence that may indirectly harm people as a result of an unequal distribution of power and resources and is embedded in societal structures. “A key aspect of structural violence is that it is often subtle, invisible, and accepted as a matter of course” (Lee 2019: 124), which makes it difficult to discern and measure.

However, given that both direct/behavioural and structural violence involve an “avoidable insult to basic human needs”, Galtung builds a taxonomy of basic needs: survival needs, well-being needs, identity needs, meaning needs and freedom needs (Galtung, 1990: 292). The most relevant ones for this paper are the need connected to identity, to the feeling of alienation and segmentation, which might appear as a result of being desocialised away from a culture and resocialised into another (for instance, through language).

Structural violence can be coded through symbols that are used to make aggression acceptable, heroic, and

even desirable. This has been referred to as cultural violence, which implies “those aspects of culture, the symbolic sphere of our existence – exemplified by religion and ideology, language and art, empirical science, and formal science (logic, mathematics) – that can be used to justify or legitimize direct or structural violence. Stars, crosses, and crescents; flags, anthems, and military parades; the ubiquitous portrait of the Leader; inflammatory speeches and posters – all those come to mind.” (Galtung, 1990: 291) The causal flow starts off from cultural violence and reaches direct violence.

THE ICONS OF WAR

First, we shall briefly revise the monuments under analysis and a few historical facts that would help explain their significance. Until the declaration of independence, the Republic of Moldova was one of the 15 republics of the former URSS and was filled with Soviet monuments. Statues of Lenin used to tower every district centre and town hall of bigger villages, while monuments portraying Soviet soldiers were a common sight. In front of the government building from Chişinău, there was Vladimir Lenin’s statue, and the parliament was filled with images of Marx and Engels (Preaşcă, 2019).

At present, most of such reminiscences of the past have disappeared. However, in the Republic of Moldova, 17 statues of the Bolshevik leader Vladimir Lenin and two of Karl Marx’s are still in place. Interestingly enough, even though in 1991, the Moldovan Parliament adopted

a law that decided to liquidate such communist symbols, five Soviet monuments were however included in the Register of Monuments from the Republic of Moldova, as resulted from the Ministry of Culture's official web page. These include statues of Serghei Lazo and Grigore Kotovski, a depiction of the *liberation* of Chişinău city by the Soviet army, the monument of the fighters for Soviet Power and the statue of the young heroes who sacrificed themselves for freedom.

Another widely discussed topic in the Moldovan press involves the Soviet tanks displayed in several localities of the country. Besides the communist statues mentioned above, the Republic of Moldova has several tanks that serve as war monuments, mostly commemorating the Second World War, located in: Comrat, Coşniţa, Tiraspol, Corneşti, Pohrebia, Cahul, Leuşeni, Bălţi, Dubăsari etc. (*În Republica Moldova sunt şapte tancuri monument*, 2016, Raţă, 2015, Stan, 2015). The history behind such monuments suggests these were weapons actually used in the Second World War, somehow preserved or found and refurbished to meet the requirements for public display.

The tank from Corneşti, Ungheni district, attracted public attention in 2016 when the Ministry of Defence decided it should be torn down, as it was a symbol of war horrors. The socialists, opposing this decision, guarded it night and day to keep it from being dismantled. Eventually, the tank stayed in place. In 2018, it was painted in the colours of the Romanian flag, to the dissatisfaction of several members of the Socialist Party of Ungheni. They repainted the tank and the platform in green (Preaşcă,

2019). In 2019, the same tank made the news because Vadim Krasnoselski, the leader of the separatist administration of Tiraspol, declared he wanted to propose that the authorities from Chişinău hand over the tank to Tiraspol. The reason was the poor condition of the decommissioned weapon, that, if handed over, would be refurbished and displayed as a tribute to the Soviet army's victory. Ungheni press reported at the time that the tank had no historical value, as it was not a relic of the Second World War. (Grâu, 2019)

The tank from Leuşeni, located 10 km away from the Romanian border, was taken out of the Prut River in 1967 and installed on a platform for everybody to see. A Moldovan newspaper also reports that it was painted in the colours of the Romanian flag, on top of which the map of extended Romania (united with the Republic of Moldova) was impressed, as a way to express the association with the Romanian ancestry. This happened on the 23 of August, exactly 79 years after the Ribbentrop-Molotov pact was signed, through which Bessarabia and Bucovina were taken out of Romania and annexed to the Soviet Union (Tancul de la Leuşeni..., 2018). This is an eloquent illustration of the clash between two opposing powers and influences.

Another war symbol, the monument from Coşniţa, is reported to be one of the tanks engaged in the fights from May 1944. It fell in the Nistru River, and it was later refurbished and ennobled with the status of a monument. With a very suggestive name, the Freedom Tank from Comrat, a T-34, symbolises the weapons that defended

Comrat against the Germans on 22 august 1944 and is considered to be a symbol of victory, as explained by the Moldovans who live there (*Pe teritoriul Moldovei sunt 8 tancuri...*, 2019).

In Transnistria, the centre of Tiraspol is marked by the Memorial of Glory, located in Suvorov Square, to commemorate the veterans and heroes of World War II, the Soviet-Afghan War and the Transnistrian war. Among the monuments, there is a decommissioned tank suggestively placed next to an orthodox chapel. In the vicinity, a statue of Lenin oversees the square. People of Tiraspol take photos of the monument and integrate it in their seemingly peaceful life. The symbolism of such an association of elements reflects the pillars of propaganda: violence as embodied by a war weapon and personified through the emblematic figure of Lenin.

One of the Moldovan tanks stands out because of the history behind it. In Taraclia, one of the little cities located in Gagauzia, next to the building of the “Grigore Țamblac” University, a decommissioned tank lifted on a platform, repainted, and covered in lake, honours the Moldovans who fought in the Afghanistan war. The fact that, against expectations, this is a rather recent monument, unrelated to the Second World War, suggests that its erection comes to mirror a tradition of having war heroes cherished through the display of weapons, thus perpetuating violent symbolism.

The weapons briefly presented above “are reminders of the Soviet past and most of them are directed towards West”, as explained through an online article (*În Repub-*

lica Moldova sunt șapte tancuri-monument, 2016), as a silent warning to occidental values. When asked, some inhabitants often refer to the Second World War as the *Great War for the defence of the country* or the *Great Patriotic War*, thus verbalising the assimilation of a Soviet myth and their feeling of pride in this heroic accomplishment.

We believe that these monuments are one of the most subtle methods of influencing public opinion, thus proving Helmus et al.'s assumption that "*the Kremlin's narrative spin extends far beyond its network of media outlets and social media trolls*" (Helmus, 2018: 8). To quote Boulegue et al., "Russian vectors of influence encompass a variety of forms and actors: identity politics invoking the Russian world narrative and Soviet nostalgia; politicized promotion of the concept of 'compatriots' (involving national minorities and ethnic Russians); language use; appeals to supporters of unification with Romania and anti-Romanian movements alike; instrumentalization of separatism and the frozen conflict in Transnistria, and overall anti-Western sentiment." (Boulegue, 2018: 29).

Moreover, the tank monuments presented above are signs of structural violence because they relate to the idea of identity and refer to a powerful narrative about glory. We believe that using weapons as monuments is more detrimental to the collective psyche than statues of communist figures because inanimate tools of destruction are put on a pedestal and presented as symbols to be honoured. Such icons of violence displayed for everybody may result in a lack of empathy and the objectification of the enemy.

Moreover, they make people accustomed to seeing, on an everyday basis, symbols that glorify violence.

FINDINGS OF THE FIELD RESEARCH

Before presenting the research results, it is of utmost importance to note that multiculturalism in the Republic of Moldova is unfathomable and only paralleled by its linguistic diversity. The 2014 census reports that the ethnic structure of the population is: 73.7% of the population – Moldovans, Ukrainians, and Russians – 10.5%, Gagauzs – 4.5 % of the population, Romanians – 6.9%, Bulgarians – 1.8%. However, there are regions where Romanian language, although the official language of the state, is seldom used (Comrat – the heart of Gagauzia, for example), while Russian and Gagauz are more frequent. Most Moldovans speak at least two languages (Romanian and Russian). It is actually quite striking to see that a rather small country is inhabited by so many cultures and that on a hundred kilometres range, there are deep changes in the language used in everyday life and the ethnicity of the people one encounters.

To assess the influence of publicly displayed symbols of war on Moldovan people, the field research has been completed through a questionnaire with 40 respondents, aged 22 – 40, from Taraclia and Comrat. The latter was conducted in Romanian, which is a second language for most respondents, so it is possible that some linguistic subtleties were lost on the participants. The five items were phrased so that they would connect the perception of monument tanks and communist statues (cultural vio-

lence) to the attitude towards direct violence against children and women, as well as to the respondents' description of their national identity.

When asked what publicly displayed tanks and weapons refer to, 45% of the respondents answered by evoking the historical event: the Second World War. However, another 40% used depictions like „the great victory” and „heroism” instead of flatly naming the event they commemorate. Only two answers bitterly mentioned Russian propaganda. The second item asked respondents to freely associate the monuments with words. Similarly, 40% said “victory”, while more than 60% of the answers used other words with positive connotations. While the first items referred to cultural violence, the third and the fourth questions referred to direct aggression towards children and women. The answers showed that, while almost 70% considered violence towards children could be justified, the percentage was reversed in what women are concerned. The respondents gave various explanations to justify violence, which we will analyse later. The fifth and last item in the survey asked respondents to define their national identity in three words, thus attempting to facilitate a connection between the perception of war icons, the attitude towards direct violence and the main traits of Moldovan people, as defined by themselves.

INTERPRETATION OF DATA

The questionnaire shed light on the way war symbols are perceived and the extent to which structural violence can pour into direct violence. The structure of the enquiry

aims to show the connection between these two types of aggressiveness to conclude whether there is a causality between them. Publicly displayed symbols are used to perpetuate and nurture historical fiction that consists of an archetypal tale of heroism, sacrifice, bravery, and national pride. In order to hide aggression and the petty, painful details of war, the dreadful aspects of communism, language is used as a shield to obliterate the obnoxious images, thus sanitising memory and communication.

What stands out when analysing the results of the survey is the extensive use of euphemisms to refer to both cultural and personal violence, but with different connotations and causes.

Euphemisms are created between semantics and pragmatics. Orwellian in nature, euphemisms are double-talk, “sweet-sounding, or at least inoffensive, alternatives for expressions that speakers or writers prefer not to use in executing a particular communicative intention on a given occasion”. (Burridge, 2012: 66). Hugh Rawson speaks about two types of euphemisms: positive ones that “[...] *inflate and magnify, making the euphemized items seem altogether grander and more important than they really are and negative ones that deflate and diminish*” (Rawson, 1983: 1). The latter are used with defensive purpose, mostly when making reference to taboo-marked concepts. Both positive and negative euphemisms can be used consciously or unconsciously, this second category consisting of “[...] mainly of words that were developed as euphemisms, but so long ago that hardly anyone remembers the original motivation” (Rawson 1983: 3). In this paper, we are interested in

the category of positive euphemisms that are used unconsciously and that can also be associated with the category that Kate Burridge identifies as underhand euphemisms – aimed to mystify and to misrepresent:

“There is a sense in which all euphemism is dishonest. No euphemism says it how it is – in a given context, something tabooed can be acceptably spoken of using a euphemism but not using a direct term. However, the euphemistic vocabulary of language varieties such as military, political and medical jargons adds additional dimensions of guile and secrecy to the disguise. Here euphemism is used, not so much to conceal offense but to deliberately disguise a topic and to deceive.” (Burridge, 2012:68).

Mystification of historical facts is at the core of the euphemisms used to answer the first two questions, thus proving Orwell’s insightful comment that every war is represented not as a war but as “an act of self-defence against a homicidal maniac”. For approximately 45% of the respondents, Second World War is no longer a violent event that scarred a generation and led to futile bloodshed but the “great victory”, the “great patriotic war”, a display of “heroism”. These are words fed by the Russian ethos aimed to describe the Russian army’s victory against Nazi Germany. Initially intended to enliven the spirits of the population, so that it would defend the homeland, the Great Patriotic War remained a closed-circuit term (post-Soviet countries) of political significance that symbolizes Soviet heritage, and that is still an integral part of the collective psyche.