

Dissertation review.

The struggle between Romanianists and Moldovanists

Andreas Johansson
Dissenting Democrats
Nation and Democracy in
the Republic of Moldova

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Andreas Johansson's dissertation is an exploration of what has been called the most understudied country in Europe: Moldova. More specifically, the author is interested in the relationship between nation and democracy in the country between 1989 and 2009. Johansson defines nation as a "political community", a definition that is discussed more closely later in this review. Scholars like Rustow (1970) and Linz & Stepan (1996) posit national unity as a necessary condition for democratization. Essentially, there must be fundamental consensus on the borders of the nation and no separatist claims that might cause division. As Johansson interprets it, the unity postulate implies a people who perceive a national, collective "we". The author argues that doubts about national unity would seriously hamper the democratic ambitions of a state.

OTHER SCHOLARS, however, argue that the case of Moldova is proof that the assumption does not hold: the country is, so to speak, the bumblebee that flies against all odds – its wings are too short and its body too fat and heavy (Way 2002). Beyond Rustow's assumptions, the case also challenges central arguments in the modernization tradition, such as those advanced by Lipset (1959). Despite national cleavages, weak economic development, and an inability to control its own territory, a process of democratization has been carried out in Moldova. After Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, Moldova is sometimes represented as the most democratic of the post-Soviet states. However, Way (2002) has suggested that Moldova is more an example of failed authoritarianism than of successful democratization. This state of affairs is partly explained by the country's national fragmentation. This "pluralism by default", as Way has chosen to describe it, offers a perhaps less encouraging explanatory model of the democratization of Moldova. The fundamental assumption is that the elites actually want authoritarian rule, but because each stymies the other, they have failed to realize their intentions. From his point of departure in Rustow's and Way's at least partially opposed assumptions about the role and preconditions of national unity in the democratization process, Johansson has formulated his main research question: How and why has Moldova, despite being a nation divided, been able to achieve relatively high democratic standards?

This question is followed by two sub-questions: What are the effects of Moldova's national division on political developments in general and democratization in particular?

How does national identity influence the nature of Moldovan political support? Here the author examines whether there are other factors influencing political support by the population at large.

Johansson's dissertation is based on extensive secondary literature in Swedish, English, and German, as well as Russian and Moldovan. Dense, descriptive accounts are supplemented by statistical analyses of survey data: the results of a survey of 1,100 respondents performed in 2003, as well as a correspondence analysis. As is customary, all of these scene-setting elements are presented in chapter 1 of the dissertation.

A COMPACT HISTORICAL and socioeconomic background to Moldovan political development is provided in chapter 2. The author relates how present-day Moldova, like other European countries situated in borderland areas, has been overrun by different empires over the centuries: first the Ottoman and later, under the name Bessarabia, the Russian. This was followed by a brief interval as an independent state in 1917–1918, the first experience of independence in modern times. Later in the chapter, Johansson describes the history of Moldova as a Soviet Republic, its incorporation into Romania during the period 1941–1944, and its subsequent restoration to the status of Soviet Republic at the end of World War II. The historical outline extends to the achievement of independence in 1991 following the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Incorporated as it was in the Soviet division of labor, with all central plans drawn up in far-away Moscow, Moldova was politically and economically as ill prepared as most other Soviet Republics for the speed with which independence arrived.

Chapter 3 establishes the theoretical groundwork – or perhaps one could more accurately say that it articulates the conceptual nodes to which the dissertation relates thereafter, for while the author cracks the doors to allow a glimpse of vast and wide literary traditions, he never really enters the rooms. He seldom discusses theoretical arguments in depth; using theory mainly as context, he has no ambitions to *develop* it further. However, a number of key concepts are introduced, discussed, and put in relation to one another, such as nation, ethnic group, national identity, and nation-building, on the one hand, and democracy, democratization, political support, and transition, on the other. While Johansson deals with the canon of nations and nationalism rather cursorily, he builds his arguments concerning levels of democracy on Robert Dahl's (1971) polyarchy model, with its focus on democratic institutions such as free and fair elections and freedom of expression. On the matter of political support, Johansson draws on Pippa Norris's (1999) expansion of David Easton's (1965) model, ranging from the most diffuse object of support (with bearing on the political/national community) to the most specific object (support for parties as political actors). With regard to transitology, Johansson defends leading scholars like Schmitter & Karl (1994) and Linz & Stepan (1996) against the frequent charges of determinism in their perspective on the direction and end results of transition. He argues that the allegations simply do not correspond to what these authors wrote. The link between democracy and the nation often advanced in the literature is also recounted and discussed here and Johansson again points to the tension between Rustow's (1970) and Way's (2002) premises.

Chapter 4 presents the ethnic minorities in Moldova,

including, in descending order of size, Ukrainians, Russians, Gagauzians, Bulgarians, Jews, and Roma. A key section presents the competing Moldovan and Romanian nationalisms, which claim to represent essentially the same ethnic group – the Moldovan- or Romanian-speaking population – but on different grounds, either that the Moldovan nation constitutes a unique community (Moldovanism) or that it is part of a Greater Romania (Romanianism). This antagonism is the empirical hub around which the dissertation's analysis revolves.

The likewise central chapter 5 discusses five phases in the evolution of independent Moldova from 1989–2009, which were informed by either Moldovanism or Romanianism. The chapter describes the rise and fall of the Popular Front during the nascence of the Moldovan state, Gagauzian separatist claims during the early years of independence, and, most importantly, the *de facto* division of the country in 1992 when, after a brief civil war, Transnistria declared independence, with Russian military support. The chapter recounts how serious conflicts sometimes arose in Moldovan politics over national symbols, the writing of national history in school curricula, and contention over a national language, primarily the extent to which Russian should be granted official status alongside Moldovan (or whether Moldovan should be called Romanian, a tricky question to which the author often refers). The main elements of Moldova's bumpy road toward democratization are explained. Until 2000, the constitution decreed that the president was directly elected by popular vote, and the parliament and the president counter-balanced each other throughout the 1990s. After a protracted struggle between the president and the parliament, the constitution was changed in the legislature's favor and the president was thenceforth elected by the parliament. When the Communist Party achieved a qualified majority in parliament, the former beneficial balance of power between the legislature and the executive went up in smoke. Nonetheless, elections were free, regular, and reasonably fair throughout the entire period.

IN CHAPTER 6, Johansson employs a few of the most common indices of democracy (Polity IV, Index of Democracy, and a few variants of the Freedom House Index) to estimate on qualitative grounds the historical development of Moldovan democracy. He concludes that democratic consolidation remains distant, even though the formal institutions have been established and their arrangements not seriously questioned. Democracy – to use the expression Johansson

often quotes – is still not “the only game in town”.

In the seventh chapter, Johansson analyzes data collected in his 2003 survey, which was, as noted, subjected to correspondence analysis. According to the author, the results of the analysis indicate that popular support for all or parts of the political system cannot be traced merely to national or ethnic identity. Instead, he identifies partitions along generational, educational, and urban-rural divides, all of which seem to have greater impact than national identity.

CHAPTER 8 CONCLUDES and summarizes the dissertation. Johansson finds that the national division in Moldova is an important determinant in political developments and that political parties in the country have often used national identity to underpin their message.

Nevertheless, issues of national and ethnic identity seem not to have played any prominent role in how people conduct their affairs in daily life.

Addressing the main question of the dissertation, how and why Moldova has, despite being a nation divided, been able to achieve relatively high democratic standards, Johansson concludes that Moldova’s institutional arrangements have been an important factor. He points to the now lost balance of power between the legislature and the executive as a beneficial influence at an early and formative stage. In concluding, the author asks whether Moldova should be seen as a divided nation or one in the process of formation.

In agreement with Rustow, he argues that shared national identity and shared beliefs about the ways and means of political development indeed seem to improve opportunities for successful work toward democracy. He is somewhat more cautious about the second prominent scholar cited – Way – concerning the relationship between nation and democracy. According to Johansson, Way’s “pluralism by default” postulate is weakened by the assumption of autocratic intentions on the part of the elites, an assumption that is virtually impossible to prove.

DEFINING “NATION”

In several places in the manuscript the fundamental distinction between state and nation is unfortunately not maintained. I believe this is a consequence of the less than ideal choice to define *nation* as a “political community”. The strong emphasis on the political dimension at the expense of the socio-cultural, ideational, or identity-based blurs the distinction between the nation and

the political-legal framework of the state. The confusion between state and nation becomes almost painfully clear at certain points in the text. One example is when Johansson (p. 70) argues the following:

If the nation manages to claim a certain territory, governs it, and is recognized by other states in the international system as the legitimate holder of the land, then a nation-state exists.

Beyond the fact that the quoted text diverges from the common Buzanian understanding of the nation-state as a unit where the borders of the state coincide with the pervasive ideological affinity with a specific nation (Buzan, 1983), it also suggests that Johansson assigns to the nation a number of political-legal functions that are usually and rightfully assumed to exist in the state, such as governing a territory and being recognized by other states.

ALTHOUGH THERE are more aspects of the author’s use of the term “nation” and related concepts that might warrant a discussion (such as nationality, nation-building, core nation, ethnicity,

people vs. population, contested vs. consolidated nation, etc.), I will confine further remarks here to just one other element under this heading. The distinction between *ethnic* and *civic* nationalism, where the former is represented as origins-based, exclusive, and malignant, while the latter is portrayed as values-based, inclusive, and benign, is not only relatively shopworn but often misleading (see Brubaker 1999). Nevertheless, it is used so often in the literature that it is hard to ignore. Johansson indeed writes that the civic-ethnic dichotomy is problematic and should therefore not be applied, but he seems nonetheless to use it implicitly, if only by asserting several times in the text that national affinity is usually, albeit not always, based on ethnicity (see for example p. 76 and p. 80). When, relatively early in the dissertation, he gives an example of national affinity with a non-ethnic identity construction at its base, he chooses to cite Mauritius and not, for example, the United States, which could otherwise have served as a powerful refutation of notions of both the marginal nature of

socially based nationalism and its always beneficial effects. I would have preferred clearer positioning and a more consistent argument by the author here.

THE PRESUMED NATION-DEMOCRACY LINK

The connection between nation and democracy is thus a key question for Johansson. First, I believe the formulation should instead have been aimed at the connection between nationalism and democracy; the nation can hardly be an active agent, but nationalisms and their interpreters certainly are. That said, my objections under this point are closely linked to the use of the concept of the



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nation. Once again, the problem lies in designating the nation as a political community: Johansson (p. 32) writes:

Without a clearly defined citizenry that acts as members of and agrees on the boundaries of the same political community, possibilities for acceptance of the rules of the democratic political game grow slim.

This is where the danger in defining a nation as a *political community* becomes apparent: state and nation flow together in a way that makes them practically impossible to separate.

RUSTOW'S POSTULATE that unity on the borders of the national territory is a precondition for democracy thus constitutes a fundamental premise for the entire dissertation. As Johansson interprets it, we are talking here about the borders of the *nation*, not the *state* (p. 71), but as far as I understand it, *political community* according to Rustow is a matter of relatively minimal agreement on borders. Rustow does not talk about shared national identity: for him, political community is about the state (1970: pp. 350–352). When he talks about “national unity”, “theory of nationhood”, etc., he is probably, in line with common usage at the time he wrote, referring to the state, not the nation. When he approaches identity, he talks instead about “issues of community”, matters that democracies must tussle with even in the habituation phase. I believe Johansson has over-interpreted Rustow; it is hardly justified to cite Rustow concerning the connection between the nation (or nationalism) and democratization. One could however talk about national unity, but that is something entirely different, and it is likely that the adjective then refers to the state.

STRUCTURE AND INTERPRETATIONS

With respect to the second main concept of the dissertation, *democracy*, the author initially mentions Moldova as a successful example of how democracy has been established against the odds in a former Soviet Republic. Towards the end of the dissertation, however, and in connection with his exposition of the flaws in Moldova’s democratic development, the author increasingly talks about the country as an example of successful *democratization*, which is, of course, an entirely different matter (see pp. 30–31, 33, 140). The bumblebee is indeed flying, but perhaps not doing much else.

Another objection concerns the correspondence analysis based on the survey which Johansson performed back in 2003 when the dissertation process was, it can reasonably be presumed, at a very early stage. When this survey was performed, it was probably expected to be considerably more central to the dissertation than it turned out to be. This begs the question how much value can actually be derived from it, considering that the survey refers to a single measurement period early in the research process, during a year when even Johansson concedes not much happened in Moldovan politics. It seems that repeating the survey and the subsequent correspondence analysis toward the end of the research process would have been a reasonable alternative to heighten the usability and relevance of the collected data. The results have instead become a chapter whose place in the whole does not seem entirely clear, although it does contain interesting empirical findings per se.

On one occasion, Johansson describes the divide in the Moldovan national identity as follows: “For the time being, the core nation is being divided into two narratives” (p. 101). This phrasing seems to suggest what might have been a promising analytical doorway. Here, one could very well imagine an analysis of the discursive battle in Moldova on the nature of the national narrative, how hegemony is being pursued, and how various political elites are fighting for interpretive precedence. I believe this would have been a more accessible and promising route than reliance on dated survey data. In the analysis, the author would also have avoided having to constantly and painstakingly express how what he calls the core nation is divided into two groups, and how part of the population belongs to both. If the orientation had instead been narrative analysis with focus on the rhetoric of political elites within the Moldovan nation, the structure of the study would have been clearer and the interpretations less forced.

The empirical hub around which the analysis revolves thus concerns the antagonisms surrounding what the Moldovan nation is: a separate, “unique” nation or a part of the Romanian nation. Johansson consistently emphasizes this struggle over interpretations and their implications for the political development of independent Moldova. A question presents itself, which is actually never answered in the dissertation, as to whether there have been any serious attempts to form and legitimize a more inclusive Moldovan identity that would offer affinity to all ethnic groups in the country, including Russians, Ukrainians, and Gagauzians for instance. In an identity category like this, the question of whether or not one’s first language is Moldovan/Romanian would not have been a marker of identity. The present-day Moldovan national identity is, however, based precisely on the participants having Moldovan as their native language: this Moldovan nation seems therefore, in terms of the familiar dichotomy, at once both *ethnic* and *civic*.

EXECUTIVE POWER IN Moldovan politics has never actually been held by the Romanianists, but only by the Moldovanists. It seems as if the Romanianists’ moment in the sun came in the early 1990s when everything was in flux and new conditions prevailed after the fall of the Soviet Union (Popa 2011). At the same time, Johansson gives the impression that the dichotomous struggle between the Romanianists and Moldovanists had a decisive impact on politics. This raises the question: How can the persistence of the struggle be explained

when it actually seems to be one group that has had an almost hegemonic hold on power? One alternative interpretation might be that political developments have been shaped by rather pragmatic considerations of whether Moldova should retreat from or draw closer to the Russian great power. While conflicts about school curricula and official languages are shown in Johansson’s analysis, one does not see much else that could underpin the notion that political developments are necessarily driven by conflicts of identity. How do we know that Johansson’s interpretation is the proper one? Might the early 1990s be only a temporary deviation from the pattern? Mightn’t good old discontent with those in charge – simply because they are in charge – be an equally strong explanatory factor? The Soviet nostalgia that seems to flower in bad times – “things were better in the old days” – fits into such an explanation, while the Soviet nostalgics, who presumably include ethnic Russians and perhaps even the Ukrainians, are not easily placed in the dichotomous Romanianist/Moldovanist matrix. On the contrary, one has to wonder what happened to these large ethnic groups, presented so carefully in an introductory chapter, in the analysis.

Other elements are also strangely absent. Johansson often refers to Moldova as “a nation divided”, and when I began reading the dissertation, I thought this referred to the tangible fact that a part of the country, Transnistria, since the short civil war in the 1990s, has been de facto independent from Moldova, partitioned and with a significant Russian military presence. The fact that Transnistria has separated from the independent and, under international law, sovereign state of Moldova, and is a base for foreign troops should have been a significant national trauma for any country. It would have been reasonable to expect this to be a theme around which national politics revolved, but once the Transnistrian issue has been dispatched in the introductory chapter, it disappears from the analysis of the dissertation, and the author’s dense description of Moldovan politics focuses instead on disputes about school curricula and the matter of an official language, which of course feel epiphenomenal given the context. In the analysis, Transnistria takes on the nature of the proverbial elephant in the room: palpable, embarrassing, and hard to ignore, but not explicitly mentioned. ✖

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