

GEOPOLITICAL SCALES OF PRESTIGE IN THE FORMER COMMUNIST WORLD: CENTRAL EUROPE, EASTERN EUROPE, THE BALKANS.

*The Case of Romania and Moldova**

Valentin MANDACHE,

I recall a small incident a few years ago, while I was working in an international company in London. A Canadian colleague came to me with a document in Russian and asked to translate its content. My reply was that I don't speak that language and apologised for not being able to help; at which he reacted saying: "but you are a Romanian, an East European and must speak Russian!" My reaction was one characteristic to most Romanians confronted with that sort of situation, feeling somehow offended and embarrassed, and trying to explain that my language is a neo-Latin idiom, much closer to English than Russian. This was of no avail for my Canadian colleague who left profoundly unhappy, grumbling about the incomprehensible and non-useful Babel of languages from the Balkans, such as Romanian. In his mind, on one hand, it was probably quite clear the notion of Eastern

Europe as a Russian culturally and politically dominated area, just as the West is dominated by the United States and the English language. On the other hand, for me, at that time, as a person freshly arrived in England from the then freshly post-communist Romania, through ethnicity I am ultimately a descendant of the colonists of Rome in Dacia and speaker of a Latin language, something similar with a Frenchman or Spaniard, in other words belonging through my roots to the West, the geopolitical area¹ of highest prestige of our times. This was wishful thinking and obviously, after experiences like the one cited here I had to review my attitude and even pass through some sort of crises of "geopolitical identity." Ultimately, encounters and experiences like mine can be multiplied practically many times to encompass the Romanians and Moldovians confronted with similar situations, and give

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an image of the national identity associated with the perception of those countries' geopolitical position.

In fact this "geopolitical identity" crisis is a problem of national identification after the fall of the European communist state-system. Ever since the foundation of the Soviet empire, the Russian communists and their followers claimed that the most prestigious and worthy of following system was the one run by Moscow, ascribing in a self-assuring manner, to Russia the locus of geopolitical prestige. Winning convincingly the Cold War, the nations of Western Europe once again assumed exclusively this attribute and it is natural for the members of other nations located within the great European peninsula to look for ties and traditions which would bring them closer and ultimately among this exclusively and prestigiously perceived group.

The polities² located within the geopolitical area of Western Europe were the first to develop, in a process dating back in the Middle Ages, a sense of nationhood among their peoples, culminated two centuries ago with the formation of nation states within this area. Liah Greenfeld traces the first modern nation in England at the beginning of the sixteenth century, during the Tudor reforms.³ Then the term *nation*, until then designating only the aristocracy, has been extended for the first time to encompass an entire people.⁴ This gave a strong sense of pride and community to the English people in belonging to a metagroup called "nation" as only the aristocrats were known before, therefore this new status of membership being seen as prestigious and elite like quality. This type of identification of an entire people living within the confines of a state, became, in a complex social process, a common feature to the Atlantic coast polities, area which today is understood as quintessentially Western Europe. From here

it spread in the form of national movements aspiring to achieve the West's standards and prestige to the rest of Europe and the world.

The process of expansion of these ideas and ideals, from West to East, with the nation perceived as a prestigious, elite like community, aptly to stand on equal terms with the nations of Western Europe, is described by Ernest Gellner in his model of "*time zones of nationalism*,"⁵ where the political principle of nationalism is represented by what he calls 'the marriage between state and culture,'⁶ in effect a political identification at the mass level on common cultural terms of the population of the given state. According to Gellner, within Europe one can distinguish four time zones of nationalism, running on a North-South direction (in a fashion similar with the geographical hourly time zones), starting with the West European Atlantic coast polities as the time zone 1 of nationalism, followed by the zone 2 consisting of Italy and Germany. These two polities were able to establish themselves as nation-states successfully encompassing the already existent Italian and German high cultures, at a later date than the zone 1. Next in line are the time zone 3 and 4 of nationalism, which include Romania and Moldova, zones represented by the geopolitical area of Eastern Europe. The imperative of the national movements in those two last time zones, ever since their initiation in the early decades of the 19th century, was to achieve the prestige status and standard of the time zone 1 of nation-states, by closely emulating zone 2 (where Germany and Italy were perceived as equals to France and Britain from the zone 1) through processes like unification, creation of elaborated high cultures and looking for a glorious past. Essential in the zone 3 and 4 of nationalism is the virtual absence not only of the state encompassing a high culture, but of the high culture as well.

When in the zone 2 the German and Italian high cultures were already in place, but lacking a political roof, in the zone 3 and 4 neither of these existed. They had to be both created by the political and intellectual elite animating the national movements in Eastern Europe. Obviously this evolution required an impressive amount of social engineering in order to achieve a homogenous national identity perception, typical of the zone 1 and 2. This in many cases was and sometimes is still expressed on the ground by a high degree of brutality (such as the ethnic cleansing or physical extermination of entire communities to attain ethnic homogeneity.)

Gellner's model of time zones of nationalism certainly helps understand the peculiar situation of the nations in Eastern Europe and their quest for a higher place on the scale of geopolitical prestige. In this area, the process of development into nation-states was further complicated and delayed by their incorporation within the Soviet empire for a period of five decades for the zone 3 nations and more than seven decades for most of the zone 4 nations. The Soviet empire and its ideology acted as a sort of refrigerator for the national movements, slowing them down considerably. Moreover, the Marxist-Leninist ideology propagated by the Soviet Union had a contrasting different ethos and objectives from the national ideology, facts which contributed to the situation that these states were considered by the Western public, including the supposed experts on the area, the so-called "sovietologists," in terms of their communist, rather than national identity. With the miserable failure of Marxism and Soviet empire's shameful collapse, it became a matter of honour for the nations of this area not to be perceived in the old fashion as belonging to the Eastern Block, which would associate them with the dubious and certainly unprestigious former Soviet geopolitical area

of domination. It became an imperative necessity to look for even invent a new geopolitical position for the concerned nation, which would bring it as close as possible to the nations of the West, now again the locus of prestige, and triumphant winners of the Cold War.

This process is reflected in an unstable perception, gliding up and down on a *scale of geopolitical prestige*, where at its top, the more prestigious nations are the ones demonstrating historical and cultural closeness to the West, conveniently categorised as "Central European" and at the bottom of the scale "the remote Balkans" how sometimes the Western media calls them. The differentiation was made less difficult by the divergent evolution of these nations in the last decade, where it became clear that the new locus of shame and barbarity in Europe is the Balkans, illustrated by the killing fields of the former Yugoslavia.

The term Central Europe became included into the mainstream political language, dislodging for the first time the one of Eastern Europe, only in the early 1990s. Until then, during the communist period, it was vehiculated only by some dissident writers, especially in Czechoslovakia⁷ and Hungary. Now, it began to be widely used among the Western diplomatic circles and increasingly among the Western public. The countries perceived as belonging to this "good," more prestigious area, closely related to the West are now widely acknowledged as Czechia, Poland, Hungary, Slovakia and in the last few years Slovenia, a country which had to overcome the outcast of its former membership in Yugoslavia and now guards very jealously its hard won and immensely more prestigious geopolitical status of "Central European nation."⁸ At the bottom of the geopolitical prestige scale, from which Slovenia has just fled, is the Balkans,

perceived as a troublesome area, doted with conflicts and age old animosities among many peoples and factions, rendering it, for some of the observers in the West, not even worthy of being included in Europe as a geopolitical unit, endowed with a very low prestige. In this regard, now ten years after the events of 1989, the Western public, media and politicians routinely categorise on the one hand Albania, Serbia or Bulgaria as Balkan, and on the other hand Czechia, Hungary or Poland as Central European. Much confusion, reflected in the Western media and even among the so-called specialist academic literature, is generated by the question of assigning to Romania and Moldova a definitive geopolitical position.⁹ This stems primarily from the lack of knowledge in the West about these two polities, where Romania with its large population and territory (the third country in Eastern Europe after Ukraine and Poland) is a polity with cultural and political traditions which can be called both Balkan (especially if one takes into account that Wallachia and Moldova were for four centuries within the Ottoman world) or Central European (when taking into account that Transylvania, the largest Romanian province, has been historically linked with the Kingdom of Saint Stephen and the Habsburgs). In case of contemporary Republic of Moldova, some observers perceive it as "former Soviet" or former Russian imperial province, closely linked with the world of Russia, others ambiguously put it as "East European," with a small minority considering it Balkan. Probably the formula of compromise which can mitigate these confusing categorisations is the name of "South Eastern Europe," a somehow neutrally perceived geopolitical locus, which has the advantage of including Greece and Turkey, economically the most developed nations of the area, with Turkey among the most powerful military European nations, and Greece belonging to

the exclusive and prestige giving club of European Union, thus attenuating the damaging perception of the other countries within South Eastern Europe as Balkan. One can observe further geopolitical delimitation in the former Soviet republics, such as "Scandinavian" for Estonia or "Caucasus" for Georgia and Armenia. Nevertheless, the most familiar term, now eight years since the collapse of the Soviet empire is still the "former Soviet republics."

However one of the most relevant criterion of delimitation between the main geopolitical areas under discussion, such as Central Europe, Balkans/ South Eastern Europe, the former Soviet republics and Eastern Europe is the degree of influence by the former empires which dominated these areas. Central Europe is generally acknowledged as the area formerly dominated by the Habsburg empire and the Balkans by the Ottomans. Also one classic definition of Eastern Europe as a geopolitical entity is centred on the influence of the surrounding empires, that is *the area of European peninsula where, over the last two centuries the peoples inhabiting it have been a part of at least one of the four European overland empires, that is the Ottoman, Russian/Soviet, Habsburg or Prussian/German, and where the contemporary dominant state language is neither Turkish, Russian nor German.*¹⁰ From this definition, the situation of Eastern Europe as a dispersed periphery of the European overland empires is obvious. Linked with the point of view of geopolitical prestige, is very unflattering to be considered a former imperial peripheral polity at the edge of the great empires. Thus, it makes more sense for the patriotic minded public of the respective nations to look and even invent closer ties with the locus of prestige in the West, using their former association with the empires which dominated them until recently. This is done

by translating these empires in prestige terms, where the Habsburg and to some extent the Prussian one enjoy a prime place, with the Russian/Soviet one benefiting of a much lower prestige, the least prestige ascribed to the Ottoman empire. The scale of prestige on which these empires are compared is not a novelty. One started practically since the principle of nationalism became prevalent in politics by the mid 19th century, and this perception, among the Western public, of the European overland empires in terms of prestige is still cultivated through contemporary textbooks of history and politics and it is certainly an important ingredient of the geopolitical prestige or shame ascribed to the many polities of the former communist world.

For an East European nation having belonged to or having links with the Habsburg empire is becoming a pedigree now, this empire being seen as the embodiment of western civilisation in the area. Thus Central Europe and the Habsburg empires are the good places to be associated with at this particular time. On the opposite side there is the Balkan area, dominated by the Ottomans for five centuries, an empire alien in many aspects to the Western norms of life, still seen throughout Europe in a stereotypical arrogant manner of racial and cultural supremacy. The nations situated within this geopolitical area have to make a great effort to be regarded even as half-European by the western public.

The geopolitical scale of prestige is further complicated in the area of former Russian tsarist and Soviet domination, such as Ukraine, Belarus and Moldova.¹¹ Important segments of these nations still look at Russia as the prestige locus, the West only recently outdoing the perception of prestige drawn from association with the Russian imperial polity. Therefore these countries have two gravitation centres, the pull toward a particular one depending on

the orientation of who has the political power. For example in Moldova the former agrarian government looked to Russia as the supreme prestige place, aiming to forge even closer ties with it; the next and actual government formed by a more nationally minded coalition, looks at the West as the embodiment of prestige worthy of attaining.

For Romania, a country larger than most of the usual East European polities, the precise place of the locus of geopolitical prestige is even more uncertain, because of extremely different regional identifications within the country, facts reflected in the confusion of the Western public in clearly placing Romania within a specific geopolitical area. This is directly linked with the nation's particular geopolitical position as a former *triple junction point of empires*:¹² the Habsburg, Russian and Ottoman empires come to the fore in the territory of actual Romania. This situation is crucial when thinking of a suitable geopolitical position for the country as Central European, Balkan or better South East European. An added complication is the general uniform self-perception of the ethnic Romanians as Western people through their descendancy from the colonists of the Roman empire in Dacia and their neo-Latin language. In a way the language puts them firmly in the West, but geography and cultural traditions somewhere between Central Europe and the Balkans.

The geopolitical position perception and its manipulation to attain prestige is more facile for the territorially small polities and also with a sufficient degree of ethnic homogeneity and I gave here the example of Slovenia conforming to these parameters, successfully escaping from the category of Balkan country to that of Central European. The same is largely true for the small polities bestowed with a lesser degree of ethnic homogeneity, but possessing a national ideology very closely

resembling the ideology of the Atlantic coast polities, namely Protestantism. I see here the typical the case of Estonia and to some extent of Latvia. Both of them have large segments of Russian populations, which seem contented to be associated with a more prestigiously perceived political roof in the shape of these nation states.¹³ Why is that not the case with Moldova which is comparable in size with the two Baltic states and having a larger proportion of the titular nationality (64 percents) than is the situation in Estonia and Latvia? Added to that aspect, Moldova has a secessionist region inhabited by a majority of Russian speakers, a fact arousing the question why does Estonia not face a similar situation in the Narva region? The answers lie in the identification and aspirations of the Russian speakers, who are the colonial settlers of the Russian and Soviet empire. Being categorised as Scandinavian, implies automatically identification with the West and also with the prestige features of that locus. Therefore many Russian settlers in the Baltic region are keenly seeking to integrate within their new mother countries. But, with Moldova? What is Moldova for them? Their usual perception is that of a small country which benefited heavily from the Russian influence and civilisation and who is now so ungrateful to the people which "civilised" and rescued it from the Ottoman "inferior" culture and domination. This perception is probably most vivid in the minds of the Russian settlers in Transnistria, which renders an obvious analogy with the situation of Northern Ireland. In Transnistria, the Russian speakers are not necessarily Russian ethnics, but in fact colonists which took the culture and language of the metropolis as their own, as is the case with the Protestants of Northern Ireland, ethnically being mostly of Irish and Scottish stock. As the Northern Ireland Protestants, committed to unity and

glory of a long faded imperial Great Britain and convinced of the superiority of Protestantism, the Transnistrian Russians feel very committed to the ideology of a Great Russia (in the shape of either imperial Russia or the Soviet Union) and pan-Slavism. The notorious Protestant parades, generating huge discontent among the Catholic population, such as Apprentice Boys or Orangemen's marches, are equalled in Transnistria by the Soviet style parades and military paraphernalia. The celebration of the Battle of Boyne in Ulster finds an equivalent in Transnistria with the anniversary of the victory over the Moldavians/Romanians in the 1992 war, etc. The essence of the problem is that just as the Ulster Protestants consider the Irish Catholics inferior,¹⁴ the Russians of Transnistria do not consider the Romanians of Moldova a nation worthy or prestigious enough to associate with, on the contrary, such a fact would be a demotion from their status as an imperial nation with a civilising mission in these lands. The situation is hugely different in Estonia and Latvia, precisely because the Russians identify these nations as more prestigious and worthy to live under their political and administrative umbrella.

If Moldova's oscillating orientation toward two geopolitical prestige loci embodied by Russia and the West, is heavily influenced by the situation in Transnistria and the colour of the parties in the government, its neighbour, Romania presents a very different picture of this problem.

Romania has a certain degree of ethnic homogeneity, but because of its large territory, this is not a viable feature in some regions where the minorities tend to concentrate. In this regard the province of Transylvania is a truly multiethnic region, having a population of about seven million people (5 million Romanians, 2 million minorities- mostly Hungarians, and an

important number of Gypsies, together with smaller minorities) distributed over a surface of about 100,000 square kilometres.¹⁵ On the other hand, the province where the capital is situated, Wallachia, is the region dominating politically the rest of the country, having also been under Ottoman domination for four centuries, which makes it a true Balkan region. The Romanian Moldova, the smallest province (though larger than a country like Slovakia) has been influenced in a slightly smaller degree by the Ottomans than Wallachia, a gap which was filled up by influences mostly from the Russian empire, but also in the North from the Habsburgs. This renders Moldova as less Balkan and with more common points with next door Republic of Moldova or even Ukraine. These three particular ways of geopolitical identification is not a convenient situation to clearly and definitively establish the geopolitical perception of the country.

Extending the identification of Transylvania as Central European to the rest of Romania can be considered a valid claim, giving the nation more prestige, next to the nations of the West. Added to this argument can be the traditional orientation of the Wallachian and Moldavian elite towards, France, imaged as the supreme prestige locus. Many of them speak French as the second language and see France as the most desirable partner of Romania. In a way this situation is inherited from the pre-war period when this was probably the case, but contemporary France is a very different place now, having other foreign policy objectives and with much less financial power to maintain expensive clients such as the old style Wallachian and Moldavian elite.¹⁶ Contrasting with the elite attitude is that of the mass of the people. Recently during the Kosovo war, in Wallachia there was a widespread discontent with the West's intervention, many of the people there voicing loudly their support for the

Serbs, participating in pro-Serbian and anti-Western demonstrations. They claimed that the Serbs are Orthodox brothers and practically similar to the Romanians, except the language. This sort of attitude renders Romania as a true Balkan nation, which is deeply resented by the elite, but acknowledged by the people living in the South, the core of modern Romania, an area of former Ottoman domination.

Yet the difficulty faced by Romania and the Republic of Moldova in carving a geopolitical prestigious position, close to the West, lies in the real fact that is not entirely an unnecessary exercise. The new architecture of Europe requires identification with the West and its values. There is truth in it, precisely embodied by the definition of Eastern Europe as a multiple periphery of the four European overland empires. The difference between the political traditions inherited from these three empires, such as Western Christianity in the Habsburg area, which on the ground makes a clear separation between church, and state, or the Orthodoxy and Islam in the Russian and Ottoman areas, with their legacy of integration of the state and church are very opposed to political traditions indeed. The real problem and danger now is the eventual employment of these characteristics by the West in the politics of exclusion, perceiving Central Europe as a poor, but viable relation, with the Balkans (or, said in a "politically correct" manner, South Eastern Europe), as dangerous aliens, who have to be kept at a long distance and taught lessons of good behaviour.

A worrying development in this respect is the enthusiastic taking over of these attitudes by the ones called now "Central Europeans" as a way to highlight their unfortunate fate under the communist oppression and also to castigate the Balkans as an evil region with which they were forcibly associated during the communist period.

In this complex geopolitical equation of identity and prestige, Romania and Moldova face a very difficult situation. A certain remedy would be the wisdom gained by the Western public from the unhappy past experiences of exclusions in Europe on the basis of cultural background, race or mere geography as compared to the current trend of integration within the European Union. But this is not enough. The main effort for

integration, which ultimately means Westernization, has to be done by these two nations alone, this time at the mass level and not only by the elite, basing their claims of Western orientation and traditions, in the new geopolitical regrouping of the East European polities, on concrete actions rather than mere rhetoric as it is the case now ten years after the fall of communism.

NOTES

¹ I understand by *geopolitical area* a large grouping of states exhibiting a series of definite common historical and political characteristics, where geography is an important factor conditioning this commonality. In this regard within the European peninsula, one can distinguish a series of clearly established geopolitical areas, such as Western Europe which comprises mainly the Atlantic coast states, Southern Europe encompassing states within the Mediterranean basin or Northern Europe including the countries of the Baltic and North Sea basins.

² The term *polity* in Ch. Tilly's conception, is '*the set of relations among agents of the state and all major political actors within the delimited territory*'. Tilly, Charles, 1997. *How Empires End. In After Empire: Multiethnic Societies and Nations - Building. The Societe Union and the Russian, Otoman and Habsburg Empires*, ed. Karen Barkey and Mark von Hagen. Boulder Colorado and Oxford UK: Westview Press., p.7.) In comparison with this rather cumbersome definition, a contemporary British dictionary gives a similar and certainly clearer one, which states that a polity represents '*an organised society; a state as a political entity*' (*The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary on Historical Principles*, Oxford Clarendon Press, 1933, entry for 'polity').

A state is usually endowed with sovereignty and a clearly delimited border, which until the recent past was not a feature for many of the East European polities. Also many of them do not have a tradition of statehood, such is the case of Moldova or Ukraine, before 1991, also Romania before 1859, in comparison with Poland or Hungary, and therefore the term polity characterises them better as political entities, with changing boundaries, before and after gaining state sovereignty.

³ Greenfeld, Lich, 1992, *Nationalism: Five Roads to Modernity*, Cambridge Massachusetts and London England: Harvard University Press, p. 6.

⁴ During the Middle Ages, the term nation described only the aristocratic class. For example in the fifteenth century Europe there was a Hungarian and Polish nation, which meant strictly the aristocracy of those kingdoms and did not include the other social strata (peasants, craftsmen or traders, who in fact were the overwhelming majority of the population).

⁵ Gellner Ernest, 1997, *Nationalism ...*, London Weidenfeld Nicholson, pp. 50-58.

⁶ Gellner Ernest, 1997, *Nationalism ...*, p. 50.

⁷ Kundera Milan, 1984. *The Tragedy of Central Europe*. The New York, Review of Books, 26 aprilie.

⁸ For example, Slovenia at the time of first wave of NATO expansion has been narrowly excluded, being put together with Romania as the best placed contenders for the next expansion wave. Interestingly, this apparent lack of chance to join the Western military alliance, was blamed by many of the high Slovenian officials and local media not on their deficiencies for such an undertaking, but on Romania, namely because they were lumped up with this Balkan country, allegedly not worthy of standing up next to the civilised Central European Slovenia. Therefore the country suffered a fatal loss of image which was reflected into NATO's rejection for membership in the first wave.

⁹ Referring to this confusion, one can encounter amusing situations in many Western universities where Moldova is in the curriculum for Russian studies, other universities including it within the Balkan studies. Romania sometimes is Balkan in some courses and others put as Central European. On the street, for example, at the big academic bookshops in Britain someone looking for books on Romania has to check both Central European and Balkan sections in order to not miss entirely the few works produced on this country.

¹⁰ Definition given in Gellner Ernest, 1997, *Nationalism ...*, p. 4. The nation-states encompassed by the geopolitical area of Eastern Europe defined in this way are at the time of writing this article, as follow: Albania, Armenia, Azerbaidjan, Belarus, Bosnia, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czechia, Cyprus, Estonia, Finland, Georgia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Macedonia, Moldova, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Ukraine and Yugoslavia.

¹¹ These countries are within the Zone 4 of nationalism as were described Gellner Ernest, 1997, *Nationalism ...*, pp. 50-58.

¹² See Greenfeld, Lich, 1992, *Nationalism: Five Roads to Modernnity*.

¹³ Traditionally, even during the Soviet occupation in the Baltic republics, the Russian speaking settlers were seen by the locals (who were mostly of Protestant cultural background), as a sort of semi-white immigrants, in very derogatory terms. Today, when these nations have re-asserted their sovereignty, it seems that this kind of perception was taken seriously by the Russian settlers, who now seem more than willing to acquire the citizenship of Estonia and Latvia and therefore being categorised in more prestigious terms as "Scandinavians," rather than seeking autonomy or secession as is happening in Moldova's Transnistria region.

¹⁴ To illustrate this affirmation, in Victorian England and Scotland, the usual perception of the Irish was so degrading, that one could often hear statements that the Irishmen were the missing link between the Homo Sapiens and Neanderthals, practically being considered a bit more evolved than the apes. This is very similar with how the Russian settlers see the peasants of Moldova. They call them *mamlizhniki*, "maize eaters," naturally backward, stupid, of corrupt nature, with a propensity to steal. The Russian commander of the Ukrainian front during the occupation of Iasi in 1944, had this to say about the Romanians in general: '... they are not a nation, but a profession!' referring to the alleged corruption and stealing habits of the Romanians Kundera Milan, 1984. *The Tragedy of Central Europe*, p. 108).

¹⁵ Perhaps it is interesting to compare here the size of this Romanian province with the next door practically ethnic homogeneous Hungary, which is only about 90,000 square kilometres.

¹⁶ It is interesting to note how this residual orientation towards France, very manifest now after the fall of communism, of the Bucharest based elite is reflected in Romania's membership of the Organisation of the Francophone Countries. This is an organism that groups a large mosaic of countries, from Canada to Vietnam, the only requirement for membership being a loose connection with French culture. It does not have any real political or economic vein, not being comparable even with the British Commonwealth, and it is mainly an operetta stage for French pretensions of cultural and political greatness. Despite all of these facts, the Romanian elite (in large proportion based in the South, in Bucharest) takes it very seriously, at the expense of other more important facts of foreign policy.