

Iceland

MOLDOVA

IN SEARCH OF ITS OWN PLACE IN EUROPE

Sweden

Estonia

Ireland

Belarus

Ukraine

Moldova

Romania

Portugal

Spain

Bulgaria

Greece

Morocco

Algeria

Tunisia

epigram

Tibet



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The rock group *Zdob și Zdub* as an example of national identity construction

Abstract

The paper shows the significance of the role of popular culture as a resource in the construction of Moldovan national identity using the case study of the popular rock group *Zdob și Zdub*. The paper presents the political aspects of the success of *Zdob și Zdub* in the country and abroad, and official recognition of the group by the political elite involved in the process of construction of Moldovan identity today. This includes the role of *Zdob și Zdub* as the first Moldovan representatives in the Eurovision Song Contest in 2005. Subsequently, the discourse analysis of the symbolic elements in the output of the group which are related to the complex question of identity and its political dimension will be provided. The paper shows how the multiple national identity of Moldova is reflected in the artistic and wider social aspects of *Zdob și Zdub*, which sing songs in both the Moldovan and Russian languages.

Zdob și Zdub is a Moldovan rock group that has achieved artistic and commercial success both at home and abroad. This paper aims to examine the significance of this group for the process of the construction of contemporary Moldovan national identity. A case study of *Zdob și Zdub* could be relevant for a wider reflection about the role of popular culture in the construction of identity today.

IDENTITY AND POLITICS

There is no doubt that the main element and aim of *Zdob și Zdub*'s musical activity is enjoyment for the listener. Nevertheless, the group also has a significant political role. Politics in this context is understood not simply as influence on the struggle for office between political parties. Institutional political processes, as Anne Norton states, "occur within specific cultural contexts; they operate within specific cultural limits. They use references, metaphors, symbols, strategies and discourses that belong to specific cultures," therefore, "politics is in culture" (Norton 2004: 7). Politics here is understood more deeply as related to social attitudes and identifications. According to the cultural studies approach, the cultural and political dimensions of social life are strongly intertwined and also influence each other. Among others,

... politics consists of the effort to domesticate the infinitude of identity. It is the attempt to hegemonize identity, to order it into a strong programmatic statement. If identity is decentred, politics is about the attempt to create a centre. (Dirks, Eley, Ortner 1994: 32)

The role of popular culture is very important here. As Stuart Hall and many other postmodern theorists of culture have noted, the division between "serious" (high) culture and "unserious" (popular culture) is largely artificial and can be easily challenged. The struggle for cultural hegemony happens on many levels and influences the way people construct their identities. According to Hall, "the classification of cultural domains into the self-sufficient and apparently transcendental distinctions of high and low is revealed, by the operation of the carnivalesque, and by the transgression of pleasure, play, and desire, as an exercise in cultural regulation, designed to make cultural practices into a formation which can then be sustained in a binary form by strategies of cultural power ... power operates in the apparently decentered sphere of culture ... This cultural operation is always in some ways linked—and continues, even in our more diversified postmodern culture, to be linked—with the mechanisms of cultural hegemony" (Hall 1996: 30).

The concept of cultural hegemony was introduced to social theory by Antonio Gramsci. As Jan Kubik writes, "the concept of hegemony forces us to think about culture and power—which are often analyzed separately—as two closely intertwined and inseparable facets of all social interactions and social processes. Also, hegemony is not a

stable attribute of sociopolitical systems; rather it is a process” (Kubik 1994: 11-12). The case of *Zdob și Zdub* shows how this process can be observed in the field of popular culture in the context of identity construction.

THE STORY OF *ZDOB ȘI ZDUB*

Zdob și Zdub started their career in the early 1990s as a teenage punk rock hard core band composed of several boys from different ethnic backgrounds who went to the same school in the small town of Strașeni, on the outskirts of the capital city Chișinău. The music they initially played was similar to many other such bands in Western countries, and in the United States in particular. It was not typical in Moldova, however, where the dominant music was pop.

Moldova has long been considered a political and cultural periphery of empires and civilisations. It has imported rather than exported cultural styles and cultural products. Moldovan folk culture was not seen as a resource for potential success in contemporary popular music or in modern identity construction. The music *Zdob și Zdub* initially played was not an exception as it was generally a copy of American hard core music.

It should be mentioned that Strașeni (as well as the rest of the country) was going through a difficult time, marked by extreme economic hardship and political turmoil following the collapse of the USSR. The civil war in the nearby territory of Transnistria (also a part of Moldova) had ended two years before and resulted in a frozen conflict that was to continue for the next decade. Both the economic and political problems led many inhabitants of Moldova, especially belonging to ethnic minorities, to leave the country.

Despite playing a strongly non-commercial style of music, *Zdob și Zdub* began to win popularity step by step. One of its large scale public appearances happened in 1995 at a festival *10 Years After Chernobyl* action in Chișinău. The band soon became increasingly popular in Russia thanks to their frequent visits and concerts in clubs in Moscow and other Russian cities. Through this, they were invited to play concerts together with US-based international stars of “hard core” music such as Biohazard and Rage Against the Machine when they visited Moscow.

In 1996 *Zdob și Zdub*'s first album was released by a Russian music company. Almost all the songs were recorded in the Russian language, which reflected the hegemony of Russian as the language of rock culture in Moldova, while the Moldovan language was traditionally associated with village folk music. The only song on the first album that was recorded in Moldovan had the ironic title *Hardcore Moldovenesc*, and its sound represented an unusual experiment of combining US-style hardcore rock with Moldovan folklore. This unusual song soon became the trademark of the band and subsequently the group used more and more folk elements in their compositions. This strongly contributed to their achievement of their own artistic originality.

While continuing to play to large audiences in concerts in Russia, the group started to write more material in the Moldovan language. This meant that *Zdob și Zdub* could also be understood by the Romanian public. In 1997 a Romanian/Moldovan-language version of their first album was released for distribution in Romania. On the second album, the songs in Moldovan were already more numerous and the music moved in the direction of folk-rock, using Moldovan ethnic music influences. From then on, *Zdob și Zdub* pursued their career, besides their home country, simultaneously in the Romanian and Russian markets, reaching a record popularity in all three countries.

The commercial success of *Zdob și Zdub* was at that time assisted by the growth of the international popularity of Balkan music in the style of Goran Bregović and the films of Emir Kusturica. *Zdob și Zdub*'s music had some similarity to this style, in particular under the influence of Gypsy folklore which could be heard on their third album *Agroromantica* released in 2001. *Zdob și Zdub*, in fact, played together with Emir Kusturica's own group The No Smoking Orchestra at a concert in Moscow on 31 January 2001.

In 2001 *Zdob și Zdub* had one of its biggest commercial successes with the recording of a cover version of *Videli Nochi* by the 1980s Russian new wave group Kino. The single sold record 1.5 million copies in Russia and other countries of the former USSR. Another commercial success was their own version of the wartime partisan song *Smugleanka-moldavanka* which was performed on the Victory Day anniversary celebration in Moscow on 9 May 2001. The group also sold one million copies of this song. The group continued to play at large festivals with mass audiences in different countries, mostly Russia, Ukraine and Romania.

The next album *450 Sheep*, in addition to the previously conquered markets, topped the charts in Slovakia. It contained Moldovan and Romanian folk motives with elements of hip hop music. At the public presentation of the album at a Chişinău club “Moscova” (“Moscow”) on 12 February 2004, the spectators were treated on entry with a glass of wine (a typical Moldovan speciality) and a piece of *brynza* (traditional Moldovan cheese). The show was shown on national television in Moldova, illustrating the recognition of the fact that the group was a carrier of a reconstructed Moldovan identity and a chief promoter of Moldovan culture at the traditional and international level. Songs from the album appeared on more than 20 European radio stations.

At the same time, the group demonstrated their attachment to the local tradition by taking part in a “cultural-historic” project titled *Following in the tracks of Geto-Dacians* with shows in five smaller Moldovan towns in August 2004.

The crowing recognition of the role of *Zdob şi Zdub* in contemporary Moldovan culture came with their participation as the first ever representative of Moldova at the Eurovision Song Contest held in Kiev in 2005. The group was chosen as the Moldovan representatives by Moldovan television viewers. Although their alternative rock background was at odds with the proverbial pop standard of Eurovision they made a good impression on listeners in many European countries and achieved a respectable sixth place at the contest. Both in the run-up to Eurovision and in its aftermath the group’s participation in the contest was widely seen as an important social and political event, symbolising Moldova’s integration with Europe. It also coincided with a radical pro-European turn in the state’s foreign policy.

On an official level, the musicians together with their management were invited to visit the president, Vladimir Voronin, who assured the group of the government’s “full support in the preparations for the contest,” including additional financial support for promotion purposes. The minister of culture and the chairman of state television also participated in the meeting. The president declared “the participation of Moldova in Eurovision is important primarily for the image and prestige of the country. Many Europeans do not even know that Moldova exists on the map of the continent. The artists are emissaries of the country. Sometimes artists can do more than ambassadors and diplomats.” (*Последние...*) The band’s vocalist

gave his account of the reasons for the meeting in a press-interview: “Because our participation in the European song contest concerns the image of the country, and we represent the country it should be correct, dignified and beautiful” (ibid.).

Upon the group’s triumphant return from Eurovision the members of *Zdob și Zdub*’s status of national heroes was confirmed, as illustrated by the awarding of high state medals by the president. In 2011 *Zdob și Zdub* participated in the Eurovision Song Contest for a second time. Before the contest they were invited for a meeting with current prime minister Vlad Filat. They even had a photo taken together in typical Moldovan *cusma* hats, the photo was reprinted by various media agencies. *Zdob și Zdub* was the only musical artist in Moldova who was given such an opportunity to meet the prime minister personally. However, one should not overestimate any impact of the state apparatus on the success of *Zdob și Zdub*’s career. It is important to note their artistic path developed entirely independently of state structures, and only after achieving national and international popularity did the group become an attractive target of overtures on the part of political actors and especially the political elites.

WHAT IS NATIONAL IDENTITY ABOUT?

The Moldovan identity promoted by the group is to be ethnically inclusive, open to both Moldovan/Romanian and Russian-speakers as well as other minorities. Therefore, the postmodern fusion of styles and languages in the music of *Zdob și Zdub* can be seen as reflecting some broader tendencies in the construction of Moldovan identity today. In this context it was not surprising that *Zdob și Zdub* has been the main attraction of the official open air celebrations of Independence Day on 27 August at Chișinău’s central square in front of the parliament building several times.

It is difficult to measure aspects of artistic and aesthetic achievements. Nevertheless, some reasons can be given for the success of *Zdob și Zdub* in Russia and Romania, which in turn have influenced the group’s domestic status as a key element of national identity. These reasons reflect some wider characteristics of Moldovan culture vis-à-vis its neighbouring cultural spaces. The cultural elements used by *Zdob și Zdub* have been both sufficiently familiar and at the same

times sufficiently different from Russian and Romanian culture, which meant it was possible to intrigue the audiences. The Russian audience could relate to *Zdob și Zdub* as a group coming from a former Soviet republic which still belongs to the post-Soviet cultural space. As it was already mentioned, most of the group's songs were initially in Russian. Heavy rock music is popular in Russia and *Zdob și Zdub* had a ready-made audience when they first played concerts in Russia with their early hard core songs.

They paid tribute to the tradition of independent Russian (Soviet) rock with the successful Kino cover. This band is known to every rock fan in Russia and is a symbol of rock music in the Russian-language space. The success of *Smugleanka-moldovanka* can also be easily explained by the common cultural and historical references which unite Russians and Moldovans, especially with regard to the history of the Second World War. It is also a reminder of the fact that Russia and Moldova were part of one state for centuries (the Soviet Union and the Russian empire before). At the same time, the Moldovan national characteristics increasingly employed in *Zdob și Zdub*'s artistic output were also intriguing to the Russian public. The already mentioned song by Kino was not played by *Zdob și Zdub* in the typical Russian rock style, but in an energetic Balkan folk style. Folk costumes and tunes from Moldova were "exotic" to many Russian rock fans who got to like their mixture with the alternative rock of *Zdob și Zdub*.

Similarly, the Romanian public found the music of *Zdob și Zdub* to be familiar and different at the same time. The Moldovan language is identical with Romanian, and most of the songs are understood by Romanians. The folk motives used by the Moldovan group are not very different from those which are popular in Romania. In fact *Zdob și Zdub* frequently cooperated with folk musicians from Romania, including the Romanian Gypsy orchestra Yagalo who were invited by *Zdob și Zdub* to Chișinău to record some folk-based songs together, as well as a cover version of the Rolling Stones' *Paint it Black*. The audience of the Romanian MTV have for several years given the annual Romanian MTV awards to the group. At the same time, some elements of *Zdob și Zdub*'s songs stressed their national specificity, which made it clear for Romanian listeners that they were not a Romanian group. The Moldovan accent (pronunciation) was made especially strong by vocalist Roman Iagupov. The lyrics themselves made frequent references to Moldova as the home country. Even at

concerts in Romania, *Zdob și Zdub* played some songs in Russian, which is characteristic of the linguistic diversity of Moldova.

By using both the similarities of Moldovan culture to the neighbouring cultures and its specificity, *Zdob și Zdub* managed to achieve a broad recognition of Moldova as a source of interesting culture among listeners. As the group's guitarist Mihai Gincu states:

We give fun to people, but we also want to promote the Moldovan language and culture in Europe. We absorbed good traditions of Russian rock, Moldovan and Romanian folklore, but remain a Moldovan band and have Moldovan passports.¹

The affirmation of Moldovan identity is visible in many aspects of *Zdob și Zdub*'s creative work. Typically Moldovan emblems and popular (folk) motives are included in the design of the covers of almost all the records of the group. For example, the cover of their debut CD *Hardcore Moldovenesc* shows a photo of the group against the background of the Moldovan tricolour flag. The Russian language description includes an explanation: "All songs in the Romanian language with a strongly marked Moldovan dialect." The back cover and the CD itself have an old-style folk pattern on it. The song *Bună dimineața!* (*Good Morning*) starts with the characteristic signal of Moldovan state radio at the beginning. The CD *Bunica bate doba* has a map of Moldova on its cover. On it, the village of Valeni is marked, from where the "grandmother" (in Moldovan *bunica*) comes. The grandmother is the elderly village woman in a folk costume who accompanied *Zdob și Zdub* to many concerts, including Eurovision in 2005. The CD cover also includes a statement in both Moldovan and English: "In the broad expanses of the Moldovan south, on the bank of the Prut River, there is Valeni village. An aged women that lives there, became the prototype of the character of our song *Bunica bate doba* (*Grandmother Beats the Drum-a*). After a hard working week the big family of Bejenaru has a real party—*mamaliga* is being cooked, the wine is sparkling in the glasses, and Granny Lidia is beating the drum and singing in low voice traditional recitative chants *strigattura*, bringing us back to our roots. This picture captured our imagination; we let it through our souls and wrote an ethno rock'n'roll song, with jungle elements and funny lyrics. The Grandmothers of all Moldova are beating the drums and sending their greetings to all the cool guys

¹ An interview with Mihai Gincu, Chișinău, 2008.

around the world!” The grinning face of *bunica* in Moldovan folk dress is on the main cover of the CD.

As has already been mentioned, the music of *Zdob și Zdub* was influenced by Bregović-style Balkan folklore and especially by Gypsy Balkan music. The song *Tigan i NLO (Gypsy and NLO)* has an expressly Gypsy theme, although it has sometimes been misinterpreted by some listeners as a song making fun of the Roma. The role of Gypsy culture in Moldova seems more mainstream than, for example, in neighbouring Romania, which is illustrated, among others, by the classic Moldovan film *Tabor uhodit v nebo*. Therefore, the social position of the Roma in Moldova is less vulnerable, and in this context the song is interpreted as humorous and not stigmatising. Moreover, the song is seen as a tribute to the colourful and cheerful Gypsy culture and an acknowledgement of the Gypsy influence on the music of *Zdob și Zdub*.

Despite the “Moldovanisation” of its songs, the group continues to sing some songs in Russian. It reflects both the multinational character of Moldovan society and the personal multiethnic background of the band members. For example, the charismatic lead singer Roman Iagupov was born in a Russian-speaking family, although he is fluent in Moldovan and an active enthusiast of Moldovan traditions.

The affirmation of the inclusive multiethnic Moldovan identity and the international success of the group has a particular social and political context. As American political scientist Charles King writes, Moldova is in a unique position among European countries because the basic existence of its distinct identity is a source of controversy. In fact, the very existence of Moldovan identity is questioned. King writes:

Moldova remained, even a decade after independence, the only country in Eastern Europe in which major disputes existed among political and cultural elites over the fundamentals of national identity. (King 2000: 229).

In fact, Moldova has always been a multiethnic state. However, more models of Moldovan identity exist, which can interact. The pan-Romanian version of identity advocates unification with neighbouring Romania on the basis of ethnic and linguistic ties, without regard for the Moldovan self-identification of the majority of the population, and for the concerns of national minorities that make up a bit less than one-third of the society in the traditionally multiethnic and

multilingual republic. On the other hand, that pan-Slavonic/Soviet identity is strong especially in the breakaway separatist region of Transnistria. It also denies Moldovan identity by seeking reintegration into a resurrected Soviet Union or annexation by Russia. In this sense again, the Moldovan identity expressed by *Zdob și Zdub* shows the world that Moldova has its own culture as a resource which can be internationally attractive and popular.

It is necessary to stress the strongly postmodern character of *Zdob și Zdub*'s way of expressing identity through music. *Zdob și Zdub* does not try to achieve a "pure" form of traditional rock music. It is strongly mixed and mediated through contemporary styles of rock, hip hop etc. The group does not focus on "pure" Moldovan ethnic music, but uses other influences, eg., Roma, Balkan, Jewish, Russian amongst others. Finally, the lyrics have a strongly humorous "tongue-in-cheek" attitude to Moldovan values and traditions. The self-ironic attitude is also clear when the vocalist walks on stage during the concert with a state medal pinned on his jacket. Roman Iagupov describes the group's stage attire as "a mix of sport dress with traditional Moldovan dress." At the same time, hybrid Moldovan identity (using Stuart Hall's term "hybrid identity") expressed by *Zdob și Zdub* is not a fully postmodern "invention." It is "real," i.e. the songs relate to real human experiences and musical traditions that exist on the territory of Moldova.

The international success of the group has empowered many young Moldovans who—through *Zdob și Zdub*—became proud of their previously regularly undervalued Moldovan background. This includes those Moldovans who left the country in search of work—it is estimated that about one-third of the Moldovan workforce is currently abroad, forming a significant diaspora. Thus, the undervalued heritage becomes translated into valuable symbolic capital in a globalised cultural context.

Moldovan folk culture (or more precisely folk-influenced popular culture) combined with alternative rock by *Zdob și Zdub* has therefore become an important resource for the symbolic construction of modern identity in the context of nation-building in Moldova. Identity-construction is a cultural-political process which is never complete or fixed, and of which the example of *Zdob și Zdub* is also an illustration.

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