MULTILINGUALISM AND INTERCULTURAL DIALOGUE: THE CASE OF MOLDOVA WITHIN THE EUROPEAN CONTEXT

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Abstract. Language is a vital form of cultural expression and a key factor that distinguishes humans from other species. It reflects our diversity, cultural heritage, and our capacity for cooperation, playing an essential role in shaping our identity and reflecting our culture. This article explores the complex dynamics of multilingualism in the Republic of Moldova, examining its historical context, the current linguistic landscape, and its cultural importance. It highlights the coexistence of Romanian, Russian, and minority languages such as Ukrainian and Gagauz, showcasing the country's rich cultural fabric. By comparing Moldova with other European countries, the article underscores effective strategies for promoting language diversity and inclusion. Furthermore, it discusses potential improvements in language policy and education, focusing on the impact of technology and globalisation on the future of multilingualism in Moldova. Ultimately, the findings emphasize the importance of multilingualism for Moldova's national identity and socio-economic development, while advocating for inclusive language policies that foster social cohesion and prepare citizens for a globalised future.

Key words: multilingualism, intercultural dialogue, cultural identity, social cohesion, European integration

JEL Classification: F02

Introduction

Multilingualism is a defining characteristic of Europe, showcasing the continent's rich cultural heritage and intricate history. The harmonious co-existence of various languages in Europe symbolizes the European Union's aim of unity in diversity, which is a fundamental principle of the European project. The European Commission reports that approximately 60% of Europeans can converse in at least one language besides their mother tongue (European Commission, 2012). This multilingual landscape not only enhances communication across borders but also fosters cultural exchange and economic collaboration among nations.

In the Republic of Moldova, multilingualism is especially important due to the country's unique geopolitical context and the historical impact of both Eastern and Western cultures. The official language, Romanian, signifies Moldova's cultural and historical connections to Romania. Nevertheless, Russian, Ukrainian, and Gagauz are also commonly spoken, shaped by the Soviet era and the presence of diverse ethnic groups (Palágyi, 2023). The linguistic landscape in Moldova has been influenced by various factors, such as historical migrations, political changes, and socio-economic conditions. To grasp Moldova's multilingual situation, it is essential to investigate how language relates to identity, culture, and social cohesion. As Moldova aims for closer ties with the

European Union, multilingualism becomes a vital tool for fostering social inclusion and driving economic growth.

This paper intends to explore the intricacies of multilingualism in Moldova, highlighting its historical roots, current linguistic realities, and the cultural implications for identity and community. Furthermore, it will discuss the challenges and opportunities that multilingualism brings, particularly in light of Moldova's aspirations for European integration.

Protecting and Promoting Linguistic Diversity in Europe

Europe is home to a rich tapestry of languages and cultures, each contributing to the continent's vibrant diversity. Preserving linguistic heritage is crucial not only for communication and cultural preservation, but also for building bridges between cultures, fostering social cohesion and promoting mutual understanding and respect among diverse communities in our increasingly interconnected world.

As highlighted in our previous research, language functions not only as a means of communication but also as a fundamental marker of cultural identity. Recognizing that language is deeply rooted in the sociocultural context of its speakers highlights the importance of being sensitive to these contexts when interpreting messages. Encouraging multilingualism involves motivating individuals to explore languages beyond their own, which fosters an appreciation for diverse cultural viewpoints. By embracing other languages, people can better understand the richness of their own culture and identity while also valuing the complexities of others (Hîrbu, 2016). This awareness is essential for creating meaningful intercultural dialogue, where different cultural expressions are understood and appreciated.

Protecting multilingualism in Europe is essential for maintaining cultural diversity and promoting social cohesion. COST Actions are instrumental in this effort by funding collaborative research that addresses the challenges and opportunities faced by multilingual societies. These initiatives advocate for language policy, education, media, and technological solutions, ensuring that minority languages can flourish alongside more dominant ones. By backing research on multilingualism, COST Actions help to preserve linguistic diversity and create inclusive environments where all languages are appreciated and maintained.

For instance, within the COST Action CA22115, "A Multilingual Repository of Phraseme Constructions in Central and Eastern European Languages" (PhraConRep), we aim to safeguard idiomatic expressions that are vital to each language's distinct cultural and linguistic identity. This project is developing a multilingual repository of Phraseme Constructions (PhraCons) across Central and Eastern European languages, thereby supporting both linguistic and cultural heritage while encouraging intercultural dialogue (MoU PhraConRep, 2023).

Another COST Action - CA22126 "European Network On Lexical Innovation" (ENEOLI), is dedicated to promoting multilingualism in Europe by highlighting the essential role of neology – the exploration of lexical innovations and their effects on languages. This initiative aims to create a multilingual digital glossary of neology terms to support international research efforts. By developing digital tools to track lexical innovations and engaging both experts and the public through crowdsourcing, ENEOLI seeks to inspire creativity in local languages and enhance clarity in institutional and scientific communication. The project also focuses on comparative studies of lexical innovation across European languages, particularly examining borrowings and their equivalents, which further enriches the region's linguistic diversity. Additionally, through training programmes for professionals such as translators and journalists, ENEOLI ensures that new terms are accurately

integrated and understood in various linguistic contexts, thereby strengthening Europe's cultural and linguistic landscape (MoU ENEOLI, 2024).

In a similar vein, COST Action CA23105, "Language Plurality in Europe's Changing Media Sphere" (PLURILINGMEDIA), aims to protect and promote multilingualism in Europe in the face of the increasing prevalence of major languages, especially English. With global competition and evolving media consumption patterns posing risks to the survival of regional and minority languages, PLURILINGMEDIA strives to encourage cooperation among scholars and practitioners to tackle these issues. It examines the effects of digitalization on regional and minority languages within Europe's media landscape (MoU PLURILINGMEDIA, 2024).

Thus, by promoting multilingualism and respecting the unique linguistic identities of communities, we can strengthen the bonds that unite us, celebrate our differences, and build a more inclusive and harmonious Europe.

Moldova's Historical Background

The historical development of multilingualism in the Republic of Moldova is deeply intertwined with its intricate geopolitical history, which has significantly influenced its linguistic landscape. Throughout the centuries, Moldova has been shaped by various empires and states, including the Ottoman Empire, the Russian Empire, and the Soviet Union. This rich history has contributed to the region's diverse linguistic environment.

In the early 20th century, the area known as Bessarabia became part of the Kingdom of Romania after World War I. During this time, Romanian was promoted as the primary language in education and governance. However, as noted by Purici, the onset of Soviet rule in 1940 brought about significant linguistic changes. The Soviet government enforced a Russification policy that elevated the status of Russian while sidelining Romanian in public life. This shift not only impacted language use but also had deep implications for cultural identity and social cohesion among the population (Purici, 2011).

After the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, Moldova declared its independence and reinstated Romanian as the official language. Nevertheless, Pavlenco points out that the legacy of Soviet influence remains, with Russian still widely spoken, especially among the Russian-speaking minority and in urban areas. This has created a unique multilingual environment where code-switching and bilingualism are common (Pavlenco, 2008).

Moldova's current linguistic policies reflect this historical context, aiming to promote the use of Romanian in education and public life while also recognizing the linguistic rights of Russian speakers and other minority groups. Despite these initiatives, language-related tensions occasionally arise, particularly in political discussions about national identity and Moldova's potential integration into the European Union.

Current Linguistic Landscape

Moldova's rich ethnic and linguistic diversity significantly influences its social and cultural environment. Recent census data reveals the breakdown of the population by ethnic group, offering a glimpse into the demographic trends within the country.
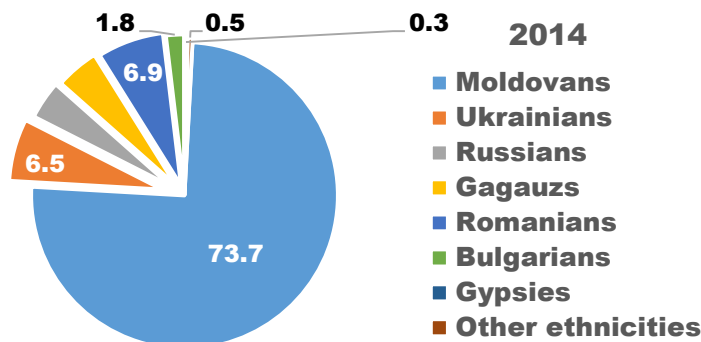
Figure 1. Ethnic Structure of the Population in the RM from the 2014 Census
Source: Author's study based on data from the National Bureau of Statistics of the RM (2014)

The current ethnic landscape of the Republic of Moldova, based on the 2014 census data, reflects a diverse population with a predominant Moldovan identity. Moldovans constitute approximately 73,7% of the total population, a slight decline from previous years. This group is followed by Ukrainians at 6,5% and Russians at 4,0%, indicating a gradual decrease in these communities. The Gagauz population stands at around 4,5%, maintaining its presence in the southern regions of the country. Notably, the percentage of Romanians has risen to 6,9%, suggesting a growing recognition of shared cultural and linguistic ties.

Smaller ethnic groups include Bulgarians (1,8%), Gypsies (0,3%), and other ethnicities (0,5%), which together contribute to Moldova's multicultural fabric. This diversity is crucial for understanding the country's social dynamics and cultural interactions, as language, heritage, and citizenship significantly influence ethnic identity. The key elements defining membership in an ethnic group are parental origin and mother tongue. Citizenship also plays a significant role, particularly for Moldovans and Romanians, while place of birth is essential for the Moldovan and Gagauz ethnic groups.

Moldova's linguistic landscape features an intricate mix of languages, where Romanian serves as the official language while Russian maintains a significant presence. The 2014 census data on the structure of the population in the Republic of Moldova by mother tongue highlights a diverse linguistic landscape.
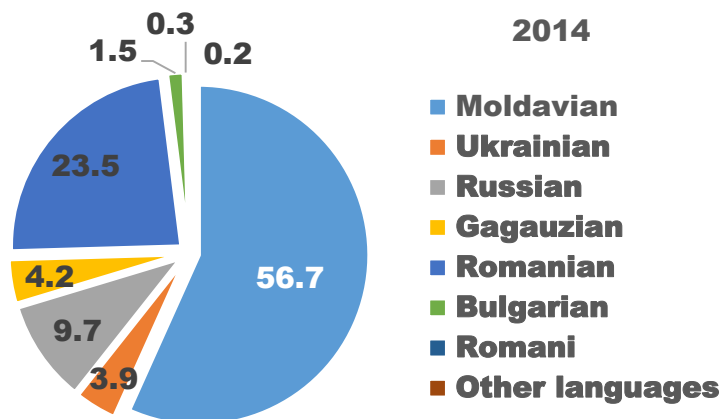

Figure 2. Language Distribution in RM
Source: Author's study based on data from the National Bureau of Statistics of the RM (2014)

The most widely spoken language in Moldova is Moldavian, with 56,7% of the population identifying it as their mother tongue. Romanian follows closely at 23,5%, reflecting the cultural and linguistic ties between the two. Russian is spoken by 9,7% of the population, highlighting its significant presence, particularly in urban areas and among certain ethnic communities. Other languages spoken include Gagauz, which is used by 4,2% of the population, mainly within the Gagauz community, and Ukrainian, spoken by 3,9%. Bulgarian is used by 1,5%, while Romani is spoken by 0,3% of the population. Other languages make up just 0,2%. This linguistic variety highlights Moldova's multicultural makeup, where several languages coexist, showcasing the country's rich ethnic heritage. Moldova's educational policies reflect this linguistic diversity. While Romanian is the main language of instruction in most schools, around 30% of urban schools provide education in Russian to cater to the Russian-speaking population (CIVIS, 2021). Recent efforts have aimed at enhancing language skills, especially in English and other European languages, which are increasingly recognized as vital for Moldova's economic growth and international relations.

Cultural Implications of Multilingualism

Multilingualism in Moldova has deep cultural and identity-related implications, affecting how individuals and communities interact with their social surroundings. The presence of multiple languages encourages a wide array of cultural expressions, reflecting the diverse backgrounds of the population. This linguistic variety is essential in shaping identity for many Moldovans, as language often acts as a symbol of cultural belonging and affiliation. For instance, Romanian is not just a means of communication; it is also a crucial part of national identity for many Moldovans. The revival of the Romanian language following independence has led to a cultural renaissance, with Romanian literature, music, and traditions becoming more prominent.

On the other hand, for the Russian-speaking minority, the Russian language is a key link to their cultural identity and community, particularly in areas like Transnistria and Gagauzia, where Russian is widely spoken. This situation creates a complex identity landscape, where individuals may navigate various cultural affiliations based on the languages they use.

Additionally, multilingualism significantly influences social interactions and community cohesion. In multicultural settings, people often engage in code-switching – switching between languages depending on the social context and their conversation partners. This practice can promote inclusivity and understanding among diverse groups, enriching social interactions and fostering a sense of community. However, it also brings challenges, such as language barriers that can hinder effective communication and create divisions between different language groups.

Cultural events and community gatherings frequently showcase this multilingual aspect, highlighting various linguistic and cultural traditions. Festivals, art exhibitions, and performances celebrate Moldova's linguistic diversity, encouraging intercultural dialogue and mutual respect among different communities.

Challenges and Opportunities

The cultural implications of multilingualism come with their own set of challenges. Tensions related to language can emerge, especially when certain languages seem to be favoured over others, which can lead to feelings of marginalisation among speakers of minority languages. To address these issues, it is essential to have a nuanced understanding of the sociolinguistic landscape and to implement inclusive language policies that honour and promote all languages spoken in Moldova.

Moreover, the pressure to conform to the dominant culture can lead to language loss, particularly among younger generations. As global and regional influences increase, some individuals may choose to focus on learning dominant languages at the expense of their native or minority languages. This trend poses a threat to the preservation of cultural heritage and identity associated with these languages, resulting in a decrease in linguistic diversity.

On a positive note, multilingualism offers significant opportunities for Moldova. For one, it boosts trade by providing substantial benefits for economic growth. By encouraging proficiency in multiple languages, Moldova can enhance its trade relationships with various countries, thereby improving its competitive position in international markets. This linguistic diversity allows for smoother communication and negotiations, attracting foreign investment and expanding export opportunities.

Additionally, Moldova's multilingual environment enhances tourism, making the country a more attractive destination for international travellers. By showcasing its linguistic diversity, Moldova can appeal to a wider audience, with multilingual services in the tourism sector – such as guided tours and informational materials – enhancing the overall visitor experience and fostering cultural exchange.

Finally, multilingualism is crucial for enhancing international relations. By improving language skills, Moldova can interact more effectively with its neighbouring countries and international organisations. This capacity to communicate across different languages promotes collaboration on various matters, including trade, security, and cultural exchange, which in turn fosters regional stability and cooperation. Moldova has considerable opportunities to leverage its multilingualism for economic growth and cultural enhancement.

Comparative Analysis with Other European Countries

Moldova's multilingualism can be effectively compared to the linguistic landscapes of Switzerland and Belgium, both of which manage complex multilingual environments.

In Switzerland, the 2019 Federal Statistical Office Report shows that about 63% of the population speaks German, 20% speaks French, 8% speaks Italian, and 0,5% speaks Romansh (Federal Statistical Office, 2022). This linguistic variety is bolstered by strong institutional frameworks that promote language education from an early age, encouraging both bilingualism and trilingualism. For example, around 75% of Swiss students learn at least one additional language alongside their mother tongue, which helps facilitate communication across regions and strengthens national unity (Grin, 2003).

In Belgium, the 2021 Census indicates that roughly 60% of the population speaks Dutch, 40% speaks French, and less than 1% speaks German (Statbel, 2021). Belgium's federal structure accommodates its linguistic communities, enabling tailored language policies that meet to regional needs. For example, the Brussels-Capital Region is officially bilingual, with educational policies supporting both French and Dutch. This decentralised approach has allowed Belgium to manage its linguistic diversity while promoting cultural identity within each language community (De Schutter, 2021).

Moldova can draw valuable lessons from these countries. Implementing comprehensive language policies that support multilingual education and promote all languages equally could enhance social cohesion and inclusivity. For example, increasing the percentage of students learning multiple languages could parallel Switzerland's model, where over 75% of students are engaged in additional language learning (European Commission. 2012). According to the latest Eurostat data, the most commonly studied foreign languages in Europe are English (97,9%), French (33,4%), German (23,3%), and Spanish (16,9%). Russian and Italian follow, with 2,5% and 1,3%, respectively.

A similar trend can be observed in the Republic of Moldova. In addition to the mother tongue, the school curriculum mandates the study of one or two foreign languages during general education. The most popular language among students is English, and according to data from the National Bureau of Statistics, the trend of learning this language has been steadily increasing in recent years. English is more favoured by urban students, who make up 63% of all learners, while French and Russian are more commonly chosen by students in rural areas. It is important to note that the languages of instruction for all subjects in Moldova predominantly remain Romanian (80,6%) and Russian (19,3%), with only 0,1% of students studying in English and Bulgarian.

By examining the successful strategies of European countries, Moldova can better navigate its multilingual challenges and leverage its cultural diversity for social and economic development.

Future Perspectives

As the Republic of Moldova continues to navigate its multilingual landscape, potential developments in language policy and education will be crucial in shaping the future of multilingualism in the country. Increasingly, there is a recognition of the need for comprehensive language policies that promote inclusivity and support all linguistic communities. Policymakers should focus on creating a balanced framework that not only prioritizes the Romanian language but also ensures that minority languages, such as Russian, Ukrainian, and Gagauz, receive adequate support in education and public life. This approach could involve developing bilingual education programs and enhancing language training for educators to address the diverse linguistic needs of students.

In addition to formal education, the role of technology is becoming increasingly significant in shaping multilingualism in Moldova. Digital tools and online platforms can provide access to language learning resources, facilitating self-directed learning and encouraging proficiency in multiple languages. For instance, mobile applications and e-learning platforms can offer interactive lessons in Romanian, Russian, and other languages, making language acquisition more accessible to a broader audience. Furthermore, technology can enable virtual exchange programs, connecting Moldovan learners with native speakers globally, thereby enriching their linguistic and cultural experiences.

Globalisation also plays a crucial role in influencing language dynamics in Moldova. As the country aspire to integrate with the European Union, the demand for proficiency in international languages, particularly English, is on the rise. This shift may lead to the incorporation of English as a key component in educational curricula, alongside Romanian and Russian. By fostering a multilingual environment that includes international languages, Moldova can enhance its competitiveness in the global economy and better prepare its citizens for opportunities abroad.

Conclusion

This paper has explored the intricate dynamics of multilingualism in Moldova, highlighting its historical, cultural, and educational dimensions. Key findings indicate that Moldova's linguistic landscape is characterised by a coexistence of Romanian, Russian, and other minority languages, shaped by historical influences and current policies. The interplay of these languages not only reflects the country's diverse cultural heritage but also plays a pivotal role in shaping individual and community identities.

Multilingualism is of paramount importance for Moldova's identity and future. As a bridge between Eastern and Western cultures, Moldova's linguistic diversity positions it uniquely in a globalised world. Embracing this diversity can enhance social cohesion, foster mutual respect among different

ethnic groups, and promote a sense of belonging. Furthermore, as Moldova aspire to integrate with the European Union, promoting language diversity is essential for aligning with European values and facilitating international cooperation.

Recent statistics highlight the importance of inclusive language policies that serve all linguistic communities, ensuring equal access to education and opportunities. By capitalizing on its linguistic diversity and prioritizing inclusive policies, Moldova can lay the foundation for a more unified and prosperous future.

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