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"Glorious Past, Age-Old Connection with Russia" Moscow and the Russo-Moldovan Historical Ties

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Abstract

The article delves into the Russian assessment of the common Russo-Moldovan past, pronounced in the framework of the Moldovan EU referendum and the concurrent presidential elections in October-November 2024. Discourse analysis, as defined by Ricoeur and Fairclough, is applied to the public speeches of Maria Zakharova, the spokesperson of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Occasionally, these are triangulated with the articulation of the Russian president, Vladimir Putin. However, due to her frequent appearances concerning Moldova, it is Zakharova who represents Russia in this issue. Entirely, Moscow's discourse on Moldovan history is tackled within the frames of the Russo-Moldovan past and present.

With a confrontational approach, Zakharova slams the Moldovan EU referendum for having taken place under totalitarian circumstances. It was the West that plotted to convert Moldova into a NATO base. The Moldovans dismissed this course since they cherish their history and their centuries-long bond with Russia. As does Putin, the spokesperson, who oversees 1200 years of Slavic-Romanian encounters. While Zakharova recaps Russia's impact on Moldova's uniqueness from the 18th century to the Soviet era, she applies a descriptive representation of facts. Hence, she covertly exhorts the Moldovans to impede the country's further integration in the West. Yet, Zakharova is unable to overcome the perpetual paradoxes throughout the ages – the similarity of Moldova and Romania, the constant economic decay, and the permanent Russian hegemony.

Keywords:

Russia; Moldova; Maria Zakharova; History; Bessarabia;
MASSR; MSSR; Discourse Analysis.

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On October 20, 2024, the Moldovan referendum on EU integration – or technically, on the constitutional amendments to outline the EU as the country's strategic objective – turned into a spectacle. Even if the preliminary results attested a clear rejection of the changes, the following dawn, the approval of the constitutional reform obtained a majority of a few hundred ballots. Then, the gap only increased. Numerically, the outcome turned 50,35 percent in favor of the amendments, while 49,65 percent voted against the changes (CEC 2024a). It is pertinent to note that the plebiscite was conducted side by side with the first round of the presidential elections. The incumbent pro-Western Maia Sandu obtained 42,49%, and Alexandr Stoianoglo, considered as her prime opponent, gathered 25,95% percent. However, if all the candidates, whether moderately or staunchly pro-Russian, are calculated, the Eastern orientation as such was desired by 51,5 percent (CEC 2024b).

Substantially, both these outcomes reiterate the thesis of Sergeyev a decade ago. The conflict in Moldova since the late perestroika is not about ethnicity or nationality, rather, it is a confrontation of two larger perceptions on heirloom. While the pro-Romanian élite of Moldova stands for the Latin roots, it simultaneously promotes the country's age-old Europeanism. Contrastively, the Russian-speakers (those who prefer Russian as their first language) view themselves as an inalienable part in the string of Slavic generations – or more exactly, the Russian World (Sergeyev 2015, 13). As for Southern Moldova, or Gagauzia as it came to be known, the causes and the evolution of the confrontation prove similar. The visible exception is the yet unfinished dispute on the ethnogenesis of the Gagauz (Bejan 2022, 29–38, 224–225, 229–238).

Russia was to first address the referendum and the elections on October 21, 2024. On one hand, to track the contiguous themes, on the other, to discover the plausible alterations in Moscow's standpoint, I have extended the research period until November 28, the same year, i.e., to the date of validating the results of the presidential elections (CCM 2024). Markedly, it is the spokesperson Zakharova to pronounce Moscow's positions on Moldova, not President Putin nor the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Sergey Lavrov. A search with the voice 'Молдова' (Moldova in Cyrillic) reveals this. During the timeline from January 1, 2024, to the date of finalizing the text, August 26, 2025, the Kremlin's search engine returns only four results with the voice (Kremlin 2025). These locutions consist of a one-word mention of the country; one of them is not even pronounced by Putin himself. In Lavrov's case, the results in the MFA's search engine total ten within an equal timeframe. Notably, the latest one dates as far as January 2025 (MID-1). As for Zakharova, the number is overwhelming, 59 results (MID-2). Therefore, with solid grounds, one may state that Zakharova incorporates Russia in Moldovan issues.

With the topical commentaries and briefings after the presidential run-off on November 3, the number of sources is seven. Regarding the campaign phase and the polling day, Zakharova underscores the undemocratic circumstances that reigned

during the electoral process, with open allusions to the “repression” of media and of those dissenting from the European alignment. The 300 to 500 thousand Moldovans residing in Russia were practically deprived of the right to express their will, whereas the utmost slight majority was obtained through “a mobilization” of the equally large diaspora in the West. These allegations were destined to defame Moldova, and thus, to hamper its pro-European course ([Lamminparras 2025](#), 35, 38–40, 42–43). Moreover, the spokesperson retains diplomacy both as a struggle and as an unsolicited movement ([Kireyeva and Pikuleva 2019](#), 22–24). Accordingly, the final purpose of all the Western “meddling” was to rip Moldova off its sovereignty – and under the guise of the EU, to transform it into an anti-Russian NATO stronghold ([Lamminparras 2025](#), 40–42, 43).

Suddenly, the Moldovans within the boundaries of the republic hoisted “a non-confidence vote” against Sandu and her government ([Zakharova-K04N 2024](#)). 54,6 percent voted against the constitutional changes. The figure for the Moldovans with residence in Pridnestrovye was 69 percent, and for the Gagauz, just short of 95 percent ([CEC 2024a](#)). It is worth noticing that the Gagauz opinion appears firm. Ten years earlier, the same percentage rejected EU integration ([Romanova 2022](#), 497). I invite my fellow scholars to deepen this preliminary investigation. Altogether, the suggestion of Sergeyev on the “two worlds” not only persists but is utterly tangible. This understanding was warmly welcomed by the Russian MFA: the premeditated fraud did not deceive the local people. According to Moscow, the reason proves simple but fundamental. Already, the Moldovans are in Europe: “through their labor and history they have made a colossal contribution to the European civilization” ([Zakharova-B21N 2024](#)). Therefore, the Moldovans are proud of their magnificent past, and they especially value the age-old tie with Russia ([Zakharova-B30O 2024](#)). Regrettably, all these are threatened by one of the prime Western instruments of interference, that is, “the obliteration of Moldova’s national identity, language, culture, and history” ([Zakharova-K21O 2024](#)). In contrast, it has been precisely Russia that has both enhanced and preserved the uniqueness of Moldova. To illuminate and advocate this vital mutuality, the spokesperson delivers a lengthy historical account ([Zakharova-B30O 2024](#)).

The emphasized recurrence to history is in line with the law ‘On the Fundamentals of the State Policy of the Russian Federation within the sphere of Historical Enlightenment’ ([Osnovy 2024](#)), promulgated by Putin in May 2024. Therefore, to disentangle the strategic narratives and potential discrepancies in Moscow’s stance on Moldova’s past, it is imperative to explore Zakharova’s language and communication. Throughout this inquiry, the textual and sociocultural levels of discourse analysis, as outlined by Fairclough, are applied to the public speeches and statements of Maria Zakharova. According to Fairclough, there are three levels of discourse analysis. As the name “textual” reveals, the first one focuses on solitary enunciations and word choice. The second level – “production” – considers resources and procedures behind any text or presentation. On the third level, which perhaps is the most

challenging, a scholar tends to differentiate the social and cultural suggestions of a given presentation (Fairclough 1992, 1, 38, 62–63, 87). To simplify these links, the substance of the words emerges from the framework in which they occur (Eskola 1996, 65, 127); therefore, a complete axiom refers “beyond itself” to the (semantic) society in question (Ricoeur 1976, 6–7, 20). In total, I distinguish the expressions, implications, and gaps of Zakharova’s articulation. The auxiliary questions are:

- How does the spokesperson depict the Russo-Moldovan ties?
- How does the sociopolitical environment shape Zakharova’s utterance?
- What questions does Zakharova remain tacit on?

The translations from Russian, Romanian/Moldovan, Finnish, Estonian, and French are produced by the author of the current text. Inasmuch as to assist the readers in tracking the history behind the events, to avoid repetition, the chapters are thematically organized. In connection with the Moldovan parliamentary elections on September 28, 2025, this article is a valuable product of a scientific research effort and serves, in addition to general information and background, for this purpose.

Despite official claims of Moldova’s distinctiveness, the probe exposes a series of divergences between stated policy and factual approach. Zakharova gladly offers detailed figures concerning the boost that Russia has brought throughout the centuries in the faraway region. Thus, she clandestinely encourages the Moldovans to encumber the country’s pro-Western integration. Logically, Zakharova remains silent on those episodes that rather accentuate the resemblance between Romania and Moldova. Also, to evade any debate on the era of stagnation, Zakharova finishes her educational and economic accounts on Bessarabia in 1860-1861. These times would merely compromise the core objective of Zakharova’s narration – to exhort the Moldovans to cherish the age-old ties with Moscow.

1. Research tools

This section is to clarify the acronyms and abbreviations utilized throughout the text. The source material is readily explained above. To conclude this section, I will discuss the findings of my predecessors.

1.1. Acronyms

EU	European Union
KASSR	Karelian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (1923-1940)
KSSR	Karelian Soviet Socialist Republic (1940-1956)
MASSR	Moldovan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (1924-1940)
MFA	Ministry of Foreign Affairs (RU)
MID	Ministerstvo inostrannykh del (Pridnestrovye)
MSSR	Moldovan Soviet Socialist Republic (1940-1991)
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
Osnovy	Foundations of the SPRF within the sphere of Historical Enlightenment

PMR	Pridnestrovskaya Moldavskaya Respublika (Pridnestrovye)
SPRF	State Policy of the Russian Federation
USSR	Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic (1918-1991)
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (1922-1991)

1.2. Literature review

There are plenty of pages on (Romanian-)Moldovan history, with their focus ranging from the primeval ages to contemporaneity ([Eyal and Smith 1996](#); [Bruchis 1996](#); [Bărbulescu, et al. 1998](#); [King 2000](#); [Dima 2001](#); [Skvortsova 2002](#); [Negru 2003](#); [Roper 2008](#); [Lamminparras 2014a](#); [ibid. 2014b](#); [Sergeyev 2015](#); [Babilunga 2015](#); [Dulgheru 2016](#); [Dulgheru 2018](#); [Țicu 2019](#); [Bejan 2022](#); [Negru Gh. 2023](#); [Negru E. 2023](#)). While all these, to a notable extent, tackle the Russian imprints throughout Moldova's history, its culture, etc., analyses with a specific accent on Moscow's corresponding speak constitute a rarity (for instance, [Lamminparras 2024a](#)). As previously mentioned, the primary Moldova commentator in Moscow is Maria Zakharova, not President Putin nor the Minister of Foreign Affairs Lavrov. Maybe due to the language barrier, most of the investigations on Zakharova's discourses are conducted in Russia, or by Russian-speaking academics. Since many of these date to the pre-war days, this examination renews and augments our topical information.

First, as noted by Gorbacheva and Zaynullina, Maria Zakharova is the first female to serve as the head of the Department of Information and Press of the Russian MFA [spokesperson]. She was nominated for the post in 2015. One of her core virtues is that she does not limit herself to the regular communication channels. Zakharova is famous for her appearance on TV talk shows and on social media platforms ([Gorbacheva 2016, 7](#); [Zaynullina 2018, 166](#); see also [Martynenko and Mel'nikova 2016](#)). Another factor in her popularity is her clear and sharp tongue, combining ironic notions, detailed narration, and insurmountable facts. Consequently, the spokesperson has become one of the most cited Russian diplomats, or to be exact, "the main media face" of the MFA ([Kireyeva and Pikuleva 2019, 21](#)).

During the last years, Zakharova's utterance has drawn wider attention. The obvious reason is the all-out war in Ukraine, on which Zakharova comments in harsh language, especially about the sufferings in Donbas (see, e.g., [Belova-Dalton 2023, 69, 77, 80](#)). Somewhat paradoxically, Sandler holds that Zakharova possesses various communicative resources under the setting of a fierce military-political and cultural-ideological confrontation between the Russian World and the collective West ([Sandler 2022, 116](#)). In general, Sandler explores the diverse techniques and strategies the spokesperson employs, such as an explanatory nature and diplomacy as a struggle. Most recently, I probed Zakharova's discourse on the Moldovan EU-referendum, but from the (geo)political point of view. The spokesperson defames Chisinau by condemning the plebiscite, which has been conducted through numerous violations of basic civil and human rights. This stark notion is to impede the country's pro-EU course. As does President Putin, so does Zakharova kindly

relate to the ordinary Moldovans and warn them of the consequences: in the European Union, their sovereignty would be lost. However, it is not the EU itself to endanger independence. Rather, a sizable electoral rigging was undertaken by the Western states for one single cause – to ultimately draw Moldova into NATO (Lamminparras 2025).

2. Lutsk alliance

Simply overlooking 1200 years, Zakharova begins her account from the early 18th century, as if there were no prior Russo-Moldovan contacts. Like President Putin, she bypasses the Slavic settlements in the areas today perceived as Romania, Moldova, and Bulgaria from the fifth to seventh centuries. Alike, she omits the Kievan Prince Svyatoslav's realm by the Danube in 969–971, the Medieval dynastical relations, and the alliance between Moldavia and the Muscovite crown in 1656. (For Putin's silence, see Lamminparras 2024a, 108–110, 112.) Ostensibly, these phases would testify to Fundament 5 of the Osnovy on the shared past and space. In its words, Russia comprehends “a mighty nation with hundreds of years of history, of state-civilization, which unites Russians and many other nations within the Eurasian plateau to one cultural-historical community” (Osnovy 2024). The likely explanation of Zakharova's omission seems to be the misfortunes of all the pre-1700 occasions; the early Slavic reigns along the Danube soon collapsed, and the later treaties were virtually never realized.

Whilst Zakharova applied a rather confrontational stratagem regarding the electoral circumstances – with a metaphorical model of diplomacy as a struggle, or a sheer war, she here shifts to the so-called descriptive representation of facts (Zakharova and this strategy, see Gorbacheva 2016, 9–10). As for the origins of the Russo-Moldovan interaction, Zakharova sets sail from the Moldavian Prince Dimitrie Cantemir:

-- since the era of Prince Dimitrie Cantemir, Russia has constituted a trustworthy ally, played an important role in the preservation and development of the Moldovan statehood and national identity (Zakharova-B30O 2024).

Neatly, in the aftermath of the Battle of Poltava – with the joint Cossack-Swedish army defeated – King Carl XII and hetman Ivan Mazepa had fled to the Ottoman Bender by the Dniester. (Linnarsson 2022, 8–9; for Poltava, see, e.g., Englund 1988; From 2007). There, Mazepa soon died. Yet, his successor, Philip Orlyk, and the Swedish king prepared a new onslaught into Russia. The plan was leaked to Czar Peter I, which led to Dimitrie Cantemir's ascension to the Moldavian princely throne. However, like his predecessor, Cantemir aspired for the freedom of the Ottoman vassal principalities of Moldavia and Wallachia (Babilunga 2015, 31–32). Also, Cantemir projected a monarchical constitution instead of the boyar rule (Bărbulescu et al. 1998, 273–274).

The alliance was forged in Lutsk in April 1711. As stated by Babilunga, Peter I agreed to guarantee Cantemir's objectives (Babilunga 2015, 31–32). In this respect, Russia indeed progressed the Moldovan state formation and its identity, as Zakharova insists (Zakharova-B300 2024). Although it does not foil this assumption, it is still valid to ponder whether Peter's benevolence was to endure or, to temporarily create an incentive for the Christians south of the Danube to align with Russia. Not least, because the alliance envisioned a Moldavia with its Medieval boundaries, i.e., with those dating to the era of Prince Ștefan cel Mare (Stephen the Great) in 1457-1504 (Dulgheru 2016, 159, 164).

However, Zakharova remains tacit about this aspect of the Treaty of Lutsk. She seems to be siding with Putin, who avoids these episodes, too. Apart from condemning Mazepa as a "mutineer", the Russian president speaks no word on this era (Putin 2021). The motivation is clear; any in-depth reference to Lutsk would only constitute a precarious precedent. If the borders were demarcated by the late 15th-century maps, the pro-Moscow republic east of the Dniester, Pridnestrovye, would lose Bender, its stronghold-entrance just on the western bank of the same river. Ukraine would have to relinquish its southwestern corner, the classical Basarabia (the western half of the modern Odesa region by the Black Sea), to Moldova. On the other hand, Chisinau could no longer claim the area east of the Dniester. During Ștefan cel Mare's epoch, Bender functioned as the principedom's eastern customs and border checkpoint. This triple territorial paradox looms as the probable cause for both Moscow and Chisinau's (and Kyiv's?) quietness.

Practically, the alliance fell in July 1711, as the Russian and Moldovan forces encountered the Ottoman army in Stănilăști, just west of the river Prut. Even though the result is described as undecided, Peter I renounced the Azov fortress and withdrew from Moldavia, followed by Cantemir (Babilunga 2015, 31–32). Exiled, Prince Cantemir developed Russian cartography, arts, and science. Alike, he served as Peter's right-hand aid (Dulgheru 2016, 159). Now what Zakharova misses, or purposefully omits, is Cantemir's conviction. Throughout his life, the prince advocated the Roman legacy and promoted the Latin heritage of his kinsmen (Țicu 2019, 88–90). Even if Cantemir nominally spoke of the Moldovans, substantially, he saw no difference between the terms 'Romanian' and 'Moldovan'. This, in turn, enters into a stark contradiction with Zakharova's utterance on a separate "Moldovan statehood" and a distinct "Moldovan national identity" (Zakharova-B300 2024).

The paradox is analogous to the one President Putin barely avoids in his Moldova discourse (Lamminparras 2024a, 110–111, 112). If the MFA's spokesperson disclosed Cantemir's life's work, she simultaneously would highlight the common Romanian-Moldovan ancestry. Time and again, this would frustrate Moscow's claims on a unique Moldova and on its apparent proximity to Russia.

3. Bessarabian bloom

The following hundred years, Russia, as well as Austria, constantly engaged in wars with the Ottoman Empire over the Balkans (see, e.g., [Lamminparras 2024b](#), 169–173, 182–183). The heyday of Moldova is the 19th century, as Zakharova introduces:

After the signing of the Bucharest peace treaty in May 1812, the territory between the Dniester and the Prut, i.e., Bessarabia, was incorporated into the Russian Empire. From this hour, the revival of the Moldovan lands, devastated by the war, embarked ([Zakharova-B300 2024](#)).

Foremost, the spokesperson continues her descriptive approach, with additional narrative markers, namely ‘After’ and ‘From this hour’. Likewise, the positive description seems to echo one of the objectives of the Foundations of the State Policy of the Russian Federation within the Historical Enlightenment. Namely, it is “the formation of the [universal] Russian civil identity and the solidification of the community of the Russian world, founded on the traditional Russian spiritual-moral and cultural-historical values...” ([Osnovy 2024](#)). Since it was Russia that was to rejuvenate the new territory, logically, Bessarabia back then welcomed, and still embraces, the same ideals.

Yet, Zakharova’s historical account circumvents a few elements. For example, the peace treaty obliged Russia to withdraw from the centuries-old principalities of Wallachia and Moldavia. It is worth weighing whether this outcome satisfied the emperor and his generals. Already by 1810, there was a plan to annex the Danube Principalities and to restructure these into four *oblasts* (provinces). The Ottoman resistance, the objections of the Great Powers, and the threat of Napoleon’s invasion contributed to the constant revisions of the plan. Finally, “the worst-case scenario” was realized, and Russia had to contend with the area from the Dniester to the Prut ([Bejan 2022](#), 84–85).

As depicted by Dulgheru, Czar Aleksandr I annexed the whole territory and “baptized” it as Bessarabia. Thus, the Czar distorted the original concept of Basarabia ([Dulgheru 2016](#), 172, 174). Per se, the term ‘Basarab’ may have referred to Cumans who in the 11th century settled in the narrow shore strip from the Dniester to the Danube, today the western wing of the Odesa region. Bejan suggests that the nomination persisted for centuries since Basarab I, the Wallachian ruler who conquered the region in the mid-14th century, himself had Cuman origins ([Bejan 2022](#), 58–59). As of 1812, the reshaped Bessarabia covered 45,360 km², but the estimates of its population vary from 350 to 500 thousand. Regardless of the exact number, more than eight out of ten spoke Romanian as their native tongue ([King 2000](#), 20; [Dima 2001](#), 14; [Roper 2008](#), 80).

Conversely, Alexandr I’s tolerant policy favored the bloom. The vast privileges of the local boyars, the status of the Romanian idiom, and the autonomy of the

[Orthodox] church were all guaranteed in 1818 (King 2000, 22). Bruchis insists that the true intention of the Czar's liberalism consisted of a showcase. That is, the vast freedoms of Bessarabia ought to attract Christians from the Ottoman Balkans (Bruchis 1996, 11). At the same time, this satisfied the local magnates (King 2000, 21–22). Following this interpretation, the Czar's objectives would only have repeated those of Peter I (the Great) a hundred years before. Nevertheless, an illuminating parallel is Finland, which the very same Czar Alexander had conquered four years earlier. In March 1809, Finland was granted the status of an autonomous Grand Duchy. The most significant turned out to be Alexander's assurances to maintain the Swedish-era laws, the prior privileges, as well as the language. Pragmatically, the language barrier alone in both fresh autonomies – Bessarabia and Finland – compelled the new potentates to resort to the local administrators. From a cynical perspective, none of these justifications proves exclusive. Due to the practical prerequisites, the Czarist regime took advantage of the ethnic people in the Northwest as well as in the Southwest, which indeed was liberal at its time. At once, this reflected the interests of the native élites, averting any plausible resentment, and conveyed an encouraging message about the new ruler.

If one follows Zakharova's articulation, the parallels do speak for each other. E.g., the boost the Russian rule embarked on in Bessarabia was overwhelming. From 1812 to 1917, the population increased 7.5-fold. Moreover, judging by the first nationwide census of 1897, Bessarabia ranked as one of the most inhabited territories of the empire (Zakharova-B30O 2024). Though it is questionable whether the demographic growth widely originated from within or from other Russian regions. As Eyal & Smith state, the so-called Novorossiia policy, i.e., resettlement with various nationalities, was promptly expanded into Bessarabia. The Jews were exempted from the military service and adorned with extraordinary rights, the Bulgarians and the Gagauz gained land ownership and economic privileges for three to seven years, and the Russians controlled the largest estates (Eyal and Smith 1996, 224; Bejan 2022, 89–91).

The heavy immigration explains the sizable increase of Bessarabian lands under crop cultivation and of those under viniculture between 1814 and 1861; the boom of their production, not to mention. Although Zakharova's description here is punctual, with exact figures included, she does not speculate or muse on the larger picture (Zakharova-B30O 2024). Repeatedly, if she extended her account, it likely transformed into a shaky history. Puzzlingly, the Russian rule did catalyze the development of the empire's southwestern frontier – but unlike in Finland, it was non-native folks who made it come true.

Second, what strikes the eye is the year 1861, in which Zakharova concludes her agricultural history of Bessarabia. There exist certain grounds to presume that the omission is dictated by the detrimental reform of the given era, especially within farming. After the Emancipation Reform of early Spring 1861, it is estimated that the arable land available for the freed serfs diminished by 18 percent. As for the fertile

soils in the entire South, the drop may have risen to 40 percent. At the time of the reform, 28 percent of the peasants could not ensure their subsistence. As the price for land kept increasing, in forty years this figure rose to 52 percent (Jussila 2006a, 240–241). Also, St. Petersburg’s conservative policy and Czarist reactionism during the 1860s–1870s effectively hampered the first phase of modernization (Țicu 2019, 148). By remaining tacit on the latter half of the century, Zakharova evades launching a risky discussion on the dramatically altered rural circumstances in Bessarabia (and in the southern lands of the empire in general).

4. Educational evolution

The very same dilemma shapes Zakharova’s claims on Bessarabia’s cultural development. According to the MFA spokesperson, both the level and the volumes of education progressed:

In Chisinau, a theological seminary was opened (in 1813), and besides that, a lay boarding house (in 1816). Till the year 1860, there operated 400 schools of all categories in Bessarabia, in which more than 12 thousand pupils were educated (Zakharova-B30O 2024).

In a peripheral region where the majority lived in rural areas and were illiterate (Țicu 2019, 98), such measures did stimulate civilization. Another encouraging factor may have been the initial schoolbooks, especially those compiled in the very region (Zakharova-B30O 2024).

Probably, the Russian occupation of Wallachia and Moldavia in 1828-1834 enhanced the national revival since it temporarily lifted the boundary drawn in the Prut. Not least, because the idea of the Moldovans as a separate nation first saw daylight in the 1840s. King underscores that the concept stemmed from the local people, though (King 2000, 26). Hence, to some degree, it is pertinent to state that the Russian Czardom factually provided for the “Moldovan statehood” and its “national identity” (Zakharova-B23O 2024). Save that it was a collateral, rather than an envisaged, outcome. On second thought, the self-perception of the very local people proved ambiguous. Up till the early 1860s, even the oblast’s administration confirmed the inhabitants to identify themselves as Moldovans and/or to speak Romanian (Țicu 2019, 112–113).

Once again, Zakharova’s narration ends in the early 1860s. This likely derives from the volatile czarist policy in Bessarabia. In 1821–1829, the political upheavals abroad sealed the fate of the region. The Greek Independence War and the brief revolts in Wallachia and Moldavia had dazed Saint-Petersburg, committed to safeguarding the balance in Europe. After the peace treaty with Persia, Russia in 1829 declared war against the Ottomans and expanded to the Danube. Moldavia and Wallachia gained autonomy under the Czar’s protection (Jussila 2006b, 228–229).

Paradoxically, as the freedoms of the two Principalities augmented, those of Bessarabia were reduced. The constitution was abolished in 1829, which turned the region into an oblast (province) (Dima 2001, 14). While the unsuccessful Crimean War in 1853–1856 compelled Russia to withdraw from the shores of the Danube, which the empire lost for 22 years, the great powers guaranteed the autonomy of Wallachia and Moldavia. Repetitively, with the kinsmen's position strengthened, the Czarist regime tightened its grip on Bessarabia. For instance, Russian was decreed the official language in 1854 (King 2000, 22). Similarly, the unification of the Danube Principalities on January 24, 1859, under Alexandru Ioan Cuza, and the subsequent state-building of modern Romania (for the merger, see Bărbulescu, et al. 1998, 374–380) only accelerated the russification of Bessarabia. By the end of the decade, the Russian language had overpowered the educational institutions and government agencies in the oblast (Yekelchuk 2008, 14; russification of the Bessarabian educational system, see, e.g., Negru Gh. 2023).

Thus, if Zakharova furthered her articulation on “facts, the true history of the Moldovans” (Zakharova-B30O 2024), she would fall into a double trap. First, how to explain the paradox of Russia having enhanced the uniqueness of ‘Moldova’ whilst the dwellers saw no distinction between themselves and the brethren beyond the Prut and the Danube? Second, if the then-Bessarabian people were as diverse as alleged, why was their freedom relegated in concomitance with the political development in Wallachia and Moldavia?

5. Soviet society-engineering

By October 1917, various military and civic circles succeeded in forming a national assembly, which on December 2, 1917, declared Bessarabia autonomous (Yekelchuk 2008, 18–19). Again, the parallel proves Finland. The declaration outlined the region to remain within a reformed Russia, but its rights to be equal to those Finland enjoyed as a Grand Duchy (King 2000, 33). Likewise, the assembly elected the *Șfatul Țării* (Yekelchuk 2008, 19), literally the “Council of State”, that is, the first Bessarabian government. According to Dima, from the very first hours, it was evident that Bessarabia would join Romania (Dima 2001, 17). However, King notes that the refugees from Transylvania, Banat, and other Romanian areas contributed to the question. After having fled their homes, they now deemed Bessarabia as a fertile soil for the national struggle (King 2000, 31). Besides, already in December 1917, the Romanian forces operated in the region (Skvortsova 2002, 162; cf. Dima 2001, 17).

Moreover, if the unification was apparent, the election of *Șfatul Țării* would have turned unnecessary. Following this interpretation, the reason to establish a cabinet was the need to safeguard the rights of the local élite within a united Romanian Kingdom (Lamminparras 2014a, 46). Thereafter, on January 24, 1918, the *Șfatul* proclaimed Bessarabia's independence, as an alternative to its merger with the Kingdom. In addition, once threatened by Ukraine's territorial ambitions and

ravaged by Bolshevik and other armed units, Bessarabia opted for the union. Despite the presence of Romanian soldiers, the decision yet entailed large regional provisions (King 2000, 33, 35).

The immediate response from the Bolsheviks, with their capital transferred to Moscow, was to interrupt the diplomatic relations with Bucharest and to confiscate the Romanian gold in the Russian banks (Dima 2001, 17). The official historiography of Soviet Russia, later Soviet Union, did not recognize the union. Since the *Sfatul Țării* failed to represent the whole population, the union of Bessarabia and Romania was illegitimate (Eyal and Smith 1996, 225). This conviction seems to prevail in Moscow, albeit Putin only states in passing “the Romanian occupation of Bessarabia” (Putin 2021). Unlike her President, Zakharova recaps the Soviet years with a column. Her summary is unembellished:

It wasn't without issues, but together we agonized. Besides that, there were huge achievements (Zakharova-B30O 2024).

Here, Zakharova's descriptive caress weakens, although the spokesperson preserves some of its traits, e.g., the marker ‘Besides that’. Instead of active forms of the verbs, Zakharova also moves to utilize the passive ones. This choice, in turn, dispels the subjects, as if Zakharova herself took distance.

Primarily, it remains unknown where Soviet history begins in the eyes of Zakharova. Does she refer to the Moldovan ASSR, founded east of the Dniester within the Ukrainian SSR in 1924 (King 2000, 54, 57; Dima 2001, 22; Yekelchuk 2008, 22)? Zakharova's depiction of the era as “the peak of the development of the scientific, cultural, artistic and intellectual potential of the republic” (Zakharova-B30O 2024) could be read as an allusion to the 1920s–1930s. As outlined in the all-union policy of *korenizatsija* (indigenization), the cultural policy of the MASSR observed the so-called moldovanisation (Yekelchuk 2008, 22). The Central Bessarabian dialect was to provide for the model of the official language, presumably to curtail the separation of the two sides of the Dniester. The first grammar was published in 1925, and the first vocabulary in 1926, but except for the Cyrillic, they were considered too identical with their Romanian equivalents (King 2000, 65). To some extent riotously, the Soviet functionaries themselves were thoroughly aware of the hindrances of the ‘Moldovanisation’ in 1927. First, the nominal ethnos constituted only one-third of the republic's population, whereas the Ukrainians counted for half. Second, the village culture was a mixture of Moldovan, Ukrainian, Russian, and Jewish traits rather than of indigenous ones. Third, among the cadres in the rural Executive Committees, the knowledge of the Moldovan language was virtually nonexistent (Țicu 2019, 207–208).

According to Țicu, it was these obstructions that turned the tide. From 1930 on, the Soviet leadership commenced to further the Romanian aspects (Țicu 2019, 209). In 1932, the Latin alphabet was introduced (Yekelchuk 2008, 22). Curiously, a new

grammar was produced as late as 1930 (King 2000, 67); it had barely sold before it was brushed aside. Then again, as the all-Union policy in the late 1930s strived to create a wholly new Soviet citizen, stripped of any local attributes, the Cyrillic was reinstated. With the purges of 1937–1938, the old Bessarabian cadres were largely indicted. Instead, the local, Ukrainian, and newly recruited party members took over the Moldovan ASSR (Bruchis 1996, 22; Negru 2003, 54–55, 65). Even here, the analogy is to be found in the Northwest, where the Soviet Union established the Karelian Workers' Commune in 1920, from 1923 to 1940 known as the Karelian Autonomous SSR. Despite the name, it was the Finnish language that prevailed, only to be subjugated in favor of the Karelian idiom. After the Winter War, in March 1940, the KASSR obtained the status of a union republic. Just like in the case of the almost concomitantly founded Moldovan SSR, the solution was to politically signal the benevolence of the Soviet rule, and militarily, to pave the way for a new westward onslaught (Kautto 1989, 31–38).

What is intriguing is that Moscow drives on two tracks while it tackles the 1920s and the 1930s in its southwest. As for Ukraine, Putin sturdily criticizes the early Soviet solutions. According to the Russian president, the nationalities policy led to an artificially demarcated Ukraine (Putin 2021). However, he does not extend his view on Moldova, in his words, “a special case” and “a unique history” (Lamminparras 2024a, 106–108, 112). Putin just briefly states the geographic changes: “in 1940, into the UkSSR were incorporated a part of Bessarabia -- and Northern Bucovina” (Putin 2021). That is, he leaves the door open for diverse interpretations. Analogically, if Zakharova disclosed her actual era of reference, the number of paradoxes would seemingly compromise the narration.

6. Modern(ized) Moldova

Even if Zakharova alluded to the Moldovan SSR, founded in August 1940, the precarious topics would be abundant. After two ultimatums to the Bucharest government, the Soviet army marched into Bucovina and Bessarabia on June 28, 1940 (Dima 2001, 28, 32). The original medieval territory of Bessarabia (today's Southwestern Odesa region), Northern Bucovina, and the county of Herta were incorporated into Ukraine. The remaining 33,700 km² constituted a fresh union republic, the MSSR (King 2000, 95). Zakharova entirely bypasses these phases. On the revulsion of the Axis invasion a mere year later, she leaves no doubt. The spokesperson condemns the recent “whitewashes” in Western Moldova where monuments and a graveyard were constructed “for Romanian soldiers -- who invaded the USSR in the phalanges of Hitler's ally, I. Antonescu”. What is even more serious, these memorials were erected not to those “defenders who struggled to save their country, region, and homes from fascism and Nazism” (Zakharova-B13N 2024; Antonescu's dictatorial reign in Romania, Bessarabia, and 'Transnistria' in 1940-1944, see, e.g., Deletant 2006; Ioanid 2023). As such, these allusions serve to undermine Chisinau's reputation, as Zakharova associates them with the Moldovan

rejection to vote for the UN General Assembly resolution on ‘The combat against glorification of Nazism’, advanced at the time by Russia ([Zakharova-B13N 2024](#)).

Apart from the wartime, the administrative reforms, the deportations, the forced collectivization, and the famine of 1946-1947 precipitated the MSSR’s Sovietization. Tragically, this eon undeniably unites the Russians and other nations, as stipulated by the Foundations of the State Policy within the sphere of Historical Enlightenment. In the freshly annexed republics, equal measures were conducted to eliminate the traditional social horizon and to lay a basis for a new one. E.g., it is estimated that a total of 33 thousand Estonians were extradited between 1941 and 1951 ([Rahi-Tamm 2011](#), 77, 88). With the notorious March Deportation of 1949 alone, circa 43 thousand Latvians were deported to Siberia ([Saleniece 2009](#), 63). As for Moldova, Zakharova’s short notion on the “agonies” ([Zakharova-B30O 2024](#)) probably indicates the very same years, sealing the fate of 140 thousand citizens ([King 2000](#), 96; [Eyal and Smith 1996](#), 226). The scale in Bessarabia was particularly severe, since the figure corresponds to roughly six percent of the entire population. Obviously, on this harsh toll it is better to remain silent.

Equally, the history policy was to characterize Moldova as a distinct nation, leading to the censorship of Romanian publications, and to the destruction or desecration of churches and monasteries (the Soviet theories on a so-called Moldovan nation, see [Negru E. 2023](#), 68–72). The demographic changes between 1944 and 1959 diminished the Moldovan majority from three-quarters to two-thirds. Meanwhile, the share of the Russians and Ukrainians together rose from 16 to some 25 percent ([Dima 2001](#), 46, 73–74, 76). Still, while those cadres that originated from Pridnestrovye (east of the Dniester) in the late 1940s pushed to establish a mix of Moldovan, Ukrainian, and Russian as the official language, the old Bessarabian intellectuals successfully resisted the project ([Bruchis 1996](#), 24). Gradually, the scope advanced, and soon the Russian culture reached its hegemony, as it had done a hundred years ago.

However, since the Moldovan SSR persisted as a faraway agrarian republic ([Dima 2001](#), 63), it is most likely that Zakharova implies the 1970s. Particularly, because she describes the Soviet period as “the peak of the industrial and socioeconomical development” as well ([Zakharova-B30O 2024](#)). The numbers truly are substantial: whilst Moldova’s industrial base in 1970 was rather restricted, between 1971 and 1975 the state-led construction program nearly tripled the amount of small, medium-sized, and heavy production ([Dima 2001](#), 67). As the core of the MSSR’s manufacture vastly consisted of the alimentary industry, leading to the republic’s heavy dependence on production beyond its boundaries ([Țîcu 2019](#), 361–362), the large investments certainly augmented Moldova’s capacities. Nevertheless, the downsides of the excessive exploitation were erosion of the viticultural soil and an increasing pollution of the rivers ([King 2000](#), 102).

A major impetus to develop the backward republic was the Romanian leader Nicolae Ceaușescu's antipathy toward Moscow since the mid-1960s. The new interpretations in the Romanian historiography, say regarding the annexation of Bessarabia in 1812 and the wartime conduct of the Red Army, fomented a friction between Bucharest and Moscow (Moisa 2015, 129, 131, 133). Thence, the triple aim of the heavy industrialization was to attach the local people to Moldova and to the Moldovan identity, to underscore the country's separateness from Romania, and to generally avert dissatisfaction.

Zakharova virtually lauds this era: during it, "a massive interest was shown in the originality of the Moldovans". At the same time, "the development of the national craft, the professional arts and literature was encouraged" (Zakharova-B30O 2024). However, the measures assumed did not advance these objectives much. Initially, most of the new complexes were erected along the Dniester (King 2000, 99). Naturally, the stream provided for energy. Perchance, the authorities perceived the Eastern bank as more fit, due to its cultural proximity to the Slavs. Especially, the Moldovan language endured an immense russification alongside the industrialization and by the increased distribution of electronics and devices. Likewise, the streets and public premises were renamed after Soviet-Russian heroes (Țicu 2019, 368). The enormous progress attracted Ukrainians and Russians to settle in the republic, again as it had done a century before. Thus, the regional demography followed the same tendency as during the previous twenty years, although the relative share of the Moldovans and that of the Slavs did not notably alter (King 2000, 97, 100).

Therefore, even this age becomes complicated for Zakharova's assertion. Why did these progresses once more ensue as a reflection of the Romanian policy beyond the Prut? Ironically, the more the Soviet power emphasized Moldova's uniqueness, the more attention was paid to the Romanian heritage (Skvortsova 2002, 175). Urbanization induced Moldovans from the countryside to move to cities; many of these found their place within publication, and subsequently, brought in traditional and national perspectives. As Eyal & Smith conclude, the emerging nationalism and the economic decline notwithstanding, the circumstances in Moldova had by the early 1980s turned flammable (1996, 230). However, as with the latter half of the previous century, Zakharova remains equally tacit on that of the 20th.

Conclusions

If the Moldovan EU-referendum and the concomitant presidential polls in 2024 were a fairytale compiled by the renowned and capable Maria Zakharova, the spokesperson of the Russian MFA, the EU would play the role of the evil Wolf which lures its prey, a unique Moldova. As a striking opposite to the classical tales, the local shepherds are aware of their distinctiveness and their magnificent past with a

third party, the Bear. Thence, they chase the marauder away. Ironically, it is not said that Zakharova could tell such a fable and utilize such metaphors. Instead, neither President Putin nor the Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Lavrov has commented on the Moldovan plebiscite. While labelling the Moldovan constitutional reform as a Western intrigue, Zakharova took advantage of repetition and, generally, of a confrontational strategy. Zakharova stresses that the electoral process was thoroughly plagued by the “repression” of individual dissidents and of the independent media. Moreover, the Russian-based Moldovans, aspiring to travel back home to vote, met insurmountable obstacles. As the core Western values and human rights were allegedly violated, the ultimate objective of Zakharova is to defame Moldova and hamper its pro-European integration.

Nonetheless, the electoral conspiracy did not betray the valiant Moldovans living within the borders of the republic. In Zakharova’s articulation, these rejected the constitutional reform with an unquestionable majority of some 55 percent. Simultaneously, they expressed “nonconfidence” in President Sandu’s government. Chiefly, this is in line with the thesis of Sergeyev on the two convictions that still shape Moldova. Whilst the pro-Romanian leadership promotes Latin origins, it at the same time advocates Western civilization. Conversely, those Moldovans who prefer the Russian language see themselves as a faithful string of the Slavic inheritance, or the Russian world. If one follows Zakharova’s utterance, exactly this latter assumption proves the reason for the rejection of the proposed constitutional amendments in favor of the EU. The Moldovans are aware of the membership’s ultimate scope, that is, the country would gradually transform into a NATO base. In other words, this is an inexcusable course for a traditionally European nation that cherishes both its “glorious history” and its centuries-old ties with Russia.

Strangely, dodging 1200 years, Zakharova dates the origins of the intense Russo-Moldovan links to the early 18th century. Her assessment – from now on applying a descriptive representation of facts – commences from the Ottoman vassal ruler of Moldavia, Prince Dimitrie Cantemir. The prince is depicted as having advanced the country’s “statehood” and its “national identity”. As vivid as this illustration is, it omits two essential issues. The Lutsk alliance, largely beneficial for Moldavia, and forged between Cantemir and Peter I in April 1711, collapsed two months later. Thereafter, the cosignatories retreated to Russia. Whilst Cantemir literally enhanced the Moldovan identity of his brethren, he did not make any distinction between the terms ‘Moldovan’ and ‘Romanian’. Paradoxically, as Zakharova underscores the importance of the prince, she in fact refers to the Roman ancestry of the Moldovans – and not to their uniqueness.

The very same inconsistency is inferred in Zakharova’s narrative concerning Bessarabia, after it was incorporated into the Russian Empire in 1812. First, the spokesperson is outright descriptive and utilizes many markers, such as “after”, “truly”, and “from now on”. Also, she presents precise figures. Initially, there indeed

manifested some progress and liberalism, as there did in the parallel, the Grand Duchy of Finland. Even so, Zakharova ends her account on educational development in 1860 and the one on economic progress in 1861, with no outspoken grounds. This implies that the latter half of the century may contain precarious precedents. For example, the more freedoms the neighboring principalities of Moldavia and Wallachia obtained, the more the authorities of Bessarabia strived for the region's russification. Russian was made the official language in 1854, and it swiftly overtook the administrative and educational systems of Bessarabia.

The Emancipation Reform in Spring 1861 aggravated the economic situation. In the Southern regions, the surface of arable land available for the freed serfs might have decreased by 40 percent. The poverty drastically increased, and the estimates speak of half of the peasants being unable to sustain their families in 1900. Thence, if Zakharova highlighted the second half of the 19th century as one of the main eras of Moldova's domestic progress, she would have to explain both paradoxes: the economic deterioration and the Russian cultural hegemony.

In the 20th century, the pattern proved identical, except for the union republic – the Moldovan SSR – founded in 1940. Out of the whole period, President Putin laconically states the Romanian “occupation” of Bessarabia in 1918 and the USSR's territorial expansions in 1940. With her allusion to the Soviet era, Zakharova, for her part, most likely refers to the aforesaid union republic rather than to the Moldovan ASSR within Ukraine in 1924–1940. In this latter regard, the Moldovan identity and language were to be codified, but any programmatic development suffered from the all-union policy, which was often steered back and forth. Instead, following Zakharova's description, it was the Moldovan SSR that nurtured a blossom of the native arts, science, and craft. Yet, she avoids revealing how and when, since the Russian language had already in the 1950s gained supremacy in the republic. In contrast to other episodes, Zakharova does denote “the agonies” of the era, that is, the tolls of the Sovietization. However, there is no data or numbers on the losses. As in the case of the Baltic equivalents, these would turn into an ominous precedent. The victims of the Stalinist policy in the MSSR rose to six percent of the population.

Economically, Moldova remained a peripheral agrarian state. To downplay the Romanian leader Ceaușescu's increasing nationalism in the late 1960s, the Soviet leadership initiated a vast industrialization program the following decade. Numerically, its achievements rose to 200 percent. Poignantly, this was the phase that factually enhanced the Moldovan identity, albeit as an unsolicited objective. The more the Soviet authorities construed the distinctiveness of Moldova, the more attraction there occurred in the common Romanian-Moldovan legacy. Just as previously, if Zakharova pronounced a more detailed version on these days, she would encounter identical contradictions as she did with all the previous eons. I.e., the Russian dominance, the likeness of Moldova and Romania, and the financial falloff.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

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DECLARATION on AI use (if applicable)

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