

# Diversity for Sale? Moldova's Nation Branding in the Age of Commercial Nationalism

**Gianina Vulpe**

Independent Researcher

**Kirill Filimonov**

 0000-0002-9052-4849

Uppsala University, Sweden

**Abstract:** In a region haunted by grave geopolitical tensions, Moldova's nation branding is an overlooked research topic, despite the country's long-standing self-promotion efforts. Addressing this gap, our article presents a critical discourse analysis of strategies undertaken by Invest Moldova Agency, the governmental institution in charge of Moldova's brand communication. Here, beyond a traditional post-socialist melange of market-oriented and globalist discourse, we find a strategy to build a consistent self-image in high internal diversity. Although the presence of the separatist pro-Russian region of Transnistria disrupts the consistency of the image of Moldova as "transition society", it also encourages the promoters to rethink the Soviet legacy. The article contributes to understanding commercial nationalism as a framework for managing political and cultural heterogeneity through commodification.

**Keywords:** Moldova, nation branding, post-socialism; commercial nationalism; post-politics

## INTRODUCTION

Moldova, a country that has unfairly remained in the margins of scholarly attention, has recently been propelled to the focus of international attention against the backdrop of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine. Together with Ukraine, the status of Moldova's application to the EU has been swiftly changed to Candidate Country in June 2022. Western leaders, including U.S. President Joe Biden, brought up the issues of Moldova's national sovereignty amidst the ongoing geopolitical tensions in Eastern Europe (Bose & Hunnicutt, 2023; Kirby, 2023).

The image of Moldova in Western scholarship has oscillated between (somewhat pessimistic) accounts of the allegedly failed post-Soviet transit amid a struggling

economy and weak state institutions (Crowther, 2023); unresolved disputes over the Russia-backed autonomous region of Transnistria (Potter, 2022); and the lasting political and cultural influence of Romania over Moldova's national self-identification, resulting in a split within elites and political movements (Tkachuk et al, 2022). Within cultural studies, Moldova has rarely been singled out among several post-socialist Eastern European states — primarily Ukraine — in analyzing its various attempts to address the international (mainly European) audience. In particular, the Eurovision Song Contest has been studied as one arena where notions of the self — often stereotypical and grotesque — can be displayed for the gaze of the European “Other” (Iglesias, 2018; Miazhevich, 2012).

This article seeks to address the research gap in Moldova's posited self-image, a promising endeavor concerning a country that finds itself in a highly complex regional and national context. We aim to carry out a discourse analysis of Moldova's nation branding efforts as manifest in the social media content by the governmental Invest Moldova Agency, as well as in-depth interviews with the agency's representatives. We find the notion of commercial nationalism (Volčič & Andrejevic, 2016) applicable to explain how the Agency strategically utilizes nation branding with an eye to managing multiple internal contradictions and present a coherent narrative for external audiences. To unpack our argument, we begin with a brief detour across Moldovan history and the current political landscape.

## **MOLDOVA AND ITS BRANDING**

### **MOLDOVA AT THE INTERSECTION OF ROMANIA, RUSSIAN EMPIRE/USSR, TURKS AND THE EU (HISTORY OVERVIEW)**

Throughout its history, Moldova and its different parts have been repeatedly contested and claimed by its powerful neighbors. Established in 1359 by Voivode Bogdan I, the Principality of Moldavia initially spanned the Prut River basin and later expanded to the Carpathians, Danube, and Black Sea. The Romanian principalities shared intertwined political, economic, and cultural ties with Wallachia and Transylvania.

From the 14th century, Moldavia faced threats from the expanding Ottoman Empire, becoming a vassal state for over 300 years while retaining internal autonomy. In the 18th century, the Russian Empire set its sights on Moldavia, annexing the eastern part in 1812, and renaming the area between the Prut-Dniestr interfluvium as „Bessarabia” (King, 1994). The annexation was framed as liberation from Ottoman subjugation (Baar & Jakubek, 2017, p. 63), although that view

was not universally shared. Romanian statesman Nicolae Iorga explains “[t]he Romanian people never asked the Tsar to be liberated” (Ghimpu, 2002, p. 370).

Despite over a century of Russian occupation and attempts at Russification and denationalization (Baar & Jakubek, 2017; Țicu, 2016), the people of Bessarabia chose to reclaim their Romanian identity. In 1918, the Moldavian Assembly voted to reunite with Romania, making Moldovans part of Greater Romania until 1940, when the Soviet Union re-annexed Bessarabia. Although Romania regained control of Bessarabia in 1941, it was forced to cede it to the Soviet Union again in 1944 as the USSR expanded closer to the West.

Under the Soviet Union (1940–1991) Moldova was renamed the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic (MSSR). Moldovan elites supporting Romanian culture were purged, followed by “re-education in the spirit of Marxism-Leninism” in education and employment circles (Baar & Jakubek, 2017). The Cyrillic script replaced the Latin alphabet, and Romanian was rebranded as Moldovan. The goal was to create a new Moldovan nation that would sever ties with its Romanian identity and become a proud socialist republic. Nevertheless, the population grew divided. Some backed the Soviet nation-building efforts, while others refused to relinquish their Romanian past, culture, and identity.

## **MOLDOVA’S CONTEMPORARY POLITICAL AND DEMOGRAPHIC LANDSCAPE (POST 1991)**

In the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union, Moldova was confronted with a critical choice: creating an independent state or reunification with Romania. Ultimately, through a parliamentary vote, Moldova chose the former, declaring its independence in 1991. The Declaration of Independence denounced the annexations of 1812 and 1940, thus highlighting Moldova’s dedication to maintaining its territorial integrity and historical ties with Romania (Țicu, 2016).

The years that followed had the Republic of Moldova “muddling through the geopolitical schism” (Morar & Dembińska 2020, p. 293) between two diametrically opposing political, economic, and cultural blocs: the European Union on one side and Russia and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) on the other. The absence of a shared Moldovan national identity remains a significant challenge, with cultural divisions reflected in the media, religion, politics, and electoral campaigns. This issue is compounded by the separatist region of Transnistria and the autonomous Gagauzia, both closely tied to Russia. Moldova’s reliance on both the West and Russia further exacerbates the situation, as the country is drawn into the ongoing discursive struggle between the West and the East.

Moldova’s European trajectory and growing inclination towards a future with the EU are becoming more potent in all discourses emerging from the

country, and the fact that the country recently gained Candidate status to join the EU further reinforces that. In this article, we show how Moldova seeks to construct a coherent self-image of its otherwise heterogeneous society for external audiences. Their efforts, we argue, align closely with the notion of commercial nationalism, to which we turn next.

### COMMERCIAL NATIONALISM: TOWARDS THE POST-POLITICAL AND BACK

The confluence of neoliberal and nationalist discourses, reflected in the notion of commercial nationalism, suggests that “states start to think of themselves through the lens of the nation as corporations” (Volčič & Andrejevic, 2016, p. 5). Thus, rather than being confined to the domain of political ideology or propaganda, nationalism is reconfigured and expressed in and through the discourse of the global economy (Kaneva & Popescu, 2011; Volčič, 2012; Volčič & Andrejevic, 2016). Aligned with the neoliberal perception of the nation brand as an asset valuable in the global competition for investment, trade, and tourism, the nation is viewed as a resource requiring management (Aronczyk, 2018, p. 3). Rather than replacing nationalist ideology, which remains an object of domestic consumption, commercial nationalism extends branding processes to external audiences, attracting foreign investments and promoting tourism. Whereas the commercial industry takes on the task of constructing a national identity, the act of identifying with the nation is viewed as a form of consumption (Castello & Mihelj, 2017). Empirical studies of commercial nationalism take scholars to contexts as diverse as Australia (White, 2018), Canada (Rettie, 2017, Quail, 2015), Colombia (Sanín, 2016) and Japan (Kobayashi, 2023), demonstrating the increasing uniformity of nation branding.

However, little has been studied on the challenges of dealing with inevitable ruptures that stem from the internal social contradictions, particularly in countries with a relatively young statehood. In this article, we bring attention to how commercial nationalism is strategically utilized to manage political cleavages *within* countries. Multiple authors (Aronczyk, 2009; Kaneva & Popescu, 2011) have argued that commercial nationalism seeks to advance a post-political logic, “where the nation remains necessary not as a democratic resource for active participation or equal recognition, nor as a geopolitical force to mediate international conflict, but as an ensemble of non-threatening fragments of culture, history, and geography determined by committee” (Aronczyk, 2009, p. 294). In other words, commercial nationalism is seen to privilege a technocratic and solutionist approach to identity building, as opposed to the view that national identification is a result of ongoing ideological struggles, and any claim over a single “identity” is inherently contestable. In discursive terms, this process

may be understood as the erasure of the surplus of meaning (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985) in order to create a coherent discourse on a nation-state.

Our paper seeks to offer a contribution to the discussion on commercial nationalism by highlighting how its neoliberal logic of consumption facilitates a transition from the political to the post-political. With the political, we refer to Mouffe's (2005) ontological notion of the conflictual dimension where political actors and institutions are embedded and power struggles take place. The post-political vision, in turn, suggests a condition where ideological ruptures have been overcome. To reclaim the space for the political in our analysis, we bring attention to the multiple discursive struggles that underlie the "post-political" nation branding process and offer a consensual, non-conflictual version of the self. In order to do so, we direct our gaze towards the postsocialist context of Eastern Europe and specifically Moldova, where a relative absence of "the full discursive and symbolic repertoire of the nation state" (Turner, 2016, p. 14) makes the push for the post-political most visible.

## MOLDOVA AND COMMERCIAL NATIONALISM IN POST-SOCIALIST EUROPE

Nation branding has become a prevalent worldwide phenomenon, attributed to the growing global competition that nations face in domestic and external markets (Dinnie, 2016, p. 6). The nation brand stems from conscious efforts made by a nation to present itself favorably to attract investment, tourism, trade or talent. These efforts take various forms (campaigns, movies, presence at expos, etc.) but, fundamentally, as a communications strategy and a practical initiative, nation branding enables countries to manage and shape the image they present globally (Aronczyk, 2008).

Transitional countries, particularly in Central and Eastern Europe, have displayed a greater propensity for engaging in nation branding initiatives (Kaneva, 2012). This goes in line with White's (2017) observation that countries with younger statehood show a stronger tendency to incorporate national symbols into advertisement, as they seek to make sense of their history and affirm their identity. Most Central and Eastern European countries have rebranded themselves to attract EU interest, foreign investment, tourism, and other industries. (Sussman, 2012). For post-communist national elites, commercial nationalism has offered a visible and seemingly easy solution to the pressing demand of dismantling communist identity markers and building new national subjectivities.

Drawing from the complexity of Moldovan national identity, the country has encountered challenges in creating a cogent narrative about its own identity. Early 2000s' nation branding efforts struggled to reshape Moldova's international image. The 2005 campaign *Moldova: Feel at Home in the Heart of Nature* was

quickly dismissed, and the subsequent *Discover Us* campaign also failed to make an impact (Florek & Conejo, 2007). Both lacked the power to persuade audiences and were unable to distinguish Moldova. In 2014, the *Tree of Life* brand campaign, with the slogan *Discover the Routes of Life*, was introduced, initially focusing on tourism. By 2018, the *Tree of Life* evolved into Moldova's official Country Brand, serving as a visual representation consolidating all efforts to boost trade, tourism, and investment.

Still, Moldova's efforts at nation branding were minimal compared to other post-socialist nations. This led Saunders (2017, p. 234) to conclude that "of all the former Soviet republics, Moldova seems to have done the least to make itself known and lays bare the truism that 'if you do not brand your nation, someone will do it for you.'" To our knowledge, the topic of Moldova's nation branding has not been developed in empirical literature. Our article seeks to address this gap, focusing on Moldova's intensified self-promotion in recent years.

## METHODOLOGY AND DATA

The aim of this paper is to understand how nation branding helps articulate a country's self-image (where commercial nationalism would emerge as the crucial interpretative framework). Moldova, a country with a relatively young statehood, offers a fascinating starting point for an empirical investigation. To operationalize our theoretical framework, we asked the following research questions (RQ):

- RQ1: How is Moldova presented in its official branding campaigns?
- RQ2: How do these campaigns support a consistent self-image?

To answer these questions, we gathered and analyzed a data corpus that includes material produced by the key actor of Moldova's branding campaigns.

The data for this study comprise a series of materials by Invest Moldova Agency (henceforth the Agency), the governmental body charged with promoting Moldova's image abroad. Their primary tasks consist of promoting and strengthening the country's brand, exports, tourism, investment, and economic diplomacy (Invest Moldova, 2023b).

The main part of our corpus consists of 196 Facebook posts from two pages administered by the Agency spanning from 1 October 2021 to 31 March 2022, and a third page with a tourism profile, covering the same time frame. Although the effects of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine is not the target of our interest, this time frame enables us to include both the pre-invasion and post-invasion period (24 February 2022), as well as to compare the discursive dynamic of the branding campaigns which, as we will show, was affected by the war. Facebook

was selected as the primary platform for analysis due to its considerably broader outreach, tenfold the follower count compared to Instagram (second place). The first page, Agenția de Investiții/Invest Moldova Agency<sup>1</sup>, is the agency's official page on Facebook, with over 14,000 followers as of March 2024. The second page, NeamPornit<sup>2</sup> focuses on a nation branding campaign created and executed by the Agency, primarily targeting an internal audience (some 13,000 followers in March 2024).

The third page, Moldova Travel<sup>3</sup>, is the official Facebook page for promoting Moldova as a tourism destination (around 44,000 followers in March 2024), developed in partnership with the Agency.

The posts were a mixture of textual content (varying in length) and images. In addition, five documents obtained from the Agency's official website, where they were publicly available and downloadable at the time of this article's submission: the Touristic Brochure (four documents) and the Investment Brochure (one document). Lastly, textual content analysis was supported by one in-depth semi-structured interview with two Agency representatives, recorded on March 15, 2022. The 87-minute interview was carried out, transcribed and analyzed by the first author. It was conducted in Romanian (native language of the first author and interviewees), and later transcribed and translated to English.

The research utilizes publicly available data, including social media posts and official documents on the Agency's associated webpages. This eliminates the need for anonymity and prior consent concerning this portion of the corpus. Consent for recording was obtained for the interview, and respondents' anonymity was preserved by omitting their names.

Approaching the promotion of particular interpretations of a country brand as an act of power, we opted for critical discourse analysis (CDA) as the method for analysis. The CDA—more specifically, Fairclough's (1995) model—was chosen as a framework that enables a continuous analytical iteration between a given textual corpus and ideology, which is essential in understanding a branding campaign that builds on a set of prior cultural and political notions. The CDA frames a text "within situational and sociocultural contexts and... incorporate[s] textual, discursive and social levels" into analysis (Henderson, 2005, p. 20).

Indeed, through the use of Fairclough's model, we paid close attention to the three aspects inscribed in the model: text, discursive practice and social practice. In the process of textual analysis, we focused on the formal features characterizing a discourse linguistically. This involved examining elements such as vocabulary, syntax, sentence cohesion, and also delving into valuable techniques like the

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/investmoldova>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/neampornit/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/MoldovaTravelMoldovaTravel>

utilization of interactional control, metaphors, nominalization, and modality. For example, the repeated usage of “Small country, big heart” as a stereotype breaking metaphor (the small size of the country vs. the goodness of its people), a juxtaposition of antagonizing concepts (small/big), are seen as creating a new articulation of the country.

Next, we identified a number of discursive strategies articulated through the production and distribution of texts by the Agency. Following Fairclough (1995, p. 76), by discourse we mean “a particular way of constructing a particular (domain of) social practice”; by putting it in terms of “discursive strategies”, we accentuate the purposeful signification of the country as a brand. Consequently, at the level of social practice, we sought to continuously relate the identified discursive strategies to the extralinguistic dimension, such as the ongoing geopolitical events and processes, to better understand the context which constitutes – and is constituted by – particular statements.

We employed abductive strategy, moving between the data and existing theories to identify patterns and develop the most plausible explanations (Kennedy, 2018, p. 52). The aim of this approach is to remain receptive to the data, while drawing upon pre-existing theories not as a means of mechanically formulating hypotheses for testing (as in deductive analysis), but rather as a source of insight, recognition, and interpretation of patterns (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2008, as cited in Kennedy, 2018, p. 52). Following the initial coding phase, inspired by Emerson et al. (2011), the theoretical categories were refined to account for the emerging patterns in data (e.g., the presence of the political/post-political dynamic), and a subsequent review of the data ensued to build the final coding system. Furthermore, some preliminary observations were made with regard to the period after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, using the analytical framework developed for this study which focuses on the period prior to the full-scale war.

## MOLDOVA'S NATION BRANDING STRATEGY

In this section, we present the prevalent themes identified through critical discourse analysis of the reviewed materials, and connect them with the wider interpretation of commercial nationalism within the post-socialist milieu. Three main strategies were identified. The first one illustrates the efforts to inscribe Moldova within the globalized neoliberal economy, by which the Agency is arguably seeking to appeal to investors, partners, and tourists. The second strategy presents the cultural component of nation branding, with a heavy emphasis on its ties with the West. Finally, the third theme addresses the efforts to integrate Moldova's internal diversity into a consistent image directed to external audiences.

## BELONGING TO THE GLOBAL CAPITALIST SYSTEM

Volčič and Andrejevic (2011) highlight that commercial nationalism partly consists in the state using marketing techniques to brand itself and subsequently shaping the nation's image on the global stage. For Moldova, the first step to shaping its image would be to articulate a new post-socialist self and choose the characteristics the country wants to be known for on the global stage. That involves focusing Moldova's nation branding strategies on economic integration into the global capitalist context.

The Agency focuses on several commercially-oriented discourses. First, Moldova is framed as advantageous and worthy of investment, with nominalizations such as "your next destination for investment," "advanced," "digital," "attractive," and evaluations like "Moldova's strategic geographic positioning permits connecting to the global economic network" (Invest Moldova, 2023a). Secondly, the Agency seeks to promote Moldova as a reliable partner, emphasizing its positive attributes to the international community as an exporter:

"Moldova's goods exports increased in 2021 by 27.5%, for the first time ever surpassing the billion threshold. [...] We will join efforts to reposition Moldova on the regional economic radar." (Invest Moldova, 2022a)

The Agency cultivates the image of a reliable partner through a dual-focused strategy: enhancing existing partnerships and establishing new ones. The first direction involves strengthening pre-existing relationships:

"The development of trade relations with partner countries is a priority for the government." (Invest Moldova, 2021a)

The second consists in establishing new relationships:

"The Republic of Moldova accepted the invitation to participate in the Texas CEE – Tech Summit [...] This event connects Texas tech companies that are looking for suppliers from CEE, with whom to initiate partnership relations." (Invest Moldova, 2021b)

Through this two-pronged approach, the Agency furthers the point that not only does Moldova belong to the global community, but in this network they can be counted on as advantageous and reliable partners.

These two elements of the branding campaign – investment attractiveness and reliability as a partner – align with commercial nationalism by providing a key point of identification, positioning Moldova within the international economic order, in contrast to its previous position. The focus on Moldova's branding efforts

to become part of the global capitalist landscape through economic integration also emerged during the interview:

“Promoting the country image serves as the backbone for all our other initiatives because you can attract investors, help exporters, bring in tourists only when you have a strong country image to project on the international stage.”  
(Interview)

Thus, nation branding has two key tasks: developing a strong country image (drawing, among others, on national identity markers) and “selling” it to the outside world to attract investment, tourism, and exports. In addition, it sets the “international stage” (in the informant’s words) as the evaluators of the effectiveness of the nation brand.

Lastly, the articulation of belonging to the global capitalist system involves a demonstration of an active engagement and participation in global affairs and international events. Utilized as instruments for enhancing the country’s image and impact, trade missions, global conferences, and summits offer Moldova the chance to amplify its global presence. Such initiatives can enable developing countries to “punch above their weight” (Hurn, 2016, p. 80) and increase their international standing.

Moldova’s efforts to amplify its global presence through international events are showcased on the Facebook page, both visually and textually, and were also highlighted during the interview:

“We go to over 15 international exhibitions every year, all related to different sectors.” (Interview)

“Between November 1–4, The Republic of Moldova participates for the first time ever at Web Summit 2021.” (Invest Moldova, 2021c)

Consequently, the act of participating in international events, when viewed as a facet of nation branding, is emphasized through discourse, positioning the country as a reputable and eligible member of the international community. As we show in the next section, the “international community” Moldova aims to belong to, is, in large, the EU and the West.

## **CULTURAL BELONGING TO THE WEST IN A GEO-POLITICAL SCHISM**

As previously discussed, commercial nationalism is particularly significant for countries with younger statehood striving to prove their belonging to the global community (White, 2017). Moldova is no exception, and the affirmation of its belonging to the international economic system is only part of its discursive strategy.

The second part consists in a continuous identification with the “Western”, which the branding campaign uses synonymously with “the global”. This manifests itself both at the level of linguistic choice, but also reliance on Western actors in producing and spreading the message. This positioning is carefully crafted alongside presenting Moldova as the “bridge” connecting the East and the West.

The Agency’s efforts predominantly center around Europe or the broader Western sphere. For instance, the Agency’s official Facebook page features significantly more references to expos, projects, and events involving Western actors compared to other regions:

“At the proposal of Invest Moldova, a meeting is set to be organized with the Investment Agencies of Romania, Poland, Hungary, and Slovakia.” (Invest Moldova, 2022b)

This persistent alignment with the Western dimension suggests a strong inclination towards identification and affiliation with it. Moreover, it is Western recognition that is desired:

“We have signed very important international treaties with the EU, which allows us very easy access to the European market. We also must highlight that Moody’s, for three years in a row, has ranked our country as a stable economy – which is a big accomplishment.” (Invest Moldova, 2021d)

A good score from Moody’s, an American rating agency, is perceived as bringing the country one step closer to the Western association it seeks.

Although the focus is on being recognized as a European/Western nation, one that embraces European values, there is still a reminiscing effort to situate Moldova as the “bridge” between the East and the West, as linguistic choices from the *Moldova Travel* and the travel brochure show. On the aforementioned Facebook page, posts are predominantly written in three languages – English, Romanian, and Russian. The emphasis on English (text and visuals) clearly targets Western audiences. Romanian is a natural choice as the official language, while the inclusion of Russian suggests the need for a balancing act, addressing unresolved political, cultural, and ethnolinguistic tensions.

The effort to position Moldova as a “bridge” between East and West has been highlighted in this post, as well:

“We’ve been talking for a long time about the possibility for Moldova to become a bridge between the countries in the West and the East. Today, we are at a point in time that is very favorable for us to consolidate this wish.” (Invest Moldova, 2021d)

This statement was made prior to the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. At the time, seeking a compromise between the two opposing camps was viewed as favorable, as it presented the country as strategically positioned on the economic map (being close to both the EU and the CIS countries was highly advertised in the Investment Brochure). Predictably, the war in Ukraine has galvanized a change in rhetoric. While an in-depth study of this change is beyond the scope of this article, it is already apparent that the pro-Western view has gained even more potency while conferences in Russia and exports to Russia have been cut drastically from the point when the invasion started forward. The only mention of Russia is in the context of cutting ties: “The value of exports to European destinations increased by 32% [...]. Exports to Russia fell by 31% in a single year” (Invest Moldova 2023d). The last positive reference to Russia on the Facebook page is dated 22 February 2022 (two days before the invasion started) and it was a post detailing Moldova’s participation at an International Fashion Expo held in Moscow. After that, no more posts acknowledging partnerships or consolidation of ties have been made.

The war in Ukraine and especially the subsequent refugee crisis have created an opportunity to reiterate Moldova’s commitment to a shared outlook with the West. One post details:

“The people of Moldova have met with open hearts and doors hundreds of thousands of refugees [...]. Today, Moldova is appreciated by the international community as a small country with a big heart.” (Invest Moldova, 2022c)

Interestingly, the “international community” serves as the receptive audience for targeted and, in this case, non-targeted branding endeavors. This lexical construction ostensibly refers to a broader global audience yet often implicitly signifies the Western community, as that is the sounding board towards which most branding efforts are directed.

In a strategy that reinforces the post-political nature of the process, the Agency regards nation branding as a tool that requires skillful administration by experts. Also here, at the level of discursive production, we see an identification with the West, by introducing Western branding consultants.

“We want to work with Bloom Consulting. We hope this collaboration will give us a set of realistic instruments that are tailored to our needs.” (Interview)

The Agency recognizes its own limits and sees external (Western) support as the answer to their discursive shortcomings. Whether it is a promotion on the BBC (the British broadcaster), getting a shoutout from Jolie (Hollywood, the USA), or their desire to collaborate with Bloom Consulting (Western nation branding consultants) whose level of expertise is seen as trumping current

discourses, Moldova's nation branding strategies are exhibiting a growing reliance on the West.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT AND COMMODIFICATION OF DIVERSITY

The third discursive strategy of Moldova's nation branding relates to representing the country's image while handling the heterogeneity that this endeavor entails, given the numerous stakeholders that produce meaning, internal and external audiences and the unique message that needs to be tailored to them.

In the context of tourism as a key element of nation branding (Dinnie, 2016; Anholt, 2007) the Agency shifts away from a political interpretation of diversity towards a post-political view focusing on the "diversity of consumption", bringing into the spotlight the wide variety of possible consumer experiences. A range of tourism forms is highlighted, each molding a distinct rendition of reality. For instance, Moldova is portrayed as a go-to destination for wine tourism, rural getaways, and dynamic pursuits like cycling, hiking, and kayaking:

"The authors [of Times Travel] highlighted the excellent tours at local wineries as well as the wonderful rural locations and architectural monuments. And this is just a small part of all that you can discover by visiting our country." (Moldova Travel, 2022b)

In line with the neoliberal view of nation brand as a valuable asset in global competition for investment and tourism, different facets of the nation are exploited to appeal to different (albeit, in the end, complementary) goals. By intertwining modernity and tradition in their discourses, the Agency is subsequently adding a new layer to the diversification of consumption.

The Agency juxtaposes visually and textually rustic rural scenes with contemporary infrastructure and emphasizes both heritage and modern advancements. For example, the touristic brochure introduces this passage:

"Moldova is the country where fruits have flavor, its wines are highly valued at international competitions, and the internet speeds are among the fastest in the world." (Invest Moldova, 2023c)

An urban and cutting-edge setting could draw in investors, whereas a rural and culturally traditional representation might appeal to tourists. To ensure a synergy in the nation branding messages, the Agency arguably seeks to strike a balance within this dichotomy.

Highlighting unique cultural attributes of specific regions within the country, notably Gagauzia and Transnistria, comes at the expense of being seen as the exotic “Other.” For example, an excerpt from the Touristic Brochure reads:

“People passionate about the Soviet period can visit the Transnistrian region, where things have changed very little in the last 30 years. The monuments of Vladimir Lenin, the sickle and the hammer – the symbols of the communist party, as well as the wide and orderly boulevards of Tiraspol, bring you into the atmosphere of the Soviet Union” (Invest Moldova, 2023c)

The brochure excerpt highlights the distinctiveness of this area of Moldova, which offers visitors an opportunity to step into a place where the Soviet legacy remains prominent. Here, one can experience Otherness through the enduring “atmosphere of the Soviet regime.” This point is reiterated on the Moldova Travel Facebook page:

“Be our guest to the Transnistrian region which became recently a must-go place. Time travel and live an authentic USSR experience.” (Moldova Travel, 2021)

Another aspect of the Soviet legacy of contemporary Moldova – two Christmas days, one left from the Julian and another from the Gregorian calendar – also becomes an object of celebration as a cultural experience, rather than the result of complex political entanglements: “In Moldova, we celebrate two Christmases: on the 25th of December, as well as on the 7th January, according to the old tradition.” (Moldova Travel, 2022a)

In sum, the region's history and intricate relationship with its Soviet heritage are utilized as discursive tools to appeal to an audience continuously seeking unique experiences and exotic encounters. Monuments of Lenin—important material elements of the discourse on the continuity between the (Soviet) past and the present—are presented in a rather playful way. This helps avoid an upfront, political reading of contemporary tensions, instead confining them to the domain of consumption.

## CONCLUSION

Moldova's nation branding campaign by Invest Moldova Agency bears resemblance with the rather traditional patterns of commercial nationalism (Volčič & Andrejevic, 2016). Indeed, we find the discourses of self-promotion as a reliable, progressive and unique country that belongs in a broader international community,

understood synonymously with the Western community. The more traditional components of cultural expressiveness (Dinnie, 2016) are also present, with the celebration of cultural heritage, arts, cuisine and landscape. Overall, as we summarize in the table below, Moldova’s nation branding efforts reproduce a neoliberal and globalist discourse characteristic of nation branding as a particular promotional genre, and projects the image of a successful post-Cold War transition society. The Agency has also painstakingly represented Moldova as a cultural and economic bridge between the West and Russia, an effort that has largely been abandoned following the latter’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Moldova’s portrayal as a ‘bridge’ is not unique for the Central European region; Romania and Bulgaria have similarly used nation branding to emphasize the tension between their pre-communist historical heritage and a new identity shaped by Western, capitalist modernity. Both countries have at times framed themselves as “a bridge between past and future, tradition and modernity, East and West” (Kaneva & Popescu, 2012, p. 200).

Table 1. Invest Moldova Agency’s strategies of nation branding

	Discursive strategies of nation branding		
	Belonging to the global capitalist system	Cultural belonging to the West in a geopolitical schism	Acknowledgment and commodification of diversity
	Investment attractiveness	Identification with the West (synonymous with the “international community”)	Diversity of consumption
	Reliability as a partner		
Articulations of discursive strategies of nation branding	Contribution to the global economic dialogue	Moldova as a bridge between East and West	Commodification of historical legacy

At the same time, as a country navigating multiple identitarian struggles, including the presence of a breakaway region within its sovereign borders, Moldova has to face a series of unique challenges in its nation branding. We argue that commodification becomes a strategy of softening the tensions. Commercial nationalism provides the Agency with a common denominator for the diverse elements underpinning contemporary cultural and political landscape of Moldova: it is “nationalism” insofar as the Agency seeks to present a cohesive Moldovan self-image to the outside world and advocate for its interests abroad; and it is “commercial” to the extent that internal contradictions are managed through celebratory or consumerist frames. For example, the articulation of Transnistria as “the last Soviet destination” recognizes the existing diversity while at the same time embedding it in the overarching discourse of commercialization. Simultaneously, this tongue-in-cheek, exotified designation of Transnistria leads

to marginalizing the alternative agendas. Minimal effort is made to meaningfully engage with the contradictions, although the Agency briefly acknowledges the existence of thorny and multifaceted socio-historic conditions underlying the branding process (i.e. recognizing the Soviet era tensions).

Our analysis offers an empirical contribution to the understanding of commercial nationalism as part of a broader post-political apparatus. Rather than confronting the multiple struggles characteristic of the national identification process, nation branding instead embeds national imaginaries within a skillfully crafted framework of commodification, providing commercially advantageous interpretations of historical memory and contemporary conflicts to appeal to external audiences. Particularly in the post-socialist context of Eastern Europe, this reinforces not only a coarticulation of Western values and capitalism, but also market discourse as an appropriate signifying frame for the domain of political participation and international relations.

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