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Book review

*Stefan Ihrig. 2008. Wer sind die Moldawier?
imänismus versus Moldowanismus in Historiographie und Schulbüchern der
Republik Moldova, 1991-2006, Stuttgart: ibidem-Verlag, 332 pages.*

Reviewed by Raluca Betea

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Stefan Ihrig. 2008. *Wer sind die Moldawier? Rumänismus versus Moldowanismus in Historiographie und Schulbüchern der Republik Moldova, 1991-2006* (*Who are the Moldavians? Romanianhood versus Moldovianhood in the historiography and school manuals from Republic of Moldova, 1991-2006*) Stuttgart: ibidem-Verlag, 332 pages.

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The post-Soviet transition period of Eastern and Central European states has become an attractive and constant subject for researchers and scholars interested in the political, social and historical development in the area. This transition period has also proven to be an auspicious time for defining their collective identity. Focusing on the situation of Bessarabia after 1991, Stefan Ihrig tries in his book *Wer sind die Moldawier. Rumänismus versus Moldowanismus in Historiographie und Schulbüchern der Republik Moldova, 1991-2006*, to define the complexity of the political and societal life of this new entity on Europe's map. As a research fellow at the Georg Eckert Institute for International Textbook Research, Braunschweig Germany, and taking part personally in the International Seminar "*Multiperspectivitatea în predarea istoriei*" held in Holercani, Republic of Moldova, (July 2006), Stefan Ihrig had the chance to place himself in the middle of the situation, which gives him the unique advantage of being impartial in the analysis he carries out, detaching himself as a independent observer throughout the study.

The author warns his readers in the beginning of his study about the fact that his work will not provide a definite answer to the question presented in the title, but rather it will be a symbolic quest in defining the post soviet identity crisis that the Moldavian society and state face nowadays. History represents a primordial domain, which is a key factor in the legitimizing process of a nation. Taking this fact into consideration, it is clear that in the Republic of Moldova, both the schooling manuals and the various historical works have become an important arena in which the identity conflict is being carried out. By analyzing the historical material and the school books from 1991-2006, the author wishes to point out the way in which the nation is perceived,

and also the manner in which it is depicted in writings and works of history or the discourses engaged in defining it.

The themes and debates that the identity discourses launch, constitute an important aspect of this volume, which turns its attention to a detailed analysis of the identity patterns (or models) and of course, towards the actors that take part in the identity conflict. In this manner the book presents us with the identity conflict found in the fields of historiography and politics, as an important way in understanding the post-soviet system in Moldavia. Stefan Ihrig's study comes firstly as an important tool for all the researchers interested in the identity paradigm, but it is also clear that the accessible language and structure of the book are features that allow it to be understood by a wider audience, not necessarily linked with the academic environment. This complex and detailed study is endowed with a great amount of sources be they qualitative or quantitative, and it is then structured in chapters. For a better understanding of the problem, the author makes an interesting effort in defining the key terms and concepts that the study will use, as well as the historic context in which Moldavia has evolved to be a country and a nation. The other chapters are trying to define and reveal the complexity of the nation-building phenomena developed in Moldavia, which is actually constituted of four unfinished projects.

Besides the two dominant discourses which stress either the Romanian factor or the Moldavian one, there is a continuous fight for identity coming from the Separatist Region of Transnistria (located in the East of Moldavia, on the banks of Dniester River), and Găgăuzia (region located in the South-West of the Moldavian republic). One of the chapters of the study is dedicated to describing in short the history works from Găgăuzia and Transnistria, and the image that these two territories have, and the perceptions that they have created in the Romanian or the Moldavian discourses. This is why the analysis that this volume undertakes becomes highly complex and relevant, as it takes in consideration the entire spectrum of beliefs and points of view of all the actors engaged in the Moldavian society.

The ethnic majority of Moldavia faces itself in an identity problem, which can be expressed using this concise question: does she represent a part of the Romanian nation or is it an independent one, a Moldavian nation? As the author points out, this country presents us with a paradox; by its nature the research should be carried in a detailed

manner. The Moldavian Republic is by all accounts a special case, because during 1994-2006, history school manuals were written and supported by the Romanian orientated cultural elites, bearing the title "The History of Romanians," even though the political scene was dominated throughout this period by Moldavian orientated parties. This phenomena, the author believes, was possible both because the academic environment was controlled by Romanian orientated elites and also by a fluctuant situation regarding national identification of the Moldavian population. Those who support the Romanian identity discourse, identify the Moldavian population (at least those whom are ethnically Romanians) as a constitutive part of the Romanian nation, wishing by all accounts to be united with the Romanian state. The Moldavian discourse is characterized by the desire that the Romanian ethnic population of Moldavia create a Moldavian nation, and also it finds that Moldavia should and must remain independent. The paradox that can be easily identified is that the educational system, one of the most powerful tools for *nation-building*, is used and supports the dissolution of Moldavia. Even though, the two discourses have different opinions, both of them stress the history of the Romanian ethnics of Moldavia, expressing a primordial an ethnocentric image. Minorities are not included in the "us" notion of the discourse, being in this way excluded from the national design (minorities in Moldavia constitute up to 35% of the total population). Stefan Ihrig's analysis is not only of the content of the history works and school manuals, but also the didactic aspect, language and features of presentation, both discourses appealing to a rhetoric dominated by clichés and poetical descriptions. Using a comparative method, he distinguishes all the facets and steps of the process known as nation-building, describing the manner in which the ethnogenesis or the "golden age" of a nation is depicted. Because the image of the "other" plays an important role in defining the identity of a group, Stefan Ihrig uses in the comparison he makes between the two dominant identity discourses, the analysis of the *identity/alter* relationship, by presenting the image of the "stranger," be he from Moldavia or abroad.

The next phase of the identity conflict begins with the year 2006, a turning point, which marks the apprehension of the schools' history curricula by the political parties. We are now presented with another comparative analysis of the new history manuals with those belonging to the old period, a methodological step that manages to point out the complexity of the phenomenon. The new history manuals, named

Integrated History, merge together the old manuals of Universal History and Romanian History. This new kind of discourse stresses statehood and ethnicity, trying to make the minorities part of the discursive methods. The final part of this study contains a detailed list of the manuals and also annexes with the results of the quantitative analysis of their contents. The value of this book is also heightened by the description provided to its sources, separated in accordance with the common usage in primary and secondary sources, representing a highly important point of reference for those who wish to continue the research in this field.

The entire study points out, as the author states, that above all problems and particularities, lies the indecision of the Moldavian population, regarding their identity and the failure of native researchers in defining an alternative approach, which should encompass the multiethnic Moldavian society and reject an enclosed discourse. Even though the author enunciated the problem concerning the Moldavian population's indecision regarding its own identity, his work does not try to establish the causes, to explain the driving forces and features of this phenomenon. We would have expected to be presented with quantitative data (statistics at least) regarding the ways in which Moldavians identify and define themselves. It is sure that integrating such an aspect is necessary, because it represents an important part of the Moldavian identity problem.

As Stefan Ihrig warns his readers in the beginning of his work, the answer to the question stressed in the title is one that cannot be truly enunciated, being composed of various views presented in the discourses analyzed. This problem will remain open and unsolved, both for researchers and politicians, for a long period of time, and it will most likely accept future considerations. It is also clear that the author has pointed out the unique situation of the Moldavian Republic, revealing in a clear and concise manner the evolution of Moldavian identity discourse. In describing and unveiling the nation-building approach of the two main identity discourses, he has made an interesting and compelling study of this problem, making his work one of the most complete ones in describing the Moldavian identity problem. We can surely state that Stefan Ihrig's book does not only serve as a tool in researching the aspects of identity crises and nation-building, but also in understanding the situation of post soviet republics nowadays.