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'Born in Moldova': Music and Soft Decolonization in Post-Soviet Republic of Moldova

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ABSTRACT

Our paper explores how music acts as a soft-power resource in the process of post-Soviet decolonization in the Republic of Moldova after its 1991 declaration of independence. While the (post)colonial status of Moldova and other former Soviet republics is still debated, we find the concept of 'inter-imperiality' (Laura Doyle; Parvulescu and Boatcă) more appropriate. It reframes post-coloniality beyond the framework of a single empire to account for the multi-laterality, combined and uneven, of imperial geopolitics. In Moldova's case, this multi-laterality includes Romania, the USSR/Russian Federation, and the European Union. The key ideological tool in this process is 'Moldovanness', a concept we understand as the (geo)political instrumentalization of collective identity. Originally a Soviet construct used as an anti-Romanian device both before and after 1991, it has recently been reshaped as a pro-EU vector for mobilizing the public participation in parliamentary and presidential elections. Our approach combines quantitative and qualitative analysis, relying on a 2025 survey of Moldovan music listeners, conducted during two music festivals organized in electoral contexts, as well as on participatory observations made during these two and four other musical events. We examine how music and musicians are perceived in relation to political and social issues, cultural activism, and 'Moldovan' identity.

Keywords: Moldova, popular music, elections, EU referendum, decolonization, soft power, public perceptions

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Introduction

Our paper examines the role of popular music as a form of soft power in the ongoing process of post-Soviet decolonization in the Republic of Moldova after its 1991 declaration of independence. While soft power, a concept coined by Joseph Nye in the post-Cold War context, is traditionally understood as a form of influence and domination exerted by powerful states, not by 'military coercion', but through 'intangible power resources such as culture and ideology',[1] small nations such as post-USSR states also employ soft power in processes of national rebuilding and geopolitical repositioning. The arts are often sites where a political imaginary emerges;[2] nevertheless, in the case of Romania and Moldova, literary expressions of such political imaginaries have been widely explored,[3] while music has remained rather understudied.

We argue that the post-1991 Moldovan musical scene both attests and enables a paradigm shift in the country's internal and external politics. More specifically, it advances a new geopolitical imaginary, built around the 'Moldovan' identity — which was weaponized during the USSR against the Romanian ethnics from Bessarabia/The Soviet Socialist Republic of Moldova (SSRM)[4] — to sustain pro-European Union (EU) attitudes and soft power activism. The most recent example of this pro-EU activist turn, which represents an extension of (but also a switch from) the pro-Romania 'paradiplomacy',[5] developed since 1990, is found in the song 'Viva, Moldova', which won the national Eurovision selection: [6]

'Viva, Moldova! Aloha! Adio, vida loca! / Soroca – Europa – Palma de Mallorca! / Salute a tutti! / Moldova is on duty! / E una! E nova! Republica Moldova!' [7]

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[1] See Joseph S. Nye, 'Soft Power', in *Soft Power and Great-Power Competition, China and Globalization* (Springer, 2023), pp. 3–15, doi:10.1007/978-981-99-0714-4_1.

[2] See Madina Tlostanova, *What Does It Mean to Be Post-Soviet? Decolonial Art from the Ruins of the Soviet Empire* (Duke University Press, 2018).

[3] See, for instance, Andreea Mironescu and Simona Mitroiu, 'Poetics and Politics of Remembering Childhood in Romanian Post-Communist Fiction', *Canadian Slavonic Papers*, 62.2 (2020), pp. 182–201, doi:10.1080/00085006.2020.1742562; Simona Mitroiu and Oxana Gherman, 'Violence and Its (In)Visibility: Forms and Expressions in Moldovan Women Writers' Novels', *Women's Studies*, 55.2 (2025), pp. 1–22, doi:10.1080/00497878.2025.2524378; Andreea Mironescu and Gabriela Vieru, 'Queer Autofiction as Reparative Practice: Coming Out in Literature', *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 33.1 (2026), pp. 6–21, doi:10.1177/13505068251407299.

[4] See Valeria Chelaru, 'The "True" Moldovans of Transnistria: A Case Study of Identity Fabrication in the First Years of the USSR (1924–1940)', *Anuarul Laboratorului pentru Analiza Conflictului Transnistrean*, 1 (2021), pp. 35–53.

[5] We borrow this concept from Sandrina Antunes, and others, 'Between Cooperation and Conflict: Explaining Strategies of Regional Paradiplomacy towards the EU in Regions Inside, Outside and in Transition (1992–2022),' *Territory, Politics, Governance*, 12.10 (2024), pp. 1445–62, doi:10.1080/21622671.2024.2399097.

[6] Eurovision is well known as a song contest where geopolitics is often more important than the songs themselves. See, for instance, Gad Yair, 'Douze Point: Eurovisions and Euro-Divisions in the Eurovision Song Contest – Review of Two Decades of Research', *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 22.5–6 (2018), pp. 1013–29, doi:10.1177/1367549418776562; and Lea M. Welslau and Torsten J. Selck, 'Geopolitics in the ESC: Comparing Russia's and Ukraine's Use of Cultural Diplomacy in the Eurovision Song Contest', *New Perspectives*, 32.1 (2023), pp. 5–29, doi:10.1177/2336825X231222000.

[7] See Satoshi, 'Viva, Moldova [new] | Eurovision 2026', online video recording, YouTube, 7 January 2026 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2IYuzG0HUXI&list=RD2IYuzG0HUXI&start_radio=1 [accessed 28 January 2026].

This song is written and performed by Satoshi, a Moldovan singer born in the late 1990s and part of the first post-Soviet generation, a cohort distinct from 'the last Soviet generation' 'born in the USSR'.[8] This first generation 'Born in Moldova', as in the title of one of the earliest songs performed by Carla's Dreams, probably the most famous Moldova-based band, came of age in a different climate than the perestroika generation. In navigating the post-Soviet transition amid ethnic tensions, economic and political turmoil, corruption, mass poverty, and labor migration, this cohort was shaped by a different type of transnationalism than either the Soviet internationalism or the (pro-)Romanian ethnic nationalism that emerged after the demise of the USSR. It was a 'forced transnationalism',[9] activated by labor migration and neoliberal policies at a time when the newly independent Republic of Moldova (as well as other ex-Soviet Republics) began its trajectory as an 'inter-imperial player',[10] as we argue in the third section of this article. The Moldovan diaspora, composed mainly of economic migrants working in the EU and longing for home, is a consistent part of the pro-European electorate in Moldova, especially in the last decade.[11] In this context, the refrain of 'Viva, Moldova!' written (and comprehensible) in four European languages is more than an artistic trick to win sympathies of the Eurovision transnational jury and public. It is, we claim, a declaration of identity and a political aspiration expressed through music.[12]

Objectives and methodology

The main objective of this study is to assess the role of music in shaping a new 'Moldovan' identity and furthering political change. We focus on popular music produced by Moldovan and Moldovan-born artists beginning at the turn of the millennium, when O-Zone, originally a local band, achieved remarkable international success in Romania, across Europe, and even in the United States with their global hit *Dragostea din tei* (widely known through the 'Numa Numa' phenomenon, which made the song go viral on YouTube in 2004).[13] This breakthrough followed an earlier wave of cross-border visibility during the late 1990s, when Moldovan band Zdob şi Zdub released their first album (1996) in Russia, where it became very popular in Moscow clubs, while simultaneously achieving success in Romania with the only song from the album

[8] We invoke here two references, one academic, namely Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation* (Princeton University Press, 2006), and the other from the field of popular culture, namely Vasile Ernu's auto-ethnography *Născut în URSS* [Born in the USSR] (Polirom, 2006). Ernu is a Moldovan writer and essayist residing in Romania. His book was translated into Bulgarian, Georgian, Polish, Russian, Hungarian, Italian, and Spanish.

[9] See Nicola Piper and Matt Withers, 'Forced Transnationalism and Temporary Labour Migration: Implications for Understanding Migrant Rights', *Identities*, 25.5 (2018), pp. 558–75, doi:10.1080/1070289X.2018.1507957.

[10] Anca Parvulescu and Manuela Boatcă, *Creolizing the Modern: Transylvania across Empires* (Cornell University Press, 2012), p. 10. We apply their framing of Transylvania to Bessarabia. The notion of inter-imperiality is borrowed by the two authors from Laura Doyle, *Inter-Imperiality*: *Vying Empires, Gendered Labor, and the Literary Arts of Alliance* (Duke University Press, 2020).

[11] Eugeniu Durbala, 'Diaspora, overwhelming vote for the European integration of the Republic of Moldova. How people voted outside the country', *Cotidianul*, 29 September 2025 https://cotidianul.md/en/15154/diaspora-overwhelming-vote-for-the-European-integration-of-the-Republic-of-Moldova-how-was-the-vote-outside-the-country/ [accessed 28 January 2026].

[12] See also Julien Danero Iglesias, 'Eurovision Song Contest and Identity Crisis in Moldova', *Nationalities Papers*, 43.2 (2015), pp. 233–47, doi:10.1080/00905992.2014.993957.

[13] See Gary Brolsman, '*Numa Numa*', online video recording, YouTube, 11 August 2023 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZBKm1MBsTbk [accessed 10 December 2025].

written in Romanian/Moldovan, 'Hardcore moldovenesc' (Moldovan Hardcore).[14] We use Romanian/Moldovan because neither of the two single options, Romanian or Moldovan, seems appropriate in this context. While the Moldovan language is a creation of Soviet linguists,[15] it remained the official language of the Republic of Moldova after 1991 until the 2013 decision of the Constitutional Court, which stated that the language should be referred to as Romanian, in accordance with the 1991 Declaration of Independence.[16] Ten years later, Moldovan Parliament approved the replacement of the term Moldovan language with Romanian language in all official documents and media communication. However, 2024 census data show that 76.6 per cent of the population identify as Moldovans and 49.2 per cent identify their native language as Moldovan.[17] The situation becomes even more complicated in the case of the band Zdob şi Zdub, which has built its artistic identity around 'Moldovanness'.[18]

In the following decades, Moldovan and Moldovan-born artists such as Carla's Dreams, Irina Rimes, and, more recently, emerging voices like Satoshi continued to build transnational audiences, often navigating and negotiating between Romanian, Russian, and European cultural spheres and audiences. These trajectories are significant for a country of just 2.5 million inhabitants, one that has faced severe post-Soviet challenges, including mass labor migration, systemic political corruption, and widespread impoverishment. In this context, popular music has functioned not only as entertainment but also as a tool of symbolic emancipation and post-Soviet nation-building, constructing a 'Moldovan' identity brand and exporting it beyond the country's borders. Nonetheless, over the last decade, popular music has also played a mobilizing role, activating various audiences — in terms of generation, place of residence, social status — in electoral contexts and often encouraged a pro-European vote from the electorate.[19] The key ideological device in this process is 'Moldovanness', a concept we understand as the geopolitical instrumentalization of national identity. This Soviet construct, used as an anti-Romanian instrument both before and after 1991, is being reshaped as a pro-EU vector, thus marking a significant geopolitical shift.

[14] Natalia Sineaeva-Pankowska and Rafal Pankowski, 'The Rock Group Zdob si Zdub as an Example of National Identity Construction', in *Moldova: In Search of Its Own Place in Europe*, ed. by Natalia Cwicinskaja and Piotr Oleksy (Oficyna Wydawnicza Epigram, 2013), pp. 92–102.

[15] See Charles King, 'The Ambivalence of Authenticity, or How the Moldovan Language Was Made', *Slavic Review*, 58.1 (1999), pp. 117–42, doi:10.2307/2672992.

[16] See 'Declaration of Independence of the Republic of Moldova', online document (1991) https://www.constcourt.md/public/files/file/Baza%20legala/Declaratia_en.pdf [accessed 10 December 2025].

[17] See 'Rezultatele preliminare ale Recensământului Populaţiei şi Locuinţelor 2024', *Biroul Naţional de Statistică al Republicii Moldova* https://statistica.gov.md/ro/rezultatele-preliminare-ale-recensamantului-populatiei-si-locuintelor-2024-10077_61626.html [accessed 12 November 2025].

[18] While acknowledging the linguistic and political nuances, for the purpose of this article we will use the term Romanian language.

[19] For instance, in 2009 Moldovan rapper Mani organized 'Dă-i la vot!' [Go vote!] caravans in several small cities from Moldova. See M. Bălan, Ramin Mazur, 'Aşa sună democraţia' [a Romanian adaptation of the slogan: 'This is how democracy looks like'], *Scena 9*, 18 March 2019 https://www.scena9.ro/article/alegeri-activism-republica-moldova [accessed 10 November 2025].

[20] Domenico Valenza, "'And Then We Sang": Affective Communities and Russian/EU Cultural Diplomacy in Moldova's Victory Day and Europe Day, 2022', in *The Routledge Handbook of Popular Music and Politics of the Balkans*, ed. by Catherine Baker (Routledge, 2024), pp. 595–612, p. 609.

As Domenico Valenza shows in his analysis of Russian and EU cultural diplomacy in Moldova, popular music performances on Victory Day and Europe Day (both officially celebrated on 9 May) generate antagonistic 'affective communities' that are 'filled with individual and collective desires, fears, and expectations for Moldova's past and future'.[20] Still, 2022, the year Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, marked a decisive turning point in this respect: the traditional Victory Day concert was cancelled and replaced by a pro-Ukraine and pro-EU concert organized in Chişinău's central square and linked to live broadcast of Moldova's Eurovision performance.[21] Thus, Moldovan popular music contributes to pro-EU mobilization and the formation of a distinct 'Moldovan' identity with European values and European aspirations.

From a methodological standpoint, this article combines quantitative and qualitative approaches. The quantitative component consists of a survey of Moldovan music listeners, conducted during two music events organized in an electoral context (the Moldovan parliamentary elections of 2025). Two questions of this survey are analysed in the last part of the article, namely: (1) Does music help us find our common identity? and (2) Does music have political power? The qualitative component consists of on-site participatory observation at six musical events, including the two mentioned above, focusing on demographics, attendees' emotional investment in the music, collective participation and practices, and the musical repertoire. Our results show that local popular music is generally perceived as capable of addressing political and identity issues, although this view differs across age groups.

Moldova as an inter-imperial player

While the (post)colonial status of Moldova and other former Soviet republics was and still is debated,[22] we find more appropriate the concept of 'inter-imperiality' coined by Laura Doyle in her 2020 book *Inter-imperiality*: *Vying Empires, Gendered Labor and the Literary Arts of Alliance*.[23] In short, Doyle reframes postcoloniality beyond the framework of a single empire to account for the multilateral, combined, and uneven nature of imperial geopolitics. She emphasizes the overlapping, competing, and mutually shaping pressures of multiple and competing empires, arguing that modern subjectivities and cultural forms are produced between interacting 'imperial formations' and geopolitical forces. For Moldova, this multilateralism includes Romania, USSR/The Russian Federation, and the EU. The current territory of the Republic of Moldova was contested by the Ottoman and the Russian empires, with Greater Romania also occupying a place in this equation. While Bessarabia was a political, economic, and cultural subperiphery of the Russian Empire in the nineteenth century and of Romania prior to World War II, the Republic of Moldova gained its independence after the dissolution of the USSR in 1991 and entered a new national phase. Given its historical situation, one may argue that Moldova is not a standard case of inter-imperiality,

[21] Valenza, "'And Then We Sang'", pp. 606–07.

[22] See, for instance, David Chioni Moore,'Is the Post- in Postcolonial the Post- in Post-Soviet? Toward a Global Postcolonial Critique', *PMLA*, 116.1 (2001), pp. 111–28; Madina Tlostanova, 'Postsocialist ≠ Postcolonial? On Post-Soviet Imaginary and Global Coloniality', *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 48.2 (2012), pp. 130–42, doi:10.1080/17449855.2012.658244; Bogdan Ştefănescu, 'The Complicated Selves of Transcolonialism: The Triangulation of Identities in the Alternative Peripheries of Global Post/Colonialism', *Metacritic Journal for Comparative Studies and Theory*, 8.1 (2022), pp. 63–83, doi:10.24193/mjcst.2022.13.04; for the particular case of the Republic of Moldova, see Andreea Mironescu, 'Finding Bessarabian Literature on the Maps of Eastern Europe: Notes on a Case of Triangular Cultural Transfer', *Transilvania*, 12 (2016), pp. 19–24; Mihnea Bâlici, 'World-Literature and the Bessarabian Literary System: Combined and Uneven Development in the Semiperiphery', *Metacritic Journal for Comparative Studies and Theory*, 8.1 (2022), pp. 84–104, doi:10.24193/mjcst.2022.13.05; and Doris Mironescu, 'Romanul memoriei ca instrument al decolonizării', in *Filologia modernă: realizări şi perspective în context european: G. Călinescu 125 ani de la naştere* (Pro Libra, 2024), pp. 48–56, doi:10.52505/filomod.2024.18.04.

[23] Doyle, *Inter-imperiality*, pp. 1-4.

as described by Doyle — if 'standard' cases of inter-imperiality exist at all. To be sure, Romania at the beginning of the twentieth century (nor Greater Romania) was not an empire, but 'an expansionist nation state with a recent decolonization experience matched by aggressive territorial expansionism'; it may have had imperial aspirations, but it lacked the necessary infrastructure to realize them.[24] Nonetheless, as Irina Livezeanu shows, some colonial elements do exist in Romania's post-1918 cultural politics of '*Romanianization*', to which Bessarabia was subjected.[25] To complicate the situation even more, after 1945, Romania entered the USSR's sphere of influence, and relations with the Soviet Republic of Moldova were frozen for decades, with moderate relaxation during perestroika.

After 1991, relations between the Russian Federation and the EU did not take the form of conventional inter-imperial rivalry, even though geopolitical tensions persisted, especially over the integration of former Soviet republics such as the Baltic states into the EU and NATO. At the same time, cooperations existed in strategic sectors, most notably energy. Against this historical and economic backdrop, we argue that Moldova is a revealing inter-imperial zone. Although Romania, in its various state forms, was not an empire and did not maintain durable political or economic dependency relations with Moldova, Moldova nevertheless draws Romania into the region's inter-imperial logic through a projected form of cultural subordination. These projections have been particularly visible since 1991 and are reflected in the post-independence public discourse.

Over the last decade, however — especially since Moldova became an official EU candidate in 2022 — this projected configuration has shifted structurally, as EU integration has emerged as a more concrete goal than the earlier ideal of reunification with Romania. We further argue that the identity-based activism channeled through popular music — 'Moldovanness' as a cohesive and compelling collective identity — has played a significant role in shaping a discourse of self-determination and in helping secure a pro-European majority in presidential and parliamentary elections held in 2024 and 2025.

Music and national politics

Recent Moldovan identity-building strategies rely on several main types of publicly curated musicians' profiles,[26] assembled to project 'to a larger, personally unknown public […] what is *seen to be seen* as good'.[27] Applying this framework helps us highlight the multiple sources and ideologies of the projected identities implicated in the Moldovanness-building project. For instance, folkloric aesthetics, often mixed with more contemporary musical genres and heavily instrumentalized in late Soviet culture, remain a go-to resource for Moldovan musicians today (from Trigon and Zdob şi Zdub to Pasha Parfeni, Via Dacă, Irina Rimes, Ana Everling, Lupii lui Calancea, and others). During the first decades of communism in Moldovan Soviet Socialist Republic (MSSR), expressing the ethnic component as identity was viewed as subversive,[28] whereas

[24] Cornel Ban, 'Inter-imperiality: A Political Economy Reading', *Transilvania*, 10 (2022), pp. 15-22, doi:10.51391/trva.2022.10.02.

[25] Irina Livezeanu, *Cultural Politics in Greater Romania, Regionalism, Nation Building, & Ethnic Struggle, 1918-1930* (Cornell University Press, 1995), pp. 100-12.

[26] For a discussion on the notions of 'profile' and 'profilicity' see Hans-Georg Moeller, Paul J. D'Ambrosio, *You and Your Profile: Identity after Authenticity* (Columbia University Press, 2021).

[27] Moeller and D'Ambrosio, *You and Your Profile*, pp. 28.

[28] Stalin rejected the idea of a national culture, but not that of 'national form'. 'National in form, socialist in content' was a phrase used by Stalin in his speech at the Sixteenth Congress of the Party. See M. D. Kammari, Lenin and Stalin on the Development of the National Question (The November 8th Publishing House, 2023), p. 96, https://november8ph.ca/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/leninstalin-natquestion.pdf [accessed 14

the use of ethnic form to host Soviet propaganda was encouraged. Later, starting with the 1950s and the de-Stalinization process, folklore was promoted in the public sphere by professional musicians, who blended it with more contemporary artistic forms, such as jazz, thus creating an intellectualized folk music that was seen as both participating to national identity building, and as acceptable to the regime.[29] In the 1960s–80s, Moldovans discovered Western and Soviet rock through unofficial channels,[30] and the first pop, jazz, and rock music bands appeared: Bucuria Jazz Orchestra (1956), vocal instrumental bands Noroc/Contemporanul (1967) and Plai (1982).[31] The blending of folk sounds and motifs with rock or jazz has increasingly become a defining profile of Moldovan artists in the post-independence period,[32] one that resonates across multiple generations (see the case study in the final part of the article).

During perestroika, the music of the national revival, centered on Doina and Ion Aldea-Teodorovici, was overtly political and sonically distinct from the jazz, and rock bands that preceded it, expressing a near-complete overlap between Moldovan and Romanian identities. Their lyrics 'paid tribute to the Romanian language, the tricolor, ancestors' traditions, [and] the sacred ideals: God, mother, language, nation, Eminescu, sovereignty, peace etc.'[33] In this way, the singers treated Moldovan identity as inherently Romanian, seeking to unite 'Romanians separated by political borders' under a shared cultural heritage.[34] After their tragic deaths, their only child, Cristofor Aldea-Teodorovici, has continued to perform his parents' repertoire, including at pro-EU events, although with considerably lower visibility.

In the post-independence period, and in connection with the political tensions of the last two decades and anti-oligarchic civic mobilization, major reconfigurations have occurred in how national identity is perceived and expressed. Zdob şi Zdub was one of the first contemporary bands to blend rock with folkloric motifs, reframing Moldovan identity through a playful negotiation of the rural-urban divide and presenting Moldovanness as a positive identity, in contrast to the cynicism of Planeta Moldova. Between 2015 and 2019, in the context of the banking scandal and widespread distrust of the ruling political class, large-scale protests brought together communities from across the ideological spectrum. These movements culminated in 2019 in the formation of a coalition between the PSRM (the Socialist Party) and the pro-EU ACUM bloc (PAS and DA), whose stated aim was to curb oligarchic influence, followed by the departure

November 2025]. For more context on Moldovan music during Soviet times, see Victor Ghilaş, 'Muzica în Moldova sovietică', in *Panorama comunismului în Moldova sovietică: context, surse, interpretări*, ed. by Liliana Corobca (Polirom, 2019), pp. 621–37 (pp. 624–25).

[29] Giovanna Di Mauro, 'From Stage to Street: The Transnational Production of Politically Engaged Art in Post-Soviet Moldova' (doctoral thesis, University of St Andrews, 2019), pp. 81, doi:10.17630/10023-17778.

[30] Diana Preaşcă, 'Ce ascultau moldovenii în anii '70 şi rolul fişelor Röntgen', *Moldova.org*, 8 October 2021, https://www.moldova.org/ce-ascultau-moldovenii-in-anii-70-si-rolul-fiselor-rontgen/ [accessed 14 November 2025].

[31] Ghilaş, 'Muzica în Moldova sovietică', pp. 626.

[32] For more context on postcommunist Moldovan music see Valeria Barbas, 'Dialogul intercultural în muzica nouă din Republica Moldova. Iradieri ale Festivalului Internaţional Zilele Muzicii Noi (1991-2016)' (Arc, 2018).

[33] 'Doina and Ion Aldea-Teodorovici's Patriotic Songs Moved Troubled Souls of Tens of Thousands', *IPN News Agency, 22 August 2008* https://www.old.ipn.md/en/doina-and-ion-aldea-teodorovicis-patriotic-songs-moved-troubled-souls-of-tens-of-7965_971164.html [accessed 12 November 2025].

[34] 'Doina şi Ion Aldea Teodorovici – Două flăcări vii ale românismului', *Vocea Naţională,* 30 November 2023 https://www.voceanationala.ro/doina-si-ion-aldea-teodorovici-doua-flacari-vii-ale-romanismului/ [accessed 12 November 2025].

from the country of Vladimir Plahotniuc, a key figure in the corrupt system that had dominated Moldovan politics in previous years.[35] In this context, opposition to oligarchy and systemic corruption brought together otherwise divergent segments of the population, engaging both politicians and civilians in civic resistance,[36] and music played an important role in shaping this resistance, as shown in the next section of the article.

The National Assembly 'European Moldova' of 21 May, 2023, which gathered tens of thousands in the PMAN (main city square), was strategically timed ahead of the European Political Community summit held near Chişinău at Mimi Castle, Bulboaca, on 1 June, 2023. The assembly's musical repertoire linked the current pro-EU mobilization to the sonic memory of the anti-communist nation-building period of 1991.[37] In contrast, on the same day, pro-Russian opposition rallies in several cities (Orhei, Comrat, Bălţi) called for a referendum on Moldova's foreign-policy direction.[38] This was followed by the constitutional referendum of 20 October, 2024, validated by the Constitutional Court on 31 October, 2024, which enshrined EU accession in the Moldovan Constitution; the measure passed by an extremely thin margin (Yes 50.35 per cent, No 49.6 per cent; turnout 50.69 per cent).[39]

The parliamentary elections of 28 September 2025, in which PAS secured an absolute majority despite Russia's hybrid war, were accompanied by a campaign that used multiple channels to project its political vision to diverse 'national profiles'. In turn, authorities organized music festivals such as the Forest Festival (14 September 2025, Condriţa, at the presidential residence, with free transport provided), featuring Cristofor Aldea-Teodorovici, Ecou Arhaic, Vali Boghean, and other folk and pop singers and ensembles,[40] including an Art Labyrinth tent where independent artists such as Marina Skaletskaya organized musical and related events. The Ethnicities Festival (21 September 2025, Chişinău) was designed to appeal to diverse audiences.

[35] On 22 July 2025, the Greek police arrested Vladimir Plahotniuc at Athens International Airport on an Interpol notice; on September 25, 2025, he was extradited to Chişinău and placed in preventive detention; on October 20, 2025, a Moldovan court extended his detention by 30 days. (see: Nadejda Coptu, 'Mandat după mandat: Plahotniuc rămâne în arest în încă trei dosare,' *Radio Europa Liberă Moldova*, 21 October 2025 https://moldova.europalibera.org/a/mandat-dupa-mandat-plahotniuc-ramane-in-arest-in-inca-trei-dosare/33565919.html [accessed 12 November 2025].

[36] Camelia Grădinaru, Cristina Dicusar, 'Blurring Online and Offline: Occupy Guguţă as an 'Onlife' Protest' (unpublished manuscript).

[37] At this event, previously mentioned Cristofor Aldea-Teodorovici performed songs from his parents' canon, including 'Bucuraţi-vă, prieteni!', and 'Eminescu' – works that became symbols of Moldovan national rebirth in the early 1990s.

[38] Mircea Ţicudean. 'Mare adunare pro-europeană la Chişinău. Chemări la referendum în oraşe din provincie,' *Radio Europa Liberă Moldova*, 21 May 2023 https://moldova.europalibera.org/a/mare-adunare-pro-europeana-la-chisinau-chemari-la-referendum-in-orase-din-provincie-/32421127.html [accessed 12 November 2025].

[39] Comisia Electorală Centrală a Republicii Moldova 'Rezultatele referendumului republican constituţional,' 2024 https://a.cec.md/ro/rezultatele-referendumului-republican-constitutional-17041.html [accessed 12 November 2025].

[40] Ludmila Hiţuc, 'Festivalul Pădurilor 2025: Vali Boghean, Cristofor Aldea-Teodorovici şi ansambluri folclorice, pe scena de la Condriţa,' *Ecopresa*, 11 September2025 https://ecopresa.md/festivalul-padurilor-2025-vali-boghean-cristofor-aldea-teodorovici-si-ansambluri-folclorice-pe-scena-de-la-condrita/ [accessed 12 November 2025].

Moldovanness is the new cool

These recent public events have added new layers to local popular music, in which expressions of Moldovan identity combine Soviet, independence-era, and post-communist histories and sounds with contemporary Western influences. Pop icon Irina Rimes has incorporated rock textures in her live performances while engaging national themes through folk references and explicit pro-EU stances. But the most significant shift in recent Moldovan music has occurred in rap and hip-hop, where artists such as Carla's Dreams, Kapushon, MANI, Satoshi and Magnat & Feoctist, among others, have developed their own code by drawing on global contemporary elements (beats, sampling, current slang) and reassembling them to reflect Moldovan socio-political realities, tastes, and mentalities, while also incorporating folk and rock elements and referencing both historical and contemporary political and social struggles. As a rule, rap and hip-hop allow a wider range of stage personas;[41] for example, Satoshi's identities can range from lyrical patriot to urban hustler, thereby enabling multiple moments of national identity building and rebuilding.

Ideologically, Moldovan rap and hip-hop are distinguished by a more critical political stance,[42] with identity forming a central part of their message. For instance, Moldovanness is addressed in songs such as Carla's Dreams' 'Born in Moldova' (2012),[43] which openly rejects the moral relativism often associated with the political elite and foregrounds civic morality as the core of national identity, posing moral questions to the listener: 'Were you honest or corrupt?' and 'Think about what you would want your grandchildren to know about you'[44] (our translation). In this framing, Moldovanness is defined by conduct: 'I am a human being, then a citizen, then (Moldovan, Russian, Romanian, or Ukrainian)'.[45] At the same time, songs that directly attack oligarchy and corruption — often mocking elite indifference and the weak culture of protest — have become increasingly popular. Beginning with songs such as Kapushon's 'Zemlianka' (2013), which parodically references the political class that captured the state after independence,[46] more tracks expressing political disillusionment appeared, portraying Moldovanness as a burdened identity shaped by corruption, structural inequality, migration, and political betrayal.[47] In 'Am o Țară ca o Floare' ['I Have a Country Like a Flower'] (2018),[48] MANI denounces corrupt elites in Parliament: 'They found any method to show all

[41] Victoria Tcacenco, 'Rap in the Republic of Moldova: Some Reflections,' *Arta. Seria Arte Audiovizuale*, new series, 2 (2018), pp. 64-69.

[42] As Di Mauro observes, the hip-hop field seems less subject to political influences and more socially engaged than the folkloric rock scene. See Di Mauro, '*From Stage to Street*', pp. 85-86.

[43] Carla's Dreams, '*Născut în Moldova*', online video recording, YouTube, 30 March 2012 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MYPor93WvVs [accessed 10 November 2025].

[44] 'Ai fost integru sau corupt?' 'Gândeşte-te ce-ai vrea să ştie despre tine nepoţii tăi,' Carla's Dreams, *'Născut în Moldova'*.

[45] 'Sunt om apoi cetăţean, apoi (moldovean, rus, român sau ucrainean),' Carla's Dreams, *'Născut în Moldova'*.

[46] He uses nominal parody, sketching caricatures of the corrupt officials: e.g. 'Blatniuc' for Vladimir Plahotniuc, 'Valciok' for Marian Lupu, and 'Vlad Fiat' for Vlad Filat.

[47] See, for instance, Magnat and Feoctist feat. Valera Leovskii, 'Soarta moldovanului;' MANI, 'Moldavian Dream'; Vasile Advahov, 'Asta-i ţara mea'; and Magnat & Feoctist, 'Cumaniok'.

[48] MANI cu Pasha Parfeni, 'Am o Țară ca o Floare,' online video recording, YouTube, 25 August 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aPsDfcQealY [accessed 12 November 2025]

their respect | To the criminals who filled the Parliament'.[49] These songs celebrate civic revolt, especially MANI's 'Moldavian Dream' (2018), which turns its focus to civic activism as a way of combating corruption and 'I Have a Country Like a Flower', where diaspora is praised for its mobilization during elections: 'London, Paris, Milan, Frankfurt, Dublin, Lisbon, / The boys are forming resistance cells in Europe'.[50]

A clear shift in the political allegories of Moldovan popular music became visible after 2020. Maia Sandu's victory in the 2020 presidential elections and Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 marked a decisive turn toward the EU, both in Moldova's foreign policy and in public perceptions.[51] Linked to Moldova's becoming an official EU candidate in 2022 (together with Ukraine and Georgia), a second layer of performative Moldovanness emerges in recent songs such as Satoshi's 'Cer Senin' ['Clear Sky'] (2024) and 'Asta-i Țara Mea' ['This Is My Country'] (2025), where the nation is imagined as a collective idealized project. In 'Clear Sky', released on Moldova's Independence Day in 2024 and featuring many Moldovan artists and public figures, the country is visualized as part of the 'civilized world' and advances a pro EU message, encapsulated in the chorus: 'if at home they ask me where I'm going / to bring back a clear sky with stars' — an image that alludes to the EU flag.[52] Free movement and the cultural recognition associated with the EU and the Schengen zone are thus presented as guarantees of a positive national trajectory.

This is also evident in public statements made during the 2024 EU referendum and the parliamentary elections, in which several mainstream Moldovan pop stars — unlike pro-Russian, communist, or socialist actors[53] — frame a pro-EU orientation as the only civically acceptable position and as a safeguard of national identity. Satoshi distinguishes between party political concerts, and pro-EU events, stating, 'We

[49] 'Găseau orice metodă ca să-şi arate tot respectul | Faţă de criminalii ce-au împânzit Parlamentul.' MANI and Pasha Parfeni, 'Am o Țară ca o Floare'.

[50] 'Londra, Paris, Milano, Frankfurt, Dublin, Lisabona, / Băieţii fac celule de rezistenţă-n Europa.' MANI and Pasha Parfeni, *'Am o Țară ca o Floare'*.

[51] While this article focuses on musicians' views, the critical literature shows that public perceptions also shifted in favor of the EU after 2020/2022. See, for instance, Alina Stoica and Cosmin Chiriac, 'The Dynamics of Moldovan Citizens' Perceptions of EU Accession: A Multimodal Approach', *Romanian Journal of European Affairs*, 2 (2025), pp. 89-110. The authors conclude that 'Between the years 2022 and 2025, support for EU integration increased, but remained unevenly distributed among various segments of the population, and is vulnerable to disinformation and geopolitical pressure', p. 94. For a more detailed analysis of the divides in political perceptions and voting, see Sergiu Gherghina and Paul Tap, 'Building Bridges: the Pro-EU Vote in the 2024 Referendum in the Republic of Moldova', *East European Politics*, 10 November (2025), pp. 1-18 doi:10.1080/21599165.2025.2581111.

[52] Satoshi, Dara, Magnat and Feoctist, 'Cer senin,' online video recording, YouTube, 27 August 2024, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yqGzPApqVOw [accessed 12 November 2025].

[53] Amid documented Russian interference in the referendum, pro-Kremlin Russian artists Nikolai Baskov, Filip Kirkorov, and Stas Mikhailov recorded a cover of the perestroika-era Moldovan national revival anthem 'Inima mea e Moldova' [My Heart Is Moldova], composed by Ion Aldea-Teodorovici (music) and Simion Ghimpu (lyrics). The music video employs a visual narrative that disseminates anti-EU propaganda, contrasting representations of war, LGBTQI+ parades, and migrant protests with idyllic images of Moldovan landscape and traditions. In doing so, it promoted the idea that Moldovans should distance themselves from the EU and, implicitly, reject European integration to preserve a peaceful traditional way of life. See Mihai-Răzvan Corman, 'Three Takeaways from the Nearly Failed EU Referendum in Moldova', *Verfassungsblog*, 2024, doi:10.59704/b586421167a15dce; 'Inima mea e #Moldova', online video recording, YouTube, 15 October 2024 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s_oj7KLLKkM&list=RDs_oj7KLLKkM&start_radio=1 [accessed 12 May 2026].

will never accept singing for an overtly political event',[54] while adding that he and his team do accept events supporting EU integration because they have a social character and reflect a widely shared will. Irina Rimes similarly presents the EU as a space that protects national identity: 'I think the EU is the space where these things are secured: national identity. On the other side, I only see the logic of force. And for me, the choice is clear'.[55] Even the rapper Kapushon acknowledges his earlier involvement with parties such as PL and PLDM — despite their place within an oligarchic system — because of their European orientation: 'During 2014–2015 I went to several concerts for PL, PLDM [...] I didn't go for the communists, socialists, but I went for these parties. I'm not ashamed [...] it seemed ok to me because they were also on the European vector'.[56] These more recent articulations of Moldovan identity no longer treat Romania as a cultural authority, as was the case in the early 1990s; instead, they reframe Moldovanness as European. Moldovan identity is detaching itself from earlier anxieties of Romanian cultural dominance, while still integrating Romanianness as a significant component of its cultural and historical legacy.

Case study: a survey of Moldovan music listeners

Given this context and our preliminary assumption that Moldovan popular music is perceived as (1) a site of negotiation and affirming a Moldovan identity that integrates, rather than completely identifies with, Romanianness and (2) a platform for political action, we conducted a mix of qualitative and quantitative demoscopic research on contemporary Romanian/Moldovan audiences, to examine the role of contemporary music in fostering collective identity and engaging with political issues. We also relied on participatory observation at five musical events attended by Cristina Dicusar.[33] The notes taken during capture surface-level features such as repertoire, attendees' fashion choices, the general atmosphere, and spontaneous remarks overheard on site, all intended to contextualize the national-political dimensions of mass music events.

From a quantitative perspective, we draw on insights from a 2025 survey of Moldovan music listeners conducted during a music festival and a concert. The questionnaire included 12 items: 2 demographic questions (age and place of residence) and 10 focused on musical preferences, preferred listening platforms and media, perceptions of the most successful Moldovan artists nationally and internationally, and the perceived relation between music, national identity, and politics. The questionnaire was specifically designed for festival audiences and intended to be completed on the spot. For these reasons, the questions were kept intentionally short and straightforward, with a limited number of open-ended items allowing respondents

[54] 'Niciodată nu vom accepta să cântăm pentru un eveniment vădit politic'. See: Zaharescu, Natalia and Satoshi, *Artiştii nu au dreptul moral să dicteze opinii politice maselor | Podcast ZdCe*, online video recording, YouTube, 21 April 2024, https://youtu.be/-unnjbNzTrs?si=8mYT0A4ruGL_pFFo&t=2754 [accessed 12 November 2025].

[55] 'Cred că Uniunea Europeană este spaţiul în care aceste chestii sunt securizate: identitatea naţională. În partea cealaltă eu văd doar logica forţei. Şi pentru mine alegerea este clară'. See: Oana Maniţiu, 'Interviu exclusiv cu Irina Rimes: despre importanţa votului şi viitorul Republicii Moldova', online video recording, YouTube, 24 September 2025 https://youtu.be/9gf_Friai6M?si=cbOdtb9v1HT2YFhW&t=656 [accessed 12 November 2025].

[56] 'În perioada 2014-2015 am mers la mai multe concerte pentru PL, PLDM (...) era perioada când abia am apărut pe piaţă... intram perfect pe vectorul european ... nu am mers pentru comunişti, socialişti, dar pentru partidele astea am mers. nu mi-e ruşine, asta credeam eu atunci. ştiam că-s cu vectorul european, mi se părea ok and because they were on vectorul european'. Kapushon, 'Kapushon - secretul unui hit, colaborări de milioane, concerte politice şi viaţa peste hotare', interview by Dorin Galben, *Internetu' Grăieşte*, online video recording, YouTube, 28 February 2021, YouTube, https://youtu.be/QD3hzRgTi9s?si=ema-L5xBpSIrds5V&t=5643 [accessed 12 November 2025].

to elaborate in their own words. In this sense, the questionnaire functioned as a type of special opinion survey, combining multiple pre-coded questions with open-ended ones.[57]

The first site of data collection was 'Născut în Moldova' ['Born in Moldova'] (NIM) music festival, held on 14–15 June 2025 in Chişinău — a large celebration of Moldovan music and national pride. The second was a Zdob şi Zdub & Lăutarii lui Nicolae Botgros (ZZLB) concert on 19 August 2025, also in Chişinău, featuring a fusion of rock, folk-punk, and folkloric orchestra traditions. Both events promoted a pro-local cultural message: the title 'Născut în Moldova' quite literally asserts belonging to the nation, while the Zdob şi Zdub and Lăutarii blend folklore and rock performance.

Additional respondents were gathered outside event settings, adding 48 participants and broadening the sample. The total number of valid responses gathered was 130. Four other cultural events were included in the broader research design: SummerFest (SF) (23–24 August 2025), the Independence Day Concert (IDC) (27 August 2025) (IDC), and Festivalul Pădurilor [Forests Festival] (FP) — the second edition of a one-day folk event held at the presidential residence on 14 September 2025). Survey distribution was not feasible at these three events; however, they were incorporated in our study through participatory observation, which allowed us to contextualize the data politically (at least two of these events were more or less directly related to the Moldovan parliamentary elections that took place on 28 September 2025).

A further limitation of our study concerns language bias. Because the survey was designed exclusively in Romanian and listed only a selection of the most popular Romanian language artists, the results were inevitably skewed toward Romanian-language and Western-aligned musical preferences, rather than Russian/Russophone ones. Still, we had strong reasons to partially exclude Russophone audiences and artists by not making the questionary available in Russian and by not listing Russian artists performing in Moldova).

First, our focus on 'Moldovanness' as an ethnic, linguistic, and artistic identity required a narrower focus on the corresponding groups, namely those identifying themselves as Moldovans. In the 2024 census, 76.6 per cent identified as ethnic Moldovans, 8 per cent as Romanians, and 3.4 per cent as Russians, while Moldovan/Romanian taken together was reported as the mother tongue by 79.9 per cent of respondents, compared with 11.6 per cent for Russian.[58] Nonetheless, bilingual respondents could still complete the questionnaire and list Russian artists under the open-ended questions.

Second, there are few Moldovan musicians whose first language is Russian, the best-known examples being Roman Iagupov of Zdob şi Zdub and Marcel Bostan from Alternosfera. Yet their repertoires consist mostly of Romanian-language content that promotes Moldovan identity through folk-rock fusions — particularly in the case of Zdob şi Zdub — which bridge rural-urban divides and reframe Moldovanness in positive terms,[59] while also advancing pro-Eu and anti-Kremlin political stances. While some musicians have

[57] This classification belongs to: Septimiu Chelcea, *Metodologia cercetării sociologice: metode cantitative şi calitative* (Editura Economică, 2001), pp. 179-208.

[58] See Biroul Naţional de Statistică al Republicii Moldova, 'Rezultatele finale ale Recensământului Populaţiei şi Locuinţelor 2024: Caracteristici etnoculturale ale populaţiei', 20 October 2025 https://statistica.gov.md/ro/rezultatele-finale-ale-recensamantului-populatiei-si-locuintelor-2024-caracteris-10121_62043.html [accessed 14 May 2025].

[59] Di Mauro, *From Stage to Street*, pp. 85.

performed at events funded by pro-Russian figures such as Renato Usatîi,[60] primarily for financial reasons,[61] these remain exceptions within the broader pro-EU orientation of contemporary Moldovan music.

Timing and setting also shaped the results. On 14 June, at NIM, many respondents were festival-goers already immersed in a celebration of local music, while on 19 August, at ZZLB, participants were attending a concert explicitly centered on Moldovan folklore and national identity. Such contexts naturally encouraged respondents to foreground local (Moldovan) and global/Western music trends and influences, while Russian artists or influences were notably absent from the responses we collected. The only event where Russian-language music was present was SummerFest, which brought together local performers and Russian popular stars; however, this audience was not included in the survey sample.

Before presenting the survey results, we summarize on-site participatory observations made by Cristina Dicusar on some key aspects of the musical events she attended. Overall, audiences were mainly adults and young adults, with noticeable variations by venue. At NIM, many attendees came with children (including infants), or with elderly relatives, reflecting an attempt to encourage intergenerational connections through music. For instance, one elderly woman commented: 'I didn't understand anything from Satoshi, but I listened'. At SummerFest (SF), the demographic changed: fewer elderly attendees were present, and the core audience appeared to be teens, young adults, and adults roughly from 25 to 45 (an estimate based on observation). Children were present as well — some dancing with parents, others playing on the ground. In contrast, the ZZLB and IDC concerts attracted more older attendees, contributing to a more visibly intergenerational audience profile.

Regarding the collective practices in the concert settings, all the events featured the *hora* (a traditional collective dance) as an inclusive form of participation. At NIM and SF, however, the *horas* tended to be smaller and more private, usually forming within groups of friends. At ZZLB and IDC, by contrast, the dance extended further into the public space. The most explicitly inclusive example appeared at FP, where a designated facilitator actively invited attendees to join. The progression from intimate *horas* at the higher-priced concerts (NIM & SF), where participants typically attended with friends and family, to larger, more collective *horas* at lower-cost or free events, illustrates how access and affordability can shape collective participation. Notably, the free events carried a political charge: FP was held during the electoral campaign, while the Independence Day celebration was overtly political. In these cases, celebration and political intent overlapped, reinforcing national identity narratives.

The musical repertoire consistently sustained the Moldovan identity narrative. Romanian-language bands performing at these events included songs that appealed to Moldovanness — especially at the Independence Day concert and the NIM Festival, but also at the more broadly themed SF. Audience behavior at this bilingual festival revealed divides among different audiences: several people left during the Russian-language acts, returning only for the Romanian performances. One Russian band (Jakone, Kiliana) incorporated well-known Soviet songs into its set to evoke the shared cultural memory of the Soviet past, specifically *Ария — Я так одинок в этот час* and *Виктор Цой — Группа крови*. A similar gesture appeared at the Zdob şi Zdub & Lăutarii concert, where the band began playing *Видели ночь*, a classic Russian hit. While a small part of the audience left at that moment, most joined in, singing even more enthusiastically than

[60] Gian Marco Moisé, 'Populism in Moldova's Informal Political System', *Journal of Extreme Anthropology*, 5.2, (2021), pp. 1–26 doi:10.5617/jea.8986.

[61] Di Mauro, *From Stage to Street*, pp. 106.

during the Romanian-language songs. This contrast reveals how Romanian nationalism and Soviet nostalgia continue to overlap in public life.

Concerning the survey, the results show that most respondents were young. Of the 130 participants, 39.2 per cent (n=52) were aged 15-20, 28.5 per cent (n=37) were aged 21–30, 25.4 per cent (n=33) were aged 31–40, 3.8 per cent (n=5) were aged 51–60, and 1 per cent (n=4) were aged 41–50. In other words, over 85 per cent of respondents were under the age of 40, indicating that the survey findings primarily reflect the tastes and cultural orientations of a younger and young adult audiences, in line with the festivals' main public.

In what follows, we focus on two questions from the questionnaire that are most relevant to our theme and address the relation between music, national identity, and politics. The two questions contained both close and open-ended response options.

(1) Does music help us find our common identity?
95.38 per cent (124 out of 130) viewed music as an identity-building force: 74.6 per cent (n=97) selected this option 'because it shows us as we are', while 59.2 per cent (n=77) of the respondents chose 'because it's reclaiming folklore'. Open-ended responses reinforced the same idea, with comments such as 'music contributes to the creation of culture and cultural trends' and 'it addresses the common national identity'. There were no significant generational differences in this response, except among the 15–20 age group, who more clearly favored the 'identity' option (76.47 per cent; n=39 out of 51 respondents) over the 'folklore' one (52.94 per cent; n=27 out of 51). Only a very small number of respondents disagreed with the premise implied by the question: three selected 'No, because we are too different', and one added that 'Music helps, but not in Moldova'.

(2) Does music have political power?
Most respondents — teenagers and young adults between 15 and 30 years old — gave positive answers to the question. Specifically, 48.8 per cent (n=43 out of 88 respondents) said 'Yes, because it presents realities that politicians do not talk about' and (n=34) respondents chose 'Yes, because it talks about Moldova and its geopolitical situation'. By contrast, 34.09 per cent (n=30 out of 88 respondents) answered negatively. One participant offered an ambivalent response, which may be read as an acknowledgement of music's limitations: 'Let's say yes, but actually no'. For the 31–40 age group, opinions were more divided, although 'Yes' responses (69.70 per cent; n=23 out of 33) still outweighed 'No' responses (48.48 per cent; n=16). The 41–60 age group included too few respondents for the data to be conclusive, although results still leaned slightly positive. Overall, 47.69 per cent (n=62) of all 130 respondents answered 'Yes' and 29.3 per cent (n=38) selected 'No', with a few respondents selecting both yes- and no-related options, revealing a high degree of ambivalence.

Conclusions

The survey results confirm our initial hypothesis that a strong connection exists between post-1991 popular music performed by Moldovan artists and the question of national identity (97 per cent of the respondents identified a clear link between the two). Moreover, respondents from the post-independence generation (ages 15–30, 68.5 per cent of the total sample) perceive local popular music as capable of addressing social, political, and personal realities neglected by formal institutions. Regarding our second hypothesis, which concerns the perceived relationship between music and politics — understood here as music's capacity to perform political action — we found an ambivalent attitude among respondents, reflected in answers such as *yes and no*. Nonetheless, the dominant perception among Romanian/Moldovan audiences in Chişinău, across generations, is that music fosters a common Moldovan identity.

Complementing these survey insights, observational data from festivals and concerts indicate that Soviet cultural memory persists alongside nationalist and pro-European narratives, positioning recent Moldovan popular music as a form of public discourse that reframes Moldovanness as a historically layered, inter-imperial identity oriented toward contemporary European self-representation. Overall, our study shows that popular music plays a significant soft-power role in Moldova's contemporary culture and national politics, functioning both as a site of national identity building and as a vehicle of political activism. Moldovan popular genres, especially rap and hip-hop, provide a musical grammar that brings together multiple, historically shaped ideologies of Moldovanness, and reframes them as a pro-EU soft politics tool.

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