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East vs. West in Moldovan commercial TV: Jurnal TV'S flagship Sundays evening show "Ora de râs"

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Abstract: The commercial TV station Jurnal TV's broadcasting policy is to showcase the former soviet republic of Moldova as an ideological combat zone. Conflicting political and aesthetical paradigms are both delineated and actually employed for the use of a pro-European, Romanian-speaking audience. Particularly, the TV show *Ora de Râs* is a case in point example. The broadcast is Moldovan infotainment at its best, targeting issues of civic commitments and, generally, public ethics.
Keywords: Infotainment, east-west, Moldova(n), Romania(n)

The TV show *Ora de Râs*[1] is a Moldovan case in point example of the infotainment genre (Bonner, 2003: 148) in 21st century television (Wheatley, 2003). Bluntly said, it openly employs the language of tabloid TV, while advancing the agenda of the EU accession. Accordingly, it replaces celebrity culture, crime stories, astrology, etc. with moralizing on public ethics. My informal data gathering boils down to watching TV and prompts me to conclude that the overall pacing of the video is faster than in traditional news coverage. To all extents and purposes, the format turns out to boost local community spirit and to re-enforce a sense of identity grounded in restoring the European/Romanian heritage in the Republic of Moldova.

The knowledge that results from the representation of politics and pop culture territorialises concepts of history and culture, nation and otherness. Conversely, the same knowledge de-territorialises (Papastergiadis, 2000: 101) the newly found Bessarabian culture which is read against the backdrop of glorified cosmopolitanism. The separate but overlapping meanings assigned to an ethnonym (Romanian) and to an ideologically charged designation (European) demand further critical attention. They are consequential for the merger of customary public and commercial service

[1] The prime time TV programme *The Hour of Reckoning* (my translation) is aired on Jurnal TV (available at , retrieved on 16.05.2014) in Republic of Moldova.

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broadcasting which the station JurnalTV exhibits mainly by means of its flagship Sunday evening programme Ora de Râs.

The reactionary east-west polarity has never been more alive than in this weekly broadcast to Moldova on the greater good of society. The performance of the presenters maps down the ideological identity of a borderland. The EU and the Russian Federation contend for the minds and souls of the audience and the broadcast objectively sides with the west. Notions of alterity, clash of civilizations, narratives of identity are all ideologically packaged. They promote a cultural policy of access and participation as opposed to the perceived civic subservience of the former Soviet era. Essentially, this is a brand of popular entertainment that, even if aired on a commercial channel, addresses the well-being of the community. The boundaries between public and commercial services are blurred mainly due to the democratic ethic and the cultural vocation claimed by the station. Even though the video aesthetic of soft news vilifies politicians, the rich, etc., the station still advertises mass communication as part of the public goods society benefits from. As a provider of these social services, a statement of limited liability always comes in handy. Conveniently, it is issued after the opening titles in order to deal with broadcasting ethics presently formalized in areas that range from advertising (Shaver and An, 2014) to social responsibility (as it is asserted by all news organizations worldwide)[2].

Fundamentally, the TV channel is in breach of the contract that calls for fair and equal treatment of all potential viewers. The solution is a disclaimer that reads literally "this is a TV broadcast". Then, it goes on to allege that certain members of parliament and magistrates are corrupt. Furthermore, mobsters and smugglers are named next to the select few above-mentioned. Supposedly, the show has them all together for an audience and suspects they experience side-effects. Explicitly, various warning signs of guilt and shame are expected. In order to deal with their condition, the repentant parties are invited to turn themselves in at the nearest jail. The emphasis on sympathy with ordinary Moldovans summarizes its populist mission. The station and the familiar format fit the profile of the post-communist media in the so called "new Europe"[3]. Both of them invite a self-explanatory reading. Moldovan media accommodates the same view once used to account for the set-up of a "pluralistic" industry in other eastern European national states. In other words, *Ora de Râs* is the telltale sign of "free press and freedom of speech [that] represent some of the most dRâstic changes to be found in most emerging democratic nations" (Marin and Lengel, 2007: 51).

Although a transnational format, the broadcast is, nonetheless, peculiar to the former Soviet republic. The straight news bulletin format is insistently quoted and re-interpreted in order to highlight the (Moldovan/Romanian) national tropes of the self-representation narrative currently prevailing in pop culture. It is informative of the

[2] See, retrieved on 21.05.2014.

[3] Originally, the new-Europe label named former communist countries, among which Romania was listed. Much, if not everything said about Romanian media, from the perspective of one national broadcasting system now dismantled, seems to be also true of the Republic of Moldova.

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conspicuous ideological, if not ethnic, divide in the 20 year old (or so) independent country. Its discourse is keen to emphasize that conservative layers of society do not go along with what appears to be the pro-Romanian policy of the station. Though only seldom mentioned as such, nostalgia for Soviet times and fear of the west are believed to lie with the Russian and Turkish-speaking communities. Particularly, with the breakaway region of Transdniestria, a self-declared republic, as well as with the autonomous Gagauz land, which in the early 1990s professed its own independence. The channel is charged for being the mouthpiece of the westernizing grand narrative that engulfs Eastern Europe. The suspicion of north-Atlantic values as well as the anxieties regarding Romanian nationalism are behind these charges brought against Anatol Durbala and Constantin Cheianu, as they themselves candidly share with the audience. In their turn, they prosecute the old Soviet regime, current corruption and state officials. At any rate, they are pop media personalities marketed as such by the typical point of view shot viewers are exposed to. This also helps construe the show as a variety of "talking-heads" magazine.

Much of its visual identity resides in their stage-like performance. The mise en scène is chiefly centred on their sharp suits, occasional dancing, quirky posturing and, importantly, contRâstive height. The background is a video-wall that screens the sequence shot of the impending programme segment. The whole scene in one shot technique features iconic digital imaging of ideology at work in infotainment. Explicitly, the superimposed flags of the European Union and of the republic are a case in point example (*Ora de Râs*, 4th of May 2014).

I dare say that, even if dramatized and over-simplified, the wording of the statement made by the TV programme is universally familiar. It is globalisation advocacy at its best. Definitely political also to the extent to which it recalls of the language employed, for example, by "The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development". In the very same words, the task undertaken is to advertise the need for "a resolute regulatory reform and reform of central public administration, accompanied by emphasis on rule-based governance, [that] could […] raise credibility […]" (OECD 2011: 179).

This is the cornerstone of the debate about the common good, as it is popularized by public ethics advocacy and by humorously framing the news bulletin convention. Obviously, the cause and effect narrative needs to be still available. Yet, there are a number of cinematic devices which articulate the soft news routine and translate the convention of realism in television as "reality: factual and fictional performances that promise some element of transparency, universality, participation, and interactivity" (Hartley, 2008: 26). This is to say that tabloid TV strives to be graphically eye-catching. It resorts to the detailed versus the minimal shots, to the subtle (or even black and white animations) versus the strong colour schemes or to scale variations of distant frames juxtaposed to close-ups. The visuals of pastiche are conspicuous and rely on editing news footage and having voices (in Hollywood blockbusters or old Soviet and newer Russian films) dubbed over. The sequencing of air-time is done almost exclusively by means of

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computer graphics which introduces the numbers of the programme. This is what structures the unfolding of events in terms of the running order of stories, the use of studio shots and location reporting, the cartoonish versions of the presenters, etc. The almost sixty minutes of popular entertainment castigate mainly governmental officials and representatives of the judicial system.

Essentially, the political leadership is under scrutiny over alleged improper conduct. Yet, there is no benefit of a doubt, no innocence until proven guilty. The political satire, at its most vicious, comes across as plain character assassination. The quest to inform and entertain is a matter of taking sides and pointing fingers. Once more, the pro-European administration and the communist opposition are blamed for the country's endemic corruption and political shakiness. The mock anchor-man performance of both Anatol Durbala and Constantin Cheianu stages (military) campaigning on behalf of the average citizen. Appropriately, action is resolute and taken on a soldierly humorous note. Unmistakably, *Ora de Râs*, showcases its fighting spirit in the opening titles. Shot on location, they are dramatized by means of computer generated graphics, alongside the use of Moldovan armed forces props and costumes. The audience is exposed to stylized images of both the presenters (as I said, in full military gear) and of the environment. This only adds to the original features of parody, with enhanced ludicrous effect. The iconography and the artwork of the programme revolves around a boy's catapult that aims to shoot down the likely foes of western style democracy. Basically, it is used to fire walnuts (branded with the name of the show) at social evils. The slingshot is iconic in itself and in so many other ways. Here, it ironically complements a battlefield impersonation of artillery troops engaging the enemy. Of course, the set-up is biblical in imagery and political in scale, quoting figments of collective imagination: Moldova versus Russia, the newsreader versus the establishment, etc.

In so many words, David's catapult against Goliath's sword is a straightforward promise made in the name of our cultural conditioning, irrespective of specific religious references. The viewers are instructed to keep this in mind right form the very start. What is more, the whirling walnut that moves across the screen and makes impact on the TV set keeps the audience alert to the contRâsting forces at war. The combat zone is the televisual perception of the country's political and cultural geography set against the background of historic and economic concerns. Optimistically enough, everything spirals into a confidence boost delivered by means of a caption that vows "they [i.e., the presenters] will save the country". Due to size, position on screen, length of the frame, etc., the pledge is almost illegible for the lay audience – yet obviously readable as revealed by frame-by-frame study of the sequence.

This is an incitement to take literally what is spoken with humorous intent. The strategy summarizes much of the rhetoric distinctive of *Ora de Râs*. Essentially, it is the same matter-of-fact view of facts that strives to recognize the typical features of an item under scrutiny. Reporting on the said item is likely to effectively explain the opinion of the show to the viewers. Further de-constructing this rhetoric would require

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mentioning once more the disclaimer. One cannot argue with the self-evident premise of – "this is a TV broadcast". By association, it follows that the presenters are popular (super)heroes, as shown in their pictorial record of manly exploits on the battleground of shaping public opinion. This is a deceptive argument which basically states that whatever is true of a part must be true of the whole too. Moldova was part of a historical province now Romanian, yet everything else seems to be open to debate. Once this is settled, the next questions and answers are culture-bound, i.e., governed by the beliefs prevalent in one community or another.

Therefore, the ensuing arguments do not necessarily make sense by convenient associations. As far as mainstream mass audience in the republic of Moldova is concerned, the strategy works nonetheless. Being obviously context dependent the knowledge that results from the representation of politics and pop culture is bound to appeal to a broad cross section of the population. Explicitly, watching TV is political i.e., it places the viewer on one side or another of the ideological divide. This happens because (soft) news and current affairs broadcasting involves assumptions the viewers are already committed to, on account of their ethnic, economic, or educational backgrounds. The "TV broadcast" traps the audience into conceding that there is no way out of taking sides.

For example, a number of the programme is "the Moldovan language for Romanians". The title says it all: since the annexation of Bessarabia by Russia in 1812 one of the most contentious issues ever has been the language of the new subjects. Whether it is Moldovan or Romanian is a debate that is set to run and run. This segment rests on Anatol Durbala's comedian skills (make-up, costuming, gesture of the body) and, generally, on the old-school values of stage-playing. What is conventionally thought to be the front of a western theatre stage – the proscenium (Mitchell and Mitchell, 2002) – can be construed as something of a moving picture. The TV-set successfully reconstructs depth perception in this talking-heads/bodies convention. Basically, the props, the lighting scheme, the minimal set design, etc. structure the frame of a picture, i.e., the rectangular playing area of the screen. They all recall of a picture-frame stage, with sound (language) cues given to move the camera from one character to the other. The number consists in standard frame editing meant to suggest a rather brief exchange between two dramatic personae.

It turns out that traditional theatrical performance is needed to produce the soft news format of the programme. His impersonation of Moldovan and Romanian type characters vents the frustration of the Moldovan public with Romania, with the Russian Federation, or, for that matter, with the east, the west, etc. Anatol Durbala's pronunciation of words is accurately associated with geographical area. If required to cause misunderstanding, extreme varieties of language are showcased. They range from the one heavily marked by the Slavic lexis and even Russian loan translation into Romanian to the less marked Moldovan vernacular. The distinction between these two linguistic varieties is mostly a matter of stress and rhythm in speaking. Once more, the

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same words from (what used to be the prestige language of the republic) Russian that riddle the speech of the Moldovan character are the only ones that need translation.

The glamour and influence of the former settlers' language are now gradually replaced with excitement about Romanian and western European ones. This particular segment of the show even touches on the historical immigration into the country, mainly from Russia and Ukraine, which led to present almost universal bilingualism. The language games played by Anatol Durbala signal a two hundred years old governmental policy designed to alter the ethnic makeup of the land lying between the rivers Prut and Dniester. The tsarist state and USSR respectively openly engaged in similar social engineering to the extent to which their legacy is the very core of politics and decision-making in the republic of Moldova. Hardly ever is the issue mentioned, yet nationalist unrest is constantly covered and, obviously, the contentious matter of non-Moldovans' rights comes out in the open. The bottom line is that the settlement resulted in practically closed communities, clustered around industrial (Transdniestria) or administration centres. Anyway, the Transdnester region "was originally part of Ukraine, but became the centre of the Moldovan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (ASSR) created by the Soviet Union to emphasize their claim on Bessarabian Moldova" (Küchler, 2008: 31). Nowadays, these Russian/Ukrainian speaking areas seem to cling on to the Soviet past and above all to Russian Federation's current promises to defend all its virtual citizens living in neighbouring states. Such underlying causes of the ideological divide, obvious in audience shares as well as in voting behaviour, are contextualised in what is essentially popular TV. Particular of *Ora de Râs* is the appropriation of a rather dry linguistic debate, from a political perspective, by a commercial channel.

Coming back to the topic of the Moldovan language for Romanians, the bottom line is that the snobbish Romanian counterpart of the native character expects people in Moldova to speak the prestige, educated variety of his mother tongue. The two of them work together to accommodate to each other's differences in speech. The result is the mixing and levelling of their respective idioms to the extent to which it comes across that they obviously share one and the same mother tongue. Of course, it is also plain to see that one and the same person plays the part of politicizing the speech communities of the Romanian language. The point is to have the audience of its coverage area realize that the differences between the way they speak and the official language of the Romanian state are perfectly normal. Even more, they are enjoyable enough to become the subject matter of mass appeal entertainment.

Roughly the same rhetoric and values underpin yet another number which, alongside the previously mentioned one, makes up the TV dramatization of openly political and ethnic bias in *Ora de Râs*. Unambiguously, the slight dramatic construction of the two sketches is supposed to balance one distant neighbour of the republic against the other. Namely, the resourceful Anatol Durbala replicates the approach and the theme of "the Moldovan language for Romanians" in "Stefan vs. Lenin" (to be read Moldova vs. imperialist Russia). The light nature of the representation has

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transparent ideological undertones. The two iconic figures on display are meant to embody the conflicting interests at work in Moldovan public discourses and politics. A fictionally polarized version of the past as well as instances of likely geo-politicking are delivered for the use of the Sunday evening TV public. Confidently enough, the intricate world of foreign affairs is exquisitely narrated by means of dialogue, costume and make-up. All in all, the rather heated argument between Stefan and Lenin is concerned with the customary target of pervasive corruption. However, the enactment of history incites to civic engagement and is to be read in various terms that can be construed as populism or nationalism. Much like the Moldovan/Romanian exchange on language, the historical take on the issues is overtly partisan. Though critical of the country's leadership as a matter of principle, the presenters come across as staunched supporters of the pro-EU policy that opposed various coalition governments to the communist party and the breakaway region of Transdniestria.

Once in a while, the ethic of fair and unbiased reporting is given up altogether. For instance, on the 25th of May, 2014, the show was aired for its two-hundredth episode. On the said occasion, Anatol Durbala and Constantin Cheianu have Lenin replaced. Instead of him, the current Prime Minister, Iurie Leanca, has a word with Moldova's defining hero. It is obvious that, irrespective of which character is paired up with him (i.e., the famous Russian dictator or the premier), the agenda of the short-play format is unchanged. Throughout the sketch, the PM is confidently praised, mainly for Brussels acknowledgement of Moldovan accession master-plan. Conceivably, the reason Durbala impersonates only Stefan has to do with the overtly political protest against the revisionist discourse and behaviour of the Russian Federation, issues extensively scrutinized in the media landscape of the former Soviet republic.

Finally, they take a picture of themselves – nothing short of a so-called selfie, in the very words of the PM (further proof that English words gradually enter the Moldovan vernacular). Everything is done so that he will convincingly prove that stamping out corruption is carried out under sacred patronage. Moreover, the suggested course of action is medieval style (chiefly, beheadings and universalized seizure of assets) and very much in tune with the often lionized figure of Stefan. The westernizing narrative of the show turns out to be zealously embraced by the 15th century head of state. Most likely, this particular segment sums up popular feelings that otherwise would go unnoticed in the politically correct environment of mainstream media. Conclusively, the European Union accession is once again the backdrop against which the programme stages its unfolding. Everything boils down to the David versus Goliath routine already-mentioned the audience is prompted to resort to.

Accordingly, the questionable allegiance of the Moldovan communist party, most of the times, has to come into play. Openly portrayed as a Russian Trojan horse, the party is charged with being a foreign interest group. As the typecast Moldovan and Russian characters debate over the future of the republic, this is the ultimate bone of contention. Sometimes, the founding-figure ruler of the Moldovan principality, Stephan the Great, even slaps around the one and only Vladimir Ilych Lenin in order

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to make his point known. The glorious exploits of Moldova's national hero and the abridged version of Russian expansionist politics find their voices in the analysis of last week's events.

Of course, the audience is asked to choose between European and EuRâsian views on identity and citizenship framed in the terms of reference neoliberalism and state paternalism eagerly provide. *Ora de Râs* graphically translates the fault-lines of geopolitics into the soft news convention and argues on behalf of the common heritage two Romanian states share. The commercial and the public-service broadcasting ethics of the show is meant to foster popular notions of democracy and prosperity in the mainstream mass TV audience of the former Soviet republic.

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