What Do Moldovans Think of and How Do They Talk about the Russian Aggression against Ukraine? Prolegomena for Qualitative Inquiry

Abstract: This essay explores the advantages of a qualitative approach based on a preliminary analysis of a collection of street interviews broadcast from March 2022 to March 2023 in the Republic of Moldova via 34 radio programmes. While the results of the opinion polls reflect a clear division of opinion on the war in Ukraine within Moldovan society along pre-existing geopolitical lines, the interviews highlight the possibility of consensus among respondents voicing opposing views on the causes of the war. Regardless of ideological positions however, when asked, most respondents said they wished for peace. The author reflects on the potential inherent in that common response for a type of community based on inclusion and cohabitation.

Keywords: Moldova, Ukraine, Russia, war, peace

24 February 2022, early morning. Like many others who had followed the tensions between Russia and Ukraine, I believed until the last moment that the Russian troop build-up on Ukraine’s borders would remain a muscle-bound strain in a negotiation process that seemed to have as much to do with uncertain posturing as it was a genuine threat. But, like my parents, who live in a suburb of Moldova’s capital of Chișinău and heard the explosions in Odesa, I was stunned by the reality of Russia’s brutal bombing of Ukraine. After that first shock, that the war was then continued left me in deep dismay; dismay that still lingers. My moral unease only increased when I discovered that people I knew were finding ways of justifying this “special operation”. Driven by what I now see was a naive faith in progress and human nature, I imagined that no-one could be a morally good person and simultaneously

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justify an armed invasion of this sort. Now however, a year after the outbreak of the war, the sociologist in me feels able to talk calmly with the panicked victim and the concerned citizen; but I still find it difficult to look dispassionately at how and why people in my country and its region understand the war in Ukraine. The format of an essay fits perfectly then with my attempt to make sense of the contradictory attitudes expressed by my fellow citizens towards the war in the neighbouring country.

In this text I will therefore sketch out my reflections, subjective as they are, on some of the opinions and moods—equally subjective—expressed through opinion polls and a series of interviews collected on the street from ordinary people all over Moldova during the year since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine. Specifically, I gathered 34 pieces of reportage by journalist Valentina Ursu in her weekly broadcasts on the radio station Free Europe Moldova (Europa Liberă Moldova) and on Voice of Bessarabia (Vocea Basarabiei). Ursu questioned the respondents’ opinions of the war in Ukraine and its consequences, and I will try to disentangle those people’s opinions and moods by placing them into the context of the social and political situation in Moldova and the region during 2022 and shortly thereafter.

The arguments of the elites are generally comprehensible even to those who disagree with them. However, ordinary people’s opinions are usually presented quantitatively based on opinion polls which asked closed questions. Little research has tried to find out what ideas, beliefs, and feelings lie behind those “yes”, “no”, or “don’t know/no answer” responses in recent polls in Ukraine and Russia. Exceptionally, a team of independent researchers conducted large-scale qualitative research in March–June 2022 aiming to discern ordinary Russians’ thoughts, views, and feelings about the war in Ukraine (Erpyleva and Savel’eva 2022).

For state theorists, war is foundational to state formation and nation-building (Tilly 1985) and from the perspective of states and elites, wars fought by those states or nations are always just. The mass of people have not always shared that perspective, despite ubiquitous propaganda insisting that support for war, even at the cost of one’s own life, is a patriotic duty. Ultimately, the ordinary people have borne war’s heaviest burdens through the human and economic contributions they have been compelled to make. From my own theoretical perspective, identifications and loyalty, to state and nation and the external “homeland”, determine people’s attitudes to war (Brubaker 1996; O’Loughlin and Toal 2020, 13). How then do Moldovans situate such a social and political cataclysm within their mental universe, faced as they are with the conundrum of competing loyalties to the former metropolis and their neighbours on the border?
A Divided Society

Moldova achieved independence from the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) in August 1991, and since then its society has been divided between those favouring a pro-Western geopolitical orientation, rapprochement with the European Union (EU) and the United States on the one hand, and those favouring a pro-Eastern orientation on the other, who would prefer closer relations with Russia and would be happy to the integration of Moldova into Eurasian structures. Between 2004 and 2022 the proportion of pro-Europeans varied between 40% and 60% with an average of 57%, while between 2014 and 2022 the proportion of pro-Eurasianists fluctuated between 30% and 50% with an average of 47% (Institutul de Politici Publice 2022). The pro-European segment includes a proportion who would favour reunification of Moldova with Romania (Bessarabia, the territory of today’s Moldova but without Transnistria, was a Romanian province from 1918 to 1940). The proportion of “re-unionists” increased significantly from 2010 to 2020 from 20% to 50%, that is, after Romania’s accession to the European Union in 2007 (IMAS 2021–2). One may say therefore that the proportion of “re-unionists” has increased in line with disappointment in Moldovan governments and, altogether with the whole project of Moldova as an independent state (Negură 2016).

In December 2020, Maia Sandu, a Harvard-trained politician, was elected president of Moldova. Then, in June 2021, the Party of Action and Solidarity (Partidul Acţiune şi Solidaritate, PAS), the centre-right party that Sandu led before becoming president, was elected with an overall majority. Maia Sandu and the PAS came to power with a pro-European agenda advocating strengthening of democratic institutions and the rule of law but avoiding geopolitically sensitive matters such as the question of possible union with Romania (Negură 2021). However, the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the policy of sanctions against Russia adopted internationally forced president Sandu and Moldova’s PAS government to adopt an increasingly firm stance; indeed on 3 March 2022, Moldova applied to join the European Union, along with Ukraine. In June, the European Commission and the European Council granted Moldova candidate status for EU membership (European Council 2022) and since then the Moldovan government has taken steps to reduce its energy dependence on Russia (Tanas 2023).

One fulcrum for Russian leverage over Moldova is the separatist region east of the Dniester, called Transnistria. Emerging from a brief but bloody conflict in 1992 involving Russian troops, the Transnistrian region has been supported by Russia economically for the past three decades through the free import of Russian gas, and despite a complicated and protracted negotiation process, relations between the two sides have been relatively peaceful, with people moving back and forth easily for
private and business visits (Negură 2021). Moldova’s society has been multi-ethnic and bilingual for the last two centuries, with most people knowing both Romanian and Russian; and with rare exceptions and despite diverse geopolitical identifications and loyalties, relations have generally been peaceful between the Romanian-speaking majority and the various ethnolinguistic minorities speaking Ukrainian, Russian, Gagauz, Bulgarian, Roma and so on (King 2000). But how might the war in neighbouring Ukraine affect such relations and change citizens’ attitudes to the two external poles of attraction: Russia and the EU?

Moldovans’ Thoughts and Moods About the War in Ukraine. Qualitative Explorations

In April 2022, after my initial shock had passed into a feeling of sustained dismay when I learned of the horrors of the Russian occupation of Bucha, I remained similarly convinced that most people must share my feeling. However, that illusion was shattered by the results of an opinion poll conducted in Moldova by IMAS between 2 and 19 April 2022, by which time events in Bucha were generally known. The poll asked a representative sample of 1109 adult respondents, “Who do you think are the main culprits for starting the war in Ukraine?” I was dispirited to learn that 42 % answered “Putin/Russia” and 43 % “NATO/West/Zelensky”. The poll was replicated in November with no significant change to the ratio of responses.

Analysing what the random respondents to Valentina Ursu’s broadcasts had actually said, I realised that most had offered quite elaborate arguments, even if I could hardly agree with some of them. Here then are a few of the main themes discussed in the interviews and the respondents’ arguments, which I will try to decipher in the context of the topic. Where practicable I have let them speak for themselves.

Putin and Russia: Occupiers or Liberators?

In Valentina Ursu’s reporting, Russia is portrayed mostly negatively as aggressive, coercive, and treacherous. Moreover, a number of respondents believe that Russian aggression in Ukraine confirms the essence of Russia throughout history, that of a coercive people:§

§ In this essay, all primary sources refer to reportages by Valentina Ursu.
A war without any perspective, a war of conquest, because the Russians have always been conquerors, and now they are fighting their Slavic brothers and have brought Chechens who are fighting against these brothers. This is inexcusable, and I think they will lose in the end and be driven out of Ukraine. It’s a free country and must live freely and independently.\(^2\)

Several respondents said that Russia is acting treacherously through energy blackmail and political destabilisation strategies using pro-Russian parties, and is plotting provocations in Transnistria, in a broad hybrid war in Moldova.\(^3\)

Moldova’s dependence on Russia for energy is seen as a weakness.\(^4\) Some respondents see economic dependence as another reason why Moldova should maintain good—or at least pragmatic—ties with Russia: “I would say that with Russia, we don’t have to break off relations, but we do have to keep close contact because we get gas from there; we this, and that; but America? What… [does it give us]? When America sees that someone has obeyed them, they are very happy. But the main thing is peace, as for the rest…”\(^5\) Other respondents consider that Russia’s aggression in Ukraine has led many Moldovans temporarily working in Russia to return home or to head for the European Union (4s/4r).\(^6\) Still others confess that the war in Ukraine has made them change their previously favourable attitude to Russia: “I never in my life thought that… I have always been at heart with the Russians as I am 61 years old and have always kept myself informed. And never in my life did I think I’d end up not being able to like the Russians.”\(^7\)

There are also opinions favourable to Russia, some of them reproducing Russian propaganda. Asked by the reporter why he thought Russia had intervened militarily in Ukraine, a respondent from a small town in northern Moldova replied—in Russian: “Because the people are suffering. Nazis are breeding all over the world,


\(^4\) “VB la Strășeni: O să răbdăm la iarnă. 30 de ani tot suntem umiliți de Rusia, ridicăm capul, mergem cu demnitate…” \textit{Vocea Basarabiei}, 10 September 2022.

\(^5\) “EL la Cărpineni: Dacă o să fie pace, viitorul Moldovei îl vedem numai decât în UE.” \textit{Europa Liberă Moldova}, 4 June 2022.

\(^6\) Even though the interviews quoted are strictly qualitative, I will refer to the number of sources (pieces of reportage) and references (interview/reportage excerpts) that refer to a given theme. The number of sources and references is indicated in brackets. In this case: (12s/26r), in other words: 12 sources (reportages)/26 references (interview/reportage fragments).

they just need to be put in their place, and no one but Russia will put them in their place.”

Pro-Ukrainian respondents on the war against Ukraine describe pro-Russian respondents as victims of Russian propaganda (11s/16r) and furthermore criticise the Moldovan government for not acting firmly enough to curb such propaganda: “I can hardly see a future for the Republic of Moldova; I can hardly see it. People are not informed, and propaganda still prevails. Even here, in Sângerei, there is crazy propaganda. Let’s stop it with some kind of law because it’s impossible to live a lie for so many years; we’ve had enough of it.”

In fact, the Commission for Exceptional Situations of the Republic of Moldova (CSE) in December 2022 suspended six TV channels, which, according to the CSE, were misinforming the public about the war in Ukraine (Fetco 2022).

If Russia and the Russian people detect ambivalence in the tone of Ursu’s reports, Putin appears in interviews as the villain par excellence (10s/30r). Putin is frequently portrayed as suffering from mental health problems while other interviews describe him as evil, and say that he is a sadistic and hateful aggressor. However, some respondents seek to distinguish between the negative figure of Putin and the Russian people as a whole:

We have nothing against the Russian people; the Russian leadership has completely slipped from orbit; they live in a parallel Universe, especially today’s leaders; there’s something extraordinary going on. In a word, I can call Vladimir Putin a fool, he’s the evil of all evils, a sick man, a man who has endangered the whole of humanity; peace is on the brink now because these threats of nuclear attacks are worrying everyone.

Some respondents said that Putin’s recklessness stems from the exaggerated ambition of a man with ideas of recreating the Russian Empire, with himself as its Tsar, while others believe that despite unfavourable circumstances he wants to restore the USSR. The figure of Putin himself appears all the more evil when placed next to that

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of Zelensky, for the Ukrainian president is portrayed as a heroic saviour, with the Russian president the personification of an evil-genius.15

Ukraine and Ukrainians: Heroes and Victims

Some respondents consider that the overwhelmingly negative representation of Russia and Putin means it is inevitable that the aggressor will lose the war (6s/6r), whereas the contrastingly positive portrayal of the Ukrainians means that victory for Ukraine is as good as predestined (14s/16r). In a number of interviews Ukrainians are seen to defend not only their own country but also Moldova, to which such respondents show gratitude (9s/10r):

"Ukraine is protecting us, now we are, you know, like hiding behind mother’s apron. What have we got for an army?! We have not got an army! What, this is an army? This is no army..."16 Moreover, the Ukrainians offer an example of courage and patriotism to Moldovans: “We see patriotism in Ukraine, in Ukrainian citizens, we see how they fight, how they endure and how they have hope that they will overcome. We must understand this."17

However, others believed that Ukraine and the Ukrainians are to blame for the conflict (3s/4r) their responses mixing Russian propaganda, post-Soviet nostalgia, and dissatisfaction with the current Moldovan government:

Ukraine is the only one to blame—for its disobedience. If Russia asked for a neutral zone from America, well: eight years of war, why not agree? [...] We should go back to how we were, when could buy six loaves of bread for one leu and we could go to either America or Europe. But the main thing—what does America want with this continent? America wants to take over the world, but Russia has been stronger for centuries. This has all happened because Zelensky is short-sighted, right? If he had been smart he’d have made concessions. After all, Russia didn’t go to war at first; it just asked the Americans not to get close to the border, that is, to push the border back.18

16 “EL la Cahul: ‘Ucraina ne protejează și pe noi, suntem ca după poale la mama ascunși.’” Europa Liberă Moldova, 12 March 2022.
Moldova and the Moldovans Face the War: Between Vulnerability and Historical Opportunity

For a number of respondents, anxiety about the war has been amplified by their assessment that Moldova is vulnerable militarily (4s/6r). For some, the neutrality enshrined in Moldova’s Constitution is the guarantee of security, but others see it as a systemic weakness (5s/5r): “I don’t think Putin is looking at the neutrality of our country; he’s just going to ride roughshod over us, we have the 14th Army here…”19 Others believe Moldova should respect the principle of its neutrality by not intervening in the conflict (7s/7r): “It’s up to us. It seems to me that if we behave properly, we’ll have peace and quiet. If we talk too much, as Mr. Putin says, they will take us too. And where does that leave us, Moldova? We’re such a small country…”20

Some interviewees consider that Moldova’s own leaders are responsible for the economic and energy crisis in 2022 (4s/6r):

Free Europe Moldova: But the future of Moldova also depends on who wins the war between Russia and Ukraine.

Answer: It depends on the government. But, God forbid, God forbid, I hope there will be changes because I don’t think this government will last its four years; they don’t consult with the people; they do what they want among themselves.21

So, what is Moldova’s way out of the crisis caused by the war in Ukraine? For many respondents the war could be both a catastrophe and an opportunity, depending on its outcome (9s/20r). For one interviewee, the war’s outcome will have a direct impact on the future status of the Transnistrian region: “It depends who wins this war. If the Ukrainians win, Transnistria will clearly have no choice. The Ukrainians have closed the border, but the Transnistrians still have to live, they have to bring in goods; and they’ll have no choice. They’ll have to unite [with Moldova].”22 For many respondents, the only escape from the Russian threat is European integration (20s/59r):

The Republic of Moldova is bound to come out ahead, unfortunately—or for us, fortunately. And I’ll tell you why. We have Romania—a European [i.e. EU] state and a member of NATO. Ukraine

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will be in NATO, it certainly will be, and it’ll be in the European Union. And by the Grace of God, that automatically puts us between two powerful countries, two big countries, and two European countries.23

Asked by the reporter why Moldova should move closer to the European Union, respondents had no hesitation. For them, the European Union means civilisation, democracy, and the rule of law: “Because there is law; there is prosperity; there is development, civilisation.”24 Many Moldovans have come to know the European Union either through their own direct experience or that of their children or other family who have gone to the EU for work:

Where we are, there are almost three thousand and something inhabitants, and now if we do the sums we’re left with 1,500 inhabitants—half; every other one of us—are in the EU. When things were better—in the Russian Federation—they were also in Russia, but most are now in the EU. Our largest community in Vadul Isac has gone to Brussels, in Belgium.25

But if Russia wins the war, many respondents believe, the outlook for Moldova can only be bleak; in fact it would simply have no future.26 A number of participants in Valentina Ursu’s reports believe Moldova must maintain flexible foreign policies to both East and West to extract benefits from both sides (11s/16r): “It seems clear, but it’s not. We can’t deny that it’s not good with the West, and it’s not good with the East. We can’t deny it because there’s a saying: ‘A gentle calf sucks from two cows.’ So, should we, a country that depends on both the East and the West, find a common language?”

According to a respondent, from the village of Mereșeșuca, good relations with neighbouring countries are just as important as community ties based on harmony and mutual support:

We’ve got to be friends with everyone. Even in a village, who do you have to get on well with? First and foremost with your neighbour, because if something happens, your neighbour’s the first to jump in and help you. I believe we should also work with Ukraine, Russia, Romania and other countries, because everyone will give us a helping hand; they us; we them. There must be friendship between all peoples.28

26 “EL la Sângerei: ‘Vrem pace, ne temem de război, de Vladimir Putin.’” Europa Liberă Moldova, 21 May 2022.
27 “Europea Liberă la Mereșeșuca: Mi-e frică să nu se întâmple și la noi un astfel de război.” Europa Liberă Moldova, 9 April 2022.
28 “Europea Liberă la Mereșeșuca: Mi-e frică să nu se întâmple și la noi un astfel de război.” Europa Liberă Moldova, 9 April 2022.
According to a Russian-speaking respondent from a small town in the south, Moldova must maintain good economic and cultural relations with all countries, but a good understanding with Russia is paramount because of the long-standing ties between Moldovans and the Russians:

We must keep good relations with Russia, I think; because Russia can do a lot for Moldova if we live on good terms with it. Of course, we must maintain good relations with Europe as well, because this will give progress in education, in the economy, on some issues; and people like to travel and visit other European countries for interest’s sake. And Russia; many try to go there too, because many families there are very closely linked; there are many people from Moldova in Russia; there are families here where 80% of them are in Russia, and 20% stayed here. So, we’re all so intertwined…

On the subject of security, respondents as followers of the specific geopolitical directions, whether Eastern- or Western-facing, reflect Moldova’s geopolitical position. Moldova will not be able to survive alone because of its vulnerable and dependent position economically nor can it guarantee its own political security. The war in Ukraine makes this argument even harder. For several respondents, the Moldova security would be ensured only by unification with Romania (11s/16r). The more Moldova’s economic and social situation is presented as increasingly disastrous, the more inevitable does union with Romania appear. Contrarily to the idealistic aspirations of the “re-unionists” of the late 1980s, the arguments of today’s equivalent respondents are ultimately pragmatic, as Moldova is defined as an entirely dependent and economically unsustainable territory:

Our future without the union is nowhere.

Free Europe Moldova: Union with whom?

With Romania! We have nothing, only poor people, the children are abroad, the old people in the villages have a miserable pension, the people in the villages have nowhere to work, first of all; and they say that we shall get ahead, Moldova will not fall behind, God forbid! We have no future…

For some respondents, Moldova’s salvation would be assured by a return to the Soviet Union (3s/5r), and their supporting or at least justification of Putin’s “special

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30 “EL la Cărpini: Dacă o să fie pace, viitorul Moldovei îl vedem numai decât în UE.” Europa Liberă Moldova, 4 June 2022.
operation” in Ukraine is an expression of the “restorative nostalgia” referred to by Svetlana Boym (2008):

[in the USSR] Moldova got on well with everyone, and everyone lived well because, first of all, there was only the one currency. But then, when the states started dividing—that is, the former republics—everyone wanted to be king, saying jubilantly, “Oh, I’ll be president, we’ll all live well. No, no! We want to live in the old way; we want to live well. Although we used to work harder, we did live well. We used to get six loaves of bread for one rouble. When I was a student, I bought *doktorskaiia* sausage for 2.20. We lived well under communism, as they used to call it, we did.”

However, a number of interview participants, even if certain of them remained ambivalent about the Soviet past, described as unattainable Putin’s suspected project of rebuilding the Soviet Union (20s/38r).

**“We Want Peace!”**

Asked by the reporter what they most want, most respondents, whether pro-Ukrainian or pro-Russian said, “Peace…!” (20s/42r). That desire included several complementary ideas: (1) peace is a supreme value (if there is no peace, nothing is worthwhile); (2) because in war, it is ordinary people, not elites, who suffer most; (3) ordinary people want peace.

Some respondents want peace because without it other basic needs such as material well-being or professional fulfilment fall by the wayside: “Peace today is more precious than bread and salt; peace is our everyday life, it is the life of our children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren.” For other respondents, peace is the essential condition for community and extended family cohesion, especially when their branches also cross into Ukraine:

Most of all, I wish for peace, for the waters to calm down, and to go to my parents’ graves. Here, we couldn’t go for two years because it was COVID, and now with this war… We are five brothers, one stayed in Ukraine, and four of us are in Moldova; we are afraid that every night the situation may change when there is martial law, and it is dangerous.”

Even respondents who justify Putin’s invasion claim to want peace, despite the risk of dissonance. Peace is necessary because, they argue, Ukrainians and Russians would form the same people:

I can’t say about Donbas, but according to the Russians, it also belonged to Russia. Ukraine as a state was created by Vladimir Ilyich Lenin in 1920; he gave them the Republic of Ukraine.

Voice of Bessarabia: Well, that’s what they say about Bessarabia, that it was sold, betrayed, a bargaining chip?

Yes, I’m not for war. I’m for peace and friendship, so you can say they are the same nation. They’re brothers, and they fight, and they kill each other. God forbid!34

In several interviews, respondents expressed their sense of impotence in the face of the actions of those in power. The only way they could have influence over those individuals’ decisions was to turn to divine authority through prayer: “Let us pray for peace; more prayers, prayers for reason among the world’s rulers, that they may clear their minds, that God may stand before them and stop them.”35 Others articulate the idea that ordinary people suffer most from war (11s/17r). Consequently, political elites have triggered the conflict in pursuit of their own interests, despite the needs of ordinary citizens: “Who suffers? We, the peasants; in Ukraine, the peasants are suffering because those who had money, who had power, have fled, and some are still sitting quietly waiting because they know they will escape unharmed.”36 Another corollary of this argument is that ordinary Russians do not want war, which is desired only by the Kremlin:

Parents suffer, old people suffer, children suffer; they shouldn’t. I feel sorry for these refugees; there shouldn’t be such conflicts that people suffer because of politicians, because of Putin and his party. Look, people are protesting in St. Petersburg, in Moscow, for this war to end. However, he is not giving up with his party; he is going ahead and going forward. […] And so the people suffer from this pandemic, the people are tormented, and now there’s this war. The people are in a lot of pain.37

Once ordinary people suffer most, they are the ones most interested in peace, as numerous respondents suggest (14s/21r). Some interviews identify a gulf between

37 “EL la Cahul: ‘Ucraina ne protejează și pe noi, suntem ca după poale la mama ascunși.’” Europa Liberă Moldova, 12 March 2022.
“us”, the people who want peace, and “them”, the elites who wage war: “Peace also depends on them. The people are not guilty; they suffer innocently.”

For some respondents, peace can be achieved only if Ukraine wins. For others, peace means Russia’s victory and a return to a Soviet illud tempus. Finally, for a category of respondents also covering the two cited above, peace can be achieved only when the two (or more) powers agree and vote to establish peace. For such peace there are respondents who would be ready to pay with their dignity and territory to stop people from suffering: “I can’t understand anything here. Is that a war, is that hypocrisy? I think one wants more, but the other doesn’t want to give in. They have to get along with each other because the people are suffering. I watch TV and see what is being done; we are suffering on all sides.”

**In Place of a Conclusion: Two Overlapping Bubbles**

This essay risks becoming just another text about how divided Moldovan society is. Its conclusion, however, will be a different one. Until 24 February 2022, Moldova’s political and social division seemed to be a functional feature of a borderland crossed by “phantom borders” inherited from former empires and nation-states (von Hirschhausen 2023). After the February invasion however, I suspected that division might conceal an ontological split. How, I wondered, can you build a society, if not a nation, on such a rupture when almost half the citizens justify the Russian invasion of their neighbouring country and perhaps even of their own?

When asked what they want most, the people interviewed by Valentina Ursu for *Europa Liberă* and *Vocea Basarabiei* in Moldova said they want peace. For many, that peace is possible only after Ukraine’s victory. Others believe that lasting peace would be possible if Russia wins and reconstitutes the Soviet Union, which those respondents remember fondly. Finally, a third category of respondents includes people from all sides: pro-Ukrainian, pro-Russian, and reserved or undecided. That category of respondents believes all politicians involved in this war must negotiate to reach a peace agreement, each surrendering the ideal of victory for the sake of the lives and well-being of ordinary citizens, those who are suffering most from the war.

When I first saw the results of the first opinion polls in April 2022, I hastily and emotionally concluded that Moldovans live in two information bubbles, one pro-European and the other pro-Russian; bubbles that do not communicate with each other.

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38 “EL la Sângerei: Vrem pace, ne temem de război, de Vladimir Putin.” *Europa Liberă Moldova*, 21 May 2022.
other. However, my reading of Valentina Ursu’s interviews suggested to me that those “bubbles” actually form open and porous spaces. Moreover, the “bubbles” or “spaces” overlap greatly. Ultimately, everyone on both sides who lives in those spaces every day is preoccupied with the same concerns: poverty, migration, soaring prices, political corruption; but also and perhaps above all, the danger of conflict affecting their own lives and those of their children.

The lesson we could draw from this finding, even hypothetical, would be about the type and format of the community we want to build in society and the world. One of those society formats is applied intensively, now and in recent decades, by Russia, extended to the whole “Russian world”. That model of community is based on an “us” (good Russians) and “them” (foreigners, from within and without). The opposite of that community model is based on cohabitation despite ethnolinguistic, social, cultural differences and geopolitical loyalties. When faced with a choice between a society in which people exhibiting all the differences mentioned above can feel included, and another that would force them into a specific mould, people will naturally choose whatever they think best suits their desire for their own well-being. Reading interviews with ordinary people in a country close to the brink of a bloody and fratricidal war has also taught me that regardless of political and geopolitical choices, people want peace first and foremost. And peace is essential for building a society we all want to live in.

References


**Bionote**

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