

## **MOLDOVAN: AN IDENTITY BUT NOT A LANGUAGE**

1 The present constitution of the Republic of Moldova, adopted in 1994, asserts that the country's official language is "Moldovan", and a recent well-publicised dictionary purports to provide evidence that Moldovan is a separate language from Romanian<sup>1</sup>. The author of this dictionary was in part provoked into its compilation by a comment from Adrian Năstase, at the time Romania's prime minister, who remarked that he would continue to call Moldova's language "Romanian" until he saw a dictionary to prove otherwise, and who once jokingly pretended to switch from Romanian to Moldovan during the course of a speech. But in reality this dictionary only confirms that the notion of Moldovan as a separate language from Romanian is a fiction.

2 In the dictionary, the headwords are followed on an apparently random basis by either a "translation" (as one would expect in a dictionary from Language A to Language B) or by a "definition" (as one would expect in an internal dictionary of Language A). Thus not all entries involve translation, and one wonders therefore at the purpose behind their inclusion, other than simply to boost the word count. Moreover, the "translations" into Romanian are, in instances where the medial "î / â" distinction occurs, written with a medial "î" rather than "â" and so conform to Moldovan rather than standard Romanian orthography<sup>2</sup>.

3 The rationale behind the entries is unclear. Some words (eg **pogrom**) are exactly the same in Romanian – again, there can be no reason for their inclusion except to boost the word count. Such words are followed by a definition, since quite obviously there can be no translation. A few words undoubtedly are "Moldovan" in the sense that they belong to a vocabulary occurring in Moldova rather than Romania; note that several of the examples below betray a Slavic origin:

<b>anină</b>	sand		Romanian = <i>nisip</i>
<b>bortă</b>	hole		Romanian = <i>gaură</i>
<b>coromislă</b>	yoke	(Russian = <i>koromyslo</i> )	Romanian = <i>cobilița</i>
<b>glavă</b>	head	(Russian = <i>golova</i> )	Romanian = <i>căpățâna</i> <sup>3</sup>
<b>gospod</b>	princely	(Russian = <i>gospodskiy</i> )	Romanian = <i>domnesc</i>
<b>hulub</b>	dove	(Russian = <i>golub</i> )	Romanian = <i>porumbel</i>
<b>mîța</b>	cat		Romanian = <i>pisică</i>
<b>morvă</b>	mulberry		Romanian = <i>dudă</i>

4 At least two words are included where the meaning in Moldova appears to differ from that in Romania (there may well be more such words in the dictionary):

<b>deal</b>	this is "translated" as <i>cîmpa</i> <sup>4</sup> , <i>ogor</i> (meaning "plain, field"), but in Romania <i>deal</i> means "hill"
<b>roman</b>	this is "translated" as <i>țigă</i> n (meaning "gypsy"), but in Romania <i>roman</i> means "Roman" or "novel".

<sup>1</sup> The dictionary is *Dicționar Moldovenesc – Românesc*, V Stati, Chișinău, 2003, ISBN 9975782485. For the relevant portion of the 1994 constitution, see paragraph 15 of this present paper.

<sup>2</sup> In 1994 Romania changed all medial instances of the letter î to the letter â; Moldova did not follow suit.

<sup>3</sup> "Translated" in the Stati dictionary as *căpățîna*, which with its medial î is not the Romanian spelling.

<sup>4</sup> *sic*: should be *câmpa* in standard Romanian.

5 And whereas most standard Romanian dictionaries customarily have 4 entries relating to the word “Moldova”:

<b>moldovean</b>	<i>noun</i>	Moldovan male
<b>moldoveancă</b>	<i>noun</i>	Moldovan female
<b>moldovenesc</b>	<i>adj</i>	Moldovan
<b>moldovenism</b>	<i>noun</i>	Moldovan word

..... the Stati dictionary has about 25 such entries, the principal among them being:

<b>Moldova nouă</b>	“New Moldova” – the area between the Dniester and the Bug
<b>Moldova mare</b>	“Great Moldova” – the area from the Carpathians to the Dniester
<b>moldovan</b>	<i>noun</i> ; person from Moldova ( <i>male</i> )
<b>moldovană</b>	<i>adj</i> ; Moldovan [ <b>moldovenesc</b> is the more usual word]
<b>moldovancă</b>	<i>noun</i> ; person from Moldova ( <i>female</i> )
<b>moldovani</b>	<i>noun</i> ; persons from Moldova ( <i>plural</i> )
<b>moldovenească</b>	<i>adj</i> ; the Moldovan language or space in the sense of historical continuity; & <i>adj</i> ( <i>philosophical</i> ); the spirit of Moldovan identity
<b>moldovenesc</b>	<i>adj</i> ; Moldovan (as in “language”, “people”)
<b>moldovenești</b>	<i>adj</i> ; speakers of the Moldovan language
<b>Munții moldovenești</b>	the Moldovan mountains; the eastern Carpathians ( <i>in Romania</i> )
<b>moldoveni</b>	<i>noun &amp; adj</i> ; representative of Moldova (something or someone)
<b>moldovenime</b>	<i>noun</i> ; the totality of Moldovans; Moldovan identity
<b>moldovenism</b>	<i>noun</i> ; Moldovan word; Moldovan national sentiment/spirit
<b>moldovoantroponime</b>	<i>noun pl</i> ; Moldovan personal names
<b>moldovonime</b>	<i>noun pl</i> ; Moldovan toponyms

6 A quick summary of the principal “Moldovan” words from the above list is as follows:

The noun for a person = **moldovan** (m), **moldovancă** (f), **moldovani** (pl)

The normal adjective = **moldovenesc**

The Moldovan noun form for “Moldovan” (= a person) differs from the standard Romanian noun form for the same word, which is: **moldovean** (m), **moldoveancă** (f), **moldoveani** (pl). However, the adjectival form is the same in both countries: **moldovenesc**. The presence in both countries of the word **moldovenism**, for a Moldovan-coined word, indicates that vocabulary differences between Romania and Moldova are a well-attested feature<sup>5</sup>.

7 As an attempt to portray Moldovan as a language in its own right, the shortcomings of this dictionary only serve to demonstrate the opposite. Not surprisingly commentators in Romania are unimpressed<sup>6</sup>, and even the head of the Institute of Linguistics in the Moldovan Academy of Sciences, Ion Bărbuță, is reported as having described the dictionary as an “absurdity”<sup>7</sup>. Indeed, the fact that the principal distinction between standard Romanian and its Moldovan manifestation is one of vocabulary is even tacitly acknowledged by the author himself. In the section of his introduction entitled **Deosebiri Esențiale** (= *Essential Differences*), Stati is obliged to concentrate almost exclusively on vocabulary, rather than linguistic, differences in the dictionary. And elsewhere, Charles King has noted that, whatever language distinctions may once have existed, these have been decreasing rather than increasing; “... in the main, Moldovan in its standard form was more Romanian by the 1980s than at any point in its history”<sup>8</sup>.

<sup>5</sup> cf the word **Americanism** in British English.

<sup>6</sup> See for example <http://www.revista22.ro/html/index.php?art=589&nr=2003-09-08> (in Romanian).

<sup>7</sup> See also paragraph 19.

<sup>8</sup> **The Moldovans: Romania, Russia and the Politics of Culture**, C King, Hoover Institution Press, 2000, ISBN 081799792X, p 108.

8 There is certainly an *orthographical* distinction, involving the medial letter “î / â”. There are also occasional *spelling* and *vocabulary* distinctions. But there is no *language* distinction, the absence of this distinction more than ever apparent now that the Roman alphabet is used for the language in both countries<sup>9</sup>. And there appears to be no *linguistic* distinction at all; Romanian and its Moldovan manifestation are as close as western and eastern German or northern and southern Korean. To determine why such an apparently perverse dictionary was compiled, we need to examine something of the background to Moldova itself.

9 Most of the present-day Republic of Moldova, the 90 per cent of it between the Prut and Dniester rivers, constitutes the eastern half of a larger principality of Moldova which existed within the Ottoman Empire until 1812. Only the Transdnistria<sup>10</sup> portion of today’s republic lies outside that realm. But since 1812 the respective histories of the two parts of Moldova have deviated markedly. The eastern half was transferred to Russian administration in 1812, acquiring the name Bessarabia<sup>11</sup>, and remained under Russian and Soviet dominance until 1991. The western half, to the right bank of the Prut and centred on the town of Iași, instead joined Wallachia in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century as the *Țara Românească*<sup>12</sup>, and ultimately became an integral part of the newly-formed Romanian kingdom in 1881. Since 1991, of course, Romania and Moldova have been separate independent states. Only between the First and Second World Wars, from 1918 to 1940, did Romania encompass the area of present-day Moldova within its temporarily expanded borders, briefly uniting again the two portions of the pre-1812 principality.

10 So for the two centuries since 1812, Moldova and Romania have been fully attached to each other for only two decades. Indeed the small Transdnistria portion of present-day Moldova has never been attached to Romania at all, except in so far as Romanian troops briefly occupied it during the Second World War. Conversely, that same Transdnistria, amounting to some 10% of Moldova’s territory and with 16% of Moldova’s population, has always previously been attached to Russian or Soviet administration, even before 1812.<sup>13</sup> Thus there is a real difference in make-up between today’s Romanian and Moldovan states. It is true that they share the same language, as we have seen, but claims that they enjoy a shared history are valid only in so far as they have shared an historical separation from each other. For most of the period since 1812, the Romanian and Moldovan portions of the former Ottoman Moldova have looked in different directions, as the minority populations of the countries show. Whereas the portion of pre-1812 Moldova within Romania remains ethnically homogenous, with Romanians the dominant group<sup>14</sup>, modern independent Moldova by contrast has significant minorities of Ukrainians (8%), Russians (6%) and Gagauz (4%)<sup>15</sup>. The Russian language retains a presence on the streets of Moldova’s towns and cities; this is not the case anywhere in Romania.

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<sup>9</sup> Though see also footnote 19.

<sup>10</sup> Also seen as *Transnistria*, *Trans-Dniester Region*, and *Dniester Region*; see also paragraph 12.

<sup>11</sup> The name Bessarabia had hitherto applied only to the south-easternmost part of the principality, an area also known as the *Budzhak* or *Bugeac* and which now constitutes part of Ukraine.

<sup>12</sup> = “Romanian Land”.

<sup>13</sup> Though there is a small Romanian population there, sufficient for the Soviet authorities to justify the establishment of a Moldavian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (MASSR), on the left bank of the Dniester and covering an area about three times the size of the present Transdnistria, in the period 1924–40. The rationale for the MASSR, on what might be considered Ukrainian territory, was to create a focal point for “Moldovan” revolutionary activity juxtaposed against Romanian-administered Bessarabia.

<sup>14</sup> There are of course significant minorities elsewhere in Romania – Hungarians in particular, who constitute almost 7% of Romania’s total population.

<sup>15</sup> The Gagauz are a Turkic Orthodox Christian group distributed sporadically through southern Moldova.

12 In the Transdnistria portion of Moldova, only 32% of the population is Moldovan, with similar numbers of Russians (30%) and Ukrainians (29%). This self-styled *Pridnestrovskaya Moldavskaya Respublika* has never accepted incorporation into independent Moldova. It even has its own “constitution”, which states in Article 12 that the status of official language is given not just to Moldovan, but to Moldovan, Russian and Ukrainian equally. In fact, the websites of both the “president” and “parliament” are in Russian, not Moldovan/Romanian<sup>16</sup>, and it is Russian which remains the principal language.

13 Given the historical context in which each country has evolved over the last two centuries, it is not surprising that there is little in common between Moldova and Romania except in respect of language. There has been more than ample time for each country to develop its own separate national identity, and indeed the concept of a separate Moldovan identity has become a tenable proposition, especially following the Soviet period. In that particular era, it was actually a feature of Soviet nationality policy to incorporate only entire nations into the Soviet Union; accordingly a Moldovan nation was “obliged” to exist and an identity which separated Moldova from Romania was essential from a Soviet doctrinaire standpoint. Indeed, this separation was deliberately enhanced during the Soviet era by an emphasis on Russian and Ukrainian rather than Moldovan/Romanian as the languages of administration, the imposition of Cyrillic script on to the Romanian language in Moldova<sup>17</sup>, and a strict severance of political and cultural ties between Moldova and Romania. And although it is true that the identity which defines Moldova has largely been developed under enforced non-independent conditions, it has arguably become none the less real for that.

14 As early as 1989, while still within the Soviet Union, the question of Moldova’s identity had caused nervousness among the authorities, as witnessed by the consternation over the adoption of a national flag. Popular demand favoured the Romanian vertical tricolour of blue, yellow and red, but the authorities were initially so concerned at the implications of this that they refused on the grounds that this flag was already in use by another country – bizarrely alluding here to Chad rather than risking any mention of Romania at all<sup>18</sup>. And it was in 1989 too that the open debate over the appropriate label for the national language began. The MSSR Supreme Soviet that year declared “Moldovan” the state language, but at the same time decreed that it should henceforth be written in Roman script. The country’s first independent constitution, in 1991, endorsed this formula. The intention was to satisfy two separate concerns. Firstly, the fragility of the newly independent country, juxtaposed against and dwarfed by Romania, seemed to its leaders to demand that the language be termed “Moldovan” rather than “Romanian”. On the other hand, the second aspect of the decrees – the reversion to Roman script – was a concession to post-Soviet reality and was a bold modernising move in countering many decades during which the population had utilised Cyrillic as the sole medium for writing; both for Russian, of course, but also for Moldovan/Romanian<sup>19</sup>.

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<sup>16</sup> See the websites <http://president-pmr.org> (“president”) & <http://www.vspmr.idknet.com> (“parliament”).

<sup>17</sup> Known in the Soviet period (1944-1991) as the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic (MSSR). In 1989, pressured by popular demand in the Gorbachev era, the MSSR Supreme Soviet switched the writing of “Moldovan” back to Roman script, though they did not accede to demands that the language be recognised as Romanian.

<sup>18</sup> The flag of Chad, as that of Romania, is a vertical blue/yellow/red tricolour. See *Moldavians*, J Eyal, pp 136-7 in *The Nationalities Question in the Soviet Union*, ed. G Smith, Longman, 1990, ISBN 058203955X.

<sup>19</sup> The period of Romanian control, from 1918-40, was the only previous time that Roman script had been utilised in Moldova. Note that the 1989 and 1991 decisions in favour of Roman script for the Moldovan language have never become effective in Transdnistria, where Cyrillic script continues to this day.

15 These two concerns are once more addressed in the present (1994) constitution of the Republic of Moldova, in which Article 13 begins as follows:

(1) The national language of the Republic of Moldova is the Moldovan language<sup>20</sup>, and its writing is based on the Latin alphabet;

(2) The Moldovan State acknowledges and protects the right to preserve, develop and use the Russian language and other languages spoken within the national territory of the country; .....

Predictably, Bucharest quickly expressed “regret” at this wording. Note the intended implication that, aside from Moldovan, Russian is first among equals of the languages spoken in Moldova. This is partly a recognition of reality, and partly a desire to placate the Russian, Ukrainian and Gagauz minorities within Moldova, all of whom regarded Russian rather than Moldovan as their *lingua franca* within Moldovan society.

16 The Moldovan authorities argued by way of justification that the two languages deserved separate status because they had evolved differently as distinct eastern Romance languages; in particular, that Moldovan had incorporated several enhancements from Russian. To be sure, this is perhaps indicative of a certain lack of national confidence, yet the perceived need for protection from Romanian overtures was understandable. In the early 1990s it was almost an expectation within Romania that Moldova would seek to unite with its larger neighbour, even though the Moldovan authorities<sup>21</sup> had given Bucharest no cause to anticipate this. Indeed, the country’s first president, Mircea Snegur, guardedly spoke initially of Romania only as a “sister country” even during the surge of “Romanianism” in the initial years of the decade, and by the end of his presidency he had become markedly anti-Romanian. His successor Petru Lucinschi, president from 1996 to 2001, was more pro-Russian than Snegur and even more inclined to argue against “Romanianism”. Similarly, the current president Vladimir Voronin has spoken of Moldovan nationalism as “healthy” and urged Moldovans to focus on their own separate history. But Bucharest continues to be bemused at this distancing. In his inauguration speech in late 2000, Romania’s President Ion Iliescu spoke of the existence of “two Romanian states, with a joint birth, culture and history”; he followed this in 2003 with the claim that the population of Moldova “is Romanian and their language is the Romanian one”. Note too that Article 7 of the 1991 constitution of Romania, on “Romanians living abroad”, implies a Romanian constitutional right to be concerned wherever they perceive their ethnic kin abroad to be living:

The State shall support the strengthening of links with the Romanians living abroad and shall act accordingly for the preservation, development and expression of their ethnic, cultural, linguistic and religious identity, under observance of the legislation of the State of which they are citizens.

17 A riposte to this is provided in the preamble to the 1994 constitution of Moldova, which adopts a determined and assertive – yet at the same time defensive – tone:

Starting from the age-old aspirations of our people to live in a sovereign country, and fulfilling those aspirations in proclaiming the independence of the Republic of Moldova,

Considering that while growing into a nation the Moldovan people has given strong evidence of historical and ethnic continuity in its statehood,

Striving to satisfy the interests of those of its citizens that, while being of a different ethnic origin, are, together with the Moldovans, forming the Moldovan people .....

The constitution is making a clear point; Moldovans consider themselves a unique ethnically mixed group which has demonstrated a discrete continuity over the course of time; this group has achieved its aim by creating its own independent country and has no interest in union with Romania.

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<sup>20</sup> “Moldovan language” in the constitution is written as *limba moldovenească*, a term imbuing it with a sense of historical continuity (see the definition of *moldovenească* compared to *moldovenesc* in para 5).

<sup>21</sup> As opposed to elements of the populace; particularly the Popular Front, which sought to create a single unitary Romanian state.

18 Interestingly, those who have had the most difficulty with this intrusion of politics, national identity and statehood into matters of language have included the intellectuals, linguistic experts and toponymists of Moldova. In general, such groups continue to belong to the “Romanian” school of language, though this is not at all to say that they are pan-Romanian in their politics. Moldova’s experts within the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names (UNGEGN), for instance, have continually insisted on the Romanian – as opposed to the Moldovan – nature of their country’s toponyms. This was first noticeable at the 18<sup>th</sup> Session of UNGEGN in 1996, where the paper submitted by Moldova included mention of “The Romanian treasure – the Republic of Moldova” and “maps of the Republic of Moldova, the first to appear in the mother tongue since the Second [World] War, in Latin characters and the Romanian language.”<sup>22</sup> These experts have been insistent that Tighina is the correct choice of toponym in the Tighina *versus* Bender debate<sup>23</sup>. They rather appear to have contradicted their country’s own policy in their constant use of the term “Romanian”<sup>24</sup> – even labelling the term “Moldovan” as “an invention of the Soviets”, albeit off the record.

19 Similarly, as recently as April 2005 Ion Bărbuță, head of the Institute of Linguistics in the Moldovan Academy of Sciences, has written of the “Romanian language spoken in the Republic of Moldova”, of the “Romanian toponymy” of Bessarabia, and even of the “Romanian population of Ukraine”<sup>25</sup>. The toponymist Magdalena Lungu appears to think along similar lines; in the introduction to her 1998 book *On the Historical Toponymy of Transdnistria*<sup>26</sup> she remarks: “The toponymy of Bessarabia and Transdnistria shows the great linkage of Romanian toponymic features across the whole Daco-Roman territory” and she entitles her second chapter “Toponymy of Bessarabia – an expression of Romanian continuity and unity across this land”.

20 The Moldovan *versus* Romanian issue is well encapsulated in the debate over the name of the town variously seen as Tighina, Bender and Bendery (4649N 2928E). This settlement, on the right bank of the Dniester river, was established in the 15<sup>th</sup> century as Tighina, and was renamed Bender by the Ottomans when they conquered it in 1538<sup>27</sup>. The Russians adapted this name to Bendery on acquiring it as part of Bessarabia in 1812. When Romania took control of Bessarabia after the First World War, the original name Tighina was restored, but the Soviet annexation of Moldova in 1944 saw a return to Bender (Bendery in Russian). So for 450 years (from 1538 to 1991) the town had been named Bender/Bendery except for the two decades between the world wars. The initial surge of “Romanianism” in Moldova after independence saw a return to **Tighina**, and this name remains the preference of those supporters of a Romanian language persuasion within Moldova<sup>28</sup>.

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<sup>22</sup> See *Statement of ... [the] Republic of Moldova*, document WP 84 from the 18<sup>th</sup> Session of UNGEGN, Geneva, 1996.

<sup>23</sup> See paragraphs 20-21.

<sup>24</sup> See, for example, *Toponymic Researches and Elaborations of the Standardization of the Moldovian* [sic] *Geographical Names*, A Eremia & Z Cameneva, Second International Symposium on Geographical Names, Frankfurt 2000; and *Standardization of geographical names in the Republic of Moldova*, document E/CONF.94/CRP.1 from the 8<sup>th</sup> United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names, Berlin, 2002.

<sup>25</sup> <http://www.cnaa.acad.md/files/institutions/iling/profile-romanian-language.pdf> (in Romanian). See also paragraph 7.

<sup>26</sup> *Din Toponimia Istorică a Transnistriei*, Chișinău, 1998.

<sup>27</sup> *bender* = “port”, from the Persian language word *bandar*.

<sup>28</sup> As demonstrated by Moldova’s toponymists; see paragraphs 18 & 19.

21 But those who assert a separate Moldovan language favour the name Bender, and it is this faction which has achieved prominence since the adoption of the 1994 constitution of Moldova. Thus, for example, in 1996 the town's football club changed its name from *FC Tighina* to *Dinamo Bender*<sup>29</sup>. Moldovan official sources have vacillated since independence between sole use of Tighina, mostly during the period of "Romanianism" prior to the 1994 constitution; and more recently either **Bender** or **Bender (Tighina)**. It appears quite justifiable to consider Bender as the Moldovan, not merely the Russian, name – with Tighina as the name preferred by those of a Romanian language persuasion. Note too that, although sited on the right (western) bank of the Dniester, this town is actually within the renegade Transdnistria portion of Moldova. Given the solid Russian basis of Transdnistria, it is no surprise that Bender has consistently been the only name adopted locally<sup>30</sup>.

22 The conclusions to be drawn from this paper are:

- A specific Moldovan identity is a tenable proposition;
- There is no Moldovan language – the "Moldovan" language is Romanian;
- Moldova's independence is recent and the country needs to assert its own status alongside Romania, thus the authorities feel the need to claim the existence of a Moldovan language – it is therefore diplomatic to label the official language as "Moldovan" in bilateral or multilateral dealings with the Republic of Moldova.

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### MAPS

For an excellent summary map of Moldova at its various stages since 1812, see the website [http://compudava.com/moldova/mold\\_img/map5.jpg](http://compudava.com/moldova/mold_img/map5.jpg) which reproduces one of the maps found in *The Moldovans: Romania, Russia and the Politics of Culture*, C King, Hoover Institution Press, 2000, ISBN 081799792X. For a map of present-day Moldova, see United Nations Map No 3759, dated January 2004, available at <http://www.un.org/Depts/Cartographic/english/htmain.htm> (use the drop-down menu to locate **Moldova**) – though note that this map has erroneously applied the medial orthographical change from î to â which ought not to be applicable in Moldova (see paragraph 2); thus *eg* Hânçești should be **Hîncești**. If the hyperlinks provided here do not work directly, copy and paste the URLs into your browser.

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Several items in this paper – *eg* the quotations by politicians seen in paragraph 16 – have been taken from selected reports issued by the British Broadcasting Corporation Monitoring Service, from 1994 to the present date; the assistance of these reports is gratefully acknowledged.

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<sup>29</sup> The club's logo is a single letter "D" which (as might be expected in Transdnistria) is written in Cyrillic, not Roman, script. The use of "D" and "Dinamo" alone avoids the issue of whether the remaining portion of the name should be the official *Bender* or an unofficial *Tighina*. Note that Romanian sources clearly find any use of the name *Bender* difficult, even in a proper title such as this club name; the Romanian website [http://www.romaniansoccer.ro/europe/moldova/news\\_2005\\_06.shtml](http://www.romaniansoccer.ro/europe/moldova/news_2005_06.shtml), reporting football news from Moldova, dispensed with *Dinamo Bender* and began to use the unofficial form *Dinamo Tighina* in mid-October 2005.

<sup>30</sup> See also paragraph 12 and footnote 19. PCGN advice is to use whichever name is encountered – either in isolation or in primary position – on the most recent official Moldovan source.