

## Political Dynamics of Urban Hodonyms: A Case of Chisinau, Moldova

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Received: July 15, 2021	This paper researches the role that hodonyms (street names) play in forming cultural and collective identity and awareness. Street names are thereby treated as the elements that get transformed from everyday communication and interaction to symbols constructed by political elites to direct the collective history perception and memory. The paper explores the principles of forming a new onomastic space of the capital city of the Republic of Moldova, Chisinau. Current work identifies some peculiarities of street renaming, grouping them into several categories. The main principles of renaming policies are also revealed. The analyses of renaming practices help understand the national identities that Moldovans are going to build, and the ideology that local and national authorities will impose.
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## 1. Introduction

The end of state socialism has produced complex processes of urban change in East and Central Europe, including the reshaping of urban identities and urban cultural landscapes in post-socialist cities. Changes have impacted the post-soviet cities as well, especially as regards their image, their trends and policies, their lifestyle, and values, etc. – and toponyms as well.

Toponyms are thought to be mainly used for orientation, identification, and navigation purposes to the public. However, urban toponymy reflects the "linguistic face" of the modern city and the facts of history and culture of the people, especially the way of life and citizens' attitudes. Urban toponymy as a mirror of national culture, a movable and variable layer of linguistics containing massive data about traditions, customs, mentality, and outlook features characterizing a particular linguistic field (Oto-Peralías 2018, p. 188-189). Toponyms conclude essential cultural and historical information related to the spiritual and material culture or nature.

Toponyms also represent the construct of social and power relations, through which the identity of the city and society is being formed. Place naming is "a socially embedded act, one that involves power relations" (Vuolteenaho and Berg, 2009, p. 9). Light and Young (2014) state that the new names attributed to places, streets, and buildings are not accidental or politically innocent (p. 669-670). Therefore, naming places is a way of inscribing a particular worldview and set of political values onto the landscape. Azaryahu (1996) argued that urban place names are "instrumental in substantiating the ruling socio-political order and its particular 'theory of the world' in the cityscape" (p. 312). So, toponyms are a critical means through which urban space is signified and saturated with political values (Verdery, 1999). Place names are one means through which an official narrative of history is reified in the built environment (Azaryahu, 1996).

Consequently, toponyms renaming is intended to institutionalize a new political agenda through shaping the meanings in everyday practices and landscapes. As S. Basik (2020) writes, new toponymy "lead to new ideological reality, modified national identity, and the transformed politics of memory" (p. 2).

The main role in the toponymic dictionary of the city is played by street names – hodonyms<sup>1</sup>. Our study researches the role that hodonyms play in forming cultural and collective identity and awareness in the city of Chisinau (Kishinev), capital of Moldova, ex-Soviet Republic, during the period 1989 till present. We will analyze the metamorphosis of the city of Chisinau, viewed through the prism of political changes that have been made during the last twenty years of independence. We will try to evaluate the modern practices of street naming in the translation of national identity. We will also examine the impact of the Soviet past on the urban landscape and dwellers' mentality and analyze the city's transition toward Europeanization through the prism of facts and events that occurred in Chisinau over the last years.

In our study we employed a mixed-method approach. Information on renaming was taken from the official decisions of local governments and administrative decrees of the heads of local state administrations. Unlike many other studies, this one does not consider the hierarchy of streets and is not limited to the historical center of cities. The present article is relevant at the regional level, highlighting aspects of Chisinau toponyms and, according to a global perspective, shedding some light on naming and renaming practices in post-communism urban space.

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<sup>1</sup> "Hodonym (from Greek language ὁδός "onym" means "road, street") is a type of urabanonym, which studies names of roads, avenues, and streets" (Podolskaya, 1988, p. 52).

## 2. Historical Reference

Chisinau streets witness the historical and political events that have occurred in the life of the city. To study the history of the formation of onomastic space in Chisinau, we have to look at the main events which influenced the city's life.

In 1812 Bessarabia became a part of the Russian state, and Chisinau became its capital. It was in the 19th century that his place names began to take shape. On the city map in 1860 we find Aleksandrovskaya, Nikolaevskaya, Podolskaya, Fontannaya, Armenian and Zolotaya streets. Streets were named only in Russian. The most common models are the adjectival type -ski/-skaya, -ny /-naya, corresponding to the grammatical system of Russian.

In 1918, Bessarabia became part of Romania, which entailed, among many changes, a change of street names. Streets named after Romanian cultural figures and politicians appear: strada Regele Ferdinand I, strada Arhiepiscop Gurie, strada Regele Carol I, strada Anton Pann.

The second period of street-naming in the history of Moldova is connected with the Soviet period. In 1940, as a result of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, Bessarabia became part of the Soviet Union. Sovietization also affects hodonymy. However, the process that has begun is interrupted by the war.

A wave of renaming will sweep through the already post-war Chisinau. In the toponymy of Chisinau, the past Soviet era has left a significant layer of names associated with the ideology. It was uniform for the USSR, common values throughout the country, and a general list of respected personalities and events (see, for instance, central streets names - Central Lenin Avenue, Engels, Marx Street, Soviet Army Boulevard).

Since 1989, when Moldova proclaimed independence, Chisinau's hodonymic space has undergone some significant changes. Renaming streets in the 1990s was a response to changes brought about by democratization in post-communist Central and Eastern Europe. These changes were related to the restructuring of urban space and the history that was marked by the ideology of communism.

Since that, a boom period in naming and renaming streets has begun. This process developed under the influence of national and global factors of an ideological or cultural character or those related to civilization. Among the priorities are:

- The desire to move away from the totalitarian past.
- The need to promote national culture and history.
- The restoration of the status of the state language.

Of the 700 streets existing in Chisinau today, more than 500 were renamed in the 90s. Despite the chaotic nature of the process, it seems possible to formulate some general principles of renaming and highlight the following main groups.

## 3. Classification of new hodonyms

### 3.1. Renaming-translations

In 1989, Romanian was declared the state language, and some of the street names, quite numerous, were translated from Russian into Romanian:

Promyshlennaya (Industrial) street → strada Industrială (Industrial),

Roz (Rose) street → Trandafirilor (Rose),

Vesenniaya (Spring) → Primăverii (Spring),

Stroitelei (Builders) → Constructorilor (Builders), etc.

According to the Romanian model, the definition (Adj) was replaced by the noun (Nom. Gen.):

Ogorodnaya (Gardens) street → strada Grădinilor (Gardens),  
 Zemlepahtsev (Agriculturalists) lane → Plugarilor (Agriculturalists),  
 Projezjaya (Travellers) → Călătorilor (Travellers),  
 Kirtichnaya (Brick) → Cărămidarilor (Brick),  
 Zavodskaya (Factory) → Uzinelor (Factory),  
 Vokzalnaya (Station). → Gării (Station).

### 3.2. Renaming-replacement

Of course, this primarily affected politically tagged "Soviet" hodonyms. The streets of Oktyabrskaya (October), Proletarskaya (Industrial Workers), Kommunarov, Mira (Peace), Iskra (Sparkle), Soviet Army Boulevard, etc. have disappeared from the city map. Instead, strada Dacia (Dacia), Traian (Trajan), București (Bucharest), Independenței (Independence), Unirii (Unions) appeared. We witness as "street naming processes can therefore serve as a highly invested strategy on the part of various political regimes, designated to symbolically constructing and reconstructing the public space" (Bigon 2020, 75).

The central street case is quite remarkable. Figure 1 illustrates the never-ending alterations of the city of Chisinau's main avenue's name. In Soviet cities, most central streets were named after core concepts or figures in the communist pantheon. Such naming practice protected the center against the renaming and equalized the "prestige" of all other districts of the city (Efremov, 1985, p. 33-45). The Fall of the Soviet Union and waves of place name changing disturbed this balance. The city center became "available" for the renamings of all kinds. In practice, it meant that the groups seeking for the most prestigious place to name were primarily attracted by renaming Soviet or other "vulnerable" layers of toponymy in the center.



Figure 1. This street plate illustrates the dynamics of central Chisinau street's names

In case of Chisinau streets renaming, the most productive model proved to be commemorative.

The practice of commemorating national personalities and events in the cityscape is a modern phenomenon. Even though naming places after important figures has existed since Antiquity (e.g., Alexandria), its widespread use began in France towards the end of the eighteenth century. Traditionally, street names were vernacular, with a clear orientation purpose, and were associated with the local topography or history. During the French Revolution, however, using street names for political purposes became increasingly common, and other European countries subsequently followed the French lead. This practice was later included in the agenda of nation-building programs during the nineteenth century (Azaryahu, 1996, p. 314). Today, commemorative street names are a familiar reality in many countries throughout the world. As Azaryahu (1996) put it, "the main merit of commemorative street names is that they introduce an authorized version of history into ordinary settings of everyday life" (p. 312).

In the case of Chisinau, commemoratives are the most vulnerable to political change. This reconfiguring of urban toponymy is underpinned by simultaneous processes of de-commemoration (removing the inappropriate toponymy inherited from the former regime) and commemoration of different personalities and events in agreement with the new authorized narrative of national history and identity (Azaryahu, 1996). Such "toponymic cleansing" (Rose-Redwood, Alderman, and Azaryahu 2010, p. 460) is relatively quick and cheap and is assumed by elites to have an immediate impact as new place names are introduced into the language, practices, and landscapes of everyday life (Azaryahu, 1996).

As our study reveals, if the previous year's name was commemorative, it remains a memorial in most cases. Still, at the same time, a kind of "lustration" occurs - Soviet political and military leaders are replaced by Moldovan / Romanian cultural figures:

st. Shchorsa → strada Ion Vasilenko (literary critic),

Kirov → Mihai Sadoveanu (writer),

Panfilov → Grigore Alexandrescu (writer),

Kotovskiy → Vasile Alexandri (writer),

Chapaev → George Călinescu (writer, publicist, literary critic),

Dzerzhinsky → Gheorghe Asachi (writer),

Gaidar → Brâncuși (sculptor),

Kalinin → Tudor Vladimirescu (hero of the 19th century people's liberation movement).

When commemoratives that do not have an open ideological connotation change, not only the memorial principle of nomination is preserved, but often the field of activity:

Dunaevskiy street → strada George Enescu (composer),

Mussorgskiy → Maria Lătărețu (singer),

Glinka → Ciprian Porumbescu (composer),

Balakirev → Maria Tănase (singer),

Glazunov → Tamara Ciobanu (singer),

Borodin → Barbu Lautaru (singer and musician, real name and surname - Vasile Barbu).

It should be noted that Marina Raskova Street (Soviet military pilot) was named Nadejda Russo (Romanian military pilot, nee Nadezhda Brozovskaya). A rather narrow specialty - lady pilot - has been preserved.

As we see, the novelty in street-naming is primarily manifested in the revival of national names. When naming streets, special attention is paid to the definition and

promotion of the ideas of the preservation of national continuity and unity with Romania, the creation of respect for the culture of Moldova and the state language, the revival of historical and spiritual roots, and strengthening patriotism.

### 3.3. Object-geographical principle

St. Kharkovskaya → strada Maramureș,  
 Kostroma → Banatului,  
 Krasnodon → Cetatea Albă,  
 Kherson lane → Dobruja,  
 1st Okhotsk Lane → Constanța,  
 2nd Okhotsk Lane → Galați,  
 Yenisei → Lăpușnei.

The new names are Romanian place names. The object-geographic principle of the nomination has been preserved; the "vector of development" has been changed - from east to west. Also see:

Caspian street → strada Danubius (hydronym replaced by hydronym), Nevskaya → Pariș (hydronym is lost, but "capital" is preserved).

### 3.4. The associative principle

It implies a semantic shift: St. Grosul (Yakim Grosul - the first president of the Academy of Sciences of Moldova.) → strada Academiei. There has been a change not only in the hodonym (with the preservation of the field of activity), but also in the principle of nomination; from commemorative into the object.

Also see: St. Luchafarul → strada Veronica Micle. Both hodonyms are tied to the life and work of M. Eminescu (Lucafarul is the hero of the eponymous poem by Eminescu, Veronica Micle is the poet's beloved).

### 3.5. "Onomatopic" principle (consonance of the new and old names)

In some cases, the reason for choosing a new name is not obvious. As we see, it could be a consonance of the new and old names.

St. Mirgorodskaya → strada Mircea Eliade,  
 Antonovskaya → Anton Pann (prose writer, poet, composer and folklorist),  
 Daliniya (Distant) → Damian (L. Damian - poet),  
 Reznichenko (S.F. Reznichenko - Soviet soldier who participated in the liberation of Chisinau in 1944) → Răzeșilor (Zemlepashtsev),  
 Angarsk → Anderson,  
 Amurskaya → Aman (T. Aman - artist, founder and professor of the School of Arts in Bucharest),  
 Timiryazev → Timiș (county center in Romania),  
 Army → Arborilor (Trees),  
 Volkova → Voluntarilor (Volunteers), etc.

The cases are opposite when the change of the hodonym does not lead to a change in semantics. So, st. Bendery was renamed Tighina. The street got its name in 1834 in honor of the victories of the Russian army over the Turks at the walls of the Bendery fortress. Tighina is the old name of Bender (note that the city itself was not renamed and is still called Bender).

Sometimes minor phonetic changes alter the semantics of the hodonym. The first case is Izmailskaya Street. At the time of Tsarist Russia, it was called Izmail, for some



time under the Romanian administration - the same (Izmail). After the war it was renamed Izmailovskaya. In the official documents of our time, the street again appears as strada Izmail (Izmail). The renaming is almost imperceptible, but the meaning is completely different: Izmail is a city in Bessarabia, which the Soviet authorities handed over to Ukraine, whereas "Izmailovskaya" is definitely a commemorative - a reference to a certain Izmailov (who cannot be identified without specifying the initials) (see Figures 2 and 3).

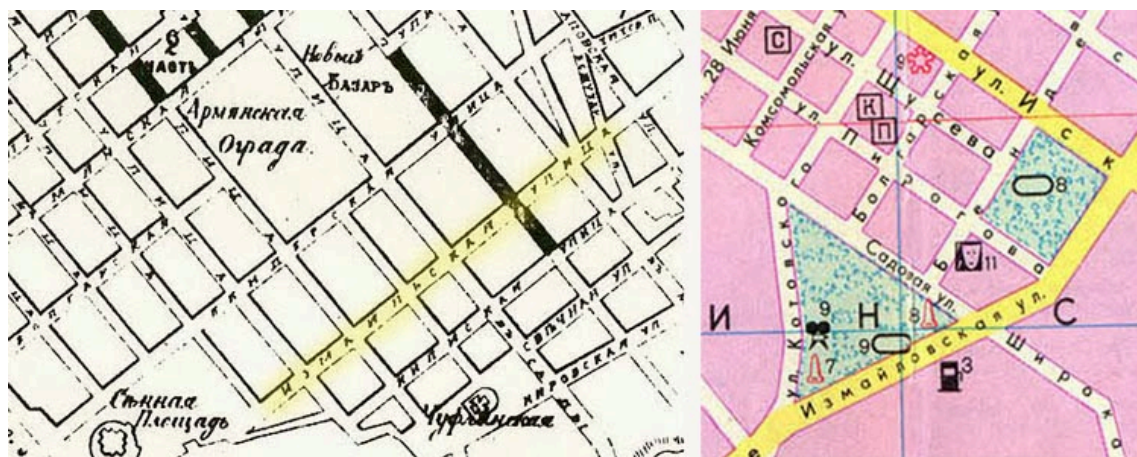


Figure 2. Chisinau maps. Map 1 is dated the middle of XIX century, map 2 – Soviet period.



Figure 3. Soviet period. Street plate - Izmailovskaya street.

In case of Sokolov Street, it became strada Socoleni. The semantics have been radically changed: the hodonym from the commemorative (in honor of Sokolov, a military officer) became the object-geographical one (Socoleni is a settlement in Moldova) - as in the case of Izmailovskaya-Izmailskaya.

It should be noted that in case of Chisinau, street renaming is sometimes a cycle process. The history of Pirogov Street renaming is indicative. At the beginning of the 19th century, the street was called Reni (Reni is a town in the Odessa region of

Ukraine). In the 19th century it was part of the Bessarabia. At the end of the century, it received the name of the Russian surgeon Nikolai Ivanovich Pirogov. In the interwar period, the street initially returned its name Reni, and a little later it was renamed in honor of Mihai Kogalniceanu, a Romanian writer and historian and politician of the 20th century. After World War II, the street regained the name of Pirogov, and in 1989 it again became Kogalniceanu (strada M. Kogalniceanu).

#### **4. New street names and their contestation**

The collapse of state socialist regimes was accompanied by efforts to erase the public symbols of socialism and to reconfigure the urban landscape to express new narratives of national history, identity, and memory (see, for example, Czepczynski 2009, Saparov 2017, Kaşikçi 2019). However, the power of political elites to reshape urban space and public memory is not absolute. As Light and Young (2014) writes, “official efforts to eradicate the toponymy of socialism (and the authorized memory expressed in that toponymy) might be less effective than is sometimes appreciated” (p. 682).

Urban residents can respond to elite projects to reconfigure urban space and public memory in a variety of ways that were not anticipated or intended. As research shows, new names might not find immediate or universal acceptance. Instead, newly imposed names can be the focus of disagreement, dispute, and contestation. This issue of contestation or resistance to officially endorsed place names is a prominent theme within critical toponymic studies. Azaryahu (1996) argued that “the rejection of names by a population, or segments of it, is a profound act of resistance” (p. 315). Such resistance takes various forms (Azaryahu, 1996; Kearns & Berg, 2002; Vuolteenaho & Berg, 2009; Rose-Redwood, Alderman & Azaryahu, 2010).

Urban residents can oppose street name changes for several reasons. As Light and Young (2018) state, they may feel “an attachment to the old name, and this can be especially important following radical political change when residents may look for the reassurance offered by the familiar” (2018, p. 191). While the incoming regime may seek to impose a new hegemonic narrative of national history, not everyone in the population will necessarily agree with the choice of new names. Consequently, they may be unsympathetic to top-down attempts to change it. Light and Young (2018) also mention the following reason why residents may oppose street renamings - the personal inconvenience it causes them. “Changing the name of a street places a burden on the residents of that street to change their identity papers and inform employers, banks, utility companies, and friends of their new address. This all involves time and expense, and for this reason, renamings can be unpopular (particularly if there is a delay between a political change and the subsequent changing of street names)” (p. 192).

A common way of contestation is the refusal to use an officially imposed name. Resistance is often expressed through the adoption of an alternative or parallel set of place names. Light and Young (2014, p. 680-682) give us an excessive survey of the historical examples. Thus, following the collapse of the socialist German Democratic Republic in 1989, a commission appointed by the Berlin Senate proposed street name changes in the Mitte district (formerly East Berlin). These were intended to decommemorate the socialist era and introduce new names drawn from Germany’s pre-World War II democratic tradition. Yet, the plans were strongly contested by residents, who campaigned to retain the former names (De Soto, 1996).

One such example is post-Soviet Russia (Averyanov, 2009), (Gill 2005). Following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1990-91, Russia claims to dismantle the structures of state socialism and replace them with a democratic regime. However, Gill (2005) argues that many post-communist politicians had deep roots in the power



structures of the Soviet government. For this reason, the result is that many Soviet-era street names remained unchanged. For example, in Moscow, many streets named after leading communist revolutionaries and Soviet politicians retained their names, such as “Lenin Street” or “Red Army Street” (Gill 2005). The following example is St. Petersburg, where streets named after critical events in communist historiography and the institutions of the socialist state have kept their original names, such as “Dictatorship of the Proletariat Square,” “Communist Youth Street,” or “Lenin” (Marin 2012).

O. Gnatiuk analyzes the process of renaming of streets in post-revolutionary Ukraine and concludes that the attempt to rename some streets in eastern and southern Ukraine in honour of the OUN-UIA leaders provoked public resistance. Particularly strong discussion in media was induced by the renaming of Moskovskyi Prospekt (Moscow Avenue) in Kyiv in 2016 in honour of Bandera (Gnatiuk 2020). The case of Marshal Zhukov Avenue in Kharkiv shows that the “processes stimulated by decommunization are not yet complete, and the pluralism and the chaotic introduction of changes in urban space can continue to cause conflicts at the local level”. (Kutsenko 2020, p.61).

Another example is the city of Minsk (Belarus). Light and Young (2018), Basik and Rahautsou (2019) describes as this city shows considerable continuity in Soviet-era Street names. Between 1990 and 1993, only 14 streets and one square were renamed, because early in the 1990s former-Soviet nomenklatura gained positions in the new urban administration and opposed proposals to return streets to their pre-1917 names. Although pressure from political groups such as the Belarusian Peoples’ Front had achieved some changes, this ended in 1994 when Alexander Lukashenka came to power and forged strong links with the Russian Federation. Interestingly, the limited street name changes that did occur in the early 2000s—such as “Francysk Skaryna Avenue” becoming “Praspekt Nezelazhnasci” (Independence Avenue) and “Masherov Avenue” changing to “Praspekt Peramozhcau” (Victors Avenue)—were linked to attempts to cement Russian oriented myths about what Russians call the “Great Patriotic War” (the Second World War) in the Minsk landscape and Belorussian identity (Bylina 2013 – cited after Light and Young, 2018, p. 187).

What is the status of new hodonyms in the perception of Chisinau residents? The issue has never been the subject of scientific research to apply to some empiric observations. As they show, there is not always a compromise between the elites and the city's population. Sometimes, an existing street name is not used among the people even after several decades. Some people identify themselves with the previous name or have their name for a particular territory. Former hodonyms continue to exist as shady, unofficial, but not forgotten. They are heard in the oral speech of townspeople, on the radio, and are found in newspaper texts and blogs. Even the return of "pre-Soviet" hodonyms was perceived by the majority as introducing new names into the city's language. Another response includes defacing or painting over official street name signs or painting alternative names onto walls and buildings. In the case of Chisinau, we don't find any evidence of this strategy, but some street plates are unintentionally (or, maybe, intentionally, kept) (See Figure 4).

Summing up, we can conclude that only by developing a richer and more nuanced understanding of the ways in which people respond to place names in their everyday lives, we can better appreciate why and how naming works (or does not work) and, more broadly, how relationships with urban landscapes contribute to the construction of collective memory.



Figure 4. New and old street plates.

## 5. Conclusions

As analysis of the research material shows, hodonyms can be interpreted as a source from which we can read the social and cultural values of a society. Street names offer an interesting reflection on what and who have been or are significant in shaping the national and local contexts of towns and cities. This mirror can be used to interpret changing attitudes through time and contestations of knowledge, heritage, and values. This paper sheds light on the street naming processes in Chisinau. Our study has revealed the essential factors in the formation of street names with historical, cultural, social, political, and linguistic characteristics and identified the main trends developing currently in the urbanonymy of Chisinau. The names of streets serve as indicators of the official views and ideological perceptions of the political, social, and historical events in the Eastern European region.

Based on the research of identity expression through the toponyms in this location, we have concluded that from the spatial point of view, street names indicate the orientation of Moldova toward national ideals, discarding and forgetting its heritage of socialism and the Soviet Union. Yet, it is more than explore the persistence of the socialist-era name within everyday practice.

Is Chisinau's experience free from mistakes in streets renaming? Of course, no. One can call into question the excessive enthusiasm for commemoration in toponymic naming. We can observe the lack of coordination in the motivation of some names with the nature of the location. However, the noted shortcomings are inevitable costs in the way of developing new approaches and creative solutions. At the same time, the example of Chisinau is beneficial for further optimization of toponymic policy and toponymic construction as part of the work on the image of cities.

Mistakes and some unsuccessful nominative decisions do not cancel the values of Chisinau's experience in municipal toponymic construction. Summing up, we can

conclude that the overall strategy of cultural and toponymic policy in Chisinau is built quite consistently.

This paper also aims to serve as a starting point for a series of studies on the relatively unexplored field of Chisinau toponymy.

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