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Exploring the linguistic landscapes of Transnistria

ABSTRACT. In this study, I explore several particularities of the linguistic landscapes (LLs) of Transnistria. This region is located between Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova, to which it *de jure* belongs. However, it operates *de facto* as an internationally unrecognized, yet functionally independent state entity with its own currency, army and parliament. According to the current legal situation, there are three official languages in Transnistria: Russian, Moldovan and Ukrainian. But, in practice, Russian is used almost exclusively throughout the territory. I argue that Transnistria's LLs are not oriented towards language policy guidelines but privilege those languages that play a central role in the education system and in international communication, namely Russian, as the most frequently used language, and English as an important global foreign language.

KEYWORDS: linguistic landscapes, Transnistria, Russian, English, language in public space.

1. INTRODUCTION

Transnistria is a region which used to belong to the former Soviet Union's Moldavian SSR, which it constituted in the Soviet times together with the central part of Bessarabia. After the Republic of Moldova gained independence, Transnistria seceded from this union and declared its own sovereignty. Its unilateral secession has not been recognized internationally. Consequently, Transnistria presently belongs *de jure* to the Republic of Moldova but operates *de facto* as a separate state with its own institutions. The region remains largely unexplored in linguistic landscapes research (hereinafter: LLs), for which reason several distinctive features of its LLs will be identified here, while going beyond the consideration of urban spaces. In order to understand the conditions under which LLs (and the linguistic situation in general) develop locally, we first need to take a historical look at Transnistria and its population structure.

2. TRANSNISTRIA: HISTORY AND GEOGRAPHY

Transnistria – officially the Transnistrian Moldavian Republic (Russian: *Приднестровская Молдавская Республика*) – is a territory encompassing some 4.163 km², most of which lies to the east of the Dniester River. It is located between the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine, without direct access to the Black Sea (cf. Map 1) but with an important industrial sector. From a historical perspective, the region's long-standing affiliation with the Russian Empire is particularly striking and goes back to Russian-Ottoman rivalries over the region (Oleksy 2016: 12). In 1792, Catherine the Great extended the Russian Empire's territorial claims to the Dniester River, bringing the area between the Dniester and the southern Bug into her sphere of direct influence.

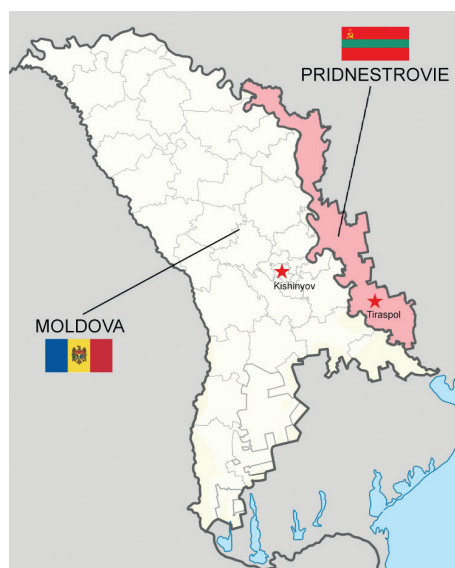
Initially, the local population in this land mainly spoke Romanian, but this was to change with the arrival of Russian and Ukrainian colonists (Cojocaru 2006: 263). The territory was, at that time, named "New Moldavia" and controlled by the Russian state (Colbey 2022: 56), and its capital of Tiraspol¹ was founded by the Russian General Suvorov. When neighboring Bessarabia, which today largely coincides with the Republic of Moldova, was incorporated into the Russian Empire in 1812, the *status quo* of Transnistria was formally and administratively consolidated. In contrast to Bessarabia, the region was more urbanized and industrialized, which continues to have an impact on its spatial structures today.

The political situation fundamentally changed in the 20th century. From 1918 to 1940, Bessarabia was integrated as a part of Romania, then again under Russian rule between 1940 and 1941, and under Romanian military occupation between 1941 and 1944. A central idea in Romania was to revive Greater Romania's ambitions, which undoubtedly included consolidating its sovereignty over Bessarabia. For this reason, rigorous efforts were made to enforce only the Romanian language usage on this territory. Along with strict language bans, the numerous other languages spoken in Bessarabia were to be suppressed, above all Russian. In 1924, Stalin had established a Moldovan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (MASSR) that encompassed Transnistria and neighboring regions of Ukraine. When the Soviet Union gained control of Bessarabia in 1940, it joined the region with the territory of today's Transnistria to form the Moldovan Soviet Socialist Republic (MSSR). Then as now, the two regions had very different socio-demographic structures. Soviet propaganda began to speak of a "Moldavian nation" with a "Moldavian" language and culture, which were supposedly differ-

¹ The name derives from the Greek hydronym *Tyra* for the 'Dniester' and the topoformant *-polis* as a shortening of Greek *polis* for 'city'. To this day, the founding of this city is a symbol of Russia's claim to power over the territory and also a reason for the region's close connection with Russia.

ent from their Romanian counterparts. In addition, there were enormous social upheavals from 1945 onwards, which led to a strong industrialization of Transnistria, while, in Bessarabia, predominantly agriculture was developed. The conceptual basis offered for the opposition between “Transnistrian Moldovans” and “Bessarabian Moldovans” thus quickly became socially accepted (Cojocaru 2006: 263).

In the course of the Soviet Union’s collapse and with the Republic of Moldova’s associated declaration of sovereignty in 1990, tensions developed between Chişinău and Tiraspol. It is important to note that, in contrast to other post-Soviet conflicts, it was social rather than ethnic turmoil that developed here (Cojocaru 2006: 261–262). This sparked a debate about the question of territorial status and linguistic alterity in Transnistria, which escalated to such an extent that armed conflicts ensued as a direct consequence in the spring of 1992 (Oleksy 2016: 12). A strong background factor in this development was the Transnistrian perspective on language. There, it was assumed that the Russian language, which had largely dominated Transnistria up to that point, could become disadvantaged – a concern rooted in the historical experience of dealing with languages in Bessarabia before 1945, as described above – and this eventuality was categorically prevented.² Hence, Tiraspol seceded from the union with Chişinău before the first considerations were made as to whether a minimal consensus could be reached in order to live in a common state (Cojocaru 2006: 262). In the Republic of Moldova, the reintegration of the Transnistrian territory has repeatedly been considered since then, but, in stark contrast to other post-Soviet territorial disputes, the issue is met with conspicuous indifference among the Moldovan population (Popescu & Litra 2012: 3). Although a solution was very close in 2003, and constructive



Map 1. Location of Transnistria

Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Atlas_of_Transnistria#/media/File:Pridnestrovie_Moldavia.png

² In addition to historical concerns, this view was also linked to the fact that ethnic Moldovans contemporarily made up around 65% of Moldova’s population but only 35% in Transnistria (Oleksy 2016: 13). Accordingly, from Chişinău’s perspective, the primacy of Romanian should be perfectly socially acceptable – but not from Tiraspol’s perspective.

progress was made with the so-called “Kozak Plan”, which could have reunited the two territories, no viable consensus was reached (Durrieu & Parmentier 2019: 82). Rather, a “frozen conflict” emerged, at the end of which Transnistria is now an internationally unrecognized but *de facto* independent state – with its own currency, its own state organs and a large contingent of (local and Russian) soldiers and security forces. It furthermore pursues political orientations that are often diametrically opposed to those desired by the Republic of Moldova. This divergence certainly has much to do with Transnistria’s dependence on Russia, without which it would hardly be able to exist geopolitically (Dreyfus 2017: 136).

The strong cultural and political ties connecting Transnistria with Russia can be well understood against this background and are justified, above all, by the region’s historical affiliation with Russia, its lack of connection to the Romanian-speaking cultural sphere and the dominance of the Russian language. Another very interesting aspect is that the situation in which Transnistria has found itself since 1992 could only arise in the first place because linguistic affinities moved far to the forefront of society and led to a resurgence of historical mistrust,³ especially concerning state encroachment upon languages, which, in Transnistria, could be directed against Russian.

3. DEMOGRAPHY AND LANGUAGES IN TRANSNISTRIA

In the previous section, we saw that Transnistria has a complex modern history. Let us now take a look at how the ethnic structure in this region developed and which languages predominate. In 1936, Transnistria had around 280,000 inhabitants, of whom 42% were Moldovans, 29% Ukrainians and 14% Russians (Colbey 2022: 58). However, this demographic profile no longer corresponded to the linguistic reality since the end of the Second World War at the latest. Ever since Transnistria and Bessarabia became united under the umbrella of the Soviet Union, Russian had become increasingly important, especially in education. In addition, the Cyrillic script was made compulsory for Moldovan (Colbey 2022: 58). Both this measure and the designation “Moldavian” (i.e. Moldovan) for the regional variety of Romanian were obviously desirable from a regionalist mindset, because they suggested a distance from the typologically identical Romanian language and, at the same time, a visual proximity to Russian.⁴ During

³ In particular, a negative historical perspective on Romania came into being in Transnistria (cf. Komarnickij 2006: 69ff.). Moreover, the recent acts of war in Ukraine (cf. Parmentier 2024 for details) and their influence on the language issue in Transnistria need further study.

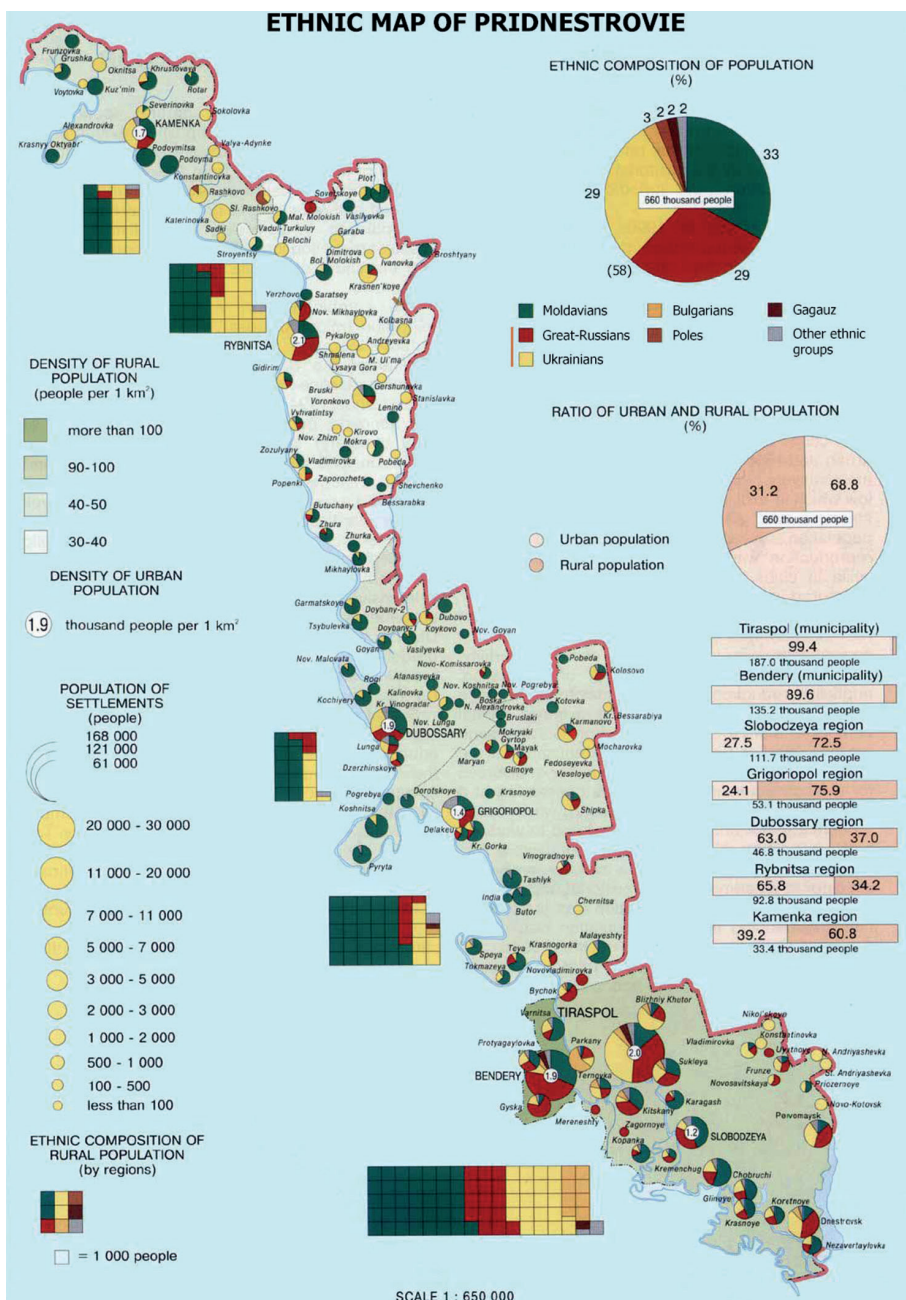
⁴ Romanian and Moldovan form a unit, from a linguistic typological point of view. The terminological distinction and the use of the Cyrillic script in Soviet Moldova and in today’s

this time, competence in Russian became the guarantor of social advancement, such that its dominance increasingly restricted the other languages of the region (Schlegel 2019: 25). Even before the collapse of the Soviet Union, the population of the region had grown considerably to around 700,000 inhabitants, 39% of whom defined themselves as ethnic Moldovans, 26% as Ukrainians and 23% as Russians (Cazacu & Trifon 2016: 356).

After the political upheavals of *Perestroika*, a demographic downward trend developed and continues rapidly today. A combination of emigration, low birth rates and an ageing society have resulted in fewer and fewer people living in Transnistria since then. The demographic surveys from 2004 reveal the seriousness of these changes, as only around 555,000 people were living in Transnistria at the time, of whom only around 32–33% were Moldovans, while 29–30% were Russians and 29% Ukrainians, alongside smaller minorities such as 3% Bulgarians and, respectively, 2% Gagauzians and Poles (Lomakina 2018: 34; <http://pop-stat.mashke.org/pmr-ethnic-loc2004.htm>; see also Map 2). According to the latest surveys, there are now only 465,800 inhabitants living in Transnistria, with most defining themselves as ethnic Russians (33.8%), followed by Moldovans (33.2%) and Ukrainians (26.7%; Statističeskij ežegodnik 2021: 26). It is, therefore, very clear that the number of inhabitants has fallen dramatically and that ethnic group affiliations have increasingly shifted in favor of a Russian identity.

This brings us to the linguistic situation in Transnistria, which consists of two basic components: the legal framework and the practical handling of multilingualism. As we will see, the facts on the ground differ considerably between these two components. As regards the situation's legal underpinnings, we should mention that the law "On Languages" was passed back in 1992 and stipulates Moldovan, Russian and Ukrainian as official languages with equal rights, while mandating their use in the education system and in mass media. State bodies are tasked with implementing measures to ensure the use of these languages (Lomakina 2018: 36). However, as Lomakina points out, considerable challenges hinder the effective implementation of this law (Lomakina 2018: 37). In practice, maintaining the use of one's mother tongue at school or in kindergarten proves insufficiently feasible for all languages except Russian. Additionally, there is

Transnistria are politically instrumentalized interventions. For this reason, the terms "Romanian" and "Moldovan" can be used typologically as synonyms, even though there are sociolinguistic differences that have to do with ethno-linguistic identities. A consistent designation as "Romanian", as we find in some studies, therefore does justice to the typological but not the sociolinguistic and legal situation in Transnistria. With regard to the writing system, it should also be noted that Romanian was formerly also written in the Cyrillic script but was eventually transitioned to a more suitable Latin script. In the Republic of Moldova, this change took place after independence, while, in Transnistria, the Cyrillic script and the name "Moldovan" remain in use.



Map 2. The ethnic composition in Transnistria in 2004, visualization published in 2005

Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Atlas_of_Transnistria#/media/File:Ethnic_map_of_Pridnestrovie.jpg

uncertainty involved in ascertaining which languages are spoken by the population, as can be seen from the fact that the figures in the Statistical Yearbook record ethnicity but not the linguistic preferences of the inhabitants. There are, therefore, no reliable surveys on the distribution of individual languages and their vitality.

Muth (2014: 29) points out further linguistic problems associated with the marginalization of Moldovan resp. Romanian, as the use of the Latin alphabet is not welcomed, schools catering to this ethnic group have been closed and there are no higher-educational opportunities in this language. This negative trend is also represented in the officially recorded data on language distributions in the education system in Transnistria. Surveys show, for example, that at least 98% of education at vocational colleges and universities of applied sciences has been in Russian since 2016, and the remaining gap is closing. Moldovan fell from 2% to 1.5% in the period from 2016 to 2021, representing a rapid decline. The situation is completely devastating for Ukrainian, which does not occur at all in data for the same period and in the same educational formats. A similar picture emerges when looking at university-level institutions: Since 2016, over 98% of teaching has consistently been in Russian. Moldovan is used even less frequently than in vocational colleges or universities of applied sciences and fell from an initial 1.4% to 1.2% at the end of the 2020/2021 academic year. The situation is most serious for Ukrainian in this domain too, but there are still measurable values for this period, which range between 0.4% in 2016 and 0.3% in 2021 (see diagrams 1 and 2).

Given these figures, it is very difficult to speak of “equality” between the official languages in Transnistria. This is rather an unimplemented formal concession that only nominally elevates the three largest ethnic groups in the region to the same level. The situation is even more difficult for languages such as Bulgarian, Gagauz or Polish, which are spoken in Transnistria but do not have official status and therefore enjoy very limited opportunities for use outside of in-group interactions. There is also no information on how many young people learn English in educational institutions, but many of them speak English in Transnistria.

4. METHODS AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Any attempt to approach the LL and conduct a study in Transnistria must carefully consider the contextual factors mentioned above. These differ significantly from those in the Republic of Moldova’s core territory and must be made explicit, because they inform one’s research questions and influence the choice of methodology.

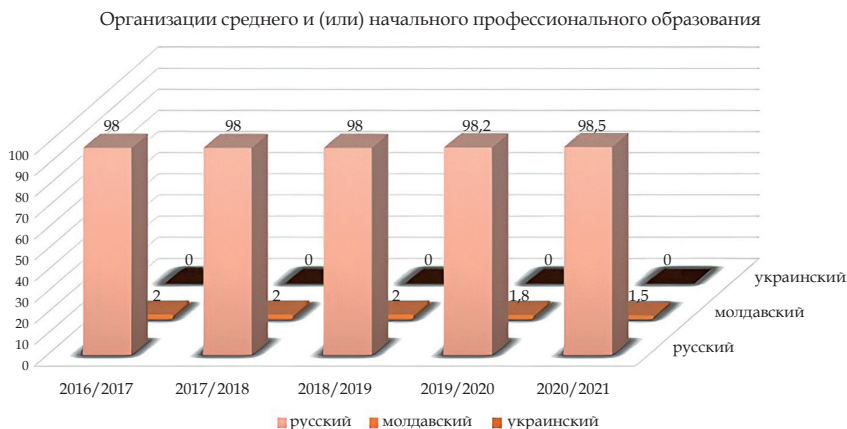


Diagram 1. Organization of secondary and (or) primary vocational education (Russian – Moldovan – Ukrainian)

Source: data from the Statistical Yearbook (2021: 62).



Diagram 2. Organization of higher vocational education; student population (Russian – Moldovan – Ukrainian).

Source: data from the Statistical Yearbook (2021: 62).

In this section, I will first present my methods before moving on to the results. I chose a primarily qualitative investigation, while still addressing several quantitative aspects, following the approach outlined by Durk Gorter (2018). He speaks of three major steps, which are systematized and brought together to serve as the basis for developing an empirical study on LLs. The first step is to define the geographical area of the study. In my case, I selected four places,

each with different socio-cultural and structural conditions. The first is the capital city Tiraspol (Russian and Ukrainian: *Тирасполь*, Romanian resp. Moldovan: *Tiraspol* or *Тираспол*), where the focus is on shopping strips and commercial zones (Gorter 2018: 43). The second place examined in the study is the district capital of Slobodzeya (Russian and Ukrainian: *Слободзея*, Romanian / Moldovan: *Slobozia* or *Слобозия*), which, in contrast to Tiraspol, has a much less commercial and touristic offering. It is a typical small town with the corresponding infrastructure. The third choice is the village of Chițcani (Russian: *Кицканы*, Romanian / Moldovan: *Chițcani* or *Кицкань*, Ukrainian: *Кіцкани*). Although the predominantly rural structure of the village suggests only limited use of written language in public spaces, it is home to an important monastery that is of interest to tourists and is advertised accordingly. The fourth and final location studied is the settlement of Parcani (Russian: *Парканы*, Romanian / Moldovan: *Parcani* or *Паркань*, Ukrainian and Bulgarian: *Паркани*), which has a Bulgarian majority population. All four places have unique ethnic and linguistic structures whose impact on the LL is to be investigated.

The second step that Gorter mentions consists in the selection of particular signs and their content for analysis (Gorter 2018: 46). In this study, I focus on positionally static signs that predominantly feature a Russian component but also include other languages. The study objects are organized according to their occurrence within specific domains and are linked to the local ethno-linguistic context, which, in some cases, involves English as an international *lingua franca*.

After geographical and domain-specific categorization of the study objects has been carried out, the third phase involves photographing the selected objects, whose analysis will enable the formulation of hypotheses about the role of different languages in society. One point that Gorter makes seems particularly important, namely that the linguistic researcher should also be the photographer (Gorter 2018: 47). This enables the person who takes the pictures to develop a comprehensive interpretation of language and multimedia in a concrete environment. This guideline was followed while conducting the present study in the period from 2022 to 2024, and empirical data was collected as follows.⁵

⁵ The total corpus compiled in Transnistria to evaluate the LL during this period comprises over 300 records. However, only those records that are relevant to the question at hand are counted and analyzed here. Since different areas in Tiraspol were already evaluated in the analysis by Muth (2014), I only deal with selected aspects concerning that place in my study. This choice explains why the total number of records collected is higher than those examined here. More photographs were also taken than were analyzed for the other locations, which means that the total corpus of material encompasses more material than accounted for in the domains presented here. In addition, data was also collected in places in Transnistria that are not evaluated in this paper.

Table 1. The empirical evidence collected (overall and relevant to the present study).

Place	All Signs	Relevant Signs
Tiraspol	146	52
Slobodzeya	26	16
Chițcani	20	15
Parcani	52	13
	n = 244	n = 86

Source: own study.

The central research questions of this study focus on identifying which languages besides Russian are used in writing in the public sphere, which domains they occur in and how Transnistria can be explored as a “visual text”. Here, I draw on the work of semiotician Tigran Simyan (2022) and consider not only matters of multilingualism but also the interaction of multimodality.⁶ This approach is motivated by the problem of Transnistria’s official trilingualism, which also needs to be explored. Although Ukrainian and Moldovan are granted official status alongside Russian, this ideal is hardly to be found represented in practical application. In addition, there are other language communities, such as the Bulgarians in Parcani, whose language has no official status but is taught in the local school and cultivated at the community’s cultural center. It is, therefore, necessary to examine where and under what conditions languages other than Russian occupy a place in the public space. Finally, this raises the question of which didactic measures are being implemented in the region’s LL and what measurable relationship exists between languages of instruction and patterns of public language use in written form.

Before we turn to the evidence gathered, it is important to recall the following contextual factors: Transnistria is unusual in its status as a *de jure* unrecognized territory that functions *de facto* as a separate state. Although the area can be reached from Chișinău by bus and entered without a visa, there are no flight connections, and hardly any countries maintain serious diplomatic relations with Tiraspol. The absence of consular or diplomatic support mechanisms leaves little means to contest decisions made by individual authorities and can bear risks for researchers collecting photographic material, as is a standard component of LL studies (Gorter 2018: 47). In Transnistria, caution is required not only when

⁶ This aspect can also be analyzed from a didactic (cf. Lisek & Putzier 2024), contrastive synchronous (cf. Henzelmann & Hacı 2025), and diachronic perspective (cf. Odaloš 2021; Simyan & Makaryan 2023). In this study, I focus on contemporary synchronic findings, although some of them allow conclusions to be drawn about diachronic developments.

photographing state facilities but even for objects of tourist interest. In both cases, it is easy to arouse the suspicion of the authorities by conspicuously taking photographs. At the same time, observing due caution can place considerable restrictions upon the researcher, especially outside the capital of Tiraspol, where relatively few foreigners travel. The data on the wider LL is correspondingly sparse, as there have been only sporadic studies carried out on its structure in most areas. The paper by Sebastian Muth is an exception, but he focused his analyses on Tiraspol and the administrative and commercial infrastructure there (Muth 2014), leaving out other less accessible regions. However, this author also pointed out that pressure from state institutions makes empirical research on languages in the region considerably more difficult than in other contexts, even if direct contact with the population is not necessarily required for a study on LLs (Muth 2014: 29). The limited accessibility and political isolation of the region, compounded by the latent situation in neighboring Ukraine, the absence of local consular support and the mistrust of foreigners by the local authorities, therefore, collectively explain the sparsity of research on the Transnistrian LL and influence how researchers must approach such a study.⁷

5. FINDINGS

Let us now take a look at the specific findings from our four selected locations, starting with Tiraspol – the capital of Transnistria, with a population of 128,400 (Statističeskij ežegodnik 2021: 28). This city was chosen as the first location for the study because it is the most accessible, thanks to its infrastructure, and because a high quantity of public signage can be expected, due to its central importance. For the present study, a total of 52 relevant pieces of textual evidence were collected on and in the immediate vicinity of “October 25th Street” (in Russian *улица 25 октября*). The evidence focuses on restaurants, shops and service-based businesses. As this is the city’s central avenue, where the main sights of the capital are located, the greatest variety of offerings is to be observed there.

⁷ From my own experience, I can report that photography in Transnistria must be practiced with considerable caution. Even taking pictures of seemingly innocuous objects such as churches, museums or monuments can arouse the suspicion of the omnipresent authorities, security services or guards. In my case, this led to an interview and inspection of the photographic material. However, as long as one avoids photographing military objects and can credibly prove a genuine interest in Transnistria, there are unlikely to be serious consequences. At the same time, these conditions make the territory less attractive for empirical studies on LLs.

Here, the commercial use of different languages is in focus. There is no question that advertisements and signs on shops and restaurants all aim to attract customers and must therefore communicate short, appealing messages. I would like to classify these texts as external marketing, as they are directed toward an outside audience, while their actual informational content is less significant than the marketing strategy employed. At the same time, however, we also find service-oriented content such as opening hours, price lists or consumer information, which I would like to refer to as internal marketing. This distinction becomes important when taking a closer look at the findings in Figures 1 to 3: The external marketing takes the form of geographical names like “Stockholm”, “Toscana” or “Korea”, accompanied by additions such as



Figure 1. An electronics shop in the center of Tiraspol.

Source: own picture.



Figure 2. An Italian-style restaurant

Source: own picture.

“restaurant” or “glow / beauty for you”. These textual elements are rendered in Latin script and thus signify Western culture while activating stereotypes associated with the corresponding toponyms, such as tasty food or superior processing of goods and services.

The observer is invited in this way to understand that international and, therefore, high-quality products are being offered, while the informationally relevant additions, which fall under internal marketing, are consistently displayed in Russian. An exception to this exists in advertising signs written exclusively in English, of which only one sample could be found on the street under investigation. The sign advertises outdated cardboard coins, which have been replaced in circulation by metal ones, and are now marketed by a bank as souvenirs for foreign tourists. Accordingly, this advertisement (cf. Figure 4) is not predominantly aimed at a domestic audience and does not require a supplementary Russian text.

Thus, information relevant for a local audience generally occurs in Russian, most saliently as additions to foreign text elements. For example, the restaurant “Toscana” offers not only Italian but also (unspecified) European dishes, as is communicated by the corresponding addition in Russian (*Европейская кухня*; cf. Figure 2). The “Stockholm” shop offers not Swedish but American products, which is also indicated in Russian (*Товары из*



Figure 3. A beauty salon in Tiraspol

Source: own picture.



Figure 4. An advertisement on a bank for cardboard coins (no longer in circulation).

Source: own picture.

Америки; cf. Figure 1). And the working days and opening hours of the beauty salon in Figure 3 are also provided only in Russian with the abbreviations *ПН–СБ* (‘Monday to Saturday’) and *ВС* (‘Sunday’). In other words, the foreign-language terms (mostly in English or, rarely, French) fulfill a symbolic function, while informative text or information relevant for orientation is provided in Russian (Muth 2014: 33; Müller 2021). Ukrainian or Romanian resp. Moldovan inscriptions are completely absent from signage providing detailed product information to customers. The following results emerge from the data collected:

Table 2. Data collection in Tiraspol

Tiraspol	Signs
N	52
Russian	30
Russian + English	7
Russian + Toponym in Latin script	8
English	3
Russian + other	3

Source: own study.

These numbers clearly indicate that Russian dominates the commercial sector of Tiraspol’s LL. While Muth (2014: 33) estimates that around three quarters of all inscriptions are in Russian only, we can demonstrate that other languages are also visible in the commercial use of language in public spaces. English phrases, in particular, play a role here, but also various foreign toponyms rendered in Latin script, while Ukrainian and Moldovan resp. Romanian are almost never used for advertising purposes. One rare exception is given in Figure 5, where a translation agency in the city center advertises its services in Russian and Romanian. A double-sided display stand contains two posters with complementary symmetrical designs: On the one side, the Romanian phrase *Birou de traduceri* (‘translation agency’) is featured centrally above the Russian addition *переводы* (‘translations’). On the reverse side, the Russian text *Бюро переводов* (‘translation agency’) is accompanied by the Romanian addition *traduceri* (‘translations’). Both posters also indicate that all European languages are offered, but only in Romanian on the one side (left in Figure 5) and Russian on the other (right in Figure 5).

Interestingly, the Latin-based Romanian, and not the Cyrillic based Moldovan, script was used here, indicating that this office translates, among other things, documents originating from or intended for purposes in the Republic of



Figure 5. A translation agency advertises its services (in Romanian and Russian)

Source: own picture.

Moldova, where Romanian or Moldovan is standardly written in Latin script. Regardless of this exceptional case, we conclude that Moldovan resp. Romanian and Ukrainian occur almost exclusively on state institutions, in street names and on some place-name signs (in some cases displayed smaller than the Russian equivalent). Only non-local languages, such as French, Italian, Abkhazian or Ossetian, occur even less frequently overall (see also Muth 2014).

The situation is significantly different in the study's second location, Slobodzeya, which is the capital of the district of the same name and has around 16,000 inhabitants. According to the 2004 census data, 46% of the population are Moldovans, followed by 41% Russians and 11% Ukrainians. Although this town is hardly home to extraordinary sights that might attract foreign tourists, it is a strategically important place within the administrative structure of Transnistria. In the center of the city, I took 16 photographs in publicly accessible places, documenting the use of language on monuments, prominent signage and street signs. The photographs were taken along a 500-meter section of Frunze Street, between Lenin Street and Komsomolskaya Street. This is where the central monuments, administrative buildings and a small pedestrian zone are located, but only a few shops. While foreign-language inscriptions

are to be expected in a large city like Tiraspol, in this small town, I specifically looked for inscriptions that reflect the local reality away from administrative structures,⁸ above all, on signposts, churches or chapels, monuments and museums. Overall, the following relevant evidence was collected in this part of the town:

Table 3. Data collection in Slobodzeya

Slobodzeya	Signs
N	16
Russian	14
Russian + English	2

Source: own study.

In contrast to Tiraspol, the limited use of Latin script is very noticeable in Slobodzeya. While foreign-language inscriptions can be observed close together in Tiraspol, especially in the city center, a comparable linguistic infrastructure cannot be attested in Slobodzeya. Even for the two official languages Ukrainian and Moldovan, only very sporadic material can be found. Instead, at first glance, Russian dominates even more obviously here than in the capital. This is not surprising in relation to Western languages, as foreign tourists rarely visit this place. However, exceptions to Russian’s otherwise near exclusive predominance nevertheless occur on signposts indicating unique sights throughout Transnistria. These standardized signs are always colored brown with white text and provide relevant information in Russian and English, as shown in Figure 6. The upper sign, for example, points the way to Wool House “Mioara” in both these languages. And, even though the name comes from Romanian resp. Moldovan,⁹ which has official status in the region, this language is conspicuously absent from the sign, a general rule that also holds true for the lower sign.

Nevertheless, we cannot simply generalize and say that Transnistria is a territory characterized by uniformity of the LL as one moves away from Tiraspol. On the contrary, the LL is diverse and varied, though this diversity is not immediately obvious or widespread. The truth of the matter is neverthe-

⁸ This is an important point, as all administrative buildings in Transnistria have trilingual signs in Moldovan, Russian and Ukrainian. This practice can be interpreted as policy signaling, a form of strategic self-representation, making it all the more worthwhile to look at linguistic infrastructure beyond these administrative units.

⁹ *Mioara* is also the name of a sheep in a famous Romanian poem.



Figure 6. Signposts for places of tourist interest in Slobodzeya

Source: own picture.

less revealed by a look at the village of Chițcani, located about 12 km south of Tiraspol on the opposite side of the Dniester River. The following data were collected there:

Table 4. Data collection in Chițcani

Chițcani	Signs
N	15
Russian	7
Russian + English	2
Russian + Romanian	6

Source: own study.

Chițcani is home to the Noul Neamț Monastery, which was reopened 25 years ago, after being closed during the Soviet era, and is visited by pilgrims and tourists. The monastery was founded by Romanian monks in the 19th century, a fact that likely serves as one of the reasons we can find Romanian inscriptions in addition to Russian throughout the monastery grounds –



Figure 7. Signage of the shop at the church

Source: own picture.

often positioned next to each other. It is interesting to note that Romanian is written exclusively in Latin script here (cf. Figures 7 and 8). This observation is significant in two respects: Firstly, Moldovan in Transnistria is always written in Cyrillic script, so one can speculate that material support for the restoration of the monastery may have come from an external partner in Moldova or even Romania. Secondly, the presence of the Latin script is all the more striking because Cyrillic is strongly associated with the Orthodox Church and contrasts symbolically with the Latin script of the Western Church. One might, therefore, have expected Moldovan inscriptions in Cyrillic characters here, but no such signage was found on the premises.

In addition, there are several bilingual (Russian–English) information boards, as shown in Figure 9, that serve to inform visitors about



Figure 8. Bilingual (Romanian–Russian) sign above the entrance to a burial chamber

Source: own picture.



Figure 9. Bilingual (Russian-English) plaque about the history of Chițcani's Monastery

Source: own picture.

the history and distinctive features of the area. Tourist information boards in this style and language combination exist at places of interest throughout Transnistria.

The final example to be considered in this study is the LL in Parcani, a village situated between Transnistria's second largest city, Bender (Russian: *Бендеры*, Romanian resp. Moldovan: *Bender* or *Tighina* resp. *Бендер* or *Тигина*, Ukrainian and Bulgarian: *Бендери*), and the capital Tiraspol. This settlement is located directly on the Dniester and is distinct in that the majority of its over 10,500 inhabitants are ethnic Bulgarians.¹⁰ While Bulgarian is not an official language in Transnistria, it is nevertheless cultivated in local institutions. These include, in particular, the village's cultural center and the school, where at least a few hours of Bulgarian language instruction are offered. In this location, the following relevant empirical evidence was compiled for the evaluation of the LL:

¹⁰ Interestingly, Parcani is, therefore, also the largest Bulgarian "village" of all, owing to its being located outside of Bulgaria. There, a population of its size would entail classification as a "town" or even "city".

Table 5. Data collection in Parcani

Parcani	Signs
N	13
Russian	11
Russian + Bulgarian	1
Bulgarian	1

Source: own study.

Figure 10 shows a banner above the main entrance to the school expressing a welcoming greeting in Russian on the left and in Bulgarian on the right (Russian: *Добро пожаловать!*, Bulgarian: *Добре дошли!*). There are a few memorial and informational displays in the school building itself, but most of them are in Russian. Among them is a memorial plaque commemorating Stoyan Atanasov, a teacher originally from Bulgaria who played a key role in cultivating the Bulgarian language in the local education system.¹¹ Beyond this, the Bulgarian heritage of the population is commemorated by a monument to the well-known and much revered Bulgarian revolutionary Vasil Levski, which is located in front of the House of Culture, and the numerous Bulgarian surnames inscribed on a memorial honoring fallen soldiers in the village's central square. The Levski monument (shown in Figure 11) is particularly noteworthy because the name is spelled in Bulgarian (as *Васил Левски*) and not adapted to Russian orthography (as *Васил*

**Figure 10.** Welcome banners at the school in Parcani

Source: own picture.

¹¹ There is also the Bulgarian association *Българска община* ('Bulgarian Community'), which maintains a multi-purpose room in the cultural center, as well as a museum attached to the town hall that documents the history of Bulgarian settlement in the area. The local Bulgarian dialect has been little studied to date, but it exhibits numerous borrowings and structural similarities with Russian (on the latter topic, cf. Iliev & Koroloff 2021 and others).

or *Василий Левский*). This choice bears particular symbolic significance when contrasted with the common practice in Parcani of adapting the first and last names of its inhabitants to Russian spelling norms. For example, a common surname in the village is *Zhelezkov* (*Железков*), which derives from the Bulgarian *Zhelyazkov* (*Желязков*) and has been modified in compliance with Russian morphophonology. Not all names are subject to adaptation, such as the very characteristic Bulgarian surname *Stoyanov* (*Стоянов*), which can be found several times on the memorial to the fallen soldiers. Other typical Bulgarian surnames found engraved on this plaque are *Stanov* (*Станов*) and *Stoev* (*Стоев*; see Figure 12). Apart



Figure 11. Vasil Levski monument in Parcani

Source: own picture.

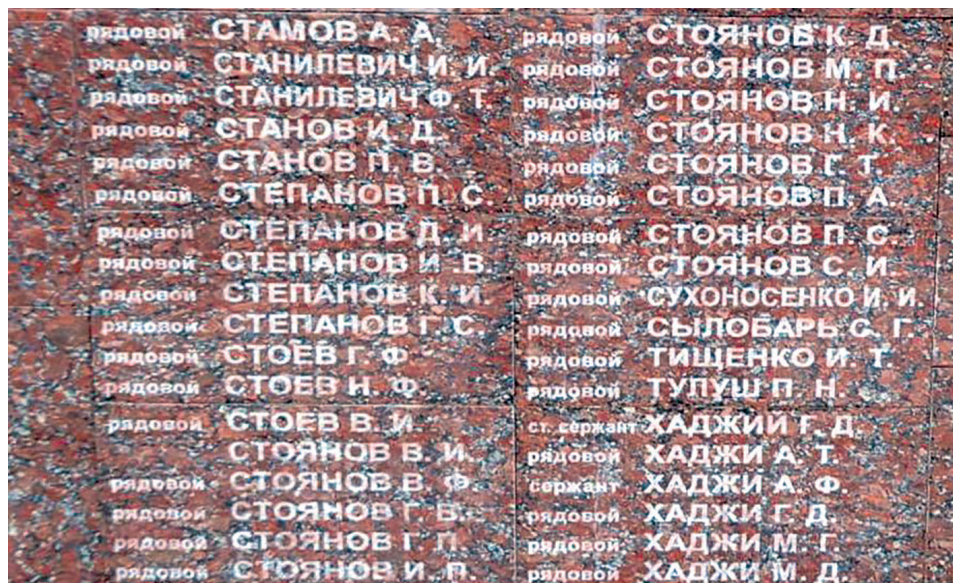


Figure 12. A memorial plaque with numerous Bulgarian names in Parcani

Source: own picture.

from these names and short phrases like the one on the school building, Bulgarian is used in Parcani almost exclusively in oral communication, such that it has hardly any recognizable impact on the LL of the village.

6. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

In this study, I have highlighted several distinctive features of the LLs in Transnistria. I began by addressing the geographical, historical and demographic specificities of this area and explained why the language situation there is very complex. I then presented data from my own corpus compiled from four different locations, which revealed significant differences in the LLs of the region. I observed that the LLs do not align with the official language policy of Transnistria but rather reflect the languages predominant in both the education system and international communication, these being Russian as the main language and English as the most important global foreign language. Our findings thus clearly show that the overall LL in Transnistria is not tailored to an officially trilingual area or a migration-related linguistic superdiversity (in the sense of Földes 2020, for example) but to the actual competences in the written use of languages cemented by the education system.

The findings on the LLs in Tiraspol, Slobodzeya, Chițcani and Parcani reveal notable local differences. They nevertheless all demonstrate that Russian is the language most widely used across Transnistria and thus lives up to the paradigm of what Piotr Oleksy (2016: 242) calls the “bastion of Russian civilization”, which is surrounded by other cultures and languages. In practice, this circumstance poses no threat to the vitality of Russian but rather to all other languages, as indicated by both the figures on language choice in the education system (cf. diagram 1 and 2) and our findings concerning the LLs.

But the findings also reveal other aspects. For instance, they shed light on how much the LL in the city of Tiraspol differs from smaller and less frequently visited places. This distinction is highly significant, because inscriptions in Western foreign languages are far more common in the capital than in smaller towns or villages. In Tiraspol’s commercial sector, a wide variety of English inscriptions or other textual elements in Latin script are visible, in contrast to places where English is mostly limited to tourist information boards or signposts for locations of interest.

Furthermore, we can decisively state that the official trilingualism of Transnistria is far from being sufficiently implemented in the region’s LLs. While the policy is consistently reflected in the signage of administrative or state institutions, as well as on a few street-name signs and prominent message boards such

as those marking the entrance to Tiraspol, it is *de facto* non-existent in the private sector, public transport, tourist infrastructure and education. The policy's implementation can therefore be regarded as a merely symbolic gesture acknowledging the multi-ethnic nature of the society (Muth 2014: 43). But, where even official languages are not adequately included in the public sphere, this lack of inclusion applies all the more to languages without official status, such as Bulgarian. The integration of this language into the public space is attested only very sporadically and is largely limited to proper names, although Bulgarian is used more comprehensively in semi-public spaces such as the school of Parcani or in the village museum.

Furthermore, I argue that there is a striking difference in the practical use of Moldovan and Romanian (resp. the Cyrillic or Latin script) for inscriptions in Transnistria: The use of Cyrillic signifies the local Moldovan language, which, however, largely fulfills symbolic functions. This practice holds true for signage at educational institutions such as schools, kindergartens or the university, even where Moldovan is hardly used in the corresponding institutions, if at all. In contrast, the use of the Latin script to render Romanian is associated with practical and informative functions for addressees, as when guiding visitors around the monastery complex in Chițcani or offering translation services in Tiraspol (cf. Figure 5).

Another component that makes these observations quite interesting from a language didactic perspective is their relationship to multilingual language pedagogy. We can recognize a strong correlation reflected in the public relevance of languages in Transnistria, with Russian as the most important language of everyday life, other languages used only locally and mainly in private communication and English as an international *lingua franca*. Presently, English is also spreading among young people in Transnistria, especially in urban areas – a trend linked to a clear increase in student internationalization from around 2010 onwards, in accordance with socio-cultural and linguistic parameters (Tavares 2025: 156). In the medium term, this means that English will become an unavoidable tool of communication for younger generations in Transnistria. This development also aligns with the potential for enhancing Transnistria's tourism infrastructure going forward, which will require adequate English-language resources. We have seen that such measures are already being implemented in some cases, for example on information boards such as those in Figure 6, which are provided in Russian and English.

A further aspect relevant to language didactics is that the official languages Moldovan and Ukrainian are scarcely in use as mediums of education and can therefore only have a very limited scope of application in the LL – especially when it comes to regulations, traffic information or product advertising. Cor-

respondingly, those languages that are learned best through their dominance in the classroom are also embedded in the public space and appear most visibly in the LL. Russian is far and away the primary language in both instances, while English acquires increasing local relevance as a global foreign language, even though we have no reliable data on English proficiency. At the same time, it is suggested to the younger generation that learning Moldovan (and thus ultimately Romanian) or Ukrainian is of little relevance, which, in the long term, will bring this generation into even greater alignment with the Russian language, while, at the same time, alienating it from the Moldovan-Romanian language area. From a linguistic perspective, Chişinău and Tiraspol are moving further and further apart, and this is immediately apparent in the LLs of Transnistria.

Finally, it is evident that Ukrainian is only sporadically represented in the places under investigation and is primarily visible on the official trilingual signage of administrative or state institutions but not in the commercial or tourist sectors. It cannot be ruled out that the strong presence of Russian military units in Transnistria and the war in Ukraine today are having at least an indirect effect on the use of this language, but that question is deserving of a separate investigation that explores places beyond the scope of this study. What is clear, however, is that Ukrainian remains understudied in Transnistria (Muth 2014: 29) and underrepresented in its LLs in relation to the high proportion of Ukrainians in the region.

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Badając krajobrazy językowe Naddniestrza

ABSTRAKT. W niniejszym opracowaniu bada się kilka szczególnych cech krajobrazów językowych Naddniestrza. Region ten położony jest pomiędzy Ukrainą a Republiką Mołdawii, do której należy *de iure*. Jednakże funkcjonuje on *de facto* jako nieuznawane na arenie międzynarodowej, choć funkcjonalnie niezależne państwo mające własną walutę, armię i parlament. Zgodnie z obecną sytuacją prawną w Naddniestrzu istnieją trzy języki urzędowe: rosyjski, mołdawski i ukraiński. W praktyce jednak na całym terytorium używa się prawie wyłącznie języka rosyjskiego. Autor twierdzi, że krajobrazy językowe Naddniestrza nie są zorientowane na wytyczne polityki językowej, ale faworyzują języki, które odgrywają kluczową rolę w systemie edukacji i komunikacji międzynarodowej, a mianowicie rosyjski jako najczęściej używany język oraz angielski jako ważny globalny język obcy.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: krajobrazy językowe, Naddniestrze, j. rosyjski, j. angielski, język w przestrzeni publicznej.

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