

# Becoming a Tree Hugger: Youth Environmentalism in Chişinău, Moldova<sup>1</sup>

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## *Abstract*

This paper focuses on Ecoweek, an environmental project for young people in Moldova, in order to explore the themes of post-Soviet cultural identity construction and the adaptation of Western ideas to local contexts. It considers how Ecoweek participants' establishment of international connections allowed them to create an environmentalism that was cosmopolitan, yet distinctly Moldovan. Their approach reflects the strong global awareness of many urban young people in Moldova, who often look outside of the country for opportunities. The paper argues that students' participation in the project was related not just to a determination to solve environmental problems, but also to a desire to be part of a global trend, to gain experience, and to make useful contacts. Moreover, it suggests that the same factors leading the students to produce a globally informed environmentalism also made it difficult to build a lasting movement.

**Keywords:** youth, environment, activism, Chişinău, Republic of Moldova

On a warm, sunny Sunday morning in April 2010, I joined a group of young environmentalists in front of a university in downtown Chişinău for a last-minute discussion of the flash mob that would start the day. When everyone had arrived, we started walking toward Ştefan cel Mare Park. As we passed the Triumphal Arch, one student threw some ripped up cardboard on the ground. The rest of the group pointed and booed. The same student then picked up the trash and put it in a trash bin as we all clapped and cheered. A few people turned to look as they walked by, and the students performed the scene several more times before we reached the park. Once there, we split up, walking around the perimeter of the park so we could enter it from all directions. We slowly made our way to the fountain in the center of the park, hugging trees as we went. No one else seemed to pay much attention, but the students enjoyed themselves, taking pictures of each other and laughing.

The flash mob and the small environmental projects that followed capped off an event called Ecoweek, seven days of environmental activities for young Moldovans. Led by Violeta,<sup>2</sup> a 21-year-old Moldovan woman studying geocology

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<sup>2</sup> All names are pseudonyms.



in Germany, Ecoweek involved about 30 high school and college students. I volunteered to help interview the applicants for the project and participated in planning sessions, as well as the week's events, including educational sessions, a trip to the local wastewater treatment plant, a movie and networking night, a tree-planting day, and the planning and execution of small environmental projects. After Ecoweek, I hosted voluntary follow-up meetings with participants and helped to plan eco-movie nights.

According to Violeta, Ecoweek aimed to impart global and local environmental information to young people, to give participants a chance to plan and carry out practical activities, and to create networking opportunities. The larger aim of the project was to start an environmental movement of young people, something the organizers felt did not exist in Moldova. At the end of the week, the students formed a Facebook group in order to maintain the ties created during Ecoweek and to attract new members. Several meetings and events, such as annual Earth Hour celebrations, took place in the two years following Ecoweek. Violeta then began to plan a new, larger project called ActivEco, which aimed to continue to raise environmental awareness in Moldova and to work toward building a sustainable "green" economy.

This paper, like the others presented as part of the conference panel "Re-inventing traditions," is concerned with cultural identity construction in former Soviet spaces, more specifically the adaptation of Western ideas to local contexts. As a global phenomenon that is constructed locally, environmentalism provides an ideal setting to explore these issues.<sup>3</sup> Ecoweek in particular presents an opportunity to consider how some young people in Moldova are actively constructing environmental identities, in part through the creative adoption of Western models. This paper examines the way in which Ecoweek participants came to "recognize themselves as environmentalists."<sup>4</sup>

The above anecdote illustrates two important features of the fledgling environmental movement in Moldova. First, by demonstrating to passers-by the merits of throwing away trash instead of littering, the Ecoweek participants were trying to distance themselves from what they described as a backward "Soviet mentality." Organizers and participants alike expressed a belief that the older generations cannot change, so change must start with the younger generations. Second, the choice of tree hugging for the second part of the flash mob reflects

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<sup>3</sup> Krista Harper, "Environment as Master Narrative: Discourse and Identity in Environmental Conflicts," *Anthropological Quarterly* 74, no. 3, 2001, 101-103; Anna Tsing, *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

<sup>4</sup> Timothy Choy, *Ecologies of Comparison: An Ethnography of Endangerment in Hong Kong* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 113.

their desire to connect themselves to the global “eco” movement, thus distancing themselves from local ways of treating the environment, which they consider harmful.

In his ethnography of environmentalism in Hong Kong, Timothy Choy argues that for activists in that country, “modes of being, feeling, and identifying with worlds outside one’s supposed own are (at) the very heart of environmental action.”<sup>5</sup> He argues further that “the environmental marks a space of transcendence,” including “transcendence of the local,” which “enables imagination of, and action for, a political alternative,” and “transcendence of prior ways of thinking,” through which global environmental ideas allow activists to leave behind an imagined, “backward” local mind-set.<sup>6</sup> In much the same way, young Moldovan environmentalists tried to move beyond local political hurdles and the so-called “Soviet mind-set” by looking outside of Moldova for solutions and connecting themselves to global environmentalism.

At the same time, however, in addressing these particular obstacles and focusing on the problems they saw around them, the students necessarily created a local form of environmentalism. Drawing on her ethnographic research in Indonesia, Anna Tsing argues that environmentalism there is characterized by a self-conscious “cosmopolitan specificity.”<sup>7</sup> She explores the ways in which “widely circulating knowledges become local” as environmentalists throughout the country draw on certain international ways to talk about and enjoy nature, creating in the process an environmentalism that is specific to Indonesia.<sup>8</sup> This paper explores this process in the Moldovan context, considering how Ecoweek participants’ adoption of Western ideas and establishment of international connections allowed them to create an environmentalism that was cosmopolitan, yet distinctly Moldovan. Their own approach reflects the strong global awareness of many urban young people in Moldova, who often report feeling trapped in a country with few opportunities. In fact, some students’ participation in the project related at least as much to a desire to be part of this global trend and to make useful contacts as to solve environmental problems. Moreover, the same factors leading the students to create a globally informed environmentalism also made it difficult to create a lasting movement.

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<sup>5</sup> Ibidem, 135.

<sup>6</sup> Ibidem, 134-35.

<sup>7</sup> Tsing, *Friction*, 124.

<sup>8</sup> Ibidem, 124.



### Transcending prior ways of thinking

Violeta told me that the goal of Ecoweek was “to see what we as people, as students, can change in our own environment, with our efforts.” Her focus on young people reflects her desire to start a new kind of environmental movement in Moldova, particularly in contrast to the existing community of environmental non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Chişinău mainly run by middle-aged men. At a planning meeting for Ecoweek, I suggested inviting Mr. Vadim, an enthusiastic ecology professor I had just interviewed, to give a talk. Violeta seemed unconvinced, telling me, “These old men just like to give big speeches. They want to show up and look good, but they don’t actually do anything.” She insisted that her movement would be different.<sup>9</sup>

Reflecting the visibility of age polarization in Moldova, young people frequently cited generational differences to explain societal problems. Ecoweek participant and high school senior Ştefan, for example, broke society into three groups. People under twenty-five, like himself, were born in a “different world” than their parents and have a “greater capacity to succeed,” while those over fifty simply don’t want to accept new ideas. “The middle generation is gone,” he went on; the economic disaster has forced many to emigrate to find work, leaving a population at home that is concentrated in the oldest and youngest groups.<sup>10</sup> Ştefan explained to me that with so many people in their thirties and forties working abroad, it feels like a generation is missing, at times causing pronounced conflict between young and old. “Society must hear the voice of the young, and accept the wisdom of the old,” Ştefan told me. “But when the middle is gone, it doesn’t work.” This smoldering intergenerational tension surfaced in April 2009, when thousands of young people gathered in Chişinău’s central square to protest elections they believed had been rigged by the Communist Party.

I often heard younger people complain about the “Soviet mentality” that is believed to pervade the older generations and prevent real change in the country. During Ecoweek, conversations often drifted to how they could convince others, especially older people, to change their behaviors and attitudes. For example, Andreas, Violeta’s German boyfriend who was working on a master’s degree in environmental management and came to help with the educational sessions, talked about the importance of recycling. He explained that in Germany, everyone

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<sup>9</sup> Violeta is one of many young people I met in Moldova trying to make positive changes in the country. Ecoweek participant Ştefan told me that foreigners are often surprised at how active the youth is in Moldova. He contrasted this with young people in the U.S. and Western Europe who “don’t give a shit.” He reasoned that when someone is in a bad situation, he or she works to change it.

<sup>10</sup> This contrast is evident in the city, but especially stark in the villages.

separates his or her garbage without thinking about it. One participant asked him where he had learned this attitude, and he answered, “I think the most important educators were my parents.”

The participant responded, “So, you see, in our country we should educate our parents, instead of...”

“Yeah,” Andreas broke in. “And there was somebody who said, ‘Oh nobody ever...these old people, you won’t move them.’ And I think that’s correct. I think it’s really hard to change old people’s lives. I think this is why Ecoweek is such a good thing, because it’s us.”

Another participant asked whether they used the mass media in Germany to encourage people to recycle. “No,” Andreas said, “it’s already common sense” not to throw away recyclable items.

Yet another participant suggested, “For us it will be a big stretch,” since it is very difficult to change people’s mentality. “How can we teach people to sort the garbage?” she asked.

Andreas suggested that they would have to frame things differently. “If you say, ‘people, hey, come on, bring your own bag to *Piața Centrală*,’ or ‘collect glass,’ or ‘send kids around to collect paper,’ that smells like Soviet times, yeah?”

Adrian concurred, adding, “Old people think it’s propaganda when you try to explain something to them.”

Andreas told me about his own experiences living in Moldova, where he had taught German for two years. For instance, each time he had taken his own reusable bags to the grocery store and the cashier reached for a plastic bag, he would tell her please not to use them. She would generally respond, “Why not? They’re free.” To many Moldovans who remember being forced to use a reusable *pungă* (bag) to carry their items, plastic bags represent a kind of freedom. But for young people who don’t remember Soviet times, Andreas believed, new reusable fabric bags could be seen as cool. Similarly, the Ecoweek participants felt that their peers and young children could learn to recycle; they were more concerned about their parents and grandparents, whom they saw as unable or unwilling to learn a new behavior. For example, they explained that a recycling program had been started in some Chişinău neighborhoods several years before, but there was no educational program to show people how to separate garbage, and many adults just threw all their trash in the bins together. Similarly, one student told a story about an event he had attended in which organizers told participants to throw their garbage in bags; the kids did as they were told, but the adults did not.

The Ecoweek participants had various explanations for older generations’ alleged inability to change. For example, Eugenia said in a follow-up meeting that Moldovans have big plans, but they never finish anything. Her opinion was



that they “don’t have the brain” to finish projects. Vlad concurred that the biggest problem is people’s mentality. Eugenia suggested that this could be addressed by “encouraging people to be curious again,” to which Vova said sarcastically, “Come on.” At another meeting, participants posited that people have been brainwashed not to care about the environment. Some suggested that education should be improved, so people would learn to stop burning leaves and throwing garbage in the street and in the river. However, someone pointed out that kids *have* been educated, at least in urban areas; they already know what to do, but they are taught in school to be silent and not make trouble. This stems from Soviet times, they insisted, when it was dangerous to say or do certain things, because you could go to prison or be killed if the wrong person found out. This has led to “social impotence,” they told me; people are passive and feel they cannot point out a problem or do things differently even if they think it would be better for the environment.

Ideas about the “Soviet mentality” extended to participants’ views of politics. During educational sessions that took place on the first two days of Ecoweek, Violeta expressed her view that political engagement is a waste of time. It makes no sense to work with the Ministry of Environment because of its small budget, she claimed, or to demand that the state pay attention to environmental issues, as politicians are too corrupt and incompetent to listen. The students often expressed similar views. In discussing ways to address pollution, one participant suggested that the government could collect taxes from polluters. In response, Adrian, a high school senior, asked where the tax money would go; “You get corruption out of this,” he insisted. During an Ecoweek follow-up meeting that I held with a handful of participants, I asked if they agreed with Violeta’s view of politics. They did. Vova, for example, said that politics “is a power world, and we can’t go there.”

While many of the students’ ideas build upon and perpetuate certain dualisms, between modern and backward mentalities and moral and corrupt politics, for example, these can allow for the development of alternative, liberating approaches.<sup>11</sup> One way that young people in Eastern Europe have rejected old forms of authority is by forming new social movements, as in the color revolutions of Ukraine and Georgia.<sup>12</sup> As young Moldovans continue to grow disillusioned with their government, they too have increasingly turned to more creative, “grassroots” efforts to try to effect change. The Ecoweek participants’

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<sup>11</sup> Choy, *Ecologies of Comparison*.

<sup>12</sup> Donnacha Ó Beacháin and Abel Polese, “‘Rocking the Vote’: New Forms of Youth Organization in Eastern Europe and the Former Soviet Union,” *Journal of Youth Studies* 13, no. 5, 2010, 615-30.

views about politics mirror the frustrations expressed by activists in recent protests worldwide related to a lack of political representation, leading to calls for “real” democracy.<sup>13</sup> These activists have turned to various alternative democratic approaches, each translating global discourses of democracy into local versions to spur political struggles.<sup>14</sup> In some Occupy movements, for example, activists have adopted practices of direct democracy such as consensus decision-making.<sup>15</sup> In the same vein, although on a modest scale and without revolutionary intent, the Ecoweek participants decided to avoid existing political structures by making their own decisions and performing their own actions.

As Violeta and the Ecoweek participants believed that change must come from them rather than from the top, they decided to educate themselves about environmental problems and then teach others and lead by example. During the first day, participants watched the short online film *The Story of Stuff*, an illustrated explanation of consumerism from production to disposal, and the environmental and social problems this process creates. When the movie ended, Ştefan promptly announced, “Until this moment, I wanted an iPhone. But now, I will remain with my Nokia.” The next day, Larisa told us she had watched another video on the Story of Stuff website about bottled water. She confessed that she had two bottles of water in front of her while she watched. “Shame on me,” she said, telling us that she plans to buy a filter now instead of more bottled water.

As a result of their attitudes about the inability of older people to change and the futility of working through existing political channels, the Ecoweek participants decided to take Violeta’s advice to change their own behavior and hopefully inspire other young people to change their behavior as well. In this way, they would “transcend” what they considered outdated ways of thinking and form Moldova’s first “eco-generation.”<sup>16</sup> This decision guided the projects they carried

<sup>13</sup> Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, “The Fight for ‘Real Democracy’ at the Heart of Occupy Wall Street,” *Foreign Affairs*, October 11, 2011; David Nugent, “Commentary: Democracy, Temporalities of Capitalism, and Dilemmas of Inclusion in Occupy Movements,” *American Ethnologist*, 39, no. 2, 2012, 280-83.

<sup>14</sup> David Nugent, “Democracy Otherwise: Struggles Over Popular Rule in the Northern Peruvian Andes,” *Democracy: Anthropological Approaches*, ed. Julia Paley (Santa Fe: SAR Press, 2008), 21-62; Julia Paley, “Introduction,” Paley, *Democracy*, 3-20.

<sup>15</sup> Jeffrey Juris, “Reflections on #Occupy Everywhere: Social Media, Public Space, and Emerging Logics of Aggregation,” *American Ethnologist*, 39, no. 2, 2012, 259-79; Maple Razsa and Andrej Kurnik “The Occupy Movement in Zizek’s Hometown: Direct Democracy and a Politics of Becoming,” *American Ethnologist*, 39, no. 2, 2012, 238-58.

<sup>16</sup> Young environmentalists in Indonesia also focused on youth as a category through which to approach identity formation. As Tsing explains in *Friction* (127), “Youth is often a time for forging new modes of agency and desire. For nature lovers, this is a resonant frame for creating cosmopolitan knowledge.”



out, all of which aimed at changing people's ideas and behavior. These included an art project for children, handing out stickers with ways to "save the planet," distributing recycling information, bicycling through Chişinău to promote this as an alternative means of transportation, and encouraging people to trade their disposable plastic bags for reusable canvas ones. Each project also reflected the influence of Western ideas about environmentalism, which is discussed next.

### Transcending the local

One way the participants tried to distance themselves from the older generations and local political constraints was to connect themselves to the global environmental movement by engaging dominant Western environmental themes and discourses. During the second day of Ecoweek, participants expressed satisfaction that they were finally learning about "real" environmentalism – about failing species, deforestation, and pollution, for example – in contrast to the local environmental messages they considered inferior, such as "Don't throw trash on the streets." Violeta had indeed looked for assistance, ideas, and expertise outside of Moldova. She had acquired German and American funding to support the project and recruited an American and a German ecology specialist to lead educational sessions. As described above, however, even forms of environmentalism that focus on global ideas inevitably make these ideas local.

Violeta's own story illustrates how an environmental identity can be constructed through a combination of Western and local influences. When I first met her, Violeta told me that she had become interested in the environment because of her mother, a biology teacher who had her young students do active projects like examining anthills. Throughout Violeta's school years they took field trips to sewage and water treatment plants so they could observe ecology in the real world. Through a high school exchange program, Violeta lived in the U.S. for a year. She found Americans to take more initiative to solve problems, and was particularly impressed by the prevalence of women in environmental movements in the U.S. and Western Europe. "This is one area where they have more power," she claimed.<sup>17</sup> Violeta decided to study abroad after completing two years of the ecology program at the State University of Moldova (USM), when she realized

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<sup>17</sup> When more women than men applied to participate in Ecoweek, however, Violeta suggested that we privilege the male applicants during the selection. Co-organizer Irina disagreed, but Violeta insisted, saying that we might need men to do physical tasks, like installing bike racks and planting trees. Here Violeta's views on female power in environmentalism, influenced by her time in the U.S. and Germany, contrast with her ideas about "natural" gender role divisions prevalent in Eastern Europe. See Susan Gal and Gail Kligman, *The Politics of Gender After Socialism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).



she wasn't learning anything about ecology.<sup>18</sup> Violeta's motivation to organize Ecoweek stemmed from her observations of problems when she comes home, such as her family using too much water when washing dishes. "Most people don't understand these things," she said, "but it is my 'essence,'" an ecological feeling that inspires her to try to change things.

A combination of local and global ideas also shaped Ecoweek. During a brainstorming session on the second day, participants identified various environmental problems they faced in Chişinău. While the students had been excited to learn about environmentalism from a global perspective, and said they were tired of hearing about trash and not littering, their list included concerns stemming from common local narratives and their own observations in addition to global concerns. They listed garbage in parks and on streets, the bad smell from the wastewater treatment facility, lake and river pollution, people cutting down trees and burning leaves, old cars, the lack of recycling services, the lack of bicycle lanes, plastic bags everywhere, energy inefficiency, and poor air and water quality.

Violeta conducted the brainstorming session, and she made sure to let the participants come up with all of the ideas themselves. During planning meetings, she and local NGO director Raluca had stressed that the organizers must allow the participants to determine the problems and solutions themselves. This did not prevent the planners from discussing what they hoped the participants would choose for their group projects, however. As a bicycling enthusiast who had installed the country's first bike rack a year or two earlier, Andreas hoped one group would install another one. Andreas and Violeta also hoped that one group would focus on replacing plastic bags with reusable ones, especially because they had designed and ordered hundreds of fabric bags. The bags were bright green and said, "Plastic bag? No, thank you!" in many different languages, adding an international spirit to the project. Finally, Raluca mentioned that recycling would be a good topic for a project because trash is a big problem locally. Steve, the American recruited to lead educational sessions, agreed, saying that it would be "pretty bad if they missed that one."

Violeta had told me at our first meeting in December that when she devised this project she envisioned having an American expert present ecological information to the group, so she was overjoyed when I told her one of my colleagues was a graduate student conducting research on the environment in Moldova. In addition

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<sup>18</sup> Violeta even claimed that the ecology students do not care about the environment; indeed, only one ecology student applied to participate in Ecoweek. She said the only reason people sign up for ecology is that it is the cheapest major at USM, since there are no job opportunities in this field.



to a lack of Moldovan experts in the country,<sup>19</sup> the specific desire to recruit an American expert reflects Violeta's privileging of Western science, a viewpoint also reflected in her decision to study in Germany. The first time she met Steve, she enthusiastically agreed with his view that we must approach environmental problems from a global perspective. They talked excitedly together about the unstoppable "green wave" of environmental awareness, eco-ethics, and green jobs spreading from Western Europe around the globe.

On the one hand, Violeta wanted to use local ideas for her project, but on the other hand, she wanted to involve American expertise and Western science. Ecoweek thus illustrates how global and local can intersect. Tsing argues that "emergent cultural forms – including...environmental advocacy – are persistent but unpredictable effects of global encounters."<sup>20</sup> These encounters are characterized by what she calls friction, "the awkward, unequal, unstable, and creative qualities of interconnection across difference."<sup>21</sup> The term friction is used here not to imply conflict, but in a productive sense; global connections come alive through friction in practical encounters. The interactions between Steve, Andreas, Violeta and Raluca, and the use of Western ecological knowledge to inform and inspire local solutions to environmental problems in Moldova, are examples of this friction in action.

Local and global do not always integrate seamlessly, of course, and interactions can reveal unequal power relationships. During planning sessions, for example, Steve's desire to control the direction of the educational sessions conflicted with Raluca's desire to ensure space for local perspectives. When Raluca said she wanted to make sure that participants gave us their own ideas about environmental problems in Moldova before we told them anything, Steve suggested that he could talk about the problems from his perspective first and then ask for their perspective. Raluca agreed to this with little argument, deferring to Steve's authority.

As mentioned above, Violeta found during her year studying abroad that Americans have more "power" than Moldovans in terms of initiating

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<sup>19</sup> Nearly 30 percent of Moldovan migrants are professionals, leading to a well-documented brain drain. See Matthias Luecke, Toman Omar Mahmoud and Andreas Steinmayr, *Labor Migration and Remittances in Moldova: Is the Boom Over? Trends and Preliminary Findings from the IOM-CB-SAXA Panel Household Survey 2006-2008* (International Organization for Migration Mission to Moldova, 2009); Maria Cristina Pantiru, Richard Black and Rachel Sabates-Wheeler, *Migration and Poverty Reduction in Moldova* (Development Research Center on Migration, Globalization and Poverty, University of Sussex, 2007); World Bank, *Consolidarea legăturii dintre migrație și dezvoltare în Moldova* [Strengthening the link between migration and development in Moldova] (CIVIS and IASCI, 2010).

<sup>20</sup> Tsing, *Friction*, 3.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibidem*, 4.

environmental projects. Her decision to study ecology in Germany, as well as her desire to involve an American ecological expert in her project, reveal her hope that Western environmental knowledge can infuse her work in Moldova with this same kind of power. By combining a desire to be part of a global “eco” movement with their concern for local environmental problems, Ecoweek participants created an environmentalism that is “both cosmopolitan and situated,” and thus in some ways distinctly Moldovan.<sup>22</sup>

### Enabling conditions

In order to understand why Moldovan environmentalism has taken a particular form, it is instructive to consider the socioeconomic and political context. Choy argues that the “environmentalist cosmopolitanisms” he found in Hong Kong, like worldliness and global solidarity, represent attempts to transcend the local context, yet necessarily “have as their enabling conditions certain structuring details of Hong Kong and global history,” such as British colonialism and the country’s position as a port and financial hub.<sup>23</sup> In Moldova, environmentalism, like many aspects of life, is shaped largely by the country’s political and economic challenges. Throughout my fieldwork, I noticed that Moldovans tend to seek solutions outside their country’s borders. Many have emigrated for work in response to the weak local economy and lack of opportunities at home, for example. Young people in Chişinău especially have a strong global awareness, which became evident during Ecoweek. Here I consider the challenges that have led to this global orientation, which in turn affected students’ motivations to participate in Ecoweek. Ultimately I argue that the same factors allowing for a “cosmopolitan” environmentalism in Moldova also make it difficult to sustain such a movement.

#### *Lack of opportunities and emigration*

Moldovan young people face many challenges, the main one being a lack of educational and job opportunities in their own country. After the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the economies of the former Soviet republics collapsed. Moldova’s economic dependence on Russia exacerbated the country’s economic problems, resulting in high unemployment and poverty levels, and leading many Moldovans to leave the country in search of work elsewhere.<sup>24</sup> In fact, “migration

<sup>22</sup> Ibidem, 126.

<sup>23</sup> Choy, *Ecologies of Comparison*, 135.

<sup>24</sup> The estimated number of Moldovans working abroad varies widely, from 16 percent of the population reported by Luecke, Mahmoud and Steinmayr, *Labor Migration*, to over 40 percent or even 50 percent reported by local newspapers, according to Pantiru, Black and Sabates-Wheeler,



is considered to be the most important and visible feature of social life in the country and it is the hottest topic of daily debate.”<sup>25</sup> Many of my friends and acquaintances in Moldova discussed this topic regularly, with many complaining about social uncertainty and their limited options both at home and abroad.

While people in their thirties or older tended to highlight the volatility and instability of society over the past two decades, however, many younger Moldovans I talked to had more positive outlooks. Pamela Abbott et al. observe that young Moldovans “have watched the changes during their formative years and been brought up by parents and teachers who themselves had no clear idea of what the future would bring or even whether the country would survive.”<sup>26</sup> While these parents and teachers continue to view life in terms of change and uncertainty, however, young people have only ever known change. In her study of post-Soviet Russian youth, Fran Markowitz found that while adults tended to experience the “transition” as a series of “jolting, unanticipated, and even threatening changes,” teenagers who had lived their entire lives during this period “witnessed and experienced these changes rather as a knobby fabric of constancy – which became their cultural ballast of stability and coherence.”<sup>27</sup> Change also seemed to be the norm among many of the urban Moldovan youth I met.

Vova, a 20-year-old law student who took part in Ecoweek, once told me that he felt lucky to be from Moldova, because it had given him the motivation to do something different, to see different parts of the world and have new experiences. If he had been born in the U.S., he reasoned, he might be content just staying in one place and having no ambitions. His dream was to move to the U.S. to work as a cook and eventually open his own restaurant. Although not everyone in Vova’s age cohort shared this particular view, I did encounter a similar optimism more often among the younger generation than among those over thirty.

J. Edmunds and B. Turner would argue that Moldovan youth like Vova belong to a “global generation,” in the sense that they share some common experiences as well as knowledge and ideas with youth across the globe.<sup>28</sup> They are increasingly

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*Migration and Poverty Reduction*, and Monica Heintz, who attributes some of this disparity to the fact that most migration is illegal and not tracked by the state. “‘Nothing has changed, it just turned illegal’: Discourses for the Justification of Illegal Trade and Immigration in the Moldovan Republic,” *Anthropology of East Europe Review*, 25, no. 1, 2007, 21-28.

<sup>25</sup> Heintz, ‘Nothing has changed’ 21.

<sup>26</sup> Pamela Abbott et al., “Concepts of Citizenship, Social and System Integration Among Young People in Post-Soviet Moldova,” *Journal of Youth Studies*, 13, no. 5, 2010, 584.

<sup>27</sup> Fran Markowitz, *Coming of Age in Post-Soviet Russia* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 4.

<sup>28</sup> June Edmunds, Bryan Turner, *Generations, Culture and Society* (Philadelphia: Open University Press, 2002), 5.

connected through the Internet to youth worldwide, with unprecedented access to pop culture and information from countless diverse sources, in some ways resulting in a “global identity”.<sup>29</sup> Nevertheless, globalization has not created homogenization, and an understanding of local dynamics continues to be essential for any analysis of youth cultures.<sup>30</sup> Additionally, young Moldovans’ goals and expectations have become more individualistic as their options have expanded. In an increasingly individualized world, “young people’s successful ‘socialization’ is not achieved through the internalization of given norms but through learning how to be self-reliant”.<sup>31</sup>

With individualization comes “the freedom to choose one’s own biography; to explore new opportunities in the labor market; to find themselves in an expanding world”.<sup>32</sup> At the same time, however, increasing economic stratification and continued corruption in post-socialist states means that new choices are not uniformly available. Individualization appears not just as liberation, but also as compulsion.<sup>33</sup> For many, the choice to move abroad does not reflect excitement about the chance to do something new, as it does for Vova, but desperation in the face of a dearth of opportunities at home.<sup>34</sup>

### *Motivation to participate*

The search for individual opportunities, whether considered liberating or compulsory, motivated many of the students to apply for Ecoweek. Violeta had

<sup>29</sup> Hilary Pilkington, Ul’iana Bliudina, “Cultural Globalization: A Peripheral Perspective.” *Looking West? Cultural Globalization and Russian Youth Cultures*, edited by Hilary Pilkington, Elena Omel’chenko, Moya Flynn, Ul’iana Bliudina and Elena Starkova, 1-20, (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2002), 14.

<sup>30</sup> Pam Nilan, Carles Feixa, “Introduction: Youth Hybridity and Plural Worlds.” *Global Youth: Hybrid Identities, Plural Worlds*, edited by Pam Nilan and Carles Feixa, 1-13, (New York: Routledge, 2006).

<sup>31</sup> Hilary Pilkington, Ul’iana Bliudina. “Cultural Globalization: A Peripheral Perspective.” In *Looking West? Cultural Globalization and Russian Youth Cultures*, edited by Hilary Pilkington, Elena Omel’chenko, Moya Flynn, Ul’iana Bliudina and Elena Starkova, 1-20. (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2002), 15.

<sup>32</sup> Charles Walker, Svetlana Stephenson. “Youth and Social Change in Eastern Europe and the Former Soviet Union.” *Journal of Youth Studies* 13, no. 5, 2010, 524.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibidem*, 525. Emigrants to Russia and to other CIS countries are more likely to leave due to “push factors,” such as poverty and the lack of jobs in Moldova, than emigrants to the EU and other countries, for whom “pull factors” such as better working conditions and social networks in destination countries are relatively more important, according to Matthias Luecke, Toman Omar Mahmoud and Pia Pinger, *Patterns and Trends of Migration and Remittances in Moldova* (International Organization for Migration Mission to Moldova, 2007).

<sup>34</sup> Anne White, “Young People and Migration from Contemporary Poland.” *Journal of Youth Studies* 13, no. 5, 2010, 565-580.



looked for students with a “passion for the environment,” and while a few of the participants had been interested in environmental topics for some time, most had only recently become interested in this increasingly trendy subject. The students’ reasons for applying to participate in Ecoweek varied, and I gained further insight into their motivations during voluntary follow-up meetings after Ecoweek. The most common reason given for applying was to gain knowledge about the environment. A few participants, including a tourism major, a food sciences major, and an environmental engineering student, wanted to gain practical experience. Two participants were active in Youth Parliament, in particular the newly formed Green Party, and wanted to gain ecological knowledge to use in their mock debates.<sup>35</sup> Some high school students participated so that they could decide on a college major: biology, ecology, or environmental chemistry, for example.

A few participants had already known most of the information presented during Ecoweek, but they had wanted to make connections with others interested in the environment. Vlad, an architecture student, was very interested in eco-architecture and wanted to meet others who shared his vision. Mirela, an eleventh grade student, told me that she had long looked for a group with an ecological focus and had been eager to meet more people who shared her interest. Victoria, a twelfth grade student who planned to study environmental chemistry in the U.S., used to be a member of Greenpeace, even though the organization does not have an office in Moldova. Ecoweek gave her the opportunity to work with other environmental advocates face to face.

For others, environmental projects were completely new. At one follow-up meeting, most of the students told me that they had not been fully aware of their impact on the environment, about their ecological “footprint,” or about sustainability. They had not realized how harmful plastic bags were, for instance, and they came to realize that people have too much “stuff” in general. One young woman, Larisa, directed a local youth group and had applied to Ecoweek in part because she wanted to make sure their office was eco-friendly. She became upset that she had purchased plastic cups before she found out they were bad for the environment, and she decided to replace these with glasses.

A few people mentioned that one of their goals in applying for Ecoweek was to get a chance to practice their English. Violeta planned for the entire week to be conducted in English, in part to ensure that foreign experts would participate and to limit the number of applicants. She also wanted to give students an opportunity to speak English. Although I wanted to practice my Romanian, most

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<sup>35</sup> One of these young men made sure to specify that he was not part of the real Green Party in Moldova, which he characterized as a small group of old men who were not using their money wisely.

of the time participants insisted that I speak English so they could hear a native speaker. After the tree-planting event on Saturday, I walked back to the city with Vova and Dorel. They wanted me to walk between them so that they could both hear me. “My English is so damn bad!” Vova lamented, telling me that he had not paid enough attention in his English classes and now regretted this. Participating in Ecoweek, a project with international funding and international experts, thus gave participants not only a chance to learn about the environment and be part of a global trend, but also the chance to practice English, make useful connections, and improve their resumes.

### Continuing obstacles

The young people I came into contact with through my research in Chişinău belong to a specific subset of Moldovan youth: well-educated and urban. While youth in this demographic throughout the post-Soviet world are the most likely to support and work toward democratic change in their societies, they are also the most likely to want to emigrate.<sup>36</sup> Similarly, while they are the group most likely to benefit from changes in their societies, they are also most likely to be frustrated by the lack of reform and lack of career opportunities. This subset of youth is “the most talented and flexible group and the group that is likely to be the biggest loss to their own countries.”<sup>37</sup>

Unfortunately, migration and international travel is one factor complicating the development of an active, youth-based environmental community. It is difficult to form a coherent, consistent group when the pool of potential members is constantly changing. Many of the well-educated and well-traveled urban youth likely to be interested in such a movement are often abroad for study abroad programs, for volunteer opportunities, to visit parents working abroad, or even to attend foreign universities. This made it difficult to plan post-Ecoweek projects, as several of the most motivated students left for internships, work and travel programs, or school shortly after Ecoweek.

On the other hand, some young people use opportunities abroad to benefit Moldova. Ştefan, for instance, has attended conferences in Sweden and applied his newly acquired knowledge to start various projects in Chişinău. Despite

<sup>36</sup> A significant proportion of Moldovan migrants are relatively well educated, 76 percent having at least completed secondary education and 51 percent having completed college and/or professional school, according to Pantiru, Black and Sabates-Wheeler, “Migration and Poverty Reduction”.

<sup>37</sup> Claire Wallace, “Young People in Post Communist Countries: Vanguard of Change or Lost Generation?” In *From Pacesetters to Dropouts: Post-Soviet Youth in Comparative Perspective*, edited by Tamar Horowitz, Bella Kotik-Friedgut and Stefani Hoffman, 3-26, (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2000), 18.



residing in Berlin, Violeta also remains determined to make a difference in her own country. Most of her university colleagues chose to carry out their required projects in Germany, but she felt that a project there would amount to “a drop in the ocean,” while the same amount of time and effort could make a significant difference in Moldova. So she decided to find enthusiastic Moldovan students and to give them the tools to do something about local environmental problems. “You can’t change Moldova in a day,” she realized, “but this is a step.”

When I returned to Moldova for follow-up research in the spring of 2012, I found that more and more environmental projects had begun to appear, such as Hai, Moldova!, a national trash clean-up day. One of the organizers told me that the network of young environmentalists in Moldova was finally expanding; it had just taken certain people meeting each other and coming together through intersecting projects. Violeta had also noticed this growth since Ecoweek, saying, “Environmental sustainability topics are in the air now. We’re making environmental consciousness trendy.” Still, she said, when she tells family and friends in Moldova that she is coming back home to do projects, they ask her why. Moldova is a dead place, they tell her; it is a waste of time to try to change things here, so she should stay in Germany. She laughed at this for now, and said she hoped she could “keep the fire” to continue planning projects in Moldova.

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