

No ethics in Eastern Europe: a story from Moldova

I am one of the very few ‘returnees’ of Romania; a former student who decided to return home after completing the Master’s and PhD studies in the USA. As it had been anticipated, I suffered from the reverse culture shock, and at the peak of this crisis published in 2010 an article on the organisation of the urban environment in Romanian, titled *The urban environment: an ecological approach*, choosing, against the mainstream trends, a Romanian online journal called *Urbanistique*. This journal lacked even an ISSN, but used peer review to control the quality of submissions and asked authors to transfer the copyright to the journal. The lack of an ISSN did not make the journal eligible for the national promotion standards, and, given the consequent lack of interest on behalf of the authors from academia and research, the journal disappeared in 2012. However, the article has been preserved even until today by the Internet Archive (<https://web.archive.org/web/20130722231309/http://www.urbanistique.ro:80/mediul-urban-o-abordare-ecologica-dr-alexandru-ionut-petrisor/>). At the time when the journal website became inactive, I uploaded the article on my personal website, indicating the original source (http://www.environmentics.ro/Papers/2010_Urbanistique.pdf). Nevertheless, the simple act of publishing the article was the beginning of a saga with consequences running until today.

In the beginning of 2017, I had first a pleasant surprise: my Google Scholar profile was enriched overnight with several citations. I was used to finding out that my articles had been cited, but never had more than a couple of citations; intrigued by the figure, I found out that a ‘new’ article was responsible for all these citations. A journal called *Noosphere: a scientific journal on environmental education, spirituality and culture* (ISSN 1857-3517), in Chisinau, Moldova, made available an article published in 2013 entitled *A current ecological approach to the urban environment (the conceptual-holistic issue)*, written mainly by a group of authors from the university who edited the journal and were responsible for the citations. The real surprise came after downloading the article; except for the title and authors, its content was absolutely identical to the article published by me in 2010 in *Urbanistique*.

In the beginning I tried to solve the problem in a non-confrontational and discreet manner by contacting the chief editor, who did not want to provide a written answer, but attempted to solve the issue through a telephone call. I found it totally inappropriate, because a letter, be it electronic or not, should be answered the same way. My communication with the journal stopped here, but from now on I started to explore legal ways of solving the issue.

In the very beginning of 2018, I contacted the Moldovan Ministry of Education, Culture and Research, presenting the case and appropriate evidence. The answer, received shortly after stated that the Ministry “cannot resolve such conflicts. There is also a Moldovan State Agency for Intellectual Property, but its attributions do not include the resolution of violating the authors’ rights or intellectual

theft cases”. Reading between the lines, it appeared that, although Moldova has a law on the author and connected rights (no. 139 of 2010), no institution is responsible for its enforcement. However, the Ministry contacted the journal and recommended that both of us find an amiable solution to the conflict.

Doubting that the journal would react, given the previous attempt (also referred to in the letter sent to the Ministry), I had explored another possibility. In early 2018, a Moldovan Government Decision merged all the governmental bodies responsible for educational quality assurance – the National Quality Assurance Agency for Professional Education, the National School Inspectorate, and the National Council for Accreditation and Attestation – into the National Quality Assurance Agency for Education and Research (ANACEC in Romanian). I believed sincerely that the new organism would be able to take effective action in this case. The answer came very fast; in a first email, the President of ANACEC8 expressed his regrets for the situation and asked me to phrase the claims. Since I ceded the copyright of the article to *Urbanistique* at the time of acceptance, the only claims I could phrase were to ask the journal *Noosphere* to express officially its position on plagiarism through a formal note, published by the journal. I have also requested the punishment of the authors who violated my author rights in accordance with the Moldovan laws or institutional procedures of their home institutions.

In the meantime I received a letter of apology from the *Noosphere* journal. Surprisingly (or perhaps not, given the other details), the letter was signed by the author of the article published by the *Noosphere* journal, from the position of Scientific Secretary of the journal. The letter stated that the article was prepared by some Master’s students of the university editing the journal, who surprised their professors, assuring them that “the requirements of drafting the paper had been met”. The letter also mentioned my contributions, auto-cited in the original article published in *Urbanistique*, in a way that suggested that the new article properly cited my other contributions. After apologising several times, the letter ended by proposing an amiable resolution of the case, and, again, they didn’t offer a retraction even though it was completely clear the article was plagiarised.

A second response from ANACEC stated that the organisation “does not have the competence of punishing the institution or people involved, especially since they are master students”. Also, “from a different viewpoint, the institution acknowledged the fact, regrets it and apologizes for it”. The letter ends with the words: “I am not sure whether the answer of the institution compensates your discomfort, but the situation is this, and we must find wise solutions for overcoming it.” In other words, the response of the journal closed the case.

The case is closed, but questions remain. For Moldova, the question is what kinds of people are being formed by its educational institutions, from a moral standpoint? How

does the national institution responsible for the quality of education perform its mission, if an intellectual theft from the academic world falls beyond its control?

An interesting follow-up comes up after the closure of the case. Stunned by the attitude of the Moldovan authorities and seeking an answer to the previous questions, in May 2018 I tried to bring the case to the attention of an international audience. My intent was not so much to be the author of an article about the issue, but to expose the case to a broader audience. I have done it through a note attempting to suggest that Moldova is the country of all possibilities:

1. despite the existence of a centralised educational system, no institution is responsible for enforcing the provisions of the national laws, even in an international context
2. a simple private apology letter is sufficient to end the possible claims of intellectual theft
3. the national bodies are exonerated by any responsibility whatsoever.

The article was submitted as correspondence to several journals, and declined; occasionally, the reason provided mentioned the time and efforts required to carry out a formal investigation, falling beyond the scope of correspondence. Although the people who answered seemed to be sympathetic to the issue, some of them declined the submission, the usual explanation being that a correspondence letter is not acceptable, or that the story is not of interest to the journal. However, some journals provided no answer, even when contacted even by post (ie *Kennedy Institute of Ethics Journal*). Perhaps the most interesting answer comes from *Publishing Research Quarterly*; intriguingly, the editor stated: “*It may interest you to note plagiarism is not so uncommon these days*”.

The entire experience seems to indicate that plagiarism and intellectual theft are hard to deal with, even in the context of internationalising good practice and establishing alliances of publishers and journals aimed at promoting ethical standards. Even more, few European journals seemed to be interested in the practices of a country on its

way to joining the European Union, although its attitudes seem to belong to a different world.

What should have been done? The story of the journal itself is not necessarily a “big issue”. The journal does not claim to follow high standards, and it probably serves very local purposes. The Author Guidelines do not even include a scope or aims of the journal, and certainly no ethics and malpractice statements. Nevertheless, the reaction of Moldovan authorities is the shocking part of the saga. In my opinion, Moldova should first take a decision: are we going to join a world with different rules? If the answer is yes, the country has to decide if it will observe the new rules and establish some clear-cut regulations and apply them consistently, regardless of internal friendships and institutional relationships. The rules should draw a line between academic journals and other publications. Of course, these recommendations are based on the example of Romania, a very similar country from a historical perspective. Starting 2005, Romanian research and education authorities ranked academic publications based on their potential to become part of the international publishing ecosystem and established a set of standards and criteria corresponding to each rank. The rules were changed, but essentially they were linked to the criteria for academic and research promotion, and for research and education funding. The process created a market for journals; those that were unable to keep up with the standards lost their authors and readers. Consequently, for most fields and overall, the Romanian scientific output and visibility (through citations) increased almost constantly, according to SCImago data. The top-down (ie national authority-based) control is probably suitable for Eastern Europe in general, until universities develop a common vision on the quality of publications.

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New editorial board member



The editorial board extends a warm welcome to Fiona Murphy. Fiona is replacing Laurence Mabile on the book review section of the journal; we would like to take this opportunity to thank Laurence for her contribution.

Until 2015, Fiona Murphy (orcid.org/0000-0003-1693-1240) was Publisher for *Earth and Environmental Sciences Journals* at Wiley). Now, she is an independent consultant and researcher, working with a range of clients on data, publishing and Open Scholarship projects. She is an Associate Fellow at the University of Reading, a member of the FORCE11 Steering Committee for the Scholarly Commons Working Group and Secretary for the Dryad Data Repository Board of Directors. Among other activities, she regularly writes and presents on data and scholarly communications, serves on a number of research and scholarly communications working groups, and is a member of the Advisory Board for the Researcher to Reader Conference.