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Moldova: A Borderland's Fluid History

Guest Editors

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The Soviet occupation of Bessarabia in June 1940 resulted in a flood of refugees, some of whom left the region by train.

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Moldova: A Borderland's Fluid History

Editorial

This special issue of *Euxeinos* focuses on the historical transformation that occurred in a territory where various political and cultural influences met and mingled, and which today is known as the Republic of Moldova. Strongly influenced by the competing expansionist ambitions and “civilizing” missions of the powerful political entities that historically controlled this part of the world, the indigenous population was subjected to multiple cultural fractures and overlaying stratifications under Ottoman, Tsarist, Romanian, and Soviet dominance. Nine articles explore the history of this region through a selection of events, which arguably form a crucial timeline for the destiny of the populace inhabiting this land. When read in their entirety, these studies will assist the reader in scrutinizing the dense and curious history of this borderland zone and contemplating the metamorphoses of the locals’ identity.

The current volume is structured around the most decisive years of the history of Bessarabia and Transnistria, with an exclusive focus on the 19th and the 20th centuries. Each of the included studies explores a particular year which brought a major political change – usually a transfer from one polity to another – to this land, and which had significant cultural, social, and economical effects for local residents. Specifically, the authors chose to weave their accounts around the years 1812, 1878, 1918, 1924, 1940, 1941, 1956, and 1991. While the authors focused on somewhat obvious historical milestones in their selection of years, they took a more offbeat path in their choice of explored subjects. The editors of this volume hope that this felicitous combination of structure and content will allow the reader to familiarize him or herself with the highlights of Moldovan history and, at the same time, gain a deeper understanding of the key

issues consuming the local society over time. While clearly differing in terms of timing and categories of interest, the selected topics of the case studies do not have a spasmodic character. All articles are deeply anchored in the investigation of this region’s transition from one polity to another and in their ensemble aim to provide the reader with a panoramic view of Moldovan history and a proper grasp of the transformations at the grass-root level during the cardinal political changes. The authors stress various processes and models of modernization put into motion during the 19th and 20th centuries in this region. They take note of the actions promoted by the incumbent empire, nation-state, or federal formation, and examine the incongruous involvement in these actions both of the regional elites (political and intellectual), as agents of reformation or mediators, and the masses – “the people” – either as a target public, or as a legitimating discourse.

As mentioned earlier, the territory investigated by these studies has the idiosyncrasy of a borderland. As many historians will be forced to agree, until the 20th century Bessarabia (and in particular Transnistria) could not be described as a realm of cultural and intellectual buoyancy. When integrated into various state formations, the perceived core mission of this peripheral area was predominantly a strategic one, either of a defensive or of an expansionist character. It is revealing in this sense that the majority of illustrious personalities selected by historians as “Romanian Bessarabians” or as “Moldovans” were educated and established themselves outside Bessarabia until the beginning of the 20th century: in Constantinople, in Russia’s capital, or in the western part of the Principality of Moldova. The economic and cultural development of Bessarabia and Transnistria sped up during the 20th century,

when some of the modernizing and “high-modernist” models of social engineering and national construction started to be tested in order to integrate the population of this territory into rivaling states / political regimes (correspondingly Romania and the USSR). In all these cases the models of political governance and identification imposed on the population of this region were imported from the outside and were not an “autochthonous” production of the indigenous elites.

The peripheral status of the region during the last two centuries and earlier profoundly shaped not only the identity of its inhabitants, but also demographic, economic, and cultural processes as well as the practices of governing political regimes, and the survival strategies of the local population. The articles in this volume tend to suggest that one of the major concerns of various incumbent regimes continued to be the unsettled sense of loyalty of the population of this land. Accordingly, the authors’ attention gravitates towards the interactions between the freshly established authorities (be it 1812, 1918, 1940, or 1941) and the indigenous population of this region, both elites and “masses.” As visible from these studies, local elites and ordinary people were cautiously embracing strategies of integration, accommodation and self-preservation, while facing the centralizing and homogenizing efforts of new centers of political power and dealing with the new authorities and their implanted elites. The painful transition from one administration to another usually forced the locals to make significant efforts to legitimize themselves and adapt to the rules and criteria imposed by new authorities. These efforts varied widely from integration into the new structures of the incumbent regime and to the refusal or inability to cooperate with the new authorities. Simultaneously, the new authori-

ties were compelled to adjust their strategies of governance towards the local population, either attempting to find a *modus vivendi* with the institutions, laws, and indigenous customs, or through their radical transformation, sometimes by using repressive means.

The studies by Victor Taki and Andrei Cușco highlight these careful acts of balancing these opposite principles of power after the incorporation of the territory between Prut and Dniester into the Russian Empire in 1812. The authors manage to detail the heterogeneous and frequently contradictory attempts of the tsarist bureaucrats to define the status and functioning of this new gubernia, while contemplating what would be the appropriate model for governance of this region. In doing so, they aim to effectively fit together both the local traditions and the interests and ambitions of the empire. The administrative and symbolic formation of this gubernia was, in the end, the point of convergence and the fruit of compromise between seemingly contradictory visions, but in essence it projected together the expansionist ambition of the Russian Empire and its “civilizing mission.” After the second half of the 19th century, once the Romanian national state was created, Bessarabia became a zone of interest of the Romanian national project. As Cușco demonstrates, the contested character of the region did not crystallize in the form of two coherent and continuous narratives that spanned during the whole pre-World War I period. Yet some moments of heightened discursive tension between the Russian and Romanian polities clearly indicated the “symbolic competition” over Bessarabia among the neighboring rivals.

It was only after the end of the World War I, under an international context favorable for Romania, that Bessarabia became part of the Romanian national state. While part of this

state, Bessarabia formed an object of fierce dispute between Bucharest and Moscow during the entire interwar period, the latter claiming its own rights to govern the former region of the Tsarist Empire. Svetlana Suveică's article complicates the usual triumphalist story of the union of Bessarabia with Romania in 1918. She indicates that the Bessarabian political, economic and social elite did not perceive this event as a radical rupture with the past, but rather approached it from the mixed prism of the past experiences, present confusions, and future hopes. These elites held multiple forms of identity, shaped around the conventional imperial space which cultivated distinct values and sentiments of belonging. Once faced with the erupted social turbulence in the Tsarist Empire, the Bessarabian elites had a difficult choice to face. They tried to carefully navigate through the political rifts of the contemporary situation and trade their primary inclination of belonging to the Russian space (where they were part of a large imperial elite) for the protection of their property and personal security by the Romanian state under the conditions of a raging war in Russia after the Bolsheviks seized power. The status of autonomy within the Romanian state granted to Bessarabia in the spring of 1918 was meant to soften the region's transition from one polity to another and to appease the population's concerns. As Suveică argues in her study, the abolition of autonomy six months later strengthened the Bessarabian elites' conviction that the union with Romania was a temporary solution and that the future of the region lies within a democratic Russia. In their anticipation of a peace treaty which would seal the fate of Bessarabia, the members of Bessarabian elites either covertly or openly directed their efforts towards persuading the wider European public that Romania occupied Bessarabia by force and that

Bessarabia belonged to the Russian sphere. In his study, Petru Negură proposes a socio-historical analysis of Moldovan writers after the annexation of Bessarabia by the Soviet Union in June 1940 until her recovery by the Romanian authorities in June 1941. Going beyond the Manichean interpretation (treacherous collaboration or heroic resistance) usually applied to the local intellectuals' behavior in June 1940 by contemporary mainstream historians and intellectuals, Negură shows that most Bessarabian writers who remained in the territory occupied by the Soviets had a number of individual or group reasons to stay in the occupied zone and to cooperate with the Soviet authorities. These reasons were related to the writers' previous ideological (regionalist or socialist) positions, to their ethnic (Jewish) identity, or to all of these simultaneously. The writers' ideological positions were especially significant when put into the context of radicalization of the political regime in Romania during the late 1930s and the royal dictatorship and in particular international conjuncture. The author also examines the binary mechanism of inclusion and exclusion set up by the Soviet authorities in order to enroll and integrate the Bessarabian writers into the Soviet cultural establishment. The 'Transnistrian' writers (coming to Chişinău from the former Moldavian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic), the survivors of a lethal 'selection' of the 1937-1938 purges, were entitled to play a privileged role of 'teachers' toward the Bessarabian writers and were meant to coach the latter into the new Soviet norms and 'language', and to act as mediators between newcomers and Soviet authorities.

The study by Diana Dumitru reinforces the idea that the Romanian authorities were clearly aware of the sensitive situation inside Bessarabia while part of Greater Roma-

nia and of the Bessarabians' mixed feelings towards the Romanian administration. Dumitru's article offers a window into a time of the Bessarabian population's categorical reappraisal – the summer of 1941–, examined through the prism of loyalty and its degree of faithfulness towards the reestablished Romanian authority. The author infers that the conclusions drawn by the representatives of the Romanian administration were ambivalent. The Bessarabians were deemed to be, in a way, "contaminated" by their contact with the communist regime during the 1940-1941 Soviet occupation. Yet at the same, this population was viewed as an integral part of the Romanian nation. Very much in line with the nationalistic logic of an ethnocratic state, the Bessarabian Romanians were perceived as the most trustworthy social category, while other indigenous ethnic groups were suspected of anti-Romanian sentiments, were considered to share an affinity for the Soviet regime, and did not enjoy the same level of confidence. However, the Romanian authorities' resentments (mostly aroused by the humiliations endured in 1940) collided with imperious necessities of their present. If the past demand the punishment of "collaborators" with the Soviet power and the revenge of the Romanian state, then the interest of the present and future brought to the surface the necessity to stabilize political power and to find reconciliation with the local population from this region. In the views of Romanian officials, the Bessarabians had to undergo a process of "rehabilitation" before returning back to "normality." Until then, the local populace could not be fully trusted and had to be administered by devoted elements, predominantly functionaries originating from the Old Kingdom, or verified member of the Bessarabian elites who took refuge in Romania after the Soviet annexation of 1940.

More than two decades later after the second takeover of the Bessarabian region, the Soviet authorities were not spared of similar concerns related to the faithfulness of local population. Under the relaxed conditions facilitated by de-Stalinization, many of the repressed feelings and ideas of inhabitants of the MSSR were first voiced in public. Aside from various grievances of economic and social character, the center was especially alarmed by the "nationalistic attitudes" displayed by the Moldovan intellectuals. Even if expressed only by a tiny minority, the calls to unite to Romania, to escape from Moscow's rule, and to become the masters of their own fate were perceived as a vital threat to the Soviet regime. While during the interwar era the Romanian state's primary concern was the infiltration of Communist ideology among Bessarabians, the Soviet authorities' unease was fostered by the idea of the Bessarabians' historical, linguistic and cultural affiliation with the Romanian nation. Indeed, these cultural connections were not obliterated during the Stalinist regime, and the issue of recognition of the Moldavian language as Romanian returned with full force in the post-Stalinist era. In the new context created by the secret speech, the previous attempts to forge a Moldavian language different from Romanian were portrayed as part of the distortion of the Stalinist nationality policy. Moldavian intellectuals favored a rapprochement of the standard vocabulary of Moldavian to the Romanian one as well as the adoption of a common scheme of grammar. As Igor Cașu claims, these efforts fostered a "tacit revolution" took place in the MSSR: in 1957 a new grammar of the Moldavian language was officially adopted, which allowed for the desired rapprochement. This also had direct consequences for cadre policy too, since it implied a renegotiating of the relationship between the Transnis-

trian cultural elites and the Bessarabian elites. The Transnistrian elites were dominant until mid-1955 and attached to a Russified Moldavian vernacular, the one they were educated in before 1940 in the MASSR. The Bessarabian elites, by contrast, were attached to the Romanian literary standard, which was used in interwar Romania when Bessarabia was a part of Romania. Cașu attests that the symbolic victory over the Moldovan/Romanian literary language and the grammar issue had immediate and long run consequences for the MSSR and the Moldovans. It basically prepared and anticipated the agenda of Perestroika starting in the 1980s.

The chronology of the events from the last Soviet decade in Moldova, which culminated with its independence in August 1991, is thoroughly reconstituted by Sergiu Musteață in his article and shows a somewhat ambivalent dynamic of the democratic transition in this former Soviet republic. On the one hand, the Moldovans, like many other nationalities from the USSR, massively expressed claims of legitimate rights and freedoms (freedom of speech, ethno-national and administrative autonomy) in the late 1980s. However, certain data revealed by the author indicate that a large part of Moldovan society (and the entire Soviet society as well) remained hesitant in face of those tumultuous changes. Around the year 1990, the reformist and conservative elites alike carried out an intense political battle to persuade this 'silent majority' to join either the proponents of change, or the forces favorable to status quo. The events of the years 1989-1991 can be interpreted in the light of these back-and-forth social and political dynamics –and negotiations – between the agents of change and conservative forces. This fight did not stop after the declaration of independence on 27th of August 1991 (following the fail of

the pro-Soviet putsch in Moscow). After the 1991-1992 war in Transnistria, and the sudden deterioration of the standard of living in the following years, the majority of the Moldovan population supported the coming to power of a party consisting of the former administrative elites in 1994. The 'singing revolution' of the late 1980s and of the early 1990s resulted in to profound disappointments, pro-Soviet nostalgia and, at a political level, a long 'velvet restoration.'

In general, during the last two decades each of the discussed years and their related historical context have been subjects of fierce historiographical debates and continuous wrangling between opposing political parties as well as vociferous "wars of historical memories (and commemorations)" in the Republic of Moldova. The supporters of a national historical narration and "memorial orthodoxy" proclaimed certain years as the founding years of the nation, or of "our" people, and categorized other years as "black pages" of "our history". The memorial dimension and its polemic aspect are implicitly or explicitly inscribed in the content of the studies included in this volume as well. Most of these studies, which take part in an academic debate with inescapable symbolical and identity implications, present an alternative or even an opposite view to the dominating paradigm of interpretation of history among the pundits and intellectuals from the Republic of Moldova and Central and Eastern Europe. The study by Alexandr Voronovichi includes a fine analysis of the instrumental usage of historical "material" as building blocks for contemporary political projects. His research display the complex political calculations of the Transnistrian political and intellectual elites, when contemplating the potential benefits and drawbacks of the inclusion into the separatist region's legitimizing narra-

tive of the creation of the Moldovan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic in 1924, as the first statehood of the unrecognised Transnistrian Moldovan Republic.

As clearly visible in the history narrated in this volume, the territory of the contemporary Republic of Moldova was never an autonomous geopolitical subject until 1991. As part of this particular historical constellation, some individuals and political actors refuse to accept its

full autonomy and intrinsic legitimacy even until today. In the collective mentality of many people, the Republic of Moldova and its inhabiting populace continue to belong either to the Russian or Romanian areas of power. From this perspective, Moldova was and will still be a fluid borderland for the foreseeable future.

Diana Dumitru and Petru Negura

1812 and the Emergence of the Bessarabian Region: Province-Building under Russian Imperial Rule

by Victor Taki, King's University College, Edmonton

ABSTRACT

This article addresses the policies of the Russian authorities in Bessarabia in the two decades that followed the annexation of this territory in 1812. It examines the process of discursive and administrative construction of the Bessarabian province from the territories that existed for centuries under different political jurisdictions. The article argues that the early Russian accounts of Bessarabia re-described these territories into a single whole, a province, whose exotic nature and population distinguished it from other parts of the Russian Empire. The article further claims that each of the three consecutive attempts to define the form of administration of Bessarabia undertaken by the Russian authorities in the years following 1812 reflected a different perception of the province's place within the imperial space. Thus, the initial idea to use Bessarabia as a conduit of Russian influence in European Turkey gave place to the vision of this province as part of Russia's self-governing Western borderlands and finally to the re-definition of Bessarabia as part of New Russia. Without fully negating its predecessor, each new vision and the accompanying administrative changes consolidated the discursive and institutional identity of Bessarabia, which ultimately enabled this province to outlast the empire that created it.

According to the Bucharest peace treaty concluded between the Ottoman Empire and Russia on May 16, 1812, the river Pruth "from the point of its entry into the Principality of Moldavia to its confluence with the Danube as well as the left bank of the latter become a new border between the two empires."¹ Having traced the new boundary, the treaty nevertheless failed to provide a name for the territory that was to be incorporated into the Russian Empire and it took several years before the annexed region came to be systematically identified as Bessarabia.² Historians who describe territorial conquests or annexations often assume that the territories in question

existed as identifiable geographical units during the moment of conquest. However, the early history of Bessarabia suggests that this is not always the case. This article uses the Bessarabian example to demonstrate that the imperial conquest sometimes contributes to the symbolic and administrative construction of new regions out of territories that had only been weakly connected to one another.

The lands annexed by Russia in 1812 consisted of three different types of territories. On the one hand, there were the eastern districts of the Principality of Moldavia located in the central and northern parts of the Prut-Dniester interfluvium. Populated primarily by the ethnically Romanian peasants, they had a somewhat deficient social structure in comparison with the territories to the West of the Prut River, which constituted the historical nucleus of the Moldavian principality. Few if any Moldavian boyars resided east of the Prut, even though many of them had their landed properties there. The eastern districts of pre-

1 See the text of the treaty published in *Polnoe Sobranie Zakonov Rossiiskoi Imperii*, ser. 1, vol. 32, 316-322. Hereafter cited as PSZ.

2 The majority of modern historians trace the origins of the term "Bessarabia" to the Bassarab dynasty of Wallachia, who ruled over the territory located between the lower courses of the Dniester, the Prut and the Danube during the fourteenth century, before it became part of the Principality of Moldavia.

1812 Moldavia were also the least urbanized and all of their twelve small towns were in the private ownership of boyars or monasteries. This applied to the future capital of the Russian Bessarabia – Chişinău, which was in the possession of the Galata monastery in Constantinople before 1812. The Galata monastery in turn was dedicated to Jerusalem's Church of Resurrection and thus administered by the representative of the Orthodox Patriarch of Jerusalem. Overall, the peculiar social character of the eastern districts of pre-1812 Moldavia became reflected in their special administrative status. While the districts to the West of the Prut were subordinated to the early modern Moldavian "ministers of interior" (*vornici*), the lands to the East were placed under the jurisdiction of special governors – *serdari* – who reported directly to the Moldavian *hospodar*.³

The social and administrative peculiarity of pre-1812 eastern Moldavia was reflected in its proximity to two other types of territory that composed the Prut-Dniester interfluvium, namely the Ottoman fortress districts and the Bugeac steppe. Although the Moldavian *hospodar* Petru Roman established his rule over the entire territory from "the (Carpathian) mountains to the (Black) Sea" in the late fourteenth century, his successors' control over its southern part proved to be tenuous and short-lived. Already in 1484, Stephen III (1456-1504) had to cede the fortresses of Akkerman and Kilia and their adjacent districts in the mouth of the Dniester and the Danubian delta respectively to the Ottoman sultan Bajezid II. The popula-

tion of the districts was thereby placed under the authority of the Ottoman fortress governors and became *reaya* – direct tax-paying subjects of the sultan. With time, this category of the Islamic law came to designate not only the non-military inhabitants, but also, and apparently uniquely in the Ottoman world, the territories on which they lived. The early modern period witnessed the alienation of more Moldavian territories to the east of the Prut into the *reaya* districts. In 1538, following Süleyman II's campaign into Moldavia, the Ottomans constructed the Bender fortress on the Dniester, followed by Ismail (1595) and Reni (1622) on the Danube and Hotin (1713), again on the Dniester. Since the level of taxation in the *reaya* districts could in fact be quite sparing, the peasants had the possibility to escape from the mounting tax burdens in the remaining territories of the Moldavian principality east of Prut, which explained relative underpopulation of these territories by 1812.

Another reason for the general scarcity of population in Eastern Moldavia was the permanent presence of the Nogai hordes in the southern part of the Prut-Dniester interfluvium. Shortly after the emergence of the Crimean Khanate and its transformation into a vassal state of the Ottoman Empire in 1475, the khans positioned themselves as successors of Genghis Khan. In this capacity, the Crimean Girays managed to win the allegiance of several Nogai hordes. This offered the Nogais the possibility to settle in the steppe lands along the northern littoral of the Black Sea. One of these hordes settled in what the Tatars called Bugeac, or the Westernmost corner of the East European steppe (also known as the Kipchak steppe) constituted by the confluence of the Prut and the Danube. Located under the double suzerainty of the Crimean khans and the Ottoman sultans, the Bugeac horde

3 Chosen among the first-rank Moldavian boyars, who were often the *hospodar*'s relatives, *serdari* were in charge of the Orhei, Soroca and Lapușna districts of the Moldavian Principality and commanded a considerable paramilitary force of 3000 cavalymen. See P. P. Svin'in, "Opisanie Bessarabii," *Stratum plus*, no. 6 (2000-2001): 381.

at times defied both (for example in the 1620s and the 1630s as well as at the beginning of the eighteenth century).⁴ At other times, its lands constituted the powerbase of particular Crimean khans (such as Kyrym Giray, who led the last Crimean raid into Russian territories in the winter of 1768-69). The proximity of the Nogais and Tatars who had not entirely abandoned nomadic practices subjected the Romanian populated territories in the central and northern parts of the Prut-Dniester interfluvium to periodic devastations, the last of which resulted in the burning of Chişinău in 1766.⁵ At the time of the Russian-Ottoman war of 1768-1774, the desire of the Bugeac horde to maximize their independence led them to enter into negotiations with the Russian government, which sought to resettle the Nogais to the right bank of the Kuban river in order to weaken the Crimean khanate.⁶ However, only part of the horde left Bugeac at that time. Others stayed until the Russian-Ottoman war of 1806-1812, when the military governor of Odessa Armand Emmanuel Duplessis, Duke of Richelieu, mindful of security of his city, organized their resettlement first into Russian interior and then into the Ottoman Empire.⁷ Thereupon, the empty Bugeac steppe as well as the reaya districts were declared Russian crown lands, and brought under the single administration with the eastern districts of the Moldavian Principality.

4 V. V. Trepavlov, *Istoria Nogaiskoi ordy* (Moscow: Vostochnaia literatura, 2002), 451.

5 Judging by the number of cavalry men that the Horde was able to put in the field in the second half of the seventeenth century, its total population could reach 250,000. See, *ibid.*, 453.

6 Alan W. Fisher, *The Russian Annexation of the Crimea, 1772-1783* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 34-37.

7 Willard Sunderland, *Taming the Wild Field: Colonization and Empire on Russian Steppe* (Ithaca: Cornell University, 2004), 112.

The first post-1812 decades were characterized by the persistence of the traditional toponymies, as well as the economic and even political ties to the Moldavian Principality. Thus, the new border cut the old Iaşi district in two, separating the bulk of its territory on the left bank of the Prut from its center in the city of Iaşi (which was also the capital of the Moldavian Principality). Nevertheless, one of Bessarabia's districts retained the name of Iaşi for years after the annexation. The same applied to the estates of the Moldavian boyars, many of whom possessed land on both sides of the Prut. In 1812, they were granted a three-year term, in the course of which they had to decide on their permanent place of residence and sell their properties across the border. However, many of the boyars preferred to sit on the fence and secured several postponements of the deadline. Inasmuch as the export of sheep and cattle to Istanbul constituted one of the major sources of revenue in the region, the creation of the new border caused discontent among the local population, as reflected in smuggling that persisted throughout the period of the Russian rule. In the absence of a special border guard service, the border was patrolled by Cossack regiments (which included Muslims), whose unsuitability for this function was the cause of concern for the first Bessarabian Viceroy A. N. Bakhmetiev.⁸

The new imperial border proved to be rather ephemeral at the time of the Greek uprising in the Ottoman Empire. In early March 1821, detachments of Philiki Etaireia crossed the Prut into neighbouring Moldavia. Several weeks

8 "Vsepoddanneishii doklad polnomochnogo namestnika Bessarabskoi oblasti A. N. Bakhmetieva," July 7, 1816, N. F. Dubrovin (ed.) *Sbornik istoricheskikh materialov izvlechenykh iz arkhiva Sobstvennoi Ego Imperatorskogo Velichestva Kantseliarii*. 14 vols. (St. Petersburg: Gosudarstvenniatipografia, 1876-1913), 7: 302.

later, the Moldavian boyars implicated in the the Greek movement fled to Chişinău in order to escape the Ottoman revenge. The Russian-Ottoman war of 1828-1829 and the Russian occupation of Moldavia and Wallachia, which lasted until 1834, practically abolished the border altogether. At the same time, the preservation of the quarantine line along the Dniester until 1830 sometimes made communication between Bessarabia and the rest of the Russian Empire more difficult than communication between Bessarabia and the neighbouring principalities. The situation changed only in the mid-1830s, following the evacuation of the Russian troops from Moldavia and Wallachia and the restoration of the Russian border on the Prut.⁹ However, even after that date, the border remained porous, as illustrated by the continued existence in Bessarabia of the so-called dedicated monasteries that were under the jurisdiction of the Eastern Orthodox patriarchs.

The creation of the new border was paralleled by the active construction of the new province on both the discursive and institutional level. Several statistical descriptions of Bessarabia, which appeared after 1812, helped the readers to perceive this territory as a single region. These descriptions downplayed the differences between different parts of the Prut-Dniester interfluvium and at the same time stressed the characteristics that were common to the entire region. The first of these descriptions composed by Petr Kunitskii still used the term "Bessarabia" in its original sense of the southern part of the territory between the Prut, the Dniester and the Danube, which comprised Bugeac and employed the term "Trans-Dniestrian region" to designate all the lands between the three

rivers. The author mentioned the three components of the new Russian province, and yet argued that they "are not separated from each other by rivers and mountains and besides are united by common mores and customs of the inhabitants, because both Bessarabia *stricto sensu* and the Hotin reaya once belonged to the Moldavian Principality."¹⁰ The unity of the new province was thus asserted by means of historical and geographical arguments. The Russian annexation could be presented as the restoration of the historical unity of the Moldavian lands that had been divided by the Ottoman conquest. At the same time, the Russian authors were equally interested in underscoring the historical distinctiveness of Bessarabia from the rest of Moldavia as to underscore the unity of the new province. Thus, Pavel Shabel'skii, the author of another early description of Bessarabia, stressed the significance of the province for the Ottomans, as well as its role as the granary of Constantinople alongside Egypt. That is why Bessarabia, according to Shabel'skii, "has always been separate from Moldavia, [and was] placed under the direct government of the Ottoman pashas."¹¹

Rather paradoxically, the discursive construction of Bessarabia involved the affirmation of its difference from other Russian provinces. The assimilationist rhetoric, which emphasized Bessarabia's organic fusion with the Russian empire, was more characteristic of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. By contrast, in the first post-1812 decades, the Russian authors focused on Bessarabia's exotic nature, which set it apart from the interior provinces of Russia. Although the em-

9 Iulian Frunţaşu, *O Istorie etnopolitică a Basarabiei* (Chişinău: Cartier, 2002), 32.

10 Petr Kunitskii, *Kratkoie statisticheskoe opisanie Zadnestrovskei oblasti* (St. Petersburg: Glazunov, 1813), 6.

11 Pavel Shabel'skii, "Kratkoie istoricheskoe obozrenie Bessarabii," *Syn Otechestva*, no. 15 (1815): 35.

pire's border had been moved to the Prut, the Russian authors continued to consider Dniester as the "actual boundary between civilized and semi-barbarous countries."¹² The civilizational boundary coincided with the climatic one, beyond which the Russians found the country, whose nature they deemed exotic in comparison even with the Ukrainian steppe, let alone the stern climate of the Great Russian plain. The floral and faunal riches of Bessarabia compensated the primitiveness of local agriculture. Bessarabian fields covered with flowers unknown in Russia and the murmur of millions of insects that filled the air of the steppe at night greatly impressed the Russian travellers. It was even easier to imagine Bessarabia as a "promised land" for those who undertook vicarious journeys by means of reading "thick journals" in the two Russian capitals. The necessity to justify the losses incurred in the previous Russian-Ottoman war explained the tendency to exaggerate the local riches, which is apparent in the references to Bessarabia as "the granary of Constantinople, similar to Egypt."¹³ The possession of Bessarabia was all the more precious since, in contrast to the southern Caucasian territories, which "bordered on hostile and predatory peoples," the region possessed "salubrious air, a healthy climate, abundance of southern fruits, numerous springs and waterfalls" and all that in the vicinity of tender and meek Moldovans."¹⁴ Accounts of the "aromas of acacias, the singing of the nightingales, huge sturgeons in the rivers and inexhaustible numbers of game in the marches" turned Bessarabia into a fairy tale

land for the inhabitants of snowy Moscow or humid St. Petersburg.¹⁵ Exiting descriptions of this kind were paralleled by the rumours of unbearable heat, the steppe replete with snakes, scorpions and tarantulas, as well as plague and eternal fevers.¹⁶ Just like the glorification of the riches of Bessarabia, the stories of the dangers that it harboured constituted an inalienable aspect of exoticization of the new province that explained its attractiveness.

The earliest measures on the administrative organization of Bessarabia reflected the rivalry between Russia and the Napoleonic Empire in the Balkans, which was one of the reasons for the outbreak of the Russian-Ottoman war of 1806-1812. The creation of the Illyrian provinces of the French Empire in 1809 put the French authorities in direct contact with the nascent Balkan national-liberation movements and threatened Russia's traditional influence over the Orthodox coreligionists in the Ottoman Empire.¹⁷ Aware of this danger, the Russian diplomats and military men considered the possibility of an attack against French Illyria that would reconsolidate Russia's standing in the region and pre-empt Napoleon's imminent campaign against Russia. One of the memoranda for this expedition was written by I. A. Capodistrias, a Greek diplomat who entered the Russian service after the destitution of the Russian-controlled Septinsular Republic in 1807.¹⁸

15 Vel'tman, "Vospominania o Bessarabii," 246.

16 Ibid., 227.

17 On this subject, see Frank J. Bundy, *The Administration of the Illyrian Provinces of the French Empire, 1809-1813* (New York and London: Taylor and Francis, 1987).

18 "Mémoire sur une diversion à opérer dans le Midi de l'Europe en cas de guerre entre la Russie et la France," Vienne, 1811, *Archive of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Empire (AVPRI)*, Fond 133, op. 468, file 11067, ll. 299-311.

12 A. I. Mikhailovskii-Danilevskii, "Vospominania za 1829 god," *Russkaia starina*, no. 8 (1893):182; A. F. Vel'tman, "Vospominania o Bessarabii," *Sovremennik*, no. 3 (1837): 229.

13 Shabelskii, "Kratkoie istoricheskoe obozrenie Bessarabii," *Syn Otechestva*, no. 15 (1815):35-36.

14 Ibid., no. 16 (1815):125.

Despite its utopian character, the project sparked the enthusiasm of Alexander I. The tsar appointed his Minister of the Navy P. V. Chichagov as the commander-in-chief of the Danubian army with a mandate to end the protracted war against the Ottoman Empire and draw the sultan into an alliance against Napoleon. Alexander I also instructed Chichagov to “excite the Slavic population” by promising them “independence and the creation of the Slavic kingdom.” The tsar also authorized “monetary rewards to the most influential people among [the Slavs] as well as decorations and titles to the leaders and the soldiers.”¹⁹ However, Chichagov arrived in Bucharest already after his predecessor M. I. Kutuzov signed the peace treaty with the Ottomans, which gave Bessarabia to Russia, but contained not a single word about an alliance between the tsar and the sultan. The crossing of the Russian border by Napoleon’s Grande Armée and its rapid advance in the direction of Moscow soon forced the tsar and Chichagov to scrap the project of the Balkan expedition and retreat from the Danube to the north. Russia’s early policies with respect to Bessarabia should be seen in this context. They were largely the product of Capodistria, who became the head of Chichagov’s diplomatic chancellery. Both Capodistria and Chichagov were friends of Scarlat Sturdza, a Moldavian boyar who collaborated with the Russian authorities during the occupation of Moldavia in 1788-1792 and who immigrated to Russia soon thereafter. This friendship explains both the latter’s appointment as the first civil governor of Bessarabia and as well as the important role that his young son and Capodistria’s secretary, Alexander Sturdza, played in the elabo-

ration of the “Rules for the Temporary Administration of Bessarabia,” which was approved by Alexander I in August 1812.²⁰ In view of the negative experience of the Russian administration in Moldavia and Wallachia during the war of 1806-1812, the “Rules” relieved Bessarabia from state taxation for three years, exempted the province from the military draft for the next fifty years and presupposed the formation of a “provincial government in accordance with the local laws, mores and customs.”²¹ The “Rules” also specified the use of the Romanian language in administrative and judicial bodies, which were to be staffed by the representatives of Moldavian nobility, who decided to settle in the region.

Mindful of the Montesquieuian principle of making the legislation conform to the mores of the country, Chichagov, Capodistria and the younger Sturdza also expected the new government of Bessarabia to serve Russia’s specific geopolitical goals in an on-going struggle with Napoleon. Chichagov’s instruction to Scarlat Sturdza called the first Bessarabian governor to “skilfully draw the attention of the neighbouring peoples to this region.”²² According to the instruction, the Russian-Ottoman war “commanded the minds and inspired the hopes of Moldavians, Wallachians, Greeks, Bulgarians, Serbs and other peoples.” Following the retreat of the Russian Army to the North, “their spirit could fall and our en-

20 On Chichagov’s relations with the Sturdza family and the younger Sturdza’s role in the elaboration of the “Rules,” see Stella Ghervas, *Réinventer la tradition. Alexandre Stourdza et l’Europe de la Sainte Alliance* (Paris: Honoré Champion Editeur, 2008), 31, 62.

21 See art. 11, of the “Rules for the Temporary Government of Bessarabia,” in A. N. Egunov (ed.) *Zapiski Bessarabskogo Statisticheskogo Komiteta*. 3 vols. (Chisinau: tipografia Oblastnogo Upravleniya, 1868), 3:109-110.

22 Ibid., 111.

19 *Mémoires inédits de l’amiral Tchitchagoff* (Berlin: Scheneider et comp., 1855), 9.

emies could come to dominate them.” The task of the Bessarabian governor was therefore to “preserve the attachment of these peoples to Russia and protect them from the influence of our enemies.” Bulgarians, Serbs, Moldavians and Wallachians are looking for a fatherland, claimed the author of the instruction, and it was up the first Bessarabian governor to offer them one in the new province.²³

The first administrative framework for Bessarabia introduced by Capodistria and Chichagov thus reflected their goal of retaining the Russian influence over the Orthodox co-religionists in the Ottoman Empire, whose security was not fully guaranteed by the Bucharest treaty. Bessarabia had to serve as the refuge for those who had compromised themselves in the eyes of the Ottoman authorities by their collaboration with the Russians during the war. At the same time, Capodistria envisioned Bessarabia as the Russian bridgehead in the Balkans akin to the one that Napoleon created in the Western part of the peninsula in the shape of the Illyrian provinces of the French Empire. To fulfil these functions, Bessarabia had to be a showcase of the benevolent Russian administration, which was attentive to local cultural peculiarities.

These well-meaning plans soon foundered over Russia’s usual lack of effective administrators, which in the immediate post-1812 years was exacerbated by imperial centre’s exclusive preoccupation with the struggle against Napoleon. Soon after his appointment, Scarlat Sturdza was incapacitated by a stroke, while major-general I. M. Garting, who replaced him as the military governor of Bessarabia in 1813, failed to find a common language with the representatives of Moldavian nobility. While Garting and the Bessarabian opposition spent their time denouncing each

23 Ibid., 112.

other, the situation on the ground deteriorated to the point of turning Bessarabia into the very antipode of the showcase province that Capodistria, Chichagov and Alexander I had intended it to be. In particular, the mid-1810s witnessed a conflict between the Bessarabian landlords and the trans-Danubian Bulgarian and Greek settlers, whom M. I. Kutuzov invited to Bessarabia during the last year of the Russian-Ottoman war. To make matters worse, the Bessarabian peasants began to run across the Prut due to rumours of the impending re-imposition of serfdom.²⁴ When the news of administrative chaos in Bessarabia reached St. Petersburg in the wake of the defeat of Napoleon and the conclusion of the Congress of Vienna, Alexander I and Capodistria, who had in the meantime become the tsar’s secretary of state, responded by appointing a Bessarabian viceroy with the mission of elaborating the definitive form of self-government for the province.

The choice of the military governor of Podolia, lieutenant-general A. N. Bakhmetiev, as the first Bessarabian viceroy in April 1816 was not accidental. Podolia was a region annexed by the Russian Empire in the context of the second partition of Poland in 1793, in which Polish or Polonized nobility remained dominant. During the first two decades of Russian rule, the relations between St. Petersburg and the Polish elites of the Western borderlands remained uncertain, in large part because of the influence of the French revolutionary ideas among the wider Polish nobility and partial restoration of Polish statehood in the shape of Napoleonic Duchy of Warsaw in 1807. In order to win the allegiance of Polish elites, the

24 For a more detailed discussion of these issues, see Andrei Cușco, Victor Taki, with Oleg Grom, *Bessarabia v sostave Rossiiskoi imperii, 1812-1917* (Moscow: Novoie Literaturnoe Obozrenie, 2012), 162-172.

Russian rulers had to demonstrate a measure of respect to their historical rights. Although Catherine II was determined to combat the “French pestilence” in Poland, the Lithuanian Statute of 1588 continued to be used in local administration together with the Polish language. Paul I went as far as to restore the local assemblies of the nobility in the Polish provinces, while Alexander I early in his reign entrusted important state offices to a number of prominent Poles and was ready to offer the Polish nobility far-reaching autonomy on the eve of Napoleon’s invasion of Russia in 1812. Although the Poles of the Duchy of Warsaw actively supported Napoleon in his campaign, in 1815 the victorious Russian emperor secured the transformation of the Duchy of Warsaw into a Constitutional kingdom of Poland, in personal union with Russia. He also considered the possibility of including into the kingdom Podolia and other Polish territories that the Russian Empire acquired as a result of the second and third partitions. By 1816, the policy of cooperation with the Polish elites was thus in full swing and the appointment of the Podolian governor to the newly created position of the Bessarabian viceroy suggested that Alexander I viewed Bessarabia as part of Russia’s Western borderlands.

The instruction that Bakhmetiev received at the moment of his appointment indicated that the emperor’s policy with respect to Bessarabia was “fully in accordance with the approach that he had adopted with respect to other territories acquired during his reign.”²⁵ As a result, one can say that the administrative construction of Bessarabia in the second half of the 1810s replicated the policy of Paul I and Alexander I with respect to Polish elites,

²⁵ See the instruction to Bakhmetiev in *Rossiiskii Gosudarstvennyi Istoricheskii Arkhiv* (RGIA), Fond 1286, op. 2, file 70, ll. 25-26.

which in its turn represented a response to the challenge of the revolutionary and Napoleonic France. The generic affinity between the Polish and the Bessarabian policy of the Russian emperor was confirmed by the direct Polish involvement in the establishment of the Bessarabian self-government. Bakhmetiev arrived in Chişinău with his Polish wife (who belonged to the famous Potocki family) and a suite of Polish secretaries, one of whom, N. A. Krinitskii, became the actual author of the Statute for the Formation of the Bessarabian Province of 1818.²⁶

The most important aspect of the Statute consisted in the creation of the Supreme Council of the province, most of whose members were to be elected every three years by the Bessarabian nobility. The Council functioned as the highest administrative and judicial body and its decisions were to be implemented immediately.²⁷ Bessarabian nobility also had the possibility to elect the majority of members of the province’s criminal and civil courts as well as their counterparts on the level of individual districts.²⁸ Although the Russian language was now to be used in the criminal court as well as in the administrative and fiscal departments of the provincial government, the civil court and the Supreme Council were supposed to examine the civil affairs in Romanian and “in accordance with the Moldavian rules and customs.”²⁹ Just as the “Rules” of 1812, the Bessarabian Statute of 1818 continued to define the local traditions and customs as the ba-

²⁶ On Krinitskii’s role see F. F. Vigel, “Zamechaniia na nyneshnee sostoianie Bessarabskoi Oblasti,” in F. F. Vigel, *Zapiski*. 7 vols. (Moscow: Universitetskaia tipografia, 1892), 6:4 (separate pagination).

²⁷ “Ustav obrazovania Bessarabskoi oblasti,” April 29, 1818, PSZ, ser. 1, no. 27357, vol. 23, 223-224.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 226, 228.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 225-227.

sis of Bessarabian autonomy. In line with this approach, the Russian authorities established a special commission for the codification of Bessarabian law, headed by Petr Manega, a Paris-trained lawyer of Romanian origin.³⁰

The Statute was approved by Alexander I during his visit to Chişinău in late April 1818, following the emperor's meeting with the Bessarabian nobility. The Statute thereby acquired the character of an agreement between the emperor and the local elites. The representatives of the latter were to enjoy a wide participation in the provincial administration. In return, the emperor expected that the Bessarabian nobles would not consider the "national character" of the Bessarabian province and its "special form of administration" as synonymous with the narrow interests of their class. In his letter to Bakhmetiev, Alexander I stressed that "inhabitants of all classes should partake in an equitable measure of the boundless good" that the Statute represented. Since such an important innovation needed to be tested "by time and experience," the Statute was introduced provisionally, which likewise testified to its contractual character and suggested that the Bessarabian "experiment" was not over.³¹

Remarkably, Alexander I approved the Bessarabian Statute soon after the closure of the first session of the Sejm of the Kingdom of Poland, where the emperor announced his intention to spread the "liberal" (*zakonno-svobodnye*) institutions on all domains that providence had placed under his sceptre.³² The

Bessarabian Statute was the first step towards the realization of this intention, and can thus be viewed as a manifestation of Alexander I's "constitutionalism." The Statute did not have the character of a constitutional charter, but only confirmed to Moldavian political tradition. Despite strong Polish influences, early modern Moldavian politics offers no example of formal mutually-binding agreements between the hospodars and the boyars similar to the Polish *pacta conventa*. Relations with the Polish Sejm in the last years of Alexander I's reign demonstrated that the emperor did not consider the Constitutional Charter that he had granted to the Kingdom of Poland to be equally binding for himself and the Polish nobility. Instead, the emperor viewed all legislative acts that he had passed in order to regulate relations with the regional elites to be the products of his unilateral benevolence, regardless of the formal legal character that these acts had.

Just like the reconfirmation of Bessarabia's autonomy in 1816-1828, its curtailment a decade later was accompanied by the re-conceptualization of the province's place in the symbolic and administrative geography of the Russian Empire. This re-conceptualization was at least in part related to the resolution of the already mentioned conflict between the Bessarabian landlords and the trans-Danubian Bulgarian and Greek colonists that erupted in 1814. Although the temporary placement of Bessarabia into the category of Western borderlands of the Russian Empire seemed to strengthen the position of the landed noblemen, the colonists were taken out of the jurisdiction of the nobility-dominated Bessarabian government and subordinated to the Board of Foreign Colonists of the Southern Russia in 1819. A year later, the head of this board, major-general I. N. Inzov, was appointed the Bessarabian vice-

30 On Manega, see L. A. Kasso, *Petr Manega – zabytyi kodifikator bessarabskogo prava* (St. Petersburg: Senatskaia tipografia, 1914).

31 Alexander I to Bakhmetiev, April 29, 1818, *PSZ*, ser. 1, no. 27357, vol. 23, 223.

32 Cited in S. V. Mironenko, *Samoderzhavie i reformy. Politicheskaia bor'ba v Rossii v nachale XIX-go veka* (Moscow: Nauka, 1989), 157.

roy in place of Bakhmetiev, who had found himself increasingly at odds with the Bessarabian nobility. Inzov neutralized some of the most outspoken oppositionists, yet the Statute remained in place and only the replacement of Inzov by M. S. Vorontsov in 1823 marked a real turn in the Russian policy towards Bessarabia. With the appointment of Vorontsov as both the Bessarabian Viceroy and the governor of New Russia in 1823, Bessarabia was administratively united with the region which for half a century constituted a space of state-sponsored colonization.³³ If the inclusion of Bessarabia into the Western borderlands of the Russian Empire during the 1810s was accompanied by a focus on its "historical rights" and local customs, the redefinition of the province as part of New Russia during the 1820s resulted in the tendency of the Russian policy-makers to perceive Bessarabia through the prism of Russia's "civilizing mission" in the south. Vorontsov's predecessors in Odessa, Armand Emmanuel Duplessis, Duke de Richelieu and Louis Alexandre Andrault de Langeron were rather typical enlightened administrators who frequently resorted to the "civilizing" rhetoric.³⁴ It is also noteworthy that Vorontsov's wife E. K. Branitskaia was a niece of G. A. Potemkin and the heiress of his fortune. With his appointment as the governor-general of New

Russia, Vorontsov "joined the rightful inheritance of sorts," in the words of his one-time subordinate, the famous Russian memoirist F. F. Vigel.³⁵

Having taken a negative view of disorders in the Bessarabian administration, Vorontov attributed them to the excessive autonomy that the 1818 Statute granted to the local nobility and became determined to curtail it. As a result, the Bessarabian nobility lost the right to elect the heads of the district administration in 1824. Four years later Vorontsov secured the adoption of a new Statute, whereby the Bessarabian Supreme Council was replaced by the Council of the Province, with only one elected representative of the Bessarabian nobility among its members. The new Statute drastically reduced the number of elected officials in the provincial and district administration in comparison to the Statute of 1818 (from 75 to 26).³⁶ No less important was the general redistribution of the elective positions, which did not leave any segments of the provincial administration beyond control of the Viceroy.³⁷ Within five years, Russian became the language of Bessarabia's public institutions. The reduction of the role of the nobility in Bessarabian government was accompanied by an intensification of state-sponsored colonization in the southern part of the province. In the second half of the 1820s, Vorontsov secured the adoption of decrees encouraging the settlement of Serbs, Trans-Danubian Cossacks as well as some 20,000 Russian state peasants from the inner provinces of the Russian Empire.³⁸

33 For the general analysis of Vorontsov's activities as the Bessarabian viceroy, see Anthony Rhinelander, *Prince Michael Vorontsov. Vice-Roy to the Tsar* (Montreal: McGill University Press, 1990), 67-93.

34 None of them was directly involved into the Bessarabian affairs. However, Richelieu played an important role in the deportation of Nogais from Bugeac in 1807, which opened the space for Bulgarian, German and Russian colonists. As for Langeron, his memoirs of the Russian-Ottoman wars of 1787-1792 and 1806-1812 represent one of the most characteristic description of Moldavia and Wallachia in terms of "barbarity" and "Oriental despotism", which could be overcome only by means of a rational and enlightened government.

35 Vigel, *Zapiski*, 6:91.

36 "Ucherezhdenie dlia upravlenia Bessarabskoi oblasti," February 29, 1818, *PSZ*, ser. 2, no. 1834, vol. 3, 197-204.

37 See "O razdelenii del po Bessarabskomu oblastnomu pravleniiu i kazennoi palate," March 11, 1828, *PSZ*, ser. 2, no. 1864, vol. 3, 236-239.

38 See "O vodvorenii v Bessarabii serbov," February 9, 1826, *Polnoie Sobranie Zakonov Rossiiskoi*

Vorontsov's activities did not result in the transformation of Bessarabia into an ordinary Russian gubernia. Bessarabia continued to be a distinct periphery of the Russian Empire for decades. However, the first years of Vorontsov's governorship determined what type of periphery Bessarabia was going to be and thereby constituted the concluding stage of the process of province-building that began in 1812. In the early to mid-1800s, Capodistrias envisioned the new province as a Russian façade turned towards the Balkans. At the end of the decade, Alexander I for a moment viewed it as part of Russia's self-governing Western borderlands and an element of a more ambitious project to spread the principle of self-government to the rest of the Russian Empire. By contrast, Vorontsov redefined Bessarabia as part of New Russia and thus as a space of colonization policies that the Russian government pursued in that region since the late eighteenth century. All three turning points in the early history of Russian rule between the Dniester, the Prut, the Danube and the Black Sea thus reveal a close relation between the ways imperial policy-makers perceived the newly annexed territory and the concrete measures they adopted. Each new approach did not completely obliterate the perceptions and policies that had characterized the preceding one, but rather contributed to the discursive and administrative construction of the new province. The cumulative result of three consecutive attempts to integrate the new territorial acquisition into the political geography of the Russian Empire resulted in the emergence

of Bessarabia as a hitherto unprecedented politico-administrative unit. A product of Russian imperial expansion, Bessarabia provided institutional and mental framework to several alternative projects of nation-building in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

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Imperii, Ser. 2, no. 132, vol. 1, 194-196; "O pereselenni krestian iz vnutrennikh gubernii v Bessarabskuiu oblast'," September 21, 1826, *PSZ*, Ser. 2, no. 592, vol. 1, 998-1000; "O vodvorennii Zaporozhskikh kazakov i drugikh zagranichnykh vykhodtsev v Bessarabskoi oblasti," February 19, 1827, *PSZ*, ser. 2, no. 913, vol. 2, 190-192.

1878, Before and After: Romanian Nation-Building, Russian Imperial Policies, and Visions of Otherness in Southern Bessarabia

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ABSTRACT

The reintegration of three Southern Bessarabian districts into the Russian Empire in 1878 represented not only a high point of the Russian-Romanian symbolic competition for Bessarabia, but also the creation of an 'administrative aberration' within the Russian Empire. The former Romanian territories, merged into the new Ismail uezd, preserved their institutional and legal peculiarities for almost 40 years. Thus, the modern structures of an emerging nation-state were transferred into the Russian imperial context. This article will discuss, first, the attitude of a number of Russian observers and officials towards the 1856 – 1878 Romanian administration, with a special emphasis on mutual perceptions and the foreign policy dimension. Second, the article will examine the polemics concerning the alternative strategies for integrating this region within the empire. The Russian bureaucracy was divided on the issue, oscillating between a centralizing approach and a more pragmatic attitude which admitted the continued existence of the Romanian institutions. The discourse displayed by the Russian officials on this occasion is a curious amalgam of flexible pragmatism, modern rationality, bureaucratic inertia, centralizing impulses and foreign policy considerations. The lack of coherence of the Russian policies on the Southern Bessarabian periphery points to the contested and fragmented nature of the imperial discourse regarding the alternative models of institutional organization and political legitimacy.

The Crimean War (1853-56) was a turning point for the Romanian Principalities of Moldavia and Wallachia and, by extension, for the Russian presence on the Lower Danube. The dominant position of the Russian Empire in the region, uncontested for the previous quarter of a century, was replaced by a 'condominium' of the Great Powers. This new balance of power was reflected in the Treaty of Paris (March 1856), which ended the war and significantly weakened Russia's leverage over the Principalities. The new circumstances also provided an impetus for the fledgling Romanian national movement. Inspired by the French model and supported by the government of Napoleon III, this movement achieved remarkable successes in the immediate aftermath of the Crimean War. The 'national' faction of the Romanian elites, advocating the union of Moldavia and Wallachia, quickly gained the upper hand over their opponents.

This process was aided by the position of the majority of the Great Powers, who endorsed a new constitutional arrangement (the Paris Convention, 1858) which provided clear mechanisms for an institutional unification of the Principalities. It was followed by the election of a common prince in Moldavia and Wallachia in January 1859 and by the gradual merging of the government of the two Principalities. These tendencies culminated three years later, in January 1862, when the Principalities became unified under a single central government in Bucharest. This is the de facto date of the emergence of the Romanian nation-state.

These events did not significantly alter the Russian official stance or policy towards the remote Bessarabian borderland. During the 1860s the potential challenge of the Romanian project was only dimly and sporadically perceived by the imperial bureaucracy of the

province. The occasional reports filed by the local police, purportedly identifying a certain “Romanian” party composed of a handful of young nobles, emphasized the “platonic” nature of their national sentiments and pointed to the ultimate loyalty of even these presumably “dangerous” elements that were worthy of police surveillance.¹ Moreover, these apprehensions of the Russian administration were linked primarily to the political turmoil provoked within the empire by the Polish uprising of 1863. It is hardly surprising to find the “Polish intrigue” among the possible catalysts of the fledgling Bessarabian “national movement” that remained in an embryonic stage throughout the rest of the 19th century. The newly united Romanian Principalities were hardly viewed as a future “Piedmont” for the Romanians of the Bessarabian province even during the darkest moods of the Russian official discourse. The contested character of the region did not crystallize in the form of two coherent and continuous narratives that spanned the whole pre-World War I period. Rather, one can speak about certain moments of heightened discursive tension that corresponded to a closer entanglement of the Russian and Romanian polities in the international politics of the era. The first of these instances of ‘symbolic competition’ emerged on the occasion of the Russian-Ottoman War of 1877-1878, when the three districts of Southern Bessarabia, awarded to the Moldavian Principality in 1856 in the aftermath of the Crimean War reverted to the Russian Empire. In the context of the Berlin Congress, a ‘diplomatic war’ between Russia and Romania over the belonging of this territory erupted. Despite the fact that this small piece of land was mostly inhabited

by ‘trans-Danubian colonists’ (i.e., Bulgarians and Gagauz), while the Romanian-speaking population was only significant in a narrow strip along the Prut River, the Romanian government forcefully claimed its right to include this region into the “national body.”²

Beyond succumbing to the logic of mutual competition and antagonism with regard to its Romanian rival, the Russian administration in Bessarabia proved flexible enough to accommodate several foreign institutional and administrative “models” that preserved a certain degree of diversity within the region during the first half of the 19th century. Starting from the 1860s, the standardizing drive of the Great Reforms period as well as the internal social dynamics in Bessarabia seemed to preclude the emergence of any “exceptional” administrative or institutional designs in the area. The international diplomatic context was, however, responsible for introducing the legal framework of an emerging nation-state into an imperial context purportedly ill-suited for such unwelcome “exceptions.” Still, contrary to the expectations of many (including high-ranking) observers on the Russian side, this framework proved resilient enough to last for forty years and withstand all the attempts to “streamline” it according to all-imperial standards. In the following, I will discuss the case of the Ismail district, which is a rare instance of the transfer of “national” administrative practices into the fold of the Russian multi-ethnic empire. I will mostly focus on the Russian imperial policies after 1878, but will also sketch the main features of the Romanian

1 Arhiva Națională a Republicii Moldova (ANRM), Fond 2, op. 1, file 7573, ll. 65-66 verso.

2 For an extended discussion of the Russo-Romanian diplomatic controversy over Southern Bessarabia, with an emphasis on the interaction between discourse and policy options, see: Andrei Cușco, “The Russian-Romanian 1878 Controversy: Between Realpolitik and National Dignity,” in: *Pontes*, Nr. 5, 2009, 51 -102.

nation-building efforts in the region in the two previous decades, when Southern Bessarabia became a part of the new Romanian state.

The territory in question comprised the southwesternmost part of the Bessarabian gubernia (in its 1812 borders) and roughly coincided with the space between the Danube and the Black Sea, with a total surface of 9,000 km². Following the Crimean War, this district, together with the Danube Delta, was ceded (for purely strategic reasons) to the Moldavian Principality, at that time an autonomous part of the Ottoman Empire, and placed under the “collective guarantee” of the victorious allies by the Paris Treaty of 1856. Both Russian and Romanian elites were acutely aware that the “border rectification” in Bessarabia was due to pragmatic calculations of international diplomacy and that the durability of the new situation was subject to the power fluctuations within the European state system. Moreover, the partial border change did not seem to satisfy anyone. Thus, two prominent Romanian intellectuals were rather reserved in assessing the benefits of the territory’s inclusion into Moldavia. They claimed that, far from redressing the “injustice” of 1812, the provisions of the Paris Treaty only gave a veneer of “European legality” to the Russian possession of the rest of Bessarabia.³ The pragmatic dimensions of this “strategic retreat” of the Russian Empire were no less obvious to a Romanian politician twenty years later⁴ on the occasion

3 Dinu Poștarencu, “Aspecte privind retrocedarea Sudului Basarabiei către Principatul Moldovei la 1856-1857,” in *Destin Românesc*, 1999, Nr. 2, 75.

4 The politician in question was the Romanian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mihail Kogălniceanu (1817-1891). He was a prominent figure in the Romanian national movement and was viewed as one of the ‘founding fathers’ of modern Romania. He was also the author of the first ‘modern’ history of the Romanian Principalities, published in 1837.

of the revision of the territorial settlement in the region: “Why was [Southern] Bessarabia given to us? Because we claimed it? Because Europe wanted to do us a favor? Because we descend from the Emperor Trajan? Far from it! Bessarabia was given to us in 1856 because Europe’s Great Powers thought that it was in Europe’s best interests to drive Russia from the Danube.”⁵ This pragmatic aspect is important to note, since the perception of insecurity had a direct impact on the “nationalizing drive” of the emerging Romanian state in the region. The effectiveness of Romanian policy in Southern Bessarabia was forcefully questioned in retrospect by several Russian writers and officials. While it is difficult (if not impossible) to assess its results in “objective” terms, the Russian stance on the Romanian administration’s practices was infused by a clear rhetorical tendency to minimize any influence the Romanian government might have exercised on local realities. Thus, in an essay written twenty years after the region’s reintegration into the empire (explicitly commemorating this event), a Russian author argued:

The Romanian government understood that this land, severed from Russia by virtue of political calculations, but acquired by Russian blood, populated and organized through the efforts of the Russian government, and also constituting, through its geographical position and the ethnographical makeup of its population, a natural part of Russian Bessarabia, will always gravitate towards Russia and will, sooner or later, return within its borders. Therefore, the Romanians always regarded their possession of Southern Bessarabia as a temporary dominion, as a sort of lease, and acted accordingly, following the rule: *take as much as you can, give as little as you can*. Their attitude towards the interests of this land

5 Dinu Poștarencu, “Aspecte privind retrocedarea Sudului Basarabiei către Principatul Moldovei la 1856-1857,” in *Destin Românesc*, 1999, Nr. 2, 75.

was exclusively limited to fiscal matters and to [the profit] of state officials.⁶

The intrusive practices of the Romanian nationalizing state were understandably the main target of criticism leveled by Russian authors and officials towards the previous regime. In fact, the Russian position displayed a curious, but hardly surprising, ambiguity: while insisting on the meager achievements of the Romanian authorities in matters relating to the local population's welfare,⁷ it also emphasized the constant pressure and even violence of the local administration, building an image of total contrast with the benevolent attitude of the Russian authorities. While engaging in a "virtual dialogue" with the Romanian government's claims to have "educated" the local inhabitants civically and politically⁸, the Russian writers were also attacking the implicit hierarchy that depicted the imperial model as inadequate in terms of bureaucratic rationality and the quality of governance. Undermining this image of an orderly and democratic political system, the Russian discourse insisted that the Romanian administration failed even in its most basic tasks of guaranteeing the citizens' security and respecting the rights of the region's multiethnic population. In fact, the argument amounted to a vision of "mock constitutionalism" that was meant to underscore the

positive features of the Russian policy in the area.⁹ Moreover, the assimilatory potential of the Romanian state was directly questioned, even if the existence of "nationalizing tendencies" was admitted.¹⁰ This image of a weak state dominated by a predatory bureaucracy and displaying only the superficial features of a modern polity derived, on the one hand, from long-held stereotypes that blamed the Romanian elite for slavishly imitating Western models and of losing its connection with the "people."¹¹ On the other hand, it was also a self-serving tactic aimed at discrediting the assumption of a direct relationship between an accelerated pace of modernization and the existence of a (formally) pluralistic political system.

Did this negative evaluation of Romanian nation-building efforts necessarily entail a total rejection of the institutional and administrative framework devised by this emerging nation-state? As I hope to show in what follows, it did not. On the contrary, the Russian authorities took advantage of the alternative model of administrative uniformization implemented by the Romanians and used it for their own purposes. Before exploring this aspect, I will briefly examine the issue of the concrete manifestations of the nationalizing agenda in Southern Bessarabia during the two decades of its integration into Romania. The challenge of multi-ethnicity undoubtedly played a central

⁶ S. Davidovich, "Vossoedinennaia Bessarabiia," in *Zhivopisnaia Rossiia*, Vol. V, 1898, part II, 173.

⁷ The author quoted above also remarked that "The twenty-two-year-long Romanian domination can hardly be described as very beneficial for this part of Bessarabia." Davidovich, 173.

⁸ This motive is not altogether absent even from contemporary Romanian historiography. As a revealing example, one could cite: Elena Siupiur, "Pătrunderea instituțiilor moderne românești în Sudul Basarabiei după Războiul Crimeii (1856-1878)," in *Destin Românesc*, Nr. 4, 1996, 35-44.

⁹ S. Davidovich, "Vossoedinennaia Bessarabiia," in *Zhivopisnaia Rossiia*, Vol. V, 1898, part II, 173, 176.

¹⁰ S. Davidovich, "Vossoedinennaia Bessarabiia," in *Zhivopisnaia Rossiia*, Vol. V, 1898, part II, 179.

¹¹ Such evaluations, occasionally amounting to a virulent critique of the "Romanian intelligentsia," can be found, for example, in F. F. Vigel's memoirs or (in a slightly less accusatory vein) in the book authored by V. Kel'siev (published in 1868), *Galichina i Moldaviia: Putevye Pis'ma*.

role in the process of dealing with the newly acquired region after 1856. This area (it should be emphasized) previously had a somewhat exceptional administrative status within the Russian Empire as well, which was due, on the one hand, to the existence of a separate territorial unit for the city of Ismail (*Izmail'skoe gradonachal'stvo*) and, on the other hand, to the privileged status of the Bulgarian colonies, which enjoyed a certain degree of self-government and were supervised by a special colonial administration with their headquarters in the city of Bolgrad. These institutional "irregularities" hardly fitted the aims of the Romanian centralizing bureaucracy. Immediately after the annexation of Southern Bessarabia to Moldavia, certain Romanian public figures and even occasional travelers expressed their dismay at the extensive privileges enjoyed by the Bulgarian colonists. The nationalizing overtones of such pronouncements were hardly concealed: "The Romanian government cannot support such privileges, whose goal is the development of a race that could counter-balance our national element. In other words, these [Bulgarian] foreigners should merge into the Romanian element, since their destiny is now connected to our land."¹² Such desiderata did not remain confined to the rhetorical sphere, but gradually became guiding principles of state policy, along with the consolidation of the Romanian institutions. The Romanian government thus appeared to pursue a rather coherent nationalizing agenda in the region, despite the skeptical assessment of its results by certain Russian observers and commentators. The most persistent legacy in this regard was represented by the institutional peculiarity of the Ismail district after its re-incorporation into the Russian Empire in 1878.

¹² G. Sion, *Suvenire de călătorie în Basarabia meridională*, București, 1857, 78.

This policy did not necessarily amount to a concerted strategy of linguistic or cultural assimilation. The non-Romanian (especially Bulgarian) population was in fact allowed considerable leverage in the educational and cultural sphere, expressed by the opening of a Bulgarian 'central school' in Bolgrad and the burgeoning activity in the field of the press and various cultural associations. By the end of the Romanian administration in the region, several upper- and lower-level urban educational institutions were established, alongside 124 rural schools, amounting to around 140 educational establishments with 4,000 pupils.¹³ Southern Bessarabia also became an important center for Bulgarian émigré political organizations and, arguably, a significant recruitment pool for the future elite of the Bulgarian state after 1878.¹⁴ However, hardly any institutional autonomy was tolerated, especially after the introduction of the radical centralizing and reformist policies of the early 1860s by the new government of the United Principalities under Al. I. Cuza. Measures such as the liquidation of the separate administration of the colonies or the imposition of general military service (completely at odds with the previous status of the colonists) were swiftly applied, despite the active resistance of the local population.¹⁵ The restructuring of the political sphere signaled by these policies was completed following the introduction of the new Civil Code in 1865 (explicitly modeled on the Code Napo-

¹³ *Bessarabiia. Geograficheskii, istoricheskii, statisticheskii, ekonomicheskii, etnograficheskii, literaturnyi i spravochnyi sbornik*. Pod red. P. A. Krushevana. Moskva: Tip. A. V. Vasilieva, 1903, 135

¹⁴ Elena Siupiur, "Pătrunderea instituțiilor moderne românești în Sudul Basarabiei după Războiul Crimeii (1856-1878)," in *Destin Românesc*, Nr. 4, 1996, 42-43.

¹⁵ The resistance of the Bulgarian colonists and its suppression is described in S. Davidovich, "Vossoedinennaia Bessarabiia," in *Zhivopisnaia Rossiia*, Vol. V, 1898, part II, 174-175.

leon) and, in particular, after the adoption of the 1866 constitution, which instituted a new administrative (communal) structure and deprived the three Southern Bessarabian districts of last traces of their administrative peculiarity. In this sense, the standardizing agenda of the Romanian government proved quite successful; this success partly explains the endurance of this structure after 1878.

The nation-building activities of the Romanian government were most obvious in the educational sphere (the Romanian language became a compulsory subject in schools at all levels) and, especially, in the ecclesiastical field. The church was squarely conceived as an effective instrument for inculcating national Romanian values in the midst of the multiethnic population of the region and was thus subordinated to the “national interest.” As a concrete manifestation of this policy, a new Bishopric of the Lower Danube (with its seat in Ismail) was established in 1864. The main aim of the new eparchy was to “Romanianize, incessantly and everyday, Bessarabia’s Church, which can be achieved only through a direct and national leadership and guidance of the material and spiritual interests of that region’s Church.”¹⁶ In the same vein, the quoted author stated that “the aim of the creation of the Bishopric of the Lower Danube was twofold: the fomenting and developing of the Orthodox religious feelings within the people and the identification of the heterogeneous elements of Lower Bessarabia with the ideal of Romanianism.”¹⁷ Another

Romanian author, writing immediately after the area was placed under Romanian control, decried Russia’s aim of “de-nationalizing” the local population and “introducing the Slavic element through the school and the church,” but also “c[ould] not disapprove of such a policy: had we been Russians, we would also have contributed to this grand undertaking.”¹⁸ In other words, Russia’s purported *logic* was at least understandable, if not commendable, and the author did not hesitate to advocate such a policy in front of his potential Romanian educated audience. Despite this apparently straightforward conclusion, the discourse promoted by the members of the clergy, even if often saddled with national elements, cannot be reduced to a purely nationalizing agenda. The Orthodox Church, due both to its institutional structure and to its late acceptance of the rhetoric and substance of nationalist claims, had a vacillating and complex position in the context of the growing nationalizing tendencies of the 19th century. In the context of the Russian-Romanian mutual perceptions, their common belonging to the Orthodox religious community was accompanied (and subverted), on the one hand, by the deep structural differences between the two churches and, on the other, by their symbolic and canonical competition over Bessarabia. It is quite difficult to extract a coherent vision of the Russian ecclesiastical establishment concerning the “nationalities problem” in general and the “Bessarabian Question” in particular, which remained marginal for the contemporary debates and rarely bore on the sphere of practical policy. However, the Russian church could function, in this case, at two levels, simultaneously producing and leveling the Russian-Romanian “cultural distance.” In

16 M. Pacu, “Amintiri bisericești și culturale din Basarabia Sudică sub cârmuirea română din 1857-1878,” in *Revista Societății Istorico-Arheologice Bisericești din Chișinău*, Vol. XIX, 1929, 379-392, here 382.

17 M. Pacu, 383. Pacu also called the Episcopal palace erected in Ismail “the most significant *national* monument of this city and of the whole of Southern Bessarabia” under the Romanian government (p. 384).

18 G. Sion, *Suvenire de călătorie în Basarabia meridională*, București, 1857, 41.

the first hypostasis, the Russian officials and church hierarchy perceived the modernizing vision advanced by the Romanian nation-building elites as a borrowed and imitative project, founded upon a blind and uncritical emulation of the Western (mainly French) model. From the Russian point of view, the final result of this 'unnatural' evolution was the gradual, but more and more obvious, distancing of the elites from the "roots of Romanian national life" and, consequently, the subversion of Orthodoxy¹⁹.

Following Southern Bessarabia's reintegration into the Russian Empire in 1878, the former three districts were reorganized into a new administrative unit, the Ismail district. This territory preserved, throughout the whole pre-World War I period, certain institutional and legislative peculiarities that transformed it into an "anomaly" in the context of the Russian imperial regime. The position of the Russian officials interested in the "institutional aberration" in the Ismail district was rather contradictory. Two opposing visions concerning the desirability of preserving the institutional specificity of this territory were articulated. On the one hand, a tendency toward administrative unification and centralization, presupposing the immediate introduction of imperial legislation and the liquidation of the Romanian institutions, was discernible within the apparatus of the Ministry of Internal Affairs. On the other hand, a more flexible approach toward the "Romanian laws," reflecting a pragmatic and relatively tolerant attitude toward diversity on the empire's peripheries, was advocated by another part of the imperial bureaucracy.

The argument of the increased efficiency and

underlying rationality of the French-modeled local administration seemed to have exercised a certain sway over these latter circles. Several attempts to revise the exceptional institutional structure of the district were undertaken before World War I to no avail. The post-Great Reform context and the uncertain situation of the local administration in the Russian Empire as a whole also must have deterred the officials involved in solving the issue. This continued toleration of institutional diversity pointed to the variety of views held in the highest echelons of state power. The Russian bureaucracy was divided by conflicting interests and state-building aims, with various agencies competing for preeminence.²⁰ While the case of Ismail and the debates surrounding it could simply be ascribed to the inertia of the state apparatus, it appears that the experiment in Ismail was favorably regarded by a part of the imperial dignitaries. The case of the Ismail "anomaly" shows how the functioning of the Russian state was in fact predicated upon a finely balanced system of factions and interest groups, within which the autocrat had the

19 Arsenii (Stadnitskii), *Issledovaniia I monografii po istorii moldavskoi tserkvi*. SPb., 1904, 388-390

20 For an earlier period, the most authoritative works studying the functioning of the Russian bureaucracy at the center and on the periphery are those of John P. LeDonne, e.g., „Frontier Governors General, 1772-1825, I: The Western Frontier (the Russo-Polish Border in the 18th and 19th century),“ *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas* 47:1 (1999): 56-88; „Frontier Governors General, 1772-1825, II: The Southern Frontier (the Russo-Turkish and Russo-Persian Border),“ *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas* 48:2 (2000): 161-183; „Russian Governors General, 1775-1825: Territorial or Functional Administration?“ *Cahiers du monde russe* 42:1 (January-March 2001): 5-30. For a very interesting analysis of these processes applied to the Siberian example, see Anatolyi Remnev, "Siberia and the Russian Far East in the Imperial Geography of Power," in: Jane Burbank, Mark von Hagen, and Anatolyi Remnev, eds. *Russian Empire: Space, People, Power, 1700-1930* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007), 425-454

role of an arbiter²¹. Moreover, the loyalty of the local inhabitants remained a matter of contention in a way that had not been possible before 1856, prompting the Russian authorities to act carefully in this sensitive region. The external factor and the perceived threat of “Romanian irredentism” were significant enough to hamper the centralizing zeal of the Ministry of Internal Affairs in St. Petersburg.

The most serious discussions concerning different projects to revise the exceptional status of the Ismail district took place on two occasions: first, immediately following the transfer of authority to the Russian Empire between 1879 and 1881 and, second, during the first years of the 20th century (1900-1901), when the officials of the Ministry of Internal Affairs came very close to prevailing over their opponents and imposing their view on the necessity to replace the Romanian institutions with their imperial equivalents. The ultimate failure of these attempts was mostly conditioned by a set of arguments put forward by the opponents of legislative uniformization. These arguments could be classified into three main categories: 1) the rationality and modernity of the Romanian administrative structure, in comparison with the available Russian models; 2) the strategy of a differentiated integration of the peripheries and the need to pursue a moderate course while taking account of regional particularism, at least at the initial stage; 3) sensitive foreign policy aspects and the problem of Russia’s image abroad (the loyalty of the local population remained the underlying issue in this context). One should emphasize that the dividing lines between the

opponents and supporters of administrative uniformization ran along institutional rather than “spatial” criteria. Thus, certain representatives of central institutions (particularly of the Ministries of Finance and Justice) pursued the “flexible” approach of preserving the local institutions in Southern Bessarabia, while the officials of the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) were fervent advocates of legislative unification.

The most clearly developed argument invoking the rationality and efficiency of the Romanian institutional model can be found in the “note” (in fact, an extensive and detailed analysis of the Romanian institutions in Ismail) sent to the Ministry of Internal Affairs by the Bessarabian Governor E. O. Iankovskii in 1881.²² The governor explicitly emphasized in his report that “certain elements of social organization in Southern Bessarabia” introduced by the previous Romanian administration “deserve exceptional attention (original emphasis – A.C); these [aspects] mostly concern the communal organization and the system of equal taxation [of all citizens], without taking into account their social estate.”²³ In fact, the governor used the argument of the efficiency of the Romanian administrative model in order to formulate a rather radical critique of the empire’s social system during that period, which he finds outdated and ineffective in the context of the modern world. As a result of his detailed analysis of the advantages inherent in the Romanian institutions, Iankovskii concluded that “all these data concur in favor of the preservation of the recently reunited section as a separate [administrative] unit, at least until the revision of our legislative regu-

21 For an excellent analysis of this topic, see: Alfred J. Rieber, “Interest-Group Politics in the Era of the Great Reforms,” in: Eklof B., Bushnell J., Zakharova L., eds., *Russia’s Great Reforms, 1855-1881*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994, 58-83.

22 “Zapiska bessarabskogo gubernatora Iankovskogo ob ustroistve vossoedinennogo kraia”, s priloženiiami za 1881 god // RGIA, Fond 573, op. 21, d. 54

23 RGIA, Fond 573, op. 21, d. 54, l. 72

lations concerning the tax system and the rural public administration.”²⁴ Admitting, however, that “superior interests of the state” might prompt the government to introduce Russian laws immediately and to abolish the Ismail uезд, dividing it between the neighboring districts, Iankovskii remains in favor of a flexible and careful strategy, asserting that “when it comes to the question of reforming this region [*uchastka*], it is necessary to act with particular caution, so that, by smashing all the existent legal norms and replacing them with new regulations, some of which must be deemed as less satisfying [than the current ones], we should not awaken among the inhabitants certain regrets concerning their separation from Romania.”²⁵ Beyond this transparent hint at the necessity of encouraging the loyalty of the local population, it seems that the flexible position of a number of Bessarabian governors had an impact on the actions of the Ministry of the Interior (or, more accurately, on the lack thereof). The Ministry officials admitted this 20 years later, in 1901, when a special report filed by the institution stated that the governors’ constant reluctance to allow any revisions of the Romanian institutional model influenced the position of the center. Both Iankovskii and his successor, A. P. Konstantinovich (1883 – 1899), noticed the “advantages” of the Romanian communal organization in comparison with the Russian model of rural administration.²⁶ The local elite generally played a central role in the transfer and adjustment process. In fact, the institutional continuity in Ismail cannot be explained without taking into account the continuity of the core elite group which managed to secure its preeminence in local affairs under the imperial government.

24 RGIA, Fond 573, op. 21, d. 54, l. 75

25 RGIA, Fond 573, op. 21, d. 54, l. 84

26 RGIA, Fond 573, op. 21, d. 54, l. 160

However, some local officials did not hesitate to express their discontent and frustration because of the persistence of the Romanian laws and institutions (seen as ‘alien’ and/or outdated) in Southern Bessarabia, firmly pleading for their liquidation. In the context of these polemics, in 1884, the acting Governor-General of Odessa and New Russia, von Roop, advanced a point of view radically different from the one supported earlier by the Bessarabian governor. In a report addressed directly to Alexander III, von Roop finds the numerous complaints and petitions filed by the population of the new Ismail district to be “exaggerated,” since these “are not confirmed” either by the emissaries sent by von Roop himself to the region or by the personal inspection that the official had conducted in Bolgrad and Ismail. On the contrary, he emphasized the progress brought to the region by the new Russian administration and decried the persistence of the Romanian laws and institutions there:

“Certain isolated abuses can still be encountered here, but, in any case, the population is exposed to them to a much smaller extent than during the Romanian government, when money and protection represented the overwhelming power, while the tribunals and the prosecutor’s office were completely in the hands of the rich dominant class, which at present is already losing its former hegemonic importance. However, one cannot deny that the Romanian communal laws, which were preserved there, even today still offer pretexts for the population’s continuing exploitation by the local [*zemskimi*] committees, a fact which is on open display particularly in the Bolgrad Committee... In any case, almost seven years have passed from the moment that the region bordering on the Danube, that had been temporarily lost, reverted to the bosom of the fatherland, and that is why the future continuation of the current state of transition and uncertainty must no longer be, obviously, tolerated, even if outstanding efforts and

sacrifices will be necessary to reach this goal..."²⁷

Alexander III fully endorsed this opinion, applying the following approving resolution on the margins: "It is time to resolve [the issue] definitively."²⁸ Despite the tsar's opinion, "the issue" remained pending for the next three decades. The Ismail district entered World War I with the same uncertain and separate status. Some Russian observers were even tempted to overplay the threat posed by the specter of "Romanian irredentism" in the region.

The ambiguity and contradictions that characterized the position of the Russian bureaucracy with regard to the "Ismail question" can also be closely followed at a more personal level. A particularly relevant and interesting case is that of Prince S. D. Urusov, who was the Bessarabian Governor between May 1903 and October 1904. Generally (and rightly) viewed at the time and by later historians as an official with liberal inclinations and as a rather informed critic of the Russifying policies of the imperial center at the peripheries, Urusov displays a revealing inconsistency and self-contradictory attitude in articulating his opinions concerning the "administrative anomaly" in Southern Bessarabia. While in his memoirs (initially published in 1907, in a period of overt opposition towards the imperial government) Urusov's attitude is essentially neutral, the governor appears as a supporter of legal uniformity and of the liquidation of the remnants of Romanian administration in his official reports submitted to the Minister of Internal Affairs. Here is Urusov's opinion concerning the situation of the Ismail district in 1903:

"In the Bessarabian gubernia there is also the Ismail district, with a significant area and rich natural conditions, which is composed of three [former] Romanian prefectures – Ismail, Bolgrad and Cahul. For 25 years already, the above-mentioned district, now reunited with the Russian Empire, is administered according to the old Romanian laws, currently modified even in Romania proper [Urusov means the 1865 Civil Code and the 1864 law on communal administration] because they do not correspond any longer to the vital needs of the population. After frequently receiving petitions from the inhabitants of this district demanding the introduction of Russian institutions into this area, I attempted to form an image about the vulnerable aspects of the order of things prevailing in the district, and I came to the conclusion that the main flaw is the lack of organization of rural life because of the imperfection of communal administration... The district's towns are managed in a very satisfactory manner, but the quality and organization of rural life leaves much to be desired... The activity of the gubernia's administrative institutions has no bearing over the Ismail district, which is why the surveillance of the communal administrative boards, where numerous abuses are discovered, is subverted... The above-mentioned reasons, as well as the unwelcome separation (in the sense of a lack of state unity) of this part of Bessarabia bordering on Romania urgently require the quickest possible introduction of Russian institutions into the Ismail district."²⁹

Despite his apparent preoccupation with the liquidation of the "peculiarities" of Southern Bessarabia, in his memoirs the former governor not only offers the reader an extended discussion of the communal structure of the Ismail district according to the Romanian legislation (without the slightest pejorative hint),

²⁷ RGIA, Fond 1405, op. 77, d. 5920, 1879, l. 111-112

²⁸ RGIA, Fond 1405, op. 77, d. 5920, 1879, l. 111-112

²⁹ RGIA, Fond 1284, op. 194, d. 94, 1904 ("Otchet o sostoianii Bessarabskoi Gubernii za 1903 g."), l. 11. The topic of the "administrative peculiarity of the Ismail district" also emerges in other reports of the Bessarabian governors submitted to the tsar or the MVD in the early 20th century, as is the case, for example, in 1912: RGIA, Fond 1284, op. 194, d. 116, 1912 ("Prilozhenie k otchetu Bessarabskogo gubernatora za 1912 g.")

but also indulges in certain potentially “subversive” reflections in connection with the possible future of this territory. At the same time, Urusov is rather critical of the integrationist and centralizing projects promoted by the government in St. Petersburg. The same person who advocated the immediate introduction of Russian laws in 1904 asserted the following only three years later:

“The Ismail district, which was newly reincorporated into Russia in 1878, following the war with Turkey, holds a completely peculiar position within Bessarabia... There were neither any noble institutions, nor any zemstvos, nor the [customary] volost’ and rural administrations, led by land captains [zemskimi nachal’nikami], in the Ismail district. Here, the Romanian communal structure was preserved. Every locality, either rural or urban, formed a separate commune, which comprised all the landowners and all the inhabitants of these localities, without distinctions based on property, class etc. The executive official [organ] of the commune- the mayor [primar], assisted by a 12-member communal council - decided on all matters of self-government and fulfilled the same general state duties as those that are delegated to local institutions in Russia. The governor only rarely intervened into the issues linked to the local administration of the Ismail district... The governor inherited, in relation to the self-governing divisions of the district, the [former] functions of the royal power, while his St. Petersburg superiors did not deal with Ismail at all and had only the vaguest notion [samoe tumannoe predstavlenie] about the functioning of the... district... Despite this, the Ministry of Internal Affairs became was once again constantly preoccupied with introducing Russian institutions into Ismail, including the land captains, the volost’ system, the nobility and the new zemstvo-urban regulations. However, the State Council always rejected this kind of ministerial projects, under the pretext of the insufficient explication and lack of serious arguments [neobosnovannosti] to back the idea of the necessity to destroy the old local regime [stroj] in the name of the general leveling of the administration. The Ismail district still remains, until the pres-

ent day, an exception within the Russian district structure; it probably will have to wait for a general reform of our local administration, unless it is not again incorporated into Romania, due to some kind of international combination. [Romania] extends its motherly embrace to [Ismail] from beyond the border river Prut.”³⁰

Thus, a combination of indifference, bureaucratic inertia, and institutional rivalry, accompanied by a certain degree of pragmatism and tolerance of administrative diversity at the peripheries seem to be the main factors accounting for, first of all, the initial possibility of this institutional transfer, and, second, for the persistence of this ‘anomaly’ in an increasingly hostile Russian context, as late as the first decade of the 20th century. Urusov’s example, however, also points to the purely opportunistic and ‘rhetorical’ character of the arguments for centralization, which operated within the complex universe of the “politically correct” vocabulary of the epoch in its Russian imperial version. At the same time, both in his “official” position and his “private” persona, i.e., in his memoirs, Urusov displayed an obvious sensitivity towards the uncertain status of the region from a geographical (or even geopolitical) point of view.

This is understandable, since the Romanian factor became more and more significant in the first decade of the 20th century, when the problem of the loyalty of the populations at the empire’s peripheries acquired a nearly obsessive character for some of the empire’s leaders. The inherent dangers for imperial unity and regional loyalty presupposed by the exceptional status of the Ismail district did not go unnoticed by more anxious Russian observers. Especially in this period (and prob-

30 S. D. Urusov, *Zapiski gubernatora: Kishinev, 1903-1904 gg.*, Litera, Chișinău, 2004, 206-207.

ably linked to the heated discussion on the necessity of introducing the Russian *zemstvo* institutions in the Western borderlands³¹), the 'uncertain' status of Southern Bessarabia became a matter of serious concern for a certain part of the governing circles. In the tense prewar context such apprehensions signaled a growing insecurity of imperial control in the borderlands. In a comprehensive report on the general situation in Bessarabia filed by a Russian counterintelligence officer with a Bessarabian background and sent to the Head of the Police Department from Constantinople on February 19, 1914, the "Ismail issue" figured prominently. The report emphasized that

the Ismail district of Bessarabia finds itself in a worse condition [compared to the rest]. [Here], from the time of its reincorporation into Russia, even the slightest sign of Russification is not visible, so that it seems that one is in Romania. This is caused not only by the recent inclusion of this land into Russia, but also by the connections of the local inhabitants with the Romanians. [Thus,] almost all the trade in agricultural products is oriented towards Romania; the credit loans of small rural landowners are [provided by] Romanian banks, due to the better conditions compared to the private Jewish banks of Southern Russia. [Another cause] is that, until the present time, the Romanian local [*zemskoe*], urban and rural regulations have been preserved.³²

31 The introduction of the *zemstvos* in the Western borderlands was one of the central points of the reform agenda promoted by Piotr Stolypin's government during 1906-1911. The project to extend these institutions to the region stemmed, on the one hand, from the center's wish to integrate these provinces more closely into the Russian 'core' and, on the other hand, from the widespread mistrust of the central authorities towards the Polish landowners, who dominated the electoral colleges and sent a substantial number of deputies to the Duma. Despite the government's efforts to push this legislation through the empire's legislative bodies, the project was shelved by the aristocracy-dominated State Council in 1911.

32 GARF, Fond 529, op. 1, d. 26, ll. 9-11. Secret Report 39, February 19, 1914 (mistakenly dated 1913), here l. 11.

The resurgence of the "Ismail issue" as late as 1914 is symptomatic. Partly due to bureaucratic inertia and partly to arguments relating to the better effectiveness of the district's western-style institutions, the Ismail district preserved its exceptional character in Bessarabia and was constantly invoked as an example of Russian administrative rationality (or, conversely, carelessness). In the early period after the region's reintegration into the empire the acceptance of the Romanian institutional model was regarded either in pragmatic terms, as a temporary expedient or, ultimately, as an example of strategic flexibility of the center's policy at the empire's multiethnic peripheries. Due to the increasing "nationalization" of the imperial discourse and practical policy, the relevance of the national factor was given great emphasis later. The Ismail district became a potential target for "Romanian irredentism," while its administrative peculiarity became increasingly awkward and questionable. However, the fact that such a situation endured for almost 40 years suggests a complex attitude towards foreign models of governance even within the late Russian Empire, which was less tolerant of regional diversity. The continuity of the local elites and the relatively generous terms of their reintegration after 1878 played a large role in this outcome. The co-existence of a French-inspired "rational" administrative structure (in a remote corner of the empire) with a multi-layered Russian model of local governance might serve as a good example of the flexibility of the state authorities. This flexibility could also be explained by the inconsistency of imperial policy, which lacked any common vision on the integration of the peripheries. The case of Southern Bessarabia might also serve as a reminder that the empire's borderlands were privileged sites of administrative and social

experiments up to the demise of the imperial regime.

The relevance of this case is also enhanced by the fact that there were no direct parallels to Southern Bessarabia's situation in the other parts of the Russian Empire. While the Romanov polity had vast experience in accommodating and dealing with institutional difference in the borderlands, the combination of factors affecting Southern Bessarabia was unique. This was the only area reclaimed by the empire from an emerging nation-state and, consequently, presented the Russian central authorities with very specific dilemmas. This is not to say that similar strategies of governance and / or tolerance of previous administrative practices were rare. On the contrary, the empire incorporated territories with rather different and long-standing institutional traditions (e.g., the former Polish lands, Finland and the Baltic Provinces) which had to be initially accepted and gradually adjusted to imperial standards. This process was always uneven and incomplete. However, the issue of institutional modernity was only at stake in Southern Bessarabia. In this sense, the flexibility noted above was also due to the uneven nature of Russian modernization. In fact, the closest parallels to the Southern Bessarabian case appear during World War I, when the Russian occupation authorities had to improvise governing strategies in the areas seized from enemy powers. Still, that was an exceptional context of generalized violence, wholesale transformation of traditional social and ethnic hierarchies, large-scale societal disruption and population displacement³³. It is thus

hardly comparable to the 'normal' rhythm of institutional transfer exhibited in Southern Bessarabia. This relative uniqueness of the "Is-mail anomaly" makes it all the more fascinating and revealing for any student of imperial borderlands.

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³³ For a substantial and in-depth discussion of these issues, see Eric Lohr. *Nationalizing the Russian Empire: The Campaign Against Enemy Aliens During World War I* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003); Peter Holquist, "Violent Russia, Deadly Marxism? Russia in the Epoch of

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Constantin Stere, one of the most prominent Bessarabian-born émigrés to the Romanian Kingdom, in the context of World War I foreign policy debates in Romania, in *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas* (No. 3, 2012). He also co-edited (with Diana Dumitru, Igor Cașu and Petru Negură) the collective volume *Al Doilea Război Mondial: memorie și istorie în Estul și Vestul Europei* [World War II: Memory and History in Eastern and Western Europe], Chișinău, Cartier, 2013.

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Between the Empire and the Nation-State: Metamorphoses of the Bessarabian Elite (1918)

by Svetlana Suveică, Moldova State University, Chişinău

ABSTRACT

The aim of the article is to examine the circumstances that shaped the feelings and attitudes of the Bessarabian political and economic elite, who experienced the disintegration of the Russian empire, but did not show readiness to embrace the Romanian-nation state perspective in 1918. I claim that 1917-1918 political changes of the region deeply affected the economic and social status of the former elite, influenced its identity and belonging, forced new survival strategies, shaped mobility patterns, as well encouraged the development of alternative political scenarios for the future of the region, namely the return of Bessarabia back to Russia. Romania's protection of Bessarabia from the Bolsheviks did not ensure the expected support for the new regime of those who cared about the preservation of their economic and social status; the metamorphoses experienced by those who served the empire were shaped, besides the feeling of loss and nostalgia for the tsar, by the frustration and disappointment for the failure to switch loyalty to the Romanian king. Besides that, the abolition of Bessarabian autonomy that lasted for six months led towards merging of a common anti-Romanian front of the former and the acting regional elite that once supported the union of Bessarabia with Romania.

Besides unprecedented human losses and material devastation, the end of World War One was marked by social revolutions and national movements that challenged imperial rules. The path of Bessarabia, like that of other East European regions, was shaped by turmoil: Bessarabia changed its political status from the western gubernia of the Russian empire to the eastern province of the Romanian nation-state. Political changes deeply affected people's economic and social status, influenced feelings of identity and belonging, forced new survival strategies and mobility patterns, and encouraged the development of alternative political scenarios for the future of the region.

The metamorphoses experienced by the regional elite who were in power during the last days of the empire remains a missing puzzle in the complex picture of transition. The fact that its representatives were active during the Peace conference in Paris, which condemned the Romanian "occupation" and claimed the return of Bessarabia to Russia, raises a series of questions which go beyond the typical rep-

resentation of the behaviour of a nostalgic, disappointed and frustrated group of people who were the last generation educated within the empire and the first generation not able to serve it. The aim of this article is to examine the circumstances that shaped their feelings and attitudes, and which led to their active engagement in the development of a political scenario for the region. This was an alternative scenario to the project of Bessarabia's belonging to national Romanian state, and instead aimed to re-attach this region to Russia regardless of the confusion of the latter's political regime. This idea found supporters among the Bessarabians who were in power during the short period of autonomy and then independence, as well as among those who voted for the union of the region with Romania in April 1918. The acknowledgement of the existence of such an alternative scenario and the revealing of the motivations of its supporters, who promoted the cause inside Bessarabia as well as in European capitals during the post-war remaking of the world order enable us to question the nation-state finality as a prede-

tined linear path, which has been long argued in the Romanian as well as Moldovan nationalist historiography.

"As soon as possible leave and trumpet and insert in every publication that must awaken Europe and make it restore all and set here an actual state of order, and not a mere appearance of it, barely covered by the existing Bolshevism of those who stand at the head of all this,"¹ wrote the Bessarabian landowner Panteleimon V. Sinadino to the former Marshal of Bessarabian nobility Alexandr N. Krupenskii. It was January 25 1919² and Sinadino was in the Bessarabian main city of Chişinău, whereas Krupenskii was in Odessa awaiting a visa to leave for Paris.

This was the time when in the French capital the representatives of either victorious or defeated countries gathered to participate in the post-war conference, which was expected to set up the principles of the new peaceful international order and redesign the East European borders. As Alan Sharp puts it, "promises had been made, expectations and aspirations rose, either deliberately or by accident, and now these pledges had to be redeemed."³ The Paris peace conference was the space where the claims to Bessarabia from both Russia and Romania were formulated, argued, and confronted. The Romanian delegation to the conference strived to obtain the international recognition of the newly shaped post-war borders. It ex-

pected to confront the opponents of the union of Bessarabia with Romania, who also gathered in Paris. On their turn, the Russian political émigrés and diplomats contested the right of the Romanians and claimed that Bessarabia belonged to Russia. The claims were sustained as part of the "Russkoe delo" (Russian cause) campaign, supported by the White forces inside Russia and in different European emigration centers. Its aim was to obtain the support of the Great Powers in the anti-Bolshevik fight, and to secure the preservation of Russia's pre-1914 borders, including the former Western territories of the Russian empire. In order to attain their overarching goal, each side drafted plans, built networks, raised money, and designed propaganda strategies.

Self-determination being declared the guiding principle for the redesign of postwar borders, the victory seemed to be on the side of the nation-state(s); the fight, nevertheless, promised to be a tough one. Romania had an official delegation, whereas Russia's interests were represented by a group of political émigrés and diplomats empowered by the White Army's General Kolchak, who had a good reputation and strong connections among the European and American officials. Especially in the first half of 1919, the Russians acted with confidence: on the one hand, the White Army gained a series of important victories against the Bolsheviks; on the other hand, the Great Powers seemed to agree on a common anti-Bolshevik position. Under these promising circumstances, the Whites in Paris and inside Russia hoped that the defeat of the Bolsheviks would be followed by a series of concessions for Russia, including territorial ones, under the condition that the country would follow a democratic path.⁴

1 P.V. Sinadino - A.N. Krupenskii, January 25 1919. Alexandr N. Krupenskii Papers, Box I Subject files, Folder Sinadino, Panteleimon V., Hoover Institution Archives, Stanford, California (further HIA).

2 All the dates in the text are New Style.

3 Alan Sharp, *The Versailles Settlement. Peacemaking After the First World War, 1919-1923*, 2d ed. (Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 196.

4 Regarding the arguments used by the Russian émigrés as well as the efforts made in order

The Bessarabians were also ready to take part in the debate over the fate of their region. The Romanian delegate at the Peace conference, Ioan Pelivan, represented the “new” regional elite who vociferated the social and national aspirations of the Bessarabians. While studying law in Dorpat (Tartu), he returned to Bessarabia with the spread of the February 1917 Revolution to the Western periphery. After witnessing the disintegration of the imperial colossus, Pelivan contributed to the claims of Bessarabian autonomy and independence, and then gave his vote for the union of this region with Romania. A former minister of justice and deputy of the first Bessarabian legislative body “Sfatul Țării”, he reached Paris via Bucharest, where he joined the Romanian Prime minister Ion I.C. Brătianu and other delegates to defend the Romanian interests at the conference. Acknowledging with all the responsibility and faith the complex task of persuading the Great Powers to recognise Bessarabia as Romanian territory, he carried out intense propaganda activities.⁵

Pelivan’s main political opponent during the Peace conference was Alexandr N. Krupenskii. In contrast to Pelivan, Krupenskii represented the “old” Bessarabian elite, which flourished during the late Romanov Empire, which was actively involved in Bessarabian social, political and economic life, was loyal to the tsar, and

to give Bessarabia back to Russia during the Paris Peace conference, see our recent study : Svetlana Suveica, “*Russkoe Delo*” and the “*Bessarabian Cause*”: the Russian Political Émigrés and the Bessarabians in Paris (1919-1920), Institut für Ost- und Südosteuropaforschung, Regensburg, IOS Mitteilungen. Arbeitsbereich Geschichte, no. 64, February 2014, accessed October 10 2014, http://www.dokumente.ios-regensburg.de/publikationen/mitteilungen/mitt_64.pdf.

⁵ Regarding the activities of Ioan Pelivan in Paris, see Ion Constantin, Ion Negrei, Gheorghe Negru (Eds.), *Ioan Pelivan, istoric al mișcării de eliberare națională* (București: Editura Biblioteca Bucureștilor), 2012, 390-409.

did not imagine that one day all this could vanish. He reached the French capital via Odessa, where he emigrated in April 1918, soon after “Sfatul Țării” declared the union of Bessarabia with Romania. Marginalized from the political life of the region, Krupenskii became active in its near vicinity, where he initiated the creation of the Odessa Committee for Saving Bessarabia (Odesskii Komitet Spaseniiia Bessarabii). Although limited in resources, the Committee carried out intense propaganda activities against the Romanian “occupation” of the region. The main initiative of the Committee was the creation of a Bessarabian “delegation” that would represent the interests of the Bessarabians in Paris.⁶ A declaration, signed in Odessa on February 10, 1919, stated that the “representatives of various organizations and community groups of Bessarabia, [...] organize, under the chairmanship of Alexandr Nikolaevich Krupenskii, a common Commission for the purpose of achieving during the International Peace Conference the liberation of Bessarabia from the Romanian annexation and the realization of the aspirations of the people of Bessarabia.”⁷ The aspirations were related to the return of Bessarabia back into the Russian borders. The list of potential members was left open, so that other delegates could adhere: among the proposed names was Panteleimon V. Sinadino, the president of the Union of Bessarabian Great Landowners, the organization that issued a mandate to Paris to A.N. Krupenskii.

⁶ For a general overview, see Svetlana Suveica, “For the “Bessarabian Cause”: The Activity of Odessa Committee for Saving Bessarabia (1918-1920)”, *Archiva Moldaviae*, vol. VI (2014): 139-169.

⁷ The document was signed by Alexandr N. Krupenskii, Alexandr K. Schmidt, Alexandr D. Krupenskii and Vladimir V. Tsyganko. Alexandr N. Krupenskii Papers, Box 2 Subject File, Folder Bessarabian commission of the Paris Peace Conference, HIA.

In contrast to Pelivan, who held the mandate of the member of the Romanian delegation to the Peace conference,⁸ A.N. Krupenskii and the former mayor of Chişinău, A.K. Schmidt, were “dispatched to Paris as carriers carrying documents and letters to the representative of Russia to the Peace Congress – Mr Minister Serge Sazonov.”⁹ In the French capital, these two men ensured the Russian émigrés that their co-nationals were eager to again be “citizens of the Great Russian State and [...] are ready to contribute to the restoration of the Greater Russia by all means.”¹⁰ During the conference, the Bessarabians acted together with the Russian political émigrés and diplomats for the support of the “Russian cause”. Although on the public scene the idea of building a democratic post-war Russia was promoted, the monarchist views were strongly backed inside the circle of the Russian émigrés. Among the supporters of the monarchist ideas was Alexandr N. Krupenskii, who in 1921 presided over the first congress of Russian monarchists held in the German city of Bad Reichenhall,¹¹ and

who took over the presidency of the Russian Monarchical Council (Russkii Monarkhicheskii Sovet) in Paris in 1926. The biography of Krupenskii can serve as a classical case study of a post-imperial subject: up to his death in 1939, he believed in the restoration of “the foundations of the old order, in which Russia, admittedly, was great, rich and mighty.”¹²

The archival documents reveal that the Bessarabian “delegation” to Paris consisted of three representatives of the former elite who served the tsar, and one representative of the “new” elite, who became active in the region during the summer of 1917. The latter was Vladimir V. Tsyganko, the head of the Peasants’ faction of the “Sfatul Țării”, delegated to Paris by the Central Committee of the Peasants of Bessarabia. In an article published in 1919 he stated that it would be “dangerous” for the Great Powers to take into consideration only the information coming from the Romanian side, which aimed at “establishing the rights of Romania over Bessarabia.” In his opinion, that “would lead to decisions absolutely inadmissible for my country [underl. in text].”¹³ It is about the fate and the property of a region of more than two and a half million of people, and we give an account of responsibility before these numerous people.”¹⁴

In Paris the regional supporters of the nation-state perspective for Bessarabia were thus confronted by the supporters of the return of Bessarabia to a restored Greater Russia in its pre-war borders. In order to answer the question under which circumstances an alternative

8 From 1 December 1919 to 31 May 1920, the member of the Romanian delegation Ioan Pelivan received a monthly salary of 20.000 FR. Arhivele Naționale Istorie Centrale București (further A.N.I.C.), fond Ioan Pelivan, dos. 41, f. 24.

9 Certificat, Odessa, January 27 1919 (Fr.), A.N. Krupenskii Papers, Box 2 Subject file, Folder Krupenskii, A.N., HIA.

10 The earlier program was rather similar to one quoted here. Obshchaia Programma Predstavitelei Bessarabskogo Naseleniia, December 10 1919 (draft). Alexandr N. Krupenskii Papers, Box 3 Speeches & Writings, 1919, Folder “General Program of the Representatives of the Bessarabian Population” (December 10 1919), HIA.

11 *Allgemeine Zeitung München*, no. 236, 7. Juni 1921, Bayrisches Staatsarchiv München, MA 103009 Deutsch-Russische-Beziehungen, 1919-1929. See also Hans-Erich Volkmann, *Die Russische Emigration in Deutschland, 1919-1929* (Würzburg: Holzner-Verlag), 1966, 99; Johannes Baur, *Die Russische Kolonie in München 1900-1945. Deutsch-russische Beziehungen im 20. Jahrhundert* (Wiesbaden: Harrasowitz Verlag), 1998, 103.

12 *Secretnaia Zapiska*, Dec. 10-23 1931. Archbishop Apollinari (Koshevoi) Papers, Box 2 Correspondence, Folder 2.18 Krupenskii Alexandr Nikolaevich, 1928-1932, Reel 1, HIA.

13 A.N.I.C., fond Ioan Pelivan, dos. 428, f. 24.

14 “Bessarabian Question before the Peace Conference”, by Vladimir V. Tsyganko, f. 3-4.

perspective – other than that of the participation to the Romanian nation-state – found its supporters in Bessarabia as well in Paris, one must look back at the events of 1917-1918.

With the spread of the 1917 February Revolution from Petersburg to the most distant corners of the empire, the emissaries of the Provisional Government found in Bessarabia an “extreme ignorance of the population, among whom the percentage of illiteracy is surprisingly high; a powerful party of the wealthy landowners, who had concentrated the local administration in their own hands; the virtual absence of industrial workers and of a democratically-inclined intelligentsia: all this was fruitful soil for counter-revolutionary pogroms and plots in favor of restoration. [...] Here the monarchist currents flowed strongly.”¹⁵ The Party of the Center, led by the Marshal of the Bessarabian nobility and great landowner Alexandr N. Krupenskii, was the main supporter of the monarchist idea. An attentive observer of the events noted that to the imperial elite “liberals advocating a constitutional regime were a greater threat even than the land-hungry peasants.”¹⁶ By the autumn of 1917 the political and administrative levers were gradually lost to the “new” leaders that propagated social-democratic reforms. The main factor that shaped the self-identification of the former elite was the economic status. The “wealthy” and “landowners”¹⁷ were con-

cerned about preserving their land and property during the peasants’ sporadic take-over of land, the so-called “agrarian revolution.” Neither local nor central authorities could stop the anarchy; in this situation, the landowners “had no illusions as to what might happen to them in the event of revolution and most of them built up reserves in foreign banks to meet extreme eventualities in case they were forced to become refugees.”¹⁸

In the power vacuum created in the period of transition from the empires to the nation-states in different parts of Eastern Europe the “kleiner Raum” initiatives were developed.¹⁹ In the autumn of 1917, when, according to Alan Kramer, “Russia’s post-war history began while the rest of Europe was still at war”,²⁰ in Bessarabia the regional assembly “Sfatul Țării” representing different social, political and professional groups, was created.²¹ The wealthy were among the deputies, although not as a coagulated group; they hoped to influence the legislative decisions of the newly instituted body, among them the preservation of private property being a priority. In the opening ceremony, Panteleimon V. Sinadino

1920, are held in Alexandr N. Krupenskii’s personal collection, HIA.

18 Michael, *More Corn for Bessarabia*.

19 The “kleiner Raum” initiatives in 1918-1919 were short-lived state-building efforts in Eastern Europe. The studies on this subject, published in a collective volume, challenged the historiography, in which the nation-state was shown as the only organizing principle after World War One. Harald Heppner, Eduard Staudinger (eds.), *Region und Umbruch: zur Geschichte alternativer Ordnungsversuche* (Bern/Frankfurt a.M.: Peter Lang, 2001).

20 Alan Kramer, *Dynamic of Destruction. Culture and Mass Killing in the First World War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 285.

21 On the social composition of Sfatul Țării, see: Katja Lasch, “Der Landesrat in Bessarabien: Ethnische Zusammensetzung, politischen Orientierung, Sozialisation und Bildungsstand der Abgeordneten”, *Transylvanian Review*, XXI, no. 2 (Summer 2012): 19-37.

15 The Dissemination outside Petrograd of the News of the Revolution (Doc. 129), in: Robert P. Browder, Alexander F. Kerensky (Eds.), *The Russian Provisional Government, 1917: Documents*, vol. 1 (Stanford: Stanford University Press), 1961, 148-149.

16 Louis Guy Michael, *More Corn for Bessarabia. Russian Experience, 1917-1917* (Michigan: Michigan State University Press, 1983), 117-118. The mimeographed copy of Michael’s memoirs is held at HIA (collection no. 79070).

17 20 letters of P.V. Sinadino, addressed to A.N. Krupenskii between August 1918 and January

greeted the assembly on behalf of the Bessarabian Greek minority and expressed hopes that “Sfatul Țării” will establish in our homeland order, legality and peace that will protect the life, the liberty and the wealth of all those who will be highly honored to live under the protection of freedom of Bessarabia. [...] Long live the free, autonomous, Bessarabia, mature as a state!”, concluded the speaker optimistically.²² The short-lived autonomy within the Russian Federation and then the independence of the Moldovan Republic declared on February 6, 1918 were less an outcome of a separate political project, but more a reality imposed by the external circumstances, namely the independence of neighbouring Ukraine. An unsuccessful Bolshevik attempt to seize power at the beginning of 1918, the territorial pretensions of Ukrainian Rada, as well as the chaos and anarchy on the Romanian front that soon spread over Bessarabia challenged the independence of the Moldovan Republic. From April 9, 1918, when the region became part of Romania, the situation slowly came back to normality.

The private correspondence between Panteleimon V. Sinadino and Alexandr N. Krupenskii reveals that at the end of 1917 and the beginning of 1918 the anxiety and fear over the spread of Bolshevism was a daily concern of the wealthy Bessarabians. Under these circumstances, those who feared life threats to their lives and property losses acclaimed the entry of the Romanian army into Bessarabia in January 1918. When the Romanian army refrained from intervening in the internal affairs of the region, a group of greater landowners led by Panteleimon V. Sinadino wrote a note to the Romanian Prime Minister, Al. Margiloman, in

which he described “land anarchy” reigning in Bessarabia. The agrarian legislation issued by “Sfatul Țării” was characterized as having a “pure Bolshevik character, tending towards marching against the classes of landowners, towards their defeat, towards the demagogic promises of the redistribution of wealth.”²³ Subsequently, the only solution seen by the landlords was the removal of “Sfatul Țării”, which was “an institution elected arbitrarily by gangs of perverted Bolsheviks and soldiers, not only without the participation of the intelligent population, but even without a true representation of the peasants.”²⁴ The address was left unanswered.

Another attempt to seek protection from Romania followed: a delegation of the greater landowners was received on March 23, 1918 by the Romanian King in Iași. Its members, led by Siandino, expressed disappointment with “Sfatul Țării”, described as “an occasional creation of occasional politicians and adventurers” and an “arbitrary institution chosen by a band of maximalist soldiers” that took advantage of the Bolshevik *coup d'état* and declared the independence of the Moldovan Republic. The landowners asked for the protection of property and personal security and expressed the belief that the union of Bessarabia with Romania was the only solution “to end the revolutionary state organized by an alleged government and an alleged Sfatul Țării”.²⁵ A decision of the Romanian Prime minister for the support of the landowners followed: “Without intervening in the regulations of property quarrels, troops and horses

22 Procesul-verbal nr. 1 al ședinței organului basarabean al Țării - Sfatul Țării, 21 noiembrie 1917, *Patrimoniul. Almanah de cultură istorică*, no. 1 (1990): 170.

23 Zapiska, undated. HIA, Alexandr N. Krupenskii Papers, Box II Subject file, Folder Occupation, Rumania, of Bessarabia – General, HIA.

24 Zapiska.

25 Ștefan Ciobanu, *Unirea Basarabiei. Studiu și documente cu privire la mișcarea națională din Basarabia în anii 1917-1918* (Chișinău: Editura “Universitas”, 1993), 250-251.

will be given to great landowners for the land not to be left fallow.”²⁶ Amid war requisitions and food shortage, the Romanian authorities thus made efforts to create favourable conditions for the cultivation of land, without being ready to intervene in the internal political debates of the region.

On the eve of the day “Sfatul Țării” voted for the union of Bessarabia with Romania (April 9, 1918), the Romanian Prime minister Al. Marghiloman met secretly in Chișinău with Pan-teleimon V. Sinadino and other landowners. Marghiloman ensured Sinadino that “Sfatul Țării” shall be dissolved immediately after the vote in the favour of the union will take place, and that the re-installment to power of the former elite, whose knowledge about the region as well experience was crucial to the new regime, will follow.²⁷ Romania’s fear for the spread of the Bolshevism across the river Pruth seemed in line with the harsh critique on the “revolutionary clique of the legislative body of “Sfatul Țării”, repeatedly expressed by the landowners before the Romanian authorities. Sinadino in turn ensured the Romanian official that the Bessarabian wealthy “stood and will stand for order, civilization, honour and truth and we hope to serve faithfully the future Motherland in the same manner we served and worked for the progress of Russia and the Tsar.”²⁸ The landowners requested the acceleration of the annexation of Bessarabia to Romania, “so that this very fertile and reach region could settle and move towards progress and civilization under a well-organized state power.” Marghi-

26 Alexandru Marghiloman, *Note politice*, vol. III, 1917-1918 (București: Institutul de arte grafice “Eminescu”, 1927), 415-416.

27 Beseda P.V. Sinadino. Marghiloman IV, undated. Vasili A. Maklakov Papers, Box 18, Folder 18.10 Bessarabia. Soiuz Zemel’nykh Sobstvennikov, f. 4, HIA.

28 Beseda, f. 3.

loman replied that “the historical injustice towards the Moldovan people will be repaired and the “union will take place, regardless of the obstacles.”²⁹

Based on the available primary sources, it is hard to tell whether Sinadino and the others believed the promises made by the Romanians. Nevertheless, it is clear that the Bessarabian wealthy expressed readiness to switch loyalty from the Russian tsar to the Romanian king as a strategy of adaptation, which was strongly motivated by personal interests, such as the preservation of property rights and social privileges enjoyed under the Russian empire.

Whereas Sinadino and others tried to negotiate their status with the new regime and adapt to the new life, their personal feelings and thoughts remained attached to Russia. In a letter to Krupenskii, Sinadino who came from a family of Greek merchants identified himself as “Russian” and “Russian by name and in soul.”³⁰ Sinadino’s name figured in the list of the potential Bessarabian “delegates” to Paris; he never joined Krupenskii and others due to health issues and because his service in Bessarabia was much needed for his fellows in Paris. Sinadino acted as the main informant of Krupenskii about the situation in the region during the Peace conference. Thus, he wisely played a double game: while the Romanian authorities considered him loyal, he sincerely hoped for the return of Bessarabia back to Russia. Sinadino used to travel hundreds of kilometres from Chișinău to Bucharest, to meet a second-rank French or British representative, who would then travel to Paris and deliver a letter or a parcel to Krupenskii. The letters received from Paris kept Sinadino and

29 Beseda.

30 P.V. Sinadino - A.N. Krupenskii, June 5 1919.

the others in Chişinău hopeful that after Paris life would return to “normality.” The point of reference to “normality” was the life in Greater Russia. “I really do not know when God will have mercy on us?! We find it hard! There are few people with ideology, most are drawn into daily life, and from this take advantage “our patrons”, deeper and deeper plunge they into people’s body, tearing it off from our (once) Great country! We stand [one illegible word] people, will the awaited change and liberation ever come?! We do not know and it becomes terrible!”³¹

The status of autonomy within the Romanian state, granted to Bessarabia on April 9, 1918, was viewed by the representatives of the former elite as the light at the end of the tunnel. Panteleimon V. Sinadino and others believed that the autonomy was the guarantee of the preservation of economic privileges and would facilitate their “come-back” in the administrative life of the region. Sinadino and Constantin Stere,³² the Bessarabian intellectual and politician whom the Romanian Government entrusted the mediation of the union with “Sfatul Țării” deputies, met secretly several times during the months of April-May 1918. Stere emphasized the willingness of the Romanian government to cooperate with the loyal Bessarabians: “When implementing the agrarian reform, it is necessary to closely monitor and analyse who among the landowners is able and willing to merge with the Romanian people, for the rest of them we should try to provide the possibility to painlessly liquidate their corners and leave.” Among the endorsed was Alexandr N. Krupenskii who emigrated

to Odessa and played the anti-Romanian card from there.³³ The discussions between Stere and Sinadino reveal an attempt of both the Romanian Government and the Bessarabian landowners to establish a dialogue for a possible future cooperation in economic and administrative matters in the region. In order to avoid the consequences of radical agrarian legislation, Stere advised Sinadino to find a way to obtain the seats within the agrarian commission of “Sfatul Țării”, so that the landowners will have their own voice heard. The attempt of the landowners to enter the commission failed.

During the month of October 1918 the spirits became agitated around a possible abolition of Bessarabian autonomy. In a private letter from October 28, 1918, P.V. Sinadino informed A.N. Krupenskii in Odessa that “among the members of Sf.T. [Sfatul Țării], i.e. those who voted pro union, is a large group (15 people), who are ready to tell the truth and give up their signatures, as well as many members of the Peasant Party who cannot remain silent spectators of all that is being done here. Some have already traveled to Iași, and called for the creation of the Sf.T. [Sfatul Țării] before November 1.³⁴ Otherwise they promise to come out openly against Romania; of course, they were not promised anything.” Apparently, these people were ready to break a “big scandal” in Bessarabia and declare the act of April 9 invalid in the case the composition of the legislative body remained unchanged. Sinadino believed that the intention of the rebellious deputies could be supported financially with sums equal to the salary of a “Sfatul Țării” deputy. Things were to be arranged in such a way “that these left-wing comrades do not

31 P.V. Sinadino - A.N. Krupenskii, December 7 1919.

32 According to a detailed transcript, written by P.V. Sinadino, the meetings took place on April 12 and 23, May 7 and 26, and June 23 1918. Beseda, f. 8-31.

33 Beseda, f. 15.

34 A new composition of the Bessarabian parliament was meant here.

receive money from you, because they would be ashamed, you need to find a reliable person from their environment.”³⁵ The rebellious deputies were expected to leave for Odessa.

At the end of November 1918, when Romania was about to send delegates to the Peace conference in Paris, the Romanian Prime minister Arthur Văitoianu travelled to Chişinău to persuade “Sfatul Țării” deputies to give up the regional autonomy. In a private conversation with the head of the Peasants faction of the Bessarabian legislative body, Vladimir V. Tsyganko, Văitoianu did not hide the fact that a unified position will support Romania’s interests before the decision-makers at the conference in Paris. He apparently said: “And why would you need autonomy? Are the Romanian laws bad? What is autonomy, I do not understand. You should abandon it for the very reason that you don’t have good public servants, good Romanian-nationalists. If you give up the autonomy you will not have a general commissar, but a special plenipotentiary for the Bessarabian affairs, a person from your surroundings named by the Central government, the Directorate in its new composition will remain until the All-Romanian Constituent Assembly [is created – n.a.]. Is this not good?”³⁶ According to the Romanian official, an autonomous Bessarabia will stay isolated from the rest of Romania.

Vladimir V. Tsyganko was among those forty deputies of “Sfatul Țării” who several days before Văitoianu’s visit to Chişinău signed a memorandum to the Romanian government, expressing disagreement with the fact that the

Bessarabian autonomy, stipulated in the act of the union April 9, 1918, was not respected. The signatories claimed that civil liberties were broken, governmental agents that replaced local servants abused their power, minority rights were not respected, and the national strife was artificially fueled among the ethnic groups that were previously living peacefully in the region. They asked for new elections and a new composition of “Sfatul Țării”, as well as for the restoration of zemstvo, the local institutions of self-administration. The signatories, thirteen of whom signed the act of the union, threatened to denounce it.³⁷ There is no documentary evidence of the fact that the document was ever sent to Bucharest; nevertheless, it should be counted as the last unsuccessful attempt to save the regional autonomy within Romania. On December 10, 1918 it was abolished.³⁸

After the cancellation of autonomy, Vladimir V. Tsyganko left Chişinău for Odessa. On April 9, 1918, Tsyganko abstained from giving his vote for the union of Bessarabia with Romania, despite being convinced that the union was the only solution for avoiding the Bolshevik invasion of the region. The abolition of autonomy six months later strengthened his conviction that the union with Romania was a temporary solution for Bessarabia, and that the future of the region lied within the democratic Russia. In Odessa he signed the common declaration of the Bessarabian “delegation”, mandated to Paris by the Odessa Committee for Saving Bessarabia, the Union

35 P.V. Sinadino - A.N. Krupenskii, October 28 1918.

36 V gostiakh u General’nogo Komissara Vaitoianu v piatnitsu 23 noiabria 1919 g., undated. Alexandr N. Krupenskii Papers, Box 3 Speeches & Writings, 1919, Folder Tsyganko, Vladimir (Tsyganko), HIA.

37 Memorandum (photocopy with original signatures), undated (Rus.). Alexandr N. Krupenskii Papers, Box II Subject File, Folder Romania – (Relations with Bessarabia), HIA.

38 The vote of “Sfatul Țării” during its last session is little discussed in the literature; some unpublished documents which we plan to explore in other publications show that it was produced in dubious conditions.

of Bessarabian greater landowners and other social-political organizations in order to fight for the restoration of Russia and the return of Bessarabia back into its borders. Although he later refrained in written form from respecting the Odessa declaration – the document that laid the basis for the founding of the Bessarabian “delegation” – and acted in Paris on his own, his activity was directed towards persuading the wider European public that Romania forcibly occupied Bessarabia. Tsyganko publicly claimed, on different occasions, that the population of Bessarabia identified with Russia and wished to belong to the Russian geographic, economic and cultural space. Similarly to the other Bessarabian “delegates”, he supported the idea of holding a plebiscite in the region. Ion Păscăluță was another “Sfatul Țării” deputy whom the abolition of autonomy motivated to publicly adhere to “the anti-unionist movement”, which was initiated by Krupenskii in Odessa then continued in Paris.³⁹ In contrast to Tsyganko, Păscăluță voted for the union of Bessarabia with Romania on April 9, 1918.⁴⁰ On the day of the abolishment of autonomy, he addressed a note to the Odessa Committee for Saving Bessarabia, “with the aim of informing on the latest acts of violence committed by the Romanian government over the defenseless Bessarabia”. He claimed that only 38 of 48 present deputies (of the total number of 140 deputies) voted for the annulment of the conditions, under which Bessarabia united with Romania on April 9 1918.⁴¹

39 Ion Constantin, Panteleimon Halippa neînfricat pentru Basarabia (București: Biblioteca Bucureștilor, 2009), 203.

40 Alexandru Chiriac, Membrii Sfatului Țării (1917-1918). Dicționar (București: Editura Fundației Culturale Române, 2001), 24.

41 V. Komitet po Spaseniiu Bessarabii, December 10 1918. Vasili A. Maklakov Papers, Box 18 Subject File, Folder 18.2 Bessarabia. Protests against abuses by Romanian authorities, HIA.

The above arguments support the conclusion that the abolition of autonomy motivated the representatives of the “old” and the “new” elite, who were once at the opposite sides of the barricade, to act together against the common enemy, the Romanian regime. Although the perspective of Bessarabia within either a democratic or a monarchic Russia was not clearly envisaged, the certitude that Bessarabia belonged to the Russian space grew together with the dissatisfactions caused by the abolition of autonomy.

In the meantime, in Paris, the president of the Bessarabian “delegation”, Alexandr N. Krupenskii, made efforts to create a network of people who dedicated their activities to the success of the “Bessarabian cause”. The network, based on the previously built social ties and personal connections, evolved into a variegated and diffuse structure, in which social, political or ethnic identification was less important than the willingness to contribute to the success of the cause. Moving back and forth across boundaries and nations and meeting former acquaintances in order to build a network of reliable people turned into a challenging enterprise. Krupenskii and others looked to update their agenda and influence the decision-makers at the conference, while also counterbalancing Romania’s position and persuading the European public to take a stance in the Russian-Romanian dispute over Bessarabia. The memoranda and protests targeted the main political actors, whereas the newspaper articles and pamphlets, published simultaneously in English and French in Paris, London, Geneva and Washington were directed towards informing and persuading the wider public.

The events in Paris echoed back to Bessarabia, nuancing the contradictory discussions as well as deepening the dramatic experiences lived

by those individuals who associated themselves with the past and could not adapt to the life under the new regime. The dissatisfaction was boosted by the signals of hope for the return of Bessarabia to Russia sent by the Russian émigrés from Paris and other European capitals. From abroad, the émigrés played the role of the “external national homeland”, continuing to promote the “long-distance nationalism” among the Russians and Russian-speaking minorities.⁴² The former Bessarabian social and economic elite – less the political elite of the 1918 – that acted in Paris mediated the transfer of the Russian “nationalism” to the former periphery of the empire.

The Romanian as well as Moldovan nationalist historiography discourse on the “legitimate desire” of people inhabiting Bessarabia to become part of Romania after World War I does not accommodate the search for a political perspective by different ethnic and social segments of Bessarabian society. The depicted archival documents reveal that during the transition from the Russian empire to the Romanian nation-state the representatives of the former political, economic and social elite did not perceive the future as a radical rupture with the past, rather as a mixture of past experiences, present confusions, and hopes. They expressed multiple forms of identity, shaped around the conventional imperial space that cultivated distinct values and sentiments of belonging. After the dissolution of the Russian empire, the former peripheral elite felt burdened with belonging to a (single) nation

and was unprepared to embrace the new Romanian “Motherland”.

Romania in turn adopted a reluctant and cautious attitude towards those that were once loyal to the tsar, considering that the protection of the province from the Bolsheviks would ensure the automatic support of the local population, regardless of ethnic or social origin. The abolition of the Bessarabian autonomy in December 1918 was painfully received by the former imperial elite as well as the Bessarabian deputies of “Sfatul Țării” who previously supported the unionist project. Those Bessarabians who were once situated at the opposite sides of political spectrum for political or social reasons merged their efforts in Bessarabia, Odessa and Paris against the Romanian “occupation” and, subsequently, supported the return of Bessarabia back to Russia. The latter Bessarabian political scenario was part of a wide “Russkoe delo” plan, backed in Paris by the Russian political émigrés and diplomats, whom the anti-Bolshevik stance of the Great Powers during the Peace conference gave hopes for the restoration of Russia in her pre-war borders. However, the future of the new post-war order belonged to the nation-states; the Paris peace treaty on October 28, 1920 recognized Bessarabia as part of Romania as the final solution for the Russian-Romanian post-war territorial dispute. Although the plan for the return of Bessarabia within Russia’s borders proved to be a lost cause, the people as well the events shaped around it shows that the union of Bessarabia with Romania was an “eventful” process that contained historical contingencies rather than a predestined linear path.

⁴² For a general overview see Rogers Brubaker, *Nationalism reframed. Nationhood and the national question in the New Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

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From a 'Liberation' to Another. The Bessarabian Writers During the First Year of Soviet Power (1940-1941): Integration Strategies and Forms of Exclusion

by Petru Negură, "Ion Creangă" State Pedagogical University, Chişinău

Abstract

The dual aim of this article is, on the one hand, to identify Bessarabian writers' individual and group rationale to stay in the territory occupied by the Soviet authorities after 28 June 1940 and, on the other hand, to analyse the institutional mechanisms set up by the Soviet authorities (namely the Moldovan Writers Union (MWU) and AgitProp) to integrate these writers into the Soviet cultural system. The three groups of Bessarabian writers remaining in the annexed territory (the 'regionalists' from *Viaţa Basarabiei* journal, the writers of Jewish origin and the formerly 'underground' (pro-Communist) activists) intersected and overlapped, since the writers' interests were often multiple. At the same time, the strategies implemented by the Soviet authorities to enrol Bessarabian writers into the Soviet institutional structures followed a binary and apparently contradictory rationale, of inclusion (of candidates deemed suitable for the aspiring status) and exclusion (of those who did not correspond to the criteria of political probity). Moldovan writers coming from the Moldavian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (MASSR) (the 'Transnistrians') had a crucial role in the integration and enrolment of Bessarabian writers into the MWU as mediators with the Soviet authorities (having had a longer 'length of service' in Soviet political and cultural affairs), as well as in the role of cultural and ideological 'tutors'. In response to these enrolment strategies operated by the MWU, Bessarabian writers adopted a zealous and emulative behaviour in order to ensure their successful integration. This behaviour laid the basis for duplicitous and somewhat dysfunctional interactions between writers, which would reach a paroxysm in the post-war 'Zhdanovist' campaign.

A few days after the annexation of Bessarabia by the Soviet Union and the creation of the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic (MSSR) in June 1940, several Bessarabian¹ writers – some of them well known in their home literary milieu – were rushing to put themselves in the service of the new regime with a surprising commitment for these formerly inveterate autonomists². Their transformation

1 By „Bessarabian” writers I mean here the writers who, before the Soviet annexation, originated from and/or lived in the Romanian province of Bessarabia, which became, from June 1940 to June 1941, and after August 1944, the main part of the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic (MSSR).

2 Many Bessarabian writers who collaborated with the new Soviet power after the overthrow of the Romanian administration in June 1940 had embraced in the 1930s a regionalist discourse, claiming an extended cultural autonomy. See in this respect

was amazing. There was a striking contrast between the often melancholic and gloomy character of their literary works, written under the influence of post-symbolist fashion, yet very influential in the late 30s, and the images of overflowing strength and optimism of the poetic productions penned by the same authors after 28 June 1940. This 'conversion' seems less paradoxical, however, if one reinstates it to its original social and political context. At that time, the question for Bessarabian writers was to stay (in Chişinău city, occupied by the Sovi-

Petru Negură, "The Romanian literature of Bessarabia: between national integration and the search for a regional identity", in *Nici eroi, nici trădători. Scriitorii moldoveni şi puterea sovietică în epoca stalinistă*, Chişinău, Cartier, 2014 (this book is the translated and reedited version of the book *Ni héros, ni traîtres. Les écrivains moldaves face au pouvoir soviétique sous Staline*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 2009).

et authorities) or to leave (as refugees, beyond the Prut River). Most Bessarabian intellectuals preferred to leave their home province during the four days reserved for that purpose by the Soviet authorities³. Those who decided to stay, by virtue of a burdensome conjuncture, became, after the reinstatement of the Soviet regime in Bessarabia, subject to strong institutional pressure and were forced to choose between cooperation and withdrawal from the public scene.

In addition to direct political coercion exerted by Soviet police and security forces, the Bessarabian writers who remained in Chişinău were constrained to accept the symbolic authority of the Transnistrian writers, deemed to be experts of socialist culture⁴. Yet, the mere expression of a desire to collaborate with the Soviets was not sufficient for Bessarabian writers to be immediately and permanently integrated into the system. They had to prove their unconditional loyalty to the new regime. The first year after they expressed their adhesion to the Soviets in July 1940 proved to be the first stage in a long period of testing that the writers would continue to undergo in the years to come. Some were eliminated after the first year of service under the communist power. Three out of the fifteen Moldovan writers of Bessarabian origin were considered undesirable to the new political order and were thus deported

3 Cf. *infra*.

4 By 'Transnistrian writers' I mean the writers coming from the Moldavian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (MASSR), created in 1924 in the Transnistrian region (see the map) exclusively for political, namely irredentist (against Bessarabia) reasons, with the capital city in Balta, then in Tiraspol. Because of their lasting 'length of service' in the area of 'national-cultural building' and their confirmed loyalty to the Soviet power (they survived the 1937/38 purges), the 'Transnistrian' writers were assigned an institutional and moral superiority towards their Bessarabian fellows. See below in this article and, for more information on the subject: Petru Negură, *Nici eroi, nici trădători...*, pp. 71-133.

three days after the outbreak of armed conflict between the USSR and Germany and its allies (including Romania). Wartime was also a period of testing for the Bessarabian writers, although not all of them were subjected to the same treatment. Following mobilisation, some were sent to the front as ordinary soldiers and most of them died there. Others fled to Central Asia and were later called to Moscow to work on the editorial staff of the Party's newspaper *Moldova socialistă* and the Chişinău radio station in evacuation, where they were entrusted with lifting the spirits of Moldovan soldiers and workers with mobilising poems, short prose, and reportages. The war became a training period for the new Soviet Moldovan writers during which the foundation for their future work was laid. Soviet Moldovan Literature remained deeply marked by a combative tone, mobilising imagery and a populist spirit, cultivated by those who had been writing and broadcasting during the "Great Patriotic War"⁵.

The most common approach to date employed by the majority of studies analysing the literature and literary environment of the MSSR is either strictly literary, generally focusing on allegedly valuable literary works (and overlooking or treating expeditiously and/or ironically any works that are not ascribed such a value)⁶, or preponderantly political, present-

5 See Petru Negură, *Nici eroi, nici trădători...*, especially the third chapter „Marele Război pentru Apărarea Patriei: armistiţiu şi încercare pentru scriitori” [The Great Patriotic War: armistice and testing for writers], pp. 157-172.

6 The masterful study of history of literature in Bessarabia by Mihai Cimpoi, *O istorie deschisă a literaturii române din Basarabia*, Chişinău, Arc, 1997, is emblematic in this respect. Alexandru Burlacu's studies (especially: *Critica în labirint*, Arc, Chişinău, 1997) focuses a little more thoroughly on the literature of the Stalinist era, but do not reinstate these works in the social and political context in which they were created.

ing Moldovan writers exclusively in terms of the state's repressive rationale and writers' alleged resistance to the Soviets⁷. Similarly, in other former Soviet republics (especially the 'Western' ones – Ukraine and the Baltic countries), local researchers have studied the relationship between writers (and intellectuals in general) and Soviet state power in 1940-41 and during the Soviet era as a whole mainly from the 'repression versus resistance' model⁸.

The studies which employed this antagonistic and Manichean model did not generally delve into the social dimension of the literary or intellectual environment. Moreover, very few of them have focused on the study of writers (or creative intellectuals)⁹. Even fewer have

7 See Alexandru Donos, *Scriitorii martiri*, Chişinău, Museum, 2000. Other works, although sometimes minutely documented, highlight the strictly functional and institutional aspect of the culture and literature during the Stalinist era. See Vasile Tăriţă, "Viaţa literară din R.S.S. Moldovenească în anii stalinismului târziu, 1948-1951", in *Arhivele Totalitarismului (Totalitarianism Archives)*, issue 34, 2013, pages: 48-56; Valentina Ursu, *Politica culturală în RSS Moldovenească, 1944-1956*, Chişinău, Pontos, 2013. The interval from 1940 to 1941 is, however, virtually overlooked in these studies.

8 Most research undertaken by local historians, on the subject of intellectuals in the countries and regions annexed by the USSR in 1939/1940, is deeply marked by the 'totalitarian' analysis model, according to which the intellectuals would have been 'subservient' by the new Soviet power or cruelly repressed. See in this respect, on the situation of intellectuals in Western Ukraine in 1939-1941: Semen Pidhainyi, *Ukrains'ka intelihientsiia na Solovkakh: spohady 1933-1941 rr.*, Ternopil', Dzhura, 1999, pp. 184-210; O.S. Rubl'ov, Iu.A. Cherchenko, *Stalinshchyna i dolia zakhidnoukrains'koi intelihientsii 20-50-ti roky XX st.*, Kyiv, Naukova dumka, 1994, 3rd vol., pp. 19-41; U.O. Kurnosov, S.I. Bilokin, eds., *Narysy istorii ukrains'koi intelihientsii (persha polovyna XX st. (3 vol.))*, Kyiv : Instytut istorii Ukrainy AN Ukrainy, 1994.

9 See: David R. Marples, *Stalinism in Ukraine in the 1940s*, New York, N.Y.: St. Martin's Press, 1992, pp. 24-26; Toivo U. Raun, *Estonia and the Estonians*, Stanford, California: Hoover Institution Press, Stanford University, 1991, p. 155; Nelly Bekus, "Nationalism and socialism: "Phase

thoroughly studied, on the one hand, the writers' (and intellectuals') strategies¹⁰ of self-positioning and integration into the institutions created and coordinated by the Soviet authorities and, on the other hand, the mechanisms of inclusion/ exclusion, implemented by the

D" in the Belarusian nation-building", *Nationalities Papers: The Journal of Nationalism and Ethnicity*, 38 (6) (2010), pp. 829-846; Vladimir I. Kuz'menko, "The Belarus' intelligentsia during the German-Fascist occupation (1941-44)", *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, 15(1) (2002), pp. 123-144; Anu Mai Koll (ed.), *The Baltic Countries Under Occupation. Soviet and Nazi Rule 1939-1991*, Acta Universitatis Stockholmiensis, Studia Baltica Stockholmiensis, Stockholm University, 2003, pp. 121-139; Olaf Mertelsmann (ed.), *Central and Eastern European Media Under Dictatorial Rule and in the Early Cold War*, Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2011; Sirje Olesk, "Writers' Collaboration with the Soviet Authorities, and the Dominant Literary Journal in the Estonian SSR in the 1940s and 1950s", pp. 171-172; Andrej Skolkay, "When Innocent Words were Sharp Swords: The Intellectual and Literary Press in the Early Years of Communism in Slovakia", pp. 183-196; Sirje Olesk, "On the Literary Life in the Soviet Estonia", *Colloquia* 17(9) (2006), pp. 122-134; Yoshie Mitsuyoshi, "Public Representations of Women in Western Ukraine under Late Stalinism: Magazines, Literature, and Memoirs", *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas, Neue Folge*, 54(1) (2006), pp. 20-36; Serhy Yekelchuk, "Diktat and Dialogue in Stalinist Culture: Staging Patriotic Historical Opera in Soviet Ukraine, 1936-1954", *Slavic Review*, 59(3) (Autumn, 2000), pp. 597-624; Tiit Kreegipuu and Epp Lauk, "The 1940 Soviet Coup-d'État in the Estonian Communist Press: Constructing History to Reshape Collective Memory", *Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture* (University of Westminster, London), 4(4) (2007), pp. 42-64; Vilijus Ivanaukas, "'Engineers of the Human Spirit' During Late Socialism: The Lithuanian Union of Writers Between Soviet Duties and Local Interests", *Europe-Asia Studies*, 66(4) (2014), pp. 645-665.

10 The use of the concept of strategy implies that the interaction between certain actors might be defined in terms of power relationship. I use here this term with a necessary theoretical and methodological caution, pointing to a – certainly uneven, but nevertheless mutual – power relationship between writers and the Soviet (power or cultural) institutions. See a summary critique of the term in David Knights and Glenn Morgan, "The Concept of Strategy in Sociology: A Note of Dissent", *Sociology*, 24 (3) (August 1990), pp. 475-483.

Soviets toward these people, in the context of how state-building was carried out by Soviet power in the newly annexed territory.

This study privileges a socio-historical approach to the literary environment in Chişinău between June 1940 and June 1941. A number of works of sociology and social history of literature serve as a frame of analysis, adjusted to the sociopolitical context of this article's specific object¹¹.

One of the main hypotheses of this article is that, during the first year of Soviet administration (from June 1940 to June 1941), key patterns of interaction (collaboration, accommodation, and negotiation) were set up between Bessarabian writers (or 'creative intellectuals') and the Soviet state institutions, and, at an-

11 See especially: Pierre Bourdieu, „Le champ littéraire”, *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, nr. 89, September 1991; Pierre Bourdieu, *Les Règles de l'art. Genèse et structure du champ littéraire*, Paris, Seuil, 1998. Several studies of social history of culture (and popular culture) provide a comparative basis and at the same time a frame of analysis for this research. See, among these, Alain Viala, *La Naissance de l'écrivain. Sociologie de la littérature à l'âge classique*, Paris, Minuit, 1985; Gisèle Sapiro, *La Guerre des écrivains, 1940-1953*, Paris, Fayard, 1999; Regarding the history of literature in Quebec (where literature was longtime subordinated by the Catholic Church): Lise Gauvin și Jean-Marie Klinkenberg, *Trajectoires. Littérature et institutions au Québec et en Belgique francophone*, Montréal, 1993; Marie-Andrée Beaudet, *Langue et littérature au Québec. 1895-1914. L'impact de la situation linguistique sur la formation du champ littéraire*, Québec, L'Hexagone, 1996; Daniel Mativat, *Le métier d'écrivain au Québec (1840-1900). Pionniers, nègres ou épiciers littéraires?*, Montréal, Triptyque, 1996; Jacques Pelletier, *Le poids de l'histoire. Littérature, idéologies, société du Québec moderne*, Québec, Ed. Nuit blanche, 1995; On the literary institution in Communist Romania, see Lucia Dragomir, *L'Union des écrivains: une institution littéraire transnationale à l'Est*, Paris, Belin, 2007; Ioana Macrea-Toma, *Privilegiul literar. Instituții literare în comunismul românesc*, Cluj-Napoca, Cartea Cărții de Știință, 2009; Dan Lungu, *Construcția identității într-o societate totalitară. O cercetare sociologică asupra scriitorilor* (ediția a doua), Iași, Editura Universității „Al. I. Cuza”, 2012; See also Petru Negură, *Nici eroi, nici trădători* and Petru Negură, *Ni héros, ni traîtres*.

other level, among the writers (intellectuals) themselves, either as groups or individuals. The year following the annexation of Bessarabia by the USSR in June 1940, and preceding the restoration of Romanian administration in this territory in June 1941, marked a turning point for Bessarabian writers (and intellectuals) in terms of and depending on their sociobiographical pathways, their social capital, and their previous relations with – or access to – political authority.

This analysis was performed based on the synthesis of a range of documentary sources: archival documents¹², contemporary press (literary and general)¹³, autobiographical writings, and biographic interviews with writers¹⁴. Historical background: border changes and exodus of civilian population

Between 1940 and 1944, Bessarabia was the site of three successive shifts of political regimes. On 28 June 1940, following the Molo-

12 In this article, I mainly refer (explicitly or implicitly) to the documents consulted in the Archive of Social and Political Organizations of the Republic of Moldova (AOSPRM), the Archive of the Moldavian Writers Union (AUSM), the Russian State Archive of Literature and Arts (RGALI), and the Russian State Archive of Social and Political Research (RGASPI).

13 For this study, I mostly quoted from the Party newspaper *Basarabia Sovietică* (June 1940 – December 1940), *Moldova socialistă* (December 1940 – June 1941), and *Octombrie*, the Moldavian Writers Union's review (from July 1940 to June 1941).

14 I interviewed the following writers and some of their relatives: Ihil Șraibman (1913-2005): 2004-01-19; Igor Crețu (born in 1922): 2004-04-02; Ariadna Șalari (born in 1923): 2003-08-25; 2003-09-10; Baca Deleanu (1924-2005): 2003-12-08; 2003-12-16; 2003-12-20; 2003-12-28; 2004-01-16; 2004-01-24; 2004-02-01; 2004-02-21; 2004-03-20; 2004-04-17; 2004-05-29; 2004-08-07; Alexei Marinat (1924-2009): 2003-12-08; 2003-12-16; Aureliu Busuioc (1928-2012): 23-12-2003; Vladimir Beșeleagă (born in 1931): 2005-09-28; Elena Curecheru-Vatamanu (born in 1940): 2002-07-25. I also consulted a number of unpublished personal biographic sources (thanks especially to Liviu Deleanu's home-museum and his wife Baca Deleanu, as well as to Ariadna Șalari).

tov-Ribbentrop Pact signed between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union on 23 August 1939, the USSR annexed Bessarabia and Northern Bukovina. On the 22 June 1941, the Romanian army, in alliance with German troops, recovered the territory lost in 1940 and, in addition, seized Transnistria up to the Bug River. Finally, on 23 August 1944, the Soviet army resumed its position in the capital of Bessarabia and pushed the Romanian and German allied forces beyond Prut.

Each time, the new authorities claimed to be 'liberators' of the Bessarabian population and labeled the previous regime as 'occupying' and 'oppressive'. The conflict with the 'occupation' regime was presented as a 'holy' or 'patriotic' war¹⁵. In the meantime, both 'liberation' by the Russians in 1940 and 1944, as well as by the Romanians in 1941 was welcomed by different groups of Bessarabians. In 1940, as in 1941 and 1944, the 'liberating' army found on-site supporters, bystanders, and opponents. If the former were willing to collaborate, the latter fled in disorder.

Between these two attitudes, enthusiastic or harshly negative, the largest – and least visible – part of Bessarabian society took a cautious position in the face of the new authorities. Some Bessarabians expected nothing good from the new administration, but they did not regret losing the old one either. Without necessarily being true opponents of the Romanian regime, they hoped that the Soviet Government would establish new, "more correct, more human" institutions, as stated by

one of the witnesses¹⁶. Others barely hid their hostility towards the victors, but they were so attached to their province (and to the non-material values that it implied) that they eventually complied with the imposed order, despite being conscious of the fact that the position they held under the former administration would be challenged. Finally, some representatives of the Slavic and Jewish minorities did not hide their joy at the retreat of Romanian troops and officials¹⁷. After the multiplication of anti-Semitic discourses and policies in the late 1930s, tolerated or even encouraged by the Romanian state, the Jewish population of Bessarabia perceived the arrival of the Red Army as a promise of a return to the security and legitimacy they lost under the Romanian administration.¹⁸ One way or another, the power shifts always generated disappointment, especially among those segments of population which were more active and better integrated under the former regime, as they nourished new expectations, namely amongst those categories of people who were the least favoured by the previous authorities.

Thus, as the Red Army advanced into the ter-

16 This is particularly the case of Alexandru Usatiuc-Bulgăr that, trying to be a good citizen, first suffered persecution from the Romanian "Siguranța" (secret police), then the repression of the Soviet security forces. See Alexandru Usatiuc-Bulgăr, *Cu gândul la o lume între două lumi* [Thinking about a world between two worlds], vol. 1, Chișinău, Lyceum, 1999, p. 86.

17 See Ioan Scurtu, Gheorge I. Ioniță, Ștefania Dinu, "Ocuparea Basarabiei de către Armata Roșie. Statutul Basarabiei în cadrul Uniunii Sovietice" [The Occupation of Bessarabia by the Red Army. The status of Bessarabia in the frame of the Soviet Union], in Ioan Scurtu, *Istoria Basarabiei. De la începuturi până în 1998* [History of Bessarabia. From origins to 1998], Bucharest, Semne, 1998, p. 215.

18 See, for example, the interviews that I conducted with two writers of Jewish origin: Ihil Șraibman (2004/01/19) and Baca Deleanu (Liviu Deleanu's spouse) 2003/12/28) in Chișinău.

15 The name assigned by Soviet ideologues to the Second World War was "The Great Patriotic War" (or in 'Moldovan' parlance: "The Great War for the Defense of the Homeland"). At the same time, the war with the Soviet Union regularly appeared in the Romanian official speeches and propaganda as a "Holy War".

ritory of Bessarabia and the Romanian army withdrew in the interval of four days reserved for that purpose, a growing number of officials, lawyers, teachers, doctors, etc. – who, according to some estimates, amounted to more than 10,000¹⁹ – were hastily evacuated to provinces of the mainland ‘kingdom’. The exodus of the Bessarabian intelligentsia caused a chronic shortage of Romanian-speaking intellectuals and cadres in the system set up by the Soviets after 1940 and, therefore, led to the Russification of the MSSR’s intelligentsia and administration²⁰. But the exodus was not unilateral. A large group of Bessarabians – composed especially of Jewish people and demobilised soldiers of the Romanian army – returned to their home province during the year following its annexation²¹. These ‘refugees’, as

19 Anton Moraru, *Istoria românilor. Basarabia și Transnistria (1812-1993)* [History of Romanians. Bessarabia and Transnistria (1812-1993)], Chișinău, Universul, 1995, p. 319. The total number of Romanians leaving Bessarabia after June 28, 1940 is estimated at 300,000, according to Ioan Scurtu *et al.*, “Ocupația Basarabiei de Armata Roșie”, in Ioan Scurtu, *Istoria Basarabiei*, p. 222. The evacuation of intellectuals is considered all the more imperative that most of them were members of the National Renaissance Front or even reserve officers of the Romanian army. The National Renaissance Front was created on the initiative of King Carol II on March 30, 1938, after the establishment of the royal dictatorship on February 20, 1938. See Ion Pavelescu, “Acțiunea militară pentru eliberarea Basarabiei. Reinstaurarea administrației românești” [Military action to liberate Bessarabia. Restoring the Romanian government], in Ioan Scurtu, *Istoria Basarabiei*, *op. cit.*, p. 233 ; See also Nicolai Costenco, *Povestea vulturului. Memorii* [The Vulture’s Fairy Tale. Memoirs], Chișinău, Arc, 1998, p. 34.

20 Cf. Hélène Carrère D’Encausse, *L’Empire éclaté. La révolte des nations en URSS*, Paris, Flammarion, 1978, pp. 75-76, Alain Blum, *Naître, vivre et mourir en URSS*, Paris, Payot & Rivages, 2004, p. 103 ; see also Iurii V. Arutiunian (éd.), *Opyt etnosotsiologicheskogo isledovaniia obraza zhizni (po materialam Moldavskoi SSR)* [Essai of Ethno-sociological Research of Life Styles (on the Material of Moldavian SSR)], Moscow, Nauka, 1980, pp. 177-179; Anton Moraru, *Istoria românilor*, *op. cit.*, p. 391.

21 Between 1940 and 1941, the number of

well as those Bessarabians who did not leave the territories occupied by Soviets, were often categorised by their Romanian colleagues and superiors as traitors and deemed to be prone to ‘Bolshevism’²². Many of them would later be charged on this account by the gendarmerie and the secret police after the restoration of the Romanian Government in June 1941²³.

At the same time, the Bessarabians who served in Romanian public institutions and remained in the province or returned to Bessarabia after June 28, 1940 were treated with suspicion by the Soviet officials. Many Bessarabian intellectuals were marginalised, when they were not outright condemned for their service under the previous authorities. Even members of the Romanian Communist Party, despite campaigning actively during the 1930s to instigate the ‘socialist revolution’ in Romania and supporting the unification of Bessarabia with the Soviet Union, were not automatically transferred to the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) and therefore were not recognised as full-fledged communists²⁴. To supplement the need for administrative staff, nearly 5,000 Russian and Ukrainian Communists were invited, temporarily or permanently, to serve in the MSSR, in addition to 4,300 members of the local Communist Party coming from the former MASSR²⁵. This ‘new generation’ of cadres, recruited after the 1937-

‘repatriated’ (returning in Bessarabia) Bessarabians dates, according to sources, between 125,000 (Anton Moraru, *Istoria românilor*, p. 319) and 165,000 (before October 9, 1940), according to Ioan Scurtu *et al.*, *op. cit.*, in Ioan Scurtu (ed.), *Istoria Basarabiei*, p. 221.

22 Ludmila Vnorovschi, *Amintirile unei basarabence (Povestea vietii mele)* [Memories of a Bessarabian (The story of my life)], Chișinău, Cartdidact, 2003, pp. 92, 94.

23 Alexandru Usatiuc-Bulgăr, *Cu gândul la o lume...*, p. 168.

24 Anton Moraru, *Istoria românilor...*, p. 320.

25 Anton Moraru, *idem*, p. 330.

1938 purges, was assigned to accomplish the Sovietisation of Bessarabia and other territories annexed in 1940²⁶.

WHY DID SOME BESSARABIAN WRITERS CHOOSE TO STAY, AND OTHERS TO LEAVE?

Five days after 28 June 1940, when the Red Army entered into the capital of Bessarabia, the Bessarabian writers who chose to remain in the occupied territory and had thus proved their willingness to cooperate with the Soviets attended a meeting with former MASSR writers and a few Ukrainian men of letters. A local correspondent of the Party newspaper remarked, in a slightly affected tone, that “for them [Bessarabian writers] it is probably the first opportunity to meet each other beyond any nationality distinction”²⁷. The assessment is not fully accurate, as several Bessarabian writers of different ethnic origin had previously been part of the same literary groups. It is true, however, that some Bessarabian writers did not know each other before that gathering in Chişinău. They came from different literary groups that communicated little, either because they lived in different cities, such as Chişinău and Bucharest, or because they did not share the same aesthetic or ideological be-

liefs, or because did not even write in the same language (some of them wrote their works in Hebrew or Yiddish).

The reasons which led them to stay in (or come to) Bessarabia after the Soviet occupation vary depending on group membership, or even from one case to another. Some writers, namely the “Regionalists” from *Viaţa Basarabiei* [Bessarabia’s Life] journal, chose to remain by virtue of a special bond with their province, which they had been cultivating for years²⁸. Writers of ‘alien’ ethnic origin (primarily Jews) were willing to cooperate with the Bolshevik regime especially because in Romania they were subjected to more and more chicanery and persecution from (or with agreement of) the state. Finally, for another category of Bessarabian writers, the adhesion to the Soviet regime was the culmination of their whole previous political activity, conducted under the Romanian administration in the frame of an allegedly clandestine organisation, subordinated, in the final instance, to the Communist International. Certainly, these categories of writers are not strictly defined. For example, a Bessarabian writer of Jewish origin could cultivate a particular penchant for avant-garde aesthetics and simultaneously share regionalist and/or socialist convictions. Thus, the writers who decided not to flee to Romania did not all follow the same rationale, often having several reasons for their decision.

THE REGIONALISTS

The largest group of Bessarabian writers who responded to the Party’s call immediately after 28 June 1940 was comprised of former contributors to the literary journal of the 30s

26 About the formation of the post-World War II Soviet *nomenklatura*, see Moshe Lewin, “Rebuilding the Soviet Nomenklatura, 1945-1948”, *Cahiers du Monde russe*, Vol. 44, No. 2/3, “Les pratiques administratives en Union soviétique, 1920-1960” (Apr. - Sep., 2003), p. 225; This ‘new generation’ of party cadres proceeded to the Sovietization of the Baltic States. See Arvydas Anusauskas, « La composition et les méthodes secrètes des organes de sécurité soviétiques en Lituanie, 1940-1953 », *Cahiers du Monde russe*, Vol. 42/2-4, 2001, p. 323; See also Olaf Mertelsmann (ed.), *The Sovietization of the Baltic States, 1940-1956*, Tartu, 2003.

27 (Signed: Corespondentul RATAU), „Întîlnirea dintre scriitorii sovietici şi scriitorii de la Chişinău” [The meeting between the Soviet writers and the writers from Chişinău], MS, July 9, 1940, p. 1.

28 About the regionalism of the writers from *Viaţa Basarabiei* journal, see Petru Negură, *Nici eroi, nici trădători...*, pp. 36-48.

Viața Basarabiei, based in Chișinău. Enrolment under the banner of the Communist Party required a difficult compromise in their case. They remained in occupied Bessarabia not so much because of their affection towards the Soviet regime, but rather due to their attachment (supported by ideological beliefs) to their region and their contempt for the Romanian government. The former leader of the regionalist writers, Nicolai Costenco, who in 1940 was the editor of *Viața Basarabiei* and the general secretary of the Society of Bessarabian Writers, was the one who set the tone. It appears that, while Pan. Halippa²⁹ was leaving to refuge, he told him: "I cannot leave my Bessarabia." Several writers from this group – Vasile Luțcan, Teodor Nencev, Bogdan Istru, and George Meniuc – were all close friends of Nicolai Costenco and his former colleagues as authors at *Viața Basarabiei*. He exerted a significant influence over them by virtue of his leading position. Some shared socialist views, but these were not strong enough to be considered a significant factor for their alignment with the Soviet regime.

Thus, for Petre Ștefănuță and Mihail Curicheru, two other former authors of *Viața Basarabiei*, their willingness to enter into the service

of Soviet power seemed to be determined by less obvious reasons, if one refers to their previous position. The compromise they did was significant, given that they were the most moderate members of the regionalist group; in the late 1930s they even signed a series of articles in favour of the nationality policy promoted by the Romanian state at that time. Finally, their speeches before 1940 betrayed no sympathy for leftist ideologies. Personal reasons are most likely to explain the apparent inconsistency of their decision to cooperate with the new government³⁰. But once integrated into the system, they successfully coped with the new requirements. They were admitted to the Moldavian Writers Union, published their works in the *Octombrie* journal and worked in different cultural and educational institutions of the MSSR.

In June 1941, the enrolment of most of the former editors of *Viața Basarabiei* was regarded as suspicious by Agitprop and NKVD officers who assuming that the past of these writers might conceal evidence of anti-Soviet activities. Three writers of this group – N. Costen-

29 Pan Halippa (commonly called Pan. Halippa) was a very influential personality in culture but also in politics of Bessarabia during 1917-1944. He was co-chair of the National Peasant Party and minister in several governments between 1918 and 1934. He was also president of the People's University in Chisinau and director of *Viața Basarabiei* journal. See about Halippa in Pantelimon Halippa, *Publicistică* [Journalistic writings], with an introduction and biographic presentation of Pan. Halippa by Iurie Colesnic, Chișinău, Museum, 2001; Pan. Halippa, „Povestea vieții mele” [The Story of my Life], in *Patrimoniul*, history review, Chișinău, 1991, nr. 1, pp. 4-40; Iurie Colesnic, „Pantelimon Halippa”, in *Basarabia necunoscută* [Bessarabia Unknown], vol. 1, Chișinău, Museum, 1993, p. 66. See also Petru Negură, *Nici eroi, nici trădători*, op. cit., pp. 53-60.

30 This fact was also evoked by Elena Vatamanu-Curecheru (Mihail Curicheru's daughter), born two days before the arrival of the Soviets on June 28, 1940. Interview with Elena Vatamanu-Curecheru, July 2002.

co³¹, M. Curicheru³² and P. Ștefănuță³³ – were arrested and deported a few days before and after the commencement of the war between the Axis powers and the Soviet Union. Three other former ‘regionalists’, Alexandru Robot (Rotmann), V. Luțcan and T. Nencev, were sent to the front. Of the latter, V. Luțcan, who fled to Romania after June 1941, was the only survivor. Finally, only two writers of the group of Viața Basarabiei (B. Istru and G. Meniuc) managed to elude the vigilance of the security forces (and their Transnistrian colleagues), probably because they were the youngest and had had the least political involvement during the Romanian administration period. However, they would be charged later, in the so-called “Zhdanovist” period³⁴, for their involvement

31 About the deportation and detention of Nicolai Costenco, see Alexander Donos, „Poet care a fost închis pe toată viața” [The poet who was jailed for life] in Alexandru Donos, *Scriitori martiri* [Writers martyrs], Chișinău, Ed. Museum, 2000, pp. 17-23 (a chapter developed based on the writer’s NKVD / MVD / KGB file, consulted at the Information and Security Service Archive (ASIS), Chișinău).

32 About the deportation and detention of Mihail Curicheru, see Alexandru Donos, „Un talent nimicit în floarea vârstei” [A talent destroyed in his prime], in Alexandru Donos, *Scriitori martiri*, op. cit., pp. 24-35; See also, Igor Cașu, „Arhivele comunismului: Destinul tragic al scriitorului basarabean Mihail Curicheru, mort în gulag” [Archives of communism: the tragic fate of Bessarabian writer Mihail Curicheru, dead in Gulag], in *Adevărul* newspaper (Moldova), November 29, 2013 (these articles were performed based on the writer’s NKVD/MVD/KGB file, consulted at ASIS, Chișinău).

33 About the deportation and detention of Petre Ștefănuță, see Alexandru Donos, „Ultimele pagini ale folcloristului Petre Ștefănuță” [Last pages of the folklorist Petre Ștefănuță], in Alexandru Donos, *Scriitori martiri*, op. cit., pp. 36-46 (a chapter developed based on the writer’s NKVD / MVD / KGB file, consulted at ASIS, Chișinău).

34 The “Zhdanovism” (from Andrei Zhdanov, Politburo member of the CPSU Central Committee, responsible for culture) is a campaign aiming at enrolling the creative intelligentsia, but also of taking control over the territories annexed in 1940 and recovered in 1944. See Nicolas Werth,

in what had been the most important literary journal of interwar Bessarabia, itself considered sufficient evidence of ‘nationalism’ and ‘bourgeois decadence’.

THE JEWS

Writers of Jewish origin who remained in Bessarabia after June 1940 or who returned immediately after that did not form a coherent group³⁵, as was the case for the writers of Viața Basarabiei. Coming from different milieus – literary avant-garde, socialist circles or Yiddish language writers – some of them became aware of their ‘Jewish’ identity only once it was assigned as a stigma as a result of anti-Semitic stereotypes or special ‘nationality policies’ promoted by the Romanian authorities in the late ‘30s or, worse, during the pogroms triggered in Romania after the annexation of Bessarabia³⁶. Each writer of ‘Jewish’ origin had

Histoire de l’Union soviétique de Lénine à Staline, 1917-1953, Paris, PUF, 1995; About the Zhdanovism in the Soviet literature: Michel Aucouturier, *Le réalisme socialiste*, Paris, P.U.F., 1998. About the Zhdanovist campaign in MSSR, see Petru Negură, *Nici eroi, nici trădători*, pp. 179-215. Here are two documents in which Meniuc (and, implicitly, Istru) were criticized for ‘nationalism’, in “Statement to the attention of the Central Committee of the Communist Party (Bolshevik) of Moldova, Agitation and Propaganda Department, the Secretary of the CC, Comrade Taranov S.V. from the writer Meniuc, G. N.”, AOSPRM, fund 51, inventory 3, file 248, p. 13; I. Canna, D. Tkaci, G. Zilberman, “Report on the literary almanac *Octombrie*, issues 1-2, to the attention of CC of the CPM, from September 4, 1946, AOSPRM, fund 51, inventory 4, file 312, p. 169-172.

35 It is about Ihil Șraibman, Moise Altman, Rahmil Portnoi, Iacob Iachir, Iacob Sternberg, David Vetrov (Pihman), Liviu Deleanu (Lipa Cligman), to whom we could add Alexandru Robot (Alter Rotmann), whom we placed in the group from *Viața Basarabiei*.

36 See about the Iași pogrom from June 27-29, 1941: Adrian Cioflâncă, „Pogromul de la Iași” [The Iași Pogrom]: <http://www.pogromuldelaiasi.ro/ce-s-a-intamplat-in-iunie-1941/> (accessed on June 2014). See also the website <http://www.pogromuldelaiasi.ro/>, containing substantial and

his own pathway and specific position in the Romanian literary environment before June 1940. Most of them were not in Bessarabia when the Soviet regime was established, and some were not even born there and had not previously lived in the region, as was the case for Liviu Deleanu (Lipa Cligman)³⁷ who was originally from Iași.

Before 1940, most of these writers sympathised with some elements of leftist ideology. However, few of them were ardent followers of communism; at least, few of them would be ready to leave their social environment and, often, their place of residence in exchange for uncertain conditions, for the sake of their ideological views. In fact, the writers of Jewish origin that gathered in Chișinău after 28 June 1940 were far from being representative of the majority of Jewish people of letters from Bessarabia and even less from Romania at that time³⁸. However, in the years 1940-1941, they

revealing studies, documents and testimonies about what was qualified as "The Iași Pogrom". See also the forthcoming study by Adrian Cioflâncă. About this pogrom and the operation of deportation and liquidation of Jews (Holocaust) in Romania (Bessarabia, Bukovina, and Transnistria), see the International Commission on the Holocaust in Romania [President: Elie Wiesel; Editors: Tuvia Friling, Radu Ioanid, Mihail E. Ionescu], *Raport final*, Iași, Ed. Polirom, 2004; About the Holocaust in Bessarabia and Transnistria, and the involvement of local population, see Diana Dumitru, Carter Johnson, „Constructing Interethnic Conflict and Cooperation: Why Some People Harmed and Others Helped Jews during the Romanian Holocaust”, *World Politics*, Vol. 63, no. 1 (January 2011), p.1-42; see also Diana Dumitru's forthcoming book on the subject.

³⁷ Born in Iași in 1911, Liviu Deleanu was a well-known poet in certain milieus of leftist, literary avant-garde, from Iași and Bucharest. For more biographical information, see Petru Negură, *Nici eroi, nici trădători*, pp. 223-229.

³⁸ As confessed by Ihil Șraibman, a Bessarabian writer of Jewish origin, derived from Yiddish literary environment in Bucharest. See the interview with Ihil Șraibman (January 19, 2004). About the writers of Jewish origin in the Interwar Romania, see: *Contribuția scriitorilor evrei la literatura*

constituted half of the writers in the MSSR (of about 20 writers who became members of the Moldovan Writers' Union in 1941). The MSSR attracted them less as a result of its political regime (of which most of those writers had a rather contradictory picture, given Romanian anti-Soviet propaganda of the time), but rather because of the refuge they expected to find in the USSR from the discriminatory treatment to which they had been subjected in Romania, especially during the late 1930s.

In Romanian Bessarabia, the grievances of ethnic minorities were also exploited by the Komintern and Soviet intelligence services to spread the seed of irredentism throughout the province³⁹. After 28 June 1940, the resentment of the Bessarabian intellectuals of Jewish origin toward the Romanian administration continued to be used by Soviet ideologues in order to build a Moldovan identity separate from the Romanian one. Intellectuals of Jewish origin enjoyed a somewhat privileged position under the Soviet regime, especially

română [Jewish writers' contribution to Romanian literature], The "Viața Românească" Cahiers, Writers Union of Romania, nr. 2, 2001. About the writers of Jewish origin of the Romanian avant-garde movement in the late 30s and 40s, see Irina Livezeanu, „'From Dada to Gaga': The Peripatetic Romanian Avant-Garde Confronts Communism", in Mihai Dinu Gheorghiu (coord.), *Littératures et pouvoir symbolique*, Bucharest, Ed. Paralela 45, 2005, pp. 239-253.

³⁹ See Charles King, *Moldovenii, România, Rusia și politica culturală* [original title: *The Moldovans. Russia, România, and the Politics of Culture*, Hoover Institution Press, Stanford, California, 2000], Chișinău, Arc, 2002, p. 44. See also „July 8, 1924, [Moscow], Extract from the minutes of the meeting of the thirty-fifth World Congress of the Communist International, devoted to the national question" (title translated); "8 July 1924, [Moscow] Excerpt from the Fifth Congress resolution of the World Communist International about national problems in the Central Europe and Balkans", in Gheorghe Cojocaru, *Cominternul și originile „moldovenismului”* [Komintern and the origins of Moldovanism], Chișinău, Ed. Civitas, 2009, pp. 122-136.

during the years 1940-1945. The Presidium of the MWU - in August 1940 consisting solely of Bessarabian and Transnistrian writers of Jewish origin - even decided to create a Jewish department and to edit a new literary journal in Yiddish⁴⁰, though the decision remained a dead letter. The Communist Party's goodwill towards the Jews did not last long. After the war, the alliance between the Bessarabian Jewish representatives and the Soviet authorities lost its strategic importance. Not only that, but Jews started to be perceived as a growing threat to the integrity of the Soviet regime, as they were suspected to be organised in a more cohesive community and claimed a specific legitimacy as the victims par excellence of Nazism and the Antonescu regime⁴¹. In the second half of the '40s, Jewish origin became an identity element most likely to discredit a Bessarabian writer, diminishing his/her chances of success, especially when associated with a 'Romanian' origin.

In order to disguise their Jewish origin, a number of Bessarabian and Transnistrian writers adopted literary pseudonyms that sounded more 'native', thus following a twofold - literary and Bolshevik - tradition of mystery and secrecy. In a letter to the Transnistrian writer Leonid Cornfeld, shortly before his death in November 1957, the writer E. Bucov reminded his correspondent about his decision to take an alias:

Then, at Soroca [in 1944, after returning from refuge in Moldova], you asked me: "What

would you say if I retouch a bit my literary name?" You had, of course, good reasons for that, I mean patriotic reasons. So I answered: "Once the great Ulyanov did not hesitate to do it..."⁴²

THE 'UNDERGROUND ACTIVISTS'

To this category only two Bessarabian writers may be assigned: Emilian Bucov and, after the war began, Andrei Lupan. Their 'underground' political activity under the Romanian administration conferred them a certain amount of legitimacy and quickly propelled them upwards in the hierarchy of the Writers' Union and even towards the leadership of the Republic. Unlike other factors of success at that moment which quickly lost their validity, as, for example, regionalism or Jewish identity, the allegedly 'underground' political activity under the previous authorities turned into a growing capital.

At a closer glance, genuine 'underground' activity in the literary circles of the 1930s was rather rare. The writers to whom it was ascribed had studied in Romanian universities: E. Bucov at the Faculty of Letters, University of Bucharest, and A. Lupan at the Faculty of Agriculture in the Chişinău branch of the University of Iaşi. During that period, they published poems under pseudonyms in some leftist newspapers, while Bucov even published a book of poetry on social topics. Both joined Communist youth organisations and, in 1936, A. Lupan became a member of the Romanian Communist Party. Within these political organisations, the prospective writers exercised the illegal activities which they would later on come to emphasise; spreading leaflets with

40 Mark Faverin, „Reuniunea scriitorilor din Basarabia” [The Bessarabian writers' gathering], *Basarabia sovietică*, August 27, 1940, p. 1.

41 As well as it happened in the center of URSS, see Laurent Rucker, *Staline, Israël et les Juifs*, Paris, Presses universitaires de France, 2001; see also Laurent Rucker, „La Jdanovschchina: une campagne antisemite?” and Laurent Rucker, „Pourquoi Staline liquida le Comité antifasciste juif?”, *Le Monde diplomatique*, December 1995.

42 Letter of E. Bucov to L. Corneanu (Cornfeld) of 14 November 1957, at the Moldovan Writers Union Archives - National Museum of Romanian Literature "Mihail Kogălniceanu" (AUSM), "Manuscripts" fund, file 9436, p. 2.

revolutionary content and organising student associations advocating in favour of social justice and against fascism.

Despite the general trend of the Soviet regime to marginalise former Romanian Communist Party activists⁴³, these 'underground' writers rapidly gained the confidence of the MSSR Party leaders and managed to maintain it. During the war, they showed perfect loyalty to the Soviet government. In 1945, they already had a great deal of influence on party leaders, especially regarding issues concerning national and cultural policy.

Forms of enrolment of Bessarabian writers after 28 June 1940

The Bessarabian writers demonstrated an exceptional ability to adjust to new circumstances. Already a few days after the establishment of the Soviet regime (which, to recall, surprised the majority of the Bessarabian population), the local people of letters began to work actively in the official newspaper of the Moldovan Republic and in the Writers' Union's journal. Despite remarkable efforts and achievements, the work of these writers in the new conditions was not without risks. With a rich experience of socialist culture, the 'Transnistrian' writers (from the former MASSR) had the task to teach the Bessarabians the basics of communist doctrine, to initiate them in the principles of Socialist Realism and to warn them against the dangers of political negligence. Each week, meetings of Bessarabian and Soviet writers were held in the presence of an audience of amateurs and with the mandatory participation of at least one state representative. These peculiar 'literary soirees' became the framework of a one-way exchange from 'tutors' to 'novices'.

⁴³ See, among other sources, Anton Moraru, *Istoria românilor...*, p. 320.

The newcomers learned the new 'political language'⁴⁴ and acquired the first rules of behaviour within the institution which had taken them in, along with its subsequent (formal and informal) hierarchical relations. Finally, these meetings allowed Bessarabians to implement the acquired knowledge and skills and the better 'educated' to distinguish themselves in front of their 'tutors' and new authorities.

RE-EDUCATION AND SELF-EDUCATION

The first lesson that Bessarabians learned from their new 'teachers' was to assume their utter ignorance regarding socialist culture. Some newcomers tried to pose as 'revolutionary' writers. But their claim was immediately crushed by the more experienced writers who exhorted them to 'ease [their] soul' by undergoing self-criticism, to condemn the Romanian 'bourgeois regime' while highlighting the negative influence that it had exerted on writers in general and on each of them in particular. The dialectic of criticism vs. self-criticism⁴⁵ was put into motion to such a degree that the tutors' intervention was no longer necessary to ensure its smooth operation. In this regard, at one of the first meetings, Nicolai Costenco made the mistake of stating that the writer's vocation

⁴⁴ After Nicolas Werth, the 'political language' was a task to which the Party candidates were subjected by the established Party members. See Nicolas Werth, *Être communiste sous Staline*, Paris, Gallimard / Juillard, 1981, p. 153. This expression is partly synonymous with that of 'speaking Bolshevik' by Stephen Kotkin, designating „learning the mores and rituals of the Soviet workplace, the rules of meetings, and the public language of newspapers”. Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism. Ordinary Life in Extraordinary Times: Soviet Russia in the 1930s*, Oxford University Press, 2000, p. 81. See Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain. The Stalinism as a Civilization*, Berkeley & Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1995, pp. 198.

⁴⁵ See John Arch Getty, „Samokritika Rituals in the Stalinist Central Committee”.

was not to involve himself in politics, but perhaps to participate in a certain cultural policy. It caused the immediate critical reaction of one of the 'underground' writers, Andrei Lupan: "The writer cannot be apolitical", he said. "He shall not close himself in his office, but must go with an open heart among the people."⁴⁶ The former member of the Romanian Communist Party touched a key issue of Soviet writers' ethics. The subject was immediately picked up and developed by the Ukrainian writers who were attending the meeting. The Bessarabian writers were invited to learn their civic mission – to be "a transmission belt" between the party and the people, between the new government and the Bessarabian population.

According to an article in the local Party newspaper, on 15 September 1940, after two and a half months of training, the Bessarabian writers, assisted by their Transnistrian 'tutors', launched themselves into "literary-cultural work among the workers of Bessarabia"⁴⁷. Gathered in the meeting hall of Printing House Nr. 1 in Chişinău, they gave speeches about the 'sad fate' of Bessarabian writers under the bourgeois regime and on their mission in the Soviet homeland. They read poems about the Soviet youth, about the war heroes in Spain and about Stalin. According to the correspondent, "listeners rewarded the writers with prolonged applause"⁴⁸. By June 1941, Moldovan writers (from Bessarabia and Transnistria) organised literary evenings in over 40 enterprises and kolkhozes of the Republic⁴⁹. In No-

vember 1940, Moldovan writers participated in the election campaign along with 36,000 agitators⁵⁰, urging the Moldovans to vote for the "bloc of communists and independents"⁵¹. For the Bessarabian writers, it was the first opportunity to attend a mass propaganda campaign. Subsequently, the participation in cultural, political or agricultural campaigns became a common practice performed by Soviet Moldovan writers.

These 'literary and cultural' manifestations, regularly organised for workers in Moldovan towns and villages, were critical for the formation of the Bessarabian writers. They provided an opportunity to test their first attempts at 'socialist' literature in front of their target audience. At the same time, the literary soirees helped to educate the audience and to familiarise it with a new type of culture. Finally, meetings with the mass audiences were a further opportunity for writers to gather new material about the everyday life of Moldovan workers – the main subject and target audience of their works.

INTEGRATION

The integration of the Bessarabian writers into the literary institutions of the Moldovan Republic developed in several stages. First, they were invited to work as journalists at the official newspaper *Moldova socialistă* and its provisional branch, written in Latin characters, *Basarabia sovietică*, as well as to collaborate with the Moldovan Writers Union's journal *Octombrie*. Subsequently, Bessarabian writers were employed as editors and translators in various cultural institutions: theatres, Philharmonics, or the State Committee for

46 (Signed: F.), „Acasă la scriitorii basarabeni” [At home to the Bessarabian writers], *Basarabia sovietică*, July 5, 1940, p. 3.

47 (Signed: S. Br.), „Scriitorii în întreprinderi” [The writers in factories], *Basarabia sovietică*, September 18, 1940, p. 3.

48 *Idem*.

49 Lev Barschi, „Literatura moldovenească după un an” [The Moldovan literature after one year], MS, June 8, 1941, p. 3.

50 See Anton Moraru, *Istoria românilor*, op. cit., p. 333.

51 (Anonymous), „Reuniunea intelectualilor din oraşul Chişinău” [The intellectuals' meeting in Chişinău], MS, November 29, 1940, p. 1.

Repertoires (Repertkom). They engaged with the Transnistrian writers in various activities of public interest. Beginning with the spring of 1941, most of them signed contracts with the MSSR State Publishing House, editing volumes of prose or poetry. But their recognition as full-fledged Soviet writers occurred only after a year of activity on the cultural and political 'front', with their formal admission to the Soviet Moldovan Writers Union.

The Bessarabian writers were admitted to the MSU in small groups. The reception of the first group took place in late March of 1941, after which other candidates were admitted gradually every two weeks until early June. It seems that the admission was made selectively following a pre-defined list, according to the applicants' merits (at least that was the impression of some candidates⁵²). The first on the list was Emilian Bucov, the 'underground activist' writer who would become president of MWU three years later. Afterwards, the order of admission seems arbitrary. Nicolai Costenco, number two on the alleged list (Costenco boasted later that he was admitted second after Bucov⁵³), was in reality one of the least favoured candidates and was deported within two weeks. Despite the rivalry present at that moment, the admission of Bessarabian writers to the MWU was seen as paramount recognition by them. Membership in the MWU was all the more prestigious as it implied automatic acceptance in the Soviet Writers Union (based

52 This impression is deduced from the interview that I conducted with the writer Ihil Şraibman, who was received in the MWU in late May 1941, and Nicolai Costenco's autobiographical writings. See the interview with Ihil Şraibman (19/01/2004); Nicolai Costenco, *Povestea vulturului*, pp. 22, 218; Nicolai Costenco, *Din bezna temniţei... Scriitori din Gulag*, Chişinău, Arc, 2004, pp. 9, 18. These sources gave me many precious details about the applicants' admission in the MWU.

53 Nicolai Costenco, *Scriitori din Gulag*, op. cit., p. 18.

in Moscow), to which the MWU belonged.

The admission meetings, held in the presence of professional and amateur writers, followed a predetermined plan. A reporter – usually a writer or a critic who was not part of the candidates, nor the chair – presented a detailed analysis of the candidate's literary work. Several writers who participated at the meeting expressed their (almost always favourable) position on the subject. Then, the presidium, made up exclusively of Transnistrian writers, invited the candidate to present his autobiography. The questions from presidium, based on the exposition, were simple, even formal, and were not intended to embarrass the candidate. Finally, the presidium voted on the writer's application and, after unanimous agreement, announced the decision that seemed predetermined: admission.

The admission procedure proved to be easier than the candidates had hoped. They had expected the procedure to involve rigorous screening and selection, but in fact the admission itself seemed to be a mere formality. Having so quickly obtained the coveted status, they tended to underestimate the 'tests' to which they had been subjected during the previous year and above all those which they would be facing later.

EMULATION

The most difficult challenges that the newcomers had to face between June 1940 and June 1941 did not come directly from the agents of power, but from the Bessarabian writers themselves as a result of the pressure from a context in which zeal and ideological emulation were perceived as determinants for successful integration⁵⁴. Driven by the desire

54 This 'proactive' – and the least anomic – behavior was noted by some social historians of Stalinism, especially during the purges. See, for

to assert themselves vis-à-vis their Transnistrian 'tutors' and governors, they used various strategies and emphasised their alleged merits with a view to ingratiate themselves and, at the same time, to reduce the chances of their competitors, who were, in fact, their peers.

It should be recalled that the three groups of Bessarabian writers who met in Chişinău in late June 1940 – 'regionalists', 'Jews', and 'underground activists' – each had specific social capital. The group of writers from Viaţa Basarabiei was the largest and most united, yet it was not the strongest. Its cohesion facilitated the pro-Soviet conversion of its members, but it did not at all represent an attractive ideology for the builders of socialist society. Thus, N. Costenco, the leader of the younger generation of Bessarabian writers – and recognised as such at the institutional level by the Romanian authorities – tried to reassert his former status after 28 June 1940 by imposing his authority over his companions and even the writers of the MASSR. However, his attempt to regain power (at least symbolically) dragged on. His 'charisma' proved obsolete in the new circumstances. "Soon, I realised that working with the Soviets was not so simple if you claim your superiority and bourgeois aristocracy"⁵⁵ – he explained later, ironically explaining his own experience as a demoted leader. Even his close friends ended up distancing themselves from their former comrade and leader. The advantage of the other two groups of Bessarabian writers came precisely from the fact that they were not structured around a 'charismatic leader' and therefore could more easily adhere – as groups or

individually – to an external authority.

After the fall from grace of the 'regionalists', the Bessarabian writers' main interest was to highlight the 'revolutionary' character of their activity under the previous authorities. The 'underground activists' enjoyed a distinct advantage over other aspirants to the position of former 'opponents', but their legitimacy was limited by the Transnistrians' undisputed prestige.

ELIMINATION

The stages of integration strategies imposed on Bessarabian writers by the MWU (rehabilitation, inclusion and emulation) sometimes led to explicit failure: exclusion. This might have been a 'solution' to 'recalcitrant' writers when all forms of integration proved ineffective. Such a case is represented by Nicolai Costenco who repeatedly manifested a recalcitrant character towards the 'tutors' and even towards some government representatives. The question one may pose is why to admit a writer into this prestigious literary institution of the Soviet Union and to then get rid of him a few days later. This form of exclusion seems to contradict the objectives of the Writers' Union.

In the MWU of that period, two views on the management of literary affairs met and sometimes collided: the literary logic – which corresponded to the main occupation of the institution – and the state's reasoning. The Writers' Union's leadership generally sought to integrate writers, regardless of group membership, in order to foster fruitful literary creation according to the institution's aesthetic and ideological orientation. At the same time, the Party and security forces had to ensure that citizens (in this case, the writers) respected the laws and the state's interests, deviation from

example, John Arch Getty, "Party and Purge in Smolensk: 1933-1937", *Slavic Review*, Vol. 42, No. 1 (Spring, 1983), pp. 60-79 and Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism*, pp. 194-217.

⁵⁵ Nicolai Costenco, *Povestea vulturului*, p. 22.

which was subject to the threat of exclusion⁵⁶. On 13 June 1941, one week before the start of the war between the Axis powers and the USSR, the two concepts clashed again. When the MWU received instructions from the secret police to unmask the 'enemies of the people' hidden inside the institution, this triggered a whole mechanism of purges (developed in the USSR in the 1930s), comprising sessions of criticism and self-criticism, of denunciation and self-defense. The writers N. Costenco, M. Curicheru and P. Ștefănuță were most exposed to attack by their colleagues because of their recent behaviour and especially in view of their past activity.

The outbreak of the war allowed the possibility of applying an indirect form of exclusion. Writers who were deemed useless, or inconvenient to the MWU or the state's interests were mobilised and sent to the front as ordinary soldiers, while others were generally exempted from military service, or went to the front as officers. This was the case for several Transnistrian writers.

THE TRANSNISTRIAN LEADERS

The Transnistrian writers who settled in Chișinău after 28 June 1940 were vested with

the role of 'tutors' for their new Bessarabian colleagues, by virtue of their 'experience' in Socialist Realism and their supposed loyalty to the Soviet government and the Communist Party⁵⁷. Like the Bessarabians, but without any freedom of choice, the Transnistrians had undergone a rigorous selection before coming to Chișinău. Those Transnistrian writers who arrived in Chișinău in 1940 were the survivors and at the same time the beneficiaries of the 'great purges' of 1937-38. In 1940, the Transnistrians were as few as the Bessarabians – not more than 15 people. Like the Bessarabian writers, they did not constitute a homogeneous group, being divided into two factions, broadly according to their 'age group.' Less numerous, the 'older ones' – Ion Canna and Leonid Cornfeld – were undeniably the most prominent figures of Transnistrian literature. Their 'age' is, of course, relative. I. Canna was 38 years old, whereas L. Cornfeld had just turned 31 in 1940. Instead, they had the reputation of founding the Moldavian Soviet Republic and, in the case of I. Canna, participating in the Civil War. The 'Great Purge' not only spared the youngest (the so-called *vydvizhentsy* – the 'promoted')⁵⁸, but even favoured them, since they were the ones who took over the administration of the MWU and the *Octombrie* journal after the "cadres' bleeding"⁵⁹ occurred in 1937-38. Less gifted in terms of cultural capital than

56 This apparent contradiction in the 'personnel management' would come, in the interpretation of the historian Terry Martin, from the tasks assigned to different Soviet institutions, on the one hand representing the 'soft-line' (culture, education, medicine, social services, etc.), on the other hand, the repressive institutions, responsible for the 'hard-line' of the Bolshevik policy. Cf. Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire, Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923-1939*, Ithaca & Londra, Cornell University Press, 2001, especially: pp. 21-23; Terry Martin, "The Origins of Soviet Ethnic Cleansing", *The Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 70, No. 4 (December 1998), pp. 813-861; Terry Martin, "Interpreting the New Archival Signals: Nationalities Policy and the Nature of the Soviet Bureaucracy", *Cahiers du Monde russe*, Vol. 40, No. 1/2 (Jan. - Jun., 1999), pp. 113-124, p. 114.

57 In this respect, the situation is similar in other republics recently incorporated into the Soviet Union. Thus, in Estonia, local intellectuals (generally local cadres), the so-called 'revolutionaries' were dominated and guided by so-called 'immigrants.' See Elena Zubkova, "L'Affaire estonienne" dans le contexte de la soviétisation des pays baltes. 1949-1953", *Communisme*, No 70/71, Paris, L'Âge d'homme, 2002, pp. 187.

58 Most of them, as Petrea Cruciuc, were born on the eve of the Russian Revolution of 1917.

59 An expression used for this purpose by Moshe Lewin in *Le Siècle soviétique*, Paris, Fayard, 2003, p. 145.

the 'older ones' and their Bessarabian fellows, the 'younger' writers asserted themselves by virtue of their enthusiasm and the confidence they had earned after the 1937 purges. However, there is an element in the young generation's careers that brought them on a par with the 'older ones' and the Bessarabian 'newcomers': they were not communists, despite being the Party's favourites. After the collective persecution experienced by the communists in 1937, these Komsomol writers appeared as a reserve team from which the Party would recruit its prospective members. Indeed, the hard work and courage they showed during the 'Great Patriotic War' would reward them after 1945 with the Communist Party membership card.

'Young' and 'old', the Transnistrian writers devoted their energy to implementing the Party's exhortation to train and guide the Bessarabian 'newcomers'. Despite a certain reluctance manifested by some 'tutored ones' vis-à-vis their 'tutors', the collaboration between Transnistrians and Bessarabians progressed in the right direction. The purge that started in June 1941 in the Writers' Union and throughout the country hindered the smooth running of that collaboration and reminded the Transnistrians of their recent experience: the 1937 purges, in which they had faced the Bessarabians⁶⁰ as their potential enemies.

The Bessarabian writers accepted a subordinate position vis-à-vis the Transnistrian writers, as was required by the Soviet power. They posed as exemplary 'disciples' and developed a contagious competition among

60 In the purges of 1937-38, the most repressed cadres and intellectuals were of Bessarabian origin, arrived in the USSR in the 1920s and settled in the MASSR on the party line. See more on this issue in Petru Negură, *Nici eroi, nici trădători*, „De la 'formarea cadrelor' la 'marile epurări'” [From 'cadres formation' to the 'great purges'], pp. 120-132.

themselves for a higher appreciation by their more favoured peers and in order to increase their chances of being recognised as fully-fledged Soviet writers. They assimilated the new 'creative method' without reservations, renouncing their claims to being the literary avant-garde which had distinguished them in the interwar period from the older generation. However, they could not give up two elements of the cultural capital inherited from the previous authorities: Romanian classical literature and Romanian as literary language which they had learned from childhood on.

The Bessarabian writers' admission into the MWU, which signalled the confidence that they enjoyed from the Party, gave them formally equal status with the Transnistrian writers. The position they adopted on the issue of the 'Moldovan' standard literary language enjoyed more credibility among the decision makers. On June 8, 1941, a few days after the last Bessarabian candidate was admitted into the MWU, the Moldovan government adopted a linguistic reform, which was the result of a compromise, following negotiation between the Bessarabian writers' position and the principles defended by the Transnistrian writers, as well as the Moldovan leaders themselves – a reform which recognised a 'Moldovan' language that was very close to the Romanian literary language⁶¹. However, the reform was only a provisional victory won by the Bessarabian writers. The discussions were soon resumed during refuge in Moscow. By the late 1950s, the linguistic issue, as well as the classic literary heritage, would be a permanent point of contention in the balance of power between the two factions of the MWU, the Bessarabians and the Transnistrians.

61 (Anonymous), „Noua ortografie a limbii moldovenești” [The new orthography of the Moldovan language], *MS*, June 8, 1941, p. 1.

On June 19, 1941, three days before the war, the Ministry of Education organised a literary soiree dedicated to the great 'Moldovan poet' Mihai Eminescu, with the participation of writers, the prime minister, and other officials⁶². It was supposed to be part of a series of cultural events aimed at popularising Moldovan literary classics among Moldovans. But the war interrupted the initiative, and also continued to pose an obstacle for continuing such a series of gatherings after the restoration of peace. Romania's involvement in World War Two in alliance with Nazi Germany would be used by the opponents of the 'Romanisation drive' of the Moldovan language and literary heritage as an argument to defend their localist and pro-Russian position.

CONCLUSION

In this article, I tried to analyse how the Bessarabian writers' integration was conducted into the literary and cultural institutions of Soviet Moldova, namely the Moldovan Writers Union, from June 1940 (the annexation of Bessarabia by USSR) until June 1941, when the territory was retaken by the Romanian army in alliance with the German army. I examined two perspectives and two different logics of this process. On the one hand, I outlined the Bessarabian writers' position depending on their group affiliation, on their social and symbolic capital and on their motivations in relation to Soviet power and its cultural institutions. On the other hand, I tried to reconstruct the rationale of the Soviet authorities in their – sometimes contradictory – actions in enrolling (or sometimes marginalising) these writers who were freshly torn from the Bessarabian and Romanian literary milieu.

⁶² (Anonymous), „O lecție despre Mihai Eminescu” [A lecture about Mihai Eminescu], *MS*, June 28, 1941, p. 1.

After 28 June 1940, the three groups that constituted the 'Bessarabian' faction of the Moldovan Writers Union (i.e. 'regionalists', 'Jews' and 'underground activists') did not represent fixed and definitive categories. The main feature which defined them all was the kind of motivation that urged everyone to cooperate with the occupation regime (in this case, the Soviets), depending on their own biographic background and cultural capital. The three categories intersected and overlapped, since the writers often had a number of competing interests. Beyond these writers' biographic particularities, certain common features determined their predisposition to seek a compromise with the Soviets and a *modus vivendi* with the Moldovan Soviet writers (the 'Transnistrians'). In 1940, they were all young and belonged to diverse – and often uncertain – ethnic origins, sharing sometimes a certain type of regionalist position in relation to the Romanian administration, albeit for different reasons. Finally, most of them had populist and/or socialist beliefs. Yet, due to their Bessarabian origin and Romanian education they were distinct from the faction of Transnistrian writers when they became part of the MWU.

The strategies aimed at integrating the Bessarabian writers into Soviet institutional structures followed a binary – and apparently contradictory – rationale, of inclusion (of candidates deemed suitable for the aspiring status) and exclusion (of those who would not correspond to the criteria of political probity advanced by the Soviet authorities). One of the psychosocial effects of these two poles of the enrolment strategy implemented by the MWU (and other state-sponsored institutions) was the zealous behaviour and ideological emulation that writers adopted in order to ensure their successful integration. This be-

haviour laid the basis for duplicitous and somewhat dysfunctional interactions between writers, which would reach a paroxysm in the post-war 'Zhdanovist' campaign⁶³.

Moldovan writers coming from the MASSR (the 'Transnistrians') had a crucial role in the integration and enrolment of the Bessarabian writers into the MWU, as mediators vis-à-vis the Soviet authorities (many were Party members, had administrative positions in various official cultural institutions and had 'length of service' in political and cultural affairs), as well as in their function as cultural and ideological 'tutors'. However, they were less endowed in terms of knowledge of the Romanian literary language (officially called 'Moldovan') and of the 'Moldovan' literary heritage (which was already claimed as Romanian in Romania), which placed them in an inferior position in relation to their Bessarabian fellows. These cultural differences would tilt the postwar balance of power between them, allowing the group of Bessarabian writers to the benefit of their cultural capital in a symbolic and institutional battle which the 'Bessarabians' were to eventually win. This decisive – yet, never final – victory was to tilt the linguistic and cultural policy during the 1950s in the Moldavian SSR towards a 'latent Romanization'⁶⁴ of literary language and literary heritage. In this way, the issue of language and cultural heritage actually reverted to the fragile compromise reached in May-June 1941 in the cultural and literary sphere of the MSSR before the withdrawal of Soviet power from the territory of Bessarabia

and Transnistria to the benefit of the Romanian and German authorities.

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⁶³ See more about the Moldovan writers' environment in the 'Zhdanovist' era, in Petru Negură, *Nici eroi, nici trădători...*, p. 179-214.

⁶⁴ According to the expression of Charles King, in *The Moldovans...*; this thesis was verified and corroborated with a body of documents, in Petru Negură, *Nici eroi, nici trădători...*, chapter 4, especially: pp. 274-299.

How Bessarabians Were Perceived by the Romanian Civilian-Military Administration in 1941

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ABSTRACT

This chapter delineates the ambivalent perception of Bessarabians by the representatives of the Romanian administration after June 1941. The resentment accumulated by Romanian officials, as a result of loss of Bessarabia to the USSR in 1940, aggregated with the broader fear of the Soviet state, and marked their attitude toward the population of Bessarabia once the province was returned to Romania in the summer of 1941. While the population was still viewed as an integral part of the Romanian nation, their mentality and their devotion towards the Romanian state were considered corrupted by the influence of communist ideology and Soviet egalitarian milieu. Correspondingly, Bessarabians were blamed for loosing their sense of being Romanians and the atrophy of sentiments of discipline, respect, and hierarchy under the rule of the Soviet Union. Still, the Bessarabian Romanians were regarded as the most trustworthy social category, compared to other indigenous ethnic groups which, were suspected of anti-Romanian feeling and deemed to share an affinity for the Soviet regime. In the views of Romanian authorities, the Bessarabians could be brought back to normality through a process of "rehabilitation." Until then, the population of Bessarabia could not enjoy the complete trust and had to be administered by devoted elements, predominantly functionaries originating from the Old Kingdom, or verified member of the Bessarabian elites who took refuge to Romania after the Soviet annexation from 1940.

Bessarabia's tumultuous history left an enduring mark on the identity of its inhabitants, presenting tremendous challenges to the numerous authorities that governed this land.¹ Subjected to pronounced cultural fractures and often contradictory overlaying stratifications, Bessarabians' sense of loyalty was constantly under vigilant scrutiny by Russian, Romanian, and other governing powers.² The problem of an assumed lack of loyalty towards the incumbent government of the population of this territory explains the sustained historic efforts to "re-educate" Bessarabians in the civic, national, and moral senses of the word.

The historiography written during the Soviet period excelled at denouncing the "Roma-

nianization" of the Bessarabian population during the territory's period within Greater Romania³ and also advanced arguments supporting the existence of a separate Moldovan national identity, distinct from a Romanian one.⁴ More recently, a series of publications have denounced earlier attempts to manipulate Bessarabians' identity by the Tsarist and Soviet administrations.⁵ After 1991, the Re-

1 A series of articles on the issue of Bessarabian identity can be found in: *Basarabia. Dilemele identității*, eds. Flavius Solomon, Alexandru Zub, Iași: Fundația Academică „A.D. Xenopol,” 2001.

2 George Ciorănescu, *Bessarabia, Disputed Land between East and West*, Muenchen, 1984.

3 S. K. Brysiakin, *Kul'tura Bessarabii v 1918-1940 gg*, Kishinev, 1978; S. K. Brysiakin, M. K. Sytnik, *Torzhestvo istoricheskoi spravedlivosti*, Kishinev, 1969; A. Dolinik, *Pod vlastiu rumynskikh boiar*, Moskva, 1945; V. Lungu, *Politika terrora i grabezha v Bessarabii (1918-1920 gg)*, Kishinev, 1979; S. F. Kustriabova, *Polozhenie trudniashikhsia i demograficheskie protsessy v gorodakh Bessarabii (1918-1940)*, Kishinev, 1977.

4 A. M. Lazarev, *Moldavskaiia sovetskaia gosudarstvennost' i bessarabskii vopros*, Kishinev, 1974; *Impotriva falsificatorilor burgheji ai istoriei și culturii poporului moldovenesc*, Chișinău, 1974; V. Stati, *Limba moldovenească și răuvoitorii ei: împotriva falsificatorilor burgheji ai dezvoltării limbii moldovenești*, Chișinău, 1988.

5 Mihail Bruhis, *Rusia, România și Basarabia (1812, 1918, 1924, 1940)*, Chișinău, 1992; W. P.

public of Moldova became a battleground of opposing political forces, while historiography and education became tools for shaping the population's identity towards various desired outcomes (typically a pro-Russian or pro-Romanian direction).⁶

This chapter does not claim to include debates on these topics, nor does it intend to provide historical or political arguments for either side involved in shaping Bessarabians' identity. It has a more modest aim: to analyse the multiple facets of how Bessarabians were described in 1941 by members of the Romanian administration. The rationale for analysing the imagery of Bessarabians from this specific vantage point follows from the exceptional nature of the circumstances under which it arose. The analysis should help scholars better understand overlapping national and regional identities, centre-periphery relations, and challenges to the sense of belonging which permeated Romania, Bessarabia, and much of Europe during

this extraordinary period of time, and thereby elucidate a topic which has so far failed to attract much scholarly attention.⁷

Notably, the year 1941 represents a crucial period – one of maximal intensity in the history of the Romanian state – and yet a watershed juncture that is significantly understudied in Romanian historiography, especially when compared to the focus placed on 1940. With the beginning of the war with the USSR, the leadership of Romania was undertaking a reappraisal of earlier phases of history and, simultaneously, launched several projects of great significance for the future of the entire country and of Bessarabia in particular. During this period, the state's border on the Nistru River was once again imbued with importance as its defensive eastern frontier and the bastion of Christendom in the fatal vicinity of Soviet Russia.⁸ Resentments which had burst forth among the Romanian administration after the surrender of Bessarabia in June 1940, helped determine the nature of national projects focused on the Bessarabian population after the territory's return to Romanian rule. In this particular context, the way in which the Bessarabian population was viewed by the central administration laid the foundation for implementing a new social construction, and, simultaneously, established the place and the definitive role

van Meurs, *The Bessarabian Question in Communist Historiography. Nationalist and Communist Politics and History Writing*, Chişinău, Arc, 1996; Charles King, *Moldovenii. România, Rusia şi politica culturală*, Chişinău, Arc, 2002; Klaus Heitmann, *Limbă şi politică în Republica Moldova*, Chişinău, 1998; Doru Mihaiescu, *Basarabia şi Bucovina (pornind de la numele lor)*, Iaşi, 2000.

6 Mircea Snegur, "Republica Moldova este ţara tuturor cetăţenilor săi," in *Pământ şi oameni*, 12 February, 1994, p. 3, Mihai Cimpoi, *Basarabia sub steaua exilului*, Bucureşti, 1994; Anatol Petrencu, *În serviciul zeiţei Clio*, Chişinău, 2001; Ion Eremia, *Falsificarea istoriei sau "Fenomenul Stati" în Republica Moldova*, Chişinău, 2003. For an account on the confrontations in Moldova's schools see the articles: Elizabeth Anderson: "Don't Falsify Our History! Moldovan Teacher and Student Reaction to State Proposed History Courses", *Nationalisms Across the Globe: An Overview of Nationalisms in State-Endowed and Stateless Nations*, Vol. I, Europe, Poznan, The Polish Academy of Sciences, 2005; Anderson Elizabeth A., "Backwards, Forwards, or Both? Moldovan Teachers' Relationship to the State and the Nation," *European Education*, 2005, vol. 37, nr. 3, p. 53-67.

7 The author of this article studies the issue of the Holocaust in Romania; most of the archival materials cited here were consulted in relation to the study of the Holocaust.

8 The Romanian government will also ponder claims on the Soviet territory across Nistru River and with the help of its political and intellectual elites will attempt to justify a new political border on the Bug River. See: Mioara Anton, "Dincolo de Nistru. Politică etnică şi construcţie identitară," *Al doilea război mondial: memorie şi istorie în estul şi Vestul Europei*, eds. Diana Dumitru, Igor Caşi, Andrei Cuşco, Petru Negură (Chişinău: Cartier, 2013), p. 25-44.

of Bessarabians inside Romanian society. The aim of this study is to highlight the image of Bessarabians as perceived by the Romanian administration starting from June 1941 until the end of that year. In order to achieve this goal we analyse a series of archival documents containing references to the civilian population of Bessarabia, most of which had been subjected to Soviet occupation between June 1940 and June 1941, by representatives of the civilian and military administration of Bessarabia, including the governor of the province. The majority of materials used for this research originates from the archives of the Ministry of National Defence of Romania and from the National Archives of the Republic of Moldova, as well as some regional archives in Ukraine.⁹ Among Romania's historical regions, cultural, ethnic, and other differences have always existed. Because of these differences, no large regional administrative units were ever created, as the central authorities in Bucharest clearly aimed to avoid the strengthening of significant regional identities.¹⁰ However, one can notice that, during the period studied here, a system was installed in Bessarabia which differed radically from the situation in the rest of the country. This was clearly on display when Marshall Ion Antonescu appointed General Constantin Voiculescu as governor of Bessarabia: he was accountable only to the Marshall himself and was given special prerogatives, including the right to annul the country's laws

within Bessarabia whenever it served the national interest.¹¹

The circulation of goods and people between Bessarabia and the rest of Romania was considerably curtailed, with the intention of erecting an impenetrable wall between the two parts of the reunited country.¹² From the first days of the war with the USSR, Antonescu demanded that qualified, competent civil servants be employed in Bessarabia and Bucovina. In order to encourage functionaries to arrive and work in these peripheral provinces a 30 percent rise in salaries was planned, in addition to the establishment of exclusive shops that would provide access to goods which were in short supply.¹³ The government and military functionaries from the Romanian Old Kingdom¹⁴ brought their preconceived notions about Bessarabians to their new assignments. At the heart of their attitudes lay anxiety over the possible duplicity of this population and the consequences of its "Bolshevisation" under the previous regime. Doubts over the Bessarabians' political reliability reflected a broader concern that permeated Romanian society at that time.

A number of factors contributed to the creation and diffusion of this particular image of Bessarabians, which is present throughout the archival documentation produced in

9 These materials were studied at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (further USHMM), which holds an important collection of documents—especially related to WWII period—originating from various European archives.

10 For a thorough analysis of regionalist movements and the efforts of national building in Greater Romania see the study of Irina Livezeanu, *Cultural Politics in Greater Romania: Nationalism, Nation Building, and Ethnic Struggle. 1918-1930*, Princeton: Cornell University Press, 1995.

11 Anatol Petrencu, *Basarabia în al doilea război mondial, 1940-1944*, Chişinău: Lyceum, 1997, p. 245; *Stenogramele şedinţelor Consiliului de Miniştri: guvernarea lui Ion Antonescu. 5 octombrie 1941-ianuarie 1942*, Vol. V, Bucureşti, Arhivele Naţionale ale României, 2001, p. 442-444.

12 *Stenogramele şedinţelor Consiliului de Miniştri: guvernarea lui Ion Antonescu. 3 aprilie- iunie 1941*, Bucureşti, 1999, p. 597; *ibid.*, Vol. IV, p. 200.

13 *Stenogramele...*, Vol. III, p. 645; *ibid.*, Vol. IV, p. 566, p. 601, p. 607; *ibid.*, Vol. VI, p. 456.

14 The term Romanian Old Kingdom, or Old Kingdom [Regatul Vechi] was used when referring to the territory covered by the first independent Romanian nation state before 1918.

1941. In the majority of these documents, the Bessarabian population is examined through the prism of loyalty, identifying the degree of faithfulness it showed towards the reestablished Romanian authority. This question of loyalty should not, however, overshadow the fact that, without question, Bessarabians were regarded by the Romanian administration as part of the Romanian nation, as compatriots of their brothers living across Prut River. This viewpoint was deemed to be an uncontested truth. Because of this nationalistic approach, in the majority of documents, ethnic Romanians from Bessarabia were singled out and judged separately from other ethnic groups inhabiting the same territory. The documents which examined the state of the “Romanian spirit” within Bessarabia emphasised that Romanians from Bessarabia in particular demonstrated an overwhelming “joy” at the restoration of Romanian authority:

“In all localities across the Prut River, where our units passed, the Romanian population received with great joy and heartfelt gratitude both the Romanian and German armies. While passing through villages, the units were received with flowers and celebratory cheers. On every face one could see jubilation over their salvaging from the Russian yoke... The Romanian population received the entrance of Romanian troops into Bessarabia as a boon and with emphatic enthusiasm.”¹⁵

One note issued by the 3rd Army reinforcements expresses in beaming, propagandistic language an opinion predominant in Romanian military circles:

15 The Archives of the Ministry of National Defence [Arhivele Ministerului Apărării Naționale], Fund „3rd Army”, Inv. nr. S/6776, reel nr. 352; Report of the Section 2 of the 3rd Army from July 8, 1941; USHMM, RG-25.003, reel 18.

„We cannot fail to notice the pride and satisfaction of the Romanian soldier who not only set free our brothers from Bucovina and Bessarabia, but through his sacrifice stuck the Romanian tricolor [national flag] faraway, on Ukrainian lands, which were possessed until recently by the Communist octopus, which for over 22 years boasted that any enemy will be destroyed on its own land.”¹⁶

Other informative documents confirmed with resolution that “sentiments of loyalty and profound trust in the new spirit of the time and joy over the reunification of Bessarabia with the Motherland can be read on everybody’s face.”¹⁷ Occasionally, documents of representatives of the Romanian administration betray a paternalistic attitude blended with a degree of condescension. For example, a report of the 3rd Army portrays Romanian soldiers as “Crusaders who went to sacrifice themselves for the faith in God and in church disgraced by the Judeo-Communists.” According to this report, one Bessarabian [presumably an ethnic Romanian] addressed these soldiers with the following words: “you took away the yoke that was upon us, now give us some intelligence [ne-ați luat jugul, dați-ne minte].”¹⁸

In this context, it is revealing that residents of Bessarabia who were of non-Romanian ethnic origin were perceived as being hostile—or in the best case indifferent—towards the Romanian administration.¹⁹ According to an infor-

16 The Archives of the Ministry of National Defence, Fund „3rd Army”. Inv. S/6776, reel 352, f. 133, Informative note from August 12, 1941; USHMM, RG-25.003, reel 18.

17 Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Odesskoi Oblasti [further GAOO], Fund 2248, inv.1, dos. 23, Informative note from August 31, 1941; USHMM, RG-31.014; Acc.1996.A.0115.

18 The Archives of the Ministry of National Defence, Fund „3rd Army”. Inv. S/6776, reel nr. 352, f. 133, 12 august 1941; USHMM, RG-25.003, reel 18.

19 During the summer and fall of the year 1941 there were executions and mass deportations

mative note, the population of Ukrainian origin “to a certain extent, showed indifference towards the new situation. They do not allow expressions of either good or bad perceptions over the reoccupation of Bessarabia by our troops [Nu lasă a se înțelege nici în bine, nici în rău, reocuparea de către trupele noastre a Basarabiei].²⁰” The ethnic Russian population was regarded as unfriendly towards the new government, being regarded as sympathisers of Soviet power. Correspondingly, on 14 September 1941, Ion Antonescu sent an order to the governor of Bessarabia Voiculescu asking him to treat “all those of Russian origin and all those who served under the Bolsheviks” with suspicion.²¹

Alongside the implementation of a forceful policy of Romanianisation which involved ethnic-Romanian residents of Bessarabia being viewed as an integral part of the Romanian national “body,” archival documents also display sentiments of another sort. These sentiments indicated a traumatic experience as a result of territorial loss and the humiliation suffered by representatives of the Romanian state during the summer of 1940. The fact that some Bessarabians openly showed satisfaction with the incorporation of their province into the Soviet Union, or the fact that most decided to remain in the territory after Soviet occupation deeply injured the pride of Romanian dignitaries, especially in a period when the ethnocratic aspirations of the Romanian state were reaching their apex. Immediately

of Bessarabian Jews. The documents produced by the administration abound in accusation of Jews and their intentions to destabilize the situation inside the country and to sabotage the Romanian leadership.

20 *Ibid.*

21 The Archives of the Ministry of National Defence, Fund „Government of Bessarabia Military Cabinet”, Inv. S/19845, reel nr. 651, p. 533; USHMM, RG-25.003M, reel 121.

after the Soviets reconquered the province, this political acrimony led to a certain disqualification of the inhabitants of Bessarabia in the eyes of Romanian functionaries. A report from the gendarmerie legion in Chișinău mentions that during the period of withdrawal of Romanian troops from Bessarabia “this population has lost the least Romanian sentiment, blended into the Bolshevik hordes and local minorities, and started the plunder against the army and functionaries.”²²

The resentment accumulated by Romanian officials as a result of the events of June 1940 was frequently enhanced by their broader fear of the Soviet state and the combination marked their attitude towards the population of Bessarabia once the province was returned to Romania in 1941. The contact of Bessarabians with the Soviet regime between 1940 and 1941 was regarded as baleful and, at times, was rendered in graphic religious terms. Bessarabians’ choice not to oppose the incorporation of their province into the Soviet state, for example, was likened by Romanian authorities to the denial of God and to moving to the side of Satan.²³ Along with the assumed apostasy of the Bessarabian population under the Soviet regime, anti-Romanian sentiment was deemed to have reached its climax at that time. One gendarmerie report insisted that during this period Bessarabians “mostly lost their feeling of being Romanian” and proceeded to take action against the Romanian state:

“Many of them indulged in acts of espionage, treason, and bringing Soviet troops to our positions during operations, culminating in the fact that some of them volunteered to fight against us while in the ranks of the Red Army,

22 General Inspectorate of the Gendarmerie, Year 1941; USHMM, RG-25.010M, reel 6.

23 *Ibid.*

caught our agents and surrendered them to the Soviet authorities who executed them.”²⁴

Curiously, even if he had “moved on the side of Satan,” the Bessarabian was not seen as an active collaborator with Soviet power, but rather as a passive object in its hands. The Bessarabian in whose soul “the communist propaganda took root” appears as wimpish, opportunistic, incapable of a judicious analysis of the situation which had been created. The calculations of these Bessarabians was understood as being “bitter and wrong,” because they “did not wait for the results of the future and the outcome which gave birth to their salvation from the Bolsheviks’ clutches.” Moreover, according to the same document, even those Bessarabians who spied on the Romanian state and helped the Soviets are partially exonerated by the affirmation that they did this “in an unfortunate act of unconscious communist motivation [print-un nenorocit act de inconștientă cauză comunistă].”²⁵

Nevertheless, the Bessarabian population’s contact with the Soviet state was not always described as harmful for the mindset of Bessarabians and for the Romanian spirit in the region. Some Romanian functionaries and militaries shared the opinion that the affiliation of Bessarabians with the Soviet regime decreased substantively after one year of being part of the Soviet state, primarily because of the terror exercised by the Soviet secret police, in addition to material shortages suffered during this period. A counter-informative bulletin of the regional inspectorate of the Chișinău police, for example, claimed that:

“one year of Soviet occupation produced serious

24 *Ibid.*

25 USHMM, RG-25.010M, reel 6, General Inspectorate of the Gendarmerie, Year 1941.

dissatisfaction among the population of cities and villages. Even the biggest sympathisers of the communist movement remained disappointed. For all social categories, the standard of life during the Soviet occupation was lower than the Romanian one.”²⁶

The chief of Cetatea Albă police office Venculescu and the head of Siguranța²⁷ bureau Petre Teodorescu repeated these words almost verbatim and, in addition, emphasised that:

„the actions against religion led by the Jews, the severe regime which was imposed upon agricultural workers, peasants who accepted to enter Collective farms and who had to provide a prescribed output during working hours, one demanded by the Soviet authorities, and the taxes in cash and in kind which were supposed to be paid by the rural population to the state, and especially those who did not enter Collective farms produced the biggest dissatisfaction.”²⁸

The gendarmery also noted that Bessarabian peasants rated the activity of the Soviet police as much more efficient than that of the Romanian security apparatus. One of them observed that:

“it was sufficient to have one militia man for a plasa [administrative unit] in order to keep the entire order, security, and the execution of orders under control, while in the case of the Romanians [government], because of favouritism and corruption in the service, the population does not execute all the dispositions given by the Administration on time.”²⁹

26 The Archives of the Ministry of National Defence, Fund „Government of Bessarabia Military Cabinet,” Inv. S/19845, reel nr. 651, August 10-20, 1941; USHMM, RG -25.003M, reel 121.

27 Siguranța/Siguranța Statului was the term used when referring to various installments of secret police in interwar and WWII Romania.

28 GAOO, Fund 2248, inv.1, dos. 23; USHMM, RG-31.014; Acc.1996.A.0115.

29 General Inspectorate of the Gendarmerie,

According to claims by the Bessarabian statesman and politician Vladimir Cristi, the Bessarabian people, and especially the rural population, were “undeniably satisfied to get rid of the yoke and tyranny of Bolshevism owing to the Romanian soldier and the wisdom of its Conducător [leader].”³⁰ Furthermore, the politician underlined that if the Romanian administration failed to secure Bessarabians’ affection and loyalty during the interwar period, then the Bolshevik regime, through its policies and the quality of life enforced upon the population in 1940-1941, moved Bessarabians closer towards Romania. Cristi expressed a daring opinion, asserting that “during one year of Bolshevik rule, Bessarabia was more romanianised than during the 22 years of our [Romanian] domination.”³¹

Even reports which harshly criticised the conversion of Bessarabians to communism admitted that a number of Bessarabians remained loyal to the Romanian state and “breathed a sigh of relief” when the Romanians entered and “brought praise to God for being rescued from the Bolshevik regime which sought their destruction.” Even those who were not deemed loyal to the Romanian administration, and who were not expected to regard the reinstallation of its regime with kindness, were nevertheless reported to not be “demonstrating [such feelings] in any form, because of the fear of new rigours of laws, and [they] seek to rehabilitate themselves through various acts of obedience and through the loyalty they

display.”³² More rarely, the locals were attributed a reserved attitude towards the Romanian administration. An informative note sent in September 1941 from the district of Ismail characterised the Bessarabian population as being “in a state of undetermined opinion,” a state excused through the fact that this population is “living in permanent fear.”³³

The ambiguous attitude of the Romanian authorities can also be explained by the fact that the resentments built up in the recent past were colliding with crucial necessities of their present. If the past was demanding the punishment of “collaborators” with Soviet power and the revenge of the Romanian state, then the interests of present and future were surfacing the necessity to stabilise political power and to find reconciliation with the local population of the region. The discourse of those functionaries from the Old Kingdom who had arrived in order to manage the reconquered province is clearly influenced by this dilemma, since many of them attempt to simultaneously condemn and justify the behaviour of Bessarabians between 1940 and 1941. A report of the Siguranța bureau from Cetatea Albă accounted for the behaviour of Bessarabians who had evacuated further east within the USSR in accordance with the Soviet authorities during the retaking of Bessarabia by Romania in the summer of 1941 by the fact that the majority of the people that had crossed over the Nistru River “were either taken through a government order or through mobilisation as part of the army or auxiliary formations, or were obliged to leave along with the factories in which they worked, as part of the Bolsheviks’

Year 1941, November 12, 1941; USHMM, RG 25.010M, reel 9.

30 Cabinetul Civilo-Militar pentru Administrarea Basarabiei, Bucovinei și Transnistriei, Arhiva Națională a Republicii Moldova, Fund nr. 706, inv. 1, dos. 10, f. 16; USHMM, CBBT, reel 2.

31 *Ibid.*

32 General Inspectorate of the Gendarmerie, Year 1941; USHMM, RG-25.010M, reel 6.

33 The Archives of the Ministry of National Defence, Fund „Government of Bessarabia Military Cabinet,” Inv. S/19845, reel nr. 651, f. 397, September 1941; USHMM, RG -25.003M, reel 121.

general mobilisation plan.”³⁴ On the other hand, according to the same document, part of the population which had arrived in Bessarabia from the Old Kingdom after 28 June 1940 came back in order to take their families, while pupils and students, among others, returned to their parents’ place of residence.³⁵ Clearly, the people who left Romania after 28 June 1940 in order to go to Bessarabia and the relatives of those Bessarabians who evacuated with the Soviets in June-July 1941 were worried about potential punishment by the newly installed Romanian authorities. Correspondingly, the authors of the document report to their superiors that

“the categories of the inhabitants listed above hope that the Government and the understanding leadership of Mr. Marshall Antonescu will equitably regulate the situation of citizenship through future measures and regulations.”³⁶

An important document, signed in September 1941 by the governor of Bessarabia, general Voiculescu, and sent to all departments, prefectures, town halls, the Inspectorate of the Gendarmerie and the Inspectorate of Politics and its divisions, illustrates in an expressive manner the unsettling qualities of Bessarabians, as perceived by the administration of the province.³⁷ In its opening paragraph, the governor’s communiqué states trenchantly that “one year of Soviet rule was sufficient to atrophy among many Bessarabians any sentiment

of discipline, respect, and hierarchy.” Seemingly, Voiculescu was irritated by the particular changes imposed by the Soviet power which, in his understanding, led to the dismantling of the hierarchic system, considered to be a constitutive element of Romanian society of that era. The governor of Bessarabia harshly criticised “that ‘camaraderie’ which aimed at the levelling of social classes replaced the rooted conventional forms to address only with ‘you’ [singular form], which created the illusion of equality with those situated on the lowest levels of society.” For Voiculescu, favouring the lower class or “those without a sense in life [a celor fără nici un căpătâiu]” was equivalent to their transformation in a “category noncompliant to any order, discipline and hierarchy.” At the same time, people belonging to superior classes were supposedly lowered, through this “equality,” imposing a kind of “inferiority complex on them.”³⁸

Voiculescu was indignant at the atmosphere of “egalitarianism” which in his opinion was reigning in Bessarabian institutions and organisations where local functionaries were working. According to the governor’s point of view,

“an attentive observer would be surprised by the lack of deference which is owed by the little ones towards those situated on a higher hierarchical level. We do not even mention the manner and the bearing of many citizens when they address an authority; ostensibly [they] have something commanding, - “something” which the person who lived in the Old Kingdom is not used to.”³⁹

This statement is supported by several examples. Among these is the case of the engineer Vasenco from the technical service of the pre-

34 GAOO, Fund 2248, op.1, ed. hr. 23, the report covers the period from November 6 to December 6, 1941; USHMM, RG-31.014; Acc.1996.A.0115.

35 *Ibid.*

36 *Ibid.*

37 The Archives of the Ministry of National Defence, Fund „Government of Bessarabia Military Cabinet,” Inv. S/19845, reel nr. 651, f. 306; USHMM, RG-25.003M, reel 121.

38 *Ibid.*

39 *Ibid.*

fecture of Bălți who, as is stressed in the document, “remained under the Soviets.” We learn that while Vasenco left his office, his courier arrived, also someone who “remained under the Soviets,” and sat on the chair of his boss, the engineer Vasenco. Voiculescu thought it scandalous that at the return of Vasenco, the courier did not stand up from Vasenco’s chair; moreover, “the engineer also did not find this deed abnormal,” but “took another chair and sat beside him.” A similar example brought up by the governor refers to the director of the Theological Seminary of Chișinău who, according to several statements, “throughout the occupation enjoyed spending time with the school’s servant staff.” Finally, the author of the document concludes that “[these] are small examples, insignificant, but they illustrate a certain state of affairs, a certain mentality.”⁴⁰

In his directive, Voiculescu explained these occurrences as a result of the fact that under the Soviet occupation neither functionaries nor professors had any authority over citizens and students; that these elite positions lost all prestige. A series of measures was meant to correct the prevailing situation. For example, the entire administrative personnel, professors, teachers, and local functionaries from Bessarabia were allowed back into government service following a verification procedure, and were sent across the Prut River (to the Old Kingdom), or “at least in another location far away from the ones where they served under the Soviet regime.” The freed-up positions were meant to be filled “primarily by the elements from the Old Kingdom and Bessarabian refugees, [who should be] double-checked, who at the evacuation [of the Romanian authorities in 1940] left across the Prut.” Finally, the governor forcefully demanded that “every chief of every cat-

egory or level [should] watch over the reestablishment of the idea of discipline, respect, and hierarchy, intervening energetically each and every time this will suffer.”⁴¹

As we can observe, in the perceptions of Romanian authorities, the Bessarabians were in a way “contaminated” by their contact with the communist regime and they could be brought back to normality through the application of a set of special measures. Until then, the civilian population of Bessarabia could not enjoy complete trust and had to be administered by devoted elements, predominantly functionaries originating from the Old Kingdom. Correspondingly, localities of Bessarabia which were administered by natives of the Old Kingdom had the highest chance to be perceived as trustworthy sites. A summary of the information compiled by the Siguranța bureau from Cetatea Albă notified its superiors that the Romanian population of the city was made up exclusively of functionaries, professors, teachers, and officers who came for service in this locality from the Old Kingdom, in addition to several indigenous families. According to this document, the spirit of the population from the city “is not unsatisfactory in any aspect;” the Romanians from here are demonstrating “the utmost confidence in the incumbent leadership of the state and comment favourably on all measures of order which are undertaken and the activity which is conducted for the restoration and rebuilding of Bessarabia.”⁴²

Yet, the publicly expressed derogatory attitude of Old Kingdom functionaries towards Bessarabians sometimes provoked conflict

40 *Ibid.*

41 The Archives of the Ministry of National Defence, Fund „Government of Bessarabia Military Cabinet,” Inv. S/19845, reel nr. 651, f. 306; USHMM, RG -25.003M, reel 121.

42 GAOO, Fund 2248, inv.1, dos. 23, the report from September 19 to October 19, 1941; USHMM, RG-31.014; Acc.1996.A.0115.

situations, such as those reported by the gendarmerie office of the village of Țaul. According to the report, a majority of people from the village of Țaul stopped sending their children to school because the director Plămădeală, wife of the priest Valerian Plămădeală, “all the time scorns the children with the words ‘sons of communists and Bolsheviks you are.’” The report states further, that, “because of this reason, the inhabitants of this settlement are very discontent.”⁴³

The shortages of war further aggravated the relationship between the Bessarabian population and the Romanian authorities. According to a memo issued by the inspector of gendarmerie, colonel Meculescu, on 14 September 1941, the population of some rural places in Bessarabia “was manifesting very big discontent because of a lack of crucial basic goods which they cannot purchase and which are desperately needed.” Meculescu was showing his concern over the fact that this discontent could be further exploited by subversive elements and was worried that the population might get involved in displays hostile to the state. As a consequence, the inspector of the gendarmerie ordered his staff to “take measures of scrutiny and surveillance concerning this problem, reporting in a timely manner to the inspectorate any relevant findings in this regard.”⁴⁴ However, even in Cetatea Albă, where a harmonious relationship between the authorities and the ethnic Romanian population was reported, the municipal Siguranța bureau did not fail to notice that “the spirit of the Romanian population is very good, except for small dissatisfactions manifested when members of the popu-

lation are requisitioned for forced labor.”⁴⁵ Frequently, Bessarabian refugees who came back to Bessarabia after July 1941 were the harshest critics of the alleged lack of loyalty towards the Romanian state on part of the population who had stayed during the Soviet occupation. An informative note by the legion of gendarmes from Lăpușna registers that the Bessarabian refugees from this locality considered the best form of government for Bessarabia to be “a military dictatorship of the most severe character,” because its inhabitants “do not have any national conscience” and they “are indifferent if today the tricolor flag is fluttering or the red banner.”⁴⁶

Yet, not all Bessarabian refugees shared these radical opinions. Vladimir Cristi, whom we mentioned above, displayed a completely different attitude.⁴⁷ On 6 October 1941 he sent a memorandum to the governor of Bessarabia, in which he expressed his point of view regarding the state of affairs within reconquered Bessarabia and, simultaneously, offered some suggestions for a more efficient administration of the province. Cristi was highlighting the favourable attitude of peasants towards the Romanian administration, especially invigorated by the abuses undertaken by the Soviet administration. In his opinion, it was absolutely necessary to irreversibly consolidate “this psychological condition of the Bessarabian Romanian so favourable to us,” but this should be done “through a wise policy.” In

45 GAOO, Fund 2248, inv.1, dos. 23, Informative note from August 31, 1941; USHMM, RG-31.014; Acc.1996.A.0115.

46 General Inspectorate of the Gendarmerie, the Year 1941, November 12, 1941; USHMM, RG 25.010M, reel 9.

47 Vladimir Cristi was a deputy to the National Council [Sfatul Țării] of Moldova, which voted the union with Romania. During the years 1938-1940 he was the designated mayor of Chișinău.

43 General Inspectorate of the Gendarmerie, Year 1941, f. 532; USHMM, RG – 25.010M, reel 11.

44 General Inspectorate of the Gendarmerie, Year 1941, f. 462; USHMM, RG – 25.010M, reel 11.

the understanding of the author of this statement, "the Moldovans from Bessarabia are kind-hearted and gentle, and therefore very easily influenced both for good or evil." Correspondingly, Cristi was insisting that only wise measures which were in complete accordance with the psychology of the local indigenous population should be applied, warning that "if the same mistakes made from 1918 until the rupture will be repeated, it will once again create an environment detrimental to the state," an atmosphere which, as he underlines, was fully displayed in 1940, at the occasion of the evacuation from Bessarabia. Unlike other representatives of the Romanian political class, Cristi does not understand that event as a direct result of the unmediated free choice of Bessarabians, but finds fault with the Romanian authorities which are characterised as the authors of "a set of deliberate and unintended mistakes committed during the entire period of the shameful, barren, and demagogic politicking," that, in addition, was "shamelessly exploited with ability by all enemies' agents."⁴⁸ While Cristi's proposal had a more moderate character compared to those of other Bessarabian refugees, it did not have any original elements and mostly offers solutions which were already partially implemented. Thus, his project was to establish in Bessarabia

"a local administration created from the most select elements of the official cadres from the Old Kingdom, which will work in close collaboration with honest Bessarabians, who know the local circumstances, entirely avoiding professional politicians, the foams of the 1918 revolution."⁴⁹

48 The National Archive of the Republic of Moldova, Civilian-Military Cabinet for the Administration of Bessarabia, Bucovina, and Transnistria, Fund. 706, inv. 1, dos. 10, f. 16; USHMM, CBBT, reel 2.

49 *Ibid.*

In conclusion, we remark that the image of the Bessarabian population as derived from the documentation produced by the Romanian administration in the year 1941, reflects a state of affairs as it was predominant at that moment in Romania and in Central and Eastern Europe. In fact, the image of Bessarabians as phrased in the language of the incumbent Romanian administration was the result of an earlier evolution in the interwar period, when Romania was increasingly becoming a state based on ethnic ideology, the implementation of rigorous hierarchy within society and open intolerance toward any manifestation of regionalism.⁵⁰ The perception of Bessarabians by the representatives of the Romanian administration was ambivalent. As before the year 1940, the population was viewed as an integral part of the Romanian nation, yet their mentality and their devotion towards the Romanian state were considered corrupted by the influence of Soviet ideology and its egalitarianism. Bessarabian Romanians were perceived as the most trustworthy social category compared to other indigenous ethnic groups, essentially because they were seen to be a part of the Romanian nation by the Romanian administration. However, ethnic Romanians from Bessarabia were suspected of anti-Romanian feeling and deemed to share an affinity for the Soviet regime. They therefore did not enjoy the same level of confidence as Romanians from the Old Kingdom and also held less confidence than those Bessarabians who took refuge in rump-Romania after June 1940. The changes assumed to have occurred in Bessarabians' mentality during the year of Soviet occupation stirred great anxieties among the Romanian administration. The civilian population of Bessarabia was blamed

50 Lucian Boia, *Istorie și mit în conștiința românească*, București, 1997; Irina Livezeanu, *Op. cit.*

for the atrophy of sentiments of discipline, respect, and hierarchy after contact with the new “egalitarian” rule of the Soviet Union. In line with this perception, an order was given to appoint primarily natives of the Old Kingdom and those Bessarabians who took refuge to Romania in 1940 to positions of public service within Bessarabia. Those Bessarabians who held official functions during the Soviet period were to be transferred to work on the right bank of the Prut River, or, in some cases, to other distant locations within Bessarabia. We cannot know with certainty if these measures were part of a temporary project or if they were meant to become a longer-term policy. However, it is apparent that in the vision of the Romanian administration, Bessarabians were supposed to undergo a process of “rehabilitation” before regaining full membership in the Romanian nation.

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"The Quiet Revolution": Revisiting the National Identity Issue in Soviet Moldavia at the Height of Khrushchev's Thaw (1956)

by Igor Cașu, State University of Moldova, Chișinău

ABSTRACT

The article highlights the impact of Khrushchev's Thaw on the question of national identity in Soviet Moldavia in the framework of the internal Soviet debates unleashed by the 'Secret Speech' and the subsequent Hungarian Revolution. The question of national identity was expressed by two groups, one representing the former GULAG returnees and the other the intellectuals or students socialized in the Soviet milieu. The position of the former was more radical and anti-Soviet, while the latter was milder and respected the *status-quo*, i.e. the Soviet regime, and only questioned some previously established traditions on what it meant to be Moldavian. Incidentally or not, the former position proved to be more long-lasting and in some way prepared and anticipated the national agenda during Perestroika, in the late 1980s. The question of national identity emerged once again with a comparable fervour in 1968 subsequent to the Prague Spring and Ceaușescu's refusal to support the Soviet invasion in Czechoslovakia. In 1956 and 1968, the former Western borderlands – the former Bessarabia, Western Ukraine and the Baltic States – witnessed what one could call a 'revenge of history'. More exactly, in periods of crisis the links between these territories and the interwar political entities and their traditions were stronger than any time before or afterwards. The specificity of the Moldavian case is that it succeeded in 1955-1957 to resume if only partially the Romanianization process witnessed by the interwar Bessarabia and partially by MASSR.

This article is based mainly on archival documents disclosed in the recent years from Chișinău-based depositories. The first set of documents comprises reports from all districts of MSSR sent to Chișinău in the months following the 'Secret Speech' and Hungarian Revolution. They are located in the former Archive of the Institute of Party History within the Central Committee of Moldavia, reorganized in 1991 in The Archive of the Social-Political Organizations of the Republic of Moldova. The other set of documents consists of reports of the KGB of MSSR from 1956 and 1957, especially those concerning the attitudes labelled as nationalistic, and are located in the Archive of the Service for Information and Security of the Republic of Moldova, the former KGB of MSSR.

The year 1956 stands out as a turning point that marked the post-WWII era both at the European and global levels. Just to name the most important events with global consequences: this was the year when Khrushchev condemned Stalin's crimes (February), the Hungarian Revolution broke out and the Soviet Union invaded Budapest subsequently (late October-early November), and it was the year when the tripartite Israeli-British-French armies invaded the Suez Canal controlled by Egypt (late October)¹. Beyond these events

there were others of local importance, for example the domino effects of Khrushchev's 'Secret Speech' (at the 20th CPSU Congress) as well as the events in Poland, Romania, Ukraine (mass protests) and the USSR on the whole. In Soviet Moldavia, for instance, the year 1956 represents one of the main turning points of its post-war history: it was the year when it seemed, at least to some groups of civilian population, that Soviet rule was vanishing, people were listening *en masse* to foreign radio stations and expressing publicly their dissatisfaction with Communism – unlike in

1 For a more global view of 1956, see for instance Martin Gilbert, *A History of the Twentieth Century*, Volume 3: 1952-1999, New York: Perennial/HarperCollins Publishers, 1999, p. 103-143.

other years of the Soviet regime till Perestroika. It was a year when the Moldavian KGB did not but registered the anti-Soviet attitudes because it was fearful of not being associated with Stalinist practices that the Supreme Soviet leader just condemned. Among the topics that resurfaced in the general atmosphere of a sentiment of freedom brought about by 1956 was the national identity issue of Moldavians, a subject that is still sensitive and has great mobilization potential in the present day Republic of Moldova (unlike socio-economic issues for example). This is not to say that the 'Secret Speech' or Hungarian Revolution did not influence the national identity debate elsewhere in Central and Eastern Europe. On the contrary, especially in Poland and Hungary, and to a lesser extent in Baltic States and Western Ukraine, the mass revolts against the establishment were fuelled or animated by a rediscovered sense of national dignity². The same phenomenon of resuscitating the memory of the interwar years in the Soviet Western borderlands re-emerged on an alarming scale for Moscow during and after the Prague Spring (1968)³. The specificity of the Moldavian case is that it succeeded in 1955-1957 to resume if only partially the Romanianization process

2 For an overview of various responses to the 'Secret Speech' and Hungarian revolution in 1956, see Elena Zubkova, *Russia after the War. Hopes, Illusions, and Disappointments, 1945-1957*, Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1998, pp. 178-202; Dan Cătănuș, Vasile Buga, eds., *Lăgărul comunist sub impactul destalinizării – 1956*, Bucharest: Institutul Național pentru Studiul Totalitarismului, 2006; Robert V. Daniels, ed., *A Documentary History of Communism and the World. From Revolution to Collapse*, Hanover and London: University of Vermont & University Press of New England, Third Edition, 1994, pp. 160-186.

3 For a theoretical approach to the subject, presenting the 1968 and partially 1956 in a *longue durée* perspective, see Amir Weiner, "Déjà vu All Over Again: Prague Spring, Romanian Summer and Soviet Autumn on the Soviet Western Frontier", in *Contemporary European History*, 15, 2 (2006), pp. 159-194.

witnessed by interwar Bessarabia and partially by MASSR (between 1933 and 1937/38 it adopted the Latin alphabet and modern standard Romanian).

TWO PARTS WITHIN SOVIET MOLDAVIA:

AN OLDER ONE, FROM 1924, AND A NEWER ONE, FROM 1940

The Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic was comprised of two distinct parts. The first older part belonged to Ukraine in the interwar. It was officially created in 1924 as a Moldavian Autonomous Republic to give local Moldavians their right to self-determination and serve as a Piedmont for the neighbouring Bessarabia, a part of Romania after 1918. It was territorially large than the present-day breakaway Transnistrian Moldavian Republic where ethnic Moldavians/Romanians constituted only about 30 % of the total population. It experienced the whole process of Sovietization just like the other Soviet regions after the October Revolution: the Russian Civil War, the NEP in the 1920s, mass collectivization and industrialization as well as famine in the early 1930s, and the Great Terror in 1937-1938⁴.

The second constituent part of Soviet Moldavia was Bessarabia, the territory stretching from the Prut River in the West to the Dniester River in the East, bordering the Black Sea in the South and Bukovina in the North⁵. Bessarabia

4 The best account on the national identity debate in the interwar MASSR, see Charles King, *The Moldovans. Cultural Policy between Romania and Russia*, Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 2001. On the repressions in the interwar MASSR, see Igor Cașu, *Dușmanul de clasă. Represiuni politice, violență și rezistență în R(A)SS Moldovenească, 1924-1956* [Class enemy. Political Repressions, Violence and Resistance in Moldavian (A)SSR], Chișinău: Cartier, 2014, chapters 1-3.

5 The Southern part of Bessarabia – and a half of the Northern County of Khotin in the North went to Ukraine in 1940, even though there was no unanimity in this regard among the local Communist elites. For more on this issue, see Igor Cașu and

was historically a part of the Medieval Principality of Moldavia, a former Tsarist territory between 1812 and 1918, and was a part of Romania in the interwar period. It experienced, if only for a short period of time, the modern nation-building and nation-creation process. Even though 22 years was not enough to finish the process, it had long-lasting consequences on the post-WWII Soviet policy in the MSSR, especially in terms of the national identity issue.

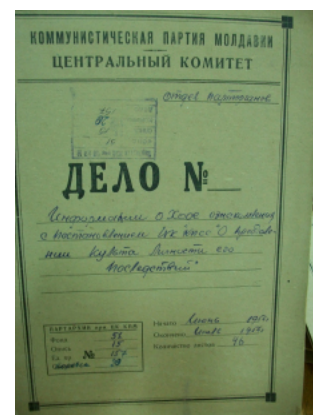
In late June 1940, Bessarabia was occupied by the Red Army according to the previous year Nazi-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact of August 23rd 1939 and its secret protocol that divided the spheres of influences in Eastern Europe. In the first year of Soviet occupation (1940-1941) and in the aftermath of WWII (1944-1953), the Moscow policy in the newly created federal republic of Moldavia was reminiscent of the interwar policy pursued in the Moldavian Autonomous Republic, i.e. to build a new ethno-nation linguistically different from the Romanian one, with a different history, heroes and literature and classical writers, among other things. The Thaw years – with 1956 as its apogee – changed this policy dramatically, at least in content, if not in form. Moscow continued to insist on the creation of the new and distinct national identity called Moldavian, but meanwhile the modern Romanian literature and language patrimony was tacitly accepted as belonging to the Moldavian nation as well. That is why the Thaw and de-Stalinization had a tremendous impact on the national identity issue in Soviet Mol-

Virgil Pâslariuc, “Moldavian SSR’s Border Revision Question: From The Project of „Greater Moldavia” to The Project of “Greater Bessarabia” and The Causes of their Failure (December 1943 – June 1946)”, in *Archiva Moldaviae*, Vol. II, 2010, pp. 275-370, introduction in Romanian, documents in Russian and Romanian, with an extensive English abstract.

davia and equalled to a “quiet revolution”.

1956: INTERTWINING OF NATIONAL, SOVIET AND INTERNATIONAL EVENTS IN THE HISTORY OF THE MOLDAVIAN SSR

The year 1956 has a significant place in the history of post-war Bessarabia and Transnistria, i.e. the present day Republic of Moldova. This year heralded an increased recrudescence of critical and inimical opinions and attitudes toward the Communist party and Soviet state, which were previously strongly deterred by the Stalinist regime. At the 20th congress of CPSU, Nikita Khrushchev condemned Stalin’s personality cult and the political repressions perpetrated by him while head the C (b) P of Soviet Union. In the context of the Cold War, this event had profound consequences not only for the international communist movement, but also for the internal situation of the Soviet satellite states of Eastern Europe. It triggered various popular movements, the most notorious among them being the Polish upheaval and the Hungarian revolution. The secret speech of the Soviet leader in February 1956 and the unleashing of



turmoil in Hungary in October-November of the same year had a great echo in the Moldavian RSS, in particular due to the more or less widespread listening to foreign radio stations such as the *Voice of America*, *BBC*, and *Free Europe*. Despite the mass repressions during the Stalinist period that left a deep wound in the memory of the civilian population in Bessara-

bia and Transnistria, critical or inimical opinions and attitudes toward the Communist Party and government reached an extraordinary frequency and amplitude in 1956. Those who expressed attitudes which usually were qualified by the regime as “unhealthy” or “anti-Soviet” were rank-and-file citizens, peasants and workers, religious groups, members of the Communist Party, Komsomol members and others⁶. This article will pay particular attention to the attitudes expressed by intellectuals as they are seen as classical careers of national identity and nationalism.

“UNHEALTHY” ATTITUDES OF MOLDAVIAN INTELLECTUALS AFTER THE ‘SECRET SPEECH’ AND IN THE CONTEXT OF THE HUNGARIAN REVOLUTION

There were numerous attitudes among the intelligentsia of the Moldavian SSR in the aftermath of the ‘Secret Speech’ and the Hungarian Revolution in 1956, which the regime defined as “unhealthy”, “anti-Soviet” or “nationalist”. However, the majority of them could be hardly called anti-Soviet or dissident,⁷ in the sense of questioning the whole or just a part of the Soviet system. For instance, at the meeting of the party organization held at the Institute

of CPSU History, the communist Z. S. Sepanaru [Săpunaru] called for a backlash against the intensification of anti-Soviet propaganda triggered by foreign imperialist forces. The latter were supposedly using a whole variety of methods – such as songs, radio broadcasts, books, movies, jokes – in order to encourage anti-Soviet elements within the USSR. The poet George Meniuc was invited to this party meeting as representative of the party committee of the district named after “Red Army” in Chișinău. He was asked, among other things, about the recent publishing policy of the journal “October”, an organ of the Moldavian Writers’ Union. Objections were raised regarding the printing of some texts which did not fit the party’s moral standards. A. A. Rusu, a communist from party organization of the Institute of CPSU History noticed that after the condemnation of the “cult of personality” the people commenced to freely express their opinions. At the same time, he was alarmed that the ideological work is not very “high.” Rusu also stressed the fact that until recently there almost no books were published on Moldavian classics or on the history of Moldavia, which was a “big mistake.” The same communist mentioned that even though enormous economic progress was recorded in the post-war period, there were practically no publications elucidating these aspects and exploiting this kind of success for ideological purposes.⁸ The same opinion was expressed by CPSU member Sergueyev, an employee of the museum of local history, who said that indeed no books had been printed on the achievements of Soviet Moldavia.

6 For more on this issue, see Igor Cașu, “Starea de spirit a populației RSSM în contextul destalinizării și revoluției maghiare (1956),” in *Pontes. Review of South East European Studies*, vol. 5, 2009, pp. 195-220; Igor Cașu, Mark Sandle, “Discontent and Uncertainty in the Borderlands: Soviet Moldavia and the Secret Speech, 1956-57,” in *Europe-Asia Studies*, vol. 66, no. 4, 2014, pp. 614-644, esp. 623-635. On the overall assessment of the de-Stalinization process, see Polly Jones, ed., *The Dilemmas of De-Stalinization: Negotiating Cultural and Social Change in the Khrushchev Era*, London: Routledge, 2006.

7 On the distinction between dissidence and dissent, see my „Political Repressions in the Moldavian SSR after 1956: toward a typology based on KGB files”, in *Dystopia. Journal of Totalitarian Ideologies and Regimes*, vol. 1, no. 1-2, 2012, pp. 94-95.

8 Archive of Social-Political Organizations of the Republic of Moldova, the former archive of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Moldova, hereafter AOSPRM, Fond 51, inventar 17, dosar 141, fila 79.

via in the fields of economics, science and art.⁹ Other attitudes were expressed among the intelligentsia in the aftermath of the 20th Congress of CPSU and particularly intensified during the events in Hungary among students and professors. Although the percentage of intellectuals is small in comparison with other social strata – peasants and workers, for instance – their impact in society should not be underestimated due to the role of this social category in shaping the public opinion. It should be mentioned also that while the criticism and dissatisfaction expressed by peasants and workers were related mainly to economic issues, the targets of the intellectuals' criticism were the communist principles as such or the way they were applied in practice. In the north of the Moldavian SSR, for instance within the party organization of Commerce College in Soroca, the communists Nesterovskaya and Dubrovski reported that there are students that did not properly understand the essence of the cult of Stalin. The student Sinitsyn said that after the death of Stalin one can notice the rise of another cult, that of Lenin. The same professors from Soroca College mentioned some ethnic conflicts between students, especially between "Moldavians and Russians."¹⁰ Other students' behaviour made the local party leaders feel uncomfortable, to say the least. At the same college during the party meeting within the trade union organisation, the student Yeftodiev protested against the current practice whereby the party controlled trade unions and prompted his colleagues not to accept the leadership of local primary party organisation, district party committee or even administration or professors' council of the college.¹¹ There were cases when such rebel positions

were backed by district officials for some time. One example is Grinman, an inspector at the district department of education who gave indications to the director of Visoka village not to follow the orders of the district party organisation. He claimed that the communists do not have the right to do so, because they were illiterate in his view.¹²

There were other alarming signs for the Soviet authorities coming from the intelligentsia in other districts. Professors Lipovetskaia and Dzhaconia from the boarding school in the south, in Comrat, "systematically" expressed their dissatisfaction with party policy, by criticizing almost every decision of the CPSU and Soviet government. They were also critical regarding the resolution of the CC of CPSU Plenum from December 1956 on the fighting against inimical and anti-Soviet manifestations¹³. The village teacher Mironiuc from Scumpia, district of Făleşti, spread licentious jokes about the party leadership and Soviet rule as a whole. It was more alarming that the party organization and teaching body of the school tolerated this situation. The ideological thaw of 1956 also triggered an intensification of anti-Semitic manifestations. An anti-Semitic inscription was reported in the Russian school of district centre Făleşti. This case was explained as rooted in the insufficient education of pupils and unhealthy influences outside school.¹⁴

In Tiraspol district on the Left bank of Dniester, the teacher Neburchilova from the village of Suclea was caught listening to foreign radio stations in Russian and discussing such information with her work colleagues afterwards.¹⁵ The state of mind of teachers

9 AOSPRM, F. 51, inv. 17, d.141, f. 79.

10 AOSPRM, F. 51, inv. 17, d.141, f. 130.

11 AOSPRM, F. 51, inv. 17, d.141, f. 131.

12 AOSPRM, F. 51, inv. 17, d.141, f. 132.

13 AOSPRM, F. 51, inv. 17, d.141, f. 65.

14 AOSPRM, F. 51, inv. 17, d.141, f. 162.

15 AOSPRM, F. 51, inv. 17, d.141, f. 152.

was discussed at the meeting and the district education department of Tiraspol. One of the issues addressed referred to the subscription of newspapers and magazines by the teaching body. It was found that 21 teachers from the district did not subscribe to any newspaper. This was seen as problematic as it had an impact on the education of young generations: how could one manage to explain correctly what is happening in the country and abroad without being properly informed? The problem was considered more serious when the teacher Martiniuk, although having subscribed to Soviet newspapers, recognised that he does not know how to inspire feelings of Soviet patriotism in children. In this sense the condemnation of Stalin in February 1956 was perceived as a critique of the communist regime as a whole, unlike Khrushchev and his followers in the CC of CPSU wanted to suggest.¹⁶ For this reason, there were previously almost unimaginable cases, when pioneers did not want to enter the Komsomol ranks and some pupils leading open anti-Komsomol propaganda.

Several representatives of the creative intelligentsia expressed their opinions openly too. Mihai Grecu, a famous Moldavian painter, said that for him it is not important which regime reigns.¹⁷ Another serious issue was that propaganda lessons were held usually in Russian, even for the mainly Moldavian audience which understood it poorly (for instance in the district of Edinets).¹⁸ The freedom of expression increased during 1956 and extended to more or less banal cases. For example Draikovski, a doctor working at the emergency hospital in Tiraspol, was reported to hum religious songs while at work. When somebody criticized him, he replied: "I am not a party member and I sing whatever I want and I can." The case of Draikovski was all the more outrageous in the perception of the party organs, because he was a member of society who spread political and scientific knowledge, and he even used to deliver public lectures.¹⁹

NATIONAL IDENTITY AND THE MOLDAVIAN INTELLIGENTSIA Given the seriousness of the revolt in Hungary and its anti-Russian tones, the local Soviet Moldavian authorities were concerned about its impact on the local debate over national identity. The regime's fear was justified in this regard, but only to a certain extent. In neighbouring Ukraine or Romania – and not to mention Poland and Hungary – nationalist and democratic mobilization evolved into open mass protests, especially among students.²⁰ This was not the case in Soviet Moldavia. At the same time, the legacy of 1956 as the culmination of the Khrushchev Thaw had lasting and unintended consequences for decades, especially in what concerns the national identity of Soviet Moldavians. More exactly, it referred mainly to the language issue (whether it was Moldavian or Romanian) and to a lesser extent to national history and Soviet nationality policy in Soviet Moldavia.

Nationalist attitudes became evident in 1956 and 1957 among the intelligentsia of the MSSR. This was partly due to the Gulag returnees, who included not just dekulakised peasants, who included not just dekulakised peasants

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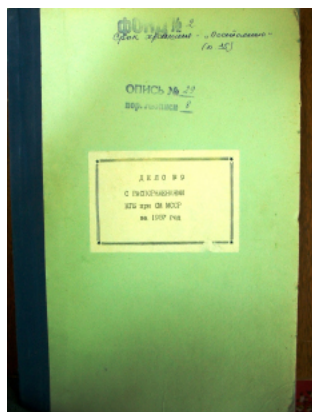
16 A. Artizov, Ju. Sigachev, I. Shevchuk, V. Khlopov, eds., *Reabilitatsiia. Kak eto bylo. Dokumenty Prezidiuma TsK KPSS i drugie materialy, mart 1953-1956*, Moscow: Mezhdunarodnyi Fond Demokratiia, 2000, p. 349-351.

17 AOSPRM, F. 51, inv. 17, d.141, f. 154.

18 AOSPRM, F. 51, inv. 17, d.141, f. 43-44.

19 AOSPRM, F. 51, inv. 17, d.141, f. 149-150.

20 See Johanna Granville, "Forewarned is Forearmed: How the Hungarian Crisis of 1956 Helped the Romanian Leadership," in *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol. 62, No. 4 (June 2010), pp. 615-645; Yuri Daniluk, Oleg Bazhan, *Opozitsiia v Ukraïni (druga polovina 50-h – 80-ti rr. XX st.)*, Kiev: Ridnii krai, 2000, esp. p. 115, 118-119, 139-150.



ants²¹, but also members of the Romanian educated interwar intelligentsia. In September 1956 the chairman of the republican KGB reported to the CC of CPM that in the first 8 months of the year no less

than 29 leaflets containing threats addressed to party and state activists were identified, many of them having a nationalistic flavour. In the same month another former political detainee condemned for 25 years, Ciocârlan, ex-head of the “nationalist and anti-Soviet” Bessarabian regional section of the Romanian organisation *National Renaissance Front*,²² returned back home and started to re-establish his network. The KGB intercepted his letters in which he baldly criticised the Soviet regime and backed the ‘counterrevolutionary’ actions in Hungary and Poland.²³ A good example of ‘nationalist’ agitation is that of Zaharia Donceev. He was arrested by the Chișinău KGB on 11 December 1956 and accused of anti-Soviet agitation pursuant to Article 54, paragraph 10. Donceev was born in 1928 in Chișinău in a

family of Moldovans (which means he was an ethnic Romanian).²⁴ Donceev was accused of writing and spreading anti-Soviet leaflets in May 1955, in which he explicitly asked for the liquidation of Soviet rule in Moldavia.²⁵ Later on, after being questioned by the KGB, on 20 December 1956, one more accusation was brought against Donceev, the one of nationalism.²⁶ One of the leaflets was written in the Latin-script ‘Moldovan’ language (Romanian) and another three were written in Russian. The following was the Romanian text:

...as you can see, the Communists are getting themselves into a catastrophe. In a year, we all will be liberated. The time is ripe for each of us to take pitchforks and scythes in order to show that we love our beloved Romania. The time has come for us to live better and more easily. Each of us must show his love for our former fatherland. This is the only way for us to win our freedom...²⁷

The content of the leaflet in the Russian language was different. It was more explicit and more incisive than the one in Romanian:

Dear friends, very soon the whole Moldovan people will stand up for the interests that it had before the war. Communism is failing everywhere. Now they are going to learn how poorly the Moldovan people live. We have all become beggars, we have no bread, clothes or land. The time is ripe for us to rise and tell the Communists: it is enough for you to get rich as flunkys. The time is ripe for us to take revenge for this life of slaves. Each of us must do something to set us free from the Communists...²⁸

24 Arhive of the Service for Information and Security of the Republic of Moldova, former KGB (hereafter – ASISRM-KGB) personal file 020293, f. 4-5.

25 ASISRM-KGB, personal file 020293, f. 57-58.

26 ASISRM-KGB, personal file 020293, f. 90.

27 ASISRM-KGB, personal file 020293, f.

182.

28 ASISRM-KGB, personal file 020293, f.

175.

21 For the definition of kulak, see Moshe Lewin, ‘Who was the Soviet kulak?’ in *Soviet Studies*, vol. 18, no. 2 (October 1966), pp. 189-212. For dekulakization, methods and goals, see Lynne Viola, *The Unknown Gulag. The Lost World of Stalin's Special Settlements*, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2007, pp. 13-53. On MSSR specifically, see my *Class enemy*, chapter 6.

22 National Renaissance Front was the only legal party in Romania between 1938-1940, during the dictatorship of the King Carol II. See Vlad Georgescu, *Romanians: A History*, London: I. B. Tauris, 1991, pp. 207-209.

23 Pasat, *Trudnye stranitsy*, p. 726.

As a consequence, on 30 December 1956, the KGB requested that a psychiatric assessment be carried out to decide on the health condition of Zaharia Doncev, proceeding from the presumption that every citizen questioning Communism and its alleged progressive nature had mental problems²⁹. Yet the result was negative, as the commission of experts decided that Doncev was in good health. Its report said that the defendant was intelligent, sociable, very attentive to everything that was happening around him, and liked reading and games. During the KGB questioning, Zaharia Doncev admitted that he had two brothers residing in the Romanian city-port Constanța.³⁰ He also admitted that he used to listen to foreign radio stations, but said he had nothing against the Soviet authorities. On the contrary, he said he loved his fatherland and that he lived a good life. What do these details of Zaharia Doncev's file tell us?

He had a good standard of living, a high wage compared with other social categories, his own residence, a wife and a child. Consequently, the regime was much more concerned about his actions because they had not been prompted by daily problems, as was the case with others. It should be noted that Doncev wrote the four leaflets in May 1955, and clearly hoped that he would not be punished for his stance as severely as he may have been prior to 1953. Although he talked with admiration about 'his former fatherland', he did not explicitly call for unification with Romania. Thus, in a way he resigned himself to the existing situation, but he wanted the Moldovans/Romanians to regain their lost dignity and be masters in their home country. It is worth

mentioning that the Chișinău-based political bodies were keen to learn his family's past. The fact that he had two brothers in Romania and that his mother applied for evacuation to Romania in 1944 were weighty arguments for the authorities to accuse him not only of anti-Soviet agitation and propaganda, but also of nationalism. Punishing such citizens as Doncev was therefore very important for the Soviet authorities, especially when their messages were distributed to the public via leaflets. Political criticism brought against the regime was not as grave for the regime as the ethnic and national dimension of this message. In other words, it was especially important that it doubted the "liberating" nature of the USSR and stated that Moscow had conquered the Moldovans and turned them into slaves in their own country. The Soviet authorities did not tolerate the idea of the Bessarabians' historical, linguistic and cultural affiliation with the Romanian nation. Doncev was accused of violating the Criminal Code of the Ukrainian SSR, Article 54, paragraph 10, point 2 and was sentenced to 7 years in jail for nationalism in line with the Criminal Code of the Ukrainian SSR, Article 54, paragraph 10, item 2.³¹

The impact of the 20th Congress and the Hungarian revolution on Soviet Moldavia is comparable, in some respects, to the developments in other Soviet western borderlands, especially Ukraine.³² Andrey Prokopenko, the chief of KGB of MSSR reported that there were attempts to recreate some nationalistic organizations, especially in Chișinău, Cahul

²⁹ See the speech by Khrushchev to the 3rd Congress of Soviet writers, May 22, 1959, in: *Pravda*, May 24, 1959, p. 2.

³⁰ ASISRM-KGB, personal file 06696, f. 236.

³¹ ASISRM-KGB, personal file 06696, f. 243 verso

³² For the early impact of Destalinization and the Hungarian Revolution on Ukraine, see for instance Yuri Daniliuk, Oleg Bazhan, *Opozitsiia v Ukraïni*, esp. p. 115, 118-119, 139-150; see also Yu. Vasil'ev, R. Podkur, H. Kuromiya, Yu. Shapoval, & A. Weiner, (eds), *Politicheskoe rukovodstvo Ukrainy*, Moscow: ROSSPEN, 2006, p. 201.

rayon in the south and Sângerei rayon in the north.³³ According to an internal report of the MSSR KGB, in Târnova rayon alone there were already 510 former Gulag returnees in January 1957, among whom 151 persons were convicted of counter-revolutionary attitudes and activities. Two of them were mentioned as former members of the anti-Soviet organization "The Sword of Justice"³⁴ and the potentially dangerous – Vâșcu and Istrati,³⁵ probably because this organization tried in 1950 to establish relations with the organization of Ukrainian nationalists in Western Ukraine.³⁶ There were also nationalists among recent Gulag returnees, who were employed at the Ghindești and Drochia sugar factories. Numerous leaflets with nationalist content were reported in July 1957 to have been spread in several *rayons*, such as Rezina, Strășeni, Nisporeni, in Chișinău and other localities. The local KGB decided to initiate a closer collaboration with the Romanian *Securitate* in order to combat local nationalists in the MSSR, since the Bessarabian émigrés from Romania were active in supporting their brethren from the Soviet territory.³⁷ There were also reports men-

tioning that there was a vibrant nationalistic mood among the returning deported priests. A decision was taken to pay special attention to about 40 itinerant priests who were traveling from village to village and spreading their ideas and inciting inimical attitudes toward the regime.³⁸ About 100 former members of Romanian nationalist organizations were reported to be Chișinău in March 1957.³⁹ Not only Romanian nationalists were deemed to be a danger for the Soviet regime. Some Jews were also under surveillance on grounds of being Zionist activists. In early 1957 trials were opened against Zionists. One such case was conducted against somebody named Shmois, who had been previously arrested for "treason against the fatherland." Coming back to Moldavia, he decided to resume his former activities and even planned to write a book against the Soviet regime.⁴⁰

If a nationalist pro-Moldavian anti-Soviet movement were to emerge, the issue of recognition of the Moldavian language as Romanian would be a crucial, as would be the publication of the classics of Moldavian literature. In 1956, the trend towards contesting the attempts to forge a Moldavian language different from Romanian continued. In the new post-Stalin context of the secret speech it was now portrayed as part of the distortion of Stalinist nationality policy. Moldavian linguists and writers called for a tacit rapprochement of the standard vocabulary of Moldavian to the Romanian one, as well as the adoption of a common scheme of grammar. In 1956, at the International Congress of Linguists the

33 AOSPRM, F. 51, inv. 15, d. 276, p. 2.

34 "The Sword of Justice" was an anti-Soviet and pro-Romanian national organization active in the north of the MSSR, especially Bălți area, in 1949 and 1950. See the memoirs of one of the leading members, Ion Moraru, *Pustiirea. Treptele Infernului*, Chișinău: Editura Flux, 2007.

35 ASISRM-KGB, F. 2, inv. 29, vol. 8, d. 9/1957, f. 3.

36 Elena Postică, *Rezistența antisovietică în Basarabia, 1944-1950*, Chișinău: Știința, 1996, p. 176.

37 ASISRM-KGB, F. 2, inv. 29, vol. 8, d. 9/1957, f. 109-110, 53. The collaboration between KGB and Securitate in identifying anti-Soviet and 'nationalistic' elements in MSSR was to continue in the following decades. For instance, in 1972, a group called the National Patriotic Front, led by Alexandru Usatiuc and Gheorghe Ghimpu, was arrested as a result of this cooperation. See ASISRM-KGB, personal file Usatiuc-Ghimpu, vol. 2, f. 102. Regarding the fact that Securitate spied on Bessarabian émigrés in Romania, see Arhivele Naționale ale României, Arhiva

Istorică Centrală (ANIC) [National Archives of Romania, Central Historical Archives, Bucharest], unpublished manuscript of Constantin Tomescu.

38 AOSPRM, F. 51, inv. 17, d. 286, f. 40.

39 Valeriu Pasat, *Trudnye stranitsy...*, p. 726-727.

40 AOSPRM, F. 51, inv. 17, d. 141, f. 162.

Italian scholar Carlo Tagliavini stated that the only difference between “Moldavian” and Romanian was the Cyrillic alphabet employed by the former. In consequence, two renowned Moscow-based linguists, R. A. Budagov and S. B. Bernstein sent a closed letter to the CC of CPM arguing that they supported the idea expressed by Tagliavini, notably that the language of the titular nationality in the MSSR was an integral part of the Romanian one.⁴¹ The public discussion on this subject which had begun in 1955⁴² was broadened and in consequence the new “Grammar of the Moldavian Language” was officially adopted in 1957. This also had consequences for cadre policy too, as it meant renegotiating the relationship between the Transdnestrian cultural elites, largely dominant until mid-1955 and attached to a Russified Moldavian idiom in which they were educated before 1940 in the MASSR, and the Bessarabian elites. The latter were more attached to the Romanian literary standard, which was used in interwar Romania, when Bessarabia was a part of the Kingdom of Romania. The victory of the “Bessarabian camp” led by two interwar Bessarabian writers – writer Andrei Lupan and poet Emilian Bucov – was made possible partly because the leader of the “Transdnestrian camp,” Ion Canna, fell from grace when he was accused of plagiarism, and his son of collaboration with the enemy during

41 Michael Bruchis, *One step back, two steps forward: on the language policy of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in the national republics (Moldavian: a look back, a survey and perspective, 1924-1980)*, Boulder Co., 1982, p. 126.

42 See for instance N. Corcinschi, L. Eșan, “Cu privire la îmbunătățirea ortografiei moldovenești”, in *Octombrie*, no. 6, 1955, p. 81-85; R. Portnoi, “Despre ortografia moldovenească”, in *Octombrie*, no. 2, 1955, pp. 83-87; V. Musteață, “Cu privire la ortografia moldovenească”, in *Octombrie*, no. 1, 1956, pp. 75-79; M. Ignat, “Pentru un alfabet econom”, in *Învățătorul sovietic*, no. 9, 1956, pp. 48-53; I. Vasilenco, “Să restabilim principiile ortografiei noastre clasice tradiționale”, in *Nistru*, no. 2, 1957, pp. 125-134.

WWII.⁴³ The symbolic victory over language patrimony and the grammar issue had immediate and long run consequences for the MSSR and its titular nation. The classics of Romanian literature were published in Chișinău following the Bucharest editions. The difference was the use of Cyrillic letters, as this way one could not be accused of bourgeois nationalism by simply employing words from literary Romanian as had previously been the case. The rehabilitation of the Romanian classics, recognized officially as Moldavian and Romanian (the poet Mihai Eminescu, first of all), was also possible because a great share of Romanian classic writers were born in historical Moldavia, mainly in Western Moldavia. Moreover, the main criterion for who was allowed to enter into the “Pantheon” of Moldavian literature was the territorial one, i.e. being born in historical Moldavia. Class criteria were very important too and the selection of texts was made in order to stress the social agenda of the authors.

This rehabilitation had its limits. It is important to note that the name of the language remained officially Moldavian, as the Soviet regime was embarrassed to acknowledge in this context that it annexed a territory from the national territory of a neighbouring Communist state, Romania.⁴⁴ Of course, some works of authors like Eminescu or Alecsandri, who wrote anti-Russian texts, were censored. In sum, one of the most important consequences of the de-Stalinization campaign for the MSSR and its national issue was the fact that the local linguists and writers succeeded in pushing for the rehabilitation of 19th century Romanian classics.

43 Petru Negură, *Nici eroi, nici trădători. Scriitorii moldoveni și puterea sovietică în epoca stalinistă*, Chișinău : Cartier, 2014, pp. 266-268.

44 See more on that in Igor Cașu, ‘Politica națională’ în Moldova sovietică, 1944-1989, Chișinău: Cartdidact, 2000, pp. 53-56.

The language issue and the question of ethno-national identity⁴⁵ began to evoke changes in the governance of the republic too. The recognition of Moldavian-Romanian identity would transfer more social prestige to the language of the Moldavians, i.e. the Russians would lose their often invoked excuse – expressed at the unofficial level – that they are not supposed to learn a ‘peasant’, ‘primitive’ and impure language as Moldavian was perceived at the time. The Moldavian elite felt it could push for their language to be employed by high party and state officials or at least to ask for equal representation in the party and state apparatus according to the official stipulation that Moldavians are the titular nationality in the MSSR. This development can be seen in the career of Konstantin Chernenko, the future Secretary General of CC of CP (b) in 1984-1985. He had been serving as secretary for propaganda at the CC of PCM in Chișinău since 1948 and became part of the Brezhnev circle in 1950-1952. After Beria sent his letters to national republics on the “distortions of Leninist-Stalinist nationalities policy” (May 26 and June 12 1953), non-Russians became bolder in their claims to be respected by Russians and Russian speakers. Thus, Chernenko started to ask his fellows in Moscow, among them V.A. Golikov, a person close to Brezhnev for years, to help him leave Moldavia. He complained, “Please help me. Moldavians are coming and saying that I have been sitting here for 8 years and that I took their job. God endowed them with enough arrogance. Help me to leave for some other place, no matter where, it is important to be in Russia.”⁴⁶ He left Moldavia in 1956 for Mos-

cow to be installed as the chair of the section for Propaganda and Agitation in the CC of CP(b). One explanation why he left Chișinău so late is that after the 20th Congress the situation he describes deteriorated considerably. Spill-over protests in Moldavian universities after the events in Hungary appear to have been widespread.⁴⁷ For instance, a KGB report from late 1957 indicated that “some persons among pupils, students and youth write anonymous anti-Soviet letters and express unhealthy nationalistic attitudes due to the influence of inimical elements (...)” In February 1957 Nicolae Bătrînu, a student at the Faculty of Philology of Chișinău State University, presented a paper at the student scientific society on the topic “The image of Stephen the Great in Moldavian oral works” in which he “admitted nationalistic interpretations and recited anti-Russian fragments from the creation of the writer M. Eminescu.” The same student said in the course on Moldavian literature that he regretted living in Soviet Moldavia. The KGB was alerted about this statement as it was expressed on March 27, the anniversary of the 1918 Union of Bessarabia with Romania. On May 8, 1957 during a meeting between professors of the department of Moldavian language and literature Bătrînu quoted a 19th century bourgeois writer’s text fragment referring to the fact that “before one becomes free, one should defend his nation...” and that “a person may be in chains, but he can nevertheless express his ideas.” Bătrînu was supported by V.A. Badiu and other Moldavian students. Badiu also manifested his “hate for the Russian people”, saying that “the Pushkin

45 The term ethno-nation is employed here in the sense defined by Walker Connor in his classical work *Ethnonationalism: A Quest for Understanding*, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1993.

46 A.S. Barsenkov, A.I. Vdovin, *Istoriia Rossii, 1938-2002*, Moscow: Aspekt-Press, 2003, p. 214.

47 Johanna Granville, “Anticipating the Ripple Effects of Military Interventions: A Case Study of the Reactions of Romania and Moldova to the Soviet Invasion in Hungary in 1956.” Located at: <http://www.irex.org/system/files/Granville.pdf> Accessed on 3 April 2012.

theatre, which hosted Moldavian opera and ballet, should be renamed after Caragiale"⁴⁸ and he was "preoccupied with the question of independence of Moldavia." Both Bătrînu and Badiu criticized Moldavian historians by calling them "daydreamers" whilst praising the "Romanian bourgeois and reactionary historian Iorga" who "correctly studied historical events." Another student name Druță, who was a member of Komsomol, commented that "the day of liberation from the German-Romanian occupiers was a day of the occupation of Bessarabia," while reading an article from *Ogonyok* dedicated to the liberation of Moldavia on August 17, 1957.⁴⁹

THE REHABILITATION OF VICTIMS OF STALINISM AND ITS IMPACT ON THE NATIONAL IDENTITY ISSUE

The rehabilitation of party and state elites who fell victims of the Great Terror in 1937-1938 in the Moldavian ASSR (a part of interwar Ukraine, as mentioned above, while Bessarabia was a part of Romania) had an unintended impact on the national identity debate and nationalism in Soviet Moldavia.

The *post mortem* rehabilitation of the party, state and other categories of the Communism nomenclatura began in 1954. Overall, 557 individuals were rehabilitated in the subsequent years, among them approx. 1/3 members of the former elite. This also included Staryi-Borisov Grigori Ivanovich, ex-chairman of the Council of Commissars of the Moldavian ASSR in 1926-1928 and 1932-1937; Nicolae Golub, ex-first secretary of Moldavian Regional Committee of Ukrainian Communist (Bolshevik) Party et al.⁵⁰

48 Ion Luca Caragiale (1852-1912), one of the greatest Romanian playwrights and the greatest humorist writer in Romanian literature, born in Wallachia.

49 AOSPRM, F. 51, inv. 17, d. 297, p. 18-20.

50 AOSPRM, F. 51, inv. 15, d. 276, f. 7-14;

Staryi underwent the full process of rehabilitation and even became a hero who fought for the establishment of Soviet power Transnistria and Bessarabia after the mid-1960s. However, he fell victim to the Stalinist machine of terror, according to the post 1956 Soviet official historical discourse. A street in Chișinău and the college of Transport among other things were named after him. The reason he was the only one chosen for this heroic role is probably that he was a Russian born in Bessarabia, in Bozieni railway station near Chișinău, in a family of railway workers. Thus he differed from the majority of leaders of the former MASSR who usually were of non-Russian and non-Moldavian/Romanian origin. In this regard, Staryi truly fitted into the paradigm of Soviet nationality policy which defined the leading role of Russians (and Ukrainians as second to them after 1954) in the Soviet family of nations.⁵¹ That was not a novelty since Stalin's partial rehabilitation of Great Russian Chauvinism in the wake, but especially during and after the "Great Patriotic War." Besides this, Staryi had real merits to the Soviet regime: he participated in the revolutionary movement in the already Romanian Bessarabia in 1919 (the Bender rebellion), crossed the Dniester shortly afterwards and was involved in the Tiraspol revolutionary *gubkom*⁵². Moreover, he was one of the founding fathers of the MASSR in October 1924. However, there were some embarrassing details about the biography of Staryi, but also hope that censorship would keep these details away from the curiosity of

ASISRM-KGB, *Spisok sovetskikh grazhdan neobosnovanno repressirovannykh organami NKVD MASSR v 1937-1938 i reabilitirovannykh v 1956-1958 za otsutstviyem sostava pristupleniya*, f. 1-27.

51 See more in L. R. Tillet, *The Great Friendship. Soviet Historians on the Non-Russian Nationalities*, Chapel-Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1969.

52 *Gubkom* – Gubernial Committee.

the public opinion: he was a Menshevik before the October Revolution; he was not very enthusiastic about the establishment of the MASSR in 1924, which gave a distinct regional autonomy to Moldavian/Romanian speakers on the left bank of Dniester River (even though he changed his mind about that later); he was one of the main leaders of the MASSR who promoted the 'Latinization' campaign in the MASSR from 1932 to 1937, i.e. the introduction of the Latin alphabet and the greatest possible convergence of the local Moldavian language to the Romanian modern literary standard. In short, he was a 'Romanianizer,' as people would say at that time and which had no pejorative connotation before 1937-1938, but changed very shortly afterwards, including in the MSSR after 1940 and again in 1944. More exactly, if the Soviets hesitated between building a Moldavian separate ethno-nation and a Romanian one in the interwar period, after the war it firmly embarked on making Moldavians different from Romanians by forbidding the Latin alphabet and introducing the Cyrillic one and favoring the borrowing of words from Russian, rather than from French as the Romanians were doing.⁵³

Among the political elites persecuted during the Great Terror in the MASSR were also prominent figures like writers Nistor Cabac, Dumitru Milev and others that used the Latin alphabet in the 1930s. The former writer became a symbol of the persecuted intellectuals and his works were introduced in the school textbooks of modern Moldavian literature. Cabac and others also participated in the Latinization and Romanianization process in the 1930s in the MASSR and the intellectual elites

of the mid 1950s took the advantage of their official rehabilitation of Stalinist terror in order to push for the Soviet regime to give up its linguistic policies which aimed at making Moldavian a different language from Romanian. After 1937, to be against the Romanianizers and Latin alphabet was equal to support for Stalin, which was no longer as prestigious after 1956, to say the least. On the contrary, it was a sign of being on the wrong side of history.

The rehabilitation of state and party nomenclatura leaders as well as intellectuals from the MASSR who were linked to the introduction of the Latin alphabet and brought the local Moldavian language closer to the Romanian literary language had a direct impact on nationality policy in Soviet Moldavia during the Khrushchev Thaw. As a side effect of this change, it became possible to rehabilitate the Romanian classics and publish them in Romanian in Chișinău, although in Cyrillic and with some censorship. While the use of modern literary Romanian vocabulary in the MSSR was previously blamed as nationalistic and anti-Soviet, it became a part of Moldavian literary heritage too after mid-1950s. In this way, the greatest Romanian poet Mihai Eminescu was officially declared both a Romanian and Moldavian classic and a monument in downtown Chișinău was erected in his honor. The place became a traditional lieu of national events that the Soviet regime tolerated reluctantly as is the case with the monument of Taras Shevchenko in Kiev during the Soviet period.⁵⁴

53 See more on that in Charles King, "The Ambivalence of Ethnicity or How the Moldovan Language was made", in *Slavic Review*, vol. 58, no. 1, Spring, 1999, p. 117-142.

54 Igor Cașu, "Was the Soviet Union an Empire? A View from Chișinău," in *Dystopia. Journal of Totalitarian Ideologies and Regimes*, vol. I, no. 1-2, 2012, p. 287.

CONCLUSION

The year 1956 stands out as one of the most important turning points in the 20th century history of Bessarabia and Transnistria. It symbolized the height of the Khrushchev Thaw as well as the beginning of its decline. After the Hungarian Revolution, the Soviet regime understood that the de-Stalinization process should be limited as much as possible, as it has the potential to put in danger the very existence of Communism and the Soviet Union as an 'empire of nations.' For the Moldavian SSR which comprised the territories of historical Bessarabia and Transnistria and was disputed between Romania and the Soviet Union, the Khrushchev Thaw can be equaled to a 'quiet cultural revolution' due to its impact on the national identity debate. More exactly, the official paradigm of the Soviet nationality policy remained the same (the titular nationality was Moldavian, defined as different from the Romanian nation), but its contents became more Romanian than ever (the Romanian literary language and literary classical patrimony were declared as belonging to Soviet Moldavians too). Among the general consequences of the Thaw – whose culmination was symbolized by the secret speech – was the encouragement of free speech and the fact that the KGB and MVD were almost inactive for most of 1956. The people started to talk not only in private, but also in public about the crimes of Stalin, to question Stalinism as well as Leninism, and thus the very foundations of the Soviet regime. As Stalin's crimes had real or perceived national characteristics, it was natural that the condemnation of the "personality cult" fueled national grievances and enabled the questioning of official discourse and even more so the policies toward Soviet nationalities on the whole and Moldavians in particular. National sentiment and nationalism were ex-

pressed in Soviet Moldavia in 1956-1957 by various categories of populations, most notably intellectuals, but also representatives of workers and peasants especially among the Gulag returnees. While the latter were monitored by the KGB and MVD, the former were not considered as too dangerous as they were expressed by Sovietized intellectuals that had a certain prestige and symbolic capital (to use Pierre Bourdieu's concept). Besides, intellectuals questioned the national identity of the previous period within the framework of criticizing Stalinism, a process initiated by the regime itself. Thus, it was seen as being legitimate and officially accepted.

As a result of the Thaw, Transnistrian cultural elites lost their hegemony in defining the national identity of Soviet Moldavians. The Transnistrians, however, continued to dominate the political scene and keep their key positions in the party, government, and in particular the KGB and the Ministry of Interior. The changes in this regard came in the late 1980s during the last years of Perestroika, which resumed the unfinished process of de-Stalinization from the mid-1950s and thus provoked another crisis of Communism which it could not survive this time. The 'quiet cultural revolution' of the mid 1950s prepared and anticipated in some respect namely this dénouement, subsequent to which pan-Romanian intellectuals led the mass national movement. However, the debate on the national identity of Moldavians did not end with the collapse of the USSR. There is extraordinary continuity after 1991 between the Soviet and post-Soviet experience in terms of cultural and political elites participating in the debate over the national identity of Moldavians: as in the mid-1950s, late 1980s and the years of independence, the clear-cut pan-Romanian elites remained limited to the intellectual scene, while the political elites, then and

now, are dominated by pan-Moldavian elites, who more or less oppose the Romanian national identity and a union with Romania. This is happening perhaps because the legacy of Communism is very profound and at the same time because the national identity issue was not settled in Bessarabia before the province was occupied by the Soviets in 1940.

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1991: A Chronology of Moldova's Independance

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ABSTRACT

This paper highlights the most important events of the year 1991 and their impact on the Moldovan society. The year 1991 proved to be crucial for the Soviet republics, including Moldova, and as a result of incremental democratic transformations and the collapse of the USSR, the Republic of Moldova became an independent state.

The year 1991 is, without a doubt, a year of crucial historical change for the Soviet space, due to the transformations of the 1980s which culminated in the collapse of the Soviet Union and the appearance of new independent states. The events of 1991 can be considered consequences of what happened in 1989 in Central Europe and East Europe - events which changed the destiny of millions of people. Even if at the beginning there were no projects of breaking up the old Soviet societies, the events of 1989-1991 created the bases for democratic and modern societies to replace the totalitarian communist regimes. If the 1989 year is considered the *annus mirabilis* or the collapse of a utopia, then the year 1991 is the beginning of the post-Cold War era¹.

In the context of the collapse of Soviet Union, the year 1991 meant the beginning of a process of creating a democratic and independent state for Republic of Moldova. For a better understanding of the context of this historical event which occurred more than two decades ago,

we propose to analyse the most important events of 1991 which led to the destruction of the Soviet Union and the creation of new independent states. The goal of this paper is to discuss the main events of the year 1991 and their impact on Moldovan society.

In April 1985, after the Plenary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU), the concept of internal development and external politics of Soviet Union changed. The period between 1985 and 1989 is considered the beginning of the democratic movement in Moldova which was possible due to the policies of Mikhail Gorbachev – Perestroika and Glasnost. In 1989-1991, the Soviet Union was in a large political crisis, created by the movements of national emancipation in the republics. The majority of Soviet republics were fighting for their independence. On June 3rd, 1988 the Democratic Movement for Perestroika's Sustainability was created in the Soviet Union by some leading intellectuals.

In Soviet Moldova the „Alexe Mateevici” Cenacle, led by A. Şalaru, had an important role in the promotion of democratic ideas and national resurgence. One of the first meetings of the Cenacle took place on January 15, 1988 next to the monument of Mihai Eminescu on the Alley of Classics, in the Public Garden in Chişinău. In 1989 many public meetings (demonstrations and political rallies) were organised to stimulate the awakening of national consciousness of the citizens of the Moldovan

¹ See Ralf Dahrendorf, *Reflecţii asupra revoluţiei din Europa*, Bucureşti, Humanistas, 1993; Vladimir Tismăneanu, *Revoluţie din 1989. Între trecut şi viitor*, Iaşi, Polirom 1999 (trans. Rom. De Dragoş and Cristina Petrescu); Sorin Antohi, Vladimir Tismăneanu (eds), *Between Past and Future: The Revolutions of 1989 and Their Aftermath*, Central European University Press, New York and Budapest, 2000 (Romanian version by Marilena Andrei, Elena Neculcea, Livia Szász, *De la utopie la istorie: Revoluţiile din 1989 şi urmările lor*, Bucureşti, Curtea Veche, 2006); Stelian Tănase, *Istoria căderii regimurilor comuniste. Miracolul revoluţiei*, 2nd edition, Bucureşti, Humanistas, 2009.

Socialist Soviet Republic (MSSR). On 25 February 1990, the election of the first Parliament of the Republic of Moldova (Supreme Soviet of the MSSR) in a democratic manner marked a further shift of the democratic movement and of nationalist claims towards the Moscow centre. It implied a challenge to the political monopoly of the Communist Party of Moldova (CPM), facilitated the democratisation of Moldovan society². The socio-political events of 1990 lead to the creation of state bodies: Parliament, Government, the National Radio-Television Company, and the National News Agency „Moldpress,”. This process culminated in the declaration of sovereignty on 23 June 1990³.

2 The idea of abandoning the CPSU's monopoly on power had been launched in Moscow by Andrei Sakharov in May, 1989, at the Congress of People's Deputies of the USSR. M. Gorbachev proposed revision of Article 6 of the Soviet Constitution of 1977, which declared the leading role of the CPSU, at the CC Plenary of CPSU, on February 5-7, 1990. The proposed revision of Art. 6 was ratified on 14 March, 1990, at the Third Extraordinary Congress of People's Deputies of the USSR. In the new version, the art. 6 of the USSR Constitution read as follows: „The Communist Party of the Soviet Union, other political party, trade and youth unions, other public organizations and mass movements, are involved in formulating policy of the Soviet state, of the administration of public affairs and civil organizations, through their representatives in the Soviets of People's Deputies.” In Chișinău, the government of SSRM, due to approximation of its election to the Supreme Soviet of the SSRM, was forced to record the first four politico-cultural organizations yet on 26th of October, 1989: Popular Front of Moldova (leader I. Hadârcă) Movement Unit-Edinstvo (A. Lisețki), Gagauz hunk (S. Bulgac), Cultural-Social Association of Bulgarians „Vozrojdenie” (I. Zabunov). The first officially registered political party in the Republic of Moldova was the Social Democratic Party, created on 13th of May, 1990, which had originally three chairmen: Alexander Coșeleu Oazu Nantoi and John Haze. See Igor Cașu, Gorbaciov propunea anularea rolului conducător al PCUS în februarie 1990, <http://www.europalibera.org/content/article/2299780.html> (Accessed on 09.02.2011).

3 See more details about the period between 1985-1991 in the next articles: S. Musteață, „Lecțiile independenței Republicii Moldova – tranziția de

The beginning of 1991 was dramatic in the Baltic republics where it took the form of a direct conflict between the local populations' wish for freedom, democracy and independence and attempts by the Soviet centre to maintain the existence of the Soviet state in a reshaped configuration. On 10 January 1991, Gorbachev addressed an ultimatum to the Supreme Soviet of Lithuania, asking for the „restoration of the Soviet constitution in the country and the revocation of the laws considered unconstitutional by the Soviet authorities.”⁴ In street fights between security forces and civilians in Vilnius on 11 - 13 January, 14 people were killed and around 600 were injured. A couple of days later, special forces killed four protesters in Riga. Great Britain was one of the first Western powers to disapprove of the military actions in Vilnius and Riga, openly demanding „reforms and not repressions” and blaming the Soviet leadership for attempts to conceal the events in Lithuania.⁵ The events in the Baltic republics lead to their secession from the Soviet Union: Lithuanian independence was declared on 11 March 1990, Latvia and Estonia declared theirs on 3 March 1991.

In contrast to Lithuania, Latvia, or Georgia, the MSSR did not see any confrontations which caused human casualties during this period. However, many street actions did take place in Chișinău between 1989 and 1991, resulting in arrests and clashes with

la totalitarism la democrație,” In: *Limba Română. Revistă de știință și cultură*, Anul XXI, nr. 3-6 (189-192), 2011, 361-372; S. Musteață, „Dilemele Republicii Moldova.” In: *Archiva Moldaviae*, IV, 2012, 103-124.

4 Moldova Suverană. Cotidian al Sovietului Suprem și al Guvernului RSS Moldova, 10 ianuarie 1991.

5 Great Britain disapproved the military actions ordered by the Soviet government in Vilnius and Riga, declaring that they sustain „reforms, not repressions” and condemned the Soviet leadership for trying to hide events in Lithuania.

the police. To mention just a few examples: On 12 March 1989, the tricolour flag was raised for the first time during a protest. The most active protesters were arrested. After the public's unsuccessful requests to liberate the arrested people, on 31 May 1989 a group of citizens began a first hunger strike in front of the Stefan the Great monument in protest against the detention.

On 28 June 1989, the first protest against the Soviet occupation of Bessarabia was held in Chişinău. Supporters of the Popular Front of Moldova (PFM) prevented a meeting of supporters of the „liberation of Bessarabia from Romanian landowners and its reunion with the Soviet homeland,” backed by the Communist authorities. The Central Committee of the Communist Party of Moldova condemned the actions of the PFM, categorising them as politically harmful.

The leaders of the Baltic republics, Georgia and Armenia renounced to organise a military parade on 7 November 1989, while the authorities in Chişinău decided to carry it out according to communist tradition. However, in the morning of 7 November, a group of approximately 100 people took candles in front of Soviet tanks preparing for the military parade. Once supporters of the PFM arrived at Victory Square, the leaders of Communist Party of Moldova left the central stage and the military parade was cancelled⁶.

During the next day some young people who tried to protest in front of the Ministry of Internal Affairs against the actions of the militia on 7 November were arrested. This caused the spontaneous gathering of people in front of the Ministry chanting: „The imprisoned – released!”. The gathered people were attacked by the police and beaten with truncheons.

⁶ Gh.E. Cojocaru, 1989 la Est de Prut, Chişinău, Prut Internaţional, 2001, p. 188-189.

At around 6 PM there were already around a thousand people in front of the Ministry building, blocking traffic on Chişinău's main street. Some two- to three hundred militias came out of the building to attack the crowd. A group of members of parliament came to the Ministry of Internal Affairs and proposed to Vladimir Voronin, then the Minister of Internal Affairs, to order the withdrawal of his troops. Given the pressure of the people outside the building, the arrested people were released. While the people were moving to Victory Square, blank bullets were shot from the Ministry building and bursts of automatic gunfire could be heard. This caused an escalation of violence with the protesters starting to throw rocks at the Interior Ministry building. At around 11 PM there were already some five to six thousand people on Victory Square demanding the resignation of the leading figures of the MSSR: S. Grosu, V. Pşenicinikov, I. Kalin, and V. Semenov.

As a result of the events of 7 and 10 November, the Central Committee of the CPM planned the prosecution and dissolution of the PFM but the authorities did not dare to implement this scenario. At a press conference on 12 November 1989, held by the Ministry of Internal Affairs it was revealed that on the night of 10th November ten military aircraft had landed at Chişinău Airport with more than 2,000 soldiers of the Special Forces of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the USSR, under the command of general Lieutenant Vladimir Dubenjuk who said that the call came from the leaders of the Moldovan Soviet Socialist Republic.

Although spirits were high in Moldova and especially in Chişinău, both, the political elites and the larger public moved with a great deal of caution. Between 1989 and 1991 the Moldovan national revival movement was growing



Photo 1. November 3, 1990, Parliament approves the new coat of arms (after Parlamentul independenței)

and had a direct impact on local society and the political class in Chișinău. Thus, on February 4th, 1991, Petru Lucinschi was forced to resign as first secretary of the Central Committee of the CPM and was substituted by Grigore Eremei.⁷ After the amendment of Article 6 of the Soviet Constitution the role of the CPSU has steadily declined.⁸ The first alternative social and political organisations to the previously dominant Communist Party were registered in Chișinău in autumn 1989. The first officially registered political party of Moldova was the Social Democratic Party, created on 13th of May 1990. Even though the Marxist-Leninist

⁷ Iurie Gogu, *Istoria Românilor dintre Prut și Nistru. Commented chronology (1988-2010)*, Chișinău, 2010, msc.

⁸ In the new version, the 6th article reads as follows: „The Communist Party of the Soviet Union, other political parties, trade and youth unions, other public organisations and mass movements, are involved in formulating policy of the Soviet State, in the administration of public affairs and civil organisation through their representatives in the Soviets of People's Deputies.”

University of Chișinău was closed in June 1990 and ideological courses for party cadres were terminated, most universities were still teaching the history of the CPSU and scientific communism by the end of the academic year 1990-1991.

In 1990, several significant events happened in Chișinău: free elections to the Supreme Soviet of the MSSR, the adoption of a new flag and coat of arms, the change of name from the MSSR to the “Soviet Socialist Republic Moldova (SSRM)”, the creation of a commission for drafting the constitution, the declaration of sovereignty of June 23, 1990, Presidential elections, etc. On the one hand, there was a continuous process of democratisation of Moldovan society; on the other hand, Moscow encouraged separatism within Moldova which threatened to lead to the formation of the Soviet Socialist Republic of Gagauzia and the Transnistrian Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic.⁹ At the request of the Chișinău authorities to take action against the separatist movements, the President of the USSR, M. Gorbachev, signed a decree on 22 December 1990 which guaranteed the integrity of the MSSR, but only as a part of the USSR. This document was more of a warning signal towards the nationalistic movements rather than an insurance of peace and integrity to the SSRM.

During 1990-1991, the Soviet central leadership tried to find different solutions to prevent the collapse of the USSR. In December 1990, during the IV Congress of Deputies of the USSR, the decision was made to hold a ref-

⁹ See: Gheorghe Cojocaru, *Separatismul în slujba Imperiului*, Chișinău, 2000. Members of the Supreme Soviet of the Moldavian SSR, natives from the districts from the left bank of Dniester, did not support national projects of adopting state symbols and on 12th of March 1991, Supreme Soviet in Tiraspol has banned the use of writing in Latin on the territory of Transnistria.



Photo 2. Protests against the USSR Referendum, Chişinău, March 17, 1991 (after *Parlamentul independenței*)

erendum on 17 March 1991 to ask the Soviet population on the issue of the preservation of the USSR. The SSRM and five other republics (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Georgia and Armenia) refused to participate in the plebiscite, despite pressure from the central state organs. Meanwhile, the districts on the left bank of the Dniester River and some institutions on the right bank participated. In those republics which did participate in the referendum, the turnout was around 80%, of which 76% voted for keeping the USSR intact.¹⁰ The Referendum results, from one point of view, gave the Soviet authorities a legal support for maintaining the integrity of the USSR. But, from other point of view, encourage the tendency towards independence of some soviet republics. In this context, the putsch in August, 1991, despite its primary intention to stop the disintegration of the Soviet state, in finally facilitated the irreversible collapse of the USSR.

The SSRM began to gradually manifest itself as an autonomous political entity both na-

10 See more details related to the referendum in I. Caşu's intervention at Radio Free Europe on 17.03.2011 – SSRM and the referendum regarding the maintenance of the USSR on 17 March 1991, <http://www.europalibera.org/content/article/2341090.html> (Last time accessed on 05.08.2011).

tionally and internationally¹¹. Between 11 and 17 February 1991, Mircea Snegur carried out his first official visit as Moldovan president to Bucharest, Romania. The visit to Romania was undertaken in the context of a vibrant national movement and as a consequence of the Moldovan leadership's intention of establishing close cultural, academic and political relations with Romania, – relations which were previously very much restricted and controlled by the Soviet authorities between 1944 and 1991. A month later, on 25 March 1991, A. Năstase, the Romanian Minister of Foreign Affairs, and Nicolae Țău, the Moldovan Minister of Foreign Affairs, signed the Protocol on the Cooperation between the Ministry of Foreign Relations of the SSRM and the Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs – the first document signed together by ministers of the two countries¹². During 1991, there were other important meetings between Chişinău and Bucharest, such as the meeting between the Presidents Mircea Snegur and Ion Iliescu in Bucharest, the visit of the Romanian Prime Minister Petre Roman, etc. A number of documents on cooperation in various areas, primarily in the fields of culture and education, were signed during these encounters. The first results of this increased collaboration did not take long to materialize: in July 1991, 170 teachers from Moldova went on a two week visit to Romania, and in autumn of the same year another group of Moldovan students went to study in Romania.¹³ On 24 June 24 1991, the Romanian par-

11 In this order is also included the Decision no. 530-XII of the Supreme Soviet of SSRM from 5 March 1991, which has stopped the incorporation of youth into the ranks of the Soviet army and decided that all citizens of SSRM will do military service only on the territory of Moldova.

12 Iurie Gogu, *Istoria Românilor dintre Prut şi Nistru. Commented chronology (1988-2010)*, Chişinău, 2010, msc.

13 In 1990, for the first time the Romanian



Photo 3. Protests condemning the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact, Chișinău, June 1990 (after Parlamentul independenței)

liament declared the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact of 23 August 1939 to be void. Three days later, on the occasion of the commemoration of 51 years since the Soviet annexation of Bessarabia, two members of the Foreign Policy Committee of the US Senate - Republican Senators Jesse Helms (North Carolina) and Larry Prester (South Dakota) - presented a draft resolution for the self-determination of Bessarabia Northern Bucovina and their reunification with Romania to the US Congress.¹⁴ Between 26 and 28 June, 1991, the International Conference on the „Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact and its Consequences for Bessarabia,” was held under the auspices of the Moldovan parliament. The participants from 16 countries concluded that „The pact and its secret additional protocol are void *ab initio* and their consequences must be eliminated.”¹⁵ On 27 March 1991, the union of government awarded scholarships for 1125 students, the majority of them from the Republic of Moldova, including 87 children from Bucovina, 43 children from Odessa Region.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact and its consequences for Bessarabia. The statement presented by Alexandru Moșanu, President of the Parliament of the Republic of Moldova, 26th of June, 1991, In: M. Cernencu, A. Petrencu, I. Șîșcanu, *Crestomație*

Bessarabia and Romania of 1918 was celebrated in Chișinău the first time since 1944. Although the issue of reunification of Bessarabia with Romania was widely discussed by the public, the political leaders of that period – Ion Iliescu, Mircea Snegur, Petru Lucinschi, and Petre Roman – claimed that the issue was not discussed at any of their official meetings.¹⁶ The Russian-speaking population of Moldova, including the Gagauz minority reacted antagonistically to these changes. The official pro-Romanian discourse and changes of the status of the Romanian language, which now became official, as well as the implementation of a “history of Romanians” in the schools and universities of Moldova became a scarecrow for the Russian-speaking population. This further exacerbated existing tensions in society, especially in the separatist regions of Gagauzia and Transnistria. Following the adoption of the Romanian tricolour as the national flag of Moldova (with an added symbol in the middle) and the new coat of arm (which got rid of the old Soviet elements and integrated elements common to the Romanian culture and history) by the parliament of the Republic of Moldova (which was the official name of the country as per a decision of the Supreme Soviet on 23 May 1991), the deputies from the left bank of Dniester refused to participate

la istoria românilor, 1917-1992, Chișinău, Universitas, 1993, pp. 249-273; Declarația de la Chișinău a Conferinței Internaționale „Pactul Ribbentrop-Molotov și consecințele sale pentru Basarabia”, 26-28 iunie 1991. In: M. Cernencu, A. Petrencu, I. Șîșcanu, *Crestomație la istoria românilor, 1917-1992*, Chișinău, Universitas, 1993, p. 274. Vezi detalii la Igor Cașu, „Pactul Ribbentrop-Molotov și consecințele lui pentru Basarabia” (26-28 iunie 1991). *Europa Liberă*, 28.06.2011: <http://www.europalibera.org/content/article/24248708.html> (Last time accessed on 05.08.2011).

¹⁶ These statements were made in recent interviews conducted by the author with the nominees (April-May 2011).

in sessions of the legislature in Chişinău.¹⁷ In the context of the changes in the Baltic states and the developments in Moldova described above, the PFM demanded on its meeting on 10 May 1991 that the parliament¹⁸ adopt a declaration of independence, new laws related to citizenship, privatisation, the creation of a National Bank, the freedom to political parties, freedom of the press, a new currency and the nationalisation of the wealth of the CPM as well as the Land Code. The implementation of these measures was delayed by several factors, including discussions on the resignation of prime minister Mircea Druc. On 21 May 1991, the political party representing the Popular Front of Moldova in parliament submitted a protest signed by 70 deputies to express their disapproval of the procedure of Government formation as proposed by President Mircea Snegur. Mircea Snegur, in turn, blamed the PFM for destabilising the social and political situation in the country. In protest, the PFM party left the plenary meeting and refused to return to plenary meetings as long as president Snegur was not proposing a declaration of independence to parliament. PFM members chanting the anthem „Deşteaptă-te, române!” (Wake up, Romanian!), headed to the National Square, where incidents took place between demonstrators and the police.

On 22 May 1991, the Supreme Soviet of the SSRM discussed the dismissal of Druc’s Gov-

ernment. The debates started with a statement by President Mircea Snegur related to the events of 21 May. President Snegur subjected the parliamentary fraction of the PFM, as well as writers, the popular movement and democratic organisations to vehement criticism, accusing them of causing the events on 21 May. Snegur urged parliament to adopt a law which would allow the population of the country to choose the president of the SSRM. Moldova’s Supreme Soviet adopted a bill indicating that the prime minister’s status was equal to the status of an ordinary member of the government (such as a minister or a general director of a department) and the dismissal of the prime minister therefore only required 50% of the votes plus one. In the ballot, 207 out of 218 valid votes were cast in favor of dismissing Prime Minister Mircea Druc, with only 11 deputies voting against it. The PFM faction drafted a complaint which was signed by 60 deputies and was addressed to the chairperson of the Supreme Soviet. There were clashes between police forces concentrated around the office of the Supreme Soviet and civilians. The conflict inside the Supreme Soviet continued the next day as well when the Agrarians’ fraction proposed a draft declaration of independence of the republic and the PFM fraction presented its complaint concerning the unconstitutional removal of prime minister Druc.¹⁹ The PFM’s positions were criticised by a number of Moldova’s key opinion leaders. Some of them formed the Moldovan Democratic Forum (MDF) on 13 July 1991 as an alternative to PFM and CPM. The MDF founders began an initiative to reconcile the Moldovan society and stop the ongoing ethnic confrontations.²⁰

¹⁷ On 27 April 1990, the Law on the state flag (the tricolour – blue, yellow and red) was adopted – a fact which on the one hand represented the success of the national movement, but which was, on the other hand, a challenging step for the separatist movements in Comrat and Tiraspol. For some members from Transnistria this was the last meeting of the Supreme Soviet of the SSRM that they attended, such as in the case of Smirnov. The SSRM’s coat of arm was adopted on 3 November 1990.

¹⁸ The first Parliament of the of Moldova (1990-1994) had 380 deputies, elected nominally according to the constituencies.

¹⁹ Iurie Gogu, *Istoria Românilor dintre Prut şi Nistru. Commented chronology (1988-2010)*, Chişinău, 2010, msc.

²⁰ See details in Igor Caşu, “Forumul Democratic din Moldova – alternativă la comunişti

After long debates, at the end of May 1991 Valeriu Muravschi (28 May 1991 – 1 July 1992) was appointed prime minister. The new government, in addition to political disasters, had to deal with a natural one as well since in early July about 90 villages had been inundated. In early July 1991, the Parliament of Moldova also adopted some laws aimed at edifying Moldovan statehood. These included a law regulating the privatisation process which, on the one hand, created new opportunities, but, on the other hand, disappointed the majority of the local population since they could not recover the property which had previously been nationalised by the Soviet authorities. Also included was a law on citizenship which granted citizenship of the Republic of Moldova to all citizens who lived in Moldova until 23 June 1990. This law was considered one of the most flexible of its kind among the former Soviet republics, especially in comparison with the Baltic States where a whole set rigor had to be completed before being granted citizenship²¹. By mid-1991, the external role and position of the USSR decreased significantly. On 1st of July 1991, the Warsaw Treaty Organization dissolved. Hungary, Poland and Czechoslovakia agreed with the Soviet Union on the withdrawal of Soviet troops from their territories. Since then, a number of Eastern European countries have declared their intention of integration into NATO's structures.

și frontişti (13 iulie 1991).” In: Europa Liberă, 13.07.2011: <http://www.europalibera.org/content/article/24263996.html> (accessed on 05.08.2011).

²¹ Legea cetăţeniei Republicii Moldova. <http://lex.justice.md/md/311522/> (accessed on 01.10.2014).

THE COLLAPSE OF THE USSR AND THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE OF THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA

Between 18-21 August 1991, a coup d'état was attempted by a conservative group with the intent of preventing the collapse of the USSR. It was called the anti-Gorbachev coup. On 18th August, 1991, Gennadi Yanayev, Vice-President of the USSR, signed a decree granted him the duties of the President of the USSR as of August 19th, 1991:

In connection with the inability for health reasons by Mikhail Sergeyevich Gorbachev to perform his duties as USSR President, I have assumed the duties of USSR President from August 19, 1991 on the basis of article 127 Kul of the USSR constitution²².

On the same day, the Soviet leadership as represented by Gennadi Yanayev, Valentin Pavlov and Oleg Baklanov declared the state of emergency in the USSR and created the State Committee on the State of Emergency (SCSE of USSR):

“We declare:

1) That, in accordance with Article 127.3 of the USSR Constitution and Article 2 of the USSR law ‘On the Legal Conditions Applying in a State of Emergency’, and striving to fulfil the demands of broad strata of the population concerning the need to take very decisive measures to prevent society from sliding towards a national catastrophe and to safeguard legality and order, a state of emergency is introduced in certain localities of the USSR for a period of six months, beginning at 4 a.m. Moscow time on 19 August 1991.

2) That it is established that the USSR Constitution and USSR laws have uncondi-

²² TASS, Decree by Soviet Vice President, retrieved 22.11.2014 from <http://rainbow.chard.org/2011/12/23/tass-coverage-of-the-attempted-coup-in-ussr-19th-august-1991/>. (editor's addition)

tional supremacy throughout the USSR.

3) That, to administer the country and provide effective implementation of the conditions applying in a state of emergency a State Committee for the State of Emergency in the USSR (USSR SCSE) is formed, with the following members: O.D. Baklanov, First Vice-Chairman of the USSR Defence Council; V.A. Kryuchkov, Chairman of the USSR Committee for State Security (KGB); V.S. Pavlov, Prime Minister of the USSR; B.K. Pugo, USSR Minister of Internal Affairs; V.A. Starodubtsev, Chairman of the USSR Peasants' Union; A.I. Tizyakov, President of the Association of State Enterprises and Industrial, Construction, Transportation and Communications Facilities; T.T. Yazov, USSR Minister of Defence; and G.I. Yanaev, acting President of the USSR.

4) That unswerving fulfilment of decisions of the USSR State Committee for the State of Emergency is mandatory for all bodies of power and administration, officials and citizens throughout the USSR."²³

During the days when the coup was in progress, the situation in Chișinău was full of anxiety, but relatively stable. The leadership of the republic managed to keep tensions under control. On 20 August 1991, the Moldovan Public Television and Radio buildings were taken under guard by people who were in support of democracy (and opposed to the coup) and the president issued a decree on the establishment of the Supreme Security Council of the Republic of Moldova. On the next day, 21 August 1991, the Moldovan Parliament adopted an official declaration condemning the actions of the Moscow coup, calling them „a serious crime against the sovereignty of the republics, which can cause enormous harm to the population.” In the statement, the Moldovan legislators urged soldiers and officers of Soviet Army not to take part in actions which

would contravene the Constitution and not to forget the need to respect the human rights of the population as well as the lawful authorities of the state. The citizens of the Republic of Moldova were called to reject the path of violence and dictatorship, and to exercise civil disobedience in the case that state power was usurped²⁴.

Simultaneously, on 21 August 1991 the parliament of Moldova adopted a decision regarding the coup in the Soviet Union, recognising that Gorbachev was illegally removed as President of the USSR, by a group of political adventurers with reactionary orientation. In the same context, Moldova proposed that at the forthcoming session of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR, the deputies should demand the resignation of Anatoli Lukyanov, the Chairman of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR for his role in the events of 18 - 19 August 1991. The same decision required the republican and local authorities of the state administration to conduct their activities strictly in accordance with the laws of the republic. It further asked the Committee for State Security, the Ministry for Internal Affairs and the prosecutor of the Republic of Moldova, to work in agreement with the local self-governance authorities in order to establish who implemented the illegal decisions of the so-called „State Committee for State of Emergency of the USSR” or helped their implementation and to hold them accountable according to the law²⁵. On 22 August 1991, Gorbachev returned to Moscow after three days of house arrest in his residence in Crimea, and on 25 August he resigned from his position as general sec-

²³ Statement by the Soviet Leadership, in: Richard Sakwa: *The Rise and Fall of The Soviet Union*. Routledge 2005, p. 461.

²⁴ The declaration of the Parliament of the Republic of Moldova, on 21 August, 1991. In: *Sfatul Țării*, 22 August 1991.

²⁵ Decision on the situation in the Republic of Moldova about the coup in the USSR. In: *Moldova Suverană*, 22 August 1991.

retary of the CPSU. This signified the fall of the Soviet single party system. On 23 August 1991, the Presidium of the Moldovan Parliament passed a law to stop the activity of the Communist Party of Moldova: it „prohibited activities of the Moldovan Communist Party throughout the country and nationalised the entire wealth of the CPM.”²⁶ On the same day, Mircea Snegur, the President of the Republic of Moldova, requested through an official telegram the aid of Gorbachev, the Defence Minister and President of the USSR, and of Boris Yeltsin, President of the RSFSR (Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic), on the issue of actions taken by the separatist leaders of the self-proclaimed Pridnestrovian and Gagauz republics (Smirnov, Ryleakov, Pologov, Topal, Chindighelean etc.) and on the support they received from I. Morozov, chief commander of the Odessa Military Region. The telegram stated that the Moldovan separatist leaders officially supported the coup of August 1991, and that they were therefore to be considered a criminal committee which continued to act in the spirit of the “State Committee for State of Emergency” with support of troops from the Odessa Military Region. Snegur asked the address ants to order the command of the Odessa Military Region to cease support of these ‘state criminals’.²⁷

The coup d’état in Moscow was the last attempt of a group of high-ranking Soviet officers (especially from the security and defence departments) to maintain the USSR. The reaction of most republics was radically opposed

to the coup. The events in Moscow described above were followed by a wave of declarations of independence by the remaining union republics: 24 August - Ukraine, 27 August - Moldova, 31 August - Uzbekistan and Kirghizia (Kyrgyzstan’s time), 9 September - Tajikistan, 18 October - Azerbaijan etc. The last declaration of independence was made by Kazakhstan on 16 December, 1991.

On 27 August 1991, the parliament of Moldova adopted the declaration of independence and the national anthem „Deșteaptă-te, române” (Wake up, Romanian):

“The Republic of Moldova is a sovereign, independent and democratic state, free to decide its present and future, without any external interference, keeping with the ideals and aspirations of the people within its historical and ethnic area of its national making.”²⁸

With the adoption of the declaration of independence the Republic of Moldova became a subject of international law and requested to be admitted to the UN and OSCE, as full member to these organisations. Moldova also declared its willingness to join the Helsinki Final Act and the Paris Charter for a New Europe. On 3 September 1991 the official borders of the Republic of Moldova were established and a decree was signed on the withdrawal of the Soviet Army from Moldova’s territory. At the time of the declaration of independence Moldova covered an area of 33,700 square km, had a population of 4,366,300 inhabitants, of which about 53% were living in rural areas, while the republic was organised in 40 districts. At the end of 1991, according to the UN Human Development Report, Moldova was ranked 64th most developed in the world.

Romania was the first country to recognise the

26 Decision regarding the Communist Party in the Republic of Moldova, no. 683-XII din 23.08.1991. In: Sfatul Țării, 24 august 1991.

27 Telegram to USSR President, tov. Gorbachev M.S. Copy: Ministry of Defence of USSR. Copy: President of RSFSR, tov. Yeltsin B.N., Chișinău, 23 august 1991, M.I. Snegur, President of the Republic of Moldova.

28 <http://www.presedinte.md/eng/declaration> (accessed 01.10.2014).

independence of the Republic of Moldova on 3 September 1991. This event has been interpreted in a number of ways: some considered this act to be a gesture of friendship and good neighbourhood, others considered it a gesture of Romania's renunciation of the idea of reuniting with Bessarabia, a territory which had been seized by force by the USSR in 1940. The Russian Federation recognised the independence of the Republic of Moldova in December 1991. In August 1991, diplomatic relations between Romania and Moldova were established, including exchange of ambassadors. At first, there was a Moldovan consulate based in Iași, and on 24th January 1992 the Moldovan Embassy in Bucharest was opened.

On 8 December 1991, the first presidential elections were held in Moldova. They were attended by 92% of the electorate, of which 67.49% voted for Mircea Snegur who became the first President of the Republic of Moldova elected via universal suffrage. The same day, the Presidents of Russia, Belarus and Ukraine - Boris Yeltsin, Stanislav Shushkevich and, Leonid-. Kravchuk, respectively - signed an agreement establishing the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) at Belovezhskaya Pushcha and proclaimed the cessation of the USSR. In this context, Mikhail Gorbachev resigned as President of the USSR.

After the events of August 1991, most of the world believed that the collapse of the Soviet Union meant a departure from the totalitarian past for the former Soviet territories, but the reality proved to be different for most of the former Soviet republics. The initiative of the three Presidents at Belovezhskaya Pushcha, was formalised on 21 December 1991 in Alma-Ata with a declaration, a protocol and a convention on the establishment of the CIS. Besides Russia, Belarus and Ukraine, eight other states which had gained their independence



Photo 4. Protests against the creation of the CIS, Chișinău, December 21, 1991 (after *Parlamentul independenței*)

joined the new organisation, the purpose of which was to maintain economic ties between the former Soviet republics and to further cooperation between them. Mircea Snegur, the President of the Republic of Moldova, signed the country's accession. The leaders of the three initial members decided to keep a form of cooperation under the umbrella of an interstate structure, via which Russia tried to retain its hegemonic position as would become apparent in the following years. Multiple attempts to strengthen the CIS resulted in failure. Thus, in the context of the political situation in Eastern Europe, the CIS is a compromised and largely ineffective organisation. Officially, the Soviet Union ceased to exist on 31 December 1991. Since then more than two decades have passed, but the question posed the sociologist Dan Dungaci remains current for the Moldovan society: „You can take the Republic of Moldova out of the USSR, but how you pull out the USSR out of the Republic of Moldova?”²⁹ Today, Moldova is facing a number of problems that have their origins in the communist totalitarian regime and that are not easy to overcome.

²⁹ The newspaper „Timpul”, 4 June 2010, <http://www.timpul.md/articol/poti-scoate-rm-din-urss-dar-cum-scoti-urss-din-rm-11664.html> (Last time accessed on 26.06.2011).

Among these problems, there are identity issues, nostalgia for the USSR, improper promotion of economic and legal reforms, the legal relationship with separatist regions, dependence on the Russian energy market³⁰. In sum, we can conclude that the year 1991 was the common starting point of independence for most of Soviet Union republics. However, the transition from a totalitarian to a democratic regime proved to be different for each post-Soviet state. In general, for most post-Soviet citizens, the fall of the Soviet system was the beginning of a big step backwards in all senses: lower living standards and a more limited system of social protection, less access to quality education, public services and other public resources. At the same time, the level of suicides in ex-Soviet states increased sharply³¹. All these tremendous difficulties and the disappointment with the performances of the first democratically elected governments may explain the contemporary phenomenon of nostalgia for the Soviet regime³².

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³⁰ For more details, see the following paper: S. Musteată, The Republic of Moldova between its Soviet legacy and State building. In: S. Musteată (ed.), *Two Decades of Development in Post-Soviet States: Successes and Failures*, Colectia Academica, 232, Iași, Institutul European, 2014, 227-255.

³¹ D. Lester, Suicide and homicide after the fall of communist regimes. In: *Eur Psychiatry* 13, 1998, 98-100.

³² Maya Nadkarni, Olga Shevchenko. The Politics of Nostalgia: A Case for Comparative Analysis of Post-Socialist Practices. In: *Ab Imperio* 2, 2004, 482-518. Maria Todorova, Zsuzsa Gille, *Post-communist Nostalgia*, New York, Berghahn Books, 2010.

Justifying Separatism: The Year 1924, the Establishment of the Moldovan ASSR and History Politics in the Transnistrian Moldovan Republic

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ABSTRACT

This article analyzes the history politics in the unrecognized Transnistrian Moldovan Republic. The paper focuses on the role played by the Moldovan ASSR and, in particular, its establishment in 1924 in contemporary politics and historiographical debates in Transnistria. Due to its history and similar territorial configuration the Moldovan ASSR became the most convenient candidate for the title of the 'first period of statehood' in the Transnistrian historical narrative. This study investigates the ambiguities, complexities, and changes in the attitude of contemporary Transnistrian politicians and historians towards the Moldovan ASSR and its representation in Transnistrian public discourse.

On October 12, 1924 the All-Ukrainian Central Executive Committee proclaimed the establishment of the Moldovan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (ASSR)¹ on the left bank of the Dniester River as part of the Ukrainian SSR. The official announcement was the culmination of the half-year long process which was launched by a short document of several pages, sent on February 4 of the same year. The paper was entitled *Memorandum on the Necessity of the Creation of the Moldovan Soviet Socialist Republic*² and bore the signatures of Romanian Communist émigrés, some of the leading members of the Bessarabian revolutionary underground, and such notable personalities as a well-known and influential Red Army commander of Bessarabian origin G.I. Kotovskii. It advocated the idea of the establishment of the Moldovan Soviet Socialist Republic, which would become the

springboard for the recession of Bessarabia to the Soviet Union and even the strategic gate for the expansion of the socialist revolution to the Balkans and Central Europe. The Soviet Union never fully recognized the unification of Bessarabia with Romania in 1918. Bolsheviks claimed that *Sfatul Țării* was not a representative body and could not make such decisions, that it was taken under the pressure of the Romanian Army which violated the agreement between Averescu and Racovsky (then one of the leading Bolsheviks in Ukraine), that presupposed the withdrawal of the Romanian Army from Bessarabia.³ In fact, throughout the interwar period Soviet maps drew the state border not along the Dniester, as it was in reality, but along the Prut river. Thus, they suggested that Bessarabia was a Soviet territory, "unlawfully occupied" by Romania. As a somewhat secondary goal of the envisaged Moldovan Soviet Socialist Republic, the memorandum emphasized its role for the cultural and national development of the Moldovan population, which compactly lived along the south-western border of the Ukrainian SSR on the left bank of the Dniester river. This argument was well suited to the context of supportive Soviet nationality policies, which culminated in the 1920s and early 1930s. While the document generally received positive first feedback, the process of establish-

1 The Moldovan ASSR was a republic on the left-bank of the river Dniester, which existed from 1924 to 1940. In contrast, the Moldovan SSR was a Soviet republic formed in 1940 out of Bessarabia and parts of the Moldovan ASSR. With an interruption during the Second World War the Moldovan SSR existed till 1991, when it seceded from the Soviet Union. The present-day Republic of Moldova is the legal successor of the Moldovan SSR.

2 The text of the Memorandum can be found in Argentina Gribincea, Mihai Gribincea and Ion Țișcanu (ed), *Politica de moldovenizare în R.A.S.S. Moldoveneasca: Culegere de Documente și Materiale* (Chișinău: Civitas, 2004), 28-32.

ment of the republic encountered a number of obstacles, partly due to internal political struggles, partly because of the lack of any reliable data on the national composition of the territory under question. Eventually, almost all the signatories of the memorandum were marginalized from the governing of the republic. At the same time after all the borders were settled, Moldovans did not even form a plurality (30-33%), let alone an absolute majority, in the new autonomous republic established in their name, as Ukrainians were the largest group (~48%). Nevertheless, the Moldovan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic lasted for almost 16 years, when its Western riverside part united with Bessarabia in order to form the Moldovan Soviet Socialist Republic.

In the postwar period Soviet historiography and official discourse celebrated the establishment of the Moldovan ASSR as the first case of the Soviet Moldovan statehood. Most of the less convenient sides of the history of the establishment of the republic, as well as its subsequent existence, were largely omitted or deliberately silenced. The story of the creation of the Moldovan ASSR resurfaced and became topical from the late 1980s and onwards, mostly in the context of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the emergence of the breakaway unrecognized Transnistrian³ Moldovan Republic (PMR), whose territory partially corresponded to that of the Moldovan ASSR. In this short article I will discuss how the events of the year 1924 and the establishment of the Moldovan ASSR and its existence figure in the history politics of the unrecognized PMR, where it became an important political symbol.

3 For the text of the agreement, see *Bessarabiia na Perekrestke Evropeiskoi Diplomatii: Dokumenty i Materialy* (Moscow: Indrik, 1996), 216-217.



Figure 1. administrative division of Moldova

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Similarly to other Soviet republics, an upsurge of the national movement took place during the final years of the Soviet Union in the Moldovan SSR. In Moldova it had a certain specificity. In the search for the 'revival' of the national culture, a part of the national movement rallied around Romanian national symbols, not Moldovan ones. While this group likely was not numerically predominant, it was very active, vocal and, as the result influential in late Soviet and post-Soviet Moldovan context. In fact, by the early 1990s, when the Soviet system was quickly breaking down, some of the leaders of the national movement in Moldova considered or at least declared the Moldovan identity, language, and culture a Soviet invention and imposition. Instead they struggled for the recognition of the Romanian language

and Latin script and carried Romanian flags. Some of the most radical political leaders even saw the sovereignty of the Moldovan SSR and the subsequent independence of the Republic of Moldova only as steps towards the ultimate political unification of the republic with Romania.⁴ Such radical positions of some of the leaders of the national movement in Moldova encountered notable opposition on both banks of Dniester. Some people advocated the preservation of the Soviet Union and were against the national movements as such. Others were alienated by the explicit pro-Romanian character of a large part of the national movement in the Moldovan SSR. Yet such attitudes were much stronger on the left bank⁵. Different factors contributed to this outcome. Unlike right-bank Bessarabia, Transnistria has never been part of the Romanian state with the exception of several years of military control during the Second World War. The ethnolinguistic composition of Transnistria was different. Each of the three major groups – Moldovans, Russians and Ukrainians – constitute roughly one third of the population of the region, Moldovans being the largest just by several per cent. At the same time, the Romanian-speaking population was the clear majority in right-bank Moldova. The social dimension of the ethnolinguistic composition also displayed certain differences. On the right-bank there were numerous Romanian-speaking urban elites, while on the

left-bank urban elites were almost exclusively Russian-speaking. As a result, the left bank of the Moldovan SSR was more sensitive to the symbolic national proclamations in Chişinău. In addition, the Transnistrian elite was traditionally dominant in Soviet Moldova, for Moscow often considered them more reliable than the members of the Bessarabian elite. The gradual political drift of Soviet Moldova away from the Soviet Union threatened the dominant political and economic positions of the left-bank leaders. Therefore, they tried to exploit the grievances of the population in order to preserve their positions of power at least in the eastern regions of Moldova. While the political conflicts and debates were often framed in ethnolinguistic, symbolic, and historic terms, one can frequently find behind the vivid rhetoric a struggle between at least several elite groups for political power and control of economic and administrative resources. Finally, certain circles in Moscow supported pro-Soviet groups in Moldova, in particular on its left-bank, and saw them as leverage to continue to exert influence on the initially sovereign and later independent republic.

The combination of these and other factors led to the gradual escalation of the conflict between two banks of Dniester which culminated in the proclamation of the Transnistrian Moldovan Soviet Socialist Republic in September 1990,⁶ which was renamed the Transnistrian Moldovan Republic in November 1991 and then in the War of Transnistria in 1992, which claimed more than 1,000 casualties. The hostilities ended with the intervention of the

4 There are two names for the regions on the left-bank of the Dniester: 'Transnistria' and 'Pridnestrov'e'. In this paper I mostly use 'Transnistria,' as it is more common for publications in English. Yet, it should be noted that the inhabitants of the region would use 'Pridnestrov'e' in the majority of cases.

5 Charles King discusses the pan-Romanian dimension of a significant part of the national movement in late Soviet and independent Moldova in Charles King, "Moldovan Identity and the Politics of Pan-Romanianism," *Slavic Review*, 53, (Summer, 1994), 345-368.

6 In the text I use different synonyms for geographical and political entities. 'Left-bank,' 'separatist,' 'unrecognized,' 'Tiraspol' in different contexts refers to the region, authorities, and/or administrative units in Transnistria. 'Right-bank,' 'Chisinau,' 'Bessarabian' mostly refers to the region between Prut and Dniester and its authorities.

Russian 14th Army which had been stationed mostly in Transnistria since the Soviet times and assumed the role of 'peacekeepers' on Dniester after the War. The War reconfirmed the status of Transnistria as legally unrecognized but de facto uncontrolled by Chişinău authorities region. In this position the Transnistrian Moldovan Republic has already existed already for more than 20 years and benefitted from the strong support of the Russian Federation, remnants of Soviet industry,⁷ and a semi-shadow economy with porous borders. As the original title the Transnistrian Moldovan Soviet Socialist Republic suggests, the main justification for the establishment and existence of the separatist⁸ republic was initially the preservation of its affiliation with the Soviet Union in a context when the leaders of the right-bank Moldova increasingly adopted anti-Soviet positions. Soviet symbols still play an important role in Transnistrian politics. One can encounter hammer and sickle images on official insignia and Lenin's monuments throughout the region. The flag of the PMR is basically the Moldovan SSR's one with a different coat of arms. Nevertheless, with the crumbling and eventually collapsing Soviet Union it became clear that the references to the Soviet system, which quickly became the Soviet

past, were not enough to justify the existence and legitimacy of the separatist republic and its administration. Unlike the Moldovan SSR, as a whole, the PMR's leadership also could not rely on the right for self-determination which was reserved only for constituent Soviet republics in the Soviet system. Therefore, local actors gradually developed additional rationales for the existence of the separatist republic. The shift of focus was also reflected in the change of the name of the republic from the Transnistrian Moldovan Soviet Socialist Republic to the Transnistrian Moldovan Republic. Historical references also played a significant role in the developing ideology of the left-bank republic.

Throughout Eastern Europe appeals to history took on particular political importance during and after the fall of the socialist system.⁹ Politicians, intellectuals, academics, journalists and other public figures used history in order to strengthen their political positions, undermine their opponents, rally support for their cause etc. In the case of the PMR the references to history were crucial, for the unrecognized republic was in particular need to justify its contested existence both on the internal and external fronts.

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On March 12, 1991, the Supreme Soviet of the PMR, the highest legislative body of the unrecognized

7 It should be noted that just like on the right-bank, where the approval for the national movement was hardly unanimous and the movement itself was not homogenous, support for the emerging separatist republic and anti-Romanian sentiments were also not omnipresent on the left-bank.

8 While the left-bank regions accounted for only 15% of the population and 12% of the territory of the Moldovan SSR, they nevertheless accounted for 40% of the GDP of the South-Western Soviet republic and for 90% of its electrical production. Most of the Moldovan industry was situated in the Transnistrian region. For more on this, see Charles King, *The Moldovans: Romania, Russia, and the Politics of Culture* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 2000), 182-184.

9 In Moldovan discourse and in general in the post-Soviet space, the term 'separatist' acquired negative connotations and often has a pejorative meaning. In this paper I do not use this word in any negative sense. The term 'separatist' here is meant to describe the situation in which a group of actors declare secessionist goals and attempt to unilaterally establish institutions which are autonomous or independent from the central authorities. In fact, in that sense the national movement in the late Moldovan SSR can be also called separatist in relation to central authorities in Moscow, similarly to Transnistrian actions in relation to republican governing bodies in Chisinau.

ognized republic adopted a decree *On the Priority Tasks of the Preservation of Distinctiveness of the Moldovan People, Its Language and Culture*. The decision, which was mostly a response to the pro-Romanian pronouncements to the West of Dniester, called, among other things, for the organization of a specialized research laboratory *History of Transnistria* which would undertake the task of studying the history of the left-bank region. Basically, the members of the laboratory were entrusted with the mission to elaborate an official view on the history of the separatist region. The close contact between the leading Transnistrian historians and institutions of power can also be observed in the major local historical publications, which often contain introductions or even full-fledged contributions by PMR's political leaders. Nevertheless, in my opinion, it would be a misinterpretation to consider the research and publications of Transnistrian historians a blunt imposition or a political order of the ruling regime. Rather, it was a case of convergence of interests of politicians and historians. The laboratory was formed out of a number of historians from both banks of Dniester who opposed the Romanianizing trend in the historic, cultural and linguistic spheres. Some of the members of the laboratory had been participating in the *Interdvoizhenie/Edinstvo*, a local branch of the political movement which stood in opposition to the upsurge of nationalism in Soviet Republics and advocated the preservation of the Soviet Union in a modified form. Therefore, the anti-Romanian, first pro-Soviet, and later pro-Russian character of the Transnistrian regime suited these scholars well and corresponded to their own stance. In addition, as the founder and longstanding chair of the laboratory, N. Babilunga admitted that the history of Transnistria was a rather vague topic, as it was never really comprehensively stud-

ied per se as a separate subject.¹⁰ Of course, this did not mean that Transnistrian scholars had a *carte blanche* in their publications, as the same historian claims.¹¹ Some of the basic principles of the emerging master narrative of Transnistrian history were set by the PMR's governing bodies, among others with the same decree which established the laboratory for the research of history of Transnistria. Yet, as suggested, Transnistrian scholars did not have many disagreements with politicians on the basic principles. At the same time in the research of specific issues they indeed had a certain degree of freedom.

Transnistrian scholars elaborated several key elements which were at the heart of almost any historical reference or writing in Transnistria, including several key publications of the established research laboratory, which introduced the developed narrative of the history of Transnistria to general audience, such as the monumental *History of the PMR, the Phenomenon of Transnistria and The Statehood of Transnistria: History and the Present*. Stefan Troebst singled out the following principles: "self-sufficiency,"¹² "statehood," "multiethnicity," "Slavic-Russian orientation," and "Moldovenism."¹³ Basically, all these features

10 For a comparative discussion of history politics in post-Soviet Central and Eastern Europe, see Alexei Miller and Maria Lipman (ed.), *The Convolutions of Historical Politics* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2012).

11 Nikolai Babilunga, "Pridnestrovska'a Moldavska'a Respublika: Priznanna'a Istoriografi'a Nepriznannogo Gosudarstva," in Matsuzato Kimi-taka (ed.), *Istoriograficheskii Dialog vokrug Nepriznannyh Gosudarstv: Pridnestrov'e, Nagornyi Karabakh, Armeni'a, Iuzhna'a Osseti'a i Gruzi'a*. 21st COE "Making a Discipline of Slavic Eurasian Studies" Occasional Papers, No. 18 (Sapporo: SRC, 2007), 16 http://src-h.slav.hokudai.ac.jp/coe21/publish/no18/1_babilunga.pdf (accessed on September 7, 2014)

12 Ibid, 16.

13 Troebst's translation of the word *samobytnost'* as "self-sufficiency" is probably not the most apt. *Samobytnost'* rather suggests local distinctive-

are also core elements of regional Transnistrian identity, promoted in official discourse. One should probably also add anti-Romanianism as one of major principles for history-writing and political discourse in the unrecognized republic.

The creation of the Moldovan ASSR on the left bank of the river Dniester in 1924 in one way or another could be interpreted in order to support every key element of the Transnistrian historical narrative. Yet, it was of particular importance for finding historical precedents of Transnistrian statehood. Historical references and usually the celebration of past statehood are central elements of almost every national narrative. Transnistrian official discourse mostly avoids the word 'nation,' preferring the term 'people' as being less associated with nationalism, which has mostly negative connotations on the left bank of Dniester. Yet, the terminological choice does not mean that PMR authorities do not promote any nation-building projects. In turn, they consciously foster regional identity which mixes mostly Soviet-style Moldovenism, a pro-Russian orientation, and the dominance of the Russian language. The regionalist and declarative multiethnic orientation of Transnistrian nation-building put the issue of statehood and its past incarnations to the forefront of the PMR politics. Moreover, the contested character of contemporary Transnistrian statehood and the questioned legality of its existence reinforce its centrality in official discourse.

The establishment of the Moldovan ASSR in October 1924 allowed late and post-Soviet Transnistrian politicians and intellectuals to claim that the newly emerging separatist republic had a historical precedent which territorially roughly corresponded to its post-Soviet 'successor.' This conclusion already ness, local specificity/uniqueness.

appeared in one of the first founding documents of the PMR – *Political and Legal Justification of the Creation of the Transnistrian Moldovan Soviet Socialist Republic*, an auxiliary paper to the declaration of the sovereignty of the break-away republic on September 2, 1990. Yet the idea was likely in the air almost a year before. According to the recollections of the first and until 2011 only PMR president Igor Smirnov, Transnistrian leaders already in autumn 1989 'started to look for theoretical foundations for the attempts to defend our rights. We recalled that Transnistria had its statehood during the period of existence of the Moldovan ASSR as part of the Ukrainian SSR. We proceeded to burrow in the archives, historical and legal literature.'¹⁴

A decree of the Supreme Soviet of the Moldovan SSR served as the pretext for the declaration of the Tiraspol authorities in September 1990. The legislature in Chişinău declared that the 'occupation of Bessarabia and Bucovina' by the Soviet Union on June 28, 1940 was illegal, being the outcome of the notorious Nazi-Soviet pact of non-aggression, more commonly known as the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact. By extension, the subsequent proclamation of the Moldovan SSR on August 2, 1940 was proclaimed an illegal 'act of the dismemberment of Bessarabia and Bucovina' with significant parts annexed to the Ukrainian SSR.¹⁵ The leaders of the separatist republic linked the decision of the Supreme Soviet of the Mol-

14 Stefan Troebst, "We are Transnistrians! Post-Soviet Identity Management in the Dniester Valley," *Ab Imperio*, no. 1 (2003): 451. Moldovenism here, though, does not in any sense imply the necessity for Transnistria to participate in any common Moldovan project. For Transnistrian leaders Moldovenism is of interest as a convenient alternative to Romanianism, which from their point of view is imposed from above and from outside on the Republic of Moldova.

15 I.N. Smirnov, *Zhit' na Nashei Zemle* (Moscow: Sovetskii Pisatel', 2001), 28.

dovan SSR to their own interests. Picking up the statement of the illegality of the declaration of the establishment of the Moldovan SSR in 1940, Tiraspol authorities claimed that the second paragraph of the document should then also be considered nullified.¹⁶ The second article stipulated that six regions of the disbanding Moldovan ASSR were to be included into the newly created Moldovan SSR. Thus, the left-bank authorities suggested that in declaring the illegality of the Soviet decision from August 2, 1940 the Chişinău governing bodies conceded their own illegality¹⁷ and in particular their lack of jurisdiction over the regions of the former Moldovan ASSR.¹⁸ Transnistrian leaders exploited the decision of the Chişinău authorities in order to update the story of the previous statehood, not just as a historical precedent, but as a legal case justifying the secessionist movement. *The Political and Legal Justification* on September 2, 1990 had not yet openly claimed that the recognition of the illegality of the declaration of creation of the Moldovan SSR legally reinstated the disbanded Moldovan ASSR or at least its right for self-determination. Nevertheless, such statements would emerge later in Transnistrian publications endorsed by authorities¹⁹ and even in official documents such as the *Conception of Foreign Policy of the Transnistrian Moldovan Republic*. The document adopted by

the Supreme Soviet of the PMR in 2005 stated that the decision of the Moldovan Parliament in 1990 on the cancellation of the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact 'de facto recognized the illegality of the creation of the Moldovan SSR, formed by the annexation of Bessarabia to the Moldovan ASSR. Thus, by default the restoration of the sovereignty and statehood of the Moldovan ASSR was recognized, and by extension, the lawfulness of the establishment of the Transnistrian Moldovan Republic.'²⁰

Moreover, after some time Transnistrian publications started themselves to question the legality of the creation of the Moldovan SSR in the part, which necessitated the disbandment of the Moldovan ASSR and its inclusion into the new republic.²¹ Transnistrian authors argue that the decision was unconstitutional, arbitrary, and imposed from above without consultation with the population. Ironically, with different aims and coming from different angles both the leaders of the national movement in the Moldovan SSR and Transnistrian leaders and intellectuals questioned the legality of the creation of the Moldovan SSR in 1940 on similar grounds.

20 *Gosudarstvennost' Pridnestrov'ia: Istori'a i Sovremennost'* (Tiraspol: Poligrafist, 2007), 8, *Istori'a Pridnestrovskoi Moldavskoi Respubliki* [Further: *Istori'a PMR*], vol. 2, part 2 (Tiraspol: RIO PGU, 2001), 37.

21 The text of the document in *Gosudarstvennost' Pridnestrov'ia*, 291. It is interesting to point out how the authors of the *Conception* talk about 'the Moldovan SSR, formed by the annexation of Bessarabia to the Moldovan ASSR.' Thus even in this regrettable for them decision, the authors of the *Conception* made the Moldovan ASSR the primary subject, which Bessarabia was only annexed to. In fact, the original document proclaimed first the creation of the new republic, the Moldovan SSR, and then the incorporation into it of most of Bessarabia and 6 districts of the Moldovan ASSR and not the inclusion of one of them into the other. It also discusses the 'reunification,' again not the merger, of 'the Moldovan population of Bessarabia and the Moldovan population of the Moldovan ASSR.'

16 <http://lex.justice.md/viewdoc.php?action=view&view=doc&id=308129&lang=2> (accessed on September 4, 2014)

17 N.V. Yakovlev (ed.), *Bessarabskii Vopros i Obrazovanie Pridnestrovskoi Moldavskoi Respubliki. Sbornik Oficial'nyh Dokumentov* (Tiraspol: RIO PGU, 1993), 95.

18 In later years Transnistrian publications claimed that in 1990 the Moldovan legislature proclaimed the 'self-liquidation' of the Moldovan state. *Atlas Pridnestrovskoi Moldavskoi Respubliki* (Tiraspol: 1996).

19 *Bessarabskii Vopros i Obrazovanie Pridnestrovskoi Moldavskoi Respubliki*, 96.

Even if we set aside the described exercises in juridical chicanery, the 'founding fathers' of the unrecognized republic used the events of the year 1924 and the 16 years of the Moldovan ASSR as a historical justification for the creation and existence of the PMR itself. Thus, they attempted to reject the accusations that the Transnistrian republic is an entirely new artificial construction.

The reference to the establishment of the Moldovan ASSR in 1924 helped Transnistrian leaders to avoid another inconvenient question. Their opponents disputed the insertion of the adjective 'Moldovan' in the name of the separatist republic. They argued that Moldovans constituted only a third of the region's population, calling into question the 'Moldovanness' of the Transnistrian republic and trying to present it as a Russian/Soviet/Muscovite intrigue. The 'Political and Legal Justification' responded with a historical precedent, stating that 'the Moldovan ASSR was created in 1924 on the territory of the Ukrainian SSR, even though Moldovans comprised only 30% of population.'²² Thus, the document implied that there was already a case of the 'Moldovan' republic on this territory, which proved to be viable despite a relatively low number of inhabiting Moldovans.

It is another question why Transnistrian leaders decided to put the adjective 'Moldovan' in the name of the republic. After all, they could leave it out and just go with the regional 'Transnistrian,' which corresponded to multiethnic character of the region and views of its leaders. By including 'Moldovan' in the title they possibly attempted to contrast their position to that of the national movement on the right-bank, which they presented as going in the Romanian direction. For them 'Moldovan' in this

context implied the advocacy of the separate Moldovan identity, language and culture and devotedness to the ideals of multiethnicity, as they understood it, and Eastern orientation, in contrast to pro-Romanian and nationalist Chişinău authorities. In addition, since the situation was still open with many possible outcomes, Transnistrian leaders probably still contemplated the possibilities of acting on an all-Moldovan scale, and not just limiting themselves to the region under their control. This change of context over time can also explain the evolution of the Transnistrian views on the legality/illegality of the proclamation of the Moldovan SSR in August 1940. *The Political and Legal Justification* in 1990 mostly lamented and attempted to expose the impropriety of the decision of the Supreme Soviet of the Moldovan SSR to evaluate the proclamation of the Moldovan SSR as illegal. At this time Transnistrian authorities still saw the whole Moldovan population, both on the left bank (to a larger extent, of course) and on the right bank of Dniester, as their audience. Later assessments of the disbandment of the Moldovan ASSR as illegal and having taken place due to the establishment of a larger Moldovan SSR could be found in Transnistrian publications which were intended almost exclusively for a Transnistrian audience. It implies that the territory of the unrecognized Transnistrian republic should never have been legally part of the Moldovan SSR and by extension of the Republic of Moldova. This message is much more appropriate in the context, when the separatist republic remained the only real political option for local leaders and intellectuals, who develop its historical narrative. In this story, the 'Transnistrian statehood was sacrificed' in order to create the Moldovan SSR, which was 'artificially designed by Stalinist regime.'²³ As

²² *Bessarabskii Vopros i Obrazovanie Pridnestrovskoi Moldavskoi Respubliki*, 97.

²³ *Fenomen Pridnestrov'ia* (Tiraspol: RIO

is usually the case in national narratives, the loss of past statehood appears in official or semi-official histories as an unjust, ideally illegal act of an external force.

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Even though the supporting documents for the Transnistrian declaration of sovereignty inaugurated the Moldovan ASSR as the justification for the existence of the PMR and later years saw its celebration as the 'first republic/statehood in Transnistria',²⁴ the attitude towards the interwar autonomous republic in the PMR's historical narrative is not entirely and exclusively positive. The socioeconomic development, construction of local industry and infrastructure, cultural and educational evolution usually receive a favorable assessment in Transnistrian histories of the Moldovan ASSR. In respective sections the PMR historians echo the traditions and style of the Soviet historiography, with the exception of the inclusion of a few paragraphs on the famine of 1932-33, the arbitrary character of collectivization and repressions in 1937-38. At the same time, Transnistrian politicians and historians have significant reservations in relation to some of the sides of the political history of the Moldovan ASSR and primarily to the mechanisms and rationales behind its establishment in 1924.

The former president of the PMR Igor' Smirnov outlined some of the issues which the Transnistrian leaders found politically inconvenient in the case of 'first statehood in Transnistria.' Discussing the first state-building steps in the

separatist region, he emphasized that the experience of the Moldovan ASSR could hardly be of use in this endeavor, for the republic was created in 1924 under different conditions and more importantly 'from above,'²⁵ without any consultations with the population. Such criticism of the 'first republic' by allegedly the most influential personality in the PMR's history may come as a surprise, taking into consideration that it was the only available historical reference to Transnistrian statehood. Yet, the PMR leader and other public figures did not admit the arbitrary character of the Moldovan ASSR simply for the sake of historical truth and justice. The acknowledgment of the top-down origins of the left-bank Soviet Republic allowed Transnistrian leaders and historians to claim the superiority of their own project even over the celebrated historical statehood. Any official narrative of the PMR's history explicitly emphasizes that the 'revived Transnistrian statehood' in early 1990s was built up 'from below.' Thus, according to this interpretation the post-Soviet reincarnation of Transnistrian statehood is more democratic and politically advanced than its interwar predecessor.

The official historical narratives often tend to include a historical 'golden age,' a period of all-round flourishing which is usually associated with strong statehood, the culmination of territorial expansion and geopolitical prestige and/or intensive cultural and economic development. In the case of the PMR's historical narrative the best candidate to occupy the niche of a 'golden age' was the period of the Moldovan ASSR. The other option could have been the postwar period, when Transnistria in the composition of the Moldovan SSR enjoyed years of economic and industrial construction. But in the postwar years the left-bank regions

PGU, 2003), 69; *Gosudarstvennost' Pridnestrov'ia*, 48.
²⁴ *Gosudarstvennost' Pridnestrov'ia*, 22; *Fenomen Pridnestrov'ia*, 22; N.V. Babilunga, B.G. Bomeshko, *Pridnestrovskii Konflikt: Istoricheskie, Demograficheskie, Politicheskie Aspekty* (Tiraspol: RIO PGU, 1998), 13.

²⁵ Smirnov, *Zhit' na Nashei Zemle*, 93.

of the Moldovan SSR did not act by themselves. They did not have a separate administrative status, 'statehood' in the terminology of Transnistrian historians.

Why, though, did the Moldovan ASSR not receive unconditional recognition as the 'golden age' in the history of the region? Why is the 'first statehood' in Transnistria celebrated in the PMR political and historical discourse, but only with certain reservations? After all, the arbitrary character of its inception could have been downplayed or simply ignored. The open criticism of one's own 'first statehood' and especially of the process, which led to its emergence is quite unusual. At the same time the mythologization and the embellishment of certain periods by silencing inconvenient facts, among other things, is not uncommon in historical narratives, especially those with political endorsement. The same publications, which criticize the top-down process of the establishment of the Moldovan ASSR, devote only two short paragraphs to the issues of famine and repressions in the 50-page overviews of the republic's 16 years of existence.²⁶ Nevertheless, the Transnistrian historical and political discourse does not in any way ignore or omit the story of the establishment of the Moldovan ASSR 'from above.' On the contrary, it deliberately focusses on it. Apparently, it was crucial for the PMR leaders to assert the superiority of the unrecognized 'second' republic in Transnistria over the 'first' one. The emphasis on the arbitrary origins of the Moldovan ASSR does call its legitimacy into question and by extension somewhat weakens its appeal as the 'first statehood' for the narrative. However, by partially sacrificing this

²⁶ To be fair, the much more detailed two-volume *History of PMR* (with the second one in two parts) devotes more than two pages to the repressions with again only several paragraphs on the famine, *Istoriia PMR*, vol. 2 part. 1, 100-102, 114-115.

part of the story the PMR leaders opened the possibility to declare the uniqueness of their subordinated republic. The originality of the PMR is a key part of the self-representation of the ruling regime. Not by coincidence, one of the key Transnistrian historical books bears the title *Phenomenon of Transnistria*, 'phenomenon' implying here something unusual and rare. According to the elaborated Transnistrian historical narrative, any major political change in this region throughout the 20th century (such as the unification of Bessarabia with Romania, the creation of the Moldovan ASSR, later its disbandment and the establishment of the Moldovan SSR, and finally the events surrounding the fall of the Soviet Union) was an imposition from above, which ignored the population's opinion. In this context the promoted bottom-up story of the establishment of the PMR serves to underscore its uniqueness and to claim moral superiority, which is of great and immediate use for the highly contested legitimacy of the unrecognized republic. The slightly tarnished image of the Moldovan ASSR is the price paid to make this focus more explicit.

However, there are some other reasons, which impede the exploitation of the story of the 'first statehood' to the full extent. To begin with, the Moldovan ASSR was a constituent part of the Ukrainian SSR. While the fostered Transnistrian identity has an evident Eastern, Slavic vector, it is mostly oriented towards Russia, rather than Ukraine. Unlike the Republic of Moldova, Ukraine does not figure as an enemy and has a rather favorable image in the PMR. Nevertheless, nobody in Transnistria seriously discusses the prospects of joining Ukraine on any basis. In turn, the issue of unification with the Russian Federation is always on the table in Tiraspol.²⁷ Thus, in this context

²⁷ In 2006 PMR authorities even organized a

the subordination of the Moldovan ASSR to Soviet Ukrainian authorities during 16 years of its existence is not the most convenient story for the ideologists of the breakaway republic. Another reason for the restrained approval of the establishment of the Moldovan ASSR by Transnistrian historians is also related to its arbitrary character, but in a different light. The Soviet decision to create the autonomous republic was not only inappropriate due to the lack of consultations with the involved population. It also imposed an agenda, which according to Transnistrian historians, was alien to local population. Thus, since the new Soviet autonomous republic appeared with the 'recession' of Bessarabia in mind, its title acquired the word 'Moldovan', even though the left-bank of the river Dniester had never been part of the Moldovan principality. In addition, the Transnistrian historian argues further, after the establishment of the Moldovan ASSR its territory (and by extension the territory of the future PMR) started to be associated with the Bessarabian problem. Apparently, the author sees here the roots of future problems: 'In 1924 an event took place, which laid the foundation for today's problems. Then the process of change ... of the state belonging of the Transnistrian lands started.'²⁸ Within the Transnistrian historical narrative this means the acquisition of an unwanted political affiliation with the Moldovan state by the Transnistrian territory which local historians perceive as a historically multiethnic Slavic land. The Moldovanness here is not a problem by itself, as long as it does not imply indissoluble ties

to right-bank Moldova and it is not imposed 'from above,' unlike the 'Moldovan' definition introduced from below during the establishment of the PMR. Basically, Transnistrian historians project their contemporary situation onto the 1920s. Since in their perception its main opponent during the years of the PMR's existence was the right-bank Moldovan authorities, aided by Romania, any historical links between the Transnistrian statehood and Bessarabia were to be condemned. This is exactly why the incorporation of the Transnistrian regions into the Bessarabian issue deserved such a strong critical assessment. In the eyes of Transnistrian historians the dismemberment of the Moldovan ASSR, that is the 'first statehood in Transnistria,' and the incorporation of its parts into the Moldovan SSR, which would later evolve into the detested Republic of Moldova, were just the logical results of the imposed agenda in 1924.²⁹ However, they unsurprisingly omit the fact that without the Bessarabian problem it was unclear and in fact quite doubtful that the 'first statehood in Transnistria' would have ever occurred during the interwar years.

To conclude, there exists an interesting discrepancy in the Transnistrian historical narrative in relation to the establishment and 16-year existence of the Moldovan ASSR. The PMR authorities, historians and public figures celebrate it as the first instance of the statehood on the left-bank of the Dniester, which provided 'historical and legal prerequisites for the revival of state structures in 1990.'³⁰ At the same time the specific circumstances of the establishment of the Moldovan ASSR and the ra-

referendum on the independence of the Transnistrian Moldovan Republic. The first question asked if the respondent supported the independence of the PMR and its subsequent free annexation by the Russian Federation. 97.1% of the participants answered 'yes' to this.

²⁸ *Fenomen Pridnestrov'ia*, 52.

²⁹ *Istori'a PMR*, vol. 2, part 1, 98.

³⁰ From the speech of the Chairman of the Supreme Soviet of the PMR, G. Marakutsa, in 2004 on the 80th anniversary of the Moldovan ASSR, cited in <http://www.pmr21.info/article.php?art=40> (accessed on September 7, 2014)

tionales behind this decision encounter strong criticism.

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There was at least one attempt to dethrone the Moldovan ASSR as the 'first statehood in Transnistria.' In 2004 at the conference devoted to the 80th anniversary of the establishment of the Moldovan ASSR, A. Volkova proposed to contemplate the possibility that the Moldovan ASSR was not the 'first experience' of statehood in Transnistria. Volkova is one of the most politically engaged historians in the PMR, who in the first half of the 1990s was the vice-Chairman of the Transnistrian Supreme Soviet and from 1996 the state advisor of the PMR president I. Smirnov until the latter's abdication after the loss in elections in 2011. As a 'forgotten' contender for the title of the 'first statehood,' the Transnistrian historian proposed the short-lived Bessarabian SSR, which the Bolsheviks proclaimed in 1919, when the fortune on the south-western front of the Civil War turned in their favour and the Red Army solidified its positions on Dniester for a short period. The Bolsheviks envisaged further advancing to the West, 'liberating' Bessarabia which was 'illegally occupied' by Romania, and under ideal circumstances the unification of forces with the Red Hungary of Bela Kun. The Bolsheviks failed to even enter Bessarabia, despite several military incursions and insurrections organized by local communist cells, and were soon themselves kicked out of Transnistria by their opponents. Thus, the Bessarabian SSR de facto had no real jurisdiction over Bessarabia itself. Yet for Volkova this did not matter much. For her it was crucial that during its short history the leadership of the Bessarabian SSR, which mostly printed leaflets rather than doing any administrative work, was stationed in the 'temporary capital,' Tiraspol, and included several regions of Transnistria.

The Transnistrian historian found these facts sufficient enough to suggest that the Bessarabian SSR was in reality the first republic in Transnistria and the PMR's statehood was five years older, starting in 1919, not in 1924. Such a statement on the 80th anniversary of the 'first republic,' just several years after the monumental *History of the PMR* and programmatic *Phenomenon of Transnistria* solidified, despite all its flaws, the Moldovan ASSR's status in the historical narrative, was undoubtedly a provocation and inspired much controversy. It not only questioned the official narrative of Transnistrian history. It openly challenged its authors, most notably N. Babilunga and his laboratory *History of Transnistria*, which virtually held a monopoly over the interpretation of region's history. The further course the events suggests that the disagreement did not have a mere scholarly basis.

A year later Volkova managed to establish a *Chair of History of the PMR* and an affiliated research laboratory *History of the PMR* at the Transnistrian State University³¹, even though the institution already included the Chair of Universal History and Babilunga's own *Chair of National (Otechestvoennaya) History*³² with the laboratory *History of Transnistria*. The main aim of the new Chair was to teach and research the history of the PMR proper, that is from late 1980s onwards. Yet, it soon became clear that this was only a pretext, to justify the establishment of the new division. Although it focused mostly on post-Soviet years, the spheres of interest of the new Chair and its research laboratory extended well into the Soviet and even pre-Soviet periods. Thus, the small separatist republic and even the same University had

31 <http://strategiya-pmr.ru/wp-content/uploads/files/d/buklet-20-let-iigp-pgu-im-t-g-shevchenko.pdf> (accessed on September 7, 2014)

32 The Chair focused on teaching of the history of the PMR, Russia and Ukraine.

two Chairs and laboratories, which de facto dealt with the same issues, duplicating each other's work, competing for similar research projects. Volkova had much success in this competition, apparently benefiting from her political experience, multiple personal connections and, of course, her position as the President's advisor.

Babilunga and his associates had no intentions to concede the position of the leading authority on region's history to the ambitious contender. Together with his main specialist on interwar period Bomesenko, he responded with several critical articles, which mostly focused on Volkova's attempt to transfer the title of the 'first statehood in Transnistria' to the Bessarabian SSR. These papers, as well as some of Volkova's publications, suggest that the conflict not only has personal and institutional dimensions, but also ideological origins based on different visions of the region's history. Unsurprisingly, Babilunga considers Volkova's interpretation of the Bessarabian SSR a profanation.³³ According to him, the short-lived republic had no jurisdiction over any territory, let alone the left-bank regions. At the same time the 'temporary capital' in Tiraspol was in reality located in a railway coach,³⁴ which probably turned out to be handy, when the Soviet Bessarabian government had to escape the advancing opponents of Bolsheviks. Due to these facts, Babilunga concludes that the Bessarabian SSR cannot be considered a case of early statehood in any way. He then finds a way to attack the establishment of Volkova's new Chair at the University and its first activi-

ties, in particular the publication of the historical atlas of the PMR and a history manual by a group of authors headed by Volkova. According to Babilunga, the authors not only restate their mistaken views on the Bessarabian SSR, but also present an unsuccessful approach to the region's history, which 'is limited only to the contemporary boundaries of the PMR, without any connections to the processes, which took place in those countries, which Transnistria was part of in different periods.'³⁵ To be fair, Volkova's atlas³⁶ does not repeat the claim that the Bessarabian SSR was the first experience of statehood in Transnistria. It does however fail to mention the mantra that the Moldovan ASSR was. The Atlas' very narrow focus is indeed of interest though. Almost all the included maps zoomed to the Transnistrian region, as if no other territories were of any relevance to its history. Moreover, on almost every map of any period there is a dotted line, which indicates the contemporary boundaries of the PMR.

This is an alternative interpretation of Transnistrian history. Babilunga and his laboratory developed a historical narrative, which is centered on the region, but often incorporates and contextualizes it in larger entities, primarily that of the Slavic/Russian/Soviet space. In many respects this is a creative interpretation and adaptation of the Soviet historical narratives in the Soviet national republics.³⁷ Volkova proposes a strictly state-centered version of the national historical narrative, which is also in fact more in line with other cases of the offi-

33 Later Babilunga would even call Volkova and her associates 'dilettanti in history,' Babilunga, *Priznanna'a Istoriografi'a*, 34

34 N.V. Babilunga, B.G. Bomesenko, "Bessarabska'a SSR: k Istarii Nesosto'avshegos'a Proekta," <http://www.pmr21.info/article.php?art=40> (accessed on September 7, 2014)

35 *Priznanna'a Istoriografi'a*, 34.

36 *Atlas. Pridnestrovska'a Moldavska'a Respublika. Istori'a* (Tiraspol: 2007).

37 For the discussion on the similarities between the *Istori'a* PMR and the Soviet historical narrative, see Vladimir Solonari, "Creating a 'People': A Case-Study in Post-Soviet History Writing," *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History*, 4 (Spring 2003): 411-438.

cial histories in Europe. The antiquity of statehood is important within this type of stories. Therefore, even five years made a difference in the Volkova's campaign for the Bessarabian SSR. The choice in the titles of the research laboratories is also indicative of the different focuses: Babilunga's 'Transnistria' geographical and vague 'PMR' with no strict borders and Volkova's 'PMR' with clear-cut political borders that define the limits of the inquiry.

The equilibrium did not always exist. In the end of 2007 a scandal broke out, which had almost swung the balance in Volkova's favor. The journal of the Babilunga's laboratory *Historical Almanac of Transnistria* published one of the critical reviews on Volkova's atlas. The latter, using her political position, devised this publication as a political attack on the PMR's authorities. This allowed readers to revisit the balance between the two conflicting parties. Volkova managed to recruit the PMR Minister of Education to her side, who accused Babilunga and his associates of publishing harmful articles without the sanction of authorities.³⁸ Minister Pashchenko even threatened to cease financing the laboratory *History of Transnistria*, for she saw no reason for the existence of two research laboratories with the same scope.³⁹ Eventually Babilunga pulled enough strings to save his brainchild, but he had to give up the journal, which passed under the supervision of Volkova's camp and tellingly changed the title to *Historical Bulletin of the PMR*. The balance of power had slightly changed, but the duplicity of two conflicting historical research laboratories was maintained. Volkova's alternative fits well with the needs of the regime which seeks

to create an independent, separate statehood. At the same time Babilunga's narrative suits the weak polity which also relies much on outside help and identifies with a larger political and cultural space. The case of the separatist Transnistrian republic is somewhere in-between these two options. Therefore, possibly neither is exclusively endorsed by the authorities and the duplicity and conflictual situation persists since 2005. This is probably fortunate for the Moldovan ASSR, which retained its status as the 'first republic in Transnistria' and expects official celebrations for the 90th anniversary of the PMR in October 2014.

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³⁸ For Babilunga's and Bomeshko's version of the situation <http://www.regnum.ru/news/polit/896191.html> (accessed on September 7, 2014)

³⁹ For the interview with the PMR Minister of Education <http://altai.regnum.ru/news/898567.html> (accessed on September 7, 2014)

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