

**CENTRO STUDI SULLA STORIA DELL'EUROPA ORIENTALE**

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**Moldavian-Russian Political Relations in Recent History**

One of the hallmarks of Moldavia's modern history is with no doubt the relation of the region with Russia, its powerful neighbour in the north. One seems justified in asserting that the way Moldavians acted or reacted both in the international context and in internal affairs was determined or largely influenced by the attitude they successively took towards Russia. Until very recently it was on the background of their relations with Russia that Moldavians perceived certain interests as their own. Similarly it was in connection with the Russian position to those interests that the decision was taken whether and how to promote them. It appears therefore extremely useful while analyzing the present state of affairs along the Dniestr river to recall some crucial moments of the Moldavian (Bessarabian)-Russian relations in modern times. Without dwelling on a punctual description of events, the present contribution deals rather with exploring cultural-political legacies in the Prut-Dniestr area, the preferences and orientations of the peoples involved. Alongside objective parameters, these traits contributed to shape the destinies of that border land in South-Eastern Europe.

### **Under Tsarist Rule**

According to the sources, the Russians army entering the eastern part of Moldova in 1806 in the course of a new military campaign against the Ottoman Empire, took control on a territory which was 'empty' of people and, from the institutional point of view, a kind of *res nullius*. Moldova was formally a Principality of its own under Ottoman protection (or suzerainty). But as a matter of fact the authority of the Moldavian prince had been during almost four centuries strongly eroded by the protector. More notably, in the part of Moldavia which was to constitute after 1812 the Bessarabian *oblast'*, the Ottoman Empire administered directly, by-passing the Moldavian prince, some areas of outstanding strategic importance; some other areas in the south had been entrusted to Tatar rule; the northern lands had been ceded to Austria in 1775 (where they were known under the name of Bucovina). In other words, weak Moldavian authority, itself vassal to the Turks, extended to an irregular territory comprising hardly a third of the surface of the Principality between the rivers Prut and Dniestr and was on the verge of complete disintegration<sup>1</sup>. To this added the insecurity caused by frequent Cossak incursions against which the Moldavian Prince had little to oppose.

Russian conquest brought peace, established ordered public law conditions, unified Bessarabia.

The absence of recognized proprietors extended from the juridical to the physical realm. As a matter of fact, political unrest, warfare and unhealthy, largely swampy environment had left the region almost "without people"<sup>2</sup>. Russian descriptions of Bessarabia in 1812, the year in which the Treaty of Bucharest finally took the region from the Ottoman Empire and assigned it to Russia, present a territory where

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<sup>1</sup> Agadjanov S.G., Trepavlov V.V.(eds.), *Natsional'nye okrainy rossiskoi Imperii. Stanovlenie i razvitie sistemy upravleniya*, Moscow, 1997, p. 162-3.

<sup>2</sup> Nakko A., *Istoriya Bessarabii*, Moscow, 1873, p. 15. See also Batiushkov P.N., *Bessarabiya. Istoricheskoe Opisanie*, St. Petersburg, 1892, p. 5, defines the territory as "almost completely empty". It is difficult to get precise figures: on the 44.200 km<sup>2</sup> lived a population varying, according to estimations, from 140.000 to 300.000.

civilization could not but be imported from abroad as human resource for indigenous development was simply lacking. The Russian government had to resort to incentives for a strong immigration in order to take under cultivation the ground abandoned to itself. New-comers were foremost Slavs, but not only: Turks (Gagauz), Bulgarians, Germans, French, Poles also settled in the area and added to its already traditional national medley.

The *leyenda negra* about Bessarabia's backwardness and desperate conditions prior to Russian occupation did not change substantially in later years. The picture of Bessarabia and of the native Moldavians in Russia remained for a long period of time a very negative one<sup>3</sup>.

The first century of Russian sovereignty over Bessarabia came to completion in 1912. Only a modest ceremony took place in Chisinau with distribution of medals sent by the Tsar to local notables, whereas in the far away imperial residence of St. Petersburg the date passed almost unnoticed, save for the visit to the Tsar of few outstanding personalities from the province. State authorities apparently considered the event not really worth of commemoration. The publication of an album with pictures by the Municipality of Chisinau, the capital town of the *guberniya*, was among the very few happenings marking the jubilee<sup>4</sup>.

In 1913, though, a remarkable work was edited in Moscow under the title *Russia on the Danube and the Creation of the Bessarabian Oblast*. It dealt with the events that a century earlier had led Bessarabia under Russian rule. The author was L. A. Kasso, at the time no less than Minister for Education in the Imperial Government, whose ancestors were of Moldavian (earlier on, Greek) descent. In the first, long part of the book he is the dry teller of military operations and diplomatic plots, delivering a great number of details interesting to erudites. In the last pages however he changes his tone and undertakes a concise but sharp analysis of the aftermath of the annexation. He notices that although Bessarabia had been integrated during the last century more and more into the structure of the Empire with regard to legislation and governance, still a thick indifference persisted towards it. Lack of interest and poor knowledge persistently characterized the relation of Russia to Bessarabia. Kasso finds an eloquent example of this in the by then last edition of the *Russian Annuary*, edited in 1910 by the Central Committee of Statistics of the Ministry of the Interior. Under the heading "*Bessarabian Population*" many ethnic groups were listed, only the Moldavians were missing. Kasso also recalls the opinion of a Russian general complaining about the poor conquest of 1812: after long years of war Russia had incorporated just a "strip of ground".

In fact, as Kasso reminds the reader, the surface of Bessarabia was three times the Elsass-Lothringen's annexed in 1870 with so great an emphasis by the German Reich<sup>5</sup>.

On this point however, as it is related by a French source, the Russian general only confirmed an opinion on Bessarabia held by Galib, the Turkish plenipotentiary at the peace negotiations with Russia in 1812: the territorial loss to Russia sanctioned by the Bucharest Treaty was just "*peu de chose*"<sup>6</sup>. This is of course to be viewed in the light of

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<sup>3</sup> Krushchevan P.A. (ed.), *Bessarabiya*, Moscow, 1903, Here, after a frightful description of the material condition of Bessarabia at the time of Russian conquest, is stated that "intellectual and moral conditions of the people were very similar to its (*of the region*) backwardness"; the inhabitants were "half wild" ("*poludikie*"), p. 101-103.

<sup>4</sup> *Iubileinyi sbornik goroda Kishineva. 1812-1912*, Kishinev, 1912.

<sup>5</sup> Kasso L. A., *Rossiia na Dunae i obrazovanie bessarabskoi oblasti*, Moscow, 1913, p. 226, 228.

<sup>6</sup> Iorga N., *Neamul romanesc in Basarabia*, Bucuresti, 1995, p. 285.

the original Russian war aims, which comprised not just a portion of the Moldova Principality but the entirety of it and the Principality of Wallachia in addition. In part, however, Galib's *bon mot* reflects indeed the value that both parties, the Russian and Turkish alike, apparently attached to the territory in question.

The insatisfaction and the frustration of Russian circles in relation to Bessarabia had surely objective reasons, notably in geo-political terms. As a matter of fact, the assets of what was going to go into history as the last conquest of imperial Russia on European soil remained by far behind expectations. It turned out that the acquisition of Bessarabia did not open but rather barred perspectives.

First of all the region did not become the basis for further Russian progresses in the Balkans. On the contrary. Having reached the left bank of the northern arm of the Danube, Russia had quickly to realize that she had got to the point where Russian-Turkish confrontation ceased to be a bilateral question and had necessarily to assume the character of an European issue. Russia did get strategic benefits by the situation created in 1812 since it became a Danubian country. But at the same time she very clearly sensed that she had touched the limit beyond which Europe would never allow it to go, without the risk of a general war.

Also in respect to the Balkan peoples, whose sympathies Russia was being canvassing in the context of her confrontation with Turkey, Bessarabia proved of little use.

The Bessarabians were the first orthodox Christians ever freed from Turkish yoke by Russia and their treatment could become exemplary to those whose liberation had yet to follow. "We have to offer to the inhabitants of Bessarabia the advantages of a wise and paternal governance and in that way draw to the region the attention of the neighboring peoples. The last war occupied the minds and the expectations of Moldovans, Valachs, Greeks, Bulgarians and Serbs, all peoples inclined to Russia. We have to maintain this inclination of theirs" wrote Capodistria<sup>7</sup>, the dynamic Ministry for foreign affairs in St. Petersburg from 1816 to 1822. In the vision of Capodistria, Bessarabia offered the tsarist government the occasion to showing to the Balkan nations that annexation by Russia could be beneficial in many respect and, foremost, that it did not mean forcibly unconditional absorption.

To make this point clear the imperial government granted a special form of self-government to Bessarabia, giving to local representatives the possibility to decide themselves on the issues concerning the province.

This generous measure, however, went largely unnoticed abroad and had in practice no impact at all. As a matter of fact, it seems that Russian agents in Christian regions of the Ottoman Empire made a very limited use of Bessarabia's special legislation in their propaganda, possibly in the absence of real confidence that the system would ever properly work. Even when Russia officially protested in Constantinople on the ground of the insatisfactory implementation by the Turks of the autonomy promised to the Serbs, she did not avail herself of the example she had just set with the autonomy for Bessarabia<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> Kasso, *Rossiya na Dunae*, p. 197.

<sup>8</sup> It is interesting noticing that Russians conceived the autonomy for the Moldavians as an instrument to facilitate their integration into the Empire, whereas the autonomy for the Serbs was from the very beginning intended as a first step towards independence. On the Russian engagement for the Serb autonomy see: Kudriyavcheva E. P., *Rossiya i obrazovanie serbskovo gosudarstva. 1812-1833 gg.*, Moscow, 1992, in particular p. 44-45; 199.

At this junction, examining the internal implications of the Bessarabian autonomy system, begins also the subjective part of the dull relationship between Russia and her new province. This is best exemplified by the very events connected with the *Statute for the establishment of the Bessarabian oblast* dated 29 April 1818. The imperial rescript, which gave Bessarabia its peculiar constitution, bears a paramount importance. Until then Bessarabia had never had in history a distinct form of governance of her own. In a sense there is no exaggeration in stating that the statute of 1818 marks the first appearance of Bessarabia (out of which most of today's Moldova Republic was to emerge) as a political entity, separated from the rest of the Moldavian territory<sup>9</sup>.

It may be assumed that on the Russian side the commitment to autonomy was not at all just a tricky device for appeasing local apprehensions in regard to the new regime, possibly in a view to swallow up the region more easily afterwards.

“Can we really believe that we may establish the happiness of any people imposing on it the obligation to deny itself? And would it not amount to the same to submit it to a governance completely alien to it?” wrote Alexandr I to the Commander of the Russian Army in Bessarabia in 1813<sup>10</sup>.

Alexandr's words and deeds proved to be time and again in contradiction nevertheless in this case it would be improper to dismiss his assertions referring to the respect due to local habits of governance in newly acquired territories as purely instrumental. During his reign Russia granted a very far reaching autonomy to Finland. At the Congress of Vienna Alexandr agreed without difficulty to the request of the Powers for an autonomous government in the Polish districts of Russia. Previously also the territories conquered by Russia on the Caucasus during the war against Turkey had been given a certain degree of local self-government, in the absence of foreign pressure.

Of course the autonomy responded not only to the enlightened principles of a Monarch but also to Russian political calculations. The new regime needed to establish itself more firmly than just by way of military conquest. Russians were looking for allies on the spot. Both the preferences of the tsarist government and the uncomplicated social pattern of the region restricted the search to the local nobility. This thin but omnipotent class was ready to accept the new sovereignty provided there would be no infringements on its privileges. The autonomy was thus offered as a pact between the Court and the Bessarabian boyards. As a consequence autonomy came to mean less the self-government of the country as the guarantee for the continuation of the oppressive, obscurant ruling of the Moldavian noblemen on their fellow citizens, especially the peasants.

The autonomy statute was certainly not an example of modern constitutionalism, but contained dispositions which in comparison to the previous state of affairs in Moldavia enabled the establishment of more orderly public law relations. At the top of the local institutions was the Supreme Council, a representative body in miniature, on which largely depended the welfare of the inner life of the province. The Council had been given the highest authority both in the administrative (it adopted any measure required by ordinary and extraordinary administration) and in the judiciary field (being the

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<sup>9</sup> It is to be noticed that from 1818 on the notion 'Bessarabia' acquired not only unprecedented political content but also a new geographic dimension. Until then Bessarabia had been one of the names for the territories on the Black sea between Prut and Dniestr, indicating therefore only the very southern part of Russia's Bessarabia province.

<sup>10</sup> Kasso, *Rossiya na Dunae*, p. 214.

second and last instance for appeals both in criminal and civil cases), somehow in disregard of the principle of the division of powers. The Council had also a role to play in the legislative. Although law making or setting of new rules remained prerogatives of the Monarch, still the Council was at liberty to propose legislative measures for the province and, if requested, had the possibility to comment on laws in preparation in the capital of the Empire inasmuch as they had relevance to the province.

A very important feature of the Council was that in it elected representatives of the provincial nobility were in the majority face to the members appointed by the Emperor (6 to 5). The head of the executive was the civil governor chosen by the Tsar among the local nobility, who together with his counsellors acted under the control of a plenipotentiary representative (*namestik-loctiitor*) of the Tsar himself.

The statute of 1818 conceded an important place to Moldavian language, which in cultural terms was undoubtedly the most distinctive trait of the province. Official papers had to be drafted and published both in Russian and Moldavian; whereas for major criminal cases verdicts had to be in Russian, civil justice was to be rendered in Moldavian only, especially if falling under “Moldavian law and customs”, which remained largely in force also under the new regime.

Finally, progressive features of the statute were the dispositions concerning the establishment of districts and city councils (institutions which were unknown until then in the region) as well as the creation of codified guilds<sup>11</sup>.

With the prerogatives provided by this document in hands, Bessarabia or, rather, the Bessarabian nobility, had a historical occasion to preserve and even develop the region’s peculiar interests, in the long run to shape a political identity of its own.

Even authors whose anti-Russian sentiments are apparent, recognize that “all main posts in administration and justice, not only in the capital but also in the periphery were held by Moldavian nobility by way of election”<sup>12</sup> and that “Bessarabian nobility had really a great possibility to influence all public affairs in the Province”<sup>13</sup>.

But in this crucial moment of the region’s history the Bessarabian noblemen failed to display a sense of responsibility toward the country. It became quickly evident that they were led by a single goal: to prevent any change in the widely arbitrary system that had permitted them to dominate without restraint or fear of punishment. In the autonomy they just saw the chance to avoid any contact with modernity.

In an address to the Emperor in 1819 Moldavian nobility objected to the fact that, according to the statute, in several criminal cases Russian laws were to be followed. They could not admit that Moldavian laws had to give way to foreign legislation. Here the kernel of their letter “The fourth century is revolving since Moldova is governed by her laws and rules; how could somebody believe that she did not have them or does not have them now? Do not old Moldavian customs exist any longer? Do we not resolve all quarrels on the ground of the laws of Iustinian and of other Byzantine Emperors?”<sup>14</sup>.

The defence of local traditions and ‘liberties’ by indignant Moldavian noblemen was the desire to keep at their mercy, foremost through unchecked jurisdiction, all other inhabitants of the region. Iustinian and other Byzantine Emperors (whose names were cautiously not mentioned in the address) were not expression of Moldavian genius but the veil behind which the country was being plundered since ever.

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<sup>11</sup> Agadjanov, Trepavlov (eds.), *Natsional'nye okrainy*, p. 174-6.

<sup>12</sup> Ciobanu S., *Cultura romaneasca sub stapinirea rusa*, Chisinau, 1992, p. 20 (first edition 1923).

<sup>13</sup> Boldur A., *Istoria Basarabiei*, Bucharest, 1992, p. 330 (first edition 1940).

<sup>14</sup> Ciobanu, *Cultura romaneasca*, p. 17.

Bessarabian nobles wanted their social and economic privileges untouched but were not enlightened enough to recognize the opportunity to clothe them in the disguise of written laws<sup>15</sup>.

Against this background the statute of 1818 did not get real life and no visible benefit derived from it to the province. The motives lie not in Russian perfidy. Moldavian nobility did not see any interest in making it work.

A good example is delivered by the activity of the Supreme Council. Local elected representatives began very early to neglect attending the meetings of this organ or, while attending, they behaved so as if they were complying with an invidious duty. According to contemporary sources the Council used to work from 10 to 13, twice in a week. But “at 11 Moldavian nobles began to yawn”, at 12 to watch the clock, at 13 they stood up and went away “even if there were just two pages left before finishing the examination of a case”<sup>16</sup>.

One should not make the error to see in this attitude the intention of boldly boycotting the new sovereignty, of giving expression to a protest against Russia that could not be articulated in other ways. It was just the pre-modern mood of Moldavian leaders, totally unable to adapt to relatively sophisticated forms of politicization.

The Supreme Council made use of its advisory faculty on legislation only twice. In both cases, namely in 1819 and 1825, the Council advised the Emperor not to extend to Bessarabia the project of law on some small easenings of the peasants’ duties to the land owners<sup>17</sup>.

It is therefore natural that when the imperial Court, beginning with the Twenties, signalled its readiness to gradually equalize Moldavian nobility with Russian nobility, the former, considering the undoubtful increasing of social prestige and self-esteem that this measure entailed, began to give up the mistrust and passive resistance it had initially displayed to Russian penetration. The boyards did assimilate after a time “as to language, customs, inclinations and even external manners”<sup>18</sup>.

Lower classes and countryside, however, remained unaffected by this process. Bessarabian villages maintained all their ethnic features the whole XIX century through. But they were neither materially or culturally equipped to determine social and political trends.

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<sup>15</sup> Not differently behaved the western Moldavian and the Wallachian nobility when having come under Russian occupation in 1828, tried to prevent every reform the latter were urging for. In Bratianu Gh., *Sfatul domnesc si adunarea starilor in principatele romine*, Bucharest 1994 (first ed. 1950) we read of clashes between “the great hopes of the boyards, who wanted to continue to be judges in their own cases - making the life of peasants all the harder by increasing the latter’s duties and reducing the area of ground that they were bound to put at the peasants’ disposition- and the more progressive and modern views of the General Kissilev both in the politic and the social field” (p. 254).

<sup>16</sup> Vengel F.F., *Zapiski*, vol. 3, tome 2, Moscow, 1892, p. 154. Vengel served Russian administration in Bessarabia at the beginning of the Twenties. Vengel’s memoirs have been published first in 1864, after his death.

<sup>17</sup> Boldur, *Istoria Basarabiei*, p. 328.

<sup>18</sup> Cazacu P., *Moldova intre Prut si Nistru. 1812-1918*, Iasi, 1924, p. 112. On the incorporation of the various ranks of Moldavian nobility into the Russian one see also Laskov N.V., *Stoletije prisoezineniya Bessarabii k Rossii, 1812-1912*, Kishinev, 1912, pp. 67-70.

As a consequence of the very poor record of the boyards in political and administrative affairs, heavy restrictions on the originally generous provisions were introduced by a new statute in 1828<sup>19</sup>. They were certainly in line with the more authoritarian view of the state held by the new Tsar Nicholas I but there is no doubt that they were dictated first of all by the necessity to adapt local public institutions to the social environment in which they were supposed to work. The powers of the Council were strongly reduced. It was degraded from 'supreme' to 'provincial', it lost its competencies as to legislation and a lot of judicial cases; the number of members appointed by the Tsar was augmented so as to leave in the minority the elected Moldavians; the use of the Moldavian language in public documents was greatly limited.

In spite of all changes, also this second statute, taken as a whole, left to local actors space enough to make known and foment the special interests of the province.

Nevertheless even this by far less requiring statute turned out to exceed the political energy of the Moldavian leading class. As a consequence in 1864, every form of autonomy was cancelled and in 1873 the Bassarabian *oblast'* became the Bessarabian *guberniya*, that is an administrative unit like all others in Russia.

As Kasso judiciously points out, Bessarabia experienced "the incidental loss of the rights it had incidentally enjoyed"<sup>20</sup>.

As a rule Romanian historiography, especially after 1918, presents the failure of the Bassarabian autonomy as a result of the fears of the tsarist government related to the strengthening of Romanian national sentiments in the region. Interpretations of this kind tend to unduly shift the attempts to russification promoted by St. Petersburg from late to early XIX century. In the second half of the century, most notably after 1880, the Russian government took indeed the course of a more nationalistic policy. In a delayed effort to tighten the relationship between the state and the citizens, which is an inevitable feature of modernization, the government actively sponsored the use of Russian language and tried to standardize legislation in all parts of the Empire<sup>21</sup>. But at the moment when Russia started this policy the Bassarabian autonomy belonged since long to the past.

During the XIX century a number of historical events took place in Russia involving Bessarabia. Interesting enough they all seem to prove that in spite of the accomplished institutional lining up, the spiritual integration of the province was not achieved and, what is more, only feebly promoted.

To validate this point may be enough to recall the circumstances under which the handing over of southern Bessarabia to Moldavia took place. This territorial change had been imposed in 1856 by the Great Powers to Russia following Russian defeat in a war against Turkey widely known as the Crimean war but which had started in and for the possession of western Moldova (and possibly Wallachia).

The correction of the frontier line decided at the Congress of Paris was not in the least aimed at restoring Moldavian historic rights or answering to Moldavian national

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<sup>19</sup> *Polnoe Sobranie Zakonov Rossiskoi Imperii. 1828, Sobranije II, Tom III, St. Petersburg, 1830, pp. 197-204.*

<sup>20</sup> Kasso, *Rossiia na Dunae*, p. 225

<sup>21</sup> Kaiser R., *The Geography of Nationalism in Russia and the USSR*, Princeton, 1994, pp. 87-89.

claims<sup>22</sup>. The only motive was the desire of the western Powers to keep away Russia from the Danube outlets. A purely technical question in strategic terms. It is worth noticing that Russia placed herself in the same perspective. In other words she did not attach to the territory (and to the people living thereon) any value more than did French and British diplomacy. To avoid the loss Russian representatives in Paris did not make any use of arguments related to linguistic and national links possibly existing between southern Bessarabia and Russia. In that case to the traditional Russian discomfort in opening discussions of this kind added the knowledge on how little Russian was at the time the region in question.

Almost twenty years later the tsarist government, under the strong pressure of Russian public opinion, began to prepare for a new war against Turkey. In spite of the fact that the military and diplomatic preparations lasted almost two years, leaving time to formulate the most varied and imaginative goals of war, southern Bessarabia was, as a rule, hardly mentioned. If it happened, seldom enough, then it was always in connection with the restoring of Russian presence on the Danube. No irredentist tones were being uttered. Serbs and Bulgarians ranged by far higher than Bessarabians, who, as former Russian citizens, were in principle more entitled to Russian rescuing.

The war aims gleaming before Russian action, inspiring newspapers' readers and the state leadership alike, were first of all the establishment of a great Bulgarian state and a new international statute for navigation in the Black Sea and through the Straits<sup>23</sup>.

The special responsibility lying on Russia as to the fate of the Balkan peoples under Ottoman rule was also in this occasion evoked repeatedly and at large. But in the second half of the Seventies, for the first time ever, the accent clearly shifted from Orthodox solidarity to ethnic Slav solidarity. Moldavians and Romanians, taken as one or two peoples, did not fit without question into the picture.

After the 1877-78 war an European Congress convened again, this time to deliberate about the results of a Russian victory, that is the peace treaty of S. Stefano. In it, among many other changes in the Balkans detrimental to Turkey, was contemplated the restitution of southern Bessarabia, although in an indirect way. Russia imposed to Turkey a huge contribution for war expenses refund. Should Turkey in future have realized that the sum was beyond its ability to pay (as it was not only likely but certain to be the case), Russia was ready to accept as a kind of indemnity the definitive possession of the Tulcea region (Dobrudgja) and a couple of townships in the Caucasus. By the same article 19a, however, Russia reserved to herself the liberty to offer the Dobrudgja to Romania, as reward for her services to Russia during the war, in exchange for the territory that the Principality of Moldavia (since 1864 part of Romania) had received by the Congress of Paris in 1856.

The Congress in Berlin strongly altered the S. Stefano Peace Treaty and stripped away many advantages Russia had ensured to herself and to the Slavs in the Balkan. Also in regard to the clause referring to Bessarabia pressures were made on Russia: the Powers pretended not to understand why Romania's integrity had to be infringed upon. It was moreover problematic to speak of a restitution. The holder of the disputed territory was

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<sup>22</sup> The Romanian position was that the Ottoman Empire had no right to cede in 1812 Moldavian soil to Russia since the Principality had accepted mid-XV c. Ottoman suzerainty precisely in order to ensure its territorial integrity. See *Romanii la 1859*, Bucharest, 1984, vol. 2, pp. 62-63 and passim.

<sup>23</sup> Hevrolina V.M., "Vostochnaya krizis 1875-1878 i russko-turetskaya voyna v novieishei sovietskoi literature," in *Voprosii Istorii*, n. 5, 1980, p. 127-134.

no longer Turkey but an ally, which had just fought and won the war on the side of Russia.

The Russian Plenipotentiary in Berlin defending the provision stated that “*la question de Bessarabie*” was in Russian eyes “*une question d’honneur*”. Would this question be left unresolved “*il serait impossible d’établir entre la Russie et la Roumanie les bons rapports nécessaires à la consolidation de la paix en Orient*”. The objection of the Romanian delegate according to which Bessarabia was “*un pays roumain*” that could not lawfully be taken away from Romania as it could not in 1812 did not prevent the Powers from deciding in favour of Russia. As the French delegate put it “*...il est opportun de ne point prolonger un état de choses qui engage l’amour propre d’un grand Empire*”. The same delegate however pointing to the fact that the Romanians had been treated “*un peu trop durement*” invited the Russians to give a sign of generosity and to agree on the concession of an additional strip of land to Romania towards the south (that is at the expense of Bulgaria). The Russians gave their consent. Quite unexpectedly they declared to adhere to the territorial rectification “*vu la présence d’éléments roumains*” on the envisaged area<sup>24</sup>.

The ethnic principle resorted to in order to justify the handing over of Bulgarian soil did not apply to Bessarabia<sup>25</sup>. In that case Russian “*amour propre*” was decisive.

Just few years after the celebrations for the union of 1912 Bessarabia, in a dramatic succession of events, became first a democratic federative republic in the framework of democratic Russia (2 December 1917), then an independent state (24 January 1918), and finally got united with the Romanian Kingdom (27 March 1918). This last passage, although sanctioned by the vote of the only regional authority in place at the time, the *Sfatul Tari* (Country Council) was made questionable by the fact that in the meantime the Romanian Army had occupied Bessarabia, taking advantage of the collapse of Russian power. According to later Soviet propaganda Romanian occupation had prevented Bessarabians from freely making use of their right to self-determination, the only ground on which the Soviet Union was ready to acknowledge secession. Bessarabia joined Romania unconditionally and ceased to exist as an individual political entity. But, quite unexpectedly, a Moldavian statehood was going to reappear elsewhere just a couple of years later.

## The MASSR

One can wonder if the idea of ‘(Dniestr) left-bank Moldavian districts’ would have been possible under other conditions than those created by the Bolshevik revolution.

Moldova had really been, as the XVII century chronicler Dascalu puts it, “an unsettled country in perennial movement” (“*tara miscatoare si neasezata*”). It had had, however, one stable frontier and this had been precisely the Dniestr river. Never in history had Moldova controlled or claimed territories on the left bank of this river, either in its times of independence or, later, when it was a peripheral entity within bigger empires.

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<sup>24</sup> The protocols of the session on Bessarabia are reproduced in original French in Bonghi R., *Il Congresso di Berlino e la Questione d’Oriente*, Milano, 1878, pp. 344-363.

<sup>25</sup> Romanian public opinion strongly resented the decision of the Powers. See: Eminescu M., *Statul. Functile si misiunea sa*, Vatamaniu D. (ed.), Bucharest, 1999, pp. 106-109 .

This is not to say that ethnic Moldavians never crossed the Dniestr. In the Podolia *guberniya* and in the Cherson *guberniya*, particularly in the Odessa region, there undoubtedly were compact Moldavian settlements, that is villages in which everyday's life run in Moldavian language and whose 'laws' were a reproduction of the rules characterizing the areas inhabited by populations of romance language in Eastern Europe.

It is extremely difficult to get an exact information on the Moldavian presence east to the Dniestr, but in the first years of the XX century it could hardly sum lower than approximately 180.000, since the Russian census of 1897 presents this figure<sup>26</sup>. Nevertheless they had never shown any national consciousness with aspirations to public recognition, let alone the desire to actively participate in public life as a specific group.

Against this background it may indeed be assumed that a 'Moldavian Republic' beyond the Dniestr could be conceived of only after the coming to power of a party like the Bolshevik one. This event enabled the insurgence of the several conditions indispensable for the formation of a Moldavian Republic.

Firstly, only a completely new state as the Soviet Union asserted to be could feel so free in respect to history and politic-cultural inheritance as to create *ex nihilo* unprecedented institutional entities and name them in the way most convenient to punctual state interests.

Secondly, the decisional power had to be in such strong a position as to be able to ignore discontent from the previous possessor of the land. Not only the left bank Moldavian districts had to be carved out from Ukrainian territory, but, as we will see, the absolute majority of the population thron spoke Ukrainian and had been registered as Ukrainian in the census. It is significant that in the dramatic months of its existence in 1917-18 the Ukrainian *Rada*, in spite of growing Ukrainian nationalistic moods, had manifested no direct claims on the Bessarabian *guberniya*, but had considered as self-evident that the Dniestr would be the western border-line of the autonomous (later independent) Ukraine<sup>27</sup>.

Thirdly, and most notably, the State leadership had to be inspired by an ideology that enabling it to see the real 'objective' good of society did not make necessary for it to inquire about the wishes of the people, if by accident they were likely not to coincide with the leadership's ones. There is absolutely no evidence that Moldavians living on the Dniestr left bank ever desired to be united with Bessarabia or to secede from Ukrainian provinces. Nothing allows the assumption that transnistrian Moldavians desired a political home of their own.

The process leading to the autonomous Moldavian republic needed to be set in motion by inputs alien to local realities, dictated by a general political doctrine and of overall state interests.

Undoubtedly, the creation of a series of national units in the USSR in the first half of the Twenties contributed much to the consolidation of the Soviet power<sup>28</sup>. This may sufficiently explain why the latter so often resorted to this option. At the same time one

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<sup>26</sup> Bauer H., Kappeller A., Roth B. (eds.), *Die Nationalitäten des Russischen Reiches in der Volkszählung von 1897*, Stuttgart, 1991, vol. 1, p. 183.

<sup>27</sup> Muzychenko P.P., *Istoriya gosudarstva i prava Ukrainy*, Odessa, 1998, p. 14.

<sup>28</sup> Connor W., *The National Question in Marxist-Leninist Theory and Strategy*, Princeton, 1984, in particular pp. 218-220.

should not lose sight of the fact that the delimitation of several national territorial units in the new Soviet state was also a basic element of the Bolshevik ideological commitment in respect to oppressed nations and, 'dialectically', a step towards internationalism.

The enigmatic Moldavian Republic of the inter-war period is thus both an element resulting from an ideological approach, as it will be briefly discussed in the following, and an instrument aimed at enhancing inner as well as foreign Soviet Union policy.

The official version regarding the establishment of the Republic is not very much concerned with credibility standards.

It tells that in the first months of 1924 chiefs of military units located in south western Ukraine began to receive messages from village assemblies, associations and private persons. They all thankfully acknowledging the Party's commitment to promote the small nationalities discriminated against by the former regime urged for the creation of an autonomous Moldavian republic. The messages were forwarded to the military commanders of the Red Army in Ukraine, who in their turn informed the party committees and the civil governments in Kiev and Moscow. Here the request was favourably dealt with<sup>29</sup>.

Things, of course, went a somehow less linear way. The idea of a Moldavian Republic had been firstly discussed in a group of Bessarabian communists who had left the native country following Romanian occupation. Realizing that Bessarabia, for a while, was lost for the Soviets they still remained faithful to the Moldavian cause and began to agitate for a Soviet Moldavian Republic, distinct and apart from Ukraine. To this end they founded a 'group of initiative' gathering data, writing *memoranda*, speaking to people. They were led by Moldavian sentiments, which occasionally made them overzealous. So for instance, according to their researches, at least 300.000 Moldavians lived on the Dniestr eastern bank<sup>30</sup>.

Their proposals initially met with coldness in leading party circles. Only in 1924 when the relations of the USSR to Romania worsened dramatically, the party gave its consent. At that moment, however, the Moldavian patriots clashed with more orthodox communists and lost. Under the pretext that they themselves were not from Transnistria, they were first excluded from the Republican organs and then hallmarked and even persecuted as people's enemies because of their 'nationalism'<sup>31</sup>.

End 1924 a federal law formally established the Moldavian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (MASSR) within the boundaries of the Socialist Soviet Ukrainian Republic. It covered an area of 8,1 thousand km<sup>2</sup> and had a total population of approximately 550,000. According to official sources 50,4% of the inhabitants were Ukrainian, 34,2% Moldavian, 8% Russian. Many other smaller linguistic groups were also registered. In absolute terms Moldavians were about 165,000. The same soviet sources notice, however, that the number of Moldavians was likely to be higher,

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<sup>29</sup> Strictly in accordance to Party's line the account of the events in Repiga A.B., *Formarea RSS Moldovenest'*, Chisinau, 1977, with a very rich bibliography.

<sup>30</sup> Murar' A.G., "Neisledovannaya stranitsa. K voprosu ob obrazovanii Moldavskoi ACCP," in: *Stranitsy istorii sovietskoi Moldavii*, Kisinev, 1990, pp. 49-71.

<sup>31</sup> Bomeshko B.G., "Pervaya gosudarstvennost' v Pridnestrov'e," in PGU (ed.), *Fenomen Pridnestrov'ya*, Tiraspol, 2000, pp. 22-72.

considering the fact that they were since long accustomed “to deliberately hide their nationality”<sup>32</sup>.

The drawing of the frontiers of the MASSR had necessarily to represent a major difficulty. Except the western border line, along the Dniestr, there was not a single geographic element providing territorial reference in the vast Ukrainian plain. Nor there was trace of former Moldavian domination or places evoked in Moldavian popular culture to which this nation would be linked by special events or feelings.

The Communist Party of the Odessa region charged a Commission with making a proposal after a thorough inquire on the spot taking the ethno-linguistic principle as main guide-line<sup>33</sup>. Considering the intertwinement of nationalities and languages in the area and the scattered, irregular dislocation of the different ethnic groups, the effort to come to a satisfactory cutting line had to remain overambitious. In addition, other elements could not be completely ignored, as f.i. the net of productive units connected with factories in Tiraspol and Kamenka.

As a result many villages with Moldavian majority or considerable Moldavian minority did get included into the new Republic, but others did not. It was on the other side inevitable to incorporate villages with compact Ukrainian population. Russians were concentrated in the towns.

If it must be admitted that the task of the Commission was a very problematic one, it is also true that, irrespective of their final decision as to this or that village, the authorities did not need to fear any criticism from any side.

Oddly enough one would in vain look for a map of the MASSR in the official publications of the Republic. Later historiographic standard works edited by post-1944 Moldavian Republic also omit to offer such a map<sup>34</sup>. The town of Balta (29,000 inhabitants) was declared capital of the Republic. It was the major settlement in the area but also the least Moldavian. In 1929 the capital moved to Tiraspol (18,000) whose population was also mainly non-Moldavian but, unlike Balta, was surrounded by Moldavian villages.

From that moment communists, when speaking about the territories of the MASSR, not only used the enigmatic definitions ‘Moldavian left bank districts’, or ‘eastern part of Moldova’ but employed straightforwardly the name ‘Moldova’ too.

The formal reason for such a vocabulary had been dressed in legal cloths. The resolution of 25 September 1924 with which the Politburo of the Central Committee of the Russian Communist (b) Party approved the establishment of a Moldavian Republic in western Ukraine, delivers the background of the unhistoric, misleading linguistic constructions just mentioned above. The argument ran this way: the Soviet Union does not recognize the Romanian occupation of Bessarabia, which therefore subsists only *de facto*. It follows that the western frontier of the MASSR is the western frontier of the Soviet Union and includes Bessarabia. In this light the MASSR of 1924 was not a new Moldavia, but a territory, by the way a small one, added to Bessarabia, an undisputedly historic Moldavian land over which Russian (Soviet) sovereignty had never ceased *de jure*. The MASSR was not a political entity on its own but the portion of Moldavia

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<sup>32</sup> Trapeznikov S.P., Mohov N.A., *Istoriya Moldavskoi SSR*, Kisinev, 1955, tome II, p. 120.

<sup>33</sup> *Inceputul unei mar' kai. Kulegere de documente si materiale ku prilejul celei de a 40-a aniversar' a formarii PCC Moldovenest'*, Chisinau, 1964. The Commission was instructed by the Party to find out the places “in which lives a great number of Moldavians” (p. 59).

<sup>34</sup> For instance: *Istoriya Moldavskoi SSR*, Kisinev, 1968, tome II; or *Enciclopedia Sovietica Moldoveneasca*, Chisinau, 1989.

where Soviet sovereignty was effective<sup>35</sup>. The reasoning may be ingenious but its inner deviousness no less apparent.

Later on, quite inevitably, the idea took root that the territory of the MASSR was Moldavian also without the necessity to link it to other regions. In highly official publications of the late inter-war period, for example, one may read of the history of “the peoples living on the territory of Moldavia and of Bessarabia” even referring to periods prior to 1924<sup>36</sup>. In a sense the MASSR came to be more Moldavian than Bessarabia itself. From mystification to mystification the confusion was brought indeed to a fancyful peak.

There is no doubt that the MASSR had been conceived of as a measure against the annexation of Bessarabia by Romania. The Republic from the very beginning served the cause of the restoration of Bessarabia to Russian (Soviet styled) rule and this in two ways.

In the first instance, it was the place from where Soviet agitation in neighbouring Romania, particularly in the lost province, had to be prepared and coordinated. The accomplished dismantlement of *latifundia*, the new place of the peasant in rhetoric political discourse (rural population of the Republic amounted to more than 60%) and the effective fight against illiteracy were all issues possessing, in theory, a certain power of attraction. But as a matter of fact it was problematic to make the MASSR the magnet for irredentistic currents in Bessarabia. By all inadequacy of the Romanian government, from the national point of view Bessarabia’s Moldavians lacked any motive to desire a change back. Even the Russophones living here, mostly concentrated in towns and mostly businessmen or former clerks, felt it uneasy to act for reintegration to Russia because of the Soviet regime<sup>37</sup>.

By far more important than the impact on Moldavians in Romania was the role of the MASSR as propagandistic tool in the context of the international relations and of Russian foreign policy. In fact this aspect was most probably decisive in determining the Soviet leadership to establish the Republic. It is surely not by accident that the ‘popular manifestations’ for a Moldavian republic took place right after the failure of the Vienna conference.

In March 1924 for the first time after the war the USSR and Romania made an official attempt to re-establish diplomatic relations. Representatives of the two states convened to Vienna on the invitation of the Austrian government after a series of technical preliminary meetings. But proper negotiations could not even begin since the parties did not agree on the agenda: the Soviet delegates intended to start the discussion on a plebiscite in Bessarabia, the Romanians were determined to avoid any talk dealing with territorial questions<sup>38</sup>. The conference ended in a complete failure and the perspective of a long diplomatic fighting became a certainty: it was at this moment that the activities connected with the creation of the MASSR were speeded up and brought to realization. Through the MASSR Moscow exercised a permanent pressure on Bucharest and kept very much alive the USSR’s territorial claims in the hope for an unpredictable but

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<sup>35</sup> *Moldavskaya SSR*, Kisinev, 1979, p. 120.

<sup>36</sup> Gerlimanov F.F., Senkevich V.M., *Sovietskaya Moldaviya*, Tiraspol, 1938, p. 23.

<sup>37</sup> Skvortova A. J., “Russkie v Bessarabii posle ee prisoedineniya k Rumynii (1918-nachalo 20-h gg.),” in *Vne Rossii. Sbornik nauchnie statei o russkih i russkoi kulture Moldovy*, Kisinev, 1997, pp. 40-48; and 46.

<sup>38</sup> The protocols of the Conference are reproduced in: *Sovietsko-Rumjnskie otnosheniya. Dokumenty i materialy*, tome 1, Moscow, 2000, pp. 222-252.

always possible redistribution of power on the continent<sup>39</sup>. It is interesting noticing that whenever Soviet diplomacy evoked the question and claimed for restitution of the region, it insisted on the unlawful occupation of the area by the Romanian Army in 1918 and the disregard of the self-determination right of the Bessarabian people. The Soviets constantly stressed that they were not interested in so called 'historical rights' possibly deriving to them by the secular belonging of the province to Russia. If Bessarabians had had the possibility to determine where to belong to politically, they would have expressed their preference for the community of people living in the Soviet Union.

When speaking at international meetings, Soviet representatives also omitted, as a rule, references to an argument they often used at home, i.e. the asserted distinctiveness of Moldavians face to Romanians as to language and culture.

This last point leads to a second set of questions connected with the creation of the MASSR. All along a period lasting roughly until 1937-38 Soviet ideology preached the implantation, *korenizatiya*, of the basic principles of the new social order in the autochthonous languages and cultures. This aim could be attained, according to Soviet policy, only through a decided nationalization of public life. In the territorial unities with no traditional Russian majority the medium for the spreading of Soviet values had to be the language of the people, and not Russian. Political activists had to emerge out of the people living on the spot and not be imported from Russian areas. This commitment, however, concerned more with the form of the teaching than with the content of it, was not seen by the party leadership as an achievement *per se*. In fact, since among the socialist principles to be implemented a basic role was played by internationalism, which gave the spatial frame for any socialist realization, *korenizatiya*, enabling the notion of internationalism to take root in nationalities' territories, enhanced the chance to overcome in the last instance precisely those cultural expressions and linguistic loyalties that in a first phase it was designed to promote<sup>40</sup>.

Is it possible to discern in this approach a sincere wish to repair historic injustices and discriminations? or was it 'objectively' contradictory in itself since in practice it inevitably ran against factual centralization of power, which constantly represented a priority in Bolshevik policy?

It would be probably futile to try to compose these apories into a coherent horizon. The inspiration, the mechanism and the aims of the soviet linguistic policy in the Twenties and Thirties are neither linear or consistent. They very often combine generous inputs with deceitful behaviours. In the light of the MASSR's experience both facets are present, although the latter in the long run seems to prevail.

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<sup>39</sup> The attitude of the Soviet diplomacy on the Bessarabian question had the effect to create serious embarrassments to Romania all the inter-war period through. Titulescu N., *Politica Externa a Romaniei, Bucharest*, 1994 (first edition 1937), pp. 103-133. For instance, in 1934 Romania was initially excluded from the negotiations on the so called Oriental Pact aimed at binding the USSR to the European collective security system. Not even the re-establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries involved a revision of the point of international law held by the USSR in respect to Bessarabia. See: Kopanskij J.M., *Diplomatziya sovietica yn lupta pentru soluzionarea ekitabila a problemei besarabene. 1918-1940*, Chisinau, 1985, p. 102-107.

<sup>40</sup> Zubov A., "Minoranze nazionali e nazionalità dominante nello Stato sovietico (1918-1939)," in Corsini U., Zaffi D. (eds.), *Le minoranze fra le due guerre*, Bologna, 1994, pp. 59-83.

The starting point for *korenizatiya* in the MASSR was not very encouraging since Moldavian presence on the left bank was numerically not quite irrelevant but politically and culturally very faint.

In the spring of 1924, when agitation for the MASSR was running at high speed, the representatives of a Moldavian village designed to join the new republic, wrote to the regional Government in Odessa. After the usual expressions of gratitude for the care the Soviets were taking about Moldavian culture, the authors of the letter apology for their own poor record in this respect: as a matter of fact “we did not think to this thing”<sup>41</sup>. At the meeting of the Executive Committee of the Odessa region on 27 September 1924 devoted to the discussion on the autonomous republic, the Ukrainian Minister for Culture Zatonskii admitted that until then little attention had been devoted to transnistrian Moldavians because “they have lost their nationality, have taken on the Ukrainian and Russian culture...they themselves speak very little about their matters, rise very seldom questions connected with their nationality”<sup>42</sup>.

In spite of these circumstances once the Republic had been established, real efforts were made both in the field of promoting Moldavian language and in the co-optation of Moldavians into leading positions. Where in 1918 no school existed with Moldavian as vehicular language, there were 11 by end 1924 and no less than 102 in 1928 (all kinds of school considered). In the school year 1930-31 20.600 children on the territory of the MASSR got their school education in Moldavian. Party and public authorities were not only eager to promote in absolute terms the teaching in that language, they also strove to foment the Moldavian language in comparison with other languages spoken in the Republic. So for instance the republican government stated in 1931 with satisfaction that in the years 1926-1930 the number of schools with Ukrainian had increased, but at a lower average than the Moldavian ones<sup>43</sup>.

The party was aware of its task to create a school system in which both the social classes and the nationalities oppressed by tsarism would find a privileged place. It seems that in the enthusiasm of those years even more would have been done, had the Republic disposed of more teachers and manuals.

A neologism was created: *moldovanizirovanie*. It designed the process which local party and republican institutions had to undergo in order to properly fulfil the objectives of inner policy entrusted to the MASSR. The report of the republican Government to the Fifth congress of the Soviets of the Republic let feel a certain proudness in noticing that “the number of the workers in the party structure who can speak and work in Moldavian has greatly increased in the last two years...The Republican Government has taken the decision to adopt this language as working language for all its offices beginning from 1.10.1931. The Government gives any kind of support to those members of the public sector who learnt Moldavian and stimulates the learning of that same language by all workers...The Moldovanization is a reality in the socialist fabric of the MASSR”<sup>44</sup>.

The commitment to ‘rooting’ socialist ideals in the MASSR went so far as to induce the party to agree on the introduction in 1931 of the Latin script for written Moldavian. Admittedly, support for the latin alphabet was part of the overall communist cultural

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<sup>41</sup> *Inceputul unei mar' kai*, p. 26.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 49-51.

<sup>43</sup> Dimitriu S.V., *Darea di sami a kyrmii RASSM c'ezdului a VI a sfaturilor*, Tiraspol, 1931, pp. 48-51.

<sup>44</sup> *Materialurili kytri darea di sami a kyrmii ASSM s'ezdului a V a sfaturilor din Moldova pi anii 1929 si 1930*, Tiraspol, 1931, pp. 119-120.

policy in the inter-war period up to 1938<sup>45</sup>. But if in other regions of the USSR the change of script might have appeared strange or even abstruse, in 'left-bank Moldova' it implied a certain risk since the similarities, or, rather, the identity with Romanian became, so to speak, visible.

Nevertheless, the party leadership accepted the risk, displaying a remarkable self-confidence.

And still, parallel to the introduction of the measures implied by *korenizatiya*, which at their face value were indeed not at all negligible, the official propaganda was very at odd in defining the relation between the Moldavian nationality and 'her' Republic.

On the one side the MASSR was the political housing where the Soviet Moldavian people could fully express and freely develop its own culture. On the other side it was easy to see that when speaking of Soviet Moldavian people Communist sources stressed the first adjective in a way that nullified the second one. This was so because the Moldavian people in its Soviet characterization had simply no past. Like the USSR herself, whose continuity with the previous form of state was in principle denied, so the Soviet Moldavian nation had come to life after the Revolution. The present of the nation was already marked by its desire to unite (according to party jargon: to merge) with the other Soviet nationalities. The next future will pay a secondary, if any, attention to sub-soviet national performances. When communist publications wrote about "the successful formation of the Moldavian nation", they conveyed more or less explicitly this chronological sequence<sup>46</sup>. The party had called to life the nation in order to prepare its vanishing.

As to the more common and understandable notion of Moldavian people as the human group speaking the same language and as such bearing its own distinct interests, the picture takes on quite different colors. There is ground to point to a striking continuity between tsarist and Soviet perception of the Moldavians except that in tsarist time there was no interest in large scale propaganda, with its repetitions and simplifications. It is not out of place to sketch some features of the Moldavian people (without further adjectives) as it was vulgarized in the time of the late MASSR. The following quotations are taken from the monography *Sovietskaya Moldaviya* edited in 1939 by the local Communist Party for the celebrations of the 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Republic<sup>47</sup>:

-At the arrival of the Russians to the left bank of the Dniestr and later on to Bessarabia the population was "very small in number and lived dispersed in the forests" (p.31).

-Although at that time in Russia ruled a feudal system, the union of these territories with Russia was a great progress for them, since Russia played in the region "the role of the vehicle of civilization" (p. 33).

-Positive though Russian rule had been, at the eve of the 1917 revolution the "only cultural Moldavian expression was the melancholy Doina song in which the people described its heavy, gloomy existence" (p. 15).

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<sup>45</sup> Zubov, "Minoranze nazionali," p. 78

<sup>46</sup> *Istoriya Moldavskaya SSR*, pp.229-231.

<sup>47</sup> Quotations from: Gerlimanov, Senkevich, *Sovietskaya Moldaviya*, passim. Interesting enough, those commonplaces are repeated by standard publication until 1989 with only slight changes in vocabulary. Look for instance the 1955 *Istoria Moldavskoi SSR*, pp. 33, 219 and 225 and the work with the same title published in 1968, pp. 210, 220 and 225.

-The achievements of the MASSR in the fields of culture, science and art were ascribed to the decisive support offered to Moldavians by Russians and Ukrainians who had moved to the Republic. In fact the major question the MASSR had had to face had been “the necessity to overcome the traditional backwardness of the Moldavian people and to lift its culture to the level of the advanced peoples of the Soviet Union” (p. 219).

-Finally the Moldavian language “differs from the Romanian in a radical way”. It developed “under the influence of Slavic peoples standing at a higher level of culture...Moldavians received from the Slaves christianity, the slavic language (*sic!*), the script” (p. 26).

At the least this picture of the Moldavian people was not apt to stimulate the proudness of its members or their readiness to manifest their adherence to it<sup>48</sup>.

In fact, although at their face value the measures implemented in a view of enhancing the social prestige of Moldavians have been indeed remarkable, it is more than questionable whether they had a real impact on the region’s political culture. Schools in Moldavian had certainly been opened but the quality of the language was horrific. In an effort to state the distinctiveness of Moldavian from Romanian, spelling, vocabulary and grammar underwent abstruse experiments which are not at all likely to have helped Moldavians in assimilating at literary level their native language. It is true that after many decades of silence, public discourse began to take into account the existence of the Moldavians. But, as it has been showed, this happend in a very peculiar way, offering a picture of them to which many would have preferred continued neglect.

The help Russians gave to transnistrian Moldavians after 1917 appears in this light more than just the expression of a spirit of internationalism, brotherly one-way exchange of skills and knowledges. It was patronage. Subsequent events were to prove that the seventeen years long experience of the MASS had left national self esteem among Moldavians and appreciation towards Moldavians in the state leadership at a very low level.

This is best proved by the circumstances under which the reintegration of Besarabia into the Soviet Union took place. As it is well known in a secret protocol to the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact of 23 August 1939 Nazi Germany gave free hand to the Soviet leadership in regard to Bessarabia. The Soviet Union did not go to cash immediatley but after the signature of the document it was merely a matter of time.

In the days following the capitulation of France the Soviets judged that the right moment had come. They jumped over the phase of negotiations with Romania which indeed, against the background of the German-Soviet agreement, would have lacked any real meaning. An ultimative note dated 26.6.1940 adressed to the Romanian government gave to the latter a 24 hours time to consent to the Russian ‘proposals’: restitution of the whole of Bessarabia and cession of nothern Bucovina to the Soviet Union. In the note was clearly stated that only the acceptance of these proposals would make possible to solve “in a peaceful way” the dispute between the two countries. Romania could not but give in<sup>49</sup>.

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<sup>48</sup> The percentage of Moldavians on the population of the MASSR decreased in the years 1926-1939, from 30.1 to 28.5, according to Kaiser R., *The Geography of Nationalism*, p. 164.

<sup>49</sup> The exchange of notes between Moscow and Bucharest on 26-27 June is reproduced in: *Istoria Romaniei intre anii 1918-1944. Culegere de documente*, Bucharest, 1982, pp. 408-410.

For the purposes of the present contribution subsequent events do not need to be dealt with at length. However two remarks should be allowed.

First it is to be observed that the note of June 26 asking peremptory and menacingly for the handing over of Bessarabia, shows an attempt to justify the request. In the political and military context of those days the Soviet Union did not need to give explanations. But probably with an eye to the future her government did not want to give the impression to act just out of desire of conquest. The note stated that Bessarabia had lived “for centuries” in union with Ukraine, and that the population of Bessarabia was “in its largest part” Ukrainian. Moreover, the note asserted the necessity of some compensation for the losses caused to the Soviet Union by the 22 years long Romanian occupation of Bessarabia. Such a compensation could be found, according to the note, in the assignment of the northern part of Moldova (Bucovina) to the Soviet Union. This region had never belonged to Russia but “its population is connected to Soviet Ukraine by common history (*sic!*), by the same language and the same national composition”.

The dramatic note of June 26 was not meant as a textbook of history or a treatise on ethnography and it would be simply out of place to point to the strains and twists it contains.

What deserves to be stressed, however, is that once again a Russian source totally neglects the Moldavians. In 22 years Soviet propaganda had developed a long series of objections for questioning the union of Bessarabia to Romania. The note could have evoked, for instance, that Moldavians were not Romanians, that their right to self-determination had been ignored by Romanian army occupation in 1918, that their real wish was to return to the political communion with Russia.

None of these arguments was used. Bessarabia and Bucovina had (allegedly) a predominantly Slav population. That was the title of possession in the hands of the Soviet Union.

The second move that shows how poorly Moscow took into consideration what was in large part its own creation, that is the Moldavian nation, followed on August 2. One month after the ‘peaceful solution of the Bessarabian question’, as certain historiography up to these days qualifies the results of the ultimatum of June 26, the Moldavian Socialist Soviet Republic was established with federal law. The actual growth in territory and population of the MASSR suggested that it could now become an independent and sovereign republic, that is a direct member of the Union and leave Ukraine.

But contrary to expectations the new Republic did not get the frontiers destined to it since 1924.

It had to cede to Ukraine not only those districts of the ancient MASSR in which the Ukrainian national element was in a clear majority, but also those parts of Bessarabia where the Moldavian ethnic character was less strongly dominating than elsewhere in the region.

In other words that same Communist party that pretended to have given to the (soviet) Moldavian nation its homeland, the first political entity in which Moldavians could they themselves take care of their national interests, that same Communist party that had so insistently tried to make credible a ‘left-bank Moldova’, took away more than the half of the MASSR and out of ethnic considerations gave it over to Ukraine. What the leadership and many activists had worked for in the MASSR during more than two decades was, with one single decision, declared no longer necessary.

About the MASSR's lost territories Moldavians did not complain. They knew, in spite of *korenizatiya* from above<sup>50</sup>, how weak the Moldavian element was on the left bank of the Dniestr both in number and politically, in comparison with the Ukrainian group. Beside that, as it has been mentioned above, they lacked any historical and sentimental connection with the transnistrian territory.

But taking away from the MSSR the Bessarabian southern districts was a measure that affected them. The leaders of the Moldavian party and of the Moldavian government went so far as to protest against this measure. They sent a letter personally to Stalin with the request to reconsider this inner-soviet border question. The authors of the letter tried first to demonstrate that depriving Moldavia of its shores and even of any outlet to the Danube had to seriously handicap the economic restoration and well-fare of the Republic. Then they came to the core of their arguments and addressed the national question. According to the local republican leaders, southern Bessarabia was inhabited in relative terms mostly by Moldavians. The other nationalities living in the area normally used for inter-ethnic intercourse the Moldavian language and in that way attested the prevalence of the Moldavian nation in the region<sup>51</sup>.

The letter did not produce any effect.

It is not arbitrary to consider both the wording of the note of 26 June 1940 and the decision of 2 August 1940 as the correct perspective one has to place oneself in order to get an idea about the manner in which Russians in Soviet dressing were being dealing with the Moldavian question in the inter-war period. They simply overlooked the Moldavians so as many tsarist dignitaries had failed to see them. The MASSR revealed in the end the instrumental role it had been designed to play from the very beginning. That part of the MASSR that was incorporated into the MSSR, constitutes today's secessionist Transnistria<sup>52</sup>, the self-proclaimed Nistrian Moldavian Republic.

It is impossible and in fact unhistorical to try to evaluate the experience of the MASSR not taking into account its lamentable end. It seems that the interpretative key to the Moldavian inter war republic is offered precisely by the way it has been disposed of.

This has not prevented some analysts from offering somehow favourable interpretations when commenting on the years of the MASSR. Among them there are, oddly enough, both supporters of pan-Romanian nationalism and strongly pro-Russian (post) communists.

The formers admit the artificial character of the Republic and that its aims were dictated solely by communist policy's interest. According to them, however, it can not be denied, that the investments made by the Soviet Union in the MASSR did have beneficial effects in terms of strengthening national self-consciousness among left-bank Moldavians. Irrespective to the intentions of the actors, the opening of schools with Moldavian as vehicular tongue, the place reserved to (Soviet) Moldavian identity

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<sup>50</sup> As distinct from *korenizatiya* from below, a process in late Soviet Union promoted by local actors to take or keep hold on republican resources with exclusion of non-indigenous. On the convincing conceptual distinction: Kaiser R., *The Geography of Nationalism*, p. 125 and passim.

<sup>51</sup> *Pakt Molotova-Ribbentropa i ero posledstviya dlya Bessarabii. Sbornik dokumentov*, Kisinev, 1991, pp. 113-115.

<sup>52</sup> As it has been repeatedly pointed out, the number of Moldavians here is not irrelevant and is certainly not under 25%. Still the fact remains that in the southern districts of Bessarabia their percentage in 1940 was higher. Ethnic considerations were therefore surely not decisive in the settlement of the border question.

in official publications, the recognized necessity of a Moldavian statehood could not but positively bear on the position of the Moldavian nation east of the Dniestr<sup>53</sup>.

Precisely starting from this appraisal of the MASSR, becomes possible to assert the 'moldoveness' of Transnistria up to our days and consider that the fate of these Moldavian (or, alternatively: Romanian) territories can not leave indifferent both Chisinau and Bucharest.

Those belonging to the pro Russian oriented group equally praise the MASSR. They do so because, in their argument, it enhanced a strong regional identity in Transnistria common to all national segments of the population living in the region. This identity above any nationalism is the best legacy of the MASSR which proved strong enough to prevent confrontations and tensions. In fact, people around the Dniestr allegedly succeeded in transforming a potentially disruptive factor into the very basis of what could be called a territorial pact, fancing off the region from the surrounding states, where wide spread nationalism has so negative effects on the living standards of the citizens and the very peace of the area. Like in the former MASSR, also in today's Transnistria were ensured "real equality among nationalities, which makes the Republic free from any inter-ethnic strain"<sup>54</sup>.

Such positive an achievement led, according to the authors sharing this view, "the majority of population (*in Transnistria*) to the acknowledgement that the condition for its maintenance is the union with other republics once participating in the USSR"<sup>55</sup>.

The similarity in the appraisals on the MASSR made by supposedly internationalist communists on the one side and Romanian nationalists on the other side, although leading to very different political conclusions, also helps in evaluating the ambivalent, short lived experience of Soviet 'Moldavian' autonomy.

## Final remarks

After the settlement of the frontier question by Moscovite *ukaz* and after the reintegrated province had payed its tribute to the deportation wave that involved so many other Soviet territories in the second half of the Fourties (the deportations affecting the German community was arbitrary enough, the one affecting Moldavians had probably no other justification than the will to terrorize and dishearten the population at large<sup>56</sup>), the federal unit MSSR found itself in the Soviet state no otherwise than Bessarabia in the Tsarist empire. Far from the center and of any major event, living in oblivion and not really desiring to call attention, it may be asserted that the years between the death of Stalin and the Gorbachev era were for Moldova a time of relative progress with no major troubles. The commitment of few intellectuals and occasionally also party members to the defence of the Moldavian language and culture, whose public role was being decreasing during this period, never succeeded in reaching a vast audience<sup>57</sup>.

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<sup>53</sup> See for instance Muraru A., *Istoria romanilor. Basarabia si Transnistria. 1812-1993*, Chisinau, 1995, pp. 307-310, and Nour A., "Intre Nistru si Bug," in *Basarabia*, n.1, 1992, pp. 82-88.

<sup>54</sup> Frolov A.K., Samospasenie, in Gryzov V.F. (eds.), *Nepriznannaya Respublika*, Moscow, 1999, vol. 3, p. 42.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 29.

<sup>56</sup> Pasat V.I., *Trudnye stranitzy istorii Moldovy. 1940-1950*, Moscow, 1994.

<sup>57</sup> Negru Gh., *Politica etnolingvistica in R.S.S. Moldoveneasca*, Chisinau, 2000. Based on secret protocols and party documents the work demonstrates that in few and limited circles the discussion about the

The border line to Romania might have been defined as an iron curtain in the communist block.

The contacts between Soviet Moldavians and Romanian Moldavians were held for decades so low and rare as possible. According to the Soviet Constitution the Republics had the right to seek and entertain international relations. The MSSR did not avail itself too much of this possibility, but even in the modest framework of the 'Moldavian foreign policy' relations with Romania ranged very low<sup>58</sup>. There is no doubt that in that period the process of estrangement of the one portion of the Moldavian people from the other one made substantial progress.

As Moldavian upper society in early XIX century readily identified politically with the grandeur of tsarism, so in post Second World War time Bessarabian Moldavians did not feel any inhibition in sharing the prestige deriving from the superpower status of the Soviet Union.

If the process went so far as to create the conditions for the building of a specific, cultural identity endowed with the energy needed to aspire to and to successfully sustain 'its own' political structure, is up to these days a very controversial question.

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language and its political implications never ceased completely from the Forties right to the Eighties. But the author notes in the introduction that "Until 1989...critically commenting on ethnolinguistic policy of the Moldavian Communist Party and making the critic known among the Bessarabian Romanians was outright impossible". p. 4.

<sup>58</sup> Moldavskaya SSR, cit., p.472-477. From this official, standard work appears that the Republic supported the relations between the Bulgarian minority living in Moldova and Bulgaria, the Turkish minority and Turkey. No mention is made of cultural ties with the Romanians or, at least, the Moldavians living in Romania.