

**BETWEEN NATION AND EMPIRE: RUSSIAN AND ROMANIAN  
COMPETING VISIONS OF BESSARABIA IN THE SECOND HALF OF  
THE 19<sup>th</sup> AND EARLY 20<sup>th</sup> CENTURY**

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## Abstract

This dissertation argues that, in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Russian province (later gubernia) of Bessarabia became an object of *symbolic competition and contestation* between the Russian Empire and the Romanian nation-state. Refusing to take both the national(ist) Romanian and the Russian/Soviet perspectives on the dynamics of the Bessarabian “problem” at face value, I argue that the symbolic contest over Bessarabia gradually crystallized in the post-Crimean War context. This competition was determined by Bessarabia’s position as a *borderland* and by the region’s *marginality* within the two conflicting projects of empire- and nation-building. Rather than displaying a systematic and continuous discursive pattern, this array of mutually subversive images of the area crystallized at certain precise moments of high symbolic tension (e.g., the 1878 Russian-Turkish War, the 1905 Revolution or the 1912 anniversary of Bessarabia’s annexation to the empire). The pre-World War I context was a formative period for the vocabulary and the substance of the two antagonistic stances on Bessarabia that fully developed during the interwar years. In this sense, the present project can be interpreted as an *intellectual prehistory of the Bessarabian problem*, focusing on the gradual accumulation of “potential forces” of the national and imperial visions of this contested periphery. The most relevant characteristic feature of the Bessarabian case that set it apart from the other borderland regions of the Russian Empire was the direct clash of a national and an imperial narrative over the belonging of the same territory. Another feature distinguishing the local situation referred to the *lack of articulation* of the Bessarabian educated strata, which played the role of a recipient of the integrative projects elaborated by the respective cultural and political centers of power.

The basic argument rests on the assumption that two coherent sets of representations (subsumed under the labels of “national” and “imperial” discourse) openly competed for the symbolic inclusion of this area into the respective state-building designs and for the prospective allegiance of its inhabitants. Nevertheless, the Bessarabian region acquired a profoundly ambiguous and problematic place within both narratives. While the Russian imperial imagination increasingly viewed it as an insecure borderland, the Romanian nation-builders accorded it a marginal importance within the priorities of national expansion and cultural unification. This project attempts to present the convoluted dynamics of the opposed (but also complementary) representations of Bessarabia in the Russian and Romanian contexts and to explain why, by 1917, all the premises for the full emergence of the “Bessarabian question” on the map of international diplomacy in the interwar period were already apparent.

Bessarabia provides an example of the entanglements, ambiguities and interconnections between discourses and practices of “nation” and “empire” that shape each other and also the fate of the populations inhabiting the physical and symbolic borderlands between polities that define themselves on the basis of opposing legitimizing principles. However, I also attempt to show that the population of the borderlands may, at certain moments, develop its own agency or react to central policies in ways unforeseen by their proponents. Most importantly, the legacies of empire (and nation) are present and constantly renegotiated in societies that have been constructed and imagined with the instruments provided by their previous history.

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## Introduction

In the introduction, I attempt to deal with two underlying issues that will help, on the one hand, clarify the general framework of the approach used in the study and, on the other hand, situate the present work in the context of recent research on the region. My first aim is to justify the relevance of a comparative investigation of the Bessarabian case and to point to the possible insights that such a framework could contribute to the general scholarly literature on the area. The second part of the introduction will be devoted to a general presentation of the historiography of the region as it emerged during the XX century. The utility of such a presentation in the introduction (as opposed to a “problem-oriented” discussion in the body of the dissertation) is conditioned by the nature of historiographical preoccupations, as well as by the necessity to present an initial picture of the “state of research” to an audience not necessarily familiar with its basic lines.

**1. The goals and relevance of the project.** Aside from the customary caveats that any case study warrants (especially when claiming wider significance in a regional context), a basic incentive for detailing the “meta-historical” presuppositions of the project derives from the “marginality” of the space in question (Bessarabia) in both “discursive formations” that will constitute the primary object of research. Thus, a closer attention to the issue of “relevance” is not entirely inappropriate and serves as a “preventive technique” on the part of the author meant to anticipate potential doubts and to explicate implicit assumptions. The general argument will be structured along several lines: 1) the necessity to transcend both the “nationalizing” framework through which the history of the region is viewed in Romanian historiography and the exclusively “center-oriented” and “statist” approach predominant in the Russian case (in its Soviet as well as the current Russian guise); 2) the emphasis on the “construction” of the region in Russian and

Romanian narratives of the area in order to further the agendas of the respective competing projects of state-building; 3) the complex interaction between local initiatives and central “signals” and the ensuing inherently dualistic nature of the central “gaze” (the problem of the “eternally present/absent Other”); 4) the problem of the “lack of articulation” of the local inhabitants (this appears to have represented a much more ambiguous phenomenon than initially envisaged, due to the multiple tactics of adaptation, appropriation and reformulation of the images coined by the two “centers” at the local level). Nevertheless, the “cognitive discrepancy” between the Bessarabian “object” and the Russian and Romanian intellectual and political “subjects” viewing it remains in place, a fact which strengthens the necessity of a comparative analysis of the Bessarabian case. Any one-sided reading of the views on the region risks obscuring the fundamental mutual dependency of these “constructions” of the image of Bessarabia.

Several obviously problematic issues that a Romanian-Russian comparative study entails should be emphasized. Among these, one could identify the following: 1) the chronological discrepancy between the respective starting points of the “intellectual appropriation” of the area (earlier in the Russian case, both due to its inclusion in the imperial polity and to the relatively protracted process of the emergence of the Romanian national project); 2) the discrepancy in the nature and number of the sources available (which in the Romanian case are represented mainly by secondary literary accounts and only rarely by officially sanctioned documents that would allow a clear delineation of the Romanian state perspective on the place of Bessarabia within the “national space,” while in the Russian case the sources are more diverse and at the same time more difficult to categorize); 3) a disproportionate concentration (one could say, the making of a “virtue out of necessity”) on moments of direct political and intellectual-symbolic confrontation between the two polities instead of a more coherent and continuous presentation of the dynamics

of the two projects; 4) the precaution of avoiding any overly deterministic juxtaposition of a monolithic Romanian “national” discourse to a no less monolithic and unproblematic Russian “imperial” discourse. Even if I constantly seek to problematize these notions throughout my work, I am no less keenly aware that I have set myself a nearly impossible task of a “middle ground,” intent of eschewing both a “reification” of these notions (which would lead to a “fixture on theory” instead of a nuanced reading of the complexity of practice) and a “relativity” approach, which would strip my argument and my narrative of any potential coherence and structure. This is less an appeal to taking such conceptual categories at face value than an assessment of the dilemmas that a case-oriented approach faces when confronted by the generalizations of theory.

A fundamental problem questioning the validity of my approach stems from the concepts of the “discourse of the nation” and “discourse of empire” that I use in an attempt to provide a coherent reading of the Bessarabian case. This problem is clearly visible at least on three interrelated levels. The first level concerns the larger epistemological issue of imposing an “order” on texts (I do not claim to find an ultimate reference in “reality” since my primary interest lies in comparing images as opposed to actual policies, though the reference to the layer of the “political concrete” will be present throughout my account). I believe such an attempt is valid inasmuch as the texts I study have been produced in order to justify a principle of political legitimacy or at least are embedded in such “justificatory” endeavors. This, of course, perpetuates the connection between the author’s (presumed) agenda and the text (it was not my aim to “deconstruct” the web of meaning entirely but, rather, to discern one of many possible ways of reading it). The second level is a purely terminological (or definitional) one and is connected to the indeterminacy and controversial character of the “categories of analysis” I employ. The only solution possible in this case is to provide a working definition of the concepts of “discourse,”



“empire” and “nation” with no claim to universal validity. These terms will be used mostly in a “functionalist” fashion, but they will occasionally incorporate tautological and self-defining elements that characterize their common usage. Finally, a “substantial” problem also arises in connection with the presumed coherence and temporal dynamics of the purported “discourses” I analyze. To present the issue in simpler terms, two main substantive doubts are immediately apparent. First, was there a more or less unitary (even if allowing for pluralism and ideological differences) “discourse of empire” throughout the XIX and early XX century in Russia and, conversely, did its counterpart in the guise of an unproblematic “national” discourse exist in Romania in the same period (at least starting from the 1860s)? Second, how significant were the dynamics of these discourses and can one meaningfully assess their internal coherence? While my working hypothesis answers both these questions in the affirmative, the definition of the object of research (Bessarabia and its place within the discourses in question) seems to be a negative one. Namely, Bessarabia is defined exactly by the *absence* of a coherent set of representations on the part of its inhabitants, and is thus transformed into an object of “inclusion” and “appropriation” by the centers of political power and intellectual “articulation” that both construct more or less authoritative images of the region. Moreover, whether one analyzes the officially sponsored or engendered positions, or if one focuses on the wider intellectual themes not necessarily coincident with the interest of the respective state as perceived by its elite, the techniques of institutional and social analysis allow a delineation of the factors and individuals primarily responsible for the articulation of these discourses.

The dissertation argues that, in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Russian province (later gubernia) of Bessarabia became an object of *symbolic competition and contestation* between the Russian Empire and the Romanian nation-state. This point is generally either taken for granted (within the logic of the Romanian national discourse which viewed the region as inherently

belonging to the national body from times immemorial) or ignored (in the case of the Soviet-era officially sanctioned narrative based on the “friendship of the peoples” paradigm). Moreover, the systematic study of the “Bessarabian question” has been undertaken mostly from the vantage point of diplomatic and political history that perceived this issue as a minor instance of interstate rivalry or, at best, as an insignificant component of the larger “Eastern question.” The Western perspective on the Russian-Romanian conflict over Bessarabia crystallized in the interwar period and was initially framed in legal-political terms, evolving into an issue of international law. The Soviet-Romanian pre-1940 controversy witnessed more complex argumentative strategies that were devised in order to claim a stronger basis of legitimacy for each of the two involved parties. One of these strategies, constantly employed by the Soviet negotiators, held that the “Bessarabian problem” was a rather recent phenomenon that only emerged during the last phases of World War I and the Russian Revolution, being artificially foiled by a part of the region’s Romanian-speaking intelligentsia that purportedly “betrayed” the true interests of the Bessarabian masses. The Romanians generally countered the heavily ideological Soviet stance by invoking the rhetoric of historical rights and by constructing a continuous tradition of “resistance” and “national consciousness” that survived under the nefarious conditions of Russian imperial rule. Though this scheme is highly simplistic and essentialist (and, as such, served as a blueprint for the mobilizing narratives destined for internal consumption), its structural presuppositions proved to be highly resilient. Indeed, in more sophisticated forms they still provide the lexicon and the reference for the two competing visions of the past struggling for preeminence in the present Republic of Moldova. Refusing to take both the national(ist) Romanian and the Russian/Soviet perspectives on the dynamics of the Bessarabian “problem” at face value, I argue that the symbolic competition over Bessarabia gradually crystallized in the post-Crimean War context. This competition was determined by Bessarabia’s position as a *borderland* and by the region’s

*marginality* within the two conflicting projects of empire- and nation-building. Rather than displaying a systematic and continuous discursive pattern, this competition of mutually subversive (but also complementary) images of the area crystallized at certain precise moments of high symbolic tension (e.g., the 1878 Russian-Turkish War, the 1905 Revolution or the 1912 anniversary of Bessarabia's annexation to the empire). The pre-World War I context was a formative period for the vocabulary and the substance of the two antagonistic stances on Bessarabia that fully developed during the interwar years. In this sense, the present project can be interpreted as an *intellectual prehistory of the Bessarabian problem*, focusing on the gradual accumulation of "potential forces" of the national and imperial visions of this contested periphery. This does not diminish the peculiarity of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century processes, which should be reassessed in their own right. The most relevant characteristic feature of the Bessarabian case that set it apart from the other borderland regions of the Russian Empire was the direct clash of a national and an imperial narrative over the belonging of the same territory. Another feature distinguishing the local situation referred to the *lack of articulation* of the Bessarabian educated strata, which played the role of a recipient of the integrative projects elaborated by the respective cultural and political centers of power.<sup>1</sup> In the absence of an independent public sphere at the level of the province, Bessarabia's images were constructed outside the setting of the region itself and thus deprived its inhabitants of agency. This did not entail a complete passivity of the territory's population, but it did presuppose a marginal or, at best, subordinate role of the local fledgling intelligentsia that was either incapable or unwilling to contribute to the process of Bessarabia's "symbolic inclusion" into the ideal spaces of the Russian and Romanian state-building projects. Thus, besides the predictable reluctance of the

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<sup>1</sup> For the notion of "articulation" and its applicability, see Ronald Grigor Suny and Michael D. Kennedy, eds. *Intellectuals and the Articulation of the Nation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999).

peasant masses to respond to modern incentives for collective mobilization, the passivity of the Bessarabian intellectuals also requires explanation. This is partly to be found in the policies of the Russian imperial government and in the long-term weakness of the local institutions before World War I.

**2. Bessarabia between the 1860s and World War I: general context.** In order to connect the above considerations to the concrete policies of the imperial center, a brief overview of Bessarabia's situation in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century is necessary. The most important dimensions of the Russian government's impact on local developments concerned the social-demographic, institutional, cultural-educational and political spheres. Naturally, all these fields were closely intertwined. Though the center never coined a full-fledged strategy of administering its south-western borderland, certain trends that account for the continuities and transformations which occurred in Bessarabian society are discernible. Even if I emphasize the interdependence of central and local signals, it is obvious that the Russian bureaucratic apparatus was the most important actor on the local level.

After the annexation of the eastern part of the Moldavian principality in 1812, a protracted period of consolidation of the central power and integration into the imperial system followed. Before the abolition of autonomy in 1828 and the liquidation of the customs barrier on the Dniester in September 1830, the newly acquired province preserved a certain peculiarity within the empire's structure. During the autonomy period, this was enhanced by the institutions of (partial) self-government granted by the Statute of 1818, which allowed for the wider participation of the noble elite in local affairs. Though these institutions were soon curtailed or abolished, the process of administrative uniformization was gradual. The 1860s were a crucial period in this regard. Bessarabia was fully incorporated into the Russian legal system by the late 1860s, when the agrarian reform statutes and the *zemstvo* regulations were extended to the area.

Besides their pragmatic importance, these acts had a certain symbolic dimension, since they assimilated Bessarabia to the central *gubernias* of the Russian heartland (the *zemstvo* legislation was not introduced in the problematic Western borderlands). However, the application of the Great Reforms in Bessarabia included certain peculiarities that preserved the inherent ambiguity of its status within the empire. Thus, the regulation on the Bessarabian peasants, approved by Alexander II on July 14, 1868 (which adapted the 1861 legislation on the abolition of serfdom to local circumstances) had to deal with a markedly different structure of land property and agriculture. Besides the absence of serfdom in the region, this difference stemmed from the allotment of land to individual households (as opposed to the peasant communes in most of Central Russia), which led to an increased social differentiation in the village and to the emergence of a stratum of relatively prosperous peasants. The *zemstvo* reform (applied to Bessarabia on October 13, 1869, somewhat later than in the central provinces) had ambiguous consequences on the provincial level. While undoubtedly intended as an effective means of streamlining local government and of further administrative integration, the *zemstvos* provided a forum for public debate and a platform for collective action that could be used as a basis for political mobilization. This became apparent in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, especially during the revolutionary crisis of 1905-1906, when the Bessarabian *zemstvos* assumed an active political role (the same was repeated on a larger scale in 1917). Despite their positive impact in the field of social welfare, education and public works, the *zemstvos* did not fulfill their initial goal of bringing the trusted elements of local society into the administration. The educated strata became more fragmented as the 19<sup>th</sup> century drew to a close and ultimately fractured along ideological lines during the revolutionary turmoil of 1905-07. The process of administrative integration into the empire culminated with the transformation of Bessarabia into a regular *gubernia* (sanctioned by the emperor on October 28, 1873) and with the introduction of general military conscription

the following year. A certain element of institutional diversity within Bessarabia was restored after the reintegration of the Ismail district in 1878. Despite the pressure for the uniform application of imperial legislation throughout the province, the southern district was left as an “anomaly” in the Russian legal system, preserving the Romanian communal and judicial organization.

Bessarabia’s demographic situation at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century reflected the multi-ethnic and strongly rural character of its population. According to the mostly reliable statistical data provided by the 1897 all-imperial census, the Bessarabian *gubernia* had, at this point, 1,935,412 inhabitants. The proportion of the rural population was overwhelming (84,8%, as opposed to 15,2% of urban dwellers). The ethnic makeup of the population was extremely diverse.<sup>2</sup> Thus, the major ethnic groups were represented by: “Moldavians” (47,6%), “Little Russians” (19, 6%), Jews (11,8%), Great Russians (8%), Bulgarians (5,3%), and Germans (3,1%). Demographically, the Romanian-speaking elements dominated the central and most of the northern districts; the Little Russians were in the majority in the Hotin district of north-western Bessarabia, while the descendants of Bulgarian and German colonists were concentrated in the south. This “duality” of the province’s space (with its southern part more reminiscent of the neighboring steppe regions of New Russia) ceased to play an important role by the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, but did not disappear altogether. Another discrepancy between these different ethnic groups proved of much more consequence for the potential success of the rhetorical strategies of the two competing projects. The rate of literacy, while generally rather low, varied widely according to gender and ethnicity. The variations in this respect could be quite significant. Thus, the German colonists were (not

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<sup>2</sup> These data (as well as the following figures on literacy) are drawn from *Pervaia vseobschaia perepis’ naseleniia Rossiiskoi Imperii. III. Bessarabskaia guberniia* (Izдание Tsentral’nogo Statisticheskogo Komiteta MVD: St.-Petersburg, 1905). Cited in: Dinu Poștarencu, *O istorie a Basarabiei în date și documente, 1812-1940* [A Chronological and Documentary History of Bessarabia] (Chisinau: Cartier, 1998), pp. 123-126. The ethnic statistics, however, are only approximate, since the only ethnically-related criterion was native language. Needless to say, this did not necessarily fit a person’s self-identification.

surprisingly) the most literate category of the Bessarabian population (with figures around 63% for both sexes), closely followed by the Poles (with 55,6% male literacy) and the Jews (49,6% male literacy, but only 21,1% female literacy). By contrast, the “Little Russians” and the Romanians (the most rural and “traditional” groups in Bessarabian society) were at the lowest end of the spectrum (with rates of 15,3% and, respectively, 3,1% for the first and 10,5% and 1,7%, respectively, for the second).<sup>3</sup> Moreover, the rate of literacy in the Russian language could be rarely assessed in objective terms and could be best described as an instance of “partial literacy.” Besides the obvious conclusion that the barely literate peasantry was a poor target for any kind of mass mobilization through discourse (be it for empire-building or nationalizing processes), this situation should be linked to the incoherent and inefficient educational policy pursued by the Russian government in Bessarabia throughout most of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

In this respect, the administration faced a major dilemma that was never resolved or even seriously addressed. The network of educational institutions was rather insignificant and had a minor effect on the masses of the rural population (in contrast to the much more structured school system of the Habsburg Empire). For instance, a report of the chief of the Odessa educational district filed in 1868, following an inspection of the Bessarabian schools, stated that, according to official statistics, there were 358 village parish schools (with 4178 pupils) on January 1, 1868. However, many of these institutions were not functional. The author of the report found that only 212 schools (with 2515 pupils) were operating on the local level.<sup>4</sup> Though the educational reforms promoted by Count D. A. Tolstoi and his successors in the 1870s and 1880s somewhat improved the situation (so that, by 1883, all the Bessarabian educational institutions incorporated

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<sup>3</sup> Dinu Poștarencu, *O istorie a Basarabiei în date și documente, 1812-1940* [A Chronological and Documentary History of Bessarabia] (Chisinau: Cartier, 1998), p. 126

<sup>4</sup> Gheorghe Negru, *Țarismul și mișcarea națională a românilor din Basarabia* [The Tsarist Regime and the National Movement of the Romanians from Bessarabia] (Chisinau: Prut International, 2000), p. 23

32543 pupils, whereas by 1901 this number increased to 92654 people, distributed in 1513 schools of all levels), the degree of penetration of the government's educational policies in the rural areas remained rather low.<sup>5</sup> This was clearly perceived by the local officials, who increasingly viewed the school system as the most appropriate means for the gradual acculturation (and eventual assimilation) of the local inhabitants into the empire. As in most other fields, Bessarabia belonged to an intermediary category, situated between the regions of the Western borderlands claimed for the ideal "Russian core" and the "alien" (*inorodcheskie*) peripheries where a subtler policy of integration was necessary. The most daunting problem for the authorities in Bessarabia was linked to the "linguistic predicament" that blocked most attempts at the "Russification" of the schools. The policy of the Russian imperial authorities in the linguistic field aimed at gradually restricting and eventually eliminating Romanian from the public domain. Whereas limitations on the use of the local idiom were introduced already in the late 1820s and legally enforced in 1834, education in the Romanian language continued intermittently at a number of Bessarabian schools until the 1860s. It can be surmised that the views prevailing within Russian official circles after the 1863-64 Polish revolt prompted the banishment of Romanian from the educational establishments. These restrictions were imposed in two stages. Initially, Alexander II accepted the proposal of the State Council to prohibit the teaching of Romanian at the Kishinev lyceum (this act was sanctioned on February 9, 1866). Five years later, in the context of similar repressive measures undertaken in the other Western provinces of the empire, a total ban on the teaching of Romanian in Bessarabian schools was approved (on February 23, 1871). This measure was emulated by the local Orthodox hierarchy, which ordered the complete switch to Russian in the drafting of official church documents in 1872. It should be emphasized that the publication of books in Romanian was never officially

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<sup>5</sup> Negru, p. 25, 35



prohibited. In fact, the printing press functioning at the theological seminary and issuing religious literature in Romanian was only closed in 1883 (to be reopened in October 1906). A limited circulation of Romanian-language “popular literature” was also permitted. This relative leniency towards Bessarabia appears to have several reasons. First, the authorities directed their attention mostly to potentially “subversive” publications and turned a blind eye to politically neutral ones. Second, the potential impact of such writings was perceived as minimal, given the low literacy of the target audience. Third, the imperial officials never devised a comprehensive strategy of dealing with the peripheries and reacted, in this case as in others (the most notorious being the Ukrainian and the Lithuanian ones) on a mostly *ad hoc* basis. An overall perception of “irredentist threat” existed in the minds of the bureaucrats, but it was not serious enough to warrant more radical measures. Finally, the imagined “closeness” or the Orthodox peasant population to the “core” of the ethnic hierarchy within the empire allowed the application of a more restrained policy that based its presumed effectiveness on the “fading away” of the ethnic and linguistic peculiarity of the local Romanians under the pressure of imperial integrative mechanisms.<sup>6</sup>

Though one cannot accept the views of the “nationalizing” historiography, that postulated the existence of a concerted policy of “Russification” in the educational sphere at least from the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century (if not starting from 1812), it appears that after the 1880s, along with the incipient discursive “nationalization” of the empire, more systematic efforts in this direction were

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<sup>6</sup> For an opposing argument claiming that the Russian authorities had a well-devised scheme of “assimilation” and linguistic Russification and going as far as imputing the intention to create a separate “Moldavian” language and nation to the imperial regime, see Lidia Colesnic-Codreanca, *Limba română în Basarabia (1812-1918): Studiu socio-lingvistic pe baza materialelor de arhivă* [The Romanian Language in Bessarabia (1812-1918): A Socio-Linguistic Study Based on Archival Materials] (Chisinau: Museum, 2003). I find the author’s argument unconvincing.

attempted.<sup>7</sup> However, these projects were never fully implemented and the school system remained chronically underdeveloped up to World War I. The failure of mass “acculturation” should be connected not only to bureaucratic inefficiency, but also to the ambiguity of the Russian officials’ attitude towards popular education. The belonging of the Bessarabian Romanian population to the dominant church also precluded an “Il’minskii-like” project of native-language education, though the re-opening of the Romanian-language press by Bishop Vladimir in 1906 and the authorized publication of the ecclesiastical journal “Luminatorul” from January 1907 pointed to such a possibility.<sup>8</sup> However, the mainstream policy of the Russian church hierarchy consisted in the total integration of the local clergy into the centrally controlled structures, which implied the rejection of any local initiative. This tendency culminated in the authoritarian administration of Bishop Serafim Chichagov (1908-1914), who tried (unsuccessfully) to reverse the emerging pattern of liberalization within the church and also attempted to enlist the Bessarabian clergy into contemporary nationalist policy through his direct involvement in the activities of the “Union of the Russian People.”<sup>9</sup>

The secondary educational institutions in Bessarabia were not able to provide a significant arena for the emergence of a modern public sphere. The first institution of secondary education in the region was the Theological Seminary, inaugurated in January 1813. Despite the early opening of a number of small private schools, followed by the (partially successful) application of the “Lancasterian model” starting from the 1820s, a significant extension of the public system of

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<sup>7</sup> Thus, the Council of Ministers discussed the Bessarabian situation in two separate meetings on March 7 and 21, 1889. The participants generally agreed on the necessity of extending “Russian education” in the province “gradually and without constraining the local alien population.” The best means in this regard were the parish Russian-language schools, which had to be opened in most villages. A special attention was accorded to the Russian-language instruction of the local clergy, that was to serve as the main agent of this “cultural policy.” The public state schools also had an important role to play. However, it was recognized that a number of “unfavorable conditions” persisted in Bessarabia, among which the “lack of understanding for the necessity of learning Russian” and the poor knowledge of Russian among the local clergy were the most important. See Negru, pp. 34-35

<sup>8</sup> Dinu Poştarencu, *O istorie a Basarabiei în date şi documente, 1812-1940*, pp. 134-136

<sup>9</sup> Nicolae Popovschi, *Istoria bisericii din Basarabia sub rusi...*

secondary education only occurred in the 1830s, when, among others, the first lyceum in Chisinau was inaugurated (in September 1833). The expansion of secondary education continued with the opening of the second lyceum (initially a gymnasium, inaugurated in September 1871 and transformed into a full-fledged secondary school in 1884). By 1914, in Chisinau and the other important cities of the province, the network of district, city and higher secondary schools improved. This was supplemented by the expansion of technical education in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Additionally, the local educated society displayed the first timid signs of self-organization in the last years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Thus, the gubernial authorities sponsored the formation of the Bessarabian Gubernial Scholarly Archival Commission, which was the first locally-based institution dealing with the region's history and cultural heritage (prior to this, a center for such activities was provided by the Odessa Historical and Antiquarian Society). Another significant initiative (this time supported by the clergy in cooperation with the emerging intellectual strata) led to the creation, in April 1904, of the Historical-Archeological Church Society of Bessarabia. Finally, in the context of the revolutionary crisis of 1905 and due to the new avenues opened for public activity, a group of conservative Romanian-speaking landowners and officials founded the "Moldavian Society for the Spread of National Culture" in September 1905. Under the leadership of Pavel Dicescul, a prominent local activist and marshal of the nobility of the Chisinau district, this organization championed a rather moderate agenda of cultural enlightenment of the Romanian-speaking peasantry, while emphasizing its loyalty to the dynasty and the imperial order. The scope of these early 20<sup>th</sup> century efforts was modest, at best, and affected only a minority of Bessarabia's intelligentsia. A quantitative (and qualitative) shift in the political mobilization of the local intellectuals occurred gradually after 1898, when the Russian universities were opened to aspiring local youth. Prior to that, the chances of receiving higher education were rather limited for the Bessarabians. The absence of a university in the

province, the elitist character of higher education (open mostly to scions of prominent noble or merchant families) and the relatively poor quality of most local educational establishments discouraged a massive influx of Bessarabian-born youth into the Russian universities. However, after 1900 the first groups of Bessarabian students formed a number of “national associations” (*zemliachestva*), the most notorious being the semi-conspiratorial “circle” at Dorpat University, which provided several important figures of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century oppositional movement. Similar organizations emerged in more important university centers (St. Petersburg, Moscow or Kiev). Despite these incipient developments, the shock of the 1905 revolution was necessary for the polarization of political opinions and for the weakening of the traditional clientele pattern that structured the distribution of power on the local level in Bessarabia.

Another fundamental factor that hampered the earlier development of a public arena for an “identity contest” in the province was the weakness of the local press. If one admits the central role of the press and journalism for state building, “national education” and the articulation of discourses of collective identity, the absence of developed media might point to one of the causes of the “lack of articulation” that was so conspicuous in the Bessarabian case. For most of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the only periodical publication issued in Bessarabia was the official bulletin *Bessarabskie oblastnye* (from 1873- gubernskie) *vedomosti*, published since July 1854 by the provincial administration. This was supplemented by the church bulletin *Kishinevskie eparhial’nye vedomosti*, issued from 1867 (and featuring a Romanian-language version until 1871). Several aborted attempts to launch other Romanian-language publications were undertaken, to no avail. On the one hand, the authorities were reluctant to allow such enterprises due to reasons of political “reliability” (the dubious loyalty of the Bessarabians became a pressing problem in the minds of the Russian bureaucrats along with the consolidation of the Romanian nation-state). On the other hand, there clearly existed a lack of demand on the local

level that precluded the emergence of a Russian-language press. Since overtly political factors cannot be invoked in this case, a possible explanation might point to the inadequacy of the reading public in the region that stemmed from the larger patterns of literacy and the small number of potential consumers. An additional reason for this situation was the conservatism of the local educated society, which reinforced traditional models of social behavior and did not foster an environment for public debate. In any case, the first privately owned paper (*Bessarabskii vestnik*) only appeared in September 1889. By the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the local press underwent a process of consolidation and ideological clarification. As a result, by 1903 two broad orientations (that might be loosely termed “liberal” and “conservative-monarchist”) crystallized in the Bessarabian press. The first tendency was mainly represented by the influential newspaper *Bessarabskaia Zhizn'* (issued between 1903 and 1918, initially under the editorship of Alexis Nour, who later left for Romania and had a significant role in the interwar polemics over Bessarabia). The second trend was epitomized by the notorious publication *Bessarabets* (printed since 1897), coordinated by the radical and anti-Semitic publicist Pavel Krushevan (a descendant of a prominent Bessarabian noble family). Krushevan's astute journalism and extremist political views, coupled with his talent as a writer, contributed to a marked shift in the role of the local press, which by the first years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century began to exercise a growing influence on the emerging “public sphere” of the province.<sup>10</sup> Despite these changes (exemplified by the accusations leveled at Krushevan's paper for the “enticement” of the population that led to the pogrom of 1903), the 1905 revolutionary crisis constituted the turning point for the transfer of Bessarabia's contested character to the local public sphere. The emergence of the first short-lived

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<sup>10</sup> For a comprehensive overview of the Bessarabian press before 1917, see B. A. Trubetskoi, *Iz istorii periodicheskoi pechati Bessarabii, 1854-1916 gg.* [From the History of Bessarabia's Periodical Press, 1854-1916] (Kishinev: Shtiintsa, 1989). A recent study focusing on the Romanian-language press in the revolutionary and wartime context is Silvia Grossu, *Presa din Basarabia in contextul sociocultural al anilor 1906-1944* [The Bessarabian Press in the Socio-Cultural Context of the Years 1906-1944] (Chisinau: Tehnica-Info, 2003).

Romanian-language publications forced the authorities to reconsider the opportunity of using the written word for propaganda purposes in the midst of the Bessarabian populace. The mainly reactive policy of the government acquired a more coherent direction on the occasion of the 1912 anniversary of the province's annexation to the empire. However, even in this case it is difficult to speak about a full-fledged integrative vision that responded to local signals. Not only the inarticulate peasantry, but also the intellectual strata within the *gubernia* were remarkably passive in constructing a hypothetical local perspective on their province's place within the empire. Bessarabia remained essentially an *object* of rival state-building projects.<sup>11</sup>

The delay in the political mobilization of ethnicity in Bessarabia should thus be related to a whole series of factors. The major trends that contributed to the *lack of articulation* of the local inhabitants and determined the discursive patterns of the “symbolic competition” between the Russian Empire and Romania can be structured along several lines. Socially, the predominantly rural character of the population and the persistence of a “deference society” in the villages conditioned the reluctance of the peasantry to respond to the various “stimuli” of the impending modernity. The educational policies of the government blocked the appearance of an articulated local intellectual stratum for most of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. When such groups began to coalesce, their formative environment was provided by the Russian universities, which by the end of the imperial period were hotbeds of oppositional currents and were deemed notoriously unreliable and even pernicious. As a footnote, the Bessarabian-born Minister of Education Leon Kasso had to deal with one of the most serious “university crises” before World War I. The educated Bessarabian youth followed the pattern of the Russian intelligentsia in its dealings with and

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<sup>11</sup> The factual and statistical references in this account are mostly drawn from the following works: Ion Nistor, *Istoria Basarabiei* [The History of Bessarabia] (Chisinau: Cartea Moldoveneasca, 1991); Dinu Poștarencu, *O istorie a Basarabiei în date și documente, 1812-1940* [A Chronological and Documentary History of Bessarabia] (Chisinau: Cartier, 1998); Gheorghe Negru, *Țarismul și mișcarea națională a românilor din Basarabia* [The Tsarist Regime and the National Movement of the Romanians from Bessarabia] (Chisinau: Prut International, 2000).

attitude towards the regime. The weakness of the local institutions and the lack of an adequate framework for social initiatives led to the rather late (and partial) formation of a “public sphere” capable of sustaining a systematic intellectual activity on the local level. Thus, official discourse supplanted the non-existent “local voices” in the symbolic competition over the region’s belonging. Politically, the masses displayed a formidable inertia in relation to the mobilizing strategies of the empire-building and nationalizing agents that attempted to reclaim their loyalty. To the extent that the bulk of the population was attracted to mass politics before World War I, the traditional criteria of religious belonging and a loose sense of attachment to the imperial dynasty were much more likely to elicit a response from the peasants than any invocation of ethnic solidarity with a nebulous “ideal fatherland” beyond the Prut. This was demonstrated by the voting pattern for the Duma elections and especially by the prominence of right-wing monarchist organizations in Bessarabia. However, it would be equally problematic to insist on the complete passivity of an immutable “traditional” society that remained unaffected by the early 20<sup>th</sup> century social and ideological changes. This became gradually apparent once the ideological differences among the small groups of the politically conscious local intelligentsia emerged during wartime and the 1917 revolutionary turmoil. The tension between the social and national aspects of the “Bessarabian question” structured the region’s public sphere in 1917-1918, when mass politics finally had a direct impact on local developments. More importantly, this tension affected the terms of Bessarabia’s integration into the Romanian Kingdom and created an atmosphere of mutual suspicion that was not attenuated during the interwar period. The dilemmas of Romanian nation-building in Bessarabia between 1918 and 1940 belong, however, to another (related but different) story. The legacies of empire and nation in Bessarabia will be briefly sketched in the concluding remarks of this work. To summarize, the region between the Prut and the Dniester was rhetorically constructed as a contested territory between

the 1860s and 1914. This discursive construction preceded in many ways the actual impact of modern ideologies and social processes in the area, but also prepared the ground for them. By the time the “Bessarabian issue” surfaced on the field of international diplomacy after 1918, both Romania and the Russian/Soviet state were in possession of a series of (submerged) arguments and discursive patterns useful in confronting their respective adversary. My intention has been, first and foremost, to discuss these strategies, their dynamics, their multiple contexts and dilemmas in order to show that Bessarabia (as any other territory) is a product of the complex interplay between “discourse” and “reality.”

**3. Historiographical overview.** The focus of this overview will naturally be directed towards the pre-World War I period while not neglecting the possible relevance of works dealing with later processes. The presentation will be conceived along four main tracks: 1) the Russian and Soviet “historiographical tradition” (mainly emphasizing the “readings” of the imperial nature of the Russian state and the polemics with the Romanian historiography); 2) the Romanian historians’ contributions to the positing of Bessarabia on the “cognitive map” of the intellectual circles in Romania starting from the interwar period, passing through the “national-Communist” reevaluation (however partial and incomplete) and culminating in the post-1989 intellectual climate; 3) the “Western” stance on Bessarabia (which largely evolved from an exclusive concentration on narrow issues of legal and diplomatic history to a more thoughtful interpretation of the complexity of “region-“ and state-building in the Bessarabian case); 4) finally, the contributions of the historians of the newly independent Republic of Moldova (however scarce) to a potential reassessment of Bessarabian “historical experience” in a wider context. This review will not discuss the multiple controversies linked with the “Bessarabian question” (a subject somewhat over-emphasized, if under-theorized), but will instead attempt to highlight the possible



points of interest touched upon in previous works that might serve as an incipient “common ground” with the interpretation proposed here.

The claim that this project emerged in a “historiographical vacuum” is both unbalanced and exaggerated. As the following chapter will clarify, my debts in this regard are abundant and substantial. However, this claim is also true in the sense that no comprehensive study of Bessarabia’s symbolic appropriation (either by the Russian imperial or by the Romanian national discourse) has yet been written. The approach proposed here is implicitly based on a large body of empirical research that was produced throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Most of these works, however, were either specialized investigations or displayed explicit ideological agendas that this study seeks to transcend. The case of Soviet (including Soviet Moldavian) historical scholarship is especially conspicuous in this regard.<sup>12</sup> In his informative analysis of the Communist historiography of the “Bessarabian question,” W. P. van Meurs generalizes his argument by emphasizing that a peculiar feature of Communist history-writing was the persistence of two basic “myths” that structured the meta-presuppositions of the historians and imposed strict limits on the range of possible opinions. Similarly to other “national peripheries” of the USSR, the history of Bessarabia revolved around *the myth of the lesser evil* and *the myth of the friendship of the peoples*.<sup>13</sup> Since Soviet historiography was subordinated to the project of building a separate “Moldavian nation,” the Russian imperial period acquired a double importance for the ideological tasks of the Soviet historians. On the one hand, it was presented as a formative period of the

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<sup>12</sup> I will not touch upon the works issued before 1918 in the Russian Empire, since these were mostly of a general character and might be viewed rather as sources for the present project. Nevertheless, officially commissioned statistical works (e.g., that of A. Zashchuk or P. Batiushkov) or scholarly monographs (e.g., the books of L. Kasso or L. Berg) preserve a certain interest as instances of an articulate and sometimes polemically tainted imperial discourse.

<sup>13</sup> Wilhelmus P. van Meurs, *Chestiunea Basarabiei în istoriografia comunistă* [The Bessarabian Question in Communist Politics and History-Writing] (Chisinau: ARC, 1996), p. 175. These two “myths” were not confined to the realm of historiography and reflected the broader dynamics of the Soviet nationalities policy. Moreover, these generalizations are valid mostly for the post-1945 period, when the direct polemics with the Romanians ceased and the “Bessarabian controversy” acquired subtler forms

“Moldavian bourgeois nation.” This implied a reservedly benevolent attitude towards the Russian imperial regime (as “objectively progressive”) and a mostly positive interpretation of the Russian imperial legacy in economic and cultural terms. On the other hand, the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries were teleologically construed as a “pre-revolutionary stage,” which led to an inordinate concentration on the “revolutionary movement,” left-wing ideologies, but also on agrarian and “social history” that quantitatively dominated the scholarly output. Even a cursory analysis of the Soviet-sponsored version of Bessarabian history uncovers the considerable resources and efforts invested in the articulation of a “Marxist-Leninist” narrative of the imperial period in Bessarabia. Thus, between the 1920s and the end of the 1980s over 1500 publications on different aspects of the region’s 19<sup>th</sup> century history were issued. While it is not my goal to analyze the general trends of Soviet historiography in its application to the “Bessarabian case,” several broad subjects of inquiry emerge even at a superficial glance.

Among these, one can name the following: the problem of Bessarabia’s annexation to the Russian Empire in 1812, which was invariably treated from the vantage point of the “liberation” of the Bessarabian population from Ottoman oppression;<sup>14</sup> the Russian-Romanian relations in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the empire’s “progressive” role in the support of the Balkan peoples’ liberation struggle;<sup>15</sup> the economic and urban history of 19<sup>th</sup> century Bessarabia (several important monographic contributions should be noted, despite their mostly descriptive character);<sup>16</sup> the territory’s social history (which meant first of all the history of the peasantry) and the (rather

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<sup>14</sup> It would be impossible to name the major works dedicated to each of the ensuing subjects. I will only limit myself to indicating the most prominent authors in each field. For the 1812 moment, such representative authors are: Ia. S. Grosul, E. E. Certan, A. I. Babii, E. M. Russev, V. I. Zhukov, I. G. Budak, M. P. Muntian, N. V. Babilunga, V. Tsaranov. As will be seen presently, most of these people were acknowledged “Soviet Moldavian” specialists on the tsarist period in Bessarabia.

<sup>15</sup> The most prolific authors in this sense were I. G. Budak, E. E. Certan, V. N. Vinogradov, I. S. Dostian.

<sup>16</sup> The most substantive works have been authored by Ia. S. Grosul, I. G. Budak, M. P. Muntian, I. A. Antsupov, V. I. Zhukov, I. D. Puhalskii, E. I. Druzhinina (focusing on the broader region of New Russia), I. I. Meshcheriuk, and V. N. Tomulets.

insignificant) record of social unrest in Bessarabia, blown out of proportion by the insistence on the local inhabitants' potential of revolt;<sup>17</sup> the political and ideological tendencies in 19<sup>th</sup> century Bessarabia, as well as issues of administration and government policy (comparatively under-researched by Soviet historians).<sup>18</sup> A separate research agenda, related to the more specialized studies on Bessarabia and providing a (however truncated and distorted) comparative perspective on ideological processes in the region was represented by works devoted to the presumable "revolutionary" traditions of South-Eastern Europe, which sought to integrate local Bessarabian manifestations of dissent into the larger context of the "Balkans." These contributions were marred by their overt propagation of the myth of the "friendship of the peoples," but should not be completely disregarded or ignored.<sup>19</sup> Another track of investigation that contributed important empirical data to the accumulation of source material on 19<sup>th</sup> century Bessarabia included the rich literature on demographic processes and the colonization policy of the Russian government. Though their analytical framework leaves much to be desired, these studies allow the placing of Bessarabia into the overall dynamics of population movements which had such a profound impact on changing the ecology of this "frontier zone."<sup>20</sup> Research on cultural and educational developments, though quantitatively important, predictably failed to address the larger trends of

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<sup>17</sup> These subjects were largely covered by the authors already mentioned above (reflecting the nexus of social-economic history in its Soviet understanding).

<sup>18</sup> The discrepancy between the social-economic and "political" dimensions of Bessarabian history is impressive. Almost no works dealing with these topics were issued during the 1970s and 1980s. The works by A. V. Surilov, I. A. Antsupov and G. K. Fedorov could hardly compensate for this relative neglect. The most solid investigations in this direction in the Soviet period were undertaken by V. Ia. Grosul: V. Ia. Grosul, *Reformy v Dunaiskih Kniazhestvah i Rossii (20-30-e gody 19-go veka* [The Reforms of the 1820s and 1830s in the Danubian Principalities and Russia] (Moscow: Nauka, 1966). This author focused on the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and continued to publish after 1991.

<sup>19</sup> Some of the more serious scholarship dealt with the Greek uprising of 1821 and the Decembrist movement and their "repercussions" on Bessarabia. Discussions of the Polish or Bulgarian "revolutionary movements" also paid considerable attention to the (vastly exaggerated) Bessarabian "link." The most representative authors within this trend are: N. V. Berezniakov, L. N. Oganian, B. A. Trubetskoi (on Pushkin), I. F. Iovva, G. L. Arsh, K. A. Poglubko, V. Ia. Grosul (who later switched to researching the "Balkan direction" in the Russian revolutionary movement of the 1870s and 1880s) and Iu. G. Ivanov.

<sup>20</sup> The most prominent works of this kind were produced by I. I. Meshcheriuk, I. A. Antsupov, A. D. Bachinskii, and, especially, V. M. Kabuzan.

Russian imperial policy in this sphere. Aside from descriptive accounts of the region's educational establishments and the emphasis on reciprocal influences that purportedly shaped the cultural and literary activity in the region, there were hardly any attempts to analyze the broader dynamics of the local educated strata and the formation of the Bessarabian "intelligentsia." In fact, the only such instance in the Soviet period is the work of A. I. Babii.<sup>21</sup> "Soviet Moldavian" scholarship also possessed a strongly institutionalized tradition of "ethnographic" research. The Soviet historians aimed at a linear-progressive presentation of the development of local Bessarabian ethnography that purportedly evolved from an initial stage of dispersed and undifferentiated observations towards a systematic research agenda promoted under the aegis of the specialized scholarly societies at the central level (the Russian Geographical Society) or of locally based scholarly associations (e.g., the Odessa Historical and Antiquarian Society, founded in 1839).<sup>22</sup> The only work explicitly focused upon the problems of interaction between the local Bessarabian context of ethnographic investigations and the broader influences stemming from the conceptual debates at the "center" in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was published in 1986.<sup>23</sup> This monograph, however, does not go beyond a descriptive and strictly "evolutionary" approach. The author builds an image of an uninterrupted progress of the "science of ethnography" that presumably led

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<sup>21</sup> A. I. Babii, *Formirovanie moldavskoi intelligentsii vo vtoroi polovine 19-go- nachale 20-go veka* [The Formation of the Moldavian Intelligentsia in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> Century] (ed. By A. N. Mohov). (Kishinev: Shtiintsa, 1971).

<sup>22</sup> Among the most representative examples of this approach one could mention the raticles and books authored by V. Zelenchuk: Salmanovich M.I., Zelenchuk V. S. „Etnograficheskaia literatura o moldavanah [The Ethnographic Literature Concerning Moldavians ]”, in: *Sovetskaia Etnografiia*, 1954, Nr. 3; Zelenchuk V. S. „Osveshchenie narodnoi kul'tury i byta moldavan v etnograficheskoi literature [The Reflection of the Moldavians' Popular Culture and Everyday Life in the Ethnographic Literature]”, in: *Izv. Mold. Filiala AN SSSR*, 1956, Nr. 4; Idem. „Etnograficheskoe izuchenie naseleniia Moldavii [The Ethnographic Investigation of Moldavia's Population]”, in: *Sovetskaia etnografiia*, 1976, Nr. 4.

<sup>23</sup> O. S. Lukianets. *Russkie issledovateli i moldavskaia etnograficheskaia nauka v XIX-nachale XX v.* [The Russian Researchers and the Moldavian Ethnographic Science during the XIX and Early XX Century]. (Kishinev: „Shtiintsa”, 1986).

to the “self-assertion of ethnography as an autonomous scholarly discipline”<sup>24</sup> at the local level by the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

This sketchy presentation seeking to point to the potentially recoverable legacy of Soviet historiography on 19<sup>th</sup> century Bessarabia only reinforces the conclusion of the inadequacy of the Soviet model in accounting for the Russian imperial experience in Bessarabia. The situation is similar in the case of the Romanian nationalizing historiography. The two historical traditions shared the logic of the symbolic competition analyzed here and thus cannot be reclaimed as balanced analyses of the Bessarabian situation. In a sense, they perpetuated the late 19<sup>th</sup> century discourses while also transforming them. The bulk of the historical literature on Bessarabia issued in Greater Romania was the oeuvre of “national activists” with a Bessarabian background who understandably pursued the aim of justifying the Romanian nation-building project in the region. This led to a highly polemical and emotionally charged stance on the Russian imperial domination in the area, highlighting the themes of de-nationalization and Russification and emphasizing the pernicious impact of the tsarist administration on the “national consciousness” of the Bessarabian Romanians. The multi-ethnic character of Bessarabia was treated either as an unwelcome accident or as the result of the conscious design of the authorities to transform the ethnic structure in order to achieve their unsavory assimilatory goals.<sup>25</sup> Romanian interwar literature was never a monolithic whole. On the one hand, more informative and balanced accounts of the 1812-1918 period were published (the most eloquent example is the work of

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<sup>24</sup> O. S. Lukianets, p. 92

<sup>25</sup> Some of the more representative works in this category are: Petre Cazacu, *Moldova dintre Prut și Nistru, 1812-1918* [Moldavia between the Prut and the Dniester, 1812-1918] (Iași: “Viața Românească, n.d.) (republished in Chisinau: „Știința”, 1992); Ștefan Ciobanu, *Cultura românească în Basarabia sub stăpânirea rusă* [Romanian Culture in Bessarabia under Russian Domination] (Chisinau: Encyclopedic Publishing House, 1992); and Ion Nistor, *Istoria Basarabiei* [The History of Bessarabia] (Chisinau: Cartea Moldoveneasca, 1991) (originally published in 1924). It is impossible to list the large number of brochures, anniversary publications on the occasion of the celebration of the 1918 unification or polemical articles.

Alexandru Boldur).<sup>26</sup> On the other hand, a number of local initiatives promoted by young Bessarabian intellectuals reevaluated certain aspects of the region's 19<sup>th</sup> century history. Aside from the circle of "provincialist" writers grouped around the journal *Viața Basarabiei* in the 1930s, the most significant endeavor of writing Bessarabian history from a locally centered standpoint was initiated by Gheorghe Bezviconi.<sup>27</sup> These developments were curtailed by the 1940 events, which led to a temporary upsurge of polemical writings defending the Romanian claims on Bessarabia. After the short-lived restoration of Romanian control no significant changes in historiography were perceptible, although Bessarabia's place in the Romanian social imaginary became more problematic. The real watershed in this sense came following the consolidation of the Communist regime in Romania, which all but banned any reference to the Soviet-held territory until the early 1960s. One could even speak about a relative convergence and tacit agreement between the Soviet and Romanian communist historians, who closely followed the Soviet "friendship of peoples" model until the late years of the Dej regime. Though this consensus was increasingly challenged as the Romanian Communist Party adopted its revised cultural policy, the "Bessarabian" issue remained a highly ambiguous reference until 1989. Two high points of direct controversy between the Soviet and Romanian perspectives on the "Bessarabian question" can be identified. The first concerned the discovery (or, more accurately, the re-appropriation) of Karl Marx's "Russophobic" writings by a group of Romanian historians that resulted in the publication of a special volume on "Marx's notes about the

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<sup>26</sup> A. Boldur, *Istoria Basarabiei* [History of Bessarabia] (Bucharest: Victor Frunza Publishers, 1992) (originally published in 1940 in three volumes). Boldur also wrote a comprehensive study on the 1812-1828 period: Al. Boldur, *Autonomia Basarabiei sub stăpânirea rusească în 1812-1828* [Bessarabia's Autonomy under Russian Domination in 1812-1828] (Chisinau: "Cartea Românească", 1929).

<sup>27</sup> Bezviconi published most of his work in the review *Din trecutul nostru* [From Our Past], which he almost single-handedly wrote and edited between 1933 and 1940. A dedicated genealogist, source collector and historian, Bezviconi's approach remained essentially descriptive and personality-centered and never amounted to a full-fledged "revisionism." His position was also subject to the turbulent political evolutions of the period.

Romanians” in 1964.<sup>28</sup> Though this move should be inscribed into the context of the tensions that emerged at this time in the Soviet-Romanian relations, it also showed the potential for manipulating the nationalist legacy of the previous historiography for political purposes. The second incident was provoked by the publication, ten years later, of a synthetic and ideologically charged work of the “Moldavian Soviet” historian Artiom Lazarev dealing with “Moldavian statehood” and the “Bessarabian question.”<sup>29</sup> This event occurred against a background of growing distrust and unease between the Romanian and Soviet historians (exemplified, among other things, by the conflation of some historians writing in the SRR under the label of “bourgeois falsifiers”). Lazarev’s massive undertaking provoked a swift and firm reaction on the Romanian side, which was, however, moderated by the party apparatus in order not to antagonize the Soviet establishment. The occurrence of such public displays of discontent and the strict limits imposed on them pointed to the complex play between history and politics in Ceausescu’s Romania. Bessarabia always lurked in the background as a potentially useful *topos* that was occasionally “activated,” but was never allowed to emerge as a contentious issue on the surface of official discourse.<sup>30</sup> After 1989, despite the full recovery of the interwar discourse on Bessarabia, the region remained rather marginal in the general scheme of history writing in Romania. Aside from certain textbook-like works produced by the collaborative effort of the historians on both sides of the Prut<sup>31</sup> and a number of serious reassessments of the region’s

<sup>28</sup> Karl Marx, *Însemnări despre români (Manuscrise inedite)* [Notes on the Romanians. Unpublished Manuscripts]. (ed. By A. Otetea and S. Schwann) (Bucharest: Publishing House of the PRR Academy, 1964).

<sup>29</sup> A. M. Lazarev, *Moldavskaia sovetskaia gosudartvennost’ i bessarabskii vopros* [Soviet Moldavian Statehood and the Bessarabian Question] (Kishinev: Cartea Moldoveneasca, 1974).

<sup>30</sup> A detailed analysis of the “truncated” Soviet-Romanian controversy over the Bessarabian question between 1964 and 1989 can be found in Wilhelmus P. van Meurs, *Chestiunea Basarabiei în istoriografia comunistă*, pp. 269-294. The author concludes by viewing the manipulation of the „Bessarabian question” in Romanian Communist historiography in terms of interdependence between the “political functionality” and the peculiar dynamism shared by the historical profession and the Communist ideology.

<sup>31</sup> Ioan Scurtu, Dumitru Almas et al. *Istoria Basarabiei : De la începuturi până în 1994* [History of Bessarabia: From Earliest Times until 1994] (Bucharest: Tempus, 1994). (second, enlarged and revised edition, 1998).

problematic international status from a “diplomatic history” perspective,<sup>32</sup> no systematic research on the pre-1918 period has been done. As the authors of a recent survey of post-1990 Romanian historiography note, Iași is the only university center where “a permanent scholarly interest in the study of Bessarabia” is apparent.<sup>33</sup> Though the projects devised there are also fragmentary and pay little attention to the Russian imperial period, certain signs of innovation and attempts at “transgressing the traditional Soviet and Romanian perspectives” are visible.<sup>34</sup> However, a more systematic and institutionalized effort focused on common projects elaborated by Romanian and Moldovan historians is necessary in order to effectively place Bessarabia’s 19<sup>th</sup> century on the “map” of Romanian historiographical preoccupations.

The notion of a “Western historiography” of the Bessarabian territory is highly questionable from several points of view. First, it is doubtful with regard to the period I am dealing with, insofar as the insignificant number of works devoted to the subject hardly amount to any coherent “tradition.” Second (similarly to other regional cases, notably the Ukrainian one) the “western”-generated discourse in the pre-1990 period was divided into two distinct tracks. On the one hand, it was represented by the writings of Romanian émigrés who perpetuated the interwar tradition and conceived of Bessarabia as a contested territory between Romania and the USSR. While these texts cannot be squarely included in the category of “nationalist historiography,” they were clearly closer to the interwar tradition, both in their content and their polemical thrust, than to the contemporary mainstream trends of Western history writing. While more attentive to the Russian imperial legacy and free of direct ideological constraints, such endeavors were negatively

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<sup>32</sup> Paul Cernovodeanu, *Basarabia. Drama unei provincii istorice românești în context politic internațional, 1806-1920* [Bessarabia. The Tragedy of a Romanian Historic Province in the International Political Context, 1806-1920] (Bucharest: Albatros, 1993). As the title shows, the “national” thrust of the new historiography persists.

<sup>33</sup> Cristina Petrescu and Dragos Petrescu, “Mastering vs. Coming to Terms with the Past: A Critical Analysis of Post-Communist Romanian Historiography,” in: *Narratives Unbound...*, p. 29

<sup>34</sup> A promising venture in this sense is represented by the collective volume: Flavius Solomon and Alexandru Zub, eds. *Basarabia: Dilemele identității* [Bessarabia: Dilemmas of Identity] (Iasi: “A. D. Xenopol” Academic Foundation, 2001).



affected by the lack of archival sources and the initial presuppositions of their authors who displayed a hidden (or overt) political agenda. This scholarly activity reached its apex in the 1980s, when the bulk of émigré literature on the Bessarabian “borderland” and on the “Soviet-Romanian territorial dispute” was published.<sup>35</sup> Another flaw of these works consisted in their over-generalized approach and in their focus on later periods, when the controversy over Bessarabia reached a more articulate stage.

On the other hand, several studies that placed the Bessarabian case within the broader context of “sovietology” and “area studies” emerged.<sup>36</sup> One of the few comprehensive treatments of the early period of Bessarabia’s integration into the Russian imperial system can thus be found in the work of George F. Jewsbury, which should be placed in the context of the preoccupation for “Russian imperialism” which crystallized in the 1970s. However, the importance of this study derived from the investigation of the Bessarabian case as a particular illustration of the broader issues of the limits (and costs) of imperial expansion, the challenges of governing a borderland region and the context of the constitutionalist and federalist experiments of Alexander I.<sup>37</sup> No comparable research exists on the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when, admittedly, the changed

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<sup>35</sup> The most representative works of this series include: George Cioranescu, *Bessarabia: Disputed Land between East and West*. (Munich: Ion Dumitru Verlag, 1985; Nicholas Dima, *Bessarabia and Bukovina: The Soviet-Romanian Territorial Dispute*. (Boulder, Colo.: East European Monographs, 1982); Nicholas Dima, *From Moldavia to Moldova: The Soviet-Romanian Territorial Dispute*. (Boulder, Colo.: East European Monographs, 1991); Manoliu-Manea, Maria, ed. *The Tragic Plight of a Border Area: Bessarabia and Bucovina*. (Los Angeles: Humboldt State University Press, 1983); and Hannes Hofbauer and Viorel Roman, *Bukowina, Bessarabien, Moldawien : vergessenes Land zwischen Westeuropa, Russland und der Türkei*. (Wien : Promedia, 1993). A more ambiguous stance can also be ascribed to the work of Michael Bruchis, *Rossiiia, Rumyniia i Bessarabiia (1812-1918-1924-1940)*. [Russia, Romania and Bessarabia] (Jerusalem, Graph Press, 1979). This author is more notorious for his works on the Soviet “nationality policy” in Soviet Moldavia.

<sup>36</sup> The “Western” preoccupation for the “Bessarabian question” appeared before 1945 in the context of the “diplomatic war” between Romania and the USSR (the high points of this conflict were reached at the Paris Peace Conference in 1918-1919 and at the Vienna Conference of 1924). These works were targeted primarily to a “western” audience and had a popularizing character. However, certain texts were examples of sound scholarship: Charles Upson Clark, *Bessarabia: Russia and Roumania on the Black Sea*. (New York: Dodd Mead, 1927); Antony Babel, *La Bessarabie. Etude historique, ethnographique et économique* (Paris : Felix Alcan, 1926) or C. Uhlig, *Die Bessarabische Frage. Eine geopolitische Betrachtung* (Breslau: Ferdinand Hirt, 1926). One can also mention the work of Andrei Popovici, *The Political Status of Bessarabia* (Washington, D.C.: Randell, 1931).

<sup>37</sup> George F. Jewsbury, *The Russian Annexation of Bessarabia: 1774-1828. A Study of Imperial Expansion* (Boulder, Colo.: East European Quarterly, 1976).

setting of the Russian imperial state made the integration of Bessarabia a less appealing subject for scholarly interest. After 1990, Western scholarship focused either on the post-1918 period or on contemporary developments in the Republic of Moldova. Though the Russian imperial legacy figured, to different degrees, in these accounts, it was usually perceived as a background for later developments. Nevertheless, the imperial period was not neglected in synthetic works devoted to the Soviet era or to the “failed” Soviet nation-building project in the MASSR and the MSSR.<sup>38</sup> It should be noted that a separate (and thriving) research field is devoted to the “minority” ethnic groups of 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century Bessarabia. Research on the German and Jewish communities has a venerable tradition and was initiated by émigrés with a Bessarabian background who were seeking to recover their cultural heritage or the memory of traumatic experiences (e.g., the 1903 pogrom or the forced displacement of the German population in 1940). A significant recent contribution in this sense is represented by the synthetic works of Mariana Hausleitner, who has inaugurated a new stage in the study of “ethnic policies” in imperial Russia and Greater Romania.<sup>39</sup>

Unfortunately, a sustained collaboration between local and “Western” historians remains an aspiration for the future. In contrast to the Romanian case, “the opportunity for convergence and cooperation between “Western” academic research and “local” scholarship” remained unfulfilled in the Republic of Moldova. The post-1991 Moldovan historiography still evolves separately from the main trends of Western scholarship and is slow in overcoming its “underlying “parochialism” and in “internaliz[ing] the theoretical and methodological achievements that

<sup>38</sup> An eloquent example in this regard is provided by Charles King in his *The Moldovans: Romania, Russia, and the Politics of Culture* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), where an informative and balanced account of Russian policy in the region and of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century local political processes is given.

<sup>39</sup> Among her works, the following deal with the pre-1918 period: Mariana Hausleitner, „Die interethnischen Beziehungen der Deutschen in Bessarabien im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert,“ in: *Südostdeutsches Archiv*, Vol. XLVI/XLVII (2003/2004), pp. 79-111 and, especially, M. Hausleitner, *Deutsche und Juden in Bessarabien (1814-1941). Zur Minderheitenpolitik Russlands und Großrumäniens*. (München: IKGS Verlag 2005).

marked the development of Western social sciences.”<sup>40</sup> Thus, one can hardly speak about a “cross-cultural dialogue” between the two traditions, much less of a fruitful “fusion” between them.<sup>41</sup> The complex identity politics in post-independence Moldova still has a direct impact on the professional milieu of the historians, who are embroiled in heated “identity struggles” between themselves and with the state apparatus. In these circumstances, the imperial period is, in itself, a field of symbolic contestation. The 1990s witnessed a massive recuperative effort directed at the interwar version of Romanian national historiography which was not futile insofar as it allowed the publication of new source materials and the repudiation of the Soviet narrative. However, most of the local professionals seem unwilling (or unable) to transcend the nationalizing framework of analysis. This assertion is valid not only for the “Romanianist” camp which continues to dominate the profession, but also for their “Moldovanist” adversaries, who mingle a restored Soviet perspective with elements of an improbable (if not impossible) “Moldovan” nationalist rhetoric. These clarifications are necessary for explaining the lack of any reassessment of Bessarabia’s pre-1918 history from the perspective of comparative history. For my purposes, the most relevant research undertaken after 1990 deals with the issue of the “national movement” in imperial-controlled Bessarabia. Despite the questionable application of this notion to the region, such gains in empirical knowledge allow for a better understanding of the Russian-Romanian symbolic competition. The most prolific historians in this regard have been Gheorghe Negru and Ion Varta.<sup>42</sup> Despite this generally disappointing picture, elements of

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<sup>40</sup> Constantin Iordachi and Balazs Trencsenyi, “In Search of a Usable Past: The Question of National Identity in Romanian Studies, 1990-2000,” in: *East European Politics and Societies* (2003, Vol. 17), pp. 415-416

<sup>41</sup> Iordachi and Trencsenyi, p. 416

<sup>42</sup> Negru’s contributions, published in various local journals, were collected in his book: Gheorghe Negru, *Țarismul și mișcarea națională a românilor din Basarabia* [The Tsarist Regime and the National Movement of the Romanians from Bessarabia] (Chisinau: Prut International, 2000). As for Varta, some samples of his scholarship are: Ion Varta, „Unele aspecte privind mișcarea națională în Basarabia la începutul sec. al XX-lea [Certain Aspects Concerning the National Movement in Bessarabia in the Early 20th Century],” in: *Revista de istorie a Moldovei*, 1993, Nr. 4, p. 14-27; Ion Varta. „Unele deziderate ale mișcării naționale a românilor basarabeni la mijloc de an 1906 [Certain

novel interpretive frameworks are discernible in recent years. A major achievement in this regard was signaled by the publication, in 2002, of Iulian Frunțasu's book *An Ethno-Political History of Bessarabia*<sup>43</sup>. This work proposes a long-term “reading” of Bessarabia's history in terms of a close interaction between the processes of social modernization and nation-formation. Well versed in Western literature, the author applies the “stage-like” model of Miroslav Hroch and the insights of R. G. Suny on the interaction of national and social factors in the nationalist movements on the territory of the former Russian Empire to his account of the territory's history. He also contributes to the analysis of the complex relationship between various mobilizing mass projects and their target audience in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century by introducing the notion of the “social intractability” of the local peasantry to describe it. Though the author could be criticized for a number of flaws (including the choice of the title, the somewhat hasty application of sociological “models” to Bessarabian society or his unclear terminology), this work deserves, in many ways, the label of a “pioneering study.” Not least among its virtues is the important place accorded to the 1812-1918 period as a formative stage in the crystallization of the region's collective identities (and identity discourses). Another recent example of the changing intellectual climate and of the greater openness of local researchers to common projects with their “Western” peers was the publication of a collective volume on Moldova's “weak state” and “uncertain citizenship” bringing together Moldovan and Western-based scholars of the region.<sup>44</sup> It would be,

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Desiderata of the Bessarabian Romanians' National Movement in mid-1906], “in: *Destin Românesc*, 1995, Nr. 1, p. 48-60.

<sup>43</sup> Iulian Frunțasu, *O istorie etnopolitică a Basarabiei (1812-2002)* [An Ethno-Political History of Bessarabia, 1812-2002] (Chisinau: Cartier, 2002).

<sup>44</sup> Monica Heintz (ed.) *Stat slab, cetățenie incertă: Studii despre Republica Moldova* [Weak State, Uncertain Citizenship: Studies on the Republic of Moldova] (Bucharest: Curtea Veche, 2007). Though mostly dealing with contemporary issues and featuring sociologists, anthropologists, ethnologists and political scientists, this volume is a welcome example of interdisciplinary cooperation. It also contains a „historically centered” article by Cristina Petrescu on the „construction of national identity in Bessarabia.” (cf. Heintz, pp. 127-153).

I think, appropriate to end this brief presentation with an injunction to the concerned historians to follow this example.

This brief overview does not claim to be a proper survey of historiography. It only pointed out the main trends in the evolution of the literature on Bessarabia of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The historians' views on the area were, to an extent, part of the same interplay of symbolic power that this project discusses.

4. **Sources, chronological framework and structure of the project.** The present project deals with a variety of topics pertaining to the traditional fields of intellectual, social, diplomatic and political history. Consequently, several types of sources have been used. The most informative accounts delineating the competing “visions” of Bessarabia belong to the category of “official discourse” and disproportionately reflect the official point of view (itself subject to inconsistency and change). Thus, the majority of the source materials discussing the Russian case are represented by archival funds of the Bessarabian administration, official publications issued on special festive occasions and other published texts (memoirs, press articles, diplomatic correspondence, statistical surveys, polemical brochures etc.). I focused my attention on the most representative texts that allowed a more intensive scrutiny for persistent motives and recurrent *topoi* (thus, the periodical press played a comparatively minor role in my research). The reports of the police institutions (mostly the local gendarmerie structures and the foreign section of the *Okhrana* operating in Romania) include a rich (and still largely untapped) quantity of information and have been quite useful in completing the picture of the Russian official stance on Bessarabia. The Romanian perspective on this region was reflected in the same kinds of sources, though the proportion of explicitly “polemical” literature was significantly higher. Also, in the Romanian case the direct agents and promoters of the “Bessarabian agenda” are easier to identify and constitute a more homogeneous group (composed of Bessarabian émigrés and nationalist

ideologues from the Romanian Kingdom). Thus, the application of an “intellectual history” approach seemed most appropriate. The sources used in this work have been mainly collected in the following institutions: the National Archive of the Republic of Moldova (ANRM) in Chisinau, the State Archive of the Russian Federation (GARF) and the Russian State Library (RGB) in Moscow, as well as at the Bucharest Central University Library (BCU) and the Library of the Romanian Academy. The Library of the Moldovan Academy of Sciences, the National Library of the Republic of Moldova, as well as the Central University Library in Iasi and the Iasi branch of the Romanian National Archives have also been very useful for my research.

The chronological framework of this study is circumscribed, on the one hand, by the early 1860s and, on the other, by the entry of the Romanian Kingdom in World War I (August 1916) and the outbreak of the February Revolution in the Russian Empire in 1917. The choice of the 1860s as the starting point of my analysis is conditioned by three main factors. First, the emergence of the Romanian national state in 1862 marked the consolidation of the alternative center of symbolic attraction and contest and shifted the perception of the Bessarabian borderland by the Russian bureaucrats to a new level. Second, the inauguration of Russia’s Great Reforms and their application to Bessarabia signified a new phase in the empire’s integrative designs on the area and also provided a broader scope for the articulation of multiple discourses within the imperial elite. Finally, the impact of the Polish uprising of 1863-64, though only indirectly felt in Bessarabia, altered the Russian policy in the Western borderlands and had a certain impact on the empire’s administrative practices. The option of the upper chronological limit was somewhat more arbitrary. Thus, I do not discuss the final phase of political mobilization in Bessarabia which witnessed the intense debates between the autonomist and nationalist factions of the local elites and exacerbated the tension between the “nationalizing” and the “socializing” agenda in the region. The changed setting of the late phases of the war and the revolutionary upheaval in the

Russian Empire completely changed the data of the Bessarabian “problem” and should be subject to a separate investigation. While there were significant continuities with the previous period, I chose to stop my discussion at the point of the regime change in Russia. The war period, however, acquired an initially unforeseen importance for my argument. A separate discussion of this short time span is justified, on the one hand, by the intense “nationalization” of the Russian imperial discourse and, on the other, by the challenges to the traditional priorities of the Romanian nation-building provoked by the 1914-1916 “neutrality polemics.” My interest in processes both largely antedating (as in the case of my discussion of the “noble project”) and transcending (the topic of early 20<sup>th</sup>-century “geopolitical” Russian and Romanian projects) the time span envisioned at the outset can be also criticized. The most obvious argument seems to be that these topics, on the one hand, point to unfulfilled (or partially fulfilled) potentialities that left their mark upon or were an outgrowth of the narrower period under discussion. Thus, the period itself can hardly be understood without taking into consideration the developments which “flanked” it on either side.

The dissertation is structured into six chapters. The first chapter discusses the theoretical and methodological presuppositions of the project and is divided into four sections (dealing, respectively, with the comparative history of empires, the field of “frontier” and “border studies,” the Russian imperial experience and the dilemmas of empire-building and, finally, the constructing of the “national narrative” in modern Romania). Chapter II examines the parallel Russian and Romanian traditions of the “appropriation of space” and sketches the general context for the “frontier debates” in the two cases in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The next chapter analyzes the evolution of the perception of the Bessarabian borderland within the Russian imperial discourse from the early 19<sup>th</sup> century (when the local elites advanced claims for a peculiar status of the region within the Russian state) until the high point of the Russian-

Romanian symbolic competition reached on the occasion of the celebration of the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Bessarabia's annexation in 1912. The argument focuses on the various integrative and rhetorical strategies used by the central authorities and on their negotiation by the local social actors. Chapter IV describes the "diplomatic war" that followed the Russian-Turkish conflict of 1877-1878 and the open confrontation between the Russian and Romanian governments over the issue of the districts of Southern Bessarabia granted to Moldavia by the Paris Treaty of 1856. Chapter V is constructed as a case study of three Romanian intellectuals and public figures with a Bessarabian background who contributed, in different ways, to the articulation of Romanian nationalism and to the elaboration of a specific image of Bessarabia in this context. The analysis is concerned with the works (and biographies) of Bogdan Petriceicu Hasdeu (1838-1907), Dimitrie C. Moruzi (1850-1914) and Constantin Stere (1865-1936). The final chapter of the dissertation presents the period of the first Russian revolution and World War I as a crucial turning point for the competition of the two narratives on Bessarabia. Starting from the wider processes of mass mobilization and politicization of ethnicity in wartime imperial Russia, the chapter seeks to compare and contrast the official Russian image of Bessarabia to the contemporary public debate in Romania. It concludes by addressing the feeble attempts at articulating a local Bessarabian voice within the inter-imperial contest for preeminence in Eastern Europe in 1916. Two years later, the radical transformation of the Eurasian space would lead to Bessarabia's wholesale (albeit temporary) integration into the Romanian nation-building project.



## **Chapter I. Empires and Borderlands: Theoretical and Methodological Problems**

This chapter is divided into four sections which discuss the main theoretical problems and methodological issues relevant for the project. The first two sections present a synthetic picture of the fields of comparative history of empires and “border studies,” focusing specifically on the recent conceptual and historiographical debates and assessing the applicability of such models to the case study proposed here. One of the central goals of the discussion is to place the Bessarabian case into the broader “Eurasian” context and to suggest an alternative reading of the long-term processes developing in the region during the modern period. The next two sections analyze the peculiarities of the Russian and Romanian state-building projects, paying particular attention to the following topics: the management of multi-ethnicity, the pattern of center-periphery relations, the construction of symbolic geographies, and the fundamental ideological models relevant for the articulation of imperial and national narratives. These aspects had a direct impact on the mental constructs and practical policies that defined the course of the Russian-Romanian symbolic competition for Bessarabia in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

### ***1. Comparing Empires and Nations: Reflections on the Validity of “Imperial History”***

The present chapter will address several general issues that determine the theoretical presuppositions and the conceptual grid of the study. The main goal of this chapter will be to explicate the categories, research problems and terms underpinning the argument in the following sections of the work. It must be emphasized at the outset that the dissertation does not aim at following or refuting any well-established “theory” of nation-building, empire or “imperialism.”

This goal is both too ambitious and irrelevant to the purposes envisaged by the project. Rather, an assessment of the insights that each of the major approaches in the study of nation- and empire-building could offer for a placing of the Bessarabian case in its proper regional and comparative context will be a major preoccupation. This does not entail an exclusively “deductive” approach, but it presupposes a critical and cautious attitude to the general tenets of the theoretical constructions claiming to offer an “explanation” of the processes of political legitimization, center-periphery relations and the symbolic appropriation of space that were of central importance in the structuring of the images and representations with which this project is primarily concerned.

The following discussion focuses on two major clusters of conceptual and methodological problems. On the one hand, the notion of “empire” as a valid object for research (or what Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper recently called- by way of Pierre Bourdieu- a “category of analysis” as opposed to a “category of practice”<sup>45</sup>) is discussed. On the other hand, the methodological implications for the identification of the “imperial field” as an independent area of research are addressed. Specifically, the main question asked deals with the possible differences of research strategies most appropriate to the study of “national” and “imperial” phenomena in a comparative perspective. An additional concern will be devoted to the usability of the notion of “imperial history” (including with explicit reference to the Russian case) in the form proposed by certain innovative research trends in the investigation of the “imperial phenomenon.” An implicit question will also consider if such a concept signifies a genuine shift in the “paradigm” of the study of processes of state building in the larger Eurasian context or, conversely, represents only a cover for contemporary political debates. Such an apparently “scholastic” interrogation serves a definite purpose in the framework of the present approach,

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<sup>45</sup> Frederick Cooper and Rogers Brubaker. “Beyond Identity”// *History and Theory*, 2000, Nr.1, pp. 1-47

which, while arguing for the necessity of “transcending the national narrative,” is nevertheless keenly aware of the possible pitfalls and dangers of an overly enthusiastic adoption of a problematic “imperial” framework.

The comparative nature of the dissertation presupposes a clear definition of the unit as well of the concrete object of comparison. In this sense, the elusiveness of the concept of “empire” is notorious. The comparison of phenomena somewhat arbitrarily dubbed as “national” or “imperial” is equally fraught with uncertainty and prone to a reification of the two concepts as a solution to the dilemma of their fluidity. While an ultimate argument to justify the terms of comparison might invoke the simple and unequivocal “fact” that the region in question was obviously the object of contending claims of two polities, one of which perceived itself (and therefore was) an empire, while the other represented itself as (and therefore was) a nation-state, such an argument does not explain much and, indeed, amounts to a tautology. Since an explicit aim of the dissertation is to uncover the unarticulated (as well as explicit) assumptions that defined the specifically imperial and national valences of the respective Russian and Romanian “discourses,” this “face value” interpretation begs the question of the legitimacy of such an intellectual endeavor. Therefore, it appears that some “objective” characteristics of “imperial” political entities must be sought which will, on the one hand, differentiate them from their “opponent by default,” the nation-state, and will help to identify the polities similar in character along a historical continuum of “empire-ness” or even through an a-historical focus on “fundamental” features of an empire. These dilemmas plagued the main schools of thought (or, more accurately, currents) of “empire studies” that will be discussed below.

The extremely complex and protean character of the concept of “empire” was neatly summarized by several contributors to a specialized journal in an insightful article on the

achievements and perspectives of “empire studies.”<sup>46</sup> The passage in question is especially revealing both due to the descriptive character of the definitions reviewed (which is a constant feature of any attempt to define the “essence” of an empire) and to the contradictions that it starkly puts into relief. It is worth quoting it at length:

The concept of empire is so universal and all-encompassing that it appears to have no particular meaning at all. Indeed, empire embodies the grim totality of unlimited domination and coercion; at the same time, it turns out to be a synonym for the clumsy neologism of “world system” [...] and evokes a unifying principle for a universe surrounded by the destructive elements of chaos and barbarism. Empire is simultaneously associated with the bygone splendor of upper classes in metropolises and with exploitation and domination in the colonies. An empire is at once a tireless and undefeatable aggressor and expansionist, and a colossus standing on clay feet...[...] Empire is the “prison of peoples,” but it is also the guarantor of the preservation of local originality and difference in the face of standardizing projects. What, then, is the purpose of using the term empire[...]?<sup>47</sup>

The category of “empire” is, thus, construed as all-inclusive and virtually devoid of meaning, succumbing under the weight of binary oppositions that seem to make any attempt at a working definition futile and impossible. The complexity is compounded by the confusion of purportedly scholarly definitions with the realm of common usage, which frames the terms of the discussion while also displaying a disquieting multiplicity of meaning. The impression of an infinite diversity of interpretations is only enhanced if one attempts to use the method of *Begriffsgeschichte* in order to arrive at a manageable “genealogy” of the concept. This is the case even if one limits the “conceptual field” to the Roman tradition that ultimately structured the “vision” of what it meant to be an empire in the case of the elites of the “European-based” polities<sup>48</sup>.

<sup>46</sup> I. Gerasimov, S. Glebov, A. Kaplunovski, M. Mogilner, A. Semyonov. “In Search of a New Imperial History”// AB IMPERIO, Nr. 1, 2005, pp. 33-56

<sup>47</sup> I. Gerasimov, S. Glebov, A. Kaplunovski, M. Mogilner, A. Semyonov. “In Search of a New Imperial History”// AB IMPERIO, Nr. 1, 2005, p. 33

<sup>48</sup> In this respect, the Introduction to: David Armitage (ed.). *Theories of Empire. 1450-1800* (Asgate: Variorum, 1998) is particularly interesting. See also his discussion in Armitage, *The Ideological origins of the British Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) esp. pp. 29-36

Indeed, even if one keeps the comparison in “manageable” limits and confines it to the three “imperial polities” directly relevant to the case-oriented approach of this dissertation (the Russian, Ottoman and Habsburg Empires), all of them defy any attempt at categorization stemming from their link to the legacy of Roman imperial tradition. Every one of these polities could (and periodically did) claim some form of legitimization derived from the “archetypal” Roman model. The elites of the Russian Empire (through its reference to Byzantine models, and also through direct borrowing in the Petrine and post-Petrine period), the Habsburg Monarchy (through the direct legacy of the Holy Roman Empire) and the Ottoman state (through the invocation of its claim to the Byzantine imperial dominion after the conquest of Constantinople) all accepted the implicit example of the Roman *imperium* as relevant to their self-awareness. However, all these “continental” empires possessed elements of self-legitimization that were clearly opposed (if not antithetical) to the “Roman tradition” (as it was interpreted through the lens of medieval and early modern political theory). The Ottoman realm was much more indebted to the concept of Islamic community and the tradition of “holy war” than to any purported connection with the Empire of the “Romans” that it superseded. Russian tsars before Peter (and, in some cases, even after the Europeanization undertaken by him and his successors) were aware of the “continuity” between the Mongol steppe empire and the Muscovite state that at times openly claimed the succession of the khans. As a late repercussion mediated through a Western education, the peculiar intellectual trends that emerged at the end of the XIX and the beginning of the XX centuries are a case in point. Finally, the Habsburg monarchs were much more embedded in the specific “German” context than in any claim to “universalism” that their self-perception as “Roman emperors” entailed (in any case, this claim disappeared after the middle of the XVI century). The notion of “composite monarchy” (that David Armitage, among others, equals with the notion of “empire”) might be useful for grasping the European experience of state-building

and the intertwining of “imperial” and “national” features in this process, but it cannot always serve as a substitute for “multinational empire” (otherwise, the term will be subject to an intolerable overstretch of meaning). The question that underlies this cursory overview concerns the feasibility of a “unitary” definition of empire given the widely different criteria of self-awareness and the distinct realities “camouflaged” by the label of “Empire.” The solution to the search for a workable definition seems even more remote and virtually disappears between the extremes of a narrow “genealogical” perspective of the term “empire” and a hugely variegated “comparative field” that ultimately must be identified with “world history” (in which case the whole endeavor of “empire studies” is compromised). In other words, the dilemma between a narrowly “lexical” study of concepts and an ahistorical search for the “theme” of empire as a “universal category” must first be superseded in order to achieve at least a temporary scholarly equilibrium.

Another enormous topic for debate that hampered for a long time the emergence of a clear definition of the conceptual category of “empire” is the distinction between “continental” (or contiguous) and “maritime” (or colonial) empires. Aside from the issue of spatial configuration, the questions underpinning this discussion have much broader implications (here included the scholarly debate on “imperialism,” which will not be of any particular interest for my project). Much more interesting is, in this respect, the relationship between the “national state” and the “colonial experience.” In a crude and over-generalized simplification of the discussion, this debate can be framed in terms of the relationship between “core” and “periphery” and the character of the respective “societies.” The early-modern and modern “maritime” empires are presented, in this narrative, as “national states” that undertook “colonial expansion” without fundamentally altering the character of “metropole societies” themselves (and thus, the process of nation-building was independent, if not opposed, to the process of empire-building). On the other

hand, the Eurasian “continental” polities were purportedly confronted with the “management of space” in a completely different form, which ultimately hampered the emergence of a well-defined “national core” or at least delayed this process until very late in the XIX century or early XX century (this seems to be confirmed by the case of the Russians in the Tsarist Empire, the Turks in the Ottoman and the Austrian Germans in the Habsburg case). The problems that this scheme poses for a coherent definition of “empire” are crucial, and it has been criticized by scholars that either attempt to arrive at a manageable object of “empire studies” or point to the “anomalies” in this scheme (the customary examples of Algeria in the French case, Ireland in the British one or, conversely, Central Asia as a clearly “colonial” enterprise of the Russian government).

However, much more important problems also emerge which undermine the well-structured and apparently convincing character of this opposition. First, as several recent studies have shown, the “imperial tactics” of the maritime empires have been closely connected to nation-building processes underway long before any “overseas expansion” took place. Thus, one cannot sever the processes of nation- and empire-formation, since the first provided both the categories and the practices used in the second. Additionally, the process of building the empire clearly influenced the domestic policies in deeper and more lasting ways than previously acknowledged in the case of “maritime” empires. Second, this “oppositional” narrative has an unmistakable teleological character linked to the differing ways of the “decline and fall” of the “continental” and colonial empires (the first being destroyed by war and revolution, while the second apparently dissolving in a much more “organic” way and throughout a longer time span). This teleological character also had to do with the widely held early-XX century perceptions concerning the “inevitability” of the dissolution of the three continental European empires that were constantly associated with “backwardness” and social and political “ancien regime.” This

perception was grounded as much in discourse as in the actual policy of the Ottoman, Russian and Habsburg elites, which differed as much among themselves as from their “colonial” counterparts. The differences in the policies towards the subject populations of the two categories of “empire-states” also provided a seeming disparity and, thus, a field for comparison that reified the existing particular features into scholarly categories. Clearly, the emergence of national states in Eastern Europe before and after World War I and their “nationalizing” agendas had a profound, if still not sufficiently studied effect upon such scholarly perceptions. Despite these cogent criticisms, the heuristic usefulness of such a distinction proved lasting and durable enough to preserve it essentially unaltered in comparative studies of “empires.” Thus, it seems appropriate to pursue the “comparative” thread in the framework of the three Eurasian “continental” entities (the Russian, Habsburg and Ottoman Empires) while acknowledging the unstable and problematic character of the “continental/maritime” opposition.

The scholarly tradition of approaching the problem of comparative studies of empires, despite the plurality of definitions sketched above, can be conventionally divided into three broad subfields. (Here I do not touch upon the much larger question of the theory of the state and international relations, of which the problem of “empire” is a subordinate, if significant, part). The first tendency might be conventionally labeled as “sociological” or a-historical (understood not as ignoring the historical context altogether, but as seeking to identify objective criteria for discerning an essence of “empire-ness” that is coterminous with human history and dependent purely on “experimental variables” that are constant in themselves and only shift their position in various combinations of factors). This tendency can include works that are highly different in style and content, but that aspire to scientific rigor or all-encompassing images of the evolution of the “phenomenon of empire” throughout history (as examples, one can cite the works of S. N. Eisenstadt, Michael Doyle or Maurice Duverger on the “concept of Empire,” which ranges from



ancient Egypt to the Soviet Union).<sup>49</sup> The conflation of these highly differing interpretations of the imperial experience under one label can of course be misleading. Alternately, other classifications may appear more valid. As one author recently emphasized, “there are few comprehensive studies of ‘empire’ as a distinct category of social science, and even fewer explicit theories, that is, explanatory accounts, of this phenomenon as a whole.”<sup>50</sup> S. N. Eisenstadt’s classical interpretation, for instance, “relies... on a purely political definition of empires as centralized, bureaucratic forms of rule which should be contrasted to modern states”<sup>51</sup> following mainly the functional criteria of the distribution of power and resources among the centers and peripheries of the political systems and the changed principles of self-legitimization. This essentially static and systemic picture can be contrasted to the historically informed account of other sociologists or international relations theorists that perceive empire as an evolving and changing rather than purely functional category.<sup>52</sup> Michael Doyle, who proposes one of the most compelling analyses of the imperial phenomenon from a political science perspective, defines empire as a “system of interaction between two political entities, one of which, the dominant metropole, exerts political control over the internal and external policy- the effective sovereignty- of the other, the subordinate periphery.”<sup>53</sup> Doyle’s view can thus be labeled “relational,”<sup>54</sup> in

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<sup>49</sup> S. N. Eisenstadt. *The Political Systems of Empires* (New York: Free Press, 1969; 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, 1992); Michael Doyle. *Empires* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986); Maurice Duverger, ed. *Le Concept d'Empire* (Paris, 1980).

<sup>50</sup> Alejandro Colas, *Empire* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007), p. 10

<sup>51</sup> Colas, p. 10

<sup>52</sup> Aside from the above-mentioned works of Doyle and Duverger, other interesting examples are: D. B. Abernethy, *The Dynamics of Global Dominance: European Overseas Empires, 1415-1980* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000); Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Power from 1500 to 2000* (London: Fontana, 1988) and, more generally, Michael Mann, *The Sources of Social Power: A History of Power from the Beginning to 1740* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

<sup>53</sup> Doyle, *Empires*, p. 12.

<sup>54</sup> On p. 45, Doyle reiterates that “empire... is a relationship, formal or informal, in which one state controls the effective political sovereignty of another political society... Imperialism is simply the process or policy of establishing or maintaining an empire.” Making a further “methodological” point, Doyle asserts that “to expolain the existence of empire... one must first demonstrate the existence of control; second, explain why one party expands and establishes such control; and third, explain why the other party submits or fails to resist effectively.” See Doyle, p. 45-46

contrast to the functional interpretation suggested by Eisenstadt. However, it would be fallacious to contrast the “historicist” approach presumably followed by Doyle and his associates with a purported “non-historical” mode of analysis preferred by Eisenstadt. Rather, I subsumed all the previous authors under the same category because of their “deductive” method of explanation and their focus on “identifying the features of empires through a systematic comparison of imperial experiences.”<sup>55</sup> The presence of an all-encompassing notion of “empire” with definable “features” that can be objectively uncovered and studied as a phenomenon *sui generis* is a factor important enough to serve as a basic criterion of classification.

A second tendency (not necessarily opposed to the first, but heavily drawing from its theoretical insights) is concrete-historical in its thrust and focuses more on definable comparisons between contemporaneous and spatially contiguous (mostly early modern and modern) imperial polities in a Eurasian context. This approach is, probably, best illustrated by the insightful work of Dominic Lieven on the Russian Empire and its “rivals”.<sup>56</sup> The author adds an important geopolitical and strategic dimension to his argument and places the notion of power at the center of his interpretation while ignoring (in his definition of “empire,” though not in his account) the criterion of center-periphery relations as a defining characteristic of imperial control. While this work is of especial significance for my project (due to its concentration on the Russian imperial experience), it undoubtedly had an impact on the debates on the nature and dynamics of empires. Both currents hitherto presented are based on an “objective” reading of the imperial experience and strive, ultimately, for identifying explanatory frameworks for the nature and evolution of polities identified as “empires.” A more complicated argument is that proposed by Terry Martin, who stresses the interplay of “objective” and “subjective” factors in any “imperial project,”

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<sup>55</sup> Colas, p. 11

<sup>56</sup> D.C.B. Lieven. *Empire: The Russian Empire and Its Rivals*. (London, 2000).

assigning primacy to the subjective “perception” of empire as the fundamental indicator of its existence. In a thought-provoking inventory of the most current definitions of the concept of “empire,” Martin prefers the interpretation of Ronald G. Suny, who views “empire” as “a composite state structure in which the metropole is distinct in some way from the periphery and the relationship between the two is conceived or perceived by metropolitan or peripheral actors as one of justifiable or unjustifiable inequity, subordination, and/or exploitation.”<sup>57</sup> He also acknowledges his intellectual debt to Rogers Brubaker’s “constructivist” and “subjectivist” reading of nationhood, which points to the mutually enriching and complex relationship between theories of nationalism and “empire studies,” a relationship that exists not only in the scholarly realm, but between these categories of analysis as such. Martin, however, is not ready to reject the “objectivist” stance in its entirety and cautiously warns the reader that “Defining empire and nationhood as categories of subjective perception, rather than reified communities or state forms, does not at all mean a resigned retreat into postmodernism and discourse analysis. Rather, it calls for a rigorous empirical and comparative study of those “objective” factors that, in a given world-historical environment, govern the subjective perceptions of empire, nation and other potent categories of practice.”<sup>58</sup> Thus, the “referentiality” of objective factors remains in place, though it is only mediated by the mind of the perceiving subject. This interpretation is close to what I want to emphasize in my study, especially since Martin does not postulate an explicit opposition between this “constructivist-oriented” argument and previous interpretations.

What could be called a “third school” (only emerging) in the study of empire concerns not so much Martin’s reflections (which still preserve much of the “middle ground” equilibrium between structuralist and post-structuralist tendencies), but rather the notion of “new imperial

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<sup>57</sup> Terry Martin, “The Soviet Union as Empire: Salvaging a Dubious Analytical Category,” in: *AB IMPERIO*, 2002, Nr. 2, pp. 91-105, here p. 95

<sup>58</sup> Terry Martin, *Ibidem*, p. 105

history” expounded and developed by the editors of the Russian journal *Ab Imperio* (a pioneering enterprise in the post-Soviet intellectual milieu). In a recent issue of this publication, the editors inserted a “manifesto” arguing for a radical re-conceptualization of the field of “imperial history” (i.e., empire studies). They openly stated that “new imperial history appears in the form of an “archeology” of knowledge about empire.”<sup>59</sup> To make their point even more explicit, they emphasized: “We understand “archeology” in the sense of a Foucauldian post-structuralist paradigm, which deconstructs basic and normative concepts of the social sciences and humanities.”<sup>60</sup> This “post-structuralist” reaction in the field of the history of the Russian Empire attempts to supersede the still dominant “national paradigm” while, at the same time, to effect a synthesis of the insights of theories of nationalism and empire starting from a “critical” stance towards the “normative versions of modernity.” While the authors of this proposal have been subjected to a variety of criticisms (starting from the choice of the label of “new imperial history” as somehow covering an “imperialist agenda” and ranging to the more general skepticism towards the applicability of “postmodernist” techniques in concrete research), it remains to be seen what this nascent trend could contribute to the burgeoning field of studies of empire.

Despite the complexity and definitional plurality of the concept of “empire” and of the field of “empire studies,” meaningful comparisons appear possible and fruitful, as long as one is aware of the “subjectivist” dimension of the imperial phenomenon and, especially, as long as one rejects the mechanistic opposition between the “imperial” and the “national” in all their manifestations, focusing instead upon their multiple interactions and mutually shaping nature of these phenomena and the corresponding discourses.

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<sup>59</sup> I. Gerasimov, S. Glebov, A. Kaplunovski, M. Mogilner, A. Semyonov. “In Search of a New Imperial History”// *AB IMPERIO*, Nr. 1, 2005, p. 54

<sup>60</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 54

## ***2. Borderlands, Boundaries and Frontiers: From Geopolitical Concepts to Intellectual Constructs***

Human agency, in its state-building hypostasis, performs multiple functions of defining the space and time categories of the polity's existence. Consequently, the "mastering of space" represents one of the fundamental challenges for empire-builders and empire-administrators, be it in the context of contiguous, continental empires, or in that of far-flung "colonial" enterprises. A purely sociological interpretation of the imperial experience, while clearly valuable in assessing the dynamics and internal nature of the functioning of the administrative mechanisms and in illuminating the stable patterns of elite interactions, is rarely, if at all, aware of the spatial dimension of imperial control. For protagonists and adversaries of the polities in question, however, the problems of confronting and appropriating space have constantly lurked in the forefront of the tactics and strategy of domination, at times even superseding concerns linked to the long-term perspectives of regime survival. This section aims, on the one hand, to emphasize the salience and impact of spatial categories upon the self-perception and the conduct of policy both within continental and maritime empires by discussing the problem of frontiers, borders and boundaries as markers of "territory, sovereignty and identity."<sup>61</sup> On the other hand, it aims to follow a trend that recently emerged at the juncture of history, political science, anthropology and geography and which sees the interaction of "complex frontiers" as a scholarly problem in its own right, dwelling on the older notion of "border cultures," but at the same time proposing an alternative vision of the geopolitical "Eurasian" context as most conducive to a reassessment of the pre-World War I evolution of inter-imperial contest and competition. Accordingly, the first part of this section will focus on a review and criticism of various attempts to represent and

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<sup>61</sup> Hastings Donnan and Thomas M. Wilson. *Borders: Frontiers of Identity, Nation and State* (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 1999), p. 44

understand phenomena of “liminality,” with the ultimate aim to clarify my interpretation of the term “borderland.” The second part will discuss the opportunities and problems associated with the framework of “complex frontiers” and the new openings it offers for a re-reading of the competing visions of empire- and nation-building in Eastern and South-Eastern Europe.

The conceptual difficulties and terminological confusion reigning within the field of “border studies” are notorious. For our purposes, one could freely borrow from the thoughtful criticism that Frederick Cooper and Rogers Brubaker leveled at the notion of “identity” in connection with the confusion between “categories of practice” and “categories of analysis.”<sup>62</sup> As is the case with other similar concepts (“empire” being one of the most obvious analogies), “borders,” “boundaries” and “frontiers” are often interpreted as nothing more than equivalent designations of limits between states that, though they may convey certain symbolically charged messages, are essentially legal and jurisdictional linear markers of the extent of a state’s territory. Though scholarly debate has generally added useful discriminations and nuances to this undifferentiated “common usage,” the picture is by no means clear in all cases. As Alfred J. Rieber remarked in a seminal article, “Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the scholarly literature gradually made the distinction clearer between boundaries and frontiers by distinguishing between a linear and a spatial concept, shifting from place to process, and introducing symbol and mythology as new disciplines like anthropology and most recently cultural studies intersected with geography and history.”<sup>63</sup> The tendency towards a more complex understanding of this distinction, with a special emphasis on the dynamic, shifting and “active” character of the “frontier,” as opposed to the intrinsically formal and legal nature of the “boundary,” is related both to the intellectual context in which these terms appeared and evolved, and to their link with

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<sup>62</sup> Frederick Cooper and Rogers Brubaker, “Beyond Identity,” in: *History and Theory*, (Nr.1, 2000), pp. 1-47.

<sup>63</sup> Alfred J. Rieber, “Changing Conceptions and Constructions of Frontiers: A Comparative Historical Approach,” in: *Ab Imperio*, Nr. 1, 2003, p. 24

another “pair” of problematic notions, those of “border” and “borderland.” On the one hand, some scholars view the difference between “boundary” and “frontier” not so much in their designation of different, if connected, aspects of the “border experience,” but in different academic or even linguistic traditions of use and interpretation. In an interesting and thought-provoking article devoted to the discussion of “frontier administration in eighteenth-century China,” Peter C. Perdue notes: “The term “frontier” can have many meanings, but there are basically two traditions of analysis: the European one, which stresses the creation of fixed borders between distinct states [the French *frontiere*], and the North American one, where frontier refers to broad regions of interaction of multiple cultures.”<sup>64</sup> The overall assessment of the author, identifying two purportedly parallel and somehow opposed “traditions of analysis,” is highly questionable. However, he does point to two important features that have influenced not only the crystallization of the terminology, but the frames of the “frontier debate” as such. The first is the linguistic non-coincidence of French and Anglophone vocabulary that has in many ways hampered meaningful comparisons and communication between the two academic environments (though it is largely superseded at present). This “linguistic predicament” is outlined in unequivocal terms in the work of one of the most distinguished French experts in “border studies,” Michel Foucher. He observes that “this lexical opposition [between the frontier as a “line” or a “zone”] has an Anglo-American semantic origin, the “frontier” being opposed to the “boundary.”<sup>65</sup> In other words, the difference of interpretation persists, but it should not be related to a “meta-discursive” level of “epistemological incommensurability,” but to different models of conceptualization of the “border experience.” The second feature has to take into account the American context of the Turnerian “frontier thesis,” which, notwithstanding its

<sup>64</sup> Peter C. Perdue, “Empire and Nation in Comparative Perspective: Frontier Administration in Eighteenth-Century China,” in: *Journal of Early Modern History*, Vol. 5, Nr. 4, 2001, p. 287

<sup>65</sup> Michel Foucher, *Fronts et frontieres: Un tour du monde geopolitique* (Paris: Fayard, 1991), p. 45

subjection to all-out criticisms, still constructs the scholarly debate along well defined lines. While disagreeing with Perdue's identification of reified and discrete "traditions of analysis," it would be a mistake to deny the differences in the French and North American interpretation of the "border phenomenon." A more useful approach is advanced by A. J. Rieber in his discussion of the "paradigms" of frontier studies. He argues for the envisioning of the current state of research in the field as being structured by a "triptych of Turner iconography," with Turner's controversial "thesis" serving as the base.<sup>66</sup> Alongside Turner's vision of the "moving frontier," the "flanks" are represented, on the one side, by "a different spatial concept linked to the rise and consolidation of the centralized state that developed out of the French experience"<sup>67</sup> while, "on the other side..., a third panel represents the symbolic geographies, that is the construction of imaginary borders on the basis of normative evaluations of the "Other."<sup>68</sup> This tripartite scheme allows a clearer differentiation of the current scholarly trends and also takes into account the complicated evolution of the investigation of the "border phenomenon" during the last century. In the following pages I will focus on the discussion of the three components outlined above, but will also attempt to "bring back" the "geopolitical dimension," that structured the terms of the debate on borders in ways that ranged from reaction (in the French case) to a reassessment of some of the tenets of the German school of *Geopolitik*, while attempting to launch a debate on the relevance of a "political geography" conscious of the dimensions of "border construction," and seamlessly integrated with the burgeoning field of "symbolic geography."

Before a more detailed discussion of the models of the "frontier experience" which shape current debates, several points should be made concerning the late nineteenth- and early

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<sup>66</sup> Alfred J. Rieber, "Changing Conceptions and Constructions of Frontiers: A Comparative Historical Approach," in: *Ab Imperio*, Nr. 1, 2003, p. 25

<sup>67</sup> A. J. Rieber, p. 25

<sup>68</sup> A. J. Rieber, p. 25



twentieth-century “geopolitical tradition.” The importance of this controversial intellectual current for the present topic stems from the preoccupation that its representatives shared for the conceptualization of “global space,” and, more specifically, for the “border dimension” of imperial and national space (especially in the German tradition). According to the remark of a contemporary critic, “[the] region of knowledge that would later be dubbed “geopolitics” was born in the colonial capitals of the rival empires of the late nineteenth century, within the established universities, geographical societies, and centers of learning of the Great Powers.”<sup>69</sup> The critique of this author, being based on a challenging combination of Foucauldian notions of “governmentality” and the recent insights of “postcolonial theory,” proposes a comprehensive examination of the origins and continuity of the interaction between “geography” (understood in the broadest sense, as the “science of space”) and power. He identifies several ideological and philosophical presuppositions that purportedly structured the logic and the modes of argumentation employed by the “geopolitical tradition” in all its regional variations. Following the lead of postcolonial studies and their (occasionally overstated) emphasis on the constant interaction between knowledge and power, O Tuathail states that “those intellectuals associated with geopolitics before World War II (sometimes called “classical geopolitics”) were invariably imperialists of one sort or another.”<sup>70</sup> Even if the “normative” component of this evaluation (implicitly present if not explicitly stated) should be approached with caution, the important point worth retaining is the character of geopolitics as an empire-conditioned intellectual endeavor which, even if put to the use of “national” agendas in the inter-war period, cannot be severed from the context of its emergence in Western Europe at a time when dilemmas of empire were prominent. Another feature astutely observed by this author pertains to the intellectual roots of

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<sup>69</sup> Gearoid O Tuathail. *Critical Geopolitics : The Politics of Writing Global Space* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 21

<sup>70</sup> Gearoid O Tuathail. *Critical Geopolitics : The Politics of Writing Global Space* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 22

early “geopolitics.” While it is commonly assumed that “Social Darwinism” is the appropriate designation for the totality of “biology-oriented” approaches to social phenomena dominant in European thought in the late nineteenth century, it is argued that “neo-Lamarckism” better defines the nature and implications of the geopolitical interpretation due to its “emphasis on design rather than randomness in the evolutionary process.”<sup>71</sup> The dilemma inherent in the deterministic nature of this doctrine is related to the “racist” and “environmentalist” potentialities that are both entailed within the framework of Lamarckian biology. Consequently, the scholars who attempt to reassess the meaning of geopolitics (especially of its German variant) as a legitimate subfield of political geography tend to introduce the opposition of “environmentalism” and “racism” as an important variable in the overall equation,<sup>72</sup> while others emphasize the indissoluble link between the two. The third unifying criterion of geopolitical thinking, as identified by O Tuathail, attempts to gauge its philosophical presuppositions by drawing on the postmodernist deconstruction of “Cartesian rationalism.” His argument is structured by an opposition to what he calls “Cartesian perspectivalism,” or, in other words, “the Cartesian divide between an inner self and an outer reality, between an internal mind and an external world of objects.”<sup>73</sup> Even if one cannot completely agree with the essentialism of this critical stance and with the pushing of the “equivalence of gazes” to its extreme, a deeper awareness of the fact that “[geopolitics] ... was not an aberration but part of the mainstream political discourse that was always conscious of the “instrumentality of space”<sup>74</sup> would suggest a more balanced attitude towards the importance of the “geopolitical tradition” for an incipient thinking about the “frontier experience” of mankind.

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<sup>71</sup> Gearoid O Tuathail. *Critical Geopolitics : The Politics of Writing Global Space* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 22

<sup>72</sup> M. Bassin, Racism and Environmentalism...

<sup>73</sup> Gearoid O Tuathail. *Critical Geopolitics : The Politics of Writing Global Space* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 23

<sup>74</sup> Gearoid O Tuathail. *Critical Geopolitics : The Politics of Writing Global Space* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 24

The “geopolitical current” represents, arguably, the most well known approach to the problems of the conceptualization of humanity in its spatial dimension throughout the nineteenth century. This is due, on the one hand, to the “essentially contested and political nature of all geopolitical discourse.”<sup>75</sup> On the other hand, it can be linked to the multiple uses that the “neo-Lamarckian” or “Social Darwinist” component, especially in its Ratzelian guise, has been subjected to by various imperial and national projects of space appropriation prior, during and following World War I. Nevertheless, the “frontier disputes” that emerged in the intellectual sphere of XIX century Europe, as a part of the attempt of political thinkers to grapple with “modernity” in its relation to the state, could also be placed within a wider context. A wide-ranging, if only tangentially interesting, classification of the concepts of territory and “borders” in the framework of the European state system has been offered by Malcolm Anderson in his work devoted to “frontiers in the modern world” (mostly interpreted as synonyms of the concept of “boundary”).<sup>76</sup> Anderson is one of the few scholars who, while working in the field of international relations, are aware of the dynamics of the process of the construction and evolution of “frontiers” and “borders.” The author clearly relates the “paradigms” he identifies within this field to the “symbolic threshold” of the French Revolution, which necessitated the envisioning of “new bases for political authority.”<sup>77</sup> The main flaw that could be imputed to this author, as to others dealing with the general problems of “frontiers” and “borderlands” within the European political system, is their concentration on the link between the phenomenon of “frontiers” and that of the nation-state. Alternatively, the territorial dimension of state building is dependent on the related concept of “sovereignty,” a tendency that limits the array of potential questions that

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<sup>75</sup> Gearoid O Tuathail, Simon Dalby, and Paul Routledge, eds. *The Geopolitics Reader*. (London: Routledge, 1998), p. 24

<sup>76</sup> Malcolm Anderson. *Frontiers: Territory and State Formation in the Modern World* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996), esp. pp. 26-30

<sup>77</sup> Anderson, p. 26.

can be addressed by scholars and also severely constrains the applicability of the concepts of “frontier” and “border” to their present, legalistic usage. Still, Anderson’s scheme could serve as a partial illustration of the possible constructions of territoriality in the nineteenth century and as an explanation of the reluctance of many students of the “frontier phenomena” to acknowledge the multiplicity and variety of the constructions of “borders.” Anderson states that: “The four most influential nineteenth-century explanations of territorial disputes can be drastically summarized under the headings of economic determinist, liberal nationalist, social Darwinist and *Realpolitik*.”<sup>78</sup> The first three tendencies are the reflections of the dominant ideologies of the epoch and, thus, can hardly represent “independent” theoretical contributions to the issue of “frontiers” as a discrete research problem. Moreover, the lumping together of the Marxist, liberal and “Social Darwinist” theories of territoriality does not acknowledge the dissimilar impact of spatial categories in the cases of the three currents. While one can hardly disagree with Anderson’s contention that “geopolitics” in general, and Ratzel’s work, in particular, represented “[the] most ambitious project to apply organic views of state and nation to territory and frontiers,”<sup>79</sup> as well as with the attention he pays to Ratzel’s “biologization” of social existence, he fails to appreciate the relevance of “space” as a distinguishing feature and a primordial category of geopolitical thinking and discourse. The entanglement of “geopolitics” with politics *tout court* has proved too enduring to allow a meaningful comparison between its tenets and the presuppositions of the alternative conceptualizations of frontiers in the nineteenth-century context. Finally, the *Realpolitik*, as the author himself readily admits, “was a practice rather than

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<sup>78</sup> Anderson, p. 26

<sup>79</sup> Anderson, p. 28

a theory,”<sup>80</sup> and, moreover, could claim, as such, a much longer genealogy than the other three alternative tendencies, which were all embedded in the contemporary intellectual milieu.

Even while international relations theory, anthropology, geography and other neighboring disciplines have shaped and continue to enrich historians’ thinking on “frontiers, boundaries and borders,” the interpretations that have had the most lasting impact are more closely related to specifically “historical” readings of these phenomena. One of the most compelling and controversial among these “constructions” of the frontier has been proposed by the American historian Frederick Jackson Turner and is commonly reduced to his “frontier thesis.” This thesis, as presented by Turner himself, argues that “The existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward explain American development.”<sup>81</sup> The main question that has to be addressed here deals not so much with the validity of Turner’s scheme as an explanatory tool (which has been abundantly and convincingly challenged in the American academia), but with the reasons of its impact on the historical discipline’s overall preoccupation with the problem of frontiers. At first sight, this impact seems all the more puzzling because of the thrust of Turner’s argument, which was clearly aimed at emphasizing American uniqueness and its difference from European models. Turner not only argues that “[the] American frontier is sharply distinguished from the European frontier- a fortified boundary line running through dense populations,”<sup>82</sup> he also explicitly proclaims that “The frontier is the line of most rapid and effective Americanization” and that, moreover, the advancement of the frontier “has meant a steady movement away from the influence of Europe, a steady growth of

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<sup>80</sup> Anderson, p. 29

<sup>81</sup> *Rereading Frederick Jackson Turner: “The Significance of the Frontier in American History” and Other Essays*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), p. 31.

<sup>82</sup> *Rereading Turner*, p. 33

independence on American lines.”<sup>83</sup> Thus, the frontier (either a definite space or the process of “advancement” itself- a conceptual uncertainty that remains a puzzle for later commentators) can only be meaningful, in Turner’s own terms, as long as it is not severed from the American context which engendered it. Why, then, has this idea aimed at the legitimization of the American national “project” acquired a definite relevance for the general historiography of the “border phenomena”? At the most general level, one could certainly agree with A. J. Rieber that “like many great themes in historiography, its importance lies more in the literature it generated than in its original propositions.”<sup>84</sup> However, several features of Turner’s approach as such have been fundamental for its serving as a model for any comparative scholarly undertaking in the field. Foremost among these characteristics is the agency that Turner’s concept of the “frontier” bestows on border societies. These communities emerge as active elements that not only may envisage agendas different from their respective centers, but that shape the policies of the center and eventually influence the character of the “core.” Such an interpretation involves the “overstretching” of Turner’s concept to the point of its applicability to any border zone, but the plasticity and inconsistency of his definitions (for which he has been justly criticized) simultaneously provide an “open space” for multiple “readings” of the interactions and exchanges that a “frontier” as a zone entails. Though Turner saw a contrast between the “linear” character of European borders and the “zonal” and shifting development in the American case, his insights have been successfully applied to instances where the “nation-state” model of borders proved inadequate. One cannot entirely agree with the position of critics who emphasize that “[Turner’s thesis] has influenced scholars in many disciplines worldwide for a century” only “because of its geographical and technological determinism and its attempt to link space and time

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<sup>83</sup> *Rereading Turner*, p. 33-34

<sup>84</sup> Alfred J. Rieber, “Changing Conceptions and Constructions of Frontiers: A Comparative Historical Approach,” in: *Ab Imperio*, Nr. 1, 2003, p. 37

to the formation of a national character.”<sup>85</sup> It could be surmised, on the contrary, that the present applications of Turner’s ideas have proved most fruitful at the point where they supersede the “geographical and technological determinism” of their first proponent and pay attention instead to the complexity of the interaction of geography, culture and history that allows for multiple scenarios of “borderland construction.”

The French conceptual model of the nature, significance and dynamics of “borders” (here used as a generic term to designate the totality of conflicting interpretations of “liminality”) is both more static and more “statist” than its North American counterpart. The primacy of “place” vs. “space” is especially poignant in the work of Foucher, who attempts to offer a synthesis of the French thought on and practice of border construction. This work is clearly aimed at disavowing the view of “frontiers” and “borders” as independent objects of study and analysis. The positions under attack are not difficult to gauge, either. Foucher qualifies the distinction between “boundary” and “frontier” as being “very much influenced by an interpretation of the territorial formation of the United States” that he understandably identifies with the “over-used texts of Turner” (here prone to a reading as both dated and over-interpreted).<sup>86</sup> The presuppositions of the “French school,” as summarized and represented by Foucher, are even more openly expressed in a further passage: “The Anglo-American distinction presents the inconvenience of considering frontiers [*les frontieres*] as objects in their own right. In fact, they only are, in their genesis, linear phenomena which surround spatial totalities of political nature, in the framework of which it will be decided whether, according to circumstances, the frontier is open or closed, [and if] the line is porous or impermeable.”<sup>87</sup> The “perspective from the center” is, thus, an indisputable tenet for

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<sup>85</sup> Hastings Donnan and Thomas M. Wilson. *Borders: Frontiers of Identity, Nation and State* (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 1999), p. 49

<sup>86</sup> Michel Foucher, *Fronts et frontieres: Un tour du monde geopolitique* (Paris: Fayard, 1991), p. 45

<sup>87</sup> Michel Foucher, *Fronts et frontieres: Un tour du monde geopolitique* (Paris: Fayard, 1991), p. 45

this author, while the state serves as the repository of the legitimacy of borders. The agency of the “frontier population” cannot have any place in such a scheme, and the notion itself would seem to lack any substance in this case. Foucher, of course, is not completely unaware of the multiple functions that a “border” can perform, but he is not willing to concede a dynamic component to the concept, since the “center of meaning” is located unambiguously at the polity’s core. His general definition of “les frontières” is illuminating in this respect: “The frontiers are elementary spatial structures, possessing a linear form, performing a function of geopolitical discontinuity and of marking, of a landmark, on the three levels [*registres*] of the real, the symbolic and the imaginary.”<sup>88</sup> There is no questioning here of the separateness between discrete “societies” that could operate cohesively, while the “border” is only a spatial “visualization” of the limits of sovereignty. This interpretation should be connected to Foucher’s larger agenda of “rehabilitating” a French tradition of “géopolitique,” as an alternative both to historical and contemporary American thought on the “frontier” and, more distantly, to the discredited, but still lingering tradition of the German “geo-politicians.”

The “symbolic” dimension of the “frontier problem” is the most complex “flank” of the tripartite structure presented and discussed above. However, it is also an indispensable part of the creation and management of spatial structures that was one of the determinants of the functioning of imperial and national polities in the “Eurasian” context. The symbolic construction of frontiers and borders, as understood here, preserves the link with the territorial aspects of “boundary drawing,” but derives its legitimacy from “mental maps” that are not necessarily congruent with the realities of power “on the ground” or with requirements of the *Realpolitik*. The dual nature of the notion of “borderland” (even in its more traditional meaning, as a zone situated on both sides of a border line between two states) was captured by Donnan and Wilson in their “inter-

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<sup>88</sup> Michel Foucher, *Fronts et frontières: Un tour du monde géopolitique* (Paris: Fayard, 1991), p. 38



disciplinary” overview of the field of “border studies.” The authors underscore this argument by unambiguously declaring that “Borderlands are sites and symbols of power.”<sup>89</sup>

One of the basic problems confronting an operational definition of “borders” or “frontiers” when used in a historically determined context is connected with the possibility of a “historical reading” of the “frontier experience.” Historians, on the one hand, have been preoccupied with problems of “border cultures” and “border societies” for longer than the related social sciences, since “it has only been in the past half-century that anthropology, sociology and cultural studies have contributed to the widening debate over frontiers.”<sup>90</sup> On the other hand, one can observe at least three weak points in the historical approaches to these complex issues that have been partially addressed above and will be discussed in what follows. First, historians have tended to under-theorize the field by lacking an adequate definitional base for distinguishing between the related, but discrete notions of “borders,” “boundaries” and “frontiers.” The conflation of these terms is still preventing an informed and critical attitude towards the cultural and symbolic, as opposed to the territorial and legal, aspects of the problem. Second, the preferred unit of analysis has been either the “state” as an abstract category of political organization or the “nation-state” as the privileged form of modern polity that purportedly allowed an appropriate framework for analyzing phenomena of “liminality.” Third, an excessive concentration on issues of “territorial sovereignty” and jurisdiction obscured the much more complex and multi-layered nature of “border interactions.” The concept of “borderland” is, in many ways, a newcomer to the field of border studies that attempts to encompass varying features customarily connected to the other three notions. While it is essentially accepted that the “frontier” represents a “zone” as distinct

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<sup>89</sup>Hastings Donnan and Thomas M. Wilson. *Borders: Frontiers of Identity, Nation and State* (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 1999), p. 1

<sup>90</sup> Alfred J. Rieber, “Changing Conceptions and Constructions of Frontiers: A Comparative Historical Approach,” in: *Ab Imperio*, Nr. 1, 2003, p. 26

from the “linear boundary,”<sup>91</sup> it is not always clear how the two cases may relate to each other or, indeed, when they coincide. In this respect, the term “borderland” may serve as an alternative not only in that it can merge the territorial, cultural, ecological and symbolic aspects into an integrated image of a region when viewed in terms of its location in space. It can also constitute a framework for assessing the “contested” nature of the space in question. To cite once again the two critics that envisage a new interpretation of “border studies” with reference to anthropological categories: “There is a growing trend in historical studies to eschew the traditional view of borders as seen from the center in favor of a new view of borders from the perspective of a state’s periphery, from the borders themselves.”<sup>92</sup> The center or the “core” from which political authority is exercised should not be left out completely from any historical analysis, but the agency of the population on a state’s “margins” is clearly one of the variables that the use of the “borderland approach” helps to uncover. The most contentious point when applying such a notion is a definition that would respond to the questions of interaction, self-definition, accommodation, resistance, and, more generally, “negotiation” between a state’s “center” and its “periphery.” One among many such possible definitions is that provided by Donnan and Wilson, who write that the “new history of borders is in fact a history of *borderlands*, the region bisected by the boundary line between states, which in comparative perspective is presumed to encapsulate a variety of identities, social networks, and formal and informal, legal and illegal relationships which tie together people in the areas contiguous to the borderline on both of its sides.”<sup>93</sup> Such a definition emphasizes the interacting, two-way nature of “border exchanges” and also points toward the “fluidity of identity” in such social environments.

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<sup>91</sup> Alfred J. Rieber, “Changing Conceptions and Constructions of Frontiers: A Comparative Historical Approach,” in: *Ab Imperio*, Nr. 1, 2003, p. 27

<sup>92</sup> Hastings Donnan and Thomas M. Wilson. *Borders: Frontiers of Identity, Nation and State* (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 1999), p. 50

<sup>93</sup> Donnan and Wilson, p. 50.

In this work, however, I argue that the symbolic and geopolitical dimensions add significantly to the understanding of what the phenomenon of “borderland” meant in the case of Bessarabia, where trans-border exchange as such was insignificant and the “separating” function of the borderline clearly prevailed over the “integrating” one.

Among the many historical works dedicated to case studies of the “construction” of borders and frontiers, the study by Peter Sahlins on the Franco-Spanish frontier in the Pyrenees deserves special attention due to its theoretical and methodological insights, as well as to the broad context of his analysis<sup>94</sup>. Though the author does not deny the dualism inherent in the distinction between “boundaries” and “frontiers” (he admits that “the first evokes a precise, linear division, within a restrictive, political context; the second connotes more zonal qualities, and a broader, social context”<sup>95</sup>), his main criticism is leveled at the widespread assumption of “perceiving an evolutionary movement, necessary and irreversible, from a sparsely settled, ill-defined zone toward an uncontested, non-substantial, mathematically precise line of demarcation.”<sup>96</sup> This supposed development from a “pre-modern,” “savage,” unsettled “frontier” to a universally acknowledged and “tamed” state boundary represents, indeed, one of the most constraining assumptions in the field of the comparative analysis of the “border,” and one that is contrary to my argument concerning Bessarabia. On the one hand, the linear boundary rarely remains uncontested in areas where a competition of opposite projects of political legitimacy is present. On the other hand, the efforts at integration and unification that the construction of a clearly delineated boundary entail may lead to the ambiguous reaction of the local population toward the

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<sup>94</sup> Peter Sahlins. *Boundaries: The Making of France and Spain in the Pyrenees* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).

<sup>95</sup> Sahlins, p. 4

<sup>96</sup> Sahlins, p. 4

“streamlining” of previously informal and loose ties that may be terminated by the state’s intrusion.

Another fundamental merit of Sahlins’ work arises from the author’s preoccupation to discern the intertwining between the agency of the “center” and the “periphery” in the crystallization and consolidation of the “borderland identity” of a region divided between two states, though sharing a similar ethnic background and cultural environment. Thus, Sahlins’ study acquires a general theoretical relevance for the present project (its main insights being mostly useful for innovating perspectives in the investigation of nationalism and state-building). More importantly, it represents a narrower model of a case of comparative analysis of “border construction” similar in many respects to the Bessarabian situation. Sahlins’ analytical framework is based on a “triangular relationship” between local (borderland) society and the competing projects of the two national states that divided the Pyrenean region of Cerdanya between them. However, the central point of the narrative of the general argument is clearly situated in the “borderland” itself. Sahlins suggests “that both state formation and nation building were two-way processes...States did not simply impose their values or boundaries on local society. Rather, local society was a motive force in the formation and consolidation of nationhood and the territorial state.”<sup>97</sup> The conclusion that the book seeks (and largely succeeds) to support is that “the shape and significance of the boundary line was constructed out of local social relations in the borderland.”<sup>98</sup> One could point to several interacting (though not necessarily coincidental) common features with the interpretation of the Bessarabian case proposed here. First, the complex nature of local responses to central intentions is visible in both cases. What differs is the role of local agency in structuring these responses. Whereas in the Bessarabian case the

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<sup>97</sup> Sahlins, p. 8

<sup>98</sup> Sahlins, p. 8

“articulation” of local interests was passive and reactive in character, in the French-Spanish borderland discussed by Sahlins the “peripheral” communities were able to frequently impose their terms on the broader state policies. At the same time, the local actors were keenly aware of the diverging contexts of their respective states and of the different paths of nation building that these promoted. As Sahlins makes clear, “national identity... appeared on the periphery before it was built there by the center. It appeared less as a result of state intentions than from the local process of adopting and appropriating the nation without abandoning local interests, a local sense of place, or a local identity.”<sup>99</sup> The “oppositional model” that Sahlins proposes is, ultimately, a variant of the “construction of the Other” not peculiar to the Cerdanya, but its heuristic value is clearly enhanced by the emphasis on the “borderland community” itself and its potential for creative appropriation of the problems of self-definition and self-representation. Second, a further point of interaction (though again not coincidence) deals with the character of the competing projects vying for the appropriation of the regions in question. Sahlins concentrates his attention upon problems of nation and territoriality, which is understandable given the character of the politics he analyzes. However, even in this case the notion of “national identity” can be interpreted as consisting of several layers, due to the complicated nature of the interaction of the Catalan national movement with the Spanish state. Bessarabia represents a no less puzzling instance because of the multi-layered structure of the legitimizing techniques of the states involved in its “intellectual appropriation” and due to the problems associated with the delineation of “national” and “imperial” ideologies as opposing categories.

One possible approach that could illuminate and further refine the multi-faceted, conflicting and unstable nature of the “borderland phenomena” has recently been proposed by Alfred J. Rieber. This explanatory framework, based on the notion of “complex frontiers,” is especially

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<sup>99</sup> Sahlins, p. 9

well suited to the purposes of the present case study. Firstly, it serves as an alternative and, simultaneously, as a complementary theoretical scheme to the conceptualizations of the “frontier” discussed above. Second, it succeeds in encompassing and accounting for both the broader agendas of the state structures dominating the “Eurasian” landmass in the late modern period and for the local population’s negotiation with the “center,” thus emphasizing the dynamic and contested character of the “borderlands”. Third, it allows the depiction of the “borderlands” of the Eurasian continental empires as “relational categories,” that were constructed by the imperial bureaucrats (and intellectuals) in order to achieve tangible goals of space management, but also symbolic aims of legitimization of the imperial polity. Fourth, with reference to the Bessarabian case proper, the “complex frontiers” framework provides a wholly new operational context of analysis. Whether this broader context is to be represented by the “macrosystem of Eurasian bureaucratic empires” (encompassing the Habsburg, Russian, Ottoman, Persian and Chinese Empires), or whether it can be limited to the three polities directly concerned with the competition for preeminence in Eastern and South-Eastern Europe remains an open question.

The most important insights that emerge from this analytical scheme concern the different methods of imagining and appropriating the “borderlands” characteristic of empires as opposed to nation-states. The author is careful to point out that “there are no absolute differences in the way in which imperial and nation-state boundaries have been drawn.”<sup>100</sup> However, several basic criteria distinguish the “imperial” type of border construction from the national one. Here a parallel can be made to the previous discussion of the possible definitions of borders and frontiers. The issues of territorial jurisdiction and sovereignty, clearly fundamental in relations between nation-states, are mostly irrelevant while discussing the processes of empire-formation

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<sup>100</sup> A. J. Rieber, “The Comparative Ecology of Complex Frontiers,” in: Aleksei Miller and Alfred J. Rieber, eds. *Imperial Rule* (Budapest: CEU Press, 2004), pp. 178-210, here p.

and development. The essence of this difference was neatly captured by A. J. Rieber when he based his analysis on the “justification and the scale of conquest” that are specific for imperial polities. In other words, both the intrinsic process of empire-formation (overwhelmingly through military conquest) and the legitimization of imperial domination lead to the essentially unstable and volatile character of the borders thus established. One can only agree with the assertion that “If imperial boundaries have no intrinsic limitations and are solely established by force, then they are bound to be heavily and persistently contested. The universal claims of empires, whatever the practical constraints may be in carrying them out, cannot by their very nature be accepted as legitimate by either the people they conquer or their rivals for the contested space.”<sup>101</sup> Certainly, this position does not automatically “de-legitimize” the practice of empire management as such. It only serves to underscore the different agendas and consequent imaginative techniques of the borderlands’ “appropriation” that imperial multiethnic composite states had to devise in order to reconcile their purported “universal” claims and the reality on the ground, which often defied imperial categorizations and policy goals.

Besides representing an innovative conceptual scheme relevant to “border studies” in the larger Eurasian region, the “complex frontiers” framework allows the Bessarabian case to be analyzed within a different spatial and geopolitical context. In this sense, the notion of “complex frontier regions” (CFR) proposed by A. J. Rieber not only provides the opportunity of an “operational” definition of Bessarabia as a “borderland” (as opposed to general heuristic, often reifying interpretations of the same concept), but also points to the phenomenon of inter-imperial (and imperial-nation-state) competition for dominion over these spaces that in many cases influenced the XX-century political and intellectual processes underway in the “borderlands.” On

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<sup>101</sup> A. J. Rieber, “The Comparative Ecology of Complex Frontiers,” in: Aleksei Miller and Alfred J. Rieber, eds. *Imperial Rule* (Budapest: CEU Press, 2004), pp. 178-210, here p.

the one hand, the special emphasis on the contested nature of the CFRs is a welcome substitute for the frequently invoked “fluidity of identities” that purportedly characterizes the human collectivities inhabiting such territories. On the other hand, the issue of the “imperial legacies,” that is often explained away or simply castigated as the inevitable, but deleterious price to pay for the “colonial experience,” acquires a “long-term perspective” and certain definable characteristics otherwise taken for granted or ignored. Moreover, as the author pointed out in another important article, the management of borders is one of the “imperial legacies” with the heaviest impact on the successor national states. In effect, the notion that “the successor states were never truly nation-states but merely reproduced on a smaller scale the multicultural character of the empires of which they had been a part”<sup>102</sup> deserves more credit than it is usually granted in mainstream academia. This is especially important if one takes into account the similar challenges of multi-ethnicity that the modern bureaucratic empires and their “nemesis”- the emerging nation-states- shared. Such an approach does not in any way minimize the differences inherent in the political and institutional structure or in the modes of self-representation and legitimization of “nation-” and “empire-states.” However, it emphasizes the “marginality” and contested character of border zones as an independent variable that persists, even if with a functionally changed status, in the otherwise divergent contexts of multiethnic dynastic empires and homogenizing national states.

### ***3. The Russian Empire and the Dilemmas of Multi-ethnicity: The Non-Russian Periphery and the Problematic “Imperial Nation”***

#### *Colonialism, Orientalism and the Russian Empire*

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<sup>102</sup> Alfred J. Rieber, “Struggle Over the Borderlands,” in: S. Frederick Starr, ed. *The Legacy of History in Russia and the New States of Eurasia*. (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1994), p. 65



Edward Said's "Orientalism," since its publication in 1978, has been claimed by literary studies, postcolonial theory, the school of "symbolic geographies," anthropology and history either as a source of unwarranted and vicious attacks against the prestige of scholarship or as a most welcome and inspiring reading of the relativity of all human intellectual constructions and of their inescapable connection with politics and power. Said's undertaking coincided (and partially reinforced) the contemporary Western tendency to deconstruct the foundations of the "canonical knowledge" that was articulated by and shaped the values of Western society itself. Hence, the enormous influence that the theory and "humanistic" impulse propounded by Orientalism had upon the "postcolonial" and "subaltern" studies that thrived throughout the past several decades. In my discussion of the Russian Empire's case, however, I am much more skeptical about the possible insights that a direct application of "postcolonial" theory can provide for a student of the Eurasian continental empires. This uneasiness derives not so much from the customary distinction made between "maritime" and "land" empires that purportedly displayed different strategies of empire-building and maintaining, but from the very different manners and outcomes of their dissolution. I believe that the context of an imperial polity's "undoing" is a constituent part of the scholarly tradition dealing with this entity. "Postcolonial" theory, while useful as a "compensatory" cognitive device, does not tell one much about the Eastern European region and the dynamics of its evolution in the last two centuries (which is my broader focus). The question of whether the Russian Empire somehow "fits" Said's analytical framework must be addressed by anyone dealing with Russia's functioning and self-perception as an empire.

The collapsing of an epistemological dimension (Foucault's "discourse") with a primarily political one (Gramsci's "hegemony") may provide a "knitted-together strength" to Said's argument, but this conceptual inconsistency (even if not perceived as such by the author himself) challenges those historians who attempt to apply "Orientalism's" rich insights to "historical

empires” other than the French and the British. According to a historian of Russian ethnography who proposed a skeptical look at Orientalism’s applicability to the Russian case, Said “proceeds from an assumption of universality. Orientalist tropes are never mere “opinion” that may or may not be shared by others. Orientalism governs the very cognitive processes through which the Orient can be “known,” making Orientalist attitudes and motives all but inescapable to anyone shaped by European culture.”<sup>103</sup> In the Russian case, I agree with Maria Todorova’s contention that the real controversy behind the debates centering on Orientalism’s presence or salience in Russian thought is “the timeless question of Russian history: how unique is Russia? How applicable are general historical categories and models (especially when universalized on the basis of Western European experience) to the Russian case?”<sup>104</sup> The uncovering of this underlying assumption offers, on the one hand, a chance to “synchronize” Russian studies with the current trends in Western scholarship, but, on the other hand, it can obscure as much as it reveals by transforming “Orientalism” into a timeless category of “cultural distancing.”

There are, however, a number of intermediate stages between an exceedingly “narrow” reading of this concept and a certain variant of its universal applicability. The Eurasian continental empires were in an extremely ambiguous position in the binary scheme that the “classical” Orientalism presupposes. On the one hand, some of them (like the Chinese state) were the quintessential object of “orientalization” throughout the modern period, and also one of the “Others” constructed by European thought in the process of the crystallization of “Western” consciousness. This process, however, did not presuppose at the outset a rhetoric of “civilizational hierarchy” (as opposed to “difference”), and thus can hardly be associated with the

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<sup>103</sup> Nathaniel Knight, “On Russian Orientalism: A Response to Adeeb Khalid,” in: *Kritika. Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History*, Vol. 1, Nr. 4 (Fall 2000), p. 703

<sup>104</sup> Maria Todorova, “Does Russian Orientalism Have a Russian Soul? A Contribution to the Debate between Nathaniel Knight and Adeeb Khalid,” in: *Kritika. Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History*, Vol. 1, Nr. 4 (Fall 2000), p. 717

“creation of backwardness.” In this context, the Russian case appears to be even more puzzling. Russia, which displayed a “triangular relationship” with the West and the “orient”, clearly does not fit into the classical Saidian mold, though the author himself acknowledges the importance of the Russian “Orientalist” tradition (at least in its academic guise). For one thing, Russia’s “oriental” (Mongol) legacy and the Russian state’s constant involvement into steppe politics made it a much more direct participant in various transactions with its “Oriental” neighbors and introduced a peculiar duality in its rulers’ self-perception (at least in the pre-Petrine period), despite the predominance of Orthodoxy as a factor of power legitimization. In the same vein, the stubborn tendency to minimize Russia’s difference from the Orient or to claim a special relationship with it (that surfaced either in the form of “self-orientalizing” pronouncements or, conversely, as a claim to superior colonizing potential due to the same superior knowledge of and intimacy with this region, especially in the latter half of the XIX century) should not be simply dismissed as a tactics of rhetorical dissimulation. It is rather an indicator of the constant uneasiness that the Russian state officials and intellectuals felt when confronted with the problem of self-identification. On the other hand, a much more fundamental question concerns the purported singularity or plurality of “Orientalisms” or, to put it another way, the structural unity versus the typical variety of this “construing of the Other.”

In most general terms, there is a difference of emphasis depending on the priority given to the geographical or cultural factors in defining the “Orient” (in Russia as elsewhere). While the cultural and civilization-based criteria of classification are obviously more important, the impact of “symbolic geography” in its specifically “geographical” dimension cannot be ignored. Because of Said’s focus on the Near and Middle East as primary objects of “orientalism,” the literal application of this tag to other regions of Eurasia is always prone to dispute. The Eastern European region, no less than Russia itself, is not squarely the domain of “Orientalism,” even if

the techniques of “making the other” display some striking similarities with Said’s model. It is a question of degree rather than kind, but no less controversial because of that. Larry Wolff’s discussion of Eastern Europe as a case of “semi-orientalization” is an eloquent example of the opportunities and pitfalls of such a model.<sup>105</sup> Wolff provides an interesting discussion of Russia as an “object” of the Enlightenment’s gaze, but he sees no problem in including it as a “secondary” subcategory in Said’s model (certainly, it was not the author’s intention to explore the Russian Empire’s ambiguity in this regard). Maria Todorova, on the contrary, is much more reluctant to wholeheartedly accept Said’s model and attempts to offer a peculiarly differentiating “regional” interpretation of the European construction of the Other. She deliberately constructs a model of the Balkans as an “antinomy” not only to Western Europe, but also to the Orient. Consequently, her definition of “Balkanism” is explicitly focused on disputing Said’s model while simultaneously drawing inspiration from it. In Todorova’s own words, “unlike Orientalism, which is a discourse about an imputed opposition, Balkanism is a discourse about an imputed ambiguity.”<sup>106</sup> The same thing could be undoubtedly said about Russia (or, perhaps, about any other region included in the larger category of “Eastern Europe”), but the fundamental question is: can one truly preserve the heuristic value of the “Orientalist” model by invoking the peculiarity of various “regional” cases? Certainly, if “Orientalism” is ultimately identified with *any* construction of “cultural distance,” such a distinction is understandable, but, as long as a certain “geographical boundedness” is admitted, the “multiplicity” of Orientalist variations does not preclude the assumption of certain underlying commonalities. Maria Todorova elaborates on the contrasts between the Balkans and the Orient and defines Balkanism (in opposition to

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<sup>105</sup> Larry Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment* (Stanford; Stanford University Press, 1994).

<sup>106</sup> Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans*.

Orientalism) as what the former is not.<sup>107</sup> The pre-eminence that “place” gains at the expense of “process” (in the sense that regional specificity displaces common mechanisms of cognitive appropriation) does not invalidate the possible advantages that the structural unity of Orientalism displays. This contention does not deny the inherent variety and contextual nature of different “Orientalisms.” On the contrary, it is based on the recognition of multiple forms of this discourse. What it seeks to avoid is the “reification” of regional dissimilarities into independent discursive formations in cases where these should rather be interpreted as “variations on the same topic.” Todorova takes “Orientalism” too literally as the enterprise of learned specialists with definite regional and disciplinary boundaries rather than as a discursive formation functioning in different contexts and articulated by different persons while preserving the fundamental points of reference and inbuilt assumptions. The problem of the “orientalization” of the self and the adjacent Other points to the common point of reference (the “imagined West”) that both the subject and the object of “Orientalism” (in case of a conscious rejection and “displacement” of this label) share. Thus, I find the concept of “nesting Orientalisms” (proposed by Milica Bakic-Hayden) useful especially because it emphasizes the multiple and complex nature of “Orientalist” discourse while not compartmentalizing it in discrete regional entities that have “Orientalism” both as their ultimate source and their “nemesis.”<sup>108</sup> As Adeeb Khalid notes in his contribution to the controversy over Russian Orientalism, “...although Orientalization posits absolute civilizational distance, it can be deployed in highly complex ways.”<sup>109</sup> Certainly, the tactics of “self-Orientalization” was also an emulation of Western European models and thus cannot be severed

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<sup>107</sup> Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans*.

<sup>108</sup> Milica Bakic-Hayden, “Nesting Orientalisms: The Case of the Former Yugoslavia,” in: *Slavic Review*, Vol. 54, Nr. 4 (Winter 1995), pp. 917-931; Milica Bakic-Hayden and Robert Hayden, “Orientalist Variations on the Theme ‘Balkans:’ Symbolic Geography in Recent Yugoslav Cultural Politics,” in: *Slavic Review*, Vol. 51, Nr.1 (Spring 1992), pp. 1-15

<sup>109</sup> Adeeb Khalid, “Russian History and the Debate Over Orientalism,” in: *Kritika. Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History*, Vol. 1, Nr. 4 (Fall 2000), p. 698

from this broader context. The identification of “regional variations,” while valuable in itself, should not obscure the importance of the common pool of scholarly and literary traditions that served as the sources and the implicit background of many instances of “nesting Orientalisms.”

Recent scholarship on the Russian Empire finally witnessed an upsurge of interest for the peculiarity of the Russian “Orientalist” traditions.<sup>110</sup> One of the most challenging and controversial interpretations of the Russian experience has been offered by Alexander Etkind.<sup>111</sup> The crucial difference between the customary approaches to the Russian case and Etkind’s somewhat idiosyncratic version stems from a displacement of meaning. The author in effect identifies “Orientalism” with colonialism (in the broadest sense of the word, hence under the influence of the “postcolonial” school)<sup>112</sup> and denies any geographical specificity of the term. According to Etkind’s definition, “Orientalism represents a construction of cultural distance that legitimizes political domination.”<sup>113</sup> Thus, *any* elite or social group that constructs some kind of “hierarchy” in its relationships with its respective subalterns or other social groups (including within the same society) articulates an “Orientalist” discourse. Moreover, this “stereotyping” does not necessarily entail a negative or pejorative categorization of the “Other,” since the

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<sup>110</sup> Among other works, one could cite: Brower, Daniel R., and Edward J. Lazzerini, eds. *Russia's Orient: Imperial Borderlands and Peoples, 1700-1917*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997; Khalid, Adeeb. “Russian History and the Debate over Orientalism,” in: *Kritika. Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History*, vol. 1, Nr. 4, Fall 2000, pp. 691-699; Knight, Nathaniel. “On Russian Orientalism: A Response to Adeeb Khalid,” in: *Kritika. Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History*, vol. 1, Nr. 4, Fall 2000, pp. 701-715; Todorova, Maria. “Does Russian Orientalism Have a Russian Soul? A Contribution to the Debate between Nathaniel Knight and Adeeb Khalid,” in: *Kritika. Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History*, vol. 1, Nr. 4, Fall 2000, pp. 717-727; Nathaniel Knight, “Grigor’ev in Orenburg, 1851-1862: Russian Orientalism in the Service of Empire?,” in *Slavic Review*, 59, Nr.1, 2000, p. 74-100.

<sup>111</sup> The author presented his argument in the article “Bremia britogo cheloveka, ili vnutrenniaia kolonizatsiia Rossii” [The Shaved Man’s Burden, or Russia’s Internal Colonization], published in the journal *Ab Imperio*, see infra.

<sup>112</sup> On Russian colonialism more broadly, see, among others: Greenleaf, Monika, and Stephen Moeller-Sally, eds. *Russian Subject: Empire, Nation, and the Culture of the Golden Age*. (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1998); Yuri Slezkine. *Arctic Mirrors: Russia and the Small Peoples of the North* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994); Thompson, Ewa M. *Imperial Knowledge: Russian Literature and Colonialism*. (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2000). For a challenging (if occasionally unconvincing) application of the “colonial model” to the Ukrainian experience, see Myroslav Shkandrij, *Russia and Ukraine: Literature and the Discourse of Empire from Napoleonic to Postcolonial Times* (Montreal: McGill University Press, 2001).

<sup>113</sup> Etkind, *Bremia britogo cheloveka*...

“structural oppositions elaborated for the understanding of the Other may work differently, but they are never completely absent: the “Other” remains an “Other,” either a “noble” or an “evil” one, and that is what Orientalism really is about.”<sup>114</sup> In this case, the author suggests that any kind of binary oppositions that include an interaction between knowledge and power can in fact be subsumed under the rubric of “Orientalism.” It is difficult to reconcile such an all-encompassing definition with Said’s original propositions. One can surely agree with Etkind’s suggestion that “Orientalism itself must be subjected to a typological, historical and, ultimately, individualizing analysis,”<sup>115</sup> and with his criticism aimed at the “inflexible, unchanging and, in this sense, a-historical”<sup>116</sup> nature of Said’s scheme. What is puzzling is the author’s own replacement of this imperfect analytical framework with an even more a-historical category of “cultural distance” that purportedly defines the essence of “Orientalism” and is characteristic for any “colonial situation.” The problem of historical context that is so central (rhetorically) for Etkind’s argument is in fact obscured by this “total” concept, which applies a “leveling technique” to the diversity of historical experience under the appearance of sensitivity to the multiplicity of “colonial” encounters. This criticism does not invalidate many of Etkind’s more interesting insights (such as, for example, the implied link between the practice of “internal” and “external” colonialism or the use of similar discursive devices in the case of one’s “own” and of “foreign savages.”) What is of interest in this context is the categorical apparatus that the author uses to prove his claim that “Russian colonialism” was directed inwards (that is, toward the Great Russian peasantry) rather than outwards (toward the non-Russian periphery). In Etkind’s own words, “the self-referentiality of Russian Orientalism will constitute the main subject of the subsequent discussion, [since it] represented its individual special feature, which differentiated it

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<sup>114</sup> Etkind, *Bremia britogo cheloveka*...

<sup>115</sup> Etkind, *Bremia britogo cheloveka*...

<sup>116</sup> Etkind, *Bremia britogo cheloveka*...

from other Orientalist systems- the British, the French etc.”<sup>117</sup> The deliberate “enlargement” of the semantic field of Orientalism in Etkind’s article seems to present the reader with a self-serving tactics aimed at the justification of his hypothesis rather than with a serious reason for re-assessing its general meaning. What he identifies as Russia’s “internal colonization” may well have derived from a peculiar strategy of Russian state-building (which does not seem so peculiar when compared to the modernizing undertakings of the European “composite states” in the modern period), but it need not be linked with the general features of “Russian Orientalism.” It is also the argument of Nathaniel Knight in a thoughtful review of Etkind’s contribution. “Why paste a new label onto an old picture?” Knight quite rightly asks the reader and himself when referring to Etkind’s “insistence that these cultural fissures can be understood as manifestations of colonialism.”<sup>118</sup> Nevertheless, Knight goes too far, it seems, when accusing Etkind of transforming Orientalism into the “antithesis rather than the correlate of Empire” and asserting that “while Orientalism holds the Other at a safe distance, denying the possibility of rapprochement or assimilation, Empire is driven by a transformative impulse.”<sup>119</sup> Knight underrates both the variability of imperial experience (that can pursue rather different goals in various periods, not all of them “transformative”) and the flexibility and inertia of imperial bureaucracy, that is ready frequently to acquiesce and even consolidate traditional structures of hierarchy and authority as opposed to weakening or destroying them (as the tactics of “indirect rule” shows in many cases). The “cosmopolitan culture” that the elites are induced (or compelled) to share often does not affect the hierarchical patterns of “traditional society” that can thrive on the local level as long as it does not impact the broader strategic or political goals of the imperial

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<sup>117</sup> Etkind, *Bremia britogo cheloveka*...

<sup>118</sup> Nathaniel Knight, “Was Russia its Own Orient? Reflections on the Contributions of Etkind and Schimmelpenninck to the Debate on Orientalism,” in: *Ab Imperio*...

<sup>119</sup> Nathaniel Knight, “Was Russia its Own Orient?...”



center. One could defend Etkind's position on the grounds that it was not the author's goal to uncover the "thing in itself," but exactly to reveal the cultural metaphor of "internal colonization" as central to the Russian self-perception (as was indeed the case with the Russian monarchy's assumed "foreignness"). The over-generalized character of Etkind's definition, on the one hand, invalidates the author's claim to "subject "Orientalism" to an individualizing analysis" (what he in fact does amounts to the opposite). More importantly, the terminological inadequacy and conceptual indeterminacy of Etkind's "Orientalism" also weakens his main argument concerning Russia's "internal colonialism," since the comparative framework itself is debatable. On the whole, this discussion indicates both the rich potential of Said's writings and the possible pitfalls that an uncritical expansion of his concept's use entails for any student of the Russian Empire.

The underlying question that structures any discussion of Russia's representations of its Eastern borderlands is: did Russia possess a single "Orient"? Our suggestion is that it is possible to talk about several stages in the creation of specific "oriental" topics and spaces in the Russian official and literary discourse. Thus, one can argue that Russia had to deal with several consecutive "Orientals" and that the emergence of each one of these spaces of "otherness" paralleled the Empire's expansion. The most important regions that played this role throughout the late XVIII and XIX century were the Crimea (annexed in 1783), the Caucasus and Central Asia. The Empire's enterprises in the Far East, which represented a type in its own right and most closely resembled the West European example of "maritime colonialism," are a separate subject for discussion.<sup>120</sup> One must emphasize that Russia's perception of its "mission" in "Asia" was structured by the West European public sphere and the ambiguity inherent in Russia's dual role as an object of "orientalizing" stereotypes (in its capacity as a semi-barbarous and peripheral

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<sup>120</sup> The best treatment of the Far Eastern enterprise is in: Mark Bassin, *Imperial Visions: Nationalist Imagination and Imperial Expansion in the Russian Far East, 1840-1865* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

state) and a propagator of Enlightenment and European “civilization” (in its capacity as a modernizing Empire and part of the European state system). This duality was characteristic not only for the “western gaze” that studied Russia as a foreign object, but also for the self-perception of the overwhelming majority of Russia’s officials and intellectual elites. However, the “discovery” of the Orient as an “Other” only took place in the second half of the eighteenth century, during the reign of Catherine the Great. The role of the emulation of Western models in this regard can hardly be overstated. Even if the active engagement of the Muscovite polity in “steppe diplomacy” starting from the XVI century could have provided a certain “preliminary knowledge” and appropriate habits in dealing with the nomadic society, the annexation of the Crimea prepared the ground for the first coherent articulation of typically “Orientalist” discursive patterns.<sup>121</sup> The most important peculiarity of the Russian case stems from the process of “triangulation” that determined the essence and evolution of Russian Orientalism throughout the Imperial period. The representations of the Crimea as an “Oriental realm” with the unavoidable accessories of illusion, fairy-tale and “Oriental luxury” were meant to convey its secondary character as a “reflection” of the Western European landscape. A motive that connects the “Oriental” depictions of the Crimea with later Romantic tropes (especially in the case of the Caucasus) is that of “escape from civilization” and the interpretation of the Crimea as “an alternative to the demands of “real” Western life.”<sup>122</sup> The problem of a “direct line of descent” from Crimean to Caucasian “images of the other” is, however, much more complicated than a simple “genealogy” would suggest. The Crimea might best be conceptualized as a “testing ground” for a rich array of images that the educated Russian (and Western) public used in order to confirm Russia’s Western identity. The late-XVIII-century attempts to conceptualize Crimea

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<sup>121</sup> Sara Dickinson, “Russia’s First “Orient:” Characterizing the Crimea in 1787,” in: *Kritika. Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* (Vol. 3, Nr. 1, 2002), pp. 3-25

<sup>122</sup> Dickinson, p. 21

as a space for the definition of the identity of the Russian Empire and of the purpose of imperial expansion surely did not amount to “a concerted institutional effort at the political and cultural control of colonial territories,”<sup>123</sup> but they set the stage for the much more articulated and complex images of the “Eastern borderlands” that came as much from without as from within the borders of the Russian Empire. The Crimean case is also relevant to the early stages of the construction of Bessarabia’s image. The climatic similarity, Muslim/Ottoman legacy and the constant invocation of the “barbarity” of the exotic region’s inhabitants connected Bessarabia to the space of the North Pontic steppe (that in fact extended to the Budjak) in more than one respect. Of course, this was much less true in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when the region became “normalized” and did not figure as prominently as a borderland of the empire. The later “orients,” extended through the elaboration of discursive images as much as by the imposition of administrative practices on the ground, added to the complex tactics of violence, pressure and negotiation employed by the Petersburg government to control and occasionally appease the native population.<sup>124</sup> The Caucasus also served as one of the borderlands where complex visions of an “Orientalist” nature were articulated, tested or contested by imperial authorities and local actors alike. As one student of the region asserts, “Russia’s general recognition of the diversity and especially the “Oriental” character of its borderland regions in the nineteenth century introduced new concerns and a new imperial purpose, especially in the wake of Russia’s own eighteenth-century clarification of its “Western” location on the modern map of the globe.”<sup>125</sup> On the other hand, “[n]otions of enlightenment, progress, and Russia’s relationship to Europe were

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<sup>123</sup> Dickinson, p. 3

<sup>124</sup> For the emergence of the literary and geographical constructions of the Caucasus, see: Susan Layton, *Russian Literature and Empire: Conquest of the Caucasus from Pushkin to Tolstoy* and Layton, *The Creation of an Imaginative Caucasian Geography*.

<sup>125</sup> Austin Jersild, *Orientalism and Empire: North Caucasus Mountain Peoples and the Georgian Frontier, 1845-1917* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2001), p. 5

especially important among multi-ethnic educated society on the frontier.”<sup>126</sup> The imperial dimension of Russian state-building was inextricably linked to complex issues of self-identification of the imperial elite and the “core people” of the Empire. Russia’s position towards the “East” was never clear-cut and cannot be conceived in terms of a starkly hierarchical relationship between a dominant core and a colonial periphery. In a sense, it was “impossible for Russia to entirely shake off the “Eastern” aspect of its identity.”<sup>127</sup> This fundamental uneasiness and the insecure self-positioning of the Russian educated strata derived not only from the vexing relationship between the tsarist empire and “the West,” but also from the fluid criteria of “Russianness” that did not always allow for strict separation between the central and the peripheral regions of the empire. The “East” became as much a space for the crystallization and negotiation of “Russianness” as a foreign and unfriendly domain. Even in the most unambiguously “colonial” relationship to its various “orients,” which was displayed in Central Asia, the Russian authorities had to find a balance between the Western-inspired models of colonial encounters and the complicated issues of advancing Slavic settlements that disrupted the ecological patterns of the region and created almost insuperable dilemmas for the imperial bureaucrats.<sup>128</sup> The contiguous imperial space of the Romanovs’ polity and the ambiguous place of the “Russian element” within its ethno-social structure should prompt any researcher of Russian “orientalism” to display extra caution when approaching the subject.

A related but distinct issue that has a more direct relevance to the Bessarabian case concerns the Russian state’s colonization of the steppe regions stretching from Southern Bessarabia in the West to present-day Kazakhstan in the East. The question of the “intentionality” of Russia’s

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<sup>126</sup> Jersild, p. 10

<sup>127</sup> Robert P. Geraci, *Window on the East: National and Imperial Identities in Late Imperial Russia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), p. 2

<sup>128</sup> For an analysis of Russian policy and discourse in Turkestan, see Daniel R. Brower, *Turkestan and the Fate of the Russian Empire* (London: Routledge, 2003) and Jeff Sahadeo, *Russian Colonial Society in Tashkent, 1865-1923* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006).

“taming” of the steppe acquired a special importance in recent analyses of the interaction between the centralized Russian state and the nomadic peoples of the “steppe frontier” before the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Contrary to the customary emphasis of the Russian imperial and Soviet historiography on the essentially natural and organic process of the expansion of Slavic settlement towards the South and East, the emerging consensus on the Russian colonization and “population politics” in the steppe regions presupposes that “Russian expansion... was anything but haphazard, spontaneous, and uncontrolled,” representing instead “a deliberate process with varying motives and policies..., but consistent in its objectives of expansion and colonization of the new regions and peoples.”<sup>129</sup> The same author employs the notion of “organic colonialism” to point to Russia’s specificity among other European polities which engaged in systematic expansion. Though certainly innovative with respect to the complex mechanism of political and cultural interaction between sedentary and nomadic societies, this approach is less convincing when arguing that the Russian Empire’s “attitudes, objectives, and strategies in the southern borderlands were fundamentally no different from those of the Western European empires in their overseas possessions.”<sup>130</sup> This appears to be the case not because the Russian government refused to emulate Western models or to borrow practices from its immediate imperial neighbors, but because the link between empire-building and colonization was fraught with profound ambiguities. These ambiguities included, among other things, a discrepancy between the discursive “symbolic appropriation” of the steppe and the practice on the ground; the refusal of the imperial authorities to perceive the steppe region as an outright colony and the preference for foreign colonists that persisted until the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century; the insecure status of the new arrivals on the steppe who failed to create anything resembling the settler communities of the

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<sup>129</sup> Michael Khodarkovsky, *Russia’s Steppe Frontier: The Making of a Colonial Empire, 1500-1800* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), p. 2

<sup>130</sup> Khodarkovsky, p. 229

Western maritime empires; finally, the common “colonial paternalism” displayed towards the Russian peasantry and the ostensibly “colonized” alien populations.<sup>131</sup> Sunderland is careful enough to link the Russian “population politics” on the steppe with “a particularly complicated kind of imperialism, one in which empire building, state building, society building and nation building... invariably intertwined.”<sup>132</sup> While the empire of the tsars was no exception to the general trend of Europe’s expansion at the expense of non-European communities, the dynamics of settlement and the legitimizing myths that the Russian officials and settlers developed clearly set it apart from analogous imperial enterprises. Ultimately, the motive of “organic settlement” was not simply a (self-) deceiving tactics of dissimulation. It was also part and parcel of Russia’s peculiar relationship to its imperial experience. Complex issues involving Russia’s self-awareness, its claim to represent civilization in the East, the enduring threat of cultural hybridization and the menace inherent in the possibility of the colonizers’ “going native” were all implicitly present in the debates on the means and ends of colonization raging until the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The major subsequent development was the displacement of the colonizing drive to Siberia and the Far East. The Eurasian steppe region ceased to be an effective area of colonization after the 1850s, but the discourses and practices developed there had a significant influence on the later phases of “agricultural settlement” in more remote regions.

In this sense, Bessarabia initially was part of the Russian Empire’s “steppe frontier.” The process of state-sponsored and spontaneous colonization tolerated and then actively promoted by the Russian imperial regime radically altered the demographic structure of the area in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The policy of inviting foreign settlers to the sparsely populated southern parts of the area had, in the eyes of the imperial center, a pragmatic dimension. It aimed at the

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<sup>131</sup> For an illuminating discussion of these aspects, see Willard Sunderland, *Taming the Wild Field: Colonization and Empire on the Russian Steppe* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), p. 4

<sup>132</sup> Sunderland, p. 5

transformation of an “uncultivated” borderland into a productive and rationally structured space. The ensuing demographic disparity between the southern “colonized” regions and the northern-central Romanian-dominated area was less a result of a systematic policy than a by-product of the imperial design to integrate an unstable and previously heavily fortified inter-imperial “military frontier” into the polity of the Romanovs. In effect, before their annexation by Russia, both the southern stretch of Bessarabia and the lands to the East, commonly known in the epoch as “New Russia,” had been a field of contention between the various conglomerates of steppe nomads and semi-sedentary warrior formations (mainly the Cossacks) and the emerging and consolidated states to their north and west (first the Moldavian Principality and Poland, to be later joined or replaced by the Ottoman and Russian Empires). The lengthy and active entanglement of the “eastern marches” of the Moldavian Principality into “steppe politics” (represented here either in the guise of the Nogai Tatars or the Crimean Khanate) are often dismissed or viewed in terms of military confrontations only. In fact, the prolonged cohabitation of nomadic and sedentary populations presupposed multiple tactics of accommodation and compromise while not excluding, of course, military conflict. The porous, shifting and “transitional” character of this frontier territory was in the process of being changed by the intervention of the Russian centralizing and (partially) modernizing polity. In the Ottoman period the string of fortifications lined along the Dniester and the Danube transformed the entire zone into a rough analogy to the Habsburg “military frontier” (certainly, without any involvement of the local population or the “policing” ambitions of the Habsburg authorities). However, the “pacification” brought about by Russian conquest presupposed a new vision of the recently acquired land. The “transitional” nature of the Bessarabian space is revealed by the duality of the Russian discourse concerning it. While, on the one hand, the major part of the province was to be integrated into the Empire on the terms of a “liberated” territory inhabited by a fellow Orthodox people, the former expanse of the

Budjak was clearly a “no man’s land” that had to be reclaimed for “civilization” and “progress.” The closest parallel, in this sense, can be provided by Russian policies in the “eastern borderlands” of the empire, where the steppe grasslands played the role of an “alien environment” that had to be “tamed.” Situated at the “edge of the Eurasian steppe” (in Willard Sunderland’s words)<sup>133</sup>, Bessarabia represented a primary area of state sponsored colonization as a part of the empire’s “social engineering” projects. The Russian state never aimed at imitating the Western concept of *terra nullius* (and certainly displayed no ambition to devise a comparable legal terminology). In practical terms, however, this region was the equivalent of a “desert” waiting to be populated and cultivated.

*Aliens, Russification and the Differentiated Character of Imperial Policy in the Borderlands*

The “pre-modern” nature of the Russian imperial polity before the Petrine period and even beyond was linked, among others, by Andreas Kappeler to a specific policy of the integration of local elites and to the preservation of multiple and conflicting hierarchies both on the central and local levels of government.<sup>134</sup> Indeed, the Russian Empire appears to have been remarkably open to the co-optation of native leaders and privileged social groups, though the criteria for their voluntary assimilation into the Russian nobility or service class shifted from an emphasis on religious conversion to a tendency towards cultural and linguistic assimilation. At no moment of its imperial experience, however, did the Russian state pursue a coherent and unitary strategy of the borderlands’ integration into the empire. Rather, its policies were essentially reactive in nature and depended on inconstant variables such as the circumstances of conquest, the local

<sup>133</sup> Willard Sunderland, *Taming the Wild Field*, p. 97

<sup>134</sup> Andreas Kappeler, *Russia: A Multiethnic History* (Harlow, Eng.: Pearson Education, 2001), p.



attitude towards the Russian presence (expressed through various degrees of resistance and accommodation), the geographical location of the acquired territory and, significantly, its proximity to other centers of power. In case the shifting borderlands had the character of an “open frontier” (as was the case on the Eurasian steppe), an entire array of manipulative, “pacifying” and integrative strategies was open to the tsarist authorities as far back as the Muscovite period. As Michael Khodarkovsky observes, such practices might include (but were not limited to) the following: a “divide et impera” tactics, similar to the Chinese practice of fomenting conflict among the “Barbarians,” possibly involving the creation of additional demographic and economic pressures through the expulsion of certain ethnic groups from the empire and the granting of imperial protection to their rivals; the creation of a network of “client states” or looser polities, based on ambiguously interpreted “oaths of allegiance” to the Russian monarch (as was the case of the Don Cossacks, the nomad Kazakhs or the Central Asian khanates in a later period); the use of Cossacks as an effective (though unreliable) agent of frontier colonization and expansion; the active support for a policy of military and peasant colonization, both by building successive lines of fortifications and by the promotion of outright peasant settlement, turning pastures into agricultural lands in the process; conversion to Christianity, which might imply either the use of force (as epitomized in Elizabeth’s reign) or the application of much milder incentives in the framework of a broad religious tolerance, as exemplified by Catherine II; the use of such Christianized or culturally Russified local elites for administering the borderlands. The likely outcome of this (sometimes protracted) process was the permanent administrative and legal incorporation of the “frontier areas” into the imperial system. This also entailed periodic shifts in the representations of “otherness” roughly coinciding with the changing intellectual currents dominating a certain epoch.<sup>135</sup>

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<sup>135</sup> An example of these intermingled developments is provided by Khodarkovsky in his discussion of the later

The underlying assumption of this project is that the policy of the central authorities towards what can be loosely called “the non-Russian borderlands” was anything but coherent and consistent throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. It is much beyond the scope of this dissertation to analyze at any length the “nationalities policy” of the Russian Empire even in its most salient features. However, a general overview of the basic “hierarchy of ethnicity” and the preferred methods of integrating the peripheral communities into the imperial system must be given. This would also allow the placing of Bessarabia in the proper context as a specific borderland of the empire. At the most general level, the various inhabitants of the Russian Empire were divided into two fundamental categories: the “natural-born” or “native” (*prirodnye*) groups, fulfilling certain obligations to the imperial state and, gradually, enjoying legal equality as subjects (and then citizens) of the empire; and the initially limited, but constantly expanding category of *inorodtsy* (“aliens”), that were deemed lacking either in “civilization” or in political reliability and enjoyed certain privileges (mostly exemption from military conscription and the preservation of their local or tribal power structures) while being placed explicitly outside the “estate-based” social structure of the empire.<sup>136</sup> This distinction was initially a legal phenomenon and did not necessarily signify a radical difference in social status (especially as long as serfdom was maintained and given the fact that the imperial state was dominated by a “service mentality” that emphasized the primacy of the subjects’ obligations towards the state as opposed to claiming rights legally pertaining to them). However, the notion of *inorodtsy* became increasingly central to the bureaucratic “mind” of the Russian authorities and to the imagination of Russian nationalists as it shifted and expanded its meaning throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

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phases of Russian “steppe policies:” Khodarkovsky, chapter 5, “Concepts and Policies in the Imperial Borderlands, 1690s-1800,” pp. 184-220

<sup>136</sup> John W. Slocum, “Who, and When, Were the Inorodtsy? The Evolution of the Category of “Aliens” in Imperial Russia,” in: *The Russian Review*, Vol. 57, Nr. 2 (April 1998), pp. 173-190

The notion itself was profoundly ambiguous from the outset, despite its ostensible legal definition. This was due to the blurred criteria of inclusion within this category. Religion, “way of life,” geographical location and the potential threat to the empire’s unity periodically surfaced as the dominant element within the otherwise shifting combination of factors. Though, as initially defined by Speranskii’s Siberian statute of 1822, the term referred explicitly to the nomadic and “wandering” peoples of Siberia, the authorities added to the uncertainty by including such sedentary and literate groups as the Jews or the Central Asian settled communities within the same category. By the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the notion of *inorodtsy* in fact served as a marker of “cultural difference” from the Russians and was gradually imbued with previously absent ethno-linguistic overtones. The widening discrepancy between the narrow legal definition and actual usage was particularly obvious from the 1860s on, when the educational reforms of the government (epitomized by Il’minskii’s “system” in the Volga region) led to the application of this label to the non-Russian “small peoples” of that area.<sup>137</sup> The real watershed in the semantic evolution of this category, however, coincides with the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, when both the nationalizing drive of the imperial court and the emergence of rightist political parties in the context of the 1905 Revolution led to a definition of *inorodtsy* in an ethnically charged and (implicitly) derogatory sense, as the totality of the essentially unreliable and potentially threatening “non-Russian” subjects of the empire. The impact of the Revolution in this respect should not be neglected and has been recently emphasized by Charles Steinwedel, who posits a direct link between the revolutionary turmoil and the complex evolution of categories of ethnicity in late imperial Russia.<sup>138</sup> The displacement of the *inorodtsy* category from the legal to the political field in the last years of the tsarist regime was expressed, on the one hand, through the

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<sup>137</sup> Slocum, p. 185

<sup>138</sup> Charles Steinwedel, “The 1905 Revolution in Ufa: Mass Politics, Elections, and Nationality,” in: *The Russian Review*, Vol. 59, Nr. 4 (October 2000), pp. 555-576

occasional (though far from systematic) inclusion of such groups as the “Little Russians” or the Bessarabian Romanians within the widening ranks of untrustworthy “aliens.” On the other hand, there occurred an appropriation of this designation by nationalist activists seeking to undermine the legitimacy of the imperial domination in the borderlands. This “semantic inversion” of the pejorative meaning of the notion was increasingly frequent and rhetorically effective during World War I, when Russia’s imperial rivals were willing to provide opportunities for the publication of anti-Russian manifestos and “pamphlet-like” writings by émigré organizations.<sup>139</sup> In effect, the use of this category by “nationally minded” intellectuals and politicians was at least as frequent as its employment in official discourse and was, if anything, more consistent. The government continued to oscillate between the initial, legal and ethnically neutral, interpretation of “cultural distance” and the later reworking of the term into a synonym for a narrow and exclusivist understanding of ethnicity as a mixture of immutable criteria of “blood” and language. The dilemma between assimilation and exclusion was of course never resolved. It is characteristic for the multi-layered character of imperial practices and perceptions of otherness that the Russian Empire’s bureaucrats never achieved the full transition to such a radical “re-reading” of its multiethnic character.

The shifting and unstable meaning of the concept of *inorodtsy* is but one instance of the changing structures and patterns of Russian imperial policy towards its subject populations. At a more general level, several criteria for a coherent classification and differentiation of the non-Russian “periphery” can be suggested. The most detailed scheme of such differentiation between the “core” and “periphery” of the Romanovs’ polity has been offered by Andreas Kappeler. Initially, the scholar insisted on a direct correlation between the proportion of the “Great Russian

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<sup>139</sup> Slocum, p. 187-188. The role of J. Gabrys’ “League of the Alien Peoples of Russia” is especially revealing and will be discussed in more detail in the last chapter of the work, as it is directly relevant to the Bessarabian case.

element” and the practices and perceptions of the imperial authorities towards the respective borderlands. This scheme was proposed in the framework of the transition from an essentially “pre-modern” and non-ethnic image of the empire’s populations prevalent throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries to a more ethnically conscious and increasingly “nationalistic” mindset of the central government later in the century. The Viennese researcher identified seven broad “peripheral regions” within the empire that differed in terms of ethno-social structure and the numbers of the “dominant” ethnic group. Bessarabia fell into two separate categories (which points to the importance of geographic and demographic factors in the makeup of this region). The bulk of its territory was part of the second “territorial layer,” along with the Kingdom of Poland and Left-bank Ukraine. Southern Bessarabia, however, belonged to the “steppe region,” the major area of colonization and foreign settlement in the Empire.<sup>140</sup> While this ethno-social classification is valuable insofar as it stresses the difference between the Western borderlands and the eastern marches of the empire, it fails to account for the multiple criteria that the central authorities employed for assessing a given ethnic group’s position in the hierarchy of the empire’s subjects. In Bessarabia’s case, it specifically focuses on the province’s ethnic structure without taking into account the circumstances of its integration into the empire and its peculiar “borderland” status during the first quarter of the century. Kappeler refined his scheme in a subsequent article,<sup>141</sup> where he identified three broad criteria for the construction of an “informal hierarchy” of the non-Russian subjects: political loyalty, the estate hierarchy (in other words, the social dimension) and the cultural criteria (which determined a group’s chances for assimilation into the imperial high culture). If the first principle presupposed a shifting picture of perceived

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<sup>140</sup> Kappeler, p.

<sup>141</sup> Andreas Kappeler, “Mazepintsy, Malorossy, Khokhly: Ukrainians in the Ethnic Hierarchy of the Russian Empire,” in: Andreas Kappeler, Zenon E. Kohut et al., eds. *Culture, Nation, and Identity: The Ukrainian-Russian Encounter, 1600-1945* (Edmonton: CIUS Press, 2003), pp. 162-181

loyalty to the monarch and dynasty (with “constants” such as the Poles and the Jews featuring in the lower rungs of political reliability in the Western Borderlands), the second element of this structure depended on “whether [the relevant community] possessed their own elites, whether those elites were loyal to the tsar, and whether they conformed to the model of the Russian nobility.”<sup>142</sup> This principle remained in operation roughly until the 1860s, when, due to the increasing suspicion of the Russian monarchs towards the nobles as a whole, their intense dislike for the Polish nobility in particular (who served as a “scapegoat” and as a potential instigator of revolt throughout the Western borderlands) and the specific context of Central Asia’s military conquest (which refused any chance at equality for the local elites), the Romanov state abandoned its previous openness to the assimilation of foreign ruling strata. Finally, the “cultural hierarchy” (which acquired increasing importance in the final decades of the imperial regime) mingled pre-modern and “modern” forms of identification (such as religion and language) and “determined the degree of otherness (*altérité*) in the Russian Empire.”<sup>143</sup> Kappeler builds an interesting system of “concentric circles,” stretching from the *inorodtsy* (whose “cultural distance” and racial otherness were deep enough for them to be denied any chance at integration into the imperial system, as shown above), going through the next “circles” of “settled” Muslim communities from the Volga and Urals region and non-Orthodox Christians, who might include groups as diverse as the Gregorian Armenians, the Catholic Poles and the Lutheran Germans of the Baltic Provinces. This system culminated with the three “circles” of the Empire’s Orthodox population, consisting of an outer “fringe” of non-Slavs (the Georgians, the Greeks, the Bessarabian Romanians, and the Christianized Animists) and centered on the East Slavic population of the empire (here, Kappeler’s distinction between the “Great Russians” and the

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<sup>142</sup> Kappeler, p. 165

<sup>143</sup> Kappeler, p. 169

other elements of the “all-Russian nation” must be at least qualified and was certainly not present in the representations of most imperial officials).<sup>144</sup> His assertion that the Bessarabian elite was essentially “Russified” and “join[ed] the edge of the inner circle of Eastern Slavs,”<sup>145</sup> though apparently correct, imposes a unitary picture on a much more complex interaction of local and central actors that never allowed a complete identification of the Bessarabian nobility and intelligentsia with the Russian national project. However, the “dual effect” of the “concentric circles” system should be taken into account when researching the Bessarabian case.<sup>146</sup>

The specifically imperial dimension of the administration of the multiple “borderlands” was primarily expressed in the rather ambiguous and multi-layered concept of “Russification.” In fact, this all-inclusive term denoted a whole array of integrative policies pursued by the Romanov Empire throughout the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The broad consensus emerging in recent scholarly literature tends to invalidate the use of this notion as a heuristic device. The controversy surrounding the notion of “Russification” points to the unequal, unstable and inconsistent character of the imagination of “imperial space” within the late tsarist polity. The contested nature of this category also derives from its appropriation by the national historiographies of the region, which were successful in imbuing it with a pejorative and value-laden meaning that tended to hamper any concrete research on its significance and evolution in its proper late imperial context. Certainly, a number of historians dealing with the non-Russian peripheries of the empire were deeply conscious of the variety of processes camouflaged under the comfortable and all-encompassing label of “Russification.” One of the pioneers in the field, Edward C. Thaden, in his work on the “Western borderlands” of the Russian Empire, thus distinguished

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<sup>144</sup> Kappeler, pp. 170-172

<sup>145</sup> Kappeler, p. 172

<sup>146</sup> Kappeler summarizes his argument thus: “The further the ethnic group was from the Orthodox Russian center, the greater the legal, social, and political discrimination against its members, but the lesser the danger to its ethnic identity.” Kappeler, p. 173

between the “spontaneous Russification” of the elites; “administrative Russification,” as a part of the centralizing policy of the Russian absolutist state, which was inaugurated in the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century; and, finally, the “forced Russification,” i.e., the effort to impose the Russian language and Orthodoxy into the outlying regions. This last policy, however inconsistent and inefficient, can only be properly identified in the final decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, when the conflation of the Russian Empire with the “Russian land” imagined by the various “national projects” could prompt more decisive measures in this regard.<sup>147</sup> Even a short list of subsequent treatments of the question would include the major recent works on the interaction of Russian national and imperial imagination and state-building.<sup>148</sup> Despite this apparent interest in the topic of Russification, a recent author nevertheless noticed the rather vague nature of the categories used to refer to various models of the “assimilation” of Russia’s subject peoples throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It is certainly true that “Russia and the Russians entertained an extraordinarily diverse set of policies and attitudes” in this regard.<sup>149</sup> It is indeed appropriate to view Russian integrative policies in terms of a “continuum,” at the one end of which was a “model of the empire as a culturally homogeneous nation-state,” while at the other one could (ideally) imagine “a resolutely non-national, multicultural empire that imposed no change of identity on its subjects, and that might even endeavor to minimize contact among different groups.”<sup>150</sup> Geraci also provides a very useful list of terms that conveyed the full range of

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<sup>147</sup> Edward C. Thaden, *Russia’s Western Borderlands, 1710-1870* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984). Also, Edward C. Thaden, ed. *Russification in the Baltic Provinces and Finland, 1855-1914* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984).

<sup>148</sup> Andreas Kappeler, *Russia: A Multiethnic History*; translated by Alfred Clayton (Harlow, Eng.: Pearson Education, 2001); Andreas Renner, *Russischer Nationalismus und Öffentlichkeit im Zarenreich, 1855-1875* (Köln: Böhlau, 2000); Dietrich Geyer, *Russian Imperialism : The Interaction of Domestic and Foreign Policy, 1860-1914* (Leamington Spa: Berg, 1987); Liah Greenfeld, *Nationalism: Five Roads to Modernity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992); Geoffrey A. Hosking, *Russia : People and Empire, 1552-1917* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997); Vera Tolz, *Russia* (London: Arnold, 2001).

<sup>149</sup> Robert P. Geraci, *Window on the East: National and Imperial Identities in Late Imperial Russia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), p. 9

<sup>150</sup> Geraci, p. 9



available options and among which “Russification” was but one possibility: “Christianization” (*khristianizatsiia*), “assimilation” (*assimiliatsiia*), “rapprochement” (*sblizhenie*), “fusion” (*sliianie*), “civilization” (*tsivilizatsiia*) and, finally, “Russification” (*obrusenie*).<sup>151</sup> The implicit element of *Begriffsgeschichte* present here could provide a first solution for overcoming the conceptual problem that a focus on “Russification” alone seems to presuppose. In fact, however, other aspects are much more important.

First, along the same lines, an attentive study of the methods and criteria for the definition of the category of “Russian-ness” (*ruskost*) appears much more promising. The excessive concentration on the notion of “Russification” presupposes the existence of a coherent model or standard of “Russian-ness” to which the newly assimilated communities should correspond. In fact, no such model was ever devised. On the contrary, the spatial and cultural boundaries of “Russian-ness” were no less fiercely contested than the more practical issues involved in integrating the non-Russian subjects of the empire. A complex intertwining of political, psychological, racial, linguistic and other criteria entered this self-definition process. The emergence of an image of *ruskost* can be studied not only from the “central” vantage point of the governmental institutions, but, perhaps more so, from the peripheral standpoint, where such images coalesced and were tested against the opposition and resistance of competing projects. This approach proved especially fruitful in the case of the “Western borderlands,” which became the focus for a whole recent trend in the scholarship on the Russian empire that one could call (for a lack of a better term) “revisionist.”<sup>152</sup> This tendency was also a “deconstructive” reaction

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<sup>151</sup> Geraci, p. 9

<sup>152</sup> Among such recent and innovative works on the interaction of the imperial and local actors in the Western borderlands one could cite: Theodore R. Weeks, *Nation and state in late Imperial Russia : nationalism and Russification on the western frontier, 1863-1914* (DeKalb, Ill.: Northern Illinois University Press, 1996); Theodore Weeks, “Defining Us and Them: Poles and Russians in the 'Western Provinces', 1863-1914,” in: *Slavic Review*, Nr. 53, No. 1 (Spring 1994), pp. 26-40; Mikhail Dolbilov, “Russification and the Bureaucratic Mind in the Russian Empire's Northwestern Region in the 1860s.,” in: *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History*, Volume 5,

against the usual ideological implications of the term “Russification,” that hardly contributed to a balanced analysis in the past.

Second, closer attention to the changing semantic and symbolic evolution of the concept of “Russification” is necessary. This entails, on the one hand, a nuanced analysis of the contemporary (and shifting) meanings of the term and, on the other hand, an emphasis on the interactions of the “agents” and “recipients” of the assimilatory/integrative practices that would account for the latter’s failures and inconsistencies as much as for their potential success. Such an analysis has been attempted by Aleksei Miller in an article that proposed a new interpretive framework for the phenomenon.<sup>153</sup> Making a distinction between the two different spellings of the word during the imperial period,<sup>154</sup> the scholar insisted that a “black-and-white” image of the assimilatory processes in the Russian Empire was grossly inadequate. In the majority of the empirical cases of “Russification,” the promoters of such projects, besides the use of coercive measures, attempted to “create a positive motivation” on the local level.<sup>155</sup> Moreover, in certain regions of the empire “Russification” was perceived as a chance to integrate into modernizing projects and could also serve as a mere instrument for the local elites that enhanced their standing in their relationship with the central authorities. It is important to emphasize that the instrumental

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Number 2 (July 2004), pp. 245-271; Darius Staliunas, “Did the Government Seek to Russify Lithuanians and Poles in the Northwestern Region after the Uprising of 1863-64?,” in: *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History*, Volume 5, Number 2 (July 2004), pp. 273-289. For a reaction, see Andreas Kappeler, “The Ambiguities of Russification,” in: *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History*, Volume 5, Number 2 (July 2004), pp. 291-297. The most comprehensive critical and theoretically grounded “revisionist” approach to Russification has been suggested by Aleksei Miller. See his contributions in: A. I. Miller, *Imperiia Romanovykh I natsionalizm: Esse po metodologii istoricheskogo issledovaniia* (Moskva: Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie, 2006).

<sup>153</sup> Aleksei Miller, “Russifikatsii: klassifitsirovati I poniatii” [Russifications: Classified and Explained], in: *Ab Imperio*, 2002, Nr. 2, pp.

<sup>154</sup> Thus, when spelled *обрусение*, the notion implied a forced and even violent process of coerced assimilation directed either towards an individual or an ethnic group with the immediate aim of turning them into “Russians.” However, if spelled *обрусъние*, the same concept presupposed a process of voluntary acceptance (by an individual or a group) of certain features characteristic for the “Russian essence,” as the latter was being understood at a given moment. See Miller, p.

<sup>155</sup> Miller, p. This of course points to the much broader issues of the “motivations” of central state agencies and local actors and of their interaction. The extent to which “motivations,” rather than policy outcomes, should constitute the future research agenda, is debatable.

character of Russification could provide the cultural resources needed to challenge the center, as was the case of the Muslim intellectuals of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, who used their proficiency in the Russian language and culture as a direct “shortcut” for access to the western intellectual tradition.<sup>156</sup> As Miller concludes, it is crucial to abandon the image of Russification as an interaction between a wholly “passive” and subordinated peripheral “object” and a unitary and disproportionately powerful “center.” In the framework of his broader “situational approach” to historical analysis, the Russian historian outlines the enormous difference between a wholesale “conversion” to the set of “Russian values” and a pragmatic acceptance of the empire’s official language as a means of career advancement or even as a method of subverting the imperial discourse from “inside.”<sup>157</sup> Of course, this distinction was neither so clear-cut nor so important to contemporaries, but it should guide any study of individuals’ or collectives’ attitudes towards and responses to “Russification” policies.

I will not dwell specifically on the interaction of the various Russification projects and the empire’s symbolic geographies (what could be referred to as the “Russification of space”). The only aspect important for the Bessarabian case regards the changing status of certain regions of the empire vis-à-vis its perceived “core.” Bessarabia suffered a peculiar, but highly significant evolution in this respect. If, in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, this region was explicitly treated as a border province enjoying a separate (if underdeveloped, by imperial standards) legal, institutional and socio-cultural identity, in the second half of the century its status became much more ambiguous. Initially belonging to the category of self-governing entities of the empire (together with the Kingdom of Poland and the Grand Duchy of Finland), Bessarabia’s image shifted to that of a “borderland” (*okraina*) religiously and culturally affiliated to the Russian

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<sup>156</sup> Adeeb Khalid, *The Politics of Muslim Cultural Reform: Jadidism in Central Asia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

<sup>157</sup> Miller, p.

“core,” but ethnically and linguistically “foreign” (in the latter respect, a state of uncertainty prevailed as late as the early 20<sup>th</sup> century). It might be more fruitful to compare Bessarabia’s status to that of Siberia<sup>158</sup> and Ukraine. The region’s intermediary position on the “mental map” of the empire meant that Bessarabia could never be unambiguously claimed by the Russian integrative projects.

#### ***4. Constructing the National Narrative in Romania: Models and Variations***

This section will shortly present the conditioning factors and the dynamics of the “construction of the national narrative” in the Romanian Principalities of Moldavia and Wallachia throughout the second half of the XIX century. The primary focus of the discussion emphasizes the main stages and “models” followed by Romanian thinkers in their representations of the place of the Romanian ethnic nation and its state in the wider European context. It also addresses the problem of the emerging Romanian state’s “symbolic geography,” and, connected to this, the relative marginality of Bessarabia in the national discourse (in comparison with Transylvania). Such a disproportionate concentration upon the “narratives” of the nation devised in the Romanian Principalities and, starting from the 1860s, in the Romanian national state (with only tangential references to the significant variations in the national narrative as it crystallized in Transylvania or Bukovina) stems from two basic considerations. First, the competing “projects” of Russian and Romanian “symbolic appropriation” of Bessarabia were elaborated within the framework of intertwining intellectual currents and *Realpolitik* state interests, a fact which in the Romanian case determined a close association of the leading proponents of a given doctrine of

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<sup>158</sup> Mark Bassin, “Inventing Siberia: Visions of the Russian East in the Early Nineteenth Century,” in: *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 96, Nr. 3 (June, 1991), pp. 763-794; Anatolii Remnev, “Vdvinut’ Rossiia v Sibir’. Imperiia i russkaia kolonizatsiia vtoroi poloviny XIX – nachala XX vv.,” *Ab Imperio*, 2003, No. 3, pp. 135-158.

“national development” with the wider political debates of the period. The peculiar East European symbiotic personality of the “intellectual-politician” had its place in pre-World War I Romanian “Old Kingdom” as well.<sup>159</sup> This does not presuppose either a total identification of the various intellectual trends with corresponding policies, or a “subordination” of intellectual preoccupations to immediate political interests. It does entail, however, an identification of the “national state” as the primary agent of fulfilling the “national ideal,” especially after the consolidation of Romania’s international status in the 1870s and 1880s. The second consideration is linked to the fact that Bessarabia, like Transylvania and Bukovina, represented an actual (or potential) object of Romania’s irredentism. From this point of view, it seems more logical to discuss Bessarabia from the same “central” viewpoint of the “Old Kingdom” than to compare its place within the Romanian “national narrative” with the variations of the same narrative in the Austro-Hungarian environment as such. This does not diminish the relevance of the Transylvanian intellectual contribution to the emergence of Romanian nationalism. It does indicate that the Romanian visions of Bessarabia were primarily articulated within the framework of the peculiar Moldo-Wallachian cultural context that differed significantly from the Transylvanian tradition.

The Romanian historiography customarily associated the crystallization of the national ideology (to the extent that such a unitary concept existed) with a progressive and “stage-like” development initiated by the educated Greek-Catholic clergy of Transylvania in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century (the representatives of the so-called “Transylvanian school”). While this point is not contentious in itself, its relationship with the parallel processes in the Danubian Principalities of

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<sup>159</sup> For the notion in question and the intricate relationship between scholarship and politics in Eastern Europe, Ronald Grigor Suny and Michael D. Kennedy, eds. *Intellectuals and the Articulation of the Nation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999); Dennis Deletant and Harry Hanak, eds. *Historians as Nation-Builders: Central and Southeast Europe* (London: Macmillan, 1988).

Moldavia and Wallachia (the later nucleus of the Romanian nation-state) is. This is obvious at least on two levels. First, the teleological implications of national historiography were hardly conducive to a balanced analysis of the proper context within which the Transylvanian clerics' preoccupation for origins, philology and culture emerged. A recent synthetic case study of Romanian nationalism in the wider East European framework, focusing on the issue of the heterogeneity and inherent internal contradictions of the region's national discourses, argues that this initial instance of Romanian national self-assertion was a "side effect of the Counter-Reformation policies of the Ha[b]sburgs" in Transylvania and that it was characterized by an "attachment toward juridical procedures" generated by the influence of "the Ha[b]sburg enlightened bureaucratic culture."<sup>160</sup> Aside from the contrasting impact of the respective versions of "Central European" and "Balkan" Enlightenments on the developments to the West and east of the Carpathians, the different cultural orientations of the Transylvanian and "Moldo-Wallachian" fledgling intelligentsias during the 18<sup>th</sup> century led to the appearance of two parallel (if not starkly opposed) frames of imagining the national community in the first half of the following century.<sup>161</sup> It is important not to exaggerate the incompatibility of these narratives, however. Like their Russian counterparts in the symbolic competition for Bessarabia, the 19<sup>th</sup> century Romanian intellectuals referred to the regional cultural "traditions" from a variety of vantage points. The previous century had marked the enhancement of the "discrepancies between Transylvania and the principalities of Moldavia and Wallachia in every way, including such elusive domains as the social imaginary, self-identity, and symbolic geography."<sup>162</sup> The rejection of the Transylvanian

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<sup>160</sup> Caius Dobrescu, "Conflict and Diversity in East European Nationalism, on the Basis of a Romanian Case Study," in: *East European Politics and Societies* (Vol. 17, Nr.3, 2003), pp. 393-414, here p. 395-396

<sup>161</sup> The above-cited author even speaks of "profound and highly significant differences [between Transylvania and the Danubian Principalities] that result in parallel traditions of understanding the concepts, symbols, and policies of nationalism." See Dobrescu, p. 396

<sup>162</sup> Sorin Antohi, "Romania and the Balkans: From Geocultural Bovarism to Ethnic Ontology," in: *Tr@nsit. Europäische Revue*, Vol. 21, 2002. Available at: <http://www.iwm.at/t-21txt8.htm>; Internet, p. 1-2

School's "Latinist" doctrine in Moldavian and Wallachian intellectual circles and the attraction exercised by the "symbolic order" of the "Balkans" until the early 19<sup>th</sup> century (at the same time as the latter category is constructed by the "Western gaze") set the stage for a different pattern of cultural "Westernization" in the Danubian Principalities. The initial period of this process witnessed the increasing impact of the intermediary Russian model on altering the cultural horizon of the local elites.<sup>163</sup> Reaching its apex at the time of the elaboration of the Organic Regulations, the influence of the Russian factor gradually receded (despite, or perhaps because, the empire's political leverage over the Principalities) until being displaced by the direct emulation of the Western European (mainly French) political and cultural model. Even before the 1848 events in Moldavia and Wallachia, the preeminence of French Romanticism (in its literary and scholarly guise), epitomized by the towering figures of Jules Michelet and Edgar Quinet, was gaining the upper hand. The future Romanian nation-builders of "liberal" political persuasion (especially Ion C. Bratianu, D. Bratianu and C. A. Rosetti) thus privileged a "political" understanding of the nation as the body of citizens enjoying equal rights and freedoms and envisaged a primarily institutional reform agenda that was to restructure the Romanian political system along rational Western lines. In this sense, 1848 was a watershed in the evolution of their political visions. The failure of the (however timid) social reformism in Wallachia during the short-lived revolutionary government did not altogether suppress the social utopian component of the "Forty-eighters'" agenda, but it surely channeled their efforts towards the political and cultural dimensions of nation-building. The more balanced approach to the tasks of the incipient Romanian nation-state promoted by prominent representatives of Moldavian elites (M.

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<sup>163</sup> The issue of "Westernization through Petersburg" cannot be discussed here in detail. One of the most vivid and colorful illustrations (with a focus on everyday life) is provided by Neagu Djuvara in his *Intre Orient si Occident*. For a Russian "Slavophile" perspective portraying the 19<sup>th</sup> century Romanian "present" as "Russian past" and condemning the unwittingly "Westernizing" role of the Russian military occupations, see F. F. Vigel', *Vospominaniia* [Memoirs], vol. II (Part VI), (Moscow, 2003), pp. 1060-1063. Needless to say, as in the case of the previous "Greek" model, the Russian-imposed Westernization had a rather ambiguous reception.

Kogalniceanu or Barbu Catargiu) was more indebted to German or (indirectly) British models of political equilibrium and social harmony. These competing visions of political and social development presaged the later crystallization of the “Liberal” and “Conservative” political groups, but also introduced significant variations into the emerging national narrative.<sup>164</sup>

The “forty-eighters” elaboration of a discourse on the essence of the Romanian nationality (perceived mainly in civic and political terms) and the following re-elaboration of this model under the guise of a more “organic” scheme of the “national body,” especially by the “Junimists” and their epigones (which eventually came to dominate the pre-World War I discussions on issues of nationality) represent the conventional, if necessary, references for analysis.<sup>165</sup> While the dichotomy between modernizing and traditionalist intellectual trends undoubtedly structured the contemporary debate on Romanian statehood and “national development,” the relationship between these competing “schools of thought” was never clear-cut or neatly antagonistic. One characteristic example is the placing of the “Junimea” current within the late 19<sup>th</sup> century intellectual climate. The piercing criticism of Titu Maiorescu’s vision of Romanian modernity owing to Eugen Lovinescu’s *Istoria civilizației române moderne* and the emphasis on the traditionalist or even regressive implications of the “Junimist” doctrine (as well as the highly personal and radical re-workings of its theses by later authors, like Mihai Eminescu and Constantin Radulescu-Motru) precluded the analysis of this trend in terms of an alternative vision

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<sup>164</sup> For an interesting discussion of the formative stage of Romanian conservatism in the context of Eminescu’s analysis as a “conservative thinker,” see Ioan Stanomir, *Reacțiune și conservatorism: Eseu asupra imaginii politice eminesciene* [Reaction and Conservatism: An Essay on Eminescu’s Political Imaginary] (Bucharest: Nemira, 2000).

<sup>165</sup> The best summary of the debates on Romania’s “models of development” is given in Keith Hitchins, *Romania. 1866-1947* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), pp. 55-89. Despite the rich literature on individual thinkers and wider literary and political trends, there is still no comprehensive treatment of the evolution of “national discourse” in pre-World War I Romania. A stimulating reassessment of certain thinkers especially concerned with problems of Romania’s social and national peculiarities and its placing within a European context is given by Cristian Preda in: C. Preda, *Contribuții la istoria intelectuală a politicii românești* (Bucharest: 2003) and in his introductory article to Constantin Radulescu Motru, *Scrisori politice* (București: Nemira, 1998).



of the modern nation-state. The references of the “Junimists” were part of the “second West” of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century (represented by the “Central European” cultural model) and, in this sense, no less “modern” than the French-inspired rhetoric and practice of the Romanian liberals.<sup>166</sup> Any criticism of “normative modernity” cannot of course alter the peripheral character of the Romanian cultural elites’ position towards their Western counterparts. The several paths that modernity could in principle follow in late-19<sup>th</sup> century Europe were thus reflected in the peculiar Romanian context, which shaped the final form of the “development debates” in Romania. In an attempt to present a more complex classification of the variegated approaches to Romania’s nation-building before (and after) 1914, Paul E. Michelson suggests the following division of the conflicting views on the Kingdom’s evolution: 1) the nationalist-traditionalist approach (represented mainly by the “samanatorist” school of N. Iorga); 2) the evolutionary-conservative position (the “Junimists”); 3) the Socialist-Marxist view (C. Dobrogeanu-Gherea and his lesser epigones); 4) the “Poporanist” (Populist) current, led by C. Stere and G. Ibraileanu, and 5) the “Modernizers” (or Europeanizers), whose ideology only emerged after 1918 as a reaction to the radically altered postwar context. Before that, the preeminence of the Western European model was hardly challenged *per se*, even if different thinkers related to different parts of the “Western” tradition.<sup>167</sup>

I do not aim to challenge, in this cursory overview, the validity of the dichotomy between the “Westernizing” and “autochthonist” tendencies that shaped the late 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century Romanian discussions of the “national essence” and nation-building. However, as the authors of a recent survey of post-1989 Romanian historiography astutely note, “in the post-1989 cultural

<sup>166</sup> The concept of the “two Wests” or of the “bicephalous West” that emerged in the period between the 1870s and 1914 is elaborated in: Martin Malia, *Russia under Western Eyes: From the Bronze Horseman to the Lenin Mausoleum* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 2000), esp. pp. 175-179

<sup>167</sup> Paul E. Michelson, “Romanian Perspectives on Romanian National Development,” in: *Balkanistica. A Journal of Southeast European Studies* (Vol. 7, 1981-1982), pp. 92-120, here p. 96

space, the dichotomy between the two contrasting positions was not so sharp but was represented rather by a continuum of combinations ranging from one end of the political spectrum to the other.”<sup>168</sup> Keeping in mind the obvious differences, the same could be said about the pre-1914 period, when the several schools vying for preeminence on the contested field of nationalist politics nevertheless held a number of common assumptions about Romania’s position with respect to the “outer world” and to the neighboring imperial polities. In this sense, it might be more fruitful to apply the concept of “symbolic geography” to the complex practices of self-identification of the Romanian intellectuals both before and after World War I.

It would be difficult to argue against the contention that “in all three historical regions [Wallachia, Moldavia and Transylvania] the formative experience behind the emergence of nationalism was similarly rooted in an attempt of emulating the “significant others,” resulting in a profound identity crisis...”<sup>169</sup> The peculiarities of the national narrative in the three contexts derived as much from the shifting attitudes towards these “others” as from the latter’s perceived features. The importance of this framework of analysis can also be linked to the overlapping “symbolic geographies” of the ideal “homeland” constantly imagined (and re-imagined) by the Romanian intellectuals of the last two centuries. During the early period of nation-building (before 1914) the fusion of intellectual and political activities in the case of a large part of the Romanian elites lent additional immediacy to such mental constructs. It thus appears that further investigation along these lines, even if past its prime in Western scholarship, would still be welcome in the Romanian context. One of the most articulate manifestoes for the “establishment of a new research object of symbolic geographies” in Romanian studies was recently issued by

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<sup>168</sup> Constantin Iordachi and Balazs Trencsenyi, “In Search of a Usable Past: The Question of National Identity in Romanian Studies, 1990-2000,” in: *East European Politics and Societies* (2003, Vol. 17), pp. 415-453, cf. p. 418

<sup>169</sup> Iordachi and Trencsenyi, p. 424

the innovative Cluj-based historian Sorin Mitu.<sup>170</sup> Though hailing from the tradition of “imagology” and the history of mentalities, the Romanian author insisted on the broader application of this model to topics in political and intellectual history. This has been partly accomplished already in the research of Sorin Antohi<sup>171</sup> and younger Romanian-born scholars, such as Marius Turda.<sup>172</sup> The foreign ideological models thus represented not only discrete instances of cultural transfer, but shaped and constituted the underlying frames of the national discourse. Antohi, for example, convincingly showed that “the autochthonist canon constructs the discourse of Romanian specificity from imported ideological elements.”<sup>173</sup> Moreover, the most radical version of the “Westernizing” stances (epitomized by the strategy of “cultural bovarism”), as well as the most extreme and totalizing form of autochthonist discourses in the inter-war period (reaching their apex in the “ethnic ontology” of the “Romanian space”) were analyzed by Antohi in relationship to Romania’s “horizontal” and, respectively, “vertical” escape from the stigmatized sphere of the “Balkans.” At the same time, the Romanian perception of these alien and hostile (or corrupting) geographical matrices was fraught with a certain ambiguity. Whereas the Balkans might elicit mixed feelings of rejection and attraction (synthesized in the motives of

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<sup>170</sup> Sorin Mitu, *Transilvania mea: Istorie, mentalități, identități* [My Transylvania: Histories, Mentalities, Identities] (Iasi: POLIROM, 2006), esp. pp. 80-85. Basing his approach on the classical works of Edward Said, Larry Wolff and Maria Todorova, Mitu provides a definition of the concept for local use: „Symbolic geographies can be defined as mental representations of a political, historical or cultural space, generated at the level of the social imaginary. These representations valorize the above-mentioned spaces, endowing them with features and characteristics of an emotional and ideological nature.” Mitu, p. 81

<sup>171</sup> Sorin Antohi, *Civitas imaginalis: Istorie și utopie în cultura română* [Civitas imaginalis : History and Utopia in Romanian Culture] and, especially, in the above-cited article : Sorin Antohi, “Romania and the Balkans: From Geocultural Bovarism to Ethnic Ontology,” in: *Tr@nsit. Europäische Revue*, Vol. 21, 2002. Available at: <http://www.iwm.at/t-21txt8.htm>; Internet.

<sup>172</sup> Marius Turda, “Aurel C. Popovici’s nationalism and its political representation in the Habsburg Empire (1890-1910),” in: Marius Turda, ed. *The Garden and the Workshop: Disseminating Cultural History in East-Central Europe* (Budapest: CEU Press, 1999), pp. 49-75 or Marius Turda, “Aurel C. Popovici and the Symbolic Geography of the Romanians of Transylvania in the Late Habsburg Empire (1890-1906),” in: *Revue Roumaine d’Histoire* (Vol. XXXVI, 1997, Nr. 1-2), pp. 97-121.

<sup>173</sup> Iordachi and Trencsenyi, p. 441

“inclusion,” “affinity” and “sublimation”)<sup>174</sup> and were thus a constant factor in the Romanian construction of the “national self,” the Habsburg and, especially, the Russian Empires represented quintessential sources of alienation and threat. In this sense, the importance of 1848 as a “symbolic threshold” cannot be ignored. Aside from the affiliation of the Romanian “revolutionaries” to the liberal nationalist Mazzinian tradition (that perceived the Romanov Empire as the main obstacle to the attainment of universal freedom), the Russian military intervention of that year and, especially, the Crimean War marked successive stages of the emergence of a markedly negative image of the Russian polity.<sup>175</sup> The “Bessarabian question” added to the anti-Russian thrust of the incipient Romanian public discourse. The “otherness” of the Russian space was rhetorically enhanced by the Romanian partaking in the Western tradition of Russophobia. Thus, Romania’s imagined belonging to the Latin (and civilized) West, combined with the persistent myth of Russian expansionism, provided the conceptual grid and the rhetorical arsenal that was later displayed in the symbolic competition over the contested territory of Bessarabia. However, even if the Russian Empire was construed as a “menacing Other,” the impact of certain ideas derived from the Russian intellectual milieu remained significant. This is to point not so much to the Russian model of “Westernization,” since it was explicitly rejected or discarded by the Romanian elites by the 1860s. Much more interesting are the traces that their Russian experiences in “nihilism” or “populism” left in the thinking of such central figures of Romanian “nationalism” (not to mention their role in articulating a discourse on Bessarabia) as B.P. Hasdeu or C. Stere. While they were clearly uncompromising in their opinions about the deleterious impact of Russian domination on the Bessarabian Romanian

<sup>174</sup> Sorin Antohi, “Romania and the Balkans: From Geocultural Bovarism to Ethnic Ontology,” in: *Tr@nsit. Europäische Revue*, Vol. 21, 2002. Available at: <http://www.iwm.at/t-21txt8.htm>; Internet ; pp.2-15.

<sup>175</sup> An interesting, if incomplete, study (following the model of “imagology”) and tracing different instances of Russia’s perception by the Romanian literary tradition between the 1840s and 1948 is: Leonte Ivanov, *Imaginea rusului și a Rusiei în literatura română, 1840-1948* [The image of the Russian and Russia in Romanian literature, 1840-1948] (Chisinau: Cartier, 2004).

population, their visions of the Romanian nation-state struck an original chord in the general picture of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century Romanian intellectual environment.<sup>176</sup>

Since the process of nation-building in the Romanian Principalities (and later the Romanian Kingdom) is the main frame of reference for this project, the Transylvanian case of “imagining the nation” cannot be discussed at length here. Still, it should be emphasized that the Habsburg (and Austro-Hungarian) factor played a prominent role in structuring the Romanian national imagination. First, the role of the Transylvanian-born intellectuals and political activists both before and after the 1848 Revolution in the articulation of the “national discourse” in the Romanian Principalities was fundamental and, thus, infused this discourse with elements rooted in the Transylvanian context. Second, Transylvania serves as an even more important contrast and “testing ground” for Bessarabia’s role and significance in the Romanian national narrative. Beyond the customary (and largely accurate) generalization that Transylvania was, within the Romanian discourse on the nation, everything Bessarabia was not (central vs. marginal, articulate vs. inarticulate, possessing a politically organized “national movement” vs. a conspicuous lack of the same etc.), a parallel between the larger Russian and Habsburg context and their respective dilemmas of “managing multi-ethnicity” could provide significant insights on the complex process of “imagining the nation” within an empire.<sup>177</sup> The central challenge when approaching the Transylvanian case from a “national Romanian” perspective (to the extent that such a vantage point is valid) is the overlapping of the “national” and “imperial” space on the mental maps of the Romanian elites in the region. Ideally, as Sorin Mitu observed, the local intellectuals had at least

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<sup>176</sup> Their contribution to the Romanian national narrative will be discussed in Chapter IV.

<sup>177</sup> Beyond the partial and generally biased accounts of pre-1989 Romanian historians, the most comprehensive works on the emergence and dynamics of the Romanian national movement in Transylvania (and its placing within the Habsburg and European context) are: Keith Hitchins, *The Romanian National Movement in Transylvania, 1780-1849* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1969); Idem, *A Nation Discovered: Romanian Intellectuals in Transylvania and the Idea of Nation, 1700-1848* (Bucharest: The Encyclopedic Publishing House, 1999) and Idem, *A Nation Affirmed: The Romanian National Movement in Transylvania, 1860-1914* (Bucharest: The Encyclopedic Publishing House, 1999).

three options of an imagined homeland that were, in principle, mutually exclusive (or became so in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century) but could also be variously combined. The first entity that could reasonably claim their loyalty was the historical Great Principality of Transylvania, which benefited from a long-standing historical and constitutional identity and which could be organized either as a multiethnic political unit or as an essentially Romanian (or, conversely, Hungarian) “national space.” However, this presupposed, in the absence of strong “regionalist” solidarities, a direct clash between the Romanian and Hungarian national projects. The commonality of both stemmed from the emphasis on local circumstances and the rejection of an overall imperial framework. The second focus of allegiance and legitimacy was the Habsburg Empire. Combining the traditional motive of dynastic loyalty and elements of modern conservative ideology, representatives of this current gradually evolved towards advocating a federalist solution to the “nationality question.” Finally, the third “homeland” suggested by the Transylvanian intellectuals represented the territories inhabited by the Romanian demographic element. However, before the formation of the Romanian nation-state they never imagined a common political structure and only envisaged “unification” through the Principalities’ inclusion into the Habsburg Monarchy.<sup>178</sup> Even if this situation changed following the formation of the Romanian nation-state and under the impact of the Hungarian nationalizing policy after the 1870s, the relationships between the Transylvanian elites and the Kingdom’s political establishment were never smooth. The Habsburg (or Austro-Hungarian) Empire could thus be not only a “significant Other,” but the main point of reference even for a part of Transylvanian Romanian nationalist intellectuals (as was the case of Aurel C. Popovici before World War I).

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<sup>178</sup> Sorin Mitu, *Transylvania mea: Istorii, mentalități, identități* [My Transylvania: Histories, Mentalities, Identities] (Iasi: POLIROM, 2006), pp. 119-120. A fascinating account of the functioning of “identity mechanisms” in the case of the Transylvanian Romanians in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries can be found in Sorin Mitu, *National Identity of Romanians in Transylvania* (Budapest: CEU Press, 2001).

These options were hardly available for Bessarabian intellectuals. The absence of any local political traditions of autonomy, the general illiteracy of the Romanian-speaking population, the Russian educational policy and the chronic weakness of federalist thought in the Russian Empire precluded any articulation of locally generated identity projects until the revolutionary events of 1917. Even if the autonomist debates of the period could be paralleled to similar developments in the Habsburg context, neither their sources nor their intensity can serve as a basis for serious comparative analysis. The closest approximation to such an analysis could involve a comparative study of the Transylvanian and Bessarabian emigration in the Romanian Kingdom before 1914, but this kind of investigation is a task for the future.

The question of “national priorities” gradually became prominent in the Romanian national discourse along with the self-assertion of the Romanian Kingdom as the center of (at first cultural, then political) gravity for all the Romanians dominated by neighboring empires. The relative importance of the Romanian-inhabited areas was determined by several factors, some of which have been sketched above. Bessarabia had a subordinate place in the hierarchy of Romanian nation-building not only due to the peculiarities of the Russian imperial context, but also because of the internal dynamics of the Romanian self-perception. The discursive marginality of the province was also structured by two other features. First, the view of the Russian Empire as “inimical” to the Romanian “element” made Bessarabia a privileged object for the invocation of national victimhood (which was not counterbalanced by an “activist” stance on behalf of the tiny Bessarabian educated stratum).<sup>179</sup> Second, besides the articulate Bessarabian émigrés, only a handful of Romanian intellectuals constructed a systematic argument for the symbolic inclusion of the region into the “national body.” The domination of the Romanian

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<sup>179</sup> This stands in contrast to Bukovina, where the framework of local (Galician) autonomy and the emergence of a public sphere facilitated the integration of Romanian elites into the political system of the Austrian Empire.

national discourse by conservative and “organicist” stances was valid also in the Bessarabian case. This is obvious from the work of the two significant figures of Romanian nationalism that wrote extensively on the “Bessarabian question:” Mihai Eminescu and Nicolae Iorga.

The position of the two authors might best be subsumed under the label of “integral nationalism.” This is meant to emphasize not so much their substantive similarities, as the paradigmatic importance of their readings of nationalism for later authors. Eminescu’s most consistent position on the “Bessarabian issue” can be grasped from the series of articles he published in the aftermath of the 1877-78 Russian-Ottoman war. Thus, his public position emerged during the broad debate involving the definition of the “priorities” of Romania’s national project. His close affiliation with the Junimist current within the Conservative Party and his generally pro-German political views shaped in many ways the terms he used and the explicit references most prevalent in his articles.<sup>180</sup> One of the most expressive examples of his appeal to “national autarchy” and a doctrine of “self-reliance” in domestic and foreign policy is to be found in the last phrases of the cited work, where he states: “Our slogan is: not to hope for anything and not to fear anything. If we do not hope for anything, we do not need to invest our confidence in others [any longer], as we have done in the past; [we can only have confidence] in ourselves and in those who are forced to take our part; if we fear nothing, we do not need to implore generosity in places where this [virtue] is an exotic plant.”<sup>181</sup> While this latter remark is clearly meant as an accusation to the “Western” world as much as to Russian policy, Eminescu’s confidence in the

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<sup>180</sup> See his article series “Bessarabia” (a “historical overview” of Bessarabian history until the XIX century) and “Tendencies of conquest” (a virulent critique of Russia’s “designs” in the Balkans) in: M. Eminescu, *Opere*, vol. X, Bucuresti, 1989. These articles have been republished as: Mihai Eminescu, *Bucovina și Basarabia: Studiu politico-istoric* [Bukovina and Bessarabia: A Political-Historical Study] (Bucharest: Publishing House of the High Military Academy, 1991). His articles relating to the 1878 Russian-Romanian controversy relating to Southern Bessarabia can be found in: Mihai Eminescu, *Basarabia* [Bessarabia] (Chisinau: Hyperion, 1991).

<sup>181</sup> Florin Rotaru, ed. *Basarabia Romana: Antologie* [Romanian Bessarabia: An Anthology] (Bucharest: Semne, 1996), p. 26



“civilizing mission” of the Romanian nation-state in the region remained unshaken (if anything, his xenophobic tendencies only reinforced it).

The placing of Eminescu’s work in the contemporary intellectual context is complicated by the eclecticism and fragmentary nature of his political views. Often invoked as one of the “founding fathers” of Romanian autochthonism, he in fact defies such neat categorizations. Eminescu derived from his “organic” understanding of the Romanian “ethnic essence” certain radical conclusions regarding the “individuality” of the “national soul.” Since the invocation of the “significant Other” is a necessary precondition for defining the collective self, it is logical that the political journalist insisted on the special danger that the Russian domination represented for Romanian ethnic survival. He characteristically contrasted the pragmatic and ultimately benevolent policy of the Habsburgs in Bukovina to the pernicious effects of the Russian administration in Bessarabia. Thus, he stated: “Russia is not content with taking a large and beautiful part of Moldavia’s hearth; it is not content with trespassing the natural boundary [*granița firească*] of the Romanian land;<sup>182</sup> it desires to also take the souls that dwell on this land and to digest [*să mistuiască*] a part of the Romanian people.”<sup>183</sup> This almost metaphysical peril had as its foundation much more “mundane” considerations of radical ethnocentrism interspersed with racist overtones that gave Eminescu’s nationalism its xenophobic and radical flavor. Claiming that the relative “weight” of the “Romanian element” in the overall scheme of humanity much surpassed that of the Russians, the writer did not refrain from claiming that “the nine million Romanians have assembled during the elapsed centuries more numerous and more beautiful treasures than the ninety million Russians will be able to ever assemble.”<sup>184</sup> Even the

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<sup>182</sup> i.e., the Dniester.

<sup>183</sup> Mihai Eminescu, *Bucovina și Basarabia: Studiu politico-istoric* [Bukovina and Bessarabia: A Political-Historical Study] (Bucharest: Publishing House of the High Military Academy, 1991), p. 142

<sup>184</sup> Eminescu, *Bucovina și Basarabia*, p. 143

cultural superiority of the Romanians was not enough, however, since the competition for Bessarabia was rooted in deeper characteristics of the immutable “national essence.” Eminescu thus introduced into his argument elements of an ethnic (and, by implication, “racial”) hierarchy that precluded any peaceful outcome of the conflict between Romania and the Russian Empire. The Russian-Romanian adversity was irreconcilable, in his view, because “every time the Russians will come into contact with us, they will have to feel the superiority of our [ethnic] individuality, to be offended by this feeling and to hate us more and more.”<sup>185</sup> This undiluted rhetoric of “ethnic warfare” could be linked not only to Eminescu’s individual reworking of radical ethnicity in the Romanian context, but also to the European-wide impact of the proliferating “Social Darwinism” that postulated the “struggle for existence” of discrete ethnic blocs as the norm of human relations in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>186</sup>

Eminescu’s radicalism has been often invoked as a deterrent for his unequivocal alignment along the fundamental liberal-conservative divide of late 19<sup>th</sup> century Romanian politics. This uneasiness was compounded by his constant criticism of the whole political establishment that virtually transformed him into an “outcast” among the contemporary intellectual-cum-political elite. Nevertheless, there are solid arguments for claiming that Eminescu (in his guise as a political journalist) was fundamentally a conservative thinker. His often disconcerting style and rhetorical “explosions,” as well as “the summary xenophobic determinism co-exist with certain pages in which his reflections are remarkably adequate to the object of discussion, while Eminescu’s variety of conservatism rediscovers the great topics of the European conservative

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<sup>185</sup> Eminescu, *Bucovina si Basarabia*, p. 143

<sup>186</sup> For an illuminating analysis of how different (but connected) nationalisms appropriated the racial implications of Social Darwinism for their own purposes, see Marius Turda, “‘The Magyars: A Ruling Race’: The Idea of National Superiority in Fin-de-Siecle Hungary,” in: *European Review of History*, (Vol. 10, Nr. 1, 2003), pp. 5-33

mental universe.”<sup>187</sup> While his references might range from de Maistre to Tocqueville (passing through the British tradition), especially in what concerned the political model of an ideal Romanian state, his anti-Semitic vituperations could be (and in fact were) easily re-appropriated by the 20<sup>th</sup> century radical Right.<sup>188</sup> Another dimension of Eminescu’s “anti-modern” and radical political agenda included a “regressive utopian” component that was visible not only on the level of his literary output, but also in his “false historicism.”<sup>189</sup> Other analyses have highlighted more straightforward motives linked to the conservative mindset, such as the author’s “traditionalism” and his (genuine) “historicism” that rested on the extolling of the “productive classes” of Romanian society and on the ideal continuity of a “national” Romanian elite that had been displaced in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century by a rapacious, cosmopolitan and essentially foreign ruling class.<sup>190</sup> This co-existence of strikingly different societal and mental models in Eminescu’s work could of course be explained away by the “immaturity” of the Romanian social and political tradition that uncritically borrowed from Western sources. However, Eminescu’s (incomplete) fusing of these elements was peculiar enough to warrant his analysis as an independent thinker. Applying this scheme to his journalistic works on “the Bessarabian question,” it is obvious that the arguments of “historical rights” and ethnic continuity could be mutually reinforcing. Though the author occasionally couched his demonstration in legalistic terms, the predominance of the language of “historical rights,” mingling an emphasis on historical continuity with a radical

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<sup>187</sup> Ioan Stanomir, *Reactiune si conservatorism: Eseu asupra imaginarului politic eminescian* [Reaction and Conservatism: An Essay on Eminescu’s Political Imaginary] (Bucharest: Nemira, 2000), pp. 31-32

<sup>188</sup> Stanomir, p. 32

<sup>189</sup> On Eminescu’s utopianism, a piece that transgresses the almost ritual invocations of his “cult for the past” and attempts a comprehensive analysis is Sorin Antohi, “Utopismul lui Eminescu” [Eminescu’s Utopianism], in: Sorin Antohi, *Civitas imaginalis: Istorie și utopie în cultura română* [Civitas imaginalis : History and Utopia in Romanian Culture] (Iasi: POLIROM, 1999), pp.

<sup>190</sup> For this kind of argument, see Mihai Dorin, *Civilizația românilor în viziunea lui Eminescu* [The Romanians’ Civilization in Eminescu’s View] (Bucharest: Publishing House of the Romanian Cultural Foundation, 1998), esp. pp. 26, 40

interpretation of “organic” ethnicity, remained unchallenged.<sup>191</sup> Eminescu’s reception by later nationalist writers and activists is no less important than his own contribution. Despite the influence that his work exercised on such early 20<sup>th</sup> century thinkers as Constantin Radulescu-Motru, Eminescu’s credentials as a nationalist were not taken for granted in the interwar period.<sup>192</sup> The reassessment of the writer’s intellectual legacy by the interwar generation of “revolutionary traditionalists” (above all by the young Mircea Eliade) invested Eminescu’s xenophobic nationalism with a centrality that it did not enjoy within the late 19<sup>th</sup> century national narrative. The “Bessarabian question” was but one of the instances of its manifestation. However, Eminescu was the first author to construct a systematic argument for Bessarabia’s “symbolic inclusion” into the national canon. The centrality of the Bessarabian factor, as well as the autochthonist motives pervading most of his nationalist pronouncements, allow the identification of a specific variant of “integral nationalism” in Eminescu’s political journalism. Even if indebted to his “Junimist” mentors, his vision of the “national organism” deserves a separate place within the late 19<sup>th</sup> century picture of Romanian images of the nation.

The emphasis on culture and tradition as the main repository of nationality and the reluctance to accept the economic and political consequences of modernization were especially prominent among the conservative-traditionalist elements grouped around Nicolae Iorga, who emerged as the main authority on the “Bessarabian question” in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Iorga’s overbearing personality and his centrality within the early 20<sup>th</sup> century debates on Romanian development are not my concern here. In later chapters, I discuss some of his main contributions to the articulation

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<sup>191</sup> An uncritical review of Eminescu’s polemics on the “Bessarabian question” (providing valuable inter-textual information) is in: D. Vatamaniuc, *Publicistica lui Eminescu (1877-1883, 1888-1889)* [Eminescu’s Political Journalism, 1877-1883, 1888-1889] (Bucharest: Minerva, 1996), pp. 147-159

<sup>192</sup> Thus, the author of a comprehensive survey of “Eminescu’s nationalism,” constructed as an inventory of themes and recurrent motives of his vision of the nation, still had to struggle with the “ignorance” of his contemporaries in this regard: D. Murărașu, *Naționalismul lui Eminescu* [Eminescu’s Nationalism] (Bucharest: Pacifica, 1994) (a reprint of the 1938 edition).

of a Romanian national perspective on Bessarabia. I will only present a brief overview of his nationalist position and his specific view of the Bessarabian region here. As one of the first students of Iorga's contributions to the national discourse noted, "nationalism, for Iorga, was a distinctive consciousness and sympathy, a completely different way of understanding and judging, and not simply an adjunct to any particular type of political ideology (thus, he maintained that one could not be a nationalistic "conservative" or a "liberal" nationalist...)." <sup>193</sup>

Besides the "persistent factors" of "language, soil, race, and ideas," Iorga held that the Romanian "national spirit... was fundamentally a combination of past political events, tradition, and above all else culture." <sup>194</sup> The notion of "culture," indeed central to the historian's concept of the nation, was embodied not so much in the artificial and "corrupted" high culture imported by the 1848 generation from false Western models, but in the organic heritage of folk culture preserved above all by the peasantry. Iorga's brand of conservative and traditionalist peasantism loosely synthesized in the doctrine of "samanatorism" emphasized not so much the material impact of modernity as its deleterious influence on the national essence. The peasantry, extolled in Iorga's political writings, was first of all a moral entity on which the construction of a viable Romanian nation-state could only be based. <sup>195</sup>

In a sense, Iorga might seem as the exact opposite to the position of Eminescu in the Romanian intellectual establishment and national discourse. Both his political preferences and his institutional impact seem to invalidate any meaningful comparison with Eminescu as a "practitioner" of the national narrative. Nevertheless, their writings on the Bessarabian "question"

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<sup>193</sup> William O. Oldson, "Nicolae Iorga: The Romanian Nationalist as Historian," in: *East European Quarterly* (Vol. VI, Nr. 14, Jan. 1973), pp. 473-486, here p. 475.

<sup>194</sup> William O. Oldson, p. 476

<sup>195</sup> For a detailed biography of Nicolae Iorga focusing on his nationalist politics, see Nicholas M. Nagy-Talavera, *Nicolae Iorga: A Biography* (Iasi: Center for Romanian Studies, 1998). An interesting analysis of the wider implications of Iorga's nationalism in: Constantin Iordachi, "Nicolae Iorga and the Paradigm of Cultural Nationalism," in: *Balkanistica*, Special Millennial Issue, (Missouri), Vol. 13, 2000, Nr. 1, pp. 167-174.

exhibit striking similarities that are worth examining. Iorga's extensive historical erudition and professional training invested his works on Bessarabia with an aura of scholarly prestige that consecrated them as the most "authoritative" response to the contemporary Russian works that sought to legitimize Bessarabia's inclusion within the Russian empire-building project. In these works and especially in his various articles scattered through the journals he edited or contributed to- *Sămănătorul* (The Sewer) and *Neamul Românesc* (The Romanian Nation), he elaborated a picture of Bessarabia that owed as much to his political agenda and to his imagination as to the actual data that he collected as a scholar or as an occasional traveler through the region (his travel notes, mingling his personal impressions and historically inspired musings, can be found in the collection of his works on Bessarabia subsumed under the label *Neamul Românesc în Basarabia*).<sup>196</sup> His visions of the region are replete with exalted images of the local peasantry as the bearers of the "national essence" and the only "bulwark" against the "Russifying tendencies" of the Russian autocratic state. One of his characteristic passages (among a plethora of others), amounting to a passionate claim for Bessarabia's integration into the national Romanian space, reads as follows:

In this *gubernia*, that stretches from the Prut to the Dniester, rivers sung in our folk songs [*doinele*], from the fortress of Hotin, where the stones are... only connected through the best of our blood, which, having dried up centuries ago, became solid as bronze, to the mother-Danube; in this broad, fertile, bright *gubernia*, there are towns [*târguri*] of Jews and Russians and Bulgarians and Old Believers [*lipoveni*] and Greeks and Germans and so many other foreign peoples. But all these towns are nothing, in beauty, in value, in labor and in hard-striving and tormented antiquity, compared to the many hundreds of white villages, which blossom on every plain, on every golden stubble field, on every green pasture, on every cornfield burnt by drought, on every orchard full of crop. Those who live in these villages are tall, handsome, tender-faced and sweet-tongued people, [they are] people full of charity and compassion for every misfortune, full of feeling for every suffering, obeying the state power that they deem sent by God to test His chosen ones... Those people are Romanians...<sup>197</sup>

<sup>196</sup> Nicolae Iorga. *Neamul românesc în Basarabia* [The Romanian Nation in Bessarabia]. 2 vols. (Bucharest: Publishing House of the Romanian Cultural Foundation, 1995).

<sup>197</sup> Florin Rotaru, ed. *Basarabia Romana: Antologie* [Romanian Bessarabia: An Anthology] (Bucharest: Semne, 1996), p. 28

Iorga even implies that the Bessarabian Romanians are “truer” to their essence than the inhabitants of the “Old Kingdom” due to the pristine conditions of their everyday life and to the “Russian patriarchalism” that left few traces on the Bessarabian village. He figured as a prominent advocate of “cultural activism” and of an increase in the Romanian public’s awareness of the “Bessarabian problem,” but did not explicitly insist on an “irredentist” agenda prior to World War I.<sup>198</sup> His ambiguous role as the embodiment of “official nationalism” made him vulnerable to attacks both from the left (in his polemics with Stere) and from the right (in the scathing critique that his position was subjected to in the writings of Radulescu Motru).<sup>199</sup> Iorga’s stance on Bessarabia is also important for two additional reasons. First, a comparison of his image of Bessarabia with the Russian works of the same period proves the extent to which similar rhetorical devices were used in both cases (obviously, with opposite goals and “valorizations” of the argument). The picture he draws of the Russian Empire also deserves particular attention, since it exhibits all the contradictions that a definition of “empire” presupposed (military strength vs. inherent weakness, claims to civilize vs. “backwardness” and arbitrariness, the vastness of the “material” space vs. the “spiritual imprisonment” of its subjects etc.). Second, Iorga figured prominently in the manifestations meant to construct a Romanian alternative to the official Russian “celebration narrative” of 1912 and was one of the few Romanian public personalities that attempted explicitly to refute the Russian official views crystallized on this occasion. Thus, alongside Eminescu’s openly polemical pronouncements, Iorga’s writings offer a “foundational narrative” that both other writers from the “Old Kingdom” and the Bessarabian-born émigrés had to take into account while imagining their own “variations” on the theme of Romanian national discourse on Bessarabia.

<sup>198</sup> This did not mean that his activity as president of the League for the Cultural Unity of All Romanians did not indirectly imply such an agenda.

<sup>199</sup> Constantin Radulescu Motru, *Scriseri politice* [Political Writings]. (Bucuresti: Nemira, 1998).

This sketchy presentation aimed at placing the debate on Bessarabia discussed in the following chapters within the wider context of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century Romanian national narrative. The complex dynamics involving Western models, local responses and competing symbolic geographies of the imagined nation left their mark on the rhetorical contest over Bessarabia. Even if emerging at certain points of high symbolic tension (and more systematically in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century), the “marginal” discourse on the Russian-controlled territory followed the same rules and encountered the same dilemmas as the more “central” components of Romania’s troubled and uneven nation-building efforts before World War I.



## **Chapter II. Frontiers, Geopolitics and the Spatial Limits of Modernity through the Lens of 19<sup>th</sup> and Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century Romanian and Russian Intellectuals**

One must constantly and staunchly remember, that the introduction of a mutual opposition and antagonism between the Slavs and the Germans, or between the Turanians and the Aryans does not provide a true solution... There is one and only one true opposition and antagonism: the Romano-Germanic peoples- and all the other peoples of the world, Europe and Mankind.  
Nikolai S. Trubetskoi, *Europe and Mankind*, 1920

History's meridian is, thus, again moving towards the East, and we find ourselves exactly at the critical point, through which this meridian will surely pass very soon. (...)  
The Romanians have again found themselves [in a position] between Asia and Europe. [1914].  
Simion Mehedinti, *Complete Works*, Bucharest, 1943, p. 98

### ***1. Introduction***

In our age of interdisciplinary investigation and mutually reinforcing claims to pre-eminence, in this respect, of every discipline in the humanities and social sciences (or at least of those aspiring to universal relevance), a special place belongs to the manifold and varied interactions between history and (political) geography. No other branch of human knowledge can boast a longer and more fruitful tradition of collaboration, occasional conflict and profound mutual influence. These two subjects of human inquiry, which developed, to a significant extent, simultaneously and whose insights were beneficial for the practitioners of the other discipline in most cases, respond to the long-standing desire to understand the situation of the human beings in time and in space and to acknowledge the influence that our situated-ness in the natural and social environment exerted upon the birth and development of human society. While geography, at least starting from the XIX century, was consciously striving towards a “natural science” status and, indeed, based its claim to scientific legitimacy upon the application of quantitative and “objective” methods, history has always been more insecure about its validity as a “science” and, after a brief “positivist” infatuation with rigorous and quasi-“experimental” observations of the past, has apparently reconciled itself to an intermediate status between the “social sciences” and

the “humanities.” The present trajectory of the two disciplines, though intersecting at times and witnessing the continuous existence of “intermediary” intellectual fields (such as “political” or “historical” geography), nevertheless tends towards a further delimitation and institutionalization of their scholarly domains. In this chapter, I will attempt to explore a small fraction of the “intellectual legacy” of a previous epoch, when the two disciplines not only enriched one another through fruitful exchanges, but were aimed at achieving a “total science” of the human experience of space. Though ultimately a complex, sometimes unlikely and often hazardous amalgamation of political, geographical and historical insights and fantasies, this tradition, inaugurated by the Germans Alexander von Humboldt and Carl Ritter, consolidated by their fellow-countryman Friedrich Ratzel and further developed (and deformed) by their conscious and less conscious disciples throughout Europe, has undoubtedly left its mark on the thinking about the spatial dimension of humanity’s existence.

My aim in this case is not to discuss the relevance and the implications of the tortuous intellectual history of the trend variously (and at different times in different countries) known as *Anthropogeographie*, “geopolitics” or “human geography.” This is a task much too ambitious even for an acknowledged specialist of the field and, moreover, a rather unrewarding endeavor, at best, since it is heavily loaded with political overtones and retrospective value judgments. Neither can my goal be to “rehabilitate” or embellish the tradition of the “old [German] geopolitical school”, whose association with the worst experience of Nazism, though partially undeniable, has been heavily nuanced and qualified by recent scholarship. One of the most interesting attempts in this sense was undertaken by Mark Bassin, a geographer turned intellectual historian who has dealt with the complicated history of his discipline both in the German and East European intellectual traditions. Rather, my starting point could be one of Bassin’s assertions, namely that “nowhere and at no time has the discipline [geography] been divorced from the pressures and

concerns of the broader political and economic milieu in which it operated.”<sup>200</sup> I will focus mostly on two aspects of the Russian and Romanian late-XIX and early-XX century intellectual tradition that could be subsumed under the conventional labels of “environmentalism” and “frontier debates.” While occasional reference will be made to later contributions in a wider European context (e.g., the work of Karl Haushofer<sup>201</sup>), my attention will mostly be devoted to the discussion of the spatial consciousness and the probing of “limits” of the Russian and, respectively, Romanian “places of development” (to freely borrow from one of the classical representatives of the “Eurasian” tradition, Petr Savitskii). A second major argument of this essay is that most representatives of this tradition, in both countries, used the spatial metaphor and geographical terms as a substitute for the concept of “modernity.” In other words, while advocating the peculiarity of their geographical environment and the special character of their geographical position, they in fact attempted to validate the belonging (or exclusion) of their “homelands” from the sphere of “modernity” as such. Geographical metaphors served to suggest their mental self-positioning in the modern world or outside it more than any actual preoccupation for a contribution to “science.” Also, I try to show that even the most ardent critics of “modernity” (such as the “Eurasians,” who proposed a scathing, wholesale and often

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<sup>200</sup> Mark Bassin, “Geographical Determinism in Fin-de-Siecle Marxism: Georgii Plekhanov and the Environmental Basis of Russian History,” in: *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, Vol. 82, Nr. 1, 1992, p. 3-22, here p. 16

<sup>201</sup> In his seminal and controversial work on “Frontiers in Their Geographical and Political Sense” (1927), Haushofer introduces a very interesting discussion of the territory figuring in Romanian “geopolitical writings” as the quintessential “frontier to the East”, namely Bessarabia. Haushofer sees this region as the “Mesopotamia of the Innereuropa” and as a “Gordian knot” of geopolitical controversy. Predictably, he views its inclusion into Romania in a negative light, since the revision of the post-World War I settlement was the ultimate aim of his work. However, he argues his point in strictly “neutral” geopolitical terms while discussing the relevance of waterways as frontiers. Ultimately, Dniester is for him no less an artificial frontier than the Rhine in the German case and he pleads for the differentiation of “river-uniting” and “river-dividing” environments. Bessarabia is squarely in the first category and, consequently, its isolation from the “Russian bank” could not be but artificial and temporary. See his argument in Karl Haushofer, “Granitsy v ih geograficheskom i politicheskom znachenii” [Frontiers in Their Geographical and Political Sense]. In: K. Korolev (ed.). *Klassika Geopolitiki. XX vek* [Classical Works of Geopolitics. 20<sup>th</sup> Century] (Moscow: AST, 2003), Vol. II, pp. 396-398. Significantly, this region is seen as “Europe’s frontier along waterways.”

idiosyncratic critique of “European civilization”) were very much embedded in traditional “Western” intellectual discourses and practices. While consistent and clear in their political agenda, they were both original and heavily indebted to their Russian and European predecessors, whose conclusions they creatively appropriated and from which they derived the ultimate logical consequences.

## ***2. The European context: geography, nation and empire***

The thematic focus of this chapter presupposes the clarification of the European *Zeitgeist* that determined (or at least influenced) the articulation of the environmentalist topics and “frontier debates” in the two cases discussed here. In this sense, the last decades of the XIX and the first years of the XX century had a truly formative impact both on the central loci of geographical thought and theorizing (situated in Western Europe and, most emphatically, in France and Germany) and the peripheral traditions represented, in this instance, by the Russian and Romanian appropriations of these trends. Even if one acknowledges the derivative character of the Eastern European “spatial debates,” this does not deprive them of creativity and of peculiarities inherent in the local context. However, the French and German examples should be invoked as implicit models that framed the terms of the discursive construction of space and provided the link between geography’s claims to scientific status and the power politics of nationalism and imperialism.

The “connection... between the rapid development of geography as a discipline, particularly after 1870, and the political and intellectual climate of aggressive imperial expansion which

developed within Europe during the later 1800s,”<sup>202</sup> appears to be more direct, but also much more complex than traditionally viewed by the sociology and history of science. It was more direct in the sense that the emergence of geography (and, later, geopolitics) was not only linked to, but literally constituted by the concerns and interests of European overseas expansion. Geographers were ardent advocates of imperial designs and members of “colonial” lobbies or societies both in France and Germany. In another sense, however, the relationship between the discipline and its context was far from unambiguous. On the one hand, the dynamics of power and knowledge never operated on a purely instrumental level, but required a constant process of negotiation and mutual shaping that produced at times unlikely combinations. On the other hand, the nature of imperialism and geography, the two ostensible “partners” in this dialogue, was itself highly contested and unstable. One should especially emphasize this point due to the persistence of certain intellectual stereotypes that reify the differences (and the internal coherence) of a purported “French” and “German” geographical tradition. The French case is constructed as a quintessential model of “national geography” that was amenable to the elaboration of an image of a homogeneous, naturally determined, but ultimately defensive and non-aggressive “benign” geopolitical vision. The emblematic figure of this tendency (called “human geography,” as opposed to the German geopolitics) is Paul Vidal de la Blache, who had an undeniable impact on early XX century Eastern European (including Romanian) spatial thought. While the liberal leanings of this strand in French geography clearly differentiate it from the more conservative and organic inclinations of its German counterparts, its involvement in French imperialist and colonial designs has been recently reevaluated.<sup>203</sup> The multiform and protean character of French

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<sup>202</sup> Michael J. Heffernan, “The Science of Empire: The French Geographical Movement and the Forms of French Imperialism, 1870-1920,” in: Anne Godlewska and Neil Smith, eds. *Geography and Empire* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1994), pp. 92-93

<sup>203</sup> Michael J. Heffernan, p. 103

and German imperialism and their entanglement with the geographic sphere point to two important conceptual points.

First, the opposition between “nationally-oriented” and “imperialy-oriented” geographies seems not only problematic, but counterproductive. In France’s case, this is amply illustrated by Heffernan’s discussion of the five varieties or “ideal-types” of the geography-empire connection (that he subsumes under the labels of “utopian,” “cultural,” “economic,” “opportunistic” and “anti-imperialism”).<sup>204</sup> In the German case, the fallacy of such an opposition is even more obvious both on the general level and in some instances of prominent intellectual figures, such as that of the “father of anthropogeography,” Friedrich Ratzel. Aside from the close association, in Germany, of the theme of overseas expansion with the European-centered topic of the German *Lebensraum* (customarily interpreted through a “national,” if not less expansionist, lens), geography’s involvement in imperial projects was expressed through a “use and misuse of geographical facts- of spaces and boundaries, distance and contiguity- to legitimate aggressive imperial strategies.”<sup>205</sup> Similarly, Ratzel can be understood as the foremost representative of a “nationalist geography” that imagined “the state as detached from civil society, an authority above society.”<sup>206</sup> For our purposes, it is much more relevant that Ratzel’s vision had an unmistakably spatial character. The description of his political geography as “largely determinist, assum[ing] the state’s direct dependence on the ‘soil,’ and employ[ing] an organismic perspective which accentuated the dependence of state power on spatial ‘size’”<sup>207</sup> is very precise and suggests the importance of all kinds of “frontiers” (not only political, but also natural and biological) in his

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<sup>204</sup> Michael J. Heffernan, p. 100

<sup>205</sup> Gerhard Sandner and Mechthild Roessler, “Geography and Empire in Germany, 1871-1945,” in: Anne Godlewska and Neil Smith, eds. *Geography and Empire* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1994), p. 115

<sup>206</sup> Sandner and Roessler, p. 117

<sup>207</sup> Sandner and Roessler, p. 117

reconstruction of the Earth's surface.<sup>208</sup> According to Mark Bassin's suggestion, Ratzel's determinism has a two-sided character, emphasizing, on the one hand, "the post-Darwinian scientific materialism adapted to 'the laws of the territorial growth of states,'"<sup>209</sup> and, on the other hand, the factor of "physical space (and not... ethnic or racial affinity) as a basis for national unity."<sup>210</sup> The importance of territory and physical environment is, of course, the distinctive feature of future geopolitical currents that distance them from similarly deterministic racialist or ethnic doctrines. Territory and space thus gradually emerged as potentially alternative (but also complementary) ways of imagining a polity's inclusion into the sphere of modernity (even if this inclusion presupposes a rejection of linear progress and an obsessive insistence on organic growth). Ratzel's relevance for the Russian and Romanian cases is difficult to overstate. Whereas in the Russian context these European models arrived much earlier and structured an emerging discourse that could boast of some native contributions (e.g., Soloviev's "environmental determinism" discussed below), the borrowings were much more direct in the emerging Romanian geographic discipline.

Second, the association of environmental currents and proto-geopolitical concerns with the conservative or liberal "establishment" of the Western powers is equally misleading. In fact, geographically-inspired theories of state and social change were often enunciated and employed to further reformist or even revolutionary designs. Recent analyses have proven the inadequacy of either reducing the variety of geographic determinism to a "rightist" tradition of conservative inspiration or of one-sidedly criticizing the "imperialist" engagements of XIX-century geographers without assessing the subversive potential of geographical factors. In the already

<sup>208</sup> This is very obvious, for example, in his later work, *Völkerkunde [Anthropogeographie]* [Russian translation], in: K. Korolev, (ed.) *Klassika geopolitiki. XIX vek. [Classical Works of Geopolitics. 19<sup>th</sup> Century]* (Moscow: AST, 2003), Vol. I, pp. 53-182, esp. pp. 53-72 and 171-182.

<sup>209</sup> Sandner and Roessler, p. 117. Cited from: M. Bassin, "Imperialism and the nation-state," p. 117-118.

<sup>210</sup> Sandner and Roessler, p. 117-118.

mentioned work on the French geographical movement, Michael J. Heffernan discusses the utopian “imperialist” projects of several prominent geographers inspired by Saint-Simonian plans for a “union” of the European and Asiatic civilizations.<sup>211</sup> The position of the most prominent “anti-imperialist” French geographer of the late XIX century, Elysée Reclus, who remained a self-styled revolutionary throughout his life, is quite revealing in this respect. Apparently, Reclus never completely abandoned his belief in the utopian designs of the Saint-Simonians, which accounted for his ambiguity towards the French imperial experience.<sup>212</sup> In a similar vein, it has been argued that “geographers and others have, at one time or another, sought to mobilize geographical knowledge for more or less radical political purposes.”<sup>213</sup> Aside from invoking Reclus’ example again (in a convincing account of the connection he perceived between the role of geography and anarchistic political views), the authors provide a valuable connection to the Russian “link” between a geographical awareness of space and climate and radical politics. This link is provided by the person of Peter Kropotkin, a famous Russian anarchist and Reclus’ friend, who was a one-time candidate for secretary of the Imperial Russian Geographic Society and who was “swept into anarchism” by “the geography of the harsh northern reaches [of Russia].”<sup>214</sup> Another example directly relevant to the Russian case concerns the purported identification of a Russian tradition of “geosociology” that involved an ideologically unsustainable opposition between “progressive” geographic sociology and “conservative-reactionary” geopolitics. The value of such an idiosyncratic reconstruction resides in the restitution of the contested nature and multiple variations of the construction of space and environmental determinism in the Russian

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<sup>211</sup> Michael J. Heffernan, p. 100-102

<sup>212</sup> Michael J. Heffernan, p. 112

<sup>213</sup> David N. Livingstone and Charles W. J. Withers, “On Geography and Revolution,” in: David N. Livingstone and Charles W. J. Withers, eds. *Geography and Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), p. 10

<sup>214</sup> David N. Livingstone and Charles W. J. Withers, “On Geography and Revolution,” in: David N. Livingstone and Charles W. J. Withers, eds. *Geography and Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), p. 10-11.



context.<sup>215</sup> These nuances are lacking in many critical discussions of XIX-century geography undertaken from a leftist position. Such authors rightly emphasize the “epistemological rupture” marked by the neo-Lamarckian (or post-Darwinian) context of the “biologization of space,” but overstate the instrumental relationship between power and knowledge (with the subordination of the latter to the former). In conclusion, one could state that “geographic determinism” is not, by any means, an essentially conservative or “proto-geopolitical” doctrine. On the contrary, it is better to speak about a diffuse *Weltanschauung* that could be incorporated in different (even opposed) political constructions. This will, I hope, become even clearer from the following discussion of the Russian and Romanian cases.

### 3. *The Russian case*

#### a. *Are the Russian and Romanian cases comparable?*

Once the connection between the emergence of modern geography and the imperial phenomenon is admitted, the relevance of a problematic comparison between the space consciousness of a multiethnic empire and of an emerging nation-state remains dubious, at best. Before proceeding to the discussion of the two cases as such, a brief justification of the parallel study of the Russian and Romanian contexts is necessary. The factors that prompted the comparative nature of my investigation include: a) the existence of important discursive similarities that allow the identification of a “discursive field” rooted in the common European (mainly German) models that the two peripheral traditions emulated and reworked; b) the

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<sup>215</sup> M. G. Fedorov, *Russkaia progressivnaia mysl' XIX v. ot geograficheskogo determinizma k istoricheskomu materializmu* [Russian 19<sup>th</sup> Century Progressive Thought from Geographical Determinism to Historical Materialism] (Novosibirsk: 1972), esp. pp. 8-68

significance of the inclusion/exclusion of both political entities into/from the sphere of modernity. The spatially-oriented approaches used a metonymic technique which resulted in a peculiarly geographic transfer of the locus of modernity to “Europe.” The elements of environmental determinism present in both instances led, however, to a constant tension between a geographical and a “cultural” or civilization-oriented perspective on modernity; c) the presence of common thematic clusters and key *topoi* that structured the (spatial) opposition between civilization and barbarism (e.g., the importance of the pattern of population movements and colonization or, connected to this, the influence of the steppe environment and nomadism upon “national character”); d) the “Bessarabian problem” and the role of this contested borderland for the mutual image and the appropriation of space (naturally, much more important in the Romanian case); e) the combination of specifically geographical factors with historical and ethnographic arguments that would ultimately lead to the elaboration of a synthetic science of the “national” or “imperial” space in its entirety. The presence of these parallels does not invalidate the fundamental differences of the imperial and national visions of space (embodied in the opposite signs ascribed to the same spatial phenomena). However, it does highlight the interdependence of imperial and national projects of state-building and their immersion in a *Zeitgeist* that determined the possibility of the most unlikely comparisons.

The problem of “frontiers” had a much longer and richer tradition in the Russian case than it had in the Romanian one. This can, of course, be explained by the invocation of historical circumstances, which led to the temporal gap and obvious lack of substance of any comparison between the two cases before the early XX century. While the Russian state became an empire as early as the mid-XVI century (in fact) and was officially acknowledged as such upon Peter’s proclamation as emperor in 1721, the Romanian national state only fully emerged on the political scene in the second half of the XIX century. Logically enough, the agendas of these two polities

contrasted starkly, not only in what concerned the disputed region of Bessarabia, but also with regard to the legitimizing criteria of their existence. Nevertheless, the discursive field that was operating in both cases was strikingly similar, as I will attempt to show later. The most important contentious aspect of what could be called “frontier debates” in both cases centered upon their relationship to “Europe” and “Asia” and upon the identification of the appropriate geographical frontier between the two “spaces.” What was at stake was their inclusion into “modernity” and their claim to represent “civilization.” Steeped in this Enlightenment-inspired stance and heavily diluted by Romantic elements, this general framework provided the starting point and the implicit reference for all the “frontier debates” raging in the intellectual circles of the Russian Empire and the Romanian Kingdom in the early XX century.

*b. The early Russian context*

The interest in the problem of frontiers as such could only emerge in a polity that perceived itself as embarking on the path of modern development. In the Muscovite period, the “scholastic” nature of geographical divisions derived from a general lack of interest in the symbolic sphere of space, save for the theologically inspired stance of Russia as the “Third Rome.” Even this doctrine, however, should be understood primarily in terms of eschatological and millenarian dispositions prevailing in an isolated Muscovite polity of the late XV and early XVI centuries. Aside from the minimal impact on practical state policy, this doctrine hardly postulated any element of specifically spatial awareness and certainly had no relevance outside of the religious sphere. The later nationalist re-workings of this thesis (and its Western misperception in a post-Petrine epoch much more prone to emphasize the motive of Russian expansionism) contributed to the elevation of this marginal stance to a prominence that it hardly deserved. The absence of any “intellectual curiosity” that was also noted by researches on the field of ethnography and

natural history<sup>216</sup> can be explained by the connection between the relevance of symbolic frontiers (and categories) and the introduction of the concept of “common good” and the related notion of “utility,” which appeared in the Russian context only in the early XVIII century. Nevertheless, some antecedents of a broader geographical imagination can be identified even before Peter’s reforms. In a recent and fascinating analysis,<sup>217</sup> it has been argued that in early Romanov Russia spatial preoccupations were rather salient. Even while pertaining to land property relations or to similar practical matters, the pre-Petrine cartographic tradition turned out to be both larger and more variegated than earlier received wisdom had it. The incipient elements of a geographic consciousness can thus be traced to the second half of the XVII century at least. Such novel interpretations may serve to further refine the notion of a total rupture inaugurated in the early XVIII century.

The critical assessment of the early XVIII century turning point does not reduce its fundamental importance. Though one could, perhaps, dispute the blunt assertion that “like Spain or England, the Netherlands or Portugal, on the largest scale Russia as well could be divided into two major components: on the one hand a homeland or metropolis that belonged within European civilization, and, on the other, a vast, but foreign, extra-European colonial periphery,”<sup>218</sup> this dichotomy undoubtedly persisted in the minds of the vast majority of educated Russians throughout the XVIII and most of the XIX century. Even the Slavophiles, traditionally perceived as the precursors and predecessors of all later ideologies that could be loosely called “nationalist” or anti-European in the Russian intellectual realm, while insisting upon the purported social, economic and political peculiarities of Russia that distinguished it from the West, nevertheless

<sup>216</sup> Y. Slezkine, „Naturalists versus Nations: Eighteenth-Century Russian Scholars Confront Ethnic Diversity”, in: *Representations*, 1994, Vol. 47, pp. 170-195

<sup>217</sup> Valerie A. Kivelson, *Cartographies of Tsardom: The Land and Its Meanings in Seventeenth-Century Russia* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2006).

<sup>218</sup> Mark Bassin, “Russia between Europe and Asia: The Ideological Construction of Geographical Space,” in: *Slavic Review* (Vol. 50, Nr.1), Spring 1991, p. 5

hardly gave any notice to the geographical factor and did not devote any attention to the problem of “frontiers” or “divisions” between Europe and Asia. Their arguments were focused on demonstrating the non-Western character of Russian society and the Russian people’s ethos, but they hardly envisaged the existence of a separate “geographical world” that could define Russia’s unique nature. A note of caution must be made here regarding the claims to “intellectual legacies” that the early-XX-century Russian intellectuals (including the “Eurasians”) advanced in order to increase their legitimacy as true representatives of the Russian “intellectual tradition.” Thus, P. Savitskii, in a special article describing the main tenets of the “Eurasian” doctrine, asserts that “the Eurasians are continuing, with regard to a whole array of ideas, a strong tradition of Russian philosophical and historical thought. Most closely, this tradition can be directly linked to the 1830s and 1840s, when the Slavophiles began their activity.”<sup>219</sup> However, the most prominent ideologue of the “geographical dimension” of this movement recognized the importance of the XX-century context for the emergence of this intellectual trend. He, moreover, dismissed Slavophilism as a “provincial and home-grown” current and saw much more grandiose perspectives for the new doctrine, which represented “a holistic [tselostnoe] creative-conservative [okhranitel’noe] *Weltanschauung*” (mirosozertsanie).<sup>220</sup> Generally, Eurasianism can be regarded as a two-pronged ideology, derived, on the one hand, from certain Russian pre-war meditations upon the relative importance of Europe and Asia for the Empire of the tsars and, on the other hand, from the peculiar context of post-World War I Europe and the Russian emigration, which provided for the anti-colonial impetus and the “trans-valuation of values” effected by the “Eurasians.” Before analyzing these aspects more fully in the case of the Eurasians, a

<sup>219</sup> P. Savitskii, *Evraziistvo* [Eurasianism], in: K. Korolev (ed.) *Klassika Geopolitiki. XX vek* [Classical Works of Geopolitics. 20<sup>th</sup> Century] (Moscow: AST, 2003), Vol. II, p. 659

<sup>220</sup> P. Savitskii, *Evraziistvo* [Eurasianism], in: K. Korolev (ed.) *Klassika Geopolitiki. XX vek* [Classical Works of Geopolitics. 20<sup>th</sup> Century] (Moscow: AST, 2003), Vol. II, p. 660 (footnote).

presentation of the theories advanced by their ideological predecessors in Russia in the last decades of the XIX century will be proposed.

*c. From the “curse of open spaces” to a separate geographical world: Soloviev, Danilevskii and the instrumental character of environmental determinism*

The intellectual “appropriation,” as it were, of the “frontier” and “environmental” issues in the Russian Empire before World War I can be grouped conventionally, into three main tendencies. The earliest coherent theory that dealt with the problem of the significance of “open spaces” and frontiers in Russian history belongs to the historian Sergei Soloviev and was analyzed by M. Bassin through a fruitful comparison of Soloviev’s views with the “frontier” hypothesis of Frederick Jackson Turner.<sup>221</sup> The second group of “frontier” and geographical-oriented views, in connection with Russia’s position towards Europe and the “West,” can be discerned in the major works of N. Danilevskii and V. Lamanskii, who can be conventionally united under the label of “Pan-slavists” or “neo-Slavophiles.”<sup>222</sup> Finally, a third group of intellectual preoccupations connected with Russia’s “frontiers” in Asia and the role of the Empire in that part of the world emerged during the early years of the reign of Nicholas II and was directly linked to the interest of the young emperor in Russia’s “destiny” as a Far Eastern power. This “group” was far less coherent and homogeneous in their pronouncements, but some of its representatives, such as E.E. Uhtomskii or S. Iu. Vitte, attempted to transcend the traditional view of Asia as a “secondary area” of Russian activity (for various and sometimes opposing reasons), while others saw Asia as an object of colonial expansion (Przhevalskii) or, in a more pessimistic vein, the source of a

<sup>221</sup> M. Bassin, “Turner, Soloviev and the Frontier Hypothesis: The Nationalist Signification of Open Spaces,” in: *Journal of Modern History*, No. 65, Sept. 1993, pp. 473-511

<sup>221</sup> M. Bassin, “Russia between Europe and Asia: The Ideological Construction of Geographical Space,” in: *Slavic Review* (Vol. 50, Nr.1), Spring 1991,” pp. 9-13

<sup>222</sup> D. Schimmelpenninck van der Oye, “Ideologii imperii v Rossii imperskogo perioda” [Ideologies of Empire during Russia’s Imperial Period], in: *Ab Imperio*,...

mortal danger to the existence of the Russian state (Kuropatkin).<sup>223</sup> While the author warns us of the dangers of ascribing a coherent ideology to state actions, when in fact conflicting views had their impact upon decision-making at the highest levels, what is of interest here are not the practical-political implications of these views, but the curious “genetic” succession that one can follow from the ideology of “vostochnichestvo” (“Orientalism”) espoused by some representatives of these latter groups and the views of the “Eurasians,” though the scale is, certainly, entirely different.

Soloviev’s brand of environmental determinism is connected, on the one hand, with the general European context of the second half of the XIX century and, on the other hand, with a specifically Russian tradition of a geographical impact on history writing that featured the prominent examples of scholars active earlier in the century (like N. I. Nadezhdin, M. P. Pogodin or T. N. Granovskii).<sup>224</sup> The common denominator of these intellectuals consisted in their nationalist agenda (especially prominent in the case of the first two) and in their aim at delineating a specifically Russian national narrative that would be simultaneously reconciled with the Russian experience of empire-building. The determining influence on Soloviev’s environmentalist views was exercised, however, by Carl Ritter’s works.<sup>225</sup> Soloviev also shared the widely spread organic metaphors that pervaded contemporary European scholarship. This biological analogy was predicated, in Soloviev’s case, on the optimistic belief in a notion of progress that was both unilinear and universal. It was hardly surprising that this vision should have its roots in his familiarity with the Hegelian scheme of world history, with significant

<sup>223</sup> M. Bassin, “Turner, Soloviev and the Frontier Hypothesis: The Nationalist Signification of Open Spaces,” in: *Journal of Modern History*, No. 65, Sept. 1993, p. 477

<sup>224</sup> N. G. Sukhova, *Karl Ritter i Rossiia* [Karl Ritter and Russia] (Leningrad, 1990), pp. 169-176

<sup>225</sup> N. G. Sukhova, *Karl Ritter i Rossiia* [Karl Ritter and Russia] (Leningrad, 1990), pp. 177-179; M. Bassin, “Turner, Soloviev and the Frontier Hypothesis: The Nationalist Signification of Open Spaces,” in: *Journal of Modern History*, No. 65, Sept. 1993, p. 483-484

additions provided by the contemporary works of Herbert Spencer and H. T. Buckle.<sup>226</sup> What was surprising was the use that Soloviev made of the “organic” metaphor in its application to the historical development of Russian society.

The fundamental problem confronting Soloviev concerned the explanation of the peculiarity of Russia’s social conditions while insisting upon its essentially European character. The historian’s basic assumption rested upon the presumed racial affinity between the Slavs (including the Russians) and the other Indo-European peoples inhabiting Europe, especially the Germans. This was also the major difference between Soloviev and later thinkers who sought to construct an autarchic picture of the Russian Empire. The tension between race and geography, which pointed in the same direction of differentiation from Europe for the Pan-Slavists and the Eurasians, led to a fundamental contradiction in Soloviev’s case. This contradiction derived from an unhappy accident of geography that diverted the Slavs’ migrations in the “wrong” directions in the earliest phases of their history. The Slavs were

part of the same great Aryan tribe, a tribe beloved by history, as are the other European peoples, both ancient and modern. Like them, [the Russians] possess an hereditary capacity for a powerful historical development; another mighty internal condition that determined its spiritual image, namely, Christianity, is also similar to the modern European peoples in their [case]; consequently, the internal conditions or means are equal, and we cannot presuppose any internal weakness and, therefore, backwardness; but, when we turn to external circumstances, we can see an extraordinary difference, a blatant unfavorable character of these conditions in our part [of Europe], which thoroughly explains the retardation of our development.<sup>227</sup>

Neither innate characteristics nor civilizational differences were thus relevant for Soloviev as factors that could account for Russia’s slow progress. Instead, in a thorough reversal of the Ritterian benign vision of nature as an *Erziehungsanstalt* for humanity, the environment became an “evil stepmother” that hindered the otherwise promising trajectory of the most advanced

<sup>226</sup> M. Bassin, “Turner, Soloviev and the Frontier Hypothesis: The Nationalist Signification of Open Spaces,” in: *Journal of Modern History*, No. 65, Sept. 1993, p. 482

<sup>227</sup> S. M. Soloviev. *Izbrannoe. Zapiski* [Selected Works. Personal Notes]. Moscow, 1983, pp. 52-53



European outpost in the Orient.<sup>228</sup> This “lack of favor” that nature bestowed on the Eastern Slavs was evident not only from their uninspired choice of the migration pattern, but also from the nature itself of the “Russian state region,” that, in Soloviev’s interpretation, coincided with the Eastern European plain. In another characteristic pronouncement, he argued: “History has pointed out, that the large dimensions of the Russian state region were a constant and powerful obstacle for the state’s and people’s welfare, that the spreading out of the sparse population throughout an enormous country deprived it of strength, narrowed its horizon, did not inspire a propensity for common action, reinforced the isolation of communal life and led to petty local interests, hampered the necessary rapidity of the state’s functions.”<sup>229</sup> Geography thus appeared as the paramount factor in stifling Russia’s intensive social development that would have allowed it to follow the “normal” path of the Western nations that Soloviev admired.

The “organic” nature of the Russian state region that was so fatefully shaped by the environment provided not only reasons for gloomy images, but also grounds to extol the potential for the state’s unity and cohesiveness. Soloviev, as a believer in progress, could not help to be optimistic about the future, despite the unfavorable premises outlined above. His environmental determinism was thus more qualified than it would seem at first sight, though he never abandoned its “negative” thrust. He admitted that, even if “the influence of the natural conditions of a country upon the character, customs and activity of the people that inhabits it is beyond any doubt,” the human factor had an active role expressed through a “fight against nature,” whose result depends on the ethnic qualities and cultural level of the community.<sup>230</sup> Moreover, the

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<sup>228</sup> For a more detailed analysis, see M. Bassin, “Turner, Soloviev and the Frontier Hypothesis: The Nationalist Signification of Open Spaces,” in: *Journal of Modern History*, No. 65, Sept. 1993, p. 492-493

<sup>229</sup> S. M. Soloviev, *Ob istoricheskom dvizhenii russkago narodonaseleniia* [On the Historical Movement of the Russian Population] (Moscow: 1867), p. 21

<sup>230</sup> S. M. Soloviev, *Ob istoricheskom dvizhenii russkago narodonaseleniia* [On the Historical Movement of the Russian Population] (Moscow: 1867), p. 22-23. In a similar vein, Soloviev overturned his earlier argument by emphasizing that a country’s vastness was, *by itself*, a favorable condition that could be pernicious only as long as

nature of the East European plain (its monotony and lack of any natural barriers within its expanse) allowed Soloviev to articulate the first clear version of a teleological relationship between the emergence of the Russian state and its natural environment. This region was ultimately *predestined* to become coterminous with the Russian state structure, since “however immense is this plain, however ethnically varied is, at first, its population, sooner or later [it] will become the region of one single state; hence, the enormous expanse of the Russian state region is clear, as are the monotony of its parts and the powerful connection between them.”<sup>231</sup> Despite Soloviev’s insistence on the negative impact of Russia’s spatial configuration on its history, the attention he gave to the importance of the region’s connected river systems and the “inevitability” of the Muscovite unifying role due to Moscow’s strategic position in its center point to the potential of interpreting the Russian political construction as objectively given from the start. There is little place left for contingency in the appearance of the Russian state. Geography may appear as a “stepmother,” but it also created the underlying conditions for Russia’s “organic” growth.

A final topic in Soloviev’s work that should be briefly discussed concerns the role of colonization and the steppe in Russian history. Soloviev appears as one of the first advocates of the thesis of Russia’s “organic” expansion to the East. This expansion, again, acquires an aura of inevitability derived from the necessity to “tame” the steppe. Far from opposing the Russian variant of “organic colonization” to European colonialism, Soloviev sees these two processes as complementary: “History has bequeathed to all European tribes to send out their settlements to other parts of the world, to spread Christianity and civilization [*grazhdanstvennost’*] there; the

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the space in question was not “civilized” or populous enough, i.e., until it could be changed by human activity. Soloviev, *Ibidem*, pp. 24-25

<sup>231</sup> S. M. Soloviev, *Istoriia Rossii s drevneishih vremen. Tom I* [The History of Russia from the Earliest Times. Volume I]. Moscow, 1959, pp. 60-61

Western European tribes [*plemenam*] were meant to fulfill this task by way of the sea, while the Eastern, Slavic tribe [did the same] by a land route.”<sup>232</sup> Russia’s civilizing mission was thus akin to that of its Western counterparts, which served Soloviev’s purpose of integrating the Russian Empire into the European “family.” The same dichotomy between barbarity and civilization underlies his squarely negative view of the steppe. For Soloviev, it represented “a sea far more dangerous, stormy and destructive [than the sea of water]; it was a sandy sea..., which continually sent out its inhabitants, the nomadic predators, who destroyed everything created by the labor of a sedentary European people [the Russians].”<sup>233</sup> This situation was again unfavorably compared to the advantages incurred by the kindred Germanic peoples who migrated in the flourishing regions of the former Roman Empire.<sup>234</sup> Russia’s “state region” was deprived of history and culture, both of which were only possible through the creative activity of the Russians that, in this respect, represented the forces of Europe which made those of Asia “retreat.”<sup>235</sup> To crown his argument, Soloviev emphasized his clear preference for the sedentary element within Russia’s social organization and dismissed as pernicious or useless the nomadic groups (like the Cossacks) who appeared as elements of social anarchy and disorder.<sup>236</sup> Thus, the steppe was the “quintessential Other” of the Russian polity, a hostile and dangerous “frontier” that, instead of fortifying national virtues, hampered the organic development of a European state. This motive of

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<sup>232</sup> S. M. Soloviev, *Istoriia Rossii s drevneishih vremen. Tom I* [The History of Russia from the Earliest Times. Volume I]. Moscow, 1959, p. 63. The notion of “tribe” denotes here an ethnic community.

<sup>233</sup> S. M. Soloviev, *Ob istoricheskoi dvizhenii russkogo narodonaseleniia* [On the Historical Movement of the Russian Population] (Moscow: 1867), p. 5

<sup>234</sup> S. M. Soloviev, *Ob istoricheskoi dvizhenii russkogo narodonaseleniia* [On the Historical Movement of the Russian Population] (Moscow: 1867), p. 6

<sup>235</sup> S. M. Soloviev, *Ob istoricheskoi dvizhenii russkogo narodonaseleniia* [On the Historical Movement of the Russian Population] (Moscow: 1867), p. 13

<sup>236</sup> S. M. Soloviev. *Izbrannoe. Zapiski* [Selected Works. Personal Notes], (Moscow, 1983), p. 61. “Our sympathy belongs to those who, by their enormous labor, developed their spiritual forces and, being encircled by barbarians, preserved their European-Christian image... To these people belongs our whole sympathy, our memory, our history.”

hostility and foreignness will undergo a striking transformation in the Eurasian reconstruction of the Russian ethos, which could not be further removed from Soloviev's "Westernizing" stance.

Undoubtedly, the most distinguished "direct" predecessor of the Eurasians is the well-known Russian Panslavist, N. Ia. Danilevskii, who was also a biologist by training. A detailed analysis of his "cultural typology" theory and of his Panslavist doctrine much exceeds the scope of this chapter. Several elements connecting him to the "Eurasian" doctrine and pointing to the European context in which his ideas emerged should be emphasized. Danilevskii was the first Russian thinker to build an alternative image of the Asia-Europe divide and to propose a coherent alternative to the ingrained geographical imagination of the Russian intellectual elite. As one of the first parts of his deconstruction of the myth of European superiority, Danilevskii "reexamined the legitimacy of Europe's physical-geographical designation as a continent."<sup>237</sup> Indeed, the philosopher asserted a "bold geographical nihilism inherent in his argument: Europe simply did not exist as an independent continent. In a geographical sense, Europe was not a continent at all, but rather a mere territorial appendage or peninsula of Asia."<sup>238</sup> The deconstruction of the traditional Ural divide was the first step in the radical revision of the Russian geographical self-awareness that Danilevskii proposed. He squarely denied the relevance of these mountains as a "natural" or symbolic barrier and rhetorically asked himself:

But what kind of special qualities do [the Urals] possess which could confer upon them alone, out of all the mountains on the face of the earth, the honor of serving as the boundary between two continents- an honor which in all other cases is granted only to oceans, and rarely to seas? In terms of its altitude, this mountain range is one of the most insignificant of all, and in terms of its traversability one of the easiest. In its middle section, around Ekaterinburg, [the Urals are so low that] people cross them... and ask their driver: but tell me, brother, just where are these mountains? If the Urals separate two continents, then what do the Alps, the Caucasus, or

<sup>237</sup> M. Bassin, "Russia between Europe and Asia: The Ideological Construction of Geographical Space," in: *Slavic Review* (Vol. 50, Nr.1), Spring 1991, p. 9

<sup>238</sup> M. Bassin, "Russia between Europe and Asia: The Ideological Construction of Geographical Space," in: *Slavic Review* (Vol. 50, Nr.1), Spring 1991, p. 9

the Himalayas separate? If the Urals make Europe a continent, then why not consider India a continent? After all, it is surrounded on two sides by seas, and on the third are mountains for which the Urals are no match.<sup>239</sup>

This premise was necessary, but not sufficient for this ambitious writer, however. Construction should follow deconstruction, and this was achieved through conveying a novel and provocative image of Russia. To replace the old division that he so thoroughly rejected, Danilevskii “outlined an entirely original alternative. Russia, he suggested, represented an independent geographical world, self-contained and distinct from Europe as well as from Asia.”<sup>240</sup> The autarchic character of the Russian landmass was perceived by Danilevskii along ostensibly the same lines as Soloviev’s vision of the “Russian state region,” but the interpretation of this phenomenon was quite the opposite in Danilevskii’s case. Linking the “organic” essence of the imperial Russian space to the peaceful character of its expansion and viewing Russia as a no less natural entity than France (at it was constructed by contemporary geographers of the “hexagon”), the philosopher painted a full picture of Russian peculiarity:

Russia is not small, of course, but the major part of its space was occupied by the Russian people through free settlement, and not by state conquest. The domain that became the property of the Russian people constitutes a wholly natural region- just as natural as France, for example, - only of enormous dimensions. This region is starkly demarcated from all sides (with the partial exception of the Western one) by seas and mountains. This region is cut into two sections by the Ural [mountain] chain, which... does not represent a natural ethnographic barrier... Never has the occupation by a people of the historical domain that was predestined for it cost so little blood and tears.”<sup>241</sup>

The emphasis on the different (and more benign) character of the Russian expansion when compared to its Western counterpart served the purpose of extolling the virtues of the Slavic civilization that Russia purportedly represented. Here, however, lay the most profound ambiguity

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<sup>239</sup> N. I. Danilevskii, *Rossiiia i Evropa* [Russia and Europe], in: K. Korolev (ed.) *Klassika Geopolitiki. XIX vek* [Classical Works of Geopolitics. 19<sup>th</sup> Century] (Moscow: AST, 2003), Vol. I, p. 335

<sup>240</sup> M. Bassin, “Russia between Europe and Asia: The Ideological Construction of Geographical Space,” in: *Slavic Review* (Vol. 50, Nr.1), Spring 1991, p. 11

<sup>241</sup> N. I. Danilevskii, *Rossiiia i Evropa* [Russia and Europe], in: K. Korolev (ed.) *Klassika Geopolitiki. XIX vek* [Classical Works of Geopolitics. 19<sup>th</sup> Century] (Moscow: AST, 2003), Vol. I, p. 298-299

of Danilevskii's whole doctrine. His insistence upon the leading role of the Russian Empire in the Slavic world in fact profoundly undermined the geopolitical unity of the Russian space that was suggested by such geographical considerations. The duality inherent in the Russian immersion into the Slavic sphere was left unaddressed, which points to the approximate nature of Danilevskii's totalizing geographical schemes. Moreover, the cultural distance from Europe that he ardently advocated did not entail a corresponding closeness to the Asiatic realm. Russia's intermediate geographical role was supplemented (and put into brackets) by its civilizational peculiarity. In fact, the tension between the "cultural" and geographic elements was left unresolved by Danilevskii's historiosophic constructions.

The complexity of defining Danilevskii's role in the contemporary context stems from the later reappraisals of his work along the lines of a "pre-Spenglerian" or self-consciously "spatial" tradition. In the first hypostasis, the Russian philosopher appears as the creator of an "integral type of cultural strategy" that mingled elements of modern-rational (positivist) inspiration with more traditional patterns of thought.<sup>242</sup> The modern facet of his views was, arguably, represented by the anti-evolutionary theory of the "immanence of species" that postulated the lack of essential transformations in biology and the existence of an autarchic sphere of being for each biological individual. The traditional features were mostly traceable in Danilevskii's discussion of the spiritual sphere and in the preeminence he accorded the religious factor in the texture of his ideal "Slavic civilization." Thus, it appears that tradition and modernity coexisted in his work in a relative equilibrium.

The concept of "a distinct geographical world" is, perhaps, the most important intellectual legacy that this thinker bequeathed to his "Eurasian" followers. He used the data of topography

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<sup>242</sup> I. Martyniuk, "Za ogradoi slavianofil'stva: Nikolai Danilevskii- shpenglerianets... karteziianets... [Beyond Slavophilism's Pale: Nikolay Danilevskii- a Spenglerian?... a Cartesian?...], in: *Ab Imperio*,... p. 4

and geomorphology in a (pseudo) scientific drive to objectivity that was common to the Slavophile and Westernizer controversy and that was drawn to its logical conclusion by the “Eurasians,” some of whom (like Trubetskoi, Jakobson and Savitskii) were also prominent scholars and mingled professional scholarship with political militancy. Aside from these conceptual similarities with the “Eurasians,” Danilevskii was influenced by an anti-evolutionary and anti-Darwinist theory of “cultural-historical types” that does not find its equivalent in Savitskii’s or Trubetskoi’s writings. Indeed, Danilevskii “projected the theoretical constructions that he used as a demonstration for the non-viability of Darwin’s evolution theory upon the social-historical reality.”<sup>243</sup> This was not the case of the “Eurasians,” who, though keenly aware of the necessity of cultural diversity and adamantly opposed to any attempt at cultural uniformization, nevertheless avoided such crude biological analogies and spoke more in terms of morality and cultural relativism. Danilevskii’s moral stance, on the other hand, was one of the many instances of his ambiguity that the “Eurasians” successfully superseded at the cost of sacrificing nuances and possible compromises and alternatives<sup>244</sup>. The “geopolitical” elements in Danilevskii’s work have been mostly retrospectively “read into it” by later generations of commentators accustomed to the German tradition and attempting to link to it such manifestations of Russian “anti-Europeanism.” However, though the European intellectual context is clearly present in his writings, it is much closer linked to anti-evolutionary and neo-Romantic reactions than to any purported “geopolitical tradition” *avant la lettre*.

#### d. *Eurasianism: from geography to geosophy*

<sup>243</sup> I. Martyniuk, “Za ogradoi slavianofil’sstva: i Nikolai Danilevskii- shpenglerianets... karteziianets... [Beyond Slavophilism’s Pale: Nikolay Danilevskii- a Spenglerian?... a Cartesian?...], in: *Ab Imperio*,... p. 2

<sup>244</sup> Possibly the most glaring instance of Danilevskii’s moral relativism can be found in his distinction between the application of the Christian moral imperative in case of individual human behavior and its non-applicability in interstate relations. See N. I. Danilevskii, *Rossii i Evropa* [Russia and Europe], in: K. Korolev (ed.) *Klassika Geopolitiki. XIX vek* [Classical Works of Geopolitics. 19<sup>th</sup> Century] (Moscow: AST, 2003), Vol. I, p. 309

The importance of the three “intellectual layers” that predated and, to a great extent, conditioned the emergence of the Eurasian doctrine, is not the same for the representatives of this doctrine as such. In fact, Soloviev’s theories and the contradictory views of the “Orientalist” Russian intellectuals were hardly conscious references for the “Eurasian” authors. The situation is entirely different in the case of the “neo-Slavophiles”, who were acknowledged as forebears and predecessors both by Trubetskoi and Savitskii. However, Soloviev’s views, though hardly congruent with the “Eurasian” theories in any way and clearly antagonistic in its thrust and conclusions, provide an interesting frame of reference for the understanding of the essence of the “Eurasians”’ critique of modernity. Soloviev, like F. J. Turner in the American case, was moved, first, by an urge to justify the claims of his (Russian) “national” community and to validate the respective “national” project (in the Russian case, a much more complex undertaking than in the American one). Second, both historians attempted to study social phenomena “scientifically,” a fact which increased the status of the knowledge they produced and provided an aura of “objectivity” to their theories. Both of these premises also functioned in the case of the “Eurasians.” On the one hand, Trubetskoi and Savitskii had the fundamental goal of preserving the geopolitical unity of the space of the former Russian Empire. Though they couched this agenda in geographical and civilization-based terminology and even used the findings of comparative linguistics and natural science to justify their argument, ultimately they sought a viable solution to preserve this continental-sized entity that plunged into a deep crisis at the time they were writing their works. On the other hand, they showed a purported objectivity and perfect use of logic and scientific arguments (naturally, this tactics served the internal coherence of their discourse more than the intellectual endeavors each of them was pursuing). Aside from these general premises, two more aspects of Soloviev’s theories and “Eurasianism” could be put in opposing contexts. First, the clearly negative evaluation of “the open frontier” that Soloviev



advocated is in clear contrast to the appreciation and even adulation that Trubetskoi and Savitskii felt towards the role of nomad peoples and the natural environment of the steppe in Russian history. Where Soloviev spoke about a “curse of empty spaces”<sup>245</sup>, the “Eurasians,” on the contrary, saw a blessing.<sup>246</sup> The second contrasting feature of the two theories concerns the attitude towards the non-Slavic elements in Russian history. While Soloviev saw the main “adversaries” of the Russian Slavic population in the mounted nomads, Trubetskoi praised the “ethos” and “virtues” of these same elements in one of his most well-known and “personal” works, *A Look at Russian History not from the West, but from the East*.<sup>247</sup> In more general terms, this opposing attitude can be linked to the most deep-held assumptions of the two thinkers. While Soloviev undoubtedly saw Russia as a European country that deviated from its “normal” course of development due to unfavorable geographical circumstances, Trubetskoi argued that Russia only existed as a state because of the absorption of the steppe moral qualities and behavioral norms and, thus, that not only was Russia not European, but its very existence depended on this non-European character. Consequently, the attitude towards the Slavic and Germanic elements could not be more different in the case of the two authors. Soloviev “denied the existence of any inherent racial differences between these groups [the Slavs and the Germans], insisting that they were sibling peoples who shared (...) a variety of cultural and ethnographic affinities.”<sup>248</sup> The differences that later ensued in their social organization could be thus reduced to an accident of geography, with fateful consequences. Starting from completely opposite premises, Trubetskoi

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<sup>245</sup> M. Bassin, “Turner, Soloviev and the Frontier Hypothesis: The Nationalist Signification of Open Spaces,” in: *Journal of Modern History*, No. 65, Sept. 1993, p. 500

<sup>246</sup> See, for example, Savitskii’s ideas in “Geopolitical and Geographical Bases of Eurasianism” and “Steppe and Sedentarity”, both in: K. Korolev (ed.) *Klassika Geopolitiki. XX vek* [Classical Works of Geopolitics. 20<sup>th</sup> Century] (Moscow: AST, 2003), Vol. II, esp. p. 684 and pp. 688-699

<sup>247</sup> N. Trubetskoi, *Vzgliad na russkuiu istoriiu ne s zapada, a s Vostoka* [A Look at Russian History not from the West, but from the East], in: K. Korolev (ed.) *Klassika Geopolitiki. XX vek* [Classical Works of Geopolitics. 20<sup>th</sup> Century] (Moscow: AST, 2003), Vol. II, pp. 144-226

<sup>248</sup> M. Bassin, “Turner, Soloviev and the Frontier Hypothesis: The Nationalist Signification of Open Spaces,” in: *Journal of Modern History*, No. 65, Sept. 1993, p. 496

and Savitskii not only denied any affinities whatsoever between the Germanic and Slavic peoples, but opposed the “Germano-Romanic” ethos and civilization to the rest of humanity. Moreover, they consciously minimized the importance of the Slavic element in the creation of the Russian state and even were ready to depict the non-Slavic ethnic character of the Russians as a positive trait enhancing their “Eurasian” essence. Moreover, Trubetskoi himself had an unmistakable preference for what he called “the Turanian personality,” that purportedly had a much higher spiritual potential than the “European” one. While several interesting insights pointed towards the personal “compensatory” effect of this concept for Trubetskoi’s psychology, this term also points towards broader issues of his *Weltanschauung*. The deeper assumptions behind this controversy presupposed a wholesale acceptance of modernity on the part of Soloviev, as a “Westernizer,” and a no less total rejection of it by Trubetskoi and his fellow Eurasians. Indeed, “Europe” meant for Trubetskoi not a racial, ethnic or religious unity to be reviled per se, but, first and foremost, the “sources of a constantly intensifying standardization of life and culture.”<sup>249</sup> Glebov also emphasizes that “the [“Eurasian”] critique of European culture had as its source (... ) the neo-romantic representations of bourgeois culture as the fundamental danger for a diversified, “flourishing” culture and a dynamic history [of humanity].”<sup>250</sup> In this case, a clear connection could also be made with the “neo-Slavophile” tradition, which was openly recognized by the “Eurasians” as the main intellectual source of their insights.

A brief mention should also be made of the “frontier” views of the “vostochniki,” the least articulate of the three intellectual currents discussed here. One of the most controversial leading figures of this trend, E. E. Uhtomskii, writing at the very end of the XIX century, stated that

<sup>249</sup> S. Glebov, “Granitsy imperii kak granitsy moderna: Antikolonial’naia ritorika i teoriia kul’turnykh tipov v evraziistve” [The Borders of Empire as Frontiers of Modernity: Anti-Colonial Rhetoric and the Theory of Cultural Types in Eurasianism], in: *Ab Imperio*, p.

<sup>250</sup> S. Glebov, “Granitsy imperii kak granitsy moderna: Antikolonial’naia ritorika i teoriia kul’turnykh tipov v evraziistve” [The Borders of Empire as Frontiers of Modernity: Anti-Colonial Rhetoric and the Theory of Cultural Types in Eurasianism], in: *Ab Imperio*, p.

“Essentially, there are no frontiers and there cannot be any frontiers for us in Asia, aside from the uncontrollable and limitless blue sea, which can be likened to the spirit of the Russian people and which freely washes its shores.”<sup>251</sup> As today’s historian insightfully observes, this assertion “could be interpreted from two points of view. On the one hand, it can be regarded as an open appeal to unbridled expansionism. (...) However, the above-mentioned citation can be also understood as an affirmation of the unity of Russia and the East in the face of the foreign and unfriendly West.”<sup>252</sup> This last interpretation (though, again, hardly acknowledged by the “Eurasians”) provides a direct link to the anti-colonial rhetoric pursued mainly by Trubetskoi in his polemical writings. To avoid anachronistic exaggerations, one should take into account the post-World War I European context and the ubiquity of theories of self-determination that had a significant impact upon the “Eurasian” anti-colonial discourse. Still, the context in late Imperial Russia was not unimportant in the emergence of the doctrine. Thus, Trubetskoi’s confession that “the ideas expressed within this book crystallized in my consciousness already more than 10 years ago”<sup>253</sup> should not simply be dismissed as a late justification of an idiosyncratic theory. On the contrary, both the European and the Russian contexts were congenial to such a “pan-continental” version of Russian nationalism (to use a conventional term). One of the most insightful and encompassing definitions of the “Eurasian” doctrine has been offered by Sergei Glebov in his article dedicated to the movement. Though the author mostly emphasized the impact of emigration upon the formation of this current (a point not discussed here), his final passages are most revealing:

<sup>251</sup> D. Schimmelpenninck van der Oye, “Ideologii imperii v Rossii imperskogo perioda” [Ideologies of Empire during Russia’s Imperial Period], in: *Ab Imperio*,...

<sup>252</sup> D. Schimmelpenninck “Ideologii imperii v Rossii imperskogo perioda” [Ideologies of Empire during Russia’s Imperial Period], in: *Ab Imperio*,...

<sup>253</sup> N. Trubetskoi, *Evropa i chelovechestvo* [Europe and Mankind], in: K. Korolev (ed.) *Klassika Geopolitiki. XX vek* [Classical Works of Geopolitics. 20<sup>th</sup> Century] (Moscow: AST, 2003), Vol. II, p. 33

A combination of the critique of European colonialism and of a tendency to limit the leveling force of modernity, by creating a dividing line composed of [self-sufficient] cultural regions, in the face of European colonial expansion, can, of course, be variously labeled. Certain [researchers] perceive it as a social and cultural utopia of the representatives of the privileged classes of the collapsed ancien regime, who strove to preserve the integrity of the last continental empire in Europe (...), or, in another guise, an attempt to conceive empire in an epoch of national states. Others see in this movement a well-known pattern, in the broader European context, of a criticism of modernity in an era of an acute crisis of capitalism and parliamentary democracy.<sup>254</sup>

This definition, while much broader than the focus of my discussion, includes several important elements that I attempted to emphasize throughout my argument: the importance of the European context of “environmentalism” and positivism, as well as of neo-Romantic tendencies for the appearance of this movement; the use of geographical and geopolitical terminology in order to “reify” a much broader critique of modernity; the persistence and the rich tradition of spatial categories as embodiments of the essence of national history and “character;” the ambivalence of “national” and “imperial” criteria in a period of active political socialization; the ambiguous and multi-faceted nature of “environmentalist” doctrines and the “double edge” of geopolitical arguments, both strengthening and weakening the impact of “racialist” theories; the “reification” of geography and its placement at the center of the “human” sciences. All these trends, though less poignantly, are present as well in the Romanian case, which I will attempt to discuss in what follows.

Eurasianism positioned itself as an integral and totalizing ideology that sought to create a new “systemic science” having as its sole object the space of Russia-Eurasia, which represented one of several clusters of autonomous civilizations. The basic definition of the doctrine should take into account the cultural relativism that made possible the articulation of a completely autarchic “world in itself” and the specifically geographic thrust of the Eurasians’ “systemic” gaze that perceived a clear symmetry in the geographical contours of the “middle continent” of the Old

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<sup>254</sup> S. Glebov, *Granitsy imperii kak granitsy moderna...*, in: *Ab Imperio...*

World. Whether one agrees or not with Patrick Seriot's contention that the Eurasians espoused a peculiar "neo-Platonic" creed and based their insistence on structure and symmetry on a theory of "correspondences" between nature and culture (and between the phenomenal and the noumenal worlds),<sup>255</sup> the specificity of Eurasia's geography derived primarily from its "regular" structure.

The narrowly geographic part of the Eurasians' views (the only one that I can discuss here) was the almost single-handed work of P. N. Savitskii, the movement's unquestionable geography specialist. Geography was not just another method of perceiving Eurasia's "revealed" nature, it was the only way to do so. The "spatial turn" advocated by the Eurasian thinkers was part of the "egocentric look" that protested against Europe's epistemological imperialism and, specifically, against the historical mode of the latter's self-perception. In order to demonstrate the ontological difference between Europe and Eurasia, a "geographical mode" of uncovering Eurasia's essence was necessary.<sup>256</sup> Savitskii found the inspiration for his construction of Eurasia's systemic geography in certain trends of late XIX century Russian natural sciences. Thus, he incurred clear intellectual debts to such figures as D. I. Mendeleev (from whom he borrowed the notion of the "periodical" character of the Eurasian geography), V. I. Vernadsky and, especially, V.V. Dokuchaev, who provided the model of "symmetrical zones" (initially, with reference to soil structures) that Savitskii transferred to the "natural zones" that formed the "regular" Eurasian space.<sup>257</sup> Savitskii's vision also owed much to the German tradition of *Anthropogeographie* and the related geopolitical currents that were roughly contemporaneous with the crystallization of Eurasianism. However, the "ontological" nature of the border between Europe and Eurasia, as

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<sup>255</sup> S. Glebov, *Granitsy imperii kak granitsy moderna...*, in: *Ab Imperio*,...

<sup>256</sup> Marlene Laruelle. *L'Ideologie eurasiste russe ou comment penser l'empire*. Paris : L'Harmattan, 1999, p. 147

<sup>257</sup> S. Glebov, "A Life with Imperial Dreams: P. N. Savitsky, Eurasianism, and the Invention of "Structuralist" Geography," in: *Ab Imperio*, 2005, Nr.2, p. 8

well as the specific forms of the “regularity”<sup>258</sup> that (pre)determined the existence of the Eurasian space were Savitskii’s entirely original contributions.

The salience of the geographic factor in the Eurasians’ overall worldview was emphasized by Savitskii in one of the general self-presentations that appeared during the first years of the movement’s activity. According to Savitskii, the self-designation of the group itself pointed towards a heightened geographical awareness:

Their name [Eurasians] is of “geographical” origin. The problem is that, within the fundamental mass of the Old World’s lands, where the former geography distinguished two continents- Europe and Asia- they started to distinguish a third one- the median [*sredinnyi*] continent of Eurasia... In the Eurasians’ opinion, in a purely geographical sense, the notion of “Europe” as the combination of Western and Eastern Europe is devoid of content and meaningless... One could say with full justice: the Eastern European or “White Sea-Caucasian” plain, as the Eurasians call it, is much closer, by its geographical nature, to the Western Siberian and Turkestan plains which are situated to its east, than to Western Europe. The above-mentioned three plains, along with the highlands that separate them from each other... and surround them from the east, south-east and south... represent a distinct world, unitary within itself and geographically different both from the regions that lie to its west and from those that are situated to its south-east and south. And, if the first are to be designated by the name of Europe, while the second are to be called Asia, then the above-named world, as a median and intermediary one, should be properly called Eurasia.<sup>259</sup>

This carefully demarcated space (coinciding, largely, with the territory of the former Russian Empire, with the exception of Poland and Finland, but including orthodox Bessarabia)<sup>260</sup> was characterized by two fundamental features. First, it was not only territorially unified and “predestined” for a single political unit, it was also autarchic and “closed upon itself” (*zamknutyi*). This autarchy was symbolized by the existence of a sharp border that isolated Russia-Eurasia (the “core” or “torso” of the Old World, as Savitskii put it), from both Europe and Asia. This division was neither cultural nor political but stemmed from the features of the natural environment (including, among others, the different configuration of the coast line and the variety

<sup>258</sup> The notion of “regularity” is here an approximate rendering of the Russian term “zakonomernost’,” which, in its turn, refers to the German notion of *Gesetzmaessigkeit*.

<sup>259</sup> P. N. Savitskii, “Evraziistvo” [Eurasianism], in: K. Korolev (ed.) *Klassika Geopolitiki. XX vek* [Classical Works of Geopolitics. 20<sup>th</sup> Century] (Moscow: AST, 2003), Vol. II, pp. 655-656

<sup>260</sup> Marlene Laruelle. *L’Ideologie eurasiste russe ou comment penser l’empire*. Paris : l’Harmattan, 1999, p. 156

of the landscape forms in Europe as contrasted to their monotony in Eurasia).<sup>261</sup> The Eurasians' anti-European bias was visible in the different nature of the borders that their "world" had with its two counterparts. While on the Asiatic side these boundaries were fluid and uncertain, the situation was reversed with regard to the Europe-Eurasia demarcation line. Savitskii in particular spent a good deal of intellectual effort to minutely map the borders on the European side, using a number of indicators in order to build the image of an incontrovertible "fault line."<sup>262</sup>

Second, the principles of periodicity, "regularity" and symmetry were all reflected clearly on the territory of Eurasia, whose very existence was only possible by virtue of these preexisting criteria. The regularity of the Eurasian landmass was expressed through the scheme of the four longitudinal zones that defined Eurasia's peculiarity. Savitskii imagined

a relatively simple, "flag-like" succession of [natural] zones... In the process of mapping, this [succession] resembles the contours of a flag divided into horizontal stripes. In a southerly-northerly direction, the [zones of] desert, steppe, forest and tundra follow one another here. Every one of these zones forms an uninterrupted longitudinal stripe... The western border of Eurasia passes through the Black Sea- Baltic isthmus [*peremychke*], i.e., through the region where the continent narrows (between the Baltic and Black Seas). Through this isthmus, in a general direction from north-west to south-east, a number of suggestive botanical-geographical boundaries are to be found... The Eurasian world is a world of a periodical and, at the same time, symmetrical zonal system. The borders of the fundamental Eurasian zones correspond rather closely to the direction of certain climatic frontiers... Nowhere, in whatever place of the Old World, are the gradual character of the changes and variations within the zonal system, its periodicity and, at the same time, its symmetry expressed so poignantly as on the plains of Russia-Eurasia. The Russian world possesses a maximally transparent geographical structure.<sup>263</sup>

The structuralist tendency that emerged from these considerations was confirmed and given a "scientific" sanction by the invocation of the coincidence of a number of natural indicators (e.g., the symmetrical and law-like patterns of temperature change and variations in humidity) that

<sup>261</sup> P. N. Savitskii, "Geograficheskie i geopoliticheskie osnovy evraziistva" [The Geographical and Geopolitical Bases of Eurasianism], in: K. Korolev (ed.) *Klassika Geopolitiki. XX vek* [Classical Works of Geopolitics. 20<sup>th</sup> Century] (Moscow: AST, 2003), Vol. II, pp. 680-681

<sup>262</sup> Marlene Laruelle. *L'Ideologie eurasiste russe ou comment penser l'empire*. Paris : l'Harmattan, 1999, pp. 154-157

<sup>263</sup> P. N. Savitskii, "Geograficheskie i geopoliticheskie osnovy evraziistva" [The Geographical and Geopolitical Bases of Eurasianism], in: K. Korolev (ed.) *Klassika Geopolitiki. XX vek* [Classical Works of Geopolitics. 20<sup>th</sup> Century] (Moscow: AST, 2003), Vol. II, pp. 681-684

gave Eurasia a transcendental unity inscribed in its configuration. One can thus support the conclusion that “the entire historical paradigm of the Enlightenment, which interpreted the eastern direction as a gradual slope away from Europe and, correspondingly, civilization, was demolished by the geographical conception of Eurasianism and the subsequent historical scheme that was built upon geography.”<sup>264</sup> In this scheme of predetermined geographical unity, the place of the steppe was paramount. The steppe represented a sort of “latitudinal axis” of the Eurasian totality. It was the area upon which the nomadic peoples, the quintessential bearers of the Eurasian “state tradition” until the emergence of the Russian polity, pursued their relentless movement that, despite its apparent chaotic nature, in fact fulfilled the mission of forging the organic Eurasian community that was defined by spatial contiguity and cultural borrowing as opposed to racial affinity.

The specificity of Eurasianism thus consisted in couching a political and ideological project meant to save the space of the Russian Empire from dissolving in an age of nationalism into an ostensibly scholarly guise. Savitskii crowned his argument of crafting an ontological and trans-historical basis for the continued existence of the Russian imperial entity by the introduction of the concept of *mestorazvitie*.<sup>265</sup> This became the central element of his whole “geosophic” approach, since it symbolized the “broad co-existence of living creatures who are mutually adapted to each other and to the environment and who adapted the environment to themselves.”<sup>266</sup> Territory itself, far from being a passive recipient of this symbiosis, actively

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<sup>264</sup> S. Glebov, “A Life with Imperial Dreams: P. N. Savitsky, Eurasianism, and the Invention of “Structuralist” Geography,” in: *Ab Imperio*, 2005, Nr. 2, p. 11

<sup>265</sup> This notion could be translated into English by the equivalent of “place-development,” which does not convey the “synthetic” overtones present in the Russian original. Marlene Laruelle prefers the use, in French, of the neologism “topogenese,” which, in my opinion, fails to account for the dynamic and symbiotic elements presupposed by the original concept. Marlene Laruelle. *L’Ideologie eurasiste russe ou comment penser l’empire*. Paris : l’Harmattan, 1999, pp. 157-160

<sup>266</sup> S. Glebov, “A Life with Imperial Dreams: P. N. Savitsky, Eurasianism, and the Invention of “Structuralist” Geography,” in: *Ab Imperio*, 2005, Nr. 2, p. 11



entered the process of mutual influence and became a “person” in its own right, a feature that the Eurasians were keen on emphasizing, since it eminently served their purpose of opposing the criterion of genetic connection and common descent in favor of a structural similarity that created a new kind of community. The structuralist tendency led to the minimization of racial difference and instead focused on the spatial dimension of a “total geographical region” that shaped the ethnic character of its inhabitants. This line of reasoning, reflected in Savitskii’s lifelong passion for the “mapping of geographical regions” (*raionirovanie*), suggested the significance of drawing borders between discrete geographical worlds. These frontiers, however, were not only symbolical or cultural, but found an equivalent in the world of natural phenomena.<sup>267</sup> The ideological implications of defining these geographical “total entities” were obvious from Savitskii’s refusal to grant such a status to the whole landmass of the Old World (“Eurasia” in the Humboldtian sense). For Savitskii, Russia-Eurasia came, in the hierarchy of “place-developments,” directly behind the globe as a whole, since its structural unity was identifiable through “objective” criteria and correspondences that were absent in the case of the larger European-Asiatic continent.

A final point concerns the parallel between the “structural geography” elaborated by Savitskii and the structuralist current in linguistics. The link between Savitskii’s notion of “place-development” and Roman Jakobson’s identification of the “Eurasian *Sprachbund*” appears much more direct and relevant than traditionally conceived. Aside from the close collaboration between the two thinkers in the late 1920s and early 1930s, the similarity derives from the same methodology that was “based on Savitskii’s vision of territoriality” and had as its cornerstone the assumption that “characteristics acquired in the process of common historical development within

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<sup>267</sup> S. Glebov, “A Life with Imperial Dreams: P. N. Savitsky, Eurasianism, and the Invention of “Structuralist” Geography,” in: *Ab Imperio*, 2005, Nr. 2, p. 12

the Eurasian space gained predominance over genetic characteristics.”<sup>268</sup> The Eurasians thus solved the dilemma of race vs. space by giving precedence to the latter in their theoretical constructions. However, the space they envisaged was not conceivable through classical geography. It needed a wholly new and integral “Eurasian” science. Though they never elaborated on explicating the presuppositions of this new science of space, Trubetskoi and Savitskii occasionally used the term of “geosophy” to define it. Savitskii asserted that “the constitution and analysis of such [structural and geographical] parallelisms appears to be the principal object of geosophy in its application to Russia-Eurasia.”<sup>269</sup> Both Russia’s history and its geography were thus exempt from traditional, Western-dominated, science. They had to be the object of a science no less self-centered and autarchic than the space it was to study. “Structuralist geography” had its correspondent in theory (as in nature) in other structural sciences of the Eurasian totality. The fact that it failed may hint to the many problems and ambiguities that the bestowing of an “ontological” essence upon the Russian Empire’s geography faced.

The Eurasians’ geographic determinism was a subtle one. The Russian Empire represented, for them, a “community of destiny” that was also natural and organic. Most importantly, it was a space of anti-modernity that preserved the diversity and cultural dynamics threatened by the standardizing Western, “Romano-Germanic” civilization. The West, however, remained a model and an unavoidable reference even in the most desperate and “nihilistic” moments of the Eurasians’ long odyssey through a complex and puzzling “Western” realm.

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<sup>268</sup> S. Glebov, “A Life with Imperial Dreams: P. N. Savitsky, Eurasianism, and the Invention of “Structuralist” Geography,” in: *Ab Imperio*, 2005, Nr. 2., p. 13

<sup>269</sup> P. N. Savitskii, “Geograficheskii obzor Rossii-Evrazii [A Geographical Overview of Russia-Eurasia],” in: *Mir Rossii-Evrazii [The World of Russia-Eurasia]* (Moscow: Vysshshaia Shkola, 1995), p. 288.

#### ***4. The Romanian case***

The Romanian intellectual milieu, at least initially, was less congenial than the Russian one for the emergence of a “geopolitical” tradition akin to the German “school” that consecrated the term or even to original intellectual trends that could be compared to Eurasianism. On the most general level of abstraction, the Romanian debates on problems of frontiers and national “destiny” were less complex than the Russian elaborations on the same topic. While Russian “anti-European” intellectuals, in various guises, excelled at transforming the arch-negativity and the low level on the “scale of civilization” that stigmatized their society into advantages and even “national” virtues (the “Eurasians” themselves are the most illustrative example of this “trans-valuation of values”), the Romanians did not attempt to challenge the superiority and “modeling influence” of the West until very late in the XX century, despite occasional “nativist” reactions. This situation was conditioned, on the one hand, by the ethos of the political and intellectual elite that “constructed” the modern Romanian state, and, on the other hand, by what Sorin Antohi calls “geocultural bovarism.” Thus, the self-definition of the Romanian intellectuals as the “West of the East” was hardly conducive to self-defeating and soul-searching “mental exercises,” at least as long as the “positivist” stance was at its height and induced an “optimism by default” into all such pronouncements. If anything, the early-XX century Romanian thinkers (until the late 1920s) regarded their own people as a “bulwark” of civilization and progress in the face of the “Asiatic steppe” that was most commonly used as an alternative name for what was then the Russian Empire. On the other hand, one should emphasize that purely “geographical” constructions were hardly present at the time in the intellectual sphere. Thus, a two-volume work dedicated to “the

sociology and geopolitics of the frontier”<sup>270</sup> and aimed at the articulation of an “alternative discourse” in contemporary Romanian politics, not only discusses the European context and various manifestations of the “geopolitical school,” but attempts to identify such a tradition in Romanian thought. The basic conclusion that one could draw from this (admittedly partial) anthology is that, right up to the late 1930s, what could be called “geopolitics” in Romania was not too aware of the geographical dimension as such. Various contributions dealing with “the national character” (C. Radulescu-Motru), “national psychology” (D. Draghicescu) and similar issues could hardly be placed under a “geopolitical” heading even if using a most generous definition of the term. Prominent Romanian historians (A.D. Xenopol<sup>271</sup> and N. Iorga) or political leaders (especially D. A. Sturdza<sup>272</sup>) made some interesting contributions to the “science of the nation” (expressed by (pseudo) theoretical and scientific conjectures about Romania’s “mission” or “national destiny”), but the geographical factor was almost non-existent in their writings. On the contrary, the influence of racialist theories and *Rassenkunde* was obvious even in the works of such generally moderate writers as A. D. Xenopol.

One of the few examples of an explicit relationship between geography and the “national character” can be encountered in Mihai Eminescu’s articles. Eminescu espoused an ethnocentric and xenophobic version of Romanian nationalism (which did not entail a systematic doctrine). He preferred an eclectic approach that combined the impact of cultural and racial factors on the Romanian national essence. However, in the context of the Russian-Romanian polemics on the

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<sup>270</sup> Ilie Badescu, Dan Dungaciu. *Sociologia si geopolitica frontierei*. [The Sociology and Geopolitics of the Frontier]. Vol. I-II. (Bucharest, 1995). Aside from the ostensible scholarly goals proclaimed by the authors, a clear ideological agenda is discernible in this work. The argument occasionally degenerates into a nationalist, autochthonist and anti-Western rhetoric that challenges the “Atlantic” orientation of the contemporary Romanian political elites. Consequently, the concept of “frontier” is generally viewed through an uncritical “geopolitical” perspective. The authors, however, are careful enough to avoid direct apologetics of the figures they claim to analyze. See Badescu, Dungaciu, vol. I, p. 337

<sup>271</sup> A. D. Xenopol. *Natiunea Romana* [The Romanian Nation].. Ed. By C. Schifirnet. (Bucharest: Albatros, 1999).

<sup>272</sup> Dem. A. Stourdza. *L’Europe, la Russie et la Roumanie. Etude historique et politique*. (Bucharest, s.d. [1890 ?]).

question of Southern Bessarabia during the 1877-1878 Russian-Turkish war, Eminescu articulated, arguably, the first complete vision of “environmental determinism” in Romanian politics. Characteristically, the object of these reflections concerned not the Romanians themselves, but their opponents- the Russians. The definition of the Russian Empire offered by the political journalist is rather eloquent:

Originating from Mongol races, driven to conquest by their own nature, settled upon vast steppes whose monotony has an influence upon human intelligence, depriving it of flexibility and imbuing it with fanatical instincts for vaguely grandiose ideas, Russia is, in equal measure, the mother of pride and lack of culture, [a product] of fanaticism and despotism. The beautiful is replaced by the majestic, just as the undulating hills and the forest-covered mountains of the Western countries are there replaced by endless plains. There is nothing beneath the tendencies of conquest, [or] the so-called historical missions that search for their natural frontiers, save for pure and simple ignorance and the taste for looting [*spoliere*].<sup>273</sup>

Eminescu thus mingles the motive of Russia’s cultural and racial inferiority with a peculiar insistence on the pernicious impact of natural conditions that are to be found in the configuration of the Eastern European plains. The space of the steppe is traditionally perceived in a negative light, but the formative influence of this expanse is a novel element that allows the identification of an “environmentalist” streak in Eminescu’s thought. Moreover, he clearly saw a connection between the spiritual poverty of Russian culture and the purported expansionism of the empire: “Thus, the so much vaunted historical mission is not one that has its origin in outside [circumstances]. It is a result of a spiritual void, of a barbarism draped in suits and gloves, of a desert that, even if it owned the earth, would still not be filled.”<sup>274</sup> The Russian lust for space is thus a compensation for a fatal infirmity of its “national soul,” which, by implication, represents a

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<sup>273</sup> M. Eminescu. “Tendence de cucerire” [Tendencies of Conquest], in: M. Eminescu. *Basarabia* [Bessarabia] (Chisinau: Hyperion, 1991), p. 33

<sup>274</sup> M. Eminescu. “Tendence de cucerire” [Tendencies of Conquest], in: *Basarabia* [Bessarabia] (Chisinau: Hyperion, 1991), p. 34. In the same vein, Badescu and Dungaciu argue that the concept of the “Romanian frontier” proposed by Eminescu was a cultural and even “spiritual” one (as opposed to a “political” version of the same). The question is whether a peculiar “frontier vision” can be discerned in Eminescu’s image of Romania as a “cultural bulwark on the Danube.” Such a contention appears quite unfounded. For their argument, see Badescu, Dungaciu, vol. I, pp. 339-340

stark contrast to the Romanian people. In an oscillation between a “spatial” and “cultural” determinism, Eminescu then declared the Russians incapable of producing high culture. The extent to which space and the environment appear as causal factors in this scheme is debatable, but the connection between lack of civilization and the unfavorable natural circumstances that it suggests is revealing.

In the Romanian case, the opposition between “environmentalism” and “racialism” is most revealing, and the balance was clearly inclined in favor of the latter current. The above-mentioned brochure of D. A. Sturdza is especially interesting in this respect. It was conceived as an explicit reaction to the Russian “Pan-Slavist” doctrine and the author’s arguments neatly summarize the views of a major part of the Romanian intellectual “establishment.” The notions of “Orient” and “Occident” are used by Sturdza as substitutes for “civilization” and “barbarity” in a rather orthodox European “Orientalist” fashion. The author declares: “it is not from yesterday that dates the struggle between the peoples of the West and of the East of Europe; it persists for entire centuries already and it is an integral part of the history of the humanity.”<sup>275</sup> The Russians are represented as the most dangerous in the unending series of barbarians who threaten to destroy “European civilization,” synonymous with progress itself:

After the Turks, the Russians have raised themselves against Europe. Imagining that they represent the element of a new civilization (...), the Russians believe they are destined to create a new world, the Russian world... (...). The Russians do not appear to have the desire to enter in the present cultural sphere and to merge with the European civilization, in order to participate at the progressive advancement of the humanity; they want to interrupt the thread of this development (...) and for two hundred years already they attempt to destroy it.<sup>276</sup>

The mission of the Romanians as the main obstacle to this immense danger could not but logically follow from these premises. The author identified the frontiers of modernity and

<sup>275</sup> D. A. Sturdza, *L'Europe, la Russie et la Roumanie. Etude historique et politique*, p. 5.

<sup>276</sup> D. A. Sturdza, p. 7.

civilization with the frontiers of the Romanian state, insisting on the role of Bessarabia as the most advanced “outpost” of the “Romanian element” and the main “battle ground” for the “annihilation of the Romanians,” purportedly one of the basic goals of Russian policy.<sup>277</sup> Though this rhetoric proves the awareness of the importance of “frontiers” in the broader context of confrontation between “races” and “civilizations,” the geographical element plays a clearly subordinate role. However, the Romanian intellectual tradition does provide a clear example of “environmentalism” or “political geography approach” in the works of the well-known Romanian geographer and writer Simion Mehedinti, who was actively involved in the political turmoil of the interwar period and whose views I will examine presently.

The influence of Fr. Ratzel and *Anthropogeographie* is clearly acknowledged by the author<sup>278</sup> himself in one of his “geographical manifestoes,” written during World War II, but unmistakably connected to his earlier opinions. Immediately upon declaring his “profession of faith”- “The Eastern edge of Moldavia is Europe’s oriental frontier”<sup>279</sup> he states that “geographers measure humanity’s events according to planetary time and space. To understand these events in a “hologeic” manner, as Fr. Ratzel, the founder of political geography, used to say, is a method for them.”<sup>280</sup> In the introduction to the same volume, he severely castigated the Romanian scholars, especially historians, for their blatant geographical ignorance and careless use of geographical terminology, proposing an ambitious agenda for the development of the discipline he

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<sup>277</sup> D. A. Sturdza, p. 12-13

<sup>278</sup> Mehedinti wrote a biographical sketch on Ratzel as early as 1904: S. Mehedinti. *Antropogeografia si intemeietorul ei Fr. Ratzel* [Anthropogeography and its Founder, Fr. Ratzel]. (Bucharest: Soccec, 1904). On the other hand, the influence of the earlier works on “comparative geography” by Carl Ritter is also discernible in Mehedinti’s case. For example, he quoted Ritter approvingly on the issue of the different geographical contours of Europe and Africa that somehow “predetermined” Europe’s cultural superiority. Cf. S. Mehedinti, *La géographie comparée d’après Ritter et Peschel* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1901), p. 2-3. In any case, Mehedinti’s “debt” towards German nationalist geography cannot be denied. Similarly to the Russian case, the submerged “nationalist” agenda combined, for Mehedinti, with a limitless faith in positivist science. See S. Mehedinti, *La Géographie comparée...*, p. 8-9

<sup>279</sup> S. Mehedinti, *Frunteria Romaniei spre Rasarit* [Romania’s Frontier to the East],” in: *Opere Complete* [Complete Works], (Bucharest, 1943), p. 268

<sup>280</sup> S. Mehedinti, “Frunteria Romaniei spre Rasarit [Romania’s Frontier to the East],” in: *Opere Complete* [Complete Works], (Bucharest, 1943), p. 268

practiced.<sup>281</sup> Thus, the European context and its influence are obvious in these more general assertions of the geographer, who marked a *prise de conscience* of the discipline and a more “scientific” approach to problems of space and frontiers. In a curious, but perfectly explicable parallel to the Russian “neo-Slavophiles” and even “Eurasians” (though with completely opposed goals in mind), Mehedinti extensively uses the notion of “the Ponto-Baltic isthmus” as marking the “frontier between Europe and Asia.” Not only does he disregard the “traditional” frontier of the Urals as irrelevant, but he proposes a “national appropriation of geography” by stating that “the frontier along the Dniester is adjacent [*vecina*] to the Ponto-Baltic isthmus,” and, thus, can serve as a “dividing line” between the two “worlds.”<sup>282</sup> Mehedinti adapts the notion of “bulwark of civilization” to his geographically oriented approach and thus can label the Dniester as a “geopolitical symbol,”<sup>283</sup> a sort of “frontier” (in the Turnerian sense) for the Romanian people, where the entire potential of the nation acquired an outlet for its manifestation. A no less significant comparison can be made between Mehedinti, Soloviev and Turner in their views of colonization and ethnic expansion. While Turner praised his nation’s advance as the quintessential achievement of the “pioneers” and Soloviev vilified the same process as “deviating” Russia from its normal course of development, Mehedinti envisaged a “compromise” solution. Understandably rejecting and condemning “Asiatic nomad migrations,” as a calamity that befell the Romanian people, he accomplished a true intellectual “feat” by simultaneously praising the Romanian “ethnic expansion to the East” and the practice of transhumance as essentially “civilizing processes.”<sup>284</sup> Nothing could, in his view, be less equivocal, than his

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<sup>281</sup> S. Mehedinti, *Opere Complete* [Complete Works], Bucharest, 1943, p. IV

<sup>282</sup> S. Mehedinti, “Frumtaria Romaniei spre Rasarit [Romania’s Frontier to the East],” in: *Opere Complete* [Complete Works], (Bucharest, 1943), p. 272

<sup>283</sup> S. Mehedinti, “Frumtaria Romaniei spre Rasarit [Romania’s Frontier to the East],” in: *Opere Complete* [Complete Works], (Bucharest, 1943), p. 272

<sup>284</sup> In this sense, a curious parallel is provided by an otherwise marginal Bessarabian-born writer, Axinte Frunza. In a booklet he published during World War I, Frunza similarly praised the Romanians’ “peaceful” ethnic expansion



assertion that “Just as superlative nomad-ism is an Asiatic phenomenon, likewise transhumance in a grand style represents a European, and specifically, a Romanian phenomenon.”<sup>285</sup> His “geopolitical optimism” allowed Mehedinti to differentiate these two experiences and, thus, to supersede, in a most ingenious way, a dilemma that remained unsolvable for Soloviev and non-existent for Turner. While otherwise heavily indebted to political conjunctures and even openly pro-Nazi at times, his more general assertions represent one of the most complete and interesting attempts to create a true Romanian “geopolitical” school and must be regarded within the broader European context of the epoch. In a much earlier article, written in 1914, he depicted the whole European history as a progressive delimitation of the “frontiers” of civilization by the Roman Empire through the “cultivation” and integration of the three “facades” of the European continent (Mediterranean, Atlantic and continental) in a sole cultural and spiritual “universe,” meant to represent an organic “unity” in the face of the foreign Asiatic element.<sup>286</sup> He argued, predictably, that, while the “Mediterranean” and “Atlantic” facades were solidly and soundly “won” for “civilization,” the “continental” one, represented by the Romanian element, was constantly subject to “Asiatic invasions” that did not allow it to advance upon the path of progress. Symbolically personified by Scipio, Caesar and Trajan, the three directions of Roman expansion were to frame and explain the whole course of the continent’s history and, specifically, the role of the Romanian people as bearers of the “civilizing” Roman potential. Naturally, Russia was

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beyond the Dniester as a benign and organic process. It was also a proof of the ethnic vitality of the Romanian element even in the most peripheral regions (in this case, Bessarabia). In fact, one could speak of a peculiar variant of a “Romanian frontier” that advanced despite and even against the state. Cf. A. Frunza, *Romania Mare* [Greater Romania] (Bucharest: Tipografia Curtii Regale F. Goebel Fii, 1915), esp. pp. 58-60

<sup>285</sup> S. Mehedinti, “Frumtaria Romaniei spre Rasarit [Romania’s Frontier to the East],” in: *Opere Complete* [Complete Works], Bucharest, 1943, p. 279

<sup>286</sup> S. Mehedinti, “Romania in marginea continentului [Romania at the Continent’s Edge],” in: *Opere Complete* [Complete Works], pp. 87-98

represented as an “Asiatic state”<sup>287</sup> with “leveling tendencies”<sup>288</sup> that had to be opposed by “Europe” and especially by its Romanian avant-garde. There can hardly be a more striking illustration of the use of similar discursive methods and vocabularies in order to achieve more differing and incompatible ends. What the “Eurasians” saw as the quintessential “evils” of European civilization (annihilation of cultural diversity, spiritual degradation, tendency to universal hegemony etc.), Mehedinti discovered, with similar conviction and using almost identical techniques, in the expansion of the Russian Empire. Thus, identical premises could lead to diametrically opposed conclusions in diverse contexts. Mehedinti, aiming at constructing a wholesale “geopolitical interpretation” of Romanian history, could not but fall into the same traps as his Russian contemporaries and adversaries (naturally, not aware of each other’s exploits). Modernity, either as desirable goal or as abominable deception, figured prominently in every “geopolitical” discourse of the epoch, though expressed in substitute, “spatial,” categories.

## 5. Conclusion

In conclusion, though the parallels and similarities between the Romanian and Russian “political-geographical” discourses can be understood as deriving from the same European context, the structural affinities between these intellectual trends go much deeper and refer to the commonality of the tasks that the “state-building” projects of both entities presupposed in this period. The “spatial self-definition” of intellectuals provided a field for controversy and resources for political action that the politicians in power did not hesitate to use for their own purposes.

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<sup>287</sup> S. Mehedinti, “Romania in marginea continentului [Romania at the Continent’s Edge],” in: *Opere Complete* [Complete Works], p. 95

<sup>288</sup> S. Mehedinti, “Romania in marginea continentului [Romania at the Continent’s Edge],” in: *Opere Complete* [Complete Works], p. 97

While, indeed, ideas possess their autonomy, their evolution and impact are prompted by factors in the “outside world” that must be taken into account in any “contextual approach.” This short analysis of the “environmental” and “frontier” awareness of the Russian “Eurasians,” their intellectual predecessors and their Romanian “counterparts” might serve as a starting point for a more even-handed judgment of the early XX-century intellectual currents and their purported links with totalitarian ideologies. The critique of “modernity,” perhaps a criterion too broad to be effective, nevertheless was with us almost from the moment intellectuals became conscious of the phenomenon as such. While the role of intellectuals as “moral arbiters” might be a thing of the past, the fascination of exploring the human mind and the “monsters” it might give birth to persists, at least as a means of understanding the limits and dangers of being human.

### Chapter III. Bessarabia as an Imperial Borderland: From *Terra Incognita* to the “Jewel of the Crown”

#### 1. Local Nobility, Tsarist Monarchy and Province-Building: The “Nobles’ Project” and Its Failure

One of the most significant aspects of the present social science investigations focuses on the complex relationships between the centres and peripheries of multinational empires<sup>289</sup>. The research on groups than can be labelled “intermediary” (in the sense of shaping and re-presenting the interests and aspirations of the indigenous society at large in its various entanglements with the central authorities) is of particular importance. The multiple facets of any such project (historical, sociological, anthropological, prosopographic etc.) lead to a fruitful combination of micro-level studies and broad comparative images of the strategies of empire in its inherent unevenness. One of the main “intermediary” groups in case of any empire are the local elites that serve as the basis and the beneficiaries of “indirect rule,”<sup>290</sup> a strategy that enables the centre to

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<sup>289</sup> A rather comprehensive discussion of the “general sociology” of state centers and peripheries and of the various mechanisms of the relationship between the central power and local elites can be found in the following work: Shmuel N. Eisenstadt, *The Political Systems of Empires* (Transaction Publishers: New Brunswick, 1992), especially Introduction and Chapter I. On the role of specific social estates and groups in the emergence of modern political regimes, see Barrington Moore, Jr. *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966).

<sup>290</sup> The issue of “indirect rule” has been elaborated primarily with reference to the British imperial experience. The British case is important for our purposes due to the importance that elite solidarity and “delegation of power” played in British policy-making. A rather “unorthodox,” but illuminating and challenging interpretation is provided by: David Cannadine, *Ornamentalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), who stresses the importance of symbol and status for the construction of the “colonial” empire. For the Russian case of the “integration” of local elites into the imperial system and the vagaries of Russian-“native” relationships, the following works might be a useful (if general) starting point: Brower, D. “Kyrgyz nomads and Russian Pioneers: Colonization and Ethnic Conflicts in the Turkestan Revolt of 1916,” in: *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas*, 44 (1995): 41-53; Demko, G. *The Russian Colonization of Kazakhstan, 1896-1916*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1969); Dowler, Wayne. *Classroom and Empire: The Politics of Schooling Russia’s Eastern Nationalities, 1860-1917*. (McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2001); Dukes, P. *Catherine the Great and the Russian Nobility: A Study Based on the Materials of the Legislative Commission of 1767*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967); Jones, St. “Russian Imperial Administration and the Georgian Nobility: The Georgian Conspiracy of 1832,” in: *Slavonic and East European Review* 1:65 (1987), p. 53-76; Kohut, Z. “The Ukrainian Elite in the Eighteenth Century and Its Integration into the Russian Nobility,” in: I. Banac, P. Bushkovich, eds. *Nobility in Russia and Eastern Europe*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), p. 65-98; Lieven, D. *Russia’s Rulers Under the Old Regime*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989); Pearson, R. “Privileges, Rights, and Russification,” in: O. Crisp, and L. Edmondson, eds. *Civil Rights*

effectively control the outlying areas without excessive waste of resources. This is a factor of paramount importance in pre-modern or modernizing polities which are permanently confronted with a scarcity of material and human “building blocs” of empire. This case study of the Bessarabian nobility aims at illustrating the complexity and dynamics of a local elite’s self-awareness and its attitude towards and interaction with the state apparatus, while also emphasizing its role as the only structured social stratum in the region for the most part of the XIX century.

Since the necessity of a comparative approach to social groups and phenomena needs hardly to be emphasised, the first cluster of problems that needs to be examined in order to understand the nature of the stratum analyzed here concerns the wider European and, more importantly, Russian context<sup>291</sup> within which this group emerged and developed. If one is to imagine the East European nobility (ahistorically) on a continuum of autonomy vis-à-vis the central power and clearly defined constitutional identity, several “ideal types” could be constructed. Starting from the complicated estate structures and constitutional privileges of the Polish and Hungarian nobility and reaching to the Russian nobility’s “service” ethics, one can argue that the nobility of

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in *Imperial Russia*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989); Rieber, A. “The Sedimentary Society,” in: E. Clowes, et al., eds. *Between Tsar and People: Educated Society and the Quest for Public Identity in Late Imperial Russia*. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1991), p. 353-376; Saunders, D. “Russia’s Ukrainian Policy (1847-1905): A Demographic Approach,” in: *European History Quarterly*, 25 (1995): 181-208; Weeks, Th. “National Minorities in the Russian Empire, 1897-1917,” in: A. Geifman, ed. *Russia Under the Last Tsar, Opposition and Subversion 1894-1917*. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), p. 111-134.

<sup>291</sup> Aside from the works cited above, one could also usefully draw on the following literature devoted to different aspects of the nobility’s social status and self-perception in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Russia: Ivo Banac and Paul Bushkovitch, eds. *The Nobility in Russia and Eastern Europe* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983); Raeff, Marc. *Origins of the Russian Intelligentsia: The Eighteenth-Century Nobility* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1966); Becker, Seymour. *Nobility and Privilege in Late Imperial Russia* (DeKalb, Ill.: Northern Illinois University Press, 1985). For the text and details on the 1785 Charter to the Nobility, the reader can be directed to: David Griffiths and George E. Munro, eds. and trans. *Catherine II’s Charters of 1785 to the Nobility and the Towns* (Salt Lake City, Utah: C. Schlacks, 1991).

the Romanian Principalities<sup>292</sup> (of which the Bessarabian boyars were a part until the advent of the Russian administration) is situated somewhere in the middle of the picture. Numerically and financially it was stronger than the Russian nobility (in relative terms, of course, keeping in mind its influence upon the general social structure). It also preserved the possibility of manoeuvring and openly bargaining with the state authorities. At the same time, it was much closer to its Russian counterpart in terms of dependence on the prince's policies than the Polish and Hungarian nobility who ultimately struck rather advantageous compromises with the state apparatus. This explains the two characteristics that, in my opinion, prevailed throughout the XIX century in the ranks of Bessarabian nobles: on the one hand, a strong corporate identity, and, on

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<sup>292</sup> The nobility of the Romanian Principalities of Wallachia and Moldavia in the modern period has been rather under-researched, both on an empirical and a theoretical level. Of the older works that touched, at least tangentially, on this stratum's dynamics in the late XVIII and XIX centuries, one could mention the book of Neagu Djuvara, *Intre Orient si Occident: Tarile romane la inceputul epocii moderne (1800-1848)* [Between East and West: The Romanian Lands at the Beginning of the Modern Era (1800-1848)] (Bucharest: Humanitas, 1995), which gives a vivid and colorful overview of the Romanian society of the period. An article by the same author, N. Djuvara, "Les Grands Boiards ont-ils consitues dans les principautes roumaines une veritable oligarchie institutionnelle et hereditaire? », in :*Sudost- Forschungen*, vol. XLVI, Munich, 1987, pp. 1-56, is devoted to a theoretical discussion of the nobles' place within Romanian society. Some works by Romanian historians on political history or the history of ideas are valuable contributions to an understanding of the involvement of the Romanian elites in contemporary political events or ideological debates, but they reveal little by way of social history of this group. Several reveling examples can be cited in this respect. First, the by now classical works of Pompiliu Eliade on the history of the Romanian "public spirit" are important sources: Pompiliu Eliade. *De l'influence francaise sur l'esprit public en Roumanie* (Paris, 1898) and Pompiliu Eliade. *Histoire de l'esprit public en Roumanie au XIXe siecle* (Paris, 1905). From the older generation of Romanian historians the contributions of Ioan C. Filitti have preserved a certain value as both secondary sources and documentary repositories. Among more recent works, several are of special significance: Vlad Georgescu. *Memoires et projets de reforme dans les Principautes Roumaines. 1769-1830* (Bucharest, 1970); Vlad Georgescu. *Ideile politice si iluminismul in Principatele romane, 1750-1831* [Political Ideas and the Enlightenment in the Romanian Principalities, 1750-1831] (Bucharet, 1972); Constantin C. Giurescu, *Contributiuni la studiul originilor si dezvoltarii burgheziei romane pana la 1848* [Contributions to the Study of the Origins and Development of the Romanian Bourgeoisie before 1848] (Bucharest, 1972). In recent years, a number of sociologically oriented and theoretically informed monographs attempted to provide a novel reading of the social makeup of the Romanian Principalities in the late XVIII and the first half of the XIX century. Some of the most significant among them (not without certain flaws) are: Gheorghe Platon and Alexandru-Florin Platon, *Boierimea din Moldova in secolul al XIX-lea. Context european, evolutie sociala si politica (Date statistice si observatii istorice)* [The Moldavian Boyardom in the XIXth Century. European Context, Social and Political Evolution. (Statistical Data and Historical Observations)] (Bucharest: Publishing House of the Romanian Academy, 1995); Alexandru-Florin Platon. *Geneza burgheziei in Principatele Romane (a doua jumătate a secolului al XVIII-lea- prima jumătate a secolului al XIX-lea): Preliminariile unei istorii* [The Emergence of the Bourgeoisie in the Romanian Principalities (the second half of the XVIII and the first half of the XIX Century): Preliminary Studies for a History] (Iasi: "Alexandru Ioan Cuza" University Press, 1997). Even if not always specifically dealing with the Romanian nobility, these writings can serve as a useful guide for a general image of this stratum's social positions and corporate interests.

the other hand, the readiness to serve the state in various capacities. Naturally, these two features could sometimes conflict, as is obvious from the early record of the boyars' relations with the central authorities.

These peculiarities of the Bessarabian nobility derived from two basic sources. On the one hand, its earlier integration into the Phanariot system (that was strikingly similar to the Russian one in the priority it assigned to the function of the individual as opposed to claims of descent) prepared the ground for a gradual acceptance of the regulations of the Russian Table of Ranks, provided that the earlier estate privileges of the local nobility were preserved and reinforced. This did not entail by any means a compromise between the two systems, due to the rigidity and strict hierarchy that the Table of Ranks imposed on the upward mobility of the Empire's nobles. By contrast, the Phanariot practice severed whatever link there might have once existed between a person's function in the bureaucracy and the noble title this person possessed, thus preserving only the external appearance of a hierarchy of titles that was superseded by the arbitrariness of the prince's choice of advisers and officials. This opposition between an essentially traditional (Phanariot) and an essentially bureaucratic (Russian) model of interaction between the state and the nobility prevented anything but a temporary accommodation between the ultimately incompatible agendas of native elites and the imperial state.

From another point of view, due to the estate structure of the Russian social system, the Russian state needed the nobility as a coherent group with significant influence on the local level. The contradictions between the meritocracy promoted (however lukewarmly) by the Table of Ranks and the strong barriers to social advancement ingrained into the estate system were in most cases resolved to the advantage of the latter. Admittedly, the procedure of recognition of the local elites' claims to legitimacy entailed a drastic selection of which Bessarabian gentlemen were

entitled to the rights and privileges of the imperial nobility. However once these people were accepted as such, they were viewed by the authorities as the only “political estate” of the province that could be entrusted with the representation of local interests at the central level or to the local bureaucracy.

This paradoxical situation (difference of mentalities combined with the imperative to collaborate with the local elites) provided significant opportunities for lively competition among differing views and ideas on the role of the nobility. While the central authorities acknowledged its function as the representatives of the local inhabitants, they also strove to transform the boyars primarily into agents of state power. This policy can be explained both by the shortage of qualified bureaucratic personnel and by the importance that autonomist projects acquired at this time in the governing circles of the Russian Empire. However, I will only discuss these aspects in so far as they are relevant for my broader purpose of assessing the forms and outcomes of the interaction between the state and local Bessarabian elites.

The Russian Empire into which Bessarabia was gradually integrated after 1812 was in many respects different from the Petrine and early Catherinian state from which it had developed. Certainly, this difference should not be exaggerated. As many researchers have recently emphasised, the rupture between the Petrine period and previous epochs was neither as complete nor as radical as previously imagined. Thus, an author writing about the continental context of the nobility’s entry into “modernity” asserts: “The tsar [Peter] was not preoccupied so much by the replacement of the dominant social class, but by its reorganization and its conversion to a new dynamism.”<sup>293</sup> What was radically new in Russia, therefore, was not the practice of the state-

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<sup>293</sup> Gheorghe Platon and Alexandru-Florin Platon, *Boierimea din Moldova in secolul al XIX-lea. Context european, evolutie sociala si politica (Date statistice si observatii istorice)* [The Moldavian Boyardom in the XIXth Century. European Context, Social and Political Evolution. (Statistical Data and Historical Observations)] (Bucharest: Publishing House of the Romanian Academy, 1995), p. 51



noble relationship, but the spirit that imbued the new Petrine officials and the role envisaged for the nobility within the new Russian Empire. Along these lines, the reforms undertaken by Catherine II during the second half of her reign, in the 1780s, further developed and refined Peter's schemes. These reforms were also more open to contemporary European influences and superseded the purely practical and utilitarian goals of her predecessor. As Marc Raeff interestingly points out, "she [Catherine] may be ranked among the great cameralist rulers, alongside the late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century German princes from whom she stemmed."<sup>294</sup> The distinguished historian also seems to provide a rather positive evaluation of the agenda the autocrat was pursuing while undertaking these reforms. Thus, he states:

"... to create the socio-institutional matrix for the modernization of Russia's economic and cultural life that she aimed for, she had to develop estates. This was the main thrust of her two charters of 1785, to the nobility and to the towns [...]. All of these legislative acts aimed at stimulating local administrative participation and responsibility by providing security and a corporate structure for the urban and noble sectors of society."<sup>295</sup>

However, even while pointing out these features, the author draws attention to the "ambiguities" and "qualifications" that a careful researcher must take into account while analyzing the outcome of these measures. The Petrine scheme was by no means discarded, though it was nuanced and brought somewhat more in tune with the late XVIII century goals of the Russian polity. The 1785 charter was, nevertheless, a fundamental document for the development of a new variant of "service ethics" among the nobles of the Russian Empire.

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<sup>294</sup> Marc Raeff, "The Well-Ordered Police State and the Development of Modernity in Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century Europe," in: *American Historical Review (AHR)*, Vol. 80, Nr. 5 (December, 1975), pp. 1221-1243, here p. 1236. Marc Raeff expanded and refined his initial argument in his subsequent book: Marc Raeff, *The Well-Ordered Police State: Social and Institutional Change through Law in the Germanies and Russia, 1600-1800*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1983.

<sup>295</sup> Marc Raeff, p. 1239

Similarly to the argument developed by Raeff, a Romanian author emphasises, perhaps somewhat too forcefully:

“Catherine’s reign and the decree [Charter] of 1785 have favoured the social and administrative supremacy of the nobility to the highest degree. In exchange for actively supporting the empress’s policy, it [the nobility] saw the complete fulfilment of all its demands and privileges. A truly symbiotic relationship, thus, was definitively established between the highest layers of the society and the state. The stability and the smooth functioning of the latter depended on the advantages that were granted to the former.”<sup>296</sup>

The estate consciousness of the Russian nobility was significantly shaped by these developments. Moreover, the criterion of inclusion into an estate as the basis for social identity survived throughout Russian society with amazing resilience even after the Great Reforms of the second half of the XIX century. This peculiarity suggests that the “estate principle” was one of the building blocks of the imperial practice and social imagery. Despite all these characteristics of the Russian imperial system, the “estate consciousness” of the nobility could come into conflict with state interests as perceived by central or provincial bureaucrats.

The notion of “estate consciousness,” while valuable as an indicator of the nobility’s subjective self-perception, should be qualified by introducing the related but distinct variable of “social identification.” The profound ambiguity of the nobility’s social standing throughout the existence of the Empire, partially explaining its passivity during the Great Reforms of the 1860s and its failure to organize effectively in order to protect its interests in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century,

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<sup>296</sup> Gh. Platon, p. 51

should be linked to the contested nature of its social identification.<sup>297</sup> There was a major discrepancy between the ostensible legal privileges and the juridical guarantees of the nobility's corporate structure and the social and economic problems that hampered the consolidation of a unitary social stratum. The ultimate failure to inculcate the nobility with the appropriate social and behavioural ethos stemmed as much from the Herculean task that the government faced in constructing a coherent social identity where there had been none before and from the internal contradictions within the nobility itself. "On the one hand, [the government] strove to create a social community with a powerful, self-regulating ethical and behavioural code. On the other hand, it insisted on [its] absolute loyalty and complete submission to imperial power."<sup>298</sup> Thus, the contradiction between the (ideal) social and economic independence of the nobility and its subordination to the state did not operate only on the periphery, but constituted a general problem of the "first estate" on the all-imperial level.

The integration of the peripheral elites only compounded the complexity and insecurity of the nobility's social identification. In fact, two of the chronic problems that A. Rieber identified as confronting the *dvorianstvo* in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries were specifically related to the multiethnic character of the Russian polity. First, the steady territorial expansion led to the gradual integration of widely differing elite groups (in social, economic and cultural terms) into an ostensibly unitary social category of *dvorianstvo*. In fact, their assimilation could be a protracted and hardly smooth process, as demonstrated by the challenges the government faced both on its Western and Eastern borderlands.<sup>299</sup> Second, the aspect of legal confirmation of the numerous claimants vying for the privileged status of a Russian noble was a central

<sup>297</sup> This interpretation is suggested by Alfred J. Rieber, "Sotsial'naia identifikatsiia i politicheskaia volia: russkoe dvorianstvo ot Petra I do 1861 g.," in: P. A. Zaionchkovskii (1904-1983 gg.): *Stat'i, publikatsii i vospominaniia o nem* (Moscow: ROSSPEN, 1998), pp. 273- 314

<sup>298</sup> Rieber, p. 275-276

<sup>299</sup> For a discussion of the controversies concerning the problem of Polish and Ukrainian gentry's identification and co-optation into the *dvorianstvo*, see Rieber, pp. 281-283

preoccupation of the state authorities throughout most of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The extent, to which this process consumed the energies of the Heraldry Department, but also of the local organs of noble self-administration, was unparalleled. Certainly, both the duration of this process and the debates that pitted the already secure members of the first estate against their dubious counterparts (especially of non-Russian origin) points to the blurred nature of the criteria for membership and, hence, to the weakness of estate solidarity.<sup>300</sup> This weakness was only enhanced by the problematic relationship between the educated nobility's estate identity and the changing policies of the monarchy regarding service patterns and requirements. The gradual separation of bureaucratic and intelligentsia elements from the noble milieu also hardly contributed to a coordinated activity of the remaining group of "typical" nobility that shunned as much from a state service career as from an openly oppositional stance towards the regime.<sup>301</sup> However, the regional peculiarities of the noble stratum are especially important for the Bessarabian case, which featured all the characteristic ambiguities between the lure of speedy assimilation and the defence of traditional "rights and privileges."

The case of the Bessarabian nobility's early position towards the central authorities and its later acquiescence in the advantages of assimilation bears substantial and significant similarities to the Ukrainian case. Like their Ukrainian counterparts, the Romanian nobles of Bessarabia were largely divided into two groups (a fact which was reflected in the first series of noble elections through the crystallization of two "parties"). The difference was that, aside from the "new men" that were either recently ennobled by the Moldavian princes or decorated by Russian authorities, there existed a small number of prominent "aristocratic" families (e.g., the Sturdzas, the Balshs, the Cantacuzinos or the Catargis) who could claim a superior status in comparison with their

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<sup>300</sup> Rieber, p. 286

<sup>301</sup> Rieber, p. 295-296

peers (this situation can only partially be compared to the competition between the Ukrainian *szlachta* and the Cossack *starshina*).<sup>302</sup> However, like in the Ukrainian case, these distinguished boyar families ultimately accepted the “rules of the game” and merged with their earlier adversaries into a unified noble estate. Even more to the point, the Bessarabian nobles (unlike the Polish, Finnish/Swedish or Baltic German nobility) did not possess a strong tradition of local leadership and independence from the state apparatus. Nevertheless, as in Ukraine, this peripheral group of boyars first articulated a weak oppositional discourse (much weaker, in fact, than the coherent, if failed petition of the Ukrainian elite elaborated at the Glukhov Council of 1763)<sup>303</sup> and became divided, “in their search for an imperial role and identity,” along, roughly, the same lines of “two basic attitudes-” an “assimilationist” and a “traditionalist” current.<sup>304</sup> Moreover, even the incentives at integration into the imperial system were basically similar and had to do with the economic and legal advantages that were guaranteed by the markedly “pro-nobility” policies of Alexander I. (In Bessarabia, though, the economic privileges of the nobility never entailed the introduction of serfdom, which was absent there in legal terms). The comparison, of course, should not be stretched too far, since the Ukrainians were in a different position towards the Russian “core” and had to deal with rather different questions of self-identification.<sup>305</sup> Still, the similarity was also visible in the institutional dimension, where the “traditionalist” current gained some strength from the protracted process of status recognition. The following assertion could be, *mutatis mutandis*, transferred to the early 19<sup>th</sup> century Bessarabian context: “The general feeling of dissatisfaction over the loss of native institutions and ancient “rights and

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<sup>302</sup> The Ukrainian case is discussed in Zenon E. Kohut, “The Ukrainian Elite in the Eighteenth Century and Its Integration into the Russian Nobility,” in: Ivo Banac and Paul Bushkovitch, eds. *The Nobility in Russia and Eastern Europe* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), pp. 65-97, here p. 69

<sup>303</sup> Kohut, p. 71

<sup>304</sup> Kohut, p. 75

<sup>305</sup> Kohut, p. 83-84

privileges” was exacerbated by a long struggle over Ukrainian claims to imperial nobility.”<sup>306</sup> The reluctance of imperial authorities to ascertain the native understanding of “noble status” could thus act as a potent blocking factor in the way of assimilationist tendencies in both cases.

The corporate rights granted by Catherine II to the Russian nobility in 1785 made the Empire much more attractive for the local boyars than might have been the case, had the Petrine system remained unchanged. Thus, theoretically, the nobility could balance its estate consciousness with loyal service to the state almost immediately after Bessarabia’s annexation to Russia. However, several factors concurred to make such an evolution unlikely and, ultimately, impossible. The main factor was, undoubtedly, the incompatibility of the content and aims of the local nobility’s own self-awareness with the long-term intentions of the Russian state. This incompatibility included, on the one hand, what could be termed “*cultural misunderstanding*” between the two partners in this mutual encounter, and, on the other hand, a *pragmatic* difference regarding the future of Bessarabia within Russia. What I call “cultural misunderstanding” means, in this case, the antagonism of criteria for social legitimization used in two different types of societies: the traditional Bessarabian social milieu with diffuse prestige and client networks and the modernizing Russian polity which aimed to rationalize the social fabric. The noble status in the Bessarabian case was linked primarily with the actual social position of the individual and the informal influence he was able to exercise. No stable legal provisions codified a person’s position as a noble, which was in stark contrast to the Russian attempt to construct a social hierarchy based as much upon the letter of the law as upon the reality behind it. I emphasise the “cultural” nature of this phenomenon because it was rooted in conflicting values and opposite ethical principles (in the Russian case- a “service” ethics with an activist orientation towards the “common good,” in the Bessarabian one- a conservative link with an immutable tradition). The

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<sup>306</sup> Kohut, p. 80

second, “pragmatic” factor is linked with the concrete dynamics of the Russian policy in Bessarabia. It found its manifestation in the conflict between three visions of the future of the province within the Empire: 1) a centralist vision of rapid integration with the Russian core; 2) an autonomist project advocated by certain representatives of the central bureaucracy who envisaged the reconstruction of Russia on a federalist model; 3) a traditionalist agenda of the local boyars interested in the preservation of the status quo and a confirmation and enhancement of their position in the province.

The first of these features involved a negative reaction (mutual rejection or incomprehension), whereas the second indicated a more assertive approach. In this case, the contentious issue was the nature of the positive contribution of the two sides to the region’s development. Consequently, the first range of phenomena displayed itself in the sphere of mentalities and mutual images, whereas the second evolved into an open competition for control over the region. I will begin with this second dimension and then gradually show how the different concrete projects were influenced by and derived from essentialist images and stereotypes that the two players directed at each other. The dynamics of alternative “projects” concerning the region’s future status within the Empire will allow a better understanding of the local nobility’s initial resistance and of its final acceptance of unconditional integration into the empire.

A fundamental question that arises in connection with this aspect concerns two main considerations: 1) the extent to which the Russian Empire was willing to rely on indirect rule and to co-opt the local boyars for this purpose and 2) the competing visions supported by various parts of the Russian state apparatus and different factions of the nobility with regard to the role to be played by this region in the future structure of the Russian state. Several stages can be discerned in this process. The major ones are the “autonomy” period (1812-1828), when the competition of opposing legitimizing claims was at its height, and the much longer “period of

centralization and integration,” which was not fully completed even by 1917, though the nobility ceased to play a significant role in challenging the policies of central authorities much earlier, perhaps as early as the last years of the autonomist experiment.

Though I will concentrate in what follows upon the “alternative project” of the nobility, several points should be mentioned concerning the controversy within the Russian bureaucracy as such. In the initial phase of the province’s organization, two basic currents dominated the thoughts and actions of the Russian officials responsible for the newly acquired province. One of them, supported by the tsar and some of his officials, was part of the larger tendency towards constitutionalist and proto-federalist models that characterised Alexander’s reign. Within this interpretative framework, the Bessarabian case is usually compared with the emperor’s Finnish and Polish “experiments”. The second current, which upheld the tradition of centralization and further standardization of the empire, developed simultaneously with the first and gradually received official endorsement despite both the resistance of the nobility and the favourable attitude of the monarch to the autonomist approach. One of the causes of such an outcome, which does not have to do only with the central bureaucracy’s reluctance to allow particular privileges to certain regions of the empire, stems from the opposing criteria for the legitimization of the Russian rule in the province. In this sense, I believe, one can speak of a “boyar project” for the province’s organization.

This “project” differed fundamentally from the autonomist and centralist designs in two main ways. Firstly, whereas they both aimed at a rationalization and modernization of the state structure- albeit with different goals in mind and different means to achieve them- the vision of the politically conscious boyars was quintessentially *traditional*. This vision had two components: a tendency towards *restoration* and one towards *renovation*. The first tendency presupposed the full recognition and practical application of the rights and privileges of the noble



estate as enshrined in the traditional legal norms and the few extant attempts at codification undertaken by previous Moldavian princes. This project was aimed at the consolidation of the nobility's position through reverting to a purportedly unadulterated tradition corrupted by the Phanariot regime. The tendency towards "renovation" stemmed from the interpretation of the new Russian administration as the inauguration of a new era of peace and prosperity for the region. The local nobles perceived the "justice" of the Russian authorities to consist in successfully combining the revival of a lost and distorted tradition with all the advantages that a "Christian" administration could offer. The "renovation" component was based on one of the few common points that the local nobility shared with the rhetoric of the central authorities. This common ground was expressed in the constant invocation of Russia's redemption of Bessarabia from the Ottoman yoke. Thus, in a letter addressed to Alexander I and written in 1814 (otherwise one of the most poignant manifestations of the boyar opposition to the centralizing tendency) the local nobles wrote:

"...we assure [Your Majesty] that the Moldavians are faithful to You; while still being held under the tyranny of the Ottoman Porte, the Moldavians were eagerly waiting for the happy destiny that befell them now, that of being Your subjects, that of having one single God in Heaven and one single Christian Emperor on earth; now all Moldavians are saying, with joy in their souls, that, finally, they have achieved that for which they have prayed to Heaven..."<sup>307</sup>

However, this common ground for legitimacy was mainly rhetorical and hardly affected the stance of the local nobility when their concrete interests were concerned. It also had rhetorical overtones in the official discourse, though the second half of Alexander's reign saw a religious

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<sup>307</sup> *Kishinevskie Eparkhial'nye Vedomosti* [Kishinev Church Bulletin], 1902, Nr. 17, p. 367-368

resurgence that the tsar himself (more or less) sincerely embraced. This rhetorical device was, however, a constant formula both in earlier and later representations of Russia's role in the Balkan region. While the content and implications of this formula changed according to the period of its utterance, its rhetorical character remained stable.

The restoration discourse can be found, by contrast, almost exclusively in the written accounts left by the local nobles and in their attempts to safeguard their own estate interests. Here the irreconcilability of the projects becomes obvious. By implication, one perceives the fundamental dissimilarity of the sense in which the essence and role of an "estate" was understood by the Russian officials and by the local boyars. The Bessarabian nobles clearly viewed themselves not as agents of state power or simple advocates of local grievances and petitions in front of the Russian authorities, but as depositories, preservers and *restorers* of a rich and long-standing tradition, corrupted or degenerated during the centuries of Ottoman dominance, but still structuring their mentality and determining their claims for renewed (but traditional) power and prestige in the region. They also seemed to regard themselves as fully entitled to an active political role. Thus, in the letter cited above, one can read:

"Your unending grace, that You have shown to us during the accession of this land [to Russia], by leaving us our customs and laws that we have been following and using for almost four centuries, gives us the courage [...] to humbly ask you to grant us the following: let us not be estranged from our laws, until, by Imperial orders, a [stable] administration is established here, instead of the temporary administration that exists today; this administration should show respect to our laws; [...] also, grant *us*, August Sovereign, a civil governor for this province issued from *native* [authentic] *Moldavians*, a man

faithful to Your Imperial Majesty, who *knows the boyar families, our customs and laws and the countries adjacent to us....*” (My emphasis- A.C.).<sup>308</sup>

This is not only a program for the restoration of a politically autonomous Moldavian administration in the province, but also one of the most forceful articulations of the consciousness of a common identity of the nobles as the authentic representatives of the local inhabitants. Not surprisingly, this program is focused on the preservation of the *status-quo*, at best, or even on a regressive drive towards forms of self-administration that could not be seriously envisaged by any Russian official as a working formula for an expanding empire of the early XIX century. In a previous letter to the Metropolitan, the boyars prove to be much more insistent on the validity and historical adequacy of their claim to “home rule:” “Four centuries will soon have passed since Moldavia is governed according to its own laws, and can one possibly believe that it never possessed or does not even now possess such laws? Do we not possess our ancient Moldavian customs and compulsory legal acts [*pravile*]? [...] What greater offence can be brought upon us in the situation in which we find ourselves now?”<sup>309</sup>

This outburst of political consciousness and the sketching of a fragmentary political agenda (rather advanced given the status of those who envisaged it) were not unprovoked. As the pattern of centre-periphery relations might suggest, it was also a response to the attempt to impose the centralist project aimed at Bessarabia’s rapid integration into the imperial core. Thus, it responded directly to the “Project of organization of civil administration in Bessarabia,” written in 1814 by Russian officials serving in the local administration and supported by the Russian governor. Aside from the customary recommendations concerning the necessary measures to be

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<sup>308</sup> *Kishinevskie Eparkhial'nye Vedomosti* [Kishinev Church Bulletin], Nr. 17, 1902, p. 368

<sup>309</sup> Arsenii Stadnitsky, *Gavriil Banulesko-Bodoni: Ekzarh Moldo-Vlahiiskii (1808-1812) i Mitropolit Kishinevskii (1813-1821)* [Gavriil Banulesko-Bodoni: Exarch of Moldo-Wallachia (1808-1812) and Metropolitan of Kishinev (1813-1821)]. (St.Petersburg: 1895), p. 283

undertaken for the improvement of administrative practices, this document contains a scathing critique of the behaviour and agenda of the local nobles, who at the time dominated Bessarabia's governing bodies. To illustrate the incompatibility of a traditional and bureaucratic "service ethics," I will cite this writing at some length.

"[the preponderance of Moldavian councillors leads to] a huge inequality among the votes cast, generated by the overwhelming surplus of the Moldavian councillors in comparison with the Russian ones. For this obvious disadvantage to be compounded, the Moldavian councillors [...] would rather unite their votes between themselves than with those of the Russian councillors. The causes are the following: the identical origin and the uniform education of the Moldavians; their well-known character, similar in their own midst, but different from that of other peoples with a healthy judgment; their innate passions for their self-interest; the bonds of blood and family among them; the close connections they maintain with each other, patriotic ones and the ones deriving from their landholdings."<sup>310</sup>

The author also harshly condemns the local nobles for their "mutual support against the Russians," whom they treat with "extreme malevolence." They, moreover, show "disgust" for the Russian laws. The nobles are also accused of "bad will" because they "apply every kind of mischief [...]" in order to "hide from the Russians, by whatever means possible, the present state of the country they inhabit, leave the Russians in ignorance and [...] are careful that the Russians should have no idea at all about this land" so that the locals could "augment their rights and privileges."<sup>311</sup> The author is also keen to emphasise that "in Moldavia, only the unworthy and inhuman rights of the strongest" are respected, and that these "damned" practices are convenient

<sup>310</sup> A. N. Egunov, ed. *Zapiski Bessarabskogo Statisticheskogo Komiteta* [Writings of the Bessarabian Statistical Committee], 3 vols. Vol. III. (Kishinev: Publishing House of the Bessarabian Regional Board, 1868), p. 81

<sup>311</sup> A. N. Egunov, ed. *Zapiski Bessarabskogo Statisticheskogo Komiteta* [Writings of the Bessarabian Statistical Committee], 3 vols. Vol. III. (Kishinev: Publishing House of the Bessarabian Regional Board, 1868), p. 82

for the boyars.<sup>312</sup> Thus, one obtains an image of a disorganised (at best) or corrupt and thoroughly degraded society (at worst), with the local nobles more akin to their former Ottoman tyrants than to anything resembling the Russian nobles.

In this case, the Russian sources of the period convey both stereotypical and original images of the “political estate” in Bessarabia. They are stereotypical insofar as a society considering itself more advanced in its claims to represent civilization labels a traditional and patriarchal society as being inherently inferior, a quality predictably represented, in the discursive field, by corruption, greed, absence of moral restraint, lack of rationality (“unhealthy judgment”), deceit and pure “survival of the fittest,” here expressed by unbridled self-interest. All these epithets, applied to the Bessarabian boyars, also recall the Orientalist discourse characteristic of Western literature of the time. However, a picture one-sidedly stressing a “dominating discourse” would be incomplete, if not inaccurate. In fact, many of these features have more to do with broader patterns of cultural interaction and misunderstanding than with outright value judgments. The boyars initially were capable of annihilating many of these degrading qualifications by turning the “rhetorical weapons” of the Russians against the Russians themselves or by appealing to the “redemptive” Russian rule through stressing the religious legitimization of the tsar’s domination in Bessarabia.

The second key feature that distinguished the “boyar project” for the province’s organization from those backed by St. Petersburg, concerned Bessarabia as a “new homeland” for the Christian peoples of the Balkans. This role for the new province was clearly one of the most important elements in the initial plan for the province’s development. While its more ambitious goals eventually had to be discarded due to logistical and political difficulties, the important part

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<sup>312</sup>A. N. Egunov, ed. *Zapiski Bessarabskogo Statisticheskogo Komiteta* [Writings of the Bessarabian Statistical Committee], 3 vols. Vol. III. (Kishinev: Publishing House of the Bessarabian Regional Board, 1868), p. 84

colonization played in populating Southern Bessarabia can hardly be denied. The first clear formulation of the “new homeland” thesis can be found in the instructions given by Admiral P. V. Chichagov to the first Bessarabian governor, Scarlat Sturdza. Chichagov particularly emphasised:

“It is necessary to create the possibility for the Bessarabian inhabitants to enjoy the advantages of a paternal and generous administration and to attract, in an ingenious manner, the attention of the neighbouring peoples towards this province. The last war [the Russian-Turkish War of 1806-1812] has awakened the minds and hopes of the Moldavians, Wallachians, Greeks, Bulgarians, Serbs and of other peoples attached to Russia. [...] The soul of these peoples can be subjugated [again] and our enemies will conquer it. Consequently, it is necessary to maintain the attachment of these peoples and to protect it from the influence of our enemies. This assessment will constitute the basis for the entirety of your actions in your present function.”<sup>313</sup>

This project, however, clashed with the traditional world-view of the boyars, who, at least initially, saw the new Russian province as either the first step towards the inclusion of both Principalities into the Empire or simply as a kind of “minor replica” of the Moldavian Principality governed by the Orthodox monarch. This can be seen from the letters cited above and from the boyars’ reluctance to recognise the potential for colonization of the area with ethnic groups other than Romanians. At one point, in the letter addressed to the Metropolitan, they mention that the Moldavian governor to be installed according to their wishes could also “be able to attract towards himself the hearts of our brothers, to augment the region’s population and to be for us an abode for evermore.”<sup>314</sup> It is not at all clear what “brothers” exactly means in this case,

<sup>313</sup> A. N. Egunov, ed. *Zapiski Bessarabskogo Statisticheskogo Komiteta* [Writings of the Bessarabian Statistical Committee], 3 vols. Vol. III. (Kishinev: Publishing House of the Bessarabian Regional Board, 1868), p. 110

<sup>314</sup> Arsenii Stadnitsky, *Gavriil Banulesko-Bodoni: Ekzarh Moldo-Vlahiiskii (1808-1812) i Mitropolit Kishinevskii (1813-1821)* [Gavriil Banulesko-Bodoni: Exarch of Moldo-Wallachia (1808-1812) and Metropolitan of Kishinev (1813-1821)]. (St.Petersburg: 1895), p. 284

but, judging from the previous context, the boyars seemed to refer particularly to the inhabitants of the Moldavian Principality. The economic interest in increasing their landholdings at the expense of free lands in the southern part of the province must, certainly, be taken into account, but this does not invalidate the claim that the local nobles were opposed to a serious revision of the demographic structure of the region. Thus, the construction of a “new homeland” for the Balkan nations, envisaged by some Russian officials and initially supported by the emperor, presupposed the minimization of the historical legitimacy of the boyar estate, since the new region had to serve as a model and, therefore, a “*tabula rasa*.” The estate consciousness of the boyars proved to be one of the factors to hamper the projects of the “philosopher on the throne,” Alexander I. Thus, what the boyars wanted was the preservation of their estate privileges, and, more broadly, of the previous social organization. They identified themselves as the only “political estate” available in the province (it would still be premature to speak of a “political nation,” especially given the ethnic heterogeneity of the stratum). At this stage, the estate interests of the nobility did not coincide with the centralization and uniformization drive undertaken by the central government. If in the long run, the result was predictable, throughout the first decades of the XIX century it was not clear to what extent the Bessarabian nobility could respond to the challenges of indirect rule presupposed by the scheme of regional autonomy. To summarise my argument, the Bessarabian boyars possessed a marked sense of estate consciousness, but this sense was based on completely different ethical criteria from that of the Russian nobility and proved to be incompatible with the intentions of the Russian state and its officials.

In what follows, I concentrate on the second major aspect of the early period of relationships between the local elite and the Russian authorities. What I call “cultural misunderstanding” refers primarily to the interpretations of the basic social categories of the province and, specifically, to

the definition of the criteria for acceptance into the Russian nobility. This is an example of “cultural translation” in the broadest sense. The use of the term “cultural” in the case of an issue centred on social categories might cause legitimate doubts. However, I consciously use this notion in order to emphasise the difference in world-views that characterised the interaction of the local elites and the imperial administration. The Orientalist stereotypes previously discussed fall in the same category, but I believe that the case of the controversy connected to the claim to noble status reveals certain long-held assumptions that transcend the purely social sphere. The problem is not so much centred upon social structure as such, but upon the mutual attitudes that the actors displayed towards one another. In this, I follow the approach used by Michael Khodarkovsky when discussing the relationship of the Russian state with the steppe nomads before the XIX century.<sup>315</sup> While keeping the many differences in mind, I find this explanatory framework useful in the Bessarabian case. I am also aware of the purely conventional nature of the “cultural” label which tends to encompass all the phenomena of the “mental sphere.” However, it is almost impossible to find a term that would better describe the multiple “translation” and “transition” experiences that the people of a borderland (such as the Bessarabian one) were constantly subjected to.

After the initial organizational period, the imperial administration needed a noble estate structured according to the Russian pattern in order to establish a permanent bureaucratic apparatus mostly recruited from prominent local families. Despite the presence of elements of a specific estate consciousness among a significant portion of the nobles, these elements were directed exclusively “inwards,” towards the traditionalist goals analysed above. As one of the most important spokesmen of the early XX century Bessarabian nobility notes: “Unfortunately,

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<sup>315</sup> Michael Khodarkovsky, *Russia's Steppe Frontier: The Making of a Colonial Empire, 1500-1800* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 2001), especially the Introduction and Chapter I, where the author presents his conceptual and theoretical framework.



the separate representatives of our estate were not able to unite among themselves and to identify those interests which should have created a link between them; their mutual relationships were expressed by various conflicts, personal feuds, arguments and endless politicking [*politikantstve*]-causes more than sufficient for the disorganisation of any good order and system in the task of administration.”<sup>316</sup> Analysing this early period of Bessarabia’s integration into Russia from a bureaucratic point of view, the author asserts the reluctance of the local nobility to serve according to the Russian model. Hence, the necessity arose of codifying the estate structure of the boyars as a first step towards their gradual assimilation into the Russian nobility.

In order to achieve this, the Russian authorities attempted to organise several commissions for ascertaining the privileges and rights of the Bessarabian nobles and for ascribing them equivalent positions within the Russian Table of Ranks. This process proved much more arduous and lengthy than initially conceived and revealed the opposing criteria for legitimacy presupposed by the Romanian and Russian traditions of estate consciousness. The “tradition,” as well as the donation acts of the Moldavian princes were, in many cases, regarded by the Russian Heraldry Department as fake or purposefully distorted. This occurred not only because of their uncertain authenticity (which was a widespread phenomenon at the time), but also because of the

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<sup>316</sup> The subject of the Bessarabian nobility’s situation under Russian rule has received very little attention from the scholarly community dealing with the region. Aside from the archival sources, the several basic reference books devoted to the subject are of a purely informative or else apologetic character. In the first category, one can include the following works: George Bezviconi, *Boierimea Moldovei dintre Prut si Nistru (1812-1940)* [The Nobility of the Land between the Prut and the Dniester (1812-1940)], 2 vols. (Bucharest: Publishing House of the Royal Foundations, 1940-1943), which represents, in fact, a detailed genealogy of the main Bessarabian noble families and contains certain previously unpublished documents; also the recent collective work edited by I. Colesnic, *Basarabia necunoscuta* [The Unknown Bessarabia], 4 vols. (Chisinau: 1993-2002), which provides short biographical sketches of many prominent local personalities of the pre-1918 period and, thus, can serve as a useful reference material, though it hardly qualifies as a scholarly monograph. The second category is represented by the only attempt at a comprehensive presentation of the Bessarabian noble estate undertaken during the Russian administration: A. N. Krupenskii, *Ocherk o bessarabskom dvorianstve* [An Essay on the Bessarabian Nobility] (Kishinev: Publishing House of the Gubernia Board, 1912). This brochure, though rich in information, is highly biased and tends to transfer the contemporary complicated political situation of the Bessarabian nobles into the early stages of the province’s integration into the Empire. The above citation is taken from it: A. N. Krupenskii, *Ocherk o bessarabskom dvorianstve* [An Essay on the Bessarabian Nobility] (Kishinev: Publishing House of the Gubernia Board, 1912), p. 7

incompatibility of the bureaucratic system with the informal prestige and client networks that characterised many local nobles' claims for inclusion into the official list of imperial nobility. This incompatibility ranged from terminological controversies to the foundations of the traditional hierarchy of the local boyars, which were often contested by the Russian officials from the centre. One of the most interesting documents illustrating this "cultural misunderstanding" was written as late as 1892 by the Bessarabian Regional Marshal of the nobility.<sup>317</sup> In the conclusion of his petition, he states:

"The descendants of the Moldavian boyars, which have spilled their blood under the yoke of the Crescent in order to defend the interests of Orthodoxy and of the Orthodox Russian State, and after that, following the inclusion of Bessarabia within the Empire in 1812, have reached into the first ranks of the Russian nobility, are entitled to demand that the real application of their rights to noble status [...] be made easier and more accessible for anyone who has the right to enjoy such a status."<sup>318</sup>

Thus, even after the successful integration of the overwhelming majority of the nobles into the imperial hierarchy, differences in traditions and mentalities continued to be perceived as one of the factors hampering the successful partnership between the state apparatus and the representatives of the local elite.

The difference between the cultural horizon of the authorities and of the boyars must not be underestimated as a cause of the failure of the autonomy project. This is, I believe, the sense in which the first and most bitter conflict between the central authorities and the local nobility

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<sup>317</sup> G. Bezviconi, *Boierimea Moldovei dintre Prut si Nistru (1812-1940)* [The Nobility of the Land between the Prut and the Dniester (1812-1940)], 2 vols. (Bucharest: Publishing House of the Royal Foundations, 1940-1943), vol I, pp. 24-30

<sup>318</sup> G. Bezviconi, *Boierimea Moldovei dintre Prut si Nistru (1812-1940)* [The Nobility of the Land between the Prut and the Dniester (1812-1940)], 2 vols. (Bucharest: Publishing House of the Royal Foundations, 1940-1943), vol I, pp. 29-30

should be understood. The pragmatic issues that opposed the interests of the Bessarabian nobles to those of the central bureaucracy (which was itself torn between competing approaches to solving the “Bessarabian problem”) led the boyars to envisage an alternative “project” for the province’s future. Their cultural background proved no less decisive in their attempts to subvert the centre’s policies. One could draw a parallel between the problems encountered by the Russian authorities in Bessarabia and the challenges the empire faced while expanding in the steppe regions of Central Asia<sup>319</sup>. This comparison should be pursued with many reservations and qualifications, but the scheme Michael Khodarkovsky elaborates of the encounter of two differing cultural environments could be successfully applied to the Bessarabian case. Bessarabia’s nobility was characterised by cultural fluidity. While rooted in a patriarchal and hierarchical social setting, the Moldavian boyars were socialised within a model of state-elite relationship that was strongly influenced by the practices of the late Ottoman Empire (based on informal power networks which replaced, in many cases, the declining authority of the state). This state of affairs was not challenged until the boyars’ interaction with the Russian occupation regimes<sup>320</sup>. Consequently, the Russian authorities almost immediately realised that this

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<sup>319</sup> Michael Khodarkovsky, *Russia’s Steppe Frontier: The Making of a Colonial Empire, 1500-1800* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 2001), especially chapter 5, “Concepts and Policies in the Imperial Borderlands, 1690s-1800,” pp. 184-220. Certain other works (including by the same author) deal with similar issues and are relevant (however indirectly) to the Bessarabian case: Barrett, Th. *At the Edge of Empire: The Terek Cossacks and the North Caucasus Frontier, 1700-1860*. (Boulder, Colo: Westview Press, 1999); Khodarkovsky, M. *Where Two Worlds Met. The Russian State and the Kalmyk Nomads in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> Centuries*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992); Lantzeff, G., R. Pierce. *Eastward to Empire: Exploration and Conquest on the Russian Open Frontier to 1750*. (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1973); Paasi, A. *Territories. Boundaries, and Consciousness: The Changing Geographies of the Finnish-Russian Border*. (Chichester, U.K.: John Wiley and Sons, 1996); Paine, S. *Imperial Rivals. China, Russia and Their Disputed Frontier*. (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 1996); Rieber, A. “Struggle over the Borderlands,” in: F. Starr, ed. *The Legacy of History in Russia and the New States of Eurasia*. (Armonk: M. E. Sharpe et al., 1994); Wiczynski, J. *The Russian Frontier*. (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1976); Wolff, D. *To the Harbin Station: the Liberal Alternative in Russian Manchuria, 1898-1914*. (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1999); and, especially, Willard Sunderland, *Taming the Wild Field: Colonization and Empire on the Russian Steppe* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2004).

<sup>320</sup> George F. Jewsbury, *Anexarea Basarabiei la Rusia: 1774-1828. Studiu asupra expansiunii imperiale*, trans. by Alina Pelea, (Iasi: POLIROM, 2003), pp. 47-60. [Romanian translation of the original edition: George F. Jewsbury. *The Russian Annexation of Besarabia: 1774-1828. A Study of Imperial Expansion*. (East European Quarterly, 1976).

autochthonous element would have to be either “streamlined” according to all-Russian standards or strongly diluted with foreign elements in order to serve as a secure intermediary between the claims of the local society and those of St.-Petersburg. The second policy line was pursued with similar vigour to the first one and was one of the preconditions of the successful integration of the local Bessarabian elite into the Russian state apparatus and Russian society at large.

One unexplored possibility in the dynamics of this stratum’s development is the applicability of the concept of “alternative modernization/ Westernization” to its evolution in the first decades of Russian rule. Both before and after the annexation of Bessarabia to Russia the boyars were subjected to cultural influences from the centre and so to an “indirect modernization” by St.-Petersburg’s mediation. As one can see from their descriptions of the nobility, the Russians saw every feature of pure “barbarians” in the persons they had to collaborate with. The Russian administration was viewed, on the other hand, as a tool for rationalization and progress. The cultural and social incompatibility between the rulers and ruled is obvious in the following lines of F. Vigel, one-time Bessarabian vice-governor and adversary of the “boyar group: “not one among them speaks the Russian language or has shown any interest to see Moscow or Petersburg; from their words it can be inferred that, for them, our North is a savage country. On the other hand, many of them have travelled to Vienna, which is much closer and where, indeed, it is warmer and more entertaining [to live]”<sup>321</sup>. Though these words are tainted by his bias towards the boyars, they point to the reluctance of the Bessarabian nobles to accept the new, Russian “cultural space” and their rooted-ness in “Oriental” cultural practices. The reference to Vienna points, of course, to “alternative Westernization.” This trend, however, did not play any significant role in the following decades and the “Westernization through Petersburg” gained the upper hand. Nevertheless, Russian officials were constantly aware of the potential attraction of

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<sup>321</sup> F. F. Vigel, *Vospominaniia* [Memoirs], vol. VI, (St. Petersburg: 1892), p. 65.

alternative paths to modernization upon the nobility in this borderland region of the Empire. Thus, during the early phase of the consolidation of the Romanian nation-state, the Bessarabian administration had to anticipate the possibility of such an attraction and often fell into hasty generalizations about the existence of an “oppositional movement” among the province’s nobility.

The shifting attitude of the Bessarabian nobility towards the central authorities leads to interesting conceptual questions linked with the pattern of centre-periphery relations. In this respect, the dynamics of resistance/subversion/accommodation proposed by Paul Werth seems the best path to follow<sup>322</sup>. Indeed, the nobles’ early attempts at imposing their own project for the region’s organization were quickly replaced by tacit subversion, and then later a gradual accommodation with the Imperial regime. Unravelling the causes of this phenomenon would contribute to a further clarification of the role of the nobility as the main player on the field of compromises and mutually advantageous bargains that accompanied the Russian Empire’s more forceful measures to strengthen control over Bessarabia. Paul Werth points out three main flaws in the exaggerated focus by the current historiography upon forms of open resistance: 1) the often undifferentiated character of the status of Russians and the peoples they purportedly dominated which made the “imperial” or “colonial” character of the state’s domination problematic; 2) the “opaque” lines between coloniser and colonised, which marginalise the multiple possibilities for analysis in favour of a single privileged line of interpretation; 3) “studies of resistance tend to assume that the subjectivity and consciousness of subalterns were undivided and fully- formed

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<sup>322</sup> Paul W. Werth, “From Resistance to Subversion: Imperial Power, Indigenous Opposition and their Entanglement”, in: *KRITIKA. Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History*, Vol. 1, (Winter 2000), p. 21-43

prior to their engagement in acts of opposition,” which rarely corresponded to the actual situation.<sup>323</sup> In another thoughtful remark, Werth suggests that

“Resistance as an analytical concept retains its greatest utility when applied to the earliest stages of imperial rule and to cases when the state embarks on novel and intrusive campaigns designed to transform aspects of local worlds that have previously retained a fair degree of autonomy. In other cases I propose that we think in terms of subversions- that is, smaller manifestations of opposition that may complicate significantly the exercise of power even as they themselves are engendered and structured by that power.”<sup>324</sup>

This definition encompasses a variety of similar case studies that Paul Werth then uses to illustrate this general assertion. It also fits the Bessarabian case, though this is rarely included in detailed investigations of the diverse “encounters” between the imperial state and the communities subjected to its control. The “boyar project” turned out to be a reaction to the other two competing projects devised at the centre, rather than a detailed and concrete political program in its own right. It was an answer by the local elite to what it perceived as encroachments upon its traditional social and political standing and aimed at a compromise with the Russians, which failed due to the inexperience of the boyars as much as to the pressure of the Russian officials.

Why were the Bessarabian nobility reluctant to engage in open forms of resistance (even the mild forms of opposition described above were mostly limited to petitions and the tactic of subversion that, arguably, worked in the short term but necessarily failed in the longer

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<sup>323</sup> P. Werth, p. 22

<sup>324</sup> P. Werth, p. 22

perspective)? First, the power base of the boyars was significantly reduced as a result of the “codifying” reforms of the first Russian governors.

“The only major reform realised by Inzov [Bessarabian governor in 1820-1823], the inquiry about the papers confirming noble status in 1820, was an important achievement. Ironically, this inquiry [undertaken in order to rationalise the administration] led to the drastic reduction of the number of boyars, thus publicizing the fraudulent claims to noble rank that were advanced by a major part of those who governed Bessarabia. Since there were no longer enough boyars to fill in all the necessary positions for the functioning of the administration, Bessarabia’s autonomy became only a fiction.”<sup>325</sup>

Second, the Russian state succeeded in infusing a part of the nobility with the service ethics that was characteristic of their Russian counterparts and in undermining the traditional estate consciousness that was the source of earlier boyars’ protests. Third, the state weakened the economic power of the noble landowners by granting generous donations to colonists in Southern Bessarabia and by gradually forcing the boyars to renounce their landed properties in the Moldavian Principality in order to bind them to the new Russian province. Fourth, the integration into the Russian social order proved much more advantageous for the bulk of the nobility as soon as the empire strengthened its hold in the province and was able to offer compensations to the local leaders that seemed more attractive than the return to the traditional society that they had earlier advocated. Finally, the developments in the Moldavian Principality did not arouse a challenge to the legitimacy of Russian control at least until the consolidation of the Romanian nation-state, and then only among the minority of Bessarabian nobles who maintained strong

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<sup>325</sup> George F. Jewsbury, *Anexarea Basarabiei la Rusia: 1774-1828. Studiu asupra expansiunii imperiale*, trans. by Alina Pelea, (Iasi: POLIROM, 2003). [Romanian translation of the original edition: George F. Jewsbury. *The Russian Annexation of Besarabia: 1774-1828. A Study of Imperial Expansion*. (East European Quarterly, 1976), p. 135

connections to Romania and were more ethnically conscious. Thus, subversion gradually gave way to accommodation so that, by the 1830s, the Bessarabian nobility was well under way of being absorbed by the Imperial elite.

In order to have a partial picture of the grievances that the Bessarabian nobles presented to the local authorities in the late 1820s, one might summarise a petition addressed by them in 1830 to the New Russia governor and Bessarabian plenipotentiary of the emperor, M. S. Vorontsov. Among these demands one can distinguish the following: 1) the exclusive use of the Romanian language in all legal and judicial matters; 2) the development of education in the province, especially the educational progress of the members of the noble estate; 3) the preservation of a separate legal system of the province and the further codification of the provincial laws; 4) various economic demands directly relevant to the interests of the Bessarabian landholders; 5) the improvement of the administrative structure and a more orderly application of the law throughout the province.<sup>326</sup> Thus, there are elements of continuity with the previous period, but the demands have become more concrete and oriented towards the fulfilment of the narrow estate interests of the nobility. While the nobles still present themselves as guarantors of the region's welfare, they consciously perceive themselves as part of the wider imperial nobility and are willing to contribute to the state's welfare on an equal footing with their Russian counterparts.

In Bessarabia, the acquiescence in imperial authority gradually spread to the whole noble estate. This is shown by its later active co-optation in the *zemstvo* structures and by the overriding loyalty to the imperial state displayed by later generations, which allowed them to attain the highest posts in the state hierarchy. The example of Leon Casso, Russian Minister of Public Instruction before World War I and scion of a prominent Bessarabian noble family, is only the

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<sup>326</sup> A. N. Krupenskii, *Ocherk o bessarabskom dvorianstve* [An Essay on the Bessarabian Nobility] (Kishinev: Publishing House of the Gubernia Board, 1912), p. 32-37



best-known such case. Still, the sometimes glaring generational differences in the attitude to central policies and the local population (including within the same family), as well as the distrust if not hostility shown by many Russian authors towards the Bessarabian nobility, point to undisclosed patterns of subversion and challenge that remain to be studied. These patterns were determined by several variables, among which the position of the concerned persons within the imperial state apparatus, the prospects for future career and service opportunities, as well as the involvement in mass political movements were the most important. After 1830, the Bessarabian nobles were gradually transformed into agents of the central power, following the original design of St.-Petersburg. The few exceptions only point to the overall accommodation of the noble estate with the government's policies.

A rather different picture emerges from the 1860s on. The appearance of the Romanian national project as an alternative, combined with the impact of mass politics, broadened the choices available to members of the Bessarabian nobility. I will not touch upon these developments for several reasons. First, the Great Reforms shifted the centre of the nobles' interests to political and educational careers and weakened the previous bases for estate identification (though this identification as such remained rather resilient). Second, the nobles gradually lost the special relationship established with the state during Catherine's reign and directed their allegiance more towards non-dynastic principles. Thirdly, the nationalistic drive of the dynasty (however defined), and particularly the role of mass movements, relegated the nobility to either purely local importance or to a subordinate role in the political projects of various leaders and ideologues. To summarise, the nobility ceased to play a political role as an estate and had to find a new definition for its role in society. In Bessarabia, it continued to control the province until the end of the imperial regime, but it lost any possibility of representing the local population and had to succumb to internal divisions and economic constraints that nullified

any chance of resistance to the revolutionary upheaval. The twin challenges of revolution and nationalism proved too much for a group overstrained by political responsibilities that did not match either its demographic weight or its economic resources in a world where there was only a place for classes or nations, and no longer for estates.

## ***2. Imperial Celebration and Tacit Acquiescence: The Anniversary of 1912 and Its Significance***

Много камней драгоценных,  
 Переливами горя,  
 Блещут в царственной короне  
 Православного Царя!  
 И из них ты не последний,  
 Бессарабский чудный край,  
 Край приволья, изобилья,  
 Плодоноснейший наш край!  
 От турецкого засилья  
 Русью ты освобожден  
 И к семье ея народов  
 Неразрывно приобщен.  
 В этом братском единении  
 Целый век уж миновал.  
 Ты, свободно развиваясь,  
 Русской житницею стал.  
 Процветай же бесконечно,  
 Небеса благодаря,  
 Под могучею рукою  
 Православного Царя!<sup>327</sup>

During the period of existence of the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic, the historiography of the “Bessarabian question” witnessed sudden upsurges that usually coincided with the periodical anniversaries of Bessarabia’s inclusion into the Russian Empire in 1812<sup>328</sup>. While the ritualistic images conveyed for such occasions extolled the quintessential Soviet myth of the

<sup>327</sup> S.S. Orlov, On the 100th Anniversarz of Bessarabia’s Inclusion into Russia. 1912.

<sup>328</sup> The Soviet historiography perceived 1812 as one of the “founding dates” of “Soviet Moldavian” statehood, which was proven by the plethora of festive articles and books issued for the occasion by the local historians. Even a cursory overview of the Soviet bibliography indicates the political implications of these writings.

“friendship of the peoples,” these images referred to an implicit symbolic heritage that went unacknowledged (and probably was not even consciously articulated) in the customary Soviet celebratory rhetoric. The more benevolent attitude of Soviet official historiography to certain aspects of the Russian imperial experience inaugurated after World War II did not lead to a similar reevaluation of the “rituals of empire.” However paradoxically, the elements of Soviet remembrance of the 1812 events shared a fundamental common feature with the earlier imperial ceremonies. This commonality stemmed from the central function of such ceremonies in both contexts: to consecrate the definitive inclusion of Bessarabia into the symbolic space of the polity ruled from Petersburg or Moscow. Despite striking differences in rhetorical devices and explicit symbolic implications, the continuity of the prominent place that the rituals of inclusion played in the appropriation of the Bessarabian borderland is no less salient.

The following section will argue that the celebration of the centenary of Bessarabia’s annexation to the Russian Empire in May 1912 marked the high point of the attempts of the imperial authorities and the Russian public sphere to construct a coherent image of the province and to forge a representation of Bessarabia as an organic part of the imperial polity. These attempts were not necessarily successful due to several factors. First, the ambiguity inherent in the Russian elite’s self-perception and the intrusion of nationalizing motives starting from the reign of Alexander III complicated the task of defining the criteria for belonging to an ideal “Russian fatherland.” The loyalty to the monarch was still perceived to a large extent in dynastic terms, even if the dynasty itself strove to be represented as the embodiment of a more nationally conscious community. In the Bessarabian case, this ambiguity is obvious both at the superficial level of rhetoric and at the deeper level of unarticulated assumptions. The language of dynasty and Orthodoxy was mingled in an uneasy union with elements of an incipient national vocabulary that sought to appropriate Bessarabia not only for the Russian Empire as a multi- and

supranational entity, but more narrowly for the Russian nation that had to be imagined simultaneously with advancing claims to its preeminence. The insecurity of the Russian national project explains the dominant position of the traditional bases for legitimization even as late as 1912, but the increasing frequency and forcefulness of the national tropes indicates a possible direction of development that was cut short by World War I and its aftermath. This argument does not suggest any form of purported continuity between the Imperial and Soviet period. If anything, it suggests the incoherence and contested nature of the Russian discourse itself and the attempts of its creators to supersede the dilemma of Bessarabia's multiethnic character by resorting to religious and dynastic terminology. In this respect, the prominent role that the clergy played in the staging and explaining of the anniversary ceremonies to the larger public is worth emphasizing. This, however, can be related not only to the local Bessarabian context, but also to the broader shifts in the representation of the Russian monarchy that were apparent after the accession of Alexander III in 1881.

As Richard Wortman notes in his magisterial study of the Russian "scenarios of power," the emperor's coronation "expressed not the unity of the Petrine empire with old Russia, but the true Muscovite identity of the Russian monarchy, despite its Western trappings."<sup>329</sup> The new elements of the monarchy's self-legitimization were aptly described by Wortman as "the synchronic mode of symbolic elevation introduced with the national myth."<sup>330</sup> However, this invocation of "Muscovite tradition" was "profoundly anti-traditional," because it "diminished the eighteenth and nineteenth [centuries] and de-legitimized the legalistic bureaucracy, the intelligentsia, and the dynamic of reform that had reached its culmination in the previous reign."<sup>331</sup> As previously

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<sup>329</sup> Richard Wortman. *Scenarios of Power. Myth and Ceremony in Russian Monarchy. Vol. II* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), p. 236

<sup>330</sup> Wortman, p. 236

<sup>331</sup> Wortman, p. 236-237

noted, one can hardly speak of a consciously and systematically pursued policy of “Russification” as the aim of the Russian government. Nevertheless, in the sphere of rhetoric and symbol a clear change occurred. Perhaps a bit too bluntly, Wortman points to these processes when he asserts that “the idealized conception of the empire shifted from a multinational elite serving the Westernized European emperor to an Orthodox, ethnically Russian elite, serving the Russian tsar.”<sup>332</sup> On the plane of rhetoric and lexical devices, one could support the author’s contention that “the symbolic break became clear in the first months of Alexander III’s reign, when the term *true Russian* became a synonym for those favoring ruthless pursuit of ethnic and authoritarian policies.”<sup>333</sup> These tendencies prevailed during the next reign as well, when an additional element of political mobilization further complicated the picture. These developments were witness, however, not so much to a regressive drive on the part of the monarchy, but to a peculiar technique aimed at manipulating the potential of nationalism as a means of consolidating the imperial authority on the basis of new principles. The central and provincial bureaucracy, while paying lip service to the new rhetorical requirements, remained passive and divided over the extent of this symbolic shift, and even more so when it came to the practical implementation of such measures. The incoherence and reactive nature of the state’s policies were only partly camouflaged by the official discourse, which was frequently internally inconsistent and contradictory. The comparison with the Romanian reaction and response to the Russian ceremonies will provide an additional criterion for assessing the significance of ritual and symbolic reenactment in the process of Bessarabia’s inclusion into the imperial sphere.

Aside from being rooted in the search for legitimacy of the autocratic state in the dynamic early XX-century world, the contested and incoherent nature of Russian discourses concerning

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<sup>332</sup> Wortman, p. 237

<sup>333</sup> Wortman, p. 237

Bessarabia derived from the complex social structure of the empire that defied any attempt at official categorization and control. In this sense, the problem of the resilience and importance of estate categories in the last decades of the imperial regime is paramount. The identification of a regular pattern within the complex picture of the Russian modes of symbolic inclusion of Bessarabia into the empire could be approached through the question of collective aggregation of social interests on the all-imperial and local levels. As noted in the previous section, the nobility played a prominent part in serving as an intermediary between the central signals and local interests for the major part of the XIX century. By the late XIX century it had lost its preeminence in this regard. This was due, on the one hand, to the appearance of other social groups capable of articulating their own interests (first of all the local clergy and the emerging stratum of professionals and intellectuals) and, on the other hand, to the complicated relationship between the central bureaucracy and the empire's purported "first estate." An additional factor that served to further complicate the situation was the increasing distance between the court and the traditional "enlightened bureaucracy," that was cultivated by the last two emperors. The monarchy thus constituted itself into a separate center of symbolic authority that sought to undermine not only the alternative claims of cultivated society, but also the legalistic consciousness of the bureaucracy.

The temptation always persists to link a certain discourse with a clear-cut social entity or institutional cluster. In the Bessarabian case one could tentatively speak about separate (if connected) stances of the nobility, the clergy, the central bureaucracy and the monarchy (understood as the imperial family and court circles). However, the problem with such a scheme (which I nevertheless follow due to reasons of practical convenience) is the overlapping and fluid nature of Russia's social groups in this period. The neat division into four large estates (that structured my previous discussion of the Bessarabian nobility) is only valid as long as one

restricts the discussion to the narrow legal usage as confined to the *Digest of Laws*.<sup>334</sup> In fact, as Alfred Rieber shows in a seminal article, the Russian society of the epoch represented rather “a social fabric woven from a mosaic of archaic and modern social identities coexisting simultaneously and overlapping with one another.”<sup>335</sup> The perspective of social history provides the possibility of a more complex and balanced analysis of discourses that might appear suspended and non-referential if the discussion focuses too much upon their intellectual or institutional sources. The “sedimentary society” thesis advanced by Alfred Rieber showed indeed that “the perspective of social movements molding state institutions” successfully moved from “heretical” to “orthodox” status within the study of Imperial Russian society.<sup>336</sup> This reading of Russian social history is relevant for my argument both on a general and on a more concrete level.

First, the image of the imperial state as a highly autonomous agency of social transformation is challenged and replaced by a more complex picture of a two-way (or even multi-way) dynamics that developed between the state apparatus and the various aggregate social groups of the empire. This complexity increased during the late XIX and early XX century and raised legitimate doubts about the existence of “the state as a cohesive organism with a unified outlook”<sup>337</sup> by the last decades of the monarchy. This had naturally important repercussions for the realm of discourse as well. Second, the powerful metaphor of “polarization” so forcefully introduced by Leopold Haimson in the mid 1960s was in many ways nuanced by Rieber’s model. If such a phenomenon was discernible in the political sphere during the last pre-revolutionary decade, the social realities required a different temporal and analytical framework to be

<sup>334</sup> Gregory Freeze, “The Soslovie (Estate) Paradigm and Russian Social History,” in: *The American Historical Review*, Nr. 91, Vol. 1, February, 1986, pp. 11-36, here p. 12

<sup>335</sup> Ilya Gerasimov, “Sedimentary Society” as an Imperial Practice of Self-Organization.”

<sup>336</sup> A. Rieber, “The Sedimentary Society,” in: *Russian History/ Histoire Russe. Festschrift for Leopold H. Haimson*, pp. 353-376, here p. 354

<sup>337</sup> A. Rieber, “The Sedimentary Society,” p. 355

apprehended. As A. J. Rieber convincingly argues, factors of social cohesion and fragmentation coexisted for most of the XIX century in an uneasy balance, which was only disrupted in the early XX century, when the “trends of social fragmentation were growing stronger within Russian society.”<sup>338</sup> The second, concrete level of analysis of the Bessarabian case also can benefit from a more socially informed view. The all-pervasive character of the “imperial” element present in all the varieties of Russian discourses on the peripheries (including Bessarabia) cannot just be explained away by the influence of the centralizing tendencies of the state or by the invocation of a hollow ritualistic rhetoric. On the contrary, the prominent place of the “imperial idea” acquires a new dimension once it is interpreted as a part of the “Petrine legacy,” as one of the “three powerful strands in the culture of the dominant elites that percolated down irregularly and unevenly into the mass of the population.”<sup>339</sup>

Even if the specifically “multicultural” nature of the Russian state was increasingly challenged by the last decades of the monarchy and notwithstanding the debatable nature of the exact influence exercised by the “imperial idea” upon the mass of the population (especially the peasantry), its impact on the discursive sphere cannot be severed from its wider social relevance. Another fundamental insight suggested by the “sedimentary society” thesis refers to “the much larger number of layers that have accumulated within the top strata of society than at the bottom.”<sup>340</sup> This social fragmentation of Russia’s elites, caused as much by economic stratification as by political differentiation, has its counterpart in the contested and unstable nature of the legitimizing discourses that originated in their midst. One of the most interesting cases is that of the nobility, which for a long time possessed the privilege of acting as a spokesman for the local society at the Empire’s peripheries. The “three or four main groups that

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<sup>338</sup> A. Rieber, “The Sedimentary Society,” p. 366

<sup>339</sup> A. Rieber, “The Sedimentary Society,” p. 358

<sup>340</sup> A. Rieber, “The Sedimentary Society,” p. 375



emerged from the old *dvorianstvo*,” though more united by their estate structure than many other social strata of late imperial Russia, frequently had widely divergent interests that determined the “difficulty” of reconciling them.<sup>341</sup> The “coalescence of the provincial landed gentry”<sup>342</sup> in the form of a powerful conservative interest group that had an ambiguous relationship with the central government is visible in the Bessarabian case, where the predominantly agrarian character of the province had a sizeable impact on the temporary success of such a project. The “interest group” mechanism also operated within the various bureaucratic agencies that competed for preeminence within the government. This “multiplication of social [and institutional] identities” was not only “politically debilitating,”<sup>343</sup> but also had its toll on the discursive sphere, through the proliferation of a number of competing stances that were frequently hidden under the veneer of social cohesion and harmony.

The basic premise of a large part of Russian and western scholarship has been encapsulated in the gradual replacement of the “traditional” estate structure with a “modern” class society throughout the second half of the XIX century. However, as both Gregory Freeze and, more recently, Charles Steinwedel have shown, the estate phenomenon was much more adaptable and dynamic than a simple “estate-class” opposition might entail. The process of social aggregation in Russia (even on the conceptual level) was much slower than in Western Europe, indeed, but this fact cannot be directly connected to the “arresting” or backward nature of the estate system. On the contrary, the estate system itself only fully emerged in the early XIX century, while the Russian equivalent of the Western European estates- *soslovie*- “combined the etymological ideas of “state institution” and “social group”- with the significant difference that this process

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<sup>341</sup> A. Rieber, “The Sedimentary Society,” p. 367-368

<sup>342</sup> A. Rieber, “The Sedimentary Society,” p. 368

<sup>343</sup> A. Rieber, “The Sedimentary Society,” p. 375

transpired centuries later and took on a far more complex and dynamic form.”<sup>344</sup> Moreover, the nobility and the urban inhabitants were the only social groups to which the term was consistently applied in the early XIX century.<sup>345</sup> Being a specifically XIX century phenomenon, “*soslovie*” formed a significant part of social reality: to the [traditional] categories of kinship, occupation and legal status” it “added corporateness and distinctive culture.”<sup>346</sup> The main point that is of interest here concerns the resilience of the estate structure in the XIX century and its complicated relationship with the institutions of the state, that was far from unilaterally imposing its agenda on the multiple social entities of the Russian Empire.

The entanglement and “enmeshing” of various estate interests with the institutions responsible for their supervision or coordination explains the fragmentation of a presumably unitary bureaucratic discourse. According to Freeze’s astute remark, “particular ministries tended to articulate the interests of a subordinate or closely associated group.”<sup>347</sup> Thus, what is sometimes misleadingly called the “official discourse” represents in fact an aggregate sum of various positions associated with a certain social stratum. There is of course no direct correspondence between the different state institutions and social groups that had a special vested interest in dominating them. However, one could substantially agree with the conclusion that “[I]f society in Russia was to an unusual degree “bureaucratized” by the state, so too, conversely, was the state “socialized” by the interpenetration of bureau and estate.”<sup>348</sup> The social makeup of the Russian Empire “remained exceedingly complex and variegated, comprised of many distinct and often hereditary social groups, each possessing its own special status and constituting a separate

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<sup>344</sup> Gregory Freeze, “The Soslovie (Estate) Paradigm and Russian Social History,” in: *The American Historical Review*, Nr. 91, Vol. 1, February, 1986, p. 18

<sup>345</sup> Freeze, p. 18

<sup>346</sup> Freeze, p. 19

<sup>347</sup> Freeze, p. 25

<sup>348</sup> Freeze, p. 25

*soslovie*.”<sup>349</sup> The “sediments” forming the multiple layers of Russian society lacked profundity and coherence (that the state sought in vain to impose through the four-estate construction). The efforts of the government to conceptualize and control the social landscape were frequently thwarted by groups that did not fit the estate divisions (as the cases of the working class or the liberal professions prove).

One could also argue, however, that the ambiguity characteristic for the relationships between the state and the estates went both ways. Even the representatives of the social groups that had most influence on government decision-making were seldom able to secure a coherent articulation of their collective interests. An illuminating example in this regard is provided by the nobility, which had an “unparalleled range of opportunities” to make their demands and grievances known to the central authorities or even directly to participate in government.<sup>350</sup> Despite Nicholas I’s growing distrust of the nobles as a whole after the Decembrist uprising and, especially, following the Polish revolt of 1830-31, the members of the noble estate retained a fundamental role in local administration right up to World War I. As Gary Hamburg notes in his discussion of the marshals of the nobility in post-emancipation Russia, their situation was “paradoxical,” since they wielded “considerable power,” but ultimately were prone to “political impotence.”<sup>351</sup> Even if the author’s diagnosis of the noble leaders’ position is somewhat too influenced by the teleological reading of Russian imperial history in light of the 1917 revolution, the duality he discovers in their “identity” is worth a close consideration. Hamburg asserts: “Despite [their] political advantages, the marshals never succeeded in forcing on the government a coherent program in the interests of the landed nobility. The best explanation for the lost

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<sup>349</sup> Freeze, p. 35

<sup>350</sup> Gary M. Hamburg, “Portrait of an Elite: Russian Marshals of the Nobility, 1861-1917,” in: *Slavic Review*, Vol. 40, Nr. 4, (Winter 1981), pp. 585-602, here p. 601

<sup>351</sup> Gary M. Hamburg, “Portrait of an Elite: Russian Marshals of the Nobility, 1861-1917,” in: *Slavic Review*, Vol. 40, Nr. 4, (Winter 1981), p. 601

opportunities is that the marshals as a group suffered from a split identity. They were simultaneously part of the nobility with responsibilities to preserve and protect the first estate and government functionaries with loyalties to the bureaucracy and the crown.”<sup>352</sup> The notion of “split identity” with its psychological overtones may not be the best shorthand to describe the situation of the noble elite in the early XX century, but it certainly conveys the complexity of the political position of the members of this group. The nobles, being especially influenced by the estate principles, were confronted with the growing opposition of the “moderate and radical parties as well as [the] articulate members of the unprivileged”<sup>353</sup> who challenged the principle of legally consecrated social barriers.

The forms of reaction of the nobility varied considerably over time and according to political circumstances. The main types of the political activity of the noble elite during the last years of the *ancien regime* can be subsumed under the four headings proposed by Hamburg in his discussion. Thus, the nobility generally chose one of the following tactics to articulate and occasionally lobby its interests in central government agencies: 1) the “legally prescribed method of petitioning;” 2) “participation in central government committees,” either formally or informally, in an “advisory capacity;” 3) “participation in extra-legal organizations” that “grew out of a frustration with government economic policy and a perception that organized criticism of government policy might bring about desired reforms.”<sup>354</sup> The most important such organizations were the *Beseda* circle, which was active in the first years of the XX century, and, especially, the “Council of the United Nobility,” formed in 1905 as an “extra-parliamentary pressure group”<sup>355</sup> that had the explicit “goal of defending the existing order in general and their own privileged

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<sup>352</sup> Hamburg, p. 601

<sup>353</sup> Freeze, p. 31

<sup>354</sup> Hamburg, , p. 598-600

<sup>355</sup> Hamburg, p. 600

status in particular.”<sup>356</sup> The impact of this organization on the coagulation of a conservative ideological platform within the ranks of the nobles is debatable. The “United Nobility,” that Seymour Becker rightly identifies as an “interest group,”<sup>357</sup> was a product both of “the mixture of absolutism and constitutionalism in Russian political life after 1905 and the transitional situation of the first estate in that period.”<sup>358</sup> Moreover, it “represented and defended not the interests of the entire nobility,” but only those of “families of large and intermediate landowners.”<sup>359</sup> The “extralegal” nature of this organization becomes a moot point when one realizes that its leaders were well connected and closely involved in the highest state institutions and court circles. It is important to emphasize that the consolidation of the conservative streak within the nobility was supported and abetted by a part of the government officials. The identification of a unitary discourse of the nobility is an optical illusion as long as this estate comprised reformist and moderate elements that sought accommodation with liberal society, as well as staunch supporters of the autocracy. In the Bessarabian case this discourse acquires a greater coherence due to the clear predominance of conservative and pro-monarchist dispositions within the majority of the local nobility. This is a reason for the difficulty of disentangling a specifically noble agenda from the broader “statist” or bureaucratic discourse that permeated the official pronouncements on the occasion of the 1912 ceremonies. A further difficulty that must be alluded to (if not directly confronted) concerns the complex interaction between the conservative ideology and the specific interests of the nobility, as well as the impact of the rightist tendencies on the political mobilization of the noble estate.<sup>360</sup> 4) An obvious fourth option for the political participation of the nobility emerged after the October Manifesto of 1905 that inaugurated the era of mass politics

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<sup>356</sup> Freeze, p. 32

<sup>357</sup> Seymour Becker, “A Conservative Lobby: The United Nobility in 1905-1910,” in: *Kritika*, Vol. 5, Nr. 1, Winter 2004, pp. 113-116, here p. 113

<sup>358</sup> Becker, p. 114

<sup>359</sup> Becker, p. 114

<sup>360</sup> G. M. Hamburg, “The Revival of Russian Conservatism,” in: *KRITIKA*, vol. 6, Nr. 1, Winter 2005, p. 107-127

in the Russian Empire. G. Hamburg remarks that “the step to electoral politics was a short one” for the noble leadership<sup>361</sup> due to their earlier involvement in organizations that possessed a quasi-political character and, generally, to their familiarity with corporate politics within their estate institutions.

Thus, the resilience of the estate structure was apparent not only on the level of actual social interaction, but also on that of the articulation of social interests. Estate successfully competed with class as the primary framework of social aggregation in the early XX century. Even if this was more accurate in the case of the privileged estates (the clergy and the commercial elites), who “exploited the turmoil of revolution to form corporate *soslovie* organizations,”<sup>362</sup> the persistence of the “idiom of *soslovie*” in representing and analyzing social reality preserved its validity in the case of the peasants as well. This position has been recently attacked by the representatives of the current of “new imperial history” for lacking a dynamic component that would highlight the manipulation of social identities that the population of the Russian Empire was involved in during the early XX century. This perspective derives from these scholars’ view of the Russian Empire as “an open-ended system”<sup>363</sup> and “a complex environment in which class, confession and gender were equally important elements of the system of social identification.”<sup>364</sup>

The “sedimentary society” argument advanced by Alfred Rieber is a starting point for this “second revision” of the Russian Empire’s social history. One of the proponents of the dynamic approach to Russian society acknowledges “the accuracy of the structuralist snapshot of the sedimentary society,” which is “by no means disputed by the new imperial history approach.”<sup>365</sup> The question of the importance of the estate identification and of the peculiar amalgam of

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<sup>361</sup> Hamburg, p. 600

<sup>362</sup> Freeze, p. 32

<sup>363</sup> Ilya Gerasimov, “Sedimentary Society” as an Imperial Practice of Self-Organization,” p. 6

<sup>364</sup> Gerasimov, “Sedimentary Society” as an Imperial Practice of Self-Organization,” p. 6

<sup>365</sup> Gerasimov, “Sedimentary Society” as an Imperial Practice of Self-Organization,” p. 6

different layers of Russia's social experience reified in the form of "sediments" should, according to this current, be replaced with new questions, dealing with different people's instrumentalization of their estate status or with the "uneven character of social dynamism in different regions, cultures and agencies."<sup>366</sup> Nevertheless, an exaggerated emphasis on dynamism and process would be just as inaccurate as an exclusive reliance on "static snapshots" of a given moment in social development. The conclusion that "only particular circumstances of social interaction added meaning to otherwise hollow structuralist categories of Russian imperial society,"<sup>367</sup> even if it can serve as a sobering reminder of the multiplicity of social experiences and tactics of everyday "negotiation" at the micro-level, goes too far in denying and deconstructing the *aggregation* of social interests. The discourses that supported (and competed with) one another on the all-imperial and local level were connected to identifiable social groups and, more importantly, addressed concrete audiences that were constructed as social subjects simultaneously with serving as objects of the discourse.

Before proceeding to the actual description of the ceremonies performed throughout Bessarabia on May 16, 1912, a sketch of the political situation on the local level is necessary. By the early XX century, the impact of mass politics was obvious throughout the Russian Empire. Bessarabia was no exception to this tendency, though the situation here was complicated by several factors. Even prior to the onset of the 1905 revolution (customarily demarcating the divide between pre-modern and modern forms of political action in Bessarabia), two events that occurred in the first years of the XX century put this borderland province of the Russian South-West on the map of imperial politics. The first of these incidents involved one of the few articulated attempts at the organization of collective political action on the part of the young

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<sup>366</sup> Gerasimov, "Sedimentary Society" as an Imperial Practice of Self-Organization," p.

<sup>367</sup> Gerasimov, "Sedimentary Society" as an Imperial Practice of Self-Organization," p. 7

Bessarabian intelligentsia. This initial stage of political mobilization took place outside Bessarabia proper, among the Bessarabian-born students of the Dorpat (Iur'ev) University. The problem of the appearance and goals of this organization is of only marginal concern here. Apparently, the members of this “society” had a twofold goal. On the one hand, they aimed at the smuggling of clandestine literature from Romania into the Russian Empire (from the official papers of the Police Department it is not very clear to what extent the Dorpat students were linked to the “populist” circles inside or outside Bessarabia). On the other hand, the private correspondence of the “Dorpat Society’s” members indicates a possible nationalizing agenda of their activities. In a confidential report of a police agent to the Department of Police in St. Petersburg (dated January 25, 1903) it is stated that “in several letters written on the 12<sup>th</sup> of the current month of January from Kishinev, a certain Andrei asks Georgii Madan [a prominent Bessarabian émigré to Romania], who at present resides in Bucharest and who is well-known to the Department of Police, to send various Romanian patriotic books” to several persons in Dorpat and Bessarabia who would later pass them on to the active members of the “Dorpat society.”<sup>368</sup>

However, this instance of active collaboration between Bessarabian émigrés in Romania and Bessarabian students of Russian universities should not be viewed through the lens of the nationalizing narrative of Romanian historiography. The relevance of this association stems from its role as an initial step in the process of growing articulation of an oppositional discourse within the emerging stratum of Bessarabian intellectuals.

The second major moment that can serve as a turning point in the interplay between the official discourse and its actual impact on local politics in the late Russian Empire is the widely publicized Kishinev pogrom of 1903. The debates surrounding the circumstances, leading actors and consequences of the violent events that occurred in Kishinev in 1903 are revealing for the

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<sup>368</sup> GARF, fund 505, op. 1, file 70, p. 28 verso



profound rifts that existed within the Russian bureaucracy (and between certain elements of the bureaucracy and the imperial court) regarding the best course of action at the empire's multiethnic peripheries. The extent of the Russian government's involvement in and even tacit support of the April pogrom quickly became the central issue of the official investigation, obfuscating the events themselves. The liberal criticism of the government's policy in connection with the Bessarabian pogrom focused on two fundamental issues: first, the role of the local anti-Semitic press (represented primarily by the publications directed or supported by the notorious journalist and writer Pavel Krushevan) and, second, the signs coming from the central authorities that tolerated or even actively encouraged anti-Jewish (and, more generally, anti-"alien") attitudes. One of the most poignant critiques of the central policies on the Empire's borderlands came from the Bessarabian governor Prince S. D. Urusov, a liberal state official who later served as a deputy in the First Duma.

Appointed to Bessarabia both in order to alleviate the simmering tensions aroused in the wake of the pogrom and to contribute to the official investigation of the events, Urusov left one of the most coherent and complete accounts of the local political context in Bessarabia in the first years of the XX century. According to his perspective, the central government was to blame for the atmosphere that made the massive outbreak of anti-Jewish violence possible: "I strongly persist in emphasizing this characteristic feature of the Kishinev pogrom. The prevailing reason for the actions of the pogrom participants was neither hatred, nor vengeance. [It was] the performance of certain actions that, following the opinion of certain people, contributed to the goals and objectives of the government. According to others, such actions were even officially allowed and,

finally, if one is to admit the explanations of popular wisdom, they represented the fulfillment of the tsar's command.”<sup>369</sup>

Following the scheme constructed by the Polish historian Witold Rodkiewicz in order to account for the shifts and dynamics of the Russian “nationalities policy,” one seems to witness, in Urusov's case, a clear clash between the “Bureaucratic Nationalism” approach and the “Imperial” idea. The latter (of which Urusov was a supporter) “stressed supra-national ties holding together the Empire- dynastic and state loyalty- and the common interest of propertied elements in order and stability.”<sup>370</sup>

Urusov's observations are an indicator of the profound incongruity between the legalistic political culture of the moderate elements of the Russian public and the nationalizing drive of the dynasty that sought to reshape the basis of the legitimacy of the tsar's authority (by emphasizing the direct and organic connection between the monarch and the mass of his subjects). As Richard Wortman indicates, “the narrative of a national monarchy... reduced the abstractions of state and power to personal representations of authority and subordination. The institutions of the bureaucracy in this framework were portrayed as a mere encumbrance, “a dividing wall” (*sredostenie*) between tsar and people.”<sup>371</sup> The rejection of bureaucratic institutions as such and the attempt to forge a direct link with the “people” pushed the monarchy to encourage the political mobilization of conservative and monarchist elements. While the relationships between the court and the “Black Hundred” organizations were never clear-cut or simple, their prominent involvement in the ceremonies staged in February 1913 during the initial phase of the Tercentenary celebration and the special “privilege[s] not granted to other political groups”<sup>372</sup>

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<sup>369</sup> S. D. Urusov, *Zapiski gubernatora*, Chisinau, Litera, 2004, p. 132

<sup>370</sup> W. Rodkiewicz, p. 6

<sup>371</sup> Wortman, p. 448

<sup>372</sup> Wortman, p. 465

that they enjoyed on this occasion pointed to the peculiarity of the “scenario of power” devised by Nicholas II. In fact, the tendency to abolish the “symbolic elevation” of the monarch or at least to transfer the focus of the monarchy’s legitimacy to the mundane sphere of politics had important repercussions not only on the level of the central bureaucracy, but also on that of local administration. This overall context helps explain the increased complexity of administering multi-ethnic peripheries in an empire that perceived itself less as a supranational entity and more in terms of a polity identified as “Russian Land.”

The discrepancy between the legalistic consciousness of the liberally inclined officials and the tolerance or active encouragement of discriminatory policies promoted by local radical public figures and supported by important government and court circles may also be exemplified, in the Bessarabian case, by reference to Governor Urusov’s work. While further discussing the causes and repercussions of the 1903 pogrom, the official notes:

... [t]he local common man could not fail to observe the impact of the benevolent views of the government [towards rightist public opinion] upon the behavior and [political] program of those persons who clad their activities into a patriotic garb, trying everywhere to express their “Russian” spirit. The ugly manifestations of this spirit, that subsequently created the well-known organizations of “true Russian people,” are common knowledge, while the involvement of many people with a dark past, a mean reputation and a tainted consciousness in the ranks of these patriots have been, probably, remarked by most of the unprejudiced men [in Russia].<sup>373</sup>

In a more accusatory vein, Urusov then asserts: “One cannot doubt that such sorts of people enjoyed a certain protection on the part of the government, which also perceived in them a “healthy foundation,” a patriotic kernel of autocracy and of the Russian people’s spirit [*narodnostī*].”<sup>374</sup> Contrary to this vision of the government’s partiality towards the “Russian element,” the newly appointed governor (somewhat retrospectively) articulates a purely legal

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<sup>373</sup> Urusov, p. 130-131

<sup>374</sup> Urusov, p. 131

conception of managing the multi-ethnic peripheral provinces of the Empire. Even if the conclusions that Urusov reached applied primarily to the “Jewish problem” (one of the most thorny questions both in local Bessarabian and all-imperial politics in the first years of the XX century), his opinions allow one to assess the gap between the legal-rational tradition instilled in the Russian bureaucracy especially after the Great Reforms and the tendencies to restore arbitrary (if “organic”) autocratic rule espoused by the last two Russian emperors. Urusov emphasizes: “I decided, first, that the existing laws, that were limiting the rights of the Jews, must be applied... in all cases, without any attenuating circumstances or misgivings, despite the opinion that was made known to me in Petersburg, according to which the regulations of May 3, 1882, proved to be a governmental error and did not reach their goal.”<sup>375</sup> This respect for the letter of the law was proclaimed to be the guiding principle of Urusov’s future governorship and was meant to consecrate the elimination of any personal or extralegal elements from the exercise of his office. Far from endorsing the literal meaning of the euphemism of “gubernia’s chief” that was currently used to designate the governor’s office in the late Russian Empire, Urusov, first, rejected the intrusion of the Ministry of Internal Affairs into the governor’s authority (that was to be limited by the provisions of the law)<sup>376</sup> and, second, pointed to “the danger of introducing [one’s] own tastes and prejudices into the administration of the province”<sup>377</sup> entrusted to him.

He also explicated the general principle of his “nationalities policy,” that reflected both a modern legal understanding of citizenship and, more ambiguously, the tolerance of ethnic diversity that a more secure imperial center could have fully supported. The governor attempted to “always follow, firmly and consistently, the point of view that the Jews are exactly the same Russian subjects as the rest of Russia’s population” and can therefore enjoy “the protection of the

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<sup>375</sup> Urusov, p. 20

<sup>376</sup> Urusov, p. 13

<sup>377</sup> Urusov, p. 20

laws and the authorities with regard to their security, equally to others.”<sup>378</sup> The prince clearly represented that part of the Russian educated society and bureaucracy that felt increasingly alienated from a monarchy which sought to shift the focus of loyalty to itself from its role as the guarantor of state unity and the “common good” of its subjects (if variously understood) to its function as the embodiment and symbol of the “Russian people” (essentially the peasantry). This conservative and nationally oriented rhetoric provoked Urusov’s angry rebuttal due to his vision of the imperial state as a set of institutions meant to serve as an arbiter for the multitude of interests represented within the population of the empire. One can infer from his position that he saw the danger of undermining the equilibrium that the state had to preserve as inherent in the policies of the Petersburg establishment. Urusov concluded his analysis of the factors leading to the 1903 pogrom by stating: “I consider our government guilty of the protection that it provides for the narrowly nationalistic ideas; [it is also guilty] of a short-sighted and brutally pursued policy towards the peripheries and the “aliens” of the empire [*okrainam i inorodtsam*]; [it is guilty] of the fact, that this policy maintained mutual distrust and hatred among distinct nationalities [*narodnostei*]...”<sup>379</sup> The disunity, rivalry and occasionally open cajoling of radically nationalistic elements that underpin this picture of the Russian government provide a glimpse of the difficulty that the official discourse encountered in camouflaging the challenges to imperial authority that were readily apparent in the first years of the XX century.

The celebration of the centennial anniversary of Bessarabia’s annexation in 1912 provides a good example of the disruptions of the social fabric on the local level that affected the symbolic sphere in multiple ways. The earliest intimations of the symbolic competition that was to characterize the official preparations for and organization of the solemn ceremonies were

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<sup>378</sup> Urusov, p. 21

<sup>379</sup> Urusov, p. 132

connected to the circumstances of the creation of a special committee that was to coordinate and direct the proceedings of the May 1912 ceremonies. The initiative for the creation of such an organ came from the Gubernia Zemstvo Assembly and certain elements of the noble estate, headed by the Bessarabian Marshal of the Nobility, A. N. Krupenski (1908-1912). The two agencies that were supposed to cooperate in organizing the festive ceremonies found themselves embroiled from the outset in a bitter conflict that grew in intensity as the jubilee was approaching and reached its climax in the summer of 1911, when the animosities were made public. This conflict emerged between a part of the zemstvo officials, who sought a broader representation of the province's social strata among the body's members, and the interests of the prominent Krupenski clan, who tried to impose its own candidates for membership. The Krupenskis also tried to devise a plan of the celebration that would, on the one hand, emphasize the preeminence of the nobility and, on the other, allow the Krupenski family to confirm their privileged status in Bessarabian society. As an indication of the ambiguous position of the nobility and of its difficulty in maintaining its former influence as the only articulators of the province's "public opinion," the efforts of the Krupenski family failed, while its representative had to resign the position of Committee head.

The membership and the role of the Committee then became a point of contention between the civil administration and the clergy, who attempted to replace the nobility as the main repository of the "public voice" of Bessarabia. The importance of these alternative projects of the nobility and the clergy resides in the breach of the monopoly of the state bureaucracy upon the emerging public sphere and in the internally subversive character of such disagreements. The image of organic unity and social harmony that the official discourse emphasized was contradicted by the actual controversial nature of these debates. For example, the accusations proffered by certain zemstvo-inspired petitions against the "usurpation" of the incoming celebrations by the

Krupenski clan<sup>380</sup> attested to the deep divisions in local politics that partly justified the label of “party politics” that the preeminence of a single family entailed. Moreover, a rather virulent text of this sort was clearly instigated (if not directly written) by the (in)famous right-wing activist and publicist V. M. Purishkevich<sup>381</sup>. This fact indicates the conflict between the more “statist” and noble-oriented (and, therefore, traditional) version of the official stance upheld by A. N. Krupenski and the radically demagogic and “right populist” pronouncements of the “Black Hundred” sympathizers and leaders that competed on the stage of Bessarabian politics. The polemics provoked by the transfer of local political animosities to the public sphere were not limited to the Bessarabian milieu, but had a reflection in the central Russian press, where different “lobbies” vied for the expression of their respective grievances. The central institutions became involved in the local controversies following the publication of an anti-Krupenski article in the *Russkoe znamia* newspaper in July 1911.<sup>382</sup>

Both A. N. Krupenski and his opponents grouped around V. M. Purishkevich characteristically insisted on the importance of the implication of the Bessarabian masses into the forthcoming celebration. Thus, Krupenski emphasized that “the initiative of celebrating this remarkable event, as well as the leading role in this celebration cannot and should not belong to anyone else but the whole population of our land, embodied in the persons of its elected representatives, i.e. our public and estate activists.”<sup>383</sup> The commission organized by A. Krupenski envisaged, during its first official meeting held on May 10, 1911, the elaboration of a concrete program of the celebrations. The program consisted, on the one hand, in the organization of “local festivities in the form of religious processions, parades, repasts, illuminations,

<sup>380</sup> A.N.R.M., fond 2, op. 1, d. 9053 (“Otnosheniia Ministerstva Vnutrennih Del o komissii po razrabotke predpolozhenii o chestvovanii 100-letnego iubileia prisoedineniia Bessarabii k Rossii”), ll. 1-8.

<sup>381</sup> A.N.R.M., fond 2, op. 1, d. 9053, l. 6-8

<sup>382</sup> A.N.R.M., fond 2, op. 1, d. 9053, l. 1-3

<sup>383</sup> A.N.R.M., fond 2, op. 1, d. 9053, l. 5

fireworks, public lectures etc.”<sup>384</sup> and, on the other hand, in the construction of a “monument that could remind all the future generations about the feelings of their ancestors towards the common fatherland.”<sup>385</sup> The critique of Krupenski’s *zemstvo* opponents did not touch as much on the program of the ceremonies or even the symbolic implications of the celebration. Instead it focused on the purported “usurpation” of the festive events by “a group of 3 or 4 persons that attempted to take into their own hands the task of organizing the jubilee ceremonies on behalf of the whole guberniia.”<sup>386</sup> The point of contention was thus internal to the Russian official discourse and involved the degree and the nature of the representation of the interests of the local population that the *zemstvo* activists denied to the Krupenski commission.

Claiming that the *Zemstvo* Assembly was the real initiator of such an organ as far back as December 1907, the author of the petition argued that the substitution of the initial project (whose failure he decried) by Krupenski’s personal initiative was “illegal” and that the 1911 committee lacked both the representation and the competence to serve as a coordinating body for the 1912 events.<sup>387</sup> Beyond defending the corporate interests of the *zemstvo* as the main reflection of the province’s national and social structure, the author played on the same discursive field of mass politics present in Krupenski’s case. The *zemstvo* appeared thus to be nothing more than the adequate representative body for the “voice of the masses.” Emphasizing the multi-ethnicity of the province, Krupenski’s opponent asserts: “All these ethnic groups [*narodnosti*] similarly took part in... the development of the welfare of our borderland...; all of them are similarly inspired by feelings of unlimited loyal fealty towards the Supreme Lord [*Verhovnomu Hozaiinu*] of the Russian State, the Autocrat of All the Russias; all of them similarly feel themselves to be the sons

<sup>384</sup> A.N.R.M., fond 2, op. 1, d. 9053, l. 5

<sup>385</sup> A.N.R.M., fond 2, op. 1, d. 9053, l. 5

<sup>386</sup> A.N.R.M., fond 2, op. 1, d. 9053, l. 8

<sup>387</sup> A.N.R.M., fond 2, op. 1, d. 9053, l. 6



of one great fatherland- Russia and are permeated by the idea of Russian Statehood.”<sup>388</sup> Consequently, the prerogative of devising the plan for the celebrations should belong to the “representatives of all the social strata of every one” of these ethnic groups, while their elected delegates should have the “right to directly participate in the forthcoming festivities” instead of being “brushed away, as is being done by A. Krupenski.”<sup>389</sup> The brand of right-wing populism displayed by the author of this petition (who appears to be a supporter of Purishkevich) invoked the direct bond between the autocracy and the “popular essence” that was one of the building blocs of the ideology put forward by the pro-monarchist rightist groups of the period. While in Krupenski’s scheme the relationship of the monarchy and its subjects was only conceivable through a number of intermediaries (among which the nobility held a prominent place), his opponents tended to support a wider local participation (institutionalized through the *zemstva*) as long as these organs remained under the control of the conservative elements of local society. The intensity of the local political struggle is made explicit also in the conclusion of the petition, in which the author is careful to make once again the point that the future anniversary should represent “a feast for the whole loyally subject [*vernopoddannogo*] population of the guberniia, and not for a small group of persons from the same family, attempting to transform a moment of wide state and social significance into a new stepping stone for their career aims.”<sup>390</sup>

Another “contested field” that emerged between the gubernia administration and the local interests represented by the Krupenskis had to do with the lack of cooperation between the governor’s office and the initiative committee headed jointly by the Marshal of the Nobility and the archbishop. Governor I. V. Kankrin openly complained to Petersburg about the “obscure” character of the preparations for the 1912 festivity and hinted at the conflict between himself and

<sup>388</sup> A.N.R.M., fond 2, op. 1, d. 9053, l. 8

<sup>389</sup> A.N.R.M., fond 2, op. 1, d. 9053, l. 8

<sup>390</sup> A.N.R.M., fond 2, op. 1, d. 9053, l. 7

A. N. Krupenski, defending the active involvement of the governor and condemning the transformation of a “state occasion” into a private feast of a part of the local “society.”<sup>391</sup> One should emphasize that such disputes had an internal character and did not undermine the validity of the overall official position. Rather, one could speak of certain relevant nuances that add complexity to the generalized image of the imperial discourse. The final outcome of these bureaucratic and symbolic arguments could be best understood as a compromise solution that consecrated the mutual power positions and dividing lines of the Bessarabian establishment.

A more ambiguous case of an alternative center for the legitimizing of the province’s inclusion into the Russian imperial space is that of the local clergy, embodied in the extremely active participation of the bishop (later archbishop) Serafim Chichagov in the organization and promotion of the official festivities. The bishop skillfully manipulated the divisions alluded to above in order to secure for the clergy (and himself) a prominent part in the anniversary events. In the final report on the activity of the “Jubilee Committee,” submitted on May 16, 1912, the interim Bessarabian Marshal of the Nobility, A. K. Leonard, asserted: “The initiative for the organization of a central organ entrusted with the elaboration of the program and the means to honor the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the memorable historical event of Bessarabia’s merging [*prisoedineniia*] into Russia... belongs to His Holiness Serafim, Bishop of Kishinev and Hotin, who gave the first impulse to this organization by holding a numerous meeting in his own quarters, on April 29, 1911.”<sup>392</sup> Leonard then goes on to describe the other meetings of the committee, emphasizing A. N. Krupenski’s role in the proceedings. However, he glosses over the controversies concerning the committee’s membership that ultimately forced Krupenski to resign

<sup>391</sup> A.N.R.M., fond 2, op. 1, d. 9053, l. 10-12. Some additional information concerning the problems of erecting a monument to Alexander I in Kishinev, the official ceremony of its inauguration on May 21/June 3, 1914, as well as certain aspects of disseminating the printed accounts of the 1912 celebrations can be found in: A.N.R.M., fond 2, op. 1, d. 9441 (“O sooruzhenii v g. Kishineve v oznamenovanie 100-letii prisoedineniia Bessarabii k Rossiskoi Imperii pamiatnika Imperatoru Aleksandru I-mu”), 12 ff. These papers mostly refer to material and financial matters.

<sup>392</sup> N. Lashkov (ed.). *Prazdnovanie Stoletii prisoedineniia Bessarabii k Rossiiskoi Imperii*, Kishinev, 1914, p. 49

from its leadership. Speaking about the “second general meeting, completed with representatives elected by the clergy, the Kishinev City Duma, the provincial and district zemstvos,” which “decided on the final composition of the committee, confirmed by the Minister of the Interior,”<sup>393</sup> Leonard fails to mention the debates provoked by Krupenski’s initial choices of prospective members and by his refusal to enlarge the basis of representation to all the estates of the province. The final version of the events, embellished on the occasion of the festivities, minimized the strife between the representatives of the local elite in order to better convey the image of unity that was to be projected over the whole empire and of which Bessarabia was to be a mirror image.

The prominent role of the clergy in the anniversary ceremonies and the conflicts between various social groups and branches of the administration should be viewed also in the broader context of the multiplicity of narratives that beset the attempts to find a stable basis of legitimacy for the Russian state in an epoch of revolutionary upheaval. The complex picture of the intertwining, but fundamentally opposed readings of Russian history that emerged in connection with the early XX-century rituals and public ceremonies is brilliantly discussed by Richard Wortman with reference to the Tercentenary Celebrations of 1913. Keeping the differences of scale and purpose in mind, I find the analytical scheme he proposes highly adequate to the Bessarabian case. Wortman’s classification is essentially useful for examining the internal dynamics of the Russian official discourse, which was complicated on Bessarabian soil by the existence of a Romanian national narrative that de-legitimized any forms of Russian representations of the annexation. However, his distinction between “moderate/statist,” “monarchical” and “church” historical narratives captures well the ambiguity and variety of the Russian imperial discourses and provides the means to analyze the recurrent rhetorical devices

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<sup>393</sup> N. Lashkov (ed.). *Prazdnovanie Stoletiiia prisoedineniia Bessarabii k Rossiiskoi Imperii*, Kishinev, 1914, p. 49

that seem chaotically distributed in sermons, official proclamations or private petitions.<sup>394</sup> My aim is not to categorize the extant sources according to a rigid scheme, but to point to the significant similarities and differences that structured the contemporary Russian visions of Bessarabia.

The “discourse of the clergy” is, to an extent, a misnomer for a totality of visions produced within the Bessarabian church hierarchy that had as much to do with the broader state discourse as with the specific interests of the clergy. Nevertheless, it is possible to identify several instances when the prominent local clergymen found certain niches for the overt invocation of Orthodoxy as the main factor explaining Bessarabia’s legitimate inclusion into Russia. These examples are much more than simple repetitions of Russian “Orthodox Messianism,” since they argue for the consolidation of the clergy’s role as a bulwark of autocracy, but also as a rampart against the pernicious influence of contemporary political tendencies. The expressions of this clerical stance to be found in the sources on the 1912 ceremonies are characteristically one-sided, reflecting the views of only the upper strata of the hierarchy. Still, it is possible to infer the broader social forces that operated behind the official façade through a close reading of seemingly innocuous passages. The ambiguity of the official picture of a harmonious and just social order was visible even in cases when the hierarchs depicted the staunch and unshakeable Orthodox faith of the Bessarabian population as its most important distinguishing feature that also made it quite similar to the Russians: “How was Russia superior to those states and tribes that lorded over the Danubian lands?... Undoubtedly, Russia at that time [of the first Russian-Ottoman wars] lacked better weapons, large resources, allies and enlightenment, while the Turkish troops were always numerous, valiant, courageous and victorious. Russia’s advantage and Moldavia’s force resided

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<sup>394</sup> Wortman, vol. II, p. 439-449

solely in the loyalty of their peoples to the true, Orthodox faith.”<sup>395</sup> In a further passage, this point is reinforced: “The spiritual power of the Russian and Moldavian peoples had always been their most precious and laudable characteristic feature or trait.”<sup>396</sup> Thus, Orthodoxy by itself seems to represent the essence of the “national character” of both Russians and Moldavians, as well as the guarantee of their past and future salvation.

The clerical discourse insisted on the religious dimension of Russia’s “liberation” of the Balkan peoples, focusing on the fact that Russia had a special position in the designs of Providence. It is not surprising, therefore, to encounter exhortations that appealed to a view of “the past that retreated to the realm of history” based on the “spiritual interpretation of events.”<sup>397</sup> According to this tendency, in another officially endorsed account the Russian-Ottoman wars are seen as having a “religious character”<sup>398</sup> or, in an even more exalted tone, as representing “wars of the people and of ideas.”<sup>399</sup> The conflation of specifically religious and populist elements shows the difficulty of disentangling the various discourses that tended to overlap. The clergy naturally received a privileged position within this order of things and was the prime agent of the “civilizing process” initiated by the central government. “The Russian [*russkie*] authorities could begin their work only with the assistance of the local clergy, to whom the country really owes its initial enlightenment.”<sup>400</sup> Contrary to the secular narrative of progress promoted by the state, the clergy is described here as the social stratum with the most important contribution to Bessarabia’s inclusion into the empire.

In the face of the erosion of traditional hierarchies and the (perceived) breakdown of traditional social bonds, the fears and apprehensions of the clergy found their way into the festive

<sup>395</sup> *K stoletiiu prisoedineniia Bessarabii k Rossii*, Kishinev, 1912, p. 20-21

<sup>396</sup> *K stoletiiu prisoedineniia Bessarabii k Rossii*, Kishinev, 1912, p. 21

<sup>397</sup> *K stoletiiu prisoedineniia Bessarabii k Rossii*, Kishinev, 1912, p. 20

<sup>398</sup> N. Lashkov (ed.). *Prazdnovanie Stoletii prisoedineniia Bessarabii k Rossiiskoi Imperii*, Kishinev, 1914, p. 34

<sup>399</sup> N. Lashkov (ed.). *Prazdnovanie Stoletii prisoedineniia Bessarabii k Rossiiskoi Imperii*, Kishinev, 1914, p. 37

<sup>400</sup> *K stoletiiu prisoedineniia Bessarabii k Rossii*, Kishinev, 1912, p. 22

context of the 1912 celebration. The specific complaints voiced by the top church leadership did not refer only to the imperial space as a whole, but more concretely to the Bessarabian situation. Aside from the reforming tendencies originating inside the church institutions, in Bessarabia official Orthodoxy was challenged at the time by a radical movement from below based on an inchoate utopian doctrine with eschatological overtones that derived its strength from its focus on preaching in Romanian to an overwhelmingly peasant constituency. This movement is commonly labeled “Inochentism,” after the name of its founder, an initially obscure Moldavian monk who managed to acquire a mass following and was later persecuted by the church authorities. The onslaught of “Inochentism” seriously threatened the position of the Bessarabian local church and partly explains the obvious alarmist streak in the following fragment: “Unfortunately, during the last years it has been noticed, that the population is falling under the influence of the contemporary general ills. Among the general ills of our state one should include the fall of religious self-consciousness, of the church life and of the spiritual-moral education throughout society and among the people. All of these are displaced by contemporary scientific and political currents... There is a need for a spiritual renaissance first of all.”<sup>401</sup>

This Christian revivalist rhetoric was associated to a general criticism of modern society and to appeals for the restoration of a conservative social order. It can be linked to a certain clerical milieu that was close to the Russian court circles and that was represented in Bessarabia by the archbishop Serafim Chichagov, who, as already mentioned, played a prominent part in the organization of the 1912 ceremonies. The hierarch sought to restore the social prestige of the clergy by connecting it to the broader vision of the state authorities, though his success was partial at best. A serious attempt to reach some kind of “symphony” between the local clergy and the central authorities not only at a symbolic, but also at a more personal level, was made during

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<sup>401</sup> *K stoletiiu prisoedineniia Bessarabii k Rossii*, Kishinev, 1912, p. 23

the journey of a delegation of Bessarabian estates to Petersburg, in June 1912, as a last stage in the complex of anniversary ceremonies. Though organized according to a strict estate scheme (there were separate representatives of the nobility, the zemstvo, the cities and the rural communities)<sup>402</sup>, the delegation was headed by the archbishop, while the clergy featured prominently among its members. Insisting on the representative character of the delegation, that was meant to serve as a faithful picture of the “loyal Bessarabian people,” Serafim characteristically asserted: “The unity between God’s anointed [ruler] and God’s chosen ones, the servants of the altar, represents the only spiritual power on earth and it is certain, that no other power can overwhelm it.”<sup>403</sup> The clergy thus had a special relationship to the monarch, especially taking into account that Orthodoxy was the primary basis for the common identity of the inhabitants of Bessarabia and their Russian (increasingly understood as Great Russian) counterparts.

The distinction between the “statist” and “monarchical” narrative is difficult to make in the Bessarabian case. This can partly be explained by the weakness of the local institutions that could have represented an alternative to the monarchical vision favored by court circles. Nevertheless, the “statist” motives are predominant in most official accounts of the 1912 events and permeate even the “dissident” views articulated by the clergy, which emphasize the Orthodox character of the state and the majority of the local population. The “statist” perspective on Bessarabia’s inclusion into Russia was expressed under the form of the trope of *loyalty* to the dynasty and the “common destiny” that the Bessarabian province shared with the rest of the empire. A concise and synthetic representation of this narrative can be found in the “Most High proclamation

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<sup>402</sup> N. Lashkov (ed.). *Prazdnovanie Stoletiiia prisoedineniia Bessarabii k Rossiiskoi Imperii*, Kishinev, 1914, p. 121-122. As an interesting, but revealing fact, it should be noted that the zemstvo was treated as a separate “soslovie,” as were the “towns” and the rural inhabitants.

<sup>403</sup> N. Lashkov (ed.). *Prazdnovanie Stoletiiia prisoedineniia Bessarabii k Rossiiskoi Imperii*, Kishinev, 1914, p. 126

granted to the population of Bessarabia on the day of the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its inclusion into the Russian Empire,” issued on May 16, 1912. Contrary to most other instances of official discourse, where the element of conquest is downplayed or sublimated by euphemistic expressions, here it is openly stated. The document asserts that “through this memorable event, which served for the eternal magnifying of the glory of Our Empire, not only were its borders expanded, but many hundreds of thousands of Orthodox Christians, sharing the same faith with us, were granted the status of Russian subjects.”<sup>404</sup> The redeeming function of the 1812 “inclusion,” which is a constant presence in most official records and commentaries, is here tacitly subordinated to the glory of the empire achieved through “the heroic efforts of the valorous Russian troops.”<sup>405</sup> The “statist” thrust of the proclamation is emphasized by the invocation of the “common good,” guaranteed by Bessarabia’s “close partaking in the general life of Our State,” which assured a “high degree of welfare” to the multiethnic population of the province.<sup>406</sup> The theme of loyalty to the “fatherland” [*otechestvo*] and the monarch, who are totally identified, according to the prevailing discursive trend, is also prominent and is put forward as a fundamental feature of the local inhabitants.<sup>407</sup>

In this case one encounters a curious mix of arguments based on historical, moral and utilitarian grounds, which was to convey an ideal image of unity based on pre-modern criteria of fidelity to the God-anointed ruler, but also on modern grounds of efficiency and increased economic benefits. A difference with regard to more elaborate narratives stressing incipient nationalizing motives lies in the conspicuous absence of the “people” from the picture. The province’s inhabitants are gazed upon from a central perspective and represent merely objects of

<sup>404</sup> *K stoletiiu prisoedineniia Bessarabii k Rossii*, Kishinev, 1912, p. 1

<sup>405</sup> *K stoletiiu prisoedineniia Bessarabii k Rossii*, Kishinev, 1912, p. 1

<sup>406</sup> *K stoletiiu prisoedineniia Bessarabii k Rossii*, Kishinev, 1912, p. 1-2

<sup>407</sup> *K stoletiiu prisoedineniia Bessarabii k Rossii*, Kishinev, 1912, p. 2



rule, be they “hard-working, honest and pious” ones.<sup>408</sup> Bessarabia is valuable inasmuch as she bears her contribution to the “utility and glory of the Russian state.” In a similar vein, the interim Bessarabian Marshal of the Nobility, A. K. Leonard, concluded his solemn speech held on May 15, 1912, in the Noble Assembly, by what he regarded as constituting the ultimate relevance of the celebrations: “The Committee expresses the hope, on behalf of the whole population of Bessarabia, that... all of us, the inhabitants of Bessarabia, with our heads held high, will be looking upright, courageously and joyfully on hearing the noble words: loyalty, patriotism and faith in our fatherland!”<sup>409</sup>

The “statist” variant of the official discourse also displayed a marked preference for the rhetorical contrast between the current reality of *progress* and prosperity and the unfortunate and *backward* state of the province prior to the founding date of 1812. This counterpoising of the former desolate situation to the achievements of the Russian administration was not merely a reflection of the “civilizing mission” motive that was present throughout the Russian literature of the epoch. It was also a reminiscence of the Enlightenment view of the state that underscored the duality of the self-perception of the Russian elite in the early XX century. While on the central level the identification with the “olden times” (especially the seventeenth century) that characterized the monarchical narrative clearly displaced the former “progressive” overtones of the official discourse, on the peripheries the civilizing and organizing character of the empire’s domination was reinforced. In the officially sanctioned account of the celebration, the author rhetorically asks: “What did Bessarabia represent in 1812?” The answer conveys an almost full picture of “Oriental despotism:” “The despotic power of the prince dominated all the branches of the administration... Urban and rural welfare, the ways of communication, commerce, industry,

<sup>408</sup> *K stoletiiu prisoedineniia Bessarabii k Rossii*, Kishinev, 1912, p. 1

<sup>409</sup> N. Lashkov (ed.). *Prazdnovanie Stoletia prisoedineniia Bessarabii k Rossiiskoi Imperii*, Kishinev, 1914, p. 51

education, justice, in a word, everything that could not be included into the program of financial exploitation had no organization whatsoever.”<sup>410</sup> This passage is important as an illustration of the relevance that the opposition between “lack/disorder” and “abundance/order” acquired in the overall structure of Bessarabia’s inclusion into the imperial space. This space was organized, orderly and safe, as opposed to the chaos and insecurity of the alien environment that threatened to engulf the oppressed local population.

Even within the structure of the church narrative, reflected mostly in the sermons and speeches of the local hierarchy, the theme of empire as a civilizing agent preserved its salience. Thus, in Archbishop Serafim’s solemn speech on May 16 one can witness the opposition between a Bessarabia “ravaged by wars, half burnt down and depleted by plague and [other] diseases” and the flourishing present situation synthesized in the metaphor of “rebirth:” “the whole people should express its gratitude and praise towards God both for the peace He granted us and for the century we lived through, which was used for the organization of Bessarabia’s welfare and education and for its rebirth to a new life.”<sup>411</sup> Similarly, in the sermon of the bishop of Izmail, Zinovii, pronounced during a special church service on May 15, 1912, the contrast between the earlier disorganized and chaotic state of the province and the progress brought about by the Empire’s civilizing mission holds a central place. The hierarch identifies the main significance of the celebration in the extolling of Russian material and spiritual achievements in Bessarabia: “And if we could recreate in our memory this [previous] period of yoke and humiliation and could compare it with the period of free and quiet life of Bessarabia under the scepter of the Russian Monarchs, then we shall clarify the whole sense of this celebration.”<sup>412</sup> In a further passage, Zinovii reasserts the trope of progress even more forcefully: “During this time [since

<sup>410</sup> N. Lashkov (ed.). *Prazdnovanie Stoletiiu prisoedineniia Bessarabii k Rossiiskoi Imperii*, Kishinev, 1914, p. 38

<sup>411</sup> *K stoletiiu prisoedineniia Bessarabii k Rossii*, Kishinev, 1912, p. 20

<sup>412</sup> *K stoletiiu prisoedineniia Bessarabii k Rossii*, Kishinev, 1912, p. 8

1812] Bessarabia flourished and mightily prospered: its wealth increased multifold, its population augmented, literacy spread, culture and civilization was cultivated.”<sup>413</sup> To enhance the rhetorical effect of the transformative agency of the empire, Bessarabia became, in the bishop’s words, “unrecognizable in all the manifestations of its life.”<sup>414</sup> The solemn address of the Kiev metropolitan on the occasion of the anniversary does not fail to mention the same rhetorical sequence: “It [Bessarabia] displayed and continues to display such a powerful forward movement in all the fields of its existence- the economic, the social and the spiritual- that every inhabitant of this wonderful border region [*okrainy*] can look back to the road happily left behind, with a feeling of deep gratitude towards God, unchanging loyalty to the Russian Throne and complete inner satisfaction.”<sup>415</sup> The persistence of this traditional array of recurring motives points to the continuity with the earlier themes present as far back as the beginning of the XIX century. However, this seeming likeness conceals the profound changes in the symbolic sphere that occurred in the meantime. Certain strikingly new elements are present which indicate the immersion of the Russian monarchy into the modern era of nationalism.

A fundamental example of the use of such tropes is provided by the recurrent representations of the empire as a *family of peoples* and the abundant use of “*family*” motives in the quasi-totality of the official accounts. The relevance of this seemingly trivial rhetoric resides, first, in the surprising continuity it discloses between tsarist discourse and the later Soviet variations on the “friendship of peoples” topic. The similarity of the rhetorical foundations does not hide the palpable differences between the two vocabularies. The insistence on “friendship” in the Soviet period was linked to the motive of voluntary association that was meant to distance the Soviet experiment from its potential imperial antecedents. However, the relationship between these two

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<sup>413</sup> *K stoletiiu prisoedineniia Bessarabii k Rossii*, Kishinev, 1912, p. 11

<sup>414</sup> *K stoletiiu prisoedineniia Bessarabii k Rossii*, Kishinev, 1912, p. 11

<sup>415</sup> *K stoletiiu prisoedineniia Bessarabii k Rossii*, Kishinev, 1912, p. 15

tropes was based not only on mutual opposition; it was also complementary in the sense of claiming a close association between the state's subjects or citizens (based either on history or on a-historical organic criteria). Far from pointing to any direct connection between the imperial and Soviet contexts, this similarity shows the extent to which tsarist officials resorted to lexical devices originating in the nationalist discourse ("the nation as family") in order to legitimize the empire's benign and paternalistic attitude toward its subjects. Second, the nature of the relationship between Bessarabia and the Russian state was commonly expressed by a series of terms denoting a close, even intimate relationship, the most frequent being "co-participation" (*priobshchenie*), which refers mostly to the sphere of the state and the values of material civilization associated with it, and "merging" (*sliianie*), which denotes the organic character of Bessarabia's inclusion into the Russian space, as well as the direct link existing between the Russian and Moldavian "peoples," as distinguished from the imperial state.

The importance of "family" metaphors should not be automatically connected to the influence of nationalism upon the outlook of bureaucrats and local intellectuals. However, my argument is that, in the case of Bessarabia, the mode of rhetorical representation of the province corresponded to a transition (however imperfect) to a nationalizing narrative. This can be related to the ambiguous status of Bessarabia with respect to the Russian "core." Even while acknowledged as a periphery (with the implied characteristic of "otherness"), the bond between this region and the Great Russian core was portrayed as stronger than in many other cases. Aside from the obvious argument of common Orthodoxy (naturally stressed by the clerical variety of the imperial discourse), the recurrence of "family" motives is a serious indication of this tendency. The "family" motives transcended the boundaries of estate or bureaucratic discourses and thus can be interpreted as a general underlying feature of the Russian public's image of the province. It manifested itself in three basic forms: 1) the direct invocation of a "filial" or "brotherly"

relationship between Bessarabia and Russia; 2) the direct relationship and affinity between the Russian and Moldavian peoples that created the preconditions for the gradual “merging” of the Bessarabian Romanians into Russian society; 3) the introduction of the *Russian blood* motive as a rhetorical device that certified the belonging of Bessarabia to the empire.

The use of direct “familial” references is scattered throughout the whole array of sources pertaining to the official proceedings of the celebration. One of the most poignant manifestations of this stance can be found in the report of the provincial marshal of the nobility on the activities of the Anniversary Committee concerning the erection of the monument to Alexander I (which was inaugurated on June 3, 1914). The monument itself was meant to represent the “indissoluble bond” between the province and the Empire. Thus, the sculptural ensemble had to include not only the statue of the emperor, but, significantly, an allegorical representation that should have been “read” in the following way: “in the front part of the pedestal there is a bronze allegorical relief that represents Russia embracing Bessarabia; above the relief a bronze two-headed eagle [will be placed].”<sup>416</sup> The representation of “empire as family” is here deciphered without much ambiguity. Despite the usual bureaucratic wrangling, the project was completed in due time essentially along the lines described above. Alexander I’s monument, erected in front of the archbishop’s residence, represented a powerful material symbol of Bessarabia’s belonging to the imperial space. As the local church’s organ reported on the occasion of the monument’s inauguration, it “depicted the emperor standing, his bronze figure being placed on a pink granite pedestal. Seven stairs, carved from the same material, were leading to the pedestal. In front of it, a [bronze] relief was constructed, representing two women.” One of them (symbolizing the

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<sup>416</sup> N. Lashkov (ed.). *Prazdnovanie Stoletiiia prisoeдинeniia Bessarabii k Rossiiskoi Imperii*, Kishinev, 1914, p. 50

Russian Empire) was embracing the other one (symbolizing Bessarabia).<sup>417</sup> The importance accorded to such signs of Russian material presence is an indicator of the empire's investment into concrete projects for the "Russification of space" at the peripheries. This symbolically charged imperial message was sufficiently internalized by contemporaries for the statue to be destroyed during the upheavals of 1918.

The Marshal of the Nobility emphasized the special importance of the initiative through invoking an image of the same sort: "The main attention of the committee was directed toward the eternal commemoration of the celebrated event through the construction of a monument fitting this occasion, so that all the future generations know and remember, how much love and loyalty the Bessarabians exhibited towards *Russia, which turned out to be not a stepmother, but a true mother* (my emphasis-A.C.) for... Bessarabia."<sup>418</sup> In the same vein, Leonard declared that "Bessarabia is truly a real and loving sister of all the other parts of limitless Russia."<sup>419</sup> This rhetoric was by no means limited to the leader of the local nobles. It also occurs with amazing regularity in the sermons and solemn orations of the clergy. In the sermon of the Izmail bishop Zinovii the "family motive" occurs twice. First, when speaking about the 1812 events, the bishop refers to Russia's "brotherly embrace" of the Moldavians on this occasion.<sup>420</sup> The second instance alludes to the contested character of Bessarabia's purportedly unproblematic inclusion into the imperial sphere. Zinovii exhorts his audience: "Let us love Orthodox Russia, our common mother [...]. Let us not listen to the calumny of evil people, who wish to sow between us the seeds of discord and controversy."<sup>421</sup> Though these examples seem to be related rather to

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<sup>417</sup> Dinu Poștarencu, *O istorie a Basarabiei în date și documente, 1812-1940* [A Chronological and Documentary History of Bessarabia] (Chisinau: Cartier, 1998), p. 154. The above description is cited from: *Kishinevskie eparhial'nye vedomosti*, Nr. 25, 1914.

<sup>418</sup> N. Lashkov (ed.). *Prazdnovanie Stoletiiu prisoedineniia Bessarabii k Rossiiskoi Imperii*, Kishinev, 1914, p. 49

<sup>419</sup> N. Lashkov (ed.). *Prazdnovanie Stoletiiu prisoedineniia Bessarabii k Rossiiskoi Imperii*, Kishinev, 1914, p. 51

<sup>420</sup> *K stoletiiu prisoedineniia Bessarabii k Rossii*, Kishinev, 1912, p. 10

<sup>421</sup> *K stoletiiu prisoedineniia Bessarabii k Rossii*, Kishinev, 1912, p. 11-12

the Biblical imagery of paternalistic ties between rulers and ruled, in other instances the context clearly points to the organic link between Bessarabia and the Russian state. The solemn letter of the Kiev metropolitan emphasizes this unity through the invocation of the same rhetorical device: “During the last century Bessarabia became connected to Russia through so many unbreakable bonds, that it now has the right to consider itself [Russia’s] own daughter [*rodnoiū dshcher’iu*]; for the last hundred years, it [Bessarabia] has walked hand in hand with its mighty Mother, has shared her grief and joys and itself enjoys [Russia’s] sincere and uninterrupted love.”<sup>422</sup> This personification of “Bessarabia” and “Russia” as two discrete (if closely linked) entities can hardly be subsumed under the customary label of the dynastic discourse. “Russia” represents here not only a metonymy of the Russian multiethnic empire, but can be interpreted as well in more narrow terms, as the land inhabited by Russian people. An aspect that needs further analysis concerns the gender vocabulary used by the Russian sources. Both Russia and Bessarabia are depicted as female figures, which fits the tradition of Russian self-perception and points to the implicit link between the intimacy of collective feelings for the “mother-country” and the powerful agency of the state and its embodiment- the monarch. These images could also be naturally related to the field of national rhetoric, within which the emblematic figure of a nation is customarily encompassed in a female collective “person.”

Another instance of invoking the “family lexicon” can be encountered in Archbishop Serafim’s sermon held on May 16, 1912, during the official celebration ceremony. Bessarabia is again depicted as “a loving sister that was closely united with Russia in suffering all the trials and misfortunes, beginning with the Crimean campaign.”<sup>423</sup> In a telegram sent to the emperor, Serafim talks about the “adoption” of Bessarabia by the Russian monarchs, who “did not cease to

<sup>422</sup> *K stoletiiu prisoedineniia Bessarabii k Rossii*, Kishinev, 1912, p. 15

<sup>423</sup> *K stoletiiu prisoedineniia Bessarabii k Rossii*, Kishinev, 1912, p. 23

engulf it” with “their love and vigilant care.”<sup>424</sup> However, in this case one witnesses a transition to the nationalizing narrative that made its entry into many of the archbishop’s pronouncements on this festive occasion.

The second cluster of representations has as its main unifying criterion the constant invocation of the *Russian people* as the main agent of Bessarabia’s symbolic appropriation. The close interpenetration of the clerical discourse with an essentially nationalist position, displayed by Serafim, becomes easily explainable once his direct involvement into the Bessarabian section of the Union of Russian People is taken into account. The bishop served as the honorary president of the organization’s Bessarabian branch.<sup>425</sup> This example illustrates the complex intertwining of political activism, bureaucratic service and estate spirit that characterized many of the officials on the local level in this period.

A condensed expression of this kind of new appropriation of the masses for the imperial project can be found in the introductory speech held by Serafim during the solemn meeting organized in the Noble Assembly building on the evening of May 15, 1912.<sup>426</sup> Despite the presence of traditional elements legitimizing the events of 1812 (the triumph of Orthodoxy over Islam and of civilization over barbarity), a striking departure from this narrative was obvious when the bishop proclaimed that “one hundred years ago, the day of May 16 was for the Moldavian people not only a day of joy and happiness, but also [a day] of the triumph ... of human rights, that were restored to it by the Russian people.”<sup>427</sup> In a repetition of the same rhetorical tactics, Serafim declared the following day, at the ceremony marking the laying of the foundation of Alexander I’s monument: “The Moldavian people, devoid in the course of many

<sup>424</sup> *K stoletiiu prisoedineniia Bessarabii k Rossii*, Kishinev, 1912, p. 23

<sup>425</sup> *K stoletiiu prisoedineniia Bessarabii k Rossii*, Kishinev, 1912, p. 8

<sup>426</sup> N. Lashkov (ed.). *Prazdnovanie Stoletia prisoedineniia Bessarabii k Rossiiskoi Imperii*, Kishinev, 1914, p. 20-22; *K stoletiiu prisoedineniia Bessarabii k Rossii*, Kishinev, 1912, p. 12-14

<sup>427</sup> N Lashkov (ed.). *Prazdnovanie Stoletia prisoedineniia Bessarabii k Rossiiskoi Imperii*, Kishinev, 1914, p. 20



centuries of human rights and peace, was liberated and called to a new life.”<sup>428</sup> The dimensions of the 1812 founding events were “larger than life” and required special means of representation that were provided by the introduction of the people’s “collective consciousness” as the only sphere capable of encompassing the otherwise “indescribable” Russian sacrifices and heroic feats. This kind of inflated rhetoric was uttered not only in order to impress the audience, but also to emphasize the bond between the Moldavians and the “imperial people.” Serafim seems to have grasped the potential that a more nationalistic argument entailed, though he transfers the essence of “popular empathy” from the political to the spiritual sphere: “It is *unthinkable* to record an impression of this century-long struggle, of so many wars of liberation, in all their details, either on canvas, or on paper, or even in human imagination. The great heroic deeds of the Russian Supreme Leaders [*Verhovnyh Vozhdei*] and of *the whole people* during these hundred years can be properly preserved only in the hearts of the [Moldavian] people, while the truth about it [is] transmitted from generation to generation...”<sup>429</sup> The portraying of the community of the people as the bearer of “truth” has, of course, a purely instrumental character. However, this image is constantly invoked in order to highlight the inevitable and legitimate character of Bessarabia’s partaking in the common destiny of the Russian state.

The archbishop sought to transcend the realm of historical arguments by using the notion of a “collective spirit” of the people that one would rather expect from a nationally minded intellectual. Even if couched in an ostensibly traditionalist frame, the following passage can hardly be interpreted as typical for the earlier discursive patterns: “But popular wisdom has the advantage, that it cannot be subject to the contemporary thinking of separate individuals and that

<sup>428</sup> *K stoletiiu prisoedineniia Bessarabii k Rossii*, Kishinev, 1912, p. 24

<sup>429</sup> N Lashkov (ed.). *Prazdnovanie Stoletiiu prisoedineniia Bessarabii k Rossiiskoi Imperii*, Kishinev, 1914, p. 21

is why it is close to truth.”<sup>430</sup> Several layers of meaning can be identified here. First, the “truth” that Serafim refers to belongs to the sphere of the divine, since it supersedes (and includes) the mundane incomplete and divisive “truths” that he rejects. Second, a clear allusion to the political doctrines of modernity is present. Nevertheless, the authority that is assumed to reveal this higher truth belongs to “the people,” who thus acquire a special quality of intuitive understanding. Thence derives the special relationship between the Russian and Moldavian peoples that was to be later secularized by the Soviet version of the *friendship of the peoples* myth. The historical events are explicitly read through the lens of this fundamentally a-historical “spiritual empathy.” When describing the emigration of the Moldavian prince Dimitrie Cantemir to Russia following the unsuccessful Prut campaign, the archbishop interprets this occurrence as a proof of “the mutual popular feelings and of who was always close to the Moldavians’ heart and spirit.”<sup>431</sup> In another revealing turn of phrase insisting on the same spiritual bond between peoples, Serafim proclaims: “The Moldavian people... proved during these hundred years... that its heart cannot be severed from the Russian heart and that it beats in the same life rhythm as the Russian one.”<sup>432</sup>

The nationalizing overtones of such fragments should not obscure the inherent ambiguity of this discourse. The first level of this ambiguity relates to the introduction of specifically historical arguments in the narrative. One interesting example is again to be traced to a solemn speech of the archbishop, this time held on May 16. Aside from the common motives stressing the efforts of the Russian state to liberate its fellow Orthodox brethren, Bessarabia is linked historically to Slavdom by the obviously inaccurate (but widespread) assumption that it “belonged from ancient

<sup>430</sup> N Lashkov (ed.). *Prazdnovanie Stoletiiia prisoedineniia Bessarabii k Rossiiskoi Imperii*, Kishinev, 1914, p. 22

<sup>431</sup> N Lashkov (ed.). *Prazdnovanie Stoletiiia prisoedineniia Bessarabii k Rossiiskoi Imperii*, Kishinev, 1914, p. 21

<sup>432</sup> N Lashkov (ed.). *Prazdnovanie Stoletiiia prisoedineniia Bessarabii k Rossiiskoi Imperii*, Kishinev, 1914, p. 21

times to the Scythians, that is, Russian Slavs.”<sup>433</sup> The insistence on the Scythian-Russian connection might be prone to over-interpretation, but its restatement in the context of efforts aimed at Bessarabia’s symbolic inclusion into the Russian “homeland” point to the eclectic character of the Russian discourse. The situation seems even more complex if one carefully analyzes the officially sanctioned historical accounts of the region specially prepared on the occasion of the celebration by N. V. Lashkov, who had a prominent role as an official historiographer and chronicler of the festive ceremonies themselves. Understandably extolling the redeeming and civilizing role of the Russian Empire in the region, he does not depart from the conventional historical narrative stressing the Romance character of the ethnic Romanian majority of Bessarabia.<sup>434</sup>

The second level of ambiguity is linked to the frequent use of the notion of *Moldavian people* in the analyzed texts. This is also a departure from the customary practice of Russian writings from the imperial period. The presentation of the “Moldavians” as a discrete entity that entered in a direct relationship with the Russian people, despite the continuity it displays with the earlier stages of the Russian images of Bessarabia, acquires certain elements that derive from the new position of the Russian people in the picture. The local officials tend to depict the ethnic diversity of the province in terms that are no longer neutral, but have political implications for the mode of celebration itself. The Moldavian “people” is not only reified as a receiver of Russian benevolence, it is also devoid of any agency in the process. Serafim uses an interesting

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<sup>433</sup> *K stoletiiu prisoedineniia Bessarabii k Rossii*, Kishinev, 1912, p. 20. I cannot dwell here at more length on the “Scythian-Russian connection.” The array of references that comes to mind is truly impressive: from the reclaiming of a special relationship to Classical Antiquity (contained in the Russian appropriation of the Crimea as Scythia Minor) to the postulation of continuity of Slavic settlement and, of course, of the special relationship of the Russians to Asia, the Orient and the steppe. The general framework of such mental constructs was laid out in the previous chapters.

<sup>434</sup> For example, his extensive discussions of Bessarabian history contained in the following books: N. V. Lashkov, ed. *Bessarabiia k stoletiiu prisoedineniia k Rossii. 1812- 1912*. Kishinev, 1912, pp. 35-52; also N Lashkov (ed.). *Prazdnovanie Stoletiiu prisoedineniia Bessarabii k Rossiiskoi Imperii*, Kishinev, 1914, pp. 24-48

distinction between “overt” and “ideal” Russification that should have turned the Moldavians into Russians on a deeper, almost ontological level. The inclusion of Bessarabia into the Russian space presupposed “teaching the Moldavians not only how to speak and pray in the Russian language, but also how to think, feel and act in a Russian manner [*po-russki*].”<sup>435</sup>

In opposition to the triumphalist rhetoric that pervaded most of the public discourse, the Moldavians clearly did not fulfill the criteria for real belonging within the Russian community (however defined). Moreover, they possessed only a limited capability of articulating their own feelings of loyalty and gratitude towards the Russian monarch and people (the monarch being conflated with the people he purportedly represented). The lack of articulation was visible in the final part of the archbishop’s speech, where the “family metaphor” is used to convey the ultimately hierarchical nature of the Russian- Moldavian relationship: “Let us, as *the elder brothers* of this people, in the present solemn assembly, hurry to be ahead of it... Let us be the first to proclaim Glory to our Beloved Sovereign and let us unanimously hail a *Russian hooray!*”<sup>436</sup> The claim of Bessarabia’s belonging to the Russian national space is almost transparent here and can be interpreted as a clear instance of nationalist rhetoric. However, the privilege to celebrate the jubilee, ostensibly open to the whole people, ultimately rested with the local educated society and the loyal servants of the monarchy that had the necessary qualifications to act on behalf of the people and the capacity to speak in its name.<sup>437</sup> The inarticulate character of the mass of the inhabitants allowed the ambiguity to persist whereby the principle of popular participation was invoked without any real impact on the degree of public involvement effectively permitted the emerging professional and intellectual strata (not to speak

<sup>435</sup> N Lashkov (ed.). *Prazdnovanie Stoletiiia prisoedineniia Bessarabii k Rossiiskoi Imperii*, Kishinev, 1914, p. 21

<sup>436</sup> N Lashkov (ed.). *Prazdnovanie Stoletiiia prisoedineniia Bessarabii k Rossiiskoi Imperii*, Kishinev, 1914, p. 22

<sup>437</sup> N Lashkov (ed.). *Prazdnovanie Stoletiiia prisoedineniia Bessarabii k Rossiiskoi Imperii*, Kishinev, 1914, p. 47-48

about the peasantry). The 1912 ceremony, even while using a nationally inspired rhetoric to an unprecedented degree, remained first and foremost a celebration of empire and for empire.

The third important rhetorical device that was to consecrate Bessarabia's belonging to the empire was centered upon the *Russian blood* motive. This expression served as a potent reminder of the materially and palpably organic connection existing between the Bessarabian soil and the Russian state and people. It is hard to assess how many of these references can be associated with the praise for the Russian military exploits present in previous accounts and what, if any, new meaning such tropes acquired in the early XX century. I would argue that the frequency of their appearance and the context of their utterance endowed such ritual expressions with an additional semantic weight. The authorities were aware of the insecure status of Bessarabia's belonging to the imperial space and also strove to respond to the challenge of the Romanian national discourse that used similar "blood and soil" metaphors for its own purposes. A direct correspondence between them is improbable, but the presence of this topic in the Russian case was not accidental and mingled the specifically imperial theme of conquest with the biological metaphor of blood into a powerful claim to the region's inclusion in the body of the state. In one of the most articulate versions of the latter, Bessarabia is literally permeated by it: "thousands of heroes irrigated and imbibed [*orosili i napoili*] the land of Bessarabia with their blood. On their blood and bones was the foundation of Bessarabia's new life erected. [This new life] began on May 16, 1812."<sup>438</sup> Thus, the "rebirth" that is related to the topic of progress and redemption analyzed above was preceded by a sacrifice of the Russian body politic that endowed it with an incontestable right to rule and incorporate Bessarabia. In a similar vein and almost in the same words, the Russian liberation of Bessarabia from the "Turkish yoke" is unmistakably associated with the "blood" of its "sons:" "A lot of Russian blood was spilled. One could say that all the

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<sup>438</sup>N. V. Lashkov, ed. *Bessarabiia k stoletiiu prisoedineniia k Rossii. 1812- 1912*. Kishinev, 1912, p. II

fields of Bessarabia are irrigated [*orosheny*] by this blood. Many bones of Russian warriors are laid to rest on the Bessarabian fields!”<sup>439</sup>

The region was reclaimed for the Russian collective imaginary not simply as a field of confrontation between Russian and Ottoman armies, but as a sacred ground filled with a special significance that derived from the foundational character of the Russian military campaigns. Another potential reading of this pattern is linked to the importance of the army as a key unifying and legitimizing element of the empire. The “blood” that made Bessarabia Russian in an almost material sense belonged not only to the Russians generally, but to the soldiers and “warriors” specifically. Though the connection between the past glories of Russian armies and their present importance for the strength of the state is usually implied rather than explicitly disclosed, at one occasion this link is made clear: “The blood of hundreds of thousands of these mighty knights [*bogatyrei*] and heroes irrigated and abundantly saturated [*nasyshchena obil’no*] our Bessarabian land... [We] salute and bow to the ground to you, contemporary representatives of our victorious Christ-loving All-Russian Host [*voinstva*]...”<sup>440</sup> Despite such references to the present relevance of the army, the blood metaphor essentially remained woven to the organic nature of Russia’s link with Bessarabia and served as a reminder of the belonging of the region not only to the empire as a whole but, at least symbolically, to its Russian and Orthodox core.

The moment of the imperial celebration of 1912 proved to be both a high point of discursive coherence in the gradual elaboration of the image of Bessarabia in the Russian context and an indication of the potentially disruptive elements that put into jeopardy the Russian project of empire-building at the peripheries. Perhaps nowhere is this ambiguity so well illustrated as in an official poem expressly written for the occasion of the 1912 anniversary which praised

<sup>439</sup> *K stoletiiu prisoedineniia Bessarabii k Rossii*, Kishinev, 1912, p. 10

<sup>440</sup> N Lashkov (ed.). *Prazdnovanie Stoletiiu prisoedineniia Bessarabii k Rossiiskoi Imperii*, Kishinev, 1914, p. 37

Bessarabia as a “jewel in the crown of the Orthodox tsar.”<sup>441</sup> This poem represents a synthesis of the discursive elements discussed above and thus allows a glimpse of the equilibrium that different sections of the bureaucracy and socio-political interests attempted to forge. While extolling the familiar civilizing and redeeming effects of Russian imperial rule in Bessarabia (through phrases such as “wonderful Bessarabian land,” “land of freedom and abundance,” “our most fertile [*plodonosneishii*] land,” or “breadbasket” [*zhitnitsa*])- thus emphasizing the theme of progress and economic prosperity-, the author also lauded the “family of Russian peoples” into which Bessarabia had (presumably) irrevocably merged [*nerazryvno priobshchen*]. Similarly, Bessarabia is depicted as enjoying a “brotherly unity” [*bratskoe edinen’e*] with Russia, which is represented as the main precondition for its century-long “free development.” Nationalizing tendencies, while not overtly stated, are to be found not only in the use of the “family” lexicon, but also in more subtle examples, one of which refers to the liberation of Bessarabia from “Turkish abuses” [*zasil’ia*] by “Rus” [*Rus’iu*]. In fact, nowhere in this poem are the notions of *Rossiia* or “empire” to be found, being consistently replaced by their national equivalents (the Russian monarch is designated as “Orthodox tsar”). One last interesting instance of the incipient nationalization of the imperial space refers to the notion of “Russian [*rusaskaia*] breadbasket” that Bessarabia ultimately became. Even its economic relevance for the empire is starting to be viewed in national terms (admittedly, on the lexical level). There is certainly a danger of over-interpretation in focusing so much on this single example, but I find it extremely relevant both for the general tendency of the Russian monarchy to downplay the “Westernized” imperial tradition in favor of a Russian national narrative and for the interplay of discourses on the local level. At the same time, images such as that of the “Russian breadbasket” or “land of abundance and free

<sup>441</sup> S.S. Orlov, *On the 100th Anniversarz of Bessarabia’s Inclusion into Russia. 1912*. Cited in: N Lashkov (ed.). *Prazdnovanie Stoletii prisoedineniia Bessarabii k Rossiiskoi Imperii*, Kishinev, 1914, p. 49

space” were meant to conceal the actual complex reality of the province as a periphery of the empire and to paint a picture of organic unity at a time when the social and political fabric of the polity were under serious strain.

The rhetorical models and patterns discussed above also constituted the framework for the public expressions of the province’s articulate “society” on the occasion of the jubilee. This is also valid for some unofficial publications that painted a less exalted image of the anniversary and even included some sketches of everyday life that provided a less Olympian view of Bessarabian early XX century society.<sup>442</sup> The officially sanctioned narratives of the event can hardly be expected to provide instances of a full-fledged oppositional discourse. The scarce expressions of the collective entity of the “people” (so much invoked during the celebration period) were highly ritualistic and orchestrated gestures that reflected, at best, the understanding of the anniversary’s significance by the literate intermediaries (overwhelmingly priests or local officials). This picture emerges clearly from the petitions addressed either to the archbishop (in the absence of a designated governor) or directly to the emperor by various Bessarabian communities.<sup>443</sup> Ritualistic invocations of the population’s enthusiasm and active participation in locally organized religious services and secular festivities leave an impression of the efforts of

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<sup>442</sup> One of the most illustrative samples of such literature is the short collection of amateur poems published by a local advertising agency. It included, for example, a number of poems devoted to Bessarabian industry or even, in a slightly ironical mode, to the economic and social “backwardness” of the region that left plenty of space for improvement in the field of social services and public welfare (see *Stoletnii iubilei prisoedineniia Bessarabii k Rossii. 1812-1912 gg. Tip. “Energiia,” Kishinev, 1912*, esp. pp. 8, 16-18, 19-20). This short collection is also symptomatic for the distribution of social prestige on the local level, which is expressed through the prominent place awarded to administrators or zemstvo activists that left an imprint on local affairs (most notably, the long serving mayor of Kishinev, Karl Schmidt [1877-1903] and the zemstvo member and philanthropist K. F. Kazimir), cf. pp. 12, 15). However, even such autonomous initiatives were heavily indebted to the discursive stances discussed above. Thus, the motive of “the Russian Empire as a civilizing force” is present (p. 14), as well as, even more importantly, the usual “founding figures” which frame the narrative of Bessarabia’s inclusion into the space of the empire (aside from Russian monarchs, the personalities of Suvorov and Pushkin are part of this image, cf. pp. 5-7, 10-11). The Russian “heroes” are also invoked (cf. p. 3-4). Still, the specifically “nationalizing” topics are conspicuously absent, which, in conjunction with certain subtle anti-authoritarian allusions, warrant the conclusion that the emerging intellectual and professional strata did not totally share in the idiom imposed on them from above.

<sup>443</sup> N Lashkov (ed.). *Prazdnovanie Stoletii prisoedineniia Bessarabii k Rossiiskoi Imperii*, Kishinev, 1914, pp. 82-89



local notables to mobilize the population on the occasion of the anniversary, but hardly tell us much about its actual impact (if any) on the wider public.

Some interesting examples are provided by the more elaborate addresses and petitions of scholarly associations (e.g., the Bessarabian Scholarly Archival Commission), zemstvo institutions or separate estates (e.g., the Kishinev *meshchane*), where some specific issues found a measure of reflection. Thus, the address of the Archival Commission emphasized: “on the basis of the preserved documents” it could be ascertained that “the autochthonous population of Bessarabia, from remotest times throughout our whole history had always [remained] faithful to its sovereigns,” which explained why it “staunchly displayed its... loyalty to the Great Russian throne” and why it preserved in its midst the principles of “duty, legality and order.”<sup>444</sup> The address of the provincial zemstvo predictably focused on the “co-option” of Bessarabia into the Russian state, but also mentioned “the great transformations [*preobrazovaniia*] of the Tsar-Liberator and the further reforms of local administration” that “put Bessarabia on a par with the central Russian *guberniias*.”<sup>445</sup> Even the most liberal circles of the local society, centered on the zemstvo institutions, hardly expressed any hint at a potential dissenting view. The reform rhetoric was itself framed by the integrative perspective of the center which paid special attention to the similarity between the Bessarabian periphery and the Russian core.

A final case worth noticing is that of the Kishinev “urban dwellers,” who elaborated their petition following the lines of the “restoration of old Rus” motive that prevailed in much of the court and monarchical circles at the time, including the nationalizing elements of this discourse. Representing itself in unambiguous terms as “true to the principles [*zavetam*] of the venerable and glorious olden times,” the society of local *meshchane* assured the tsar that it was “filled with

<sup>444</sup> N Lashkov (ed.). *Prazdnovanie Stoletiiia prisoedineniia Bessarabii k Rossiiskoi Imperii*, Kishinev, 1914, p. 87

<sup>445</sup> N. Lashkov (ed.). *Prazdnovanie Stoletiiia prisoedineniia Bessarabii k Rossiiskoi Imperii*, Kishinev, 1914, p. 87-88

a unanimous desire to promote in the future as well the Russian cause [*russskoe delo*] in Bessarabia.”<sup>446</sup> This instance is one of the rare occurrences when a constituted social body attempted to articulate its role beyond ostensibly official or bureaucratic occasions, though its autonomy is highly questionable, given the context and the top-down character of the official ceremonies.

The internal analysis of the Russian stance on Bessarabia during the 1912 anniversary discloses a number of interesting patterns and allows the placing of the region in an all-imperial context. Bessarabia acquires an identifiable (but not unique) image in the multi-ethnic structure of the Russian Empire, even if this image stresses the organic and “natural” bond between this borderland and the center. Behind this ostensible picture of unity, the province’s contested character constantly undermined the efforts of imperial administrators to consecrate Bessarabia’s unproblematic status within the empire. The Russian authorities were well aware of the potential negative reaction that the festivities might provoke in the Romanian kingdom. Before discussing this reaction, it is necessary to see what, if any, reflection the projected Romanian response received in the Russian official circles.

The 1912 moment represented not only the point of articulation of two diametrically opposed visions of Bessarabia, but also a direct clash between the Russian and Romanian states. The Bessarabian authorities were clearly troubled by the perspective of Romanian national “demonstrations” that were meant to challenge the image of Bessarabia’s belonging to the empire so carefully crafted by local publicists and bureaucrats. Three weeks prior to the May 16 ceremonies, the apprehension of the Bessarabian police officials was growing. Thus, the chief of Bessarabian Gendarmes reported to his superiors that, in connection with the forthcoming anniversary, “the Romanian press organized a propaganda campaign [*agitatsiia*] that aims at

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<sup>446</sup> N. Lashkov (ed.). *Prazdnovanie Stoletiiia prisoiedineniia Bessarabii k Rossiiskoi Imperii*, Kishinev, 1914, p. 88

proclaiming the days of the Kishinev festivities as days of national Romanian mourning.”<sup>447</sup> The Russian officials appear to be well-informed concerning the projected manifestations, since they mention a whole array of symbolically charged events that have been allegedly in preparation. Significantly, all these measures are depicted as mainly hypothetical and initiated from below, that is, by certain elements of the journalistic and intellectual milieu. Aside from purely demonstrative gestures, such as “decorating the houses of Iasi, Galati and Braila with flags bent in mourning and appearing in the street wearing mourning clothes,”<sup>448</sup> a specific challenge in the rhetorical sphere would be represented by “holding public lectures and also lectures in educational institutions” that would focus on describing “the event of “severing a part of the Romanian people.””<sup>449</sup>

Another component of this process of symbolic challenge was the proposal to “compile brochures on the same topic,” a task entrusted to “two [unmentioned] history professors.”<sup>450</sup> This information, however fragmentary, points to the degree of interest displayed by Bessarabian authorities towards the potential danger that the Romanian national discourse represented. In a later document this motive is reinforced through the invocation of “intelligence data” that would confirm the preparation of “anti-Russian demonstrations in Romania” on the occasion of the anniversary ceremonies.<sup>451</sup> In fact, the author generalizes beyond the actual information contained in the previous account on which he relies and emphasizes that “there are openly held conversations referring to the annexation of a part of our Bessarabia.”<sup>452</sup> This last point is especially significant for the picture of “Romanian irredenta” elaborated by the Russian officials

<sup>447</sup> GARF, Fond 102, op. 121, d. 179, (“O prazdnovanii stoletnego iubileia prisoedineniia Bessarabii k Rossii”), l. 1-2 (document dated April 25, 1912).

<sup>448</sup> GARF, Fond 102, op. 121, d. 179, l. 1

<sup>449</sup> GARF, Fond 102, op. 121, d. 179, l. 2. Quotation marks in original.

<sup>450</sup> GARF, Fond 102, op. 121, d. 179, l. 2

<sup>451</sup> GARF, Fond 102, op. 121, d. 179, l. 3 (document dated May 4, 1912).

<sup>452</sup> GARF, Fond 102, op. 121, d. 179, l. 3

themselves and hardly warranted by the open statements of the Romanian press and intellectuals. However, the situation is clarified by the ensuing correspondence between the MVD and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which explicitly refers both to the sources and the protagonists of the planned protests. Not surprisingly, the center of the events appeared to be the University of Iasi, with the initiative clearly attributed to A.D. Xenopol.<sup>453</sup> In this context, the Russian sources inadvertently provide additional data on the dynamics of the Romanian response. The Iasi intellectuals (grouped around Xenopol and Stere) represented an alternative center of the discourse on Bessarabia, separate from the Bucharest milieu dominated by Iorga. Despite his active involvement (and extensive writing) on this occasion, Iorga hardly appears in the Russian sources discussing the Romanian reaction to the celebration.

At this point, the stance of the Russian officials towards the Romanian “demonstrations” acquired a certain ambiguity. The reaction of the Romanian public, though annoying for the Russians, is carefully dissociated from the position of the state authorities. In an official letter of the War Minister to the Minister of Internal Affairs, the distinction between the “public opinion,” especially the nationally minded intellectuals, and the restraint of the authorities is highlighted: “[t]he jubilee celebrations in Bessarabia... caused a painful response [*boleznennyi otklik*] in the Romanian society generally, and particularly in the intellectual [*intelligentskoi*] milieu, among professors and students. The Romanian chauvinists have already raised a propaganda campaign [*agitatsiia*] throughout the country with the aim of protesting against the celebration of an event woeful for Romania- the conquest of a purportedly [*iakoby*] Romanian province by Russia.”<sup>454</sup> The potential impact of such attempts at the mobilization of a wider social constituency is seen as minimal by the Russian official, since “both the Romanian Government and the serious statesmen

<sup>453</sup> GARF, Fond 102, op. 121, d. 179, , l. 5. The direct source for this information is the Iasi newspaper „Minerva,” Nr. 1170, March 20, 1912.

<sup>454</sup> GARF, Fond 102, op. 121, d. 179, l. 7

[*gosudarstvennye liudi*] of the country are not involved in such propaganda,” which, it is predicted, “will not acquire a provocative character towards Russia.”<sup>455</sup> Nevertheless, another bureaucratic recommendation insists on the subversive character of the works that the Romanian intellectuals intended to produce according to Xenopol’s plan outlined above: “it would be, perhaps, convenient to apply measures against the penetration into Russia of the brochures” that were to be “composed by the Romanian professors.”<sup>456</sup> The concerned officials are thus aware of the mobilizing potential of the nationalizing intellectuals and of the irredentist current that was starting to have a sizeable impact on the country’s intellectual and, partly, political establishment.

This is not to suggest that Bessarabia represented a central theme in the Romanian national discourse, but merely to point out that in the increasingly tense international climate of the pre-war years a part of the Russian bureaucracy came to regard Bessarabia as a threatened territory. The increasingly nationalizing rhetoric pervading the Russian discourse contributed to these mutations as well. In this sense, the military dimension of imperial control became of a centrality previously unknown. This can be deduced from two instances that occur in the same context. The first represents a curious attempt at the “appeasement” of the Romanian authorities, expressed through the questioning of the relevance of the military’s participation in the celebrations. The War Ministry initially complained of its ignorance of the exact program of the festivities<sup>457</sup> and then, citing Archbishop Serafim’s request for the dispatching of two infantry battalions to Kishinev for the duration of the ceremonies, timidly enquired “whether, in Your Highness’ opinion, the participation in these festivities of military troops is desirable, considering the

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<sup>455</sup> GARF, Fond 102, op. 121, d. 179, l. 7

<sup>456</sup> GARF, Fond 102, op. 121, d. 179, l. 20

<sup>457</sup> GARF, Fond 102, op. 121, d. 179, l. 8. This is also a puzzling example of the conspicuous lack of coordination between Russian central institutions.

above-mentioned conclusions of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs”<sup>458</sup> (these “conclusions” refer to the neutral attitude of the Romanian government). Although these apprehensions had no effect upon the decision of the Council of Ministers to endorse the military’s presence during the celebrations,<sup>459</sup> such tactical differences point to potential conflicts within the Russian bureaucracy that only confirm the inadequacy of viewing it as a more or less unitary political actor.

The second example is connected directly to a diplomatic incident that marred the Russian-Romanian relations during the anniversary. The incident itself was rather minor, but its implications were perceived by both parts as too important to be ignored. Accordingly, in the introductory part of the report describing the event, the wording of its author is rather strong: “Romania, which at present finds itself in an alliance with Austria-Hungary, hopes [*mechtaet*], in case of a war between Russia and Austria, to receive for itself the whole of Bessarabia from Austria as a prize for its attack against Russia.”<sup>460</sup> This bellicose rhetoric (that permeated the vision of a number of Bessarabian officials, especially those working in the police apparatus) reveals the underlying Russian-Romanian tensions that erupted periodically in moments of overt symbolic competition.

The incident that provoked the stinging rebuke of the deputy chief of the Bessarabian gendarmes should be interpreted in this context. In a report dated May 16, 1912, the official remarks that “initially, Romania decided to dress itself in mourning during this day,”<sup>461</sup> but then this intention was dropped in favor of a more “harmless,” but also more striking

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<sup>458</sup> GARF, Fond 102, op. 121, d. 179, l. 8.

<sup>459</sup> GARF, Fond 102, op. 121, d. 179, l. 9. See also ll. 10-11.

<sup>460</sup> GARF, Fond 102, op. 121, d. 179, l. 17

<sup>461</sup> GARF, Fond 102, op. 121, d. 179, l. 17

demonstration.<sup>462</sup> The increased suspiciousness of the imperial authorities during the celebration even led to embarrassing confusions that the Russian press quickly turned into presumably major “international incidents.”<sup>463</sup> Beyond and above the intrinsic significance of such events, the increasing politicization of the Russian and Romanian stances on Bessarabia during the celebration period is obvious. The region emerged as a symbolically, but also politically contested space which is subject to a “reconstruction” according to the interests of each of the two centers where discursive images of Bessarabia originated.

The Romanian discourse on Bessarabia displayed a stronger coherence than its Russian counterpart, since it perceived Bessarabia as a temporarily alienated part of the “national body.” On the rhetorical level, the “family” metaphors are used with the same frequency as in the Russian case, which is perfectly consistent with the internal dynamics of the national discourse. The most striking rhetorical difference concerns, of course, the designation of the founding events of 1812. Whereas the Russian stance is built upon notions stressing integration, peaceful assimilation or organic unity (exemplified by such terms as “unification” [*prisoedinenie*], “merging” [*slivanie*] or “inclusion” [*priobshchenie*]), the Romanian literature on the topic emphasized a forceful, brutal and radical break with the past that invariably bore negative connotations. The most frequent words used to denote this position were: “annexation”

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<sup>462</sup> The incident itself consisted in the following: “on this date [May 16], at 7 P.M., the Romanian king Carol I departed from the town of Galati and proceeded down the Danube river on his yacht, *extremely close to the Russian shore* [original emphasis], under the protection of two mine carriers and accompanied by his suite.” Both the yacht and the mine carriers were, significantly, “decorated by Romanian flags.” The king’s seemingly innocuous trip and its impressive paraphernalia were troubling enough for the Russian authorities to be also reported to the Minister of Foreign Affairs two weeks after the fact.

<sup>463</sup> GARF, Fond 102, op. 121, d. 179, l. 23-25. The „incident” involved the „public” of a small border town on the Prut. According to a Russian press report, a „huge crowd” of Romanians gathered on the opposite bank in national costumes in order to sing a „funeral march,” which attracted the attention of the local population. Following the playing of the Russian anthem, the Russian orchestra (as a sign of courtesy) played the Romanian national anthem. To add insult to injury, the Romanians did not respond in the same way, but played their own anthem once again. The chief of the Bessarabian gendarmes had to intervene in order to „rectify” the exalted journalistic account and to „deflate” the politically charged message in a case where, apparently, there wasn’t any. The Chief of the gendarmes concluded that „this case did not have the character of a political manifestation.”

[*anexarea*], “alienation” [*instrăinarea*] or even “stealing” [*răpirea*] of Bessarabia. Another expression referred to the breach of an initial and longed for “unity” of Moldavia, in which case the appropriate term was the “tearing apart” [*sfâșierea*] of the Moldavian land. The terminological level appears as the most obvious field of symbolic contestation.

The coherence of the Romanian national discourse also derived from the organizational consolidation of the movement for “national unification” around the League for the Cultural Unity of All Romanians (*Liga pentru unitatea culturală a tuturor românilor*), commonly referred to by contemporaries as “The Cultural League” (*Liga Culturală*). The role of this society (subsidized by the Romanian government) will be discussed later, since the peak of its activity in matters Bessarabian coincided with the outbreak of World War I. Nevertheless, the 1912 anniversary provided a significant opportunity for the assertion of a discourse that mingled the rhetoric of historical rights with a “progressive” reading of the present situation of the Romanian state that appeared as a possible “Piedmont” for the “estranged provinces” (the generic term applied to Bessarabia, Transylvania and Bukovina in the conventional lexicon of the Romanian national narrative). The most complete and condensed expression of the Romanian national discourse on the occasion of the 1912 events is to be found in several writings of the main figure of the early-XX century Romanian nationalist movement, Nicolae Iorga.<sup>464</sup> While his overall contribution to the elaboration of the national narrative is discussed elsewhere, a more thorough examination of his works specially dedicated to the commemoration of Bessarabia’s “loss” in 1812 should clarify the complex intermingling of nationalist and populist motives that informed his interpretation.<sup>465</sup>

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<sup>464</sup> It should be noted that Iorga played a prominent role in the “Cultural League,” which he helped co-found and directed until the outbreak of World War I.

<sup>465</sup> Iorga’s position, that reflected the views of most of the country’s political establishment, was developed in two brochures printed in May 1912. The first, of a more general character, bore the title “The Significance of the Lands



Iorga's initial point insists on reclaiming Bessarabia for the Romanian "national organism" in rather unambiguous terms. The author accomplishes this on two interrelated levels. The first level is terminological. Iorga vehemently points to the artificiality of the designation of "Bessarabia" as such in order to de-legitimize the Russian claims to have created *ex nihilo* a fundamentally new political and social order. He asserts that "the Romanian, "Moldavian" lands beyond the Prut... have acquired, following their annexation by Russia in 1812, the unjustified and tendentious name of *Bessarabia*, which is applicable only to the former Wallachian territories close to the mouths of the Danube, and which later was an abode for the Tatars, then a desert open to all immigrations and state colonizations."<sup>466</sup> In another revealing passage, Iorga repeats that "we lost the land that I can call "Bessarabia" only with difficulty and against the historical truth, for "Bessarabia" was only the part from the mouths of the Danube."<sup>467</sup> This stance is, of course, ambiguous. In fact, the Russian-controlled province was willingly appropriated by the Romanian national discourse under its official name, which was used without any restraint by Iorga himself in his earlier and later works.

In this case, his ultimate point is to deny any fundamental difference between the Russian-controlled territory and the rest of the old Moldavian Principality, positing a perfect identity between the two that would allow the transfer of the tradition linking them historically to the present and, perhaps, to an a-historical, primordial temporality. The author declared that "the [Bessarabians'] primordial ethnic Romanian-ness and their historical Moldavian-ness are exactly

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beyond the Prut for the History of the Romanians and for Romanian Folklore." The second represented the published version of a speech held in Bucharest on May 16, 1912, "on the occasion of the commemoration of Bessarabia's loss."

<sup>466</sup> N. Iorga, *The Significance of the Lands beyond the Prut for the History of the Romanians and for Romanian Folklore*, p. 1

<sup>467</sup> N. Iorga, *Speech held in Bucharest on May 16, 1812, on the occasion of the commemoration of Bessarabia's loss*, p. 5

the same”<sup>468</sup> as those of the rest of the “Moldavians” living in Romania, the only difference consisting in “the political and high-cultural forms” that Iorga, faithful to his nationalist-populist creed, simply dismisses as irrelevant. The second level of Iorga’s argument represents a perfect analogy to the Russian insistence on “historical rights.” The major difference is the national frame of the Romanian version and, predictably, the central opposition between the “autochthonous” character of the Romanians (expressed through both material and spiritual artifacts that “permeate” the land of Bessarabia) and the transience and shallowness of the “foreign” presence in the region (occasionally with barely concealed xenophobic overtones). One of the most coherent instances of this discourse is the following:

Romanian monuments, Romanian memories, Romanian fields [*ogoare*], Romanian rights, are to be found at every step. The co-habiting nations: Ruthenians [*Rusneci*] from the Hotin region, Russians who arrived from beyond the Dniester, Bulgarians who fled from beyond the Danube, for fear of the punishing Turks, Old Believers [*Lipoveni*] exiled as far as possible from the official Orthodoxy, Germans seeking privileges and quick enrichment- all of them possess... only the antiquity of a hundred years that have elapsed since the 1812 treaty and the significance, historical rights and moral sense that can derive from the presence of at most three generations on the same land.<sup>469</sup>

The “blood and soil” metaphor already analyzed in the Russian case is here implicitly present, if not openly stated. The theme of fundamental belonging that is developed in a potent rhetorical mix of positive and negative (self-promoting) arguments is re-stated in the second work with the same poignancy (here the direct challenge to the Russian image of Bessarabia is even more pronounced). While reflecting upon the implications of the “commemoration” for the nationally minded Romanian public, Iorga describes the same difference between the superficiality of the

<sup>468</sup> Iorga, *The Significance of the Lands beyond the Prut for the History of the Romanians and for Romanian Folklore*, p. 3

<sup>469</sup> Iorga, *The Significance of the Lands beyond the Prut for the History of the Romanians and for Romanian Folklore*, p. 2

official Russian society and the inalienable rights residing in the inexpressible “national spirit” of the peasantry: “We are talking about things that *we do possess* (Iorga’s emphasis). If possessing a country means sending there one’s frontier soldiers, police, card-playing and drunken officials, then Bessarabia is not ours. If, on the other hand, this means cultivating all its fields [*ogoarele*], embodying all its labor, providing all its defenders-, then Bessarabia belongs to us, and not to the others.”<sup>470</sup> The belonging implied here includes material as well as spiritual components. While the Russian authorities and publicists extolled the virtues of the state’s civilizing and “redeeming” accomplishments and the bond provided by the Russian “blood sacrifices,” Iorga resorts to his customary populist motives in order to emphasize essentially the same preoccupation for symbolic appropriation.

Iorga’s brand of traditionalist populism displayed its particular features when focusing on Bessarabia as well. These features are discernible in three important ways in the texts currently discussed. First, he uses extensively the typical contrast between the virtues of the primitive peasantry that appears as the exclusive bearer of “authenticity” and the corrupting and decomposing influence of modernity. In Iorga’s case, this argument is doubly effective. On the one hand, it allows the author to express an exalted optimism concerning the perspectives of the national Romanian project in the case of Bessarabia that valorizes its sheer backwardness as a positive value. One dimension of this local particularity comes, somewhat paradoxically for Iorga’s nationalist logic, from the nature of the Russian regime itself. From one point of view, the Russian administration is an instrument for “denationalization.” From another perspective, however, Iorga finds a different reality behind it: “Whereas in Transylvania and Hungary the administration penetrates even into the remotest rural commune, pursuing insistently its well-

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<sup>470</sup> Iorga, *Speech held in Bucharest on May 16, 1812, on the occasion of the commemoration of Bessarabia’s loss*, p. 4

known [assimilatory] goals; whereas every corner of Bukovina's land is subject to the most thorough-going official influence, the Russian patriarchal life has altered to an immeasurably smaller degree the most ancient primitive [peasant] substance."<sup>471</sup> This "queer phenomenon of immobility, of total stagnation [*încremenire*] in the life conditions of one part of a people"<sup>472</sup> is regarded in at least ambiguous terms, not only as heuristically interesting for a scholarly eye (which is a part of Iorga's argument), but also as an enlightening contrast to the "hurried, even haphazard, nervous development"<sup>473</sup> that he found frequently damaging for Romania.

His praise for the purported "authenticity" of the Bessarabian peasant's culture goes much further than that. Bessarabia's lack of civilization provides its Romanian inhabitants with a clear advantage over their counterparts from the Romanian kingdom. The Bessarabian *noble savage* enjoyed a purity that was already lost by that time in Romania due to the onrush of "Western forms." Iorga makes this idea explicit when talking about Bessarabian folklore: "The Bessarabian popular poetry could not be influenced- as has been ours here, unfortunately, both in form and substance,- by the language corrupted by French spoken by our officialdom, the gendarmes and the tax collectors, by the often confused knowledge provided by our schools, by Western laws and administrative forms."<sup>474</sup> In contrast to all these agents of superficiality and distortion, the people's culture in Bessarabia represented both a reminder and a potential hope for the restoration of "authenticity" in Romania itself, since it preserved the "thought, feeling, rhythm, rhyme, tune" of ancient Romanian culture in a "totally unchanged and absolutely authentic"<sup>475</sup> form. This, in fact, embodied the essence of Bessarabia's future contribution to the "complete

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<sup>471</sup> Iorga, *The Significance...*, p. 4

<sup>472</sup> Iorga, *The Significance...*, p. 5

<sup>473</sup> Iorga, *The Significance ...*, p. 6

<sup>474</sup> Iorga, *The Significance ...*, p. 11

<sup>475</sup> Iorga, *The Significance...*, p. 11

icon” of the whole Romanian people, of which Bessarabia represented a part and a “special chapter.”<sup>476</sup>

The second area where Iorga exhibits his mix of nationalism and populism is connected to the role he ascribes the local Bessarabian (and generally the Romanian) elites in the loss of Bessarabia. The portrait that he draws of the Bessarabian (and Moldavian) nobility cannot be reduced to a clear-cut image. On the one hand, he is careful to inform the reader that “among the boyar families that remained under Russian domination following the annexation... not all forfeited their land in order to get lost in the world of officials or spenders of inherited money from the immense Empire.”<sup>477</sup> He claims to have witnessed himself “distinguished and cultivated ladies, with an unexpected knowledge of the Romanians’ history, old men who displayed a glorious genealogy, young men in whom one seemed to perceive the first stirrings of a consciousness of national duty...”<sup>478</sup> coming from Bessarabia. On the other hand, Iorga’s primary criterion for assessing the significance of the “boyar class” was their degree of national consciousness, a “test” that the Moldavian elite clearly did not pass in 1812. He thus severely castigated what he perceived as the “irresponsible” behavior of the Moldavian boyars at the moment of the annexation: “The Moldavian boyar class of 1812 had no [collective] consciousness, thus breaking the duty of any dominant class to encompass and express all the memories, all the hopes, all the [historical] rights, all the pride and honor of a people.”<sup>479</sup>

Iorga’s anti-aristocratic drive is thus by no means generalized, being oriented specifically towards the nobility of the Moldavian Principality that did not fulfill its presumed mission as articulator of the people’s “collective essence.” The causes of the nobility’s failure are

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<sup>476</sup> Iorga, *The Significance...*, p.1, 6

<sup>477</sup> Iorga, *The Significance...*, p. 8

<sup>478</sup> Iorga, *The Significance...*, p. 8

<sup>479</sup> Iorga, *Speech held in Bucharest on May 16, 1912, on the occasion of the commemoration of Bessarabia’s loss*, p. 9

characteristically viewed not only in moral terms (to be expected given the historian's moralizing stance), but also in a national guise. Iorga accuses the boyars of acting in a morally reprehensible manner because they "lacked any ideal and any other feeling for the country and the nation [*neam*] save that elementary instinct that nothing can uproot from human souls."<sup>480</sup> This explanation (focusing on the feeling of material loss of the boyars as landowners that purportedly prevailed over any principled political reasoning) seems insufficient to account for the inadequacy of the ruling stratum. The missing element is discovered in the almost ontological dualism of the nobility, which was composed of "Greco-Romanian boyars, with two native tongues [*graiuri*]" who were therefore "divided between two national souls."<sup>481</sup> This mixed ethnic makeup of the nobility has important practical consequences for the scheme that Iorga attempts to build. He directly connects the state-building capacity of a human collectivity with its "ethnic value,"<sup>482</sup> which holds pride of place in the historical-philosophical hierarchies that underlay his ethnicist doctrine.

This lack of self-conscious and articulate elites constitutes a point of departure for one of the few instances in Iorga's work when a motive of national victimization is present. This point is especially significant given the direct (although implicit) reference to the rival Russian discourse that insisted so much upon the gallery of "heroes" meant to confirm not only the military prowess of the tsar's armies but, more significantly, to inscribe Bessarabia on the map of the empire's collective memory. Abandoning his generally optimistic tone, Iorga emphasizes that the boyar elite is to blame primarily for its failure to provide a "heroic" tradition of resistance that could have fueled the national memory and thus strengthened the Romanians' self-confidence in their symbolic competition for Bessarabia. He asserts: "And thus today, when we would need at least a

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<sup>480</sup> Iorga, Speech held in Bucharest on May 16, 1912..., p. 7

<sup>481</sup> Iorga, Speech held in Bucharest on May 16, 1912..., p. 7

<sup>482</sup> Iorga, Speech held in Bucharest on May 16, 1912..., p. 10

single hero, in whose name we could hold our commemoration, *we cannot find him* (Iorga's emphasis), and this absence is indescribably painful."<sup>483</sup> Rather than admitting the impossibility of conceptualizing Bessarabia's annexation in national terms (which would have undermined his argument), the writer chooses to view the noble elite as a convenient scapegoat whose negative image also serves to reinforce Iorga's previously mentioned connection between the peasantry and "national authenticity" (that the boyars were conspicuously lacking).

The third element that demonstrates to what extent the historian's view of Bessarabia was indebted to his populist-traditionalist outlook is his position toward social change in general and revolution in particular. Since revolution is ultimately a result of the modernity that Iorga rejects, any socially based program of "national liberation" is for him not only contradictory, but unfeasible and obnoxious. He focuses his argument on the principle of class solidarity (based on ethnic homogeneity) that appears as the only realistic tactic for transforming the Romanian kingdom into a future "Piedmont" (in C. Stere's words) for the other Romanian-inhabited territories. He is quick to clarify his position at the outset of his speech on the 1912 events, where he decries the notion of "lamentation and sighing" as defining the Romanian reaction to the Russian anniversary. Those who are credited with spreading such defeatist moods among the Romanian public do it in the form of an "impertinent revolutionary manifesto" written on "red paper."<sup>484</sup> To leave no ambiguity concerning the nature of these internal enemies of the Romanian national organism, Iorga characterizes them as "those trouble-makers who will never... live to see a socialist society in which, instead of the soul that moves a body, the harmony of well-fed bodies would prevail, being decisive for the despised soul as well."<sup>485</sup> This

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<sup>483</sup> Iorga, Speech held in Bucharest on May 16, 1912..., p. 8

<sup>484</sup> Iorga, Speech held in Bucharest on May 16, 1912..., p. 3

<sup>485</sup> Iorga, Speech held in Bucharest on May 16, 1912..., p. 3-4

crude anti-materialism is not just a rhetorical device, but serves to underline the irreconcilable opposition between the ethnic and the social dimensions of a community.

The historian further develops his thesis when discussing the possibility of a compromise with a prospective liberal or revolutionary Russia with regard to Bessarabia. He squarely rejects such a possibility not only because of the “spiritual makeup of the Russian people”<sup>486</sup> that supersedes all political differences between parties, but also because the notion of “social revolution” is irrelevant to the Romanians: “[t]he liberating Russian revolution has nothing to do with us. It would be accomplished for humans in general, for the lowly and oppressed, without any distinction. And what we need is something specific for our nation [*neam*], which is distinct from all the others and requires special measures for itself.”<sup>487</sup> The principle of national specificity (embodied in an organic national work and, primarily, in the transcending of all class-based conflicts and solidarities) appears as the only way to attain the “national ideal.”<sup>488</sup> Iorga’s national optimism has its roots in the Romantic-inspired vision of “peasant authenticity,” which, in his view, is fundamentally conservative and can provide a “healthy” basis for national unity that can never be replicated in the Russian case due to the artificiality of the imperial administrative apparatus and high culture. His peasantism is thus far removed from any populist insistence upon the socially progressive character of the rural commune. The anti-revolutionary stance advocated by Iorga is to be linked to a national conservatism and anti-modern skepticism that places his ostensibly populist rhetoric closer to contemporary conservative ideologies than to more socially activist doctrines (represented in Romania at the time by Stere’s *poporanism*, if not by social democracy).

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<sup>486</sup> Iorga, Speech held in Bucharest on May 16, 1912..., p. 12

<sup>487</sup> Iorga, Speech held in Bucharest on May 16, 1912..., p. 12-13

<sup>488</sup> Iorga, Speech held in Bucharest on May 16, 1912..., p. 14



A final important problem concerns what could be called the comparative dimension of Iorga's work. Bessarabia's loss is compared (predictably) to the annexation of the Alsace and Lorraine by the German Empire.<sup>489</sup> In an interesting twist of an argument otherwise employed to support Russia's claim to rule Bessarabia, the Romanian historian and nationalist stresses the absence of a Romanian national state that could rightfully cede Bessarabia to Russia in 1812. Making a virtue out of necessity, Iorga resorts to a revealing distinction between state and nation (contrary to his usual position), in order to exculpate the nation from guilt. The Romanians appear even in a privileged position in comparison to the French, who did possess a respectable tradition of statehood and thus could hardly be expected to be unaffected by the defeat on the deeper level of their "national essence." However, in his reading of the Franco-German War Iorga argues along the lines of the "state-nation" divide introduced above, concluding that, although the inept French government lost the battle, "the French felt then as they do now that it was not they, their freedom, their national energy or their responsibility that were crushed by the Germans. And thus the year of mourning [1871] is not for them also a year of shame."

The invocation of the French model was carefully chosen by the author in order to serve as a moral injunction to his Romanian contemporaries. He was certainly aware of the additional emotional appeal of such an illustration among the overwhelmingly Francophile Romanian public of the epoch. Iorga's more subtle goal, however, was to imbue his audience with a sense of historical optimism that it was to emulate following the example of Romania's "Latin sister." He expressed this through the revealing phrase: "Even less should we lower our heads [in mourning] when remembering the tearing apart of our land in 1812."<sup>490</sup> The historian's didactic examples of a better apprehension of a purported "national trauma" did not end there, however. He employed

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<sup>489</sup> Iorga, Speech held in Bucharest on May 16, 1912..., p. 5-6. All the further citations in the paragraph refer to these pages.

<sup>490</sup> Iorga, Speech held in Bucharest on May 16, 1912..., p. 6-7

a more direct comparison (this time that of Sweden's "loss" of Finland) in order to underscore the factors that could transform Romania into a viable competitor for the allegiance of its "alienated brothers," but also to revert to the argument concerning the nefarious role of local elites. Even if Iorga chose not to develop the parallel further, the passage itself is quite interesting for the context that Bessarabia was associated with by the Romanian national discourse:

...the others that were dispossessed in 1812 [sic!], the Swedes, [are] similar to us by their difficult situation, facing the same colossal enemy, but superior in comparison to us with regard to the political inclusion [*valorificarea*] of the peasant element and to the moral power that results from a peaceful and legal collaboration of an entire people. Even the Swedes, however, cannot find, beyond the treason of their king, the cowardice of their dominant class, a single hero of their resistance and vengeance, with whom the loss of Finland would have been eternally and gloriously linked.<sup>491</sup>

Aside from the dubious intrinsic value of the comparison, such examples were clearly meant to give additional weight to Iorga's nationalist political agenda couched in mainly moral terms. They also indicated a trend towards a more comprehensive (if unilateral) view of Bessarabia as a particular case in a wider clash between principles of nationality and empire that informed much of the discourse of the Romanian intellectuals in the early XX century.

The 1912 anniversary also triggered reactions among the wider Romanian public. A detailed discussion of a number of didactic publications printed on this occasion is beyond the scope of this chapter.<sup>492</sup> The visions of Bessarabia articulated in publications of popularization generally

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<sup>491</sup> Iorga, Speech held in Bucharest on May 16, 1912..., p. 9

<sup>492</sup> One of the most interesting such examples is the heterogeneous, but comprehensive collection of texts printed with a didactic purpose by a Romanian teacher: D. Munteanu-Ramnic. *Pentru Basarabia. Culegere de texte privitoare la tara, trecutul, literatura si starea actuala a fratilor basarabeni*. [For Bessarabia. A Collection of Texts Concerning the Country, Past, Literature and Present Situation of the Bessarabian Brothers]. Ploiesti: Editura Revistei "Curierul Liceului," 1912. This collection contains a variety of materials that could be divided into the following categories: 1) general descriptive historical, geographical and statistical overviews (of a purely informative character); 2) excerpts of original literary or scholarly pieces written by or about "Bessarabians" (this rubric includes mostly fragments of works published by Bessarabian émigrés to Romania, such as B. P. Hasdeu, Z. Arbore or D. C. Moruzi and a number of texts by N. Iorga), but also features some original examples of prose written in Bessarabia itself; 3) a "historical-political section" based on selections from works of prominent Romanian historians (mostly A. D. Xenopol and N. Iorga) describing the 1812 events. This section also includes official documents connected to the Paris treaty of 1856 and, of course, some texts pertaining to the Berlin treaty of 1878. 4) a collection of accounts meant to convey a

lacked complexity and privileged the “discourse of lamentation” that Iorga found grossly inadequate. Alternatively, the Romanian claims to Bessarabia were discussed from a purely historical perspective (as in the brochure published by A. D. Xenopol).<sup>493</sup> Despite these shortcomings, the emergence of such examples of didactic literature oriented (at least theoretically) towards a wider reading audience denotes the qualitatively new role that the “Bessarabian question” acquired within the broader Romanian national narrative. It would be exaggerated to insist upon the centrality of the Bessarabian topic in the overall scheme of Romanian imagined nation-building before World War I. Nevertheless, the 1912 anniversary created the premises for the first coherent attempt at a wholesale symbolic construction of Bessarabia as a “Romanian land” in direct opposition to the Russian discourse. The importance of the 1912 moment can be gauged from the prominent place awarded the events in question in works published *post factum*, during World War I.<sup>494</sup> It can be concluded that the 1912 ceremonies performed in the Russian empire had a number of unanticipated consequences, among which the firm placing of Bessarabia on the map of the Romanian intellectual community had the most far-reaching impact. This tendency will reach its apex, however, only during World War I, when the interests of the articulators of the nation will be coupled with the pragmatic interests of the state leadership, promoting the “Bessarabian question,” unexpectedly, to the forefront of national politics.

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picture of the “present” [1912] state of Bessarabia. (including excerpts from Romanian newspapers on various prominent Bessarabian figures or “cultural events.”) However, one can find here more interesting pieces as well (for example, an article by Iorga on the 1912 anniversary, a fragment of D. Moruzi’s novel “Exiles in a foreign country,” or a sample of opinions expressed by N. Durnovo concerning the opportunity to strike a “deal” with Romania through a conciliatory stance on Bessarabia, going as far as suggesting certain territorial changes). 5) a final “poetic dedication” consisting of a number of poems reclaiming Bessarabia for the Romanian “national body” (represented by appropriate “organic metaphors,” as, for example, in the final poem where Bessarabia is depicted as a “beloved sister” wearing a “blood mantle” and bearing a “weeping heart” in its “chest”).

<sup>493</sup> A. D. Xenopol. *Centenarul rapirii Basarabiei* [100 Years Since Bessarabia’s Alienation]. Iasi: 1912.

<sup>494</sup> For example, in the very interesting book authored by Vasile D. Moisiu: *Stiri din Basarabia de astazi* [News from Today’s Bessarabia]. Preface by Dumitru Furtuna. Bucuresti: 1915, especially pp. 160-167. This work will be discussed in a following chapter.

## Chapter IV. The Russian-Romanian 1878 Controversy: Between Realpolitik and National Dignity

The emergence of the Romanian national state in 1862 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.<sup>495</sup> 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 XIX 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. Isolated incidents akin to that of Alexandru Hajdeu, an eccentric and learned landowner from the Hotin district who was elected a founding member of the Romanian Academic Society (soon to become the Romanian Academy) in 1866 and whose attempt to emigrate to Romania was eventually blocked by the governor P. A. Antonovich (engendering a rather extensive and interesting correspondence in the process) are but additional proof of the conspicuous absence of any internal challenge of the imperial regime even within the ranks of potentially oppositional groups

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<sup>495</sup> ANRM, fond 2, op. 1, d. 7573, ff. 65-66 verso. Cited in: Gh. Negru, *Țarismul și mișcarea națională a românilor din Basarabia* [The Tsarist Regime and the National Movement of the Romanians from Bessarabia] (Chisinau: Prut International, 2000), p. 125

in local educated society.<sup>496</sup> The “lack of articulation” that characterized the local Romanian-speaking intellectuals’ position up to the revolution of 1905-1907 invalidates any claim to the existence of a “national movement” in the province in the second half of the XIX century. 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. While “real” events determined the motives and dynamics of these “nodal points” of symbolic competition, the internal evolution and the disproportionate rhetorical investments that accompanied their unfolding originated in the different criteria of political legitimacy of the two states, as well as in their otherwise unstated mutual grievances.

The problem of Bessarabia first emerged on the “map” of Russian-Romanian relations at a crucial juncture of the “Eastern Question,” during the Russian-Ottoman War of 1877-1878. This moment marked the elaboration of an official position of the Romanian government concerning the inclusion of (Southern) Bessarabia into the “national body” and provoked the reaction of Russian official and semi-official circles, which developed a series of counter-arguments that responded to the Romanian stance. However, this acute stage of Russian-Romanian controversy was also paradoxical and uncharacteristic in many respects. First, the object of the argument was curiously “metonymic,” in the sense that it could not be easily integrated into the Romanian national narrative due to both ethnographic and historical circumstances. Aside from a rather narrow line along the Prut, the Romanians represented a minority of the local population and thus

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<sup>496</sup> Liviu Marian, *Alexandru Hâjdeu și Academia Română: după dosarul secret Nr. 41 din 1867 al Guvernatorului Basarabiei, cu 24 documente*. [Alexandru Hâjdeu and the Romanian Academy: according to the secret file Nr. 41 from 1867 of the Bessarabian governor, with 24 documents]. Bucharest, 1932.

could not be squarely reclaimed as the only “autochthonous” inhabitants of the area. Moreover, this territory was for the most part directly administered by the Ottoman Empire for almost three centuries before being annexed by Russia in 1812. To make matters even more insecure from a Romanian national point of view, this region also became the center of state-sponsored colonization in the first decades of the XIX century. The three Southern Bessarabian districts of Cahul, Bolgrad and Ismail that represented the disputed territory were awarded to the Moldavian Principality in 1856 according to the Paris Treaty that sanctioned Russia’s defeat in the Crimean War. Article XX of this act explicitly stipulated that the “rectification” of the frontier in Bessarabia was accepted “in order to secure in the future the freedom of navigation on the Danube.” The primacy of the strategic element caused an interesting two-pronged “argumentative displacement” that accompanied the traditional historically inspired arguments that underlay the Romanian official view. On the one hand, the three southern Bessarabian districts were “conflated” under the generic name of “Bessarabia” to implicitly include the rest of the province remaining under Russian domination. This deliberate omission allowed the Romanian polemicists to use the traditional claim of historical sovereignty even in the case of a territory to which it could be only tenuously applied. On the other hand, the “displacement” manifested itself through the insistence upon the economic, strategic and legal aspects of the problem. This strategy was explicitly aimed at the international audience that had to be impressed by the invocation of an “all-European” interest in the region of the Lower Danube that Romania was presumably best fit to uphold.

The arguments employed by the Romanian officials and publicists differed according to the target audience, but also according to the institutions that elaborated them. Thus, the mainly legalistic and “interest-based” arguments of the Romanian discourse can be partly explained by its official nature. The Romanian position was explicated in various diplomatic papers

(telegrams, circular notes to the country's foreign agents or lengthy memoranda to the same diplomats or to Russian officials, starting from the Russian agent in Bucharest and culminating with A. M. Gorchakov in St. Petersburg). The bulk of these documents emanated from the Chancellery of the Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, headed at the time by Mihail Kogalniceanu, one of the most prominent intellectuals of the 1848 generation. However, this official "moderate" line of the "Bessarabia campaign," promoted by M. Kogalniceanu and, more ambiguously, by the Liberal Prime Minister I. C. Bratianu, was vigorously challenged at least from two directions. The first was the "internal opposition" within the liberal government. It was headed by Dimitrie A. Sturdza, a rising political figure who waged a relentless anti-Russian campaign throughout and after the war both in press and, especially, in frequent parliamentary speeches. The second, more virulent, campaign stemmed from the circles of the conservative opposition and reached a particular intensity in the series of articles by Mihai Eminescu published in the official organ of the Conservative Party- the "Timpul" newspaper. Eminescu's case is of special importance due to the openly articulated nationalist rhetoric that consecrated him as one of the most original (and extremist) thinkers of pre-1914 Romania. These aspects will be detailed during the following discussion. Two important points should be emphasized at the outset, however. First, it is impossible to speak of a unitary Romanian stance on Bessarabia at the time of the 1878 controversy. Besides representing a "transitional" phase in the appearance and development of the "Bessarabian topic" within the Romanian national narrative, this controversy was differently exploited by the various circles competing *within* the Romanian political and intellectual establishment for its appropriation. Though these differences are of secondary importance for my argument (I would suggest they are of degree rather than of kind), such nuances can hardly be ignored. Second, the 1878 diplomatic conflict had far-reaching repercussions on the practical-political level. While in the intellectual realm it only reinforced

pre-existing anti-Russian tendencies (which were a feature of the 1848 generation as a whole), the events accompanying the Russian-Romanian “settlement” of 1878 were an incentive for the new policy of diplomatic alliances pursued by the Bratianu government that culminated by Romania’s signing of the 1883 treaty with Germany and Austria-Hungary that consecrated its adherence to the Triple Alliance. Though after 1878 the “Bessarabian problem” entered the shadows of Romanian diplomacy, its sudden reemergence during World War I cannot only be explained away by the irredentist logic of a nation-state’s foreign policy, but has to take into account the previous experience of mutual symbolic competition. The following argument will focus on two distinct but interrelated topics. First, I examine the polemics between the Romanian and Russian authorities concerning the validity of their mutual claims to the territory of Southern Bessarabia. The second track of discussion pursues the specifically Romanian context of the 1878 debate and, more narrowly, a comparison between the relative “value” of Southern Bessarabia and Dobrogea for the Romanian “national project” both from a material and from a symbolic point of view.

A succinct pre-history of the Russian-Romanian negotiations leading to Romania’s material and military cooperation with the Russian forces during the 1877-78 war is necessary in order to contextualize the counter-arguments of the Romanian government in the process of the diplomatic struggle for Southern Bessarabia. Two stages of this intense diplomatic activity are worth emphasizing here. The first concerns the preliminary talks held between the Romanian Prime Minister I. C. Bratianu and the Russian Foreign Minister A. M. Gorchakov during the visit of a Romanian delegation to the tsar’s Crimean residence at Livadia in the autumn of 1876. During this preliminary stage of negotiations, the “Bessarabian problem” figured among the most sensitive issues of the Russian-Romanian relations. The mutual interest for a future anti-Ottoman alliance precluded any open discussion of the matter and left a generous place for all kinds of



interpretations that crystallized in the latter historiography into two opposing sets of arguments. For writers defending a “Russophile” position, it seemed clear that “at least a beginning of a deal in this respect [of the retrocession of the Bessarabian districts with an appropriate territorial compensation] was reached between the Romanian and Russian governments.”<sup>497</sup> Thus, the subsequent rhetorical “battle” between the Russian and Romanian officials appears either as a tactic of dissimulation of the Romanian government used in order to “deceive” its own public opinion (that was apprehensive of a Russian-Romanian alliance) or as a calculated tactics employed in order to gain a larger territorial compensation at the peace conference at the expense of manipulating the differing and antagonistic interests of the Great Powers on the Lower Danube. A second view, supported by most Romanian publicists and “nationally minded” historians, blamed the Russian government for the same tactics of “dissimulation” while predictably insisting on the common myth of “Russian expansionism” that served as a privileged (pseudo)explanatory tool for the complex interplay of considerations of political interest that in fact determined the dynamics of Russian-Romanian relations in this period.<sup>498</sup> A closer scrutiny of the contemporary sources reveals that the Romanian government, while clearly aware of the Russian claims on Southern Bessarabia, decided to pursue a strategy of “suspension” of the Bessarabian “question” until the end of the war in the hope of striking an advantageous bargain at

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<sup>497</sup> Const. Calmuschi. *Relatiunile politice ale Tarilor Romane cu Rusia*. Galati: Tipografia Buciumul Roman, 1911, p. 278

<sup>498</sup> For a somewhat more balanced account along these lines, see: G. I. Bratianu. *Le probleme des frontieres russo-roumaines pendant la guerre de 1877-1878 et au Congres de Berlin* (Bucuresti, Cartea Romaneasca, 1928), esp. pp. 39-49. Heavily influenced by the contemporary Soviet-Romanian dispute over Bessarabia and directly engaged in a polemic with Christian Racovski on this subject, Bratianu concludes that “dans cet affaire, la diplomatie imperiale a manqué non seulement de franchise, mais aussi de suite et d’unité dans ses vues.” (p. 49). For a classic contemporary account of the 1877-1878 controversy as a case of Russian expansionism, see A. D. Xenopol, *Razboaiele dintre Rusi si Turci si inaurirea lor asupra Tarilor Romane* (Bucuresti: Albatros, 1997), chapter on “The War of 1877. The Peace of Berlin. 1878”, pp. 326-369. The author’s conclusion is characteristic: “... the Russians have but one aim with regard to the Romanians: that of wiping out their name from the face of the earth as soon as possible. As protectors, as allies they have dispossessed us; what more could they do as enemies? Therefore, an alliance with the Russians in any circumstance... will always be an expensively paid folly.” [Original edition 1880]. A contemporary account following the same basic line of argument and lacking any trace of a critical analysis is Dumitru P. Ionescu, *Razboiul de Independenta a Romaniei si problema Basarabiei* (Editura Academiei Romane, 2000).

its completion. The ambiguous position of St. Petersburg, careful to assuage the apprehensions of a potentially useful ally and to secure its military communications in Romania for the duration of the military campaign, only enhanced the hopes of the Romanians for an ultimate compromise on the matter. These considerations transpired during the second stage of the Romanian-Russian negotiations that culminated with the signing of a military convention regulating the passage of the Russian troops through Romania and their status in the country.

On the one hand, the Liberal government sought to acquire an explicit guarantee of Romania's territorial integrity in the text of the convention that would eliminate any basis for later Russian territorial demands from the point of view of international law. This insistence on "legalistic" aspects led to the inordinate prolongation of the negotiations, which dragged on from November 1876 until early April 1877. Despite the interest shown by the Russian government in a speedy signing of the document (confirmed by the secret mission of the head of the diplomatic chancellery of the Russian General Staff, A. I. Nelidov, sent to Bucharest on November 15, 1876),<sup>499</sup> the Romanians pursued their rather cautious approach. This prompted A. M. Gorchakov to write to the Russian agent in Bucharest, Baron D. I. Stuart (who was left in charge of the negotiations after Nelidov's departure), instructing him not to insist upon an immediate signing of the convention and to "leave Bratianu to his own thoughts."<sup>500</sup> After several months of further delays and explanations by the highest Russian military officials concerning the goals and prospective results of the future war,<sup>501</sup> the military convention was finally concluded on April

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<sup>499</sup> G. I. Bratianu. *Le probleme des frontieres russo-roumaines pendant la guerre de 1877-1878 et au Congres de Berlin* (Bucuresti, Cartea Romaneasca, 1928), p. 12

<sup>500</sup> AVPRI, fund Chancellery, 1876, d. 15, l. 311. (date: December 26, 1876 O.S.). Cited in: V. N. Vinogradov, M. D. Ershchenko etc. *Bessarabiia na perekrestke evropeiskoi diplomatii. Dokumenty I materialy*. Moskva: Indrik, 1996, p. 144

<sup>501</sup> AVPRI, fund Main Archive U-A 1, d. 1, l. 15, Letter of Grand Duke Nikolai Nikolaevich to the Romanian Prince Charles I, where he asserted: "this aim [of the war] leaves out any idea of conquest, annexation or warlike ambitions and can be resumed to the holy duty of protecting the oppressed from the oppressors, the restoration of our co-

4/16, 1877, barely a week before the outbreak of the war. The most important provisions regarding Romania's legal and political status during the period of the military campaign were contained in Article 2, which stipulated: "In order that no inconvenience or danger can result for Romania from the fact of the passage of Russian troops upon its territory, the Government of H. M. the Emperor of All the Russias engages itself to maintain and effectively respect the political rights of the Romanian State as these result from internal laws and existing treaties, as well as to maintain and defend the present integrity of Romania [*l'intégrité actuelle de la Roumanie*]."<sup>502</sup> This clause, introduced at the behest of the Romanian government at the last stage of the negotiating process and initially resisted by the Russian officials, would prove to be the cornerstone of the Romanian position both in its later protests addressed to the Russian authorities and in the presentation of its grievances at the Berlin Congress in June 1878. Though this "legal" argument would be later dismissed by Russian diplomats by using similar "legal" motivations (e.g. by invoking the validity of the convention only for the duration of military operations or by arguing that this guarantee was only effective against the violation of the Romanian territory by Ottoman or Austrian troops), it can be surmised that the clause in question was intended not so much for the attention of its Russian signatories, but mainly for the diplomats of the Great Powers that presumably had to appreciate the salience of the principle of territorial sovereignty. The wider implications of the provision are demonstrated by the stance of the Romanian delegation at the Berlin Congress, when it used the text of the convention as the main "material" proof for its claims to preserve the Southern Bessarabian districts.

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faithful brothers of the Orient to their legal rights..." (date: January 12 (24) 1877). Cited in: Vinogradov et al., p. 144.

<sup>502</sup> *Conventions conclues entre la Russie et la Roumanie le 4/16 avril 1877*. Edition officielle. Bucarest : Imprimerie de l'Etat, 1877, p. 3-4

On the other hand, however, the Romanian leaders were very much aware that Russia's victory would almost automatically invalidate the provisions of the Paris Treaty of 1856 and thus endanger the Romanian position in Southern Bessarabia. Though it has been argued that the Romanian government was divided between the moderate approach pursued by Kogalniceanu and the more intransigent position held by Ion C. Bratianu<sup>503</sup>, such a conclusion is hardly supported by the Russian sources. It appears, in fact, that the tactics of "suspension" was promoted by both Romanian officials. Thus, in a report to St. Petersburg of a conversation he held with the Prime Minister more than one month before the signing of the convention, the Russian consul D. I. Stuart writes: "He [Bratianu] confesses, that the trip to Livadia convinced him completely that Bessarabia from now on is lost for Romania, and that Russia will not miss the occasion to take back this small slice of land which is so necessary to it, at the first opportunity."<sup>504</sup> The Russian diplomat reported Bratianu as saying that "all... Romanians who possess common sense understand well the inevitable necessity of liquidating the anomalies created by the Paris Treaty, but it is hard for them to acquiesce in the irredeemable loss of a territory that they perceived as rightfully belonging to them."<sup>505</sup> After invoking this purported admission by Bratianu of the primacy of *Realpolitik* in comparison with arguments inspired by the rhetoric of "historical rights," Stuart concluded that "the Romanian government, being prepared for the idea of giving up Bessarabia, is secretly harboring the hope of receiving from Russia's magnanimity a compensation in the eventuality of being forced to renounce a part of its territory to the advantage of its mighty neighbor."<sup>506</sup> Following the same logic of a future territorial compensation, A. I. Nelidov devised a project (elaborated immediately before the

<sup>503</sup> For this argument, see especially G. I. Bratianu, *Le probleme des frontieres russo-roumaines pendant la guerre de 1877-1878 et au Congres de Berlin* (Bucuresti, Cartea Romaneasca, 1928), p. 20

<sup>504</sup> AVPRI, fund Chancellery, 1877, d. 17, l. 49-50. Cited in: Vinogradov et al., p. 146

<sup>505</sup> AVPRI, fund Chancellery, 1877, d. 17, l. 49-50. Cited in: Vinogradov et al., p. 146

<sup>506</sup> AVPRI, fund Chancellery, 1877, d. 17, l. 49-50. Cited in: Vinogradov et al., p. 146-147

outbreak of hostilities) arguing that the most appropriate solution would be to grant Romania the Danube Delta and a portion of the “territory between the Danube, Serbia and the course of the Lom River with the fortress of Vidin” instead of Dobrudja.<sup>507</sup> The latter province had to become a part of the future Bulgarian Principality, since “for strategic reasons it would be desirable” for Russia to “preserve a direct communication with Bulgaria, in order not to be forced in the future, in case of a new campaign beyond the Danube, to pass through the territory of Romania, which will become independent and, possibly, ill disposed towards us...”<sup>508</sup> Romania’s entry into the war was also partly conditioned by the hope of reaching a territorial compromise with the Russian Empire. Characteristically, the country’s participation in military operations was viewed both by Romanian officials and their Russian counterparts as a negotiating tool at the future peace settlement. The potential difficulties that the Romanian military cooperation would entail for the projected territorial exchange were perceived by certain Russian diplomats as early as April 1877, when Nelidov stated that “Romania’s cooperation [in the war] did not occur, due to our efforts and at our behest.”<sup>509</sup> Though later developments caused the Russian military to reconsider the usefulness of Romanian assistance, the Bucharest government saw its military involvement not only in terms of an “effective consecration” of the country’s independence (proclaimed on May 10/22, 1877), but also as an additional argument in its (potential) “frontier dispute” with the Russian Empire. Thus, in an instruction to the Romanian diplomatic agent in Vienna written during the war, in November 1877, Kogalniceanu openly asserted that “the obligation to rescue this part of our country [Southern Bessarabia] was, to a great extent, the cause of the cooperation of our army in front of Plevna. *We gave our blood in order not to give*

<sup>507</sup> AVPRI, fund Main Archive, A-U1, d.1, l. 97. Cited in: Vinogradov et al., p. 149

<sup>508</sup> AVPRI, fund Main Archive, A-U1, d.1, l. 97. Cited in: Vinogradov et al., p. 148

<sup>509</sup> AVPRI, fund Main Archive, A-U1, d.1, l. 97. Cited in: Vinogradov et al., p. 148

up our land. (emphasis in original).”<sup>510</sup> This invocation, in an otherwise pragmatic context, of the organic link between the “redeeming blood” of the Romanian soldiers and the territory that had to be thus secured for the “national body” indicates the complex relationship between the exalted rhetoric of Romanian diplomacy and the impact of *Realpolitik* that it obscured.

The “Bessarabian question” did not effectively reemerge as the main contentious issue between the two governments until the successful achievement of the anti-Ottoman campaign in the winter of 1877-1878. Despite occasional references to a future “compromise” that hinted at the salience of this matter for Russian officials (as exemplified by the conversation between the Romanian prince and Gorchakov held at Ploiesti in June 1877)<sup>511</sup> and the apprehensions of the Romanian Foreign Minister articulated during his trip to Vienna in the summer of the same year,<sup>512</sup> the official position of the Russian government was only explicated in a letter written by the Russian Chancellor to the Romanian Foreign Minister in the early days of 1878 and dispatched to Bucharest by Gen. N. P. Ignatiev, who was passing through Romania on his way to the headquarters of the Russian High Command in the Balkans as a plenipotentiary for signing the armistice with the Ottomans. Referring to the “suspension tactics” pursued by the Romanian government, Gorchakov asserted that “the Emperor has judged this moment appropriate for clarifying certain questions that I was already in the position to discuss with Your Excellency in general terms in view of the future peace.”<sup>513</sup> While emphasizing his desire to avoid any

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<sup>510</sup> N. Iorga, *Razboiul pentru independenta Romaniei: actiuni diplomatice si stari de spirit* (Bucuresti: Albatros, 1998), p. 169-170

<sup>511</sup> G. I. Bratianu, *Le probleme des frontieres russo-roumaines pendant la guerre de 1877-1878 et au Congres de Berlin* (Bucuresti, Cartea Romaneasca, 1928), p. 18-19

<sup>512</sup> G. I. Bratianu, p. 19. During his conversations with the Romanian diplomatic agent in Vienna, I. Balaceanu, Kogalniceanu made an interesting comparison between the situation of Romania in 1877 and that of Piedmont in 1859, referring to the cession of Nice and Savoy to France. Balaceanu, who did not share Kogalniceanu’s scepticism at the time, made the comment that such a comparison was not appropriate, since “Russia was not France, Alexander II was not Napoleon III, Romania was not Piedmont and, above all, Kogalniceanu was not Cavour.” Behind the superficial rhetorical level, the parallel between Bessarabia and Nice/Savoy indicates to what extent this region was integrated into the image of an “ideal fatherland.”

<sup>513</sup> *Congres de Berlin. Actes et discours des Plenipotentiaires de S. A. le Prince de Roumanie*. Buc., 1878, p. 12

“misunderstanding,” the Chancellor forcefully stated the Russian position in the following terms: “we also have interests and rights to safeguard, which we cannot subject to any kind of bargain [*sur lesquels nous ne pouvons pas transiger*].”<sup>514</sup> The active involvement of the Russian Empire in the Eastern Question and its former protectorate over the Principalities were also invoked (vaguely) as constituting the basis for a special relationship between the two countries<sup>515</sup> that could, however, be established only by the adoption of a *Realpolitik* approach by the Romanian leadership. This equivocal language was meant, on the one hand, to prepare the way for N.P. Ignatiev’s mission to Bucharest (he was officially instructed to clarify the position of the Russian government during his meetings there) and, on the other hand, to preempt the active opposition of the Romanian officials.

The diplomatic conflict that was in gestation for several months due to both governments’ interest in muting their grievances during the war suddenly erupted on January 14/26, 1878, when the Romanian diplomatic agents in Paris and St. Petersburg informed Kogalniceanu about the formal Russian claims concerning the retrocession of Southern Bessarabia. The implicit clash of the national and imperial discourses crystallized in a coherent set of arguments and counter-arguments that framed the symbolic competition over the region in the following months. In a telegram sent from the French capital, the Romanian agent there reported a conversation with the Russian ambassador, Prince Orlov, who, while still preserving a cautious tone, declared that he “believed in the probability of such a demand” [the reclamation of Southern Bessarabia] on the following grounds: “that there are, in Ismail and its environs, memories and monuments of glorious fights that are dear to the hearts of every Russian; that he recalls that at the Congress of

<sup>514</sup> *Congres de Berlin. Actes et discours des Plenipotentiaires de S. A. le Prince de Roumanie*. Buc., 1878, p. 12

<sup>515</sup> The Russian Foreign minister reminded his Romanian counterpart about the “traditions that connected Romania to Russia” and attempted to defend Russia’s moral high ground by emphasizing that “your country owes its entire past to [these connections] and I think that it will equally find [in Russia] its most solid support in the future.” (Ibidem, p. 12).

Paris this cession cost [the Russians] more than the destruction of the fleet; that he knows that the Emperor Alexander personally attaches a great importance to this question, and that this [issue] has perhaps been one of the determining causes of the war.”<sup>516</sup> Thus, an emphasis on strategic considerations and powerful invocations of past and present military exploits, coupled with the restoration of the monarch’s honor (a recurring motive that points to the importance of the “conqueror” image of the tsar for his domestic legitimacy) combined into a “defense of empire” somewhat unlikely to result from a diplomat’s thinking. Mingling a moral and “legalistic” stance, the Romanian agent retorted by stressing the “serious moral considerations that link us to this part of our heritage [*patrimoine*]” and the “painful sacrifice” that the loss of the territory entailed for the nation, but was also careful to point to the “unsparing” efforts of the Romanian army during the war and to the legal guarantee “contained in the April Convention.”<sup>517</sup> In stark contrast to his previous position, Orlov responded that “after all, this territory has no great importance” and assured his Romanian colleague that Romania would receive a “large compensation” in case of a final decision that would deprive it of Southern Bessarabia.<sup>518</sup> The national rhetoric of “heritage” and sacrifice clashed here with an imperial vision that curiously combined an utterly pragmatic attitude with musings on military prestige and “honor” that seemed to better fit a pre-modern polity than the ostensibly modern empire of Alexander II.

An even more revealing example of the discursive “conundrum” facing the two governments can be found in the telegram sent to Bucharest the same day by the Romanian agent in St. Petersburg, Gen. Prince Ioan Gr. Ghica. Informing his minister about the “formal intention” of the emperor to “retake the part of Bessarabia until Kilia,” instead of which Romania would

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<sup>516</sup> Telegram of N. Callimaki-Catargi to M. Kogalnicenu, Paris, January 14/26, 1878. Cited in: *Documente oficiale din Corespondinta diplomatica de la 5 (17) octombrie 1877 pana la 15 (27) septembrie 1878, prezentate corporilor legiuitoare in sesiunea anului 1880-1881*, p. 22

<sup>517</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>518</sup> Ibidem.



acquire “the Danube Delta and Dobrudja until Kustenge [Constanta],” the diplomat listed the arguments that the two highest-ranking persons in the empire invoked: “that this territory had been returned [*retrocédé*] to Moldavia and not to Romania; that it had been severed from Russia by a treaty of which there is nothing at all left; that it isn’t just that Russia alone should abide by it to its own damage [*détriment*], and that this claim is for it [Russia] a question of national honor and national dignity [*d’honneur et de dignité nationales*].”<sup>519</sup> Though the difference in emphasis is striking if one compares the thrust of these essentially legal points with the previous document, the common topic of “honor and dignity” provides the opportunity to appreciate the extent to which such a lexicon impacted the thought of Russia’s leaders and how it was linked to the self-legitimizing of imperial elites.<sup>520</sup> The answer of the Romanian diplomat to these considerations was, if also partly “legalistic” in its essence, also framed in unambiguously national terms. Thus, Ghica’s resume of his own answer emphasized, on the one hand, the “specious” [*spécieux*] nature of the argument that invoked the non-existence of the Romanian state at the time of the Paris treaty, as well as the “unconditional” character of the inclusion of Southern Bessarabia into Moldavia. On the other hand, Ghica argued in front of Alexander II and Gorchakov that “this territory is a strip of our own body [*un lambeau de notre corps*], a possession that is our right *ab antiquo*.”<sup>521</sup> This historical-organicist rhetoric of course failed to impress the Russian dignitaries, who reiterated their “unalterable” [*inébranlable*] decision to pursue their announced course of action, adding that Russia would prefer to discuss this question directly with Romania instead of

<sup>519</sup> Telegram of General I. Ghica to M. Kogalniceanu, St. Petersburg, January 14/26, 1878. Cited in: *Documente oficiale din Corespondinta diplomatica de la 5 (17) octombrie 1877 pana la 15 (27) septembrie 1878, prezentate corporilor legiuitoare in sesiunea anului 1880-1881*, p. 22

<sup>520</sup> Though it would be tempting to “read into” this fragment the possible influence of a “nationalizing” agenda and a deeper symbolic inclusion of Bessarabia into the Russian core, the French-language document probably refers in this case (while using the term “national”) to the Russian “state” (this substitution is customary in French).

<sup>521</sup> Telegram of General I. Ghica to M. Kogalniceanu, St. Petersburg, January 14/26, 1878, Ibidem, p. 22

submitting it to a future peace conference.<sup>522</sup> The reaction of the Romanian Foreign Minister, if it is not viewed as a calculated manoeuvre in order to impress the foreign capitals, represented not a diplomatic answer of a politician, but an emotional response of a nationally minded historian. Kogalniceanu said as much when, in his telegram sent to Ghica the next day, he bluntly asserted that he was “so troubled by what your telegrams reveal” that he did not “feel capable of dominating [his] indignation.” In a series of exalted phrases, he declined his stature as a “public person” that entailed the use of “cold reason” and proclaimed: “for the moment, it is the Romanian alone who can speak.”<sup>523</sup> Accusing the Russian Empire of a “desire to deprive the Romanians of a part of their heritage [*patrimoine*],” Kogalniceanu, while mentioning the moral and legal obligations of the Russian authorities presupposed by the Convention of April 4, 1877, and by Romania’s military assistance, ultimately resorts to a classical instance of the “rhetoric of victimization:” “Thus, we have spilled our blood, we have exhausted our country, not in order to gain, not even in order to preserve [our territory], but in order to lose! Wouldn’t it have been better, then, to let the Turks become victorious? for they, certainly, in case of victory, wouldn’t have taken Bessarabia from us!”<sup>524</sup> The historical component could hardly be omitted from this inventory of grievances by a nation-builder who started his career as the editor of medieval Romanian chronicles and as the author of the first modern history of the Romanians, published in 1837. Moreover, Kogalniceanu added an unexpected personal note (his family was of Bessarabian origin) in the following passage: “It is not the Minister who is talking to you at present; ... for the moment, it is the Romanian, the descendant of those who have protested, even under the Turkish yoke, against the annexation [*prise*] of the Bukovina, against the annexation of Bessarabia!” The exalted tone of the dispatch culminated in the final phrase, when the Minister’s

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<sup>522</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>523</sup> Telegram of M. Kogalniceanu to Gen. I. Ghica. Bucharest, January 15/27, 1878. Ibidem, p. 23

<sup>524</sup> Telegram of M. Kogalniceanu to Gen. I. Ghica. Bucharest, January 15/27, 1878. Ibidem, p. 23

stance reached an almost “prophetic” intensity: “May God prove me wrong, but there are plenty of tempests coming in the wake of the taking away [*la prise*] of this strip of land [*lambeau de terre*] that they call Romanian Bessarabia.”<sup>525</sup> It is not clear whether Kogalniceanu meant here the diplomatic complications that might result from a clash of interests of the Great Powers on the Lower Danube (which the Romanian leadership hoped to exploit) or the future of the Russian-Romanian relations. The importance of these diplomatic sources (perhaps analyzed in too much detail) lies in the framing of the Romanian arguments in terms of a nationally colored discourse which had probably to consider the reaction of the public opinion as well as to provide a token of symbolic resistance that would supersede the impact of the *Realpolitik* and the inequalities of international power the ultimately determined the outcome of this diplomatic struggle. The explanation of Kogalniceanu’s apparent incoherence stems from the duality of the Romanian discourse concerning Southern Bessarabia. While the national agenda was meant for “internal consumption” by the Romanian political elites and educated public, the legalistic arguments had a better chance to “function” on the international arena, where the Romanian government hoped to find effective support. However, one can hardly delineate the two spheres (at most, the difference in emphasis is a significant indicator of the prevailing stance at any given moment).

The further exchange of telegrams between the Romanian Foreign Minister and the diplomatic agent in St. Petersburg reveals the same tension between the rhetoric of “national dignity” and the pragmatic dimension that prompted the Bucharest officials to invoke the legal grounds of their resistance to an amiable settlement. In a dispatch dated January 17/29, 1878, Gen. Ghica informed his superior in Bucharest that during a conversation with the Russian Chancellor he “again developed the moral and political considerations that can be opposed to a [Russian] claim”

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<sup>525</sup> Telegram of M. Kogalniceanu to Gen. I. Ghica. Bucharest, January 15/27, 1878. Ibidem, p. 23-24

on Bessarabia,<sup>526</sup> which included “article 2 of the [1877] Convention, the aim of our [military] cooperation, our rights of possession, the interests of Russia not to lose the benevolent attitude [*les sympathies*] of Romania.”<sup>527</sup> This time, however, Gorchakov had no patience to develop the Russian point of view and dismissed the Romanian arguments as irrelevant, reaffirming the “unalterable” [*inébranlable*] character of the political decision concerning Southern Bessarabia and confronting the Romanian authorities with a “political necessity” that had to be treated accordingly.<sup>528</sup> Reverting to the previously used language of diplomatic interest, he suggested that the Bratianu government persuade the country that “the awarded territorial compensation much exceeds both by its size and its importance the loss of the reclaimed strip [*lambeau*].”<sup>529</sup> Here one encounters for the first time an open comparison between the intrinsic value of the two territories that constituted the object of the “territorial bargain.” Though other mutual recriminations followed (Gorchakov accused Bucharest of waging a diplomatic “campaign” against the Russian Empire and of “instigating” pro-government petitions in the disputed districts, while Kogalniceanu complained about the policies of the Russian military authorities in Romania), the “Bessarabian question” remained at the center of the dispute. Initially determined to discuss the controversy with Russia in strictly legal terms (insisting that “we have in our favor Article 2 of the [1877] Convention, and this is the only act of which we shall make use”),<sup>530</sup> the Foreign Minister nevertheless made recourse to the motive of “historical rights” and the absolute legitimacy of the “national will” embodied in the “public opinion” and stemming from “human consciousness.” The latter, Kogalniceanu proclaimed, “will not rest on the side of Russia, which, as a reward for the material resources that Romania has provided it with, as a price of the blood

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<sup>526</sup> Telegram of General I. Ghica to M. Kogalniceanu, St. Petersburg, January 17/29, 1878. Ibidem, p. 24-25

<sup>527</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>528</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>529</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>530</sup> Ibidem.

of our children generously spilled in front of Plevna, instead of giving us back [*rendre*] the entire province of Bessarabia, unjustly annexed [*prise*] in 1812, wants to deprive us of the strip [*lambeau*] that we owe to the Great European Powers.”<sup>531</sup> The national narrative is reflected at its height in this fragment, where the rhetoric of material sacrifices, heroic feats and historical justice combine in a powerful case against the claims of the rival power. Ignoring (deliberately) the issue of the proposed territorial exchange, Kogalniceanu emphasized the national solidarity that legitimized his argument. Far from being “duplicitous,” it in fact embodied the “national will,” since this “[rhetorical] language is held by all the Romanians, without distinction.”<sup>532</sup> In a revealing sample of the “national dignity” motive, the Foreign Minister added a “finishing touch” to his discourse by asserting that “Prince Gorchakov... will be obliged to respect us nevertheless, since, if we lose our land, we do not want, at least, to lose also our honor.”<sup>533</sup>

The oscillation between the emphasis on the discourse of “national dignity” and a more “pragmatic” approach to the Bessarabian question became apparent on the occasion of Gen. N. P. Ignatiev’s official visit to Bucharest at the beginning of February 1878. According to the official report sent to St. Petersburg by the Russian agent in Bucharest, Baron D. I. Stuart, the general believed that he succeeded in convincing the Romanian government of the “futility of its attempts aimed at resisting” the Russian demand.<sup>534</sup> Moreover, Ignatiev’s exaggerated optimism prompted him to interpret the reaction of the Bucharest officials in a key that was completely invalidated by later occurrences. The Romanian government seemed to pursue a tactic of rhetorical dissimulation that was meant to temporarily assuage the Russian delegate while allowing Bucharest to gauge the position of the other Great Powers. The situation was in fact rather

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<sup>531</sup> Ibidem, p. 25

<sup>532</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>533</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>534</sup> AVPRI, fund Chancellery, 1878, d. 15, ll. 6-10. Cited in: Vinogradov et al., pp. 151-154, here p. 152

complex. Kogalniceanu, while ultimately realizing the inevitability of the territorial “exchange,”<sup>535</sup> probably sought to gain time before assessing the country’s international situation and the domestic costs of a “compromise” policy. Otherwise, one can hardly explain the position of an official who, while earlier a staunch defender of Romanian “inalienable rights” and moral superiority, should suddenly agree to “print a brochure in which, on the basis of statistical data that are in Kogalniceanu’s possession, it will be argued that the part of Dobrudja offered in exchange for Bessarabia provides unquestionable advantages, that it would be impractical to ignore them and thus to provoke... the rancor of a mighty neighbor and ally, being opposed to the exchange.”<sup>536</sup> Both Gorchakov and Stuart remained unconvinced by this unexpected change of mind of the Romanian authorities and were proven right several days after Ignatiev’s departure.<sup>537</sup> Ignatiev’s optimism is even more puzzling if one resorts to the Romanian diplomatic correspondence. Thus, in a dispatch sent to the Romanian delegate in St. Petersburg the Romanian Foreign Minister, while reinforcing the “legalistic” counterarguments that Bucharest opposed to the Russian claims, also spoke about the “awkward and ugly [*pénible*] impression that the Russian demand produced in the entire country, and above all in Moldavia, without any party distinction. The [public] spirit is very troubled [*agité*].”<sup>538</sup> The rhetorical consistence seems remarkable, despite Ignatiev’s claims to the contrary. The terms of the political debate spurred by Ignatiev’s official communication found their consecration in the joint

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<sup>535</sup> As is obvious from the telegram the Minister sent to the Romanian diplomatic agent in Vienna on January 17/29, 1878. Ibidem, p. 25

<sup>536</sup> AVPRI, fund Chancellery, 1878, d. 15, ll. 6-10. Cited in: Vinogradov et al., pp. 151-154, here p. 152

<sup>537</sup> Gorchakov remarked that Ignatiev’s impression of Bucharest’s readiness to reach a compromise with the Russians was “nowhere to be seen in the telegrams sent to Ghica” from Romania, while Stuart observed that, though Ignatiev’s declarations “give some grounds for admitting” a “change of mind of the Romanian government favorable to us,” he noticed “certain indices” that induced him to “doubt the sincerity of such a quick and unexpected change.” See Vinogradov, p. 153

<sup>538</sup> Telegram of M. Kogalniceanu to Gen. I. Ghica. Bucharest, January 23 (February 4), 1878. Ibidem, pp. 30-31. Kogalniceanu again mentioned the Romanian rights “ab antique” and the place of Southern Bessarabia within the national “heritage.”

resolution adopted by the Romanian Parliament on January 26/February 7, 1878. This document synthesized the various arguments presented above while clearly insisting on the legal and moral aspects of the problem without resorting to a specifically historical language. The rationale for “maintaining the integrity of the Romanian territory” and for rejecting “any alienation of whatever portion of Romanian territory against any kind of territorial compensation” was based on a set of legal, morally binding and political considerations. These included: the guarantee of the integrity of the Romanian territory by the Great European Powers; the signing by Russia of the 1877 Convention; the invocation of Romania’s faithful completion of the provisions of this Convention and the appeal to the “sentiment of justice” of the Russian monarch; the “great sacrifices” that Romania suffered during the war and, finally, the European interest in the existence of an “independent and homogeneous” Romanian state.<sup>539</sup>

As a consequence of these political acts, the Russian-Romanian relationships suffered a serious setback that triggered the efforts of the Romanian government to find a more consistent support of the other members of the “European concert.” The atmosphere of mutual suspicion and apprehension only increased after the signing of the San Stefano treaty on February 19/March 3, 1878. Before and around that date, the rhetoric of the Russian officials attempted to resort to a strategy of “appeasement” of their Romanian counterparts by insisting on the benefits that a rational and *Realpolitik* approach would entail for the Romanian state. This strategy can be discerned from an article published on February 11/23 in the quasi-official organ of the Russian Foreign Ministry, *Journal de St. Petersbourg*, which asserted that “national susceptibilities are to

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<sup>539</sup> *Congres de Berlin. Actes et discours des Plenipotentiaires de S. A. le Prince de Roumanie*. Buc., 1878, p. 14. The same arguments were repeated in an extended form in an official letter written by the Romanian Foreign Minister to his Russian counterpart on January 29/February 9, as well as in the instructions to the Romanian agent in St. Petersburg compiled by Kogalniceanu on February 2/14, 1878. In the latter document, Kogalniceanu again invoked the “unanimous public opinion” that was “solemnly formulated by its legal organs” and proclaimed that the act of territorial exchange would signify a “suicide” for the national organism. He also referred to the argument of “ingratitude” that was to be expected (and was already formulated) from the Russian part while referring to the famous Austrian quip. (“our ingratitude will surprise the world”).

be respected, on the condition that they are not exaggerated,”<sup>540</sup> as well as from the language used by Gorchakov’s deputy, N. K. Giers, during a later conversation with Ghica. While accusing the Romanian government of “encouraging” and fomenting the expressions of public “outrage” against Russia, Giers also blamed the Romanians for “being too sensitive [*susceptibles*], too inclined at exaggerating [*grossir*] everything,”<sup>541</sup> which amounted to a veiled appeal at pragmatism and potential compromise. However, the Romanian government also had to respond to the growing internal pressure from the opposition and to the domestic accusations of a faltering and even “treacherous” position in the dispute with St. Petersburg.<sup>542</sup>

This increase of the internal and diplomatic tension expressed itself in a series of memoranda elaborated by the Foreign Ministry (some of them clearly written by Kogalniceanu himself) which attempted to delineate a coherent position of official Bucharest on the “Bessarabian question.” The first of these memoranda was sent by the Minister to Romanian diplomats abroad on February 25 (March 9) in the form of a circular note. In the preamble explaining the necessity of such a document, Kogalniceanu stated his aim as being “to succinctly present the arguments of a historical, political and economic nature [*ordre*] upon which the Romanian Cabinet, faithful interpreter of the national sentiment..., bases its repudiation of an exchange of Bessarabia for Dobrudja.”<sup>543</sup> Despite his stated intention, the document itself is rather peculiar if compared to the earlier emphasis of the Romanian official rhetoric. Far from granting the same attention to the three sets of ideas mentioned above, this memorandum is unmistakably “economic” in its thrust. The most plausible explanation for this is the intended audience that it was addressed to, namely, the future peace conference that the Romanians hoped would meet their multiple grievances. This

<sup>540</sup> Telegram of General I. Ghica to M. Kogalniceanu, St. Petersburg, February 11/23, 1878. Ibidem, p. 60

<sup>541</sup> Telegram of General I. Ghica to M. Kogalniceanu, St. Petersburg, February 24/ March 8, 1878. Ibidem, p. 72

<sup>542</sup> See the series of scathing articles by M. Eminescu in the Conservative newspaper *Timpu*.

<sup>543</sup> Circular note of M. Kogalniceanu to the Romanian diplomatic agents abroad. Bucharest, February 25 (March 9), 1878. Ibidem, p. 73



is confirmed not only by the Foreign Minister's open admission of the fact,<sup>544</sup> but also by the main body of the text, that was structured on two fundamental premises: 1) the "European interest" that demanded the Romanian possession of the left (Bessarabian) bank of the Danube in order to secure the free navigation and unhindered commerce on the river and that conditioned the "mission" of the Romanian state on the Lower Danube and 2) the detrimental (if not disastrous) effect on Romania's economy and "civilization" of the loss of Southern Bessarabia, which was determined by the "direct proportion" presumably existing between the country's prosperity and its control over the whole extent of the Lower Danube.<sup>545</sup> The author also insisted upon the "sudden revivals and brusque fluctuations caused by the changes of domination upon the left bank of the [Danube] river." The conclusion that Moldavia's economy suffered heavily as a result of the loss of Bessarabia in 1812, while "in 1830 Wallachia has gained the most precious advantages from the recuperation of the towns and territories of Braila, Giurgevo [Giurgiu] and Turnu" was thus quite predictable.<sup>546</sup> An especially interesting point emphasized by Kogalniceanu refers to the negative appreciation of the proposed territorial exchange, that is squarely judged to be "essentially damaging" [*préjudiciable*] to Romania. The supporting

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<sup>544</sup> Circular note of M. Kogalniceanu to the Romanian diplomatic agents abroad. Bucharest, February 25 (March 9), 1878. Ibidem, p. 73

<sup>545</sup> The Memorandum defended the first point in the following eloquent terms: "The rectification of frontiers in Bessarabia, stipulated by the Treaty of 1856, and the return to the Principality of Moldavia of a portion of its ancient territory on the left bank of the Danube, had as their goal to satisfy a double interest of European public order: 1. To secure the free navigation of a river that forms the main commercial artery of Central Europe, entrusting the protection [*la garde*] of its mouths to a country of secondary importance whose constant deference to the intentions of the Powers was thereby assured; 2. To place the Romanian Principalities, due to the partial restoration of a province that had anciently belonged to them [Bessarbia], in the position to fulfill, according to the requirements of topography and the economic necessities, the mission that was delegated to them, with the consent and to the advantage of the whole of Europe." The second point was summed up in the phrase: "History shows that the commercial activity of the peoples bordering the Danube slowed down or developed in direct proportion to the increase or the decrease [diminution] of their immediate contact with the river." See *Congres de Berlin. Actes et discours des Plenipotentiaires de S. A. le Prince de Roumanie*. Buc., 1878, p. 21

<sup>546</sup> *Congres de Berlin. Actes et discours des Plenipotentiaires de S. A. le Prince de Roumanie*. Buc., 1878, p. 21. The ultimate benefits of the possession of the entire left bank of the Lower Danube were not purely material, since "the [Bessarabian] districts that endow this possession with its useful value" have always led to the "almost mathematical corollary of a rapid and continuous progress [*élan*] of the Romanian commerce, its industry and its interior culture." (Ibidem, p. 21).

argument is worth being cited at length: “It is enough... to examine the configuration of those places to become convinced that the loss of the Bessarabian bank would make the maintenance of Dobrudja” under Romanian control both “awkward and onerous,” since this region was “separated by a wide river from the body of the country [*corps du pays*]” and, moreover, lacked any proper ways of communication with the rest of the territory (aside from some “impracticable marshes”).<sup>547</sup> The invocation of geography as a potent (and ostensibly “neutral”) ally in this dispute is suggestive and shows to what extent the official discourse was malleable to immediate political necessity. This stance could not be more different from the later arguments that re-discovered Dobrudja’s “Romanian-ness” once it was clear that the territorial exchange was inevitable. At this stage, however, the Romanian officials perceived the relative importance of Dobrudja and Southern Bessarabia in the following terms: “it is apparent that the abandoning of Romanian Bessarabia would entail for all of Romania the most annoying results, since the acquisition of Dobrudja would be, from the moment of the loss of the left bank of the Danube, which is the true and the only key for the opposing bank, an embarrassment, a burden and, perhaps, a permanent danger [*un danger à titre permanent*].”<sup>548</sup> The “material” interpretation of Romania’s “mission” on the Lower Danube was only somewhat diluted in the final phrases of the memorandum by the invocation of the moral and political considerations otherwise so important for the direct Russian-Romanian diplomatic exchanges. The tendency to alter the emphases and terms of the dispute according to the intended audience shows the multiple rhetorical methods that in fact constituted the “unitary” national discourse. To the extent that it is possible to speak about such a “discourse” at all, the combination of “pragmatic,” historical and moral elements

<sup>547</sup> *Congres de Berlin. Actes et discours des Plenipotentiaires de S. A. le Prince de Roumanie*. Buc., 1878, p. 22

<sup>548</sup> *Congres de Berlin. Actes et discours des Plenipotentiaires de S. A. le Prince de Roumanie*. Buc., 1878, p. 22. It is not clear to what extent the last words might refer to possible future conflicts with Bulgaria.

denotes the dexterity of the Romanian elite in subordinating its open rhetoric to the vagaries of the shifting “national interest.”

Following several unsuccessful attempts at finding a potential “common ground” with the Russian officials, undertaken at the end of February and in early March 1878,<sup>549</sup> the pessimism of the Romanian diplomacy was clearly expressed by the envoy in St. Petersburg in a short dispatch sent on March 2/14, 1878, where he remarked that he “[saw] the question of Bessarabia in black [tones]” and that he even lacked “belief in the [future] Congress,” since the “loss of this territory seems imminent.”<sup>550</sup> This state of mind seemed to prevail among the Romanian leadership especially after the official reports concerning the signing of the treaty of San Stefano reached Bucharest. The reaction of the Bratianu government was expressed in two lengthy letters written by Kogalniceanu to Gen. I. Ghica, respectively, on March 8/20 and March 10/22, 1878. Since both of these memoranda were meant for the “consumption” of the Russian officials, the discourse of mutual historical grievances and “national dignity” reemerged in full force. The first letter was explicitly designed in order to refute the Russian reproach of “ingratitude” that became recurrent both in the official circles of the empire and in the Russian press. Reasserting the high appreciation that Romania preserved for the “good deeds” [*bienfaits*] of the Russian Empire towards the Romanians, the Romanian Foreign Minister built his case upon two interconnected arguments that were also developed in the second document. The first of these points emphasized the “sufferings” of the Principalities as a result of their transformation into a field of battle between the Russian and Ottoman armies during the XVIII and XIX centuries: “Haven’t the

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<sup>549</sup> For the details of the continuous diplomatic tension, see the telegram sent by the Romanian agent in St. Petersburg, Gen. I. Ghica, on February 28/ March 12, 1878, as well as the response by Kogalniceanu on March 1/13, 1978. While in the first of these documents Ghica appreciated any further discussion of the Bessarabian question with the Russian Chancellor as “sterile,” Kogalniceanu resorted to a strategy of “total negation,” instructing Ghica to reassert the Romanian position as “*Non possumus*.” See *Documente oficiale din Corespondinta diplomatica de la 5 (17) octombrie 1877 pana la 15 (27) septembrie 1878, prezentate corpurilor legiuitoare in sesiunea anului 1880-1881*, p. 87-89

<sup>550</sup> Telegram of General I. Ghica to M. Kogalniceanu, St. Petersburg, March 2/14, 1878. Ibidem, p. 89

Principalities been, since Peter the Great, the theater of all the major wars between Russia and Turkey? A field of battle perpetually open to the most bloody clashes, haven't they, for one hundred and fifty years, carried all the weight and endured all the horrors of the struggles engaged on their territory?"<sup>551</sup> This rhetoric of "national victimization" was supplemented by the motive of "Turkish vengeance" that purportedly explained not only the much abhorred Phanariot regime, but also the loss of Bessarabia in 1812, due to the "malevolence" of the Porte towards the Romanians.<sup>552</sup> The second argument, however, was much more important, since it involved the principle of "national dignity" that demanded an energetic and unanimous reaction of the country. Far from any hint at a material interest in the possession of Southern Bessarabia, the language of official Bucharest suffered a marked shift: "The Romania of 1878 understood that it could not be less concerned about its dignity than the Moldavia of 1812 had been,"<sup>553</sup> that it should not, at the conclusion of a war during which it showed a universally recognized valor, subscribe by itself and with its own consent to the cession of a province that the transactions [*convenances*] of the neighboring and powerful empires had at another time stolen [*enlevée*] from under its authority. Faithful depositories of the heritage [*patrimoine*] that they have received from their fathers and for which they are responsible in front of their children, the Romanians would renege on [*démentiraient*] their past, would betray their present, would ruin their future if they agree to sign the renunciation to a part of their heritage [*heritage*]."<sup>554</sup> Aside from the symbolic integration of the contested region into the image of the "national heritage," another interesting aspect involves the (implicit) conflation of the three Bessarabian districts with the whole region annexed in 1812. This invocation of historical continuity was supplemented by the introduction

<sup>551</sup> Telegram of M. Kogalniceanu to Gen. I. Ghica, Bucharest, March 8/20, 1878. Ibidem, p. 104.

<sup>552</sup> Telegram of M. Kogalniceanu to Gen. I. Ghica, Bucharest, March 8/20, 1878. Ibidem, p. 105

<sup>553</sup> Allusion to the protests of certain Moldavian boyars after the Russian annexation of 1812.

<sup>554</sup> Telegram of M. Kogalniceanu to Gen. I. Ghica, Bucharest, March 8/20, 1878. Ibidem, p. 106

of the element of “national will” that transformed the “manifestation of national sentiment” into a “spontaneous and unanimous” act that endowed the Romanian official protests with an aura of universal consent.<sup>555</sup> This argument, however, proved especially vulnerable to Russian accusations of manipulation and “instigation” of collective protests and petitions by the Romanian government (including in the contested territory) that cannot be simply dismissed, despite the claims of the Romanian Foreign Minister to the contrary.<sup>556</sup> In a curious attempt at “re-appropriating” the motive of Russia’s “liberating mission” in the Balkans, the Romanian official did not hesitate to interpret it as a “glorious task to recall to an individual life the nationalities of the Orient and to reconstitute their patrimonial territory in its integrity.”<sup>557</sup> This tendency to challenge the Russian visions of the empire’s role in the Romanian Principalities and the region as a whole from an “internal” point of view, insisting on the weaknesses and inconsistencies of the imperial narrative was even more pronounced in the next letter discussing the historical background of the “Bessarabian question.”

The memorandum of March 10/22, 1878, has a special significance among the plethora of official and quasi-official “signals” exchanged between Bucharest and St. Petersburg in the early months of 1878. It has an unmistakably historical character and displays Kogalniceanu’s claim to professional expertise as much as to political competence. The main focus of the document is a historical review of the Russian-Romanian relationships during the XVIII and XIX centuries,

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<sup>555</sup> Telegram of M. Kogalniceanu to Gen. I. Ghica, Bucharest, March 8/20, 1878. Ibidem, p. 106

<sup>556</sup> Telegram of M. Kogalniceanu to Gen. I. Ghica, Bucharest, March 8/20, 1878. Ibidem, p. 107. A similar starting point informed the recrimination addressed by the Russian diplomatic agent in Petersburg to the Romanian prince, in a later conversation held in April 1878. Baron D. I. Stuart remarked that “the complete indifference that the country exhibited towards Bessarabia until the day when the question of its retrocession to Russia arose gives [him] grounds to doubt the sincerity of the feelings that provoked the complaints in connection with the return of this piece of land.” (AVPRI, fund Chancellery, 1878, d. 15, l. 68. Cited in: Vinogradov et al., p. 162. Kogalniceanu spoke about the “explosion of a legitimate patriotism, alarmed by certain sudden revelations,” while accusing his Conservative opponents of returning to their “old errors” and of serving as a “polemical instrument.”

<sup>557</sup> Telegram of M. Kogalniceanu to Gen. I. Ghica, Bucharest, March 8/20, 1878. Ibidem, p. 108. The usual elements of Romania’s “moral superiority” were also present in the final part of the document.

analyzed through the lens of the relative advantages and disadvantages that accrued to the Principalities as a result of the Russian- inspired peace settlements with the Ottoman Empire and of the regime of Russian protection that functioned from 1774 until 1856.<sup>558</sup> The details of the account are of little relevance for the dynamics of the Russian-Romanian polemics as such. In fact, the narrative followed the usual pattern of the successive Russian-Ottoman wars and argued along the lines of the previously analyzed letter, emphasizing the “calamities” that befell the Principalities as a result of the armed clashes between the Russian and Ottoman forces. If anything, the motive of “Turkish vengeance” is elaborated in more detail. The significant exception to this bleak picture is provided by the figure of Count Kiselev, who, however, represents the exception that confirms the rule. Thus, the period of 1829-34 is described as “an epoch in which the constant confidence and the traditional good feelings of the Principalities towards Russia at last found their reward,” while Kiselev himself “left indelible memories in the Romanian hearts.”<sup>559</sup> In the final analysis, this “comparative” discussion of the Russian and Romanian mutual relationship clearly left Russia with a “moral debit” that could not be compensated by the sum total of the past historical experience. Much more relevant than the narrative part of the memorandum are several “general” remarks that the author strategically places in the introductory and final part of the document. First, Kogalniceanu displays his “belief” in history as an almost transcendental and “illuminating” force that could provide the ultimate arguments for the dispute. Though the balance between Romantic and “positivist” elements in his “appeal” to history’s “judgment” is hard to assess, his phrases are revealing: “The principles of a loyal historical criticism would demand that the parallel annals of Russia and Romania lend one another [*se prêtassent*] a mutual light” in order to examine “on which side

<sup>558</sup> Telegram of M. Kogalniceanu to Gen. I. Ghica, Bucharest, March 10?22, 1878. Ibidem, p. 108-115.

<sup>559</sup> Telegram of M. Kogalniceanu to Gen. I. Ghica, Bucharest, March 10?22, 1878. Ibidem, p. 113

there is impartiality and on which side the sincerity of history is suffering.”<sup>560</sup> The invocation of “objectivity” is by no means accidental, since the author’s professed aim is to transcend the polemical spirit (stirred by “certain passions and a so-called [*prétendue*] *raison d’état*”) and thus to achieve a scholarly (if not scientific) understanding of the controversial issues.<sup>561</sup> Second, the author displays a striking example of an “avoidance tactics” that pretends to refuse the discussion of certain aspects of the “Bessarabian question,” but in fact amounts to a condensed dismissal of a series of arguments invoked by the Russian press and official circles. This strategy of “discursive suspension” is especially important, since it touches upon the national “sensitivities” of the Romanian nation-builders. Thus, Kogalniceanu asserts:

I refrain from discussing the question of the true nationality of the inhabitants of the Bessarabian districts and the property rights [*titres de propriété*] of Romania on Bessarabia. The nature of this nationality and the authenticity of these rights are sufficiently proven by irrefutable documents, and the scholarly [*savantes*] responses opposed by our publicists to the scientifically erroneous assertions of certain Russian [press] organs have already discredited [*renversé*] the theses that ingeniously tried to demonstrate that Bessarabia had been conquered by the Russian armies from Tatar hordes, and [thus] belongs to Russia by the sovereign right of force.<sup>562</sup>

The opposition between the “scholarly” stance of the Romanian press and the “polemical” extremes to which its Russian opponents presumably resorted served to reinforce the veiled (but potent) claim of a “privileged” access of the Romanian public opinion to the “historical truth.” Thus, behind Kogalniceanu’s “modest” claim to provide a “balance sheet” of the Russian-

<sup>560</sup> Telegram of M. Kogalniceanu to Gen. I. Ghica, Bucharest, March 10?22, 1878. Ibidem, p. 108

<sup>561</sup> Telegram of M. Kogalniceanu to Gen. I. Ghica, Bucharest, March 10?22, 1878. Ibidem, p. 108

<sup>562</sup> Telegram of M. Kogalniceanu to Gen. I. Ghica, Bucharest, March 10?22, 1878. Ibidem, p. 108. This passage is also revealing in the sense of showing to what extent the “official” Romanian discourse was aware of and exploited the rhetoric of the intellectuals, even if this rhetoric came from oppositional circles (it is almost certain that Kogalniceanu refers in this context to Eminescu’s articles, which represented the most consistent and detailed response to be found in the Romanian press of the time).

Romanian relations lay a whole set of presuppositions that were imbedded in the national narrative that he helped to create. Third, the Romanian Foreign Minister emphasized a point that hinted at his appreciation of the importance of collective national “rituals” of remembrance in a symbolic competition for a part of the national body. The peculiarity of his argument resided in the “pro-Russian” twist that he endowed it with. He elaborated on an “eloquent symptom of our sentiments towards Russia” that signaled a fundamental difference in the “commemoration” of the “loss” of Bukovina in 1775 and that of Bessarabia in 1812. The 1775 events were “the object of a [yearly] patriotic ceremony of a somewhat funerary character”<sup>563</sup> that acquired the importance of a “periodic protest” (expressed by religious services in the memory of Prince Grigore Ghica, beheaded by the Ottomans for resisting the Austrian annexation of Bukovina), and this “despite our excellent relations with Austria-Hungary.”<sup>564</sup> The attitude towards the annexation of Bessarabia was, however, totally different: “Never has the loss of Bessarabia in 1812, as alive [*vivace*] and painful as its memory still is, been deplored by analogous manifestations, and the respect of the Romanians towards the court of Russia has always constrained the explosion of their regrets.”<sup>565</sup> The phenomenon of Bessarabia’s marginality within the Romanian national discourse was thus transformed into an additional argument for reinforcing the moral “superiority” that the Romanians availed themselves of in their dealings with the Russian empire. This symbolic “inversion” also sought to invalidate the Russian accusations of “disinterest” of the Romanian government in its Southern Bessarabian districts

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<sup>563</sup> Telegram of M. Kogalniceanu to Gen. I. Ghica, Bucharest, March 10?22, 1878. Ibidem, p. 115

<sup>564</sup> Telegram of M. Kogalniceanu to Gen. I. Ghica, Bucharest, March 10?22, 1878. Ibidem, p. 115

<sup>565</sup> Telegram of M. Kogalniceanu to Gen. I. Ghica, Bucharest, March 10?22, 1878. Ibidem, p. 115



that figured prominently in the Russian rhetorical “arsenal,” as well as to rebut the accusation of “ingratitude” that constituted the starting point for this stage of the dispute.<sup>566</sup>

Both documents discussed above should be integrated into the wider effort that the Romanian diplomacy undertook in order to protest against the treaty of San Stefano. Though only tangentially referring to the narrower Russian-Romanian controversy on Bessarabia, a further important piece of the “puzzle” was added on March 16/28, 1878, when the Romanian Foreign Ministry sent out a circular note to its representatives abroad arguing forcefully against the provisions of the treaty. The issue of Southern Bessarabia was only discussed to the extent that it fit the “European interests” agenda and, in general, closely repeated the arguments presented in the earlier memorandum of February 25/ March 9, with more attention devoted to matters linked to the security of navigation on the Danube in case of Russia’s admission to the European Commission overseeing the river.<sup>567</sup> The previously discussed official papers are highly relevant for one of the most detailed and cogent Russian responses to the Romanian stance. This response appeared in the quasi-official journal of the Russian Foreign Ministry, *Journal de St. Petersbourg*, as a front page article in the issue of March 16/28, 1878. It represented a direct reaction to the Romanian official view outlined by Kogalniceanu and, while repeating some motives of the earlier diplomatic controversy, provided a synthesis of the Russian position. The author (probably a Foreign Ministry official) used a whole array of arguments (some of them curiously reminiscent of later Soviet positions) in order to rebut the tenets of the Romanian official position held at the time. Some of these arguments are especially eloquent: 1) at the time

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<sup>566</sup> In a final touch of his “rhetorical pen,” Kogalniceanu accused the Russian Empire of falsely claiming to have “held its word of evacuating the Romanian Principalities every time following a military occupation,” invoking Bessarabia’s annexation in 1812.

<sup>567</sup> Telegram of M. Kogalniceanu to the diplomatic agents of Romania. Bucharest, March 16/28, 1878. The “Bessarabian question” was only mentioned in connection with the “competence of Europe” necessary to solve it, since it “implies an essential modification of the European accomplishment of 1856, through a displacement of domination in a region where the whole of Europe has constant interests.” Ibidem, p. 118

of Southern Bessarabia's "detachment" from Russia in 1856, the Romanian state did not exist as such and, in any case, the territorial provisions of the Treaty of Paris did not conform to any "law or right," but purely to the "European interest;" 2) the Treaty of 1856, which serves as the only legal basis of the Romanian possession of Southern Bessarabia, has no juridical power any longer because of its constant violation by all of its signatories; 3) Romania's military alliance with Russia presupposed a clear knowledge of the Russian territorial demands, and all Romanian claims to the contrary are but a tactics of deliberate dissimulation, 4) the Romanian administration proved inefficient and detrimental to the territory in question and this leaves no "moral" justification for the Romanian claims; 5) the strategic and economic importance of Dobrudja as a "more than adequate" compensation for Southern Bessarabia.<sup>568</sup> This refutation of the Romanian position, if expressed in clearer terms than the earlier fragmentary observations of the Russian officials, also signalled the "apogee" of the diplomatic dispute around the Bessarabian question. From this point forward, this issue faded from the focus of direct Russian-Romanian polemics due to several reasons. First, the controversy, while not entirely overcome, moved from the sphere of discourse to the sphere of international power. The Romanian government had now to confront the reality of the provisions of the treaty of San Stefano and to seek to accommodate the internal opposition that it faced along with the international complications that dominated the relations within the "European concert." The Romanian leadership, while still declaring that "we have firmly decided not to negotiate [*transiger*]"<sup>569</sup> any terms of a settlement with Russia regarding Bessarabia, in fact attempted to mute this issue in the hope of submitting its grievances to the peace Congress that was scheduled to open in Berlin in

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<sup>568</sup> V.N. Vinogradov et al., eds. *Bessarabiia na perekrestkah evropeiskoi diplomatii. Dokumenty i materialy*. Moscow: Indrik, 1996, pp. 157-160

<sup>569</sup> Circular telegram of M. Kogalniceanu to the Romanian diplomatic agents abroad. Bucharest, March 16/28, 1878. Ibidem, p. 121

June 1878. Second, the “Bessarabian question” became overshadowed by more practical matters as the stipulation of the San Stefano treaty became an object of close analysis. In the lengthy protest submitted to the Russian government on March 24/ April 5, 1878, the retrocession of Bessarabia figured among other grievances only insofar as “the free and effective domination of the mouths of the great river [the Danube]”<sup>570</sup> was concerned. Third, the efforts of the Romanian leaders now concentrated upon the presentation of their case to the Western powers and were thus directed towards arousing the preoccupation of the European chancelleries with regard to their “interests” on the Lower Danube. The two months preceding the Berlin Congress witnessed an intense diplomatic activity pursued by the Romanian envoys in Western capitals with the aim of assessing the position of the European powers at the prospective negotiations. These attempts to exploit the rivalries within the European “concert” ultimately failed<sup>571</sup> due to the secret negotiations between the major European powers that resulted in a preliminary settlement. The only success of the Romanian government was limited to the admission of its plenipotentiaries (M. Kogalniceanu and I. C. Bratianu) to the proceedings of the congress in order to present their case at one of its meetings. The issue of Southern Bessarabia thus gradually left the arena of international polemics.

The final attempt to use the combined strategies of *Realpolitik* and “historical rights” in order to defend Romania’s “territorial integrity” was undertaken in the memorandum elaborated by Kogalniceanu and read in front of the official delegations at the Berlin Congress on June 19/ July 1, 1878. By this time, as a result of a number of private conversations with the plenipotentiaries of the European governments, the Romanian delegates realized the futility of their rhetorical and

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<sup>570</sup> Telegram of M. Kogalniceanu to Gen. I. Ghica, Bucharest, March 24/ April 5, 1878. Ibidem, p. 127

<sup>571</sup> See the telegrams of the Russian diplomatic agent in Bucharest reporting the “probing” of a potential Romanian participation in the eventual war between Russia and Britain or Austria-Hungary and the angry reaction of the Russian officials in: Vinogradov et al., p. 163-164

diplomatic efforts. In a dispatch sent from Berlin on June 9/21 to his temporary deputy in Bucharest, Kogalniceanu admitted as much when reporting that “the illusions that we might have preserved would be fatally disappointed: Bessarabia must be regarded as lost, despite all our efforts; it would be almost too much still to believe in one favorable chance against ninety-nine unfavorable [ones].”<sup>572</sup> The Romanian position at the Congress was outlined in two variants of the memorandum submitted first in written form and then as an oral presentation by Kogalniceanu at the meeting of June 19/ July 1, 1878. The importance of these papers derives from the peculiar combination of “legalistic,” economic and “national” arguments, all inspired by an underlying vision of a special mission of “order, civilization and progress” that Romania was purportedly meant to fulfill in the “Orient.”<sup>573</sup> The first account emphasized the evolution of the diplomatic conflict with Russia, following the usual pattern of the invocation of the April 1877 convention and insisting on Romania’s role in the hostilities. Nevertheless, the Romanian claims were reinforced by two additional considerations. One of them related to the material circumstances that transformed the Danube into a precondition for the existence of the Romanian state.<sup>574</sup> While the first argument rested on the “particular interests” of Romania, the second referred in a somewhat veiled form to the “national sentiment” that did not square well with the mainstream stance favoring the topic of “European interest.” Significantly, the “national discourse” was diluted by emphasizing the importance of Bessarabia as an outlet to the sea.<sup>575</sup>

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<sup>572</sup> Report of M. Kogalniceanu to the interim Foreign Minister in Bucharest. Berlin, June 9/21, 1878. Ibidem, p. 165

<sup>573</sup> This characteristic motive of a “European mission” that consecrated Romania’s role in the region was expressed in the following words: “The particular interest of the Romanian nation is in complete harmony with the general interest of Europe. Because of its geographical situation, its cause is that of the Orient’s calm [*repos*] and peace.” See: *Congres de Berlin. Actes et discours des Plenipotentiaires de S. A. le Prince de Roumanie*. Buc., 1878, p. 7

<sup>574</sup> “The country that was once called the Danubian Principalities could not give up the most important part of the river, to which it owed its ancient denomination, its commercial development and the benefits of its geographical situation.” *Congres de Berlin. Actes et discours des Plenipotentiaires de S. A. le Prince de Roumanie*. Buc., 1878, p. 6

<sup>575</sup> “Romania attaches a still greater price to the preservation of a province that is a part of the country’s body [*fait corps avec le pays*] and puts it in contact with the sea, since it has better appreciated, after the loss of the whole of Bessarabia, suffered in 1812, the advantages of the partial restitution effected in 1856.” *Congres de Berlin. Actes et discours des Plenipotentiaires de S. A. le Prince de Roumanie*. Buc., 1878, p. 6

Further emphasizing the purported danger for Romania's international status due to the perceived annulment of the regime of collective guarantee of the Great Powers, the Romanian delegation used these general premises in order to claim the fulfillment of five conditions that responded to "the legitimate necessities and desires of the country."<sup>576</sup> These five points (that provided the structure of the second memorandum) included: 1) the refusal of the detachment of any part of the Romanian territory (directly referring to Bessarabia); 2) the request to abolish the provision stipulating the right of passage of the Russian troops through Romania for a period of two years; 3) the restoration to Romania of the mouths and islands of the Lower Danube; 4) the awarding of a financial compensation (indemnity) proportionate to the country's losses during the war; 5) the definitive consecration of Romania's independence and the neutralizing of its territory.<sup>577</sup> For our purposes, the first point is of special significance. The peculiarity of the Romanian stance concerning Bessarabia as expressed in the second memorandum resided in the change of rhetorical emphasis. Thus, aside from detailing the "argument from interest" addressed specifically to the representatives of the "European concert," the Romanian delegates insisted to an unprecedented extent upon the "historical rights" motive usually reserved for bilateral diplomatic "skirmishes" with Russia. This discursive shift was probably meant to impress the Russian negotiators, who foresaw the potential complications and were reluctant to admit Romania's delegation to the Congress proceedings.<sup>578</sup> Kogalniceanu's presentation in fact

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<sup>576</sup> *Congres de Berlin. Actes et discours des Plenipotentiaires de S. A. le Prince de Roumanie*. Buc., 1878, p. 7

<sup>577</sup> *Congres de Berlin. Actes et discours des Plenipotentiaires de S. A. le Prince de Roumanie*. Buc., 1878, p. 7

<sup>578</sup> *Les Protocoles du Congrès de Berlin avec le traité préliminaire de San Stefano et le Traité de Berlin*, Bucharest : Official Press, 1878, p. 67. The debates sparked by the discussion of the conditions of Romanian independence is quite revealing for the alignment of opinions among the Great Powers. While the principle of territorial exchange was accepted by the majority of the plenipotentiaries, the only "dissident" opinion was expressed by (not surprisingly) the British Prime Minister, who declared to "regard with the deepest regret the provisions of article 19 of the treaty of San Stefano relative to Bessarabia." His protest was of course based upon "legal" arguments (the "letter" of the Paris Treaty) and his "fears" concerning the liberty of navigation on the Danube. The objections of his Russian counterparts centered, on the one hand, upon the distinction between the legal status of Moldavia in 1856 (which was at the time part of the Ottoman Empire) from that of the Romanian Principalities and, on the other hand, upon the importance of the retrocession as a "question of honor" (as opposed to "interest and ambition") for the

represented a systematic (if self-contained in terms of the national discourse) rebuttal of the fundamental tenets of the Russian claims on Bessarabia. His demonstration can be interpreted as an implicit response to a series of Russian arguments discussed above. The most important among these included: 1) the presumed “right of conquest” by which the Russian Empire legitimized its possession of Bessarabia. Declaring that “the partition [*morcellement*] of 1812 could not be justified by the fact or the right of conquest,” the Romanian delegate based his position on a two-pronged strategy (the repeated “conflation” of the 1812 and 1878 events is conspicuous). First, he invoked the “external” status of the Principalities at the time of both “founding moments,” arguing that “in 1812 Bessarabia depended on a Principality whose autonomy had been solemnly attested by all the treaties previously concluded between the Russian and Ottoman Empires.”<sup>579</sup> Second, as a corollary of this assertion, the Moldavian Principality acquired, under the historian’s inspired glance, a clear institutional, legal and even national identity at the time of Bessarabia’s annexation in 1812. All of this was presumably confirmed by Emperor Alexander I in the official decree sanctioning Bessarabia’s integration into the Empire;<sup>580</sup> 2) the claim of a predominantly “Tatar” historical legacy in Southern Bessarabia that rendered Russia’s “liberating” mission in the region both necessary and logical while

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Russian Empire. An additional argument invoked by Gorchakov referred to the “value of the exchange” and to Dobrudja’s superiority in comparison with Bessarabia. The Russian Chancellor remarked that the annexation of Dobrudja would entail “the augmentation of [Romania’s] territory by... 3,500 sq. km. and 80.000 souls of population” and would secure for Romania the Danube Delta, certain agricultural districts and a good commercial port on the Black Sea [Constanta]. For this polemics, see Ibidem, pp. 68-70.

<sup>579</sup> *Congres de Berlin. Actes et discours des Plenipotentiaires de S. A. le Prince de Roumanie*. Buc., 1878, p. 9

<sup>580</sup> *Congres de Berlin. Actes et discours des Plenipotentiaires de S. A. le Prince de Roumanie*. Buc., 1878, p. 9-10.

Kogalniceanu asserted : “It [Bessarbia] was thus a Romanian country, with Romanian institutions and laws, explicitly maintained by H. M. the Emperor Alexander I. This respect of the ancient nationality [sic] was formulated in the imperial decree, promulgating the administrative and judiciary organization of this province following its incorporation into Russia, without the least distinction being made between the Lower and the Upper Bessarabia.” The retrospective “reading” of national elements into the early imperial policy in Bessarabia is not unexpected given the polemical context.

depriving the “national” Romanian stance of its substance;<sup>581</sup> 3) the trope of “liberating mission” in the Balkans and the recurring memories of past military exploits that strengthened Russia’s “historical rights” in Bessarabia;<sup>582</sup> 4) the much debated reproach of “ingratitude” already laboriously refuted by the same Kogalniceanu in the earlier memoranda and treated here in the same vein of a “balance sheet” of gains and losses, of which the most significant was “the loss, to Russia’s advantage, of half of Moldavia, that is, the Bessarabia from the Prut to the Dniester.”<sup>583</sup> Bratianu added a more “pragmatic” dimension to this polemical discourse replete with historical references, pointing to the dangers that would ensue from the projected “dispossession” for the future national development of Romania as well as for the successful accomplishment of its progressive “mission” in the region.<sup>584</sup> The practical impact of these impassioned pleas was minimal, but their importance as illustrations of Bessarabia’s symbolic place within the Romanian national discourse was paramount. The 1878 controversy remained a defining moment for the later nationalist re-workings of the Bessarabian issue in the XX century and provided both the lexicon and most of the topics that were merely “recycled” in later phases. The above analysis is certainly one-sided and essentialist. Thus, it accorded pride of place to the official diplomatic discourse instead of focusing of possible alternative stances of the intellectuals and public figures

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<sup>581</sup> *Congres de Berlin. Actes et discours des Plenipotentiaires de S. A. le Prince de Roumanie*. Buc., 1878, p. 10. “One apparently wished to conclude that Bessarabia was a Turkish or Tatar region, from the simple fact that the Ottomans occupied three fortresses there. But the history of Wallachia presents an analogous anomaly: Turkish fortresses have existed there for a long time; it doesn’t result, however, that Wallachia had ever been a Turkish country.”

<sup>582</sup> *Congres de Berlin. Actes et discours des Plenipotentiaires de S. A. le Prince de Roumanie*. Buc., 1878, p. 10. “Memories of military glory and valor have been invoked to support the retrocession of Bessarabia. But, during a long series of wars, the Russian armies have distinguished themselves on plenty of battlefields, and have carried their glory as far as the walls of Adrianople. This, however, does not represent a title to the property of the Balkan region.” The impact of the recurring myth of “Russian expansionism” is scarcely veiled here.

<sup>583</sup> *Congres de Berlin. Actes et discours des Plenipotentiaires de S. A. le Prince de Roumanie*. Buc., 1878, p. 10.

<sup>584</sup> *Congres de Berlin. Actes et discours des Plenipotentiaires de S. A. le Prince de Roumanie*. Buc., 1878, p. 12. “I would simply allow myself to add, that our dispossession of a part of our heritage would mean not only a profound pain for the Romanian nation; it would also destroy any confidence in the effectiveness of treaties and in the observation both of absolute justice and of written law. The troubles [*le trouble*] that [our] belief in the future would suffer would paralyze [our] peaceful development and [our] enthusiasm [*élan*] for progress.”

opposed to the government agenda. I aimed, however, at focusing on the governmental position because of the constraints of the *Realpolitik* that operated on this level and in order to show how flexible the “national discourse” could become under its strains. Pragmatic considerations of diplomacy and “interest” accompanied the organicist and “historical” spheres of the national discourse in an “uneasy alliance” whose terms shifted as much as a result of internal oscillations as of external “irritants.” Most importantly, both the Russian and the Romanian cases should be studied in close interaction, as they responded to each other’s arguments and opened new areas of controversy. My ultimate goal was to identify the terms under which Bessarabia was integrated into the Romanian national discourse. The discussion did not follow a “diplomatic history” narrative, since it would be completely inadequate for my purposes.

The Berlin Congress, aside from confirming Romania’s independence (under certain conditions),<sup>585</sup> marked the high point of the “internationalization” of the Bessarabian question, but also induced a fundamental shift in the formulation of Romanian foreign policy up until World War I. In fact, aside from certain symbolically charged moments, like that of the anniversary of Bessarabia’s annexation in 1912, the Romanian official stance consciously avoided any kind of claims that might have been interpreted as “irredentist.” This position was clearly articulated by the same person who elaborated Romania’s foreign policy during the Russian-Romanian 1878 controversy, Mihail Kogalniceanu. In a speech held in the Romanian Parliament on September 30, 1878, on the occasion of the ratification of the Berlin Treaty, in response to a speech by D. A. Sturdza, who argued for an “intransigent” attitude towards any territorial exchange, he declared: “... what aspirations can we Romanians have? Could we harbor

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<sup>585</sup> The most important were the acceptance of the “territorial exchange” proposed by the Russian Empire, the granting of civil rights to all Romanian citizens regardless of religious confession (which provoked a fiery debate on “the Jewish question”) and the solving of certain pending financial conflicts with a number of Western (mostly German) creditors (the so-called “Strosberg affair”).



any beyond the Carpathians or beyond the Prut? Would [Mr. Sturdza] dare recommend to his country such a revolutionary policy, and can we hope to secure the future of our fatherland by such a policy? God can bend mountains and dry rivers in the future, but if we want to enter and live peacefully within the family of European states, we must... live in peace with our neighbors, the Russians and the Hungarians, by repudiating any policy of [territorial] claims beyond the Prut and the Carpathians.”<sup>586</sup> Thus, the impact of *Realpolitik* finally superseded the motive of “national dignity” that informed so much of the Romanian diplomats’ dealings with their Russian counterparts in 1878. On the other hand, the anti-Russian inflammatory rhetoric, though sporadically present before 1878, was now systematized due to the efforts of thinkers such as Eminescu and became a commonplace of Romania’s “national narrative.” This quasi-consensus was rarely broken and was only seriously questioned during World War I.

The (implicit or explicit) comparison between the importance of Southern Bessarabia and Dobrudja for the Romanian state surfaced during the early phases of the 1878 conflict, as it became apparent that a “neutral stance” of the Romanian officials and public opinion on this question was no longer possible or desirable. As is obvious from the fragmentary examples discussed above, the idea of a territorial “bargain” was squarely rejected by the Romanian authorities and press during the initial phase of the conflict. An additional example of such an attitude is offered by the debates that took place in the Romanian Parliament during late January of 1878 in the context of the adoption of the resolution reconfirming Romania’s territorial integrity. The rejection of any territorial “compensation” was motivated by the nature of the Romanian nation itself, whose “essence” would be altered in case of such an event: “The Romanians are a homogeneous nation, without any expansionist ambitions, preoccupied not to

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<sup>586</sup> Mihail Kogalniceanu. *Discursuri parlamentare* [Parliamentary Speeches]. Bucharest: Minerva, 1994, p. 142

sow tempests for the future.”<sup>587</sup> In fact, this position anticipated two of the later arguments that enriched the rhetorical arsenal of the conservative opposition. One of them claimed that Russia’s “hidden intention” lurking behind its apparently generous proposal for Dobrudja’s inclusion into Romania aimed at reclaiming this territory at a convenient time because of strategic considerations. The second was linked to the perceived “permanent threat” for the Bulgarian-Romanian relations that the contested status of Dobrudja would entail in case of a Romanian annexation of the region.

The coordinates of the discourse on Dobrudja’s role for the future Romanian development were essentially derivative from the terms in which Bessarabia’s severance from the “national body” was viewed. The image of the territory situated between the Danube and the Black Sea was thus anything but stable. While initially regarded as a barren country consisting of nothing but marshes and a few insignificant settlements on the Black Sea, mostly inhabited by a mixed Muslim and Slavic population (and thus endangering the homogeneity of the Romanian nation), the country gradually came to be seen as both materially superior to Southern Bessarabia and morally fit to become an integral part of the Romanian “heritage.” Moreover, the trope of Romania’s “civilizing mission” was invoked within an unmistakably “Orientalizing” frame of mind that turned Dobrogea into a field of the transforming designs of the Romanian nation-state. Another important feature was the “rediscovering” of the region’s historical “Romanian-ness” that provided additional arguments for the internal justification of the annexation. The motive of “European interest” that Romania had to consider was also not absent in the rhetorical arsenal used in order to integrate the new acquisition in the ideal image of the “fatherland.” In what follows, I will mostly discuss the evolving picture of the newly acquired province as it transpired,

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<sup>587</sup> Apostol Stan, *Rezistentă la raptul Basarabiei în 1878*, in: *Revista istorică*, tom. III, 1992, pp. 61-80, here p. 68

on the one hand, from a direct comparison with Bessarabia, and, on the other hand, from a broader view of Romania's role in the Balkans.

The most consistent position in the problem of Dobrogea's relative importance vis-à-vis Bessarabia emerged from the circles advocating a "Russophile" attitude. Meagerly represented in the overall intellectual life of the Romanian nation-state, this kind of texts fully "internalized" the logic of the Russian arguments presented during the controversy on Southern Bessarabia and appreciated Dobrogea's integration into Romania in terms of relative "gains and losses." One of the most interesting examples of this stance comes from a later work on Russian-Romanian relations written from a pro-Russian perspective. In this rare instance of a "counter-current" to the "mainstream" of the national narrative, Dobrogea is presented as "hardly a thing to despise," since it is "superior to Bessarabia."<sup>588</sup> In order to substantiate his claim, the author uses a whole set of material "arguments" meant to impress the reader: 1) Dobrogea's greater territorial extension and its closer association with the mouths of the Danube, where a lively and flourishing commercial activity has been developing; 2) the larger dimensions of the Black Sea coast offered by Dobrogea in comparison with Bessarabia (225 km vs. 85 km of sea littoral), as well as its more favorable geographical setting; 3) the existence of three important sea ports in Dobrogea (Sulina, Constanta and Mangalia) as opposed to none in Southern Bessarabia; 4) the region's wealth in all kinds of mineral resources and fertile soils, which clearly surpass those of Southern Bessarabia both by their number and variety; 5) the strategic and military advantages that the control of Dobrogea presents in the case of a future war and the better possibilities for constructing a solid defense line, linked to the existence of "powerful natural frontiers," while

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<sup>588</sup> Const. Calmuschi. *Relatiunile politice ale Tarilor Romane cu Rusia*. Galati: Tipografia Buciumul Roman, 1911, p. 288

those of Southern Bessarabia are both uncertain and indefensible.<sup>589</sup> Significantly, the “historical” argument is also present, though mostly in order to minimize the impact of Bessarabia’s “loss.” Thus, the writer emphasizes that “our rights have extended in ancient times also to Dobrogea” and that “along the Danube and in the northern part of Dobrogea there exists for a long time a numerous Romanian population,” reaching the conclusion that “the country that has been given to us is not wholly foreign.”<sup>590</sup> The combination of “strategic-material” and historical arguments even in an account poised to defend the Russian position in the “Bessarabia vs. Dobrogea” dispute shows the salience of the discourse of “historical rights” and of its pervasive influence throughout the period.

A more interesting picture emerges from several articles written by Eminescu on the problem of Dobrogea’s annexation to Romania. While his overall contribution to the articulation of the Romanian vision of Bessarabia will be analyzed elsewhere, his articles on Dobrogea represent an object in their own right and provide a cogent counter-argument both to the intransigent position of certain dissident Liberal groups advocating the refusal of the “exchange” and to the position of the government, accused by the Conservatives of duplicity and double-dealing. Eminescu’s position is discernible mainly from two articles published in the official Conservative newspaper in August 1878.<sup>591</sup> The first article represented, in fact, a reaction to the “skeptical” view of Dobrogea’s acquisition promoted by the so-called “free and independent faction” of the Liberal Party, consisting of a group of politicians based in Moldavia who, along with a number of other

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<sup>589</sup> Const. Calmuschi. *Relatiunile politice ale Tarilor Romane cu Rusia*. Galati: Tipografia Buciumul Roman, 1911, p. 288-289

<sup>590</sup> Const. Calmuschi. *Relatiunile politice ale Tarilor Romane cu Rusia*. Galati: Tipografia Buciumul Roman, 1911, p. 289

<sup>591</sup> The first article was published in the issue of August 2, 1878, while the second (explicitly named “Dobrogea’s annexation”) appeared on August 16, 1878. As is obvious, both articles represented reactions to the provisions of the Berlin Treaty. Thus, the “conciliatory” position towards Dobrogea’s inclusion into Romania espoused by Eminescu should be viewed in this context. Both articles are included in: M. Eminescu, *Basarabia* [Bessarabia] (Chisinau: Hyperion, 1991), respectively pp. 43-49 and 52-62.

political figures of the party, notably D. A. Sturdza, rejected any compromise on the “Bessarabian question.”<sup>592</sup> For our purposes, two of Eminescu’s considerations are worth emphasizing. First, contrary to his implicit opponents, Dobrogea represented for him a “barrier” to Slavic advancement much more formidable than Southern Bessarabia could ever be. Far from rejecting the substance of the “anti-Slavic” argument, he turned it on its head: “By not accepting Dobrogea, we leave... a free way for Russia in the Balkan Peninsula. Moreover, the mix and contact with the Slavic race [in Dobrogea] cannot be proven, since Dobrogea is not inhabited by Bulgarians, but for the most part by Romanians, Turks and Tatars.”<sup>593</sup> It is not the only instance when the image of Dobrogea as a “bulwark against Russian expansionism” surfaces in Eminescu’s writings. In the introduction to an earlier series of articles discussing the parallel historical “destinies” of Bessarabia and Bukovina, the same author employs the topic of Dobrogea’s “blocking” of Russia’s communication with Bulgaria.<sup>594</sup> However, he uses this argument to substantiate a totally different demonstration. In Eminescu’s own words, “Admitting the legitimacy of Russia’s interests, we do not understand how Russia [can] offer us Dobrogea in exchange [for Bessarabia], since, as soon as Dobrogea becomes a Romanian territory, the communication between Russia and Bulgaria could only be effected through our country... In any case, Russia can only grant us Dobrogea on the condition of later forcing us to give it up in her favor.”<sup>595</sup> Though the “dialectics” of the two examples is curious (and revealing), the central

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<sup>592</sup> The points that Eminescu opposed can be summarized as follows: 1. the purported “contamination” of the Romanian “Latin” race with Bulgarian elements from Dobrogea, which would eventually lead to the Romanians’ “engulfing” by the Slavic element; 2. the complications that would follow for the Romanian-Bulgarian relations and Russia’s role as an “arbiter” in the dispute, that would enhance Romania’s dependence on its eastern neighbor; 3. the necessity of maintaining a standing army in Dobrogea in order to control its “savage” populations and the increasing financial burden; 4. the further financial expenses necessary to transform the “marshy” province into a productive part of the country; 5. the possibility of Bulgarian territorial claims that could be supported by Russia at a later moment and the ensuing instability of Romanian control in Dobrogea.

<sup>593</sup> M. Eminescu, *Basarabia* [Bessarabia] (Chisinau: Hyperion, 1991), p. 45

<sup>594</sup> M. Eminescu, *Bucovina si Basarabia: Un studiu istorico-politic* [Bukovina and Bessarabia : An Historical-Political Study] (Bucharest: Editura Acad. De Inalte Studii Militare, 1991), p. 26

<sup>595</sup> M. Eminescu, *Bucovina si Basarabia*, p. 26

piece of the argument stressing the comparative strategic advantage of Dobrogea's possession for Russia is worth noticing.<sup>596</sup> The second aspect of Eminescu's demonstration is much more puzzling, however. His position represents a fascinating instance of the manipulation of "Orientalism" and suggests to what extent apparently "Orientalist" lines of argument could in fact be subverted internally. In Eminescu's hierarchy of "ethnic dangers" the Slavic element clearly took precedent over any other group, including the undoubtedly "oriental," but essentially "harmless" Turkish and Tatar population of Dobrogea. The tendency to minimize the importance of the Bulgarian (i.e., Slavic) inhabitants of the region prompted him to "exonerate" Dobrogea's Turks and Tatars from the stigma of "savagery" that transpired through the discourse of the oppositional Liberals. This rhetorical twist did not mean the abandoning of the "Orientalist" logic as such. On the contrary, Dobrogea was nothing less than a "small Orient" waiting to be cultivated by the intelligent and cautious policy of the Romanian nation-state: "To do what everybody does, that is, to take and possess [Dobrogea] through the bayonet, is an easy thing; on the contrary, to preserve this "Orient in miniature," with its entire mix of peoples, to prove that we have enough justice and enough prudence in order to hold the most diverse elements in equilibrium and in good peace is an art, is the true and real policy, in comparison to which the policy of brute force is nothing but a toy."<sup>597</sup> Romania's "mission" that was deducible from these lines rested upon the presumed moral superiority of the Romanian nation that had to invest its best qualities in the administration of Dobrogea and become a better "civilizer" than its counterparts elsewhere (the reference to the Russian Empire is almost explicit here). This "mission," however, was also fundamentally different because of the existence, in Dobrogea, of an "oxymoron" in terms of Orientalism, that is, of a "civilized Orient." The belonging of the local

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<sup>596</sup> The parallel with the considerations presented in Nelidov's abortive memorandum envisaging alternative territorial compensations for Romania is striking here.

<sup>597</sup> M. Eminescu, *Basarabia* [Bessarabia] (Chisinau: Hyperion, 1991), p. 57

Turks and Tatars to “civilization” was based on two premises: on the one hand, the specificity of their settlement patterns and economic activity and, on the other hand, the existence of “national susceptibilities” in their midst. Thus, Dobrogea’s Tatars “are not savage,” since they “are for the most part emigrants from the steppes of the Kuban... and agriculturalists who... produced significant quantities of grain for export. Those who are working for export, however, and who become producers and consumers in Europe’s general economy cannot be called savage.”<sup>598</sup> The author reinforced his claim by insisting on the flourishing urban and railway development that was purportedly initiated by the same Tatars, who are thus portrayed as quintessentially modern.<sup>599</sup> The Turks, conflated (in typically Orientalist fashion) under the same category of “Muslim population”) are nevertheless presented as both politically and nationally conscious: “With what right could we complain that our people is being divided as a silent flock, if we ourselves treated as a silent flock the parts of a people that also possesses great qualities and, especially, powerful and not entirely unfounded national susceptibilities? Or, maybe, Dobrogea’s Turks, with their magnificent military past, they, conquerors on three continents, could be regarded as a spineless herd, that doesn’t care what master rules it?”<sup>600</sup> Thus, the local Muslims, far from being exotic and “immobile,” appear as essential allies for Romania’s “civilizing project” in the Balkan “Orient.” This eccentric (even illogical) view appears very consistent once Eminescu’s attitude towards the Russian Empire as the greatest danger for the existence of the Romanian state is taken into account. Without dwelling on this point here, it is worth noting that Eminescu’s stance is not as singular in the epoch as it might seem. His argument can be inscribed in the same logic that contributed to the earlier anti-Russian “diatribes” of Ion Heliade Radulescu, who saw the reforming Ottoman Empire of the 1850s as a “lesser evil” (if not a useful ally) in

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<sup>598</sup> M. Eminescu, *Basarabia* (Chisinau: Hyperion, 1991), p. 46

<sup>599</sup> M. Eminescu, *Basarabia* (Chisinau: Hyperion, 1991), p. 46

<sup>600</sup> M. Eminescu, *Basarabia* (Chisinau: Hyperion, 1991), p. 57

comparison with stifling and constraining influence of the “despotic” Russian protectorate.<sup>601</sup> The rhetorical strategy of the Romanian publicist also contained a significant “historical” narrative meant to legitimize the Romanian control of Dobrogea. Based on a personal reconstruction of the Thracian, Roman and finally Wallachian (rather short) presence in the region, the thesis of Romanian “continuity” as locally applied to Dobrogea added a *post facto* legitimacy to the annexation sanctioned by the European congress.<sup>602</sup> The final part of Eminescu’s claims derived from the “moral superiority” motive referred to above. Romania’s position in Dobrogea was, in principle, congruent with “political morality” from two points of view. First, the Conservative journalist squarely rejected the logic of “territorial exchange” that informed the Liberal government’s “transactions” with the Russian authorities. Eminescu’s image of the Romanian nation-state as an “organic entity” naturally impelled him to protest against the view of Dobrogea as a “compensation for Bessarabia.”<sup>603</sup> Second, this region could be integrated into Romania only on the basis of a “peaceful conquest” that would thus correspond both to Romania’s “civilizing mission” and to the perceived interest of the local inhabitants, who possessed the effective “property rights” over its territory, as opposed to the Romanians’ anciently lost historical rights. The importance of the free consent of Dobrogea’s population was especially emphasized, since this represented the concrete application of the principle of national solidarity, which could alone, in Eminescu’s view, assure the success of Romania’s “mission” in the newly acquired

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<sup>601</sup> See: I. Heliade Radulescu, *Protectoratul Tarului sau Romania si Rusia: Noi documente asupra situatiei europene* (Bucharest: Cartea Romaneasca, 2002, reprint of the original edition).

<sup>602</sup> Historical accounts constitute an important part of the substance of both articles discussed here. In both cases, Eminescu proceeds from the conclusion that “from a historical point of view, our rights over Dobrogea cannot be contested” (and that in the absence of these rights the “European interest” demanding Dobrogea’s annexation would be “null and void”) in order to present his readers with condensed presentations of the province’s history. See M. Eminescu, *Basarabia* (Chisinau: Hyperion, 1991), pp. 47-48 and 58-60.

<sup>603</sup> M. Eminescu, *Basarabia* (Chisinau: Hyperion, 1991), p. 48 : “We have said from the start that there cannot be any compensations for Bessarabia, as there can never be any fee for even a small portion [*palma*] of the fatherland’s soil. These are holy things, that are lost or gained through historical circumstances, but can neither be sold, nor bought, nor exchanged.”



province.<sup>604</sup> The apparent pragmatism of these considerations derived from the link between the expression of the “national will” and the possibility of a real “merging” of the region with the “national body.” The “national will” represented the basic moral principle upon which a reconstruction of Dobrogea along modern and national lines was feasible. In its absence, the region would continue to languish in the “state of nature” that made it a “desert” and a “marshy and unhealthy,” though “fertile” piece of land.<sup>605</sup> Thus, the “cultivation” of Dobrogea entailed not so much a material component (that was certainly indispensable), but a “spiritual” investment that was attainable through a community of the “national psyche” of its inhabitants with the rest of the country. The motive of Dobrogea as a potential “danger” for the viability of the Romanian state thus resurfaced again, this time in the form of a warning rather than a threat. Eminescu’s distinction between principles of “political morality” and “state pragmatism” allowed him to present his case in ostensible terms of *Realpolitik* while in fact basing his argument upon a series of almost “metaphysical” presuppositions about the Romanian nation’s “essence” and “mission.”

Despite their political differences, the Liberals’ discourse on Dobrogea following the Berlin Congress did not significantly differ from that of Eminescu. The most important discursive shift relates to the internal evolution of the official view that was discussed above. An articulate position of the government concerning Dobrogea crystallized during the debates on the provisions of the Berlin Congress in the Romanian Parliament at the end of September 1878. I. C. Bratianu and M. Kogalniceanu presented their case as a response to the recriminations of the Conservative opposition and the accusations of the dissident Liberal faction headed by D. A. Sturdza. Aside from “recycling” the argument of the European interest on the Lower Danube that caused the Great Powers to reach a compromise on Dobrogea’s inclusion into Romania, both

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<sup>604</sup> M. Eminescu, *Basarabia* (Chisinau: Hyperion, 1991), p. 60-61. In a very interesting parallel, the principle of consent sanctioned through a referendum was illustrated through the invocation of the examples of Nice and Savoy.

<sup>605</sup> M. Eminescu, *Basarabia* (Chisinau: Hyperion, 1991), p. 62

politicians agreed on a set of advantages that the possession of the region presupposed. The most important among these involved the strategic benefits that Dobrogea presented in comparison with Bessarabia. Thus, it provided not only a “gate through which we enter directly in connection with the entire world and with the West,”<sup>606</sup> but also a breach in the “Slavic wall” that would surround the Romanian nation in case it did not take advantage of this commercial and territorial “outlet to the sea.” The image of Dobrogea evolved from a dangerous “Trojan horse” that could subvert the Romanian-Bulgarian entente to its exact opposite, becoming a bulwark against Russian (and, by extension, Slavic) “expansionism.”<sup>607</sup> Another strategic advantage that the Romanian Prime Minister emphasized referred to the “natural defenses” that guaranteed a more solid Romanian control over this region in comparison to Bessarabia: “Dobrogea is obviously endowed with a much better natural defense against all invasions than Bessarabia. Consequently, if you say that we cannot defend the freedom of the Danube without possessing Bessarabia, which is much easier to conquer, how can you claim that we cannot protect this freedom by having Dobrogea?”<sup>608</sup> Bratianu did not omit the “historical argument” from his demonstration, though it was subordinate to more “pragmatic” considerations. The “ethnic priority” of the Romanians in the region was an additional factor that de-legitimized any serious Bulgarian irredentist claims. Moreover, Bratianu made a revealing comparison between the Bulgarians from Dobrogea and those from Bessarabia. The latter appeared as both more numerous and more articulate and, thus, as a potentially greater danger for the homogeneity of the Romanian nation, that, however, was not endangered by this mutual contact. Thus, Bratianu appeased his

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<sup>606</sup> N. Georgescu-Tistu, ed. *I. C. Bratianu: Acte si cuvantari* [I. C. Bratianu. Documents and Speeches]. Vol. IV. (Bucharest : Cartea Romaneasca, 1932), p. 103-104, also p. 122.

<sup>607</sup> N. Georgescu-Tistu, ed. *I. C. Bratianu: Acte si cuvantari*, vol. IV, p. 104

<sup>608</sup> N. Georgescu-Tistu, ed. *I. C. Bratianu: Acte si cuvantari*, vol. IV, p. 121. Bratianu reinforced his point by stating: “it is incontestable, that the Bessarabia that we lose has no boundaries that could be defended... against an invasion, that it is an open field impossible to protect.” Ibidem, p. 121

colleagues' fears of an active resistance of the local population.<sup>609</sup> In a similar intervention in the Senate, Kogalniceanu concentrated mostly on the material and economic advantages that the annexation of the new province would provide. On the one hand, he emphasized the outstanding fertility of a major part of the province's territory (in stark contrast to the earlier vision of a "marshy and unhealthy desert"). On the other hand, he rejected D. A. Sturdza's assertion that viewed Dobrogea as a "nest of fevers." This "epidemiological" aspect is rather important, since it directly refers to the degree of "cultivation" (in both senses of the word) that the newly acquired territory enjoyed. In this context, Kogalniceanu invoked the example of the "Tatar agriculturalists" already used by Eminescu and spoke about the "rare energy" that these atypical "Orientals" displayed in transforming Dobrogea's "virgin land" into a cultivated soil.<sup>610</sup> Dobrogea's belonging to "civilization" was further demonstrated by the invocation of the economic productivity of the land and by the minimal efforts and financial expenses that the Romanian government would have to invest in its further development.<sup>611</sup> All these material considerations were subsumed, however, by the "mission" that the Romanian state had to turn Dobrogea into a "truly Romanian country," this being the only precondition for the fulfillment of the larger role of Romania bestowed upon it by the "European concert:" the guardianship of the mouths of the Danube. The process of Dobrogea's inclusion into the national "body" was rhetorically expressed through a lexicon of "national vitalism." This region now became not only a "moral" compensation for Bessarabia's loss, but the preferred field for the display of the Romanians' "national energy." Bratianu put it as follows: "it has been said... that, in case we take Dobrogea, we will not be able to transform it into our own land [*pamant al nostru*]. But

<sup>609</sup> N. Georgescu-Tistu, ed. *I. C. Bratianu: Acte si cuvantari*, vol. IV, p. 124

<sup>610</sup> Mihail Kogalniceanu. *Discursuri parlamentare* [Parliamentary Speeches]. Bucharest: Minerva, 1994, p. 139-140

<sup>611</sup> Mihail Kogalniceanu. *Discursuri parlamentare* [Parliamentary Speeches]. Bucharest: Minerva, 1994, p. 141. In a vein repeating Bratianu's stance almost ad litteram, Kogalniceanu insisted that Dobrogea represented "a country given to us by Europe, a country that places us in contact with Western Europe, that from the first day secures commercial advantages for us ...". Ibidem, p. 141

these... doubts can only arise in the mind of those who do not have faith in the vitality and the nature of the Romanian nation.”<sup>612</sup> The same national framework informed Bratianu’s appeal to the “bravery of the Romanians,” who “will know how to create a free Romanian [land] from a country that had belonged to our ancestors, from a rich country that secures for us the mouths of the Danube.”<sup>613</sup> The same symbolic appropriation of Dobrogea (prefiguring its effective integration) was expressed in more eloquent terms by Kogalniceanu: “I believe that what we have to do in this situation is to surrender to Europe’s decision, to take Dobrogea, to rule it well, to make it truly ours [*sa o facem a noastra*], to make it one with Romania’s body, to make it the heritage [*patrimoniul*] of our children. From the first day, let us prove to Europe that we take it for [all the] Romanians and that we do not intend to sell it to the Bulgarians.”<sup>614</sup> Thus, Dobrogea became not only a suitable “replacement” for Bessarabia as an element of the Romanian national discourse, but also proved a welcome substitute for “nation-building” in practical terms. Aside from the diplomatic conjunctures that determined the reality of the “territorial exchange,” Dobrogea served as an appropriate moral compensation for the damage dealt to the “national prestige” by the loss of Southern Bessarabia. The official stance proved extremely flexible in realizing this symbolic “transfer” and in endowing a previously ignored region with the aura of “national destiny.” More importantly, the palpable successes achieved in the “merging” of Dobrogea with the rest of the country secured for it a place on the map of national imagination that not only Southern Bessarabia, but also Bessarabia as a whole never came close to matching before World War I.

Romania and the Russian Empire completed the formal transfer of powers by December 1878 (in a gesture that pretended to be symbolically charged, the Romanian Parliament never gave its

<sup>612</sup> N. Georgescu-Tistu, ed. *I. C. Bratianu: Acte si cuvantari*, vol. IV, p. 103

<sup>613</sup> N. Georgescu-Tistu, ed. *I. C. Bratianu: Acte si cuvantari*, vol. IV, p. 124

<sup>614</sup> Mihail Kogalniceanu. *Discursuri parlamentare* [Parliamentary Speeches]. Bucharest: Minerva, 1994, p. 142.

official consent to the cession of the Bessarabian districts in a separate act). The former “Romanian Bessarabia” (re-united into one district under the Russian administration, having its center in Ismail) retained its peculiar position within the structure of the Russian Empire, being governed internally according to the old Romanian laws and possessing a “communal” administration and a judiciary constructed on the Romanian (in fact, the French) model. The administrative and judicial reforms undertaken in the 1860s were never applied to the Ismail district, which remained an awkward reminder of a nationalizing state’s agenda in a slowly evolving imperial framework. Despite the intense debates raging up until World War I concerning the necessity of “harmonizing” the administration of the Ismail district with the rest of the Empire, no practical consequences followed. Some of the more insecure local Russian officials even voiced their apprehensions about the possibility of this region’s “estrangement” from the wider imperial economic and even cultural sphere due to its purported “orientation” towards Romania. Though these fears proved unfounded, the loyalty of the local inhabitants remained a matter of contention in a way that had not been possible before 1856. The “contested” character of this “strip of land” thus spilled over (in a rather more benign form) from the realm of discourse, rhetoric and representation into the more complex world of “reality.”<sup>615</sup>

In the Romanian case, the dilemma between the requirements of *Realpolitik* and the rhetorical accouterments of the “national discourse” provided the framework for the internal political debate sparked by the provisions of the Berlin treaty. While the Conservative opposition emphasized the moral impossibility of accepting the “mutilation of the national body” under any form, the government defended the Realpolitik approach, best exemplified by I.C. Bratianu’s declaration that “the country should have enough reason and enough patriotism to submit itself to

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<sup>615</sup> “Pravila, podlezhashchie sobliudeniui pri rassmotrenii ugovnyh i grazhdanskih del, voznikshih pri Rumynskom pravitel’sve v prisoedinennoi k Rossii po Berlinskomu traktatu chasti Bessarabii.” See ANRM, fond 2, op. 1, d. 8465.

Europe's will.”<sup>616</sup> This stance was a part of a strategy of defense of the Romanian claims that involved a dualistic discourse with reference to Russia and the European “Great Powers” assembled at the Berlin Congress. The Romanian Prime Minister again explained this in unambiguous terms during the debates in Parliament: “To Russia we presented [our case at the Congress] by means of invoking our rights [over Bessarabia] *ab antiquo*; we told her [diplomats]: Bessarabia was never yours, but ours, and you took it from us without any legal basis; [you did this] before as you are doing it now, by breaking the formal engagements that you have agreed to; whereas Europe we told that it is a European interest that Bessarabia remain in our hands.”<sup>617</sup> However, the fault lines between the two rhetorical strategies were not those of Conservative vs. Liberal political factions. The national discourse was divided internally and was expressed through a constant oscillation between the lexicons of “national dignity” and *Realpolitik*. The “reactive” nature of the Romanian position, as well as its uneasy adaptation to different “audiences,” also contributed to its unstable character. The most important conceptual shift linked to the Russian-Romanian controversy concerns the emergence of Bessarabia (paradoxically, of its southern part, which comprised the least ethnically Romanian parts of the province) as an identifiable object of the Romanian “national space.” Similarly, the analysis of the shifting discourses on the relative importance of Southern Bessarabia and Dobrogea provides an illuminating example of the ambiguities and dilemmas of the Romanian national discourse. It also points to the varied and sometimes ingenious solutions that the government and the intellectuals coined to supersede (or at least lessen) these ambiguities and dilemmas.

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<sup>616</sup> N. Georgescu-Tistu, ed. *Ion C. Bratianu. Acte si cuvantari*. [Documents and Speeches]. Vol. IV. Bucharest : “Cartea Romaneasca,” 1932, p. 115

<sup>617</sup> N. Georgescu-Tistu, ed. *Ion C. Bratianu. Acte si cuvantari*. [Documents and Speeches]. Vol. IV. Bucharest : “Cartea Romaneasca,” 1932, p. 120

## Chapter V. Three Hypostases of the “Bessarabian Refugee:” Hasdeu, Stere, Moruzi and the Uncertainty of Identity

### *1. Introduction*

The present chapter will examine the works of three Romanian intellectuals and publicists with a Bessarabian background who have left their mark (in rather different ways) upon the articulation of the Romanian visions of this area: Bogdan Petriceicu Hasdeu, Constantin Stere and Dimitrie C. Moruzi. The first two achieved prominent positions in the Romanian academic and/or political circles, while the third one languished on the margins of the Romanian bureaucracy, but nevertheless elaborated one of the most poignant and forceful written accounts of the Romanian “irredentist” stance with reference to Bessarabia. The first argument of this chapter is that each of these men embodied a certain “stage” in the Romanian “symbolic appropriation” and inclusion of Bessarabia into the “national” body politic. Thus, I identify Hasdeu with the “Romantic” period of the “search for origins” and the close interaction of history and philology that was characteristic of the earliest “national awakenings” in the European East. Conversely, Stere remained very much immersed in the populist rhetoric that shaped his experience in Russia and his later political affiliation in Romania. Finally, Moruzi was much closer to a “state-centered” nationalism and at the same time acutely aware of the importance of mass politics in the mobilization of the “nationalist agenda” (his major difference from Stere lies in the active role he envisaged for the “masses” themselves in the destruction of multinational empires, without necessarily emphasizing the importance of “enlightenment,” since for him the “world of nations” was an historical inevitability). However, I should emphasize two major qualifications to any attempt at a rigid categorization of these authors’ views according to a preordained “evolutionary scheme” of the national discourse. First, I consciously avoid using

Miroslav Hroch's interpretive framework suggested in his famous work. While admittedly useful in some cases as a means of approaching the complex issues of nation-building in Eastern and Central Europe (though certainly not in all of them), this approach fails to grasp the peculiarity of the Bessarabian case, where the region as such never became a "subject" of nation-building (even at the imagined level), but always preserved the character of a "contested space" (hence, an object) of claims on the part of larger projects of state and identity construction. Second, the ideas of the writers discussed here were both more complex and eclectic than an unproblematic "labeling" might suggest. I use the distinction between the three authors as merely an indicator of the larger intellectual and political trends that framed their opinions, and not as a constraining element that pervaded their texts at every moment. The differences in their "readings" of the place of Bessarabia within the Romanian "national narrative" and of the Russian Empire as the "quintessential Other" are, however, too obvious to ignore and, thus, call for a careful comparison of their views.

Hasdeu's contributions to the discussion of the "Bessarabian problem" should be read in the context of his implicit references to his experience as a native of Bessarabia and as a student in Russian universities, that shaped his early career in Romania in more than one respect. Even more telling are his rare pronouncements on the Russian Empire that were hardly made explicit in most of his literary or historical works or in his public role as a scholar and intellectual. We do possess, however, two instances of his writings that contribute to an assessment of his attitude towards the Russian Empire as a hostile and even "sub-human" alien environment. One of them is a short piece ostensibly devoted to a critique of Tolstoy's story "The Kreutzer Sonata," but which serves as a pretext for the elaboration of an "allegorical" image of Russia through the "animalization" of its inhabitants. This story can be read in various ways, but it clearly points to Hasdeu's predilection for the use of "biological" metaphors in order to better convey the utmost



“otherness” of the Russian “space.” His criticism of Russian “mores” transcends the social realm in order to be shifted to an “ontological” level. A later example pointing in the same direction (but with a more explicitly political thrust) is provided by a short piece in which he undertakes a thorough criticism of Russian autocracy by comparing its “universalistic” pretensions to the by then discredited claims of the Roman papacy.<sup>618</sup> Hasdeu’s views thus are more difficult to “pin down” to a common denominator, but his involvement in the assistance of Bessarabian refugees as well as the ambiguity of his “status” in Romanian academia made him a central figure among this group. Stere’s position on the “Bessarabian question” has been determined by his active political involvement in the region both before and (especially) after the Revolution of 1905 and his much more “activist” social stance (never transcending the “populist” framework of analysis)<sup>619</sup>. Dimitrie Moruzi (a scion of the Moruzi family born in Bessarabia and later an émigré to Romania) has a special place within the “triad” discussed here. A mediocre writer of novels and short stories, supported (intellectually and financially) by Nicolae Iorga, he made his literary debut at the age of 55 (in 1905) with a brochure on “Russians and Romanians”<sup>620</sup> and later published several novels represented (by the author) as “monographs” of the Bessarabian society. In his above-mentioned booklet and in a series of articles on the “contemporary situation of Bessarabia” (presumably in the early XX century), Moruzi draws a picture of Bessarabia that curiously mingles elements of “national characterology,” personal impressions, political and social criticism and results in a clear argument in favor of the Romanian irredentist claims and in prophetic generalizations about the incoming triumph of nationalities in their struggle with the multinational empires. Curiously neglected at the time of their writing, despite Iorga’s insistent

<sup>618</sup> B.P. Hasdeu. *Papa de la Neva* [The Neva Pope]. Bucharest, 1901.

<sup>619</sup> Stere’s most interesting works from which his particular “image of Bessarabia” emerges include his (partly) autobiographical novel “In preajma revolutiei” and, especially, the collection of his polemical articles written during World War I and grouped under the title “Marele Razboi si politica Romaniei” (Bucharest, 1918), esp. ch. III.

<sup>620</sup> Recently published in a new edition as: Dumitru C. Moruzi. *Rusii si romanii*. Chisinau, 2001.

promotion, these works amount to one of the most coherent (if not too sophisticated) applications of the Romanian “national discourse” on Bessarabia prior to World War I. Moruzi adds a new (politically conservative but nationalistically assertive) dimension to the not too rich edifice of the Romanian early-XX century “visions” of Bessarabia.

The different (but compatible) visions of Bessarabia exhibited by the “triad” in question are but one major aspect of their substantive contributions to the Romanian national narrative. A much larger topic that underlay the construction of Bessarabia’s image concerned the interpretation of Russian “reality” in its broader and general features. In a sense, one can distinguish between *two* separate yet closely interconnected “*objects*” of these authors’ *perception*: Bessarabia proper and the Russian Empire, which represented the wider (and alien) environment into which the region was thrust due to the machinations of international diplomacy. Russia, in fact, constituted a fascinating and distorting mirror that reflected their frustrations and designs on Romania’s future development. The depiction of Romania’s giant eastern neighbor as a quintessential “other” allowed them to gloss over the similarities between the two societies (that did not escape the gaze of the less emotional Russian observers) and also to consolidate a vision of the “national self” built in explicit opposition to an “Asiatic” and menacing foreign force. The motive of *Orientalism*, more or less metaphorically construed (ranging from Hasdeu’s ironic “biological” analogies to Moruzi’s much less veiled condemnation of Russian despotism and to Stere’s overtly political analysis) could not be absent from the picture. The various visions of the Russian Empire articulated by the three authors were thus more relevant for their political differences than for any purported social or political reality from beyond Romania’s eastern borders.

A second argument centers upon the “psychological” dimensions of the phenomenon of the “Bessarabian refugee” and emphasizes the multiplicity and uncertainty of personal (and group)

identity of these émigrés in the Romanian context. A fruitful theoretical framework that might be applied in this case derives from the concept of “stigma,” elaborated first by Erving Goffman<sup>621</sup> and adapted to the Romanian case by the insightful analysis of Sorin Antohi, who extensively uses the notion of “ethnic stigma” to discuss some of the most compelling and long-standing images of Romanian “self-negativity” articulated in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>622</sup> In the case of the phenomenon of the “Bessarabian émigré,” one can hardly invoke the general meaning of “ethnic stigma” as a profoundly negative and traumatizing self-image. Ostensibly, the three authors discussed here exhibited an optimistic and “progressive” vision of the nation. However, on the personal level the marginalization of the Bessarabian-born national “ideologues” displays most characteristic features of a stigma. It is important to remember that stigma “always depends on a relational ensemble, on a background of values and connotations.”<sup>623</sup> The marginal status of the concerned intellectuals derived from their imperfect integration into the Romanian “body national.” One can thus suggest a peculiar case of “regional stigma” that was present, in different forms, in all three instances. The marker of the problematic identity of the Bessarabians derived from their association with the menacing world of “Russian-ness,” which condensed their foreignness.

Hasdeu had, perhaps, the most complicated relationship to his Russian experience and sought to transcend his stigmatized status by completely identifying himself with the cause of “Romanianism” and by claiming the priority of the most unequivocally “Romanian” region of Oltenia within his national hierarchy. Stere, however, managed to convert his marginal status in the Russian Empire (as a political convict) into a source of self-legitimization in the Romanian

<sup>621</sup> Erving Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (London: Penguin Books, 1990).

<sup>622</sup> Sorin Antohi, *Civitas imaginalis: Istorie și utopie în cultura română* [Civitas Imaginalis: History and Utopia in Romanian Culture]. (Iasi: Polirom, 1999), esp. the essay “Cioran și stigmatul românesc. Mecanisme identitare și definiții radicale ale etnicității,” pp. 235-324.

<sup>623</sup> Antohi, p. 249

context. His case is also emblematic for the ultimate failure of this strategy, since he was constantly perceived as a threat to the political system due to his “foreign roots,” frequently in starkly psychological terms. Stere also used the rhetorical device of self-stigmatization during the wartime polemics with his political opponents. However, the limits of applying the notion of “ethnic stigma” to the present case are also apparent. As Antohi emphasizes, ethnic stigma in the Romanian context pertains to an “extreme [version] of the Westernizing current” and represents “the negative copy of the litany of ethno-national ego.”<sup>624</sup> Moreover, the Westernizers were those who claimed the “discursive monopoly of ethnic stigma” and therefore “repressed almost any positive reference to their own nation.”<sup>625</sup> If anything, our three nation-builders were on the opposite side of the intellectual spectrum. Even Stere, who was, arguably, the best placed to contest the triumphalist national narrative from within, eventually succumbed to its logic and rhetoric. Thus, the “ethnic stigma” worked here mostly on the personal level and gave birth to a series of compensatory strategies that shaped their images of themselves and their relationship to the nation, but did not lead to the articulation of a full-fledged picture of national or regional negative self-images.

All three of the authors discussed above experienced some kind of “marginality” in the Romanian establishment that shaped their political affiliations and literary preoccupations. Hasdeu’s ambiguous position vis-à-vis the Russian regime is one case in point. Though ostensibly (and probably sincerely) highly critical of Russian society and government, he nevertheless was rather reserved when his personal interests or scholarly prestige were affected (e.g., the unclear legal status of Hasdeu in Russia, including the dubious circumstances of his emigration to Romania, or his acceptance of membership in the St. Petersburg Academy of

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<sup>624</sup> Antohi, p. 268

<sup>625</sup> Antohi, p. 294

Sciences). In the same vein, Stere's ambiguous political position (enhanced after World War I, but visible before) or Moruzi's unsuccessful efforts to integrate in the Romanian social fabric, arguably, indicate the persistence of a "stigma" (real or perceived) that structured the discourse of these persons. I will attempt to discuss this issue without over-emphasizing the psychological dimensions, but by paying more attention to the interplay of social, cultural, political and biographical factors that contributed to the peculiar character of the position of these émigrés in Romania. The intertwining of their discourse on Bessarabia with the criticism of the contemporary Romanian society deserves, in my view, more attention than it has been previously granted, and such an approach might provide useful insights, if not a complete explanation. While not ignoring other prominent personalities from the émigré group (such as Zamfir Rally Arbore) or other accounts of less widely known authors from the "Old Kingdom," I believe that a focus on the works of the authors examined above provides a consistent image of an important layer of the Romanian national discourse concerning Bessarabia and introduces previously unexplored topics and variations into its overall dynamics.

## ***2. Hasdeu or the Romantic Nationalist***

The intellectual tradition inaugurated (or continued) by Bogdan Petriceicu Hasdeu is fundamental for the Romanian national discourse not so much due to an inordinate focus on Bessarabia, but because of his "radical transformation of nationalism and liberalism as ideological frameworks of Romanian political thinking."<sup>626</sup> In strictly political terms, Hasdeu is very difficult to pin down to the dominant "liberal" and "conservative" tendencies in late-XIX century Romania. In a recent work, it is rightly emphasized that "Hasdeu in political and cultural terms continued the romantic-liberal heritage" (commonly labeled in Romanian historiography as

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<sup>626</sup> Balazs Trencsenyi, "National Characterology in the Romanian Political Discourses of the Nineteenth Century" (unpublished paper presented at the *We the People* project workshop on November 11-12, 2005), p. 25

“*pașoptism*”), but, at the same time, turned this intellectual legacy into “a more directly ethnicist direction.”<sup>627</sup> The Bessarabian-born thinker is also very important for the articulation of one of the most poignant visions of the Romanian “national character,” based on the intertwining and the re-interpretation of the connections between “the political projects, the historical narratives and the normative discourse of the “national self.”<sup>628</sup> As the same author stresses, “Hasdeu’s example is also paradigmatic for the complex processes of cultural transfer characterizing the emerging national ideologies of East-Central and South-Eastern Europe.”<sup>629</sup> The issue of “cultural transfers” in Hasdeu’s case is crucial for the understanding of the mechanisms that influenced the context in which the “national discourses” competing for preeminence with the imperial ones came to the fore. In fact, the intellectual environment of the Russian Empire had a clear impact on young Hasdeu’s frame of mind, despite his later energetic disclaimers meant to prove that his “Russian experience” left no mark upon him. His assertions that no teacher at the Harkov University (which he attended before emigrating to the Romanian Principalities in 1857) has influenced him in any way or that he “considered all of them to be enemies only because they were Muscovites”<sup>630</sup> are meant to strengthen his credentials as a staunch nationalist even in his early youth. This persistent denial of any intellectual debts to his “pre-Romanian” period also served psychological, “compensatory” functions, in his struggle for consecration in the Romanian intellectual milieu, where he was periodically accused of “Russophilia.”

Several aspects concerning Hasdeu’s intellectual and academic career in Romania should be clarified in order to situate him in the epoch’s environment and to assess his place within the

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<sup>627</sup> Balazs Trencsenyi, *National Characterology in the Romanian Political Discourses of the Nineteenth Century*, p. 25.

<sup>628</sup> Balazs Trencsenyi, *National Characterology in the Romanian Political Discourses of the Nineteenth Century*, p. 25.

<sup>629</sup> Balazs Trencsenyi, *National Characterology in the Romanian Political Discourses of the Nineteenth Century*, p. 26.

<sup>630</sup> E. Dvoicenco, *Inceputurile literare ale lui B. P. Hasdeu* [B. P. Hasdeu’s Literary Beginnings], Bucharest, 1936, p. 24.

Romanian national narrative. The traditional perspective on Hasdeu's intellectual trajectory emphasizes his evolution from a purely "Romantic" period, comprising his early years, first in Iasi and then in Bucharest (roughly between 1858/1860 and 1872), followed by a more pragmatic, "scientific" tendency that dominated his scholarly output between roughly 1872 and 1886. Following a series of professional and personal crises in the late 1880s, Hasdeu finally succumbed to a "spiritualist" infatuation with the paranormal that led to an increasing personal and academic isolation and gave birth to the myth of an imposing but solitary figure whose "genius" remained too unsystematic and self-centered to yield any significant long-term results.<sup>631</sup> This "fragmentation" of Hasdeu's contribution to Romania's cultural evolution neglected not only certain underlying continuities of his national vision, but also his role as a public figure and leader of one of several major currents struggling to dominate Romania's intellectual scene in this period.

The "revisionist" reading of Hasdeu was initially undertaken by the interwar generation of right-wing Romanian intellectuals and found its embodiment in the critical edition published by Mircea Eliade in 1937.<sup>632</sup> Eliade's "reconstruction" of Hasdeu's significance is based on two premises that the editor develops in his lengthy and highly personal preface. The re-appropriation of this "forgotten" author appeared necessary, first, in his hypostasis as a nationalist "prophet" and thinker and, second, due to the "universal" relevance of Hasdeu's work, that displayed a remarkable holistic and "magical" intuition of the world which no other Romanian writer ever

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<sup>631</sup> This image was successfully and insistently propagated by Nicolae Iorga, who was one of Hasdeu's main rivals on the arena of nationalist politics in Romania in the final years of the XIX century. As recent investigations have shown, Iorga's relationship with Hasdeu was neither as univocal nor as uncompromising as is customarily believed. Hasdeu's influence on Iorga will be discussed later.

<sup>632</sup> B. P. Hasdeu, *Scriseri literare, morale si politice* (Mircea Eliade, ed.). [Literary, Moral and Political Writings]. Bucuresti: 1937.

equaled.<sup>633</sup> Hasdeu is also interesting for the interwar nationalist tradition in connection with the “encyclopedic” character of his work and with the widely comparative method that he used in his philological and historical treatises. Stemming from the tendency to put Romanian culture “on a par” with the European tradition, so important for the 1930s “generation,” the monumentality of Hasdeu’s intellectual legacy seemed an appropriate starting point for the infusion of this culture with the “universalism” that it lacked.<sup>634</sup>

Beyond and above this partial re-evaluation in a nationalist and “universal-comparative” key, the main point of interest in this case is Hasdeu’s position within the contemporary intellectual debates. A close analysis of his impact upon Romania’s “public spirit” has only been attempted during the last several years. In this sense, it would be appropriate to speak about an emerging “second revisionist” view of Hasdeu as a public intellectual, timidly inaugurated two decades ago<sup>635</sup> and drawn to its logical conclusion by two monographs elaborated by the Cluj historian Ovidiu Pecican.<sup>636</sup> The main thrust of the “revisionist” argument rests, first, on a full-fledged rehabilitation of Hasdeu’s role as a mainstream nationalist thinker along the lines of the tradition inaugurated by the 1848 generation and, second, on the attempt to prove the existence of a nationalist current based in Bucharest with Hasdeu at its helm that was opposed both to the critically minded “Junimist school” and to the emerging social-democratic circles grouped around the *Contemporanul* review and headed by Constantin Dobrogeanu-Gherea. The implications of

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<sup>633</sup> M. Eliade, *Despre Eminescu și Hasdeu* [Concerning Eminescu and Hasdeu], ed. By Mircea Handoca, Iasi: Junimea, 1987, p. 59-104. In his concluding remarks, Eliade forcefully reiterates this point: “By restoring the Romantic vision to its true axis- that of magic,- Hasdeu is not only our most profound Romantic, but he is also one of the most significant figures of European Romanticism. After Novalis, he is the only one who had such a perfect and coherent magical intuition of the world.” In the context of the “totalizing” and irrational tendencies amply represented in the thought of the European right in the 1930s, Eliade’s interpretation is hardly surprising.

<sup>634</sup> M. Eliade, *Despre Eminescu și Hasdeu* [Concerning Eminescu and Hasdeu], ed. By Mircea Handoca, Iasi: Junimea, 1987, p. 59-60.

<sup>635</sup> V. Goia, *B. P. Hasdeu și discipolii săi* [B. P. Hasdeu and His Disciples], Junimea : Iasi, 1987.

<sup>636</sup> O. Pecican, *Hasdeenii: O odisee a receptării* [The „Hasdeu School:” An Odyssey of Reception], Cluj: Grinta, 2003 and Ovidiu Pecican, *B. P. Hasdeu istoric*, [B. P. Hasdeu as an Historian], Cluj: Casa Cartii de Stiinta, 2004.



this re-writing of Romania's late-XIX century intellectual history are fundamental, since Hasdeu's transformation from a solitary and eccentric figure into one of Romania's main "nation-builders" goes against the grain of the "received wisdom" according to which the "Junimea" circle dictated the tendencies and norms of the country's scholarly and literary standards up to the early XX century, representing the formative framework for such "prophets" of Romanian nationalism as Eminescu and Iorga.

Contrary to this view, Pecican goes as far as arguing that "[The "Hasdeu school"] dominated Romanian public life of the last decades of the XIX century with respect to the success of their reception. Their combined nationalist and scholarly undertakings served as a "guide" in the most delicate questions of the [Romanian] kingdom's development. With regard to this state of affairs, both *Junimea* and *Contemporanul* represented formidable reactions, -through their constant criticism, through the quality of their collaborators, through the alternatives they suggested- but mere reactions nonetheless."<sup>637</sup> If one is to draw a "line of succession" that would restore Hasdeu's appropriate stature within the Romanian intellectual realm of the period, his "school" could be represented as the "link" between the liberal nationalism of 1848 (epitomized by such figures as Nicolae Balcescu<sup>638</sup> in the sphere of scholarship or I.C. Bratianu, M. Kogalnicanu and C. A. Rosetti in that of politics) and the "integral nationalism" of the early XX century to be found in the "samanatorist" doctrine of Nicolae Iorga. In one of Mircea Eliade's astute remarks, even Eminescu (despite his conservative credentials and his open affiliation to the "Junimea") is reclaimed for the nationalist tradition embodied in the above-mentioned figures and is thus

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<sup>637</sup> O. Pecican, *Hasdeenii: O odisee a receptării* [The „Hasdeu School:” An Odyssey of Reception], Cluj: Grinta, 2003, p. 160

<sup>638</sup> A detailed and cogent analysis of Hasdeu's intellectual "relatedness" to Balcescu is to be found in O. Pecican's work. Pecican squarely rejects the opinion stressing Balcescu's direct "influence" on Hasdeu and postulates an intellectual affinity that is to be traced to common sources and preoccupations rather than to a direct "encounter." He concludes that Balcescu's "influence" on Hasdeu is, at best, a "minor" one. See Ovidiu Pecican, *B. P. Hasdeu istoric*, [B. P. Hasdeu as an Historian], pp. 56-63

implicitly included within Hasdeu's sphere of influence (if not directly into his "school").<sup>639</sup> Though this categorization derives mostly from a retrospective construction of a "national canon" that favored continuity instead of rupture, it points to the radicalization of the "national narrative" and to the importance of "autochthonist," xenophobic and anti-Semitic features in Hasdeu's doctrine that separated him from the Liberal mainstream. Hasdeu's political radicalism was, however, never matched by a corresponding social emphasis, a fact which created the potential for a conservative re-working of his theses that was successfully accomplished by Eminescu and, to a lesser degree, by Iorga.

The intellectual trajectory that Hasdeu pursued after his emigration to Romania was hardly a smooth one. Spending the first five years of his Romanian period in Iasi (1858-1863), he subsequently moved to Bucharest, where his academic and journalistic career reached its apex between 1868 and the early 1890s. The personal feuds with Titu Maiorescu, the leader of the "Junimea" circle (which did not fully crystallize until 1866), as well as Hasdeu's negative attitude toward the cultural trends emerging in Moldavia's former capital, all dated from the early 1860s.<sup>640</sup> His failure to integrate in the Iasi intellectual environment, as well as the public scandals involving several of his scholarly and literary productions in this period<sup>641</sup> should also

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<sup>639</sup> M. Eliade, *Despre Eminescu si Hasdeu* [Concerning Eminescu and Hasdeu], ed. By Mircea Handoca, Iasi: Junimea, 1987, p. 61

<sup>640</sup> In this context, Pecican addressed the problem of the emergence of the "Junimea" current as an expression of the "cultural frustration" experienced by the Iasi establishment after the downgrading of the city's political importance in the 1860s. While the wider implications of Pecican's thesis seem doubtful, a certain "frustration" in Hasdeu's case is clearly identifiable. See O. Pecican, *Hasdeenii: O odisee a receptării* [The „Hasdeu School:” An Odyssey of Reception], pp. 189-191

<sup>641</sup> I of course do not aim at over-emphasizing the "personal" factor as an explanatory tool, but the link between Hasdeu's personal and professional mishaps of the "Iasi period" and his later rabid (and unsubstantiated) attacks against "Junimea" cannot be ignored. The persistent accusations of "cosmopolitanism" leveled at Maiorescu and his collaborators are not unrelated to the resentment felt by Hasdeu towards the Iasi intellectuals and Maiorescu personally. The public outrage was caused, first, by Hasdeu's article *Perit-au dacii?* [Did the Dacians Perish?], published in 1860, where he developed a virulent attack on the dominant "Latinist" theory. Hasdeu was forced to abandon his article halfway because of the protests. Second, the publication of a short novel (partly inspired by Russian Romantic influences) led to the official accusation of "immorality" and ended in a lawsuit. Despite his acquittal, Hasdeu lost the chair he held in Iasi. In this context, he was also accused of a veiled "Russophilia" and

be considered as a significant factor that intensified his resentment towards the Moldavian-based “critical” current and his open bias towards the Wallachian intellectual milieu. This early period is also significant for Hasdeu’s peculiar strategy on the contemporary intellectual scene, which consisted in the creation of his own periodicals without a direct political affiliation. It must be emphasized, however, that Hasdeu was much less successful institutionally than his “Junimist” rivals in forging a “circle” akin to the Iasi group which gravitated around the *Convorbiri Literare* journal.<sup>642</sup>

Hasdeu’s career fully developed only after his moving to Bucharest in 1864. The problem of the “aggregation” of the nationalist current based in Bucharest and guided by Hasdeu thus can be of any scholarly interest only after the consolidation of his position in Bucharest and the publication of his major work from the early “Romantic” period, the monograph *Ioan Voda cel Cumplit* [John the Terrible] (1865). In a slightly apologetic vein, Ovidiu Pecican indicates the above date as the moment when Hasdeu “acquired an important position in Romania’s cultural life, having the advantage of espousing a set of firm political attitudes. These can be summarized under the labels: unionism [i.e., support for the union of the Principalities-A.C.], nationalism, anti-Semitism and a pro-Cuza [pro-government] attitude.”<sup>643</sup> This convoluted phrase indicates, in fact, some of the major continuities in Hasdeu’s thinking (his rejection of any kind of “localism,” his xenophobic and liberal tendencies) that were also characteristic for his “school,” in general. A more sober assessment insists upon “three important moments [that] distinguish the creation of

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“separatist” designs (due to the title of one of his journals, *Din Moldova* [From Moldavia], which he later changed into *Lumina* [The Light]). Thus, his marginality in the Romanian context was rhetorically (if not actually) enhanced.

<sup>642</sup> Hasdeu’s journalistic activity in his early period led to the publication of a series of short-lived journals which he wrote almost single-handedly: *România* [Romania] (Dec. 1858- Jan. 1859); *Foaia de storia română* [Review of Romanian History] (1859); *Foiþa de istorie și literatură* [Historical and Literary Leaflet] (March- July 1860) and, most importantly, *Din Moldova/ Lumina* [From Moldavia/ The Light] (1862-1863). All these publications, though ephemeral, had an “encyclopedic” character and displayed both Hasdeu’s eclecticism and his “monumental” plans. Details in: Liviu Marian, *Activitatea publicistică a lui B. P. Hasdeu* [B. P. Hasdeu’s Journalistic Activity], Chisinau, 1932, esp. pp. 4-10.

<sup>643</sup> O. Pecican, *Hasdeenii: O odisee a receptării* [The „Hasdeu School:” An Odyssey of Reception], p. 168

Hasdeu's group: 1869-1870, when the scholar becomes president of the "Românismul" Society and gathers his first adherents; 1873, when they are joined by the journalists of the *Contemporary Review*, headed by V. A. Urechia; and, finally, 1887, when the *Revista Nouă* [The New Review] is launched and the group is completed with the last disciples."<sup>644</sup> The major problem that persists in identifying the exact profile of the current formed under Hasdeu's patronage is not connected so much with his own contribution, but rather with the intellectual quality of his "disciples," most of them minor figures in the late XIX century context. The Bucharest "core" of his followers consisted of diverse intellectual profiles, including historians (G. Tocilescu, G. I. Ionnescu-Gion), linguists and philologists (L. Saineanu, N. Apostolescu, I. Barbulescu), folklorists and ethnographers, political journalists that embraced a nationalist credo and put themselves in opposition to the "Junimist" tendency.<sup>645</sup>

Hasdeu's image as a solitary and overwhelming personality derived, to a significant extent, from the unequal scholarly output and the lack of an organized nucleus of the group (in the guise of a stable periodical or a "circle" structure). The largely informal character of Hasdeu's current does not invalidate the claim of its fundamental role in the shaping of the national narrative of the Romanian intellectuals. The period comprised between the late 1860s and the early 1890s witnessed a constant competition for preeminence within the Romanian public sphere, in which Hasdeu played the part of an impressive (if at times awkward) "establishment thinker" of the Liberal camp. The radical nationalist tendencies visible in much of his work made him inappropriate for a "transfer" to the political realm, but his anti-aristocratic and "populist" pronouncements clearly differentiated him from contemporary conservatives. There was a peculiar "division of intellectual labor" between the "Junimist" penchant for literary criticism and

<sup>644</sup> V. Goia, *B. P. Hasdeu și discipolii săi* [B. P. Hasdeu and His Disciples], Junimea : Iasi, 1987, p. 18

<sup>645</sup> V. Goia, *B. P. Hasdeu și discipolii săi* [B. P. Hasdeu and His Disciples], Junimea : Iasi, 1987, p. 17

philosophical meditation and the historical-philological thrust of the “Hasdeu school.” The fascination with the national past and the “constant emotion” that Hasdeu and his epigones perceived when approaching this uncharted field were as much a reflection of the “Romanticism” that pervaded their worldview as of the continuity with the 1848 generation’s priorities that they assumed as their own.

The transition from Hasdeu’s “school” to the early XX century nationalist current dominated by Nicolae Iorga is another contentious point. After focusing on his academic activity and attempting to re-enter politics (which he abandoned in the early 1870s)<sup>646</sup> for a brief period in the middle 1880s, Hasdeu re-launched his “cultural offensive” through the most significant publication that he patronized- *Revista Noua* (1887-1895). This journal represented the most serious attempt to form an organized “circle” of like-minded intellectuals grouped under his aegis. Despite the initial success of the project, the early 1890s witnessed Hasdeu’s gradual retirement from the public arena into a self-imposed seclusion caused as much by personal reasons (the death of his only daughter) as by the increasing competition in the field of nationalist politics. The effective disappearance of the current under his leadership was signaled by the journal’s suspension in 1895, followed by his gradual retirement from the public functions he held.<sup>647</sup>

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<sup>646</sup> The apex of Hasdeu’s implication in national politics coincided with the turbulent period between 1866 and 1871, when Romania’s emerging political system found itself in a state of instability and acute crisis. In this interval, Hasdeu founded two of his most important “political” journals- *Traian* [Trajan], which appeared from March 1869 until February 1870, and *Columna lui Traian* [Trajan’s Column] (1870-1883), which started as an politically oriented publication, but gradually assumed a scholarly character. The transformation was definitive by the mid- 1870s. This transition coincides with the most fruitful period in Hasdeu’s scholarly output, characterized by “positivist” tendencies and resulting in large-scale projects, the most revealing example being his unfinished *Istoria critică a românilor* [A Critical History of the Romanians] (1873-1875). Hasdeu’s political credo, which he defined as a “national-democratic” program, was summarized in the slogan “Romanianism in democracy, democracy in Romaniansm.”

<sup>647</sup> Thus, in 1897 the Romanian Academy suspended Hasdeu’s project of elaborating a complete philological dictionary of the Romanian language, in 1899 he left the directorship of the National Archives, a post he had held since 1876, and in 1900 he vacated his university chair. For details, see V. Goia, *B. P. Hasdeu si discipolii sai* [B. P. Hasdeu and His Disciples], Junimea : Iasi, 1987, p. 64

Hasdeu's intellectual posterity, despite the apparent "sterility" of his scholarly and militant nationalist activity, had a clear impact upon the early XX century integral nationalism professed by N. Iorga. It has been rightly emphasized that "even on the ideological level, the ideas of nationality, "Romanianism," cultural and political unity, that Hasdeu and his disciples borrowed from the preceding [1848] generation, are continued, in a new context, by Iorga and the other militants grouped in the "League for Cultural Unity."<sup>648</sup> Along the same lines, O. Pecican suggests a direct continuity between Hasdeu's and Iorga's "Romantic" vision of history, but also between certain emphases in their nationalist doctrines, among which the veneration for "national origins," the idealization of the peasantry or the pronounced anti-Semitism of both authors stand out. This analysis, however convincing, fails to address the question of the phases of development of Romanian nationalist thought and does not clarify to what extent these commonalities can be traced to a continuity as opposed to the immersion in a similar discursive field that could better explain the perceived "common ground."<sup>649</sup> The most important conclusion that emerges from the examination of the late period of Hasdeu's activity amounts to the identification of a "transition period" (roughly between 1891 and 1906) that marked the transformation of the Liberal-inspired and "Romantic" stance that dominated the positions of the "Hasdeu school" into a more conservative (though not less radical, in nationalist terms) vision of nationhood advocated by Iorga and his supporters.

The identification of "Romantic" elements in Hasdeu's vision of the Romanian "national self" may prove problematic, not only due to the notoriously unclear definition of the "Romantic current," but also to the peculiarity of the intellectual context in which he was educated in his youth. According to the pertinent remarks of the Romanian historian Ovidiu Pecican, "the

<sup>648</sup> V. Goia, *B. P. Hasdeu si discipolii sai* [B. P. Hasdeu and His Disciples], Junimea : Iasi, 1987, p. 68

<sup>649</sup> O. Pecican, *Hasdeenii: O odisee a receptării* [The „Hasdeu School:” An Odyssey of Reception], pp. 209-227

Romanian historiographic tradition that served as an inspiration for Hasdeu during the period of his school instruction was, undoubtedly, a peripheral one, even in comparison with the historical writing of the Romanian Principalities.”<sup>650</sup> The “peripheral” or “marginal” character of Hasdeu’s early scholarly sources and influences (in a Romanian context) turned out to be both an advantage and a liability for his later academic career in Romania. In this sense, the Russian “Romantic” literary models, but also the controversies between Slavophiles and Westernizers raging in the Russian intellectual circles in the mid-XIX century must be taken into account<sup>651</sup>. One can probably agree with Pecican’s conclusion that Hasdeu “was and remained to the end of his life, fundamentally, a Romantic.”<sup>652</sup> However, his Romanticism was conditioned by several factors (primarily biographical, but also philosophical) that made him somewhat atypical in the contemporary Romanian milieu.

First, the prevailing influence exercised by his father, Alexandru Hajdeu, must be emphasized. A. Hajdeu’s personality displayed many features of the “Romantic type,” including a drive towards universality and intellectual polymorphism that was even more pronounced in his son’s case. Thus, Mircea Eliade’s intuition of a “Romanian encyclopedic tradition,” of which B.P. Hasdeu was, arguably, one of the first representatives, can be linked to the “Romantic typology” that characterized many of the Eastern European public intellectuals of the XIX century. Second, the philosophical sources of Hasdeu’s thinking were fundamental for assessing his vision of “national characterology” and the role of “otherness” in this construction. In this context, Pecican states: “Similarly to a number of Romantic historians, the ideas provided by pre-Romantic philosophers (Vico, Herder) or by the German philosophical Romanticism (Hegel, Fichte,

<sup>650</sup> Ovidiu Pecican, *B. P. Hasdeu istoric*, [B. P. Hasdeu as an Historian], p. 14

<sup>651</sup> E. Dvoicenco, *Inceputurile literare ale lui B. P. Hasdeu* [B. P. Hasdeu’s Literary Beginnings], Bucharest, 1936, p. 14-15

<sup>652</sup> Ovidiu Pecican, *B. P. Hasdeu istoric*, [B. P. Hasdeu as an Historian], p. 45

Schelling, Schlegel) functioned, in Hasdeu's case, as a general framework that proved to be flexible enough in order to... become adapted to later [intellectual] acquisitions.”<sup>653</sup>

This variety of references led, however, to a constant tension in Hasdeu's vision of nationhood. It was “based on the imperative that the real love of humankind was to promote one's own ethnic community (“*propria sa gente*”) [and] thus tried to bring together the Vicoian-Herderian and the Hegelian construction- harmonizing particularism with universal progress.”<sup>654</sup> Hasdeu's oscillation between “universalism” and “particularism” is hard to decipher, especially because his later appropriation by the inter-war thinkers was highly selective and consciously downplayed the factor of “progress” that Hasdeu was never ready to abandon altogether. This ambiguity, however, did not mean that the two parts of the equation of the development of human society were equivalent in Hasdeu's mind. His preferences are made explicit in a series of speeches that he gave in the late 1860s and the early 1870s at the meetings of the “*Românismul*” Society, whose president he was elected in 1869.

His concept of *Românism* [“Romanianism”] is relational *par excellence*. In other words, it can only exist in opposition to the notion of “cosmopolitanism,” which, for Hasdeu, is in fact a misnomer for a “refined egoism.”<sup>655</sup> The principle of “Romanianism” is, thus, a precondition for the existence of the Romanian nation as such. Moreover, only through this principle can the “universal truths” of humankind be approached. It is not surprising, then, that Hasdeu declares the opposition between these two phenomena to be not only functional, but ontological: “Romanianism is humanity, freedom and truth... Cosmopolitanism represents egoism, slavery and

<sup>653</sup> O. Pecican, *B. P. Hasdeu istoric*, [B. P. Hasdeu as an Historian], p. 49

<sup>654</sup> B. Trencsenyi, *National Characterology in the Romanian Political Discourses of the Nineteenth Century*, p. 27-28

<sup>655</sup> B. P. Hasdeu. *Publicistică din ziarul „Traian” (1869-1870)*. [Essays and Articles from the “Traian” Newspaper. 1869-1870]. Ed. by G. Mumjiev and P. Balmuş. Chişinău: ARC, 1998, p. 257



lies!”<sup>656</sup> In one of his more virulent pronouncements on the same topic, Hasdeu offered a “metaphorical” definition of cosmopolitanism that encapsulated his nationalistic credo: “Let us therefore preserve with a fanatic jealousy this... treasure [the national principle] that the pestiferous breath of the demon of monotony could one day forever steal from us, destroying all variety in its steady progress, reducing harmony to a single tone, incarcerating light into a single ray, slaying all originality through imitation, strangulating all enthusiasm through apathy, replacing struggle with inertia and confining life to its own tomb!”<sup>657</sup> Since the progressive development of humanity is only possible through the complete manifestation of each and every one of its national components (one can again see the intertwining of Herderian and Hegelian motives here), it is only natural that the antagonism between nationalism and cosmopolitanism should be shifted to an ontological instead of a purely political level.

It is not clear to what extent the impact of the “East-East” transfers can be discerned here (any direct link with the contemporary debates in the Russian Empire would be hazardous at best). The balance between “particularistic” (national) and “universalistic” principles in Hasdeu’s thinking is gradually shifting in the direction of the former. Hasdeu’s Romanticism thus can be said to have evolved from a stance aware of the factor of “progress” to a more organicist position. While initially paying lip service to the evolutionary schemes of Henry Thomas Buckle or even Herbert Spencer, the impact of positivist or evolutionist currents on Hasdeu’s thinking is hard to assess. In fact, he was constantly confronting the various intellectual currents present in the XIX century European *Zeitgeist*. However, the basic framework of his doctrine remained essentially “Vicoian and Herderian.” One could cite, for example, the following revealing passage in which

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<sup>656</sup> B. P. Hasdeu. *Publicistică din ziarul „Traian” (1869-1870)*, p. 259

<sup>657</sup> B. P. Hasdeu, *Publicistica Politică (1858-1868)*. [Political Essays and Articles. 1858-1868]. Ed. by Stancu Ilin, Bucuresti, 2003, p. 70-71

Hasdeu attempts a reconciliation between the contemporary idea of “progress” and his pre-Romantic and Romantic intellectual sources:

Vico’s doctrine is a theory that nobody understood, not even the Italian Contoni, who, in his book *Giambattista Vico* (1864) calls Vico a “regressive” writer. In fact, nothing can be more progressive than Vico and his theory. For Vico, the entire mankind is a human-soul, not a human-body, and this human-soul is constantly reborn, becoming more and more perfect. [...] every rebirth signals a certain progress and each one of the three ages represents for Vico a concentric circle... Vico’s theory is, thus, progressive and, with regard to universal history, it is the equivalent of Christ’s theory about a single human being....<sup>658</sup>

The “providentialism” that is purportedly expressed in human history is an essential element in the overall structure of his writings. Hasdeu’s position towards the contemporary intellectual fields of Romanticism, positivism and evolutionism was underpinned by a characteristic division of the different “orders of reality” dominated by separate but interconnected principles. The thinker asserted that “a positivism based on history should be materialist, spiritualist and deist at the same time...,” since human existence and human progress are only possible through the constant and purposeful action of Providence, which represents an “intentional cause, an intelligent force, an ordering power having as its aim human progress in the future.”<sup>659</sup> On the other hand, one should not over-emphasize Hasdeu’s critical attitude towards the concept of progress. The interwar reading of his work (especially in the interpretation of Mircea Eliade) performed such a function by stressing the “instrumentality” or the secondary importance of progress for Hasdeu. Eliade thus “accentuates that Hasdeu’s vision of progress was not corresponding to the mechanistic vision of the positivist mainstream. For him, human progress was only possible, not necessary, and destiny could not be derived from merely material

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<sup>658</sup> O. Pecican, *B. P. Hasdeu istoric*, [B. P. Hasdeu as an Historian], p. 52

<sup>659</sup> M. Eliade, *Despre Eminescu si Hasdeu* [Concerning Eminescu and Hasdeu], ed. By Mircea Handoca, Iasi: Junimea, 1987, p. 101

factors.”<sup>660</sup> It is true that Hasdeu invoked the role of Providence in shaping human history, but Eliade’s perspective is clearly shaped by the messianic and anti-historicist intellectual atmosphere of the 1930s. As Balazs Trencsenyi argues, there was a “fundamental difference between the nineteenth-century late Romantic projects of national-identity building and the new nationalism of the interwar period.”<sup>661</sup> One can support the author’s conclusion that “Hasdeu’s understanding of the fusion of evolutionism and cultural relativism differed considerably from that of Eliade, who practically rejected the nineteenth-century understanding of progress which Hasdeu did share, even if critically.”<sup>662</sup> The Romantic stage of nation-building in Romania, as elsewhere, presupposed a partial formulation of elements of cultural relativism, but, even in its more radical variants, it preserved the ambiguity between particular and universal principles that essentially derived from Herder’s work.

The assessment of the extent to which the positivist and evolutionist currents mingled with Hasdeu’s Romantic and “providentialist” reading of reality is also hampered by the conflation of positivist and evolutionist tendencies under an essentialist label fundamentally opposed to the “Romantic model.” Despite his receptivity to the positivist methodology, Hasdeu never renounced his basic “Vicoian-Herderian” scheme. In a characteristic pronouncement from the mid-1870s, a period which coincided with the most “rigorous” phase of his historical writing, the scholar asserted: “We have respected in the past and we will staunchly respect in the future the experimental method, admitting as the sole basis for discussion reality and reality alone; within this reality, however, above things material [*pipaite cu degetul*], a directing omnipresent and trans-experimental force manifests itself, a force that man is not meant to *cognize*, but one that he

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<sup>660</sup> B. Trencsenyi, *National Characterology in the Romanian Political Discourses of the Nineteenth Century*, p. 32

<sup>661</sup> B. Trencsenyi, *National Characterology in the Romanian Political Discourses of the Nineteenth Century*, p. 32

<sup>662</sup> B. Trencsenyi, *National Characterology in the Romanian Political Discourses of the Nineteenth Century*, p. 32

cannot fail to *recognize*.”<sup>663</sup> In this sense, the idea of the division of reality into two spheres (the “knowable” and the “unknowable”) is borrowed from Herbert Spencer, whose “soft” variant of positivism Hasdeu preferred to the Comtean version that he was also familiar with.<sup>664</sup> For Hasdeu, national history is to be transformed into a “national pedagogy,” but strictly in the limits of the sphere of the “knowable.” Thus, Providence remains beyond human purview, as does history, whose sense cannot be apprehended by its human objects.

This distinction between “history” and “destiny” is important in order not to read elements of “ethnic ontology” into Hasdeu’s scheme. The difference between the inter-war image of the “national essence” as fundamentally a-historical and immutable and Hasdeu’s historicist vision should be kept in mind. Otherwise, even astute commentators could succumb to unsubstantiated parallels between Hasdeu’s version of Romanian continuity and (to give one example) Blaga’s image of the “Romanian space.”<sup>665</sup> No less interesting is Hasdeu’s connection to the Darwinian model and its transfer to the social realm. The organic development of the national and social entities is a “given” for Hasdeu even in his “purely Romantic” early period, but it is reinforced later in his career by his readings of Darwin. Before using his satirical acumen to “dissect” Russian society in a pseudo-Darwinian key, Hasdeu applies one of the most consistent readings along the lines of an “individual-society” parallel to contemporary Romanian society.

In a lecture elaborated in the early 1890s and attempting to present a diagnosis of the situation in late-XIX century Romania, Hasdeu starts from the premise that “nations have their ages, just as individuals do.” He then goes on to assert: “Between the individual and the species that he

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<sup>663</sup> O. Pecican, *B. P. Hasdeu istoric*, [B. P. Hasdeu as an Historian], p. 53. Hasdeu’s emphasis in original. The “force” he is talking about is, of course, divine Providence.

<sup>664</sup> A detailed analysis of Hasdeu’s “encounter” with evolutionism and positivism can be found in: O. Pecican, *B. P. Hasdeu istoric*, [B. P. Hasdeu as an Historian], p. 63-82. The most important authors that Hasdeu cited in his writings and that clearly had a major impact on his worldview are, as mentioned above, A. Comte, H. Spencer, H. Th. Buckle and, on the “evolutionist” side, Darwin and Alfred Russell Wallace. (Pecican, p. 70).

<sup>665</sup> This is the case of Ovidiu Pecican: *B. P. Hasdeu istoric*, [B. P. Hasdeu as an Historian], p. 229-236

belongs to, between ontogeny and phylogeny, as the naturalists express themselves, there is the closest connection of a parallel development,”<sup>666</sup> while directly invoking Darwin’s example of inference of the “great law of evolution of the human species” from his examining of the human embryo.<sup>667</sup> Hasdeu’s conclusion is more than revealing: “This correlation between the individual and the species is the only true and scientific ground, the only pedestal upon which the philosophy of history can and should be placed. Just like in the case of individual development, every nation, and the whole human species everywhere [pass] through the same evolutionary degrees and develop in a similar way.”<sup>668</sup> Hasdeu then employs Vico’s scheme of the “historical ages,” which he sees as an “application of Christ’s teaching” to society, in order to prove his thesis of an “infantile” stage of contemporary Romania, and concludes on a solemn note: “Christ, Vico and Darwin: these three names summarize the science of life [*stiinta vietii*].”<sup>669</sup> The evolutionist, “cyclical” and deist scheme of human history (with a particular application to the Romanian case) are here entangled in a way that points to the direction in which Hasdeu’s mature thought evolved, but also indicates the remarkable continuity with his earlier opinions. The image of society as an organism thus achieved its full representation in a powerful synthetic view. National history played a central role in Hasdeu’s classification of the “life sciences” (in the sense of “humanities”), but he remained too anchored in the XIX century idiom of universal progress to elaborate the concept of a specifically Romanian scholarship.

As stated above, Bessarabia was not a central building block in Hasdeu’s scheme of national history. The hierarchy of symbolic geographies in his work has been recently deciphered by Ovidiu Pecican. In the opinion of this author, the attention of the scholar was mainly

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<sup>666</sup> B. P. Hasdeu, *Scieri filosofice* [Philosophical Writings], ed. By Vasile Vetisanu (Bucharest: Editura Stiintifica si enciclopedica), 1985, p. 117

<sup>667</sup> B. P. Hasdeu, *Scieri filosofice* [Philosophical Writings], ed. By Vasile Vetisanu, p. 117

<sup>668</sup> B. P. Hasdeu, *Scieri filosofice* [Philosophical Writings], ed. By Vasile Vetisanu, p. 117

<sup>669</sup> B. P. Hasdeu, *Scieri filosofice* [Philosophical Writings], ed. By Vasile Vetisanu, p. 118

concentrated upon the regions of Wallachia (especially Oltenia) and the Banat. It is not clear if this thematic and interpretive preference can be linked to the peculiar variant of the “continuity theory” postulated by Hasdeu (according to which these two spaces represented the “hearth” of the Romanian people) or to some more mundane factors (like his warmer reception in Bucharest or his close relationship with some political figures or intellectuals from these regions)<sup>670</sup>. In any case, Oltenia and the Banat represented a kind of “spaces-matrices” which proved fundamental not only for Hasdeu’s self-positioning in the spiritual universe that he created, but also for the image of the national body that he conveyed. In this case, one encounters another ambiguity that characterized the protean world of Hasdeu’s mind. The rejection of “foreign elements” (either in the form of external threats and borrowings or in the guise of the menacing and insidious “internal aliens”) is generally linked to the formulation of a full-fledged national discourse. The trope of “national purity” is, of course, not reducible to “racialist” doctrines and is present (not necessarily in ethnicist forms) in most narratives of national essence and rebirth. This is also Hasdeu’s case.

In his earlier pronouncements against the “Latinist” current in Romanian historiography (especially in the controversial article “*Pierit-au dacii?*”) the young scholar already intimates his later theory of “strata and substrata” and thus recognizes the “amalgamated” character of the Romanian ethnic community. Even while constantly urging the national elite to fight against the “foreign element,” Hasdeu occasionally extols the national virtues of the Romanians in regions permeated by foreign influences by shifting the emphasis of his narrative and by presenting the non-Romanian communities as catalysts of national consciousness. For example, in a piece devoted to the continuity of the Romanians in the region of the Banat, he states:

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<sup>670</sup> O. Pecican, *B. P. Hasdeu istoric*, [B. P. Hasdeu as an Historian], p. 126-130

Of the two original nests of Romanianism, the first one on the Olt and the other one on the Timis, Oltenia was almost completely spared any foreign invasion, and still one cannot say that it preserved its nationality better than the Banat, where the Romanian was ceaselessly in contact with various kinds of barbarian peoples... [...] This uninterrupted contact with foreigners made him, on the one hand, more jealous of his own nationality and more conservative out of fear of somehow losing it; but..., on the other hand, the memory of that contact became gradually crystallized, like some kind of layered strata, in the speech and legends of the Romanians of Banat, so that only in their midst one can still find certain medieval ethnic traditions, that one would search for in vain in Oltenia and, with even lesser success, in Transylvania.<sup>671</sup>

On the one hand, the power and “ethnic vitality” of this branch of the Romanian people and, on the other hand, the archaism and traditional character of their mores provided a privileged point for the observation of the past in the “living mirror” of the present. The picture drawn by Hasdeu is multi-dimensional. First, he invokes (even if obliquely) the rhetoric of the “superiority of the Latin race” (represented by the Romanians) over all the other “floating” elements that it came into contact with. The civilizational hierarchy that is so salient in his argument (the opposition between “Romanians” and “barbarians” is revealing) points to the importance of the idealization of the past in his rhetorical construction. Second, the “archaism” and “conservatism” of the Banat Romanians is valuable not so much *per se*, but primarily as a mechanism for preserving the ethnic purity and the direct access to the original sources of the Romanian nationality that other parts of it have purportedly lost. Third, this passage should be interpreted within the context of the “hierarchy of ethnic danger” for the Romanians elaborated by Hasdeu. In other words, he created a scheme of “comparative otherness” that could serve, in his view, as a “litmus test” for the interaction of the Romanian (i.e., Latin) element with other “nationalities” (*ginti*).

This hierarchy presupposed different degrees of affinity between the Latin “peoples” and the Slavic and Germanic “tribes” that constituted the “historical” components of European

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<sup>671</sup> B.P. Hasdeu, *Romanii banateni din punct de vedere al conservatismului dialectal si teritorial*. [The Banat Romanians from the Point of View of Linguistic and Territorial Conservatism]. București: Institutul de Arte Grafice „C. Goebel,” 1896, p. 66

civilization. In Hasdeu's opinion, "the Latins must beware of Slavs, and among all Latin [nations] the Romanians are the most exposed to danger. Especially against this Slavic danger, and particularly against the Muscovite colossus, the Germans are our natural allies."<sup>672</sup> The Russian Empire thus represented the epitome of otherness in Hasdeu's scheme of Romanian history. Significantly, Russia was not only a politically antagonistic system (embodying the despotic and imperial principles starkly opposed to Hasdeu's "national democratic" program), but also (and primarily) an agent of uniformization and "leveling" that threatened the existence of national entities in the Eastern part of Europe.

In its appearances in Hasdeu's work, Bessarabia is depicted as a corrupted part of the national body immersed into a hostile and threatening environment. Contrary to most interpretations of Hasdeu's activity (and contrary to the actual modest share that Bessarabian topics received in his writings), one of his late disciples, Iuliu Dragomirescu, wrote: "Hasdeu's consciousness was always filled with this heart-breaking tragedy of our Romania, and [his heart] was always palpitating along with its pain and its muffled revolt. He listened to Romania's devastatingly sad song only through the voice of Bessarabia, and nobody understood this song better than he. The eyes of his Moldavian heart were always attentive towards the North-East and he seemed to bear his entire life a deep hole or a mortal wound in his soul: Bessarabia."<sup>673</sup> Accordingly, Dragomirescu dedicated his biographical sketch to the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Bessarabia's annexation to Russia and emphasized Hasdeu's Bessarabian origin and the formative imprint of his Bessarabian family (and physical) environment upon the intellectual and emotional components of his personality.<sup>674</sup> However, this reconstruction is highly personal and does not

<sup>672</sup> Liviu Marian. *B. P. Hasdeu si Rusia*. [B. P. Hasdeu and Russia]. Chisinau, 1925, p. 19

<sup>673</sup> Iuliu Dragomirescu. *Ideile si faptele lui B. P. Hasdeu. Partea I (1836-1863)*. [The Ideas and Deeds of Bogdan Petriceicu Hasdeu. Part I (1836-1863)]. Bucuresti, 1913, p. 3

<sup>674</sup> Iuliu Dragomirescu. *Ideile si faptele lui B. P. Hasdeu*, p. 19



reflect Hasdeu's own openly stated priorities as an intellectual and a public figure. Similarly, the connections established by Liviu Marian between his "hatred" for Russia and his Romanian nationalism do not reveal too much about the "uncertainty of identity" that Hasdeu displayed in his early period.

In any case, it seems that the ambiguity of his legal status following his immigration to the Romanian Principalities<sup>675</sup> did have a sizable impact on his understanding of the belonging to the Romanian nationality. In fact, Hasdeu evolved from a justification of his legal position as a Romanian citizen based exclusively on his ethnic origins<sup>676</sup> towards a more "legalistic" and pragmatic stance that emphasized his "naturalization" according to the existing laws and his "patriotic" academic credentials that made him a useful subject of the Principalities.<sup>677</sup> It is not at all clear if a direct link can be established between the periodic accusations of Russophilism that his opponents used in order to attack him during his stay in Iasi and his radical nationalist program gradually developed throughout the 1860s<sup>678</sup>. However, his status of marginality in the Russian context and his insecure position in the late 1850s and early 1860s in Iasi point to the possibility of a reactive nationalism of a non-dominant representative of an empire's periphery that transferred his frustrations into the favorable context of an emerging nation-state.<sup>679</sup>

According to the "legend" propagated by Hasdeu himself, he was purportedly sentenced to exile to Siberia because of his "desertion" and his defiance of the Russian authorities (that he expressed through "ripping the Muscovite passport" upon his arrival to Romania). As his later biographers showed, these colorful details were certainly a debt to Hasdeu's youthful tendency

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<sup>675</sup> Aurelian Sacerdoteanu. *Impamantarea lui Hasdeu*. [Hasdeu's "Naturalization" in Moldavia]. Iași: Tipografia „Liga Culturală,” 1943.

<sup>676</sup> Aurelian Sacerdoteanu. *Impamantarea lui Hasdeu*, p. 10

<sup>677</sup> Aurelian Sacerdoteanu. *Impamantarea lui Hasdeu*, p. 11

<sup>678</sup> This could be inferred from the connection that the historian Gh. Bezviconi makes between the work of Dumitru C. Moruzi and Hasdeu, in his booklet *Romancierul Dimitrie Moruzi* [The Novelist Dimitrie Moruzi], Iasi, 1942, p. 25

<sup>679</sup> See O. Pecican, *B. P. Hasdeu istoric*, [B. P. Hasdeu as an Historian], p. 99.

towards Romantic exaggeration and did not reflect the circumstances of his actual emigration to Romania.<sup>680</sup> His position as a former subject of the Russian Empire “haunted” Hasdeu’s early years to an extent that was exaggerated by the inter-war commentators (and probably by Hasdeu himself), but the Russophobic tendencies in his work should not be ignored either. Late in life, Hasdeu retroactively constructed an image of his education in Russia, in the following terms: “Born beyond the Prut, in Bessarabia, educated in a Muscovite, “tsardox” atmosphere, that I detested everywhere and that I always hated: at school, at the university, in cultural circles, I liked none of my teachers...”<sup>681</sup> Accordingly, Hasdeu constructed a self-image that emphasized his auto-didactic efforts and only recognized an intellectual debt to his father. His Russian experience, albeit fundamental for his familiarization with contemporary Romanticism (both in its literary and historical guise), worked in his case as a stigma that he constantly sought to transcend.

The fundamental ambiguity of Hasdeu’s relationship with the Russian cultural milieu is also obvious in connection with the reaction to his election as an honorary member of the Russian Academy of Sciences in 1884. In a letter to his family (residing in Paris at the time), Hasdeu appreciates this “unexpected honor” not so much *per se*, but mostly due to the fact that this election meant his exoneration from his hypothetical condemnation “as a sort of nihilist” and allowed him to reclaim his father’s assets on Russian soil.<sup>682</sup> The insistence on such exceptional aspects of his (real or imagined) biography throughout his life show to what extent the motive of “Russian persecution” served as a compensatory tool for his self-assertion in the Romanian context. The ambiguity of his position as a Bessarabian exile never quite vanished from his

<sup>680</sup> I. Oprisan, *B. P. Hasdeu și setea de absolut. Tumultul și misterul vieții* [B. P. Hasdeu and the Thirst for the Absolute: The Turmoil and Mystery of a Life], p. 145

<sup>681</sup> Liviu Marian, *B. P. Hasdeu și Rusia*. [B. P. Hasdeu and Russia]. Chisinau, 1925, p. 5

<sup>682</sup> I. Oprisan, *B. P. Hasdeu și setea de absolut. Tumultul și misterul vieții* [B. P. Hasdeu and the Thirst for the Absolute: The Turmoil and Mystery of a Life], p. 146

background, even if gradually minimized by the successful integration in the Romanian cultural life.

In a typical gesture of “Romantic rebellion,” the young Hasdeu presented his emigration to the Romanian Principalities in 1857 as a “flight” and attempted to enter the Iasi cultural milieu on his own terms, fabricating a “Romanticized” biography that confused later observers and commentators.<sup>683</sup> The imprint of the “Romantic personality” model on Hasdeu’s self-construction (that went hand in hand with the elaboration of his nationalist doctrine) is also visible through his constant oscillation between a “national-democratic” program that dominated his political activity and the “aristocratic model” that he pursued not only on the scale of tracing the Romanian continuity, but also by mythologizing the remote origins of his own family.<sup>684</sup> The aristocratic streak in Hasdeu’s work derived, however, not only from a personal necessity of self-assertion and from the attempt to overcome his initial marginality in the Romanian context, but also from a peculiar concept that discriminated between “true” and “false” elites. Hasdeu’s idealization of the peasant element which perpetuated the nation’s essence through folklore and traditional customs was counterbalanced by a “genealogical” approach that can be linked, on the one hand, to the “hero worship” model that indebted him to Carlyle and, on the other hand, to the liberal political affiliation that he chose after emigrating to Romania.<sup>685</sup> Hasdeu’s ostensible democratic preferences were diluted by a typically Romantic tendency to extol the role of exceptional figures that embodied the action of divine Providence in history.

The problem of Hasdeu’s marginality (in his early period) within the Romanian intellectual and, more narrowly, historiographic tradition can also be “inverted” in the sense that this tradition

<sup>683</sup> Among the attempts to “disentangle” Hasdeu’s early intellectual evolution, some of the most important are those of E. Dvoicenco and I. Oprisan.

<sup>684</sup> I. Oprisan, *B. P. Hasdeu și setea de absolut. Tumultul și misterul vieții* [B. P. Hasdeu and the Thirst for the Absolute: The Turmoil and Mystery of a Life], p. 9-15.

<sup>685</sup> For Hasdeu’s intellectual debts towards Herder’s concept of “great ideas” and Carlyle’s work see Ovidiu Pecican, *B. P. Hasdeu istoric*, [B. P. Hasdeu as an Historian], p. 39

itself was somewhat marginal for Hasdeu's professional training. This was true from two points of view. First, his early cultural environment conditioned his better grasp of the Russian, Polish and French historiography in comparison with a barely emerging Romanian modern historical writing represented in the mid-XIX century by such figures as Kogalniceanu or Balcescu.<sup>686</sup> Second, the impact of the French Romantic historical tradition upon the thinking of the Romanian Liberals of the 1848 generation and their epigones (including Hasdeu) proved much more important for the formative period of the national Romanian historical canon than any "autochthonous" sources. The interest that Jules Michelet or Edgar Quinet displayed towards the history of the Principalities produced a "feedback" in the Romanian milieu that has been insufficiently studied, but that was far from negligible.<sup>687</sup> Third (as mentioned above), the Bessarabian context of Hasdeu's early upbringing and his proficiency in the main Slavic languages made him much more sensitive to the "East-East" cultural transfers than most of his Romanian contemporaries. The accusations of "Russophilia" periodically surfacing in the 1860s in fact reflected Hasdeu's receptivity towards the non-Romanian East European scholarly traditions. Such exchanges proved most fruitful in the field of Slavic studies, where Hasdeu's contacts spanned the whole region. This intellectual openness hardly affected his image of the Russian Empire as such, which the following discussion will attempt to present in its main features.

The full-fledged criticism of Russian society undertaken by Hasdeu in his two short pieces mentioned above (*The Kreutzer Sonata* and *The Neva Pope*) is centered upon two distinct but interconnected themes. In the first case, his argument can be appreciated as a "satirical inversion" of the evolutionary scheme of human society that he came to reject late in his life. The rhetorical

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<sup>686</sup> See O. Pecican, *B. P. Hasdeu istoric*, [B. P. Hasdeu as an Historian], p. 11

<sup>687</sup> O. Pecican, *B. P. Hasdeu istoric*, [B. P. Hasdeu as an Historian], p. 12

tropes stressing the “animal” nature of the Russian society and the utter foreignness of its space are important especially as instances of transcending the political in order to emphasize the existential danger that the Russian Empire represented for the West (in general) and for the Romanians (as representatives of the Latin “tribe”) in particular.<sup>688</sup> By turning the “Darwinist” scheme upside down and using an ostensibly scholarly framework of analysis in an otherwise ironical and occasionally grotesquely satirical piece, Hasdeu merged his national militancy with pseudo-academic considerations in a powerful, if exaggerated, vision of ontological difference.

In his second piece, he attacks a central point of “sameness” between the Romanians and the Russians- their shared Orthodox faith. His argument becomes more narrowly political and mingles his vision of “internal” and “external” aliens. Thus, he states:

I have never confronted the Slavic element everywhere; on the contrary, I have always displayed a special sympathy, in particular, for the Bulgarians and the Serbs; but I always fought, and I will always fight, against the Muscovites. Likewise, I am not against the Semitic element everywhere. The Arabs are Semites, and still I have constantly praised them; but I will always fight against the Jews. I will not spare the Jews and the Muscovites even on my death bed, since they are the most dangerous elements for the Romanians and for any other nationality. The first ones are [agents of] denationalization; the others [are agents of] cosmopolitanism; they, the Muscovites and the Jews, are essentially the same thing.<sup>689</sup>

This discrimination between positive and negative varieties of the same “tribe” and, more importantly, the equation of Russians and Jews proves to what extent Hasdeu remained faithful to his radical ethnic vision of nationalism, despite his many vacillations on a number of topics throughout his career. Aside from the obvious points of his essay- the “unmasking” of the purported Russian Pan-Slav “machinations” and the attempt to articulate his own image of a Balkan confederation without and against Russia-<sup>690</sup> his main goal is to de-legitimize one of the

<sup>688</sup> B. P. Hasdeu, *Scieri* [Selected Writings], vol 2, Chisinau: Stiinta, 1997, pp. 492-503

<sup>689</sup> B. P. Hasdeu, *Publicistica Politica (1858-1868)*. [Political Articles. 1858-1868]. Ed. by Stancu Ilin, Bucuresti, 2003, p. 81-82

<sup>690</sup> B. Trencsenyi, *National Characterology in the Romanian Political Discourses of the Nineteenth Century*, p. 28; see Hasdeu, *Publicistica Politica*, p. 84

pillars of the Russian imperial discourse- namely, the rhetoric of Orthodox mission in the Balkans. In this sense, Hasdeu's stance can be defined as an "anti-discourse" aimed explicitly at undermining this central tenet of the self-legitimization of the Russian monarchy. Hasdeu asserts: "And then, if one comes to the issue of Orthodoxy, let the Muscovites pretend, at best, that they are some kind of Christians; but they certainly are not Orthodox, since they only follow a wholly distinct faith, that could be called "*tsardoxy*," with a Neva Pope at its head."<sup>691</sup> Hasdeu further denies any connections between the early Romanian church and the Muscovite state and ecclesiastical hierarchy: "Until the last [XVIII] century we, Romanians, were not even [direct] neighbors with the Muscovites, but only with the Ruthenians... So, one should not mix the Muscovite masters with the enslaved Ruthenians; the Ruthenians, just like the Poles, are only victims of the barbarous Muscovite."<sup>692</sup> Hasdeu's "Ukrainophile" position was, probably, influenced by his position towards the "Polish question" and by his proficiency in the contemporary Polish literature (even though this point is of only tangential interest here).

The Romanian writer then provides an account of Russian sectarianism, meant essentially to show the bankruptcy and "falsity" of the Russian official church. His conclusion is quite revealing: "If one could eliminate the wild fanaticism of these sectarians, they are the most honorable [group] among the Muscovites: they are honest, they keep their word, they stay away from lies; so that if, during the last Russian-Turkish War [of 1877-1878] an Old Believer [*lipovan*] had been at the helm of the Russian state, it is certain that [Russia] would not have stolen from us that little piece of Bessarabia, after it had promised to preserve the integrity of the

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<sup>691</sup> B. P. Hasdeu, *Publicistica Politica (1858-1868)*. [Political Articles. 1858-1868]. Ed. by Stancu Ilin, Bucuresti, 2003, p. 84

<sup>692</sup> B. P. Hasdeu, *Publicistica Politica (1858-1868)*. [Political Articles. 1858-1868]. Ed. by Stancu Ilin, Bucuresti, 2003, p. 85

Romanian territory.”<sup>693</sup> Along with the elements of “national characterology” present in this brief image, the unstated message of the author points to the corrupted and “heretical” character of even the most “honorable” part of the Russian populace. Another topic used by Hasdeu with the aim of emphasizing the “otherness” of the Russian environment is the “Russian knout,” that the author connects (with a certain ingenuity) to the “heretical” nature of the Russian church. Hasdeu equates the Russian “tsardoxo” with the unbridled domination of despotism throughout the Russian realm, which makes the “tsar-pope” even more reprehensible than his Roman counterpart: “In 1702 [actually in 1721] Peter the Great abolished the Moscow Patriarchate and proclaimed himself supreme chief of the church. Starting from that date and until today the tsar is the Neva Pope, just like in the Catholic Church there is the Pope of the Vatican. [But] the Muscovite pope is incomparably more terrible, since instead of a staff he holds in his hand a *nagaika*, a special knout of the Cossacks. This is a Caesarodoxo, a tsardoxo, a “nagaikodoxo,” but this cannot be Orthodoxy.”<sup>694</sup>

Hasdeu’s insistence upon the religious aspect of “difference” between the Romanians and the Russians cannot be explained by any special preoccupation of the author with religious issues. Aside from the “spiritistic” preoccupations that dominated the latter part of his life, Hasdeu was reluctant, at best, to assign an important place to the religious factor as such either in his scheme of world history or in his public pronouncements. On the contrary, his skeptical attitude towards religion became a liability for the interwar epigones who attempted to appropriate his work in terms of the integral nationalist doctrine. In a recent discussion of Hasdeu’s version of Romantic nationalism and its later reception (particularly in Mircea Eliade’s reading from 1937), it is

<sup>693</sup> B. P. Hasdeu, *Publicistica Politica (1858-1868)*. [Political Articles. 1858-1868]. Ed. by Stancu Ilin, Bucuresti, 2003, p. 85

<sup>694</sup> B. P. Hasdeu, *Publicistica Politica (1858-1868)*. [Political Articles. 1858-1868]. Ed. by Stancu Ilin, Bucuresti, 2003, p. 89

emphasized that: “Eliade is... surprisingly restrained when discussing the place of religion in Hasdeu’s system. As a matter of fact, Hasdeu was a supporter of secularization, and he was even greeting the “League of Freethinkers,” stressing that public instruction and morality should be independent of “any mingling of religion” and going so far as linking conceptually the Church with some other ‘public enemies’...”<sup>695</sup> It is obvious that for Hasdeu the invocation of the religious “otherness” of the Russians was purely instrumental and was only applied in order to strengthen his otherwise political argument.

He rejected the purported religious “sameness” of the Romanians and the “Muscovites” because of the centrality of this discursive device in the Russian case. His conclusion is but a logical corollary of this construction of “otherness.” Hasdeu proclaims: “The Muscovites are not of the same religion as the Romanians, the Greeks, the Serbians and the Bulgarians. Only a small step further, a simple variation, and the [Ottoman] sultan could abolish the Patriarchate of Constantinople, proclaiming himself supreme chief of the Christian Church.”<sup>696</sup> The equivalence of the Russian and Ottoman polities that is implied here is not only a consciously introduced hyperbolic rhetorical device. Orthodoxy is viewed as an exclusively “national” religion of the Balkan peoples, while its subordination to the imperial interests and designs of the neighboring multinational states is a potential threat for the “national principle” in the European East (as is the case of the “universalistic” Roman Catholicism in the West). Moreover, the equation of the Russian and Ottoman Empires allows Hasdeu to depict both polities as “anti-models” or aberrations in the modern world of nations.

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<sup>695</sup> Balazs Trencsenyi, *National Characterology in the Romanian Political Discourses of the Nineteenth Century*, p. 32

<sup>696</sup> B. P. Hasdeu, *Publicistica Politica (1858-1868)*. [Political Articles. 1858-1868]. Ed. by Stancu Ilin, Bucuresti, 2003, p. 89



In conclusion, Hasdeu's ethnicist reworking of the emerging Romanian national narrative required a complicated operation of identity construction, both on the community and the personal level. In the first case, while heavily indebted to the Western and Eastern European (mainly Russian) intellectual traditions, he proposed a coherent scheme of "incremental otherness" that distinguished between national "spaces-matrices" and alien environments which were inimical to the "national principle" either through the propaganda of "cosmopolitanism" or by "denationalizing" practices. Bessarabia's position in this scheme was ambiguous, since it was clearly a part of the national organism, but at the same time it was heavily impaired due to its belonging to the Russian space, one of the epitomes of the "otherness" so feared and resented by Hasdeu. On the personal level, the "construction of the self" went hand in hand with the construction of the nation, so that Hasdeu could relate his own experience as a "refugee" to the experiences of the "enslaved" Romanians of Bessarabia. The specifically Romantic nature of his personality, as well as the impact of his family education and his readings of the "Russian period" must be taken into account when analyzing his radical "national and democratic" political and historical program. His marginal status in the Russian Empire provided much of the initial impetus for the articulation of his views in the Principalities. This intertwining of personal and cultural motives in Hasdeu's work makes the in-depth study of his case both necessary and fascinating.

### ***3. Moruzi or the Uprooted Traditionalist***

The case of Dimitrie C. Moruzi is rather different, in most respects, from that of Hasdeu. His marginality is obvious not only from the lack of reception of his work in contemporary intellectual circles, but also from his unsuccessful bureaucratic career in Romania. This combination of personal, professional and social frustrations resulted in a peculiar mix of

memoirs, “social monographs” and political criticism along conservative-traditionalist lines that Moruzi infused into his major works with a Russian or Bessarabian subject. The somewhat discordant note he introduced into the national narrative (with a powerful impact of “national characterology” motives) was sufficiently amenable to a re-appropriation by mainstream nationalist thought for Nicolae Iorga to praise the message (if not the style) of Moruzi’s writings on several important occasions.<sup>697</sup> Iorga, moreover, served as an “academic mentor” who promoted Moruzi’s irredentist stance and added an aura of scholarly objectivity to an essentially journalistic and polemical work that operated with clichés and extensively used rhetoric in order to impress the reading public. Though he wrote in the early XX century (all of his works appeared late in his life, between 1905 and 1914), most literary critics who studied his output agree that Moruzi belonged to the “Romantic” period of the 1848 generation and that his understanding of nationalism was much closer to the optimistic and activist position of modern Romania’s “founding fathers” than to the critical and “somber” tones to be found in the “Junimist” current and, particularly, in Eminescu’s journalism.<sup>698</sup>

The following discussion will challenge this view by focusing on the specifically political message of Moruzi’s nationalism. Far from endorsing the liberal and “progressive” vision of his ostensible predecessors, Moruzi’s argument should rather be seen as a conservative (even regressive) criticism of modern society underpinned by a hostile attitude to social change and a vision of social harmony based on national solidarity. Iorga’s interest for this author was thus based on ideological affinity as much as on personal sympathy. The idealization of traditional mores and of the peasantry as the “foundation of the nation” (*temelia neamului*), the rejection of

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<sup>697</sup> First, in his volume on the “Romanian nation in Bessarabia” (*Neamul Romanesc in Basarabia*), published in 1905, followed by the preface Iorga wrote to the collection of Moruzi’s articles reunited in a single volume in 1906. Iorga made a final pronouncement on Moruzi’s importance as a nationalist writer in the funeral oration he wrote on the latter’s death in 1914.

<sup>698</sup> One such opinion is cited in the biographical sketch by G. Bezviconi which remains the most complete account of the writer’s career: G. Bezviconi, *Romancierul Dimitrie Moruzi* [The Novelist Dimitrie Moruzi], Iasi, 1942, p. 24.

any foreign influence and the advocacy of “national revival” through culture and the people’s “enlightenment” were major common themes that Iorga discerned in the work of this “epigone,” despite their generational differences.

Politically, Moruzi displayed a militant and irredentist nationalism that saw the division of empires along national lines as not only necessary, but inevitable. The Russian Empire was not only anachronistic, but fundamentally illegitimate because of its heterogeneity and apparent uniformity that in fact obscured fundamental internal divisions expressed by endemic “national hatreds.” The Russian imperial system was also reviled through the invocation of a radical and crude version of the theme of *Oriental despotism* that purportedly acted as the sole binding force for this artificial conglomerate. The most important novel element that Moruzi introduced into his account was the extensive use of “national character” as an analytical framework for his (pseudo)social approach to the “Russian phenomenon.” His highly simplistic and essentialist vision of the Russian Empire is interesting not so much internally, but mainly as an illustration of the antinomy between Russia and “European civilization” that underlay his whole argument.

A homogeneous culture and nationality represented the sole criteria for the viability of a political construction. The Russian Empire lacked both and thus fundamentally diverged in its “social bases” from all the other political entities.<sup>699</sup> In one of his most characteristic passages defining the nature and tendencies of Russian educated society, the continuity of the expansionist drive, changing its form according to the shifting political fortunes of the dominant ideologies, is illustrated through the equation of autocracy, Pan-Slavism and socialism (in its Russian “nihilist” guise) as avatars of the same “atavistic” impulse of the Russian monarchy to “overwhelm” not only the territories of its neighbors, but also the principles of “true justice, complete freedom and

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<sup>699</sup> Dumitru C. Moruzi. *Rusii si romanii* [The Russians and the Romanians]. Chisinau: Museum, 2001, p. 6

human fraternity.”<sup>700</sup> Moruzi attempted to justify his irredentist agenda by repeatedly employing the “authorial justification” of objectivity and equidistance when in fact pursuing a highly subjective and personal reading of the “Russian colossus.”<sup>701</sup> This summary sketch points to the duality of his social and political messages that in fact amounted to an extolling of the national principle as primary and superior to social divisions.

Before discussing these aspects in more detail, a brief biographical sketch that might clarify the role of Moruzi’s marginality in his discourse and career is appropriate. Born on July 2, 1850, into one of the most prominent Romanian aristocratic families of Phanariot descent and related to the Sturdzas on his mother’s side, the young Moruzi spent his childhood on one of the Bessarabian estates of his father, Prince Constantin Moruzi. Educated in France from 1863 to 1869, the young aristocrat (now a Russian citizen) became an ardent Francophile and also possibly derived a number of his anti-Russian and pro-Polish positions that dominated his later works from the contemporary Paris environment. The importance of the Polish tradition of “aristocratic resistance” proved fundamental for the picture of the Bessarabian nobility he later elaborated in his articles and novels. The Polish example served as both a model and an injunction to his fellow members of the noble estate that he put forward as the quintessential didactic case of avoiding “alienation” and serving the national cause. After returning to Bessarabia, he briefly served in a variety of local *zemstvos* and nobles’ district assemblies before being attached to the Russian High Command in Romania during the Russian-Ottoman war of 1877-1878. This beginning of a service career in the Russian bureaucracy was cut short by a series of professional and personal mishaps that forced him to immigrate to Romania in 1880, severing the ties with his family. Thereafter, from 1882 until 1895 he held several minor jobs in

<sup>700</sup> Dumitru C. Moruzi. *Rusii si romanii* [The Russians and the Romanians]. Chisinau: Museum, 2001, p. 76

<sup>701</sup> Dumitru C. Moruzi. *Rusii si romanii* [The Russians and the Romanians]. Chisinau: Museum, 2001, p. 6, 69

Romania's administration in Dobrogea, but was ultimately dismissed as a result of Liberal "fraction politics."

Subsequently, his material situation deteriorated, forcing him to resort to writing as all the other sources of revenue were cut short. This period, spanning the last ten years of his life, witnessed the publication of several novels and shorter literary pieces, as well as occasional collaboration at a number of periodicals. Besides Iorga, he was politically close to another important figure of early XX century Romanian nationalism- A. C. Cuza-, but never transcended the position of a marginal and semi-obscure writer preoccupied by subjects of "alienation" and "displacement" in a foreign environment and praising the vitality and endurance of the traditional "national" virtues.<sup>702</sup> Moruzi died in Iasi in October 1914, pursuing his interest for the topic of "alienation" and contributing his share to the contemporary debate on the "Jewish question" by two less interesting works published the same year.<sup>703</sup>

Moruzi's work discussing the "Russians and Romanians" comprises two unequal but closely related parts. The first and most extensive section represents in fact a passionate plea for the nationalization of the Russian imperial space and an attack against the Russian political and social fabric based on several premises. The most important factor explaining the resilience, but also the contemporary irrelevance of the Russian imperial state is the "*Oriental despotism*" that

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<sup>702</sup> Aside from the brochure on "Russians and Romanians," that contains the most articulated vision of the "self" and the "other" produced by Moruzi, other significant sources for the dynamics of his discourse are his novels: Dumitru C. Moruzi, *Înstrăinații: Studiu social, în formă de roman (1854-1907)* [The Alienated: A Social Study in the Form of a Novel]. Vălenii de Munte: Editura „Neamul Românesc,” 1910 [Original edition: 1907] and Dumitru C. Moruzi. *Pribezi în țară răpită: Roman social Basarabean*. [Refugees in a Stolen Country: A Bessarabian Social Novel]. Iași: Institutul de Arte Grafice N. V. Ștefăniu et Co., 1912. Also significant for Moruzi's infatuation with the „national tradition” and his „rural utopia,” as well as his idyllic „nostalgia” for a „lost Bessarabian [personal] paradise” is the collection of (pseudo) popular songs he published on the occasion of the 1912 anniversary: Dumitru C. Moruzi. *Cântece basarabene* [Bessarabian Songs]. Iași: Institut de Arte Grafice N. V. Ștefăniu et Co., 1912.

<sup>703</sup> Details of Moruzi's biography, as well as a short (if comprehensive) bibliography of his works and the meager critical assessments of his writings (mostly from a literary perspective) can be found in the "apologetic" preface written for the recent Chisinau edition of his political articles: I. Colesnic, "Reintoarcerea pribeagului" [The Return of the Refugee], in: Dumitru C. Moruzi. *Rusii si romanii* [The Russians and the Romanians]. Chisinau: Museum, 2001, pp. III-XIX

the author identifies as the cornerstone of the social organization of the Russian Empire. At the outset of his “analysis,” Moruzi proclaims: “When the founder of the current dynasty was asked by the Muscovite people to accept Muscovy’s crown, he rejected this honor twice; the third time, however, the people knelt before him and said the following: ‘May Thou be our Tsar; may our lives and property be your own; where you will go, we will follow; your word and will shall become law to us.’ This is, then, the foundation upon which this huge empire was built...”<sup>704</sup> The motive of abdication of the “original rights to life... and property”<sup>705</sup> by the Russian populace becomes almost obsessive for Moruzi. This autocratic and despotic principle acquires a physical visibility and materiality expressed through the general presence of the “zertzal” (i.e., *zertsalo*), which carries the inscription of the above “oath” and embodies the exercise of monarchical authority.

This invocation of the Oriental despotism “myth” (lacking only the appropriate designation) is reinforced by its transfer from the political to the wider social realm. Russian society was thus radically different from everything known to human history before, a fact curiously neglected, in Moruzi’s opinion, by most foreign observers, who “regarded Russia through the prism of Western ideas and, when judging things Russian, employed the criteria of their native countries, where they should have pondered the words carved on the zertzal.”<sup>706</sup> Not surprisingly, the lack of political and social autonomy went hand in hand with the uniformity and monotony of the “Russian space” itself, shaped by the same “super-human” will of the Russian monarchs. The contradictory image of an empire’s might and simultaneous weakness is at its height in the following phrases:

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<sup>704</sup> Dumitru C. Moruzi. *Rusii si romanii* [The Russians and the Romanians]. Chisinau: Museum, 2001, p. 5

<sup>705</sup> Dumitru C. Moruzi. *Rusii si romanii* [The Russians and the Romanians]. Chisinau: Museum, 2001, p. 6

<sup>706</sup> Dumitru C. Moruzi. *Rusii si romanii* [The Russians and the Romanians]. Chisinau: Museum, 2001, p. 7

Everywhere the same buildings, monumental and dreary in their uniformity; on the streets, in the railway stations, on the roads, [one can see] the same bearded and morose faces, the same caps and broad waistcoats, as broad as everything that surrounds you; the same broad Russian life, *russkaia shirokaia zhizn'*, as they say, that starts with the excessive breadth of the streets and of the railways... One can feel that a single and unhindered will combined everything, from ancient times, in order to show the greatness of the empire and to give, through uniformity, the illusion of unity...<sup>707</sup>

This “reading” of the Russian space *à la Custine* is characteristic for Moruzi’s anti-imperial agenda, but also points to the superficiality of the imperial construction, since ultimately it is nothing but a “veil” (the reference to Custine again comes to mind) that is hiding the reality beneath it. The fundamental difference resides in the message that Moruzi tries to convey. He welcomes the advent of mass politics on the scene, but the only form conceivable and desirable for this phenomenon is the national one. His ostensibly social analysis is in fact primarily political, since its aim is to discern what future political project could replace the decaying and dissipating tsarist “illusion.” The author makes this goal explicit by stating: “Once [the readers] ascertain the spiritual state of every separate [social] stratum, it will be easy for them to decide: whether *tsarism* today can still rest upon the words carved on the zertzal; whether a *constitution* is possible for this flood of peoples; or whether *federalism*, with different laws and constitutions, could hold them together in one piece.”<sup>708</sup> The answer to all these interrogations is obviously negative, since neither autocracy, nor parliamentary government (or federalism) can have any intrinsic value unless they reflect the independent existence of national entities.

The difference of “national characters” precludes, for Moruzi, any constitutionalist project or revolutionary design to restore the Russian state on a new basis, since it is the creation of autocracy and should disappear along with it.<sup>709</sup> Moreover, a sovereign people is only possible within a homogeneous national state and is unthinkable under Russian conditions: “France

<sup>707</sup> Dumitru C. Moruzi. *Rusii si romanii* [The Russians and the Romanians]. Chisinau: Museum, 2001, p. 7-8

<sup>708</sup> Dumitru C. Moruzi. *Rusii si romanii* [The Russians and the Romanians]. Chisinau: Museum, 2001, p. 12

<sup>709</sup> Dumitru C. Moruzi. *Rusii si romanii* [The Russians and the Romanians]. Chisinau: Museum, 2001, p. 11

substituted the will of the people to the king's will because there was a king and there was a people. What could Russia replace the will of the tsar with?"<sup>710</sup> Accordingly, the author rebels against the notion of "Russian people," which he sees as a "conventional lie" and an "illusion." The subjugated multitudes appear immersed in a "doublethink" scheme, secretly harboring national desires while openly proclaiming their allegiance to the monarchy.<sup>711</sup> The salience of nationality is purportedly confirmed (in a circular argument) by the failure of Russification, which "only had an influence upon the newly built cities and the newest parts of old towns," whereas the Russian "people" consisted of "the Muscovites [Great Russians], the aristocracy of the subdued countries, officials in service or in retirement, coming from all over [the Empire] and settled, along with their offspring, in all provinces, merchants, artisans, gathered in the same way as the officials and with the same feelings and hidden respect for their origins..."<sup>712</sup> The "Russian people" thus appeared as an artificial conglomerate that lacked any truly "national" characteristics.

Moreover, the Great Russians themselves, though originally part of the Slavic "tribe" that Moruzi endows with incipient "democratic" institutions, appeared corrupted by the Mongol invasion that altered their "national character" and made them prone to exchanging their purported ancient "social contract" for an unbridled despotism of the Moscow princes. This "Mongol legacy" acquires the dimensions of a stigma that tainted the whole Russian imperial tradition and that Peter the Great's reforms did nothing to surpass, only consolidating the old system inaugurated by his "Mongol" predecessors.<sup>713</sup> Though Moruzi's argument is certainly derivative from Western "Russophobic" circles and is out of tune with the contemporary, more

<sup>710</sup> Dumitru C. Moruzi. *Rusii si romanii* [The Russians and the Romanians]. Chisinau: Museum, 2001, p. 107

<sup>711</sup> Dumitru C. Moruzi. *Rusii si romanii* [The Russians and the Romanians]. Chisinau: Museum, 2001, p. 9

<sup>712</sup> Dumitru C. Moruzi. *Rusii si romanii* [The Russians and the Romanians]. Chisinau: Museum, 2001, p. 10-11

<sup>713</sup> Dumitru C. Moruzi. *Rusii si romanii* [The Russians and the Romanians]. Chisinau: Museum, 2001, p. 44-47



benign, perceptions of Russia, echoing the apprehensions voiced in mid-century, he presents one of the most extensive Romanian meditations on the topic.

The theme of “Oriental despotism” is supplemented by the related motive of civilizational hierarchy and cultural inferiority that de-legitimize the claims of the Great Russians to domination over “their” empire. This difference in the cultural sphere seems all the more abhorrent to the author since the Great Russians are not only inferior, in cultural terms, to the Western European homogeneous nations, but also to most of the ethnic groups inhabiting the empire’s western borderlands. In a later work, Moruzi even identifies a “great historical truth, an ethnological principle well-proven and recognized as elementary by the entirety of the cultivated mankind: *a nation [neam] older in enlightenment and civilization can never melt or lose itself within a barbarian nation, even when, due to circumstances, the former might lose those [progressive] features, preserving only its language.*” (author’s emphasis- A.C.)<sup>714</sup> This passage is important as an illustration of Moruzi’s immersion into a radical version of anti-Russian discourse, but also points to the primacy of linguistic criteria in the author’s classification of “national features.”

The motive of cultural difference is important for his argumentative strategy both as an “absolute” criterion of comparative “national psychology” and as a distinctly political shortcoming that invalidates any attempt at the internal restructuring of the Russian Empire. Moruzi camouflages his conservative political views under a cloak of “pragmatism” that “instrumentalizes” cultural difference in political terms: “If more cultured and anciently civilized peoples, like the Poles, the Germans etc. have until now surrendered to certain customs resting upon the right of the strongest and divine sanction, will they bow before a people that is much

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<sup>714</sup> Dumitru C. Moruzi. *Pribezi în țară răpită: Roman social Basarabean*. [Refugees in a Stolen Country: A Bessarabian Social Novel]. Iași: Institutul de Arte Grafice N. V. Ștefăniu et Co., 1912, p. 405

inferior to them from these two points of view and that, reborn to life in the name of liberty and human rights, will no longer be able to invoke either divine right or the right of the strongest?”<sup>715</sup> Revolutionary upheavals and federalist schemes are, thus, as illusory a solution as the anachronistic autocracy, since they ignore the primacy of nationality as the sole basis for collective identification and autonomy.

Moruzi's subjective and polemical examination of Russian imperial society follows a double path. On the one hand, he reviews the “vertical” social structure of the empire, following roughly the estate classification and tirelessly emphasizing the hidden but deep national divisions that subvert it from the interior. On the other hand, most of his polemical energy is devoted to a “horizontal” analysis of the major ethnic groups (including the Great Russians) from the Western part of the Romanovs' polity.<sup>716</sup> In the case of the Jews, the author's fundamentally anti-Semitic position is somewhat qualified by a pro-Zionist stance<sup>717</sup> and, rather unexpectedly, by a parallel between the “ethnic character” of the Jews and the Romanians: “One can thus see that the Jew's ethnic character is at least as constant and as inflexible as that of the Romanian; thus, his faith, though opposed to ours, has not been less a staunch shield of his ethnicity [*neam*] than Orthodoxy has been for us.”<sup>718</sup> Moruzi is much more vehement in his condemnation of the “Jewish element” as an agent of cosmopolitanism and modernity. While traditional Jewish mores are perceived as “natural,” the rejection of traditional values, the tendency of assimilation and, especially, the association with revolutionary circles are depicted as “truly dangerous.”<sup>719</sup>

Moruzi's anti-Semitism thus represents a transitional stage from the pre-modern phase of religious difference to its nationalist appropriation, though his “drift” in this direction is

<sup>715</sup> Dumitru C. Moruzi. *Rusii si romanii* [The Russians and the Romanians]. Chisinau: Museum, 2001, p. 107

<sup>716</sup> Thus, he dedicates special chapters to the “national characteristics” of the Jews (*Russians and Romanians*, pp. 27-36), the Poles (pp. 37-40), the Great Russians (pp. 41-52), the Ruthenians (Little Russians) (pp. 53-58).

<sup>717</sup> Dumitru C. Moruzi. *Rusii si romanii* [The Russians and the Romanians]. Chisinau: Museum, 2001, p. 30

<sup>718</sup> Dumitru C. Moruzi. *Rusii si romanii* [The Russians and the Romanians]. Chisinau: Museum, 2001, p. 28

<sup>719</sup> Dumitru C. Moruzi. *Rusii si romanii* [The Russians and the Romanians]. Chisinau: Museum, 2001, p. 35

moderated by the emphasis on the common task of “national liberation” confronting all the national entities of the Russian Empire. However, one should not minimize Moruzi’s anti-Semitic credentials. Writing in the early 1940s, one of the few exegetes of Moruzi’s work did not hesitate to trace the “incontestable impact” that the rabidly anti-Jewish sketches of Pavel Krushevan had on Moruzi’s image of the “Jewish element.”<sup>720</sup> In this context, one should mention that the influence of the Russian anti-Semitic discourse on its Romanian variant was not accidental. An even more interesting example is the highly ambivalent position espoused by Iorga towards the same Krushevan. Iorga’s hesitation between praising Krushevan’s anti-Semitism and condemning his Russian nationalism was bitterly denounced by Constantin Stere in a series of polemical articles during 1905 and 1906.

Moruzi’s position on the “Polish question” is much more straightforward. Moruzi is clearly an ardent Polonophile, which is hardly surprising, given his upbringing in the pro-Polish atmosphere of the Paris of the 1860s. His positive attitude towards the role of the Polish aristocracy as the “awakener” of the nation and (in a messianic vein) as a group “expiating” its “sin” of political anarchy and irresponsibility transformed it into a model that its Bessarabian counterparts conspicuously failed to emulate. In Moruzi’s own words, “One can say, in all truth, that, among the whole heterogeneous, heterodox and even heteroglossic aristocracy which surrounded the tsar, a sole [group] remained constant in its faith and true to its own nation: this is the high Polish aristocracy!”<sup>721</sup> An even more exalted vision accompanies the author’s presentation of the history of the “Polish people,” who represent for him the epitome of national consciousness and fidelity to tradition. Moreover, the Poles are an element of resistance to the revolutionary designs of the cosmopolitan intellectuals and agitators that endanger Moruzi’s ideal of national harmony based

<sup>720</sup> G. Bezviconi, *Romancierul Dimitrie Moruzi* [The Novelist Dimitrie Moruzi], Iasi, 1942, p. 28

<sup>721</sup> Dumitru C. Moruzi. *Rusii si romanii* [The Russians and the Romanians]. Chisinau: Museum, 2001, p. 16

on an organic model of social solidarity: “Oh, you, future citizens of the world, you, who abolish borders, tongues and peoples, try, if you feel numerous and strong enough, to instill your irresponsible ideas into nine million creatures [the Poles] that you see as benighted, when in fact they have as their bulwark a faith older, higher and more humane than your own: the love of hearth, of their native tongue and of their nation...”<sup>722</sup>

In a scheme of dualistic symbolic opposition, the Poles are the positive figurants on a “stage” of national characters whose negative protagonists are the Great Russians, beset by their “barbarian” past and enslaved by the will of their monarch. To enhance the impact of his impressionistic argument, Moruzi resorts to the simplifying and didactic method of “national personification,” introducing emblematic figures or “ideal types” that offer a synthesis of the “national essence.” Perhaps the most poignant sketch of a “collective national person” is offered in the case of the Great Russians, who are presented in the form of a generic peasant distorted by a number of moral vices (greed, thievery, lack of restraint, talent of dissimulation, a visceral sense of xenophobia etc.).<sup>723</sup> The rhetorical effect is even more powerful if one compares this image with the picture of the Ruthenian peasant, who originated from “a mix of people..., some of them born free and others escaping from slavery.”<sup>724</sup>

The extent to which Moruzi internalized the *topos* of “Muscovite slave mentality” is amply confirmed by the idealized presentation of the Ruthenians/ Ukrainians, who are the more remote from their Great Russian counterparts by virtue of their “thirst for freedom” that is added as a defining element in the author’s inventory of national qualities, along with fidelity to tradition and the preservation of the native language. The Ruthenians are especially important for

<sup>722</sup> Dumitru C. Moruzi. *Rusii si romanii* [The Russians and the Romanians]. Chisinau: Museum, 2001, p. 40

<sup>723</sup> Dumitru C. Moruzi. *Rusii si romanii* [The Russians and the Romanians]. Chisinau: Museum, 2001, p. 50-52 (Chapter X, “Nikita Ivanovici”).

<sup>724</sup> Dumitru C. Moruzi. *Rusii si romanii* [The Russians and the Romanians]. Chisinau: Museum, 2001, p. 54

Moruzi's narrative due to the "geopolitical" relevance of their intermediate position between the Romanians of Bessarabia and the Russian center. In fact, this is one of the rare instances where Romanian authors are aware of the importance of the Ukrainian national element as a potentially disrupting force for the unity of the Russian empire. Moruzi's "Ukrainophile" position was, however, filtered through his familiarity with the Polish interpretation of the "Ukrainian question." Thus, Poles and Ukrainians appear as allied components in the "barrier" against Russian domination: "In the future and inevitable dismemberment of the great tsarist empire, I see, between the Great Russians and the Bessarabians, between Chisinau and Moscow, at least one big state, if not two states, that will emerge: Poland and Ruthenia, Warsaw and Kiev, either separated or united."<sup>725</sup>

Moruzi also draws on the similarities in the everyday customs of the Ruthenians and the Romanians of Bessarabia, emphasizing the difference of both communities from the Russians who dominated the empire's "center." Whereas the Great Russians appear as the quintessential "imperial people" (though maimed by the imperial dilemma in their most profound "national essence"), the Ruthenians represent the most anarchic, but also the most "authentic" part of the "Slavic triad" examined by Moruzi, lacking both the tradition of social oppression (contrary to the Poles) and that of political oppression (contrary to the Russians). Hence, the necessity of cordial relations between the Ruthenians and the Romanians (both of them "authentic," peasant peoples and both of them unaltered in their basic purity, despite their positions as "objects" of foreign expansion) appears as natural: "I only strove to put in front of the reader those three nations of the Slavic tribe [*semințiile*], in order to prove that between the Dniester and Moscow, between the Dniester and Warsaw dwells the Ruthenian people, our true neighbor, with whom we

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<sup>725</sup> Dumitru C. Moruzi. *Rusii și romanii* [The Russians and the Romanians]. Chisinau: Museum, 2001, p. 109. The only analogy can be found in Constantin Stere's discourses during the First World War. Curiously, Iorga was totally innocent of the "Ukrainian factor" in his pronouncements on the Russian Empire.

have the same need to live in good faith as it does to have friendly relations with us.”<sup>726</sup> The ethnic hierarchy of the Russian Empire’s “Western borderlands” thus emerges in a form distorted by Moruzi’s predilection for the peasant element as the embodiment of the national virtues and by his belief in a peculiar, ethnicized form of “national democracy” based upon conservative principles and respect for an almost immutable national tradition.

Moruzi’s stance on Bessarabia, which he develops in the second section of his work, is resolutely irredentist and is accompanied by prophetic overtones proclaiming the advent of the “world of nations.” In a characteristic example of rhetorical inversion, he claims of harboring no such thought when in fact integrating Bessarabia into the “national body:” “I have no intention to promote any kind of irredentism in the Bessarabian question, or [to argue for] an arrogant behavior towards the Russian government in the moments of extreme difficulty it is passing through [i.e, the 1905 Revolution- A.C.]... I always had respect for the dead and the fatally ill. We do not need an irredenta in our own home.”<sup>727</sup> The picture of the Bessarabian populace is constructed along the lines of the general traditionalist discourse sketched above, according to which the Bessarabian peasantry represents the “foundation of the nation” and is the most solid guarantee for the persistence of an elementary “Romanian-ness” in Bessarabia. The Moldavian peasant of Bessarabia inhabits a world of a-temporal and patriarchal tradition that is placed outside of history. The much vaunted “ethnic resistance” turned out to be, in fact, an historical immobility preserving the rural population in the “pristine” state prior to the Russian annexation: “The force of ethnic resistance of the Romanian element from the Bessarabian villages is unimaginable! No matter what has been done, no matter what strategies have been used to denationalize him, everything remained fruitless. The peasant of 1905 is still the peasant of 1812.

<sup>726</sup> Dumitru C. Moruzi. *Rusii si romanii* [The Russians and the Romanians]. Chisinau: Museum, 2001, p. 70

<sup>727</sup> Dumitru C. Moruzi. *Rusii si romanii* [The Russians and the Romanians]. Chisinau: Museum, 2001, p. 109

He passed, unmoved, through good and evil [times], through the temptations of interest and through the disasters of the knout, without losing either his language or his customs.”<sup>728</sup>

Moruzi's indebtedness to Iorga's vision of traditional peasant society is obvious in such instances. He is far, however, from any sympathy to the reformist (or even revolutionary) change that was the ultimate goal of the Populist ideologues (in the Romanian case, represented by figures such as Z. Rally-Arbore or C. Stere). On the contrary, Moruzi can be reclaimed by the conservative “samanatorist” current of Iorga and his followers. The peasants are, by definition, inert and patriarchal, since they appear as preservers of the primordial nationality rather than active agents of history. The shocks of history hardly affect this group that embodies the collective memory of the national community. In an “authorial introduction” to one of his novels (a strategy he routinely used in his works), Moruzi makes this explicit by invoking “a figure greatest of all, greater than... Cuza, that for innumerable centuries persists, unmoved and constant in its faith, language and customs, letting, with the same indifference, all the invasions, migrations and the thoughtless inventions and phrases of another sort of “alienated” people... pass over it.”<sup>729</sup> The same motive of resistance through “ignorance of history” and persistence in ancient traditions recurs in the conclusion of a later novel specifically devoted to the mechanism of “alienation” in the Bessarabian context.<sup>730</sup> The consistency with which Moruzi returns to this theme points to one of the fundamental contradictions of his position: while his narrative is rooted in history, the “national essence” manifests itself in forms of everyday life that have only a tangential contact with actual historical events and that constitute, rather, a genetic cultural code resistant to outside change. The politically modern mass mobilization of the peasants in the name

<sup>728</sup> Dumitru C. Moruzi. *Rusii si romanii* [The Russians and the Romanians]. Chisinau: Museum, 2001, p. 90

<sup>729</sup> Dumitru C. Moruzi, *Înstrăinații: Studiu social, în formă de roman (1854-1907)* [The Alienated: A Social Study in the Form of a Novel]. Vălenii de Munte: Editura „Neamul Românesc,” 1910, p. 6

<sup>730</sup> Dumitru C. Moruzi. *Pribegi în țară răpită: Roman social Basarabean*. [Refugees in a Stolen Country: A Bessarabian Social Novel]. Iași: Institutul de Arte Grafice N. V. Ștefăniu et Co., 1912, p. 405

of national values should thus rest on a regressive social order based on an idyllic vision of rural social harmony.

This abstract “ethnic resistance” is detailed through a narrative of the strategies of the Russian authorities aimed at “Russifying” the local population, but thwarted by the “vitality” of the traditional social structures. The peasants’ reluctance to engage in the workings of the modern state apparatus (expressed by the intruding of the local administration, the army, the church or the school system) is valorized by Moruzi’s nationalist perspective as a fundamental asset for the Romanian irredentist designs. His conclusion reinforces this point as follows: “Thus, neither through [mixed] marriages, nor through colonization, the church, the schools, or through material interests and the creation of new interests in local politics [the *zemstvos*], could [the Russians] reach the [goal of] de-nationalization of the Bessarabian peasant. The foundation of the nation remained unspoiled: the language, the clothing, the mores, the customs are unchanged, and even the general aspect of the villages is the same as within [Romanian] Moldova.”<sup>731</sup>

Despite these favorable premises, the Romanian irredentist project was beset by a fundamental shortcoming: the “Chinese wall” of ignorance and mutual prejudices that Moruzi attempted to “deconstruct.” Bessarabia’s marginality within the Romanian national discourse was clearly perceived by this author, who emphasized that “It is a fact that at present the majority of our intellectual elite know in more detail the life and customs of the Boers and the Japanese than those of the Bessarabian Romanians.”<sup>732</sup> Bessarabia was absent not only from the political and academic preoccupations of the Romanian intellectuals, but, more significantly, from the artistic depictions of the ideal fatherland which were central to the invention of the national canon: “This unbounded treasure of poetry and of inspiration for the [national] art is sleeping, buried in the

<sup>731</sup> Dumitru C. Moruzi. *Rusii si romanii* [The Russians and the Romanians]. Chisinau: Museum, 2001, p. 94

<sup>732</sup> Dumitru C. Moruzi. *Rusii si romanii* [The Russians and the Romanians]. Chisinau: Museum, 2001, p. 85



Romanian's indifference, waiting for a Pushkin or a Lermontov to uncover it and to sing it in Russian! Our poets limit their songs only to [the space] from the Tissa to the sea! They want to hear nothing about the Dniester that washes the true borders of our ancient domain, or they lose their voice for fear of the Cossacks.”<sup>733</sup> The ideal boundaries of the national space called for a re-alignment according to the changed priorities of the national discourse. As in the case of other Bessarabian émigrés in Romania, Moruzi waged a (losing) campaign not only against the Russian discourse, but also against the internal marginality of the region within the Romanian symbolic space.

The rhetorical arsenal that he used to counter this peripheral status of the Bessarabian case presupposed, above all, the combination of the argument “from ethnicity” with the argument “from history.” Bessarabia's special importance for the Romanian national state resided in its *historical* link with the Kingdom, that should ideally have promoted the “Bessarabian question” to the forefront of the national agenda and that made Bessarabia's example qualitatively different from the other Romanian-inhabited territories:

The Romanians from the Pind [in Macedonia] are our brothers by blood, origin and language, but never has the Pind been a Romanian land; the Transylvanians are even closer to us... I have always admired these more industrious and persistent brothers of ours; but even Transylvania has not been united with us save for a short and insignificant period; Bessarabia, however, has been ours since the foundation of the state, it shared our glories and our sufferings; it had the same language, history and faith as we did. Are some ninety years, not even a whole century, sufficient for it to become more estranged and less known to us than Japan?<sup>734</sup>

One of the most interesting aspects of Moruzi's account relates to the “inverted mirror” of mutual prejudices that he lists as the main impediments for a wholesale integration of the Bessarabian region into the ideal fatherland on a par with other targets of the Romanian irredenta. From the Bessarabian part, the Romanians of the Kingdom are purportedly perceived as “a kind

<sup>733</sup> Dumitru C. Moruzi. *Rusii si romanii* [The Russians and the Romanians]. Chisinau: Museum, 2001, p. 86

<sup>734</sup> Dumitru C. Moruzi. *Rusii si romanii* [The Russians and the Romanians]. Chisinau: Museum, 2001, p. 87

of Moldavians, mixed with Hungarians and Bulgarians, that speak a corrupted language” and have a kind of “foreign faith.”<sup>735</sup> This level of popular mentality is complemented, in Moruzi’s view, by the misperceptions of the educated circles, who construe Romania’s society as immoral. The linguistic barrier stemming from the heavy infusion of neologisms into standard Romanian and, hence, the widening “lag” between the Romanian Kingdom and Bessarabia in terms of national construction is also referred to with a vaguely negative connotation, but this topic is not elaborated, since it hardly fits Moruzi’s broader agenda. The publicist emphasizes instead the fundamental difference between the prejudices held by the Bessarabians against the Romanians (that are ultimately the product of “Russian propaganda” and can thus be excused) and those of the “Kingdom Romanians.” The latter stem either from ill-will or ignorance and are the result of “our laziness and carelessness.”<sup>736</sup>

Another factor of the distortion of the Bessarabians’ image in the Romanian Kingdom derived from the reaction of the inhabitants of the three districts returned to Russia in 1878, who apparently welcomed the reinstatement of the Russian administration. Moruzi is at great pains to demonstrate that this region was the least Romanian part of Bessarabia and, thus, was hardly fit as a test case for the “national features” of the Bessarabian Romanians, who remained essentially unknown to the wider Romanian public.<sup>737</sup> This position was of course radically different from the Romanian official stance of 1878, which perceived the region of the Budjak as an integral part of the national body. The implications of this insistence upon the necessity of a complete knowledge of the “true Bessarabian people” are of course much broader. The major prerequisite for a coordinated and efficient national policy is the prior knowledge of all the parts of the “national heritage” to be later “redeemed” by the emerging nation-state. The Romanian

<sup>735</sup> Dumitru C. Moruzi. *Rusii si romanii* [The Russians and the Romanians]. Chisinau: Museum, 2001, p. 87

<sup>736</sup> Dumitru C. Moruzi. *Rusii si romanii* [The Russians and the Romanians]. Chisinau: Museum, 2001, p. 88

<sup>737</sup> Dumitru C. Moruzi. *Rusii si romanii* [The Russians and the Romanians]. Chisinau: Museum, 2001, p. 88-89

establishment failed to comply with these requirements and was thus threatened to lose the “symbolic war” with the Russian Empire, even if the other factors were in its favor. The solution envisaged by Moruzi (as by most of his nationalist contemporaries) lay in the realm of culture and cultural policy:

Our role, though, is to tread the just and peaceful road of culture [expressed through] brotherhood and the community of language and ideas. Let our brothers beyond the Prut give up their prejudice of us as Papists or atheists, immoral and Judaized [*jidoviți*], let them forget that we hate and despise them; as for us, let us cease to think that the Bessarabians have betrayed us, that they are Russified and are renegades of their... origins. Let us learn to know them, and then we shall love them; let us teach them to know us, and then they will be proud of us.<sup>738</sup>

This emphasis on the importance of the spread of culture and enlightenment derives from the same intellectual influence of Iorga’s circle, of which Moruzi was a minor member. “Culture” meant, for Moruzi, a truly “national pedagogy” that was the only remedy against the well-nigh obsessive threat of “alienation.”<sup>739</sup>

The image of Bessarabia that results from his work is not limited, however, to a “regressive utopia” stressing the innate virtues of the patriarchal local population. More in tune with the “age of nationalism” he was writing in, Moruzi’s argument at times resembles the appeal of a militant rather than the musings of an intellectual. Along the lines of his insistence on the cultural factor, he appreciated that the studying of this “dear and unfortunate province, torn from the very body of the Moldavian Principality, of the same Romanian blood as we”<sup>740</sup> was not only a necessity, but stemmed from “a patriotic duty to rekindle and consolidate our ethnic ties, so that [the future] events not find us unprepared.”<sup>741</sup> The “events” he was referring to were, of course, the incoming

<sup>738</sup> Dumitru C. Moruzi. *Rusii și românii* [The Russians and the Romanians]. Chisinau: Museum, 2001, p. 110

<sup>739</sup> A clear articulation of this view can be found in the introduction to the volume: Dumitru C. Moruzi, *Înstrăinații: Studiu social, în formă de roman (1854-1907)* [The Alienated: A Social Study in the Form of a Novel]. Vălenii de Munte: Editura „Neamul Românesc,” 1910, p. 6

<sup>740</sup> Dumitru C. Moruzi. *Rusii și românii* [The Russians and the Romanians]. Chisinau: Museum, 2001, p. 85

<sup>741</sup> Dumitru C. Moruzi. *Rusii și românii* [The Russians and the Romanians]. Chisinau: Museum, 2001, p. 85

collapse of the “artificial” Russian realm and the final “liberation” of its peoples along national lines. Moruzi in fact interpreted the 1905 Revolution as a temporary detour on the road to the final “awakening” of the empire’s nationalities. He occasionally reached a prophetic tone, as in the final phrases of his booklet, where he proclaimed “the end of ten centuries of tsarist slavery,” or in another passage identifying the Russian revolution with “an agony whose inevitable result would be the death” of the Romanov state.<sup>742</sup> This prophetic streak is certainly far from original (as is Moruzi’s approach generally), but nowhere in the Romanian literature on Bessarabia prior to World War I (save perhaps in some of Iorga’s articles) was it expressed with such uninhibited violence.

The motive of ethnic resilience of the Romanian elements in Bessarabia had as its logical correspondent the “superficiality” of the Russification and the purely material incentives that made the Bessarabian aristocracy or merchants prone to a closer integration into Russian society.<sup>743</sup> Moruzi of course does not perceive the contradiction between his constant “recycling” of the danger of “ethnic alienation” and the fundamentally optimistic view he holds of the “ethnic resistance” of even the most “Russified” parts of the local society. This contradiction does not even find a corresponding place in his hierarchy of collective identifications within which the “national principle” holds the upper hand. His arguments for the ultimate failure of the Russification project can be grouped under three headings: ethnic (with racial overtones), religious and pragmatic.

The ethnic argument was based on the widespread assumption of racial hierarchy that differentiated the progressive potential of the three major European “families of peoples:” the Romance, the Germanic and the Slavic “tribes.” As I pointed out elsewhere, this pseudo-

<sup>742</sup> Dumitru C. Moruzi. *Rusii si romanii* [The Russians and the Romanians]. Chisinau: Museum, 2001, p. 110, 84.

<sup>743</sup> Dumitru C. Moruzi. *Rusii si romanii* [The Russians and the Romanians]. Chisinau: Museum, 2001, pp. 97-106

classification was invoked even by more moderate political and intellectual figures (such as A.D. Xenopol or D. A. Sturdza) as an “explanatory” scheme for the relative position of the Romanian kingdom on the international scene. Moruzi used the same cliché in order to argue the “innate superiority” of the Latin Romanian element in Bessarabia (however corrupted) in comparison with the Slavs and, thus, the lack of success of any project meant to turn them into Slavs.<sup>744</sup> The same premise is used in the case of the “justificatory” picture of the Bessarabian nobility, whose “Latin intelligence” is deemed superior to the “Slavic one” and thus amenable to the acceptance of its “national mission,” even if this was temporarily obscured by the veil of tsarist autocracy.<sup>745</sup>

The religious argument was constructed on the same model that Hasdeu used in his sketch on “The Neva Pope.” While direct influence is improbable in this case (though plausible), the emphasis on the fundamental difference of the Russian Church from all the other Orthodox Christians due to its subordination to the Russian emperor is present in Moruzi’s work.<sup>746</sup> This is of course a device consciously used to maximize the difference between the Orthodox Russians and Romanians, since the author is keenly aware that the Bessarabians are especially endangered in their “national essence” by their religious proximity with the Russians, effective assimilation requiring only a “change of name.”<sup>747</sup> The institutional difference of the church administration is thus transformed into a basic “rupture” between the “truly Orthodox” Romanians and the “imperial” Russians that substituted autocracy for Orthodoxy.

Finally, the pragmatic argument insisted on the greater relative significance of Bessarabia as part of Romania in comparison with its insignificant place within the Russian Empire. Moruzi is

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<sup>744</sup> Dumitru C. Moruzi. *Pribeși în țară răpită: Roman social Basarabean*. [Refugees in a Stolen Country: A Bessarabian Social Novel]. Iași: Institutul de Arte Grafice N. V. Ștefăniu et Co., 1912, p. 405

<sup>745</sup> Dumitru C. Moruzi. *Rusii și romanii* [The Russians and the Romanians]. Chisinau: Museum, 2001, p. 106

<sup>746</sup> Dumitru C. Moruzi. *Rusii și romanii* [The Russians and the Romanians]. Chisinau: Museum, 2001, p. 46-47; Dumitru C. Moruzi. *Pribeși în țară răpită: Roman social Basarabean*. [Refugees in a Stolen Country: A Bessarabian Social Novel]. Iași: Institutul de Arte Grafice N. V. Ștefăniu et Co., 1912, p. 404-405

<sup>747</sup> Dumitru C. Moruzi. *Rusii și romanii* [The Russians and the Romanians]. Chisinau: Museum, 2001, p. 20

careful to warn his potential Bessarabian elite audience of the dangers of constitutionalism, since “After the despotism of the autocracy, they would encounter the despotism of parliamentary majorities, against which one can only fight with the help of numbers. Returning to its maternal fold, Bessarabia would represent at least one fifth of the Romanian state.”<sup>748</sup> A conservative and aristocratic bias is clearly discernible here, confirming the author’s rather ambiguous attitude towards democracy if it is not solidly entrenched in a national framework.

The pragmatic argument is turned “on its feet” when Moruzi discusses the two categories of the “Russified” Bessarabians that do not fit his national ideal. In a novel published in 1912 (on the occasion of the annexation anniversary) he again conflates the pro-monarchical aristocratic and rightist elements (the “true Russians”) with the revolutionaries and, in a pamphlet form, identifies these two groups as the most pernicious for the “healthy” Romanian element.<sup>749</sup> Moruzi then scathingly refers to the 1912 celebration itself, stating that “These two categories will participate at the jubilee marking one hundred years of Russian domination... in the summer of 1912. They will be the only ones to surround the tsar, the first with the lust to gain personal profit, ranks and decorations; the second, harboring a no less altruistic desire to send the Tsar to the serene spheres [of heaven]... through the noble and valiant means of a dynamite bomb!”<sup>750</sup> In the same context, he makes an implicit comparison between the situation of Bessarabia and the “well-inhabited, rich and flourishing shores of Dobrogea” that are part of a world intrinsically opposed to the Russian anachronistic realm: a Romanian state that is defined as “free, independent and European.”<sup>751</sup> Thus, the pragmatism of the Russified stratum of the Bessarabians

<sup>748</sup> Dumitru C. Moruzi. *Rusii și românii* [The Russians and the Romanians]. Chisinau: Museum, 2001, p. 106

<sup>749</sup> Dumitru C. Moruzi. *Pribegi în țară răpită: Roman social Basarabean*. [Refugees in a Stolen Country: A Bessarabian Social Novel]. Iași: Institutul de Arte Grafice N. V. Ștefăniu et Co., 1912, p. 401

<sup>750</sup> Dumitru C. Moruzi. *Pribegi în țară răpită: Roman social Basarabean*. [Refugees in a Stolen Country: A Bessarabian Social Novel]. Iași: Institutul de Arte Grafice N. V. Ștefăniu et Co., 1912, p. 402

<sup>751</sup> Dumitru C. Moruzi. *Pribegi în țară răpită: Roman social Basarabean*. [Refugees in a Stolen Country: A Bessarabian Social Novel]. Iași: Institutul de Arte Grafice N. V. Ștefăniu et Co., 1912, p. 402

is presented as false, since it presupposed the acceptance of a political and social order that was contrary even to their own interests, if not to the tendencies of the contemporary social development. The implicit antinomy between Romania and Russia is driven here to its logical outcome, postulating the superiority of the Romanian political and social order due to its purported national and social solidarity that differentiated it from the artificial “patchwork” of the Russian Empire. Moruzi bases his idealization of the Romanian social fabric on the premises of Iorga’s national conservatism, using an even more one-sided lens that stressed the primacy of the national over the social and minimized the signs of social strain that beset the Romanian nation-state in the early XX century.<sup>752</sup>

A final aspect worth emphasizing concerns the wider context in which this nationally optimistic author places the Bessarabian case. In order to support his claim of the resilience and “rebirth” of the local “Romanian nationality,”<sup>753</sup> he invoked the parallel with the example of the Alsace and Lorraine, which acquired the status of a commonplace in the Romanian literature of the early XX century. Contrary to most other references, however (including Iorga’s), Moruzi employs this comparison to stress the legitimacy of German claims to the two French provinces, since these are based on the “national principle,” so important for his version of state nationalism. Bessarabia’s position with respect to Romania is thus likened to the situation of Alsace: “The reintegration of the Alsatians into the German fatherland was much more difficult, and, despite this, it was achieved, not only through the force of arms, since blood does not turn into water!”<sup>754</sup> The author sacrificed his Francophile position to the supremacy of the “national interest.” His ethnicism reached its climax in another work where he developed the “Bessarabia-Alsace”

<sup>752</sup> Dumitru C. Moruzi, *Înstrăinații: Studiu social, în formă de roman (1854-1907)* [The Alienated: A Social Study in the Form of a Novel]. Vălenii de Munte: Editura „Neamul Românesc,” 1910, p. 7

<sup>753</sup> Dumitru C. Moruzi. *Pribegi în țară răpită: Roman social Basarabean*. [Refugees in a Stolen Country: A Bessarabian Social Novel]. Iași: Institutul de Arte Grafice N. V. Ștefăniu et Co., 1912, p. 400

<sup>754</sup> Dumitru C. Moruzi. *Rusii și românii* [The Russians and the Romanians]. Chisinau: Museum, 2001, p. 100

parallel in much greater detail. The ritualistic phrases invoking “blood and soil” only served to enhance the rhetorical effect. It becomes obvious, that ethnicity (based on language) superseded in his scheme any considerations of civilizational superiority or cultural affinities. This passage is worth quoting at length, since it illustrates Moruzi’s whole vision of Bessarabia’s place within the Romanian national space (and its corresponding “shallow ties” to the Russian imperial state):

For 210 years, Alsatian Germany [sic] remained under French administration, without losing either its language and its national costume, or its customs and traditions. It even acquired a certain affinity for its conquerors, due to the reason that its German brothers were still suffering under a feudal regime, while it enjoyed the human rights proclaimed by the First French Republic. It therefore fought with a German bravery and obstinacy against its German brothers... Memories of shared glories and suffering, multiple kinship relations took place between the conquerors and the conquered; such ties never occurred between the Russians and the Bessarabians. The language, however, the German language, the German mores and customs remained unaffected, like a misunderstood mission that nevertheless foreshadowed the future. Even when the day of the reintegration into the nation arrived, this holy mission was not understood, and the Alsatians fought against their blood brothers to defend... France... Today, however, after only forty years of German domination, the Alsatians have again become Germans in language, clothing and character [*fire*], ready to defend the German fatherland with the same bravery and obstinacy!<sup>755</sup>

Moruzi reiterates the same point in the concluding remarks of his work, where he shifts the emphasis (but not the essence) of the argument by introducing a direct opposition between the Bessarabian and Alsatian cases. This time, the author employs a strategy of rhetorical questions which amount to the conclusion that, despite the radical difference between the attitude of the French towards their Alsatian citizens and that of the Russian government towards its Bessarabian subjects, the policy of integration (under whatever form) is doomed to failure due to the resilience of the “national essence.”<sup>756</sup> The “national character” thus turns into an a-temporal and immutable feature that can hardly be affected by the domain of history. Progress appears as relative with reference to the national features that are its only framework and that have a primary and determining influence on a community’s development.

<sup>755</sup> Dumitru C. Moruzi. *Pribezi în țară răpită: Roman social Basarabean*. [Refugees in a Stolen Country: A Bessarabian Social Novel]. Iași: Institutul de Arte Grafice N. V. Ștefăniu et Co., 1912, p. 402-403

<sup>756</sup> Dumitru C. Moruzi. *Pribezi în țară răpită: Roman social Basarabean*. [Refugees in a Stolen Country: A Bessarabian Social Novel]. Iași: Institutul de Arte Grafice N. V. Ștefăniu et Co., 1912, p. 404-405



Moruzi's reading of the Bessarabian case is both more straightforward and radical than other contemporary instances of the same discourse. This radicalism, however, bears no social connotation and is rather a combination of a militant and conservative nationalism with a personal streak of "local nostalgia" that is discernible in some of his poems with a local Bessarabian flavor.<sup>757</sup> Moruzi in fact elaborates a "personal utopia" of a traditional and immobile Bessarabian peasant society that fits his ideal image of the Romanian nation rather than any form of social reality. The author himself is aware of this contradiction and seeks to transcend it by endowing his highly personal prose with a "sociological" clout. The frustrations of this marginal official and intellectual found an outlet through the construction of an image of Bessarabia that allowed the transfer of the "alienating" reality of early XX century Romania into a space of tradition and "eternal past" that was only distorted by the pernicious influence of a foreign power, but that had the potential of infusing new energy into the project of "national restoration" pursued by the Romanian national intelligentsia in the early XX century.

#### ***4. Stere or the Legal Revolutionary***

The figure of Constantin Stere is, perhaps, the most emblematic example for the notion of "refugee" used in the title of this chapter. Stere's career is a peculiar blend of centrality in the contemporary ideological debates and an acute sense of marginality that followed him throughout his life in his double guise as the most outspoken representative of the Bessarabian born intellectuals on the Romanian political scene and a controversial political activist mired in accusations of treason and double-dealing. The following discussion will focus only on the first part of Stere's public activity in the Romanian Kingdom, comprising the last years of the XIX century and, especially, the early XX century up to (and partly including) World War I.

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<sup>757</sup> Dumitru C. Moruzi. *Cântece basarabene* [Bessarabian Songs]. Iași: Institut de Arte Grafice N. V. Ștefăniu et Co., 1912, p. 15-16

Specifically, I do not examine Stere's importance as a social theorist and political doctrinaire and his involvement in the elaboration of the "populist" (*poporanist*) ideology and movement in the first decade of the XX century.<sup>758</sup> Neither do I transcend the divide of the war in order to follow the convoluted path of Stere's involvement in the organization and theoretical elaboration of the bases of the "peasantist" doctrine in the 1920s. I only touch upon Stere's populist framework of analyzing social phenomena insofar as it is relevant to his stance on the Bessarabian case and emphasize the differentiating impact of this ideological peculiarity in comparison with the previously discussed authors.

I highlight, first, both these differences and the inherent continuities that embedded Stere's visions of Bessarabia in the mainstream national narrative. Second, I shortly present Stere's position on Romania's foreign policy during the period of Romania's neutrality in World War I (1914-1916) as an illustration of the dilemmas that a consistently anti-Russian discourse presupposed for an intellectual who went against the grain of the dominant current of opinion, insisting on the privileged position of Bessarabia in the hierarchy of Romanian irredentist claims. Third, I point out Stere's awkward position within the Romanian establishment, not only due to his political preferences, but also due to his personal experience as an exile (in the Russian as well as the Romanian context) and to the "uncertainty of identity" that this engendered. The tension between Stere's prominence as a political thinker and his failure as a practical politician created a distorted view of his personality in contemporary circles, producing an image of a towering, but solitary and isolated figure that remained in many ways foreign to the Romanian

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<sup>758</sup> For a detailed discussion of Stere's foundation of and contribution to the "poporanist" current, see Z. Ornea, *Poporanismul* [Romanian Populism] (Bucharest, 1972) and also Z. Ornea, *Viata lui Constantin Stere* [The Life of Constantin Stere], vol. I (Bucharest: Cartea Romaneasca, 1989). A useful volume of Stere's selected works has been published by the same exegete as far back as 1979 (C. Stere, *Scrieri* [Writings], Bucharest, 1979). For a synthetic presentation of the Romanian variant of populism espoused by Stere, See Keith Hitchins, *Romania. 1866-1947* (Bucharest: Humanitas, 2004), pp. 82-86

environment that he entered in the early 1890s, if not culturally, then at least psychologically and intellectually.

The biographical element in Stere's self-construction is more significant than in either of the previous two examples of Bessarabian émigrés. Unlike both Hasdeu and Moruzi, Stere was directly shaped by his youth's Russian environment in many ways. The two fundamental dimensions, in this respect, are his personal experience as a convict in Siberia and his intellectual and political immersion in the world of Russian populism. Born in 1865 into a family of well-to-do petty noble landowners of Northern Bessarabia, Stere pursued his secondary education in Chisinau, where he apparently entered the local revolutionary circles grouped around the "People's Will" in the early 1880s. He quickly achieved a certain prominence among his colleagues (both due to his intellectual abilities and his organizational skills), but his active phase as a revolutionary ended abruptly upon his graduation from the local gymnasium, when he was arrested along with most of his collaborators in May 1884.<sup>759</sup> After spending a year in the Odessa prison, he was sentenced to exile in Western Siberia and, later, due to his involvement in certain suspect activities in his place of detention, his sentence was extended and he was transferred to a much less hospitable environment. During this period of existential upheaval, he apparently abandoned his earlier radical brand of populism in favor of a more reformist variant advocating gradual change through legal means instead of violent revolution.<sup>760</sup> He also had the means to

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<sup>759</sup> Curiously, this incident provoked a vivid reaction of the local educated society, which shows to what extent such occurrences were atypical for the quiet atmosphere of the Bessarabian "backwater." An account of the event, as well as eloquent portraits of the protagonists (including Stere himself), can be found in: G. Bezviconi, ed. *Amintiri din Basarabia. 1884-1891* [Memories from Bessarabia. 1884-1891], in: *Convorbiri Literare*, June 1940, pp. 533-535. This is a Romanian-language edition of the private journal of M.C. Zozulin, a high-ranking Bessarabian bureaucrat at the time, which also contains other interesting details about Bessarabia during the 1880s.

<sup>760</sup> During the early 1930s, the Soviet press uncovered a purported "repentance letter" written by Stere to the Chief of Gendarmes in 1888, when his health was deteriorating. Stere never recognized his authorship, though the authenticity of this document is highly plausible. It is clear, however, that by the late 1880s Stere was no longer a radical Populist. For a discussion of this letter and the stages of Stere's political evolution during this period, see Z. Ornea, *Viata lui Constantin Stere* [The Life of Constantin Stere], vol. I, pp. 99-101.

pursue an intense process of self-education, reading mostly works on positivist philosophy and political economy, which indicated an early penchant for a sociological approach to political and moral problems.

The period of his exile also witnessed the emergence of the tension between the social and national aspects of his views. This tension later characterized Stere's particular stance in different periods of his political activity. The social aspects clearly predominated, but the nationalizing tendency held the upper hand in moments of crisis (e.g., during the neutrality debates on foreign policy or in the later phase of the Romanian involvement into the war, when he elaborated his most coherent vision on the "Bessarabian question."). Stere himself acknowledged his indebtedness to his early Russian milieu and the impact of his revolutionary engagement upon his attitude to national issues: "Even national consciousness was reached by our entire generation not through any direct influence coming from the [Romanian] kingdom, but through an emanation from the Russian revolutionary current. [This happened] through the contact with the popular masses required by a revolutionary's duty, since, from the first steps of descending "to the people," we discovered that, more than the way of life and social hierarchy, language and the external form of culture separate us [from them]."<sup>761</sup>

Stere perceived this influence, however, in intellectual rather than practical terms. In a polemical piece written as a reaction to Gherea's main theoretical work, Stere declined his expertise on the rural question in Russia and on Great Russian issues in particular due to the irrelevance of his personal experience in this respect. In a characteristic gesture of self-denial, he emphasized his marginal status in contemporary Russian society, that he viewed either from a geographically or a socially peripheral position: "I am forced to make, once and for all, a

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<sup>761</sup> C. Stere. *Preludii. Partidul National Taranes si "cazul Stere."* [Preludes. The National Peasant Party and the "Stere Case"], Bucharest, 1930, p. 21

“sensational” confession. I can say that I haven’t lived a single day in Russia. Aside from Bessarabia, I only know Siberia and the [tsarist] prisons- and Mr. Gherea will not claim that Russia can be reduced to that. I know the Russian peasant only very slightly, and I have never been a peasantist [*țărănist*] in Russia. I have displayed a constant dislike for bogus peasantism [*țărănismul de operetă*].”<sup>762</sup> Stere used this argument of „ignorance” (in stark contrast with his usual confident and expert-like discourse on matters Russian) not only to hide his uneasiness towards Gherea’s position, but also to distance himself from the stigma of his Russian background that surfaced only too often in his critics’ appraisals. His vacillation on recognizing the influence of Russian populism on the *poporanist* current served similar purposes of rhetorical distancing from his past as a revolutionary and “internal exile” in the Russian Empire.<sup>763</sup>

After returning to Bessarabia from his administrative exile in late 1891 or early 1892, Stere immigrated to Romania in November 1892. Like Hasdeu’s, Stere’s early biography was often prone to “romanticizing” by contemporaries who turned his stigmatized status as an émigré from the Russian Empire into an essential trait of his personality that determined not only his political options, but also his peculiar status in the Romanian cultural and political milieu. Unlike Hasdeu, Stere did not promote his self-image as an exile until late in life, in his auto-biographical novel.<sup>764</sup> This was amply compensated for by the image constructed around, on the one hand, the circumstances of his emigration to Romania and, on the other hand, in connection with the cliché of “revolutionary hero (or villain)” used as a label to define Stere’s position in the political landscape. The problem of his legal status in Romania (similarly to Hasdeu’s case) gave birth to

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<sup>762</sup> C. Stere, “Neoiobagia” dlui Gherea,” in: *Viata Romaneasca* [Romanian Life], 1910, Nr. 11, p. 254. Cited in: Z. Ornea, *Viata lui Constantin Stere* [The Life of Constantin Stere], vol. I, p. 98

<sup>763</sup> Z. Ornea, *Viata lui Constantin Stere* [The Life of Constantin Stere], vol. I, p. 150

<sup>764</sup> However, it would be an exaggeration to see Stere’s reluctance to exploit his experience of exile as a conscious “avoidance strategy.” In 1914, for example, he published a semi-fictional sketch powerfully evoking the time he spent in Siberia, *In voia valurilor. Icoane din Siberia* [In the Waves’ Power. Icons from Siberia], which he used as a basis for his later novel. Stere was rather careful to disassociate his image as a public figure from these personal experiences, which was not the case of most of his political followers and opponents.

contrasting interpretations that sought to present his emigration as an exceptional experience that would enhance his status as a refugee from a hostile and foreign environment. Reviewing the various versions of the events surrounding Stere's leaving the Russian Empire (including "escaping from Siberia" and "fleeing beyond the Prut"), Stere's biographer concludes that these conjectures are not credible and were concocted in order to better connect the personal dimension of Stere's exile with his political Russophobia.<sup>765</sup>

After acquiring Romanian citizenship in 1895, Stere's connection to the Russian environment was transferred from the legal to the mental sphere and caused a permanent ambiguity in the public perception of this figure that did not fit the usual pattern of a Romanian politician. Stere's simultaneous belonging to and estrangement from the realm of national policy (and discourse) derived from his double position as the most vocal representative of the Bessarabian theme in the Romanian public sphere of the early XX century and from his immersion in the alien universe of the Russian Empire that shaped his moral and social preferences. While Stere's sensibility to national issues was viewed as a manifestation of his marginal status as a Bessarabian, his propensity to emphasize the social dimension of reform was linked to his adoption of the moral and political ethos of the Russian intelligentsia. Aside from the external level of Stere's "foreignness," symbolized by the (self-assumed?) nickname of "the Siberian," by which he was known in political circles, many of the later commentators emphasized the peculiarity of Stere's psychological type. By implication, Stere's personal character did not fit the "national character" of the Romanian people (or at least the collective traits of the country's political elite), leading to his isolation and failure to fully integrate in the Romanian political system.

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<sup>765</sup> Stere himself denied that he was a "refugee" and apparently produced a passport issued by the Bessarabian governor, A. Konstantinovich, granting him free passage to Romania. Stere's version seemed all the more plausible since he pursued his education at the University of Iasi, which might have provided a reason for granting him a passport. See Z. Ornea, *Viata lui Constantin Stere* [The Life of Constantin Stere], vol. I, p. 137.

One author defending this psychological interpretation of Stere's career asserts: "Throughout his hectic life, he remained unchanged, in the same [mental] shape he acquired as a young revolutionary raised in the specific atmosphere of the Russian revolutionary milieu, just like Siberia molded his sensibility."<sup>766</sup> In a further development of the same thesis, Seicaru reinforces his (unconvincing but revealing) point: "Fundamentally, Stere was an uprooted person, a permanent exile; as a Bessarabian Moldavian, [he was] an exile in the Russian world and, later, as an ex-revolutionary and deportee, [he was] an exile within Romanian life."<sup>767</sup> This image (important, of course, not as an explanatory tool for Stere's activity, but as an indication of the place he achieved in the public consciousness of the period) led to a conclusion of fundamental ambiguity and displacement that had not only morally devastating but also politically crippling consequences. Seicaru does not hesitate to make this explicit enough:

C. Stere lived with a [truly] Romanian intensity through all the [epoch's] political problems. His love for the Romanian land, his passion for Bessarabia, his preoccupation for the future of the Romanian nation [*neamului*] are obvious, but it is no less obvious that his spiritual formation, his intellectual sensibility remained, till the very end, under a Russian intellectual influence. This is, perhaps, the explanation... for the isolation that he felt throughout his entire life. Into that [Romanian] climate of ironic liveliness [*vioiciune zeflemista*], he brought a seriousness, a grave preoccupation for the problems of [human] existence. This [feature] made him singular; it made him unable to spiritually integrate into the [Romanian] environment.<sup>768</sup>

Despite Stere's apparent success as a public figure and political ideologist, his constant failures as a practicing politician (exacerbated after World War I due to accusations of collaboration with the German occupation authorities) were interpreted not as due to contingent factors, but to a deeply embedded psychological difference that did not allow him to become adapted to the Kingdom's political mores. Whereas Stere perceived himself as primarily a political thinker and public intellectual (in both of these roles he eminently, if falteringly,

<sup>766</sup> Pamfil Seicaru, *Un singuratec: C. Stere* [A Loner: C. Stere] ("Carpatii" Publishing House: Madrid, 1956), p. 5

<sup>767</sup> Pamfil Seicaru, *Un singuratec: C. Stere* [A Loner: C. Stere] ("Carpatii" Publishing House: Madrid, 1956), p. 6

<sup>768</sup> Pamfil Seicaru, *Un singuratec: C. Stere* [A Loner: C. Stere] ("Carpatii" Publishing House: Madrid, 1956), p. 30

succeeded both as a proponent of “poporanism” before 1914 and of peasantism after the war), his social reformism that owed indeed much to the Russian context made him a *bête noire* of the Romanian political mainstream.<sup>769</sup> However, the transfer of political differences to the level of mental incompatibility proved to what extent the motive of the “uncertainty of identity” influenced the pattern of the construction of the careers and public images of the Bessarabian émigrés in Romania. Even when, in Stere’s case, his reformist designs were ultimately accepted by the Liberal establishment (and, likewise, by the National-Peasant Party after the war), the problematic nature of his personal identity impacted his position as a public figure. Even if Stere’s marginality cannot be explained only (or even mostly) through the stigma of his Russian background and through his Bessarabian origin, the psychological lens through which his contemporaries interpreted his peculiarity and Stere’s own acknowledgement of the formative impact of his early traumatic experience in Siberia and of his indebtedness to Russian intellectual sources should keep one’s mind open to the importance of such “outside factors” in the analysis of discourse.

Stere’s articulation of a coherent vision of the Bessarabian case emerged mainly on two occasions, both linked to the revolutionary upsurges in the Russian Empire in the early XX century. Though acutely aware of his own identity as a Bessarabian,<sup>770</sup> he only produced a significant written output on Bessarabian realities in times of crisis or of active involvement in local politics. Contrary to the two previous figures, Stere directly witnessed and participated in

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<sup>769</sup> In this sense, the parallels between Stere’s political ideas and the Socialist Revolutionary current in Russia are not completely hazardous. Stere’s variant of peasant-oriented “populism” never reached the theoretical elaboration of Social Democracy, even in its Romanian “soft version” represented by Gherea’s doctrinal works of the late XIX and early XX century. I will not further dwell on this topic here; for an interesting analysis of Stere’s peculiar position in the contemporary ideological debates, see Z. Ornea, *Viata lui Constantin Stere* [The Life of Constantin Stere], vol. I, pp 152 and ff. and pp. 355-385.

<sup>770</sup> Occasionally, this awareness led to a defensive stance pointing to the difficulties that this status entailed for his career prospects or academic performance. Not surprisingly, the linguistic predicament held a prominent place within this line of argumentation. Z. Ornea, *Viata lui Constantin Stere* [The Life of Constantin Stere], vol. I, p. 227



the actions of the fledgling local intelligentsia aimed at exploiting the revolutionary crisis of 1905 in order to advance claims concerning social reform and (only very timidly) cultural autonomy. Stere undertook a first trip to Chisinau apparently with the consent, if not the direct financial support of the Romanian government in early December 1905, at the apex of the revolutionary events. Especially important for his position in this period are the two articles he wrote for the Liberal newspaper *L'indépendance Roumaine* in December 1905. Praising the October Manifesto (in an optimistic phase of his analysis of Russia's situation) as a chance for the gradual emancipation of the non-Russian peripheries according to the principle of national autonomy, Stere had this to say on Bessarabia's future: "During this period of transformation, the last stage will lead to a new Russia, where every race will be able to develop according to its own genius, following the solemn promises of the imperial decree; the role of the Romanian intellectuals from Bessarabia is definitively fixed. The duty of Bessarabia's Romanian intelligentsia is to dedicate itself today to the cause of the conservation of the race, to the cause of civilization and order."<sup>771</sup>

Stere fully internalized the Romanian national discourse (the use of the term "race" as equivalent to a national community is revealing in this sense), though at this stage his national militancy was expressed "by default" rather than in the guise of a full-fledged program. The importance of the organic rhetoric of the nation is visible even at this early stage and will constitute one of the obvious commonalities both with the other two cases discussed here and with the larger framework of the Romanian national narrative. During his stay in Chisinau, Stere combined his national and social agenda. While significantly contributing to the preparations for the publication of the first local Romanian-language newspaper, he also wrote a series of articles

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<sup>771</sup> "Bessarabie," in: *L'indépendance Roumaine*, November 30/ December 13, 1905. Cited in Z. Ornea, *Viata lui Constantin Stere* [The Life of Constantin Stere], vol. I, p. 344

in early 1906 that specifically emphasized the agrarian question.<sup>772</sup> The importance of his mission to Bessarabia (and its quasi-official character) is also suggested by the vehement reaction of Krushevan's newspaper to Stere's presence in Chisinau. The Bessarabian officials and rightist journalists were clearly aware of the potential dangers that Stere's skills as an organizer entailed for the consolidation of the local oppositional movement.<sup>773</sup> There are grounds to believe that he was directly involved in coordinating the local conspiratorial circles that were forming during the period of the heightened political turmoil in the winter and spring of 1906.<sup>774</sup>

However, this activist period in Stere's interest for Bessarabian matters came to an end later during 1906, when he was forced to return to Romania. He limited his contribution to the Bessarabian developments by providing logistical and (partly) financial assistance and by consulting the local militants on matters related to the best tactics aimed at appeasing the Russian authorities and, at the same time, at articulating the specific economic and cultural demands that dominated the revolutionary agenda. On this occasion, however, Stere failed to propose a coherent vision of Bessarabia as part of the Romanian national discourse. His general democratic and socially informed rhetoric that viewed the Russian Empire in a negative light faced the dilemma of creating an attractive picture of the "Romanian alternative" for the emerging local Bessarabian opposition and also of putting Bessarabia on the map of the Romanian national imagination. The tension between Stere's preoccupation for social and national issues combined in a powerful critique of the Russian imperial regime, but did not produce a true alternative discourse, since the Romanian societal model did not live up to his populist standards.

<sup>772</sup> Z. Ornea, *Viata lui Constantin Stere* [The Life of Constantin Stere], vol. I, p. 345

<sup>773</sup> C. Stere, "Basarabia si revolutia din 1905 [Bessarabia and the 1905 Revolution]," in: C. Stere. *Marele războiu și politica României*. [The Great War and Romania's Policy]. Editura ziarului „Lumina,” Bucharest, 1918, p. 91

<sup>774</sup> Z. Ornea, *Viata lui Constantin Stere* [The Life of Constantin Stere], vol. I, p. 346-347

Stere's discourse changed dramatically during the intense debates on Romania's international position in the context of World War I. The national overtones became much more pronounced in his writings, but also in his public speeches. His importance as one of the vocal defenders of a pro-German position will be discussed later. Generally, the dominant topics that he advanced in the framework of the polemics raging throughout the neutrality period concerned a detailed elaboration of the "myth of Russian expansionism" that entailed purportedly catastrophic consequences for the future of the Romanian state. A second major argument that designated Stere as a staunch defender of the Bessarabian agenda referred to his concept of "integral national ideal" that he developed in order to avoid the accusation of privileging the Romanian irredenta in Bessarabia at the expense of other Romanian-inhabited territories. His premise derived from the purported closer historical connection between Bessarabia's history and Romanian statehood, but also from an almost obsessive insistence on the danger of short-term advantages or territorial gains in Transylvania that would only delay the final advent of Russian hegemony that would ultimately engulf both the Romanian Kingdom and Transylvania into a Russian-dominated space.<sup>775</sup>

Aside from the specific arguments devoted to these issues, Stere provided a glimpse of his concept of the Romanian nation that displays striking similarities to the opinions of the more conservative authors analyzed above. The nation appears as an organic totality that can only reach its full potential through the reintegration of all the severed parts of the national body. The

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<sup>775</sup> Stere expressed his position on the problem of "Russian expansionism" and the Romanian course of action in foreign policy on three major occasions that comprised the period between December 1914 and early 1916. These three works are: C. Stere, *Romania si razboiul European* [Romania and the European War] (Iasi: Publishing House of the "Viata Romaneasca" Journal, 1915); *Politica externa a Romaniei. Cuvantarile ... d-lor P. P. Carp si C. Stere* [Romania's Foreign Policy. The Discourses... of P. P. Carp and C. Stere] (Iasi: Publishing House of the "Viata Romaneasca" Journal, 1915) and, finally, C. Stere, *Discutul D-lui Take Ionescu. Studiu critic* [Mr. Take Ionescu's Discourse. A Critical Study] (Iasi: Publishing House of the "Viata Romaneasca" Journal, 1916). The last two publications reflected the debates on Romania's future involvement into the war that took place in the Romanian parliament in December 1915. Stere's role in this controversy was analyzed by Z. Ornea in Z. Ornea, *Viata lui Constantin Stere* [The Life of Constantin Stere], vol. II, pp. 102-118 and will be examined in the next chapter.

author does not hesitate to mix the arguments of historical continuity, the “borderland” character of the Romanians and the organic nature of the development of the national entity and achieves a rhetorically compelling vision of Romania’s national destiny (from which the reference to a “national character” is not missing either):

We, gentlemen, are not a conquering people. If the elements that entered into the composition of this nation [*neam*] have come from other places, we, however, were born on this earth, we have grown directly from it; so, we cannot give up even one atom (sic) from the nation’s domain [*tarina neamului*]. Each and every Romanian element contributed to the creation of the Romanian soul, which is one and the same everywhere. And the fact that we have remained here, at the frontiers of three civilizations, gives us, perhaps, the power to later bring our own... contribution to the thesaurus of the common human civilization. (Applause.) And, gentlemen, especially in what concerns Bukovina and Bessarabia, that have been a part of ancient Moldavia, they have shared their entire history with the Romanians from the Kingdom. Our [Bessarabian] ancestors, like your ancestors, have lived together under Alexander the Good, under Stephen the Great and under John the Terrible! There isn’t a single particle [*pulbere*] of Romanian land that doesn’t also contain a drop of their blood and a molecule of their bones! We have built this State together... [T]he nation is a living being that persists through the centuries. We are but transitory links in the unending chain of generations, so not only do you not have the right to give up the graves of the ancestors that lie beyond the Prut, but you do not have the right to give up the Romanian life from those territories also for the sake of the generations that will come later.<sup>776</sup>

Stere’s positioning in the contemporary Romanian public sphere thus displays a certain ambiguity beyond the personal dimension. While sharing the basic premises and notions of the mainstream discourse, he differed with most of his contemporaries with regard to the priorities of nation-building and the methods required for achieving national unity. Despite his claims to the contrary, he also thought in categories of a hierarchy of national territories that privileged Bessarabia. The “pro-Bessarabian” argument rested on a number of assumptions, including: the perceived civilizational inferiority of the Russian Empire, expressed mainly in political, but also in moral and economic terms; the stronger claim to historical continuity that Bessarabia shared with the other parts of the Kingdom and which differentiated it from Transylvania; the greater danger of assimilation that the Bessarabian Romanians were subject to in comparison with their

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<sup>776</sup> *Politica externa a Romaniei. Cuvantarile ... d-lor P. P. Carp si C. Stere* [Romania’s Foreign Policy. The Discourses... of P. P. Carp and C. Stere] (Iasi: Publishing House of the “Viata Romaneasca” Journal, 1915, pp. 43-45

Transylvanian co-nationals, due both to the better organization of the latter's resistance and to the weakness of the Hungarians' assimilatory capacity; the pragmatic advantages that an alliance with the Central Powers guaranteed in the face of a Russian Empire that could only build its relations with Romania starting from a logic of a "zero-sum game." Though these motifs were present throughout his earlier writings, an articulate version of Stere's position on the "Bessarabian question" was elaborated after Romania's disastrous involvement into World War I, at the lowest ebb of military fortunes, when Romania was on the brink of collapse in the late autumn and winter of 1917.

At the end of 1917, while residing in the Romanian capital, Stere began editing the first (and only) Romanian-language newspaper in the occupied zone. While advocating a pro-German position (both out of personal conviction and pragmatic necessity), Stere pursued his two-pronged agenda of social reform and national militancy in terms identical with his prewar stance.<sup>777</sup> He later republished his editorials in a separate volume that amounted to the most detailed and coherent illustration of Stere's opinions on the burning national and social issues that dominated public debate in this time of crisis.<sup>778</sup> Faithful to his Germanophile argument, he envisaged Romania's future in a close alliance with the seemingly victorious Central Powers that would eventually consecrate Romania's entry into the "political and economic complex of the Mitteleuropa." The future of Romania's institutions and the chance for effective democratization, as well as the fulfillment of the "national ideal" were linked, in Stere's view, to Romania's geopolitical realignment within the sphere of German hegemony.<sup>779</sup> In this context, as well as due to the revolutionary events in the Russian Empire that precipitated the developments in

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<sup>777</sup> An account of the context of appearance and of the significance of the "Lumina" [The Light] newspaper can be found in: Z. Ornea, *Viata lui Constantin Stere* [The Life of Constantin Stere], vol. II, pp. 173-178

<sup>778</sup> C. Stere. *Marele războiu și politica României*. [The Great War and Romania's Policy]. Editura ziarului „Lumina,” Bucharest, 1918

<sup>779</sup> Z. Ornea, *Viata lui Constantin Stere* [The Life of Constantin Stere], vol. II, p. 177

Bessarabia, Stere devoted much of his attention to the significance of Bessarabia's inclusion into the Romanian national space and to the adequacy of pre-war Romanian nationalism to the changed circumstances.

Stere constructed a two-sided argument that emphasized, on the one hand, the already familiar topics outlined above (and the impossibility of reaching any compromise with Russia). On the other hand, these articles represented a rebuttal of the variant of Romanian nationalism promoted by such figures as N. Iorga and A.C. Cuza, which Stere accused of hollowness, wishful thinking, lack of an efficient national strategy and even outright hypocrisy and bad faith.<sup>780</sup> The author's interpretation of the "Bessarabian problem" derived from the same organic model that informed his opponents' views. However, Stere tended to endow the Russian-Romanian controversy with a pragmatic dimension of interstate conflict and "legalistic" arguments that did not match either the Romantic or the conservative model. In this scheme, the 1878 moment played the role of a founding event at least to the same extent as the other emblematic temporal marker of 1812. The explanation for this emphasis on later occurrences can be found in the symbolic importance that Stere perceived in the "Russian felony" that deprived a faithful ally of a part of its inalienable "physical being."<sup>781</sup> In fact, Stere conflated the moral and material consequences of the 1878 controversy and equaled any collaboration with the Russian Empire to an effective sanction of the "terrible act" that ran counter not only to Romania's traditional foreign policy, but also to the opinions of its "founding fathers—" Kogalniceanu and I. C. Bratianu.<sup>782</sup>

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<sup>780</sup> The condemnation of the ignorance, indifference or of the distorted and counterproductive visions of such nationalists is especially poignant in two articles of the series: "Basarabia si "Tara-Muma" [Bessarabia and the "Mother-Country"] (October 26, 1917) and "Nationalism?..." [Nationalism?] (December 17, 1917), in: *Marele războiu și politica României*. [The Great War and Romania's Policy]. Editura ziarului „Lumina,” Bucharest, 1918 , pp. 96-99 and 103-105

<sup>781</sup> C. Stere, "Idealul national" [The National Ideal] (October 1, 1917), in: *Marele războiu și politica României*. [The Great War and Romania's Policy]. Editura ziarului „Lumina,” Bucharest, 1918 , p. 79-80

<sup>782</sup> C. Stere, *Marele războiu și politica României*. [The Great War and Romania's Policy]. Editura ziarului „Lumina,” Bucharest, 1918 , p. 79, 97, 101-102, 103-105

The same argumentative logic prompted him to equate, in a characteristic turn of phrase, the claim to Bessarabia with the French claim to the Alsace and Lorraine. The Romanian case for Bessarabia appeared even more legitimate since it rested on a sounder historical basis:

If someone in France had suggested an anti-British alliance with Germany during this war, he would have surely fallen under the opprobrium of the public. But France lost Alsace and Lorraine nine years before us, and it lost them in a just fight, not through a stab in the back on the part of an ally. Moreover, the Alsace and Lorraine were but provinces once conquered by France, but inhabited mostly by Germans, and they do not have as much significance for France from any point of view as does for us the ancient land of Stephen's archers and of John the Terrible.<sup>783</sup>

The topic of the unitary national body of which Bessarabia was a severed and suffering part surfaced repeatedly in Stere's presentation of the situation in Bessarabia under Russian domination. He was not content with depicting the Russian policy in his native province in the bleakest colors, but also sought to undermine from within the Russian official view of liberation from the Ottoman yoke. Invoking the legal guarantees that were introduced in the legislative acts confirming Bessarabia's autonomous status and deploring its subsequent liquidation, Stere uses the metaphor of the "ordeal" to define Bessarabia's regress from an "emancipated" to an "annexed" country subjected to a "yoke a thousand times crueler" than that of the Ottomans.<sup>784</sup> Though he does not elaborate further on this comparison between the two empires, the exceptional intrusiveness and brutality of the Russian state is a recurring motive in Stere's image of Bessarabia. This image, however, is not as unproblematic as it may seem. The empire of the tsars is present in Stere's writings in a double hypostasis: as a "colossus on clay feet" that is doomed to disappear due to its internal weakness (in a process accelerated by the revolutionary movement) and as a mortal danger to Romania's existence due to its unbridled expansionism.

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<sup>783</sup> C. Stere, "Idealul national" [The National Ideal] (October 1, 1917), in: *Marele războiu și politica României*. [The Great War and Romania's Policy]. Editura ziarului „Lumina,” Bucharest, 1918, p. 81

<sup>784</sup> C. Stere, "Din calvarul Basarabiei" [From Bessarabia's Ordeal], in: *Marele războiu și politica României*. [The Great War and Romania's Policy]. Editura ziarului „Lumina,” Bucharest, 1918, pp. 86-87

This contradiction (that Stere's critics did not fail to notice during the polemics preceding Romania's entry into the war) is, of course, inherent to the discourse on empire in general. Stere, writing at the time of Russia's revolutionary upheaval of the autumn of 1917, did not moderate his discourse on the Russian state despite the monarchy's demise, since he perceived the long-standing tendencies of Russian policy as independent of its form of government. This note on continuity should alert us to the artificiality of the World War I divide, but should also pose the problem of how the discursive form changed in the case of intellectuals that remained active throughout the prewar and interwar period.

Stere's organic analogies reach their apex in a synthetic article devoted to a brief description of Bessarabia's social and mental state under Russian administration.<sup>785</sup> This article is not as interesting per se as because of the possibility to identify one of the few moments of inter-textual communication of the authors discussed here. Stere's presentation is, in fact, a slightly altered (and abridged) version of Moruzi's account of Bessarabia's social makeup, to the point of repetition of the same clichés and expressions. While it is impossible to say exactly when Stere discovered and read Moruzi, it is impossible to deny that he had indeed done so. This borrowing shows to what extent the nationalist rhetorical devices could be interchanged, even if the respective authors did not necessarily share each other's message. Stere was as far removed ideologically from Moruzi's "regressive utopia" as possible, but the two squarely met on the ground of the "national idea." This suspension of his social acumen during his infatuation with the priorities of the national project also helps explain Stere's collaboration with the Conservatives both before and after Romania's entry into the war.<sup>786</sup>

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<sup>785</sup> "Cimitirul" [The Graveyard] is the title of the article and Stere's chosen designation of the lethargic (if not terminal) phase of the local population's self-awareness. In: *Marele războiu și politica României*. [The Great War and Romania's Policy]. Editura ziarului „Lumina,” Bucharest, 1918, pp. 87-90

<sup>786</sup> Z. Ornea, *Viata lui Constantin Stere* [The Life of Constantin Stere], vol. II, pp. 113-115



In the same article, Stere inveighed against the Cuza-Iorga brand of nationalism in unequivocal terms: “We are very nationalist. The “National League” [The League for the Cultural Unity of All Romanians, headed by Iorga- A.C.] was preoccupied by [the fate of] the Romanians from Istria, from Macedonia and even from Bithynia, waged violent campaigns for all the “cadrilater”<sup>787</sup> in the world,- but who has ever been interested in Bessarabia?”<sup>788</sup> The recurrent motive of ignorance and indifference was a central point in Stere’s plan to overturn the hierarchy of national priorities and place Bessarabia in a privileged position on the agenda of national action, though it made his task all the more arduous. In one passage, the author complained that “this creek [the Prut] could, for more than a century, separate so deeply a significant part of the Romanian people [from the others] that in Romania one can certainly find much more exact information about Indo-China and Paraguay than about Bessarabia- whereas in Bessarabia they know Romania even worse... And how could it be otherwise? [I]f Russian censorship was aided by the complete indifference of those from the Kingdom?”<sup>789</sup>

This intentional exaggeration was compounded by the systematic comparison between the under-investment and disinterest for Bessarabia (despite its crucial importance for the national future, in Stere’s view) and the over-enthusiastic engagement with the clearly peripheral and insignificant movement of the Romanians (Vlachs) from Macedonia. Even more than Moruzi, Stere used Macedonia as an ideal counter-example to Bessarabia’s marginal status (since it was, if anything, even less important for the national organism). However, the Macedonian case was paradigmatic for Stere not only in itself, but also as an illustration of the hollowness, primitiveness and inflated rhetoric of the official nationalism (represented mostly by Iorga and A.

<sup>787</sup> A reference to Southern Dobrogea, annexed by Romania in 1913 as a result of the Second Balkan War and known as the “Cadrilater” (The Quadrangle). The territory reverted to Bulgaria in September 1940.

<sup>788</sup> C. Stere, *Marele războiu și politica României*. [The Great War and Romania’s Policy]. Editura ziarului „Lumina,” Bucharest, 1918 , p. 87

<sup>789</sup> C. Stere, *Marele războiu și politica României*. [The Great War and Romania’s Policy]. Editura ziarului „Lumina,” Bucharest, 1918 , p. 87

C. Cuza) that the Bessarabian abhorred.<sup>790</sup> The flawed essence of this “pseudo-nationalism” (in Stere’s reading) was unveiled on a number of occasions, among which he is careful enough to place the very weak reaction to the 1912 anniversary or the attacks against Bessarabian students in Iasi and the accusations of “Judeo-Russian agents” that these students were subjected to by Iorga’s newspaper during the 1905 Revolution.<sup>791</sup> Beyond the actual ambiguity of Iorga’s and Cuza’s position on the anti-Semitism of the Russian authorities and their occasional “flirting” with the Russian rightist press (the case of Crusevan was mentioned above), the Stere-Cuza conflict on specific issues of national strategy emerged not only from their ideological and personal differences, but also because of a competition for defining the nationalist and irredentist program that undermined any chance for a common ground.

These internal conflicts did not entail a radical difference in the realm of nationalist rhetoric. Stere’s fundamental peculiarity derived from the reversal of national priorities that he consistently advocated and that placed Bessarabia at the center of the state- and nation-building process. Faithful to his almost literal understanding of the national “body,” Stere concluded one of his articles on Bessarabia thus: “in our national preoccupations, Bessarabia had to preserve *the first place*. [It is so] because, if we bow in front of brutal force, if we resign ourselves to bear the wound inflicted not only on our national dignity, but also on *our physical unity*, on our integrity, *we [will] lose the right to any other aspiration in History*.”<sup>792</sup> (original emphasis- A.C.). Stere ostensibly repeated the arguments invoked on the occasion of the 1878 controversy (and similarly

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<sup>790</sup> C. Stere, *Marele războiu și politica României*. [The Great War and Romania’s Policy]. Editura ziarului „Lumina,” Bucharest, 1918, p. 104-105. The Macedonian example was also preferred by Stere due to the pragmatic competition for funds that the Macedonian “lobby” successfully gained, while Stere himself was not very successful in securing money for Bessarabian students even in his position as rector of the Iasi University in 1913-1916.

<sup>791</sup> C. Stere, *Basarabia și “Tara-Muma” [Bessarabia and the “Mother-Country”]* (October 26, 1917), in: *Marele războiu și politica României*. [The Great War and Romania’s Policy]. Editura ziarului „Lumina,” Bucharest, 1918, p. 95

<sup>792</sup> C. Stere, *Marele războiu și politica României*. [The Great War and Romania’s Policy]. Editura ziarului „Lumina,” Bucharest, 1918, p. 103

identified the southern districts that were its object with the entire province), but in the changed context of war and revolution the claim to symbolic inclusion was much more pronounced.

A final strategy used by Stere to strengthen his point of Bessarabia's essential belonging to the Romanian space was linked to a specifically legal argument. This thesis was developed in one of the articles of the series that, already in its title, subverted the customary center-periphery hierarchy and claimed an agency for the Bessarabian population that the latter obviously lacked.<sup>793</sup> In a "mirror argument" of the Russian claim that Romania could not advance any territorial demands on Bessarabia because no Romanian state was in existence in 1812, Stere asserted that "Romania has not only the historical right, but also the obligation toward Bessarabia, and even toward the whole of Moldavia, to reclaim the districts beyond the Prut that were part of ancient Moldavia, [s]ince those circumstances that motivated and justified" the Russian protection of Bessarabia were no longer valid.<sup>794</sup> Beyond the historical and ethnographic continuity that the Romanian nation-state could (and did) invoke in its stance on Bessarabia, Stere argued for a much more tenuous (even within the internal structure of the Romanian discourse) legal continuity of Bessarabia's inclusion into Romania.

On the one hand, the 1812 annexation is presented as "a brutal deed, an abuse of force, without any legal basis: it was neither a conquest, because we haven't been at war, neither a voluntary cession confirmed by a treaty between [Russia and] Romania."<sup>795</sup> Behind this apparently naïve argument, Stere probably intended to impress the reading public by his professional expertise (he was a professor of constitutional law at the University of Iasi) but, more to the point, he also concluded that

<sup>793</sup> C. Stere, "Dreptul Basarabiei asupra României" [Bessarabia's Right over Romania], in: *Marele războiu și politica României*. [The Great War and Romania's Policy]. Editura ziarului „Lumina,” Bucharest, 1918, pp. 96-99

<sup>794</sup> C. Stere, "Dreptul Basarabiei asupra României" [Bessarabia's Right over Romania], in: *Marele războiu și politica României*. [The Great War and Romania's Policy]. Editura ziarului „Lumina,” Bucharest, 1918, p. 96

<sup>795</sup> Ibidem, p. 97

legally, then, it [Bessarabia] is still a part of Romania, which did not give its sanction [to the annexation]- and neither had it the right to do so... Thus, no treaty agreed to by us and no law... could sanction the annexation according to our Constitution, even if Romania had wanted it: the Romanian people of Bessarabia would be entitled to deny to any government, even to the unanimous will of the rest of the country, the right to dispose in such a way of its fate and of the fate of the future generations.<sup>796</sup>

The argument is, of course, doubly fallacious, since it, first, conflates the situation of 1878 with the altogether different context of 1812 and, second, applies retrospectively the constitutional provisions of 1866 to a prior territorial settlement between two empires that in no way affected the contemporary state relations. There is, however, a certain consistency in Stere's argument, and this derives from his concept of the nation which contained an appreciable dose of a-historical elements. Despite his constant tendency to link the national phenomenon to the state (at one point, Stere called the Romanian Kingdom "the territory of national consolidation"), Stere's organic vision rebelled against any possibility of historical contingencies that might determine a voluntary compromise on territorial unity. He emphasized that "One part of the nation, however significant, cannot sell or exchange another part of the nation, however small, regardless of the price. A nation can suffer violent amputations, but it cannot consent legally to its own vivisection for whatever advantages, which, in the case of such a moral degradation, could only be imaginary."<sup>797</sup>

The image of a suffering body that should preserve its physical and moral integrity framed Stere's perspective on Bessarabia's inclusion into the Romanian space even in his most "legalistic" moments, when he discussed the possibility of individual petitions for Romanian citizenship on the part of Bessarabian inhabitants born Romanian subjects or their descendants

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<sup>796</sup> Ibidem, p. 97

<sup>797</sup> Ibidem, p. 98

(mostly in the case of Southern Bessarabia).<sup>798</sup> Such arguments should be placed in the context of the contemporary polemics on the relative importance of “non-redeemed” territories, in which Stere tried to transcend his position as a spokesman for the Bessarabian “voice.” He proposed a model of “integral national ideal” that in fact reflected both his pro-Centralist convictions and Romania’s complicated situation in the later phase of the war. However, he remained consistent with his earlier insistence on the centrality of the Bessarabian problem, which was far from being just a tribute to the political necessity of the moment. Stere’s approach to the Russian Empire might have been less metaphysical and better informed socially and politically than that of his predecessors, but it was not fundamentally different. He was also rather critical of contemporary Romanian society, but his support for nation-building was unconditional. What he brought to the already established national narrative was a clearer political awareness and a complicated experience of a failed revolutionary that ultimately determined his problematic integration into the Romanian political system and, perhaps in a more acute form than in Hasdeu’s or Moruzi’s case, displayed the multiple challenges that a Bessarabian émigré encountered because of what I have called “the uncertainty of identity.”

Each of the three authors examined here left an imprint on the Romanian discourse about Bessarabia (and, by implication, the Russian Empire). The significance of their joint discussion, despite their many differences (ideological, generational, the heterogeneity of their cultural background), stems from the importance of perceiving the dynamics of the insider/outsider position that these persons exemplified. The ambiguity of their place in the Romanian intellectual realm is not just a truism, since it impacted the specificity of their works and their understandings of Russianness and Romanian-ness. Bessarabia was of course the central object that provided a connection between them (less so in Hasdeu’s case), but they are no less interesting in their own

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<sup>798</sup> Ibidem, p. 99

right as contributors to the Romanian national discourse. The ways in which they exploited their own and their province's marginality in order to either subvert or minimize it tells one much about the multiplicity and contested character of the Romanian national narrative itself. Their nationalism was certainly a peripheral one (in all respects), but the intellectual dialogue they engaged in, to various degrees, shows to what extent transfers and borrowings are important in the articulation of a national project. No less important is the imperial dimension, that these Bessarabian-born Romanian nationalists confronted and appropriated in ways that were often more creative than those of their later epigones or intellectual descendants.

## **Chapter VI. Revolution, War, and the “Bessarabian Problem:” Russian and Romanian Perspectives (1905-1916)**

### ***1. Introduction***

This chapter will explore the impact of the immediate prewar period and of World War I on the construction of Bessarabia’s image within the Russian and Romanian public sphere. The narrative will follow a twofold, sequential structure. On the one hand, the Bessarabian case will be analyzed in the context of the major policy shifts initiated by the Russian central government and military authorities following the outbreak of hostilities in August 1914. Bessarabia’s “borderland” position acquired in this period a functional character previously unknown. Beyond the symbolic dimension, demarcating the utmost extent of Russia’s territorial advance in the south-western direction, the province now became an object of open territorial contention with neighboring Romania. Due to the hesitating position of the Romanian government during the initial phase of the conflict, Bessarabian authorities seriously envisaged the possibility of a military clash and, consequently, paid an increased attention to the potentially subversive dispositions of the local population. This applied not only to the German colonists of Southern Bessarabia, who were unequivocally included into the category of “enemy aliens” alongside other ethnically German communities of the same type in Southern Russia, but also to the Romanian-speaking peasants and (partially) intellectuals who were suspected of harboring a certain pro-Romanian sentiment. The role of the 1914-1916 period in the transformation of the collective image of the Bessarabian population along ethnic lines is crucial. The first two years of the war represented an “inflection point” for the reassessment of the multi-ethnic character of Bessarabia. Following the general trend of connecting ethnicity directly to state loyalty pursued by certain

groups in the central bureaucracy and, especially, the imperial army, the Bessarabian Romanians tended to be viewed, for the first time, as a collectively suspect group. This transition to the imposition of nationalizing categories upon the subjects of the Russian Empire was neither smooth nor straightforward in the Bessarabian case. The local population was traditionally regarded as staunchly loyal to the throne and the Russian state, while its closeness to the Great Russians was derived from its adherence to the Orthodox Church and its sharing in the economic benefits of the all-Russian market. The peasant masses also seemed to be willing recipients of and recruits for the right-wing ideologies espoused by pro-monarchist and extremist organizations (e.g., the Union of Russian People, which was quite successful in attracting a sizeable part of the peasant activists in its ranks). In connection with the weakening of the traditional bases for legitimacy stressing dynastic motives, a growing feeling of uneasiness and apprehension gripped the Russian authorities in Bessarabia. The invocation of the threat of “separatism,” which was uttered only sporadically throughout the pre-war years (for example, during the 1863-64 Polish revolt)<sup>799</sup> now acquired an immediacy that was hardly conceivable before. This was obviously the case before Romania’s alignment with the Entente powers, when Bessarabia became vulnerable militarily and was included in the zone administered directly by the Russian army. The exceptional status of the province placed the Russian administration under strain, which was complicated by the massive presence in the region of other obvious candidates

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<sup>799</sup> In this sense, the report of the Bessarabian civil governor to Alexander II, dated July 6, 1863, is quite revealing. The official stated that Bessarabia, as a borderland region, found itself in an “extraordinary position,” since it bordered on Moldavia, inhabited by the “same nationality” (*edinoplemennoi*), at least in the case of “half of the population.” The governor warned Petersburg about the appearance of a “Romanophile” party, consisting of certain young noblemen, who were dreaming of “a united Romania,” being attracted by the constitutional-representative government of the United Principalities. Writing in the context of the implementation of the Great Reforms, the governor saw in the latter’s success a guarantee for the eradication of “any dreams about a Moldavian nationality.” The reforms will “force the Romanophiles to forget about the appealing ghost of Moldavian constitutionalism that lures them at present.” However, the governor was careful to emphasize that this “young party” was “very insignificant” and did not represent any palpable threat to the Russian administration in the region. (A.N.R.M., fond 2, op. 1, d. 7573, ff. 65-66 verso).



for “enemy alien” status: the Germans and the Jews. Thus, Bessarabia became the object of a nationalizing policy that transcended the realm of discourse and affected the practice of governing the imperial borderlands.

On the other hand, World War I triggered an upsurge in the interest for the “Bessarabian problem” in the Romanian Kingdom. The region’s “marginality” within the Romanian national discourse was overcome on several levels. First, Bessarabia became a potential object of diplomatic bargaining, which naturally drew the attention of the Romanian political elites to the region as a potential “compensation” for Romania’s adherence to the bloc of the Central Powers. Second, the polemics around Romania’s entry into the war produced several consistent accounts of the importance of the “Bessarabian question” for the Romanian establishment. This kind of literature could be sub-divided into three main categories: 1) “policy analyses,” assessing the economic, strategic and demographic importance of Bessarabia for the Romanian nation-state from a pragmatic point of view; 2) political debates and parliamentary discourses that acquired a wide resonance due to their programmatic nature or to the prominence of the involved personalities (the most visible cases of such publications are the printed versions of the speeches given by Constantin Stere<sup>800</sup>, Petre Carp<sup>801</sup> and Take Ionescu in late 1915 and early 1916, as the controversy over Romania’s neutrality came to its apex); 3) travelogues and general accounts of Bessarabia’s situation (from the Romanian point of view), along the tradition inaugurated by Nicolae Iorga<sup>802</sup> and continued by such figures as State Dragomir<sup>803</sup> and Vasile D. Moisiu<sup>804</sup>. The latter two cases are particularly revealing, due to the lack of an open political agenda of the

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<sup>800</sup> C. Stere. *România și războiul european* [Romania and the European War]. (Iasi: 1915); C. Stere. *Discursul D-lui Take Ionescu. Studiu critic* [Mr. Take Ionescu’s Speech. A Critical Study]. (Iasi: 1916); C. Stere. *Marele Război și politica României* [The Great War and Romania’s Policy] (Bucharest: Lumina, 1918).

<sup>801</sup> C. Stere and P. P. Carp. *Politica externă a României* [Romania’s Foreign Policy]. (Iasi: 1915).

<sup>802</sup> Nicolae Iorga. *Neamul românesc în Basarabia* [The Romanian Nation in Bessarabia] (Bucharest: 1905).

<sup>803</sup> State Dragomir. *Din Basarabia* [From Bessarabia]. (Iasi: 1908).

<sup>804</sup> Vasile D. Moisiu. *Știri din Basarabia de astăzi* [News from Today’s Bessarabia]. Preface by Dumitru Furtuna. Bucharest: 1915.

authors in question. Another feature distinguishing the neutrality period in Romania relates to the intensification of the openly “irredentist” activities of the “Cultural League” and to the appearance of specific organizations aimed at the reclaiming of the Bessarabian territory. The human and scholarly resources for such endeavors were mostly provided by Bessarabian born émigrés.<sup>805</sup> However, this period also witnessed an open split between the “Transylvanian” and “Bessarabian” factions within the national-cultural movement. Epitomized by the staunchly pro-Entente Nicolae Iorga and the equally uncompromising Germanophile Constantin Stere, the competition over the priorities of the national expansion raged throughout the first half of the war. It was only stifled once Romania entered the conflagration in August 1916, only to reemerge briefly in late 1917 and early 1918, following the tumultuous events in Russia and the collapse of the Romanian Front. This later phase will remain outside the present discussion, which will not touch upon the impact of the Russian Revolution on events in Bessarabia and on the corresponding shifts in Romanian policy. The time frame of the chapter will thus comprise the two-year period between the beginning of World War I and Romania’s engagement in military operations on August 14/27, 1916.

A final problem refers to the Bessarabian initiatives to “place” the area on the new “geopolitical map” that had to be redrawn in the aftermath of the war. The discussion will focus on a document recently published (and analyzed) by a Romanian researcher that sheds some new light on the self-awareness of the local Bessarabian emerging intellectual strata during the war.<sup>806</sup> This “memorandum” written by one of the most active participants in the fledgling Bessarabian Romanian “national movement,” Alexis Nour, is important not so much by its content (its

<sup>805</sup> One of the people involved was the former anarchist Zamfir Arbore, who played a prominent role in the ranks of the “Bessarabian group” and contributed to the anti-Russian polemics with the brochure *Liberarea Basarabiei* [Bessarabia’s Liberation], published in 1915. Also, Axinte Frunză, *România Mare* [Greater Romania] (Bucharest: Tipografia F. Goebel Fii, 1915).

<sup>806</sup> Teodor Pavel. *Intre Rusia tarilor si Germania Wilhelmiana: Un memoriu basarabean din 1916* [Between Tsarist Russia and Wilhelmine Germany: A Bessarabian Memorandum from 1916]. (Cluj-Napoca, 1996).

explicit aim was to provide an inventory of “Russian domination” in Bessarabia), but by the context of its publication and the implications it suggests. It was a part of a publication project secretly initiated by the German government (through a number of intermediary “civil society” organizations) within the propaganda effort meant to subvert Germany’s imperial competitors (in this case, Russia). The intersection of Bessarabian local “grievances” and the international context led to one of the few explicit attempts to view the place of the region within the larger structure of the Russian Empire. Though written in Romania (where Nour had to emigrate before the war), this work showed the potential that the “Romanian national discourse” emanating from Bessarabia proper possessed and was an indicator of the possible developments of a “national movement” in Bessarabia that the events of 1917 accelerated and whose course they modified.

## ***2. Bessarabia as a Contested Borderland during Revolution and War (1905-1915)***

In order to understand the significant shifts in the changed symbolic status of Bessarabia within the Russian Empire by the outbreak of World War I, a more extended analysis of pre-war developments is necessary. There was no question of any active opposition towards the Russian authorities in Bessarabia before the 1905-1907 Revolution, despite the occasional resurgence, in a number of official papers, of the motive of “political unreliability” and “Moldophile tendencies.”<sup>807</sup> The Russian officials were rarely concerned about the loyalty of the

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<sup>807</sup> As relevant examples, the following documents can be cited: 1) a report of the Head of the Provincial Gendarmes to the 3<sup>rd</sup> Section of the Imperial Chancellery, dated July 21, 1875 (GARF, Police Department, 3<sup>rd</sup> Expedition, fond 109, 1875, d. 68, ff. 62 verso-63); 2) a secret report of the deputy Head of the Bessarabian Gendarmerie to his superior, dated January 21, 1888, concerning the “suspect sympathies” of certain intellectual elements from Northern Bessarabia towards the “neighboring countries: Austria, Romania and Moldavia (?)” (GARF, Police Department, 3<sup>rd</sup> Expedition, fond 102, 1888, op. 84, d. 89, fascicle 50, f. 17-17 verso); 3) a similar report, dated January 21, 1892, focusing on Central Bessarabia and this time talking about “anti-Russophile” leanings in certain small circles of the nobility and intellectuals. (ANRM, fond 297, op. 1, d. 15, ff. 1-3, 5-5 verso). The available data allow, however, only

overwhelming majority of the population to the state and monarchy, noting either the satisfactory situation of Bessarabia in this regard or commenting on the indifference of the peasants towards anything beyond their narrow economic interests. The region was not explicitly perceived as a “threatened borderland” in the way that the lands of the former Polish Commonwealth or even the Caucasus were. Though the existence of the Romanian Kingdom was, in itself, a constant reminder of the potential for a Bessarabian “irredenta,” the symbolic competition for the region’s belonging was left to intellectuals or, in its pragmatic dimension, to the Russian foreign espionage which held the suspicious Bessarabian immigrants under surveillance. One of the most interesting documents attesting to the activity of the Russian counterintelligence in Romania deals with the identification of a purported “Society of Bessarabians,” founded in Bucharest in 1903. Apparently not without links to the Tartu (Dorpat) organization of Bessarabian students, this society allegedly included the most notorious among the Bessarabian émigrés to Romania (e.g., B. P. Hasdeu, Dr. P. Cazacu, G. Madan, Z. Ralli, C. Stere) or other important personalities, such as C. Dobrogeanu Gherea [Mihail Katz]. According to the report of the Russian liaison officer, V. V. Trzhetsiak, this society had as its final goal “the unification of Bessarabia with Romania and the future achievement of Bessarabia’s autonomy under Romania’s protection” (the apparent contradiction escaped the Russian agent). The immediate activity of this organization involved, among other things, the “spread throughout Bessarabia of Romanian patriotic publications.” However, the existence of such an organization appears rather doubtful and seems to be an invention of Trzhetsiak, eager to prove himself in front of his superiors. This is also suggested by his spurious claim that this community “existed as far back as the time of Bessarabia’s integration into Russia.” Correctly identifying some of the more prominent

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very tentative conclusions on the possible existence of an opposition to Russian rule. In any case, such circles involved a handful of individuals and never articulated any kind of “national” program.

Bessarabian “national activists” in Romania, the agent clearly exaggerates the cohesion of this community.<sup>808</sup> Despite the frequently self-serving reports of the Russian foreign agents, the pre-1905 period did not witness any important instances of “internal sedition” that drew the attention of local authorities. The Romanian challenge remained in a latent state and did not significantly affect the practical policy of the Russian government towards Bessarabia. However, following the revolutionary upheaval of 1905, Bessarabia suddenly emerged as a problematic borderland of the empire.

In late 1906 and early 1907, an articulated image of Bessarabia was elaborated by the local administration. This image is especially important since it would prevail for the next decade and would structure the approach of the authorities to the newly crystallized “national problem” in the gubernia. The most significant discursive shift concerns the use of the lexicon of “separatism” and “irredentism” to account for the possible troubling developments in the midst of a part of the local intelligentsia. The revolutionary context of the apprehension of the imperial officials should be kept in mind. From the extant sources, it is clear that the Russian administration had to deal with an unusual degree of the mobilization of the local educated society that could potentially develop an alternative project for the province’s future. This open challenge was only possible, at the time, due to the weakening of the government apparatus throughout the empire. Nevertheless, the Bessarabian governor, A. N. Haruzin, clearly saw the potential complications that could arise in the region if concrete moves to quell the fledgling movement were not immediately taken. The Bessarabian officials were stirred into action by a demand issued in November 1906 from the Police Department requiring detailed information on the “Romanophile current that exists among

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<sup>808</sup> Secret information sent by V. V. Trzhetsiak to the Head of the Bessarabian Okhrana Office on May 31, 1903. ANRM, fond 215, op. 1, d. 4, ff. 37-37 verso, 40-40 verso. The agent also provides a list with biographical and occupational details of the émigrés (ANRM, fond 215, op. 1, d. 4, ff. 38-39 verso). My doubts regarding the existence of a crystallized “organization” also stem from the absence of any data on its activity in the contemporary Romanian publications. Trzhetsiak was apparently active throughout 1903, which triggered the attention and apprehension of the Romanian authorities and press. See GARF, fond 505, op. 1, d. 70, f. 28 verso.

the population” of Bessarabia.<sup>809</sup> The initial source for this heightened interest in Bessarabian affairs derived from the information collected by Russian counterintelligence officers in Romania concerning the intensification of “Romanian propaganda in favor of Bessarabia’s autonomy.”<sup>810</sup> These enquiries prompted the Bessarabian governor to elaborate a detailed analysis of the political situation in Bessarabia during the revolutionary period. Before discussing the document as such, several general features of the argument should be emphasized: 1) the neat distinction between the unquestionable loyalty of the majority of the population and the pernicious activities of the small “Moldavian party” (thus, the opposition between the trustworthy “people” and the unreliable “elites,” characteristic for late imperial Russia, was transferred to Bessarabian soil); 2) the identification of the “intermediate” stratum of the intelligentsia and its active involvement in the revolutionary and nationalist movements in the borderlands (the direct link of the revolutionary and national activists received special attention); 3) the pragmatic policy of the authorities, who attempted to counter revolutionary propaganda by printing leaflets in Romanian and distributing them in rural areas. This example proves to what extent the officials were reacting to local circumstances and using local idioms to outplay their ideological opponents (in this sense, the thesis of the purposeful “suppression” of the Romanian language in Bessarabia should be questioned, if not revised); 4) the importance of the regional context, in the sense of Bessarabia’s comparison to the other Western Borderlands, and the implicit influence of this context on the local developments.

What, then, were the concrete data of the Bessarabian “problem” as envisaged by the highest-ranking imperial official in the region? First, Haruzin asserted that “the broad masses of the local

<sup>809</sup> Secret letter of the deputy director of the Police Department’s Special Section to the Bessarabian Governor, November 11, 1906. GARF, Police Department, fond 102, 1906, op. 235, fascicle 1, d. 936, f. 9

<sup>810</sup> Secret letter of the deputy director of the Police Department’s Special Section to the Bessarabian Governor, November 11, 1906. GARF, Police Department, fond 102, 1906, op. 235, fascicle 1, d. 936, f. 9. Also see a similar document issued 2 days later by the same institution, this time addressing the Head of the Bessarabian Gendarmes. ANRM, fond 297, op. 1, d. 50, f. 187

Moldavian population are completely alien” to the “pro-Romanian tendencies” and “do not deserve any reproach concerning their lack of loyalty to the Throne and the Russian State.”<sup>811</sup> Beyond this general thesis, the governor provided several explanations for the continuing loyalty of the Moldavians that could be grouped into three sets of factors: 1) Russia’s position in the Romanian Principalities as a “protector,” and, thus, “the inclusion of the current territory of the Bessarabian gubernia into Russia did not have the character of a conquest, inimical towards the local population, but that of inclusion into [*prisoedineniia*] a friendly power;”<sup>812</sup> 2) the common Eastern [Orthodox] Church, which “strengthened the unity [*edinenie*] and mutual understanding between the Moldavians” and the Russians settled in Bessarabia;<sup>813</sup> 3) the absence of any “antagonism between the Russians and the Moldavians” in the social sphere, due to the “benevolent attitude of the supreme Government and the local authorities towards the Moldavians,” who were not regarded as “aliens [*inorodtsev*] that were foreign to Russia’s interests.”<sup>814</sup> As a result, the governor concluded that the Moldavians’ identity was shaped by their closeness to and common interests shared with the Russians: “quite often, a local Moldavian, while not renouncing his own ethnicity [*narodnosti*], thinks of himself as a Russian or designates himself by the blurry and undefined term “Bessarabian [*bessarabets*].”<sup>815</sup> The absence of “any signs of irredentism among the broad masses of the Moldavian population” was also connected by the Bessarabian official to the economic benefits guaranteed by the all-Russian market and, especially, to the widespread perception of the Romanian peasantry’s relative

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<sup>811</sup> Strictly Confidential letter of the Bessarabian Governor A. N. Haruzin to the Director of the Police Department M. I. Trusevich. January 15, 1907. GARF, Police Department, Special Section, fond 102, 1906, op. 235, fascicle 1, d 936, ff. 11-15, here f. 11

<sup>812</sup> Ibidem, f. 11

<sup>813</sup> Ibidem, f. 11

<sup>814</sup> Ibidem, f. 11

<sup>815</sup> Ibidem, f. 12

poverty and bureaucratic exploitation in comparison with its Bessarabian counterpart.<sup>816</sup> The economic argument played a leading role in the rhetorical arsenal of the Russian authorities. It was also routinely noted by the Romanian observers as one of the main deterrents for the creation of an attractive image of the Romanian Kingdom. Nevertheless, the economic factor had an obverse side dutifully summarized by Haruzin. There developed a growing discontent among a large part of Bessarabian “Moldavian” landowners who were apparently losing the competition with landlords of Greek and Armenian origin who were actively buying estates in Bessarabia. The latter managed to better respond to the challenges of intensive agricultural production. This fact engendered “national-economic conflicts” that did not affect the legitimacy of the Russian government as such, but could prove potentially troubling for the authorities.<sup>817</sup>

Second, the governor insisted on the doubtful political reliability of the local nobility. Certain members of the “first estate” were active in a particular “Moldavian party,” whose existence could be explained through the ties of acquaintance, mutual interests and blood that connected them to “members of Romania’s upper classes.”<sup>818</sup> Despite the fact that this group “frequently manifested a certain flexibility regarding questions of a nationalist nature [*svoistva*],”<sup>819</sup> Haruzin was careful enough to qualify the danger of such occasional manifestations by emphasizing their gradual integration into the Russian *dvorianstvo*. This integration was effected by means of family relations, the common educational background received in Russian institutions and the bureaucratic assignments to central Russian provinces that gradually “leveled the differences between persons of Russian and Moldavian descent.”<sup>820</sup> This “benign” image of the nobility was opposed to the more immediate challenge to the imperial state posed by the “third element” of the

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<sup>816</sup> Ibidem, f. 12

<sup>817</sup> Ibidem, f. 12

<sup>818</sup> Ibidem, f. 12

<sup>819</sup> Ibidem, f. 12

<sup>820</sup> Ibidem, f. 12



local society- the emerging stratum of the intelligentsia. The Bessarabian officials were aware that the combination of revolutionary slogans and nationalist mobilization could be a serious threat in the borderlands. Haruzin talked about “a general tendency towards separatism in the borderlands” that facilitated the emergence of the dreaded “national-revolutionary” nexus in Bessarabia.<sup>821</sup> In this context, the counter-measures envisaged by the authorities are of special significance. Far from relying solely on repressive measures, the local administration displayed striking flexibility and pragmatism in tackling the issue of “subversive propaganda.” As suggested above, they mounted a concerted campaign of alternative propaganda, consisting of three related elements.

The first element involved the printing of pro-monarchist proclamations to be distributed in Bessarabian villages. Apparently, this move succeeded in overwhelming the revolutionary “printing industry” by sheer numbers.<sup>822</sup> The second element presupposed the publication of an alternative press organ to outweigh the purported impact of the “Basarabia” newspaper, which was the main press outlet of the fledgling oppositional movement and which received generous editorial and financial support from Romania-based public figures, such as Constantin Stere and Zamfir C. Arbore (and, indirectly, from the Romanian government). The project of an alternative newspaper, financed (secretly) by the Ministry of the interior, was soon to be realized through the publication of *Moldovanul* [The Moldavian]. This ostensibly private and moderately pro-monarchist editorial enterprise was headed by Gheorghe Madan, one of the most interesting and controversial early 20<sup>th</sup> century Bessarabian intellectuals.<sup>823</sup> The authorities attempted to

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<sup>821</sup> Ibidem, f. 13

<sup>822</sup> Governor Haruzin reported: “I issued in the same [“Moldavian”] language appeals and addresses to the people... in such significant numbers (I issued over one million copies for the whole gubernia), that they dominated in the countryside.” Ibidem, f. 13

<sup>823</sup> G. Madan (1872-1944) was a prominent member of the Bessarabian émigré community in Romania in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, working as an actor in Iasi. After 1905, he returned to Bessarabia to enter the service of the Russian government as a censor of Romanian-language publications and a secret agent of the Russian espionage in Romania.

dissociate themselves from the publication, fearing that any hint at official patronage might jeopardize its impact on its target reading public. The final counterweight to the “irredentist propaganda” was provided by the activities of the Union of the Russian People. If one is to believe Haruzin, its progress in Bessarabia was quite significant at this time. The explanation he gave for it is quite revealing: “the success... that this Union enjoys in Bessarabia should not be explained by the presence in this gubernia of numerous elements of people of Russian ethnicity [*narodnosti*]. [Rather, it derives from] the idea “For the Fatherland, For the Tsar, For Loyalty to the Throne,” which is easily understood by the Moldavian peasants and which received a lively response among the Moldavians, who are alien to Romanophile ideas.”<sup>824</sup> The governor’s report marks a shift in Russian policy at least on two fundamental levels. First, a clear and coordinated strategy aimed at blocking the potential irredentist “threat” was elaborated. Such a strategy never existed before (at least in an articulated form) and suggests a change of attitude of the Russian bureaucracy to the “Bessarabian problem.” However, this shift attests more to the state of mind of the Russian officials than to any accurate estimate of the actual intensity of nationalist mobilization in the province. For all intents and purposes, this seems to have remained rather low. Second, the manipulation of traditional and dynastic motives of loyalty to the state acquired an intentional and instrumental character and, despite their ostensible success, signaled their perceived vulnerability. Both these factors were to frame the Russian policy and discourse on Bessarabia in the next decade, up to the collapse of the imperial regime. In his summary, Haruzin reiterated that the broad masses of the population were alien to “Romanophilia” and that the revolutionary circles, allied with Romanian nationalists, were working in a “separatist and

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The exact role of Madan in the pre-World War I period is hard to ascertain (he might have been a “double agent”). The reports he sent to the Russian Office of Gendarmes in Bessarabia in 1909 will be discussed in what follows. Ibidem, f. 14. The “Moldovanul” newspaper was published intermittently between January 1907 and October 1908.

<sup>824</sup> Ibidem, f. 14

irredentist direction.” To frustrate these designs, “unfailing attention and constant, but rational counteractions” were needed.<sup>825</sup> In case this pragmatic and rational approach failed, the governor warned that “without any doubt, in the near future a rather serious borderland question will arise in Bessarabia.”<sup>826</sup> Thus, Bessarabia came to be perceived as a threatened borderland at the official level. The Russian Empire started to play by the rules of nationalism even in cases where its position seemed previously rather secure, while the potential contenders were either weak or simply ignored.

Even after the waning of the revolutionary tide and the de-radicalization of local politics, the gubernial authorities were careful to trace and control the channels and people involved in the “irredentist” current. Increasingly aware of the regional context of the “Romanian problem” and conscious of the importance of reliable information concerning the political tendencies within the Romanian Kingdom, Governor A. N. Haruzin resorted to the services of Gheorghe Madan (who proved his effectiveness as editor of the aforementioned newspaper). Madan received the position of censor of Romanian-language publications in October 1908, but his duties in fact included a wide array of activities that transformed him into a central information source for the Bessarabian administration. While informing him about his new appointment, the governor attached a set of detailed instructions that point to the new context of perception of the Bessarabian “question.”<sup>827</sup> Aside from his usual censorship duties involving a close surveillance of all the incoming Romanian-language publications, Madan was also given the following tasks: 1) to pay special attention to the “anti-Russian tendency” of such editions with the aim of “elaborating a definite and exact system of combating the pro-Romanian irredentist current” both in Bessarabia and in

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<sup>825</sup> Ibidem, f. 15

<sup>826</sup> Ibidem, f. 15

<sup>827</sup> Strictly confidential instruction of the Bessarabian Governor to the correspondent of the St. Petersburg Telegraph Agency G. V. Madan, issued on October 2, 1908. ANRM, fond 2, op. 1, d. 9263, f. 16-16 verso

Romania proper; 2) to be “constantly and thoroughly informed about Romanian political movements” and to be familiar with the activity of the most prominent leaders of Romanian nationalist organizations focused either on Bessarabia or on Transylvania and Bukovina; 3) to study the measures undertaken by the Hungarian and Austrian governments in order to deal with “Romanian propaganda;” 4) to gather information concerning the Romanian-language books and newspapers sold in Transylvania; 5) to assemble data on the persons in Bessarabia who receive such publications and to determine whether there is a market for this literature inside Bessarabia; 6) to investigate which social strata and political associations are particularly prone to pro-Romanian leanings, such as: “an interest for Romania and everything Romanian, an infatuation with the idea of “Greater Romania” or an infatuation with “Romanian culture;”<sup>828</sup> 7) finally, to assess whether, “in the space of past decades, within Bessarabia’s borders, the pro-Romanian attitudes were increasing or fading away; whether the process of assimilation of the local population into the Empire has been strengthened or not; and, in case the data in this respect prove to be negative, to clarify the cultural-historical causes of this phenomenon.”<sup>829</sup> All of this amounted to a comprehensive agenda of stemming the “nationalization” of the Bessarabian masses by, on the one hand, closely surveying the potential “national activists” and blocking the channels of written propaganda and, on the other hand, by studying the experience of the neighboring empires in the field. This last point is significant due to the inter-imperial dimension of the “Romanian problem” that it discloses. The inter-imperial collaboration, borrowing of techniques and theoretical frameworks and (presumably) even legislation on the “nationality question” not only proves the interdependence of the “imperial players” in this part of Eurasia,

<sup>828</sup> Quotation marks in original. See ANRM, fond 2, op. 1, d. 9263, f. 16 verso.

<sup>829</sup> ANRM, fond 2, op. 1, d. 9263, f. 16-16 verso

but also points to the inherent potential of mutual subversion that was to be activated during World War I.

This ambitious program of countering the crystallizing internal “nationalist” challenge in Bessarabia reflected not so much the actual dimensions of the perceived threat to Russian authority in the region as a debate on the possible change of imperial strategies of governing. Before 1905, the administration pursued a policy of ignoring the feeble attempts at the articulation of linguistic and cultural grievances expressed by certain members of the elite. The possible alliance with the “revolutionary elements” triggered the government’s reaction. Another factor might have been the interaction of young Bessarabian students with the national “activists” of the Polish and Ukrainian movements, who were rather active in the university centers most accessible to the Bessarabians- Iur’ev (Dorpat) and Kiev. In any case, the authorities were now conscious of the necessity to “win over” the rural masses to the imperial project before they could be drawn into the nationalizing sphere of the “pro-Romanian” intellectuals. The sketchy outline of such a strategy can be found in several “policy papers” elaborated by the same Gheorghe Madan during 1909, while serving as an agent for the local Gendarmes’ Office.<sup>830</sup>

The most original part of his policy recommendations concerns the elaboration of an alternative method of “russifying” Bessarabia. His approach suffers from an apparent contradiction between the assertion of the Moldavian population’s staunch loyalty towards the state and the ostensible failure of the authorities to assimilate the local population into the Russian language and culture. This contradiction refers not to the *ends* of Russian policy in Bessarabia, but solely to the ineffective *means* hitherto employed by the state officials. In fact,

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<sup>830</sup> Though his name is not explicitly mentioned in the “recruiting report” sent by the Head of the Bessarabian Gendarmes, Colonel Sokolov, to the Police Department in late September 1909, several clues to the agent’s identity are present. First, he is identified as a “former editor of a Romanian-[language] newspaper, a Russian subject.” Second, his task is defined as “reporting on the propaganda of Romanian nationalist ideas in Bessarabia.” Both of these allusions point to Madan. See ANRM, fond 297, op. 1, d. 98, ff. 130 verso- 131. Also see ANRM, fond 297, op. 1, d. 98, f. 179

Madan's proposal has a striking resemblance to Ilminskii's strategy of Christianization of the Volga non-Tatar ethnic groups through the use of local languages. Somewhat out of tune with contemporary tendencies that put Ilminskii's methods increasingly under critical scrutiny, Madan argued that the consolidation of Russian "patriotism" was only possible through a concerted propaganda in the Romanian language. He thus favored a "cultural" and "state-patriotic" version of Russification instead of a linguistic variety that was ultimately unsuccessful. Moreover, he explained the partial success of "pan-Romanian" propaganda by invoking the extensive use of the local Romanian dialect in its dealings with its potential "target audience" in village areas. In fact, Madan pointed to the failure of the Russian-language educational system in Bessarabia to inculcate even the rudiments of a Russian state consciousness into the peasant masses of the region. This was of course due to the numerous flaws in its organization and to the rather superficial character of the education mostly provided by church-run parish schools that left the Bessarabian rural population overwhelmingly illiterate. The early 20<sup>th</sup> century situation, as described by Madan, acquired the traits of a classical paradox, which the author emphasized by resorting to a rhetorical question meant to highlight the patent absurdity of the contemporary reality. "Who could have thought," Madan asked, "that the Bessarabian Moldavians, attached to Russia almost 100 years ago, when there was no Romanian national culture, no national consciousness, no national pride, that these Moldavians, having during this time increased their numbers till they reached 1 ½ million, living together with various Slavic elements, remaining for so long under Russian domination, not only would not assimilate, not only would not russify [*obruseli*], but have "moldavianized" [*omoldovanili*] and continue to "moldavianize" the Slavic elements... in Bessarabia [?]"<sup>831</sup> The underlying significance of this passage lies also in the explicit indication of the non-participation of the Bessarabian Romanians in the nation-building

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<sup>831</sup> ANRM, fond 297, op. 1, d. 98, f. 181

process underway in the Romanian Principalities from the 1820s on.<sup>832</sup> Despite this pessimistic assumption (that was contrary to the triumphalist stance adopted by the imperial officials on festive occasions, as was the case in 1912), the Russian agent observed that “if one would study the people’s soul [*narodnuiu dushu*] until the end of the last [19<sup>th</sup>] century, then one would see that the Moldavians espouse the most complete and sincere love and loyalty towards the Sovereign Emperor, the most profound pious awe towards Great, holy Russia and ardently desire to learn [to be] Russian, to become completely Russian.”<sup>833</sup> In a similar passage Madan reinforces his point by asserting: “The Bessarabian Moldavians, though not speaking the Russian language, think of themselves [*shchitaiut sebia*] as Russians, desire to learn Russian, to be closely acquainted with Russian culture.”<sup>834</sup> The author implicitly blamed the government for missing the opportunity to exploit this favorable atmosphere before the involvement of the masses in politics and the appearance of reformist currents in local society deprived the authorities of any initiative. In a sense, it was the government’s inefficiency and indecisive policies that did not allow for “organic Russification” to take root, despite the promising initial conditions. Madan still found some reasons for optimism, however, when speaking in more detail about his suggested strategy to overcome this predicament:

At present, there is no serious organization pursuing a lively pan-Romanian activity; there are only a handful of separate individuals, but the field for this kind of agitation is quite wide in Bessarabia. This field has already been ploughed and partially sown with the seeds of Romanianism. It has to be ploughed all over again and sown with the seeds of Russianism [*russizmom*], and it has to be done in clear and familiar words [in Romanian]. More significance should be ascribed to the propagation of Russian Statehood, Russian culture, Russian patriotism, than to the forcible imposition of the Russian language. At least until the Moldavians are thoroughly Russified [*obruseiut*], love for Russia and unity with the Russian people can also be preached in Moldavian.<sup>835</sup>

<sup>832</sup> The author further develops this point when speaking about the fundamental differences between Bessarabia, on the one hand, and Transylvania and Bukovina, on the other.

<sup>833</sup> ANRM, fond 297, op. 1, d. 98, f. 181

<sup>834</sup> ANRM, fond 297, op. 1, d. 98, f. 181 verso

<sup>835</sup> ANRM, fond 297, op. 1, d. 98, f. 182

In another report elaborated in the same period, the author, while concluding that “the progress of assimilation is hugely [*strashno*] weakened in Bessarabia,” insisted, in similar terms, that “when the severed Russian historical life will be again reestablished, when the Ministry for Public Instruction will create a rich popular patriotic Russian literature, it has to be immediately propagated in the midst of the Moldavians, without waiting until they would learn the Russian language.”<sup>836</sup> As in Haruzin’s case, the Bessarabian-born Madan was aware of the importance of the local idiom in the potential mobilization of the previously passive Bessarabian rural population. This population was still perceived as an amenable object of rival political projects. The main unknown factor of the equation referred to the most successful mobilizing agent, with Madan being more pessimistic regarding the government’s previous achievements and attempting to adapt the imperial political practice to the competitive atmosphere of the “age of nationalism.”

A second fundamental aspect of Madan’s arguments concerned the historical conditions that distinguished Bessarabia’s evolution from that of the Romanian Principalities and the contemporary threat of Romanian nationalism, which in his view was far from abstract. Emphasizing the benevolent attitudes of the Moldo-Wallachians towards the Russian Empire (which began to change gradually after 1848), the author is also careful to make the distinction between the strength of the “national movement” in the Principalities and in the Romanian-inhabited provinces of Austria-Hungary and its quasi-total absence in Bessarabia. The province is, again, defined in terms of absence and lack of nationalizing elements that might have articulated an opposition to Russian rule. Madan’s perspective is almost singular in the period under discussion, though its relevance is enhanced by his posture as an “insider” of the Bessarabian community in Romania. This opposition is explicit in the following fragment: “Such historical events as the tumultuous awakening of national consciousness among the Romanians

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<sup>836</sup> ANRM, fond 297, op. 1, d. 98, f. 183 verso



from the Moldavian and Wallachian Principalities during 1848, accompanied by the flourishing of national literature and by the unification of the Principalities [in 1859], did not elicit any reaction from the Bessarabian Moldavians, with the exception of a handful of intellectuals and priests. On the contrary, in the case of the Transylvanian and Bukovinian Romanians one could witness a unanimous national enthusiasm.”<sup>837</sup> This situation suffered a dramatic change once the revolutionary movement within the Russian Empire became sensitive to national grievances and forged an alliance with the nationally minded intellectuals. In Madan’s words, “Bessarabia and Romania became a revolutionary anti-Russian camp.”<sup>838</sup>

The existence of the Romanian nation-state was potentially dangerous for the Russian authorities in Bessarabia not merely because of the direct influence exercised by the Romanian intellectuals and government, but also due to certain internal features of Bessarabian society, among which the surprising salience of the Romanian language was the most prominent. The author commented: “If the revolutionary national idea of pan-Romanianism started to successfully penetrate these [peasant] masses, it is because, during the last several years, these [activists] were the only ones... who preached to them in a language that these masses understood. This propaganda was conducted both orally and in print. The Romanian language is more widespread in Bessarabia than Russian.”<sup>839</sup> In keeping with his earlier proposal of “alternative Russification,” Madan advocated the increased participation of Bessarabian-born officials in the measures promoting Russian culture in rural areas: “The Moldavians employed in state service should be required to fruitfully contribute to the Russification of the masses since they are the closest to the people and enjoy its special confidence.”<sup>840</sup> This of course raises the

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<sup>837</sup> ANRM, fond 297, op. 1, d. 98, f. 181 verso

<sup>838</sup> ANRM, fond 297, op. 1, d. 98, f. 182

<sup>839</sup> ANRM, fond 297, op. 1, d. 98, f. 183

<sup>840</sup> ANRM, fond 297, op. 1, d. 98, f. 182 verso

question of the potential loyalty of locally rooted state officials that cannot be answered here. This task was made more difficult by the purported lack of a representative Slavic element in Bessarabia that could have served as the most appropriate agent of Russification. Somewhat unexpectedly, Madan asserts that “there is no Great Russian element in Bessarabia. Slavdom is represented by the Poles, whom the Moldavians regard with a historically developed ardent religious dislike.”<sup>841</sup>

The image of the Romanian kingdom that the author presents is framed in terms of a direct competition for the loyalties of the empire’s Bessarabian subjects. Accordingly, the Romanian state’s potential for irredentist activities is somewhat exaggerated. This becomes obvious on several levels. First, Madan warns about the strong nationalizing capabilities of the Romanian administration in comparison with its Russian counterpart. For this purpose, the writer uses the example of Dobrogea as a case of successful nation building: “30 years ago Dobrogea, inhabited by non-Romanians, was attached to Romania. Now, 30 years later, Dobrogea’s entire population speaks Romanian, whereas in Bessarabia a Russian needs a translator at every step.”<sup>842</sup> Second, Madan repeatedly insisted on the special vulnerability of Bessarabia to the Romanian “national-cultural” propaganda. The motive of Romania as a potential “Piedmont” for Bessarabia surfaces in both reports he sent to the Gendarmes’ Office. Thus, he depicts the Romanian kingdom (in surprisingly positive terms, given his addressees) as a full-fledged alternative to the Russian imperial regime: “An independent, well-organized [*blagoustroennoe*] Romanian kingdom flourishes near Bessarabia’s borders; its influence upon the Bessarabians will be increasingly felt

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<sup>841</sup> ANRM, fond 297, op. 1, d. 98, f. 182 verso. This assertion is doubly misleading. First, Madan somehow omits the “Little Russian” population, which was quite significant in numerical terms and certainly represented an important “Slavic element” in the province. He probably means the “visibility” of various ethnic groups within the elite and the questionable loyalty of the “Little Russians” in official eyes. Second, the “ardent dislike” for the Poles was more characteristic for government officials than for “Moldavian” ethnic stereotypes. Such phrases are clearly intended for the consumption of his superiors.

<sup>842</sup> ANRM, fond 297, op. 1, d. 98, f. 182 verso

in the future. Besides, in itself, this tribe [*plemia*] is rather numerous, reaching a total of 10 million people, and occupies a surface greater than Italy's. In Romania there is a powerful party that pushes for active propaganda in Bessarabia."<sup>843</sup> This challenge was compounded by the author's near-obsession with the competition in the cultural sphere that the Russian authorities were, arguably, already losing. In an alarmist and urgent tone, the agent painted a picture of Romania's "quiet" cultural expansion that undermined the chances for integrating the Bessarabians into the Russian imperial community: "though Romania's political borders end on the Prut, the borders of its cultural influence extend to the Dniester. A song... that is sung in Bucharest today is already to be heard, in a month or two, in Bessarabia's villages. Both in rural and urban areas a powerful movement towards one's [ethnic] kinsmen can be observed. Among a part of the intelligentsia a passion for Romanian culture and even for revolutionary nationalism is discernible."<sup>844</sup> This account clearly intended to provoke the suspicion and apprehension of the local authorities rather than to depict the actual developments in the province. The author failed to distinguish the "peak" of national activism during 1905-1906 (which was rather modest, at best) from the situation prevailing three years later. However, this text shows to what extent the imperial officials were ready to accept such a "nationalizing" version of events and how they gradually shifted from a neutral stance regarding their Bessarabian subjects' loyalty to a competitive logic structured on the assumption of Romanian irredentism. Madan also fueled this interpretation by a twofold tactic of argumentation. On the one hand, he identified the opponents of the regime as young Bessarabians studying mostly in Iasi and representing an "energetic and pugnacious element" that, together with the Romanian establishment, purportedly hatched a "revolutionary nationalist" plot in Bessarabia, fearing the emergence of "a national patriotic

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<sup>843</sup> ANRM, fond 297, op. 1, d. 98, f. 182 verso

<sup>844</sup> ANRM, fond 297, op. 1, d. 98, f. 183

culture”<sup>845</sup> there. On the other hand, he warned against the growing anti-Russian sentiment in Romania, which was visible not only from Romania’s alignment with the Triple Alliance, but also from “all the historical publications, a part of the literary productions and certain newspapers,” that were characterized by a “scandalous anti-Russian direction.”<sup>846</sup> Bessarabia thus emerged as a problematic area on the empire’s south-western edge threatened (at least rhetorically) by a rival nation-state. The confusion regarding the best strategy to integrate the local peasant population into the all-imperial (or Russian national) space led to the articulation of original solutions, of which Madan’s proposal is a fascinating sample.

A final part of Madan’s argument concerned the possible model of dealing with the Romanian national movement provided by the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Beyond mentioning the existence of a special “nationalities department” which studied and monitored the evolution of the national organizations (an example that the author suggested to be followed by the Russian Empire), he also praised the creation of alternative Romanian-language publications that would undermine the nationalist current from within. In the Hungarian case, these newspapers fought against “separatism” and “promoted the ideas of Magyar culture and statehood, of fraternity and unity with the Hungarians,” which proved to be “hugely deleterious to pan-Romanian propaganda.”<sup>847</sup> The implicit conclusion that followed was that, in the Bessarabian case, such a strategy might be even more successful, considering the much weaker nationalization of the masses and the much more reduced intensity of national activism. Moreover, Madan himself had practical experience in exactly such an editorial project that he directed several years earlier. The interest in and

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<sup>845</sup> ANRM, fond 297, op. 1, d. 98, f. 183. Madan was overstating his case. In fact, the much vaunted nexus between revolution and nationalism was a constant source of uneasiness for the Romanian government. The attitude of the Kingdom’s governing circles towards the Bessarabian radical nationalists was at least ambivalent, which became clear during the events of 1917- 1918.

<sup>846</sup> ANRM, fond 297, op. 1, d. 98, f. 183 verso

<sup>847</sup> ANRM, fond 297, op. 1, d. 98, f. 183 verso

mutual borrowing of administrative methods in neighboring empires thus had its application also in the Bessarabian case.

The preoccupation of the Russian imperial authorities for the “Romanophile” movement in Bessarabia persisted until World War I. However, it did not lead to the elaboration of other “policy proposals” comparable to the one written by Madan. The Russian officials were content to limit their counter-measures to the close surveillance of the few Bessarabian “national activists”<sup>848</sup> and to the suppression of the attempts at the publication of uncensored and, occasionally, moderately oppositional newspapers.<sup>849</sup> Despite the heightened tensions that erupted during the 1912 ceremonies, the overall consensus before the war rested on the assumption that the specter of separatism was, at best, a remote and improbable possibility. This did not preclude the awareness of the local bureaucrats that the cultural grievances voiced by the local intellectuals could become potentially destabilizing. In early 1914, the Head of the Bessarabian Gendarmes noted that “recently, among a certain part of the Bessarabian intelligentsia, a tendency towards national “self-determination” and “cultural work” among the Moldavian population of Bessarabia emerged.”<sup>850</sup> The authorities were more worried, however, about the central role of the Romanian Kingdom as a potential nationalizing center than about developments in Bessarabia itself. This is also demonstrated by a comprehensive report filed by a Russian counterintelligence officer with a Bessarabian background and sent to the Head of the

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<sup>848</sup> For example, see the report of the Head of the Bessarabian Gendarmes, Colonel Sokolov, to the Police Department, dated December 31, 1909, from which it is clear that, beyond the activities of certain local intellectuals, the most troublesome element from the central point of view was the local clergy, who demanded the introduction of generalized Romanian-language service in the church and who benefited from its own press organ. See ANRM, fond 297, op. 1, d. 108, ff. 396- 396 verso

<sup>849</sup> The censorship proved effective in blocking the appearance and distribution of such materials. Thus, during the tense period of the celebration of the 1912 anniversary, the authorities forbade the continued publication of a newspaper that featured “highly condemnable” comments on the anniversary and its significance. In the governor’s opinion, this newspaper had as its goal “to inculcate among the Moldavian part of the gubernia’s population mistrust towards the government and to undermine the Moldavians’ loyalty... toward the Throne and Fatherland.” ANRM, fond 2, op. 1, d. 9263, ff. 4-5, 10-10 verso

<sup>850</sup> GARF, fond 102, op. D.P., Special Section, 1914, d. 300, f. 24 Quotation marks in original.

Police Department from Constantinople on February 19, 1914.<sup>851</sup> This report focused, first, on the activities of the Romanian “Cultural League”<sup>852</sup> in Bessarabia and elsewhere and, second, provided a general analysis of political tendencies in Bessarabia itself. The author adopted a reserved and neutral stance that allowed for a more balanced assessment of the challenges the Russian Empire faced in the region. He correctly identified the fundamental difference between the earlier disparate “nationalist circles” and the coordinated and wide-ranging agenda of the “Cultural League,” which attempted to extend its influence in both the Russian and Habsburg-controlled lands inhabited by ethnic Romanians. The agent also noted the close involvement of the Romanian educated society and political establishment into the League’s activity, emphasizing that the actual scope of its goals ranged far beyond strictly cultural matters. In fact, the League aimed at “sustaining the feelings of national self-consciousness and unity among the Romanians living outside Romania.”<sup>853</sup> The author pointed to the difference between the Bessarabian and Transylvanian contexts. While in the latter case the Hungarian government had to pursue an alternative policy of repression and wide concessions due to the intensity of nationalist political mobilization, the efforts directed at mobilizing the Bessarabian masses during 1905-1906 had largely failed.<sup>854</sup> Accordingly, the report concluded that there were no signs of “separatism” in Bessarabia since the subsiding of the revolutionary wave in 1906-1907, despite the upsurge in the interest for Bessarabia among Romanian nationalist intellectuals on the occasion of the 1912 anniversary. Apparently, even the “Cultural League” had to admit the poor premises for a full-fledged “national propaganda” in Bessarabia, which again differentiated this

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<sup>851</sup> GARF, fond 529, op. 1, d. 26, ff. 9-11. Secret Report Nr. 39, February 19, 1914 (mistakenly dated 1913)

<sup>852</sup> The League for the Cultural Unity of All Romanians, headed by Nicolae Iorga.

<sup>853</sup> GARF, fond 529, op. 1, d. 26, f. 9

<sup>854</sup> GARF, fond 529, op. 1, d. 26, f. 9-10. The program of the fledgling Bessarabian oppositional movement included, among other demands, the following points: 1) the introduction of Romanian-language church services; 2) the teaching of Romanian in local schools; 3) the compulsory knowledge of Romanian by state officials; 4) the publication of Romanian-language newspapers. Similarly to previous analyses, the author associated the emergence of this movement with the activities of the local clergy and village priests, supported by “Romanian agitators.”

region from Transylvania and even Macedonia, where a more coherent program could be envisaged: “concerning the Bessarabian gubernia, it has been decided [during the League’s recent meetings] that at present, given the low degree of development of the rural class and considering the firm governmental regime in Russia, nothing can be effectively achieved, with the exception of providing the local population with [Romanian] books for reading.”<sup>855</sup> The Romanian challenge was thus relegated to a distant, if possible, future and conditioned by the weakening of Russia’s political institutions.

The second part of the report focused more closely on the situation in Bessarabia. The resulting picture proved more complex than the author intended it to be. Here one encounters the same mixture of optimism regarding the state’s capability of checking the anti-regime leanings of a certain part of the local intellectuals and the loyalty of the peasant masses to the state and implicit pessimism concerning the deeper tendencies of the educated strata:

As a person who knows Bessarabia in all respects and has connections within all strata, without exception, I know for certain that, though the rural population, the majority of the clergy and most lower schools’ teachers intimately prefer everything that is Romanian to everything Russian [*v dushe predpochitaiut russkomu vse rumynskoe*], there are no signs of separatism. Nationalism is expressed by conversations in the Moldavian language, which always existed, by reading Romanian books (seldom, for now) and singing Romanian national songs of a non-revolutionary character. The above-mentioned elements of the population do not go beyond this and are loyal subjects. The intelligentsia and, especially, the landowners, though occasionally speaking Moldavian at home, undoubtedly prefer their continued situation as Russian subjects, due to the protection of the Russian government, and are the most loyal [group] to the Throne and to Russia in the whole Empire, which they have proven repeatedly. There are also some Romanophiles among the latter, but their number is quite insignificant.<sup>856</sup>

Another factor that drew the author’s disapproval referred to the uncertain status of the Ismail district, which was still administered according to the pre-1878 Romanian legislation. The lack of any progress in “Russification,” which caused the Russian agent to perceive the district as a “Romania in miniature,” was explainable not only through the institutional links to the Romanian

<sup>855</sup> GARF, fond 529, op. 1, d. 26, f. 10

<sup>856</sup> GARF, fond 529, op. 1, d. 26, f. 11

kingdom, but also through the economic connections that oriented the district's inhabitants towards the neighboring country<sup>857</sup>. The resurgence of the "Ismail issue" as late as 1914 is symptomatic, since the debate concerning the necessity to streamline the local legislation to all-Russian standards was raging since the territory's re-annexation in 1878. 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). Due to the gradual "nationalization" of the imperial discourse and practical policy during World War I, the toleration of such administrative exceptions became increasingly questionable.

### ***3. The Wartime "Nationalization" of the Russian Empire and its Significance***

Several recently published contributions have shed new light on the fundamental impact of World War I on the policies and self-perception of the Russian civilian and military elites. Peter Holquist has, first, questioned the traditional chronology and conceptual framework used for interpreting Russia's early-20<sup>th</sup> century "continuum of crisis" and, second, insisted on the importance of the "all-European" and wartime context for the assessment of the dynamics of violence and state-society relationships that allowed its unprecedented scale displayed throughout the Russian Revolutions and the civil war period.<sup>858</sup> Holquist emphasizes the wartime roots of mass deportations and forcible displacements customarily associated with the policies of totalitarian regimes. The author also significantly observes that "total war was made possible by

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<sup>857</sup> GARF, fond 529, op. 1, d. 26, f. 11

<sup>858</sup> Peter Holquist, "Violent Russia, Deadly Marxism? Russia in the Epoch of Violence, 1905-1921," in: *Kritika. Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History*, Volume 4, Nr. 3, Summer 2003, pp. 627-652, esp. pp. 636-640.



the fact that society restructured *itself* in order to make it possible to continue the war.”<sup>859</sup> Far from representing a mere outside imposition on the empire’s social fabric, the war mobilization of economy and society had profound consequences on redrawing the lines of the conceivable and the feasible in imperial policies. Similarly to other European states engaged in modern warfare, Russia was forced to apply highly interventionist practices in order to secure the adequate support of the war effort. Beyond the coercion exercised in the economic and narrowly social sphere, the government also began to regard the multi-ethnic structure of the empire in different terms. Despite the pre-war intimations of a nationalizing policy, the imperial bureaucracy never pursued a consistent practice of ethnic categorization before the outbreak of the war.

Eric Lohr has most insightfully shown how a combination of the prevalence of nationalistically minded elements in the highest echelons of the Russian army and of ostensible considerations of strategy and security prompted the military authorities to initiate violent population displacements throughout the front zone ultimately aimed at “nationalizing the Russian Empire.”<sup>860</sup> The author “has established beyond doubt that the war witnessed a shift from the “traditional” imperial politics of assimilation to the more “modern” style of categorical exclusion”<sup>861</sup> and has, moreover, juxtaposed “military and civilian thinking and practice.”<sup>862</sup> The role of the military should not be underestimated in this context, since the whole territory of the “Western borderlands” (including Bessarabia) was subject to the administration of the Imperial High Command, according to the War Statute of July 1914. Lohr argues that “the War Statute deeply exacerbated a long-standing defect of the Russian political system, namely that different

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<sup>859</sup> Holquist, *Violent Russia*, p. 639

<sup>860</sup> Eric Lohr, *Nationalizing the Russian Empire: The Campaign Against Enemy Aliens During World War I* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003).

<sup>861</sup> Peter Gatrell, Review of Eric Lohr’s book, in: *Cahiers du Monde Russe*, Vol. 44, Nr. 4.

<sup>862</sup> Peter Gatrell, Review of Eric Lohr’s book, in: *Cahiers du Monde Russe*, Vol. 44, Nr. 4.

parts of the administration pursued conflicting policies without an institutionalized means to resolve their differences and provide a “united government.”<sup>863</sup> Beyond the usual lack of coordination among central government agencies, the persistent disagreements and reluctance of the civilian authorities to implement the radical measures advocated by the military point to the persistence of a more traditional bureaucratic ethos in their midst that did not discriminate against Russian subjects according to ethnicity.

Nevertheless, the war did have important repercussions on the civilian administration as well. First, the insistence of the military on the application of an exclusionary and violent “population politics” gradually penetrated the elements of civilian bureaucracy. The civilian government, prompted by the example of the army high command, but also responding to severe shortages of labor force in the rear of the front, resorted to previously untapped tactics of drafting traditionally exempt populations in the later phases of the war. As Joshua Sanborn convincingly argues, the decision to draft the Central Asian Muslim population not only broke with the long-standing imperial tradition of appeasing and tolerating local customs and enforcing barriers between *inorodtsy* and Christian subjects of the empire, but was also “fateful” in the sense of inaugurating the spiral of violence that ultimately led to the horrors of the civil war.<sup>864</sup> The researcher also stresses the massive population displacements (both planned and unplanned) that occurred during the first two years of the war throughout the territories under military authority and the severe social dislocation they engendered. The complex processes of socialization taking place within the army units, as well as, increasingly, between the military and the displaced civilian population go a long way into explaining the final “unraveling” of the social structure of the

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<sup>863</sup> Eric Lohr, “The Russian Army and the Jews: Mass Deportation, Hostages, and Violence during World War I,” in: *The Russian Review* (Vol. 60, July 2001), pp. 404-419, here pp. 407-408. Lohr also provides a map depicting the territorial jurisdiction of the War Statute.

<sup>864</sup> Joshua A. Sanborn, “Unsettling the Empire: Violent Migrations and Social Disaster in Russia during World War I,” in: *The Journal of Modern History*, (Vol. 77, June 2005), pp. 290-324, here p. 318-320

empire that reached its climax once the last “bastion of social cohesion,” represented by the armed forces, broke down under the strain of revolution and military setbacks in 1917.<sup>865</sup>

Second, the new attitude towards “population politics” should be placed within the larger context of the heightened interventionist role of the state. In Russia, however, the dynamics of the relationships between state and society had important peculiarities. Following the shock of the violent events of 1905, a large part of the educated society turned to the state as the sole instrument capable to restrain the destructive energy of the masses while at the same time instructing them in the new role of citizens. The ideal of the liberal elements of the political spectrum envisaged a powerful and modern state that could overcome Russia’s perceived backwardness.<sup>866</sup> The autocracy clearly did not fit into this scheme, both due to its reluctance to collaborate with members of “society” and to the generally conservative, even stifling social policies of the monarchy, aimed either at blocking the integration of the masses into the political sphere or at using their political loyalties instrumentally. This unequal relationship changed with the onset of World War I, which “engendered new types of political rationality” and “suggested new horizons for the state” and its representatives.<sup>867</sup> More significantly, the war ended the autocracy’s monopoly on social and political action. Following Michael Geyer’s model of the “para-statal complex,” Holquist argues that in Russia a peculiar “para-statal” complex emerged, forming itself under the aegis of the state, but simultaneously undermining the autocratic state through its harsh critique of its incompetence and ineffectiveness in dealing with the war effort. In other words, it “raised itself *against* the autocracy that ostensibly governed the state and was

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<sup>865</sup> Sanborn, *Unsettling the Empire*, pp. 320-322

<sup>866</sup> Peter Holquist, “La société contre l’Etat, la société conduisant l’Etat : la société cultivée et le pouvoir d’Etat en Russie, 1914-1921,” in: *Le Mouvement Social* (July- September, 2001), Nr. 196, pp. 21-40, here p. 24

<sup>867</sup> Holquist, *La société contre l’Etat*, p. 25

formed *under the influence* of the critiques by anticipation of the liberal society.”<sup>868</sup> The necessities of modern warfare radically altered the political atmosphere and made the oscillation of the government between rival groups of the bureaucracy more inadequate than ever. The division of authority and the implicit rivalry between the increasingly vocal representatives of the liberal educated society (grouped in the *Zemgor* and other associations), the military and the imperial court not only frequently fragmented central decision-making, but also provided the conditions for the increasing alienation of the elite from the dynasty and the emperor, who lost his traditional role of arbiter and policy coordinator.

Aside from the dilemmas linked to the growing intervention of the state into the economic and social spheres, the government also faced the challenge of “domesticating” nationalism and channeling its potential to fit its own purposes. The question of the relative “nationalization” of the Russian Empire’s population in the initial phase of the war thus acquires fundamental importance. This process clearly did take place later in the conflict, though with varying degrees of intensity, and only occasionally involved large segments of the population. The first phenomenon to be considered in this context is inter-imperial competition. The role of this kind of rivalry has been recently explored, among others, by Alexei Miller, who advanced the view that the collapse of the “macro-system” of Eurasian continental empires during World War I was largely a self-inflicted catastrophe. The elites of the Russian, Habsburg, Ottoman and German Empires are thus portrayed as consciously breaching the former conventions of inter-state relations in the region and as trespassing the boundaries of their “rational behavior” in the process. Dating the origins of this transformation from the Crimean War (which, according also to other authors, undermined the equilibrium of the “European concert”), Miller insists that it was World War I which finally destroyed this system of “communicating vessels.” Rather than

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<sup>868</sup> Holquist, *La société contre l’Etat*, p. 28

following the traditional paradigm, which emphasized the subversive potential of national movements per se, the Russian historian argues that the manipulation of ethnicity by belligerent empires led to the final implosion of these multi-ethnic polities. The presence of ethnically related trans-border communities in all the concerned parties warrants further investigations along these lines. In any case, there is plenty of empirical evidence on the creation of national military units or on the financing of nationalist organizations by war adversaries in order to undermine the internal stability and to counter the propaganda of enemy powers.<sup>869</sup> It is also certain that local officials were keenly aware of such dangers even in border provinces that were not strictly part of the war zone.<sup>870</sup> While Miller's scheme might be criticized for drawing too much attention to inter-imperial rather than imperial-nation-state rivalry,<sup>871</sup> his point that the imperial framework was crucial for the development and consolidation of ethnic nationalisms must be retained.

The degree of "nationalization" of the Russian masses by the summer of 1914 and later during the first phases of the war is, in itself, a contentious point. The interpretive differences stem not so much from the available data as from the contested definitions of nationalism used by different authors. The predominantly rural nature of the empire's population, as well as the uncertain "nationalizing" effect of the imperial army, seems to indicate a weak impact of national motives on most Russian subjects' self-awareness. In any case, even if the war is usually viewed as a formative period in terms of "nationalizing the masses," the 1914 situation is treated differently. Joshua Sanborn recently argued for a reconsideration of the question of the Russian nation in

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<sup>869</sup> Bessarabia was one of the cases involved, as will be argued in more detail below. The Ukrainian case is, of course, even more interesting.

<sup>870</sup> Alexei Miller, *Pochemu vse kontinentalnye imperii raspadlis posle Pervoi Mirovoi voyny?* [Why Did All the Continental Empires Collapse After World War I?]. Available at: [www.polit.ru](http://www.polit.ru)

<sup>871</sup> This criticism is certainly valid in the Bessarabian case, where Russia had to deal with the irredentist claims not of a fellow-imperial, but rather of a national state. However, the processes at work might be very similar, and thus Miller's thesis should not be, in itself, discarded.

wartime, asserting that “the national political form does not require agreement or loyalty, either between segments of the population or between citizens and the regime,” since “the nation by definition opens up this space of contestation.”<sup>872</sup> The author then relies on Rogers Brubaker’s model of “nation-ness as event” to argue that “nationness is *both* an event that suddenly crystallizes *and* one that is the product of deep developmental trends.”<sup>873</sup> Despite Sanborn’s clarification concerning his preference for a “kinetic” interpretation allowing for a preliminary buildup of potential energy, his conclusion remains somewhat disconcerting. His insistence on the fallacy of the link between the emerging of “nationness” and the urban environment should be taken into account, but I believe he is overstating the case for a peculiar “peasant nationalism.” The “national framework” that the peasants used in their public dealings with the government might as well be a classical case of discursive influence “from above.” Rather, World War I should be seen as an “inflection point” that provided the conditions for activating the “potential energies” of the broader self-identification of the peasantry. More importantly, the author acknowledges the different directions into which emerging projects of nation-building were pointing, due to the conflicts between elements of the Russian bureaucracy. Thus, one could agree with the argument that “the real barriers to nation-formation... were the conservative state officials who feared an active populace and scuttled plans for formal incorporation of peasants into national political structures whenever they could.”<sup>874</sup> However, even such an interpretation presupposes the existence of a measure of coherence within the Russian bureaucratic apparatus that was clearly exaggerated. The conflicts linked to the most effective principle for mass mobilization were in fact related to the much deeper division on the question of the nature and

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<sup>872</sup> Josh Sanborn, “The Mobilization of 1914 and the Question of the Russian Nation: A Reexamination,” in: *Slavic Review*, Vol. 59, Nr. 2 (Summer 2000), pp. 267-289, here p. 282

<sup>873</sup> Sanborn, *The Mobilization of 1914*, p. 282

<sup>874</sup> Sanborn, *The Mobilization of 1914*, p. 284

spatial configuration of the “Russian nation” itself. This can be clearly gauged from the example of A. N. Kuropatkin, one of the most prominent military figures during the last decades of the imperial regime. His ostensible complaint concerning the crisis of traditional legitimizing criteria (“devotion to the Tsar... and Fatherland”) referred not so much to the pre-national, dynastic overtones of these notions, but primarily to their nationalist re-interpretation whose perceived failure Kuropatkin regretted.<sup>875</sup> This is one of Sanborn’s main failings in his otherwise fruitful discussion of the emerging problem of integrating Russian subjects into a modern community during wartime. Though attentive to the “vertical” social stratification of the Russian populace (in the sense of rehabilitating the peasantry as a subject as well as an object of potential nation-building), this focus on the “Russian peasantry” ignores the “horizontal” fault lines between ethnic groups in the imperial borderlands that were activated after 1914. The picture becomes even more complex once we accept the observation of one of Sanborn’s critics who argued that the author in question “underestimate[d] the degree to which nation, empire, and class pulled in different directions from 1916,” leading to an increasing social polarization along the lines of discrete and opposed political “languages.”<sup>876</sup> In fact, such developments could be identified even in earlier phases of the war, at least starting from the “Great Retreat” of the Russian armies in the spring of 1915, and are thus a general feature of the whole period.

The extent to which the government and the public were trying to forge an “ideal community” through inculcating an awareness of the common war effort or through building a cult of heroes and exceptional feats remains a contentious issue. Recent investigations have argued that Russia equaled its co-belligerents in constructing a whole infrastructure of memory and commemoration

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<sup>875</sup> Sanborn, *The Mobilization of 1914*, p. 284

<sup>876</sup> Eric Lohr, “Russian Economic Nationalism during the First World War: Moscow Merchants and Commercial Diasporas,” in: *Nationalities Papers*, Vol. 31, Nr. 4, (December 2003), pp. 471-484, here p. 471

in order to foster a feeling of common belonging and state cohesion among the population.<sup>877</sup> The author remarks that “honoring, rewarding, and commemorating the nation’s soldiers was a way to sidestep vexing differences in the multinational state and bring all together on common ground.”<sup>878</sup> This “common ground,” however, mostly remained an unattainable ideal due to the fundamental differences in the attitudes of military and civilian officials to the participation of the peasant masses in the Great War. Far from perceiving the soldiers in the Russian army as (potential) citizens, some of the highly placed military commanders regarded them as unfit for modern warfare because of their parochial interests and lack of understanding of “the idea of fighting for Russia.”<sup>879</sup> Despite the unprecedented scale of the public’s involvement in wartime developments and the huge impact of mass population movements on destabilizing the social fabric of the empire, the bulk of the population concerned was indeed relegated by the central authorities to a passive and subordinate role. The incapacity of the imperial state to impose its integrative projects upon a restive population (and its success in promoting highly exclusionary practices of ethnic discrimination) proved ultimately fateful for the survival of the imperial regime and for the upheavals that plunged the empire (and especially its borderlands) into a maelstrom of confusion and violence.

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<sup>877</sup> Melissa K. Stockdale, “United in Gratitude: Honoring Soldiers and Defining the Nation in Russia’s Great War,” in: *Kritika. Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History*, Vol. 7, Nr. 3, (Summer 2006), pp. 459-485.

<sup>878</sup> Stockdale, *United in Gratitude*, p. 484. For a cogent criticism of Stockdale’s position, see Alfred J. Rieber, “The Problem of Social Cohesion,” in: *Kritika. Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History*, Vol. 7, Nr. 3, (Summer 2006), pp. 599-608, esp. pp. 603-604. While admitting that these projects represented “the last attempt of the autocracy to forge a unified, national community,” Rieber concludes that “many problems remain in developing the idea that the Russian Empire was moving toward a generally accepted definition of citizenship.” (p. 604).

<sup>879</sup> See the discussion by Stockdale (that significantly undermines her argument) of the bitter disagreement between Chief of Staff of the General Headquarters Gen. N. Ianushkevich and Minister of Agriculture A. V. Krivoshein. While Ianushkevich expressed his deep skepticism with regard to the existence of any “national feeling” among the peasant conscripts and soldiers, Krivoshein, joined by the other ministers, strongly objected. Disagreement on such fundamental issues is symptomatic. See Stockdale, *United in Gratitude*, pp. 472-474. Ianushkevich’s “xenophobic nationalism” did not preclude him from having little faith in effective mobilizing factors, beyond purely material incentives.



Following the declaration of war in late July 1914, Bessarabia immediately entered the sphere of the military administration. This temporary shift in the region's legal status had direct repercussions upon the authorities' attitude toward the presence of certain "unreliable" individuals in the province. The degree of "unreliability" of the Bessarabian Romanian population in official eyes was not comparable to more directly targeted ethnic groups, like Jews or Germans. Nevertheless, the accusation of "Romanophilia" bore much more serious consequences during the years of Romania's neutrality and uncertain military allegiance than during the immediate pre-war period. An important change in the authorities' perception of internal subversion concerned the spreading of false or pernicious rumors among the civil population of the gubernia and, especially, among the reservists at the time of mobilization. The role of rumors as the most widespread and uncontrollable means of subverting collective morale was significant in enhancing the general atmosphere of "war paranoia" and suspicion of foreign espionage.<sup>880</sup> One of the most interesting individual examples of such a tendency involves the case of Elena Alistar, a Bessarabian-born activist in the Romanian women's rights' movement who was, at the time, a student at the University of Iasi.<sup>881</sup> Alistar was accused of spreading rumors about an impending Russian-Romanian war among young reservists that were recruited from her native village. The accusations were serious enough to draw the attention of

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<sup>880</sup> The persistence and variety of "rumors" concerning Bessarabia's future relationship to Romania was a constant source of worry for the local authorities even prior to 1914. For example, Madan related a "rumor" which appeared during the Russian-Japanese war referring to a mysterious delegation of "Bessarabians" which purportedly went to the Romanian King Carol I and asked him to have the Romanian troops ready in order to "occupy Bessarabia" in the case of a Russian military defeat. See ANRM, fond 297, op. 1, d. 98, f. 182. Another revealing example is cited by the Romanian historian Gh. Ghibanescu, who undertook several journeys through Bessarabia during 1912 and 1913 and who registered a "rumor" about the planned marriage of the Romanian prince Charles (the future Carol II) to a Russian Grand Duchess. According to this rumor, Bessarabia would be "returned" to Romania as a "dowry" for the young couple. The source was mentioned by the above-cited report, which annexed an article from the Romanian newspaper "Universul" of January 28, 1914. See GARF, fond 529, op. 1, d. 26, f. 12. The issue of the impact of such collective "intoxications" is worth investigating further.

<sup>881</sup> Elena Alistar was to attain a rather high profile in interwar Romania, being the most prominent member of Romania's women's organizations coming from Bessarabia. She was also the head of the Bessarabian section of the Society of Romanian Women.

Bessarabia's Chief of Gendarmes, who interrogated her in person. Despite finding no solid evidence to prove the charges of "subversive anti-war propaganda," he recommended Alistar's expulsion from Bessarabia and "other border gubernias" for the duration of the war on the grounds of her being "a convinced and extreme Romanophile."<sup>882</sup> Alistar's activities seemed even more troubling because of her association with a Romanian citizen arrested for suspected military espionage.<sup>883</sup> Apparently, this was not the only example, since later in the war a similar decision was issued in the case of Daniil Ciugurean, one of the most prominent members of the "Romanophile" circle, later to serve in the first government of the Moldavian Democratic Republic in late 1917 and early 1918.<sup>884</sup> The insistence of military authorities on applying radical repressive measures was not followed by the civilian officials, who proved far more lenient and rejected the decision of the Gendarmes' Chief. This shows how the different emphases and conflicting interests within the Russian bureaucracy could lead to unforeseen outcomes even in the security-obsessed atmosphere of the war.

By late 1915, the specter of an emerging "national movement" in Bessarabia resurfaced in the reports of the region's Gendarmes' Office. Since Romania's position in the war was still doubtful (despite the growing pro-Entente sentiment), the possibility of an open conflict between Russia and Romania remained open. In this context, the Chief of Gendarmes emphasized the "peculiarity of the Bessarabian gubernia- namely, the national Moldavian question, which until now has elicited scant, or, better to say, almost no attention, since the population of this nationality is

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<sup>882</sup> Decision of the Chief of Bessarabian Gendarmes, Colonel Nordberg, dated September 19, 1914. See ANRM, fond 297, op. 1, d. 520, ff. 31-33, here f. 33

<sup>883</sup> ANRM, fond 297, op. 1, d. 520, f. 33

<sup>884</sup> Decision of the Chief of Bessarabian Gendarmes, Colonel Nordberg, dated September 5, 1915. The evidence uncovered in Ciugurean's case confirming his involvement both in revolutionary and "nationalist" propaganda was far more compelling. See ANRM, fond 297, op. 1, d. 358, ff. 17-18

considered to be rather loyal. This is undoubtedly true.”<sup>885</sup> The peasant masses are described as inert, not affected by “Russian patriotism,” but nevertheless economically attracted to the Russian Empire, which guaranteed greater material well-being in comparison with its Romanian rival. Nordberg astutely remarks the crucial role of “the events of 1905” and the 1912 anniversary in nurturing, “among the local intelligentsia,” of a group that “strive towards “cultural self-consciousness of the Moldavians,” or, as they call them more often nowadays, “Romanians.”<sup>886</sup> The novel development that provoked Nordberg’s apprehension consisted in the “propaganda within the peasant masses,” which intensified during the war. The war had a destabilizing influence as well, since it “created certain illusions of a separatist character” among these rebellious intellectuals.<sup>887</sup> Commenting on its general weakness, the official observed that this movement “ha[d] a certain reflection” on local society.<sup>888</sup> Thus, the “nationalizing” logic was compelling the Russian authorities to view the Bessarabian developments increasingly in terms of a “borderland question.” The threat of “separatism” or “Romanian irredentism” was mostly a mental construct of insecure imperial officials that faced new challenges in a multi-ethnic context that could be no longer perceived in pre-modern terms. The weak, but growing, articulation of the local educated society also created the premises for the extrapolation of the rather moderate, culturally-oriented grievances of the Moldavian “intelligentsia” into a full-fledged “separatist” project. There were, however, some premises for the Russian officials’ insecurity. These premises emerged not so much from inside Bessarabia as from the Romanian kingdom, where the anti-Russian rhetoric exploited the “Bessarabian question” in internal political struggles. This

<sup>885</sup> Report of the Chief of Bessarabian Gendarmes, Colonel Nordberg, dated October 31, 1915. ANRM, fond 297, op. 1, d. 312, ff. 6, 9, here f. 9

<sup>886</sup> ANRM, fond 297, op. 1, d. 312, f. 9. Quotation marks in original.

<sup>887</sup> ANRM, fond 297, op. 1, d. 312, f. 9

<sup>888</sup> ANRM, fond 297, op. 1, d. 312, f. 9

polemics reached its culmination during the first two years of the war, when Romania's foreign policy options were still largely undecided.

#### ***4. The Controversy over the “Bessarabian Question” in the Romanian Kingdom (1914-1916)***

Before 1914, the interest displayed by the Romanian educated society and political establishment towards Bessarabia was ephemeral, at best. This changed periodically at certain moments when political turmoil in the Russian Empire or the official ceremonies staged by the Russian monarchy elicited a response from the Romanian part. Aside from the polemics sparked by the 1912 anniversary, a good example is provided by the 1905 revolution, though the intensity of the Romanian reaction was much weaker. Beyond Moruzi's prose, another important author who left a consistent account of Bessarabian matters is Nicolae Iorga. The Romanian historian undertook a short journey through the region in the spring of 1905.<sup>889</sup> Though his primary interest targeted the historical “Romanian” monuments situated on Bessarabian soil (mostly the fortresses on the Dniester and the few remaining medieval or early modern churches), Iorga, who was also a nationalist militant, could not refrain from remarks on the contemporary situation. A striking feature of his narrative was the prominence he gave to the “Jewish question,” to which he devoted most of his analytical acumen. This even led some of his political adversaries to accuse him of a disproportionate focus on the Jews instead of concentrating on the Romanian-speaking population. The latter was traditionally perceived in terms of a rural multitude stagnating in an a-historical past. Given Iorga's version of conservative peasantism, his Bessarabian travelogue contained several instances of idyllic rural scenery that was meant to emphasize the organic

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<sup>889</sup> Nicolae Iorga. *Neamul românesc în Basarabia* [The Romanian Nation in Bessarabia] (Bucharest: 1905).

symbiosis between the peasants and their environment. However, in a more “pragmatic” turn of his analysis, Iorga could appear much less enthralled about the nature of this phenomenon: “And the fact that here there is no question of a Romanian life, however weak, within any other social stratum save the peasantry is really terrible.”<sup>890</sup> The inadequacy of this situation in an epoch when the importance of mass politics was acknowledged even by staunch conservatives results from the further depiction of the wholesale “Russification” of local educated society, whose political views, interests and even speech differed markedly from those of the Kingdom’s elites. The historian’s position towards the Bessarabian “cultured elements” is one of deep mistrust and lack of understanding, despite the more frequent direct contacts between the Bessarabians and the Kingdom Romanians. These contacts, in Iorga’s view, were distorted by the prejudices that the former held against Romania. Thus, “there are periodic trips [to Romania], but only the bad side of things is noticed. Naturally, Bucharest cannot bear any comparison to brilliant Odessa, but it is very painful to hear it being said by a Romanian, who has neither the face nor, quite often, the speech of a Romanian!”<sup>891</sup>

Another persistent cliché encountered in Iorga’s work refers to the organization of the urban landscape by the Russian imperial state. Like in other cases, a direct link is posited between the despotic tsarist regime and the scale and spatial arrangement of official buildings in the central part of the region’s cities. Architecture appears as a quintessential symbol of autocracy and as an epitome of the enormous and frightening “Russian space.” “It can be seen,” Iorga asserts, “that this limitless empire desired to express, through these enormous masses of stone, its power and durability, which nothing could shatter... One seems to breathe harder when seeing these huge facades of white stone that press both upon the earth and upon human souls... A wild majesty

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<sup>890</sup> Nicolae Iorga. *Neamul românesc în Basarabia*, p. 86

<sup>891</sup> Nicolae Iorga. *Neamul românesc în Basarabia*, p. 87

and a wild wealth pour forth from them.”<sup>892</sup> Even if monumental and impressive, the “Russian style” was foreign and rigid in a manner that underscored the alienation of Bessarabia from the familiar space of home. The author remains ambiguous about the degree of Bessarabia’s belonging to the national body, though the official grandeur of an oppressive regime might be compensated for by the continuity of the village. This state of rural immobility derived, in Iorga’s view, not only from the ethnic vitality of the Romanian element (in fact, the author never dwells on this point here), but from the purported indifference and carelessness of the Russian administration. This conclusion is only reinforced by an explicit comparison between the situation of the peasantry in Bessarabia and Bukovina. While in Bukovina the “Romanian village” was plagued by the influx of the Ruthenians, an excessive taxation, and, most of all, by the pernicious activities of Jewish officials and usurers, none of this could be encountered in the Bessarabian villages, which preserved their original patriarchal aspect and where the state authority was embodied, at best, in an “[ethnically] Romanian policeman.” Such an image is relevant insofar as it alludes to the under-governance characteristic of the Russian Empire even in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. As in other cases, however, this comparison only serves as a pretext for Iorga to contrast the virtues of traditional society with the flaws of modernity: “From all this it follows that a scandalously bad administration, a non-existent [*nulă*] administration can, in some circumstances, be more favorable than an administration that is too efficient. The latter assists “civilization,” imposes its forms and appearances, but doesn’t the natural development of a people, which cannot rush [to civilization] without being killed, represent something higher than these forms?”<sup>893</sup> The same rhetoric will re-emerge on the occasion of the 1912 polemics. Thus, Bessarabia symbolized, in its rural essence, an opportunity of “organic development,” missed by

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<sup>892</sup> Nicolae Iorga. *Neamul românesc în Basarabia*, p. 85-86

<sup>893</sup> Nicolae Iorga. *Neamul românesc în Basarabia*, p. 77-78

the Romanian Kingdom, but also missed by Bessarabia due to the alienation of the educated classes from the otherwise uncorrupted peasantry. If the Romanian state was interventionist and brutally transformative, the Russian state's sole merit was its quasi-absence on the local level.

A final aspect of Iorga's analysis refers to the absence of any stirrings of a "national movement" in Bessarabia. This conclusion seemed only logical and stemmed from the ostensible inertia of the masses and the purported success of Russification among the elites. In fact, Iorga pursued a bitter struggle against his potential competitors on the field of nationalism inside Romania. The thrust of his argument was directed against the "false nationalism" of Bessarabian émigrés to the Kingdom, whose activity he found futile, at best. In Iorga's opinion, "the only nationalist Bessarabians are those who have passed to us [to Romania] from various reasons." His main target is B.P. Hasdeu, who, along with his unnamed peers, was guilty of a "platonic nationalism" that did not affect Bessarabian reality in any way: "If these Romanians from Bessarabia did, in their native province, with all prudence required to avoid any misfortune, one percent of what they say in Romania, things would have an entirely different evolution for our nation beyond the Prut."<sup>894</sup> In another work (otherwise, of a purely historical character) written on the occasion of the 1912 events, Iorga attempted to draw an inventory of the most prominent Bessarabian writers and intellectuals who pursued a career in Romania. The nationalist-conservative criteria that Iorga used to assess their relative usefulness for the "national cause" led him to conclude that Bessarabia did not produce a figure capable of condensing the national program as he understood it: "A Bessarabian consciousness, at times full of pain, at times full of hope, or touched in passing by the wings of joy was absent, however."<sup>895</sup> Hasdeu, though judged less severely, is viewed as an exceptional individual, but, exactly because of his uniqueness, is

<sup>894</sup> Nicolae Iorga. *Neamul românesc în Basarabia*, p. 87

<sup>895</sup> Nicolae Iorga, *Basarabia noastră* [Our Bessarabia], in: *Neamul românesc în Basarabia*, p. 305

denied the quality of Bessarabia's representative. Similarly, younger prominent personalities of Bessarabian descent (like C. Stere or Z. Arbore) were criticized for their leftist leanings. Iorga vituperated against the purely "material and political" goals of Russian Populism whose nefarious consequences seemed to penetrate the Romanian atmosphere along with its bearers coming from beyond the Prut. "A violent [*iute*], but barren current," Iorga asserts, "in comparison with the slow, but steady development of national realities, it [Populism] annihilated, both here and beyond the Prut, the action of such richly cultured people as Zamfir Arbore and C. Stere."<sup>896</sup> Bessarabia was clearly failing the exam of national consciousness even in case of such happy exceptions from the rule, providing instead dubious solutions to Romania's problems. The primacy of social grievances articulated by these ideologues was alien to Iorga's organicist (and rather vague) concept of national harmony that would provide a miraculous cure for Romania's ills. The "Bessarabian problem" was as much, if not more, present on the map of internal political struggles in the Kingdom as it was on the mental map of an ideal fatherland.

This became even more obvious after 1914, when the war changed the context of the Bessarabian question and transformed it into a pressing (geo)political issue. Romania's membership in the Triple Alliance of the Central Powers became increasingly challenged in the immediate pre-war years. The intensification of the nationalizing efforts of the Hungarian state that led to growing tensions in Transylvania, the ambiguous behavior of the Austro-Hungarian government during the latter phase of the Balkan wars, the changes in the political leadership of both major Romanian parties and the concurrent growth of Francophile tendencies among the political establishment all constituted major obstacles in the continuation of the previous foreign policy course. Though the Conservative government of Titu Maiorescu and Take Ionescu renewed the alliance treaty with the Central Powers in 1913, the diplomacy of the latter was

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<sup>896</sup> Nicolae Iorga, *Basarabia noastră* [Our Bessarabia], in: *Neamul românesc în Basarabia*, p. 307



aware that Romania became an unreliable partner. More ominously, direct negotiations between the Hungarian Prime Minister Count Tisza and the leaders of the Romanian national parties in Transylvania failed in early 1914. These negotiations were supported both by the Bucharest government, hopeful for a settlement with the Hungarians, and by the Austro-Hungarian Foreign Office, anxious to placate its ally in the turbulent post-Balkan wars period. Parallel to these developments, a gradual change in Russian-Romanian relations occurred. This change should be analyzed in the context of an overall “normalization” of Russia’s image in Western Europe just before World War I.<sup>897</sup> Romanian Francophilia and the pro-Western stance of the Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Sazonov provided a congenial atmosphere for direct negotiations between Russian and Romanian high-level officials. The culmination of these preliminary efforts came in June 1914, two weeks before the Sarajevo murder, when the Romanian king Carol I met Nicholas II in Constanta.<sup>898</sup> These fluctuations in Romania’s international position were only enhanced by the uncertainty that dominated the Bucharest governing circles following the onset of hostilities. At the Crown Council held on August 3, 1914, the overwhelming majority of the country’s active politicians summoned for the occasion rejected the king’s proposal to join the Central Powers and opted instead for “strict neutrality.” In fact, this decision signaled the beginning of a hectic diplomatic campaign that went hand in hand with an intense polemics over the country’s future course in the war. Following the king’s death in September 1914, the supporters of the Central Powers began to lose ground steadily to the pro-Entente faction, who held the upper hand through the means of an active press campaign and who also benefited from a strong following in the ranks of both the governing Liberals and the opposition Conservatives. The government chaired (since January 1914) by the Liberal leader Ion I. C. Bratianu hesitated

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<sup>897</sup> Martin Malia, *Russia under Western Eyes*, p...

<sup>898</sup> Nicolae Ciachir, *Marile Puteri si Romania (1856-1947)* [The Great Powers and Romania: 1856-1947] (Bucharest: Albatros, 1996), p. 155-156

for two more years before bringing Romania into the war in August 1916. This interlude witnessed an open competition of “national priorities,” and it is in this context that the Bessarabian question suddenly acquired a reality and immediacy unknown in the past.

Before proceeding to the analysis of the polemics between the pro-Entente and pro-German factions, a discussion of two important works dealing with the Bessarabian problem is necessary. Both of these works appeared during 1915 and thus bear the imprint of the war context.<sup>899</sup> The difference between them was that the first belonged to a young scholar originating from the Romanian Kingdom, while the latter was written by a Bessarabian émigré specifically with the aim of war propaganda in mind and advocated a radically pro-German course. Moisiu’s book appeared as a result of the author’s journey through Bessarabia in 1914, immediately before the outbreak of the war. It thus belonged more to the genre of impressionistic travelogue epitomized by Iorga’s writing than to the politically charged and polemical genre adopted by Frunza. Moisiu specifically rejected any irredentist agenda, claiming that his book pursued a purely intellectual goal of filling a gap in the knowledge of a Romanian-inhabited land by the Romanian public. At the outset, he claimed that the only emotion allowed an educated Romanian in the contemporary circumstances was one of “platonic compassion,” adding that his interest for Bessarabia was of an ethnographic nature: “I would not exaggerate if I said that we knew too little about Bessarabia. And we must know her not for the purpose of conquest, but because there lives a part of our nation’s body, a part which, in many respects, is worth knowing, researching, seeing.”<sup>900</sup> Consequently, the motive of ignorance and indifference displayed by the Kingdom’s establishment towards Bessarabia occupied a central part in his argument. Thus, “for the Kingdom Romanians, Bessarabia, though desired and mourned, has always remained a “*terra*

<sup>899</sup> Vasile D. Moisiu. *Știri din Basarabia de astăzi* [News from Today’s Bessarabia]. Preface by Dumitru Furtuna. Bucharest: 1915; Axinte Frunză, *România Mare* [Greater Romania] (Bucharest: Tipografia F. Goebel Fii, 1915).

<sup>900</sup> Vasile D. Moisiu. *Știri din Basarabia de astăzi*, p. 8

*ignota*,” a dark labyrinth...”<sup>901</sup> This was due, on the one hand, to the scarcity of the information on the region appearing in the Romanian press, and, on the other hand, to its lack of reliability and to the absence of any specialized personnel that would display a constant interest for Bessarabian realities “from a Romanian point of view.” Even the Bessarabian émigré community in Romania failed to fulfill this function, due to its purported reluctance to concentrate on such a painful subject, but also because of a peculiar “distortion of perception” that did not allow it to fully appreciate the similarities and differences between the Kingdom and their native province.<sup>902</sup> Despite the ostensible striving towards “objectivity,” Moisiu did not fail to make revealing parallels between the “plight” of Bessarabia and that of Alsace-Lorraine. He used even a wider array of historical references, invoking the “grief” of English and Austrian monarchs for the lost territories of Calais and Silesia as an appropriate parallel for Romania’s position towards Bessarabia.<sup>903</sup>

The author followed the lead of the unanimous opinion of Romanian writers concerning the importance of the Bessarabian peasants as repositories of the “national essence.” A Bessarabian village seemed indistinguishable from its counterpart in Romanian Moldavia, though Moisiu observed a higher degree of material well-being among the Russian gubernia’s peasants.<sup>904</sup> A corollary of this situation was the alienation of the upper classes, which the author blamed more on these strata’s propensity to safeguard their material interests than on a conscious policy of the Russian authorities. The image of the Russian administration that emerges from Moisiu’s account is contradictory. Condemning its “brutal indolence” and the “stifling” and “tendentious” impact of Russian culture, he simultaneously asserted that the Russian authorities never pursued a

<sup>901</sup> Vasile D. Moisiu. *Știri din Basarabia de astăzi*, p. 7

<sup>902</sup> Vasile D. Moisiu. *Știri din Basarabia de astăzi*, p. 8

<sup>903</sup> Vasile D. Moisiu. *Știri din Basarabia de astăzi*, p. 7. Moisiu’s arsenal of revealing parallels reached even the realm of Greek mythology. Thus he compared Bessarabia to an „enchanted and lost Medea,” while Macedonia was more akin to a „desperate Hecuba.”

<sup>904</sup> Vasile D. Moisiu. *Știri din Basarabia de astăzi*, p. 29

systematic policy of de-nationalization, being rather careless about their subjects' loyalty to the state.<sup>905</sup> On the other hand, he squarely dismissed any substantial pro-Romanian feeling among the overwhelming majority of the population. The accusations of "separatism" leveled by the Russian authorities were absolutely unfounded, since the subject of "Bessarabia's rapprochement with Romania" was never present "in the thoughts" of the local clergy and intellectuals. The example of the national movements of other ethnic groups (mainly the quintessential model of the Poles) appeared as the triggering factor in the "awakening" of the Bessarabian sense of national consciousness.<sup>906</sup> The clergy was the main social group who articulated the grievances of the Moldavian peasantry, despite the fact that even this stratum was anxious to prove its loyalty towards the imperial state. Still, the author was more than pessimistic with regard to the chances of the emergence of a full-fledged "separatist" agenda, not least because of the "distorted" image of the Romanian Kingdom created by the official school system and propaganda.<sup>907</sup> The question of Romania's image among the Bessarabian peasantry prompted Moisiu to devote a fragment of his work to the most salient stereotypes that were partly inculcated by the Russian high culture and partly reflected broader popular patterns of thought. It is hard to assess how much of this picture was actually taken from oral sources and how much was built upon earlier Romanian accounts of the region (there are some similarities with Moruzi's writings). If one is to believe Moisiu, the Moldavian peasantry perceived the Kingdom Romanians as "brothers" who were unfortunate to be ruled by a foreign king and to be cruelly exploited by "boyars and Jews." The characteristic signs of otherness were mainly visible in two aspects of difference: religion and language. The first cluster of stereotypes presupposed that the Romanian elites had abandoned

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<sup>905</sup> Vasile D. Moisiu, *Știri din Basarabia de astăzi*, p. 57, 188

<sup>906</sup> Vasile D. Moisiu, *Știri din Basarabia de astăzi*, p. 90-91

<sup>907</sup> Moisiu noted, however, the pressing nature of the social question in Romania and the problems this might entail for a future integration of Bessarabia into the Romanian nation-state. Moisiu, p. 91

Orthodoxy and converted to their king's "German" faith. Only the "poor Christians" (i.e., the peasants) preserved the true faith, but even these were threatened by spiritual corruption and material decay due to their "betrayal" of the tradition of their ancestors. Moisiu's interviewees seemed to believe that the Russian tsar was planning a campaign to "liberate the Christians from the damned hands of the German [king], the boyars and the Jews."<sup>908</sup> The second sign of alienation consisted in the use of the Latin alphabet, which, because of its Roman character, was not suitable for an Orthodox people and was thus perceived as an outside imposition of the alien elements controlling Romania. The "sanctity" of the Russian script was an element that Moisiu related to the "education received at school and in the church," thus emphasizing its "official" origins.<sup>909</sup> Another dimension of the "language problem" related to the differences between the Bessarabian peasant idiom and standard Romanian. The attitude of Moisiu's subjects seemed to oscillate between mistrust towards any attempt to elaborate a high culture in "Moldavian" and a timid realization of the possibility of such an evolution when confronted with the presence of educated Romanians from the Kingdom. The author devoted a whole chapter to the presentation and analysis of the speech peculiarities of the Bessarabian Romanians, concluding that, despite dialectal features and the influence of Russian, linguistic unity remained unaltered.<sup>910</sup>

The Romanian observer further focused his attention upon the hetero-stereotypes that both the peasant masses and the cultured elements held with respect to the Russians. He noted that "the Russian people and Russian culture- which is indeed significant among the upper classes- constitute the object of a special affection for the Bessarabians."<sup>911</sup> This affection for the Russians, however, acquired an abstract and almost grotesque character in Moisiu's

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<sup>908</sup> Vasile D. Moisiu. *Știri din Basarabia de astăzi*, p. 92.

<sup>909</sup> Vasile D. Moisiu. *Știri din Basarabia de astăzi*, p. 92

<sup>910</sup> Vasile D. Moisiu. *Știri din Basarabia de astăzi*, p. 129-149

<sup>911</sup> Vasile D. Moisiu. *Știri din Basarabia de astăzi*, p. 150

interpretation. The Bessarabians seemed to suffer from a collective “split vision,” since they simultaneously upheld an idealized image of “Russians in general,” but purportedly had a rather negative view of the Russians they encountered in Bessarabia. The attitude toward the latter was defined by “a true disdain, an indifference, pride and dignity which were not ridiculous, but were a feature of the [Romanian] race.”<sup>912</sup> Though he did not develop this “psychological” point further, it is clear that the author extrapolated his own visions of ethnic hierarchy upon the rather diffuse sentiment of peasant xenophobia rooted locally in Bessarabian society. This “double” identity of the Russians in the Bessarabian mirror served the purpose to emphasize the gap between the effects of imperial propaganda (based on an image of unity and harmony) and the everyday reality of simmering ethnic tensions: “This is a curious instance of platonic love: the Russian language- not the one they hear- is for them a delightful music, whereas the “true Russian”- which they do not see- is a chef d’oeuvre, both in body and soul.”<sup>913</sup> This contradictory, almost schizoid image of the Other (doubly distorted by the lens of the Romanian observer) was apparently characteristic mainly for the uneducated peasantry, since the local intellectuals were much less ambiguous about the superiority of Russian culture and education. Moisiu narrated his encounters with representatives of these groups with apparent equanimity and resignation, though occasional remarks<sup>914</sup> made clear his subjective view on the immersion of the Bessarabian intellectuals into the realm of Russian culture. To substantiate his point about the powerful impact of the official propaganda upon the Bessarabian public, the author provides extensive fragments (in Romanian translation) from certain official publications printed on the occasion of the 1912 anniversary. Though hardly commented upon, the implicit goal of this

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<sup>912</sup> Vasile D. Moisiu, *Știri din Basarabia de astăzi*, p. 150

<sup>913</sup> Vasile D. Moisiu, *Știri din Basarabia de astăzi*, p. 151

<sup>914</sup> For example, “Russianism [*rusismul*] seeks to erect impenetrable walls between itself and the rest of the world, selecting the grain of truth with the shovel of censorship.” Moisiu, p. 152

sample of Russian rhetoric was to convince his potential audience in Romania to follow the example of the Russian authorities in mounting a much more vigorous campaign that would challenge the quasi-monopoly of the Russian Empire on the discursive representation of the region.<sup>915</sup>

In general, a significant novelty of Moisiu's approach involved a change of strategy and attitude of the Romanian establishment towards Bessarabia. This also entailed a change of perception of the Russian Empire that the author recommended in his work's conclusion: "Our mentality regarding Russia, as well as our attitude towards the Moldavian people of Bessarabia should be radically altered. The enlightenment and education of a people cannot be based on fear and timid whispers; for this, heroism and sacrifices to open new avenues are needed."<sup>916</sup> Such "heroic sacrifices" presupposed neither the following of the consecrated models of national resistance within the Russian Empire (embodied in the Polish example), nor the revolutionary solution of social transformations, which "have never awakened the consciousness of peoples." Moreover, "nihilist and anarchist ideas contributed nothing to mankind's welfare"<sup>917</sup> and lured many educated Bessarabians to "the wrong direction, indicated by certain elements which tend to destroy every state structure in the world."<sup>918</sup> This unfortunate tendency also led to the perception of Bessarabians in Romania as being "anarchic and dangerous." Both internal conditions in the Russian Empire and the features of the "Slavic temperament" were against the odds of a revolutionary upheaval, in Moisiu's view. His recipe for these ills was founded on two premises that he clearly linked to the future post-war settlement. First, he hoped for the "recognition of the right to [autonomous] life of small peoples" by the Russian Empire, according to the ideals

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<sup>915</sup> Vasile D. Moisiu. *Știri din Basarabia de astăzi*, p. 154-167

<sup>916</sup> Vasile D. Moisiu. *Știri din Basarabia de astăzi*, p. 185

<sup>917</sup> Vasile D. Moisiu. *Știri din Basarabia de astăzi*, p. 186

<sup>918</sup> Vasile D. Moisiu. *Știri din Basarabia de astăzi*, p. 187

proclaimed (but not fulfilled) by the belligerent powers. Second, he suggested the intensification of “organic national work” in Romania that could only be built upon the overcoming of the state’s and public’s “apathy.” He proposed a rather unexpected means to spread the “enlightenment” of national Romanian culture to Bessarabia. Instead of continuing to disregard the Russian intellectual tradition as dangerous or futile, Romanian youth should pursue their education in Russian gymnasia and universities, where, on the one hand, they could overcome the incomprehension and ignorance of the Russian Empire so prevalent in Romania and, on the other hand, would be able to directly influence the Bessarabian students (who were numerous in the universities of European Russia) in the sense of a “national-cultural” agenda.<sup>919</sup> This apparently “Russophile” tendency was conceivable only following the liberalization of Russia’s internal regime and the abandoning, from Romania’s part, of any irredentist designs of “political unity.” The long-term agenda of patient “enlightenment of the masses” also presupposed a significant ethnic vitality of the Romanian peasant element in Bessarabia. Moisiu did not perceive any danger from this point of view, expressing his confidence in the “tenacity of our people’s soul between the Prut and the Dniester” and asserting that “any waves that might come in the future will shatter against the same solid rock [of the people’s essence] and will turn into mere drops.”<sup>920</sup> Both the rhetoric of perennial ethnicity and the anti-revolutionary stance seem to warrant the hypothesis that the young author was writing in the tradition of Iorga’s school, somewhat moderated by the war context of the book’s appearance. Moisiu ended his work by a renewed appeal to “drain the source of [Romanian] indifference” and to end the “spiritual isolation” between the Russian province and the Romanian state through a concerted cultural

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<sup>919</sup> Vasile D. Moisiu. *Știri din Basarabia de astăzi*, p. 187-188

<sup>920</sup> Vasile D. Moisiu. *Știri din Basarabia de astăzi*, p. 188



activity with no immediate political goals in mind.<sup>921</sup> Both the book's content and its interpretive framework belonged to the pre-war variety of tentative, ethnographically-oriented travelogues and shunned any radical political messages. The polemical dimension of the argument, when present, focused mostly on the inadequacy of the Romanian preoccupation for an alienated part of the national totality. Though the author probably favored a pro-Entente position, the impact of World War I was hardly visible in the structure and narrative of this picture of contemporary Bessarabia.

The second work under discussion was a polemical piece written explicitly within the context of the controversy over Romania's foreign policy orientation during the period of neutrality. The book, in fact, was a sharply worded pamphlet aiming as much at the flaws of Romanian politics and society as at the criticism of Romania's hesitation to join the Central Powers. Frunza was particularly close to Zamfir Arbore, who epitomized the dangerously radical Bessarabian émigré in the eyes of conservative nationalists grouped around Iorga. The author based his argument on three main premises stemming from his radically populist and anarchist political visions and his uncompromising opposition to the Russian imperial regime. First, he postulated an irreconcilable opposition between the masses of the Romanian peasantry and the "official state" in all its hypostases. The widely used Populist motive of a gap between the lower classes and the upper strata (including the state apparatus) was extended by Frunza to an almost ontological level of utter mutual foreignness. The adjacent topics of "internal Orientalism," authenticity vs. inauthenticity, superficiality of the state- and nation-building processes, accompanied by a viscerally anti-aristocratic and anti-elite stance all found their way into the Bessarabian's witty and ironic text. Second, also in a Populist vein, Frunza proclaimed the immutability and supreme vitality of the "popular essence" (both in the Romanian Kingdom and in Bessarabia) not only

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<sup>921</sup> Vasile D. Moisiu. *Știri din Basarabia de astăzi*, p. 188

despite, but against the state. The blending of ethnic primordialism and anarchism led him to a highly original vision of the Romanians' ethnic expansion towards the East and to the extolling of the people's "a-historicity" opposed to the pseudo-historicity of the Romanian state. Third, he advocated a virulently anti-Russian and pro-German course, motivated as much by reasons of civilizational attractiveness and political-historical factors as by more pragmatic motives of immediate state interests and military expediency. This last layer of his argument fit more neatly into the contemporary war polemics and was a direct contribution to the raging controversy over war policy. The question of the relative priorities of future nation-building also featured Frunza as one of the more articulate (though overlooked) representatives of the "pro-Bessarabian" faction.

The author built his anti-establishment argument on a wholesale criticism of modern Romanian institutions and the philosophy of "national regeneration" underpinning them. He challenged the Romanian political elite in its entirety, accusing it of wasting the chance at building a viable nation-state and in substituting a veneer of patriotic rhetoric for the effective reforms that would have transformed Romania into an organic political structure.<sup>922</sup> Frunza attacked both the social and national dimensions of Romania's nation-building process. In effect, his criticism amounted to a thesis of "internal colonialism" exercised by the upper strata upon the "barbarian" or "native" population- the Romanian peasantry. His rhetorical methods and polemical thrust were reminiscent of Eminescu's political journalism, which likewise transcended the lines of party politics and occasionally degenerated into angry denunciations of politicking and of the "emptiness" of the country's elite. In fact, Frunza directly invoked Eminescu as a

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<sup>922</sup> Axinte Frunză, *România Mare* [Greater Romania] (Bucharest: Tipografia F. Goebel Fii, 1915), ch. II-VI, pp. 13-54. A short biographical sketch on Frunza can be found in: Iurie Colesnic, *Basarabia necunoscută* [The Unknown Bessarabia], Vol. I, (Chisinau: Universitas, 1993), pp. 12-15. The choice of title was not accidental. Frunza sought to contrast the „true greatness” of the people to the mainly politically oriented patriotic rhetoric extolling an ideal „Greater Romanian” state.

source of his opinions, while his whole anti-elite bias seemed to be underpinned by the sketchy theory of the foreign “superposed stratum” elaborated by Eminescu.<sup>923</sup> Another source of the Bessarabian’s political vision of the superficiality and in-authenticity of the Romanian state apparatus might be linked to the “forms without substance” theory advanced by the Junimist circle. However, Frunza’s vision lacked Eminescu’s autochthonist tendencies and the utopian and past-oriented “regressive” streak to be found in the latter’s incoherent doctrine of Romanian specificity. His political preferences lay in the sphere of leftist Populism and rejected any notion of “official nationalism.” The distinction between the political nation and the “true nation,” separated by an “abyss” was the cornerstone of Frunza’s whole scheme of modern Romanian history.<sup>924</sup> The “political nation,” which was to be blamed for the social and cultural backwardness of the masses, included the hereditary aristocracy (and its direct successor, the landed elites), but also the false “democrats” that inherited all the flaws of their former social betters. These social strata were guilty of a “false populism” that the author found particularly reprehensible.<sup>925</sup> Aside from the social dimension of the state’s policy, Frunza condemned the inadequacy of Romania’s attitude towards the national question. The author deplored the fact that “the degree of closeness between a subjugated province and the “mother-country,” or the degree of preservation of the ethnic Romanian element is measured according to the *sum* allocated to a certain province within the budget of the Ministry of Public Instruction.”<sup>926</sup> The discrepancy between the real grievances of the Romanians outside the Kingdom and the pseudo-patriotic rhetoric of the Bucharest establishment appeared so deep that it led, on the one hand, to a faltering policy towards the Transylvanian national movement and, on the other, to the

<sup>923</sup> Axinte Frunză, *România Mare*, p. 23

<sup>924</sup> Axinte Frunză, *România Mare*, p. 38

<sup>925</sup> Axinte Frunză, *România Mare*, p. 20-22

<sup>926</sup> Axinte Frunză, *România Mare*, p. 29. Author’s original emphasis.

emergence of a “Macedonian problem” that in fact was blown out of all proportion by certain interest groups inside Romania and did not reflect the actual significance of the Romanian-speaking population in the Balkans.<sup>927</sup> These examples served the purpose of drawing the attention of the reading public to Frunza’s native region, which was undeservedly ignored or marginalized. Unsurprisingly, the author lamented the apparent indifference and the “phenomenal ignorance” that characterized the Romanian educated public’s attitude towards Bessarabia. This was mirrored by a similar tendency in Bessarabia proper, where Romania remained a *terra incognita*.<sup>928</sup>

This situation did not serve only as a pretext for nationalist lamentation, however. The social aspect of the “people” vs. “elite” opposition was much more important in this author’s case. Keeping in mind the difference of scale, Frunza faced the same dilemma as Stere in squaring the circle of the relative priority of the national and the social in the process of Romanian state-building. Unlike Stere’s, Frunza’s populist convictions were much less affected by an active involvement in Romania’s political life and occasional compromises with the establishment. Frunza, though belonging to Stere’s circle grouped around the journal *Viata Romaneasca*, always remained a marginal member due to the radicalism of his social opinions. In his wartime pamphlet, he rhetorically conflated the ostensibly patriotic Romanian elites and the “Russified” Bessarabian upper strata into an equally unappealing picture of a materialist and hypocritical interest group that consciously betrayed their proclaimed function of guiding the “people” in favor of securing a privileged economic and social status.<sup>929</sup> The real difference lay not between a “progressive” Romanian state and a “backward” Russian Empire, but between the thin veneer of Western civilization internalized (or, rather, deformed) by their elites and the immutable ethnic

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<sup>927</sup> Axinte Frunză, *România Mare*, p. 25-31

<sup>928</sup> Axinte Frunză, *România Mare*, p. 32- 33

<sup>929</sup> Axinte Frunză, *România Mare*, p. 41-54

vitality of the “people.” In an eloquent passage, Frunza draws a picture of the Romanian people as being a “cold and un-deciphered mystery,” which “does not shy away from anything, does not disappear, but neither does it assert itself, nor does it de-nationalize; even less does it civilize or change.”<sup>930</sup> This immobile and essential “state of nature” was the only guarantee for the preservation of the unaltered “national character” that lay completely outside history and belonged to the realm of eternity and tradition. The author builds an antinomic binary comparison between the natural element of the people and the corrupted elites that become the epitome of transience and treason:

whereas the “boyars” disappear or degenerate, occasionally run away and reappear, betray, swear, lie, forget everything, change their language according to the regime, their religion- according to territory, their ideas- together with their clothes, the people,- who alone remained “since times immemorial” on this soil, who ran nowhere, who did not cede any territory, did not swear, did not lie and did not forget anything, who survived plagues and famines, and, like a... phoenix, was reborn from ashes and wars,- the people rests immobile as the mountains, cold and indifferent as the waters, ever savage, ever uncivilized, ever young and ever the same.<sup>931</sup>

In a somewhat paradoxical logic, the a-historicity of the Romanian peasants provided the sole and primary condition for their ethnic survival and even expansion.<sup>932</sup> Frunza appeared to have a limitless faith in the elemental energy of the “eternally young [national] organism,” which manifested itself with particular vigor in those regions where the existence of the “race” was most seriously threatened.<sup>933</sup> The use of this “natural” lexicon was not hazardous and went beyond the epoch’s widespread organic tendencies. The author sought to integrate his image of a non-historical Romanian people into a scheme of “nature vs. culture” that invalidated the state structure as a meaningful factor in the deeper currents of peasant life. This became obvious in Frunza’s discussion of the Bessarabian Romanians’ “ethnic expansion” to the East, which, in his

<sup>930</sup> Axinte Frunză, *România Mare*, p. 55

<sup>931</sup> Axinte Frunză, *România Mare*, p. 56

<sup>932</sup> Axinte Frunză, *România Mare*, p. 64

<sup>933</sup> Axinte Frunză, *România Mare*, p. 58. Also see p. 66

view, was an instinctive reaction to the oppressive regime of the Russian Empire. The “anarchic” and instinctual migratory movement led, in the writer’s exalted vision, to the creation of “two more Moldavias” to the east of the Romanian Kingdom (i.e., Bessarabia and the Dniester-Bug region) that lacked any traces of Western-imposed institutions, but exactly because of that were more organically constituted, “preserving the unaltered cultural background from the epoch of the [Moldavian] state’s foundation [*descălicărei*].”<sup>934</sup> These Romanian elements formed “not only a powerful Romanian boulevard in the face of Slavic influence, but even a strong body of ethnic offensive advancing slowly and peacefully...”<sup>935</sup> However, “these Romanians have no history, just as the water of the Dniester or the woods of Orhei have no history.”<sup>936</sup> The expansion of the Romanians in the Eastern direction had all the features of a natural phenomenon, governed by laws beyond the control of any human authority. The ethnic unity of the Romanian people, according to Frunza, was based on a peculiar “genetic memory” that inscribed the “amazing uniformity of physical types and linguistic unity which, by its almost total absence of dialects, could indeed exasperate all the philologists in the world.”<sup>937</sup> The conclusion that he drew from this wide picture of the vegetative vigor of the “savage” Romanian people sharply differentiated the superficial state-led cultural projects from the organic “indestructible solidarity of the race” which was expressed through “the background inherited by innumerable past generations.”<sup>938</sup> The peasantry thus embodied the “national essence” through its instincts and vital impulses and did not owe anything to modernity. On the contrary, its pre-modern character preserved those traits of the national psyche that were absent among the country’s elites and that defined an ideal

<sup>934</sup> Axinte Frunză, *România Mare*, p. 60

<sup>935</sup> Axinte Frunză, *România Mare*, p. 62

<sup>936</sup> Axinte Frunză, *România Mare*, p. 65

<sup>937</sup> Axinte Frunză, *România Mare*, p. 74

<sup>938</sup> Axinte Frunză, *România Mare*, p. 76

community. The state and its institutions were but an awkward construction erected upon the living body of the “people” and searching in vain for a pre-existing unity.

Frunza’s position cannot be reduced to an unqualified anarchist and anti-state rhetoric. The last part of his text, discussing the “pragmatic” dimension of Romania’s war policy, was written in terms of an approach dominated by *Realpolitik*. The author’s argument for a pro-German course was based on two premises. The first derived from an ostensibly “objective” analysis of the military situation. Like his colleagues grouped around Stere (and like Stere himself), Frunza argued that the Russian army was suffering heavy losses and that the progress of the Habsburg troops during the 1915 Galician offensive in effect doomed Russia’s war effort. Consequently, any alliance with the swaying “northern colossus” would be not only futile, but pernicious for the Romanian Kingdom.<sup>939</sup> Much more important in his scheme was the myth of “Russian expansionism,” which Frunza exploited to its ultimate logical consequences. Aside from bringing in the discredited, but still ideologically effective motive of the fictitious “testament of Peter I,” the Bessarabian-born anarchist constructed his argument on two rhetorical pillars. On the one hand, he attempted to impress his readers by arguing that the victory of the Entente was incompatible with the continued existence of the Romanian state. This conclusion stemmed both from the particular Russian war aims and from the general condemnation of the “unnatural” alliance between the Western European powers and the Russian Empire. Germany appeared as the only power capable of “supreme sacrifices” to achieve its war objectives, while the Entente was purportedly dominated by mercantile and cynical strategic calculations. Frunza did not hesitate to use a rather strong language in his comparison of the two belligerent alliances: “Will the war be won by narrow and petty egoism, anarchy, hysteria, drunkenness, ignorance, and thievery? Or will it be won by the strict following of prescribed rules, iron discipline, will,

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<sup>939</sup> Axinte Frunză, *România Mare*, p. 106

bravery, and the almighty power of science?”<sup>940</sup> Even more ominously, a possible Russian victory would spell the end of Romanian statehood and possibly the disappearance of the nation itself (though on this last point the writer remained ambiguous). In any case, he did not have any doubts that the Russian Empire pursued a systematic and coordinated anti-Romanian policy: “With regard to us, Russia’s constant goal has always been the complete engulfing of our territory and the ethnic annihilation, without a trace, of this nation of “Gypsies” that the Russians have always treated and continue to treat accordingly; also, a blind fatality, certain truly “legitimate” aspirations drew all the movements of tsarism to pass... directly over our bodies.”<sup>941</sup> The author also resorted to more concrete anticipations of the eventual consequences of Romania’s joining the Entente. In Frunza’s version, only somber perspectives for Romania’s future could be envisaged, regardless of the fact whether the Russians would be defeated or emerge victorious: “1. Defeated together with our Russian “friends,” we will surely lose at least Moldavia to the Siret [river], *given to the Russians* as the sole consolation and “compensation” allowed for the defeated “colossus.” 2. Victorious together with the Russian “friends,” we will surely lose at least Moldavia to the Milcov [the border with Wallachia], the mouths of the Danube and the entire Dobrogea.”<sup>942</sup> This almost apocalyptic picture of territorial losses, doubled by a similarly pessimistic image of the preservation of internal autonomy, could only lead to “our wiping out from the ranks of states, in order to wipe us out also as a people.”<sup>943</sup> The Russian Empire appeared as a purely destructive and alien force with which no compromise could be reached.

<sup>940</sup> Axinte Frunză, *România Mare*, p. 81

<sup>941</sup> Axinte Frunză, *România Mare*, p. 92-93

<sup>942</sup> Axinte Frunză, *România Mare*, p. 119. Italics and quotation marks in original.

<sup>943</sup> Axinte Frunză, *România Mare*, p. 119



On the other hand, this image of utter incompatibility of Russian and Romanian interests was reinforced by a virulent criticism of Russia's internal organization. As all empires, Russia seemed to represent simultaneously a mortal danger for its neighbors and a "colossus on clay feet" which was in an advanced state of dissolution.<sup>944</sup> This contradiction was present in all the writings of the "Germanophiles" and was consequently one of the points most frequently attacked by their adversaries. The substance of Frunza's argument followed the traditional pattern of presenting Russia as an unreformed "Oriental despotism" based on savage repression and the suppression of all opposition. The radical Populist background prompted the author to postulate the existence of two starkly opposed "Russias:" the Russia of the political prisoners and exiles, inhabited by "uncured idealists," and its quintessential opposite: "official Russia," whose origins could be traced to its imperial legacies ascending to the Scandinavian, Byzantine and Tatar traditions of statehood. All these elements were incompatible with modern civilization and transformed the empire of the tsars into a dangerous anachronism.<sup>945</sup> In his polemical fervor, Frunza ascribed the few elements of superficial Westernization present in the Russian Empire to the beneficial German influence, which was being hypocritically reneged by the tsarist regime following the outbreak of the war.<sup>946</sup> Without developing this point further, he clearly hinted at a civilization-based hierarchy in which Russia hardly found its place.

A final aspect of the Bessarabian's argument concerned the reasons that made Bessarabia's integration into the Kingdom preferable to Transylvania's. Using an idea that would be tirelessly invoked by other pro-German authors, Frunza insisted that the Bessarabian Romanians were much more endangered by the unfavorable conditions of their ethnic and cultural environment. Despite their ethnic vitality (that the author continuously emphasized), their re-integration with

<sup>944</sup> Axinte Frunză, *România Mare*, p. 83

<sup>945</sup> Axinte Frunză, *România Mare*, p. 89-90

<sup>946</sup> Axinte Frunză, *România Mare*, p. 88

the Kingdom would represent an “act of justice” or “compensation” for the heroic, but wordless struggle of the Eastern “marches” of the Romanian nation.<sup>947</sup> Whereas the Transylvanians were privileged due to their permanent contact with the West and because of the existence of a vigorous national and cultural movement, the Bessarabians did not have any articulate means to defend their interests within the Russian Empire. Frunza also sketched the argument (later developed by Stere) referring to the legal “right” of Bessarabians to be included into the Romanian state due to their direct contribution to Romania’s nation-building. Moreover, the “Bessarabian direction” of national consolidation was the only conceivable option for Frunza, who did not doubt the imminence of a German victory. He vehemently protested the warnings of his opponents concerning the possible future complications in Russian-Romanian relations that Bessarabia’s occupation might entail.<sup>948</sup> Frunza reached the apex of his pro-German stance in the introductory and concluding sections of his work, where he praised the German army as the only “savior” of the Romanian people.<sup>949</sup> The Romanian Kingdom was, in his view, the only European state who had all the legitimate reasons to enter the war, since its fight would represent the “*two great causes* that still haven’t been and should never be forgotten: the first is *the cause of civilization* threatened by the Byzantine-Tatar state of the tsars, the second is the cause of our own existence as a state and as a nation.”<sup>950</sup> The vision of Romania as an advance guard of “civilization” in the East and, as such, its mission to resist the “Russian expansion” structured the vision of this otherwise original and occasionally radical author. The association of nationalism with a democratic and even leftist social agenda was thus far from marginal in the pre-war

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<sup>947</sup> Axinte Frunză, *România Mare*, p. 108-111

<sup>948</sup> Axinte Frunză, *România Mare*, p. 84, 104. Frunza repeatedly reacted against Bessarabia’s image as a „second Alsace” between Romania and Russia.

<sup>949</sup> Axinte Frunză, *România Mare*, p. 4, 118, 121. Thus, the German general von Hindenburg appeared as the embodiment of all hope for the retrieval of Bessarabia. In his preface, Frunza did not refrain from calling Hindenburg a „God [who] will soon save us from the alliance with Holy Russia and [who] will return to us- if we want it- our poor Bessarabia.” See p. 4

<sup>950</sup> Axinte Frunză, *România Mare*, p. 122. Italics in original.

Romanian context.<sup>951</sup> Though the importance of such figures should not be exaggerated, this peculiar amalgam of organic nationalism and powerful social criticism remains one of the most original contributions of a Bessarabian-born writer to the polemics around Romania's place in the war.

The "Bessarabian question" was debated in the contemporary polemical literature mainly from three intertwined points of view. These perspectives may be subsumed under the labels of the "economic," "geopolitical" and "national" arguments. The "economic" argument emphasized the commercial and practical importance of Bessarabia's acquisition for Romania's position on the Black Sea. In this sense, the direct competition with the Russian Empire in the sphere of grain and oil exports was one of the most effective rhetorical devices. Russia appeared as Romania's chief competitor for these raw materials on the Western European market. Consequently, a weakening of Russia's position on the Black Sea and, especially, Russia's elimination as a determining factor from the mouths of the Danube by their placing under Romania's control could be achieved through Bessarabia's integration into the Kingdom. The second, "geopolitical" component of the "Bessarabian nexus" was based on the assumption of Russian designs for the control of the straits and of Constantinople. Aside from the traditional apprehensions of the Romanian establishment, this fear was enhanced in the initial period of World War I due to the information concerning the secret Anglo-Franco-Russian negotiations on the post-war settlement and mutual compensations for the Allied powers. The apparent readiness of the French and, especially, British governments to recognize the primacy of Russian interests on the Straits, coupled with the declarations of high imperial officials hinting at the pressure of the public opinion for an expansion to the south, were readily cited as proof of the impending danger of a

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<sup>951</sup> In the interwar period, Frunza radicalized his political views and became a sympathizer of the Communist Party. See Colesnic, p. 15

Russian victory for the future status of the Romanian state. This geopolitical vision was also built on the assumption of the “greatest relative danger” represented by the Romanov Empire in comparison with the Austrian or German monarchies. In the view of the pro-German authors, neither of the Central Powers was interested in the weakening of Romania. Russia, on the other hand, purportedly viewed Romania as an obstacle in the fulfillment of its fundamental interests. The third dimension of the “Bessarabian problem” referred to the question of national priorities. The pro-Entente faction insisted on Transylvania’s greater relevance for the fulfillment of the “national ideal.” The symbolic competition for the importance of the two provinces in the image of the “ideal fatherland” left the “Bessarabian faction” in the minority. Its representatives sought to counter this argument by invoking the “integrity of the national body” as the only possible premise of a viable foreign policy. As C. Stere’s case showed, this competition also involved two opposed visions of Romanian nationalism.

What I have called the “pro-Bessarabian” faction was in fact a loose association of very different political figures united exclusively by their foreign policy preferences. Thus, the core of this group was formed, on the one hand, by the “old” leaders of the Conservative Party (P. P. Carp and Titu Maiorescu) and, on the other hand, by the group headed by Constantin Stere (which included the bulk of the Kingdom-based Bessarabian émigrés). The most consistent writings of this group were published under the aegis of the “League for Bessarabia’s Liberation,” which acted as a coordinating center for the promotion of the “Bessarabian problem” in the public sphere. Another publishing avenue was the “Minerva” newspaper (apparently financed by the German embassy). Most of the written output of these publishers was represented

by short brochures structured along the lines presented above and propagating either staunch neutrality or an immediate joining of the Central Powers.<sup>952</sup>

A typical instance of such a publication mingled an economic explanation for the causes of the war with a nationally inspired argument. From the outset, the author proclaimed that “the war began and is waged currently for the economic domination of the world.”<sup>953</sup> Accordingly, the framing of the confrontation in terms of the principle of national self-determination was an example of hypocrisy. From the economic point of view, Romania “needs a complete freedom of navigation on the Danube and the complete freedom of the mouths of the Danube.”<sup>954</sup> Both these aims, as well as the complementary requirement of free and open trade on the Black Sea, were endangered by the Russian Empire’s “expansionist” plans in the Balkans and on the Dardanelles. In a curious parallel to the widespread assumption of Russia’s “drive to the warm seas,” the anonymous writer perceives Romania’s possession of a direct communication with the sea as a fundamental precondition for its further development: “A sea outlet is a condition for the life of any state, and in this war- which will undoubtedly bring significant changes to Europe’s map- Romania has the duty to guarantee, first and foremost, that this outlet to the sea is neither closed, nor in any way hindered for her.”<sup>955</sup> The author even sought to emphasize the primacy of economic and geopolitical considerations over the “national question” by asserting that, “even if it [Bessarabia] had not been Romanian, even if it had not been a part of our body, we should still

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<sup>952</sup> Some examples of “pragmatic” works advocating an unequivocal alliance with Germany against Russia and insisting on Bessarabia’s annexation are: Historicus. *De ce ne trebuie Basarabia* [Why We Need Bessarabia] (Bucharest: S.I., 1915); Ioan D. Filitti. *Politica externă a României și atitudinea ei în conflictul european* [Romania’s Foreign Policy and its Attitude Towards the European Conflict] (Bucharest: “Minerva,” 1915); Zamfir C. Arbore, *Liberarea Basarabiei* [Bessarabia’s Liberation] (Editura Ligei pentru Liberarea Basarabiei, 1915). For a polemical answer, see R. Dinu, *O replică la broșura „De ce ne trebuie Basarabia” de Historicus* [A Reply to the Brochure “Why We Need Bessarabia” by Historicus] (Bucharest: “Universala” Graphics, 1916). A more balanced approach, reflecting the government’s policy of neutrality, can be found in Vintilă I. Brătianu, *Pentru conștiința națională* [For National Consciousness] (Bucharest: Flacăra, 1915).

<sup>953</sup> Historicus. *De ce ne trebuie Basarabia* [Why We Need Bessarabia] (Bucharest: S.I., 1915), p. 11

<sup>954</sup> Historicus. *De ce ne trebuie Basarabia*, p. 12

<sup>955</sup> Historicus. *De ce ne trebuie Basarabia*, p. 16

be ready to accept all the necessary sacrifices in order to have it.”<sup>956</sup> Nevertheless, the appeal to the national sentiments of the potential audience seemed effective enough to be developed in the second half of the brochure’s argument. The implicit comparison with the “plight” of the Transylvanian Romanians was the most salient rhetorical device at the author’s disposal. Bessarabia appeared as the most recently “stolen” and also the most threatened Romanian-inhabited province.<sup>957</sup> The author concluded that, by “conquering Bessarabia, we will fulfill a part of our national ideal and we will, at the same time, secure our future and our freedom.”<sup>958</sup> The issue of “national priorities” was, however, the weakest link in the logical chain of arguments built by the “pro-Bessarabian” faction. Bessarabia was on the losing side of the symbolic and pragmatic competition with Transylvania as the most likely and profitable direction of irredentist designs. The fallacy of their ideological opponents in insisting on the opportunities offered by Bessarabia’s inclusion into Romania was remarked by the pro-Entente writers, who could object that “we should first take care of that [province] which has suffered for a longer time in comparison with that which only now begins to feel the yoke... Let us save first the land that time has forgotten in the hands of our enemies from the North before that [land] over which only a century of slavery has passed!”<sup>959</sup> A direct comparison with Transylvania’s or Bukovina’s situation was rarely serving the cause of the Germanophile group that advocated an anti-Russian policy. Some publications printed under the aegis of the “League for the Liberation of Bessarabia” represented pure examples of a classical “national propaganda,” ripe with patriotic

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<sup>956</sup> Historicus. *De ce ne trebuie Basarabia*, p. 25

<sup>957</sup> Historicus. *De ce ne trebuie Basarabia*, p. 29-32. This picture was reinforced by a concise narrative of the various means used by the Russian authorities to “Russify” the region.

<sup>958</sup> Historicus. *De ce ne trebuie Basarabia*, p. 34. To discredit his pro-Entente opponents, he cited extensively from an article written by one of the most outspoken representatives of the latter current, Take Ionescu, where Ionescu argued for an anti-Russian foreign policy, basing his demonstration on geopolitical considerations and speaking about the “natural and inexorable” rivalry between Romania and Russia. Russia appeared as the “natural enemy” of the Romanian state.

<sup>959</sup> R. Dinu, *O replică la broșura „De ce ne trebuie Basarabia” de Historicus* [A Reply to the Brochure “Why We Need Bessarabia” by Historicus] (Bucharest: “Universala” Graphics, 1916), p. 12

appeals at the regaining of the “missing star” in the Romanian crown and emphasizing the historical continuity of the Romanian element in Bessarabia. Such publications carefully avoided the thorny issue of “national priorities” and did not ponder the relative advantages of Romania’s alliance with Germany, focusing instead upon the depiction of the “brutal and inhuman” character of the Russian regime and representing Romania’s involvement in the region as a mission of national salvation.<sup>960</sup> The polemics over Romania’s position in the war was not limited to the level of pamphlets and poor-quality nationalist propaganda. Certain more articulate strategies are discernible in contemporary political debates. One of the central policy proposals in this respect was drafted by Constantin Stere, who became one of the most convincing critics of the majority pro-Entente position during 1915 and early 1916.

Stere’s involvement into the controversy included a three-stage strategy that started with the publication of a consistent sketch of Romania’s suggested foreign policy in early 1915, continued by a series of parliamentary discourses pronounced in mid-December 1915 and culminated by a longer text devoted to an extensive commented analysis and rebuttal of the arguments of one of his chief opponents, Take Ionescu, that Stere printed in early 1916.<sup>961</sup> Though the wider framework of Stere’s nation-building project was not altered, the specific terms in which he articulated his foreign policy program bore the unmistakable imprint of the war context. The eloquence of his arguments (even given their ideological bias) apparently left a lasting impression on his contemporaries. Among the numerous reactions to Stere’s written and oral injunctions, the testimony left by I. G. Duca, one of his party colleagues who did not share the minority pro-German view, is revealing: “For those who might want to know, in the future, on what

<sup>960</sup> One of the more characteristic examples of such an approach is: Gh. Dighiș, *Sub jug străin!...* [Under Foreign Yoke!] (Bucharest: Tipografia Curtii regale F. Goebel Fii, 1915), 48 pp. The above citation is on p. 48

<sup>961</sup> C. Stere. *România și războiul european* [Romania and the European War]. (Iasi: 1915); C. Stere and P. P. Carp. *Politica externă a României* [Romania’s Foreign Policy]. (Iasi: 1915); C. Stere. *Discursul D-lui Take Ionescu. Studiu critic* [Mr. Take Ionescu’s Speech. A Critical Study]. (Iasi: 1916).

arguments were based the beliefs of those who, just before the beginning of the war for our national unity, demanded that Romania should not leave the Central Powers and, especially, should not unite with Russia, as well as for all those who will hear the voice of the Bessarabian woes, or the cry of despair of the Romanianism from beyond the Prut, Stere's speech [on December 15 and 16, 1915] will undoubtedly remain [their] most complete, brightest and most moving expression."<sup>962</sup> This impression of compelling argumentation owed as much to Stere's specific rhetorical strategy as to his substantial demonstration. The rhetorical dimension of his speeches and texts rested on two instances of classical *captatio benevolentiae*. First, he positioned himself as the legitimate representative of the inarticulate Bessarabian population, appealing to his bemused audience as the only "voice... which can reach [you] from a graveyard of two million Romanian souls."<sup>963</sup> This trans-personal dimension apparently authorized him to go against the grain of the dominant current of public opinion and justify his pro-German stance in terms of a better understanding of the national priorities. It also showed to what extent the topic of Bessarabia's discursive "silence" could be manipulated in the sensitive context of the war. In a somewhat paradoxical vein (given his leftist social views), Stere argued that the "popular instinct" (which he equaled with public opinion) was not the best guiding principle for the formulation of the adequate national interest. For the sake of argument, Stere was even ready to support an elitist view of politics that he otherwise rejected. In his opinion, "the national interest can be indicated by the wise judgment of the statesman, by the cold and objective analysis of the circumstances, by the calculation of all chances of success, by the balanced assessment of all the threats. Instinct, however, is blind by definition and can often flow from

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<sup>962</sup> I.G. Duca, *Amintiri politice* [Political Memoirs], vol I, p. 215. Cited in: Ioan Căpreanu. *Eseul unei restituiri: C. Stere* (Iași: Junimea, 1988), p. 257. Also Z. Ornea, *Viața lui Constantin Stere* [The Life of Constantin Stere], Vol. II (Bucharest: Cartea Românească, 1991), p. 112

<sup>963</sup> C. Stere and P. P. Carp. *Politica externă a României* [Romania's Foreign Policy]. (Iași: 1915), p. 14-15



passion and prejudice.”<sup>964</sup> Thus, national interest was purely a matter of everyone’s “judgment and consciousness” and could not be entrusted to the passions of the fluctuating public opinion.<sup>965</sup> Stere’s isolation in the contemporary political milieu could be almost transformed into a virtue as long as the author assumed a self-consciously prophetic tone. Second, the Bessarabian-born politician argued that he in fact better represented the country’s political tradition than his opponents, who preferred a sudden change of policy instead of following the well-tread path of the alliance with the Central Powers. Stere based his argument on the “founding event” of the Russian “felony” of 1878 and invoked the figures of the “founding fathers” of modern Romania as the true representatives of the now distorted “national interest.” He insisted that he was only consistent with the majority of the country’s leaders who advocated a rapprochement with Germany in order to thwart Russia’s ambitions in the region.<sup>966</sup>

Stere’s arguments, reiterated only with slight changes of emphasis throughout his involvement in the polemics, could be grouped under several headings that structured his agenda: 1) the “geopolitical” dimension, that insisted on the direct interest of the Russian Empire in the destruction of the Romanian state due to the irrepressible “drive to the south” that purportedly characterized Russia’s policy (i.e., a variation on the theme of “Russian expansionism”); 2) the “national” dimension, which emphasized the priority of “national consolidation” and was based on the concept of “integral national ideal” (i.e., an organic image of the nation, that could not set any priorities for its national unity without being seriously endangered in the process); 3) the

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<sup>964</sup> C. Stere. *Discursul D-lui Take Ionescu. Studiu critic* [Mr. Take Ionescu’s Speech. A Critical Study]. (Iasi: 1916), p. 26. Also C. Stere. *România și războiul european* [Romania and the European War]. (Iasi: 1915), p. 1-2

<sup>965</sup> C. Stere. *Discursul D-lui Take Ionescu. Studiu critic* [Mr. Take Ionescu’s Speech. A Critical Study]. (Iasi: 1916), p. 26. This position was curiously close to the staunch anti-democratic bias of Stere’s „fellow-traveler” P. P. Carp, who dismissed public opinion as irrelevant and even harmful for the making of political decisions. See C. Stere and P. P. Carp. *Politica externă a României* [Romania’s Foreign Policy]. (Iasi: 1915), p. 9

<sup>966</sup> C. Stere. *România și războiul european* [Romania and the European War]. (Iasi: 1915), p. 3-4; C. Stere and P. P. Carp. *Politica externă a României* [Romania’s Foreign Policy]. (Iasi: 1915), p. 45-46; C. Stere. *Discursul D-lui Take Ionescu. Studiu critic* [Mr. Take Ionescu’s Speech. A Critical Study]. (Iasi: 1916), p. 28

economic dimension (less important, but including the familiar motive of economic competition in the field of exporting raw materials); 4) the “civilizational” dimension, which constructed an irreconcilable opposition between Russia, as the embodiment of a hollow “Oriental despotism,” and Germany, as the representative of “European civilization” (both politically and culturally); 5) the “pragmatic” dimension, focusing on Romania’s relative gains in the case of either of the two military camps prevailing.

In effect, the author started by invoking exactly this argument of relative benefits when he asserted that “in the fight for preponderance in the Balkans, between the Central Powers, on the one hand, and the Russian Empire, on the other hand, our future as a state and as a nation is threatened... much less on the part of the Central Powers than on Russia’s part.”<sup>967</sup> Stere based his opinion on the invocation of the neighboring empire’s geopolitical “obsession” with the Balkan region and Constantinople. The difference in Stere’s approach consisted in the more substantial evidence that he adduced in favor of his thesis. Both in his general brochure and in his speech, he analyzed extensively the book of the late L. A. Casso, which he presented as one of the most convincing examples of Russia’s unrelenting “drive to the South.”<sup>968</sup> To enhance the effect of his demonstration, the author made a distinction between the purely intellectual idea of pan-Slavism and the “pan-Muscovite” projects that presupposed Romania’s “swallowing” by the Russian conglomerate along with the Southern Slavs. Using the example of the Poles and the Ukrainians, Stere concluded that “pan-Russianism was thus born through the drowning of the Slavs.”<sup>969</sup> The logic of anti-Russian sentiment prompted Stere to anticipate a similar situation for the Romanians in case of a Russian victory. Any expansion of the Romanian state into the

<sup>967</sup> C. Stere. *România și războiul european* [Romania and the European War]. (Iasi: 1915), p. 4

<sup>968</sup> C. Stere. *România și războiul european* [Romania and the European War]. (Iasi: 1915), p. 11-13; C. Stere and P. P. Carp. *Politica externă a României* [Romania’s Foreign Policy]. (Iasi: 1915), p. 33-35.

<sup>969</sup> C. Stere and P. P. Carp. *Politica externă a României* [Romania’s Foreign Policy]. (Iasi: 1915), p. 38

Western direction would be rendered useless by the intolerable strategic position that Romania would acquire, since “the *minimal* result of Russia’s victory” would mean “the annexation of Galicia by Russia, the annexation of Constantinople and the Straits, the transformation of the Slavic states of the Balkans into a simple *Rückendeckung*”<sup>970</sup> One of the most salient tropes that Stere used to depict the catastrophic consequences of a Russian victory refers to the “common yoke” that the Kingdom and Transylvanian Romanians will share under Russian domination. Instead of fulfilling the country’s “national ideal,” its leaders were in fact unwittingly preparing the ground for a “common grave” of the Romanian people.<sup>971</sup> The logical continuation of this image could only be the construction of a “counter-point” to the essentially negative picture of the Russian Empire by a positive assessment of the “civilizing mission” of the Habsburg Empire. The Russian-Habsburg opposition was necessary both in order to legitimize Bessarabia’s (unstated) priority in the hierarchy of “national redemption” and to highlight Austria’s role in blocking the advance of dangerous forces from the East. Thus, not only did the Habsburgs provide all the conditions for the emergence of an educated elite and for the conduct of a vigorous national struggle, but they also represented a “shield against the conquest and annihilation [of small peoples] by the despotisms of the Orient.”<sup>972</sup> Stere also countered the arguments of his opponents concerning the alternative danger of an Austro-Hungarian annexation by arguing that not only was such a scenario improbable, but that it would be dangerous for the

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<sup>970</sup> C. Stere. *România și războiul european* [Romania and the European War]. (Iasi: 1915), p. 14. In a similar “resume” of his thesis, Stere asserted: “In case of Russia’s victory, we must give up forever the two million souls from Bessarabia, and we are at least condemned to become a Russian enclave, to fall into a de facto vassalage towards the mighty empire, which will hold under its dominion the keys of the Black Sea and will also dominate the Balkans. This, I repeat, is the *minimal* evil that awaits us!” Ibidem, p. 16

<sup>971</sup> C. Stere. *România și războiul european* [Romania and the European War]. (Iasi: 1915), p. 16-17: „The vassalage under Russia will create... for the Romanians of Bukovina and Transylvania... a more terrible yoke than that under which they suffer today. We would only find the consolation of a common grave for the dispersed branches of this people.” Also C. Stere and P. P. Carp. *Politica externă a României* [Romania’s Foreign Policy]. (Iasi: 1915), p. 40: “You will be able... to destroy the border pillars between us and Transylvania- but only for us to come under a common yoke, more terrible than the Hungarian one, and instead of a national life to have a common grave.”

<sup>972</sup> C. Stere. *Discursul D-lui Take Ionescu. Studiu critic* [Mr. Take Ionescu’s Speech. A Critical Study]. (Iasi: 1916), p. 24

internal balance of the monarchy, since the inclusion of “14 million Romanians” would either radically shift the fragile ethnic structure of the state or lead to the eventual dissolution of Austria-Hungary.<sup>973</sup> The question of relative danger was thus unequivocally solved in Stere’s mind. The logic underpinning the impressive dimensions of the Russian threat was rejected by the pro-Entente faction on the basis of a contradiction between its image as a backward and decaying regime and the cliché of “the Northern Colossus” that Stere abused for polemical purposes. In his reply, the attacked author objected, first, that he adopted a comparative perspective (i.e., the Russian threat was greater than the German or Austrian one, which did not invalidate the fact of Russia’s military weakness) and, second, that the contingency of Russian victory depended on the forces involved in the hostilities.<sup>974</sup>

Stere’s concept of “national organism” was discussed earlier and will not be touched upon here. The notion of “integral national ideal” can only be understood in the framework of his understanding of the nation as a “living body” whose “signs of health... are confirmed by the energy with which it reacts every time it is damaged in its integrity.”<sup>975</sup> Russia represented such a danger not only because of its disproportionate military might and ostensibly expansionist tendencies, but most of all due to its political backwardness and civilizational inferiority in comparison with Germany. In order to build this scheme of political and cultural antagonism, Stere had to perform a complicated operation of disassociating Russia from its Western European allies. He achieved this by asserting that the only significance of an Allied victory for Romania would be the consecration of Russian hegemony on the European continent, while the war aims of the Western Allies were irrelevant for the country’s immediate interests. The premise of

<sup>973</sup> C. Stere. *Discursul D-lui Take Ionescu*, p. 48

<sup>974</sup> C. Stere. *Discursul D-lui Take Ionescu*, p. 45-46. The implicit contradiction of course remained unaddressed.

<sup>975</sup> C. Stere. *România și războiul european* [Romania and the European War]. (Iasi: 1915), p. 17. In another work, he introduced the notion of a “Romanian Piedmont,” defining the Romanian Kingdom as “the territory of consolidation. Only from here can begin the evolution that will lead to the coincidence of the ethnic notion of Romanianism with the political notion of the Romanian state.”

Stere's judgments rested on the assumption that the war was essentially a clash between Russia and Germany. In thus simplifying the terms of the military and political equation, Stere was able to present the Russian polity as "the only state in Europe which does not rely upon a legal order—a "police state," not a *Rechtsstaat*."<sup>976</sup> The author also rejected the insistence of his political opponent, Take Ionescu, on a "normalization" of the Russian political order. Ionescu in fact followed a growing current of opinion throughout the continent that perceived the Russian political system in more favorable terms by pointing out the similarities between the "old regime" as it existed in Russia and its more Westernized, but essentially similar variants developed in Germany and Austria-Hungary. This view was anathema to the Bessarabian émigré, who contrasted the federal structure and the extensive civil and political rights of the Central European monarchies with the outdated and unreformed autocratic essence of the Russian government.<sup>977</sup> Beyond the political sphere, Russia also constituted a dangerous "Other" for the whole European civilization. Russia's claim to belong to the latter was challenged on the grounds of its superficial internalization of the Western values and derived from its insecure status between Europe and Asia: "[How can] Russia, which had lived until Peter the Great outside the sphere of European civilization and, since then, for merely two hundred years, can barely crawl upon the path tread by more advanced countries, be considered as the representative of civilization in a conflict with Germany?"<sup>978</sup> The "Asiatic" nature of the Russian state (which Stere was careful enough to separate from that of the Russian society as a whole) was rhetorically enhanced by a direct parallel that he drew between the Russo-German conflict and the Greco-Persian wars of antiquity: "the fight between Russia and Germany constitutes, in reality, a new form of the fight

<sup>976</sup> C. Stere. *România și războiul european* [Romania and the European War]. (Iasi: 1915), p. 21. He also spoke about "the [political] abyss that separates the empire of the tsars from the rest of Europe." C. Stere and P. P. Carp. *Politica externă a României*, p. 17. Stere also used the concept of a „Ukrainian Piedmont” with reference to Galicia, borrowing it from a wartime Ukrainian manifesto. See Stere. *Discursul D-lui Take Ionescu*, p. 23

<sup>977</sup> C. Stere. *Discursul D-lui Take Ionescu*, p. 17-19

<sup>978</sup> C. Stere. *Discursul D-lui Take Ionescu*, p. 16

that Ancient Greece once waged against the empire of the Persians. It is the fight between two visions of social and political life. Germany represents in this fight the common foundation upon which the political and social edifice of civilized humanity has been erected, while Russia represents the final assault of Oriental despotisms.”<sup>979</sup> The “Orientalist” overtones of such images are certainly a part of the mechanism refined during the mutually subversive operation of war propaganda machines, but they also fit neatly into the Romanian tradition of constructing the “Russian Other” (of course, this tradition was in itself derivative). Germany’s image is, accordingly, built on the principle of an explicit opposition to Russian backwardness and arbitrariness. The resulting idealized picture of discipline, cultural achievement and intellectual effervescence provided the pretext for a direct comparison between the two empires that left the Romanov polity on the wrong side of the civilizational divide.<sup>980</sup> Not content with extolling the modern output of German intelligence and economic prosperity, Stere insisted on the “founding character” of the German element as an initial and necessary ingredient for the emergence of European civilization as such. In his words, “when, through the exhaustion of vital forces, the Western Roman Empire died, there was one last region in Northern Europe which had not been conquered by the Roman armies. From there, a Barbarian current, healthy and potentially rich, could emerge... Only the Germanic race thus secured for us the transmission of the elements of ancient civilization and facilitated their assimilation.”<sup>981</sup> Through its eloquence and synthetic character, Stere’s public position represented the most comprehensive example of the pro-German option within the Romanian political establishment. On the one hand, it perpetuated the persistent anti-Russian clichés of Romanian pre-war rhetoric and reflected Stere’s overall concept

<sup>979</sup> C. Stere. *România și războiul European*, p. 22. Stere also made a distinction between the (however commendable) personal qualities of the leaders of “despotic” states and their lack of relevance for the overall character of the regime, again citing the example of Persia’s Darius I. C. Stere. *Discursul...*, p. 18

<sup>980</sup> C. Stere. *Discursul D-lui Take Ionescu*, p. 13-15

<sup>981</sup> C. Stere and P. P. Carp. *Politica externă a României*, p. 50-51. Stere ended his speech by repeatedly invoking the threat of „Cossack dominance” and „Orthodox hordes” [*hoardele pravoslavnice*]. Ibidem, p. 52

of the nation. On the other hand, the impact of the war context is visible in the “pragmatic” aspects that attempted to assess Romania’s strategic dilemmas in early 1916.

A final aspect of the “Bessarabian problem” in the context of World War I involves its international dimension. Bessarabia did not figure among the important points on the agenda of the belligerent powers. This was especially true during the first two years of the war, when Romania’s neutrality precluded the formulation of specific plans for the province’s future. However, Bessarabia did surface occasionally in contemporary debates either as a potential base for military operations against Russia or as one of the “national peripheries” whose emancipation might be of interest to Russia’s war adversaries. The first possibility was envisaged not only by Romania’s pro-German circles, but also by anti-Russian émigré organizations. The Ukrainian anti-Russian emigration was particularly active in Romania during the neutrality period and entered into direct contact with the pro-German elements grouped around the Bessarabian community in Bucharest. The “Union for the Liberation of Ukraine” (ULU), created in Lviv in August 1914 with the aim of seizing control of Russian Ukraine with the assistance of the Central Powers, very soon extended its operations to Romania. After the Russian occupation of Galicia in the fall of 1914, this organization (comprising certain prominent Ukrainian nationalists both from the Austro-Hungarian and Russian Empires) moved its headquarters to Vienna and effectively transferred its propaganda campaign abroad, conducting its activity through its two main bases in Bucharest and Constantinople. In September 1914, the Bucharest branch of the ULU was instrumental in spreading its first *Manifesto*, which called for a common struggle of the Ukrainian and Romanian peoples against Russian autocracy. The memorandum was introduced by an “Appeal to the Romanian people” and was prefaced by the notorious left-wing Bessarabian émigré, Zamfir C. Arbore. This was not surprising, given the social-democratic political orientation of most ULU members and Arbore’s links with revolutionary circles in the Russian

Empire.<sup>982</sup> One of the most interesting cases in this respect pertains to the Ukrainian groups operating in the Ottoman Empire during the first half of the war. The Constantinople branch of the ULU envisaged a common military operation of Turkish forces and Ukrainian volunteer detachments that would land simultaneously near Odessa and in the Kuban with the hope of inciting a revolt among the local population.<sup>983</sup> Though nothing came of this, an abortive landing operation of much smaller proportions took place in early December 1914. The original plan involved a landing of 24 Turkish cavalymen in Southern Bessarabia (near Akkerman). These were supposed to reach Romania after destroying a part of the Russian infrastructure in Bessarabia. The actual landing took place on the Serpent Island, at the mouths of the Danube, and was unsuccessful, since the detachment was immediately captured by Russian forces.<sup>984</sup> Bessarabia's military vulnerability thus drew the attention of the belligerents only to a limited extent and did not have any impact on the local situation, persisting as a potential threat for the region's Russian authorities.

The mutual "propaganda war" did leave an important testimony relating to Bessarabia that will be discussed presently. The document in question represented a memorandum drafted by the well-known Bessarabian writer and journalist Alexis Nour, who was involved in the publishing of the first Romanian-language newspaper in Bessarabia during 1906-1907 and was also editor of the moderate Kadet-oriented daily *Bessarabskaia Zhizn'* since 1903. He moved to Romania after 1912 and became associated with Stere's circle in Iasi. Before discussing the relevance of this memorandum for the specifically Bessarabian war context, its wider implications should be examined. Nour's memorandum is a striking example of the mutually subversive propaganda that

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<sup>982</sup> Teodor Pavel. *Intre Rusia tarilor si Germania Wilhelmiana: Un memoriu basarabean din 1916*, p. 60, 99

<sup>983</sup> Hakan Kirimli, "The Activities of the Union for the Liberation of Ukraine in the Ottoman Empire during the First World War," in: *Middle Eastern Studies*, (Vol. 34, Nr. 4, October 1998), p. 177-200

<sup>984</sup> Kirimli, p. 190



the belligerent empires used in order to undermine the internal stability of their rivals. In this sense, the thesis of the “trespassing of rational behavior” by World War I adversaries finds its confirmation also in the Bessarabian case. The extent to which the Entente allies and the Central Powers used secret services and their diplomatic missions in neutral countries for espionage and propaganda purposes was unprecedented.<sup>985</sup> The “national question,” especially salient in the case of the multi-ethnic Russian and Austro-Hungarian Empires, was understandably exploited by the war rivals for purposes of destabilizing the enemy’s war effort. The same logic operated on the Russian-German “diplomatic front.” Germany’s ostensible war goals, aiming at the eventual creation of a series of “buffer states” on the territory of the Russian Empire’s Western borderlands, presupposed the elaboration of detailed plans for fomenting internal sedition among Russia’s ethnic groups. One of the earliest and most comprehensive designs of such a plan belonged to the Finnish-born and German educated lawyer Fredrik Wetterhoff. As early as June 1915, Wetterhoff presented his proposal to the German Foreign Ministry and General Staff. According to it, a simultaneous uprising in the Baltic Provinces and the Caucasus, if well coordinated, would lead to an armed insurrection in the Ukraine and thus, eventually, to a revolutionary upsurge throughout the Russian Empire. The author insisted that “the assistance of the liberation struggle of these peoples is... much more important than winning the alliance of a certain state, like, for instance, Romania, through which Russia’s power will certainly be weakened, but will never be completely destroyed.”<sup>986</sup> The relationship of the disgruntled national activists that emigrated from the Russian Empire after 1914 with Germany’s networks of military and diplomatic institutions supervising the anti-Russian propaganda campaign was

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<sup>985</sup> For the Russian case, see J. F. N. Bradley, “The Russian Secret Service in the First World War,” in: *Soviet Studies*, Vol. 20, Nr.2 (October 1968), pp. 242-248

<sup>986</sup> Teodor Pavel. *Intre Rusia tarilor si Germania Wilhelmiana: Un memoriu basarabean din 1916*, p. 91. For a general presentation of Germany’s espionage activity and propaganda campaign against Russia, see Pavel, pp. 85-93.

ambiguous. Most of these émigrés (with the partial exception of the Poles) were ready to profit from the support of the German Empire and entered a pragmatically advantageous relationship with the Berlin authorities who provided the resources for various publishing and institutional projects. Such was the case of the so-called League of the Alien Peoples of Russia (*Liga der Fremdvölkern Rußlands*), which was created in April 1916 and operated from two main bases in Switzerland and Sweden. This organization of anti-Russian nationalist orientation emerged as a result of the fusion of an earlier “Union of Nationalities,” led by the notorious Lithuanian journalist and writer Juozas Gabrys, and of a smaller émigré group headed by the Baltic German Baron Friedrich von Ropp. It was supported and funded by the German Foreign Ministry and became one of the major centers of anti-Russian propaganda.<sup>987</sup> The immediate impulse for the elaboration of Alexis Nour’s memorandum came from a manifesto issued by the League in March 1916 that called for the publication of a collective volume on the “national question” in Russia that would include a presentation of the major “nationalities” of the Romanov Empire in a comparative perspective. The planned volume was to be published in the major international languages and distributed in the capitals of the belligerent powers. Ostensibly devoted to the goal of informing the European public opinion about the “plight” of the non-Russian ethnic groups in the Romanov Empire, the resulting publication had a barely dissimulated pro-German tendency that was camouflaged by its initial publication in Swedish and then by its “translation” into German and French.<sup>988</sup> Nour’s memorandum was included as one of the chapters of this collective work and, as such, put Bessarabia on the map of international wartime polemics.

<sup>987</sup> Teodor Pavel. *Intre Rusia tarilor si Germania Wilhelmiana: Un memoriu basarabean din 1916*, p. 100-102. This organization included a number of Baltic Germans, Finns, Ukrainians, Poles, Jews, Georgians and Tatars.

<sup>988</sup> For details, see Pavel, pp. 109-119. The final trajectory of this volume is interesting insofar as its French-language version, significantly abridged and modified to eliminate the passages with pro-German implications, was used as one of the documentary sources at the Peace Conference, including on the “Bessarabian question.”

The memorandum is dated May 15, 1916, and was sent by the German ambassador to Romania to the German Chancellor a month later.<sup>989</sup> The relevance of this document stems from two main factors. First, it represented an exceptional example of the “internationalization” of the Bessarabian question before the fall of the Russian imperial regime. After 1917, Bessarabia received an increased share of international attention due to the Soviet-Romanian territorial controversy. However, the 1916 memorandum apparently was the first precedent that pointed to Bessarabia as one of the problematic peripheries of the Russian Empire. Second, it is one of the few examples of the articulation of an image of Bessarabia’s future within the context of the war transcending the narrowly Romanian context. This was obvious on two levels. On the one hand, Nour’s memorandum should be analyzed in the framework of the controversy over the chances for a restructuring of the empire on a federal basis. On the other hand, Nour intended his text to be an ideological appeal for a Romanian-Ukrainian alliance against the Russian imperial regime. This of course depended on the German military hegemony in the region, which still appeared rather plausible in the spring of 1916. It was also predicated upon Romania’s alliance with the Central Powers, the possibility of which was not ruled out until the late summer of 1916. Nour’s position on the question of federalism as a possible alternative to the unitary structure of the Russian empire is doubly ambiguous. The federalist option was rather popular among the majority of the politically active Bessarabians who were mostly integrated into the Russian Left. This became clear during 1917, when the Romanian “national” option was in the minority and was not seriously envisaged until the collapse of the local authorities in Bessarabia in January 1918. Federalism also had its supporters in Romania, especially within the group of pro-Central

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<sup>989</sup> Teodor Pavel, pp. 185-186

Powers intellectuals grouped around Stere.<sup>990</sup> Nour, however, rejected this option completely, believing that the collapse of the Russian Empire was imminent and that the only conceivable future for its nationalities would be the creation of a number of allied independent states, while in the specific case of Bessarabia only its unification with Romania would be a lasting solution.<sup>991</sup> Today's editor of Nour's manuscript draws a direct parallel between the 1916 memorandum and the views of Dimitrie C. Moruzi, reading Nour as the representative of the "next stage" of the national discourse on Bessarabia. Despite the appealing conclusions that such a comparison might elicit, it is exaggerated to assert a direct "descent of ideas" from Moruzi through Stere to the 1916 document, as the author appears to claim while remarking upon certain fundamental differences.<sup>992</sup> The 1916 memorandum was essentially a product of the war context and appeared as a result of the intertwining of external pressures and internal polemics. Nour was a close collaborator of Stere, whose position clearly influenced the Bessarabian writer. Similarly to Stere, Nour emphasized the strategic importance of Bessarabia and even Transnistria for the Romanian nation-building, since these regions "secured our [Romanian] future on the Black Sea."<sup>993</sup> Following the tradition of his nationally minded predecessors, he also lamented the ignorance of matters Bessarabian among the Romanian educated public, invoking the absence of any active symbolic opposition from the part of Romanian intellectuals on the occasion of the 1912 celebration. More significantly, he compared the quasi-generalized "silence" surrounding the

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<sup>990</sup> "Federalism" could of course be understood very differently. Such views ranged from the "Great Austrian" doctrine propagated by the Transylvanian Aurel C. Popovici (envisaging a transformation of the Habsburg Monarchy into a federation along national lines) to a much looser conception of a "Danubian Confederation" with the Monarchy favored, at one point, by Stere himself.

<sup>991</sup> In a series of articles published in Stere's journal, *Viata Romaneasca*, in 1915, Nour insisted upon the necessity of an "alliance" with the Polish, Jewish and Ukrainian national movements. He also rejected the persistent accusation of Bessarabia's transformation into an "Alsace-Lorraine" in Russian-Romanian relations, arguing for the legitimacy of the "right to national self-determination." See Pavel, pp. 71-78

<sup>992</sup> For this argument, see Pavel, pp. 62-71

<sup>993</sup> Alexis Nour, „Alsacia-Lorena” româno-rusă”[The Romanian-Russian „Alsace-Lorraine”], in: *Viata Romaneasca*, X, Nr. 4, April 1915, p. 117

events of 1912 with the much more vigorous reaction to a similar ceremony held by the Austrian authorities in Bukovina. The author remarked that in 1912 the Bessarabians “were not meant to be in Bukovina’s situation of 1875... We, the Bessarabians ourselves, could not produce any protest. Why was that? I have already shown this: there was no one to produce it, no one could or knew how to do it!”<sup>994</sup> Nour thus became one of the more prominent writers on the “national question” in Bessarabia after 1912. It is not clear to what extent he followed Stere’s Populist political preferences. Apparently, he was slightly to the right politically than most of the Romanian-based Bessarabian émigrés (one only has to compare Nour’s pronouncements with the much more radical stance of Axinte Frunza). The 1916 memorandum, though intended for a foreign audience, can also be regarded as a synthetic expression of an emerging strand of Bessarabian political circles that chose nationalism rather than social reformism or federalism as their political credo.

The Memorandum was structured into 9 chapters that dealt with various aspects of Bessarabia’s geography, ancient and modern history, ethnographic makeup, economic situation, political problems and the perspectives for the province’s future following the world war. The text was partially a narrative presentation of the essential data on the province and partially a “policy paper” outlining the author’s vision of Bessarabia’s overall situation in the Russian Empire and the perspectives of Bessarabia’s relationship to a reformed Russian state. This latter part is of special interest here. The narrative chapters also contain a significant comparative dimension that put the province’s evolution under Russian rule in the context of the policy of the neighboring empires and of other non-Russian peripheries of the Romanov state. The Russian policy was presented, traditionally for the Romanian nationalizing discourse, as a story of

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<sup>994</sup> Alexis Nour, “Scrisori din Basarabia: Basarabia de la 1912 incoace” [Letters from Bessarabia: Bessarabia since 1912], in: *Viata Romaneasca*, IX, nr. 7-9, July-September 1914, p. 265

Russification of the elites, passive resistance by the peasantry and complete lack of political and national “rights” of the local population. Bessarabia seemed to have endured the worst fate both within the empire and in comparison with the rest of the Romanians. Thus, Nour observed that, contrary to the Russians, “the Turks did not oppress the Bessarabian population culturally and nationally.”<sup>995</sup> The author insisted that Bessarabia’s relative backwardness was a matter of pure conjuncture and inadequate policy, since the local population had all the potential to reach the development of more advanced provinces of the empire, like, for example, Finland: “If 99% of the nobility, clergy and townspeople had not been engulfed by the Russian state, if the common people had not been deprived of national culture, we would have become today what modern Finland is and we shouldn’t have pursued a humiliating fight for the recognition at least of our nationality.”<sup>996</sup> Due to the policy of the Russian regime, Bessarabia could not reach the stage of national awareness characteristic for Ireland or Finland, since both the assimilatory practices and the protest of the population were much weaker in Bessarabia than in the former cases. However, Bessarabia’s situation was even more dangerous and preoccupying exactly because of its backwardness and thus differed fundamentally from that of Poland or Finland. Nour argued that “the liberation of [this] people deprived of fighters is a necessity for the general human progress, which cannot allow that a people... situated on a medieval stage of culture should harm its neighbors through its lack of culture.”<sup>997</sup> This ostensibly pragmatic argument followed Nour’s general stance which emphasized the region’s backwardness and the alienation of its elites as the main results of the Russian administration. The difference that separated Nour from his Romanian peers was the primacy of the Russian context within which he framed his argument. Bessarabia’s integration into Romania was not only (or mainly) determined by a metaphysical

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<sup>995</sup> Teodor Pavel. *Intre Rusia tarilor si Germania Wilhelmiana: Un memoriu basarabean din 1916*, p. 161

<sup>996</sup> Pavel, p. 167

<sup>997</sup> Pavel, p. 172-173

belonging to the national body, but was a pragmatic outcome of the non-viability of Russian imperial policy that the author likened to British policies in Ireland: “The [generic] reactionary Russian has been and will remain our enemy, just as the English for the Irish, because he seduced our aristocracy and our priesthood, he passed our population into the hands of foreigners that live on the basis of autochthonous [elements], he gave us the chimera of autonomy a century ago only to take it back later.”<sup>998</sup> The Bessarabian Romanians thus appeared as a colonized people whose only hope rested with the international “public opinion,” while its internal resources for emancipation were still rather weak. Though the influence of the political turmoil that gripped Russia after 1905 was, from the author’s perspective, “minimal,” he admitted that immediate pre-war developments (and especially the 1912 ceremonies) sparked a certain reaction in local society and “put forward the Moldavian problem, the idea of the existence of a very loyal, but nevertheless distinct people.”<sup>999</sup> Still, the writer maintained the customary opposition between the “instinctive ethnic vitality” of the Romanians (which secured their survival in demographic terms) and the essentially pre-modern stage of their traditional culture that was not supported by the existence of powerful local elites.<sup>1000</sup> The immersion of the Bessarabians into a pre-modern rural world seemed no longer adequate in the context of the great upheavals of modernity.

The population of Bessarabia appeared as a quintessential victim in Nour’s narrative. Its victimized status stemmed as much from the general trends of the imperial regime as from the specific war context. The memorandum contains one of the few references to the war’s impact on Bessarabian society and sheds a certain (though distorted) light on local events. Though careful to register the initial “people’s enthusiasm” in the face of the foreign threat that was also reflected

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<sup>998</sup> Pavel, p. 183. Nour also compared the Russian educational policy rather unfavorably with the Austro-Hungarian model, Pavel, p. 174

<sup>999</sup> Pavel, p. 173

<sup>1000</sup> Pavel, p. 166. This rural mass was, however, “without a developed language, without literature, schools and a [national] church, without a national culture,” though its elemental power of ethnic survival was impressive.

upon Bessarabian society, the author was quick to emphasize that it soon turned into disappointment and discontent, first linked to the ensuing economic hardship and then intensified by unfulfilled promises of land grants from the available funds left after the partial expulsion of German colonists from Bessarabia.<sup>1001</sup> The direct impact of war “anti-alien” policies was much reduced in Bessarabia, since “here the Russians did not resort to the annihilation of their subjects of non-Russian origin; the Romanians of Southern Russia were not subject to physical destruction through the evacuation of the territories they inhabited; the Romanians were not deported either, as were the Jews, Poles etc., so that, being dispersed, they would drown in the Russian ocean.”<sup>1002</sup> However, this difference was only relative, since the possibility of Austrian-Russian clashes and, especially, the specter of a Romanian invasion provided all the conditions for the application of the same repressive policies in Bessarabia. It is hard to believe Nour’s unverifiable assertion that “*the population of this province was categorically ordered to leave the country en masse, in the case of a Romanian invasion, and to flee beyond the Dniester, in order to show the entire world that the two million “Moldavians” from Bessarabia do not even want to hear about the unification with the Romania beyond the Prut!*”<sup>1003</sup> This seems to be rather an effective propaganda device than an actual reflection of wartime plans (though the presence of such motives on the level of collective rumors is plausible). The “tragedy” of the local population was enhanced, in Nour’s opinion, by the partial application of the “scorched-earth” policy in the northern part of the Hotin district, where occasional clashes with Austrian troops prompted the authorities to act decisively. Bessarabia’s north-western edge was thus touched by “the effects of the war waged by the Russians behind the front against their own subjects.” According to the author’s (exaggerated) estimate, “it can be asserted that nearly one-tenth of Bessarabia’s

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<sup>1001</sup> Pavel, p. 175

<sup>1002</sup> Pavel, p. 176

<sup>1003</sup> Pavel, p. 176. Italics and quotation marks in original.



population passed through the same road of the Golgotha as the millions of people from Poland, Lithuania, Volynia, Courland and Little Russia.”<sup>1004</sup> The lesser direct suffering of Bessarabia’s population ultimately depended on Romania’s declaration of neutrality, which precluded the further implementation of the military’s repressive policies. Nour believed that “Russia spared the Romanians of Bessarabia, Kherson and Podolia only because of the position that Romania adopted in the European conflict.”<sup>1005</sup> The Bessarabian émigré concluded that, though the material deprivation reigning in Bessarabia by early 1916 could not be compared with the plight of the areas of the front zone, the psychological state of its inhabitants was rather disturbing: “The mania of persecution, the fear of words, of social movements, of traitors and spies, the panic generated by non-existing dangers, the continuous hunt for an imaginary and chimerical enemy”<sup>1006</sup> not only undermined the morale of the population, but also called into question the further association of Bessarabia’s interests with a state that fought the war in an increasing atmosphere of insecurity and widespread paranoia. Though motivated by propaganda aims and grossly overstating his case, Nour hinted at a complex local reality and pointed to the growing challenges that the Russian authorities faced and that would finally overwhelm them during 1917.

The final part of the memorandum was devoted to Bessarabia’s future in the post-war context. Recognizing the usefulness of Russian high culture for the emergence of a well educated local intelligentsia, Nour advocated a “parting of ways” with the Russian heartland during the foreseeable social upheavals. He based his argument on the priority of specifically national tasks that required a concentration on the “national self” instead of the participation in the reconstruction of a federal Russian state whose governing principles on the “national question” would be indistinguishable from those of the autocracy: “Our national powers are still very

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<sup>1004</sup> Pavel, p. 177

<sup>1005</sup> Pavel, p. 177

<sup>1006</sup> Pavel, p. 178

modest: why should we squander them in the Russian ocean, why should all our intellectuals, instead of toiling for the interests of their country, be alienated and engulfed by the great Russian culture?”<sup>1007</sup> The principle of nationality was incompatible with an all-Russian cultural and political realm within which the Romanians “will be crushed by a leveling culture, painfully at first, then without any pain.”<sup>1008</sup> The image of Russian culture as an agent of national dissolution and the eventual disappearance of cultural diversity could only be prevented through the Bessarabians’ “merging into the great and whole mass of our nation comprising over 15 million people dwelling... in the South-Eastern corner of Central Europe, at the mouths of the majestic Danube.”<sup>1009</sup> The stereotype of Russia as a foreign and leveling power thus transcended the specific phenomenon of the autocracy and was transferred to the prospective democratic Russian state rising from the turmoil of world war. Nour invoked the model of the Ukrainian national movement as the example to be followed by Bessarabian national activists. The paradigmatic role of the Ukrainians related not only to the commonality of traditions, interests and aspirations with the Romanians, but was also due to their specific relationship to Russian high culture, which they rejected despite its greater attractiveness for them in comparison with other ethnic groups of the empire.<sup>1010</sup> Russia’s consolidation on a new political basis was, for the Bessarabian author, an even greater danger for the Romanians than the continued existence of the autocracy, since a wider popular basis of the regime made the “annihilation of all Romanians as a nation” a virtual certainty.<sup>1011</sup> In his concluding remarks, the author argued that the emancipation of Russia’s national peripheries will not affect the “rich potential” of the Great Russian people, since the

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<sup>1007</sup> Pavel, p. 180

<sup>1008</sup> Pavel, p. 180. In the same vein, Nour proclaimed: “Today, oppression and domination according to the dictum “divide et impera;” tomorrow, however, a cultural grave of first order awaits us, over which will stand a recreated Russia, situated on a higher spiritual stage, which will not tolerate to stand face to face with the small and insignificant [peoples].” Pavel, p. 182

<sup>1009</sup> Pavel, p. 180

<sup>1010</sup> Pavel, p. 181-182

<sup>1011</sup> Pavel, p. 183-184

Western borderlands represented but an insignificant part of the empire's territory and population. This "minimization" of the losses in the eventuality of a Russian defeat reflected a faint attempt to justify the final thesis of the author.<sup>1012</sup> The only solution for the development of the inherent potential of the non-Russian ethnic groups consisted, in Nour's view, in "Russia's defeat and its retreat to the ethnic borders of the old Muscovite empire," which would guarantee the demise of "Russian imperialism" and would erect a "barrier in the face of the Russian danger" for the peoples of the former western borderlands.<sup>1013</sup> Echoing the war aims declared by the German Empire (despite their justification in national terms), Nour finally abandoned the reserved language he had used previously to placate the eventual misgivings of his potential readers. The distinguishing feature of the 1916 memorandum was the emphatically pragmatic character of the argument and the "policy proposals" advanced by the author. This was as much a conscious authorial choice as a necessary adaptation to the requirements of the war context. The populist overtones that were to be expected, given the intellectual environment of the memorandum's elaboration, were not altogether absent (e.g., the topics of the urban-rural opposition and the extolling of the peasantry's instinctive "ethnic vitality"). However, they were moderated both by the author's political preferences and by the immediate propaganda aims of the document. The memorandum lost its immediate relevance following Romania's entry into the war in August 1916 as an Entente ally. The Bessarabian "question" temporarily receded from public view, but was to reemerge in more dramatic circumstances. Reacting against the Russian imperial narrative, Nour's version of Bessarabian Romanian nationalism, though still in the

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<sup>1012</sup> Nour also reverted to the topic of "ethnic victimization," according to which the favorable circumstances of the region's development were thwarted by the "degeneration" of the local Romanian element in the "terrible hands" of their Russian "stepmother." Pavel, p. 184

<sup>1013</sup> Pavel, p. 184

minority at the time of the text's elaboration, was to prevail due to the complex intertwining of war and revolution during late 1917 and early 1918.

In conclusion, this chapter showed how a combination of internal developments in the Russian Empire and of changed international circumstances modified the terms of the symbolic competition over Bessarabia. The immediate prewar period witnessed the gradual transformation of the extreme south-western region of the Russian state into an insecure borderland in a new and disturbing way (at least in the minds of the Russian bureaucracy). The declaration of war and the radical transformative policies of the Petrograd government, though not affecting Bessarabia to the fullest extent, laid the premises for the gradual politicization of the masses that would erupt in social upheavals and political clashes after the February Revolution. Bessarabia's position as a contested territory was also enhanced by the 1914-1916 polemics in Romania, which put the province on the intellectual map of the Kingdom with a hitherto unknown urgency. Though the marginality of the Russian-controlled region within the Romanian national discourse was not overcome, it acquired a new substance and was openly represented as a part of the hierarchy of "national priorities." The most important result of the first two years of the war, to be fully researched yet, was Bessarabia's at first faltering, but then increasingly brutal and tumultuous entry into the world of violent change that would signify the final advent of modernity to the region.

## Conclusion

This dissertation aimed at showing how the region known, since 1812, under the name of Bessarabia was construed as an object of rival claims for belonging and symbolic appropriation by the Russian Empire and the Romanian nation-state between the 1860s and 1916. Far from representing a unique case of contestation between two state entities in the Eurasian context, Bessarabia shared many common experiences and patterns of imperial policy with the empire's other "Western borderlands." However, the territory's position within the Russian state was unparalleled in the sense that it was reclaimed not by a rival empire or non-state national project, but by a (recently) formed nation-state that included it in the overall scheme of its nationalist rhetoric and aspirations. The basic argument thus rested on the assumption that two coherent sets of representations (subsumed under the labels of "national" and "imperial" discourse) openly competed for the symbolic inclusion of this area into the respective state-building designs and for the prospective allegiance of its inhabitants. Nevertheless, the Bessarabian region acquired a profoundly ambiguous and problematic place within both narratives. While the Russian imperial imagination increasingly viewed it as an insecure borderland, the Romanian nation-builders accorded it a marginal importance within the priorities of national expansion and cultural unification. This project attempted to present the convoluted dynamics of the opposed (but also complementary) representations of Bessarabia in the Russian and Romanian contexts and to explain why, by 1917, all the premises for the full emergence of the "Bessarabian question" on the map of international diplomacy in the interwar period were already apparent. The profound identity rifts and the murky local politics of self-identification that beset the contemporary Republic of Moldova, if primarily shaped by the Soviet and Romanian interwar policies and ideologies, can hardly be understood without delving deeper into the pre-World War I period. As

pointed out in the introduction, this dissertation is, essentially, a pre-history of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century “Bessarabian question.” It can be hoped that this intellectual and political “pre-history” can point to the enduring patterns of symbolic competition that, despite the frequent and brutal regime changes of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, still structure the opposing narratives of identity and political projects of the current local elites.

*Bessarabia as the object of a “triangular relationship”*

Both discursive traditions vying for the region’s inclusion were, in a sense, peripheral with respect to the Western “master narratives” of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. This assertion does not postulate any normative model located in a reified “West,” but only highlights the peculiar mechanisms of the construction of identity and “otherness” in Eastern Europe. Beyond the two direct protagonists of the controversy over Bessarabia, the “eternally present” Western point of reference influenced the terms of the debate. The Russian Empire constantly oscillated between an optimistic assessment of its “civilizing mission” in the borderlands (thus representing an agent of modernity and enlightenment) and a defensive (even occasionally nervous) anti-Western rhetoric of peculiarity and imputed opposition. This was valid not only for the usually invoked “Slavophile-Westernizer” dispute, but also for the spatial representations of the empire’s territory that might ultimately acquire the features of an autarchic and self-sufficient separate “world” (as seen in Chapter II). I argue, however, that these musings had as much to do with the terms of Russia’s inclusion into modernity as with the wholesale rejection of the “Western model.” In this sense, the “space consciousness” of the Russian intellectuals can be linked to their Romanian peers’ thoughts on the new nation-state’s spatial position on Europe’s “mental maps.” This wider context determined the significance of “border areas” as fault lines where apparently

irreconcilable oppositions met and collided. The possibilities of framing this argument were multiple, ranging from an emphasis on cultural, civilizational and moral hierarchies and reaching the heightened intensity of “ethnicist” discourses (sometimes with racialist overtones) where trans-border communities were involved. The motives of threat and subversion in the borderlands were necessary both for imperial states (with their specific understanding of the shifting zones of mutual influence and struggle) and for nation-states that needed to define their “ideal fatherlands” in unambiguous terms (needless to say, such an aspiration was and remains essentially utopian). Where two (or more) such narratives met, one can usually speak of a “contested borderland.” Bessarabia was perceived in these terms by imperial bureaucrats long before any local stirrings justified these apprehensions. The logic that determined the empire’s policies and fears in the Western borderlands or the Caucasus began to be gradually transferred to the Bessarabian setting. Thus, by the early 20<sup>th</sup> century the Romanian Kingdom was regarded (by the Russian publicists and officials) as an “alternative center” of attraction for the Bessarabian populace (in similar terms as Galicia/the Habsburg Empire in the case of Ukraine and the Ottoman Empire in that of the Caucasus). One needs to be careful when comparing these instances, insofar as the extent and intensity of such arguments were much smaller with regard to Bessarabia. Still, the progressing “nationalization” of the Russian imperial discourse, the ambiguous position of Bessarabia vis-à-vis the Russian “core” and the consolidation of the Romanian nation-state proved to be strong incentives for the emergence of such an image. Although “reality” caught up with “discourse” only following the 1905 revolution (and then only timidly), by the time of World War I the region was no longer a secure periphery. Though the Romanian side of the equation appears much less problematic, even so Bessarabia was an awkward component of the “national body.” This area was clearly marginal in the general scheme of national priorities. This was due, on the one hand, to the social and educational situation in the province (that delayed the political

mobilization of the masses). On the other hand, this marginality should be related to the negative vision of the Russian Empire in late 19<sup>th</sup> century Romania. After the Crimean war, and even more so after the Russian-Ottoman war of 1878, the Russian Empire became a threatening “quintessential Other” only tenuously linked with the “sphere of civilization.” Far from following the dominant trend of “normalization” of Russia’s image in the West before World War I, the Romanian public sphere remained immersed in the mid-19<sup>th</sup>-century “Russophobic” discourse. This tendency not only served the pragmatic purpose of the consolidation of Romania’s self-image as a “bulwark of civilization” in the Orient, but also reflected the deep-seated mistrust of a nation-state towards a neighboring empire. Though Bessarabia was part of the problem, its regrettable belonging to the “alien” Russian space also made it less amenable to an easy integration into the “national hearth.” Though the rhetoric of national redemption was also extensively used, a widespread pessimistic streak was discernible. The characteristic *topoi* of estrangement, alienation and ignorance of Bessarabian realities in the Kingdom provide ample illustration of this marginality. The logic of the “triangular relationship” thus functioned by ascribing Bessarabia to the Russian or Romanian “spaces” (each of them embodying a peculiar version of modernity). However, the Bessarabian “issue” was also a part of the two polities’ complicated relationship to the West. It was a testing ground for the vitality of state-building (or national) forces that were to consecrate the Russian Empire’s and Romania’s claims to inclusion into modernity.

The most salient feature of the “symbolic competition” over Bessarabia was the lack of articulation of the local inhabitants and the absence of a coherent “local voice” in the Russian-Romanian controversy. Bessarabia remained a passive object within the logic of mutual claims to belonging for most of the studied period. Even the revolutionary turmoil of 1905-07 failed to produce any articulated projects pointing to a specific agenda rooted in the province’s context.



The only group claiming to speak as a collective representative of the Bessarabian inhabitants was the tiny community of Bessarabian émigrés to Romania who attempted to inscribe their native region on the map of the Romanian national discourse by transcending its previous discursive marginality. Though differing widely in their ideological preferences and public impact, they came closest to constructing an “alternative narrative” within which Bessarabia became an indispensable part of the “national organism.” The success of such figures as B. P. Hasdeu, Z. Arbore, C. Stere or D. Moruzi at subverting the “narrative silence” of Bessarabia and at substituting their voice for the non-existent local initiatives was partial at best. This was due also to the “uncertainty of identity” that plagued the ideologues themselves and did not allow them to integrate their Russian intellectual heritage into the Romanian Kingdom’s political system or public sphere. The weak development of the local press and the monopolization of the strategies for symbolic inclusion of the area by the Russian official stances also precluded any local initiative to reclaim Bessarabia for the Russian core or to build any narrative of “regional peculiarity.” The closest any Bessarabian public figure came to such a project were the feeble attempts of Pavel Krushevan to explore the local realities in order to further his Russian nationalist and radical agenda. However, these projects were too insignificant to justify the existence of a well-defined “agency” of the Bessarabian local actors before 1917. The integration of the local elite into the Russian imperial system and the insignificance of the intellectual strata up to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century deprived the province of effective intermediaries that could negotiate the terms of the region’s appropriation by either of the two alternative “centers.” Thus, the story I attempt to present here is more about the dilemmas that the Russian and Romanian state-building projects encountered in this contested borderland than about the Bessarabian context as such.

*The discontinuity of the two competing discourses and the high points of symbolic tension*

An implicit query underpinning my narrative deals with the dynamics of the emergence and evolution of the alternative visions sketched here. Far from amounting to a continuous competition of two coherent sets of representations, the controversy over Bessarabia's belonging surfaced periodically during moments of international crisis or mutual symbolic subversion, when the legitimacy of the Russian control over the Bessarabian borderland was questioned. I identified three crucial instances that marked and structured the discursive clash between the Russian and Romanian imaginative constructions of the region. The first direct confrontation occurred on the occasion of the 1877-1878 Russian-Ottoman war, when the Russian claim to the three districts of Southern Bessarabia led to the articulation of opposing criteria for the territory's symbolic appropriation. This moment marked the elaboration of an official position of the Romanian government concerning the inclusion of (Southern) Bessarabia into the "national body" and provoked the reaction of Russian official and semi-official circles, which developed a series of counter-arguments that responded to the Romanian stance. However, this acute stage of Russian-Romanian controversy was also paradoxical and uncharacteristic in many respects. The object of the argument was curiously "metonymic," in the sense that it could not be easily integrated into the Romanian national narrative due to both ethnographic and historical circumstances. The primacy of the strategic element caused an interesting two-pronged "argumentative displacement" that accompanied the traditional historically inspired arguments that underlay the Romanian official view. On the one hand, the three southern Bessarabian districts were "conflated" under the generic name of "Bessarabia" to implicitly include the rest of the province remaining under Russian domination. This deliberate omission allowed the Romanian polemicists to use the traditional claim of historical sovereignty even in the case of a territory to which it could be only tenuously applied. On the other hand, the "displacement"

manifested itself through the insistence upon the economic, strategic and legal aspects of the problem. This strategy was explicitly aimed at the international audience that had to be impressed by the invocation of an “all-European” interest in the region of the Lower Danube that Romania was presumably best fit to uphold. The national discourse was divided internally and was expressed through a constant oscillation between the lexicons of “national dignity” and *Realpolitik*. The “reactive” nature of the Romanian position, as well as its uneasy adaptation to different “audiences,” also contributed to its unstable character. The most important conceptual shift linked to the Russian-Romanian controversy concerns the emergence of Bessarabia (paradoxically, of its southern part, which comprised the least ethnically Romanian parts of the province) as an identifiable object of the Romanian “national space.” Similarly, the analysis of the shifting discourses on the relative importance of Southern Bessarabia and Dobrogea provides an illuminating example of the ambiguities and dilemmas of the Romanian national discourse. It also points to the varied and sometimes ingenious solutions that the government and the intellectuals coined to supersede (or at least lessen) these ambiguities and dilemmas.

The second moment of symbolic tension was linked to the celebration of the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the region’s annexation to the Russian Empire in 1912. This event marked the high point of the attempts of the imperial authorities and the Russian “public sphere” to construct a coherent image of the province and to forge a representation of Bessarabia as an “organic” part of the imperial polity. The ambiguity inherent in the Russian elite’s self-perception and the intrusion of “nationalizing” motives starting from the reign of Alexander III complicated the task of defining the criteria for belonging to an ideal “Russian fatherland.” In the Bessarabian case, this ambiguity is obvious both at the superficial level of rhetoric and at the deeper level of unarticulated assumptions. The language of dynasty and Orthodoxy was mingled in an uneasy “union” with elements of an incipient “national” vocabulary that sought to appropriate Bessarabia not only for

the Russian Empire as a multi- and supranational entity, but more narrowly for the Russian nation that had to be imagined simultaneously with advancing claims to its preeminence. Aside from being rooted in the search for legitimacy of the autocratic state in the dynamic early 20<sup>th</sup>-century world, the contested and incoherent nature of Russian discourses concerning Bessarabia derived from the complex social structure of the empire that defied any attempt at official categorization and control. In the Bessarabian case one could tentatively speak about separate (if connected) stances of the nobility, the clergy, the central bureaucracy and the monarchy (understood as the imperial family and court circles). However, the problem with such a scheme (which I nevertheless follow due to reasons of practical convenience) is the overlapping and fluid nature of Russia's social groups in this period. The "internal analysis" of the Russian stance on Bessarabia during the 1912 anniversary discloses a number of interesting patterns and allows the placing of the region in an all-imperial context. The main rhetorical tropes used to convey the province's essential belonging to the imperial space could be classified into four main groups: 1) the motive of *progress and civilizing mission* of the empire at the peripheries (entailing a broader opposition between civilization and barbarity); 2) the motive of *empire as family*, mingling traditional paternalist themes with the recent influence of the nationalizing vocabulary; 3) the related topic of a *direct relationship between the Russian and Moldavian peoples*, with clear populist overtones; 4) the extensive use of the *Russian blood* metaphor, in order to strengthen the material claim of the Russian state to the province's symbolic inclusion. Bessarabia acquired an identifiable image in the multi-ethnic structure of the Russian Empire, even if this image stressed the organic and natural bond between this "borderland" and the center. Behind this ostensible picture of unity, the province's contested character constantly undermined the efforts of imperial administrators to consecrate Bessarabia's unproblematic status within the empire. The Romanian discourse on Bessarabia displayed a stronger coherence than its Russian counterpart, since it

perceived Bessarabia as a temporarily alienated part of the “national body.” On the rhetorical level, the “family metaphors” are used with the same frequency as is the Russian case, which is perfectly consistent with the internal dynamics of the national discourse. The most striking rhetorical difference concerns, of course, the designation of the “founding events” of 1812. Whereas the Russian stance is built upon notions stressing integration, peaceful assimilation or “organic unity” (exemplified by such terms as “unification” [*prisoedinenie*], “merging” [*sliianie*] or “inclusion” [*priobshchenie*], the Romanian literature on the topic emphasized a forceful, brutal and radical break with the past that invariably bore negative connotations. The most frequent words used to denote this position were: “annexation” [*anexarea*], “alienation” [*instrainarea*] or even “stealing” [*rapirea*] of Bessarabia. It would be exaggerated to insist upon the “centrality” of the Bessarabian topic in the overall scheme of Romanian imagined “nation-building” before World War I. Nevertheless, the 1912 anniversary created the premises for the first coherent attempt at a wholesale “symbolic construction” of Bessarabia as a “Romanian land” in direct opposition to the Russian discourse.

The third defining moment for the Russian-Romanian symbolic conflict over Bessarabia coincides with World War I. The role of the 1914-1916 period in the transformation of the collective image of the Bessarabian population along ethnic lines is crucial. The first two years of the war represented an “inflection point” for the reassessment of the multi-ethnic character of Bessarabia. Following the general trend of connecting ethnicity directly to state loyalty pursued by certain groups in the central bureaucracy and, especially, the imperial army, the Bessarabian Romanians tended to be viewed, for the first time, as a collectively suspect group. This transition to the imposition of nationalizing categories upon the subjects of the Russian Empire was neither smooth nor straightforward in the Bessarabian case. The local population was traditionally regarded as staunchly loyal to the throne and the Russian state, while its closeness to the Great

Russians was derived from its adherence to the Orthodox Church and its sharing in the economic benefits of the all-Russian market. Bessarabia became the object of a nationalizing policy that transcended the realm of discourse and affected the practice of governing the imperial borderlands. World War I also triggered an upsurge in the interest for the “Bessarabian problem” in the Romanian Kingdom. The region’s “marginality” within the Romanian national discourse was overcome on several levels. First, Bessarabia became a potential object of diplomatic bargaining, which naturally drew the attention of the Romanian political elites to the region as a potential “compensation” for Romania’s adherence to the bloc of the Central Powers. Second, the polemics around Romania’s entry into the war produced several consistent accounts of the importance of the “Bessarabian question” for the Romanian establishment. Another feature distinguishing the neutrality period in Romania relates to the intensification of the openly “irredentist” activities of the “Cultural League” and to the appearance of specific organizations aimed at the reclaiming of the Bessarabian territory. However, this period also witnessed an open split between the “Transylvanian” and “Bessarabian” factions within the national-cultural movement. The competition over the priorities of the national expansion raged throughout the first half of the war. A final aspect relates to the emergence of the first Bessarabian initiatives concerning the province’s future in the changed post-war geopolitical context. These initiatives could be openly discussed only after the collapse of the imperial regime, when the conflict between federalist/autonomist and nationalist projects dominated the political debates on the local level.

*Rural immobility, ethnic continuity and national characterology: Bessarabia as a part of the Romanian national organism*

As stated above, the Romanian national narrative on the Russian-controlled province was more coherent than its imperial Russian counterpart. Though contested between the liberal-leftist, “statist” and conservative camps of the Romanian political establishment, the image of Bessarabia articulated in the Romanian Kingdom displayed a number of underlying common features that used rather similar techniques of symbolic appropriation. The consensus of the Romanian writings on Bessarabia before and during World War I rested upon the assumptions of the nation’s organic character that was contrasted to the artificial and transient essence of the neighboring imperial polities. In this sense, a contradictory and uneven image of the “imperial space” (as inherently torn between centrifugal and centripetal tendencies and displaying simultaneous features of military strength and internal structural weakness) prevailed. The opposites of the national unitary “organism” and the imperial “conglomerates” were thus complementary in many ways. The national discourse was also rather insecure with regard to the onset of modernity. While presenting the nation-state as its embodiment and vehicle, the Romanian intellectuals writing on Bessarabia rediscovered recurrent motives of national endurance and unchanging tradition that were directly responsible for the preservation of the “ethnic vitality” of the Romanian elements in the East. However, the generalization that such motives could be made instrumental exclusively for nation-building purposes would be inaccurate. The musings of Romanian writers about the “a-temporality” of the Bessarabian village or the superior traits of the locals’ “national character” were not so different from their Russian peers’ remarks on the uncorrupted and pristine nature of the Bessarabian “noble savage.” Bessarabia constituted an object of a peculiar variation of *internal Orientalism* both within the Romanian and the Russian discourses of collective identity. What differed fundamentally were the frames for political legitimacy of the two states and the ensuing implications for Bessarabia’s symbolic geography. The “nationalizing tendency” dominating late 19<sup>th</sup> century Russian

ethnography could thus fundamentally agree with the Romanian observers on the essentially immobile and patriarchal nature of the local peasantry while endowing this assertion with a starkly different political and cultural significance. This shows to what extent the results of any projects of political inclusion (including nation-building) are contingent on the relative success of the competing actors. In the Romanian case, the extolling of the presumable “ethnic vitality” of the Bessarabians was clearly in the eye of the beholder. However, a more detailed study of the emerging trend of “national pedagogy” and of the emphasis on “national character” (that was to reach its peak in interwar Romania) could shed new light on the relative importance of the eastern “borderland” for Romanian (mental) nation-building. It could also point to the common context of the Russian and Romanian visions of the self (and the Other) that played themselves out in the marginal Bessarabian setting.

*Bessarabia as a borderland: ambiguous loyalties and imperial legacies in the 20<sup>th</sup> century*

One of the major aims of this work (from the perspective of possible research avenues for the future) has been the elaboration of a new interpretation of the Bessarabian case from a “long-term” perspective. Being part of one of the “complex frontier regions” (CFRs) on the fault lines of the continental Eurasian empires, the area construed by the Russian Empire as a discrete territorial entity under the name of “Bessarabia” witnessed a number of phenomena characteristic for “borderland zones.” The major difference between the notion of “borderland” and its partial equivalent- “periphery”- stems primarily from the contested character of the territory in question and from the unstable nature of “belonging” that precludes the definitive inclusion of such places into the ordered space of an organized state. This “ambiguity of belonging” is visible both on a symbolic and on a material level. These two levels interacted in most peculiar ways and



ultimately constituted the “imperial legacies” that continue to influence the current situation in the region. The intertwining of the “material” component of imperial competition and the symbolic implications of the struggle over the borderlands was expressed, in the Bessarabian case, through several features:

*a. The process of state-sponsored and spontaneous colonization* tolerated or even actively promoted under the Russian imperial regime that radically altered the demographic structure of the area in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Rather than signaling a concerted effort at the “denationalization” of the province, the policy of inviting foreign settlers to the sparsely populated southern parts of the area had, in the eyes of the imperial center, a pragmatic dimension. It aimed at the transformation of an “uncultivated” borderland into a productive and rationally structured space. The ensuing demographic disparity between the southern “colonized” regions and the northern-central Romanian-dominated area was less a result of a systematic policy than a by-product of the imperial design to integrate an unstable and previously heavily fortified inter-imperial “military frontier” into the polity of the Romanovs. In effect, before their annexation by Russia, both the southern stretch of Bessarabia and the lands to the East, commonly known in the epoch as “New Russia,” had been a field of contention between the various conglomerates of steppe nomads and semi-sedentary warrior formations (mainly the Cossacks) and the emerging and consolidated states to their north and west (first the Moldavian Principality and Poland, to be later joined or replaced by the Ottoman and Russian Empires). The lengthy and active entanglement of the “eastern marches” of the Moldavian Principality into “steppe politics” (represented here either in the guise of the Nogai Tatars or the Crimean Khanate) are often dismissed or viewed in terms of military confrontations only. In fact, the prolonged cohabitation of nomadic and sedentary populations presupposed multiple tactics of accommodation and compromise while not excluding, of course, military conflict. The porous,

shifting and “transitional” character of this frontier territory was in the process of being changed by the intervention of the Russian centralizing and (partially) modernizing polity. In the Ottoman period the string of fortifications lined along the Dniester and the Danube transformed the entire zone into a rough analogy to the Habsburg “military frontier” (certainly, without any involvement of the local population or the “policing” ambitions of the Habsburg authorities). However, the “pacification” brought about by Russian conquest presupposed a new vision of the recently acquired land. The “transitional” nature of the Bessarabian space is revealed by the duality of the Russian discourse concerning it. While, on the one hand, the major part of the province was to be integrated into the Empire on the terms of a “liberated” territory inhabited by a fellow Orthodox people, the former expanse of the Budjak was clearly a “no man’s land” that had to be reclaimed for “civilization” and “progress.” The closest parallel, in this sense, can be provided by Russian policies in the “eastern borderlands” of the empire, where the steppe grasslands played the role of an “alien environment” that had to be “tamed.” Situated at the “edge of the Eurasian steppe” (in Willard Sunderland’s words), Bessarabia represented a primary area of state sponsored colonization as a part of the empire’s “social engineering” projects. The Russian state never aimed at imitating the Western concept of *terra nullius* (and certainly displayed no ambition to devise a comparable legal terminology). In practical terms, however, this region was the equivalent of a “desert” waiting to be populated and cultivated. The inherent duality of the official discourse reached its climax in the early XX century, when the “border” character of the Bessarabian *guberniia* acquired previously unknown meanings linked to the emergence of the Romanian national project which challenged the legitimacy of the Russian “imperial” narrative. Using the traditional historically-based arguments to prove the Russian “right” to rule Bessarabia, the officially sanctioned accounts of the province’s history emphasized at the same time the “pristine” state of the region prior to its inclusion into the imperial sphere.

*b. The (suspected or real) ambiguous loyalty* of the local inhabitants to the respective centers reclaiming their allegiance. After the “founding moment” of 1812, Bessarabia both lost its liminality (due to its “redemption” from the space of the “wild field” to which it purportedly belonged) and acquired a new kind of “frontier identity,” that was consolidated once the projects of incorporating the rest of the Romanian Principalities into the empire were abandoned. In the Romanian case, this region was also viewed ambiguously. It simultaneously belonged to the ideal “national body” and was suspect because of its century-long immersion into a politically and even “ontologically” alien space. The multi-ethnicity of the province (itself due to the transformation of the demographic landscape by the imperial authorities) was not always amenable to a neat inclusion into either of the competing (Romanian and Russian) “projects.” While in the Romanian case the problem might seem obvious, it was not so simple in the Russian one. The gradual undermining of the dynastic principle (that accepted and even extolled the empire’s multi-ethnicity as a fundamental element for its well-being and “glory”) led to the emergence of certain projects of “radical inclusion” of Bessarabia into the “Russian core” of the empire. However, this “inclusionary” (or, rather, exclusionary) discourse was challenged all along by the “moderate” or “bureaucratic” approach of the supporters of a traditional “imperial” tactics of accommodating local diversity. The terminological uncertainty and “contest” surrounding such controversial terms as *okraina* (“periphery,” sometimes with pejorative overtones) or *inorodtsy* (aliens) points to the unstable character of the loyalty of the local population to the central government. Constantly praised as a “bulwark of the throne and fatherland,” the inhabitants of the province (be they Romanians or other “aliens”) were nevertheless perceived as “potential traitors” once a major conflict would emerge. To give only two examples: A) the uncertain status of the Ismail district, which was ceded to Russia following the Berlin Treaty of 1878. The Russian officials were constantly preoccupied by the possible

“attraction” that the Romanian state could exercise upon this region. Curiously, the argument was not framed in “national” terms (the Romanians being a minority in this area), but in economic and “pragmatic-political” ones; B) the local “war panic” caused immediately after the outbreak of World War I by rumors of an imminent Romanian “invasion” of Bessarabia. The traditional logic of “struggle over the borderlands” (even if applied this time not to a hostile empire, but to a neighboring nation-state) continued to hold its salience in the early XX century.

c. *The “strategic” considerations of the Soviet leadership* (mostly under Stalin) that shaped the spatial and ethnic configuration of the Moldavian SSR after Bessarabia’s annexation by the Soviet state. The recurring theme of “Soviet expansionism” that purports to (and partly does) explain the creation of the MASSR and the role that the “Piedmont principle” played in this case fails to grasp the impact of traditional imperial patterns of thought upon the minds of the Soviet elite. The understanding of the “western borderlands” as a contested space influenced the geopolitical imagination of the Moscow decision-makers both before and during World War II. The extent to which such “imperial legacies” mingled with utopian revolutionary or purely “pragmatic” considerations in the Soviet leaders’ (and particularly Stalin’s) visions of space is debatable. Nevertheless, A. J. Rieber’s argument that what he calls “the civil wars in the Soviet Union” during this period in fact reflected long-standing patterns of imperial “borderland politics” is worth a close scrutiny<sup>1014</sup>. Stalin was clearly more attuned than most of his potential and actual rivals to the subtleties of “mastering the borderlands” (of which he was himself a representative), and his notorious involvement in the elaboration of the Soviet “nationalities policy” is the corollary of his interest in such matters. His constant apprehension regarding the “permeability” and vulnerability of the (western) borderlands of the USSR cannot be properly

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<sup>1014</sup> Alfred J. Rieber, “Civil Wars in the Soviet Union,” in: *KRITIKA. Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* (Vol. 4, Nr. 1, Winter 2003), pp. 129-162

assessed without taking into consideration the long-term patterns of Russian imperial “frontier policy.” Thus, the “War scare” that characterized the often paranoid atmosphere within the Soviet leadership in the late 1920s (and which is often invoked as an explanation for the oscillation between “hard” and “soft” policies of the center) cannot be reduced to the single trope of “capitalist encirclement.” The “western borderlands” (including Bessarabia) were viewed as hotbeds of resistance or objects of rival claims by various “projects” antagonistic to Russian empire-building at least starting from the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Aside from the aims of “exporting revolution” that had their impact in the calculations of the Bolshevik leadership, the traditional “imperial” perspective held its sway over important elements of the Soviet elite. This argument does not aim at postulating a straightforward “continuity” between the imperial and Soviet policies in the borderlands that had as many differences as there were similarities. It simply points to certain recurrent patterns or policy trends that shaped the “inner circle” of Soviet geopolitical interests within the multi-layered structure of Soviet foreign policy agendas in the inter-war period.

*d. The widespread practice of mass population displacements (deportations)* that was especially characteristic for the period of World War II and post-war years. The question that arises here involves the exact character of the deportations undertaken by the central authorities. The problem of “ethnic cleansing” is, by itself, a huge area for debate that I will not touch upon here. The “borderland” character of Bessarabia/the MSSR stemmed from the “unreliability” of the local population. This was one of the main presuppositions and policy determinants of the Soviet authorities. Such practices of forced population resettlement are customarily linked with the “totalitarian” nature of the regimes that dominated Europe for a large part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Indeed, the mass scale of such atrocities, as well as their class or racist justifications might lend credence to this view. However, what is often omitted are the antecedents that made collective

categorizations based on ethnic (or other socially bound) criteria possible. In fact, the Eurasian continental empires were pioneering agents of (limited) “ethnic cleansing” long before the emergence of totalitarian regimes. Matters of military security or political stability overrode ideological factors in this initial period. In the Russian case, two instances of state-sponsored “ethnic cleansing” stand out. The first is connected to the forced resettlement of the “Circassian” inhabitants of the Black Sea coast to the Ottoman Empire. This partly voluntary, but mainly forced resettlement took place at the behest of the Russian authorities, who feared the possible “subversive” actions of the Muslim population in the probability of a prospective war with the Ottoman or British Empires. The loyalty of the empire’s Caucasian subjects was suspicious “by default” due to the allegiance they owed to the caliph (i.e., the Ottoman sultan). The experience of the Crimean War, during which certain Caucasian tribes were perceived as collaborating with the British and French invading forces, strengthened the intolerance of imperial officials and secured the endorsement of the “resettlement” plan. The second, more systematic, example refers to the policies of the Russian government in the Western borderlands during World War I, when the Poles and the Jews became “unreliable elements” that needed to be removed as far as possible from the theater of military operations. Despite the somewhat “exceptional” character of this measure, it pointed to a tendency of directly linking ethnicity to “degrees of loyalty” to the empire. The contest for the borderlands thus acquired an additional impetus, since the control of the peripheries was crucial for the survival of the imperial regime. In the Soviet case, issues of class and “political loyalty” somewhat displaced ethnicity as the dominant category. However, in the deportations of the 1940s ethnicity and issues linked to the “reliability” of different “nationalities” played a prominent part. The ambiguity of the loyalty of the local Romanian population proved an important incentive for the repressive policies of the Soviet authorities.

“Population management” in the borderlands was complicated by the “fluidity of identities” that these areas traditionally exhibited.

### **Instead of an epilogue: autonomy, federalism or national unification (1917-1918)?**

The collapse of the imperial regime in March 1917 and the new opportunities created by the opening up of the political space throughout the former empire had an immediate effect on Bessarabia. The major cleavage that emerged at this time concerned the priority of the national or social aspect of the revolutionary transformation. Similarly to other borderlands of the Russian Empire and with a much greater intensity than was the case in 1905, the clash between the nationalizing and socializing agendas determined the broad lines of the political debate from March 1917 until March 1918. In more concrete terms, the first efforts aimed at a systematic politicization of the masses were undertaken. The actors that competed for the allegiance of the potential (mostly peasant) constituencies could be conventionally divided into the following categories: 1) the “revolutionary” tendency, represented by the local organizations of the Bolsheviks and Socialist Revolutionaries, which emphasized the “agrarian question” and the immediate redistribution of land property in the province. The effect of the combination of long-standing peasant grievances and the concerted propaganda of the “socializing agents” was to be felt in the massive eruption of peasant violence throughout 1917 culminating in a significant change in the patterns of land ownership which later had an important impact upon the terms of the agrarian reform in Bessarabia; 2) the “national activists,” grouped around the periodical *Cuvant Moldovenesc* and, later, the Moldavian National Party (MNP), founded in April 1917. However, this loosely defined “national movement” was far from unitary in its designs on the province’s future. Thus, if the more nationally conscious wing (headed by Pan Halippa and Ion

Pelivan) insisted from the outset upon the preeminence of the national-cultural aspect and partial political emancipation, the “Petrograd group” (based in the Russian capital and directly participating at the revolutionary events there) was much more reluctant to sever the links with the central government and upheld the primacy of social reforms (its main representatives who returned to Bessarabia in the summer of 1917 were P. Erhan and I. Inculeț); 3) the right-wing and monarchist currents were marginalized during the revolutionary period and failed to mobilize their adherents effectively, which showed to what extent the war context changed the locus of social power, but also how dependent these organizations were on state support. In what follows, I will briefly focus on the political imagination of the local actors in the revolutionary context and discuss their position towards Bessarabia’s symbolic belonging.

The local Bessarabian “voices” that finally emerged on the occasion of the intense debates about the province’s future within the insecure post-imperial space spoke primarily the idiom of “autonomy.” This *topos* could, however, be framed in starkly different terms depending on the context of its utterance, the target audience and the intended outcome. Thus, in early April of 1917 the program of the Moldavian National Party (the most outspoken organization on the field of national grievances) reclaimed the “broadest autonomy” for Bessarabia in the administrative, judiciary, ecclesiastical, educational and economic fields. The grounds invoked for the region’s new status stemmed from the precedent of the early-19<sup>th</sup>-century autonomist experiment, but also invoked the principle of “national self-determination.”<sup>1015</sup> The claim of a Moldovan historian that the leaders of the Moldavian National Party evolved from a “confederative scenario” towards a much more limited vision of “national-regional autonomy” seems doubtful, at best.<sup>1016</sup> In fact, the leaders of this organization oscillated between competing models of relationship to the central

<sup>1015</sup> Ion Calafeteanu and Viorica Moisuc (eds.). *Unirea Basarabiei și Bucovinei cu România, 1917-1918* [Bessarabia’s and Bukovina’s Unification with Romania, 1917-1918] (Chisinau: Hyperion, 1995), p. 26

<sup>1016</sup> Gh. Negru, p. 83



power for the whole of 1917. If anything, the radicalization of the initially moderate autonomist program derived from the uncontrollable dynamics of the Russian political scene. It can be argued that, as long as the hope of the restoration and consolidation of a stable government at the center persisted, the local Bessarabian leaders were securely anchored in the realm of the imagined space of the Russian state. This did not mean that the impact of federalist thought and a “contamination” by the mental models of restructuring of political space devised in the Habsburg Monarchy was negligible. In fact, the federalist model was, apparently, dominant among the Moldavian politicians at the time. The criteria for the future organization of the federal relationship were, however, hotly debated. A compromise had to be reached between the ethno-national principles promoted by the former and the territorial criteria preferred by the representatives of the other ethnic groups who feared the potential transformation of multi-ethnic Bessarabia into a “Moldavian” nation-state. Thus, during the discussions preceding the convocation of the local assembly (*Sfatul Tarii*), constituted through the co-optation of the representatives of local institutions, professional corporations and estates, one of the former employees of the Russian imperial administration asserted: “I know that you [Moldavian “separatists”] desire to create a nation-state in Bessarabia. This is the dream of the whole 19<sup>th</sup> century, but it failed in Great Russia, and you want to institute a nation-state here, in Bessarabia, which is so similar to Russia from the ethnographic point of view.”<sup>1017</sup> Here the clash between the vision of unitary Russian statehood and the restructuring of the former empire along ethno-national lines seems obvious. Still, such an opposition would be quite misleading. The local “nationalism” was anything but assertive and did not fundamentally challenge Bessarabia’s belonging to the symbolic sphere of the Russian space. The process of “nationalization” of a part of the Bessarabian intellectuals was fraught with ambiguities until the very eve of the decisive

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<sup>1017</sup> Negru, p. 96

events of 1918 leading to the region's integration into the Romanian Kingdom. One of the eloquent examples in this sense is provided by the official declaration of the autonomous "Moldavian Democratic Republic" by the "Sfatul Tarii" on December 2, 1917. This "foundational document" of Bessarabian autonomy ended by solemnly evoking "the common mother of all of us- the Great Russian Democratic Republic" (an already imaginary project by the time the declaration was issued).<sup>1018</sup> Ironically, just three and a half months after the event, the same assembly solemnly proclaimed the "perpetual union" of Bessarabia with its "mother-country"- Romania. What made it possible to turn the marginal project of "pan-Romanian" unification into a viable and realistic option by the spring of 1918?

Three main factors accounted for this momentous shift in the local political landscape. First, the prominent role played by the "Moldavian" military units in the nationalization of local politics should be considered. Partly as a result of the policy of introducing "national units" in the Russian army promoted by the Provisional Government and partly as a consequence of the self-organization of the soldiers' committees under the circumstances of the anarchy prevailing throughout the Romanian Front, the political awareness of the Bessarabian-born soldiers and officers sharply increased in the 1917 context. The Russian imperial army provided the hitherto absent environment for mass political inclusion. Aside from being attracted by the revolutionary parties' propaganda, the first signs of a national agenda among the troops were apparent as early as the spring of 1917. Intensified by the contact with the Romanian prisoners from the Austro-Hungarian units, a lively campaign among Bessarabian soldiers stationed in Kiev and Odessa was under way. The impact of the politicization of the military was soon felt in Bessarabia proper. Though the first articulated political programs were formulated at earlier assemblies of the co-operative movement, the peasants and the local teachers during April and May, 1917, the decisive

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<sup>1018</sup> Calafeteanu and Moisuc, p. 120

steps for the legitimization of local autonomy and the convocation of the *Sfatul Tarii* were taken during the Moldavian Military Congress held in Chisinau on October 20-27, 1917. On this occasion, the profound rifts between the nationalizing and socializing priorities of the different groups among the military were made apparent. The final resolution of the congress, which was in fact a compromise between the rival factions, declared Bessarabia's allegiance to the project of a Russian federative democratic republic of which the territory was to be a constituent part. The concrete terms of Bessarabia's "political and territorial" autonomy were to be deferred until the convocation of the Russian Constituent Assembly. Thus, the framework for political legitimacy still had its source in the presumable organ of a renewed and "democratic" Russian statehood. Two additional factors made this option impossible. The first was the declaration of autonomy and then independence of the Ukrainian state. The relations of the local Bessarabian administration and political circles with the Ukrainian Rada were rather tense due to the territorial claims that the Kiev government advanced first to the territories of the Hotin and Akkerman districts (where the "Ruthenians" were a sizable part of the population) and then to the whole Bessarabian territory. The rejection of these demands had the consensus of all the political parties in the region and clearly prompted the official declaration of autonomy in December 1917. Moreover, the existence of a Ukrainian political entity meant the severing of all direct links with the Petrograd government, which prompted even its adherents in Bessarabia to be more attuned to local realities. The second, and decisive, factor was linked to the disappearance of any legitimate government in the eyes of the Bessarabian elites after the Bolshevik seizure of power. Besides the local Bolsheviks, no part of the Bessarabian politically active population recognized the new government. Though the summoning of the Romanian troops to Bessarabia in January 1918 was initially a pure matter of military expediency and of restoration of public order, the option of unification with Romania was increasingly favored both by the propertied elements

(who addressed a petition to the Romanian King Ferdinand already in January 1918) and by the members of the local assembly, most of them belonging to the “political left.” Though the Romanian state was obviously wanting from the point of view of its social policies and political system, it offered the best alternative in comparison with a disintegrating Russian social and political space. The discourse of Romanian cultural and political unity was not absent in 1917 and early 1918. It was promoted both by the Bessarabian national activists and by other public figures (most notably, by the Transylvanian-born writer and journalist Onisifor Ghibu, whose memoirs and polemical writings convey one of the fullest and most compelling pictures of Bessarabian “reality” of the period). This discourse, however, was as marginal for political action as before 1917, until the evolutions of international politics prompted the Bessarabian elites to negotiate a compromise with the Romanian government in March 1918.

The Act of Union voted on March 27, 1918, represented in fact such a compromise. The 11 conditions stipulated in the document (guaranteeing extensive local self-government, the speedy application of a radical agrarian reform, concrete prerogatives in the financial, administrative and military fields) seem to indicate that the Bessarabian politicians envisaged a sort of federalist arrangement between the province and the center. Though the chances for the realization of this scenario were minimal (given the structure of the Romanian political system and the limited space for maneuver of the Bessarabian leaders), it is revealing for the sphere of their political imaginary. Far from being the predominant strand in the local politics of the period, the motive of national unification was one of the many options available to them (moreover, it only became the preferred option in early 1918). The incongruence between the sphere of discourse and that of political action, so characteristic for the Bessarabian case, was especially visible during 1917-1918. The horizon of expectation of the Bessarabian elites was much more indebted to immediate social concerns sparked by the revolutionary upheaval than to a coherent national Romanian

project. When finally allowed to display their “subjecthood,” the articulate strata among the Bessarabian Romanians defied the logic of the Russian and Romanian discourses that claimed their loyalty. By the end of 1918 this logic reasserted itself again. In its last act, the *Sfatul Tarii* voted the abolition of the conditions for the union, on November 27, 1918. Several days later, Greater Romania, a most improbable creation of the complex web of international politics after World War I, became reality. Bessarabia was thus wholly included in the Romanian nation-building project. The Russian-Romanian controversy entered a new phase that, in many ways, has not been completed even in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. This project attempted to show that its 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century antecedents should not be ignored.

In conclusion, Bessarabia provides an example of the entanglements, ambiguities and interconnections between discourses and practices of “nation” and “empire” that shape each other and also the fate of the populations inhabiting the physical and “symbolic” borderlands between polities that define themselves on the basis of opposing legitimizing principles. However, I also attempted to show that the population of the “borderlands” may, at certain moments, develop its own agency or react to “central” policies in ways unforeseen by their proponents. Most importantly, the legacies of empire (and nation) are present and constantly renegotiated in societies that have been constructed and imagined with the instruments provided by their previous history as much as by their prospects for the future. Whether today’s inhabitants of “Bessarabia” will be able to construct something durable out of the materials at hand, or whether they will be continually plagued by the “specter of history” (and of empire) still remains an open question.

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