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## THE ROOTS AND EARLY DEVELOPMENT OF MOLDOVAN-ROMANIAN NATIONALISM IN BESSARABIA (1900-1917)

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**Abstract.** A study of Moldovan national consciousness is necessary for understanding Bessarabia. Outside the former Soviet Union, it has been almost generally accepted by Romanians and by Western experts that Moldavians are not ethnically distinct from Romanians.

In this paper, I have dealt with how the Moldovan national movement appeared and became a mass phenomenon. The “old” and weak national movement, pre-modern and aristocratic before 1900, can be said to have given way to the modern national movement of “commoners”, especially intellectuals, which emerged around 1905. Even this movement was rather weak before the Russian Revolution of 1917. A large majority of the Moldovan-speaking people felt that they were ethnic “Moldovans” rather than “Romanians” throughout the period, with the percentage of the latter increasing over time. One might be surprised that most Moldovans voted for autonomist platforms in the elections of 1917 if he would look at literacy and other “development” statistics and at the weakness of the Moldovan national movement; it is clear that the strength of pre-existing proto-nationalism is key in the process of determining the growth of the national movement.

**Key words:** Moldovan national identity, “old” Moldovan national movement, “new” Moldovan national movement.

Bessarabia, the historical province between the Prut and Dniester rivers, is undoubtedly one of the most mysterious and underresearched areas in the former Russian Empire (or Eastern Europe). The issue of Moldovan/Romanian nationalism is undoubtedly more interesting and controversial than most topics connected with Bessarabia. In this paper, I will try to evaluate, almost exclusively on the basis of secondary sources, the nature and strength of the Moldovan national movement before the Bolshevik Revolution in the fall of 1917. How nationalistic were the masses? How much mass support did the nationalist movement get, and

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from whom? What was the nature, and what were the divisions of the national movement? How much Moldovan-Romanian nationalism was “Moldovan”, and how much was “Romanian”? How should one place Moldovan nationalism in relation to the agrarian question and the Russian Revolutions of 1905-1907 and 1917? What were the strong points and pitfalls of the various historiographical and sociological treatments of the problem? How did Moldovan reality fit in the framework of a number of studies on nationalism, and Russia during that particular period of time?

A study of Moldovan national consciousness is necessary for understanding Bessarabia. Outside the former Soviet Union, it has been almost generally accepted by Romanians and by Western experts that Moldavians are not ethnically distinct from Romanians. This is no longer denied by most post-Soviet authors, and especially by Moldovan historians. The Bessarabian Moldovan idiom, “Moldovan”, diverges from standard Romanian only in terms of differences of dialect and accent. However, if one uses Walter Feldman’s terminological framework, there is, and there has been throughout history, a very large population of Romanian “nationality” with a “Moldovan” “nationality consciousness”.<sup>1</sup>

Overall, Romanian scholarship has argued that historically all ethnic Romanians (including the Bessarabian Moldovans) have thought of themselves as Romanians. Soviet sources have argued that the process of the formation of the Moldovan nation was ended in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. The truth is, of course, more complicated. Since at least the 13<sup>th</sup> to 15<sup>th</sup> centuries, in the principality of Moldova, in addition to a Romanian identity shared by a minority of the population, including (but not only) members of the aristocratic and intellectual elites, there was a Moldovan identity shared by most people, who thought that they were part of the “Moldovan people”.<sup>2</sup> Historically, many individuals seem to have shared both identities. Each one of them had different degrees of salience (and meaning) in comparison with the other one for different groups of people.<sup>3</sup> During the period of Russian rule in Bessarabia, which lasted from 1812 to 1917, the survival of the Moldovan identity was caused by traditionalism, plus the isolation, backwardness, repressive character and Russification policies of the Tsarist Empire.

In any case, according to the most prominent conservative Russian Bessarabian landlord, politician and anti-Romanian activist, A.W. Krupensky, probably

<sup>1</sup> Walter Feldman, “The Theoretical Basis for the Definition of Moldavian Nationality”, in Ralph S. Clem (ed.), *The Soviet West: Interplay Between Nationality and Social Organization*, (New York, Praeger Publishers, 1975), p. 47-48.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Vlad Georgescu, *The Romanians*, (Columbus; Ohio State University Press, 1991), p. 15-16, 18, 41-42, 67, 70-71, Dimitrie Cantemir, *Descriptio Moldaviae*, (București; Editura Academiei Republicii Socialiste România, 1973), p. 298-299, 337-341, etc., *Cronica Ghiculeștilor*, (București, Editura Academiei Republicii Socialiste România, 1965), and Radu Popescu, *Istoriile Domnilor Țării Românești*, (București, Editura Academiei Republicii Populare Române, 1963), Ionas Rus, “Românii și Minoritarii în Basarabia Interbelică”, in *Revista de Istorie a Moldovei*, (Chișinău, Știința, 1994), no. 1 (17), January-March 1994, p. 29-30, and Ionas Aurelian Rus, *Self-Determination, Moldovan-Romanian Nationalism, and Nationality Conflict in Bessarabia, 1900-1940*, Henry Rutgers Thesis, History and Political Science Departments, April 1995, p. 9-11, and *passim*.

<sup>3</sup> See Dimitrie Cantemir, *Descriptio Moldaviae*, p. 298-299, 337-341, 365-367, Mihai Canciovi, *Domnitori Români în Legende*, (Editura Sport-Turism, 1984), and Octav Paun and Silviu Angelescu, *Legende Populare Românești*, (București, Editura Albatros, 1983) and my two works cited above.

developed in 1917-1918 or before that, 48.2% of Bessarabia's population was "Moldovan" and 21% "Romanian".<sup>4</sup> Of course, the percentages are not wholly accurate because the Moldovans/Romanians, officially counted as "Moldovans" represented 47.6% of the province's population according to the Russian census of 1897. Even adjusting for Russification, the Moldovans represented, according to the research of a Soviet scholar, only 52.1% of Bessarabia's population.<sup>5</sup> In any case, Krupensky's estimate that most Moldovan-Romanians of Bessarabia thought of themselves as "Moldovans" at the beginning of the twentieth century is accurate and corroborated by various Romanian estimates.

The Moldavian-Romanian nationalist movement (a term which refers to networks and groups of Moldovan-Romanians, some of whom had a predominantly "Romanian", and some of whom had a "Moldovan", identity and nationalism) was initially very weak. It did not involve the peasant masses (who formed more than 90% of the Moldovan population) for a long period of time. This was the situation between 1812 (the year when Russia annexed Bessarabia, mostly from Moldova, and the south-eastern and extreme northern parts, from the Ottoman Empire) and around 1900. It was so partly because of the repressive Russification of the church, school and administration, and the end of the use of Moldovan for any public functions. Perhaps even more importantly, it happened this way because of the pre-political, pre-activist frame of mind of the serf peasants and their descendants, and, to a lesser extent, of the other non-noble sections of the population. This mentality did not start to slowly wither away until the beginning of the twentieth century.<sup>6</sup> Up to the last decade of the nineteenth century, the only politically-minded and politically-activised group was the landed aristocracy.<sup>7</sup>

Demographics also played a role. A Soviet scholar, V. Zelenchuk, shows on the basis of Russian archival data, that in 1817, Moldovans formed 78.2% of the population of the province, 58.2% in 1835, and in 1858, 51% (or 54.9%, if one includes Russified Moldovans, in 1859) of all the Bessarabians.<sup>8</sup> In other words, the proportion of Moldovans was lower than most official Russian imperial estimates, and the Romanian sources which used these numbers, alleged. The demographic change is explained by the colonization of the province (especially up to the 1860's) with, or other forms of immigration into the province of, Russians, Ukrainians, Germans, Bulgarians, Gagauzi, Jews, etc., as well as by the Russification of Moldovans.

The Moldovan national movement in the nineteenth century has been dealt with only in Romanian sources. Throughout the nineteenth century, some members

<sup>4</sup> A.W. Krupensky, *Bessarabie*, (Paris, 1920), cited in Ioan Scurtu, Constantin Hlihor, 1940. *Drama Românilor dintre Prut și Nistru*, (București, Editura Academiei de Înalte Studii Militare, 1992), p. 145.

<sup>5</sup> Michael Bruchis, *The USSR: Language and Realities — Nations, Leaders, and Scholars*, (Boulder, Colorado, East European Monographs, 1988), p. 276-278.

<sup>6</sup> Consult, among others, Prince Serge Dimitriyevich Urussov, *Memoirs of a Russian Governor*, (London; Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1908), and Grigore Constantinescu, "Din Vremuri Tariste", in Iurie Colesnic, *Basarabia Necunoscută*, (Chișinău, Universitas, 1993), p. 35-36.

<sup>7</sup> Consult Prince Serge Dimitriyevich Urussov, and Iurie Colesnic, *Basarabia Necunoscută*, (Chișinău, Universitas, 1993), p. 35-36, 250.

<sup>8</sup> Michael Bruchis, *The USSR: Language and Realities — Nations, Leaders, and Scholars*, p. 276-278.

of the Moldovan aristocracy very much desired, and sometimes agitated for, a number of things. They demanded the greater use of the Moldovan (as opposed to Russian) language in the public sphere, for political autonomy for Bessarabia and, in the case of some isolated individuals throughout the period, for union with the other Romanian-inhabited areas in a Romanian national state.<sup>9</sup> In 1862-1867, the nationally-minded sections of the Moldovan nobility united in a loosely-structured, small "Party of the Moldovan Boyars".<sup>10</sup> In the repressive conditions of the Russian empire and with the banishing of the Moldovan language from education and the church which started in the 1860's and 1870's, nationalism switched from being both political and cultural to being only cultural. National organizations disappeared.

There is a universal consensus that many Moldavian nobles and city people became completely or partly Russified, even before the 1860's. Nevertheless, the view of a number of Romanian and Western scholars, including the Romanian nationalist historian and politician Ion Nistor, that most Moldovan nobles had switched to using Russian as their mother tongue, is false. According to various Romanian and Western scholarly works, the nobility of Moldovan descent represented 28.6%, 29.5% or 34.7% of the Bessarabian nobility.<sup>11</sup> Seymour Becker's study on the Russian nobility shows that 22% of all the Bessarabian nobles used "Moldovan" as their native language. Most Bessarabian nobles used Russian as their mother-tongue, but 63-77% of those of Moldovan descent (or even more) were Moldovan-speaking. It would be more fair to say that most Moldovan nobles believed that Russian should be used in public affairs, and Moldovan in family, colloquial and local discussions.<sup>12</sup>

Russification did not make any significant inroads into the great mass of the Moldovans because of the latter's peasant traditionalism and inertia, and even more saliently, medieval-style ethnic identity, pride and xenophobia. Historians such as Ion Nistor note some examples of this. For example, during the 1860's there were a few unsuccessful petitions signed by peasants who de facto demanded that the switch from Moldovan to the Russian language in teaching in the village schools, which was taking place during that decade, be reversed. The petitioners also demanded more Moldovan-language schools.<sup>13</sup> However, the only form of widespread militant fight against Russification during the nineteenth century was the smuggling (and reading) of Romanian books, but even this was an informal grass-roots rather than organized effort, which, of course, involved only a small minority of the population.

<sup>9</sup> See Ștefan Ciobanu, *Basarabia: Populația, Istoria, Cultura*, (Chișinău, Știința, 1992), p. 47-60. Also consult Ion Nistor, *Istoria Basarabiei*, (București, Humanitas, 1991) and Alexandru V. Boldur, *Istoria Basarabiei*, (București, Editura Victor Frunza, 1992), p. 454-455.

<sup>10</sup> See Ștefan Ciobanu, p. 58-60, 95-97 and Alexandru V. Boldur, p. 395-398. Also consult Ion Nistor.

<sup>11</sup> See Alexandru V. Boldur, p. 538, Ifor L. Evans, *The Agrarian Revolution in Roumania*, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1924), p. 171, Charles Upson Clark, *Bessarabia: Russia and Roumania on the Black Sea*, (New York, Dodd, Mead & Company, 1927), p. 111.

<sup>12</sup> The data are from Seymour Becker, *Nobility and Privilege in Late Imperial Russia*, (DeKalb, Illinois, Northern Illinois University Press, 1985), p. 185.

<sup>13</sup> See Ion Nistor, *passim*.

A number of ethnic Romanian scholars, including Andrei Popovici and myself, have argued that the Russification process failed, and that this compelled the Russian authorities to make a few concessions.<sup>14</sup> This was undoubtedly partially true, but a Romanian sociological study by D. Dogaru of the village of Napadeni, a village of formerly free peasants of mostly aristocratic descent, who were classed by the Russian authorities as small nobles, presents a somewhat different picture. These people were always Romanian-speaking, but at least the peasant-nobles believed that knowledge of Russian made one a “distinguished” man.<sup>15</sup> Although this phenomenon has not been noted by historians, it is clear that a minority of the Moldovans took Russian-style first and second-name forms (e.g. “Nikolai Ivanovich” instead of the Moldovan “Nicolae Ion”) or Russian nicknames/abbreviations such as “Vania”.<sup>16</sup>

Many students learned very little in the Russian schools because of their lack of knowledge of the Russian language. The use of Russian in education also accounts for why fewer rural Moldovans went to school, which explains why, according to Keith Hitchins, the number of village schools in Bessarabia plummeted from 400 (with 7,000 students) in the mid-1860’s, to only 23 in 1880.<sup>17</sup> Whatever literacy existed among the Moldovans was often only in the Moldovan language, and, as C.U.Clark notes, the Russian authorities found it necessary to print “emergency” information about epidemics, plant diseases, etc., in Moldovan all throughout the Russian period.<sup>18</sup> The Russian authorities felt compelled to permit Moldavian to be used again in church activities in 1900.<sup>19</sup>

The national movement emerged in 1898, 1901, 1903 or 1905 (according to the chronologies of Ion Nistor, Alexandru Boldur, Keith Hitchins<sup>20</sup>, etc.). I would argue that Hitchins’ definition of a national movement is more restrictive than the others. His conceptualization of “a Moldavian national political movement, or even a political party”, which “did not exist before 1905”<sup>21</sup> does not include the underground small, but modern, nationalistic group of Bessarabian Moldovan students in the Ukraine, and even in Bessarabia, before 1905.

During the 1905-1907 Russian Revolution, many (though, because of passivity, not most) Moldovans clearly demonstrated their opposition to Russification, and their desire for cultural and territorial autonomy. Even more peasants showed that they wanted more land from the mostly city-living absentee landowners, who happened to be overwhelmingly Russian or Russified.

The various Moldovan nationalist currents which were emerging during the 1905-1907 revolution were not united, as Nistor notes. The “Moldavian Cultural Society”, a continuation of noble nationalism, demanded the end of Russification,

<sup>14</sup> See Andrei Popovici, *The Political Status of Bessarabia*, (Washington, D.C., School of Foreign Service, Georgetown University, 1931), and Ionas Rus, “Românii și Minoritarii în Basarabia Interbelică”.

<sup>15</sup> Dumitru Dogaru, “Năpădenii, Un Sat de Mazili din Codru”, in *Sociologie Românească*, Year 2, no. 7-8, July-August, 1937, p. 297.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> Keith Hitchins, *Romania, 1866-1947*, (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1994), p. 245.

<sup>18</sup> Charles Upson Clark, *Bessarabia*, p. 80-81.

<sup>19</sup> Andrei Popovici, p. 105-106.

<sup>20</sup> See Ion Nistor, *passim.*, Alexandru Boldur, *passim.*, and Keith Hitchins, p. 249.

<sup>21</sup> Keith Hitchins, p. 249.

and teaching in Moldovan. The nationalism of this group was, as one can see from its program and activities, cultural rather than political.

The Democratic Moldavian Party, founded by the lawyer Emanuel Gavrilita and which included, as Alexandru Boldur and some newer research show, mostly current or former students of the Theological Seminary of Kishinev (Chişinău), the provincial capital. Iurie Colesnic argues (I think convincingly in view of the few dozen cases of important activists whose lives are discussed in his work and other sources) that these young people of rural origin, mostly the sons of priests and deacons, absorbed in the villages, as children, a Moldovan ethnic consciousness.<sup>22</sup> However, I believe that they absorbed an activist frame of mind, which allowed them to act on their beliefs, not from the villages, but from more modern realities and forces. This group included numerous people with an emerging "Romanian" national consciousness.<sup>23</sup> It obtained the support of a number of priests, teachers, other intellectuals, and peasants, especially younger ones. It demanded education in Moldovan, land reform, Bessarabian autonomy, universal suffrage and the creation of a cooperative movement.<sup>24</sup> The leadership and activists of the group were, like their Ukrainian counterparts, mostly Social Revolutionaries in sympathies according to Alexandru Boldur.

The program of this nationalist group, more than that of the aristocratic nationalists, is consistent with Miroslav Hroch's model of the fight of the nationally-activated population in "small nations" (even though the Bessarabian Moldovans do not fit perfectly in the category of "small nations" under "foreign" rule as described by Hroch). He believes that these nationalistic movements fought for "equal rights, national language and culture, for a share in economic prosperity, for social liberation and political autonomy", which is certainly true of the Moldovan movement.<sup>25</sup>

For a time, the Russian authorities allowed the publishing of various Moldavian newspapers (including one in Latin characters, as in Romania). They also permitted the introduction of teaching in Romanian at the theological seminary, and at a high school in the provincial capital of Kishinev (Chişinău in Romanian).<sup>26</sup> In 1905, a church congress decided that Moldovan could again be used for preaching in the villages, after a formal interdiction of such practices for a few decades. But after that, during the period of reaction that started in 1906-1908, the authorities tried to minimize the open manifestations of Moldovan nationalism and to roll back some of these Moldovan gains.

It is rather clear, as I have argued elsewhere, that the politicized Moldovan national movement of 1905-1907 was still rather weak.<sup>27</sup> It was not able to get its members elected to the Russian Duma (parliament). In 1905-1907, some

<sup>22</sup> Iurie Colesnic, p. 250.

<sup>23</sup> R. W. Seton-Watson, *A History of the Romanians*, (Archon, 1962), p. 563.

<sup>24</sup> Andrei Popovici, p. 113, 116-117.

<sup>25</sup> Miroslav Hroch, "How Much Does Nation Formation Depend on Nationalism?" in *East European Politics and Societies*, (University of California Press), vol. 4, No. 1, p. 109-113.

<sup>26</sup> Hugh Seton-Watson, *The Decline of Imperial Russia*, (New York; Frederick A. Praeger Publishers, 1969), p. 235.

<sup>27</sup> See Ionas Rus, "Românii și Minoritarii în Basarabia Interbelică", p. 30-31.

grievances were expressed through meetings and mass petitions to the Tsar for land and national linguistic rights (like the ones convened in a few localities). Nevertheless, in numerous, possibly most villages, people were not concerned with things beyond the village level, as the study by the Romanian interwar sociologist T. Al. Știrbu of the village of Valenii would seem to indicate.<sup>28</sup> Therefore, no activity in favor of Moldovan nationalism or the Moldovan language took place during the period of Russian rule in them.

Only a minority of the agrarian discontent was channeled towards the national movement, which was demanding land reform. Most rural discontent manifested itself in spontaneous agrarian unrest. The non-nationalistic character of the agrarian strife would seem to indicate that most peasants found their Moldovan identity relevant only in terms of language, traditions and culture, not in the political and social arenas.

The aristocratic cultural nationalists were opposed to land reform. So, as the Romanian historian Ion Nistor emphasizes, the Moldovan nobles made common front with Russian conservative forces, apparently driven by their class interests. This would indicate that social and political factors were more important in shaping their attitudes than their nationalism, which was in any case cultural rather than political-autonomist.

It is not clear whether 1905-1907 represented the “breakthrough” for the national movement. The work of the Romanian interwar historian Alexandru Boldur contains statistical data showing that a small (though, one could argue, increasing) number of non-nationalist Moldovan deputies were elected among the nine Bessarabians sent to the various Dumas. There were no Bessarabian Moldovans in the 1906 first Duma. There was one in the February 1907 second Duma, one in the third Duma of November 1, 1907, and two in the fourth Duma of 1912.<sup>29</sup> It is possible that, even in Russia’s system of unequal suffrage, and not altogether free and fair elections, the Moldovan population’s electoral choices were increasingly discriminating along the ethnic line.

In 1913, a newspaper which represented a common nationalist front of some nobles, and especially members of the radical group of 1905, including both laymen and priests, appeared. It was called *Cuvânt Moldovenesc* (Moldovan Word). It was the first Moldovan endeavor in which nobles and non-nobles came together. The nucleus of the Moldovan-Romanian national movement consolidated itself around this newspaper.<sup>30</sup>

Nistor argues that in 1905 (and, it would appear, also in 1917), most nationalist activists were not the descendants of serfs, but the educated sons of clergymen, and to a lesser extent, of the old estates of market-town dwellers and free peasants. I would tend to think that his use of class or estate is to some extent misleading because there were comparatively few, if any, nationalists before 1917-1918 who were descended from the old market-town dwellers. Moreover,

<sup>28</sup> T. Al. Știrbu, “Valenii de Lângă Prut”, in *Sociologie Românească*, Year 3, October-December 1938, p. 521.

<sup>29</sup> Alexandru V. Boldur, p. 377-378.

<sup>30</sup> See Onisifor Ghibu, *Pe Baricadele Vieții în Basarabia Revoluționară (1917-1918)*, (Chișinău, Editura Universitat. 1992), Alexandru V. Boldur, and Iurie Colesnic, etc.



the students (or former students) of the Kishinev theological seminary were social-revolutionary nationalist activists because of their social position as students or budding intellectuals rather than because of who their parents were.

One observes the comparative lack of importance of the industrial and commercial bourgeoisie and proletariat in national activism. The role of industrialization, which Miroslav Hroch and Ernest Gellner emphasize as a factor in the development of nationalism<sup>31</sup>, was totally unimportant in Bessarabia, at least among Moldovans. By 1900, as Edward H. Judge shows in his study of the famous 1903 anti-Jewish pogrom in Kishinev (in which, like in the 1905-1907 pogroms throughout Bessarabia, the participants included Russians, Moldovans, Ukrainians, etc.), commercial and other business positions were occupied overwhelmingly by Jews. They formed more than 80% of the merchants of the province, and three fourths of all the industrialists of the provincial capital, Kishinev.<sup>32</sup> By 1900, there were also very few Moldovan proletarians, bureaucrats, or urban inhabitants in general. At the turn of the century, 37.2% of all urban people were Yiddish-speakers, 24.4% were Russian-speakers, 15.8% spoke Ukrainian, and only 14.2% Moldovan.

Roman Szporluk's category of nations without a modern economy, where nevertheless nationalism is developing in the area of civil society/culture is useful for understanding the case of the Bessarabian Moldovans.<sup>33</sup> One has to agree that the Eastern European pattern postulated by Szporluk, that nationalism first appeared in the area of culture is applicable to the Bessarabian Moldovans, especially in the area of print culture.<sup>34</sup> This is true in terms of "cultural" nationalism, with its "journalistic" connections. The previously-noted evidence shows that his emphasis on the role of schooling (for the "studious youth" which was enrolled in the national movement), newspapers, and (sometimes smuggled) books is to some extent accurate.<sup>35</sup> However, Szporluk, Gellner, Hroch and other analysts (though not Ronald Grigor Suny) tend not to discuss, and to de facto ignore, the existence of ethnic identities, and of pre-modern mass proto-nationalisms, among the popular masses since the Middle Ages. These "ethnocentric" realities would transform into genuinely modern nationalism at the time when the masses would later be mobilized or activated, and politicized.

During the first part of World War I, the newspaper *Cuvânt Moldovenesc* ("Moldovan Word") marginally helped the national cause. After the fall of Tsarism on March 12, 1917, the Moldovan nationalist movement reemerged politically in the form of the Moldovan National Party (PNM) on April 3rd. Its party committee and activists included prominent figures from the 1905-1907 generation, and people of various social classes, including peasants. The party's newspaper was *Cuvânt Moldovenesc*, and the party demanded the use of Moldovan

<sup>31</sup> See, for example, Miroslav Hroch, p. 106 and Ernest Gellner, "The Dramatis Personae of History", *East European Politics and Societies*, (University of California Press), vol. 4, No. 1, 126-127, 131.

<sup>32</sup> Edward H. Judge, *Easter in Kishinev: Anatomy of a Pogrom*, (New York: New York University Press, 1992), p. 26.

<sup>33</sup> Roman Szporluk, "In Search of the Drama of History: or, National Roads to Modernity", in *East European Politics and Societies*, (University of California Press), vol. 4, no. 1, p. 141-144, 146.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 141-143.

<sup>35</sup> See *Ibid.*, p. 146.

in education, the church and administration, and an autonomous Bessarabia, a mostly Moldovan state or polity.

Although traditional scholarship has presented the PNM as a very popular party, indeed as the party which included most Moldovan nationalists and obtained the support of large numbers of Moldovans, I would argue that this was not the case. One of its weaknesses was the fact that the party was accused of being in favor of union with Romania by Russocentric anti-autonomist, mostly non-Moldovan revolutionaries. PNM was also accused by groups more leftist than itself (like the Socialist Revolutionaries) of not being radical or revolutionary enough on issues of social reform (especially land reform, that is, the giving of land to the peasants without compensation).<sup>36</sup>

Moldovan nationalism and the option of union with Romania had the support of only a small minority of even the Moldovans according to a Romanian sociologist who investigated the attitudes of the Moldovan soldiers on the Romanian front during the period.<sup>37</sup> For most of them, their community of language with other ethnic Romanians did not have too much significance, and did not indicate a common nationality. The people felt that they were “Moldovans”, not “Romanians”, and did not find anything unnatural in living under Russian rule.<sup>38</sup> There is universal agreement that many articulate and less articulate Bessarabians, including some Moldovans, were anti-unionist partly because Romania was seen as an undemocratic country ruled by landlords who owned most of the land.

The Soviet of Deputies of the Peasants (SDT), which is still a mysterious group, and which has been largely ignored by Romanian and Western scholarship despite its great importance, was an officially non-partisan group of people originating from various political parties. Its most important activists had been elected by the peasants in the provincial peasant Soviet. These people would eventually put forward an electoral list for the elections for the Russian Constituent Assembly in late 1917. SDT included among its foremost personalities popular and well-known more or less Socialist Revolutionary Moldovan nationalist leaders and activists. SDT was in favor of the restoration of Moldovan Bessarabian autonomy (like in 1812-1828), which explains the conflict between SDT and the SR's. There is widespread scholarly acceptance of the view that land reform was somewhat more important for the party than Moldovan nationalism. In any case, it is an accepted fact that the Bessarabian peasants had seized 2/3 of the arable surface of the landed estates from March 1917 until the end of the year. The desires of the SDT leaders, and of its overwhelmingly Moldovan peasant constituents, caused the group to adhere to the program of the National Moldovan Party, including in its demands for Bessarabian autonomy, but with more radical plans for land reform than the PNM.

The SDT was widely regarded as being led mostly by “Moldovan nationalists” (some of whom had a “Romanian” national consciousness) and as being almost

<sup>36</sup> Gheorghe Cojocaru, “Cu Privire la Problema Adunării Constituante în Basarabia în anul 1917”, part 1, in *Revista de Istorie a Moldovei*, (Chișinău, Știința, 1991), no. 2(6) for 1991 (April-June).

<sup>37</sup> Dumitru Dogaru, p. 297.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

a Moldovan peasant party. However, as some recent research done in Moldova shows, unlike the PNM, it was not regarded as, or accused of, being in favor of Bessarabia's union with Romania, despite the past desires for such a union of some of its leaders. It was accused only of having some reactionary nationalist leaders.<sup>39</sup> The mostly false accusations of reactionarism did not stick, and the "reactionary nationalist" SDT leaders were apparently the most popular politicians. The party's calls for Bessarabian autonomy, which were convenient for the Moldovan majority in the province, and were well-received among that native population, were hardly supported by any non-Moldovan descendants of the colonists who settled in Bessarabia during the Tsarist period. This guaranteed that SDT would get very few non-Moldovan votes. Some Ukrainians who had been natives of northern Bessarabia for centuries voted for SDT, but the ethnonational rift between SDT and the SR's can not be doubted.

After the overthrow of the Tsars, the Moldovan population, or, more exactly, a large part of it, through its political mass mobilization, achieved for itself the national linguistic rights which the national movement was demanding (the use of Moldovan in education and the church, etc.). It was increasingly agitating in favor of autonomy. Elected peasants', teachers' and priests' congresses, cooperative congresses, a number of grass-roots village assemblies, etc., proclaimed their support for not only the use of Moldovan in public functions, but also for Bessarabian autonomy. There was even ethnic friction, which partly explains the creation of the SDT political group. In the first (multiethnic rather than Moldovan) peasant congress, the Moldovans felt insulted by the other ethnic groups, and left the Congress until concessions were made to them in the area of ethnic rights. The PNM activists were also able to make more Moldovans identify themselves as Romanians.

Pro-autonomy rallies, in which thousands of people (mostly soldiers and peasants) participated, took place. On October 20/November 2, 1917, there was a meeting of the Military Committee. This body represented not 300,000 Bessarabian soldiers, as most scholars have believed, but slightly less than 100,000, because each of the 989 delegates to the committee were selected either one delegate by one hundred soldiers, or two by one hundred officers.<sup>40</sup> In fact, the number 300,000 probably refers to the entire adult male population 18 to 60 years old. The body decided that a local parliament or diet, Sfatul Țării ("The Council of the Country"), should rule an autonomous Bessarabia.

For the elections for the All-Russian Constituent Assembly held in November 1917, we have three published sets of statistics. One set was published by Oliver Radkey in his updated study of the Russian Revolution, which covers a minority of Bessarabia's population on the basis of the calculations of the Soviet historian Afteniuk (who is well known for his polemics against pro-Romanian studies dealing with Bessarabia). Another set includes the partial, detailed results whose

<sup>39</sup> Gheorghe Cojocaru, "Cu Privire la Problema Adunării Constituante în Basarabia în anul 1917", part 2, in *Revista de Istorie a Moldovei*, (Chișinău; Știința, 1991), no. 3 (7) for 1991 (April-June), p. 18.

<sup>40</sup> Wim P. Van Meurs. *The Bessarabian Question in Communist Historiography: Nationalist and Communist Politics and History Writing*, (Columbia University Press; East European Monographs, 1994), p. 59.

accuracy has been proven, and which have been published in *Revista de Istorie a Moldovei* ("Moldovan History Review") by G. Cojocaru. They cover almost two-thirds of Bessarabia's voters, but do not include the votes of the soldiers. There are also allegedly complete results published by the Soviet author G. Ustinov in the interwar period, which seem plausible enough since they tend to be corroborated by the other data. Although Radkey does not indicate the districts for which he has the data, one realizes (after playing with the numbers) that the Moldovan numbers apparently includes the districts covered by Radkey's data, plus some new electoral new statistics. However, one can not be completely sure because of some discrepancies in connection with the numbers, so I will also include Radkey's figures. Finally, I will also include my own calculations in which I will add the military votes to the civilian votes of G. Cojocaru, thereby including all the reliably counted ballots cast in Bessarabia.

According to the Moldovan set of data, between a little over 40% of all adult men and women, or over 60% according to the second Ustinov set, participated in the election.<sup>41</sup> For the districts where the rate of turnout is known, 52.4% of the eligible voters participated in the elections.<sup>42</sup>

According to my calculations on the basis of the various sets of data, the National Moldovan Party won 2.2%-2.3% of vote (2.6% according to Radkey's data, and 2.1% according to my numbers). The province's list of the Soviet of Deputies of the Peasants, whose votes were almost exclusively Moldovan, won 36.7% of the reliably counted votes according to the Moldovan historians, 35.3% according to my numbers, one-third of the total according to the Soviet interwar source, and only 27.2% according to Radkey's data. The two predominantly Moldovan parties obtained about 42.5% of all the rural civilian votes tabulated by Cojocaru, and 38.9%, 35.7% and 37.5% of all the votes according to the Moldovan, Soviet, and, respectively, my, numbers. The votes for the SDT came from the rural areas where peasant holdings were of particularly small size. The greatest mass land seizures by the peasantry largely coincide territorially with support for the SDT.

One has to take into account the fact that the Moldovans represented about 52.1% of the population. On the basis of the county by county, and locality-by-locality electoral and ethnic distribution and turnout figures, to the extent to which they are available, it would appear that a clear and undeniable majority of the Moldovan voters cast their ballots for the two autonomist lists. However, less than 1/5 (indeed 1/10) of the urban Moldovan vote went for these two lists.

One-fourth or less of all the Bessarabian civilian Ukrainian voters supported a left-wing nationalist party, the Ukrainian Socialist Party, which won 4% of the vote according to Cojocaru, 4.1% according to my numbers, and 1.7% according to Radkey. The Socialist Revolutionary Party (SR), which was opposed to Bessarabian autonomy, obtained 31.2% of the vote according to Cojocaru, 31.6% if one

<sup>41</sup> Oliver H. Radkey. *Russia Goes to the Polls: The Election to the All-Russian Constituent Assembly, 1917*. (Ithaca; Cornell University Press, 1990), p. 107-108, 153-158.

<sup>42</sup> Gheorghe Cojocaru, "Cu Privire la Problema Adunării Constituante în Basarabia în anul 1917", part 2, p. 10-15 and passim.

includes the soldiers' vote, 33.6% according to Radkey, and 38.2% according to the Soviet source. The SR obtained numerous ethnic minority votes (the bulk of its support), particularly from southern Bessarabia. A substantial minority of Moldovan votes seems to have gone to the SR according to Radkey.<sup>43</sup> The National Jewish Party obtained 10-10.6% (11.3% according to Radkey, 10.2% according to me) of the total number of votes, at least 90% of the members of the Jewish Party of the votes according to the Moldovan source and my numbers, and 6.5% according to Radkey.<sup>44</sup>

The closest thing to a Bolshevik electoral list were the Internationalist Socialists (SI), which included Bolsheviks and Mensheviks. The SI were for this reason generally branded as Bolsheviks by a part of the press, and by Radkey. The SI list obtained 6.9% according to Cojocaru, 8.2% according to me, 10.1% according to Radkey, and more 15% of all votes of the "workers and peasants" of Bessarabia according to the unproven and improbable allegations made by Soviet sources published after World War II.<sup>45</sup> The Bolshevik votes were overwhelmingly non-Moldovan, with a strong Ukrainian overrepresentation.

According to the partial detailed results, the SI (Bolsheviks) were popular among the soldiers who voted in military polling places. They obtained 41% of all the military votes, which represented 39.8% of the SI-Bolshevik votes in those districts. In addition, many soldiers who voted SR (41.4%) were in favor of the SR agrarian policy, but took the radical Bolshevik position that there should be an immediate peace in the war against the Central Powers.<sup>46</sup> These Left SR and Bolshevik soldiers, and their comrades who were leaving the Romanian front and passing through Bessarabia, especially after the October 25/November 7, 1917, Communist takeover in St. Petersburg (Petrograd), were almost exclusively neither Bessarabians nor Moldovans, but from the Russian heartland, and secondarily, from the Ukraine. This explains why only 2% of the soldiers in Bessarabia voted for SDT and PNM.<sup>47</sup>

Overall, Bessarabia elected five deputies from SDT, 5 SR's, one Kadet, one Jewish National Electoral Committee candidate, and an Internationalist-Bolshevik.<sup>48</sup> All the SDT deputies were Moldovans, and the other deputies included 5 or 6 Russians and 2 or 3 Jews (including 1 or 2 SR's).

The history of Bessarabia from November 1917, with which I have dealt with elsewhere, does not concern us in this paper, except to the extent to which a synopsis might help put some things in perspective.<sup>49</sup> The deputies from Sfatul Țării (more than 70% of whom were Moldovans), were elected, mostly

<sup>43</sup> Oliver H. Radkey, p. 151,160.

<sup>44</sup> Gheorghe Cojocaru, "Cu Privire la Problema Adunării Constituante în Basarabia în anul 1917", part 2, p. 14-15, and Oliver Radkey, p. 151, 160.

<sup>45</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>46</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> Gheorghe Cojocaru, "Cu Privire la Problema Adunării Constituante în Basarabia în anul 1917", part 2, p. 15.

<sup>49</sup> For more details and information, consult Ionas Rus, "Românii și Minoritarii în Basarabia Interbelică", and Ionas Aurelian Rus, *Self-Determination, Moldovan-Romanian Nationalism, and Nationality Conflict in Bessarabia, 1900-1940*.

indirectly, by about half of the Bessarabian population. The emergence of Sfatul Țării on November 21/December 2, 1917 inaugurated the beginning of Bessarabia's separation from Russia. Sovereignty was declared. When "the right time" (January 5-13/18-26, 1918) came, most of the soldiers, whose political opinions I have discussed above, supported the attempted Bolshevik coup against Sfatul Țării. The Romanian troops called in by the diet defeated the Bolsheviks in January 1918, after which, for a number of reasons, Sfatul Țării voted for independence (January 24/February 6, 1918) unanimously, and later for union with Romania (March 27/April 9, 1918). At that time 86 members voted for union, 3 against, 36 abstained, and 13 were absent.

The evidence from both primary (including archival) and secondary sources clearly supports the view that from the 1923-1924 on, and probably from 1918, until 1940, half (between 1938 and 1940) or more (before 1938) of the Bessarabians were pro-Romanian. The rest was divided between the pro-Soviet population and a slightly smaller group of "neutral" people. The available evidence suggests that most Moldovan historians have found my arguments persuasive.<sup>50</sup> It is also clear that most Moldovan-Romanian voters were clearly definite and conscious supporters of Romanian nationalism by the late 1930's.

It has already been shown that the period up to 1917 presents a Moldovan/Romanian nationality that was a nationality in itself, aware of its identity. But it was not necessarily also "for itself", if one adapts Szporluk's terminology.<sup>51</sup> The nation becomes "for itself" when its members support nationalist demands, hopes, options, fears, desires, etc. This did not happen to most Moldovans until 1917, when, during the Russian Revolution, they showed this in a fashion which was undeniable from the electoral point of view. Most of those Moldovans who had a choice between more than one candidate from their ethnic group, chose nationalists over non-nationalists, and the SDT over the PNM. These choices were consistent with their mentality. Most Moldovans were clearly ethnically-minded and proto-nationalistic (or, more exactly, in a state of transition from proto-nationalism to nationalism). However, I would hesitate to call most of those who lived in 1917 Moldovan and/or Romanian "modern nationalists".

It is hard to place the Moldovans in the framework of Ronald Grigor Suny's models of national ("vertical") and class ("horizontal") integration during the Russian Revolution. The Moldovans, unlike the Belorussians, Lithuanians and Azerbaijanis, did have a national consciousness.<sup>52</sup> Moldovan ethnic consciousness was older and more universally widespread than the Ukrainian one, even though, obviously, the Moldovan population was more inert and more illiterate.<sup>53</sup> Suny argues that most Ukrainian peasants voted for Ukrainian parties because they preferred people of their own kind over foreigners rather than because of

<sup>50</sup> See the response of the editorial board of *Revista de Istorie a Moldovei* to my article, in *Revista de Istorie a Moldovei*, (Chișinău, Știința, 1994), no. 1(17), January-March 1994, p. 29, 37.

<sup>51</sup> Roman Szporluk, p. 136.

<sup>52</sup> Ronald Grigor Suny, *The Revenge of the Past: Nationalism, Revolution, and the Collapse of the Soviet Union*, (Stanford, California, Stanford University Press, 1993), p. 30-43.

<sup>53</sup> Oliver H. Radkey, p. 108.

nationalism.<sup>54</sup> In any case, the Ukrainian SR's and other Ukrainian parties were simply national offshoots of Russian parties with the same names. This applied to many other parties of other non-Russian nationalities (Finns, Georgians, Estonians, Latvians, etc.), but did not apply to the Bessarabian Moldovans.<sup>55</sup> The Moldovans had the SDT and the PNM, which were not offshoots of any Russian party. These groups were two genuinely Bessarabian major parties in every sense of the word despite the former, or current, SR connections of many Moldovan nationalists. The Moldovans were also different from the Armenians because the latter had only one real option, the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (Dashnaksutiun), but similar because that Armenian group, like the SDT, was a group including people of various political ideas.

The issue of vertical, as opposed to horizontal, integration is difficult and, in some sense, somewhat dialectical and irrelevant for the Bessarabian Moldovan case. For the voters of the SDT, that is, for most Moldovan peasants, class or land was more important than Moldovan nationalism. However, they refused to vote for horizontal integration across the national line, by not voting for the SR's, Bolsheviks, Kadets, Mensheviks, etc. Instead, they preferred a Bessarabian solution to the agrarian problem, and for a moderately, but unambiguously, nationalistic program. We are dealing with oblique integration.

I would argue that the Moldovans should be treated as an ethnic group different from most other peoples in Russia. Moldovan-Russian nationalism was definitely as much central or southeastern European as similar to other nationalisms in the Russian Empire. A large majority of the Moldovan nationalists were educated in seminaries, and were religious and parochial or provincial-minded. Moreover, there was the pan-Romanian aspect. Many key Moldovan nationalists, including the PNM activists, and some of the SDT leaders of SR origin, had been more connected to Romania through their university education, through what they read and wrote, and through their friends and mentors, even before the war. The program of the Moldovan National Party of 1917 was written by a Transylvanian Romanian, Onisifor Ghibu, who wanted to "channel" the Moldovans out of all-Russian and Social Revolutionary orientations, and largely succeeded in doing that for most intellectuals and activists.<sup>56</sup> The SDT accepted the PNM program with few changes and additions. Moldovans, to the extent to which they had cared about all-Russian currents before, retreated into provincialism. Being interested in Bessarabian autonomy within Russia, and in Bessarabian rather than in all-Russian politics by November 1917, the Moldovans elected to the Constituent Assembly simply did not leave Bessarabia to go there.<sup>57</sup> Most Moldovans started not to care about new Russian ideas and politics before they started to separate from Russia. The switch to the Latin alphabet was intimately connected with this, because it represented a change in orientations.

In this paper, I have dealt with how the Moldovan national movement appeared and became a mass phenomenon. During the period from roughly 1900 until

<sup>54</sup> Ronald Grigor Suny, p. 48.

<sup>55</sup> Oliver H. Radkey, p. 160.

<sup>56</sup> Consult Onisifor Ghibu.

<sup>57</sup> Gheorghe Cojocaru, "Cu Privire la Problema Adunării Constituante în Basarabia în anul 1917", part 2, p. 15.

1917, most Moldovans had proto-nationalistic views, but passivity was dominant before 1917. Nationalism and national mobilization increased through the activization of the masses rather than through the imposition of an ethnic consciousness by the elites, or by turning “peasants into Moldovans/ Romanians”. The “old” and weak national movement, pre-modern and aristocratic before around 1900, can be said to have given way to the modern national movement of “commoners”, especially intellectuals, which emerged around 1905. Even this movement was rather weak before the Russian Revolution of 1917. A large majority of the Moldovan-speaking people felt that they were ethnic “Moldovans” rather than “Romanians” throughout the period, with the percentage of the latter increasing over time. During the year 1917, most Moldovan voters came to support the Moldovan-Romanian national movement which was in favor of giving the land to the peasants, and was fighting for national rights, and especially provincial autonomy. The agrarian current, which was visibly stronger than the national one, and distinct from it, in 1905-1907, was merged with the national current through “oblique integration”. One might be surprised that most Moldovans voted for autonomist platforms in the elections of 1917 if he would look at literacy and other “development” statistics and at the weakness of the Moldovan national movement; it is clear that the strength of pre-existing proto-nationalism is key in the process of determining the growth of the national movement.

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