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## **Romanian, Bessarabian or Moldovan?**

### **Identity Turmoil and Political and Social Assertions in Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century Bessarabia**

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**Keywords:** *Bessarabia, Union, identity, nationalism, independence, autonomy, Greater Romania, State Council, Russian Revolution, First World War*

„Bessarabia, Romanian land“ - a political slogan, surfacing in the most unexpected places in Romania of the year 2013, shows just how present the issue of statal belonging of the territory encompassed between the Prut and the Dniester is; as well as the issue of national identity of the population inhabiting this space. Additionally, within the early political discourse of the still young state of the Republic of Moldova, the issue of identity plays an important role, fact which is proven by the debate about the national language of the state, the contents of history schoolbooks, as well as the state of the conflict about Transdnier. From this perspective, Bessarabia represents a true case study for a state formation process, which cannot be considered completed to date.

The present dissertation deals with the history of the peripheral region of Bessarabia between the years 1905-1919. It surveys the origins of the process of identity and national makeup of the Romanian speaking population from the respective territory, against the backdrop of historical events taking place in the Russian province. The identification of identity models, ethnical self-perception as well as the process of articulating political will of the Romanian-speaking population from the territory which was disputed over by several states during the entire 20<sup>th</sup> century are of topical interest in the present dissertation.

Research aims at delineating the activities undertaken by Moldovan intelligentsia, more precisely on the activities of the intellectual and political elites of the region, which played an important role in the political parties and movements of the epoch, which were seconded by a prolific journalistic output. One needs, however, to take heed of the fact that when talking about Bessarabia, one cannot clearly single out intellectual and political elites.

In this research, the term 'elite' comprises on the one hand Moldovan land owners, who most often were also nobles, and on the other hand, educated elites, who were soaring during the respective period. The educated elites is also called within the research 'intelligentsia', thus resorting to the Russian term, as well as 'the bourgeois elite'. Both terms refer to emerging social strata of the modern history, which is singled out from the strata of peasants by the input of institutional education and the explicit desire to serve societal interests. Mention should be made, however, of the fact that bourgeois elites of Bessarabia are dissimilar with their Central European counterparts. While in Central Europe bourgeoisie is remarkable because of self awareness and belonging to a class system (*Bürgerlichkeit*), as well as because of a certain urban lifestyle, education and wealth, in Bessarabia the bourgeois elites is different from the general population because of their acquired knowledge. The two social groups of Bessarabia (land owners and bourgeois elites) were not set off by ethnical guidelines, since speakers of Romanian were to be encountered in both groups.

A constructivist approach is fundamental to the analysis of concepts such as identity and nation. The deciphering of the origins of the process of identity makeup and crystallization of the political will of Romanian-speaking population of Bessarabia through a constructivist lens, and the reception and reactions of Moldovans to different concepts respectively, have not to date become of central interest to historical scholarship. The present dissertation aims, therefore, at filling this void of historical scholarship.

Special attention was granted to phenomena with impact on identity generation within Bessarabia, in the transition process from Russian Empire toward Greater Romania. While previous scholarship focused solely on

the role of the international context in the process of identity formation, the present dissertation aims at opening up a topical debate, advancing at the same time a different approach to the question of identity, from within the frame of reference.

Resorting to historical evidence, the dissertation pursues the notion of crystallization of group identity of Romanian-speaking elites from Bessarabia, whether this identity was marked ethnically or nationally, and what platform requests consequently surfaced on the political arena. The present research attempts at finding an answer to the following questions: What was the identity position of Moldovan intellectuals at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century? What was the role of the neighboring Romanian nation? To what extent did Bessarabian inhabitants participate in the process of national foundation of Romania, and to what extent did they think of themselves as Romanians? What state concepts and political ideas were pursued by the Romanian-speaking elites? A critical approach to the question whether the union between Bessarabia and Romania which was carried out in 1918 was or not based on Romanian national awareness, the way Romanian scholarship presumes, or, conversely, the independence of Bessarabia, claimed in the spring of year 1918, was actually the result of the wish of Bessarabian nationals?

### ***Timeframe***

The years 1905-1918 are central to the dissertation, since this period comprises two significant turning points. On the one hand, this is the period of the Russian Revolution of 1905-1907, which stormed across the Empire, and was seconded by liberal, democratic, socialist trends, as well as by national ideals. On the other hand, the Russian Revolution of 1917 was also a turning point affecting the political and social levels. Both revolutions of 1905 and 1917 (February, and October respectively) have meant for the political elites of Bessarabia an unexpected greenlight, and they tried to take advantage of this by generating their own political platforms. With the elections for Greater Romanian Parliament, a first and important step of legal and administrative integration of Bessarabia was completed. This is the reason why the year 1919 represents the end of the surveyed period from the present dissertation.

### ***Sources and supporting literature***

Alongside a comprehensive analysis of the supporting literature, the dissertation is based on several categories of historical evidence. The results of the MA dissertation of the author, defended in 2002 within Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München, were put to good account within the present dissertation. An important role was played by numerous memoirs and published reports, which had been drafted by Moldovan deputies, or by contemporary witnesses.

Secondly, the analysis is substantiated by documents which were consulted in the State Archives of the Republic of Moldova in Chişinău, or the National Archives of Romania in Bucharest. While in Chişinău, special attention was devoted to documents issued by the State Council (Sfatul Ţării), which are preserved in a special fund. The respective documents allowed, on the one hand, to better understand the activities of the State Council, while minutes, membership catalogues, as well as diverse questionnaires were put into a database which provided foundation for the question of identity. All data regarding deputies was consolidated with supplementary data from specialized literature, to the extent to which the dissertation presents for the first time a comprehensive analysis of the structure of the State Council, and by extension of the Romanian-speaking elites of Bessarabia.

The National Archives of Romania provided research material for the written heritage of renowned Moldovan intellectuals, such as Ion Pelivan, Pantelimon Halippa, Daniel Ciugureanu, but also Gherman Pântea. More particularly, the personal fund of Ion Pelivan, which comprises vast correspondence, allows for deeper insight into the Moldovan intellectual circles of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The analysis of Bessarabian foreign affairs between 1917/1918 is mostly based on supporting literature, and additional information regarding the position expressed by the German Empire and the Central Powers was documented by resorting to data made available by the Political Archives of the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Journalistic evidence provided by such newspapers as *Basarabia*, *Moldovanul*, *Basarabia Reînnoită*, *Kuvynt Moldovenesk* și *Sfatul Țării* provided additional valuable information for the research.

### ***Dissertation layout and conclusions***

Since the dynamics of Romanian-speaking elites are closely knit, or even determined by certain historical events, the dissertation proposes a chronological outlook of the research material.

**The first chapter** includes, on the one hand, the clarification of fundamental concepts used in the dissertation, and on the other hand, a detailed outlook on the current scholarship on the given topic.

*Identity, nation, nationalism, nationalistic movements, ethnic identity, mass awareness, ethnicity* – here are a few concepts that more often than not, are resorted to in historical expertise, or in political studies without a prior definition of their meaning as intended by the respective author. It is not unlikely that scholarship often sets off from the universally accepted definition of these phenomena, while it is true at the same time, that these important concepts (identity, nation, nationalism) have brought up significant debate in scholarship in recent decades.

In all scientific fields, notions of identity are crucial; be they individual or group-based, and gradually they were rendered obsolete and replaced by constructivist perspectives, which spring from the premise that neither individual identity, nor group identity, could ever be innate. Identity is borne out of environmental interaction, and thus, results from social processes. The present dissertation claims tribute to this latter, constructivist perspective.

National or ethnic belonging enables two analytical directions. Belonging can be regarded as individual identity, because it allows observations about where an individual positions him- or herself, or in which manner he/she questions the influence of environment in the process of identity making. On the other hand, reference can be made to the manner in which group identity makeup functions, as well as its accompanying mechanisms. Within the same frame, nation and ethnicity need to be regarded as constructed group identities, phenomena of modernity, by and large constructed by resorting to mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion. As such, the focus of the research is, on the one hand, on the manner in which Moldovan intellectuals defined themselves, and on the other hand, the dissertation pursues the issue of to what extent Moldovan intellectuals developed categories of identity of their own devise, and how they attempted at making them part of the public discourse.

The input of the generous supporting literature, which deals with diverse aspects of Bessarabian history within the proposed timeframe (1905-1919), shows that the vast majority of publications was issued in the Soviet Union, Romania, or the Republic of Moldova. Their analysis shows a certain interest toward meta-historical narratives, partly with a political prerogative, which do not put to good use innovating theoretical approaches,

such as social constructivism. The adaptation of events to frames of large-scale historical interpretation, dictated by politics, have lead, in the case of Bessarabia, to oftentimes random selection of data and evidence. Sources are not regarded within their respective historical realities, or within their original context, but are further manipulated as arguments to serve preconceptions that are projected onto the future.

Conversely, Western history research did not focus on singled out aspects of Bessarabian history of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, and therefore did not take advantage of prime historical sources. It becomes, therefore, obvious, that a study of identity formation with the Romanian-speaking population of Bessarabia is long due from a constructivist approach. The present dissertation aims at overriding this shortcoming.

**The second chapter** is dedicated to Bessarabia under Russian rule and analyses its administrative progress, as well as advances made in economy and culture in the region during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, in order to better explain the premises that lead to the creation of identity patterns within the Moldovan population. The last section of the chapter deals with the extent to which there was a national movement of the Moldovan population during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. At the same time, a certain influence of Bucharest agitative actions is under scrutiny, in order to judge the latter's impact on events occurring in Bessarabia. Special attention was granted to the deployment of the 1905-1917 revolution, which meant the inclusion of national issues next to the social issues on the agenda of the revolution, thus giving leeway to national movements.

The completed research demonstrates that, due to its peripheral location in both Ottoman and Russian Empires, Bessarabia partook but to a smaller extent to the process of social and economic modernization which had started in the neighboring Europe in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, to the effect of it being by the early 20<sup>th</sup> century a poorly developed region, with a clearly agrarian profile. Under these circumstances, Moldovan bourgeois intellectuals developed only during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century an ethnic awareness per se. The impulse behind the creation of an identity formation process was created through an elite who studied within Russian universities, which opened their gates to Moldovan subjects after 1898. The example of the association of Bessarabian students of Dorpat shows that Romanian-speaking students were guided in their search of an own identity by the Romanian model, incorporating its ethnical makeup but without reference to a territorial context and without claiming the union of all Romanians in a common national state. The association of Bessarabians did not confine itself to national claims, such as the restrictive language policies within Bessarabia, but advocated for the reform of the political and social systems of Russia. The Moldovan approach, therefore, cannot be deemed to have had ethnic or social features.

The closely knit connection between ethnic emancipation and claims of political and social reform was carried on during the 1905-1917 Revolution. Although the two leading social strata, namely aristocracy and intelligentsia, defined themselves as being Romanian, the ethnic feature was not overall cohesive, and therefore, divergencies arising between the two strata's political and economic outlooks, were not overridden. At the same time, it becomes obvious that the Romanian-speaking elite of Bessarabia did not have a coherent political agenda regarding the future of Bessarabia, which could have served as guideline for the sketching of the destiny of the province, this latter aspect being but a later outcome, based on reactions to historical events. Lastly but not least, mention should be made of the fact that Moldovan peasantry was at the outburst of World War I in a proto-national state and lacked the concept of a common history, leave alone a feeling of national belonging.

In then contemporary Romania, the Bessarabian Moldovan movement did not rejoice from overall support until the outburst of World War I. The perception of Bessarabia on the European arena altered significantly up to

1906-1917, to the effect that the territory encompassed between the Prut and the Dniester finally got the attention of St. Petersburg/Petrograd and Bucharest alike, and with the early World War I it also attracted the attention of European powers.

**The third chapter** of the dissertation is devoted to the year 1917 in Bessarabia. The foreground is taken over by the period February-November 1917, during which period Bessarabia no longer is a part of the Russian Empire, and which is now an independent body with own institutions to manage the territory. In reality, however, the province is under the influence of a national spirit, social turmoil, as well unclear political competencies, a weakened central administration and the constant search of elites for guiding solutions against crisis and anarchy. Several associations were founded in Bessarabia during the span of these few months, with their own social and national agendas, which, against the backdrop of problematic relations with the Russian Empire, as well as the lack of a strong hand of tsarist authorities, have attempted to actively influence the local events. Associations and movements founded by Molodovan elites are central to the analysis, as are their platforms. At the same time, the premises for creating the State Council, the political governing body, first summoned in November 1917, is given its due attention.

The State Council, its deputies and the latter's activity are key to understanding the mechanisms behind ethnic identity of Moldovans from Bessarabia of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, all the more since up to 70% of the respective deputies belonged to the Romanian-speaking population. In this context, features such as age, socializing, level of education, professional insertion, ethnic or political self-definition become relevant for the analysis of deputies elected in the State Council, because this enables us to determine their positioning to the issue of identity in contemporary political discourse.

The conclusion is that only with the occasion of the Russian Revolution of 1917 the Romanian-speaking elites became, after a muffled period, a vocal presence on the public arena, by their involvement in different institutions. Even at this time, the imposition of a common body, which was supposed to serve the common interests of all Moldavans, failed to surface.

The major players of the Moldovan movement were the Moldovan National Party and the councils lead by Moldovan military. Their platforms included national desiderata, alongside social and democratic ones, as well as the issue of agrarian development and the introduction of universal vote and a Parliament system in Russia. The identity concept in its ethnic Romanian version, stays unchanged and is underlined by the constant claim of territorial independence within the Russian Empire. The vast majority of the Romanian-speaking elites had not internalized by 1917 the notion of an extended Romanian state, so the Moldovan national movement had a national scope, with a territorial frame dissimilar from that of the Romanian movement.

Compelled by the weakness of Central Powers, the peril of the collapse of public order in the province, as well as annexing wishes from Ukraine, the political elites of Bessarabia were looking for solutions aimed at an administrative upgrade both locally and regionally, which ultimately meant the creation of the State Council in November 1917.

The State Council, even if the result of an indirect choice, mirrored, however, to a large extent the ethnic and social relations present in Bessarabia. This is the reason why the State Council can be regarded as a representative institution for the entirety of Bessarabia, the decisions of which had a compulsory regime. With the foundation of the State Council, the 'Bessarabian Revolution' took immense liberty from the prerogatives of

the Petrograd Revolution. The management of domestic affairs was completely undertaken in November 1917; however, the leaving of Bessarabia from the Russian Empire did not become of topical interest before January 1918.

The analysis of the deputy structure shows among many other things, the fact that Moldovan deputies from the Council had but briefly and punctually admitted to a Romanian national concept, and more often than not they did not default to calling themselves 'Romanians'. Only a proportion of 20% of the respective deputies claimed they were Romanians, or oftentimes 'Romanian Bessarabians'. What is more, ethnic belonging was regarded in strict connection with political beliefs.

**The fourth chapter** deals with both the autonomous period of independent Bessarabia, and the decision to reunite with Romania in 1917/1918, with focus on the activities of the State Council and of the Moldovan deputies. During the autonomous and independent stages, the State Council decided on the guidelines of the politics of the former Russian province, making fundamental decisions for regional development. Being an institution which hosted most of Bessarabia's intelligentsia, the State Council allows for a thorough scan of the ideologies and discourses of the local elites. The activity of this body is up to the challenge of providing valuable information about the political preferences of the deputies. This was the context in which research was conducted in order to see whether the managing political system attempted indeed the building of a an autonomous state, for which the former was about to provide fundamental principles. In order to assess as objectively as possible the options of the State Council, they were placed in a larger context that encompasses the positions taken by Central Powers to the Bessarabian issue.

During the autonomous and independence periods, the State Council was in charge of the destiny of the territory between the Prut and the Dniester, and attempted at developing their own politics and to put into place own administrative structures.

In the light of events occurring in Russia, Ukraine and on the Eastern front, the State Council declared in January 1918 the independence of the territory between the Prut and the Dniester. The Moldovan elites, favoring the concept of cultural nation, declared the newly formed republic a national state, with foundations such as culture, language, and history that are all common to Moldovans. The ensuing decisions of the State Council regarding both foreign and domestic affairs are indicative of the fact that state independence was not considered a transient stage, but instead, the consolidation of the fundamental independence of the Democratic Republic of Moldova were aimed at. During its entire activity span, the State Council and its Moldovan deputies expressed their adhesion to national desiderata formulated in December 1917, as well as to the general objectives of the Russian Revolution. They stated at the same time the belonging of Moldovans to the Romanian people, without stressing the national program as being central to their political agenda, and did not envisage the creation of a Romanian national state as being their prerogative.

Against the grain of these trends present in the State Council, a Moldovan faction becomes vocal on the public space which pleaded for a union with Romanian, should certain conditions be met, such as minimum decisional autonomy, the safeguarding of already attained revolutionary targets, as well as their say in the general outline of the reform of the extended Romanian state.

Yet the analysis of the treaties between the State Council and the Romanian Government is in favor of the assumption that the decision that led to the union of Bessarabia and the neighboring Romanian State, which was

declared by the State Council on March 27, 1918, was not so much motivated by the existence of a national awareness and the desire to achieve an extended Romanian national state, but instead by the foreign and domestic political context, as well as the international context, and by the meager political will of Central Powers to support the newly created Bessarabian state.

**The last chapter** focuses on the integration of Bessarabia within Greater Romania, in order to make light over what happened with the autonomous movement of Bessarabia and to what extent we can actually speak about a regional identity of Bessarabian Moldovans. The analysis focuses mainly on the first few months of the integration process, the overall lifespan of which was between 1918-1925. The integration of Bessarabia within the Romanian state was carried out during several years, since the body of laws pertaining to the Kingdom of Romania was not simply integrated as a batch into provinces, but gradually implemented in the other provinces, with heed to new administrative and legal frames.

The documents under scrutiny lead to the conclusion that the decision of a union did not in a first step mean the abandon by Moldovan intellectuals of their political objectives. In the decree that led to the union of Bessarabia to Greater Romania, regional autonomy was mentioned, and in force until November 27, 1918. Moldovan deputies from the State Council proved through their legal initiatives that they were regarding the long-term future of Bessarabia as being an autonomous province included into the Romanian State. They were equally unwilling to give up their principles which came into being by the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, more specifically equality in the status of national claims, democratic values and social objectives. In contrast with the political groups which governed the State Council, and which favored the project of regional autonomy, Romanian-speaking land owners were against this. They expressed their dissent from the politics of the State Council and from the manner in which autonomy was implemented by the latter.

After the repeal of regional autonomy on November 27, 1918, which also meant the dissolution of the State Council and an unconditioned union with the Romanian State, the process of gradual integration of Bessarabia into Romania ensued until up to 1925, with an accompanying process of adaptation to the structures of the unitary state. The examples offered by the education and press systems illustrate the fact that the entire process of naturalizing the Romanian-speaking population of Bessarabia, which was alien to the concept of national belonging at the time of the union, was a sinuous trajectory and did not meet the expected outcome on all levels.

Mention should be made of the fact that the political discourse and the activities of Romanian-speaking intellectuals of Bessarabia were not victims of censorship upon union, and their main concerns were just as vocal as during the brief period of independence. Neither public discourse, nor party politics did not stress the importance of the national issue. The imminent agrarian reform, social issues, as well as the implementation of general democratic rights were at the top of the agenda of the political elites of Bessarabia. Even if upon union the vast majority of Moldovan elites claimed the Romanian State was an ideal state, thus appropriating for the first time thoroughly the Romanian national discourse, they did not give up completely the claim to an independent state until roughly 1919.

The social and revolutionary attitude of Moldovan intellectuals, the lack of insight into the general state of affairs in Bessarabia and structural fear of a Bolshevik revolution favored, within Bucharest-based political circles, which to date had shown but limited interest in the region, the creation of overall skepticism about the leaders of the Moldovan movements. This led to a tense relation between elites from the new province and the old kingdom, with an outstanding makeup of preconceptions and disbelief.

Eventually, the analysis of the evolution of identity discourse and political activities of Moldovan elites during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century allows for the researcher to draw some general conclusions.

Both bourgeois and aristocratic Moldovan intellectuals favored from an ethnic point of view their inclusion in the overall Romanian nation. There were no moments in which either of the two categories developed their own platform approach regarding an autonomous Moldovan ethnic model. However, ethnic belonging was not in relation to the Romanian national state. The Romanian unitary national state, vented by the Romanian national movement, was not until 1918 a clear objective for the Moldovan movement, since the latter did not show its dissent of the Russian Empire as territorial frame for Bessarabia. Debate over regional autonomy, which first sparked off with the onset of the First Russian Revolution, aimed permanently at Bessarabia as province, with the objective of integrating all cohabiting ethnic groups within the same administration of an autonomous region.

From an early stage, the bourgeois movement had strong ties with national, social and democratic claims. The movement did not have the reference frame of an exclusively national movement and kept on its agenda the appeal to rural populations from the province. Another feature of the Moldovan movement is its relativity. Activities undertaken between the Revolutions of 1905-1907, as well as the activities carried out by the State Council were less based on a strict implementation of a carefully sketched platform, and they strike as mostly reactions to domestic and international political contexts. The leeway granted to Moldovan elites was conditioned by the peripheral location of Bessarabia in general, as well as by the international context during the First World War.

From the early onset of the Bessarabian movement, a certain discrepancy between boyards and intellectuals arises, which they were not able, despite their best efforts, to quench during the revolutionary years of 1905-1907, or to act as one in a pursuit of a greater good of the general interests of Bessarabia or the Moldovan populations either during the period of independence or after the union, for that matter. Even while sharing the same position with regard to the issue of ethnicity, their different approach to agrarian issues will eventually lead to irreconcilable differences.

Beside this latter aspect, the Moldovan bourgeois elite acting in different bodies and institutions did not always share the same political options themselves. By way of consequence, one cannot clearly speak about a Moldovan national movement, but an oftentimes nuanced, and differential portrayal thereof needs to be sketched instead.

While Romanian elites focused mainly on Transylvania, with Bucharest being a major player during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century in the influence of a Romanian national movement in the province, the interest of the Bucharest elites for Bessarabia was but marginal until the onset of World War I. One can speak of an influence within this context, with a decisive outcome on the Moldovan movement, but it is confined to individual initiatives of a handful of Romanians. One can safely assume that the frequent contact with Bessarabian student youth and their being provided with magazines or books impacted their increased Romanian ethnic self-definition. Until the union, and also following the union, Bessarabia was for the majority of political elites from the old Kingdom a terra incognita and their rapport with leaders of the Moldovan movements were chipped by skepticism and disbelief.

The dissertation does not assume the role of providing a comprehensive image of the identity game of the entire Romanian-speaking population of Bessarabia. Due to the complexity of the subject, some of the topics were but marginally approached, thus being hopefully starting points for further research. To date, for instance, there is no comprehensive study of the reception of historical events from Bessarabia by Romanian politicians and the

general public. It would be interesting to find out how well informed were indeed Romanian political decision makers and which was the image of the province and of its inhabitants in Romania of the epoch?

Another promising field of research, which will benefit the scope of this dissertation, could be the opinions of the other ethnic groups and their rapport with Moldovan elites and the latter's ensuing policies. Stress should be placed on the fact that the analysis of Moldovan elites, especially of the bourgeois elites, represents only a facet of the complex mosaic of ethnic and national identities of the region.

For this particular reason, the present dissertation can serve as a resourceful starting point for further analyses, which can focus on identity appropriation by rural populations of the province, for instance. In this context, one should insightfully research to what extent the Moldovan elites managed to convey their concepts to diverse social strata, thus being able to steer or not a sustainable change in their contour of ethnic and national identity.