

BORDERS AND TERRITORIAL IDENTITY IN MOLDOVAN ASSR: TRANSNISTRIA AND THE "BESSARABIAN QUESTION" BETWEEN 1918 AND 1940

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ABSTRACT

Bessarabia's unification with the rest of the Romanian historical provinces in order to create the Greater Romania in 1918 opened up a dispute between the new state and Soviet Russia. The loss of its previous gubernia to the detriment of Romania, combined with a series of strategies imposed by its tremendous internal transformation, made the Soviet Union to reconsider its western borders. This article provides an overview of the formation of the Moldavan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (MASSR) – the political ancestor of contemporary Dnestr Moldovan Republic or Transnistria – and then proceeds to analyse its role as propaganda and political tools inside the USSR. In such context, Transnistria will be studied as borderland of Greater Romania in order to better understand its socio-political profile in accordance with Soviet policies. The main aim of this paper is to give an objective account of the events from the historical perspective and to reassess the socio-political engineering which the MASSR underwent from its creation in 1924 up until its union with Bessarabia in 1940.

Keywords: the USSR, frozen conflict, nationalities issue, indigenization, Moldovenization

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INTRODUCTION

Transnistria or the DMR (Dnestr Moldovan Republic) represents a *de facto state*¹ on the territory of the Republic of Moldova, which emerged in the aftermath of the Soviet Union's dismemberment. Soon it developed as the main party of one of the *frozen conflicts*² in the ex-Soviet space. According to international law, the conflict in Transnistria broke out as a domestic dispute between the central authorities of the Moldovan Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR) and the local political elites on the left bank of Dnestr River (Transnistria) (Burian, 2011,

¹ A *de facto state* – also named "quasi-state," "unrecognized state," "pseudo-state," "separatist state," "auto-proclaimed state," etc. – is a political entity which declared independence from a state and whose existence de jure is not recognized by the parent-state or the international community. In the ex-Soviet space, de facto states are intrinsically linked to frozen conflicts (Kolsto, 2006, pp. 747-764).

² A *frozen conflict* represents an armed conflict in which the military operations have stalled without reaching any agreement. As the status of the main political party of this conflict remains both undefined and unrecognized on international level, the term used to refer to it varies depending on the source. One of the most common though is *de facto state*.

p. 102). What is more, while Moldova denounces Transnistria for separatism, Tiraspol points out that the region's history prior to 1940 had been distinct from that of Bessarabia and that Transnistria's territory has never been part of Moldovan traditional lands. Based on this distinctiveness, Transnistria currently claims its legitimacy and territorial identity. Nevertheless, the frozen conflict in Transnistria is an issue much more complex whose study remains outside the scope of the present paper.

This article focuses rather on analysing the role of the Moldovan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (Moldovan ASSR) – the political ancestor of contemporary DMR or Transnistria –, as propaganda and political tools inside Soviet Russia. Considering the Bessarabian dispute between the newly created Romania and the young Soviet state, the border on Dnestr made Transnistria a vital point on the Soviet Union's political map. Since these historical events are highly connected to the post-Soviet animosities between Tiraspol and Chişinău, the subject of the frozen conflict will be a marginal yet unavoidable discussion throughout this article.

It has been argued that the creation of the Moldovan SSR in 1924, on the approximate territory of present-day Transnistria, had two distinct aims: firstly, to disseminate communism outside the Soviet Union, and secondly, to help reacquire the lost Bessarabia through strong propagandistic and ideological methods (King, 2000, p. 63; Nantoi, 2009, p. 58; Shevchenko, 2019, p. 68). However, as Charles King has pointed out, the policies of nation-building in the MASSR had not been determined by the Soviet Union's expansionistic aims, but represented complex repercussions of central-policy goals combined with local forms of identity, and the programmes of cultural and political leaders within the republic itself (King, 2000, p. 63).

In this article, Transnistria will be studied as borderland of Greater Romania in order to better understand its socio-political profile in accordance with the Soviet policies. From this perspective, the current work represents both an attempt to reconcile the main existing theories considering the foundation of the MASSR, and a comprehensive survey of the Soviet political mechanism which had impacted on the region's identity. The evolution of this identity in its relationship with the changing socio-political context represents the contribution of this study in the field.

Also, despite the MASSR's above-mentioned significance within the USSR, the aim of the article is not necessarily to stress the region's impact on Bessarabia or on Romania's relations with the USSR. It rather gives an account of events from a historical perspective and analyses the socio-political engineering which MASSR underwent from its creation in 1924 up until its union with Bessarabia in 1940. Only from this perspective the paper can be considered a study of how borderlands may affect each other and be instrumentalised as ideological agents; likewise, the legacy of the borderlands in conjunction with the collapsing socio-political order may help to better understand the roots of Transnistria's frozen conflict.

CREATING THE "MOLDOVAN" BORDERS WITHIN THE USSR

In the wake of the 1917 revolutions in the Russian Empire, the minority nationalisms came to the fore as a mighty force; the way in which the Bolsheviks managed the issue had a great impact on their victory in the civil war (Kenez, 2007, p. 53). According to the Marxist doctrine, nationalism as legitimacy for the ethnic-based independent states was dismissed as unnatural and ephemeral compared to a future nationless society (Suny, 1993, p. 4). Lenin himself had

not paid much attention to nationalism before the revolution as he envisaged a new Russian state in which the political-administrative divisions would not be based on ethnic lines.

Nevertheless, as many nations which liberated themselves from Tsarist Russia were unwilling to obey the imperial centre after the revolution, Lenin understood that in order to gain a stable union, concessions to national rights had to be made (Bremmer, 1993, p. 9). When the ferment of nationalism reached the peripheries, Bessarabia, annexed by the Russian Empire in 1812, joined its historical lands and formed together the Greater Romania in 1918. Meanwhile, the territory on the left bank of Dneestr River – gained by Tsarist Russia after the Russo-Turkish War of 1787-1791 – was incorporated into the Ukrainian SSR.

To conclude, according to the new political reconfiguration, Dneestr became the border between the Romanian state and the USSR. The Bessarabian question remained a thorny issue between Moscow and Bucharest as long as the Soviet Union did not acknowledge the validity of the unification. In such a context, the USSR’s failure to resolve the Bessarabian question during the Paris Peace Conference (1919-1920) determined the creation of the Moldovan ASSR (Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic) as part of the Ukrainian SSR on the territory of contemporary Transnistria. Established on 12 October 1924 with its capital in Balta, it comprised almost the entire Balta district (*okrug*), part of the Odessa district in Odessa Governorate (*gubernia*), and part of the Tulchin district in the Podolia Governorate.³

What is more, the creation of the autonomous Moldovan Republic on the left bank of Dneestr had been initiated by a group of local communists – many of whom were Romanian communists which had immigrated in the USSR – led by the Bessarabian Grigori Kotovski. Accordingly, the purpose of the new political unit was to serve as “object of drawing attention and goodwill of the Bessarabian population,” and, in this way, to restore Bessarabia to the Soviet Union (Medinets, 2016, p. 1534). In addition, once the Bessarabian question had been resolved, it would have easily spread the spirit of world revolutions in Romania and other countries of Eastern Europe (Galuschchenko, 2014, p. 207). With the support of Mikhail Frunze,⁴ during the third session of All-Ukrainian Central Executive Committee, in October 1924, it was adopted the resolution “On the formation of the Moldovan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic” (Medinets, 2016, p. 1534).

From its very inception, the new political-administrative unit witnessed the boiling nationalism among the nations of the ex-empire. The establishment of the MASSR as part of Soviet Ukraine did not flatter much the Ukrainian leaders who had pointed out the lack of ethno-territorial data. As their national interests were interfering with those of the Bessarabian-born communists, the discrepancy between the data that both camps collected in order to serve their goals was striking. While Kotovski’s inquiry resulted in the number of 283,398 Moldovans, the Ukraine’s central commission reported a total of 170,451 Moldovans (Voronovici, 2010, p. 49). Nevertheless, the census of 1926 established the exact figure for ethnic Moldovans in MASSR as 572,000 people, which represented 26% of the whole population (Galuschchenko, 2008, p. 143).

³ Старые карты Европы: Исторические карты России и стран Европы [Old European Maps: Historical Maps of Russia and European Countries].

[Old European maps: historical maps of Russia and European countries] visited on 8.VII.2010.

⁴ Mikhail Frunze was an important Bolshevik leader, particularly known for his defeat of the White officer Peter von Wrangel in the Civil War. Although associated with the Russian Revolution and the Civil War, Frunze was also considered a Moldovan ethnic, as his father was a Moldovan from Kherson Governorate (located between Nistru and Dneestr Rivers).

This Soviet Census, which took place in 1926, had a significant role in the process of the Soviet state-building as it provided ample ethnographic information about the numerous peoples of the Tsarist Russia. Never before in the Russia's history a similar event – designated to determine the exact ethnicity (*narodnost'*) of the population – had taken place. Considering its novelty and also the role of ethnic identities in building the new Soviet state, the accuracy of the census cannot be considered totally flawless. Nevertheless, its figures for the ethnographic data in the MASSR should be evaluated in conjunction with the data provided by the local leaders of the main competing ethnic groups, the Ukrainians and the Moldovans. Also, contemporary researchers have pointed out the outrageous fabrications of the next Soviet census (1937). In contrast, specialists in the field corroborate previous reliable figures for the ethnic Moldovans in the MASSR. According to Galuschchenko, at the end of 1924, Ukraine's Ministry for Internal Affairs declared that the Moldovan ethnic group in the region accounted for 419,000 people. In 1926, based on the Soviet Census, the same group numbered 572,000. Considering that the new created unit expanded rapidly after its creation, the increased number of the Moldovan speakers can be easily explained. According to the same document, the Moldovan speaking population was concentrated in six *raions* (along the Dneestr) and represented the absolute majority in Dubossarskiy and Slobodzeiskiy *raions*; the Ukrainians lived mainly in Ananievo and Birzula, the Jews in Balta and Rybnitsa, while Russians constituted the dominant group in Tiraspol (Galuschchenko, 2008, p. 143).

Up until the census in 1926, the borders and the ethnic composition of Soviet Autonomous Moldova remained on the political agenda as essential issues. Moreover, the size of the initial territorial unit founded in 1924 expanded in less than two months when Balta region was dismantled and combined with the autonomous Moldovan Republic. The choice of Balta as the capital was explained through economic reasons as it became too remote from its new centre (Pervomaisk) after the creation of the MASSR. However, as Alexandr Voronovici stressed, the redrawing of the borders must have been also determined by other considerations since Balta was chosen capital even if there were at least two other options: Tiraspol and Birzula (Voronovici, 2010, pp. 51-52). Compared to them, Balta was not only far from the border, but also a predominantly Ukrainian and Russian speaking town, with a much more reliable profile. Despite all the theories, one fact is undeniable: the capital of the MASSR was provisional as the USSR's western border on the official maps was the Prut River and Bessarabia was considered to be under Romanian occupation (Nantoi, 2009, p. 58).

NATION BUILDING IN THE MASSR BETWEEN 1924 AND 1930

The Communist Party created the ethno-federal structures of the Soviet Union in the 1920s with the major aim to convince the minority ethnic groups to accept communism by presenting it as the end of the repressive Tsarist policies directed against the country's non-Russian population (Gorenburg, 2003, p. 77). That is why the "language and other manifestations of national uniqueness ... were merely forms. It was the party, acting through the state, which would give them content." This policy was accompanied by the slogan "national in form, socialist in content," through which the government was seeking to institutionalize ethnicity in order to promote and establish communism among the non-Russian groups (Gorenburg, 2003, p. 77). In order to fortify the new political system, the early directives of Soviet Russia had been particularly attentive to accommodating the multiple nationalities of the ex-empire (a very common usage in the literature concerning that period).

This took the form of substantial linguistic and cultural benefits, as well as political access to the state and the party apparatuses. Lenin wrote in 1922, with the evident goal to defame the previous Tsarist policies:

"What is important for the proletariat? For the proletariat it is not only important, but also it is essential to ensure the absolute confidence in the proletarian class struggle on the part of inorods.⁵ What do we need for this? For this, formal equality is insufficient. For this, it is necessary to reimburse, one way or another, through deeds or behaviour, that suspicion, those insults that were made to them in the historical past by the government of the 'great nation'" (Karpov, 2012, p. 300).

These strategies were fabricated with the aim to integrate the ethnic groups alienated by the policies of the previous regime, and to fortify the sense of belonging to an organic Soviet society which had emerged from a single social class. They characterized the centre-periphery relations between the 1920s and 1930s having taken the form of a dialogue in which the local leaders became the main tools in managing the formation of ethnic regions. Given the fact that the resources were ideologically loaded, and the configuration of the new state was based on a hierarchy with proportional access to advantages, the political status of the federal structures sparked competitive animosities among ethnic groups, in striking disaccord with their initial plans for homogenisation. As state structures became increasingly solid, the nationalities issue turned into a political resource for both the central leaders and the local nomenclature represented by the national elites. The interplay of these political strategies, combined with the ideological goal to spread communism beyond the western border and regain Bessarabia, as well as the existing forms of multiple identities, marked the process of Moldovan nation-building in the MASSR.

In accordance with the policies of the indigenization or *korenizatsiya*,⁶ which characterized the 1920s, a new Moldovan identity, distinct and separate from that of Bessarabia, was starting to build up. Moreover, the project known as "Moldovenization" suited down to the ground Moscow's plans to secure a political buffer against Romanian influence among Moldovan speakers. Throughout the 1920s, the debates between the linguists and the historians, in conjunction with the belief of certain people in saving the Bessarabians from the oppression of Bucharest landlord-capitalism, moulded the ideology of the MASSR national distinctiveness (King, 2000, p. 63).

It is important to note that the significance of present-day Transnistria as borderland had been analysed by the communist leadership long before the establishment of the MASSR and the implementation of *korenizatsiya*. Among the great actors of the nationalities policy in the region, the main debate took place between the Romanian Communist émigrés (the so-called "initiative group" represented by A. Bădulescu, I. Dic, T. Chioran, A. Nicolau and others-

⁵ In the Tsarist Russia, the big ethnic groups were distinguished based on their religious affiliation. The Russian Orthodoxy was seen as one of the main pillars of state's ideology and a sign of deep loyalty to the Russian state. Consequently, the exonym *Inover* ("of a different religion") was used for stressing the religious differences, in the same way as *Inorod* ("of a different kin") was defining the differences between the Russians and the other three big nationalities inside the empire: the Velikorussians, the Malorussians, and the Belorussians. Here, the term *Inorod* indicates all non-Russian nationalities.

⁶ "Korenizatsia" or *indigenization* represented a pragmatic policy through which the Soviet power was ensuring its consolidation over the ex-political subjects of the Russian Empire. The etymology of the word is related to *koren`* (root). The policy was characterized by the centre's support for local language and culture, ethnic identities and autochthonous leaders, in order to accommodate the various ethnic groups inside the new Soviet state and party apparatus.

Galuschchenko, 2014, p. 203), mostly based in Moscow, and the local (Soviet Moldovan) communists such as G. Staryi, I. Badeev and A. Grinstein. Their conflicting views on the directions of the Soviet nationalities issues in the region can be roughly described by their general opposing positions on the Moldovan identity.

While the so-called “Romanianizers” argued the necessity for the region to follow the already Romanianized Bessarabian language as a preliminary step in the future unification of the two provinces, the “Moldovanizers” stressed the distinctiveness of Transnistria compared to Bessarabia in the same way as the Russians differed from Ukraine or Belarus (Voronovici, 2010, pp. 64-66). The final resolution on the issue was adopted at the Forth Session of the Odessa Gubkom, where the representative of the Central Committee of the CP (b) U – the Communist Party (Bolshevik) of Ukraine – and the Government of the Ukrainian SSR, V.P. Zatonskii, voiced the official position of the Ukrainian authorities in the debate. Accordingly, Zatonskii underlined that the creation of the Autonomous Moldova inside Soviet Ukraine was a “movement for the revival of the Moldovan nation,” which, among other nations, lived under oppression of the Romanian Kingdom (Voronovici, 2010, p. 68). The lack of trust in the radical projects of the Romanian émigrés clarified the position of the Ukrainian leaders that any comparisons between the Moldovans and the Romanians were not accepted.

The new programme of political culture stressed the distinctiveness of the true Moldovan language written in Cyrillic script as opposed to modern Romanian, which had widened the gap between the so-called bourgeois exploiters and the peasants. Between 1920 and 1930, the debate among various local scholars such as Pavel Chior, Gabriel Buciușcanu and Leonid Madan was focused on promoting the true Moldovan cultural and linguistic peculiarities. For ideological purpose, the Moscow linguist M.V. Sergievskii mapped two dialectal regions in the republic and, as Chior stressed, the dialect spoken in central Bessarabia was not only the most common among the Moldovan speakers, but choosing it as the literary base – as opposed to a form used in Transnistria only – would facilitate the national liberation of all Moldovans (King, 2000, p. 65). However, as Charles King has underlined, the Cyrillic alphabet had never been imposed on the local population, its rationale deriving rather from Bessarabia’s past (King, 2000, p. 65). Since the Bessarabians had been part of the Tsarist Empire before their union with Greater Romania, they missed the standardization and the Latinization of the Romanian language and script; consequently, literary Romanian was not very familiar in Transnistria and Bessarabia.

At the same time, the resolute campaign for building a distinct Moldovan language, opposed to Romanian, stressed the fact that the process was artificial and lacked documentary base: except from its Cyrillic script, Buciușcanu’s grammar was almost identical with the Romanian grammars published in the same period. Likewise, Leonid Madan’s efforts to demonstrate the specificity of the local tongue and identity were accompanied by the anthropometric investigations, apparently confirmed by a group of experts. As it follows, they pointed out the Moldovan profile: “oblong cranial structure” and “brown type with chestnut hair similar to the northern Russians”. In contrast, the Romanians were the “dark type” and “round-headed” (King, 2000, p. 68). In line with the general trend in the USSR, the language theories were mere fabrications while their experts were submissively toeing the party’s line⁷ (Chelaru, 2019, p. 64). In the case of Transnistria, they played an important role in ingraining not only the seeds of territoriality, but also the idea that the Moldovan Transnistrians are the “true” Moldovans –

⁷ The so-called Soviet experts, who made their careers through political obedience and ideological cooperation, had been very common during Stalin’s period to resolve the nationalities question, but not only. A similar case took place in Abkhazia, when the theories of Pavle Ingorovka demonstrated the Georgian origins of the Abkhaz (Chelaru, 2019, p. 64).

a discourse much exploited in the future frozen conflict’s debate (cf. Centre for Geopolitical Studies, 2007, p. 6).

The idea of building the national identity aimed to educate the autochthonous peasants and co-opt them into state and party apparatus. Apart from that, the programme aimed at combating illiteracy – particularly among women – and at promoting education in the autochthonous language; raising revolutionary consciousness and disseminating socialism through native languages implied various political educational programmes, as well as campaigns of instructing the illiterates. As in most parts of the USSR, the campaign for Sovietizing the masses included a range of difficult to achieve and contradictory goals; not to mention that the implementation of such cumbersome policies needed not only good strategies and coordination, but also an ethnic social base, which the minority of the Moldovan ethnic group could not provide.

Despite the programme’s official goal, the commission for Moldovenization established in Balta in 1925 was additionally named “and Ukrainization,” purportedly to avoid any language distress among the ethnic Ukrainians (Gribincea, Gribincea & Şişcanu, 2004, p. 7). Considering the large number of ethnic Ukrainians in the area – not to mention the general trend of *korenizatsia* in which the Ukrainian schools in MASSR had been also Ukrainianized during Ukraine’s own indigenization campaign prior to 1924 – and the scarcity of Moldovan teachers, the pre-eminence of the Ukrainian population prevented the Moldovan from having become the language of instruction.

MOLDOVANIZATION, LATINIZATION AND THE GREAT TERROR (1930-1940)

The indigenization campaign which followed the creation of the USSR constituted an accommodating strategy for the ethnic minorities of the ex-empire; its final aim was to engage the non-Russian groups in building socialism in the USSR (Gribincea, Gribincea & Şişcanu, 2004, p. 4). Peter Kenez noticed that in the process of consolidating the newly-constituted state, Russian nationalism was seen perhaps more dangerous than the nationalism of minorities. The task was thus to increase the level of the “backward” people to the level of the Russians as the precondition for a genuine sense of Soviet nationalism (Kenez, 2007, p. 57).

However, in the 1930s, Stalin’s interest switched from the Great Russian Chauvinism as the main menace to the Soviet state to a national project aimed at forging a new Soviet nation defined as “a historically constituted, stable community of people, formed on the basis of a common language, territory, economic life, and psychological make-up manifested in a common culture” (Stalin, 1913, unnumbered page). The implementation of the project aimed at achieving cultural homogeneity manifested through what Stalin perceived as policies of convergence (*sblizhenie*) and fusion (*sliyanie*) of the nations. Owing to the fact that *korenizatsia* was not officially eliminated as a nation-building programme, these two policies overlapped in a conflicting dialogue between the central authorities and the local leaders. The degree of dissension varied according to the peculiarities of each national unit. Naturally, the new policy was welcomed in the most Russified regions and the MASSR was one of them. Even before the official political change, all signs indicated that Moldovenization and the strive for building a Moldovan identity in the region did not live up to expectations. Already in the early 1930s, the radical experimentations in the sphere of the nationality policies – such as the creation of the languages and national symbols, as well as open debates on the nationality

issues –, typical of *korenizatsia* in its heyday, started to be condemned by the Soviet authorities (Voronovici, 2010, pp. 80-81).

The fear among the Moldovan cultural-planners that local policies would interfere with the central norms had long existed, since the work of the Moldovan Scientific Committee – the first scientific body in the MASSR, led by Pavel Chior – had been often under debate in the 1920s. In line with the new trend of the 1930s, the criticism of local nationalism increased. According to a special resolution of the Ukrainian Central Committee in February 1930, based on the fact that the Moldovans could not claim their own national culture, the aim of building the Moldovan culture and identity had to be put off in order to draw attention to more important goals.

A full-scale criticism was published in September 1930 in “Plugarul roș.” It pointed out the committee’s distancing itself from the masses: having worked on puzzling linguistic and ethnographic issues, the specialists neglected other important practical tasks, as well as the political aspect of their work. The replacement of Pavel Chior with Ivan Ocinschi in 1931 initiated a campaign of assault against the other members of the Scientific Committee; it ended up with the committee’s full subordination to the local government (King, 2000, p. 79-80). In addition, Madan’s grammar⁸ was denounced, its author and the whole leadership of the Scientific Committee were repressed as counter-revolutionaries (Gribincea, Gribincea & Șișcanu, 2004, p. 11).

Moreover, in February 1932, a party resolution announced the transition to the Latin alphabet and called on the Moldovan local cadres to focus their work on enriching the Moldovan language with words accepted by all Romanians, including the Moldovans of MASSR. Contrary to *korenizatsia*, the new cultural policy promoted the literary standard model of the language which corresponded to the region stretching from Dnestr River westward to the Carpathian Mountains. Briefly, the new official language in the MASSR was in no way different than the language spoken in Romania. Owing to the fact that the Latin script was also introduced in other regions of the USSR (Gribincea, Gribincea & Șișcanu, 2004, p. 15),⁹ the cultural shift in the MASSR could have been part of a general trend.

Nevertheless, the reversal of the cultural policy concerning the nationalities question indicated a general volte-face for the Soviet Union and there are several theories trying to explain this shift. Perhaps the most common one in the case of the MASSR is related to Soviet expansionism and the Bessarabian question. Since the Moldovenization carried out during the first years of the *korenizatsia* stressed the differences between Romanian Bessarabia and MASSR, the new policy would have been more suitable as a strategy to approach and then regain the lost province. Unattested sources claim that Stalin himself had enforced the new policy (King, 2000, p. 82; Voronovici, 2010, pp. 82-83). Given the Bessarabian question and the fact that Soviet diplomacy considered that the USSR was at war with Romania (Voronovici, 2010, p. 85) – Romania did not withdraw its troops from Bessarabia as the Averescu-Racovsky agreement had stipulated – such a scenario was highly likely.

⁸ Buciușcanu’s grammar was denounced in January 1926. Among its failures was the fact that it had contained ideological mistakes.

⁹ The Latinization had been adopted in many other countries of the USSR such as: Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, Dagesta, Kazakhstan, etc. The measure was taken in order to combat the Islamic influence in the Soviet Asia. Lenin himself had seen the replacement of the Arab script with the Latin as a revolution in the East.

However, the new change signalled undeniably that *korenizatsia* became obsolete and the Moldovanization was no longer favoured. According to another approach, the Soviet authorities might have resorted to the Latinization due to a general fear of war, in the context of the inevitable confrontation between capitalism and socialism (Voronovici, 2010, pp. 86-90). Since the Moldovanizers failed in their project, the new strategic planning was focused on consolidating the Soviet power in the borderlands, and reinstating the strength of the Soviet propaganda in Bessarabia through a different, linguistically comprehensible programme (Voronovici, 2010, p. 91). The Latinization policy soon faced the same burdensome process as Moldovanization. Apart from the scarcity of resources, it was difficult to implement the campaign in the rural areas. The lack of capital and trained teachers was often reported along with low attendance figures and little interest on the part of the local population.

In conjunction with the collectivization campaign, the socio-political atmosphere in the countryside was strikingly bleak. The forced collectivization imposed equally in the Soviet Ukraine and the MASSR between 1931 and 1932 provoked mass hunger among the population, with its peak in 1932-1933 (Applebaum, 2017). At the end of the spring of 1932, it was already known that 25,300 of the inhabitants of the MASSR were starving. In less than two months, the number doubled. There are sources claiming that more than half of the region’s population was suffering from hunger (Cașu, 2015, p. 60). Starting with the autumn of 1931, the immigration across the Dnestr increased dramatically. In March 1932, the Romanian press was reporting a number of twenty thousand immigrants from MASSR (Galuschchenko, 2008, p. 143). Considering the MASSR’s role as Romania’s borderland, the issue became particularly sensitive for MASSR authorities. The emigration and rebellious attitudes of the peasants were central topics of the party debates (Voronovici, 2010, pp. 89-90).

In the same manner, the new policy of Latinization encountered hostility at higher levels – the Russian pedagogues and the members of the Scientific Committee were both condemning the artificiality and the incomprehension of the new language (Gribincea, Gribincea & Șișcanu, 2004, pp. 16-17). Similar to the previous campaign during *korenizatsia*, the Moldovan leadership ended up harshly criticized by the Ukrainian centre for the inability to carry out “the Latinization of the alphabet and the Romanianization of the language” (King, 2000, p. 84). In addition, the Latinization programme was so fierce in condemning the Moldovanization that it embraced the theory of the so-called “literary legacy” – the works of the Romanian classic writers (George Coșbuc, Mihai Eminescu, Vasile Alecsandri, etc.) were adopted as iconic for the Soviet literature of the MASSR.

Generally speaking, the Latinization campaign stood in deep contrast with the previous cultural policy, despite its real impact on the social level. Also, it is hard to deny that all the official measures taken to support this policy were not promoting an essentially Romanian culture. There are even views according to which the process of Latinization helped to preserve the Romanian identity among the Romanian people of Transnistria and confirmed their belonging to the Romanian nation. This fact had presumably alerted the Soviet authorities which adopted new counteractive measures in the MASSR (Gribincea, Gribincea & Șișcanu, 2004, p. 19). Considering the socio-political situation on a larger-scale, though, the new measures taken in the MASSR in 1937 could be explained through the general political duress having taking place in that period in the USSR. The Great Purge¹⁰ with its outrageous manifestations was carried out across the Soviet Union and did not spare the MASSR either.

¹⁰ The Great Purge (or the Great Terror) represented a campaign of political repression in the USSR from 1936 to 1938. It comprised genocidal actions against the ethnic minorities, but also large-scale

It is noteworthy that the role of the MASSR as borderland had grown more nuanced in the aftermath of the USSR’s political change of heart. Stalin’s suspicious policies, looming large after Kirov’s death¹¹ in 1934, reached also the nationalities issue. Combined with various local policies concerning ethnic groups – as a consequence of the First Five Year Plan and the insecurities which accompanied its disastrous effects – large scale resettlement campaigns, disguised under different official explanations (Chelaru, 2019, pp. 63-64; Haindrava, 2011),¹² were targeting particularly the “dubious” people.¹³ Considering its geographical position, its ethnic structure in conjunction with its previous cultural policies, but most importantly, its stake in Moscow’s plans to regain Bessarabia, the MASSR could have signalled a certain need for vigilance on the part of the Soviet authorities.

However, the campaign against the nationalities cannot be entirely put down to the vulnerability of the borderlands, in the same way as the denouncement of the Latinization programme in the MASSR cannot be totally explained by its common frontier with Romania. The borderlands, though, could have increased the degree of suspicion which characterized the period of the Great Purge, and have offered additional “evidence” and justification for this downright carnage. The peoples of the borderlands, such as the Poles, the Finns, the Koreans, but not only, were especially liable to suspicion; but so were the party leadership, the various “counter-revolutionaries,” “enemies of the people,” “foreign spies” and many other categories which could serve the official aim to cleanse the state of subversive elements.

Likewise, the Soviets might have not followed any particular ethnic, historical or any other type of logic when they carried out such policies in the MASSR, but rather used strategic considerations, or just complied with the general political trend of that time in the USSR. However, due to the border position, the purges in the party apparatus hit a large number of the Romanian and Bessarabian émigrés. In addition, the contradictory views on the identity issue in the MASSR became the target of the mass purges (Voronovici, 2010, p. 96). From the total (unknown) number of those arrested on 17 August 1937, in accordance with the so-called “Romanian operation,” 35 people confessed to belonging to a Romanian espionage group and to their cooperation with the Romanian “Siguranța.” The most prominent representatives among them were: Ivan Krivorukov – as member of the Bessarabian Sfatul Țării between 1917 and 1918, he opposed Bessarabia’s union with Romania; Dumitru Prestescu – the head of the Pedagogical Institute in Tiraspol, and Pavel Chior – the ex-party secretary of Rybnitsa raion, as well as the ex-secretary of MASSR Komsomol (the communist youth) organization. All confessed to having been part of a nationalistic plot led by Staryi (Cașu, 2015, pp. 88-89).

repression against the peasantry, the political officials, and the society in general. The number of its victims varies between 600,000 and 1,200,000.

¹¹ Sergey Kirov (Kostrikov) was a Soviet politician and old Bolshevik assassinated in December 1934. After his death, political repression escalated greatly in the USSR.

¹² In 1937, as part of a discriminatory campaign against the Abkhaz ethnic group, massive groups of Svans and Mingrelians (Georgian ethnic groups) were relocated in the Autonomous Republic of Abkhazia inside the SSR Georgia, allegedly in order to help working the agricultural fields. Considering the actual scarcity of the Abkhaz agricultural lands, and the general political attitudes against the Abkhaz, the measures were taken in accordance with the Georgianization campaign carried out by Lavrenti Beria, the secretary of the Communist Party of Transcaucasia.

¹³ When reassessing the issue of the forced migration imposed on various ethnic groups in the USSR, Pavel Polian argues that the treatment of each nationality was based on their political profile as “loyal” or “disloyal” ethnic groups. This was the case of the Ossetians to the detriment of the Vainakh (the Chechen ethnic groups) peoples, such as the Ingush (Polian, 2001; De Waal, 2010, p. 136).

What is more, the culprits in the “Romanian operation” (the executed ones, as well as those sentenced to imprisonment), were charged with different accusations. Between January and August 1938, the militia and political police of the MASSR processed 3,374 people, from which 1,010 as Romanian counter-revolutionary elements, engaged in espionage for Romania. Also, 614 were accused of Ukrainian nationalism, and 374 prosecuted as German spies; 170 – as Polish spies, 140 – as ex-social-revolutionaries, 32 – as ex-Mensheviks, and 31 – as Trotskyists and rightist elements; again, 198 were charged with Zionism, and 160 – with anti-Soviet agitation (Cașu, 2015, pp. 88-89). The range of accusations inside the same group points out the inconsistency and arbitrariness of the whole campaign.

For most officials, the readoption of the Cyrillic script in 1937 represented an easy way to accomplish the centre’s task to catch out “the enemies of the people.” An informative letter addressed to Georgy Malenkov in August 1937, after the campaign of unmasking the enemies of the people inside the party organization of MASSR, stated that “the sectors of the cultural and national construction proved to be totally attacked by the enemies” (Gribincea, Gribincea & Șișcanu, 2004, p. 19). According to the letter sent to the Central Committee of the Communist Party (Bolshevik), this harmful activity, led at the State Publishing House, had a double aim: to prevent the people from instructing themselves, both politically and literarily; and to educate the Moldovan youth in the spirit of Romanian nationalism.

Moreover, there is evidence suggesting that the initiative to restore the Cyrillic alphabet belonged to the party leadership in Tiraspol, in order to put an end to the Romanianization campaign in the MASSR. The decision was further approved by the Ukrainian party leadership, especially by Nikita S. Khrushchev (Gribincea, Gribincea & Șișcanu, 2004, p. 19). If the change was indeed a local request and not a central imposition, it rather indicated a pre-emptive action in the wake of the general terror of the Great Purges, than a strategic measure which took into account the borderland rationale. The theory is even more plausible, considering that during the Great Purges in the MASSR, the Latinizers and their previous counterparts, the Moldovenizers, were equally targeted. As across the Soviet Union at that time, the victims of the Purges could have been the same people who denounced the recently prosecuted person.

Another theory, related to the same context, might be the interethnic animosities within the local leadership, exploited against the backdrop of the various nationality policies. As earlier argued in this paper, the project of founding the autonomous Moldovan republic within the Ukrainian USSR met the opposition of the Ukrainian political elite. Also, the mismanagement and the clash of interests between the Ukrainians and the Moldovans during *korenizatsia* sparked further fears. Since the defamation of the Latinization campaign was officially encouraged in order to denounce the “wreckers” of Socialism, it could have also served as the easiest way to protect various interests of the local officials inside the party and the state apparatus. However, by the second half of 1937, out of the nine Moldovan members of the Regional Committee of the Communist Party (Bolshevik) of Ukraine, only one was still in charge; gradually all the MASSR’s leadership was replaced with apparatchiki from the Ukrainian SSR (Voronovici, 2010, p. 97). Up until June 1940, the development of Moldovan local culture was still carried out by the leaders of the MASSR, yet any extravagant national policies were kept at bay.

CONCLUSIONS

As Natalia Cojocaru has rightly stressed, naming “Moldovan” the ex-autonomous republic inside the Ukrainian SSR was nonsense, since “neither the territory of the contemporary Transnistria, nor the lands to its east, had any relation to the area called ‘Moldova’” (Cojocaru, 2006, p. 263). Likewise, when the Moldovan SSR was constituted on 2 August 1940, it comprised Bessarabia and only six out of the thirteen *raions* of the MASSR. It is believed that the leadership in Kremlin did not follow any particular ethnic, historical or cultural logic in the creation of the new Soviet republic, but rather relied on strategic considerations (Țicu, 2016, p. 55). Strategic considerations are usually invoked when trying to explain the reasons which accompanied the creation of the MASSR.

Nevertheless, in this article, I pointed out the region’s role as borderland in conjunction with the general policies of the USSR. As it follows, despite its geopolitical set-up in the Soviet state’s machinery, it would be wrong to reduce the entire existence of the autonomous republic to a mere project of regaining a lost territory. Such a theory would be equally scant and erroneous as it defies the facts and downplays the complexity of the issue. There is no doubt that MASSR was founded as a springboard to restore Bessarabia and to disseminate communism outside the borders of the Soviet Union. But the inconsistency and mismanagement of the policies carried out throughout its existence were typical for the entire Soviet system, and not an isolated programme, especially designated to serve some expansionistic purposes. They were rather part of the Soviet behemoth, which was firstly trying not to fall apart at the seams and then not to lose the tight grip on socialism.

The existence of the first Moldovan political-administrative unit within the USSR coincided with the latter’s most difficult and ferocious period. Internally, the Soviet state was not only ravaged by the chaos which followed the civil war, but also drained of all available resources in the earnest endeavour of the new political leadership to build communism. On the left bank of the Dnestr River, in contemporary Transnistria, the echo of the Soviet policies took the form of the famine in 1921-1922 and 1924-1926. The first five-year plan followed in line with the general Soviet political trend; in its context, the collectivization campaign (1929-1933) unleashed unprecedented violence and terror in the MASSR. Also, the mass famine which broke out in 1932-1933 was soon to be followed by the Great Terror and high Stalinism. Evidently, all these macro-political programmes reached the MASSR and, combined with its peculiarities and political profile, the local policies manifested accordingly. Along with the indigenization (the Moldovanization) and the Latinization, the policies carried out in the MASSR had equally aimed to align the region to the general political trend, and to use it as a strategic tool in the fight against Romania. MASSR’s fate inside the Soviet Union, though, had been decisively determined by its role as borderland.

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