



TRANSNISTRIA FROM THE FORMATION OF THE MOLDAVIAN AUTONOMOUS SOVIET SOCIALIST REPUBLIC TO ITS INTEGRATION INTO THE MOLDAVIAN SOVIET SOCIALIST REPUBLIC (1924-1940)

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The creation of autonomous regions on the territory of the union republics of the newly created Soviet state was a practice often used by the communist regime to resubordinate the provinces lost at the end of the First World War. In order to theoretically preserve the chance to integrate the former province of Bessarabia into the new empire during 1924, the new Kremlin leader Joseph Stalin decided to form a republic and a new people, the Moldavian SSR and the Moldavian people distinct from the Romanian one. This decision proved to be catastrophic for the Romanians living in Bessarabia over the next 100 years, who in this way could be forced to link their fate to Russia.

Keywords: *Transnistria; autonomous republic; Soviet; communism; Moldovenism.*

Introduction

The victory of the Bolsheviks in the civil war and the establishment of the USSR marked the beginning of a new era of territorial expansion. Despite heroic resistance from the peoples of the Caucasus and Central Asia, the new political leadership in Moscow was determined to restore the pre-war borders in the shortest

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possible time. The security guarantees offered by France and England to the newly created states of Central and Eastern Europe made it much more difficult to regain this area. Poland, Finland, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia had been reconstituted in this part of Europe and the former governorate of Bessarabia had been integrated into the borders of Greater Romania Sanborn Joshua 2014, 218.).

1. The international context that favored the formation of the Moldavian RSSA

The loss of the province between the Prut and the Dniester, for a long time considered to be a Russian outpost in the south-eastern part of Europe, has put a stop for the time being to Russia's plan to extend its influence to the Balkans (Cojocaru Gheorghe 2009, 93). Aware of the risk of losing this territory and unable to organise a direct military intervention, the Bolsheviks tried since the end of 1917 by various means to prevent the separation of Bessarabia from the Russian Empire. Even though during the entire period of Russian rule there was no concern for preserving the national identity of the "Moldavian people" living on both sides of the Dniester, a first congress of Moldavians was held in Tiraspol on 17-18 December 1917. Representatives of the Moldavians in Transnistria were pressing for: "We wish to unite with our brothers in Moldova! We want to unite with Bessarabia!" (Stepaniuc Victor 2005, 256). After the unification of Bessarabia with Romania, for a short time on the left bank of the Dniester, a territorial administrative structure without international recognition came into being called the Basarabian Soviet Socialist Republic. This self-proclaimed republic came into being in May 1919 and had an ephemeral existence, disappearing in the turmoil of the Russian civil war as a result of military intervention by officers loyal to the Russian monarchy (White Army) (Stepaniuc 2017, 311). However, in 1921, once the civil war was over, the supposed "popular movement" in Tiraspol resumed its activity, aiming to create a counterweight to the Romanian national movement that had brought about the unification of the province with the Romanian kingdom. This movement was a product of the interventionism of the new Bolshevik leadership, which sought to create dissension in territories it could no longer control militarily, so that it could later organise movements to destabilise the states on the borders of the future Soviet empire.

The unification of Bessarabia with Romania was a momentary defeat for the Soviet authorities, who at that time were economically and politically weakened. This "shortcoming" was carefully analysed and rapid solutions were sought to recapture this area without coming into direct military conflict with the European powers that guaranteed the Romanian borders. From 7 March 1924 the new authorities in Moscow developed a strategy for regaining influence in Romanian Bessarabia. The Kremlin leadership ordered the Political Bureau of the Central Committee of the



Ukrainian Communist Party (CC of the Communist Party of Ukraine) to delimit the territory of Ukraine as the new Autonomous Republic of Moldavia (Cojocaru 2021, 99). The same strategy was also used to take over important territories from Poland and Finland. On the territory close to the borders it was decided to create the autonomous republics of Karelia and Belarus.

Soviet Russia never recognized the union of Bessarabia with Romania and tried to take advantage of the misunderstandings that had formed in the camp of the Western powers. They speculated that Japan, one of the great victorious powers in the First World War, had refused to ratify the provisions of the Treaty of Paris signed on 28 October 1920 by France, Great Britain and Italy. This document legally regulated the de facto situation that had arisen as a result of the decision recognising the province's membership of Romania. Aware of the need to normalise relations with the newly created Soviet state, the Romanian government initiated several rounds of negotiations aimed at gaining recognition for the new political reality. The two sides met in Warsaw from 22 September to 25 October 1921 (Cojocaru 2021, 100) and in Geneva from 10 April to 19 May 1922 (Moraru 2016, 91), but the result was the same, the Soviet side rejected any argument by which the new border between the two states could be recognised. The last round of negotiations preceding the formation of the Moldavian ASSR was held in Vienna on 27 March 2 April 1924 (Șișicanu Daniela and Stănescu Manuel 1924, 19). The chairman of the Soviet delegation N. Krestinskii made several demands which the Romanian side considered unacceptable. As a result, Romanian-Soviet relations remained frozen throughout the interwar period, during which time the Soviet side continued to carry out a number of subversive activities on the territory of Bessarabia.

2. The Establishment of the Moldavian ASSR

Through these new republics, the Soviets wanted to create an attractive model of social space for the “peoples” incorporated into the nation states on the western border of the USSR, on the basis of which they could organise themselves politically and demand the right to self-determination. The members of the initiative group led by the former secretary of the Romanian Revolutionary Military Committee, Ion Dic (Ion Dicescu) (Șișicanu 1924, 158), believed that the Moldavian ASSR would succeed in: “shaking the unity of Greater Romania” and “serve as an additional impetus for the tendency of the newly joined provinces to national self-determination. And the (state) organization of the national minorities (Bulgarians and Gagauz), who will live within the boundaries of the future Moldavian Republic, will serve as an example for the national minorities populating the Romanian Kingdom” (Cojocaru 2021, 91-96). The idea of organising this republic on Ukrainian territory had its critics, one of the most vocal being the People's Commissar for Foreign Affairs,



Cicerin, who warned that the identification of such a large number of citizens of Moldavian origin would only support the ideas of continuity of the Romanian people in this area and encourage “Romanian chauvinism”: “The formation of the MASSR at this time is premature, because it will generate expansionist tendencies of Romanian chauvinism. The discovery of such a large number of Moldovans, i.e. Romanians, in Ukrainian territory will strengthen the position of Romanians in the dispute over the Bessarabian question” (Cojocaru 2009, 16). In this way the Soviet Commissar indirectly acknowledges the Romanian origin of the Transnistrian Moldovans and draws attention to the fears the Soviets had at that time about the future of Bessarabia.

However, the plan set in Moscow went ahead and step by step the elements that the regime thought it would need in its future endeavours were realised. An essential element of the political change they were seeking to bring about was the future “hatchet men”, the activists who would be sent to the territory of neighbouring states. The ideological training of the future party cadres who would operate in the Central European states was carried out at the Moscow-based Communist University of National Minorities of the West. Among the obligatory ideas introduced in the lessons for training future party cadres were those arguing for the need to establish autonomous regions. On 6 December 1924 in a document addressed to Gr. Starii (Țicu, 2021, IV) it was stated that : “by the formation of the Moldavian Republic we must understand the organization of an outpost for the offensive against Romania. The Moldavian Republic must be given back a more or less Romanian character, so that we can use it to oppose two regimes of one and the same people, the peasantry of Bessarabia and Romania will have the opportunity to see and judge how their brothers live across the Dniester” (Cojocaru 2009, 195).

Although the document of the initiative group (consisting of Gr. Cotovschi, I. Dic Dicescu, P. Tkacenko, A. Nicolau) (Burlacu and Cojocaru 2019, 99) which proposed the establishment of the new territorial administrative unit was handed over to General Mihail Frunze on 4 February and was carefully examined by the Central Comitee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union March 1924, the Moldavian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic came into being only on 29 July 1924. The new territorial administrative unit acquired the status of an autonomous republic within the Ukrainian Soviet state (Rotari Ludmila 2004, 267). There were voices, especially from Kiev representatives, calling for its establishment only with the status of an autonomous region. The new autonomous republic with its capital in the city of Balta (the cities of Ananiev and Birzula have also been proposed for capital status) (Popa, Ioan and Popa, Luiza 2012, 86), initially included 12 districts with an area of 8100 km² (Burlacu and Cojocaru 2019, 102). On 29 September 1926 by a decision of the CEC of Ukraine the number of districts was increased to 14 (Camenca and Veliko-Kosnitsky districts which had previously been part of Podolia Governorate



and Ananiev, Barzula, Kruteni, Dubasari, Grigoriopol, Ribnitsa, Slobzia, Stavrov and Tiraspol districts which had been part of Odessa Governorate, adding about 2000 square kilometres. Throughout the 1920s, several changes to the republic's borders continued to be made, and in Timiș the districts of Valea-Hoțului and Balta (the villages of Pașițel, Ghidirim, Baital) were added, increasing its territory to about 8300 km². The purpose for which the new republic was formed was evident from the very first days of its existence. On October 26, 1924 the Ukrainian SSR People's Commissar of Justice, Mykola Skrypnyk that the western border of the Moldavian ASSR was only a temporary one: "We consider not the Dniester but the Prut as the border (...) On our map Bessarabia is marked with a red line, for Bessarabia must become an inseparable part of the Moldavian SSR" (Rotari 2004, 269).

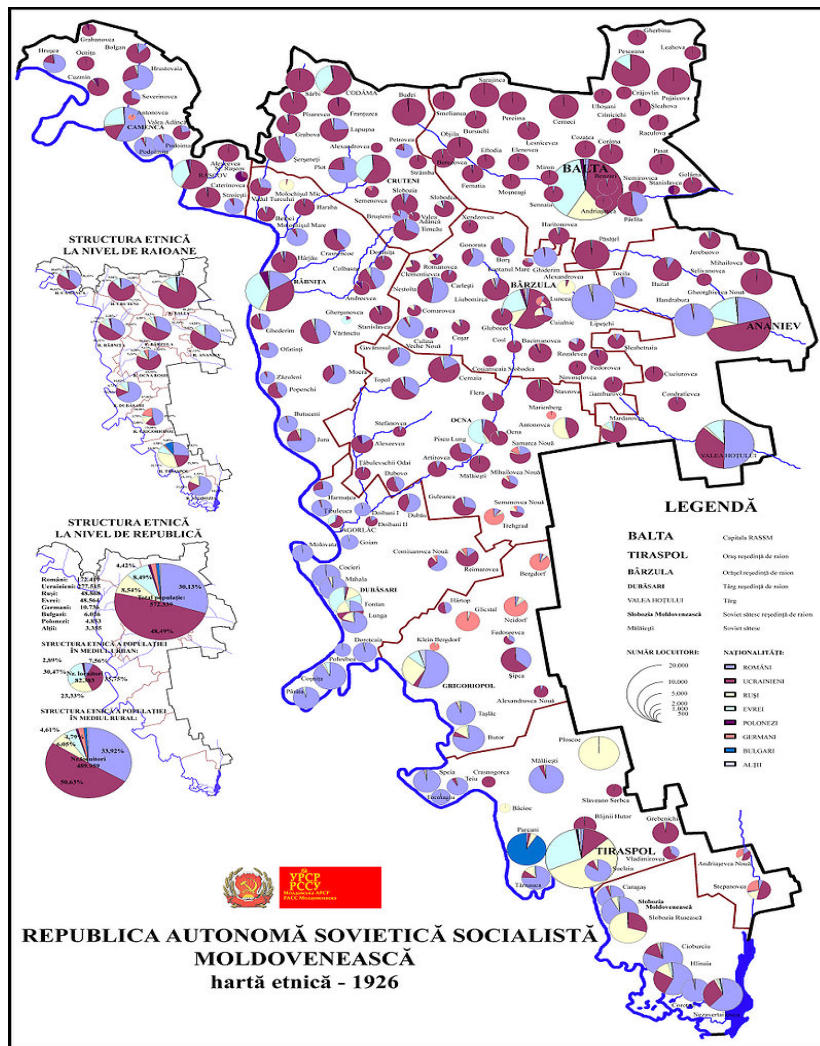


Figure no. 1: Ethnic map of Moldavian SSR



In terms of the ethnic structure of the new republic, the Romanian (Moldavian) element represented only 31.6%, which proves the fragility of this Stalinist construct. The only districts with a majority Romanian population were Ribnitsa (52%), Dubasari (58%), Tiraspol (an overwhelming majority not specified) and Ananiv (53%), located in the immediate vicinity of the Dniester (Nistor Ion 1939, 19). The majority ethnic group was Ukrainians 45.5%, especially in the eastern districts, which for this reason from 1929 were reintegrated into the Ukrainian SSR. Alongside Romanians and Ukrainians, Russians (9.7%), Jews (7.8%) and ethnic Germans (2.2%) also lived in the new republic (Pântea Călin 2008, 170). An important point to note is that despite official declarations to create an autonomous republic for Moldavians living on Soviet territory, almost half of the total number remained outside the borders established in 1924. According to the 1926 census, out of approximately 283,000 Moldavians living on Soviet territory, of which approximately 257,800 on Ukrainian territory, only 172,300 were integrated into the administrative boundaries of the new republic (Burlacu and Cojocaru 2019, 103).

Until its integration into the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic created after the occupation of Romanian Bessarabia in 1940, the territory of the newly formed republic underwent several changes. Taking into account the error in the ethnic structure of the new republic, the Soviet authorities decided to reduce its territory and reintegrate the eastern districts inhabited mainly by Ukrainians into the Ukrainian SSR. Following these changes the final territory that was unified with Bessarabia in 1940 had an area of only 4,118 km², where, despite the will of Soviet officials, the “Moldavian” population continued to be a minority (Covalski Stanislav and Leanca Viorica June 2014, 243).

3. The Thesis of “Moldovenism” as a Component of Stalinist Repression to Transform the Social Space in Communist Moldavia

It is worth noting that the Romanian population, who lived predominantly in the rural areas of the province, was forced to form agricultural production associations (households), which immediately reduced agricultural productivity and generated vulnerability from the point of view of food resources. Repressive action against the Romanian population living in Transnistria was unleashed during 1929 with the forced collectivisation. Many of those who refused association were deported to Soviet territory. It is estimated that more than 3200 Romanian families were expropriated and forced to leave their villages and deported to regions such as Archangelsk, Tomsk (Popa and Popa 2012, 101) or Kazakhstan (where it is estimated that more than 2000 Transnistrian Romanian families arrived). There are indications that some of the Transnistrian Romanians were also deported to the islands of Solovet (Igor Cașu 2009, vol. 3-4) in the White Sea. The Romanian



community living on the territory of the Autonomous Republic was also affected by the Great Famine which was deliberately generated by the Soviet authorities in Ukraine in the period 1932-1933 (King Charles 1999, 51). It is estimated that about 18,000 people died in the Moldavian Autonomous Republic due to lack of food (Dragnev D., Iarkutchi I., Chirtoagă I. and Negru E. 2001, 167). A large part of the Transnistrian Romanians crossed the Dniester to take refuge in Romania. In the first part of 1932 alone, an estimated 4,500 people crossed the Romanian-Soviet border, drawing international public attention to the shortcomings of the Soviet regime. This prompted the Bolshevik authorities to institute a harsh blockade ordering the border guards to shoot at those forcing their way along the Dniester. Several locations are recorded where dozens of people were killed in cold blood (40 Romanians were killed near the village of Olanesti and about 100 others were machine-gunned near the town of Tighina) (Popa and Popa 2012, 102).

The main element to remember in the interwar evolution of Soviet Moldavia is the formation and promotion of the thesis of “*Moldovenism*”, which was supposed to justify the annexation of the territory between Prut and Dniester. The idea of the Moldavian language as distinct from Romanian was the result of a misinterpretation of the decision of the Chisinau County Council, which in December 1917 had decreed Moldavian language as the official language of the newly formed Moldavian Democratic Republic. Article 78 of the Draft Constitution of the Moldavian National Republic, which sought to neutralise the Russian language, stated: “The Moldavian language, the official language of the state, is a compulsory subject of instruction in all schools of the republic” (Stepaniuc Victor 2017, 304). This decision did not represent an official proclamation of a new national identity but was a compromise formula necessary at that time to identify the Romanian nation in Bessarabia as distinct from the allogenic population.

The idea of distinct identity was widely publicized by the Soviet authorities who were preparing the ground for the future annexation of Romanian Bessarabia. This desire was materialized in the immediate aftermath of the 1940 territorial abduction, when the thesis of Moldavianism became the main instrument of denationalization of the Romanian population of the province. In the 1925 constitution, along with the “Moldavian language”, the Russian and Ukrainian languages also received the status of official languages of the autonomous republic (Gribicea A., Gribicea M. and Şişicanu I. 2001, 9.). The theory that Moldovans have a distinct identity from the Romanian ethnic group was widely promoted by the Soviet regime, creating generations of people who cannot identify themselves as part of the Romanian people, despite clear evidence proving their similarities.

The use of the Cyrillic alphabet and the Slavonic language in the medieval religious writings of the two extra-Carpathian principalities became elements through which the ideologists who laid the foundations of this theory questioned



the very Latinity of the Romanian people. According to these supposed scholars, the Moldavians are a people of Slavic origin (Slav-Romanians [Prisac Lidia 2021, 169]) whose language was influenced by the Romanian culture and took on a number of its characteristics. The supposed Slavic origin of the Moldavians can be disproved from the outset by the translation of the Slavic word *bolohu* or *volohi* (Gherghel Ilie 1920, 4-8), which refers to the Wallachians (the name given to the Romans in the Middle Ages) who lived on the territory of the future principality of Moldavia. Since 1926 a committee of intellectuals was formed with the task of reconstructing the Moldavian language based on the Moldavian grammar spoken in Transnistria. The campaign entitled “Apple in the People” was aimed at identifying the words of the Moldavian language still in use in Romanian villages. They concluded that: “The Moldavian language, in which the Moldavian people speak, is the language of the people, the Romanian language” (Popa and Popa 2012, 115). As a result, on February 2, 1932, the Bureau of the Moldavian Regional Committee of the Communist Party of Ukraine approved the creation of the Moldavian language written with the Latin alphabet (Rotari 2004, 268). After 1937, however, due to the intensification of political repression, it was decided to return to the Cyrillic script. This idea, which had no scientific support whatsoever, remained in place for almost a hundred years when, at the behest of the famous Moldavian President Vladimir Voronin, historian Vasile Stati wrote the Romanian-Moldavian dictionary (Zahariuc Petronel 2009, 439). This volume contains a collection of archaisms that also exist in Romanian, the use of which has ceased over time as a result of the modernisation of the Romanian language through the adoption of neologisms.

4. Formation of the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic

An unfortunate chapter in the history of the territory between Prut and Dniester was written on August 2, 1940 (Dolghi Adrian 2020,168), immediately after the annexation of the province to the Soviet Union, when the borders of the new Soviet republic were redrawn. The integration of Bessarabia into the USSR involved several rounds of discussions at the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. The period when this province was part of the Greater Romania overlapped with the time when the former Tsarist empire was reorganised according to new principles, which generated administrative territorial units other than the traditional ones. The administrative and territorial reform of Bessarabia was somewhat delayed because of the war. In May 1948, the new authorities installed in Chisinau decided to abolish the counties and organise the new republic into districts (60 such territorial administrative units were created) (Cornea Sergiu 2010, 61). The Soviet Empire aimed more than its predecessor to assimilate the peoples within its borders and to form a mixture of peoples that would eventually lead to the formation of a new



type of man, the Soviet man. This could have been accelerated by redrawing the old ethnic borders and massive colonisation with an allogeneic population. This criterion was the basis for negotiations in the CC of the CPSU meeting on 2 July 1940 to discuss the drawing of the new borders of the future Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic. The discussions, under Stalin's direct leadership, were attended by V. Molotov, M. Kalinin, G. Kaganovich, A. Jdanov, A. Mikoian, A. Andreev, leading members of the Communist Party who proposed that: "*The CC of the Communist Party of Ukraine to form county committees of the Communist Party of Ukraine in Bessarabia and the northern part of Bukovina and county executive committees in the following counties: Chisinau, Hotin, Balti, Soroca, Orhei, Bender, Akerman, Ismail, Cahul and Chernivtsi*" (Moraru Anton 1995, 321) thus extending the authority of the Supreme Soviet and the Council of People's Commissars of the MASSR over the whole province. Discussions continued on 9 July 1940 with a new round establishing the need to reunite the Moldavian people on both sides of the Dniester.

Despite their intended aim to dismember Bessarabia, regardless of the ethnic composition of its various districts., the Soviets officially promoted a false principle formulated by the Soviet dictator Iosif Visarionovich Stalin himself that the Soviet Union is organized in ethnically homogeneous union republics. Stalin argued that "*The nation is a stable, historically developed community based on a common language, territory, economic life and psychological state manifested in a community of culture*" (Țicu Octavian 2021) and in this way it was justified that Bessarabia was attached to 6 of the 14 districts of the Moldavian ASSR. The intention of the Moldavian ASSR to join Bessarabia had been made public in an article published on 10 July 1940 in the newspaper Pravda (Pasat Valeriu 2011, 21). In the original proposed format Soviet Moldavia was to retain its entire territory and receive the 6 Transnistrian districts, thus increasing its area from 45.1 thousand km² (the area of Bessarabia) to about 53.6 thousand km². This could not have been possible, the approaches between the leaders in Chisinau and Kiev were particularly tough. The Ukrainians wanted to fully limit the new republic's access to the Danube and the Black Sea, while the leaders in Chisinau wanted borders based on the principle of majority nationhood. To achieve this goal, the Moldavian Communist leaders Pyotr Borodin, secretary of the Moldavian Regional Committee of the Communist Party of Ukraine; Tikhon Constantinov, chairman of the Council of People's Commissars of the Moldavian SSR, and Feodor Brovco, chairman of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the Moldavian SSR, submitted a letter to Stalin requesting that a much smaller portion of the southern part of the province be ceded to Ukraine than the Ukrainians had requested. The Moldavian Communists were seeking approval to include only three Transnistrian districts (Kodima, Balta and Peschansk) in the borders of the new republic, while in the south the boundary between Ukraine and Moldavia was to be made at the border of the Chilia Pond. This would have allowed



Bessarabia to keep the Reni, Bolgrad and Ismail plates, including the town of Ismail (Țîcu 2021). The exclusion of a significant part of the Transnistrian rayon was logical given the ethnic composition of this region. Despite the name Moldavian Republic, the Romanian (Moldavian) population in this area only represented 28.54%, while Russians and Ukrainians together formed a bloc of over 60% (Ukrainians 50.71% and Russians 10.23%) (Galuscenco Oleg 2001, 43).

On July 22, 1940, Mikhailo Greciuha, Chairman of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the Ukrainian SSR, countered the proposal of the Moldavian side by arguing that “a. it is not necessary to prove the advisability of annexing to the Ukrainian SSR the county of Hotin, where Ukrainians live”; b. Akkerman county “must also be fully annexed to the Ukrainian SSR”; c. Ismail county must be included in its entirety in Ukraine, because “Russians and Ukrainians cannot be separated here”; d. 10 of the 16 districts of the former Moldavian SSR (Țîcu 2021) must be included in the MSRSS”. The Ukrainian leader’s proposal won the day thanks to the strong support of Nikita Khrushchev, a leading member of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and Stalin’s future replacement. Perhaps the most shameful part of this was the desire to legitimise the territorial abduction by a ‘democratic’ decision of the peoples of Bessarabia and Northern Bukovina. The hypocrisy of the Soviets was evident when they selected the 32 delegates who were to attend the meetings and ratify the boundaries of the new republic. Of the entire delegation only 7 were Moldavians, the rest belonged to various national minorities, 19 of whom were Russians and Ukrainians, 4 Jews and one Hungarian (Dolghi Adrian 2020, 167).

After the Second World War in 1946, the issue of rectifying the borders of the Moldavian SSR briefly came back into focus. The letter written by the Chairman of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the Moldavian SSR, F. Brovco, was most probably an attempt to revive the idea of the formation of Greater Moldavia, which had been discussed for the first time during the war on 24 August 1944, when Soviet troops entered Romanian territory. Several possible options were put forward during discussions on the delimitation of the new administrative boundaries of the Moldavian Republic. It is interesting to note the contents of the letter submitted to Soviet dictator Stalin by the Chairman of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the MSSR F. Brovco, the Chairman of the CCP of the MSSRT. Constantinov and the Secretary of the CC of the CP of Moldavia N. Salagor. The three leaders of the Moldavian Communists called for the enlargement of the borders of the Moldavian SSR and the formation of a Greater Moldavia, which should have included the whole of Romanian Moldavia, including southern Bukovina and two counties in northern Transylvania, Năsăud and Maramureș (Țîcu 2021). After the war, the idea of annexing Romanian Moldavia was abandoned, but the idea of annexing part of Transylvania



remained under discussion. There is also a reported incident in Maramureş county where a group of ethnic Ukrainians travelled to Sighetul Marmăţiei and tried to intimidate the Romanian authorities to demand the unification of the province with Subcarpathian Ukraine (Orzac Dorina 2006, 119).

Following the same pattern of interethnic intermingling and the creation of latent conflicts, the Supreme Soviet accepted the Ukrainian SSR's request to include the south and north of Bessarabia, falsely justifying this territorial abduction in order to create ethnically homogenous republics (at that time southern Bessarabia was inhabited by a multitude of national minorities, Ukrainians being only one of these groups [Alongside Romanians in 1940 in southern Bessarabia lived Germans, Bulgarians, Gagauz, Russians, Jews, a small Greek minority and Ukrainians whose number at that time did not exceed the Romanian population of the province.]). In exchange for the two pieces of the territory of historical Bessarabia the newly established Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic received a strip of land of about 4163 square km located on the eastern side of the Dniester River (The Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic of Moldova had been created as early as 12 October 1924 as part of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic in order to act as a bridgehead for communist propaganda in Romanian Bessarabia, which the Russians wanted to "reintegrate" into the new empire.), a region that would never be truly integrated into this province and would be the source of future problems.

Conclusions

The formation of the Moldavian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic in 1924 represented a step forward in the plan the Soviets had devised to regain influence in Romanian Bessarabia. Even though until that moment there had been no preoccupation with the identity of the peoples contained within the borders of the former Russian empire, the communists who had taken power developed "a veritable industry" of forming fictitious national identities especially for the population of the territories that at the end the war had been integrated into other states. At that moment, the foundations of the Moldavian people distinct from the Romanian people were laid, a thesis that unfortunately was also taken up by the pro-Russian politicians who remained to govern the newly formed states after the disappearance of the USSR. Ignoring these ideas can have dire consequences for regional peace and stability, being able to produce secessionist movements (the case of the self-proclaimed Moldavian Dniester Republic) or even more seriously the promotion of historically aberrant ideas such as the recreation of a Moldavian state that would include all the territories of the medieval principality of Moldavia.



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