

# "The Quiet Revolution": Revisiting the National Identity Issue in Soviet Moldavia at the Height of Khrushchev's Thaw (1956)

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## ABSTRACT

The article highlights the impact of Khrushchev's Thaw on the question of national identity in Soviet Moldavia in the framework of the internal Soviet debates unleashed by the 'Secret Speech' and the subsequent Hungarian Revolution. The question of national identity was expressed by two groups, one representing the former GULAG returnees and the other the intellectuals or students socialized in the Soviet milieu. The position of the former was more radical and anti-Soviet, while the latter was milder and respected the *status-quo*, i.e. the Soviet regime, and only questioned some previously established traditions on what it meant to be Moldavian. Incidentally or not, the former position proved to be more long-lasting and in some way prepared and anticipated the national agenda during Perestroika, in the late 1980s. The question of national identity emerged once again with a comparable fervour in 1968 subsequent to the Prague Spring and Ceaușescu's refusal to support the Soviet invasion in Czechoslovakia. In 1956 and 1968, the former Western borderlands – the former Bessarabia, Western Ukraine and the Baltic States – witnessed what one could call a 'revenge of history'. More exactly, in periods of crisis the links between these territories and the interwar political entities and their traditions were stronger than any time before or afterwards. The specificity of the Moldavian case is that it succeeded in 1955-1957 to resume if only partially the Romanianization process witnessed by the interwar Bessarabia and partially by MASSR.

This article is based mainly on archival documents disclosed in the recent years from Chișinău-based depositories. The first set of documents comprises reports from all districts of MSSR sent to Chișinău in the months following the 'Secret Speech' and Hungarian Revolution. They are located in the former Archive of the Institute of Party History within the Central Committee of Moldavia, reorganized in 1991 in The Archive of the Social-Political Organizations of the Republic of Moldova. The other set of documents consists of reports of the KGB of MSSR from 1956 and 1957, especially those concerning the attitudes labelled as nationalistic, and are located in the Archive of the Service for Information and Security of the Republic of Moldova, the former KGB of MSSR.

The year 1956 stands out as a turning point that marked the post-WWII era both at the European and global levels. Just to name the most important events with global consequences: this was the year when Khrushchev condemned Stalin's crimes (February), the Hungarian Revolution broke out and the Soviet Union invaded Budapest subsequently (late October-early November), and it was the year when the tripartite Israeli-British-French armies invaded the Suez Canal controlled by Egypt (late October)<sup>1</sup>. Beyond these events

<sup>1</sup> For a more global view of 1956, see for instance Martin Gilbert, *A History of the Twentieth Century*, Volume 3: 1952-1999, New York: Perennial/HarperCollins Publishers, 1999, p. 103-143.

there were others of local importance, for example the domino effects of Khrushchev's 'Secret Speech' (at the 20th CPSU Congress) as well as the events in Poland, Romania, Ukraine (mass protests) and the USSR on the whole. In Soviet Moldavia, for instance, the year 1956 represents one of the main turning points of its post-war history: it was the year when it seemed, at least to some groups of civilian population, that Soviet rule was vanishing, people were listening *en masse* to foreign radio stations and expressing publicly their dissatisfaction with Communism – unlike in

Perennial/HarperCollins Publishers, 1999, p. 103-143.

other years of the Soviet regime till Perestroika. It was a year when the Moldavian KGB did not but registered the anti-Soviet attitudes because it was fearful of not being associated with Stalinist practices that the Supreme Soviet leader just condemned. Among the topics that resurfaced in the general atmosphere of a sentiment of freedom brought about by 1956 was the national identity issue of Moldavians, a subject that is still sensitive and has great mobilization potential in the present day Republic of Moldova (unlike socio-economic issues for example). This is not to say that the 'Secret Speech' or Hungarian Revolution did not influence the national identity debate elsewhere in Central and Eastern Europe. On the contrary, especially in Poland and Hungary, and to a lesser extent in Baltic States and Western Ukraine, the mass revolts against the establishment were fuelled or animated by a rediscovered sense of national dignity<sup>2</sup>. The same phenomenon of resuscitating the memory of the interwar years in the Soviet Western borderlands re-emerged on an alarming scale for Moscow during and after the Prague Spring (1968)<sup>3</sup>. The specificity of the Moldavian case is that it succeeded in 1955-1957 to resume if only partially the Romanianization process

2 For an overview of various responses to the 'Secret Speech' and Hungarian revolution in 1956, see Elena Zubkova, *Russia after the War. Hopes, Illusions, and Disappointments, 1945-1957*, Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1998, pp. 178-202; Dan Cătănuș, Vasile Buga, eds., *Lağărul comunist sub impactul destalinizării – 1956*, Bucharest: Institutul Național pentru Studiul Totalitarismului, 2006; Robert V. Daniels, ed., *A Documentary History of Communism and the World. From Revolution to Collapse*, Hanover and London: University of Vermont & University Press of New England, Third Edition, 1994, pp. 160-186.

3 For a theoretical approach to the subject, presenting the 1968 and partially 1956 in a *longue durée* perspective, see Amir Weiner, "Déjà vu All Over Again: Prague Spring, Romanian Summer and Soviet Autumn on the Soviet Western Frontier", in *Contemporary European History*, 15, 2 (2006), pp. 159-194.

witnessed by interwar Bessarabia and partially by MASSR (between 1933 and 1937/38 it adopted the Latin alphabet and modern standard Romanian).

#### **TWO PARTS WITHIN SOVIET MOLDAVIA: AN OLDER ONE, FROM 1924, AND A NEWER ONE, FROM 1940**

The Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic was comprised of two distinct parts. The first older part belonged to Ukraine in the interwar. It was officially created in 1924 as a Moldavian Autonomous Republic to give local Moldavians their right to self-determination and serve as a Piedmont for the neighbouring Bessarabia, a part of Romania after 1918. It was territorially large than the present-day breakaway Transnistrian Moldavian Republic where ethnic Moldavians/Romanians constituted only about 30 % of the total population. It experienced the whole process of Sovietization just like the other Soviet regions after the October Revolution: the Russian Civil War, the NEP in the 1920s, mass collectivization and industrialization as well as famine in the early 1930s, and the Great Terror in 1937-1938<sup>4</sup>.

The second constituent part of Soviet Moldavia was Bessarabia, the territory stretching from the Prut River in the West to the Dniester River in the East, bordering the Black Sea in the South and Bukovina in the North<sup>5</sup>. Bessarabia

4 The best account on the national identity debate in the interwar MASSR, see Charles King, *The Moldovans. Cultural Policy between Romania and Russia*, Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 2001. On the repressions in the interwar MASSR, see Igor Cașu, *Dușmanul de clasă. Represiuni politice, violență și rezistență în R(A)SS Moldovenească, 1924-1956 [Class enemy. Political Repressions, Violence and Resistance in Moldavian (A)SSR]*, Chișinău: Cartier, 2014, chapters 1-3.

5 The Southern part of Bessarabia – and a half of the Northern County of Khotin in the North went to Ukraine in 1940, even though there was no unanimity in this regard among the local Communist elites. For more on this issue, see Igor Cașu and

was historically a part of the Medieval Principality of Moldavia, a former Tsarist territory between 1812 and 1918, and was a part of Romania in the interwar period. It experienced, if only for a short period of time, the modern nation-building and nation-creation process. Even though 22 years was not enough to finish the process, it had long-lasting consequences on the post-WWII Soviet policy in the MSSR, especially in terms of the national identity issue.

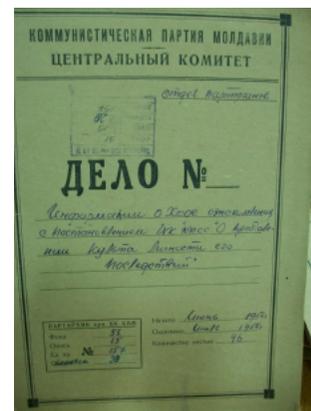
In late June 1940, Bessarabia was occupied by the Red Army according to the previous year Nazi-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact of August 23rd 1939 and its secret protocol that divided the spheres of influences in Eastern Europe. In the first year of Soviet occupation (1940-1941) and in the aftermath of WWII (1944-1953), the Moscow policy in the newly created federal republic of Moldavia was reminiscent of the interwar policy pursued in the Moldavian Autonomous Republic, i.e. to build a new ethno-nation linguistically different from the Romanian one, with a different history, heroes and literature and classical writers, among other things. The Thaw years – with 1956 as its apogee – changed this policy dramatically, at least in content, if not in form. Moscow continued to insist on the creation of the new and distinct national identity called Moldavian, but meanwhile the modern Romanian literature and language patrimony was tacitly accepted as belonging to the Moldavian nation as well. That is why the Thaw and de-Stalinization had a tremendous impact on the national identity issue in Soviet Mol-

Virgil Pâslariuc, “Moldavian SSR’s Border Revision Question: From The Project of „Greater Moldavia” to The Project of “Greater Bessarabia” and The Causes of their Failure (December 1943 – June 1946)”, in *Archiva Moldaviae*, Vol. II, 2010, pp. 275-370, introduction in Romanian, documents in Russian and Romanian, with an extensive English abstract.

davia and equalled to a “quiet revolution”.

#### 1956: INTERTWINING OF NATIONAL, SOVIET AND INTERNATIONAL EVENTS IN THE HISTORY OF THE MOLDAVIAN SSR

The year 1956 has a significant place in the history of post-war Bessarabia and Transnistria, i.e. the present day Republic of Moldova. This year heralded an increased recrudescence of critical and inimical opinions and attitudes toward the Communist party and Soviet state, which were previously strongly deterred by the Stalinist regime. At the 20th congress of CPSU, Nikita Khrushchev condemned Stalin’s personality cult and the political repressions perpetrated by him while head the C (b) P of Soviet Union. In the context of the Cold War, this event had profound consequences not only for the international communist movement, but also for the internal situation of the Soviet satellite states of Eastern Europe. It triggered various popular movements, the most notorious among them being the Polish upheaval and the Hungarian revolution. The secret speech of the Soviet leader in February 1956 and the unleashing of



turmoil in Hungary in October-November of the same year had a great echo in the Moldavian RSS, in particular due to the more or less widespread listening to foreign radio stations such as the *Voice of America*, *BBC*, and *Free Europe*. Despite the mass repressions during the Stalinist period that left a deep wound in the memory of the civilian population in Bessara-

bia and Transnistria, critical or inimical opinions and attitudes toward the Communist Party and government reached an extraordinary frequency and amplitude in 1956. Those who expressed attitudes which usually were qualified by the regime as “unhealthy” or “anti-Soviet” were rank-and-file citizens, peasants and workers, religious groups, members of the Communist Party, Komsomol members and others<sup>6</sup>. This article will pay particular attention to the attitudes expressed by intellectuals as they are seen as classical carriers of national identity and nationalism.

**“UNHEALTHY” ATTITUDES OF MOLDAVIAN INTELLECTUALS AFTER THE ‘SECRET SPEECH’ AND IN THE CONTEXT OF THE HUNGARIAN REVOLUTION**

There were numerous attitudes among the intelligentsia of the Moldavian SSR in the aftermath of the ‘Secret Speech’ and the Hungarian Revolution in 1956, which the regime defined as “unhealthy”, “anti-Soviet” or “nationalist”. However, the majority of them could be hardly called anti-Soviet or dissident,<sup>7</sup> in the sense of questioning the whole or just a part of the Soviet system. For instance, at the meeting of the party organization held at the Institute

6 For more on this issue, see Igor Cașu, “Starea de spirit a populației RSSM în contextul destalinizării și revoluției maghiare (1956),” in *Pontes. Review of South East European Studies*, vol. 5, 2009, pp. 195-220; Igor Cașu, Mark Sandle, “Discontent and Uncertainty in the Borderlands: Soviet Moldavia and the Secret Speech, 1956-57,” in *Europe-Asia Studies*, vol. 66, no. 4, 2014, pp. 614-644, esp. 623-635. On the overall assessment of the de-Stalinization process, see Polly Jones, ed., *The Dilemmas of De-Stalinization: Negotiating Cultural and Social Change in the Khrushchev Era*, London: Routledge, 2006.

7 On the distinction between dissidence and dissent, see my „Political Repressions in the Moldavian SSR after 1956: toward a typology based on KGB files”, in *Dystopia. Journal of Totalitarian Ideologies and Regimes*, vol. 1, no. 1-2, 2012, pp. 94-95.

of CPSU History, the communist Z. S. Sepanaru [Săpunaru] called for a backlash against the intensification of anti-Soviet propaganda triggered by foreign imperialist forces. The latter were supposedly using a whole variety of methods – such as songs, radio broadcasts, books, movies, jokes – in order to encourage anti-Soviet elements within the USSR. The poet George Meniuc was invited to this party meeting as representative of the party committee of the district named after “Red Army” in Chișinău. He was asked, among other things, about the recent publishing policy of the journal “October”, an organ of the Moldavian Writers’ Union. Objections were raised regarding the printing of some texts which did not fit the party’s moral standards. A. A. Rusu, a communist from party organization of the Institute of CPSU History noticed that after the condemnation of the “cult of personality” the people commenced to freely express their opinions. At the same time, he was alarmed that the ideological work is not very “high.” Rusu also stressed the fact that until recently there almost no books were published on Moldavian classics or on the history of Moldavia, which was a “big mistake.” The same communist mentioned that even though enormous economic progress was recorded in the post-war period, there were practically no publications elucidating these aspects and exploiting this kind of success for ideological purposes.<sup>8</sup> The same opinion was expressed by CPSU member Sergueyev, an employee of the museum of local history, who said that indeed no books had been printed on the achievements of Soviet Moldavia.

8 Archive of Social-Political Organizations of the Republic of Moldova, the former archive of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Moldova, hereafter AOSPRM, Fond 51, inventar 17, dosar 141, fila 79.

via in the fields of economics, science and art.<sup>9</sup> Other attitudes were expressed among the intelligentsia in the aftermath of the 20th Congress of CPSU and particularly intensified during the events in Hungary among students and professors. Although the percentage of intellectuals is small in comparison with other social strata – peasants and workers, for instance – their impact in society should not be underestimated due to the role of this social category in shaping the public opinion. It should be mentioned also that while the criticism and dissatisfaction expressed by peasants and workers were related mainly to economic issues, the targets of the intellectuals' criticism were the communist principles as such or the way they were applied in practice. In the north of the Moldavian SSR, for instance within the party organization of Commerce College in Soroca, the communists Nesterovskaya and Dubrovski reported that there are students that did not properly understand the essence of the cult of Stalin. The student Sinitsyn said that after the death of Stalin one can notice the rise of another cult, that of Lenin. The same professors from Soroca College mentioned some ethnic conflicts between students, especially between "Moldavians and Russians."<sup>10</sup> Other students' behaviour made the local party leaders feel uncomfortable, to say the least. At the same college during the party meeting within the trade union organisation, the student Yeftodiev protested against the current practice whereby the party controlled trade unions and prompted his colleagues not to accept the leadership of local primary party organisation, district party committee or even administration or professors' council of the college.<sup>11</sup> There were cases when such rebel positions

were backed by district officials for some time. One example is Grinman, an inspector at the district department of education who gave indications to the director of Visoka village not to follow the orders of the district party organisation. He claimed that the communists do not have the right to do so, because they were illiterate in his view.<sup>12</sup>

There were other alarming signs for the Soviet authorities coming from the intelligentsia in other districts. Professors Lipovetskaia and Dzhaconia from the boarding school in the south, in Comrat, "systematically" expressed their dissatisfaction with party policy, by criticizing almost every decision of the CPSU and Soviet government. They were also critical regarding the resolution of the CC of CPSU Plenum from December 1956 on the fighting against inimical and anti-Soviet manifestations<sup>13</sup>. The village teacher Mironiuc from Scumpia, district of Fălești, spread licentious jokes about the party leadership and Soviet rule as a whole. It was more alarming that the party organization and teaching body of the school tolerated this situation. The ideological thaw of 1956 also triggered an intensification of anti-Semitic manifestations. An anti-Semitic inscription was reported in the Russian school of district centre Fălești. This case was explained as rooted in the insufficient education of pupils and unhealthy influences outside school.<sup>14</sup>

In Tiraspol district on the Left bank of Dniester, the teacher Neburchilova from the village of Sucleea was caught listening to foreign radio stations in Russian and discussing such information with her work colleagues afterwards.<sup>15</sup> The state of mind of teachers

9 AOSPRM, F. 51, inv. 17, d.141, f. 79.  
 10 AOSPRM, F. 51, inv. 17, d.141, f. 130.  
 11 AOSPRM, F. 51, inv. 17, d.141, f. 131.

12 AOSPRM, F. 51, inv. 17, d.141, f. 132.  
 13 AOSPRM, F. 51, inv. 17, d.141, f. 65.  
 14 AOSPRM, F. 51, inv. 17, d.141, f. 162.  
 15 AOSPRM, F. 51, inv. 17, d.141, f. 152.

was discussed at the meeting and the district education department of Tiraspol. One of the issues addressed referred to the subscription of newspapers and magazines by the teaching body. It was found that 21 teachers from the district did not subscribe to any newspaper. This was seen as problematic as it had an impact on the education of young generations: how could one manage to explain correctly what is happening in the country and abroad without being properly informed? The problem was considered more serious when the teacher Martiniuk, although having subscribed to Soviet newspapers, recognised that he does not know how to inspire feelings of Soviet patriotism in children. In this sense the condemnation of Stalin in February 1956 was perceived as a critique of the communist regime as a whole, unlike Khrushchev and his followers in the CC of CPSU wanted to suggest.<sup>16</sup> For this reason, there were previously almost unimaginable cases, when pioneers did not want to enter the Komsomol ranks and some pupils leading open anti-Komsomol propaganda.

Several representatives of the creative intelligentsia expressed their opinions openly too. Mihai Greco, a famous Moldavian painter, said that for him it is not important which regime reigns.<sup>17</sup> Another serious issue was that propaganda lessons were held usually in Russian, even for the mainly Moldavian audience which understood it poorly (for instance in the district of Edinets).<sup>18</sup> The freedom of expression increased during 1956 and extended to more or less banal cases. For example Draikovski, a doctor working at the emergency hospital in Tiraspol, was reported to hum religious songs while at work. When somebody criticized him, he replied: "I am not a party member and I sing whatever I want and I can." The case of Draikovski was all the more outrageous in the perception of the party organs, because he was a member of society who spread political and scientific knowledge, and he even used to deliver public lectures.<sup>19</sup>

**NATIONAL IDENTITY AND THE MOLDAVIAN INTELLIGENTSIA** Given the seriousness of the revolt in Hungary and its anti-Russian tones, the local Soviet Moldavian authorities were concerned about its impact on the local debate over national identity. The regime's fear was justified in this regard, but only to a certain extent. In neighbouring Ukraine or Romania – and not to mention Poland and Hungary – nationalist and democratic mobilization evolved into open mass protests, especially among students.<sup>20</sup> This was not the case in Soviet Moldavia. At the same time, the legacy of 1956 as the culmination of the Khrushchev Thaw had lasting and unintended consequences for decades, especially in what concerns the national identity of Soviet Moldavians. More exactly, it referred mainly to the language issue (whether it was Moldavian or Romanian) and to a lesser extent to national history and Soviet nationality policy in Soviet Moldavia.

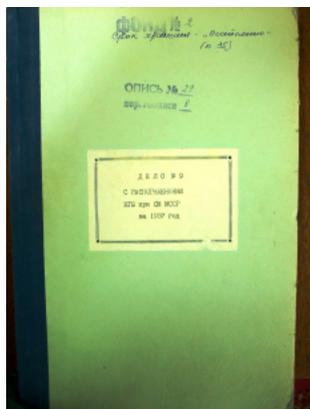
Nationalist attitudes became evident in 1956 and 1957 among the intelligentsia of the MSSR. This was partly due to the Gulag returnees, who included not just dekulakised peas-

19 AOSPRM, F. 51, inv. 17, d.141, f. 149-150.  
20 See Johanna Granville, "Forewarned is Forearmed: How the Hungarian Crisis of 1956 Helped the Romanian Leadership," in *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol. 62, No. 4 (June 2010), pp. 615-645; Yuri Daniluk, Oleg Bazhan, *Opozitsiia v Ukraïni (druga polovina 50-h – 80-ti rr. XX st.)*, Kiev: Ridnii kraj, 2000, esp. p. 115, 118-119, 139-150.

16 A. Artizov, Ju. Sigachev, I. Shevchuk, V. Khlopov, eds., *Reabilitatsiia. Kak eto bylo. Dokumenty Prezidiuma TsK KPSS i drugie materialy, mart 1953-1956*, Moscow: Mezhdunarodnyi Fond Demokratiia, 2000, p. 349-351.

17 AOSPRM, F. 51, inv. 17, d.141, f. 154.

18 AOSPRM, F. 51, inv. 17, d.141, f. 43-44.



ants<sup>21</sup>, but also members of the Romanian educated interwar intelligentsia. In September 1956 the chairman of the republican KGB reported to the CC of CPM that in the first 8 months of the year no less

than 29 leaflets containing threats addressed to party and state activists were identified, many of them having a nationalistic flavour. In the same month another former political detainee condemned for 25 years, Ciocârlan, ex-head of the “nationalist and anti-Soviet” Bessarabian regional section of the Romanian organisation *National Renaissance Front*,<sup>22</sup> returned back home and started to re-establish his network. The KGB intercepted his letters in which he baldly criticised the Soviet regime and backed the ‘counterrevolutionary’ actions in Hungary and Poland.<sup>23</sup> A good example of ‘nationalist’ agitation is that of Zaharia Doncev. He was arrested by the Chișinău KGB on 11 December 1956 and accused of anti-Soviet agitation pursuant to Article 54, paragraph 10. Doncev was born in 1928 in Chișinău in a

family of Moldovans (which means he was an ethnic Romanian).<sup>24</sup> Doncev was accused of writing and spreading anti-Soviet leaflets in May 1955, in which he explicitly asked for the liquidation of Soviet rule in Moldavia.<sup>25</sup> Later on, after being questioned by the KGB, on 20 December 1956, one more accusation was brought against Doncev, the one of nationalism.<sup>26</sup> One of the leaflets was written in the Latin-script ‘Moldovan’ language (Romanian) and another three were written in Russian. The following was the Romanian text:

...as you can see, the Communists are getting themselves into a catastrophe. In a year, we all will be liberated. The time is ripe for each of us to take pitchforks and scythes in order to show that we love our beloved Romania. The time has come for us to live better and more easily. Each of us must show his love for our former fatherland. This is the only way for us to win our freedom...<sup>27</sup>

The content of the leaflet in the Russian language was different. It was more explicit and more incisive than the one in Romanian:

Dear friends, very soon the whole Moldovan people will stand up for the interests that it had before the war. Communism is failing everywhere. Now they are going to learn how poorly the Moldovan people live. We have all become beggars, we have no bread, clothes or land. The time is ripe for us to rise and tell the Communists: it is enough for you to get rich as flunkys. The time is ripe for us to take revenge for this life of slaves. Each of us must do something to set us free from the Communists...<sup>28</sup>

24 Arhive of the Service for Information and Security of the Republic of Moldova, former KGB (hereafter – ASISRM-KGB) personal file 020293, f. 4-5.

25 ASISRM-KGB, personal file 020293, f. 57-58.

26 ASISRM-KGB, personal file 020293, f. 90.

27 ASISRM-KGB, personal file 020293, f. 182.

28 ASISRM-KGB, personal file 020293, f. 175.

21 For the definition of kulak, see Moshe Lewin, ‘Who was the Soviet kulak?’ in *Soviet Studies*, vol. 18, no. 2 (October 1966), pp. 189-212. For dekulakization, methods and goals, see Lynne Viola, *The Unknown Gulag. The Lost World of Stalin’s Special Settlements*, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2007, pp. 13-53. On MSSR specifically, see my *Class enemy*, chapter 6.

22 National Renaissance Front was the only legal party in Romania between 1938-1940, during the dictatorship of the King Carol II. See Vlad Georgescu, *Romanians: A History*, London: I. B. Tauris, 1991, pp. 207-209.

23 Pasat, *Trudnye stranitsy*, p. 726.

As a consequence, on 30 December 1956, the KGB requested that a psychiatric assessment be carried out to decide on the health condition of Zaharia Doncev, proceeding from the presumption that every citizen questioning Communism and its alleged progressive nature had mental problems<sup>29</sup>. Yet the result was negative, as the commission of experts decided that Doncev was in good health. Its report said that the defendant was intelligent, sociable, very attentive to everything that was happening around him, and liked reading and games. During the KGB questioning, Zaharia Doncev admitted that he had two brothers residing in the Romanian city-port Constanța.<sup>30</sup> He also admitted that he used to listen to foreign radio stations, but said he had nothing against the Soviet authorities. On the contrary, he said he loved his fatherland and that he lived a good life. What do these details of Zaharia Doncev's file tell us?

He had a good standard of living, a high wage compared with other social categories, his own residence, a wife and a child. Consequently, the regime was much more concerned about his actions because they had not been prompted by daily problems, as was the case with others. It should be noted that Doncev wrote the four leaflets in May 1955, and clearly hoped that he would not be punished for his stance as severely as he may have been prior to 1953. Although he talked with admiration about 'his former fatherland', he did not explicitly call for unification with Romania. Thus, in a way he resigned himself to the existing situation, but he wanted the Moldovans/Romanians to regain their lost dignity and be masters in their home country. It is worth

mentioning that the Chișinău-based political bodies were keen to learn his family's past. The fact that he had two brothers in Romania and that his mother applied for evacuation to Romania in 1944 were weighty arguments for the authorities to accuse him not only of anti-Soviet agitation and propaganda, but also of nationalism. Punishing such citizens as Doncev was therefore very important for the Soviet authorities, especially when their messages were distributed to the public via leaflets. Political criticism brought against the regime was not as grave for the regime as the ethnic and national dimension of this message. In other words, it was especially important that it doubted the "liberating" nature of the USSR and stated that Moscow had conquered the Moldovans and turned them into slaves in their own country. The Soviet authorities did not tolerate the idea of the Bessarabians' historical, linguistic and cultural affiliation with the Romanian nation. Doncev was accused of violating the Criminal Code of the Ukrainian SSR, Article 54, paragraph 10, point 2 and was sentenced to 7 years in jail for nationalism in line with the Criminal Code of the Ukrainian SSR, Article 54, paragraph 10, item 2.<sup>31</sup>

The impact of the 20th Congress and the Hungarian revolution on Soviet Moldavia is comparable, in some respects, to the developments in other Soviet western borderlands, especially Ukraine.<sup>32</sup> Andrey Prokopenko, the chief of KGB of MSSR reported that there were attempts to recreate some nationalistic organizations, especially in Chișinău, Cahul

31 ASISRM-KGB, personal file 06696, f. 243 verso

32 For the early impact of Destalinization and the Hungarian Revolution on Ukraine, see for instance Yuri Daniliuk, Oleg Bazhan, *Opozitsiia v Ukraïni*, esp. p. 115, 118-119, 139-150; see also Yu. Vasil'ev, R. Podkur, H. Kuromiya, Yu. Shapoval, & A. Weiner, (eds), *Politicheskoe rukovodstvo Ukraïny*, Moscow: ROSSPEN, 2006, p. 201.

29 See the speech by Khrushchev to the 3<sup>rd</sup> Congress of Soviet writers, May 22, 1959, in: *Pravda*, May 24, 1959, p. 2.

30 ASISRM-KGB, personal file 06696, f. 236.

rayon in the south and Sângerei rayon in the north.<sup>33</sup> According to an internal report of the MSSR KGB, in Târnova rayon alone there were already 510 former Gulag returnees in January 1957, among whom 151 persons were convicted of counter-revolutionary attitudes and activities. Two of them were mentioned as former members of the anti-Soviet organization "The Sword of Justice"<sup>34</sup> and the potentially dangerous – Vâșcu and Istrati,<sup>35</sup> probably because this organization tried in 1950 to establish relations with the organization of Ukrainian nationalists in Western Ukraine.<sup>36</sup> There were also nationalists among recent Gulag returnees, who were employed at the Ghindești and Drochia sugar factories. Numerous leaflets with nationalist content were reported in July 1957 to have been spread in several *rayons*, such as Rezina, Strășeni, Nisporeni, in Chișinău and other localities. The local KGB decided to initiate a closer collaboration with the Romanian *Securitate* in order to combat local nationalists in the MSSR, since the Bessarabian émigrés from Romania were active in supporting their brethren from the Soviet territory.<sup>37</sup> There were also reports men-

33 AOSPRM, F. 51, inv. 15, d. 276, p. 2.

34 "The Sword of Justice" was an anti-Soviet and pro-Romanian national organization active in the north of the MSSR, especially Bălți area, in 1949 and 1950. See the memoirs of one of the leading members, Ion Moraru, *Pustiirea. Treptele Infernului*, Chișinău: Editura Flux, 2007.

35 ASISRM-KGB, F. 2, inv. 29, vol. 8, d. 9/1957, f. 3.

36 Elena Postică, *Rezistența antisovietică în Basarabia, 1944-1950*, Chișinău: Știința, 1996, p. 176.

37 ASISRM-KGB, F. 2, inv. 29, vol. 8, d. 9/1957, f. 109-110, 53. The collaboration between KGB and Securitate in identifying anti-Soviet and 'nationalistic' elements in MSSR was to continue in the following decades. For instance, in 1972, a group called the National Patriotic Front, led by Alexandru Usatiuc and Gheorghe Ghimpu, was arrested as a result of this cooperation. See ASISRM-KGB, personal file Usatiuc-Ghimpu, vol. 2, f. 102. Regarding the fact that Securitate spied on Bessarabian émigrés in Romania, see Arhivele Naționale ale României, Arhiva

tioning that there was a vibrant nationalistic mood among the returning deported priests. A decision was taken to pay special attention to about 40 itinerant priests who were traveling from village to village and spreading their ideas and inciting inimical attitudes toward the regime.<sup>38</sup> About 100 former members of Romanian nationalist organizations were reported to be Chișinău in March 1957.<sup>39</sup>

Not only Romanian nationalists were deemed to be a danger for the Soviet regime. Some Jews were also under surveillance on grounds of being Zionist activists. In early 1957 trials were opened against Zionists. One such case was conducted against somebody named Shmois, who had been previously arrested for "treason against the fatherland." Coming back to Moldavia, he decided to resume his former activities and even planned to write a book against the Soviet regime.<sup>40</sup>

If a nationalist pro-Moldavian anti-Soviet movement were to emerge, the issue of recognition of the Moldavian language as Romanian would be a crucial, as would be the publication of the classics of Moldavian literature. In 1956, the trend towards contesting the attempts to forge a Moldavian language different from Romanian continued. In the new post-Stalin context of the secret speech it was now portrayed as part of the distortion of Stalinist nationality policy. Moldavian linguists and writers called for a tacit rapprochement of the standard vocabulary of Moldavian to the Romanian one, as well as the adoption of a common scheme of grammar. In 1956, at the International Congress of Linguists the

Istorică Centrală (ANIC) [National Archives of Romania, Central Historical Archives, Bucharest], unpublished manuscript of Constantin Tomescu.

38 AOSPRM, F. 51, inv. 17, d. 286, f. 40.

39 Valeriu Pasat, *Trudnye stranitsy...*, p. 726-727.

40 AOSPRM, F. 51, inv. 17, d. 141, f. 162.

Italian scholar Carlo Tagliavini stated that the only difference between “Moldavian” and Romanian was the Cyrillic alphabet employed by the former. In consequence, two renowned Moscow-based linguists, R. A. Budagov and S. B. Bernstein sent a closed letter to the CC of CPM arguing that they supported the idea expressed by Tagliavini, notably that the language of the titular nationality in the MSSR was an integral part of the Romanian one.<sup>41</sup> The public discussion on this subject which had begun in 1955<sup>42</sup> was broadened and in consequence the new “Grammar of the Moldavian Language” was officially adopted in 1957. This also had consequences for cadre policy too, as it meant renegotiating the relationship between the Transdnestrian cultural elites, largely dominant until mid-1955 and attached to a Russified Moldavian idiom in which they were educated before 1940 in the MASSR, and the Bessarabian elites. The latter were more attached to the Romanian literary standard, which was used in interwar Romania, when Bessarabia was a part of the Kingdom of Romania. The victory of the “Bessarabian camp” led by two interwar Bessarabian writers – writer Andrei Lupan and poet Emilian Bucov – was made possible partly because the leader of the “Transdnestrian camp,” Ion Canna, fell from grace when he was accused of plagiarism, and his son of collaboration with the enemy during

41 Michael Bruchis, *One step back, two steps forward: on the language policy of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in the national republics (Moldavian: a look back, a survey and perspective, 1924-1980)*, Boulder Co., 1982, p. 126.

42 See for instance N. Corcinschi, L. Eșan, “Cu privire la îmbunătățirea ortografiei moldovenești”, in *Octombrie*, no. 6, 1955, p. 81-85; R. Portnoi, “Despre ortografia moldovenească”, in *Octombrie*, no. 2, 1955, pp. 83-87; V. Musteață, “Cu privire la ortografia moldovenească”, in *Octombrie*, no. 1, 1956, pp. 75-79; M. Ignat, “Pentru un alfabet econom”, in *Învățătorul sovietic*, no. 9, 1956, pp. 48-53; I. Vasilenco, “Să restabilim principiile ortografiei noastre clasice tradiționale”, in *Nistru*, no. 2, 1957, pp. 125-134.

WWII.<sup>43</sup> The symbolic victory over language patrimony and the grammar issue had immediate and long run consequences for the MSSR and its titular nation. The classics of Romanian literature were published in Chișinău following the Bucharest editions. The difference was the use of Cyrillic letters, as this way one could not be accused of bourgeois nationalism by simply employing words from literary Romanian as had previously been the case. The rehabilitation of the Romanian classics, recognized officially as Moldavian and Romanian (the poet Mihai Eminescu, first of all), was also possible because a great share of Romanian classic writers were born in historical Moldavia, mainly in Western Moldavia. Moreover, the main criterion for who was allowed to enter into the “Pantheon” of Moldavian literature was the territorial one, i.e. being born in historical Moldavia. Class criteria were very important too and the selection of texts was made in order to stress the social agenda of the authors.

This rehabilitation had its limits. It is important to note that the name of the language remained officially Moldavian, as the Soviet regime was embarrassed to acknowledge in this context that it annexed a territory from the national territory of a neighbouring Communist state, Romania.<sup>44</sup> Of course, some works of authors like Eminescu or Alecsandri, who wrote anti-Russian texts, were censored. In sum, one of the most important consequences of the de-Stalinization campaign for the MSSR and its national issue was the fact that the local linguists and writers succeeded in pushing for the rehabilitation of 19th century Romanian classics.

43 Petru Negură, *Nici eroi, nici trădători. Scriitorii moldoveni și puterea sovietică în epoca stalinistă*, Chișinău : Cartier, 2014, pp. 266-268.

44 See more on that in Igor Cașu, ‘*Politica națională în Moldova sovietică, 1944-1989*, Chișinău: Cartdidact, 2000, pp. 53-56.

The language issue and the question of ethno-national identity<sup>45</sup> began to evoke changes in the governance of the republic too. The recognition of Moldavian-Romanian identity would transfer more social prestige to the language of the Moldavians, i.e. the Russians would lose their often invoked excuse – expressed at the unofficial level – that they are not supposed to learn a ‘peasant’, ‘primitive’ and impure language as Moldavian was perceived at the time. The Moldavian elite felt it could push for their language to be employed by high party and state officials or at least to ask for equal representation in the party and state apparatus according to the official stipulation that Moldavians are the titular nationality in the MSSR. This development can be seen in the career of Konstantin Chernenko, the future Secretary General of CC of CP (b) in 1984-1985. He had been serving as secretary for propaganda at the CC of PCM in Chișinău since 1948 and became part of the Brezhnev circle in 1950-1952. After Beria sent his letters to national republics on the “distortions of Leninist-Stalinist nationalities policy” (May 26 and June 12 1953), non-Russians became bolder in their claims to be respected by Russians and Russian speakers. Thus, Chernenko started to ask his fellows in Moscow, among them V.A. Golikov, a person close to Brezhnev for years, to help him leave Moldavia. He complained, “Please help me. Moldavians are coming and saying that I have been sitting here for 8 years and that I took their job. God endowed them with enough arrogance. Help me to leave for some other place, no matter where, it is important to be in Russia.”<sup>46</sup> He left Moldavia in 1956 for Mos-

45 The term ethno-nation is employed here in the sense defined by Walker Connor in his classical work *Ethnonationalism: A Quest for Understanding*, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1993.

46 A.S. Barsenkov, A.I. Vdovin, *Istoriia Rossii, 1938-2002*, Moscow: Aspekt-Press, 2003, p. 214.

cow to be installed as the chair of the section for Propaganda and Agitation in the CC of CP(b). One explanation why he left Chișinău so late is that after the 20th Congress the situation he describes deteriorated considerably. Spill-over protests in Moldavian universities after the events in Hungary appear to have been widespread.<sup>47</sup> For instance, a KGB report from late 1957 indicated that “some persons among pupils, students and youth write anonymous anti-Soviet letters and express unhealthy nationalistic attitudes due to the influence of inimical elements (...)” In February 1957 Nicolae Bătrînu, a student at the Faculty of Philology of Chișinău State University, presented a paper at the student scientific society on the topic “The image of Stephen the Great in Moldavian oral works” in which he “admitted nationalistic interpretations and recited anti-Russian fragments from the creation of the writer M. Eminescu.” The same student said in the course on Moldavian literature that he regretted living in Soviet Moldavia. The KGB was alerted about this statement as it was expressed on March 27, the anniversary of the 1918 Union of Bessarabia with Romania. On May 8, 1957 during a meeting between professors of the department of Moldavian language and literature Bătrînu quoted a 19th century bourgeois writer’s text fragment referring to the fact that “before one becomes free, one should defend his nation...” and that “a person may be in chains, but he can nevertheless express his ideas.” Bătrînu was supported by V.A. Badiu and other Moldavian students. Badiu also manifested his “hate for the Russian people”, saying that “the Pushkin

47 Johanna Granville, “Anticipating the Ripple Effects of Military Interventions: A Case Study of the Reactions of Romania and Moldova to the Soviet Invasion in Hungary in 1956.” Located at: <http://www.irex.org/system/files/Granville.pdf> Accessed on 3 April 2012.

theatre, which hosted Moldavian opera and ballet, should be renamed after Caragiale"<sup>48</sup> and he was "preoccupied with the question of independence of Moldavia." Both Bătrînu and Badiu criticized Moldavian historians by calling them "daydreamers" whilst praising the "Romanian bourgeois and reactionary historian Iorga" who "correctly studied historical events." Another student name Druță, who was a member of Komsomol, commented that "the day of liberation from the German-Romanian occupiers was a day of the occupation of Bessarabia," while reading an article from *Ogonyok* dedicated to the liberation of Moldavia on August 17, 1957.<sup>49</sup>

#### THE REHABILITATION OF VICTIMS OF STALINISM AND ITS IMPACT ON THE NATIONAL IDENTITY ISSUE

The rehabilitation of party and state elites who fell victims of the Great Terror in 1937-1938 in the Moldavian ASSR (a part of interwar Ukraine, as mentioned above, while Bessarabia was a part of Romania) had an unintended impact on the national identity debate and nationalism in Soviet Moldavia.

The *post mortem* rehabilitation of the party, state and other categories of the Communism nomenklatura began in 1954. Overall, 557 individuals were rehabilitated in the subsequent years, among them approx. 1/3 members of the former elite. This also included Staryi-Borisov Grigori Ivanovich, ex-chairman of the Council of Commissars of the Moldavian ASSR in 1926-1928 and 1932-1937; Nicolae Golub, ex-first secretary of Moldavian Regional Committee of Ukrainian Communist (Bolshevik) Party et al.<sup>50</sup>

48 Ion Luca Caragiale (1852-1912), one of the greatest Romanian playwrights and the greatest humorist writer in Romanian literature, born in Wallachia.

49 AOSPRM, F. 51, inv. 17, d. 297, p. 18-20.

50 AOSPRM, F. 51, inv. 15, d. 276, f. 7-14;

Staryi underwent the full process of rehabilitation and even became a hero who fought for the establishment of Soviet power Transnistria and Bessarabia after the mid-1960s. However, he fell victim to the Stalinist machine of terror, according to the post 1956 Soviet official historical discourse. A street in Chișinău and the college of Transport among other things were named after him. The reason he was the only one chosen for this heroic role is probably that he was a Russian born in Bessarabia, in Bozineni railway station near Chișinău, in a family of railway workers. Thus he differed from the majority of leaders of the former MASSR who usually were of non-Russian and non-Moldavian/Romanian origin. In this regard, Staryi truly fitted into the paradigm of Soviet nationality policy which defined the leading role of Russians (and Ukrainians as second to them after 1954) in the Soviet family of nations.<sup>51</sup> That was not a novelty since Stalin's partial rehabilitation of Great Russian Chauvinism in the wake, but especially during and after the "Great Patriotic War." Besides this, Staryi had real merits to the Soviet regime: he participated in the revolutionary movement in the already Romanian Bessarabia in 1919 (the Bender rebellion), crossed the Dniester shortly afterwards and was involved in the Tiraspol revolutionary *gubkom*<sup>52</sup>. Moreover, he was one of the founding fathers of the MASSR in October 1924. However, there were some embarrassing details about the biography of Staryi, but also hope that censorship would keep these details away from the curiosity of

ASISRM-KGB, *Spisok sovetskikh grazhdan neobnovanno repressirovannykh organami NKVD MASSR v 1937-1938 i reabilitirovannykh v 1956-1958 za otsutstviyem sostava pristupleniia*, f. 1-27.

51 See more in L. R. Tillet, *The Great Friendship. Soviet Historians on the Non-Russian Nationalities*, Chapel-Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1969.

52 *Gubkom* – Gubernial Committee.

the public opinion: he was a Menshevik before the October Revolution; he was not very enthusiastic about the establishment of the MASSR in 1924, which gave a distinct regional autonomy to Moldavian/Romanian speakers on the left bank of Dniester River (even though he changed his mind about that later); he was one of the main leaders of the MASSR who promoted the 'Latinization' campaign in the MASSR from 1932 to 1937, i.e. the introduction of the Latin alphabet and the greatest possible convergence of the local Moldavian language to the Romanian modern literary standard. In short, he was a 'Romanianizer,' as people would say at that time and which had no pejorative connotation before 1937-1938, but changed very shortly afterwards, including in the MSSR after 1940 and again in 1944. More exactly, if the Soviets hesitated between building a Moldavian separate ethno-nation and a Romanian one in the interwar period, after the war it firmly embarked on making Moldavians different from Romanians by forbidding the Latin alphabet and introducing the Cyrillic one and favoring the borrowing of words from Russian, rather than from French as the Romanians were doing.<sup>53</sup>

Among the political elites persecuted during the Great Terror in the MASSR were also prominent figures like writers Nistor Cabac, Dumitru Milev and others that used the Latin alphabet in the 1930s. The former writer became a symbol of the persecuted intellectuals and his works were introduced in the school textbooks of modern Moldavian literature. Cabac and others also participated in the Latinization and Romanianization process in the 1930s in the MASSR and the intellectual elites

of the mid 1950s took the advantage of their official rehabilitation of Stalinist terror in order to push for the Soviet regime to give up its linguistic policies which aimed at making Moldavian a different language from Romanian. After 1937, to be against the Romanianizers and Latin alphabet was equal to support for Stalin, which was no longer as prestigious after 1956, to say the least. On the contrary, it was a sign of being on the wrong side of history.

The rehabilitation of state and party nomenclatura leaders as well as intellectuals from the MASSR who were linked to the introduction of the Latin alphabet and brought the local Moldavian language closer to the Romanian literary language had a direct impact on nationality policy in Soviet Moldavia during the Khrushchev Thaw. As a side effect of this change, it became possible to rehabilitate the Romanian classics and publish them in Romanian in Chișinău, although in Cyrillic and with some censorship. While the use of modern literary Romanian vocabulary in the MSSR was previously blamed as nationalistic and anti-Soviet, it became a part of Moldavian literary heritage too after mid-1950s. In this way, the greatest Romanian poet Mihai Eminescu was officially declared both a Romanian and Moldavian classic and a monument in downtown Chișinău was erected in his honor. The place became a traditional lieu of national events that the Soviet regime tolerated reluctantly as is the case with the monument of Taras Shevchenko in Kiev during the Soviet period.<sup>54</sup>

53 See more on that in Charles King, "The Ambivalence of Ethnicity or How the Moldovan Language was made", in *Slavic Review*, vol. 58, no. 1, Spring, 1999, p. 117-142.

54 Igor Cașu, "Was the Soviet Union an Empire? A View from Chișinău," in *Dystopia. Journal of Totalitarian Ideologies and Regimes*, vol. I, no. 1-2, 2012, p. 287.

### CONCLUSION

The year 1956 stands out as one of the most important turning points in the 20th century history of Bessarabia and Transnistria. It symbolized the height of the Khrushchev Thaw as well as the beginning of its decline. After the Hungarian Revolution, the Soviet regime understood that the de-Stalinization process should be limited as much as possible, as it has the potential to put in danger the very existence of Communism and the Soviet Union as an 'empire of nations.' For the Moldavian SSR which comprised the territories of historical Bessarabia and Transnistria and was disputed between Romania and the Soviet Union, the Khrushchev Thaw can be equated to a 'quiet cultural revolution' due to its impact on the national identity debate. More exactly, the official paradigm of the Soviet nationality policy remained the same (the titular nationality was Moldavian, defined as different from the Romanian nation), but its contents became more Romanian than ever (the Romanian literary language and literary classical patrimony were declared as belonging to Soviet Moldavians too). Among the general consequences of the Thaw – whose culmination was symbolized by the secret speech – was the encouragement of free speech and the fact that the KGB and MVD were almost inactive for most of 1956. The people started to talk not only in private, but also in public about the crimes of Stalin, to question Stalinism as well as Leninism, and thus the very foundations of the Soviet regime. As Stalin's crimes had real or perceived national characteristics, it was natural that the condemnation of the "personality cult" fueled national grievances and enabled the questioning of official discourse and even more so the policies toward Soviet nationalities on the whole and Moldavians in particular. National sentiment and nationalism were ex-

pressed in Soviet Moldavia in 1956-1957 by various categories of populations, most notably intellectuals, but also representatives of workers and peasants especially among the Gulag returnees. While the latter were monitored by the KGB and MVD, the former were not considered as too dangerous as they were expressed by Sovietized intellectuals that had a certain prestige and symbolic capital (to use Pierre Bourdieu's concept). Besides, intellectuals questioned the national identity of the previous period within the framework of criticizing Stalinism, a process initiated by the regime itself. Thus, it was seen as being legitimate and officially accepted.

As a result of the Thaw, Transnistrian cultural elites lost their hegemony in defining the national identity of Soviet Moldavians. The Transnistrians, however, continued to dominate the political scene and keep their key positions in the party, government, and in particular the KGB and the Ministry of Interior. The changes in this regard came in the late 1980s during the last years of Perestroika, which resumed the unfinished process of de-Stalinization from the mid-1950s and thus provoked another crisis of Communism which it could not survive this time. The 'quiet cultural revolution' of the mid 1950s prepared and anticipated in some respect namely this dénouement, subsequent to which pan-Romanian intellectuals led the mass national movement. However, the debate on the national identity of Moldavians did not end with the collapse of the USSR. There is extraordinary continuity after 1991 between the Soviet and post-Soviet experience in terms of cultural and political elites participating in the debate over the national identity of Moldavians: as in the mid-1950s, late 1980s and the years of independence, the clear-cut pan-Romanian elites remained limited to the intellectual scene, while the political elites, then and

now, are dominated by pan-Moldavian elites, who more or less oppose the Romanian national identity and a union with Romania. This is happening perhaps because the legacy of Communism is very profound and at the same time because the national identity issue was not settled in Bessarabia before the province was occupied by the Soviets in 1940.

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