

1878, Before and After: Romanian Nation-Building, Russian Imperial Policies, and Visions of Otherness in Southern Bessarabia

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ABSTRACT

The reintegration of three Southern Bessarabian districts into the Russian Empire in 1878 represented not only a high point of the Russian-Romanian symbolic competition for Bessarabia, but also the creation of an 'administrative aberration' within the Russian Empire. The former Romanian territories, merged into the new Ismail uezd, preserved their institutional and legal peculiarities for almost 40 years. Thus, the modern structures of an emerging nation-state were transferred into the Russian imperial context. This article will discuss, first, the attitude of a number of Russian observers and officials towards the 1856 – 1878 Romanian administration, with a special emphasis on mutual perceptions and the foreign policy dimension. Second, the article will examine the polemics concerning the alternative strategies for integrating this region within the empire. The Russian bureaucracy was divided on the issue, oscillating between a centralizing approach and a more pragmatic attitude which admitted the continued existence of the Romanian institutions. The discourse displayed by the Russian officials on this occasion is a curious amalgam of flexible pragmatism, modern rationality, bureaucratic inertia, centralizing impulses and foreign policy considerations. The lack of coherence of the Russian policies on the Southern Bessarabian periphery points to the contested and fragmented nature of the imperial discourse regarding the alternative models of institutional organization and political legitimacy.

The Crimean War (1853-56) was a turning point for the Romanian Principalities of Moldavia and Wallachia and, by extension, for the Russian presence on the Lower Danube. The dominant position of the Russian Empire in the region, uncontested for the previous quarter of a century, was replaced by a 'condominium' of the Great Powers. This new balance of power was reflected in the Treaty of Paris (March 1856), which ended the war and significantly weakened Russia's leverage over the Principalities. The new circumstances also provided an impetus for the fledgling Romanian national movement. Inspired by the French model and supported by the government of Napoleon III, this movement achieved remarkable successes in the immediate aftermath of the Crimean War. The 'national' faction of the Romanian elites, advocating the union of Moldavia and Wallachia, quickly gained the upper hand over their opponents.

This process was aided by the position of the majority of the Great Powers, who endorsed a new constitutional arrangement (the Paris Convention, 1858) which provided clear mechanisms for an institutional unification of the Principalities. It was followed by the election of a common prince in Moldavia and Wallachia in January 1859 and by the gradual merging of the government of the two Principalities. These tendencies culminated three years later, in January 1862, when the Principalities became unified under a single central government in Bucharest. This is the de facto date of the emergence of the Romanian nation-state.

These events did not significantly alter the Russian official stance or policy towards the remote Bessarabian borderland. During the 1860s the potential challenge of the Romanian project was only dimly and sporadically perceived by the imperial bureaucracy of the

province. The occasional reports filed by the local police, purportedly identifying a certain “Romanian” party composed of a handful of young nobles, emphasized the “platonic” nature of their national sentiments and pointed to the ultimate loyalty of even these presumably “dangerous” elements that were worthy of police surveillance.¹ Moreover, these apprehensions of the Russian administration were linked primarily to the political turmoil provoked within the empire by the Polish uprising of 1863. It is hardly surprising to find the “Polish intrigue” among the possible catalysts of the fledgling Bessarabian “national movement” that remained in an embryonic stage throughout the rest of the 19th century. The newly united Romanian Principalities were hardly viewed as a future “Piedmont” for the Romanians of the Bessarabian province even during the darkest moods of the Russian official discourse. The contested character of the region did not crystallize in the form of two coherent and continuous narratives that spanned the whole pre-World War I period. Rather, one can speak about certain moments of heightened discursive tension that corresponded to a closer entanglement of the Russian and Romanian polities in the international politics of the era. The first of these instances of ‘symbolic competition’ emerged on the occasion of the Russian-Ottoman War of 1877-1878, when the three districts of Southern Bessarabia, awarded to the Moldavian Principality in 1856 in the aftermath of the Crimean War reverted to the Russian Empire. In the context of the Berlin Congress, a ‘diplomatic war’ between Russia and Romania over the belonging of this territory erupted. Despite the fact that this small piece of land was mostly inhabited

1 Arhiva Națională a Republicii Moldova (ANRM), Fond 2, op. 1, file 7573, ll. 65-66 verso.

by ‘trans-Danubian colonists’ (i.e., Bulgarians and Gagauz), while the Romanian-speaking population was only significant in a narrow strip along the Prut River, the Romanian government forcefully claimed its right to include this region into the “national body.”²

Beyond succumbing to the logic of mutual competition and antagonism with regard to its Romanian rival, the Russian administration in Bessarabia proved flexible enough to accommodate several foreign institutional and administrative “models” that preserved a certain degree of diversity within the region during the first half of the 19th century. Starting from the 1860s, the standardizing drive of the Great Reforms period as well as the internal social dynamics in Bessarabia seemed to preclude the emergence of any “exceptional” administrative or institutional designs in the area. The international diplomatic context was, however, responsible for introducing the legal framework of an emerging nation-state into an imperial context purportedly ill-suited for such unwelcome “exceptions.” Still, contrary to the expectations of many (including high-ranking) observers on the Russian side, this framework proved resilient enough to last for forty years and withstand all the attempts to “streamline” it according to all-imperial standards. In the following, I will discuss the case of the Ismail district, which is a rare instance of the transfer of “national” administrative practices into the fold of the Russian multi-ethnic empire. I will mostly focus on the Russian imperial policies after 1878, but will also sketch the main features of the Romanian

2 For an extended discussion of the Russo-Romanian diplomatic controversy over Southern Bessarabia, with an emphasis on the interaction between discourse and policy options, see: Andrei Cușco, “The Russian-Romanian 1878 Controversy: Between Realpolitik and National Dignity,” in: *Pontes*, Nr. 5, 2009, 51 -102.

nation-building efforts in the region in the two previous decades, when Southern Bessarabia became a part of the new Romanian state.

The territory in question comprised the southwesternmost part of the Bessarabian gubernia (in its 1812 borders) and roughly coincided with the space between the Danube and the Black Sea, with a total surface of 9,000 km². Following the Crimean War, this district, together with the Danube Delta, was ceded (for purely strategic reasons) to the Moldavian Principality, at that time an autonomous part of the Ottoman Empire, and placed under the “collective guarantee” of the victorious allies by the Paris Treaty of 1856. Both Russian and Romanian elites were acutely aware that the “border rectification” in Bessarabia was due to pragmatic calculations of international diplomacy and that the durability of the new situation was subject to the power fluctuations within the European state system. Moreover, the partial border change did not seem to satisfy anyone. Thus, two prominent Romanian intellectuals were rather reserved in assessing the benefits of the territory’s inclusion into Moldavia. They claimed that, far from redressing the “injustice” of 1812, the provisions of the Paris Treaty only gave a veneer of “European legality” to the Russian possession of the rest of Bessarabia.³ The pragmatic dimensions of this “strategic retreat” of the Russian Empire were no less obvious to a Romanian politician twenty years later⁴ on the occasion

3 Dinu Poștarencu, “Aspecte privind retrocedarea Sudului Basarabiei către Principatul Moldovei la 1856-1857,” in *Destin Românesc*, 1999, Nr. 2, 75.

4 The politician in question was the Romanian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mihail Kogălniceanu (1817-1891). He was a prominent figure in the Romanian national movement and was viewed as one of the ‘founding fathers’ of modern Romania. He was also the author of the first ‘modern’ history of the Romanian Principalities, published in 1837.

of the revision of the territorial settlement in the region: “Why was [Southern] Bessarabia given to us? Because we claimed it? Because Europe wanted to do us a favor? Because we descend from the Emperor Trajan? Far from it! Bessarabia was given to us in 1856 because Europe’s Great Powers thought that it was in Europe’s best interests to drive Russia from the Danube.”⁵ This pragmatic aspect is important to note, since the perception of insecurity had a direct impact on the “nationalizing drive” of the emerging Romanian state in the region. The effectiveness of Romanian policy in Southern Bessarabia was forcefully questioned in retrospect by several Russian writers and officials. While it is difficult (if not impossible) to assess its results in “objective” terms, the Russian stance on the Romanian administration’s practices was infused by a clear rhetorical tendency to minimize any influence the Romanian government might have exercised on local realities. Thus, in an essay written twenty years after the region’s reintegration into the empire (explicitly commemorating this event), a Russian author argued:

The Romanian government understood that this land, severed from Russia by virtue of political calculations, but acquired by Russian blood, populated and organized through the efforts of the Russian government, and also constituting, through its geographical position and the ethnographical makeup of its population, a natural part of Russian Bessarabia, will always gravitate towards Russia and will, sooner or later, return within its borders. Therefore, the Romanians always regarded their possession of Southern Bessarabia as a temporary dominion, as a sort of lease, and acted accordingly, following the rule: *take as much as you can, give as little as you can*. Their attitude towards the interests of this land

5 Dinu Poștarencu, “Aspecte privind retrocedarea Sudului Basarabiei către Principatul Moldovei la 1856-1857,” in *Destin Românesc*, 1999, Nr. 2, 75.

was exclusively limited to fiscal matters and to [the profit] of state officials.⁶

The intrusive practices of the Romanian nationalizing state were understandably the main target of criticism leveled by Russian authors and officials towards the previous regime. In fact, the Russian position displayed a curious, but hardly surprising, ambiguity: while insisting on the meager achievements of the Romanian authorities in matters relating to the local population's welfare,⁷ it also emphasized the constant pressure and even violence of the local administration, building an image of total contrast with the benevolent attitude of the Russian authorities. While engaging in a "virtual dialogue" with the Romanian government's claims to have "educated" the local inhabitants civically and politically⁸, the Russian writers were also attacking the implicit hierarchy that depicted the imperial model as inadequate in terms of bureaucratic rationality and the quality of governance. Undermining this image of an orderly and democratic political system, the Russian discourse insisted that the Romanian administration failed even in its most basic tasks of guaranteeing the citizens' security and respecting the rights of the region's multiethnic population. In fact, the argument amounted to a vision of "mock constitutionalism" that was meant to underscore the

positive features of the Russian policy in the area.⁹ Moreover, the assimilatory potential of the Romanian state was directly questioned, even if the existence of "nationalizing tendencies" was admitted.¹⁰ This image of a weak state dominated by a predatory bureaucracy and displaying only the superficial features of a modern polity derived, on the one hand, from long-held stereotypes that blamed the Romanian elite for slavishly imitating Western models and of losing its connection with the "people."¹¹ On the other hand, it was also a self-serving tactic aimed at discrediting the assumption of a direct relationship between an accelerated pace of modernization and the existence of a (formally) pluralistic political system.

Did this negative evaluation of Romanian nation-building efforts necessarily entail a total rejection of the institutional and administrative framework devised by this emerging nation-state? As I hope to show in what follows, it did not. On the contrary, the Russian authorities took advantage of the alternative model of administrative uniformization implemented by the Romanians and used it for their own purposes. Before exploring this aspect, I will briefly examine the issue of the concrete manifestations of the nationalizing agenda in Southern Bessarabia during the two decades of its integration into Romania. The challenge of multi-ethnicity undoubtedly played a central

6 S. Davidovich, "Vossoedinennaia Bessarabiia," in *Zhivopisnaia Rossiia*, Vol. V, 1898, part II, 173.

7 The author quoted above also remarked that "The twenty-two-year-long Romanian domination can hardly be described as very beneficial for this part of Bessarabia." Davidovich, 173

8 This motive is not altogether absent even from contemporary Romanian historiography. As a revealing example, one could cite: Elena Siupiur, "Pătrunderea instituțiilor moderne românești în Sudul Basarabiei după Războiul Crimeii (1856-1878)," in *Destin Românesc*, Nr. 4, 1996, 35-44.

9 S. Davidovich, "Vossoedinennaia Bessarabiia," in *Zhivopisnaia Rossiia*, Vol. V, 1898, part II, 173, 176.

10 S. Davidovich, "Vossoedinennaia Bessarabiia," in *Zhivopisnaia Rossiia*, Vol. V, 1898, part II, 179.

11 Such evaluations, occasionally amounting to a virulent critique of the "Romanian intelligentsia," can be found, for example, in F. F. Vigel's memoirs or (in a slightly less accusatory vein) in the book authored by V. Kel'siev (published in 1868), *Galichina i Moldaviia: Putevye Pis'ma*.

role in the process of dealing with the newly acquired region after 1856. This area (it should be emphasized) previously had a somewhat exceptional administrative status within the Russian Empire as well, which was due, on the one hand, to the existence of a separate territorial unit for the city of Ismail (*Izmail'skoe gradonachal'stvo*) and, on the other hand, to the privileged status of the Bulgarian colonies, which enjoyed a certain degree of self-government and were supervised by a special colonial administration with their headquarters in the city of Bolgrad. These institutional "irregularities" hardly fitted the aims of the Romanian centralizing bureaucracy. Immediately after the annexation of Southern Bessarabia to Moldavia, certain Romanian public figures and even occasional travelers expressed their dismay at the extensive privileges enjoyed by the Bulgarian colonists. The nationalizing overtones of such pronouncements were hardly concealed: "The Romanian government cannot support such privileges, whose goal is the development of a race that could counter-balance our national element. In other words, these [Bulgarian] foreigners should merge into the Romanian element, since their destiny is now connected to our land."¹² Such desiderata did not remain confined to the rhetorical sphere, but gradually became guiding principles of state policy, along with the consolidation of the Romanian institutions. The Romanian government thus appeared to pursue a rather coherent nationalizing agenda in the region, despite the skeptical assessment of its results by certain Russian observers and commentators. The most persistent legacy in this regard was represented by the institutional peculiarity of the Ismail district after its re-incorporation into the Russian Empire in 1878.

12 G. Sion, *Suvenire de călătorie în Basarabia meridională*, București, 1857, 78.

This policy did not necessarily amount to a concerted strategy of linguistic or cultural assimilation. The non-Romanian (especially Bulgarian) population was in fact allowed considerable leverage in the educational and cultural sphere, expressed by the opening of a Bulgarian 'central school' in Bolgrad and the burgeoning activity in the field of the press and various cultural associations. By the end of the Romanian administration in the region, several upper- and lower-level urban educational institutions were established, alongside 124 rural schools, amounting to around 140 educational establishments with 4,000 pupils.¹³ Southern Bessarabia also became an important center for Bulgarian émigré political organizations and, arguably, a significant recruitment pool for the future elite of the Bulgarian state after 1878.¹⁴ However, hardly any institutional autonomy was tolerated, especially after the introduction of the radical centralizing and reformist policies of the early 1860s by the new government of the United Principalities under Al. I. Cuza. Measures such as the liquidation of the separate administration of the colonies or the imposition of general military service (completely at odds with the previous status of the colonists) were swiftly applied, despite the active resistance of the local population.¹⁵ The restructuring of the political sphere signaled by these policies was completed following the introduction of the new Civil Code in 1865 (explicitly modeled on the Code Napo-

13 *Bessarabiia. Geograficheskii, istoricheskii, statisticheskii, ekonomicheskii, etnograficheskii, literaturnyi i spravochnyi sbornik*. Pod red. P. A. Krushevana. Moskva: Tip. A. V. Vasilieva, 1903, 135

14 Elena Siupiur, "Pătrunderea instituțiilor moderne românești în Sudul Basarabiei după Războiul Crimeii (1856-1878)," in *Destin Românesc*, Nr. 4, 1996, 42-43.

15 The resistance of the Bulgarian colonists and its suppression is described in S. Davidovich, "Vossoedinennaia Bessarabiia," in *Zhivopisnaia Rossiia*, Vol. V, 1898, part II, 174-175.

leon) and, in particular, after the adoption of the 1866 constitution, which instituted a new administrative (communal) structure and deprived the three Southern Bessarabian districts of last traces of their administrative peculiarity. In this sense, the standardizing agenda of the Romanian government proved quite successful; this success partly explains the endurance of this structure after 1878.

The nation-building activities of the Romanian government were most obvious in the educational sphere (the Romanian language became a compulsory subject in schools at all levels) and, especially, in the ecclesiastical field. The church was squarely conceived as an effective instrument for inculcating national Romanian values in the midst of the multiethnic population of the region and was thus subordinated to the “national interest.” As a concrete manifestation of this policy, a new Bishopric of the Lower Danube (with its seat in Ismail) was established in 1864. The main aim of the new eparchy was to “Romanianize, incessantly and everyday, Bessarabia’s Church, which can be achieved only through a direct and national leadership and guidance of the material and spiritual interests of that region’s Church.”¹⁶ In the same vein, the quoted author stated that “the aim of the creation of the Bishopric of the Lower Danube was twofold: the fomenting and developing of the Orthodox religious feelings within the people and the identification of the heterogeneous elements of Lower Bessarabia with the ideal of Romanianism.”¹⁷ Another

Romanian author, writing immediately after the area was placed under Romanian control, decried Russia’s aim of “de-nationalizing” the local population and “introducing the Slavic element through the school and the church,” but also “c[ould] not disapprove of such a policy: had we been Russians, we would also have contributed to this grand undertaking.”¹⁸ In other words, Russia’s purported *logic* was at least understandable, if not commendable, and the author did not hesitate to advocate such a policy in front of his potential Romanian educated audience. Despite this apparently straightforward conclusion, the discourse promoted by the members of the clergy, even if often saddled with national elements, cannot be reduced to a purely nationalizing agenda. The Orthodox Church, due both to its institutional structure and to its late acceptance of the rhetoric and substance of nationalist claims, had a vacillating and complex position in the context of the growing nationalizing tendencies of the 19th century. In the context of the Russian-Romanian mutual perceptions, their common belonging to the Orthodox religious community was accompanied (and subverted), on the one hand, by the deep structural differences between the two churches and, on the other, by their symbolic and canonical competition over Bessarabia. It is quite difficult to extract a coherent vision of the Russian ecclesiastical establishment concerning the “nationalities problem” in general and the “Bessarabian Question” in particular, which remained marginal for the contemporary debates and rarely bore on the sphere of practical policy. However, the Russian church could function, in this case, at two levels, simultaneously producing and leveling the Russian-Romanian “cultural distance.” In

16 M. Pacu, “Amintiri bisericesti și culturale din Basarabia Sudică sub cărmuirea română din 1857-1878,” in *Revista Societății Istorico-Arheologice Bisericești din Chișinău*, Vol. XIX, 1929, 379-392, here 382.

17 M. Pacu, 383. Pacu also called the Episcopal palace erected in Ismail “the most significant *national* monument of this city and of the whole of Southern Bessarabia” under the Romanian government (p. 384).

18 G. Sion, *Suvenire de călătorie în Basarabia meridională*, București, 1857, 41.

the first hypostasis, the Russian officials and church hierarchy perceived the modernizing vision advanced by the Romanian nation-building elites as a borrowed and imitative project, founded upon a blind and uncritical emulation of the Western (mainly French) model. From the Russian point of view, the final result of this ‘unnatural’ evolution was the gradual, but more and more obvious, distancing of the elites from the “roots of Romanian national life” and, consequently, the subversion of Orthodoxy¹⁹.

Following Southern Bessarabia’s reintegration into the Russian Empire in 1878, the former three districts were reorganized into a new administrative unit, the Ismail district. This territory preserved, throughout the whole pre-World War I period, certain institutional and legislative peculiarities that transformed it into an “anomaly” in the context of the Russian imperial regime. The position of the Russian officials interested in the “institutional aberration” in the Ismail district was rather contradictory. Two opposing visions concerning the desirability of preserving the institutional specificity of this territory were articulated. On the one hand, a tendency toward administrative unification and centralization, presupposing the immediate introduction of imperial legislation and the liquidation of the Romanian institutions, was discernible within the apparatus of the Ministry of Internal Affairs. On the other hand, a more flexible approach toward the “Romanian laws,” reflecting a pragmatic and relatively tolerant attitude toward diversity on the empire’s peripheries, was advocated by another part of the imperial bureaucracy.

The argument of the increased efficiency and

19 Arsenii (Stadnitskii), *Issledovaniia I monografii po istorii moldavskoi tserkvi*. SPb., 1904, 388-390

underlying rationality of the French-modeled local administration seemed to have exercised a certain sway over these latter circles. Several attempts to revise the exceptional institutional structure of the district were undertaken before World War I to no avail. The post-Great Reform context and the uncertain situation of the local administration in the Russian Empire as a whole also must have deterred the officials involved in solving the issue. This continued toleration of institutional diversity pointed to the variety of views held in the highest echelons of state power. The Russian bureaucracy was divided by conflicting interests and state-building aims, with various agencies competing for preeminence.²⁰ While the case of Ismail and the debates surrounding it could simply be ascribed to the inertia of the state apparatus, it appears that the experiment in Ismail was favorably regarded by a part of the imperial dignitaries. The case of the Ismail “anomaly” shows how the functioning of the Russian state was in fact predicated upon a finely balanced system of factions and interest groups, within which the autocrat had the

20 For an earlier period, the most authoritative works studying the functioning of the Russian bureaucracy at the center and on the periphery are those of John P. LeDonne, e.g., „Frontier Governors General, 1772-1825, I: The Western Frontier (the Russo-Polish Border in the 18th and 19th century),“ *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas* 47:1 (1999): 56-88; „Frontier Governors General, 1772-1825, II: The Southern Frontier (the Russo-Turkish and Russo-Persian Border),“ *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas* 48:2 (2000): 161-183; „Russian Governors General, 1775-1825: Territorial or Functional Administration?“ *Cahiers du monde russe* 42:1 (January-March 2001): 5-30. For a very interesting analysis of these processes applied to the Siberian example, see Anatolyi Remnev, “Siberia and the Russian Far East in the Imperial Geography of Power,” in: Jane Burbank, Mark von Hagen, and Anatolyi Remnev, eds. *Russian Empire: Space, People, Power, 1700-1930* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007), 425-454

role of an arbiter²¹. Moreover, the loyalty of the local inhabitants remained a matter of contention in a way that had not been possible before 1856, prompting the Russian authorities to act carefully in this sensitive region. The external factor and the perceived threat of “Romanian irredentism” were significant enough to hamper the centralizing zeal of the Ministry of Internal Affairs in St. Petersburg.

The most serious discussions concerning different projects to revise the exceptional status of the Ismail district took place on two occasions: first, immediately following the transfer of authority to the Russian Empire between 1879 and 1881 and, second, during the first years of the 20th century (1900-1901), when the officials of the Ministry of Internal Affairs came very close to prevailing over their opponents and imposing their view on the necessity to replace the Romanian institutions with their imperial equivalents. The ultimate failure of these attempts was mostly conditioned by a set of arguments put forward by the opponents of legislative uniformization. These arguments could be classified into three main categories: 1) the rationality and modernity of the Romanian administrative structure, in comparison with the available Russian models; 2) the strategy of a differentiated integration of the peripheries and the need to pursue a moderate course while taking account of regional particularism, at least at the initial stage; 3) sensitive foreign policy aspects and the problem of Russia’s image abroad (the loyalty of the local population remained the underlying issue in this context). One should emphasize that the dividing lines between the

opponents and supporters of administrative uniformization ran along institutional rather than “spatial” criteria. Thus, certain representatives of central institutions (particularly of the Ministries of Finance and Justice) pursued the “flexible” approach of preserving the local institutions in Southern Bessarabia, while the officials of the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) were fervent advocates of legislative unification.

The most clearly developed argument invoking the rationality and efficiency of the Romanian institutional model can be found in the “note” (in fact, an extensive and detailed analysis of the Romanian institutions in Ismail) sent to the Ministry of Internal Affairs by the Bessarabian Governor E. O. Iankovskii in 1881.²² The governor explicitly emphasized in his report that “certain elements of social organization in Southern Bessarabia” introduced by the previous Romanian administration “deserve exceptional attention (original emphasis – A.C); these [aspects] mostly concern the communal organization and the system of equal taxation [of all citizens], without taking into account their social estate.”²³ In fact, the governor used the argument of the efficiency of the Romanian administrative model in order to formulate a rather radical critique of the empire’s social system during that period, which he finds outdated and ineffective in the context of the modern world. As a result of his detailed analysis of the advantages inherent in the Romanian institutions, Iankovskii concluded that “all these data concur in favor of the preservation of the recently reunited section as a separate [administrative] unit, at least until the revision of our legislative regu-

21 For an excellent analysis of this topic, see: Alfred J. Rieber, “Interest-Group Politics in the Era of the Great Reforms,” in: Eklof B., Bushnell J., Zakharova L., eds., *Russia’s Great Reforms, 1855-1881*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994, 58-83.

22 “Zapiska bessarabskogo gubernatora Iankovskogo ob ustroistve vossoedinennogo kraia”, s prilozheniiami za 1881 god // RGIA, Fond 573, op. 21, d. 54

23 RGIA, Fond 573, op. 21, d. 54, l. 72

lations concerning the tax system and the rural public administration.”²⁴ Admitting, however, that “superior interests of the state” might prompt the government to introduce Russian laws immediately and to abolish the Ismail uezd, dividing it between the neighboring districts, Iankovskii remains in favor of a flexible and careful strategy, asserting that “when it comes to the question of reforming this region [*uchastka*], it is necessary to act with particular caution, so that, by smashing all the existent legal norms and replacing them with new regulations, some of which must be deemed as less satisfying [than the current ones], we should not awaken among the inhabitants certain regrets concerning their separation from Romania.”²⁵ Beyond this transparent hint at the necessity of encouraging the loyalty of the local population, it seems that the flexible position of a number of Bessarabian governors had an impact on the actions of the Ministry of the Interior (or, more accurately, on the lack thereof). The Ministry officials admitted this 20 years later, in 1901, when a special report filed by the institution stated that the governors’ constant reluctance to allow any revisions of the Romanian institutional model influenced the position of the center. Both Iankovskii and his successor, A. P. Konstantinovich (1883 – 1899), noticed the “advantages” of the Romanian communal organization in comparison with the Russian model of rural administration.²⁶ The local elite generally played a central role in the transfer and adjustment process. In fact, the institutional continuity in Ismail cannot be explained without taking into account the continuity of the core elite group which managed to secure its preeminence in local affairs under the imperial government.

However, some local officials did not hesitate to express their discontent and frustration because of the persistence of the Romanian laws and institutions (seen as ‘alien’ and/or outdated) in Southern Bessarabia, firmly pleading for their liquidation. In the context of these polemics, in 1884, the acting Governor-General of Odessa and New Russia, von Roop, advanced a point of view radically different from the one supported earlier by the Bessarabian governor. In a report addressed directly to Alexander III, von Roop finds the numerous complaints and petitions filed by the population of the new Ismail district to be “exaggerated,” since these “are not confirmed” either by the emissaries sent by von Roop himself to the region or by the personal inspection that the official had conducted in Bolgrad and Ismail. On the contrary, he emphasized the progress brought to the region by the new Russian administration and decried the persistence of the Romanian laws and institutions there:

“Certain isolated abuses can still be encountered here, but, in any case, the population is exposed to them to a much smaller extent than during the Romanian government, when money and protection represented the overwhelming power, while the tribunals and the prosecutor’s office were completely in the hands of the rich dominant class, which at present is already losing its former hegemonic importance. However, one cannot deny that the Romanian communal laws, which were preserved there, even today still offer pretexts for the population’s continuing exploitation by the local [*zemskimi*] committees, a fact which is on open display particularly in the Bolgrad Committee... In any case, almost seven years have passed from the moment that the region bordering on the Danube, that had been temporarily lost, reverted to the bosom of the fatherland, and that is why the future continuation of the current state of transition and uncertainty must no longer be, obviously, tolerated, even if outstanding efforts and

24 RGIA, Fond 573, op. 21, d. 54, l. 75

25 RGIA, Fond 573, op. 21, d. 54, l. 84

26 RGIA, Fond 573, op. 21, d. 54, l. 160

sacrifices will be necessary to reach this goal..."²⁷

Alexander III fully endorsed this opinion, applying the following approving resolution on the margins: "It is time to resolve [the issue] definitively."²⁸ Despite the tsar's opinion, "the issue" remained pending for the next three decades. The Ismail district entered World War I with the same uncertain and separate status. Some Russian observers were even tempted to overplay the threat posed by the specter of "Romanian irredentism" in the region.

The ambiguity and contradictions that characterized the position of the Russian bureaucracy with regard to the "Ismail question" can also be closely followed at a more personal level. A particularly relevant and interesting case is that of Prince S. D. Urusov, who was the Bessarabian Governor between May 1903 and October 1904. Generally (and rightly) viewed at the time and by later historians as an official with liberal inclinations and as a rather informed critic of the Russifying policies of the imperial center at the peripheries, Urusov displays a revealing inconsistency and self-contradictory attitude in articulating his opinions concerning the "administrative anomaly" in Southern Bessarabia. While in his memoirs (initially published in 1907, in a period of overt opposition towards the imperial government) Urusov's attitude is essentially neutral, the governor appears as a supporter of legal uniformity and of the liquidation of the remnants of Romanian administration in his official reports submitted to the Minister of Internal Affairs. Here is Urusov's opinion concerning the situation of the Ismail district in 1903:

27 RGIA, Fond 1405, op. 77, d. 5920, 1879, l. 111-112

28 RGIA, Fond 1405, op. 77, d. 5920, 1879, l. 111-112

"In the Bessarabian gubernia there is also the Ismail district, with a significant area and rich natural conditions, which is composed of three [former] Romanian prefectures – Ismail, Bolgrad and Cahul. For 25 years already, the above-mentioned district, now reunited with the Russian Empire, is administered according to the old Romanian laws, currently modified even in Romania proper [Urusov means the 1865 Civil Code and the 1864 law on communal administration] because they do not correspond any longer to the vital needs of the population. After frequently receiving petitions from the inhabitants of this district demanding the introduction of Russian institutions into this area, I attempted to form an image about the vulnerable aspects of the order of things prevailing in the district, and I came to the conclusion that the main flaw is the lack of organization of rural life because of the imperfection of communal administration... The district's towns are managed in a very satisfactory manner, but the quality and organization of rural life leaves much to be desired... The activity of the gubernia's administrative institutions has no bearing over the Ismail district, which is why the surveillance of the communal administrative boards, where numerous abuses are discovered, is subverted... The above-mentioned reasons, as well as the unwelcome separation (in the sense of a lack of state unity) of this part of Bessarabia bordering on Romania urgently require the quickest possible introduction of Russian institutions into the Ismail district."²⁹

Despite his apparent preoccupation with the liquidation of the "peculiarities" of Southern Bessarabia, in his memoirs the former governor not only offers the reader an extended discussion of the communal structure of the Ismail district according to the Romanian legislation (without the slightest pejorative hint),

29 RGIA, Fond 1284, op. 194, d. 94, 1904 ("Otchet o sostoianii Bessarabskoi Gubernii za 1903 g."), l. 11. The topic of the "administrative peculiarity of the Ismail district" also emerges in other reports of the Bessarabian governors submitted to the tsar or the MVD in the early 20th century, as is the case, for example, in 1912: RGIA, Fond 1284, op. 194, d. 116, 1912 ("Prilozhenie k otchetu Bessarabskogo gubernatora za 1912 g.")

but also indulges in certain potentially “subversive” reflections in connection with the possible future of this territory. At the same time, Urusov is rather critical of the integrationist and centralizing projects promoted by the government in St. Petersburg. The same person who advocated the immediate introduction of Russian laws in 1904 asserted the following only three years later:

“The Ismail district, which was newly reincorporated into Russia in 1878, following the war with Turkey, holds a completely peculiar position within Bessarabia... There were neither any noble institutions, nor any zemstvos, nor the [customary] volost’ and rural administrations, led by land captains [zemskimi nachal’nikami], in the Ismail district. Here, the Romanian communal structure was preserved. Every locality, either rural or urban, formed a separate commune, which comprised all the landowners and all the inhabitants of these localities, without distinctions based on property, class etc. The executive official [organ] of the commune - the mayor [primar], assisted by a 12-member communal council - decided on all matters of self-government and fulfilled the same general state duties as those that are delegated to local institutions in Russia. The governor only rarely intervened into the issues linked to the local administration of the Ismail district... The governor inherited, in relation to the self-governing divisions of the district, the [former] functions of the royal power, while his St. Petersburg superiors did not deal with Ismail at all and had only the vaguest notion [samoe tumannoe predstavlenie] about the functioning of the... district... Despite this, the Ministry of Internal Affairs became was once again constantly preoccupied with introducing Russian institutions into Ismail, including the land captains, the volost’ system, the nobility and the new zemstvo-urban regulations. However, the State Council always rejected this kind of ministerial projects, under the pretext of the insufficient explication and lack of serious arguments [neobosnovannosti] to back the idea of the necessity to destroy the old local regime [stroj] in the name of the general leveling of the administration. The Ismail district still remains, until the pres-

ent day, an exception within the Russian district structure; it probably will have to wait for a general reform of our local administration, unless it is not again incorporated into Romania, due to some kind of international combination. [Romania] extends its motherly embrace to [Ismail] from beyond the border river Prut.”³⁰

Thus, a combination of indifference, bureaucratic inertia, and institutional rivalry, accompanied by a certain degree of pragmatism and tolerance of administrative diversity at the peripheries seem to be the main factors accounting for, first of all, the initial possibility of this institutional transfer, and, second, for the persistence of this ‘anomaly’ in an increasingly hostile Russian context, as late as the first decade of the 20th century. Urusov’s example, however, also points to the purely opportunistic and ‘rhetorical’ character of the arguments for centralization, which operated within the complex universe of the “politically correct” vocabulary of the epoch in its Russian imperial version. At the same time, both in his “official” position and his “private” persona, i.e., in his memoirs, Urusov displayed an obvious sensitivity towards the uncertain status of the region from a geographical (or even geopolitical) point of view.

This is understandable, since the Romanian factor became more and more significant in the first decade of the 20th century, when the problem of the loyalty of the populations at the empire’s peripheries acquired a nearly obsessive character for some of the empire’s leaders. The inherent dangers for imperial unity and regional loyalty presupposed by the exceptional status of the Ismail district did not go unnoticed by more anxious Russian observers. Especially in this period (and prob-

30 S. D. Urusov, *Zapiski gubernatora: Kishinev, 1903-1904 gg.*, Litera, Chișinău, 2004, 206-207.

ably linked to the heated discussion on the necessity of introducing the Russian *zemstvo* institutions in the Western borderlands³¹), the ‘uncertain’ status of Southern Bessarabia became a matter of serious concern for a certain part of the governing circles. In the tense prewar context such apprehensions signaled a growing insecurity of imperial control in the borderlands. In a comprehensive report on the general situation in Bessarabia filed by a Russian counterintelligence officer with a Bessarabian background and sent to the Head of the Police Department from Constantinople on February 19, 1914, the “Ismail issue” figured prominently. The report emphasized that

the Ismail district of Bessarabia finds itself in a worse condition [compared to the rest]. [Here], from the time of its reincorporation into Russia, even the slightest sign of Russification is not visible, so that it seems that one is in Romania. This is caused not only by the recent inclusion of this land into Russia, but also by the connections of the local inhabitants with the Romanians. [Thus,] almost all the trade in agricultural products is oriented towards Romania; the credit loans of small rural landowners are [provided by] Romanian banks, due to the better conditions compared to the private Jewish banks of Southern Russia. [Another cause] is that, until the present time, the Romanian local [*zemskoe*], urban and rural regulations have been preserved.³²

31 The introduction of the *zemstvos* in the Western borderlands was one of the central points of the reform agenda promoted by Piotr Stolypin’s government during 1906-1911. The project to extend these institutions to the region stemmed, on the one hand, from the center’s wish to integrate these provinces more closely into the Russian ‘core’ and, on the other hand, from the widespread mistrust of the central authorities towards the Polish landowners, who dominated the electoral colleges and sent a substantial number of deputies to the Duma. Despite the government’s efforts to push this legislation through the empire’s legislative bodies, the project was shelved by the aristocracy-dominated State Council in 1911.

32 GARF, Fond 529, op. 1, d. 26, ll. 9-11. Secret Report 39, February 19, 1914 (mistakenly dated 1913), here l. 11.

The resurgence of the “Ismail issue” as late as 1914 is symptomatic. Partly due to bureaucratic inertia and partly to arguments relating to the better effectiveness of the district’s western-style institutions, the Ismail district preserved its exceptional character in Bessarabia and was constantly invoked as an example of Russian administrative rationality (or, conversely, carelessness). In the early period after the region’s reintegration into the empire the acceptance of the Romanian institutional model was regarded either in pragmatic terms, as a temporary expedient or, ultimately, as an example of strategic flexibility of the center’s policy at the empire’s multiethnic peripheries. Due to the increasing “nationalization” of the imperial discourse and practical policy, the relevance of the national factor was given great emphasis later. The Ismail district became a potential target for “Romanian irredentism,” while its administrative peculiarity became increasingly awkward and questionable. However, the fact that such a situation endured for almost 40 years suggests a complex attitude towards foreign models of governance even within the late Russian Empire, which was less tolerant of regional diversity. The continuity of the local elites and the relatively generous terms of their reintegration after 1878 played a large role in this outcome. The co-existence of a French-inspired “rational” administrative structure (in a remote corner of the empire) with a multi-layered Russian model of local governance might serve as a good example of the flexibility of the state authorities. This flexibility could also be explained by the inconsistency of imperial policy, which lacked any common vision on the integration of the peripheries. The case of Southern Bessarabia might also serve as a reminder that the empire’s borderlands were privileged sites of administrative and social

experiments up to the demise of the imperial regime.

The relevance of this case is also enhanced by the fact that there were no direct parallels to Southern Bessarabia's situation in the other parts of the Russian Empire. While the Romanov polity had vast experience in accommodating and dealing with institutional difference in the borderlands, the combination of factors affecting Southern Bessarabia was unique. This was the only area reclaimed by the empire from an emerging nation-state and, consequently, presented the Russian central authorities with very specific dilemmas. This is not to say that similar strategies of governance and / or tolerance of previous administrative practices were rare. On the contrary, the empire incorporated territories with rather different and long-standing institutional traditions (e.g., the former Polish lands, Finland and the Baltic Provinces) which had to be initially accepted and gradually adjusted to imperial standards. This process was always uneven and incomplete. However, the issue of institutional modernity was only at stake in Southern Bessarabia. In this sense, the flexibility noted above was also due to the uneven nature of Russian modernization. In fact, the closest parallels to the Southern Bessarabian case appear during World War I, when the Russian occupation authorities had to improvise governing strategies in the areas seized from enemy powers. Still, that was an exceptional context of generalized violence, wholesale transformation of traditional social and ethnic hierarchies, large-scale societal disruption and population displacement³³. It is thus

33 For a substantial and in-depth discussion of these issues, see Eric Lohr. *Nationalizing the Russian Empire: The Campaign Against Enemy Aliens During World War I* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003); Peter Holquist, "Violent Russia, Deadly Marxism? Russia in the Epoch of

hardly comparable to the 'normal' rhythm of institutional transfer exhibited in Southern Bessarabia. This relative uniqueness of the "Is-mail anomaly" makes it all the more fascinating and revealing for any student of imperial borderlands.

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Publications: Bessarabia as a Part of the Russian Empire, 1812-1917, published in Russian by Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie Press (Moscow) in March 2012, co-authored with Victor Taki; a study (co-authored with Victor Taki) on the 'construction of the Bessarabian province' focusing on the role of cultural, administrative and institutional transfers in this process; an article on the integration of the Bessarabian nobility into the Russian imperial system, published in the *European Review of History* (ERH), No.1, 2009; and a piece discussing the ideology and nationalist vision of

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Constantin Stere, one of the most prominent Bessarabian-born émigrés to the Romanian Kingdom, in the context of World War I foreign policy debates in Romania, in *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas* (No. 3, 2012). He also co-edited (with Diana Dumitru, Igor Cașu and Petru Negură) the collective volume *Al Doilea Război Mondial: memorie și istorie în Estul și Vestul Europei* [World War II: Memory and History in Eastern and Western Europe], Chișinău, Cartier, 2013.

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