

Between the Empire and the Nation-State: Metamorphoses of the Bessarabian Elite (1918)

by Svetlana Suveică, Moldova State University, Chişinău

ABSTRACT

The aim of the article is to examine the circumstances that shaped the feelings and attitudes of the Bessarabian political and economic elite, who experienced the disintegration of the Russian empire, but did not show readiness to embrace the Romanian-nation state perspective in 1918. I claim that 1917-1918 political changes of the region deeply affected the economic and social status of the former elite, influenced its identity and belonging, forced new survival strategies, shaped mobility patterns, as well encouraged the development of alternative political scenarios for the future of the region, namely the return of Bessarabia back to Russia. Romania's protection of Bessarabia from the Bolsheviks did not ensure the expected support for the new regime of those who cared about the preservation of their economic and social status; the metamorphoses experienced by those who served the empire were shaped, besides the feeling of loss and nostalgia for the tsar, by the frustration and disappointment for the failure to switch loyalty to the Romanian king. Besides that, the abolition of Bessarabian autonomy that lasted for six months led towards merging of a common anti-Romanian front of the former and the acting regional elite that once supported the union of Bessarabia with Romania.

Besides unprecedented human losses and material devastation, the end of World War One was marked by social revolutions and national movements that challenged imperial rules. The path of Bessarabia, like that of other East European regions, was shaped by turmoil: Bessarabia changed its political status from the western gubernia of the Russian empire to the eastern province of the Romanian nation-state. Political changes deeply affected people's economic and social status, influenced feelings of identity and belonging, forced new survival strategies and mobility patterns, and encouraged the development of alternative political scenarios for the future of the region.

The metamorphoses experienced by the regional elite who were in power during the last days of the empire remains a missing puzzle in the complex picture of transition. The fact that its representatives were active during the Peace conference in Paris, which condemned the Romanian "occupation" and claimed the return of Bessarabia to Russia, raises a series of questions which go beyond the typical rep-

resentation of the behaviour of a nostalgic, disappointed and frustrated group of people who were the last generation educated within the empire and the first generation not able to serve it. The aim of this article is to examine the circumstances that shaped their feelings and attitudes, and which led to their active engagement in the development of a political scenario for the region. This was an alternative scenario to the project of Bessarabia's belonging to national Romanian state, and instead aimed to re-attach this region to Russia regardless of the confusion of the latter's political regime. This idea found supporters among the Bessarabians who were in power during the short period of autonomy and then independence, as well as among those who voted for the union of the region with Romania in April 1918. The acknowledgement of the existence of such an alternative scenario and the revealing of the motivations of its supporters, who promoted the cause inside Bessarabia as well as in European capitals during the post-war remaking of the world order enable us to question the nation-state finality as a predes-

lined linear path, which has been long argued in the Romanian as well as Moldovan nationalist historiography.

“As soon as possible leave and trumpet and insert in every publication that must awaken Europe and make it restore all and set here an actual state of order, and not a mere appearance of it, barely covered by the existing Bolshevism of those who stand at the head of all this,”¹ wrote the Bessarabian landowner Panteleimon V. Sinadino to the former Marshal of Bessarabian nobility Alexandr N. Krupenskii. It was January 25 1919² and Sinadino was in the Bessarabian main city of Chişinău, whereas Krupenskii was in Odessa awaiting a visa to leave for Paris.

This was the time when in the French capital the representatives of either victorious or defeated countries gathered to participate in the post-war conference, which was expected to set up the principles of the new peaceful international order and redesign the East European borders. As Alan Sharp puts it, “promises had been made, expectations and aspirations rose, either deliberately or by accident, and now these pledges had to be redeemed.”³ The Paris peace conference was the space where the claims to Bessarabia from both Russia and Romania were formulated, argued, and confronted. The Romanian delegation to the conference strived to obtain the international recognition of the newly shaped post-war borders. It ex-

pected to confront the opponents of the union of Bessarabia with Romania, who also gathered in Paris. On their turn, the Russian political émigrés and diplomats contested the right of the Romanians and claimed that Bessarabia belonged to Russia. The claims were sustained as part of the “Russkoe delo” (Russian cause) campaign, supported by the White forces inside Russia and in different European emigration centers. Its aim was to obtain the support of the Great Powers in the anti-Bolshevik fight, and to secure the preservation of Russia’s pre-1914 borders, including the former Western territories of the Russian empire. In order to attain their overarching goal, each side drafted plans, built networks, raised money, and designed propaganda strategies.

Self-determination being declared the guiding principle for the redesign of postwar borders, the victory seemed to be on the side of the nation-state(s); the fight, nevertheless, promised to be a tough one. Romania had an official delegation, whereas Russia’s interests were represented by a group of political émigrés and diplomats empowered by the White Army’s General Kolchak, who had a good reputation and strong connections among the European and American officials. Especially in the first half of 1919, the Russians acted with confidence: on the one hand, the White Army gained a series of important victories against the Bolsheviks; on the other hand, the Great Powers seemed to agree on a common anti-Bolshevik position. Under these promising circumstances, the Whites in Paris and inside Russia hoped that the defeat of the Bolsheviks would be followed by a series of concessions for Russia, including territorial ones, under the condition that the country would follow a democratic path.⁴

1 P.V. Sinadino - A.N. Krupenskii, January 25 1919. Alexandr N. Krupenskii Papers, Box I Subject files, Folder Sinadino, Panteleimon V., Hoover Institution Archives, Stanford, California (further HIA).

2 All the dates in the text are New Style.

3 Alan Sharp, *The Versailles Settlement. Peacemaking After the First World War, 1919-1923*, 2d ed. (Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 196.

4 Regarding the arguments used by the Russian émigrés as well as the efforts made in order

The Bessarabians were also ready to take part in the debate over the fate of their region. The Romanian delegate at the Peace conference, Ioan Pelivan, represented the “new” regional elite who vociferated the social and national aspirations of the Bessarabians. While studying law in Dorpat (Tartu), he returned to Bessarabia with the spread of the February 1917 Revolution to the Western periphery. After witnessing the disintegration of the imperial colossus, Pelivan contributed to the claims of Bessarabian autonomy and independence, and then gave his vote for the union of this region with Romania. A former minister of justice and deputy of the first Bessarabian legislative body “Sfatul Țării”, he reached Paris via Bucharest, where he joined the Romanian Prime minister Ion I.C. Brătianu and other delegates to defend the Romanian interests at the conference. Acknowledging with all the responsibility and faith the complex task of persuading the Great Powers to recognise Bessarabia as Romanian territory, he carried out intense propaganda activities.⁵

Pelivan’s main political opponent during the Peace conference was Alexandr N. Krupenskii. In contrast to Pelivan, Krupenskii represented the “old” Bessarabian elite, which flourished during the late Romanov Empire, which was actively involved in Bessarabian social, political and economic life, was loyal to the tsar, and

to give Bessarabia back to Russia during the Paris Peace conference, see our recent study : Svetlana Suveica, “*Russkoe Delo*” and the “*Bessarabian Cause*”: the Russian Political Émigrés and the Bessarabians in Paris (1919-1920), Institut für Ost- und Südosteuropaforschung, Regensburg, IOS Mitteilungen. Arbeitsbereich Geschichte, no. 64, February 2014, accessed October 10 2014, http://www.dokumente.ios-regensburg.de/publikationen/mitteilungen/mitt_64.pdf.

5 Regarding the activities of Ioan Pelivan in Paris, see Ion Constantin, Ion Negrei, Gheorghe Negru (Eds.), *Ioan Pelivan, istoric al mișcării de eliberare națională* (București: Editura Biblioteca Bucureștilor), 2012, 390-409.

did not imagine that one day all this could vanish. He reached the French capital via Odessa, where he emigrated in April 1918, soon after “Sfatul Țării” declared the union of Bessarabia with Romania. Marginalized from the political life of the region, Krupenskii became active in its near vicinity, where he initiated the creation of the Odessa Committee for Saving Bessarabia (Odesskii Komitet Spaseniia Bessarabii). Although limited in resources, the Committee carried out intense propaganda activities against the Romanian “occupation” of the region. The main initiative of the Committee was the creation of a Bessarabian “delegation” that would represent the interests of the Bessarabians in Paris.⁶ A declaration, signed in Odessa on February 10, 1919, stated that the “representatives of various organizations and community groups of Bessarabia, [...] organize, under the chairmanship of Alexandr Nikolaevich Krupenskii, a common Commission for the purpose of achieving during the International Peace Conference the liberation of Bessarabia from the Romanian annexation and the realization of the aspirations of the people of Bessarabia.”⁷ The aspirations were related to the return of Bessarabia back into the Russian borders. The list of potential members was left open, so that other delegates could adhere: among the proposed names was Panteleimon V. Sinadino, the president of the Union of Bessarabian Great Landowners, the organization that issued a mandate to Paris to A.N. Krupenskii.

6 For a general overview, see Svetlana Suveica, “For the “Bessarabian Cause”: The Activity of Odessa Committee for Saving Bessarabia (1918-1920)”, *Archiva Moldaviae*, vol. VI (2014): 139-169.

7 The document was signed by Alexandr N. Krupenskii, Alexandr K. Schmidt, Alexandr D. Krupenskii and Vladimir V. Tsyganko. Alexandr N. Krupenskii Papers, Box 2 Subject File, Folder Bessarabian commission of the Paris Peace Conference, HIA.

In contrast to Pelivan, who held the mandate of the member of the Romanian delegation to the Peace conference,⁸ A.N. Krupenskii and the former mayor of Chişinău, A.K. Schmidt, were “dispatched to Paris as carriers carrying documents and letters to the representative of Russia to the Peace Congress – Mr Minister Serge Sazonov.”⁹ In the French capital, these two men ensured the Russian émigrés that their co-nationals were eager to again be “citizens of the Great Russian State and [...] are ready to contribute to the restoration of the Greater Russia by all means.”¹⁰ During the conference, the Bessarabians acted together with the Russian political émigrés and diplomats for the support of the “Russian cause”. Although on the public scene the idea of building a democratic post-war Russia was promoted, the monarchist views were strongly backed inside the circle of the Russian émigrés. Among the supporters of the monarchist ideas was Alexandr N. Krupenskii, who in 1921 presided over the first congress of Russian monarchists held in the German city of Bad Reichenhall,¹¹ and

8 From 1 December 1919 to 31 May 1920, the member of the Romanian delegation Ioan Pelivan received a monthly salary of 20.000 FR. Arhivele Naţionale Istorică Centrale Bucureşti (further A.N.I.C.), fond Ioan Pelivan, dos. 41, f. 24.

9 Certificat, Odessa, January 27 1919 (Fr.), A.N. Krupenskii Papers, Box 2 Subject file, Folder Krupenskii, A.N., HIA.

10 The earlier program was rather similar to one quoted here. Obshchaia Programma Predstavitelei Bessarabskogo Naseleniia, December 10 1919 (draft). Alexandr N. Krupenskii Papers, Box 3 Speeches & Writings, 1919, Folder “General Program of the Representatives of the Bessarabian Population” (December 10 1919), HIA.

11 *Allgemeine Zeitung München*, no. 236, 7. Juni 1921, Bayerisches Staatsarchiv München, MA 103009 Deutsch-Russische-Beziehungen, 1919-1929. See also Hans-Erich Volkmann, *Die Russische Emigration in Deutschland, 1919-1929* (Würzburg: Holzner-Verlag), 1966, 99; Johannes Baur, *Die Russische Kolonie in München 1900-1945. Deutsch-russische Beziehungen im 20. Jahrhundert* (Wiesbaden: Harrasowitz Verlag), 1998, 103.

who took over the presidency of the Russian Monarchical Council (Russkii Monarkhicheskii Sovet) in Paris in 1926. The biography of Krupenskii can serve as a classical case study of a post-imperial subject: up to his death in 1939, he believed in the restoration of “the foundations of the old order, in which Russia, admittedly, was great, rich and mighty.”¹²

The archival documents reveal that the Bessarabian “delegation” to Paris consisted of three representatives of the former elite who served the tsar, and one representative of the “new” elite, who became active in the region during the summer of 1917. The latter was Vladimir V. Tsyganko, the head of the Peasants’ faction of the “Sfatul Țării”, delegated to Paris by the Central Committee of the Peasants of Bessarabia. In an article published in 1919 he stated that it would be “dangerous” for the Great Powers to take into consideration only the information coming from the Romanian side, which aimed at “establishing the rights of Romania over Bessarabia.” In his opinion, that “would lead to decisions absolutely inadmissible for my country [underl. in text].¹³ It is about the fate and the property of a region of more than two and a half million of people, and we give an account of responsibility before these numerous people.”¹⁴

In Paris the regional supporters of the nation-state perspective for Bessarabia were thus confronted by the supporters of the return of Bessarabia to a restored Greater Russia in its pre-war borders. In order to answer the question under which circumstances an alternative

12 *Secretnaia Zapiska*, Dec. 10-23 1931. Archbishop Apollinari (Koshevoi) Papers, Box 2 Correspondence, Folder 2.18 Krupenskii Alexandr Nikolaevich, 1928-1932, Reel 1, HIA.

13 A.N.I.C., fond Ioan Pelivan, dos. 428, f. 24.

14 “Bessarabian Question before the Peace Conference”, by Vladimir V. Tsyganko, f. 3-4.

perspective – other than that of the participation to the Romanian nation-state – found its supporters in Bessarabia as well in Paris, one must look back at the events of 1917-1918.

With the spread of the 1917 February Revolution from Petersburg to the most distant corners of the empire, the emissaries of the Provisional Government found in Bessarabia an “extreme ignorance of the population, among whom the percentage of illiteracy is surprisingly high; a powerful party of the wealthy landowners, who had concentrated the local administration in their own hands; the virtual absence of industrial workers and of a democratically-inclined intelligentsia: all this was fruitful soil for counter-revolutionary pogroms and plots in favor of restoration. [...] Here the monarchist currents flowed strongly.”¹⁵ The Party of the Center, led by the Marshal of the Bessarabian nobility and great landowner Alexandr N. Krupenskii, was the main supporter of the monarchist idea. An attentive observer of the events noted that to the imperial elite “liberals advocating a constitutional regime were a greater threat even than the land-hungry peasants.”¹⁶ By the autumn of 1917 the political and administrative levers were gradually lost to the “new” leaders that propagated social-democratic reforms. The main factor that shaped the self-identification of the former elite was the economic status. The “wealthy” and “landowners”¹⁷ were con-

cerned about preserving their land and property during the peasants’ sporadic take-over of land, the so-called “agrarian revolution.” Neither local nor central authorities could stop the anarchy; in this situation, the landowners “had no illusions as to what might happen to them in the event of revolution and most of them built up reserves in foreign banks to meet extreme eventualities in case they were forced to become refugees.”¹⁸

In the power vacuum created in the period of transition from the empires to the nation-states in different parts of Eastern Europe the “kleiner Raum” initiatives were developed.¹⁹ In the autumn of 1917, when, according to Alan Kramer, “Russia’s post-war history began while the rest of Europe was still at war”,²⁰ in Bessarabia the regional assembly “Sfatul Țării” representing different social, political and professional groups, was created.²¹ The wealthy were among the deputies, although not as a coagulated group; they hoped to influence the legislative decisions of the newly instituted body, among them the preservation of private property being a priority. In the opening ceremony, Panteleimon V. Sinadino

1920, are held in Alexandr N. Krupenskii’s personal collection, HIA.

18 Michael, *More Corn for Bessarabia*.

19 The “kleiner Raum” initiatives in 1918-1919 were short-lived state-building efforts in Eastern Europe. The studies on this subject, published in a collective volume, challenged the historiography, in which the nation-state was shown as the only organizing principle after World War One. Harald Heppner, Eduard Staudinger (eds.), *Region und Umbruch: zur Geschichte alternativer Ordnungsversuche* (Bern/Frankfurt a.M.: Peter Lang, 2001).

20 Alan Kramer, *Dynamic of Destruction. Culture and Mass Killing in the First World War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 285.

21 On the social composition of Sfatul Tarii, see: Katja Lasch, “Der Landesrat in Bessarabien: Ethnische Zusammensetzung, politischen Orientierung, Sozialisation und Bildungsstand der Abgeordneten”, *Transylvanian Review*, XXI, no. 2 (Summer 2012): 19-37.

15 The Dissemination outside Petrograd of the News of the Revolution (Doc. 129), in: Robert P. Browder, Alexander F. Kerensky (Eds.), *The Russian Provisional Government, 1917: Documents*, vol. 1 (Stanford: Stanford University Press), 1961, 148-149.

16 Louis Guy Michael, *More Corn for Bessarabia. Russian Experience, 1917-1917* (Michigan: Michigan State University Press, 1983), 117-118. The mimeographed copy of Michael’s memoirs is held at HIA (collection no. 79070).

17 20 letters of P.V. Sinadino, addressed to A.N. Krupenskii between August 1918 and January

greeted the assembly on behalf of the Bessarabian Greek minority and expressed hopes that “Sfatul Țării” will establish in our homeland order, legality and peace that will protect the life, the liberty and the wealth of all those who will be highly honored to live under the protection of freedom of Bessarabia. [...] Long live the free, autonomous, Bessarabia, mature as a state!”, concluded the speaker optimistically.²² The short-lived autonomy within the Russian Federation and then the independence of the Moldovan Republic declared on February 6, 1918 were less an outcome of a separate political project, but more a reality imposed by the external circumstances, namely the independence of neighbouring Ukraine. An unsuccessful Bolshevik attempt to seize power at the beginning of 1918, the territorial pretensions of Ukrainian Rada, as well as the chaos and anarchy on the Romanian front that soon spread over Bessarabia challenged the independence of the Moldovan Republic. From April 9, 1918, when the region became part of Romania, the situation slowly came back to normality.

The private correspondence between Panteleimon V. Sinadino and Alexandr N. Krupenskii reveals that at the end of 1917 and the beginning of 1918 the anxiety and fear over the spread of Bolshevism was a daily concern of the wealthy Bessarabians. Under these circumstances, those who feared life threats to their lives and property losses acclaimed the entry of the Romanian army into Bessarabia in January 1918. When the Romanian army refrained from intervening in the internal affairs of the region, a group of greater landowners led by Panteleimon V. Sinadino wrote a note to the Romanian Prime Minister, Al. Margiloman, in

22 Procesul-verbal nr. 1 al ședinței organului basarabean al Țării - Sfatul Țării, 21 noiembrie 1917, *Patrimoniul. Almanah de cultură istorică*, no. 1 (1990): 170.

which he described “land anarchy” reigning in Bessarabia. The agrarian legislation issued by “Sfatul Țării” was characterized as having a “pure Bolshevik character, tending towards marching against the classes of landowners, towards their defeat, towards the demagogic promises of the redistribution of wealth.”²³ Subsequently, the only solution seen by the landlords was the removal of “Sfatul Țării”, which was “an institution elected arbitrarily by gangs of perverted Bolsheviks and soldiers, not only without the participation of the intelligent population, but even without a true representation of the peasants.”²⁴ The address was left unanswered.

Another attempt to seek protection from Romania followed: a delegation of the greater landowners was received on March 23, 1918 by the Romanian King in Iași. Its members, led by Siandino, expressed disappointment with “Sfatul Țării”, described as “an occasional creation of occasional politicians and adventurers” and an “arbitrary institution chosen by a band of maximalist soldiers” that took advantage of the Bolshevik *coup d'état* and declared the independence of the Moldovan Republic. The landowners asked for the protection of property and personal security and expressed the belief that the union of Bessarabia with Romania was the only solution “to end the revolutionary state organized by an alleged government and an alleged Sfatul Țării”.²⁵ A decision of the Romanian Prime minister for the support of the landowners followed: “Without intervening in the regulations of property quarrels, troops and horses

23 Zapiska, undated. HIA, Alexandr N. Krupenskii Papers, Box II Subject file, Folder Occupation, Rumania, of Bessarabia – General, HIA.

24 Zapiska.

25 Ștefan Ciobanu, *Unirea Basarabiei. Studiu și documente cu privire la mișcarea națională din Basarabia în anii 1917-1918* (Chișinău: Editura “Universitas”, 1993), 250-251.

will be given to great landowners for the land not to be left fallow."²⁶ Amid war requisitions and food shortage, the Romanian authorities thus made efforts to create favourable conditions for the cultivation of land, without being ready to intervene in the internal political debates of the region.

On the eve of the day "Sfatul Țării" voted for the union of Bessarabia with Romania (April 9, 1918), the Romanian Prime minister Al. Marghiloman met secretly in Chișinău with Panteleimon V. Sinadino and other landowners. Marghiloman ensured Sinadino that "Sfatul Țării" shall be dissolved immediately after the vote in the favour of the union will take place, and that the re-installment to power of the former elite, whose knowledge about the region as well experience was crucial to the new regime, will follow.²⁷ Romania's fear for the spread of the Bolshevism across the river Pruth seemed in line with the harsh critique on the "revolutionary clique of the legislative body of "Sfatul Țării", repeatedly expressed by the landowners before the Romanian authorities. Sinadino in turn ensured the Romanian official that the Bessarabian wealthy "stood and will stand for order, civilization, honour and truth and we hope to serve faithfully the future Motherland in the same manner we served and worked for the progress of Russia and the Tsar."²⁸ The landowners requested the acceleration of the annexation of Bessarabia to Romania, "so that this very fertile and reach region could settle and move towards progress and civilization under a well-organized state power." Marghi-

26 Alexandru Marghiloman, *Note politice*, vol. III, 1917-1918 (București: Institutul de arte grafice "Eminescu", 1927), 415-416.

27 Beseda P.V. Sinadino. Marghiloman IV, undated. Vasili A. Maklakov Papers, Box 18, Folder 18.10 Bessarabia. Soiuz Zemel'nykh Sobstvennikov, f. 4, HIA.

28 Beseda, f. 3.

loman replied that "the historical injustice towards the Moldovan people will be repaired and the "union will take place, regardless of the obstacles."²⁹

Based on the available primary sources, it is hard to tell whether Sinadino and the others believed the promises made by the Romanians. Nevertheless, it is clear that the Bessarabian wealthy expressed readiness to switch loyalty from the Russian tsar to the Romanian king as a strategy of adaptation, which was strongly motivated by personal interests, such as the preservation of property rights and social privileges enjoyed under the Russian empire.

Whereas Sinadino and others tried to negotiate their status with the new regime and adapt to the new life, their personal feelings and thoughts remained attached to Russia. In a letter to Krupenskii, Sinadino who came from a family of Greek merchants identified himself as "Russian" and "Russian by name and in soul."³⁰ Sinadino's name figured in the list of the potential Bessarabian "delegates" to Paris; he never joined Krupenskii and others due to health issues and because his service in Bessarabia was much needed for his fellows in Paris. Sinadino acted as the main informant of Krupenskii about the situation in the region during the Peace conference. Thus, he wisely played a double game: while the Romanian authorities considered him loyal, he sincerely hoped for the return of Bessarabia back to Russia. Sinadino used to travel hundreds of kilometres from Chișinău to Bucharest, to meet a second-rank French or British representative, who would then travel to Paris and deliver a letter or a parcel to Krupenskii. The letters received from Paris kept Sinadino and

29 Beseda.

30 P.V. Sinadino - A.N. Krupenskii, June 5 1919.

the others in Chişinău hopeful that after Paris life would return to “normality.” The point of reference to “normality” was the life in Greater Russia. “I really do not know when God will have mercy on us?! We find it hard! There are few people with ideology, most are drawn into daily life, and from this take advantage “our patrons”, deeper and deeper plunge they into people’s body, tearing it off from our (once) Great country! We stand [one illegible word] people, will the awaited change and liberation ever come?! We do not know and it becomes terrible!”³¹

The status of autonomy within the Romanian state, granted to Bessarabia on April 9, 1918, was viewed by the representatives of the former elite as the light at the end of the tunnel. Panteleimon V. Sinadino and others believed that the autonomy was the guarantee of the preservation of economic privileges and would facilitate their “come-back” in the administrative life of the region. Sinadino and Constantin Stere,³² the Bessarabian intellectual and politician whom the Romanian Government entrusted the mediation of the union with “Sfatul Țării” deputies, met secretly several times during the months of April-May 1918. Stere emphasized the willingness of the Romanian government to cooperate with the loyal Bessarabians: “When implementing the agrarian reform, it is necessary to closely monitor and analyse who among the landowners is able and willing to merge with the Romanian people, for the rest of them we should try to provide the possibility to painlessly liquidate their corners and leave.” Among the endorsed was Alexandr N. Krupenskii who emigrated

to Odessa and played the anti-Romanian card from there.³³ The discussions between Stere and Sinadino reveal an attempt of both the Romanian Government and the Bessarabian landowners to establish a dialogue for a possible future cooperation in economic and administrative matters in the region. In order to avoid the consequences of radical agrarian legislation, Stere advised Sinadino to find a way to obtain the seats within the agrarian commission of “Sfatul Țării”, so that the landowners will have their own voice heard. The attempt of the landowners to enter the commission failed.

During the month of October 1918 the spirits became agitated around a possible abolition of Bessarabian autonomy. In a private letter from October 28, 1918, P.V. Sinadino informed A.N. Krupenskii in Odessa that “among the members of Sf.T. [Sfatul Țării], i.e. those who voted pro union, is a large group (15 people), who are ready to tell the truth and give up their signatures, as well as many members of the Peasant Party who cannot remain silent spectators of all that is being done here. Some have already traveled to Iași, and called for the creation of the Sf.T. [Sfatul Țării] before November 1.³⁴ Otherwise they promise to come out openly against Romania; of course, they were not promised anything.” Apparently, these people were ready to break a “big scandal” in Bessarabia and declare the act of April 9 invalid in the case the composition of the legislative body remained unchanged. Sinadino believed that the intention of the rebellious deputies could be supported financially with sums equal to the salary of a “Sfatul Țării” deputy. Things were to be arranged in such a way “that these left-wing comrades do not

31 P.V. Sinadino - A.N. Krupenskii, December 7 1919.

32 According to a detailed transcript, written by P.V. Sinadino, the meetings took place on April 12 and 23, May 7 and 26, and June 23 1918. Beseda, f. 8-31.

33 Beseda, f. 15.

34 A new composition of the Bessarabian parliament was meant here.

receive money from you, because they would be ashamed, you need to find a reliable person from their environment.”³⁵ The rebellious deputies were expected to leave for Odessa.

At the end of November 1918, when Romania was about to send delegates to the Peace conference in Paris, the Romanian Prime minister Arthur Văitoianu travelled to Chişinău to persuade “Sfatul Țării” deputies to give up the regional autonomy. In a private conversation with the head of the Peasants faction of the Bessarabian legislative body, Vladimir V. Tsyganko, Văitoianu did not hide the fact that a unified position will support Romania’s interests before the decision-makers at the conference in Paris. He apparently said: “And why would you need autonomy? Are the Romanian laws bad? What is autonomy, I do not understand. You should abandon it for the very reason that you don’t have good public servants, good Romanian-nationalists. If you give up the autonomy you will not have a general commissar, but a special plenipotentiary for the Bessarabian affairs, a person from your surroundings named by the Central government, the Directorate in its new composition will remain until the All-Romanian Constituent Assembly [is created – n.a.]. Is this not good?”³⁶ According to the Romanian official, an autonomous Bessarabia will stay isolated from the rest of Romania.

Vladimir V. Tsyganko was among those forty deputies of “Sfatul Țării” who several days before Văitoianu’s visit to Chişinău signed a memorandum to the Romanian government, expressing disagreement with the fact that the

Bessarabian autonomy, stipulated in the act of the union April 9, 1918, was not respected. The signatories claimed that civil liberties were broken, governmental agents that replaced local servants abused their power, minority rights were not respected, and the national strife was artificially fueled among the ethnic groups that were previously living peacefully in the region. They asked for new elections and a new composition of “Sfatul Țării”, as well as for the restoration of zemstvo, the local institutions of self-administration. The signatories, thirteen of whom signed the act of the union, threatened to denounce it.³⁷ There is no documentary evidence of the fact that the document was ever sent to Bucharest; nevertheless, it should be counted as the last unsuccessful attempt to save the regional autonomy within Romania. On December 10, 1918 it was abolished.³⁸

After the cancellation of autonomy, Vladimir V. Tsyganko left Chişinău for Odessa. On April 9, 1918, Tsyganko abstained from giving his vote for the union of Bessarabia with Romania, despite being convinced that the union was the only solution for avoiding the Bolshevik invasion of the region. The abolition of autonomy six months later strengthened his conviction that the union with Romania was a temporary solution for Bessarabia, and that the future of the region lied within the democratic Russia. In Odessa he signed the common declaration of the Bessarabian “delegation”, mandated to Paris by the Odessa Committee for Saving Bessarabia, the Union

35 P.V. Sinadino - A.N. Krupenskii, October 28 1918.

36 V gostiakh u General’nogo Komissara Vaitoianu v piatnitsu 23 noiabria 1919 g., undated. Alexandr N. Krupenskii Papers, Box 3 Speeches & Writings, 1919, Folder Tsyganko, Vladimir (Tsyganko), HIA.

37 Memorandum (photocopy with original signatures), undated (Rus.). Alexandr N. Krupenskii Papers, Box II Subject File, Folder Romania – (Relations with Bessarabia), HIA.

38 The vote of “Sfatul Țării” during its last session is little discussed in the literature; some unpublished documents which we plan to explore in other publications show that it was produced in dubious conditions.

of Bessarabian greater landowners and other social-political organizations in order to fight for the restoration of Russia and the return of Bessarabia back into its borders. Although he later refrained in written form from respecting the Odessa declaration – the document that laid the basis for the founding of the Bessarabian “delegation” – and acted in Paris on his own, his activity was directed towards persuading the wider European public that Romania forcibly occupied Bessarabia. Tsyganko publicly claimed, on different occasions, that the population of Bessarabia identified with Russia and wished to belong to the Russian geographic, economic and cultural space. Similarly to the other Bessarabian “delegates”, he supported the idea of holding a plebiscite in the region. Ion Păscăluță was another “Sfatul Țării” deputy whom the abolition of autonomy motivated to publicly adhere to “the anti-unionist movement”, which was initiated by Krupenskii in Odessa then continued in Paris.³⁹ In contrast to Tsyganko, Păscăluță voted for the union of Bessarabia with Romania on April 9, 1918.⁴⁰ On the day of the abolishment of autonomy, he addressed a note to the Odessa Committee for Saving Bessarabia, “with the aim of informing on the latest acts of violence committed by the Romanian government over the defenseless Bessarabia”. He claimed that only 38 of 48 present deputies (of the total number of 140 deputies) voted for the annulment of the conditions, under which Bessarabia united with Romania on April 9 1918.⁴¹

39 Ion Constantin, Panteleimon Halippa neînfricat pentru Basarabia (București: Biblioteca Bucureștilor, 2009), 203.

40 Alexandru Chiriac, Membrii Sfatului Țării (1917-1918). Dicționar (București: Editura Fundației Culturale Române, 2001), 24.

41 V. Komitet po Spaseniiu Bessarabii, December 10 1918. Vasiliu A. Maklakov Papers, Box 18 Subject File, Folder 18.2 Bessarabia. Protests against abuses by Romanian authorities, HIA.

The above arguments support the conclusion that the abolition of autonomy motivated the representatives of the “old” and the “new” elite, who were once at the opposite sides of the barricade, to act together against the common enemy, the Romanian regime. Although the perspective of Bessarabia within either a democratic or a monarchic Russia was not clearly envisaged, the certitude that Bessarabia belonged to the Russian space grew together with the dissatisfactions caused by the abolition of autonomy.

In the meantime, in Paris, the president of the Bessarabian “delegation”, Alexandr N. Krupenskii, made efforts to create a network of people who dedicated their activities to the success of the “Bessarabian cause”. The network, based on the previously built social ties and personal connections, evolved into a variegated and diffuse structure, in which social, political or ethnic identification was less important than the willingness to contribute to the success of the cause. Moving back and forth across boundaries and nations and meeting former acquaintances in order to build a network of reliable people turned into a challenging enterprise. Krupenskii and others looked to update their agenda and influence the decision-makers at the conference, while also counterbalancing Romania’s position and persuading the European public to take a stance in the Russian-Romanian dispute over Bessarabia. The memoranda and protests targeted the main political actors, whereas the newspaper articles and pamphlets, published simultaneously in English and French in Paris, London, Geneva and Washington were directed towards informing and persuading the wider public.

The events in Paris echoed back to Bessarabia, nuancing the contradictory discussions as well as deepening the dramatic experiences lived

by those individuals who associated themselves with the past and could not adapt to the life under the new regime. The dissatisfaction was boosted by the signals of hope for the return of Bessarabia to Russia sent by the Russian émigrés from Paris and other European capitals. From abroad, the émigrés played the role of the “external national homeland”, continuing to promote the “long-distance nationalism” among the Russians and Russian-speaking minorities.⁴² The former Bessarabian social and economic elite – less the political elite of the 1918 – that acted in Paris mediated the transfer of the Russian “nationalism” to the former periphery of the empire.

The Romanian as well as Moldovan nationalist historiography discourse on the “legitimate desire” of people inhabiting Bessarabia to become part of Romania after World War I does not accommodate the search for a political perspective by different ethnic and social segments of Bessarabian society. The depicted archival documents reveal that during the transition from the Russian empire to the Romanian nation-state the representatives of the former political, economic and social elite did not perceive the future as a radical rupture with the past, rather as a mixture of past experiences, present confusions, and hopes. They expressed multiple forms of identity, shaped around the conventional imperial space that cultivated distinct values and sentiments of belonging. After the dissolution of the Russian empire, the former peripheral elite felt burdened with belonging to a (single) nation

and was unprepared to embrace the new Romanian “Motherland”.

Romania in turn adopted a reluctant and cautious attitude towards those that were once loyal to the tsar, considering that the protection of the province from the Bolsheviks would ensure the automatic support of the local population, regardless of ethnic or social origin. The abolition of the Bessarabian autonomy in December 1918 was painfully received by the former imperial elite as well as the Bessarabian deputies of “Sfatul Țării” who previously supported the unionist project. Those Bessarabians who were once situated at the opposite sides of political spectrum for political or social reasons merged their efforts in Bessarabia, Odessa and Paris against the Romanian “occupation” and, subsequently, supported the return of Bessarabia back to Russia. The latter Bessarabian political scenario was part of a wide “Russkoe delo” plan, backed in Paris by the Russian political émigrés and diplomats, whom the anti-Bolshevik stance of the Great Powers during the Peace conference gave hopes for the restoration of Russia in her pre-war borders. However, the future of the new post-war order belonged to the nation-states; the Paris peace treaty on October 28, 1920 recognized Bessarabia as part of Romania as the final solution for the Russian-Romanian post-war territorial dispute. Although the plan for the return of Bessarabia within Russia’s borders proved to be a lost cause, the people as well the events shaped around it shows that the union of Bessarabia with Romania was an “eventful” process that contained historical contingencies rather than a predestined linear path.

⁴² For a general overview see Rogers Brubaker, *Nationalism reframed. Nationhood and the national question in the New Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Svetlana Suveică has a Ph.D. in history and is a researcher at the Institute of History of the University of Regensburg and an Associate professor at Moldova State University in Chişinău. Dr. Suveică is a former Humboldt research fellow at the Institute for East and Southeast European Studies (IOS) Regensburg (2012-2014) and Fulbright research fellow at CREEES, Stanford University, California, USA (2009-2010). She authored two monographs and one edited volume, and numerous publications on the interwar political, administrative and social transformation of Romania and Bessarabia, social processes in the Moldovan SSR, as well as on recent political and social changes in the Republic of Moldova.

E-mail: Ssuveica@gmail.com