

1812 and the Emergence of the Bessarabian Region: Province-Building under Russian Imperial Rule

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ABSTRACT

This article addresses the policies of the Russian authorities in Bessarabia in the two decades that followed the annexation of this territory in 1812. It examines the process of discursive and administrative construction of the Bessarabian province from the territories that existed for centuries under different political jurisdictions. The article argues that the early Russian accounts of Bessarabia re-described these territories into a single whole, a province, whose exotic nature and population distinguished it from other parts of the Russian Empire. The article further claims that each of the three consecutive attempts to define the form of administration of Bessarabia undertaken by the Russian authorities in the years following 1812 reflected a different perception of the province's place within the imperial space. Thus, the initial idea to use Bessarabia as a conduit of Russian influence in European Turkey gave place to the vision of this province as part of Russia's self-governing Western borderlands and finally to the re-definition of Bessarabia as part of New Russia. Without fully negating its predecessor, each new vision and the accompanying administrative changes consolidated the discursive and institutional identity of Bessarabia, which ultimately enabled this province to outlast the empire that created it.

According to the Bucharest peace treaty concluded between the Ottoman Empire and Russia on May 16, 1812, the river Pruth "from the point of its entry into the Principality of Moldavia to its confluence with the Danube as well as the left bank of the latter become a new border between the two empires."¹ Having traced the new boundary, the treaty nevertheless failed to provide a name for the territory that was to be incorporated into the Russian Empire and it took several years before the annexed region came to be systematically identified as Bessarabia.² Historians who describe territorial conquests or annexations often assume that the territories in question

existed as identifiable geographical units during the moment of conquest. However, the early history of Bessarabia suggests that this is not always the case. This article uses the Bessarabian example to demonstrate that the imperial conquest sometimes contributes to the symbolic and administrative construction of new regions out of territories that had only been weakly connected to one another.

The lands annexed by Russia in 1812 consisted of three different types of territories. On the one hand, there were the eastern districts of the Principality of Moldavia located in the central and northern parts of the Prut-Dniester interfluvium. Populated primarily by the ethnically Romanian peasants, they had a somewhat deficient social structure in comparison with the territories to the West of the Prut River, which constituted the historical nucleus of the Moldavian principality. Few if any Moldavian boyars resided east of the Prut, even though many of them had their landed properties there. The eastern districts of pre-

1 See the text of the treaty published in *Polnoie Sobranie Zakonov Rossiiskoi Imperii*, ser. 1, vol. 32, 316-322. Hereafter cited as PSZ.

2 The majority of modern historians trace the origins of the term "Bessarabia" to the Bassarab dynasty of Wallachia, who ruled over the territory located between the lower courses of the Dniester, the Prut and the Danube during the fourteenth century, before it became part of the Principality of Moldavia.

1812 Moldavia were also the least urbanized and all of their twelve small towns were in the private ownership of boyars or monasteries. This applied to the future capital of the Russian Bessarabia – Chişinău, which was in the possession of the Galata monastery in Constantinople before 1812. The Galata monastery in turn was dedicated to Jerusalem's Church of Resurrection and thus administered by the representative of the Orthodox Patriarch of Jerusalem. Overall, the peculiar social character of the eastern districts of pre-1812 Moldavia became reflected in their special administrative status. While the districts to the West of the Prut were subordinated to the early modern Moldavian "ministers of interior" (vornici), the lands to the East were placed under the jurisdiction of special governors – serdari - who reported directly to the Moldavian hospodar.³

The social and administrative peculiarity of pre-1812 eastern Moldavia was reflected in its proximity to two other types of territory that composed the Prut-Dniester interfluvium, namely the Ottoman fortress districts and the Bugeac steppe. Although the Moldavian hospodar Petru Roman established his rule over the entire territory from "the (Carpathian) mountains to the (Black) Sea" in the late fourteenth century, his successors' control over its southern part proved to be tenuous and short-lived. Already in 1484, Stephen III (1456-1504) had to cede the fortresses of Akkerman and Kilia and their adjacent districts in the mouth of the Dniester and the Danubian delta respectively to the Ottoman sultan Bajezid II. The popula-

tion of the districts was thereby placed under the authority of the Ottoman fortress governors and became reaya - direct tax-paying subjects of the sultan. With time, this category of the Islamic law came to designate not only the non-military inhabitants, but also, and apparently uniquely in the Ottoman world, the territories on which they lived. The early modern period witnessed the alienation of more Moldavian territories to the east of the Prut into the reaya districts. In 1538, following Suleyman II's campaign into Moldavia, the Ottomans constructed the Bender fortress on the Dniester, followed by Ismail (1595) and Reni (1622) on the Danube and Hotin (1713), again on the Dniester. Since the level of taxation in the reaya districts could in fact be quite sparing, the peasants had the possibility to escape from the mounting tax burdens in the remaining territories of the Moldavian principality east of Prut, which explained relative underpopulation of these territories by 1812.

Another reason for the general scarcity of population in Eastern Moldavia was the permanent presence of the Nogai hordes in the southern part of the Prut-Dniester interfluvium. Shortly after the emergence of the Crimean Khanate and its transformation into a vassal state of the Ottoman Empire in 1475, the khans positioned themselves as successors of Genghis Khan. In this capacity, the Crimean Girays managed to win the allegiance of several Nogai hordes. This offered the Nogais the possibility to settle in the steppe lands along the northern littoral of the Black Sea. One of these hordes settled in what the Tatars called Bugeac, or the Westernmost corner of the East European steppe (also known as the Kipchak steppe) constituted by the confluence of the Prut and the Danube. Located under the double suzerainty of the Crimean khans and the Ottoman sultans, the Bugeac horde

³ Chosen among the first-rank Moldavian boyars, who were often the hospodar's relatives, serdari were in charge of the Orhei, Sorooca and Lapuşna districts of the Moldavian Principality and commanded a considerable paramilitary force of 3000 cavalymen. See P. P. Svin'in, "Opisanie Bessarabii," *Stratum plus*, no. 6 (2000-2001): 381.

at times defied both (for example in the 1620s and the 1630s as well as at the beginning of the eighteenth century).⁴ At other times, its lands constituted the powerbase of particular Crimean khans (such as Kyrym Giray, who led the last Crimean raid into Russian territories in the winter of 1768-69). The proximity of the Nogais and Tatars who had not entirely abandoned nomadic practices subjected the Romanian populated territories in the central and northern parts of the Prut-Dniester interfluvium to periodic devastations, the last of which resulted in the burning of Chişinău in 1766.⁵ At the time of the Russian-Ottoman war of 1768-1774, the desire of the Bugeac horde to maximize their independence led them to enter into negotiations with the Russian government, which sought to resettle the Nogais to the right bank of the Kuban river in order to weaken the Crimean khanate.⁶ However, only part of the horde left Bugeac at that time. Others stayed until the Russian-Ottoman war of 1806-1812, when the military governor of Odessa Armand Emmanuel Duplessis, Duke of Richelieu, mindful of security of his city, organized their resettlement first into Russian interior and then into the Ottoman Empire.⁷ Thereupon, the empty Bugeac steppe as well as the reaya districts were declared Russian crown lands, and brought under the single administration with the eastern districts of the Moldavian Principality.

4 V. V. Trepavlov, *Istoria Nogaiskoi ordy* (Moscow: Vostochnaia literatura, 2002), 451.

5 Judging by the number of cavalry men that the Horde was able to put in the field in the second half of the seventeenth century, its total population could reach 250,000. See, *ibid.*, 453.

6 Alan W. Fisher, *The Russian Annexation of the Crimea, 1772-1783* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 34-37.

7 Willard Sunderland, *Taming the Wild Field: Colonization and Empire on Russian Steppe* (Ithaca: Cornell University, 2004), 112.

The first post-1812 decades were characterized by the persistence of the traditional toponymies, as well as the economic and even political ties to the Moldavian Principality. Thus, the new border cut the old Iaşi district in two, separating the bulk of its territory on the left bank of the Prut from its center in the city of Iaşi (which was also the capital of the Moldavian Principality). Nevertheless, one of Bessarabia's districts retained the name of Iaşi for years after the annexation. The same applied to the estates of the Moldavian boyars, many of whom possessed land on both sides of the Prut. In 1812, they were granted a three-year term, in the course of which they had to decide on their permanent place of residence and sell their properties across the border. However, many of the boyars preferred to sit on the fence and secured several postponements of the deadline. Inasmuch as the export of sheep and cattle to Istanbul constituted one of the major sources of revenue in the region, the creation of the new border caused discontent among the local population, as reflected in smuggling that persisted throughout the period of the Russian rule. In the absence of a special border guard service, the border was patrolled by Cossack regiments (which included Muslims), whose unsuitability for this function was the cause of concern for the first Bessarabian Viceroy A. N. Bakhmetiev.⁸

The new imperial border proved to be rather ephemeral at the time of the Greek uprising in the Ottoman Empire. In early March 1821, detachments of Philiki Etaireia crossed the Prut into neighbouring Moldavia. Several weeks

8 "Vsepoddanneishii doklad polnomochnogo namestnika Bessarabskoi oblasti A. N. Bakhmetieva," July 7, 1816, N. F. Dubrovin (ed.) *Sbornik istoricheskikh materialov izvlechenykh iz arkhiva Sobstvennoi Ego Imperatorskogo Velichestva Kantseliarii*. 14 vols. (St. Petersburg: Gosudarstvenniatipografia, 1876-1913), 7: 302.

later, the Moldavian boyars implicated in the the Greek movement fled to Chişinău in order to escape the Ottoman revenge. The Russian-Ottoman war of 1828-1829 and the Russian occupation of Moldavia and Wallachia, which lasted until 1834, practically abolished the border altogether. At the same time, the preservation of the quarantine line along the Dniester until 1830 sometimes made communication between Bessarabia and the rest of the Russian Empire more difficult than communication between Bessarabia and the neighbouring principalities. The situation changed only in the mid-1830s, following the evacuation of the Russian troops from Moldavia and Wallachia and the restoration of the Russian border on the Prut.⁹ However, even after that date, the border remained porous, as illustrated by the continued existence in Bessarabia of the so-called dedicated monasteries that were under the jurisdiction of the Eastern Orthodox patriarchs.

The creation of the new border was paralleled by the active construction of the new province on both the discursive and institutional level. Several statistical descriptions of Bessarabia, which appeared after 1812, helped the readers to perceive this territory as a single region. These descriptions downplayed the differences between different parts of the Prut-Dniester interfluvium and at the same time stressed the characteristics that were common to the entire region. The first of these descriptions composed by Petr Kunitskii still used the term "Bessarabia" in its original sense of the southern part of the territory between the Prut, the Dniester and the Danube, which comprised Bugeac and employed the term "Trans-Dniestrian region" to designate all the lands between the three

ivers. The author mentioned the three components of the new Russian province, and yet argued that they "are not separated from each other by rivers and mountains and besides are united by common mores and customs of the inhabitants, because both Bessarabia stricto sensu and the Hotin reaya once belonged to the Moldavian Principality."¹⁰ The unity of the new province was thus asserted by means of historical and geographical arguments. The Russian annexation could be presented as the restoration of the historical unity of the Moldavian lands that had been divided by the Ottoman conquest. At the same time, the Russian authors were equally interested in underscoring the historical distinctiveness of Bessarabia from the rest of Moldavia as to underscore the unity of the new province. Thus, Pavel Shabelskii, the author of another early description of Bessarabia, stressed the significance of the province for the Ottomans, as well as its role as the granary of Constantinople alongside Egypt. That is why Bessarabia, according to Shabelskii, "has always been separate from Moldavia, [and was] placed under the direct government of the Ottoman pashas."¹¹

Rather paradoxically, the discursive construction of Bessarabia involved the affirmation of its difference from other Russian provinces. The assimilationist rhetoric, which emphasized Bessarabia's organic fusion with the Russian empire, was more characteristic of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. By contrast, in the first post-1812 decades, the Russian authors focused on Bessarabia's exotic nature, which set it apart from the interior provinces of Russia. Although the em-

10 Petr Kunitskii, *Kratkoie statisticheskoe opisanie Zadnestrovskei oblasti* (St. Petersburg: Glazunov, 1813), 6.

11 Pavel Shabelskii, "Kratkoie istoricheskoe obozrenie Bessarabii," *Syn Otechestva*, no. 15 (1815): 35.

9 Iulian Frunţaşu, *O Istorie etnopolitică a Basarabiei* (Chişinău: Cartier, 2002), 32.

pire's border had been moved to the Prut, the Russian authors continued to consider Dniester as the "actual boundary between civilized and semi-barbarous countries."¹² The civilizational boundary coincided with the climatic one, beyond which the Russians found the country, whose nature they deemed exotic in comparison even with the Ukrainian steppe, let alone the stern climate of the Great Russian plain. The floral and faunal riches of Bessarabia compensated the primitiveness of local agriculture. Bessarabian fields covered with flowers unknown in Russia and the murmur of millions of insects that filled the air of the steppe at night greatly impressed the Russian travellers. It was even easier to imagine Bessarabia as a "promised land" for those who undertook vicarious journeys by means of reading "thick journals" in the two Russian capitals. The necessity to justify the losses incurred in the previous Russian-Ottoman war explained the tendency to exaggerate the local riches, which is apparent in the references to Bessarabia as "the granary of Constantinople, similar to Egypt."¹³ The possession of Bessarabia was all the more precious since, in contrast to the southern Caucasian territories, which "bordered on hostile and predatory peoples," the region possessed "salubrious air, a healthy climate, abundance of southern fruits, numerous springs and waterfalls" and all that in the vicinity of tender and meek Moldovans.¹⁴ Accounts of the "aromas of acacias, the singing of the nightingales, huge sturgeons in the rivers and inexhaustible numbers of game in the marches" turned Bessarabia into a fairy tale

12 A. I. Mikhailovskii-Danilevskii, "Vospominania za 1829 god," *Russkaia starina*, no. 8 (1893):182; A. F. Vel'tman, "Vospominania o Bessarabii," *Sovremennik*, no. 3 (1837): 229.

13 Shabel'skii, "Kratkoie istoricheskoe obozrenie Bessarabii," *Syn Otechestva*, no. 15 (1815):35-36.

14 *Ibid.*, no. 16 (1815):125.

land for the inhabitants of snowy Moscow or humid St. Petersburg.¹⁵ Exiting descriptions of this kind were paralleled by the rumours of unbearable heat, the steppe replete with snakes, scorpions and tarantulas, as well as plague and eternal fevers.¹⁶ Just like the glorification of the riches of Bessarabia, the stories of the dangers that it harboured constituted an inalienable aspect of exoticization of the new province that explained its attractiveness.

The earliest measures on the administrative organization of Bessarabia reflected the rivalry between Russia and the Napoleonic Empire in the Balkans, which was one of the reasons for the outbreak of the Russian-Ottoman war of 1806-1812. The creation of the Illyrian provinces of the French Empire in 1809 put the French authorities in direct contact with the nascent Balkan national-liberation movements and threatened Russia's traditional influence over the Orthodox coreligionists in the Ottoman Empire.¹⁷ Aware of this danger, the Russian diplomats and military men considered the possibility of an attack against French Illyria that would reconsolidate Russia's standing in the region and pre-empt Napoleon's imminent campaign against Russia. One of the memoranda for this expedition was written by I. A. Capodistrias, a Greek diplomat who entered the Russian service after the destitution of the Russian-controlled Septinsular Republic in 1807.¹⁸

15 Vel'tman, "Vospominania o Bessarabii," 246.

16 *Ibid.*, 227.

17 On this subject, see Frank J. Bundy, *The Administration of the Illyrian Provinces of the French Empire, 1809-1813* (New York and London: Taylor and Francis, 1987).

18 "Mémoire sur une diversion à opérer dans le Midi de l'Europe en cas de guerre entre la Russie et la France," Vienne, 1811, *Archive of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Empire (AVPRI)*, Fond 133, op. 468, file 11067, ll. 299-311.

Despite its utopian character, the project sparked the enthusiasm of Alexander I. The tsar appointed his Minister of the Navy P. V. Chichagov as the commander-in-chief of the Danubian army with a mandate to end the protracted war against the Ottoman Empire and draw the sultan into an alliance against Napoleon. Alexander I also instructed Chichagov to “excite the Slavic population” by promising them “independence and the creation of the Slavic kingdom.” The tsar also authorized “monetary rewards to the most influential people among [the Slavs] as well as decorations and titles to the leaders and the soldiers.”¹⁹ However, Chichagov arrived in Bucharest already after his predecessor M. I. Kutuzov signed the peace treaty with the Ottomans, which gave Bessarabia to Russia, but contained not a single word about an alliance between the tsar and the sultan. The crossing of the Russian border by Napoleon’s Grande Armée and its rapid advance in the direction of Moscow soon forced the tsar and Chichagov to scrap the project of the Balkan expedition and retreat from the Danube to the north. Russia’s early policies with respect to Bessarabia should be seen in this context. They were largely the product of Capodistria, who became the head of Chichagov’s diplomatic chancellery. Both Capodistria and Chichagov were friends of Scarlat Sturdza, a Moldavian boyar who collaborated with the Russian authorities during the occupation of Moldavia in 1788-1792 and who immigrated to Russia soon thereafter. This friendship explains both the latter’s appointment as the first civil governor of Bessarabia and as well as the important role that his young son and Capodistria’s secretary, Alexander Sturdza, played in the elabo-

19 *Mémoires inédits de l’amiral Tchitchagoff* (Berlin: Scheneider et comp., 1855), 9.

ration of the “Rules for the Temporary Administration of Bessarabia,” which was approved by Alexander I in August 1812.²⁰ In view of the negative experience of the Russian administration in Moldavia and Wallachia during the war of 1806-1812, the “Rules” relieved Bessarabia from state taxation for three years, exempted the province from the military draft for the next fifty years and presupposed the formation of a “provincial government in accordance with the local laws, mores and customs.”²¹ The “Rules” also specified the use of the Romanian language in administrative and judicial bodies, which were to be staffed by the representatives of Moldavian nobility, who decided to settle in the region.

Mindful of the Montesquieuian principle of making the legislation conform to the mores of the country, Chichagov, Capodistria and the younger Sturdza also expected the new government of Bessarabia to serve Russia’s specific geopolitical goals in an on-going struggle with Napoleon. Chichagov’s instruction to Scarlat Sturdza called the first Bessarabian governor to “skilfully draw the attention of the neighbouring peoples to this region.”²² According to the instruction, the Russian-Ottoman war “commanded the minds and inspired the hopes of Moldavians, Wallachians, Greeks, Bulgarians, Serbs and other peoples.” Following the retreat of the Russian Army to the North, “their spirit could fall and our en-

20 On Chichagov’s relations with the Sturdza family and the younger Sturdza’s role in the elaboration of the “Rules,” see Stella Ghervas, *Réinventer la tradition. Alexandre Stourdza et l’Europe de la Sainte Alliance* (Paris: Honoré Champion Editeur, 2008), 31, 62.

21 See art. 11, of the “Rules for the Temporary Government of Bessarabia,” in A. N. Egunov (ed.) *Zapiski Bessarabskogo Statisticheskogo Komiteta*. 3 vols. (Chisinau: tipografia Oblastnogo Upravlenia, 1868), 3:109-110.

22 *Ibid.*, 111.

emies could come to dominate them.” The task of the Bessarabian governor was therefore to “preserve the attachment of these peoples to Russia and protect them from the influence of our enemies.” Bulgarians, Serbs, Moldavians and Wallachians are looking for a fatherland, claimed the author of the instruction, and it was up the first Bessarabian governor to offer them one in the new province.²³

The first administrative framework for Bessarabia introduced by Capodistria and Chichagov thus reflected their goal of retaining the Russian influence over the Orthodox co-religionists in the Ottoman Empire, whose security was not fully guaranteed by the Bucharest treaty. Bessarabia had to serve as the refuge for those who had compromised themselves in the eyes of the Ottoman authorities by their collaboration with the Russians during the war. At the same time, Capodistria envisioned Bessarabia as the Russian bridgehead in the Balkans akin to the one that Napoleon created in the Western part of the peninsula in the shape of the Illyrian provinces of the French Empire. To fulfil these functions, Bessarabia had to be a showcase of the benevolent Russian administration, which was attentive to local cultural peculiarities.

These well-meaning plans soon foundered over Russia’s usual lack of effective administrators, which in the immediate post-1812 years was exacerbated by imperial centre’s exclusive preoccupation with the struggle against Napoleon. Soon after his appointment, Scarlat Sturdza was incapacitated by a stroke, while major-general I. M. Garting, who replaced him as the military governor of Bessarabia in 1813, failed to find a common language with the representatives of Moldavian nobility. While Garting and the Bessarabian

23 Ibid., 112.

opposition spent their time denouncing each other, the situation on the ground deteriorated to the point of turning Bessarabia into the very antipode of the showcase province that Capodistria, Chichagov and Alexander I had intended it to be. In particular, the mid-1810s witnessed a conflict between the Bessarabian landlords and the trans-Danubian Bulgarian and Greek settlers, whom M. I. Kutuzov invited to Bessarabia during the last year of the Russian-Ottoman war. To make matters worse, the Bessarabian peasants began to run across the Prut due to rumours of the impending re-imposition of serfdom.²⁴ When the news of administrative chaos in Bessarabia reached St. Petersburg in the wake of the defeat of Napoleon and the conclusion of the Congress of Vienna, Alexander I and Capodistria, who had in the meantime become the tsar’s secretary of state, responded by appointing a Bessarabian viceroy with the mission of elaborating the definitive form of self-government for the province.

The choice of the military governor of Podolia, lieutenant-general A. N. Bakhmetiev, as the first Bessarabian viceroy in April 1816 was not accidental. Podolia was a region annexed by the Russian Empire in the context of the second partition of Poland in 1793, in which Polish or Polonized nobility remained dominant. During the first two decades of Russian rule, the relations between St. Petersburg and the Polish elites of the Western borderlands remained uncertain, in large part because of the influence of the French revolutionary ideas among the wider Polish nobility and partial restoration of Polish statehood in the shape of Napoleonic Duchy of Warsaw in 1807. In order to win the allegiance of Polish elites, the

24 For a more detailed discussion of these issues, see Andrei Cușco, Victor Taki, with Oleg Grom, *Bessarabia v sostave Rossiiskoi imperii, 1812-1917* (Moscow: Novoie Literaturnoe Obozrenie, 2012), 162-172.

Russian rulers had to demonstrate a measure of respect to their historical rights. Although Catherine II was determined to combat the “French pestilence” in Poland, the Lithuanian Statute of 1588 continued to be used in local administration together with the Polish language. Paul I went as far as to restore the local assemblies of the nobility in the Polish provinces, while Alexander I early in his reign entrusted important state offices to a number of prominent Poles and was ready to offer the Polish nobility far-reaching autonomy on the eve of Napoleon’s invasion of Russia in 1812. Although the Poles of the Duchy of Warsaw actively supported Napoleon in his campaign, in 1815 the victorious Russian emperor secured the transformation of the Duchy of Warsaw into a Constitutional kingdom of Poland, in personal union with Russia. He also considered the possibility of including into the kingdom Podolia and other Polish territories that the Russian Empire acquired as a result of the second and third partitions. By 1816, the policy of cooperation with the Polish elites was thus in full swing and the appointment of the Podolian governor to the newly created position of the Bessarabian viceroy suggested that Alexander I viewed Bessarabia as part of Russia’s Western borderlands.

The instruction that Bakhmetiev received at the moment of his appointment indicated that the emperor’s policy with respect to Bessarabia was “fully in accordance with the approach that he had adopted with respect to other territories acquired during his reign.”²⁵

As a result, one can say that the administrative construction of Bessarabia in the second half of the 1810s replicated the policy of Paul I and Alexander I with respect to Polish elites,

²⁵ See the instruction to Bakhmetiev in *Rossiiskii Gosudarstvennyi Istoricheskii Arkhiv (RGIA)*, Fond 1286, op. 2, file 70, ll. 25-26.

which in its turn represented a response to the challenge of the revolutionary and Napoleonic France. The generic affinity between the Polish and the Bessarabian policy of the Russian emperor was confirmed by the direct Polish involvement in the establishment of the Bessarabian self-government. Bakhmetiev arrived in Chişinău with his Polish wife (who belonged to the famous Potocki family) and a suite of Polish secretaries, one of whom, N. A. Krinitskii, became the actual author of the Statute for the Formation of the Bessarabian Province of 1818.²⁶

The most important aspect of the Statute consisted in the creation of the Supreme Council of the province, most of whose members were to be elected every three years by the Bessarabian nobility. The Council functioned as the highest administrative and judicial body and its decisions were to be implemented immediately.²⁷ Bessarabian nobility also had the possibility to elect the majority of members of the province’s criminal and civil courts as well as their counterparts on the level of individual districts.²⁸ Although the Russian language was now to be used in the criminal court as well as in the administrative and fiscal departments of the provincial government, the civil court and the Supreme Council were supposed to examine the civil affairs in Romanian and “in accordance with the Moldavian rules and customs.”²⁹ Just as the “Rules” of 1812, the Bessarabian Statute of 1818 continued to define the local traditions and customs as the ba-

²⁶ On Krinitskii’s role see F. F. Vigel, “Zamechania na nyneshnee sostoiane Bessarabskoi Oblasti,” in F. F. Vigel, *Zapiski*. 7 vols. (Moscow: Universitetskaia tipografia, 1892), 6:4 (separate pagination).

²⁷ “Ustav obrazovania Bessarabskoi oblasti,” April 29, 1818, PSZ, ser. 1, no. 27357, vol. 23, 223-224.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 226, 228.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 225-227.

sis of Bessarabian autonomy. In line with this approach, the Russian authorities established a special commission for the codification of Bessarabian law, headed by Petr Manega, a Paris-trained lawyer of Romanian origin.³⁰

The Statute was approved by Alexander I during his visit to Chişinău in late April 1818, following the emperor's meeting with the Bessarabian nobility. The Statute thereby acquired the character of an agreement between the emperor and the local elites. The representatives of the latter were to enjoy a wide participation in the provincial administration. In return, the emperor expected that the Bessarabian nobles would not consider the "national character" of the Bessarabian province and its "special form of administration" as synonymous with the narrow interests of their class. In his letter to Bakhmetiev, Alexander I stressed that "inhabitants of all classes should partake in an equitable measure of the boundless good" that the Statute represented. Since such an important innovation needed to be tested "by time and experience," the Statute was introduced provisionally, which likewise testified to its contractual character and suggested that the Bessarabian "experiment" was not over.³¹

Remarkably, Alexander I approved the Bessarabian Statute soon after the closure of the first session of the Sejm of the Kingdom of Poland, where the emperor announced his intention to spread the "liberal" (*zakonno-svobodnye*) institutions on all domains that providence had placed under his sceptre.³² The

Bessarabian Statute was the first step towards the realization of this intention, and can thus be viewed as a manifestation of Alexander I's "constitutionalism." The Statute did not have the character of a constitutional charter, but only confirmed to Moldavian political tradition. Despite strong Polish influences, early modern Moldavian politics offers no example of formal mutually-binding agreements between the hospodars and the boyars similar to the Polish *pacta conventa*. Relations with the Polish Sejm in the last years of Alexander I's reign demonstrated that the emperor did not consider the Constitutional Charter that he had granted to the Kingdom of Poland to be equally binding for himself and the Polish nobility. Instead, the emperor viewed all legislative acts that he had passed in order to regulate relations with the regional elites to be the products of his unilateral benevolence, regardless of the formal legal character that these acts had.

Just like the reconfirmation of Bessarabia's autonomy in 1816-1828, its curtailment a decade later was accompanied by the re-conceptualization of the province's place in the symbolic and administrative geography of the Russian Empire. This re-conceptualization was at least in part related to the resolution of the already mentioned conflict between the Bessarabian landlords and the trans-Danubian Bulgarian and Greek colonists that erupted in 1814. Although the temporary placement of Bessarabia into the category of Western borderlands of the Russian Empire seemed to strengthen the position of the landed noblemen, the colonists were taken out of the jurisdiction of the nobility-dominated Bessarabian government and subordinated to the Board of Foreign Colonists of the Southern Russia in 1819. A year later, the head of this board, major-general I. N. Inzov, was appointed the Bessarabian vice-

30 On Manega, see L. A. Kasso, *Petr Manega – zabytyi kodifikator bessarabskogo prava* (St. Petersburg: Senatskaia tipografia, 1914).

31 Alexander I to Bakhmetiev, April 29, 1818, *PSZ*, ser. 1, no. 27357, vol. 23, 223.

32 Cited in S. V. Mironenko, *Samoderzhavie i reformy. Politicheskaia bor'ba v Rossii v nachale XIX-go veka* (Moscow: Nauka, 1989), 157.

roy in place of Bakhmetiev, who had found himself increasingly at odds with the Bessarabian nobility. Inzov neutralized some of the most outspoken oppositionists, yet the Statute remained in place and only the replacement of Inzov by M. S. Vorontsov in 1823 marked a real turn in the Russian policy towards Bessarabia. With the appointment of Vorontsov as both the Bessarabian Viceroy and the governor of New Russia in 1823, Bessarabia was administratively united with the region which for half a century constituted a space of state-sponsored colonization.³³ If the inclusion of Bessarabia into the Western borderlands of the Russian Empire during the 1810s was accompanied by a focus on its “historical rights” and local customs, the redefinition of the province as part of New Russia during the 1820s resulted in the tendency of the Russian policy-makers to perceive Bessarabia through the prism of Russia’s “civilizing mission” in the south. Vorontsov’s predecessors in Odessa, Armand Emmanuel Duplessis, Duke de Richelieu and Louis Alexandre Andrault de Langeron were rather typical enlightened administrators who frequently resorted to the “civilizing” rhetoric.³⁴ It is also noteworthy that Vorontsov’s wife E. K. Branitskaia was a niece of G. A. Potemkin and the heiress of his fortune. With his appointment as the governor-general of New

33 For the general analysis of Vorontsov’s activities as the Bessarabian viceroy, see Anthony Rhineland, *Prince Michael Vorontsov. Vice-Roy to the Tsar* (Montreal: McGill University Press, 1990), 67-93.

34 None of them was directly involved into the Bessarabian affairs. However, Richelieu played an important role in the deportation of Nogais from Bugeac in 1807, which opened the space for Bulgarian, German and Russian colonists. As for Langeron, his memoirs of the Russian-Ottoman wars of 1787-1792 and 1806-1812 represent one of the most characteristic description of Moldavia and Wallachia in terms of “barbarity” and “Oriental despotism”, which could be overcome only by means of a rational and enlightened government.

Russia, Vorontsov “joined the rightful inheritance of sorts,” in the words of his one-time subordinate, the famous Russian memoirist F. F. Vigel.³⁵

Having taken a negative view of disorders in the Bessarabian administration, Vorontov attributed them to the excessive autonomy that the 1818 Statute granted to the local nobility and became determined to curtail it. As a result, the Bessarabian nobility lost the right to elect the heads of the district administration in 1824. Four years later Vorontsov secured the adoption of a new Statute, whereby the Bessarabian Supreme Council was replaced by the Council of the Province, with only one elected representative of the Bessarabian nobility among its members. The new Statute drastically reduced the number of elected officials in the provincial and district administration in comparison to the Statute of 1818 (from 75 to 26).³⁶ No less important was the general redistribution of the elective positions, which did not leave any segments of the provincial administration beyond control of the Viceroy.³⁷ Within five years, Russian became the language of Bessarabia’s public institutions. The reduction of the role of the nobility in Bessarabian government was accompanied by an intensification of state-sponsored colonization in the southern part of the province. In the second half of the 1820s, Vorontsov secured the adoption of decrees encouraging the settlement of Serbs, Trans-Danubian Cossacks as well as some 20,000 Russian state peasants from the inner provinces of the Russian Empire.³⁸

35 Vigel, *Zapiski*, 6:91.

36 “Ucherezhdenie dlia upravlenia Bessarabskoi oblasti,” February 29, 1818, *PSZ*, ser. 2, no. 1834, vol. 3, 197-204.

37 See “O razdelenii del po Bessarabskomu oblastnomu pravleniiu i kazennoi palate,” March 11, 1828, *PSZ*, ser. 2, no. 1864, vol. 3, 236-239.

38 See “O vodvorenii v Bessarabii serbov,” February 9, 1826, *Polnoie Sobranie Zakonov Rossiiskoi*

Vorontsov's activities did not result in the transformation of Bessarabia into an ordinary Russian gubernia. Bessarabia continued to be a distinct periphery of the Russian Empire for decades. However, the first years of Vorontsov's governorship determined what type of periphery Bessarabia was going to be and thereby constituted the concluding stage of the process of province-building that began in 1812. In the early to mid-1800s, Capodistrias envisioned the new province as a Russian façade turned towards the Balkans. At the end of the decade, Alexander I for a moment viewed it as part of Russia's self-governing Western borderlands and an element of a more ambitious project to spread the principle of self-government to the rest of the Russian Empire. By contrast, Vorontsov redefined Bessarabia as part of New Russia and thus as a space of colonization policies that the Russian government pursued in that region since the late eighteenth century. All three turning points in the early history of Russian rule between the Dniester, the Prut, the Danube and the Black Sea thus reveal a close relation between the ways imperial policy-makers perceived the newly annexed territory and the concrete measures they adopted. Each new approach did not completely obliterate the perceptions and policies that had characterized the preceding one, but rather contributed to the discursive and administrative construction of the new province. The cumulative result of three consecutive attempts to integrate the new territorial acquisition into the political geography of the Russian Empire resulted in the emergence

Imperii, Ser. 2, no. 132, vol. 1, 194-196; "O pereseleenni krestian iz vnutrennikh gubernii v Bessarabskuiu oblast'," September 21, 1826, *PSZ*, Ser. 2, no. 592, vol. 1, 998-1000; "O vodvorenii Zaporozhskikh kazakov i drugikh zagranichnykh vykhodtsev v Bessarabskoi oblasti," February 19, 1827, *PSZ*, ser. 2, no. 913, vol. 2, 190-192.

of Bessarabia as a hitherto unprecedented politico-administrative unit. A product of Russian imperial expansion, Bessarabia provided institutional and mental framework to several alternative projects of nation-building in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

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