

Justifying Separatism: The Year 1924, the Establishment of the Moldovan ASSR and History Politics in the Transnistrian Moldovan Republic

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ABSTRACT

This article analyzes the history politics in the unrecognized Transnistrian Moldovan Republic. The paper focuses on the role played by the Moldovan ASSR and, in particular, its establishment in 1924 in contemporary politics and historiographical debates in Transnistria. Due to its history and similar territorial configuration the Moldovan ASSR became the most convenient candidate for the title of the 'first period of statehood' in the Transnistrian historical narrative. This study investigates the ambiguities, complexities, and changes in the attitude of contemporary Transnistrian politicians and historians towards the Moldovan ASSR and its representation in Transnistrian public discourse.

On October 12, 1924 the All-Ukrainian Central Executive Committee proclaimed the establishment of the Moldovan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (ASSR)¹ on the left bank of the Dniester River as part of the Ukrainian SSR. The official announcement was the culmination of the half-year long process which was launched by a short document of several pages, sent on February 4 of the same year. The paper was entitled *Memorandum on the Necessity of the Creation of the Moldovan Soviet Socialist Republic*² and bore the signatures of Romanian Communist émigrés, some of the leading members of the Bessarabian revolutionary underground, and such notable personalities as a well-known and influential Red Army commander of Bessarabian origin G.I. Kotovskii. It advocated the idea of the establishment of the Moldovan Soviet Socialist Republic, which would become the

springboard for the recession of Bessarabia to the Soviet Union and even the strategic gate for the expansion of the socialist revolution to the Balkans and Central Europe. The Soviet Union never fully recognized the unification of Bessarabia with Romania in 1918. Bolsheviks claimed that *Sfatul Țării* was not a representative body and could not make such decisions, that it was taken under the pressure of the Romanian Army which violated the agreement between Averescu and Racovsky (then one of the leading Bolsheviks in Ukraine), that presupposed the withdrawal of the Romanian Army from Bessarabia.³ In fact, throughout the interwar period Soviet maps drew the state border not along the Dniester, as it was in reality, but along the Prut river. Thus, they suggested that Bessarabia was a Soviet territory, "unlawfully occupied" by Romania. As a somewhat secondary goal of the envisaged Moldovan Soviet Socialist Republic, the memorandum emphasized its role for the cultural and national development of the Moldovan population, which compactly lived along the south-western border of the Ukrainian SSR on the left bank of the Dniester river. This argument was well suited to the context of supportive Soviet nationality policies, which culminated in the 1920s and early 1930s. While the document generally received positive first feedback, the process of establish-

1 The Moldovan ASSR was a republic on the left-bank of the river Dniester, which existed from 1924 to 1940. In contrast, the Moldovan SSR was a Soviet republic formed in 1940 out of Bessarabia and parts of the Moldovan ASSR. With an interruption during the Second World War the Moldovan SSR existed till 1991, when it seceded from the Soviet Union. The present-day Republic of Moldova is the legal successor of the Moldovan SSR.

2 The text of the Memorandum can be found in Argentina Gribincea, Mihai Gribincea and Ion Şişcanu (ed), *Politica de moldovenizare în R.A.S.S. Moldoveneasca: Culegere de Documente si Materiale* (Chişinău: Civitas, 2004), 28-32.

ment of the republic encountered a number of obstacles, partly due to internal political struggles, partly because of the lack of any reliable data on the national composition of the territory under question. Eventually, almost all the signatories of the memorandum were marginalized from the governing of the republic. At the same time after all the borders were settled, Moldovans did not even form a plurality (30-33%), let alone an absolute majority, in the new autonomous republic established in their name, as Ukrainians were the largest group (~48%). Nevertheless, the Moldovan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic lasted for almost 16 years, when its Western riverside part united with Bessarabia in order to form the Moldovan Soviet Socialist Republic.

In the postwar period Soviet historiography and official discourse celebrated the establishment of the Moldovan ASSR as the first case of the Soviet Moldovan statehood. Most of the less convenient sides of the history of the establishment of the republic, as well as its subsequent existence, were largely omitted or deliberately silenced. The story of the creation of the Moldovan ASSR resurfaced and became topical from the late 1980s and onwards, mostly in the context of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the emergence of the breakaway unrecognized Transnistrian³ Moldovan Republic (PMR), whose territory partially corresponded to that of the Moldovan ASSR. In this short article I will discuss how the events of the year 1924 and the establishment of the Moldovan ASSR and its existence figure in the history politics of the unrecognized PMR, where it became an important political symbol.

3 For the text of the agreement, see *Bessarabiia na Perekrestke Evropeiskoi Diplomatii: Dokumenty i Materialy* (Moscow: Indrik, 1996), 216-217.

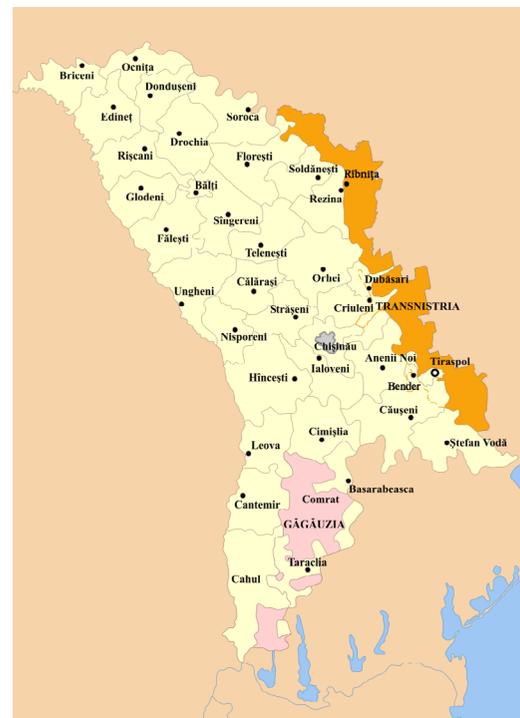


Figure 1. administrative division of Moldova

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Similarly to other Soviet republics, an upsurge of the national movement took place during the final years of the Soviet Union in the Moldovan SSR. In Moldova it had a certain specificity. In the search for the 'revival' of the national culture, a part of the national movement rallied around Romanian national symbols, not Moldovan ones. While this group likely was not numerically predominant, it was very active, vocal and, as the result influential in late Soviet and post-Soviet Moldovan context. In fact, by the early 1990s, when the Soviet system was quickly breaking down, some of the leaders of the national movement in Moldova considered or at least declared the Moldovan identity, language, and culture a Soviet invention and imposition. Instead they struggled for the recognition of the Romanian language

and Latin script and carried Romanian flags. Some of the most radical political leaders even saw the sovereignty of the Moldovan SSR and the subsequent independence of the Republic of Moldova only as steps towards the ultimate political unification of the republic with Romania.⁴ Such radical positions of some of the leaders of the national movement in Moldova encountered notable opposition on both banks of Dniester. Some people advocated the preservation of the Soviet Union and were against the national movements as such. Others were alienated by the explicit pro-Romanian character of a large part of the national movement in the Moldovan SSR. Yet such attitudes were much stronger on the left bank⁵. Different factors contributed to this outcome. Unlike right-bank Bessarabia, Transnistria has never been part of the Romanian state with the exception of several years of military control during the Second World War. The ethnolinguistic composition of Transnistria was different. Each of the three major groups – Moldovans, Russians and Ukrainians – constitute roughly one third of the population of the region, Moldovans being the largest just by several per cent. At the same time, the Romanian-speaking population was the clear majority in right-bank Moldova. The social dimension of the ethnolinguistic composition also displayed certain differences. On the right-bank there were numerous Romanian-speaking urban elites, while on the

left-bank urban elites were almost exclusively Russian-speaking. As a result, the left bank of the Moldovan SSR was more sensitive to the symbolic national proclamations in Chişinău. In addition, the Transnistrian elite was traditionally dominant in Soviet Moldova, for Moscow often considered them more reliable than the members of the Bessarabian elite. The gradual political drift of Soviet Moldova away from the Soviet Union threatened the dominant political and economic positions of the left-bank leaders. Therefore, they tried to exploit the grievances of the population in order to preserve their positions of power at least in the eastern regions of Moldova. While the political conflicts and debates were often framed in ethnolinguistic, symbolic, and historic terms, one can frequently find behind the vivid rhetoric a struggle between at least several elite groups for political power and control of economic and administrative resources. Finally, certain circles in Moscow supported pro-Soviet groups in Moldova, in particular on its left-bank, and saw them as leverage to continue to exert influence on the initially sovereign and later independent republic.

The combination of these and other factors led to the gradual escalation of the conflict between two banks of Dniester which culminated in the proclamation of the Transnistrian Moldovan Soviet Socialist Republic in September 1990,⁶ which was renamed the Transnistrian Moldovan Republic in November 1991 and then in the War of Transnistria in 1992, which claimed more than 1,000 casualties. The hostilities ended with the intervention of the

4 There are two names for the regions on the left-bank of the Dniester: 'Transnistria' and 'Pridnestrov'e'. In this paper I mostly use 'Transnistria,' as it is more common for publications in English. Yet, it should be noted that the inhabitants of the region would use 'Pridnestrov'e' in the majority of cases.

5 Charles King discusses the pan-Romanian dimension of a significant part of the national movement in late Soviet and independent Moldova in Charles King, "Moldovan Identity and the Politics of Pan-Romanianism," *Slavic Review*, 53, (Summer, 1994), 345-368.

6 In the text I use different synonyms for geographical and political entities. 'Left-bank,' 'separatist,' 'unrecognized,' 'Tiraspol' in different contexts refers to the region, authorities, and/or administrative units in Transnistria. 'Right-bank,' 'Chisinau,' 'Bessarabian' mostly refers to the region between Prut and Dniester and its authorities.

Russian 14th Army which had been stationed mostly in Transnistria since the Soviet times and assumed the role of 'peacekeepers' on Dniester after the War. The War reconfirmed the status of Transnistria as legally unrecognized but de facto uncontrolled by Chişinău authorities region. In this position the Transnistrian Moldovan Republic has already existed already for more than 20 years and benefitted from the strong support of the Russian Federation, remnants of Soviet industry,⁷ and a semi-shadow economy with porous borders. As the original title the Transnistrian Moldovan Soviet Socialist Republic suggests, the main justification for the establishment and existence of the separatist⁸ republic was initially the preservation of its affiliation with the Soviet Union in a context when the leaders of the right-bank Moldova increasingly adopted anti-Soviet positions. Soviet symbols still play an important role in Transnistrian politics. One can encounter hammer and sickle images on official insignia and Lenin's monuments throughout the region. The flag of the PMR is basically the Moldovan SSR's one with a different coat of arms. Nevertheless, with the crumbling and eventually collapsing Soviet Union it became clear that the references to the Soviet system, which quickly became the Soviet

past, were not enough to justify the existence and legitimacy of the separatist republic and its administration. Unlike the Moldovan SSR, as a whole, the PMR's leadership also could not rely on the right for self-determination which was reserved only for constituent Soviet republics in the Soviet system. Therefore, local actors gradually developed additional rationales for the existence of the separatist republic. The shift of focus was also reflected in the change of the name of the republic from the Transnistrian Moldovan Soviet Socialist Republic to the Transnistrian Moldovan Republic. Historical references also played a significant role in the developing ideology of the left-bank republic.

Throughout Eastern Europe appeals to history took on particular political importance during and after the fall of the socialist system.⁹ Politicians, intellectuals, academics, journalists and other public figures used history in order to strengthen their political positions, undermine their opponents, rally support for their cause etc. In the case of the PMR the references to history were crucial, for the unrecognized republic was in particular need to justify its contested existence both on the internal and external fronts.

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On March 12, 1991, the Supreme Soviet of the PMR, the highest legislative body of the unrec-

7 It should be noted that just like on the right-bank, where the approval for the national movement was hardly unanimous and the movement itself was not homogenous, support for the emerging separatist republic and anti-Romanian sentiments were also not omnipresent on the left-bank.

8 While the left-bank regions accounted for only 15% of the population and 12% of the territory of the Moldovan SSR, they nevertheless accounted for 40% of the GDP of the South-Western Soviet republic and for 90% of its electrical production. Most of the Moldovan industry was situated in the Transnistrian region. For more on this, see Charles King, *The Moldovans: Romania, Russia, and the Politics of Culture* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 2000), 182-184.

9 In Moldovan discourse and in general in the post-Soviet space, the term 'separatist' acquired negative connotations and often has a pejorative meaning. In this paper I do not use this word in any negative sense. The term 'separatist' here is meant to describe the situation in which a group of actors declare secessionist goals and attempt to unilaterally establish institutions which are autonomous or independent from the central authorities. In fact, in that sense the national movement in the late Moldovan SSR can be also called separatist in relation to central authorities in Moscow, similarly to Transnistrian actions in relation to republican governing bodies in Chisinau.

ognized republic adopted a decree *On the Priority Tasks of the Preservation of Distinctiveness of the Moldovan People, Its Language and Culture*. The decision, which was mostly a response to the pro-Romanian pronouncements to the West of Dniester, called, among other things, for the organization of a specialized research laboratory *History of Transnistria* which would undertake the task of studying the history of the left-bank region. Basically, the members of the laboratory were entrusted with the mission to elaborate an official view on the history of the separatist region. The close contact between the leading Transnistrian historians and institutions of power can also be observed in the major local historical publications, which often contain introductions or even full-fledged contributions by PMR's political leaders. Nevertheless, in my opinion, it would be a misinterpretation to consider the research and publications of Transnistrian historians a blunt imposition or a political order of the ruling regime. Rather, it was a case of convergence of interests of politicians and historians. The laboratory was formed out of a number of historians from both banks of Dniester who opposed the Romanianizing trend in the historic, cultural and linguistic spheres. Some of the members of the laboratory had been participating in the *Interdoizhenie/Edinstvo*, a local branch of the political movement which stood in opposition to the upsurge of nationalism in Soviet Republics and advocated the preservation of the Soviet Union in a modified form. Therefore, the anti-Romanian, first pro-Soviet, and later pro-Russian character of the Transnistrian regime suited these scholars well and corresponded to their own stance. In addition, as the founder and longstanding chair of the laboratory, N. Babilunga admitted that the history of Transnistria was a rather vague topic, as it was never really comprehensively stud-

ied per se as a separate subject.¹⁰ Of course, this did not mean that Transnistrian scholars had a *carte blanche* in their publications, as the same historian claims.¹¹ Some of the basic principles of the emerging master narrative of Transnistrian history were set by the PMR's governing bodies, among others with the same decree which established the laboratory for the research of history of Transnistria. Yet, as suggested, Transnistrian scholars did not have many disagreements with politicians on the basic principles. At the same time in the research of specific issues they indeed had a certain degree of freedom.

Transnistrian scholars elaborated several key elements which were at the heart of almost any historical reference or writing in Transnistria, including several key publications of the established research laboratory, which introduced the developed narrative of the history of Transnistria to general audience, such as the monumental *History of the PMR, the Phenomenon of Transnistria and The Statehood of Transnistria: History and the Present*. Stefan Troebst singled out the following principles: "self-sufficiency,"¹² "statehood," "multiethnicity," "Slavic-Russian orientation," and "Moldovenism."¹³ Basically, all these features

10 For a comparative discussion of history politics in post-Soviet Central and Eastern Europe, see Alexei Miller and Maria Lipman (ed.), *The Convulsions of Historical Politics* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2012).

11 Nikolai Babilunga, "Pridnestrovska'a Moldavska'a Respublika: Priznanna'a Istoriografi'a Nepriznannogo Gosudarstva," in Matsuzato Kimitaka (ed.), *Istoriograficheskii Dialog vokrug Nepriznannyh Gosudarstv: Pridnestrov'e, Nagornyi Karabah, Armeni'a, Iuzhna'a Osseti'a i Gruzi'a*. 21st COE "Making a Discipline of Slavic Eurasian Studies" Occasional Papers, No. 18 (Sapporo: SRC, 2007), 16 http://src-h.slav.hokudai.ac.jp/coe21/publish/no18/1_babilunga.pdf (accessed on September 7, 2014)

12 Ibid, 16.

13 Troebst's translation of the word *samobytnost'* as "self-sufficiency" is probably not the most apt. *Samobytnost'* rather suggests local distinctiveness.

are also core elements of regional Transnistrian identity, promoted in official discourse. One should probably also add anti-Romanianism as one of major principles for history-writing and political discourse in the unrecognized republic.

The creation of the Moldovan ASSR on the left bank of the river Dniester in 1924 in one way or another could be interpreted in order to support every key element of the Transnistrian historical narrative. Yet, it was of particular importance for finding historical precedents of Transnistrian statehood. Historical references and usually the celebration of past statehood are central elements of almost every national narrative. Transnistrian official discourse mostly avoids the word 'nation,' preferring the term 'people' as being less associated with nationalism, which has mostly negative connotations on the left bank of Dniester. Yet, the terminological choice does not mean that PMR authorities do not promote any nation-building projects. In turn, they consciously foster regional identity which mixes mostly Soviet-style Moldovenism, a pro-Russian orientation, and the dominance of the Russian language. The regionalist and declarative multiethnic orientation of Transnistrian nation-building put the issue of statehood and its past incarnations to the forefront of the PMR politics. Moreover, the contested character of contemporary Transnistrian statehood and the questioned legality of its existence reinforce its centrality in official discourse.

The establishment of the Moldovan ASSR in October 1924 allowed late and post-Soviet Transnistrian politicians and intellectuals to claim that the newly emerging separatist republic had a historical precedent which territorially roughly corresponded to its post-Soviet 'successor.' This conclusion already ness, local specificity/uniqueness.

appeared in one of the first founding documents of the PMR – *Political and Legal Justification of the Creation of the Transnistrian Moldovan Soviet Socialist Republic*, an auxiliary paper to the declaration of the sovereignty of the break-away republic on September 2, 1990. Yet the idea was likely in the air almost a year before. According to the recollections of the first and until 2011 only PMR president Igor Smirnov, Transnistrian leaders already in autumn 1989 'started to look for theoretical foundations for the attempts to defend our rights. We recalled that Transnistria had its statehood during the period of existence of the Moldovan ASSR as part of the Ukrainian SSR. We proceeded to burrow in the archives, historical and legal literature.'¹⁴

A decree of the Supreme Soviet of the Moldovan SSR served as the pretext for the declaration of the Tiraspol authorities in September 1990. The legislature in Chişinău declared that the 'occupation of Bessarabia and Bucovina' by the Soviet Union on June 28, 1940 was illegal, being the outcome of the notorious Nazi-Soviet pact of non-aggression, more commonly known as the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact. By extension, the subsequent proclamation of the Moldovan SSR on August 2, 1940 was proclaimed an illegal 'act of the dismemberment of Bessarabia and Bucovina' with significant parts annexed to the Ukrainian SSR.¹⁵ The leaders of the separatist republic linked the decision of the Supreme Soviet of the Mol-

14 Stefan Troebst, "We are Transnistrians! Post-Soviet Identity Management in the Dniester Valley," *Ab Imperio*, no. 1 (2003): 451. Moldovenism here, though, does not in any sense imply the necessity for Transnistria to participate in any common Moldovan project. For Transnistrian leaders Moldovenism is of interest as a convenient alternative to Romanianism, which from their point of view is imposed from above and from outside on the Republic of Moldova.

15 I.N. Smirnov, *Zhit' na Nashei Zemle* (Moscow: Sovetskii Pisatel', 2001), 28.

dovan SSR to their own interests. Picking up the statement of the illegality of the declaration of the establishment of the Moldovan SSR in 1940, Tiraspol authorities claimed that the second paragraph of the document should then also be considered nullified.¹⁶ The second article stipulated that six regions of the disbanding Moldovan ASSR were to be included into the newly created Moldovan SSR. Thus, the left-bank authorities suggested that in declaring the illegality of the Soviet decision from August 2, 1940 the Chişinău governing bodies conceded their own illegality¹⁷ and in particular their lack of jurisdiction over the regions of the former Moldovan ASSR.¹⁸ Transnistrian leaders exploited the decision of the Chişinău authorities in order to update the story of the previous statehood, not just as a historical precedent, but as a legal case justifying the secessionist movement. *The Political and Legal Justification* on September 2, 1990 had not yet openly claimed that the recognition of the illegality of the declaration of creation of the Moldovan SSR legally reinstated the disbanded Moldovan ASSR or at least its right for self-determination. Nevertheless, such statements would emerge later in Transnistrian publications endorsed by authorities¹⁹ and even in official documents such as the *Conception of Foreign Policy of the Transnistrian Moldovan Republic*. The document adopted by

16 <http://lex.justice.md/viewdoc.php?action=view&view=doc&id=308129&lang=2> (accessed on September 4, 2014)

17 N.V. Yakovlev (ed.), *Bessarabskii Vopros i Obrazovanie Pridnestrovskoi Moldavskoi Respubliki. Sbornik Oficial'nyh Dokumentov* (Tiraspol: RIO PGKU, 1993), 95.

18 In later years Transnistrian publications claimed that in 1990 the Moldovan legislature proclaimed the 'self-liquidation' of the Moldovan state. *Atlas Pridnestrovskoi Moldavskoi Respubliki* (Tiraspol: 1996).

19 *Bessarabskii Vopros i Obrazovanie Pridnestrovskoi Moldavskoi Respubliki*, 96.

the Supreme Soviet of the PMR in 2005 stated that the decision of the Moldovan Parliament in 1990 on the cancellation of the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact 'de facto recognized the illegality of the creation of the Moldovan SSR, formed by the annexation of Bessarabia to the Moldovan ASSR. Thus, by default the restoration of the sovereignty and statehood of the Moldovan ASSR was recognized, and by extension, the lawfulness of the establishment of the Transnistrian Moldovan Republic.'²⁰

Moreover, after some time Transnistrian publications started themselves to question the legality of the creation of the Moldovan SSR in the part, which necessitated the disbandment of the Moldovan ASSR and its inclusion into the new republic.²¹ Transnistrian authors argue that the decision was unconstitutional, arbitrary, and imposed from above without consultation with the population. Ironically, with different aims and coming from different angles both the leaders of the national movement in the Moldovan SSR and Transnistrian leaders and intellectuals questioned the legality of the creation of the Moldovan SSR in 1940 on similar grounds.

20 *Gosudarstvennost' Pridnestrov'ia: Istori'a i Sovremennost'* (Tiraspol: Poligrafist, 2007), 8, *Istori'a Pridnestrovskoi Moldavskoi Respubliki* [Further: *Istori'a PMR*], vol. 2, part 2 (Tiraspol: RIO PGU, 2001), 37.

21 The text of the document in *Gosudarstvennost' Pridnestrov'ia*, 291. It is interesting to point out how the authors of the Conception talk about 'the Moldovan SSR, formed by the annexation of Bessarabia to the Moldovan ASSR.' Thus even in this regrettable for them decision, the authors of the Conception made the Moldovan ASSR the primary subject, which Bessarabia was only annexed to. In fact, the original document proclaimed first the creation of the new republic, the Moldovan SSR, and then the incorporation into it of most of Bessarabia and 6 districts of the Moldovan ASSR and not the inclusion of one of them into the other. It also discusses the 'reunification,' again not the merger, of 'the Moldovan population of Bessarabia and the Moldovan population of the Moldovan ASSR.'

Even if we set aside the described exercises in juridical chicanery, the 'founding fathers' of the unrecognized republic used the events of the year 1924 and the 16 years of the Moldovan ASSR as a historical justification for the creation and existence of the PMR itself. Thus, they attempted to reject the accusations that the Transnistrian republic is an entirely new artificial construction.

The reference to the establishment of the Moldovan ASSR in 1924 helped Transnistrian leaders to avoid another inconvenient question. Their opponents disputed the insertion of the adjective 'Moldovan' in the name of the separatist republic. They argued that Moldovans constituted only a third of the region's population, calling into question the 'Moldovanness' of the Transnistrian republic and trying to present it as a Russian/Soviet/Muscovite intrigue. The 'Political and Legal Justification' responded with a historical precedent, stating that 'the Moldovan ASSR was created in 1924 on the territory of the Ukrainian SSR, even though Moldovans comprised only 30% of population.'²² Thus, the document implied that there was already a case of the 'Moldovan' republic on this territory, which proved to be viable despite a relatively low number of inhabiting Moldovans.

It is another question why Transnistrian leaders decided to put the adjective 'Moldovan' in the name of the republic. After all, they could leave it out and just go with the regional 'Transnistrian,' which corresponded to multiethnic character of the region and views of its leaders. By including 'Moldovan' in the title they possibly attempted to contrast their position to that of the national movement on the right-bank, which they presented as going in the Romanian direction. For them 'Moldovan' in this

²² *Bessarabskii Vopros i Obrazovanie Pridnestrovskoi Moldavskoi Respubliki*, 97.

context implied the advocacy of the separate Moldovan identity, language and culture and devotedness to the ideals of multiethnicity, as they understood it, and Eastern orientation, in contrast to pro-Romanian and nationalist Chişinău authorities. In addition, since the situation was still open with many possible outcomes, Transnistrian leaders probably still contemplated the possibilities of acting on an all-Moldovan scale, and not just limiting themselves to the region under their control. This change of context over time can also explain the evolution of the Transnistrian views on the legality/illegality of the proclamation of the Moldovan SSR in August 1940. *The Political and Legal Justification* in 1990 mostly lamented and attempted to expose the impropriety of the decision of the Supreme Soviet of the Moldovan SSR to evaluate the proclamation of the Moldovan SSR as illegal. At this time Transnistrian authorities still saw the whole Moldovan population, both on the left bank (to a larger extent, of course) and on the right bank of Dniester, as their audience. Later assessments of the disbandment of the Moldovan ASSR as illegal and having taken place due to the establishment of a larger Moldovan SSR could be found in Transnistrian publications which were intended almost exclusively for a Transnistrian audience. It implies that the territory of the unrecognized Transnistrian republic should never have been legally part of the Moldovan SSR and by extension of the Republic of Moldova. This message is much more appropriate in the context, when the separatist republic remained the only real political option for local leaders and intellectuals, who develop its historical narrative. In this story, the 'Transnistrian statehood was sacrificed' in order to create the Moldovan SSR, which was 'artificially designed by Stalinist regime.'²³ As

²³ *Fenomen Pridnestrov'ia* (Tiraspol: RIO

is usually the case in national narratives, the loss of past statehood appears in official or semi-official histories as an unjust, ideally illegal act of an external force.

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Even though the supporting documents for the Transnistrian declaration of sovereignty inaugurated the Moldovan ASSR as the justification for the existence of the PMR and later years saw its celebration as the 'first republic/statehood in Transnistria',²⁴ the attitude towards the interwar autonomous republic in the PMR's historical narrative is not entirely and exclusively positive. The socioeconomic development, construction of local industry and infrastructure, cultural and educational evolution usually receive a favorable assessment in Transnistrian histories of the Moldovan ASSR. In respective sections the PMR historians echo the traditions and style of the Soviet historiography, with the exception of the inclusion of a few paragraphs on the famine of 1932-33, the arbitrary character of collectivization and repressions in 1937-38. At the same time, Transnistrian politicians and historians have significant reservations in relation to some of the sides of the political history of the Moldovan ASSR and primarily to the mechanisms and rationales behind its establishment in 1924.

The former president of the PMR Igor' Smirnov outlined some of the issues which the Transnistrian leaders found politically inconvenient in the case of 'first statehood in Transnistria.' Discussing the first state-building steps in the

PGU, 2003), 69; *Gosudarstvennost' Pridnestrov'ia*, 48.
 24 *Gosudarstvennost' Pridnestrov'ia*, 22; *Fenomen Pridnestrov'ia*, 22; N.V. Babilunga, B.G. Bomesenko, *Pridnestrovskii Konflikt: Istoricheskie, Demograficheskie, Politicheskie Aspekty* (Tiraspol: RIO PGU, 1998), 13.

separatist region, he emphasized that the experience of the Moldovan ASSR could hardly be of use in this endeavor, for the republic was created in 1924 under different conditions and more importantly 'from above,'²⁵ without any consultations with the population. Such criticism of the 'first republic' by allegedly the most influential personality in the PMR's history may come as a surprise, taking into consideration that it was the only available historical reference to Transnistrian statehood. Yet, the PMR leader and other public figures did not admit the arbitrary character of the Moldovan ASSR simply for the sake of historical truth and justice. The acknowledgment of the top-down origins of the left-bank Soviet Republic allowed Transnistrian leaders and historians to claim the superiority of their own project even over the celebrated historical statehood. Any official narrative of the PMR's history explicitly emphasizes that the 'revived Transnistrian statehood' in early 1990s was built up 'from below.' Thus, according to this interpretation the post-Soviet reincarnation of Transnistrian statehood is more democratic and politically advanced than its interwar predecessor.

The official historical narratives often tend to include a historical 'golden age,' a period of all-round flourishing which is usually associated with strong statehood, the culmination of territorial expansion and geopolitical prestige and/or intensive cultural and economic development. In the case of the PMR's historical narrative the best candidate to occupy the niche of a 'golden age' was the period of the Moldovan ASSR. The other option could have been the postwar period, when Transnistria in the composition of the Moldovan SSR enjoyed years of economic and industrial construction. But in the postwar years the left-bank regions

25 Smirnov, *Zhit' na Nashei Zemle*, 93.

of the Moldovan SSR did not act by themselves. They did not have a separate administrative status, 'statehood' in the terminology of Transnistrian historians.

Why, though, did the Moldovan ASSR not receive unconditional recognition as the 'golden age' in the history of the region? Why is the 'first statehood' in Transnistria celebrated in the PMR political and historical discourse, but only with certain reservations? After all, the arbitrary character of its inception could have been downplayed or simply ignored. The open criticism of one's own 'first statehood' and especially of the process, which led to its emergence is quite unusual. At the same time the mythologization and the embellishment of certain periods by silencing inconvenient facts, among other things, is not uncommon in historical narratives, especially those with political endorsement. The same publications, which criticize the top-down process of the establishment of the Moldovan ASSR, devote only two short paragraphs to the issues of famine and repressions in the 50-page overviews of the republic's 16 years of existence.²⁶ Nevertheless, the Transnistrian historical and political discourse does not in any way ignore or omit the story of the establishment of the Moldovan ASSR 'from above.' On the contrary, it deliberately focuses on it. Apparently, it was crucial for the PMR leaders to assert the superiority of the unrecognized 'second' republic in Transnistria over the 'first' one. The emphasis on the arbitrary origins of the Moldovan ASSR does call its legitimacy into question and by extension somewhat weakens its appeal as the 'first statehood' for the narrative. However, by partially sacrificing this

²⁶ To be fair, the much more detailed two-volume *History of PMR* (with the second one in two parts) devotes more than two pages to the repressions with again only several paragraphs on the famine, *Istoriia PMR*, vol. 2 part. 1, 100-102, 114-115.

part of the story the PMR leaders opened the possibility to declare the uniqueness of their subordinated republic. The originality of the PMR is a key part of the self-representation of the ruling regime. Not by coincidence, one of the key Transnistrian historical books bears the title *Phenomenon of Transnistria*, 'phenomenon' implying here something unusual and rare. According to the elaborated Transnistrian historical narrative, any major political change in this region throughout the 20th century (such as the unification of Bessarabia with Romania, the creation of the Moldovan ASSR, later its disbandment and the establishment of the Moldovan SSR, and finally the events surrounding the fall of the Soviet Union) was an imposition from above, which ignored the population's opinion. In this context the promoted bottom-up story of the establishment of the PMR serves to underscore its uniqueness and to claim moral superiority, which is of great and immediate use for the highly contested legitimacy of the unrecognized republic. The slightly tarnished image of the Moldovan ASSR is the price paid to make this focus more explicit.

However, there are some other reasons, which impede the exploitation of the story of the 'first statehood' to the full extent. To begin with, the Moldovan ASSR was a constituent part of the Ukrainian SSR. While the fostered Transnistrian identity has an evident Eastern, Slavic vector, it is mostly oriented towards Russia, rather than Ukraine. Unlike the Republic of Moldova, Ukraine does not figure as an enemy and has a rather favorable image in the PMR. Nevertheless, nobody in Transnistria seriously discusses the prospects of joining Ukraine on any basis. In turn, the issue of unification with the Russian Federation is always on the table in Tiraspol.²⁷ Thus, in this context

²⁷ In 2006 PMR authorities even organized a

the subordination of the Moldovan ASSR to Soviet Ukrainian authorities during 16 years of its existence is not the most convenient story for the ideologists of the breakaway republic. Another reason for the restrained approval of the establishment of the Moldovan ASSR by Transnistrian historians is also related to its arbitrary character, but in a different light. The Soviet decision to create the autonomous republic was not only inappropriate due to the lack of consultations with the involved population. It also imposed an agenda, which according to Transnistrian historians, was alien to local population. Thus, since the new Soviet autonomous republic appeared with the 'recession' of Bessarabia in mind, its title acquired the word 'Moldovan', even though the left-bank of the river Dniester had never been part of the Moldovan principality. In addition, the Transnistrian historian argues further, after the establishment of the Moldovan ASSR its territory (and by extension the territory of the future PMR) started to be associated with the Bessarabian problem. Apparently, the author sees here the roots of future problems: 'In 1924 an event took place, which laid the foundation for today's problems. Then the process of change ... of the state belonging of the Transnistrian lands started.'²⁸ Within the Transnistrian historical narrative this means the acquisition of an unwanted political affiliation with the Moldovan state by the Transnistrian territory which local historians perceive as a historically multiethnic Slavic land. The Moldovanness here is not a problem by itself, as long as it does not imply indissoluble ties

referendum on the independence of the Transnistrian Moldovan Republic. The first question asked if the respondent supported the independence of the PMR and its subsequent free annexation by the Russian Federation. 97.1% of the participants answered 'yes' to this.

28 *Fenomen Pridnestrov'ia*, 52.

to right-bank Moldova and it is not imposed 'from above,' unlike the 'Moldovan' definition introduced from below during the establishment of the PMR. Basically, Transnistrian historians project their contemporary situation onto the 1920s. Since in their perception its main opponent during the years of the PMR's existence was the right-bank Moldovan authorities, aided by Romania, any historical links between the Transnistrian statehood and Bessarabia were to be condemned. This is exactly why the incorporation of the Transnistrian regions into the Bessarabian issue deserved such a strong critical assessment. In the eyes of Transnistrian historians the dismemberment of the Moldovan ASSR, that is the 'first statehood in Transnistria,' and the incorporation of its parts into the Moldovan SSR, which would later evolve into the detested Republic of Moldova, were just the logical results of the imposed agenda in 1924.²⁹ However, they unsurprisingly omit the fact that without the Bessarabian problem it was unclear and in fact quite doubtful that the 'first statehood in Transnistria' would have ever occurred during the interwar years.

To conclude, there exists an interesting discrepancy in the Transnistrian historical narrative in relation to the establishment and 16-year existence of the Moldovan ASSR. The PMR authorities, historians and public figures celebrate it as the first instance of the statehood on the left-bank of the Dniester, which provided 'historical and legal prerequisites for the revival of state structures in 1990.'³⁰ At the same time the specific circumstances of the establishment of the Moldovan ASSR and the ra-

29 *Istori'a PMR*, vol. 2, part 1, 98.

30 From the speech of the Chairman of the Supreme Soviet of the PMR, G. Marakutsa, in 2004 on the 80th anniversary of the Moldovan ASSR, cited in <http://www.pmr21.info/article.php?art=40> (accessed on September 7, 2014)

tionales behind this decision encounter strong criticism.

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There was at least one attempt to dethrone the Moldovan ASSR as the 'first statehood in Transnistria.' In 2004 at the conference devoted to the 80th anniversary of the establishment of the Moldovan ASSR, A. Volkova proposed to contemplate the possibility that the Moldovan ASSR was not the 'first experience' of statehood in Transnistria. Volkova is one of the most politically engaged historians in the PMR, who in the first half of the 1990s was the vice-Chairman of the Transnistrian Supreme Soviet and from 1996 the state advisor of the PMR president I. Smirnov until the latter's abdication after the loss in elections in 2011. As a 'forgotten' contender for the title of the 'first statehood,' the Transnistrian historian proposed the short-lived Bessarabian SSR, which the Bolsheviks proclaimed in 1919, when the fortune on the south-western front of the Civil War turned in their favour and the Red Army solidified its positions on Dniester for a short period. The Bolsheviks envisaged further advancing to the West, 'liberating' Bessarabia which was 'illegally occupied' by Romania, and under ideal circumstances the unification of forces with the Red Hungary of Bela Kun. The Bolsheviks failed to even enter Bessarabia, despite several military incursions and insurrections organized by local communist cells, and were soon themselves kicked out of Transnistria by their opponents. Thus, the Bessarabian SSR de facto had no real jurisdiction over Bessarabia itself. Yet for Volkova this did not matter much. For her it was crucial that during its short history the leadership of the Bessarabian SSR, which mostly printed leaflets rather than doing any administrative work, was stationed in the 'temporary capital,' Tiraspol, and included several regions of Transnistria.

The Transnistrian historian found these facts sufficient enough to suggest that the Bessarabian SSR was in reality the first republic in Transnistria and the PMR's statehood was five years older, starting in 1919, not in 1924. Such a statement on the 80th anniversary of the 'first republic,' just several years after the monumental *History of the PMR* and programmatic *Phenomenon of Transnistria* solidified, despite all its flaws, the Moldovan ASSR's status in the historical narrative, was undoubtedly a provocation and inspired much controversy. It not only questioned the official narrative of Transnistrian history. It openly challenged its authors, most notably N. Babilunga and his laboratory *History of Transnistria*, which virtually held a monopoly over the interpretation of region's history. The further course the events suggests that the disagreement did not have a mere scholarly basis.

A year later Volkova managed to establish a *Chair of History of the PMR* and an affiliated research laboratory *History of the PMR* at the Transnistrian State University³¹, even though the institution already included the Chair of Universal History and Babilunga's own *Chair of National (Otechestvoenniaia) History*³² with the laboratory *History of Transnistria*. The main aim of the new Chair was to teach and research the history of the PMR proper, that is from late 1980s onwards. Yet, it soon became clear that this was only a pretext, to justify the establishment of the new division. Although it focused mostly on post-Soviet years, the spheres of interest of the new Chair and its research laboratory extended well into the Soviet and even pre-Soviet periods. Thus, the small separatist republic and even the same University had

31 <http://strategiya-pmr.ru/wp-content/uploads/files/d/buklet-20-let-iigp-pgu-im-t-g-shevchenko.pdf> (accessed on September 7, 2014)

32 The Chair focused on teaching of the history of the PMR, Russia and Ukraine.

two Chairs and laboratories, which de facto dealt with the same issues, duplicating each other's work, competing for similar research projects. Volkova had much success in this competition, apparently benefiting from her political experience, multiple personal connections and, of course, her position as the President's advisor.

Babilunga and his associates had no intentions to concede the position of the leading authority on region's history to the ambitious contender. Together with his main specialist on interwar period Bomeshko, he responded with several critical articles, which mostly focused on Volkova's attempt to transfer the title of the 'first statehood in Transnistria' to the Bessarabian SSR. These papers, as well as some of Volkova's publications, suggest that the conflict not only has personal and institutional dimensions, but also ideological origins based on different visions of the region's history. Unsurprisingly, Babilunga considers Volkova's interpretation of the Bessarabian SSR a profanation.³³ According to him, the short-lived republic had no jurisdiction over any territory, let alone the left-bank regions. At the same time the 'temporary capital' in Tiraspol was in reality located in a railway coach,³⁴ which probably turned out to be handy, when the Soviet Bessarabian government had to escape the advancing opponents of Bolsheviks. Due to these facts, Babilunga concludes that the Bessarabian SSR cannot be considered a case of early statehood in any way. He then finds a way to attack the establishment of Volkova's new Chair at the University and its first activi-

ties, in particular the publication of the historical atlas of the PMR and a history manual by a group of authors headed by Volkova. According to Babilunga, the authors not only restate their mistaken views on the Bessarabian SSR, but also present an unsuccessful approach to the region's history, which 'is limited only to the contemporary boundaries of the PMR, without any connections to the processes, which took place in those countries, which Transnistria was part of in different periods.'³⁵ To be fair, Volkova's atlas³⁶ does not repeat the claim that the Bessarabian SSR was the first experience of statehood in Transnistria. It does however fail to mention the mantra that the Moldovan ASSR was. The Atlas' very narrow focus is indeed of interest though. Almost all the included maps zoomed to the Transnistrian region, as if no other territories were of any relevance to its history. Moreover, on almost every map of any period there is a dotted line, which indicates the contemporary boundaries of the PMR.

This is an alternative interpretation of Transnistrian history. Babilunga and his laboratory developed a historical narrative, which is centered on the region, but often incorporates and contextualizes it in larger entities, primarily that of the Slavic/Russian/Soviet space. In many respects this is a creative interpretation and adaptation of the Soviet historical narratives in the Soviet national republics.³⁷ Volkova proposes a strictly state-centered version of the national historical narrative, which is also in fact more in line with other cases of the offi-

35 *Priznanna'a Istoriofafi'a*, 34.

36 *Atlas. Pridnestrovska'a Moldavska'a Respublika. Istori'a* (Tiraspol: 2007).

37 For the discussion on the similarities between the *Istori'a PMR* and the Soviet historical narrative, see Vladimir Solonari, "Creating a 'People': A Case-Study in Post-Soviet History Writing," *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History*, 4 (Spring 2003): 411-438.

33 Later Babilunga would even call Volkova and her associates 'dilettanti in history,' Babilunga, *Priznanna'a Istoriofafi'a*, 34

34 N.V. Babilunga, B.G. Bomeshko, "Bessarabska'a SSR: k Istorii Nesosto'avshegos'a Proekta," <http://www.pmr21.info/article.php?art=40> (accessed on September 7, 2014)

cial histories in Europe. The antiquity of statehood is important within this type of stories. Therefore, even five years made a difference in the Volkova's campaign for the Bessarabian SSR. The choice in the titles of the research laboratories is also indicative of the different focuses: Babilunga's 'Transnistria' geographical and vague 'PMR' with no strict borders and Volkova's 'PMR' with clear-cut political borders that define the limits of the inquiry.

The equilibrium did not always exist. In the end of 2007 a scandal broke out, which had almost swung the balance in Volkova's favor. The journal of the Babilunga's laboratory *Historical Almanac of Transnistria* published one of the critical reviews on Volkova's atlas. The latter, using her political position, devised this publication as a political attack on the PMR's authorities. This allowed readers to revisit the balance between the two conflicting parties. Volkova managed to recruit the PMR Minister of Education to her side, who accused Babilunga and his associates of publishing harmful articles without the sanction of authorities.³⁸ Minister Pashchenko even threatened to cease financing the laboratory *History of Transnistria*, for she saw no reason for the existence of two research laboratories with the same scope.³⁹ Eventually Babilunga pulled enough strings to save his brainchild, but he had to give up the journal, which passed under the supervision of Volkova's camp and tellingly changed the title to *Historical Bulletin of the PMR*. The balance of power had slightly changed, but the duplicity of two conflicting historical research laboratories was maintained. Volkova's alternative fits well with the needs of the regime which seeks

to create an independent, separate statehood. At the same time Babilunga's narrative suits the weak polity which also relies much on outside help and identifies with a larger political and cultural space. The case of the separatist Transnistrian republic is somewhere in-between these two options. Therefore, possibly neither is exclusively endorsed by the authorities and the duplicity and conflictual situation persists since 2005. This is probably fortunate for the Moldovan ASSR, which retained its status as the 'first republic in Transnistria' and expects official celebrations for the 90th anniversary of the PMR in October 2014.

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38 For Babilunga's and Bomeshko's version of the situation <http://www.regnum.ru/news/polit/896191.html> (accessed on September 7, 2014)

39 For the interview with the PMR Minister of Education <http://altai.regnum.ru/news/898567.html> (accessed on September 7, 2014)