

## *Identități colective, geografii simbolice*

### **SOME CONSIDERATIONS ON THE ETHNIC AND CULTURAL IDENTITY OF THE BESSARABIAN ROMANIANS REFLECTED IN THE RUSSIAN HISTORIOGRAPHY**

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The problems connected with the emergence, crystallization and development of group identities are very complex and intertwined with a whole set of cultural, psychological, political and social issues. These problems acquire a further dimension in the case of the involvement of a national project or of a “national idea” in the process of the creation of a collective identity. The identity of a larger community cannot be subject to a unilateral analysis and requires a thorough interpretation of available sources and a conscious selection of significant elements to be emphasized. The qualifications attributed to the larger concept of “identity” when speaking of a social community reflect in many cases the predominant interest of the scholar concerning this or that facet of the community’s social life. However, the concept of “identity” deals not only with the “social” in its narrow sense, that is, with the relationships between social layers, the material base of a layer’s identification etc. The concept of “identity” necessarily presupposes a mental sphere of self-identification and of the delimitation of the Other as the distinguishing factor in the self-awareness of a community. For this reason the discussion of a group’s identity can be very elusive and can lead the researcher to dangerous generalizations and extrapolations which make his analysis in itself a purely mental construct, an invented artifact. This, of course, raises the question of historical objectivity as such, since in this case the historian is literally “constructing” the reality according to his preferences instead of “reconstructing” it according to the coherence of his sources and their more or less discernible relationships with the historical reality. A way out of this dilemma may be the “internal realism”, proposed as a solution by Chris Lorenz in an article he published in a specialized collection<sup>1</sup>. However, it is not this paper’s purpose to discuss the larger implications of the historical analysis of the concept of identity. The main aim is to show the reflection of some identity elements of the majority ethnic group of Bessarabia as seen by some Russian authors during the period of the Russian rule of the territory. Certainly, the question appears of the relationship between the above

general remarks and this “case study”. This paper rejects the extrapolation of historical evidence, the “retrospective” reading of historical sources and the application of modern criteria of social perception to the phenomena of the past. Additionally, it reviews the main interpretations of the identity of the Bessarabian Romanians by the Russian authors in order to underline the biases inherent in the representation of this ethnic group by the Russian educated strata (whatever limited interest it might have in fact aroused). The essay dwells mainly on the ethnic and cultural traits mentioned by the Russian authors, since the ethnic consciousness and the sense of “Otherness” of the Besarabian Romanians had some peculiar traits and a certain dynamics determined by the historical circumstances of Russian annexation. Thus, the paper focuses on the perceptions of the ethnic characteristics of the majority inhabitants of Bessarabia, as well as on their developing a sense of “otherness” towards the Russians as inferred from the Russian works of the period.

The fundamental difficulty while treating the subject of ethnic identity and group self-consciousness is relating these phenomena to the national developments and projects or, to be short, to *national* identity as such. The dilemma an historian faces in this case is, at first glance, an either/or problem: either one admits that all “national” traits are purely artificial and invented, or, at best, completely “imagined”, constructed concepts,<sup>2</sup> or one overestimates the ethnic bases of national constructs and derives the “national” elements directly or less so from the sense of “ethnicity”.<sup>3</sup> The first of these two “schools” seems to take the lead in the latest debates on the problem, especially after the huge amount of works dealing with “invented” concepts and symbols which shape our everyday life. The problem with this approach, that undoubtedly has some merits in “de-essentializing” the concepts taken almost for granted in the last century and a half, is that it ultimately argues against any base for the emergence of what is now called “national consciousness” and makes even the term superfluous. However, the influence this concepts still exerts on human communities is obvious and undermines the validity of the above-mentioned ideas. On the other hand, it would be impossible to deny that without an “intellectual impulse” the crystallization of a “national consciousness” or identity would be very problematic. What is, then, the solution? It is plausible to argue that the creation of “national feelings presupposes the combination of the above-mentioned factors. In other words, the ethnic, cultural, religious, social and other “traditional” forms of identity, on the basis of a coherent vision of the “national project” devised by the educated strata (not necessarily and exclusively intellectuals) can coalesce and form what is ultimately known as the “national identity”. The final product may be partly artificial, but the initial ingredients have to be already there.

The Bessarabian case is especially revealing in this aspect. The existence of traditional forms of collective identity can be easily followed from the works of Russian authors, which makes it even more obvious that these elements were consolidated at the time. However, the separation of this region from the Romanian Principalities at the moment of gestation of Romanian national

consciousness proved to be of crucial consequence. Moreover its inclusion in the space of the Russian Empire subjected it to the hypothetical influence of the Russian “national project,” which was delayed only due to the particularities of the development of this state. It is not the aim of this paper to treat these problems more extensively. They have been mentioned in order to clarify the context of the Russian perceptions of the ethnic and cultural identity traits of the local inhabitants. The emphasis on the “traditional” identity elements cannot be devoid of political implications either. The Russian authors tended to show the apolitical and, above all, non-modern character of the local population and thus to minimize the possibility of its inclusion in any national project, be it Romanian or (until a certain period) Russian. Even after the emphasis on “Russianness” as the binding element of the Empire became preeminent, the basic picture of the ethnic traits of the Bessarabians remained, basically, the same, which shows their resistance (by traditional, premodern means) to the influence of the “national” ideas.

What are the basic elements perceived by the Russian authors determining the image of the Bessarabian Romanians as an ethnic group? Firstly, it must be mentioned that the basic ethnic characteristic common in all the works of the period is the pointing out of the Romanic character of the local inhabitants of the area. How can be this ethnic characteristic linked to the contemporary period, in which the authors were writing? It must be mentioned that the Romanic character of the indigenous population was treated by the authors in a dual dimension: a) diachronically (the historical aspect) and b) synchronically (the “modern” aspect). These two aspects are, obviously, closely intertwined and, at first sight, do not have major implications on the distinctive features of the perception of the locals’ ethnicity. At a closer look, however, the link of such a perception with the overall conceptual framework of the Russian authors becomes clear. This conceptual framework could be defined as an organicist theory of the development of the Bessarabian Romanians. The apparent contradiction between these two temporal dimensions can be dismissed as soon as one lists the elements of the Romanic character, i.e., of distinctive ethnic features, of the local inhabitants. Thus, these features are 1) the language (the fundamental one); 2) the customs and traditions; 3) the physical appearance; 4) very rarely – the self – identification of the locals.

The organicist imprint is clearly pervading their interpretation. The language as a “living”, biological, organism, is not an uncommon element in that epoch. In this case, it is illustrated by the transferring of the essence of the Besarabian majority ethnic group in times immemorial. The Russian authors, naturally, concentrate on the present as well, emphasizing that the language spoken in Bessarabia is identical with that spoken in Romania.<sup>4</sup> However, that is not by far the main focus of the Russian authors. They admit the ethnic and linguistic reality of the province, but the implications they draw from it are quite interesting. Namely, their main emphasis is on the *origins* both of the language and of the people speaking it. Several quotations will illustrate this point, as

well as the dynamics of this perception over the whole period. One of the first authors interested in the region writes: "The autochthonous inhabitants of the region are Moldavians or Romanians (Vlachs), who, as I have already said, are descended from Roman colonists. They speak the Moldavian language, which is of Latin origin and which, like the Italian language, preserves many particular features of the neo-Latin languages."<sup>5</sup> He further dwells on the links between the region and the Romanian Principalities, but in what concerns the language he explicitly underlines is origins rather than its present status, thus creating an image of an "ancient" language only partially changed by later influences. This image persists with astounding stability in all the later works. Paradoxically, though the Russian authors understandably, point out the Slavic imprint, the fundamentally Romanic character is nevertheless the underpinning particular feature of the language. During the later XIX century their ideas become more and more coherent and allow to follow the dynamics of the organicist approach to the ethnicity of the Bessarabian Romanians.

Thus, already at the beginning of the XX century one of the main Russian political figures in Bessarabia, P. Krushevan, wrote about the "origins of this *nation*" that link it to "the peoples living in Moesia and... Dacia" and to the "Roman colonists".<sup>6</sup> The language is described in practically the same terms as those cited above. However, here one encounters a new "ethnic feature," the physical appearance that links the local inhabitants to the Romans: "If we look attentively at the Moldavian's face, we can see... delicate features and forms that point to an ancient, noble race. Here we encounter faces with a characteristic Dacian-Roman shape that remind us of ancient sculptures... The exquisite and energetic profile, the high forehead, the Roman... nose, the black curly hair, the black eyes, the head proudly arranged on the shoulders, all this reminds us of the statues from the Roman forum."<sup>7</sup> Thus, here the biological link with the past is already openly stated, the autochthonous population being pictured as "living statues" of the past. One can thus better understand the emphasis of the Russian authors on the origins and the organic features both of the language and of the ethnic group. The authors perceive the ethnicity of the Bessarabian Romanians not in modern terms, but as a peculiar "transfer" of the past into the present. The organicist approach views the contemporary ethnicity of the Bessarabians as essentially static and at the same time essentially past. Thus, the place of this group is not in the present, but in the world of eternal past and eternal present- the world of memory and tradition.

This view is especially poignant in the work of Leon Casso, who discusses extensively the relationship between the present situation of the Bessarabian Romanians and their historical remembrance. The "historical memories" of the Bessarabian Romanians are for this author the synonymous to their self-awareness, to their existence as a separate historical entity as such. Tracing their presumed "memories" as far back as the Middle Ages through the later period until the Russian-Turkish wars of the XIX century, he implies that at the beginning of the XX century, when he was writing his work, the Bessarabians

have “forgotten” their alleged Middle Age “troubled political” situation.<sup>8</sup> Does he consequently state that at present this community has found its place in the modern world, be it under Russian domination? No, he states quite the contrary: “The old peoples, like old people, remember with difficulty the more recent times and they like to focus their thoughts on their remembrances from their young years. Likewise, in the fairy tales and popular legends of Moldavia and Wallachia the singer is submerged in the depth of the centuries and in the times of sadness and oppression he gladly appeals to the almighty sorcerer, to the venerable emperor, to the immortal Trajan.”<sup>9</sup> This statement is extremely important for its reflection of the overall view of the ethnicity of the Bessarabian Romanians by the Russian authors. First of all, the sphere of the ethnicity of the local inhabitants is again pictured as by definition located in the past and, consequently, the Bessarabians themselves are viewed as living only in and from memory. The invocation of “fairy tales” and “legends” leads one to traditions and customs, that eternal present through which the Roman origins and, implicitly, the essential ethnicity of the Bessarabian Romanians is constantly reasserted in a ritualistic way. The organicist approach is again clearly present by the direct analogy of the Bessarabian people to a living organism, to a person who has reached an old age. Secondly, here one can interpret the hitherto only veiled implications of this statement. Casso uses the organicist image not only for the Bessarabians as a part, but for the Romanians as a whole. The seemingly illogical “generalization” acquires completely new meanings once one turns to the theory advanced by one of the leading Slavophile thinkers of the second half of the XIX century, N. Ia. Danilevsky.

Why have I linked the opinion of Casso (synthesizing the opinions of the previous authors) with the theory of Danilevsky? Firstly, because Casso definitely knew his work very well and could have been easily influenced by him, though there is no direct proof of such an influence. Secondly, Casso quotes Danilevsky as arguing for the cession of Bessarabia to Romania. The extensive treatment of this problem is worth undertaking, since the conclusions drawn from the alleged Danilevsky statement can lead one to gross misinterpretations of the real opinion this Slavophile had concerning the relationship of the Bessarabian Romanians to Romania. So, what does Danilevsky say about the “historicity” of an ethnic group? He divides the ethnic groups of the world into two parts: 1) peoples who live a “historical” life, and thus have the right to self-determination; and 2) the others, who do not have a “historical life” and are either “ethnographic material”, or peoples who have lost their historicity long ago and live only by its memories.<sup>10</sup> The similarities of the latter definition and of the description Casso gives to the Romanians as an “old” people is quite striking. The direct influence of Danilevsky’s work on Casso cannot, of course, be undoubtedly assessed, but Danilevsky’s general pattern might be the source for Casso’s statements. Danilevsky, as a biologist by education, was himself a follower of the organicist approach, which he applied to the whole scheme of world history. So the common elements between the

two authors are not so improbable. Starting from his general theory, does Danilevsky really envisage a retrocession of Bessarabia to Romania? Casso quotes him in the context of his negative evaluation of even a partial change of the border. But the context in which Danilevsky treats this problem is completely different and has to do with his project of Pan-Slav Union. Before addressing the issue, it is interesting to quote Danilevsky's view on the annexation of Bessarabia: "In the south-western corner of Russia Bessarabia is situated, which is also a recent acquisition. Here the Christian Orthodox population has been liberated from the hands of its wild, coarse and oppressing conquerors – the Turks – a population, which celebrated this event as a redeeming from a life of prisoners. If this was a conquest, then Cyrus, while freeing the Hebrews from their Babylonian bondage, was also a conqueror. This is not worth even discussing further."<sup>11</sup> Thus, Danilevsky himself did not seem to regard the Bessarabian Romanians as an "agent in history", as a "historical people". The implications drawn from his texts are quite unconvincing, given this attitude.

However, Danilevsky did say something about the opportunity of the retrocession of Bessarabia. The context must be again taken into consideration. Danilevsky saw Romania as a part of the Pan-Slav Union, and only thus he imagined the eventual returning of a part of Bessarabia to Romania. He admitted only the incorporation of "the Western part of Bessarabia, inhabited by Moldavians", to the Romanian state. Moreover, he stated that "the Romanians can hope for the unification of half of Transylvania, Bukovina, and of *a part of Bessarabia* to their state *only and solely with Russia's agreement and contribution*."<sup>12</sup> Thus, the unification of "a part of Bessarabia" was possible only if it was in Russia's interest to consent. Still more interesting and revealing is Danilevsky's "plan" for the future of Romania after the creation of the Pan-Slav Union with Russia as its center. The "Romanian kingdom" as a part of the Union should include "Wallachia, Moldavia, a part of Bukovina, half of Transylvania with the border approximately on the river Maros [Mures] and the Western edge (?) of Bessarabia populated predominantly by Moldavians, in exchange for which Russia should acquire the now lost part of Southern Bessarabia with the Danube delta [the book was published in 1871] and the Dobrudja peninsula."<sup>13</sup> Thus, Danilevsky's plans for Romania put the so-called "retrocession of Bessarabia" in a completely new context. Danilevsky admits the common ethnicity of Bessarabian and the other Romanians (which has not been denied in principle by any Russian author), but it does not stop him from engulfing the non-Slav Romania into the projected Pan-Slav Union, in which all Romanians will eventually have to be assimilated. Thus, the image of Danilevsky as an "advocate" of Russia's returning of Bessarabia to Romania is inaccurate and does not consider his opinions carefully enough.

The ethnic identity of the Bessarabian Romanians was interpreted by the Russian authors in an organicist way not only to show their "ahistoricity" and thus, indirectly, to justify the "mission" of the Russian Empire in the region as an organizing and protecting force of a population who lacked historical

“agency” and whose ethnic identity was still in a process of crystallization. This interpretation can also be derived from the actual situation of the majority ethnic group of Bessarabia in this respect. What the Russian authors are not saying is as, and perhaps, even more important as what they are admitting openly. The ethnic identity must have been consolidating gradually during the Russian administration, with its first elements dating back to the pre-1812 period. The shift of emphasis on “organicist,” traditional and “apolitical” elements of the identity of the local population could not displace the uneasiness felt by certain Russian writers or officials concerning the long-run implications and consequences of the further developing of the locals’ ethnic identity. Thus one can better appreciate such “dissonant” statements as those that can be found among phrases confirming the scheme outlined above in the works of authors as dissimilar as Batiushkov (a “court” publisher of ethnographical works) and Kuropatkin (a well-known Russian general). The former admitted that “Romanians are the most numerous [ethnic group] in Bessarabia and, naturally, they direct their eyes towards their compatriots from the Romanian kingdom and towards those from Austria.”<sup>14</sup> This statement is more a prediction for the future than a faithful reflection of the real situation in Bessarabia at the end of the XIX century, but it has a major significance from two points of view. Firstly, it acknowledges the potential that the “traditional” ethnic identity carries with it: that of its transformation, under proper conditions, in a consolidated national consciousness. Secondly, it reflects the growing preoccupation of the Russian imperial authorities with the “national problems” and the constantly strengthening impact of the Russian nationalism on the official policy of the autocracy starting in the 1880s.

The words of gen. Kuropatkin, written more than 20 years after Batiushkov’s work, enhance the impression of apprehension felt by some Russian officials concerning the future of the region. He wrote: “The Romanian population of Bessarabia annexed 100 years ago even today lives completely apart and isolated from the Russian population. There can be no doubt that, if at the beginning of the XIX century the Principalities had been annexed to Russia, their population not only would have remained foreign, but would have very soon become an enemy to the Russian people and in that case, instead of a single Poland, we would have had two, which would have led to an even greater weakening of Russia. In the future, the fact that the unity of the Romanian people will be done peacefully or by war is inevitable.”<sup>15</sup> This statement again is an exaggeration, but here the explosive potential that the ethnic identity of the Bessarabian Romanians had for their control of the region is expressed much more articulately. Thus, the apparent “double discourse” of the Russian authors is in fact quite coherent and simply gives an image both of the contemporary stage of development of the ethnic identity (which is minimized) and of the possible future development of a national identity on the basis of the ethnic self-consciousness (which is exaggerated).

Another major problem that can be discussed concerning the development of the self-awareness of the Bessarabian Romanians as an ethnically and culturally, if not yet nationally, distinct community within the Russian empire is the mode of consolidation of feeling of “Otherness” of the locals towards the Russians. Generally speaking, the appearance of this feeling can be simultaneously perceived on two levels: 1) the distinctiveness of the locals from the other ethnic groups (mainly colonists attracted by the Russian authorities) and especially 2) on the level of Russian authorities themselves, who were perceived as alien. However, the distinctions made above are necessarily subject to major qualifications. Firstly, there was no conscious opposition between the locals and other ethnic groups *as* ethnic groups. The underpinning sense of “Otherness” was transferred either in the sphere of rural-urban contrast or in that of differing social roles within the same type of living environment. Much more important and interesting is the relationship between the Russian authorities and the local population. The role of Russian authorities in the creation of the locals’ sense of “Otherness” has been indeed central. Of course, on the one hand the incorporation of Bessarabia into the Russian Empire proved, initially at least, to hamper the sense of “otherness”, which was then still understood in religious terms. If the Ottoman was a definite “other” by his religious, that is, symbolical nature, the Russian was perceived as a more habitual “Other” due to the common confessional background. The impact of Russian-Turkish wars waged throughout the XVIII century signified the beginning of the process of recognizing the Russian as no less “different” than the Ottoman. But only during the Russian domination did that peculiar situation emerge when the Bessarabian Romanians and the Russian authorities became, in a way, reciprocal “others” and shaped one another’s view.

The annexation of Bessarabia to the Russian Empire inaugurated a new period in the locals’ defining of otherness. Separated from the formation of Romanian common self-awareness on a superior, national, level, given the largely pre-modern character of the society before and largely after 1812, the Bessarabian Romanians had to adapt themselves to the new circumstances. The preservation of traditional material and, above all, mental values proved to be a seemingly viable solution, and it indeed worked for a long period of time. Still, the inclusion of the region in a new identity space could not leave the situation unchanged. The role of a catalyst of the sense of otherness, played in the rest of the Romanian space either by conscious cultivation, or by the existence of a long-term tradition of inter-community relations (as in the case of Transylvania) was played in the Bessarabian case by the Russian authorities themselves. This apparently paradoxical situation led to the phenomenon conventionally called in this paper “*reactive identity*.” What is meant here by this term? This term, as is obvious from the combination of words used to define it, has two interrelated levels: an active and a passive one. However, this phenomenon in itself is neither purely “active,” nor exclusively “passive.” The “active” element is



initially represented by the Russian authorities, which by their policy arouse the most often unconscious reaction of the locals. Accordingly, the “passive” role is played by the population subject to these policies. Still, the consequences of this process are completely opposite to the initial situation: the sense of community is strengthened among the locals, whereas the authorities, under unfavourable circumstances, find themselves weakened. This mechanism of “reactive identity” helps to explain the first manifestations of the “national movement” in Bessarabia at the beginning of the XX century. The seemingly chonical incapacity of this movement to transcend a purely local, limited level, inarticulation and lack of a coherent vision of the future, its limitation to almost exclusively cultural and economic demands – all this is an expression of the “reactive” nature of the Bessarabian sense of identity.

However, the mechanism of “reactive identity” had not only inhibiting consequences on the development of the community’s self-awareness. The realization of the distinctiveness of one’s community provides the members of this community with a means of resistance to assimilation, though it is based primarily on pre-modern bases. By stimulating the emergence of this phenomenon, the Russian authorities weakened their control over the local population or at least made it problematic. The 1806-1812 Russian-Turkish war is an eloquent example of the mechanism of the appearance of this phenomenon. The behaviour of Russian occupation troops caused an openly negative reaction of the local population, which is abundantly reflected mainly in the work of the already mentioned L. Casso. The sense of “otherness” with reference to the Russians, already in consolidation in the previous Russian-Turkish wars, acquired a powerful stimulus<sup>16</sup>. The consequences of the Russian policy as a catalyst for protest and, hence, for the strengthening of communal solidarity and identity, was perceived accordingly by the Russian authorities, who tried to attract the local population by propaganda measures.<sup>17</sup> However, the Russian authorities found themselves in a non-solvable contradiction: they perceived the local population as alien themselves and tried to integrate it closer into the Empire, but this policy provoked itself the resistance of the local population, although it manifested itself mainly in passive forms.

A further example of the role the “reactive identity” played in the strengthening of the “communal sense” of the Bessarabian Romanians is provided by the policy of the Russian authorities towards the organs of the local administration of the region. These institutions were perceived as enhancing the “particularistic” claims of the Bessarabians, especially of the nobility, within the Empire, which was contrary to the uniformization promoted by the central authorities. Interestingly, the causes for their dissolution were presented by the Russian authors as a consequence of their inefficiency and their opposition to the Russian measures of centralization. Thus, the reaction to the Russian policy was a fundamental cause of the hardening of this same policy, which, in its turn, increased the locals’ self-awareness and feeling of difference towards the

authorities.<sup>18</sup> It can be argued that the “reactive identity” was a spontaneous movement which, however, had enduring consequences in the molding of the relationships between the local population and the Russian authorities. Its spontaneous nature explained the weak resistance of the locals to the Russian policies, but at the same time gave the “reactive identity” a “conserving” dimension regarding the sense of collective identity among the Bessarabian Romanians.

An important problem linked with that of reactive identity is the impact of the Russian “national project” on the development of the locals’ sense of identity. In other words, why did not the Russian national “idea” have a more sizable impact on the large mass of the Bessarabian Romanians? Of course, some exceptions were present and are exemplified by high Russian officials of Bessarabian Romanian descent (e.g., Leon Casso) or by political activists (e.g., P. Krushevan), who reflected the Russian official state doctrine or even “extreme” varieties of Russian nationalism. But these exceptions merely confirm the rule. The Bessarabian nobility is a much too complex problem to be discussed here and, moreover, it was very insignificant when compared with the overall population. A plausible hypothesis is that one must investigate this problem on two levels. First, how does the concept of “Russification” relate to the Russian “nationalist” program? Second, can one speak of the impact of any national (ist) program on the bulk of the Bessarabian Romanians until the years prior to World War I? The link of “Russification” and of Russian nationalism is not so straightforward as it may seem at first sight. In fact, the content of this term has shifted along the XIX century. Generally, the concept initially referred to the above-mentioned “uniformization”, that is, a standardization of political and educational spheres according to the overall Russian “standard.” In the Bessarabian case, it also meant the subordination of the church to the central authorities, since the local population had the same religious affiliation as the Russians. This was pursued at first gradually, then increasingly after the introduction of the well-known “triad” “Autocracy, Orthodoxy, Nationality.” But what did “nationality” mean at the time? In fact, the Russian word “*narodnost*” did not acquire a “national” meaning but retrospectively. Initially it meant something akin to loyalty of all the subjects of the Empire to the tzar as the embodiment of the supreme authority. Of course, it also had “Great-Russian” connotations, but it still largely referred to the “political nation”, to the strata enjoying a higher social status. Thus, the concept of “Russification” did not automatically presuppose nationalist overtones, though the assimilation of mainly Orthodox “non-Russians” proceeded further in order to create a more or less “unified” structure within the Empire. Still, local traditions remained largely unchallenged.

Here the second question arises. The problem still lies in connection with the relationship of the traditional elements of identity and its “superior”, national level. Through their mechanism of self-adaptation, the Bessarabian Romanians have developed a resistance to any modern ideology. This phenomenon may be better called “non-participation.” The locals were “without” the influence of any

“national project” due to their overwhelmingly traditional civilization. In a sense, they remained “frozen” at a pre-national level, with ambiguous consequences: on the one hand, the Romanian national consciousness remained largely ignored by the ethnic Romanians of Bessarabia; on the other hand the penetration of any Russian influence with a “national” imprint was practically impossible. Though both Romanian and Russian “national projects” tried to integrate the region in their sphere of influence, they both met formidable challenges: Russia – the Romanian ethnic majority of the province; Romania – the lack of a national Romanian consciousness within this Romanian majority. Hence the importance attributed to the means of socialization of the peasantry by the Russian functionaries in order to effectively inculcate the imprint of Russian “state ideology” at least in some layers of the Bessarabian rural society. This process is reflected by the attempts at Russification directed mainly in the educational and cultural sphere (especially the church organization). In this case one can discern a certain dynamics which proves revealing as much for reaction of the local population as for the evolution of Russian policy. Starting from the 1870s, the process of “Russification” is much more intensified and coordinated by the state infrastructure. It can be linked to the emerging idea of Russia as based on the “dominant” Russian “nationality,” in other words – to the growing influence of Russian nationalism. Thus the statement of Batiushkov (who reflected largely the official position of the Russian Imperial court) concerning the necessity to make “the Moldavians at least half Russian”<sup>19</sup> can be fully understood. The preoccupation of the Russian authorities with the “national minorities” of the Empire acquired completely new dimensions compared to the previous period, threatening the traditional structures of the peoples from the “peripheries” of the Empire, which until then were left more or less intact. The special situation of Bessarabia as outlined above predetermined the general failure of Russification “in depth.” However, it had two major consequences: 1) the intensification of the “reactive identity” of the locals on the rudimentary, traditional level; and 2) the socialization of the tiny Bessarabian educated stratum (emerging as such only at the beginning of the XX century) in the Russian intellectual tradition, which left its imprint on the specificity of their demands during the events of 1917-18. The specific traits of the resistance of the Bessarabian Romanians to the Russian policy on a “traditional” level also help to explain the comparatively sizable impact of the policy of the Romanian State after 1918 especially in the educational sphere. It could act relatively freely in the socialization of the local population which remained generally little affected by the Russian attempts at Russification. Before 1918 the situation changed somewhat only during World War I, when the traditional rural society was “penetrated” by the outer developments, but this is a rather complicated problem and cannot be discussed in detail here.

In the last part of the paper a comparative approach of the situation in Bessarabia and in the Balkan region before the emergence of the national states will be attempted. Of course, the problem appearing in connection with such an

undertaking is the legitimacy and the validity of such a comparison per se. Undoubtedly, important limitations and qualifications must be acknowledged and admitted in order not to fall into hasty generalizations. Firstly, Bessarabia became a “borderland” after 1812, which had a non-negligible impact on the developments taking place in the region. Secondly, the ambiguity is enhanced by the fact that ethnically it was a part of the Romanian space, whereas economically and even culturally (through the preservation of traditional culture) it had a different trajectory of development after 1812. That adds a further complication to a parallel with the situation in the Balkans. Thirdly, the “Balkans” is in itself a rather loose concept and the variety is striking within this conventionally delimited geographical and cultural space. Fourthly, the lack of an autochthonous educated stratum in Bessarabia till almost the end of the period of Russian rule is in stark contrast with the Balkans, where this stratum began to appear during the XVIII century and was definitely consolidated in the second half of the XIX century (at least in the case of major South Slavic peoples). Then, the creation of national states changed the situation in a decisive way and provided the instrument for the consolidation of a clearly defined national identity. These and other not less important qualifications remain. What, then, is the purpose of such a problematic parallelism? The main aim is to put the Bessarabian case into a larger context and to show the common traits that the construction of collective identities has in traditional societies, even though the evolution towards the “national” level can be extremely varied and depends on a multitude of factors. Another aim is to emphasize the falsity of the dilemma between “natural” and “artificial,” “constructed” elements in the national identity, which is almost in all cases a combination of the two sets of elements, though the respective importance of each of them may differ. A further qualification must be made concerning the temporal dimension of this comparison. The time periods under discussion do not overlap in the case of different ethnic groups, neither in the framework of the Balkan region, nor in that of its overall comparison with Bessarabia.

One obvious commonality in the “identity portrait” of the majority ethnic group of Bessarabia and some of its Balkan counterparts is the overwhelming importance of language as a distinctive element of both ethnic and cultural identity. However, the importance of language as a basic element of national identity, beyond cultural differences, is very problematic. Eric Hobsbawm in his book on “nations and nationalism since 1780”<sup>20</sup> provides quite an interesting basis for discussion. He puts the discussion in the larger context of “popular proto-nationalism.” Could this concept be applied to Bessarabia under the Russian rule? In the light of the above considerations, its applicability seems very doubtful in this case. The distinction here can be made between “popular proto-national identity” (and even so with great cautiousness, in the sense of the existence of some potential elements of such an identity, namely the cultural and ethnic identity), and “proto-nationalism,” that presupposes an active element of self-consciousness, not obligatory in the first case. Nevertheless, the

elements Hobsbawm identifies as constitutive of “proto-nationalism” can be applied just as successfully to the analysis of collective identity in a “pre-national” phase. It is especially obvious in the case of language. Hobsbawm rightly points out that the “gap” between literate and illiterate is the major hampering factor in discovering the “ideas” that form the basis of “proto-national” consciousness.<sup>21</sup> Mass illiteracy, as a primordial characteristic of traditional society, applies fully to the Bessarabian case, as to the Balkan region in the period before the creation of the national states and long after that. What is especially interesting is the ambiguous character of “linguistic identification” of an ethnic group. Firstly, Hobsbawm argues the obvious idea that “the actual or literal ‘mother tongue’, i.e. the idiom children learned from illiterate mothers and spoke for everyday use, was certainly not in any sense a ‘national’ language.”<sup>22</sup> More importantly, he admits that a “popular cultural identification” with a certain idiom is an important element distinguishing a community from their neighbours, in other words, an indication of the conscience of “otherness,” and, thus, of self-identification. In Bessarabia this undoubtedly was the case in what concerns the relationship of the local population with the Russians and the Russian perception itself of the Bessarabian Romanians. In the Balkans the closest parallel is the central place language had in the self-identification of Albanians, one of the most “traditional” societies in the region and thus particularly interesting when compared to the Bessarabian case. However, the importance of the language could be explained largely by the clear divisions along religious and even, more or less, ethnic lines between various parts of what later became Albania. Language was a sort of “compensatory” element and one of the few bases of common conscience of the many tribes as a “people.” Hence, the weakness of an identity based on language, since it was more a “negative” identification than a “positive,” “affirmative” sign of cultural/ethnic consciousness. The self-identification of Albanians was generally either religious or tribal, so that the emerging “national intellectual” stratum had to appeal more to kinship than to common language.<sup>23</sup> What is common in both cases is the failure of linguistic identification to supersede traditional boundaries and become a conscious element of “otherness.” In Bessarabia the particular emphasis on language as a distinctive feature of the locals’ “otherness” may draw from the lack of other clear “symbolical” differences between them and the Russians (e.g., religion).

Language, nevertheless, even if not a necessary and absolute indicator of “proto-national identity,” is a fundamental potential element of later stages of “national construction.” It is particularly obvious from the central role played by it in the nationalist discourses of the Balkan nation-states after their creation. The clearest example is the Bulgarian one, here the nationalist programs being invariably “tainted” with a strong linguistic imprint<sup>24</sup>. The explanation provided by the author for the “centrality” of language as an element of national consciousness has to deal primarily with the intellectuals’ “interpretation” of language in Herderian terms, that is, as a necessary element of the emergence of

a *Kulturnation*.<sup>25</sup> Still, the mention of language as a feature of Bulgarian “distinctiveness” vis-à-vis both the Greeks and the Turks indicates the “pre-national” attachment to language as a part of the sense of self-identity of Bulgarians as a separate ethnic group. In this respect it is similar to the role already referred to above of the language in Bessarabia as a “symbolic” element of “otherness” in the reciprocal relationship between the Russians and the Bessarabian Romanians. The importance of language is linked in the Bulgarian case with the same “failed role” of religion as a differentiating factor with regard to the surrounding ethnic groups.

Another seminal insight pointed out by Hobsbawm in his work is the direct dependence of the transformation of language from a cultural into a “national” factor of identity on state policies. The question of the role of the state in the “upgrading” of the traditional cultural/ethnic identity into a “national phenomenon” has by now been widely discussed and is generally regarded as one of the major factors in “nation-building,” particularly by the “constructed identity” school. It would be superfluous to point out to its importance once more. However, the interrelation between the “cultivation” of “national languages” and the conscious policy of the state apparatus must not be overestimated, since the “popular roots” of language identification are in many cases an “organic development,” consciously enhanced by the modern state. Hobsbawm’s conclusion that “languages multiply with states; not the other way round”<sup>26</sup> must, therefore, be nuanced according to different cases, without losing its general relevance.

The problem of ethnic identity and its role in the later evolution of the “national consciousness” is quite complicated and is even less subject to systematization than the cultural/linguistic identification. The comparison in this respect of Bessarabia and some cases in the Balkans is especially revealing. The paradoxical situation of the region, already hinted at above, consisted in the impossibility, in the given conditions of the Russian domination, of the transformation of the ethnic identification of the locals in a prerequisite of national consciousness. The Russian authorities were, understandably, not interested in such a development, though they regarded the ethnic characteristics of the locals as a clear sign of “otherness.” The traditional structure of the Bessarabian society could hardly contribute to such a transformation. In the Balkans the situation was much more complicated. The religious divide, the policy of the Ottoman Empire of privileging certain groups of its Christian subjects to the detriment of others, the overlapping “historical memories” of various ethnic groups and the complete lack of correspondence between these memories and the actual distribution of the same ethnic groups, enhanced by the different historical circumstances in which different parts of the Balkan Peninsula found themselves – all these factors contributed to a failure of the ethnic criterion as a binding force of the later created nation-states. It illustrates the peculiar situation ethnicity plays in the different phases of a group’s “self-awareness.” In the pre-national stages it serves at best as a sign of “otherness” in the relationship with the “dominators” (the Russian Empire in Bessarabia’s case

and the Ottoman/Habsburg Empire in the case of the Balkans in the XVIII-XIX century). In this phase it operates at an unconscious, spontaneous level and is usually not expressed directly in ethnic terms. In the national phase, however, it acquires a major significance in the “national projects” and becomes a politically loaded notion. The ambiguous of the situation of such ethnic groups in the Balkans as the Macedonians or even the Albanians, not to mention the controversies surrounding the Croats, Serbs and “Muslims,” are examples of just this kind of dynamics. In this respect, the observations of Hobsbawm seem to be convincing. Speaking about differences of the role of ethnicity in pre-national and “national” phases, he identifies three major peculiarities in the first case (even though he refers mainly to “racial” characteristics, these observations can be applied to ethnicity in the broader, including cultural, sense). The first is the ethnic differences “have, historically, functioned as horizontal dividers as well as vertical ones” and, moreover, “probably more commonly served to separate social strata than entire communities.”<sup>27</sup> The following particularity is that “‘visible’ ethnicity tends to be negative, inasmuch as it is much more usually applied to define ‘the other than one’s own group.’”<sup>28</sup> These two criteria apply fully in the Bessarabian case. The first reflected itself indirectly in the social connotations kept by the term of the locals’ self-identification- “ruman”, as well in the conscious emphasis of the Russian authors on rurality as the distinctive and fundamental feature of the locals as a group. The second criterion found its expression in what I called “reactive identity,” as well as in the general reciprocal relationships between the Bessarabian Romanians and the Russian authorities. The third feature mentioned by Hobsbawm is more problematic in the case of Bessarabia, but is clearly relevant in for the evolution of ethnicity in the Balkans. “Third,” Hobsbawm writes, “such negative ethnicity is virtually always irrelevant to proto-nationalism, unless it can be or has been fused with... a state tradition...”<sup>29</sup> Here the distinction between proto-nationalism and “proto-national identity” must be emphasized once again. If in the Balkans one can talk of an earlier “proto-nationalism” (due largely to the policies of the empires controlling the region, as well as to an earlier appearance of an educated stratum), in Bessarabia one can talk at most of a “proto-national identity,” on a more rudimentary level, due to due to the incipient stage of “Romanian proto-nationalism” itself at the moment of Russia’s annexation of the province.

A final similarity between the Bessarabian and the Balkan “cases” of identity “construction” is the “reactive identity” as a means of consolidating the ethnic group’s sense of self-awareness. The closest parallel is again provided by the Albanian example, since the Albanian society was the most traditional and inhibited one among the Balkan societies. The traditional loyalty of the Albanians to the Ottoman Empire, the lack of a “national frame of reference”<sup>30</sup> due to the above-mentioned character of the Albanian society, the tribalism and numerous divisions between the various parts of the country made the appearance of national identity very improbable. Consequently, the Albanian

national consciousness needed an “external catalyst” to crystallize in a relatively coherent form. Such a catalyst was the politics of the “Young Turks”, which aroused the first significant reaction among the Albanians. Fischer writes: “By 1912 the Young Turks had managed to alienate most of the divergent groups in Albania, which forced them to cooperate with each other.”<sup>31</sup> Thus, it is a clear case of a “reaction” to the policy of the Ottoman Empire. Of course, Albania is a somewhat particular case, but the similarity with the role the “reactive identity” played in the Bessarabian case is all the more obvious. The character of this “reaction” was, undoubtedly, different in its manifestations and impact, but the pattern is essentially the same. “Reactive identity,” even in its unconscious and spontaneous phase, is a major factor in collective consciousness and a base for the consolidation of this consciousness under appropriate conditions. In Bessarabia the process was more gradual, but the base it provided for the Romanian state is much alike to that created for the Albanian “nation-builders.”

The “reactive identity” played a prominent, though indirect role, in the crystallization of the later “national ideas” and “national projects” of the Balkan nation-states. The main difference was, on the one hand, that this new variation of “reactive identity” was manipulated by the state in its own interests. On the other hand, that it was largely based on historical “memories” of the domination of the “Other,” exploited in order to foster the “national” feelings among the citizens of newly emerging polities. The archetypal “Other” was represented chiefly by the Turks (at least in the case of the majority of the South Slav nation-states). Thus, the “reactive identity” was transferred from the present events to memories of the past, but continued to perform an important function in the “mental binding” of ethnic communities, even though on a national, not traditional, level. Moreover, this “reactive identity” in its new, ideologically loaded, variant was directed against the neighbouring states, which were depicted as the main threats to the consolidation of the specific nation. Such ideas could easily “clothed” into the language of “justice” and “crystallization” of the Balkans, as, for example, in the case of the work by D. Rizoff, *The Bulgarians in Their Historical, Ethnographical and Political Frontiers* (1917)<sup>32</sup>. This example illustrates how the national discourse transforms the pre-national collective identities into a theoretically justified and coherent system of ideas.

In conclusion, this paper had two main purposes: 1) to review and analyze some of the main works of Russian authors concerning Bessarabia from the point of view of discerning the main traits of cultural and ethnic identity of the majority ethnic group of Bessarabia under the Russian rule; and 2) to put the Bessarabian case in a wider context and try to point out some common traits between the traditional societies of South-Eastern Europe in the “pre-national” phase of their development. The main problems discussed in connection with these larger issues were: the organicist approach of the Russia authors to the identity of the Bessarabian Romanians; the larger context of this approach connected to Danilevsky’s view of the “historicity” of a certain people; the mechanism of the appearance of the feeling of “Otherness” among the local



population and, connected with it, the problem of “reactive identity”; the role played by the traditional character of the society in the resistance of the locals to inclusion in the “national projects” both of Romania and of the Russian Empire. The second part of the paper dealt with some common trends of “identity construction” discernible in South-Eastern Europe in the “pre-national” phase, attempting to show the similarities between the “identity elements” in otherwise quite different traditional societies. The overall conclusion that can be inferred from the hitherto analyzed data is that both the “constructed identity” school, and the “ethnic essentialists” tend to emphasize different sides of the phenomenon of identity construction and thus reach opposite conclusion. However, it can be argued that the identity of a group, in this case, of an ethnic group, is a very complex phenomenon determined not only by subjective factors, but also by objective common traits rooted in the historical reality. In other words, the necessity of a middle ground in treating the problem of a group's identity becomes obvious. In the Bessarabian case, the “traditional identity” of the Bessarabian Romanians had ambiguous consequences, that prove the non-viability of a unilateral approach: on the one hand, it hampered the inclusion of Bessarabia in any of the two competing “national projects”; on the other hand, it provided the objective pre-requisites of the potential national identity which began to crystallize after 1918 in the framework of the Romanian state policy (how successful it was is another problem). The national identity is, primarily, a mental artifact, but at the same time it has its roots and sources in the historical process. Speaking of “identity construction,” I meant not an entirely artificial process, but a combination of conscious activity and pre-existent identity traits (though without this activity the emergence of national identity is improbable). This project has as its goal to indicate some points of discussion, so its conclusions are necessarily tentative. Still, problems as multifaceted and complex as those presented above are worth to be thoroughly and creatively investigated.

1 “History and Theory. Contemporary Readings”, ed. By Brian Fay, Philip Pomper, and Richard T. Vann, London, Blackwell Publishers, 1995, p. 342-376.

2 The by now classical works of Benedict Anderson and Eric Hobsbawm are notorious illustrations of this approach.

3 The works of Anthony D. Smith generally exemplify this other “school”.

4 A. Zashchuk, “Materialy po geografii I statistike Bessarabskoj oblasti”, St-Petersburg, 1862, p. 151.

5 P. P. Svin'in, “Opisanije Bessarabskoj gubernii”, in: “Zapiski Odesskago Obschestva istorii I Drevnostei”, 1867, vol. VI, p. 220.

6 P. Krushevan, “Bessarabiia geograficheskii, istoricheskii, statisticheskii, ekonomicheskii, literaturnyi I sprabvochnyi sbornik”, Moscow, 1903, p. 223.

7 *Ibidem*, p. 175.

8 L. Casso, “Rossija na Dunae I Obrazovanie Bessarabskoj Oblasti”, Moscow, 1913, p. 227.

9 *Ibidem*.

10 N. Ia. Danilevsky, “Rossiia I Evropa”, St.-Petersburg, 1995, p. 21-22.

11 *Ibidem*, p. 29.

12 *Ibidem*, p. 344.

13 *Ibidem*, p. 330.

- 14 P. N. Batiushkov, "Bessarabia. Istoricheskoe opisanie", St.-Petersburg, 1892, p. 174.  
 15 A. B. Kuropatkin, "Zadachi Russkoi armii", St.-Petersburg, 1910, p. 338.  
 16 L. Casso, *Rossia na Dunae*, 31-32, 64-65, 75-76, 87-88, 127-128.  
 17 L. Casso, p. 190-191.  
 18 A. Zashchuk, *ibidem*, vol. II, p. 83; P. Batiushkov, *ibidem*, p. 150.  
 19 P. N. Batiushkov, *ibidem*, p. 175.  
 20 E. J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality*, Cambridge University Press, 1990.  
 21 E. J. Hobsbawm, *ibidem*, p. 48.  
 22 *Ibidem*, p. 52-53.  
 23 *Ibidem*, p. 54.  
 24 Maria Todorova, "The Course and Discourses of Bulgarian Nationalism", in Peter F. Sugar, ed., *Eastern European Nationalism in the Twentieth Century*, The American University Press, 1995, p. 75.  
 25 *Ibidem*.  
 26 E. J. Hobsbawm, *ibidem*, p. 63.  
 27 *Ibidem*, p. 65.  
 28 *Ibidem*, p. 66.  
 29 *Ibidem*.  
 30 Bernd J. Fischer, *Albanian Nationalism in the Twentieth Century*, in Peter F. Sugar (ed.), *Eastern European Nationalism in the Twentieth Century*, The American University Press, 1995, p. 27.  
 31 *Ibidem*, p. 30.  
 32 Cited in Maria Todorova, "The Course and Discourses of Bulgarian Nationalism", in Peter F. Sugar, ed., *Eastern European Nationalism in the Twentieth Century*, The American University Press, 1995, p. 55-59.

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