The Soviet Union as Empire:
Theoretical Considerations

The nature of a given polity could be grasped more clearly in the light of the causes that brought about its end. The causes of the breakdown of the Soviet Union were manifold. Ideological crisis, economic failure, and
the nationalities problem are usually invoked as main causes of the Soviet collapse. There were scholars though, such as Victor Zaslavsky, who argued that the nationalities policies and imperial character of the Soviet state were the main cause of the demise of USSR.\textsuperscript{1} Other authors rightly distinguished between systemic crisis of the Communist regime in the Soviet Union and the crisis of Soviet federalism.\textsuperscript{2} What is certain is that the Soviet collapse was less violent than expected, especially if we keep in mind the tradition of large-scale use of state violence during USSR’s history. That was due to the fact that political secessionism from the part of national republics coincided with the desire of the leadership of the Russian Republic, personified by Yeltsin, to liquidate the Union Center as well as Gorbachev’s unwillingness to use force on a large scale.

Between 1990 and 1991, at the level of perceptions, both national republics—to a lesser degree the Central Asian ones—and the Russian Republic felt they were victims of the unjust redistribution of resources and unequal system of economic exchanges. In other words, at the level of perceptions, nobody was satisfied with the situation and apparently approved the demise of the Soviet Union. At the level of objective, measurable variables, the absolute majority of Russians from Russia and from the non-Russian republics voted for the signing of the new Union Treaty in the federal referendum held in March 1991. At the same time, Baltic republics, Moldavia, Georgia, and Armenia decided to boycott the referendum, as it was anticipated that Moscow could use the vote of Russians and Russian speaking minorities as a motive to impose the signing of the new Union Treaty.\textsuperscript{3}

The most authoritative and well documented account on the Soviet Nationalities Policy—albeit covering only the first two decades of the existence of the USSR—has been written by Terry Martin. Martin’s


book stipulates that the Soviet Union was the first “affirmative action empire,” which codified and institutionalized ethnicities, consolidating and even inventing, in some cases, alphabets for certain tribes, promoting ethnic cadres and intelligentsia in their own national territories. This was envisaged as a strategy of Lenin and Stalin to fight against and control a competing political ideology of mass mobilization—nationalism that was viewed as responsible for the liquidation of four empires after the World War I. The policy of korenizatsiia was promoted (Stalin called it nationalizatsiia) with this particular purpose in mind in the 1920s. It relied on the positive discrimination of non-Russians in order to convince them that in national terms USSR was not a continuation of the Tsarist Empire. In early 1930s, however, with the inception of the first Five-Year-Plan based on mass industrialization and collectivization and on the abandonment of NEP, korenizatsiia was relegated to the role of secondary policy. Instead, one could witness a slow rehabilitation of Russian Great Power nationalism, to be strengthened on the eve of World War II and especially during the war.  

The field of Soviet studies still lacks a detailed and minutely documented examination on the Soviet nationalities policy after 1945, at least one equal in scope and quality to Terry Martin’s book on the interwar period. However, one assumes—and Martin is extrapolating in this sense—that up until the end of the Soviet Union, local nationalism and not Great Russian nationalism was perceived by Moscow as the greatest danger to the cohesion and the very existence of the USSR. This was the case at least of Moldavian SSR as I will try to show further in this article.

Another important theoretical contribution to the study of Soviet nationalities policy has been made by Rogers Brubaker. His main argument is that the Soviet Union institutionalized nationhood, but at the same time it tried to wither away any political content of the meaning of the nation. His analysis echoes Stalin’s well-worn pronouncement of socialist communities “national in form, socialist in content.” Another

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interesting and useful distinction that Brubaker makes is related to the institutionalization of two contradictory paradigms in the Soviet nationalities policy. The first was based on collective and territorial principles while the second was founded on the personal and ethnocultural one. The former referred to the myriad of Soviet ethnicities that were offered the possibility to enjoy national rights such as schools in their language, newspapers, journals, and so on, but only within the borders of their own national territory. The latter concerned the Russians who enjoyed access and privilege to Russian schools and all other national rights in all parts of the Soviet Union, not only in the Russian Federation. Even though the official policy in national Union republics was bilingualism, Russians were not supposed or expected to know the language of the titular nationality.

Mark Beissinger, one of the current authorities on ethnic mass mobilization in Soviet Union in the late 1980s to early 1990s, emphasized “the pivotal role played by the Soviet state in blurring the boundary between state and empire and in pioneering forms of non-consensual control.” He defined the USSR as “the most striking example of informal empire.” He also insisted on the idea that one should understand “emprise as claim rather as things” and even though Soviet Union did not claim to be an empire, the outcome was rather the contrary and “emprise implies today illegitimate and non-consensual rule.”

Moldova under the Soviet Regime: What Was Specific?

How are the above mentioned theories of Soviet Union as empire relevant for the case of the Republic of Moldova (the former Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic)? What was the character of relations between the authorities in Moscow and Chișinău and to what extent

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they can be defined as imperial? At the same time, which are the difficulties of such a conceptualization?

Throughout the existence of the USSR, Soviet historiography and propaganda claimed that Russia and Moldavia had century old relations. It was stated that at least two medieval rulers of Principality of Moldavia—Stephen the Great in the late fifteenth century and Dimitrie Cantemir (a personal friend of Peter the Great) in the early eighteenth century—asked for their principality to be included in Tsarist Empire. This narrative relied on a biased interpretation of the documents in which Moldavians asked for help in fighting the Ottomans. Such requests never implied the desire to unite with Russia. In 1812, after a six-year Russian-Turkish war, the Tsarist Empire occupied the Eastern part of medieval Principality of Moldavia and renamed it Bessarabia. At that time around 90 percent of the local population was ethnic Romanian. This dropped to 50 percent on the eve of Bolshevik revolution due to mass colonization of the province with Russians, Ukrainians, Bulgarians, Gagauz, Germans, and Swiss. In March 1918, the local parliament Sfatul Țării voted for Union with Romania based on the so-called Lenin-Wilson principle of self-determination of peoples.

Throughout the interwar period, the Soviet Union did not recognized Romanian sovereignty over Bessarabia. This behavior was based on geopolitical reasons, as the USSR was interested to create a security zone for its biggest port on the Black Sea, Odessa, situated just 60 kilometers from the frontier. But they could not explicitly admit that Bessarabia was claimed based on dynastic, Tsarist criteria: that is, it had been conquered by sword by Alexander I in 1812 and the Soviet Union was the de facto heir of the Russian Empire. This was

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8 The Principality of Moldavia covered the territories from Carpathian Mountains in the West to Dniester River in the East, and from Black Sea and Danube mouths in the South to Podolia in the North.

9 The terms Moldavian and Bessarabian refers to regional identity, not ethnic. From an ethnic point of view, historical Bessarabia and present day Republic of Moldova are inhabited by Romanians. The interchangeable use of the term Moldavians/Moldovans has been ethnicized in the Soviet period. The majority of this population self identifies as Moldavians (Moldoveni). See more on that in Dmitri Furman, “Moldavskie moldavane i rumynskie moldavane,” Prognosis, no. 1, 2007, 278–315, Charles King, Moldovans. Cultural Politics between Romania and Russia (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 2001).
especially true in the 1920s, when the official Soviet paradigm about the Tsarist Empire was extremely critical of pre-revolutionary Russia and especially its policy toward non-Russians. This situation was best expressed in Lenin’s famous postulate that “Tsarist Russia was the prison of peoples.” This is also one of the explanations for Moscow’s promotion of the korenizatsiia process in the first decade after the revolution. The Kremlin leadership wished to demonstrate to non-Russians that the Bolshevik regime was different from the ancien régime. In the case of Bessarabia, the Soviet regime invented a new formula, ideologically mixed with the ethnic one, in order to legitimize its pretentions over the territory between Prut and Dniester Rivers. After several abortive military attempts to establish control in Bessarabia, Moscow changed its tactics in mid 1920s by creating a separate Moldavian autonomous republic (MASSR) on the Ukrainian territory. Situated just across the Dniester river and Bessarabia, it comprised some 160,000 Moldavians, (i.e., ethnic Romanians), but their share in the total population of MASSR was only a third. The establishment of Moldavian autonomy had first and foremost a crucial function for external consumption: to show to the world and to European Communists particularly that USSR was different from Tsarist Russia, that it was not imperialistic. It was proof that it cared about the supposed injustice made to Bessarabia and its inhabitants through their incorporation into Romania. More precisely, the idea was to demonstrate that the unification engineered by Bucharest authorities and their local stooges divided a people, as the two parts were separated by the Dniester River. In this narrative, Soviet claims over Bessarabia simply became manifestations of the USSR’s will to unite a nation—the so-called Moldavian one—that supposedly was subject to the national and social yoke of the Romanian “landlords and bourgeoisie” in the interwar period.

This was the first instance when there was a direct connection between Soviet foreign policy goals and the creation of the national territory inside the Soviet Union. According to historian Terry Martin, the situation presented above was an exceptional case when “the Piedmont principle was even the primary motivation for the formation of a

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10 Elena Negru, Polițica etnoculturală în RASSM, 1924–1940 (Chișinău: Editura Prut Internațional, 2003), 17.
national republic: Moldavian ASSR.” According to the same author, the Piedmont principle was nothing else than “the belief that cross-border ethnic ties could be exploited to project Soviet influence into neighboring states.”

Ukraine itself employed the Piedmont Principle in relation to Poland and even Russia at that moment, but Kharkov [the capital of Ukraine until 1934] agreed on the formation of MASSR as it remained a territory of this Soviet republic. The new autonomous republic had its temporary capital established in Balta and, since 1929, in Tiraspol. What is more important from the point of view of the perspectives invested by Moscow in this endeavor, the founding document of MASSR dated from October 12, 1924 mentioned that the western frontier of new autonomous republic was Prut River. It included a priori Bessarabia and Chișinău was to become its permanent capital. The MASSR existed from 1924 to 1940. Its development is important as the national formation experiment employed in this case anticipated in great part Moscow’s policy toward the Moldavian SSR, established in 1940 after the occupation of Bessarabia (and Northern Bukovina) by the Red Army. Between 1924 and 1932, the Soviet authorities tried to create a separate Moldavian language based on a local Russified vernacular in Cyrillic alphabet. Such experiment though was abandoned after it was admitted to be total failure because the local Moldavians did not recognize it as a literary standard. Subsequently, from 1932 to 1938, Stalin himself agreed to switch to Latin alphabet and make the local Moldavian as similar to Romanian as possible. Among the promoters of Romanian was a Russian Bessarabian, Grigori Staryi, president of the Council of People’s Commissars of MASSR. He would be shot by Stalin in October 1937 during the Great Terror. Other members of the party and state nomenklatura from the MASSR establishment, as well as writers and journalists were sent to their deaths on


accusations of putatively being Romanian and sometimes Polish or German spies.\textsuperscript{13}

On June 28, 1940, the Red Army occupied Bessarabia and Northern Bukovina as a result of the Nazi-Soviet Pact of August 23, 1939. According to several articles published by \textit{Pravda} in the aftermath of the occupation, the latter was presented as a union of MASSR and Bessarabia. There were numerous letters, including from ethnic Ukrainians living in the South and North, supporting this plan. A Moldavian-Ukrainian frontier commission chaired unofficially by Khrushchev was created in order to make the final territorial settlement. It decided to give one-half of the MASSR back to Ukraine along with a third of the territory of Bessarabia in the south and north. The basic idea invoked was that Moldavians/Romanians are a majority in these areas of Bessarabia. The argument was partially legitimate if assessed from an ethnic standpoint, but it was also true that the Romanian element was the most important ethnic group in the area, 28 percent compared to the Ukrainians, who were only 25 percent. Moreover, as various authors reported, including Russians as well as Moldavian Communist authorities in 1946, the majority of the local non-Romanian population spoke Romanian, the latter being the language of interethnic communication during the Tsarist period, too.\textsuperscript{14} In this case, however, Khrushchev used his double authority as first secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist (Bolshevik) Party of Ukraine and secretary of CC of All-Union CP (b) SU to push for more territories for Ukraine. He tried the same with Belorussia in 1939, but the secretary of the Central Committee of the latter had direct access to Stalin, so the Ukrainian pretensions were declared void.\textsuperscript{15}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{13} Elena Negru, \textit{Politica etnoculturală in RASSM, 1924–1940}, 115–127. The complete list of the victims of Great Terror in MASSR are to be found in Ion Varta, Tatiana Varta, Igor Şarov [Sharov] (eds.), \textit{Marea Teroare in RASSM. Documente} (Chisinau: Editura ARC, 2010), vol. I, no. 2 to 5 to be published.
\item \textsuperscript{14} The Archive of the Social-Social Organizations of Moldova, former Archive of Central Committee of the Communist Party of Moldavia (AOSPRM), Fond 51, inv. 4, d. 64, f. 7–12.
\end{itemize}
ties of the MSSR did not have the same connections with Stalin and lost out. Furthermore, the division of Bessarabia was anticipated by the contents of the Soviet ultimatum sent to Bucharest on June 26, 1940, which mentioned that Bessarabia has been populated since ancient times by a Ukrainian majority. That was false, but the formula was employed deliberately in order to inculcate the idea—especially for Western audiences—that the partition of Bessarabia was a continuation of the unification of all Ukrainian inhabited territories in one Ukrainian Soviet state. It was a process that had began a year before with the annexation of Polish-ruled Galicia.

What was Moscow’s policy in the province in the aftermath of the occupation? Was it resembling a colonial experiment or was it rather close to the emancipation claim of Soviet Communist propaganda? One should mention that in the first year of Soviet occupation of Bessarabia—two-thirds of it and half of the MSSR forming Moldavian Union republic in August 1940—the colonial policy was more evident and brutal than in the following decades. This was true in terms of the forceful inclusion of Bessarabia in the Soviet Union and of the imposition of Communist ideology and institutions. It also comprised the imposition of the linguistic hegemony of Russian. The process presupposed investing loyalty only to cadres from across the Dniester River as well as discriminating against the local ones. In other words, the Soviets did not trust even members of the illegal Bessarabian Communist party—no matter their ethnic background—who were active on the territory of Bessarabia in the interwar period. Such discrimination obviously targeted those who represented or collaborated in some way or another with interwar Romanian authorities, as well. They were suspected of being traitors to the Soviet power, at least 136 of them were shot in 1940–1941. This was based on the assumption that Soviets supposedly took power in Bessarabia in early January 1918 just a few

17 AOSPRM, F. 51, inv. 6, d. 3, ff. 62–74.
18 That was also true of the leaders of the Communist Parties in the Baltic States. See more in Elena Zubkova, Pribaltika i Kreml’, 1940–1953 (Moscow: ROSSPEN, 2008).
days before the Romanian army arrived at the request of the local parliament. According to Moscow’s viewpoint—in contradiction to elementary international rules—the entire Bessarabian population was Soviet in terms of citizenship *ab initio* and implicitly, in 1940, so its members were considered traitors to the Soviet fatherland for paying taxes to the Romanian state, for participating in the public life as members of cultural or political organizations and so on. All these activities were regarded as counterrevolutionary and anti-Soviet.\(^{20}\)

Unsurprisingly, there were three mass deportations in mid-June 1941, early July 1949, and late May 1951 that brought about the forced displacement of 60,000 persons. Among the victims of the Soviet regime one also has to count around 150,000–200,000 dead, the outcome of a mass organized famine in 1946–1947 in former Bessarabia.\(^{21}\) The total number of victims of Moscow’s policy in the Moldavian SSR during the Stalinist period exceeds 300,000 persons (including the victims of the 1930s in the MASSR). As to the ethnic composition of the victims, they were of various ethnic backgrounds and in this sense Communist authorities did not discriminate against any ethno-national group.\(^{22}\)

In economic terms, Soviet Moldavia received usually more than other USSR republics (situated in the Western borderlands). This trend was a continuously ascending one according to the official figures up until the end of Soviet Union. In this sense, the Moldavian SSR was not discriminated against in contrast to what has been defined as a classical unjust economic relation between metropolis and colony.\(^{23}\) It is also apparent from this perspective that the imperial paradigm does not apply to post-Stalinist Moldavia especially if one looks at the economic, investment rate variable as compared to the amount

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\(^{23}\) *Narodnoe khozyaistvo Moldavskoi SSR v 1984* (Chișinău: Cartea Moldovească, 1985), 15.
received by other national peripheries of the Soviet Union. The same argument can be made if one takes into consideration the situation of the Baltic republics. Their level of consumption, quality of life, and economic development rate was higher than the all-union one, being in the top of all union republics.\textsuperscript{24}

At a closer look, however, the efficiency of central investments in Moldavia was not as impressive as it appears at first glance. Moreover, the funds came with a very precise political agenda. According to the economist Sergiu Chircă, the overall investments in Soviet Moldavia have been rather modest if one takes in account their share per capita, which was less than the Soviet average.\textsuperscript{25} In 1965, for instance, the Moldavian SSR was rated seventh among the fifteen union republics in terms of economic development.\textsuperscript{26} Twenty-five years later (1990), it dropped to ninth place, being the least developed of all European Soviet republics.\textsuperscript{27} Taking into account the higher level of the birth rate among ethnic Romanians and their progressive decrease in the total share of the population inside the MSSR, one can conclude—as in the case of other union republics—that the high investments were made in combination with an influx of cadres from the center. In other words, more Russians and Ukrainians were sent to the Moldavian SSR in parallel with allotting more money from Moscow for developing the industrial sector. In the meantime, more Moldavians, especially ethnic Romanians were encouraged to work in Russia and Ukraine.

The specificity of Moscow-Chișinău relations could be noticed also in the way the investments from the center were distributed at the regional level. For instance, the present day Transnistrian territory, which after 1940 was never an officially distinct region, received around 30 percent of the total investments allotted by Moscow to the Moldavian SSR. Such an allocation was disproportionate if one considers that this region comprised less than 10 percent of the territory

\textsuperscript{24} Osnovnye pokazateli ekonomicheskogo i sotsial’nogo razvitiia Moldavskoi SSR i soiuznykh respublik v 1988 godu (Chișinău: Gosdepartament po statistike, 1989), 45.
\textsuperscript{25} S. Chircă, Regional’nye problemy protsessa sozdaniia material’no-tekhnicheskoi bazy kommunizma v SSSR (Chișinău: Cartea Moldovenescă, 1979), 65.
\textsuperscript{26} Voprosy Ekonomiki no. 4, 1970, 128.
\textsuperscript{27} Igor Cașu, “Politica națională” în Moldova Sovietică, 1944–1989 (Chișinău: Cartdidact, 2000), 95.
and population of the republic. The districts across Dniester were inhabited by a Slavic majority—Ukrainians and Russians (more than 50 percent), while ethnic Romanians represented 40 percent and lived mainly in villages. For instance, the largest city in the area—Tiraspol—had only 17 percent of ethnic Romanians in 1989.28

Another aspect as to the urban-rural development in Soviet Moldavia relevant for the nationalities policy and imperial character of Soviet rule in MSSR refers to the evolution of urbanization rate of ethnic Romanians. According to the last Soviet census of 1989, their share in the total number of urban dwellers was only 25 percent. This is to say that two-thirds of Romanians lived in the rural areas, that is, in a less developed environment. In the meantime, the share of urbanized Russians was 80 percent and 45 percent of Ukrainians.29 It still remains unclear if that low share in the total urban population was an intended part of the centrally planned nationalities policy or just a side effect of the center administered industrial enterprises, which covered about 25 percent of the total local industry in comparison with only 10 percent in the Baltic republics.30

What is certain is that the discrimination of local ethnic Romanian cadres was not merely a perception. In the industrial sector, for instance, at the level of managers of enterprises, Romanians were 2.3 percent in 1964, rising to only 8.6 percent twenty years later, in 1984.31 If in the immediate postwar period the focus on arriving cadres—especially Russians and Ukrainians was somewhat justified, from the Moscow point of view, as the local cadres were lacking or could not be trusted because of their social and ideological origins—that could be hardly the case after the 1960s. The cadres that were prepared offi-

28 See more on that in Istoria Transnistriei. De la începuturi până în zilele noastre (Chișinău: Civitas, 2005).
cially for Moldavia’s needs were sent to work in other republics, primarily in Russia and Ukraine.

Another factor on the basis of which one can verify the level and dynamics of Moscow’s control in Soviet Moldavia is the evolution of the share of ethnic Romanians in key Communist party and government positions. In the early 1950s, the share of ethnic Romanians in the Communist nomenklatura was around 10 percent. In 1967, it increased to 42.5 percent and in 1987 it reached 54 percent. The share of ethnic Romanians among the total number of communists was around 8 percent in 1950, increasing to 35 percent in 1965 and 49 percent in 1989. Simultaneously, however, the same share in government positions at the republican level increased from 38 percent to 49 percent in 1984. However, if one looks at the key positions in the party and government, the situation is far from impressive. For instance, the first ethnic Romanian from the Bessarabian part of the former Moldavian SSR to serve as First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Moldavia was Petru Lucinschi appointed in mid-November 1989. Before that, this position was held by Transnistrians—including ethnic Romanians but highly Russified, some of them speaking poor Romanian if at all. The position of Second Secretary of the local party organization, the individual who de facto controlled the cadres’ policy at the republican level and other key domains, was always held by an ethnic Russian. The first ethnic Romanian to hold this position was Ion Guțu, appointed in 1989. This was true also in what concerns key governmental positions such as President of the Council of Ministers. The first ethnic Romanian—born in Northern Bukovina—to hold this position was Mircea Druc, elected by a democratic Supreme Soviet (parliament) in May 1990. Key ministries such as Ministry of Interior and the KGB were always headed by non-Romanians or ethnic Romanians from across the Dniester, i.e., Russified ones. The first ethnic Romanian from the Bessarabian territory to serve as Ministry of Interior was Ion Costaș, who was nominated in 1990. The first to become local chief of the KGB was Tudor Botnaru, appointed in the same year—just on the eve of the collapse of the

Soviet Union. The latter remained subordinated to Moscow until the official collapse in December 1991.

One can identify the particularities of the Soviet Communist regime in the Moldavian case also from other points of view: the linguistic or cultural policies. Officially, there was a permanent increase starting with the 1960s of the total number of books, journals, and newspapers published in Romanian (officially called Moldavian) in Cyrillic alphabet. However, one can notice a dramatic decrease in the public use of Romanian language. That could be observed especially at the level of higher education institutions, as more and more disciplines every year switched to Russian as the language of teaching among the official Romanian groups.

The quality of the spoken language was decreasing because Russian became the main language in the mass media, higher education, and academia. Not to mention that all documents in the government and party were only in Russian. This was a permanent reality until 1989 when the first official documents in Romanian timidly made their way out of the central administration. Speaking Romanian publicly was often a sign for Communist authorities of Moldo-Romanian nationalism, especially during party meetings or meetings held at various educational institutions (this was also true, for instance, of Ukrainian language in Ukraine). The Latin alphabet in the Moldavian SSR had been prohibited since 1944 as in the most part of Tsarist period. It had been replaced with the Cyrillic one, which was envisaged to serve as an identity marker and a communication barrier for the Romanians across the Prut River. Those contesting the appropriateness of employing Russian letters for an East Romance language were severely punished. In the Stalinist period they were arrested and deported to Siberia as Moldo-Romanian nationalists. After 1953, they were either socially marginalized or sent to psychiatric hospitals, as was the case of numerous citizens, among them Gheorghe David, who was sent to Dnepropetrovsk psychiatric hospital during Gorbachev’s rule in 1986. Besides asking to reestablish the Latin script for “Moldavian language,” David also criticized the discrimination against local cadres and the Soviet invasion in Afghanistan. It is interesting that David sent letters with the

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same messages to Brezhnev, Andropov, and Chernenko, but only under Gorbachev was he sentenced to psychiatric treatment.\footnote{The Archive of Service of Information and Security of the Republic of Moldova, former KGB, \textit{ASISRM-KGB}, personal file of Zaharia Doncev, no. 06696, f. 243 verso; \textit{Basarabia}, no. 9, 1990, 140–152, etc.}

Other symbolic assertions of national identity, within the officially imposed limits, were subject to KGB intervention and treated as disloyal political behavior. For instance, the simple gesture of putting flowers at the statue of the most important Romanian poet, Mihai Eminescu, in downtown Chișițău (officially he was accepted by Moscow as a Moldavian poet, too) was interpreted as a manifestation of nationalism and anti-Russian attitude.\footnote{Interview with Nicolae Cibotaru, Associate Professor in History at Moldova State Pedagogical University, March 11, 2011.} The same was true about the statue of Moldavian medieval Prince Stephen the Great.\footnote{AOSPRM, F. 278, inv. 8, d. 82, f. 27.} In 1964, Mihai Moroșan, a student from the Polytechnic Institute, initiated with colleagues from other higher education institutions a letter of protest against the removal of Stephen the Great statue from the downtown area to a marginal location. He was promptly arrested by the KGB, expelled from the Polytechnic Institute, and sentenced to two years in a correctional work camp.\footnote{Archive of the Polytechnic University (in the Soviet period it was an Institute), personal file of Mihai Moroșan, f. 31. Interview with Mihai Moroșan, March 2011.}

Romanian identity, called Moldavian throughout the Soviet period in the Moldavian SSR, was allowed only at the level of folk culture. There were folklore ensembles, national theater, and opera performing in Romanian, but almost all the movies until late 1980s were broadcasted exclusively in Russian, including those made in Chișițău by the republican movie company, Moldova-film. This was also true of almost every TV program and this contradicted flagrantly the official pretension that national republics enjoyed equal conditions to develop their own language and culture. Those who insisted on buying books from Romania, in the Latin alphabet, were harassed by the authorities. And those doubting the existence of a “Moldavian nation” in ethnical terms were severely punished. The individuals who did not question the Communist system, but just proposed the Union of former Bessara-
bia and North Bukovina with Romania were condemned as nationalists. This was especially the case of the group called National Patriotic Front led by Alexandru Usatiuc and Gheorghe Ghimpu. Two other leading members of this group were arrested and sent to the Gulag plus exiled to Siberia for four to thirteen years. At the same time, there are few cases when a Russian from Soviet Moldavia—albeit there are cases in Russia—was imprisoned, trialed, or at least admonished for Russian chauvinism or Great Power nationalism.

Speaking about the short-term perspective in center-periphery relations in the late 1980s, it is important to stress several factors that dramatically worsened the interethnic dialogue and the relations between the republican periphery and the Kremlin center. The first factor was the promulgation of language laws in the late 1980s in Moldova, which revealed the tensions between the authorities in Chișinău and Moscow, on the one hand, and Romanian speakers and the local Russian speaking community, on the other hand. To put it differently, even though linguistic laws were among the most liberal as compared to other republics, the Russian speakers perceived the establishing of Romanian language in Latin alphabet as an affront to their previous status. They claimed that their rights were violated. In fact, they were losing a privileged position. Another problem was related to some new industrial projects initiated by Moscow in Chișinău, such as building a huge computer manufacturing company of all-Union importance in the late 1980s. This also contributed to the growing tension in the center-periphery relations because it involved a mass influx of cadres from the Center. The situation fueled mass mobilization on an ethnic basis, because the new cohorts were perceived to be a threat to local interests considering that unemployment in the urban areas, especially in Chișinău, was already rampant. Another problem that was used to mobilize local masses against the center was the ecological issue; Moldova being one a notorious polygon in the Soviet Union for experimenting new chemicals in agriculture.

38 ASISRM-KGB, file 017006, Usatiuc – Ghimpu, in 11 volumes.
39 AOSPRM, F. 51, inv. 29, d. 34, f. 186–190.
40 See, for instance, Nikolai Guboglo, Jazyki etnicheskoi mobilizatsii (Moscow: Vysshaia Shkola, 1998)
Out of all of these sources of conflict, the most enduring was the linguistic problem as well as the issue of interpreting the Communist past. Ethnic Romanians tended to blame the local Russians as occupiers, accusing them for transplanting Communism in Moldova. In their turn, the latter argued that they have been victims of the Communist regime too, and they did not suffer less than the Romanians. In this sense, the best answers to such questions were formulated by a Russian journalist from Moldova in 1989. Addressing her fellow Russians from Moldova, Evghenia Solomonova said:

A lot of you would ask me: what is the guilt of the Russian people [in establishing Communism in Moldova], who have been themselves victims of Stalinist repressions and stagnation [referring basically to Brezhnev period]? [You would say that] It is about our common misfortune, not about guilt, isn’t it? Dear fellow citizens! My opinion is that our sufferings could not justify us in the face of others whom we forced to share our misfortune.

She continued mentioning the realities of the Soviet nationalities policy in Moldova in order to reach her fellow Russians:

Under the influence of the Stalinist national policy, there was a stereotype in our thinking . . . namely that we are liberators and protectors of the Moldavian people. . . . We developed the psychology of the “Big brother” who should guide, but who is not obliged to take into account, himself, the opinion of the “Smaller brother,” less to learn his language, history, and culture. Such an ideology that saved us from such “details” was convenient for us because it compelled the “Smaller brother” to “mutual understanding,” namely on the level that was suitable for us. The fact that we are asking now for two state languages is a proof in this sense.41

These words obviously hardly convinced all to whom they were addressed. The refusal of Russian speakers to accept Romanian as official language ignited the phenomenon of Transnistrian separatism, which is to be explained in itself primarily as a result of competition

between left-bank elites and Bessarabian ones. The former were losing their privileged connections with Moscow and thus initiated a strike and then a separatist regime in 1990. The latter survived until present and it benefited from strong Russian support, including the involvement of Kremlin’s armed forces.

The Rehabilitation of the Victims of Communist Terror

The partial rehabilitation of the victims of the Communist terror commenced as early as the mid-1950s. It was only partial because the former repressed (in concentrations camps and special settlements) did not have the right to return back to their homes. However, by 1960, around 80 percent of the persons deported from Moldavian SSR returned in their republic, but few of them succeeded to settle in their former households. Their properties were expropriated and given to state or party officials. In this sense, the return of deportees was a danger for the Soviet Communist regime.42

After 1989, the victims of the communist regime were further rehabilitated, but their properties were never returned or they never received material and moral compensation for their suffering. The main reason was that, with the exception of the period from 1998 to 1999, post-Soviet Moldova never had, until 2009, a pro-European government. The various state leaderships feared that the full rehabilitation of the victims of communist terror would be perceived by Russia as an anti-Russian policy. The novel element brought by the post-Soviet process of rehabilitation was that not only the victims of the period 1917–1953 were the object of the new laws, but also all those who have been condemned for political crimes after Stalin’s death up until the late 1980s. The Law of 1992 also included the victims of political psychiatric imprisonment, unlike similar laws adopted around the same time in Russia and Ukraine.

Some families, however, protested against the deportations even as they were taking place. They sent letters to communist authorities in Moscow or Chișinău. Those who had one or more family members serving in the Red Army were paid attention to. In mid-1952, eighty-seven families (389 individuals) were rehabilitated along with 108 other individuals. After Stalin’s death, in July 1953, the Soviet Minister of Internal Affairs, S. N. Kruglov, suggested that the Soviet government abolish deportation decisions and liberate the deportees, including those from Soviet Moldavia. It was admitted that the deportations, especially those in 1949, disregarded the principles of socialist legality. The mass rehabilitation of deportees began after the Twentieth Congress of CPSU, in February 1956, when the new Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev denounced Stalin’s cult of personality and his terror tactics. By October 1956, 3,290 Moldavian families (6,950 persons) were released from special settlements. By 1961, most Moldavian deportees had been liberated as a result of the Supreme Soviet decree of May 19, 1958, which abolished residence restrictions for the majority of the victims of Stalinist terror. Nevertheless, the decree did grant them the right to return to their previous place of residence or to receive back their confiscated properties. The decree of January 7, 1960, abolished further restrictions of movement for other social categories. The decision whether to allow the return of the deportees or not was the prerogative of local authorities. Between 1958 and 1963, 2,033 families received permission to return to Moldova. In August 1961, the Moldavian branch of the Soviet KGB estimated that the absolute majority of deportees had returned home to their villages and cities and lived with relatives or rented private apartments. Though they had found jobs, they neglected the obligation to officially register at their place of residence (*propiska*). Most returnees did not receive their confiscated property back and thus lost forever their previous social status in Moldavian society.\(^{43}\)

The full rehabilitation of the victims of Stalinist terror began on April 10, 1989, when the Council of Ministers of the Moldavian SSR annulled its decision of June 28, 1949 regarding the deportation of families of *kulaks*, former landowners, and tradesmen. Almost three

years later, on December 8, 1992, the Moldovan Parliament adopted Law 1225-XII on the Rehabilitation of Political Victims, which applied to all those deported, arrested, or executed during the Soviet rule. According to the law, survivors were entitled to a monthly pension of 200 Moldavian Lei (US $16).\textsuperscript{44} The amendments passed on June 29, 2006 prescribed that all political victims of the Soviet period were entitled to compensation for their lost real estate. The state must compensate the victims within three years if the price of their properties did not exceed 200,000 Moldovan Lei (about US $11,000 in 2014). The compensation for more valuable properties should be paid within five years.\textsuperscript{45} These changes did not affect compensations related to the return of agricultural land, forests, or pasture. Local authorities, not the central government, were responsible for the payment of compensations, a stipulation hindering the law’s application since Moldovan local authorities generally lacked the financial resources needed for the restitution program. Thus, the Communist parliamentary majority passed this law under pressure from the opposition parties without creating the financial and institutional framework means necessary to carry out such an ambitious program.

Politics of Memory and the Victims of Communism After 1989

From 1956 to 1991, Soviet Moldova lacked a strong anti-communist opposition. There was an upsurge of anti-Soviet and anti-communist sentiments in 1956 following the secret speech of Khrushchev at the twentieth CPSU Congress. After Soviet tanks crushed the Hungarian Revolution in November 1956 and Western governments adopted a policy of noninvolvement, Moldovans decided not to oppose Soviet rule.\textsuperscript{46} In the late 1950s and 1960s, resistance primarily took the form of protest against the Russification of the Romanian language.

\textsuperscript{44} Monitorul Oficial al Republicii Moldova, nr. 12, 30.12.1992.
\textsuperscript{45} Monitorul Oficial al Republicii Moldova, nr. 126–130, 11.08.2006.
There were, however, some individuals or small groups questioning the monopoly of power of the Communist Party in Moldavian SSR in particular and in the USSR as a whole. During the late 1980s, Mikhail Gorbachev’s glasnost and perestroika encouraged public discussions about the Stalinist terror and the fight against nationalists during the Brezhnev era. Writers and intellectuals started to touch upon the repressive aspects of the Soviet regime. Historians, a highly dogmatized stratum of intellectuals in the USSR, joined the anti-Communist and anti-Soviet writers in 1989. The newspaper *Literatura și arta* and journal *Orizontul* took the lead in reconstructing collective memory. Among the main issues discussed, related to the Soviet past, were the consequences of the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact for Bessarabia, the Stalinist deportations, and the postwar famine of 1946–1947. The debates on these questions of repressed memory helped Moldovans to better understand their identity, encouraging them to push first for more autonomy and then for complete independence from Moscow.

As in the case of the Baltic States, the resolution of the Yakovlev Commission in December 1989 on the political and juridical evaluation of the secret protocols of Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact triggered a national movement in Moldavia. The Commission was established at the First Congress of Peoples’ Deputies of USSR held in May–June 1989 under the initiative of Alexander Yakovlev, one of the spiritual fathers of perestroika. The memory of Stalinist terror and the recognition on the part of the CPSU that Moscow sided with Nazi Germany in occupying the Baltic States and Bessarabia delegitimized the Soviet regime and hastened the collapse of the Soviet Union.

The Moldovan Popular Front was at the forefront of decommunization in the late 1980s and early 1990s. This organization failed to gain parliamentary majority in March 1990, winning only 25 percent of the seats. As an economic crisis developed in the country, Moldovans, regardless of their ethnicity, voted in the 1994 parliamentary elections for the Democratic Agrarian Party, which represented the former Soviet nomenklatura. As expected, this party held a nostalgic view of the Soviet past and it supported a less critical view of the Soviet

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Union in the public discourse and history textbooks. Their efforts failed because cultural and educational elites organized mass rallies protesting against these initiatives and blocked them.

In the earlier 2000s, attempts to rehabilitate the Soviet past and to justify mass deportation and famine came from another party. The Communist Party, which was in power from February 2001 to August 2009, embarked on the “soft” restoration of Stalinism: the public discourse was invaded by nostalgia toward the Soviet past, with communism celebrated as the most progressive and glorious period in the history of Moldova. In 2006, history textbooks were changed to reflect a communist interpretation of the past despite the vehement protests of civil society groups like the Association of Historians and other anti-communist professional organizations. As a result, from 2006 to 2009 there unfolded a war of history textbooks, as high school teachers boycotted the new interpretation of history and continued to use the former history textbooks. From their point of view, the latter presented a European, national interpretation of the past that was not reflective of the historical narrative and mythology imposed by the Soviet Union before 1989.48

The Creation of the Commission for the Study and Evaluation of Totalitarian Communist Regime in the Republic of Moldova

The politics of memory played an important role during the two parliamentary campaigns of 2009. The anti-communist Liberal Party tried to gather electoral support by invoking the need to outlaw the Communist Party, claiming that communism was as criminal as National-Socialism in particular and Fascism as a whole. Another important political party of the Alliance for European Integration, the Liberal Democratic Party, was very critical of the Communist Party’s reluctance to condemn communist-era crimes. It promised to restore the

pro-Romanian and pro-European national discourse on history dominant in the 1990s. The strong appeal to the Moldovan electorate of these two parties was due to the fact their leaders represented a new generation of Moldovan politicians educated mainly in Romania and the West, with no nomenklatura past. Even the oppositional “Our Moldova Alliance,” lead by former middle level nomenklatura members, played the anti-communist card. Following the elections, these three parties, along with the Democratic Party led by Marian Lupu, formed a coalition government in September 2009. Although the Communist Party pursued a policy of rehabilitating Stalin and worshiping Lenin, during the 2009 electoral campaign it changed its attitude toward the victims of mass deportations. Sensing the loss of popular support after the violent anti-communist riots in Chișinău on April 7, 2009, the communist government allotted around thirteen million lei (one million US dollars) for reparation payments to the victims of Stalinist deportations. This was an excellent example how the politics of memory was instrumentalized for electoral purposes.

Lustration was discussed publicly in 2005 and 2006. One of the leading national weeklies, *Jurnal de Chișinău*, published around 200 interviews with local politicians and cultural personalities asking for their opinion about communism, the possibility of a lustration law, and if they collaborated with the KGB in the Soviet period. Although the majority condemned communism, only a minority supported a lustration law and some voiced no regret for their Soviet-era collaboration with the political police.

The breakthrough in the politics of memory came in January 2010 when a Presidential Commission for the Study and Evaluation of the Communist Totalitarian Regime was created by the interim President of the Republic, Mihai Ghimpu, who was also the leader of Liberal Party. The Commission included thirty members, among them historians, writers, sociologists, lawyers and linguists. As a result, the previously inaccessible archival depositories were disclosed, including that of the former KGB and the Ministry of Interior. The Commission was supposed to deliver a preliminary report by June 1, 2010, but it could not be finalized because there was no unanimity on the final version. There were two contending groups, the one represented by former Soviet official historians who played now the nationalistic card and another composed of young historians educated in Romania and in the
West who insisted on a more balanced approach, rejecting the ethnici-
zation of the Communist repressions.

Finally, a volume covering the main contributions of the members
of the Commission was published in the fall of 2011 in Chișinău.\textsuperscript{49} It
comprised the main aspects related to repressive policies of Moscow in
former Moldavian SSR, including several chapters on Soviet nation-
alities policy and an extensive chapter on the politics of memory of
Chișinău authorities after 1989. The first part of the volume includes
articles written by historians and political scientists from Eastern and
Central Europe, including several members of the Presidential Com-
mission for the Analysis of the Communist Dictatorship in Romania.
These scholars helped their Moldavian colleagues by generously shar-
ing their experience in working in the Romanian archives and dealing
with administrative issues related to the access to previously secret
files. Several volumes of documents were also published as a result of
the activity of the Commission\textsuperscript{50} and others will be published in the
years to come.

The outcomes of the Moldovan Commission for the Study and
Evaluation of the Communist Totalitarian Regime in the Republic of
Moldova have been summarized briefly by one of its young members,
Andrei Cușco, who holds a Ph.D. in History from Central European
University:

\begin{quote}
The Commission’s effectiveness was limited by the vagueness of
its mandate; the short time span of its operation; the lack of effec-
tive legal tools (subpoena powers); the limited political support for
its work and the tendency of certain political forces to use it for
their own purposes; and the underrepresentation of the civil soci-
ety, the victims’ associations, and ethnic minorities on the Com-
mission. However, it helped to open previously inaccessible archi-
val (including secret police) files and it increased public awareness
\end{quote}

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{49} Sergiu Musteață, Igor Cașu (eds.), \textit{Fără termen de prescripție. Aspecte ale în-
vestigării crimelor comuniste în Europa} (Chiși
nău: Cartier, 2011).
\textsuperscript{50} For instance, Gheorghe Cojocaru (ed.), \textit{Operatiia IUG: Kishinev 1949} (Chi-
nău, Cartdidact, 2011).
\end{footnotesize}

More recently, there has been an ongoing discussion to create a similar state commission to disclose the crimes of the Antonescu regime in Bessarabia and Transnistria during the World War II. Besides the data published by the Wiesel Commission in Romania (2004), the recently opened archives in Chișinău can shed new light on the scale of the Holocaust on the territory of the present day Republic of Moldova and Ukraine.\footnote{One of the best accounts on the Holocaust in Bessarabia and Transnistria has been published by Moldovan historian Diana Dumitru, together with Canadian political scientist Carter Johnson. Their study was awarded the best article in Political Sciences for 2011 by the American Political Association. See Diana Dumitru, Carter Johnson, “Constructing Interethnic Conflict and Cooperation: Why Some People Harmed Jews and Others Helped Them During the Holocaust in Romania,” \textit{World Politics}, vol. 63, no. 1, January 2011, 1–42.}

Conclusions

The specificities of the policies of the Soviet regime in the Republic of Moldova can be generally explained by the fact that Bessarabia was the only republican territory in the Soviet Union inhabited by an ethnic majority belonging to a Communist neighbor state, i.e., Romania. This reality had a considerable impact on the nature of Communist rule in the former Moldavian SSR and on the center-periphery relationship. The interaction between Moscow and Chișinău was often influenced by the state of relations between Bucharest and Moscow and vice versa, especially starting with the 1960s when Romania became a maverick state, with a strong nationalistic component.
The politics of memory on Communism after 1989 in the Republic of Moldova have been quite ambiguous, to say the least. Sometimes the discourse of the Moldavian authorities was nostalgic toward the Communist past, especially, but not exclusively, during the government of the Party of Communists from 2001 to 2009. After 2009, however, a new democratic, pro-Romanian and pro-European alliance came to power in Chișinău. Its leadership embarked on a new policy toward the Communist past. The creation of a special State Commission for the Study and Evaluation of the Communist Totalitarian Regime in January 2010 and the subsequent opening of the archives of KGB were the main aspects of this new policy.

The problem of punishing former officials who perpetrated crimes during the Soviet regime has been not discussed widely in Moldova yet. In this sense, the politics of memory and the rehabilitation of the victims of Communism in Moldova is closer to the model followed by Russia and other post-Soviet republics than to cases on East Central Europe. However, if Moldova wants to integrate one day into the European Union, it should take into consideration that the EU shares a set of values that are contrary to the Soviet ones. This means that it should condemn the crimes committed by the communist regime and the mass terror exerted over its various ethnic groups, not only the Romanian speaking majority.