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**THE ATTITUDE OF THE LOCAL ROMANIAN
POPULATION OF BESSARABIA TOWARDS
THE RUSSIAN AUTHORITIES AND
THE PROBLEM OF “REACTIVE IDENTITY”**

The subject of this paper concerns the relations between the czarist authorities and the Romanian population from Bessarabia, at the end of the 19th and the beginning and the 20th centuries. The author analyses the process of the “collective identity” formation in the case of the Romanians living under Russian domination. The idea of “otherness”, his image, as well as the peaceful or tense relations with those who did not belong to the Bessarabian Romanian community, played a decisive role in the genesis and consolidation of the Bessarabian Romanian’s “collective identity”.

The problem concerning the relationship between the local Bessarabian Romanian population and the Russian authorities or, conversely, the ethnic communities colonized in later periods by the Russian government in order to alter the ethnic picture of the region and to exploit more effectively the lands of its southern part represents an aspect which has not been analyzed in the modern historiography. The main focus of this paper rests upon the issue of differences or otherness, which is, simultaneously, the “other” side and one of the fundamental components of an ethnic group’s collective identity. The defining of the “collective self” presupposes the existence of an “Other”, whose difference serves as an impulse for the consolidation of the group’s self-awareness. The identification of this process or, at least, of its more general elements, is almost impossible, in the Bessarabian case, if one were to base the research upon primary sources. This fact is primarily due to the absence of any significant means of the local population’s self-expression or advocating of its interests under the circumstances created in the intellectual life of the Bessarabian region during the XIX and the beginning of the XX century. Consequently the present section primarily discusses certain indirect elements that can point to the unfolding of this process during the period in question and which can be deduced from the fragmentary information offered by the accounts of the Russian authors writing at the time. Several theoretical considerations are necessary in order to better understand the context of the situation created in the region by the beginning of the XX century. Certain fundamental elements that determine the pattern of a people’s construction of collective identity and its gradual evolution towards a “national” level can be identified. In the lines

below an explanation of two basic phenomena determining the evolution of the local populations' collective identity under Russian domination will be attempted. On the one hand, the problem of the reasons determining the absence of a well defined collective identity in the ranks of the Bessarabian Romanians will be partially clarified. On the other hand, the claim concerning the preservation of a "traditional," mainly ethnic and cultural identity, as a counterbalance to the attempts at the imposition of the influence of the Russian "identity space" in the region will be discussed in greater detail.

In order for the viability of a "modern," national identification having its roots in the pre-modern identity elements, to be organically constructed, the combination of several fundamental factors is a primary condition. A Romanian historian has proposed an interesting and rather coherent scheme for the classifying of the primordial preconditions of a crystallized "national project."¹ Thus, several factors determining the definitive shape of "national identity" of an ethnic group can be identified: 1) the specific *national identification* of a community; 2) the *national language*; 3) the *confessional/religious commonality*; 4) the appearance and crystallization of a *national historiography*; 5) the *political unification* of the ethnic group, which implicitly presupposes the existence of a well organized national/ethnic state; 6) a strongly developed and fully defined *cultural identity* of the group (*national culture*). Obviously, one cannot speak of the last three among the mentioned factors when considering the circumstances of historical development of the Bessarabian region at the epoch. On the other hand, the first three factors are a constant presence in the works of the Russian authors concerning Bessarabia written during this period and, moreover, these factors are fundamental for the building of a coherent representation of the locals' collective identity in the works of these authors.

However, in this case the main problem is the revealing of the extremely complicated relationship between the "historical reality" and its reflection through the mind of the observer, in the latter case the lack of concordance with the first part of the dichotomy presenting itself as crucial. In other words, the identification of the above-mentioned elements of collective identity in the works of the Russian authors does not indicate in a faithful manner the degree of self-consciousness that their own bearers possessed concerning the existence of these common features. Thus, for example, the Russian authors do not follow the same pattern and reach rather

¹ A. Pippidi, "Ethno-cultural identity within the Romanian space. Methodological problems," in: *Identitate/alteritate în spațiul cultural românesc* [Identity/Otherness within the Romanian Cultural Space], ed. by Al. Zub, Iasi: 1996, p. 56-79

dissonant conclusions in what concerns the ethnic auto-identification of the Bessarabian Romanians during the period. The authors employ the identification of the locals as “Moldavians”, as well as the other ethnic name of the Bessarabians- that of “Romanians”, cases which can be discovered repeatedly in their works. Moreover, they openly use quite contradictory statements while discussing this problem, these statements largely depending on the particular context of the fragment including the quotation. The obvious conclusion is that no stark opposition existed at the period of their writing between the two ethnic denominations, which shows the undifferentiated character of the self-identification of the locals. The ethnic name “Moldavian” was primarily a territorial designation which referred to the old Moldavian Principality and which subsisted in Bessarabia as the “regional designation” even after the creation of Romania. On the other hand, the name of “Romanian” (român/rumân) did not, probably, bear any ethnic connotation for the Bessarabian peasants and, obviously, could not have served as a “national designation.” It still had, first of all, preserved its medieval social meaning, being essentially synonymous to the notion of “peasant” or “serf”, and, later, to that of “man” as such. One should again emphasize that the plurality of ethnic names of the Bessarabians is the best indicator of the insecurity and the blurred character of their identity as a separate “nation”.

Still, it appears that the language of the Bessarabian Romanians has been viewed by the Russian authors as the fundamental factor determining the difference and constructing the “otherness” of the locals in relationship to other ethnic groups. This fact is indirectly confirmed by the persistence of the demands linked to the Bessarabians’ linguistic identity throughout the period of Russian administration in the province.

It is rather difficult to identify the crucial moments of the manifestation of the phenomenon conventionally referred to as the “reactive identity” of the local population. This situation is primarily determined by the extreme scarcity and the lack of systematization present within the works of the Russian authors in connection with this issue. Still, several particularly important moments can be distinguished. They mainly refer to the manifestation of the attitude of the Bessarabian Romanians towards the Russian authorities, an aspect that the Russian authors of the period have especially emphasized due to its importance for the Russian policy in the region. The accounts of the Russian authors have mentioned the manifestation of the “active involvement” of the locals into the events determining the evolution of Bessarabia on three occasions closely connected to certain historical, military, or political circumstances. These examples of “reactive” identity of the locals can be classified under the following rubrics: 1) the negative attitude of the local Romanian population towards the Russian

occupation army during the years of the Russian-Turkish war, which is prior to the annexation of Bessarabia to Russia; 2) the mass emigration of the Bessarabian Romanians to the Moldavian Principality during the first years of Russian administration, which is a particularly controversial subject and is not subject to a coherent interpretation; 3) the mostly passive, but significant resistance of the local nobility towards the centralizing measures and policy undertaken by the Russian administration, which has been a basic reason and justification for the Russian authorities to abolish the autonomous status of the Bessarabian region (1828) and its later transformation into a simple province of the Empire. These circumstances and examples seem quite revealing in the aspect of the involuntary and contradictory impact of the policy of the Russian authorities upon the gradual crystallization of the sentiments of “Otherness” in the midst of the local population with regards to the Russians, as representing the central government, and to the other ethnic groups of the region. One should not, of course, exaggerate the circumstantial or primordial importance of certain events and processes. They have been, basically, introduced in the present analysis in order to illustrate through these images a more general tendency towards the crystallization of the “collective identity” of the locals, and not for the emphasizing of their importance as such. The reflection of only a part of the Bessarabian reality by the Russian authors has also left its imprint upon the framework of the analysis.

The discussion of the attitude of the local population towards the Russian occupation troops during the Russian-Turkish war of 1806-1812 is not a subject widely referred to by the bulk of the Russian writers on Bessarabia. The reason for the scarcity of references can be found in the time span of these events, which took place before the annexation of Bessarabia to the Russian Empire and, consequently, were of little interest to the authors of the later period. However, a source distinguished by the rather detailed treatment of this subject and “compensating” the absence of this aspect in the other works is the book written by L. Casso, *Russia on the Danube*. The specificity of the book’s topic and the emphasis upon the geo-strategic and military aspects of Russia’s preoccupation for Bessarabia has left its imprint on the great importance of this issue in his account. Particularly crucial for the proportions of this phenomenon of the locals’ reaction seems the frequency of the author’s references to this subject. The clear and even exaggerated (by the author) negative attitude of the Romanians towards the Russian occupation troops is immediately perceived from Casso’s interpretation of the events. Certainly, one must admit that the direct causes and implications of these attitudes are due to momentary and ephemeral circumstances, such as: the devastation of the Principalities, including that of

Bessarabia, by the Russian troops and the ensuing economic ruin; the irrational and abusive exploitation of the resources of the region in order to fulfill the necessities of the occupation army; the arrogant and, sometimes, brutal behaviour of some Russian soldiers and officers, and other less important incidents.² However, from these passages in Casso's work one can conclude that the incipient elements of the local populations' reaction towards the Russian policy in the Principalities and, especially, in Bessarabia, were already formed, significantly shaped by the Russian tactics in the region. This example illustrates quite eloquently the role that the Russian domination and its practices have, indirectly, played in the crystallization and gradual consolidation of the spirit of the Bessarabians' communitarian spirit and of their strengthening of collective identity.

In a much larger proportion and with significantly enhanced minuteness is the second aspect of the locals' "reactive" manifestations described in the Russian literature of the period. This aspect emphasizes the phenomenon of mass migration of the Bessarabian Romanians to the Moldavian Principality immediately following the Russian annexation of the region. Still, the analysis of this phenomenon must be rather cautious, in order not to be subjected to the danger of exaggeration. The "extreme" view of connecting this phenomenon directly to a purported feeling of *organic adversity* of the local population towards the Russian people, as well as the deducing, starting from this erroneous presupposition, of the appearance of the feeling of the belonging of the Bessarabians to the Romanian identity space, are quite possible extreme implications of this artificial intellectual construct. It is especially fallacious to advocate such opinions, given the incipient moment of the crystallization of the Romanian identity, as such. Certainly, the reality of this phenomenon was far from stemming from such mental states of the Bessarabians. The actual reasons, which have been identified with great accuracy by the Russian authors themselves, leave absolutely no solid foundations for such kind of uncompromising and, essentially, non-provable assertions. This topic and its implications are subjects already discussed by the first authors who were interested in the Bessarabian region. The reason for this enhanced preoccupation can, probably, be found in the particularly dangerous and urgent character that the phenomenon of mass migration had for the Russian domination of the region during its first years. Some authors have even pointed to the presumable "depopulation" of the entire region as the final result of the emigration,

² L. A. Kasso, *Rossija na Dunae I obrazovanie Bessarabskoj oblasti* [Russia on the Danube and the creation of the Bessarabian region]. (Moscow: 1913)., p. 31-32, 64-65, 75-76, 87-88, 127-128.

constantly featured as reaching terrifying proportions. The first direct observation in connection with the massive emigration of the Bessarabians into Moldavia is contained in the monumental monograph written by captain Zashchuk. The latter underlines the significance of this phenomenon due to its unwelcome impact upon the dynamics of the population's growth in the Bessarabian province during the whole of the XIX century.³ In the second volume of his writing, Zashchuk extensively quotes the account left by a high Russian official in Bessarabia, Somov, concerning the primordial causes that have, possibly, determine the emigration. The opinion advocated by Somov regarding this event supports the conclusion that the Russian central authorities were keenly aware of the destabilizing potential that such a "total emigration" might have had for the endurance of Russian domination in Bessarabia and thus, implicitly, for the consolidation of the local population's ethnic consciousness and the strengthening of its feeling of "otherness" with reference to the Russian authorities.⁴ Batiushkov does not forget to mention the emigration of the Bessarabian Romanians to the Moldavian Principality, either (which he openly calls a "flight" from Bessarabia). In this phenomenon this author seeks to find a fundamental cause (though, essentially, it is nothing but a pretext) for the later active colonization of Bessarabia with non-Romanian ethnic elements. However, in his account Batiushkov does not mention the other causes of this colonization.⁵ Still, the most thorough and multilateral account of the situation created in Bessarabia as a result of the emigration is, undoubtedly, presented in the fundamental work of L. Casso.

In his writing the information concerning the "total depopulation" of the Bessarabian region is contained. He purposefully puts this assertion in opposition with the numerous natural beauties of this region. These statements can be better understood in the context of the general tendency of the Russian authors to exaggerate on purpose the reasons and the impact of this emigration, a device which only emphasizes the subjective and biased discourse of some writers⁶. Casso does not only refer to the proportions and concrete cases of the emigration of the Bessarabians, but also attempts to identify and explain the causes for this phenomenon. He primarily

³ A. Zashchuk, *Materialy dlja geografii i statistiki Rossii, sobrannye ofitserami General'nogo Shtaba. Bessarabskaja oblast'* [Materials on the geography and statistics of Russia collected by the officers of the General Staff. Bessarabian Region]. (St.-Petersburg: 1862), I, p. 148.

⁴ Ibidem, II, p. 85.

⁵ P. N. Batiushkov, *Bessarabija. Istoricheskoe opisanie* [Bessarabia. A historical description]. (St.-Petersburg: Publishing House of the Ministry of the Interior, 1892), p. 136-137.

⁶ L. A. Casso, *op.cit.*, p. 190-191.

emphasizes the non-enduring and conjuncture -determined reasons for the mass exodus of the Bessarabians, stating that the panic among the local population has been provoked only by unclear rumours, false information and similar deceiving means. However, he also discusses certain rather important reasons for the process of “flight” to Moldavia, most crucial among them being the deplorable material situation of the rural population as a result of the Russian-Turkish war, famine etc. He gives particular attention to the implications and consequences of this emigration, significantly pointing to the lack of confidence of the Bessarabian Romanians into the Russian authorities and raising the emigration to the impressing proportions of a general collective psychosis among the Romanians, which he suggestively calls “la grande peur.”⁷ The assertions of this author are quite relevant for studying the aspect of the influence exercised by psychological factors upon the strengthening of the sentiments of “otherness” with regards to the Russian “identity space” in the midst of the Bessarabian Romanians. Thus, a rather interesting fact mentioned in Casso’s book points to the building of the perception of the Russian space by the local Romanian population as being foreign to their cultural identity. This is illustrated by his assertion that the Bessarabians preferred rather to remain under Ottoman domination than to be subjected to the “Russian Orthodox Government.” The urgent character of the problem has also been perceived as such by the Russian authorities themselves. The important reforms in the Bessarabian provincial administration undertaken under the reign of the tsar Alexander I have been determined, to a large extent, by the imminent necessity to stop the depopulation of the province of its peasantry.

This case is especially revealing in order to grasp the essence of the mechanism of formation of the “reactive identity” of a given ethnic community towards a new and foreign identity space into which it has been recently included. The deep roots of these processes lie in the collective mentality of the group and, consequently, the reaction appears to be provoked by totally insignificant causes. Berg does not touch upon this process in too great detail, though he discusses the problem of the differing attitude of various social layers forming the Bessarabian society towards the instauration of the Russian domination in the province, during the early period of Russian administration.⁸ He then extensively dwells on the main causes of the colonization of Bessarabia with ethnic groups of non-Romanian origin, as well as on the dynamics of the population growth in Bessarabia throughout

⁷ Ibidem, p. 202-204.

⁸ L. S. Berg, *Bessarabija. Strana, ljudi, hozjajstvo* [Bessarabia. Land, people, economy]. (Petrograd: Ognj [Lights], 1918), p. 67.

the XIX century, and consequently also mentioning its hampering factors.⁹ However, the author informs the reader about the causes of the Romanians' mass emigration towards the Moldavian Principality as viewed from the perspective of the tsar Alexander I. Through this information, Berg introduces precious additional features into the more complete understanding of this event by the contemporary public opinion and the Russian authorities. He also indirectly underlines the special importance of the problem by indicating the involvement of the tsar in solving the problem. Generally speaking, one can trace quite similar tendencies in the works of all Russian authors even by using the fragmentary information provided by Berg. This fact demonstrates the crucial importance of the "emigration issue", in the vision of Russian authors, for the strengthening of the feeling of "otherness" and "reactive identity" in the ranks of the Bessarabian Romanians.

The attitude of the local population displayed towards the Russian authorities, in particular the relationship between the local Bessarabian nobility and the government officials has had a considerable impact, among other things, upon the political evolution of the region under Russian domination and, more to the point, upon the abolition of Bessarabia's autonomous status according to an imperial decree in 1828. The fact that the institutions of Bessarabian local autonomy were regarded by the majority of Russian authors as an expression of the local population's particularities and reflected their interests within the centralized structure of the Russian Empire cannot be denied and has a great impact upon the region's status. During the period of the functioning of Bessarabia's autonomy, coinciding with the early decades of the Russian domination in the province, one cannot, obviously, speak of a full-fledged Russian nationalism, but, rather, of the undisputable tendency of the Russian authorities to promote a total uniformization of the internal political organization of the Empire. Thus, the conclusion that ensues from the examination of this tendency is that the institutions of local administration, limiting the jurisdiction of the central government, and expressing, even if to a small extent, the differences within the purported organic unity of the Empire's "organism," were regarded as one of the major threats undermining just this tendency towards the unconditional unity of the state. Hence, the special attention drawn by some Russian authors to the factor of the negative attitude of the Bessarabian Romanians towards the Russian central authorities or, in more concrete terms, the emphasis upon the purported inefficiency of the institutions of local autonomy, and, particularly, of the Supreme Council (the highest institution of local self-administration).

⁹ *Ibidem*, p.83-85.

Thus, Zashchuk, in his book, openly points the reader's attention to the hostility manifested by the Bessarabian Romanians (here, primarily, the local nobility is taken into account) towards the measures of the Russian authorities promoting centralization. The author mentions even some attempts of the Bessarabian nobles to block the functioning of the Russian bureaucratic apparatus in the province.¹⁰ This activity of the boyars is regarded by the author as one of the major hampering factors that determine the failures of the Russian officials to organize the administration of the land according to modern principles. In Batiushkov's work one can also observe some short references to the issue of the position of the local Romanian population with regards to the measures undertaken by the Russian authorities in the newly acquired province, a position that doesn't appear to be quite convenient to the latter, according to the information provided by Batiushkov in his account.¹¹ Later, during his reporting of the situation of land ownership in the province, he emphasizes the active resistance that the Bessarabian peasants opposed towards the Russian land regulations.¹² Thus, one could conclude that the "reactive identity" displayed by the local Romanian population did not have an organized character, but, on the contrary, had only sporadic outbursts and was, during the whole period, essentially spontaneous. The only difference that can be discerned between various social layers of the population had to do with the premises, on which they were basing their claims, without changing the character of their demands. Thus, if the noble stratum appealed to the "custom of the land," as well as the "local laws," the peasants were attempting to preserve the material and social status that they have reached in the past. In fact, the consolidation of the collective identity elements among the locals as a reaction to the centralizing policy of the Russian government was a process of which its own subjects were, basically, unaware and, thus, it had a significant unconscious element incorporated into its development. Assessments of the situation similar to those made by other previous authors are contained also in Casso's book. He has a clearly negative attitude towards the demands put forward by the Bessarabian Romanians. Thus, to give examples of the latter's harmful activities that impede the progressive measures of the government, he points, in particular, to the lack of confidence in the Russian central authorities and, more importantly, the tendency (of the locals) to limit the involvement of the Russian officials into the internal political life of the province. The author also criticizes the wish of the nobility to maintain the local autonomy of the

¹⁰ A. Zashchuk, *op.cit.*, II, p. 83.

¹¹ P. N. Batiushkov, *op. cit.*, p. 150.

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 152.

region, which he deems inefficient.¹³ In this fragment from Casso's book one can, again, see the manifestation of reactive identity on behalf of the local population. Paradoxically, the issue of the region's autonomy, which was, in fact, conceived, applied and promoted primarily by the Russian authorities themselves, becomes, gradually, a problem of the preservation of the local population's collective identity. Consequently, the following question is inevitable: why did not the abolition of the autonomous status of Bessarabia provoke a more active and stern resistance from the Romanians' part? The explanation of this controversial fact can, it seems, be derived from the strictly incipient phase of the formation of the phenomenon conventionally called, in this paper, "collective identity," as well as from the already mentioned in the previous lines unawareness and unconscious character of this process among the Bessarabian Romanians. The situation will remain, essentially, the same even after the watershed of 1828. Berg does not add any significant elements to the rather detailed scheme already constructed by the previous authors. However, he does refer, though only in passing and in most general terms, to the position of the Romanians with regards to the Russian domination in the province, as mentioned before.¹⁴ In conclusion, one could argue that the attitude of the Bessarabians towards the Russians has been modeled, to a significant extent, according to the actions undertaken by the Russians themselves in Bessarabia. In this section, one could speak, in discussing the above-mentioned problems, of a double reflection of reality: first through the "lenses" of the traditional mentality and identity, and, secondly, through the attitudes of the above-analyzed Russian authors.

Several considerations upon the causes of the preservation of traditional identity in the ranks of the Bessarabian Romanians are necessary in this concluding paragraph. The insignificance of the impact of the Russian state ideology on the collective identity and mentality of the peasant majority of the Bessarabian population is also worth discussing. In this aspect, the situation presents itself as being paradoxical: the same factors that have made impossible the existence of a concept of national identity (by definition a *Romanian* national identity) during this period among Bessarabia's Romanian population, have also made impossible the enduring implantation of the consciousness of belonging to a coherently defined *Russian* identity space. Though certain progresses of the latter tendency cannot be ignored, they have only had an impact upon an extremely minor social segment of the local Romanian population (mainly the intellectuals). In more concrete terms, this ambiguous role has been played by the rural character of the Romanians

¹³ L. A. Kasso, *op. cit.*, p. 206-208.

¹⁴ L. S. Berg, *op.cit.*, p. 67-68.

of Bessarabia, which allowed the unaltered preservation of a traditional collective identity, reluctant to accept the imposition of any national idea, regardless of its essence and implications. In other terms, the incomplete inclusion of the majority of Besarabia's population into the rhythms of modernity has almost totally hampered the influence, upon this region, of the Romanian national idea, but also, more significantly, of the Russian national idea as well. In a way, the rural Bessarabian Romanian population has remained non-included into the sphere of these two projects of the Russian vs. Romanian "identity spaces." This does not, by any means, signify that the efforts from the part of both interested competitors aiming at the total and definitive inclusion of the region in their identity sphere were somehow lacking, on the contrary. However, both potential interested parts have encountered unsurpassable difficulties. Russia was hampered in its efforts by the ethnic reality of the province, the ethnic Romanians constituting the majority of its population. Romania was blocked in its aspirations by the lack of a Romanian national consciousness within the Romanian ethnic community (which was a major difference in comparison with, for example, Transylvania). The Russian authors have, of course, noticed the process of preservation of the traditional identity, as well as the stern resistance of the Bessarabian mostly rural population exhibited towards "modernization," used here in the narrow sense of unconditionally accepting one of the two competing "national variants." In the lines that follow, only the emphasis on the most general tendencies that can be deduced from the works of the Russian authors will be attempted, in an extremely partial and fragmentary sketch. First of all, the unreserved admiration expressed by the quasi-totality of the Russian authors towards the "purity" and "simplicity" of the patriarchal traditions and way of life of the Bessarabian Romanian peasantry is particularly eloquent.

Another tendency, closely related to this one and stemming from the mental framework of the Russian authors themselves, is the predisposition of viewing the Bessarabian peasants as a human community being quite "remote from the modern civilization," and, consequently, living, at least at the spiritual level, if not in fact, in an immemorial past, where they appear as "trapped" (cf., for example, Casso's opinions). The frequent references to the popular customs and traditions can be included within the same general perspective on the problem. It thus appears that the Bessarabian peasants do not belong to the present any more, but, a fact which is confirmed by their whole way of life, that they are indestructibly linked to the essence of the past and to the eternal tradition. Such expressions as, for example, "barbaric habits" (Zashchuk), or "in the midst of slavery" (Krushevan), though undoubtedly bearing a significant negative connotation (especially when

applied to the “upper” layers of the Bessarabian society), seem to mainly refer to the same stereotypical invocation of the local populations’ “remoteness and isolation from modern civilization.” No less important and revealing is the emphasis that the Russian authors explicitly put upon the Bessarabian Romanians’ cultural traditional collective identity, an emphasis that can be clearly discerned from the above-analyzed works. The religiosity and the everyday life of the Romanian peasant population, loaded with traditional mental patterns and values, as well as the “primitive” popular customs and the ancient pagan beliefs seem to represent, following the vision of the majority of the Russian authors, the quintessential traits determining the overall “traditionalism” of the Bessarabian peasantry. From this overall vision also stems the underlining, by some politically biased, but also more balanced Russian writings, of the importance of education as a means of mass socialization and, hence, of the necessary inclusion of the Bessarabian Romanian peasantry into the Russian “identity space” not only on a superficial and mostly formal, but also on a visible and real level. One can argue, following this line of argument, that only in this larger context can the too well-known and already “classical” quotation from Batiushkov’s work be adequately perceived and understood, taking into account all its deeper implications, and the overall argument of this author. This quotation refers to the necessity and the best ways of making “the Moldavians at least half Russian through education,” a quotation which has been invoked and constantly reinterpreted by all the works recently published on the situation of Bessarabia under Russian domination. Similarly, the statement that Bessarabia has been Russified through two basic means: the school and the church, also endlessly repeated by the Romanian national historiography, can be better assessed and evaluated through the taking into account of the above argument.

To conclude the discussion of the Russian authors’ views on the “traditional identity” of the Bessarabian Romanians, another statement of Batiushkov, whose book has been so often invoked here, is quite significant. Namely, he claims: “In what we are concerned, we can safely argue that not only in the more isolated villages of the Bessarabian province, but even in the center of the city of Chisinau we have encountered Moldavian peasants that knew absolutely no Russian word. I should add that this ignorance of the Russian language must not be interpreted as stemming from [their] separatist tendencies, but [only] from their isolation.”¹⁵ To conclude and recapitulate the above considerations, one can argue that the collective identity of the Bessarabian Romanians as reflected in the works of the contemporary

¹⁵ P. N. Batiushkov, *op. cit.*, p. 175.

Russian authors was interpreted, to a large extent, through the lenses of peasant traditionalism. This feature had, indeed, a particularly important, though quite ambiguous role, in the crystallization and the development of the reactive identity of the local Romanian population. The phenomenon of reactive identity can be viewed, on the one hand, as an impediment in the process of the creation and defining of the locals' national identity and consciousness. On the other hand, however, it has been a factor which contributed, though indirectly, to the preservation of the cultural and ethnic identity of this human community. This allowed the intensifying of the resistance of the Bessarabian Romanians to the integrating efforts promoted by an identity space with a significant assimilating potential- the Russian one.

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 consolidating the 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 chronical incapacity of this movement to transcend a purely local, limited level, in 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.

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”¹⁶ 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.

Through the analysis of the works of Russian authors written during the period of 1812-1918, the present paper sought to fulfill two principal

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 175.

aims. On the one hand, it attempted to present a more balanced perspective, detached from the nationalistically loaded view on the issue, which plagues the East European national historiographies. Also, in pursuing this goal, it had the objective of discerning the fundamental features of the Bessarabian reality which more thoroughly reflected certain crucial elements of the Bessarabian Romanians' collective identity. On the other hand, it had the aim of uncovering the essence of the interpretation of this reality proposed by the Russian authors of the epoch, both in its objective and subjective or even biased hypostases. In pursuing this focus of the present research, one should take into account not only the particular features of each authors' representation of the locals' collective identity, but also the similar and constant features of their observations, which ultimately present the Russian historiography of the XIX-beginning of the XX century, in spite of all its inconsistencies and drawbacks, as, essentially, a unitary and coherent whole.

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