

# The Moldovan Bloc in the Country Council The Creator of Bessarabia's Destiny

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Country Council  
(1917–1918)

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ONE HUNDRED years ago, in the festivity hall of the Boys High School No. 3 in Kishinev, the voice of history began to be heard: awakened to their national life, on that exact day, a handful of individuals who loved their people and country gathered in that hall seeking to take into their own hands the fate of Bessarabia, alienated in 1812. A lot of things had been said until that moment, in the various meetings held on the territory of Bessarabia, as well as abroad, about the necessity of a Country Council as a representative institution at the level of the province, which could assume the entire responsibility for the fate of the former tsarist guberniya, which, under the existing conditions, could only lead to the self-determination of the people living between the Prut and the Dniester rivers, as was happening on almost the entire territory of the former Russian Empire. The ideas of a provincial Diet, of Bessarabia's autonomy, of solving the agrarian problem, of being educated in their native tongue, of making the Church turn to-

wards the lower categories of the population were all going hand in hand with the claims for democratic freedoms and rights. Won through the emancipating effort of the Russian revolution, those rights had to be put in the service of a noble cause, they had to take a national form in order to acquire greater appeal and consistency all over Bessarabia. If the revolution had opened the path towards freedom, then the way to overcome the past was not easy at all, especially since the revolution itself, at a certain point, had started to deny its own ideals and to devour its artisans.

At such a turning point was summoned in Kishinev a great Moldovan Military Congress, on the tricolor flags of which one could read the unanimous desire of putting themselves in the service of the oppressed people living east of the Prut River. Having arrived with representative mandates from the various units on the Eastern Front, on 21 October, the more than 800 delegates firmly declared themselves in favor of Bessarabia's autonomy; it was also the moment when a current emerged, favoring the re-inclusion of the territory between the Prut and the Dniester rivers into Romania.<sup>1</sup> In the then context of the Russian Revolution, declaring Bessarabia's autonomy marked a first and irreversible step towards national self-determination. The congress decided to establish the Country Council, also electing the first deputies of the prospective legislative forum, which would lay the foundations of the future Moldovan Bloc, as a parliamentary faction. As to the method of election, by delegation, of the Country Council members, the representativeness and legitimacy of this institution were often questioned. Certainly, the elections through a direct vote were preferred, if only there had been people to organize them, if only there had existed an electoral law that took into account Bessarabia's specificity, if only the land had not been subjected to all the misfortunes caused by the proximity to the Romanian front, if only the 300 thousand young Bessarabians sent to the battlefield—which represented around 25% of the mature population of the land—had been able to cast their votes, too. However, since all those circumstances lacked, the only means of preventing arbitrariness and abuse in Bessarabia was the collective will for self-determination and the pursuit of national interest. It is here that lies the historic merit of the Moldovan Military Congress, the merit of having defined the mechanism and of having initiated the procedure for the creation of the Country Council, of assuming power in a moment of great distress, and of giving it a strong democratic and national expression.

A bureau for the organization of the Country Council, elected in the Congress, carried out in less than one hundred days a series of organizational activities, the purpose of which was to set up a democratic and representative parliamentary institution. The initiative and tone of all those actions belonged to the deputies who would later organize themselves in the Moldovan Bloc, while

their leaders would fully speak their mind in all the 15 meetings of the bureau. The 70% quota given to the representatives of the Romanian population in the Country Council was not a simple statistical finding. It reflected the great preoccupation of those who had initiated the national movement for the provincial Diet to be a national democratic institution, which should really serve those who, living in the territory between the Prut and the Dniester rivers, had had no one to talk to or anyone to protect them for more than one hundred years.

Consequently, on 19 November, the *Ardealul* newspaper published a short announcement, signed by Vasile Țanțu, president of the organization office of the Country Council, which stated: "The inauguration of the Country Council has been set for 21 November 1917, irrespective of the number of deputies present. All deputies are invited to participate on the mentioned date."<sup>22</sup> No less than 95 deputies participated on the set date.

The opening of the works of the Country Council confirmed the capacity for national creation, channeling political developments on a parliamentary path, of the Western type, complying with the democratic principle of the separation of powers. In the context created after the Bolshevik party took the power in Petrograd, the path of free Bessarabia had nothing in common with dictatorship and class discrimination, the new authorities in Kishinev being willing to see in V. I. Ulianov's (Lenin's) Government only an executive arm of Russia within their natural borders. The young Bessarabian political class saw their mission as the defense of democratic values, the modernization of society, national emancipation and self-determination. If a parliamentary majority had not been formed around the Moldovan Bloc, which had attracted the most enlightened and determined minds in Bessarabia at that time, without their excellent organization or their solidary efforts, all those objectives would have remained unfulfilled.

Thanks to their leaders' wisdom, the Moldovan Bloc pursued the identification of a consensus in the Country Council activities, making reasonable compromises, as in the case of the election of Ion Incuț as head of the legislative institution, instead of Ion Pelivan, the incontestable leader of the Bloc, or in the formation of the leadership bodies of Parliament and of the first Bessarabian Government, where seats were also offered to the ethnic minorities. In what concerns its social profile, the Moldovan Bloc included people whose political convictions were left-wing, reformist, European democratic, but also widely inclined towards the ideas of national emancipation and serving the common good.

The proclamation of the Democratic Republic of Moldova, on 2 December 1917, as an expression of the aspirations for national emancipation, marked a first step towards the separation from the former metropolis, and consolidated the framework of a parliamentary political system. It is worth mentioning that,

among the fundamental demands of the 1917 national movement, formulated after the collapse of the tsarist autocracy, there was nothing regarding the formation of a separate entity of Bessarabia, more specifically of a republic. A Diet of the territory between the Prut and the Dniester rivers, Bessarabia's autonomy, a series of other objectives of great political, social, and national breadth were all envisaged. However, the idea of proclaiming a republic would appear much later. The first one to publicly express this idea was Ion Buzdugan, on 21 October 1917, during the debates on Bessarabia's autonomy held at the Moldovan Military Congress in Kishinev. The issue was approached by Ion Incuțeț, after his election as president of the Country Council on 21 November 1917. Incuțeț said that, based on the right to self-determination gained after the Revolution, Bessarabia "would have to become a democratic republic, an indivisible part of the great Russian Democratic Federative Republic."<sup>3</sup> Among the first supporters of the idea of a "Bessarabian democratic republic" was Pantelimon Erhan,<sup>4</sup> who had been elected to run the executive institution of Bessarabia. Mention should be made that both of them were sent by the Provisional Government in Petrograd to "deepen" the revolution in Kishinev. Here is a contribution—disregarded by historiography—of the "envoys" of the former metropolis, which opened new horizons for the national movement in the territory.<sup>5</sup>

As a sum of factors and conditions, the context played an essential role in the proclamation of the Moldovan Democratic Republic. As the national fringes of the former Tsarist Empire proclaimed themselves republics one by one, the creation of the Moldovan Republic was rightfully triggered by the contamination with all those ideas and projects, as well as based on the right to national self-determination.<sup>6</sup>

On 7 November, neighboring Ukraine proclaimed itself a Popular Republic, while previously, as a result of the Bolshevik coup in Petrograd, Russia had also declared itself a Federative Republic of Soviets, which precipitated the inclusion on the Country Council's agenda of the matter regarding the declaration of an autonomous Bessarabia—proclaimed by the Military Congress as a Moldovan Democratic Republic—even more so since on the entire territory of former Russia there were talks about the possible creation of a federative community of the new national republics, in which, at that stage, the Kishinev leaders also intended to participate. However, to be able to sit at the same table with the representatives of the new national republics and to plead in favor of Bessarabia's interests, they needed a special form of representation at the level of the province, as well as an incontestable mandate from an entity equal in status to those of the future project partners.

A large part of the population and of the various social and political organizations supported the authority of the Country Council and the proclamation

of the Moldovan Republic,<sup>7</sup> which subscribed to the fundamental democratic values and aimed for a series of social and economic reforms. The new entity had, therefore, the necessary internal legitimacy, and expected external recognition. The very formation of the Moldovan Democratic Republic, between the Prut and the Dniester rivers, between Khotin and the Black Sea, conferred upon Bessarabia an equal status with the Republic of Ukraine or Russia, and marked a new and irreversible stage on the path to national self-determination.

During the troubled times at the end of 1917 and beginning of 1918, when a military structure from outside Bessarabia, but which had established itself in Kishinev, the Battlefront Section of the Odessa RUMCEROD, maliciously attacked the Country Council, the leaders of the Moldovan Bloc, mandated by the legislature, took the courageous action of asking for external help, putting Bessarabia under the protection of the Romanian army, which had crossed the Prut River with the consent of the Entente countries, and which could not have been a foreign army to those who had been alienated from their brothers 106 years before. Neither could it have been “an intervention army”—as the Soviet historiography claimed—on the territory of a republic that had requested its assistance.

The dissolution by the Bolshevik authorities, on 5 January 1918, of the Constituent Assembly of the entire Russia, which was expected to legalize the great “Russian Democratic Federative Republic,” cancelled all the efforts of willingly bringing back together the former national territories, which had as a consequence the categorical abandonment of the old project and the reconsideration of the process of national self-determination. The Ukrainian Popular Republic declared its independence, while the Country Council was also determined to take this decisive step.

Just like the declaration of 2 December, the declaration of independence of the Moldovan Democratic Republic bears the clear mark of the Moldovan Bloc, being unanimously adopted on 24 January 1918. It seemed the time had come to start the promised agrarian, constitutional, and administrative reforms. However, given the hardships of the previous year of the Great War, it was absolutely necessary for Bessarabia not only to protect its present, but also to ensure its future. The solution could not have come from anyone else but from those who had advanced and promoted a comprehensive national program, suitable for the Bessarabian population, and who, under the new conditions, had to decide which path to follow—to choose between the unpredictability of staying on their own in the turbulent Eastern area, or to make an effort to overcome their own condition and to unite Stephen the Great’s old province with Romania, pursuing a Western orientation. For the Moldovan Bloc, the leaders of which had an appropriate perspective on the gravity of the domestic and foreign situation of the Moldovan Republic, that issue did not have the character of a dilemma, as

Bessarabia would find its natural place in the Romanian family. However, not only did its return home have to end a historical injustice, but, more than that, it had to bring in the life of the entire Romanian society new freedoms and democratic reforms, in order to broaden and strengthen its European developmental horizon. This is the meaning that one has to keep in mind when thinking about the overwhelming vote of the Moldovan Bloc and of the other deputies who had joined it in support of Bessarabia's union with its mother country, Romania, on 27 March 1918.

**S**ADLY, EVEN today, one hundred years later, the Country Council and, implicitly, the Moldovan Bloc are still denied the merit of having taken the unification decision, on account of the stated “provisional” character of the legislature and the absence of the respective prerogatives. The Country Council actually had the most comprehensive prerogatives, at national and international level, and they were extended when the local and regional situation deteriorated. Moreover, if the Country Council's rights of assuming the supreme power in Bessarabia, of forming a Democratic Republic, of proclaiming the independence of the state without questioning the legitimacy of their mandate up to that moment, are all recognized, then it is clear that the essence of the matter does not reside in the nature or mandate of the Bessarabian legislative institution. It is rather found in the twisted logic of those who loathe the choice made by the parliamentary majority on the memorable day of 27 March, and who, driven by resentment, are afraid of the impact of the union on the present moment, trying to suppress it by distorting the historical truth. Consequently, isn't it obvious that challenging, under one pretext or another, the vote of 27 March, which has to be seen without hatred or bias in the context of the era, actually means contesting everything that was built through the efforts of the Country Council and of the parliamentary majority, gathered around the Moldovan Bloc, since the very day of the opening of the works of the legislative body on 21 November 1917, contesting exactly what appears to be accepted?

Furthermore, history does not tolerate selective approaches, and the history of the Country Council has to be seen in its organicity, has to be understood and assumed as an inseparable and enlightening part of the Romanian spiritual heritage, with care for the past, accountability for the present, and confidence in the future that awaits us.

During the one hundred years that have passed since those historic events, a lot of good and bad things have been said about the Country Council and the Moldovan Bloc, the history of which is practically intertwined with the history of the Bessarabian legislative assembly. The force of the redoubtable Moldovan Bloc, of this vigorous axis of national representation in 1917–1918, drew in-

spiration from the sorrows and needs of a people, in order to take that people out of the mists of history. They distinguished themselves through organizational coherence, courageous actions, thirst for justice, and ideological uprightness before both friends and foes. Aware of their historic mission and of their Romanian identity, keeping their unity and widening their social support, the Moldovan Bloc knew how to navigate around the pitfalls of that time, giving meaning, direction, and a precise purpose to the complicated self-determination process, and remaining a model for the pursuit of the supreme national goal, the creator of free Bessarabia's destiny.



## Notes

1. *Lupta*, no. 36, 19 November/2 December 1917. In an interview published in the same newspaper of the Romanian socialists settled in Odessa, Captain Em. Catelli, president of the Moldovan Military Committee in Odessa, stated that the relations between Bessarabia and Romania were supposed to be “those between two good neighbours, like two independent states.” “We,” said Catelli, an old militant for the socialist revolutionary party, “love the Romanian people like a brother, but we will never accept to be subjugated by the Romanian oligarchy.” Not very long after, however, Catelli mentioned that “once democracy triumphs in Romania, where other social institutions will be set up, once the Romanian peasants become free citizens and owners of their land, if Bessarabia’s annexation corresponds to the unanimous vote of the two countries, then we shall all accept it.”
2. *Ardealul* (Kishinev), 19 November 1917.
3. Gheorghe E. Cojocaru, *Sfatul Țării: Itinerar* (Kishinev: Civitas, 1998), 37.
4. *Ibid.*, 39.
5. The notion of “Moldovan Republic” is first found in the minutes of the Country Council of 28 November, when a representative of the battlefront congress of the Polish military saluted (!) the “Moldovan Republic.” In response, and anticipating the 2 December Declaration of the Country Council, Pan Halippa, who was chairing the meeting, stated that “Bessarabia is a piece of Moldavia, broken from it. We, the Moldovans, by proclaiming the Moldovan Republic, limit ourselves to securing our rights in the territory between the Prut and the Dniester rivers. The peoples’ ultimate purpose is the union of all populations; this union is a matter of the future, and we, for the time being, will put ourselves in the service of order.” *Sfatul Țării: Documente. Procesele-verbale ale ședințelor în plen*, ed. Ion Țurcanu (Kishinev: Știința, 2016), 115. Ion Buzdugan regretted that the Declaration concerning the Moldovan Republic was not adopted on the very day of the inauguration of the Country Council’s works (*ibid.*, 170).
6. For more details see: Valeriu Popovschi, *Biroul de organizare al Sfatului Țării (27 octombrie–21 noiembrie 1917)/Republica Democratică Moldovenească (Formarea și evo-*

*luția, 1917–1918*) (Bucharest–Brăila: Ed. Academiei Române, Muzeul Brăilei “Carol I,” Istros, 2017). Valeriu Popovschi mentions that the Moldovan Republic, “being created out of necessity, does not have and can never have anything in common with the RASSM or the RSSM, established by Moscow, in 1924 and 1940 respectively, for political purposes, and neither does it have anything in common with the current Republic of Moldova,” and some people’s attempt to use this name to prove the “continuity” over time of “the Moldovan national statehood” “is nothing more than an aberration” (ibid., 231).

7. *Sfatul Țării: Documente*, 102–121, 127, 147, 155, 205–206, 214, 222, 226, etc.

### **Abstract**

#### The Moldovan Bloc in the Country Council: The Creator of Bessarabia’s Destiny

In this study, the author analyses the role played by the Moldovan Bloc, the majority parliamentary faction in the Country Council (*Sfatul Țării*), in the years 1917–1918. The most important decisions of the Bessarabian legislative assembly, such as the declaration of the Moldovan Democratic Republic on 2 December 1917, the proclamation of its independence on 24 January 1918, the unification of Bessarabia with Romania on 27 March of the same year, were initiated and carried out by the deputies of the Moldovan Bloc, supported by other parliamentary representatives. The author points out that the history of the Country Council, including the activity of the Moldovan Bloc, must be understood and assumed in its entirety, as an inseparable part of the contemporary spiritual inheritance.

### **Keywords**

Bessarabia, Country Council, Moldovan Democratic Republic, Romania, Moldovan Military Congress