

The Invention of the “Moldavian Language” in 1924

As a Political Weapon in the
Conflict between Romanian
and Ukrainian Bolsheviks at the
Beginnings of the Soviet Union

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*The Soviet project of
creating a “Moldavian
language” separate from
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failure.*

THE CONSTITUTIONAL Court of the Republic of Moldova ruled on 5 December 2013 that Romanian is the official language of the country. This ruling superseded the provisions of the Constitution of 1994, which states in Article 13 that the official language is Moldavian.¹ While the majority of linguists agree that there is no fundamental difference between the Romanian and Moldavian languages, the issue of the name of the idiom spoken in the Republic of Moldova remains a hot subject during electoral campaigns, a strong indicator that it is a political issue. The aim of the present article is to determine the moment when the “Moldavian language” became a political issue and to elucidate the process behind this development.

The province of Bessarabia, the region of the medieval state of Moldavia located between the rivers Prut and

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Dniester, was annexed by the Russian Empire in 1812, and most of this province became the nowadays Republic of Moldova, after having been part of Romania between 1918–1940 and 1941–1944, and part of Soviet Union between 1944 and 1991. While Bessarabia was part of Romania, in 1924 the Soviet Union formed a Moldavian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (MASSR) on the left bank of the Dniester with the stated objective of re-annexing Bessarabia and launching a Soviet-style revolution in Romania. The MASSR was the crucible for the Moldavian language as a political concept, aimed at building a Moldavian ethnic and national identity separated from the Romanian identity. At the end of World War II, the MASSR was united with Bessarabia and eventually, during the dissolution of the USSR, the former MASSR on the left bank of the Dniester formed the secessionist Transnistria. The origins of the disputes regarding the denomination of the language spoken in the Republic of Moldova can be traced back to the formation of the MASSR.

A Vague Origin

THE EXPRESSION “Moldavian language” was used in writing at least since the 16th century, describing the language spoken in the medieval principality of Moldavia, but the chroniclers mentioned the fact that the vernaculars used by Romanians in Moldavia, Wallachia and Transylvania were basically the same language, commonly referred to as Romanian. Grigore Ureche (1590–1647), Miron Costin (1633–1692), Dimitrie Cantemir (1673–1723) went to great extents to argue for the common origins and language that the people of Moldavia shared with the inhabitants of Wallachia and Transylvania.² While Bessarabia was part of the Russian Empire there was no attempt from the central or local government to build a separate identity for the inhabitants of the province. They were named Moldavians, but at the same time there was no doubt about their Romanian ethnic identity, while the language was either called Romanian or, when it was called Moldavian, it was not deemed different from Romanian.³

The project of a Moldavian language separated from the Romanian language was started in the MASSR, but the specific details about the exact circumstances are not revealed in any of the recent extended studies devoted to the issue. Wim van Meurs presented the ambiguity faced by the Soviets in the case of the language to be used in Bessarabia or on the left bank of the Dniester and the campaign to invent a “Moldavian language” in the MASSR, but he did not pinpoint the exact moment when the Soviets embarked on this project.⁴ Argentina Gribincea, Mihai Gribincea and Ion Șișcanu also follow the actions of the MASSR

during its first years of existence end the endeavors to impose a “Moldavian language,” but still do not search for the origins of this political project.⁵ Charles King also devoted a chapter to the efforts made by the self-titled linguists of the MASSR in developing a “Moldavian language” separate from Romanian—efforts so thorough that the result was virtually incomprehensible to any speaker of any Romanian language variant—and analyzed the Soviet unsuccessful policies in imposing the new language, without trying to reveal the mechanisms behind the decision to start the development of the “Moldavian language.”⁶

Gheorghe Cojocaru published a comprehensive collection of documents regarding the birth of the MASSR along with a study focused on the Soviet political objectives regarding Romania, the linguistic policy being only touched upon when deemed relevant.⁷ Using the documents published by Gheorghe Cojocaru it is possible to outline the process that led to the decision to create a separate “Moldavian language.”

The Beginnings of a Moldavian Republic

THE ORIGINS of the Moldavian Autonomous Socialist Soviet Republic (MASSR) on the left bank of the Dniester may be traced back to the Initiative Group to Form the Moldavian Republic, composed of Grigory Kotovsky, Robert Eideman, Dubogo, Osadchenko, Ion Dic Diicescu, Popovici, Alter Zalic, Alexandru Nicolau, Al. Bădulescu, Pavel Tkachenko and Solomon Tinkelman.⁸ It was a heterogeneous alliance: Kotovsky, Eideman, Dubogo and Osadchenko were members of the Soviet military, commanders of large units in Ukraine; Ion Dic Diicescu, Alexandru Nicolau, Alter Zalic, and Popovici were Romanian socialists, supporters since 1917–1918 of the Bolshevik revolution, active in the Odessa group of Christian Rakovsky, then high level members of the Comintern; Solomon Tinkelman was a Bolshevik activist from Kishinev; the nom de guerre Al. Bădulescu belonged to Ghiță Moscu, a former socialist from Iași; the Ukrainian Pavel Tkachenko was the single member of this group with origins on the left bank of the Dniester. The founding of a Moldavian republic on the left bank of the Dniester reveals itself, through the membership of its initiative group, as a common project of the Soviet military in Ukraine and the Cominternists of Romanian origin who supported Christian Rakovsky (a Bulgarian socialist raised in Romania, with a personal objective of founding a Balkan Communist Federation, aiming for a line connecting Soviet Russia with the region south of the Danube). On another level, this initiative group illustrates the conflict between the Cominternists of Romanian origin and the communists in Bessarabia; the former, having high level positions in Moscow, wanted to

provoke a Bolshevik revolution in Romania via Bessarabia, but saw the province between the Prut and the Dniester as part of a communist Romania; the latter, Bolsheviks of Ukrainian origin, had a different objective: a Bessarabian province separated from Romania, autonomous or part of Soviet Ukraine.⁹

The progress of the new soviet republic lacked momentum after the initial push. In spite of highly placed figures such as Mikhail Frunze and Semion Budionyi backing the foundation of the Moldavian republic, the Politburo of the Communist Party in Ukraine—CP(b)U—did not hurry to follow the Memorandum of 4 February 1924. During the meeting of 7 March, the communist leadership of Ukraine underlined its will to create an autonomous region and not a new republic on the left bank of the Dniester, and on 18 April the decision was indefinitely postponed under the pretext that there was no reliable ethnographic and territorial data.¹⁰ About the same time, the CP(b)U decided on 6 March to establish a Moldavian Section under the wing of the Odessa CP(b)U—this Moldavian Section being the center of control for the future Moldavian Republic.

A Struggle for Power

THE CONFLICT between the “Romanian” and the “Bessarabian” Bolsheviks had its roots in 1921, when the “Romanians” managed to take over the leadership, during the Third Congress of the Comintern in July 1921, with the objective of uniting Bessarabian and Romanian émigrés in their common party work on the Bessarabian direction. Under the initiative of Ion Dic Diicescu, the Bolsheviks with origins in Romania asserted their dominance, the Central Bureau of the Communist Party from Romania being formed of émigrés with origins in Romania. This alienated the Bolsheviks coming from Bessarabia, creating a division of labor: the “Romanians” stayed in Moscow, while the “Bessarabians” returned either to the southeastern regions of the Ukrainian SSR to continue their work in the local party committees, or to the Bessarabian underground.¹¹

The abovementioned conflict and resentment from the “Bessarabian” Bolsheviks came to light in the eve of the formation of the MASSR. On 1 July 1924 a group of Bolsheviks from Bessarabia asked the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Russia to support the idea of a Bessarabian Section separated from the Communist Party of Romania, following the model of the Moldavian Section in Odessa—a request that illustrated the tendency to escape the influence of the “Romanian” Bolsheviks.¹² The same request was made shortly after, during the 7th Conference of the Balkan Communist Federation, under the

claim that the Bolsheviks from Romania did not understand the real problems in Bessarabia.¹³

The project for the MASSR gained traction again on 29 July when, after the intercession of Mikhail Frunze with Joseph Stalin, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Russia asked the Communist Party of Ukraine to give the necessary directives for the formation of the MASSR.¹⁴ Two weeks later, the Secretary General of the Communist Party of Ukraine, Grigory Petrovsky, entrusted Abraham Grinshtein with the formation of the MASSR, asking the Moldavian Section in Odessa to provide the necessary support.¹⁵ On 19 August 1924 the Moldavian Section of the Communist Party of Ukraine in Odessa formed a Commission for the Formation of the MASSR, its main members being Abraham Grinshtein, Joseph Badeev, Grigorii Saryi, Ivan Krivorukov, and Pavel Chior.¹⁶ During this meeting the Moldavian Section in Odessa rejected a report from Ion Dic Diicescu asking for a debate on the membership in the Commission for the Formation of the MASSR, saying that such a debate would endanger the project by putting it under public scrutiny.

Ion Dic Diicescu was enraged by the fact that the initiators of the MASSR idea had been overlooked and the project was being run by “Bessarabian” Bolsheviks under the protection of the Communist Party of Ukraine. The events of 1921, when the “Romanian” Bolsheviks asserted their dominance over those coming from Bessarabia had just backfired; the “Bessarabians,” enjoying the local support of the Communist Party of Ukraine, managed to take over the whole operation. At the same time, the Ukrainian Bolsheviks were reluctant to offer autonomy to a frontier region neighboring a capitalist state, Romania. The “Romanian” Bolsheviks enjoyed support from Moscow—but not to the extent they wished, as Moscow was more than happy to let the Ukrainian Bolsheviks deal with local issues.

Still, during August of 1924 the balance of power was unpredictable and Ion Dic Diicescu did his best to regain control over what he saw as his project. On 22 August 1924 the Odessa Section of the Communist Party of Ukraine complained to the Secretary General Grigory Petrovsky about Ion Dic Diicescu, who tried to change the membership of the Commission for the Formation of the MASSR, accusing him of breaching the secrecy of party matters.¹⁷

The Argument for a “Moldavian Language”

THIS IS the moment when the “Moldavian language” issue emerged, a false problem that would endure for almost a century, until our days. The minutes of the Commission for the Formation of the MASSR from 22 August 1924 record a dispute between Grigorii Saryi, on one side, and

Abraham Grinshtein and Joseph Badeev, on the other.¹⁸ Staryi thought that the variant of the Romanian language understood by the population on the left bank of the Dniester lacked any political vocabulary, rendering mute all attempts at communist propaganda. Therefore, he considered that the best course was to use the established political vocabulary of the Romanian language, as being close to the local speech, recommending at the same time the use of the Latin alphabet for the future publications. Badeev and Grinshtein opposed this course of action, maintaining that the locals felt close to the Russian culture and language, rejecting the idea of using Romanian words in Soviet propaganda and arguing in favor of the Cyrillic alphabet.

Staryi detailed his arguments in a report, stating that the language issue must be addressed directly, since it was fundamental for the political activity in the region.¹⁹ Declining his philological and linguistic competences, Staryi stated the problem (is there a Moldavian language different from the Romanian language?) and then approached it from a practical point of view, affirming that the language spoken east of the Carpathians up to and across the river Dniester is mutually understood, being basically the same. This popular language lacked any political vocabulary, hindering any communist propaganda in the region. Staryi argued in favor of the Latin alphabet, saying that in Bessarabia this was the official norm, and given the perspective of annexing this province and for the future propaganda, the best solution would be to use the same script in MASSR schools. Staryi considered that it would have been impossible to invent a new “Moldavian language” separated from the Romanian language, the only solution being to follow the steps of the linguistic evolution from Romania.

The reply to Staryi’s report was signed by Joseph Badeev, who stated that the “Moldavian language” is entirely different from Romanian, sharing only a common Latin origin—and while the “Moldavian language” fell under the influence of Russian for neologisms, the Romanian language adopted many French words, the two idioms being mutually incomprehensible. Regarding the future official alphabet, Badeev expressed his belief that the population on the left bank of the Dniester was fearful of the Latin letters and would reject them.²⁰

The Commission for the Formation of the MASSR carried on its activity, Staryi insisting on the use of the Romanian language, especially since he was the editor of the newspaper *Plugarul Roș* (The Red Plowman) addressed to the population of the left bank of the Dniester. On 22 September 1924 Ion Dic Diicescu mobilized some members of the Communist Party of Romania (A. Nicolau, Al. Bădulescu, T. Chioran) to support a new intervention to the Central Committees of the Communist Parties of Ukraine and Russia, asking to be accepted in the organization of the MASSR and protesting the idea of a “Moldavian language” using a Cyrillic alphabet. Unfortunately for them, Moscow endorsed on 25 Sep-

tember the decisions made by the Communist Party of Ukraine.²¹ On 11 October 1924 the Council of People's Commissars of Ukraine decided the formation of the Moldavian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic on the left bank of the Dniester.²² On 15 October 1924 the Communist Party of Ukraine entrusted Staryi with the leadership of the new republic, Badeev and Krivorukov being his seconds, alongside several others (Pavel Chior was recalled from his tenure as a military political commissar in order to be part of the attempt to impose a "Moldavian language")—no member of the Romanian group being allowed to be part of the leading structures of the MASSR.²³ On 28 October A. Nicolau proposed a long list of comrades from Romania that could have been part of the leadership of the MASSR—too late, the decision was made and the Communist Party of Ukraine did not want any Romanian émigré to be in charge of things at the border with Romania.²⁴

The decision to announce the formation of the MASSR on 11 October 1924 might have been precipitated by a statement of Vintilă Brătianu, Romanian finance minister at the time and brother of the Romanian Prime Minister Ion I. C. Brătianu. On 7 October 1924 *Plugarul Roș* published an article signed by Staryi which criticized a statement attributed to Vintilă Brătianu who said that

*The Romanian Government is glad that the Soviet Government is not hiding the fact that on the left bank of the Dniester there are several hundreds of thousands of Moldavians, and for these Moldavians the Soviet Government is forming a Moldavian Republic, in other words a Romanian Republic.*²⁵

For the Ukrainian Bolsheviks, already uneasy with the idea of Moldavian autonomy on the borders with Romania, this statement might have been the confirmation of their fears that the formation of a republic using the Romanian language would open the future possibility of union of the said republic with Romania.

Staryi's opposition to the Cyrillic alphabet faded in the weeks following the official formation of the MASSR.²⁶ The nomination of members of the Communist Party of Romania to the leadership of the MASSR reached Balta, the capital of the new republic, on 2 December 1924, and Joseph Badeev answered by saying that the Romanian émigrés were trying to destabilize the MASSR.²⁷ The Politburo of the Communist Party of Ukraine lent a helping hand on 15 December 1924, asking the Communist Party of Russia to abolish the Romanian Initiative Group that kept on trying to meddle in the affairs of the MASSR.²⁸ On 20 December the Moldavian Section of the Communist Party of Ukraine adopted a resolution that established the "Moldavian language" as the official language of the MASSR.²⁹

The Last Line of Resistance

ION DIC Diicescu fired a broadside on 8 January 1925, printing a brochure addressed to all leaders of the Soviet Union: Kamenev, Zinoviev, Kalinin, Trotsky, Bukharin, Stalin, etc. Ion Dic Diicescu harshly criticized the methods employed in establishing the MASSR and launched the severe accusation of Russification. According to Dic Diicescu, the theory that promoted the idea that Moldavians were a different nation from Romanians was lacking any scientific arguments. In regard to the language to be used in the MASSR, he defined the problem very much like Staryi: the idiom spoken by the population on the left bank of Dniester lacked the modern vocabulary, which opened two ways of action—to introduce Russian words adapted to the local idiom, or to make use of the modern vocabulary developed by the Romanian language. Dic Diicescu argued in favor of the latter and criticized the language used by the local newspaper *Plugarul Roș*: the new “Moldavian language” was considered incomprehensible for the locals.³⁰

The angry reaction of Dic Diicescu changed nothing. On 21 January 1925 the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Russia approved the proposal from the Communist Party of Ukraine to disband the Initiative Group for the MASSR from the Communist Party of Romania and to block all interferences from the Romanian group in the affairs of the MASSR.³¹ The fate of the official language of the MASSR was sealed by the Politburo of the Communist Party of Ukraine: on 13 February 1925 it decided that the “Moldavian language” would be used, along with the Cyrillic alphabet.³²

The convoluted story of the “Moldavian language” in the Soviet Union was far from over. The process of “Moldovenization” would be changed into “Romanization” after just a few years, only to be reversed back to “Moldovenization.” The attempt to create a “Moldavian language” separate from Romanian would suffer ups and downs along the entire history of the Soviet Union—after the death of Stalin only a handful of Soviet linguists that totally disregarded their scientific probity would dare to say that the “Moldavian language” is different from Romanian.³³ The final compromise was to use the Romanian language with the Cyrillic alphabet, without trying to invent a different language, something that changed in 1989 when the Latin alphabet was reinstated.

A Political Decision and Its Consequences

THE INVENTION of the “Moldavian language” was a political decision, the result of the confrontation between the Bolsheviks with origins in Romania and those with origins in Bessarabia. In this balance of power the “Romanians” thought at first they had the upper hand due to their connections with Moscow. On the other hand, the “Bessarabians” preferred the local politics under the protection of Communist Party of Ukraine. At the crucial point of confrontation, Moscow chose to let the Ukrainians deal with the local problems, abandoning the “Romanians” and supporting the decisions made by the Communist Party of Ukraine. Why did the “Bessarabians” choose to promote the idea of a “Moldavian language” distinct from Romanian? The political explanation is that they thus managed to escape the influence and dominance of the “Romanian” Bolsheviks, something they had sought since 1921 (a parallel result of the confrontations around the MASSR was the separation of Romanian émigrés from all matters concerning Bessarabia and the creation of a separate Moldavian Communist Party). At the same time there is a practical explanation: most of the Bessarabian leaders of the MASSR were fluent in Russian and did not speak even the local rural idiom they called “Moldavian language,” an accusation frequently used by Dic Diicescu in his complaints. Those able to speak this “Moldavian language” were not familiar with the modern Romanian vocabulary and felt intimidated and patronized by the “Romanian” Bolsheviks, and thus chose to break with them. The only rational voice, that of Staryi, was covered by the political interplay, and even he accepted quite hastily the concept of “Moldavian language” when the final decision was made. The main result was a strange and exotic attempt to create a new language, an entirely failed experiment with a separate history.³⁴

The fate of the founders of the MASSR and main supporters of the “Moldavian language” is worth examining, since this decision would have dire consequences for them. Grigorii Staryi (real name Borisov, an ethnic Russian born in 1880 in Bozieni, Bessarabia) was one of the leaders of the Bolshevik rebellion in Bender in 1919. He was sentenced to death in absentia by a Romanian court after the rebellion was suppressed. Grigorii Staryi was the uncontested leader of the MASSR from 1924 to 1937, with a short interruption between 1928 and 1932. In May 1937 Staryi was arrested by the NKVD in the Great Purge. Some of his former comrades in the MASSR who were detained by the NKVD (Ivan Krivorukov and Pavel Chior) confessed under torture that Staryi was the leader of a spying ring working for Romanian intelligence and that he had recruited them. After 10 days of questioning (and most probably torture) Grigorii Staryi confessed

to all accusations, saying that he had been an agent of Romanian intelligence since 1918 and carried out a secret anti-revolutionary mission against Soviet Union. The accusations and the confessions were equally ridiculous, Staryi being nothing else but a true soldier of the Soviet Revolution—he tried to bargain his own life for the life of his wife and child by admitting his guilt and asking for the most severe punishment, something that many true Bolsheviks did when confronted with the NKVD. At the same time Staryi provided his captors with a long list of names of his presumed co-workers in the fantastic ring of Romanian spies—most probably a list of people he hoped would share his fate. It is worth noting that among the accusations against Staryi was that he had opposed the creation of “Moldavian language” and supported the use of the Latin alphabet in the MASSR. Staryi was executed on 11 October 1937.³⁵

Mirroring the fate of Grigorii Staryi is that of Pavel Chior, another founder of the MASSR and the leading character in the process of creating a “Moldavian language.” He tried hard to build a “Moldavian language” by grafting Russian words on the rural idiom spoken on the left bank of the Dniester, but to no avail.³⁶ Paradoxically, while Staryi was accused of opposing the creation of a “Moldavian language,” Pavel Chior was accused by the NKVD in 1937 that he had tried to create a new “Moldavian language” distinct from Romanian!³⁷ The conflicting accusations brought against Staryi and Chior at the same time were not unusual at the time of the Stalinist Great Purge (Pavel Chior died in prison in 1943). Another founding father of the MASSR, Ivan Krivorukov, was also executed in 1937 under the accusation of spying for the Romanian intelligence services, which had allegedly recruited him in 1918—actually, in 1918 Krivorukov was a member of the Parliament in Chişinău and voted against the union of Bessarabia with Romania. Last but not the least is Abraham Grinshtein. He was also accused of being a Romanian spy in 1937 and executed—while actually in 1921 Abraham Grinshtein was the coordinator of the terrorist attack carried by Max Goldstein against the Romanian Senate.³⁸

The Soviet project of creating a “Moldavian language” separate from Romanian was an utter failure. After the death of Stalin a tacit compromise was reached in Chişinău: the official name of the language remained “Moldavian,” it used the Cyrillic alphabet but there were no further attempts at creating a new language—it was practically the Romanian language written in Cyrillic.³⁹

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Notes

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Abstract

The Invention of the “Moldavian Language” in 1924 As a Political Weapon in the Conflict between Romanian and Ukrainian Bolsheviks at the Beginnings of the Soviet Union

The birth certificate of the Moldavian language as a Soviet political project aimed at creating a Moldavian ethnic identity opposed to that of the Romanians may be traced back to the origins of the Moldavian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic. The confrontation between the Bolsheviks of Romanian origin and the Bolsheviks from Bessarabia supported by the Communist Party of Ukraine generated the idea of a Moldavian language separated from Romanian.

Keywords

Bessarabia, Moldavian language, Moldavian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic, Republic of Moldova, Soviet Union, Romania