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## Bessarabia as Part of Greater Romania: Challenges and Solutions

### Abstract

The focus of the article is Romania during the last part of the World War I (January– November 1918), when, after the demise of the Tsarist Empire, and shortly after the Bolshevik coup, Bessarabia proclaimed independence from Russia (24 January 1918), followed shortly by a union with Romania on 27 March. Based on documents of the time, we describe the circumstances of the Union, the difficulties that arose in the process of the integration of Bessarabia (proclaimed a republic) with the Kingdom of Romania, as well as the various opinions on the constitution of Greater Romania (through the later union of Bukovina and Transylvania).

After the end of the World War I and after the establishment of Greater Romania, the state and society faced various challenges, which they overcame (some successfully, others less so). The important figures of the time, some of whom were actively involved both in the Union and in subsequent political life, wrote about the emerging problems. For instance, Dr Petre Cazacu, a member of the Country Council (the Parliament of Bessarabia, 1917–1918), outlined a number of difficulties faced by the Bessarabian population in the first decade after the Union in his book *Zece ani de la Unire: Moldova dintre Prut și Nistru*

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(1918–1928) [Ten years after the Union: Moldova between the Prut and the Dniester (1918–1928)].

The publisher and politician Onisifor Ghibu expressed his views on this issue even more forcefully, and voiced his strong conviction that the Union of Bessarabia with Romania had been hasty. “Things would have turned out very differently in Bessarabia,” stated Ghibu, “if the union had not been forced and if it had occurred naturally, in the autumn of 1918, at the same time as that of Transylvania and Bukovina, in an atmosphere of triumphant Romanianism. Shielded by the Romanian army, Bessarabia, guided by its national culture and by the idea of the union of all Romanians, supported by people imbued with the holy feeling of love for the nation, would have made such progress during the eight months (March–November 1918) [of] favourable development, like in the past, that it could no longer have fallen prey to the ambitions of some, or to the poison of others”. We do not share Ghibu’s views. We believe that by the end of World War II Romanian historians (from both Romania and the Republic of Moldova) had already objectively presented the history of Romanians after World War I.

### Keywords

World War I, Romania’s neutrality, Bessarabia, Greater Romania

On the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the outbreak of the Great War (1914), Romania’s joining the war (1916), the collapse of the Tsarist Empire (February 1917) and the Bolshevik coup d’état (October 1917), successful national reunification (1 December 1918) and the international recognition of Greater Romania, Romanian historians wrote monographs and articles, published new documents and republished the most important texts of the time (documents, memoirs, and photographs). Romanian historians also organized international and national conferences, symposia, and round tables addressing these events. In turn, museographers held thematic exhibitions, while local authorities, as well as community organizations or even individuals built (or

restored) monuments or installed busts in memory of the great figures and events of the time. The efforts of historians, museographers and those directly involved in the commemoration of the Union's Centennial are presented in a fundamental work: *Enciclopedia: Centenarul Războiului de Reîntregire și al Marii Uniri (2014–2020)* [Encyclopaedia: The Centennial of the War of Unification and the Great Union (2014–2020)].

The minutes of the plenary sessions of the Country Council,<sup>1</sup> the minutes of the Agrarian Commission of the Country Council,<sup>2</sup> the republished five volumes of *Note politice* [Political Notes] authored by Alexandru Marghiloman<sup>3</sup> and others are particularly important for local history scholarship among the thousands of publications issued between 2014 and 2020.

The following is a succinct overview of the fundamental events in Romanian history during the years of World War I. Particular attention is paid to issues related to Bessarabia's separation from Russia and its return to its motherland Romania.

### **Romania during the years of neutrality: Romania's joining and participation in the War**

Around the beginning of the World War I, the Romanian nation was divided politically and administratively. Thus, in 1916, the year Romania joined the war, Transylvania and Bukovina – territories populated mainly by Romanians – were under the rule of the oppressive Austro-Hungarian Empire, and the Romanian province of Bessarabia was part of the “prison of the peoples” (Lenin): the Tsarist Empire.

The Romanians' sense of belonging to a national community and their manifest desire to achieve the sacred ideal of national-state unity were amply demonstrated by Bucharest both in the years leading up to the outbreak of the Great War and during the first two years of neutrality. Telling evidence of this was the prodigious activity of

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1 Sfatul Țării. *Documente*, vol. 1.

2 Sfatul Țării. *Documente*, vol. II.

3 Alexandru Marghiloman, *Note politice. 1897–1924...*

the Romanian Cultural League, which had foreign branches in the main European political and cultural-academic centres (Marinescu, 1993, p. 145). In September 1911, the Bucharest section of the Cultural League organized large-scale demonstrations under the banner of national unity, on the inauguration of the History Exhibition in Carol Park, thousands of Romanians “from all corners of Romania, as well as from the alienated provinces” came at the call of the League” (Marinescu, 1993, p. 192).

The philanthropic activity of Vasile Stroescu, a Bessarabian Romanian, leader of the Romanian Cultural League, is an epitome of Romanian solidarity, tangible proof of the sense of national unity. In 1911, for instance, Stroescu donated 500 crowns to the Romanian school in Mândra, Făgăraş, and another 500 crowns to the school in Marcoş. In the same year, he donated another 500 crowns to the church and school in Sălişteia Zarandului. The total sum contributed by the Bessarabian patriot to support Romanian culture across the Carpathians was 1 million lei (Marinescu, 1993, p. 189).

The years of Romania’s neutrality (1914–1916) saw an intensification of the movement for liberation and national-state unity of the Romanians, as part of the general European movement of the peoples oppressed by multinational empires. The outbreak of the war compelled Romania’s political class to make crucial decisions, especially with regard to achieving complete state unity. The leadership of the Romanian Kingdom was faced with a great dilemma: whether to choose an alliance with the Entente states or with the Triple Alliance states. Joining the war on the side of the latter military block offered the prospect of Bessarabia’s return to the bosom of the motherland land, but “would have prevented the national liberation of the Romanians of Transylvania and Bukovina” (Marinescu, 1993, p. 208).

In this situation, the Bessarabian-born Romanian patriot Constantin Stere fervently pleaded for Romania to join the war on the side of the Triple Alliance. In his speeches during the sessions of the Romanian Chamber of Parliament, which was meeting to discuss the Message to be delivered by the Crown, Stere provided multiple arguments in favour of his position and that of his followers on the issue of Romania’s foreign policy. “Bukovina and Bessarabia,” stressed

Stere, “were part of the old Moldavia, and shared their entire history with the Romanians of the Kingdom. Our parents, like yours (the Romanians living in the Kingdom – A.P.), lived during the reign of Alexander the Good, Stephen the Great and John the Brave. There is not a speck of Romanian soil without a drop of their blood and a molecule of their bones. We have built this state together” (Stere, 1997, p. 35). Based on historical facts, Stere convincingly demonstrated the aggressiveness of Russian tsarism’s foreign policy, and the anti-Romanian nature of St. Petersburg’s policy in the Balkans and in the Straits regions. “There is only one path open for us,” insisted Stere: that against Russia and for Bessarabia. Otherwise we will lose Bessarabia and will be left without Transylvania also. Transylvania hasn’t perished in a thousand years, it is not going to perish from now on either” (1997, p. 38).

Political and patriotic groups rallying around the Romanian Cultural League, were firmly in favour of Romania’s joining the war alongside the Entente, especially after the signatories to the alliance (France, Great Britain, and Russia) decided to fully satisfy Romania’s demands for the union of Transylvania and Bukovina with Romania. This “gradually became the main focus of the vast majority of Romanian public opinion” (Marinescu, 1993, p. 209).

In 1916, criticism (both from the pro-German party and from the supporters of the alliance with the Entente) against the government led by Ion I.C. Brătianu intensified. Bucharest’s policy of neutrality could not last long. Romanian diplomacy carried out extensive secret activities, whose main aim was for Romania to join the war alongside the Entente. Later, on 16 December 1919, Brătianu delivered a speech in the Chamber of Deputies, in which he explained why Romania had joined the war alongside the Entente countries. The first reason was the Romanian government’s rejection of the policy conducted in the Balkans by the Germans and Austro-Hungarians, whose attack on Serbia had led to the outbreak of World War I. Romania entered into an alliance with these two powers in October 1883.

“We entered into an agreement (with Germany and Austria-Hungary – A.P.)”, Brătianu pointed out, “in order to guarantee the independence of the Balkans, we did so in order to maintain peace, and those who were our allies waged a war of aggression, seeking

to destroy the Balkan state and suppress its independence. That is why we could not join our yesterday's allies in their war" (Brătianu, 1996, p. 28).

The second reason that prompted Romania's officials to advocate joining the Entente was the two main principles on which the policy of the Allies (the Entente, A.P.) was based: a) the independence of small states and b) the freedom of nations. "When this banner is raised in a great battle, capable of changing the previous situation of Europe," Brătianu noted, "all feelings, all interests, all the souls in Romania can only rally around it. Romania must not watch this struggle helplessly, like a bystander waiting idly and watching two men fight only to have the winner decide its fate in the end" (Brătianu, 1996, p. 29).

Romania joined the war at the request of the Entente states, at the time "when their armies were in a difficult situation on almost all fronts" (Marinescu, 1993, p. 238). Prime Minister Brătianu drew attention to this significant fact: "We did not join the war as unwelcome petitioners. We entered the war valiantly, when the French ambassador to Petrograd said: if Romania does not enter the war, the western front may be compromised. We went into the war when the Russians were telling us: now or never" (Brătianu, 1996, p. 34). Therefore, the timing of Romania's joining the war was not chosen only by Bucharest, but was largely imposed by the Entente powers. Admittedly, Romania was not sufficiently well prepared to fight a modern war. Nevertheless, its involvement in the hostilities "produced 'a marvellous effect on the morale' of the member states of the Entente and also brought about important favourable changes on the battle fronts" (Marinescu, 1993, p. 239).

By signing the Treaty of Alliance and the Military Convention on 16 August 1916, Romania obtained from the Entente Powers the recognition of its right to reunite Transylvania, Banat and Bukovina and to have this union enshrined in the future Peace Treaty with the Central Powers. Military cooperation defined the obligations of both sides.

In accordance with the provisions of the Military Convention, Romania declared war on Austria-Hungary on 14 (27) August 1916. The Romanian army crossed the Carpathians, liberating a vast territory with important urban centres such as Orşova, Braşov,

Sf. Gheorghe, Miercurea-Ciuc, Târgu Secuiesc, and Borsec. The Romanian army's advancement was not supported by the Allies. Moreover, in the midst of the Romanian army's offensive in Transylvania, Bulgaria declared war on Romania. The Bulgarian army, in alliance with German military troops, went on the offensive in southern Romania. The Romanian General Staff was forced to send some of the troops to the front in Dobrogea. In the meantime, German and Austro-Hungarian military forces had gone on the counter-offensive in Transylvania. On the Southern Front, the Romanian Army took up defensive positions. East of the Carpathians, after fierce battles, German and Austro-Hungarian troops were stopped at Oituz. In southern Transylvania, however, Romanian resistance was less successful.

The overwhelming superiority of the enemy and the refusal of the Russian commanders to conduct military actions in support of the Romanian Army forced the Romanian military to abandon its strategic plan for defending the Olt Gorge. In the Argeş-Neajlov region, the Romanian Army put up strong resistance in the Battle of Bucharest. After heavy fighting, in December 1916, the front stalled in the valleys of the Suşiţa, Putna and Şiret rivers. The indisputable numerical and technical superiority of the German and Austro-Hungarian armies over the Romanian army, the failure of the allies to fulfil their obligations, and the insufficient supply of Romanian troops with rifles, machine guns, planes, and cannons resulted in the defeat of the Romanian army. Thus, a complex set of objective and subjective causes led to the temporary withdrawal of the Romanian Army, the Royal House, the Government, the Parliament and other state bodies to Iaşi.

Facing enormous material hardships and suffering considerable human losses due to shortages of food and medicine, the Romanian people overcame the difficulties of the war between December 1916 and spring 1917.

In the summer of 1917, German and Austro-Hungarian forces resumed their offensive on the Siret front. Soon, however, their operation failed. In July 1917, Romanian troops went on the counter-offensive and won a brilliant victory at Mărăşti, which was a prelude to the great victorious battle of Mărăşeşti.

The fighting at Mărășești began on 24 July 1917 and continued for two weeks. The Romanian army won a glorious victory, defeating a numerically superior enemy equipped with modern combat gear. “Mărășești was the grave of German illusions” (Marinescu, 1993, p. 269). – this is how national and universal historiography recorded this major military event. According to historian Marinescu, the Battle of Mărășești “was the key to the later achievement of the Great Union of 1918, it was the cornerstone of this great act sealed at Chișinău, Cernăuți and Alba Iulia by the will of the entire nation” (1993, p. 271).

Despite the brilliant victories of the Romanian Army in the summer and autumn of 1917, the situation on the Siret front worsened due to the lack of Allies assistance and, especially due to the disarray of the Russian Army after the Bolshevik coup of October 1917. Keen to retain power at all costs, the Bolshevik government signed the Brest-Litovsk armistice on 22 November (5 December) 1917. Russia’s withdrawal from the war made Romania’s situation considerably worse. Actually, “Romania was left alone against the armies of the Central Powers, which had overwhelming superiority and had advanced far not only into Romania, but also into Ukraine, on the Galician front” (Marinescu, 1993, p. 274).

After thorough consideration of the situation on the Eastern Front, in particular on the Siret river, on 21 November (4 December) 1917 the Romanian Government, presided over by King Ferdinand I, concluded that “the armistice was imposed as a case of force majeure and that it would be purely military, and not political” (ibid). On 26 November (9 December) 1917, Romania signed an armistice with the Central Powers. Romania’s Prime Minister addressed the Allies in an extensive memorandum explaining Romania’s new situation after Russia had exited the war. Romania’s departure from the war, as Brătianu stressed, did not entail a change in Bucharest’s relations with the Allies. Romania reserved the right to resume the armed combat in order to achieve its ideal of national unity, as soon as favourable internal and external circumstances would allow it (Marinescu, 1993, p. 277).



### **The demise of the Tsarist Empire and the national liberation movement of Bessarabia**

Tsarist Russia was fully involved in the Great War, as the First World War was called. Russia was a multinational empire, in which the policy of Russification of non-Russian peoples was ostentatiously enforced. Sometime earlier, in the late 19th and early 20th century, some political parties in Europe (the Second Socialist International) took up the issue of the right of nations (peoples) to political self-determination and the formation of independent states. The idea was also debated by the political parties in Russia, including the most important one, the Party of Socialist Revolutionaries (the so-called Esers, from eS-eR/SRs), who believed that after the fall of Tsarism, the Russian Empire would be transformed into a federation similar to the United States of America, however not a federation of states, but of national state formations.

According to the Esers' views, Russia, as the centre of the future federation, was to retain four functions: a single military force, a single financial system, the right to dictate foreign policy and to establish the judicial system. Otherwise, the other constituent parts of the Russian Federation would be independent in their decision-making. After the fall of Tsarism, the Esers came to power and formed the Provisional Government, headed by Alexander Kerensky. The leader of the Provisional Government sent commissaries to Bessarabia who advocated the implementation of the Petrograd Executive policy, including in matters of national interest. The Bessarabian Ion Inculeț was one of them.

The year 1917 was a time of large-scale movements for the national emancipation of Bessarabian Romanians. The programme of the National Moldovan (or Moldavian) Party, established in April 1917, called for the introduction of autonomy for Bessarabia: "Starting from the democratic and national objectives, which have been acknowledged both by the temporary rulers of Russia and by the rulers of the countries that have joined her in the Great War, the National Moldovan Party will fight to obtain the widest administrative, judicial, ecclesiastical, educational and economic autonomy for Bessarabia. While remaining bound to Russia by the laws of common interest, Bessarabia

will govern its own internal life, while taking into account the national rights of all its inhabitants" (*Unirea Basarabiei...*, 1995, p. 26).

The party's programme stipulated that democratic freedoms would be guaranteed, that all internal laws of Bessarabia would be drafted by the provincial parliament, the Country Council, that the administrative system would be made up of native citizen who spoke the language of the people; and that the language of instruction of all grades in schools should be the national language of the people.

In the summer and autumn of 1917, democratic Russia held elections to the Constituent Assembly: a pan-Russian Parliament, which was empowered to draft the Constitution of the future Russian Federation. The democratic forces in Russia were placing high hopes on the authority of the Constituent Assembly's decisions and demanded that it be convened. The demands to convene the Constituent Assembly continued after the Bolshevik coup in Russia. Their fraction in the Constituent Assembly, however, was too small. That is why, on 6 January 1918, the Bolshevik leaders convened the Constituent Assembly in the "Tavriceski" Palace in Petrograd, and dissolved it after a day of debates. In this way, Russia abandoned the path of democratic development.

In the summer of 1917, things in Russia began to spiral out of the control of the authorities. In July 1917, the Bolsheviks, financially supported by the Germans, tried to overthrow the Provisional Government, but failed. By autumn, the situation had grown worse for the Russian democracy. Under the influence of Bolshevik agitators, Russian Army soldiers stopped obeying the orders of their commanders; on the contrary, many of them were arrested, and anarchy became rampant. This state of affairs had spread into Bessarabia.

In the autumn of 1917, at the initiative of Bessarabian members of the Russian Army, a legislative body of the province, called the Country Council, was set up in Chişinău, with Ion Inculeţ elected as its president. On 21 November 1917 the first session of the Bessarabian Parliament was held. During the meetings, the Country Council debated pressing problems facing Bessarabian society at the time.

One of the first issues that was repeatedly discussed was the legitimacy of the Country Council. Taking into account the special situation that arose in the provinces, deputies to the Country Council were sent

by political parties, national communities, professional associations, peasants, workers, etc. Therefore, from the very first sessions of the Parliament, some deputies, in particular representatives of ethnic minorities, believed that the Moldovan Legislative body was a provisional body that would function until the Constituent Assembly in Russia was convened and a new legislative body of Bessarabia was elected by universal, equal, direct suffrage and secret ballot.

On 1 December 1917, the Country Council issued a Declaration that stated: "Upholding the principle of national-state self-determination, ... with a view to introducing state order and in the name of consolidating the gains of the Revolution [the Revolution of February 1917, which had abolished tsarism – A.P.], Bessarabia, by virtue of its historical past, henceforth titles itself the Moldovan People's Republic,<sup>4</sup> an equal member of the Russian Democratic Federal Republic. From now on, until the People's Assembly of Bessarabia is convened, elected by universal, equal, direct and secret suffrage in accordance with the principle of proportional representation, THE COUNTRY COUNCIL SHALL BE THE SUPREME POWER IN THE MOLDOVAN PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC" (*Sfatul Țării*. Vol. 1, p. 179) [highlighted in capital letters in the document – A.P.].

The message seemed to be clear: until normal conditions are established for elections to the Country Council by universal, equal, and direct suffrage by secret ballot, this legislative body will rule Bessarabia. However, some deputies (such as Nadezhda Grinfeld, a member of the Russian Social Democratic Revolutionary Party, an Eser, and a member of the Bund) always questioned the legitimacy of the Country Council as the supreme legislative body of Bessarabia and refused to acknowledge it.

The Bessarabian political figures, who saw the establishment of the supreme legislative body as a practice similar to the creation of similar institutions in other regions of the former Tsarist Empire of the time, argued for the legitimacy of the Country Council. Thus, Petre Cazacu, a member of the Country Council, pointed out: "Speaking

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4 In the document, *Moldavskaia Narodnaia Respublica* – the Moldovan People's Republic. Elsewhere, including studies of contemporary authors, the name is the Moldovan / Moldavian Democratic Republic.

of the organization and membership the Country Council strictly from the point of view of its legitimacy, there is no doubt that it was a revolutionary body, just as were and still are all the institutions of the former Russian Empire since 2 March 1917, when the only source of legitimacy, namely the will of the emperor, disappeared and was not replaced by another legitimate source, but by factual situations without any legitimacy, or with a common one: the expression of the will of the people at a given place and time" (Cazacu, 1992, p. 305). The author cited similar examples: the Provisional Government in Russia, the Governorate's Council in Estonia, the Rada in Ukraine, and the Taryba in Lithuania. In addition to those mentioned by Cazacu, one may cite the establishment of state bodies in Poland, Czechoslovakia and other states.

Another topic that was constantly under discussion in the Country Council meetings was the issue of ethnic identity. At the very first meeting of the Country Council, all the speakers called for equal rights for ethnic groups, in essentially similar addresses with certain nuances. The Country Council's president, Ion Inculeț stated that in Bessarabia "the rights of national minorities must be guaranteed; in a free Bessarabia there will be no place for nation-states [in Russian "*ne doljno bîti mesta derjavnîm națiam*", where *derjava* means "power", "state"] (*Sfatul Țării*. Vol. 1, p. 104).

On the other hand, Karol Shmidt, the Mayor of Chișinău, expressed the hope that "the Country Council would not forget the great achievements of the [Russian] Revolution [of February 1917 – A.P.], and that all nations are *derjavnî*" (ibid. p. 106), respectively nation-states. This meant that "Moldovans" as a "nation" would be equal to the other nations of the Russian Federation.

Ion Pelivan, the representative of the National Moldovan Party in the town of Bolgrad, delivered a remarkable speech. "The opening of the work of the Country Council," he said, "is the most important day for the Moldovan people. A nation that was doomed to extinction is being reborn today". Pelivan briefly outlined the history of Bessarabia, and said that in 1812 the area between the Prut and the Dniester was torn away from Moldova and annexed to the Russian State. "It has always been like this in the past: whenever the two great, spoliating robbers – the Russians and the Turks – fought

each other, the Moldovans had to suffer. This was also the case in 1812, when Bessarabia was torn from the body of Romania to be handed over to the Russian Tsar.” Pelivan spoke about the situation of Moldova under the Ottoman protectorate and under the Tsarist regime to demonstrate that under the Turks, after paying the tithe, Moldovans were free (they could speak their own language, attend churches, etc.), “The Turks were robbing us, but they did not trample our souls under their dirty boots” (ibid., p.112) (rounds of applause followed). In other words, Pelivan gave a patriotic speech, demonstrating that “Moldovans” are, in fact, Romanians.

The deputy Solomon Eigher, president of the United Socialist Party of Jews, read out a statement in Russian, followed by the same text in Hebrew (in the text – Jewish), thus saluting the establishment of the Country Council, and called for “personal national autonomy” (ibid. 114). He demanded that the Jewish community should be recognized as a condition for this autonomy, as should be its so-called Seim (Sajm), proof that the Jews had migrated from Poland. According to the speaker, this “Seim” was to deal with the development of Jewish culture, with Jewish settlers and emigration, Jewish population statistics, etc.

Other addresses were delivered by representatives of the Bulgarian-Gagauz community, Ukrainians, and Greeks (Sinadino). Most notably, Moldovan deputies to the Country Council indicated repeatedly, more or less explicitly, that they were Romanians. Thus, at the opening of the Country Council sessions, a choir led by Mihail Berezovschi sang the anthem “Awaken thee, Romanian”. The deputies warmly welcomed the speech of Onisifor Ghibu, editor of the Romanian newspaper *Ardealul* [cf. the Minutes – A. P.]. He was greeted by the deputies with a standing ovation, long rounds of applause, then his speech was punctuated by applause (ibid., p. 116).

The minutes of Country Council sessions show that the deputies of ethnic minorities always demanded certain advantages for themselves and took a stance against the name Democratic Republic of Moldova, arguing that it wronged ethnic groups, and insisting on the title of Republic of Bessarabia.

New developments continued to unfold in the meanwhile. The Bolshevik coup, the civil war in Russia, and the threat of Communist

power spreading across the territory of the former Tsarist Empire prompted Ukraine to proclaim its independence as a state. Bessarabia found itself separated from Russia. Under the circumstances, Bessarabia's leaders decided to proclaim the independence of the Republic, which happened on 24 January 1918. The Declaration of the Country Council stated: "Under such circumstances, we are also compelled to proclaim ourselves, in agreement with the will of the people, as independent and free and self-governing Moldovan Democratic Republic, with the right to decide its own fate in the future" (*Unirea Basarabiei*, p. 149).

Another major challenge faced by the deputies of the County Council was that of ensuring public order and the safety of people and their possessions. Spurred on by Bolshevik agitators, the soldiers of the Russian army committed murders, vandalised people's households, and incited peasants to seize the properties of so-called "exploiters". The situation in the northern and southern counties of Bessarabia was discussed in plenary sessions on many occasions. Both the deputies of the Country Council and the members of the Government of the Democratic Republic of Moldova, the Council of General Directors, found that the military forces at their disposal were too few and unable to manage the situation. For this reason, despite the protests of some deputies who were in the minority, the majority of the members of the Country Council decided to turn to Romania for assistance, including for military aid, in order to stop the anarchy and unrest and to ensure peace in Bessarabia.

### **The union of Bessarabia with Romania.**

#### **The aftermath of the Union**

The chaos and disorder that descended on the country after the Russian armies were defeated on the battlefield, and the attacks of Bolshevik bands of deserters who brutalised the civilian population in the villages and towns of Bessarabia fuelled the desire of most of the population as well as the deputies to be united with the country. These were further motivated by the expansionist tendencies that certain Ukrainian circles were showing towards Bessarabia.

On 27 March 1918 a historic meeting of the Country Council was held, which voted for the Union of Bessarabia with Romania. The Prime Minister of Romania, Alexandru Marghiloman addressed the deputies and members of the Council of Directors (the Government): he explained the historic circumstances under which the deputies would decide the fate of Bessarabia and laid out the conditions under which the Union would take place. Alexandru Marghiloman and those accompanying him then left the meeting room in order to allow the deputies to decide the fate of Bessarabia independently.

Constantin Stere, an experienced politician, an old and close friend of the Polish politician Józef Piłsudski, whom he had known since the Tsarist times, made a significant contribution to convincing the deputies to vote for the Union. Constantin Stere declared before the deputies: "Today we must make a historic decision, for which we need a clear head and a clear conscience. There are not many moments like these in the lives of men and nations... Today we proclaim the rights of a sovereign people" (*Sfatul Țării*. Vol. 1, p. 555).

Stere then went on to address the deputies representing national minorities in the Russian language. When one of them warned that if Bessarabia were to unite with Romania, all the Russian intelligentsia would leave, Stere replied that he respected this sentiment, but that "people who have such a weak sense of connection with this land cannot think like the native population thinks. The Romanian nation, Stere stressed, did not arrive from elsewhere; it was born here; here is the melting pot of the different elements of which the Romanian people was created. We have nowhere to go and nobody has the right to drive us out of our country. For a whole century, we bore the yoke, subdued and silent, for a whole century our language was suppressed, for a whole century the books in our mother tongue were persecuted like revolutionary poison... And now, when we speak our language and enter our own house as masters, the representatives of minorities have no moral right to shut the door in our face" (*ibid.*, p. 556).

The speech of the illustrious patriot at that historic and inspiring session of the Bessarabian Parliament was followed by addresses of representatives of political parties and national minorities. On behalf of the Polish community of Bessarabia, deputy Felix Dudkevici

stated: "I have taken the floor only to express the joy of the Poles for the historic step you are taking and by which you are acting on the people's right to decide their own fate, returning to the bosom of the mother from which you were forcibly taken away over one hundred years ago. I wish the Romanian nation the bright future it deserves" (ibid., p. 559).

The result of the vote is well known: 86 votes in favour of Bessarabia's union with Romania, 3 against, and 36 abstentions. The historic act of 27 March 1918 was the work of a wonderful group of fighters, endorsed by the masses of Bessarabian Romanians and by some national minorities. The union of the Bessarabian Romanians into a unified state led to their national liberation, their salvation as part of the Romanian nation, of the Romanian soul.

Pantelimon Halippa wrote about the Union as follows: "The Union marked the end of a long, difficult path, trodden by Bessarabia's greatest patriots, the Act of Union was the torch of Romanianism passed from generation to generation, starting with the family of Alexandru Hașdeu, Constantin Stamati, brothers Vasile, Mihai and Alexandru Stroescu.... Our ancestral ideals were achieved through the Union. The Union opened wide the windows through which light and culture poured in abundantly, nourishing the Romanian people between the Prut and the Dniester... The union of our province with our Old Homeland, Romania, was an act of special significance, because the beneficial effects of the Union are still manifest today. The beautiful Romanian language is spoken in our province, just as it is in Bucharest" (Halippa, Moraru, 1991, p. 195).

Contemporary Romanian historians justly assessed the importance of the Union as a historic event. According to *The History of Romanians: A Compendium*, the Great Union "elevated the community of material and spiritual life formed over the centuries between all the Romanian territories and created the national and state framework for a swifter development of Romanian society. The reforms of 1918–1923 changed the old economic, political and social structures... Greater Romania not only united provinces, but was also a more democratic state. Not all problems were fully solved, certain abuses were not eliminated, certain contradictions and even social conflicts could not be avoided as a whole, but ... significant progress was



made in many areas and in many ways. On the basis of the principles adopted in 1918, the Romanian state sought to achieve and did achieve important democratic reforms, with consequences for all Romanian provinces, for all inhabitants, regardless of nationality” (*Istoria Românilor*, 1996, p. 273).

As part of Greater Romania, the Bessarabians solved the most vexing problem, which the Russians had been unable to solve for decades: the agrarian problem. Thanks to the agrarian reform of 1927, the Bessarabian peasants were given plots of land. They received the plots by law; they became owners of the land by buying it out, which ensured their economic freedom and independence from the state.

In 22 years of nationhood, the Bessarabians made greater strides than they had made in centuries. The Tsarist regime had gone to great lengths in order to completely Russify the Bessarabian Romanians through schools, the church, the army, the administration, etc. As a result, Bessarabian Romanians were among the least educated in the Tsarist Empire. This was no accident. As part of Greater Romania, the province received a modern education system, with compulsory and free primary education. Graduates of Bessarabian high schools could apply to any university in the country and abroad. The most talented and dedicated professionals, teachers and professors from the Romanian Kingdom travelled to Bessarabia and, going from house to house, on foot, convinced the parents and brought the children to school. Thus, through education and cultural activities, the Bessarabian Romanians were integrated into Greater Romania.

During these 22 years of common history, the population of Bessarabia increased naturally, as a result of economic improvement, better sanitation, etc. It had the widest telephone network compared to other Romanian provinces; the railway track gauge was made compatible with the European standard in only three years; good roads and solid bridges were built.

However, the Bolsheviks did not accept that just solution to the Romanian question. After unsuccessful attempts to export the communist revolution to Romania, in October 1924, they established the so-called Moldovan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic on the territory of the Ukrainian SSR with its capital in Balta, then Tiraspol.

On 28 June 1940, in agreement with Hitler's Germany, the USSR annexed Bessarabia, northern Bukovina, and the Hertza region. The Soviets imposed their authoritarian vision on society: mayors of towns, politicians, including former members of the Country Council, were arrested, interrogated, executed or sent to Siberia.

On the night of 12 June 1941, the Soviets carried out the first wave of deportations from the so-called Moldovan Soviet Socialist Republic; among those deported were the so-called "kulaks", that is the Bessarabian peasants who had received land under the Agrarian Reform and managed to create prosperous farms.

In 1944, the Soviets reoccupied the territories conquered in 1940 and imposed their way of life again. However, despite the efforts to Russify the captive Romanian population, Moldovan Romanians were able to assert their national identity and proclaimed their state independence from the Evil Empire, the USSR in August 1991.

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