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## REFLECTING THE UNIONIST MESSAGE IN THE ROMANIAN PRESS

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### Abstract

Not much has been written about the unionist press in contemporary Romania. However, the unionist press has pervaded the entire Romanian media, since the fall of communism until nowadays. It is known that, after the change in 1989, the references to the space between the Prut and the Dniester Rivers, populated mostly by Romanians, grew exponentially, as the former Soviet republic shook off the traces of the past and the burden of imperial history.

Initiated enthusiastically, the unionist rhetoric of the Romanian press gradually began to change, as the authorities in Chisinau moved away from the idea of reunification, which, in fact, they did not want, with power, at any time of the existence of the independent state of the Republic of Moldova. The initiatives of some true patriots (Alexandru Moșanu, Ion Ungureanu, etc.), who held discussions with Bucharest, in order to find a way to reunification, met the resistance of the post-communist leaders from both countries.

Going through tumultuous stages, the “Bessarabian issue” is treated, today, with pragmatism, by the Romanian press, which moved away from the romantic period of the 1990s.

**Keywords:** Romania, Republic of Moldova, Romanian journalists, unionist message, media

### Introduction

Bessarabia is “the drop of my bloodline”, the poet Grigore Vieru said in a lyrical creation that quickly acquired far-reaching resonances in the consciousness of the Romanians on both banks of the Prut, separated from the troubled times of history. The fate of this province was decided, in the modern and contemporary eras, by the

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arrangements made by the great powers (Ottoman Empire and Tsarist Empire, in 1812; the Nazi Reich and the Soviet Union in 1939), without regard to the will of the native population.

The Bessarabian issue, which involved the forced denationalization practised by the Russians, began to be brought to the attention of public opinion, before Romania's entry into the First World War, which led to lively discussions regarding the side Bucharest had to choose. Undoubtedly, Bessarabia was in a worse situation than Transylvania, in terms of preserving the national identity. However, the Germanophiles were not successful, and Romania chose the Entente, therefore, the alliance with Russia.

After the Union of Bessarabia with Romania, which occurred on March 27, 1918, the territory between the Prut and the Dniester River experienced a new stage of development. The authorities in Bucharest attempted (but failed) to implement policies that would lead to the homogenization of the province, from all points of view.

The Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, signed on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of August 1939, and its consequences, again removed Bessarabia, but also the Northern part of Bukovina, from the country's frame, the two territories being evacuated, following the Soviet ultimatum notes, in June 1940. Their liberation was ephemeral (1941-1944), after which the Soviet rule was restored, with even more harshness, in order to completely eliminate any protesting voice. In the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic (which did not coincide with the territory of historical Bessarabia, the South and North being given to the Ukrainian SSR) "trustworthy personnel" were brought from the entire Soviet Union, the Russian language and the Russian culture became predominant, and the Romanian (Moldovan) language has retained the role of Cinderella, this fact being best synthesized in the usual formula with which they were greeted, in institutions and shops, by officials or sellers, those who spoke the language of the natives: "Speak humanly!".

The publicist Vitalie Ciobanu said that, in the 1970s, if you spoke Romanian on the streets of Chisinau, people would turn around and stare at you allusively: "This one comes from the countryside!". He

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also drew attention to the fact that, during the Soviet period, there were numerous cases in which parents, both Moldovans, spoke to their offspring only in Russian. This was their acknowledgment of how to secure a better future for them: to speak Russian fluently, without an accent, unlike theirs, so as not to be discriminated against, to study in Moscow, in Leningrad, and in other large cities in the USSR, to become important people and rise out of poverty (Voicu, Stanomir, Naumescu, Fati, Ciobanu, 2018).

The Soviet authorities, like the Tsarist ones, were permanently preoccupied with dynamiting any attempt to reconnect the culture from the Moldavian SSR to the Romanian culture. Romanian writers were banned (with a few notable exceptions), and specialists' studies in the field spoke about the Slavic character of the "Moldovan" language. And this time, there were notable exceptions, prestigious Russian scholars, for instance, V. F. Şişmariov, drawing the attention of the yes-men that there are no differences between the Romanian language and the "Moldovan" one (Cojocaru, 2014).

### **"The Bessarabian Issue" during Romanian Communism**

Obviously, the Gheorghiu-Dej era was marked by absolute silence on the subject of Bessarabia. Moreover, the Romanian scientists (with real merits or promoted on the criteria of loyalty to the party) resumed their theses regarding the "Slavic nature" of the Romanian language or about the strong influence of the Slavs on the history of the Romanian people. An example is conclusive: Alexandru Graur spoke about the five dialects of the Romanian language, among which there was also...the Moldovan language (Graur, 1955).

The arrival of Nicolae Ceauşescu at the helm of the Romanian Communist Party, in 1965, would change Bucharest's vision on this subject. The emergence of the "Valev plan", which was to transform Romania, Bulgaria, and the Moldavian SSR into agricultural areas of the Comecon, starting from the doctrine of "economic specialization", led to retaliation on behalf of the Romanian authorities. In this context, in Bucharest Marx's writings about the Romanians are published, stating that: "The Romanian peasant from Bessarabia harbours only

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thoughts of hatred for the Muscovite!” (Marx, 1964).

Moscow's reaction was to be expected, and the friction between the leaderships of the two communist parties was amplified. However, Ceaușescu did not dare go further, because Moscow outspokenly accused him of revisionism. "Things seemed to get out of control, but in August 1976, Nicolae Ceaușescu was called to order by Leonid Brezhnev. Shortly before his visit to the Soviet Union, at the Congress of Socialist Culture and Education, which carried out its works in the month of June, of the same year, Ceaușescu, almost repentant, publicly announced that Romania and the USSR did not have and do not have any territorial problems“ [5, online].

However, the Romanian communist leader plans to resume the subject whenever the Kremlin shows signs of weakness. However, it should be noted that the dispute over Bessarabia was conducted exclusively on historiographical and linguistic grounds, as the press did not receive the green light to press this hot button.

In the last decade of Romanian communism, references to Bessarabia continued to grow. Of good appreciation were the works of some approved historians of the communist regime, Mircea Mușat and Ion Ardeleanu, who approached with extraordinary objectivity little-known moments, at that time, from the saga of the Union of Bessarabia with Romania (Mușat, Ardeleanu, 1983). Following, there is the monumental work “Romania after the Great Union”, in two volumes, of the two historians, which deals, among other things, with the dramatic moments of the loss of Bessarabia, Northern Bukovina, and the Hertsa Region, as a result of the Soviet Union carrying the Romanian state with a hard hand (Mușat, Ardeleanu, 1988).

After the coming of Mikhail Sergeyevich Gorbachev to the leadership of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and especially, after the adoption of the policy of glasnost and perestroika, which did not fall with the vision of Ceaușescu, who felt threatened by the wind of change, the leader from Bucharest finally gives the green light to approach the subject of Bessarabia, in central media. In 1988, on the communist leader's birthday, *Scînteia* took over the speech in which

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Ceaușescu condemned, in clear terms, the Soviet-German agreement of August 1939 (*Scînteia*, 1988). A year later, Ceaușescu, in a plenary session of the Central Committee of the Communist Party, declared: “The problem of Bessarabia is related to the agreement with Hitler, that is, to the Soviet Union and Hitler. The annulment of this agreement, inevitably, must also raise the question of cancelling all the agreements that have been made...including properly solving the problem of Bessarabia and Northern Bukovina. We will have to discuss this issue in the Soviet Union in the coming period” [9 online]. Ceaușescu said that “Gorbachev was as reluctant as Khrushchev or Brezhnev”.

In the last years of communism, in Chisinau, as in other Soviet capitals, benefiting from the opening of Gorbachev, the nationalist movement began to take shape. Nicolae Ceaușescu, at least from the evidence we have at the moment, had no involvement in the phenomenon of national revival in the capital of the Moldovan SSR. The gonfalon of the struggle for national revival is represented by the “Alexei Mateevici” literary circle and the *Literatura si arta* magazine, featuring Bessarabian writers like Nicolae Dabija, Ion Hadîrcă, Grigore Vieru, Mihai Cimpoi, Leonida Lari, etc. “It is well known that the writers were the soul of the changes in Chisinau. Each literary figure believed that it was his or her duty to defend the language in which s/he writes, the alphabet in which to write, and the reader for whom s/he writes. The meeting rooms of the Writers' Union in those days, weeks, and months, were streaked with lightning; the word became all-powerful again, it could mobilize, injure or heal the wounds. Too much pain, iniquity, hopelessness shattered, all of those had been gathered for half a century, and the people were speaking through their writers” (Dabija, 2015).

The promoters of the national revival movement brought to the attention of the public in the Moldovan SSR the great names of Romanian literature, and the references to the Romanian language and the space of Eastern Latinity began to multiply. All this was possible thanks to Gorbachev's reforms, but the Soviet leader came from among the communist apparatus, and his efforts were aimed to reform the system and not to dissolve it. Under these circumstances, the national problem remained unresolved, the “homo sovieticus”, sketched so well

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by Alexander Zinoviev, continuing to manifest itself (Zinoviev, 2018).

The Baltic Republics gave rise to the struggle for the national revival of the oppressed people within the Soviet Union, and their gesture was quickly followed by most of the Union republics, including Soviet Moldova. A Popular Front, following the model of those who were active in the Baltic area, was also created in Chisinau, in which many young intellectuals entered, enlivened by the desire for profound changes, after long years of stagnation.

### **The emergence of the unionist press**

We can state that, from a cultural perspective, the unionist press was born in Chisinau and not in Bucharest. In the newspapers over the Prut River, which were not strictly subordinated to the party and state bodies, articles began to appear, talking about the cultural, historical, and ethnic unity of the Romanians from both banks of the Prut, managing the performance of directing the attention of the population from Soviet Moldavia to Romania, given that, due to the policy of denationalization, Moldovan Romanians had more knowledge about the people of Central Asia than about the brothers from across the Prut River.

The activists of the Popular Front of Moldova tried to get the support of Bucharest, in order to carry out their project, but Ceaușescu was reluctant. However, in a small circle, the dictator from Bucharest said: “They are Romanians and they do not let them use the language they want and, at least in the first stage, to ensure the ties between Moldova and Romania. Sure, we don't want to raise the immediate change of borders in some form now, but the solution to this problem needs to be thought about and we need to discuss it” [9, online]

In the Moldovan SSR, however, things were precipitating, so that on the 27<sup>th</sup> of August 1989, the first Great National Assembly was held in Chisinau, where the leaders of the national revival movement presented to over 100,000 demonstrators a document requesting, among other things, the declaration of Romanian language as a state language and the return to the Latin script. A few days later, at the

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thirteenth session of the Supreme Soviet of the Moldovan Soviet Socialist Republic from the 29<sup>th</sup> of August to the 1<sup>st</sup> of September 1989, the provisions regarding the return to the Latin script and the designation of the “Moldovan language” as state language were adopted (Law No. 3462 of 31.08.1989 on the return of the “Moldovan” language to the Latin script and the Law No. 3464 of 31.08.1989 on the status of the state language of the Moldavian SSR).

In the Romanian press in the last months of 1989, these topics were not approached, although Nicolae Ceaușescu told his close friends: “We drew the attention of the comrades that we must publish them in the press” [9, online]

The moment when the two banks of the Prut River looked, after decades of barbed wire, at each other, was the month of December 1989, when the violent overthrow of the communist regime in Romania took place. In Chisinau, people gathered in squares, lit candles, in memory of the victims of repression in Romania, and sent aid. An eyewitness stated:

In front of the statue of Stephen the Great, placards with pro-Timisoara messages began to appear. From there, we started shouting Union, Romanian brothers! to the Tourist Hotel, where the tourists coming from Romania were staying. There and in front of the Academy I shouted about the union with Romania (*Zi de zi Mures*, 29<sup>th</sup> of November 2014).

TV Chisinau also freely reflected the repression of the bloody demonstrations in Timisoara, and the rally on the 21<sup>st</sup> of December in Bucharest, where Ceaușescu had been booed, as well as the other events that followed. Now it is clear why Soviet censorship has been pushed aside and allowed freedom of the press to triumph [14 online].

The new political change in Romania spurred the movement to bring Romanians closer together on both sides of the Prut River. The Bucharest press was rediscovering Bessarabia (and Northern Bukovina). Soon enough, the articles on these subjects began to flow, the emphasis being placed on the nefarious consequences of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, on the drama of the Romanians in the provinces annexed by the Soviets, who had been subjected to a violent policy of denationalization. Other articles were commenting on

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deportations, assassinations, terror, organized famine, the KGB, and the miracle of the survival of the Romanian language.

Leaders of the national reawakening movement in still Soviet Moldova were present, extremely often, in Bucharest, and in the news journals of the TVR channel and in the national press began to appear information about the political, social, and cultural life of the Moldovan SSR. We could state that, from a media point of view, Bessarabia had been reintegrated into the Romanian timeliness (for example, Chisinau appeared on the weather map of TVR, in each news journal). The public had access to materials about the events in the capital of Moldova as they read, for example, information about the state of things in Timisoara.

In Romania, many organizations were born that aimed at the closeness between the citizens who lived on both banks of the Prut River, the best known being the Association “Pro Basarabia and Bucovina”, founded in Paris by a Bukovinian. “Nicolae Lupan was the founder and animator of the World Association Pro Basarabia and Bucovina, based in Brussels and Paris (1975-2008), an association that numbered about 100,000 members in 24 countries!” [15 online].

Under these conditions, took place the two “Bridges of Flowers” (1990 and 1991). The events were organized by the Cultural Association “Bucharest-Chisinau” and the Popular Front of Moldova. There were extraordinary moments, full of enthusiasm, when people were able, for a day, to cross beyond the border, to see their relatives, acquaintances, and friends. “Even if the goal of reunification was not achieved then, the moment of the *Bridges of Flowers* reactivated many people's consciousness that no matter which part of the Prut they live on, they belong to a single nation” [16 online].

The Romanian press, connected to the realities of Moldova, was constantly reporting on the political decisions in Chisinau, on the activity of the Druc government and president Mircea Snegur, the latter declaring, in Bucharest, “I, the son of a Bessarabian peasant, did not think I would get to speak in the Parliament of Romania!”.



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The failure of the Moscow putsch in August 1991 led to the fulfillment of an almost unimaginable dream for the inhabitants of Moldova across the Prut: the proclamation of independence on the 27<sup>th</sup> of August 1991. In the centre of Chisinau, the Great National Assembly was convened, and the Parliament, meeting in an extraordinary sitting, adopted the *Declaration of Independence*, the flag, and the state anthem *Awaken Thee, Romanian!* with an absolute majority of votes.

The Republic of Moldova is a sovereign, independent, and democratic state, free to decide its present and its future without any interference from outside, in accordance with the holy ideals and aspirations of the people in the historical and ethnic space of its national becoming [17 online].

As the Soviet Union ceased to exist at the end of 1991, it seemed that the Union was a matter of time. The Romanian press, which had carefully followed the tense moments during the putsch and then reported in great detail the appearance of the new subject of international law, the Republic of Moldova, abounded in articles on the topic of the expected reunification.

Inexplicably, the bilateral meetings between Presidents Iliescu and Snegur were stopped, and the Moldovan leader signed, at the end of 1991, the accession to the Commonwealth of Independent States. Little by little, the unionist idea, enthusiastically promoted in Romania, began to be less and less discussed. In Chisinau, the authorities were facing the difficult problems created by the secession of Gagauzia and Transnistria, and by the war on the Dniester, with the Russian Federation, which was on the front page of the Press in Romania.

The Romanian journalists found, astonished, that in Chisinau were resumed terms from the beginning of the Soviet occupation: “Moldovan people”, “Moldovan language”, and even a Moldovan-Romanian Dictionary was published, an aberration born in the mind of the pseudo-scientist Vasile Stati.

After Mircea Druc stepped down from his position as the head of the government, the new authorities began to practice a policy against everything that was Romanian: donations of books were blocked, in customs, speeches were circulated regarding “Romania's intrusion into

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the internal affairs of a sovereign state”. From the idea of reunion, viewed with enthusiasm, in Romania, we came to the vague concept of Chisinau, “the spiritualization of borders”. The phrase “Two countries – one nation” was eliminated and the articles highlighting the independence and statehood of the Republic of Moldova were multiplied over the Prut, and even the concept of “Greater Moldova” was activated.

The irredentism of this *Moldavianism* of Soviet origin is not only brazen from the point of view of scientific justification but hides in itself territorial claims towards our direct neighbours, Romania and Ukraine, which, obviously, transpires from the requirements for the realization of Greater Moldova at the expense of these states [18 online].

The rise of the communists, as well as the change of direction of some of the leaders of the Popular Front of Moldova, under the leadership of the controversial Iurie Rosca, who ideologically slipped, made the relations between the two states enter a period of genuine frost, especially during the time when the president of the Republic of Moldova was the communist Vladimir Voronin.

A filthy populism, as a part of the press noticed, which claimed that Vladimir Voronin's team has slogans, not specialists able to deal with the country's affairs [19, online].

The public opinion in Romania, as well as the press, were deeply disappointed by the new political course in Chisinau, as well as by the distant attitude of Moldova. For this reason, for a long time, the news about the Republic of Moldova was fewer and fewer and devoid of any emotional charge. Psychologically, it was understandable, any gesture of goodwill was treated with indifference or even hostility. Phrases such as “nobody gives anything for free”, often used over the Prut, seriously offended the national pride of the Romanians around. The fact remains that the public opinion in Romania was incapable of understanding the complexity of the situation over the Prut River.

The communist leaders in Chisinau speculated on this lethargy of the Romanian press towards the problems of Bessarabia and increased the anti-Romanian measures.

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An awakening from the oblivion into which the subject of the Republic of Moldova had entered occurred in 2009, when the great protests of pupils and students took place, and the communist Prime Minister at that time, Zinaida Greceanîi, threatened to use firearms. After the demonstrations in 2009, a new period of media silence followed. The events in Chisinau were summarised: changes of government, Russian troops in Transnistria, and new austerity measures.

The one who reinvigorated the subject of the Republic of Moldova was Traian Basescu, who said, loudly, that the Moldovans are Romanians and that, one day, the Union will be made. The Romanian press spontaneously rediscovered the Republic of Moldova. Extensive articles about the neighbouring country began to reappear, fairly, of a deadly pragmatism, compared to the romantic period of the 90s. At that time, Union, language, and culture were spoken of... Now the Association Treaty with the EU, GDP, and economic growth are spoken of.

The presidential mandate of socialist Igor Dodon, marked by heinous servility towards Moscow and a hostile attitude towards Bucharest, kept the headlines of the newspapers, under the heading “foreign news”. Moldova's orientation was obviously pro-Kremlin, after the disappointing performances of the “pro-European” governments, in reality, dominated by oligarchs subservient to the Russians. In these conditions, the interest of the Romanian press towards the subject of the Republic of Moldova was relatively low, the public opinion in the country being convinced that Bessarabia is well held in claws by the “big bear”.

Maia Sandu's victory in the elections, in 2021, has again aroused the interest of the media in Romania, but it is obvious that the romantic moments of the 1990s press are long gone. Today the Union is not spoken of anymore, although surveys show that over 70% of Romanians want the union (in 1991 there were 96%). Beyond the Prut, one in three Moldovans thinks about it.

The war in Ukraine, triggered by the Russian Federation, will certainly have unsuspected consequences for the future of this small country,

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which realizes that history has not placed it in the right place, in order to be able to afford neutrality.

Like most of the Romanian journalists, who wrote from the hearts and with all their hearts about Bessarabia, I believed deeply in the immediate Union, then in the probable Union. When hopes died, disappointment remained, killed, in its turn, by pragmatism. Like the entire Romanian media, the articles about Bessarabia also changed their tone and option and regularity of appearance. Today, we look closely at an uncertain and unsafe future.

But... who knows?

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