

Oana-Maria MITU*

**STATE-SANCTIONED IDENTITY VERSUS MINORITY
IDENTITY: THE CASE OF SOUTHERN BESSARABIAN
GERMANS IN INTERWAR ROMANIA**

***Identitate agreată de Stat versus identitate minoritară: cazul
germanilor din Sudul Basarabiei în România interbelică***

Abstract: *The analysis of the Romanian interwar nation-building process still contains too few regional case studies. That of Southern Bessarabia is interesting because of its special circumstances: a very complicated social scene, where the State wanted to enforce its authority in creating a homogenous national identity, but could not administer enough horizontal social pressure in order to do so. Our study follows the manner in which the State imagined its cultural propaganda program, then focuses on part of the strategies and instruments it used for its implementation, namely on the manner in which its cultural mission was internalized and carried out by local schooling staff. We will then turn to the case study of a community that widely featured the complex relations between socio-cultural politics and local identity: the Southern Bessarabian Germans. By following elements within their relationship with cultural politics and State propaganda, we intend to show the bi-directional character of the culturally-formative process, as well as the struggle of keeping one's own identity while being pressured to assume the one of the majority. We have gathered our theoretical framework from the writings of the Romanian elite of the time, and our facts from archival documents.*

Keywords: *Akkerman, Tarutino, cultural politics, cultural propaganda, national elite, minority elite, teacher, choir, ethnic celebration, ethnic music*

In the overall historical process of building a Romanian nation-State, the first decade of the interwar period is quite representative because of its special status, that of a transition between pre- and postwar socio-political typologies. The first and the second five-year sequence after the formation of Greater Romania (1918 to 1923, 1923 to 1928 respectively) clearly distinguish themselves as two intervals with distinctive characteristics. For the first part, the systems used in the regional administration of day-to-day life continued to be different from one province to another, keeping with structures and customs that had been used under previous rules: traditional Romanian in the Old Kingdom,

* PhD Candidate, „Dunărea de Jos” University, Galați, Romania; mituoana@gmail.com

Date submitted: February 19th, 2021

Revised version submitted: March 12th, 2021

Final draft accepted: March 15th, 2021

Austro-Hungarian in Transylvania and Bukovina, Imperial Russian in Bessarabia¹. The next five years of the interwar period then marked the implementation and settlement of new, standardizing principles and rules. These canons were meant to support the creation of a homogenous political identity, one that would ensure the stability of the newly enlarged State. More subjectively than that, they were meant to create a uniformly-Romanian nation-State. A new, neo-liberal Constitution in 1923, and an ensemble of laws concerning all aspects of public life (politics, economy, education, health, religion, military service, etc) were meant to gradually reconstruct individual and collective values, principles, attitudes, and behaviours regardless of ethno-cultural backgrounds, but with a precise interest towards “true” (i.e. bloodborn) Romanians. The main objective of the State was to mold and cultivate a mental space in which individuals and communities would automatically identify themselves within the attributes of *Romanian-ness*. In order to achieve this goal, the interwar State chose to concentrate its forces into varied styles of cultural pressure, and to construct its nation-building program around cultural politics and policies. Its preference was grounded on the belief that, be it on an individual or social level, culture is the most profound determinative for identity.

Although the material investments that went into the culture-based nation-building program were more than significant, the unfavourable proximity to the war and the Great Depression meant that the State had a limited capacity for supporting the financial requirements that came along with such a complex project². Adding the manner in which Romanian mentality defined concepts as *nation*, *patriotism*, *duty*, and the relationship between them, the interwar State practiced a great deal of reliance on the moral partnership that it wished to conclude with its citizens. It was a social contract, seen by the State as an honourable bestowal and as a binding duty for all its subjects. Through it, they were called to serve the greater interests of the Nation, by acting as agents for socio-cultural integration and uniformity. The *national energies* of intellectuals were mostly used in this respect, as they were deemed models for - and guardians of - national values. The resources of private cultural associations, both moral and financial, were also seen as important assets in the nation-building program, and used to that end. State discourse

¹ This was a natural and objectively-assumed consequence of the political, economical, social, and administrative huddle that came right after the War and the Union of 1918. The State, its government, and the population itself needed to re-settle and establish stability before taking on the next major socio-political project: uniformization. Furthermore, there were no clear structural guidelines for the nation-building process until the proclamation of the 1923 Constitution and the new set of State laws. In this sense, diverse liberties were granted as a result of communities being freed from under imperial rule, but regional life went on to function with particular characteristics, as a composite between practices new and old, that had been internalized by the people due to their real functionality.

² This was not an exclusive characteristic of the cultural program. Suitable funds were also insufficient for administrative and infrastructural modernisation, amongst other matters.

mandated its very own “human resources” (public servants, teachers, clerics, military men, etc.) with a duty of honour for preserving and propagating national spirit. Preaching the pledge that any *good Romanian* was morally indebted to take for the higher interests of the national community, the interwar governments called upon all those who respected their national identity to fulfill the *sacred duty* of radiating the *Romanian manner*.

Cultural policies were mostly mindful of the peasantry, which was seen as the vessel for traditional identity essence, and therefore the most appropriate foundation on top of which the ultimate national design was to be erected. In the newly united provinces, and especially in Bessarabia and its Southern region, similar attention was granted to the poorly formed Romanian elite, in the endeavour of shaping a stronger and more levelled national conscience, and of subsequently ensuring an exponential propagation of desired values, principles, and behaviours. The elite were given the mission of disseminating the *Romanian manner* of feeling and thinking. Endowed with the moral authority (and obligation) to be the keepers and the preachers of *Romanian-ness*, they were responsible with setting the standards for social conduct. They were loosely defined, especially in the provinces that were in dire need of national agency. This meant that an intellectual and/or a member of the elite could be anyone that possessed a minimal set of qualities that would make them a good example for those around them. Civil servants, teachers, servicemen, clergymen, freelance professionals such as doctors, merchants, craftsmen, even better off peasants³ were automatically considered intellectuals and/or members of the local or regional elite. An entire set of values, principles and norms, as well as a typological activity program were designed for the guidance of this veritable *army*⁴ composed of the special personnel put in

³ Those that had a bit more schooling than the average, that were hard working, dutiful and obedient, and that could engage the compliance of their fellowmen.

⁴ The use of State personnel as a factor of social influence was a part of the strategy used by the elite ever since the first interwar years. However, up until mid-1920s its use in cultural propaganda was done in a rather unstructured manner. In the case of schooling, for example, up to the mid-'20s the State concentrated on the expansion of infrastructure, while the cultural activity of teachers was guided by mere appeals to individual scruples concerning their duty towards the greater good. But around 1923/24 intervention became much more structured. After 1925 the State itself got involved in the cultural process. Its personnel started receiving directives, that became mandatory professional duties. The militaristic nuance of State discourse was an interesting element: „Until recently, cultural propaganda was the exclusive domain of private initiatives. In more recent times, the Ministry for Public Instruction found it necessary for the State to also embrace this activity. Minister Petrovici sees this propaganda as a «cultural offensive», whose command goes to the State and for which it gives a permanent army, recruited from the members of the educational staff. Private initiative will alternatively fight alongside this permanent army; the State will look to coordinate it with its own, creating a single army under its command” – as said by Onisifor Ghibu, one of the most representative members of the interwar cultural elite and an agent for Romanian nation-building. Cited from his work, *Trei ani pe frontul basarabean. Bilanțul unei activități* [*Three years on the Bessarabian front. The audit of*

the service of State cultural politics. Our analysis will regard the manner in which this cultural mission was assumed and performed by members of the teaching staff⁵. Our ultimate interest lies in Southern Bessarabia, a socio-administrative region that was problematic from multiple points of view. The case study itself will circumscribe to Akkerman (Cetatea Albă) county. The theme regards the profile of a regional minority, and the manner in which it interacted with the socio-cultural environment of interwar Romania.

Before submitting the facts, it is instrumental to mention that we will concentrate on a number of analytical elements. We have already made a brief presentation of the State's standpoint on cultural politics. It is relevant to say that the cultural propaganda carried out under the guidance of the interwar Romanian State had a prominently internal and proselyte character. Its internal perspective shaped as a systematic action for the spread of culture amongst the masses. The proselyte aspect manifested as the pursuit for gaining adhesion from all social conscience, regardless of its origins, to the political, civic, and cultural norms shaped by the State and its representative ethnic group. In relation to these two orientations, we will position the particular matter of the reasoning (and pursuant actions) to maintain ethno-cultural identity by a minoritarian group. We will therefore discuss the relationship between the implementation of a national program for cultural integration and homogenization, on one hand, and the right, interest, and actions taken by a minoritarian community so as to manifest its own cultural profile, on the other. In a wider setting, our analysis portrays the differences between a socio-political discourse, built upon a set of generally accepted values and principles (neo-liberal civil liberties), and

activities], edition, introduction and notes by Marian Radu, The Romanian Cultural Foundation, Bucharest, 1996, p. 174. For the State's change of perspective and strategy concerning cultural politics, especially for the partnership it made with private associations, see Oana-Maria Mitu, „Din contribuția ASTREI la integrarea culturală a Basarabiei interbelice” [Aspects from ASTRA's contribution to the cultural integration of interwar Bessarabia] in Aurel Ardelean (coord), Ioan Boia Stelean, Maria Alexandra Pantea (eds), *ASTRA și arădenii, ctitori de modernitate românească* [ASTRA and the elite of Arad, builders of Romanian modernity], Vasile Goldiș University Press, 2018, pp. 87-122.

⁵ A period in which all social energy was turned towards completing a unitary socio-political environment for the Romanian people, the interwar years were governed by the belief that „the teacher prepares the future of the nation. His calling is difficult and full of responsibility to the State, which put onto him the kneading of this future” – see Constantin Angelescu, „Evoluția învățământului primar și secundar în ultimii 20 de ani” [The evolution of primary and secondary schooling in the last 20 years] in Nicolae Peneș, *Dr. C. Angelescu. Reformator al învățământului românesc* [Dr. C. Angelescu. A reformer of Romanian education], Editgraph, Buzău, 2008, p. 236. P. P. Negulescu defined matters in the same spirit: „the teacher prepares the future of the nation. He is trusted and expected to erase the differences that the soul of our people has gathered under centuries of living in different conditions, to bind our unity and to form our unitary national conscience”; see full text in Paul Negulescu, Ion Dumitrescu, George Alexianu, Titus Dragoș, O. C. Demetrescu, *Codul învățământului (primar, secundar, superior)* [The schooling Statute (primary, secondary, tertiary)], Bucharest, «Pavel Suru» Library, 1929, p. 120.

the realities of social conducts. We refer to the relation between the official State principle of not intervening in the private cultural matters of minorities (as long as they did not disturb social security) and the actual approach that State personnel took to these guidelines, by combining them with the counter-address that pushed them to undertake a very active Romanian propaganda. We do take into consideration the fact that the adversary differences between these two elements could have been the result of either a collective act of will or an incontrollable sociological reaction. However, the nature of the differentiation is of lesser importance to our analysis, which seeks to ascertain its intrinsic existence. Within a social environment that was being reconstructed, sideslips, excesses, and sometimes power abuse were proven realities, with different frequencies and intensities, and with different interpretations and consequences for those involved. Fervour and zeal, as well as their possible exaggerations, had complex origins, and were directly linked to a vast set of causes.

To name just one of such possibilities, civil servants were certainly often confused about the objectives they had to accomplish, and about the proper means to do so. In fact, authorities had received anticipatory warnings from the elite about how cultural agents needed to receive very careful guidance in order to be effective. This meant that they needed to be very clearly instructed on the specific results they had to obtain. Secondly, they had to be provided with prerequisite tools in order to efficiently obtain those results⁶. One of the faults for general confusion was, in itself, the foundation on which were designed the new legislative principles of the interwar nation-states, including those of Greater Romania. Calling for the shaping of strong societies that would be based on a collective spirit educated in the direction of a national union, fundamental laws asserted State power over cultural matters. These socio-political definitions led to a certain limitation of individual and collective liberties for the benefit of common interests and public order. Therefore, in many of the interwar European Constitutions, cultural politics and policies turned from liberalism to normativism⁷.

Within this context, and in the settings of its new social tableau (with a transition from 8% in 1912 to approximately 28% of the population being ethnically non-Romanian in 1930⁸), the State had several possible directions for interpreting and acting on the matter. It could choose either social uniformisation, toleration of autonomous cultural developments, or

⁶ See G. G. Antonescu, *Educație și cultură* [Education and culture], IIIrd edition, revised and completed, «Cultura Românească», Bucharest, 1935, p. 145.

⁷ Ștefan Bârsănescu, *Politica culturii în România contemporană* [The politics of culture in contemporary Romania], «Alexandru Țerek» Tipography, Iassy, 1937, pp. 35-36.

⁸ See Cristian Gojinescu, „Situția demografică a cultelor după 1918” [The demographic situation of cults after 1918] in *Etnosfera*, nr. 2, 2009, p. 1; and *Recensământul General al Populației României din 29 decembrie 1930* [The General Census of Romania's Population from December 29th 1930], Central Statistics Institute, vol. II, Bucharest, 1938, p. XXIV.

the attempt to conceive a harmonious blend of all cultures⁹. Public appeals raised dissimilar opinions over these possible scenarios. They ranged from arguing that the State's cultural mission was bonded to national culture interpreted as (and only as) the particular profile of the Romanian majority, to advocating that the superior interests of the Romanian State could be simultaneously ensured with the inward development of minoritarian cultures (considering that one of the State's responsibilities was accounting for the inevitable organic differences inside its social structures), or to considering that full cultural autonomy could be granted to ethnic minorities, and that an equilibrium could be achieved amongst multiple cultures while still maintaining a unitary State. Being faced with the necessity of making a choice in the matter, the governing elite knew that, with the new European socio-political principles that guaranteed liberties and rights previously refused by imperial regimes, the integration of minorities through some sort of official de-nationalization program was impossible to undertake both on a moral and a practical level. The traditional Romanian style of governance and the highly centralised administration of the State, as well as the fragile stability of interwar politics did not permit the opposite scenario, that of complete cultural autonomy inside a politically unitary State. These conditions, and the need to sustain political stability, led to the official option of trying to obtain some sort of understanding between majoritarian and minoritarian objectives. Therefore, the State declared that it promoted national Romanian values by adding the patrimony of universal ones, and that it fully understood and respected every ethnic community's need for self-manifestation. In addition, however, it also announced that it had both the right and the responsibility to construct a collective conscience that would ensure social conformation to its greater needs, and that it would thusly conduct its cultural politics, by ensuring that each and every one of its citizens respected a set of national requirements. On this line, the nation-State gave itself warrants and allowances towards minoritarian practices concerning spirituality and education¹⁰.

Legislative attention was focused on the general instruction system, on the use of language, and on religious practice. Very few references addressed cultural manifestation per se, or the relation between educational, religious, and social environments, whether they were administered by the State or by the private endorsements of communities (sometimes minoritarian). The only officially declared principle was that of free cultural

⁹ Mîrcea Vulcănescu, „Reorganizarea Ministerului de Instrucție, Culte și Arte și transformarea lui într-un Minister al Culturii Naționale” [The reorganisation of the Ministry for Instruction, Cults and Arts and its transformation into a Ministry for National Culture] in Dimitrie Gusti, *Un an de activitate la Ministerul Instrucției, Cultelor și Artelor (1932-1933)* [A year at the Ministry of Instruction, Cults and Arts], anastatic edition, TipoMoldova, Iassy, p. 1056.

¹⁰ Idem in *Ibidem*, pp. 1056-1057.

manifestation as long as State interests and public safety were not undermined, and Romanians were vaguely told that minorities were their equals in the eyes of the political State. This meant that a mutually respectful cohabitation was desired, and that the population needed to be educated in the regard of cultural alterity, a practice to which it was not at all accustomed to, and which did not fit the century-long desire for Romanian uniformity. As far as State politics went, the Romanian governance wanted to prove that, especially in relation with the newly united provinces, it would rule in a much more rightful and democratic manner than its imperial predecessors. However, the other (and stronger) half of the socio-political mentality was that the Romanian people, finally together inside the same State, were under the historical opportunity of creating their uniform nation, and that it was their right and duty to do so. In this sense, the neo-liberal discourse that granted democratic rights to all citizens (but favoured the State's higher interests) became progressively narrower, and interpreted the latter as the right for the *State-creating nation* to prevail over others, especially in the cultural department. A very heavy and repetitive discourse stated that all *good Romanians* had the moral obligation to defend the Romanian spirit¹¹. In these conditions, it is not difficult to sense how it was possible for confused interpretations to develop, and for incorrect choices to appear within the public conduct of those summoned to apply State policies.

We now turn to the cultural mandate that the State gave its educators, to teachers of all levels, especially in Bessarabia and in its Southern region. In wanting to Romanianise the province, the central governance firstly launched a campaign for re-nationalizing Bessarabian teachers, and for introducing Romanian culture to minoritarian schooling staff. The truly structured debut of this endeavour can be determined around 1923 or 1924. Courses for language and national subjects (history, geography, literature, civics) had opened ever since 1918¹², but only grew

¹¹ It is important to note that this mentality and discourse were not yet interpreted, nor did they manifest in an extremist manner. They revolved mainly around the objective of regional Romanians regaining their national conscience and building a uniform identity, and were not targeted to the active exclusion of minorities.

¹² For 1918-1920 see Natalia Maftetuță, „Învățământul secundar teoretic de Stat din Basarabia în perioada interbelică” [State theoretical secondary schooling in Bessarabia in the interwar period] in *Anuarul Institutului de Istorie* [The History Institute's Annual], Science Academy of Moldova, nr. 1/2011, pp. 213-214. Ever since 1918 courses for re-acquainting with the Romanian language were held for Bessarabian teachers, and starting from 1920 courses for learning grammar and basic conversation were held for ethnics. For lack of funding, their duration was cut in half, but they still managed to have „gratifying” results, judged by the good grades that most of the participants got and by the „connection made between the Ukrainian and Romanian teachers”; see Idem in *Ibidem*, pp. 213-214. An address sent to schoolmasters by the General Directorate for Primary Education shows how teachers from all around the newly united provinces gathered in these courses, while the authorities „tried their best to blend these elements in order to standardize their acquirements and to make them acquaint with one another and to distribute them in such a

around 1922¹³. In the South of the province, 248 teachers were temporarily transferred to the Old Kingdom in 1924 precisely for the purpose of taking Romanian classes¹⁴. Organically, only the Romanian-born participants were seen as future instruments in the State's cultural offensive, that *permanent army* recruited from the members of the schooling staff¹⁵.

It is therefore appropriate to bring into discussion a brief typology of this *educational legion*. Naturally, each person reacted in a different manner to the appeal launched by the State, and teachers separated themselves into several varieties. We will set aside those who did not reach even their minimal level of professional duties as educators¹⁶. Others did cover their primary responsibilities, but did not have any intention of bringing an additional contribution to the national-cultural movement. The reasons behind the poor yield of some teachers were manifold: some were of inferior professional quality, some had a faulty personal nature, others sensed the lack of real support coming from the State itself and the unfavourable conditions for pursuing certain aspects of their duties, most lacked motivation. It is important to keep in mind that this entire enumeration is exclusively attached to Romanian teachers. In the eyes of the governance, a different ethnicity automatically deemed an individual as having an organic inability for being an agent for Romanian culture¹⁷.

manner that they would no longer lead a life that would impede the accession to the objectives of the classes". Teachers were divided into those who did not know anything about the Romanian language, history, geography, or Constitution, and those who had some knowledge about them. Participants were supervised so they would interact by using Romanian. The manner in which they were treated had to be „amiable”, and the environment had to be „likeable” in order for them not to feel „as in a foreign place”. See The National Archives of Romania, Central Archival Service [CAS], *Ministerul Instrucțiunii* [Ministry of Instruction] Fund, dos. 115/1924, ff. 17-18.

¹³ When approximately 1 250 Romanian teachers from minoritarian schools from all the provinces participated in 40-day summer courses held in the Old Kingdom. See *Ibidem*, dos. 144/1922, f. 4.

¹⁴ 50 teachers from Tighina county were sent to Iassy and 8 were sent to Bucharest, 80 teachers from Akkerman county were sent to Bârlad, 100 were sent to Galați and 10 were sent to Bucharest. See *Ibidem*, dos. 115/1924, f. 29.

¹⁵ Onisifor Ghibu, *Trei ani pe frontul basarabean. Bilanțul unei activități*, p. 174.

¹⁶ See the complaints and the general debate raised around the assignment of questionably qualified personnel to Bessarabia. For the four counties of Southern Bessarabia, and for the entire interwar period, there are numerous reports concerning primary and secondary teachers not fulfilling basic educational duties. In a selective manner, we can indicate to CAS, *Ministerul Instrucțiunii* [Ministry of Instruction] Fund, dos. 301/1923 and 255/1925, *Inspectoratul General al Jandarmeriei* [The General Inspectorate of the Gendarmerie] Fund, dos. 62/1939 for Cahul county; *Ministerul Instrucțiunii* Fund, dos. 16/1924 and 256/1925, *Inspectoratul General al Jandarmeriei* Fund, dos. 63/1939 for Izmail county; *Ministerul Instrucțiunii* Fund, dos. 301/1923 and 255/1925, *Inspectoratul General al Jandarmeriei* Fund, dos. 36/1935 for Akkerman county; *Președinția Consiliului de Miniștri* [The Presidency of the Council of Ministers] Fund, dos. 3/1924, vol. I and *Ministerul Instrucțiunii* Fund, dos. 296/1929 for Tighina county.

¹⁷ It was thought that, for a teacher to be able to awaken in his pupils the conscience of belonging to the same ideals, the crucial condition was that he himself „be spirited by that

Nevertheless, this did not stop a certain part of the public discourse to simultaneously ask minoritarian teachers to actually *be* active supporters of Romanian culture, as proof for their good faith towards the *Romanian right* of determining social culture. Within the State's nation-building program, the *entire* teaching body was therefore called to do its educational duty whilst also applying the values and principles of Romanian nationalism. Naturally, official reports showed that minoritarian teachers had difficulties in being vessels for both scientific knowledge and Romanian spirit. Their attitudes ranged from neutral indifference in pursuing their own integration in the new system, to the disqualification of national ideals that were strange to them, to active counter-propaganda; all scenarios were applicable to individuals that, just like Romanians, either still fulfilled other educational responsibilities, or neglected those also. From this whole perspective, the quantity of minoritarian teachers present in Bessarabia, and especially in its Southern region, was perceived by Romanian authorities (specifically by those inflated by a passionate national spirit) as somewhat of an insult to majoritarian primacy, and as a possible menace to national interests. Taken further than necessary, the cautiousness with which authorities watched over the private cultural manifestations of minoritarian communities in Southern Bessarabia sometimes transformed into institutional and/or individual reactions that were too intrusive. In itself, the phenomenon developed into a generalised occurrence in the mentality and behaviour of the State apparatus. Extremely indicative for the fact is the testimony left by Nicolae Iorga¹⁸, who stated that:

which he wishes to induce in the hearts of the children". It was also thought that „for this to happen, the teacher must be Romanian by origin”, and that ethnic teachers could be loyal to the State and fulfill their professional duties, but that they could never teach anything other than sciences. „Educators, in the national sense of the word, makers of an active national conscience, they cannot be”, it was said, „at least not the current minoritarian generation”. Being of a different nature, spirit and ideals – how could Romanians ask of them to change their soul and raise children in the Romanian manner?, the national elite asked. See Constantin Kirişescu, *Apărarea națională și școala. Conferință ținută la Universitatea Liberă* [National security and schooling. A conference held at the Free University], published by the «House of Schools», Bucharest, 1927, p. 23.

¹⁸ Nicolae Iorga (1871-1940), important Romanian historian and politician. As a historian, he produced a very large body of scholarly works, and became well known for having impressively extensive capacities for research in general humanities. A professor at the University of Bucharest, he is also credited for having established the Popular Summer University in Vălenii de Munte, Prahova county, the first non-governmental academic and cultural center for the young elite. As a politician, he was a right-of-center activist who combined conservatism, nationalism, and agrarianism. Co-founder of the Democratic Nationalist Party, he was a Member of Parliament, President of the Chamber of Deputies and of the Senate, cabinet minister and, for a very brief time, Prime Minister. Initiator of large-scale campaigns to reinforce traditional Romanian identity and culture, his discourse sometimes included antisemitic rhetoric, but he was a fierce opponent of the Romanian radicalist far-right movements. This opposition ultimately led to his assassination.

„there is great error in the manner in which cultural politics is perceived nowadays (...): the Ministry takes on an official initiative to draw up a number of papers, which are then sent to all corners of the country, calling on a number of persons to undertake propaganda in support of the cultural politics. All sorts of inspectors, great and small, are then created, and all sorts of scholarly bureaucrats throw themselves at the unfortunate nation and at the minorities. A Saxon, a Hungarian, or a Russian cannot walk the street without an entire crowd of cultural agents keeping close behind”¹⁹

In the context of a socio-political program put into the service of a national system defined as „the culture of the majoritarian kin”²⁰, the spiritual competition with minorities sometimes developed into negative manifestations, a rivalry that ultimately hurt both sides²¹.

Resuming the categorization of Bessarabian teachers and their enrolment in the State’s cultural program, we turn our attention to a specific type of Romanian reactions (although there were some cases, albeit very few, in which minoritarians acted in the same manner). In opposition to those that, for various reasons, did not partake in (or even adversed) cultural propaganda, there were those who identified themselves as fierce cultural agents in support of State interests. For many of these individuals, manifestations were not only participatory – they anticipated official calls. This reaction was interpreted by the subjects themselves as being a result of an „imperative command of the soul to immediately proceed to the consolidation of local life within the lines of the new Romanian spirit and to guide it in the national-cultural direction”²². The different forms in which their activity unfolded was, once again, directly linked to personal characteristics. They varied from a non-aggressive and inviting approach, which succeeded in attracting the admiration and collaboration of minorities themselves²³, to excessive zeal, which worsened the relations

¹⁹ Nicolae Iorga, „Politica culturii” [Cultural politics] in *Politica culturii. 30 prelegeri publice și comunicări organizate de Institutul Social Român și aspecte ale unei politici a culturii, texte de legi de biblioteci populare și o bibliografie a culturii* [The politics of culture. 30 public lectures and dissertations organised by the Romanian Social Institute, and aspects of a cultural policy, drafts for public libraries laws, and a cultural bibliography], Romanian Social Institute, Bucharest, 1931, p. 3.

²⁰ Mircea Vulcănescu, „Reorganizarea Ministerului de Instrucție, Culte și Arte și transformarea lui într-un Minister al Culturii Naționale”, p. 1056.

²¹ Friedrich Müller, „Statul, cultura și școala minoritară” [The State, culture and the minoritarian school] in *Politica culturii. 30 prelegeri publice și comunicări...*, p. 469.

²² Remus Iliescu, „Cum s-a întemeiat Cercul Cultural Cetatea Albă” [How the Akkerman Cultural Club came to be] in *Cetatea Albă, zece ani de la realipire (9 aprilie 1918-9 aprilie 1928)* [Akkerman, ten years from the reunification], «Prince Carol» Cultural Foundation, Bucharest, 1928, p. 45.

²³ See the example of Pavel Melinte, a primary school teacher sent from Covurlui county to Izmail, where „through energy and love for his people he created a school worthy of the name of a Romanian teacher”. Schooling inspectors reported that „upon seeing his pupils

with ethnic communities rather than obtaining any development in the spread and acceptance of Romanian culture.

In order to monitor the national program and the teachers that were putting it into practice, the State created administrative structures such as the Extracurricular Service within the Bessarabian Directorate, or the Inspectorate for Extracurricular Activities and for the Promotion of Romanian Culture. Their representatives were obliged to constantly communicate with local teachers in order to guide them in their cultural propaganda activities. Special inspectors reported to the Ministry of Public Instruction and made propositions concerning the optimal methods for realising Romanian culturalisation. They spoke of the necessity for local forces collaborating both on an institutional and an individual level, and of immediate needs such as the prompt payment of these agents²⁴. In Bessarabia, cultural inspectors had their most active season between 1922 and 1926, supervising the implementation of national propaganda and mobilising „the forces of the teachers and of the population towards the fortification of the School, [and towards] organising cultural activities aimed at strenghtening national conscience”²⁵. Discussing the State’s cultural politics, the Bessarabian Extracurricular Service noted in 1920 that:

„our plan is that we have a cultural movement in every town, with a library, a local newspaper, a music association, Romanian theatre and dances, lectures, etc (...) Small travelling [performance] companies will do much more than a single central organisation for the whole of Bessarabia”²⁶

The same institution planned that a part of the following year’s budget be used for the payment of „advertisers of Romanian music and traditional dances in every town”, this being one of the only possible manners of „introducing our art to the [Bessarabian] students, which dance far too many Russian dances”²⁷.

[Melinte worked with ethnic children] one might think that they were Romanians themselves, judging by the way in which they have learned to speak Romanian and by the way in which they recite Romanian poems”. Alongside his school duties, the teacher constantly organised public gatherings and was an active member of several cultural associations. See CAS, *Ministerul Instrucțiunii* Fund, dos. 258/1922, ff. 10-11.

²⁴ „Because otherwise their enthusiasm diminishes and results become null”. See the report of Ioan Tudor, schooling and cultural inspector for the counties of Akkerman, Tighina, Kishinev, Soroca, and Bălți in the spring of 1926, in Gheorghe Palade, *Integrarea Basarabiei în viața spirituală românească (1918-1940)*. *Studii* [The integration of Bessarabia in the Romanian spiritual life], Cartdidact, Kishinev, 2010, p. 55.

²⁵ See *Ibidem*, p. 54. In 1925 there were 9 inspectors, in 1926 there were 5.

²⁶ CAS, *Casa Școalelor și Culturii Poporului* [House of Schools and Peoples’ Culture] Fund, dos. 417/1920, f. 9.

²⁷ *Ibidem*, f. 9.

As far as the Southern part of Bessarabia went, it was officially part of a *cultural sanitary belt* which had been established by law in multi-ethnic and multi-lingual areas. As such, it was put through an intensive propaganda program²⁸, with cultural and educational inspectors receiving indications for granting special attention to minoritarian settlements²⁹. As a matter of fact, the South was where the very first local/regional ASTRA³⁰ department was established in Bessarabia (in 1924). But, even with the enthusiasm of the frail local Romanian elite, doubled by the authorities' concern for the numerical majority of other ethnics, cultural activity advanced at an extremely slow pace in Southern Bessarabia. If at the debut of their counseling visits (1923) the schooling-and-cultural inspectors recorded that the extracurricular activity within Akkerman county was practically non-existent³¹, ten years later authorities testified to the same feebleness in cultural activity³². The only element that could bring about a

²⁸ „Considering the intensification of Romanian schooling in the regions with a polyglot population, we decide that: Art. 1 – In the regions with a polyglot population a cultural area will be established in which teachers' curricular and extracurricular activity will be especially intense. This area will include: (...) in Bessarabia the counties of Hotin, Tighina, Akkerman and Izmail”. See Decision no. 40771/April 21st 1924 of the Secretary of State in the Department for Instruction, CAS, *Ministerul Instrucțiunii* Fund, dos. 408/1924, f. 9.

²⁹ Gheorghe Palade, *Integrarea Basarabiei în viața spirituală românească...*, p. 53.

³⁰ ASTRA (an acronym for «Asociațiunea Transilvană pentru Literatura Română și Cultura Poporului Român»/«The Transylvanian Association for Romanian Literature and the Culture of the Romanian People») is a cultural association founded in 1861 in Sibiu (at that time, a part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire). It played a very important role in the process of national awakening for the Romanians in Transylvania and, in the interwar period, acted as a solid partner for the State in the nation-building program, as it established a wide range of local institutions which operated directly towards cultural socialization and integration.

³¹ Gheorghe Palade, *Integrarea Basarabiei în viața spirituală românească...*, p. 55. In order to redress the situation, the inspector convened teachers from several settlements and explained various methods of doing cultural propaganda, including an activity plan that would concentrate their efforts into „national, social, civic and political education”.

³² The report made by the Akkerman Security Police in May 1933 said that „cultural activity consists of occasional celebrations, plays held by the National Theatre from Kishinev, and conferences held by teachers at the ASTRA community centres. National propaganda is generally shallow and reduced. We find it necessary for the central [administration] to send lecturers, performers, funds for public gatherings, and for it to allow citizens to participate in such activities without paying a ticket; we believe this is how the Romanian sentiment will evolve”. In August 1933 they wrote: „in our county national propaganda (...) has been fairly insufficient, especially in this area, which needs a very well structured national propaganda because of the large number of minoritarians which occupy all social levels. We recommend that national and cultural propaganda be intensified; public conferences should be held on national subjects, followed by national dances and the spread of national literature amongst the young”. In January 1934 they wrote that there were 450 ASTRA centres in Akkerman county and 1 730 registered members, but that actual cultural activity was „almost non-existent”, and that „as long as teachers and priests will keep on being Russian, Ukrainian, Bulgarian, or German, the Romanian national idea will continue to remain undervalued”. In July 1934 they wrote: „Cultural national propaganda is non-existent, especially now during the school holiday. A number of teachers from Akkerman have established a choir, and are touring Southern Bessarabia and the Old Kingdom. We recommend the intensification of Romanian national propaganda in the areas with Romanian population, but especially in the

certain degree of appeasement to the cultural competition imagined by the authorities was the fact that minorities were in the same situation, not really mounting up to many cultural manifestations³³.

For Romanians and ethnics alike, the main environments for cultural activity were schools, churches, and public gatherings. Celebrations [*serbări* in Romanian] were theorized and practiced as supplements for activities that took place within institutions that were especially meant for cultural propaganda. They could be organised by teachers, local authorities, or by private associations. In regions that held special status, such as Southern Bessarabia, they were viewed as „a very precious means to fraternize the population still refractory to schooling”³⁴, meaning that by participating in school-organised celebrations locals would become more open to the idea of sending their children to Romanian schools. Celebrations were also – at least theoretically – a means for obtaining multicultural interaction and mediating social dialogue. Ever since 1923, the People’s Culture Directorate in Bessarabia requested that the Ministry of Public Instruction bound educational staff to endorsing the population’s cultural manifestations „as long as these initiatives do not harm Stately order, the harmony between social classes, or the concord between minorities and the Romanian people”³⁵. This particular issue is the connecting point to our case study.

Inside the Southern Bessarabian ethnical mosaic, the German population was one that, on a day-to-day basis, had a generally unproblematic interaction with Romanian authority. Although the reorganisation of public life, and the new principles and rules imposed by the Romanian State concerning education³⁶ and local administration

areas with German, Russo-Ukrainian, and Bulgarian residents”. All cited segments apud Arthur-Viorel Tuluș, *Stări de spirit ale populației din județul Cetatea Albă între anii 1933-1934. Documente din Arhiva de Stat a Regiunii Odessa, Ucraina* [The population’s state of mind in Akkerman county between 1933 and 1934. Documents from the State Archives of Odessa region, Ukraine], Istros, Brăila, 2016, pp. 97-98, 149, 181, 239, 315-316.

³³ Ibidem, p. 46.

³⁴ Mircea Ispir, Panait Antohi, *Un sat din Bugeac. Monografia satului Plătărești, județul Cetatea Albă* [A village in Budjak. The monograph of Plătărești village, Akkerman County], «Scrisul Românesc», Craiova, 1932, p. 164.

³⁵ Fragment from a report sent in June 1923 by the Regional Directorate for People’s Culture to the Ministry of Instruction, CAS, *Ministerul Instrucțiunii* Fund, dos. 611/1923, f. 16v.

³⁶ The reactions of Bessarabian Germans to the nationalisation of schools were divided: political leaders strongly opposed the action, whilst a part of the local population supported it because of the communities’ inability to continue sustaining them financially, according to Vasile Ciobanu, *Identitatea culturală a germanilor din România în perioada interbelică* [The cultural identity of Germans in Romania in the interwar period], National Museum for Romanian Literature, Bucharest, 2013, pp. 128-129. Also, one of the most important post-Unification acquisitions made by the Bessarabian Germans was the re-Germanization of their schools, which had undergone strong Russification since the last decades of the XIXth century, according to Natalia Mafteuță, „Aspecte ale învățământului particular din Basarabia în primii ani după Unire” [Aspects of private schooling in Bessarabia in the first years after the Union] in *Buletinul Științific al Tinerilor Istorici* [The Young Historians’ Bulletin], New

prompted some opposition, the Southern Bessarabian German community was, for the most part, described in official reports as being law abiding and orderly³⁷. In some cases, it even acted as a trustworthy partner to the stability of the Romanian presence in the region and for the guard of public order and security, such as it did in the events of Tatarbunar in 1924³⁸.

In the interwar years, similar to the situation of Romanians and of other ethnic communities, Bessarabian Germans were going through their own process of re-acknowledging traditional national identity. In 1918, at the time of the Unification that made them a part of the enlarged Romanian State, German communities that resided in different provinces did not have the same national conscience. Apart from having different backgrounds, their ethno-cultural identity had been affected by the various socio-political regimes that had ruled them for centuries, and sometimes their shared

Series, II (VII), Kishinev, 2013, p. 115. The nationalization of teachers was a problematic issue, as official State policy was to replace minoritarians with Romanians. Also, the new rules for the Baccalaureate were a troublesome matter; see CAS, *Ministerul Instrucțiunii* Fund, dos. 641/1924, f. 43 and Petre Andrei, *Opera Omnia*, an edition by Cătălin Bordeianu and Doru Tompea, Tome VI, Vol. I, Part I, *Discursuri Parlamentare (1929-1933)* [Parliamentary Discourses], TipoMoldova, Iassy, 2010, pp. 117-120. If primary and secondary German schools initially kept using the German language, during the first decade of the interwar period it was gradually replaced with Romanian. In the end, 82% of local German schools went under State administration, and in 1931 only 3 continued to be managed by the community: the gymnasiums for girls and for boys in Tarutino, and the Pedagogical School in Sărata, according to Vasile Ciobanu, *Identitatea culturală a germanilor din România în perioada interbelică*, pp. 128-130.

³⁷ According to the Army's General Staff (the Bureau for Counter-Intelligence), „German colonists maintain the same orderly manner, and are refractory to Bolshevik ideas”. Also, „the German population in Bessarabia, due to its unique culture, takes all the hardships of these times without revolting against the Romanian authorities”. See its newsletters (September 29th 1920; March 1st to 31st 1925) in CAS, *Ministerul de Interne, Direcția Generală a Poliției* [Ministry of Internal Affairs, The General Police Directorate] Fund, dos. 3/1920, ff. 34, 340. For similar information, see the reports for the 1930s in *Ibidem*, dos. 6/1932, ff. 307, 309, 350-351.

³⁸ See Vasile Ciobanu, „Considerations on the German Peasants of Romania in the First Decade of the Interwar Period” in Sorin Radu, Oliver Jens Schmitt (eds), *Politics and Peasants in Interwar Romania: Perceptions, Mentalities, Propaganda*, Cambridge Scholars, 2017, pp. 476-477]; also see Ludmila Rotari, *Mișcarea subversivă din Basarabia în anii 1918-1924* [The subversive movement in Bessarabia between 1918 and 1924], Encyclopaedic Publishing House, Bucharest, 2004, p. 244. The „1924 Tatarbunar events” were a local armed conflict that took place approximately between September 15th and 18th in the region of the Tatar Bunar settlement of Akkerman county. It was part of a greater Communist plan to start riots all over the Romanian Kingdom in order to destabilize its socio-political structure and to end „Romanian imperial occupation” of Bessarabia, turning the latter into a Soviet republic. Instigated and led by Communists which had illegally crossed the border over the Dniester river, the Tatarbunar „uprising” was caused by a Bolshevik raid, and was ended by the Romanian army shortly after it commenced. Being an outside intervention, it did not gain large popular support, and it mainly implicated individuals following the commands of the Communist Third International. German settlers fought alongside the Romanian Gendarmerie against the Bolsheviks until the Army came and terminated the attack.

affiliation was reduced to a very general definition of being German³⁹. In Bessarabia, same as all other local ethnics, they had been subjected to an aggressive assimilation program inside the Russian Empire, which they now wished to reverse. Declaring their obedience to the new, interwar rule⁴⁰, being especially interested in the linguistic, educational, and economical integration of their future generations⁴¹, the representatives of Bessarabian Germans nevertheless expressed the hope that the preservation and development of their own national character would never be restricted⁴², and that an honourable competition be led between the majoritarian and minoritarian cultures, one which would not interfere with the organic growth of either community⁴³. Once more similar to Romanians, their conservative socio-cultural profile made them refractory to anything that implied an intrusion in the private life of the community, and to any such intervention, be it for cultural, religious, or administrative matters⁴⁴.

Opinions differ on the manner in which the cultural activity of the South Bessarabian Germans evolved under the interwar rule. On one hand, some researchers consider that it went on unrestricted, and that it made use of approximately the same methods and instruments as the Romanian system: public libraries, schooling, educational counseling and cultural orientation, scholarships, conferences for adults in rural environments, and so on⁴⁵. On the other hand, there are specialists that underline the restrictive side of Romanian politics, which affected these local German communities⁴⁶. It is true that the Romanian authorities had a circumspect, often mistrustful and interventionist attitude, and that this specifically expanded over Bessarabia's multiethnic South, as it was considered to be a very unstable region because of its social disparity and its status as an

³⁹ Vasile Ciobanu, *Identitatea culturală a germanilor din România...*, p. 10.

⁴⁰ The Congress of the German settlers of the Moldavian Republic gathered in Tarutino on March 7/20th 1919 and gave a unanimous resolution which declared the union with the Romanian Kingdom. It also stated „the firm belief that the Bessarabian Germans will live in peace and unity with the Romanian people, united under the same [royal] sceptre”. See Dinu C. Giurescu (coord), *Istoria României în date* [The history of Romania in data], Encyclopaedic Publishing House, Bucharest, 2003, p. 357.

⁴¹ Ever since 1922 Southern Bessarabian Germans asked for schooling personnel that could teach their children the language of the State, because they thought that linguistical stagnation of their young „is not only in our detriment, but also in the disadvantage of the State, because a child that is educated under the dominance of the Romanian culture and language will bring good services to the country when he becomes a citizen”. See CAS, *Ministerul Instrucțiunii* Fund, dos. 401/1922, ff. 70-72.

⁴² Vasile Ciobanu, *Identitatea culturală a germanilor din România...*, p. 30.

⁴³ The State had to comprehend that its resources were not exclusively meant for the spiritual development of Romanians, that ethnics played an important role in their accumulation and were thusly also entitled to receive support from the State; see Friedrich Müller, „Statul, cultura și școala minoritară”, p. 469.

⁴⁴ Vasile Ciobanu, „Considerations on the German Peasants of Romania...”, p. 476.

⁴⁵ Idem, *Identitatea culturală a germanilor din România...*, pp. 87-93.

⁴⁶ Ute Schmidt, „Germans in Bessarabia: historical background and present-day relations” in *South-East Europe Review for Labour and Social Affairs*, nr. 03 (2008), p. 312.

entryway for Communists on national soil. Unaccustomed to the principles of ethnic plurality in socio-political matters, constantly being on-guard because of revisionist tendencies, Romanian authorities did not look kindly upon the pro-active attitude of German leaders.

In Bessarabia, German colonists had not envolved themselves in politics during the Russian rule, remaining immune to political agitations and especially to the Bolshevik discourse. On the other hand, the imperial regime had not given them the opportunity to actively participate in dealings of State politics. The rights and liberties gained through integration in the Romanian State therefore permitted them to become more active in the interwar years. In 1920 a Popular German Council for Bessarabia (the *Volksrat*) was established; it was reorganised in 1923 in Tarutino, the German community's „capital” in Akkerman county. The *Volksrat* was a popular institution, meant for the representation of German interests in regional politics, economy, culture, and social matters. Though they were determined to assure the well-being of their own people, the leaders of the *Volksrat* were not radical in their demands to the State⁴⁷. However, many Romanian authorities saw any and all acts of protecting or advocating ethnic cultural identity as being „active” undertakings for resisting State politics, and thusly as an immediate threat to national interests⁴⁸. In these circumstances, the *Volksrat* was deemed as having the

⁴⁷ Up until 1933 the *Volksrat* associated itself with the political parties that held governance, in order to negotiate benefits for its community. Aware of their regional sway, and having the historical memory of the liberties they had had in the first half of the XIXth century, the Germans from Southern Bessarabia did indeed start making demands that vexed the Romanian nationals, such as local autonomy, German-only civil servants and the official use of the German language in local administration. Even so, the first-generation leaders of this organisation were generally inclined to collaborate with the State and did not encourage social rebellion. In the beginning, the *Volksrat* operated „by the principle of keeping away from political conflict and from the Romanian political matters in order to be able to represent the interests of its minority”. Its activity, as well as that of German deputies, was mainly turned towards minimizing the losses caused by the agrarian reform, the retrocession of property that had been confiscated under the Russian rule, and preventing the Romanianization of German schools. For the first half of the interwar period, Pastor Daniel Haase was the most reknowned figure of the Bessarabian German community, as high Church representative, Member of Parliament, and president of the *Volksrat*. When national-socialism rose to popularity, he and his peers were gradually replaced, and eventually the command of the *Volksrat* was taken over by supporters of the hitlerite movement in Romania (such as Otto Bronetzchi/Broneske from Tarutino). For more details see Ute Schmidt, *Basarabia. Coloniștii germani de la Marea Neagră* [Bessarabia. German colonists on the Black Sea], translated by Cristina Grossu-Chiriac, Cartier, Kishinev, 2014, pp. 305-306. Also see Arthur-Viorel Tuluș, „The Germans from Southern Bessarabia (Bugeac). From Colonisation to Repatriation” in Mircea Brie, Sorin Șipoș, Ioan Horga (coord), *Ethno-confessional realities in the Romanian area: historical perspectives (XVIII-XX centuries)*, University of Oradea Publishing House, 2011, pp. 298-299.

⁴⁸ See the report written up by secondary schooling inspector Anton Bobeică on the concert held in Tarutino on June 8th 1924 in CAS, *Ministerul Instrucțiunii* Fund, dos. 641/1924, f. 55. The inspector wrote down that „especially this *Volksrat* undertakes an energetic activity against the Romanian schooling”.

pretences of acting as „a State inside the State”⁴⁹, in spite of the fact that in their official reports regional authorities themselves recognised that, overall, the Southern Bessarabian German population was not at all interested in political dealings⁵⁰. Even so, this manner of interpreting the minority’s right, interest, and option for preserving its own cultural profile disseminated through public discourse from governmental to local administration. Afterwards, the nature and intensity of individual actions depended on the way in which public servants had internalised the sermon of their *national duty*. In Akkerman county, where the majority of the Bessarabian Germans lived⁵¹, authorities mandated with the supervision of educational and cultural matters concentrated their attention on the activities of the Volksrat and the Tarutinoer Sportverein «Bessarabia»⁵².

The event that sparked direct tensions was a public celebration organised by the latter in 1924. Here is what happened:

Members of the local German elite had arranged that on June 8th 1924 a concert take place in Tarutino with the participation of musical ensembles coming from other German communities within or outside of the country. Learning about this event, a Romanian music’s professor from the Girls’ Gymnasium in Akkerman city, Vladimir Vlasov (Vlasiu), decided that he would also participate in the event with the student choir that he coordinated within the school. According to his own statements, beside having a „scientific purpose”, his intentions were to do Romanian national propaganda⁵³. From this point on, events whirled and embroiled, and an entire series of opinions and deductions were engaged, only amounting to the destabilisation of a fragile social balance.

Driven by the confidence of his „national rights”, professor Vlasov had unreservedly announced his presence at the event, appealing to the authority of the highest rank in local Romanian administration, the Prefecture of the county, to enforce his decision. However, the latter, more aware of the appropriate ways of managing an environment where Romanians were at an universal disadvantage, avoided to intervene imperatively in the internal affairs of an otherwise unproblematic

⁴⁹ See Idem in Ibidem, f. 55.

⁵⁰ Excerpt from the report of Izmail county prefect to the Ministry of Internal Affairs, 1932. See CAS, *Ministerul de Interne, Direcția Generală a Poliției* Fund, dos. 6/1932, f. 35.

⁵¹ In 1930 there were 55 598 Germans living in Akkerman county, 10 524 in Tighina, 8 664 in Cahul, and 983 in Izmail (a total of 75 749 persons), according to *Recensământul General al Populației României...*, vol. II, pp. XXXII-XXXIII. In 1935 there were 60 419 Germans living in Akkerman county, 11 400 in Tighina, 7 663 in Cahul, and only 898 in Izmail (a total of 80 830 persons), according to CAS, *Inspectoratul General al Jandarmeriei* Fund, dos. 8/1936, f. 25.

⁵² The «Bessarabia» Sports Club had been established in Tarutino in 1919 with the purpose of engaging young Germans in sports, educational and cultural activities. Its motto was „Einigkeit macht stark”/„Unity makes us strong”. In 1924 it had 120 registered members. See CAS, *Ministerul Instrucțiunii* Fund, dos. 641/1924, ff. 62-63.

⁵³ Ibidem, ff. 54, 65-66.

community, and had guided him to the source of the upcoming happenings. Sent to discuss matters directly with the Germans, the Romanian Vlasov saw himself entitled to draw their attention to the moral obligation of minority celebrations to be opened and accompanied by Romanian cultural elements. (We note that the entire situation was unfolding at a time when ethnic populations in Southern Bessarabia had not yet had much contact with the national program of the majority, and even less with its side that claimed to be persuasive and attractive). Taking it upon himself to ensure the indispensable greeting of Romanian primacy, Vlasov saw his participation in the German celebrations as a certainty. He failed to perceive the obvious restraints of the minority, which avoided making any open commitments, instead offering dry explanations for the improbability in changing a program that had already been approved by State officials.

The complete failure in communication was easy to see from the start of these void negotiations. The Romanian teacher would later declare that he had been „decisively told”, as a promise, that his choral group would open the festivities⁵⁴. Therefore, there was little left to interpret regarding the manner in which communication between those directly involved and, by extension, between the Romanian authorities and the community under their responsibility, had taken place. In the end, a scandal arose, and on it, an official investigation. Statements were taken, and their content showed the lack of real dialogue. None of the parties had been the least receptive to the other. The Romanian professor, obsessively focused on fulfilling his national mission, had not had the capacity to observe (or refused to do so) the natural and clear reserve of the minoritarians. Much less had he had the social wisdom to not force himself upon a community that had the legal right to organize a private and peaceful cultural manifestation, independent of State structures and their interference. On the other hand, the German party did not seem to treat the clearly expressed attitude of the Romanian representative with the necessary seriousness, failing in their turn to take into account the socio-political climate of the newly constituted nation-State. The year 1924 itself can be defined through the accentuation of the idealistic nation-building discourse and, by being positioned outside the culturally-established „sanitary belt”, Southern Bessarabia was in the direct attention of authorities, within the reach of their most concentrated enterprises. In Tarutino, direct and unequivocal messages had failed to be understood by both majority and minority.

As a result of this disfunctional dialogue, on the day of the gathering the Romanian professor had presented himself with his entire, 50-student choir, and immediately asked to be given the stage. Seeing such a large group (that, for their part, had not even been expected), the German organizers would find a single solution that would not disturb their own festivity: progressively postponing in giving Vlasov definite directions.

⁵⁴ Ibidem, ff. 65-66.

Seeing that he was not being given the attention he claimed, still receiving ambiguous answers about the impossibility of modifying a program that had already been approved by the same authorities whose honor Vlasov was claiming to save, the professor left the event by metaphorically turning the house on its head, proclaiming to all that would listen that his participation in the event had been blocked by the malevolence of minorities „because we wanted to do national propaganda with beautiful Romanian songs”⁵⁵. The story’s thread, in the form it had been given by the teacher, was indicative for his way of interpreting the whole situation:

„[we were placed] at the back of the hall, to wait until they would announce us (...) afterwards, we were told that the choir would perform after the second part of the concert. After the second part we approached the stage to sing genuine Romanian songs and we were bewildered to find that if we wanted to perform we could do so only after the conclusion of the show. My response to this situation was that a secondary State’s school choir which undertakes national propaganda is not fitted to perform at the end of an event, at a time in which the audience is already turning its back to the stage. This proposition was so offensive to a State school that myself and the pupils immediately left the concert hall, without waiting for the end of the show. The concert’s program was printed solely in German and with the use of Gothic letters. I brought this fact to the attention of the subprefect, who said that the brochure had been approved by the Ministry. All of my pupils were dressed in beautiful traditional clothing and were very spirited with being called to do national propaganda with Romanian songs, but afterwards they complained about sensing enmity from the Germans in Tarutino. We cannot surpass the following incident: when we were waiting at the back of the hall, deputy Muciler, MP, on entering the room and seeing me, came over (as he has known me for some time) and said: «I am glad that you came, it would be nice if you sang religious or Ukrainian songs, as these melodies are pleasing to the Germans». This was said in front of the pupils. (...) Muciler then continued: «If you are concerned, do not be; I, as an MP, will do away with any discontent». This is the manner in which a deputy of the Romanian Parliament does «national» propaganda within the German population, by asking the pupils of a Romanian school to sing Ukrainian songs. I told him that a State school does not do Ukrainian melodies; that we are subjects to our superior authorities and that we do not infringe their commandments. Our intent of doing national propaganda was thusly paralyzed by the malevolence of some Germans, which under the guise of a «sports’ club» undertake foreign propaganda inside our own country, in our unceasingly troubled Bessarabia,

⁵⁵ Ibidem, ff. 65-66.

but under the favour of our own authorities, which give them trains to travel when our Romanian schools in Bessarabia can hardly obtain such facilitations”⁵⁶

The words, the phrasing, and the interpretations given to the incident by the Romanian professor clarify much of the conflict’s subcontext, and explain the psychological foundations for the series of official investigations that the event generated. The reasons for dissatisfaction, as they unveil, were: the bruised national ego of the Romanians; the minority’s refusal to grant the Romanian teacher his „right” to cultural superiority; the German’s „audacity” of printing the brochure of an otherwise private event using their own language and alphabet⁵⁷; the „insult” brought to Romanian culture by the fact that Germans were more open towards the Russian or Ukrainian cultural profiles rather than to the Romanian one⁵⁸; last but not least, the discontent over facilities given to minorities⁵⁹ in the so-called detriment of Romanians, who were considered entitled to be privileged by default.

Professor Vlasov’s perspective would later be taken up by most of the local (Romanian) authorities which investigated the scandal that ensued. Being an occasion to celebrate cultural tradition and to strengthen inter-community ties, the music festival in Tarutino had not been limited to local participants, instead having received delegates from various German environments. Noting the events, Anton Bobeică, one of Akkerman county’s schooling inspectors, had written up that guests had been received by locals „with the German flag” and with greetings spoken in German. Following the protest of Romanian officials, the flag had been confiscated, to be sent to the Ministry of Interior Affairs as part of a future punitive investigation. The brochure of the concert had in turn been rejected by censorship because of the language in which it was written, because it lacked songs or poetry in Romanian, but also because it had been considered biased through the way in which it depicted the map of Bessarabia⁶⁰. The position of the inspector (and, through him, that of

⁵⁶ Ibidem, ff. 54, 65-66.

⁵⁷ It is important to note that this practice was otherwise allowed, and even encouraged by the Romanian authorities for all ethnic communities living in Bessarabia. This was not only an application of the new constitutional policies but, most importantly, a means through which the governance tried to eliminate Russian cultural influences (the strategy for integrating minorities by re-nationalising them first) and to make the general transition towards the Latin alphabet in the province.

⁵⁸ A fact that could have ultimately been easily explained by their long (and sometimes forced) contact with those cultural elements over the span of a century.

⁵⁹ However, this was an official provision of the new Constitution and legislation, and it had also been officially chosen as an integratory strategy by the government.

⁶⁰ The statement does not include details on the subject, but merely indicates to page no. 15 in the aforementioned brochure. Most probably, it was either an old map in which Bessarabia was part of the Russian Empire, or a map envisioning some type of German self-

school authority itself) became obvious since he found it inconceivable to approve a minority gathering without Romanian cultural elements being imposed on it. The fact that „the performance began with the «Long live the King» anthem, sung by all the choirs of the German colonies”, did nothing to save the Germans in the accusing eyes of this public servant⁶¹. Moreso, inspector Bobeică took it upon himself to be the spokesman for „the entire Romanian community” in saying that German hymns and national songs, written by the renowned Southern Bessarabian professor Albert Mauch⁶², should not have been performed at all during the event. His conclusion was that the Romanian pupils had not been allowed to interpret their own songs on false excuses, that „in this case indeed” an insult had been made to Romanian culture in Bessarabia, that this did not fit at all „with the prestige of the Romanian State”, and that „the Sportverein would do well to officially apologize to professor Vlasov”⁶³.

The documents drawn up by law enforcement contained a very fine change in the passionate description of the incident; however, the general tone of interpretations and the manner of establishing guilt remained the same. Introducing very few new details on the matter, they summarized the statements of the two representatives for the Romanian school system (Bobeică and Vlasov himself), then gave short and sharp judgments. Of all those accused of misconduct, the Gendarmerie had identified Heinrich Roemmich, the director of the Tarutino boys’ gymnasium, as the most criticizable⁶⁴, as he presumably had treated the Romanian choristers with contempt, „without any sense of being a good Romanian and of his duty”⁶⁵.

administrating community in Southern Russia (a project that had been imagined ever since the first settlements in the Empire, but had no real foundation for accomplishment).

⁶¹ CAS, *Ministerul Instrucțiunii* Fund, dos. 641/1924, ff. 55, 72. It is important to take note of the fact that, although one of the issues initially raised by Vlasov was that Germans did not know the National Royal Anthem (and therefore were about to offend Romanian authority by not performing it at the event), the German community in Tarutino had given the issue its due importance and had made sure that the requirement be completed.

⁶² Albert Mauch was the principal of the German Pedagogical School in Sărata, Akkerman county, one of the community’s most important institutions. Over several decades, the Mauch family had given some of the most active and well known teachers of Southern Bessarabian Germans. Primary school teacher Christian Mauch, for example, had fueled the development of secondary education for the German people by founding, in 1872, the first classes which pupils could take in order to continue their studies after the first 4 grades.

⁶³ CAS, *Ministerul Instrucțiunii* Fund, dos. 641/1924, f. 55.

⁶⁴ Heinrich Roemmich had been born in a German colony in the Herson district, studied theology in Dorpat and had been given a parish in the area. In 1917-1919 he had taken a teaching position at the Secondary School for Boys in Tarutino. He was to be the principal of this school between 1919 and 1932. Between 1918-1921 he had also taught at the School for Girls in Tarutino. He was one of the founders of the German newspaper in Bessarabia and vicepresident of the Volksrat. He would voluntarily relocate to Saxony in 1932, then to other regions in Germany. After World War II he would preside over the association of Germans from Russia.

⁶⁵ See the report send by the 5th Regiment of Gendarms to their Corps in Akkerman in CAS, *Ministerul Instrucțiunii* Fund, dos. 641/1924, f. 57. Although never indicated by name or by

His dismissal had therefore been recommended, so that his opinions would not harm State interests by wrongfully influencing future generations of Southern Bessarabian Germans as Romanian citizens. In its turn, the Army had reprimanded the local Romanian authorities instead, „the only ones able to avoid such unfortunate incidents”⁶⁶, by accusing them of lacking vigilance and promptness in action, of failing to impose an adequate (privileged n.n.) place within the festivity for Romanian elements, and also of having allowed the event in the first place.

Very few of the documents drawn up by State authorities brought to light new details about the incident. Many of them had derived already circulated information only to pass it on, paradoxically, to the very source from which they had originally received it from (see the correspondence between the Schooling Inspectorate in Akkerman and the IIIrd Army Corps' Security Brigade). They did not resolve the issue of Vlasov's complaints and his interpretation of the facts. On the contrary, their conclusions aggravated the state of affairs by feeding institutional frustrations. The documents that survived do not contain actual resolutions on the statements collected, or decisions that could have been carried upon the complaints. We therefore lack the opportunity to find who was ultimately named as the guilty party inside a situation that was interpreted by the local Romanian authorities as being a solemn offense brought upon the honour of the majority. Bearing in mind similar clashes, the socio-political balance (sometimes tense, but stable) established between the two parties, as well as information we hold on some of those involved in the story, we have reason to think that the outcome may have supplemented animosities between local elites, but that they did not mount to anything more. Despite all its threatening statements, the conflict did not seem to rise above an administrative scandal. The situation often repeated itself, in very similar circumstances, without determining significant consequences on the way in which the daily lives of the two local populations, German and Romanian, were conducted. Beyond the demagoguery of nationalist discourse, the administration had admitted the natural and inevitable existence of contradictions in multiethnic communities such as those found in Southern Bessarabia and, although it kept them under record, pursued other, seemingly more impending threats raised by the general socio-political context. Undoubtedly, under viable conditions, the State would have exploited any measures favourable to Romanian interests and would have given out more than just symbolical reprimands in such matters. The fact that its line of action was generally limited to loosely built investigations

position, the female principal of the Girls' Lyceum in Tarutino was also considered to be at fault for „wrongfully” managing the national spirit of young Germans, seeing how in this institution authorities had found „the portrait of our King torn, with his Majesty's eyes drawn on with pencil”; see the report send by the Security Brigade of the IIIrd Army Corps to the Schooling Inspectorate in *Ibidem*, f. 72.

⁶⁶ From the report of Akkerman Garrison to the XIInd Division in Izmail, see *Ibidem*, f. 70.

indicated, among other things, that by lacking a consistent demographic representation in Southern Bessarabia the Romanian administration also lacked the power needed for specific interventions. Other, more objective grounds for not taking strong action against such incidents resided in the newly established legislative framework, as well as in the political reasoning which dictated that, despite the strong homogenizing intentions and the verve of cultural agents, the major interest of the State was not to aggravate conflicts in extremely sensitive regions such as Southern Bessarabia, or in relation to minorities that proved to be otherwise unproblematic in terms of civic conduct.

For all of these reasons, many other enmities would be aroused over the years by the more vocal members of both parties, without this causing great upheaval on the part of the system itself. The leaders of Southern Bessarabian communities would continue to quarrel with varying degrees of malice, but over time the Romanian missionaries' annoyance with the Germans' „impropriety”, on the one hand, and the German elite's dissatisfaction with the claims of the former, on the other, would no longer provoke such significantly impulsive disputes as had been the case in Tarutino in the summer of 1924. Cohabitation between the Romanian administrative authority and the German elite in Southern Bessarabia gradually settled as the stabilization of national laws took place. The State continued a relentless implementation of its rules and values, folk adapted to the new conditions of coexistence, and the mutual opposition of elites moved underground, in reciprocal suspicion and surveillance.

Looking back to 1924, we have every reason to think that the first encounter of parties played a specifically significant role in the subsequent development of relations between the two elites. Each of them had had the opportunity to notice the other's interests, goals, and attitudes. German leaders had had the first clear contact with what the Romanian cultural integration program would entail, as well as with the intensity of manifestation that some of its supporters would develop. For their part, Romanian cultural agents had already formed a „conviction” that the German population of Tarutino did „not nurture feelings of sincere friendship to everything that is Romanian”, or that „at least the members of the Society [*Sportverein* n. n.] [were] indifferent to what [was] currently troubling the soul of the Romanian people”. Although they admitted Germans were „an element of social order”, these functionaries did not see them as „sincere friends of the Romanian people”, and thought that „in the event of an European conflict [they would] not be on the side of the Romanians”⁶⁷. Under these circumstances, the administration proclaimed that the most appropriate way of action was „to begin an intensive cultural

⁶⁷ Ironically, just some months afterwards the Tatarbunar incident would occur, in which the German population was to prove itself very helpful to the Romanian authorities, and very unhesitating in fending off the Bolshevik attacks.

and national propaganda in order to make known to them all the good qualities of the Romanians and thus to bring them closer and connected with the Romanian people”⁶⁸. Seemingly noble in the perspective of a fruitful inter-community communication (and certainly necessary in terms of civic relations), these intentions, candid in theory, became provocative when transformed into actions by members of the State apparatus which condensed the strict cadence of a holy national mission. What these local representatives of administrative power did not take into account was precisely the principle argued at central political level regarding the objective inability of other ethnics to be real participants in the process of cultural reconfiguration according to purely Romanian values. Even the most fervent theorists of Romanianism had established that it was impossible for minorities to *feel* Romanian in the sense dictated by the national culturalization program. Or, upon reading the statements of the Tarutino conflict, one easily sees that the renunciation of their own internal cultural authority, the abandonment of their previous affiliations, and the voluntary assent to a cultural spirit foreign to them was precisely what had been asked of the Germans in Southern Bessarabia by the new administration. In blaming these ethnics for being indifferent to „what is currently troubling the soul of the Romanian people”, the latter contradicted their own logic. They then committed a similar fault by not taking into account the local social context, which they were now responsible for, as governing authority.

Idealistically thinking that a neo-liberal Constitution, together with the promise of temperance in the development of the national-constructive program⁶⁹, would suffice to navigate the complex social environment of Southern Bessarabia, Romanians lost sight of the similarities that they shared with other ethnics in the region. All communities were trying to bring back and solidify the cultural identity which they saw as traditional, pure, and righteous. In the attempt to unilaterally resolve social issues in the interests of the majority, a vicious cycle was created, in which the State strived to impose its own cultural profile, deeply dissatisfying ethnic communities and hindering their desire to preserve their own cultural identities.

⁶⁸ See the conclusions of schooling inspector Anton Bobeică’s report in CAS, *Ministerul Instrucțiunii* Fund, dos. 641/1924, f. 55.

⁶⁹ One official declaration said that national authorities and the elite would „strive for the creation, in our children’s hearts, of a sentiment of respect, love, and understanding for all kins, [and that it] will fight against national ego, which is dangerous”. See D. V. Toni’s (president of the Association of Primary School Teachers of Romania) intervention in the Chamber of Deputies, session of December 8th 1932, in Petre Andrei, *Opera Omnia*, Tome VII, Vol. I, Part II, *Parliamentary Discourses (1929-1933)*, p. 465.