Everyday Ethnicity and Popular Responses to Nation-Building Projects in Moldova after 1989

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Abstract: This article revisits the foundational years of 1989–1992 when the Republic of Moldova obtained its independence and simultaneously suffered territorial losses due to separatist movements. The quasi-official view in today’s Moldova holds that separatist movements of that era in Transnistria and Gagauzia were the results of Moscow’s meddling in Moldovan affairs aimed at punishing the Moldovans’ quest for independence. The paper argues that this interpretation attributes too much power to the decision-makers in Moscow, and also strips local actors of agency. Instead, the article calls for a renewed focus on the developments in Moldova itself and for discourses developed by separatist leaders and opinion-setters to be treated as representative of genuine popular sentiment. It argues that the Moldovan national movement alienated the non-Moldovan population whose primary means of communication was Russian. The article relies on personal recollections as well as numerous published primary and secondary sources.

Keywords: Republic of Moldova; Transnistria; independence; Russia; separatism

This article explains the origins of the separatist movements in the Republic of Moldova (RM) in a way that is at odds with the prevailing account in the country today. The latter lays the blame squarely at the door of the separatist leaders in Transnistria, the Moscow leadership of the early 1990s, and the commanders of the 14th Soviet, later the Russian army in Transnistria (Snegur 2008, 425; Dragnev 2007, 357-432; Covalschi and Veancă 2014, 243). Reading history backwards, this view assumes that the very fact that the current Transnistrian leadership serves as a puppet of Putin’s regime proves that the region’s breakaway from Moldova was conceived

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and directed from Moscow from the very beginning. On the other hand, a mythologizing account of the de facto separation of Transnistria from the Republic of Moldova following the conflict between the two sides, with the involvement of Russia, which functions as “official” historiography in today’s “Pridnestrovian Moldovan Republic” (Pridnestrovskaja Moldavskaja Respublika, PMR), in English referred to as Transnistria, portrays Moldovan nationalists/fascists as singularly responsible for provoking the PMR’s secession from the Republic of Moldova (Grosul 2000).

Each one of these narratives sees the crisis, its dynamics, and its outcome as largely predetermined by forces outside the control of the main protagonists. In the dominant narrative in the Republic of Moldova, this protagonist is the “national movement”, and in Transnistria’s official history, it is the “Pridnestrovian people”. Both protagonists deny responsibility for the Republic’s disintegration, and the possibility of a different course of events is ruled out. Instead, this article argues that although the political crisis at the end of the Soviet regime and its immediate aftermath was inevitable, the form it assumed and the escalation leading up to the disintegration of the Republic as a single entity were not. The article endeavors to unveil, without negating the influence of structural and outside factors, the agency republican-level protagonists had and their own contribution to the Moldovan disintegration. Without reducing the discussion to an exclusive focus on the vaunted “role of the subjective factor”, it does strive to bring factors such as popular sentiment and political culture to the fore.

Full disclosure is warranted here. From 1988 to 1997, I was a member of the executive committee of the Internationalist Movement “Unitatea-Edinstvo”. I was elected to the Moldovan parliament on the Movement’s lists twice, in 1990 and in 1994, and was expelled from its ranks for supporting the “wrong” candidate (the would-be president Petru Lucinschi) in the presidential elections of 1997. I left Moldovan politics in 2001 and have played no part in it since then. Having served in the Moldovan parliament for ten years, from 1990 to 2000, I then returned to my original profession and have been a practicing historian since residing in the United States. The following text is based both on my recollections of events and on the application of the tools of analysis and interpretation characteristic of the profession to which I have the honor to belong. All aspects of this text that are not substantiated by empirical material rely on my recollections. In the following, I will, first, describe the main feature of Moldovan society as it existed on the eve of perestroika; second, I will show how perestroika led to popular mobilization along ethnolingustic lines; and third, I will explain how and why at various points of the crisis real prospects of reconciling differences by means of political compromise were lost.
Perestroika and Popular Mobilization in the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic (MSSR)

In the mid-1980s, Moldovan society was largely quiescent. Under the immense weight of KGB surveillance, there were no signs of organized protests, a political or cultural underground network, or dissident groups. Most of the “anti-Soviet” groups consisted of members of the intelligentsia privately voicing their critical views on the various aspects of Soviet foreign or domestic policy. The Moldavian KGB managed to disperse them by intimidation and usually without the need for arrests (Cașu 2000, 38-81).

After the turbulence of the late 1940s, namely the mass famine of 1946–1947, collectivization, and deportations, followed by Stalin’s death and de-Stalinization during the 1950s, Moldovan society entered a period of relative “normalcy”. In the 1960s and 1970s, industrialization and urbanization accelerated (Cașu 2000, 82-115). Most of the industrial growth resulted from investment from Soviet Union funds, and it was directed and controlled by the USSR’s line ministries, such as “Heavy Industry” and “Machine-Building”. As a result, Moldovan cities, including Chișinău, Bălți, and Bender (Tighina) on the right bank of the Dniester River, and Tiraspol and Rîbnița on the left, experienced exponential population growth, with many immigrating from outside of the Republic, particularly Russia and Ukraine. In 1944, only 19% of the Moldavian SSR’s population lived in the urban areas; in 1989 it was 47%.1 Moldovans constituted less than half or 46.3%, while the rest were ethnic Russians, Ukrainians, Jews, and other minorities (Cașu 2000, 107). As most non-Moldovans were Russian-speaking, industrialization led to an increasing Russification of the cities.

The dominant patterns of development, in particular Soviet-style industrialization with concomitant high in-migration from the rest of the Soviet Union, created a cleavage between urban Russian-speaking and purportedly “modern” spaces and the supposedly “backward”, mostly Romanian-speaking countryside (although one has to keep in mind that in the areas with ethnic Gagauz and Bulgarian populations, the language of public discourse was Russian and that in the ethnic Ukrainian villages, Russian was more widely used than Romanian). Ethnic Moldovan migrants in the Republic’s cities experienced profound alienation. Many resented the enforced hegemony of Russian and were often confronted with the arrogance of Russian speakers who considered Romanian-speaking villagers to be

1 In this article, I use the name Moldova to refer to the current-day, independent Republic of Moldova, and Moldavia when referring to the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic (also MSSR or Moldavian SSR).
uncouth rustic intruders in “their” space, unsuited to “modern” times. The Soviet dual system of education—Moldovan Romanian-language schools for ethnic Moldovans and Russian-language schools for every other ethnicity—contributed to the division of the Moldovan population into two language-based communities. With Russian dominant in the public sphere outside of Moldovan village communities, most Moldovans, especially those living in urban areas, spoke both languages, while only a minority of Russian speakers spoke any Moldovan. Either by neglect or intentionally, the authorities made no effort to either teach them Moldovan or encourage them to study the language.

The quality of Moldovan political and cultural elites was generally low. Before the 1917 revolution, the Bessarabian province (губерния) was ruled by coteries of the land-owning class; this social group was decimated by the Bolshevik revolution and the 1921 agrarian reform in Greater Romania. After 1918, the place of this Russian-speaking elite was taken by local Romanian-speaking intelligentsia. After World War II, the members of this elite, tiny as it was, were arrested, imprisoned, and exiled by the Soviet and communist authorities (Cașu 2010a; Cașu 2010b). From its creation in 1940 through 1941, and then from 1944 onward, the Moldavian SSR was ruled by a party nomenklatura, most of whose members were initially imported from the Ukrainian SSR. Gradually, however, the composition of this group changed in favor of local Bessarabian ethnic Moldovans (Stavilă 1996; Lisnic 2019). Whether imported or local, the skills of this nomenklatura, acquired in the party apparat, proved unsuited to mass politics.

Increasingly numerous and influential groups of “national cadres” within the Communist Party nomenklatura often patronized Moldovan creative intelligentsia who populated Soviet-style scientific and cultural institutions such as the Academy of Sciences, the Writers’ and Painters’ Unions, the Drama, Opera, and Ballet theaters, the dance and music troupes, and the Moldova-Film Studios. Created in accordance with the precepts of Soviet nationalities policies, these institutions were meant to provide space within which a “Moldovan socialist national culture” was to flourish. The same logic was applied in all Soviet republics, but the Moldovan case was unique in that the “Moldovan culture” thus promoted was supposed to be different from the Romanian one, so much so that even its working language would be different from Romanian. Very few intellectuals, even if they publicly subscribed to this fiction, believed in it, and some even protested against it (Negură 2014).

The Russian speakers were largely disinterested in the developments within the Moldovan cultural sphere, which they often regarded with disdain, deeming it second-rate in comparison with Russian-language “Pan-Union” culture, whose centers were in Moscow and Leningrad, on the one hand. The Russian-speaking cultural intelligentsia was virtually nonexistent in the Republic as any artistic talent
born in the Moldovan Russian-speaking milieu gravitated towards cultural centers elsewhere in the Union. On the other hand, what was known in Soviet parlance as the “technical intelligentsia”, that is industrial engineers and managers, as well as scientists employed in universities and the Academy of Science, were mainly Russian-speaking, despite the fact that some of them were of Moldovan ethnic origin, and as such had little in common with the Moldovan creative intelligentsia, with a few exceptions.

Two points should be emphasized here. The first concerns the virtual lack of communication between Romanian and Russian-speaking communities in late Soviet Moldavia, as well as a lot of pent-up resentment on the part of the former against the latter, especially in the urban spaces. Compounded by the disdain the supposedly more cultured Russian speakers felt toward the ethnic Moldovans who they perceived as “backward” and “rustic”, the situation was kept under control by targeted KGB intimidation. The second point is that neither the Moldovan nor the Russian-speaking elites were in any way ready for the political roles they would play during the political crisis unleashed by perestroika. With very limited knowledge of the outside world, they were steeped in Soviet ideology, which emphasized inter-class and international conflict as the driving force of history. All the contradictions that were inherent in this worldview “naturally” ended in the victory of one side or another, while compromises were deemed to have no lasting benefits. Devoid of the skills to navigate the fluid space of mass democratic politics, few anticipated the imminent crisis, and even fewer could imagine where they would soon end up as a result. Perestroika was the catchword that denoted a new course of Soviet domestic politics ushered in by the newly elected (March 1985) General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, Mikhail Gorbachev. Initially conceived as an “acceleration” of economic development through the introduction of limited market mechanisms, perestroika soon evolved into a policy of increasingly radical political reforms.

The most enthusiastic support for the new course came from the non-Russian western republics, first and foremost the Baltic states, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. Taking advantage of the relaxation of censorship, the Moldovan periodicals published views that were critical of the environmental damage caused by the Soviet industrialization drive. Seeing that the authorities were now refraining from repressions and were instead making concessions to popular demands, environmentalist protests quickly moved to the discussion of previously taboo topics such as the mass deportations of the 1940s, repressions, and even the illegal annexation of the formerly independent Baltic states. In short order, from 1986 to 1988, the opposition organized itself into popular fronts (Sajūdis in Lithuania) led by nationalist intellectuals, initially calling for “full economic sovereignty” within the Soviet Union but eventually, in 1988–1989, demanding the proclamation of full
independence by the republican Supreme Soviets (Miljan 1990; Hackman 2020). It bears repeating that Moscow’s support for popular fronts at the time of their creation in 1988 was crucial for their eventual success as the process could be easily stopped in its tracks by a simple hint from those on top (Zubok 2021, 56).

Moldovan political developments followed closely behind those in the Baltic republics, and here, too, Moscow’s unprecedented encouragement of the protests had a decisive effect. When in 1987, some Moldovan writers initiated a discussion on the environmental problems in the Republic, they were threatened with “consequences” by the local leaders and decided to go ahead with their campaign only after the Moscow-based weekly Literaturnaia gazeta published an article by Moldovan writer Ion Drutâ, articulating their grievances more clearly than they ever managed to do in Chișinău (Hutchinson 2020, 488-503). Moldovan historian Anton Moraru reported having attended, in February 1989, a meeting held by Viktor M. Chebrikov, former KGB chief and, at the time, Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CC CPSU) on a visit to Chișinău, with Moldovan officials and intellectuals. Moraru was impressed by Chebrikov’s “calm demeanour”, adding:

Perhaps some of our people expected to receive instructions to take strong measures so as to guarantee order. However, Chebrikov advised us to utilize political methods to solve misunderstandings, meet more often with the mass media and the creative unions, improve our ideological work with the masses, and pay great attention to interethnic relations.2

The conservative majority in the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Moldavia (CC CPM) was only too happy to crack down on the protests by means of police repressions and the muzzling of the press. It was solely Gorbachev’s ban on using such methods that prevented them from doing this.

Initially, Moldovan opposition groups, later collectively known as the “national movement” or “movement for national renaissance”, developed along two tracks. First there were gatherings of nationalist intellectuals and students of Chișinău universities, at which various previously forbidden topics of national history were discussed, patriotic songs sung, and poetry recited, and then there were the more moderate Democratic Movement for the Support of perestroika, which was closer to the party leadership and consisted of “established” Moldovan writers and artists as well as scientists and professors. After these groups merged on 20 May 1989 into the “Popular Front of Moldova” (Frontul Popular din Moldova, FP), the movement became the dominant force in the Republic, capable of organizing rallies attended by

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thousands of people, the most powerful of which, known as the “Great National Assembly”, took place in Chisinău on 27 August 1989. The number of participants was estimated at between 100,000 and 500,000, an astonishing figure for a republic of 4.3 million citizens.

By that time, tensions in the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic (MSSR) had reached boiling point. The radicalized nationalist movement, emboldened by Moscow’s prohibition of police repression and angered by the republican leadership’s procrastination in adopting their demands, switched to the strategy of exerting pressure from below, employing mass rallies, hunger strikes, and confrontations with the police. By this point, their demands centered on immediately granting official status to the Moldovan (Romanian) language, official recognition of its identity with Romanian, thus doing away with the myth imposed by the Soviets since 1938, first in the Moldavian Autonomous SSR (MASSR) as part of the Ukrainian SSR, and later in the Moldavian SSR, of Moldovan being a separate language from Romanian. This included the aim of it returning to the Latin script instead of the Russian-type Cyrillic imposed in 1938. Other demands included the abrogation of historical myths that lay at the basis of Soviet Moldavian identity, such as the “progressive” nature of the Russian Empire’s annexation of Bessarabia in 1812 and the 1940 “liberation” of Bessarabia by the Red Army from “bourgeois landowners’ Romania”; curtailment of in-migration from the rest of the Soviet Union; “full sovereignty” of the MSSR within the USSR, and even its outright independence or unification with Romania.

The “language problem” was the most immediate one, on which reluctant local party leaders were soon forced to act. On 25 January 1989 the Presidium of the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic’s (MSSR) Supreme Soviet, pursuant to the “recommendation” of the Bureau of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Moldavia (CPM CC), created a working group charged with the elaboration of the respective draft legislation. “Invited specialists” from the Academy of Sciences and universities played the leading role in the process. The final products of these proceedings were two draft laws, “On the status of the state language” and “On the function of the language spoken in the territory of MSSR”, published for discussion on 31 March 1989. The bills granted Moldovan the status of the “state language”, at the same time conferring the Russian language the status of “language of interethnic communication” [limba de comunicare între națiuni in Romanian, iazyk mezhnatsional’nogo obshcheniâ in Russian]. The use of this latter term was unfortunate as the subsequent debates focused on it to the detriment of other provisions that regulated the use of languages in communication between various public bodies and between these bodies and private citizens.

This term invoked Soviet official discourse, which invariably denied that Russian was an official language in the USSR and insisted that it was just “the
language of interethnic communication”. Since, despite the authorities’ denial, Russian did function as the official language in the Soviet era, Moldovan nationalist leaders suspected that unless this provision was removed, the law would not change much in practice. As publicist Valentin Mândăcanu put it, “I dare say that these draft laws will not guarantee the functioning of our language in all spheres of activity […]. We will have two state languages, one on paper, another in reality” (Negru 2019, 116). Such black-and-white thinking had by that time become the norm in Moldovan public space, both in the Romanian-speaking community and among Russian speakers.

Given how poor the knowledge of Romanian was among ethnic non-Moldovans – according to the 1989 census, only 11% had a command of it – such demands were bound to cause anxiety among them (Shornikov 2009, 37). Since Russian speakers were substantially more urbanized than Moldovans, their jobs often presupposed an ability to receive and deliver specialized information orally and in writing (Dumbrava and Cașu 2012, 107). Quick transition to Romanian thus threatened their very livelihood. They were further aggrieved by information policies popular among Moldovan radical media outlets, such as the weekly Literatura și arta led by writer Nicolae Dabija, which sank to the level of gutter press publishing vicious attacks on Russians as an ethnic group and holding them collectively responsible for the wrongs inflicted by the Soviets. Although the slogan “Suitcase – train station – Russia” (Chemodan – vogzal – Rossiiă) may never have been recited at nationalist rallies as the persistent rumor has it, this urban legend (if legend it is) accurately reflected the mood. While it is certain that not all ethnic Moldovans, even those who took part in the rallies, shared such attitudes, the very fact that no leader of the national movement ever publicly distanced themselves from them created the impression that the whole Moldovan community was consumed by hatred of Russian speakers and wanted them out, immediately (Cașu 2013, 298). For most Russian speakers who considered the Soviet Union their country and were comfortable with the notion of Soviet citizens, even if they were critical of various aspects of Soviet reality, the emergence of Romanian tricolor flags at the rallies and signs with slogans such as “One language, one people, one country”, together with calls for reunification with Romania, were proof that the Moldovan national movement had been hijacked by traitors who would soon bring the Republic back to Romania. The idea of reunification however was unpopular

3 Writer and journalist Iulian Ciocan, for example, later confessed, in an interview with Moldovan historian Igor Cașu, that he did not like to recall the events of the summer of 1989, as on August 27, the day of the Great National Assembly, he saw the central square in Chișinău “full of naïve, Romantic people, inspired or poisoned by the miasma of counterproductive nationalism” (Cașu 2013, 298). In his study, Cașu also cites other, positive, opinions of the same event.
not only among Russian speakers but Moldovans too, and the aforementioned slogan only reflected the opinion of a small minority of the protesters. At the time, however, events were developing at dizzying speed, and anything seemed possible. In this context, language demands seemed to be just the tip of the iceberg which would inevitably destroy the Russian speakers’ ship.

Thus, changing the official language from Russian to Romanian required some compromises, particularly in areas with a heavy concentration of Russian speakers, such as urban centers. In Tiraspol (approximately 180,000 inhabitants), Bâlți (120,000), Bender (80,000), and Ribnița (60,000), for example, where the great majority of inhabitants preferred Russian in their daily communication, this change could not occur without the cooperation of the municipal authorities, which could not but reflect the views and preferences of their constituencies. The same was true of the area in the south of the Republic where Gagauz (mostly the Comrat and parts of the Ciadîr-Lunga and Vulcănești districts (raion)) and ethnic Bulgarians (the Taraclia raion), who were also heavily Russified, predominated. Local party bosses, such as first secretaries of the municipal party organizations Leonid Tsurkan (Tiraspol), Pavel Tsymai (Țâmai), and Vasile Iovv (Bâlți), advocated devolving regulations on the use of languages to the level of the local authorities. Still, this demand was anathema to the nationalists, who suspected that it would mean little would change in practice, and it did not gain traction. Imposing Romanian in areas with a strong majority of Russian speakers was nearly impossible, at least in the short run.

On the other hand, most Russian speakers quickly adopted the demand for two state languages, Romanian and Russian. Most of them sincerely believed that this would be a simple and equitable solution. For Moldovan leaders this proved that Russian speakers were unwilling to learn Romanian and stubbornly defended their privileges. Such an assumption was not far from the truth. Even so, their insistence that Romanian become an official language overnight, exactly as the Soviets had done in 1940 when they replaced Romanian with Russian, was vengeful and unrealistic.

The backlash came in the form of various local initiatives. In January 1989 in Chișinău, a group of Russian-language intellectuals, mainly from Chișinău State University and the Academy of Sciences, created the Internationalist Movement in Defense of Perestroika “Unitatea-Edinstvo”, which means “unity” in Romanian and Russian. The main slogan of “Edinstvo”, as the movement became known (its opponents used the more confrontational sobriquet “Interfront”, although this term was never used by its members), demanded that Russian be given the status of the second state language alongside Moldovan.4 This immediately found support

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4 I was the only one on the executive board to insist that this slogan was unnecessary and provocative.
among employees of industrial enterprises. Anatolii Belitchenko, director of Moldovan Metal Works in Ribniţa, would later recall that the workers perceived “Edinstvo” as the only organization capable of defending Russian speakers’ rights and “stopping the nationalist psychosis in Moldova” (Slobodianîuk 2019, 53). In February 1989, smaller groups of Gagauz activists merged to form a “Gagauz Halkı” movement, whose main aim was territorial autonomy for the area where the Gagauz lived.

By that time, fearful Russian speakers had become convinced that the Moscow leadership, who they for a time expected to bring Chişinău nationalists to heel, had lost control of the situation; they were now ready to take matters into their own hands. From April 1989 onward, meetings were held at Moldovan enterprises to discuss the proposed language regime changes and resolutions were adopted calling for Romanian and Russian to be made official languages. When on 11 August 1989, local newspapers in Tiraspol leaked reworked draft laws, there was a new wave of protests. This resulted in a body called the “United Soviet of Workers’ Collectives” (USWC) being formed in Tiraspol, and analogous councils soon appeared in Bender, Ribniţa, Bălţi, and Chişinău. On 16 August, workers from Tiraspol, Bender, and Ribniţa held a two-hour “warning” strike “to force republican leadership to take into consideration the requests of the Russian-speaking population” (Slobodianîuk 2019, 65). As no concessions were made, and on August 20 the draft was officially published, the strike was resumed, first in Tiraspol and then in the other cities, eventually engulfing the entire Republic. Between 100,000 and 200,000 people participated in this strike, which did not end until 29 September (Slobodianîuk 2019, 89; see also Harrington, in this issue).

The strikers portrayed themselves as a working-class movement, using a familiar Marxist-Leninist trope, which implied their noble, “progressive” character as a struggle of underdogs against elites. This image was, however, contradicted by the prominence among the movements’ leaders of the directors of their enterprises, such as Igor’ Smirnov, Vilor Ordin, and Anatolii Bol’shakov from Tiraspol, Viktor Nikulin from Chişinău, Gimm Polagov from Bender, and Anatolii Belitchenko from Ribniţa. In fact, “red directors”, as they were derisively called by their detractors, played the leading role in the movement and indeed seem to have always controlled it. They were probably all ethnic Russians or Ukrainians born outside of the Moldavian SSR (I am unaware of any exceptions). They were in direct subordination to the USSR line ministries and as such, were only under the nominal control of the Moldavian Communist party bosses, thus representing a counter-elite. Not being rooted in the local polity and being culturally and professionally oriented toward Moscow and the USSR’s interior, they were particularly hostile to Moldovan nationalism, denying it any legitimacy.
Nevertheless, it would be wrong to assume that Russian speakers’ political mobilization resulted from their cynical manipulation by an industrial managerial counter-elite. The population’s emotions were running high, and the bewilderment and humiliation expressed at the rallies were undoubtedly genuine. The situation was somewhat similar to that seen among ethnic Moldovans, mobilized by the cultural elites, educated in and nurtured by the Soviet Union, who all of a sudden (or so it seemed from the outside) shed their Soviet skin and donned the mantle of freedom fighters. Whatever one might think of the individual writers and poets who led this movement, the popular sentiment behind it was real.

A new language law was adopted by the Moldavian SSR Supreme Soviet on 29–31 August, entering into force on 1 September. The Supreme Soviet, a fake Soviet-era “parliament” with members selected by the party, was by that time politicized and had split along ethnic lines, with Moldovans comprising 64.2%. A newly minted Chairman of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet, Mircea Snegur, also the Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Moldavian SSR (CC CPM), supported the legislation. However, he was still following the party line, which by then had crystallized around the idea of conferring official language status to Moldovan (Romanian), while labelling Russian the “language of interethnic communication”. With mass rallies and strikes by Moldovans and Russian speakers all over the Republic, each clamoring to push through their own position—one or two official languages—the session of the Supreme Soviet, broadcast on local television, was nevertheless largely controlled by the party. The formula previously approved by the CC CPM won the day after a last-minute theatrical intervention by the first Secretary of CC CPM, Semion Grossu, in its favor.

**From Languages Laws to Popular Front Hegemony: September 1989 to August 1990**

The party leadership was content with what they perceived to be the best possible compromise under the circumstances, and indeed one could make the case that they were right. Besides enshrining the aforementioned status for each of the two languages, the law contained numerous provisions that favored Russian speakers, who were allowed to use their primary language while communicating with public authorities (the law did not regulate the use of languages in the private sphere). While Romanian was to be used in public and official documents, they were then supposed to be translated into Russian (art. 9, 10). Art. 10 of the same law permitted the use, besides Romanian, of any other language in the local administration of
localities where Ukrainians, Russians, Gagauz, Bulgarians, or persons of other nationalities comprised a majority.\(^5\)

Two provisions of the law were particularly sensitive as they threatened employees who did not have sufficient command of Romanian. Art. 7 required that all clerks in public administration, enterprises, services, etc. be able to communicate both in Moldovan and Russian “in the interest of guaranteeing a citizen the right to choose the language of communication”. Art. 9 required that all “secretarial work” in all spheres be conducted in Moldovan. Legislators were aware of the problems these provisions created and in Decision no. 3466 on the mode of application of the Law on the Functioning of Languages provided for a transitional period of five years in the Russian-speaking cities and villages (art. 7) and six years in Gagauz areas (art. 9). “In case of necessity”, the MSSR Supreme Soviet could prolong these terms.\(^6\)

In a more normal atmosphere, the abovementioned law might have calmed people’s spirits and led to political stability. However, times were not normal in the USSR; the economic situation steadily deteriorated and the fear of looming catastrophe rose. In the RSSM, the approaching local and parliamentary elections (February 1990) increased intra-elite rivalry within the two opposing communities. Public space was dominated by raised voices denouncing one another, and very few people were ready to study the law and acknowledge its compromising nature. While Moldovans celebrated their victory over what they saw as forces of reaction and oppression, Russian speakers were alarmed and despondent. In their eyes, the very fact that yesterday’s party loyalists, propagandists, and apparatchiks who had persecuted “nationalists” now took their side was proof that they were not to be trusted in anything, including the reasonable application of language legislation. Their failure to condemn violent nationalist rhetoric in the media and at the rallies only confirmed the Russian speakers’ fears.

The 1990 elections were the first and only free elections in Soviet Moldavia. With political parties still nonexistent, the real fight was between the old party nomenklatura, including directors and managers of state enterprises and collective farms, and their populist critics. The latter tended to gravitate to the Popular Front in areas with a predominantly Moldovan population, “Edinstvo” and the “United Soviet of Workers’ Collectives” (USWC) in Russian-speaking urban centers, and the “Gagauz


Halkı” movement in Gagauz areas. In the wake of the 1989 crisis, the language issue was still paramount; another prominent issue was the support for the quest for Moldova’s independence, increasingly seen as a way of preserving the Soviet Union. The party was also vulnerable because it failed to prevent Moldavia’s economic downfall.

In the wake of the August–September strike, the leaders of the “United Soviet of Workers’ Collectives” (USWC) in the left-bank cities as well as Bender, which by that time, having controlled them during the strike, had acquired a taste for running their own localities, started a campaign for the region’s “economic autonomy” within the Moldavian SSR. As a result, developments unfolded in the same direction in the south of the Republic but with greater speed. Gagauz leaders, by now united in the umbrella organization “Gagauz Halkı”, summoned, on 12 November 1989, an “Extraordinary Congress of the Gagauz People”, which proclaimed the creation of a Gagauz Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic within the Moldavian SSR as a necessary precondition for the Gagauz people’s economic development. In response, Moldovan radical publicists denounced this decision, its authors, and the Gagauz people in crude terms, bordering on a racial slur. The Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic (MSSR) immediately cancelled the congress, proclaiming it “illegal”. Predictably, the “Gagauz Halkı” called a new congress and created a “Transitional Committee” to implement the autonomy (Angeli 2006, 37-9).

On the left bank, the autonomist initiative was first put forward during the strike held by the “United Soviet of Workers’ Collectives” (USWC) of Tiraspol and Ribnița, and, despite the “economic” qualifier, its primary rationale was to obtain the right to establish their own language regime. Financed by local enterprises whose budgets were under the full control of their directors, the USWC proceeded to organize rallies and referenda in the cities and raions of the left bank as well as in Bender, which lasted from December 1989 through 1990. The vote tallies collected by the organizers, which showed over 90 % everywhere, were supposed to demonstrate the strength of popular support. That said, their veracity remains questionable since there were no independent observers (Slobodiănîuk 2019, 135).

Another indicator of the level of popular support for this project of autonomy is the results of the parliamentary and local elections of 25 February 1990. The call for regional autonomy was the wedge that the USWC drove between the masses and the local party leaders who, following the line of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Moldavia (CC CPM), spoke out against it and in favor of implementing the languages law which, they argued, offered sufficient protection for the region’s Russian-speaking population. Fear of the Soviet Union’s disintegration played a role, as the USWC pledged its unwavering support to preserve the
country. At the same time, republican party leaders were increasingly suspect due to their loyalty to Gorbachev who was seen as weak and probably traitorous to that cause and as having made concessions to the demands of the Moldovan nationalist leaders. In this respect, the USWC’s strategy mirrored that of the Popular Front, which in the ethnic Moldovan-dominated areas waged war against party leaders accused of subservience to the still supposedly hostile “imperial center”. In the Gagauz settlements in the south of Moldova, the Gagauz nationalists also waged war against the party nomenklatura under the banner of autonomy, which included the right to use Russian instead of Romanian as the language of official communication. Under such conditions, “Edinstvo” lost the leading role it had briefly played in early 1989, and its influence was reduced to the Russian-speaking community in the capital.

The February–March 1990 elections to the MSSR Supreme Soviet were conducted according to the uninominal electoral districts system. To win, candidates required the majority of 50% plus one vote. If no candidate succeeded in gaining this share, a second round was held, in which the two most successful candidates competed, and this time a simple majority sufficed. On the left bank of the Dniester River and in Bender, the “United Soviet of Workers’ Collectives” (USWC) won a sweeping victory, wiping out any influence of the local party nomenklatura (except for a few Moldovan villages where local agricultural leaders opposed the USWC and regional autonomy representatives were elected). In Chișinău, where voting was mostly along ethnic lines, the results were mixed, as both the Popular Front and “Edinstvo” candidates were elected, together with a few representatives of the party nomenklatura. In Bălți, party leaders, many of them Russian speakers, held the sway. In the Gagauz settlements, the supporters of autonomy won. In the rural Moldovan areas on the right bank, the results were mixed with the Popular Front supporters carrying the day in some places and local agricultural bosses with no firm political views but “allergic” to the Popular Front emerging victorious in others. The scene for the decisive phase of the Moldovan crisis was set (Cașu and Șarov 2011, 398-402; Shevchenko 2012, 164).

In the longer run, the victories of the USWC proved the most consequential, as they were determined to implement regional autonomy. With power on the local level in their hands, USWC leaders were ready for a confrontation with the republican center, whose composition and orientation were to be determined by the new Supreme Soviet. The latter was convened on 17 April 1990 and rapidly went on to elect its chair, which, since the Communist Party of Moldavia (CPM) soon lost what remained of their influence, was likely to become the most powerful person in the Republic. Two leading contenders vied for the post: Mircea Snegur, who from 29 July 1989 was the chair of the Presidium of Supreme Soviet, and Petru Lucinschi, who...
from 16 November 1989 replaced Grossu as the first secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Moldavia (CC CPM). Both from a rural background and of almost the same age (born in 1939 and 1940, respectively), they had followed different career trajectories. Snegur graduated from the Chișinău Agricultural Institute and worked his way up from the chairman of a kolkhoz to the Central Committee (CC) secretary for agriculture. This gave him the solid support of the agricultural nomenklatura, which comprised up to one-third of the 371 Supreme Soviet deputies in 1990. Lucinschi, on the other hand, graduated from the Department of History and Philology of Chișinău State University. He made a career in the Komsomol, the Soviet Union’s political youth organization, in urban centers such as Bălți and Chișinău. In 1976–1978, Lucinschi was the first secretary of the Chișinău city party organization. During that time, he fostered ties with the Moldovan creative intelligentsia, who considered him their protector. Lucinschi’s growing popularity in this milieu upset the then first secretary Ivan Bodiul, who, in order to get rid of a potential competitor, managed to get Lucinschi transferred to Moscow, where he would serve from 1978 to 1986 as deputy chief of the Department of Propaganda. There, through January 1982, he was supervised by Mikhail Suslov and after this by Konstantin Chernenko until the latter’s death in March 1985. Suslov and Chernenko were hardcore conservative ideologues, and little is known about Lucinschi’s role under them. In the meantime, he was badly missed in Moldova, where his transfer to Moscow was considered a blow to the interests of the nationalist intelligentsia. Shortly after Alexander Yakovlev was appointed propaganda watchdog, Lucinschi was transferred to Tajikistan as second secretary of the Central Committee of that Republic’s Communist Party (CC of CP). This transfer was probably due to Yakovlev’s purge of his predecessor’s personnel. Nevertheless, Lucinschi’s promotion to the position of the first party secretary in Moldova in November 1989 was a clear sign that Gorbachev had come to believe that he would be able to help restore the party’s position within the Moldovan ethnic community.

Lucinschi faced a daunting task as Snegur had already become the Popular Front’s darling. Lucinschi, who believed that the Russian-speaking deputies’ votes were in his pockets him being a “Moscow man” and having no viable alternative for that office, concluded that his path to success consisted in securing enough Moldovan deputies’ votes to prevail over Snegur. Since the latter had the guaranteed support of the agricultural lobby, Lucinschi’s only hope consisted in attracting enough votes from the pro-Popular Front intelligentsia deputies who might have remained loyal to him before his departure to Moscow in 1978. Hence, both Snegur and Lucinschi were competing for the same block of votes, the pro-Popular Front deputies, who thus held the key to victory.

Russian-speaking deputies mattered little: Snegur never condescended to meet with them, while Lucinschi had just one meeting, in which he was largely
noncommittal. The issue of autonomy was never broached. Ultimately, Mircea Snegur won the competition, having been elected chairman of the Supreme Soviet on 27 April. Combined votes of pro-Popular Front nationalists and the agrarian lobby gave him a majority of 196 (with the required minimum of 191) against 160 in favor of Petru Lucinschi (Shevchenko 2012, 165).

Judging from the events that followed his election, Snegur obtained the support of the Popular Front-oriented deputies by committing himself to fulfilling their demands, which he proceeded to do immediately. The same day, the Supreme Soviet adopted the Romanian tricolor as the new flag of the Republic, a decision that immediately provoked a new wave of protest on the left bank of Dniester River and in Bender, where this flag invoked negative memories of the 1941–1944 Romanian occupation (strengthened by decades of Soviet propaganda); the local Soviets controlled by the USWC banned this flag on their territory.

Under the pretext that self-defense units had started to be formed in the enterprises on the left bank of Dniester and in Bender, the Popular Front initiated the creation of national guard units in Chișinău. On 22 May 1990, their members attacked and beat up deputies from the left bank as the latter were leaving the building of the Supreme Soviet. Some received injuries and had to return to the Supreme Soviet building, which was barricaded as the mob tried to break through. Some ethnic Moldovan deputies from rural areas, known as “agrarians”, were also assaulted, as a crazed mob was upset by their failure to support one of the Popular Front candidates. For most of the day, police refused to intervene, only escorting the left bank deputies to their hotel at night (Angeli 2006, 50-2). It seemed that Moldova was descending into chaos with the connivance of the new leadership.

The inactivity of the police was hardly accidental. More likely, they were acting in connivance with Popular Front leaders who intended to thusly isolate Russian-speaking deputies and heighten nationalist hysteria on the eve of a decision that these leaders considered of central importance, but that was likely to be unpopular with other deputies. This decision was the appointment of their candidate, Mircea Druc, as prime minister. Druc is a talented man, a polyglot who impresses his interlocutors at first encounter. However, he was incapable of a sustained effort and often disappointed his followers. A passionate public speaker, he tends to quickly lose focus and meander. Druc was popular among the nationalist intelligentsia who remembered his ties to the Moldovan nationalist youth group led by Alexandru Usatiuc-Bulgăr, who dreamed of the establishment of a Moldavian Democratic Republic, its secession from the Soviet Union, and union with Romania, and several of whom were sentenced to long prison terms in 1971

7 I was elected to the Supreme Soviet for the Chișinău electoral district. I participated in these consultations, during which no minutes were taken. This account is based on my recollections.
(Cașu 2012). Although not charged at that time, Druc had to leave the Republic. From 1975 to 1989, he lived and worked in Moscow and later in Ukraine. As a result, he was little known in Moldova outside of nationalist circles.

On the day after the mob assault on the USWC-supported deputies from the left bank and Bender on 23 May, the latter declared their refusal to participate in the Supreme Soviet’s sittings. The Supreme Soviet moved on and no serious attempt was made to dissuade them, address their grievances, or investigate and charge perpetrators of violence of the previous day. On 25 May 1990, Mircea Druc was confirmed as prime minister with 259 votes in favor and one against, with the USWC deputies conspicuous in their absence (Shevchenko 2012, 167).

In retrospect, this was the point of no return. It may seem surprising that neither Mircea Snegur nor Mircea Druc realized the gravity of the situation and tried to prevent the crisis from deepening, for which there still might have well been a chance. In spite of their heightened rhetoric, the USWC leaders were still not ready to make a decisive break with Chișinău. Perhaps they could have still be engaged in talks, which might have led to a compromise. One area in which this might have been possible was the composition of a new government (on 31 May, the Moldovan central executive body’s name was changed from “Council of Ministers” to “Government”). Offering several portfolios to the representatives of the left bank of the Dniester River was the most obvious way of breaking their common front and placating the regional population’s fears. Instead, Druc formed a strictly mono-ethnic government, with not a single non-Moldovan member. Rejecting any talk of regional autonomy out of hand was not a wise move either, especially given the fact that the republican leadership by then had no force at its disposal to suppress the autonomist movement.

These omissions were no coincidence. Druc was a committed unionist, that is a protagonist of the quest for reunification of Moldova with Romania. Although this position was widely unpopular in the Republic, Druc apparently believed that reunification could and should be achieved quickly. His focus was not the day-to-day management of the republican economy – a major concern of its citizens and the primary sphere of the prime minister’s responsibility. Rather, he wanted to prepare the way for reunification. His appointment was followed by the mass dismissal of Russian-speaking employees from governmental institutions and the latter’s “nationalization”. The government also tried to subordinate the KGB of the Moldavian SSR to itself, and the Soviet armed forces deployed in its territory to its Ministry of Internal Affairs, with only mixed results (Shevchenko 2012, 167-8; Shornikov 1997, 38-64).

These developments further inflamed the passions on the Left Bank. On 3 June, the USWC leaders convoked, in the village of Parcani, located between Tiraspol and Bender on the left bank of the Dniester River, the First Congress of Deputies of all
Levels of *Pridnestrov’e*.\(^8\) This was one of the first times that the term *Pridnestrov’e* had been used in the sense it would henceforth be used by the USWC leaders, i.e. to refer to the cities, together with most, albeit not all (primarily the Ukrainian) villages on the left bank of the Dniester as well as the city of Bender on the right bank.\(^9\) The declared aim of the Congress, which was an unconstitutional ad hoc body, was to discuss the region’s economic problems. Its real focus however was on propounding the case for its autonomy. The Congress elected a Coordinating Committee, which composed legal and other documents. Igor Smirnov, the newly elected USWC-supported chair of the Tiraspol city soviet and former director of a state-owned factory in the same city, became the committee’s chair. The Moldavian SSR Supreme Soviet promptly declared these decisions null and void (Shevchenko 2012, 168). The Coordinating Committee leaders did not proclaim autonomy, let alone the region’s independence, on that occasion, and there was still a chance to engage them in negotiations. No such attempt was made.

The most important decisions of the first weeks of the new government were taken on 23 June 1990. First, the Moldavian SSR Supreme Soviet adopted a Declaration on Sovereignty, which declared the MSSR a sovereign state and the supremacy of its laws over the laws of the USSR. These would enter into force on Moldovan territory after their ratification by the Supreme Soviet of the Soviet Socialist Republic of Moldavia (SSRM).\(^10\) The Moldovan declaration contravened the 1977 Soviet Constitution, which unambiguously established the opposite, namely the primacy of the federal laws (art. 74). This followed in the footsteps of a similar declaration adopted by the Supreme Soviet of the Russian Federation, on 12 June, with the Baltic republics, Georgia and Uzbekistan preceding Russia.\(^11\) Other republics soon followed suit (the process was known as the “Parade of Sovereignties”), and Moldova felt safe to join its “Soviet sisters” in their confrontation with the recently all-powerful center. However, a closer analysis of these sovereignty declarations reveals that there were serious differences between them. Significantly, the Moldovan declaration differed from that of the RSFSR in that it did not mention the USSR. Instead it referred to the “community of sovereign states” to

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\(^8\) In the Soviet parlance still in use, members of municipal (both village and city) and raïon councils/Soviets were called “deputies”, the same title that was used to refer to members of the Supreme Soviets of the individual republics and the USSR as a whole.

\(^9\) In Russian, *Pridnestrov’e* means “territory along the Dniester River”. In Romanian, “Transnistria” is usually used as a synonym, although the exact meaning of this word is “the territory across the Dniester”.

\(^10\) The Supreme Soviet had changed the republic’s name on 5 June 1990.

which the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic (MSSR) supposedly “transmitted powers”, without, however, abandoning its rights “to participate in their exercise” (art.7). The Moldovan declaration stated the intention to institute separate republican citizenship, without mentioning all-Union citizenship (art. 8), and proclaimed Moldova “a demilitarized zone”, thus implying that the Soviet troops had to be withdrawn from its territory (art. 12). All this strongly suggested that the Supreme Soviet of the Soviet Socialist Republic of Moldova saw the future of the USSR as a loose confederation, in which central authorities would have few real powers.12

Immediately after this declaration, the Supreme Soviet adopted the “Decision on the Opinion of the Commission of the Supreme Soviet on the Politico-Legal Assessment of the Soviet–German Non-Aggression Treaty and the Secret Additional Protocol of 23 August 1939, and their Consequences for Bessarabia and Northern Bukovina”.13 Earlier, on 24 December 1989, the USSR Congress of People’s Deputies had already condemned the Secret Protocol, the very existence of which the Soviets had denied for decades.14 The Moldovan legislators went considerably further, not only decrying the illegal and imperialist nature of the document but also stating that in June 1940, when the Soviets annexed Bessarabia (comprising most of Moldova) and northern Bukovina (now Chernivtsi oblast in Ukraine), those territories were lawfully Romanian and that the annexation happened against the wishes of the inhabitants. The most striking statement was the following: “The illegitimate proclamation on 2 August 1940, of the Moldavian SSR was an act of dismemberment of Bessarabia and Bukovina.”15 This was historically and legally correct, as the formation of the Moldavian SSR was decided by the USSR Supreme Soviet, which did not have such power according to the 1936 Soviet Constitution. The declaration was a political bombshell, as one could claim from that point on that since the Moldovan SSR was an illegal entity, the acts adopted by the MSSR Supreme Soviet were also unlawful.

15 “Hotărăre Nr. 149 din 23.06.1990”. 
The second Congress of the Popular Front, held from 30 June to 1 July 1990 in Chișinău, added fuel to the fire. The Congress called on the authorities to create the Romanian Republic of Moldova, open the border with Romania, and terminate the financial support for the Soviet military recruitment centers (Adağ and Roșca 2008, 163-74). The Moldovan authorities agreed to participate in working on the new union treaty to replace the one from 1922 that had served as the legal basis for the USSR – an idea Gorbachev had proposed to prevent the country’s disintegration. In reality, they sabotaged it (Snegur 2008, 145-54).

In the meantime, Mircea Snegur and Mircea Druc continued to issue empty and counterproductive threats, according to which the Moldovan leadership had no leverage if push came to shove. For example, in his address to the people on national TV on 23 July 1990, Snegur declared that the “time has come to punish the Transnistrian and Gagauz towns whose actions have separatist character” (Slobodiăniuk 2019, 146). Here the qualifier “separatist” preempted developments, as the USWC leaders still officially demanded autonomy within, not separation from Moldova. However, Snegur’s qualifier was not a misspeak as he intentionally equated demands for autonomy with separatism, as was customary for Moldovan politicians at the time. Such language cast the Transnistrian leaders as criminals even before they had committed a crime, making any compromise well-nigh impossible (Angeli 2006, 57-8).

Disintegration: August–December 1990

On 27 July 1990, the Supreme Soviet, which had debated the Gagauz leaders’ request for territorial autonomy, rejected it in strong terms and “annulled” the decisions of all “congresses of the Gagauz people.” Fedor Angeli, the Gagauz deputy who had attended the session and taken detailed notes, later recalled that the overall tenor among the adversaries of autonomy was that the “Gagauz are Turkicized Bulgarians who were brought into the Moldovan territory by the Russian Tsar”. Thus, they did not have the right to territorial autonomy. The opinion of the parliamentary committee that examined the issue labelled the Gagauz demands “monstrous plans to divide the national territory of Moldovans once again”, equivalent to “an attack on the very existence of the Moldovan people and the state”. Acting according to a logic of escalation, the Transitional Committee

convened the “Congress of Deputies of All Levels” from the Gagauz localities on 19 August in Comrat (in Gagauz, Komrat). The Congress proclaimed the creation of the “Gagauz Autonomous SSR”, which did not recognize any “politico-legal obligations toward the RSS Moldova, as its Supreme Soviet declared the creation of MSSR on 2 August 1940 illegal”. While “being free from state power and control of RSS Moldova”, the new republic strove to remain within the USSR as a constituent republic, signing the new Union treaty (all quotes in Angeli 2006, 60-64; see also Snegur 2008, 804).

The Pridnestrovian leaders followed in the footsteps of their Gagauz counterparts. On 2 September 1990, the Coordinating Committee convoked the “Second Congress of Deputies of all Levels of Pridnestrovian Leaders” in Tiraspol that declared the establishment of the “Pridnestrovian Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic (PMSSR) within the USSR”. In other words, the new “republic” was breaking away from Moldova but remained firmly anchored within the Soviet Union, an entity whose future seemed bleaker with every passing day but whose complete disintegration was still, to many, unimaginable. In a separate document, the Congress laid down its justification for this fateful decision. Besides such grievances as supposedly discriminatory language legislation, the use and threat of violence for political ends, and the creation of a “mononational” (that is, ethnic Moldovan-only) government, two points stood out. The first was that the Declaration of Sovereignty from 23 June 1990 confirmed the Republic’s exit from the USSR, which was a gross misstatement of fact. The fact that so many people subscribed to this view reveals their heightened fears and the atmosphere of general hysteria characteristic of that year. It testified to the growing influence of the most radical, die-hard elements of the Pridnestrovian leadership. The second point was that by declaring, in its “Conclusions on the Ribbentrop–Molotov Pact”, that the creation of the Moldovan Soviet Socialist Republic (MSSR) in 1940 was illegitimate, the MSSR Supreme Soviet also delegitimated the inclusion of the territories on the left bank of the Dniester River in its composition, while implying that Bessarabia and northern Bukovina should be returned to Romania. The creation of the Pridnestrovian Moldavian SSR was necessary to preempt such developments. The “congress” then proceeded to elect the “Provisional Supreme Soviet” of the new entity and ruled that despite the congresses’ radical rhetoric, compromise was still an option.

As the Pridnestrovian Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic (PMSSR) Transitional Supreme Soviet, elected by the “Second Congress of Deputies of All Levels”, went on to create a new “Executive Committee”, a pseudo-government, it became clear that this was dominated by Tiraspol leaders, to the detriment of other groups, in particular leaders from Bender, who were excluded. Significantly, many, if not all, deputies of the MSSR Supreme Soviet from Bender and some other localities besides Tiraspol continued to attend its sessions, despite the pressure from the “PMSSR” leaders to refrain from doing so. Unfortunately, the republican leaders showed very little interest in attracting and exploiting these divisions as long the Popular Front remained a dominant force in Chișinău, and that lasted well beyond 1990.

In the meantime, two further developments brought tension in the Republic to fever pitch. On 2–3 September 1990, MSSR Supreme Soviet tasked the attorney general, minister of the interior, and chief of the Moldavian KGB to bring to justice “persons who try to dismember the Republic”.¹⁹ On the proposal of Mircea Druc, who argued that such a measure would allow the faster establishment of the national army and “measures to protect the territorial integrity and sovereignty of the Republic”, the Supreme Soviet created the post of president and immediately elected Snegur to the position. Alexandru Moșanu, a respected university historian who was close to the Popular Front at the time, was elected as chair of the Supreme Soviet. The immediate aim was to prevent the election to the Supreme Soviet of the newly proclaimed Gagauz Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic (GMSSR), the date for which was fixed for 28 October. According to Fedor Angeli, “both sides spent the months of September and October collecting ‘flammable’ material” (Angeli 2006, 80). The republican media, still largely controlled by the government, published numerous articles proving the “baselessness” of the Gagauz requests for autonomy and denouncing their leaders. These publications and Snegur’s address to the “Gagauz citizens” further alienated them and strengthened their determination to carry out the elections which had already been banned. On 22 October, a massive rally in the center of Chișinău called on “volunteers” to mobilize for “a campaign of justice”, i.e., an attempt to occupy the Gagauz settlements and prevent the elections from taking place there. Prime Minister Mircea Druc and the Minister of Internal Affairs, General Ion Costăș, actively encouraged recruitment to the campaign. According to numerous eyewitnesses, many were armed with iron sticks and chains and inebriated. By 25 October, their numbers may have reached 25,000. On the day that the early voting in the Gagauz territory started, Costăș ordered the police—the only (slightly) armed force at the republican government’s disposal—to surround

the Gagauz settlements under the pretext of “training”. The Supreme Soviet once again debated the situation in its extraordinary session of 25–26 October. It introduced a “state of emergency” in the Gagauz areas and created a committee charged with its implementation, which was given extensive powers, including banning all gatherings, suspending the activity of local authorities, and establishing direct rule.20

The Moldovan leadership’s determination to forestall the elections by force was met by their opponents’ resolve to resist it. On 25 October, they requested support from the Pridnestrovian Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic (PMSSR) Supreme Soviet, which in response sent “workers’ brigades” from Tiraspol, Ribnița, and Bender, who arrived at Cădăr-Lunga on 27 October having taken a circuitous route through Ukrainian territory. The residents met them with tears of relief and flowers in their hands. On the same day, Mircea Druc and Alexandru Moșanu, who were in Cimișlia at the time, decided to head to the column of “workers’ brigades” moving toward Comrat, a putative capital of the new “republic”. Whatever Druc’s purpose, the moment he saw the column, he understood his mistake as the crowd was ready to lynch the two men. A Gagauz deputy who happened to be there at the time prevented the violence at the last moment. Druc and Moșanu turned back.

From the somewhat contradictory accounts of the participants, it appears that following this encounter, the “volunteers” stopped advancing further. Perhaps the news that on the night of 26 October, mechanized units of a paratrooper’s division of the still unified Soviet Army deployed in Bolgrad (Ukraine, a short distance from the border with Moldova) had entered Comrat, purportedly for the “protection of the recruitment center”, had a cooling effect on Moldovan leaders. Snegur, alarmed by the prospect of a bloodbath, insisted, against the demands of pro-Popular Front deputies to arm the volunteers, that they should be withdrawn immediately, and his demand was met (Snegur 2008, 823-7). On 31 October 1990, an agreement (probably verbal) was reached that the “volunteers” would withdraw and the “workers’ brigades” return to their localities. The next day, the latter departed, and the tension gradually subsided. The “elections” were pronounced successful, and on 31 October, Stepan Topal was elected as chair of the “Supreme Soviet of the Gagauz SSR” (Angeli 2006, 81-105).

From the point of view of the Gagauz leaders, a decisive step had been made toward their goal. The Gagauz populations were relieved that the worst had been

avoided. As to the Popular Front, it blamed the failure to prevent the “elections” on Moscow’s interference. On 31 October, its Executive Committee issued a statement containing the following assessment:

Undoubtedly, the Republic of Moldova could have defended its [territorial] integrity and sovereignty by relying solely on the volunteers’ force. But this chance was missed due to the instruction in the zone of the state of emergency of the Soviet troops, which, once deployed in Komrat, took the side of the separatists (Angeli 2006, 71).

However, the units of the Soviet army that had been redeployed to Comrat did not take part in the confrontation and negotiations. Their presence served to deter mob violence, and one can hardly deplore that such violence was avoided. Nevertheless, even without bloodshed, the local population continued to live in great fear for the next several months. With the benefit of hindsight, the crisis could have been avoided had a form of territorial autonomy been granted to the Gagauz settlements. On 23 December 1994, such autonomy was legislated by Law no. 344, which, with minor modifications, remains in force. The law satisfied most Gagauz demands without endangering Moldovan territorial integrity and sovereignty. Today, the Russian language dominates the Gagauz public space just as it did during Soviet times.

Parallel to the dramatic developments in the Gagauz areas described above, there were two violent confrontations between Moldovan and Transnistrian forces (including regular and irregular formations). The first was deliberately provoked by Mircea Druc, who on 17 September 1990 convened a field session of his government in the town of Dubăsari on the left bank of the Dniester River. The separatists’ position was somewhat shaky in Dubăsari: the town itself was firmly on their side, but ethnic Moldovan villages in its vicinity stayed loyal to the Chişinău authorities. The declared aim of the field session was to debate problems of economic development in Dubăsari district—a gesture designed to demonstrate Chişinău’s interest in the bread-and-butter issues supposedly neglected by the separatist leaders. Druc’s provocation backfired, as an angry mob surrounded the raion executive committee’s offices where the meeting was taking place, denouncing Druc and his government. When the prime minister exited the building to talk to the crowd, he further angered them by bluntly declaring that he did not recognize the Pridnestrovian Moldavian SSR (PMSSR). Amid hisses and howls, somebody slapped him in the face. Druc called the meeting off and returned to the

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right bank. The violent scene in Dubăsari was broadcast on Moldovan TV and shook the viewers (Shevchenko 2012, 174). On 2 November, the first blood was split in a confrontation between the Moldovan loyalists and the “PMSSR” separatists, also in Dubăsari. According to the version presented by Mircea Druc to the Supreme Soviet, that day, the “workers’ brigade” from Ribnița, returning home from Comrat along the road that traversed the town, ransacked the government police station and the court building, ejected their lawful occupants, and installed sentinels on the bridge across the Dniester that led into the town. They claimed “the necessity to defend the town from volunteers” (whose groups were indeed gathering nearby). Druc ordered police “to restore order in the town”. The police, under the command of Colonel Şt. Vârlan, forced the separatist supporters off the bridge and entered the town, where they were fought back by the local militia. Three locals and four Moldovan policemen were killed. Police and “volunteers” retreated across the bridge, leaving the town in the separatists’ hands (Shevchenko 2012, 176; Diukarev 2000, 213-27; Snegur 2008, 428). On November 25, “elections to the PMSSR” were held which saw the separatist leaders win “victory”.

Throughout this decisive year of 1990, the Soviet Union’s center was largely absent from Moldova. Undermined by Russian nationalism and the democratic opposition in the Russian Federation, led by charismatic Boris Yeltsin, and preoccupied with the quest for independence by the Baltic republics and the nationalist unrest in the Caucasus, and focused on foreign policy—the only area in which he was successful—Moldova was a long way down Mikhail Gorbachev’s list of his priorities. Besides, the rapidly deteriorating economic and financial situation left very few resources at his disposal. Yet, despite all evidence to the contrary, Mircea Snegur was convinced that Moscow was behind the separatist movements. In an interview with the Spanish daily El Mundo, he said, “The Pridnestrovian and Gagauz Republics are pseudo-republics supported and paid for by Moscow to hinder our independence and justify military intervention” (Angeli 2006, 78). Simultaneously, he and other Moldovan leaders continually cast separatists as “anti-perestroika forces” and their own actions as “democratic”.22

In November 1990, Moldovan leaders attempted to persuade Gorbachev to intervene on their behalf in the intra-republican conflict and prevent “elections to the PMSSR Supreme Soviet” from happening. Gorbachev’s and other Soviet officials’ pleas to the separatists were, however, ignored. In December, Moldovan leaders made one last attempt to recruit Gorbachev, who agreed to issue, on 22 December

1990, the Decree “On the measures to normalize the situation in the SSR Moldavia”.\textsuperscript{23} It declared “null and void” all decisions concerning the creation of the Pridnestrovian Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic (PMSSR) and the Gagauz Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic (GMSSR), “recommended” to the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic (MSSR) Supreme Soviet to revisit “some of the provisions of the law on the functioning of languages” as well as its decision of 27 July on Gagauz autonomy. It also declared null and void the provision contained in the decision of the Supreme Soviet on the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact “concerning the assessment of the creation of the Moldavian SSR on 2 August 1940”. However, the Decree had no practical effect, as all sides found reasons not to follow its “recommendations” and declaration of nullity of decisions that had already been adopted. The Popular Front even decried it “as an attack on the Republic’s sovereignty” (!) (Shevchenko 2012, 176-8).

**Conclusion**

By the end of 1990, Moldova was in a deep crisis and faced an uncertain future. Its population was divided along ethnolinguistic lines. Ethnic Moldovans rejoiced at seeing their language declared an official one. Nevertheless, only a tiny, if loud, minority strove for immediate unification with Romania. Most inhabitants preferred either membership in a loose confederation of former Soviet and soon-to-be independent republics or outright independence. As to the national minorities, a full one-third of the population, most of whom used the Russian language in their day-to-day lives, were bewildered and scared by the sudden change of language regime. Most of these minorities would have preferred the preservation of the Soviet Union as a federation. Particularly jarring was the territorial disintegration of the small Republic, a development perceived by some as permanent with others deeming it a problem requiring an immediate solution by whatever means necessary.

Some of these tensions were to be expected, as long pent-up resentment of ethnic Moldovans against Russian predominance was bound to erupt powerfully as soon as an opportunity presented itself, and as the Russian speakers’ resistance grew. But the way the conflict unfolded and the ugly, even violent form it assumed were not inevitable. The very fact that the “Gagauz problem” was effectively solved

\textsuperscript{23} “Ukaz Prezidenta Sovetskikh Sotsialisticheskikh Respublik ‘O merakh po normalizatsii obstanovki v SSR Moldova’.” Sovetskaja Moldova. 23 December 1990, 1. Also available at https://ru.wikisource.org/wiki/%D0%A3%D0%BA%D0%B0%D0%B7_%D0%9F%D1%80%D0%B5%D0%B7%D0%B8%D0%BD%D1%82%D0%B0_%D0%A1%D0%A1%D0%A0_%D0%BE%D1%82_22.12.1990_%E2%84%96_1215 (accessed 5 November 2023).
by granting them limited territorial autonomy in December 1994, i.e., after the trauma of the “volunteers’ march” and the mistrust this caused, suggests that there was a good chance of preventing these developments had more understanding and tact been employed in 1989 and the first half of 1990. As the Pridnestrovian leaders were taking the lead from the Gagauz, one cannot but wonder what mitigating effect a more far-sighted policy toward the latter might have had on the former.

As for the language issue, there was never a realistic chance of forcing Romanian onto the big agglomerations of Russian speakers in Tiraspol, Bălți, Bender, and Ribnița, as well as in Gagauzia, for that matter. Significantly, Bălți, although never a breakaway city, remains largely Russian-speaking today. The inclusion in the 1989 languages law of the provision suggested by the Communist Party leaders from those localities, which would have granted the local Soviets the right to regulate the use of languages in their territory—a simple recognition of the reality on the ground—might have prevented the rise of the “United Soviet of Workers’ Collectives” (USWC) movement and all the complications that ensued. Moreover, even when the USWC had established effective control over the left-bank cities and Bender and demanded autonomy, there was still a possibility of undermining their unity by engaging some of them in negotiations on the formation of a more ethnically representative government, as well as granting concessions on languages and “economic autonomy”.

It is tempting to explain this political myopia on the part of Moldovan leaders by their personal ineptitude. Still, perhaps this was not the only reason for their stubborn refusal to negotiate with the left-bankers and the Gagauz. It is likely that the Popular Front and the Druc government acted in accordance with their hidden agenda, intentionally inflaming tensions in order to push Moldova toward reunification with Romania, with or without the left bank. Although no smoking gun was ever discovered to prove this hypothesis, their actions during this crucial period suggest as much, otherwise collective insanity would have to be accepted as an adequate explanation.

I am writing this article as the war unleashed by Putin’s Russia on Ukraine is raging. In this brutal and criminal war which just months ago was unimaginable, Pridnestrovie (Transnistria) is widely considered a potential base for Russian troops action against Ukraine. Although such developments seem unlikely, the fear of the Russian forces still deployed in Pridnestrovie is entirely understandable. Since 1990, when the conflict started, and to this day, the nature of Pridnestrovie’s regime has undergone profound change. From a stalwart of the Soviet Union, Pridnestrovie became a bastion of Russia in its quest for influence in the former Soviet space. The Soviet Fourteenth Army deployed there has, for a long time, been manned by the Pridnestrovian youth. From a force sympathetic to the separatists but reluctant to take their side, these troops have become auxiliaries of the Russian
army. None of this was foreseeable in 1990, even less so inevitable. It is easy to interpret the origins of the Pridnestrovian conflict through the contemporary lens, assuming that since its leaders are now Moscow’s loyal servants, Pridnestrovie was thus created by “Moscow” to serve its interests. As this article shows, such an assumption is wrong. The difference between the Pridnestrovie of 1990 and that of 2023 is as great as that between Gorbachev’s Soviet Union and Putin’s Russia.

References


**Bionote**

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