

**Title of the Paper: A Potential Fifth Column? Anti-Secession Sentiment Amongst Transnistria's Moldovans, 1989-1990**

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**Introduction:**

Titulars from the parent state live in almost all of the post-communist de-facto states. However, there is a relatively small body of scholarship that deals with this matter. Moreover, this body of work is almost exclusively limited to the de-facto states attitude toward these minorities in the post-conflict era, with no account of how titulars from the parent state reacted toward secession as it was happening.<sup>1</sup> Regarding Transnistria, scholars, such as Pål Kolstø, typically only acknowledge that Moldovans accounted for forty percent of the region's population when they are arguing that the conflict was not an ethnic one.<sup>2</sup> This has created an image of total loyalty to the separatist regime on the part of local Moldovans, leading some scholars to contend that they were 'completely loyal to the Soviet Union and fully integrated into Russian culture.'<sup>3</sup> However, while scholars may argue that Moldovans uniformly supported Transnistrian secession, they have presented little evidence to support this claim.<sup>4</sup> However, there is a substantive number of primary sources located in both Transnistria and Moldova that states otherwise. So far, no work has adequately explained the attitude of Transnistrian Moldovans toward secession.

After consulting a wide range of primary sources, I will address this gap in the literature in the following chapter, asking whether their ethnic identity meant that they opposed secession? Or did generations of Russification mean that they supported it? As Elise Giuliano notes, symbolic goods, such as language laws, have polarising effects not just amongst various ethnic groups, but also within them.<sup>5</sup> The Moldovans of Transnistria were no different, and we see a great deal of intragroup variation in attitudes toward some of the most pressing issues of the time such as the language laws, the tricolour, and of course, secession. By focusing on the Transnistria's formative years, 1989-1990, this chapter poses two main questions; why did some Moldovans support Transnistrian secession? And why did others oppose it?

On a macro level, we have a good understanding of what encourages territories to secede, and what factors are conducive to their survival. These are aptly summed up by Pål Kolstø and Davor Paukovic, who contend that to survive de-facto states need 1) a strong military, 2) an

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<sup>1</sup> See for example: Magdalena Dembinska, 'Carving out the nation with the enemy's kin: double strategy of boundary-making in Transnistria and Abkhazia', in *Nations and Nationalism*, x (2018), pp 1–20, at p. 4 & Giorgio Comai, Bernardo Venturi, 'Language and education laws in multi-ethnic de facto states: the cases of Abkhazia and Transnistria', in *Nationalities Papers*, xliii (2015), pp. 886-905.

<sup>2</sup> This argument is particularly prevalent in many earlier works on the conflict. See for example; Kolstø, Pål Malgin, Andrei, 'The Transnistrian republic: A case of politicized regionalism', *Nationalities Papers*, xxvi (1998), pp. 103-127.

<sup>3</sup> Rebecca Haynes, *Moldova* (London, 2020) p. 143.

<sup>4</sup> See the work by Rebecca Haynes cited above.

<sup>5</sup> Elise Giuliano, 'Who determines the Self in the Politics of Self-Determination? Identity and Preference Formation in Tatarstan's Nationalist Mobilization' in *Comparative Politics*, xxxii (2000), pp. 295-316 at p. 303-304.

external patron, 3) a weak parent state, 4) a disinterested international community, and 5) a common national identity. In the absence of these five factors, they argue, it is incredibly difficult for de-facto states to secede and survive.<sup>6</sup> However, no substantive account of the conditions required to oppose secession has so far been offered.<sup>7</sup> This chapter argues that successful opposition is contingent on three categorical variables, portion of titulars in a given region, strength of ethnic identity, and the position of local elites (see below). These are applied to Transnistria to show that when all three are in place, local opposition is likely to manifest itself. While this study focuses solely on Transnistria, this analysis could be applied to other de-facto states that have a high portion of parent state titulars, such as Abkhazia or South Ossetia.

The three variables are defined as follows:

1. The ethnic composition of the region:

Are titulars from the parent state in the majority of a given territory? Or are they in the minority. If they are in the majority, then there is a chance that they will mobilise together to oppose the separatist authorities.

2. The strength of ethnic identity amongst these titulars:

In the Soviet Union, ethnic identity was something that was written on your passport and did not always correlate with how a person felt. For example, in the absence of Moldovan language schools, a Moldovan born and raised in Tiraspol may speak Russian and identify more closely with Russian than Moldovan culture, irrespective of what is written on their internal passport. The strength of their attachment to their ethnic identity is imperative in understanding whether or not they will oppose the separatists. The best way to gauge this is by investigating the number of ethnic institutions, such as schools, in each territory.

3. Finally, what is the position of local elites?

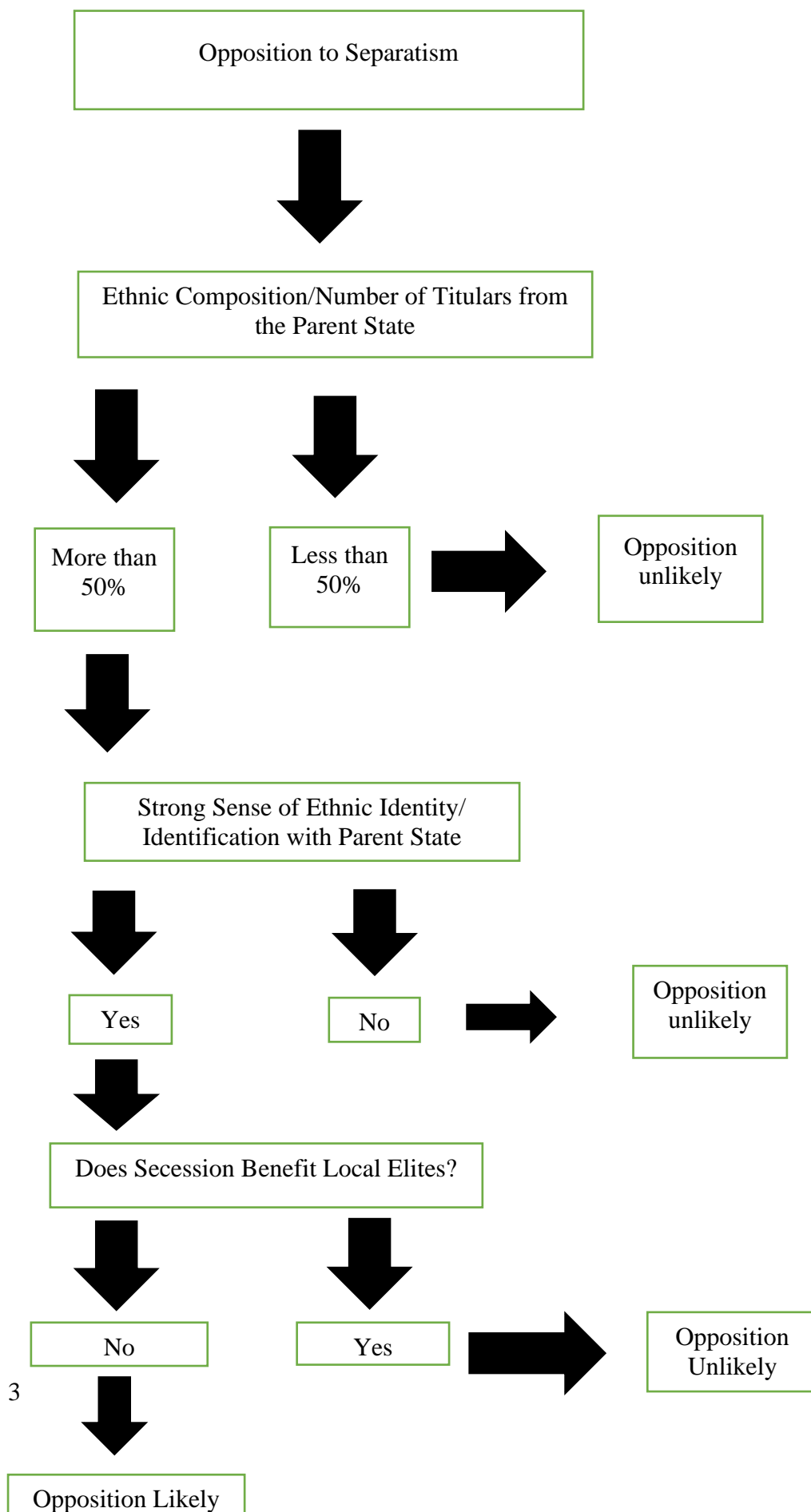
Will it benefit or disadvantage them? For this, it is important to understand their ethnic, linguistic, and professional background. For example, a Russian speaking deputy is likely to support secession, if they believe that they will be disadvantaged in the nationalising state. Their support for secession will increase even more should he represent a factory whose workers are also ethnic minorities who believe that they will be negatively impacted. However, if a deputy is a titular that will benefit from the nationalising campaign, they will oppose the secession. This opposition is compounded when the deputy represents an enterprise, such as a collective farm, where titulars predominate.

This argument can be summed up by the following diagram.

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<sup>6</sup> Pål Kolstø and Davor Paukovic, 'The Short and Brutish Life of the Republika Srpska Kranjina: the Failure of a De Facto State', in *Ethnopolitics*, xiii (2014), pp 309–27 at p. 312.

<sup>7</sup> Some localised efforts have been made to explain why separatism only occurred in the Donbas in 2014/ See for example; Ihor Stebelsky, 'A tale of two regions: geopolitics, identities, narratives, and conflict in Kharkiv and the Donbas', in *Eurasian Geography and Economics*, lix (2018), pp. 28-50 & Quentin Buckholz, 'The Dogs That Didn't Bark Elite Preferences and the Failure of Separatism in Kharkiv and Dnipropetrovsk', in *Problems of Post-Communism*, lxvi (2019), pp. 151-160.



Now that I have detailed the necessary requirements for successful opposition, they will be applied to the seven regions of Transnistria. However, before proceeding, it is also necessary to define what exactly is opposition. As this chapter focuses solely on the pre-war phase, it will focus on the social opposition, and not detail the violent resistance that occurred from 1991 onward. Social opposition can be defined in three ways: 1) Protests in support of the parent states policies or territorial integrity, 2) Implementing the policies of the parent states, particularly those that the separatists disagree with, 3) Non-Compliance with the separatist authorities, such as refusing to participate in separatist sponsored referendums or elections.

### **The Number of Titulars:**

There were two factors which determined the response to the ethnic revival: the demographic makeup of a given region and the extent to which titular elites controlled the regions local government. According to the 1989 Soviet constitution, there were 240,536 ethnic Moldovans living in Transnistria. However, they were unevenly distributed. Prior to the 1970s, Moldovans struggled to get residency permits to reside in the cities, where Russophones typically predominated. However, even as the Soviet Union began to liberalise and pursue less discriminatory policies towards the non-Russian titulars, Moldovans still struggled to receive residency permits to live in the cities of Bender, Tiraspol, and Rîbnița.

This led to a great disparity between urban and rural Moldovans, with 67,500 living in the cities, while 174,000 resided in the countryside. Moldovans were particularly underrepresented in cities like Tiraspol and Rîbnița, where they accounted for seventeen and twenty-four percent of the population respectively. In some rural regions, such as the Dubăsari district, Moldovans made up eighty-nine percent of the local population, while in some communes in Grigoriopol, they accounted for ninety-eight percent of the rural population (see figures 1 and 2).<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Dmitry P. Gorenburg, *Minority Ethnic Mobilization in the Russian Federation*, (New York, 2003), p 232 ; *Знамя Победы*, 6 декабря 1990 г. (*Victory Banner*, 6 December 1990) & *Moldova suverană*, 31 august 1991 (*Sovereign Moldova*, 31 August 1991).

## THE NUMBER OF MOLDOVANS LIVING IN INDUSTRIAL CITIES VS RURAL REGIONS

■ Rural Moldovans ■ Urban Moldovans

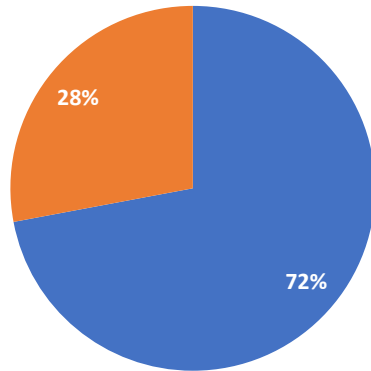


Figure 1: Source: *Знамя Победы*, 6 декабря 1990 г. (Victory Banner, 6 December 1990) & *Moldova suverană*, 31 august 1991 (Sovereign Moldova, 31 August 1991).

## Distribution of Moldovans in Transnistrian cities/districts

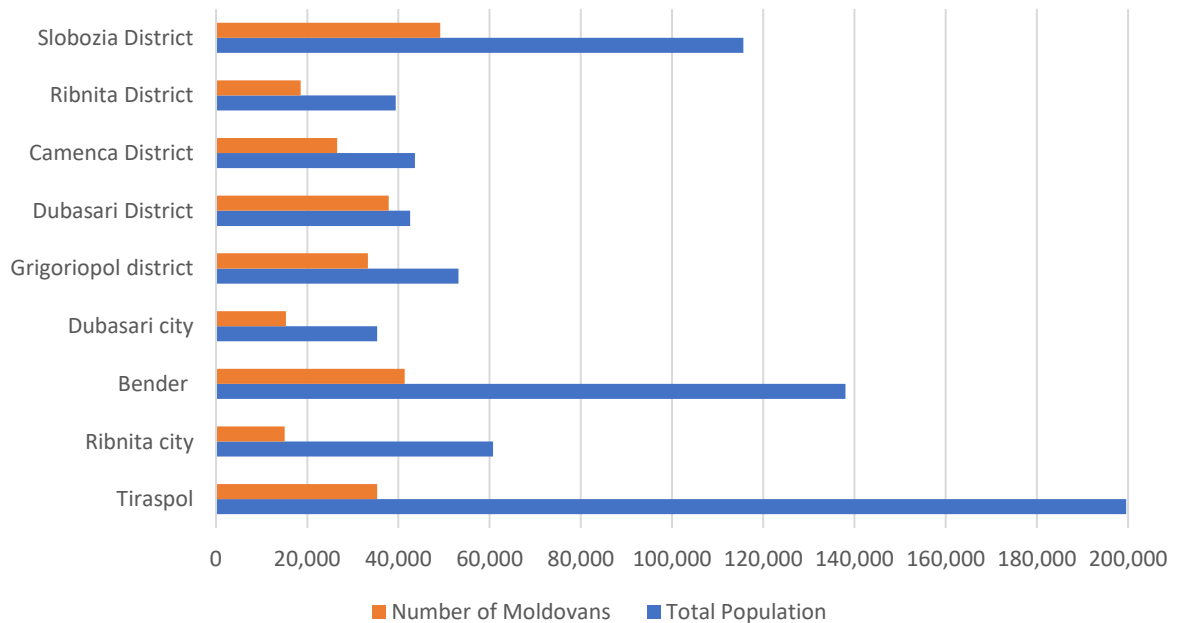


Figure 2: Source: *Знамя Победы*, 6 декабря 1990 г. (Victory Banner, 6 December 1990) & *Moldova suverană*, 31 august 1991 (Sovereign Moldova, 31 August 1991).

### Strong Sense of Ethnic Identity/Identification with the Parent State:

It is now widely accepted in social science that ethnic identity is socially constructed, and not primordial.<sup>9</sup> However, many scholars speak generally when it comes to nationalism, assuming that certain ethnic groups have fixed preferences, and make little effort to account for intragroup preferences. Ethnic preferences are not non-negotiable, and members of an ethnic group do not automatically respond to nationalist appeals.<sup>10</sup> Within the Soviet Union ethnicity was institutionalised, and the strength of one's self-identification within their ethnic group was typically predicated upon their exposure to these ethnic institutions—which included homelands, schools, museums, and periodicals.<sup>11</sup> The strength and number of these institutions in a given region was largely dependent upon the size of a particular ethnic group residing in a given territory.<sup>12</sup> If we refer to the above graph, we expect Moldovan language institutions to be relatively weak in Tiraspol and Rîbnița, but strong in the Dubăsari and Camenca regions.

For one to feel a strong sense of ethnic identity, they generally have to be exposed to information pertaining to their ethnicity frequently and from a young age. Unsurprisingly, the primary vehicle for establishing a sense of ethnic identity is the school system. This was recognised by the Soviet authorities, who used the school system to denationalise and Russify non-Russian children. After the 1956 school reform, titular language schools were removed from many urban areas. However, they remained the primary mode of education in the rural regions.<sup>13</sup>

Native language schools reinforced ethnic identity in several ways, as titular students were physically separated from their Russian speaking counterparts. In class, children studied in their native language, and learned about the history and culture of their people, which in turn reinforced their right to rule their homeland. In Moldovan language schools, children learned about Stefan the Great, Alexei Mateevici, and other national heroes. On the contrary, children in Russian language schools, including titulars, were not obliged to study in their native tongue and would have been given less exposure to information about titular groups culture and history.<sup>14</sup> The disparity between the number of titular language schools and Russian language schools came to the fore in 1989, when the Moldovan national revival. The national revival sought to reverse decades of Russification. Unsurprisingly, many looked to Transnistria with particular concern, given the lack of Moldovan language educational facilities there.

Within Transnistria, the number of educational facilities varied drastically between regions. However, in general, there were far more Moldovan language schools in the rural regions than there were in the industrial cities. Even though Moldovans accounted for seventeen percent of Tiraspol's population, there were just four Moldovan language kindergartens

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<sup>9</sup> 'Elise Giuliano, 'Who determines the Self in the Politics of Self-Determination? Identity and Preference Formation in Tatarstan's Nationalist Mobilization' in *Comparative Politics*, xxxii (2000), pp. 295-316 at p. 296.

<sup>10</sup> 'Elise Giuliano, 'Who determines the Self in the Politics of Self-Determination? Identity and Preference Formation in Tatarstan's Nationalist Mobilization' in *Comparative Politics*, xxxii (2000), pp. 295-316 at p. 296.

<sup>11</sup> Federica Prina, 'Linguistic Justice, Soviet Legacies and Post Soviet *Realpolitik*: The Ethnolinguistic Cleavage in Moldova' in *Ethnopolitics*, xiv (2015) pp. 52-71 at p. 59.

<sup>12</sup> Dmitry P. Gorenburg, *Minority Ethnic Mobilization in the Russian Federation*, (New York, 2003), p.198.

<sup>13</sup> Steven D. Roper, 'The politicization of education: Identity formation in Moldova and Transnistria', in *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, xxxviii (2005), pp. 501-514 at p. 504. & Dmitry P. Gorenburg, *Minority Ethnic Mobilization in the Russian Federation*, (New York, 2003), p 259.

<sup>14</sup> Dmitry P. Gorenburg, 'Not with One Voice: An Explanation of Intragroup Variation in Nationalist Sentiment', in *World Politics*, liii (2000), pp.115-142 at p.122.

serving 102 children.<sup>15</sup> In Bender, the situation was similar, of the forty-three preschool institutions in the city, twenty-eight were in Russian, two in Moldovan, and thirteen were bilingual (with Russian as the primary language of instruction). Here, nationalists were particularly concerned, as only twenty Moldovan parents had requested that their children be transferred to Moldovan language schools in the wake of the national revival.<sup>16</sup> Unsurprisingly, the situation was better in the Dubăsari, where roughly half of the city and district's 3000 children were enrolled in Moldovan language kindergartens.<sup>17</sup>

When it came to schools, the situation in the industrial cities was even worse. In neither Tiraspol nor Rîbnița was there a single Moldovan language school. Worse still, there were no bilingual schools either. This meant that Moldovans in both cities had no choice but to be educated solely in Russian. The Tiraspol city authorities promised to make Moldovan mandatory for all students in 1989, but this was never carried out.<sup>18</sup> In Bender there were three schools. However, at least one of these schools was located in the village of Varnita, an ethnically Moldovan village located just outside the city that was subordinated to the city authorities. The city of Dubăsari only had two Moldovan language schools, despite the fact that Moldovans accounted for about forty percent of the population. The city noted a rise in requests for more schools in 1987, but these declined in 1989 following the rise of linguistic tensions.<sup>19</sup>

Both the Dubăsari and Camenca districts had a considerable number of Moldovan language schools, nineteen and fifteen respectively. In the other districts, there were some Moldovan language schools. However, these schools never reflected the ethnic composition of the region and were always outnumbered by Russian language institutions (see figure 3 and 4).<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Тираспольский городской Совет народных депутатов МССР, протокол № 9, 23 мая 1989 г., фонд 107, опись 1, дело 2547, стр. 4-5. (Tiraspol City Soviet of People's Deputies of the MSSR, protocol number 9, fund 107, case 1, storage unit 2547 pp. 4-5).

<sup>16</sup> Требования представителей Бендерской секции «Народного фронта» и клуба «Ватра» от 26.11.1989 к ЦК Коммунистической партии Молдовы, фонд 51, опись 73, дело 127 стр. 9 (Requirements of the representatives of the Bender section of the 'people's front' and of the club Vatra from 26.11.1989 to the Central Committee of the Communist party of Moldova, fund 51, inventory 73, case 127, p.9).

<sup>17</sup> Протоколы заседаний исполкома Дубасарского городского Совета депутатов, фонд р 2848, опись 37, дело 1476 стр. 4 (Protocols on Meetings of the Executive Committee of the Dubasari City Council of Deputies, fund p. 2848, inventory 37, case 1476, p. 4.)

<sup>18</sup> Тираспольский городской Совет народных депутатов МССР, протокол № 9, 23 мая 1989 г., фонд 107, опись 1, дело 2547, стр. 4-5. (Tiraspol City Soviet of People's Deputies of the MSSR, protocol number 9, fund 107, case 1, storage unit 2547 pp. 4-5).

<sup>19</sup> Протоколы заседаний исполкома Дубасарского городского Совета депутатов, фонд р 2848, опись 37, дело 1476 стр. 4 (Protocols on Meetings of the Executive Committee of the Dubasari City Council of Deputies, fund p. 2848, inventory 37, case 1476, p. 4.)

<sup>20</sup> Данные о школах по языкам обучения на начало учебного года, фонд 51, опись 73, дело 128 стр. 38. (Data on schools by language of instruction at the beginning of the academic year, fund 51, inventory 73, Case 128, p. 38.).

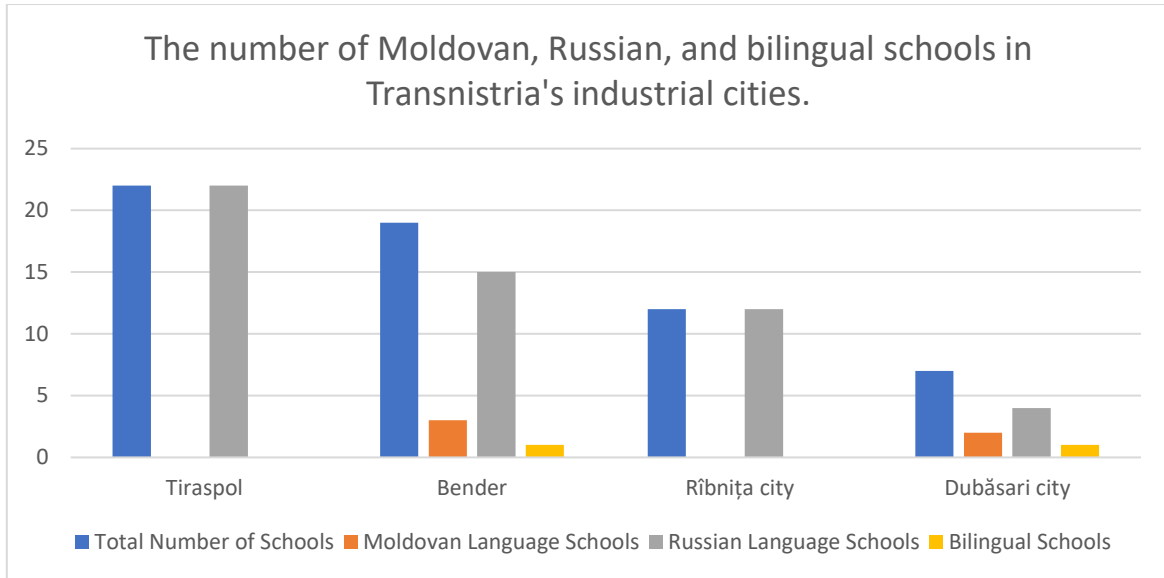


Figure 3: Source: Данные о школах по языкам обучения на начало учебного года , фонд 51, опис 73, дело 128 стр. 38. (Data on schools by language of instruction at the beginning of the academic year, fund 51, inventory 73, Case 128, p. 38.).

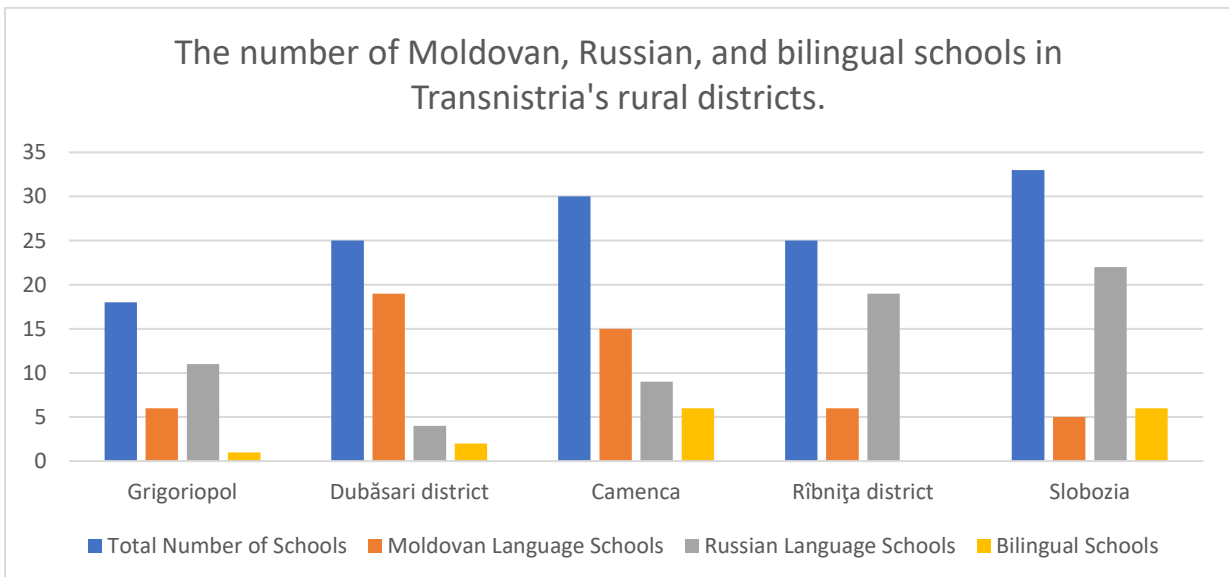


Figure 4: Source: Данные о школах по языкам обучения на начало учебного года , фонд 51, опис 73, дело 128 стр. 38. (Data on schools by language of instruction at the beginning of the academic year, fund 51, inventory 73, Case 128, p. 38.).

Dmitry Gourenburg argues that within Russia's ethnic republics, titular academics were some of the most stringent supporters of nationalism. This was primarily because these figures had dedicated their careers to the study of their ethnic groups' history and culture, and were acutely aware of the damaging effects of Russification. This was also true in Moldova, where the Moldovan Popular Front (MPF), was led mostly by academics. While the leaders of the MPF mainly taught at universities in Chisinau, many of the group's other members taught at the various smaller colleges and pedagogical institutes that were located across the republic. Just like their counterparts in Chisinau, the teachers at these institutes had a strong influence



on their students, who in turn often functioned as messengers, carrying the nationalists' message from the intellectual circles back to their villages.<sup>21</sup>

In the territory of the future Transnistrian Moldovan SSR, it was Bender and Tiraspol that housed the most third level institutions. In Bender, the situation was not very encouraging for nationalists, who wrote to the Central Committee to complain about the number of third level institutes that conducted their teaching in Russian. They noted that in both the Bender College of Public Utilities and Technical Schools, and the College of Light Industry, there were no Moldovan language classes, even though there were a considerable number of Moldovans in both institutions. They also noted that at the local pedagogical institute, where nationalists were traditionally recruited from, only a fraction of classes were conducted in Moldovan.<sup>22</sup>

The most notable third-level institution in Transnistria at this time was the Tiraspol Pedagogical Institute (TPI). The TPI was notable for several reasons. The TPI's board of directors was made up mostly of Moldovans. This was unique to the TPI, as Russians or Ukrainians typically occupied most of the city's top positions. In addition to this, while Moldovans made up less than twenty percent of the city's population, they accounted for over seventy percent of the TPI's student body. Most of these ethnic Moldovans were not locals and came from the rural regions of Transnistria or elsewhere in the republic (see figure five).<sup>23</sup> With the TPI having a similar ethnic background to most of the universities in Chisinau, it is unsurprising that nationalist ideas found support amongst the staff and students. Between 1989-92, the university functioned as a hub of anti-separatist activities in the de-facto capital, lending institutional support to local nationalists, including figures such as Ilie Ilascu, the Moldovan nationalist who was famously sentenced to death in 1993. Given that the TPI was an academic institute, it should come as no surprise that much of the nationalist mobilisation that occurred there had a pan-Romanian flare.

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<sup>21</sup> Dmitry P. Gorenburg, *Minority Ethnic Mobilization in the Russian Federation*, (New York, 2003), p.171.

<sup>22</sup> Требования представителей Бендерской секции «Народного фронта» и клуба «Ватра» от 26.11.1989 к ЦК Коммунистической партии Молдовы, фонд 51, опис 73, дело 127 стр. 9 (Requirements of the representatives of the Bender section of the 'people's front' and of the club Vatra from 26.11.1989 to the Central Committee of the Communist party of Moldova, fund 51, inventory 73, case 127, p.9).

<sup>23</sup> In 1987 Moldovans accounted for 67% and in 1988 they accounted for 65% see Справка ЦК КПСС об учреждениях государственного народного образования за 1989 г. фонд 51, опис 73, дело 128 стр. 34 (References of the Central Committee of the Communist Party on the Institutions of the State Public Education for 1989, fund 51, inventory 73, case 128, p. 34) ; Справка Управления науки и учебных заведений ЦК КПСС по работе с кадрами в ВУЗах МССР от 1989 г. . фонд 51, опис 71, дело 547 стр. 22 (Note From the department of science and educational institutions of the Central Committee of the Communist Party on Work with Personnel in Higher Educational Institutions of the MSSR from 1989) & *Lumina*, 12 iunie 1990 (*Light*, 12 June 1990).

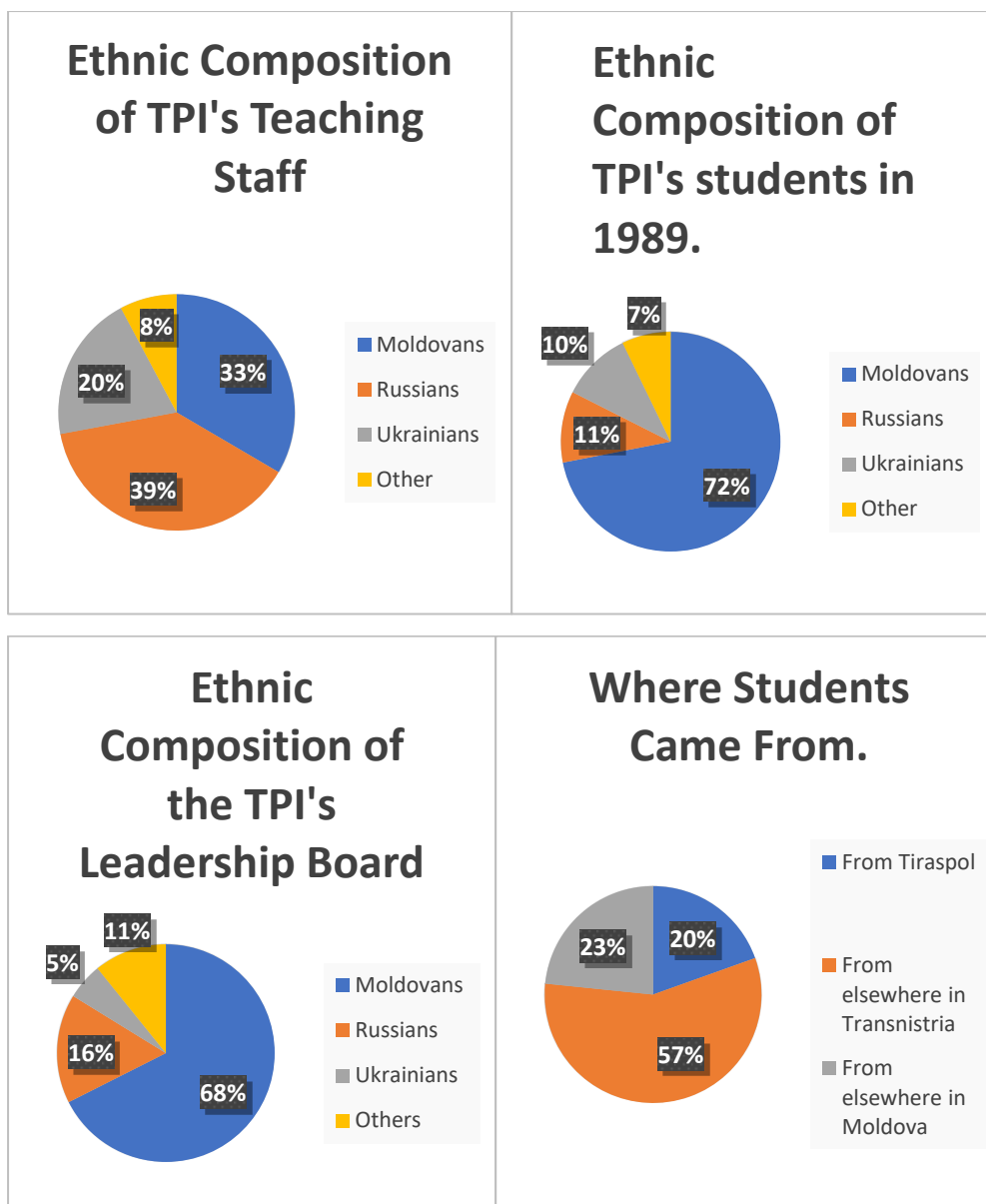


Figure 5: Source: *Lumina*, 12 iunie 1990 (*Light*, 12 June 1990).

While schools and other educational facilities may be the primary way to instil a sense of ethnic identity in someone, this identity must be sustained. As shown by Gourenburg, the primary way to sustain this identity in the Soviet Union was through cultural institutions, such as culture and literary clubs, museums, and titular language publications such as newsletters and periodicals. Titular language publications were particularly important in spreading nationalist ideologies. These publications were essential for the growth of ethnic nationalism in the late-Soviet period, demonstrating not only the existence of ethnic groupings but also instilling a sense of national identity and contemporaneous and historical grievances. If citizens are regularly exposed to reports about a groups' struggles, or positive reports on local nationalist organisations, they are more likely to support their cause. However, if a group is demonised by the local press, and their struggle is devalued, then those with a weak sense of national identity will almost certainly refrain from supporting them.<sup>24</sup> Essentially,

<sup>24</sup> Dmitry Gorenburg, 'Nationalism for the Masses: Popular Support for Nationalism in Russia's Ethnic Republics' in *Europe-Asia Studies*, liii (2001), pp. 73-104 at p. 76.

this means that it was not the amount of titular language publications that is of interest, but their content.

Each of the cities and districts of Transnistria had their own titular language periodicals, with all varying greatly in popularity, and content. The communist party of neither Tiraspol, Rîbnița, nor Bender had a Moldovan language newspaper, communicating with the people exclusively in Russian.<sup>25</sup> For a while, the Tiraspol party had a Moldovan language press, but it was disbanded due to poor circulation, with just 866 copies a week being bought in the 1970s, in comparison to 24,000 copies of the Russian version.<sup>26</sup> However, this is not to say that there were no Moldovan language publications in these cities. Each of these cities, and Dubăsari, had multiple Moldovan language periodicals. In Tiraspol, perhaps the most notable publication was *Light*, which was published by the TPI. Unsurprisingly, *Light* had a pro-Romanian basis, which became more apparent in 1990, when articles began purposely referring to the state language as Romanian (see figure 6). In the months before the passing of the language laws, the local press in the industrial cities tended not to report on either the national revival or the MPF. However, in Camenca and Dubăsari, both the national revival and the MPF generally received favourable coverage. The native language press was not the only way to spread the nationalist message in Soviet Moldova, and state sanctioned folk groups also played an important role.



Figure 6: *Light*, the title of the Tiraspol Pedagogical Institutes periodical. Note- it is written in Moldovan Cyrillic

<sup>25</sup> Требования представителей Бендерской секции «Народного фронта» и клуба «Ватра» от 26.11.1989 к ЦК Коммунистической партии Молдовы, фонд 51, опись 73, дело 127 стр. 9 (*Requirements of the representatives of the Bender section of the 'people's front' and of the club Vatra from 26.11.1989 to the Central Committee of the Communist party of Moldova, fund 51, inventory 73, case 127, p.9*); Тираспольский городской Совет народных депутатов МССР, протокол № 9, 23 мая 1989 г., фонд 107, опись 1, дело 2547, стр. 4-5. (Tiraspol City Soviet of People's Deputies of the MSSR, protocol number 9, fund 107, case 1, storage unit 2547 pp. 4-5).

<sup>26</sup> Ronald J. Hill, *Soviet Political Elites* (London, 1977), pp. 15-16.

Transnistria was home to a vast array of cultural organisations. In the pre-*perestroika* era, these groups were typically folk groups, which were often formed in villages or enterprises.<sup>27</sup> Folk groups were strictly managed by the local authorities and encouraged participants to reproduce a version of their culture that was ideologically acceptable. These groups mostly focused on performative aspects, and any discussions on cultural issues was discouraged. This changed with the advent of *perestroika*, with Gorbachev encouraging the formation of cultural groups that would discuss pressing issues. All over Moldova, numerous Moldovan cultural clubs were formed, and Transnistria was no different. Ostensibly, these groups were meant to be apolitical. However, they quickly became vehicles for nationalist discontent.



*Figure 7: Moldovan Folk Group from the Canning Factory ‘October’ in Slobozia performing the Song ‘Our Language’. A song by Alexei Mateevici and future national anthem of the Republic of Moldova. Source: Satul Nou, 7 martie, 27 aprilie, 1 mai 1989 (New Village, 7 March, 27 April, 1 May 1989).*

In the industrial cities, these groups tended to be organised by local academics and other cultural elites. They tended to be heavily influenced by the MPF and pro-Romanian. The most notorious groups were the Tiraspol branch of the MPF and Vatra. The former comprised mostly of staff and students from the TPI, while the latter was made up of Moldovan intellectuals from Bender. Vatra was registered in October 1988 and proclaimed that its goal was to ‘end discrimination against Moldovans in the city.’<sup>28</sup> They also called for the ‘Romanianisation of the city,’ which included it being renamed Tighina, and the erection of numerous monuments to famous Romanian and Moldovan literary figures.<sup>29</sup> The Tiraspol

<sup>27</sup> *Satul Nou*, 7 martie, 27 aprilie, 1 mai 1989 (*New Village*, 7 March, 27 April, 1 May 1989).

<sup>28</sup> *Victoria*, 24 ianuarie 1989 (*Victory*, 24 January 1989)) & *Решение Бендерского городского депутата*, фонд 101, опись 1, дело 818 стр. 24 (*Decision of the Bendery City Deputies*, Fund 101, Inventory 1, Storage 818 p. 24).

<sup>29</sup> *Решение Бендерского городского депутата*, фонд 101, опись 1, дело 818 стр. 24 (*Decision of the Bendery City Deputies*, Fund 101, Inventory 1, Storage 818 p. 24) & *Требования представителей Бендерской секции «Народного фронта» и клуба «Ватра» от 26.11.1989 к ЦК Коммунистической партии Молдовы*, фонд 51, опис 73, дело 127 стр. 9 (*Requirements of the representatives of the Bender section of the 'people's front' and of the club Vatra from 26.11.1989 to the Central Committee of the Communist party of Moldova*, fund 51, inventory 73, case 127, p.9).

branch of the MPF was formed in early 1990 to defend the territorial integrity of Moldova and promote its future unification with Romania.

The groups formed in the Transnistrian districts were more pro-Moldovan than pan-Romanian. Several pro-Moldovan groups were formed in almost every region. These groups included Bastina and Integrate from Slobozia, the Earthly Group from the Dubăsari district, and Dignity, which had members in Dubăsari district and Grigoriopol. Each group had its own unique objective. Bastina focused its attention on the promotion of Moldovan literature; the Earthly Group sought to raise awareness of the poor living conditions of Moldovans from five villages in the Dubăsari district, while Integrate and Dignity sought to promote interethnic harmony.<sup>30</sup> Despite their differing objectives, all the groups supported Moldova's territorial integrity in the face of Transnistrian secession. Moreover, they grew increasingly critical of the separatist's efforts to 'eradicate Moldovan culture from the region' and create 'homo pridnestroficus' (Transnistrian man) in its absence.<sup>31</sup> However, these groups could only achieve so much, and were continuously reliant on the support of elites.

### **Does Secession Benefit Elite?**

As we have seen above, each region of Transnistria was home to a certain amount of titulars, and hosted a number of Moldovan ethnic institutions, yet concrete resistance only manifested in few select regions. When trying to understand why this was, it is essential to question whether or not secession benefitted elites? In the industrial cities, elites retained control over mobilizational resources, such as the media, and used it to encourage separatism. By extension, those elites that believe separatism would be detrimental to their interests could use their own resources to mobilise the local population against it. In the case of Transnistria, we would expect that elites who were ethnic Moldovans, that spoke their native language, would benefit from the policies of the nationalising government, and so oppose secession.

To gauge the composition of elites, it is first useful to look at who was elected to the local Soviets in 1990. This is particularly important in the case of the rural districts, where the position of chairman of the village Soviet was important in shaping the views of the villagers.<sup>32</sup> The local and republican elections of 1990 elections saw a landslide victory for Union of Joint Labour Collective's (OSTK) candidates in the industrial cities, and they also made considerable gains in Grigoriopol. Just as had happened elsewhere, the local elections brought great changes to the district soviets of Dubăsari and Slobozia.<sup>33</sup> Unfortunately, there is no data on how many newcomers were elected to the Camenca district Soviet, but given the changes that took place elsewhere, it is reasonable to assume that a high-level of newcomers were elected (see figure 8).<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> *Сельская новь*, 30 августа 1990 г. (*Rural nov*, 30 August 1990) ; *Документы (анализы, справки, информации) о деятельности общественно-политических формирований в республике за 1990*. фонд 51, опись 73, дело 163 стр. 107 *Documents (analyzes, certificates, information) of the activities of socio-political formations in the republic for 1990*, Fund 51, inventory 73, case 163 , p. 107.

<sup>31</sup> *Независимая Молдова*, 23 января 1992 г. (*Independent Moldova*, 23 January 1992).

<sup>32</sup> Dmitry P. Gorenburg, *Minority Ethnic Mobilization in the Russian Federation*, (New York, 2003), p.17.

<sup>33</sup> *Знамя Победы*, 3 марта 1990 г. (*Victory Banner*, 3 March 1990) & *Сельская Новь*, 6 марта г. 1990 (*Selskaya Nov*, 6 March 1990).

<sup>34</sup> None of the editions of Camenca's Newspaper *Dniester* that dealt with elections noted the number of newcomers; *Днестр*, 1, 13, 17 марта и 24 апреля 1990 г. (*Dniester*, 1, 13, 17 March & 24 April 1990).

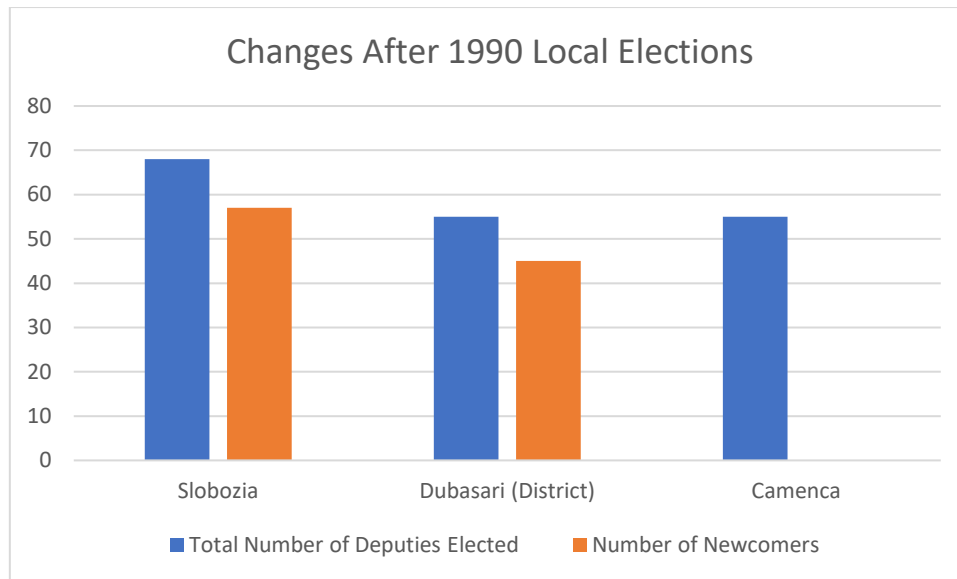


Figure 8: Source: *Знамя Победы*, 3 марта 1990 г. (*Victory Banner*, 3 March 1990) ; *Сельская Новь*, 6 марта г. 1990 (*Selskaya Nov*, 6 March 1990) & *Днестр*, 1, 13, 17 марта и 24 апреля 1990 г. (*Dniester*, 1, 13, 17 March & 24 April 1990).

By understanding the socio-political situation of each region, it is possible to discern the positions of the deputies who were elected to the various soviets. For example, given that the OSTK was relatively popular in Slobozia, with some villages even wanting to be transferred under Tiraspol's jurisdiction, it is likely that many of the newcomers elected to the district Soviet were sympathetic to the separatists. This is furthered by the fact that of fifty-five percent of deputies came from ethnic groups that typically did not speak Moldovan (Ukrainian, Russian, Bulgarian).<sup>35</sup> Given the lack of Moldovan language institutions, most Moldovans elected were likely either sympathetic to the OSTK or held a moderate pro-Moldovan position.

The OSTK held little sway in Camenca, at least until mid-1990. Nevertheless, the group remained popular with many of the territory's minorities, most of whom resided on the left-bank portion of the district (see below). It is likely that only a moderate number of OSTK sympathisers were elected to the local soviet. Finally, given the failure of the OSTK to win favour amongst the inhabitants of the Dubăsari district, it is unlikely that many sympathisers were elected to the region's district Soviet. However, given the region's lack of academic institutions, it is likely that most deputies who were elected were pro-Moldovan, not pro-Romanian.

The Soviet system was built on a vast patronage network that rewarded compliance with the centre. In such a system, the local deputies were intended to implement the policies of the republican government, who in turn were (generally) complying with the wishes of the centre. During the *perestroika*-era, local deputies used their positions to resist republican policies and draft their own legislation. However, for this legislation to be implemented, deputies needed to secure the support of the nomenklatura, a category of people who held key bureaucratic positions right across the country. If elites were to successfully oppose separatism, by organising mass protests or implementing the parent states policies, then they would also need the support of the nomenklatura. By extension, for the nomenklatura to

<sup>35</sup> *Сельская Новь*, 6 марта г. 1990 (*Selskaya Nov*, 6 March 1990).

support such policies, they would need to feel that they would be disadvantaged by separating from the parent state. Just like with the deputies from the local soviet, we would expect that ethnic Moldovans, particularly in the less Russified areas, would feel that they could benefit from maintaining ties to the parent state.

Amongst the rural regions' nomenklatura, the single largest ethnic group was Moldovans. The highest portion was found in Camenca, where they accounted for fifty-eight percent. In Dubăsari, they accounted for forty-seven percent of the nomenklatura. However, this figure accounts for both the city and the district, and it is likely that the portion from just the latter is far higher. In both Slobozia and Grigoriopol, Moldovans were the largest group, but outnumbered collectively by Russians, Ukrainians, and Bulgarians (see figure 9). Unsurprisingly, in the cities, Moldovans had a poor showing, with only accounting for fourteen percent of Tiraspol's elite.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Справки по персоналу, включенному в номенклатуру, фонд 51, опись 103, дело, 103, страницы 27,28,33,34,41,42,76,77 (References on Personnel Included in the nomenclature, fund 51, case 103, inventory 103, pages 27,28,33,34,41,42,76,77).

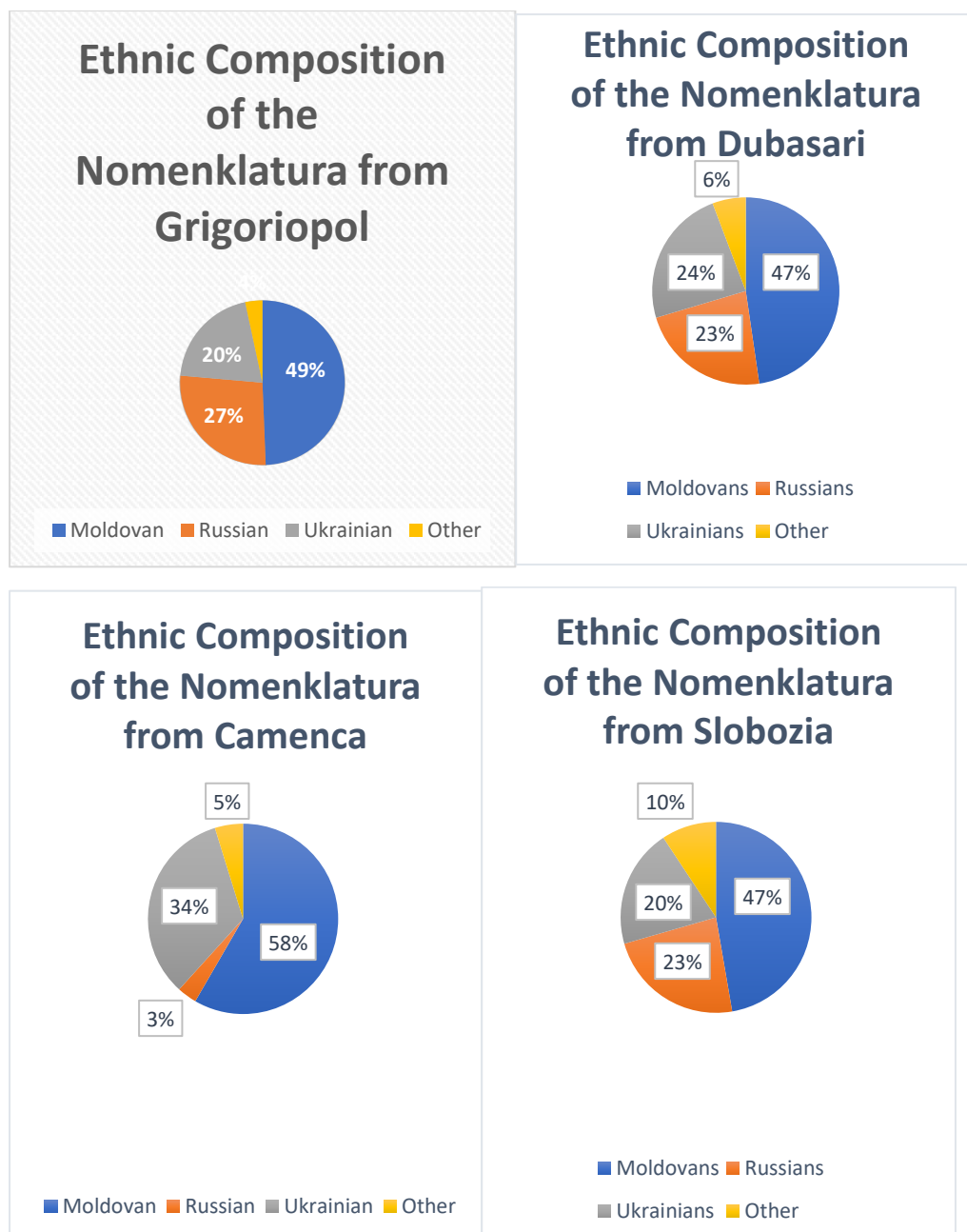


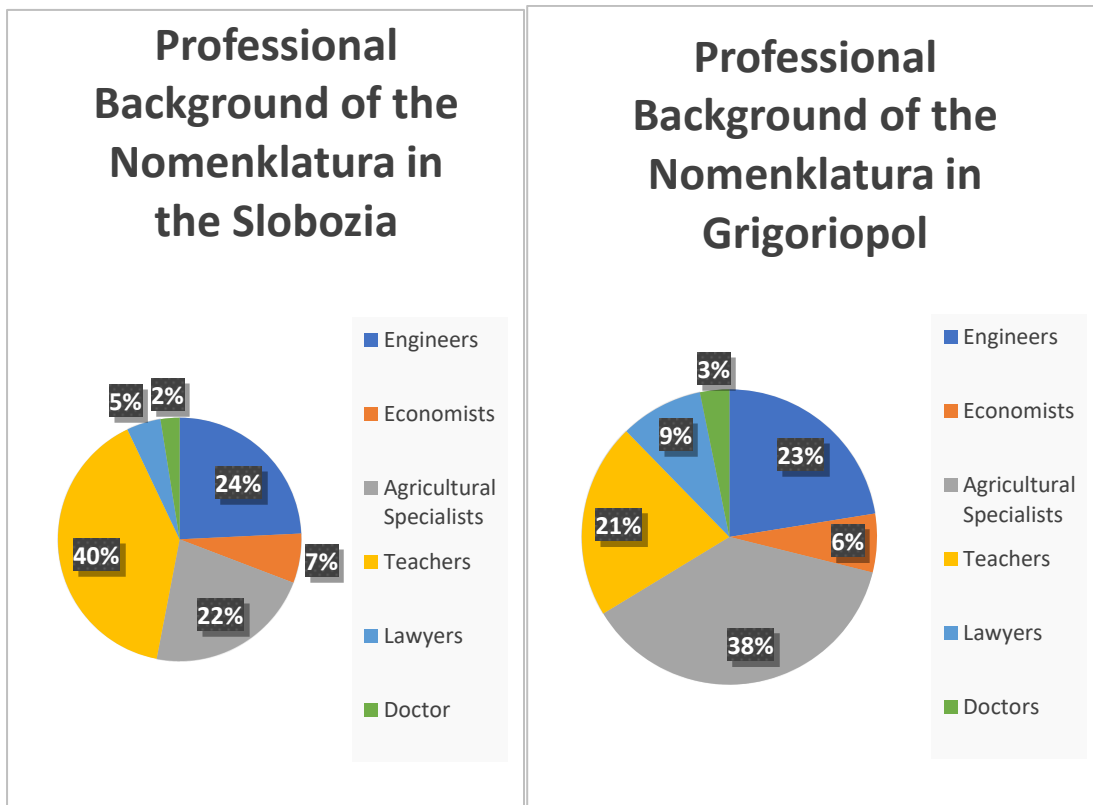
Figure 9: Source: Справки по персоналу, включенному в номенклатуру, фонд 51, опись 103, дело, 103, страницы 27,28,33,34,41,42,76,77 (References on Personnel Included in the nomenklatura, fund 51, case 103, inventory 103, pages 27,28,33,34,41,42,76,77).

The ethnic composition of the nomenklatura only tells a part of the story. The ethnic identity issue is particularly muddled in both Transnistria and Moldova as a whole, as some Moldovans may identify as Romanians, while others may identify with what is now called the Russian world. If we are to better understand the nomenklatura's position, then we must also investigate their professional background. Do they come from a background that is typically supportive of nationalism? Or hostile toward it? According to Dmitry Gourenburg, industrial workers tend to oppose nationalism. But who usually supports it? In the Transnistrian case, it was generally the urban and rural intelligentsia. The rural intelligentsia consisted of lawyers, doctors, and perhaps most importantly teachers. Another important group is collective farm chiefs and other agricultural specialists, as these people work almost solely with titulars. Gourenburg argues that these figures normally oppose nationalism. While



this may be true for elsewhere, in the Transnistrian case they were some of the most vocal opponents of secession, at least when they came from regions were Moldovans predominated.<sup>37</sup>

The rural intelligentsia and collective farm representatives had a strong showing in all of Transnistria’s rural regions. In Dubăsari, they accounted for almost one hundred percent of the districts nomenklatura. In Camenca too their presence was felt, accounting for seventy-seven percent. Ostensibly, they also had a strong showing in Grigoriopol and Slobozia (see figure ten). However, their impact is somewhat negated here for several reasons. First, in both these regions, the portion of engineers is higher. Second, the high showing of teachers is misleading, especially in Slobozia. Given the lack of Moldovan language schools, these teachers likely came from Russian speaking schools. Finally, collective farm chiefs in these regions were not as opposed to separatism as in the likes of Dubăsari, as demonstrated by the numerous farms that donated food to the workers from Bender and Tiraspol during the strikes. Unsurprisingly, the industrial cities nomenklatura was dominated by those generally hostile to nationalism, including industrial figures.<sup>38</sup>



<sup>37</sup> Dmitry P. Gorenburg, *Minority Ethnic Mobilization in the Russian Federation*, (New York, 2003), p.170.

<sup>38</sup> Справки по персоналу, включенному в номенклатуру, фонд 51, опись 103, дело, 103, страницы 27,28,33,34,41,42,76,77 (References on Personnel Included in the nomenclature, fund 51, case 103, inventory 103, pages 27,28,33,34,41,42,76,77)

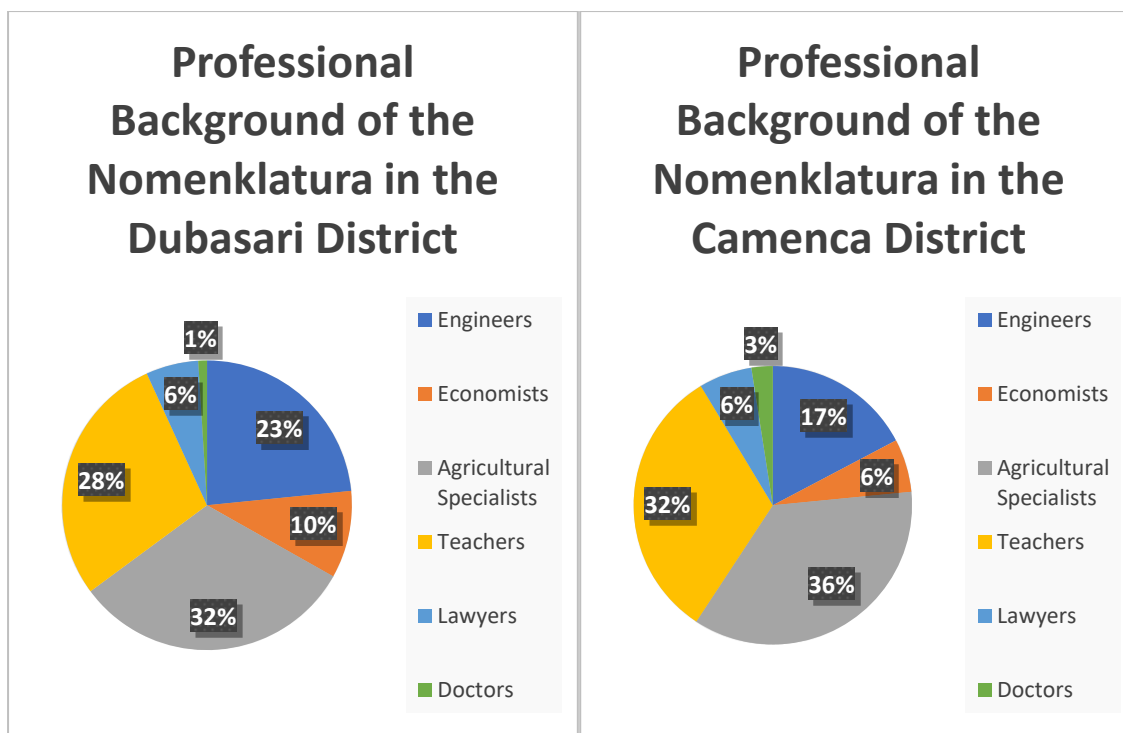


Figure 10: Source: Справки по персоналу, включенному в номенклатуру, фонд 51, опись 103, дело, 103, страницы 27,28,33,34,41,42,76,77 (References on Personnel Included in the nomenclature, fund 51, case 103, inventory 103, pages 27,28,33,34,41,42,76,77).

### Expectations:

Support for nationalist movements and opposition to secession is dependent upon the degree to which people have been conditioned to believe that their ethnicity is an important component of their identity.<sup>39</sup> If ethnic institutions play such an important role in shaping this identity, we would expect that the inhabitants of regions where ethnic institutions were strong to oppose secession. Should elites in these regions also oppose secession, we would expect them to allocate resources to this opposition, thereby increasing the likelihood of the given territory remaining within the parent state.

With this in mind, we would expect that following: that the fiercest resistance to Transnistrian separatism would come from the Dubăsari district, followed by Camenca. We would also expect moderate resistance in Slobozia and Grigoriopol. However, given the demographic makeup of these regions, the lack of titular institutions, and the composition of the elite, opposition would be rather limited. Finally, we would expect minimal resistance in the industrial cities. However, given the presence of academic institutions in both Bender and Tiraspol, we would expect that any resistance would be of the pan-Romanian variety. The following section of this chapter tests these assumptions by detailing how the inhabitants of these regions reacted to some of the events that sparked the conflict, including the language laws, the strikes, the tricolour, the referendums, and the creation of the TMSSR. As noted in the introduction, this chapter will deal solely with the years between 1989-1990, as chapter seven will deal with the separatist's efforts to suppress this dissent.

### Reaction to the Language Laws:

<sup>39</sup> Dmitry Gorenburg, 'Nationalism for the Masses: Popular Support for Nationalism in Russia's Ethnic Republics' in *Europe-Asia Studies*, liii (2001), pp. 73-104 at pp. 77-78 & Dmitry P. Gorenburg, *Minority Ethnic Mobilization in the Russian Federation*, (New York, 2003), p.28.

The communist parties from the cities and districts in Transnistria imposed an effective media blackout on the language laws. This was particularly true in the rural areas. Whereas the city newspapers sometimes gave them negative coverage, their counterparts in the districts rarely mentioned them at all. There was, however, one notable exception. In Camenca, the local authorities took a similar approach to their counterparts from Bessarabia and used the press to explain the laws to locals. In May 1989, the district's newspaper, *Dniester*, conducted a survey and claimed that almost one hundred percent of participants supported the laws.<sup>40</sup> This was in stark contrast to Tiraspol, where some locals sought to have Russian made the sole official language of the republic.

Letters from local Moldovans appealing to their Russian and Ukrainian neighbours to accept the laws also appeared in *Dniester*. In these articles, local Moldovans pointed to how they learned Russian, but most minorities had not learned Moldovan. They spoke of the frustration and humiliation they felt as their mother tongue was treated as a second-class language in their own homeland.<sup>41</sup> Such a stance was a stark departure from the OSTK's approach, who only aired the opinions of Moldovans that opposed the laws. In addition to this, local deputies wrote articles in support of the laws, highlighting the positive aspects, including the fact that they would facilitate the opening of Ukrainian language schools, in an area where twenty-seven percent of the population identity as such.<sup>42</sup>

The following year, the district authorities in Camenca even partook in the celebrations of *Limba Nostra*, the holiday created to commemorate the passing of the laws. The authorities tried to emphasise the civic aspects of the holiday and use it to reintegrate disenfranchised minorities and prevent the district's breakdown along regional and ethnic lines. In *Dniester*, the official title of the holiday 'Our Language' appeared in Moldovan, Russian, and Ukrainian. The authorities noted that all ethnolinguistic groups had reason to celebrate the laws and that they would each be allowed to showcase their culture. However, the task of presenting the holiday as inclusive was made difficult by the fact that many in the republican press insisted on calling the day 'Our Romanian Language' and presenting it the celebration as one commemorating Moldova's victory.<sup>43</sup>

Outside of Camenca, local deputies gave little public indication as to whether they supported the laws, although the authorities in both Grigoriopol and Slobozia were criticised for their 'ambiguous positions'. In the Dubăsari district, neither the deputies nor the local press campaigned for the laws. This was likely due to the fact most of the territory's inhabitants had a strong sense of Moldovan identity, and so naturally supported the laws. Nonetheless, it is worth noting already in September 1989 sessions of the district Soviet were conducted exclusively in Moldovan.<sup>44</sup> The laws were also supported by the inhabitants and deputies from the village of Varnita. Administered by Bender, Varnita was a small village of roughly 3,000 inhabitants, the majority of whom were Moldovan. During sessions of the Bender city

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<sup>40</sup> *Днестр*, 27 мая 1989 г. (*Dniester*, 27 May 1989).

<sup>41</sup> *Днестр*, 5 сентября 1989 г. (*Dniester*, 5 September 1989).

<sup>42</sup> *Днестр*, 14 сентября 1989 г. (*Dniester*, 14 September 1989).

<sup>43</sup> *Moldova Suverană*, 27 August 1990 (*Sovereign Moldova*, 27 August 1989).

<sup>44</sup> *Исполком Дубасарского районного Совета народных депутатов Протоколы заседаний районных Советов народных депутатов и документы к протоколам 1989 г., фонд 4, опись 1, Дело 2848, стр. 50* (*Executive Committee of Dubasari District Soviet of Peoples Deputies Protocols of sessions of District soviet people's deputies and documents to protocols 1989, fund 4, inventory 1, case 2848 p. 50.*)

Soviet, deputies noted that the laws found widespread support amongst much of the population.<sup>45</sup>

The most ardent supporters of the laws in the industrial cities was Vatra and the staff and students from the TPI. While staff at the TPI maintained a pro-Moldovan position, members of Vatra were openly pro-Romanian. Deputies from Bender reported to the CPM that certain members from Vatra had been 'radicalised' in the Spring of 1989, after members of the MPF had attended their meetings and encouraged them to take radical action to reclaim Bessarabia's historic capital. On 26 July 1989, some of Vatra's members acted on this advice, holding an unsanctioned rally in the centre of the city in support of the laws, and unification with Romania. A tense standoff between demonstrators and Russian speakers ensued, with members of the local militia eventually having to disperse both. Afterwards, the city's executive committee warned the group that they would be deregistered if they organised another unsanctioned rally. However, just six days later some members of Vatra travelled to Chisinau, and met with members of the MPF, who agreed to host a rally in the city on 2 August to mourn the fiftieth anniversary of the Soviet Union's annexation of Bessarabia.<sup>46</sup>

What happened that day in Bender was hotly disputed. According to accounts offered by journalists from the city's newspaper, *Victory*, members of Vatra and the MPF walked through the centre of the city, dressed in all black and waving tricolours. Afterwards, protestors began to insult onlookers, referring to them as 'occupiers.' The local militia came to the scene and requested the protestors to disperse, and once they refused to do so they were faced with little choice but to forcefully break up the demonstration.<sup>47</sup> A different account was offered by the journalists in the nationalist publication, *Art and Literature*. According to their narrative, members of the local militia, dressed in plain clothes, attacked the demonstrators, and arrested them once they tried to defend themselves.<sup>48</sup> Looking at the primary sources, it is difficult to determine what exactly happened that day. Nevertheless, what is clear is that the incident was used as propaganda by both the city authorities and the OSTK for weeks to come.<sup>49</sup>

The rector of the TPI helped the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet draft the laws. When the preliminary drafts were published in May 1989, one lecturer wrote a letter to the press organ of the Ministry of Education, *Public Education* and criticised the fact the laws would be implemented in phases, arguing that their language return to its roots 'immediately'.<sup>50</sup> When members of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet visited Tiraspol to gauge people's opinions on the laws, they found that the TPI was one of only four enterprises that supported making Moldovan the sole official language of the republic.<sup>51</sup> The pro-Moldovan position of many of the Moldovan lecturers irked many members of the Russian speaking staff. The issue came to a head when certain lecturers published an article in *Public Education*, claiming that all the

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<sup>45</sup> *Бендерский городской Совет народных депутатов МССР*, фонд 101, опись 1, дело 818, стр. 23 (*Bendery City Council of People's Deputies of the MSSR*, fund 101, inventory 1, case 818 p. 24) ; *Победа*, 19 сентября 1989 г. (*Victory*, 19 September 1989) & *Победа*, 23 сентября 1989 г. (*Victory*, 23 September 1989).

<sup>46</sup> *Победа*, 5 августа 1989 г. (*Victory*, 5 August 1989) & *Решение Бендерского городского депутата*, фонд 101, опись 1, дело 818 стр. 24 (*Decision of the Bendery City Deputies*, Fund 101, Inventory 1, Storage 818 p. 24).

<sup>47</sup> *Победа*, 5 августа 1989 г. (*Victory*, 5 August 1989).

<sup>48</sup> *Artă și literatură*, 10 august 1989 (*Art and Literature*, 10 August 1989)

<sup>49</sup> *Победа*, 10 августа 1989 г. (*Victory*, 10 August 1989).

<sup>50</sup> *Народное образование*, 7 июня 1989 г. (*Public Education*, 7 June 1989)

<sup>51</sup> The other enterprises was small, including a driving school.

staff at the TPI were supportive of the laws.<sup>52</sup> This offended many Russian speakers, who wrote a letter arguing that they had not been consulted on the article, and that they did not support them. This led to a split amongst the staff, with Russian lecturers eventually campaigning for the OSTK.<sup>53</sup> The most prominent Russian speaking lecturer was Anna Volkova, whose decision to use her position to legitimise the OSTK led her to become a close confidant of Igor Smirnov, and one of the most influential academics in Transnistria to this day.

It was not just the Moldovan lecturers from the TPI that supported the language laws, the Moldovan language teachers from across Transnistria were also vocal about their support for the language laws. Initially, teachers refrained from publishing their opinions on the matter. However, this changed when the OSTK began to target them explicitly. Ignoring the fact that there was a complete lack of Moldovan language schools in their cities, the OSTK argued that the poor standing of Moldovan was due to the poor quality of teachers in the region and the republic at large. Infuriated by these remarks, various teachers' unions wrote letters to their local press criticising the OSTK and arguing that the laws were necessary. The Union of Moldovan Teachers from the Rîbnița district alleged that students did not want to learn Moldovan because their parents had a 'poor attitude towards it.'<sup>54</sup> In Grigoriopol, the local teacher's union made a somewhat nationalistic statement claiming that it was obscene that the OSTK expected Moldovans to negotiate what language they spoke 'in their own republic'.<sup>55</sup> Many Moldovans in Transnistria did not just publicly express their support for the language laws, but they also actively tried to undermine those who went on strike against them.

### **The Strikes:**

The strikes played a fundamental role in Transnistrian history, representing the first time both sides of the Dniester had ever come into conflict. From a practical point of view, the strikes transformed the OSTK into a formidable political entity that had all but mastered the art of propaganda. From an ideological perspective, they represented a coming together of a multinational people in the face of nationalist adversity. This is the general thesis supported by both the separatists and many academics. However, the argument is not entirely true. While the OSTK enjoyed great support, its support was limited mostly to the Russian-speaking populations of the industrial cities and the surrounding regions, while the Moldovans outside of these regions expressed apathy towards them. Decades of discriminatory policies pursued by the Soviet authorities ensured that the regions where Moldovans predominated were devoid of any significant industry. However, where industry did exist, such as in the town centres of Camenca and Slobozia, support for the strikes was minimal. Even in the industrial cities, such as Bender, certain portions of the Moldovan population voiced their opposition.

The strongest opposition came from Camenca, where the local authorities actively protest against the strikes, publishing articles in *Dniester* highlighting the illegality of participation.<sup>56</sup> Yet, in the face of strong political resistance, workers from the district's largest enterprise, a repair factory named PROT, decided to go on strike on 28 August. The workers were encouraged by a local representative of the Supreme Soviet, himself an opponent of the laws.

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<sup>52</sup> Тираспольский городской Совет народных депутатов МССР, протокол № 9, 23 мая 1989 г., фонд 107, опись 1, дело 2547, стр. 4-5. (Tiraspol City Soviet of People's Deputies of the MSSR, protocol number 9, fund 107, case 1, storage unit 2547 pp. 4-5).

<sup>53</sup> *Забастовки тирасполь*, 14 сентября 1989 г. (*Striking Tiraspol*, 14 September 1989).

<sup>54</sup> *Ленинское знамя*, 30 августа 1989 г. (*Lenin's Banner*, 30 August 1989).

<sup>55</sup> *Дружба*, 1 июля 1989 г. (*Friendship*, 1 July 1989).

<sup>56</sup> *Днестр*, 10 августа 2019 г. (*Dniester*, 10 August 2019).

<sup>57</sup> Enterprises in neighbouring Ukraine that relied on PROT's services were furious with the workers decision to participate in the strike and began to put pressure on the factory's directors and the local authorities to encourage the workers to return to work. Demoralised from the lack of support they received, the workers returned to work on 4 September.<sup>58</sup> Aside from PROT, the local authorities were able to prevent any other enterprise from participating in the strikes. However, the inhabitants of some of the region's Ukrainian villages did send telegrams to the OSTK in Tiraspol and Rîbnîța proclaiming their support for their cause.<sup>59</sup> Contrary to the dominant scholarly narrative, the deputies from Camenca viewed saw ethnic dimensions to the civil unrest that unfolded in August-September 1989. When reflecting on the events in the district, deputies remarked that the 'non-Moldovan' portion of the population had 'become somewhat excited'.<sup>60</sup>

Support for the strikers was not forthcoming in either the city or district of Dubăsari. In the post-war era, the Transnistrian authorities have gone to great lengths to cover up the region's lack of engagement, particularly in the city. For example, the region's local archive has been purged of all documents from the district authorities from that time.<sup>61</sup> Nevertheless, using sources from Chisinau, it is possible to discern the attitude of those from the city and district toward the strike. A local branch of the OSTK was not established until 28 August 1989. Even then, only five enterprises participated in the strikes, which is the same amount that participated from the far less industrialised region of Grigoriopol.<sup>62</sup> In addition to this, the Central Committee noted that it was mostly ethnic Russians that participated in the strikes.<sup>63</sup> No branch of the OSTK was established in the district, and at a session in September, deputies condemned the OSTK for the economic damage they inflicted on the region.<sup>64</sup>

In the industrial cities, the only form of Moldovan resistance to the strikes came from Bender, which also happened to have the most developed ethnic institutions of the three. In Bender, there were examples of both individual and collective forms of resistance. The most famous form of individual resistance came from Valentina Moroi, who wrote a letter to the Moldovan

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<sup>57</sup> *Днистер*, 2 сентября 1989 г. (*Dniester*, 2 September 1989) & *Дниестер*, 10 августа 2019 г. (*Dniester*, 10 August 2019).

<sup>58</sup> *Днистер*, 5 сентября 1989 г. (*Dniester*, 5 September 1989).

<sup>59</sup> Рашков КМН Молд 18 30 29 Августа 1989 г. 1500 (Rashkov KMN Mold 18 29 August 1989 1500) (telegram) & Каменка РК МОЛД 1102 38 29 Августа 1989 г. 1600 (Camenca RC MOLD 1102 38 29 August 1989 1500) ; *Днестр*, 2 сентября 1989 г. (*Dniester*, 2 September 1989).

<sup>60</sup> *Днестр*, 14 октября 1989 г., (*Dniester*, 14 October 1989).

<sup>61</sup> For example, one man told me 'because there were only six enterprises there'. Yet when I asked the director of the Dubasari museum about enterprises in the Soviet era, she proudly showed me an exhibition dedicated to them, which revealed there were a lot more than 6. Also, many of the documents or newspapers from 1989 are not available in the local archive.

<sup>62</sup> А.З. Волкова, 'Политическая Забастовка В Молдавской ССР (август-сентября 1989 г.)' в *Вестник СПбГУ*, ii (2010) стр 149. (A.Z. Volkova, 'Political Strike in the Moldovan SSR (August-September 1989)', in *Bulletin of St Petersburg State University*, ii (2010), p. 149) ; *Знамя Победы*, 29 августа - 9 сентября 1989 г. (*Victory banner*, 29 August - 9 September 1989) & Alla Skvortsova, 'The Cultural and Social Makeup of Moldova', in Pål Kolstø (ed.), *National Integration and Violent Conflict in Post-Soviet Societies The Cases of Estonia and Moldova* (Oxford, 2002), pp. 159-196 at p.183.

<sup>63</sup> информация о социально-политической ситуации в Дубэсарах, связанной с забастовками на некоторых предприятиях в августе-сентябре 1989 г., фонд 51, опись 73, Дело 125, стр. 58 ( *Information on the social - political situation in Dubasari related to the strikes in some enterprises in August-September 1989*, Fund 51, inventory 73, case 125, p. 58)

<sup>64</sup> *Знамя Победы*, 28 сентября 1989 г. (*Victory banner*, 28 September 1989); *Исполком Дубасарского районного Совета народных депутатов Протоколы заседаний районных Советов народных депутатов и документы к протоколам 1989 г.*, фонд 4, опись 1, Дело 2848, стр. 50 (*Executive Committee of Dubasari District Soviet of Peoples Deputies Protocols of sessions of District soviet people's deputies and documents to protocols 1989*, fund 4, inventory 1, case 2848 p. 50.)

version of the republican newspaper, complaining that Moldovans who did not want to participate in the strikes were threatened with dismissal. Moroi also recounted incidents when she was discriminated against and insulted by her colleagues due to her ethnicity. In one instance, she claimed her Russian speaking colleagues told her to 'speak like a human' when they overheard her using Moldovan.<sup>65</sup> The article was widely circulated in the Moldovan language press and was used by the MPF to discredit the OSTK and their platform.

Valentina's case provided Vatra with an excuse to create an anti-strike committee in Bender. Soon, the committee opened another branch in Camenca. The group comprised of representatives of twenty labour collectives from within the city and was established to 'protect the rights of workers, like Valentina, who did not wish to participate in the strikes'.<sup>66</sup> The anti-strike committee came under fierce attack from the OSTK and its supporters. The OSTK sought to delegitimise the group by publishing the names and professional backgrounds of members of the anti-strike committee and demonstrating that their movement did not represent the working class's wishes.<sup>67</sup> The OSTK's response to the group revealed its authoritarian nature. Publicly the OSTK styled themselves as defenders of democratic values and equality but were infuriated by the anti-strike committee's very existence. The OSTK pressed the executive committee to deregister the group. However, their request was refused due to 'insufficient grounds'.<sup>68</sup>

Considering the OSTK was led primarily by factory directors and managers, it is unsurprising that they viewed the anti-strike committee with such disdain, even though they posed little real threat to their movement. As industrial relation theorist Alan Fox argued, the conventional picture of the industrial firm, held by many managers and directors, is that it is a unitary system. In such a system, the employees are supposed to know their place within their workplace, follow the instructions of their leadership and strive together to towards a common objective.<sup>69</sup> The anti-strike committee refused to follow the leadership of the OSTK and, by extension, failed to strive towards the 'common goal' of forcing the Supreme Soviet to adopt two state languages.

Just outside Bender, in Varnita, the locals made their opposition to the strikes known by berating the OSTK and threatening to withhold food from the city. The situation brought grave concern to the city's deputies, who feared that clashes between the villagers and strikers were imminent. However, these fears would not materialise until the following year.<sup>70</sup>

From the above analysis, we can see that opposition to the strikes developed along ethnic lines. In the Dubăsari district, where Moldovans accounted for ninety percent of the population, and ethnic institutions were most numerous, the district authorities did not have to promote the laws, as they were supported by most of the population. Nor did they have to campaign against the strikes, as there was little support for the OSTK's 'internationalist' platform. Even in the city, which had a considerable number of Moldovans and a modest

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<sup>65</sup> *Молдова Сочилистэ*, 27 Аугуст & 15 Септемврие 1989 (*Socialist Moldova*, 27 August and 15 September 1989).

<sup>66</sup> *Победа*, 14 сентября 1989 г. (*Victory*, 14 September 1989) ; *Победа*, 19 сентября 1989 г. (*Victory*, 19 September 1989), *Решение Бендерского городского депутата*, фонд 101, опись 1, дело 819 стр. 4 и 11. (*Decision of the Bendery City Deputies*, Fund 101, Inventory 1, Storage 819 pp. 4 & 11.)

<sup>67</sup> *Решение Бендерского городского депутата*, фонд 101, опись 1, дело 819 стр. 21 (*Decision of the Bendery City Deputies*, Fund 101, Inventory 1, Storage 819 p. 21).

<sup>68</sup> *Победа*, 19 сентября 1989 г. (*Victory*, 19 September 1989).

<sup>69</sup> Richard Human, *Strikes* (New York, 1999), p. 159. Alan fox, 1966 p. 3

<sup>70</sup> *Бендерский городской Совет народных депутатов МССР*, фонд 101, опись 1. дело 818, стр. 23 (*Bendery City Council of People's Deputies of the MSSR*, fund 101, inventory 1, case 818 p. 24) ; *Победа*, 19 сентября 1989 г. (*Victory*, 19 September 1989) & *Победа*, 23 сентября 1989 г. (*Victory*, 23 September 1989).

amount of institutions, support for the strike was limited. The situation was similar in Camenca, where the local deputies explicitly noted that the OSTK won support mostly among minorities. In Varnita, too, opposition to the strikes was strong. Finally, the only major industrial city where resistance to the strikes manifested was also the only one with titular ethnic institutions- Bender. Tensions between Transnistria and Moldova would ease somewhat between late 1989 and early 1990. However, they would be reignited in April 1990, when the Supreme Soviet of the MSSR adopted a new state flag that closely resembled the Romanian tricolour.

### **The Reaction to the Adoption of the Tricolour:**

On 27 April 1990, the Supreme Soviet of the MSSR adopted 'the Law on State Symbols', which saw the old state flag, a red and green bicolour, replaced by a new tricolour that was virtually identical to the Romanian flag. It also mandated that the new state flag was to be flown outside every administrative building around the republic. The new law sparked a wave of condemnation across Moldova, as minorities from Transnistria and elsewhere labelled it a 'fascist symbol', since it had been flown by the Romanians during the Great Patriotic War. The local soviets in Tiraspol, Rîbnița, and Bender quickly passed legislation banning the flag on their territories.

Neither the language laws, nor the strikes required any public declarations from deputies. As a result, the elites from regions where Moldovans predominated were free to react to these issues as they saw fit. In Grigoriopol and Slobozia, elites mostly expressed silent support for the central authorities, while in Camenca and Dubăsari, they expressed overt support. The decision taken by the Supreme Soviet on 27 April 1990 greatly altered the situation and put these elites in a difficult position.

The new laws put the moderately pro-Moldovan authorities in Dubăsari city and Slobozia and Grigoriopol districts in a difficult position. During the dispute over the language laws, elites in these regions were not compelled to clarify their position and avoided confrontations by lending silent support to the republican authorities. Now, however, if they were to continue supporting the republican government, they would have to fly the tricolour, and risk offending locals and attracting the attention of the OSTK. However, if they did not do this, they risked infuriating that republican government. In essence, the local authorities in these polarised regions found themselves at a crossroads, forced to choose between the republican government and the OSTK. Even in Camenca, the new law presented difficulties, as many of the residents in the Transnistrian portion of the district also viewed it as a nationalist symbol.

Unlike other cities in Transnistria, the deputies of the Dubăsari city soviet did not immediately pass a law banning the tricolour from being flown in their city. In fact, they only moved to adopt such legislation under pressure from Russian speaking workers in the city. In late May 1990, workers from several enterprises wrote a highly provocative open letter to the city authorities, urging them to ban the flag that Romanians had flown when they pillaged their town and murdered countless 'women and children'.<sup>71</sup> The letter was widely supported by the city's Ukrainian and Russian population and encouraged the city's authorities to adopt legislation against the flag.<sup>72</sup> However, the decision taken by the city's authorities did not remove the tricolour completely from the city, as the flag still hung from the district's administrative buildings, which were also located in the city. The district authorities

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<sup>71</sup> *Знамя победы*, 12 мая 1990 (*Victory Banner*, 12 May 1990).

<sup>72</sup> *Знамя победы*, 12 мая 1990 (*Victory Banner*, 12 May 1990) ; *Знамя победы*, 17 мая 1990 (*Victory Banner*, 17 May 1990) & *Знамя победы*, 5 июнь 1990 (*Victory Banner*, 5 June 1990).



proclaimed their support for the tricolour and continued to display it, even after the Second Congress. This infuriated many citizens and would result in violence in November 1990.<sup>73</sup>

The elections of February 1990 brought about great challenges for the local authorities in Camenca. Prior to the elections, local politics was dominated by pro-Moldovan figures on both sides of the river, as evidenced by the authority's outcry of support for the language laws. This changed in 1990 when several pro-OSTK figures were elected from the left-bank. Alone, these deputies posed little threat to pro-Moldovan hegemony in the region. However, many of the newly elected pro-secession deputies in Rîbnița made winning support for their cause in Camenca a priority. Deputies from Rîbnița supported their counterparts in Camenca, encouraging them to organise rallies in the towns on the left-bank. The passing of the tricolour came at an opportune time for these figures and served as a symbol that could mobilise minorities.

The pro-Moldovan authorities once again used their control over mobilizational resources to their advantage. Articles challenging the OSTK's claims that the tricolour was a 'fascist symbol' appeared in *Dniester*. These articles were written by ethnic Moldovans, who explained that the tricolour was a symbol of hope and rebirth and was thereby a perfect symbol to represent *perestroika*.<sup>74</sup> As they often did in times of crisis, the authority's also claimed that tensions could lead to the district's dissolution. While the local government argued that this was something nobody wanted, it appeared as if certain portions of the left bank's population would favour such an event.

Those supportive of the OSTK capitalised on the discontent caused by the tricolour and organised demonstrations in the district's main town, which was also called Camenca and located on the left bank. At these rallies, speakers rallied against the district authorities for flying a 'fascist symbol' in their hometown. The appeals of the OSTK worked, and a few days later, locals surrounded the local soviet and demanded that the flag be removed. When their demands were not met, locals stormed the building and removed it themselves (see below).<sup>75</sup> The events of 30 May signalled a shift in the balance of power and demonstrated that the OSTK now held great influence in the Transnistrian portion of the district.



Figure 11: The Tricolour being removed from the Camenca District Soviet. Source: *Приднестровская война история в иллюстрациях* (Тирасполь, 2012) стр. 7 (*Transnistrian war history in illustrations* (Tiraspol, 2012) p. 7).

<sup>73</sup> *Знамя Победы*, 29 мая 1990 (*Victory Banner*, 29 May 1990)

<sup>74</sup> *Дниестер*, 7 июнь 1990 (*Dniester*, 7 June 1990).

<sup>75</sup> *Дниестер*, 29 & 31 мая 1990 (*Dniester*, 29 & 31 May 1990)

The adoption of the tricolour also brought unrest to Slobozia. In some respects, Slobozia was similar to Camenca as the district was spread across both banks of the river Dniester. However, a far greater portion of Slobozia's population was Russified, and its proximity to Tiraspol made it a target for the OSTK. Just as had happened in Camenca, attitudes towards the tricolour were divided along ethnic and regional lines. The district's executive committee, which was made up mostly of Bessarabian Moldovans, supported the republican authorities and the tricolour. On the other hand, the People's Deputies from the district Soviet, the majority of whom were Russian speakers, supported the OSTK. Both the executive committee and People's Deputies tried to use the local press to undermine the other and win support for their position. The executive committee concluded that the tricolour was acceptable as it was not the same flag as Romanians. On the contrary, the colours were a different shade, with the red being the same shade as the Soviet flag.<sup>76</sup> They also cautioned against listening to the 'poorly thought out' declarations of the OSTK and the district's People's Deputies. In contrast, the People's Deputies recycled the OSTK's narrative.<sup>77</sup>

The issue came to a head in mid-May, when protesters surrounded the building of the executive committee and demanded that the tricolour be removed and replaced with the Soviet flag. Similar to Camenca, their demand was refused, and protestors stormed the building, forcefully removing the flag in the process. The incident was condemned by the executive committee and members of the rural intelligentsia, with the region's deputy prosecutor opening a case against those involved.<sup>78</sup> The protestors actions were commended by the OSTK, and the People's Deputies in both Slobozia and Tiraspol. Just as had happened in Camenca, some began to see ethnic and regional dimensions to the struggle. In explaining why protestors felt compelled to storm the building, one commentator from Tiraspol claimed that the executive committee was out of touch with the local population because they 'came from the right bank'.<sup>79</sup> While not explicitly stating as much, it is clear that some saw the dispute in ethnic terms, with Bessarabian Moldovans allegedly supporting the centre's discriminatory policies.

Deputies from Grigoriopol also found themselves in a difficult position. Some of the region's largest communes, such as Malesti and Butor, were basically ethnically homogenous, with Moldovans accounting for upwards of ninety-nine percent of the population in some villages.<sup>80</sup> In these areas, the national revival, was supported by deputies and locals alike. On the contrary, in the Grigoriopol's town centre, the local population tended to oppose the national revival. While many of the local deputies were supportive of the central authorities, they thought it best to take preventive measures to avoid ethnic tensions and passed a law banning the tricolour. Nevertheless, more clashes occurred in Grigoriopol than in any other region over the tricolour during this period. The district authority's decision to ban the tricolour was not popular with Moldovans in the region's homogenous communes. As a result, deputies from six communes continued to fly the tricolour outside the village soviet right up until mid-1991.<sup>81</sup> This resulted in the tricolour being removed from various buildings on multiple

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<sup>76</sup> *Сельская новь*, 12 мая 1990 (*Country Nov*, 12 May 1990).

<sup>77</sup> *Сельская новь*, 15 & 19 мая 1990 (*Country Nov*, 15 & 19 May 1990).

<sup>78</sup> *Сельская новь*, 19 мая 1990 (*Country Nov*, 19 May 1990).

<sup>79</sup> *Днестровская правда*, 19 мая 1990 г. (*Dniester Truth*, 19 May 1990) & *Днестровская правда*, 23 мая 1990 г. (*Dniester Truth*, 23 May 1990).

<sup>80</sup> *Moldova suverană*, 31 august 1991 (*Sovereign Moldova*, 31 August 1991).

<sup>81</sup> *Днестровская правда*, 6 мая 1991 г. (*Dniester Truth*, 6 May 1991)

occasions. However, those removing the flag were not locals, but Russian speakers who had travelled from the town centre or even Tiraspol. This often led to tense standoffs between villagers and these ‘outsiders’ who had come to remove ‘their’ flag, further increasing interethnic tensions.<sup>82</sup>

Following the elections of 1990, Pologov and his supporters ostracised Vatra and effectively made them a defunct organisation. This meant that the only opposition left from within the industrial cities was the TPI’s staff and students. After the adoption of the language laws and the harsh backlash they received from the local population, the staff, and students from the TPI had formed a local branch of the Popular Front. While the city authorities were organising Victory Day celebrations and using them to push their anti-Moldovan agenda, the Tiraspol branch of the MPF decided to organise their own counter protest. During one rally, staff and students from the TPI descended upon constitution square in the centre of Tiraspol, waving their tricolours and professing their support for Moldova and its ‘impending’ union with Romania.<sup>83</sup> Aside from the TPI, the only people to fly the tricolour inside the industrial cities were the various branches of law enforcement and the judiciary that remained loyal to the republican authorities.

For local elites in Transnistria's rural regions, the tricolour proved to be the most divisive issue thus far. Supporting the republican authorities required them to display a symbol, that many believed represented fascism, publicly. The tricolour's adoption also polarised all these local governments and led to divisions emerging along ethnic and regional lines. The flag's adoption fragmented the region and set clear divisions going forward- with those who opposed the flag firmly supporting the OSTK and secession and those who supported it supporting the republic's territorial integrity. The dispute over the tricolour greatly exacerbated tensions between Moldova and Transnistria and encouraged more districts to organise referendums on Transnistrian autonomy. However, the divisions forged in the spring of 1990 remained, as those who supported the tricolour refused to organise referendums.

### **Referendums and Separatist Elections:**

Between late 1989 and early 1990, the local authorities in Transnistria organised referendums on autonomy, which were organised in a decentralised manner. This saw local authorities organise referendums at different times. While many regions did participate of their own free will, some chose not to. Virtually all the districts and villages that supported the tricolour refused to organise referendums on their territories. How they prevented their organisation varied. In some cases, the local authorities passed legislation that made it illegal to open polling stations in their districts, while in other cases, the local authorities refused to comply and obstructed those who attempted to do so by locking buildings and withholding ballot papers. Whatever the method, the pro-separatist authorities took non-compliance as a threat to their hegemony and sought to undermine local elites by setting up polling stations nearby that residents could use.

When Bender city authorities declared they would organise a referendum on autonomy on the 1 July 1990, deputies from Varnita quickly passed a motion forbidding the opening of any polling station in their village. In response, the city authorities opened a polling station in the city specifically for villagers. The republican press also challenged the local authority’s official turnout figures, arguing that they were inflated. One journalist claimed that most of the city’s Moldovans had boycotted the ‘farcical referendum’ and that the actual voter turnout

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<sup>82</sup> Дружба, 19 мая 1990 (*Friendship*, 19 May 1990).

<sup>83</sup> Днестровская правда, 11 мая 1990 г. (*Dniester Truth*, 11 May 1990).

was closer to sixty-percent.<sup>84</sup> A few weeks after the vote in Bender, the authorities in Camenca also passed a motion making it illegal to organise any referendum on their territory.<sup>85</sup> Understanding the difficulties they faced in Camenca, the OSTK decided not to hold a referendum and would simply incorporate the Transnistrian portion of the district when the time came.

In Grigoriopol, the district soviet's decision to organise a referendum received a mixed reaction. Initially, six communes that had insisted on flying the tricolour also refused to organise a referendum.<sup>86</sup> When voting was taking place, some deputies were accused of obstructing the voting process by failing to distribute ballot papers or locking buildings where polling stations were located, and leaving Transnistria. Polling stations were opened in neighbouring villages for those who wished to attend, but the turnout was chronically low. A few weeks later, the separatists forcefully organised referendums in these six villages. However, once again, turnout was dismal, and no commune saw more than a forty percent turnout.<sup>87</sup> The low turnout is particularly important, as it demonstrates that even under duress, many villagers were unwilling to participate in these referendums. This undermines the claim that only elites opposed secession, as the separatists often claim, and proves that even many villagers viewed the Transnistrian 'state' as illegitimate.

The most significant opposition to the referendums came from the Dubăsari district. Until this point, the city and district authorities managed to work together on several critical issues. Most importantly, both contributed and moderated the local newspaper, *Victory Banner*. In general, this had prevented it from becoming too bias in favour of either the OSTK or the republican authorities. However, the city's decision to organise a referendum on 10 August 1990 was a step too far for the district authorities, who promptly severed relations with their counterparts in the city, and took control of the local newspaper.

The district authorities used the local press to appeal to citizens not to participate in the 'anti-constitutional referendum'.<sup>88</sup> Most citizens heeded their warnings, and voting was only organised in two villages, Lunga and Dzerjinscoe, both of which are currently under the administration of the separatist authorities. Anti-secession elites also used *Victory Banner* to discredit the voting process by sending journalists the polling stations and reporting irregularities. At these centres, journalists claimed to have witnessed numerous examples of ballot-box stuffing. One journalist also claimed to have witnessed officials distributing multiple ballots to voters and encouraging them to vote for absentee family members because they 'knew how they would vote'.<sup>89</sup> The city authorities disregarded these accusations, and claimed that the referendum had been a great success, particularly among Moldovans, many of whom, they alleged, had travelled from the district to participate.<sup>90</sup> Later, however, the city authorities would attempt to fool the inhabitants of the district into participating in a 'referendum', by distributing a questionnaire asking locals if they supported Moldova's territorial integrity. Knowing the overwhelming majority would answer yes, the district

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<sup>84</sup> *Moldova Socialistă*, 21 iunie & 3 iulie 1990 (*Socialist Moldova*, 21 June & 3 July 1990).

<sup>85</sup> Бомешко, Б.Г., *Создание, Становление и защита приднестровской государственности* (Бендеры, 2010), стр. 84-85. (B.G. Bomeshko, *Creation, Formation and Protection of Transnistrian Statehood 1990-1992*, (Bendery, 2010) pp.84-85.

<sup>86</sup> *Дружба*, 13 сентября 1990 г. (*Friendship*, 13 September 1990).

<sup>87</sup> *Дружба*, 25 сентября 1990 г. (*Friendship*, 25 September 1990).

<sup>88</sup> *Знамя Победы*, 11 августа 1990 г. (*Victory Banner*, 11 August 1990).

<sup>89</sup> *Знамя Победы*, 11 августа 1990 г. (*Banner of Victory*, 11 August 1990).

<sup>90</sup> *Днестровская правда*, 11 августа 1990 г. (*Dniester Truth*, 14 August 1990).

authorities alleged that the separatists intended to doctor the questionnaire and use it to demonstrate that locals supported secession.<sup>91</sup>

As secession began to appear more likely, we can see a division along regional and ethnic lines. All across Transnistria, from the industrial city of Bender to the villages of Grigoriopol, Moldovans boycotted the referendums. These boycotts were most successful in the rural regions, such as the Dubăsari District and the villages of Varnita, and Butor for a number of reasons. Firstly, the inhabitants of these regions felt a strong sense of ethnic identity and an attachment to their parent state, and years of living in ethnically heterogeneous villages meant that most identified more with Moldova rather than some arbitrary Transnistria whose ideology was based on internationalism and the (unspecified) pre-eminence of the Russian language.

Secondly, most local elites were ethnic Moldovans who believed that they would be rewarded in a nationalising Moldovan state. Many expected that failure to comply with the laws would result in dismissal and open up opportunities for ethnic Moldovans, who had long since been overlooked in Transnistria. Moreover, anyone that could read between the lines was aware that Transnistrian secession was driven by monolingual Russophones that wanted to preserve their privileged position. Most recognised that aligning themselves with the separatists would bring little reward, especially in a region where ethnically based dismissals were not unheard of.<sup>92</sup> With this in mind, most were willing to obstruct the organisation of referendums on their territories. While these regions may have refused to participate in the voting, the elites in Tiraspol still proclaimed them part of the TMSSR. This caused a great deal of concern amongst these rural titular elites and encouraged them to be even more open about their objection to Transnistrian secession.

### **Reaction to the Second Congress:**

At the Second Congress of People's Deputies, the MPF and their local supporters were presented as fifth columnists, who would attempt to destabilise the new republic. However, Smirnov also targeted the moderate pro-Moldovan factions, and turned his attention to the districts where the citizens and authorities had pro-Moldovan sympathies. In the weeks after the Second Congress, Smirnov began systematically removing those who opposed him from power. In late September, he travelled to Grigoriopol to attend a session of the district Soviet. At the meeting, he chastised the Grigoriopol's First Secretary, Petru Poian, for failing to organise a referendum before the Second Congress and allowing six communes not to participate. He alleged that Poian, an ethnic Moldovan, had pro-Moldovan sympathies and demanded his resignation. Smirnov's actions were met with discontent and around 200 students gathered outside the local Soviet chanting 'down with Smirnov'.<sup>93</sup> In addition to this, there were also reports that deputies from Slobozia and elsewhere in Grigoriopol were being dismissed based on their ethnicity.<sup>94</sup>

At the Second Congress, deputies had only claimed control over the Transnistrian portion of the Camenca district. From their perspective, this was a pragmatic approach. As one journalist noted in the immediate aftermath of the Second Congress, 'if the majority of the inhabitants on the left-bank of Camenca supported autonomy, then the majority of those on

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<sup>91</sup> *Знамя Победы*, 3 ноябрь 1990 г. (*Victory Banner*, 3 November 1990).

<sup>92</sup> *Документы (справки, информации, списки) об общественно-политической обстановке в республике за 1989*, фонд 51, опись 73, дело 125 стр. 4-5 (*Documents (notes, reported, lists on social-political situation in the republic for 1989*, Fund 51, inventory 73, case 125, page 4-5, “

<sup>93</sup> *Moldova suverană*, 27 septembrie 1990 (*Sovereign Moldova*, 27 September 1990).

<sup>94</sup> *Знамя Победы*, 20 октября 1990 г. (*Victory Banner*, 20 October 1990)

the right opposed it'. With the district highly polarised, the separatists understood it would be a waste of time and resources to attempt to enforce their hegemony over both banks. Following the Second Congress, those in Tiraspol urged pro-secession deputies in Camenca to seize power on the left-bank.<sup>95</sup> In the months that followed, deputies from both banks met and agreed to formally dissolve the district in 1991.<sup>96</sup> However, not everyone was pleased with their district's inclusion in the new republic. Moldovans from the left-bank wrote to *Dniester* to protest their separation from their 'motherland', with one letter being signed by 600 students and teachers.<sup>97</sup>

With Poian removed from power in Grigoriopol and the left-bank of Camenca secured, there were only two regions that Smirnov viewed as a threat, Varnita and the Dubăsari district. The village authorities in Varnita refused to acknowledge Transnistria's sovereignty over their territory.<sup>98</sup> While this frustrated Smirnov, the village was not of any serious strategic importance, and he made no effort to crush local dissent until the hot phase of the conflict. The Dubăsari District, on the other hand, was another issue entirely. Situated in the centre of Transnistria, the region was strategically valuable, and failure to capture the region would result in the republic being split in two. Unfortunately for Smirnov, though, neither the political elites nor the local population wanted to be part of the TMSSR.

Two days after the Second Congress, roughly a thousand Moldovans gathered in the village of Lunga to protest the creation of the TMSSR. While the rally was attended by local political elites and collective farm chiefs, it was largely led by villagers who called for the separatists' arrest and the district's detachment from the city.<sup>99</sup> Some pro-separatist deputies, the few that there were, tried to speak at the rally. However, their attempts to speak incited a hostile reaction from the crowd.<sup>100</sup> During the days that followed, two key anti-secession figures emerged in the district, Ion Mitchul, the First Secretary of the Dubăsari District Party, and Sergey Popa, the Chairman of the Presidium of the District Soviet.

Both Mitchul and Popa worked hard to attract the attention of the central authorities and undermine the separatists. In doing so, they became immensely popular with Moldovans from the district. They organised numerous rallies in both the city and the district during the first weeks of September, where they called the declaration of independence an act of aggression and called on people to ignore the separatists. Both Mitchul and Popa maintained that they were neither pro-Romanian nor Moldovan nationalists and argued that they simply respected their republic's territorial integrity. However, despite their best efforts, ethnic divisions quickly began to emerge. At a rally organised in the city, Popa initially addressed the crowd in Russian, to which they responded by insisting he address them in Moldovan.<sup>101</sup>

Local opposition to the separatists was the least of Smirnov's worries. He and the separatists in Tiraspol were far more concerned with the destabilising influence the district might have on the wider region, and their concerns were not misplaced. The Dubăsari district quickly developed into an anti-secession hub, with opponents from all over Transnistria visiting the region. On 8 September 1990, 500 deputies from across the newly created TMSSR met in Dubăsari. All those who attended opposed Transnistrian secession. Representatives from Tiraspol issued a joint decree stating that the creation of the TMSSR was an 'insult to the

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<sup>95</sup> *Днестр*, 8 & 15 сентября 1990 г. (*Dniester*, 8 & 15 September 1990).

<sup>96</sup> *Днестр*, 12 сентября 1991 г. (*Dniester*, 12 September 1991).

<sup>97</sup> *Днестр*, 8 & 15 сентября 1990 г. (*Dniester*, 8 & 15 September 1990).

<sup>98</sup> *Новое время*, 28 ноября 1991 г. (*New Time*, 28 November 1991).

<sup>99</sup> *Знамя Победы*, 15 сентября 1990 г. (*Victory Banner*, 15 September 1990).

<sup>100</sup> *Moldova suverană*, 4 septembrie 1990 (*Sovereign Moldova*, 4 September 1990)

<sup>101</sup> *Знамя Победы*, 13 сентября 1990 г. (*Victory Banner*, 13 September 1990).

Moldovan people', while representatives from Bender, Slobozia, and Grigoriopol jointly called for the organisation of a Grand National Assembly in Dubăsari.<sup>102</sup>

Perhaps even more concerning, those in attendance created their own parallel government called 'The People's Deputies of Transnistria'. This group, which was chaired by Mitchul, comprised representatives from Transnistria that rejected the region's independence and recognised Moldova's sovereignty over the region. To further delegitimise the separatists, the group was renamed 'the Committee for the Coordination of Social, Political and Economic Activity in the Regions on the Left Bank', to counter the separatists claims that Transnistria was a unique region with its own identity.<sup>103</sup>

On 16 September, the Grand National Assembly was organised by the Transnistrian opposition in the village of Lunga. Moldovans from all over the newly proclaimed republic attended the convention, including 300 from Bender alone. The rally was attended by many prominent political figures, including President Snegur and Prime Minister Druc, with the latter visiting numerous villages in the Dubăsari district and meeting with locals.<sup>104</sup> In their speeches, the representatives from the republican government took a more balanced approach, asking everyone in the region to remain calm. However, the representatives from Transnistria made some nationalistic proclamations. Some speakers claimed that Transnistria had been 'subject to colonisation' by Russian speakers, while others claimed that Russification was accelerating in the industrial cities and surrounding areas, as the separatists were 'liquidating the Moldovan media'.<sup>105</sup>

The Dubăsari District was quickly becoming a problem for Smirnov and his colleagues, becoming a safe haven for oppositionists and attracting the attention of the republican authorities. If the issue were not quickly resolved, it could be used against the separatists and potentially destabilise their fledgling republic. Between 1989-1990, the OSTK was able to manage interethnic relations with ease, by virtue of the fact that almost everyone in the cities, regardless of their ethnicity, spoke Russian. Even in many of the surrounding region's, the population was either significantly Russified, or there were enough minorities to ensure popular support for the OSTK and its anti-nationalist platform. However, in the Dubăsari district, locals were neither Russified, nor wanted to join the separatists. This meant that popular support was not forthcoming, and that backroom manipulation and coercion were unlikely to work. If the separatist were to curtail dissent and capture the region, then they would need to do it by force. As the next chapter will demonstrate, their decision to do just that would lead to war between the central authorities and the separatists.

### **Conclusion:**

This chapter challenged the long-held assumption that there was no pro-Moldovan opposition in Transnistria. A misconception that has been perpetuated in scholarship since the 1990s. When explaining how and why opposition manifested itself in certain regions and not others, this chapter argued that mass opposition was contingent on three factors: (1) the percentage of Moldovans living in a given area, (2) how strongly they identified with their ethnic kin and parent state, (3) and the attitudes of local elites towards secession. I argued that if Moldovans accounted for more than fifty percent of the local population and felt a strong sense of ethnic identity, then they were likely to oppose Transnistrian secession. This opposition would be supported by elites who believed that they would benefit more from remaining in the parent

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<sup>102</sup> *Знамя Победы*, 15 сентября 1990 г. (*Victory Banner*, 15 September 1990).

<sup>103</sup> *Знамя Победы*, 15 сентября 1990 г. (*Victory Banner*, 15 September 1990).

<sup>104</sup> *Знамя Победы*, 15 & 18 сентября 1990 г. (*Victory Banner*, 15 & 18 September 1990).

<sup>105</sup> *Moldova suverană*, 19 septembrie 1990 (*Sovereign Moldova*, 19 September 1990).

state than separating from it. I concluded that if all these factors were in place, we would see opposition to the separatists. This opposition would include protests in support of the parent state's territorial integrity, support for its policies, and non-compliance with the separatists. These findings were applied to Transnistria with great success and could likely be applied to other de-facto regions where parent state titulars predominate, such as the Gali region in Abkhazia.

Moldovan opposition was most prevalent in the Dubăsari district. The Dubăsari district was the most ethnically homogenous region in Transnistria, with Moldovans accounting for eighty nine percent of the population. The territory's rural nature discouraged mass migration to the region, which ultimately allowed ethnic institutions to flourish. The Dubăsari district had the highest number of Moldovan language schools in Transnistria, and it was one of the few districts in Transnistria where groups were established to protect the interests of the 'indigenous population'. The local elite were also primarily ethnic Moldovans, who came from professional backgrounds that were traditionally sympathetic to nationalism. Given the presence of all these factors, it is unsurprising that the Dubăsari district was the site of the fiercest opposition to the separatists, adhering to the language laws, flying the tricolour, refusing to participate in referendums, and organising rallies decrying the Second Congress.

Initially, the Camenca district also opposed the session. Regional deputies campaigned for the laws and against the strikes, supported the Tricolour, and came from backgrounds that would typically support nationalism. However, they were in a difficult position, as the region was divided between both banks of the river Dniester. In the district as a whole, Moldovans accounted for sixty percent of the population. However, in the Transnistrian portion, they were outnumbered by Russians and Ukrainians, who collectively made up forty nine percent of the population. In addition to this, more Moldovans from the Transnistrian portion of the district were Russified than the Bessarabian side. On the left bank, both Russified Moldovans and minorities supported the OSTK's position, which eventually allowed the separatists to take control of the region after September 1990.

In Slobozia and Grigoriopol, opinions were deeply divided on the issue of the national revival. In Slobozia, there was a political divide between the People's Deputies and the executive committee, with the Tiraspol press claiming that the latter was made up of Bessarabian Moldovan. This discrepancy limited pro-Moldovan opposition, but it is worth noting that it was only the villages with Slavic majorities and close links to the industrial cities that organised referendums. In Grigoriopol, the district's authorities initially opposed the OSTK but began to support their position in the aftermath of the 1990 elections. In an effort to limit ethnic tensions, the local authorities banned the tricolour. However, this was not respected by six communes, all of which were almost entirely Moldovan. These communes also refused to freely participate in the referendum, and voting was only conducted under duress some weeks later.

The absence of Moldovan language cultural institutions in the industrial cities of Transnistria proved detrimental to the acceptance of the national revival project there. In both Tiraspol and Bender, any resistance was confined to academic quarters, where intellectuals and migrant students supported the cause. Moreover, these groups tended to support a pro-Romanian position, which further isolated them from the population. For the rest of the cities' Moldovan population, there was a lack of native language schooling, Moldovan periodicals, or Moldovan cultural clubs. Furthermore, the cities were overwhelmingly Russian speaking, which led most to closely identify the OSTK and their internationalist values. Significant opposition did manifest itself in Varnita. However, the conditions here were more similar to the Dubăsari district than Bender.



In summation, there was significant social opposition to Transnistrian separatism between 1989-1990. Despite most scholars denying that this was an ethnic conflict, opposition manifested itself along ethnic lines. Those regions that were mostly ethnically homogenous (Dubăsari, Butor, Varnita) put up the stiffest resistance to the separatists during the de-facto states formative years. Ethnic institutions created conditions that encouraged mobilisation against the separatists. Although they usually played only a formal role, they were critical in determining titulars' identities and incentive structures.<sup>106</sup> Finally, those who resisted separatism tended to come from the following groups: rural titulars, members of the rural and urban intelligentsia, and regional functionaries who stood to gain from the governments nationalising policies.

So far, this thesis has focused on the social mobilisation that occurred in the region between 1989 and 1990. It has shown that while the majority of citizens supported the separatists, there were many, particularly in the rural regions, that opposed it. In the next chapter, this thesis will shift its focus to the 'hot phase' of the conflict. However, unlike much of the scholarship on this topic, it will not focus solely on Russian intervention. Instead, it will detail how the separatists sought to suppress the dissent in these rural regions through force, by using their own militias, Cossacks, and eventually the Soviet Fourteenth Army. It will demonstrate how many of the skirmishes that occurred between the separatists and Moldovan police forces between late 1990 happened in and around the villages discussed in this chapter. Finally, it will show how the Transnistrians securitised Moldovans, and passed legislation aimed at curtailing dissent.

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<sup>106</sup> Dmitry P. Gorenburg, *Minority Ethnic Mobilization in the Russian Federation*, (New York, 2003), p 265.