Resistance to schooling and nation-building in the Soviet and Romanian borderlands during the interwar period (1918-1940): The cases of Bessarabia and Transnistria

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Summary

Recent scholarship has studied the “indifference” of local people to elite-driven nation-building projects in Central and Eastern Europe in the 19th and early 20th centuries (Bjork, 2008; Judson, 2006; King, 2002; Zahra, 2008). This paper expands this theoretical approach by examining the local responses to the state-sponsored nation-building projects through passive and overt resistance to mass public education in two neighbouring border areas: Romanian Bessarabia and Soviet Transnistria, during the period 1918-1940. Both Romania and the USSR were *modern mobilizational states* (Khalid, 2006) aimed at radically transforming the local populations. Romania implemented mass schooling to instil a common ethnonational identity and to assimilate ethnic minorities, while the USSR adopted a flexible nationality policy, while determinedly imposing compulsory education for all children. Resistance to schooling has taken passive and active forms and expressions in the rural settings in both regions, from truancy and drop-out to various manifestations of violence against teachers and school agents. In the areas of Romania where assimilation policies were implemented through schooling, negative attitudes towards schools have also had an ethnic component. In Soviet Transnistria, middle-level officials, teachers, and some local communities opposed nationalization and indigenization policies through schooling. Based on the preliminary research on Bessarabian and

Transnistrian cases, we find that in areas where the degree of coercion in schooling was higher, as was the case in Transnistria (especially, during the late 1920s), resistance to schooling and other state interventions was all the more acute. The compliance with and resistance to schooling varied in the two studied cases depending on the ethnolinguistic group, the rural or urban setting and the national and educational policies applied by the two states in these border areas. In the tense relationship between rural communities and state authorities, teachers often assumed the difficult position of mediators (see Ewing, 2002).

Sociological theories of resistance to school education, since the 1970s, refer more to the opposition applied by students, especially older students, from disadvantaged social and cultural backgrounds to schooling (Giroux, 1983; Abowitz, 2000). In these cases, the rural communities as a whole apply collective strategies of resistance to schooling, in space and period when formal schooling was still underdeveloped. The expression and intensity of manifestations of resistance to schooling depend very much on the general relationship between the school, represented by teachers and the school administration and the local community. Some manifestations of the opposition have an episodic character, being caused by certain dissatisfactions related to certain schooling conditions, such as the fines applied by teachers for truancy or the application of corporal punishment. Other manifestations of opposition are, however, systemic in nature, expressing a general rejection of formal education. Resistance to schooling and nation-building through schooling diminished during the 1930s as a *modus vivendi* was established between the rural population and state authorities, with mutual compromises. As a result of this unequal balance of power, the rural population adopted a *pedagogical ethos* (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1971) by gradually recognizing the school as an institution within the local community.

Keywords: primary education; Romania; USSR; nation-building; resistance to schooling.

Introduction

This paper examines the local responses to schooling in rural areas in two neighbouring regions, Bessarabia and Transnistria, in the interwar period (1918-1940), under the Romanian and Soviet administrations, after the separation of these regions from the Tsarist Empire. The two countries were considered ideologically antagonistic in that period. Bessarabia, a former Russian *guberniia*, became a Romanian province in 1918. The Soviet authorities created the *Moldovan Soviet Socialist Autonomous Republic* (MASSR) on the territory of Transnistria region, inherited from the Tsarist Empire. Yet the schooling and national policies implemented by the two states were similar in many aspects. In these two border areas, the establishment and expansion of mass public education were central components of a wider project of nation and state-building, as in other parts of the modern world or those undergoing modernization (Gellner, 1964, 1983; Weber, 1976; Heathorn, 2000; Green, 2013). The population of Bessarabia was subject, with other provinces annexed in 1918, to ambitious schooling policies to facilitate the rapid integration of the province into the Romanian state and assimilation of ethnic minorities into the titular nation. In Soviet Transnistria, during the interwar period, schooling was part of a more complex nationality policy aiming at creating national republics and non-territorial ethnic minorities, within the unitary Soviet state (Martin, 2001). Both in Bessarabia and Transnistria, the implementation of mass schooling faced many difficulties and encountered different forms and degrees of resistance from the local population.

This paper discusses a series of common features concerning schooling and nation-building processes in the two regions (Bessarabia and Transnistria), located on the border of two neighbouring states – Romania and the USSR. The comparison of these cases is all the more interesting as the local populations in the two regions were socially and ethnically similar before 1918, both regions being predominantly rural and inhabited by ethnic Moldovans (Romanians), Ukrainians and other ethnic groups. The structural similarity of the populations in the two regions also highlights several notable

differences as regards the nation-building and educational policies applied by the two states. Romania (like other European nation-states) adopted a nationalizing strategy consisting of the linguistic assimilation of ethnic minorities (Brubaker, 1996). Conversely, the USSR embraced an “affirmative action” strategy consisting of promoting titular and minority ethnic groups (Martin, 2001). The working hypothesis of this comparative study is that the compliance with and resistance to schooling varied in the two cases depending on the ethnolinguistic group, the rural or urban setting and the national and educational policies applied by the two states in these border areas.

Eager to overcome the condition of economic and cultural backwardness to the more developed Western states, both the Soviet Union and Romania adopted in the interwar period extensive modernization projects. These projects were accompanied by a civilizing discourse that established categories and degrees of development and backwardness with a certain level considered as a reference (usually the average urban dweller, male, of majority ethnicity). Based on this modernizing discourse, advanced rurality, certain ethnic categories and low literacy were considered manifestations of “backwardness” that were to be addressed or eradicated (about the trope of backwardness in civilizing discourse in the USSR and Eastern Europe, see Martin, 2001; Brown, 2013; Khalid, 2006; Hahn, 2015). Both regions studied in this paper were considered backward to others and to that ideal-typical level, due to the dominant rurality and the low level of literacy, especially among the “titular” nationality. Also, the trope of backwardness was used by “modern mobilizing states” to stigmatize popular manifestations of resistance to modernizing actions (see Brown, 2003; Khalid, 2007).

This paper focuses on rural areas. This limitation is motivated by specific dynamics of the process of establishing general public education observed in rural areas where the literacy rate and the schooling rate were much lower than in cities (Enciu, 2002). Under modernization and “mobilizing” ambitions of the two states, the level of coercion of authorities and intensity of the population’s response to this

project was more intense and more violent in villages than in cities where the school had been an established institution for nearly half a century.

For the reasons mentioned above, the institutionalisation of the public school in rural communities and the transformation of subjects into citizens were part of a troublesome nation-state building process. During this process, the attitudes and strategies of the population towards the school underwent many changes. From complete refusal to unreserved recognition, there was a wide range of accommodation tactics and negotiation strategies, from bottom to top but also from top to bottom. The balance of power between the state institutions and the local population was unequal. Both the Soviet and Romanian administrations made use of physical force against the civilian population. Sometimes the state entered into a fierce conflict with the local population, for instance in the context of popular uprisings in Bessarabia in the ethnically mixed areas in Hotin (1919) and Tatar-Bunar (1924) (Rotari, 2004; Basciani, 2005), or the Soviet Union, including Ukraine and Transnistria, during the collectivization campaign and the so-called "cultural revolution," in 1929-1933 (Viola, 1996; Graziosi, 1996; Fitzpatrick, 1978). The process of imposition and recognition of mass public education was an element that the authorities considered to be central for nation-building and state expansion (see Green, 2013). Yet the USSR imposed compulsory schooling in Transnistria in a more determined way and more successfully than Romania in Bessarabia, during the same period. This can be explained by the Soviet Union's stronger ambition to consolidate state structures in this peripheral region, in the event of an expansion to the west. At the same time, Romania applied a weaker and more oscillating schooling and state-building policy in Bessarabia, perhaps because the integration of this border area was seen as challenging by authorities, due to its ethnic heterogeneity and the expansionist claims of the USSR (Basciani, 2005). In both cases, the resistance of the population to mass schooling and nation-building policies increased when state interventions were more intense.

Resistance to schooling and nation-building: a theoretical framework

Studies of nationalism have privileged the perspective of elites and the state, paradoxically neglecting the involvement of the masses and ordinary people, although their role has been recognized as decisive (Fox & Miller-Idriss, 2008). Recent approaches to the study of nationalism, inspired by the works of Rogers Brubaker and Michael Billig, have sought to fill this gap by proposing to study nation-building projects from the perspective of ordinary people in the everyday dimension (see Knott, 2019 for an analysis of the literature on "everyday nationalism").

Fox and Miller-Idriss (2008) identified four situations in which nationhood is produced and reproduced in ordinary people's daily life: 1) 'talking the nation' refers to how the nation is defined through routine talk in interaction; 2) 'choosing the nation' shows how nationhood determines the decisions people make in their everyday life; 3) 'performing the nation' refers to the production and staging of the symbols of a nation; 4) 'consuming the nation' considers the daily consumption of national symbols. However, Fox and Miller-Idriss do not speak about forms of disengagement from national projects through attitudes of indifference to or contestation of the nationhood and the patterns of belonging, speaking and behaving inculcated through the "agencies of loyalization" such as the public school (Haslinger & v. Puttkamer, 2008; Osterkamp & Wessel, 2016).

Tara Zahra and other authors have studied, on the example of border areas in the (former) Habsburg Empire, the lack of lasting forms of attachment by large sections of the population to certain national mobilization projects (Zahra 2008, 2010; see also King, 2002; Judson, 2006; Ginderachter & Fox, 2019). Zahra defines the "national indifference" as a form of agency translated by ordinary people into concrete actions, such as giving children to schools and families of other language groups, for pragmatic reasons and despite exhortations for ethnic segregation on behalf of national activists. Some theoretical and methodological limitations of this approach were also discussed. As Zahra suggests, it is not clear whether and to what extent "national indifference" can be defined as a manifestation of

agency: can the absence of action (here national actions) be understood as a manifestation of agency? Continuing the approach of Tara Zahra and other authors, we propose to tackle other more or less active forms of resistance to schooling and nation-building, both by ethnolinguistic minorities and representatives of "titular" ethnic groups. We, therefore, consider various tactics to counter the nationalizing interventions of the states and their "agencies of loyalization." (Haslinger & v. Puttkamer, 2008; Osterkamp & Wessel, 2016). Nationalisms and other forms of collective identification have to do with inequality, oppression, frustration and feelings of injustice felt by various people with state power and dominant groups (Jones & Merriman, 2009). Everyday life offers multiple ways for ordinary people to counter nationalizing projects promoted by states, from ignorance to active opposition, passing through various tactics of accommodation and "secondary adjustment" (Goffman, 1961; Scott, 1985; Brubaker, 2004; Brubaker et al., 2006; Zahra, 2008; Jones & Merriman, 2009).

This paper examines the popular responses to schooling and nation-building. Most manifestations are defined here as forms of resistance, passive or active, to schooling and nationalization. Just as Zahra defines "national indifference" as a manifestation of agency by the local population towards nationalization policies, so too the reluctance of a significant part of the rural population in Bessarabia and Transnistria to respond positively to schooling policies can be interpreted as a manifestation of agency and an expression of defence of individual and group interests. At least in the cases studied here, these manifestations are rather defined as forms of resistance, passive or active, to schooling and nationalization. As the public school was the institution that implemented the nationalization agenda with the greatest force of coercion and persuasion, resistance to nationalization manifested itself simultaneously with resistance to schooling, although one did not necessarily reduce to the other.

Both reproduction theories and resistance theories define the school education process as an institutionalized relationship of domination. From the perspective of reproduction theory, the school

is seen as an institution that seeks the internalization and reproduction by students of the dominant ideology and the balance of power in society in favour of the dominant classes (Baudelot and Establet, 1971; Giroux, 1983). In this way, the school is an institution that exercises *symbolic violence* (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1971). According to the authors of the theories of resistance to schooling, studies based on reproduction theories have overstated the idea of domination and diminished the agency and room for manoeuvre by the actors involved in schooling: pedagogues, students, and their parents (Giroux, 1983). Researchers distinguish two main forms of opposition and resistance to schooling, manifested by symbolic expression (clothing style, language codes, and verbal disobedience) or by open action (overt disagreement, truancy, physical disobedience, and school dropout) (Abowitz, 2000). Some acts of resistance are local, episodic, and not systemic. Most of the time, the acts of resistance operated by students within the school at the same time defy and confirm hegemony (Giroux, 1983). In these cases, through their behaviour, students challenge the hegemony of the school without questioning the legitimacy of the school as an institution (Allen, 2013; Bourassa, 2012). Yet this form of opposition can lead to the transformation of the power relationship (Abowitz, 2000). According to research, the working classes and other marginalized groups resist the norms and authority of the school which is perceived to contradict their group interests (Giroux, 1983; Abowitz, 2000). From an anthropological perspective, resistance is a response to oppression, sustained and mediated over time. These areas of collision (and 'contact zones') give rise to various forms of cultural fusion, interculturality, hybridity and acculturation (Pratt, 1991; Abowitz, 2000).

Sociological theories of resistance to school education refer more to the opposition applied by students to schooling, especially older students from disadvantaged social and cultural backgrounds (Giroux, 1983; Abowitz, 2000). In our cases, the rural communities as a whole apply strategies of collective resistance to schooling, in space and period when formal schooling was still underdeveloped. These strategies of resistance, developed primarily by parents and some local leaders cover a range of actions

such as collective school absenteeism or petitioning the authorities. In some cases, opposition to the school may take the form of a conflict between the local community and state structures. In the USSR, and especially in the case of Soviet Transnistria, relations between the state and the local community radicalized in the late 1920s. Under these circumstances, some representatives of the rural community came into clear conflict with teachers and school authorities. The expression and intensity of manifestations of resistance to schooling depend very much on the general relationship between the school, represented by teachers and the school administration, and the local community. Some manifestations of opposition have an episodic character, being caused by certain dissatisfactions related to certain schooling conditions, for example, the fines for truancy or the application of corporal punishment by some teachers. Other manifestations of resistance are, however, systemic in nature, expressing a general rejection of formal education.

Resistance to schooling diminished during the 1930s as a *modus vivendi* was established between the rural population and state authorities, with mutual compromises. As a result of this unequal balance of power, the rural population adopted a *pedagogical ethos* by gradually recognizing the school as an institution within the local community (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1971). Important educational issues, such as the enforcement of compulsory education, schooling of ethnic minorities, the education of girls, and the application of corporal penalties, facilitated an intense communication between state authorities and the civilian population and put the basis for a citizenship pact.

Nationalization and Romanization of schools and through schools

Immediately after Bessarabia was annexed by Romania in December 1918, Romanian political elites mobilized their efforts to approximate and, ultimately, unify the school education system from the province with that of the country, in the framework of a general project of national integration (see Livezeanu, 1995; Mihalache, 2016). Cultural unification was considered indispensable and calling for immediate attention especially because the province was believed to be, according to slightly obsolete

data, the most backward in terms of population literacy (literacy rate in Bessarabia was 15.6% at the 1897 census), in a country that was considered itself to be lagging in this respect in Europe and the region. The share of literate people in Bessarabia was 38%, during the 1930 census (the lowest in the country), while in Romania as a whole, this share reached 57% (Enciu, 2002; Șandru, 1980). Through a cultural unification of Bessarabia with Romania, it was also intended to harmonize the province with an economic and administrative system that was believed to be more advanced (Basciani, 2005; Suveică, 2010). On official occasions, this project was presented by senior officials of the Ministry as an eminently idealistic endeavour, an "urge of the soul" (Angelescu, 1926). The nature of that ideal was easily understood in that era and the minister's speech explains it – building a strong, united nation, capable of resisting the enemies from outside and within: „[Schools] must ensure the unity of soul of all Romanians with Romanian culture and life, and increase the power of life and resistance of the nation to all assaults from outside and inside, thus ensuring the durability of our rule within the new borders of Romania" (Angelescu, 1926). Enemies were, of course, all the elements that opposed this "spiritual unification," while the School was the most appropriate tool – the experience of other more advanced nations only confirmed the correctness of this choice – to achieve this goal, which indeed seemed idealistic, given the numerous difficulties ahead, especially in this newly annexed province. The reference to "Western countries" was frequent in the speeches of political and intellectual elites in Romania at that time (see e.g., Gabrea, 1933; Angelescu, 1926; 1936; Gusti, 1934.) It is also important to bear in mind that the "nationalizing" policies of transforming minority schools into schools teaching in the state (national) language were extensively used in the process of establishing many nation-states in the west and the region (see e.g., Weber, 1976; Lamberti, 1989; Cicek, 2012; Berecz, 2013).

The nationalization of schools, which started in 1917, was very energetic (see Livezeanu, 1995; Mihalache, 2016; Negură, 2021). In 1922, the nationalization and Romanization of schools were

declared accomplished in Bessarabia (Livezeanu, 1995). This official statement has to be treated with caution. Nationalization implies transforming Russian language schools in Romanian language schools or, to a lesser extent, in "minority" language schools, under a statistical proportion inaccurately estimated at 70% of the Romanian population (Mihalache, 2016). This process would continue in this direction for many years. The final result was supposed to be, as some school reviewers suggested, an entirely Romanian school system, even in the private sector and confessional education (National Archives of Romania, Fund of the Ministry of Public Instruction (FMIP), Inventory nr. 710 (the year 1922), File no. 11, page 125 – hereafter: ANR, FMIP, 710(1922)/11/125); see also FMIP, 710(1922)/11/105; Mihalache, 2016). However, the available data shows a much slower and troublesome evolution of the schooling process. Thus, in several schools for German-speaking pupils, inspections showed that both teachers and students "do not know Romanian at all" (ANR, FMIP, 907(1933)/33/82; 909(1935)/15/283; see also Livezeanu, 1995).

Romanization of Russian schools in the province and establishment of other Romanian schools was sometimes received with reluctance by the local population. To the consternation of officials of the 'Old Kingdom' (the founding provinces of Moldova and Walachia) and nationalist intellectuals in Chisinau, not only ethnic "minorities" but even (Romanian-speaking) Moldovans "sabotaged" the new schools (see e.g., ANR, FMIP, 710(1922)/11/8-10; 710(1922)/11/93-94; 710(1922)/11/125; 711(1923)/302; 2553(1921)/655/628-632). When Romanization of schools was only at the beginning, even the teachers, who were supposed to give life to the school in the coming years, shared a generalized scepticism that the Moldovan language (*i.e.,* the local Romanian dialect) could be suitable for education (Livezeanu, 1995). Ethnic minorities (except for Germans who had had church schools in the German language before 1914 (Schmidt, 2014; Hausleitner, 2005; Chirtoagă, 2012)) did not either gladly welcome the nationalization (*i.e.* "Bulgarization," "Ukrainisation," etc.) of their schools, with Russian language education before that time (ANR, FMIP, 711(1923)/302; 2553(1920)/430/7;

2553(1921)/655-867; Druță, 1938; Mihalache, 2016). For this reason, Romanian authorities suggested transforming schools into state language schools as the only alternative if some ethnic minority communities refused to “nationalize” their school (Angelescu, 1926; Mihalache, 2016; Livezeanu, 1995; ANR, FIMP, 2553(1921)/655/867; 2553(1920)/443/3; 2553(1921)/655/628-632; see also The Law). Yet, as it was said above, dissatisfaction was even more obvious in cases where schools were directly subjected to Romanization.

A set of measures aimed at “Romanization” of schools in settlements inhabited by a numerically significant Romanian population, often to the detriment of representatives of another ethnicity. Parents’ requests to open (or reopen) a school where children could learn in the mother tongue of their community or Russian were often interpreted as an act of hostility towards Romanian authorities (ANR, FMIP, 711(1923)/302/9; 2553(1921)/655-628-632; 711(1923)/302/11; 2553(1921)/420/332). Likewise, a school or extra-curricular activity of any teacher in a “minority” language was suspected of subversion (ANR, FMIP, 711(1923)/302/11; 2553(1920)/430/2; 2553(1920)/439/96; 2553(1921)/415/1; 713(1925)/211/319; 914(1940)/351/61). To facilitate Romanization, mixed school programs, Romanian-Ukrainian or Romanian-Russian, were implemented with a view of transforming them, subsequently, into “purely Romanian” schools (ANR, FMIP, 710(1922)/11/125; Mihalache, 2016). During the economic crisis of 1929-1933, low attendance became a plausible reason for closing down some minority schools and transferring pupils into Romanian schools in the vicinity (ANR, FMIP, 907(1933)/52/112; Buzatu & Ignat, 1965).

According to some school inspectorates, the reason for poor school performance and low attendance in some schools was the ethnic origin (non-Romanian) of pupils and their parents (see e.g., ANR, FMIP, 2553(1920)/107/33; 713(1925)/211/2; 814(1930)/115/8; 907(1933)/52/112; 903(1935)/15/291). The explanations generally made use of an essentialist argumentation: “The inhabitants of Tureatca village are Ruthenians, not convinced of the benefits of the school (…)” (ANR,

FMIP, 713(1925)/211/2). However, some reports admit a logic, even if interpreted in a nationalist way, related to low school attendance by some ethnic minorities; their “refractory” behaviour rather opposed the policy of Romanization than the schooling process itself (see e.g., ANR, FMIP, 811(1927)/16/71; 814(1930)/115/8; 912(1938)/28/52). The response of school authorities to such an attitude expressed by some communities was, as a rule, a defensive one, suggesting repressive measures. In particular, the Ukrainian (Ruthenian) communities were usually regarded with suspicion by Romanian authorities, including school authorities (see e.g., ANR, FMIP, 2553(1920)/430/6; 2553(1921)/420/332; 710(1922)/11/93-94; 710(1922)/11/105; 711(1923)/302/11; 812(1928)/280/270; 813(1929)/293/5; 912(1938)/28/52; 912(1938)/28/32, see also Mihai, 2015; Blasen, forthcoming). The uprisings of Hotin (1919) and Tatar-Bunar (1924), two towns densely populated by Ukrainian and other minority communities and which were cruelly quelled by Romanian troops, confirmed these suspicions (Rotari, 2004; Basciani, 2005). Source of disagreement of the “minority” population, the Romanian or Romanized schools were seen by authorities as a strategic aim and viable measure to counter the hostile attitudes towards Romanian administration of the “heteroglote” (official euphemism of “alien”) residents.

Not all the minorities were perceived as “refractory” to the benefits of school. In some minority schools, such as Jewish or German schools, school attendance was better than the attendance by Moldovan schoolchildren of Romanian schools in the same locality (ANR, FMIP, 813(1929)7/163; 814(1930)115/8; DJAN, FIȘRL, 206(1922)43/1-47). Both low attendance rate in state schools in minority localities and enrolment and attendance of private or confessional schools were perceived as a threat to the Romanization project (see e.g., ANR, FMIP, 710(1922)/11/125); 710(1922)/11/105; Mihalache, 2016). Both of them had to be reduced or even eliminated with time.

School Absenteeism in Romanian Bessarabia

In the 1920s and the 1930s, school attendance was a constant concern for education authorities and employees in Romania. Hundreds of reports, written by the Ministry's oversight staff, monitored school attendance in Bessarabia. The Bessarabian pedagogical journals debated the issue (*Şcoala,* 1921; Lupașco, 1922; *Școala Basarabiei,* 1923; Balmuș, 1933; *Cetatea Albă*,1931; Biciușcă, Jul-Aug 1930; *Buletinul* Jan-Feb 1933; Angelescu, 1936; Isbășescu, 1938). Intellectuals, inspectors, and teachers tried to explain the phenomenon and asked why villagers did not take their children to school. Who was to blame? Some observers proposed a cultural explanation (Șandru, 1980; Barbu 1937). Others blamed the education system for being too theoretical and not practical enough (Barbu, 1938; Gusti, 1934; Rădulescu-Motru, 1934; Ţane, 1936). In 1921, an author proposed two sets of explanations for poor attendance:

> The external factor (...) is the state of the school, the means at its disposal, which it uses according to its needs: 1) the school building, 2) the classroom, 3) its size, the light, the hygienic state, 4) the furniture, 5) the didactic material, and 6) the economic situation of the pupil's family… The internal factor is the power and quality of the source from which the pupil quenches the thirst of the soul and heart (Lupașco, 1922).

If the "external" factor was fulfilled, the author claimed, then the "internal" factor would boost attendance. This explanation idealized the "thirst for knowledge" of peasant children and their parents and underestimated their agency. The "external" factor was far from being ensured at the time. School inspectors complained until the late 1930s of the lack of "proper" school facilities, insufficient classrooms, and premises not roomy enough given the steady increase in enrollment and attendance (Angelescu, 1936). Appropriate furniture and didactic material were missing from many rural schools, even in the 1930s (*Şcoala Basarabeană* Jan-Feb 1939, 65). The peasants' economic situation and living standards were dire, while drought and hunger periodically ravaged rural Bessarabia, even after

the agrarian reform of 1921 (Enciu, 2002, 173-4). These were all reasons why Bessarabian peasants did not send their children to school (ANR, FMIP, 714(1926)/212/16); 713(1925)/16/10. FMIP, 714(1926)/74; FMIP, 713(1925)/18/154; 713(1925)/257/110; Suflery, 1936; see also interviews with Ilie P., 1921, v. Bălăneşti; Maria B., 1931, v. Petroasa; Maria P., 1923, v. Bălăneşti; Agafia C., 1926, v. Bălăneşti). Several petitions signed by villagers justified their refusal to send children to school, citing the brutal behaviour of teachers, particularly the use of corporal punishment "harshly" or "out of revenge." (ANR, FMIP, 712(1924)/273/381; 712(1924)/275/150-151; 811(1927)/274/127; 815(1931)/ 221/272; 908(1934)/251/48; 908(1934)/251/48; 909(1935)/214/210; 910(1936)/299/190; 910(1936)/333/30; see also Negură, 2009). The number of pupils who attended school (on average 30 children per grade in 1931/32) remained lower than classroom capacity (40 seats). As for the economic conditions in Bessarabian villages, even wealthier peasants found credible excuses for their children not to attend school, including heavy workload in the household (ANR, 1938/362/237-238; Interviews: Alexandru Ţ., 1924, v. Grigorovca; Vera F., 1930, v. Dănceni; Marina C., 1924, v. Bălăneşti; Minadora A., 1925; v. Arioneşti, Vasile N., b. 1929, v. Petreşti). Thus, the cultural factor was not entirely irrelevant, as many teachers and civil servants claimed at the time (ANR, FMIP, 814 (1930)/115/8); FMIP, 714(1926)/212/45; FMIP, 812 (1928)/282/52).

Although the education laws of 1921, 1924, and later years provided for compulsory education for girls and boys alike, attendance in primary schools was lower among girls across the country, while girls' absenteeism was the most marked in primary schools in Bessarabia. The discrepancy between the share of boys and girls enrolled in rural schools was the largest in this province: 61 percent of boys versus 39 percent of girls (in cities, 51.7 percent of boys versus 48.3 percent of girls) (Golopenția, 1934). School inspectors explained girls' absenteeism by "objective" factors, as a rule, also invoked in case of boys' absenteeism: non-payment of fines, annulment of fines, abusive behaviour of the teacher, and inadequate premises (see ANR, FMIP, 811(1927)/6/18; FMIP, 812(1928)/282/52; FMIP,

714(1926)/212/46; FMIP, 812(1928)/282/73; FMIP, 909(1935)/214/211). Reports further suggested that poor attendance of girls stemmed from the villagers' gender stereotypes, according to which girls would not need to study or at least not as much as the boys. The explanations were again cultural, blaming the "stubbornness of villagers" and "refractoriness of parents." (ANR, FMIP, 2552(1919)/182/8; FMIP, 714(1926)/12/45; FMIP, 812(1928)/282/52). This perception is also found in interviews with people educated during the interwar period (Interviews with: Agafia C, 1926, v. Bălănești; Maria P., 1923, v. Milești; Ecaterina C., 1922, v. Bălăneşti; Ilie P., 1921, v. Bălănești; Alexandra G., 1920, v. Bocani; Alexandru C., 1918, v. Bocani; Maria B., 1931, v. Petroasa; Nina C., 1927, v. Petroasa; Paraschiva R., 1918, v. Petroasa; Ion C., 1924, v. Petroasa; Maria B., 1931, v. Petroasa). Archival records show that gender stereotypes of girls' education were shared and even tolerated by some teachers or school inspectors (Barbu, 1937). Yet the laws on education allowed for such discrimination, providing for compulsory education "especially for boys," when school premises did not allow education for all children (Legea, 1924).

Cultural revolution and resistance to schooling in Soviet Transnistria (1918-1940)

The case of primary education in Soviet Transnistria has many elements in common with that of Romanian Bessarabia in the interwar period (dominant rurality, low literacy, multiethnic society, a "mobilizational state" actively involved in building a mass public education system). However, the Soviet authorities had a different strategy than the Romanian ones for mass schooling of the local population in this border region, especially in terms of the education of ethnic communities. This strategy proved to be successful, given the circumstances and despite some common difficulties with those in the neighbouring Romanian province.

The Moldavian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (MASSR) was created in 1924 for reasons of external policy, namely for "exporting" the Bolshevik revolution to Romania and the Balkans. In the aftermath of revolution and civil war, the Soviet education system faced problems similar to those of Bessarabia in Romania and even with more serious problems, foremost the widespread child homelessness (*besprizornost'*) and destruction of school infrastructure (on mass education in the URSS, see Fitzpatrick, 1978, 1979; Bérélowitch, 1990; Ewing, 2002; Holmes, 1991; Kelly, 2007; on education in MASSR, see Negru, 2003; Negură, 2021). In MASSR, the majority population was poorly schooled, especially in rural areas. In 1926, 63% of adult residents were registered as illiterate (All-Union Census, 1926; see also: The Archives of Socio-Political Organizations in the Republic of Moldova, Fund 49, Inventory 1, File 222, p. 25 (henceforth: AOSPRM, 49/1/222/25)). As in Bessarabia, the rural population showed reluctance to formal schooling through various forms of passive resistance, especially truancy and drop-out. In 1926, half of the school-age population was out of school (AOSPRM, 49/1/1022). "Children enrol and attend school only in winter" – said G. Buciușcanu, the People's Commissar for Public Education, at the second Congress of Soviets, in May 1926 –, "but in spring they abandon school." (Negru, 2003). In 1928, the schooling of children aged between 8-11 years accounted for 45,2% (Negru, 2003; AOSPRM, 49/1/1840/62; 49/1/1531/6). In MASSR, as in Bessarabia, rurality, mass illiteracy, and ethnic heterogeneity of the population were perceived by governing elites as challenges to the state-building process (Central State Archives of Public Organizations of Ukraine, hereafter TsDAGO, 1(1925)/20/2144). The Soviet authorities, as the Romanian ones, considered schooling as a powerful tool of nation and state-building in those ethnically mixed and majority rural border areas (Livezeanu, 1995; Martin, 2001; Pauly, 2014).

Reports of school inspectorates and party bodies noted, in 1924 and later years, that Moldovan and Ukrainian children were included in a smaller proportion in the schooling process, compared to other ethnic groups (Russians, Germans, Jews, Bulgarian, Czech). In 1924/25 – 70% of children were out

of school (TsDAGO, 1/20/2144, 91). In 1926/27, 47.8% of all children of school age were included in the schooling process (AOSPRM, 49/1/1022). Despite the general progress of schooling, in 1928/29, Moldovan pupils continued to be slightly underrepresented to the other ethnic groups (Moldovans representing 27% of pupils and 30% of the general population of MASSR) (AOSPRM, 49/1/1531, 9). This fact was noted by the rapporteur on the part of the party bodies as a gap that the school authorities were going to rectify. Some reports explain school absenteeism by the involvement of children from rural areas in seasonal agricultural work (AOSPRM, 49/1/1082/51-52). The MASSR, and the Moldovans as an ethnic group, were sometimes regarded by the central Soviet authorities from the ideological lens of the "backwardness," along with other "peoples" and territories in the USSR, because of the high illiteracy, the dominant rurality and the low level of economic development (Martin, 2001, King 2001; Brown, 2003; Khalid, 2006). The cultural "backwardness" had to be overcome in an even more imperative way, as MASSR was considered a border region with Romania and other states in South-East Europe, and the *raison d'être* of this territorial unit was to be attractive to the population on the right bank of the Dniester and thus serve as a bridgehead for the expansion of the USSR to the west (King, 2001).

The situation of primary education changed radically starting with 1930 when primary education was proclaimed compulsorily; the application of this resolution had to be carried out by emergency (History of Sov. Constitution, pp. 621-626). In 1932/33, according to official data, the school-age children were included in a proportion of 99% in primary education. By then, the discrepancies of schooling between ethnic groups have been eliminated, at least in the four-grade primary cycle (Central State Archives of Supreme Bodies of Power and Government of Ukraine, hereafter TsDAVO, 166/10/1225/9). From that moment on, the quantitative differences between ethnic groups moved to the upper primary cycle (from the fifth to the seventh grades) and to secondary education, but also in terms of access to quality education and school infrastructure.

Starting with 1932/33, the Soviet authorities in MASSR set an even more ambitious goal of including all school-age children in the two levels of the primary cycle up to the seventh grade (for children aged 7-14). The approach of the state was differentiated in the imposition of compulsory schooling in the rural and urban areas. The Decree on the compulsory school of 1930 obliged all 7 to 10 years children (boys and girls alike) to attend the primary school of the first level (grades 1-4) and only the children of the urban area of 7-14 years to follow both cycles of the education primary of seven classes (History of Sov. Constitution). This decree took into account the different level of schooling and literacy of the population in rural and urban areas, but also the farmers' needs to use their children in agricultural work. This legislative act (formulated similarly in other countries at the time, including Romania) disadvantaged the rural population and, implicitly, the Moldovan and Ukrainian children, most of whom lived in villages, preventing them to continue their studies beyond the primary cycle (Livezeanu, 1995).

As in the Ukrainian republic as a whole, the "nationalization" and "indigenization" policies, implemented since 1923/1924, by which representatives of ethnic groups were endowed with schools and cultural institutions in their language, did not go smoothly under the conditions where the elites of all levels had very poor knowledge of the local languages, primarily of the Ukrainian and Moldovan languages (AOSPRM, 49/1/2017/36; 49/1/2401; Negru, 2003; Pauly, 2014). This task faced some difficulties, especially since the Moldovans and Ukrainians were the most rural and least educated groups. Schooling in local languages generated some disagreement from the ground. For example, some Ukrainian and Jewish communities still preferred education in Russian, to the detriment of the national language (see e.g., TsDAVO, 166/6/1212/19-20; see also Martin, 2001 and Pauly, 2014, on Ukraine). Also, some local Ukrainian communities expressed reluctance toward the opening of Moldovan and Polish schools (TsDAGO, 1/20/2144(1925)). Resistance to policies of "nationalization" and "indigenization" of administrative and educational institutions was also noted

during the same period (especially during the 1920s) in Ukraine and in Belarus, among other republics, both on the part of Russian speakers, but also from representatives of “native” population that preferred to use the Russian language in daily communication and formal settings (Martin 2001; Gauthier, 2010; Pauly, 2014).

From late 1932, the former Head of People’s Commissariat for Education in Ukraine, Mykola Skrypnyk, became the subject of harsh attacks coming from Moscow and from within the Party circles in Ukraine for alleged “nationalism” and “forced Ukrainization” (Martin, 2001; Pauly, 2014). The nationalization/ indigenization process was also hampered by daily dissensions and frictions on the ethnic ground. Several reports written during this period denounced the teachers’ negative attitudes towards students of certain ethnic groups, especially Moldovans and Jews. These cases were condemned, along with other “counter-revolutionary” deeds, such as the application of corporal penalties. In these cases, teachers, and sometimes also the school principal, were publicly blamed and, in more severe cases, dismissed (AOSPRM, 49(1934)/1/2506; 49(1935)/1/2953/31; 49(1935)/1/2953/32-48, 118-119; 49(1939)/1/4297).

Teachers between local state leaders and the peasants

“Most teachers did not accept the October Revolution.” Thus begins a 1930 report to AgitProp of MASSR about teachers (TsDAGO, 1/20/3099, p. 7). Yet the report describes a more nuanced situation. This report and other sources from the “Cultural Revolution” period show the tricky position of the rural teachers located between the government and party bodies of the Autonomous Republic, the local Soviet and Party leaders, and, finally, the local rural community. The Party Regional Committee traced the general political directions. The Ministry of Education was responsible for the implementation of these policies and the teachers’ professional education and political loyalty, checking them periodically by school inspectors and other officials. But teachers depended directly on the goodwill of local Soviet and Party leaders, from whom they received some material benefits

(e.g., food ration and other material aids). Thus, local leaders felt legitimate to use and often abuse teachers to engage in economic tasks (e.g., in sowing campaigns or inventory of traction forces) and in political activities, for example, in the collectivisation campaign or cereal requisitions. Besides, all teachers were committed to involving in the literacy campaign, atheist propaganda, work with women, and other extracurricular activities. These extra-didactic activities were encouraged by the government and party authorities of the Republic. Many times, when some teachers failed or refused to meet these tasks, they were persecuted and harassed by local leaders. In fact, during the first year of the Five-Years Plan, the number of teachers' dismissals increased throughout Ukraine, including MASSR. In 1928, the number of dismissed teachers, including "willingly," was 522 (or 9.2%), and in 1929 it increased to 929 (15.2%). When teachers left the workplace to look for work elsewhere, they were accused of "desertion" – a serious charge given the context. Young women teachers, the report states, were all the more vulnerable to local leaders. Some of them complained of harassment, abuse and persecution by local leaders. Often these abuses took a bureaucratic form: wage delays by 2-3 months, delay and low quality of food rations. The housing was often the subject of numerous complaints from teachers to local leaders. Under these tense circumstances, many of them expressed negative moods. Some teachers complained of hunger and threaten suicide, others even committed suicide. (In Ukraine, including MASSR, in 1929 there were 15 cases of suicide among teachers, of which 9 in villages). These cases were not many, but they were sufficient to be discussed by the high government and party officials and presented as legitimate concerns (TsDAGO, 1/20/3099).

Against the background of the "cultural revolution" of 1929-1933, which led to a real "class struggle" between the ruling class and the peasantry, class and status differences between teachers and local peasants often embraced more active forms of resistance and sometimes of inter-ethnic tensions (see also Viola, 1996). According to a 1934 party body report in Grigoriopol, a teacher stated that "Moldovans cannot be re-educated, because they are primitive people." In the Birzula district, after

long harassment by some villagers, who were described as kulaks and anti-Semites, a Jewish teacher was killed (AOSPRM, 49(1934)/1/2506/2).

Voluntarily or not, many teachers participated in political actions: collectivisation, cereal requisitions or even de-kulakization (deportation of kulak families). According to some data, from 1/3 to half of the teaching staff from the villages participated in the collectivisation campaigns of 1929-1931. However, even when teachers were not involved in these political actions, the school was seen by many villagers as an institution hostile to the traditional lifestyle of the community as it propagated atheism and cultivated the rupture between generations. For these reasons, some teachers have been victims of various forms of violence, described by the rapporteurs as "terrorist acts", by representatives of the local community (qualified as "kulaks"). Thus, according to some reports, some teachers received anonymous letters, death threats, and sometimes have been victims of beatings, and even rape and murder. There have also been reports of collective violence against some teachers and schools in some villages in Ukraine, including MASSR, during spontaneous riots (the so-called *volynki*), especially against teachers who participated in cereal requisitions (TsDAGO, 1/20/3099, p. 22). But school and teachers became more often, in the highly tense context of the First Five-Year Plan, (collectivisation campaigns, dekulakization, and cereal requisitions, followed by a terrible famine), the subject of relatively "peaceful" responses from the rural population: gossip, rumours, and anonymous complaints (Scott, 1985).

After 1933, as the food crisis was overcome, the relations between school (teachers), local leaders, and rural communities went through a relative stabilisation and pacification. It can be said, along with Thomas Ewing (2002), but also based on archive documents and oral sources, that teachers were not just subjects and victims in often extremely tense relations between state institutions and the civilian population, but also mediators between these demanding stakeholders. The direct result of this mediation was the schooling activity, which oral history respondents generally remember in a positive

glance. Documents also witness that the school institution was becoming more and more positively recognised within the rural community during the 1930s.

Conclusions

Both Romanian and Soviet administrations made considerable efforts to school the rural population in the two regions (Bessarabia and Transnistria). However, the results of these schooling campaigns were uneven. The Soviet system of education managed to achieve complete schooling of the school-age population (and adult literacy), due to intense political pressure and systematic application of compulsory universal schooling. The universal and compulsory primary education was at first troublesome in a period of social and political upheaval. Mass public schooling initially manifested itself as a conflict between school staff and local rural communities. However, also because of the capacity of the state officials, teachers and local communities to negotiate and come to a consensus, this tense relationship was gradually replaced by a more comprehensive recognition by the rural population of the legitimacy of the school institution and the pedagogical authority of the state.

This comparative case study on the institutionalization of primary education in two neighbouring border areas, on the fringes of two "modern mobilizing states" in the first half of the 20th century, shows that mass public education, and the nation-building process in general, were processes that involved significant institutional pressure from the state on the civilian population. The more intense the state's coercive power over the population, the more violent were the popular responses to these projects. In the two cases studied, the institutional pressure applied on the rural population in the process of schooling and nationalization varied during the 1920s and 1930s. In Romanian Bessarabia, the expansion of primary education in rural areas began firmly in the early 1920s, after the annexation of the region to Romania, but the intensity of this pressure decreased in the late 1920s. In the Moldovan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic, on the contrary, universal and compulsory primary education was applied in 1929 with a high degree of coercion by the Soviet authorities. The Romanian authorities

showed negotiating capacity and consensus to the actions of disagreement manifested by the rural population. Thus, the state and school authorities have shown flexibility in setting the school calendar to meet the demands of farmers to employ children in seasonal agricultural work. Especially starting with 1933/34, the Romanian Ministry of Education also showed greater openness to adjust the content of the school curriculum to the agricultural occupations of the students' parents. Likewise, Soviet primary education marked a shift towards the "polytechnization" of school content, adjusted for urban and rural localities. In the Soviet case, schools offered free lunches to primary school pupils to boost school attendance. These lunches were a considerable resource during the severe supply crises of the early 1930s. After strong resistance to schooling in the two regions, but all the stronger in the Soviet context during the so-called "cultural revolution" of the first five years (1929-1933), institutional pressure and popular resistance decreased in intensity in the 1930s, giving rise to various forms of mutual compromise.

One of the reasons for the dissatisfaction of the civilian population in the two provinces was the nationalization of schools, more precisely the Romanianization of schools in Bessarabia and the Moldovanization and Ukrainianization of schools in MASSR. Both the representatives of the "titular" nationalities and, above all, the ethnic minorities opposed this transformation. The nationalization policy was applied during the 1920s and 1930s in a fairly coherent way in Bessarabia and other provinces annexed by Romania in 1918. On the other hand, In MASSR and Soviet Ukraine, the nationalities policy was relatively discontinuous (e.g., in MASSR three radical linguistic reforms of the Moldovan language followed one another during this period, which disrupted the schooling process). In both cases, however, the authorities put an end to schooling in the languages of ethnic minorities in the late 1930s, in the context of the political radicalization of the two regimes in which ethnic minorities were progressively suspected of subversion and disloyalty. The resistance of the population to the nationalization of schools expressed during this period through various actions of

opposition, from manifestations of open disagreement to various forms of passive resistance and accommodation tactics. We also note that the resistance of ethnic minorities to schooling and nationalization has been less intense in MASSR, where ethnic groups have been provided with schools in their mother tongues. On the contrary, in the Romanian Bessarabia, where the schools in the localities inhabited by minority ethnic communities were subjected to a sustained process of Romanianization, the resistance to schooling on the part of the parents was more significant.

This comparative case study shows that the daily responses of the civilian population to nation-building projects, here in schools and through schools, are not limited to those analyzed by researchers (e.g., 'talking the nation,' 'choosing the nation,' 'performing the nation,' and 'consuming the nation' (Fox & Miller-Idriss, 2008) These cases, among others, demonstrate that, especially in rural areas, popular responses to state-building through various "agencies of loyalization" provoked opposition from the population. These manifestations are obvious forms of agency that go beyond the passive character of "national indifference", analyzed by T. Zahra, J. King, P. Judson and others. The existence of these manifestations of popular opposition to one of the main institutions of nation-building suggests the relevance of these forms of resistance to nationalization in other geographical areas and institutional settings as well.

The cases studied in this paper suggest that resistance to schooling decreases as the two parties, state authorities, including school authorities, and rural communities subjected to schooling make mutual concessions on the conditions and content of schooling. As demonstrated by other researches, the duration of exposure to formal education generally contributes to the acceptance of it by communities (Green, 2013 (1990); Koyama & Carvalho, 2016; Carvalho, Koyama & Sacks, 2017; Bukowski, 2019). Acceptance of formal education also takes place through the recognition of its practical relevance by rural communities, but also insofar as education does not contradict the economic and socio-cultural interests of these communities. The Romanian authorities were more willing to make

concessions to the rural communities in Bessarabia for the application of compulsory primary education, including through collective exemption of school fines for truancy. The Soviet authorities managed to consistently implement universal and compulsory primary education for all the school-age population. Without admitting exceptions to the application of compulsory schooling, MASSR school authorities used strategies to stimulate school attendance (e.g., by providing students with breakfasts).

It can be said that a coercive application of universal primary education has met with various forms of resistance from students and parents in both regions. However, these forms of resistance to schooling decreased as the parties resorted to mutual concessions. At the end of the 1930s, the educational process reached a certain status-quo through the progressive recognition by the rural communities of the pedagogical authority of the state in the two studied contexts. This social recognition of school authority lays the foundations for a process of epistemological domination called by Bourdieu 'symbolic violence' (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1971).

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