

## **The continuity of Romanianism in Bessarabia's education, cultural and spiritual life under the Russian rule, during the 19<sup>th</sup> century**

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**Abstract:** *Moldavia has been one of the most challenged provinces of our nation, as, from an early stage, it has suffered from amputations caused by its temporary rulers and neighbors. Bessarabia's drama has been the consequence of the Russian-Turkish war (1806-1812), which resulted in its annexation to the Tsarist Empire. In 1812, the Russian diplomats bribed the Ottoman ones and extended the term of "Bessarabia" over to the entire territory between the Prut and Dniester (Nistru) rivers, in order to cover up the act of annexation and to create a new geographical and historic identity, with the aim of concealing its historic nexus to the Romanian Principalities. Bessarabia has always been and will continue to be a Romanian land. The continuity of the Romanian identity in the spiritual life of Bessarabia, under the Russian rule, has endured largely thanks to the church prints. At that time, the church was the main factor in the formation of spirituality and it played an important part in the preservation of the Romanian language, traditions and customs.*

Key-words: *Bessarabia, education, cultural and spiritual life, 19<sup>th</sup> Century, Romanianism*

Up until 1812, Bessarabia's history cannot be tackled separately, as it coincides with the history of medieval Moldavia. It had gone through the same historic events that the entire history of Romania was faced with, ever since the ancient times until the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when it was seized by the Russian empire. The territory between Prut and Dniester that was named Bessarabia in 1812 designated a geographical and politico-administrative entity that had the same historic, temporal and spatial past as the Romanian people.

Bessarabia or the country of the Wallachian prince Basarab, was the Southern part of the medieval Principality of Moldavia (or *Moldova*) and it comprised the territory between the Danube Delta and the mouth of the Dniester river. In his well-known book, "*Descriptio Moldaviae*", the famous ruler Dimitrie Cantemir shows us that Moldavia was once divided into three administrative parts:

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“1. **Lower Moldova** - encompassing the counties of Iași, Vaslui, Covurlui, Lăpușna (which had also included Tighina). Here, on the river Bacu, there was once a borough, initially of small importance, called Chișinău, etc;

2. **Southern Moldova** – spanning over the counties of Khotyn (Romanian: Hotin), Hârlău, Cernăuți, Suceava, etc. It is worth mentioning that the river Prut was not separating the province of Moldavia, but it was welding together the territories between the Eastern Carpathians and the Dniester river, as an organic part. Compared to the Principality of Wallachia, here the solder was more significant, as Oltenia enjoyed its autonomy and the Great Ban of Craiova was a defender of the rights of the boyars from across the Olt river;

3. **Bessarabia** – the area is mostly hilly plains with flat steppes; it has neither mountains, nor forests, and a great lack of water – except for the Lake Yalpug; it was subjugated by the Turks in 1538. Even today – writes Cantemir – the boroughs and villages are populated by Moldavians who have remained Christian and, yet, have to endure the forced rule of the Turks and Tartars. Today - Cantemir goes on – this region encompasses four counties: that of 1. Bugeac, 2. Akerman, 3. Chilia, 4. Ismail. The Tartars live mainly on the plains, they have no boroughs, except from that of Căușani, on the river Botna. There is also the town Reni, which the Ottomans renamed Timarova, “although under Ottoman rule, there was no Turk there; the guard was made up of Christians, all Moldavians and its commander, of the same faith with them, commonly known as “beșli agasi”, under the command of the Ottoman governor in Silistra.” (Ciachir 1999, 16).

The description provided above emphasizes once more the fact that, according to Cantemir, Bessarabia meant only the Southern part of medieval Moldavia. At the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Bessarabia represented the Moldavian territory between Prut and Dniester, which had been, for hundreds of years, the object of the complicated diplomatic game of the great powers; a subject of litigation - in international relations - within the “oriental problem” of dividing the Ottoman Empire and collateral countries, between the great powers. The stake was the domination of South-Eastern Europe, the seizing of Constantinople and of the Bosphorus and Dardanelles Passages, which allowed the exit to the Mediterranean Sea.

The population of Bessarabia had a lot to suffer after the annexation in 1812, both due to the war aftermath and to the Russian occupation. Not being able to withstand the maltreatment they were being subjected to, a lot of them left their homes and took refuge in the mountains and in forests.

Documents from that period reveal undeniable proofs regarding the situation of the Bessarabian population after annexation. Such a document is *File no. 31 – About the various offenses and oppressions brought to the inhabitants of Moldavia and Wallachia by the militants*, which is presently kept at the Senators’ Archive in Chișinău.

By studying the documents of the year 1812, we can imagine the spiritual tragedy of the native population, which was being deprived of everything pertaining to tradition, customs and nation.

A document that is highly significant in this matter is *File no. 517* of June 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1816 from the Archive of the Chancellery of the Bessarabian governor.

The discontentment and complaints of the Moldavian population led Emperor Alexander I to issue a ukase, on April 1<sup>st</sup> 1816, whereby Bessarabia was to receive an administrative organization that was in accordance with its local laws and customs.

During the first years of Russian rule, two official languages were being used in the institutions in Bessarabia: Romanian and Russian.

In 1818, Alexander I, czar of Russia granted Bessarabia its local autonomy, by which a *local superior council* was established, comprising a *viceroi*, a *governor*, a *vice-governor* and *two counselors*, appointed by Petersburg. The decisions were made in two languages: Romanian and Russian. The entire civil administration was in the hands of the local population.

However, these terms did not last, as the Tsarist Empire was implementing a policy of denationalization and Russification of the Bessarabian Romanians. In 1828, czar Nicolae I suspended Bessarabia's autonomy and named it "*The Bessarabia Region*", and later on, "*Guberniya Bessarabia*", which was being governed according to Russian laws. In the same period, he issued a ukase by which he inaugurated a policy of Russification through administration, schools and churches, excluding the Romanian language from all the official institutions. The aim of the Tsarist Russian Empire was to subjugate Bessarabia completely, by destroying, bit by bit, the strongest fortress of its people – *the national conscience*. Hence, between 1828-1830, most of the indigenous nobility that was part of Bessarabia's autonomous administration withdrew to the Moldavian region on the right of Prut. The ones who remained were powerless, in the face of the Russian Empire's rule.

The annexation of Bessarabia to the Tsarist Russia had disastrous effects on the cultural, spiritual, economic and social life of the Romanian people from this region. The main weapons of denationalization were the *school* and the *church*. Taking advantage of the fact that Bessarabia did not have, at that time, an organized and state-subsidized education system, the Russians introduced their own system, based on the Russian language and tradition. The urban environment underwent a more significant process of Russification, as compared to the rural one, as most of the cities became centers of the political, confessional and cultural administration of the Russian rule. The policy was to infest the society with foreign elements, unsuited to the Romanian people. Romanian-language schools continued to operate only in villages, near monasteries. The Romanian rural environment kept its culture and national spirit almost intact, throughout the entire rule of the Tsarist Empire. Thus, it preserved its original, specific traits and the Russians that settled here had to adopt the culture and tradition of the local people.

In addition to the state education system, there was also the private familial education system – as a form of spreading education while maintaining the Romanian traditions. This was accessible only to the upper-class families, which, in their turn, were being summoned by the state and church authorities to send their children out to the official schools, where the classes were being held in Russian.

Concerned with the old Moldavian traditions of public education, the metropolitan bishop Gavriil Bănulescu-Bodoni set up an *Eparchial School* and a *Theological Seminary* in Chișinău, asking the Holy Synod in Petersburg for permission that, in addition to the Russian language, the national and Latin languages be studied in these institutions, with the purpose of spreading God's word for the understanding of all people.

His successor, Archbishop Dimitrie Sulima, retackled the issue of public education and set up a few schools that implemented the *Lancasterian system of teaching*.

Being consistent with its total denationalization policy, the Tsarist Empire set up a Russian *theological seminary* in Chișinău, in 1813, with the aim of forming clergymen and church clerks that spoke Russian. After that, other high-schools were set up, in which only the children of Russian clerks, great landowners and members of the upper class were accepted.

Concurrently with the activity of these high-schools, there were a few Moldavian schools near some monasteries that operated almost clandestinely. The teaching curriculum was limited only to church-related subjects – *the book of hours, the psalm book, Byzantine music, etc.*

The necessity of a more elevated teaching system in the national language led the great Bessarabian boyars to request, in 1841, to the Russian administration, that Romanian teachers be promoted in the elementary schools and, also, that these schools be provided with manuals in the Romanian language, at their own expense. The Russian authorities went along with the boyars' request for only a short period of time, since, in 1870, they completely ruled out the study of the Romanian language in the Bessarabian schools.

The education system adopted after 1870 was intended to Russify the rural population (at least 50%), in order to facilitate and hasten the process of full assimilation of Bessarabia by Russia.

Despite all impediments, the Romanian people from Bessarabia kept the love for their country, customs and traditions alive. An important role in the preservation of the Romanian language and traditions was played by the church – an essential factor in the formation of a people's spirituality. At that time, the Orthodox Church in Bessarabia was under the jurisdiction of the Metropolis of Moldavia, which, after the annexation of Bessarabia to the Tsarist Empire, was placed under the jurisdiction of the Synod in Petersburg.

In 1808, Metropolitan Veniamin Costachi was forced to retreat to the Neamț Monastery, as Czar Alexander I issued a *ukase* by which an *Exarchate* was to be

established, which was subordinated to the *Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church in Petersburg*. This comprised the Metropolises of Moldavia and Wallachia. Metropolitan Gavriil Bănulescu-Bodoni was appointed Exarch of this exarchate.

An event of great importance in the life of Metropolitan Gavriil Bănulescu-Bodoni was the issue of the Ukase from March 27, 1808, by Emperor Alexander I, which said:

“As of this day, the former Metropolitan of Kiev, Gavriil, shall be a member of the Holy Synod and Exarch in Moldavia, Wallachia and Bessarabia.” (Trudy 1910, 5) From this moment on, Gavriil Bănulescu-Bodoni acted not only as an Exarch, but he also had important political duties, as he was the head of the boyar councils (divans). During these nine years of service (1812-1821), Metropolitan and Exarch Gavriil introduced - in the Moldo-Vlach church - the principles, manner of organization and some practices of cult inherent to the Russian church. Throughout this period, according to the liturgical formulas set by the Exarchate, it was imperative that the Russian imperial family be mentioned in the church, during service.

On November 4, 1812, he submitted to the Synod in Petersburg a *project of organization of the church life* from his exarchate, in which: “...he proposed that a new eparchy be established on the territory annexed to Russia, motivating that there were, at the time, in Bessarabia, over 750 churches in boroughs and villages, whose parishioners were different from the rest of the inhabitants of the Russian state, through their language, traditions and customs. He also proposed that this new eparchy also include some territories between Dniester and Bug (the Oceacov region), with the towns of Tiraspol, Dubăsari, Ovidiopol and Odessa, as well as the towns Cherson, Oceacov and Olviopol from the Kherson Governorate (guberniya), motivating that, in those towns, the number of Russians was reduced, as compared to the Moldavians, Greeks and Bulgarians. The new church administration unit was to be entitled “The Eparchy of Chişinău” (since its new leader resided here) and Khotyn” (as a remembrance of the former eparchy with that name). The local traditions were to be taken into account in the organization and management of this new religious institution, provided that they did not come into contradiction with the Russian civic and church laws. Metropolitan Gavriil requested that priests be exempted from any fees for their land, and that they be granted “the same rights that the Russian clergy enjoyed”. He also demanded that the civil authorities have no right to interfere in church-related matters, “as was the case in Russia”. For his own remuneration, the Metropolitan requested the incomes of the Căprians Monastery, which was dedicated to the “Zograf” Monastery from Mount Athos, as well as the so-called “perks” from priests, which was being charged in Wallachia and Moldavia, at the time. He also solicited that the current priests be maintained in service, for the time being, and that a theological seminary be set up in Chişinău for the priests’ sons!” (Tomescu 1929, 39).

As a result of the approval of this project by the Czar of the Russian Empire, on August 21<sup>st</sup>, 1813, Metropolitan and Exarch Gavriil Bănulescu-Bodoni organized a new eparchy according to the specific Russian pattern, also introducing a series of administration bodies characteristic to the Russian church.

In January 1813, he opened the *Theological Seminary* in Chișinău, with professors from within the country, from Russia and Ukraine. Though, at first, the subjects were taught in Romanian, later on - as the use of the Romanian language in public institutions was officially suspended – they were taught exclusively in Russian. After 10 years since the foundation of the seminary, the Metropolitan set up a *Theological School*, where the candidates for the theological seminary were being trained, for 4 years. Such schools were also established in 1869 in Ediniți and in the county of Khotyn.

Apart from schools, Metropolitan Gavriil Bănulescu-Bodoni also founded the *Printing House of the Metropolis of Chișinău and Khotyn* (1814), as well as the *Bessarabian Branch of the Russian Bible Society*, which had a direct connection with the publishing of the Romanian Bible, in Petersburg in 1819.

In September 1813, in order to set up the printing house, the Metropolitan filed a petition to the Holy Synod in Petersburg, claiming that it was needed because of the lack of spiritual books for clergymen and civilians, as well as of prayer and liturgical books. Due to these deficiencies, the churches in Bessarabia had to procure their church books from Austria. Hence, the Synod in Petersburg approved the foundation of this printing house in May 1814, but with a series of interdictions. The printing house operated, with short interruptions, until 1822, when Archbishop Serghie Leapidevski closed it, reasoning that Bessarabia no longer needed liturgical and prayer books in Romanian.

During the mandate of Metropolitan Gavriil Bănulescu-Bodoni, the printing house published a significant number of books. According to a written account from those times, no less than 19,320 various Romanian-language church books were published between 1815-1820. Consequently, despite the restrictions imposed by the Holy Synod in Petersburg, Gavriil Bănulescu-Bodoni managed to publish more books in Romanian than in Russian, most of them being translated from Russian, under his supervision.

The church books in Romanian published in Bessarabia were different from those printed in the same language on the Romanian territory outside of Bessarabia, as they were impregnated by the spirit of Russian orthodoxy.

Other two great accomplishments of Metropolitan Gavriil Bănulescu-Bodoni were the construction of the *Metropolis of Bessarabia in Chișinău* (1817) and of the *Soborul* Cathedral (which was completed by his successor, Archbishop Dimitrie Sulima). Although influenced by the Russian culture and constrained by the Russian Tsarist forces, Metropolitan Gavriil remained faithful to his origins, in his heart; he was a fervent defender of the interests of his people; he fought for and obtained the local autonomy of Bessarabia. Thanks to this achievement, the Romanian civil code of Calimachi remained valid, in the judicial system, as did the local laws, customs and mother tongue. Moreover, he set the bases for the Romanian culture in Bessarabia, while under Russian rule, which largely contributed to the preservation of the Romanian spirit on this territory.

Following the death of Metropolitan Gavriil (on March 30, 1821) and until 1918, the Eparchy of Chişinău and Khotyn was headed only by Russian bishops appointed by the Holy Synod in Petersburg, with the Czar's consent. Hence, there were 12 bishops who led the Bessarabian eparchy in Chişinău, throughout this time.

Bishop Iacov Piatnitski has been yet another important figure for the Bessarabian church. In Chişinău, he founded *The Orthodox Missionary Brotherhood of the Birth of Jesus*, which aimed at promoting the Christian culture and its religious and moral teachings by editing books, brochures and leaflets, not only in Russian, but also in Romanian, with Cyrillic letters.

Only a few of Metropolitan Gavriil's successors to the Bessarabian Eparchy managed to keep a close connection with the Romanian Bessarabians. Since these metropolitans were Russians and did not know the local language, traditions and customs of the Romanian parishioners, they proved to be a real support to the Russian Empire authorities, in the process of Bessarabia's Russification (which amplified in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century).

All through the difficult period of Russification, the lively flame of the Romanian spirit continued to burn in the monasteries across Bessarabia, as they were strong spiritual centers and genuine monuments of culture and art, where chronicles of our people and church books were written. Most of them were opened in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Since their foundation and throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, they spread their Christian and Romanian work within the local community. From the documents kept in the Bessarabian Archives, we learned about the existence of the following monasteries: *Vărzăreşti, Hincu, Soroceni, Chipriana, Condiţa, Hârjauca, Cârbovăţul, Răciula, Frumoasa, Ţigăneşti, Tabăra, Curca, Chirova, Coşelauca, Saharnea, Călărăuşauca, Jabca, Dobruşa*. [*Cărătura, Cosovăţul, Lometa, Rezina, Soroca, Ciura, Borzeşti, Butuceni, Cucuruzeni, Fântâna Doamnei, Hârtopul, Grădişte, Galiţa, Ignăţei, Peştera, Poiana, Popăuţi, Râşca, Rudi, Verejeni*]<sup>2</sup>, *Cetatea* and the new monastery "*Noul-Neamţ*", founded in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The Tsarist Empire conducted its Russification policy not only in the urban and rural churches, but also in monasteries. For this purpose, the archbishops of Chişinău used to appoint Russians and Ukrainians in the positions of abbots of the monasteries. These foreign abbots would force the monks to learn Russian and to perform the religious ceremonies in this language.

Being faced with this situation, the monks did not deny their language, but they set up one more lectern for Russian-language chanting. Thus, the religious ceremonies were being performed in two languages. The monks from the Bessarabian monasteries had the same intellectual activities (the copying of books and preaching in the Romanian language) and the same life as the monks from Moldavian monasteries. They were highly educated – they spoke Slavonic, Greek and Latin and knew universal history, logics, philosophy and geography. Despite the constraints, restrictions and Russification attempts, the monasteries in Bessarabia succeeded in preserving and promoting the Romanian language, traditions and national life.

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<sup>2</sup> Monasteries closed by the Russians

The continuity of Romanianism in Bessarabia's spiritual life under the Russian rule was largely maintained with the aid of church prints, which, up until 1812, had been procured from the Romanian printing centers - Iași, Blaj, Buda, etc. After Bessarabia's annexation to the Russian empire, the Romanian spirit endured for a long time. In the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, church priests and monks were using the books that had been procured until 1812. In time, as the procurement of books from across the Prut got more and more difficult, there became a necessity to set up a local printing house. Consequently, on May 4<sup>th</sup> 1814, at the request of Metropolitan Gavriil Bănulescu-Bodoni, the Holy Synod in Petersburg approved the foundation of the *Eparchial Printing House* in Bessarabia, which was opened on May 31<sup>st</sup> 1814. Certainly, the approval was accompanied by some restrictions, such as: the translation from Russian into Romanian had to be made with the same Cyrillic script as the books published by the Synodal Printing House in Moscow; everything was printed only with the approval of the Synod and under the hierarch's control.

After the death of Metropolitan Gavriil, his activity was taken over by Archbishop Dimitrie Sulima. Though he achieved fewer things, as compared to his predecessor, Archbishop Sulima dedicated his efforts to the benefit of the Bessarabian church and of the Romanian people.

Between 1841-1852, no religious books were printed by the Eparchial Printing House. In 1853, the printing house resumed its activity until 1883, when it was closed. In the second part of its activity, the printing house published more and more books that had been issued in the Romanian principalities.

For 70 years, the Eparchial Printing House in Chișinău has promoted the Romanian language and spirituality and the books printed here served the Romanian national cause, both in Bessarabia and in the principalities of Moldavia and Wallachia. By studying the spiritual life of the Romanians in Bessarabia, we can conclude that, despite the harsh times of oppression by the Russian Empire, they still kept the old Romanian tradition of their people and their ancestors.

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