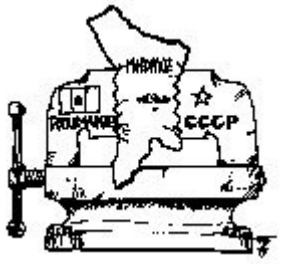
Between Russian hammer and Romanian anvil

Description

Sandwiched successively between the Russian Empire (then the USSR) and Romania, Moldavia (formerly Bessarabia) has been the scene of a vast movement of troops over the last two centuries. Here's the story of a region that was once highly coveted.



The first traces of occupation of the region date back to the 4th century BC and are attributed to the Dacians, distant ancestors of the Moldavian people, who were a mixture of Romanians and Slavs. Since then, these two influences have constantly interfered and battled over the territory that established their union. Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, there was a constant coming and going in what is now Moldavia: it was successively a Russian province, a Romanian region, then a Soviet Socialist Republic before gaining its independence.

The Russian occupation

The history of Moldavia is challenging to understand without a clear idea of the region's geography. This strip of land between the Dniester and Prut rivers was a major military and strategic challenge for Russia. In 1812, when Russia seized Bessarabia following the defeat of its Ottoman neighbors, it succeeded in realizing its long-held dream of obtaining a maritime outlet providing access to the Turkish straits. This marked the beginning of a long Russian occupation, which did not end until 1917. From 1818 to 1828, Tsar Alexander I sketched an original policy, offering the region fairly extensive autonomy. But this experiment was short-lived, ending with his death in 1825. Despite this brief autonomy of a decade, tensions remained very high within this entity, quickly becoming the subject of numerous debates and territorial claims. The Russian defeat at the end of the Crimean War (1853-1856) led to an initial reshuffle of the borders at the Congress of Paris (1856): the counties of Cahul, Bolgrad, and Ismaïl reverted to Moldavia; definitive boundaries were established between Russia and Moldavia on 6 January 1857.

Two years later, a Moldo-Vlach community came into being. In 1861, the united principalities of Wallachia and Moldavia were created, demonstrating a genuine desire to re-establish an ancient identity that had hitherto been impossible to assert. In other words, the new outline obtained at the Congress of Paris was far from satisfying Russia. So, Russia naturally turned to Germany and Austria-Hungary, which needed Russia's support to implement their policy of isolating France. On 23 October 1873, the Three Emperors' Alliance was signed. Russia promised to support these two countries (the alliance finally fell apart in 1890) on the express condition that Bessarabia would be returned.

Relations between Russia and Romania were extremely ambiguous at the time. During the war against the Turks (1877-1878), a brief Romanian-Russian alliance came into being, but from 1878 onwards, relations deteriorated. Romania hesitated for a long time before participating in the First World War; in 1915, Germany offered Romania an alliance in exchange for a promise to return Bessarabia. It was not until 1916 that Romania broke its neutrality to enter the war on the side of Russia's allies. However, the region's demands for autonomy did not cease, and on 9 April 1917, Pavel Gore founded the Moldovan National Party, calling for broad administrative, judicial, and educational independence. The birth of the Moldavian Democratic Republic was finally announced on 15 December 1917 by the Council of the Bessarabian Country, still within the framework of a Russian Democratic Federative Republic. However, this was not enough; in response to calls for help, the Romanians decided to enter Bessarabia on 25 January 1918. The Soviets were then pushed back into Transnistria.

The Romanian period

It was not until 9 April 1918 that Bessarabia, faced with the Bolshevik threat, officially chose to unite with Romania, a decision confirmed a few months later by an inter-allied commission (8 February 1919), taking *"into consideration the general aspirations of the people of Bessarabia, the Moldavian character of this region as well as arguments of a geographical, ethnic, economic and historical nature"*(1). The future of this new Romanian entity remained fragile until the fighting between the White Russians, the Poles, and the Red Army was finally over. Talks between the Romanians and Soviets did not begin until the autumn of 1920, with precise demands from the Romanian government: *"The Republic of Moldavia was freely constituted and, in this form, it maintained state-to-state relations with the Republics of Moscow and Ukraine. It was also in complete freedom that it proclaimed its union with Romania"*.

The USSR, newly recognized by Western countries, did not want to give in to Romania, which was no longer in a strong position diplomatically; no common ground was found, but eager to assert its *"historical rights"* over Bessarabia, the USSR founded a Moldavian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (MASR) on Ukrainian territory in 1924! The USSR did not, however, abandon its views on Moldovan territory, as Article 3 of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact (23 August 1939) shows, underlining Russian rights over Moldovan land. The defeat of France and the German victories only accelerated the return process: on 26 June 1940, an injunction was sent to Romania, and on 28 June, the Red Army crossed the Dniester. On 2 August, the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic (RSSM) was proclaimed.

Soviet times

Faced with Soviet aggression, the Romanians allied with Germany and benefited from the attack on Russia. They were granted a brief respite, during which they occupied Transnistria (19 August 1941-29 January 1944). But Soviet troops soon returned to the region, supported by the Allies, who recognized their right to recover Bessarabia (Anglo-Soviet treaty of 26 May 1942). On 24 August 1944, the Red Army entered Chisinau after conducting a major offensive in Boudjak (Tighina) and northern Moldavia. The Romanian-Soviet armistice was signed in Moscow on 12 September 1944. The Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic (RSSM) was reconstituted, much to the dismay of the Romanians.

However, at the time of the Treaty of Paris (1947), Romania could only recognize the integration of Bessarabia into the USSR; as a result, there were no longer any disputes between the two Communist countries. In 1964, old grudges between the two "sister states" over the Moldovan question resurfaced. Mao Zedong's denunciation of Moscow's imperialism was fully endorsed by the Romanian government, which went further by condemning Soviet interference and declaring Romanian sovereignty. The Soviet authorities found it difficult to accept these provocations, which led Moscow to harden its stance and reinforce its power within the Moldavian SSR (in 1967, a measure was adopted banning Romanian books and films).

Not until Mikhail Gorbachev came to power in 1985 did socio-political structures in the Moldovan SSR change significantly. This unexpected easing of the atmosphere allowed the Moldovan Democratic Movement, comprised mainly of intellectuals, to emerge to support the perestroika policy, calling for economic reforms and recognition of the Moldovan language (Romanian) in Latin script. Similarly, in May 1989, a Moldovan Popular Front was founded by supporters of perestroika in opposition to the positions of the then-leader of the Moldovan CP, Simion Grossu. Tension increased considerably, and street demonstrations broke out in Chisinau (notably on 27 August 1989), putting pressure on the Soviets of the Moldavian SSR to proclaim the Moldavian language the "official language of the Moldavian SSR." On 31 August 1989, the Supreme Soviet gave in, Moldovan became the state language, and the Latin alphabet, banned by Stalin, was reintroduced. Simion Grossu was forced to resign; he was replaced on 10 November 1989 by Petru Lucinshi, a close associate of Mikhail Gorbachev. A new era dawned in the history of Moldova: on 27 August 1991, the country became independent...

Like many newly-formed Eastern European countries, Moldova has inherited a series of problems: issues of minorities, religion, and national identity, all extremely delicate, make the country's situation all the more fragile as its two neighbors have not yet abandoned the idea of taking advantage of this small territory's landlocked position. A battle for influence is waged between a Romanian identity through culture and language and a Russian-Ukrainian identity established during the years spent within the USSR. Which way to turn? How can we develop our identity without sinking into an artificial construction of identity that some have already denounced?

Notes :

(1) A. Ruzé, *La Moldava entre la Roumanie et la Russie*, l'Harmattan, 1997

Thumbnail: Drawing by Edouard COP

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Link to the French version of the article

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